Coming to Terms

by Bibliotecaria_D

Summary

Peace negotiations are a fragile thing. The Decepticons decide to do their part to cement the alliance, and now the Autobots have to come to terms with culture clash, interfacing kinks, and rubber chickens. Jazz can only hope these things aren’t somehow connected.
"The Decepticons Do The Autobots. FOR PEACE. (Rubber chicken not included.)"

Peace negotiations are a fragile thing. The Decepticons decide to do their part to cement the alliance, and now the Autobots have to come to terms with culture clash, interfacing kinks, and rubber chickens. Jazz can only hope these things aren’t somehow connected.

Title: Coming to Terms
Continuity: G1/IDW/WTF AU
Rating: R

HEY -- READ THE WARNINGS.
Warnings/Kinks: Physical intimacy (tactile/hardline overloading), Sparkplay, Courtship, Contractual interfacing, Restraint/bondage, General BDSM, Sexual frustration, Consent issue (resolved & unresolved), Culture conflict, Violence, Humiliation, Voyeurism, and (Food?)play. That is the short list. If you can’t handle it, don’t read it.

Characters/Pairings: All of them. (Jazz/Starscream, Jazz/Vos, Ratchet/Constructicons, Jazz/Ratchet, Optimus Prime/Megatron, Skywarp/Thundercracker, Jazz/Thundercracker/Starscream)
Prompt/Motivation: Setting: “sunrise on the final day of war”+ Kinkmeme prompts

From TFWiki –
vorn = 83 years
decivorn = 8.3 years
stellar cycle = ~7.5 months
deca-cycle = ~3 weeks
mega-cycle = 93 hours (15.5 joors)
orn = 1 Cybertron day
joor = 6 hours
cycle = 1.25 hours
breem = 8.3 minutes
klik = 1.2 minutes
mechanometer ~ meter
kil ~ kilometer

[* * * * *]
Pt. 1
[* * * * *]

And then there was a ceasefire.

When the war began, it’d felt unbelievably strange to be shooting at another mech, even if that mech called himself a Decepticon. Now, as the ceasefire continued on, it felt equally strange not to be shooting at a mech calling himself a Decepticon, even if it was another mech. It was an adjustment they’d have to make. The ceasefire had become an uneasy peace, and the peace was easing through negotiations into an actual treaty. It seemed, unbelievably strange as it felt after so long, that the end of the war was within sight.

So within sight, that having a Decepticon land in front of the Autobots’ building inspired caution, not gunshots. Officially, there was a building near the center of what had been Vos that the factions were cautiously co-habiting as headquarters. It had been hastily reconstructed for the business of trying to get along with each other, i.e. hammering out the terms for ending a civil war. Living side-by-side
was a nice thought, but nobody on either faction was going to recharge well with the enemy staying on the other side of a flimsy wall. Even if they weren’t shooting at each other anymore.

Shared headquarters weren’t realistic, not yet, and probably not for a long while despite all the progress made. Technically, neither faction had a base or barracks inside Vos anymore, so they just...‘went home’ in opposite directions. That ‘going home’ happened in shifts that happened to coincide with recharge cycles was a convenient coincidence. A very carefully scheduled coincidence.

It was a system that worked alongside the peace progress so long as nobody actually talked about it.

In fact, it’d worked so well that a Decepticon landing outside the unofficial 'home/not-a-base' for the Autobots felt a bit like an invasion of privacy. Although, to be fair, Starscream seemed to know it. He did knock.

No alarms sounded. Nobody grabbed weapons and openly aimed out the windows. However, it was with a definite wariness that Jazz opened the door.

"Whatever you're selling, we don't want any," he said cheerily, scanning the area without looking like it.

The Decepticons really had been on Earth too long. The Seeker twitched, obviously getting the reference to door-to-door salesmen and visibly stifling the need to snap a comeback. Instead, he extended one hand to the smaller Autobot. "For the purpose of ending our Great War," he recited, a phrase that had almost become ritual preface to any interaction between Autobot and Decepticon.

After over six million years of conflict, both sides had recognized the fact that they were taking offense at unintentional slips. Tolerance and tempers were in short supply when mortal enemies were trying to have a conversation, but the negotiations were too important to screw up because somebody said something wrong and caused a snit. The ritual phrase had basically become a catch-all pre-said apology: 'I'm not trying to mess this up. Forgive my blunders.'

Jazz eyed the extended hand and attached Decepticon, but it would have been offensively rude to refuse under the circumstances. Starscream was abiding by the terms of the ceasefire. He’d even knocked instead of barging into the Autobots’ unofficial home(not a)base. Jazz trusted the Seeker as far as -- no, he didn’t trust him at all, really. But.

He reached his own hand forward to clasp the other mech’s hand. “For the purpose of ending our Gre -- what the slag are you..?”

The Autobot’s voice trailed off into a slack-jawed gape when Starscream finished bending in a deep bow over the hand now captured gently in his grip and laid a courteous kiss on the back of it. It was a supremely chaste gesture. Jazz had never been so aware of the back of that hand. Starscream’s lips felt as smooth as a finely polished ornament against it, and it finally registered just how good the jet looked. Even for as vain a creature as Starscream, the mirror shine to his plating was remarkable. His wings were held up and out in blatant display, and Terran birds-of-paradise would die of envy for a Vosian flyer’s plumage display.

“For the purpose of ending our Great War, I ask that you meet me, alone, by the front gate of the War Academy at dusk,” Starscream said, raising his head without straightening so he looked just slightly up into Jazz’ wide visor. Low and intimate, the characteristic screech he was known for husked into a pleasing rasp. The sound caught Jazz as much by surprise as the kiss, and it tripped down his back strut with each syllable causing a tiny shiver as it went.
“Ah. I.” Jazz shook himself physically and snatched his hand back, rude or no. Starscream actually smirked at that, straightening gracefully as if the reaction were according to plan. The Autobot saboteur scowled up at him, unconsciously cradling his defiled hand against his bumper. It might have been his imagination, but it tingled faintly. “I don’t know what you’re playing at, mech, but no way am I goin’ anywhere alone with you!”

The Seeker stiffened, red eyes flaring crimson as the teasing left them, and Jazz immediately rewound his own words.

…aw, scrap. Situation: Decepticon A came under the flag of peace to speak with Autobot B. Autobot B flung flag of peace back in Decepticon A’s face. Tact C: missing from situation entirely.

It was Jazz’s turn to extend his hand. “For the purpose of ending our Great War,” he recited hurriedly. That apology without apologizing had all kinds of connotations at the moment.

‘I’m not trying to mess this up. Forgive my total lack of manners.’

‘Creepy behavior or not, I could have rejected that better. Sorry.’

Starscream looked down at the hand, then back to Jazz’s face. His optics burnt a darker red yet, but they had all been relearning patience since the ceasefire. Peace was not an easy habit to take up when all the ingrained instincts came right off the life-or-death of a battlefield. “For the purpose of ending our Great War,” he said back at the Autobot, and the words were deliberately weighted. Confused, Jazz let his hand drop as the jet inclined his head stiffly. “I will wait for you, and you alone, at dusk.”

With that, the Decepticon stepped backward and launched himself skyward.

Jazz stood in the doorway staring after him. The message was strange but clear: this had something to do with ending the war. Trust Starscream and go alone, or...

“What just happened?” Bluestreak asked from beside him, where he’d been hidden out of Starscream’s sight around the doorjamb, and a speculative murmur filled the room as the others started exchanging ideas. The Seeker had to have known the other Autobots were there, but he’d still -- what? Threatened him? In the middle of peace negotiations, in front of a crowd of witnesses, on enemy territory? That didn’t make sense at all. It’d felt like an invitation, but anything coming from a Decepticon -- especially that Decepticon -- was suspect.

Correction: none of this made sense. And curse Jazz’s curious nature, because he loved puzzles.

His hand was still cradled against his bumper. His other hand obsessively washed over it, and if the tingle was still there, well, he wasn’t going to tell the other Autobots what it felt like.

[* * *]
Picture by Shibara on LJ/Ao3/Tumblr.

[* * *]

[* * * * *]
End Pt. 1
[* * * * *]
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 2
[* * * * *]

Cybertron falling into orbit around a star had actually been a key factor to the treaty process. Not just for the energy provided by a sun, but that certainly was a big factor. Solar energy was stable, abundant energy. The energy crisis was one less area of conflict between the factions, and it allowed them time to work on the other issues. Compromises were easier to come by in a post-starvation statis, post-civil war world. Everybody was starting out on the level, rebuilding Cybertron from the bottom up and watching the sunrise every day with the shared sense of 'Hey, we’re not dead yet.'

Their new sun had wrecked merry havoc with the way Cybertronians told time, however. Cybertron had been without a star for so long that Cybertronians had taken to living according to their work shifts. Those shifts depended on an endless, linear timeline instead of a circular, reoccurring clock. Their short length time units were causing communication difficulties as various mechs assigned them tentative new meanings that weren’t yet shared across the planet. Fresh from Earth, the Autobots and Decepticons already used to humanity’s short and mid-range time lengths were greatly surprised to find their casual usage of a seven-day time measurement was cropping up throughout the rest of their factions. Phrases like ‘at dusk’ or ‘during daylight’ crept into the language to replace time phrases like ‘on shift’ and ‘off shift.’

The planet was slowly settling into a diurnal lifestyle where the majority of work shifts happened during the day, taking advantage of the energy-saving free light source. Most of Cybertron was still adjusting their schedules to recharge during the dark time, newly dubbed ‘nighttime.’ It was a little weird for so many mechs to get out of work at the same time, now. It seemed to be promoting mingling among the workers, from what Jazz had seen so far. Instead of just hanging out with a mech’s shift-mates, a mech had options now. In Jazz’ opinion, having experienced the mass after-work scene on Earth, the effort required to adapt Cybertron into a planet with time zones balanced out against imagining what Cybertronian nightlife would be like.

After the war ended, that was. If the war ended. If Starscream wasn’t plotting again, the backstabbing fragger.

But the only way to find out about his latest scheme was to meet with the Seeker. Of course.

Dusk came far too soon for Jazz’s peace of mind. That being said, every moment between then and now took an eternity to pass.

Jazz could really get used to seeing sunsets on Cybertron, however. He drove slowly through the ruins of Vos, and the setting sun turned broken glass to scattered treasure, broken building spars to art. The bombed-out buildings of the War Academy looked like empty birds’ nests; abandoned homes for the flyers who had fled its shelter when the Senate sent the retaliatory strike against Vos.

The citystate had been sympathetic but not aligned with the Decepticons until then. The Senate hadn’t seen it that way, however, and eradicated the citystate in return for the Decepticon strike against the Enforcer units in Kaon. War Academy alumnae had swept back in a reverse graduation from all over the planet, descending on the destroyed campus in a desperate search for survivors. When there were no survivors to be found, the campus had become consecrated ground where oaths
of vengeance had been sworn, allegiance declared. And Vos had flown, feral and furious, against the Senate in a flock of purple-stamped wings.

That alone made Jazz extra paranoid about meeting Starscream, Air Commander and ex-Emirate, here. The War Academy had become a symbol for a lot of things during the war, but it wasn’t for nothing that Starscream bragged about graduating at the top of his class. That evoked a lot of memory and associated respect, whether or not the Academy still stood. This was either a place of pride for the Seeker, or a reason for revenge. As unpredictable as Starscream was, Jazz didn’t want to even hazard a guess at his motivations for meeting here. The rest of the Autobots were already a guessing every which way from Luna 1.

Jazz braked to a controlled, easy stop outside the campus entrance, scanners out on full. Except for the ghostly blip that showed Mirage covering his back from far off to one side, there was only one mech within range. That didn’t mean Starscream didn’t have his own back-up with a signal-masker in place, but it was more reassuring than not.

The Decepticon Second-in-Command stood by the broken, leaning gate that had once been the prestigious War Academy’s entrance, but he didn’t move to meet the Autobot. He waited as Jazz transformed and turned in place, peering into the shadows and re-scanning. His optics followed the Autobot Third-in-Command, but if the expression on his face was one of assessment, well, they were still -- technically -- enemies. Good intentions aside, they’d be fools not to size each other up for potential combat.

To be honest, Jazz was severely out-classed. Out here in the open, Starscream had the advantage not only in flight but in actual hand-to-hand. Jazz had a thousand tricks, but Starscream had height and weight over him. Give the saboteur a hiding spot or a gun, however, and the odds suddenly evened. When it came to stealth or sabotage, the Jazzmeister ruled the pantheon. Starscream had the skies, but Jazz had the ground below. Of course, they both specialized in underhanded subtlety, so there could never be a clear winner until one of their bodies grayed-out and was confirmed dead. Even then, Jazz would worry.

When the Autobot finally ran out of shadows to search, he turned to the mech standing right there in the open. Darkness was coming on fast, and Mirage was far enough away that they had something approaching privacy. The Decepticon had what he’d demanded: Jazz, alone.

Starscream put out his hand again, smiling guilelessly as the saboteur approached. “For the purpose of ending our Great War,” he recited.

Jazz looked at the hand. “So you keep saying,” he answered, keeping his tone light enough that, this time, it wasn’t slap-to-the-face offensive. He sounded wary. Justifiably suspicious, really. “What do you want, Starscream?”

The Seeker seemed amused by his reluctance to surrender his hand again, and Jazz took a step back before he could catch himself when the jet came forward. Starscream paused, allowing the smaller mech to get used to his sudden proximity, and then he slowly reached down for the Autobot’s hand. A twitching flash of wariness crossed the blue visor, but Jazz let him take it. Once more, the Air Commander bent over it.

“The frag, mech!” Jazz yanked his hand away and stopped short.

Because Starscream had let him. Starscream was, in fact, waiting with hand still open, half-bent in a bizarrely formal bow and face locked in an exaggerated expression of patience. Bent over as he was, they were almost face to face. Warm air from the jet’s intakes blew heat across Jazz like --
-- he really didn’t want to think about what it was like. The point was, he’d interrupted some sort of gesture from the jet, and things clearly wouldn’t move on until Starscream was allowed to complete it.

Something fluttered around Jazz’s spark, because it was paint-peelingly embarrassing to not only have to offer his hand, but slip it back into the Seeker’s hold. Unhurried and disregarding the Autobot’s squirming embarrassment, Starscream lowered his head. He pressed the supple curve of his mouth to the back of that black hand. Strangely, although the changed angle meant the Seeker’s intakes were blowing downward now, heat continued to flush ripely under Jazz’s armor as the kiss lingered. Oh, the things he did for the sake of Cybertron and the Autobots.

At least he wasn’t being attacked. This definitely didn’t feel like a threat. It felt like the exact opposite, truth be told, and his squirming took on a whole new element of uncomfortable. The flutter became a firm squeeze.

Finally, Starscream lifted his head. “’The frag,’ as you so crudely put it, is still far off in our future,” he said with the calm self-satisfaction of a mech who knew exactly what was going on and wasn’t going to be pushed into revealing the situation a moment too soon. He straightened and inclined his helm respectfully. “I am simply asking for permission to court you right now.”

Heat and thought stuttered to a halt. “What?” Jazz asked, very faintly.

This time, the Seeker raised the Autobot’s hand up to his mouth. Their height difference required the shorter mech to take that final step forward until only a meter or so separated them. Shock got him that close, numbly responding to the light pull on his arm, and resulted in the odd tableau of Jazz staring into his own reflection. Blue light reflected curved and green in the yellow glass of the jet’s cockpit canopy. The blue visor flickered through reset, and Jazz’s head snapped up as the Air Commander turned his attention to the black hand in his hold.

It was closely studied, close enough that Starscream licked it before exhaling cooled air across it. The twitches as fine-tuned sensors reacted to the temperature change were carefully noted, and another lick was ventured. This time it traced the sensitive lines of the saboteur’s best weapon with deliberate care. The hand spasmed, and Jazz made an interesting noise of half-confusion, half-protest. That had been a most unexpected sensation.

Uh. How was a mech supposed to react to being licked by the (not)enemy?

Without releasing the hand, Starscream looked through the fingers at the smaller mech. “You know that interfacing is a means of sealing a binding contract among Decepticons, yes?” As opposed to the Autobots’ far friendlier practice of interfacing for pleasure and company. Jazz had never been able to figure out why the Decepticons limited themselves that way, but he at least knew about it. He forced a nod and tugged experimentally on his trapped hand. Starscream nudged his nose into the palm before letting it go, and the action made Jazz’s hand hesitate in the air before -- slowly -- dropping.

“It’s been a topic of much discussion for us since the ceasefire began.”

This was becoming surreal. “Really,” Jazz said. He wasn’t having much luck finding any other words to say. Starscream…courting. Asking permission. What? “Whyzat?”

“Mmhmm.” The Air Commander lifted his own hand and, making sure the Autobot saw it coming and had time to move away if he so wished, brushed the back of the fingers down the side of Jazz’s helm. Jazz controlled his first instinct and didn’t duck. This was beginning to feel like -- well, many things, but one of those things was a challenge. Jazz didn’t back down from challenges. “My contract with Thundercracker and Skywarp ends upon the end of the war, and that exact moment is being negotiated. Any day now, I will be free to enter a new contract with whomever I please.” The
Seeker’s fingers curled, smoothing up to the tip of a helm projection and swirling about it quite intentionally. Jazz jolted, visor flickering white as maxed-out scanners blared with the contact before he could turn them down. His scanner suites’ were up in the antenna projections for added boost, but he hadn’t counted on a Decepticon *fondling* them! “Many of us will be. For the purpose of ending our Great War,” the jet stated again, re-emphasizing it, “we have been discussing what contracts should be sought.”

This time, the saboteur did step back. He needed distance to think, and clear thought just wasn’t coming with the Seeker’s hand on his helm. He dreaded what Mirage could see from his position. “And I’m a potential contract? I’m not a flyer!” Jazz pointed out, needing to get that obvious flaw out into the open. The fact that he was an Autobot was far too evident to even bother bringing it up.

“Social contracts are more varied than militant ones. I’m not interested in taking another flight partner,” Starscream countered, apparently prepared for that objection. He let his arm fall back to his side, but there was a kind of reluctance to the way his hand flexed in the air that made something constrict in Jazz’s fuel pump. A small frown crossed the Seeker’s face, and he cocked his head as if a bit bemused by Jazz’ stare of incomprehension. “Flying in trios only became standard when battle made it a necessity,” he explained. “Prior to that, Vosians in the Planetary Guard were assigned to larger units and flight wings. We trained up for efficiency’s sake in the Decepticons. With the war over, if the war’s over,” he corrected without a hitch, “the Armada may not disband entirely, but there is little reason to bind ourselves into militant units any longer. Surely you didn’t think I enjoy the company of Thundercracker or Skywarp!”

Well, no, but he hadn’t known anything about the reasons behind the trine formations in the Decepticons, either. Not many Vosians had defected to the Autobots after the Senate’s attacks had devastated their citystate. “You’ve flown with ‘em for most of the war,” he said, and he hoped it didn’t sound as much like an awkward excuse for his assumption as he thought it did. There was no reason he should feel like he should apologize!

Though he hadn’t expected the Seeker to look so taken aback by the idea.

“We contracted! I’d never flown in a wing before unit-training in the War Academy, and I entered no formal wing-contract until becoming a Decepticon.” Starscream seemed frankly indignant, but Jazz could detect a thread of disconcertment fueling the indignation. Apparently, the thought of being permanently bound into a wing with his current trine was really not appealing. “Ask that lumbering - - “ He stopped and visibly reined himself in. Patience and new habits for the sake of peace. “Ask… Skyfire. I’ve always flown solo.” He puffed up, proud. “No one could keep up with me.” Implied was that no one could be worthy of slowing down for, either.

“So what could you possibly want me for?” Jazz asked shrewdly. His visor narrowed, mind finally catching up and beginning to pick through everything. “What kind of ‘social contract,’” Decepticons were *weird* mechs, “do you want?”

Again, that slightly bemused look. “I realize this is sudden, but I’d think that was obvious.” The plump curve of Starscream’s lip pursed slightly, just enough to be on purpose, and a heat-flush swept down Jazz’s front like spilled water. He had to tear his gaze away. Starscream gave him a knowing look and continued, “As I said, it’s been a topic of discussion among the Decepticons. You Autobots interface to strengthen your social bonds. Friendship and companionship, I gather?” A frown pulled that lip downward, and Jazz hadn’t realized he was fixated again. “Autobots have strange customs. You seem much looser in regard to intimate contact -- ah. In any case, it was suggested that in order to make the reintegration of customs easier for the rank and file, the officers should seek social contracts among the Autobot officers. To set examples, as it were.”
“Follow the leaders,” Jazz murmured, somewhat fascinated by the Decepticons’ perception of the Autobots. Starscream had checked himself quickly, but the Autobot had caught how his voice had taken on the sort of musing tone Perceptor usually filled with technobabble and theories that blew non-scientifically inclined minds. Had Starscream researched the Autobots’ interfacing habits?

Primus’ rusty crankshaft. If that was the kind of science some mechs did, maybe Jazz should become a scientist.

The Air Commander inclined his head. “Exactly. It doesn’t appear to be that far of a stretch, as far as cross-cultural exchanges go. Interfacing for…friendship can be interpreted as peace for you Autobots, and those of us with open contracts can seal the treaty by taking Autobots in binding agreements.”

From what Jazz did know about Decepticon interfacing customs, it was logical. Seductively so, and it was true what the mech said: Autobots were looser than Decepticons in terms of who they traded cables with. It made them closer to each other, a tighter-knit faction that was practically family they were on such good terms with each other. But terms were something anyone in an agreement had to be aware of. “What’s the agreement?”

A richly curved smile spread under frankly predatory red optics, and Starscream took a step of his own back to openly ogle the Autobot up and down. “Well, now. Negotiating that would be the point of a courtship, now wouldn’t it?” The smile faded, and the jet took a more serious stance, letting his hand reach out in offer. “If, that is, you will grant me permission? I can promise that in this I am very skilled. Don’t judge my ability by my current wingmates. Had Skywarp not assassinated the pair I was courting, I would have taken contract and flown with a different wing during the war.” A dark scowl briefly dipped the luscious curve, and Jazz mentally slapped himself for thinking that.

“Gimme a minute,” he muttered, and Starscream just stood there, hand extended and optics watchful. Jazz looked back at him. At all of him, sinful lips and all.

A courtship?

He didn’t want to agree to anything without first passing it by everyone else. This could still be part of a plot by the conniving Air Commander’s, as ridiculous as the whole idea seemed. He needed the other Autobots’ input on all of this. He needed to pull some strings and get information.

Even if Starscream was telling the truth, why the frag would he want Jazz? Even more important, why would Jazz want him?

On the other hand, outright rejection wasn’t really an option. “For the purpose of ending our Great War.”

“I’m not comfortable with this,” Jazz finally settled for.

Starscream smirked. “Understandable. I’m not entirely in favor of it myself, but the reasoning is sound. I supported the idea when Megatron decided to put it to orders, and I can hardly be exempt considering my rank. It’s been made very clear to me that my participation in this contract binding is mandatory.” He broke optic contact to look aside, looking self-conscious at last. Jazz felt an entirely unexpected surge of sympathy; knowing Megatron and his command style, being forced into social contracts was probably one of the better options to control the more aggressive Decepticons. Optimus Prime hadn’t asked about repressing the brutes in the Decepticon ranks, and none of the Decepticons were telling, but the Autobot spies had reported a sharp increase in disciplinary executions. “You were -- are, I suppose -- the best choice available to me. It is in my best interest to pay court to you properly,” Starscream finished softly. “An amendable contract partner is an asset to
both sides of the agreement.”

“Uh-huh.” The Autobot looked at him for a moment more, mulling it all over. As Third-in-
Command, he had the authority to make on-the-spot judgment calls. That didn’t mean he had to like it, especially not when the decision went beyond personal and might affect the peace negotiations. “Look. If -- if -- I give you permission to, erm, court me…it doesn’t automatically mean we’re contracted, right?”

“No!” Starscream actually had the gall to look surprised. “Interfacing to bind the contract would occur at a place and time of our choosing, to culminate the negotiations and begin our relationship as agreed. It’s a mutual decision.”

“Okay, yeah, you said somethin’ about fragging being far off in the future,” Jazz said, waving a hand in a get-on-with-it gesture. “So giving you permission is just a courtesy?” He tried to wrap his own mind around the concept of maybe, possibly, allowing Starscream to -- nope, not quite able to process it yet. “Like opening hunting season on my cables, huh,” he said, trying to find some humor. He’d always had an easier time understanding the funny side of things.

Fortunately, the Seeker seemed amused by his crude statement. “In a way. It’s a commitment of intent on my part, and an acknowledgement that you’ll not court another unless or until our courtship concludes.” Another uncomfortable shifting and sidelong look. “You…may accept courtship from more than one mech at a time. I don’t believe any other Decepticon would dare stand rival to me once I’ve declared intent to court, but you have the right to accept if they do. I have no right to stake a claim on you, only commit myself as a suitor.”

Jazz looked at him. He looked at the hand still hopefully extended. There were a thousand reasons not to take that hand.

But he just wouldn’t be the Jazzmeister if he couldn’t take a dare.

“Alright. You can, uh, court me.”

Starscream’s optics went wide with surprise, but pleased assent lit them brilliant red a moment later. He clasped Jazz’s hand like he’d been given a precious gift, and the Autobot had a second to wonder what all he didn’t know about the importance of Decepticon courting customs before the Seeker’s voice dropped to a raspy purr. It stroked his audio receptors like a chamois cloth. “Excellent.”

The Air Commander tugged him forward, delicate and careful as though Jazz would pull apart at the seams, and curved his other hand around the back of the Autobot’s neck. Jazz stiffened, threatened and repressing his own combat-ready programming as that hand eased up under helm armor, but Starscream only smiled with an odd tenderness. He held the Autobot’s hand to his face and just cycled his vents, letting the heated air billow softly over the tensed hand until it slowly, slowly relaxed in his hold. The hand under Jazz’s helm pet soothingly in tiny circles. The fingers went nowhere and meant nothing but harmless contact, gentling the Autobot like a wild animal.

“I don’t think,” Starscream breathed, mouthing the words against the saboteur’s palm, “that you understand what you agreed to. We’re going to take things very slow until I know you’re up to speed with me.”

“Ah,” Jazz ruthlessly stomped on the shiver that wanted to rattle down his arm, “and what am I gettin’ up to speed on?” He’d never known his hands were that sensitive, and this was really not the time to discover such a fact. He was not in over his head, no matter what Prowl would probably tell him later.
“Courtship,” Starscream said, and the smooth glide of his lips in Jazz’s palm squeezed something tight and hot around the Autobot’s spark, “means that I am allowed physical intimacy. And I am very,” a whisper of contact, a bare kiss, “very,” the hand on the back of his neck was holding him steady by now, because Jazz’s knees were wobbling, “very good at courting.” Starscream blew heavily, ex-venting up the length of Jazz’s hand until the last finger, which received a sharp nip.

It shot pleasure-streaked pain like a bolt of lightning down to spin Jazz’s tires, to his eternal embarrassment. A whine of need came from the Autobot, and the Seeker looked down at him. A faintly morose, yet triumphant, smirk crossed the Air Commander’s face.

Starscream lowered the captured hand back to Jazz’s side, pressing it into place with a little pat. Which served to remind Jazz not to paw at the Seeker’s cockpit like a pleasure-starved mech looking for an overload, at least. “Thank you for your permission,” Starscream said, again with that out-of-place formality. “I have more modesty than some, and would prefer to continue to meet you here instead of in a more public setting. I hope this is acceptable to you. For now, good night.” He bent down.

Jazz had never had an obsession in his life, but if he didn’t find out what those lips felt like on his own, he might just combust where he stood. He tilted his face up to meet the jet, expression ironed into neutrality by sheer willpower alone.

Shock broke that mask when Starscream pressed their helms together, forehead to forehead. The Seeker turned his head enough to slide down until their faces fit together, noses side-by-side. The silky glide of their cheeks moving against each other was one of the most intimate caresses Jazz had ever received. The bridge of Starscream’s nose stroked over Jazz’s face, down against his chin, and turned to nudge under it. There was a noisy inhale as all of the Seeker’s vents in-vented at the same time, taking in the air around the Autobot as if to fill the jet with his essence: the scent of Earth oil and rubber, rusted metal and high explosives, open roads and underhanded missions.

Then the vents snapped shut. Holding his breath. Holding Jazz in, and when Starscream stepped back, his optics smoldered with the effort it required to just take that up and away, into the night sky.

Jazz stood staring after him. He now had a fairly good idea of why Optimus Prime had been coming out of private meetings with Megatron looking the way he did. He also had the disturbing notion that Starscream had just implied the other Decepticons weren’t going to limit themselves to private meetings to discuss, ah, ‘terms of agreement’ with their chosen Autobots. That could make official headquarters a very interesting place to be tomorrow.

These were all very vague thoughts at the peripheries of his mind, because the all-consuming fact of the matter was that Starscream had just nuzzled him goodnight.

It was, quite possibly, the hottest thing in the history of ever.

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 2

[* * * * *]
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]

So there was a meeting.

A historic ending of millions of years of civil war? Entire geological eras had passed while the Decepticons and Autobots fought. Planets had formed. Life forms had crawled out of the primordial ooze and fought over who got the sprinkled donut, all in the time Cybertron had been at war. Of course there was a meeting. Whole species would probably evolve (if they didn’t kill each other over the meeting refreshment platter) before the peace process fully completed, and nobody was taking a step without first having a meeting about how high they’d lift the foot, how fast they’d walk, and -- for Primus’ sake -- what direction they’d be walking in.

It’d be that one idiot who charged off without first consulting anyone who’d restart the war, and nobody wanted to be that idiot. They had enough trouble tethering their bands of armed yahoos already. They were having pre-meeting meetings about their meetings at this point, because paranoia wasn’t a strong enough word for how badly both factions wanted this peace thing to work.

Red Alert was having the time of his life. It wasn’t often everybody checked twice with him before going anywhere or doing anything.

So, yes, there was a meeting.

Well, more of a flummoxed scrambling as half of the Autobot command cadre got pummeled by urgent communication pings from Jazz the moment he recovered from Starscream’s departure. Mirage kindly didn’t mention to anyone that it’d taken Jazz at least a breem to recover, but Mirage also didn’t bring up the fact that he hadn’t prodded his commander into recovery any faster because his own fans had been busy whirring away for at least that long. Starscream was an attractive mech. Jazz could melt steel when he set his mind to it. Both of them in one room was enough to set the grunts in either faction to twittering, and whatever that last exchange had been between the two hotties…

Mirage had been sent as backup. He’d been looking for danger, but somehow he’d ended up watching live action pornography.

A spy in peace time was better known as a voyeur. And, oh, did Mirage love his job.

Anyway, meeting. Yes. Not porn. Porn wasn’t a serious topic for a meeting, no matter what Mirage mumbled on his way to his bunk. This por -- courtship thing was a potential tripwire if Jazz had ever fallen over one, and it needed to be dealt with right now. Which, coincidentally, was what Mirage was doing. But Jazz was stuck in a Meeting of Awkward, which was only slightly less interminable than a Meeting From the Pit, which usually involved arguing whether to use ‘if’ or ‘when’ in Clause H, Sub-Clause 42.3 of the treaty draft. Meetings of Awkward typically highlighted things nobody wanted to talk about but had to be brought up in excruciating detail for commentary by the entire officer cadre.

This particular emergency meeting involved a metric aftload of embarrassment on Jazz’s part, but it
had its high points. Watching his commanding officer dither and fall over himself verbally always entertained.

“You did not see fit to mention this any time prior to tonight?” Prowl’s tone could cut ice. The Autobot Second-in-Command had pinned Optimus Prime to his seat by sheer, frigid indignation, and he had no mercy when it came to proper procedure. Finding out that the leader of the opposing faction had been molesting the Prime in the name of ‘peace’ was neither proper nor procedure. If the perfectly squared organization of his datapad and stylus on the table were anything to go by, Prowl was **livid**.

Their Prime squirmed in his seat like Bluestreak trying to hold onto a juicy secret. Bluestreak couldn’t keep a secret to save his life. He was the best broadcast system the gossip network had. “I… didn’t know it was…” The excuse trailed off into mumbles, because it wasn’t holding water under Prowl’s glacial stare. “Megatron insisted my permission was the only way the peace process could begin?” Prime offered meekly. “And he’s not **hurting** me, which is an improvement, so I didn’t think it was important?” ‘**Not as important as peace!**’ was implied in big, bold subtext, with added petro-rabbit bunny-optics underscoring the words. Optimus’ face was startlingly expressive despite the mask.

”**For the purpose of ending our Great War.**”

There was a beat of silence, and then the assembled officers groaned as one. Prowl’s look morphed into one of long-suffering resignation, and his hands rose in a half-clenching gesture like he wanted to strangle something. It was questionable what, since Prowl would never commit violence against a superior officer and trying to strangle aspects of a mech’s personality really didn’t work.

“What did we **tell** you about this self-sacrificing attitude you got?” Ironhide demanded.

Optimus Prime tucked himself down, cringing under their reproving glares. “‘There’s only one Prime, and he is indispensible,’” he recited obediently, but ruined it by straightening up and adding, “I will never agree with that, no matter how many times you make me say it. I am of no more value than any other Autobot, and I will gladly sacrifice my body for -- “

“Shut up, Prime,” Ratchet, Ironhide, and Prowl said at the same time. Jazz was snickering too hard to join in.

“I am calling Sludge,” Prowl went on to inform their leader, and Optimus went from looking mutinous to looking for a quick exit, visibly afraid that Prowl was actually following up on that threat, “and he will be sitting on you until you agree to what we decide.”

“But -- !”

“No. I warned you after the last time you ‘sacrificed’ yourself for the ‘greater good.’ There is a reason you turn to me for tactics, and it is because your judgment is not sound in these situations.”

Prime seemed slightly panicked. Also a little insulted, because just because it was true didn’t mean Prowl had to be so condescending about it. “Ironhide!” he appealed.

“Shaddup, siddown, and take your punishment like a mech. Prowl warned ya.” Ironhide didn’t even look up. He was hunched over the latest meeting schedule with Red Alert on one side and Jazz on the other, and they were tearing it apart with a brutal efficiency that would do a shark feeding frenzy proud. “Alright, we’ve got rid of all the private meetings between you and that fragger -- ” Ratchet leaned over Red Alert and smacked Ironhide upside the head, but there wasn’t much force to the blow. Relearning tolerance for peace or not, finding out Megatron had been all over Prime the
second the doors closed behind them kind of justified the name-calling. Ironhide didn’t even correct himself. “Wheeljack, you’re gonna have to bolt from meeting with Shockwave to get all the way to the third floor meeting hall in time, but we’re good after that. When he checks back in from patrol, Bumblebee’s gettin’ reassigned.”

Jazz grinned at their ashamed, alarmed, and otherwise aft-headed leader. “You’ve got yourself a personal secretary, Prime! Think about how much less filework you’ll have to do,” he tacked on in backhanded comfort. That got him a sullen look, and he grinned back. Seriously, Optimus was cute when spited. “Unless you really want that private time..?”

The officers all turned to look in genuine interest when an immediate refusal wasn’t forthcoming. Prime spluttered as he became the focus of far too many speculative gazes. “Wh-what? No! Of course not!”

“Mmhm.” Ratchet gave him a shrewd once-over. “He’s not hurting you, is he? I should take you in for a physical to make sure -- ”

“No! Well,” Prime amended, “not anymore than sparring with Grimlock -- for Primus’ sake, I didn’t mean it like that!”

The officers continued to grin at each other, absolutely glorying in the gush of gossip they’d just been handed. “Sparring matches have rules, and they’re usually friendly. Grappling hand to hand would probably be a form of courtship among warbuilds,” Ratchet said, all crisp efficiency until his optics twinkled with glee as Optimus continued chanting “No no no stop it no” in the background, ignored by all. “I’m going to be monitoring any inter-factional sparring matches from now on.”

“Make sense,” Ironhide put in, fighting a smile. “Negotiations between equally deadly warriors has to be taken outta context of real combat, or they’d be killing each other trying to get a contract. Why ask permission if the courtship involved force? I’d say no every time, and there goes the contract.”

“Military contracts are probably set up between equal or complementary mechs,” Wheeljack mused. “We need to find out more about this. Especially social contracts, if they’re different. Jazz?”

Jazz sat back in his seat and shrugged, reaching for a casual It’s All Good air and pulling off a sharp I’m Embarrassed To Exist instead. “Screamer seems to be open to talkin’ about it. I’ll see what I can find out from him.” Which meant actively seeking the Seeker out. Oh, dear. “In the meantime, Skyfire’s bringing half the Constructicons back from the solar collectors as soon as maintenance is finished. I’ll pull some strings, ask some questions, and nab Skyfire soon as he gets back.” Starscream had actually said to ask Skyfire about his past contracts, indicating that his old science partner might have some information. ‘Some’ was more than they had at the moment.

“It’s imperative that the command staff know to inform me instantly if there are any more courtship proposals.” Red Alert said, making a note to himself and covertly watching Optimus Prime over the top of his datapad. The Autobot leader was whining and had buried his face in his hands, defeated by their ability to make him regret sacrificing himself for their sakes. They could take care of themselves, thank you very much, if saving them came at the price of Megatron chasing him around the peace table. “Threat assessment?” the security director asked Jazz.

A fan kicked on, but it was stifled as soon as it started. “I didn’t feel threatened,” Jazz said truthfully, tipping back in his chair and training his visor on the ceiling to avoid their optics. He was apparently unaware that one hand was cradled to his bumper, and the other was trailing fingers, slow with memory, across his jawline and down the linkages of his throat. “He just…asked.”

He came back to himself with a full-body shake and looked at them. “I’m more worried that even
assigning Prime a secretary’s not gonna be enough. Starscream, uh, well, I got the feeling that he was bein’ discreet.”

That sank into them. Starscream had shown up on their front doorstep and made a show of asking Jazz out in front of pretty much everyone. If that was discreet, then what were the other Decepticons going to do?

Prime looked mortified.

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 3

[* * * * *]
I'm not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 4
[* * * * *]

"Jazz, there’s a situation in the medical building." Red Alert managed to convey urgency without volume.

The saboteur turned on his heel and headed for the nearest staircase. Energy was still too precious to waste on lifts; when Grapple and Hoist had refurbished the old building, they’d put in staircases instead. On the one hand: great, Jazz didn’t have to wait for a free elevator. On the other hand: stairs were slow. But only if a mech let himself be slowed by them. He took them three at a time going down.

"Situation?" Jazz wasn’t normally a religious mech, but he spared a thought for prayer: 'Please, Primus have mercy, don’t let it be a fight.’

War still hung heavy over them.

"Ratchet reported a courtship proposal," Red Alert responded.

It was questionable if that was better than a fight. Jazz had been procrastinating on trying to find Starscream all day. "Who?’

"The Constructicons."

Surprise made Jazz stumble, and only his infamous agility caught the fall and made it into a tumble a gymnast would have envied. He righted himself in a springing mid-air spin at the bottom of the stairs, almost on top of Brawl’s feet, and offered the startled Combaticon a jaunty salute before pelting for the exit.

"…what, all of ‘em!" Six Decepticons, one Autobot. Never good odds. While Ratchet wasn’t easily intimidated, standing up to an enemy combiner team was a bit much even for him.

"Skyfire reports four Constructicons are still at the solar collector center. Mixmaster and Bonecrusher are the only Constructicons in the area, and Ratchet said they came into his office as a pair. They presented the proposition together as well. They wouldn’t split up, would they?’ Red Alert seemed uncertain, and understandably so. Jazz’s heads-up had given the Autobots warning that some of the Decepticon military units would be splitting apart, but a combiner team splitting? Could they even do that? "He said he was going to tell them he’d give them an answer tomorrow,’" Jazz stumbled again, torn between shock (Ratchet was considering it?) and embarrassment (Prowl had torn a strip off of him for agreeing without first consulting the other Autobots), "but his transmission cut off?"

"He’s not answering hails?" Jazz was already sending out pings at the medical officer even as he cornered around the joint factions’ main headquarters building and sprinted for the neighboring building.

Ratchet had claimed it for a hospital/engineering set-up. Optimus Prime and Megatron had simply stood aside and let him, because nobody stood in the way of a determined medic with two gestalts
backing him up. As if the Protectobots and the Constructicons weren’t intimidating enough, both factions medical corps. had united to give Shockwave the evil optic for protesting. Shockwave had quickly conceded that politics and repairs could happen simultaneously. Another building had been required because of, sadly, the huge amount of reconstruction their shattered world required in body, mind, and infrastructure. The main building constantly swarmed with guards, officers, and political dealings, but Ratchet’s domain was a busy hive of physical work.

"Internal comm. line seems to be off, but outer microphone activated. I’m getting nothing but feedback and unidentifiable background noise. There’s a sound that might be Ratchet trying to speak. I’m not sure if it’s mechanical failure or a malfunction in Ratchet’s vocalizer, however. The line’s wide open, and it doesn’t sound like there’s a fight."* The security director hesitated. **"There’s definitely something going on, Jazz. Be quick."**

"I’m hurrying,” Jazz assured him grimly, already part-way up the first flight of stairs. Ground floor was medical treatment rooms, repairbays, and construction supplies. Second floor was engineering, laboratories, and medical supplies. Third floor was offices.

The comm. line opened to his ping, and the transmission was everything Red Alert said: outer microphone only, and noises that couldn’t be readily identified. There was a scraping, clanking noise, not loud enough for fists hitting metal, and starts and stops that sounded like someone’s vocalizer failing to initialize.

Jazz pictured the aftermath of a beating. It could be the sounds of two mechs dragging a body. Had the Constructicons taken it as an insult that Ratchet didn’t give permission? They weren’t talking, but it sounded like somebody was trying to form words. Maybe they’d jumped him, knocked him for a loop, and had him down and dazed.

The Autobot skidded to halt outside Ratchet’s open door and -- froze, one step inside.

Ah…ha. Oh.

Well, he’d been right. They’d jumped him, alright, and that was definitely not the face of a mech who was all there any longer. Just…wrong circumstances entirely. And Ratchet wasn’t wholly horizontal yet, at least until somebody moved the desk, so he wasn’t officially down so much as listing a great deal to the side.

Besides, Bonecrusher was obviously prepared to catch him if he fell. In fact, the Constructicon was more than ready, and Jazz had no doubt that he was eager for Ratchet to lose his balance and fall into his arms. In the meantime, the bulldozer contented himself with encouraging such an act by running his hands over every square centimeter of the Autobot he could reach. Meet-n-greet, molestation style: getting to know a mech via wandering hands. Since Bonecrusher was all but plastered against Ratchet’s back, there was a lot of ambulance territory open for exploration.

The Constructicon glanced up briefly when Jazz stopped short just inside the door, but he visibly dismissed the black-and-white Autobot from his thoughts. He was busy with far more important things. Such as the low moaning murmur that pushed out of Ratchet when Bonecrusher caressed the very edges of the wheel wells on either side of his torso. The moan hitched in the middle when the Constructicon’s fingers slid inside and scratched gently.

Jazz’s fans began to hum. That sound. He numbly matched with one of the odd sounds Red Alert hadn’t been able to identify, and no wonder! He’d fooled around with the medic before, but physical foreplay always fell to the wayside too quickly to get -- that. That sound. Ratchet made some tasty sounds when hooked up into a hardline interface, but nothing compared to the shaky warble coming out of the medic’s slack mouth right this moment. It was the sound of a mech denied what he really


wanted, a mech begging for what he needed, but too buried in pleasure to do anything about it.

It was a shame they’d never had the time or patience to do this themselves. Jazz could all-too-easily imagine teasing that moan out of the medic again, but if the sound was mouth-watering, the sight glued Jazz’s feet to the floor and his jaw to his chest. He’d sprinted up here to stop a potential fight. Ratchet might start one with him if he interfered at this point.

The medic’s optics were blown almost white, flaring overbright as Bonecrusher pinched thin metal edges between forefingers and thumbs. The Decepticon grinned like a kid handed a delicious piece of candy as experimental wiggling of the captured wheel wells produced a choked groan.

It grated around the lower tones like a stuck gear, indicating an extremely stressed vocalizer. Ratchet was trying to suppress his cries, and it just wasn’t working. His elbows jerked in, trying to protect the over-sensitized wheel wells, but the move stopped almost before it started. As badly as Ratchet’s left arm was shaking, it was still all that held him semi-upright against the desk. He wouldn’t -- couldn’t - - let that support go without falling back into Bonecrusher’s waiting arms. As for his right arm…he could move it. He really could. Even from Jazz’s place just inside the door, he could see that the hands holding Ratchet’s right hand were infinitely gentle. Mixmaster was barely touching it with his own fingertips, just guiding it around.

If anyone had asked Ratchet, he might have managed enough coherency to say something about balance. Yes, balance. Truth was, Ratchet simply didn’t want to take that hand away. But never in a million years would he admit that the slick of Mixmaster’s tongue nimbly delving between his fingers had him dazed and knock-kneed, shuddering when the Constructicon switched fingers. Mixmaster lapped at the base of the two middle fingers, coaxing them into his mouth up to the third knuckle, and then he began to suckle. Not suck; the pressure wasn’t hard enough to qualify. Yet it was all Ratchet could do to stay even vaguely upright as the Decepticon applied soft, rhythmic pressure to the lucky fingers. A warm, wet tongue rippling and flicking at them zinged charge straight to Ratchet’s engine. His fans roared, stuttering and catching as he frantically overrode his body, but he couldn’t stop the betraying cough of an engine trying to turn over.

Like Bonecrusher, Mixmaster had ramped Ratchet’s sensitivity up by constant, teasing touches until every sensor strained to read even the slightest contact. Increasing the weight behind their hands might actually be painful at this point, but Mixmaster only suckled a moment longer before pulling the ambulance’s hand free. Ratchet whimpered, faint and thankful, but regretted releasing his control even that much as teeth scraped deliberately across the throbbing sensors.

Bonecrusher chuckled in his audio receptor as Ratchet arched and squealed. The hand on the desk seized into a claw, and the Autobot’s knees collapsed against each other, propping him up by leverage alone. Since Ratchet stubbornly remained upright under his own power, Bonecrusher winked at Jazz over the medic’s shoulder and drew his own hands away from the wheel wells. They disappeared behind the medic as Mixmaster released the red hand trembling over his palm. Ratchet had a second to look somewhat relieved -- his shoulders even eased down a bit -- but Bonecrusher and Mixmaster were part of a combiner team. Reading each other’s actions was second nature.

They gave the medic a moment to recover, and then they attacked simultaneously.

Jazz saw it coming, too, and he stuffed the side of his hand in his own mouth to prevent…whatever it was that wanted to come out. A warning? It wouldn’t do any good with an attack this well-planned. A moan? Please, he had some dignity left. He wasn’t going to start working himself to overload right here in public.

Ratchet just might. Only eons of experience in a warzone kept a full-throated scream from escaping the medic as the Constructicons struck. Ratchet squawked, a purely mechanical noise of emergency
vocalizer shut-down. It did nothing to hide how his now-free hands clutched at the Constructicon in front of him. Mixmaster went straight for the white chevron on his helm. The tip disappeared into the Constructicon’s mouth. This time suction was so hard and loud Jazz could hear it from where he stood. Ratchet thrashed, pushing into Mixmaster’s mouth with a toss of his head, writhing closer and up into that wonderful pressure that spun specialized sensor suites into dizzy, buzzing disarray. Brilliantly lit optics went suddenly dark.

The medic’s face contorted with silent yelling as, behind him, Bonecrusher sank slowly out of sight, hands and mouth manipulating back kibble as he went. Even hidden by Ratchet’s shuddering frame, Jazz almost predicted when Bonecrusher found the underside of Ratchet’s bumper. Hardline interfacing provided much more immediate pleasure, not to mention closer pleasure, but he knew some of his fellow officer’s hot spots. The transformation joints where the front of Ratchet’s altmode swung apart were located between his two front tires and that bumper. Jazz had smaller fingers; he’d gone after those joints before.

He'd never gotten around to using his tongue, however, and therefore he’d never had the chance to see the reaction.

Ratchet convulsed hard enough to shake Mixmaster loose as emergency sirens wailed to life and the vocalizer lock failed. There were words to describe the passionate sound he made. Some of them would be considered impolite, even pornographic, in modest company. If Mixmaster’s face was anything to go by, it’d take more than a thousand of such words to describe what a pretty picture the Autobot Chief Medical Officer made while making that sound. The Constructicon stood back, optics fixed on Ratchet like he'd seen a miracle, and it was good.

"Status update?" Red Alert asked weakly, and Jazz jolted when he realized that, yes indeed, the comm. lines were still wide open.

He said it before he could censor himself: "Do you really need t’ ask?"

"I’m going to need something to put on the shift report," Red Alert snapped back. "I can’t put ‘Medical officer fragged by enemy forces.’" He paused. "I mean, we’re not technically enemies anymore."

Good point. Jazz took a moment to collect his thoughts, because thinking was really the last thing on his mind with Ratchet looking like that. The medic was still upright, although not by much. His knees had turned in, thighs clamped together, and his elbows had tucked in tight to his sides. His hands splayed with the palms up-turned in unconscious supplication, shoulders down and pulled as far back and together as they’d go. His helm was thrown back, and his mouth wordlessly moved in lusciously soft shapes as his head helplessly jerked in time with whatever Bonecrusher was stroking. His siren wailed, rising and falling like a wind-up toy on its last legs. It sounded like a Doppler radar, or maybe the mating call of the wild ambulance.

Jazz swallowed, unable to tear his visor away from the sight. Bonecrusher’s powerful engine growled, all the force needed in construction behind that sound, and Ratchet really did scream this time. It was a throaty howl that did shivery things to Jazz’ internals, and Mixmaster’s optics went dim and very appreciative as Ratchet twisted, grabbing desperately for the desk with both hands. They didn’t really work properly, red fingers scrabbling for a grip instead of closing. Bonecrusher stayed on his knees behind the medic and leaned forward to follow the sudden movement, continuing to chew on a tire all the while. The lightest flick of a finger spun the other tire, and Ratchet’s siren climbed another octave.

The soft, irregular panting was either coming from him or over the open comm. link. Jazz wasn’t really sure which, and it hardly mattered right now. He could see Bonecrusher’s teeth indenting the rubber. They ground in and released, chewing gentle, then hard, and gentle again until Ratchet
melted down to the floor as his knees gave way at last. The medic’s expression was completely undone.

And, oh, look at that, Bonecrusher’s lap was ready and waiting. The Constructicon sat back on his treads, letting go of the tire reluctantly but looking entirely too pleased with himself as he guided Ratchet down. The Autobot folded like a house of cards, ending up with his legs bent to either side of the Constructicon’s. His knees spread indecently wide over the bulldozer’s much wider frame. His head lolled back, pillowed on Bonecrusher’s broad shoulder, and his bottom lip was tightly caught between his teeth in a pathetic attempt at stopping the little whimpers still leaking out. Not that it mattered, with the constant weebling of his siren picking up the slack as Bonecrusher started in on him again.

Jazz’s self-repair stubbornly refused to find the heavy weight he could swear was standing on his vocalizer. He had to cough to free up his voice, and even then his normally smooth tone sounded ready to tumble in the berth. That really wasn’t a tone of voice officers were supposed to use while logging a status report. ”Medical officer is temporarily incapacitated due to,” removal of higher functions via a hand crawling over one red hip. The look on Mixmaster’s face was both hungry and immensely satisfied as he watched his fellow Constructicon’s fingers walk. But Jazz really couldn’t put that in a report, so he edited for polite company, ”Constructicon interference.”

“We did ask,” Mixmaster said without moving his optics or otherwise acknowledging Jazz’s presence.

*“He agreed to this?!”* Red Alert yelped, and Jazz obediently repeated the question.

This time, Mixmaster did turn. “Of course he did,” he said blankly, as if it were the most reasonable thing in the world. Jazz just gaped at him. “He said he’d give us an answer tomorrow,” the Constructicon said, looking a little irritated by Jazz’s open disbelief. “Do you have any idea how frustrated Hook is right now? He hates changing schedules without warning, and your dimwitted shuttle -- ” he checked himself; patience, tolerance, and not insulting the other faction. Peace negotiations outside the meeting rooms, right here. “Skyfire doesn’t seem to understand the urgency of the situation. The others have to be in time for the contract binding. Erm, uh.” He glanced at the lovely tableau that was Ratchet quivering on Bonecrusher’s lap as the other Constructicon ignored their conversation to go after the chevron conveniently now within his reach. “Not to say that we’re assuming his agreement to our terms,” Mixmaster hastily assured Jazz, apparently trying not to insult Ratchet’s bargaining skills, “but it would certainly help to have the other Constructicons here to complete the courtship.”

Scrap metal and rust. Four more mechs piled on Ratchet? The medic would be a helpless, pleasured puddle on the floor, and that floor would probably be located in the busiest hallway available. Had these mechs no sense of decorum?!

Bonecrusher nibbled roughly, highly conductive dental molds sparking off a sensor-packed chevron that hadn’t been meant to be abused so. Ratchet twitched in time with each graze and skimming touch. Red hands opened and closed feebly, dragging across Bonecrusher’s treads in a search for stability amidst the washing, uncontrolled tidal wave of system build-up. It filled his body, crackling charge under armor plating as the sensor input kept increasing, pushing the energy toward an inevitable peak. The Decepticon’s touch could easily harm, easily hurt, and instead conveyed tender, torturous care. The contrast between expectation and reality made mere sensation into an agonizingly pleasurable flood of feeling that just kept surging.

Jazz stared as Ratchet arched and moaned, emergency lights flashing in tempo with the careful nip of teeth around the edge of his chevron. The medic was well beyond such foolish notions of modesty.
Nope. No decorum here. Next up: the street outside headquarters. Come one and all to watch the Constructicons reduce the Autobots’ Chief Medical Officer to pawing at them in public.

Mixmaster ran a hand down his own face, a look of unhappy, nervous tension replacing the irritation and underlying lust that had been there previously. “I hope we’re doing this right. Scraper had it all planned out, but none of us counted on Ratchet giving us just one day before deciding. Scavenger had a whole line-up of gifts to give him, and Hook’s really better at courting than either of us.” He waved a hand vaguely. “I’d know what to do if he were a warbuild or an industry-make, but he’s a medic.” The chemist had the look of a mech really out of his comfort zone.

He turned an oddly appealing look to the Autobot saboteur as if suddenly realizing that Jazz had experience with this particular medic. 'Teach us, oh wise, experienced Autobot.’ “He’s a specialty build, I can tell, but we’re making this up as we go because we don’t know what he likes! We’re going to lose the contract if we don’t get it right.” The unhappy tension deepened, as well as the imploring 'Help us?' gaze. “He hasn’t even brought up what kind of terms he’s interested in.”

Despite the tempting scene before him, Jazz’s attention transferred to the Constructicon at that. The unexpected insight into the Decepticon side of this bizarre courtship process lit a strange pang of empathy under his spark. “He hasn’t said anything because you’ve got him pretty well speechless,” the black-and-white saboteur said a little dryly. “I think you’ve gotta good handle on what he likes.” He debated potential pros and cons a short second, then added, “Go for the headlights.”

There was a breathy squeal from Ratchet, and a pleased grunt of assent from Bonecrusher. When Jazz glanced at the two, Ratchet’s headlights were being thoroughly mapped out by Bonecrusher. Even as he watched, the big Constructicon contorted, half-twisting himself and half-pulling Ratchet around until tongue could replace hands, and Ratchet’s engine hiccupped blissfully. Sirens bleated, momentarily shrieking unspoken ecstasy when a particular headlight corner was probed. These Decepticons seriously wanted to get this courtship thing right with the medic.

Red Alert coughed over their connection, seemingly shaking himself from whatever fantasies Ratchet’s various noises were conjuring over on his end. *”A time limit. We can set those?”*

“Apparently,” Jazz said, starting to find some amusement from the whole ordeal. The office was hot enough to steam up his windshield, but standing around like a spectator made him think he should get a cube of mid-grade and settle in as some kind of supervisor. Mixmaster shot him an inquiring look, and Jazz filled him in. “What’s the rush, anyway?” he asked when he got a nodded confirmation on the time limit question. “You can only court a mech once.”

Bonecrusher paused, taking short break as his engine rumbled solid vibrations into Ratchet. “We can ask again, but why would we? Who wants a mech who doesn’t want you?” His vents heaved air to cool him down, reaching for self-control as Ratchet shuddered on his lap. “This isn’t a military contract.”

“Besides,” Mixmaster tacked on, “we got lucky asking first. Ratchet’s a good catch for a social bind.” His expression darkened. “We’ll have rivals if we wait.”

“I suppose this explains why Scraper’s asked for immediate transfer back to headquarters,” said a scratchy voice behind Jazz, and the Autobot whirled to see Starscream leaning against the doorjamb. The Seeker was all shiny red angles, gold cockpit, and lazy smile. Jazz felt like a very small glitchmouse, frozen to the spot under a predator’s optics. The Air Commander’s optics gleamed with heat and a hunger that fed a different appetite, however, and Ratchet’s renewed groaning really wasn’t helping Jazz’s composure any.

The hot gaze released him in order to look over Mixmaster, and the smile dropped. Starscream made
the mental sidestep from questionable intent to Official Business, and it flung up all sorts of red flags in Jazz’s head. “You do have a rival,” the Air Commander said curtly. “I came to warn you, actually.”

Bonecrusher stopped what he was doing so abruptly Ratchet managed an actual word in protest: “Please…”

The plea -- and accompanying siren-blip -- hit the room like a shot of highgrade. Jazz’s engine revved. Starscream’s optics blinked through an impressed reset. Mixmaster ticked, stopping himself from automatically stepping over to continue his teammate’s aborted action. When Jazz dared looked, Ratchet was wriggling into Bonecrusher’s motionless hands, sprawled wantonly over the Decepticon’s lap.

Both Constructicons were too focused on Starscream to give the medic the attention he so dearly desired. Their heads tilted, asking something over internal comm. lines, and Starscream shrugged carelessly as he replied the same way. The two exchanged quick looks of alarm while the Seeker plainly felt his duty had been fulfilled.

Jazz felt a dreadful sinking sensation in his tanks. *”That doesn’t sound good,”* Red Alert murmured, and he could only agree. Who could stand rival to the Constructicons that would cause them so much worry? More importantly, was Ratchet in danger from that rivalry?

Starscream met his visor with an expectant look. They had to talk, and the Seeker knew it. Duty over, the Air Commander backslid toward his own goals. Such goals likely involved the way the red optics swept over the short Autobot, cataloguing vulnerable points in a distinctly non-combat fashion.

There was another sensation in Jazz’ tanks, and it wasn’t a sinking one. It kind of felt the way Ratchet sounded right now.

Something that had been nagging at the back of his mind popped up, now that the Constructions were distracted by their own problems. The saboteur tore his visor away from the Air Commander to look at the Constructicons. “What exactly,” he said, stretching the words out slowly, “did Ratchet say to you?” It was a bit weird to talk about the medic like he wasn’t present, but Ratchet wasn’t all there at the moment anyway.

Mixmaster and Bonecrusher blinked at him. “He said he’d decide tomorrow.”

*”That matches what he told me he was going to say.”*

“Not the shortest courtship on record,” Starscream noted, “but short nonetheless.” The Constructicons gave him exasperated looks of *Tell us something we don’t know!*

“Uh-huh,” the Autobot Third-in-Command agreed with all of them. “And what was he deciding on?”

The office fell into silence. Mixmaster and Bonecrusher seemed confused, but Starscream straightened sharply, giving their supposed innocence a second look.

*”Interesting question.”* Red Alert said quietly, hard and stern. Jazz nodded just slightly.

“Bonecrusher,” Starscream rasped in a voice of whetstones and dull knife blades, “may I speak with outside for a moment?”

“Do I have a choice?” Bonecrusher said under his breath, but he began untangling himself from
Ratchet. “Yeah, sure.”

The medic optics were returning to blue gradually, but there wasn’t a whole lot of logic in them yet. His siren wailed, giving dying chirps of sound in time with the fitful flashes from his emergency lights as his systems leveled off. He kind of draped over the desk chair when Bonecrusher gently set him in it. The Autobots really needed to try tactile overloading more often if this was the kind of response it typically got. Or perhaps the reaction was so strong because they didn’t typically practice it?

But that was a question to experiment with later, after Jazz finished backing Mixmaster into a corner. “Well?” he demanded, and instead of the Jazzmeister who gave interface advice, this was a superior officer of the opposite faction talking. ‘For the purpose of ending our Great War, your answer had better be a good one.’

The Constructicon chemist looked uneasy but defiant. “He said he’d decide tomorrow. We had to pay court before then, so we started immediately. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“It didn’t occur to you that Ratchet was gonna decide whether or not to give you permission to court him tomorrow?” His voice rose, and Mixmaster seemed unsettled by that. The Jazzmeister didn’t lose his cool, especially not in front of Decepticons. He was the Autobot Third-in-Command, the scary little black-and-white saboteur who disappeared into the shadows of the Decepticons’ own bases and laughed about it later on the battlefield while shooting a mech in the face.

“Well…I mean, it did, but why would he say it like that if that’s why he meant?” There was genuine confusion behind the question, but there was also a lot of intentional ignorance. This was a Decepticon on the defense, knowing he was in the wrong, and Jazz made a sound like a transmission seizing up.

“Because I already briefed you morons on courting the Autobots, and I know I mentioned how astoundingly inaccurate their information is on courting customs,” Starscream snapped from the doorway. Bonecrusher lurked shame-faced behind him. “An entire war of spying on us, and you don’t know ritual phrasing when you hear it?” the Seeker said to Jazz, and the Autobot lost his rage in a rush of indignation.

“We didn’t exactly associate courting with Decepticons, alright?” Jazz retorted. “We just thought you didn’t trust each other enough for frequent hardline ‘facing. It’s not like we didn’t get enough footage of ‘Cons overloading each other whenever and wherever you could!’” Seriously, an entire faction that wouldn’t trade cables except to close negotiations, but they’d pin each other against the nearest wall and tease to overload no matter who could see? There was something wrong with the Decepticons.

“Footage? I know some mechs who’d pay to watch.” Bonecrusher flinched back when Starscream jerked a wing at him, but his grin was sly. “No, really, that’s some kinky stuff.”

“I will put you on extended patrol duty for the next three orns,” Starscream spat coldly, “and good luck paying court while stuck in Kaon.”

Bonecrusher wisely shut up. Mixmaster seemed about to say something, too, but a glare from the Decepticon Second-in-Command silenced him before he could start.

“They deliberately took advantage of a cultural misunderstanding,” Jazz said, equally cold, and the two Constructicons had the grace to look guilty. “They didn’t wait for Ratchet’s consent. They used the advantage of size and mass t’ take him by surprise and prevent him from struggling. This was done against his will. Among Autobots, this’s considered a crime. As his superior officer, I’m
demanding they -- “

“We asked!” the Constructicons protested as one.

“He gave consent!”

“I asked him twice if he was okay with us continuing! He said yes!”

“I asked him if he liked it when I had my hands up behind his windshield, and he nodded!”

“Oh, so he didn’t really say yes, but that was a definite yes.”

“Right! His mouth was kind of busy because I had my thumb in it at the time, but c’mon, it was still a yes.”

“If we’d waited, you’d have talked him out of giving permission before he even gave us a chance to make an offer!”

“It was kinda a dirty trick, but it’s just courtship. We’re not at agreement of contract yet!”

“We’d never take a mech into contract against his will!”

“Autobots have different levels of consent,” Starscream interrupted them, looking unsympathetic as the Constructicons got more frantic with each protest. “Physical intimacy is held at the same level as data interfacing, evidently.”

They seemed taken aback. “That’s crazy,” Mixmaster said, too surprised to be anything but blunt. “How do they enter negotiations?”

“They never actually spell it out by outright saying that they’d like to enter contract negotiations. There’s some kind of social taboo against explicitly signaling interest through open touching as well. It’s supposed to be vague signals that the other mech will take as hints if there’s mutual interest. Verbal exchanges are discouraged as interfacing is an obscene topic.”

Bonecrusher and Mixmaster were looking back and forth between Jazz and Starscream as if hoping the Autobot would say the Seeker’s factual analysis was a joke. Jazz was as taken as aback as they were. He’d…never really heard Autobot friendships and interfacing customs described quite so clinically. The outsider viewpoint was disconcerting. Put that way, it was amazing any of the Autobots ever got consent at all!

“So how do they negotiate?” Bonecrusher asked in a small voice. “A blindfold and a dartboard with the terms on it?”

“Their social negotiations are nonbinding, as I understand it. Unspoken agreements instead of actual defined contracts.” The Air Commander shot Jazz an uncertain look. “So the theory goes.”

For the first time, Jazz got an idea of just how adrift they all were. The Decepticons had apparently already had a briefing on courting the opposite faction, but the Autobots had kept it within the command staff present in Vos. The Decepticons had already researched the Autobots’ customs, even if they had some of the details wrong. They were trying so hard to make this work, but they were working around a massive culture gap. The Autobots hadn’t even gone so far as to acknowledge that same gap as more than a strange eccentricity. Both sides thought the other was almost unforgivably rude for following their own faction’s unwritten rules.

In this, it seemed the Decepticons had more organization.
“Blaster’s been enhancing the audio on the transmission from before you came in,” Red Alert said, still harsh but more thoughtful. “It’s muffled, but we have what sounds like at least one question asking if Ratchet wanted them to continue. No confirmation from Ratchet, however.”

“I agreed,” Ratchet finally chimed in, and his voice was hoarse. He didn’t lift his head from resting on the back of the chair as everyone turned to stare at him. “They asked if I was okay with what they were doing, and I said -- well, indicated that I was.”

“That’s still agreement under duress,” Jazz pointed out, and the Constructicons bristled at him. “Would you have stopped if he said no?” Jazz challenged them right back.

The two Decepticons scowled. “Of course!”

“If the courtship isn’t consensual, it’s not worth the time put into it. A forced contract isn’t binding!” Jazz eyed Starscream, considering. The Seeker was frowning at the Constructicons, but his earlier anger had eased off. “Ratchet,” he said into the internal comm. channel, “Screamer seems to be takin’ this fairly seriously. Say the word, and I think he’d throw them outta the city to get ‘em away from you.” Whether to appease the Autobots or impress Jazz was debatable.

“You don’t have to say you agreed to prevent an incident,” Red Alert said gently. “This will be reported regardless of your actions. We can’t afford to not inform the others about it.”

“I agreed,” Ratchet gritted out, and now he looked at Jazz. And -- oh. Ah ha. Jazz recognized that look. It was a look of I’m Embarrassed to Exist if he’d ever seen one. Well, that explained a lot. “I was curious. They wanted to court me, and I didn’t think it’d go that far, but like the Pit am I going to complain that they tweaked my gyros to spinning.” The words looked like they’d cost the medic his pride to force out, and Starscream coughed delicately into his hand to conceal a wicked grin. The Constructicons lit up like incandescent lightbulbs of relieved happiness.

Ratchet was determinedly not looking at them. He hauled himself to his feet, using the desk because his knees were as bendy as rubber, and stomped around it. “Now, get off my back and get out of my office. I have work to do!”

“Yes sir,” Starscream drawled, letting himself be herded.

Jazz grinned unrepentantly, skipping ahead of Ratchet as his own relief swooped in strong enough to bottom out his tanks. There would still be inquiries and a practical interrogation of the medic and probably enough briefings on the subject to scar the Autobots for life, but Primus be praised if they hadn’t dodged a bullet here and now. A rape accusation would have been horrible for all involved, especially if the Constructicons’ protests of Ratchet wanting it were believed at all. Starscream might be putting on an indignant act now, the Constructicons making emphatic denials, but Jazz could easily see how the Decepticons would have laughed and congratulated the Constructicons behind an official censure. Even some of the Autobots might have raised a few doubts about burying the incident to smooth the peace process.

Truthfully, Jazz had hesitated to interfere at first because it’d looked like Ratchet was practically begging for it. It wasn’t like the Constructicons had been hardlined in make the question moot. How was tactile interfacing consent judged? He could see, uneasily so, how consent could be hard to argue that way. That kind of unresolved smear added to the Autobot Chief Medical Officer’s reputation was the last thing any of them needed, much less keeping Ratchet himself together through the ensuing whispers and rumor-mongering.

But it hadn’t happened, and relief had Jazz dancing with it. “Sure thing, Ratchet. We’ll just leave
you with your -- ?” He cocked his visor inquisitively at Starscream.


Mixmaster and Bonecrusher looked briefly murderous, but they were handily distracted by Ratchet shoving them bodily toward the door. He pushed them out between Jazz and Starscream and turned on his heel to key the door shut -- but hesitated.

“Yes.”

The Constructicons snapped to attention, riveted. “Yes?”

“Yes?” Jazz repeated dumbly.

”Did he just say yes?”

“Yes,” Ratchet said firmly, and shut the door.

“Yes!” Bonecrusher hooted, and Mixmaster punched him in the shoulder. They slapped hands like adolescent humans and ran down the hall in an exultant storm of joy.

“I’m going to kill him,” Red Alert growled, and his comm. signal blared static before signing off, presumably to link to Ratchet’s comm. system for a private harangue.

Which left Jazz standing in a public hallway with that conveniently empty floor with the Decepticon who just so happened to be courting him.

Jazz, there’s a situation in the medical building…

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 4

[* * * * *]
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 5
[* * * * *]

Look at all that open, spacious floor in this nice public hallway. So available! So…there! And clean enough to frag on, because this was Ratchet’s domain.

Not good.

Jazz attacked, because the only other option was full-fledged running away down the hall. And -- really? Him, run away? Mech, please. “What was that?” he demanded, pointing a finger back toward the office. “Are we gonna have to put out a -- a -- rape alert warning about overly-amorous soldiers chasing our tailpipes?!”

Amusement was crushed under the cool mask of the Decepticon Second-in-Command. Starscream’s wings swept up like a cat’s hackles rising, and he folded his arms across his chest. “Of course not, and I’ll thank you to remember those ‘overly-amorous soldiers’ are doing their best to breech a gap in culture to court mechs whose manners leave much to be desired. You’re doing little to meet us halfway. Is it any surprise they feel pressured?” Optics cold enough to burn leveled on Jazz, sneering down. “I’ll concede that their enthusiasm needs to be curbed, but I will handle discipline issues.”

The Seeker looked away, forcing the contemptuous expression off his face. It was probably reflex to use that expression when dealing with Autobots, but they all had to learn new reflexes now. Peace.

When Starscream looked back, he’d donned the neutral mask that had been two paces behind Megatron’s right shoulder since the beginning of the serious treaty negotiations. Jazz eyed it warily. It felt no more real than the sneer had. Curse the mech for have emotions as hard to read and quick to shift as mercury!

“For the purpose of ending our Great War,” Starscream ground out, voice an irritating grate as he admitted without saying it that he’d gone too far.

As had Jazz, for that matter, but better to catch Starscream off his guard than have that dangerously amused look still on his face. Jazz reached out to clasp hands formally. “For the purpose of ending our Great War.” He was half-prepared for the Air Commander to kiss his hand again, but it seemed that was a permission-seeking thing. Starscream just nodded and…ah. Alright, so he wasn’t going to let Jazz’s hand go.

Jazz tugged experimentally, and slag if there wasn’t humor lurking behind the mech’s bland expression. “It’d be a lot easier to meet you in the middle if we knew what was going on,” he said lightly, discreetly shaking his hand. “You know we’re blundering around cluelessly, but you’re not exactly being helpful. You can’t blame us for not gettin’ your cultural cues when you’re not telling us what we’re seeing.”

A hint of a smirk quirked Starscream’s mouth. He hung on just a moment more, apparently just to see Jazz try and pry him off without being too insulting about it. The annoying part was that Jazz kind of preferred the humor over Starscream’s I’m Playing Nice mask. It was too creepy when Starscream erased all emotion off his face. That just wasn’t natural. So when his hand was released,
Jazz propped it on his hip to sass attitude at the Air Commander. Dangerous or not, Jazz would take catty Starscream over unreadable Starscream any day.

“Why, Jazz,” one bitchy Second-in-Command, Starscream by name, inspected his hand as if checking for Autobot residue, “you never asked for my help. Do you want it?”

Did he..? Oh, come on, it couldn’t possibly be that easy! “You’re yankin’ my chain,” Jazz said flatly.

Red optics blinked through reset, and suddenly Starscream was looking him up and down with a lot more open interest than a moment ago. “You come with a chain? Fascinating.” A grinding scrape came from the direction of the floor, and Jazz couldn’t help but look down, visor getting wider and wider. Starscream’s turbines were turning slowly against the floor. Those turbines were taking slow strides forward, as well. “That hasn’t been in any file on you I’ve ever looked through. Where is this chain, and may I yank it?”

A sputter got out before Jazz could stop it, because nothing so insane should be couched in such a coaxing, thoroughly delighted tone of voice. “No! I -- it’s an idiom from Earth!” He took two quick steps back, pivoting to move parallel to the wall. “I don’t come with a chain attached!”

“Oh? A pity.” Starscream stopped, a pout crossing his face. The Decepticon’s head cocked to the side, disappointment and tentative hope in one. “Is it an optional accessory?”

What?

“I have a vivid imagination,” the Seeker informed him, taking his speechlessness as an invitation to continue. Of course, he also took Jazz stopping in his tracks as permission to invade his personal space, crowding close enough to rest a hand on the rubber of one shoulder-tire. He rolled it back and forth, testing resistance and slipping a finger into a hubcab opening. “I can picture something attached here, maybe going through to wind around the axle. It’d be a challenge for you to escape quickly, I’m sure, and if I yanked it,” Jazz rocked to one side as Starscream tugged for illustrative purposes, “it’d lay right across your -- “

“No!” Jazz finally spluttered. He could feel exactly what it would lay across, and like the Pit was he going to let the Seeker’s filthy imagination infect his own with theoretical escape challenges! Scrap metal and rust, was tactile overloading all the Decepticons ever thought about?! “No chain!”

“Are you sure? Something strictly utilitarian to contrast with your pretty design…”

Yes, okay, so the crooned compliment was flattering, and the fingers stroking his tire felt quite nice, and why the frag was he still close enough to let Starscream touch him? “Not cool, mech,” Jazz said, jerking away and taking another two steps back. “We’re talking about what courting is gonna mean to the Autobot-Decepticon alliance. Lay off the berth fantasies.”

Starscream moved away from the wall, and Jazz countered by taking half a step more toward the middle of the hallway. Getting trapped against the wall wouldn’t be a good thing. “I see. You want information?” The Air Commander’s smile was dazzlingly innocent; Jazz was instantly suspicious. “I would be happy to supply it. Under what terms am I providing such information?”

Decepticon and Autobot faced off. Jazz mulled that over.

“…Decepticons,” he said flatly. “We’re going to have to double-check every single blasted thing we say to our suitors, aren’t we?”

It was as much of a real question as Starscream’s smile held true innocence. Ratchet had shown half an opening, and the Constructicons had dove into it seeking every single advantage they could. And
it wouldn’t just be the Constructicons. Starscream was smirking now in full-blown evil amusement at Jazz’s disconcertment.

Because Starscream and the Constructicons were Decepticons. Decepticon culture was an utterly bizarre thing, but what Jazz had to remember was that it came from an entire faction named for its tendency to deceive. Just attempting to be peaceful wasn’t going to stop the Decepticons from trying to influence negotiations in their own favor. They were Decepticons trying, in their clumsy way, to stretch a common practice within their ranks. They were trying to include the Autobots.

The Autobots, in turn, were a group of mechs who had no idea what tricks were probably ordinary and avoidable among the Decepticons. Give and take happened by the klik in the Decepticon ranks; exchanges of favors, pleasures, and credits went back and forth in a mind-bogglingly complicated process every day. Jazz could sometimes predict and occasionally infiltrate that process. It was part of his job. However, as an Autobot, he didn’t really understand the underlying system that kept the process going. Everything Autobot in Jazz insisted that the Decepticon faction should have collapsed in on itself like scraplet-ridden wreckage long ago.

Yet, it most definitely hadn’t. If anything, Decepticon culture seemed to have redoubled and grown out of conflict that should have destroyed it!

…Primus help the Autobots. Courtship negotiations were going to be like trying to navigate a minefield.

“Smelt me,” Jazz said out loud, processing that. “I’m beginning to get why you’re starting with the officers only.”

Starscream snorted explosively through his vents, straightening up to fold his arms again. He turned his head to one side and glared at the wall. “You think it’s hard from your side of things? I’ve made a study of Autobot interface culture, and even I can’t understand a third of your reactions. If you were a Decepticon, I’d have you halfway to your second overload by now, and we’d have the basic framework for the contract laid out.” Jazz swallowed and shuffled his feet, trying not to draw attention as his hands tingled. Second overload? “My imagination’s good enough to picture what the results would be if we turned the rank and file loose on your poor little ‘bots right now. Letting them court as they wish without a, hmm, set of courtship guidelines would be…most unwise. What’s that human phrase? Wolves in the fold? Sheep to the slaughter?”

Er, yes. Jazz could picture it, too. Cliffjumper would draw a gun on the first Decepticon who put pressure on his personal space bubble, treaty negotiations or not. This whole courtship process was getting more complicated by the klik. Starscream made an aimless gesture at nothing with one hand, trying to expression frustration -- sexual or otherwise, Jazz couldn’t tell. He felt a little guilty for that, then smacked himself upside the helm for even thinking about feeling guilty for a Decepticon’s sexual frustration. Complicated! Yes.

Starscream blew out air again, sighing. “Either I’ll figure out the proper protocol for this…endeavor, or we’ll find another method.” The glare at the wall intensified, and the Seeker’s shrill voice shrank to a sullen mutter. “I’m just not sure what other methods are open to us, anymore.”

The war loomed over them suddenly, darkening the hallway, and Jazz’s tingles turned to a shiver. The chill wasn’t physical, but it could freeze the spark. Yeah, the courtship process seemed a nightmarishly strange complication to him, but what was it like from the Decepticons’ perspective? What would it be like to decide overnight that a binding contract to an enemy was the best way to make that enemy an ally?

“The other Decepticons will pass all propositions by me before presenting them,” Starscream said
more formally. His head turned, optics dark crimson with rotten temper and a sort of helplessness that Jazz had to sympathize with. “Does that satisfy your Autobotish need to coddle your officers, or shall I supervise the propositions personally?”

“Not sure havin’ a Decepticon supervise Decepticon behavior would really serve the intended purpose,” Jazz said, trying for humor. It came out wanly, and he smiled even less convincingly.

Starscream eyed him, seeming to debate whether or not to take offense at that. “I do not want some idiot to end the peace by saying or doing the wrong thing and wounding some Autobot’s precious little feelings,” he said, settling for adding extra acid to his words. “A misunderstanding under these circumstances could explode into something far worse, and while I’ve tried to impress upon the officers a need to take things slow and careful, that will do little to ease tension. It is difficult to understand your reactions. It’s so counter-intuitive. You Autobots seem to regard everything surrounding interfacing as unnatural and complicated instead of a natural extension of -- nevermind. If you wish, I can take you along to witness the propositions and make things even more awkward,” he added somewhat viciously, tucking his wings down and folding his arms tighter. “Because Primus knows it’s so easy to understand how you want us to behave.”

“Hey, heeeey,” Jazz ventured a step forward, hands open in contrast to the Decepticon’s closed body language. “Calm down. I’m tryin’, I really am.” It was difficult to read Starscream’s underlying motivations at the best of times, but his face gave away surface emotion easily. Frustration and resentment made some mechs lash out. Starscream had lashing out down to an art. Jazz really didn’t want to start a fight. “I just want to understand what’s goin’ on, here,” he coaxed. Calm down, there’s a good jet.

One blue hand shot out, deflecting Jazz’s closest arm to the side and wrapping securely around the wrist. The Autobot immediately twisted his arm to disengage, but Starscream moved into the pull and followed it in. Jazz was abruptly looking up into the Air Commander’s face, and that treacherous glimmer of amusement was back. Mech had moods like slagging mercury.

“Yes, so you’ve said,” Starscream said, and his voice had dropped to that pleasing rasp again. Jazz looked up at him, defiant and annoyed, and took a step back as a thruster eased forward as if trying to stand right where the Autobot currently stood. The Seeker followed, turning around that foot like an axle and never releasing the grip on Jazz’s wrist as he lowered his voice further. The rasp became something…intimate. “What are you going to give me if I answer your questions?”

That was a question with a whole Fed-Ex airplane of implications, special delivery. Also, surely that voice wasn’t legal outside the berth.

The saboteur ducked under his own arm, quicksilver fast. He was almost fast enough to slip under Starscream’s wing before a quick switch of turbined heels had them facing each other again. “No chain,” Jazz cut him off before he could even start.

“You’re no fun.”

He couldn’t help himself: he winked, half his visor flickering dark. “Oh, mech, you have no idea how much fun I am.”

Turbines spun, but that didn’t put the Decepticon as off-balance as Jazz had counted on. He aborted his next move halfway and danced back, feet lightly crossing over each other and settling into a modified combat stance as far away from Starscream as their outstretched arms allowed. If this were actual battle, he’d step in closer and kick at the jet’s side, then snap a punch at Starscream’s face when he flinched from the kick. In the spirit of experimentation, the Autobot allowed the gentle pull on his arm to drag him in. He took the steps in slow motion.
Starscream watched him come with avid optics. “I’m sure I don’t. Are you willing to show me?”

“Are you asking for sparring or something more?” Jazz’s foot left the floor, a slow motion kick that could clearly be seen coming.

A brief expression of startlement crossed Starscream’s face, but it mellowed into mild interest. “I do like hands-on negotiations.”

At the same slow motion time, the Seeker’s right leg bent as his free arm lifted to block the kick. His left leg straightened to the side and swept across the floor toward Jazz’s anchor-leg. Jazz turned the kick into a lunge forward, free arm going back and then forward in a slow-motion punch. He pulled on his captured wrist, gambling that the Seeker would either let go or be pulled off-balance into the punch to the faceplates.

Starscream merely smiled and smoothly changed his unneeded block into an intercept for the punch. The Decepticon was larger and stronger; he could accept the force of the smaller mech’s punch in order attempt capture Jazz’s other hand. Jazz’s lunge turned into ducking under Starscream’s intercept. He came up under the hand, running in slow strides around the Seeker in such a way that he wrapped the mech’s own arm around him. He sling-shot all his mass onto his trapped arm, trying force the Seeker off-balance.

As predicted, Starscream transferred weight to the leg that had been sweeping forward to trip the Autobot up. Jazz dove neatly over it, trying to slam the hand on his wrist against the sharp edge of the closest wing. If he could get the edge into the vulnerable joint between forearm and wrist, it’d pop Starscream’s hand open, but the Seeker countered with by flicking the wing back and trying to hit him with the flat instead.

And suddenly they were dancing around each other, joined by that one hold Starscream utterly refused to relinquish. Sped up to real time, it would have been a deadly test of battlefield survival. At half-time, it was a feat of showmanship and skill. Their feet were placed with deliberate care, and their bodies evaded, collided, and separated to turn about again. Starscream avoided slamming the smaller mech with his larger mass. Jazz didn’t stab him with a concealed blade. They fought, and they both knew the steps to this slow dance. Even if Jazz threw in some discothèque moves just to liven things up a bit.

The curve of Starscream’s lips grew ever-closer to a smile with every sally up the hall, and it looked so smooth. A ghost-echo skittered through the Autobot’s memory, recalling the plump feel of it, and the hand in Starscream’s grip tingled faintly. Despite that distraction -- temptation? -- Jazz was actually having something he might, if interrogated, call fun. Maybe. He liked mixing business with pleasure, after all.

“Megatron’s not a fighter build.”

“You know that for sure, do you?”

“He’s a miner, an’ he had extensive rebuilds for the gladiatorial pits, but he wasn’t part of a warbuild culture.”

“Very good, you know your -- Ack! Where did you a joy-buzzer our size?! -- history. Point of interest: Soundwave isn’t a warbuild either.”

“Wheeljack, duh. Mech’s got weird hobbies. Kinda undermines you trying to sell this binding contract idea t’ me as a warbuild cultural thing.”
“I never said it was exclusive to warbuilds. To answer the question you’re flitting about, Megatron learned it.”

“Float like a butterfly! Sting like a -- ow!”

“Turn-about is fair play, yes?”

“…sting like a bee. A joy-buzzer bee. So, he learned it, huh? Riiiiight.”

“This is not the first time I’ve taught cultural awareness. This is just the first time teaching to an entire segment of population opposed to even the basics.”

“The frag..?”

“I assume that wasn’t an invitation. What?”

“Oh, you assume right. Just picturin’ you teaching Megatron. Also, you hit me with a rubber chicken. I think that counts as a weapon.”

“It’s a very small weapon.”

“Still…weapon.”

“I’m not letting you go. Megatron learned. He recognized useful knowledge when it was presented to him.”

“How was courtin’ useful to the Decepticons?”

“We were setting up a planetwide faction to revolutionize Cybertron. Binding contracts and the associated culture provided a social structure previously lacking. Megatron and Soundwave had military ideas from the Planetary Guard and the ability to exert change within that military, but little in the way of actual rank and file organizational skills outside of the gladiatorial arena. No matter what your prudish Autobot…pardon me.”

“For the purpose of ending our Great War.”

“Yes. For the purpose of ending our Great War, give me back my rubber chicken.”

“Gimme back my joy-buzzer.”

“Hrn. No. I have plans for it.”

“I know you do. Hence, I’m holdin’ the chicken hostage.”

“And Scavenger will be sparkbroken.”

“Why would he care -- oh, no. He wouldn’t.”

“He would. Scavenger doesn’t have the best judgment when it comes to giving gifts. I think it would be best for your dear medic’s peace of mind if you kept that. Or gave it back to me.”

“Buzzer?”

“Keep it. Anyway, you may question our methods from your viewpoint on the outside, but you must admit that the Decepticons have been successful.”
“I’m not commentin’ on that. How could Megatron have known it would work? I mean, seems like you were experimenting wholesale on your own faction.”

“…ah, I see.”

“Yet I don’t. See how this whole giving-Jazz-information thing works? Along with the giving-Jazz-his-buzzer thing.”

“Which isn’t working nearly so well as the information-giving, you may have noticed. Tell me something. When you think of Praxus, what kind of mech do you think of?”

“Really hope you’re not trying t’ start a fight, Decepticon.”

“The Senate leveled my city, too, Autobot. There are very few sore points I can pick at that don’t have mirrored injuries, anymore.”


“Rich or poor?”

“Middle class, I guess. Why?”

“Bear with me. Did they stay in their city or leave to find work?

“Stayed. No, wait, a lot of ‘em rotated through the Enforcers. So they left but always came home.”

“A stable city-state population with a definite authoritarian culture that promoted rules and enforcement of those rules. But, the majority of the Praxians died. Don’t give me that look, I’m making a point you can’t see yet. Did most of the Praxian survivors join the Autobots or Decepticons?”

“Autobots!”

“Of course. What about Iacon?”

“Autobots.”

“You don’t sound as sure.”

“Not all Iaconians came to our side.”

“No? But you were so certain the Praxians did.”

“Praxians are a close-knit bunch.”

“What you’re too polite to say is that Iacon had two societies: the Tower nobility and the peons whom the nobles stepped on getting to those Towers. The nobles mostly didn’t survive the collapse of their privileged lifestyle, but I’d say a 50-50 split happened among those who did survive. The idealists went to the Autobots, and the, hmm, disillusioned came to us. But the Decepticons took far more of the Iaconian dregs. Most of them weren’t even from Iacon. The Iacon lower class left the city whenever possible. Polyhex?”

“Flyers. Decepticons.”

“Yes, exactly. But before the war, I mean.”
“Not rightly sure, now that you mention it. Industrial area, so…grounders, mostly.”

“Yes. Was the population indigenous or migrant?”

“What?”

“Did mechs want to stay there, or did they leave as soon as they made money?”

“Oh. Migrant workers.”

“Unstable citystate with no fixed population or mainstream culture. Kaon?”

“Same, I suppose.”

“Flyers or grounders?”

“Grounders.”

“Heavy industry that burnt out workers as quick as they migrated in looking for jobs. Again, an unstable citystate.”

“…I think I see where you’re goin’ with this. Most of the Vosians joined the Decepticons.”

“Yes. We did.”

“Group decision.”

“Yes.”

“When most of us think of Decepticons, we think of flyers.”

“Of course you do. The Decepticons truly came into military might the day Vos was leveled. We gave Megatron the strength to outright challenge the Senate. We had the social stability and the military structure, not just the numbers. We, like the Praxians, cycled in and out of our city, but we went off-world as mercenaries or joined the Planetary Guard. The difference between what happened at Praxus and what the Senate did to Vos is that far more of us survived the slaughter. But both city states had the only real, cohesive culture left to transfer into the setting of a faction. Praxus went to the Autobots; Vos went the Decepticons.”

“There were a lot more differences.”

“I was attempting to skip the politics. And if that’s a paint can in your hand, I will take you to the floor right here and now.”

“Paint? Would I throw paint at -- whoooa! Hey!”

“Yes, you would. I think I’ll keep a hold on both of your hands from now on.”

“And if I tell you to get your hands off me?”

“I will do so. But if that really what you want, Jazz?”

It was a question more breathed than spoken, and Jazz could read the words on those satin-gloss lips. He pressed his own lips together like he could crush out the traitorous prickle that crossed them, but he was unable to tear his visor away. Did he want Starscream to let him go?
Good question.

Their sparring had become something that could only be called flirtation. Negotiated price for information or not, this was not business. Their free hands had brushed aside attacks that were really excuses for body contact. Their legs had intertwined and released, and Jazz’s fans were busily humming to disperse heat saturating him from head to foot. His helm projections felt like they were sparking with excess energy. Starscream’s turbines ground against the floor, and Jazz’s engine wanted to turn over so bad.

The Seeker had him by both hands, long fingers wrapped around the wrists, and even as Jazz hesitated to tell him back off, Starscream gradually edged closer. The Decepticon had him nearly to the wall, but Jazz refused to take the single step back that would force him into a position of no escape. One step of clearance gave him room to dodge. He just…wasn’t sure he wanted to.

Starscream’s right hand drew back, extending their arms like they’d begin waltzing at any moment. The motion pulled so that soon Jazz would be flush against the gleaming gold cockpit, and that wouldn’t be a waltz. The tempting curve of Starscream’s mouth would be well within reach as he bent toward the Autobot, and no dance from the Decepticon Air Commander would be acceptable but a fiery tango. No more slow dancing through old steps. This would be new. New, and rather exciting in a dangerous-bait way for a connoisseur of dance.

Something liquid and boiling drizzled desire down Jazz’s back like a lust waterfall.

There was a small sound, no more than the creak of a dry hinge. Starscream’s head turned fractionally, optics darting to the side. Jazz wouldn’t give way, wouldn’t be distracted, and his processors shot a dozen moves through his head to take advantage of the opening. Not all the moves were combat-related.

The darted glance steadied into a look. Starscream’s posture loosened, tension easing down. He had been closely focused on Jazz, bringing his attention and intent to bear where the peace negotiations wouldn’t allow for physical pressure, but now he refocused in the beat of a second. It was as if they’d been holding their breath during a stand-off, and the aggressor had suddenly taken a mental step back. Starscream’s body didn’t move, but his mind redirected.

Jazz felt the shift keenly. A weird swell of disappointment replaced what could have been, maybe, anticipation that had built with every step they’d taken. The creak came again, and Jazz took his visor off Starscream just enough for a quick glance.

The words burst out of him before he could stop them. “The frag are you two doing?!?”

Starscream’s wings trembled in renewed tension. Amusement shook them this time, however, not restraint, and the Decepticon Second-in-Command snorted with poorly-suppressed laughter.

His own words turned about and smacked Jazz in the back of the head like a board. Because Mirage and Sunstreaker were just standing there in the hall, staring with half-dumbfounded, half-enthralled looks on their faces. Like, say, anyone who walked into this situation would do.

Despite himself, Jazz became abruptly aware of just how he was standing. They were facing off, yes, Decepticon and Autobot posed face to face. They were evenly matched: Jazz’s questions to Starscream’s answers, slow-motion sparring with words and actions down the hall. They’d spun and parried, action and reaction like a body language chessmatch, and come to rest at mutual ‘check.’ Starscream couldn’t press forward. Jazz wouldn’t back down. They were waiting for whoever had the ball-bearings to dare try for ‘checkmate.’
But to an outside observer who’d walked around the corner in a perfectly innocent corridor on the third floor of the medical/engineering building…well. Reality check: Starscream and Jazz were the ones clearly engaged in questionable activities. The question really should have been directed at them.

Mirage and Sunstreaker were well aware of that fact, too, if the wide smiles creasing their faces were anything to go by. Jazz resisted the urge to bury his face in his hands, because that would require bringing Starscream’s hands along for the ride. There was accidentally saying something foolish, and then there was jumping gung-ho into foolish action. Jazz would rather like to stop at just saying the foolish things, please.

A fine black hand made a dismissive gesture that emphasized Jazz’s stupid question by bypassing it completely. What question? Oh, that question? Now, why would Mirage ask that question, hmmm? He was obviously answering a perfectly reasonable question from a superior officer. “I was just talking with Sunstreaker,” Mirage said, polite as anything.

Sunstreaker blinked a few times, missing his cue. He caught it eventually. “…yes. Something about a commission?”

He pointedly turned to face Mirage as if their fellow Autobot and superior officer wasn’t posed like a tarted-up model in a lurid, full-page spread from Tango Passionistas. Which only made Jazz want to squirm all the more. The thing about Sunstreaker was that he was a brutal sociopathic frontliner on the battlefield, or even when just provoked or impatient. To be honest, that was a set of pre-existing conditions that had ruled him for most of the war, but Sunstreaker wasn’t always like that. He’d had a job, once upon a Golden Age, and that job had required socializing with customers who’d been among the rich elite of Iacon. He was a highly-talented artiste, and he knew how to act like one.

Much to Jazz’s dismay at this very moment.

“Of that right there, in fact,” Mirage said, ever-so-politely turning his attention to Sunstreaker. He motioned toward the two officers posed motionless not halfway down the hall. “I thought that you might be open to a commission bid to renew interest in the arts on Cybertron. The war may end soon, have you heard?”

“The rumor had reached me,” Sunstreaker agreed gravely. He took a second look at the pair and splayed a hand indecisively when he pointedly turned back to Mirage. The noblemech projected amusement that had nothing to do with Jazz’s level glare, nope, nothing at all. Sunstreaker just seemed bored, which was almost worse. “The subject doesn’t quite fit my style, to be honest. I’ve been experimenting with landscapes since Earth, and I’ve fallen out of practice using models. My working relationships have always been turbulent, and diving right back into personalized, mech-focused pieces won’t be easy for me or my models.”

“Mnhmm.” Mirage nodded agreement, tilting his head to study the pair of officers critically. “It might do you good to at least start. Think of it from a business perspective: I’m offering to pay both you and the models. A paid practice period, all in the name of supporting the arts.”

He didn’t leer. Noblemechs didn’t indulge in such plebian facial expressions unless they were Decepticons, and then the leering was really part of an overblown villain personae. Alpha Trion-type facial ornaments had gone out of style among the Autobots, but noblemechs in the Decepticon ranks had been known to have them, apparently for no useful purpose but twirling under specific circumstances. Usually, those circumstances involved tying someone to train tracks. Astrotrain was popular with that lot.

Mirage had never expressed an opinion of the Decepticon triple-changer one way or another, oddly
enough. That’s not to say that Astrotrain and/or a mustache would have been out of place in the
noblemech’s vicinity at that moment.

Sunstreaker gave Jazz and Starscream the benefit of a true artiste’s bored, I’m Too Good For This
once-over. “Would either of them be interested in modeling for the piece? They’re not ones for
holding still, so far as I’m aware.”

“I don’t know.” So polite. Mirage smiled blandly, deigning to speak directly to them finally. “Would
you agree to model?”

Jazz was going to kill them all. It was one thing to be chased like a extra-bouncy bumpercar around a
rink, but talking about him like he wasn’t locked up on display with the blasted Air Commander of
the Decepticons?! That was just objectifying him. And he was never going to stop talking in hysteric
Italics inside the sanctity of his own head if Starscream’s wings didn’t stop jigging with not-so-
hidden laughter. Frag the lot of them.

He tried pulling in his extended arm, hoping to at least get out of this ridiculous pose, but that just
brought the Seeker’s attention back to him. The amusement dancing like captive fireflies in the
mech’s red optics was…almost attractive. Jazz had expected more maliciousness, or even defensive
anger. Starscream had to know that Mirage’s ultra-polite snobbish buyer act was nothing but
mockery, and he typically reacted to mockery by lashing out.

Taken aback, Jazz’s frown eased. His lips parted, on the cusp of asking, and his visor fastened on the
puzzle in front of him.

The red optics darkened, slowed, and Jazz’s extended arm was gently pulled. The Autobot didn’t
give in, of course, but that also meant he couldn’t back down when the taller mech leaned forward.
Jazz’s hand slid down the wall as the jet pulled down, straightening them out so the back of
Starscream’s wings no longer blocked half their bodies from the two Autobots watching them. Jazz
hesitated but allowed his weight to roll onto one shoulder-tire. He hitched his shoulder up, allowing
the door of his altmode to flick up and over to lay flat against the wall. The vulnerable small of his
back curled reflexively, aching aware of empty air, but the flat of his back struts between his doors
met the wall.

Just like that, he was suddenly trapped. The feeling came almost as a shock even though he’d seen it
coming. He’d allowed it happen. Why?

This was exactly where he hadn’t wanted to be: chest to chest, jet cockpit to radiator grill. No room
to dodge. Pressed up against the wall, where there could be no escape. Jazz felt his professional pride
burn, but it only ached through the heat already soaking his circuits. The hand around his right wrist
loosened and slid up, still pushing his arm flat but sliding into his loose fist. One elegantly-tapered
finger lingered to caress his palm as Starscream turned entwining their fingers into one more step of
their little dance. Mirage and Sunstreaker’s optics were a very real weight upon him, their
conversation falling silent, but a strange, hypnotic feeling stole over him:

Jazz wanted to know what would happen next.

‘Dare you,’ whispered underneath Starscream’s every move, and the Jazzmeister didn’t accept dares.
He conquered them as a matter of course. The Air Commander moved slowly into him, an
aggressive Decepticon demanding he give way and abandon his defiant stance, while still a suitor
allowing time for rejection. And Jazz let him. The Autobot’s visor blurred, white static-flecks of hard
thought stuttering across the blue until they solidified into solid blue determination.

He re-met Starscream’s gaze with a look full of skepticism -- and challenge. ‘Bring it on.’
Jazz’s right hand accepted Starscream’s left, fingers interlacing palm to palm, and they stayed that way even as the Seeker let them slide down the wall, following the movement of their bodies. Because their bodies were moving, forearm to forearm and knee to knee. The Seeker’s knee bent further, taking more of his weight as he leaned down to press their chests together. The pressure pushed his hood into Starscream’s cockpit even as the Autobot’s shoulders flattened to the wall. Jazz’s right leg braced and took the weight, bending to arch the small of his back. His off-leg, his left leg, was no longer pressed knee-to-knee with Starscream’s right, and it relaxed just slightly.

Alright, well, it would have relaxed if that small release of tension wouldn’t have brought their now-crossed thighs together instead. That was an intimate contact Jazz wasn’t quite ready for.

Jazz’s braced foot had turned sidelong to the wall, as if he were about to either throw himself sideways or use his leverage against the wall to shove the Seeker off. Somehow, he’d gotten into a position a less flexible ‘bot would have broken something trying to accomplish. Getting back out of it probably would have twisted a lesser mech’s back struts beyond parameters. It left Starscream looking as if he’d lunged forward, pinning the Autobot. With his right hand pressed into the wall at waist-height and the other held far forward, legs pushing him forward into a sharp arch that met the wall at foot and shoulders, the saboteur should have looked like a prisoner fighting a losing battle.

Ah, but Primus help him. Send cold weather, because he was heating up. Jazz didn’t feel like a prisoner. This was a step in the dance, frozen in that pivotal moment of the song when the dynamics changed like a bolt of lightning, and they’d light the stage on fire. The whole world held its breath. Jazz’s vents closed almost as tight as his fingers curled around Starscream’s firm hold.

Mirage. Sunstreaker. Who were they? Why did he care, anyway? Stampede the whole blasted army through here, and he wouldn’t notice.

Starscream dipped his head, just the beginning of a teasing smile crossing the lush pewter lips -- help, Primus, help, he was fixated on the mech’s lips again -- as they descended toward Jazz. His processors spun, hamster going nowhere, as it raced to blame the position, the angle of his trapped arms, because he’d never in a million vorns say why his back chose that moment to arch that extra impossible inch. His hood pressed into the shiny gold cockpit with a squeal of armor against glass, and, yes yes. Jazz had to open his mouth to gasp, his vents were all closed, and --

Their cheeks stroked together. The soft feel of moving air briefly skirled up the side of Jazz’s face, and the very corner of the Seeker’s mouth touched his in passing. It was far closer and warmer than the kiss he’d been expecting, but the fleeting caress wrapped his mind in cobwebs of something more tender than lust. It paralyzed him with surprise richer than shock. Velvet heat swirled a tornado of sensation through his spark casing. It skipped his fuel pump and came out of Jazz’s parted lips in a tiny, tiny hitch of air.

The Seeker followed an invisible line down, nosing across the saboteur’s high cheek ridge and trailing down to his jawline. Starscream lowered himself obliquely, cockpit skreek-skeeing across the Autobot’s hood as he angled himself. His face slid down, down, until the bridge of his nose nuzzled where helm and jawline met. He stayed burrowed in there for a moment -- Jazz’s fuel pump counted, skip one, skip two -- as if gathering control. Then he turned his head, letting the tip of his nose trace under the smaller mech’s chin.

Metal met metal, vulnerable neck linkages against flexible facial plate, and Jazz’s threat assessment programs faltered as badly as his ventilation system. The Autobot’s chin tipped down, just slightly. He could claim it was a poor attempt at protecting the linkages, but truthfully, he was moving into the relentless exploration mapping out the side of his neck, one cable at a time. He would just never, ever say that out loud.
His visor dimmed. Although he couldn’t see it, he could feel the way Starscream finished mouthing unspoken words down the side of his neck, nudged one shoulder tire with his nose as if testing the rubber’s resilience, and then turned the meticulously thorough progress of his mouth back toward center. That mouth! Primus, those lips were as plumply-giving as their looks had promised, polished silky-smooth as they brushed across each linkage on the way, lipping them to hear that inaudible hitch again.

A vent of cool air startled Jazz’s left leg into tensing. It drew up a bit, pressing the less-exposed inner side with an almost-unnoticeable vibration against Starscream’s thigh. If the Seeker’s leg hadn’t already had a miniscule tremble of its own, neither of them might have felt it. As it was, Jazz suddenly felt hyper-aware of every sensor humming to the rhythm of another mech’s arousal.

They should have looked like a tableau of threat: a Decepticon forcing an Autobot to surrender.

“And if I tell you to get your hands off me?”

“I will do so.”

Jazz had never felt more powerful in his life.

Starscream vented deeply in a meditation on self-control, and his hands held the Autobot in place so firmly because the rules could make him let go. He mouthing one particular cable-cord with single-minded purpose, and that lovely little hitch of air came again. If Jazz hadn’t been so aware of the Seeker’s audio right next to his vocalizer, listening to every stifled noise that wanted to jump out, he wouldn’t have felt anything but a surge of drugged power-pleasure. But he was aware, and so he felt the Air Commander smile against his throat.

Oddly, that only made Jazz even more aware of the fact that he wasn’t being kissed silent. There was nothing stopping him from gasping and moaning but the frayed ends of self-control.

There was a extremely quiet click as his hood popped. A satisfied hum answered the barely-heard -- and slapping embarrassing -- sound of the catch releasing, and a quick lick right under his chin rewarded him.

Red optics tilted enough to flash a mischievous look at the two Autobots gawking at them. “May we be allowed to choose the pose?” Starscream asked, as innocent as the day he was sparked. “Because I can think of a few we can hold all day.” His voice had lowered down into that husky rasp no one expected to hear from Starscream of all mechs. Jazz smiled widely, finally finding the humor of the situation in one hilarious go. “Holding still isn’t difficult,” rasped against his throat, and the Air Commander tipped his head up just a little to suck briefly on the spot that’d just been kissed.

Jazz immediately proved him a liar by writhing. The Seeker chuckled, low and amused, and sucked harder. He lifted his mouth reluctantly, but gave their watchers a trademark smirk and finished, “If one has sufficient motivation, that is.”

Fans suddenly roared to life, astonishment breaking into itty-bitty pieces that fell to the floor right beside the trampled heap that had been Mirage and Sunstreaker’s dignity.

“I--I-- That is -- “ Mirage stammered, scrambling mentally for something to say that would salvage his noblemech pride. Sunstreaker just inhaled/exhaled through a full, shaky ventilation cycle while the blue Autobot spy verbally tripped all over himself beside him. “W-we never meant to say -- I didn’t mean -- surely you wouldn’t -- “

“Wouldn’t we?” Jazz murmured, letting his visor come back online. He still couldn’t see
Starscream’s face, but he wasn’t looking at the Seeker. He gave the two Autobots down the hall a trademark grin of his own. They deserved to be slapped in the face by the echo of their fans banging off the walls. It betrayed just how much they wanted what they’d just tried to embarrass Jazz with. “You should know better than to give me limitations by now, Mirage.”

‘Dare you,’ his grin said.

His visor narrowed, however, hard-edged reminder that this was the Head of Special Operations wearing such a friendly grin. ‘Bring. It. On.’

The Jazzmeister could turn any situation to his advantage, and he was going to make sure they knew it.

Stammering stuttered into the tortured mechanical creel of a vocalizer forcibly shut off, and Mirage stood in mute horror for a moment. His face was a picture of consternation: sheer disbelief vs. ‘I want me some of that.’ The fan rhythm flubbed for a second, but even Mirage’s stung pride wasn’t enough to shut his ventilation system off without enough time to cool his overheated frame.

Sunstreaker just cycled again, huffing his vents full-bore as he watched Starscream nuzzle his helm under Jazz’s chin. “That pose?”

The only reason Jazz felt it was because Starscream remained pressed against him. The wings jolted, just a tad: ‘Is he serious?’ in body language. “Maaaaybe,” the Decepticon drew out, sounding as confident as if Jazz hadn’t felt a thing.

“How maybe? ‘Maybe’ doesn’t art make.”

There was a pause. Even Mirage was giving Sunstreaker an incredulous Really? look, but there was smidge of wonder in that look. Nuts and bolts, Jazz was gazing in silent awe at the frontliner, and by now he’d over-drafted his account with the invisible Bank of Flabbergasted for the day. Sunstreaker hadn’t done true art in so long, most mechs assumed the bloody-minded sociopath war personae was his default. The dabbling in new medium on Earth didn’t count, no matter how Sideswipe had crowed during psyche-evaluations. It was a good sign, but good signs didn’t resurrect peace-time careers. There hadn’t been even a hint that Sunstreaker would -- or even could -- resume artwork.

Under the heat, under the pulling desire, something that had almost stopped hoping squeezed around Jazz’s spark.

So, of course, Ratchet chose that moment to open the door to his office. How he managed to bang open an automatic sliding door was anybody’s guess, but he stomped out into the hall like CMO actually stood for Chief Medical Outrage. He reeked of righteous wrath as he rounded on Mirage and Sunstreaker, who reared back on their heels in utmost surprise to suddenly be facing yet another superior officer, this one post-molestation by Decepticons. Ratchet didn’t seem to notice that he was practically bleeding fury. He just got in the two Autobots’ personal space and started yelling.

“Why the frag are you in this building?! Unless one of you is going to keel over right here and now, get your tires off this floor and back to your units! So help me, if I have to start assigning bored soldiers tasks to keep them from bumming about in my medical building causing trouble, I will dredge up the worst jobs I possibly can! Dump patrol! Recyclables sorting! Ferrying the human dignitaries around, and I will find them French fries to eat if I have to make them myself. No, corn chips! Nasty, oily smears all over your interiors, and don’t even think about coming to me for a solvent, because I’ll -- fraggers! Get back here when I’m threatening you!”

For a medic better known for his skill and icy stability under fire, this no-holds-barred kind of
hostility just blared *Over-Compensating For Something!!*’ If Mirage and Sunstreaker hadn’t been backpedaling in appalled fright before him, they might have summoned the gall to be curious. As it was, they turned tail and fled with Ratchet bellowing threats involving junk food and babysitting humans after them. He ground gears when they cleared the corner, the squeal of rubber on metal floor panels informing everyone that two high-performance cars had transformed and gone for the exit.

“Hrrumph,” the angry medic grumbled, turning to storm back up the hall. “Jazz! What by Primus’ holy skidplate is going on…out…” He stumbled to a halt, staring.

Jazz and Starscream stared back, still sunk in shock. The last they’d seen, Ratchet had been a debauched ‘bot still trembling with stymied overload. Jazz had figured he’d kicked them all out of his office to save what little dignity he had left while working himself to completion. He’d kind of wanted to go back and help, but Starscream had put a stop to that thought fairly quickly. Now it was Jazz’s limbs beginning to give those betraying little quivers, and Ratchet’s optics drank in the sight like a draught of high-octane, additive-cocktailed highgrade. Overworked fans reluctantly kicked back on, rattling painfully on loose hubs, and Ratchet made a muted sound like a whimper as his abused body heated right back up.

There was a word for the look on the medic’s face. Jazz made a query at the Bank of Flabbergasted, which informed him that there was no longer credit in the Gobsmacked account. Ratchet had evidently made a hefty withdrawal. Starscream and Jazz reset their optics in unison, just looking at the stricken mech in rather entertained bemusement.

After far too long, Ratchet coughed his intakes clear of appreciation. “Ah. This explains why Red Alert wanted me to come out here and tell you two to get a room.” A helplessly amused look crept over the medic’s face as Jazz’s visor jerked up, searching the ceiling. The camera was at the far end of the hall, opposite the direction Mirage and Sunstreaker had fled, and distracted or not, the saboteur should have remembered it was there! “Really, Jazz? A hallway?”

Starscream didn’t even bother to lift his head. He nestled a little closer, in fact, radiating smug contentment. “I’d forgotten that mech’s wicked sense of humor,” he murmured, and Jazz’s neck twinged as he attempted to look at his own throat.

“Who, Ratchet?” he asked, because Ratchet’s gloating smirk didn’t seem all that surprising to him. It was even a little funny. Sure, he felt a flare of humiliation burn anew under the slow tide of pleasure, but he knew as well as the medic that being caught with Starscream holding him had nothing on the scene Jazz had walked into. Starscream wasn’t even touching anywhere strictly inappropriate.

…no matter what it felt like.

“Oh, no.” The dark helm that was all Jazz could see turned, and Starscream sighed cool air into neck cables. Jazz’s tires left black marks as they juddered against the wall in response. “Red Alert.”

That sent all kinds of warning signs popping up. Jazz kinked his neck again trying to catch a look at the Decepticon’s face. “What do you know about Red Alert’s sense of humor?” he asked sharply.

“Hmmm. Enough.”

“That is not an answer.” That remark had sounded too familiar, as if Starscream knew more than a file, and Jazz’s mind suddenly recalled a memory of Red Alert fritzing. Red Alert running off with this very mech while in the grip of madness, handicapped by damaged circuitry unable to cope in the midst of battle. Red Alert had come back from that incident with faulty memory file gaps. That’d been normal considering the state of his crashing CPU at the time, but Jazz had the sudden, horrible
certainty that he needed to know what had happened in those time gaps.

“No, it’s not.”

“Lover’s spat, Jazz?” Ratchet got out around the guffaws trying to get out first. “Going to do that in the hall, too?”

Okay, he couldn’t let that one pass. Time to get the Jazzmeister back to the pitching mound. ‘Batter up.’

His weight shifted, pushing off his braced leg and shoulders. Instead of settling onto his other leg, evening his stance, Jazz lifted his foot entirely off the floor and curled his leg around Starscream’s supporting leg. His thighs straddled the Seeker’s leg, now. While his back remained in a dramatic arch, now it looked like he was lunging forward into Starscream’s hold. He let his body press forward into Starscream.

The Decepticon didn’t raise his head, but he yielded without question to the push. The subtle thrum of tension in the Seeker’s thigh went up a notch. Which, ah, felt nice but hadn’t been the point.

‘Strike one.’

His arm remained extended, wrist encircled by Starscream’s hand as if they were about to start waltzing. Their entwined wrists had come forward nearly to rest on Starscream’s waist. All of the Autobot’s weight was supported by one braced foot. It kept him pushed into place on the Seeker’s upper thigh, back arched so their chests pressed together.

Jazz let his head fall back, relaxing totally into Starscream’s grip. The Seeker’s body shook, just once, before he burrowed his face into the vulnerable spot opened fully to him. A quicksilver tongue snaked between cables, and Jazz shuddered.

‘Strike two.’

He let his visor dim to a sultry glow and turned it toward Ratchet. “Haven’t you heard?” he asked, berth-lazy and engine purring under the Air Commander’s ardent attention. “Public debauchery is medically advised. Just…following your fine example, after all.”

‘Strike three.’

The Bank of Flabbergasted reported that several accounts under the names Taken Aback and Discombobulated had just drained out. Ratchet had emptied them all. “…you.”

“Yup. Me.” Jazz wondered his level of self-assurance tasted like. Starscream seemed to be trying to find out.

“You.”

“You’ve sa~aid that,” he sing-songed, then eeped in surprised as Starscream let go of his captured hand. Well, not so much let it go so much as firmly setting it on the Seeker’s waist so his own hand was free to finger Jazz’s grill. Oh, Primus, clever fingers. Clever fingers thrusting in and out, in and out in in and ouuPrii-i-imus!uut of his grill and climbing, one grill at a time, up toward the popped hood Jazz had hoped was forgotten about.

Ratchet’s fans weren’t racing nearly as fast as Jazz’s, but the competition was close. The medic visibly swallowed down several retorts -- there might have been a request to join somewhere amidst the indignation, too, but he’d never own up to it -- and turned on his heel to bolt back into the office.
The door swished closed meekly in his wake.

'You’re out!'

Jazz’s vision blurred around the edges with the feel of lips on his throat and the teasing brush of a nose. Things wavered all too pleasantly every time Starscream insistently nudged, encouraging him to tilt his head to the side just a bit. The jet made pleased noises between sucking on an exposed fuel line he hadn’t had access to before. His free hand fingers wiggled under the hood’s edge, searching for the release catch. The Autobot flared his vents, inhaling hard against his fans until they stalled out, and pushed.

“Hands off,” he demanded coldly.

[* * *]

Picture by DarthNeko on LJ.

[* * *]

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 5
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 6
[* * * * *]

Starscream stopped like someone had flung a kill-switch. His lips pulled away from the Autobot’s throat, and his head rose. Red optics questioned without words, but Jazz was dead serious. Fans burring with strain, limbs shaking, and yes, right there, oh by the Pit -- !

But he was serious. First and foremost, Jazz was the Head of Special Operations, an Autobot officer, and duty sternly kicked him in the back of the cortex. The rest of him was a wibbling mess, but duty stood firm.

…frag it.

Scenarios of reluctance ran through Jazz’s mind, growing more extreme as they went: a miser spending his last credit, a starving mech pouring out a full energon cube, letting go of the last handhold before falling off a cliff, and Tracks surrendering a tin of Super Turtle wax polish. They all went up against Starscream’s expression and came up short. Nothing could compare to the way the Decepticon shut off his optics and gritted his teeth as he pried his fingers off Jazz, one by one.

The Seeker had been shivering with self-restraint before, apparently determined to tease Jazz at an excruciatingly slow pace. Now the shivers turned to outright shaking, and -- Jazz wasn’t much better, truth be told. Part of it was because Starscream was concentrating so hard on releasing his hands that his thigh was still firmly wedged between both of Jazz’s.

The Seeker’s increased shaking right there right there more more was doing exciting things to Jazz’s temperature gauges. Jazz’s head helplessly thunked back against the wall again, and it was the best he could do to maintain the severe set of his mouth as armor plating sweetly vibrated. The all-over quivering tapped his sensor network into a frenzy. It tried to pinpoint the location of the touches, and there were too many locations. Which only made him all the more aware of them. That, in turn, spun his sensitivity up even higher.

It was like racing through the first spring rain on Earth, systems pumping overdrive but tuned to the feel of joy and delight as warm flecks of harmless liquid hit him from every angle. There had been so few chances for speed on Cybertron that didn’t involve a mission, and the rain had always been acid. The contrast to Earth’s rainstorms and roads hadamped sensation unreasonably high, and the Autobots had deserted the Ark en masse when spring rains first fell. They’d staggered back punch-drunk with the soaring high of multiple networks maxing out and tripping circuit blocks. Everybody’s quarters had usually acquired a tangled knot of cables when the Autobots reached the end of their willpower and dragged whomever was in reach to the nearest berth for some truly spectacular interfacing.

Good times. Great memories. Really not helping his self-control at the moment.

Starscream’s hands on him echoed the pleasant shock of Earth’s rain: Jazz had expected one sensation and gotten the total opposite. He’d thought it’d be fast, like tires hitting asphalt, and it’d been agonizingly slow. He’d thought a Decepticon would take, but this was all giving. He thought it’d be a cold, impersonal business transaction, acid rain because that’s what one would expect from
polluted skies, but Starscream was peeling fingers off like they’d been glued down.

The contrast ramped a bit of playful molestation against the wall into, well, whatever this was.

So the buzz of armor plating became an assault too pervasive and delicate to be anything but pleasurable. Jazz was doing some shaking of his own. He only just kept his hips from bucking against the Seeker’s thigh as Starscream freed their clasped hands at last. Jazz’s hand stayed suspended in mid-air, fingers spread. The Autobot was proud that he wasn’t reaching to touch the gleaming glass cockpit still pressed against his chest.

He couldn’t respond. He couldn’t reach out. Duty mule-kicked Jazz, fighting fire in his body with cool reason flooding down from his mind. If he responded, if he wanted, it wouldn’t be taunting Mirage or Ratchet anymore. It would be him, Jazz, officer and saboteur, admitting that he wanted what the Decepticon Second-in-Command was offering. That would be a weakness to be exploited.

Offering a chink in the armor to Starscream was suicide. There was a peace treaty in progress, but Jazz would be smelted before he trusted the Seeker.

The treacherous mech’s hand trembled in the air like a drone given conflicting orders, but then it balled into a fist and slammed into the wall beside Jazz’s head. Starscream dropped his chin, forehelm blocking his optics from sight, and gave a scraping whine of frustrated arousal. “You’re… sure.”

The Autobot didn’t feel threatened. No, correction: he didn’t feel threatened by Starscream. He felt more than a bit threatened by the urge melting down his back struts. He wanted to turn his head and bite the jet’s wrist. The joint was right there, vulnerable cable within reach, but the wavelets of liquid desire lapping at the base of his spark casing had nothing to do with disabling an enemy. A sharp nip, right on the cable strung tense, and scrap metal and rust, his curiosity needed to take a long walk off a short pier. Preferably a pier in Sharkicon-infested waters. Because, yes alright yes, Jazz wanted to see what the Seeker would do.

His stupid blasted curiosity was going to get him interfaced against a wall. By Starscream. Who was still technically an enemy.

Jazz absently made a resolution to stop italicizing his own thoughts. The situation was ridiculous enough that every other thought deserved a few extra exclamation marks and an entire trust fun from the Bank of Flabbergasted.

“Yes,” he bit out, and it was all duty speaking. Like it had to, frag it.

He shut off his visor to block out the tempting wrist and fought his ventilation system. The fans stubbornly kept spinning, prodded by a subprocessor that kept presenting him with more inappropriate ideas quickly pushing his sense of duty toward throwing a hissy-fit. The Seeker’s weird banter over a certain Earth idiom was coming back to haunt him, and Jazz busily stuffed any and all chain-associated -- or not associated, he wasn’t even sure where they were coming from at this point -- urges into a freezer located somewhere in Siberia to cool down.

"You’re no fun."

"You have no idea how much fun I can be."

No. Bad body. Stop making things more difficult than they already were.

He was sure that his body betrayed how much he wanted this. The tiny movements he couldn’t repress weren’t visible, but they didn’t have to be seen in order to feed back into Starscream. Their
bodies were just pressed too closely together to hide anything, and it probably wasn’t helping the situation any. Their bodies were tuned into each other. They’d made a loop that would only break when Starscream managed to let go. It was not, as Jazz was all too aware, such an easy task as that. The Seeker’s wings were hiked high and shivering, moving parts flared at their widest as he tried to do precisely that, and his wrist was tempting Jazz because it was a sign of vulnerability.

Jazz was struggling to control himself because, yes, Primus that felt good. But the other half of the issue was far more internal. This was the Second-in-Command of the Decepticon faction openly displaying just how much Jazz revved his turbines. Any other situation, and Starscream would be a shrieking harpy hiding honest physical reaction behind a barrage of hate and gunfire. He’d had Jazz pinned and mostly helpless, but it was Starscream forcing himself to let go. Jazz had done this to him. Jazz was making him stop, all just by saying ‘No.’

What a time to discover he had a powerplay fetish.

…and really shouldn’t have been such a surprise. He was a Special Operations operative. He was a specialist even for Special Operations. The whole Autobot division probably had a control kink a galaxy wide. But mechs could only be equal when hardline cables crossed. Physical bodies were background noise when data interface began. Everything centered around the connection.

SpecOps mechs were already under suspicious scrutiny from the other Autobots. Offering cables to another Autobot was all about trust: taking and receiving. Data interfacing for Jazz had been for so long about the thrill of throwing himself wide open under another mech’s mind, information files locked away behind firewalls and partitions but personality and emotions nothing but laid out.

Suddenly laid out physically, unreciprocated touch leaving him drowning mentally --

It hit all kinds of chords Jazz hadn’t heard before from his body. He hadn’t even known this station existed, much less what kind of music it played.

Starscream’s fingers slid out from under his hood, and the Autobot had to suck air in just to give himself something to concentrate on that wasn’t the slow slide of fingers departing. “Your hand,” the Seeker got out, and it sounded like someone had put his normally-shrill voice through an extra round with the cheese grater.

His hand? Jazz brought his visor back online, peering down his arm somewhat muzzily. “Oh,” he said faintly, his jumping-jack thoughts getting caught and pinned down by duty one at a time. “Right.”

That hand. He’d forgotten it. The hand that Starscream had placed on his own waist. It was just sitting there, neither holding on to the jet or pushing away, and a hopeful subprocessor suggested that maybe it was okay. Maybe it was enough that he wasn’t actually, measurably responding? Neutrality! Neither protesting nor supporting! Furthering the treaty process by putting his hands on over the enemy without intent to maim or molest! This was progress, surely? Yes?

Duty steamrolled that idea like a cement mixer hitting a pogo stick at 200 MPH. NO.

Jazz let gravity have its way, and his hand fell. It made a sad little clang hitting the wall. “Your leg,” he said back to the jet, pushing strength into his voice because whimpering would not project the image of stern Autobot officer he needed right now, “should move.” Not…in the way that irrepressibly energetic subprocessor immediately suggested. He had the mental image of his sense of duty glaring at the back of his head, trying to incinerate the suggestion.

“Yes, it should,” Starscream agreed, surprisingly, and his helm rose to flash deep, burgundy optics at
the smaller Autobot. They met Jazz’s blue gaze the same way a human woman target-locked on the last piece of chocolate cake: ‘Yum. Time to eat.’

That look went straight through his visor and rooted about among his thoughts, setting fires as it went. That obviously-malfunctioning subprocessor gleefully started writing subroutines directing Jazz’s body on how he should respond to a look that heated. Duty squeaked dismay and hauled on logic-reins as hard as it could, starting a tug-of-war that Jazz wasn’t sure who would win. He wasn’t sure who he wanted to win, to be honest. He knew who he should want to win, but -- right. When a mech stooped to personifying his conflicting desires in order to control them, they were probably already out of his control.

“Why isn’t it moving?” the Autobot said, and if his voice was a little higher than normal, it was still nicer to listen to than Starscream’s piercing tones.

“Give me…a moment.” A chuff of laughter left Starscream’s air intakes, and the dark helm dropped again. “It’s good to know we’re physically compatible, I suppose,” the Seeker said conversationally almost a full klik later. “I’d been slightly concerned that you wouldn’t find my frametype desirable after so long on the opposite side of the battlefield.”

Jazz had absolutely no response for that. Say he found the jet…compatible, and he’d be admitting that he wanted this. Say he didn’t, and it’d be a blatant lie. It probably wouldn’t end the peace negotiations, but it certainly wouldn’t help. Autobots and Decepticons were still finding their boundaries with a slap to the face. What was the phrase? ‘Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.’

Fortunately, Starscream didn’t seem to be expecting a response. “It doesn’t make this any more understandable. Why won’t you simply accept what I’m offering you?” The Seeker sounded strangely plaintive, but he was pulling back. “Am I still taking this too quickly?”

The slow scrape of his leg between Jazz’s thighs stroked the Autobot speechless. Something tender convulsed in the center of his spark. Over-sensitized sensors sat up and begged, panting for just a little more stimulation, an extra push over their parameters, and they’d -- “Yes,” duty said, because Jazz had left the building.

Starscream whipped around as soon as he was clear, thrusting himself away using the fist on the wall and taking three quick steps across the corridor. The Seeker’s wings flexed as if they could still sense him, even with the Seeker’s back turned. “It’s just an overload,” the Decepticon insisted, and it sounded like each word cost metal shavings off his vocalizer. “If I hadn’t walked in on that,” one blue hand waved at Ratchet’s door, “Mixmaster and Bonecrusher would have overloaded your CMO. I sincerely doubt,” a look more caustic than carnal was finally turned on Jazz, “that he would have stopped them. I doubt even more that he’d have complained when they did it again. And again.” Jazz watched the jet’s wings slowly shift down, the hunched shoulders rolling down and back as icy control settled over Starscream again, and something sank in the Autobot’s chest.

Hostility was reflex in the Decepticon ranks, and Starscream topped the ranks. “I didn’t see you stopping them. Why is it acceptable for those bolt-brained menials to bring the Autobot Chief Medical Officer to overload, but I am not allowed to -- “

A shrieking sound of frustration burst from Starscream as he turned to fully face the Autobot still slumped against the opposite wall. “I am Second-in-Command of the Decepticon forces, the Air Commander of the Armada, and I will be the one to restore Vos to her former glory. Can you at least lower your prissy Autobot standards enough to deign to feel honored by my intentions?! There isn’t a flyer in the ranks who wouldn’t change places with you in a flash!”

That was going too far, but he knew it was a mistake even as he responded. “I’m not one of your
flyers!” Jazz said back sharply. “It’s not idealism if I’m more concerned with what those intentions are than a quick grope in the halls!” Starscream’s head jerked back, offense following on the heels of shock, but Jazz had been riled up too far to back down now. Lust, anger, conflict of expectations and reality; it all scorched his internal systems until the sound of coolant pumping through his lines shook his neural circuitry in their slots. “All those titles mean nothing but ‘shoot on sight’ to me unless or until the Pit-slagged peace agreement goes through! What’d you think I’d do, lay down an’ let you paw me?” Mocking laughter barked across the hallway like a raised fist, and the Seeker tensed to meet it. Jazz slashed his hand through the air, denying a fight even as his words punched. “Ratchet can handle himself, and he’s a medical officer. The Constructicons may be powerhouses, but they don’t stand a chance hackin’ him. You’re more of a threat to my -- “

“Why are you bringing hacking into this?!?” Starscream howled, taking a half-step forward, and Jazz’s shoulder-tires sprang him off the wall to take a combat stance opposite him. Not the low-key stance of a sparring match, but aggression facing off against aggression as Autobot and Decepticon began to circle. “Typical Autobot! You see a little pleasure as trying to take advantage of you! I never once went for your cables, but you’re acting like I’m about to force-download your entire cortex!”

Jazz smoothly retreated before the Seeker’s longer stride, coolly noting that the stairs were down this way. He wanted the option of escape. “You dare say you’ve never done it, and I’ll pull up every Autobot profile that says differently,” he shot back. “Decepticons have done it before, and you’ll do it -- “

“-- again? Really. Is that what you think this is about?” The smile on Starscream’s face qualified as a lethal weapon, and just the sight of it registered across Jazz’s tongue as bitter. “Interesting how Autobot ideals strip down to the metal when exposed to reality. Autobot interrogators force-download Decepticon prisoners, too, and don’t pretend otherwise. At least we,” the words were individual drops of acid delivered with a scientist’s accuracy, “don’t commonly practice it for fun.”

“That’s not the same thing,” Jazz said, voice low and cold enough to freeze water. His visor was a narrow blue band giving nothing away, but threat assessment was running the Seeker’s every stalking step forward. In the corridor, Starscream’s wings impeded his fighting ability. It nominally gave Jazz the upper hand, but the Decepticon’s mass was in his favor if it came to a fight. “Data interfacing is nothin’ like force-downloading. We only did that when the war gave us no choice but survival or sacrifice.”

Starscream’s lip curled. “Oh, please. Save the sniveling sacrificial innocent act for someone who hasn’t seen you murder his subordinates with a smile so wide it should have split your face in two.”

“Murder -- !” Jazz took a step forward, visor blazing, and the Seeker’s turbines spun on with a threatening cough. “You’re one to talk!”

“I’ve never denied my kill count,” Starscream said, smooth as a knife sliding between armor plating, and his optics were vicious slits set over a sneer only elongated canines away from being a feral animal’s snarl, “but neither have I ever said they were anything but killing. And don’t say Decepticons are alone in glorying over the number of enemies destroyed. I’ve seen your sociopaths on the front line, and our spies have overheard enough conversations comparing kill counts among your troops. Even now with whatever the fragging truce mandates, I wouldn’t fly alone out near Autobot territory. Your innocent little soldiers would shoot me out of the sky, ceasefire or not, and they wouldn’t bother to hide my body. They’d say that it was justified, and you name one Autobot officer,” he stepped closer, crowding the smaller mech, “one officer of your dear cadre that’s supposed to hold so closely to Prime’s mantra of forgiveness and freedom -- you name one mech that wouldn’t agree.”
The smaller mech glared up, fists balled at his sides. “I regret every time I’ve had to force-download a mech’s cortex,” his fists shook with the memories, “because it’s nothing like interfacing. It left wounds on my mind and spark I don’t even want to think about. But I don’t regret killing Decepticons who had it comin’. Those that didn’t, yes. But you -- “ one fist unfolded a single finger to stab at the Seeker, “ -- you name one of us who doesn’t deserve the death sentence for what we’ve done in this war!”

“I’m sure we could argue about the technicalities of that for vorns, but don’t project your guilt on me,” Starscream said softly, and the rasp of a blade over a whetstone underlaid his voice. “Regrets are useless. They change nothing. If I went back in time, I would still kill every Autobot I did the first time through.” His head tilted, cocky and gloating just to see Jazz’s cold mask flicker anger hot as the blue-white of a welding torch. “Probably more.” He leaned closer, deliberately inviting the Autobot to throw a punch, go for his throat, make the first move. “And do you know why?”

“You’re a sick piece of pit-slag?” Jazz clipped out, but he didn’t strike. It took every bit of self-control he could dig up, but he didn’t strike. Starscream chortled. “Quite possibly, but no. I would do it all over again, because otherwise we wouldn’t be here.” His sneer twisted, and he raised his head to glance around the hallway. They’d circled nearly to the corner. “Here, on the edge of -- peace.” His tone made it at curse, but he also took a step back to eye Jazz disdainfully. “We’ve all become killers, but if we hadn’t…where would we be, hmm? A whole society of weak fools beneath the Senate’s heel has been culled until only the strong have survived. We are the best of our race,” a sudden blink of thoughtfulness crossed his face, faster than it could be suppressed, “despite how odd those ‘best’ mechs have turned out to be.” He shook his head, perhaps freeing himself from that presumably disturbing thought.

He gave Jazz an unreadable look as the sneer dropped entirely. “You Autobots! You can’t see the living for the bodies anymore.”

There was a heaviness dragging down Jazz’s jaw, but disbelief alone wasn’t enough to drop his mouth open. There were words that were stronger than the need to gape in shock. “We can’t -- you’re insane. Crazy! Cybertron has practically become a recycling plant for the dead, and you think this’s progress?!” He took the step forward that Starscream had given up, and suddenly they were circling back up the hall as the Autobot returned aggression for aggression. “There’re barely any living mechs left t’ see because we’re up to our optics in the dead!”

“If the next words out of your mouth blame the Decepticons for all those bodies,” Starscream shrilled, “I will laugh in your face!”

“Then go ahead and laugh!” Jazz yelled. “The Decepticons destroyed our civilization and massacred whole cities! How can you blame that on the Autobots?! You’ve had your Primus-damned revenge for your blasted city six times over, and the Autobots aren’t the Senate! You can’t blame Vos on Prime, so you tell me why the fragging flyers stayed with the Decepticons if not t’ kill for the power of it!”

“What do you think the Decepticons want, you stupid ‘bot?! If it were power, we wouldn’t have slaughtered so many!” Starscream’s voice shattered off the walls like broken glass, dangerous pieces flying out of control, and the Seeker was crowding Jazz again. “There’s no power to be had if your power base is all dead!”

“I don’t know!” Jazz shouted. The pressure of fury and confusion ignited into an unexpected explosion that had only one outlet available, and his voice turned into an outright scream: “I don’t know what you want!”
Silence struck hard enough to stun, and the words filled the hall in almost visible heatwaves. Jazz vibrated like a strung bow in the tension, visor glaring and when had he drawn his gun? Starscream’s arms were almost into position to fire his nullrays.

But they’d stopped. Barely.

"Jazz, do I need to send a team to your location?" Red Alert’s transmission dropped through the network, and Jazz would have flinched if Starscream’s optics weren’t watching his every movement for threat. "Ratchet is standing by to assist."

Thank Primus for soundproof doors and cameras without microphones. “No, Red. Starscream and I are just, ah, having a discussion,” Jazz said, and the trace of a smile in his voice was a credit to his acting skills, because it certainly didn’t reflect anything he was feeling at that moment. He cut off the transmission and forced out, “For…the purpose of ending our Great War.”

It almost wasn’t enough. Not for a Decepticon relearning tolerance and patience. Or for an Autobot who’d shot on autopilot at this Decepticon more times than he could count, for that matter. Peace was a teacup full of nitroglycerine, and it was so fragile in their hands.

Finally, Starscream’s arms lowered. He moved stiffly, as if de-escalation were a foreign concept working against his basic subroutines. Just as stiffly, Jazz holstered his gun. They regarded each other warily from less than an arm-length apart. For all that they’d never stopped moving, they’d circled right back to where they’d started in the hall. Self-defeating progress, turning common ground into a battlefield.

“At least I am willing,” the Decepticon Second-in-Command nearly whispered, “to accommodate what you want. Even when I don’t know what precisely that is.” Hot turbines pinged against the cooler metal of the floor as he took a slow step back away from the Autobot he courted. An expression too raw to be identified came and went on the Seeker’s face, and Starscream scoffed. “How much faith can I possibly hold in a peace treaty with the Autobots when neither side knows anything about the other?”

“Trust can’t be one-sided,” Jazz said back, just as low, “and the Decepticons have been proven untrustworthy.”

“Yes,” Starscream agreed sourly. Harsh emotion flowed like buried magma behind the red optics studying Jazz. “Which is why I said ‘faith,’ not ‘trust.’ I wouldn’t bet on any trust being offered from your side of things.” His optics turned away, something resentful in the set of his mouth. “There seems little point in continuing this farce.”

He swept into a shallow bow, a stiff formality. “For the purpose of ending our Great War,” he recited, going through the motions with utterly no sincerity behind them before turned on a turbine and walking away.

Jazz watched him go. A dozen responses, comebacks, scenarios, and potential problems/solution subsets went through threat assessment and came up empty. A subprocessor offered a note about nice afts and chasing the one currently going out of sight.

This time, duty had no problem ruthlessly suppressing it.

[* * * *]  
End Pt. 6  
[* * * *]
Pt. 7

I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 7
[* * * * *]

“What was that all about?”

“Wish I knew, my mech, wish I knew.” Jazz put his back to Ratchet’s office door and slouched, armor ruffling up in a way that should have been anatomically impossible for a mech of his make and model. It stretched the extra weave of tensile cables that didn’t come standard issue with said make and model, and Ratchet gave him a quelling look. Jazz obediently stopped before something dislocated. “He just -- “ He paused, shook his head, and restarted. “I don’t understand how -- “ No, that wasn’t right either. “I wish I knew,” he repeated lamely, because he really did.

He headed Special Operations, and his first instinct in a situation like this was to gather more intel before making another move. How unfortunate, because his source of information had just stalked off in a spited huff.

Second instinct built on the first, insisting that action trumped waiting on the battlefield. Behind the scenes, yeah, patience was key. However, at some point Jazz had classified this whole mess as a new form of fighting. That had a bucketload of bad connotations, considering the fact that they were supposed to be in the middle of negotiating a peace treaty. Pump-level combat routines didn’t care; they’d decided to classify ‘courting’ as ‘potentially fatal.’ That part of him saw Starscream walking away less as a loss of an informant than a move on the battlefield, and that required immediate reaction. A list of suggestions scrolled down the side of Jazz’s vision: all things to soothe the savage Decepticon by seeming to promise a lot without actually delivering a single thing.

The fact that this list was peppered with lewd suggestions from one obviously malfunctioning subprocessor wasn’t worth acknowledging.

The Autobot saboteur slowly spelled out events in the hall for Ratchet, knowing that Red Alert was listening in and passing on relevant details to the Autobot command cadre. He hesitated slightly over delving into his own response to Starscream’s advances, settling at last for skimming the highlights. It wasn’t like the footage from the corridor surveillance camera wasn’t enough to fill in the blanks, but he’d rather not talk about it at the moment. In hindsight, it was more than a bit embarrassing just how much he’d responded. Starscream hadn’t done more than a little creative groping, and Jazz had balanced on the very edge of endurance.

He kept his visor trained on the floor and laid out what the -- ‘conversation’ -- with Starscream had revealed. If there was an overtone of I’m Embarrassed to Exist in his voice, Ratchet had enough tact to not bring it up. Possibly because the Intimate Adventures of Ratchet & the Constructicons had been acted out in this very office not all that much earlier. Possibly because, for all their teasing and snarking, the Autobot command staff knew each other inside and out, and they knew when it was time for some prudent silence.

Silence was not on Jazz’s list of conciliatory actions to get back in Starscream’s good graces before the temperamental Decepticon started causing trouble. The Air Commander’s parting words raised all kinds of alarms, and Ratchet’s worried look confirmed Jazz’s concern. They could think of very few good things resulting from “There seems little point in continuing this farce.”
"He took off the second he stepped outside," Red Alert reported, troubled. "He’s out of my surveillance zone. Should I consult with Soundwave?"

That was asked reluctantly. Red Alert couldn’t exactly be called paranoid when it’d been proven so very often that the Decepticons really were out to get him. He was a security specialist. Like all specialists in the war, he’d been identified and tagged for termination with extreme prejudice. As the war went on, the surviving specialists had become even better in their chosen fields. Red Alert was a fine example of what kind of specialist fighting superior forces and supply lines with leftovers and salvage could make out of a mech. Just because Autobots had been on the defense for so long didn’t mean that Red Alert’s counterparts in the Decepticon ranks didn’t remember the nasty tricks he pulled on the offense. The tags had been tagged with additional kill orders, and then those tags had been flagged with ASAP notifications.

By the time the ceasefire had eased into actual negotiations, the Decepticon rank and file had elevated Red Alert to some kind of Autobot boogieman. It was an attitude that seeped in odd ways into the Decepticon Elite as well, even though they probably knew better after their time on Earth. Or maybe witnessing Red Alert chasing Laserbeak around the Ark’s control bridge with a gigantic flyswatter had only increased their respect for the security director. Who knew what Decepticons thought? All anyone knew was that Soundwave and his Casseticons had an unnervingly eerie way of always keeping Red Alert in sight.

So the Autobot Security Director had no desire whatsoever to approach Soundwave for help. Even if the Decepticon communications specialist probably had Starscream tracked at all times. Truce or not, nobody was foolish enough to think Starscream was subdued.

“Naw, Red. Let ‘im sulk,” Jazz said, letting Ratchet pull him upright. “Put out a general heads-up for everyone t’ keep an optic out for him, but actively chasing the fragger’s not gonna help anything.”

He tried to brush the medic off with an, “I’m fine,” but Ratchet briskly started examining him for damage anyway. Jazz shrugged and bore the poking and prodding. He didn’t even flinch when the medic popped a hatch under his bumper and plugged in, inspecting his system status from the inside. It actually served to remind him of information the other Autobots needed to hear.

"We’ve got bigger issues than one overclocked squawk-box. Seems that the Decepticons equate hardline interfacing with force-downloads.”

Ratchet frowned, and Jazz had the feeling he was using the examination to keep his hands busy while he thought. The buzz of data streaming through the port was certainly distracted enough. Jazz’s subprocessors whined complaints at the medic, citing sensor spikes from outside stimulus that would have had Ratchet’s fans spinning again if not for the medical partition standing between Jazz’s systems and the medic’s. Blue optics went subtly wider, and Ratchet cocked an inquisitive look at him. The smaller Autobot locked down his own ventilation system before that could even get started again. He was not in the mood for instant replay.

The medic shook his head. “That’s twisted. That implies that a substantial percentage of Cybertronians regard data interfacing as an act of war, and -- that actually explains some standard protocol for handling Decepticon POWs.” Ratchet finished slowly. “It’s never occurred to me to wonder why there’s always been a strict ‘hands off’ policy for prisoners, but no ban on interfacing. That implies the Decepticons have resorted to one, but not the other.” His optics were troubled. “Implying that we didn’t understand what we were banning in the first place. Are we regarding the same thing with such a wide divergence that we don’t even define it using similar words anymore?” He looked down at the cables linking him to his patient and abruptly disconnected them as if the standard practice suddenly made him uncomfortable. “The humans have a generalized ban on all sexual activity that’s written into their international code, what’s it called -- “
“Third Geneva Convention, Part III: Captivity,” Red Alert supplied. “The language used has always been a sticking point for interpretation, too. I knew there’s always been the risk that one of our soldiers might abuse a position of power as a guard to take advantage of a prisoner, but my primary concern has been that the prisoner would use interfacing as a bargaining tool or trick.” He sounded disturbed by this new line of thought. “Of course it was to keep the Decepticons from facing their way free, but I never thought about it from the Decepticon perspective.”

“If every uplink feels like rape,” Jazz said, shuddering at the thought, “those policies have been keepin’ our guards from blithely violating Decepticons.” Ratchet’s presence running parallel to his data stream had sinister implications that had never crossed his mind. Another Autobot sharing his ports and meshing with his cortex was a feeling of openness. Welcome. But if a mech didn’t know that feeling as anything but a threat, because Primus knew the Decepticons didn’t trust each other…

“Tactile overloads are a socially acceptable activity among the Decepticon ranks,” Ratchet put in. “No privacy required, apparently. What do you bet that this ‘courtship’ thing is actually negotiating the specific circumstances allowing two ‘Cons to link up?”

“Decepticon offers to overload his Autobot guard, who totally doesn’t get the mech’s meaning ‘cause they’re talking about two different things altogether. But the policy only bans touching, so our Autobot offers his cables in return because, y’know, it’s technically allowed, and -- huh, can you imagine the level of fear and hostility that just bodyslammed that Decepticon?” Nobody expected a POW to be relaxed, but now that he thought about it, the Decepticons had to know Autobot prisoner policies. Which, with only the ‘hands off’ part spelled out, probably explained just how defensive even low-ranking Decepticon prisoners got. Just because they had no information anyone was interested in didn’t mean that they thought they were safe from the Autobots.

Smelt it, the scenario of a prisoner trying to bribe a guard physically might not even been the part giving Autobot policies a bad reputation. Guaranteed, at some point in the war, an Autobot with too much kindness and a spark full of trust had tried to offer some poor Decepticon grunt a little hardline comfort. Turning it around, if the casual attitude toward physical interfacing was offered toward an Autobot…the expectations on both sides was terribly skewed. The fuel in Jazz’s tanks curdled at how well both scenarios had probably gone over.

The black-and-white saboteur shook his head free of uneasy thoughts, then suddenly looked up. “Most of our POW policies are derived from the Enforcer Codes, right? Makes me wonder what the history archives might have t’ say about the Enforcer presence in Vos. I know they weren’t welcome, but now I think we gotta know why.”

“Primus,” Red Alert breathed. “I’m calling Smokescreen in for consultation tonight. We don’t have the archives anymore, but Smokescreen knows every regulation he’s ever had to eel around, backward and forward.” He cut out for a second, icon blinking off and then immediately on again to continue, “Prowl’s already started contacting other ex-Enforcers for any incident reports we can dig up.”

“Look for incidents outside of Vos. I doubt the Enforcers stepped foot outside their station in the city. It was only by Senate ruling that they even got that station. Praxus got the Enforcer contracts because
it was one of the Tri-Peninsular Torus States that formed the core of the Senate’s economic and political power, not because any of the other city-states wanted outside forces policing them,” Ratchet warned. “The city-states were only nominally joined under Senate rule. Most of the Neutral territories debated every Senate ruling fiercely before allowing them, and the Enforcer stations were one of the more grudgingly accepted rulings. Vos was the political lead for the Neutral city-states, and it had a long history of independence before the Senate forced the Cybertron Unification Alliance through. I remember Starscream’s speech before the Senate as Emirate, and he all but tore a strip off the Senators for attempting to enforce outside laws on city-states with law codes already in place.” Blue optics squinted as the old medic pulled up memories long-archived. “Though that was just a side-note. His speech really focused on the emerging disparities in resource allocations by the Senate. They…weren’t so blatant as they became later.”

Yeah, later, when the Senate claimed the majority of every mine-share for ‘essential developments’ in Iacon. Jazz kind of wished he’d been around to hear Starscream lay into those pompous afts who’d starved Cybertron into civil unrest. Ratchet flicked one of his helm projections, chiding him for his impudent thoughts, and the saboteur grinned up at him unrepentantly.

Ratchet flicked his helm again and went on. “His speech wasn’t well-received. In fact,” the medic paused, perusing pre-war files, “that’s odd. I don’t recall the Vosian Emirate ever speaking on the Senate floor again. That’s very strange. Starscream’s nothing if not stubborn, but I’m inclined to say that he never came back to Iacon at all. I’m not finding anything in my Senate files tagged with his name after that.”

“He probably flounced off with his wings ruffled and refused to go back ‘cause they didn’t roll over when he stomped his foot and told ‘em to,” Jazz commented wryly. “Her Majesty Starscream doesn’t handle authority figures well when they don’t bow to his pretty, pretty princess whims.”

*”There may be a more concrete reason,”* Prowl said, his icon flashing online and dropping into the network.

Jazz couldn’t help himself. “Screamer’s ego is solid concrete sometimes.”

*”As you say,”* the other officer agreed blandly. *”However, diva tendencies aside,”* Ratchet and Jazz splorfled in unison, curling about each other as they helplessly laughed at the Earth slang coming from Prowl, of all mechs, *”assassination attempts are enough reason for a snit. A sniper put six rounds through one of the Emirate Flight Guard and a perfectly aimed shot through Starscream himself.”* The channel hissed white noise for a brief moment as Prowl let that sink in. *”It is unknown how Starscream survived a projectile straight through his spark chamber, but the Vosian embassy packed up and left less than two joors after the initial shooting. There was never more than a three-mech diplomatic party working in the Iacon embassy building again, and they made it clear they were there to pass on messages, not act as representative diplomats for Vos. The Senate was informed of the incident, but no official statement was ever issued. The sniper was never apprehended, and when Starscream next appeared in public, his science modification builds had been retrofitted back to warbuild armor and armaments.”*

“Cowardice?” Jazz asked, letting information assessment mesh that with the Starscream he knew from the war.

*”Entirely possible.”* 

*”Justifiable caution on the part of a governing official,”* Red Alert disagreed, sounding thoughtful. *”If someone outside the White House took a shot at Optimus Prime, we wouldn’t let him go back to Washington, D.C. We’d reinforce his armor before we let him outside the Ark, too. A response from the American government like the Senate’s would make us suspicious of just who ordered the
shooting as well. Who’s to say Vos simply refused to allow Starscream to put himself in that kind of danger again?”*

Ratchet walked over to lean a hip against his desk, crossing his arms as he turned that question over. “We’re assuming Vos liked him as Emirate that much.”

“How many terms did he serve, anyway?” Jazz followed the older mech, hopping up onto the desk to sit beside him. “Wait. I don’t even know how the Emirate was…elected?” he hazarded. “Did he beat the former Emirate at Pac-Man? Disco dance-off a la ‘Saturday Night Fever’? I know: horse shoes!” He beamed as Ratchet gave him a Look of I Am Unimpressed By Your Logic.

Prowl went one better and somehow managed to transmit that Look via just the tone of his voice. **"Election of the Vosian Emirate happened through the governing council casting votes. The governing council representatives were, in turn, draw by lot from the 26 city districts, along with 44 guild leaders and civil department heads. There were also an unspecified number of ‘special interest group’ representatives, including anywhere from three to fourteen representatives from the War Academy alone. My understanding was that the student body changed their representatives each semester to reflect current enrollment.”**

They were all silent for a moment, digesting that. “…that sounds a lot fairer than how the Senators kept office,” Jazz offered finally. While there had supposedly been elections for the Senate, Jazz had never heard of anyone ever voting. Or any other candidates than the Senators who’d been in office already. “ Weird.”

**"How it worked in theory differed from how it was actually practiced, I’m sure.”** Prowl chastised him. **"Starscream is a master of manipulation. As I’m sure you’re well aware.”**

Like Jazz didn’t have the memory of Starscream manipulating his -- right. Yes, he was well aware of Starscream’s ability to give a mech exactly what he shouldn’t want, vowing all the while it was exactly what he needed. “Gotcha.”

**"I will have to make inquiries into how many terms Starscream…served.”**

The term sounded all kinds of wrong applied to Starscream. Also to the Senators. Civil servants may have been the official classification for their jobs, but it just didn’t fit. Jazz felt a twinge of unease that he was capable of looking back and making these observations about the past ruling body of Cybertron. He didn’t mind regarding the Senate as being in the wrong, but having to put Starscream into the same classification area was doing a doozy on his worldview. Psychotic Second-in-Command of the Decepticons was something Jazz knew how to deal with. Emirate of Vos, a head of state arguably equal with the Senators Jazz had once been sworn to protect -- not so easy to reconcile that in his mind.

Then again, the Senators had turned out to be, propaganda aside, a group of megalomaniac egotists. Starscream could slot firmly in with that group any day.

“He didn’t outright say it, but he went fairly heavy on implying that the survivors of Vos followed him into the Decepticons,” Jazz said. “He did say it was a group decision, but I’m thinkin’ more along the lines of whether they’ll be following him out of the Decepticons. He’s puttin’ himself forward as the mech who’ll be restoring Vos.” Starscream had an ego-bloating tendency to hype up his importance, even if it involved giving himself fictitious titles. “What’s the latest draft of the treaty have to say ‘bout that?”

The comm. line clicked as Bumblebee’s icon blipped and dropped into the conversation. **”I’m not seeing anything to do with Vos in here. Maybe we haven’t reached city governance assignment**
yet?”

**“Not for Vos,”** Prowl corrected, **”but the Decepticons have provisionally claimed the areas of Kaon and the southern territories as their forces are still centered in the lower hemisphere. The reason Vos was chosen for the location of the peace negotiations is its central location in the Neutral territories, and the city structure remains more intact than Tarn. It’s been an unwritten assumption that both factions would continue to use this city as a meeting point.”**

“I don’t think Starscream’s ever gonna be a Neutral,” Jazz asserted, “meaning that putting him in charge of a neutral meeting point’s not gonna work.”

**“He seemed confident of his placement?”**

“Prowler, Scream’s attitude on a **bad** day makes confident mechs seem timid. I don’t care what the treaty says because, like I said, I’m more worried that he has the survivors of an entire city-state followin’ him still. No matter what the official words say, how the frag could anyone stop him?” Without restarting a civil war millions of years in the ending, and the tiny glow of hope near and dear to Jazz’s spark flickered fearfully to think it.

Ratchet wrapped an arm around the smaller mech’s shoulders and squeezed the tires, offering what comfort he could. The saboteur’s visor tilted up to look at him, concern darkening the usual blue to a dark indigo. “Bumblebee, how’s it going in there?” the medic asked, diverting attention a little while they pored over this new problem. “Megatron keeping his hands to himself?”

There was a short pause, as if Bumblebee actually had to think that over. Ratchet and Jazz blinked at each other. **”…yes?”**

**”You don’t sound very certain about that,”** Red Alert said, sounding more than a bit cranky that he hadn’t been permitted to install cameras in the meeting rooms themselves. **”What’d he do, smack Prime’s aft with his elbow or something?”**

**”Or something,”** Bumblebee agreed more cheerfully. **”I set up next to Prime when the meeting began, and ol’ Megs took me at my word.”**

Ratchet and Jazz exchanged looks again. Well, if that didn’t have ominous overtones. “And that word was..?” Jazz asked cautiously, visor asking a question of Ratchet. Ratchet shrugged back, free hand flatly gesturing cluelessness.

**”That I’m here to assist. Look, I don’t know what slag Starscream’s pulling with Jazz, but Prime’s holding his own in here.”** Jazz bristled; so he wasn’t holding his own, eh? **”Somebody put down some rules in here early on, and Megatron’s not toeing the line. They’re arguing terms. Things are kinda hot, but by Primus’ rusty camshaft, when have they ever cooled down between these two?”**

Ratchet and Jazz were nodding in unison, because…well, yeah. Everyone had had those kind of thoughts about Prime and Megatron before. **”So long as they’re not hitting each other, I’m keeping my trap shut and assisting.”** Bumblebee’s amusement could almost be felt, as could an overtone of indulgence.

It was a feeling familiar to the command cadre, and Jazz’s lips quirked despite his indignation. Prime on the battlefield was a horrible thing to witness; they’d all felt ashamed for forcing the Matrix Bearer, a mech of peace, to become a brute. No matter how necessary, they’d never adjusted to such a thing. But setting Prime loose on Earth to diplomat his way around the globe had been more adorable than words could express. Ironhide had been caught more than once by human cameras wearing a sappy look on his face as he bodyguarded Prime during NATO summits: ‘Aww, lookit our Prime kicking diplomatic aft! Aww, he’s such a **good** leader, yes he is! Atta boy, Prime.’
Nine out of ten Autobots agreed: Optimus Prime could be so slagging cute sometimes.

Jazz chuckled softly and shook his head. “Yeah, alright, keep us updated.”

*’Will do.’* Bumblebee’s icon flashed twice and went back into stand-by. Optimus’ icon had remained in stand-by the whole time, even though everyone knew he was getting relayed all the relevant details from this conversation. It wouldn’t surprise Jazz at all if he were listening in to the whole discussion and was just too embarrassed to log in.

Ratchet pushed off the desk and walked around it to sit in the chair. It was a functional piece of office furniture when not draped with a Construction-muddled medic, but Grapple had welded wheels on the bottom. Utilizing them just as intended, the Autobot CMO scooted back around the desk until he could grab Jazz’s nearest foot with one hand. A thin sprocket wrench appeared in the other, and he proceeded to poke it into and around the tires, testing rivets and dislodging bits of grime. Basic maintenance to keep his hands busy. Jazz envied him that.

He leaned back and accepted the treatment, because a soldier never passed off the chance for maintenance. “Okay. Worst case scenario: we blow up. Itty bitty Autobot pieces, everywhere.” Ratchet’s hands paused. Red Alert’s end of the line blurted static. Even Prowl’s online icon somehow conveyed disapproval. Jazz grinned at the world at large, completely unchastened. “Just sayin’. I think getting the worst case out of the way clears the way for actual planning.”

Ratchet tweaked something that shouldn’t have been tweaked in that direction, and his patient yelped. “Fine, that’s the worst that could happen. What’s a step up from that?”

*’Starscream consolidates a powerbase and manages to retake Vos,’* Prowl said promptly.

Jazz fell easily into the role of Unmaker’s Advocate, taking a stance opposite the tactician. “Why’s that automatically bad? So Screamer takes Vos. He seems pretty committed to restoring it, and that means playing nice with the rest of Cybertron. The flyers are a big chunk of Megatron’s forces, but a combined Autobot/Decepticon assault could take them down.”

Red Alert made a noncommittal noise. *’Assuming that Starscream cut all ties to Megatron, that would reduce future threats of violence from either of them. There’s no way desertion could lead to future reconciliation, either. Megatron would never willingly let that much of his army go.’”*

*’Granted,’* Prowl conceded, “*but that’s assuming too much. If Megatron has knowledge of Vosian courting culture, as Starscream informed Jazz that he does, then he must be aware of any contracts from before the war. If any of them are still in place, they’d threaten his power. It’s far more likely that he has deliberately steered the treaty negotiations away from assigning Vos a governing body so that Starscream may claim it later, unofficially but not illegally.’”*

“So Starscream would remain under his thumb,” Jazz mused, “and bring a whole planetary sector into the Decepticon fold.”

Ratchet pried out a stubborn piece of grit. “The remaining cities here are destroyed or too weak to stand alone. The Neutral territories would follow Vos out of fear.”

“Or maybe even loyalty,” Jazz agreed.

*’It wouldn’t officially be Decepticon territory, but if an entire surviving city-state population resettles itself and declares itself led by a mech who just happened to be Starscream, Air Commander of the Decepticons, it’d be hard to fight that through official channels.’”* Red Alert sounded more frustrated by the klik. *’It’d be like all the survivors of Praxus resettling and voting Bluestreak their...
leader. What could we do -- declare that it’s not what we want, so we’re not going to let them do it?"

“That brings back unpleasant echoes of Senate sanctions on the more rebellious city-states,” Ratchet spoke up. “The Vosians are nominally Decepticons, unless or until they declare themselves otherwise. Do we even know that Starscream’s not just blowing hot air out his afterburners? It’s been a long time since the Senate leveled Vos. Starscream isn’t well-liked in the ranks these days. He might have any support left.”

“You’re sayin’ his confidence is misplaced?” Jazz mulled that over. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

*”It would be wise to assign a tracker to him,”* Red Alert said, a little hopeful.

“No shiny, Red-my-mech. That’s explicitly against the terms of the ceasefire. And the truce. And it’s already been drafted into the treaty.” Jazz frowned as Ratchet knocked one foot off his lap and gathered up the other one. “I know Soundwave’s making you twitchy, but -- “

*”He’s up to something.”* Poor Red Alert, having to work in the same room as half the Decepticon command staff. The daytime shift brought most the officers of both factions to these temporary headquarters, and the central room had been designated some kind of mutual workspace. It split neatly down the middle: Blaster and Red Alert setting up shop on one side; Soundwave and the Reflector components on the other. Everyone else went in and out as negotiations required, but it was the official command location for two factions not quite at peace. Tension levels never dropped in that room. *”They’re all up to something!”*

“They’re Decepticons,” Ratchet grunted. “I’d be more surprised if they weren’t.”

“That doesn’t,” Jazz stressed, “mean that you can spy on them. You have camera surveillance. You share it with Soundwave. You’ve bugged it to alert us if he tries to block us from seeing something. Take whatcha can get, Red!” There was an ill-tempered grumble on the other end of the line. It made Jazz feel bad, but it had to be brought up. “Look…I hate to do this to you, but how much do you remember from, well, from everything that went down with the Nevagator?”

Funny, it hadn’t been cold in the office until right then. Jazz eyed Ratchet and shivered. The medic hadn’t raised his head, but the hand rotating a tire was suddenly holding on a lot tighter than it had a moment ago. Jazz couldn’t blame him for reacting badly. Due to the nature of Red Alert’s damage, the security director had willingly submitted himself to a force-download. Ratchet had been the unlucky mech to have to go through with it.

Willing submission aside, such things left hard feelings like an aftertaste of bile. Jazz hadn’t heard even a rumor of those two crossing cables since.

…okay, so maybe the Decepticons had something, there.

And if he’d thought the room temperature had plummeted to sub-arctic, the comm. line seemed to be forming icicles. *”I was thoroughly debriefed after that incident,”* Red Alert said stiffly. *”You should be well aware of that, considering the fact that you were part of an extensive interrogation aimed at revealing any hidden Decepticon sympathies I might have still held.”*

“Whoa, hey, calm down,” his hands went up defensively, despite the fact that there wasn’t a camera actually in Ratchet’s office. “I’m not questioning your commitment to the Autobots! It’s just -- “ He sighed air through his vents, trying to clear out guilt he’d thought he was long over. Nobody had walked away from the Nevagator incident with positive emotions. “You’re not gonna like this. Starscream’s talking like he knows more about you than he should, and, uh, my thought is when you
two formed that screwy alliance -- “

“*He might have courted me.*” Red Alert sounded sick, like his tanks were boiling over, but worse was the way his normal assurance fled. It left a small, insecure mech to whisper, “*Oh. Oh, slag. He might have -- he might have --*”

Jazz winced. This was exactly the reaction he’d prayed he wouldn’t get. “Fragged you, yeah. And maybe interfaced to seal the deal.” He didn’t want to think it, didn’t want to picture Starscream pressing Red Alert back against the Nevagator, touching him the way he’d touched Jazz. Because the picture was undeniably hot, right until that mental picture included the way Red Alert’s helm projections had been sparking from the sensor ports, indicating logic circuitry so damaged he couldn’t have made an informed decision with a how-to manual from IKEA.

Starscream was the Second-in-Command of the Decepticons. Taking what he wanted from a mech incapable of withholding consent wasn’t even a shocking concept, sadly. Worse, it would explain what Starscream had said about Red Alert earlier. When else would he have found out about Red Alert’s deeply-buried spurts of wicked humor?

“I’m coming over there,” Ratchet was saying, pushing Jazz’s feet off his lap entirely, “and we’re going over that download a frame at a time. Together. It was so badly distorted by the state of your cerebral processor units that I couldn’t get any relevant information out of it before, but I wasn’t looking for…this.”

“*I understand,*” Red Alert said in that tiny voice, and Jazz’s spark broke. He reached out for Ratchet, aching, and the medic met him halfway. This time, the connection slid into place without a medical partition between them, and they rocked together in shared horror as their fellow officer and friend scraped up enough courage to make a nervous request. “*Prowl, can you make time to join us? I know your meeting with the triple-changers ends in two breems, but the city-planning meeting with Grapple and Shockwave is scheduled immediately after the --*”

“*I will make my excuses,*” Prowl said gently. “*My presence will not be missed for the course of a single meeting.*” Not at the cost of shoring up a mech torturing himself into an apprehensive wreck over something that he couldn’t have possibly prevented. “*Please reserve Room 3C for our use. Unless you’d rather meet in Ratchet’s office?*”

“*No!*” Red Alert caught himself, paranoid now about his paranoia. “*I-I mean, Ratchet’s office hasn’t been secured properly.*” Unlike the primary building, which Red Alert inspected for bugs and nasty hidden Decepticon tricks several times a day. “*I’ll meet you in 3C in two breems,!*” that pathetically small voice said, and Red Alert’s icon blipped meekly as it dropped off the network.

Jazz leaned his head against Ratchet’s windscreen and cursed fluently. It pulsed uneven flows of energy across their connection, and Ratchet’s medical protocol-backed systems slowed the datasteam in response, reaching across the hardline to calm the flux. Eventually, soothed despite himself, the saboteur calmed enough for coherent threats. “If he took advantage of Red, I’m going to rip his wings off and feed them to him.” he swore, engine a steady junkyard-dog growl under his words. “Frag the treaty, frag this stupid courting slag -- it’s just an excuse to jump a mech and make him do what you want!”

Skilled hands stroked the cables, pulling just enough to remind Jazz that he wasn’t alone. Outside emotions swirled around him, a foreign intruder welcomed for the comfort he brought, and they hadn’t moved from standing by the desk for half a breem. A glint of hard amusement stabbed into the soothing dataflow, and Ratchet projected a questioning feeling back.

“Nothing,” Jazz said, voice muffled against clear glass. “Just thinking.” Just thinking that if the warm
armor in his grasp had been Starscream’s, there would have been no shared silence, no experience and sympathy cradling his hurting mind with a medic and friend’s reassurance. No wonder the Decepticons didn’t go for each other’s cables. Connecting to Starscream probably felt like sword-swallowing, or having a wall of razor blades fall on a mech.

But…huh. A breem and a half before Ratchet had to face bad memories. Enough time for some good ones.

Ratchet reset his optics, but the blue visor still looked up at him in strange determination. “What?”

Jazz pushed away, hands already reaching for his fellow officer and old friend. The cables disconnected with a quiet *snick* that sounded the way disappointment felt, but he had plans. He went straight for the wheelwells on Ratchet’s sides, and the larger Autobot jerked with a muffled moan as nimble fingers ran a ringing note around the edges. Ratchet’s optics blinked again, but he reacted gamely enough.

His hands dove over Jazz’s shoulders and dug the fingers between the armor plating protecting vulnerable back struts, and he *dragged* those fingers up. Jazz arched, keening. Every linkage running along the struts caught on those fingers, stretched, and snapped back into place with crackle of temporarily-interrupted function. The smaller Autobot’s hands scrabbled at Ratchet’s chest, searching for dropped cables, but the medic *tsk*ed.

“No yet,” he whispered, lowering his head to take one exquisitely sensitive, sensor-packed helm projection into his mouth. He laved it with his tongue, refusing to be hurried even as hands finally found his cables. Fortunately, they seemed unable to decide what to do next, and instead of plugging them in, the hands just kneaded them uncertainly. Jazz groaned, low and throaty. He blindly pushed into the slow slide of Ratchet’s tongue as it traced the lines of miniscule armor gapes where the sensor nodes hid, and Ratchet smiled. “You like that?”

“Yes!” It had been a long day, and Jazz’s body remembered all-too-well the way he’d been riled up before. Both of them had fans rattling away, and the office wasn’t cold anymore. Excess heat billowed out of them.

“Patience.” Ratchet wasn’t in any better shape than his friend, but he was curious. This wasn’t really something they’d done before. A little physical stimulation while linked up was pleasant, but it wasn’t the circuit-melting pleasure the Constructicons had inflicted on him, or the slow slide of Starscream’s hand on Jazz’s hood.

“Patience is overrated,” the black-and-white saboteur panted, pushing his vents open to their widest and still not getting enough circulation. Forcing his hands to drop Ratchet’s cables felt like letting go of a can of coolant while walking on the sun, but slag it, he was curious, too! His hands rose, exploring Ratchet like the older mech was new territory. The path they took strayed as Ratchet switched to the neglected helm projection, apparently feeling that it needed some strong suction to make up for the lack of attention. They made it to their intended destination after some time, however, and it was the taller Autobot’s turn to make an undignified sound of pleasure as Jazz swept his fingers over the curved surface of a pair of headlights Ratchet had *thought* were safely out of reach.

The medic managed a laugh through a moan, and his head dropped. “Go for the headlights?” he asked lightly.

Jazz laughed right back at him. “Hey, whatever works.” He stroked again to demonstrate, and Ratchet’s sirens made a very interesting *meeble!* noise as emergency lights briefly strobed the room with spots of red. Jazz bit his lip, fastening his visor on the way Ratchet’s mouth dropped open as
clever fingers wiggled between turning indicators and headlights. Ratchet was no beauty contestant; the curve of his mouth couldn’t be described as anything nearly so flattering as ‘lush,’ but…

He stood tall, pushing himself up as far as he could until Ratchet got the hint and lowered his head to meet him. And no, as far as kisses went, it wasn’t a Primus-blessed cosmic event to set the universe on its head. But it was the slow glide of a mouth that tasted of honesty and hard work, and that was enough to set Jazz’s circuits aflame any day. He clawed at the hard glass of the lights under his fingers, and Ratchet’s moan came out garbled because Jazz lunged upward to capture it.

No, Cybertron didn’t move. But Jazz enjoyed it well enough.

He wasn’t imagining another pair of lips at all.

Besides, it got Ratchet’s chevron within range of a not-so-stealthy attack, and the whimpered cry that got could melt anybody’s knee joints. Jazz licked and nipped, supporting more and more of the heavier mech as Ratchet subsided like a balloon losing helium. The only reason Ratchet’s hands were the ones fumbling for their cables was because Jazz’s hands were too full of wobbly-kneed medic to make the connection himself.

The circuit completed, and the blaze of white-hot shared pleasure drowned out every doubt lurking in their processors about why, exactly, they’d resorted to hardline connection in the end.

[* * * * *]
End Pt. 7
[* * * * *]
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

Monitor duty had become Serious Duty since treaty negotiations started. Sitting around staring at a bank of vidscreens was vastly more important when there was a Decepticon sitting at your back doing the exact same thing. Only being more Decepticon about it. Which mostly resembled the way the Autobots did it but was why an already serious duty got the capital letters now.

So Jazz took over for Red Alert without even a token protest. Not only was it really not the time for putting up a fuss about boring duty shifts, but, well, everyone knew that in order to keep the mech on monitor duty awake and alert, it was best to come gab at him for a while every shift. Not huge, attention-diverting discussions about the state of the universe in general, but some small talk. A short spat of chit-chat to pass the time.

Gossiping by the water cooler, basically.

It wasn’t _official_, per se, but there was always constant flow of mechs filtering in every shift. They’d come in, chatter for a bit, get updated on the latest news that the last mech in had brought, and then go off again. Decepticon or Autobots; it didn’t matter. Monitor duty was Gossip Central, and that hadn’t changed for all that Soundwave and Blaster now waged passive-aggressive office battles over who got the most comfortable swivel chair every day.

Two factions, one room, all gossip? You’d better believe that the Jazzmeister would be there!

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemechs,” he said in his best announcer’s voice as he flopped into the not-quite-as-comfy-as-the-comfy-chair next to Blaster, “and welcome to this evening’s edition of the Unofficial Newscast. I’m your host, Jazz, and this is my co-host..?” He held an invisible microphone out, inviting his co-host to chime in.

Blaster had the nice swivel chair and could afford to be gracious tonight. He good-naturedly took his cue, accepting the microphone with aplomb. “I’m Blaster, and we’re here to tell you all the news that isn’t news.”

“And then some,” Jazz agreed. He put his elbows on the console, sweeping an assessing gaze over all the monitors. Nothing seemed terribly out of place during his rapid check, and he nattered on, “First up today: those whacky triple-changers and their shenanigans. Blaster?”

“After a three cycle-long meeting with Ratbat and Hot Spot, we’re still no closer to a resolution on the shipment schedule. Astrotrain claims building transport shuttles for energon distribution from the solar plants should be the focus of the next joint project, while Blitzwing insists yet again that the shuttle subset in the Decepticon Armada is not meant to be assigned to long-term materials transport! I don’t know what to think of that. Self-centered, much?” Blaster shrugged in exaggerated dismay across the room at Spyglass, who was watching the two Autobot officers goof around with a semi-resigned, faintly-amused look on his face. Soundwave was ignoring them the same way he would the Insecticons trying to eat a mech’s leg: it wasn’t a serious threat, so it wasn’t worth acknowledging until someone died.
Jazz shook his head right back at Blaster when turned to for his opinion, still speaking into an invisible microphone held in one hand while the other logged him in as on-shift. “No idea, my mech. You’d think he’d sacrifice a little dignity for the cause of peace, wouldn’t you?”

“Exactly.” One of Blaster’s fingers twitched, pointing without pointing at the third monitor to the right, but Jazz didn’t so much as turn his head. Behind the disguise of his visor, however, he watched as that monitor cycled through a series of camera shots from outside the main building. Blitzwing and Astrotrain seemed to be having an argument as they slouched against the outer wall.

“So they’ll have to spend a few stellar cycles ferrying energon around until the distribution network’s up and running,” the saboteur pooh-poohed as he checked the comm. network for available icons. Gears and Huffer were tagged to ‘casually meander’ in the triple-changers’ direction. “Big deal! They’ve spent how many millions of years ferrying Decepticon soldiers around? At least the energon doesn’t get frisky in their holds!”

#Ride that choo-choo!# belted out into the command room from Blaster’s tape deck, and this time Soundwave did react. He turned around and glared, visor narrowed just enough to be imposing as Blaster and Jazz swiveled from side-to-side in their seats in time to the music, arms raised to tug on invisible train whistle-strings.

The two Autobots were too busy hooting #Woo woo~!# to take notice of Soundwave’s disapproval. Intimidation: FAIL.

The Decepticon officer turned back to his own monitor bank, and if he’d been less adept at hiding emotion, there probably would have been a pointed grumble or two aimed at immature idiot counterparts. There was no sign he’d noticed that two particular Autobots had just exited the medical/engineering building to walk toward main HQ, sulking the whole way. Well, he’d probably noticed -- c’mon, this was Soundwave -- but that wasn’t the same as caring.

Jazz loved his job, some days. There was nothing quite like the rush of hiding things in plain sight.

Most of the Decepticons (and the Autobots, for that matter) had no idea the Olympic-level complaint marathons Gears and Huffer held had gotten more information for the Special Operations division than Mirage’s stealth mods. Complainers weren’t a threat. They were big, obvious annoyances who could initiate a one-up-you competition with anyone, anytime, no matter the topic. People blurted all kinds of information they normally wouldn’t when trying to out-complain those two mechs. Unhappy with Optimus Prime’s latest speech? Yeah, whatever, Gears had a bigger grief with the way Sunstreaker pushed him around in the halls. Think Megatron’s master plan was a pile of slag? Tell Huffer about it; everything he’d ever built was a waste of time. A mech thought his life was bad? Then he had another thing coming, because Huffer and Gears took their unique mad skillz of finding the worst in everything to whole new depths of dissatisfaction with the world. They didn’t just gripe; they rocked gripsing out.

Blaster smiled as the monitors cycled through again, showing Huffer and Gears ‘stumbling’ across the triple-changers. There were a few back-and-forth exchanges, silent because of the lack of audio, but there was no mistaking the sight of four mechs settling in for an epic bitchfest. Oh, the debriefing tonight would be rich.

“So what’s the problem, here? Seems to me it’s a little work for some future play,” Jazz spoke into his invisible microphone, settling back to tell everyone his opinion on the matter. “Blaster, my main mech, level with me. It worth the fuss those two are puttin’ up?”

“Blitzwing’s going to ride his pride down in flames if he doesn’t abandon ship, but Astrotrain seems to be thinking it’s a waste of resources better allocated to shuttle-building instead of fueling a delivery
Ratbat came out of nowhere with a series of plant production numbers that knocked the gaskets off those two, however,” Blaster chuckled, “and Hot Spot’s ever-hopeful that they’ll see reason. Still, the question on everyone’s lips remains:” and Jazz chimed in, because everyone had been asking, “Where is Octane?”

“Is he still on Earth?”

“Did he crash into an asteroid?”

“He might be dead!”

“Or stranded!”

“My bet,” Swindle put in, leaning against the doorjamb, “is that he high-tailed it off to Monacus with a tank full of pure oil-distilled energon. He’s probably bartered it off to a casino for three pleasure-drones and a docking slot hook-up. Off living the good life, the fragger. We won’t be seeing him again until Cybertron has something he wants again.”

Jazz and Blaster both swiveled to face the Combaticon, faces lighting up. ‘Company!’ beamed from their ecstatic grins. Swindle smirked back at them, knowing it was a solemn monitor duty to pump him for every iota of information he’d let slip. But, slaggit, the Autobots were more fun about it than the Decepticons ever were. For instance, Soundwave just gave him a blank stare, and the Reflector components had a distinct aura of disapproval.

The two Autobot officers, on the other hand, were all but dancing in their seats because someone had come to play! Yay!

“Three drones?” Blaster asked. “Really?” He made room at the monitor station, and Swindle leisurely sauntered over to take the offered spot leaning on the console between the Autobots. It wasn’t like anything on the monitors couldn’t be seen from the other half of the room, anyway. “Is that all, you think?”

“I’dve thought at least six or seven,” Jazz agreed. “Folks, our first guest joining us for tonight’s broadcast is the ever-scheming Swindle. Swindle’s just put in his two-cents -- well, more like one because he’s a cheap sonnuvagun -- on the Octane question, leaving us with the burning question of why he’s predicting only three pleasure-drones hangin’ off Octane’s arms.” He propped an elbow across the Decepticon’s thighs, invading his personal space like it didn’t even exist. And, like most sane mechs confronted with a lap full of Jazz, Swindle didn’t protest. “Swindle, our listeners have to know. Only three? Why?”

Swindle widened one optic at Jazz, silently asking if this was actually being broadcasted. Jazz gave him nothing more informative than a wink of half his visor, and lifted his invisible microphone. The Combaticons briefly looked like he debated leaving, but hey, there was no business like show business.

Humoring the mad Autobot, he spoke toward the ‘microphone’ as if this were a real interview. “It’s a matter of economics, Jazz. You’d think a mech like Octane would go for immediate pleasure over numbers, but I’ve seen him count his credits. Mech’s not that bright, but he’s canny.” He held his hands out flat in front of himself. “Say he gets the six drones.” His right hand dipped like someone had set a weight on it, and his other hand rose in response. “Suddenly, he’s got only enough left in his tank for half a vorn of dock space. Three drones,” his right hand rose, balancing out with his other hand, “and he’s got a full vorn to plan his next move.” He considered the balance and nodded to himself. “Full tank of pure distill? Casinos on Monacus will pay premium price for that. He’ll have it good there, and I wouldn’t bet on him leaving until he runs out of credits.” Swindle clapped his
hands together decisively, looking down at the blue visor gazing attentively up at him. “So! Three drones, you see?”

“Uh-huh,” Blaster said thoughtfully, attention split between Swindle and actual monitor duty. “I can see the logic in that. But Monacus isn’t the only place Octane could hit up for sanctuary, and I’ve got a listener on the line who’d like to have his say. Kup?”

“Evening, Blaster, Jazz. Swindle, you no-good scoundrel,” Kup said clearly from Blaster’s speakers, and his playful tone of voice kept away even the remotest chance of offence, “who’re you fooling? Octane wants hot bods and hotter mods, he’ll head to Brobdingnag. Planet of the giants, and you know they do everything -- and I do mean everything -- almost larger than a mech can handle! There was this one time back in…”

Swindle relaxed back on the console, not even bothering to pretend that he wasn’t enjoying being the center of attention as Kup started in on one of his famous stories and Jazz made himself comfortable for the long haul. Huffer and Gears annoyed ‘bots into complaining back, but Kup had competitive storytelling down to an art. Even when a Decepticon knew he was giving too much away, it was just too entertaining to stop when the banter began with Kup. Jazz let Blaster take over the ‘interview’ and dimmed his visor enough to not give away where he was looking while arranging himself to keep half of the monitors in his line of sight. It may have looked like he was slouched half-on Swindle, elbow and back propped against the Combaticon, but he kept Soundwave in sight at all times. He counted on Blaster to both watch his back and keep an optic on the Reflector components.

This truce thing was far more difficult than it looked on the surface. A neutral observer might walk into this room to see three mechs talking and another group across the room working. Any Cybertronian would probably walk in and promptly rebound off the layers of tension turning the air solid. This was nine million years of distrust, shut into a room.

There was a ping on the comm. network, requesting a pick-up from one of the security duty slots. Blaster diverted it from Red Alert’s icon automatically. The Security Director would have to be dead before he’d drop himself off monitoring Autobot lines, but Blaster could -- and would -- keep anything but an emergency from interrupting him right now. Jazz accepted the ping as Blaster opened a second diversionary line for another call from some Autobot working out at the solar plants. Swindle continued to soak up the attention, and Jazz didn’t shift a centimeter as he opened a line to Silverbolt.

*"Talk to me, Hannibal Smith."*

*"Is the line secure?"* The Aerialbot commander rarely dropped his sober mien, but he’d added an extra dollop of serious to his voice today.

*"Hold on a sec."* Jazz twisted, display an improbable amount of flexibility in order to point a finger over Swindle’s lap at Blaster. “Wait, wait, we’re all assumin’ Octane’s left Earth! Why’d he go and do that? Mech’s got it made. There’s over thirty countries with open-door policies just for him, and another fifteen that wouldn’t actively kick him out.” Which made it a gearstuck nightmare trying to track him down, even though the mech supposedly was still in Trypticon’s company. That was just the grease on the joint for why everyone was so anxious to find the mech, but both fortress-former and fuel tanker had up and disappeared.

“The mech makes friends out of entire countries,” Blaster agreed. “Fuel or not, we could use him around here right now.” Diplomacy on the casual level didn’t seem like a big deal until the Autobots and Decepticons had found that they didn’t have a single iota of it outside of high politics. Jazz was trying his best to get Kup’s storytelling and the complaint marathons going if only to promote some kind of interaction between the factions.
Uh...non-interfacing interaction, that was. Although that seemed as though it was being pushed on the Decepticons’ side, so the Autobots were going to have to just deal with it. Sooner, rather than later.

The Combaticon had startled at Jazz’s sudden move and jerked his arms away from where they’d been folded across his chest. Uncertain hands hovered over the Autobot’s helm as Blaster spoke and the smaller black-and-white mech nodded thoughtfully. Jazz rested his chin in the crook of the elbow on Swindle’s thigh, and across the room, somebody didn’t choke off their ventilation system in time. Swindle grinned lopsidedly in that direction as all four Decepticons studiously did not look at Jazz settling himself firmly into the argument.

“We can’t even go to the United Nations asking for him to be turned over to us.” The saboteur wriggled to make himself comfortable. Someone’s fans made a suspicious whirring noise. “Our darling Decepticons here,” he tilted his head toward the other side of the room, “agreed to classify humans as ‘sentient aliens, Autobot allies’ in the ceasefire. Unless Megatron declares Octane a criminal, we’ve got no grounds to evict him from friendly ally-countries!”

“Are you saying I could go to Earth right now if I wanted to?” Swindle asked the Autobot in his lap. The Combaticon was all business. Mostly. There might have been a low rumble from his engine underlying his words, but who could blame him? Jazz’s fingers had started tapping on his -- along his -- up his -- business! All business. When it came to business, Swindle was cool as a cucumber!

“I’m not a criminal.”

“Guilty until someone is sufficiently bribed,” Jazz said, always the optimist, and Blaster warily leaned away from the pair of mechs who smiled at him with freakily similar ingenuousness. “To answer your question,” the saboteur turned his head to peer sidelong up at his armrest, “no. You’d have to apply for an entry and business visa from the Earth Embassy to go back, now. Octane’s only a legal resident on Earth right now if he’s still on Earth. If he didn’t leave before the truce ally-planet stipulations went into effect, the country he’s in can issue him an in-place Earth residence permit, just like the USA did for Metroplex.” Meaning that Trypticon could be a legal resident of Earth as well. And wasn’t that an alarming loose end?

Swindle looked down the length of his own windshield at the Autobot coyly peeking up at him, and from the look of it, he swallowed down the first three things than went through his processor. They were probably all business-related offers, but the first two were likely enough to put some stress on the peace negotiations, and the third was almost certainly illegal outside of the Decepticons. Actually, that was limiting the conmech. Jazz wasn’t sure about the legality of Swindle’s business propositions on Cybertron, period. “Ah...so, not likely I’ll be getting a visa?” the Combaticon said a little weakly. Tap tap went Jazz’s fingers. “I don’t know about that. I can be pretty persuasive.”

“I’m sure you can,” Jazz put just the right emphasis on that, and suddenly there was more than one rogue fan buzzing in the room. “However, I’m still wonderin’ -- if you wanna go back so bad, why are you assuming Octane ever left?” He heaved himself back around, settling back into his previous position lounging against Swindle’s leg. That leg jolted, just a tad. “Seems like he’d wanna stay. Blaster?”

The other Autobot took over without a hitch, having caught Jazz’s tap-code and secured the open comm. line while everyone was distracted by The Jazz Game, Interactive Edition. “We’ve already got a caller on the line agreeing with you, like he read your mind! Hound, fill us in. Where’s Octane hidden himself?”
“Blaster, I don’t know about the political atmosphere, but I can tell you, there’s thousands of places on Earth Octane could hide away in! I don’t even know where to start listing…”

*"Don’t know how sensitive this information is,"* Silverbolt told Jazz as soon as the saboteur dropped back into the comm. line, *"but better safe than sorry. We’ve found Starscream."*

A surge of rage never made it to Jazz’s face, but it was felt all the same. Dismantling the Air Commander would have to wait, however. *"Why do you think it might be sensitive information?"*

*"Because we found all the other Decepticon flyers, too,"

* Silverbolt said slowly. *"All the ones off-shift, anyway. Air Raid saw a formation heading out of city limits toward Tarn, and he...decided to follow them."

* Meaning that Air Raid had taken off after the Decepticons without checking in with Silverbolt or otherwise warning anyone that he was going off half-cocked. As per usual, really. Jazz didn’t even bother slapping a mark on Air Raid’s disciplinary record anymore. *"They must have known he was there,"* because Air Raid was many things, but stealthy? Not so much. By Silverbolt’s tone, his commander knew that fact all too well, *"but they made no evasion attempts. About 6 kils outside of the ruins, Skywarp contacted him and offered to escort him to, and I quote, ‘the show.’ Contact, I should add, was made by Skywarp teleporting in just out of weapon’s range and swinging about to fly parallel to his flight path."*

* Meaning that the escort offer hadn’t been so much an offer as telling Air Raid that this was what Skywarp was going to do, so if he didn’t like it - tough luck.

*"Any hostile moves?"

Silverbolt actually seemed somewhat amused. *"This is about when I was informed of what was going on. Air Raid was thoroughly thrown off his course by Skywarp being, and I quote again, ‘so dang polite.’ He called me in a panic."

* No surprise there. Ironhide had sat down with each of the more, er, *excitable* Autobots currently staffing Vos for the peace negotiations. He’d made sure they understood exactly what the consequences of being the moron who upset the tentative Autobot-Decepticon peace process would be. Cliffjumper had volunteered to stay back at the unofficial HQ after his session with Ironhide, but the Aerialbots had developed an urgent need for authority figures to sign off on any and all interactions with Decepticons. The constant permission-seeking had been steadily driving Silverbolt up the wall, but it’d been a relief to the other Autobot officers. Better too cautious than not enough!

*"I contacted Skywarp."* There was a pause, and the Aerialbot commander’s amusement had disappeared into apprehension when he continued, *"I’ve never heard Skywarp be that formal. He invited me out to their location as well."*

That particular word use was beginning to carry bad connotations for Jazz. *"What do you mean by ‘formal’?"

Instead of answering, Silverbolt played back an audio clip. *"If you wish to observe the proceedings, you are invited to join us,"* a disquietingly familiar voice said, and it was just plain wrong to hear Skywarp sounding like a rational, normal Cybertronian. *"Air Raid followed Skywarp,"* Silverbolt said while Jazz pondered that, *"and they landed in what the map downloads tell me is what’s left of downtown Tarn. He couldn’t give me a count, but it sounds like there’s at least three hundred Deception flyers out there with him."*

One Autobot surrounded by hundreds of Decepticons? A chill raced through Jazz’s spark. *"Get him out of there immediately."

*"With all due respect, sir, I think that might be a bad idea. Air Raid says it’s really tense there, but, well, it’s not being directed at him. He’s getting lots of strange looks, but Skywarp’s sticking to him.
There are more flyers arriving by the klik, but nobody’s leaving. If we pull him out…”

That tension might ignite. Jazz had been in that kind of situation before, where people might fasten on the oddity as a target if given an excuse. *"Gotcha. What’s the focal point?”*

*"Starscream.”* Of course. *"Sir, Air Raid says he’s fighting for his life.”*

…what? *"Explain that!”* This could be bad, very bad. It was one thing to plot revenge on Red Alert’s behalf, but actually following through was a personal luxury Jazz could never allow himself for the sake of the peace treaty. Assassinating the Decepticon Second-in-Command this far into the negotiations would result in a power struggle no one could afford at this point. Megatron’s hierarchy in the ranks would need to be re-established, and the likelihood of in-fighting leading back to restarting the war was terribly high.

Silverbolt was unhappily aware of that fact. *"I’m not sure of the details. I pinged as soon as Air Raid mentioned the fighting, and all he’s been able to update me on is that it seems to be some kind of ritualized combat. Starscream’s fighting an unidentified Decepticon grunt one-on-one, and all their weapons are laid out on the ground. They’re not using them. But Starscream’s already wounded.”*

The part of Jazz that had been seething with fury since Red Alert’s meek sign-off cackled with fierce joy. The rest of him fell into glacial calm, already pinging Prowl, Optimus Prime, and Ironhide with a briefing of the situation and Jazz’s proposed action response. First Aid received a heads-up alert to prepare for possible incoming wounded, and the other officers were put on alert. Sideswipe accepted the monitor duty-tag and headed down from his station on the fourth floor to replace him, already setting up a backstory with the saboteur as he went. Blaster rearranged the shift schedule without missing a beat talking to Swindle and Trailbreaker.

Jazz himself stretched luxuriously, causing Swindle to momentarily lose his train of thought and stare down at him. The Autobot let his helm fall back against the Combaticon’s thigh, and he smiled up at him. “What? I’m not made to sit still for so long.” The Combaticon shut off his optics and shook his head before pointedly redirecting his attention to Blaster’s last question.

Jazz pushed off Swindle and stood up for another stretch, but his mind was a dozen steps ahead already. *"Hannibal, leave Face at the base.”* Skydive would be the least likely to mindlessly race off to the rescue if something did happen, and he’d also be the one most likely to survive if the rest of his team went down. Like Prowl, the strategist had suppression software that clicked into play under high emotional stress. That wouldn’t guarantee he’d outlive his gestaltmates, but he had the best chance. *"Pull Murdock and B.A. off patrol, and the three of you meet me at the Vos/Tarn border. Warn B.A. and Barracus to be on their best behavior.”*

*"Yes sir.”*

Most of the flyers were Vosian, and the only rituals that had come up lately were Vosian in nature. Assuming this was some kind of Vosian ritual, not Decepticon, Jazz could think of no good that could come from it. Except Starscream’s messy end, but in the cold logic of Jazz’s thoughts, even that couldn’t be celebrated.

Sideswipe moped into the command room like a mech going to waste-dump duty. Overdone angst, minus the bowl of Cheerios to cry into. 'Wah wah waaaah,’ he bleated protest. Didn’t wanna, couldn’t make him.

Jazz frowned, Jazz-the-officer showing through the Jazzmeister-the-mech for the first time the whole shift. Yes, he could. 'Bad mech. Monitor duty for you.’
’Wah wah WAH!’ But Sideswipe hadn’t done it! There was no evidence! He hadn’t even been on Cybertron! He’d been set up by -- by garden gnomes! And the Mech Who Wasn’t There! Anyway, it had been a joke and Prowl needed to grow a sense of humor, so --

The frown deepened. ’Bad mech. Monitor duty for you.’

’…wah.’ Sideswipe plunked down in Jazz’s chair and sulked. Woe betide him. Blaster and Swindle laughed with utterly no sympathy when he gave them his best pitiable optics, and he turned a sullen pout on the monitors since nobody else seemed to sympathize with his whining. ’Waaaaaaaaah.’

“Good luck with that,” Jazz told Blaster, who jokingly shook a fist after him. He gave Soundwave’s watchful look a jaunty salute and waved at Reflector as he walked toward the door. Even as he left, however, Sideswipe was starting a game of Texas Hold ‘Em with Swindle, keeping up his pouting mask with apparently no effort as he did so. Jazz tagged Smokescreen to join them as soon as the Praxian reached the area; there was no way to prevent Soundwave from tracking this little adventure, but a loud, distracting crowd in the command room would at least help. No reason to make it easy, after all.

Jazz exited the building and transformed to drive toward the unofficial Autobot base. He didn’t see anyone following him, but catching Laserbeak or Ravage wasn’t a certainty any day, even with his sensors stretched to their limits. He settled for racing along the route, taking advantage of the one thing larger mechs had over Cassetticons: speed. He pushed himself as fast as possible for a breem before suddenly veering toward the border. Now he stuck to what shadows the setting sun gave him and took advantage of anything that sheltered him from spying optics on high. Speed was still his best bet.

He pinged Silverbolt as he went. *’Two breems until I reach the border. Is the A-Team in position?’*

*’We’re ready.’*

*’Update?’*

*’It’s still one-on-one combat, unarmed. Starscream’s fought off two mechs so far. No fatalities, although the damage was pretty bad. Air Raid says he tore the wings off one mech after forcing him to surrender or die.’* Silverbolt sounded revolted, and Jazz couldn’t blame him. At the same time, he could almost understand Starscream’s reasoning. Just because a Decepticon surrendered didn’t mean he was out of the fight. It just meant he’d wait for a better time to strike. Want to take a surrendered Decepticon out of the fight for good? Disable him. Want to disable a flyer? Take away his wings.

Understandable, but still brutal.

*’What’s happening to the wounded?’*

*’One moment.’* Silverbolt’s icon flashed off the secured line. Jazz’s tires squealed around a hard corner, and the saboteur swore softly before running silent again. The icon came back on. *’Air Raid couldn’t see, but he asked Skywarp. There’s a medic on-site tending the wounded. Somebody named Knock Out?’*

Jazz raced the sun, trying to make it as far as possible before having to turn on his headlights. He could use his scanners, but he’d have to slow down for that. Headlights were big flashing signs of ’Autobot here!’ he wanted to avoid as long as he could. *’I know him. Tell Air Raid to stay the frag away from him, no matter how shiny he is.’*
*"Fireflight’s the one with the shiny thing obsession, sir,”* Silverbolt said wearily.

*I don’t mean just physically. Mech once talked his way out of the middle of an Autobot battalion, and those he couldn’t talk around, he cut through.”* The only good news was that Knock Out wasn’t a flyer, and that probably meant he wasn’t Vosian. If this wasn’t a Vosian-only event, then maybe disaster could be averted. Not to raise his hopes or anything, but a medic being present might mean this wasn’t combat to the death. If Starscream survived, the treaty might make it, too. If the horrid little Decepticon medic didn’t just laugh and kill him for the fun of it. *"Think Ratchet, only prettier and more psychotic.”*

*"More psychotic..? Nevermind. I’ll warn him.”*

*I pinged icons, dropping them into the comm. line. It made it less secure, but there was no avoiding that now. *"You ready to be soldiers of fortune, A-Team?”*

*I’m happy to oblige,” said the Aerialbot commander, standing up and reaching down from the top of the wall. Jazz made a running leap, taking a jump-step up the wall before grabbing hold of Silverbolt’s outstretched hand. The larger Autobot hauled him up easily, and Jazz glanced back the way he’d come. The last rays of sunlight backlit Vos, turning it dark as midnight. Even if a Cassetticon had been following him, he wouldn’t have been able to see anything against the sun. He settled for hunkering down behind the wall. The Aerialbots were already clustered there, although Fireflight looked jittery from staying grounded and Slingshot had a sneer almost wider than his face.

*“Alright, here’s what I want. B.A.,” he pointed at Slingshot, who sneered back at him, “you stay on the border. Patrol this area, but don’t enter Tarn and don’t be a sitting target.” He gave the smallest Aerialbot a glare when Slingshot started to protest. “Cram it. Remember what Ironhide said he’d do if you stepped outta line again?” The jet’s reddish-orange visor widened nervously, and Jazz summoned a singularly nasty grin. “Don’t make me tell you what I’ll do after he’s done. Murdock, you’re flying in with us.”

Fireflight nodded so enthusiastically he bounced on his knees. Silverbolt just sighed his vents in resignation, having long-ago given up keeping his dignity in the face of Jazz’s persistent flippancy. Besides, unlike Slingshot, the other Aerialbots secretly -- or not-so-secretly -- enjoyed the A-Team references the other Autobots inflicted on them. The comparisons weren’t always flattering, but having a whole American television show of in-jokes had done a lot to bring the Aerialbots into the Ark’s crew.

It wasn’t that Slingshot really hated being referred to as ‘Bad Attitude B.A.’ He just hated everything in general. He glared after them when they took off, but he transformed to start flying the border as ordered.

*“He’s worried,”* his commander said quietly, voice echoing through his interior.

*“I am, too. This could get pretty ugly, and I don’t just mean because we have to look at Starscream’s face.”* Jazz had braced himself against the curved inner wall of Silverbolt’s altmode for take-off, feet against the opposite wall. The Concorde SST was meant to be a human passenger plane, but Ratchet
had taken out three-quarters of Silverbolt’s passenger seating to make way for situations just like this. Optimus Prime wouldn’t be able to fit in Silverbolt without some elbow grease to pop him in and out, but most of the smaller Autobots could manage comfortably. Jazz propped his feet on either side of a window and watched Fireflight fly at Silverbolt’s wing.

Silverbolt’s voice was even quieter this time, just whispering through the cabin. “I thought…he was courting you?” He sounded uncertain if he should press for more information.

“We’re not sure what’s going on with that,” the saboteur said as neutrally as possible. Silverbolt had been present at the officer briefing last night, but he hadn’t been in on the loop for events today. Silverbolt was a commander of a sub-group of Autobots, making him an officer by default, but his youth and accompanying lack of actual experience meant he wasn’t strictly part of the command cadre. Sometimes. Occasionally. He held, in the words of Optimus Prime introducing him to Ultra Magnus, a complicated rank.

Okay, so the Prime had originally said ‘special’ rank before Slingshot was a jerk and made a shortbus joke that’d gone completely over Ultra Magnus’ head. Ironhide and Air Raid had smacked the loudmouth upside the head, and Ultra Magnus had politely let the confusion pass when Prime restated himself. Thank Primus. The Ark crew was having a difficult enough time explaining all their Earth references to the other Autobots without having to admit that a couple of the Aerialbots — whose creation was hard enough to explain on its own! -- thought their team leader was retarded in the programming because he was afraid of heights. The Aerialbots hadn’t been created with a ‘Politically Correct’ button to mash in situations like that. Or ever, really.

Immature flying war machines. Oi.

Speaking of which. “I’m being hailed by Skywarp,” Silverbolt reported right as purple light flashed out beyond Fireflight. It momentarily lit the twilight sky, and Fireflight veered alarmingly close to Silverbolt before the Concorde evaded. “Response?”

Jazz narrowed his visor at the black and purple jet barely visible in the twilight sky beyond the smaller Aerialbot. “Give him a second to scan you and pick up -- “

"Jazz!” Skywarp exclaimed, mock-delighted. "How nice of you to visit!"

“ -- my signature.” Fireflight descended and ducked underneath his commander, presumably to take position on his other side as Skywarp slid into place at Silverbolt’s wing. "Hello, Skywarp. It seems there’s a party, and I wasn’t invited. I’m hurt."

An unpleasant tone of amusement underlay Skywarp’s voice as he demurred, "It wasn’t intentional. You’re welcome to come." A dark laugh came across the comm. line, the kind of laughter that meant nothing good for the one being laughed at. "This’ll be of particular interest to you. I’d think. Follow me!" He crowded closer before zipping ahead, and Jazz had to brace himself as Silverbolt lurched in the Decepticon’s turbulent wake.

"What kind of party is this, Skywarp?" Jazz asked, but only more laughter answered him. Silverbolt angled down, murmuring a warning that they were coming in for a landing. "I better not need my dancing shoes."

"Oh, that would depend." Skywarp dropped back to transform and smirk through the window at Jazz as Silverbolt’s nose tipped back up and the ground got closer.

The Decepticon was trying to be annoying, but the Autobot Third-in-Command was also Head of Special Operations. He was used to putting up with irritating informants. "On what?"
One last smirk, and then Skywarp was out of sight. Silverbolt jolted as his landing gear touched down. *"On whether Starscream is still courting you."*

Silverbolt was still taxi-ing to a halt and Jazz was edging toward the exit when the stoic Aerialbot commander snapped sharply, “Fireflight, pull up!” The black-and-white mech tucked and rolled out the open hatch just as Silverbolt started to transform. The exit shrank behind the saboteur, sliding along transformation seams as the Concorde mass-shifted, stowing a large portion of his altmode’s structure in subspace. It resulted in an Autobot only a few meters taller than an average Seeker whirling around to look for his wayward gestaltmate.

Who was being held bridal-style, undamaged but shell-shocked, in Skywarp’s arms. “They still let you fly on your own?” the Seeker asked him. “You’re a menace.”

Fireflight’s surprise morphed into a hurt scowl. “You’re mean.”

“Decepticon!” Skywarp asserted with no shame whatsoever. “Comes with the territory.” He looked up, grinned at the two Autobots gaping at him, held Fireflight out as if offering him to them -- and then cheerfully dropped him.

“Waaaaaaaol!”

“You’re welcome,” he said to the Aerialbot now sprawled at his feet.

Dazed, Fireflight just looked up at him. “…thank you?”

“Fireflight, get up,” Silverbolt sighed, seeming to decide that chiding Skywarp was a lost cause. Catching Fireflight before he crashed had been positively charitable of the mech, anyway. Being petty about it afterward was a small price to pay. “Thank you, Skywarp.”

“No thanks necessary. I’m always up for rescuing little Autobots from…all kinds of things,” the Seeker leered suggestively. Silverbolt stiffened angrily, optics narrowing. Skywarp’s optics glittered cruelly, and Fireflight looked into them with dawning fear.

The Aerialbots had adored the Decepticon Seekers, once upon a time. Such crushes didn’t die away into nothing, not during war.

“Keep your mitts off my ‘bots, Skywarp, or I’ll give Megatron a list of all the infractions we’ve been keepin’ track of since the peace negotiations started,” Jazz said, striding forward so the Seeker focused on him and not the Aerialbot clumsily scooting away. “Don’t think we haven’t been noticing your excuse for a sense of humor showing up. We haven’t done anything ‘bout it so far because peace is worth tolerating an annoyance like you. But which do y’ think Megatron thinks is more important: one easily-replaced, uppity soldier who thinks he’s funny, or peace?” The small Autobot officer stood in front of him, hands on his hips and visor insolently tilted up, and the hint of a grin really ground the point in. “Think real hard on that, now.”

They matched glares for a klik, but it was Skywarp who eventually gave in. Jazz was right; Skywarp’s pranks had been steadily getting more malicious, and they had to be going against Megatron’s express orders. Given the choice of Skywarp or the peace negotiations, Skywarp was going to be the one who lost.

That didn’t mean he had to be a gracious loser. “Come on,” he snarled, whirling away to stomp through the ruins. “And keep up,” he said over a wing as the three Autobots hurried after him. His voice turned sweetly poisonous. “You wouldn’t want one of your precious baby jets to get left behind among us uppity soldiers.”
Jazz didn’t reply. It was a snide comment not meant to be replied to, and the saboteur had bigger things on his mind than pandering to Skywarp’s smarting pride. His sensors had been screaming warnings at him from the moment he exited Silverbolt, and the internal alarms were only getting louder. Fireflight yipped softly but didn’t object as Silverbolt and Jazz sandwiched him between them, taking firm holds on his horizontal stabilizers from either side. The small jet was twitchy with nerves and proximity alerts, head twisting every which way to try and see everything at once, but that wasn’t possible. Jazz and Silverbolt were more guarded, giving less away as they scanned in opposite directions.

Only Skywarp was at ease here, picking his way through gutted buildings that were all that remained of Tarn. Twilight had rapidly given way to full dark, just the distant metallic shine of a rising moon lighting their way, but the darkness all around them was full of red optics. Some of them watched the Autobots pass, turning in pairs and groupings to track them. Others clustered and moved in the dark without more than an assessing look, more concerned with their own affairs.

Jazz’s sensors picked out what his optics couldn’t show him, and his hand tightened on Fireflight’s stabilizer as if it could keep the young Aerialbot safe. All around them, Decepticons perched on broken struts, sat on crumbled walls, and stood in dead-end streets more wreckage than paving. They spoke quietly, laughed raucously, and when the distant din of combat changed, they moved toward it with the uncanny unison of a flock of birds.

Or a trained military unit, which wasn’t what Jazz wanted to think about when that military unit was several hundred strong and sweeping him along in its midst. Silverbolt and Fireflight had unconsciously picked up the sense of excitement all around them communicated by raised wings and moving flaps, and Jazz had to increase his pace when they sped up. Skywarp gave him an archly superior look when they drew even with him, but he didn’t comment on the Aerialbots’ sudden intensity. There was a strange sort of animation in the purple-and-black Seeker’s expression, too. Jazz couldn’t identify it.

Sound carried far among the ruins of Tarn. Skywarp guided them through the wreckage toward the source, but there was a reason the Autobots and Decepticons had chosen to meet in Vos instead of one of the other destroyed city-states in the region. Vos had been bombed out, but the assault concentration had been on taking out flyers. Ground-level damage was comparatively minimal. Not like Tarn. There wasn’t a whole building left standing in this city-state.

They edged past a collapsed wall, through the lobby of some past apartment building, and climbed up the stairs to the fourth floor. From there, the harsh glare of floodlights could be seen up ahead. Skywarp scornfully offered Jazz a hand, but Silverbolt was the one who lifted the Head of Special Operations from the fourth floor, across the rubble that had been a crossroads, and set him on the second floor of another burnt-out building. They went down the stairs and emerged onto a street that was still traversable.

It was full of Decepticons. Most ignored them, possibly because Jazz’s smaller body was hidden in the stark shadows cast by the three flyers around him. Skywarp led them into the river of soldiers, heading toward the circle of floodlights up ahead. In that light, Jazz glanced at the mechs streaming past. They were gliders, fighter jets, helicopters, shuttles, and transport skiffs. He couldn’t even identify all their altmodes, but they all possessed that singular pride of Vos: flight. Their faces shared Skywarp’s odd eagerness. They communicated it through body language like predators closing in for the kill -- or spectators.

*"Air Raid says Starscream’s taking on one of the Rainmakers,"* Silverbolt murmured through the comm., and Jazz nodded fractionally. The Rainmakers were Shockwave’s lead trine, not Megatron’s, but they’d headed the Decepticon Armada during Starscream’s four million year absence.
Taking the chance that distance would help secure the line from Soundwave, Jazz pinged Air Raid’s icon. *"Which one is it?"*

*"Not the green one, what’s-his-name, Rainman,"* Air Raid said promptly. *"It’s the yellow one who always looks like he’s got a campfire in his cockpit."*

*"Not Rainman. Acid Storm,"* Fireflight put in. *"Even I know that."*

*"How do you know that?"*

Fireflight shot a shy look at Jazz, then Silverbolt. *"Um…tell you later."*

That sounded like something inquiring minds needed to know. Jazz had an inquiring mind. He obviously needed to know.

He and Silverbolt gave the Autobot between them a demanding look, and Fireflight squirmed. He flapped his hands, part shrug and part helpless gesture at Skywarp: *'Later later.'* The two officers exchanged resolute looks. Fireflight smiled wanly as they nodded at him: *'Yes, later.'*

There was a barrier across the road up ahead where the skyscrapers on either side had crumpled toward each other, met in the middle, and gone down in a massive heap of debris. Half of the ‘flock’ around them accelerated, hitting the wreckage in leaping runs lit by the short flame-bursts of thruster-boosted jumps from foothold-to-foothold until they disappeared over the top. No one seemed willing to just fly up and over.

The other half of the soldiers headed straight into the mound of rubble. Skywarp forged ahead, wings spread wide to clear room in his wake as they joined the crowd.

Jazz was too short to see what was happening. From his perspective, the brief fires of the jumpers kept getting closer and closer, but the crowd wasn’t climbing up. Instead, they were suddenly on a rough-hewn pathway sloping down, and the floodlight-lit dark of night was replaced by the pitch black of a tunnel. His visor narrowed, then widened in response, reaching for any bit of light to help see while his scanners bleeped and warbled enemy proximity alerts in constant dismay: *Warning, danger, warning, danger, warning…’*

There was light, once his vision adjusted. Red and orange and green optics provided muted illumination, studded by the occasional blue and purple pair. Optics, visors, and sometimes cockpits or wingtips glowed like an underground rainbow. One large mech with a full set of white and pink running lights tracing his forearms, lower legs, and wings shouldered past Silverbolt. Skywarp’s dark canopy glass didn’t show anything inside, but Jazz could see the frenzied whirl of radar and lidar panels through Fireflight’s cockpit.

It was more beautiful than it should have been.

There was no silence, despite the strange pressure the Autobots felt to whisper. Metal feet clanged off the uneven metal ground; wings scraped across shoulders, banged off girders propping up the walls; snatches of continued talking echoed loudly; turbines whined. Someone tripped further back, prompting a whole percussion section of thumps, thunks, clinks, and clanks, along with yells of surprise and anger. And up ahead, a dull roar grew. It sounded familiar, and something ached in Jazz’s chest to hear it.

It sounded like the ocean on Earth, throwing waves up on a storm-torn sea-shore. It sounded like a concert heard from outside the venue: nothing but indistinct noise and cheering. It sounded like driving toward a far-away battle. It sounded like the propaganda rallies Megatron had held in the
lower levels of Kaon, after the gladiatorial matches but before the Enforcers arrived. It sounded like
standing at the back of the room when Sentinel Prime had given a speech: grumbles and mumbles
and nonstop noise.

Jazz held onto Fireflight’s stabilizer just a little tighter as the tunnel exit appeared, an arch of white
light above the heads in front of them, and then the sound of a crowd washed over them in a blaze of
brilliant light: cheers, laughter, jeering, commentary, mockery. It was the noise of several hundred
separate conversations trying to be heard above the hubbub, and -- somewhere close, somewhere
central, standing out yet mixed in -- the fierce, sharp staccato sounds of a fight.

An unwelcome hand had him by the shoulder, but Jazz restrained his first impulse to remove that
hand at the wrist. Patience, tolerance, relearning war-time habits. Thinking first and reacting later was
the price of peace. The multiple layers of his visor compressed as he squinted into the harsh
floodlights, filtering the worst. He identified the shape before he could see the colors.

“Stick close,” Skywarp said, pulling on his shoulder. “You’ll never find each other if you get split up
here.”

That was more than a little ominous, but as his vision adjusted and fed information into the picture
painted by his scanners, it was also only truth. Air Raid’s initial estimate had been three hundred
Decepticons. Looking around, Jazz upped that estimate to at least five, if not six hundred. There had
to be that many different color combinations, a few hundred different special modification builds, a
couple hundred different frame designs. Hundreds of pairs of wings folded up and down, flicking
every which way in excitement, or boredom disguising excitement. Every pair was stamped with
purple insignia, and every Decepticon was armed.

Fireflight looked cowed, and even Silverbolt’s stoic mask had slipped to reveal just how
overwhelmed the Aerialbot commander was. Three Autobots in the midst of the Decepticon
Armada. If they got separated…

Jazz obediently followed Skywarp’s pull and towed Fireflight after him in turn. Silverbolt, of course,
wasn’t about to let his gestaltmate go, so he brought up the rear of their little train. The Aerialbots
were pressed close to each other, concerned with staying together, but Jazz looked around. He
pinged Blaster and Ironhide, feeding information from his scanners straight through the comm.
system to them. At this distance, Soundwave likely got a copy of everything the saboteur sent over
the network, but that was a necessary sacrifice at this point. The Autobots needed real-time
information on this situation. Visual scans always transmitted badly through comm. systems, but it
was better than nothing. He let his gaze linger on the crowd, counting individuals and units as well as
assessing the overall mood.

The collapsed skyscrapers provided two walls around what had probably once been a city park.
Maybe there had once been a sculpture featured in the park’s center. A circle-intersection had
probably gone around it before the skyscrapers had gone down. The surrounding buildings had
fallen over those roads, forming a makeshift amphitheater around the center, which was still mostly
clear of major wreckage. Tonight, the collapsed buildings had become seating. The rubble stacked
up in tiers from what had been the park’s center, providing arena-type seating for the still-arriving
crowd.

The Decepticons seemed in no hurry to settle down. The flyers swirled in eddies and drifts, groups
and individuals always moving. But they climbed and sat and got up to move again with one optic
always on the middle, the center of the ‘arena.’ They were here to watch the fight.

Even under the floodlights, Sunstorm glowed a vicious yellow. His fists trailed streamers of
electromagnetic fire, and his armor crackled with white sparks. The air around him distorted with
radiation visible to the naked optics, and it shrilled dangerously across other sensors. His optics were the orange of an angry sun, spitting tendrils of fire out of the join where optic-glass was set into flexible facial micro-plating. There were deep scrapes across his armor, and where there weren’t scrapes, there were cracks where repeated impact-damage had finally broken through the radioactive Decepticon’s augmented structure. It looked like someone had held him down and beat the living slag out of him until his enhanced regenerative abilities threw in the hat.

Smoke trickled in short exhales from his vents, including his mouth. From the set of that mouth, Sunstorm was very much unhappy with the situation. Whether from the beating he’d already taken, or the pleased look on his opponent’s face, it was hard to say.

Starscream shouldn’t have looked much better. Sunstorm had dented armor, a torn lip and cheek, missing chunks of glass from his cockpit, and from the right-angle bend in both wings, he wasn’t flight-capable any longer. Starscream was missing half of one wing entirely, and he limped heavily from damage to one turbine. Armor-grade glass in his cockpit and one optic had cracked. The dents around the cracked optic showed he’d taken a fist with large knuckles to the face. Being that close to his radioactive, energy-bleeding clone had to be doing nothing good for his health, either, but still he smiled.

Not just smiled. Starscream smirked. He was, after all, the Seeker left standing.

“Well, reformat me into a yacht,” Skywarp said mildly, coming up short as they climbed up onto the next tier. The purple-and-black Seeker seemed slightly entertained but more disappointed as he watched Sunstorm drag himself upright and the Air Commander knock him down again. “Sunstorm sure lost quick.”

“He doesn’t look defeated yet,” Jazz pointed out, and Skywarp glanced down at him before returning his optics to the fight. Sunstorm had just launched himself at Starscream’s legs, trying to tackle the other mech. He’d apparently been counting on the Air Commander favoring his weak leg, but the damaged turbine instead kicked out and took the radioactive Seeker straight in the face. Something snapped loudly enough to be heard up in the tiers, and Sunstorm lurched back with the soft metal of his nose disjointed and smeared across one cheek.

Sunstorm’s howl of pain temporarily drowned out the crowd noise, but cheering overwhelmed him in turn.

Starscream stomped forward with his good leg, thruster on low burn, but Sunstorm rolled desperately. One hand cradling his snapped nasal bridge, Sunstorm kept rolling until he was out of reach. It must have been both awkward and painful considering the state of his wings, but given the choice of getting stomped on and melted or some wing-pain? Yeah, Jazz would have rolled, too.

“He’s not completely out yet,” Skywarp noted, resuming their climb, “but he won’t last long. Starscream had him the klik he lost the flight advantage. Wonder how he managed that one?”

A baritone grunt preceded Thundercracker’s presence on the next tier up. “Sun-dazzled fool assumed that missing a wing meant Starscream couldn’t fly.” Jazz wasn’t entirely surprised when the blue Seeker moved into sight, looking down on them. He offered his wingmate no help up the sheet of corroded metal leading to where he stood, but Skywarp didn’t seem to expect any. “Starscream got his hands on the idiot’s nosecone and used his own momentum to slam him right into the ground. Once he got one split in Sunstorm’s armor, he just never let up long enough for it to repair.” He looked over the Autobots’ heads at the fight as his wingmate reached the top. Starscream shrieked, a sound more rage than pain, and the arena laughed callously when an answering squeal of what was definitely pain rang out. “A pity. Everyone expected this to be the toughest fight, too.”
“Starscream versus his own clone? Pfft,” Skywarp made a dismissive gesture as he stood upright. Air Raid peeked around him, optics wide, and hurried to offer the other Autobots a hand up. Jazz took a running step and went up first. “Shockwave did a good job on Sunstorm’s armor and whatnot, but c’mon. He’s, like, two hundred thousand vorns younger than Starscream.”

Fireflight and Silverbolt were pulled up to join the group, and Thundercracker gave the four Autobots a disinterested once-over. “Mmhmm. It’s been the younger ones who’ve been challenging, so far.”

“Yeah, ’cause nobody else is stupid enough.” Skywarp crouched on the edge of the flattened area Thundercracker had apparently claimed. The rubble had tamped down into a sort of plateau on top of what had once been a wall, and it was wide enough for all of them to spread out on. There was a large group of flyers on the tier underneath wearing the same unit-marker on their wings. They looked up at Skywarp and whooped enthusiastically, raising their fists to the Air Commander’s wingmate. He waved a hand, acknowledging them, then rested his elbows on his knees and watched his wingleader pin Sunstorm on his front. A crackle of electromagnetic fire wreathed the downed mech, twining up the injured turbine planted between Sunstorm’s bent wings. The fire flashed a brilliant, sickly yellow and retreated when the crunch of cockpit glass giving way snapped above the cheering. “Not much longer now.”

Thundercracker looked like an art critic watching a play, not a spectator at one of the more grotesque matches Jazz had ever seen. Pieces of bright, if dented, armor were being flung to the side as Starscream ground his clone down with one foot, dug his fingers into gaps, and used the leverage to tear them loose. “Betting pool was weighted toward Sunstorm winning,” he told Skywarp.

“Lotta mechs gonna be out credits, then.”

“Mmhmm.”

“You?”

“No.”

“Good mech.”

“Sunstorm didn’t stand a chance,” Air Raid whispered to Jazz. “I thought maybe because of the damage -- but no way. Starscream took a few hits, but as soon as he got his hands on Sunstorm, it was a massacre. Just… I don’t know how else to describe it!” Blue optics pale with fear and awe turned toward the fight again. “And as soon as this one’s down, he’ll just invite somebody else, and it’ll start all over again.”

Silverbolt was carefully standing between Fireflight and the edge of Thundercracker’s little observation platform. The unit below laughed uproariously as a particularly pained cry came from Sunstorm. “This is insane. It’s horrible.” Fireflight kept trying to look, but his commander shuffled between him and the view.

Meaning it was up to Jazz to get actual information out of this spectacle. Which, truth be told, was why he was here instead of Mirage or Trailbreaker. Not only did he currently have a…unique…in with Starscream, but he had rank to pull in case of emergency. It might not mean much to the gathered Vosians, but it might mean enough to the gathered Decepticons. The peace negotiations could mean nothing or everything, right here and now.

So he left Air Raid and Fireflight in Silverbolt’s capable hands and went to stand by Skywarp. One of the flyers at his feet glanced back, did a double-take, and elbowed the mech next to him. Jazz
folded his arms loosely on his bumper and crossed one leg over the other, digging the tip of his foot into the rusted rubble for balance. The whole unit turned to stare up at the Autobot above them. He nodded cordially to them, and they began turning back to the more interesting event after a klik of not-quite-hostile staring.

Jazz let his head tip to one side thoughtfully, studying the combat winding down below, and asked, “Who’s next?”

No comment on the sickening nature of the ‘show.’ No disapproval in his voice. No officer demanding information. Just the curiosity of a bystander. Skywarp glanced up, a bit surprised, and Jazz’s sensors informed him that Thundercracker had moved. A moment later, the blue Seeker stopped on the other side of his wingmate.

“Sunstorm’s wingmate’s have the right to challenge next on his behalf, but Slipstream couldn’t care less and Acid Storm’s smarter than that. He’ll wait until what he really wants is up for grabs.” Thundercracker’s baritone had a kind of level neutrality to it. It gave little away, but the Seeker himself was eyeing Jazz speculatively. “You shouldn’t be here, you know.”

The small Autobot feigned injury. “Skywarp invited me!”

“Skywarp said,” said Skywarp, and there was mischief in his voice, “that you were welcome to come. That doesn’t really mean you should be here.” He slanted a sly look up at the Autobot officer, more than a little meanness in his expression. “So. How’s that courtship going, Jazz?” Disrespect edged the question like a weapon, and Thundercracker’s optics were openly searching.

The black-and-white saboteur let his visor return to the floor of the makeshift arena, turning the question over in his head. Starscream had stopped torturing the downed flyer by tearing him apart, but the look on his face was too pleased to mean anything good for Sunstorm. The Air Commander had bent down, resting yet more of his weight on Sunstorm’s writhing body, and he said something to his clone. Sunstorm braced his hands against the ground and tried to heave himself up, but another push from Starscream had him prostrate again. Starscream cocked his head. Jazz could see his lips moving, because Primus help him he was looking at the mech’s lips again. They quirked with perverse pleasure when Sunstorm, helm helplessly pressed to the ground, clearly forced an answer out. Whatever Sunstorm had said, it looked like it’d hurt to say.

The din of the crowd lessened, their attention zeroing in on surrender. A flyer in the unit below Jazz had Sunstorm-yellow pin-stripes on his limbs, and he made a startled sound of bliss as the nearest mechs began actively molesting him. Everyone’s optics were on the scene below, but this unit apparently wanted some hands-on fun of their own. The unit clustered together, nearly burying the color-matched flyer with grabby hands and dirty comments. Jazz took notes on the ones that made Skywarp glance down at them.

Starscream pushed himself off Sunstorm to the sound of glass shattering, and, limping but proud, he took a couple steps back. The yellow Seeker’s fingers curled against the rusted metal of the arena floor, getting a grip on self-control. There was really nothing else for Sunstorm to hold on to. His weapons were stacked neatly beside Starscream’s at the far end of the area. With his armor perforated or torn away, his electromagnetic powers would do as much damage to himself as his opponent. The radiation was already doing bad things to his circuitry, visible to the crowd in violent sparking and crawling lines of light under his remaining armor plating.

Sunstorm had lost the fight. It was time to pay tribute to the victor.

Jazz took a look around the crowd. Any Seeker with yellow on him was getting groped. Most of them looked quite happy with the sudden attention, and the sound of voices was gradually being
replaced by the rapid fan-beat of circulating air.

Ratchet’s icon flashed and dropped, contacting Jazz through the comm. system. *"Status update, Jazz."*

*"How’s Red?’"* he asked immediately, and his tone didn’t even hint that he was watching an orgy in the making. Below, beaten, a mech pulled himself along the ground using only his hands and arms.

Ratchet, on the other hand, sounded disturbed enough for them both. *"He’s upset, but it could have been worse.”* Something in Jazz calmed, however; the medic didn’t sound murderous anymore. That was a better sign than he’d been hoping for. *"We couldn’t pull the entire sequence of events out of his download, but we got the gist. Is Starscream there with you?'"*

*"You could say that.”* Sunstorm’s legs might have been damaged beyond use, but Jazz wouldn’t bet on it. It was probably just safer for the defeated challenger to stay down. So he half-slithered, half-crawled to Starscream’s feet, and lowered his helm.

*"Good. When you get a chance,”* Sunstorm’s mouth dripped energon and joint lubricant in a delicate pattern across the Air Commander’s feet, and his lips followed the drips in a series of dainty kisses, *"punch the fragger as hard as you can in the face.”* Kisses evidently weren’t enough, and Starscream nudged Sunstorm's cheek with a foot. The crowd murmured approval as Sunstorm turned his head and obediently licked it, battered face too tired for humiliation. *"Then overload him so hard his scrap-metal processor blows out. And repeat that sequence until I get my hands on him!”*

If Jazz was shocked by Ratchet’s instructions, he didn’t show it as he asked aloud, “What exactly am I looking at here?” On the comm. line, he sounded more weirded out. Justifiably so. That was the most bizarre medical advice he’d ever been given. *"What are you going to do with him?”*

*"Dissemble him for spare parts, reassemble him, and ‘face him through my desk.’”*

Shock nearly made it through this time, but Jazz was a professional. It would take more than that to rattle him, even if that was the mental image of Starscream on Ratchet’s desk, legs wrapped around the medic’s waist and canopy pressed in a gloriously wanton arch up against him. Or the very real image of the yellow-striped flyer on the tier below imperiously lifting a foot that six mechs swooped down to lavish kisses on. *”…so…he didn’t take advantage of Red?”*

Skywarp and Thundercracker exchanged considering looks. Jazz looked between them and the arena floor, where Sunstorm had licked his way up Starscream’s leg to the point where he had to sit back on his heels in order to reach any higher. The Air Commander seemed amused when his injured foot ended up in his clone’s lap, held like spun glass in unsteady hands as Sunstorm bent his head to run his tongue along the lines of Starscream’s lower leg. At no time did Sunstorm raise his head, and the hands holding Starscream’s foot offered no resistance when Starscream shook himself free. The yellow Seeker simply knelt, head bowed, and waited for orders.

The triumphant Decepticon lifted his chin, flashing a proud smirk at the crowd, and patted Sunstorm twice on the head like a good pet. He turned his back on his crushed clone with a dismissive flick of his remaining wing.

The Sunstorm-yellow flyer below Jazz yowled through a very pretty overload, covered in purring unit-mates who began to tease him toward another. Another Seeker Jazz finally identified as Slipstream made her way out of the crowd toward the downed mech still kneeling in the arena. An exasperated expression plastered itself across the other Rainmaker’s face when Sunstorm weakly
.tried to stand up on his own, and the yellow Seeker yelped audibly when Slipstream snatched an arm and kept walking, dragging her crippled wingmate behind her.

Starscream never even glanced at them. He raised his hands, accepting the crowd’s applause, and for a klik, his injuries looked like trophies. ’Hail the conquering hero.’

His optics went up the tiers, searching out his wingmates, and locked instead on Jazz.

*’He did,’* Ratchet confirmed grimly. *’But not in the way he could have, and trust me, Red Alert was in no state to protest if he had. What the fragger did was for a very specific purpose, and I’m sure it served his own ends. Which is why I’m going to kill him. But, I’m going to resurrect him afterward because what he did saved Red Alert’s life. More than once.’* Blue met red, and the red narrowed with an emotion that defied easy definition. Skywarp and Thundercracker weren’t the only ones looking between Autobot and Air Commander, now. *’It was intentional, Jazz. He knew what he was doing, and he went out of his way to make sure Red Alert stayed alive.’* Silverbolt and Air Raid stepped up behind Jazz, defiance and support ready at his back when the victor far below dropped his arms.

But the Seeker didn’t move. He just…looked. Not a surprised stare; not a glare. Just a fixed, unwavering look that peeled the Autobot officer away, pushed aside the Jazzmeister, and confronted whomever was underneath.

*’You bring him back here, Jazz. I have questions to ask and an aft-kicking to deliver. And,’* Ratchet added wryly, *’I have a burning need to express my appreciation in very carnal ways to that manipulative cog-sucker, since that’s apparently the only kind of gratitude Decepticons really understand.’* 

*’I’ll do my best,’* Jazz said evenly to the CMO, gaze never leaving Starscream’s narrow optics, and Ratchet’s icon blipped off the line. *’Is it just me, or does ol’ Screamer really not like me being here?’*

Still crouched at the edge of the platform, Skywarp snickered. Thundercracker smacked him on the back of the helm with an open hand and looked at the Autobot officer over the resulting whining. *’It makes things a little more complicated than I’m sure he’d like,’* the blue Seeker said smoothly. *’Most of us had assumed you had rejected his courting, but if you’re here…’* He trailed off, looking at Jazz meaningfully.

Jazz only saw that out of his peripheral vision, as Starscream had yet to release him from that heavy look. His hands were tingling. *’Oh, well, you know how it is these days. A tryst in the hallway at noon, a lovers’ duel with pistols at dawn,’* he said lightly. Fireflight choked behind him, but the Decepticons seemed confused by the Earth reference. Just as well, since he hadn’t meant to imply that the peace would be broken by shooting flimsy flintlock guns at each other. *’I hadn’t been aware of rejecting him,’* he tacked on. *’Did I miss something?’*

*’There seems little point in continuing this farce.’*

A sensation like sugar settling in his fuel tank overcame the pleasant tingles abruptly, and the saboteur had to work to keep it off his face. Whatever or whoever Starscream was looking at so intently, it wasn’t going to show him a weakness.

A comparatively tiny mech bustled out onto the arena floor, all shiny plating and flashy red paint job. He hurried toward the injured Air Commander, snarking all the way. Starscream switched his attention to Knock Out, and Jazz reset his visor with a feeling like a vise had just let go of his head. He blinked again before turning to Skywarp and Thundercracker. The two Decepticons were
looking at him the same way Perceptor examined a fascinating new specimen.

“What did you say to him last?” Thundercracker asked, tone casual but optics avid.

“What exactly am I looking at here?” Jazz repeated his question, jerking a thumb at the arena. Starscream was tolerating Knock Out’s dramatics for the sake of a quick patch-job on his leaking wing, apparently. “This some kinda Vosian dominance thing, or should we be informing Megatron that there’s infighting going on in the Armada while he’s busy talkin’ to Prime?”

If anything, that made the two Decepticons concentrate even harder on the smaller ‘bot. “A ’Vosian dominance thing?’” Skywarp said, testing the words in his mouth. “I like that. What do you think?” He leaned toward Jazz, looking up at him suggestively. “Should I show you some Vosian dominance?” His optics strayed toward the trio of Aerialbots standing behind Jazz. “It won’t hurt, I promise.” He grinned as the yellow-striped Seeker on the tier below trilled through another overload, taking several of his comrades with him. The unit clustered closer as they subsided to the ground en masse, contented and exhausted.

Jazz scoffed. “You couldn’t dominate a paper bag,” he said, drawing Skywarp’s optics back to him. He held the Seeker’s now-angry gaze with his own, gesturing down into the arena. “If you could, I’d expect to see you down there. There’s no love lost between you and Screamer, so why aren’t you in on the fighting? Don’t think you can take him?” he prodded.

“I -- “ Skywarp caught himself, straightening and standing up from his crouched position to loom over the smaller mech. “Nice try, Autobot.”

Thundercracker’s hand clamped onto one purple-black wing. “For the purpose of ending our Great War,” the more rational Seeker said gravely, tightening his hold until Skywarp winced and backed down. Skywarp jerked his wing loose and stalked past Thundercracker to stand at the far end of the platform and glare at the crowd as if looking for a target. Thundercracker turned his head to watch him go, but he looked back to Jazz when his wingmate was safely away. “You’re pushing, Jazz.”

“I do that, Thundercracker.” The Jazzmeister grinned fiercely, all liquid trouble and nice curves, and the Seeker’s optics widened a fraction. “How ‘bout this; you tell me what’s goin’ on here,” his gesture took in everything around them, “and I’ll tell you what I told Starscream.”

There was a low exchange of Aerialbots talking behind him, and Silverbolt discreetly withdrew his team to the opposite end of the platform from Skywarp. It gave Thundercracker and Jazz the pretense of privacy. The blue Seeker watched them go and gave Jazz a calculating look. Behind Thundercracker, Skywarp lifted a hand in greeting to someone below. A moment later, a mottled, violently-green Seeker bounded up onto the platform. He gave Jazz an intrigued look, which Jazz returned with his blankest expression, and Thundercracker turned to follow his gaze.

“Huh. Acid Storm!” Thundercracker beckoned, surprising Skywarp and Acid Storm, if their expressions were anything to go by. A closed look crossed Skywarp’s face, telling Jazz he was talking over an internal comm. line. Thundercracker’s wingmate sneered and turned his back a second later, confirming that Thundercracker had said something he didn’t like, but Acid Storm cautiously walked over toward them. “Have you met Jazz?” the blue Seeker said, mockingly courteous.


“Hello, Acid Storm. Leader of the Rainmakers, Subcommander of the Decepticon Armada.” Jazz inclined his head politely. “Where does that put you in the Decepticon hierarchy, anyway?”
“Below Skywarp.”

“Ouch.”

“Tell me about it.” They all regarded Skywarp’s stiffly-turned back with varying degrees of resignation and amusement.

“How’s Sunstorm?” Jazz asked, schooling his face to look politely interested. Look at them being all so well-mannered. It was almost like they weren’t all suppressing combat subroutines. “He looked fairly bad off at the end, there.”

Acid Storm grimaced. “He’s still ranting about how he’s the Chosen of Primus, and only he can lead Vos back to her blessed self.”

“So,” Thundercracker broke in, smiling slightly, “he’s doing just fine.”

Acid Storm brought a hand up to rub at his optics, obviously wishing that he could just reset them and have his wingmate disappear when he brought them back online. “I thought for sure Slipstream would finally take the chance to murder the dumb glitch, but she’s just sitting on him until Knock Out’s finished patching the Air Commander. I mean, it’s a perfect opportunity to shut him up for good, but noooo.” He dropped his hand and glared at Jazz. “Do you know what it’s like to be saddled with a mech who’s convinced his every crazy thought comes directly from Primus?”

“Thankfully, no. We just have Sunstreaker,” the small Autobot said tactfully.

“Who? Oh, him. Yeah,” the green Seeker said glumly, “we got him once with the acid rain, and he ripped my wings off. Couldn’t fly for fifteen orns. He’s got a direct line to Primus, too?” Acid Storm looked oddly hopeful, like he truly wanted someone to share his pain.

Jazz felt a little bad crushing that hope. But only a little. “Nah, he just has a Primus-complex. ‘And Primus spoke unto Cybertron,’” he quothed, “‘and said, This is Sunstreaker, whose color I love. Touch his finish and die.’”

“Rust and scrap metal. Hey, wait, he’s yellow too, right?”

“You’re joking. It can’t be something that simple.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s not even the same color yellow.”

“No, but I’ve never seen Sunstorm without the fireball thing goin’ on. What color is he without the lightshow?”

“…you might be on to something.”

They both fell silent, thinking over the relation between color and lunacy. Thundercracker looked back and forth between them, clearly not-quite-following their logic. After nearly a klik of waiting out their pondering, he tapped them on the nearest shoulders and pointed at the tier below. They looked. The yellow-striped Seeker was a scratched-up mess, half-buried by other mechs and smiling at nothing. Lunatic, perhaps, but hardly obsessed with divinity or looks. Jazz and Acid Storm made identical sounds of disappointment.

“So much for that theory,” Jazz said.

“Yeah.”
“If you two are done,” Thundercracker broke in before they could begin theorizing again, “I thought we might take this opportunity to trade some information.”

Acid Storm suddenly looked sharper around the edges, charisma stripping away to reveal the canny Decepticon officer who’d led the Armada in Starscream’s absence. “What information?” The look he turned on Jazz was pure speculation.

The Autobot Third-in-Command returned it, visor looking the polluted cloud-camouflage flyer up and down. “I want to know what’s goin’ on here. Thundercracker’s reluctance to say anything means I should probably report this t’ Prime, if not Megatron. What do you think?”

He thought that was a bad idea, if the angle of his wings meant anything. But Acid Rain merely glanced down to where Starscream was speaking with a group of large mechs who looked to be capable of space flight. “It’s not a secret. I doubt Megatron doesn’t know already.” He shrugged it off like it was nothing.

“And your refusal to share this not-secret with the Autobots looks mighty suspicious,” Jazz retorted. “So here’s my deal: we ask questions, we answer. You tell me, I tell you. Capiche?”

Acid Storm blinked his optics and looked at Thundercracker for translation of the Earth term. The blue Seeker made a face, and a moment later the other Decepticon nodded. “Oh. Yeah, I understand.”

“Thundercracker?” Jazz’s smile was full of charm, humor, and the highway to Hell.

The blue Seeker might have been one of the more even-tempered of the Decepticon Elite, but he hadn’t gotten his rank by backing down from challenges. “I agree,” he said coolly. “Do you want to start?” Down below, the group around Starscream had gotten larger, and Starscream’s gestures had become more animated. Whatever he was saying was lost in the dull roar of the crowd of Vosians dispersing back into the ruined city to mingle until the next fight began.

“Why, thank you,” Jazz said. “Why isn’t Skywarp down there fighting Screamer?”

The two Decepticons gave him a surprised look for the unexpected question. Thundercracker’s surprise slid into rueful understanding. In order to explain Skywarp’s refusal to fight, he’d have to explain what was going on. “Good question,” he granted. “What do you know about the military contracts?”

“You use them to form trines,” Jazz said promptly. “Other than that, not much.”

“We’re starting from the very beginning, then.” Thundercracker looked momentarily dismayed, but he straightened his wings and fell into a practiced stance, like he’d done this before. “There are two main kinds of contracts: social and business. Military contracts fall under business, but they are more stylized. Individual terms can be negotiated on a case-by-case basis, but the Flight Guard didn’t negotiate with every single recruit who wanted to join. The recruit sought permission to court a particular unit or officer from the recruitment office, and the office presented the standard terms from the contract of that unit or officer if the recruit’s courting suit was accepted. The recruit would then reject or accept the proposal of terms. Some negotiation was allowed, but mostly it was an open/close situation. Seek permission, court a unit, get the terms, and accept or reject the contract.”

Thundercracker looked over his wing at Skywarp. “That didn’t change much at the beginning of the war. The rules of wingmate courtship within the Armada are more rigid than they used to be, but it’s still based off of standardized contracts. The terms are negotiated by rank and individual, and the basic hierarchy hasn’t changed. A mech contracts with his unit-mates. The leader of the unit
contracts with his superior. That mech then contracts with his superior, and -- "

"-- so on and so forth," Jazz said thoughtfully. "That makes more sense. The way Starscream," he hesitated, "implied, I kinda had the idea that all the Seekers contracted with him independently."

Acid Storm’s fans kicked on hard enough to blow air into Jazz’s face. "Can you imagine that?" he said wistfully. "He would never leave the berth. Nothing to do all day but face us senseless."

"Never leave the berth?" Thundercracker gave him a puzzled look. "You obviously didn’t do much negotiating in your courtship if he kept you confined to the berth."

That didn’t help Acid Storm bring his ventilation system under control. He looked somewhat dazzled, in fact, looking down at the group surrounding the Air Commander with a smile lingering about his lips. "I’ll keep that in mind."

Thundercracker snorted a quick burst of air out his intakes. "You do that. In any case," he dragged his attention back to Jazz, "wingmate contracts are less formalized than regular military contracts because they’re closer to a regular business contract. Military contracts are all about structure, you see?" he asked, and the Autobot nodded carefully. "They don’t change much from soldier to soldier. Wingmate contracts are highly personalized by comparison. We settled into military units of three for stability, but it takes a lot of searching to find someone who can fill a -- that’s not important right now." Thundercracker verbally stumbled for a split second, and one of Jazz’s information assessment processor filed the fragment of intel for later analysis.

How often did a Seeker fly solo? Starscream had bragged that no one could keep up with him in flight, but the hidden implication was that mechs had tried -- and he’d allowed them their trying. Why exactly was his frametype classified as ‘Seeker’?

It wasn’t important at the moment. Thundercracker covered his slip with an irritated gesture vaguely in Skywarp’s direction. The other Seeker was kibitzing with somebody on the tier below. "The higher a mech’s rank, the harder it is to get his permission to court, and the more difficult negotiations are. More terms are demanded, and there’s more haggling. Just like the bigger a business contract, the more the involved parties have to spell out the details." He looked down at the arena floor. "Starscream demanded non-compete clauses from Skywarp and I."

"I’ve seen you shoot Starscream," Jazz said evenly.

“And he’s shot me,” Thundercracker said back, just as even. "Trying to kill each other doesn’t count as competition. That’s just being a Decepticon. Non-compete means that neither of us can attempt to usurp his position -- any of his positions -- without nullifying the contract entirely. If Skywarp challenges Starscream, he loses his position in Starscream’s wing. Technically, he wouldn’t lose his position in my wing, but Starscream would likely hold me accountable for Skywarp’s actions and repudiate me, too."

"Losing your position in the lead trine," the Autobot said softly, "would mean what? Demotion?" His visor squinted in thought. "Do you even hold a rank outside of the Air Commander’s wing?"

Thundercracker regarded him, weighing his answer. Jazz could almost see him tallying up the extra question for his own use later. "Yes," he answered finally. "Political Protocol Officer."

This time, Jazz really couldn’t keep the shock off his face. Acid Storm’s head whipped around, and he gaped at Thundercracker like a stunned fish, mouth opening and closing silently. "Really?" the violently-green mech squeaked at last, coughed his vocalizer through reset, and repeated in a more normal voice, "Really?"
The blue Seeker folded his arms over his cockpit and utterly refused to be made uncomfortable by
their combined staring. “Really.”

“The Thought Police,” Jazz said, disbelief clawing its way through astonishment. “‘1984’,
Decepticon-style.”

“What?” Thundercracker frowned, obviously checking the reference against his Earth database.
“What?! No. That’s not -- that’s wasteful. Why would I reprogram anyone and then kill them
afterward?”

Jazz recoiled. Okay, now that was a case of completely missing the point! “So you do reprogram
mechs to believe in the Decepticon Cause?” Primus, there hadn’t been a hint that Thundercracker
was that dangerous. A tremendously competent warrior in Starscream’s wing, a dangerous Seeker in
his own right, but most of the rumors centered around the blue flyer indicated that the mech was less
than fanatic about the Decepticon Cause. He’d been marked by SpecOps for possible defection to
the Autobots, for frag’s sake!

The saboteur’s mind kicked into high gear, processing that. Suddenly, Thundercracker’s whole war
record was cast into sinister mystery. There had been no hint.

“I didn’t know we had Political Protocol officers anymore,” Acid Storm was saying, impressed.
“The rank’s not even in the posted hierarchy. What division does that go under?”

Thundercracker wrinkled his lip and closed one optic, a strange expression on the normally
unflappable Seeker. It conveyed the amount of disgust felt by him quite well, however, as he said,
“Soundwave’s, unfortunately. The Office of Political Protocol was included in the Communications
Division.” He seemed to catch on to Jazz’s growing horror, no matter how well the Autobot thought
he was hiding it, and gave Jazz glare devoid of real feeling. “Don’t look at me that way. I still
technically hold the rank, but it’s an empty title. Megatron decided Political Protocol officers were
unnecessary after he came up with the Robo-Smasher, and we were dispersed among other divisions.
I was never recommissioned in another division because I already held officer rank in the Armada as
Starscream’s wingmate.” His expression turned sour when Jazz just stared at him. “And we didn’t
reprogram mechs into Decepticons. My primary duty was to indoctrinate new recruits on the rules
and regulations, and make sure they understood what the Cause really meant.”

Jazz nodded warily, still eying Thundercracker like he’d sprouted another pair of wings. Although
that might have been less surprising. Thundercracker had been touting the Decepticon Cause to new
recruits? That didn’t line up with what Jazz knew about the mech in front of him, and that was a
scary thought for the Head of Special Operations. He was supposed to be the one who knew all the
details.

This detail? He hadn’t known. This was not a good thing. “I…see.”

Thundercracker turned to glare into the arena, brooding. Or trying to set Starscream on fire by sheer
willpower; Jazz wasn’t sure, looking from his angle. “That’s what our wing did. I taught, Skywarp
tested, and if the newbies survived us, Starscream led them.” It seemed oddly like he was
reminiscing. “It wasn’t all that different than what I’m doing right now. The street scum off of
Kaon’s lowest levels came to Megatron’s banners with no idea what they were really fighting for or
how to contract. I had to indoctrinate them.”

“So if I asked you what the Decepticons wanted from the war..?,” Jazz asked cautiously.

Reminiscing about the past slammed headlong into the present, and Thundercracker bristled, turning
on the Autobot. “You’d be taking my turn to ask the question.”
“Whoa, hey, okay.” The black-and-white saboteur rocked back on his heels, holding up his hands defensively. As much as the Autobots needed a clear answer to that question, he also needed time to process what he had just learned. And he had, according to the deal, already asked one question too many. “Ask, then.”

Acid Storm and Thundercracker wheeled, abruptly standing shoulder-to-shoulder facing the smaller mech. “Have you rejected Starscream’s courting?” The question was nigh breathless with anticipation, for all that Thundercracker’s baritone remained steady. Acid Storm’s expression was probably the last thing small fuzzy mammals on Earth saw before something with big talons and a beak swallowed them whole.

Jazz slid into a ready stance, turning himself sidelong to the two Seekers. If they lunged, he could sprint for the Aerialbots. Silverbolt pinged him, but he sent back a Be Ready status advisement instead of opening a comm. line. “I’m not sure. Wait!” he held up a hand as Thundercracker’s mouth turned down. “I’ve been tripping over ritual phrases all day, alright? We’re Autobots, not Decepticons. You guys don’t come with operation manuals.” Acid Storm actually cracked a grin at that, and the Autobot officer shrugged amiably at him. “I dunno if I’ve rejected him or not. What am I supposed to say to reject a, uh, suitor?” It still felt weird to say that out loud.

Thundercracker stayed tensed a klik more, but his wings drooped as he accepted Jazz’s question. “…just like a new Kaon recruit,” he muttered, and Acid Storm snickered. The blue Seeker shot him a quelling glare, and then turned a forcefully patient look on Jazz. “There’s no set ritual phrase. Traditionally speaking, a courtship decision tends to be prefaced by ‘I have decided,’ but it can also be as simple as ‘Yes, I agree,’ or ‘Slag you and your altmode, no, not in a million vorn.’”

“Skywarp?” Acid Storm asked idly.

“Starscream. To Skywarp, appropriately enough.”

“Ah.”

“Does any of that sound like something you said to Starscream today?” Thundercracker asked, still wearing the expression Jazz was starting to label ‘I Will Teach You If It Kills Me.’

The small Autobot rewound his encounters with the Air Commander, tentatively holding the phrases up against everything he’d said. It certainly didn’t seem like he’d rejected anything. “No, I didn’t reject him,” he said without lying, because if anything, it seemed the other way around.

“There seems little point in continuing this farce.”

The Seekers’ shoulders slumped, but Thundercracker’s crestfallen attitude seemed matched against Acid Storm’s relief. That was apparently not the answer both wanted to hear. “Should I?” Jazz asked impulsively.

“No,” Acid Storm said immediately.

“Yes,” Thundercracker said at the same time.

“What?”

“What?”

“…I’ll be sure to do that,” Jazz said, helplessly smiling as the two Decepticons frowned at each other. “Can he reject me?” he asked, no more innocent or overtly interested than before. Because that’s how spies got their information: by not letting informants know what they really needed to
“He can,” Thundercracker said, attention diverted to internal communication equipment. Acid Storm’s frown deepened. “He won’t, though, not with Megatron’s orders being shoved down his intakes.”

“Exactly,” Acid Storm snapped. “He’s under orders to court an Autobot. If he,” Jazz smiled, head tilting to one side as a hand was waved in his direction, “rejects him, all it does is make him offer suit to someone else. At least this one’s a purely social contract. If he has to contract with another Autobot, who knows what kind of contract we’d end up with?!”

“He shouldn’t be contracting with anyone outside of Vos, social or otherwise!” Thundercracker insisted. “Everyone agrees with that, or there would be challenges being issued!”

“Would you rather it he be rejected? This was inevitable even if rumor didn’t have the contract open,” Acid Storm jerked his chin at the arena floor, “but a rejection is far less dignified than a challenge! Do you have any idea what it would do for our reputations to get turned down flat two orns into a courtship?!”

“We’re going to have a contract with an outsider either way! How respectable can we be bound to a ground-pounder from -- ”

“’scuse me -- ‘we’? Who’s ‘we’?” Jazz picked out, visor ping-ponging between them. “Why would Starscream courting me mean anything for… ‘we’? It is my turn for a question.” He raised a hand like a polite kid in class when the two Seekers turned their anger on him.

Thundercracker made a sound more commonly heard coming from kettles boiling over. “Ignorant, overclocked, empty-headed Autobots.” He stopped and cycled his vents through a full inhale/exhale. Peace. “I… apologize. That was rude,” he gritted out, and Jazz nodded acceptance. The Seeker forcibly kept his cool. “What position do you think is being challenged down there?” He pointed at the arena floor.

Starscream was half-fighting, half-playing with a flyer three times his size, now. The Air Commander had on a tolerant smile, and his blows weren’t meant to do more than deflect. The giant mech was obviously just doing it for the chance to touch the Air Commander’s remaining wing and dart suggestive hands aft-ward. The crowd was barely even looking.

“I think whatever the position is, it involves a berth,” Jazz said tactfully. He winked half his visor at Acid Storm. “Or not.”

Thundercracker just looked at him, and a strange sort of recognition filled his optics. “It’s like having two Skywarps,” he lamented out of nowhere. “A Decepticon one and an Autobot one, but still… two Skywarps.” He looked down at the faux-battle being cheered on by mechs busy groping each other, and he seemed to mourn dignity as a lost cause. “He’s Vos’ last Emirate, Autobot. The other officials are all dead. Until we get the city governance running again and start selecting representatives, he’ll continue to lead us.”

“It’s something the Vosian survivors have accepted for millennia,” Acid Storm said quietly. “He’s not a great leader, but he’s who was elected last.”

“He led us into the Decepticons.” Thundercracker still looked at the mock-fight, its fakeness all the more obvious because of the brutality that had prefaced it. “Ability aside, Megatron didn’t make him Air Commander. We did.”
The green Seeker beside him regarded Jazz steadily. “We believed in the Decepticon Cause, but we followed Starscream.”

Blue wings hiked irritably. “It changed, as Megatron and Starscream grew more at odds with each other. Megatron’s distorted the initial Cause so much, it…nevermind.” He shook himself, rejecting the subject. Jazz was beginning to see how a mech who’d spent the first part of the war indoctrinating recruits could have become someone disillusioned by the Decepticons today. And it made it all the more important that the Autobots dig up just what Cause Vos believed in, if it wasn’t Megatron’s. “Megatron held our loyalty through his contract with the Emirate of Vos, and…heh. Self-preservation dictated that we side with Megatron when Starscream had his mad bouts of treachery. Megatron has the Decepticons, and that makes him more powerful than Starscream.” The wings eased back down, but Thundercracker didn’t turn around. “But Megatron didn’t kill him. Beat him, maimed him, exiled him -- but he didn’t kill our Emirate. He didn’t dare. Starscream’s the last Emirate; if he died before another election, the contracts wouldn’t be passed on. They’d be annulled.”

“We would have followed Megatron if Starscream died in battle,” Acid Storm denied. “We wouldn’t have had a choice, not until the war ended. But he wouldn’t have liked our terms after renegotiation. It wasn’t always just treachery, Thundercracker.” He made an aimless gesture, perhaps trying to illustrate motive behind the Air Commander’s traitorous behavior. “Starscream’s tried annulling the contract and renegotiating updated terms, but Megatron’s always managed to meet his challenges. Can’t renegotiate if the challenge is overthrown.”

Thundercracker drew himself up, something old and proud straightening his shoulders. “My point is, government office is more important than the one holding it. When a head of state contracts with someone, that mech isn’t just contracting with another mech.” One narrowed red optic turned to regard Jazz as if the Autobot were the most dangerous mech in the arena. “It’s not just Starscream courting you, Jazz. It’s Vos.”

Jazz’s spark was doing funny little flip-flops in his chest, bouncing around on top of his fuel pump and shrieking alarm. He recklessly tapped icons for the whole Autobot command cadre and began sending information packets as fast as he could assemble them. This was important. This was ‘Annie get your gun!’ important. They needed a pre-meeting about the meeting leading to the actual meeting dealing with this fragged-up situation before Jazz took another step or screwed this up any further. Because smelt him if this hadn’t gone all kinds of wonky between Starscream nuzzling him in the hall this morning and the Air Commander coldly turning away less than a joor later.

Starscream courting him. Starscream possibly rejecting him. Starscream-as-Vos courting him. Starscream-as-Vos possibly rejecting him. The potential problems and benefits had Jazz’s threat assessment subprocessor spooling this new information into tangled, interconnected weaves that didn’t so much analyze the scenario as fret uselessly about it.

“Now, my question,” Acid Storm said, optics locked on the confused Autobot, “is what terms have you been setting?”

He looked at the green jet, visor pained. “…what?”

“The contract,” Thundercracker elaborated. “What terms have you discussed?”

“We haven’t discussed any,” Jazz admitted. Both Decepticons twitched. “We keep getting, er, interrupted by other things,” he amended, trying to make it sound less like they’d gotten into a shouting match over -- over -- it really hadn’t been over anything he felt necessary to tell two Decepticon officers, no matter their relative rank.
Ah, but there was something of gossip-value he could use to head off any awkward questions. “We somehow got right in the middle of the Constructicons asking Ratchet’s permission to court him, today,” the saboteur said, putting just enough exasperation into his voice that it didn’t sound like a big deal. Jazz and Starscream hadn’t gotten around to that whole courtship thing; oh, well, whatcha gonna do? Maybe tomorrow. “And I had monitor duty after that, and he…had to go fight off half the Armada, apparently.” He gave the two Seekers an inquisitive look, silently asking what that was all about.

They ignored that. “The Constructicons and Ratchet? I can see that,” Acid Storm nodded. “Good social contract. A medic’s a solid social bond, and it’s not like Hook will be on-call in the medical sector for more than emergency cases for a few vorns. Very little business cross-over to complicate things. So he gave permission?” he asked Jazz.

“Yeah.” That was still kind of funny, not matter what was happening right now. Especially since Acid Storm had slid into a bizarrely conversational tone of voice, like he was the village matchmaker or something. Jazz continued to broadcast information packets, and Ratchet’s icon strobed embarrassment that he’d become the discussion topic. “I don’t know how negotiations will go, but the ‘Structies seem to know what a mech likes.” He added a bit of leer to his grin and turned it on the mottled green Decepticon.

“That’s good. He’s a pretty thing, for a ground-pounder.” Acid Storm’s good-humored smile turned the backhanded insult into a joke. “A bit blocky for my tastes, but it’s not like the Constructicons were made for form over function.” Beside him, Thundercracker shifted his feet uneasily and fanned his wings back, looking meaningfully at the vividly-colored Seeker. Internal comm. went back and forth, and Acid Storm’s approval melted into amused horror. “Oh. Well. That’s going to make things…interesting, won’t it?”

Jazz looked between them. “What? What am I missing?” Red Alert pinged him with a reminder. “Does this have t’ do with Ratchet’s other suitor?” Two pairs of red optics focused on him again, and he shrugged guilelessly. “Lucky guess.”

“Lucky guess, my thruster,” Thundercracker said, suddenly irritable. “You tell your medic to watch his step, or this whole thing is going to blow up in our faces. I don’t want to see the peace treaty fail at this point.” His head turned, scanning the crowd.

The atmosphere in the makeshift arena had become much more relaxed. Starscream had won himself some breathing room by defeating Sunstorm, apparently, and no other challengers had stepped up yet. The Vosians were widely dispersed and, beyond a few fist-fights, were more interested in talking than causing trouble. The Aerialbots were still huddled at one corner of the platform in a tense group, but Skywarp was on the opposite end talking with a tiny rotary mech. Whatever the two Decepticons were talking about, it apparently required the rotary to mime riding a wild bronco, or maybe a friend. Skywarp seemed to enjoy watching, in any case.

Thundercracker looked at it all and fanned his wings back. “We’ve got too much to lose, now.”

That was reassurance for the Autobots listening in, but ominous at the same time. Ironhide, Prowl, and Red Alert immediately formed a comm. network for compiling a list of what over fifty-six thousand Vosians planet-wide could potentially gain from the current draft of the peace treaty. It did not sit well with any of them that very few of the gains featured peace or cooperation with the rest of Cybertron.

“What kind of terms do you want?” Acid Storm asked shrewdly, poking one finger at Jazz’s hood. The Autobot, taken a bit aback, skipped a step out of reach. “You’ve had time to think about it, surely.” He smiled broadly, projecting trustworthiness. It didn’t work very well. “If you want to
explore your options, we’re the mechs to ask. Thundercracker and I, we know contract terms in and out.”

Even Thundercracker tried on a warm smile. It was kind of creepy, honestly.

*"I don’t like the sound of that,”* Blaster said. *"Sounds like they have lots of experience shafting other ‘bots with the fine print, to me.”*

*"I agree,”* Prowl said. *"Speak carefully, Jazz.”*

*"Go teach grandma to suck eggs,”* Jazz snarked back, his tone admitting that the importance of this situation hadn’t escaped him. *"Trust me, I’m double-checking every single word I say, here!”*

There was a pause. Ratchet and Optimus Prime’s icons almost vibrated with contained amusement. Prowl’s somehow managed to look confused. *"…I do not have a grandmother.”* Red Alert seemed to take pity on the Autobot SiC, and his icon transmitted a brief interpretation of the Earth expression. The tactician occasionally had trouble translating idioms from their literal meanings. *"Jazz!”*

*"I know, I know, insubordination, blah blah blah. Shaddup, trying to work here.”* Prowl was going to read him the rulebook through a speakerphone at 78 RPM when this was over. It’d be totally worth it, however, as smarting off to a superior officer had firmly settled Jazz into The Zone. Word games with Decepticons?

The Jazzmeister smiled charmingly back at the duo. *'Bring it on.’*

“So kind of you,” he demurred, “but I couldn’t possibly waste your valuable time like that.” He carefully pulled in excess armor with cable attachments his design wasn’t supposed to have, letting his body language speak of uncertainty and conflicting desires.

“We don’t mind,” Thundercracker said, deep voice practically thrumming as he moved closer in unconscious predatory response to Jazz’s unspoken signals. Blue wings flared confidently. “As I said, I used to do this all the time for new recruits.”

Acid Storm sidled in on the other side, looming like a guardian angel with demon optics. “You know, since the peace treaty is falling into place…you’re really the Autobot equivalent of a recruit.”

“Newbie to Vos protocol, new recruit -- same difference. Less discussion of the Decepticon Cause, of course.”

“But you still need guidance.”

“Starscream is, after all,” the blue Seeker reached out and gently dusted off the Autobot’s shoulder, removing some rust flakes solicitously, “my wingleader. My Emirate, too.”

“We are under orders to help you Autobots with the courtship proceedings,” Acid Storm brushed the other shoulder clean. Jazz didn’t flinch, wouldn’t flinch, *not flinching, here.* “You must have questions.”

*"Oh, they are going to screw you hard.”* Blaster’s voice held all the warnings threat assessment was already scrolling down Jazz’s visor. *"Cat, you better walk like you’re on a hot tin roof, or you are gonna get burned.”*

*"On it. Fair warning, folks, I’m gonna take a risk here. A-Team, you’re playing back-up. If anyone asks, I’ve always wanted Prowl’s job.”* Silverbolt tweaked Fireflight’s nosecone, preventing the
smaller Aerialbot from turning to give their superior officer an incredulous look. Jazz looked down into the arena and bit his lip, doing his best to look like a worried mech trying not to look worried. From the way the two Decepticons drew closer, it seemed he’d succeeded. Wolves gave wounded deer similar looks. *"Way I see it, if everyone here thinks I rejected Starscream, they’re all bucking for a shot at my spot. I dunno how prior contracts conflict with renegotiating for better terms, but I think what I’m watchin’ is a combination of Decepticon bloody-mindedness and Vosian contract annulments."

*"Skywarp’s not challenging because he doesn’t want to lose his position in Starscream’s wing,”* Prowl interjected, *"and only the younger Vosians are challenging at all. Older and wiser mechs don’t trust the peace treaty to make rank a past issue? Or are they confident they’re where they want to be right now?"*

*"Or Skywarp doesn’t want what they think Starscream offered me.”* Because what he had right now was a completely open contract, a blank slate that hadn’t yet been limited. *If* Starscream hadn’t rejected him, and right now, a definitive answer to that question was unknown to all. Which was something Jazz wasn’t leaving to chance. *"Blaster, if Starscream tries to contact me from here on out, I’m having communication hardware failure."*

*"Gotcha. Jazz who? Nope, don’t know the mech.”*

Jazz widened his visor subtly and peered up at Thundercracker. His tank gaskets skreeled shut. It was an unseen anxious reaction he’d never been able to suppress. “I was wondering something.” The two Seekers did very good impressions of concerned interest, leaning closer and making encouraging noises. “Just how flexible are the terms for a social contract? Because if the peace treaty is signed, I’m gonna need something to do afterward, and, well, a head of state needs an executive officer…”

The Bank of Flabbergasted reported a withdrawal on all accounts. Thundercracker and Acid Storm had the emotions. They had all the emotions.

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 8

[* * * * *]
Pt. 9

I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 9
[* * * * *]

It was probably the last thing they’d expected, an Autobot asking that. Coming from one of the Aerialbots? *Maybe* that could be filed as a flyer glitch. Wanna-be Vosians looking for a promotion. Coming from Jazz, Head of Autobot Special Operations, Third-in-Command under Optimus Prime, a mech whose only claim to flight was getting hit so hard his feet left the ground -- it probably sounded like a cosmic joke.

Okay, so they weren’t laughing. But their faces sure were funny.

*‘Will not laugh at the big scary warbuilds. Will. Not. Laugh!’*

Jazz found it even funnier that both Seekers immediately looked over his head at the Aerialbots as if looking for confirmation. Was it a flyer thing? Did their distrust of grounders run so deep that every statement had to be verified by somebody with a pair of wings?

*“Is he serious?”*

*“Tell me he’s not being serious.”*

Silverbolt gave them his most somber *I Am Not Hannibal Smith Stop Calling Me That* look, which only made the other Autobots all agree that he definitely was Hannibal Smith, and forwarded the slightly-wild comm. bursts to Jazz even as he replied. *“Jazz? Rarely. What did he say this time?”*

That calmed the two Seekers down from reflexive hysteria, but their wings were still outflung with shock. From behind them, Skywarp caught on to their sudden tension and turned, frowning. *“He said -- ah, it’s not important.”*

*“No! It’s not.”*

*“Really.”*

*“But…”*

*“How long has he been the Prime’s Third?”*

The barest twist of a cynical smile showed under the floodlights set up around the makeshift arena. *“From what I hear? Too long.”* Silverbolt made it sound like whatever he’d heard, he’d heard a lot. His smile took on a hint of puzzlement. *“Why?”*

Thundercracker and Acid Rain automatically looked down, optics popping wide and slightly wild around the edges again, and Silverbolt zeroed in on Jazz. Puzzlement went straight through disbelief with the power of a lead brick of Get-A-Clue to the head. “Jazz, what’s going on?”

Jazz gave Thundercracker his widest visor, betrayal in Autobot blue, and didn’t look back at Silverbolt. And he wasn’t squirming like a guilty mech caught with his hand in the energon goodie packet. Nope, not squirming at all. SpecOps mechs didn’t squirm. It was an unwritten rule or
Silverbolt led a team of chronic troublemakers notorious for not only having their hands in the packet, but licking it clean after they finished stealing all the goodies inside. His optics narrowed, and the sound of a bomb counting down toward comprehension ticked almost audibly. Blue optics never changed as the mind behind them rolled the Get-A-Clue Brick over and over to pick out the incriminating details. He turned slowly to look down in to the arena. Starscream was still talking, always the center of attention and rank and wasn’t there something about a courtship? Right, courtship negotiations. Rank and negotiations. Decepticons asking about Jazz’s rank, and Starscream negotiating.

The Aerialbot commander didn’t make a single aggressive move. He didn’t, yet when he turned to fasten his optics on Jazz, Fireflight and Air Raid actually took a few steps back from their team leader. “Jazz.”

Thundercracker and Acid Storm were busy not looking at Jazz, embarrassment having temporarily overwritten their urgent Need To Know. They were Decepticons. They knew all about that one stupid loudmouth who spilled a mech’s plan to just the wrong person. Well, label them Stupid Loudmouths.

“Oops,” the dark blue Seeker muttered quietly.

“Yeah, uh, oops,” the vivid green Seeker mumbled. “Guess you hadn’t, uh, yeah.”

The small Autobot standing in front of them peeked over his shoulder-tire, 90% jovial Jazzmeister and 10% dead mech walking. “Yeah, Silverbolt?”

“May I speak with you a moment?” There were reasons Slingshot got away with being an aft on a regular basis, and one of those reasons was the fact that every Autobot had seen that expression on Silverbolt’s face at one time or another: ‘You can run, you little miscreant, but you cannot hide. Not from me.’ Slingshot and Air Raid got a lot of pity passes just because the rest of the Autobots knew that the Aerialbots had to merge eventually. Payback could be ceded to someone who knew how to dole it out best.

“I’m kinda talking with them at the moment…” Jazz smiled sickly and jerked his thumb at Thundercracker and Acid Storm.

Who threw him under the bus without the slightest hesitation. “No, that’s alright!” Thundercracker spread his hands, indicating that, no no, the conversation could wait!

“I wanted a chance to say hello to Fireflight again,” Acid Storm said smoothly, “so if you’ll excuse me for just one moment.” He half-bowed, using the courtesy to slither around Jazz. Thundercracker copied the motion around the other side, leaving the black-and-white Autobot standing alone in the middle of the platform as the two Decepticons strode eagerly toward Air Raid and Fireflight. The saboteur looked oddly undersized and abandoned in their wake.

Not that they cared. Decepticons, after all. Acid Storm glowed with an abundance of charisma as he homed in on, “Fireflight! Good to see you again.”

Silverbolt passed the two Seekers halfway, walking forward. He stopped beside Jazz, body language so stiff it was almost hostile. **“Yes?”**

**“Yes, quite. Nice job.”** Jazz turned so they stood shoulder to, um, arm. Silverbolt was taller than him, after all. They stood observing the arena, obviously engaged in a Serious Conversation over
So serious. They couldn’t possibly be shamelessly eavesdropping on Thundercracker and Acid Storm trying to politely chat up Air Raid and Fireflight. The two Autobot officers were far too busy with more important matters. Who had time to spy on Acid Storm’s semi-successful attempt at edging closer to Fireflight? *"So, how does Agent Lynch know Murdock?"*

Silverbolt’s expression was so severe plastic surgeons on Earth would frame it to scare their clients into signing on the dotted line. Whatever Jazz had just said was obviously displeasing. *"He’s still weaseling out of telling me. They do look cozy together, don’t they?"* Fireflight was, in fact, retreating one coy step at a time from Acid Storm, keeping Air Raid between them even as he giggled at whatever the Rainmaker was telling him.

Well, the flightiest Aerialbot probably wanted to look coy, but his attempt at flirting was betrayed by the adorably shy look on his face. Acid Storm seemed enchanted. He inched after the smaller flyer, endlessly pursuing him round and round the other Aerialbot. As he talked with Air Raid, Thundercracker kept ‘accidentally’ getting in Fireflight’s way. It was almost enough to let the acid-green Seeker get a hand on the pretty little red stabilizers held tantalizingly out of reach, and the near-misses flustered Fireflight to no end. Fireflight flustered was a common sight among the Autobots, but Acid Storm was watching him with every evidence of delight.

Jazz shrugged carelessly, looking away from Silverbolt as if he didn’t give a slag what the Aerialbot commander said. *"Aw, it’s sweet. It reminds me of th’ time we got Ravage to chase a laser pointer."*

An aborted gesture with one hand, and Silverbolt shot a suspicious look over at the group of four as if they could hear the two officers’ comm. conversation. Thundercracker’s optics snapped back to Air Raid. Who, Thundercracker? Watching two Autobot officers like Laserbeak on a spying mission? Surely not.

Silverbolt eyed the blue Seeker, distrustful, but his voice over internal comm. held remembered laughter. *"He really just didn’t know what to think of it, did he? Every time he started to get an override in place, that little red dot kept zipping around just out of reach, and he’d lose it again."*

*"Ravage is hard-wired to chase. Heh. It was good, wasn’t it? Four kliks of watching the gears turn in his head, trying to figure out how t’ stop long enough to kill us."*

*"Instinct is strong, as they say on Earth."*

*"Programming imperative, as we say on Cybertron."* Just at the edge of peripheral vision, Acid Storm pursued Fireflight in another circuit. The Rainmaker had a small smile of amusement on his face, and the Aerialbot’s shy expression was changing to a silly grin. Jazz puffed air through his vents, snorting hot air like he’d just been told something ludicrous. *"Betcha my hubcaps Acid Storm is an ex-instructor from the War Academy."*

*"We need to separate them ASAP."* Silverbolt’s head snapped around, and while he didn’t glare at his superior officer, there was some definite disapproval going on. Skywarp was watching them closely from the other side of the platform, his rotary acquaintance forgotten. *"I don’t like the idea of any of my team getting singled out like that, especially by someone with instructor experience. Look how Fireflight began imitating Ironhide, for Primus’ sake. It took us weeks to convince him he couldn’t pull off the accent."* The disapproval deepened. This was Serious Stuff being discussed here. Look at them discuss it so seriously. *"He’s getting paired with Skydive from now on, and Skydive isn’t going to let him out of his sight."*

*"Good. Although his version of Ironhide’s drawl was about forty different kinds of cute."* The smaller Autobot’s head came around, meeting the Aerialbot officer’s stern gaze with a glare of his
own. The fact that he was laughing over internal comm. didn’t touch that glare. It was the sort of glare authority figures used to bludgeon subordinates into line, and it looked particularly dangerous coming from Jazz. *"I thought Ironhide was never gonna stop doting on him. Now, when I give the word, you three go for broke back to the base. Don’t wait for me. I got work to do, here."

Ah, and that was genuine worry making Silverbolt drop his optics. Not all of that worry came from Acid Storm abruptly reversing and coming around Thundercracker’s wide wings to surprise Fireflight on the other side. Fireflight jumped, startled, and didn’t retreat fast enough to avoid the gentle pinch of fingers on his stabilizer. Acid Storm smiled and slowly reeled him in. There was token resistance at best.

Silverbolt’s worried look deepened for every step closer together those two got. *"Yes, sir. We’re ready. Blaster’s got a line to Air Raid, so any moment now, Thundercracker’s going to get around to asking about your -- "*

“Fragging figures,” Air Raid growled, suddenly an irate barrier to his gestaltmate’s flirting. Fireflight seemed confused, hopping back as Air Raid shouldered he and Acid Storm apart, but the other Aerialbot focused on Jazz. The Special Operations operative coolly turned his head to look back at him, and Air Raid definitely was glaring. The lead brick of Get-A-Clue had landed. “What’s the matter, Jazz? Sleeping your way to the top not working with the Autobots?” The flyer’s smile was just plain vicious, his normal fun-seeking transmuted to instant rage. “Or is Starscream just a better fuck than Prime?”

“Air Raid! That was out of line!” Silverbolt barked.

“You really wanna go this route with me, Air Raid?” Jazz said, and where Silverbolt had gone for volume, Jazz’s voice went quiet. Yet the whip-crack in his words was all the clearer for his low voice. “Right here, right now? You think you’re that much of a hotshot?”

The Aerialbot’s shoulders hunched, upper body tensed forward as if he’d like nothing more than to start a fight. “Why bother? You’d probably get your newest fling to take me out instead of doing it yourself.” Silverbolt’s furious hiss was ignored, and Air Raid purposely toed a line most mechs were too wise to cross. “You SpecOps mechs are all the same. You can’t take anybody in a real fight, so you resort to trickery!”

Jazz didn’t bother turning to confront him, choosing to simply meet his angry optics with a chilly stare. Thundercracker got out of the way in two quick steps, face a picture of surprise -- but intent red optics flicked back and forth between the two Autobots in a way that watched too closely for total innocence. Acid Storm retreated more reluctantly. He looked slightly mystified by the crude Earth terminology, but he clearly got the gist of Air Raid’s angry tirade. His optics lingered on Fireflight as the last Aerialbot helplessly looked between the other Autobots in complete bewilderment.

Air Raid’s lip peeled up in preparation to speak again, and Silverbolt took a huge step forward, hand slashing through the air. “Enough! Air Raid, you will stand down, or you will be grounded for the next twenty orns!”

The Aerialbots faced off, and Air Raid’s glare tried to burn through Silverbolt’s head. The Aerialbot commander was no happier, but his scowl darkened every second Air Raid didn’t back off. His wings had fixed-placement on his rootmode, incapable of raising or lowering to intimidate other mechs like many flight models, but that didn’t keep Air Raid from glancing down at them. Maybe Jazz wasn’t in-tune enough with winged mechs to know what the riled flyer saw in Silverbolt’s rigidly-clamped flaps, but there was a quick blink of the optics, an even tinier flick of a tongue. Fast, there and gone again from Air Raid’s face, but a close observer could catch it.
Air Raid’s aggressive stance eased down, just a tad.

Jazz was impressed despite himself. From the sidelong look exchanged between Thundercracker and Acid Storm, he wasn’t the only one. Silverbolt seemingly reserved bark was apparently no measure of his bite. The Aerialbots hadn’t always been happy with Silverbolt’s leadership, but…huh. That was kind of odd, now that he thought about it. None of the Autobots had ever really pried into why the combiner team suddenly swung into line behind Prime’s appointed leader. There had been infighting for the first couple of months, even after that weird time-traveling incident, but then they’d just…settled down. He’d have to ask a few questions about that later.

If the timing coincided with the week of the A-Team marathon, Sideswipe was never going to let anyone forget it.

Jazz suddenly cracked a smile. Air Raid’s optics jerked to his face, and the impulsive Aerialbot snarled like an enraged beast. “If I ever had to take you out,” the black-and-white officer promised, words so silky they nearly didn’t register as sinister, “it’d be in a real fight, and you’d see me coming.” The blue of his visor softened, and his head slowly tilted to the side as that sank in. To look at him, an observer might think him just the most darling little mischief-maker in the Autobots, now wasn’t he? “And with an attitude like that, can you really blame me for…exploring my options?” His helm nodded a tiny motion toward the arena floor. “I could put in a word for you, y’know.”

Silverbolt spun on his heel, disapproval written large across his face. Behind him, Air Raid made an inarticulate sound of anger so great it couldn’t get through his vocalizer any other way, and Fireflight gasped, big blue optics injured as he apparently began to catch on.

This time, the three Decepticons closely watching the byplay couldn’t help but react. “The frag you will,” Thundercracker said, turbines angrily growling.

“As if Starscream would listen to you?” Acid Storm scoffed, but Jazz took careful note of the fact that he didn’t look quite as certain as he sounded.

Skywarp invaded Jazz’s personal space bubble from behind without so much as acknowledging the two Autobot flyers attempting to stab him to death with their optics. Powerful jet engines were beginning to start up all around the small platform, and Jazz alone seemed at ease as Skywarp rested his elbows on the smallest Autobot’s shoulders. “What are you guys talking about over here?” the purple-and-black Seeker asked, ready to get involved no matter what they wanted. Jazz tipped his helm up to look at the Decepticon Elite’s most notorious meddling prankster -- who smugly folded his hands over the Autobot’s forehelm and rested his chin on his hands. After a moment’s hesitation, the helm slid under his hands as the Autobot decided to let him be and returned to looking forward. Skywarp blinked innocently at the four flyers in front of them. “Looks interesting.”

“Jazz’s given up waiting for one of you to take out Prowl and moved on to teaming up with your faction’s back-stabbing creep,” Air Raid sneered before Silverbolt could stop him.

“He wouldn’t do that!” Fireflight protested, interrupting Silverbolt starting in on the other Aerialbot. Big blue optics, beginning to hurt, beginning to get it, turned to Jazz. “…would you?”

There was an extremely awkward pause.

Like, really awkward.

Acid Storm looked down and to the side, resetting his vocalizer uncomfortably. Thundercracker was staring at Jazz as if he’d never seen the Autobot officer before. Silverbolt was advancing on Air Raid, one baleful step on a time, and Air Raid was shuffling back while looking at everything but his
commander. And Fireflight. Because nobody, not even big mean Decepticon Seekers, wanted to be the one to puncture Fireflight’s childlike belief in everyone’s good intentions.

Well, not every big mean Seeker. Skywarp probably would have said something, but his jaw had dropped with a *tunk* right onto Jazz’s helm. That was a weird sensation even disregarding the Decepticon proximity alerts screaming through the saboteur’s head. Everything in Jazz demanded he drop and roll out of the unpredictable slagger’s reach, but this was all working out so perfectly he was reluctant to change anyone’s focus.

Ever-so-slowly, the purple-and-black Seeker used the hands on Jazz’s helm to tip the Autobot’s head back again. Skywarp tilted his own head in order to meet the blue visor. “What?”

Jazz pouted, playful expression failing to cover sharp annoyance at how pear-shaped everything had gone. “I asked a simple question. Suddenly, everyone’s overreacting all over the place.”

Thundercracker and Air Raid had identical expressions. It’d have been hilarious if they were a little less ready to lunge for Jazz’s throat. **Overreacting -- ?!**

Skywarp glanced at them, then back to Jazz, expression half-curious and half-dreading. “Okay, I’ll bite.” Acid Storm looked alarmed, head whipping around. “What’d you ask?”

“I asked,” the Rainmaker relaxed when no biting seemed forthcoming, which meant Acid Storm really hadn’t been around Skywarp or Jazz long enough to know better, “if the terms for a social contract are flexible enough t’ sign me on as executive officer to the Vosian Emirate.”

“No,” Thundercracker said, not giving anyone else a chance to comment. “They’re not. Social contracts are social only, and after I’m doing speaking with Starscream, your contact with each other is going to be limited to you being an Autobot frag-toy and nothing else.” His face was forbidding, expression set and hard as fresh-cut stone. “Take it or leave it.”

“I don’t recall your input being part of the bargain,” Jazz said back, and Skywarp’s hands had ended up on his shoulders, restraining him. The blue Seeker was the larger mech, but somehow, the waves of threat radiating off the small Autobot made him the more dangerous one. “I’m no one’s frag-toy. And y’know what? I don’t believe you. I think a social contract is broad enough to cover government office, even if it’s just off the record.” His smile looked like a knife aimed at Thundercracker’s vital linkages. Skywarp’s hands tightened, but the teleporter leaned as far back as his arms allowed. He looked like he was trying to hold onto a live grenade while staying out of the blast zone. “Not that it matters. Since we haven’t set a single term, I might just ask for a business contract instead. Who knows? If Starscream’s wants some decent lovin’ after being stuck with you for so long…”

Acid Storm had grabbed Thundercracker by one wingtip, a fierce look of concentration drilling into the side of the blue Seeker’s helm as he tried talking him down via internal comm., but Thundercracker was having none of it. He surged forward against the grip on his wing, face twisting into a snarl. “You *dare* say that to me -- “

“Both of you,” a commanding voice cracked over them, and suddenly Silverbolt was standing between the Seeker and saboteur, “calm down before I call in reinforcements!” Fireflight stepped up, covering his back and trying to glare at Thundercracker even as Air Raid took position on Silverbolt’s other side and glared quite effectively at Jazz. Air Raid looked pissed. Silverbolt looked one step from calling Optimus Prime directly.

Fireflight just reminded anyone who saw him of a petro-rabbit trying to look bigger and more imposing as a ridiculously overpowered predator threatened it. He probably did more to diffuse the
situation than a drawn weapon could have. Thundercracker’s hands snapped into shaking fists, but the Seeker pointedly avoided looking at him. He glared at Silverbolt instead, who met his optics with all the authority of a combiner team leader. Acid Storm blinked, breaking his fixed gaze at Thundercracker in order to glance at the intervening Aerialbots, and his face sort of melted into of helpless expression of ‘D’awww, lookit the baby jet!’

Fireflight noticed and all but fuffed and spat, turbines sputtering fire angrily. It was like a kitten facing off against a full-grown tiger; ‘I am a brave Autobot, and you should fear me!’

Oh yeah, definitely an ex-instructor. Acid Storm had never fought the Aerialbots, being that he’d headed the Decepticon Armada on Cybertron, and the youngest flyers in the Decepticon ranks had to be almost as old as the war at this point. Jazz had watched the Aerialbots hit all the right buttons for certain Autobots with past instructor experience back on Earth. That kind of sappy ‘Primus, I’ve missed this’ look was hard to cover. Even for hardened Decepticon officers, apparently.

Jazz shook his shoulder-tires free of Skywarp’s ginger hold and set his hands on his hips. Deliberately catching Thundercracker’s optics over Silverbolt’s shoulder, he lifted his chin cockily and forced a tiny amount of fuel through the combustion chamber of his engine. The Seeker’s more powerful engine ripped the air, a junkyard dog’s warning growl, but rust skittered across the ground around Jazz a second later as the exhaust system in his feet loudly backfired. Everyone jumped, startled. In the small cupola of the wrecked building they stood on, the loud pop was magnified into a gunshot.

The Autobot officer didn’t even lower himself to sneer as everyone, rattled, tried to regain their composure. He turned his back on Thundercracker, contempt sufficiently expressed, and strode to the opposite end of the platform as if the Seeker weren’t worth acknowledging any longer. Once he reached the edge, he folded his arms across his hood and refused to turn back around. The stragglers in the makeshift arena tiers were occasionally looking toward the platform, wondering what was going on, but Starscream’s group on the arena floor remained the center of attention.

The vulnerable small of his back itched. His windshield was reinforced armor-grade glass, but it didn’t feel like enough when his back was turned on three Decepticons. Three Aerialbots, too, but threat assessment was highly charged at the moment and didn’t give good odds of them winning if it came to a fight. Behind him, a voice raised and, just as sudden, cut off mid-word. Someone was attempting to be reasonable. Somebody else was grumbling. There were turbines scraping the rusty ground, and stomping sounds from somebody trying to get attention.

Jazz kept his sensor scans tight and close, pulling them back from setting off anyone’s active receptors. Considering the situation, it was a good bet that everyone’s battle sensor suites were up and running. He himself was riding the upsweep of energy he got when threat assessment pushed his systems to optimum processing. Jazz loved the sensation; the high not from fighting, but from doing his job. Humans called it an adrenaline rush. Ratchet called it idiocy. Pushing over the limits for the sweet zing of extra energy had killed more than a few SpecOps mechs during the war, but like a junkie addicted to a drug, Jazz kept doing it.

*”Jazz, you got this?”* Blaster said, and the crackling charge of an operation well-done flooded down Jazz’s internals at the communication officer’s uncertain tone. There’d been a tiny, niggling doubt that he’d fooled anyone, but he was good at this slag.

*”I’ve got it. Tell the A-Team they’re all gettin’ new posters for their quarters when this is over,”* Jazz said, and if he sounded a tad giddy, then it was just him getting his fix. Danger and manipulation were his drugs of choice. *”I might even spring for shipping their action figure collections from Earth. They’re doin’ a bang-up job, my mech. How much of that’s you?”*
Blaster chuckled, misgivings gone. Hearing the Jazzmeister at work was all the reassurance he’d needed. *"I’m guiding tonight’s Running of the Drama-Llamas, but they’re picking their own lines. Barracus’s got a nice flair for the dramatic, wouldn’t you agree?”*"*”

*"I would. The cussin’ was a nice touch. Although Murdock’s takin’ the cake. He’s got Agent Lynch wrapped around his finger like you wouldn’t believe.”* 

*"There was sinking sensation in his tanks when Blaster didn’t immediately reply. *"Don’t tell me. Please, don’t tell me.”*"

*"I don’t want to, but that ain’t me. He knows what’s going on, but I’m sensing prior complications there.”*"

*"Aw, scrap.”* Oh, *Fireflight.* *"He wasn’t acting, was he.”*"

*"You said it.”*"

*"We’re on it,”* Silverbolt broke in, sparing some attention from being the responsible Autobot officer soothing ruffled wings in Jazz’s wake. *"Skydive’s going to sit on him until we get the full story. And maybe for some time after that, depending on what that story entails.”*"

The sinking sensation didn’t stop. Not another crush. The Aerialbots were just too blasted young for war, and sometimes it showed through. Usually at the worst times. *"You do that. I don’t want him alone with Acid Storm from here on out, and when I mean ‘alone,’ I mean ‘less than three other Autobots standing between them at all times’.”*"

*"Yes sir.”*"

*"Logging that order as we speak, Jazz.”*"

There was a loud spike in the conversation behind him as Air Raid and Thundercracker synchronized their railing about “Auto-whores ‘face-climbing the ranks!” and set of feet came up behind the short Autobot. He didn’t turn, but Skywarp came into view beside him soon enough. The purple-and-black Seeker seemed oddly cautious, edging into place like he wasn’t sure Jazz wasn’t about to explode in his face.

"For the purpose of ending our Great War,” the Decepticon said, saying the unfamiliar words with the look of a wizard trying his first magic spell. ‘Alacadabra!’

“For the purpose of ending our Great War,” Jazz responded grudgingly.

Skywarp’s face brightened; hey, it’d worked! “Soooooo,” he drew out, “since we’re supposed to be all cooperative and stuff with you Autobints -- uh, Autobots, I’m here to answer your questions!” He bounced slightly on his turbines, turning a bit to face the Autobot as he spread his hands. Presenting: the amazing Skywarp, source of all answers. “Ask away!”

Jazz failed to be impressed, if the level look he gave the Seeker was any indication. “You already know my question.”

“Right. Um. About that.” The not-so-amazing Skywarp let his hands drop back to his sides, tapping his fingers on his thighs like he was incapable of standing still. “Look, it’s like this…”

“No more bullshit,” the Autobot cut him off.

Skywarp’s optics blanked momentarily as he looked that up. “Manure? Why the -- oh.” He’d obviously flipped past the literal meaning. “No, I’m being serious,” he insisted, spreading his hands again as if to demonstrate his seriousness. “Thundercracker’s got a bird up his engine intake about it
because you really could get that contract. I mean, I don’t think you will,“ he stressed, “’cause
Starscream isn’t a total space-case, but contract terms can be really flexible depending on who’s -- I
don’t like that look. I really don’t like that look.“ Skywarp eyed the look in question. “Stop giving
me that look.”

Jazz only smiled wider, and there was something unpleasantly Decepticon in it. It said better than
words that the one who wore it was a crafty mech who, need it remind Skywarp, headed the Special
Operations Division of an entire faction. Terms? Flexibility? The Jazzmeister was there, mech. “Im
in ur base killin ur d00dz,” the saboteur murmured softly around his improbably wide smile, and
Skywarp began to look truly alarmed.

Thundercracker just looked disgusted as he came to halt beside his wingmate. Possibly because he
could actually hear the Autobot misspelling words into L33t. Except for a few rare exceptions, most
of the Elite Decepticons who’d crashed onto Earth had gladly left it behind. It had, unfortunately for
them, followed them to Cybertron in the form of an ally planet. With old TV show posters. And
temporal language, now that Cybertron had to restructure its time around a sun. And humans, Primus
transforming, the slagging humans! Who were turning up everywhere and getting into everything in
the way that parasitic species did -- except that the Decepticon rank and file were sucking up Earth
trivia at an unbelievable rate. The Earth Embassy on Cybertron was less of an ally-presence and
more of a ruthless pop culture invasion.

Which meant that the unlucky Elite were never going to be able to delete their Earth-information
databases. Meaning, in turn, that Thundercracker would always know exactly how Jazz was
misspelling words. Which shouldn’t have even been possible, since he was talking, not writing, but
this was Jazz. He had mad skillz.

“There is no Decepticon base in Vos, and if there were,” Thundercracker gritted out, “it would
negate the peace negotiations if you were to kill anyone in it.”

“Officially, there’s no Decepticon base,” Jazz corrected spitefully, “but we all know there just
happens to be a large fortified building on the north end of the city with lots of Decepticons standin’
guard around it.” His smile defied the bounds of his own face as he turned it on the blue Seeker.
“And if I killed anyone in it, you’d never know it was me.”

“You go too far, Autobot,” Thundercracker warned quietly, and the distant rumble of a storm filled
his voice. Skywarp was darting jittery looks between them, obviously not happy to be the buffer
zone for this conversation.

“For the purpose of ending our Great War,” Jazz said, all syrupy sweetness and ‘Oo, silly me!’

Thundercracker eyed him skeptically. “…yes.”

The Autobot’s smile took on a strange cast as he pointedly turned it away from the two Seekers and
out over the arena instead. He beamed at the crowd down on the arena floor in an almost…
proprietary manner. From the look of him, Thundercracker liked that look even less than Skywarp
had liked the devious smile preceding it. “Im in my base,” Jazz tasted the words, relishing the way
his lips shaped them, “c0mmandin ur d00dz.” His chin canted up, surveying all he pwned. “Huh. I
like the sound of that.”

Thundercracker’s optics glowed a furious crimson, and his engines roared to life in a deafening pulse
of sound. Skywarp made a belated grab at his wingmate as the blue Seeker kicked into the air, but
Thundercracker was already in motion. Purple hands snatched at empty air that resounded with
repulsed, revolted hate. Every head in the arena jerked around; a rainbow of optics wide with shock
turned up toward the night sky. Thundercracker’s wings were a black silhouette against the
floodlights.

“Never!” he swore, making an oath and a curse of a single word.

But Jazz stood defiant beneath him, a glittering black-and-white manifestation of the Decepticons’ inability to crush the Autobots, and laughed for the sheer unholy joy of it. “Never say never!” he called above the burn of lit turbines, and Thundercracker’s silhouette bent its arms, hands fisting. Skywarp looked desperately to Acid Storm for guidance, but the Rainmaker had frozen in disbelief, optics locked on his superior officer. The Aerialbots were a knot of tension, helpless to do anything as the fists rose, shaking visibly.

The air in the arena congealed. The war loomed again, returning on Seeker wings. For an eternity of a moment, just a single spin of a spark, everything came to a head. There was silence.

In the silence, in the quiet of his deadly-calm thoughts, Jazz doubted.

Thunder rocked the arena, shattering the silence and poor-grade glass as specialized flight engines turned sound waves into a sonic weapon, and Thundercracker launched himself forward.

“Starscream! I challenge you!”

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 9
[* * * * *]
Pt. 10

I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 10
[* * * * *]

Chaos. Multi-colored wings erupted from the arena floor, scattering like a flock of birds before Thundercracker’s charge, and everyone was shouting. What wasn’t being bellowed by voice was being transmitted, and so many comm. lines pinged into place that the network almost shimmered into sight. Starscream shrieked in confused anger, demanding an explanation that Thundercracker yelled back, and their voices spanned octaves above and below the crowd noise. The flyers converging on the seats had to shout all the louder to be heard.

"I hope to Primus you know what you’re doing," Blaster said in the back of Jazz’s helm, the only calm voice amidst the shouts. "They’re trying to cover it up, but the ‘Cons just started being real unhappy in here."

"You should see what I’m seeing," Jazz said lightly, trying to transmit a sensor package and getting a 'Network Down: Please Hold' message. "Blaster, we got eavesdroppers."

"Don’t I know it. Scrambler should be giving them a headache, but alerts started popping up the second Thundercracker pulled his stunt. Somebody wants to know what’s the haps in your neck of the woods, real bad."

Red Alert broke in with an all-units broadcast over the Autobot system: "Consider the comm. network compromised. Cover chatter, people!"

Icons bounced and dropped, plonking into the line like the fat kid at the public pool. "Geez, Jazz, you always go around kicking beehives?" Sideswipe cannon-balled. "Subtle as done by Slag. When did a missile blitz and a foot up the aft start replacing ‘what’s your sign’?"

"What can I say? I want me some-a that there honey, baby."

"Jazz!" Bluestreak’s giggles didn’t cover the scandalized buzz that suddenly cropped up. Autobot icons jumped onto the network to join the gossip-fest. Not everyone knew what was going on, but they knew enough to play along.

"Oh, like you’re one to talk!" Sunstreaker jeered. "I’ve fixed your finish enough times to know banging bumpers to berth-hop is your favorite method!"

"Sunstreaker! If you’re incapable of civilized speech, then get off the network," Prowl interrupted. "An Autobot’s personal choices are no business of yours, much less ours!"

"It’s my business when I have to look at it afterward," Sunstreaker argued. "Mech makes cable uplinking into bungee-jumping or something, because there are marks left behind that are -- "

"Sunstreaker!" five different Autobots cut in, in five flavors of disapproval.

A slow voice, gravelly and grave, drowned them all out. "Me Slag more subtle than Jazz." The Dinobots tended to be not-so-quick on the uptake when it came to verbal banter. The sheer
unexpectedness floored the other Autobots for a second, especially when Slag went on to say, still as level as ever but in an unmistakable rhythm, "*Him Bluestreak like big ‘bots?*"

Everyone else recognized it, and they were stupefied. "*And I cannot lie!*"* Bluestreak rapped, two parts joy to one part naughtiness, and Jazz prayed to Primus that Soundwave was indeed listening in on the network at that very moment. He’d like to see the Decepticon communication specialist try and decode this for hidden messages! *"You Autobots can’t deny ~ "*

*"I’m sure I can,"* Prowl said, deadpan. As if all emotion were lost to him. Woe betide the Autobot executive officer with such a crew.

*"Them Dinobots tried to warn me Slag,"** Autobot icons were beginning to jig gleefully in time, *"but that ‘bot you Bluestreak got make me Slag so horny!"*

*"Thought that was your altmode,"* Cliffjumper quipped.

*"Well use me, use me a lot, cuz you ain’t that average Dinoboeeeeek! Wooho~o!"* Dinobot and Datsun dropped off the network in unison.

*"I’m…going to go have a long talk with the Dinobots about using human pick-up lines without understanding what they really mean. Again,"* Wheeljack excused himself, resigned to duty. The Dinobots didn’t really understand sexual interfacing yet. They seemed to think it was companionable comfort-interfacing with funny dialogue and strange noises behind closed doors. It fell to Wheeljack to explain such things. Usually over and over again. *"Don’t wait up, folks."* His icon bounced back up into stand-by. The inventor was presumably off to rescue Bluestreak from Slag’s well-meant but totally off-target intentions.

Not that anyone worried. The night would probably end in a Bluestreak-centered Dinobot cuddle-pile.

*"They screwed up the lyrics,"* Gears complained into the silence left behind, and it was like poking a hole in a dam. Laughter swept down the line in a cascade of hilarity, and Jazz laughed with the rest of them.

Meanwhile, however, under the cover of noise and radio network transmission, numbers dialed, encoded, and -- temporarily secured -- sent old-fashioned text.

[I will not ask this of you.] Optimus Prime’s icon hadn’t pinged into the general conversation yet, but Blaster had keyed his number in the moment the chatter started. The messages came over the connection with an apologetic feel only genuine emotion could generate. [It is not right to sacrifice one mech for the hope of a plan that may not work.]

[And now you know how we feel every time you pull this slag on us.] Ironhide sent. [Jazz, what are you trying to pull?]

[Thundercracker’s just broken his trine-contract with Starscream,] Jazz sent back, direct-texting to officer numbers, [because he’s under the impression that I’m bargaining with Starscream for the position of Second-in-Command of Vos.]

[So it is possible for you to bargain for that position.] Prowl’s text was as flat as the mech’s voice probably was as that information processed. [Is this speculation or fact?]

Jazz took in the view before him. Flyers flocked to find seats, overflowing the makeshift tiers until it was standing room only as the Decepticons came and kept coming. More arrived every second, rushing up from the tunnel in their hundreds or bounding over the top of the skyscraper ruins in a
constant flow. They swooped and shoved each other, jockeying for the best spots or at least a place to stand witness in. The Aerialbots let themselves be ushered to the center of the platform by Acid Storm and Skywarp, who were eyeing the overflow of flyers starting to perch on the edges. Jazz found himself surrounded by the three Autobots and guarded by two Decepticon officers warding off the curious. He didn’t take his visor off the arena floor.

In the center of the tornado of wings, blue-black squared off against red-silver-blue. Shrill fury banged off of deep rumblings, distance and several hundred shouting mechs turning the argument between Thundercracker and Starscream into a spectacle of wild gesticulations. That was escalation if Jazz had ever seen it.

[Thundercracker wouldn’t have broken his contract over speculation. It’s a real possibility.] Text didn’t let him lighten the grim words with his typical humor, but maybe the situation called for seriousness. [Has the topic of Vos entered negotiations?]

[No,] Prime sent. [Megatron refuses to let it be brought up. He actively changes the subject.]

[Avoidance. Question being, does he avoid it because it’s going according to plan, or because he can’t control it?] Red Alert’s icon had dropped into the open line, and he was yelling at the other Autobots to get off the comm. network, didn’t they know the Decepticons were listening in?! The gossiping Autobots dismissed his concerns. What, did Soundwave need a recipe for bad jokes as told by Bumblebee? [The assumption is that Starscream is controlling the Vosians, but Megatron controls Starscream. Vos would be Megatron’s.]

[This isn’t a Decepticon thing.] Jazz texted, watching the chaos. [They’re Decepticons, but this isn’t anything I saw in the Decepticon ranks during the war. Megatron might not have control much longer, or he might but it’s not going to be the same as during the war.]

Ratchet was taking some flak from the other Autobots as word of the Constructicon Molestation Incident spread like wildfire. Well, that was one way to debrief everyone on what to expect from amorous, alliance-seeking Decepticons from now on. Under the cover of his embarrassed bluster on the comm. line, however, the medic caught Jazz’s meaning. [Megatron and Starscream have a military contract. That ends when the war ends, from what little we know about this contracting scrap.]

[They’ll renegotiate,] Ironhide asserted. [No way will Buckethead let Screamer loose that easy.]

[But that’s my point.] That was the gamble, and it’d be up to him to make the payoff worth it. [If I can get the right terms, we’d have an Autobot presence in Vos before Megatron can claim it as his own.]

[No.] The single word was as firm as if Prime had actual said it aloud. [There is no guarantee it would work, and it asks far too much of you to even try.]

[Prime, you’ve asked nothing more of me every time I’ve gone on a mission.]

[There has always been the risk of damage or death, but not of,] the text hesitated strangely, as if Optimus were picking the letters out one by one, [moral ambiguity.]

That was a horrible way to phrase what Jazz was beginning to see as a cultural difference. It wasn’t political incorrectness on Prime’s part, or even unkindness. It was…a lack of terminology. The Autobots didn’t yet have to way to express the differences between Autobot and Decepticon interfacing practices without couching it in derogatory terms. Even the catcalling at Ratchet had overtones of negativity that just didn’t fit how Starscream and the Constructicons had approached
things. But this was not the time to debate culture contrasts.

[With all due respect.] Blaster sent, plinking Autobot icons on the chatter-channel with groan-worthy Earth spambot porn messages featuring Constructicon heads pasted over select portions of human anatomy. [Prime? Pot’s calling. Something about the color black.]

[Beat me to it.] Ironhide agreed. [And how are those negotiations going with Megatron, huh?]

[That is not the same situation!]

[No? You’re right. I’m replaceable. You aren’t.] Jazz really wished there was a way to make encoded text italicize, bold, underline, and possible dance. Just to get this through their slagging Prime’s head! Hypocrisy, no matter how well-meant, was still hypocrisy. [Let’s look at this a different way: if interfacing with a Decepticon was the only way to complete a job, would you any of you hold it against me?]

A half-dozen texts fought to be first in the queue. [No!]

[Of course not.]

[An unusual method, but not one I haven’t heard before.]

[Don’t be ridiculous.]

[If you judged it to be necessary, it was.]

[The war has called for extreme solutions before, and we’ve never held the victims to blame. No.]

[Jazz, this is not a mission.] Prime protested, and Jazz couldn’t tell if his leader was angry or concerned. Or both. [This is your life we’re talking about.]

[Yes, it is.] he sent back, and he wished there was a way to make the words more gentle. [I’d like to have a life after the war, but the war isn’t over yet. I’m still your best operative in the field, and I’ve laid out the situation. We may not gain anything concrete, but we are definitely going to lose Vos to the Decepticons if I don’t act. Orders, sir?] The cursor blinked at the bottom of his visor: blip blip. Beyond it, Starscream was screaming bloody murder at his wingmate, throwing a fit worthy of his name as Thundercracker coldly ignored him to ceremoniously disarm himself. The blue Seeker’s weapons stacked neatly beside the Air Commander’s own. Knock Out ventured out to frisk the Seeker, enhanced medical scanners glowing in sheets of purple that cross-sectioned Thundercracker’s body in a search for hidden weaponry. The Decepticon medic made some kind of snide remark, and Thundercracker backhanded him into the lowest tier of the audience.

Finally, the words came, typing across his vision slow and somber: [Jazz, against my better judgment, your mission is to infiltrate and secure the Vos city-state government structure. You are authorized to use any means at your disposal, as you find necessary.] A hesitation. [May Primus forgive me, and I hope to someday earn your forgiveness as well for using you this way.]

He’d set himself up for it. He’d dug out the information on a hunch and used it to pry under Thundercracker’s plating. Jazz’s spark still spun to read the assignment laid out in implacable text. [That’ll happen the day you forgive yourself, sir.] Approximately an eternity from this moment, if the Prime’s load of guilt from the beginning of the war on was any indication. [I’m going to need a lot of free rein here, boss.]
[Granted.]

[Ratchet, Ironhide, Blaster, Red Alert: I need everyone running interference between Starscream and me tomorrow if I can’t start the ball rolling tonight. I suspect he’s a verbal delivery away from formally rejecting this courtship, Megatron’s orders or not. We need to make sure he’s not allowed to make that rejection.]

[On it.]

[Prowl, this is a long-term deep-cover mission.]

[I will divert conflicting duties as needed.]

[Thanks.] He couldn’t help himself. [Think you’ll still respect me in the morning?]

Blip blip.

Speechlessness via text message was pretty anticlimactic. Oh, well. Jazz didn’t much feel like laughing right now, anyway.

Down in the arena, Thundercracker evidently let something slip, and Starscream’s head whipped up. Demonic optics target-locked on Jazz, and the Aerialbots at his back clustered protectively close even as the saboteur met that accusative gaze. Blazing red slitted dangerously, and the Air Commander’s lips pressed into a thin, angry line. ‘You did this,’ that expression hissed, and Jazz allowed a narrow smirk to cross his face. ‘Who, me? Now why would you think that?’

Out of nowhere, the entire Autobot network shut down. Jazz’s comm. links led into a vast nothing, blacked out from even sensing the massive load of Decepticon communication happening all around him, much less the secured Autobot lines. He almost staggered, hands rising to hold his helm as if he’d been literally deafened. The reaction was unreasonable, but having a third of his sensor suites cut out all at once gutted his senses. He was off-balance, and Silverbolt’s hands were suddenly on his shoulders to keep him steady.

More than one Decepticon turned to follow the Air Commander’s deadly glare, but the Aerialbots were all focused on their officer in distress. Acid Storm and Skywarp exchanged uneasy glances, trying to guess what had happened. One of Jazz’s hands left his helm to press to the sound system set into his lower torso, unconsciously seeking reassurance that his receivers hadn’t actually been torn out. The speakers in his pelvic plates and on the inside of his doors hissed white noise briefly, testing, but there were no radio stations to play, no wireless to pick up, no comm. network to link into. Jazz’s whole communication system was dead weight, locked up from the outside. It’d have to be rebooted manually before it’d work again.

Blaster did good work. Starscream had apparently tried to contact the saboteur, and that couldn’t be allowed. Not right now, not with a mission at stake.

Jazz straightened, visor a deeper blue than a moment ago but rapidly resettling as he gave Starscream his most guileless look. Now, what could that have possibly been? Jazz certainly didn’t know. A malfunction, surely. He’d have it looked at later.

Starscream snarled, taking a step toward the infuriating mech.

“Starscream! I challenge you!” Thundercracker boomed. He’d positioned himself on the far end of the cleared area serving as the arena center, and while the challenge was more controlled than before, a hush still filled the tiers. Everyone waited for the Air Commander, their Emirate, to answer.
Starscream didn’t even give his challenger a glance. His optics bored into the Autobot far above. If Jazz hadn’t been meeting his optics just as intently, he might have missed the minute flick of red.

His fuel pump didn’t even skip a beat. “Aerialbots, go report to Prowl that no, I’m not dead.” He turned his head enough that they could see his smile, still not breaking optic contact with Starscream. “My comm. system just went down. Everyone at HQ probably thinks I got shot.” Bypassing the fact that Soundwave could easily tell the Autobots sharing the central monitoring station with him that Jazz was fine. That would require trusting Soundwave’s word, after all, and wouldn’t get the Aerialbots out of here.

Silverbolt hadn’t been privy to the officer texting free-for-all, but he didn’t hesitate. “Yes sir.”

Fireflight did hesitate, soft-spark that he was. “But -- “

“That’s an order, Murdock,” Jazz said quietly, reassurance and official order in one.

“…yessir.”

The Aerialbots launched. There was a second where they hovered instead of boosting up, and Jazz could almost imagine the conversation over internal comm.

*"Relay a message to that,"* his imagination lacked sufficient vitriol to come up with a bad enough word here, *"commander of yours!"*

Silverbolt would be diplomatically polite. *"I’m sorry, Starscream, but we have prior orders to carry out."*

Air Raid wouldn’t be quite so diplomatic. *"Tell your flunkies to deliver it."* He’d pause, probably looking too much like Slingshot at his jerk-iest for his own good. *"Oh, sorry, are they too busy attacking you for delivery duty?"*

*"Good luck!"* Fireflight would add in, six kinds of encouraging. His words would be all the worse because they were genuinely well-meant.

And then the Aerialbots were up, up and away. A few of the Decepticons in the tiers watched them go, but the majority of attention remained glued to the show. Starscream was literally shaking with stymied rage, fists knotted and remaining wing flaps at full extension. Jazz met incineration-red with cool blue, making his own silent challenge to the Decepticon Second-in-Command’s pride even as Thundercracker’s deep voice boomed a repeat of the formal words. It was the Air Commander’s choice: lower himself to involving Skywarp or Acid Storm in admitting that Jazz had played four of the highest ranking officers in the Decepticon Armada, or salvage his pride at the cost of accepting Thundercracker’s challenge.

For a moment, it seemed that Starscream’s hot temper would win. The Air Commander stood poised to fling himself over the crowd.

The Jazzmeister’s lips quirked. *'Bring it on.'*

[* * *]
A shriek burst out of the Seeker, and he whirled to face Thundercracker across the ring. “Fine, you idiot -- I accept!”

The blue Seeker immediately launched upward, body twisting into his altmode. The F-14 looked entirely out of place in an arena full of Cybertron’s finest flyers, but Jazz realized that at some point on Earth, he’d gotten used to it. It’d be a little weird, in fact, to see Thundercracker as anything else. The idea of Starscream waiting for his (ex?) wingmate’s charge standing tall and proud in any other altmode wasn’t just weird. It actually felt heretical. Cybertronians were a whole race based on adaptation and disguise, but some mechs were so deeply hidden the altmode was the only stability to grab onto.

“This is going to be good,” Acid Storm said from his side. When Jazz glanced aside, he could see the green Seeker watching raptly as Thundercracker came around.

Skywarp snorted air scornfully from his other side. “This is going to be ugly,” he corrected, and a glass-cracking BOOM exploded through the air.

Amplified by the shape of the makeshift arena, Thundercracker’s engine warped sound waves with its force. Armor plating rebounded off the very air, flattening lighter mechs and sending others staggering. Whole sections of the tiers stumbled and fell, tripping up further as reverberation came back around with a miniature crack! Yells of pain, excitement, and anger dissolved the audience into chaos. Half the flyers were scrambling to move, either further away or closer, and everyone was getting in everyone else’s way.

Hands clamped onto Jazz’s shoulder-tires, keeping the small Autobot upright even as the two Seekers at his side struggled to stay on their feet. Skywarp’s wings folded back with the force of the sonic slap, and he leaned forward like he was heading into a strong wind. Acid Storm must have tried to brace against it instead of riding the thunder like Skywarp had; cloud-patterned green wings snapped back, transformation hinges squealing protest as they were forced out of rootmode position. The Seeker’s mouth thinned with what had to be pain as he dropped abruptly to one knee.

Jazz shook his head, briefly disoriented as his sensor suites flicked through realignment, and looked out over the arena. The heaving mass of multi-color limbs didn’t immediately resolve into anything that made sense. His audios rang oddly, making him miss Acid Storm’s question the first time.

“Say what?” His own voice sounded too loud, but he knew it was a trick of his recovering audios.

“I said, are you alright?” The Rainmaker eased himself back upright, and although the question sounded nice enough, his optics never left the direction Thundercracker had disappeared in. Radar tracked what the night sky concealed: the F-14 jet whipped through a tight turn. The audience screamed louder, seeing him coming, and only Acid Storm’s inbuilt charm kept his tone courteous as Thundercracker accelerated. “Maybe you should go. You’re not made for this kind of combat.”

Starscream had gone to one knee in the arena and evidently rolled with the force. His cockpit dripped broken glass when he stood, but stand he did. “Is that the best you can do, drone-fragger?” his shrill
Voice taunted about the madhouse noise.

Air pressure built, snapped, and -- as the foreign jet altmode snarled through the center of the crowd like a hostile alien attack -- released again.

The whole slagging world rang like the inside of a bell. Resonated like the inside of a discharging cannon. Sounded and felt like the inside of a bomb shelter during a direct hit. Concussive force flattened the first five tiers and anyone left standing in the next few rows above that. Starscream went down, but he was hardly alone in that. His shriek of rage was audible and painful, cutting through the tinny aftermath as everyone yelled and screamed and couldn’t hear properly.

At least his windshield hadn’t gone yet. That was a muzzy and not terribly reassuring thought to have, but it helped Jazz focus against the throbbing beat as he fought his way back to his feet. His helm’s sensor projections were ringing hard enough to hurt from pulsing waves of haphazard data input, but he didn’t dare turn the sensors down as they reset yet again. He had to know where the threat was coming from next -- there. The Autobot looked up, thanking Ratchet in the back of his mind for reinforced visor glass. HUD snapped tracking into place over inadequate night vision. Thundercracker was flying high, nosecone pointed straight up in the air as he gained altitude rapidly.

“Is anyone made for this?” the saboteur asked, voice strained. “And I’m fine, thanks.”

This time, it was him offering the two Decepticons a hand up. The black-and-purple teleporter waved his hand aside impatiently, choosing to climb to his feet unaided, but Acid Storm accepted the help to get back up onto one knee. He stayed there, glancing between Thundercracker’s distant signal-blip and Starscream as the Air Commander pushed himself back up. Skywarp stood, oddly mirroring his wingleader’s defiant posture as he folded his arms and scowled up into the night sky.

“They’re made for it,” Acid Storm said, waving a hand vaguely at Skywarp for Jazz’s benefit. “Or modified for it, anyway. They’re his wingmates. They wouldn’t have lasted long flying by him if they didn’t have the mods added to make them able to fly through this slag.”

“Then why’s he doing it?” Jazz asked, not expecting an answer as he squinted down at the Air Commander. His vision blurred momentarily before bringing up high-resolution magnification. He scanned the Seeker visually and frowned. Rust, spatters of lubricant and energon, some already-broken armor that had given up and fallen off, but no real damage. Even the missing canopy glass had been cracked before Thundercracker’s attack, Jazz recalled. “Starscream’s not disabled by the attacks, so what’s Thundercracker tryin’ to pull, here?”

The Seeker-blip on Jazz’s HUD reached its peak and held, just for a second. The audience fell unnaturally quiet, and a glowing optic-rainbow of dread turned up toward the sky. The radar blip that was Thundercracker turned almost leisurely, nosecone pointing straight downward.

Gravity took hold. Thrusters grabbed gravity right back and fragged it senseless like a speed-freak groupie, wringing it for everything possible.

Skywarp spat a sharp curse and dropped to his knees, wings unlocking to fold close to his body. Starscream’s manic laughter wove through the tension, egging it on until the wave of horror crested. Suddenly everyone was shouting: instructions, panic, bets, all of them rendered almost incomprehensible even through the comm. network by ambient noise. Air pressure upped, a storm building, and no one could get out of range in time, even if they weren’t here to witness Ground Zero.

Acid Storm hesitated, conflicted, but then quickly offered his hand to Jazz. "For the purpose of ending our Great War," he recited hurriedly, and the small Autobot didn’t hesitate to take it.
The mottled green Seeker pulled him down onto the ground between his knees and tucked him close. Jazz found himself pressed against a Decepticon’s cockpit, securely wrapped in enemy arms and sheltered by lowered wings. “For exactly this,” the Rainmaker said quietly, helm bent protectively over his Air Commander’s intended.

It had occurred to Jazz, but Acid Storm’s words confirmed it. “He’s showing off,” he said back, and that’s when the world blew up.

The sky beat angry fists against the ground in punishing waves of thunder. The ground leapt up to concuss Jazz, slamming into his helm, and everything fritzed into scribbled lines of black and white static.

Jagged white flashes, interspersed with black. A muffled, deep rhythm underbeat a shining, whining rill. It sounded the way a submarine with engine trouble did, including dozens of hazard alarms going off.

A lock-away processor deeply rooted near his spark casing assumed control when stunned central processor units failed to respond to command pings. It clicked over to emergency sequences and forced reboot by isolating cerebral circuitry from physical input. Autobot medics hated the necessity of this core processor reboot, but they still coded for it. Even when they had patients wake up on the surgery table suddenly fighting, understanding nothing but the fact that they were being held down, that was one patient who might live a moment more out on the battlefield.

Get the mind online. The body might be headed for statis lock, seized up in pain or under a hack’s control, but get the mind online. So long as there was current flowing and pressure in the fuel lines, it gave an Autobot the precious opportunity to think. Even if it was only a last thought before fuel trickled away into nothing, maybe it gave a mech one last chance to make peace with Primus.

Jazz snapped back to himself with a garbled blurt of panic, flailing for that critical moment before recent memory fell back into place and the lock-away processor handed over control to his CPU. A heavy weight on his back had him pinned, anyway, and flailing was useless until it moved. Jazz went totally still in Acid Storm’s grip as the Seeker raised his head. The waves of distortion through his optical sensors were nauseating, but a quick reset of his visor failed to make the jagged pattern of light and dark disappear. Jazz blinked again, lifting his own head cautiously.

The world came into focus slowly as his vision adjusted better, static shimmering into waves of rust falling through the air. He tensed for a second because it looked like they were rushing toward him, but then another floodlight popped out in a burst of blinding light and sudden darkness. The rush became just the dizzy reflection of flickering lights.

The blurry green Seeker curled around him said something. Jazz could see his mouth move, but all he heard was, “oboqbajfbubfubqcubquhprrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
Acid Storm he wasn’t hearing anything. From experience, he knew it’d take a breem to recalibrate his audio receivers.

Thankfully, the Rainmaker seemed to understand. The Seeker nodded and sat up carefully, head turning as he scanned the area. His hands kept a hold on the smaller mech, and Jazz let him because it was easier than trying to sit up on his own. He concentrated on reeling his jaw back into place, as some part of him thought that having his mouth open would help him hear. It actually would, but it made him look extremely stupid, too.

This wasn’t the first time he’d been hit by Thundercracker’s specialized engine, but experience rarely helped make a mech’s body feel any better. It just let a mech tell his body, ‘Do this, and eventually it’ll get better.’

“Do this,” Jazz told his body, which whined complaints back at him. “Don’t care. Do it anyway.”

His body informed him that it didn’t like whatever had happened. He blew a mental raspberry at himself for stating the obvious.

When he turned his attention away from the pop-up parade of internal alerts, the saboteur gave the area a visual scan since his other sensor suites were still tuning up. He saw purple-and-black legs braced nearby, standing on the edge of the platform. Over the edge, a mass of feebly stirring limbs was visible in the flickering light of the floodlights, like a tumbled metal junkyard for the barely online. A few mechs were climbing free, but most of the Decepticons in the tiers below weren’t in any better shape than Jazz himself. And he’d been sheltered from the worst of the impact by Acid Storm. Ouch.

The Autobot turned his head, looking up sidelong at the one mech within sight who seemed capable of standing. Skywarp didn’t look happy. Smug, yes, because everyone else was wallowing about helplessly while he very much was not -- but not happy. Obviously, being able to withstand his wingmate’s weaponry wasn’t all fun and games.

Displeased red optics cut toward them when Acid Storm apparently decided it was safe to get back to his feet. “Wahwho,nrrrr,burrerrrrr,” Skywarp said, which Jazz was fairly sure wasn’t actually what he’d said at all. It sounded like the Seeker was standing about 600 meters further away than he really was, and from the sound of it, he was gargling septic tanks and trying to swallow a sheep at the same time. “Whackassackatingting,fabbagebabbaay?”

Acid Storm helped the small Autobot up, and Jazz shrugged at Skywarp. Half a breem until recalibration. He tapped the side of his helm and shrugged again.

“Whar,burr.Brrllim,dockdockdonk,” Acid Storm said, and there were two sheep and a large plank of wood being gargled. Jazz just barely kept from giggling. It was shock reaction as much as amusement that made the sound so funny.

Skywarp seemed annoyed, and his optics bore into the Autobot. After a two full seconds of silence, the annoyance transmuted into baffled ire. Skywarp’s optics seemed faintly puzzled. Apparently, he’d thought Jazz hadn’t been telling the truth about his comm. system crash, because that was the look of a mech unable to make comm. contact. “Ramalamadingdong?” he said directly to the small Autobot, words deliberately loud and slow.

Oh, seriously, now that had to be intentional. Jazz gave Skywarp a filthy look and held up three fingers. ‘Three kliks.’ He let his hand drop, and oh, oops, he just happened to let two of his fingers fall first.
The fickle Decepticon grinned appreciatively.

Of course, the obscene Earth gesture went right over Acid Storm’s head. “Warg?” he asked.

“Don’t ask,” Jazz, keeping his vocal output as low and level as he could without feedback from his audios.

“Murgle,” Skywarp said cheerily, and Acid Storm gave him a doubtful look before turning his attention to the arena floor.

Jazz took a single step just to test whether he had his balance back yet. When his body informed him of its intent to cooperate now, he took the remaining two steps to the edge with more confidence. The high, ringing keen in his audios was hiccapping now as recalibration tuned him in to the changing pitch of separate voices that made up the background noise of six hundred mechs moaning and groaning their way back to the land of the functional. If they felt anything like Jazz did, they felt like they’d woken up post-combat with a hangover. Drinking heavily during battle wasn’t an experience Jazz had ever wanted to repeat again, mostly because it felt like this afterward.

Normally, Thundercracker wouldn’t divebomb like that. Typical battle conditions would make a straight dive too tempting of a target, and nobody on the ground would stay in the target zone if they saw it coming.

Normal didn’t apply here and now, however.

Thundercracker hovered in the air in his rootmode, almost level with the platform. He balanced on tongues of flame from his heel-turbines, perfectly composed and utterly unharmed by the force he’d brought down on them. There was no gloating on his face as he looked over the slowly-recovering Decepticons below, but there was an impassive kind of satisfaction visible on his face when the floodlights popped back on, one by one. This was his power, and now they’d felt it. His hands were in tense fists, and his face had pulled into severe lines. His optics played around the arena in quick flashes, taking in the crowd’s reaction -- but he never looked up for long.

Like the mechs beside him and the Seeker hovering in the center of the arena, Jazz looked down.

Starscream had gone down hard, if the rust streaks and indented armor on his front were anything to go by, but the Air Commander was upright again with only his limp slowing him down. He turned in a slow circle, balanced on his good turbine, and he’d abandoned his arrogantly aloof pose for a ready stance. His hands were empty and held open, poised to hit or hold, and he watched his ex-wingmate the way the Big Bad Wolf watched human girls entering dark fairytale forests. There was something terrible and hungry in his optics, burning fractured and mad where cracked optic-glass had fallen out. Where he should have looked battered by repeated combat, he seemed victorious. When he should have seemed disadvantaged or made lopsided by his injuries and missing wing, he seemed to have fed off the pain.

He was the one on the ground, small and wounded, yet Starscream looked all the more dangerous and not at all small. The grin splitting his face was so fierce it bordered deranged. ‘Come closer, Little Red Riding Hood.’

Thundercracker looked down at him from above, and maybe it was Jazz’s imagination, but the blue Seeker seemed just a tad intimidated. Certainly, he was wary. ’My, what big teeth you have.’

Skywarp said something. Although the sound of his voice devolved into warbled hiss-pops of nonsense, Jazz picked up most it: “Welpft, hee’s successfully made him rescreekly mad. Way to g’leep dercracker.”
“He bet pop stay up threep,” Acid Storm said back. Even through the static, he sounded serious. “Starskrriiiiiiii took Sunstopm down even with all his extra arm roooorssskt.”

Jazz’s sensor suites helpfully blurted a status update, then rebooted in one extended cycle. It left Jazz feeling oddly like he was suspended in zero-gravity for a split second as everything shut off and on. He quickly sent a denial command when his reboot log came to the offline communication suite. That needed to stay off for a while longer.

The background riithiiiiiiing suddenly resolved into individual shouts, the sounds of a crowd starting to cheer again. The rhythmic beat snapped into the dull roar of jet engines and turbine fire from Thundercracker. The Autobot blinked as his receivers shut off, blanking the world to silence, and calibrated back up to normal levels. It felt like the audio equivalent of spiraling outward, and it was almost dizzying without his comm. systems to balance him.

Jazz shook himself to resettle crimped cables and, incidentally, catch the two Seekers’ attention. “That was quite a demo,” he said, honestly relieved to be able to hear his own voice again. He didn’t take his visor off the stand-off. “Did it do anything besides waste Thundercracker’s energy?” Although he could see it had. If the goal had been to impress the assembled Vosians with Thundercracker’s abilities, that had been a blast of a demonstration. Nothing said ‘powerful’ in Decepticon lingo quite like knocking everyone head over thrusters, and sheer sonic boom had done that quite well.

“Back with us again?” Skywarp quipped. “Thought you were having a comm. malfunction.”

“Still am,” Jazz admitted easily. “Can’t access anything.” He smiled blandly, because if Skywarp was going to take out the Autobots’ Third-in-Command, this was his chance. It really wasn’t very likely he’d try, not with what was already happening. “I can hear you now, though.”

Skywarp scoffed. “’Malfunction’ my shiny purple -- look at that!”

Starscream had lunged upward. One outstretched hand missed Thundercracker’s foot by a wide margin, but the blue Seeker still veered heavily to the side. He recovered immediately, but even the flyers still sitting on the ground leaned forward like predators sensing weakness at just how far he’d moved. Starscream landed lightly, damaged turbine sputtering but still functional, and his wolfish grin only widened. ’Little Red, Little Red, why are you running?’

Thundercracker didn’t even spare a look at the crowd this time. He kept his optics locked on the Air Commander. ’Because I’m not stupid.’

The dark helm tilted slowly to the side as if considering the challenger up above him. ’Now now, Little Red. Are you afraid of me?’

Red optics locked together. ’…such big teeth you have.’

Starscream was in the air a moment later, and the arena roared approval.

Acid Storm sidled up to Jazz’s side again as hot air buffeted everyone hard enough rock them on their feet. Thundercracker’s engines boomed, concussive threat still seeking weak spots, hoping to snag something through breeched armor as the blue Seeker dodged and Starscream shot past. “What exactly do you think you’re watching, here?” the acid-green Rainmaker asked, optics more thoughtful than worried.

Thundercracker swapped end-for-end in mid-air, turbines bursting incandescent as he transformed and tore after the Air Commander, but Starscream careened across the arena just out of reach. The
red Seeker stayed fast and low, half-running and half-flying in giant leaps that allowed him to change direction every time he touched down. The blue jet’s greater speed was useless; Thundercracker’s altmode didn’t have the agility necessary to aim his engine at the quicksilver-fast mech ahead of him. The pursuing Seeker was forced to transform, twisting in order to align his thrusters in the correction direction. Starscream just took off in another direction, forcing Thundercracker to transform yet again to correct.

Except that this time Starscream did a half-transformation of his own, jet engine igniting and lighting the specialized thrusters that made him the fastest flyer on Cybertron. For a breathless moment, running momentum pushed him opposite ignition thrust, suspending him near-motionless in the air. The two Decepticons hung nosecone-to-nosecone. Thundercracker’s surprise almost bled off his wings, but there was no time for the blue Seeker to react before gravity pulled Starscream’s nose down. The Air Commander twisted back through the half-transformation into rootmode again, and thrust kicked in. He zipped underneath his ex-wingmate close enough to scrape broken gold canopy glass in creeling lines across the blue armor even as Thundercracker transformed and grabbed for him.

He was also close enough to reach up and smack Thundercracker’s aft.

Silence bitchslapped the audience like a pimp. Like a hardcore pimp, ‘cause that audience had better respect. Starscream’s derogatory laughter demanded it. In the middle of challenge combat, fighting with an opponent current odds had him losing to, and the Air Commander made it absolutely clear who he thought the bitch was. Or maybe who he thought the alpha-bitch was, anyway. ‘Bend over and take it, Little Red.’

Thundercracker staggered on air for almost a full klik, turbines sputtering just enough to keep him flying. Puppets with tangled strings jerked that way. His jaw had gone slack, and his optics were wide and flat with shock.

“I dunno about you,” Jazz said clearly into the silence, knowing he was pushing it but just unable to stop himself, “but I’m pretty sure I’m watching a ‘Girls Gone Wild’ video. The uncensored catfight edition.” He looked around earnestly. “Where’s the Jell-O vat? Can we get a Jell-O vat down there?”

“What flavor?” Skywarp asked, loud and clear, and there was a creeping, gleeful devilry bubbling up in his voice. Acid Storm just stared at them both, dumbfounded.

“Cherry, of course.” Thundercracker lifted his head, a burgeoning rage verging on horror filling him to overflowing, and Jazz gave him his sauciest wink. “Because you gotta know, that Seeker just got it popped.”

No one else got it, but despite that, everyone got it. It was impossible not to get it.

Laughter didn’t rock the arena. It destroyed it. Thundercracker’s engines had flattened the audience, but Jazz brought the house down on top of them. Flyers fell over and clutched the nearest mechs, laughing so hard whole tiers fell like dominoes. A huge, reversed Mexican wave swept the arena like drunken fans at a Superbowl: flyers fell down, stood up, and fell back over in succession as the ribald, mocking laughter fed off itself, up and up. The nearest mechs in the tier below Jazz turned around and boosted each other up the incline to reach hands up toward the Autobot, who shook their hands congenially and grinned acceptance of their half-coherent praised words. Acid Storm and Skywarp turned to fend off congratulations from the other mechs on the platform with them, and still the laughter went on.

In the center of it, Thundercracker hovered in a blooming cloud of dark anger. The face he turned up to Jazz was genuinely scary, but the glare redirected toward where Starscream had landed. Because it
always, always came down to Starscream. The Air Commander cackled loudest of all, optics narrow red slits of unappeased rage all his own, and he jerked his chin up when Thundercracker let loose another reverberating thwoom! The merriment rolled on, barely subdued, and Thundercracker’s wrath built to tower over the arena like an atomic explosion in slow motion.

Jazz could almost see the mushroom cloud forming, getting ready to spread and fall, but suddenly there were spots of hysterical laughter started up all over again throughout the crowd. The flyers had been gradually calming, but that just made the renewed laughter more obvious. Curiosity clustered the nearest mechs closer. The spots expanded into large knots of mechs that were gasping to their neighbors, and Thundercracker’s mask of rage cracked. The blue Seeker turned a stunned look on the wildly laughing crowd. He glanced back at Starscream -- who was grinning wickedly, obviously at fault here -- and quickly darted an appalled look up at the platform.

Where Skywar whooped helplessly, clutching his hands to his cockpit as he sat down and laughed. Acid Storm stumbled around behind Jazz to kneel at the purple-and-black Seeker’s side and prop his forehelm on Skywar’s right air intake, laughing until his ventilation system went through a reset. And still they kept laughing.

Baffled, the lone Autobot met Thundercracker’s utterly mortified look with a quizzical shrug. Oddly, that seemed to reassure the Seeker. Whatever was happening, he didn’t want the Autobot to know. He turned a deeply black glare on Starscream and shouted something unheard over the mirth.

Jazz scanned the crowd. It took him a bit of rifling through his files to match faces and unit-markings to ranks, and the spread-pattern finally began to make some sense. It had started with the officers. Since he hadn’t seen anything all that humorous happen, it’d likely been a comm. broadcast. Over the officer network, it seemed, and the officers had, of course, immediately spread the word. The small mech looked below, to where Starscream couldn’t be heard over the windstorm-gale of laughter. From the look of things, he was taunting his ex-wingmate. If Thundercracker’s face was anything to go by, the atomic cloud was amassing again fast.

Curse his curiosity, because the saboteur wanted to know what the Air Commander had broadcast to get that kind of reaction. “Do I wanna know?” he asked the two Seekers still gasping faintly beside him on the ground. He really did, but spies didn’t get information by flat-out asking for it.

“No,” Acid Storm said, climbing to his feet.

“Yes!” Skywar chirruped around a huge, profoundly evil grin. “Oh, yes, you do. You want to know so bad.”

“But you’re not gonna tell me,” Jazz said back dryly.

“Why would I?”

The Autobot looked into the arena. Thundercracker was slowly hovering in a circle, exchanging biting commentary with the Air Commander as they eyed each other warily. “Depends, I suppose,” he watched closely, trying to read their lips, “on how much loyalty you have to Thundercracker.” With all the languages of Earth at their disposal, lip-reading was as tricky as hacking an encrypted comm. line on the fly. The nearest tiers of the audience seemed enthralled, however. “But since Starscream didn’t immediately oust you from his wing, my guess is you’re the wild card. If Thundercracker wins, you’re fine. If Starscream wins, you’re fine. You don’t give a scrap who wins because the winner will keep you either way.”

Passive sensors mapped out the two Seekers looking at each other behind his doors, possibly exchanging a quick internal comm. in order to explain the Earth idiom. Acid Storm moved around to
Jazz’s other side again. The Autobot kept his attention on the arena floor, but his sensors showed the Rainmaker standing close enough to look down at him like a breeder examining new stock. There was just something coming off the Decepticon that had Jazz half-expecting the green flyer to try and inspect his teeth. Did he come with papers? What was his pedigree?

Unconsciously, he stood straighter and crossed his arms across his radiator grill.

Skywarp stayed seated, apparently content to sit at Jazz’s feet as he watched his wingmates face off. “Good guess.” One red optic angled to look up at the Autobot as Starscream took off across the arena. “My contract’s one-sided. I’m not expected to be able to control either of them.” He seemed amused by the concept. “I mean, how could I stop them?” Unspoken, of course, was the question of ‘Why would I want to?’

Okay, the mech had a point. The Autobots knew that Thundercracker and Starscream rode herd on Skywarp, but it had honestly never occurred to Jazz to think about it going the other way. Which, watching the fight, kind of made sense. He couldn’t imagine Skywarp getting in the middle of this fight. The black-and-purple teleporter was twelve kinds of nasty in a back-stabbing flitting way during battle, but this was a totally different type of combat. It was a fight, raw and brutally up-front.

Thundercracker rocketed across the arena, but Starscream’s speed slipped him past his heavier, slower opponent. Unfortunately, his missing wing seemed to pull him askew as well, and Thundercracker reversed just fast enough to clip Starscream in the helm with an elbow. The Air Commander hit rust, sliding painfully across the ground. Sparks showered in his wake as exposed struts and bent armor edges scraped metal, and Thundercracker’s turbines lit those sparks to multicolored flames. Flakes of rust rained droplets of fire to the ground, catching up to the Air Commander as he slid to a stop and looked up to see Thundercracker bearing down on him.

Starscream rolled out from underneath black feet not a moment too soon. They slammed into the ground, and the Air Commander flipped into a crouch right next to them. Instead of jumping away, he surged right into them the moment his own feet hit ground, turning about in a scraping creel of rust as they dug in. Thundercracker’s reaching hands closed on empty air where the blue Seeker had expected Starscream’s neck to be. The Air Commander was the lighter mech, but he’d thrown his whole body into the move. It was less of a tackle than a sprinter hearing the starting pistol.

His heavily-armored ex-wingmate grunted, hit mid-thigh by the projectile-impact of Starscream’s shoulder, then yelped loud enough to be heard over the crowd’s bloodthirsty cheering as the edge of Starscream’s broken wing stabbed into the pelvic join. Thundercracker’s thigh jerked up out of defensive impulse that did nothing but trap the equivalent of a blunt knife into his hip joint. Starscream’s shrieking curse was clearly audible as his forward motion came to an abrupt halt. Thundercracker’s bellow of pain was even louder, because that sudden stop had all of Starscream’s weight behind it.

Streams of pink energon and oil-hued green lubricant spurted down the blue Seeker’s leg in lurid squirts. Apparently, even blunt knives could slice if a mech hacked with sufficient force. Or, in this case, if Starscream jerked on his wing hard enough. Starscream was a trapped animal pushing and tearing at the trap with all four limbs. If not for the blue Seeker’s heavier armor, the blast of fire from Starscream’s turbines would have punched holes through to internal structure. Clawed fingers ripped into armor joins, yanking frantically.

As it was, Thundercracker was hardly better as pain and unexpected close combat hooked one knee out from underneath him. He flailed, losing his balance, but war-trained hands instinctively attacked even as he fought not to go down. Where Starscream was causing minimal damage against Thundercracker’s heavier plating, one swift punch down visibly dented the Air Commander’s helm.
The strong knock shook Starscream into a head-wobbling split second of reset, and in that second, Thundercracker lost his footing.

He fell backward, skidding a bit sideways as he hopped on one foot in a last-ditch attempt at staying upright, but his collapse yanked Starscream forward as he went. The Air Commander ended up landing almost on top of his opponent, and Thundercracker yelled again as the move sawed the blunt wing edge over already-sliced tubes and linkages. Either the different position or additional slick pour of liquids opened up the clamped joint, however. Although Thundercracker twisted on the ground, grabbing for him, Starscream ripped himself free. He kicked into a crouch, planting his feet on the damaged hip joint. One turbine twitched, grinding into the gap.

Jazz’s visor widened at the Air Commander’s truly vicious grin -- or rather, at Thundercracker’s uncontrolled cry of, “No!”

Starscream’s turbines lit, and he erupted straight up into the air. The force of those specialized turbines turned to full power launched the blue Seeker tumbling across the ground, but what had the audience up and screaming applause was the explosion.

“Well, that’s that,” Acid Storm said a little ruefully as he watched Thundercracker burn. “So much for that bet.”

“Oh.” Jazz said, not giving away the ill seep of disgust curling in his tanks. Or the tight bite of fear. Not only was the crowd cheering on the violence, but they were applauding the pain of a mech being incinerated from the inside out. “Why’s Knock Out just standin’ there?” he asked, winching his reaction down to simple curiosity as he pointed out the medic standing on the sidelines in a pose of exaggerated patience.

Skywarp cast him a ‘Duh!’ look. “Fight’s not over yet, Autobot.” He gave the Rainmaker a mock-sympathetic look. “Although it’s fairly obvious who’ll eventually win.”

“You’re not serious.” Jazz looked between him and the frantic efforts of Thundercracker. Skywarp’s mouth quirked, and the Autobot gave him an incredulous stare. “Can he even stand?”

The blue Seeker had come out of his roll already tearing at his own armor, desperately prying open melted catches and throwing plating aside in order to manually clamp off lines. He worked feverishly even as flames hungrily licked at his hands and melted the tubing under his fingers. Fire lit his face gruesomely, fed by his own fuel and fluids. Lubricant burned at high enough temperatures, and the fire had definitely reached those levels under Starscream’s thrusters. It consumed hoses and aperture valves, linkage joins and cable housings; it ignited anything that wasn’t metal and softened even that in the heat of energon-fed flames. It was trying to run up the fuel lines, seeking the tanks of unprocessed energon that would burst Thundercracker at the seams like a firecracker exploding inside an overripe fruit.

Thundercracker kicked and screamed hoarsely when the out-of-control fire burning down his leg hit the thruster reservoir, and a loud Bang! echoed above the crowd’s cheering. The blue Seeker forced agony-clawed fingers back into the fire at his hip, working all the faster with his lower leg a shredded ruin as vivid illustration of his imminent fate. It was a dripping, ragged, fiery motivation.

Jazz had seen it on the battlefield a thousand times. More than once, he’d been the one to put a Decepticon down for good with another shot to a shoulder or fuel pump. Whichever was handiest for him, because taking one of the burning mech’s arms out of the equation was as lethal as a killshot. It was the price paid for being robots fueled by volatile substances: a well-placed fire killed, even if the wound didn’t seem severe.
Sometimes, Ratchet had said back on Earth, he envied the humans their blood-filled bodies.

Starscream gently touched down across the arena, accepting the audience’s enthusiastic ovation. Even the jeering from those who’d lost their bets was accepted as tribute, because the losers had to admire him. He turned slowly, worse for wear but still standing, and basked in their praise. He was still the best, and they knew it.

At long last, his opponent managed to close off the open lines. Face grim and streaked in black char, Thundercracker began fire suppression. It was sadly pathetic, seeing the Seeker using his palms and handfuls of gritty rust scraped off the ground to beat out the flames. Knock Out's rant on hygiene and tirade about how "I'm not cleaning that slag out!" could be heard by half the crowd. They only laughed in response. Jazz felt a twinge of empathy for the blue Seeker, but the arena was an ocean of mockery as the assembled flyers called rude suggestions.

Thundercracker kept his head bent over his work. Saving his own life was more important than pride at the moment.

Starscream turned his attention leisurely to the downed flyer, and the whole arena fell silent. Anticipation had the tiers leaning forward, whispering excitedly but no longer shouting. This was the drama. This was what they had assembled to see!

The blue Seeker tensed, and he slowly, slowly looked up to meet Starscream’s optics.

Jazz involuntarily leaned forward with the audience, and Skywarp glanced up. “It doesn’t matter if Thundercracker can stand,” he said to the Autobot, casually resuming their conversation as if his wingmates weren’t facing off below. “This isn’t over until he concedes. What do you really think you’re watching? A power-struggle in the ranks?”

Jazz hesitated, because he wasn’t entirely sure anymore what was happening. Thundercracker was stiffly bending his remaining functional knee now, levering himself up onto it with his arms, and from there he stood upright. He rocked alarmingly, burnt leg hanging like dead, useless weight off his body, but he stood up. He met Starscream’s critical gaze with a sort of mute defiance.

“I don’t think I know,” the Autobot confessed, watching Thundercracker’s hands tighten into fists. The downed flyer was in no condition to fight further, but he obviously intended to continue. “I thought he was challenging for Starscream’s position. I thought all of this,” he shrugged, tossing his head to indicate the arena and eager crowd, “was a challenge for Emirate.” That wasn’t completely accurate, but better to be underestimated as a dumaft than remind everyone that the ignorant little black-and-white mech in their midst was the Head of Special Operations.

A *tsk!* of disbelief came from his other side. “Emirates are elected,” Acid Storm informed him, contempt Jazz identified as Vosian and directed toward an outsider dripping off his words. “Challenging Starscream for that position wouldn’t work.”

Skywarp eyed the Autobot, considering. “Sunstorm probably would have tried that, eventually,” he disagreed slowly.

“Oh, well. **Sunstorm**.” The Rainmaker’s tone made it clear what he thought of Sunstorm’s mental state.

“What am I watching?” Jazz asked softly, treading his careful line. The two Decepticons looked at him, and if he’d played the situation right, they were seeing someone closer to an almost-ally than a definite enemy. Because he hadn’t reacted with revulsion or shock, and he’d gone for conversation over demands.
He was the spy, the saboteur, the Jazzmeister. He was building the role even as he became it. The most adaptable Autobot in the ranks watched Thundercracker painfully hobble forward on exposed, melted framework, and he didn’t push. He just stood there and existed, and around him layered the complicated unsaid implications and ramifications of courtship and intentions, possibilities and probabilities of success.

There was a close bubble of silence amidst the murmurs and chatter of the crowd. Inside it, Acid Storm and Skywarp weighed the odds. Help him or not. Who he was now, against who he could soon be. What could he be…

A sharp clang of metal fist on metal body, and Thundercracker crashed to the ground. His broken pelvic plating squealed across the rust, and the Decepticon Air Commander stood over him like an angry god of the air.

“Get up,” Starscream hissed. “I’m not done with you.”

The blue Seeker groaned as he started the long process of regaining his feet. Starscream waited half a klik before rearing back and striking down with one fist. Thundercracker looked up just in time to get that fist to the face, and the sharp crack of an optic shattering ricocheted around the arena. Thundercracker went down again, thrown violently face-first into the rust.

“I said, get up!”

Skywarp rearranged his legs, turning to lean his back against Jazz like the Autobot were a bizarre backrest. “You’re watching a contract challenge,” he said neutrally, tilting his helm up to see Jazz looking down at him.

“Thundercracker would have won the right to break contract if he’d won the challenge,” Acid Storm said, similarly neutral as he shifted just a tad closer to the smaller mech. “He could have used that to enter another contract with another wing, but what he wanted was to win the right to renegotiate.”

He gave the two Decepticons unimpressed looks, letting them know he knew exactly what they were doing. Shameless red optics looked back at him. “Renegotiate. Not for a military contract, huh?”

“Oh, no,” Skywarp blithely waved a hand at his blue wingmate as Starscream beat him down again. “He wants what you have.”

Jazz grinned. “Good looks, better friends, and the best sex life this side of the quadrant?”

Cue spluttering.

Seekers: 0.
Jazzmeister: 1.

When they stopped making incoherent half-words, Acid Storm and Skywarp gave Jazz identical wide-opticked looks of surprise. Weren’t Autobots supposed to be prudes?

Jazz smiled back, radiant as an angel. A really hot angel, mmm, yeah. A devious, manipulative angel from the wrong side of Heaven, but Starscream would never be able to convince the other Seekers he and Jazz weren’t banging armor, now. One more nail in his cover act, right there. “What?”

“…I don’t even. I can’t. What.” Skywarp opened and closed his mouth, searching for the right words to express his thoughts. They weren’t coming.

Below them, Thundercracker laboriously dragged himself upright again. Starscream snapped out a
kick to his chin that knocked him partway across the arena, wings skidding along the ground. His intakes coughed flecks of rust and gobs of internal fluids when the blue Seeker got up to his hands and knees this time, spattering the ground in patterns of green and pinkish purple. Something in his ruined leg sluggishly bled oil-hued black liquid.

“I’m getting all these nice pictures,” Acid Storm said plaintively, “and no real data. It’s not fair.” The look he gave the Autobot was less cool assessment and more greed. Jazz waggled his doors at him. “Not. Fair.”

“So he wants that Second position, huh?” Jazz chirped cheerfully. “Tough luck for him.” He looked down at the fight. It could barely be called that. “He’s not gettin’ it.” There was no guarantee that Jazz would, either, but Thundercracker? No way on Cybertron.

Starscream stalked closer, and Thundercracker’s optics lit mulishly. He lashed out with an arm, wrapping it around Starscream’s closest leg and curling around it as if he were a big wildcat, kicking and clawing and -- dear Primus, was he biting?! The Air Commander staggered back, shrieking loud enough to make the audience cover their audios, but Thundercracker stubbornly hung on. He recklessly tore at the knee joint and the already-damaged turbine while Starscream shook his leg and punched at whatever he could hit.

It was barbaric. It was the desperate attempt of a defeated mech. Thundercracker savaged Starscream’s leg, but the Air Commander’s heavy punches were doing far more injury. One black hand was torn loose, leaving tracks in Starscream’s armor as the Air Commander twisted it out of the way until there was an opening. His free hand dove down toward the melted slag that was Thundercracker’s hip joint, and --

-- the scream this time was all pain, attack forgotten.

“Is Starscream gonna kill him?” Jazz asked, keeping himself impassive. “That’d throw a wrench in the works for the negotiations. I’m not sure I can stand here and watch murder.” His voice implied doubt, not toward the morality of what he was witnessing but toward the official duties of his position.

Honestly, Jazz’s fuel pump was squeezing uneasily as he watched Starscream pry Thundercracker’s hand away before beginning to just gracelessly kick the downed Seeker over and over. The gold cockpit canopy shattered. Bits of blue metal with black streaks of soot began to litter the ground, bright reflections of tarnished color under the floodlights. This wasn’t combat. This wasn’t Decepticons attacking Autobots. This was Starscream beating the slag out of a helpless mech unable to even do more than shield his head in his arms. Thundercracker weakly cried out, trying to block the blows, but they were coming too fast. If he sheltered his head, Starscream kicked his cockpit. The furious kicks aimed for his face if Thundercracker dared to curl up around his midsection.

Jazz wasn’t sure he could stand by much longer.

Acid Storm frowned slightly, turning the Autobot’s odd response over in his head. The smaller mech didn’t seem distressed, exactly, but he’d raised a valid point. The idea of Megatron coming down on them all for provoking the Autobots was a bad one. “He might,” the Rainmaker said a bit worriedly. “Skywarp?”

“Dunno,” Skywarp said easily, not even hiding the fact that he was enjoying the show. He glanced up at Jazz. “He’s lost the challenge, but all that means is that he can’t formally break contract.
Because of the terms of our contracts with Starscream, though, he broke it anyway.” He shrugged his wings against the Autobot’s leg and went back to watching Starscream pin his wingmate -- or ex-wingmate, apparently -- down and begin tearing things out of the blue Seeker’s cockpit. “It’s up to
Starscream whether he takes him back into the wing or not.” He gave a short laugh. “He hasn’t conceded yet. The fight’s not over until he does. Starscream hasn’t even started **punishing** him, for frag’s sake! How in the Pit would I know if he’ll kill him?”

Instrumentation pattered down the ground in a terrible rain of parts. Stuffing from a seat followed quickly. Jazz held back, pushing aside his morals with all the iron self-control he had. Text scrolled at the base of his visor, underlining Thundercracker’s writhing form: “…your mission is to infiltrate and secure the Vos city-state government structure. You are authorized to use any means at your disposal, as you find necessary.”

Prime’s orders were cold comfort.

[* * * * *]
End Pt. 10
[* * * * *]
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]

Thundercracker looked like a turtle flipped onto its back, unable to get back up while Starscream gutted him. First the shell of armor plating was torn away, flung aside to join the curved, shattered pieces of glass already on the ground. Then the tender insides were exposed, and the turtle-jet hoarsely yelled as wires and tubes and everything else were pulled loose. Fluids gushed, spurting out in a spreading puddle of colors mixing in the rust. Battered blue limbs weakly tried to fend off the Air Commander’s hands, but Starscream smacked aside the weak efforts in order to dig viciously clawed fingers deep into the gaping hole that had been Thundercracker’s cockpit.

The crowd winced back, faces twisted around happy ‘Ooof’ s of delighted horror. Many of them had their hands held over their own midriffs in unconscious protective gestures. Skywarp laughed, one arm propped casually on his knee as he leaned back against Jazz’s leg. Acid Storm was looking between the spectacle and the small Autobot standing beside him.

The black-and-white mech listened to Thundercracker begin screaming, and he remained grave and silent. Inside, he turned it all over in his head. Thoughts flitted and combined, trying to find the right angle to the problem. It was what he specialized in. That didn’t meant it was easy.

Okay. Break it down. Both for his own sake, and for the sake of peace.

The mission was to infiltrate Vos, which couldn’t be done just by allowing Starscream to court him. If, that was, the Seeker was still trying to court him. Even if he was, the accumulated evidence was pointing toward a superficial contract that would cede Jazz no influence over Vos. If it were true that Starscream still stood as the Vosian Emirate and it was possible to contract a political position under him, then Jazz needed that contract. This was no longer just a matter of figuring out Decepticon courtship practices; now Jazz had to gain the support of a whole city-state. Courtship appeared to be his best method for that.

Vos had been a proud city-state. Absorption into the Decepticon ranks seemed to have made the citizens even prouder. The city-state had been destroyed, true, but the survivors would be even more difficult to bring to his side. Thundercracker’s reaction might have been an extreme example, but even toning it down, the average Vosian wouldn’t be in favor of an Autobot being part of their city government. The Vosians had flocked to the Decepticons, flying against the Senate and the Prime.

Megatron wasn’t here, but his shadow was felt. Purple emblems glared from every wing, and there was no way the Decepticon Lord Commander didn’t know about a gathering of his followers. The Vosians were making no secret of it. Blaster had said the control room back at headquarters was aware of Thundercracker’s challenge. Soundwave had to be monitoring the combat. Megatron might not be here, but he’d granted permission by abstaining from objection. Or perhaps he’d even approved it. Regardless, the Decepticon leader understood -- or at least allowed -- and gave his Air Commander free reign here.

Really, was this any different than the executions and discipline among the Decepticon troops? Call Jazz a cynic, but where could he draw a definite line between personal morals and discretion for the sake of the peace? The Autobots had been resolutely looking the other way when the question of
Megatron’s methods of control came up for weeks now as the peace negotiations progressed, because the truth was that only the warlord’s brutal hand on his soldiers’ necks was keeping them in line. They knew there were examples being made among the Decepticon troops to keep the peace negotiations going, but no one had said anything. Did Jazz have a leg to stand on if he protested an execution done right in front of him, as opposed to out of his line of sight?

It was the Decepticon way. This was the Decepticon way.

Wasn’t it?

Cold slag and scrap iron, Jazz wasn’t even sure he could label this Decepticon military procedure anymore, but it was following some kind of formalized structure. A trial-by-combat legal contract procedure, or something like that. Taken from an outsider’s perspective as if Jazz had actually come across this while spying, he’d assume this was some kind of outlandish infighting among the Decepticon Elite. If Thundercracker died, here and now, it’d be within whatever unwritten rules Decepticon culture allowed, and outsiders would never know the difference. Jazz had the sudden, unsettling feeling that he wasn’t watching a society buried within the Decepticons reemerging. No, his vision was clearing about what exactly SpecOps had been watching the whole war.

The Autobots had known of attempts on Starscream’s life before, although it had never occurred to anyone to wonder which position was being grabbed at. If Jazz understood this right, apparently only the Second-in-Command position could ever be in question. But as an ignorant observer, unaware of needing to be an anthropologist just to watch a fight, would he know that? There seemed to be a legal network binding this arena together that wasn’t visible, had been agreed upon long ago and out of sight, and yet it made the unseen power-grabs far different than they first appeared.

Looking at Thundercracker’s beat-down from the angle of an Autobot spy, he’d report back that the blue Seeker had failed at self-promotion and was being executed for his failure. That was what he’d witnessed over and over again throughout the war, after all. Assassination attempts weren’t exactly kosher, but a well-done behind-the-scenes play was subtly lauded by the Decepticons as a way of obtaining a better rank. Failures got what they deserved; executions were as much for being caught as trying in the first place.

Jazz couldn’t just see this as a spy observing from the outside anymore. From even the short distance he’d managed to worm himself into this situation, he’d discovered far more convoluted workings on the inside than ever suspected. Decepticon and Vosian cultures had merged to the point where this had to be a cultural event. Military culture, as developed by a destroyed city and a rebellion-turned-civil war. His processors were still reeling as they tried to integrate what he’d unconvered in the past two orns into what long vorns as a Special Operations mech had shown him.

Regardless of other consequences of this new information, it meant that objecting to Thundercracker’s murder would bring a whole culture down on an interfering outsider. Not a Decepticon military response, but a cultural one. If there were actually a difference, which was a line that was becoming increasingly blurred the more he learned. Trying to separate the Decepticon Cause from Vosian customs didn’t seem possible. Perhaps? Maybe. Primus, Jazz hadn’t even known the Vosian element had been there all along. Trying to pick out what was one or the other when he could only see the merged society from outside the Decepticon faction…there would probably be large amounts of misinterpretations, along with offenses taken and given.

He’d already monumentally screwed things up in that direction already today. Part of his mind was busily compiling options for fixing that misunderstanding with Starscream later, but this was more important at the moment.

Thundercracker arched, hands uselessly pushing at the foot planted on the side of his helm, forcing
his head to the ground and his neck to bend past where it should stop. The intakes on either side of
his contorted face cracked as helm armor dented inward. The fins popped out as pressure increased.
They pattered to the ground in an erratic hail, plumping into the shallow puddles of vital fluids
already on the ground. The pressure never let up, grinding him into the rust even as he screamed and
screamed. What had started as a brief cry of unbearable pain had lengthened into something the blue
Seeker seemed unable to stop.

Starscream’s hands had been dented and covered in paint transfers, but now they were liquid-smooth
with raw pink energon and bluish processed fuel. They twisted inside Thundercracker’s torso,
ripping out great handfuls of loose wires. They stuck halfway out so that the Air Commander had to
brace his foot and heave until they popped free in a hail of tiny sparks from frayed ends.

Jazz had stood by as worse atrocities were committed. He’d perpetuated worse himself for the sake
of the ideals he believed in and the faction he fought for. He knew how to bury his personal morals
and tamp them down for the sake of a mission. That had never made watching someone die any
easier. Torture should never become easy to witness.

Especially since he shouldn’t have to stand by any longer. The war was supposed to be over.

Patience. Tolerance. They were relearning everything in the peace process, but negotiations meant
each side had to give something up. Each side had to be equally committed, or the peace would
never work. The Autobots had to try and learn to understand the Decepticons, allow for their
failings, but in return, the Decepticons had to give something back. Jazz had to allow for Vosian --
for Decepticon -- culture, but that meant Starscream had to give something back.

The puzzle fell into place. Or rather, it shifted so he could see the separate pieces that made up part of
the whole. He still couldn’t see the entire picture for pieces gone missing, but slag, weren’t they all
making this up as they went? Nothing was left intact on Cybertron anymore.

"For the purpose of ending our Great War," Jazz said, lifting his chin to speak with the taller Seeker
beside him. The catch-all ritual phrase sounded vaguely apologetic, but it got Acid Storm’s attention.
Skywarp shifted against his leg, too, and the purple-and-black Seeker let his laughter die. “Answer
me this: do I have the right to stop this?” He opened one hand at the horrid scene below.
Thundercracker’s wailing had heightened his normal bass vocal range to a high, thin sound, and it
made the fuel in Jazz’s tanks freeze.

Skywarp and Acid Storm exchanged speaking looks around Jazz, the seated Seeker shrugging one
wing in a way the Autobot couldn’t read. “Technically?” the Rainmaker started, but he fell silent as
someone cut the floodlights.

Night blanketed them, only the banshee-scream of a mech in utter agony piercing it. It shrilled
around the arena like a living, dying creature. The tiers shifted and murmured as optics adjusted to
the sudden darkness, and thousands of confused optics looked around. Only to catch, because there
was light where there shouldn’t be, and intakes sucked air in gasping unison.

Illuminated by sparklight, Starscream’s hands continued their tearing, terrible work.

“Frag,” Skywarp said softly.

Jazz’s visor was a hypnotized blue band of nausea. The glow was mesmerizing in the night. The
light flickered frantically, and Jazz wasn’t the only one who couldn’t look away. Even Skywarp’s
laughter had tapered off, amusement giving way to a more sober mien. Cheering had descended to
whispers and silent observation. There was still anticipation zinging under the audience’s low-level
sound, but there was a growing awareness, as well. This was wingmate against wingmate, their Air
Commander executing a disloyal member of his own trine, and the arena stood witness as he ripped more of Thundercracker’s cockpit loose. The opening widened, and sparklight spilled reluctantly out. In its whirling light, Starscream’s face was fiercely determined.

Acid Storm regretfully touched the Autobot on one shoulder-tire, downturned mouth offering half-hearted sympathy when the smaller mech looked up at him. “You don’t,” he said quietly, voice lowered beneath the subdued crowd-buzz. “Thundercracker hasn’t conceded, and even if the challenge weren’t to Starscream,” he flipped his free hand, indicating that they both knew the Air Commander to be an unforgiving slagger, “a challenger has the right to die.”

“Do you really think he wants to die?” Jazz asked incredulously, and a whining screech of agony punctuated his question. “How could he?!”

Skywarp sighed his vents and wriggled back against the Autobot’s leg as if trying to get comfortable. If he ended up sitting a little more defensively, knees tucked a bit closer to his own chest, well, nobody else was in any position to talk. Hundreds of other flyers around the arena were shifting in similar ways. “Thundercracker’s always been stubborn. Seems kinda strange, but -- yeah, not all that surprising. He might even think Starscream’s gonna stop before he goes critical.” One red optic tipped up to regard Jazz sidelong. “He won’t, in case you were wondering. Nobody does all that,” he flicked a finger in the direction of the heaving pile of scrap metal that had been his wingmate, “unless they’re intending to offline a mech.”

“He’ll breech spark containment soon enough,” Acid Storm agreed. He eyed the blue Seeker’s frantic struggles, judging. “Not much longer. Wonder if the Commander intends to take the whole spark chamber out, or just breech it?”

The other Seeker let his optics return to the arena floor, considering the question. “Knowing Starscream? He’ll want to nail the spark chamber to his wall.” It wasn’t even Thundercracker’s spark chamber’ anymore; just any spark chamber. Skywarp had already distanced himself from the dead mech who’d been his wingmate. “Although…heh. Betcha he’s going to rip it out and stomp on it to extinguish the spark.”

Vivid green armor glimmered under the light of a thousand different optics. Also under the light of a gambler’s interest. Acid Storm apparently enjoyed games. “I’ll take that bet.”

“You’re on.”

“Usual terms?”

“Of course. What do you think he’ll do?”

“You know, I don’t even know?” Acid Storm cocked his head, thinking it over as Starscream reached both hands into Thundercracker’s chest and seized a horizontal brace. “It’s going to be dramatic, I know that.”

The blue Seeker gave a garbled cry reminiscent of a turkey whose wishbone was pulled apart while it still lived, and the brace gave with a sickening crack that had the whole audience unconsciously pressing hands to their own chests. That sound could be felt deep down in their chassis. It echoed from far inside where vulnerable internal parts were never supposed to be pulled into open air, and it triggered a visceral wrench in all of them.

“He’s in shock,” Jazz said, fighting down revulsion for everything. For the two Seekers and the audience and his own inaction, but mostly for the monster below forcing the broken brace apart like a blackmarket doctor cracking open a ribcage. “He’s in shock,” he repeated when Acid Storm and
Skywarp only gave him mildly questioning looks. “I’ve seen it often enough when a mech’s down and out in battle.” He looked between them. “You’ve seen it, too! Even warbuilds aren’t built to cope well with having someone pulling them to pieces!” Especially not when the spark was involved. Overwhelm a mech’s processor with enough sudden damage reports, continued injuries causing pain sensors to go crazy as they were assaulted from all sides all at once, and it froze things up.

“Thundercracker doesn’t want to die,” Jazz said forcefully, visor narrowing to an accusing sliver in the darkness. “You know he doesn’t! If Starscream won’t stop until he concedes but he’s physically handicapped from doing so -- “

“What do you care?” Acid Storm interrupted, and he sounded slightly puzzled. “He’s a Decepticon. You’re an Autobot.”

“He’s Thundercracker,” Skywarp pressed. “You’ve shot him before. You’ve tried to kill us all, before! What the frag do you care if Starscream disassembles him to subatomic particles and snorts him up his primary intakes?”

“Oh, now that’s just gross!” Acid Storm gave the other Seeker a revolted look. “Where did you even come up with that?!”

“Earth,” Skywarp said matter-of-factly, “has some phenomenally entertaining recreational habits. But that’s my point!” Skywarp spoke over a particularly loud wail, ignoring it in favor of glaring at the Autobot. “If this had happened back on Earth, you’d probably be back in your stupid orange ship watching this like primetime TV!” He waved his arms, apparently unable to communicate how strange he found Jazz’s objection by mere words alone. “I mean, what the frag? What the frag? What the frag? This is because of you!”

“True,” the Rainmaker said, upping his voice to be heard over Thundercracker’s sobbing shriek as Starscream’s relentless yanking finally snapped the side-hinges keeping the blue Seeker’s chest closed. Sparklight bathed the area abruptly, a lightbulb of quivering terror exposed to the pitiless outside world. “Thundercracker wouldn’t have challenged if you hadn’t threatened his position.”

“I don’t want to be Starscream’s wingmate!” Jazz blurted, because deeper thought had temporarily been derailed by the sickening show. Only long experience as an undercover operative kept him from showing more reaction than that.

“Not that position, idiot,” Skywarp said, disgusted. “Thundercracker’s been maneuvering to be the Emirate’s Second since Starscream first contracted him.”

“Probably before that,” Acid Storm added in. Skywarp’s optics glanced up quizzically, and the Rainmaker scoffed. “You don’t think he just happened to wander across the Commander’s line of sight when you two finalized, do you? Half the uncontracted single flyers went into a blitz of courtship displays when you, ah, ‘prevented’ Starscream from trine-contracting with a solid pair-contract.” He smirked at Skywarp’s bemused expression. “You’re so psychotic the other half ran the other way.”

“Hey!”

“It’s true.” Acid Storm looked back to Jazz even as Thundercracker’s vocalizer began spitting pathetic swatches of nothing but static, too strained beyond proper usage to continue screaming. “Then along comes the ceasefire, and he’s been just waiting for the war’s end to finish our military contracts. Nuts and bolts, he’s probably been planning to the klik the right time to ask permission to
court -- only here you are.”

“Megatron,” Skywarp declared, “is a great leader.” He looked suddenly uncomfortable, which even the show below hadn’t been able to accomplish. “It’s just…his orders sometimes suck. It’s not right, bringing an outsider in like this.” He gave Jazz a mulish glare. “Why couldn’t you at least have wings?”

The saboteur carefully didn’t flinch, but the two Seekers were suddenly looking at him anyway. Their faces showed dawning comprehension.

“You feel guilty,” Acid Storm breathed, and Skywarp brightened like someone had just handed him the world’s best present.

“I’m an Autobot,” Jazz countered, low and hard. “I’ve tolerated as much of this -- this challenge as I can because of my role in what’s happening, but even for the sake of the peace negotiations, I can’t condone murder.” The multiple layers of his visor slotted together, narrowing to a rock-steady gaze of hard blue. “I don’t want to do this, but you’re telling me I can’t interfere as -- “ he hesitated.

“As Starscream’s intended,” Skywarp supplied. “Unless that’s in your contract? Nope.”

Meaning it could be, which the cold mech behind his personal feelings took note of for future use. “ - - right, whatever. That leaves me no choice but to act as an Autobot officer.” Even in the dim, unsteady light of optics and cockpit instrumentation, the smaller mech suddenly looked every inch a dangerous Autobot. No Decepticon in his right mind wanted to mess with the Autobot Head of Special slagging Operations.

Even surrounded by six hundred+ Decepticon flyers, that gave the two Seekers pause.

Something horrible snapped in that pause, and Thundercracker’s voice fitzed into a higher pitch of pain. By the light of a panicked, helpless spark, Starscream was inserting cruel hands into the blue Seeker’s open chest. He took his time, hands moving with the precision of a surgeon. Jazz held the sick certainty that he knew who would win the Decepticons’ latest betting pool.

Acid Storm’s head turned, back and forth between show and disapproving observer. The Rainmaker’s mouth worked, but no words came out. Any mech in his position would be as indecisive, caught between conflicting duties: Megatron’s peace and Starscream’s rights. If Jazz took a stand, here and now, the peace negotiations were over. The challenge had gone too far. Starscream was too proud, and the audience’s mood had progressed too far to accept their Emirate backing off because some Autobot’s prissy ethics said so. Someone would die, and that would be it for peace right then and there. All three of them here on the platform knew it, but the fact that the Autobot officer was taking a stand anyway meant that this wasn’t a bluff. This was serious, and Acid Storm didn’t know what to do.

Which was very unfortunately, because neither did Jazz. He just knew that sometimes the right thing was what an Autobot had to do. His mouth pressed into a resolute line, and he started to step forward --

"For the purpose of ending our Great War," Skywarp rushed out, and if that hadn’t been enough, the purple-and-black Seeker had the Autobot’s leg in a tight grip. He’d rolled into a crouch, hands hold Jazz in place. Starscream’s wingmate had an excited, intense expression like he’s seen the explosion at the end of the tunnel, and he’d been the one to cause it. Not every mech in Acid Storm’s position locked up; some saw an escape route.

Thank Primus, because Jazz was scraping the bottom of the Barrel o’ Inspiration here.
“You don’t have the right to interfere,” Skywarp said hurriedly, “but technically? I do.”

Acid Storm looked like he’d been slapped. “You do?!”

Skywarp looked past Jazz to stick his tongue out at the other Seeker’s disbelief. “I can’t stop him, but I can ask him to stop. It’ll give Thundercracker some time to get his cortex back together.”

Jazz dipped his chin in a sharp nod. “If Thundercracker recovers enough to decide he wants to die, that’s his choice and not a murder. I…” He grimaced, because he didn’t want to, it’d be his fault and he didn’t want to but he had to for peace’s sake. “I can allow that.”

“Primus, let him see reason,” Acid Storm half-prayed, optics worried and focused on the Air Commander. Starscream had straightened up, rolling his shoulders and smirking at the crowd. ’Let this be a lesson to you,’ that smirk said at the assembled Vosians, and then Starscream looked down again. Thundercracker’s hands alternated between pawing weakly at the foot planted on his helm and hovering, shaking violently, over his bright, defenseless spark.

“But you owe me,” Skywarp asserted, hissing suddenly as he dug his fingers into the Autobot’s thigh. “You owe me, Jazz.”

Who frowned, somehow not surprised that a Decepticon would manipulate even this. “I won’t compromise the Autobots,” he warned.

Skywarp shook his head, refusing to acknowledge the comm. line from Acid Storm even Jazz’s disabled system could practically feel poking at the flyer. “Not asking you to.” He freed one hand to bat at the Rainmaker, telling him to shut up, already! “You owe me. Something small. You have the choice to turn me down if the favor’s too much, but you owe me.”

He could see the angle: Skywarp wanted to hold something over him, either as Third-in-Command of the Autobots or as a potential Second in Vos. And maybe the cost would end up being too high, but Jazz had made tougher deals with even less trustworthy informants during the long vorns of the war. Threat analysis kicked it over to noncombat-dealing as Starscream leisurely reached down, hands glittering and deceptively beautiful.

The cost/benefit analysis came out positive, and the Autobot jerked an unhappy nod. “Agreed.”

Skywarp disappeared instantly, but Jazz didn’t know if even a teleporter was fast enough.

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 11

[* * * * *]
Pt. 12

I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 12
[* * * * *]

The pop of displaced air couldn’t be heard up on the platform, but Starscream whipped around and dropped into a defensive stance even before the purple flash of light consolidated into Skywarp’s distinctive colors. He looked as if he expected the purple-and-black Seeker to attack, too.

“You as well?” he barked, angrily shrill as the audience erupted into startled chatter. “Has the entire Armada gone mad?!”

Skywarp’s hands went up, and the flyer stumbled back a couple steps. His optics were locked on the gruesome drip of internal fluids down his wingmate’s hands. “Hey, no, back off!” His volume dropped a little, and the crowd hushed to listen. “Like you’re one to talk? Since when do I have to be the reasonable one, anyway?”

That bought him a moment; Starscream relaxed fractionally to eye him askance. “What?”

Skywarps nodded up into the audience, a petulant scowl replacing words as he switched to internal comm. Starscream’s optics followed the gesture, zeroing in on Jazz like the Autobot had a target painted on him. Narrowed, serious blue met furious red, and Starscream seemed confused. Combat-ready eased into wary, then into disbeliefing. The Air Commander snapped his optics back to Skywarp, obviously incredulous. Whatever the other Seeker was saying, Starscream either couldn’t believe it or couldn’t believe who it was coming from. Jazz could almost sympathize with that last one.

Skywarps, in turn, wasn’t shy about vigorously waving his arms in the air as he tried to drill holes in his wingleader by glaring alone. Exasperation windmilled around him. It seemed that he couldn’t believe he was the one acting as mediator. If he had be the reasonable one for the greater good, then he was going to be as unreasonable as possible about it. Starscream bristled back at him, unwilling to concede whatever point had been raised.

There was only a flicker of red optics toward Jazz after the silent gesturing began, but some of the audience turned to follow that look. Acid Storm shifted uneasily at the Autobot’s side as an ugly murmur began to spread. The atmosphere in the arena darkened underneath the night sky, and something close to the charge of impending lightning started to gather.

This could still turn very bad.

Jazz wasn’t watching the crowd, however. He could feel the mood shift and change, but his visor stayed on the dimly-lit shape sprawled behind Starscream’s thrusters. It twitched in the rust of the arena floor. Blue narrowed further, urging, ‘C’mon.’ The mangled body was slowly turned onto one wing, huddling in on itself, but that was an involuntary -- if useless -- movement. He’d seen mechs without heads try to curl inward like that in their last seconds. It was body-reflex to try and protect the spark chamber. ‘C’mon, Thundercracker.’

Now, the hand groping toward Starscream’s foot? That was conscious.
The argument stopped as sensors registered the motion, and a tense coil around Jazz’s core twisted
just that much tighter when Starscream and Skywarp looked down. The audience went dead silent,
ugly rabble-rousing diverted as Thundercracker’s searching hand touched a crippled turbine. The
fingers hesitated. Everyone’s vents closed, holding a collective breath.

If Thundercracker tried to fight again, Jazz was going to let him die.

The dark, crumpled helm lifted laboriously from the intake it’d slumped onto, and an abrasive
metallic skree! buzzed through the waiting silence. Thundercracker tried to turn a little more onto his
side, but although his wings were damaged, they hadn’t bent enough to allow that. When he
coughed his mouth clear, the murky fluids oozed down his cheek instead of spattering onto the
ground.

The word gurgled alarmingly, but was still understandable: “…y-yield.”

Starscream snarled, and it was as sinister as a gunshot during a fist fight. From the look Skywarp
gave him, it was as unexpected, too. “No, you don’t.” He turned on his injured turbine, deliberately
setting the flat of his foot on Thundercracker’s reaching fingers. He leaned forward to really grind his
weight down on them. “And do you know why?”

A pained whine was clearly heard through the arena. “Starrggulk,” another glob of fluids coughed
up from atop his vocalizer, and Thundercracker’s tugged futilely on his trapped hand. “S-starscr-
ream..?”

Skywarp warily laid a hand on Starscream’s upper arm, leaning closer to catch his wingleader’s
optic. It was either internal comm. or long experience that let the two Seekers exchange something in
a glance, but the teleporter let go a moment later. He folded his arms and looked down at the pathetic
wreck that had been his wingmate. No evidence of pity crossed his face. There was no hope of
rescue from this mech. He seemed to have adopted a bored sort of tolerance for Starscream’s
mindgames.

Thundercracker’s remaining optic sputtered orange and yellow behind broken glass as he tried to
focus on the Air Comander sneering down at him. “Because you’re not a warrior. You’re an oath-
breaking glitch who doesn’t have any honor left to yield.” The smelters operated off of less heat than
the vengeance driving Starscream, burning in his own unbroken optic. The outraged hiss he spoke in
could have ignited brushed steel, but his wings straightened into a more authoritative position as he
sucked in a deep in-vent. The cool mask of an officer made the anger disappear as if it’d never
existed. He lifted his chin and looked contemptuously down his nose at the mech huddled nearly
under his feet. “Decepticon Thundercracker,” he said in a voice so coldly formal it seared fury into
the words, “you are hereby demoted from my wing -- and from the Armada. You are stripped of all
rank within it, nor will contracting with any wing inside it allow you to hold any.”

Even through the pain and what had to be truly spectacular onslaught of damage alerts,
Thundercracker managed to turn his face up toward the Air Commander. There was stunned horror
written among the cuts and scrapes, and an honestly sympathetic ‘Ohhh’ ghosted through the
audience as that registered. Skywarp reset his optics through a blink before shrugging. He nodded
acceptance and looked vaguely impressed by the ruling.

“Can he do that?” Jazz whispered, tipping his head to the side without taking his visor off
Thundercracker.

Acid Storm tipped his head to meet him halfway, attention engrossed in the show. “Apparently,” he
whispered back.
“I thought he had another rank?”

“Decommissioned.”

“Ouch.”

Lit all around by the light of many optics and from below by one badly-protected spark, Starscream had never looked more imposing. “Do you understand, Decepticon?”

Fluid-coated lips moved silently for a very long moment. Eventually, having no choice, Thundercracker found words. “Yes.” He flinched as the foot on his hand crushed it further.

“Commander!” Metal sheared, and the blue Seeker cried out hoarsely. “Sir, yes sir, I understand, Air Commander -- sir!”

Starscream scraped his foot away, dislocating two of the blue Seeker’s fingers in the move. A muted cough answered the move, scream blocked by more fluids, and Thundercracker tried to pull in his newly-damaged hand. The awkward position he was in didn’t allow it. For a klik, he just lay there. His helm had slumped back to rest on his intake, but Jazz thought the jet seemed to be gathering strength. His functioning optic dimmed, and the horror on his face fell into a kind of hollow despair. The whole arena hushed even further, leaning forward, and Jazz risked a glance up to the tiers. The flyers all seemed to be waiting for something, understanding what was going on at a level he, the outsider, just didn’t see. He looked back to the arena floor.

“What’re we waiting for?” Jazz asked, still whispering. He was oddly reluctant to raise his voice. It was less a feeling of ‘yelling in a recovery ward’ and more of ‘don’t be a target’. Acid Storm gave him an impatient flick of his optics. There was a second of silence where the Rainmaker seemed to debate the wisdom of answering an Autobot’s questions, but Jazz’s dubious status won out again. “He’s out of the Armada, and now he’s got the rank of, what, a footsoldier?” He seemed a little amused by that thought. “Thundercracker the grunt. Huh. That’s going to take some getting used to.” He shook his head. “That doesn’t make him any less of a Decepticon, however, and he got into a fight with an officer. Not just any officer, either.”

“The Air Commander, Second-in-Command of the Decepticons,” Jazz finished, mouth twisting to one side as he got it. “Punishment?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Bad?”

“He’ll probably survive. Examples are more effective when you can watch them crawl away afterward.” The mottled green Seeker didn’t bring up the fact that having the Autobot Third-in-Command around to witness might play into the life-or-death decision. Down in the arena, Knock Out had bustled forward and totally ignored the more critical patient. Instead, the flashy red medic started fussing around Starscream. The Air Commander traded snarking comments with him and Skywarp, who just looked bored now. “We’re waiting to see if Thundercracker can appease our beloved,” ah, sarcasm, everyone’s old friend, “Air Commander enough to be punished personally.”

Now there was a mental image Jazz didn’t really want. It had poked something uneasy in his fuel pump to see Sunstorm crawl to Starscream’s feet, and the golden clone had been in better shape than Thundercracker. The fight hadn’t gone to these extremes even before his…punishment. “What’s the alternative?”

“Somebody’ll haul him to the nearest Decepticon base to be strung up by the barracks’ master for
insubordination, treason, disrespect, failure to obey, resistance, conspiracy, noncompliance, mutiny, and assault.” Just in case the Autobot forgot he was talking with the officer who’d led the Armada for four million years, the look on Acid Storm’s face was all the reminder needed. There was something infinitely ruthless burning in those red optics. “Basically, he’ll be charged for the crime of existing with intent to continue living.”

“Everything but the kitchen sink,” the small black-and-white mech muttered.

That earned a tranquil smile. “I have no idea what that is, but probably that, too. Twice, if the Air Commander’s really riled.” The smile twisted like a knife and sliced across the Rainmaker’s deceptive charm to show the officer he was underneath. “I doubt anyone would see our poor dear grunt off-base ever again. The first thing I’d do is take his wings, and he’d never get them back with a list of offenses like that.” A quick flick of thoughtful optics. “Plus a kitchen sink.”

“Wonderful,” Jazz said heavily. “Just peachy.”

Acid Storm gave him a strange look. “What do Autobots do when two mechs get in a fight?”

“Depends on the mechs,” he replied absently. Most of his thoughts were on the scene below. His HUD popped up a window to zoom in on Thundercracker, running calculations on just how badly the blue Seeker was damaged. Thundercracker was slowly gathering himself up into a less heap-like position. How much ‘punishment’ could he tolerate before offlining? “Punishment detail usually ranges from extra scutwork to brig time. Sometimes we transfer the mechs t’ different units to prevent future conflict. Demotion,” he added, “if it’s a repeat offense or Medical files charges.” He blinked and threw a look up at the green Seeker. The strange look had intensified. “Why?”

“You get brig time for hitting an officer?” Acid Storm asked, frankly incredulous. “I -- you know, I’d heard about how soft-sparked the Autobot ranks are, but -- really? That’s it?”

“There’re exceptions for special circumstances, but yeah,” the Autobot said cautiously. “We don’t promote physical violence as the answer to misbehavior.” He just couldn’t visualize any circumstances in the Autobots where Thundercracker propping himself up on shaking arms, drawing in audible gasps of air to cool damaged systems, would ever happen. Even Optimus Prime and Grimlock throwing each other around over disagreements was a real rare case of violence being specifically requested, and that’d been by the Dinobot himself. Prime only humored Grimlock when the sparring let off steam instead of causing more strife. Because that’s what violence tended to do: feed on itself until it got out of control.

Jazz didn’t say anything about his thoughts on how answering violence with violence had led to, well, this. It was probably pretty obvious what he was thinking, however. It wasn’t that dark out.

The Rainmaker didn’t dismiss the unspoken thought, at least. He just answered it with some spoken skepticism of his own. “How, by Cybertron’s silver skyline, do you keep discipline?”

There were a hundred ways to answer that question. First and foremost was responding with a sharp comment about how, hey, because beating on each other for millions of years had done just great things for everyone’s discipline! Oh, wait, no, that was called civil war, and the Autobot could use a little less of that in the ranks, thank you very much.

Jazz weighed the possibility of starting a philosophical debate with a Decepticon officer right here and now, but this really wasn’t the time. Okay, blunt-object honesty or acidic sarcasm aside, there were still a thousand flippant remarks he could make. But he didn’t want to dismiss an open question from someone who was a potential ally.
Argh. Talking with Decepticons was almost as stressful as shooting at them. His threat assessment subprocessor didn’t like how everything here had to be triple-analyzed.

He settled for a half-serious answer he thought even a Decepticon could get behind. “Have you ever heard Prime lecture someone?”

“What?” That surprised Acid Storm.

“You must have heard Prime give a speech before, right?” Jazz’s lips twitched, trying to stay straight as the Rainmaker hazarded a nod. “He’s good at speeches. Great at ‘em, really.”

“I suppose,” the Seeker said neutrally, obviously confused about where this topic was going.

“He puts lotsa thought and emotion into them. Lots of concentration on really making the audience feel what he feels.” A hesitant nod. Jazz nodded, too, more ruefully. The Decepticons probably didn’t have a clue what being under Optimus Prime was like. The majority of the initial Decepticon High Command officer cadre had been formed before the Matrix chose Optimus, after all. “Now imagine he’s very disappointed in you. Just you. All of that speechifying directed at you, disappointed at you, personalized down to the last detail, for hours and hours. It’s not pretty.”

A dim bulb brightened. “Oh.” Brightened further as that scenario really sank in to the Seeker’s mind. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” The rueful twist to his smile had a faint air of nostalgia to it, but Jazz just folded his arms and looked down again. “The thing about liking your leader as well as admiring him,” no insult intended; Skywarp seemed to admire Megatron, anyway, “is that it hits you where it hurts when you screw up.”

It really did. The lectures were spark-wrenching, but it was worse when Prime just gave a mech his Y U Hurt Me? sad look. Not only did it make the unfortunate mech feel like an utter greaseblotch, but then everyone -- yes, everyone -- made a point of riding that dumb mech’s aft until they felt that he felt properly sorry for making Prime sad. Slingshot had lasted about two days of that treatment before caving and apologizing. That had almost beat the Wreckers’ joint record. Although, to be fair, there’d been a lot of distance involved with the Wreckers’ incident. Also pride. Slingshot? He was just a jerk.

Mental note: get Prime to try the sad look on a Decepticon. Maybe Megatron. Jazz kind of wanted to see what would happen.

There was still a faint aura of confusion around Acid Storm, but he seemed to accept that for the moment. Mostly because there were more interesting things happening down below.

Thundercracker had managed to get his torso off the ground enough to force his wing out from under himself. Part of an already broken wingspar cracked as that wing dragged across rust. He winced, but the move allowed him to rest on the elbow of his uninjured hand. It also allowed him to hold his damaged hand close, covering the obscene gap that was all that remained of his cockpit. He stared down at the ground as if looking for the right words, but apparently there were no easy solutions there. He slowly winched his helm up, losing another few vent fins in the motion.

“Air Commander, sir?” the blue Seeker asked, and Jazz had never heard someone sound so exhausted.

Starscream took his time turning around, letting Knock Out finish patching a puncture on his lower leg first. Jazz wasn’t surprised at the way the medic’s hands were, ah, wandering. Skywarp grinned
when Starscream had to shake the medic loose, in fact, and the vain little Decepticon leered in return. It was an oddly familiar look. How well did the Decepticon Elite know the medic? Information had always indicated that the Constructicons personally worked on the Elite, yet Knock Out seemed too at ease standing between two superior officers.

Jazz shoved the question into the back of his mind to worry about later as Starscream finally deigned to bestow his attention on the defeated challenger. “Yes?”

Thundercracker almost visibly swallowed his pride. Oh, how the mighty had fallen. “Sir, I withdraw my challenge. I regret my -- my presumption. I am unworthy of any position but that far below you, and I -- deserve nothing less than your contempt.” That looked like it’d hurt to get out. The audience leaned forward, listening eagerly, and even Starscream’s coldly displeased expression developed a tint of satisfaction. Watching a former officer grovel was a crowd-pleaser, alright. “Please, Air Commander, sir, I…I beg permission to apologize to you. I ask -- “ A full-body flinch from Thundercracker as he caught himself, and Starscream tsked just loud enough to be heard.Oops, language of an equal not allowed.

The blue Seeker ducked his head a little -- ‘Sorry, sir, won’t happen again, sir’ -- and stumbled onward, “I, uh, humbly request you accept my unconditional surrender and…and…” Jazz was actually squirming a little with how uncomfortable this was to listen to, but if the rapt expressions around him were any clue, he was alone in that feeling. “…and punish m-me appropriately for. For my. My.”

“For what, soldier?” Starscream rasped, and Skywarp’s obnoxious interest beside him was vastly overshadowed by the Air Commander’s gloating. “What exactly should I punish you for?”

For once, however, his voice wasn’t the worst nasal whine present. Thundercracker’s deep bass had devolved into an ingratiating snivel an octave or two higher than his usual voice. It was a pitch he obviously had very limited practice in. “For -- for -- “ His shattered optic glanced frantically around the arena, searching for a way out, a friendly face, anything, but Thundercracker was well and truly trapped by his own actions. Even Jazz could tell the mech had no way out, here.

And his inexperience being in this position made the downed flyer’s stretched nerves snap at the worst possible moment. He burst out, “Scrap metal and iron, Starscream, just put me out of my misery already!”

For being dark already, the arena suddenly developed a whole new blackness. This one crackled like an oncoming storm, or like a flouted Air Commander’s gathering rage.

“Oo, not cool,” Jazz winced. He had to catch himself and translate the Earth lingo. “Means not, uh, good.”

“You said it.” Acid Storm seconded, but his sympathetic wince had definite undertones of gaiety. It was mirrored throughout the crowd, which was merrily taking bets again. This was the best show in town!

“Nice knowing you, Thundercracker,” Skywarp quipped, positively gleeful, but his ex-wingmate was scrambling back with strength only desperation could lend.

Ruined leg or not, Thundercracker wasn’t staying within arm’s reach of anybody who looked like that. Frag, dead bodies would try to get away from Starscream when he wore that expression. Especially if the Air Commander was stalking after them. They’d probably get up and run if he were closing his fists like that.
Thundercracker didn’t have that option, and his babbling narrated a descent into panic: “I’m sorry! Sir! I’m sorry, sir, I meant no disrespect, Air Commander, sir, forgive me, please, pardon m-my error, sir, it was a mistake, I’m sorry!” The cowering mech scooted himself across the ground before Starscream’s slow advance. “Please, sir, I apologize, sir! I sur-surrender, I b-beg your forg-giveness, sir -- !” Thundercracker’s good turbine clanked off of Starscream’s foot, and the blue Seeker’s voice ended in a frightened squeak.

He froze into a trembling statue. At some point, even terror recognized there was no escape. He just stared up at his doom, one functioning optic wide and mouth silently forming a litany of useless words. Starscream loomed over him, and Jazz couldn’t imagine what the frightened Seeker saw by the upcast light of his own spark.

He should do something. But Jazz didn’t have the slightest idea of what, and that had him as paralyzed as the helpless mech below.

“Is that what you want, Thundercracker?” The Autobot jolted in surprise, and he wasn’t the only one. Around the arena, the husky rasp ran a seductive caress over a thousand wings. Acid Storm snapped straight beside him, and every single optic locked on the Air Commander. Starscream ignored their astonishment to kneel beside his ex-wingmate and grasp the crippled mech’s throat in a cruel hand. The rough grip was all the harder to understand for Starscream’s thrumming tone. “I could put you out of your misery, if that’s so.”

“No.” Thundercracker seemed half-hypnotized, half-petrified by Starscream’s behavior. His hands hovered defensively in front of his open chest, dislocated fingers stark against the light, but Starscream’s other hand brushed them aside easily. It dipped into the nearly-solid glow, playing gently in the streamers of plasma, and the blue Seeker keened as his optic suddenly shut off. “Please. Sir. Air Commander, sir. No.”

“No?” And Starscream’s face was indeed terrible, lit into ghastly relief. The hand on Thundercracker’s neck was the only thing keeping the blue Seeker down as blue fingers twined into his spark, and he writhed, back arching an involuntary echo of Starscream’s stroking. The Air Commander ruthlessly pinned him down and tugged on a near-solid strand of sparklight until his challenger cried out. It was something more pain-ravaged than a pleasured wail, and it tore from Thundercracker’s vocalizer to echo around the arena. “I’m fairly certain you gave me -- me! -- that order not a klik ago. Isn’t that so, Skywarp?”

The purple-and-black Seeker was a dim shape, barely lit by the mesmerized optics of the crowd. He shook himself out of his own staring. “Uh…yeah, I’m pretty sure I heard that, too.”

“What did he, hmm,” a particularly sadistic pull had Thundercracker wriggling like a fish on a hook, “say? Remind me. I’m not very good at remembering orders given to me by rankless empties.”

Skywarp stepped closer, until his sweetly insincere smile could be seen in the light as he so-innocently repeated, “He said, ‘Beat me into spare parts, because I’m a space-case geek.’”

“Really? Is that what you said, Thundercracker?” Starscream turned sharp optics toward the blue Seeker’s beaten face, turning his head as if the spark he played with was suddenly beneath his notice. “Is that what you are?”

Air stuttered in and out of Thundercracker’s vents in big gulps: sobs of terror and pain and something even worse that had Jazz pressing a hand over his own spark. It fluttered in troubled response to the helpless mech’s choked cry.

Thundercracker’s fritzing optic came back on, and it mutely beseeched his ex-wingleader for mercy.
Shaking hands lifted, daring to touch Starscream’s wrists. He seemed afraid to risk trying to push them away. “Y-yes, sir, Air Commander, sir,” he mewled, arching again with a gasp. “I’m… I’m a space c-case g-ge-geek.”

Starscream made a small sound of agreement. “What else did he say?” he asked Skywarp, mockingly attentive despite the rising sound of an excited crowd all around them. Where the sight of the Air Commander swirling his hand inside Thundercracker’s chest disturbed Jazz immensely, the Decepticons apparently liked it. Acid Storm’s fans were burring away beside Jazz, and the Rainmaker was riveted by the scene.

“He said he’s a dolt and a boltbrained dweeb who can’t fly worth a credit.”

“Oh?”

“Yes -- augh! -- y-yes, sssir.” A mechanical creel of agony interrupted his tortured self-abasement as fingers clenched. Thundercracker’s head fell back, held upright only by the hand wrapped around his throat as the pain mixed with undiluted bliss until it became a purely loathsome sensation, and he cried out weakly. His hands feebly pushed, but Starscream shook them off. He also shook the blue Seeker until he managed to raise his head again and blearily continue, “I-I’m a… a dolt, a-and… and. And I’m.” He hesitated, giving Skywarp an unconsciously pleading look.

“A boltbrained, underclocked, grounder-loving dweeb who can’t fly worth a credit,” his ex-wingmate repeated, ever the helpful mech.

Thundercracker whimpered, trying to process that. He gave up after a moment, unable to repeat something that complicated. “Y-yes, sir, Air C-Comm-aand-der,” his ducts were so damaged air pressure was plugging vents as broken fins flipped up and stuck in place, and he had to pause to pant. It drew cooler air in, but it also bent things inside already-damaged intakes. “I’m… wh-whatever you say? S-sir?” He cringed as far as he could, expecting a blow for his failure.

Starscream rewarded him with another tender stroke, however. That had him cringing for an entirely different reason. “Hmm. I suppose it’s good you know your place. You do know your place, correct?” he asked pointedly.

The blue wreck of a Seeker nodded as vigorously as he could against the hand on his throat. “Yes, sir, Air Commander, sir!” The force of his words brought up another glob of fluids, and Thundercracker’s face was comical in its horror as yellow-green lubricant dripped from his lips down onto Starscream’s wrist. A wave of chuckles went through the audience, but it was the kind of amusement found in a hyena’s laugh. “S-orry, sir, please, sir, I-I didn’t -- I didn’t mean to -- !”

A sneer of distaste silenced the downed flyer, and Starscream shook him again for good measure. “Disgusting waste of engine pieces and used oil,” he snarled.

“Yes, sir!”

“I’d send you to the recyclers, but you’d never make it through their standards. You’re only fit for the smelter!”

Thundercracker wilted. If there was anything left of the dignified Elite Decepticon Seeker Jazz knew, he didn’t see it in the mech who lowered his sole remaining optic and meekly said, “Yes, sir. I…I a-apologize for -- for my poor qu -- ” He hastily swallowed down a bubble of something before it seeped out. “For my poor quality. Sir.”

The whole arena practically hummed with the power of over six hundred flyers’ fans going all at
Starscream raised his head and looked around the optic-lit darkness, and his face slid into a crafty expression. “Yes, I should have you melted down for floor paneling, but Skywarp?” Skywarp perked to attention, bending over his wingleader solicitously. “I believe Thundercracker ordered me to do something?”

That lone optic shot up, barely daring to hope. Jazz felt a weird surge of hope as well, because Skywarp was a mean, evil fragger with the most twisted sense of humor ever birthed by a war -- but he wanted Jazz to be in his debt. It was there in the way the teleporter glanced quickly up at the Autobot. They nodded fractionally at each other.

“I think he said you should beat him,” he said to the Air Commander.

Starscream seemed to think that over, shifting his grip on Thundercracker’s throat until he had the blue Seeker by the chin instead. He studied him. “I don’t know. Do you deserve a beating, soldier?”

Trick question: say yes, and Starscream would bring down an even harsher punishment for being impudent enough to set terms. Say no, and Starscream would punish him further for failing to recognize the severity of his crime.

Talking with Decepticons was sort of like an extreme sport version of Russian Roulette. Or juggling live grenades with one arm. Things were going to get messy; it was only a question of when.

Even pain-addled and spark-tormented, however, Thundercracker was a Decepticon himself. “I deserve the whip, Air Commander, sir. It is at…at your discretion, sir, that I live or die by it.”

That was a good answer, evidently. An approving murmur swept through the crowd, and Starscream’s sneer upticked into something in the vicinity of neutral. That was an improvement over the burning anger that had been the dominant emotion driving him since Thundercracker first challenged. Skywarp barked out a laugh, folding his arms and giving Jazz a triumphant smirk. The Autobot met his smug look with a steady blue gaze, but Jazz just inclined his head in acknowledgement.

Starscream stood up abruptly, thrusting Thundercracker away as if his very presence were a contamination. The blue Seeker stifled a cry as he was knocked flat. “Knock Out!” The pleasing rasp was gone, replaced by the Air Commander’s regular screech. “Get this pile of junk functional enough not to deactivate immediately. You two!” He pointed to a couple of random flyers in the first tier. “Have him positioned and bound by the time basic repairs are finished. Pick a good spot.” The sneer returned briefly. “I want everyone to see this.”

The medic hustled over, smarmy grin already in place, but Starscream had already strode away. An impatient gesture had Skywarp following at his heels. “And someone get those lights operational! Primus, how many Decepticons does it take to screw in a lightbulb?!”

[* * * * *]
End Pt. 12
[* * * * *]
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 13
[* * * * *]

The answer to Starscream’s question ended up being more complicated than just screwing in a lightbulb. First the Decepticons had to find the slagging floodlights, two of whom had transformed and stumped off into the city as soon as they decided they weren’t needed anymore. The other four were being stubborn about working without all their components present. Once the other two mechs were herded back to the arena, they still cited that these were poor working conditions, and anyway they really weren’t comfortable with what was going on. They’d really rather just go back to the barracks. Thanks so much for the invitation, it’d been interesting, but they wanted to go home now.

Jazz only knew this because, A. Starscream’s response to their blathering had been given in the upper ranges of his vocalizer, at decibels that would send dogs barking and make human ears bleed. B. Gossip spread by word-of-mouth through the audience like wildfire. The unit clustered on the tier beneath Jazz weren’t exactly trying to keep secrets while they yammered at each other. C. Acid Storm’s calm and considered response to Starscream stomping off in disgust was to call for volunteers from the gossip-happy audience. Volunteers to, in his words, “Persuade our friends that staying is worth their time.”

The six Decepticons with floodlight transformations stood pinned under the mass stare that call created. Despite their faces being 90% bulb, stunned petro-rabbits had similar expressions. Also more of a chance of getting away. The tall, lanky mechs stood stupefied, all gangly arms, minimal armor, and sturdy struts exposed by that lack of armor. They were made of rebar angles and shiny glass.

Hands shot up all over the arena.

So it became less a question of ‘How many Decepticons does it take to screw in a lightbulb?’ and more of ‘How many Decepticons does it take to screw a lightbulb?’

Needless to say, all six floodlights were back in operation. Even if the sixth flashed fitfully because there were a couple of unsated flyers leaning against him doing erotic things to his support poles.

Jazz was beginning to think Acid Storm was better at interpersonal squabbles than Special Operations had ever given him credit for.

He was also well beyond thinking unmentionable things about Decepticon interfacing habits. The light-mechs had been tackled like interfacing were a spectator sport, which didn’t seem far off from what the Autobots had observed in the Decepticon ranks throughout the war. The floodlights hadn’t just caved in once the shock wore off. One of them had been, in fact, on top of three flyers. None of said flyers had seemed about to object. Audience participation had been loudly encouraged, but half the crowd hadn’t even been paying attention to the highly public event. Knock Out had occasionally looked up from his work long enough to yell suggestions when things got rowdy. Skywarp had wandered over once and done commentary, a la Latin American football announcers. ‘Goooooooooal!’

To be honest, it’d been kind of hot. But Jazz was never going to admit that.
He’d been too busy with other issues to spend time gawping at the show, anyway. Starscream was on the far end of the arena being choosy about what whip he wanted to use. Half a dozen noncommissioned officers had converged on him the moment he announced his intentions, offering a wide selection that made Jazz’s tanks curdle. The nearest Decepticons in the tiers craned their necks and shouted their opinions. Starscream catered to their enthusiasm. Ever the crowd-pleaser, he held up each whip and pretend to rate them by applause. It was enough to make Jazz sick.

The Autobots had some of those whips. This was war; as much as Jazz wanted to think that violence wasn’t the answer, at times it had to be. He’d done interrogations before. Sometimes, he’d even done discipline on the most out-of-control of the Autobots. When Jazz had to do it, it was discipline for those too far gone in war to be brought back by anything else. Those Autobots were always carefully marked for special watch by Security. Sadly, about half of them ended up traitors, criminals, or suicides. Violence did not solve violence.

Ratchet still sought sanctuary in his office whenever the medic had to deliver what the files officially called a ‘psychological stabilization.’ When Ratchet had to wield a whip, it was a psychological necessity in the name of treating a patient. It still wasn’t pleasant. War didn’t give emotionally damaged mechs time to heal. It only made things worse. Sometimes the only outlet was physical pain. Sometimes it was necessary, but Jazz could only be glad that Ratchet didn’t let First Aid be involved in that part of Medical. It was one duty the Chief Medical Officer utterly refused to allow First Aid to take a turn at, resident medic in practice or not. Better to let a medical professional administer the needed pain than have mechs inflict it on themselves away from someone present specifically to offer caring and as much understanding as possible. But…First Aid cared too much. The Protectobot medic had a bad habit of not partitioning professional and personal life.

Jazz was so, so glad First Aid was far away from here. If someone had to be here, Jazz would rather it be him, and him alone. No other Autobots should have to witness this. He was having a tough enough time even with his SpecOps partitions up to feed everything through threat assessment for information tagging first. Starscream fussing over the whip selection was a horrible drama by itself, but then he noticed Thundercracker watching in repulsed fascination. The blue Seeker had been staring as Knock Out worked on him, and Starscream’s smile was nasty. Cunning, and dreadfully nasty.

The Air Commander waved the whip he was currently holding at the crowd. “I don’t know if I like this one. What do you think?” A rousing cheer informed him that they did, indeed, like that whip. He tapped his chin thoughtfully with it, faking some overdone pondering. “Maybe I should test it, first. Who should I test it on?” He looked around in innocent inquiry. “Does someone here need to be whipped?”

Suddenly, the arena was a giant shouting match.

“He’s not seriously going to beat someone just as a test, is he?” Jazz asked around an enormous, choking clog of disbelief. Flyers were pushing and shoving all over the arena, and what he couldn’t believe was that they were all competing to present their unit’s candidate to the Air Commander. The candidates themselves were yelling protests and trying to get away, but that wasn’t stopping Starscream from inspecting all the choices presented to him.

Acid Storm gave him a perfectly blank look. “Of course he is.”

The audience dissolved into boooing and hooted approval when Starscream selected a small teal flyer from mid-tier. The unfortunate mech had double-hinged wings on his legs that were flapping frantically as he twisted loose and tried to get into the air. The whole tier clustered around him when he managed a short launch, and ten pairs of hands grabbed him, dragging him back down. Laughter
rippled through the crowd. Still struggling, he was passed over the audience’s heads with hands roving over his frame as they passed him on: groping and restraining him in one.

Starscream limped over as the teal mech was dumped onto the rust of the arena floor. The poor little fly er scrambled up off his face only to find an active electro-whip limned in sinister pink in front of his optics. It slid under his chin. He froze, red optics pale with shock and fear, and slowly followed the whip’s nudging until he was looking up at the Air Commander.

Who was smiling sadistically like a purring cat gnawing on a still-living mouse. “On your knees, soldier.”

The Decepticon couldn’t get into position fast enough.

Starscream circled the kneeling flyer in a lazy inspection. The smaller Decepticon knelt in a prisoner’s pose: hands behind his helm with the fingers laced together, and knees braced a shoulder-width apart. Three flexible flanges of metal flared a brighter pink as they came down on his back: crack! The flyer jerked and grunted. Jazz was vaguely grateful that he couldn’t see his face, but the audience on that side of the arena certainly seemed to enjoy his expression. The lash fell again: crack! Another grunt. The tracks left behind were singed black against bright teal. Where one track had been hit twice, a grey trickle of smoke could be seen under the floodlights. Starscream tilted his head, smirking in Thundercracker’s direction as he repositioned himself and deliberately struck downward this time, straight across the wide wings laid flat on the ground.

The crack was underlined by a pained yelp this time.

“This’s barbaric.” Jazz folded his arms tightly because otherwise he wasn’t sure he’d be able to keep from reaching for his gun. “That mech didn’t do anything!”

“So?” Acid Storm asked. He wasn’t even watching the beating. The green Seeker watched Jazz’s face twitch in time with the rhythmic lashes, and he drew just a little closer. The urge to exploit an Autobot’s weakness must have been high. Jazz shifted his feet into a better position, just in case.

Despite the casual way he’d shifted his weight, the slight motion didn’t go unnoticed. Acid Rain glanced down at his feet before easing back a tad. This was just a conversation, right? ‘No pressure, Autobot.’

Ha. Yeah, right.

“So what did he do?” The black-and-white mech made a half-frustrated gesture before tucking his arms close again.

“Why would it matter if he did anything?” Jazz’s visor popped wide, and Acid Storm shook his head. “You don’t get it, do you? Look, that’s the Air Commander. The Second-in-Command of the Decepticons. Our Emir ate. Do you think those are empty titles? He says ‘Jump,’ and we don’t come down until he says so.”

“No,” Jazz shook his head, just not understanding as what he was seeing and everything the Autobots stood for clashed in his head, “that’s not the same. How is this military?” The whip cracked again, and Thundercracker was utterly still under Knock Out’s hands as he watched. “Yeah, okay, I can -- understand punishing Thundercracker. I’m not happy about it,” understatement of the vorn, “but I get why it’s happening. But explain this to me!” He pointed at the teal flyer now screaming through clenched teeth as the lash went after his wing-hinges. “Random selection is okay?! What if you’re next? How do you know what’s safe or who’s going to get beaten to slag for kicks, if this is how the Decepticons always are?”
His frustration seemed to catch Acid Storm by surprise. The Rainmaker blinked through reset as if not trusting his optics. Jazz continued to scowl furiously at him. “…huh. You’re really just not…” He had to stop, thoughts colliding behind his optics and a weird look of confusion sprouting from the clash. “I…think I’m not qualified to explain this to you. It’s just,” he waved one hand helplessly at nothing, then more specifically at the teal flyer now crying out with each new stripe burnt into his wings, “we know what’s going on. I mean, you know -- okay, so you don’t know, but you know how there are things that happen in your -- your -- frag, I don’t know.” His hands clutched air, trying to find the right words. “I guess in your officer cadre, maybe? Oh, I know!” He brightened, seeming to hit on an idea. “The new-sparks! The baby jets! Their officer’s a newbie, right?” Jazz jerked a nod. “Right, and when he joined your cadre, did he get why you did everything? There’s always that what-the-slag? thing that makes perfect sense to you, but nobody else gets because you’ve been on the inside the whole time.”

Skepticism boiled over. “Oh, come on,” the saboteur scoffed, hard and angry, “You can’t tell me this is an inside joke!” Another crack, and the audience was idly applauding Starscream’s technique as a true scream split the air.

Acid Storm blinked again. Nope, the Autobot was still pissed. “Well, not a joke, but it’s just,” the uncertain hand motions were back, sculpting unfathomable Decepticon ideas in the air. The Rainmaker opened one hand at Jazz, waving at the arena floor with the other. “It’s just something we know about.”

“It’s horrible!”

“No, it’s not! Wait,” that was revised hurriedly, “right, it sort of is. But it’s not like you think!”

The screaming only made Jazz’s flat look of unamusement even more forbidding.

“Ugh.” Acid Storm put one hand to his helm as if trying to find a way to explain this was driving him to defragment. “I’m…guessing you want to go down there and stop this.”

“Yes.” The word was clipped. It didn’t hint at Jazz’s fraying self-control, but it held all the frosty cool of a mech capable of heading Special Operations.

Acid Storm’s optics slid sideways, wide and wary. “Oookay. Uh. Well, you could, but you do know what would happen?”

“They’d kill me.” Stark truth. An interfering Autobot in the middle of 600 or more Decepticons? The odds weren’t good, peace negotiations or not.

“In all probability, yes. But the one who’d try first is that mech right there.” Acid Storm’s finger stabbed in the direction of the little teal flyer.

Jazz’s face said it all for him: *The Decepticons hate us that much?* What hope could there be for peace if saving a mech from unfair punishment earned nothing but hatred?

Acid Storm shook his head. Explaining Decepticon thought processes had obviously failed. “Just… trust me, alright? Just watch.”

Again, Jazz’s face spoke volumes. Trust a Decepticon?

The Rainmaker looked between him and the whipping. “Give it two kliks. Five, max.”

“…fine.”
The small grounder refolded his arms twice as tightly, armor clamped close and rigid. Acid Storm eyed him the way he’d eye a ticking explosive, but the cloud-mottled green Seeker gingerly settled beside him again. The screams continued. The Autobot blew hot air out, unhappy to be watching a mech in pain, but what was really upsetting him was the audience. Six hundred+ Decepticons were in the tiers, talking and watching and making bets, and it rubbed him the wrong way how totally *relaxed* they were. It wasn’t right. Worse, it didn’t make sense!

They’d just watched -- even participated in -- a unit throwing one of their own out there to be beaten to screaming. A haze of smoke was wafting up from the little teal flyer, but Starscream didn’t seem to care. The crowd didn’t seem to care. Skywarp had at least *reacted* to Thundercracker flinging himself into combat, even if he hadn’t stopped Starscream from pounding the blue Seeker into scrap metal. Sure, the little teal mech’s unit-mates were watching in obvious interest, but even to Jazz’s experienced glance, there wasn’t a protest present. Body language was attentive, not reluctant or resentful. They’d actively thrown him to torture for no discernible reason, and they were just *watching*?

For as random as the flyer’s selection had been, nobody seemed concerned for their own sakes. If it were true that any one of them could be next, why wasn’t there tension in the crowd? The assembled Vosians should be more worried about saving their own wings. Weirder yet, the other mechs who had been ‘volunteered’ didn’t seem nervous. Their units and friends had just tried to get them beaten, but when Jazz located a few standing in the crowd, well, it was weird. Very weird. The teal flyer was screaming under the whip, yet the expressions Jazz saw were hard to define. Not sympathy, or empathy. Definitely not pity or compassion. Some lust, yes, but there was something more laced through it all.

He was getting the disturbing feeling that he was missing something important, here. Because the closest emotion he could pin down was something that might be, could have been, but sort of resembled…envy.

Starscream eventually relented. He tossed the whip aside to one of the noncom officers, who caught it deftly, and returned his attention to the kneeling flyer. “Not bad.”

He reached out, tracing a few of the black streaks of scorch marks. The teal mech warbled a strange sound of not-just-pain that had Jazz completely puzzled. The smaller Decepticon arched up into Starscream’s scientific prodding, and the Air Commander absently pushed him down like someone would push an overeager pet. The flyer sat back on his thrusters again obediently, but even from this far away, Jazz could see him quivering in a way he most certainly had *not* been during the actual whipping. Acid Storm gave the Autobot beside him a meaningful look, but Jazz still just didn’t get it.

“Not bad at all.” The Seeker straightened up and dusted off his hands, nodding to himself. “Dismissed, soldier.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” could be barely heard about the ambient noise, and the teal mech climbed painfully to his feet. He looked a mess. The black marks showed up in terrible swathes of melted burns against brightly-colored plating.

Acid Storm nudged him with an elbow, but Jazz was already paying close attention.

Not as close as the tiers in front of the little flyer. Those mechs were practically breathless in anticipation. Starscream had gone over to the cluster of noncoms, uninterested in the aftermath, but all optics were locked on the beaten mech. Who swayed in place, and Jazz wished he could see his face. The mech’s helm turned, surveying the tense rows of fellow flyers watching him like he was the last cube of highgrade at a party. He took a staggering series of steps out of the main arena floor, toward the first tier of observers. His helm turned the other direction. From Jazz’s perspective, it
looked like he was searching the mechs before him for...something. What?

Finally, he raised an arm and pointed once, twice, three times. The audience tensed, three mechs’ optics in particular gaining a sudden gleam of lottery-winning lucky. Fans buzzed. Starscream looked over and seemed unaccountably amused by the byplay. Arm still outstretched, the teal mech flipped his wrist and curled his index finger in a coy *Come Hither* gesture.

The selected mechs practically dove off the tiers to obey.

Jazz did not get Decepticons. At all. Especially when Starscream strode out of the group of noncom officers with a different whip, testing it against his hand as he walked. “Who’s next?”

Pandemonium ensued.

“There. See?” Acid Storm said, satisfied, and he seemed a bit surprised when the blue visor turned up to him looked even more confused than before. At least the anger had evaporated. “…you don’t. You don’t?”

“I really don’t,” Jazz agreed somewhat helplessly. He pointed at the large red shuttleformer being currently pulled onto the arena floor by his legs. There were fourteen mechs involved, at seven per leg. The poor mech’s fingers were making *skreeeeeep* noises as they were pulled through the rust, and two more audience members leapt down to good-naturedly pick his fingers loose when he got a grip. They had to sidestep the writhing dogpile of happy ‘Cons on top of the former test subject. “They don’t want to be whipped!”

There was a lack of conviction in that statement. Acid Storm smiled, but the way he smiled made Jazz think of basket-cases and putting up with them. “Of course not. Pain hurts,” he informed the Autobot, who gave him a disgruntled glower for that mastery of the obvious. “No, seriously. It does. Even if somebody liked getting hurt, it’d be asking for trouble to admit to it. Every time there’s a fight, both sides would claim the other mech ‘wanted it’.” Yeah, Jazz could see how that would be a nightmare dispute to mediate, violent Decepticon disciplinary tactics or not. “Frag, that’d mess the system up something awful.” The Rainmaker grimaced, just imagining it. “Giving a mech what he wants would end in both mechs on report: one for damaging another soldier, and the other for inciting violence. The repair bays would throw them both in a smelter.”

“Why would someone want pain?” Jazz asked, low and serious as he turned that idea over in his head. He could think of reasons, but this didn’t seem to be matching up with stopgap mental health methodology the Autobots had been forced to come up with during the war. None of Ratchet’s patients had ever been *happy* that they’d needed pain.

Acid Storm gave him a funny look, like he’d just asked a drone the meaning of life. “Because that’s just how some mechs are wired, I guess. I don’t know. Why do you like what you like?”

It seemed like an honestly puzzled question, and that nagging feeling prodded Jazz again. The real meaning of this conversation was passing him by. “I don’t like pain,” he said firmly. The crowd applauded as the pile of mechs overloaded down below, hands in each other’s armor seams and the teal flyer shrieking an extremely pleased high note as two pairs of hands dug into his whip-scored wings.

“Neither do I,” the Rainmaker replied, “but there are times when it still good, you know?” He took one look at Jazz’s incomprehension and covered his face with one hand. If Jazz didn’t know any better, he’d say he’d managed to embarrass the Seeker. “I can’t believe I’m having this discussion with an Autobot.”
“I can’t believe I’m watching this!” Jazz’s gesture took in the idly chatting crowd, the yelping shuttleformer now being flogged, and the teal flyer being helped to his feet by two adoring mechs. The third mech was still sprawled on the ground recovering. Jazz really could not believe he’d just witnessed, er, whatever that’d been.

Acid Storm looked. He looked back at the Autobot standing beside him. It was like they were firing conversational salvos at completely different targets. “I…” He shook his head, and for all that he was sneaky underhanded officer who’d led the Armada for four million years, Jazz could read nothing off him but bafflement. He gave the small saboteur an unconsciously blank look of helpless frustration. “I don’t even know where to start. Can’t you just -- wait? The Air Commander’s better at explaining this stuff…”

Oh, Jazz was sure he was. But conversations with Starscream never went according to plan, and he couldn’t afford to wait for an opportunity that might never come. “Try me.”

Face? Meet palm.

Acid Storm slowly let his hand slide down his face, wiping away indecision. “Right. Fine. I’m not into pain. Like I said, it hurts.” He gave Jazz a peeved look when the Autobot saluted Cybertron’s newest Captain Obvious. “Oh, shut up. What I mean is that even though I don’t like pain, there are times when I can see the appeal. I mean, I don’t like to be held down and beaten,” the shuttleformer shrieked, “but -- alright, my armor’s made to repel acid rain, but it doesn’t protect me once it’s breeched. Which, in combat, happens. More than I’d like but less than you would, I’m sure.” Jazz shrugged acknowledgement when the Rainmaker wryly nodded to him. Autobot, after all. “Thing is, post-combat, I usually don’t even register in the repair bay queue for a cycle or two. Damage isn’t turn-on for me, but the feel of rain inside me is…” His optics took on a distant look. “…hard to describe. It stings and corrodes and it’s wet in a way that lubricant or fuel can’t feel like. And it’s fragging hot. Primus, I can’t even tell you how hot it gets me.”

Jazz could believe that, however unbelievable it seemed. Acid Storm was alarmingly tranced-out as he tried to describe the sensation, and Jazz could only stare. “It’s like -- like feeling what I can bring down on everyone’s heads, deep down in my chassis, and Primus that’s a good pain.” He shuddered, coming back to the real world but smiling just a touch lustfully. His fans had kicked on sometime during his daydream, and he sighed hot air. “I could ‘face someone right now, in fact.” His optics lingered on the Autobot, who made a face back on him.

It wouldn’t be diplomatic to say how strange he found Acid Storm’s revelation. He could almost wrap his mind around it, but it still didn’t make sense. “That isn’t the same thing,” he said instead, pointing at the shuttleformer being helped to his feet by a laughing group of mechs down in the area. By the color-markers on their forearms, they seemed to be his unit-mates. “He didn’t want to be whipped like that.”

“I don’t want to have my armor breeched, either,” the green Seeker said mildly as the shuttleformer transformed with some difficulty, landing in his altmode at the edge of the arena floor. “That doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy the aftermath sometimes.”

Black scorch marks criss-crossed the shuttle’s hull. His unit-mates checked him over as if they were about to take off on a mission, but their hands were exploring in an entire unprofessional manner. Transport shuttle, Jazz noted, flicking through his files to match altmode with a designation. The red shuttle’s unit milled about outside his hull until the hatch opened and they could stream inside in a disordered chaos of multicolored wings. The hatch resealed, and the group’s noisy laughter cut off.

“That isn’t the same thing,” Jazz insisted. 'Loadbearer,’ his files dug up. 'Delta-class transportation,
speed rating: 4. Intelligence…'

He scrolled through the file, but it was a standard information packet on any Decepticon soldier. No indication of undue conflict with his unit or commander that could have caused them to drag him down to be beaten. Nothing worth noting on his state of mind, although admittedly, the rank and file of the Armada didn’t get as detailed files as the officers.

Down in the arena, Loadbearer rocked back and forth. Just enough to be noticeable.

“No, but I’m not into pain,” Acid Storm was saying. “And I’m not into being watched, either.” He gave one of the flyers up on the platform with them a meaningful look. “I like to be the one watching.”

The soldier had unbroken the unspoken rule on the platform: don’t pay attention to the Autobot in their midst. He snapped his optics back down to the arena floor, but now his unit-mates were giving Acid Storm inquiring looks. The corner of his mouth lifted, and they grinned. The spying mech was suddenly pulled into the middle of the unit, and fans began humming.

Jazz was definitely Not Looking. He focused determinedly on Acid Storm, ignoring the steady drone of a powerful flight engine purring on. “You’re saying that those mechs,” he waved down into the arena, where Starscream was snapping another whip in preparation while a third ‘volunteer’ sullenly shook himself loose of his unit’s hands, “are enjoying this. How can you possibly claim that? Nobody screams in pain when they’re enjoying something!”

The sulking mech stomped through the crowd, visibly seething but apparently defiant enough to prefer walking over being manhandled into position. He met Starscream’s amused look with a borderline-disrespectful scowl, turned his back, and plopped to his knees. The move had no grace. He radiated resentment as he glared up at his unit, and he made no sound whatsoever when the first lash fell. Crack!

“That is not enjoyment,” Jazz pointed out. ‘Riprazor. Frontliner. Lengthy disciplinary record on file.’ This beating at least made a twisted kind of sense.

“No,” Acid Storm agreed. “But it’s a classic example of trying to preserve dignity.” The mech’s hands were fisted on his thighs, and his glare intensified with every whipstrike. His unit was starting to look nervous. “Ten to one he’s going to ‘face his unit into the ground as soon as the Air Commander’s finished with him,’” he offered casually, and Jazz just gave him a disgusted look. The acid-green Seeker’s hands rose in surrender. “O…Kay. Right. No betting. Well.” He looked back to the show. “He’s not enjoying the beating. Slag, I don’t know of anyone who really likes getting the metal stripped off them except -- heh.” He shook his head. “No, I do. There are some mechs who like pain. They don’t admit it because, like I said, it could cause problems, but that’s the kind of preferences that you find out about when you work with a mech enough. And, well, I think the war’s gone on long enough for mechs to know their unit’s preferences inside and out by now.”

Jazz didn’t quite believe him, but he was getting the feeling he didn’t dare disbelieve him, either. This was a Decepticon thing. But it sounded vaguely familiar, like he should be recognizing bits and pieces of what Acid Storm was saying.

He wanted to cover his visor with his hands. His processors were spinning too fast, and the heat was making his helm projections ache as the sensors ran through too many refresh cycles in too short a time. There was an edge-of-knowledge feeling nibbling at the fringes of his thoughts, but his processors weren’t making the connection. Jazz was a master of making quick decisions based off of tidbits of data and working with information pried out of nooks, crannies, and reluctant informants. Acid Storm wasn’t precisely reluctant. Actually, he seemed to be doing his level best to explain -- for
Decepticons, at least -- the obvious.

It was incredibly frustrating.

“I’m not doing a good job at this, am I?” The Rainmaker seemed dismayed by his failure.

“Just…” The Autobot succumbed to the urge to rub one sensor-horn, trying to soothe it. His other hand made little circles in the air. “Tell me what I’m seeing, right there.” The flyer under the lash had started flinching with each crack, but he still stubbornly refused to cry out. “All I see is a mech being tortured for the sick entertainment of a crowd which apparently likes to see pain be inflicted on the undeserving.”

When the Seeker didn’t start talking after a klik of silence, Jazz looked up.

Acid Storm’s face was a priceless picture. It could be framed as art. Title of ’Rainmaker Handed a Bucketful of Misunderstandings.’

“. . . what’d I say?” the saboteur asked, more resigned than wary. He hadn’t gotten as far as he had by not recognizing when he’d stuck his foot in it.

Acid Storm slowly shook his head. “What didn’t you say?” he asked back, and his expression slid into something less WHAT. No. and more I Don’t Even. “I…can’t you just wait for Starscream to explain this?” His optics looked slightly hunted. “Please?”

That look was one Jazz’s operative training picked up on. Even in this situation, going in for the kill was automatic. “No. You’re here. I’m here. Explain this!” Uh…less of an order would probably be wise. Autobot and Decepticon, here. “Please,” he tacked on for politeness’ sake. And for the sake of diplomacy: “For the purpose of ending our Great War.”

The Rainmaker turned wide optics on him, somewhere between astounded at his audacity and offended by the order. Rapid thought caught up to him a moment later -- hello? Autobot officer present, still capable of making Very Big Trouble? Megatron most unhappy? -- and he slumped. “Frag my life,” he muttered.

Informant pinned. Time to make it easier for him to blurt out any and all information. Jazz offered equally helpless hands in a companionable shrug, suddenly just another mech sympathizing with the Decepticon’s headache. It would be so easy to tell this little black-and-white mech all his problems, right? “I know what you mean.” He smiled self-deprecatingly. “Except that I don’t know what you mean, so would you mind explaining it? Again?”

That earned him a surly look. “Nobody,” Acid Storm bit out, “is being tortured.”

Jazz looked down at the way Starscream was walking around the kneeling mech, trying to decide on the next place to whip. “Really.”

“Really.” Acid Storm’s mouth tightened. “I know you Autobots probably think a whip is horrible, terrible, and the end of the world,” Jazz tilted his visor at him; exaggeration much? “but we’re warbuilds. The whip is a disciplinary tool, not a torture tool. If I wanted to torture someone, I’d get out the electrodes and drainers. 40,000 volts of electricity or some starvation? That’s torture!”

It dawned on the Autobot that Acid Storm actually seemed kind of offended. He took a half-step back from the larger mech, just in case, but the Rainmaker was getting too into his rant to notice.

“How weak do you think we are? We’re designed to be sent into battle, not fall into statis lock because somebody beats us a few times with an electro-whip!”
“That’s not ‘a few times’,” Jazz put in cautiously, nodding down into the arena. Starscream had finally wrung an honest cry from the flyer, and the audience was applauding.

Acid Storm flung his hands up in exasperation. “It’s surface damage. Sure, it hurts, but that’s because we have pain sensors. It’s not going to send him offline!” He gave Jazz a suddenly shrewd look. “You’re a spy. How are Decepticons executed?”

He didn’t want to admit to how much information Autobot spies had really gathered, but Jazz could offer something in return for Acid Storm’s spill of information. “A shot to the head or spark,” he said, reaching for neutrality. “When it’s not straight execution, there’ve been reports of disabling motor functions and opening major fuel lines. Shockwave’s notorious for sending mechs to the smelter pits alive.” A sickening practice that had haunted the Autobot rebel cells on Cybertron.

But Shockwave’s subcommander was nodding, seemingly satisfied by his boss’ work. “Now that’s real torture,” he said approvingly. “Melting Autobots alive has been our best -- ah.” Oops. “Sorry.” He glanced aside, to the other side of the platform where the unit was still molesting their nosy soldier, as if hoping it would distract the Autobot from his faux pas. It failed. The Autobot’s steely gaze was attempting to bore a hole in the side of his head. “I’ve seen mechs beaten to death, but it takes a really long time. Usually armor plates are stripped off to expose vital systems before the beating starts, and that’s a torture of prolonged execution. And it’s not that common.” He fidgeted. The glare hadn’t faltered, despite the attempt to shift back to topic. “Look, I said I was sorry for bringing it up, but I can’t change the past!”

“You don’t have to sound quite so pleased about it,” Jazz spat, but his ire was subsiding. Getting angry over war history could be a full-time occupation. They were relearning patience and toleration, but the greatest roadblock on the path to peace was forgiveness. Or at least forgetfulness. “You can’t tell me an electro-whip isn’t tool of torture. It’s been used in interrogation -- “

Acid Storm snorted through his intakes, deliberately interrupting him. “Most Autobots aren’t warbuilds,” he said dismissively. “Of course we use it on you.”

“I meant we’ve used it,” Jazz snapped back, and Acid Storm winced a little at the pointed use of past tense.

“Ah...yeah.” The Rainmaker shook his wings as if to resettle them. “Not all Decepticons are warbuilds, you know. Besides,” he risked a glance at the Autobot, “an Autobot beating a Decepticon for information is more likely a psychological tool than physical torture. It’s pounding in that there’s no escape, and worse could be done. Held helpless and drilled for information while someone disciplines you -- “

“That’s kind of hot,” a flyer walking behind them said, then did a doubletake as he registered just whose conversation he’d commented on. “Uh. Sorry, sir. I, uh, didn’t mean to, uh, interrupt.” The two officers turned and glared in equal measure. “Or, um, overhear?” Embarrassment for his own stupidity and panic for torqueing Acid Storm flashed over the unfortunate Decepticon’s face. “I didn’t hear anything important, I swear!”

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” the Rainmaker snarled. “Like fetching me your ration of energon, for instance.”

The poor mech gave his superior officer the same look petro-rabbits gave turbo-foxes when cornered. “Yes, sir, right away, sir!” He turned on a thruster and fled.

“I did not just hear that,” Jazz said flatly. “He did not just say that.”
“He did.” The interruption had broken the tension, at least, and Acid Storm gave him a cheeky grin. “What, nobody in the Autobots has a power kink?”

That stuttered through Jazz’s head, trying to make connections and just failing. “What do you mean?” he asked, and the question came out weak.

The Rainmaker actually laughed, he was so incredulous. “You’re telling me nobody in your whole faction wants to be tied up or ordered around?”

Jazz knew his jaw was dropping, but he just couldn’t stop it. Gravity had sheer ridiculous deviancy helping it at the moment. “I…don’t get it.”

His disconcertment seemed to entertain Acid Storm, anyway. “This is so weird!” he chuckled, and shook his head, optics lighting brightly with the kind of glee Jazz was used to seeing from Skywarp. Who, thank Primus, was still occupied on the arena floor instead of up on the platform making Jazz’s reality any stranger.

“Lemme give you an example. You know Sunstorm’s a few files short of a full download, right?”

“Right,” the Autobot drew out guardedly.

“He thinks he’s a prophet of Primus.”

“Or something,” Acid Storm agreed. “Chosen, avatar, hand-puppet, I don’t know what all.” His hands upturned, asking for help from on high dealing with the mech. “All I know is that one day Shockwave foisted this religion-crazy clone off on me to deal with, and frag if anyone else wanted to contract with him. I had to find someone able to contain him, and nobody knew where to even start. I mean, it’s bad enough he bleeds electromagnetic radiation when his control slips.” He paused. “Or when he’s angry.” Another pause. “Or most of the time, really. But that was kind of the problem. At least with a transfer, I could have asked his last unit what gets his engines going and built on that, but Sunstorm was just too new. Nobody had a slagging clue what he liked, and none of us could get close enough to find out. But!” He held up a hand in a ‘wait for it’ gesture when Jazz seemed about to interrupt.

“Shockwave had an idea. Your Prime’s the Matrix-Bearer, right? That’s sort of the Grand High Poohbah of Primus on Cybertron.”

“Stop using Earth terms you don’t understand.”

Acid Storm deflated a little. “I thought I got that one right.”

“You did.” Jazz gave him a quelling look. “But it’s still wrong.” Equating Optimus Prime with a Flintstones’ character could never be right. Cartoon titles just weren’t serious enough. Although it did serve to show just how far Earth popular culture had weaseled through even the Decepticon ranks.

“Uh…okay.” Confusion flickered briefly across the Rainmaker’s face before it was dismissed in favor of continued mockery of Sunstorm. Intel had indicated the other two Rainmakers didn’t particularly like their third wingmate, but Jazz was getting the first-hand account. It was fascinating, in a train-wreck kind of way. “Anyway. So Shockwave put together a sound-splice of Prime’s voice.”

“Oh, rust me.” The Autobot put his head in his hands, giving in. The dignity of his rank lost out before the need to hide his face right now. Just -- wow. The things he was learning about the Decepticons. “Let me guess: it said something like, ‘Work yourself to overload’.”

The Rainmaker positively sparkled with mirth. Apparently, embarrassing the Autobot was his new favorite game. “Close. It just said, ‘Overload now’.” He shook his head. “Bolt-head overloaded on the spot. Strangest thing I’ve ever seen.” But funny, if his continued silly grin was anything to go by. “Turns out Sunstorm has an authority kink a kil wide. Once we knew that, Slipstream had him on
his knees so fast I never even saw the negotiations.” The silly grin got wider when slack-jaw disease revisited Jazz. The smaller mech’s visor appeared over his hands like a shocked blue dawn, and the mottled-green Seeker grinned back at it. “Slipstream’s got the other end of the powerplay fetish. She likes to give the orders. And be prayed to and served and worshiped, since that’s apparently what Sunstorm’s really into.” The grin was attempting to take over Acid Storm’s head. “You Autobots ever want to infiltrate something, break into his quarters. He rebuilt it into a shrine.”

Jazz didn’t want to know. He really didn’t. But he did. “What’s your part of the trine-contract?” he asked, unable to stop himself.

The grin turned sly and dark. “Oh, I don’t have a power kink. Like I said, I like to watch.” The Autobot’s blue visor was wide and pale, staring up at the Seeker like he was picturing things little innocent Autobots usually didn’t. Right then, Jazz looked nothing like the war-hardened Head of Special Operations. Which only loosened Acid Storm’s tongue further. “I have the wingleader role, but Sunstorm’s contract to me is like Skywarp’s is to Thundercracker: I have control over him, not the other way around. Slipstream’s the one who keeps him in line. She’s the reason we don’t have a violent maniac loose in the barracks preaching,” his pitch changed to a mocking tone, “Primus’ holy scripture.”

“She doesn’t control him on the battlefield, apparently.” ‘Violent maniac’ sounded about right. Sunstorm was a Seeker nobody wanted to see let loose on the battlefield. The klik he joined the Rainmaker in battle instead of seeding the clouds for acid rain, even the Decepticons ran for cover. He targeted Autobots first, but he didn’t seem to mind if his own side got in the way.

“Not my fault ‘Autobots are heathens’,” Acid Storm’s voice kept the mocking imitation of Sunstorm’s battle cry. “The ceasefire’s really had him riled because, well, Matrix-Bearer or Vos?” He raised two hands and weighed the separate issues. “How can he choose? I’m surprised he got his head sorted enough to challenge today. Slipstream’s been just waiting for him to start petitioning to be your Prime’s first religious acolyte.”

Well, there was one more thing to warn the other Autobots about. Rumor had it that temples were starting up again, but the central focus of those who worshiped Primus was the Matrix. How long before religion started to become an issue in the peace process? That could complicate things fast.

Jazz forcibly dragged the conversation back on topic. “That.” He pointed at the mech proudly staggering to his feet, refusing all aid. Starscream dug hard fingers into a particularly deep scoring, and the mech arched in pain -- but didn’t scream. The Air Commander looked impressed and said something too low to be heard where Jazz stood. “That is still torture.”

“No.” Acid Storm hesitated. “Maybe? Hold on.” He turned and waited until the flyer standing just out of audio-range anxiously offered him four cubes of standard ration-grade. The Rainmaker immediately handed them to Jazz, who fumbled for a split second in surprise. “You,” Acid Storm said to the flyer. “Cynokline, correct? 85th Division, 4th Wing.” Poor Cynokline hunched his shoulders guiltily and nodded. He looked like he expected to be written up on report for interrupting earlier, but Acid Storm just nodded back. “What do you like in the berth?” The flyer’s orange optics widened into saucers of shock. His superior officer frowned. “What’s your favorite way to interface?”

“Altmode,” Cynokline said excitedly, and his fans kicked on with a loud whirrrrrr. “Grounded, and
locked into my altmode.”

The green Seeker’s attention returned to him. “What if I punched a chain through your wings and chained you down into the middle of the Tower runway where everyone could see you, then ‘faced you?’

Sunstorm seeing the holy light of Primus looked less enlightened than the Decepticon standing before Acid Storm. “Guh.”

“It’d hurt,” Acid Storm warned him solemnly. Jazz’s composure gave up the ghost, and he just stared at the two Decepticons. “Six or seven chains per wing. Medical will pitch a royal fit afterward for the way I’d tear into your sensor network doing it.” The Rainmaker reached out and ran an assessing hand down the swept-back wings adorning the Cynokline’s upper arms. “I’d want them fastened around each major support strut, and winched down so tight your transformation hinges bent. It’d take at least a cycle to set up properly, and by then half the Tower garrison would be out watching you cry and squirm as the chain hooks tear through your plating.” Fans were burring with the strain, they were spinning so fast. When Jazz glanced down, he saw that the grinding sound was indeed the soldier’s turbines turning against the ground. Acid Storm drew closer, hand closing around one wingtip and voice lowering to an intimate whisper. “Maybe I’d bring the Autobot along. Let him do the chaining. Have him ask you all kinds of…questions.”

His tone made the word dirty and suggestive, and Jazz was shocked further when the flyer’s mask quivered. It was the same quiver Prime’s mask gave when interface cables clicked home, and that was just wrong.

“Would you like that?” Acid Storm whispered, and Cynokline nearly gave himself whiplash, he nodded so quickly.

“Yessir!” Orange optics were almost reverent, now, wide and wildly aroused.


“Yessir!” The soldier turned, then stumbled over his own thrusters as he whipped back around to clumsily salute. “Thank you, sir!” He turned again and ran off.

“There.” Acid Storm looked down at the Autobot gaping after the flyer and nodded smartly. “You tell me: torture or pleasure?”

Jazz forced a blink, tearing his visor away and making his jaw function again. “You’re…you’re really going to..?”

“Sure. It’ll be fun.” A wink flashed. “Want to help make his vorn?”

“No.”

“Aw, come on, for peace? Just show up for a while and ask a few questions like, ‘Do you like it when I put my fingers up your -- ’”

“No!”

“He’ll be so disappointed.” Acid Storm sounded disappointed himself.
“I can’t believe you,” Jazz said, but there was no force behind the despairing mutter. The saboteur shook his head and tried to analyze what he’d just witnessed. “You’re going to put holes in another mech for fun, and he’s going to let you.”

“That…wasn’t the point of that,” the Rainmaker said, and Jazz had the abrupt feeling that they were misfiring words again. Acid Storm seemed taken aback. “He doesn’t want me to hurt him any more than that soldier,” he indicated the newest test ‘volunteer’ trying to stay still under the lash, “wants to be beaten. But I know that he does want to be locked into his altmode and grounded, so I know he likes it when he can’t stop his ‘facing partner. I just,” the vividly green Seeker opened his hands, trying to explain, “expanded on that from the comment he made before. And now I know that he does want to be watched, and he really likes being helpless. Throwing in you asking him questions was just a whim, but apparently he’s got more than a bit of a power kink.” That seemed to be all the explanation he could manage for that, and he seemed puzzled when Jazz just continued to look at him. “We’re warbuilds. We’re built for combat. We tend to like power games.”

He gave the Autobot a look that asked for understanding. “The chains were just to prove to you that pain’s a…way to get what he wants? A means to an end. I mean, I’ll enjoy watching him overload over and over again while I work on him, and he’ll enjoy having everyone’s attention on him. The chains are, um, props. They’ll hurt, but he’s going to love it so much he won’t care. It’s like,” his hands sawed air, taking the concept to pieces as he tried to explain, “the airshows in Vos. Orns and orns of showing off, or watching everybody else show off. Stunt flying and trick shots and parade formations, and mechs used to push themselves to malfunction. It wasn’t because they wanted to crash or hurt themselves by doing too much. They just wanted to make sure they were the ones everyone watched.”

The flyer Starscream was beating screamed, and it was an peculiarly elated sound for how piteous the mech looked kneeling in the rust. Acid Storm’s oddly-pleading look only intensified. “I’m not going to do anything he won’t want, Jazz. Starscream-- the Air Commander-- he’d never hold me down and whip me unless it was punishment, because I’m not into that. I like to watch, not…that.” He nodded into the arena. “I hate being restrained, even if it’s by a superior officer. The only mech I’ve ever really had an authority kink for was Lord Megatron, and I think everybody’s got that one.” He shivered, happily imagining big black hands pinning him to the berth and ordering him to overload.

Jazz could see him imagining it. It was embarrassing.

“You’re telling me,” he said slowly, because Primus alive this was the last conversation he ever wanted to have with anyone, much less a Decepticon, “that those mechs down there…want to be hurt. Because of the attention.”

One red optic squinted, trying to parse the sentence correctly. “…yes. In a way. I don’t know if some of them actually like the pain or not, but their units would know. And they’d never admit it to an outsider, because it’d be an exploitable weakness.”

Oi, this was hurting his head. Badly. Yet it was starting to make a bizarre sort of sense at the very fringes of thought where he couldn’t quite see it. “Instead, their units throw them out into an arena to be whipped,” Jazz said, wiping a hand down his face, “because then it doesn’t look like they want it. And even if they don’t want the pain, they want everyone to be looking at them.”

Acid Storm hesitated, thinking that over. “Basically, yes?”

“You don’t sound very certain.”
“I really don’t think you understand what’s going on here,” the Decepticon said, and that helpless note was back in his voice. “I’m not explaining this right or something.” And by ‘something,’ it was heavily implied that Jazz was being denser than lead. Were all Autobots like this? “Look, you’re right,” he said finally, giving up on that line of thought. “Most of them don’t like getting beaten. But the ones who do are getting whipped by our Air Commander, so nobody’s getting brought up on charges. They win. The ones who don’t likely are going to get the best interfacing of their lives after the beating, because they’re so revved up on attention or power kinks or -- or, I don’t even know. Pride, I suppose, for not being a weakling in front of everyone and making too much of a fuss under the lash.”

Starscream had another whip in hand, this one long and overcharged, and he was taking his time selecting the next ‘volunteer.’ Jazz looked down at him, at the audience clamoring for his attention, and the saboteur could almost get it. He could almost understand, because the arrogant slagger grandstanding down below was the last Emirate of Vos, the Second-in-Command of the Decepticons, and the Air Commander. It was hard to find a more powerful mech in the optics of the Decepticons gathered here.

The idea of fetishizing rank snagged something at the back of his databanks, and Jazz let it mull. There were so many information threads criss-crossing his cortex now that his threat assessment and information processors were passing things back and forth depending on what he was looking at. Which, at the moment, was two flyers at his feet. One had the other pressed against the rough wall of rubble that formed the platform base; the pinned flyer only struggled to get closer. They were both groping each other intently, and it was so strange. Not just the way they were doing it public, but how easily they were pulling gasps and moans out of each other. He could theoretically do the same, but the sheer amount of experience every mech here apparently had flustered him.

Jazz averted his visor, embarrassed, and his gaze landed squarely on two of the unit sharing the platform with him. A large red flyer with yellow pinstripes on his heel-thrusters had a relatively tiny Seeker facedown in the rust as he systematically worked over the mech’s blue-and-black wings. The smaller Decepticon squeaked and bucked, subsiding with a groan when the red flyer reared up only enough to rap him sharply between the wings. The Autobot watching them had to freeze his face to stop from reacting. The groaning continued, taking on a blissful overtone as the larger ‘Con reduced the Seeker to squirming. The wriggling pushed up into the hands dominating him, however, and Jazz had no idea why. He just didn’t get it.

Tactile interfacing was so different than hardline, and he was entirely out of his depth trying to talk about it. Hardline cabling was all about equality. It was about synchronizing data streams until there was no rank or war or anything but two mechs deeply meshed together below the level of conscious thought. It was like linking two widely unequal computers: the access ports buffered data flow until neither computer could have more or less access and therefore have a stronger/weaker presence in the interface. Firewalls could partition off entire processors and data archives, but not reduce the exchange rate.

It was always possible to tamper with that by disabling cables or tampering with the interface docks. Force-downloads were done that way, hooking up one-sided so there was no interface, only access. It was an awful way to twist something that should be wonderful into mindrape.

Wasn’t that the main concern he held?

“What if they don’t want it?” he asked quietly, turning his visor back to watching Starscream’s newest victim almost get loose before he was tossed into the arena. The groaning to one side sounded happy, but who was he to judge that? He was a SpecOps operative. He knew all about
feigning reactions to fool someone. “There’s physical restraint as well as coercion by rank and peer pressure going on down there. What if that mech you’re going to chain down doesn’t dare say no to you?”

There was a moment of silence. Jazz raised his visor, and there was that weird feeling again. This felt like playing a game of Battleship, only they were using two entirely separate pegboards. Instead of hitting the Decepticon’s conversation-submarine, every guess was a miss.

“I don’t think I understand,” Acid Storm said, and his face had taken an atypical look of worry. “Why would Cynokline do that?”

Miss. “You’re his superior officer. You could abuse your power over him if he denied you.”

The look deepened. “…what?”

Miss again. The Autobot and the Decepticon just stood there, looking at each other. Were they even playing the same boardgame? The way this conversation was going, Jazz had the instructions to CandyLand and Acid Storm was going by the rules of Monopoly.

Down in the arena, Starscream had the soldier flat on his face as the whip snapped out. The mech jerked and grunted under the lash. Skywarp sauntered away from watching his wingleader play and headed over toward his ex-wingmate. His smile was most unpleasant.

Knock Out had almost finished sealing up the torn rebar in Thundercracker’s chest, but the blue Seeker wasn’t even paying attention to the medic molesting him in the name of ‘repairs’. He stared instead at the whipping, mesmerized and wings twitching in time with every crack. The two soldiers designated to bind him had hauled him back to sit on his thrusters once Knock Out had pulled out enough melted slag in his left leg to allow the knee joint to bend. He probably wouldn’t be able to straighten it again, and there was definitely no way that sitting on his shredded turbine could be anything but painful, but that hardly mattered right now. He hadn’t been positioned for comfort. They’d forced his wings back and up, shoving a bar horizontally beneath the leading edges. His wrists were cuffed across his lower torso in front of him, but his elbows were bent back around the bar behind him. Not only had it let them secure his arms, but it arched his back slightly while making him tip forward to keep from dislocating his upper wing-hinges.

It was an effective way of disabling transformation and flight. Incidentally, it also exposed his back to whatever his captors wished.

Skywarp stood watching Knock Out ‘work’ for a klik before him shoving him out of the way. Thundercracker’s functional optic snapped toward him, and the unpleasant smile became quite wicked.

“How does Cynokline know you won’t make him ‘face with you’?” Jazz asked, and his voice had gone quieter yet.

From the look on Acid Storm’s face, not only had the saboteur’s salvo missed the boats and pegboard, he’d also missed the table and possibly fired in the wrong direction entirely. “What are you talking about? No, wait,” he held up a hand and shook his head, “I get what you’re saying, but, I mean…why would I do that?” The Autobot’s blue visor blinked, but the Rainmaker looked even more confused than Jazz. “Why would I want to frag someone who didn’t want me?”

Skywarp spoke to the tied Seeker, who seemed to shrink into himself a bit. Thundercracker dipped his chin in a resigned nod and shifted about. The upper half of his left pelvic join was a blasted ruin of half-melted slag, but he managed to muscle his knees apart. Skywarp used a foot to nudge the
closest knee, demanding it spread further, and the bound mech had no choice but to comply.

Jazz gave Acid Storm an openly doubtful look. “You must be joking.”

Acid Storm’s optics narrowed, and he looked a little ill. “What…what exactly happened while you were on Earth? I know Vortex is a sick freak, but he was under two layers of lockdown, wasn’t he?” The Seeker’s nausea seemed to grow when Jazz’s face went blank. “That newbie truckform in the Menasor gestalt didn’t get someone, did he? I heard he’s rough, but, well, nobody said anything about being forced.”

Someone had let Jazz loose on the BattleShip board with a rowboat and a pingpong ball gun. He was woefully underequipped for this conversation. “Uh…no, not that I know of.”

“Then who?” It really seemed to be bothering Acid Storm. His wings were steadily hiking higher as he became more agitated. “Was it Vortex? What did he do?”

Wait, what? “Vortex force-downloaded anyone captured long enough for it,” Jazz said slowly, wondering if he was being played for a fool.

That was dismissed with a wave of a hand. “Of course he did. He’s an interrogator; it’s his job. But he’s not supposed to be able to unlock his interface cables for anything less than an official interrogation. Only his commander and the Constructicons have the codes for that.” Acid Storm flicked an uneasy glance over the small Autobot as if checking for damage. “He…he didn’t..?”

“Are we talking about the same thing?” Jazz ventured carefully. “Rape?”

Even the word made the Decepticon’s unease spike. “Yes. Was it the truck? Uh, what’s his name, Motormaster?”

“Motormaster.” A shake of the head, and Jazz blinked his optical and audio systems through a full reset. Threat assessment was trying without much success to figure out where and when the conversation had left an area he understood. This was CandyLand vs. Monopoly, alright. “Nobody was raped on Earth!”

“Then what..?” Confusion had returned full-force, and Acid Storm’s flaps and slats were going through their extensions as he gave the Autobot a puzzled glare. “I don’t understand. Where do you get off calling the Decepticons rapists?”

Jazz drew himself up, fiercely indignant. What the frag did he mean --

A subprocessor kicked him in the back of the cortex. It rewound the conversation a bit, and suddenly, the saboteur’s self-righteous outrage burnt itself out in a puff of realization.

-- oh.

Huh. He kind of had.

And the longer he thought about it, the more illogical that statement became. Because that same subprocessor that’d stopped him was speed-searching incident report in a quest to back up a conclusion that seemed obvious. Obvious, but yet it was failing to turn up one specific keyword. The *Ark* crew had spent over 50 years on Earth -- over half a vorn with the best and worst of the Decepticon forces -- and the keyword search found evidence of threats, harassment, torture, force-downloads for information, and even some groping and verbal intent. What it didn’t find was that one keyword. ‘Rape’ was distinctly missing.
His subprocessor began decompressing archived reports from before the Ark launched, but Jazz had a tank-sinking feeling it wasn’t going to find that missing word. Had he jumped to a conclusion with no evidence to support it? How had that happened?

Okay, it wasn’t proof, but there was one thing that’d contributed. He could at least bring it up while the search continued running on his archives. “Skywarp keeps threatening the Aerialbots -- ‘” Jazz started, and Acid Storm’s engine growled.

“Skywarp!” he bellowed.

The purple-and-black Seeker had just settled to one knee between Thundercracker’s spread thighs, and he almost fell over when Acid Storm shouted his name. “What?!” he yelled back, righting himself. Thundercracker kept his head turned away from the platform, apparently too humiliated to even look up at either Acid Storm or Jazz.

“Are you still trine-contracted to the Air Commander?!”

“Yeah! Why?!”

“Nevermind!” Acid Storm turned, disgusted, back to Jazz. “Let me fill you in on Skywarp’s contract, Autobot. He’s got no concept of boundaries, so Starscream bargained hard to control him as much as possible. His contract explicitly states he can’t frag around outside the trine without prior approval. If he’s been ‘facing the baby jets, tell me now, and Starscream will have him out so fast his wings’ll lose paint.” He waited. Jazz stared. “Well?” More staring. Skywarp had a Starscream chastity belt? “Has he ever done more than talk?” the green Seeker probed impatiently. “I don’t mean a little roughing up. Has he ever assaulted an Autobot sexually?"

The subprocessor pinged search completion. The keyword still hadn’t turned up. “No,” Jazz said, soft and disbelieving. His spark squeezed uncomfortably in his chest, and it was becoming hard to keep his vents open. His systems were heading toward total upset. This…this was wrong.

This was a common assumption, and it was wrong.

Dear Primus. Jazz had no clue how he himself had come to believe what the reports were failing to support. The Autobots assumed that the Decepticons grabbed and took whoever they wanted, yet there were no incident reports saying they took Autobots, who were the biggest, most obviously vulnerable targets available in war. He was the Head of Special Operations, one of the largest sources of vital information for the Autobot faction as a whole, and he’d held onto a wrong conclusion the entirety of the war. The whole war, he’d been analyzing everything his agents and operatives gave him about Decepticons personnel and practices through the assumption that the weak had no protection. That they were exploited in every way possible, and only stayed in the faction out of fear or fanaticism.

He’d despised the Decepticons for how they treated each other, and…and he’d looked upon the courtship proposition as highly suspicious because the Decepticons were deplorable for what they did to each other. How could contract negotiations be taken seriously if it happened among Decepticons? Everyone knew what Decepticons were like. Everyone knew. Right?

The assumption was that the Decepticons had a rape culture. Nothing could be sacred, and nothing was safe.

Looking out over the arena, the inside of Jazz’s head suddenly felt wodgy as that assumption began to overturn. The Autobots knew nothing.
Starscream was standing over his latest test subject, saying something that had the nearest tiers applauding. The mech at his feet was marked in stripes of burnt black, but he was also nodding eagerly. Skywarp was kneeling between Thundercracker’s legs, and two fingers were stroking into the hip joints. The blue Seeker was beginning to writhe, just slightly. Skywarp was paying ardent attention to everything but the panel exposed by Thundercracker’s spread knees. That panel usually was held between a mech’s thighs, under constant shifting pressure as the hip joints moved, but now it was open to nothing but air. Skywarp stroked around and under and over it, but didn’t touch it. The plating between Jazz’s legs ached to watch.

He still didn’t understand what he was watching, but he did understand that he didn’t understand. And that knowledge was frightening.

“What, just because we’re warbuilds we’re a bunch of rapists?” Acid Storm was saying bitterly, and the saboteur couldn’t even say that bitterness was misdirected. “This is the same slagging waste scrap the Senators used to spout when they set up that Pit-slag Enforcer Code in Vos. We are not dumb beasts killing each other for fun, fraggit!”

A harsh sound of compacted hate grated through the air, and the Rainmaker looked like he wanted to hit someone with the hand he raised. “Every one of those mechs,” his finger stabbed air, pointing toward Starscream’s testing area, “every single one has been in constant comm. contact with his unit. I know. I have the override codes, and I’ve been tracking the network. If things had gone too far, somebody would have said something to me, and I would have said something to Starscream. We know what ‘no’ means, Autobot.” He made the faction sound like a curse. “Do you have any idea what kind of damage Decepticons could do if someone tried rape in the ranks? It’s not like anyone could claim the victim wanted it, and a rapist would have to kill his victim to keep charges from being brought against him. I don’t care what rank he had; I’d execute the slagger myself if the charge were valid!”

The black-and-white grounder couldn’t meet the glare trying to incinerate him on the spot. “We talk about what we like. Can you say the same?” The mottled-green Seeker glowered resentfully, and once again, Jazz was struck speechless. “I got the briefing on Autobot ‘facing practices, and I couldn’t make wings or tainfins of it. You don’t ask permission. You don’t negotiate. You don’t discuss what’s allowed or not allowed. You don’t even talk directly to someone you’d like to frag. You sputtered like a flooded engine when I asked Cynokline about what he liked in the berth! What, do Autobots never talk about interfacing? Do you just sneak around and swap cables like you’re ashamed of it? How do you control that slag? What if someone gets hurt? How can you tell who’s at fault for that if nobody said anything before fragging?!”

“It’s not like that,” Jazz said hoarsely, but for the life of him, he couldn’t find a way to explain what came so naturally in the Autobot ranks. The sense of companionship, of belonging, of knowing that no matter the military rank, they were all equal…

He was beginning to sympathize with Acid Storm’s earlier problem explaining things.

“No?” Now the Rainmaker was the ruthless one, pressuring for answers as his informant fidgeted uncomfortably. “So what do you like, Jazz? Do you like to be held down? Do you like to be watched?” His smile was hard and cold as the Autobot took a step back, visor wide. “Does spinning your tires in rootmode make you hot, or do you like to race in your altmode until winner takes all? Can I cop a feel -- ?”

“No!” Jazz blurted, taking another step backward when the Rainmaker actually raised a hand. His feet landed in a combat-ready stance, and although his voice wasn’t exactly steady, it was more demand than panic. “Don’t touch me!”
The Decepticon stopped dead, and Jazz suffered sudden vertigo as he remembered another Decepticon stopping like a thrown switch. And two Constructicons protesting that they’d asked permission, of course they’d asked permission, as if it’d never occurred to them that consent were something optional. Starscream’s face when he’d thought Ratchet hadn’t been given a choice.

Oh, Primus. By all that was holy, Primus, help him understand this situation, because Jazz could feel something teetering on the edge of falling, and he was very afraid it was peace.

Acid Storm’s intakes reversed and blew impotent rage out. He turned abruptly to the side and scanned the nearest group of flyers. “You!” he pointed at a soldier, who jumped in shock at being singled out. “Get over here!”

“Sir?” The Decepticon grunt scuttled over, glancing at the Autobot nervously before focusing on his superior officer.

“Describe how your wingmates like to interface,” Acid Storm ordered grimly, and Jazz’s systems hiccupped in chagrin.

The mech gave Jazz another glance, this time more wary than nervous. It only served to remind the Autobot that he was an intruder here. “Sir, with all due respect, that’s confidential information.”

“You’re not filing a blasted report with the Prime himself,” the Rainmaker snapped. “Giving away one wing’s personal preferences will not weaken the whole Armada. Now talk!”

“Yessir!” The flyer clicked to attention. “Echozone likes to be chased. The better the hunt, the better the ‘facing. He doesn’t like to be hurt, but he likes to be cornered. Usually, we manage to get him cornered in our quarters so we have a berth, but he kind of enjoys ‘facing where someone could find us. Haven’t been caught yet, sir, so I don’t know if he actually wants to be watched or not. We’ve got a clause in the contract covering default assumption of blame, though, so me and Downdraft are waiting to try it when Echozone’s got some credits saved up. We’ve got a unit commander -- Air On? Know him? Yeah. He’s kinda a stuck gear about you-bust-it, you-buy-it for the common room furniture, and me ‘n’ Downdraft got plans for the table.”

“Downdraft’s shyer but touchier. He likes to be polished until he overloads…”

No wonder Jazz had never heard anything about supposedly common interfacing practices, if that’s how the information was handled. Verbal confidential information, exchanged freely among fragging buddies? Contract negotiations done between overloads? Special Operations collected Decepticon gossip for relevant war information. Dirty talk about interfacing habits hadn’t qualified.

Hideously uncomfortable with the topic or not, Jazz attentively took notes.

Below in the arena, someone was screaming again. Skywarp had his head bent forward, murmuring into Thundercracker’s audio as the blue Seeker’s hips twisted, trying to follow the teasing fingers touching everywhere but one that one exposed area. That made Jazz’s thighs clamp together and his tank churn, but by the time the soldier finished reporting, the Autobot’s head was reeling anyway.

It wasn’t just the massive amount of detailed information. The astonishing part was that this was clearly a report that had been made before. The wingmates had specific codes for interfacing in and out of their trine, letting each other know what should be said or done at any point in time. That was part of their contract. That had been negotiated and renegotiated as the trine was transferred from unit to unit. And this was information that had been reported, clearly and concisely, in a matter-of-fact voice that had Jazz embarrassed for being embarrassed.
He honestly could not remember the last time he’d asked his partner flat-out, “Do you want to cross cables?” Part of it was because the Ark crew knew each other so well that a certain turn of phrase or gesture meant the same thing, but…at the same time, he had to take a step back and look at his embarrassment objectively. The idea of asking -- no euphemisms, no interpreting coquettish behavior, no trying to slip it in under a sexy touch, no guessing at the real meaning of a sidelong look -- had his fuel pump skipping with pure unease. Bluntly asking seemed rude, which was utterly bizarre in and of itself. Asking consent couldn’t be wrong. It wasn’t always right, but it was never wrong.

Jazz numbly stood there listening to a soldier -- a Decepticon soldier! -- laying out the foundations for a whole society based on consent, and his spark hurt. He needed to talk to the other Autobots. This needed to be explained to everyone, like whoa. The Autobots had been playing BattleShip by the rules of CandyLand, but the Decepticons had been outside wondering what was with the boardgames. And somebody, hopefully somebody better with words, needed to explain Autobot interfacing practices to the Decepticons in turn.

When Acid Storm dismissed the flyer and turned his anger back on the Autobot, he seemed surprised by the almost apologetic cast to the blue visor. “Do I need to call someone else over here?” the Rainmaker asked stiffly, every bit a Decepticon officer nursing wounded pride.

“No, thank you,” Jazz said quietly. “I get the point, I think.” Although he wasn’t really sure of that, but by Ironhide’s ammo stash, he was going to try until he did. He was the Head of Special Operations. It was his job to collect accurate information. This had been a huge blindspot for the Autobots for the course of an entire war. Seeing things correctly had to begin here and now.

Jazz’s gaze drifted toward Starscream’s distant form, and under the hurt, under the embarrassment and confusion, his spark still gave a giddy swirl. If the Decepticons put that much time and effort into negotiating tactile interfacing, what were they putting into negotiating contracts? If everything in Decepticon culture was based on asking permission and never assuming consent, what did that say about the peace treaty?

Maybe it was time the Autobots started listening to their terms.
Pt. 14

I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 14
[* * * * *]

Right.

Wrong, but right.

Jazz looked out over the arena, and he tried to see it.

Not a callous war unit throwing one of their own to a merciless beating. Mechs who knew each other in and out giving one of their own what he liked, in a socially acceptable setting.

Not an arrogant Air Commander carelessly abusing Decepticon soldiers. Decepticon soldiers using their Air Commander for their own ends.

Not an orgy every other tier.

…well, no, Jazz still saw that one. But apparently public debauchery was acceptable among the Decepticons. Maybe it was a widely held kink.

Everything in his Autobot background recoiled from the spectacle. There was something deeply, fundamentally wrong with what he was seeing, but information subprocessors were combating that initial recoil with a sudden shift in perspective. Threat assessment was throwing a mild fit as his ability to adapt got tested to its limits. Everything he thought he knew contrasted sharply with what he was learning. This was public debauchery, molesting mechs out in the open where anyone and everyone could see, and it was wrong. Wasn’t it?

He didn’t know anymore. There wasn’t a scrap of shame to be found in the arena, but that would mean that 600+ Decepticons -- all Vosians, a united city-state’s culture -- felt that there was nothing here that should be hidden behind closed doors. This wasn’t an isolated incident. Every Decepticon base ever infiltrated had showed the conflicting signs of rampant sexuality and callous violence.

That led Jazz to take a look at why exactly he felt they should be ashamed. Not the violence; what Acid Storm had explained was still percolating in the saboteur’s cortex. No, he had to think about the sex. Sex, sex, everywhere, and yet he didn’t understand a thing about it.

The Autobots didn’t practice tactile interfacing, but the longer he thought about it, the less logic he could come up with for why. Sure, the Autobots had wonderful sex. Wall-banging, neighbors-knocking, awesome fragging that left mechs staggering after overload. Hardline cables gave a glorious high of mutual pleasure and sharing that couldn’t possibly be matched by mere touch. Sheer energy transfer did things to a mech’s body that couldn’t be mimicked by hands, mouth, or -- from what he was seeing right now -- whatever other appendage could fit. That wasn’t a good reason for why the back of Jazz’s cortex flinched away from the idea, however.

Starscream had brought him close to overloading, and he’d certainly enjoyed it. Ratchet had been flustered by being walked in on, but he hadn’t seemed to mind what the Constructicons were doing. Tactile charge-building was good! Okay, it was better than good. It’d felt like his sensor network had
caught fire with charge, it’d been so good. So why had Jazz never tried it before?

Some playing around, sure. A few deft touches in the right places was a great way to get someone revved up and let him know there was interest. Being too forward, however, would earn a mech a loose reputation. Everybody knew a mech who had to ask for it got his bolts screwed tight by anybody and everybody. Which was an odd stigma, since sharing cables was generally such a loving thing, even among the frontliners. But being too open about it was discouraged by a very odd type of peer pressure.

Huh. Jazz had thought about it before, but his job was to analyze the Decepticons. Analyzing his own faction had been a background process working in the back of his head all this time. He’d thought about it, but he hadn’t actually thought about it. He knew the others had, too. The Autobots all knew how to respond to the proper social cues in the ranks, so they must have at least had a passing thought about what they were reacting to.

Smokescreen slinked through the ranks, always poking that chevron of his into everyone’s business and berth. It made him a good meter for troop attitude, but he wasn’t quite respected because of it. Prowl stood stiffly on the opposite side of that invisible line. Everyone knew he was a cold one. While he’d interface regularly with the officer cadre, he rarely invited any of the rank and file to his berth. It gave him an unshakeable aura of authority, but it also made him unapproachable. Smokescreen could be as professional as physically possible on-duty, but nobody would ever regard him as fully respectable. There was a...taint. His bold attitude when it came to inviting others to his berth had marked him. Prowl was not shy when it came to issuing his own invitations, but he was discreet.

There didn’t seem to be a middle ground. It was either private or in everyone’s faces. There was a fine line between discretion and unappealing brazenness for the Autobots. Jazz walked that fine line like a gymnast on a tightrope. As the unofficial morale officer and as -- to put it bluntly -- a spy even among the Autobots, he had to be everybody’s friend without favoring anybody. Everyone knew he was uncatchable, but they also knew they could snare him for a quick shag just by walking by him the right way and waiting for the famous Jazzmeister’s smile.

Yet it was mostly unspoken. The whole arrangement worked, and Primus knew the interfacing was glorious, but it was all hardline. Physical stimulation was never more than foreplay in Jazz’s experience, and Jazz was experienced. No denying that.

When it came to tactile fragging, however, he was an amateur among specialists. The Decepticons all around him were showing him how very much he didn’t know, and it was disconcerting. Not just his lack of knowledge -- the fact that they were showing. Showing everything. They were asking permission, talking about consent, and discussing what each mech enjoyed. All of that, in public. Jazz hadn’t been this unsettled by interfacing since the first time he’d flirted with Optimus Prime.

It’d taken orns for him to brace his struts enough to act casual while bending over in just the right way to show off his aft to the Matrix-Bearer. The idea of flat-out walking up to the Prime and talking about how attractive Jazz found his leader, how he wanted the chance to link in and exchange energy with him...that would have taken wider diameters than the ball-bearings he had. He’d have been more worried about his forwardness would put off the mech than confident that -- what? That he’d effectively communicated his desire?

How could two completely separate cultures have developed like this? They were all Cybertronians. They shared the same planet. How had their cultures diverged so widely? The welcoming, equality-seeking Autobots kept their intimacy behind closed doors and coy smiles while the hostile, warmongering Decepticons abused each other and fragged every which way from Sunday right out in
the open. From the other angle, the Decepticons saw nothing but frightening hardline interfacing
hidden like a dark secret and never talked about, while they talked about *everything* and didn’t do a
thing without asking permission first.

Maybe the question wasn’t so much how the cultures had developed so differently, but more along
the lines of how they hadn’t destroyed each other yet. Although not for lack of trying.

The real question was how they’d managed to get as far as they had in the peace process if they were
working blind. Neither side understood the foundation the other worked off of to make basic
decisions.

Both sides were trying desperately, tonight, to understand.

A few pieces slotted together, pushed into place by that busy subprocessor, and Jazz had the sudden
thought that a few Autobots could easily fit into this society. Heh. Did the Decepticons have a brig
fetish? He could think of a couple ‘bots who seemed to get into trouble just to end up on punishment
detail. Power play…oh, yeah, Tracks would adore having someone dedicated to polishing him to
overload several times an orn. Carly had once joked that Prowl was a pair of handcuffs and a
billyclub away from being a sexy Bad Cop, and that was a hilarious mental image to have while
watching --

Scrap metal and iron. *The humans.*

Several things aligned in Jazz’s mind, snapping into a pattern that still made little sense but at least
explained why it had all seemed vaguely *familiar.* A whole alien race with no hardline cables, the
humans had a hundred million different ways to orgasm just by tactile sensation. Or visual, or
auditory, or frag, Jazz didn’t know. Imagination alone capped the limits, for all the information he
had on the subject. The point was that they didn’t have the option of equality via a cable interface, so
they’d invented every possible permutation of sex their clever race could conceive of. As his
processor raced to decompress his low-importance Earth database, his scrambling thoughts seized on
the most prominent label available to slap on what he was standing in the middle of.

He blinked through reset. And again. “Whips and chains and fetishes, oh my,” he muttered, half to
himself.

Acid Storm eyed his wide blue visor suspiciously. “What?”

“BDSM.”

“Is that military code or a music group?” the vivid green Seeker asked warily, then stiffened in
offense when Jazz started laughing at him. “Pardon me?”

Amusement pumped his vents to heaving, but it was relief more than anything that had the small
Autobot wheezing. He waved a hand at the Rainmaker, asking silently for time to recover.

He’d been dreading trying to explain the Decepticons to the other Autobots. It had seemed like an
impossible task when he himself could barely wrap his head around the basic tenets of Decepticon
society. It had literally not even occurred to him to explain it this way. Not in the context of
Bondage-Discipline/Domination-Submission/SadoMasochism -- that was too limited. But explaining
the Decepticons *outside* the context of the Autobots!

...frag. How did different cultures develop side-by-side? Earth was a living example. Earth had
*hundreds* of different societies, with thousands of different subcultures hidden under the generic
‘normal’ each society labeled itself. The short-lived race that lived on it could be the fast-forwarded
illustration for how cultures could destroy each other on contact, or meld into something new. It wouldn’t be the first time the Autobots had picked up interesting bits of mind-bending knowledge from the young, energetic humans that populated Earth. The small organics seemed to specialize in unexpectedly shifting Cybertronians’ comparatively ancient perspectives.

Humankind was a weird, weird race with some utterly right-angle turns in their thoughts and cultures. The whole planet stepped Cybertron through a looking glass into Wonderland. The Ark crew had been repulsed and shocked to the core the first few days and weeks on Earth, because trying to understand humans in the context of Autobot society just didn’t work. The humans were just too different. There were enough parallels on Earth to render things eerily similar, but not quite enough. Rabbits and petro-rabbits; foxes and turbo-foxes; man and machine. Alice recognized the caterpillar as a caterpillar, but her world’s version had been far, far different than Wonderland’s.

It had put the Autobots’ minds through the wringer trying to twist Earth’s varied peoples and practices into their accepted order of things. They’d despaired of ever reaching an understanding with their human hosts and allies, right up until Perceptor had finally lit upon the key. It was only once the Autobots accepted the fundamental differences under the surface similarities that they had been able to open their thoughts and understand. It hadn’t been easy, but it’d been possible.

They weren’t the same, Decepticons and Autobots, but they sure seemed similar enough at first glance. Similar enough that they’d been clashing because nobody had gone looking under the surface for a way to resolve things.

Jazz had gone through the looking glass. Again. Somebody should put a warning sign over that thing.

“‘Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast,’” Jazz quoted merrily, lifting his head at last. This time when Acid Storm frowned at him, the Jazzmeister beamed back up at him. “How ‘bout I tell you what I see right now, and you educate me?”

The Rainmaker’s frown slowly smoothed out into neutral consideration. He still wasn’t happy with Jazz’s rapist accusations, but to be fair, the Autobot seemed to have taken the issue seriously. “Fine,” he agreed curtly. He turned and, folding his arms over his cockpit, jerked his chin at the arena floor. “What do you see?”

Still smiling, Jazz looked down into the arena. “I see Starscream tying up another mech with a rotary’s blades.”

Red optics followed his gaze. The rotary mech was sitting on the ground, digging his fingers into the rust and grunting as Starscream slowly bent his blades back around the last flogged victim. The creepiest part being that another helicopter stood in front of the abused mech, hand petting his helm. The standing Decepticon was talking to Starscream as the Air Commander worked, apparently unconcerned with the pained creel of metal bending, but the rotary at his feet leaned into his touch.

Now that Jazz knew to look for it, even through a mask the expression on the rotary’s face was obviously one of bliss. The Autobot saw it, and turned over the thought that other helicopter didn’t have to be there. Neither of the standing Decepticons, the ones he automatically labeled as the ones forcing the other two ‘Cons to cooperate, were actually acting to restrain them. Even Starscream wasn’t pinning the flyer he’d beaten. Jazz really couldn’t understand the purpose of this strange sideshow.

“It’s a rotary thing,” Acid Storm said blandly.

That was his explanation. Jazz even waited a moment to make sure.
“We have rotaries in the Autobots,” he objected, trying not to sound accusatory. “They don’t like that.”

“Have they tried it?”

“What?” The black-and-white Autobot sputtered a bit. “No! Why would they – no, wait, not going there, not here nor now.” Jazz put one hand to his head and waved the other in a quest for the right words. Looking glass world, Alice; things went deeper than what he expected to see. “You can’t just shove a whole category of altmodes into a stereotype after getting mad at me for doing the same thing,” he settled on after a moment.

Mottled green wings flicked back, offended, but Acid Storm gave it some thought before reacting. The peace negotiations meant patience. Tolerating stupid Autobot ideas. Yes. “I’ll grant you that,” he bent his neck in a stiff nod, “but some stereotypes are based off of repeating truths.” Heavily implying that truth had to be present. Oh, Jazz was not looking forward to debriefing the other Autobots on their collective ignorance. “Are your rotaries warbuilds?”

Jazz had to think about it. There seemed to be a divide, which he hadn’t really thought about before. There was a sort of unspoken judgment on a mech’s frametype in the ranks, but long vorns of war had torn through most of the prejudice that had once prevented warbuilds from being welcome in, say, Iacon. Something that had likely contributed to this wide difference in cultures now, considering the fact that the initial majority of the Decepticons had been warbuilds.

Somebody was going to have to have an educational seminar on Decepticon culture for the Autobots. From what he’d heard so far, Starscream had already held one for the Decepticons. He was beginning to think his debriefing for the Autobot command staff was going to be a class entitled ‘Autobot Interfacing 101: How We Don’t Talk About Sex.’

He shook his head free of that thought. Later. That was a problem for later. “Some of them.”

“Hnn. Ours, too,” the Seeker admitted. “The warbuilds get more out of control, but they’re all inclined to be…” He paused, optics turning toward Jazz.

“Feisty?” he suggested, thinking specifically of Blades.

Green wings ruffled, slats and flaps pulling out. “I was going to say ‘aggressive.’ It sounds better than ‘action-hungry destructive whirligigs’.” Acid Storm turned that over in his head and eventually nodded. His wings smoothed back down. “But ‘feisty’ works, too.”

Oh. Well, that sounded a lot like Springer, come to think of it. “Sooooo…what? This is some kind of control method?”

“In a way,” the Rainmaker agreed. “Rotor stimulation is very diverting.” Starscream started bending another rotor as the helicopter burrowed his face into his fellow Decepticon’s hand and moaned happily. The sound carried well around the makeshift arena. “I’ve been told it has to do with a direct-gate connection from their hubs to other motor functions,” Acid Storm continued almost clinically. “It leads to higher repair priorities, but it’s also a higher sensory level the rest of the time. If they don’t get enough stimulus from combat flights, their spinny ‘copter CPUs start getting…” His hands opened before closing around his elbows again.

“Twitchy,” Jazz supplied wryly. “I get it.” He studied the rotaries below, trying to be objective. He couldn’t see Blades getting his rotors bent. He might like them stroked, but not bent. A Protectobot pile, all focused on stroking --
His fans locked on command, but his ventilation system complained. Jazz told it to shut up, he was busy thinking of kinky things. Which really didn’t help with the whole overheating issue, but his mischievously racy subprocessor took that as permission to pop another ‘copter to mind. Springer… no. Maybe? No. He couldn’t decide. He couldn’t picture the Autobot triplechanger on his knees like that, but Jazz suddenly had a vivid mental image of him wrestling with Whirl, both Autobots sinking fingers or teeth or both into each other’s rotor assemblies. Whirl he could definitely see as into rougher stuff. No? Maybe.

“Are – do all –“

Thankfully for Jazz’s ongoing battle against embarrassment, Acid Storm shook his head. “It’s personal preference. Some like pain,” the kneeling rotary nuzzled his mask against the standing mech’s tail-rotors, “others like less, ah, forceful stimulation.” The little blades turned lazily, and the mech fervently nuzzled each one as they came into reach. Starscream glanced down at him and reached for the last rotor.

His mouth opened, but Jazz closed it with a click. He let that run through his head. More mental pictures chased after. “Fair enough,” he conceded after giving himself time to think about it properly. Not about the pictures. The concept!

Duty glared into the back of his helm where that naughty subprocessor lurked. Bad Jazz.

“What else do you see?”

Feisty helicopters with flirty rotors. “I see a crowd cheering on pain,” Jazz said instead. Red optics darkened and cut toward him, and he held up his hands. “Hey, whoa, I’m seeing things here!” That could be accurate phrasing, either way. Hmm. “I meant that I saw all these mechs,” he waved at the tiers of Decepticons around him, “laughing when Starscream beat Thundercracker into sheet metal.” Before that as well, when Starscream beat Sunstorm’s challenge. And in between, watching Sunstorm’s ‘punishment.’ Slag, they were laughing at Thundercracker right now!

Crimson lightened back into plain red, and Acid Storm’s displeasure ebbed back down into mere disgruntlement. “Alright.” He looked at the crowd himself, and a faint expression of puzzlement crossed his face. It deepened after a klik of thought as Jazz looked to the Seeker expectantly. “…in our defense, Decepticon military hierarchy doesn’t promote liking superior officers,” the Rainmaker said finally. “The Autobots, I take it, are more than a little different there.”

Jazz gave him a lopsided grin when an oblique look asked confirmation on that. “If I saw my superior getting his aft whooped, I’d be down there helping him so fast you’d think I could fly,” he said. “Slag, it wouldn’t matter who it is: lowest footsoldier or Prime himself. Seeing someone in pain is just wrong.” Uh, wait, remember who he was talking to. “To us,” he amended, but there was no hiding how ill at ease changing his statement made him.

Pain was pain was pain. Except, apparently, when it wasn’t.

“Really.” Acid Storm let that one dubious word express his opinion on that. Considering the daily arguments going on in the peace negotiations, he really didn’t need to say more. Everyone was doing a lot of evaluating their own words these days.

So Jazz thought about it.

One of the most fundamental tenets of the Autobots was Prime’s oft-stated motto: ‘Freedom is the right of all sentient beings.’ That didn’t just mean having the freedom to do as a mech pleased. It also meant the right to live without another person’s will imposed upon that mech. In this case, it meant
the right to live without pain inflicted by that other person.

As red optics met blue visor, that stood between them like a wall. Because what was going on in this arena wasn’t just the Decepticon way. It was also, apparently, the Vosian way. Freedom, as Jazz was painfully aware, was often an ideal held up above reality. It was a nice thought, but not really feasible. Universal freedom would be anarchy. Reality required rules, regulations, and imposing a government on Cybertron. In governing, where did the line lie between the right of a governing body and those it governed?

Freedom was a right. Freedom, according to a faction and a city-state, to challenge the current governing system, but also to punish a failed challenger. Vos had been an independent city-state longer than the Senate’s Cybertron Unification Alliance had been in place. The system seemed wrong from the outside, but that’s what every invader thought when imposing his own system upon what was already there.

Did any government have the right to take away personal freedoms? There was anarchy versus prevention of crimes, but the Decepticons had obviously determined different things to be crimes than the Autobots had. In this arena, the mechs had the freedom to outright laugh at someone’s pain or humiliation if that’s what they enjoyed.

The Autobots didn’t allow that. Openly, at least. As much as Jazz didn’t want to admit it, to be honest, there were more than a few Autobots who laughed when a Decepticon went down, and no one stepped in to stop that. Which was rather hypocritical when laid out like this.

Frag, where did the line get drawn between laughing at black humor -- or even slapstick! -- and actually laughing at someone? He could name a handful of Autobots who were made entirely uncomfortable by Earth humor simply because certain cultures favored laughing at the unfortunate humans who fell victim to oft-violent or derogatory ‘humor’. It wasn’t that the Ark crew had been free of that sort of thing, but in the interest of camaraderie, nobody ever said anything against each other. They just avoided the mechs they were uncomfortable around.

Television and the Internet had brought the topic into open discussion, however, because the Autobots had been more comfortable expressing their discomfort about an alien culture. It’d been easier to critique a different -- and therefore ‘inferior’ -- society than analyze their own.

Jazz looked down into the arena, and this time he saw it from a different perspective. If this had been plastered across Teletraan One’s main screen, how many Autobots would have been laughing?

The good news was that he could release the lockdown on his vent fans. He suddenly wasn’t in danger of overheating.

Acid Storm watched him. There was no outward sign of the saboteur’s thoughts, but after the silence stretched on long enough, he nodded. “What else do you see, Autobot?”

“I see Skywarp molesting a helpless mech.”

“Mmhmm.” Acid Storm gave the observation due thought. Indeed, Skywarp was kneeling between Thundercracker’s spread knees, and his hands were teasing his ex-wingmate to squirming. “Fair enough.”

That was a little surprising. “I thought Decepticons didn’t -- “ Jazz paused, because using the ‘r’ word right now would probably not be wise. Diplomactic phrasing was a go. “ -- didn’t take anyone against his will?” The blue visor narrowed in thought. “Is this part of Thundercracker’s punishment? It doesn’t seem…right.” Not that he had a good handle on what the Decepticons considered ‘right,’
but it did seem odd.

The Rainmaker hesitated himself. “It…is, but it isn’t.”

“Your answers are so illuminating,” the Autobot said dryly, shifting his weight to one leg. It stuck his hip out in a way he knew most mechs found sassy in an appealing way. Right now, he’d use any weapon he had to keep this conversation flowing.

A contemptuous snort answered his efforts. “It’s complicated.”

’No, really?’ the wide blue visor said. “You don’t say.” Jazz feigned surprise, and this time Acid Storm reluctantly cracked a smile.

The Seeker shook his head at the smaller mech. He gave the two Seekers down in the arena another considering look. “You remember how the Air Commander had us all laughing during the challenge?” he asked, feeling his way around whatever it was that was so complicated.

“The first or the second time?” The first time had been the smack on the aft and Jazz’s joke.

“The second time.”

“Uh-huh. Yep, I remember. Don’t know what he said, but it must-a been funny.” The officers had started laughing first, obviously in on whatever the Air Commander had said over the Decepticon comm. network. It made Jazz wish his comm. system were still operational, but he probably wouldn’t have been able to hack the commissioned officers’ secured line that quickly. He was good, but not at the level of Blaster.

“Right. It was, but…not in the sense of a joke.” Acid Storm seemed to be weighing how much to reveal. Explanation versus Autobot. “There are certain aspects of contract that aren’t common knowledge as a mech gets promoted,” he said slowly. His words were picked carefully. “It’s strategically inadvisable to reveal that a highly ranked officer enjoys certain activities,” was decided on finally. “That’s something strictly confined to either the officer cadre or a mech’s closest contracts. Or a trusted frag-buddy, I suppose, but that’s sometimes just asking for it to get spread around half of Cybertron.” He shook his head at the gullibility of some Decepticons. “Anyway, we were laughing because Starscream leaked an interesting clause in the trine-contract.”

Jazz reached for casual, but his information assessment protocols were blinking excited pop-ups at him. Valuable personal information on a Decepticon officer! “Someone will take advantage of it?”

Red optics chided the saboteur. Acid Storm knew what he was doing, but the Decepticon found a vague angle to answer with. “Some mechs don’t know how to leave the berth out the duty shift. Slipstream’s one of them, but fortunately, so is Sunstorm. They can play their powergames all over the base on or off duty because nobody’s stupid enough to not respect Sunstorm for worshiping her contrails. He’s a lunatic,” his wingmate said, weary but oddly proud, “but he’s a blatantly powerful lunatic. Thundercracker,” Acid Storm cocked his head at the bound mech wriggling under Skywarp’s hands, “is powerful, but he’s not crazy. Losing respect because of what he likes in the berth is a real problem just because it’d take so long to punch everyone back into line. Sunstorm just goes ‘burn in the holy light of Primus!’ he imitated his loony wingmate, and Jazz grinned appreciatively, “and everybody’s too busy running for their lives to disrespect him.”

“Can’t really see Thundercracker having a one-way dialogue with Primus.”

“I hope not.” Acid Storm shook his wings distastefully. “One ultra-religious bolt-brain in the Armada is quite enough.”
Jazz nodded. He stared at Skywarp molesting Thundercracker some more. The blue Seeker’s injuries were field patched and obviously had to hurt, but he was arching into Skywarp’s hands despite himself. Skywarp kept his mouth beside his ex-wingmate’s audio, whispering something as he dipped his fingers into the main pelvic joins. The upper left side was so much melted slag from the explosion, but he had all his attention on the lower area presented by Thundercracker’s spread legs. Everything was mapped out, thoroughly explored with long, slow strokes of his fingers, except for that one flat panel at the bottom. That, he skipped. And kept skipping, no matter how Thundercracker’s pelvis squirmed. That panel, Skywarp didn’t touch. It was the most protected place simply by the way the joints worked. That panel was normally under constant pressure, rarely seen by anyone, always scraped by the interior edges of armor plating from on both thighs...

White thighs squeezed together. Jazz caught himself doing it a split second later, but fortunately for his dignity, Acid Storm was shuffling his feet, too. There was something about watching Skywarp work that made a mech’s plating ache. He’d never even known it was a hot spot, for frag’s sake! Well, okay, he hadn’t known his hands were sensitive, either, until Starscream had --

Acid Storm gave him a mildly amused look when he couldn’t get his fans shut off in time.

“I don’t get it,” Jazz said quickly. “Is Starscream punishing him for challenging, or I going to be watching Thundercracker get his ailerons get ‘faced off’?” It was really bothering him that Thundercracker didn’t have a choice either way, but he was wary about bringing that up.

The Rainmaker hesitated again.

“Let me guess: it’s complicated.”

“Yes.” Red optics lit suddenly, and a cunning smile Jazz didn’t like slid into place under it. “Hold on. You might…this could work.” Acid Storm turned that smile into the arena, and Skywarp was looking back up at him inquiringly.

Jazz watched them speak over internal comm., and he worried. It was almost guaranteed he wasn’t going to like whatever they were talking about. Skywarp’s optics flicked to him, and a sly grin quirked his lips. Check that: 100% guaranteed. Acid Storm chuckled. The Autobot looked at him suspiciously, but the Rainmaker shook his head and held up at hand to ask for patience.

Down in the arena, Skywarp had returned to whispering to Thundercracker. This time, the blue Seeker’s helm shot up. The glass remaining in his one working optic glowed orange and yellow instead of red because of cracks, but it still served to reflect horror quite well as he stared up at Jazz. Skywarp snickered loud enough to be heard up on the platform, and Thundercracker began shaking his head. Skywarp whispered. Thundercracker’s head-shaking sped up, but his optic stayed locked on the Autobot.

Some of the crowd was beginning to take notice of the small drama on the other end of the arena from Starscream. There was a cluster of flyers assembled around the now-crippled rotary and the whipped mech bound to his back, but the next whipping hadn’t started yet. Starscream glanced over and frowned, and Skywarp turned his grin on him. A moment later, the Air Commander laughed shrilly and turned back to his latest victim.

That was all the permission Skywarp needed, if Thundercracker’s face was anything to go by. The blue Seeker was bound too tightly and was too injured to move much, but he leaned forward as best he could to get closer to the purple-and-black teleporter. The new position required him to look up at his ex-wingmate, and his expression was pleading. His mouth moved rapidly, talking fast.

Skywarp snickered again and patted his head. It was a supremely condescending move.
Thundercracker let his head fall, clunking against Skywarp’s cockpit. Jazz could read his lips: ‘No, no, no, please, no…’

“That’s right,” Acid Rain crooned maliciously, and the Autobot beside him jumped in surprise. “I’m going to tell Jazz all about your little secret.” His cockpit clicked, seal popping as the glass opened slightly, and the Seeker turned the opening toward the smaller mech. “Won’t that be nice, Jazz?”

Having that smile turned on him reminded Jazz of watching this mech manipulating the acid rainclouds that were his favored mode of attack. Nothing good could come of it. “Uh…sure,” he said, leaning back from the canopy being thrust into his personal space.

“Please don’t,” a voice said from Acid Storm’s chest, and Jazz blinked. The deep voice was tinny and thin coming from the tiny speakers inside Acid Storm’s cockpit, but it was definitely Thundercracker. “Skywarp, don’t do this.”

“Shhhh,” Skywarp this time, louder and closer to the exterior microphone. Jazz could see that the teleporter’s cockpit was popped now, too, likely because Starscream had busted Thundercracker’s own communication equipment.

“Say hello to Thundercracker, Jazz.” Acid Storm smiled, optics mean as they narrowly watched the Autobot’s expression. “I thought he might want to listen in, since it is part of your personal turn-on. Isn’t that right, Thundercracker?”

“Acid Storm, there has to be something you want --”

“Now, now, don’t interrupt a superior officer.” Skywarp’s voice was tinny as well, but the sickly-sweet glee came through quite well.

“What,” Jazz started, but Acid Storm turned to put a companionable arm around his shoulders. “ -- what.”

Charm appeared, as applied with a trowel. “Well, Jazz, I don’t want you to think you’re about to witness a rape,” the Seeker said, putting pointed emphasis on the last word. He paused artfully, then let his smile turn sadistic. A faint, pleading sound came from the speakers in his cockpit. Jazz only heard it because he was now held against Acid Storm’s side, which was slagging weird in and of itself. “Oh, wait. You are.”

The black-and-white mech stopped discreetly trying to shrug Acid Storm’s arm off and twisted his head to the side to stare up at him. However, the Rainmaker’s smile was directed down into the arena. When Jazz followed the look, he saw Thundercracker looking up at them again. The blue Seeker immediately ducked his head, avoiding the Autobot’s gaze as Skywarp’s sniggering came through the open comm. link.

“You see,” Acid Storm continued, “Thundercracker’s little secret is that he likes to give up control. He likes to be the victim. He likes to be forced to enjoy all the awful, awful things Skywarp’s going to do to him. It’s not as though he has a choice, right?” The Rainmaker was practically cooing. “His big bad commander’s going to punish him for his sins, and poor ickle Thundercracker has to kneel there in the dust like a grounder and take whatever’s coming to him. Isn’t that right, Thundercracker? You’re all tied up with nowhere to go. Starscream’s going to use that whip on you until you scream for mercy, and everyone knows the only reason Skywarp’s got his hands on you right now is because Starscream’s given you no choice. He’s going to ‘face you until your vocalizer gives out, and you have to allow it. You’re going to overload again and again because you have to. Everyone’s going to watch it happen and laugh at you. Poor, poor helpless Thundercracker.”
The blue Seeker moaned a denial, but his wings were flexing against the bar, fluttering. His forehelm ground against Skywarp’s cockpit, but he had his split bottom lip between his teeth as if to keep the sound from turning urgent. The teleporter’s fingers worked between his spread thighs, increasing their tempo as half-burnt cabling in the hip joints were tweaked and stroked. Thundercracker shuddered but couldn’t stop a needy sound from escaping.

“Oh, he wants it,” Skywarp giggled over the comm. line. “He wants it so bad his plating’s crackling, but it so doesn’t look like it from up there, does it?” He turned his head and grinned sharply. “You have no idea what you’re doing to him, Jazz. He’s so mortified I can see his spark trying to crawl into itself, just because an Autobot knows that he wants this. If Starscream didn’t want you bound,” the teleporter said to the shivering mech, voice dropping to a predatory purr scary even through the tiny speakers, “I’d have so many orders for you. Have you lick my thrusters out. Polish my wings. Finger my cockpit. Self-service in front of me.” He shivered himself. “In front of the whole world. I’d make you do it all, right here. And you,” he almost whispered, “would do it. And you’d love it.”

“Sk-Skywarp, I -- “

“Shh. Am I going to have to stop?” Skywarp’s hands lifted away, and Thundercracker made a broken sound. He shook his head hurriedly. “Good.” The purple hands slid back down again.

“I don’t understand,” Jazz said, scraping up coherency from the bottom of his personal lock-box of dignified behavior. He knew just asking was humiliating Thundercracker further, but he really didn’t understand. “I’m sorry, but this doesn’t make any -- “

“Don’t apologize,” Skywarp said, tinny and grinny. “He’s going to spontaneously overload just walking by you in the hall from now on.”

“It’s extreme,” Acid Storm explained so kindly it was clear he was only doing it to grind further rust in the wound, “but this scenario?” His optics flicked around the arena. “Being punished for something and being forced to enjoy what’s happening to him while everyone stares and gossips? It’s fairly similar to what he’s asked for, before. Fantasy made real life. Lucky Thundercracker. Did you know Slipstream and I courted him once?” the Rainmaker asked abruptly.

The subject-change made Jazz’s spinning head feel like a bobble-head on a dashboard. “No...?” That meant Acid Storm must know what Thundercracker liked, but it just wasn’t fitting together in his head yet. How the frag could any of this have anything to do with contracts and negotiating?

“Yes.” Thundercracker was shaking his head again, staring up at Acid Storm with an expression of despair. “He could have made a decent Rainmaker,” the leader of the Rainmakers said, smirking back. “Problem was, it took us half an eternity to figure out what he wanted. Do you know how hard it is to get an explanation out of a mech who wants to be publicly shamed and overloaded against his will? I thought Slipstream would throw him out an airlock when we finally cornered him and got him to spill an actual fantasy. She lives for this stuff.” He blasted air out his vents, pretending exaggerated nostalgia. “Alas, ’twas not to be. Slipstream can’t leave the fantasy in the berth,” he confided seriously to Jazz, who gaped at him, “and for officers, well, like I said, openly having this kind of kink just doesn’t promote respect from the ranks.” He couldn’t keep the serious aura and smirked again. “Which isn’t a concern anymore, is it, Thundercracker?”

“Thanks to Starscream’s big mouth,” Skywarp chortled, “everyone knows you’re the one calling the shots, here. All you’d have to say,” he breathed, and the speaker just barely transmitted his words, “is stop. Come on, Thundercracker.” The blue Seeker shook, hips twisting and face utterly conflicted as Skywarp teased him. “Tell me to stop. Starscream’s going to beat you, either way. You’ve earned your punishment. It’s your choice,” the words drew out, slow and cruel, “if you want your pleasure
A whining noise came from the speaker. Acid Storm turned to the dumbstruck Autobot still standing under his arm. “I can’t keep a straight face through this kind of thing. Powerplay can be interesting, but when he asked me to pretend I was raping him...” He grimaced a bit. “He knew that I knew that he knew it wasn’t real, and acting it out was so corny I couldn’t stop laughing. Kind of, uh, ruined the moment.”

“Being laughed at is plenty humiliating,” Skywarp said. “Hey, Jazz, remember that Inky Crystal of Power thingie?”

“Incan,” Jazz corrected automatically.

“Whatever. The shiny crystal underground in South America.”

“Yes,” the Autobot said slowly, “I remember it. As I recall, the Decepticons lost that battle spectacularly.”

“Pfft, whatever, it was just a shiny crystal.” Skywarp sulked. “Earth had a million of them. Anyway, what I remember is Thundercracker screwed up big time.” The helm against his cockpit dug in as if the blue Seeker in question were trying to hide against it. The strained whine hadn’t stopped. Then again, neither had Skywarp’s fingers. “He let Skyfire get too close because he wanted Starscream to be blamed for losing the crystal. When Starscream got out of repairs, he made dumbarf here,” Thundercracker whined louder as purple fingers deftly twisted, “clean the corridors down in the docking bay with a buffing cloth and his teeth. And say what you want now, Thundercracker,” Skywarp snickered, “but I watched you after the Cassetticons got done pointing and laughing. I walked up and pinched your wingtip,” he did it, illustrating the story, “and you overloaded hard.”

Thundercracker tossed his head back, teeth buried in his lower lip as he bucked against his ex-wingmate’s hand. Skywarp pinched his wingtip again, and the blue Seeker sobbed air through damaged intakes. Still smirking, Skywarp lifted his hands away. The sob lengthened into a helpless keen, and Thundercracker’s helm snapped forward to entreat the teleporter.

“Tell me to stop, Thundercracker,” the teleporter coaxed. “Just one word, and I’ll go away. You can take the whipping like a mech. See that Autobot up there watching?” He pointed, and half the crowd turned to stare at Jazz. When had Skywarp’s sideshow torment become center stage? Acid Storm’s arm tightened, bringing the small grounder in closer to the Rainmaker’s side. Jazz narrowed his visor and refused to fidget. Thundercracker did not look. “He’ll tell on me if I don’t. Don’t you feel safe?”

“Rescued by an Autobot,” Acid Storm chuckled. “Oh, that’s got to hit all your humiliation buttons right there. It’d almost be worth it, wouldn’t it?”

“Whoa, hey, I’m not comfortable with this,” Jazz said uneasily. He wasn’t comfortable with any of this, but having everyone look at him was only making it worse.

The Seeker half-holding him wore a smug, evil grin. “But don’t you want to make sure this isn’t rape? Go ahead. Ask him if he wants this.”

“Yeah!” Skywarp lit up like dayglow. Thundercracker’s helm fell forward against his cockpit again, and the tank transmitted through Acid Storm’s speakers. “Do it! Oooooo, no, I’ve got one better.” An idea had obviously struck the teleporter. Thundercracker winced. This could only be Bad News. “Give him an order.”

“Skywarp.” That one word was desperate. Bad News, indeed.
Skywarp sat on his thrusters and used one hand to lift Thundercracker’s chin. His ex-wingmate fought him at last, trying to yank his face away until the darker Seeker finally made him meet his optics. “What’s the matter, Thundercracker?” he asked sweetly. “You don’t want one of those pathetic, squishy-loving Autobints giving you orders, huh?” A shiver visibly wracked the blue Seeker. “But he’s an officer, soldier. What with the peace negotiations and all, why, he outranks you now. If he gave you an order,” the teleporter purred, pulling his ex-wingmate close to whisper against trembling lips, “you’d just have to obey it, now wouldn’t you.”

Faulty ventilation failed, and an emergency heat spill triggered. Circuits tripped, parameters exceeded. The excess charge had to go somewhere.

Thundercracker arched back so hard his wing hinges distorted as crackles of electricity and heat coursed from every limb, centering on his spark. Skywarp actually had to flinch away, shielding his face with his hand as overload spat flares of energy out of the blue Seeker’s open chest.

Thundercracker shuddered silently -- once, twice -- before collapsing forward again. He heaved air, trying to cool resetting systems.

Silence reigned the arena. Starscream half-turned to look. The audience stared.

“Oh, yes, just like that,” Acid Storm breathed.

Someone started clapping. It broke the stunned quiet like a footballer punting a Ming vase. Suddenly, the whole crowd was on their feet, stomping their feet and cheering and catcalling. It was complete chaos. Jazz’s doors went up defensively, surprised, and he glanced around a little wildly before catching himself.

“Please,” panted tinny and faint from Acid Storm’s cockpit, “please don’t stop. Please, please don’t stop.”

[* * * * *

End Pt. 14

[* * * * *]
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 15
[* * * * *]

It didn’t compute. It seriously did not compute in Jazz’s head. The subprocessors whirred. Threat assessment kicked it over to information. Information tried to file it, but there wasn’t a category for this. The tagging system was getting cross-correlated all over the place as processors tried to access, reassess, and change all the labels in one go. Jazz had fallen down the Primus-fragged rabbit hole, and nothing was as it seemed anymore. The deep voice coming from the thoroughly humiliated Seeker down below was feverishly asking for more, and it made no logical sense.

At least according to the logic system he currently followed, but there were gaping holes popping up the longer he stayed in this arena. Welcome to Wonderland. Throw out the old rules from the Autobot world, because Alice was through the looking glass. Everything backward was now forward, and Jazz was in the wrong. Although it wasn't precisely wrong so much as just...not right. According to a set of standards Jazz couldn’t rightly say were applicable in the Autobot ranks, and there weren’t a lot of clear reasons why.

"You want him to keep going?" he asked, but he’d reached some sort of shock plateau. The incredulous question tamped down into a simple inquiry. It sounded like he was asking why energon quality was down this orn. "You realize that everyone is staring at you." His visor shifted. "And that Starscream has found a whip he likes."

Thundercracker’s sob was perfectly audible through Acid Storm’s speakers. A prolonged shudder wracked his frame. "Nng. Oh…oh."

"Nice," Skywarp said, looking up at the Autobot with clear approval. "Very nice."

"Please."

"Shhh." A purple hand stroked the side of Thundercracker’s face, and the shivering mech turned his head to burrow into it. Yet he was all the more obviously on display for hiding his face. “That’s right,” Skywarp soothed, the same maliciously giddy grin he wore into combat gracing his face now. “We’ll take care of you, yes we will. I’m going to use you so hard you won’t even feel Starscream peel the plating off your back. You’re going to beg us to stop, and we won’t, and you can’t stop us.” He leaned down and purred his engine. “You’re going to love it, Thundercracker. Won’t you? Mmm, yes.”

The words were cloying sweet, obviously mocking, but a chill of truth dropped into Jazz’s core like a broken icicle. Taken from an outside perspective, or even from his perspective of a single cycle ago, and those words would have had him lunging into the arena to stop this. Peace negotiations or not, watching a mech get raped in front of him was too much to ask.

Because that was Skywarp down there, evil and immature. There was nothing sincere in his tone, and the words were meant to flay Thundercracker to the quick until the blue Seeker cringed under him. Jazz had watched the teleporter take bets on this same Seeker’s grisly demise with no more concern than a spectator at a race. No, more like a human seeing his old car in the compactor: ‘Oh, well. Kind of a shame, but we had our good times. Time to move on.’ Skywarp had made no move
to interfere, not even when Starscream tore Thundercracker to pieces. Jazz had bargained with him just to interfere long enough to give Thundercracker a chance to gasp surrender.

Now he claimed in a blatantly false voice to care about his ex-wingmate?

The stark contradiction triggered something amidst what all the confusion had been holding at bay. It keyed a flip in processor priorities.

Jazz’s job entailed information gathering and sabotage, not information integration. Spies didn’t do the same prioritization and cross-linking analysis that tacticians did on information. It’s why Jazz could outthink Prowl on the run in the short term, but stand-and-fight situations and longer strategies left Special Operations in the support position for Tactical. Operatives had to be the quick thinkers. They were the mechs hidden in shadows and layers of deception. They were notoriously unstable because they counter-balanced the more stodgy -- but stable -- tacticians. Prowl saw the past and present, then forecast the future of the larger picture; Jazz saw the micro-snapsots.

SpecOps fed Tactical information. In order to head the division, however, Jazz had some ability in picking up a grasp of the overall situation to make a plan for more than himself. Using all the information he gathered wasn’t his specialty, however. It was why he’d reeled so badly from Acid Storm’s flurry of revelations, but he was the only Autobot available. He had to make the plan. He had to use the information being flung at him almost too quickly to assimilate.

Jazz: jack of all trades tonight.

Tonight, he had to borrow some processor tricks from Tactical. Skywarp’s teasing comments crossed Jazz’s already criss-crossed lines of thought, and information assessment suddenly grasped the newest thread, weaving it into the warf. Wove it in, tightened it down, and an overall pattern abruptly emerged from the tangled mess. There was a larger picture here, even larger than the dangerous cultural gap he’d tripped over. He had to take a step back to see the forest for the trees -- or rather, the Decepticons for the mechs.

He’d been watching Decepticons. He’d been listening to Decepticons.

Decepticons. Decepticons being watched and listened to by an Autobot. SpecOps used layers of lies in their work, but they were still Autobots. Decepticons specialized in deception to the point where Jazz had almost forgotten how much it saturated their daily lives.

Anyone who had ever run information assessment in Special Operations knew that a spy spotted could only gather flawed information. The Decepticons habitually used truths to make their lies just plausible enough to be inseparable. In their hands, a made informant became a weapon against the Autobots. Nuts and bolts, Jazz had turned the trick around on identified Decepticon spies among the Autobots! Nobody gave information away to the enemy unless there was some advantage to it. Even if the enemy wasn’t quite an enemy at the moment.

The unspoken rule on the platform was that nobody looked at the Autobot in their midst. That did not mean they were unaware of his presence. They were as aware of him as he was of them. He knew very well that his presence had been a hot topic among the various comm. line conversations zipping about the arena. With his communication system completely down, Acid Storm could be broadcasting their entire conversation, and Jazz wouldn’t be able to tell.

“What do you really think you’re watching?” Skywarp had asked.

Truth and lies; flawed reality and fiction related to the real world. This could all be a show for the lone Autobot in the audience, but he didn’t know how much of it was acting and how much of it was
genuine. He didn’t know how much of the information he had was hopelessly riddled with half-truths. There was a line between believing in a mech’s honest word and -- well, being dead, if that mech was a Decepticon. Or so it had gone since the war began.

Starscream had flown with his current wingmates for over six million years, but he apparently didn’t want them as a flight wing after the war. Jazz had automatically assumed that meant he didn’t like them...but then again, Starscream didn’t seem to like anyone. Thundercracker had apparently possessed high hopes of being his executive officer in Vos. The fine line of ‘liking’ versus ‘working well with’ in politics was impossible to guess from an outside perspective. If Skywarp were half as stubborn about choosing his wingmates as passing comments seemed to hint, it didn’t quite make sense that he’d stand by and watch Thundercracker die. At least not without good reason. What reason could be good enough?

“What do you really think you’re watching?”

Jazz didn’t know.

“Acid Storm,” he said slowly, deliberately pulling out of the Seeker’s hold, “if you had challenged Starscream, would you have survived?”

The move took him away from Acid Storm’s external microphone, and the green Seeker smirked as he shrewdly covered it with a hand to muffle their words further. “No.”

“Sunstorm did.”

“Sunstorm,” Acid Storm used the words as carefully as knives, slipping them under the Autobot’s armor, “has no real authority. Everyone knows why he’s in my trine, and while he has power, he’s too young and too mad for more than military rank. He got away with it because nobody expects him to support the Commander.”

He gave the larger mech a considering look. “You are expected to?”

“Of course. I’m the wingleader of the Rainmakers.” Acid Storm drew up proudly. “I wouldn’t expect to survive if I challenged Starscream.”

“Because…?” Jazz prodded.

“Oh, no.” The mottled-green Seeker’s smirk widened smugly. “I’m not giving you that answer.” ‘Figure it out yourself,’ his optics dared. If the Autobot thought himself worthy of a contract with the Vosian Emirate, then it was about time he showed Vos some of that worthiness.

Hey, a challenge? This was why the Jazzmeister was here. The Autobots didn’t send just anybody down the rabbit hole, after all, and Jazz was beginning to find a method to the madness. “Division of loyalty,” he concluded, and this time he was certain. “Starscream would kill you to ensure you couldn’t threaten his power.”

“Not to brag or anything,” the haughtiness in Acid Storm’s stance didn’t need to stoop to mere bragging, “but when the election finally comes around, I will be one of the candidates contending. I intend to win, legal and binding. Undermining the Commander’s authority at this juncture would divide the Armada when we can least afford it, and that would push the election off even further. He’d have to kill me, or others would take that as implicit permission to follow in my contrails. Then…” he trailed off, throwing his hands apart meaningfully. Like a flock of birds scattering apart.

“Divided we fall,” Jazz murmured, looking down into the arena. Starscream had chosen his whip and was showily flicking it at the ground. Rust burnt to black streaks in its wake. Skywarp had
Thundercracker shaking visibly, although whatever he was whispering into the defeated Seeker’s audio was blocked from Jazz’s hearing by Acid Storm. “Why is Thundercracker still alive?”

“Thundercracker’s not a wingleader.”

That earned Acid Storm an annoyed glance. How ignorant did he think Jazz was? Wingleaders led their trine, but Thundercracker was -- or had been, anyway -- an officer in his own right. “He’s no Skywarp. Mechs would follow him.”

“Yes.” The haughty aloofness faded, and for once, the red optics resting on the Autobot seemed almost troubled. The Decepticon appeared to briefly debate something before reaching a decision. His helm cocked to the side as he looked down at Jazz/ “Let me put it this way: did you know I once had a full wing?”

‘Acid Storm, Leader of the Rainmakers, Subcommander of the Decepticon Armada.’ His profile was extensive and under continual update. One of Jazz’s subprocessors filtered out relevant information to add even as they spoke.

An older mech, emerging at the beginning of the Armada as one of the most prominent officers in the Decepticons. He’d headed the Armada in Starscream’s absence as one of the most powerful and favored officers under Shockwave. Inside the Armada, he was outranked only by officers in the Elite under Starscream’s command. That theoretically positioned him under Thrust, Dirge, and Ramjet, as they were also Elite officers, but so far as Jazz knew, that command chain had never been tested. Starscream typically assigned him to head large chunks of the Armada he himself wasn’t physically present to command.

Once upon a start of the war, this mech had flown in a trine made of two completely different mechs than those he flew with today. Jazz nodded. Of course the Head of Special Operations knew. “Yes, I know.”

“Hmm.” The optics didn’t shift, and the weight of their gaze was beginning to feel uncomfortable. Jazz refused to show it. “Do you know how they died?”

The notes in the files weren’t extensive, but Cause of Death was listed. “Acidwash fell in battle. You executed Stormfront soon after for insubordination and mutiny.” In case Jazz had dared forget for one moment that this was a ruthless, sparkless Decepticon he was talking to. Acid Storm’s file also noted that he’d flown with his trine prior to the war, although details were sketchy and based off of gossip. Which, among the Decepticons, might be the carrier of real truth.

“It’s good to know damage control on that worked as planned,” the Rainmaker said, sounding oddly distant. If they were capable of moving, Jazz’s helm projections would have perked up. ‘damage control’ was SpecOps’ code for ‘making the enemy think otherwise.’ Which meant the Autobots had been fed a cover-up.

Acid Storm’s optics had clouded as if steam from past battlefields obscured the glass. “I shot Acidwash down myself. A swift execution was the only mercy I could give him.” He smiled almost mechanically, face flexing on automatic at the Autobot. “He had been my wing-third since the Academy, but it didn’t matter what I felt. I would have spared him, but I could not. Once you reach a certain rank, you are more your position than you are the mech inside it. Rank supersedes personal opinion.” His optics cleared a tad, actually seeing Jazz. “You must know this. Have you never executed a traitor? The way you run your army, you must all be half in each other’s minds all the time.”
Disgust cleared the last of memory from his optics, and Acid Storm sneered. “How you can trade cables the way you do and then go into battle with dead mechs’ access gates still active in your cortex is -- “ He stopped himself and looked away, forcibly reining in his thoughts. “I…apologize. I did not mean to imply Autobots -- well. For the purpose of ending our Great War,” he recited dully.

This was information, but the thrill of gleaning relevant data from the enemy was distinctly missing. Jazz felt ill, in fact. “For the purpose of ending our Great War,” he agreed softly, trying not to interrupt. Trying to offer sympathy despite himself.

In a way, Acid Storm was right: crossing cables gave every Autobot who shared that way a deep connection. It made deaths among the ranks more deeply felt, and it made it harder to forget those who’d fallen. Uplinking created a separate access gate for every different mech who cabled in. The access gates from individual mechs long gone still waited in vivid reminder for a renewed connection that would never happen.

Every time Jazz interfaced, his CPU ran through the list of access gates to match up his current partner with previous uplinks, and it hurt in an empty way when his cortex flipped past the same gates again and again. It was an almost physical, aching reminder of the dead. Each deactivated gate was a memory of living pleasure that could never happen again. Some Autobots felt those empty gates as sad remembrance of those dead and gone. Jazz had always treasured them for reminding him of better times.

There were connection points that ached badly, however. Those were the traitors. And as much as Jazz personally had made love to, felt for, and connected with those mechs at the time, he hated those cold gates now. For that reason, he sympathized with Acid Storm despite himself. Because he knew what it was like to find out someone he’d embraced and interfaced with had betrayed his faction. It was a personal, painful thing branded on his very spark. He’d purge the gates, but only time could do that. Instead, they sat in his cortex and continually reminded him that those mechs he’d once linked up with had turned against him. They were dead, and many of them had died by his own hand. Some had gone by formal execution. Some of them had been imprisoned indefinitely, but prisons were something the Autobots hadn’t been able to afford since they’d begun their guerilla tactics on Cybertron. Hit and run required mobility, and prisons weren’t mobile. Those executions hurt even more for how little justice supported them.

The Autobots’ interfacing habits knit their ranks close, but it meant the dropped stitches were all the more obvious. Traitors didn’t unravel them, but it hurt them as a whole.

The lower ranks occasionally accused Jazz of being cold and unfeeling, but the charges were easy to disprove because Jazz could play any part. He walked the fine line of officer and friend, and it was a hard line to define. Jazz could give the worst orders and murder Decepticons with a smile, but then he could come back to being every Autobot’s buddy. Prowl had a harder time simply because, as Acid Storm had said, the higher the rank, the less of a mech could show outside it. Stuck between Optimus Prime’s soft spark and Jazz’s bouncing joviality, someone had to play the cold-sparked professional. It was, as the officer cadre knew, a series of carefully assigned roles.

Even if they’d wanted to spare a traitor, none of them could afford to. Not by their roles. Not by the war they fought.

“What did Acidwash do?” he asked quietly, not expecting an answer.

To his surprise, Acid Storm answered. “He covered for Stormfront. I know why he did it,” the green flyer said, vision distant again, “and I can even understand, looking back at it now. He thought he could stop Stormfront and bring him back to the Cause, no one the wiser. He didn’t personally betray
me, for all that he did by lying to me. In a twisted way, he was trying to preserve our wing.” Even from the side, Jazz could see the oddly pained cast to the red optics. “My position did not allow me to accept personal reasons, however.” He reset his optics and looked down at the listening Autobot. “The most I could do was give him a quick death.”

There was a hurting pinch at the base of Jazz’s spark chamber, and although he didn’t realize it, his visor had softened to a deep azure with sympathy. It was a familiar story to anyone who’d worked within the grunt units, especially early on in the war when causes and concerns had still been fairly fluid. Loyalty in the ranks had moved like the tides of an ocean depending on the newest battle or speech. Personal loyalty to a friend could make a mech cover a shift from one faction to another. Among the Autobots, it was an acknowledged personal struggle.

Smokescreen’s berth-hopping wasn’t just because he enjoyed bumping bumpers. The mech was fiendishly adept at weaseling out secret sympathies and accepting anonymous tips from guilty consciences. Sometimes it was as simple as someone needing to have a spark-to-spark conversation with the mech in question. Sometimes it was the only warning before someone turned traitor.

It was one thing when someone switched factions within the rank and file. They mostly were concerned with getting out of the Autobot ranks and defecting alive. They left their friends and unit-mates wondering what they’d done wrong, or if they could have ‘saved’ the defectors. There were counselors within Medical who specialized in going in to those abandonment situations. Guilt caused hesitation, or mindless, raging hate. Both could get mechs killed.

While Jazz had passed on his share of priority kill-orders for army grunts, it was defectors from the officer cadres that passed assassination orders over his desk. Prowl made those a priority for Special Operations’ most dangerous agents. There could be no regret or sadness for officers who defected. There was no gloomy nods and ‘what-ifs’ shared among the others, wondering if it were somehow their fault. With higher rank came more responsibility and more expectation, but also no way out.

Covering for a traitor was aiding and abetting, no explanations accepted. No exceptions made, no matter personal feelings.. Apparently, that was true among the Decepticons as well.

“Do you…” Acid Storm hesitated, expression conflicted. “You weren’t the Autobot Third back then, but…do you remember Stormfront? Do the Autobots…remember him?”

Oh. Oh, weld-scars and pit-scrap, Jazz didn’t want to feel this. Not for a Decepticon. For a mech desperately seeking -- reassurance, perhaps, that he’d done the right thing. But not for a Decepticon. “No,” Jazz said gently, voice as soft as the dark blue light of his visor. “There is nothing on Stormfront’s file other than the notation about a lack of information on the circumstances surrounding his execution.”

For all that he didn’t move, standing stubborn with wings flared proudly, Acid Storm still sagged. His helm turned, hiding his face even as he seemed to look over the crowd. “You know,” and this time Jazz heard the struggle of a long-past decision through the distant tone, “I turned him over to Shockwave to myself. He died tortured and screaming, stripped of his brands and his rank, his dignity and eventually his life. And I was finally satisfied when his spark extinguished. Because he’d betrayed me. He’d betrayed the Decepticons, but he’d betrayed me. Even if I’d been allowed to show mercy, I wouldn’t have for that crime.”

His face turned forward at last, but his profile showed nothing but an old tiredness. “But…” A snort disparaged himself, but he couldn’t seem to stop. “I’d held onto a kind of hope that he’d at least died for something. That maybe his death had been worth it.” The red optics stared blindly into the night sky, no longer pretending to see anything. “Foolish of me, I suppose, to think the Autobots would remember one death among millions.”
There were no information downloads tagged under the dead Rainmaker’s name. Jazz’s overworked processors were dutifully unpacking old archives from the requested timeframe. While he hadn’t been more than a junior Autobot officer at that point, a potential defector from that high in the Armada ranks should have been tagged in his old files. It was entirely possible that he just didn’t have the right files in his personal archive, however.

“We may not have anything on him because you caught him,” the Autobot suggested, a little disbeliefing at just how badly he wanted to offer anything to a Decepticon. The attempted comfort earned him a stricken look, and Jazz flinched as it hit him how that sounded. The look turned mean. Ouch. But then, accepting sympathy instead of rejecting it as pity was a skill not many had. Jazz should know. “I don’t mean -- “

“He was a traitor,” Acid Storm snapped, optics narrowing. “There was too much evidence to be proven otherwise.” He clearly didn’t want to entertain the thought that his ex-wingmate might have been executed before actually turning traitor. That implied Stormfront might not have actually gone through with it. That Acid Storm might not have had to kill his own wing. Doubt could not be allowed.

Jazz raised his hands. “So you got him on time.”

“Yes.” The clipped word stung them both.

His question was tentative, and he almost didn’t dare ask, “Did…you ever think he might have been right?”

Acid Storm stiffly folded his arms and pointedly looked down into the arena. ’Talking over.’

A rueful, self-directed smile tugged on his lips as Jazz looked into the arena. Okay, not even a smidgen of Autobot sympathizing there. Acid Storm had killed his own wing, and however much he apparently missed them, he didn’t regret the necessity of their deaths. Jazz probably wouldn’t have been allowed that far into Acid Storm’s past unless the vulnerabilities had long been stripped away, anyway. Some questions festered through the war, waiting to be asked, but despite how Jazz’s spark ached for the asking, he was well aware that it was a Decepticon’s question. It could have been one more layer of deception.

In a way, Acid Storm’s little roadtrip down memory lane had served its purpose. It connected a few dots in Jazz’s mind to explain Skywarp’s noninterference. Starscream’s utter brutality, as well. Skywarp could sometimes be somewhat dumb, but Acid Storm and Starscream obviously knew that Jazz had instigated Thundercracker’s challenge. It was an Autobot-caused event, for Jazz’s reasons and not Thundercracker’s. Heightened emotion and manipulation aside, Thundercracker had betrayed Starscream under Jazz’s direction.

This time Jazz saw the arena from a different angle.

“What do you really think you’re watching?”

He was watching politics: a Vosian politician squashing dissension before it could undermine the system.

He was watching military discipline: a Decepticon officer putting down a mutinous underling before the mutiny spread.

He was watching information control: Decepticons showing the Autobot that they were united and willing to kill anyone.
He was watching a declaration: Starscream would not succumb to personal feeling over rank and duty.

He was watching a show of strength, and the underlying message was for everyone watching, but especially Jazz: there would be no mercy for those who betrayed the Vosian Emirate. There would be even less for those who betrayed Starscream, Air Commander and Second-in-Command. There could be no room for a mech’s personal needs or wants before the twin onslaught of politics and military rank.

It didn’t matter what Acid Storm had felt; his ex-wingmates had died. It didn’t matter what Skywarp and Starscream actually felt. Jazz might never see the Decepticon officers’ real emotions. With an Autobot -- or even just the soldiers of the Armada, for all he knew -- watching, no honest feeling could be allowed to show. In the Decepticon ranks, weakness was ruthlessly exploited. But every weakness had sixteen different covers, and a mech’s weakness could be yet another concealment.

Because it seemed that not every weakness was taken advantage of. As frustrating as discovering the contract system was, it was also quickly making sense of a faction and society that didn’t seem operational. On the surface, at least. The Autobots had been frustrated the entire war, watching the Decepticons’ seething quagmire of internal sniping. Tactical and Special Operations jointly predicted imminent implosion of the Decepticons every cycle, but it never happened. There was a system here that Autobots hadn’t seen, weren’t understanding. They had, in fact, failed to factor it in during the entire war.

Jazz had the most up-to-date relevant information on that system, but he lacked Prowl’s tactical mind to connect it all. But he thought he saw enough. The big picture was blurry, but he thought he could see a pattern, vague as it was.

Skywarp’s sweet whispers were blatant mockery, but under that assumption lurked an Autobot fallacy. Jazz had to root deep into automatic information assessment, stopping the process to find a key point. Not to invert it, but to tweak it. The assumption was that Skywarp’s smile and stroking fingers held nothing but sinister promise. That the teleporter wanted nothing more than to debase his ex-wingmate. Starscream had stopped at the edge of executing Thundercracker because Skywarp had interfered, and everything from that point on had been showmanship meant to really grind the traitor’s face in his mistake. This was all discipline and demonstration for those stupid enough to follow Thundercracker’s example.

Processors stuttered to halt, then turned over as Jazz took away that underlying assumption. Instead, he introduced the possibility of maybe.

Suddenly, information assessment exploded with a hundred new scenario interpretations. Maybe Skywarp was sincere. Maybe his mockery was a cover, one more act in damage control. Maybe he was giving his ex-wingmate what Thundercracker really wanted. Maybe Starscream was slipping a strange version of mercy underneath the dead-serious charade.

Jazz’s threat assessment processor spat out a string of garbled trash, giving its considered opinion on maybes. How could it judge what was action/reaction when every action had 44 layers of maybes and every reaction couldn’t be trusted for the maybe nots? Did Skywarp had enough connection to his ex-wingmate to be motivated by his pain? Did Starscream judge Thundercracker punished enough to give Thundercracker the Decepticon version of a reward?

Jazz had played this all wrong. The Decepticons had been playing him all along, and he’d based his gamble with Thundercracker on the faulty information of a spotted spy. Yes, the challenge had broken the trine contract and taken out a contender for the Vosian Second. It was the position his mission dictated he try for. In return, however, there were at least three high-ranking Decepticons
who knew that he’d stirred the trouble here tonight. That number likely included the majority of the arena by now, realistically. If they were half as aware of the situation as he now suspected, the whole audience was aware of his part in the challenge.

On the surface of politics and military rank, that had been acceptable. Jazz had factored out personal connection originally, because his sources had never indicated there were more than a few of those. But with *maybe* putting emotional attachment back into play…

He’d broken up a stable wing, and anyone with a potential emotional link to Thundercracker was going to resent him for that. Leading those mechs would be Starscream and Skywarp. Skywarp had already been causing trouble despite the peace negotiations. Starscream caused trouble by just existing. Threat assessment shrieked unholy terror at what he could do intentionally if he turned on the Autobots in revenge for Jazz’s interference. That didn’t even take into consideration what the Decepticons standing witness here tonight might do, following their officers’ examples.

Jazz’s visor narrowed suddenly. He was SpecOps, not Tactical. His specialty was operating off of limited information on the short-term. Okay, time to stop analyzing the larger picture and get with the micro. Mission goal, not overall plan. Like infiltrating a minor Decepticon base, his concern had to be in fooling the units inside, not the entire Decepticon faction. Prioritize according the mechs at hand, and align the priorities to the mission goal.

**Goal:** infiltrate Vos. Every other concern about the flyers in this arena slotted naturally into place under that.

*Time to think like a Vosian.*

What did he know about Vosians? Information assessment clicked smoothly over to facts, running *maybe* under confirmed knowledge. Subtle powerplays were applauded. Displays of strength were respected. Demonstrations of power beyond physical strength were held at much the same level. Emotions appeared as a weakness, and bargaining was held as vitally important. Surface appearance was deceptive, except when it wasn’t.

If Jazz could give them something suitably reasonable to back up his displacement of Thundercracker, then they might see it on their own standards. They might see him as *one of them* instead of as an invading outsider. The first rule of spying was to blend in, not stand out, but Jazz didn’t have much hope of that. An Autobot -- a grounder Autobot, at that -- among Decepticon flyers already stood out.

That didn’t mean Jazz couldn’t use it to his advantage. Sometimes standing out was its own disguise. If he could manage to turn it around, wear his surface ‘weakness’ as strength, then...yes. He could *use* this.

So. His most stand-out feature was also his ‘in’ right now: Jazz was the outsider. The outsider who was being courted. When he’d been establishing his placement as Starscream’s intended, there had been burgeoning respect in Acid Storm and Skywarp’s behavior. *Maybe* it was time to push that place. There were no terms yet. Starscream had been leading this bizarre dance of seduction and politics so far, but what if Jazz turned it around on him?

Starscream was the treacherous Second-in-Command of the Decepticons and Air Commander of the Decepticon Armada. Yeah, well, the Jazz was sneaky Third-in-Command of the Autobots and Head of Special Operations. If any two mechs could go toe-to-toe with each other, it’d be them.

He had an idea, and it was crazy. Crazy like making Autobot warriors out of old Earth fossils, because sometimes crazy worked. Sometimes crazy stomped all over Decepticon plans because
crazy couldn’t be predicted. Fortune favored the bold and Dinobots alike, and the Autobots had already done Dinobots. What the slag. It was time for the Jazzmeister to do bold like it was going out of style.

“Hey, Skywarp!” Jazz called suddenly, and half the audience jolted in surprise. “Spread his legs more -- I can’t see!”

Shocked optics turned up toward him, a rainbow sea of colors, and Acid Storm straightened in surprise beside him, hands dropping to the green Decepticon’s sides. A shivery moan came from the speakers in the Seeker’s cockpit. Jazz shifted his weight to one leg and cocked his hip, folding his arms over his hood and smirking in response to the stares. Starscream paused in his dramatics to direct a blank look up toward him.

Down below, Skywarp blinked through reset before shaking his head and reaching down to smack the inside of Thundercracker’s thighs. A whimper came through this time as Thundercracker struggled to obey.

“Oh, come on,” the Autobot scoffed. “Is that the best you can do?”

Skywarp cackled, and the smacking this time rang loud enough to be heard over the sudden buzz of excited conversation. There were a thousand optics glancing between Jazz and the two Seekers kneeling together below. Starscream looked at the two entwined mechs, then up at the Autobot high above. He nodded slightly and strolled slowly across the arena floor. Acid Storm only looked at Jazz, seemingly unaffected by the continued whimpers coming out of his cockpit speakers.

Thundercracker thrashed against his bonds, trying to spread his knees despite the damage to his hip. Skywarp said something sharply, words muffled by the crowd sound, and cruelly twisted his fingers in the blue Seeker’s pelvic join. Thundercracker yelped and surged up against the lock-bar under his wings, and his legs popped wide before he collapsed back down. His helm fell forward against Skywarp’s cockpit.

“Not much of a show,” Jazz commented to the Rainmaker loud enough that the tier below turned to gape at him, and now Acid Storm was giving him a half-amused, half-bemused little smile. “Reminds me of, oh, what was it he said?” He unfolded an arm enough to raise a hand to his chin, tap-tapping a finger against his lips as he pretended to think. The green Seeker continued to wanly smile. “Oh, yes.” He let his smirk widen as Thundercracker’s shattered optic turned up toward him. “Making sure I was nothing more than a frag-toy. Who’s the frag-toy now, huh?”

The gossip spread like wildfire. 'Vengeance.' It’d been a set-up to get revenge on Thundercracker belittling the Autobot. That was something that the rank and file could understand. 'Infighting,' Jazz’s confident stance hinted into the back of their minds. 'Infighting among the officer cadre.' Infighting, like Thundercracker letting Skyfire past his guard or Skywarp shooting Starscream up the afterburners during battle. Not an Autobot taking out their officer. Starscream’s intended taking out the competition.

Acid Storm’s optics glowered deep crimson, but he dipped his helm in wry acknowledgement of Jazz’s skill. Down in the arena, Starscream looked as forbidding as ever, but there was a tiny curve to dark lips. Worthy of a Decepticon? Worth of the Vosian Emirate? Jazz met his optics and let his own smirk become something luxurious. A victor reveling in victory, posed on a ledge like his triumph was a display trophy. If anyone could be worthy of being courted by an entire city-state, it was this Autobot!

“Who’s a good frag-toy?” Skywarp chirped, obnoxiously cheerful.
“Oh, Primus, yes,” moaned from Acid Storm’s cockpit, and Thundercracker hid his face against Skywarp again. “I am. I am.”

“That right, you are!” the teleporter chirruped with a preschool teacher’s overdone joy. He’d likely have clapped his hands, too, but his hands were busy petting the blue Seeker’s helm and thumbing the broken fan vents. “Aww, who’s a boogie-boo? A boogie-booboo!”

“What in the Pit?” Acid Storm laughed.

“Baby talk, Skywarp?” Jazz’s disdain was overdone and all the more mocking for his poorly-hidden smirk at Thundercracker’s expense. The blue Seeker moaned and squirmed under Skywarp’s nonsense patter, and the audience’s gossiping lowered to a purring buzz as more and more ‘Cons fell to watching the show again. “Are you going to use him or raise him?”

Skywarp giggled and lifted his head to grin at the Autobot. Only because Jazz knew to look for it did he see the shadow of resentment lurking in the devilry-bright optics. ‘You did this,’ the teleporter blamed even as he shouted, “Hey, if you think you can do any better -- !”

“And what if I can?!” Jazz shouted back, interrupting him, and for a moment, everything froze.

That sound? That lack of sound was 600+ Decepticons’ processors mashing the kink button all at once. Power failed, rerouted to imaging things that hadn’t occurred to any of them until it occurred to them all. That shift in light was even the floodlights turning toward the mech standing on the little platform mid-tier.


Look at Thundercracker. Poor, defeated, beaten Thundercracker. On his knees and trying not to look like he wanted it. They all knew better, but smashing his pride was the point. Look at his total degradation and hopelessness, strangely magnificent in the way it wrapped hot lust around their sparks and gloated.

Look at the Air Commander, battered but still standing under his injuries. Look at him walking slowly up behind his ex-wingmate, drawing the vivid pink flanges of his chosen whip through his hands. Look at him. Power, prestige, glory; all painted peacock-strutting proud in blue, red, and white paint. Beautiful before, but a splendid dream of desire now.

Now picture a Thundercracker sandwich: Starscream working the whip down one side, and Jazz’s hands working up the other.

…ahhh. Now that was scrumptious.

A thousand optics turned up to Jazz, dim with shock as that picture flashed, full-formed and absolutely delicious, through their minds. Starscream alone seemed unaffected, regarding the Autobot’s frankly provocative look with unimpressed impassivity. That look said that the Air Commander knew exactly what the Autobot was doing. That collective mental image had been carefully calculated for best effect.

Jazz piled on the charm, smiling wider, and the small uptick to Starscream’s lips flashed briefly higher before smoothing back out. It implied permission for Jazz’s meddling. They both knew the game, but neither played fair -- and in disobeying all the rules, they made a kind of rulebook all their own. It tailor-made the game for them, personal and intimate.
The way they were looking at each other wasn’t helping anyone regain coherence. There was enough chemistry boiling in the air between the two hotties that Mixmaster could sample it. It might not be Love Potion #9, but the mechs in the audience would eat it up with a spoon.

“How,” Acid Storm squeaked, and hurriedly cleared his throat with a vocalizer reset. “How likely is it that you’d, ah, follow up on that threat?”

Jazz peeled his visor away from Starscream to give the Rainmaker a sultry look all his own. The mottled-green Seeker actually took a step away, taken aback by the mercurial change from Autobot officer to regular mech to ‘I’ll take two of that to go, thank you!’ “Depends on how nicely I was asked, I suppose,” the small grounder drawled. A high-performance engine turned over with an audible thrum, and the Decepticons on all sides were straining to hear the low-voiced conversation.

Acid Storm’s flaps flicked through their extensions, and the burr of his fans wasn’t covered by the Autobot’s engine noise. “Please?”

“Pff.” Jazz waved his free hand in dismissal.

Air popped, displacing forcefully enough to buffet Jazz’s doors. “What if I called in that favor you owe me?” Skywarp asked, all sorts of urgent.

He hadn’t even considered that. Giving Skywarp a self-indulgent reason to curb his righteous rage, yes, but not flat-out clearing that debt before it became a problem. That was...a very good idea, actually. Jazz gave it some thought, showily returning his fingers to tapping on his chin. Dimming his visor, he eyed the two Seekers. They were obviously exchanging Words over internal comm. lines. Scrap metal and iron, what he wouldn’t give to have a hack on that network right now.

“Nope,” he said at last, betting that he could push a bit further. “Not enough.”

“Aw, that’s pit-scrap. Really? Why not?” Jazz fluttered his fingers at the Seekers; such trifling offers were not enough for the sexy Autobot. The two Decepticons exchanged another glance. “Please?” Skywarp offered artlessly. “Pretty please with whipped cream on top?” That got him a perplexed look from Acid Storm and a laugh from Jazz, but the Autobot still shook his head.

The look between the two officers this time was longer, and Skywarp was frowning unhappily at whatever Words were being said. The surrounding tiers were all but hovering, not daring to get any closer but drooling over the eyecandy flicking his doors at them playfully as the officers talked. The unit on the tier below had clustered underneath Jazz’s feet, staring up at him. He tilted his head to the side and winked half his visor off at them, shifting to push his other hip out as he peered down over his prominent hood at them. There was hushed discussion of that bumper. And they were rather fixated at how far that hip went out. Extra flexibility for his frametype?

_Gah. Want want want._

The two Seekers beside the black-and-white Autobot continued talking, but their optics skimmed the audience with a casual air that wasn’t casual in the slightest. Disappointing an arena-full of flyers could cause trouble. More importantly, judging by the whirr of their fans, the two officers _wanted_ themselves. Skywarp shrugged at Acid Storm. The Rainmaker hiked his wings back at him.

Jazz went back to smoldering in Starscream’s general direction. Let it never be said that the Jazzmeister wasn’t capable of using every weapon at his disposal. His outsider status centered around his faction, but also his grounder status. Well, he was perfectly capable of making his body exotically unique instead of a liability. He shifted his weight again, letting his aft sway and languidly swishing his doors downward as if he were relaxed. Look at him being so casual.
The Air Commander had his back turned to him. He was ostentatiously busy checking Thundercracker’s ties. The blue Seeker, however, stared up at Jazz with a panicked mix of pleading and revulsion. It was want, but a want so perverse the flyer was revolting himself. The conflict turned his expression to agonized indecision.

Jazz tried to understand it and felt a queer mix of empathy pulling his own spark. What was it like to want something like this? Did it feel like need or an indulgence? Thundercracker’s expression reminded him of his few times helping Ratchet. That look reminded him of the way his fellow Autobots had twisted in an agony of pain and self-hate, half-shame but half-need while the medic inflicted what was needed. All Jazz had been able to do was offer support, because that’s all that could be offered.

The idea lit something like magnesium in the back of Jazz’s head. The plan snapped around, re-centering, and maybe crystallized. Clear and tricky at the same time, but if Special Operations were easy, there’d be more Autobots coming back from missions.

“I don’t suppose you take bribes?” Acid Storm finally offered half-heartedly.

In his peripheral vision, the two Decepticon Seekers were still frowning at each other. Acid Storm didn’t expect him to take the suggestion seriously. But Jazz’s goals were short-term steps leading toward a larger end, and ultimately, he wanted down into that arena. The means versus the ends was a constant debate in war, but Prime wasn’t here to mourn his methods.

Information assessment kicked over the suggestion and weighed it. The likelihood of a better offer was slim.

The Autobot tilted his head down and to the side, not turning to face the officers but giving them his full attention. “How much of a bribe are we talking?” His smiled dropped, replaced by a quick flick of his tongue over his bottom lip. “The idea of doing this in public makes me…nervous.” That last word was laden with many things, most of them involving other people’s nerves. Jazz drew his bottom lip in and set his teeth into it, then slowly slid it out from underneath the dental molds.

Skywarp and Acid Storm fixated on the tiny motion, mesmerized. When it popped free, Skywarp jerked like he’d been shocked. His wing knocked into Acid Storm, who shook his head as if clearing his head.


“Don’t look at me,” Skywarp said defensively. “I’m broke. I spent it all on,” he glanced at Jazz, and just as quickly away, “stuff.” Acid Storm glared at him. The teleporter shrugged, for once seeming embarrassed. “Human TV shows, okay? I liked the ‘Simpsons.’” He ducked his head slightly under the Rainmaker’s glare. “I’m still paying Soundwave back for the last 16 seasons of the series. Me no have money.”

“What, you bought the downloads from Soundwave?” That actually surprised Jazz enough to break character as Acid Storm’s face twisted up at the strange grammar. “You know Blaster has them all, right? He’s Cybertron’s authorized distribution vendor for the major Earth TV networks.”

Red optics rounded by dismay looked to him. “Well, now I know. D’oh.”

Several previously minor details of the Decepticon/Autobot departure from Earth clicked into place, and Jazz gave him a peeved glare of his own. “You’re the one who stole the Los Angeles’ Randy’s Donuts giant donut sign, aren’t you?”
“It was the Insecticons!” Skywarp denied immediately, but his guilty face said it all.

“For Primus’ sake.” He abandoned the pretty pose. Some things required the full-on facepalm, complete with slouched shoulders. Jazz: Made Of Disappoint. Oi. Immature war machines. Who liked the Homer Simpson, apparently, and were willing to haul giant donuts across the galaxies because of it.

“I wanted a souvenir,” the purple-and-black Seeker muttered, sulking. “I’m not giving it back!” he said a second later, wagging a finger at the Autobot. “So you can take your squishy-love and shove it where the -- “

“Skywa~arp,” Acid Storm half-sang, pulling on his fellow flyer’s arm. “We like the Autobots now, remember?” Despite the friendly smile on his face, the Rainmaker’s optics were sharp and narrow. They practically transmitted a berating lecture all on their own without the aid of comm. links. His voice lowered to a forced-cheer hiss, like a snake upchucking glitter. “We very much like the Autobots, especially this one, and if you make him angry, I’m going to drop-kick your precious ‘donut’ into Shockwave’s smelters.”

Both Jazz and Skywarp stared speechlessly at him for that. It wasn’t just the words. It was the contrast of words and the pleasant smile pasted across his face. The contradiction was so severe Acid Storm just looked unhinged. The Rainmaker had evidently had enough of their Earth-tainted ways. He wanted something, and if Skywarp got in his way, it was quite clear he’d have no problem finding a place for the body afterward. Since everyone in the arena hungered after Jazz’s aft at the moment, they’d probably help with disposal.

Jazz did good work.

“Right…” Skywarp looked down at the hand on his arm and pulled futilely. “Uh. Yeah. Sorry,” he muttered in Jazz’s direction.

“I’m telling the Earth Embassy,” the Autobot retorted, “and you can deal with the fall-out. They’ve been blaming the Aerialbots for years, did you know that?”

“Really?” The teleporter seemed elated. “That’s so coof!”

Acid Storm didn’t deign to notice Skywarp rubbing his cockpit and resentfully pushing away the elbow he’d just shoved into the black-and-purple teleporter. “Are you serious about this?” he demanded of the Autobot. “You’ll take a bribe to go down there and ‘face him into the ground?’” His finger stabbed toward Thundercracker, who shuddered under the sizzling heat of the whip trailing over his wings as he stared up at Jazz.

The saboteur flicked his tongue over his lip again, and thin slivers of glass glinted under the floodlights as his door windows peeked out. He looked down at the Air Commander circling the wounded Seeker, then back to the two Decepticon officers. “Clear the debt,” he told Skywarp. “I don’t owe you anything.” The teleporter made a face but nodded reluctantly, and the Autobot-blue visor swung to Acid Storm. “And make the bribe sizable.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Acid Storm swore fervently. He took a large step back from their little group and raised his arms. “Attention!” he bellowed, and comm. lines were totally unnecessary in the breathless silence as every optic fastened on the acid-green Seeker’s fierce grin. “It seems our Autobot friend here needs some financial persuasion to give us a show! Those of you who want to make this happen, we’ll be passing the chip.” A flat encoder pad appeared between the Seeker’s two forefingers, held up on display.
The Rainmaker brought it down. Slow and deliberate as an entire audience’s fans sucked in air greedily, he typed in a passcode. When he held the pad up again, there was a number stamped in glowing orange across the display. Jazz schooled his reaction down to nothing, replacing shock with boredom even as his fuel pump skipped a beat. The crowd murmured, unsurprised and already trading speculative comments, and he couldn’t risk showing anything.

“You know what to do.” Acid Storm smiled and held out the encoder invitingly.

Half the crowd surged forward, but a thin flyer from the tier below darted into the air and snatched it from his hand before zipping back to his unit. Noise exploded like the hurricane windfront hitting all at once, swirling out around the makeshift arena. Starscream and Thundercracker were the peaceful eye of the storm. The Air Commander smirked up at Jazz as if he could see past the saboteur’s calm façade. Units audience-wide clumped together, throwing credits onto encoder chips and sending their representatives off toward the pad now making its rounds.

Decepticons clambered over each other, yelling numbers with an excitement that bounced and built up. It was like the Wallstreet of Interfacing, stockbrokers buying shares in the show and selling snippets of their imaginations in ribald shouts and flung credits. The number didn’t creep upward: it shot. Acid Storm watched it leap madly up, smugly satisfied. Sizable bribe, indeed.

Skywarp sauntered closer and leaned down into the Autobot’s personal space. “You’d better make it good,” he said through a smile made of entirely too many teeth, and Jazz was certain -- maybe -- that he wasn’t just referring to the show.

Below, bartered like a base commodity and ignored by even Starscream at the moment, Thundercracker arched into another overload.

No pressure, Jazz.

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 15

[* * * * *]
Pt. 16

I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]

Pt. 16
[* * * * *]

Politics, military procedure, and personal lives. A difficult trio to juggle any day, but throw peace into the mix, and the juggler was suddenly balancing on a highwire tightrope over vats of acid while the audience took pot-shots at him.

Yet Starscream seemed icy calm as he knelt beside Thundercracker and talked softly to his ex-wingmate. Jazz had seen him furious, betrayed, blank, and gloating -- all within the space of a klik. The evil fragger had moods like mercury, and not a single one could be pinned down as genuine. The Autobot couldn’t tell if the Air Commander hated Thundercracker or held some kind of twisted Decepticon love for him.

It abruptly struck Jazz how wrong it was to even wonder that. Not pondering the kind of stage-play interpersonal dynamics required to live among the Decepticons; that was a puzzle in and of itself that had baffled the Autobots for vorns. No, it was the idea of love. He’d held onto the idea of the Decepticons being a faction of rapists despite no evidence, but had it ever even occurred to him to wonder about the opposite?

A culture based on consent was difficult enough to process, flung at him like this. Overlaid over Skywarp’s sadistic enjoyment of his ex-wingmate’s suffering, it seemed contradictory. Acid Storm had needed overwhelming (and somewhat embarrassing) evidence to pound that idea through a stubborn stereotype, and it still tried to sneak in around the outer edges of thought. Jazz had to keep reminding himself of the evidence before his visor: the words being said, not events on surface-level.

It…scrambled his base concepts to introduce the idea of love. Decepticons…and love? No matter how many layers of concealment were applied over it, Jazz couldn’t wrap his mind around love being a driving force for any Decepticon’s actions. He’d seen the devastation and death left behind by Megatron’s forces. He’d comforted tortured Autobots in fluid-stained cells and been tortured in turn by the professional sadists who seemed to end up as interrogators in the Decepticon ranks. He’d seen the scrap metal that had once been friends and enemies alike, and the idea that the mechs capable of tearing Cybertron apart had the same base needs and urges as he did --

A dull sort of horror rose up Jazz’s primary intake. At some point in the war, he’d started relying on the assumption that Decepticons were fundamentally different than Autobots.

What hope could there be for peace if he hadn’t realized that underlying keystone of his own worldview until this very moment?

The Decepticons were Cybertronians. War builds or industrials, specialists or service sector builds, they were Cybertronians. It should not be so difficult to contemplate the mere idea that Decepticons could be motivated by emotions other than hate, rage, or greed. He knew better. He’d fought and infiltrated the Decepticons for far too long to think of them as other than living, thinking beings. They were mechs and femmes with a full range of thoughts and feelings available to them. They weren’t machines. The humans had sometimes tried to tack a preformed idea of emotionless, logic-following robots onto Cybertronians, but there had been no way to make that stereotype stick. Not when Earth witnessed Starscream shrieking in a fit of irrational fury at Megatron, or Bumblebee
mourning at the grave of his first human friend. Nobody could call the Decepticons unemotional when the Constructicons viciously defended one of their own on the battlefield, and even the humans had conceded that Prowl made illogical decisions.

Because they weren't machines. They were robots in the same way that an a chimpanzee was a human: there was something resembling it in the ancestry.

Jazz still felt a sense of being far out of depth leaking like contamination into his tanks. Love? There had to be a more sinister motivation. They were Decepticons.

Except that he knew emotions couldn't be curtailed that way. Contained, changed, and suppressed, but Decepticons or not, they were still Cybertronians. It wasn't just possible, it was probable -- even certain! -- that they felt the full range of emotions any other Cybertronian felt...including love. To think otherwise would be to shunt them into a different category of being.

From the queasy roil of his tanks, Jazz had to question how close he’d come to putting them there. Not Cybertronian, but some strange mechanical species more murderous war machines than living, sentient beings. Machines incapable of love.

This was an idea that needed to be purged from his databanks. From the Autobots’ databanks in general.

There were too many underlying assumptions changing at once. His assessment programs were fumbling new input, bouncing it back and forth between threat assessment and noncombat-dealings. All in all, it was actually kind of a relief when the bidding came to an end. He’d rather think about interfacing with Thundercracker.

Part of his threat assessment processor space had been dedicated to dealing to extrapolating potential reactions. There was going to be backlash for basically agreeing to have sex for cash. This was going to get back to the Autobots. There were simply too many gossiping mouths at the ready. It was a given that whole Decepticon faction already knew. The question was how he was going to play it out. There was an entire processor calculating how bad the fallout would be among the Autobots, but the rest of threat assessment was concentrating on the more important issue: how the Decepticons would react..

It was such a strange concept that threat assessment was waffling. One subprocessor had stuck on the idea that he should feel shame, but it could provide no concrete reason why. That tripped up the others. There was no prior evidence to draw from. Inter-factional interfacing wasn’t well-documented, for reasons that were becoming really, scarily obvious. Interfacing for money had a stigma, but that stigma didn’t seem to have historical precedent. So far as Jazz remembered, there had been courtesans available for hire in the Iacon Towers, and they had been respected members of the upper class.

Outside of the rich nobles, making a living just from selling cable-time didn’t seem feasible. Not many mechs wanted a paid interface. The nobles had been mostly buying the coveted experience of having a trained, beautiful, intelligent mech or femme on call. They were companions far more than they were sexual partners. Cable uplinking was such a beloved intimacy that it was either freely offered or an unpleasant experience all around.

Then came the war, and the courtesans disappeared. Now paid interfacing happened in the ranks, but there was a stigma attached.

Okay, wait, rewind that thought. To be honest, Jazz had heard that it’d happened, but nobody he knew had actually participated. It was always one of those ”I knew a guy who said…” rumors. If he
didn’t know better than to dismiss recurring rumors, he’d have chalked it up to bored imaginations making up stories.

At least among the Autobots, that was. He was the getting the idea that the Decepticons considered it a reasonable transaction, and…it made a sort of sense, the more he saw of Decepticon interfacing practices. Giving a mech money for cable interfacing just didn’t really work out. As logical as a money transaction seemed, emotions were far more difficult to bribe. A paid cable-frag would feel more like a force-download. However, tactile interfacing didn’t transmit feelings. Taking a bribe for some tac-time could happen.

Everything in the Decepticon ranks seemed to be negotiable: office, politics, wingmates, rations, and interfacing. Versatility was a virtue. Like a mech? Think he was hot? Then bribe him for a good time. It had a strange sort of transactional logic to it, among the Decepticons.

Jazz still wasn’t sure what kind of connotations taking the bribe carried. Had there been a courtesan-class in Vos? Was the class rated high or low? Was paying for ‘facing a dirty secret, as the rumors had it among the Autobot grunts? Or was it just business as usual for Decepticons? Nuts and bolts, the saboteur didn’t even know if it made him available to all, suddenly. Should he prepare for offers from anyone with the money from now on? And was that necessarily a bad thing?

The niggling worm of shame tried to twist up through the bottom of his tanks, and Jazz determinedly crushed it. That persistently negative processor compared this to how whoring was stigmatized in some human cultures, but for all he knew, it established him as desirable to the Decepticons. He just didn’t know, and there was no time to find out. His observational protocols were already incorporating what surrounded him.

Where he normally used the protocols during a mission to blend into the background, now he was using them to understand the character he was becoming. The protocols underwrote rationalization into his behavioral codes as quickly as he registered understandable behaviors. His mannerisms were changing swiftly. He didn’t even consciously register it, and he wouldn’t until it came time to unravel the code again.

All SpecOps mechs had hyper-aware observational protocols. Any Cybertronian with an altmode had comparable programming. The protocols gathered information from a mech’s surroundings and changed underlying code to incorporate a scanned altmode’s function into a mech. When it came to scanning a new alternate form, Cybertronians didn’t just change their outer shells. They transformed, inside and out. A particularly jarring example of the depth of that program change was Ravage. The Cassetticon had picked up noticeably feline traits from scanning a jaguar altmode, despite the fact that Cybertron didn’t have cats. Petro-rabbits, turbo-foxes, and robo-possums, yes, but the felines of Earth didn’t have a Wonderland-warped equivalent on Cybertron. Yet Ravage had become markedly more alien in his behavior, from a Cybertronian standpoint, simply by adapting to his new altmode.

That rapid adaptation had made the Decepticons incredibly difficult to find on Earth when they weren’t blatantly blowing things up, but it was also why Jazz was so dangerous. SpecOps operatives took protocols already used for gathering information and applied it like the specialists they were. Now Jazz was using it to become a Decepticon. No, not a Decepticon: a Vosian.

As an Autobot, the shame wanted to drag his tanks down, but there was no room for shame right now. Later, he’duss out the answers to the questions popping up, not the least of which was why he should feel ashamed at all. Right now, he had to concentrate on playing this part to the hilt. He had to be Jazz, the Vos city-state’s intended. Not just worthy of being courted by their Emirate, but capable of being one of them. Even a Vosian courtesan or a whore would be acceptable, because,
well, the Vosians were still enlisted in the Decepticon military ranks. The mech bought today could be a commander tomorrow.

When he shoved the unreasonable shame away and thought like a Decepticon, he could follow their reasoning so far as he understood it. However little he understood it. If he could believe any of it, which maybe he could.

Consent centered everything. It was a tightrope, the line the juggler walked. All the other issues juggled could change, but consent remained the key to everything. The social contracts gelled Vos together, and consent was the bottom line for every contract.

Jazz was idly interested in what Acid Storm’s stance was on the ethics of buying consent. Was that considered a form of coercion, or just financial appreciation?

Even as he thought, Jazz’s doors flicked up and back. They weren’t wings, but they fanned in display that the flyers surrounding him understood on code-level. A glittering field of optics around the arena tracked the motions, and a thousand wings rose in response. He could feel the flyers watching him greedily, and he had to admit in the privacy of his own head that it felt nice. Attention slid over his curves like their scanners were fingers touching him all over. It felt like appreciation. Greed and desire, but he didn’t feel degraded by the lust. They knew who he was. They knew how dangerous he was. And they were bidding a metric ton of credits on his…favors…anyway.

Awkward? Incredibly so. But there was definitely something to be said for having an army of Decepticons subtly trying to catch his attention with their own wing displays. The floodlights were even angling to light up his paintjob. Black, white, and glossy grounder curves stood in the midst of an audience of flyers, who were all watching him. He preened a little under the attention and let his windows roll up to maximize display area. He wasn’t exactly sure what he was doing, but he must have been doing it right to get this kind of response.

Acid Storm watched his display with a critical eye, but Skywarp’s grin was a mixture of hopeful anticipation and nasty, petty threat. The purple-and-black flyer had retrieved the encoder pad. “You talk big, Autobot,” he sneered in an undertone as he showily presented the final number. Unspoken was the dare: ’You talk the talk; now walk the walk.’

Politics, military procedure, and personal lives, with the added difficulty of peace. It was the Decepticon circus act. Now it was Jazz’s turn to venture out onto the highwire.

Jazz met his sneer with a brilliant smile that made the Seeker’s resentment falter. “Skywarp, you should know better by now,” he declared, plucking the chip from the pad and tossing encoder back as if it were no big deal that he’d just been handed enough credits to purchase Ratchet’s medical wishlist twice over. “I don’t bluff.” His smile grew hard edges as his visor narrowed at Skywarp. “Gotta say, though, if it were you down there? Mech, there wouldn’t be enough money on the planet to buy me.”

Red optics popped wide, and the Seeker’s jaw sagged slightly. Behind Skywarp, Acid Storm made a funny fizzing noise as he tried to keep his face straight. Jazz winked half his visor off at the green Rainmaker. Walk the walk? Pit-scrap, no, he wasn’t going to walk. He was going to saunter down there and flaunt it, because there wasn’t a Decepticon alive who could cow the Jazzmeister.

He stashed the credit-chip carefully in a side cache, trying not to look like part of his cortex was bouncing around waving pom poms and cheering wildly. Ratchet was going to flip his chevron with joy. Prime would give Jazz the Look of Disappoint, and Red Alert would pitch six kinds of security fits, but Ratchet would get his equipment. That he’d promptly use to scan the saboteur half to death, in all likelihood, searching for any ill effects from interfacing with a Decepticon.
Jazz himself worried about other consequences, but he wasn’t worried about taking the credits. The Autobots could always use more money, no matter what Prowl would likely tell him later. The Autobots were not intergalactic beggars. There was no need to sell themselves for credits. They weren’t rich, but they weren’t exactly impoverished, either. There were entire worlds worse off than their faction, war or no.

But if Jazz had known he’d get this much straight-up cash auctioning off his body, er, well, future war documentaries would probably include a few more racy scenes.

A snide, raunchy little voice in the back of his noted that the war wasn’t officially over yet. For all he knew this would end up being a historical turning point for the peace process. Future generations might get to watch -- for educational purposes, of course -- him molest Thundercracker in front of the Decepticon Armada.

Speaking of which. “Gimme a lift?” he asked, cocking his visor past Skywarp at Acid Storm. The Decepticon reset his optics before nodding. Skywarp was evidently grumbling over internal comm., because the Rainmaker shouldered him aside with a long-suffering look. The teleporter pouted like a petulant child but only glared silently when Jazz smiled at him. Both Decepticons looked puzzled when the Autobot bent over and picked up two of the forgotten ration cubes. “I’ll just be taking these…”

Acid Storm began to open his mouth to ask and visibly checked himself. He just extended his hand. The shorter ‘bot accepted it, stepping forward. All of the black-and-white Autobot’s nervous energy ironed into the shape of an overly bright smile. He’d been carried by flyers before, but rarely when they were in rootmode, and it had never been a comfortable ride for anyone involved when the flyer was a Decepticon. Comfort and safety both agreed that it was better to choose Acid Storm Airlines than Skywarp Air, however. Both were unreliable, but one was more likely to drop him for fun.

The Rainmaker’s hand tightened around his. ‘Come fly the unfriendly skies, Autobot.’

His right arm cradled the energon cubes to his bumper. He spared a thought to worry that it would be awkward to carry them like that, but the larger mech just folded him into his arms completely. One hand curled over a shoulder-tire to splay against Jazz’s altmode roof, and the other slid up his right arm to take a firm hold. It felt…secure, not clutching. It was also completely not what he was expecting.

“Put your feet on top of mine,” Acid Storm ordered and seemed amused by the uncertain flick of blue up at him. The small Autobot stepped up onto his feet as if the Rainmaker would snap at him for it, but a chuckle answered his hesitance. “You’re not heavy enough to hurt me. Get your balance, or I’ll have to pick you up.” Jazz shifted a bit, daring to lean some of his weight against the arms holding him, and Acid Storm continued laughing at him. Okay, so his discomfiture was funny. That was better than annoying. “You act like you’ve never flown with someone before!”

“Hey, not many Seekers in the Autobots,” Jazz excused himself, but…yeah. The Aerialbots apparently needed lessons on carrying fellow Autobots. They usually just grabbed a hand and took off, or went for bridal style-carrying. It wasn’t embarrassing, but it didn’t exactly grant their passengers a great sense of control. This position was more, ah, intimate, but it was an improvement over swinging about crazily by one arm while trying to shoot with the other, or being squished against someone’s chest while said someone tried to free up a hand of his own to do the shooting.

“I’d say that’s a shame, but we both know I’d be lying.” Acid Storm’s smile had an unexpected wistfulness to it.

Jazz looked up into and froze. Mostly because of how close it was. Intimate. Yes. That blasted rogue
processor suddenly piped up, wondering how many of the Decepticons’ kinks centered around interfacing while flying.

“Hold on,” the Rainmaker, and Jazz’s processor – still stuck on its wondering -- squeaked alarm. But, no, the Decepticon was merely warning him that they were launching.

The kick of turbines lighting up jolted them, but Jazz had somehow expected it to be stronger. It made sense, he mused as the Rainmaker lifted off and took them out into the open air in the center of the arena. There was a difference in aerodynamics and momentum between being flown in odd carry-positions and standing upright. Of course, Jazz still wasn’t made for any form of flight, but Acid Storm was taking it slow.

In fact, he was hovering in a slow turn like a display carrousel. “Really?” Jazz murmured low and a little amused. “Is this necessary?” He looked over his own shoulder-tire, smiling a bit at the greedy sea of optics drinking him in. The hand on his back was in a perfectly chaste position, but the thumb was rubbing little circles. Between the active scanners swiping over him from the crowd and how oversensitized he was becoming off the attention, it was enough to make him shuffle his feet on top of the Seeker’s.

“They paid good money for the show,” Acid Storm said back, just as amused. The weight-shift didn’t even phase him; he adjusted so smoothly they didn’t so much as wobble midair. “Might as well let them see what they’re getting, hmm?”

“I’m fairly sure gettin’ your hands on me wasn’t part of the deal,” Jazz snipped tartly, and the thumb stopped dead.

Wary red looked down at innocent blue. “...you’re certainly in a mood.”

The saboteur smiled sweetly. “You aren’t watching Starscream watching us.”

Acid Storm’s head snapped away, looking down at his Air Commander -- who knelt behind Thundercracker, speaking in his ex-wingmate’s audio and not even looking up at them. The Rainmaker’s head came back around so he could glare at the mech in his arms, but the point was made. Getting caught fondling, however benignly, his overly-possessive superior officer’s intended was a Not Good thing. Jazz’s tanks lurched as they dropped rapidly. Their landing barely even jostled the energon cubes he held, but that was Acid Storm showing off. The Seeker’s face had hardened into a formal mask, and he released the Autobot with no more feeling than if the saboteur were cargo.

The Autobot stepped off his feet onto the rust of the arena floor and gave him nod that could have been a bow, doors held wide. “Thanks for your help, Subcommander Acid Storm.”

That got him a surprised flick of wings in return, and after a moment’s confusion, Acid Storm gave him a nod in return. "For the purpose of ending our Great War," he recited, because it really was a catch-all phrase between the factions right now. And because it was terribly, inappropriately funny in this situation.

Jazz’s there-and-gone-again grin acknowledged that. He nodded once more and turned to face the only other mechs on the makeshift arena floor as the Rainmaker launched back into the air.

Thundercracker looked up at him through one shattered optic. While his face was rigidly blank, that optic was pale with fear. More obvious than that, the whorl of sparklight in his chest fluttered visibly. Knock Out had wrestled the broken cross-brace back into place and welded just enough together to close the blue Seeker’s torso, but the medic hadn’t bothered trying to fix the gutted cockpit. That left
Thundercracker’s spark open to air.

Despite the Seeker’s attempt at controlling his facial expressions, all anyone had to do was look down to see how he really felt. Watching the panicked swirl and ebb was almost hypnotizing. Jazz had to stop and stare for a long klik.

In that klik, Starscream continued to talk.

“A grounder, Thundercracker. He’s a grounder. I doubt he’s ever flown on his own before, and what is a jet-pack to one of us?” The harsh, rasping voice fed pure poison into the blue Seeker’s audio. Starscream angled just enough that Jazz could see his sadistic smirk as well. “We are the lords of the sky and masters of Cybertron. A mere road-runner can’t compare. I’ve heard you say it often enough how low they are. Not just Autobots, no. You’ve always held ground-pounders in such contempt, haven’t you, and here this one is. A grounder, and this time you’re the lesser being. So much lesser.” Thundercracker shuddered as the malicious words wrapped lovingly around him, and he couldn’t seem to look away from Jazz. His spark glittered, sending out snapping arcs of plasma. “You’re not even a Seeker now. What Seeker cannot fly? No, you’re nothing unless I allow it, and the only thing I’ve allowed is Acid Storm’s little dramatic showing. Did you think that was about you? Oh, no. That was about that inferior grounder… but he’s not so inferior to you now, is he. No. He’s an Autobot officer, an ally officer, and you are nothing. Inferior? Not to you, not now.”

The shudders had become one continuous motion, shaking the blue Seeker head to foot. Jazz walked slowly forward, still mesmerized, but what kept him silent was the frantic whirl of Thundercracker’s spark. In it, he saw panic, but it wasn’t just panic. That would be like saying the tightening of his own spark when he barreled into combat was only fear. It was, but it wasn’t, and that other feeling was overpowering in small doses. The dosage Starscream poured into his ex-wingmate’s audio drugged Thundercracker in a way that Jazz didn’t want to see, couldn’t help but see, but it was erotic as a Constructicon-Ratchet orgy.

His fans clicked on, and he didn’t bother to lock them down. The whirring sound made the blue Seeker shut off his optic and moan softly.

Jazz wasn’t sure what to think of that. He wasn’t sure what to think about how he was reacting to it, either. Starscream’s voice scraped acidic, sharp-edged shrapnel over Thundercracker’s punctured ego, and Jazz’s fans busily whirred away. That rogue subprocessor made a small note relating to how Starscream apparently saw him, and an electric sort of excitement seeped into his fuel lines. Politics, military procedure, and personal lives might yet balance with peace if he could only juggle this right!

“What does that make you, Thundercracker? Nothing. Nothing,” the Air Commander shot a piercing glare at Jazz, and the Autobot almost took a step back, “but a frag-toy auctioned off for someone else’s pleasure. That was no bribe this Autobot accepted. That was the Armada paying him to take ownership of you. You’re owned, Thundercracker. By an Autobot, a ground-pounder, and from now on, you’re going to be at his feet unless he orders you elsewhere.” A hand with battered knuckles forced Thundercracker’s head around. The shattered optic lit again in time to see Starscream bare his teeth in a smile that held no pity whatsoever. The fluttering spark whirled faster, and there was a faint scent of overheated circuitry as the damaged mech’s fans failed to keep up with his rising temperature. “Do you understand? You’re not my wingmate. You’re not an officer. You’re not even a Decepticon. You’re not even a flyer. Until I say differently, you are nothing,” his optics slid sidelong like a dagger slipping across Thundercracker’s dented cheek, and Jazz met the red gaze evenly, “but his toy. A pet.”

He flung Thundercracker’s face away as if shaking his hand free of used oil. It took the restrained
mech off-guard and nearly sent him face-first into the rust at Jazz’s feet. “A courting gift, Jazz. Use him as you will,” Starscream sneered to the Autobot, and Thundercracker’s shuddering seized up once, twice.

A skittering ring of blue charge flashed out from under the wounded Seeker as he overloaded hard enough to spit spark plasma out onto the rust. That knocked out the last of his balance, and the Seeker collapsed prone on the ground, helm pressed against the side of Jazz’s foot. For a stunned second, there was only the uneven vent of hot air against the Autobot’s tire.

Then Starscream laughed shrilly and grabbed one blue wing. “You would like that!”

The Air Commander surged to his feet, hauling Thundercracker back into position as he went. The blue Seeker cut off a pained yelp as his wounds protested. He swayed, trying to find a way to sit back on his thrusters that didn’t hurt. He knelt there resetting his optics as Starscream bent to retrieve his chosen whip from the ground. Starscream used it to tip up Thundercracker’s chin, directing the crippled mech’s solitary dazed optic toward Jazz as if displaying the ‘courting gift’ to his intended.

Maybe it was Jazz’s assessment programs failing under the onslaught of new underwriting, but he thought he saw satisfaction cross Starscream’s face when the blue Seeker made an incoherent noise of scrambled processors. Thundercracker was three overloads in and recovering more slowly each time. Even taking into account damaged ventilation systems causing more frequent heat-dumps, the abused Seeker was enjoying this. Despite himself -- or so he wanted it to seem. Enjoying himself immensely, if Acid Storm hadn’t just been feeding Jazz an epic lie.

That was entirely possible. But this close, catching the shadow of smug achievement under Starscream’s smirk and watching the slow, sated swirl of Thundercracker’s spark…Jazz didn’t think so.

The swirling spin tripped into a quick whirl when Thundercracker reset his optics one last time and finally registered who he was looking up at. Shame and fear made him jerk his chin off the whip in order to look away. “Jazz.”

Starscream’s wrist twisted and flicked, and the whip cracked across the wide, exposed expanse of the kneeling Seeker’s wings. Caught unprepared, Thundercracker cried out and rocked forward on his knees.

“Is that how you address a superior officer?” the Air Commander demanded, red optics catching and holding Jazz’s visor.

“Sir!” Thundercracker rocked under the whip again, biting back a cry this time. He looked up at Jazz uncertainly. The saboteur could practically see him searching files frantically. What was the this grounder’s proper rank, anyway? Like he knew Autobot rank titles?! “Lieutenant?” the blue Seeker ventured.

The Autobot could only see him out of peripheral vision, but he didn’t acknowledge the tentative guess. ‘Wrong, Thundercracker.’ Starscream struck out again, and neither of them looked down at the strained grunt. Red optics burned, but it wasn’t like Jazz was a ice sculpture. Something that hot got a reaction from him, alright. “Autobot Lieutenant officer!” was cried out between them. The black-and-white mech took slow steps forward as if walking against a strong current. He held Starscream’s gaze as fiercely as the Decepticon whipped the pink flanges down. “Jazz, sir! I -- I don’t know what --“

The whip fell again, but Jazz’s last step nestled his foot between Thundercracker’s spread thighs. The blue Seeker’s words cut off with a strangled sound even before the whip struck yet again. The
Autobot stood, one foot between the kneeling mech’s legs and one arm holding two ration cubes to his chest, and looked into Starscream’s optics from a distance of a whip and an arm. The air between them had a near-visible heatwave distortion. Audience where? Vos what? Decepticons -- who cared?

“I believe you’re mine,” Jazz murmured, and he didn’t break the stare-down. He knew what his voice could do to mechs. Starscream had that surprising drop in his vocal range, but Jazz had a berth-voice that purled words into a silken nest mechs wanted to curl up into. Carly had once commented that he and Barry White should have a voice-baby made of sex and cozy blankets on winter nights. Spike had blushed beet red but agreed later, once his wife was out of the room.

Thundercracker just stared upward, shattered optic wide, as the soft accent rolled over him with the purring undertone of a high-performance car engine. For all that Jazz was talking to him, the Autobot never even looked down. The air over Thundercracker’s head was thick enough to slice, and the sleek grounder smiled slightly under the steady blue of his visor at Starscream.

He didn’t look down even as he told the kneeling Seeker, “You should address me as such.”

Starscream’s optics narrowed into glowing slits, but it wasn’t a glare. Looking into his optics was like trying to read information off a wiped disk, but with the emotional depth of the Pit and the snapping flames of an inferno behind cracked glass. Jazz stared into the abyss, and the abyss stared back. His fans hummed under that gaze. He’d known confronting the Air Commander would be difficult, but he hadn’t expected it to be quite this hot.

“…lord?” Thundercracker offered cautiously, and flinched as the lash snapped over his wingtip. The foot between his thighs shifted, pushing against that panel Skywarp had delighted to torment, and the flinch turned into an uncomfortable squirm. The whip cracked over his wingtip again, and Thundercracker couldn’t help but jerk away. “I don’t understand!” he rushed out, trying to angle the abused wing away, but Starscream mercilessly brought the whip down: crack! “Tell,” Thundercracker’s deep voice jumped, “me what you want me to say!”

Now Jazz looked down. It transferred all that built-up heat-pressure to the Seeker helplessly squirming at his feet. It funneled the intensity of a desert sun through a magnifying glass and nailed the smelter door shut. Jazz looked down, and Thundercracker melted into the Autobot’s silken voice. “If you’re my toy, you’re not my enemy or one of my mechs. You’re my pet. So what’s that make me?”

The whip snapped, but this time the Seeker threw himself back into it. Away from the Autobot, and out of the pleasant, heated haze muddling his processors. “No!” Denial painted Thundercracker’s face in lurid, revolted desperation. “Slag you to the Pit, Autobot -- no mech is my master!”

Denying the inevitable, and Jazz felt a stab of pity catch his spark. Body language spoke of refusal, but under the surface flared desire. Thundercracker’s exposed spark sped up and started giving off excited little flares. The blue Seeker’s bound torso recoiled violently, but the move forced the bar under his wings to arch his back struts, which ground the poor mech’s pelvic plating against Jazz’s foot. Damaged vents stuttered. Denial dropped straight into a sick craving.

A moment later the whip fell again, and the Seeker shuddered all over, spark crackling as he tried to stop his own hips from working. Jazz couldn’t tell if Thundercracker even knew what he wanted at this point. The flyer was all but pressed along the length of Jazz’s leg as he arched and struggled, and Starscream ruthlessly whipped one wingtip until smoke rose from the burnt metal.

The Air Commander was still focused upon the Autobot Third-in-Command, however. Thundercracker was a means for them to meet here, not the main cause. This wasn’t about him. It was about the two officers standing above him.
It felt inevitable that Jazz would look up again, meet that smelter-depth heat in Starscream’s optics, so he refused to do it. He focused on Thundercracker instead, because while none of this was really about the powerless mech, Jazz refused to ignore him.

Decepticons juggled politics, militaries, and personal lives differently than Autobots. It...might not be a matter of ‘softer’ emotions or sincerity. Decepticons might love, but Autobots showed it more easily. In a new era of peace, the Decepticons were going to have to get used to Autobots participating in their three-ring circus. Jazz could juggle just fine, and it was time to direct things like a ringmaster. Thundercracker wasn’t going to be a forgotten sideshow among Jazz’s priorities. Starscream was just going to have to deal with that fact.

So he carefully bent and placed the cubes on the ground beside Thundercracker while Starscream settled into a rhythm, and he didn’t look up into the smoldering optics waiting for him. The Seeker at his feet struggled hard enough that the bar under his wings wedged up against the hinges, but all that did was angle his wings into the lash. Screams choked down into grunts. Warbuild or not, Thundercracker was so heavily damaged that an extensive whipping could be dangerous. More obvious yet, he couldn’t block the pain of the whip. The mech had just overloaded. Jazz had once stubbed his foot after overloading and hopped around convinced he’d broken something. Overloading primed a mech’s sensor grid, and following an overload with a flogging was supremely cruel.

Or, frag, it could be a fantasy come true. Jazz didn’t know.

He sank down slowly, sliding onto his own knees. Incidentally, it also slid his body down the length of Thundercracker’s torso. His leg and hip actually slipped into the gaping hole that had been the flyer’s cockpit, sliding down, and the very edges of a plasma-hot spark corona brushed against Jazz’s far cooler armor plating.

A true scream ripped from Thundercracker, and the light behind his shattered optic lit far beyond normal parameters. He thrashed feebly, trying with joint-popping effort to push into the Autobot’s leg. Starscream laughed as the blue Seeker’s wings went absolutely rigid, no longer trying to evade the lash as spark-deep pleasure ramped Thundercracker’s sensor grid past pain.

The Autobot sank down, unhurried. He intentionally turned the motion into a graceful, extended caress of the kneeling mech. He settled his knees on either side of Thundercracker’s left thigh, straddling the flyer’s undamaged hip. At this angle, his own thigh lodged firmly between Thundercracker’s and pressed against that neglected, abused, teased panel. The blue Seeker’s helm fell forward, thunking onto Jazz’s shoulder. Thundercracker was desperate to hide

Jazz could feel the way he trembled, gathering self-control strand by strand in order not to buck against the Autobot’s thigh. Starscream targeted the other wingtip. The trembling broke into shivers.

Kindness and manipulation twined in Jazz’s spark. His visor shut off, and for a moment of no visual input, he drew up archived memories from back before the Ark. There had been a time before his duties as Head of Special Operations and Autobot Third had put him in too prominent and risky a position, and he needed the memories of that time right now. A status bar began filling in on his HUD: ‘file unpacking in process.’

He pushed his hips forward, riding up on Thundercracker’s leg and back down. He undulated, thigh and body rubbing just a little, just enough, and the glitched, hitching vocalizer error-noise became a steady stream of little whimpers. The Seeker turned his helm away but bent over more to press the side of his face into the Autobot’s upper arm under the tire. Thundercracker was desperate to hide
but unable to stop wanting. Jazz could feel the hot pant of overworked vents, and the status bar blipped completion.

He remembered. The face had been red, not silver, the helm white instead of black, but Jazz smiled just as warmly at the back of this dark helm. Tracks had sobbed under the pain Ratchet had grimly scratched in, one peel of metal at a time, and Jazz had held him as he’d broken. Tracks had far more trauma under his vain exterior mask than most mechs suspected. He’d been unable to let go any other way. This? Not the same. But Thundercracker’s ordeal was still oddly similar.

Jazz pulled up remembered duty because it was the only experience he really had to go on in this situation. He looked up, visor unfocused, and for an unsettling moment Ratchet’s red and white wavered on top of Starscream’s blue and red like a transparent overlay. He looked down again.

One hand lifted to touch Thundercracker’s unseen face, but the Seeker tried to turn further into the Autobot’s arm. “Is it so bad?” that velvety voice soothed him. “Autobots take care of our pets. We never hurt them, and we always make sure they want what we give them.” Thundercracker was flinching now in time to the whip, and the hand persisted until it found his cheek. The fingers curled, smoothing the backs down the dented surface. “You gotta want this, Thundercracker. I’m not gonna do anything to you y’ don’t ask for. If you tell me ‘no,’ I’m gonna stop. But if you want this…I’ll take care of you.”

The Autobot’s armor vibrated with the deep thrum of a high-performance car engine, and Thundercracker pressed his face into it harder. Jazz hummed softly, swamping the Seeker with almost enough comfort to drown out the sharp stripes of pain lashed over his wings, one burnt line at a time. The fingers stroked in time, petting him, and it was the worst humiliation such a proud mech could ever suffer.

So it made no sense that the crippled flyer would push his face into the gentle touch, but he did. “You gotta tell me, Thundercracker. You gotta agree, and you gotta talk. You gotta let me know what y’ want me to do.”

Thundercracker trembled, trying to burrow further into that rich voice, that purring motor, but the fingers insistently urged his chin up and away. Jazz’s blue visor was waiting. Thundercracker’s resistance melted as thoroughly as his back struts. He pushed forward into the black hand on his face.

“How do you get what I’m sayin’?” Jazz asked him, infinitely tender. “I’m an Autobot. I gotta know you want this. I’ll give you what you need, but only if I know it’s what you want, too.”

Starscream laughed, sharp as a knife. The whip paused just so he could lean over them. “And the Autobots say I’m cruel?” His hand idly fell on one half-melted wingtip and twisted, but Thundercracker only moaned and helplessly arched his back struts down.

It pushed the blue Seeker’s face further into Jazz’s hand, and the Autobot’s smile held a saint’s mercy. The black-and-white mech cupped the suffering flyer’s face in his hand and hummed a snatch of lullaby. The sound had all the connotations of a hymn sung in Hell, and Thundercracker moaned again. He arched the other way, offering his back to Starscream in order to burrow into that comfort.

“Oh, Jazz,” the Air Commander breathed, and while the Autobot’s face slanted up to share the smile, that blue visor never left Thundercracker. “I do believe I’ve sorely underestimated your capacity for vengeance. What on Cybertron did he do to earn this from you?”

“This isn’t vengeance,” Jazz’s free hand reached down and picked up one of the ration cubes. “You gave me a pet, Starscream. What’d you think I was gonna do with him?” He set it on the unstable flat of the thigh held between his legs. The top opened with minimal fiddling, and Jazz dipped his thumb
in. “That leaves me responsible for his care. I don’t know what his limits are. I don’t know what he likes, or what he hates. I gotta ask, and he’s gotta answer.”

The hand on Thundercracker’s face raised it up. Jazz smiled into the unfocused, broken optic and brought his other hand up. Pink energon dripped down the side of his hand into his palm, but his thumb carefully smeared the majority of it across the blue Seeker’s bottom lip. “I don’t break my toys,” the Autobot hummed to them both. “I like to play with them again -- “

Thundercracker’s tongue flicked out unconsciously, and Jazz’s thumb swept back the other direction.

“ -- and again."

Half-hypnotized, the Seeker stared into the blue visor and licked his lips. The energon vanished into hungry systems bled out by the challenge, and a small sound of need whined out of the depths of Thundercracker’s drained tanks: ‘More.’ The Autobot’s thumb left momentarily and returned dripping more pink fuel. The hungry whine pitched higher when the fumes registered. Thundercracker didn’t realize it, but his mouth had dropped slightly open. Wanting and waiting to be fed. Needing this, as a growing glaze of desire spread over his face in the excited sparklight from his open chest.

This time, Jazz took his time tracing the line of energon across the pale curve of Thundercracker’s lower lip. There were two splits near the middle, no longer leaking but still ragged enough to snag his finger on the edges. He made sure to coat the wounds with an extra layer of energon, and there was a soft, unmistakable whimper when Thundercracker tongued the cuts to get the last of it out. Jazz’s smile widened. If his right hand hadn’t still been cradling Thundercracker’s jaw, he wouldn’t have noticed the almost imperceptible pressure; the Seeker had chased after the thumb leaving his lip.

He dipped his forefinger into the cube this time, and however slight the motion, the Seeker definitely lunged to meet it.

“You have no idea how cruel you’re being, do you?” Starscream asked, but his question had a vague approval to it. Jazz could see him at the corner of his vision standing behind Thundercracker’s wing, hand on his hip and whip’s tip resting on the ground as he watched.

Jazz slanted that smile at him again, but his attention remained on the slow, smooth slide of his forefinger. He let it rest for a moment on one of the cuts, and there was a barely-there sensation against the very tip. The tiniest lick, hidden behind a quivering lip. His smile was directed at Starscream, but his processors sang triumphantly for the nearly-inaudible sound of disappointment from Thundercracker when he took his forefinger away.

“I’m doing exactly what you ‘Cons do, according to Acid Storm,” he informed the Air Commander. “I’m just not playin’ your games. He’s my pet, and I’ll treat him good, but we’re gonna do this my way. I don’t know what all’s Decepticon power-games and what’s really wanted, here. So he’s gonna tell me what he wants, or we’re not doing anything.”

“That is far more twisted than I ever gave you credit for.” There was a strange sort of respect implied in that statement, and Jazz’s smile was all for the Air Commander this time. Admittedly, it was a sly smile, but Jazz thought the respect had a tinge of interest in it when Starscream mused, “Killing with kindness is still killing. Autobots may have more to their ways of thought than I’d previously assumed.”

The unpleasantly screechy voice Starscream was notorious for was steadily dropping toward that rasping husk. Even after everything that had happened in the past two nights, it managed to trip something very like desire down underneath Jazz’s back armor. He hid it by tending to his new ‘toy.’
Another fingerful of dripping pink was transferred in the slowest, most inefficient way possible up to Thundercracker’s mouth.

Starscream eyed it. “You’re going to make him admit, out loud, in front of an audience of his peers, that he wants this degrading little fantasy. Just,” he remarked, “so you know he wants it.”

Putting it that way did sort of lay out just how terrible his Autobot morals seemed in this situation. “Asking consent is never wrong,” Jazz repeated his own thoughts from earlier, from watching entire units team up to give one of their own a chance at being beaten. Because that was what was wanted. “This isn’t a fantasy. It’s reality,” he said solemnly.

“That just makes it worse,” the Air Commander pointed out, bending down again to wrench the wingtip he’d mangled earlier. Thundercracker made a strangled sound around the fingertip now in his mouth, and Jazz had to control a start of surprise when the blue Seeker responded by desperately sucking his finger in deeper. “You’re going to give him the scenario of his dreams, but laying it out for everyone to see like this -- “

“-- is what he wants, or so I’ve been told,” Jazz interrupted. He pulled his finger free and got another fingerful of pink fuel. Instead of coating pale lips with it, however, he just offered it to Thundercracker. The Seeker made a small noise, a sound like fragile things breaking, and shut off his flickering optic. An expression of pain beyond physical hurt crossed his face. But he lifted his head to take the Autobot’s finger into his mouth all on his own.

“You can say no,” Jazz said to him, and his gentleness hurt. “I’ll stop, Thundercracker. I promise.”

It was manipulation like the fine silk of a spider’s web: even the slightest show of strength and will could easily break it, but this Autobot was so skilled he’d turned the fine lines into a safety net. Breaking free condemned the ensnared as fully as being caught in the first place. This was the Autobot’s Head of Special Operations at work, traversing the complicated knots of the Decepticon network and tying his own threads into their pattern.

If Jazz weren’t so hyper-aware of what he was doing right here and now, he wouldn’t even see it. It was a problem that truly needed to be addressed by the Autobots, and soon. This was part of what was making it so hard for the Autobots and Decepticons to negotiate peace. They were playing the same social game, but on completely different levels. Jazz’s offer was yet another move in the game, but until tonight, he hadn’t been aware of the complexity of the Decepticons’ rules of play. He hadn’t really even been aware of the Autobots’ version. There was a vast difference between unspoken rules and explicitly stated ones. This was something that had to be dealt with -- but not now. Right now, he had other issues to deal with.

The flare of sparklight was so bright it would blind anyone looking directly at it, but Thundercracker had gradually shrunk into a miserable huddle around it. As the two mechs talked over his head, the blue Seeker had compacted into himself. He couldn’t physically get smaller, but his shoulders had hunched and he’d cringed toward the ground. Which had practically doubled him over into Jazz’s lap, open cockpit close enough to shimmer plasma spark-heat onto the Autobot’s thigh. For all that he seemed to want to vanish into the rust, his face remained upturned, cradled in Jazz’s palm as the smaller mech fed him fuel, fingerful by fingerful.

Each time, the Autobot’s finger lingered longer. Forefinger was joined by the middle two, and the Seeker couldn’t seem to stop himself. He couldn’t keep his mouth closed or his tongue from licking them until they were cleaned. Couldn’t stop licking them after the energon was gone. Jazz could only imagine why. Was it because they tasted like energon and Autobot, rust and road grit, dishonor and everything he’d ever held in contempt from his superior vantage-point in the sky? Did he want the taste that badly, swallowing down all the scorn now heaped upon him, the rankless loser, the
courting-gift frag-toy? His tongue lapped at the saboteur’s fingers, curled around them, and pulled them deeper into his mouth each time.

Jazz could only give him what he wanted. His fingers pressed down on the Seeker’s tongue, curving the pliable metal under their pressure, and stroked the chemical receptors lining the top of his mouth. Thundercracker whimpered, hiding in the darkness behind his offline optic as if to block out the entire arena watching them, and swallowed around black fingertips. Jazz lifted his hand, and Thundercracker obligingly bent his neck back until the cables strained. The fingers pulled up and away, leaving his mouth open for their violation, and when they defiled him again, he suckled energon and tank-churning pleasure off them.

All of which Jazz and Starscream watched, because it was becoming blatantly obvious just how much the mech between them was enjoying this. Jazz didn’t look up despite the almost tangible feel of red optics gliding over him. Observing him, evaluating him. Re-evaluating him, perhaps, in the way his fingers thrust in and out of Thundercracker’s mouth. The Air Commander absently fiddled at Thundercracker’s wingtip, bending back and forth to strain the melted metal. Thundercracker groaned and arched, but as soon as his back went down, it pushed back up in order to lift his mouth toward the feeding.

“What does it matter to you, anyway?” Jazz asked quietly. He let Thundercracker nurse off his fingers, but his question was for Starscream. “You’ve already ruined him. His reputation will be shot,” the blue wing shuddered under the Air Commander’s hand, “but it’s not like you were going to take him back into your wing when this was over.” His voice lilted slightly, not quite asking.

His visor finally rose to meet that red gaze, questioning. Starscream’s heavy stare slammed into him, a near physical force, and it didn’t matter that they were in the middle of an arena. It didn’t matter how Thundercracker’s spark whirled or the way the defeated Seeker writhed between them. For that moment, it was just the two of them, and Jazz couldn’t decide if they were mortal enemies or about to interface each other right there in the rust.

One cracked red optic reset, nearly too quick to be seen. Jazz’s visor flickered surprise. “True,” Starscream conceded, giving one last twist to Thundercracker’s wing. The tip came away in his hand, trailing wires, and the blue Seeker choked a scream around Jazz’s fingers. “His…tastes…were really only forbidden because of his rank. Without that,” the whip lifted as Starscream shrugged, “he’s just one more grunt with a fetish.”

“An ex-officer.”

“Mnhmm. Well, demotion happens.” The Air Commander’s optics shifted, expanding out of their narrow focus on Jazz to look at the audience. The crowd noise had been parsed out and de-prioritized by Jazz’s audio sensors in favor of Thundercracker’s small sounds, but he was abruptly all-too-aware of the roar of cooling fans and the chatter of 600+ Decepticons. “It makes a good show to distract the rabble from causing trouble,” Starscream noted, knife-edge smile slashing across the combat-dents on his face.

He gave the Autobot a pointed look and suddenly darted his hand down to catch Jazz’s wrist when the Autobot’s hand went to dip into the open cube. Jazz stiffened but glared up at him fearlessly as the Air Commander lifted their hands. Pink fuel dribbled down the smaller mech’s fingers and scattered droplets onto Thundercracker’s helm and shoulder. Starscream gave him a crooked smirk and bent forward over the blue Seeker toward him. His head angled, red optics staring hotly around the black hand held between them.

“So you had better get on with it,” Starscream purred, all damaged armor and danger. Then, never once looking away, he licked from wrist to fingertip, catching the dribbling energon on his tongue.
Jazz tensed, startled, but otherwise didn’t move. His hand remained relaxed. Starscream turned his head a bit and gave an extra lick to the join between thumb and forefinger before releasing his hold.

The blue of his visor darkened to something sultry, but Jazz’s face was a mask of calm. His hand slowly dropped to rest on his thigh, subtly drawing into a loose fist, and it wasn’t because there was a tingling streak painted across his palm. Really, it wasn’t. Sort of how he wasn’t looking at the faint sheen of pink fluid on the side of Starscream’s lower lip.

For a moment, there was a leap in his chest like Thundercracker’s wildly spinning spark. Fortunately, his reactions weren’t so exposed.

“That’s up to this gift of yours,” his tone poked right back at the Air Commander. “It’s his choice.”

Thundercracker whined softly and turned his face into the hand still holding his jaw. It was the universe’s worst attempt at hiding, but it was really all the poor mech had left as the Autobot’s thumb caressed his cheek. Denial had evaporated away.

“Tell me ‘no’, and I’ll give the money back,” Jazz told him. “But you have to tell me, one way or another, what you want.”

Starscream laughed, but the sound was lost in the snap of the whip. Thundercracker juddered, armor shredded and dignity utterly destroyed. A conflicted, constricted noise blew against Jazz’s palm, thin and metallic. The whip cracked. The Air Commander fell into a punishing rhythm: a figure-eight meant to score both blue wings equally. Thundercracker jolted and flinched under it. His face turned further into the Autobot’s palm in an unconscious search for comfort amidst the punishment.

“Thundercracker.” Jazz sounded so gentle. So kind. The absolute opposite of the mech searing burn marks into Thundercracker’s precious wings. The Seeker’s mouth opened against the black palm, but all that came out was a gasp as the whip fell again. Jazz shifted his hand, returning to smoothing the backs of his fingers down Thundercracker’s contorted face. “Poor pet,” he crooned. “Are you gonna let me take care of you?”

He kept his voice and hands gentle, treating Thundercracker like the mech were a spun-sugar sculpture instead of a Decepticon warrior. It both helped and hindered the blue mech’s pain-addled thoughts, and he knew it. And he deliberately took all that careful handling and used it like the weapon it was: “Nobody else wants you, after all.”

Thundercracker’s head jerked around, shattered optic online and incredulous as it snapped upward. But the shock dimmed as quickly as it came. Said in that voice, under the slow stroke of those hands, it demolished any tattered remnants of hope. The Seeker searched his face, but there was nothing but sympathy in the line of the black-and-white grounder’s mouth. Sympathy, and also honesty, because there was no one stepping forward from the audience. There was only the ex-wingmate whipping him, and the Autobot he’d been given to.

The blue visor was opaque, hiding Jazz’s thoughts, but it never wavered. Two fingers dipped into the forgotten energon cube, and they slowly drew out. Thundercracker winced as the lash hit a particularly vulnerable sensor cluster, but his optic followed that hand as it rose toward his mouth. Pink dribbled onto Thundercracker’s thigh, down the Autobot’s wrist and arm, but the black hand stopped just out of reach.

Jazz waited. Patiently. Refusing to push. Refusing to make the choice for him.

Refusing to allow him to keep that scant piece of pride.
Thundercracker flinched under the whip and whispered an answer to the ground.

The pink-coated fingers came a little closer, but Jazz’s free hand curled under the Seeker’s chin and made him look up at him. “Yes…what?”

The fingers traced over his split lip, but Thundercracker didn’t lick at the energon. He just looked up at the Autobot with the most thoroughly beaten expression Jazz had ever seen. “Yes, I -- I want you to take care of me.” Another pass of the fingers, and they rested on the Seeker’s bottom lip as if waiting. Thundercracker’s mouth moved against them, and he swallowed like it hurt. It probably had. Humility never went down easily. “…master.”

He humbly bowed his head, and the hand under his chin let him. When he lapped at the Autobot’s fingers this time, they slid past his lips in one long stroke like they were claiming his mouth as their own. If there had been any resistance stiffening the Seeker’s back struts, it crumbled into hot little pieces before that claim. The whip rose and fell, but Thundercracker all but melted down into Jazz’s lap, optic dimming and bliss arcing sparklight in fitful spurts across the Autobot’s thighs as he sucked and licked and made undignified, tiny, weak noises.

The overload was building, pulsing in time with the fingers thrusting in and out of Thundercracker’s mouth, and the watching blue visor judged the Seeker too close. The hand on his chin held him steady. Instead of pulling away to refresh their coating of energon, black fingers matched the rhythm of the whip.

Pain in striped out his wings in and it felt out too fragging in good out in out in oh Primus in out.

“And fight it,” silk and velvet and sliding fingers, but still an order, and in oh yes out yes.

Thundercracker tore his mouth free and bit into the closest thing at hand -- Jazz’s bumper, which did not help -- but the strangled shout got out anyway. “Master!”

Out of the periphery of his vision, Jazz saw a strange emotion cross Starscream’s face as Thundercracker shuddered into a fourth overload.

He couldn’t put a name to that emotion. But Jazz didn’t rule out that it might be love.

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 16

[* * * * *]
Pt. 17

I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 17
[* * * * *]

“I must admit,” Starscream said under the wild sound of the arena bursting into cheers, “I did not expect him to surrender so readily.”

“Because he’s that proud, or because I’m an Autobot?” The hand petting Thundercracker’s helm continued its steady, soothing strokes, but Jazz’s shrewd look was anything but soothing. He directed it over the blue Seeker’s hunched back at Starscream. “Maybe I’m really just that good.”

The Air Commander cocked his head, eyeing the Autobot right back. “Yes.”

Jazz started to say something back and paused. It took a moment to parse that singularly unhelpful agreement. “…yes to what?”

“Exactly.”

“You smug bastard,” Jazz grumbled, amused despite himself.

A smile tugged at Starscream’s lips, and sadly, Jazz was getting used to the fact that he seemed to fixate on them given half a chance. “You are well aware of the fact that I don’t have a father. Why question the legitimacy of a fictional ancestor?”

Oh, so they were back to word games and banter? ‘I’m questionin’ whether that rusty lawnmower in your background had a legal connection to the toaster oven it fragged to produce you,” he said in all seriousness as he used the hand petting Thundercracker’s helm to bring the dazed Seeker’s face into view. Passive scans indicated damaged systems were recovering at a cripplingly-slow pace, and Thundercracker’s lack of response to the conversation backed that up. The injuries from the challenge had been severe to start with; multiple overloads on top of that were doing him no favors. Although they probably weren’t hurting him, considering the alternative.

Speaking of which, Starscream fingered the whip flanges thoughtfully. “That seems excessively crude,” he said, mildly reproving.

Banter was a step in the right direction, believe it or not. Jazz wasn’t stupid enough to think this was a return to actual courting, but it was an improvement. “Says the mech who just watched me overload someone in front of him,” he snarked back. “If that’s not crude, apparently I need to step up my game.”

For a betraying second, the Air Commander looked intrigued. Jazz gave him the dirtiest grin he could dredge up on short notice. He ruthlessly stepped on the rogue subprocessor that not-helpfully popped up a few suggestions in the back of his mind. Banter, not outright verbal molestation!

It was also really not helping that his fans were whirring away, trying to disperse heat from overworked systems. Bad Jazz. He wasn’t supposed to be…well, not liking, but -- but -- okay, so he didn’t usually practice denial of the obvious, but Jazz shied away from calling what he felt enjoyment. He’d always relished being the center of attention, and pulling one over on the
Decepticons was a source of vast professional glee, but ‘enjoyment’ seemed so...inexcusable.

He looked down at his hand where it stroked Thundercracker’s helm and pulled it away quickly. This was not the time to get attached. The blue Seeker was a means to an end, and if Jazz couldn’t maintain professional detachment, then he should tender his resignation of office to Optimus Prime. The Head of Special Operations had to be a calm, cool, collected officer under every circumstance.

And if anyone actually believed that, then they’d never taken a plan into combat and watched it fall apart. Jazz sighed pent-up hot air and brought his hand back up to Thundercracker’s head. Self-denial of a manifesting control fetish aside, his ability to invest totally inappropriate enthusiasm into his work was what had propelled him up the ranks. SpecOps operatives blended into any situation. Jazz had simply honed his natural talent at it into an unsurpassed weapon, and his ability to switch personality gears at the drop of a pin was an additional sharp edge. That did mean he tended toward emotional involvement in his work.

That didn’t mean he wouldn’t assassinate a Decepticon after cuddling him.

Jazz’s brand of professionalism had the side benefit of giving bystanders whiplash trying to keep up.

“I look forward to whatever voyeuristic tricks your garbage disposal ancestry has gifted you with,” Starscream said, and Jazz was reminded once again that, of all mechs, this one was perfectly capable of keeping up with his mental gymnastics. He looked up, and the Air Commander drew the whip through his hands underneath a leer so filthy it ought to have been edited for content.

Jazz’s fans kicked up a notch.

The dark helm resting against the Autobot’s hood rolled to one side, thankfully derailing the conversation before it could nosedive into the gutter. “Mrrbruh?” Thundercracker mumbled, blinking his poorly-functional optic through reset several times. The disoriented sound could be barely heard over the crowd’s ribald shouting.

“My princess awakens,” Jazz announced grandly, and his teasing tone didn’t so much as hint at how gratefully he grabbed the distraction. “Wakey, wakey.” He patted the mech’s cheek with his fingertips. “Y’ with us yet, dearest?” He got another confused mumble for his pains, and the Autobot grinned. “And evidence says: I really am that good.”

Starscream snorted and took a step back, swinging the whip in a crackling swish through thin air. The sound had Thundercracker flinching without being functional enough to even process what he’d heard. The Air Commander’s face held a haughty arrogance familiar to anyone who’d ever seen him debate battle plans with Megatron. Facts were weapons when this mech used them. “He’d have overloaded for Skywarp, too. It doesn’t take much under the right circumstances.”

A bright grin under a brighter visor flashed up at the standing Seeker. “I thought you didn’t expect him to surrender so quick?”

“But you’ll note I didn’t say he wouldn’t have eventually surrendered,” Starscream pointed out.

“So I guess it’s up t’ me to ‘face him better than Skywarp ever co -- oop!” Jazz pulled his attention back down as Thundercracker suddenly jerked his head up to stare at him. “Hi there,” the Autobot chirped cheerfully, waving with his free hand. His other hand now rested on Thundercracker’s shoulder, half support and half restraint.

The blue Seeker made an awful sound. It was partly an unbooted vocalizer trying to initialize before it was ready, but some of the sound came directly from the expression of dread creeping over
Thundercracker’s face. The empty pit that had been an optic widened in sync with the broken lens that still worked, and the split lips thinned into a tense line in anticipation of something Jazz couldn’t even name. Mockery, probably, if Starscream’s contempt for his surrender were any indication.

But just because Jazz’s coding was picking up and integrating Vosian traits didn’t make him a Decepticon. Besides, SpecOps operatives didn’t do predictable. They didn’t survive long if they did.

He lowered his voice to a berth-ready purr that came straight from his engine. “Beautiful,” he drew out, reaching to cup the Seeker’s face and rub his thumb over the dented faceplate. “Just beautiful. I wish you could of seen what I saw. You overload like a gift -- my gift. My treasure. They can watch,” his visor flickered, indicating the slowly-quieting audience, “but you’re mine. Just mine, t’ keep or to share, and can’t you hear how much they wanna share you? They want you. They want you bad, but you’re mine, Thundercracker. My pet, my beautiful pet.”

Thundercracker’s mouth drooped open slightly into a soft, vulnerable shape of shock and awe, optic wide and dim under the barrage of unexpected praise. The compliments poured over him, peppered with firm reaffirmations of ownership, and Jazz kept his hands gentle as they stroked. He touched the Seeker like he would a wounded turbo-fox on the cusp of running -- or attacking. With Decepticons, either outcome was equally likely. Black fingertips stroked down the slack faceplates, counting the dents. They traced the broken helm vents, assiduously straightening the bent fins, and rubbed slow, hypnotic circles along the Seeker’s jawline until they could run down the sides of his neck. The thumbs lingered on his throat linkages, deft as a medic’s. Black hands settled in a strangler hold, a claiming grip of mine, and then they moved on. Across the shoulders, dancing over the cracks and walking fingertips over battered plating as if assessing property damage.

And through it all, the cotton-soft dabbing of tender words on a crushed ego. “Look at you. You’re like a crippled gyro-falcon with your broken wings. I wanna take you home, fix you up, tame you to hand…Primus, I wanna launch you back into the sky and bring you down again to kneel like this. Kneeling under me, under my hands. Do you know what it’s like t’ get my hands on something so magnificent? Someone so wild? I’ve seen how gorgeous you are on the battlefield, but that’s nothing compared to this. It’s like watching birds at a distance or having a bird in a cage. I wanna put you in that cage and have you to myself forever. No more sky for you, little birdie. I’m gonna hold onto you, ground you permanently. I want you at my feet because you’re mine, you’re mine, you’re gorgeous and you’re mine.”

The hands darted back to the Seeker’s throat, clasping firmly until Thundercracker made a small noise of bewildered protest, and they were away again, this time exploring the ragged hinge where his cockpit canopy had previously been. “You’ve been brought down, Decepticon, and you’re all mine. You lasted the whole war tearing apart the skies, admired by all of us, feared by everyone, but now you’re down here with me. Under me. You aren’t a free mech any longer. You’re a broken-winged gyro-falcon flopping on the ground, and I can’t even tell you how hot you are. How hot it is having someone so powerful like this: helpless before me, under me. You overload, and the crowd goes crazy. Nothing can compare. Nothing.”

His hands could feel the tension slipping from the blue Seeker’s frame. The words stroked as gently as his hands, pushing the mech little by little back into the right headspace. Thundercracker subsided into the fantasy with a reluctance only matched by his eagerness, and he began squirming. Not away; he arched up into the hands, turning to meet them halfway as he lowered his head to nuzzle at the Autobot’s hood. One black hand wrapped around his neck again, kneading fingertips into the exposed circuitry in the cracked linkages at the back, and the soft protest turned into a quiet moan of need. Split lips parted, and Jazz’s engine purred approval as the Decepticon almost shyly licked at the stripes of color on his hood. The hand tightened, guiding him along the lines of the ‘4’ in the center.
Jazz’s other hand lowered. The first ration cube had been knocked off his lap when Thundercracker had shuddered through overload, but the second was still full. He opened it by feel and dipped his fingers inside. The Autobot’s throaty, rumbling berth-voice kept up its litany of possessive praise, and his hand lifted. One headlight was bathed in drips of pink fuel, and the rumble became a growl. An order, backed up by the guidance of an owner’s hand.

Thundercracker’s voice shook, deep tones pitched unusually low when he saw what he was directed toward. “Yes…yes, master.” His head lowered, and, like a good pet, he obeyed.

The Autobot reared up on his knees and threw his head back with a gasp as the Seeker proceeded to clean every drop away.

There was no crowd noise. Background chatter had cut off the moment Thundercracker began responding to Jazz’s taming touch, and now there was nothing but the unchecked buzz of cooling fans failing at their duty. The hitching exhale when Jazz sat slowly back down on Thundercracker’s thigh was clearly audible. The blue Seeker turned his head to look up at him, licking his lips, and black fingers went right back into the cube. For all that Thundercracker was huddled down like the meekest, most defeated mech, his expression held an avid readiness as he watched those fingers paint the opposite headlight sopping wet with energon. But he waited for orders like an obedient pet.

For his submission, he was rewarded. The hand on his neck guided him toward the new feast, and he went eagerly. The audience’s fans rattled and labored in the background, but Jazz’s throaty monologue drowned them out. It detailed exactly how much they wanted him, how much they couldn’t have him, because he was Jazz’s. Jazz wasn’t going to share his beautiful Seeker, his lovely prize. They could look, they could watch, but they couldn’t have him. They couldn’t have Jazz’s frag-toy, his pet.

Each new word degraded and uplifted him in one, and Thundercracker’s abused ventilation system sent up a whole new slew of warnings. The Autobot could clearly hear the rattletrap burr of inadequate cooling systems. His words shifted just a bit as the Seeker’s tongue laved the round metal frame around his headlight.

“What a good pet you are,” Jazz crooned, painting his grill dripping pink and raising his visor to shoot a look at Starscream as Thundercracker went after the fuel like his life depended on it. The Air Commander had temporarily ceded the floorshow to them, but the look he leveled on the entwined pair was anything but a bystander’s. He met the Autobot’s See What I Can Do? look with an unreadable smirk. “Such a good pet,” Jazz said to them both. “What a good frag-toy, gettin’ fired up for me. I can feel your systems warming up, and Primus Himself would ‘face you like this. Look at you! Who wouldn’t want you?” He rocked, chest pushing in time with the mouth feeding off him, and his gaze challenged Starscream. “Do you want me, Thundercracker? Do you?”

“Yes,” the mech panted against his grill, lapping between words. The Autobot moved into the agile tongue flicking at the metal. “Yes, master, I-I want -- I want -- “

“What d’you want?” Jazz asked, every inch a devoted owner, but his visor never left Starscream. The Air Commander took a step closer, looming over them both, and the smirk had widened. Jazz’s free hand wandered out over the blue stretch of Thundercracker’s wing, tweaking the damaged ailerons and thumbing the bent edge. Thundercracker wriggled a bit, nudging his face into the Autobot’s grill and whimpering as sensors sent conflicting reports of pain and pleasure. “Does my beautiful pet want another overload?” the saboteur asked sweetly, sugared tone completely over the top and all the more humiliating for it.

That was exactly what pushed Thundercracker’s buttons, forcing him to acknowledge out loud what he wanted. He shivered, wings flexing helplessly against the bar wedged under them, and his voice
dropped into a near-subsonic pitch. It trembled the fluids in Jazz’s lines, he spoke so low and close. “I…yes. Please, yes.”

Jazz rewarded him with another long stroke over his wings. Black palms sent out passive scans from embedded sensor suites, and the fingers followed the revealed paths of sensory networks under the plating. They dipped into unsealed cracks to pick at interior struts and wiring alike. The Autobot worked into one large rent and rolled the wires he found there between thumb and forefinger, pinching delicately at the tiny sensor nubs under the metal.

Thundercracker cried out and writhed, biting desperately at the grill he hid his face against. Jazz demurely peered up from under his forehelm at Starscream: ‘This could be you.’

He almost faltered when the Air Commander met his sultry come-on with a blatant ‘Oh, Really?’ look. It all but crawled between Thundercracker and Jazz to join in the fun. “I take it you like my gift?” Starscream asked, mock-solicitous. He bent down and tapped the melted backside of blue wings with the whip. A shock of electricity crackled over the whip-charred plating.

His ex-wingmate only gave a choked cry and turned to nibbling instead of biting. At this point, pain melded seamlessly into pleasure, upping the ante on both.

Jazz’s shoulders went back, and he shoved Thundercracker’s face brazenly into his grill as he stared defiantly up at the Air Commander. ‘I’d have preferred a bouquet of roses, t’ be honest.”

Red optics judged his sincerity. “I see. Bundles of dead vegetation turn your engine? I’ll keep that in mind.” For the life of him, Jazz really couldn’t decide if the mech was being serious. His visor narrowed suspiciously.

Starscream just smiled blandly at him. The burning intensity of his optics never changed, but the Air Commander’s expression was deceptively blank as he leaned close enough to wash hot air from his helm vents over him. The Autobot didn’t know if he were about to be kissed into oblivion or viciously sucker-punched, but either way he couldn’t seem to stop watching the slagging mech’s lips. Why, by Primus’ rusted camshaft, had he fixated on that one body part as erotic?!

“Don’t look now, but I do believe Skywarp likes what he sees,” Starscream stage-whispered. …well, that was one way to divert his gaze from a certain mech’s too-tempting lips.

He almost looked. Nuts and bolts, Thundercracker almost looked, and Jazz would have laid money on the blue Seeker being too occupied mouthing his bumper to even hear what Starscream said. The Air Commander frowned slightly, and the whip tapped again: mild punishment for stopping his task even for a moment. Thundercracker grunted painfully and went for Jazz’s left headlight as if salvation could be found by licking broad swathes across the smooth glass.

Mech was a fragging tease, telling him not to look like that. “‘facing someone, huh?” he asked, voice purposefully light. He refused to look. He also refused to let his voice change as Thundercracker ran his tongue around the sensor-laden metal rim of his headlight.

“Rather vigorously.” Starscream sounded quite amused, but the husky rasp held more than amusement. It held an entire novel more than amusement.

Thundercracker’s wings strained back into the light taps of the whip, moving under the spots of burning electricity but not trying to evade, and the dark curve of the Air Commander’s lip smiled. Jazz had to fight to keep his expression neutral. Smelt him, he was watching Starscream’s mouth again. This was getting ridiculous.
Those luscious -- oh, for Primus’ sake -- lips curved into an evil smirk as Starscream straightened back to his full height to glance aside, presumably at his ‘vigorous’ wingmate. “Acid Storm is going to have some difficulty getting airborne if he manages to get his whole fist up that thruster.”

That…was more information than he wanted to know. Now he was glad he hadn’t looked. “I’m not sure that’s physically possible,” the saboteur remarked matter-of-factly, “and I don’t wanna know for certain.” Thundercracker shuddered against his chest, lips suddenly warm and quivering as they worked up toward the center of his hood. Jazz’s visor ticked a fraction wider, and not just because the Seeker’s tongue began obsessively outlining the number on his hood. Despite the definite perk of interest from one pit-slag subprocessor with kinky interfacing stuck in its solution algorithms, threat assessment kicked over an emergency topic change. “I thought he couldn’t frag around outside your trine?”

“I see somebody’s been a curious Autobot. Just who’s been telling tales on my contract terms, hmm?” Fortunately, that seemed more of side-observation than a real concern, and Starscream only nodded agreement. “He can’t. Not without my permission, anyway. Which Acid Storm was quick to acquire, as I take it he was as eager to ease some charge as Skywarp. You are, ah, how shall I say -- providing quite the show.”

The Air Commander didn’t look away from where he was holding the whip pressed to Thundercracker’s remaining wingtip. Blue paint bubbled away to black char, then melted into silvery slag as the metal slumped. Silent agony had that entire wing fluttering as every moving part tried to escape, but the blue Seeker held himself rigid. He just licked harder and scraped his teeth across the Autobot’s hood, whimpering softly when Jazz’s hand squeezed the back of his neck.

The sound was composed of more need than pain, and Jazz used that hand to lift Thundercracker’s head. “What a good pet,” he crooned to the Seeker, chugging his engine in arousal and approval that had the Decepticon pressing further into to his lap. Sunk so deep in the fantasy, under the spell of Jazz’s lazy drawl, even shame had been forgotten. There were only so many processor threads available between the damage reports and self-repair power demands, and the majority of them were being redirected to the magma-spill of hot systems turning joints to rubber and rubber to gummy, heated liquid. “I think my pretty birdie should have a reward,” Jazz said, visor sharp no matter how playful his voice. “What d’you need, pet? Tell me what you need to overload.”

“Oh, good luck flying on that,” Starscream was saying, attention and amusement elsewhere at the moment. “Physically possible, yes, but certainly not physically advisable!”

“My spark,” Thundercracker breathed, so low Jazz had to dial his audios up to hear him. “I…my spark.” A twist of something more painful than fear pulled his face into a mask, but need stole its strength until the Seeker’s face fell into frantic lines again. His systems whined, vents whistling and fans unable to keep up, and Thundercracker sucked in a great gulp of air as if it were courage. “Touch…touch my spark.” His shoulders twitched. “Master.”

For once, even the Jazzmeister was rendered speechless.

Sparks were off-limits. Even medics didn’t open the spark chamber unless a mech was dying. There weren’t many circumstances when having it open helped, anyway. By the time an injury involved the spark, it was usually too late. Jazz had seen mechs rip the sparks out of each other on the battlefield, and it was the most brutal way to die. Melting alive in the smelter might be slower pain, but give a mech the choice between execution by spark or smelter, and there’d be a lot of hesitation in that decision.

Kill the body, and a mech was dead. Kill the spark, and…theories varied. It was true that mechs could practically be reconstructed from the personality components out. Case in point: the
The Decepticons imprisoned their political dissenter in cell blocks that were nothing more than storage boxes. Inside those boxes, the personality components of each prisoner lay wrapped in their own malleable spark plasma. Starscream had reconstructed the Combaticons using nothing more than old, scrapped vehicles for protoforms and the sheer, long-confined energy of each mech’s imprisoned spark.

Sparks were capable of that. They were the one piece of Cybertronians that went beyond machine.

Cybertronians were not robots. Jazz had tried to explain this to the humans for years, but they seemed unable to look beyond the giant metal bodies to the most important part of every Cybertronian: the spark. The Autobots had shied away from relating their sparks to human souls, as religion had been a particular volatile subject on Earth, but it was the closest equivalent Jazz could think of. Sparks had the nebulous, immeasurable, unscientific significance of the soul combined with the placement, physical presence, and emotional connotations of the heart. Unlike a heart, however, they couldn’t be replaced.

Destroy the spark, and it didn’t matter how preserved the rest of the body was. Even if the body continued functioning, the mech was dead. Processors could be replaced, and personality components were occasionally corrupted. Lose the memory and rust the body, but the spark still contained the fundamental essentials of a mech.

There were atheists and divergent cults aplenty on Cybertron, but the most common theory of spark origins centered on Primus. Through His vessels on Cybertron -- only one of which was Vector Sigma -- He granted life to Cybertronians. Optimus Prime and Megatron had skirted on heresy by bringing the Aerialbots and Stunticons to Vector Sigma fully formed, but war had muted most everyone’s first instinct to protest.

Traditionally, Decepticon or Autobot, only vaguely shaped metal protoforms were presented to be imprinted by the sparks. The first surge of energy from a new life would shape the body as the spark needed. Preprogrammed processors and set transformations had been become more commonplace during the Golden Age, when the Senate began decreeing the necessity of certain bodytypes for state-mandated functions. That had never sat easy on Cybertron.

Personally, Jazz had tried not to think about it. He’d done his stint as an Enforcer bringing in the preformed protoforms in and escorting the new-sparked from the crèche-vessels afterward. He had done his best not to think about how the Senate flunkies had examined each new mech and assigned them a life function based on that initial examination. It…hadn’t been right, watching sparks slotting into solid code instead of the other way around: the sparks should have written the code and determined what each new mech could be.

Jazz had never been a religious mech, but that could be said of a lot of Autobots nowadays. He had no idea what it was like in the Decepticon ranks. He did know that both sides of the growing civil war had almost stumbled to a halt back when the crèche-vessels stopped working overnight. Say whatever they wanted about Primus not intervening in the war, but even the atheists had hedged around admitting it’d been a fairly clear sign that He didn’t approve of creating more of His children to fight and die. Primus wouldn’t contribute sparks to either side of the war effort. If Cybertron wanted to kill itself, they’d have to resort to building drones and smart-droids. Which they had, unfortunately.

The Dinobots had been an extremely depressing attempt by Wheeljack to perpetuate their own race. It’d turned out better than expected; they were almost full Cybertronians in everything but sparks. But the sparks weren’t there. For as much as the Autobots liked their rampaging brute squad and acknowledged their individual personalities, there were still Autobots who completely refused to
interface with them. Because the Dinobots were, in basic terms, glorified robots.

The Aerialbots, on the other wing, had been welcomed into the Ark like the miracles they were. Slag, the Autobots had even welcomed the Stunticons. Both combiners had raw enthusiasm and talent to spare, but neither team should have survived their first decivorn of civil war. Silverbolt was afraid of heights, for frag’s sake, but he’d gone toe-to-toe with the Elite of the Decepticon Armada for years. And while Motormaster was almost as tough as he thought he was, taking on experienced Autobot frontliners should have been a recipe for immediate offlining.

Yet both combiner teams survived. Jazz couldn’t speak for all the other Autobots who’d ever had a Stunticon down and out, but he hadn’t been able to land the final blow. He just…couldn’t. They were horrible mechs on the wrong side of the war, and he hadn’t been able to kill them. At the same time, he’d seen Thrust and Ramjet lay into Slingshot and just -- stop. Perfect opportunity to kill an Autobot, gone right to waste. Not that it was anything to risk a life on, but he couldn’t blame the Coneheads for pulling their blows.

It was obvious the pre-programmed directives and gestalt links had messed up both combiner teams, but Vector Sigma had still activated. The Key hadn’t worked for millions of years. There had been no logical reason it should have worked when Megatron brought the Stunticons to Vector Sigma, but Primus had still granted them sparks. Both sides of the war had practically given up on their race continuing at that point in the war, and suddenly there were new-sparks running about on Earth sending the factions into a raging tizzy of hope. Nobody had wanted to be the one who murdered the first sign of their deity’s blessing in nine million years.

Jazz truly wouldn’t rule out that Vector Sigma’s reactivation had really been the first step in the peace process. Cybertron had fallen into an orbit around a star, end of the energy crisis, blah blah blah -- frag that! Primus had spoken to His children, and maybe they’d finally paid attention to His will.

So, yeah. Sparks? Important things.

A Decepticon asking an Autobot to handle his spark was mind-blowing.

Jazz blinked. Swallowed. Reset his vocalizer and his visor again, because it was taking that long to process the request. The hand on the back of Thundercracker’s neck had gone strangely numb and cold. His arm felt heavy. The blue Seeker only stared at him, sole optic dumbly hopeful and terrified at the same time.

“…are you sure?” Jazz asked, but somewhere between request and thinking, the low rumble of his voice had fallen to a new intimacy. His words stroked over the Decepticon in vibration and sound, shivering down Thundercracker’s back from the hand on his neck.

That watching optic dimmed appreciatively. It still took a moment to scrape up the ball-bearings to quietly reply, “Yes.”

He didn’t understand. He couldn’t wrap his mind around the idea of someone touching his own spark, but dear merciful Primus, the thought! Liquid heat that had been slowly pooling in Jazz’s tanks raced up the sides to climb out and coat his internals in a fountain of sudden, undeniably carnal desire. Arousal erupted in boiling hot droplets drizzling down the inside of his armor, swirling around his spark and sending his ventilation system into overdrive. The hand on the back of Thundercracker’s neck went straight from numb to oversensitive, clamping down with a possessive will that couldn’t be disguised.

Jazz didn’t speak. ‘Speaking’ implied mere movement of air. No, his vocalizer had sex with sound,
sending out his voice to find audio receptors and do obscene things to them. “Well, since you’ve been such a good pet, I suppose I can oblige.” The blue Seeker’s jaw worked, and he turned his head to nuzzle into Jazz’s arm.

Jazz raised his voice to catch Starscream’s attention. “Oh, suitor-mine. I could use some help down here.”

Audio-ravishing, noisy, bang-on-the-wall, ‘Come over here and take me!’ vocal sex; the tone effectively caught the Air Commander’s attention well before the words actually registered. Red optics snapped to him, subtly wider than a moment ago. The night stuttered into sound and light as half the audience overloaded, pushed over the brink by the power of that thrumming voice alone. Jazz curled the fingers of his free hand in a come-hither gesture so full of innuendo it practically molested Starscream where he stood.

…they were all a little keyed up, here.

“Really.” Lechery underscored Starscream’s words, but he gamely bent down. “And what do you need help with, intended?” He sneered the last word.

The Autobot slipped his hand around to the front of Thundercracker’s throat and firmly pushed him up, out of his lap. “Here, hold this.”

Surprised, Starscream caught the blue Seeker by the shoulders and held him. The move curved Thundercracker’s back against the bar wedged under his wings, straining his shoulders and making his shattered cockpit thrust outward. Which was the point, after all, and Thundercracker actually struggled to straighten further. Starscream frowned and dropped the whip in order to wrestle his ex-wingmate into a better position sitting back on damaged thrusters. The Air Commander ended up kneeling, lower leg braced along the whip-striped length of Thundercracker’s back. The bar crossed just under his knee, and Starscream wrapped a less-than-gentle hand around Thundercracker’s neck from behind, keeping him upright with fingers dug into throat linkages. His other hand was clamped onto Thundercracker’s shoulder as if the mech were trying to escape.

He wasn’t. Thundercracker shrugged against the tight hands holding him still, testing how much wiggle-room he had. Starscream hauled him back, shoving his leg against the bar and making the blue Seeker’s back struts creak as the hand on his throat dragged him into a punishing arch over the Air Commander’s knee armor. Thundercracker cried out, a hushed, involuntary sound of pain as whip scores and structure alike protested. He rose up slightly on his knees, trying to ease the stress.

Jazz rode down his thigh and was abruptly face-to-cockpit with the blue Seeker. He smiled like he’d just invented sin and was ready to give a hands-on demonstration.

There was an inrush of air as the entire arena saw that expression in the blue-white light of an exposed spark.

It had been bizarrely erotic when Starscream had torn open his challenger and toyed with his spark, forcing him to yield at the basest level. Disturbing to a sickening degree, but something hungry and frankly burning had clenched around the audience’s sparks when he’d breeched spark containment and played with the flares of plasma leaking out. Plasma leaks were a Bad Thing, in a way that had medics running triage to make those injuries top priority. Seeing something like that scared even hardened Decepticons, no matter what they pretended. No Cybertronian could be unaffected by watching the flicker of sparklight. It was like seeing another mech’s soul, his heart, his very being exposed to all. In the chaos of war, it was far too easy to imagine their own sparks open to air like the light shining from Thundercracker’s chest.
Starscream had been exquisitely careful while preparing Thundercracker’s spark chamber for execution extraction, disabling everything but the most vital connections. Knock Out had hooked most of those leads back up to prevent unexpected containment failure from lack of energy or jolting systems. That didn’t mean that the medic had fixed the armor petals Starscream had peeled out of their intricate iris, breaching the chamber’s containment field enough to allow the plasma leaks in the first place. Thundercracker was wounded to the core, and everyone knew it. They could see it. Tactile overloads often crackled energy across a mech’s plating, but the spitting spark-flares that had lashed out of Thundercracker’s chest were big, obvious signs of something very, very wrong. It was Very Bad with eighteen exclamation marks and a chorus of medics citing survival statistics.

It was also the hottest thing this side of Cybertron.

“Now, just what are you up to?” Starscream asked, optics narrow and intrigued. The Autobot looked up, blue visor almost shadowed in the stark sparklight, and Thundercracker’s head turned. The blue Seeker’s red-orange broken optic sought his ex-wingleader’s gaze, soundlessly pleading for -- what? Intervention? Salvation?

Cooperation, perhaps?

“I’m doing what your lovely courtship gift has requested,” Jazz said with a beatific smile belied by the audio-sex of his voice. “Apparently,” black hands rose, “he wants to be ‘faced,” they dipped into the blue-white flare that was all Starscream could see from behind Thundercracker, “with my hands.”

The blue Seeker convulsed wildly in Starscream’s hands, a full-throated scream tearing through the silence of the arena. The high-pitched sound was one of utter bliss.

Suddenly, air was in short supply. Mechs were gasping, fans inadequate as the overall temperature of the whole area sped upward. Entire units fell over each other, even the just-overloaded pawing and whimpering at their partners. The Autobot’s fingers stroked, agonizing meticulous. They moved in silhouette against the gleaming spark pulsing like a captured star in Thundercracker’s chest. That entire side of the arena craned their necks, clutching hands over their own chambers as careful fingers picked knowingly over every frail, delicate petal of the forced-open chamber iris.

Thundercracker shuddered and squealed. His wings flapped, metal bending on the bar with a tortured groan as the wide, flat plating banged against Starscream as if he needed the pain of the whipmarks to ground himself.

If that was his goal, it failed. Streamers of plasma stretched unhurriedly out of his gutted cockpit, gradually coaxed and twined in glittering strands around gentle black hands like an impossible cat’s-cradle. Jazz flexed his fingers, looping an extra coil around his forefingers. Thundercracker arched with strut-bending effort, wailing a cry that had the rust quaking as his engines broke lock-down and roared to life. Starscream cursed shrilly and jerked the blue Seeker down, forcing him to sit back on and repress his own turning turbines. The scream squawked off into white noise, the primitive sounds of a machine pushed past its limits. Jazz’s wrists rolled in the plasma, and Thundercracker surged up again, squirming and bucking. Starscream could barely keep a hold on him as code-level instinct blared emergency alerts but body-level pleasure sang almost audibly through every shaking screw.

The Air Commander might have protested having to keep the other Seeker restrained, but he evidently couldn’t keep his optics off the flaring spitfire of sparklight burning over Jazz’s fingers. The Autobot washed his hands in forbidden pleasure. Jazz could see wide, fascinated red optics out of the corner of his vision, but most of his attention was on the phosphorescent material in his hands.

It slid, slick and semi-solid like liquid gelatin inside a slippery skin that glowed and singed his hands.
He could feel the way it resisted his touch, but it spat tiny arcs of light to dance over his knuckle joints at the same time. It was strange. It was wonderful, but it was strange. Jazz’s systems were in flux, pumping sizzling charge instead of fuel through his lines, and his spark chamber bleated inquiries at him. His processors tumbled denials and *oh Primus please yes* back in response, and he had never, ever been so aware of the individual petals that made up his chamber iris. They were *fluttering*. He hadn’t even know that was *possible*, but he was watching the warped, bent petals of Thundercracker’s spark chamber shift and flex right before him, so it had to be more than his imagination.

The streamers of plasma snapped back into the fitzing ball inside the chamber, then spat back out in pulsing rhythm that sped up with every touch. Jazz ignored them for a moment and resumed playing with the iris petals, tweaking them gently until static broke into ecstatic, hitched squalls. Thundercracker strained against Starscream’s hold, twisting into every tender tracing along the thin chamber edges and sobbing as the pleasure built and built. The Air Commander’s punishing grip had turned into a near-embrace, bringing his ex-wingmate under control and offering a peculiar kind of support as the Autobot tormented Thundercracker’s spark with a swirl of fingers right inside the chamber itself. Fondling the inner surface of the iris petals had Thundercracker mewling, head thrown back and mouth gaping open in a howl constricted down to tiny, helpless grunts of utmost pleasure.

The spark all but separated into hissing strands of light, plasma-heat leaving black streaks on Jazz’s forearms as charge coalesced in visible crackle-snaps of electricity and field energy over Thundercracker’s armor. It ran in painful jolts through open rents, transmitting from wire to cables to ragged metal edges in his injuries. Miniature lightning bolts zapped from the Seeker’s internals, running in blue-white charge over the outside of the spark chamber until they grounded through Jazz’s hands.

The Autobot’s smile never faltered. His visor lifted to visually caress the only Seeker aware enough to stare down at him, and Starscream’s sudden intake of air shocked them both in an involuntary stutter of fans. For a moment, visor and optics locked in mutual arousal.

Then Jazz’s visor dimmed completely, and the saboteur lowered his head. From Starscream’s perspective, there was just the briefest glimpse of parting lips.

**Thundercracker shrieked.**

Light exploded outward.

Starscream swore, flinching back as charge smacked into the palms of his hands and blew out Thundercracker’s wide open mouth in a gust of smoke and failed ventilation. The Air Commander coughed the burnt smell of melted rubber and singed copper from his intakes, squinting. The light went out with a faint sputter, going from blinding to almost nothing in the space of a pump-beat.

In that low light, Jazz sat back with a satisfied sigh of his vents. Black coated one side of his face, smeared across his cheek in wanton evidence of what he’d just done.

What he’d just done was overload Thundercracker hard enough that -- Starscream shook one shoulder experimentally -- the mech had been knocked offline. Not even a wince from the blue Seeker when Starscream knocked sharply on a blue wing, purposefully digging into a whip score.

Jazz couldn’t interpret the look the Air Commander directed at him. “You really are just that good,” Starscream murmured, and oh. Ah ha. That look was *respect*.

He lowered his visor demurely, hiding his smirk. “What can I say?” he said, mock-modest. “It’s all in
the wrist, my mech.” He rolled one hand in demonstration, using his other hand to check his tongue for burns. The taste receptors were blipping sad little messages to self-repair, but the flexible plating seemed mostly intact. A few areas stung, melted, but it seemed he’d escaped with surface char instead of real damage. Not that he regretted it. He could have burnt his tongue to a nub and not regretted it.

Thundercracker’s spark had tasted the way a thunderstorm felt. It’d slammed across his senses as if the Seeker were prostrate and hacked open to his every whim, riding the storm and booming across the sky but bound to his will at the same time. The spark plasma had licked heat and personality down his throat, and it’d tasted like distilled Thundercracker.

Jazz looked up at Starscream and very deliberately licked his fingertips.

The Air Commander blinked through reset, startled. Maybe just a bit interested as well.

Blue wings twitched. A barely-functional optic lit and looked at nothing much. “…muh?”

Oh, come on. That was both annoying and amusing. Plus a little reassuring, because Jazz had been a smidgen afraid he’d managed to do permanent damage to Thundercracker’s spark. But as funny as the muzzy sounds of a fragged-senseless mech were, it did kind of interrupt Jazz’s attempt at outright seducing a Vosian Emirate, one Starscream by name. Said Emirate shook his wings back and visibly redirected his attention toward the wobbly-jointed puddle of a Seeker hanging from his hands, and Jazz narrowed his visor. This was neither the time nor the place to just pounce the Air Commander, but he was beginning to think it was viable option.

…alright, he was a little fired-up. And that rogue subprocessor had apparently collected a harem, because there were far more scenarios being churned out than could be blamed on one lone unit.

Jazz inhaled deeply, forcing his vents open to their widest setting and holding it for a long moment. His temperature gauge logged off the scale, but he sternly kicked himself in the back of the cortex. Duty staggered back from where it’d been watching hardcore porn -- er, Jazz’s imagination run rampant, and it gingerly settled back into the groove.

Thundercracker made another thoroughly unintelligible noise and stared blearily at the night sky as Starscream brusquely tipped his head back. The Air Commander turned his face from side to side, snapping his fingers in front of his nose and chuckling when Thundercracker only made a faint, questioning sound.

“He’s going to be out of it for a while,” Starscream said without looking at Jazz. He slid his hand down and daintily swept it through the open space that had been a cockpit. Sparklight flickered fitfully but subsided after a moment. Thundercracker whimpered softly, expression oddly confused. He obviously wasn’t comprehending a single thing going on. “I think you gave them their money’s worth, Autobot.”

Money’s worth..? Huh, right.

Selective filters were great, but a mech had to remember to turn them off when they weren’t needed. Jazz’s audio receptors flipped the custom filters off, and suddenly he reeled in the onslaught of noise.

Stunned, Jazz turned. Wherever he looked, there were cheering flyers standing, stomping, waving their hands and applauding deliriously. Some of them were hardly able to stand. The air even in the middle of the makeshift arena floor reeked of the charged-ozone scent of interfacing. He couldn’t imagine how heavy the atmosphere over the crowd was. There were still mechs rolling about on the building wreckage, cries audible even above the cascading shouts of approval pouring down around
him. He was surrounded by a multicolored, heaving mass of wings, hot-opticked desire, and screaming ventilation fans.

Not bad, Jazz. Not bad at all.

Not that there’d ever been a doubt of that. “Of course I did,” he said cockily, giving the Air Commander his most charming grin. The Seeker harrumphed at him without pausing the scans running over Thundercracker. “So, doc, will the patient recover?” Jazz righted himself, still straddling Thundercracker’s thigh but now just perching instead of grinding.

That earned him a thoughtful look. “He will. Which raises the question of what exactly I’m going to do with him,” Starscream said under the crowd noise. “You,” he accused, and despite the teasing smirk, his optics held frustrated anger, “are trouble.”

Less anger than he’d expected, to be honest. Considering the effort he’d just put into lessening that anger, however, Jazz would take anger over the fury Starscream had held during the challenge. Anger could be appeased; fury raged until it burnt out.

Jazz shrugged his doors, flashing the windows at the audience. “He got in my way,” he said far more flippantly than the situation deserved.

Red optics turned cutting. “He…got in your way.”

Autobot blue met that penetrating gaze with a coy flash of a visor. “Mmhmm.”

Starscream glared. Jazz just looked back. Behind his visor, threat assessment waited tensely for new input, but it had already run the odds. It’d run acquired knowledge and studied behaviors past information assessment, and this was the resulting gamble. The right of someone being courted versus the trouble caused by an Autobot outsider.

After a moment, glaring became grudging acceptance. “Trouble,” the Air Commander repeated, huffing out an angry exhale.

“And you’re not?”

Dark lips almost smiled. “I suppose you have a point.”

Jazz hummed agreement and stretched up to fold his arms on top of Thundercracker’s shoulder. He rested his chin on the scorch marks from the Seeker’s over-stimulated spark and looked up at Starscream from around the nearest air intake. “…so.”

The Air Commander straightened, still kneeling behind his ex-wingmate but able to look down at the Autobot at the same time. Sometimes Jazz loathed having a small frametype. “So.”

“What will you do with him?”

An expression that was nearly…conflicted crossed the Decepticon Second-in-Command’s dark face. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

Starscream’s head angled, and he gave the smaller mech a wry look as he slowly climbed to his feet. Without his support, Thundercracker slid gradually down into a senseless pile of restrained limbs in the rust. Starscream offered the Autobot a hand up. “Nothing. You see,” he said as Jazz accepted his hand and gracefully stood, “I seem to be involved in a courtship right now, which prevents me from
accepting or offering another suit at this time.” Surprise popped Jazz’s visor wide, and the Air Commander’s smirk was caustic. “A pity. That leaves poor Thundercracker abandoned on the runway, as none of the Armada would dare cross my orders and offer for him.”

He tucked the Autobot’s hand in the crook of his arm, pointedly claiming him in front of the Decepticons and Vos and Primus alike. The crowd noise took on a much more gossiping note, excitedly commenting on the move, and Jazz’s mouth flattened into a half-disapproving, half-resigned line.

At their feet, Thundercracker rolled onto his side, something finally seeping through the post-overload haze. “…sir?”

The Air Commander shook his head, and Jazz couldn’t read anything but wicked entertainment on his face. Mech had moods like quicksilver! “You have a choice, Decepticon Thundercracker,” he said, stiffly formal, and that snapped through the pleasure faster than any whip. “My recommendation is that you grant permission and agree quickly. I sincerely doubt you will receive a better offer.” Confused horror painted over Thundercracker’s face as Starscream stepped back, drawing Jazz away as he went.

“He’s all yours,” Starscream said to the arena in general.

It took all of Jazz’s hard-won operative self-control not to react as Soundwave emerged from the crowd.

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 17
[* * * * *]
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 18
[* * * * *]

Awkward silence.

Awkward with some extra vowels thrown in for extended awkwardness. Aaaaawkward.

Jazz had endured some awkward silences in his time. He’d caused quite a few of them. It could be argued, in fact, that he’d caused this one. He’d agree with that, too, but only to a point. This silence was actually the result of Jazz staunchly refusing to respond to the accusation of causing something even more awkward.

So this was awkward squared, really. If this were a science experiment, it could be said that the AWK² element had supersaturated the test. Time to go back to the drawing board.

Or find an escape route, but that wasn’t going to happen right now. This experiment had an observer keeping the mouse in the maze. He wasn’t impartial in the least, but he seemed very interested in the end results. He also seemed to be working under the question of ‘How much awkward can be added before the test subject explodes?’

“I’m not saying that you outright said anything,” Starscream drawled from further ahead. “I was standing right beside you, after all. You didn’t say anything.”

Jazz picked his way through the rubble of Tarn and hopped over what had once been a shop sign. He deliberately ignored the Seeker perched on the wall up ahead. A teasing chortle informed him that he was being watched anyway. Jazz vaguely wished he knew what the experiment hypothesis was, if only so he could rebel against it out of spite. Playing by the rules seemed to be inviting more awkward to be added right now.

Fortunately, keeping his footing with only the moons and his headlights to guide his way was sufficient excuse for why he kept his head down. Two moons were up, now, but that barely gave more ambient light than the stars through the pollution that still drifted through Cybertron’s skies in wispy, acrid clouds. Since he couldn’t possibly get more spotted by the Decepticons than being in the company of Starscream, Jazz had his brights on to help light his way. Scanners weren’t enough unless he wanted to pick his way slowly through the ruins. What hadn’t collapsed in the repeated assaults during the war had been torn apart by scrap salvagers. All that was remained was inferior building materials left to rust. It made walking tricky at best, or a sinkhole lottery at worst.

Tarn really was a mess. Jazz doubted it’d ever be rebuilt.

Cybertron’s population had been decimated by the civil war, and those who still left were clustered around outposts and fortresses, or hidden underground as Neutrals or part of the Autobot resistance cells. Cities like this had long ago been abandoned. Survivors had fled, knowing that it was better to be a refugee than a sitting target. As the energy crisis got worse, refugees had pulled together enough resources to build statis-holds far under the surface of the planet. Sometimes, it hadn’t saved them. The substrata of Cybertron had collapsed as the support structure fell to war and neglect. Energy lines had been intercepted, and the statis-holds became crypts when the energon was blocked,
The Autobots had uncovered far too many of those crypts. Some had still been sealed. Some had been ripped open, the inhabitants slaughtered or gone missing. The culprits could have been anyone, even Autobot units prioritizing their own survival over neutrals. Neutral groups were just as ruthless, at times, willing to brutalize strangers to ensure their company made it. Decepticons had gone after any group large enough to be a potential threat, and, at least at the very beginning of the war, the Senate hadn’t been much better.

Sadly, that last fact hadn’t come out early enough in the war to stop the Senators’ last gasps of power from screwing over the planet. There was no denying that the Decepticons had been out for victory and vengeance, but there was also no denying that the Senate had been equally vicious in the early days of the rebellion and subsequent war. It had blocked any peaceful resolution back in the time when its dissolution would have gone most of the way toward satisfying Megatron’s initial demands. Instead of surrendering their power in return for nonviolent solutions, the Senators had ordered more than their fair share of war horrors to try and destroy the Decepticons.

The truth had been long lost in the sucking pull of news-spinning from both factions, but the Senate had committed atrocities. Even after all this time, vorns after making it to Third-in-Command and poring over Special Operations’ gruesomely detailed history of the war, sick horror still tightened Jazz’s spark. When he climbed to the top of a toppled support pillar and looked back the way he’d come, the sensation worsened. The pillar wasn’t very high, yet he could see the floodlights from the arena in the distance. There was nothing still standing tall enough to block his sight. An entire city, flattened.

Tarn had been leveled, but not by the Decepticons. Like a dying Morphobot flailing through its death throes, the Senate had managed a lot of damage going down. In its last gasps, using its last loyal units of the Planetary Guard and Enforcers, it’d struck out against the Neutral Territories. The stubbornly independent city-states had never fully agreed with the Senate’s rule before the war, and they’d refused to join either side of the burgeoning war. In the name of the Cybertron Unification Alliance, in the name of propaganda, the Senate had attempted to turn that fierce individualistic pride against the Decepticons.

They’d sent the six orbital ships, the vast platforms between Cybertron and her moons, to crash into the city-states. The great engines and technology from a forgotten time had been wrenched from their era-long orbits and careened down into atmosphere, breaking up as they fell. It had been set up to look like sabotage by the Decepticons. The Senate’s troops were supposed to move in afterward to ‘rescue the survivors’ -- after conveniently wiping out any witnesses who might provide a different account of things.

It would had been a masterful political move, if a horrifying act of war. It might have even worked, if the citizens had survived to rally against the Decepticons. At that point, however, the only mechs left serving the Senate had either truly believed the Senate’s was in the right, or they hadn’t known what was really going on, despite civil war erupting in every corner of the planet. Mechs with that kind of closed-minded fanaticism and ignorance had descended on the Neutral Territories.

Despite the original plan, every living mech in the cities had been classified as a witness. The Senate’s chokehold on Cybertron’s mass media had prevented the real story from becoming widespread, but the attempts to pin blame had failed as well. The whole incident had become a meaningless massacre that’d done nothing but spread panic across the planet.

Even if -- if -- the peace negotiations ended in a real treaty, Tarn wasn’t going to rise again. There weren’t enough survivors left to come home, and fear saturated the foundations. The ruins still felt
like a target.

The Decepticons had butchered entire cities in the course of the war. Sometimes it was difficult to remember that, for some of the Decepticons, it had been revenge. It didn’t make slaughter any more excusable. Right now, however, walking through Tarn, Jazz found it more understandable than he usually did.

How many mechs had joined the Autobots because those who stayed neutral became targets? How many mechs had become Decepticons out of hate for the Senate? How many Decepticons had defected to the Autobots in order to strike back at those who hit them? How many Autobots had gone Decepticon because they believed only tyranny could bring peace?

The war was a constant exchange of vengeance, back and forth. There weren’t any clear parameters, no studied proposals and simple science explanations. Nobody could point at one event, one person, one idea, and say, “This. This is what we’re fighting over.”

Things hadn’t become far too complicated; they’d started out that way. It had never been as straightforward as cause and effect. Economics and other factors were easy ways to analyze something that wasn’t that simple. That kind of perspective reduced people to numbers and refused to acknowledge their inherent unpredictability. The war had tangled morass of emotion and response, and no observer could blame one single element for the continuing turnover of vengeance and defense, offense and revenge.

Jazz had to understand how people worked. He had to sympathize with what they felt. He wasn’t above that cycle himself.

Starscream waited up ahead, a dark silhouette against a darker night sky, and some part of the saboteur wanted to take the shot. For the friends who’d been torn apart, or the cities destroyed, or the screech of maniacal laughter above the battlefield as the Autobots lost another battle. One shot, and the Air Commander would go down for good. One shot, and the Decepticon Second-in-Command would be just another statistic in the war. One shot, and the Decepticon Second-in-Command would be just another statistic in the war. A casualty as the Great War continued, because continue it would, for many reasons that Starscream’s death would only be one of.

Jazz stood there on the pillar, looking out over the ashes of Tarn, and contemplated revenge. A single shot to restart a war.

It was the easy way out, really. Wading through the propaganda and twisted spins on the facts was tiresome. It was difficult, maybe even impossible, to pick out the real meaning behind what he’d seen and participated in tonight. Jazz was so frustrated by trying to pry truth out of Starscream’s warped plotting. He was a mouse in a maze scurrying around looking for cheese, and he didn’t know if the observer was merely testing him or actively attempting to deceive him. The maze could be a deathtrap instead of a trial. The Autobots were guessing, and one wrong guess could ruin it all.

Maybe there was no cheese. The reward of peace could be pure fiction. The Seeker lied habitually. Why would he be honest now?

He looked ahead, and red optics were looking back. For all that his tone had been light and teasing, Starscream hadn’t come within arm’s reach since they’d left the makeshift arena downtown. One of the Air Commander’s wings was halved, but he’d taken to the air and jetted from wall to wall ahead of Jazz the entire way. If not for the embarrassing accusations said in that mischievous tone, he could hardly be said to be keeping the Autobot company at all.

One shot. Just one.
Jazz sighed his vents clear of the old smell of char and met the red optics with a steady stare. He could take the shot, or the risk. Bait, or motivation. Maybe the cake was a lie, the cheese didn’t exist, and peace would never happen. Starscream could be staying out of reach because he was a wary observer of a revolutionary new experiment, waiting for a possible explosion from the test subject. Or he could be a coward afraid his scheme had been found out. Either way, it was up to Jazz to decide.

Meh. Nothing was certain, anyway. If Special Operatives mechs took the easy way out, they’d just be Operatives, no Special.

He began climbing down, careful where he put his feet. “I didn’t say anything.”

“I know. What did I just say?” Starscream tsked.

“Then what’re you getting at?”

“He’s a telepath.”

“Oh, please, mech couldn’t read my mind with Vortex holdin’ me down and half a refinery pumping through my tanks,” Jazz snapped back, most of his concentration on a slippery slope of roofing tiles piled in the middle of the pitted road. “You really think I don’t have shields up around him?” He skidded down the slope and danced a few steps on momentum at the bottom, turning it into a jogging run up the next heap of junk in his way.

Starscream watched him come closer. “That’s actually my point.” From here, the cracks in his optic glass were almost invisible. “You’d have had to drop your shields and project to get the idea across to him.”

“You’re…saying that I came up with that.”

“Mnhmm. Suggested it, in any case. Quite an interesting insight into what goes on in that head of yours, I think.”

Aaaaand they’d come right back around to the awkward silence.

The footing really was treacherous here, wasn’t it? Jazz found the road surface to be utterly fascinating. He didn’t look away from it. Who knew where the next pitfall was located?

Starscream had worked with Soundwave for millions of years. Jazz didn’t doubt that the Air Commander could discern when the Communications Officer used his unique abilities to read other mechs’ neural circuitry. Like the command cadre of the Autobots, the Decepticon officers had modified themselves against known threats. Among Decepticons, that meant protection against each other as well as against Autobots. Starscream probably had cerebral shield-mods just as strong as any the Autobots used.

It gave him a headache, but Jazz had a field-scrambler installed to cover the electromagnetic output of his central processors. It didn’t protect his lock-away processor or remote units, but those required much more than a surface scan to decode. The scrambler wouldn’t stand up to prolonged attack from Soundwave, but it prevented casual access while, say, standing near each other in a makeshift arena in the dead of night. Starscream hadn’t done more than pause to greet the other Decepticon officer, but Jazz had slammed his scrambler on the moment he realized they were approaching the telepath. One could never be too careful around Soundwave.

…thought the Autobot who’d had his hand held in the crook of the Decepticon Air Commander’s arm at the time. Uh. Yeah.
Well, in Jazz’s defense, he had been riding a mission-high more than half made of stymied overload at the time. He’d just fragged Thundercracker’s spark, and Jazz really didn’t want to meet the mech who could walk away from that without wanting a frag of his own. Seriously -- Thundercracker’s spark. Jazz had been touching his spark with fingers and tongue. It had been furthest thing possible from the data interface Jazz knew, and it’d been hotter than melted metal. He hadn’t been thinking all that clearly afterward, and he’d been concentrating hard for those uninterrupted lines of thought he did have going.

So maybe he’d had an idea, and just maybe he’d shut off the scrambler for a quarter a klik, and, okay, it was theoretically possible that Soundwave’s scanners had caught it. Erm, especially since Jazz had been thinking a specific mental picture as strongly as he could at the telepath when Starscream stopped before Soundwave to exchange completely out-of-context pleasantries. It had totally not been the time for small talk. Who asked about where progress on the draft had halted tonight when Thundercracker was sprawled on the ground behind them? Jazz had been completely justified in being impatient with waiting.

That did not mean he was going to confess he was the reason Soundwave had cut things short, however. No matter how close to the mark Starscream’s guesses were falling. Jazz hadn’t said anything. Soundwave had been on Earth just as long as he had. Nuts and bolts, the mech was the Decepticon Communication Officer; he’d probably had even more exposure to humanity’s bizarre disciplinary practices.

So it was entirely possible that yanking Thundercracker over his knee and spanking his aft had been the telepath’s own idea. And Jazz hadn’t been staring at all, no matter how Thundercracker had kicked and squealed with each heavy smack! from Soundwave.

Ahem. Silence continued to be Jazz’s best answer, here. The AWK² element reading was positively sky-high in this area tonight.

Starscream laughed from up ahead, but Jazz kept his visor on the ground. Tricky stuff, rubble.

“Now you know what a courtship proposal looks like among the Decepticons,” the Air Commander commented dryly, apparently deciding to let the subject lie. For the moment, anyway. “What do you think?”

Jazz thought that he was fortunate Starscream hadn’t pushed him as hard as Decepticons evidently pushed each other. “I think it’s weird we never heard anything ‘bout this prior to you landing on our doorstep,” he said, because it was true.

Also because he wasn’t going to even field a hint of a suggestion that contract negotiations between Autobots and Decepticons include tying mechs up and walloping them to overload. Just…not a good idea, that.

A kinky idea, but definitely not a good one.

There was a moment of silence, during which the small Autobot ducked and crawled under an old girder propping up a wall. When he straightened up on the other side, Starscream looked down at him from the top of the Tarn/Vos border wall. Jazz reset his visor, shunting away all the automatic target-locks that popped up, and flexed his armor out so the plating gaped. Rust pattered to the ground in a dusty hail when he shook himself.

“Hmm.” Red optics sized him up and dismissed the thought of offering a hand up. “It’s not all that strange. It’s customary to seek permission across private comm. lines,” Starscream said, thinking aloud, “but Thundercracker’s communication suite was,” he smirked, “broken during the challenge.
Soundwave had to propose out loud.” His wings shrugged. “And you must admit that it got more attention when announced that way.”

From the way Thundercracker’s sated spark had sluggishly sped up, it probably had something to do with the Seeker’s peculiar humiliation fetish, too. Making him, once again, admit out loud what he wanted. In this case, wanting what Soundwave had offered: a contract for rank held in the Communications division under Soundwave.

Jazz was never going to understand wanting that. Or being excited by someone spanking him, either. Thundercracker had quietly granted permission to court from where he’d been sprawled in the rust, then gasped agreement to the spanking from over Soundwave’s knee. Even charged up and giddy, Jazz had boggled at that.

“Why’d you ask me off comm., then?” The saboteur walked along the wall, looking for a way up. There were enough handholds below Starscream’s chosen perch to scramble up, but threat assessment insisted that he have a hand free in case he needed to draw a weapon. “You guys seem to be all ‘bout the customs, so why break now?”

Yeah, it was still just really odd thinking about the Decepticons as being traditional. Traditional Vosians, no less.

Starscream rose and limped along the wall, keeping pace with the Autobot. “You think I don’t know that anything put through to your network will be broadcast back in your base for everyone to listen to?” Contempt dripped off the high-pitched voice, making it an audible sneer. “I do prefer at least the pretense of modesty, Au -- Jazz.”

Speaking of awkward, the way Starscream stumbled over using his name was worth noting. The small black-and-white mech glanced up, trying to judge if it’d been intentional or not. Starscream’s face gave nothing away, but Jazz’s sight at the moment consisted of what could be seen by the pale metallic light of the moons, Starscream’s own optics, and passive sensor sweeps. He could be missing something. Not that it would mean much, considering the Seeker’s mercurial moods. The temperamental Air Commander could be incredibly easy to read at times, but nobody knew when his transparent body language was honest reaction or part of a ploy.

Information and threat assessment processors collided. The resulting random firing of subroutines made Jazz ache in unfamiliar ways. His thoughts were pulled in conflicting directions by code. Suggested actions and predicted reaction models scrolled down his HUD in a constant rapid-fire cascade. Starscream was either a scientist or a test subject himself. Jazz was either part of an experiment or a playing piece on the board. This was either war or peace, and he didn’t know how to make the decision of which it was.

He was the Head of Special Operations, the Third-in-Command of the Autobots. Right now, he felt that wasn’t enough. He wasn’t equipped to decide the fate of a world.

If tonight was somewhere in the endless cycle of vengeance, someone had to rise above it. Someone had to stop and refuse to pursue revenge any longer. Maybe peace wasn’t so much about ending conflict between the factions as it was recognizing they were locked in a self-destructive cycle against themselves. Whatever other reasons had ultimately led to the peace negotiations, the truth was that Cybertron had been well on its way to dying. The Autobots and Decepticons had been killing themselves off in their cyclical civil war for so long that that even an optimistic planetary census read like a science report on a dying species. Including estimates for undisturbed statis-holds, remaining Cybertronians still counted in under a million.

If they’d been organic, there’d be a massive outcry of concern involving propagation of their species.
As it was, the initial ceasefire had allowed rationality to creep in around the bloody-minded revenge driving so many of them. The war had seemed so huge and out-of-control that nobody had really understood how very small it’d gotten. When battles were fought by resistance cells or drones, or far away in entirely different star systems, it’d been difficult to tell how many mechs were still alive. The factions had boiled off to next to nothing. The rank and file had become concentrated down, with only the very best left alive.

Cybertron had become a whole planet of Tarns, with not enough survivors left to rebuild their leveled world. And the majority of those survivors currently struggled to feel responsibility to do so, rather than an obligation to keep fighting for what had already been destroyed.

What a wake-up call.

“I wish,” Jazz said softly, letting wishful thinking override his aching processors for a moment, “that I could trust you.”

When he looked up, the red optics in the darkness seemed too weary for caution. “You said it yourself, Autobot: Decepticons are not trustworthy,” Starscream returned, and his voice was a brassy, strident discord in the night. To the Autobot below, the Air Commander’s nasal voice held more bitterness than mockery.

“There seems little point in continuing this farce.”

Whatever hope the Autobots held, the Decepticons might be, could be holding onto, too.

“What do you really think you’re watching?”

But the Decepticons would never show it. That would be weak.

Assessment processors fought not to freeze up. There had been too much code-changing in too short a time. Jazz needed recovery time for a thorough defragmenting. Tonight had introduced too many new factors into the subroutine protocols. Information, threat assessment, and noncombat-dealings were straining under new data-sorting protocols.

He kept himself from wincing. He looked up at Starscream and listened to his processors. War or peace, death trap or puzzle maze…reward or bait. Welcome to Decepticon courtship: cake or death?

He listened, and gambled on maybe.

“Are you gonna help me, or just stand there ogling me all night?” he demanded as if it were the most casual thing in the world. “I realize I’m too sexy for my altmode, but I got more to do tonight than stand around bein’ optic candy.”

Starscream’s optics flared, but that was only sign of surprise. “Do you really think half the Armada won’t have their optics glued on your aft after your little show?” He knelt on the edge of the wall and extended a hand down toward the Autobot. His face held none of the amusement giving his already shrill voice a keen edge. “Current odds have that I’m courting you merely for your looks and, ahem. Skills.” He put emphasis on the last word, and somehow Jazz doubted the skills being bet on had anything to do with SpecOps.

That was oddly flattering, truth be told. Which truth Jazz would never tell, because becoming the ‘face-fantasy of the Decepticon Armada brought a whole new level of awkward to the table. Awkward squared plus the square root of mortified.

On the surface, however, he only smiled and stretched to grab hold of Starscream’s hand. “What’re
“The past favorite was political, that I’m settling for second-best since the Prime isn’t available.”
Their gazes locked and held as the Air Commander lifted him up, off his feet. Starscream took his time. The black-and-white Autobot suppressed a shiver working its way down his back struts one joint at a time. “About the time you arrived tonight, the odds shifted toward unrequited personal interest, since no one could understand why else you’d call off the courtship otherwise.”

Apparently the Armada was still under the impression that Jazz would be the one to call it off. Was Starscream too proud to admit defeat and call it off himself, or was this another courtship tradition? Or was this a purely coerced contract? Both Acid Storm and Thundercracker had seemed unhappy that Starscream was courting, and Skywarp had all but admitted Megatron was forcing something none of them wanted.

“There seems little point in continuing this farce.”

“Maybe we’re not politically compatible,” Jazz suggested, covering an unpleasant judder of his fuel pump by kicking out a foot to catch the top of the wall. “Autobot…Decepticon…sometimes these things don’t work out, y’know?” Understatement of the orn, right there.

Also, a backhanded acknowledgement of…before. Recognition of the argument in the hallway that had likely caused much of the upheaval tonight. Not an apology, but a nod to the fundamental differences in culture and thought that separated them. Jazz had learned a lot tonight. Too much, perhaps, but what had been seen couldn’t be and shouldn’t be unseen.

This close, the cracked optic and dented face plate were clearly visible. Starscream shook his head as if chiding him. “It’s common knowledge that the only reason for the Decepticon/Autobot contracts is Megatron’s orders. What’s kept the betting going is why I chose to court you.” The saboteur arched, using the Seeker’s grip and the foot on the wall to buck himself up onto the wall -- and practically onto Starscream as well. The Air Commander caught him before their bodies did more than brush together, and his mouth turned down in a mild frown as he looked down at the smaller mech. “It’d be easy credits to collect on the bets myself if I could only recall why I made that choice.”

That was not a good thing to hear. Sounded like Starscream was still fuming. When the Air Commander fumed, he’d shoot his own foot to spite his face. Or screw a peace treaty over to get back at a meddling Autobot.

“What, you don’t want me?” Jazz boldly kept his grip on Starscream’s hand and stood his ground. He tilted his head back and grinned fiercely. “Everybody wants me.”

“You were not my first choice.” Starscream’s voice was flat and insulting, just daring him to take offense. “You were not even my second.”

“Ouch.” The Autobot recoiled exaggeratedly, pushing his lip out in an overdone pout. “That hurts.” A smile won out over the pout after a moment, and he poured on the charm. “But I’m so shi~iny,” he coaxed. He was in a destroyed city with no witnesses in sight, trying to tempt the ornery Second-in-Command of the Decepticons into a round of verbal banter. He was pushing his luck and knew it. “C’mon, y’know you want the shiny Autobot.” He pushed a hip out and propped his free hand on it. His windows rolled up and down as his doors jigged slightly.

The brief surge of anger that had surfaced on the Seeker’s face melted back into arrogance. A less observant mech might not have even noticed it covered pain and weariness. “You are, I think, more trouble than you are worth.”
Not a good sign at all. “Then why’d you go after me in the first place?” Jazz asked, keeping his tone playful. He really, really did not want this to be taken seriously. “Fine, whatever. You’re not good enough for me, anyway. If you can’t take the heat, get outta the smelter.” He shook his hand free and examined it as if it had Decepticon cooties, now.

Starscream snorted and muttered something that had the sound of “I’ll stuff you in a smelter,” but he didn’t reach for the saboteur. Instead, he took a step back along the wall. His freed hand disappeared behind his back, and Jazz’s passive sensors blared alarm as the sudden spike of energy signaled the opening of an altmode storage subspace pocket. The Autobot’s fuel pump started to pound as threat assessment immediately slid into high gear. Jazz had to control a flinch as information assessment started screaming lurid warnings down his HUD. Starscream’s hand came back out of subspace, and maybe wasn’t a certainty. Jazz had gambled on the wrong thread of possibility, and --

-- and that was a cube of energon, not a weapon. From the purplish glitter, it was highgrade.

Red optics were watching him just as intently as his visor watched Starscream, and the Air Commander huffed a sullen bark of laughter. It sounded as if he didn’t want to be amused by the surprise on Jazz’s face. “Well,” Starscream said as he looked down at the cube in his hand, “no one ever said Autobots were easy.”

“I resemble that remark,” Jazz said back tartly, but his mouth was on automatic. His attention was more on the fact that the Seeker had extended his free hand toward him. “What’re you playing at now?”

This time it was the Decepticon who piled on the charm until it oozed. “Oh, did you want me to play?”

Jazz looked at the larger mech, and half a dozen scenes of what had happened tonight flew through his mind. That one rogue subprocessor spun out a few more, just for fun, and his visor shuttered through reset twice trying to stuff those imagined scenes back where they’d come from before they set his vents to blowing again. “I think I’ll pass.”

Even with chipped dental molds and dented facial plating, Starscream’s smile was deceptively innocent. “The night is young.”

“And I need my beauty sleep, so I’ll just be going now, yeah?”

"For the purpose of ending our Great War," Starscream rasped, voice dropping, and it sent all those back struts to vibrating again.

He was not nervous. Amateurs got nervous. The Jazzmeister was just searching for what the angle was, and not finding it was making him a little chary. Jazz edged into a pose from which he could either fling himself off the wall or fight back. At this point, threat assessment was only guessing what Starscream would do next.

Mech was as unpredictable as a SpecOps operative.

Jazz stared into the looking glass, Decepticon-distorted like a funhouse mirror, and wondered who was testing whom.

No, he couldn’t trust Starscream. However, for the sake of the Autobots, for peace and Cybertron, someone had to start having some blind faith.

He looked down at the hand and reluctantly extended his own. "For the purpose of ending our Great
Black fingers settled onto blue, and warped joints creaked as they closed around the Autobot’s smaller hand. A blue thumb caressed his knuckles before turning his hand over and opening it upward. That blue thumb swept in again, pressing firmly into the palm of a black hand, and Jazz couldn’t look away from Starscream’s face. He couldn’t even begin to guess what he saw in the expression there. A flicker of a smile, and the highgrade was transferred to Jazz’s palm.

Starscream’s now-free hand extended, and Jazz offered his other hand without conscious thought. Half-mesmerized, he let the Air Commander take his hand and turn it toward the night sky. Red optics studied it carefully, attention fastened to it as if refusing to look into Jazz’s visor were another challenge he intended to win. The combat-battered Seeker almost-smiled once more and bent over their hands.

Jazz’s pump skipped a beat, and his visor widened. This again?

He could have taken the shot; he hadn’t. He could have pulled away; he didn’t. He saw it coming, and let it happen.

In the dim light of the moon, the curve of Starscream’s mouth hid beneath the shadow of his helm. Jazz couldn’t see it. He could only feel the satin-smooth slide of finely polished metal in the center of his palm. Starscream pressed a kiss there, and the slight pressure revealed nicks in the soft metal. The Autobot’s fans stuttered quietly to life when Starscream drew his mouth up from the palm, gently touching his mouth to the vulnerable wrist joint where black hands met white-armored forearm. Hyper-sensitive sensor networks blitzed Jazz’s cortex with the soft, slow feel of it, but also of the uneven drag of a nanite-clotted wound on the inside of Starscream’s lower lip.

If not for the blue hand still cradling Jazz’s other hand, the cube of highgrade would have sloshed as a full-body shudder passed through the saboteur from helm projections to tires. It was small, but noticeable.

Starscream looked up, just enough to meet Jazz’s clouded gaze. The almost-smile lurked, and the Decepticon bowed his head down. Another kiss to Jazz’s open palm, and then Starscream folded the Autobot’s hand around it. Blue fingers stroked each finger into place, one at a time, until Jazz’s hand was a loose fist holding onto a sensor-memory.

When the Seeker stepped forward, straightening out his half-bow enough to be level with the smaller mech, Jazz only stared at him. Starscream’s smirk was lopsided but registered as oddly genuine despite the circumstances -- or maybe because of them. The Autobot wasn’t really sure what was going on, but there was a vast feeling of relief bottoming out his tanks. This was not aggression. This was not rejection. Somehow, Jazz had managed to wrestle something resembling victory out of the night.

Even if victory was merely Starscream pressing their forehelms together, vents sighing heated air into Jazz’s face. There was a tiny brush of metal against Jazz’s cheek, which he only realized had been the tip of the Seeker’s nose when Starscream stepped back and straightened to his full height. Baffled but game, Jazz met his smirk with his own patented grin. His hands were still before him, just barely held up by blue fingertips. Those dropped away as the Seeker took another step away.

The small grounder looked down at what he’d been given and let his grin go crooked. “Dinner and a show, huh?”

“There have been worse first dates,” Starscream replied, so martyred the Autobot’s grin nearly became a laugh.
Powerful thrusters came online with a muted roar, pushing the flyer gradually up in the night sky. Knowing the kind of damage the Seeker had suffered, Jazz had to admire the even launch. Decepticon red stayed locked on Autobot blue as the Air Commander hovered briefly above him.

“Enjoy the rest of your night, intended. I would escort you home to your berth, but apparently further attention would prevent recharge. You say you need rest to maintain your looks.” There was barely enough light to see the evil flash of a smirk when it came. “I’ll just go ask Soundwave a few pointed questions about novel ideas and their source instead. Should be an interesting conversation, don’t you think?”

The Seeker’s thrusters lit to full burn not a second later, not giving the Autobot time to do more than stiffen as that processed. Starscream shot off over the ruins of Tarn, back toward the arena. Also toward Soundwave and his information on just why he’d put Thundercracker over his knee.

Jazz was left on the wall alone, holding a cube of highgrade in one hand and the sensor-ghost of a goodnight kiss in the other. His mouth opened, but closed helplessly after a moment. There wasn’t really anything he could say to that.

Aaaakward.

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 18

[* * * * *]
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]

Pt. 19

[* * * * *]

All Cybertronians had at least two modes: a primary mode and an alternate mode.

Without an extensive rebuild, the primary mode stayed the same. It was the rootmode that the alternate built around. Mechs and femmes couldn’t switch core builds, and frametypes stayed the same under surface changes. While technically it was possible to do an entire structure shift, the sheer cost and time involved made it wholly impractical. It wasn’t just calling in medics to keep vital systems and the spark stable, or engineers to design and implement protoform-deep changes. It was also the cost to the person on the table.

Cybertronians weren’t robots, but there was no denying that ancestry. Take a computer CPU out of its mechanical casing and put it into another, and it was still the same CPU, still trying to operate the original casing. In order to get it to operate a new casing, the CPU would have to be changed as well. Programs would need to be uninstalled and reinstalled, systems upgraded and introduced through new software interfaces, and everything from the spark casing out had to be hooked individually into the transplanted computer. Every sensor suite and line of code had to be tested, checking for compatibility between shell and processor units. One rejection could throw the entire body into potentially lethal malfunction. Imagine the problems to be had when someone was brought online for the first time -- and rejected the new frametype’s fuel pump.

Ratchet’s favorite anecdote for scaring bad patients into line was the rebuilt mech who pestered his medic out of doing a last inspection, only to go into convulsions three orns later. Turned out that part of the original rootmode’s self-repair system had slipped under the radar during previous inspections. It’d spent three orns busily ‘repairing’ what it saw as damage. First it’d reverted the self-repair system itself, then started in on the mech’s new body. The mech had been a mess inside and out before he’d been stabilized.

Lesson being: don’t tell a medic to leave off work just because it was boring to sit around medbay. Shut up and be thankful the medic was doing his job.

The other lesson, the one Ratchet didn’t talk quite so much about, was that core rebuilds didn’t often end well for the rebuilt. It wasn’t just that different frametypes were rejected by sparks, although it often happened. It wasn’t the lack of money, materials, or time, although that certainly was an issue during war. Rebuilds were expensive, but the cost was more than physical. A rebuilt mech wasn’t necessarily the same mech as before.

Ratchet’s story usually ended before telling about how that particular mech hadn’t made it. Someone had been alive inside the body afterward. It just hadn’t been the mech who’d been on the table to begin with.

Muck about with a robot’s computer, and the robot could end up a drone with a useless, malfunctioning computer no longer capable of higher processing than basic motor skills. Worse, or maybe more mercifully, the computer could be nothing but a defunct lump of metal inside the mechanical shell. That was unfortunate for a machine, but machines could be duplicated. The computer could be torn out and replaced.
Not so much with Cybertronians.

They had computers in their background, but the hardware components being yanked from casing to casing weren’t just computer parts. Cybertronians weren’t robots, not anymore. Somewhere between spark and processor units, assembly language meshed seamlessly into real thought. Installing new programs or rewriting code to integrate the computer into a new body shell didn’t just change the computer: it changed the Cybertronian’s mind. More often than not, a rebuild resulted in a different person entirely -- and there was no easy ‘reset’ button to push. That person couldn’t revert to the previous model.

Sure, the spark hadn’t changed, but the spark was only part of the sentence equation. The resulting person may have similar traits, maybe even the same basic personality, but half the mind had been irrevocably, physically rebuilt. Changing software/hardware and their interface protocols without competent medics and engineers monitoring the rebuild the whole way ended in disaster. Some sparks balked, rejecting primary mode remodels entirely as if the mental differences were too much to recognize.

The humans joked about ‘the Blue Screen of Death’ when their computers crashed. Cybertronians didn’t have the ability to name colors anymore when that final, fatal ‘System error: Shutdown imminent: 3…2…1’ message came up. They still didn’t laugh at the humans’ jokes. The blue screens had been enough to freak out some of the Ark crew.

Prowl was one of the few who had seen the actual terminal color so many times he recognized it. Nobody had gotten a clear answer out of him yet, but he had admitted that it wasn’t blue.

The Autobots’ Executive Officer had a notoriously stolid spark. It got thrown into upset whenever circumstances forced Prowl’s self-modification program protocols into activation. His system had strict guidelines to deal with those circumstances. If the situation started modifying his information set architecture enough to affect his tactical processors’ logic algorithms, it shut him down.

The alternative was a total crash when Prowl’s spark rejected the dissonant ISA changes. Better a quick reboot than a drone named Prowl.

Prowl’s situation was extreme, but not unique. There was a risk of mind-alteration every time a mech installed a different ammo-lead for a new gun, or even just scanned a new altmode that didn’t quite fit design specifications. At this point in the Great War, there weren’t many mechs left who hadn’t endured replacement surgery or field-upgrades to their rootmodes. The changes required on the fly happened because they were necessary. A mech either made it, or he didn’t, just like with every medical procedure done in lousy war conditions.

The ones with finicky sparks hadn’t made it this far. Even those with less-than-stellar medics had bit it. Those whose personalities remained mostly intact were the ones whose medics dragged them through injury-related rebuilds by sheer competence or a stubborn refusal to let details slide.

It was why head wounds were so dangerous. Technically, an unspecified half of a Cybertronian’s mind was an electronic machine. Cerebral circuitry could be reconstructed. Processor units and the personality matrix could be re-loaded from a backup. That didn’t mean the spark would accept the old hard drive content. The process of updating or downgrading so the hardware/software interface matched backup and body again was notoriously tricky. The mind that came online afterward usually wasn’t the same mech who’d taken a head-shot.

They all knew it. They knew the problems and the risks, and they accepted them. Part of life as a Cybertronian was dealing with change. It was what they did, after all: they transformed.
It was why defectors from either side were usually pressured into undergoing at least a partial primary mode reformat. It was a literal change of mind under the new faction. It was an undeniable statement of commitment to the opposition: *I have changed my mind* made physical.

The humans argued that artificial intelligence could never equal living thought because computers couldn’t change without outside input. The Autobots looked upon that statement as unrealistically simplified. What was considered outside input? When did a computer begin to learn instead of gather data? Could artificial intelligence change itself based on prior data? Could that prior data be considered experience?

Choice was one of the key defining factors of sentience. The debate about the difference between artificial and actual intelligence could take many angles, but the ability to make a choice without someone else pulling the strings was a pretty obvious one. Advanced drones could operate on their own, but they had to be programmed with decision-making routines.

The drone said, “My programming dictates.”

The living being said, “I think.”

It was a frustratingly thin line, and still the largest source of contention between organic and mechanical beings. The organics argued that ‘mechanical organisms’ was an oxymoron. Those mechanical organisms questioned why there was a sliding scale of sentience defining, say, a human as somehow better than a dog. A dog could choose to preserve its own life against all previous training, just as an advanced enough A.I. could make that rationalize and make that same decision against all its programming human. Where was the line drawn where humans were more sentient than a dog, or a Cybertronian more than a well-programmed drone?

The arguments could and did go on for days. Years, in the case of Cybertron and Earth. The Autobots who hadn’t been on the *Ark* mission had initially met the Earth ambassadors with trepidation, not xenophobia, but it’d been a close call considering Cybertron’s historical precedent with organic species. The sentience argument had caused war between Cybertron and aliens before.

Despite any and all expectations and conflicts, however, Earth and Cybertron were getting on like a house on fire. It helped that human popular culture changed so quickly it hooked the long-lived Cybertronians before they even knew what was going on. Even the Decepticons were getting addicted.

All external differences aside, humans and Cybertronians had far more in common than they didn’t. It didn’t seem like it, but under their respective squishy or metallic surfaces? There was a meeting of minds happening between their two worlds.

Most sentient beings changed through time and experience. Humans evolved their minds through self-reflection and outside pressure, and their bodies adapted on a very slow timeline. To counter that, their minds came up with ways to facilitate physical adaptation. Cybertronians as a species simply had their own way to do it. Their way could be measured by lines of code like a robot -- right up until it couldn’t. Because Cybertronians had sparks, and sparks could not be predicted or measured.

Humans could relate. The human soul screwed up every projected behavior model, too.

Autobot X should have worked. The theory of implanting a human into a robotic form was sound. But nobody had ever or would ever try the process again after Spike Witwicky. There was an unknown factor in humans and Cybertronians, but only the Cybertronians’ unreadable flux could be seen. Medics could open up a mech, point at the spark, and say, “*That’s* why the rebuild didn’t
work.” The human soul? Not so much. Even Wheeljack shied from testing something invisible to every sensor scan known to Cybertron or Earth.

Skyfire’s social studies and Perceptor’s cross-sectioning of engineering and psychology had yielded an interesting after-action report for the Ark mission. It indicated that encountering such a short-lived, highly reactive species had boosted the Autobots’ self-modification program protocols into hyperdrive. Encountering the humans hadn’t caused protoform-out rebuilds, but the core-level alterations had been neither slow nor minor. While every Autobot had the ability to change internally on that scale, it was rather telling that none of the Ark crew had seized up from major differences between CPU and spark.

Prowl had rebooted so many times on Earth it’d become a running gag, but he hadn’t locked up. That said quite a bit about relations between humankind and Cybertronians.

Landing on a new world always resulted in the contact team emerging not quite the same as when they’d arrived. Earth had taken that adjustment allowance and accelerated it wildly. Cybertronians were a species who thought little of coming out of the medbay with minor personality changes from a weapon’s upgrade, much less the programming imperatives installed by scanning a new altmode. Earth hadn’t caused primary mode shifts, but it’d pushed the envelope on how far those ‘minor’ changes went.

There were mechs returning from Earth who looked only a little different but were nearly unrecognizable under the surface. Prowl used terms like ‘diva tendencies’ now, and he hadn’t missed a beat when applying it to Starscream. It’d boggled Springer the first time Red Alert threatened to get the flyswatter out. The Scale of Ridiculous made regular appearances when the Autobots rated situation reports now, although none of the Ark crew would explain why it went from 1 to Purple Griffin.

Humor on the job, especially during war? That was a jarring change for many. It was made even stranger because the prominent officers who’d returned from Earth showed the effects so strongly.

It certainly wasn’t just the Autobots who’d been affected. Blaster reported that Blitzwing had three separate online accounts on Earth for ‘Fantasy Football: Ultimate Team Match’, and not one of them reflected the triple-changer’s pre-Earth psych-profile. Astrotrain had only left Earth after an expensive online order of model trains went through and was delivered to one of the Decepticons’ dummy addresses. The Autobots had tracked, intercepted, and then bemusedly let the tiny train sets through to be picked up on time.

Even accounting for the ‘deception’ part of ‘Decepticon,’ that was out of the ordinary. Jazz would argue that Megatron had returned from Earth changed, too. The Decepticon leader wasn’t precisely a sane mech, but he’d become noticeably more…stable.

Others on Earth had undergone similar personality changes. For instance, Sunstreaker had left Cybertron a narcissistic sociopathic bastard of a frontliner. He’d returned as a narcissistic sociopathic bastard of a frontliner, of course. He’d also utterly unsettled members of his former unit, who had watched their emotionless, self-absorbed killer trip over himself to answer a call from some little human girl surnamed ‘Chase.’ The sociopathic tendencies remained, but the golden Autobot had changed.

There were personality-matrix reasons for his artistic dabbling on Earth. Just as Sunstreaker had shifted from artist to warrior at the beginning of the war, he was shifting into someone different now. Only time would tell who this new evolutionary phase would turn him into.

Time, and circumstances. Outside influence came in many forms, and Cybertronians’ alternate
modes incorporated those outside influences. Altmodes always served a purpose, whether it was for transportation or battle. That purpose came through in the primary mode as the altmode’s function wormed through the processor registers and component microarchitecture. But it took time, and internal changes could only be pushed so far before an actual physical root-change had to be done.

A flyer couldn’t scan a ground-based altmode; a grounder couldn’t scan a flight-based one. A Minibot couldn’t take on an altmode larger than his design expansion allowed; Optimus Prime couldn’t compress his primary mode into an altmode too small for his frametype. Noncombatants couldn’t become warbuilds overnight. An alternate mode had to complement the primary mode, and the primary mode had to be able to incorporate the alternate mode.

Some said that Megatron’s erratic rages sprang from an incorrect graft done when the Constructicons had rebuilt him from an industrial equipment altmode into a powerful gunformer. Theory went that adopting the crude technology of an Earth gun as an altmode had re-aligned some of his industrial frametype functions and restored some of his sanity. But who knew, really?

Despite eons of adaptation to war, industry-makes and civilian-function frametypes still struggled to take on alternate forms made specifically for war. Most of the Autobots were still grounders in civilian altmodes. Some of the Decepticons were, too. Swindle still had to scan a noncombatant altmode, even though he’d managed to splice in half an armory. His primary mode accepted the relevant links-in but still wouldn’t allow the additional weaponry to fully integrate into his core structure.

Powerglide had scanned an Earth plane, judging it sufficiently within his design specs, only to seize up when his scanner tried to use the data. Powerglide was not a warbuild, and his CPU didn’t have the rootmode connections necessary to install and use a machine of war -- even a human machine of war -- as an alternate form. The massive power consumption difference alone had led to seizures as his protoform tried to purge the data. He’d been determined to stick with the A-10 Thunderbolt II, however, and he’d tried to force the transformation through.

Spark-rejection of his own processor units had very nearly killed the little flyer. It’d glitched him so badly Ratchet had confined him to the Ark medbay for months. Only a combination of Earth’s contagious weirdness, Ratchet’s ruthless attention to detail, and Powerglide’s sheer pig-headedness had slapped enough patches on core and programming to make the altmode stick.

Afterward, nobody mentioned how the spitfire Minibot had changed when he got out of medbay. His odd attachment to Astoria Carlton-Ritz had only been the most obvious tweak. Moonracer never commented. She looked blindly through the affair, just as he accepted what four million years apart had done to her.

That’s how it went, when people changed. It was either accept and move on, or fight reality and be left behind.

Most of the Autobots had accepted the truth, and the truth had been that the Great War would not end quickly or easily. The majority of Cybertron had begun the war as civilians. Like Powerglide, time and pressure had changed that. Most of Cybertron’s small remaining population couldn’t be classified as what they’d started as. Peace had been such an impossible thought for so long that even pacifists had war modifications, now.

These days, meeting someone without war mods tacked onto his primary mode was beyond strange. Skyfire had been made very uncomfortable by the nonstop staring. The weeks after his defrost had been really awkward as the Autobots gradually figured out what they found so strange about him.

The confused stares hadn’t stopped even after Ratchet went elbow-deep into his exploration mods,
upgrading defensive subroutines and weaponry to combat-ready status. Post-modification upgrades, the shuttle had still only been permitted to run taxi-service for years after getting out of the ice. Entire system rejection had been a real risk. Skyfire was not a fighter. It wasn’t his function. Even if he’d wanted it to be, warping his current function parameters to accept the changes would have taken far more time than the Autobots could spare.

The rest of Cybertron had had that time. There’d been a whole war’s worth of time and all the reasons therein for it. Many Cybertronians had wanted, however reluctantly, to change their functions. The Decepticons beat the savagery and glory of combat into their ranks, but the Autobots…

They were kinder, perhaps, or understood better the price paid to twist a protoform. No matter Optimus Prime’s regret when asking them to fight for him, he still asked. In return, the Autobots did their best to do more than just survive another day. They wanted to win. Where primary modes or alternate forms failed, the Autobots -- like Swindle, like the non-warbuild Decepticons -- turned to external technology add-ons.

The more specialized an ability or weaponry mod, the more distorted data paths became. Tech-installation required forcing the primary mode into accepting its presence. No other mechs had Mirage’s invisibility or Skywarp’s teleportation drive. It wasn’t because both sides hadn’t tried to duplicate the actual mechanisms. That, at least, was possible. It was integrating the technology into living beings that was a waste of time and resources.

The Autobots weren’t willing to sacrifice each other for experimentation that consistently ended in failure. The Decepticons kept running out of raw materials and scientists, or just plain lost control of the test subjects. Sunstorm was insanely powerful but prone to crazed rampages that made him an enemy to his own faction, and he was considered a success.

That left non-invasive weaponry as the best option for many. Warbuilds were proud of the fact that they were made for battle. More and more these days, those who modified themselves for war were proud of their changes as well. Arming themselves with the best and most destructive weapons had become a point of pride. Autobots and Decepticons alike were turning into nothing but war machines. War machines all the scarier because they had minds: intelligent weapons.

Which was why Weapon Specialists were so vital. Medics knew sparks and bodies inside and out; engineers knew designs. Weapon technicians knew, well, weaponry. Wheeljack could MacGyver a solution to whatever the problem at hand was using only a roll of duct tape and a tire. Ratchet could repair half the Autobots with a twig and three bolts. Give Ironhide a handful of marshmallows, and he could level a building. Give him the bag, too, and he could probably eradicate a city.

Most units had someone unofficially acting as a weapon technician, but there were relatively few Weapon Specialist officers. The actual titled rank typically fell to noncommissioned officers who ended up in the command cadre by pure knocked-down, dragged-out, battle-torn and age-worn experience. They were usually identified by the fact that they wanted nothing to do with staff meetings and had already been doing all the duties of a senior noncom well before anyone got around to giving them some fancy-nancy promotion. Real Weapon Specialists followed that with a grumble of disgust and a declaration that this was all a waste of time, and “I gotta get back to keeping these scrapheaps from blowing themselves up.”

No one knew by what voodoo Kup had avoided the rank. He seemed like he fit the stereotype perfectly. Although it couldn’t be said that he looked the part, since weapons technicians didn’t look anything alike.

Medics and engineers were usually commissioned into rank by their specialty builds. Weapons
technicians weren’t built. They just happened. Some of them had inexplicable spark affinities to weapon-tech installations. Some really, really liked guns. Some merely survived long enough that they knew everything and couldn’t dodge official rank anymore. The science divisions had at least one Weapon Specialist on call, if not a technician actually on the team. As the war had raged on, it’d become a necessity. They worked closely with -- or even were -- the unit medics.

Equipment intel had shifted into personnel intel as civilian builds slowly merged closer to warbuilds. A weapon technician nowadays was more of a staff sergeant with a particularly intimate internal perspective on every team member’s battle-related capabilities. The soldiers were becoming, upgrade by careful upgrade, living armaments. The lines between engineer, medic, and weapon technician had long ago blurred.

All three made sure the grunts on the battlefield wielded weapons meant to eventually become part of them. An engineer designed mods for a mech, and a medic put him back together to use it. A weapon technician knew down to the ammunition what weapon fit the technical specifications for that mech, before and after modification.

Normal soldiers were dangerous enough, but none more than those assigned to Special Operations. SpecOps didn’t need advanced firearms. Everything they were already made them weapons of war.

Before Jazz’s promotion to the Head of Special Operations, Ironhide had actually ranked as Autobot Third-in-Command. That had changed when Prowl had assumed control of Tactical after being promoted to Executive Officer. It had been a logical move for a military strategist to also be the Autobot Second-in-Command. It had seemed like an overwhelming amount of responsibility, but both duties called for an overarching awareness of the larger picture.

The descending trio of personnel-centered offices beneath him took on the smaller picture: Weapon Specialist, Chief Medical Officer, and Chief Engineer. Special Operations had been a division under the Weapon Specialist. The whole division was classified an arsenal: an armory instead of a unit. Other Autobots could be disarmed, if only with some difficulty. SpecOps operatives existed in a permanent ‘locked and loaded’ ready-state, and like every firearm, the Weapon Specialist had to know them inside and out. He had to know how to use them -- and disable them, if necessary.

Ironhide had argued for promoting Jazz to the Third position after Prowl’s promotion. At that stage of the war, Tactical had needed information sources and professional sneaks more than Ironhide’s generalized duties. He had responsibility for the entire faction’s personnel, and that had been pulling him more and more into commitments inside Medical and Engineering every orn. He had to focus on restructuring civilian Autobots and then retraining them to use their changed bodies. He was having enough trouble just ensuring all the post-mods got in combat practice before actual battle, much less some personal observation time on the firing range. Ironhide didn’t have enough time to split between duties anymore.

The Autobots had needed a duo of officers to stand opposite Starscream’s brilliant aerial maneuvers and Soundwave’s subtle manipulation. Prowl needed a counterpart, and Ironhide couldn’t separate from Medical and Engineering to step fully into that role.

Optimus Prime had agreed. Jazz had gotten himself a spiffy new rank as Third-in-Command.

That had not, no matter the official hierarchy, taken the Special Operations operatives out of Ironhide’s hands. They were weapons. Weapons were dangerous things, especially secret ones. They were the hidden landmines, the ones who could be do the most damage if turned against the Autobots. The reason spies and saboteurs were so distrusted was because they weren’t just sent out onto a battlefield. They were sent out to disappear and blend in and erase their own existence until, suddenly, they reappeared again. And nobody knew what happened during that missing time.
The spark rejected major distortions of a mech’s CPU, but if a hacker didn’t care if the hacked mech wouldn’t survive too long…there were ways to temporarily mask core-deep reprogramming. Infiltration by corrupted spies had been done by both sides. When it came down to force-downloads and torture anyway, it was only arguing semantics to care if a captured mech went back to his faction with the same mind he started with. Done skillfully enough, the hack-patches could even slide under a medic’s examination.

A patch covering a timed compulsion might not last long, but it could last enough for an assassination. Regular ‘rescued’ soldiers had caused havoc before the poor mechs glitched fatally. Special Operations agents had done worse.

Which was why Jazz outranked Ironhide but the red mech was still the one waiting outside of Autobot not-headquarters when he pulled up. SpecOps operatives reported to Jazz. He was the mech who wielded them, knew them down to smallest details, and could put the safeties back on. Jazz, however, was the best of the best. The only one who could be trusted to break a weapon this dangerous down was the Weapon Specialist himself.

The smaller Autobot rolled to a halt under a heavy blue gaze that gave nothing away. The building was completely dark, windows opaque. The only light other than the dim moonlight came from their headlights and Ironhide’s optics. The black-and-white car before him stayed quiet for a moment, engine shutting down and sensor suites winding down from active to passive scans, but the older Autobot just waited.

Ironhide could outwait and outstare stone walls. There was no point in putting off the inevitable.

Jazz transformed and saluted, only half joking. “Reporting for debriefing, sir.”

Ironhide stood watching him, as if waiting for him to explode. It had, sadly, happened before. And if it did, Jazz knew that the Weapon Specialist’s expression wouldn’t change from that emotionless mask. Right here and now, they weren’t two officers in the same cadre. He was a suspicious package at the airport, and Ironhide was the bomb squad. The Head of SpecOps was nothing but a potentially compromised weapon coming back under a technician’s scrutiny.

After a long pause, the red mech turned and led the way inside the dark building.

Resignation twisted Jazz’s lips as he followed at a strict 50 mechanometer distance. Just out of projected fatal radius for a suicide bomb. A step closer, a move outside of the rigid guidelines every operative knew to follow exactly, and he’d be dropped where he stood. His sensors repeatedly pinged him. There were enough targeting scopes leveled on him right now that he almost twitched nervously. An intense scanner wave rushed over him as he crossed the threshold, leaving him dizzy as sensors strained to their limits reeled in the sudden pulse.

When his optical feed stabilized again, he was alone in the hall. The lights were off, and the hallway was abandoned. Jazz waited patiently. Ratchet and Red Alert were combing the scanner data for any anomalies. Only once they finished picking his physical status apart would he be deemed safe -- well, safe enough -- to approach.

Right on cue, Ironhide stood up from behind the fake wall acting as a blast shield. It was conveniently placed in front of the door. Peace negotiations and unofficial headquarters did not gullible idiots make; the Autobots had renovated their makeshift home for war. The old building had been shored up into a bunker.

The Weapon Specialist beckoned, and Jazz obediently followed him down the hall. There were optics still on him. If he turned his sensors back up, he’d probably pick up Mirage’s signature
ghosting about the vicinity. He wouldn’t be able to pinpoint the spy’s location even with his sensitive sensor suites, but most scanners couldn’t even find that faint signature. The comm. network would be awash with Bluestreak’s never-ending chatter, pulling the sharpshooter’s thoughts away from his task and leaving his hands rock-steady as he took aim between Jazz’s doors. Someone would be watching the Praxian’s back, too. Sideswipe, perhaps, or more likely Trailbreaker and his forcefield.

It’s what Jazz would have done, anyway, and he’d put together the operative return guidelines. Firearms with unknown fingers on their triggers were distrusted until proven safe.

Ironhide led him to the first door on the right, furthest from anyone’s quarters and any important building supports. He palmed it open and stood aside. “In here,” he said shortly.

Jazz walked past him and stopped in the middle of the room. He didn’t need to look around to see that there was no furniture, just four blank walls. When the door slid closed again, it locked them inside alone. If something went terribly wrong, now, there could be only two casualties. Anyone who tried to open the door without the proper code transmitted to the correct people outside would come down with a fatal disease known as *Shot To Slag.* Not physically carrying explosives on his body didn’t mean that Jazz had been disarmed, and nobody would risk him getting loose.

“You know the drill,” Ironhide said gruffly. The Weapon Specialist had no patience for distracting words while working. Jazz had become the weapon, the weapon was Jazz, and the Head of Special Operations was a very, very dangerous weapon, indeed. *Handle with care.*

The grinding whirl of the red mech’s cannons coming online filled the room, and the saboteur didn’t need his sensors to know where those cannons were aimed. Ironhide had more at his disposal than mere marshmallows. One wrong move, and Jazz could bid his spark casing, fuel pump, and most of his torso goodbye.

Back to the door, the black-and-white saboteur knelt in the center of the room, one knee after another and no sudden moves. There were two sets of statis cuffs waiting there on the floor. Smooth as oil, Jazz picked the larger pair up and toggled the catches open. Without turning, he reached back and worked the cuffs through the tires on his ankles. Tires could be taken off, but the axles weren’t something that could be removed quickly. It took a klik while cannons whirred and Jazz’s tank gaskets skreeled shut, but the cuffs snapped shut.

His lower legs and feet immediately went numb as the statis circuit completed. The operative didn’t react. He reached for the other set of cuffs. One cuff snapped around his wrist, and then he crossed his wrists behind his back. A practiced flip of his hand, and the free cuff clicked shut. His arms went totally numb as the statis circuits seized current right out of his transmitters and redirected it into an infinite loop through the cuffs.

Jazz knelt, letting his body adjust to the sudden dead weight hanging off his shoulders and knees. There was always a weird moment when his motor control centers tried to force more energy through, convinced that his limbs weren’t getting enough current to implement commands. The cuffs absorbed the extra charge, and a second later the surge ebbed.

It suddenly struck him just how he was positioned: kneeling, knees spread for balance, with his arms locked behind his back. Just as every operative knelt for him, waiting to be broken down and reassembled.

Oh. No wonder seeing Thundercracker helpless had --

-- uhhh, yeah, now was probably not the best time to be thinking about that. Although now that he’d made the connection, he couldn’t *unthink* it.
Slaggit.

His visor dimmed as he tried to force his thoughts back to duty. Duty, yes. Occasionally Jazz did manage to be serious about it, and this was definitely a time for sobriety. The safeties had to be put back on. He’d been among Decepticons for almost a joor. Even an operative of his caliber could have been hijacked in some way. There was only one way to insure that Jazz was still Jazz.

Jazz took care of his people, and that care wasn’t just physical. Ratchet and Red Alert had scanned him for physical problems. They’d snare him for more scans later, but now it was Ironhide’s turn. And Ironhide, like Jazz, was exceedingly thorough.

…that really wasn’t shutting down that stupid processor and its ribald suggestions. Duty glared at it from the forefront of Jazz’s mind until went to lurk behind recent memory. He could feel it just waiting to pop up uninvited.

Reminded of recent memory, he found there was something that he felt compelled to do. Embarrassment squirmed up from his spark to flutter about in his tanks, but he had to say it. He really didn’t want to, but he had to. “For the record,” it took some effort to keep his balance, but Jazz managed to ease himself to the floor without falling flat on his face, “I want this.”

The ready-sound of active cannons picked up. “What scrap are ya talking?”

He could sympathize with Ironhide’s wariness. This wasn’t a suspicious action, but it sounded so, so strange.

The fact that it did was so, so wrong. Embarrassment flushed hotly through Jazz’s lines, but they chilled right afterward as dread swamped him. How could something so important have become marginalized? The cold bite of fear skipped his fuel pump.

His first impulse was to take it back, but that made fear stab deeper. Social protocols always ran in the back of his processors, part of CPU usage keyed into his information assessment programs, but that one statement had brought them right up front. They urged him to take it back. They demanded he laugh and pass it off as a poor joke. Threat assessment agreed, practically screaming warnings about subconscious social cues from Ironhide. According to what they read off his voice, Jazz’s words had been improper, and there would be severe repercussions if he didn’t correct himself right away.

Annoyingly, a direct query to the causation models produced nothing but an error message and sense of vague alarm. Jazz’s initial reaction had nothing but unplaceable fear fueling it, and trying to sort out the fear for real consequences twinged something approaching pain in his head. That was…bad.

Good in a way, because he recognized the sensation from Earth: self-modification program protocols had activated. Still bad, however, because that meant he’d been following incorrect social cues. Tracing his reaction back to its roots had exposed intrinsically faulty lines in his action/reaction model equations, and now his processors were acting to correct.

Jazz’s almost-headache made a weird of sense. For thousands of vorns, the Autobots had been ingraining a cycle of self-perpetuated cause and effect: they thought it was wrong to openly talk about interfacing because they got embarrassed, so ventures into thinking about it further were halted before the illogic registered. Now he was deliberately breaking the cycle, and there were a barrage of little alerts flying up. The resulting processor complaints were demanding enough to border on real pain.

He really needed to run deep defragment to sort out everything that had happened tonight. Dear holy
Primus and all His little Primes, how deep did this unease run that he had unfounded program code writing it in?

He couldn’t take his words back. Not after tonight. Inertia had gotten the Autobots to this point, and Jazz was responsible for prodding them into motion.

That did not diminish the urge to cringe out of his own armor. Emotions were more volatile than logic. Changes to the computer didn’t necessarily change the spark. If it were that easy to change someone’s mind, Cybertronians would be able to logic themselves out of deep convictions such as falling in (or out) of love. Megatron’s Robo-Smasher would have been more useful than it’d turned out to be if that were true.

Talking bluntly about interfacing was not something to be ashamed of. Jazz should not feel flustered. There was no reason to be embarrassed, but not understanding his reaction was only making it worse because that made him overanalyze it all the more.

The smaller Autobot rocked slightly until he was off his bumper, turning enough on the floor that his hip and shoulder tire took most of his weight. His helm could just barely rest against the floor this way. It still wasn’t a comfortable position, but he could hold it longer. “I’m sayin’ that I want you to interface with me,” Jazz said quietly. Despite how serious he tried to sound, his tone still had a hefty dose of I’m Embarrassed to Exist laced through it.

Ironhide’s guns whirl-clunked. Discomfort filled the room like a fart in a box, and it was nearly as awkward. Especially for mechs who didn’t have the bodily functions required to fart. Jazz had done something alien and strangely repellent, and Ironhide didn’t quite know what to do in response.

Jazz smushed the urge to apologize. He’d done nothing to apologize for, no matter what errant social protocols were yelling at him.

He knew, and it squeezed fear and near-physical hurt around his spark to know, that Ironhide wouldn’t ask. Permission was an implicit part of Jazz’s job description. Jazz either submitted to the operative guidelines or resigned on the spot. They both knew that, but the shudder of his pump only worsened to think about it. He wasn’t afraid of Ironhide. He didn’t have any objections to his duty, either. The fear sprang from the fact that at no point had the words been explicitly stated.

Okay, that wasn’t a surprise. That hadn’t changed in the last joor. Jazz’s job was still the same. Ironhide wouldn’t ask, and Jazz wouldn’t deny him. That did not, however, free Jazz from the other side of the issue. That had changed. Or rather, Jazz had found a different perspective to see what had been there all along.

Asking consent was never wrong. Neither, therefore, was giving it. If the Autobots didn’t start talking about this stuff, they were screwed in more ways than one. They had to acknowledge the importance of verbal agreement in interfacing, or the peace negotiations were in jeopardy. Verbal agreements were binding contracts according the Decepticons. If the Autobots didn’t start stating things clearly, things could only end badly.

The Decepticons weaseled around wisely chosen words. Jazz could only imagine the trouble they’d cause eeling around the Autobots’ current evasive, innuendo-reliant communication methods.

“Trust me,” Jazz said softly, curling on the floor to peer over his hood at Ironhide, “it’s important. Just…yeah. I wanna cross cables with you, Ironhide. Okay?”

The Weapon Specialist’s impassive mask had a strong flavor of hostility. Jazz knew it probably hid confusion. One more whirl of the red mech’s cannons, and then they gradually began to slow. “…
fine,” Ironhide muttered.

Relief flooded his strained subroutines, and Jazz uncurled to lie on his side on the floor. He pulled in a deep vent and exhaled slowly as tensile cables winched loose again. The wrongly-predicted backlash hadn’t occurred; information assessment confirmed the logic as faulty and approved the self-modification. He hadn’t even realized how stressed he’d become until his temperature gauge started dropping.

It was…odd. Relaxing ran counter to his usual reaction. Debriefing could be as difficult as a mission. Despite Jazz’s self-confidence, a truly great Decepticon hacker could make him believe capture had never happened, no time had been missed, and nothing was wrong. It was why every operative followed strict return guidelines, even the Jazzmeister. Just because he didn’t remember being a prisoner didn’t mean he hadn’t been. War had taught SpecOps mechs to never, ever trust themselves, and to trust others even less.

Here and now, however, he didn’t have to trust. Weapons didn’t trust. They simply were. It felt somewhat backward to relax, but he was going to while he could. Things weren’t going to get any easier from here on out if his own reactions were anything to go by. For now? For now it was out of his hands.

Jazz laid his helm back on the floor and reveled in just existing.

Impersonal hands opened the tiny hatch tucked up under the back of his helm. Cool air wafted against the cable coiled inside as Ironhide unspooled it. Jazz winced. Cold metal brushed against the little port hidden beneath the cable. It didn’t hurt, but exposing a cerebral port felt a bit weird. Vulnerability rarely felt normal.

Data cable ports were usually located somewhere in the chest or arms for convenience, but this port allowed hardline access direct to the cortex. Not many mechs would know what to do if they tried plugging into this port on Jazz. The standard jack was too large, and interface adaptors wouldn’t fit. Then again, show a mech this same port somewhere on a firearm, and he’d immediately offer an input cable. Just like Ironhide was doing right now.

Jazz’s port wasn’t unusual in anything but placement. Typically, helms covered these ports completely. They were uncovered or installed only when primary mode tech-mods were hooked up, and that required surgery. Not so with Special Operations operatives, however. They didn’t connect to weapons. They were weapons.

Ironhide plugged into the weapon that was Jazz with no more or less care than he’d betray when starting an inspection in the armory. The saboteur could feel the way the Weapon Specialist tensed, suspicious, when Jazz actually relaxed further. Right now, the smaller Autobot honestly couldn’t care. Ironhide would understand later, and that was good enough for him now. His visor dimmed to a dark blue, and the black-and-white mech sighed as he stretched, flaring his armor to make tensile cables unkink.

The jack hit home, and his port latchkeys spiraled down to adjust to Ironhide’s adaptor. There was a brief second of waiting as the port snugged shut. Jack and port surfaces came into full contact for ground/return communication. The port’s magnetic surface prevented the jack from slipping free, just as the jack base’s coupling would keep it in place if Jazz struggled.

And then there was a foreign presence knocking on Jazz’s firewalls. There were no medical overrides automatically dropping the physical blocks between port and systems. Ironhide’s recognition codes transmitted. Jazz allowed the microscopic gap between wires to close and connect port to computer. The moment the connection established, the old red mech’s transmission slipped a
program through, dropping it past Jazz’s defenses to the machine level and installing before scans caught it. The program initialized and infiltrated in a fraction of a klik. It shook hands with Jazz’s primary user permits (‘Hey buddy, good to see you again’) and casually stole everything (‘Don’t mind me, just picking your pockets for passcodes’).

By the time Jazz’s cortex flicked through and reconfirmed Ironhide’s access gate, the program had already solidified the connection. It immediately shunted Jazz’s authority keys out of the way like a hacker’s virus. They were connected through the gate, but the weapon technician had successfully cabled deeper than conscious thought. Jazz was an advanced firearm, and Ironhide had assumed control of the mechanism behind the A.I.

There was a nearly audible *shunk*, an almost-rattle of joints, and, suddenly, Jazz became a passenger inside his own head. He was still there, still himself, but there was someone else remote-access controlling his hardware components. A moment later, control established, Ironhide slid Jazz’s input jack into his own port. A query pinged: ‘Remote hardware detected. Connect to access gate?’

Jazz didn’t have the user permit to answer the query, but that other presence in his head did. ‘Yes.’

The access gate opened, and data began to stream freely. Jazz had remote access to Ironhide’s processors, but the connection was a tube connecting hamster cages. It led nowhere, and there were still bars all around him. The gates were closed, and the keys were out of his hands. Without permits to get him through the Weapon Specialist’s partitions, he could do nothing more than feel the data packets pass him by.

Even through the partitions keeping their systems separate, however, the sensation of the red mech transmitted. His encoding felt old and familiar. The signal was reassuringly strong. The pulse of energy flowed steadily into Jazz’s uplink port, carrying Ironhide’s transmissions and pushing the cycle of return information back through Jazz’s cable to Ironhide for assessment. Cool as only a professional could be, the Weapon Specialist ran comparison checks between Jazz’s pre-mission processor unit backup and his current configuration. The steady rhythm of energy driving the datastream continued through every instruction set, never rushing down the hierarchies. Every line of code received the same consideration.

Meticulous mental hands opened up the weapon and checked every moving part, noting down the condition it’d returned in compared to how it’d been sent out. Software opened and closed, and updated drivers were tested for installation dates. Every change self-modification program protocols had racked up over the course of the last two orns was double-checked against system logs for spikes indicated coercion or outside activation. The Decepticons had some excellent hackers. There weren’t many that could fool Ironhide, not at the machine level. Artificial data left tell-tale trails, and he knew exactly where to look for them.

He knelt beside the small black-and-white mech, one hand hard on his upper arm and optics flickering white and blue as he pored through Jazz’s processor units. He clicked past the independent firewalls shoring up the saboteur’s information archives. He’d leave analyzing Jazz’s latest information haul to the others. Ironhide wasn’t interested in the ammo, just the weapon. It was up to Red Alert, Prowl, and Blaster to determine if Jazz had brought back blanks or real bullets. Ironhide’s responsibility lay in making sure the Autobot’s Third had returned in working condition.

So far, so good. The data compiled into packets and went back through the cables to Ironhide. His own threat assessment program received the packets, unpacked them, and ran the data.

Meanwhile, Jazz existed. He waited inside the cage of code, patiently watching his chronometer tick down. His automatic malware programs weren’t connected to his primary user permits because of exactly these circumstances. They were connected to his lock-away processor instead, which only
assumed control when his CPU didn’t respond to command pings.

Ironhide’s bypass meant that it currently wasn’t. The lock-away woke, and when it woke, the malware diggers went to work. They scanned, found the false permits Ironhide was using to override control, and started digging out the Weapon Specialist’s infiltration program. They weren’t exactly stealthy, but they were designed to use trickles of memory and run deep. Their CPU usage tended to be disguised by whatever programs were running on the surface, and their image names were perfectly innocent. Unless someone knew to look for them, they tended to be overlooked.

Right up until they kicked the invasive program right out of his systems, that was. Ironhide had been working against the clock since the second the connection had activated. Jazz had surprised Decepticon hackers with a miraculous recovery more than once this way. There was nothing quite like finding out an Autobot victim really wasn’t under total control, especially when that lack of control was communicated via sudden decapitation.

Even without his malware diggers active, he could have fought. Ironhide had seized control, but Cybertronians’ minds were more than computers. Oh, Jazz could have fought.

He didn’t, however. He just waited. He waited and existed and swam in the sensation of throwing himself open under a fellow Autobot. This was trust. This was what Starscream could shove up his aft and twist on, because the Decepticons were just as wrong about the Autobots’ interfacing habits as the Autobots were about the Decepticons’.

Jazz knew down to his struts that he didn’t have to struggle. Ironhide would take care of him. Energy pulsed and data flowed, flushing through his cortex and forcing his hardware into hyperawareness as all his software came under scrutiny. Ironhide accessed and examined everything. Every -- single -- program -- file.

Input cables weren’t rated the same as an actual interface cable. The transmission speeds were too slow, and the ports couldn’t handle data packets beyond a certain size. That didn’t stop the pour of attention rushing fluid and hot between them. It mounted in oceanic surges, a syrupy building pressure gradually synching their processors. Even without direct connection to his body, Jazz could feel it. Below cognizant thought, Ironhide bent all his considerable experience on the smaller mech. He held the saboteur helpless and stroked him from the inside.

Assessing his condition, yes. Professional handling, yes. But there were professions older than weapon technician that didn’t get this intimate.

The data streamed. Energy zipped back and forth, pushing the flow. Synchronization inched closer, tick by tick.

The files were carefully closed, one by one, and the programs were shut down. A vague impression of approval filtered through the partitions. Whatever changes had happened tonight were legitimate. The Jazzmeister-weapon had passed inspection.

Ultra-aware and practically humming, Jazz’s cerebral circuitry thrummed in its slots. The smaller mech couldn’t tell where his engine vibrations stopped and Ironhide’s began. He couldn’t even recall when either of their engines had turned over. All he knew was that the floor under him trembled with all the power of a truck capable of towing recalcitrant Dinobots around, and the deep rumble underbeat the crackle of charge through the cable. It felt so slagging good he wouldn’t have moved if he could.

Somewhere in his lock-away processor, a malware program bleeped triumphantly.
Control washed over Jazz, and *dear holy Primus* his fans blasted full bore trying to dump heat. “Ironhide!” He pressed his forehelm to the floor and moaned in unabashed pleasure. “Oh…frag. Frag me.” It was half-curse, half-plea.

The Weapon Specialist’s partitions fell; there were no barriers in interfacing. There were only equals here. The cool professional dropped away, letting Jazz in to twine with Ironhide the mech. No longer strictly partitioned, their processors throbbed into a harmonious transmission/reception rhythm through the inadequate cable. A countdown cascaded down Jazz’s HUD, flashing toward system synch. Jazz’s systems slowed dangerously, and Ironhide’s screamed into sudden acceleration. Neither could hold the pace long.

Wires and tensile cables jerked, both mechs’ bodies trying to match energy output and data processing. They were machines of dissimilar models clacking into sync, and their temperatures soared with the effort. Gauges protested, and tubing threatened to melt. Frustrated, pent-up charge snapped across peaking processor units, crackling electricity across armor plating. Systems cried out to reset, trying to trip the circuit breakers, ground the charge, and disperse the dangerous, built-up pressure.

Their spark chambers already crawled with excess energy as both mechs climbed toward overload. The countdown continued to fall, and they were *so close* to synching, resetting, overloading, and it felt good, it felt so blasted *good*.

The hand on his arm pulled him upright, away from the floor, and the other hand curved fingers under the back of his neck to lift him further. He gasped at the cool metal on hot linkages, but Ironhide’s mouth closed over his open mouth. That hardly helped his overworked ventilation system, but Jazz did his part disperse the heat by orally transferring it to the larger Autobot. It probably would have worked better if Ironhide’s mouth weren’t just as hot. Every panting exhale scorched his already singed taste receptors.

Ironhide’s tongue lingered on that damage as their lips parted, and if the saboteur tasted different than when he’d left -- well. Change happened. The red mech licked his lips and dipped down for another kiss without comment. He was still Jazz, no matter the current transformation, and Ironhide accepted that.

If Jazz had been awash in sensation before, now he was drowning. And it was okay, because he was bringing Ironhide down with him.

The heads-up number hit zero. Ironhide grunted. Jazz threw his head back so hard his helm would have cracked open against the floor if the other Autobot weren’t holding him up. Their systems synched, perfectly matched machine-level data flow running.

They weren’t machines. No two Cybertronians were, or could be, completely alike. Almost as soon as they synched, their systems reset back to normal performance parameters.

The torrent of released energy had to go *somewhere*.

Overload.

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 19

[* * * * *]
Pt. 20

I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]

Pt. 20

[* * * * *]

“What am I watching?” Intrigued, Jazz reached out and tilted the screen more to the left, then brought his hand back so he could put his chin on it.

Ratchet promptly took his elbow out from under him and rolled him half on his side to get at the access hatch under his bumper. “You tell me,” the medic scoffed. “Aren’t you supposed to be the info-specialist?” A jack was linked in here, a cable uncoiled there, and the complacent smaller ‘bot was rolled back onto his front before the footage progressed more than half a klik. Jazz’s fascinated blue visor never left the screen.

A frown crossed Ratchet’s face as data buzzed through the cables. He looked between the screen and -- yes, Jazz had scooted closer yet again. For the third time, the larger Autobot grabbed one shoulder tire and used it to heave his patient backward on the repair berth. The inbuilt conformity slots had been programmed to allow for Jazz’s prominent hood, but only if the small mech actually laid in the slots. Due to wriggling closer to the screen at the head of the berth, he’d worked himself out of the slot. Ratchet muttered imprecations to himself as he forcibly rearranged the problematic spy back into position.

Jazz went limp and let it happen. One thing SpecOps learned early on in the war was to cooperate with medics. Medics were Primus’ gift to those who would go out unto the Decepticons and get themselves half-slagged in the name of gathering vital information. One didn’t question such gifts. Even if the gifts insisted on handling a mech like he was a sack of spare parts instead of a living mech.

He was used to it. Being bossed around the medbay had a kind of comforting routine to it. The Autobot Chief Medical Officer had every lead available wired into the monitors surrounding the berth, and any processor power left to spare was running his onboard sensor suites over the saboteur like a multi-spectrum bath of energy. It tickled. Jazz’s circuitry sparkled playfully under the deluge. His thoughts were keyed up from the night’s activities, and his body still resonated strongly of old metal and weaponry. Ironhide’s sweep had left the saboteur hyperactive, or maybe that was the feeling getting checked over by the Weapons Specialist left him with. It was the familiar feeling of passing security measures with flying colors and a rude hand gesture at the Decepticons’ best efforts. He was back to base, safe and sound. Nyah!

Now there were so many things to do that he had a hard time keeping still.

The hands on his shoulder left, but he stayed still to make sure Ratchet’s attention went back to watching internal messages. The mech had so many separate operations screens up on his HUD that Jazz just had to wait a moment for him to get reabsorbed by the influx of information. Then he could stealthily wriggle further up toward the screen again, balancing on his bumper and his elbows.

Rocking back and forth between elbows and bumper kept him harmlessly occupied. The fidgeting was confined to a small space, letting him stay still without staying still. He did want a better look at the screen, but the restlessness had a more serious cause. Ratchet was in his personal bubble, here.
The automatic reaction was to resist, and he had to sit on that urge.

Keeping his firewalls down and shutting off every one of the under-armor shunts in place to prevent enemy scans required a tricky bit of concentration on his part. The rhythmic rocking on his bumper helped him focus. Master spies were not meant to go under a medic’s hands easily, even if the medic was a friendly. Keeping himself on the berth for the physical check-up and cooperating with the medical bypasses currently combing his programming for illicit code changes required more effort than some forms of combat, and definitely more trust.

It also got the smaller Autobot that much closer to being passed through security. Ironhide had put the safeties back on him, but a physical by a real medic was S.O.P. for returning operatives. Only once Ratchet’s hands-on cleared him would Red Alert allow him to attend the officer meeting that’d apparently been in progress since the Aerialbots had returned. Resisting in any way was counterproductive.

Besides, it served Jazz’s purposes in more than one way. Not only was this exam going to clear him for duty, but it was just plain clearing his head. One of the things Ratchet’s medical partitions allowed for was parallel processing capabilities that even spies envied. Medics with those could be formidable hidden agents. Lacking any inclination toward multiple personalities, however, Ratchet was using it to run defragmentation. It wasn’t a substitute for a deep defrag done during recharge, but the Autobots needed Jazz back on his feet now. There wasn’t time for the processor downtime he needed.

In the short-term, the running defrag made Jazz feel twitchy as his lock-away processor spun up repeatedly, responding to the noticeable lag from his main central processor units. His thoughts ricocheted oddly, pinged belatedly by defensive protocols as Ratchet manually logged in, got his clearance, and ran the defrag cycle unit by unit. He felt scrambled, as well he should. Having most of his head working didn’t mean the missing pieces weren’t, well, missing. In the long-term, however, it’d resettle his info-blitzed mind. He was already packaging relevant information as the sorted processors plugged fragmented data neatly into place and started running smoother. It made cross-referencing much easier. His information assessment subprocessors had begun consolidating incomplete files, assigning consistent key terms for faster searches, and compiling an index of relevant concepts by group terminology. Observational protocols were opened, and the updated assessment programs ran comparisons side-by-side with the previous versions. All changes with a timestamp past the point of arrival in downtown Tarn and the arena were pulled up for review.

Ticking slightly as his processors were taken offline to defrag one by one, Jazz assembled a briefing info-packet for the other officers. It kept bulking up as connecting concepts joined the information he tagged as vital. The fundamental assumption of consent in Decepticon society fed back into the widespread misconception of rape. The ability to love among Decepticons, along with the political and military reasons it never appeared on the surface, circled around to the underlying decision by the Autobots that Decepticons were somehow incapable of a full range of emotions. The odd ways interpersonal relations could, possibly, maybe have been hidden in plain sight among the Decepticons all along split off from the courtship proposals. The many and varied forms of tactile interfacing held up against the hidden but full-blown intimacy of hardline connections, and Jazz had to then include the illogical social protocols that alienated an outsider studying either style.

He turned the briefing packet over in his mind and added a personal thought. Not a fact, but an observation: hope in both factions had been nearly beaten to nothing by war and wariness. What he had seen tonight was that Starscream believed that there could be no trust between Decepticons and Autobots -- but there could be faith.
After browsing through the packet’s index, the black-and-white mech sent a directional ping to the gently probing presence melded to the borders of his mind. Ratchet acknowledged the direction and added Jazz’s archival databank to the defragment schedule. It seemed wise to make sure they were organized enough to pull on short notice, since unpacking the files would take enough time as it was. There seemed to be a lot of history getting thrown about lately. He wanted everything available on demand.

At the very least, he wanted every scrap of information available on Vos. He was going to have to do a lot of inquiries and hit the Special Operations’ secure database. If Starscream had wholesale transferred the culture of his precious city-state to the disordered ranks of the newly-assembled Decepticons, there had to be records of what Vos had been like. Someone had to have done a social study of Cybertron’s city-states. The Autobots needed to brush up on their history lessons.

The next few hours were going to be nothing but processor aches, serious talks, and possibly a lot of shouting. That didn’t even take into consideration how the rest of the Autobots would take this. The officers were going to have to figure out how to brief the troops. There were a lot of misconceptions happening, and it’d only get worse if the Autobots put off talking about this.

That was the near future, however. In the meantime, Jazz kicked his heels up and watched TV.

Well, not really. The screen hung on the wall at the head of the berth had the same general rectangular shape, but the humans had never broadcast this kind of show. It was educational, yes, but not something from the Discovery Channel. Most people wouldn’t watch this sort of thing for fun. Jazz was enjoying it, but that was because he liked being handed puzzles. He watched and tried to figure it out.

It resembled a cross between PacMan and a radar scan, but it seemed to be a wide-angle view of Cybertron’s crowded orbit as seen by scanners. The little blips indicating solid matter had all been tagged with I.D. numbers for referencing; most of the identifiable bigger chunks were dead satellites and trash leftover from the Golden Age. Nothing useful, but nobody had ever gotten around to recycling or getting rid of the scrap. The clutter had been left alone at first because it hadn’t been worth the effort, and then because it’d become too dangerous.

Anything that had launched too far from the planet’s gravity had drifted off in a trail of refuse left behind as Cybertron had wandered the galaxy, but plenty had remained close enough to stay. The debris field had become unpredictably treacherous to navigate as Cybertron’s magnetic poles aged and changed, gravity affected the ellipses, and debris bounced things into terminal orbits. Nuts and bolts, the planetary axis tilt had a tendency to just change by 90 degrees every million years or so. The world had yet to start rotating around another axis entirely, but Perceptor got twitchy when asked about the possibility of that happening.

Planets weren’t meant to leave their solar systems, but Cybertron had been wandering a long time. Legend held that Cybertron’s original sun had simply vanished overnight, but Kup and Ironhide told conflicting stories about what had really happened. Since both mechs had been forged in the era pre-dating the Senate’s establishment, they were some of the few remaining living Cybertronians who might have spoken with witnesses. Rumor had it that Rung was older than even Kup, meaning that he might actually have been alive during the departure, but he firmly deflected questions when asked.

Once upon a time, the Planetary Guard’s main focus -- beyond defense, of course -- had been to assist the Planetary Science Corps. in finding a potential new sun to orbit. Both organizations had aimed to prepare the planet for permanent solar system placement. There had been stars under investigation, but the science involved to somehow install Cybertron into a new orbit had still been in development.
The fact that Cybertron had survived leaving its former orbit had made it a scientific curiosity for the galactic science community. There’d never been scientific reason for Cybertron’s continued stable rotation, resultant gravity and atmosphere, or the fact that they hadn’t plunged into the thousands of minor and major gravity wells they’d sailed through in the course of Cybertron’s eons-long wandering. Science in general seemed to have forgotten to include Cybertron in its usual antics. Most of the Planetary Science scientists Jazz had ever met were fervent believers in Primus because of that.

The Planetary Science Corps. and Guard had been intent on solving the inexplicable problem before science remembered their world. The idea had been to find somewhere to park before the improbable physics Cybertron existed by decided to stop working one orn.

That orn had eventually come, and nobody had been ready.

The ceasefire had originally been struck because the Decepticons and Autobots had a mutual desire to not watch their homeworld plunge into the star it was merrily sailing toward. Nobody had seen it coming. The planet had hung an improbable turn in space and started off toward the nearest star as if it were pure iron and the world had suddenly magnetized. Shockwave had started building a planetary space bridge before Megatron even contacted Optimus Prime, and Grapple had beaten the Constructicons to the build site. Everyone capable of breaking orbit had been sent off to look for building sites for the other side of the bridge, only to be called back when the abrupt, sucking attraction between star and planet made Shockwave’s careful space bridge equations into scrambled gibberish.

The technology just hadn’t been ready. The war had obliterated what progress the Planetary Science Corps. might have made. Here had been a perfect candidate star for the placement project, and under all the wrong circumstances.

Autobots and Decepticons alike had been flailing for solutions, throwing everything they had at the crisis, when it just…ceased to be a problem.

Jazz had been in the command center the orn Starscream stopped yelling -- a nonstop screech about the angle of approach being wrong to escape the star’s gravity well, planetary engines would never work in time, they didn’t have enough power, someone put him out of his misery having to deal with all these half-clocked pretenses for scientists -- and stared at the console he’d been monitoring. He’d stared in total silence while the rest of the room slowly quieted and took notice of the lack of screech. They’d all been keyed up. Shouting had been a normal mode of communication at the time, but Starscream’s voice had a unique shrillness to it that they’d all grown to expect as background noise. Not hearing it had been disquieting even under the circumstances, or perhaps because of them.

After a good two breems of stunned silence, the Air Commander-reverted-to-scientist had staggered back from the console. He’d folded up and sat down right there at Skyfire’s feet, his face a complete mask of shock. The Autobot shuttleformer had blinked down at him, severely alarmed. Frag, Megatron had been taken aback, and he’d been shouting at Optimus Prime at the time. Two Constructicons, Skyfire, and Shockwave had rushed the console. Starscream had continued to sit there on the floor, uncaringly undignified as he stared at nothing.

The four mechs at the console had looked at it. They’d watched the read-out, which had inexplicably just…stopped. Stopped, and a new scroll of results had begun listing down the screen. New, unbelievable results that’d been tracking the impossible.

Hook had outright squawked, tripped over his own feet, and fallen into his gestaltmate, whose balance didn’t seem to be any better. They’d clung to each other and nearly blown their vocalizers laughing giddily. That was not a sound Jazz could say he’d ever heard before. Crazed, maniacal laughter was somewhat common from Decepticons, but not the sound of honest relief. Also, the sight
of Hook clinging to anything had left the rest of the room speechless all over again. Seeing Shockwave, logical and ever-aloof Shockwave, collapse over the console like someone had knocked the struts out of him hadn’t helped them find words.

Wheeljack had war-whooped from outside, rushed in still holding a handful of equipment, and tackle-glomped the first mech he’d seen. Thrust would have probably been offended and Red Alert might have started a potential traitor file on the engineer if Wheeljack hadn’t also been screaming, “We’re in orbit, praise Primus, we’re in orbit!”

Jazz had never had much faith in higher powers, but rust him if an atheist wouldn’t hadn’t slagging well converted on the spot. Cybertron’s path had skewed once more, spinning her through the star’s gravity well in just the right way. The planet fell into orbit, and nobody but nobody had so much as a theory why. There wasn’t a plausible explanation for cause, and that left the implausible ones. After having spent a dozen frantic orns listening to a cross-factional group of scientists panic about how all science pointed to doom and destruction, belief blossomed anew. Random chance wasn’t any more or less believable than an old god most mechs merely mouthed faith in.

A total failure of science in their favor? It’d been entirely possible Primus existed at that point. There’d been a lot of mechs praying to Him that first miraculous sunrise.

Jazz had been among them. He’d stared at the star on the horizon -- Cybertron’s sun, they had a sun! Cybertron had a morning now! -- and quietly searched inside himself for words to express gratitude to whatever or whomever had just saved his world. Primus? Sure, why not. He’d sent a few silent words of thanks out His way.

It’d been impossible, glorious, and felt even stranger because Jazz had been standing within arm’s-reach of Megatron, who’d been side-by-side with Optimus Prime. Nobody had moved or spoken, much less shot at each other, for nearly a cycle. Sunlight had spread over Cybertron’s surface, warm and amazing.

But also far more unforgiving in scope than artificial light. Cybertron's surface had been battered under lights. Under sunlight, the scale of disaster couldn't be concealed by darkness or smoothed over by distant starlight. The silence had started because of the sunrise. It continued because of what Cybertron looked like under it.

“How long will our Great War continue?” Optimus had asked at last, and his voice had been hushed less from awe than weary sadness.

Yet for once, Megatron hadn’t reacted to the Prime’s exhaustion by attacking. Instead, he’d looked out over their destroyed world and seemed to give the rhetorical question real thought.

Nobody had dared breathe. There’d been a mixed-faction crowd of scientists and high-ranking officers assembled around their leaders, and not a single mech had moved. For a klik, then a breem, the soft sound of ventilation systems straining against manual lockdown had been the only sound.

The whole crowd had frozen, waiting for the fight to restart as it always had, except it hadn’t. This time, for the first time, it hadn’t. Megatron had turned and simply strode away. There had been no shots fired, or promises made. There had just been sunlight and everything mercilessly illuminated by it.

Six millions years of civil war, and this was how it had ended: not in a grand speech or an epic battle, but in a question left unanswered.

From that first tentative morning of real peace, negotiations had progressed. That was almost as
unbelievable as Cybertron’s new sun.

Belief in Primus? Growing every on Cybertron. There were rumors of temples being founded, even.

For all their excitement, however, the fragile alliance hadn’t gotten around to sending exploration parties out through their new solar system. There’d been a few solo missions checking out their new orbit for potential collisions. It'd been necessary in order to anticipate the affect Cybertron’s arrival had had on any other satellites. The missions had been risky and short, but the limited data obtained during them had been pounced the moment the explorers returned. Jazz had never before thought of scientists as a starving pack of Empties, but then he'd witnessed Astrotrain land, take one look at the crowd waiting for him, and take off running across the landing pad with three Constructicons and Perceptor on his heels.

Turned out that scientists could intimidate anyone in sufficient numbers. *With their minds.*

There had been projections for the length of their new local, solar-based year, and everyone heaved a sigh of relief when it seemed the orbit was a solid one. There was some worry that Cybertron’s rotation had begun to pick up. Increased speed would mean a shorter day and night, but it also meant an increase in gravity. That would mean a lot of things, including seismic activity as the core of the planet heated and all the complications therein. The Constructicons had been venting down Wheeljack's neck as the Autobot put together a satellite meant to track and measure Cybertron’s spin. Megatron had made it clear that as long as that’s all the satellite was meant to do, the Decepticons wouldn’t touch it. They’d help position it, in fact. As long as it didn't explode, because they knew about Wheeljack and his inventions.

But a real joint, cooperative effort to get out and see their new solar system hadn’t happened yet. It was cautiously in the works still, because it required a lot of planning. Like the joint launch of a necessary satellite, only more complicated because actual mechs from both factions would have to work together. The medical/engineering building back at the real Decepticon/Autobot headquarters kept figuratively leaning on the main building. All those finicky negotiations? Speed it up. Politicians only complicated things. If the peace treaty had been left in the hands of the other building, the Constructicons would have hammered it out in three days and Perceptor would have translated it into the fanciest of legal languages if that's what it'd take to make everyone leave them to their discoveries.

Not that Skyfire, Wheeljack, or Perceptor would come out and say, *'Hurry up and make a peace treaty; we’ve got science to do!’* but Brainstorm certainly had. Luckily not in front of any Decepticons. Yet, anyway. There was a reason he wasn’t included in the group of Autobots stationed in Vos. The mech had no concept of anything being more important than his own ego.

The rest of the Autobot scientists were being more patient with politics. Some of that was because, hello, six million years of civil war? Nobody wanted to screw the negotiations up. However, their patience also had to do with the amount of work that had to be done before an exploration mission -- or even the satellite -- could be launched. Finding the right crew was important, of course, and planning out what information had to be sought, but there were mechanical details that had to be ironed out. Not so much once they got off planet, but…getting off-planet in the first place. And returning.

The spacefarers who'd been sent out looking for a refuge for Cybertron hadn't all returned. A few of them hadn't even made it out of orbit.

The war had left its own mark on Cybertron’s near-space, which explained why most spacefarers stayed in atmosphere these orns. Traveling at higher altitudes made a mech less of a target for those
down below, but there weren’t many Cybertronians who went orbital anymore. There were battle- torn bodies floating about up there, as well as the shattered remnants of at least one of the major orbital platforms. There were anti-spacecraft/satellite minefields intact up there as well. Their patterns had long since shifted from how they’d been originally sewn, and incomplete detonations had scattered the mine fields even more. Now there were dangerous weapons just drifting about loose through the debris. The sky occasionally still lit up with brief explosions as something bumped a mine and set it off.

Orbital maps could be trusted as far as the naked optic could see. The stretch between Cybertron and her three remaining moons was an ever-changing hazard zone. Maps through to clear space were as reliable as maps for ever-changing chaos could be. Anyone trying to leave or enter Cybertron without the aid of a space bridge was taking his life in his hands.

Cybertronian near-space was a mess, but it was less cluttered than it had been. Over-eager spacefarers had encountered a lot of the stealth satellites, often fatally. Time and collisions had cleared some of the debris. The Decepticons had concentrated on clearing paths several times, trying to create an open corridor to made access to the moons easier, but such corridors were never safe. They didn’t last. Near-space was simply too full of dangerous objects, and what wasn’t inherently dangerous by design became so because of constant movement. Junk collided constantly, setting off chains of irregular collisions elsewhere that knocked everything spinning.

Stable orbit was an intentional thing, and most of the junk up there wasn’t there intentionally. It was all in some form of degrading orbit. Jazz could clearly recall the sky lit by blazing trails of fire as wreckage re-entered atmosphere, finally falling. Frag, he’d been on salvage crews trying to pull useable material from the melted meteors. He’d even lost friends to getting hit by them.

There was still a lot of stuff of there, surrounding the planet. Not as much, not since the major near-space battles had ceased, but a lot. Sometimes it still fell, but not nearly as often as before. There just wasn’t as much going up to replace what fell, anymore. The Ark mission had been the last true attempt to leave Cybertron, and the Autobots’ switch to guerilla tactics had given the Decepticons no clear targets for launching new weapons into orbit. The Moonbases were defensive fortresses, not launch-points for offensive attacks. Neither faction had forces able to manage that, anymore. Most of the space-worthy mechs had deactivated in high-altitude battles early on in the war, and building or upgrading frametypes for spaceflight had been expensive even during the Golden Age.

Astrotrain and Blitzwing didn’t represent the Decepticons’ remaining Space Division just because they were the highest ranking spacefarers. They were triple-changers, the heavy-weight heavy-hitters. It was a last-ditch defensive move for the remaining spaceflight-capable frametypes to rally behind those two. Proposed assault plans that would waste their lives needlessly had to get past the two Elite Decepticon powerhouses first. If such a plan did, well, the majority of the surviving high-altitude mechs were shuttleformers. They mostly flew atmospheric these orns. They shamelessly hid in the Armada’s ranks as troop and supply transport if they still didn’t like the look of what the higher-ups wanted them to do.

Seriously. Cybertron’s orbit? Not a place anyone wanted to venture casually. Definitely not where anyone wanted to take combat to. It was like running an obstacle course full of explosives while getting shot at, knowing the whole time that the obstacle course would be just as dangerous on the return flight.

So, yes, what Jazz was watching looked like cluttered chaos as seen through a scanner, and that was an accurate account of what Cybertron’s skies looked like. There was a method to the madness on the screen, however. Blaster must have been climbing the walls after Jazz’s communication equipment went offline. There was stuff labeled on the graph that the saboteur couldn’t ever recall.
seeing I.D.ed before. It’d give the Autobots the advantage in future battles -- if they happened. If, that was, the Decepticons weren’t using the ceasefire as an opportunity to map the debris field as well. And if this map could be relied upon if/when/by the time the peace negotiations failed. Any orbital charts made now would be disrupted by the first major conflict as things careened off in every direction. For that matter, the first mine to get set off would disrupt the debris field again and render every map useless.

Despite that, it was an interesting project for the moment. Jazz was fascinated. Blaster had put some real effort into making this a complete chart. There were altitude, mass, and velocity labels on every chunk of debris. Their paths were being mapped out as the planet turned, leaving dotted lines moving across the screen in a complicated weave. It looked like something Skyfire would drool over, or Perceptor made for fun.

The secondary curve at the top of the screen finally clued him into where the chart focused. “That’s Moonbase Two,” Jazz said slowly, studying the screen. The moon rotated, and an I.D. icon popped up as the very edge of the Autobot base came into sight at the top of the screen. Maybe Blaster hadn’t been the one getting label-happy, after all. “We get this from Elita One?”

Luna 1 was supposedly part of the dense wreckage-field in orbit -- there was some debate as to whether it had imploded or simply been displaced by a vast energy explosion early in Cybertron’s wandering -- but the other three moons of Cybertron were mostly intact. Although the vulnerable colonies were long destroyed, there were still Moonbases on each moon.

Not that every base was still populated. The battle of Moonbase Four had left tiny Luna 4 uninhabitable except by mechanical scum. The tech-scavengers and parasites that occasionally swarmed down to the surface of Cybertron from it would have been cause for an extermination squad if not for the war. That, and its peppering of still-active defense satellites. Cautious remote surveillance of the barren surface had led to speculation that the ruins of Moonbase Four were abandoned, but another structure may have been constructed underneath. It might have been the work of Neutrals, but definitely not Decepticons. Not unless Megatron enjoyed ordering his own troops on suicide scouting runs. The Decepticons had tried exploring the wasteland surface only to fail spectacularly. Remote-piloted drones, solitary armored mechs, entire units; none of them came back. Anyone that landed fell out of contact when the tiny moon’s rotation cut off planetside communication-reach, and they never came back into contact again.

After too many costly disappearances, the Decepticons had settled for claiming Luna 3. It was better placed for their purposes, and Megatron could cede Luna 4 as a loss so long as the Autobots couldn’t claim it either. The Decepticons used Luna 3’s location near the Kaonite pole to build a maximum security facility even Starscream couldn’t have broken into. The Combaticons were lucky they hadn’t been confined there.

The Autobots had stubbornly held onto Luna 2. Ultra Magnus had used its remote location to consolidate the resistance cells after the Ark had launched. He’d taken advantage of the superior technology and facilities left from before the war to hold onto it despite several assault forces and two pitched battles between the Autobots and Shockwave’s troops. The Decepticon Guardian of Cybertron had not made himself a popular commander with the Space Division after a third assault was proposed. The Space Division had suffered a curious plague as shuttleformers disappeared into the Armada. The third assault hadn’t happened.

Jazz personally doubted a third assault would have won the moon. The Autobot resistance cells had done their best to sabotage supply transfers up to Luna 3, and what made it past them had often gotten lost in transit when the clear paths through the debris field proved not so clear. Even launching the assaults from Luna 3 when Luna 2’s orbit swung close had left the Decepticons in a weaker
position during the attacks. Luna 2 had an orbital period of 55 orns. That was over three times what Luna 3’s was, but the Decepticons didn’t have Moonbase Two’s high-powered, high-tech computer and communication equipment. Luna 2 was small, only briefly within range of attacks, and practically bristled with defensive power.

Elita One had taken over command of Moonbase Two upon Metroplex’s departure for Earth. Ultra Magnus had gone with the cityformer, which took away the main Autobot stronghold on Cybertron and relocated the command staff to Luna 2. That sent the Prime back his right-hand commander and boosted the femme unit’s already specialized abilities. Her unit wasn’t always on the right side of the planet for when the Autobots needed an optic in the sky, but she could analyze Cybertron down to the nitty-gritty molecules when Luna 2 came around into place.

Oddly, sending the femmes off-world had only made them more fearsome for the Decepticons on-world. Given a sliver of information, and Elita One was a pink one-’bot army who could and had emptied out Shockwave’s energon reserves and sabotaged the Decepticons’ supplies. Give her whole unit an information haven to nest in, and they’d steadily fed the rest of the Autobots crippling data. The decivorn between the femmes’ relocation to Luna 2 and the ceasefire had shown how much more damage the femmes could cause from further away. Optimus Prime’s return to Cybertron had been possible because the Elite Decepticons had abandoned Earth to retake ground lost to devastating Autobot attacks coordinated from above.

Elita One was a scary, scary ‘bot to get on the wrong side of. Shockwave had spent drones and Decepticons aplenty in chasing and cleaning up after her unit. He hadn’t even gotten image-captures of the unit spear-heading the resistance cells on Cybertron, they were that good at their job. Shockwave, Jazz had noticed, seemed to hesitate before stepping out into the open these orns. It was almost like he was wary of the sky, now.

He might be justified in staying indoors. Chromia did, after all, have a thing for using over-powered weaponry. There was a ceasefire and peace negotiations in progress, but death from above would be just as permanent if it wasn’t officially sanctioned by the Prime. Shockwave hadn’t been aware of whom the guerilla warfare specialists tormenting him had been until nearly four million years had passed. His files on their personalities had to be just as spotty. For all the Decepticon knew, the femmes were loose cannons the Autobots only barely had leashed.

Ironhide spent as much time smiling up at the sky as Shockwave did avoiding it. That probably did nothing for the Guardian’s nerves.

Nuts and bolts, but Jazz had missed his division’s sub-units. Elita One’s group was the equivalent of Special Operation’s secret weapon, and they’d done their division proud by causing merry mayhem in his absence. Tales of exploding Decepticon supply depots warmed a professional saboteur’s spark, they did.

“She’s the one who drew it to our attention, yes,” someone confirmed from the door. “What you’re watching is a filtered scan collating the orbital map project and Blaster’s latest from Sky Lynx’s energon delivery flight to Luna 2.” Prowl stepped into the not-a-medbay and frowned.

Because the joint-faction base in the center of Vos had the real medbay, the room that Ratchet had taken over at the Autobot not-a-base wasn’t really a medbay. Most of the time, it was where either Ratchet or Hoist recharged, depending on the shift. The medics just happened to only feel comfortable recharging when surrounded by all the comforts of home: a full surgery tool set, a repair berth, and a half the closest actual Autobot base’s medbay equipment. But it wasn’t a medbay, because this wasn’t a real base, just like the Decepticons didn’t have a base on the other side of the city.
Such was the polite fiction in Vos.

In other words, it was a little crowded in here because this was a repurposed bunk-room, not a room for equipment storage and multiple mechs. Adding another two Autobots to the already crowded room took Ratchet’s elbow room away.

Prowl ignored the ambulance’s resultant muttering and flattened against the wall beside the door to keep his intrusion to a minimum. “What’s your initial impression?”

“Haven’t watched it all the way through yet, Prowl, my main mech.” The Head of Special Operations smiled, visor narrow and intent on the dotted lines. He was beginning to make sense of the labeling system. Elita One’s unit must have set to mapping their new location with a will. Oh, those lovely, dangerous Autobots. Be afraid, Shockwave, be very afraid. “Don’t ya’ll have a meeting to be in?”

“Don’t ‘ya’ll’ at us,” Red Alert snapped, pressing himself to the wall on the other side of the door. There was more disgruntled medic muttering, which the Security Director ignored. “You always have an opinion.”

“And you’re always rushing it.”

“I have reason.”

“Enlighten me.”

“Both of you, stop,” Prowl cut in before it could get any tenser in the makeshift medbay. “Elita One sent us this footage, and she is the one who noticed events first. We would prefer your unbiased impression of what you see before passing along her comments.”

Jazz glanced over one shoulder briefly. “Uh…huh. Gotcha.” Meaning that there was something on the screen that he wasn’t catching, yet. Something important enough for Elita One to have sent a direct transmission down into the political tangle that Vos had become, where the likelihood of Soundwave intercepting any information was almost unacceptably high. Whatever was on this screen was probably being watched by the Decepticons right now.

The femmes had relocated their resistance cell up to Luna 2 before the Ark crew had returned to Cybertron, but it was the change in focus for the Moonbase that’d caused the war’s abrupt turn. Ultra Magnus had, until he accompanied Metroplex to Earth, been coordinating the resistance from the moon. Elita One had fed him information from groundside and been his agent on-planet.

Optimus Prime had made a strategic call in taking Ultra Magnus and Metroplex from Cybertron: the resistance on Cybertron had been meant to go back underground. It frequently had in the four million years since the Ark’s departure. Cybertron hadn’t always been close enough to a star to fuel war efforts. Unlike during those long periods of planetary statis, however, this time the war didn’t go on hiatus. This time, the Decepticons had been receiving energon manufactured by the Elite on Earth. The Prime had judged closing that particular pipeline more important than supporting current resistance efforts on Cybertron.

That could have meant Shockwave retaking the planet, except for the revitalizing affect the Prime’s return had inspired among the Autobots on Cybertron. Elita One had relocated to Luna 2 without any intention of surrendering a sliver of ground to the Decepticon Guardian. Ultra Magnus’ departure had replaced command staff with specialists. The femme unit settled in, and that’s when Shockwave had learned to fear the sky. Luna 2 became an important stepping point for information gathering, not just a coordination center. Suddenly, the Autobots groundside had been handed the
best weapon possible for effective guerilla warfare: information.

Seizing a spacebridge intact had been an unprecedented act of boldness and courage. The Autobots on Cybertron had not only seized it, but held it. Earth and her allies had immediately thrown in behind the Autobots, delivering off-world support in a way that hadn’t been available since the colonies had slipped out of reach. Energy and supplies had poured through that spacebridge, and Elita One had grimly utilized everything she’d been given in a no-holds-barred push against Shockwave’s forces.

She’d been so successful that Megatron had been forced to return to Cybertron to direct the war in person. Which, in turn, had allowed the Prime’s return. That, more than anything else, had changed the tides of the war yet again.

Beyond the changing of the guard, however, the physical location of Luna 2 hadn’t changed.

So…what was he looking for?

Jazz studied the display and tried to figure it out. Dotted lines continued to trace across the screen in thick swathes. Only the altitude measurements on each label showed how deep the field lay as well as how wide. Dotted lines intersected as pieces of space trash crossed orbital planes, sometimes missing collision by only seconds.

A personnel label popped up right before an icon nosed on screen, and he eyed the information askance. Nothing stood out. That was the right I.D. to see. Cosmos had been in short-period orbit since the ceasefire had gone into effect, running prograde to Cybertron’s rotation. He ran a low-altitude orbit most of the time, skimming through Luna 3’s gravity’s envelope at the pole to keep an optic on the Decepticons and test goodwill. Moonbase 3 pinged him incessantly but didn’t attack. Cosmos passed through the target-locks directed at him from Kaon and sling-shotted around the planet to take a spin over Vos. The Decepticons watched him warily but allowed him to pass unharmed.

That was a good sign for the peace progress. His route took him low enough to dip into atmosphere frequently, which was a glowing target for someone to take a shot any other time. Nobody took the shot. He swished around the planet in a constant test of good will and information gathering that was too obvious to be called spying.

His chosen route would have cost the Autobots too much in fuel if navigating through the wreckage further up weren’t so dangerous. Lower orbits took more fuel to hold, but they were also safer.

He kept to an irregular schedule, so it wasn’t surprising to see the Autobot orbital platform out surfing the debris out near Luna 2. It got lonely up in orbit, and unpredictable routes kept nasty ‘accidents’ from happening. Cosmos, like Jazz, trusted the Decepticons only up to a point, and that point was a very short distance away. Maybe he’d decided to follow Sky Lynx’s delivery route out to exchange news with Moonbase Two.

Or…maybe he’d had enough company at the time.

Ratchet grabbed the smaller mech by the shoulder-tire again and dragged him backward as Jazz perked up, trying to put his face closer to the screen. The sudden move knocked the berth against the wall, and the screen skewed. Jazz twisted, trying to follow it, and the medic bodily heaved him back into place. “Settle down! I’m almost done!”
“Yeah, yeah,” the smaller Autobot waved a hand as his bumper was unceremoniously dropped back in the berth’s shape-slot. “What the frag..?”

Prowl’s optics were blank as he read something off his HUD, but Red Alert watched their fellow officer squirm out from under Ratchet’s exasperated hold. The wriggly saboteur was trying to get a better angle on the screen now tilted heavily to the side. His sudden intensity doubtlessly matched the way the rest of the officer cadre must have gone still and silent upon seeing this footage for the first time. It wasn’t a live feed, but that didn’t make it any less riveting.

Ratchet resorted to leaning heavily on top of the smaller Autobot, squashing him on the repair berth. The medic was going to finish running his scans, and no one was going to stop him. The saboteur wheezed slightly, flattened, and his doors waggled on either side of the ambulance now practically sitting on him.

“What do you think?” Red Alert asked the black-and-white mech.

“I think that’s Blast Off tailing Cosmos,” Jazz absently replied. Continued escape attempts were foiled by Ratchet’s greater mass, so the side of his helm pressed into the berth as he tried to read the altitude on the Combaticon’s icon label. Some quick math, and one side of his visor twitched. “Mighty closely. Gimme a time frame?”

Red Alert nodded grim agreement to the assessment. “This happened almost three joors ago.”

Peripheral sensors picked up the nod, because Jazz’s gaze was locked on the screen. The various I.D. labels were ever so much more interesting now that there was a chase happening in slow motion through the dotted lines. The two mechs were actually racing at a speed groundbound mechs couldn’t hope to match, so the small screen didn’t adequately display the sheer size of the debris field. The icons almost appeared to overlap, but the curve of Luna 2 and the I.D. labels gave away how tiny the mechs really were, and how fast they were going.

Yet for all their speed, the race seemed to be a tie. Blast Off’s icon remained steady, the distance between Autobot and Decepticon spacefarers changing only by mechanometers. There were several hundred of those between the two mechs, but still? From what Jazz knew about orbital flight, keeping that distance steady was something of a feat, especially considering the debris field. Blast Off wasn’t shaped the same as Cosmos. The Minibot seemed to be deliberately slipping through gaps that closed before the combiner mech could follow, but Blast Off managed to change his route vertically and side-to-side without actually changing the horizontal distance between them. He had to be burning an incredible amount of fuel to be changing course so often. Every time he had to light his thrusters to evade something in order to follow Cosmos, the larger spacefarer had to boost himself forward faster as well to keep the distance steady. Even with his smaller tanks, the Minibot clearly held the advantage so long as Blast Off kept following his lead.

“Right here,” the Autobot Security Director said, sliding forward to squeeze between repair berth and wall when Ratchet began disconnecting leads, “is where things start to get interesting.” Jazz gave him a disbelieving look, and Red Alert jerked his chin at the screen. “I sped things up, obviously,” or they’d still be sitting here two joors from now watching events unfold in the slow vastness of space, “but right about now is when Elita One passed a situation briefing info-packet up to Cosmos. She challenged Blast Off’s intrusion into Autobot space, requesting that he remain in his current course while Moonbase Two got verification of his identity and flight clearance from Decepticon Command.”

The saboteur’s helm tapped against the berth as Cosmos’ icon registered a reversal. The Minibot flipped and took off on a completely different tangent, apparently burning fuel recklessly. The fast-forwarded footage showed Cosmos darting up and around the curve of Luna 2. Blast Off’s icon
complied with the Moonbase's request. He remained steady on his previous course.

According to the terms of the ceasefire both factions were almost fanatically abiding by, the mechs from one faction could traverse areas claimed by the other faction as long as they didn’t cause or provoke trouble. Mooncase Three and Kaon called every time Cosmos went and tested that, and Autobot Command patiently fielded the calls confirming his I.D. and flight clearance. Chasing a Minibot around Moonbase Two really wasn’t the best way Blast Off could have welcomed himself into Autobot territory, however. Elita One’s request had probably been pointedly polite.

“Here’s where he sent a declaration of non-aggression down to Moonbase Two,” Red Alert narrated, optics as intent as Jazz’s visor on the screen. “Elita One requested he repeat his broadcast, claiming interference on the line. He did so, and Decepticon Command sent verification. His flight path had been approved for reasons of, and I truly think you’ll appreciate this,” a quirk of the Security Director’s mouth, “‘recreational pursuit’.”

Cosmos’ icon vanished off the top of the screen. Blast Off remained steady a moment longer, then abruptly veered off-course to rocket to full power. His icon took off around Luna 2 like someone had lit his aft on fire.

Jazz scoffed, “Non-aggression? Really.” Oh, yeah, because barreling after the Minibot wasn’t aggressive in the slightest. True, Blast Off hadn’t been approaching him, but that last high-speed boost had definitely been a chase. The Combaticon had been almost stalking Cosmos prior to that. The Autobot Third shook his head, stretching his kinked neck linkages at the same time. “‘Con Command’s pushing it if they think we’ll buy that. What does ‘recreational pursuit’ mean, anyway? Be vewy vewy quiet, he’s hunting wabbits?”

To Jazz’s surprise, all three of the other officers in the makeshift medbay snorted in amusement.

“Watch,” Prowl directed him, even though his own optics continued reading through internal messages. “The transmitted briefing packet covered the very basics of the developing situation down here.” Meaning the courtship situation, the gathering of Vosians in downtown Tarn, or both. Jazz wasn’t clear on what exactly that meant, and Prowl didn’t seem inclined to explain until all the footage had been viewed. “Cosmos immediately dropped into Moonbase Two’s comm. network and logged a high-priority request for immediate updates on further developments,” the Prime’s Executive Officer added blandly.

“He also requested some specific things about the info-packet that Elita One had no further information on.” Red Alert hedged around actually stating what the requests had been, but the quirk of his lip stayed.

Ratchet was outright smirking as he stood up straight at last. He pulled out half the cables that had been running separate diagnosis programs and started putting things away.

The sliding glass panes that made up Jazz’s expressive visor held half a dozen secrets only he knew, but the ability to slot together into a narrow band of suspicious blue was not one such secret. He gave the three mechs the benefit of his glare for a moment before puffing air out his vents, pulling his bumper back out of the berth accommodation, and reaching out to right the display screen. Ratchet sourly allowed it since he’d already finished most of his scanning. The rest could run no matter what physically improbable position the saboteur decided to lay in. In the spirit of spite, Jazz chose to balance on his bumper, elbows, and knees, kicking his heels up at the medic.

Red Alert blinked down at the rump in front of him. It bobbed in time with the heel-kicking. “Ah…” He wisely chose to squeeze up closer to the screen. Who knew what kind of ideas or mood Jazz had returned from his mission with, after all. “We have Moonbase Two’s scans for the orbit they chose
going around Luna 2,” he informed the saboteur. “It’s more of the same, although I’d prefer if you reviewed them with me later. Blast Off went back to the exact same distance, choosing to expend fuel while Cosmos settled on a stable speed and orbit. Elita One made it quite clear to them that Moonbase Two was monitoring their positions. She sent a formal statement reminding Blast Off that causing one of our number distress could and would be construed as an attack. Cosmos continued to request clarification on the briefing.”

Glass shifted and slid. The mind behind it moved facts and speculation around in much the same manner. “Sounds like Cosmos found something interesting in that info-packet.”

What did he know of Cosmos? Good question.

The little spacefarer fell into the Minibot classification, although only for his frametype. That had confused the humans at first -- he was taller and bulkier than the more conventional frametypes’ Minibot classes -- but his compact stature was similar enough to the other Minibots on the Ark that the similarities showed up under a second look. And, as any fighter in this war knew by now, frametype was no reason to overlook a mech. If nothing else, the Great War had proven to all Cybertronians that frametype was no measure of a mech, and power could come in extremely small packages.

Cosmos embodied that. He was a living example of kicking aft and taking names, and that Minibot frame concealed a disproportionately large altmode. He transformed from a Minibot rootmode into an A-Class DAM-Range observation platform. The huge amount of mass-shifting involved had led Red Alert to originally mark his file as a potential Iaconian noblemech refugee because of the expense such transformations involved.

Jazz’s predecessor had removed that mark. Investigating the little space-goer had turned up evidence against Iaconian origin, apparently. He’d then put the Minibot up for promotion. There was, frustratingly enough, no explanation provided for either of the former SpecOps’ Head’s decisions.

Jazz dug into his archived files, pulling up what he could.

Cosmos didn’t come up very often. He had one of the rarer abilities Cybertronians possessed: space flight capabilities. A fair percentage of shuttleformers could make orbit, but not many could break it, much less safely return to atmosphere. There were good reasons why the moons had proven so difficult to claim, no matter the faction or danger in Cybertron’s cluttered near-space. An already small portion of Cybertron’s population had been whittled down to practically nothing by war, and orbit-breakers were almost as expensive as nonliving shuttles to build, anyway.

True, the Minibot couldn’t take off for other star systems like Skyfire could, but he’d been ranked as the Autobot Space Division’s Reconnaissance Officer for hundreds of vorn before Skyfire’s return to life. He wasn’t the highest-ranked ‘bot in the Space Division, but he didn’t have the drive to be in charge. Sky Lynx had more combat ability and initiative. The Lieutenant Commander came off as a loud-mouthed, arrogant git of a mech, but he was a decent leader. His self-confidence belittled people at the same time it made them determined to do better. He’d beaten out Cosmos to lead the division, but perhaps that'd been because Cosmos wasn’t the best when working with people.

He wasn’t bad at it by any means. Jazz’s personal experience with the mech painted the Minibot as an energetic bundle of positive emotions and a surprisingly cutting wit. Maybe not so surprising. Cosmos had reduced the Ark’s common room to whooping laughter on more than one occasion by commenting on something or another, but being good with words was probably to be expected for a mech whose major source of socializing came from a commlink. That likely tied into why he did better by himself than when leading others. The Minibot’s job often required him to be isolated for long periods of time. As much as he seemed to enjoy company, reconnaissance and orbital
surveillance kind of required a personality that did better as an individual than as part of a team.

Come to think of it, that was a description that could be applied to a lot of the Space Division. Of either faction. Although the Autobots seemed to do more to integrate their divisions, trying to include individuals from different divisions into cohesive whole units meant to stick together. The Decepticons lumped their Space Division into the Armada, but the divisions were still separate. The only long-term assignments Decepticon spacefarers took outside of their own division were with the Armada, possibly because of the similarities between orbital and atmosphere flight frames.

Sometimes the separation blurred; Starscream himself had limited space flight abilities but led the Armada. Yet, as had recently been made very clear to Jazz, the Decepticons relied on a more militant structure. The divisions were kept apart, operating independently, and the Space Division had its own rank hierarchy within itself.

The Decepticons liked structure in general, odd as Jazz would have thought it two joors ago. It kept popping up all over the place among the apparent chaos of the faction. It’d been there all along, but Jazz was still adjusting to its alien nature enough to analyze it as a working structure instead of a sliding powerhouse of backstabbing cards. He still couldn’t fully wrap his head around it. Understanding how contracts worked within the strange brute strength and open hostility of the Decepticon ranks would take some doing.

Jazz’s processors shook off the last defragment cycle lag and began whirring away at full power. Suddenly, archived reports were getting tagged left and right for significance. In retrospect, the contractual structure’s presence explained a lot about the war. The military hierarchy had long since been picked over by SpecOps, but attempts to disrupt the straightforward ranking system with assassinations and powerplays had been a tricky business. No matter how carefully planned, the results had split evenly between predicted fallout and completely unexpected reactions within the Decepticons.

*Maybe* might explain that. *Maybe* could be the missing element for his threat assessment processor. *Maybe* emotional ties were sending his indexes into a flurry of re-sorting as potential contract ties were evaluated between Decepticon personnel. Noncombat interaction cues were getting reevaluated by information and threat assessment subprocessors alike. Gossip in the ranks dealing with who liked to be fragged which way had been formerly tagged as inconsequential and vulgar. That was suddenly in urgent need of reassessment according to new assessment standards.

Oh, and wasn’t that going to be fun? Red Alert was going to take one look at the saboteur’s new parameters for self-modification program protocols and scream in frustration, Jazz could already tell. He skimmed the biggest clusters putting up flags for attention off the top of his processors and stuffed the attached files into his briefing info-packet for the other officers to get a look at. There would be a lot of screaming. Some of the shocked and horrified variety, but some just of sheer surprise for what Jazz had turned up this night.

Cosmos, however, might not be as surprised. Jazz got the feeling he needed to dig into the little Autobot’s past as he watched the Minibot’s icon bustle back onto the screen. He didn’t even know what Cosmos pre-war job had been, much less where he actually originated from. That wasn’t unusual, but it made him want to climb through the screen and interrogate the mech for information right now. He watched Blast Off follow Cosmos back toward Cybertron, and he wondered.

What did Cosmos know, that he’d asked Moonbase Two for information instead of assistance? This wasn’t the first time Cosmos had faced off against a Decepticon in space. It was practically his specialty to take on the Decepticon Space Division’s heavy-hitters by now, but he wasn’t stupid. He called for backup when someone started chasing him.
Jazz had seen Cosmos pursued by Astrotrain more than once, especially once the Ark’s crash confined the Minibot to Earth’s solar system. They just hadn’t had the energon to allow Cosmos to venture further very often, and the three spacefarers among the Decepticons had been even more limited. Astrotrain and Blitzwing had spent over half a vorn trying to kill the little Autobot whenever they ran across him, and they’d gone through great lengths to engineer those encounters. The chases were nasty, the crashes worse, but they hadn’t succeeded. Which had, in turn, embarrassed the two triple-changers and made them that much more determined to off the smaller mech. They’d had no luck on that score, however.

It was kind of unfortunate that Cosmos’ altmode was so badly suited for combat. He tried, adjusting astonishingly quickly to advanced weapon-mods, but an observational platform wasn’t meant for the maneuverability an assault shuttle had in combat. Astrotrain had shot him down more than once -- and that’s when the triple-changer’s luck ended. Cosmos topped the Minibots for combat abilities. He was small, but he was dense because of the mass shifting. He packed his altmode’s weaponry, too, which most mechs didn’t expect when facing off with someone whose rootmode compacted so small.

Cosmos had repeatedly pounded much, much larger Astrotrain into the dirt. Blitzwing wouldn’t even engage him in close combat anymore.

So there was ill-will between the Elite Decepticons fresh from Earth and the bitty-‘bot who might not out-fly them but could certainly out-fight them. The third spacefarer among the Elite on Earth, however…huh. Jazz couldn’t recall much interaction between Cosmos and Blast Off, either before or during their stay on Earth. Blast Off had the team and bulk for close combat, but he was meant for observation and precision strikes from orbit. He’d been put into high security imprisonment well before the Ark, but he hadn’t always been one of Onslaught’s team.

Jazz didn’t know what he’d been, and right now that information gap made his visor narrow. The same question went for Cosmos, too, and that had the SpecOps mech tense on the repair berth. Spacefarers in the both factions’ ranks had spotty records from all their time spent off-world. Already sparse information had been lost when the orbital platforms and original moonbases had been destroyed.

It wasn’t something to be automatically suspicious about. A lot of mechs had done their best to shed their pasts, signing up for their chosen faction with a clean slate. Some of them hadn’t even been trying; the files had just plain been lost. There’d been mechs up on the platforms who hadn’t been to Cybertron’s surface since their emergence from the crèche-vessels, meaning that all their residential, financial, and job-related records had gone down in the wreckage. Kup had a dozen contacts among the Neutral groups -- those that were left, anyway -- who’d been stranded when Cybertron had left their colonies’ star systems, and some of the colonists had returned to Cybertron before their homeworld left them behind. Jazz and Red Alert had shared more than a few cubes grousing in perfect harmony about how they didn’t know scrap about those mechs.

Files from before the Great War were really only reliable if they were about mechs who’d been on the planet’s surface the whole time. Even then, alterations or efforts to erase the records made mechs difficult to trace. Scrap iron and metal, just look at Starscream as an example for that. Second-in-Command of the Decepticon Empire, Air Commander of the Armada, and yet the Autobots didn’t known anything about his past before he’d emerged as the Emirate of Vo. According to the best information Jazz’s predecessor had been able to find, Starscream had just appeared one orn as the top graduate of the War Academy. Jazz’s search efforts hadn’t fared any better.

It’d taken reviving Skyfire to get any sort of background, and what a shocker that had been. Despite how they’d wanted to pump the peaceful scientist for that information, both he and Red Alert had
been restrained from it by Ratchet’s concern for the poor mech’s mental health. All they knew were the dribbles of information Skyfire let slip. That had been enough to floor the whole Ark. If revealing Starscream’s past as an exploration team scientist for the Planetary Science Corps. had been enough to stun the Autobots, there was information locked in the shuttle’s head that would probably knock the tires off them.

Ratchet’s concern was getting overridden. Skyfire was scheduled to return to Vos by noon tomorrow, and Jazz was going to grill him for information. He rather desperately hoped that somewhere in that interrogation, Skyfire handed over a handy guidebook for courtship he’d tucked away in his databanks. Or something. Anything. The saboteur would settle for vague hints, at this point. Someone with some experience still knew more than the rest of the Autobots right now.

From the look and sound of things, the Minibot getting chased around Luna 2 might know enough to be very useful at the moment.

“Tell me we’ve recalled Cosmos,” he demanded of Prowl without turning from the display. Cosmos had settled on a steady course, but Blast Off had not. For all that his icon didn’t move, his label was doing very interesting things if a mech knew how to translate the information into a flight pattern.

“We have,” Prowl confirmed from behind him, and a new tension entered the makeshift medbay. Jazz’s intense focus on the screen changed the other officers’ muted entertainment to closely watching a Special Operations mech at work. “What is your reasoning, Jazz?”

There was just enough snap to the question to make it an order, not an opening for more banter. “It’s speculation,” he warned, visor reflecting the icons. Blast Off’s flight pattern continued to spiral around Cosmos’ straight line. The Minibot had stopped trying to evade by dodging around debris. He appeared to be ignoring the shuttle slowly making precise circles at a perfect 90 degree angle to his flight path. “I’ve gotta ask a few questions of my mechs before anything’s confirmed, but what I think is that our favorite I.F.O. used to be part of either the Planetary Science crew, or maybe he was a Guard. He kinda doesn’t fit the profile for somebody in the Guard, but frag, he had to pick up the ability to kick ‘Cons around from somewhere, and it ain’t like I’ve ever seen anybody take him to the training rink.”

The Autobot Second-in-Command was no longer reading on his HUD. He watched his fellow officer bounce on the berth, hyperactive but focused, and frowned even as he nodded conditional agreement to the speculation. “That lines up with our conclusions based off our own viewing. Ironhide confirmed that training regimes have never included Cosmos as anything other than an instructor as far back as his archives reach.” He hesitated, optics going a bit blank. “Ah…define ‘I.F.O.’ It is not an abbreviation I currently -- “

“Identified Flying Object,” Red Alert interrupted, too impatient to let the grinning saboteur explain. “Because we know who he is. What do you think of his reactions so far?”

The last was directed at the now-pouting officer on the berth. “Spoilsport,” Jazz mumbled just quiet enough not to get called out for it. “Gotta buncha info to pass on, but you guys pick up my packets from earlier?” The transmissions had been under Blaster’s interference and SpecOps’ encryption, but transmitting so much data from downtown Tarn had probably resulted in at least a few interceptions by Soundwave. The peace negotiations likely meant that they’d gotten through to the Autobots anyway. There hadn’t been anything incriminating, but the Decepticons would still pick over anything they got a copy of. The data packets had been urgent information about what Jazz had observed so far tonight that had needed to be sent to the officer cadre right away. “Ties into the way Vos pretty much cycled its whole slagging population through the Guard. I dunno how it used to be set up, but what I’m thinking is that,” he tossed a hand up as if he was holding a ball, “if Cosmos’s
been in the Guard,” his other hand picked up another invisible ball, “and Vosians were all over the place in the Guard,” both pretend-balls were smashed into one large ball in front of the blue visor that then peered through it at the screen, “then Cosmos’s been courted before. We need that information.”

Blast Off continued to make careful, graceful circles. Even from Jazz’s ground-pounder perspective, the way the numbers on his flight pattern never wavered was just plain showing off. Managing to keep his spiral in and out around Cosmos’ flight path perfectly curved and on a 90 degree angle required control and concentration in excess of any standard. It brought to mind Terran male birds fluttering their plumage and dancing about in displays of physical prowess, trying to impress the females. Except that this particular ‘bird’ was navigating a potentially deadly debris field in pursuit of an Autobot.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Jazz snickered. Once imagined, that mental image wasn’t leaving him alone. The other officers paused the discussion that’d started over his head to stare at him.

The saboteur glanced to either side of the repair berth just long enough to beam up at them before nodding at the screen. “Lookit me! Lookit! See what I can do?” he said in his best imitation of Blast Off. Which, admittedly, wasn’t great, but it got the point across. Prowl’s expression dropped into a cool mask. Red Alert slapped a hand across his face. Ratchet outright laughed. “Are you watching?” Jazz narrated, smiling as Blast Off gradually closed the distance toward Cosmos. “Are you? Huh? Huh?”

“No. I’m not interested,” an exaggeratedly bored voice sighed from the doorway. Blaster could mimic Cosmos much better than Jazz could Blast Off. The Communications Officer lounged against the doorframe and smiled widely when Jazz and Ratchet laughed at his dialogue. “Go away. Shoo. Shoo.”

The bored tone certainly seemed to fit how the Minibot on the screen ignored Blast Off’s advance. If anything, he sped up. Jazz checked the numbers; yep, the orbital platform had boosted his speed to stay ahead of the Decepticon.

“Aw, come on,” not-Blast Off whined, “gimme a chance!”

“No. You’re not pretty enough.” Ignore that shuttle harder, Cosmos. “Go away.”

“But -- but -- !” The spirals were speeding up a little, progressively becoming more difficult. Blast Off spent more fuel and had to concentrate harder on plotting a safe course while remaining steady. The Minibot he was displaying for didn’t seem impressed, but Jazz couldn’t deny that he was. Mildly, anyway. He knew just enough about space flight to admire those capable of doing it well. “Lookit my wings! And my flying!”

“Shoo. Pesky ‘Con.”

“Lookit meeeeee. Come on, you know you want to.”

Cosmos broke his flight path when Blast Off’s acceleration pushed him too close, and Jazz sniggered as the two icons on the screen abruptly appeared to dance in place, turning about each other. “Are they…Primus, are they really playing ‘Ring Around the Satellite’?” Cosmos’ icon paused and went back the way it’d come, and the turning reversed as Blast Off chased him the other direction. “Come back here!”

Jazz’s already lousy imitation was even worse while helplessly laughing, but Blaster just went with it. “Catch me if you can!”
"Fragging pipsqueak!"

"Slagging slow-aft shuttle!"

After a klik of circling the relatively small piece of debris in some sort of ridiculous chase, the Minibot’s icon took off for the nearest larger piece. He hid behind its shelter. Blast Off lurked on the other side. When the Combaticon drifted up over the top, casually edging closer, his Autobot prey scooted under and away. Jazz, fascinated, kept track of the altitude and velocity measurements. Every time Blast Off came within visual range of Cosmos, however briefly before the Minibot zipped away, his label went into a frenzy of changes. The shuttle all but danced in place.

"It is just me," Jazz asked rhetorically after the fifth or so time that Blast Off’s icon did its jigging display, “or is Cosmos playing coy?” He could measure the timing himself. Cosmos was lingering longer every time Blast Off caught up, letting the Combaticon show off more every time. Almost like a reluctant bird letting herself be persuaded by a flouncing suitor in full mating display.

The room was already too crowded to fit another mech in, but Blaster wasn’t the Autobot Communication Officer for nothing. An alert lit up on the screen, flashing on and off with an arrow pointing to Cosmos’ label stats. Those, if Jazz wasn’t off his game, were showing some interesting changes. He did believe that they had begun showing their own variations. The reluctant birdie was beginning to preen under the attention.

The alert changed, still pointing at Cosmos’ icon. Blaster’s considered opinion: 'Totally Flirting.'

Jazz read the alert and grinned, half worried but unable to be anything but amused at the same time. The little spacefarer totally was. Cosmos wasn’t letting the Decepticon catch up to him, but he was showing off some of his own moves while fleeing.

“Interested yet?” not-Blast Off asked hopefully.

Blaster’s grin was audible even through his bored-Cosmos impression. “Hmm. Maaaaybe.” Blast Off’s icon danced. Cosmos sped out of sight again. “No.” Blast off pursued and danced about some more. Smooth moves, spacefarer style. Jazz wondered if he should be taking notes on how to flirt in space, because those label stats showed one skillful, entirely unnecessary loop-de-loop before Cosmos ducked under the debris. Somebody was liking what he saw.

“Yeees?” not-Blast Off drew out.

Blaster’s grin got louder under his Cosmos voice. “Yes.” More fanciful little flight moves got shown off as the Autobot’s apparent reciprocation injected enthusiasm into Blast Off’s performance. Cosmos’ icon lingered a moment, but when the Decepticon shuttle drifted in a casual attempt to close the distance between them, there was an immediate zoom away. “Nope, do not want!”

Jazz laughed, but he sobered quickly. “Y’know, if it wasn’t for who I’m watching, this’d be cute?” He sounded wistful even to himself, but the saboteur really wished he could just sit here and be delighted. Two mechs flirting up in space sounded adorable, and he wished it could be that simple. “This would be much easier if you would stay still,” he told the screen in his Blast Off voice.

“Make me,” Blaster/Cosmos challenged back.

“If you would just stay there and watch me for a klik…”

“Pffft. Seen it before. Not impressed.”

“No?”
“No.” Cosmos scooted around the debris again, and Jazz grinned stupidly at the screen, imagining the frustration of the shuttle following after. “And stop staring at my aft,” Blaster added just for good measure.

Jazz nearly doubled up on the berth laughing. “Then stop shaking it!”


Blast Off hustled after him. “No! Nonono, get back here!”

“Hmmph.”

“Fraggit!” The Decepticon’s icon paused, holding course for a moment. Cosmos must have passed briefly into sight, because the shuttle’s label bobbed with dancing stats.

There was just no help for it. He gave in. “Pretty bird, waaaark!” Jazz catcalled.

Combining a parrot’s cry with Blast Off’s voice was too much. Out in the hall, there was a deep chuff of heavy truck engines, and Prowl’s mask fractured just enough for a tolerant smile.

“Remember bird baths?” Ratchet asked suddenly, and the engines out in the hall were overridden by familiar laughter.

“I was tryin’ not to think of that, thank you!” Ironhide called from behind Blaster. Optimus Prime chuckled and then coughed to cover the sound. His engine continued to rumble, however, betraying the fact that Jazz wasn’t the only one who found the situation cuter than it had any right to be. Ramifications and potential problems aside, it was nice to share laughter for a moment. A miniature shuttle flapping stubby wings while splashing around in a bird bath was just a good mental picture to share.

“Little wings,” Red Alert murmured from beside the berth, and the saboteur looked up at the Security Director as black thumbs crossed and hands flapped. “Flit flutter flit.” Solemn optics met his visor, allowing the moment of amusement but serving as a reminder that Jazz was now cleared for full duty. The Autobot officer cadre had gathered, and it was time for debriefing.

Flit flutter flit. All the wings of Vos, a-courting did they come.

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 20

[* * * * *]
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 21
[* * * * *]

All good things must come to an end. Not a natural one, as Red Alert had no patience when the stakes were so high. He fast-forwarded to the end of the footage. After Cosmos skedaddled down to Moonbase Two for a refuel, he kicked everyone in the direction of an actual briefing room instead of trying to squish everyone into the makeshift medbay. Ratchet put his stamp on a clean bill of health for Jazz, and Red Alert signed off on the all-clear status for the Autobot Third. Ironhide handed over the weaponry he’d confiscated before the medical exam began. Jazz politely pretended that he’d actually been disarmed.

The Security Director knew better, but he confined himself to a sardonic look at the smaller Autobot when he handed over Elita One’s notes on Decepticon Command’s odd reaction -- read: nonexistent -- to the incident they’d just watched. The specialist’s impression of events from her end was cautiously optimistic due to the fact that Blast Off’s behavior hadn’t come off as threatening. Strange, yes. Certainly that. Not outside of the limited info-packet that’d been transmitted to her to judge these things by, however. Which, by the way, and Red Alert looked like he was quite in line with this strongly worded demand, she would like more information on. This courting practice stuff needed a detailed explanation and step-by-step guideline as of yesterday. Perhaps earlier.

She’d questioned Cosmos, but she reported a distinct ‘Hands off my personal life’ brush-off from that direction. The Minibot had been polite but evasive. He seemed willing to discuss the facts of what Blast Off had done and what he’d done in return, but his report was couched in studiously neutral tones. Professional tone only, ironed of all personal connotations. The way it read gave off a practiced feel. Cosmos either had the best professional poker-face in existence, or he’d written reports like this before.

Show of hands for the number of Jazzes who believed the former? None? Yeah. Cosmos had experience, and it was showing.

Jazz tolerated Ratchet unhooking him from equipment while he tore through the spacefarer’s reports. Information was ripped out and tagged with the single-minded focus of a scientist dissecting a new specimen while under a deadline. The fact-based report still made for interesting reading, and the neutral narration of events made them even more interesting. Intense curiosity about what exactly Cosmos wasn’t telling would eat the Head of Special Operations alive any second now.

From the way Prowl’s doors never relaxed down when he pushed off the wall to leave the room, the tactician had to be just as curious. Well, ‘curious’ probably wasn’t the right word. What Prowl felt for intelligence sources during unclear, unstable situations like this bordered on unholy vampiric hunger. The Autobot Second was far too dignified to slaver over information and latch onto sources until they were drained dry, but he utterly hated being without a plan. He had a tactician’s typical need for control.

Hence the reason Cosmos was due to launch again and head planetside to Vos as soon as he caught some recharge time. Jazz saw who’d signed off on those orders. He was looking at them right now. By the timestamp, Prowl hadn’t even waited to look through the full info-packet from Elita One
before firing his orders back.

Jazz himself was looking forward to meeting the Reconnaissance Officer with all the enthusiasm of a starved cyberhound offered an energon goodie. There might be less gnawing, but he couldn’t guarantee that he wouldn’t roll around on the Minibot like an ecstatic pet. Contract term limitations. The Minibot had asked Moonbase Two what *contract term limitations* Autobot Command had set. Primus alive and kicking, Cosmos knew what a contract was! He must have some idea what negotiating a contract entailed! He had to have at least the rough idea of what a contract structure was supposed to be set up like!

All things the Autobots currently didn’t have a clue about. Jazz’s information processor labeled Cosmos his new favorite information source. Regardless of whether or not the mech tried to call it personal business with a hands-off sign slapped on it, Jazz was going to get him. They didn’t have the luxury of keeping this personal right now. If Jazz had to tell-all about his evening, then the Minibot could dish out details as well!

For now, however, the spacefarer was safely tucked away up on Luna 2, sleeping the sleep of the… huh. Courted, apparently. Jazz scrolled through everything Elita One had sent, plus the other Autobot officers’ notes, and that seemed to be everyone’s conclusion. Blast Off wanted to woo Cosmos.

“He didn’t stick around? Shame on you, Blast Off, taking off on a mech like that.” The shorter officer left the not-medbay at Red Alert’s side, watching the last of the footage on his HUD as they walked through the halls toward a secured briefing room.

Blast Off had peeled off from Luna 2’s orbit and headed back through Cybertron’s near-space debris field as soon as Cosmos slipped away from him. The fuel usage estimate on his icon label indicated that the Combackon had probably made a rough re-entry into the closest Decepticon air space available planet-side. He must have been carrying extra fuel onboard or pushing to the dregs to keep up with the Minibot that long. Either way, he hadn’t imposed on Autobot hospitality for a refuel.

That could have been awkward. Elita One wouldn’t have been rude or hostile, but how did the revised, temporary-possibly-not ceasefire-theoretically-treaty regulations address former enemy forces asking for energon? Or requesting emergency aid? Nuts and bolts, Blast Off hadn’t needed rescue, but if he’d played his little game with Cosmos any longer, Moonbase Two might have had to tow his underfueled aft in.

“What’s the current draft got to say about provisioning?” Jazz called down the hall to Prowl.

The Executive Officer caught his meaning without explanation, because the mech was just that good. Or they’d just finished watching the same footage together, but Jazz preferred to think Prowl read minds. “Current ceasefire terms address passage through neutral and claimed territories, not provision of depleted members of the opposing faction. Paragraph 14 clause A of the peace treaty addresses how the borders will be defined; clauses B through F.103 address disputes of said borders. Clause H assures safe passage through held territories given the behavioral provisions of clauses H.2 through J.” There was a pause in the factual reporting as Prowl evidently pored through today’s revisions to the current treaty draft. “Provisioning has not been addressed. I shall amend the list.”

The list was something maintained by the whole cadre, because if they didn’t keep a list of issues to be addressed in the peace treaty, it would be one of those unsorted problems that broke the peace. It got amended frequently as everyone thought of potential problems. There were so many -- too many -- potential problems. There was a sinking feeling of relief mingled with dread whenever someone thought of a new item to add to the list. It combined ‘Thank Primus, we caught that one!’ plus ‘How many more have slipped past us?’
Optimus’ engines rumbled from up ahead, vaguely uncomfortable. While Prowl, Mirage, and Smokescreen spent long cycles closeted with Shockwave and Soundwave debating legal terminology and subclauses, it had been left up to the Prime to raise the greatest issues with Megatron directly. It wasn’t until yesterday that anybody thought to wonder how exactly he’d been bringing the list to the negotiating table.

“Better move it up and add something about emergency aid to the ceasefire’s terms, too. We might have Decepticons pullin’ more antics in Autobot territory soon,” Jazz said lightly, craning his neck to look past Ironhide at Optimus’ back. Antics like Megatron chasing that very same back around the negotiating table, only possibly more public. “Call it a courtship clause. Aw, c’mon, all that effort and not a single comm. squawk?” The last was said at his HUD. He’d gotten to the end of Cosmos’ report on the pursuit. According to Cosmos, Blast Off hadn’t even attempted contact. “What the frag? No proposal, just a show? What’re you supposed to do, assume he wants you? Rusted shuttle’s gotta step up and say something, or I’m gonna start thinking he’s doing a mindfrag on us. I thought the ‘Cons were all about being upfront and honest on this stuff,” he grumbled.

Everyone stopped. There was dead silence, and then the small creaks of half a dozen heads turning. The small black-and-white mech found himself the focus of a hallway of incredulous stares. He stared back, head cocked curiously to the side, not getting it for a moment. With self-modification program protocols active and mucking through threat assessment and information processors alike, his sense of ‘normal’ was temporarily off. His cortex hadn’t yet fully made the half-step of internal change necessary to return *'Jazz; Autobot; Head of Special Operations; Third-in-Command'* root personality profile to the forefront of his mind. He was still the Jazzmeister on assignment, adapted to the persona of *'Jazz; Autobot; Vosian; intended of Starscream; potential government authority figure.'*

It took a moment for current circumstances to hit. When it struck him what he’d just said, in the context of the faction he was talking about, a weak laugh pushed out of him. Uh, yeah. He’d compiled a list of things he’d already absorbed in order to brief everyone on what he’d seen tonight, but the briefing hadn’t happened yet. The others had no idea what he was on about. “Right. Mechs, have I got some info to dump on you.”

“Sounds like it,” Ratchet said dryly from behind him. “Might it have to do with that -- ahem.” Curious about the brief hesitation, the saboteur looked over his shoulder in time to get a small smile as the medic found the appropriate term. “That rather graphic video Soundwave transmitted to us?”

Time to reach for a protective cloak of casual self-confidence. “Oh, is that already doing the rounds?” Well, he’d tried. Jazz was certainly not embarrassed to exist right now. Nope, not at all. He forced a grin and hoped it didn’t look as sickly as it felt. “It might.”

_Augh._ He’d thought he’d at least have the night to prepare himself! Frag, frag, frag.

No. No, it was okay. He was okay. He was Jazz, and Jazz was cool, so he was okay.

“If it explains how you came to be wrist-deep in Thundercracker’s vital systems, then I’m all audios,” Ratchet snarked. “Primus, Jazz! I hope the rest of the night was less intense, or I’ll be replacing everybody’s vent fans by morning!”

Ironhide turned as the Prime entered the room’s lock code ahead of him. Blue optics narrowed, and the Weapons Specialist gave the medic an unamused look as he let everyone pass through the door first.

Ratchet sailed on by, snorting, “Don’t give me that. You’re a lying slagheap if you say watching that
didn’t rev your engine.”

“Hot as melted slag.” Blaster put in, grinning widely as he flopped into a chair. “Jazz, mech. Level with me. Where’d you learn to make Seekers scream?”

“That’s for me to know and you to speculate on.” He tried to meet their optics, he really did, but it just wasn’t happening. Something kept yanking his visor to the nearest wall as if it were magnetic.

He was not embarrassed, he was not -- okay, yes, he was. Frag his life if he didn’t have some reputation to salvage come morning. Jazz’s behavior skirted the boundaries of indecency during normal times, and he’d been pushing it to charm the Decepticons with ‘unintentional’ touches and flirting. Tonight, however, dove headlong into interfacing in public, in a way he feared most of the Autobots wouldn’t understand their own reactions to. It wouldn’t be so bad among SpecOps, where every operative knew just what lengths they’d go to for a mission, but that left the rest of the faction. If Soundwave had outright broadcast a transmission, the rank and file were going to find out. That would either help get everything out in the open, or bury the real issues in inconsequential scandal.

Horrified gasps would abound, he was sure. Grapple should starting building the fainting couches now.

…Primus, he was really starting to understand Acid Storm’s expression while explaining Decepticon interfacing practices. This was the first time the saboteur had ever thought about his friends and fellow faction members as kind of prudish. It was excusable ignorance considering how the factions had separated, creating wildly different societies, but scrap metal and rust was it ever going to cause his processors to overclock.

Jazz slunk around the table to his spot and slouched into the chair, not caring that he probably looked like a sulking new-spark. He crossed his arms and sullenly looked down at the tabletop, mind speeding ahead. “How much did Sounders broadcast, or didja get the uncensored Pay-Per-View edition of tonight’s Jazz Show?”

A ’tuh!’ of disbelief went around the table as everyone settled, and the maligned Autobot couldn’t help but crack a grin. Nobody believed for a second that Soundwave of all mechs would send them anything that hadn’t been heavily edited first.

I’ve got an offer for the full night sitting in my queue,” Blaster volunteered.

“That was quick,” Jazz muttered, but he wasn’t too surprised. “Swindle?”

“Yup.”

Definitely not surprised. Swindle would find a way to capitalize off the heat death of the universe. “Ugh. Take the offer. We need that footage.” What Soundwave chose to edit out might be more telling than what he’d left in. The comparison could be interesting.

The Communications Officer twirled a hand by his temple -- ‘loco in the coco’ -- and grimaced. “Swindle’s price is way funky, though. Table other issues,” he said, flipping his hands as if pushing Jazz’s activities aside for the moment. “I wanna pass it by you guys first, ‘cause he ain’t talking cold hard cash or credit. He’s calling in a favor.”

The rest of the command staff gave him their immediate attention. Although the trading of favors between Decepticons and Autobots wasn’t a condoned thing, several of the Ark mission Autobots owed Decepticons blank checks from their time on Earth. Red Alert kept close watch on those favors, tracking who owed what to whom. Most of them were very minor, from similarly minor
incidents, such as Astrotrain owing Red Alert the tiniest bit for letting his shipment of model trains through the human postage system unhindered, or Sunstreaker giving a nod to Mixmaster for passing on the correct formula to replicate his exact shade of gold in a human brand of paint. Most of them were stupid little favors, smidgeons of gratitude, but a few major things had cropped up here and there. According to Red Alert’s ledgers, but for a couple rare exceptions, those big ones had been called in to avoid being shot during battle.

Minor or not, the remaining favors belonged to the canniest of mechs on both sides. Soundwave had more than his fair share, but his Cassettes currently owed more favors than they’d gathered. Starscream held at least one or two that’d slipped detection, but the Air Commander played his cards close to his chest. Estimating the markers that mech had squirreled away for getting his nosecone out of the fire was a constant guessing game. Jazz wasn’t about to tell Red Alert how many the SpecOps’ pool held, although he was curious as to how accurate the Security Director’s records on his division were. Ratchet had more than four, less than a dozen, but owed heavily in small favors to Decepticons who’d ‘accidentally’ missed shooting him while tending patients on the battlefield. First Aid had at least a double handful owed to him, and he owed no one.

None of the Decepticons were dumb enough to shoot at the medic with a gestalt backing him. Only a threat to a patient could bring First Aid’s titanium core boiling up through his sweetspark exterior, and the other Protectobots ran pacifism over like roadkill when someone went after their teammate. Jazz dove for cover when that combiner team hit their limit. The Protectobots were reluctant soldiers at best, but they were still soldiers. Defensor typically stuck to defense because of his components’ backgrounds in rescue operations, but when he seized warfare by the horns, he gripped hard and used it to bludgeon the chaos back into order. He’d once backhanded Megatron so hard Devastator broke apart because Hook and Scrapper went running to the tyrant’s unconscious side.

Lesson learned: Don’t. Shoot. At First Aid.

Swindle didn’t need that lesson. Swindle didn’t shoot at anyone unless there was a percentage in it for him somehow. He was an avid trader of favors, and his access to goods the Autobots wanted had resulted in skilled bargaining at the debt game. He’d cashed most of his bartered favors as soon as they were written in order to slip his nonweaponry business-dealings with the humans past Autobot interdiction. He had a few left, however, and it seemed he was calling one in.

“He knows I ain’t gonna give him scrap-all for what he’s got left on me, but he knows we want that footage, too. His offer’s givin’ us what we want for what looks like a pitance, but there’s gotta be an angle.” Blaster scowled, rubbing his nasal crest. “I just can’t see it. I wanna pass it by you guys.” He put his hand flat on the table and leaned forward. “Check it: he wants an introduction to the human Embassy.” That got widened optics around the table. “Not any ol’ secretaries. Ambassadors Witwicky themselves. And get this.” He leaned further forward, as if paranoid that Soundwave had the sealed briefing room bugged even after he and Red Alert had finished with it. “He wants it full-formal, done by Mirage. He didn’t specify, but I’m thinking what he means is full-formal as in Iaconian Towers formal.”

“Mech’s got business sense,” Ironhide said. He propped one knee up against the table and folded his arms, frowning as he thought. “Could be trying to make himself look like he’s somebody important here on Cybertron.” Because like fun the humans didn’t know he’d been sleaze on four wheels while on Earth. “Presentin’ himself as a noblemech could be a try at makin’ a good impression and puttin’ himself forward as the Decepticon official contact for off-world dealin’s. He wants slag imported or exported from Earth, current draft says he’s gotta go through official channels. Right?” He threw Prowl a glance.

Prowl obviously had the peace treaty draft open in front of it on the table’s inbuilt screen display.
Jazz could read the open windows upside-down as his fellow officer touched and dragged them around, searching for the relevant passages and checking six other things at the same time. “Correct. Our contacts on Earth have reported that the orbital stations have had to repel unidentified alien craft more frequently. Their outermost outposts have caught similar craft attempting to infiltrate the solar system.” The tactician pulled up a series of reports to skim over. “While I can believe that our involvement may have opened the planet to interstellar traders or piracy, I find it highly improbable that there would be this much activity within such a short amount of time.”

“Invasion?” Ironhide’s knee dropped off the table, and they all sat straighter.

Earth was in a transitive time as humankind ventured out into the wider galaxy. Inexperience left the race vulnerable, and the Autobots were rather protective of their ally planet. Humankind’s bizarrely infectious nature accounted for some of that protectiveness, but the Ark crew felt intensely responsible for what had been done to Earth in the name of their war. The Autobots, much less the Decepticons, should have never ended up on Earth.

Humans were incredibly tough in some ways, but it was hard to see it for their frail little bodies.

“Possible, but unlikely.” Prowl touched a minimized window and zoomed in on a short note. “No aggression shown, and those craft that made it into atmosphere were targeting specific areas in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.”

A heavy truck engine rattled the table as the Prime angled to see the report. Prowl obligingly flicked it to the console screen at their leader’s place, set into the head of the table. “They knew where they were going. Precision drops,” Optimus said after looking over the information himself.

“Or pick-ups,” Prowl agreed. “In Swindle’s most active areas of business.”

“Some shipments got through,” Ironhide asserted, frown hard and tight. As much as the humans had shored up their vulnerable world’s protections, they still weren’t up to galactic standards. They couldn’t have intercepted every attempt to land on their planet. “It’s still gotta be cuttin’ into that scumball’s profit margin.”

True enough. Swindle had been out of circulation for over four million years in the Detention Centre. He’d built a business network from scratch on Earth, but half a century was a long time in human terms. That was plenty of time to establish a deep network on Earth, and practically nothing for re-establishing his network off-planet among longer-lived races. Whatever contacts he had left on Cybertron, he had to be promising them exotics from the human world. It was his only selling point until he got his network set back up here.

“The Ambassadors are aware of Swindle’s reputation and criminal record, both on and off Earth.” Red Alert had pulled up a series of files on his own touchscreen. “A fancy introduction will accomplish nothing if we make them aware of our speculations. He is not the official Decepticon contact for anything, and our alliance with Earth explicitly states that dealings with the Decepticons must pass through us first for security. If he is seeking to bypass that, the Ambassadors will shut him down without qualm.”

“Hmm. Could be that, but he doesn’t strike me as the type to beat his head against a wall.” Jazz rattled his fingers on the table as he mulled the puzzle over.

Swindle had to know about the provisos put in place to protect the Autobot Alliance’s ally-worlds. The Autobots were representing more than themselves in these peace negotiations, but so far only the cease-fire only had one concession acknowledging that fact. The Autobots hadn’t pushed the issue very hard. In the past, the Decepticons had shown themselves willing to work with and use other
species, but the faction as a whole had a superiority complex. It was as if Megatron’s efforts to level
Cybertron’s social rankings had made Senator and miner equal but somehow also resulted in
elevating Cybertronians above all other forms of life in the universe. The Decepticons in general had
contempt bordered on xenophobia for off-worlders.

The Autobots had let the delicate topic lie once they’d won the single concession, because that
concession was ground-breaking by itself. The Decepticons had allowed the classification of
humankind as ‘sentient aliens, Autobot allies.’ Unspoken in the fine print Prime and Megatron were
slowly sorting out in their closed meetings, that meant Megatron sort of, maybe, sideways
acknowledged humankind as an equal species. A little. As long as no one openly talked about it.

The classification didn’t stop the Decepticon ranks from curiously poking at the Earth Embassy in
Vos, but it kept them from stomping on the squishy organics inside. The Embassy had responded to
the constant gawking by putting a giant vidscreen along one whole wall of the building. Within six
months, off-duty Decepticons were standing in skittish herds around it, mesmerized by educational
and entertainment programs from Earth. Now, twelve years on from the beginning of the cease-fire, a
cautious mingling of Decepticons and Autobots gathered at the Embassy on the unofficial movie
nights.

Blaster claimed that 70% of his Decepticon and Earth Embassy middleman work had to do with
requests for reruns or demands for this deca-cycle’s show schedule. Another 20% was purchasing
through him as the major Earth TV networks’ authorized distribution vendor for Cybertron.

Earth’s pop culture sucked mechs in wholesale. The vidscreen had been a brilliant diplomatic move,
in Jazz’s opinion. The Ambassadors Witwicky were no fools, and Swindle had to be aware of their
cleverness.

“Might just be as simple as getting a foot in the door as far as any future dealings,” Jazz mused.
“Nothing says that Earth can’t request who we contact in the Decepticons. I mean, as long as an
official contact isn’t specifically designated in the treaty, he’s got as good a chance as anybody.
Introduction done by an Autobot makes him look good, and doing it this early on might be him
trying to look like he supports Earth getting in on the negotiations.” It’d be a typical greasy move on
the conmech’s part, but it could be legitimate business sense as well. Swindle could schmooze with
the best of them.

He looked up at the others. “I say go for it. We need that footage.”

Optimus Prime looked to Prowl and Red Alert, who gave reluctant nods of agreement. “Very well.
Blaster?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Leading us back to what we’re really here to discuss,” Ratchet said dryly. He tilted his head,
directing an amused, almost impressed look across the table at Jazz. “The footage we’ve already got.
We got four kliks of you pulling some moves on Thundercracker’s spark that I haven’t seen outside
of some high-voltage pornography from before the war,” he declared as if that were the standard
measurement for such things.

Of course, then he immediately had to fend off Wheeljack’s interest. His friend appeared to agree
with his standards and was flashing his vocal indicators suggestively. “No, you can’t watch it! No. I
don’t have it. I don’t have the archive space to keep that sort of filth on file!”

“Implying that you once did keep it,” the Autobots’ Chief Engineer pointed out cheerfully. “You
might want to dig out what you remember about it, because from what we saw tonight,” he gave the
Porsche across the table a broad wink, “it counts as instructional vids. Think you could teach classes?”

Blaster hooted and pushed himself back in his chair. “Sign me up! Smelt me if anything I saw back in the day had more than some plate-pawing before the data details started flashing ‘cross the screen. I mean, frag yeah I gotta few ideas, but anybody here actually done the deed without swapping cables?”

Suddenly, nobody could meet anyone else’s optics. Jazz glanced around the table. Embarrassment became so much easier to bear when it spread about, but this was a little weird. Optimus’ engine coughed, Ironhide had his optics trained on the ceiling, and Prowl rearranged his touchscreen’s windows obsessively. Ratchet and Wheeljack appeared to be having an argument over internal commlink. Red Alert was following Prowl’s fine example and busily arranged his open files in different patterns. Even Blaster looked like he regretted what’d just come out of his mouth.

Then again, the Autobot Communications Officer had a history of not watching his words when it came to sharing too much information. Professional though he could be, he nosedived into details on personal stuff. This wasn’t the first time he’d said something too risqué for polite company. It’d earned him a bit of a loose reputation that…Jazz really had to revaluate in the light of what he’d learned tonight. Huh. The same went for Ratchet’s words.

The glimmer of unease that’d started nagging him shouldered out into the open and demanded he listen to it. He’d let embarrassment get a foothold when the teasing had started in the hall, but that wasn’t right. He needed to stop and think about that reflex, and how the logic under the reaction worked. Or rather, how the Autobots assumed it worked.

His unease related back to how every Autobot here thought about the footage his spies brought back from missions. Every surveillance mission came back with cycle upon cycle of obscene acts caught everywhere in every Decepticon base. The Autobots recoiled from watching such footage, and dismissed it as disgusting interpersonal byplay holding no greater meaning in the larger setting of the war. Well, showed what they’d known about how the Decepticons did things. The public debauchery among the Decepticons that had appeared to serve no purpose suddenly did. Jazz’s unease over the teasing crystallized: the standards they’d been judging an entire faction by were based on flawed arguments. And those standards carried over into their own society.

The only one in this room, in this building, that knew something was wrong with the standards was Jazz himself. It gave him a strange sense of disassociation. Listening to the slurs and the teasing when he couldn’t relate to them put him on the outside, studying the rest of the cadre from the perspective of a judgmental observer. He squeamishly wondered what a Decepticon would think of having his preferred method of interfacing referred to as a bad joke at best, ‘filth’ at worst.

No wonder the Autobots had stuck with hardline interfacing alone, if anything different got shamed out of practice as an obscenity.

Jazz couldn’t say that Autobot mores were precisely wrong, but after what he’d seen tonight? He could definitely state that they weren’t right.

The Autobots had to clean house before thinking about Decepticon guests. A lot of internal issues needed to be reevaluated before the external ones could even be touched. Taking apart their standards to puzzle out the flawed logic had to be done, and it had to start somewhere. Unfortunately, all the places to start were all places he wanted to avoid for his own peace of mind right now.

When every place to begin sent his temperature skyrocketing with embarrassment, why bother with
the niceties?

Had anyone at the table gone straight through to overload without cable interfacing? Yes indeed, someone had, and it’d be public knowledge fairly soon even if he didn’t confess to it. There’d been too many witnesses to bother with delaying the inevitable. He could all but feel duty weeping inside his head as that randy subprocessor gleefully gained the upper hand.

Time to talk porn.

“Yes.” He threw it out on the table with a boldness he certainly didn’t feel at the moment. “But you saw the extent of it, and that was one-sided. So sign me up for classes, too. I need to know where to touch, how hard, and what’s safe. I pulled that spark-stuff out of my exhaust pipe, mechs, ‘cause I got nothing. All the stuff I used to get were pornloads.”

Jazz shrugged his doors, working to seem less flustered than he really was. Talking about this was acutely embarrassing. Because, really, self-servicing happened, but who in the universe wanted to talk about it? It belonged behind closed doors, and that’s where it should stay -- except that was a fallacy. Embarrassment killed discussion, so the discussion never happened, and that perpetuated the circular argument that made openly speaking about pleasure anathema. That was wrong.

Knowing that didn’t make it any less humiliating to speak out in front of the other officers. He’d just admitted to syncing his systems with fantasy mech downloads meant to imitate a real interface. Now he couldn’t even meet their optics.

Wait, what? No. He stopped that line of thought and went after it with a staple-gun, trying to pin down what exactly it was that was trying to make him feel ashamed. There was no shame in admitting to self-servicing. There was no shame in talking about it, or about his experience level with tactile interfacing. Acid Storm would probably be wondering what his hang-up was.

A quick self-assessment made him conclude it came down to peer pressure. A processor loop had lodged tight: he thought this topic didn’t belong in public, so he felt that everyone would disapprove of it being brought up, so it wasn’t brought up, and the silence became self-perpetuating as everyone accepted that the topic was Not To Be Spoken Of. Someone had to take a step out of that circle of assumption, and here Jazz was.

Truth be told, this wasn’t the oddest report he’d given to the officers at this table. The looks they were giving him, however, certainly ranked as some of the most shocked he’d collected in return. That sort of challenged him, in a backward way. He could play this game. The air of casualness settled more easily on his shoulders, and Jazz stretched to hook his doors over the back of his chair. Ante up, Autobots.

He met that incredulous, table-wide stare and raised the bet. A round of details on the house. Details for everyone! “The cheap-charge stuff got me off, but it’s kinda leaving me woefully underequipped going up against the ‘Cons on this battlefield. I think they give each other lessons on tactile ‘facing.” He frowned, remembering Acid Storm demanding a report on interfacing preferences from a subordinate. “No, wait, I know they do.” He either needed to sign up for lessons somehow, or go through previously-discarded mission footage with an optic for fragging.

Staring morphed into gaping. Slack-jaw disease infected even Prowl, which would have been hilarious if Jazz’s intakes weren’t skreeling shut out of embarrassment.

Ratchet sputtered, fastening on a detail. “You’ve never -- You could have killed him!” Indignation crossed his face. “Why on Cybertron did you agree to touch his spark if you didn’t know what you were doing?!”
He flashed a cheeky grin at the medic. “I figured mechs have been making this stuff up for ages without exploding. I just went with what felt good, y’know?”

“Jazz.”

The somber tone repressed his embarrassment-fueled giddiness a little, and he turned to give the Prime a more serious look. “You telling me you’re confident you know how to turn the Slagmaker’s fans? Because I did what I had to, but this is something the Decepticons do on a regular basis to negotiate. They’re gonna do whatever it takes to get the advantage on these slagging contracts. I barely know where a few of your sweet spots are, much less what I should be aiming for on Starscream. Gimme a cable, sure, I can hold my own. But he gets his hands on me,” he admitted, but this admission was grim, “and he’s got me melting in a klik or two. Tell me I’m wrong that ol’ Megs ain’t doing the same to you.”

“We’re not fighting,” Optimus said, troubled enough to ignore the sudden speculative glances of the officers cataloguing what they knew got his engine running. “Interfacing is not a weapon that we must hold over the Decepticons. True, I am not experienced in this practice, but I am confident of my ability to,” his optics slid to the side, “learn what to do. It has sufficed so far.” He shifted under the narrow optics of the entire table. Suspicious Autobots were suspicious. ‘Sufficed,’ eh?

Ironhide nudged Jazz in the side and pointed with his stylus at the newest item on his personal agenda: ‘Question Bumblebee on closed meeting events.’

The saboteur nodded and updated his own agenda to match. What were the two faction leaders getting up to behind closed doors, anyway? Bumblebee’s presence as a secretary was meant to tamp down the naughtier negotiating techniques Megatron might try pulling out, but after witnessing the highly public events of the night, Jazz wasn’t sure Bumblebee was enough. He wasn’t sure an entire armed squadron would be enough. It might turn into an orgy, with the way things were going.

Optimus caught his two officers exchanging scheming looks and seemed mortified. “I do not need lessons!”

Interesting that the Prime had assumed that’s what they were planning. Veeeeeeery interesting. ‘Yes he does,’ Ironhide tapped out with his stylus. ‘Alternative option: chaperone?’

Jazz nodded agreement and turned his visor on the rest of the table. “Look, I’m not saying we couldn’t go a few rounds of intimate Twister and catch up to the party,” he wiggled his fingers in illustration at the mechs across the table, and Ratchet sat up straight in a real hurry, “but that’s gonna take time we don’t have. Trust me, we are way outclassed in experience. We gotta level-up fast, or we’re gonna be wondering what we agreed to after the static clears. This isn’t fighting,” he said to his Prime, “it’s not a weapon, but it is a tool. It’s a tool I need, and pronto. ‘Cause, mechs?” He reset his vocalizer. “Gotta admit, I’ve never gone tactile all the way ’cept for that thing with Thundercracker tonight. I got no idea what to expect under normal circumstances.”

Hello, embarrassment. Welcome to the meeting. Come in and visit everyone.

“…me neither,” Ironhide admitted gruffly, optics locked on his agenda. “Stuff like that’s just foreplay, in my book.”

“I want a look at your book,” Ratchet muttered sourly. “Might borrow some pages here and there.” His voice rose a little, and he crossed his arms across his windshield defensively. “Before anyone starts, I’m not a pervert. The vids I had were both good studio-quality and some really lousy homemade slag, and it was for a class. All the medical students were given terrabytes of various popular entertainment vids to analyze.” He sank a bit in his chair, avoiding their intrigued, slightly
appalled gazes. “Reporting on the physical probability of stuff. And things.” He slid lower in the chair. If he got any more defensive, they’d need to rename him Fort Ratchet. “It wasn’t all pornography.”

“But a lot of it was?” Wheeljack prodded, fascinated.

If Ratchet were any less a self-confident mech who’d seen everything and done it twice during his time as Chief Medical Officer, the drum of his fingers on his upper arm would have been a full-blown squirm. “It was what everyone wanted to analyze,” he said stiffly. The room continued to look at him. Finally, he met their stares and blustered, “For Primus’ sake -- it was a long time ago, and I was very young!”

…maybe Jazz should have been a medic. All they’d shown during the Enforcer training courses was boring videos of old award ceremonies.

Attention tactfully turned from the glowing mortified medic in their midst when Prowl made an aimless gesture with one hand. “I know of tactile interfacing, but it is not something that was practiced in Praxus. You, ah,” the tactician cleared his throat unnecessarily, attempting to treat the subject delicately despite the fact that it splayed out lewdly on the table. “You are aware of my preferences in such things.”

That brought up a surge of memory. It swept around the room as the assembled officers looked at him, optics softening, and the Autobot Second-in-Command suddenly found a datapad in dire need of an update. He busied himself tapping his stylus, expression impassive.

Everyone pretended not to see Optimus reach out a hand and lay it gently on his Executive Officer’s forearm, or Prowl stop writing momentarily in order to cover the Prime’s hand with his own. Ratchet’s face didn’t unscrew from its scowl and his arms remained tightly crossed, but his elbow somehow knocked against the tactician’s closest altmode door anyway. Physical and emotional connections could be dismantled to an exploitable, mathematical equation in the numerical world seen through Prowl’s logic center. His battle computer ran almost constantly in these wartorn times, and the priorities set by processing information through it made personal attachment…difficult. He used his cold personality as ruthlessly as Jazz used his social nature, but Prowl was no emotionless robot.

At the end of the day, he was as Cybertronian as any mech in the room, with the same basic needs that could only be pushed aside for so long. Every mech in the briefing room had linked up with him before, and the interfacing had reminded them that basic needs were surprisingly easy to fulfill. Namely, that interfacing with Prowl involved simply holding him and being held in return. There was no reaching for pleasure or striving toward a climatic peak. It was plain, comfortable, platonic intimacy that let him relax.

Comparing interfacing with Prowl to even just flirting with Starscream broke Jazz’s mind a little. He might have sneaked a quick grope of the Executive Officer’s aft a few times, but come on. That’d been wishful thinking and some clowning around. How less like tactile interfacing could a mech get than a nice, wholesome hug?

’SIGN HIM UP FOR EVERY CLASS. EVER.’ He slid that over for Ironhide to read, then dragged the datapad back and underlined the last word a few times. He didn’t doubt that Prowl could hold his own on a battlefield, but the mech operated at maximum efficiency when he had a plan. Until there was real experience to back up theory, Jazz’s threat assessment grouped the Autobot Second into the category of potential liabilities.

Unlike, of course, Wheeljack. Experiments based on wild theories were his strong point. “I’ve
“dabbled,” the engineer admitted easily, winking his indicators at the medic warily edging away from him. Prowl grunted from Ratchet’s other side, abruptly squished in his seat by the ambulance now leaning on him. “Not much, but, er, humans are remarkably touchy creatures. Studying their nervous systems and attempts to repair handicapped humans with nerve damage allowed Perceptor and I to introduce several new advancements in Cybertronian medical technology. It shouldn’t surprise anyone that concepts relating to increased sensitivity and concentration upon physical stimulus inspired us to field-test our own -- “

Ratchet croaked faintly, and optics went wide around the table. No one was ever going to look at the equipment in the medbay the same.

Wheeljack just shrugged. “Overall, it was pleasant, but we moved on fairly quickly. I can’t say I’d object to trying it again, but…” His optics went pensive. “Is the spark thing normal for the Decepticons?” he asked hesitantly, indicators dimming as everyone looked at him. “I’m sorry, but opening my chest isn’t something I want to do.” An anxious fidget, and one hand covered his chest unconsciously while he earnestly stared across the table at Jazz. “From the way he was bound, Thundercracker didn’t seem to have a choice about what you -- “

“Far as I can tell, it’s not something they do regularly,” Jazz interrupted quickly. “An’ what Thundercracker wanted is kinda complicated.” He hesitated, wondering if there were enough qualifiers in the universe to pile on that one word. Complicated. Yeah. “Uh…I’m gonna need a klik to upload everything for you guys. Gimme a sec.”

One hand waved, shooing them onward as he pulled over a download pad. He opened up the appropriate program on it and jacked in. The briefing packet was ready to go, but getting everything prioritized correctly by which officer he aimed every data-packet at required some individual tweaking. For instance, Ratchet really needed a heads-up on the extent this information was going to recompile their underlying program protocols. Depending on how quickly Prowl tried to analyze and assimilate the changes, there could be Very Bad Reactions happening soon. Not just for Prowl. Red Alert could turn his assumptions on a dime in order to handle traitors popping out of the floor and a base collapsing on his helm, but that didn’t mean he’d come out of the settling dust a well-adjusted mech. Or a quiet one, for that matter.

While Jazz worked, attention shifted to the far end of the table, where their Communication Officer shrugged at them. “I, uh, only ever had pornloads.” Blaster seemed almost apologetic, either for introducing the topic or for not having wider experience in the media they needed. Usually, he could be relied upon to have dabbled in every genre of every communication medium ever invented. Although battles might have been a lot more fun if pornography had been considered essential to the war effort before this. “I don’t even know where to go beyond some heavy petting. So…uh. Red?”

Red Alert’s curt answer held all the embarrassment his face didn’t show. “No.”

“Has anyone tried asking Kup what he knows?” Prowl asked suddenly. A round of mumbles went around, but it seemed that nobody had. “Blaster?”

“On it.” The boombox mech smiled wanly. “Just need to, um, figure out how to word it. Kinda one of my weirder info requests. ‘Hey, Kup, tell me a story ‘bout the time you finger-fragged a buncha --”

“He broke off, wilting under Ironhide’s glare and several shocked stares from the others. “Oh, uh, sorry. Just…yeah. Bad timing?”

“This is no joking matter,” Optimus Prime said sternly. “As…awkward as the subject may be, I wish it to be handled with as much dignity and common sense as any other relating to the peace process.”

Blaster winced. “Yes, Prime. Sorry ‘bout that, guys.”
Even caught up in his own work, Blaster’s flustered apology had Jazz frowning. It seemed that nobody had a better idea of what to do than Jazz. Wonderful. It made sense, however. The Autobot officer cadre came mostly from the Tri-Peninsular Torus States where the Senate -- and after it, the Autobot faction -- had centered its powerbase. That whole hemisphere had been where the Senate had the most power, or at least control. As Acid Storm had railed about, the Enforcers hadn’t just been out to universalize the Senate’s laws over Cybertron; the Enforcer Code had been set down to create a society ruled by those laws. Standardizing a whole planet’s social practices based out of those laws required ignoring any previous cultures and overriding any conflicts by coming down in favor of the ‘standard’ every time.

If the outside judges viewed the culture already in place as intrinsically harmful, they’d have been out to subvert the foreign culture. Jazz could see why the warbuilds had been up in arms over that. Knowing what he knew now about his own faulty assumptions, he would have gone into Vos ready to view its native society as bad. Most of the Enforcers, like the Senate’s bureaucracy, came from the Tri-Peninsular Torus States, where the standards had been in place long before the Cybertronian Alliance went into affect planetwide. The Enforcers stationed in Vos had probably had no idea how to handle the culture clash other than labeling the Vosian side as ‘wrong.’

That brought up another train of thought, and he spoke without looking up. “Anybody done a background search on city origins? Those who came from closer to the equator and survivors from the Neutral city-states gotta have some experience in this. Mechs from the Planetary Guard probably had a few run-ins with this scrap.” He needed to touch base with his operatives, too. Before, reporting that a quick session with a Decepticon had gotten key information or greased the gears to free someone in a tight spot had been SpecOps code for an operative not wanting to talk about his methods. Jazz had let himself gloss over the details for too long, especially now that he knew it wasn’t cable interfacing that’d had his mechs so uncomfortable during reports.

“Defectors.” Oh, that one word had eons of paranoia worked into it. The Security Director stabbed his stylus at a datapad as if the idea personally offended him. “I will pull files on every confirmed defector from the Decepticons. Rumored ones as well.” He frowned thoughtfully. “I can start an inquiry, but calling for volunteers might be just as effective.” He paused, and a strange look of realization spread slowly across his face.

Ironhide nudged him with an elbow. “What?”

“A lot of extremely odd questions from my mechs working integration make so much more sense, now,” Red Alert said, voice distant. Security held responsibility for keeping tabs on defectors as well as indoctrinating them into the Autobot Code and ranks. Jazz could just bet there’d been some odd questions asked on both sides.

A huff of air from the head of the table accompanied Optimus Prime sitting forward and folding his hands together on the table’s surface. “Jazz, I must ask: is there a reason you’ve directed the conversation to…this?” He unlaced his fingers to make a vaguely uncomfortable gesture. “I don’t question that it is relevant to ongoing events, but our personal experience in, ah, interfacing techniques hardly seems to take precedence to your debriefing.”

The download pad bleeped completion as he shut down his hardline to it. “Roll with it a klik longer, Prime,” the saboteur assured him, “because this briefing’s gonna get your shock absorbers working. Mechs, I’m proposing we get some tactile classes on the schedule right away. Ratchet, you remember those vids well enough to teach some basics for feel-good times?”

“Oh, Primus, I hate you.” Jazz’s grin flashed brightly as the medic put his elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands. Embarrassment! Embarrassment for all! “Yes, fine. Better to learn from
a medical professional than you just making this Pit-scare fragging nonsense up while holding someone’s spark.” Amused rumbles from a high-performance engine earned Wheeljack a hard smack in the shoulder. “Consider yourself deputized as my teaching assistant, afthead!”

“Right.” The Autobots’ resident problem-solver turned his urchin’s grin on the rest of the table, but his visor had the steely glint of the Jazzmeister’s ruthless purpose. “You’re all signed up. Frag, the whole roster’s signed up. We should set up some equipment and distribute recordings to every Autobot outpost we can reach in a hurry. Ratchet, your office is now Interfacing HQ, because class attendance is mandatory.” That hard visor turned to nail the Prime where he sat, and Optimus sat back, startled. “Mandatory. As in, you’re goin’.” The look expanded to the other six officers. “All of you.”

Ratchet spluttered. “What -- don’t I get a say in this?!”

“You can say all you want,” Jazz said, gentling his voice a bit from the merciless cheer of the Autobot Third-in-Command giving orders. “You don’t have to lay a hand on anyone, but we need this. Gimme a hint, Ratchet. Some general pointers. Things to avoid. Stuff like that. Anything taught by the Decepticons on this’s gonna be skewed to their advantage, and I dunno ‘bout you, but I’d rather learn a few dance moves in the amateur rink before I’m swept off my feet by the grand champion.” He drew in a deep vent. “I’ve got some things I’ve gotta follow up on, but I might -- might -- be able to bring in a couple, ah, Decepticon ‘volunteers’ for demonstrations.” He had a couple of options in mind. He had no idea if either would cooperate, but right now, the Autobots needed him to try and drag in those leads.

Hot air puffed out his vents, and the small Autobot put his download pad flat on the table. His hands were steady, but his intakes were skreeling all the way shut. As hard as he was trying to cover it, embarrassment was catching up with his bravado. He could only imagine what the topic was doing to the others.

Scratch that. He didn’t have to use his imagination. If Prowl stiffened any further in his seat, he’d snap a strut. Only shock had kept the Autobot Prime and his Executive Officer silent so far, because Jazz was pushing it by abusing his authority like this.

On purpose, even if they didn’t see the purpose yet. “Ironhide, lemme tell you what I want to try,” Jazz said, turning to the mech beside him as if this were an everyday conversation. “I wanna fight you. I wanna fight dirty, pin you down, get pinned down, get so charged up and dented that we’re hot an’ bothered and two cables away from ‘facing each other right out in the open where everybody can see us.”

It came out chatty, casual, and Ironhide’s face was priceless. Red Alert made a funny sound of wheezing intakes from the Weapons Specialist’s other side. Wheeljack’s indicators lit so brilliant that Ratchet’s dropped jaw cast a shadow across Prowl’s stunned face. Blaster blatted static, and Optimus blinked rapidly as Jazz stood up, one hand reaching out to toy with the old red soldier’s tire.

“So you wanna interface with me?” he asked, calm and still casual.

For reasons they didn’t understand yet, that was the part that blew the assembled officer cadre flat. Optics went blank as astonishment temporarily wiped everything else away. He understood that feeling all too well: knock-out shock and an odd, growing sense of offense.

Hopefully, there was a similar growth of confusion for such a strong reaction.

Ironhide’s mouth opened, but no sound came out. There might have been a tiny squeak of jaw gears.
“Jazz!” Of course the Prime would recover first. “What are you -- “

Jazz blatantly ignored his commander. “Yes or no,” he asked, visor capturing Ironhide’s stunned gaze, and oh, it hurt his spark to see how close to fear that look came. Ironhide, oldest and boldest of the officer cadre, had been confused to the point of being afraid by open speech and a frank question.

Asking consent should never cause that. Talking about what they wanted shouldn’t be something they were scared of.

The fear sucked down into the beginnings of anger, because that’s how Ironhide handled such things, and Jazz grabbed the older mech’s tire so hard the rubber bulged around his fingers. “That, right there,” he snapped at the room at large, but his visor bored into his friend and fellow officer’s defensive anger. “What are you feeling right now about what I just did? What’d I do? I talked. About interfacing. In the open. That’s it. Hold onto that, and think.” Solemn and tense, he turned to lift the download pad from the table, slipping it into briefing slot so they could access what he’d discovered tonight. “Think about it, Autobots.”

[* * * * *]
End Pt. 21
[* * * * *]
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 22
[* * * * *]

The room wasn’t silent.

On the other side of the table, Ratchet had half a dozen leads hooked into Prowl as the tactician studied an open document window on the table’s inset console. The document was blank, and every few seconds, Prowl’s hand twitched toward the screen as if he wanted to start taking notes on the information uploading slowly into his cortex but didn’t know precisely what to write yet. Other than that slight gesture of indecision, the Autobot Second-in-Command’s poker face revealed nothing but a neutral frown to the world at large. Or to briefing room, as it were. Ratchet had his optics on a datapad of his own, but there was a flicker of blue whenever his patient’s hand moved.

Jazz had deliberately thrown as many related details into Prowl’s briefing packet as he could in order to delay quick absorption. He’d wanted Ratchet to have time to monitor the situation. That, and Prowl worked best when his tactical computer had everything available at its disposal. The tapping of Prowl’s index finger lingering in indecision was erratic but a good sign. It meant he was seeing the connections without being floored by what was connecting. The mech didn’t know how the facts linked together yet, but at least nothing had knocked him for a loop yet.

The datapad Ratchet kept his optics on had a single cable leading across the table into Red Alert’s wrist input. The Security Director had his elbows on the table and his helm in his hands as a continuous unintelligible mutter flowed from him. His optics had clouded over the moment Jazz’s download went into the briefing slot, gaze turning inward to process the data with an optic for security. Prowl did situational awareness; Red Alert did security. Right now, they were both falling off a cliff of prior erroneous assumptions about their specialties that had run the course of the entire war.

Talk about rattling their cages. Jazz had been -- was still -- shaken, himself. Everything thing they’d thought they knew had gotten them through a war, but now they were finding out they’d been skating thin ice all along. Fear lurked under Jazz’s brash determination, tonight. There were so many missteps they could have made and could make yet. Ratchet’s monitor was there to make sure the recalculations and new knowledge didn’t cause permanent damage.

Prowl would wait to start making new connections. Red Alert had started working things into his previous threads of threat assessment as soon as the data started uploading. They had the luxury of some time. Because of that precious commodity, duty priorities had kicked in. They weren’t running simultaneous data analysis processor threads. Instead, threat assessment and information assessment subprocessors had organized according to their function. Red Alert would process the download and secure the immediate situation before the consequences caught up to him. Prowl, given that safety, would internalize the download fully and bear the consequences as they happened in order to ultimately pull through and craft a plan afterward.

It made Prowl look unaffected right until he crashed, and then unaffected afterward. It made Red Alert twitch the whole rusted time.

The joke on the Ark had been that Red Alert was a paranoid spaz. He’d responded by yelling back,
“Who told you that?!” and getting out the flyswatter. The humans hadn’t gotten the joke, but then, the humans hadn’t been fighting for millions of years. The fact that Red Alert’s sensitivity over his behavioral ticks had transmuted into a running joke he participated in baffled the Autobots who hadn’t gone to Earth.

The fact that anyone still had a sense of humor about high-priority duty function handicaps this late in a civil war was the Ark crew’s petty victory. They’d returned to Cybertron determined to hang on to that sideways, human-influenced humor.

It’d been an excellent curveball to pitch at the Decepticons of Cybertron, right up until the Elite had responded in kind. Turned out that Earth and its quirks had gotten to them, too.

Well, at least now they all had something in common.

On Ratchet’s side of the table, Wheeljack had begun stacking datapads, datasticks, and a few things he’d pulled out from under his hood on top of each other. The inventor never went anywhere without a few tools stashed about himself. He seemed to be intent on balancing them together in an intricate structure not unlike a house of cards. His vocal indicators stayed dull as he concentrated. The idle work of his hands merely indicated that his mind was working. Wheeljack’s processors had completely different priorities. Who knew how his mind sorted the downloaded information? Security and tactics weren’t his thing.

The orn somebody figured out what his ‘thing’ really was, they’d have to blow up something to celebrate. The inventor’s processors were uniquely chaotic. They were capable of connecting completely unrelated concepts in ways most mechs couldn’t and wise mechs wouldn’t. It made him a stellar inventor. It made him impossible to predict, sometimes. Jazz very badly wanted to know what he was thinking right now.

Music, of course, was Blaster’s preferred working atmosphere. The other officers had adjusted enough to his eccentricities that they’d only had to hush him twice, now. At the moment, Michael Jackson’s ‘Thriller’ kept the Autobot cadre company at low volume, and Blaster had his head tipped back to stare at the ceiling. His mouth pulled into a strange, thoughtful pout as he listened and rearranged the inside of his head. His fingers drummed in time on the table.

Normally, Ironhide would have frowned at him for what he strongly believed to be lousy taste in music. Not that it was anything to start a war over, but the two officers had begun bickering on Earth about the local music and hadn’t stopped arguing since. Their disagreement fell somewhere between good-natured pastime and hidden passion. The arguments were silly, but snarking at each other usually served to keep everyone else amused.

The conflict hadn’t stopped with the return to Cybertron. The humans and their infectious culture Cybertron were being absorbed quicker than the new diurnal aspects of language were integrating into daily life. The two-way argument, which the Ark Autobots had anticipated as creating hilarity, had unexpectedly turned into a multi-legged continuing discussion wandering off in every direction. Everyone had an opinion on new music, and the stuff from Earth was decidedly different than anything from Cybertron’s Golden Age or music produced during the war. Opinions were varied and always a good topic when other small talk ran dry.

Walking into a room full of Autobots and Decepticons eying each other warily inspired old tensions. Casually making a comment on music and having the whole room turn into a passionate argument along sides that weren’t clearly drawn? That never got old.

Ultra Magnus had taken a firm stance liking Asian classical music. Elita One, apparently infected by a spirit of devilry, had sent in Moonbase Two’s vote for anything by Elvis Presley, and smelt the rest.
Blaster had been forced to explain to the Decepticons of Darkmount that Beethoven had only been alive to compose less than a vorn, so no, there was seriously no more music by him. Optimus Prime had been caught playing K-Pop while driving in his altmode. Soundwave seemed to be some sort of Cybertronian purist. He kept wiping the Earth music out of the shared HeadQuarters’ databanks and replacing it with meticulously labeled and sorted music from individual city-states from back before the war.

That had resulted in a passionate but mostly one-sided debate about how music was classified, a conversation carried almost entirely by Bluestreak on the orn Soundwave -- apparently by mistake, but that mistake seemed to be unforgiveable -- mislabeled a Praxian pop song as a historical ballad. Bluestreak had stormed out of the main room at the end of that shift still ranting at a thousand words per klik about the ignorance of some mechs calling themselves specialists.

Soundwave had watched him go with a look Blaster had only been able to describe as dumbfounded. A ‘What…the frag…just happened here?’ look. Soundwave had worked in information collection with a communication specialization since long before the war started. That didn’t make him a music guru. Getting the smackdown over correct information by Bluetreak, of all mechs, had probably rubbed that fact in quite well.

It’d taken Blaster an hour to stop laughing.

The offending label, it should be noted, had been amended. And not to say that the Decepticon Third meekly bent before the tirade of an Autobot sniper, but close observers might notice that no new Praxian music replaced the Earth stuff unless it had three genre source citations and a short summary of the musicians’ careers attached. Soundwave apparently didn’t enjoy having his ignorance announced stridently throughout Vos.

Meanwhile, the Ironhide and Blaster had stuck to their guns. The Weapons Specialist was a cowboy hat and a guitar away from attending the Grand Ol’ Opry. Blaster stubbornly insisted that 80’s hair bands would make a comeback. Jazz thought they both needed to lighten up, and, in the case of Blaster, graduate from the 1980s at some point. More importantly, they needed to catch on to the fact that human DJs were importing and remixing Cybertronian music. That slag was hot. Some guy in Latin America was performing wizardry with the old theme songs of vidshows, maracas, and a bass woofer. Those remixes would have gotten a mech arrested in Iacon for how hips shook to the beat.

That was a strange thought to have, after all this time. The Autobots had been discomfited by Earth’s various prejudices -- bias because of skin color still unnerved them -- but the puritanical limits set on things like dancing had been laughable. Sort of. If a mech didn’t think too closely about how familiar the preaching against ‘sinful behavior’ seemed. Because, yes, disapproval still got heaped on an Autobot who acted too…freely.

Not in the sense of churches or Primus. The lines of thought and causation weren’t that straight, when Jazz tried to untangle them. The familiarity lay in the spots nobody ever connected, because human similarities hadn’t allowed for contrast. Where they had, the alien nature of their flesh-and-blood allies made it somehow easier to overlook.

It’d taken Mirage half the war to stop being horrified when Beachcomber taught tensile cable stretching techniques in public. Beachcomber had taken the noblemech’s averted optics and acid commentary in stride, gliding around every critique with practiced ease. That bore a second look, thinking back on it, as did the Autobots’ reaction to the odd bits of human practices they could participate in. Jazz had signed all of SpecOps up for partnered yoga classes back on Earth, recognizing them as a version of an exercise half of them already knew. Since attendance got his mechs out and about in unusual locations in Portland, it’d been more for security than education or
teamwork. He’d still had to persuade Trailbreaker and Mirage that they weren’t actually committing public indecency by working together.

Factually, the Autobots knew SpecOps was doing yoga poses together under the shield of diplomacy and teambuilding. Even so, the jokes from the other Autobots had been relentless. They’d put their hands all over each other in the middle of a battlefield, but Primus help the two Autobots caught in a compromising position off it. Which was something Jazz needed to dig out of his thoughts and analyze right now, because he had the feeling the shame would be used against the Autobots if they couldn’t nail down the source.

He was starting to really dislike finding out how he’d hadn’t questioned this kind of contradiction before.

Iacon had always been somewhat prudish. Jazz had vaguely known that, because it had stifled him when he’d moved there for Enforcer training. He hadn’t fit in the whole time he’d been in training. The Senate had been strictly conscious of the ‘tone’ of the city-state, policing the citizenry in a way that’d made him uncomfortable. The rulebook had been thrown at him when he’d entered the city boundaries, and there had been no room for movement inside it. He’d just never made the connection between the behavioral constraints put on the city and his own distaste for them. Or how they’d infiltrated his own social protocols.

Sure, his home city had been much more relaxed, but every city was more relaxed compared to Iacon. Yet every city-state bordering Iacon attempted to imitate it wholesale, displacing the current social standards. He’d done it himself, returning from Iacon with an intense feeling of relief for leaving the oppressive standards but inwardly comparing everything in his home city to them. He hadn’t thought about how weird it was that the Senate had based the Enforcer Codes off of Iaconian policies without input from the other city-states’ laws.

The Enforcer Code had been the standard every citizen in the Cybertron Unification Alliance. That’s just how it’d been.

Nobody thought it was odd, back then. There had been grumbles and complaints and talk that went nowhere about reform movements that never started, and everyone went right on feeling like they should conform. It’d been easier than trying to protest.

Looking back at it, Jazz had the inkling that he understood why the Vosian Emirate would have taken the floor in the Senate to tear a strip off the outsiders trampling on the rights of an entire polity. The point of a Senate instead of a single mech holding power was to ensure equal representation, right? Where was that equal consideration when the Iaconian laws were meant to govern the whole of Cybertron?

No wonder Starscream had been shot. The Senators hadn’t liked upstarts who rocked the boat.

No wonder Starscream had given his speech. Jazz couldn’t imagine someone like Starscream accepting anyone else’s control when he took a position of power. The Senate’s standards must have grated something fierce against his pride. Multiply that pride by the independence of an entire city-state used to standing on its own, and no doubt Starscream’s own position had been cemented when he took a stand and got shot for daring to do so. The amount of calculated risk behind defying the Senate must have paid off.

See Starscream. See Starscream be a righteous patriot for his city-state on the Senate floor.

Don’t see Starscream manipulating his way into a secure powerbase by exploiting very real issues.
At least until it’s too late to stop him from being a hero in the optics of his constitutes. Surviving an assassination attempt must have handed him Vos on a silver platter. Their leader had nearly become a martyr while standing up for their rights as Cybertronian citizens. They must have loved him.

Vos stood by its Emirate still, and Jazz was beginning to see why. Call him a cynic, but he rather suspected that Starscream didn’t hold the city-state in the forefront of his thoughts at all times. He wondered how that factored into how the Vosians saw their Emirate now. Was it stubbornness or faith that kept an entire city-state loyal to the Air Commander? Jazz couldn’t think of a single other city-state that’d stayed that cohesive during the course of the war.

It made sense, as Starscream had explained it. There hadn’t been that many cohesive city governments to begin with.

The lines between Autobot and Decepticon couldn’t be drawn simply using geography, but there was no denying that the northern hemisphere had gone mostly to the Autobots. That had been heavily influenced by the mass migration of the Enforcers’ loyalty from the Senate to the Prime himself. The Tri-Peninsular Torus States had thrown in with the Prime well before the Iaconian nobles had, influenced more by organization and law than the continuation of old power, and the Enforcers had come mostly from those city-states. They’d gone with their city-states’ votes instead of the Senate’s furious condemnations.

The Planetary Guard’s dispersal wasn’t so easy to track, nor were the Neutral States’, but the industrial city-states of the southern hemisphere could be said to have, roughly speaking, gone Decepticon. As Starscream had pointed out, however, most of the industrial city-states hadn’t been populated by stable populations. There had been very few city-wide, unified agreements. The decisions had been done at street level, amidst the mob, because the city governments didn’t represent the mechs inside them. They were there to keep the working class in line and productive.

The riots when the Senate began automating the mining operations had preceded huge population shifts as mechs moved on searching for the next job. It’d been on an unprecedented scale -- all 32 of the C and D Mining Outposts around Kaon had emptied out into ghost towns within five orns -- but such resettlements happened. Mechs went where the work was. That was how it’d always been. It was only when the next job wasn’t available that real trouble had started. Without jobs, mechs left the outpost towns and collected in the main cities to take piddling temporary work to scrape by. There wasn’t anywhere else they could have gone.

It’d been Jazz’s job, at one point, to turn away mechs looking to enter Protihex. Without proof of a job in hand, the border process had become pitiless. Exceptions to the rules had been few and far between. Mech had to have a letter of recommendation from a past employer or an educational degree from an accredited university, most of which were in the city-states these mechs had been trying to enter. Without those, they’d been turned away. Jazz and his buddies had found jobs for anyone they could, but that assistance didn’t last long.

After a short while, there had been laws passed to prevent a deluge of cheap labor from driving wages down. The migration standards had become stricter. Fewer mechs needing work to survive had been able to get in. The ones already inside became more desperate to do whatever it took to not have to leave.

Those who’d lost their jobs to people willing to work for less had been forced to leave the cities. Those who’d had work grasped it hard, afraid to change anything for fear that they’d be the next to lose. Unease over going against the unwritten conformity became outright fear.

Those that’d pushed for change were ostracized and hated for pointing out what everyone knew but were terrified of acknowledging. Those who’d had power and used it to direct a gradual growth of
justice within the Senate’s rotted structure were cheered on secretly yet avoided because everyone knew it was only a matter of time before the hammer dropped. Optimus Prime’s refusal to comply with the Senators had won him a stalemate in the Senate, but few friends outside it. However avidly Cybertron had watched his speeches on the floor, the discussion of his proposed changes had been done in hushed voices and under a cloak of fear of what the Senate would do.

The new Prime had sought compromise and persuasion, and he’d won very little ground in the Senate as a result. Popular support, yes, but timid, frightened support at best. Everyone had known he wouldn’t win. Nobody had known where the glum knowledge of failure came from, but they’d all agreed on it.

And from the fear to act had risen Megatron. Someone with no power but what he tore from the Senate, a miner with nothing left to lose but his life, and absolutely no patience for the slow reforms that were coaxing support from the public. He hadn’t the patience or trust for promises of eventual change. He hadn’t cared about the hatred heaped on him by the scared masses. Gladiators were already ostracized.

Like gladiators, the social justice warriors the Decepticons first touted themselves as had been the reviled heroes for the working class of Cybertron. They’d even been that for some of the more radical of the upper class. Megatron had been the scandalous darling doing what everyone had assured themselves was too risky for regular mechs to do. He’d been crazy to go about it as he had, and everyone had told each other he’d get slapped down soon enough.

At the same time, they’d admired his boldness. They’d listened and scoffed at him, but wondered. He’d said out loud the things that made the comfortable public shift and mutter uneasily at the truths. Fiery as Megatron had been, he’d raised legitimate issues. Optimus Prime’s work in the Senate had been the more rational approach on the same subjects.

Jazz himself had recoiled from Megatron’s blunt, offensive speeches, but he’d stepped back and thought about it. He’d decided that having a raging mech yelling angrily probably served to rip open an awareness of the issues. It hadn’t necessarily been a good way, as it’d given the reform movement a bad name as the timid public equated even the moderates with Megatron’s extremists. The Prime’s tactful route had been lumped under the gladiator’s extremism.

Jazz had given the problems raised a lot of thought independent of Megatron’s ranting, however. Instead of backpedaling and lashing out against the entire reform movement, he’d applied for a transfer to Iacon to work his way toward supporting the Prime’s changes.

Not everyone had thought about their reactions that much. There had been a massive backlash against change for a while. Cybertron in general had been upset by this gladiatorial upstart accusing them that their Senate-approved, comfortable lives were perpetuating an oppressive society. Enraged, a lot of mechs had made the jump to assuming that meant they were being accused of being bad people. Quite frankly, Jazz hadn’t been happy about that one himself. For as diplomatic as the new Prime had been, exposing the general populace’s ignorance had shoved a load of unpleasant facts in people’s faces. People tended to get emotional and defensive when that happened. Nobody wanted to find out they’d been thinking about everything wrong.

Jazz sure had been abashed when the Prime chided the Senate for ignoring the plight of the unemployed, under-employed, and unfairly employed. It wasn’t that the Prime had been calling him a bad person, but being called out on his underlying prejudice and blindness had sure felt like it.

So, yeah, Optimus Prime had made a lot of enemies. Megatron had made even more, because he had started making those accusations. If a mech hadn’t joined Megatron’s movement, then that mech was the enemy. There were no explanations, there were no excuses, there was no alternative action or
moderation or allowance for differing circumstances. In the Decepticons, even before the group had been the Decepticons, there had been only one re-imagination of the world. It was still Megatron’s way or get out of his way, but back before the first violence of the war, he’d only harangued the rest of the world for not agreeing.

Later, the threats had started.

It’d become clear that Megatron intended on demolishing the whole Senate structure. All of it: the Senate, the provincial Councils, the Enforcer Code that had been law for ages in the northern hemisphere. The stability that ruled everyday life for many of the city-states, and the organizational systems that they’d been told and they’d told themselves was just how it was. It all had to go, in the optics of the angry mob led by the gladiator.

Oh, it made a kind of sense when looked at from the right perspective. It had to. Everyone was righteous in their own optics. Normal citizens didn’t come out of recharge as ruthless evil villains suddenly thinking that torture, violence, and destruction of fellow Cybertronians in an eons-long civil war sounded like a fun time. Megatron had wanted to burn the world down and start over; Optimus Prime had wanted to carefully restructure what was already established; the Senate had wanted everything to remain exactly the same. They’re all believed they were doing the right thing. Didn’t the humans say something about a road to Hell and good intentions? Everyone who’d taken up arms had believed that he was doing it for the right reason, even if just for survival.

Cybertron hadn’t abandoned its colonies and murdered its population down to the brink of extinction merely because of differing opinions on what music was best, after all.

That’s not to say that Cybertronians wouldn’t shoot those who didn’t share their personal preferences. At this point, personal opinions were driving the war forward almost as much as the overarching Causes for either faction. To be fair, it wasn’t just the Decepticons holding grudges. Both factions took things personally now, fighting for what had been done to them instead of ideals.

Still, it was the Causes that were the ‘official’ reason for the war. Jazz had a rough idea of what the Decepticon Cause had started out as -- or rather, he’d thought he did right up until he started getting the ignorance smacked out of him by current events.

He’d always thought the Decepticons were fanatics and naturally violent. Starscream was a backstabbing power-hungry creep that could represent far too much of the faction either for his intrinsic canny nature or tendency to shoot whatever got in his way, even though he seemed predisposed to scheme around obstacles more than the average Decepticon. The Autobots usually typcast the average Decepticon as a stupid grunt for the most part, with the rare dangerous smart one in the mix.

Which was a horribly ignorant stereotype to have after all this time. It was…sort of wince-worthy, the more Jazz dug into it. Warbuilds hadn’t been welcomed into the Enforcers because everyone knew they were more prone to violence. When the majority of warbuilds ended up in the Decepticons, that idea had reinforced into fact. Not a terribly factual fact, as it’d turned out. The Decepticons were as Cybertronian as the Autobots. If they were capable of love -- and yes, they were. No matter the Senate’s early blitz of media defaming the mechs flocking to Megatron’s banner, Jazz should have never allowed that thought a foothold -- then grouping them into any kind of hive-mind stereotype of lesser-than-Autobot thought was just fragging wrong. Wrong.

True, Jazz was awkwardly aware that he’d had shared the common beliefs. That one about how it seemed most of the educated mechs had become Autobots while the uneducated mechs got tricked into Megatron’s fold? That was a particularly nasty one. It insinuated a variety of things that weren’t true but sure sounded like it on the surface. Education and intelligence didn’t work like that in reality.
He knew that statistic had come about because the upper class had supported the Senate for the most part, making the richer mechs less likely to join the faction swearing to tear them down. It was also because the upper class had had the time, money, and access to education, while the lower classes had been scraping from job to job just to survive.

Education was no measure of intelligence. Also, as Starscream’s educational background seemed to indicate, the educational institutes of the Neutral territories and entire southern hemisphere had been looked down upon in contempt by Iacon and her allies. Jazz had to wonder how many Decepticons were as educated as the Autobots, but were regarded -- and perhaps even considered themselves -- as lesser because of where that education had been done.

Those were part of the list of wrongs Optimus Prime had chastised the Senate and the public over, once upon a time. They were all things Megatron had taken advantage of to build a powerbase. The Senate had appealed to Cybertron’s fear of insecurity. Optimus had appealed to its morality. Megatron had appealed to its suppressed fury. Everyone was righteous in their own optics, but the Decepticons had gone beyond righteousness into a belief of superiority and a manifest destiny about how conquering anyone who stood in the way of a new Decepticon society was inevitable. They’d been power-blind and power-hungry, angry at the unfairness of the world, convinced that might made right, and that Megatron could right the world.

Well, hopefully the ceasefire would stifle that belief. Because the Senate was long gone, and the Decepticons were free to make their own society now. The Decepticons held the southern hemisphere; the Autobots, the north. There were cautious negotiations to make the separation permanent and establish actual boundaries. Giving up the idea of unification had hurt the Prime’s hope and Megatron’s pride in equal measure, but they were both trying to end the cycle of war.

Jazz put his elbows on the briefing room table and cycled a long, tired sigh. There were no educational institutes left. There was no more Enforcer Code or individual city-state laws. There was no more upper, middle, or working class. They were all equally war-educated soldiers following the military law of their respective factions. Only rank separated soldiers. Even the functionalist stigma that’d once prevented the miners of Kaon from seeking work outside of manual labor had dissolved. The war had broken previous widely-touted theories on single-function frametypes. The war itself could stand as proof that Cybertronian adaptation could be tweaked to include functions that didn’t seem natural.

Slag ‘natural.’ If anyone from the Functionalist Party remained unconvinced, Autobots and Decepticons alike would raise sixty degrees of the Pit refusing that mech entrance into a position of power. Jazz would be right there yelling, too. Nobody was ever again going to set up a box of limitations around him based on his current frametype specs.

It should have been easy to reconcile their differences, if that’d been all they’d been fighting over. Economics, functionalism, classism, and every spin-off of those issues were complicated, sure, but they were armies now. Pure civilians were kind of nonexistent. Even the Neutrals went armed. Comparing regulations and coming to a compromise based off of military law should have been easy.

Except that the social structure the Senate had attempted to standardize had been implied between the lines of the actual written Code, and the Autobots still followed those unwritten rules. They still held those insidious, poisonous beliefs about lower classes, education, and inherent violence, like the Decepticons were closer to drones than actual Cybertronians. It didn’t matter that nobody outright said it; the belief still influenced how they thought. Meaning that the Decepticons probably had similar bias toward the Autobots. Meaning that if they didn’t root these things out of their heads, there was going to be some ugly clashes.
All that, and here they were blindly groping after peace. It was a miracle nobody gotten so fed up the shooting started up again. The Autobots and Decepticons had truly separated during the course of the war. The gap was huge.

They really needed to start bridging it. Like now, before somebody fell in.

…right. Okay. The Decepticons had obviously decided to give it a try. The problem was that there hadn’t been a single rule about courting written down in any Decepticon file Jazz had ever decrypted, leaving the Autobots scrambling for how to meet the ‘Cons halfway on this one.

“You really want to ‘face me?” Ironhide asked suddenly, interrupting the saboteur’s worried thoughts.

He turned his head without raising it in order to look at the older Autobot through his fingers. “Right now might not be the best time, but yeah. Yeah, that’d be nice. You down for another round later? I could do with some sparring beforehand. A warm-up, if y’know what I mean.” Nudge nudge, wink wink.

The red mech stared at him. His expression fell completely neutral as Jazz’s hopeful tone caused the other Autobots to shift. The rest of the officer cadre looked uncomfortable at the blunt offer, but more uncomfortable by being made uncomfortable. Frag, but that was a familiar look. It was a look that said, ‘I don’t know why I want to avoid this topic.’

Ironhide dimmed his optics, brow ridges furrowing, and he folded his arm with a grunt. “Still getting’ angry. This ain’t right.”

“Yes,” Optimus Prime said distantly from up the table. “It does make sense of a number of incidents, however. Megatron has been surprisingly…” His head cocked to one side in a slow movement that probably mirrored the way preconceived notions were being tipped on their sides in his mind. “Hesitant, I suppose, although I hesitate to apply the word to him. I’ve had the feeling that he’s not certain how to interpret some of my reactions to his -- ah.”

Still processing important data or not, the whole table had abruptly fastened attentive optics on him. Reactions to what, hmm? Do tell, Optimus. Just what had Megatron been up to in those private sessions?

The calm baritone fell to flustered mumble. “To ongoing negotiations.”

Jazz grinned, and the Prime studiously didn’t look at him. That choice of words didn’t stop the black-and-white spy’s randy subprocessor from throwing out an assortment of lurid speculations. Negotiations were a hands-on deal in Decepticon contracts.

“This is making sense of a lot of incidents,” Red Alert muttered commentary cleared up enough to add, but the Security Director promptly went back to words too low to hear.

Another restless shifting moved chairs and changed positions around the table before the cadre settled down again. Jazz looked back down and wished his thoughts didn’t lead to scary places.

How long would an entire city-state tolerate cultural suppression? How many restraints on personal freedom could a society take before it lashed out? Vos had been only one city-state, and one of the strongest in the Neutral territories. Multiply that by every city-state cohesive enough to have a unified culture, and every mech of the migratory working class who’d chafed under the Senate’s monoculture. How many of these unrecognized cultural differences were being suppressed by the disapproval of the lingering Senate standards? It wasn’t that the Autobots were intolerant, but there
were definitely certain things that were unofficially enforced as proper Autobot behavior. Anything related to sex was simply slapped under a big, unspoken blanket order of silence.

What else wasn’t being talked about? That was a scary thought. Ohhh, was that a scary thought. Jazz had thought he’d known what the Decepticons were fighting for, but it seemed that he’d never seen the full picture. The glimpse he’d gotten tonight was blowing his mind and rattling every officer at the table with him right now. The wider connotations would have to be dissected, likely in intense meetings among the Autobots and then openly at the peace talks with as many Decepticons as Jazz could drag in to be involved. He was not letting misunderstandings and unspoken assumptions derail the treaty!

For now, Jazz’s night in Tarn was on the table. The unfounded rape bias held against the Decepticons had to be uprooted, and the maybe aspect had to be introduced to the other Autobots’ data assessment processors. A legitimate protest couldn’t be raised against applying what he’d discovered. His concern was that first instinct of a closed mind: anger. He feared the backlash from fear of loss. A loss of stability, a loss of power or control, a loss of something intangible that disappeared when pinned down to examine.

There were going to be a lot of Autobots in the ranks soon who were going to get angry. He could already hear the protests. Their mindsets were right, surely! The idea that they’d been fundamentally wrong about the Decepticons on this level was going to create a defensive backlash of, ’But -- !’

But everyone knew, but everyone thought, but everyone had heard, but there was that one time -- !

But they were wrong.

Prowl’s fingers tapped, then did it again more purposefully. Ratchet watched the tapping warily, part of his attention on his HUD readings from the tactician.

“You alright over there?” Jazz asked.

“I’ll survive,” the Autobot Second said dryly as he began taking notes. “Although if anyone caught the number on the tank that just ran me over, I would appreciate the opportunity to ticket him.”

Half the table relaxed slightly. Humor meant that Prowl could think past the error messages. Humor was a good sign.

“I think that’d be me,” Jazz volunteered, pretending to cower back in his chair. “Driving the Knowledge Panzer.”

Wheeljack snickered softly and put in, “That explains the Treadmarks of Information left on my CPU.”

The corner of Prowl’s mouth ticked up just barely, and his fingers started to fly as he input --

“Whoa, hey!” Jazz and Optimus lurched forward in the same second as Prowl’s optics flickered dark and he slumped forward.

Ratchet was already there, however, easing the unconscious cop car down to rest on the table. “Easy, folks. Medical override reboot, not a crash. His tactical mainframe is having fits about what the download’s doing to cross-referencing and threat assessment, so I’m taking the cautionary route.”

His hands moved over the downed Autobot, and his voice stayed calm and professional. It brought the roused combat protocols around the table back under control even as he checked the readouts. “Probably looking at about six reboot cycles total.”
In other words, settle in for the wait.

Red Alert twitched and muttered something to Optimus. Wheeljack had found a wrench somewhere and was trying to balance it on the top of his little building. Ratchet monitored Prowl and kept an optic on Red Alert. Jazz thought about how to introduce the Autobot Cause to the Decepticons, because neither side of the war apparently knew what precisely they’d been fighting over.

“Primus, will ya at least play something good?” Ironhide snapped at Blaster.

[* * * * *]
End Pt. 22
[* * * * *]
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 23
[* * * * *]

Not every meeting ended up with Jazz in Wheeljack’s lap, but his vote was for the trend to continue.

“How about here?” He delicately traced the bare edge of one finger around the seals of the engineer’s windshield. “Is that good?”

Wheeljack happily pushed into his touch and nodded. “Really good. Harder?”

Harder it was. Jazz flattened his hands against Wheeljack’s chest and used the leverage to firmly drag his thumbs where his finger had just traced. “Yeah?” There was a loud engine rev. “Yeah.” He committed that to memory and moved on searching for more spots to make his friend and fellow officer squirm. Except for the reasons behind it and the fact that they were in public, this was actually a lot of fun. The publicity made him feel rebellious, in fact, and the Jazzmeister didn’t back down from a challenge like that. Onward ho!

It wasn’t that he’d never run his hands over somebody before, but this wasn’t a lead into the mental exercise of cable interfacing. This was a systematic search for physical hotspots as an exercise unto itself, and it was kind of fascinating. The crude pleasure of hands and mouth --

Back that thought up. Ah, no. That wasn’t right in any way, shape, or form.

Jazz snagged the thought and picked it apart. Connecting the concept of crudity to this pleasure because it came from touch instead of a cable now struck him as odd, which was progress. He could see the problem, even if he couldn’t quite fit his head around why it was a problem yet.

The connection traced back to a conflict between social protocols: threat assessment still registered the other Autobots’ reactions as negative, thus influencing his causation model to urge a defensive reaction. The link to crudity evaded him, but at least the causation equation balanced. His processor consciously studied the data, and self-modification kicked in to rewrite the illogic while he tried to find the source of the lurking unease.

Was this shameful? No. Was physical stimulation somehow inferior and primitive compared to hardline connection? Wait, why the frag was there even a comparison? He’d used foreplay plenty of times before. It’d just never gone further than ensuring interest before tonight. That did not mean touch was somehow lesser than cable interfacing.

Information assessment was having fits. His adaptive program protocols reached fingers toward social data filed so old and deep it was practically part of his CPU’s interior architecture. There was machine code around threat assessment’s social subprogram set that relied on the supposed ‘facts’ now being called into question. Self-modification would reroute the conflicts eventually, but that relied on time. It was trying to skip that step at the moment, and he had to keep suppressing it.

His social protocols were badly out of line with current events, and self-modification wanted to change All The Things. Right away. That would be a bad idea. He didn’t have the most stolid of sparks, but Jazz didn’t want to have Ratchet monitoring him like the medic was watching Prowl.
There was still a cable draped across the table from Prowl’s wrist to a hookup on Ratchet’s side, even as the Chief Medical Officer worked on Red Alert. That impromptu surgery right here at the meeting table was also a good cautionary example, by the way. Mechs could crash and burn from messing with their coding too much. Ratchet only had Red Alert’s helm open to replace a fried circuit breaker, but the timing was more than coincidence. The concern of it happening to others at the table was legitimate.

Half the officers at this table right here and now had information-dependant CPU models, as opposed to knowledge models like Ironhide or Ratchet. Information models initially prioritized acquisition and organization over usage and application, in short. They were meant to find, sort, and understand enough information to run an entire war. Usage came only after that, which was why every one of the realizations slamming into the cadre over the past two days had been disrupting those models. Put a stumbling block in the basic information sublevels that acquisition and categorization were based off of, and their minds reeled as bypasses and fix-its were rushed into place. Secondary priorities couldn’t kick into working order until those primary steps were fulfilled or worked around. It was why Optimus Prime wasn’t nearly at risk of crashing as Prowl was. The Prime’s processors were prioritized differently, meant to handle information handed to him by his subordinates ready for him to use.

Logically, Jazz knew that the rest of the Autobots weren’t going to be as heavily affected as Prowl and Red Alert were. Most of the faction didn’t have processors weighted into this kind of dependence by skewed priority lists. The majority of the Autobots weren’t specialists, obviously. Confusion, refusal, and even shock could be expected, but collapse wouldn’t be a risk for most mechs below certain ranks or outside of a few military divisions. Jazz had gotten hammered by things tonight, and it was hard to keep in mind that most of the Autobots weren’t going to look at what he’d learned and feel the same resounding core-shaking shock.

His difficulty keeping that in mind came from how intensely personal this change was. The social data changing in his cortex substructure had been ingrained code-deep over millions of years. Jazz’s head hurt, and he was having a hard time keeping a wider perspective on just how much or how little this might rock the rest of the faction. Right now, he had to focus on the rest of the officer cadre -- and himself. He had a custom processor, painstakingly added onto from different models throughout the war, but he was riding the edge of what he could handle. Changing his mind’s substructure this quickly could very well kill him, he was so information-dependent. The saboteur kept a log of suggested changes from self-modification but only approved the ones that could be changed back easily. Just in case things went bad and he crashed, he wanted Ratchet to be able to shift him back to normal.

What did get approved was still enough to give him a different perspective on sitting in Wheeljack’s lap. Applying acquired information in real time.

Wheeljack, of course, had his own self-modification running right here along with him, and he seemed to be enjoying the application just as much. The inventor had a particularly mischievous light to his vocal indicators. The pleasure of hands and mouth had gone from being a secret naughty shame their subprocessors vaguely disapproved of, to a joyful exploration. In public, in all seriousness, but still in fun. Jazz and Wheeljack could make good fun out of anything, together or separate. A mere audience would not deter them.

It was riling Jazz up a little, to be honest. Having Prime look at them that way made him want to try things. Simple things. Complicated things. Hands-in-places, make-Optimus-moan type of things. That randy subprocessor wanted to put its backlog of ideas into action. It seemed to have caught on to exhibitionism, big time.
Later. For now, he had his hands full of Wheeljack. “How much of this is what I’m doing, and how much is psychological?”

“Good question. I’m leaning toward -- ooo. I like that. Do that some more.” Jazz grinned and increased pressure to massage the lower corners of the side sets of windows. Wheeljack shrugged his shoulders back and moved his arms to give the smaller Autobot more room. It was immediately taken advantage of, and the inventor hummed approval as his lapful of Jazz curled closer. It made his vocal indicators fluctuate in a rainbow rarely seen outside his lab. “Mm. Thanks. Uh…right, I think a large portion of it is psychological. I have sensors there, but even dialed up out of normal range consciously, I don’t think I’d be getting this kind of feedback unless my processors were turned on to what you were doing.”

“Turned on, huh? Yeah, I can get that. The difference between a normal touch an’ interest in the intent behind that touch?” Blaster mused from the end of the table. “Mental switch. I dig it.”

Jazz almost reached out to poke him for the sheer sake of weird. He was *straddling Wheeljack’s lap* at the meeting table, and there was Blaster staring into space an arm’s-length away like nothing was happening. Wheeljack chuckled quietly, and Blaster still didn’t notice.

“Foreplay’s good for getting attention and sayin’ let’s get it on. Tactile ‘facing instead of jacking in just keeps that energy going. Turn me on, baby.” The boombox Autobot sighed and leaned forward to set his chin in his hands, tilting his head in an absent dodge of one of Jazz’s doors. His optics gazed almost directly at the two mechs beside him without really seeing what Jazz was now doing to Wheeljack’s throat. “See, I can groove to the idea. Makes sense. If Eject smacks my aft, I’m not gonna do nothin’ but jump a little. It’d be confusing, see? All the sensors fire, but he’s my Cassette. Wrong reaction goes off in my CPU for anything like ‘facing.”

An absent frown darkened his face as he finished the thought, “But…if Soundwave smacks my aft, we’re gonna tango, and not in a good way. Don’t care what his intent is; it’s gonna feel like an attack.” The frown deepened, and his optics came back from wherever his mind had sent them looking. He glanced at Jazz and didn’t even remark on how the saboteur had jumped the table to sit on top of Wheeljack. Then again, he hadn’t appeared to notice it happen in the first place. Maybe he thought it was too late to comment, or perhaps he was thinking of more important things at the moment. “It’s gonna take a lot longer than this to get my social protocols right-way up on him. Not just him, but -- well, he an’ I aren’t doing too shabby just takin’ shifts in the same room. Anything more’s gonna get tricky real fast.” He shook his head. “We aren’t the only ones, folks.”

The console screen inset in the table in front of the Comm. Officer scrolled as he made a note. Jazz couldn’t read it from where he’d tucked his head to make Wheeljack’s engine thrum, but it was probably about addressing the problem. It *was* a problem. If the Autobots’ processors never made a link to a Decepticon’s touch as non-hostile and, in reality, meant to provoke the opposite reaction altogether, this courtship attempt could turn into a series of fights. The entire peace process would end up going nowhere if the Autobots couldn’t overturn the part of threat assessment interpreting ‘Decepticon contact’ as ‘shoot everything and let Primus sort them out.’

Like Blaster said: working in the same room with a bitter rival and enemy was progress. For some of them, abiding by the uneasy peace via total avoidance of Decepticon contact was the best they could do at this point.

Jazz had been wrestling his own combat protocols down every time Starscream touched him. He’d been actively forcing himself into being receptive to other reactions, which was fortunate. If he’d gone with his first reaction, the Air Commander would have gotten a punch instead of permission. Starscream was lucky that Jazz was fully capable of flirting on the battlefield, or the courtship
proposal would have gone straight into the smelter.

Or maybe not. Starscream could seduce a wall.

Either way, Jazz had reacted with -- well, with arousal instead of anger. That was difficult to admit even to himself, but it put him ahead of the game. He was naturally more flexible than most mechs could be. Starscream might have counted on that fact. He still hadn’t gotten a clear answer as to why the Air Commander had chosen to court him, and he wouldn’t dismiss Starscream being cunning enough to recognize that Jazz would see what was being offered and try his hand at the game. Adaptation came far easier to him than, say, Cliffjumper.

Cliffjumper was going to have problems. Tolerating a Decepticon touching him would be pushing it, for Cliffjumper. The volatile red Minibot stayed near unofficial Autobot HQ here in Vos because even he knew that his reflexes were the wrong type. Negotiations and trigger-happy did not mix well together. Even so, Jazz had been somewhat impressed that Cliffjumper had been managing to strangle down the urge to shoot first. After millions of years of war, giving the benefit of doubt was a decent level of progress for the little spitfire mech.

Reacting with arousal? That wasn’t likely, not anytime soon. Nuts and bolts, reacting with confusion would be a massive step forward for him!

The Autobots needed to talk about this. Not just relating to the Decepticons’ proposals, specifically. In general, the Autobots were coming up ignorant in an area where ignorance was rather alarming. They needed to talk about the proposals because they needed to understand their own reactions. They had to find information because there was a yawning gap of knowledge they were only now aware of, and they were wandering along the edge.

The Decepticons were openly sexual, so much so that their approach to interfacing was foreign. The Autobots had always known it, but the standard response to spotting two Decepticons going at it had always been disgust. Watching was perverse. Reacting instead of flat-out recoiling was just as disgusting.

Now the Autobots had to stop and think about why.

Being confronted by the blatantly sexual way the Decepticons approached each other left the Autobots floundering and somewhat offended. Being approached by that barefaced sexuality was inspiring unreasonable panic. Thinking through that was proving difficult, and that still didn’t solve the problem of how to field advances from Decepticons. Or each other, actually. Anything but hardline interfacing had such a stigma of strange attached to it that the Autobots needed coaching in how to handle the basics.

Combining that ignorance with threat assessment’s tendency to evaluate every touch as hostile immediately tuned their sensor networks to combat protocols. They were keyed to violence instead of something more heated. Under that combination, even recognizable flirting was going to become an obstacle course. One full of tripwires that would blow the whole planet back into war if somebody didn’t suss out a map, soon. The first time a Decepticon less suave than Starscream hit on a nervous Autobot might be the last time.

The Decepticons had held meetings over anticipating potential Autobot backlash already. Of course, they apparently knew as little about Autobot lifestyle as the Autobots knew about theirs, but the attempt had been made. It was the Autobots’ turn for classes. ‘Tactile Turn On 101’: correct identification of intent and appropriate processor response.

The officer cadre would die of embarrassment yet, because they were the default teachers. Also the
student body. Cue the coughing and uncomfortable fixation on nearby walls.

Maybe not all of them would expire. Wheeljack was all about exploring new territory, as the hands stroking up Jazz’s thighs attested to, and Blaster was clearly planning out his own adventures in non-hardline interfacing.

“Some mechs,” the boombox thought out loud, chin in his hands and optics focused on the air over the table. “Frag, I get a smack from them, I’m gonna wag my skidplate for another.”

Wheeljack laughed even as Ironhide sputtered from across the table. That wasn’t new; Ironhide had been sputtering since Wheeljack’s cheery question about when experimentation would be authorized. Jazz had promptly taken the engineer up on the offer. To the soundtrack of Ironhide failing to say a coherent word, the saboteur had hoisted himself up onto the table and crawled over to lean into a lingering kiss.

His lips had slid over the surface of Wheeljack’s face mask to plant a trail of small kisses along the horizontal joins where the mask’s blast vents opened. Wheeljack had felt up his bumper in turn. That’d led to pouring himself into the mech’s lap for some serious making out. It’d seemed like a good idea, since the rest of the officers were busy poring over his briefing packet.

That wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. It was better than the Wrath of Morally Offended Autobot Officer descending upon them. That’d started up once or twice from Prowl’s direction, only to be silenced as thought caught up to code-level instinct. The Executive Officer had started to speak up, twitched slightly as self-modification program protocols woke, and then gone very quiet and alert as it went to work. Now he was ignoring the show happening one seat over in favor of staring intently at the ceiling.

Amazing how immensely fascinating the walls had become lately.

Ironhide had been heading off similar gut-deep reaction, only without the attempt to stare down parts of the room. The Weapons Specialist took a more head-on route whenever possible, and he wasn’t going to displace his discomfort. Prowl sorted out his code gradually by backtracking the initial error warning and following every conclusion to ensure its logic. Ironhide kept provoking the error warnings until he got results.

The urge to interfere was rooted firmly into their subconscious instincts, and that unnerved them all. Since when had the Autobot officer cadre become the Ethics Enforcers? About the Cause, certainly. The officers were definitely held to a standard above the rest in order to serve as examples for the rank and file, but -- interfacing? Really? There was no official code of conduct for interfacing, and even if there was, it wasn’t written anywhere in the regulations that officers interfered in Autobots’ personal affairs. Yet even the Prime admitted to bending a look of disapproval upon mechs who were too open about their, ah, private time. Talking about it was considered inappropriate enough, but getting too touchy in public could scandalize a whole base!

In the Autobots, what happened in the berth stayed behind closed doors. Anything else was unofficially disapproved of by official people. It had nothing to do with the Cause, but yet the officers unofficially policed it. It was a messed up system, especially when the mechs in this room realized how long it’d been in place, and how long they’d been blind to the circular error it was based on.

So Ironhide’s spluttering was an improvement. It was a sign of automatic reaction cut-off. It meant he was thinking about what his social protocols urged.
“Alright over there?” Jazz asked softly, twisting around to look across the table.

“**Working** on it,” Ironhide ground back at him. Blue optics lit, took in where Jazz’s hands were, and shut off right away. The old red fighter had taken the battle to his coding, where he seemed to be yanking out any social protocol without a solid foundation backing it. He uncrossed and crossed his arms again. “No? Not yet. Maybe. It’s -- “ His optics turned on to look again, then turn away to the floor. “I’m workin’ on it. I know why we gotta talk about this junk -- stuff -- difference.” The verbal stumble got an impatient shrug before Ironhide moved on. “I’m just not sure I want t’ watch it happen right in front of me.”

“A good point,” Wheeljack murmured, sliding his thumbs over a headlight as Jazz turned back toward him. He took advantage of the twist to lower his face to the smaller Autobot’s hood and nuzzle the ‘4’ decal, scraping the top edge of his mask along it. “Forcing us to be spectators is an unsettling idea. There’s acceptance of an idea, but then there’s respect for our fellow mechs.”

Jazz arched as hot air vented forcefully against his hood. His mouth opened, showing the pleasure he hadn’t been able to display before all of Vos, and Wheeljack purred his engine. Fingers stole up to rub at blue lines, and the saboteur moaned in the back of his throat. There was absolutely no reason for different colors of his *paint job*, of all things, to be any more sensitive than the rest of him!

He wasn’t the only one noticing that fact. Wheeljack’s attention caused a strange reaction in those paying attention to what was actually happening instead of shriveling with embarrassment over it happening publicly.

Blaster finally focused on what was happening right to his left, and he smirked a little at how Jazz squirmed. “Gotta be a psychological difference,” he concluded, resetting his optics decisively. “No way ‘Cracker could like getting minced on the battlefield, but he was definitely into whatever the slag you two did to him tonight. The difference ain’t so much different injuries as the circumstances. It’s how you got to him.”

Optimus and Ironhide made the exact same fizzling sound, and Prowl hissed a virulent curse at the ceiling he studied so closely. Ratchet’s hands paused. The medic reset his optics once before resuming work. Blaster’s smirk was pained but trying for normal as his optics lit near-white for a second and faded back to regular blue.

Jazz’s own social protocols spat up nonsense errors as he dug into their causation models for why he felt embarrassed. He and Starscream had fragged Thundercracker nearly to pieces between them tonight, and there was no shame in talking about that right now. This was a *necessary conversation*. The shame kept returning, however, and it was easy to see that he wasn’t the only one failing to boot it out.

Talking about the night’s events was important to this briefing and the Autobots in general, so *why* did threat assessment keep insisting he was under attack every time someone brought it up directly? This sourceless sense of fear needed to go away fast.

For now, he could at least join Blaster in pretending to be unaffected. “So what you’re telling me is that this,” Jazz walked his fingers up to drum across one vocal indicator, “isn’t actually all that, hmm. Nice? Pleasurable?” It dipped under the pressure instead of pushing into it, so he stroked the line where it joined Wheeljack’s helm instead. “Aww, so much for me being proud of myself for makin’ mechs scream.” Well, one mech. Maybe interfacing didn’t have a ‘*One size fits all*’ Jazz.

“Remember that I’ve got partitions for my sensor network,” Wheeljack warned the saboteur. He turned his head, mask still pressed to Jazz’s hood and optics twinkling. “It gives me a buffer against
pain when I need it, but I’ve a better outside view of my own network reactions than most mechs. I can turn the sensitivity up or down with a certain degree of freedom that internal access gateways typically block for main processors.”

Jazz frowned, as he always did when this came up. “I still want those.” Most of SpecOps did. Medical kept denying them.

“I’m not hearing this,” Ratchet groused. “I’m not. Don’t tell me you’re abusing those partitions for this, of anything!”

Wheeljack tossed his head up to clear Jazz’s hands away and tipped his head to the side to peer around the saboteur. He flashed a smirking light pattern at the medic bent over Red Alert. “Okay, I won’t tell you.” There was a frustrated skree of metal as Ratchet’s axles tried to turn against the brakes. The light pattern picked up as Wheeljack’s amusement grew. “You’re the one who installed them, you know.”

“Because you consistently blow yourself up!” Despite his ire, Ratchet didn’t turn from his work. “It’s not supposed to be something you use every time you feel like it! That’s how major system damage happens. First it’s ignoring something minor so you can hobble to a medic, and soon enough it turns into ignoring warning signs because you can. Then it’s the smelter for you because that kind of thing builds up into major injuries you can’t even feel!”

It was a well-worn rant from the Chief Medical Officer. From anyone in the Medical Division, really. Medics knew better than anyone what a danger sensor-data partitions could be to a mech, and they weren’t shy about giving their opinions over in the medbay. Jazz could recite the words to this rant by memory.

Wheeljack good-naturedly let his friend run out of steam before asking, “Are you done?”

“Tell me you’re not using the partitions to analyze tactile interfacing.”

“I’m not using partitions to analyze tactile interfacing,” was dutifully recited.

“Are you lying to me?”

“Depends. Are you ‘not hearing’ me?”

Suspicious blue optics eyed the innocently pale vocal indicators on the other side of the table. “…yes.”

“Lies everywhere.”

“Argh.” Wheeljack gave the medic his best earnest look of inquiry, and Ratchet hunched over his work. “Nothing. I said nothing.” The look wormed under his plating almost visibly. Armor clamped down tight but couldn’t shut the engineer out. A snarl from Ratchet’s engine answered when the look needled a response from him at last. “Can’t you see I’m busy?!”

Blaster and Jazz sniggered. Ratchet stubbornly ‘didn’t hear’ them. Wheeljack just shook his head and went back to the real subject.

“Anyway, other mechs -- ones without partitions, that is,” unhappy ambulance grumbles belied Ratchet’s deafness, “aren’t going to be as aware of, umm, desire of the mind affecting actual sensor activation feedback. I can see how the read-outs are staying the same as they travel my sensor network.” The inventor leaned forward to nuzzle against one of Jazz’s helm projections. “It’s when
they reach my processor that they are interpreted differently than normal. I can suppress or deny them access where they pass the partition while most mechs can’t, however. It’s letting me analyze my processor’s reactions instead of just feeling the results.”

The saboteur in his lap curled slightly to tuck his head down for easier access, and that put his bumper flush to Wheeljack’s chest. The inventor’s high-performance engine could out-speed even his own, and armor vibrated as their engines ran up against one another. The buzzing vibration ran down his back and tuned his sensor network up a notch. It felt very nice indeed. “All that to say..?”

Wheeljack obligingly revved his engine and clicked the blast filters in his mask across the tip of the closest helm projection. “All that to say that most of the pleasure originates in our processors. Other than intentionally activating them in atypical sequences under deliberately applied pressure, it’s the same sensor-data transmission. A caress,” he demonstrated, much to Jazz’s delight, “activates the same sensors as a less seductive touch, but your processor interprets the data differently.”

He made a thoughtful sound while the black-and-white mech under his hands parsed that into useable information. “You know, I don’t think there are many sensors on our networks that are keyed to feeling pleasure without the addition of mental stimulation.”

“There are some,” Ratchet huffed, cutting off the question before Jazz even opened his mouth. “It’s possible to overload someone with involuntary pleasure. A force download or tampered cable connection makes it relatively simple to force interface compliance, but it’s just as possible to ramp up the right sensors until the rest of the network is triggered into reacting how you want. It’s just not easy, so -- ah, yes. Well.” His sirens flashed without sound for a second. “All that is to say that the mind’s involvement makes it far more likely to achieve overload.”

“If you want it, you’re gonna get it,” Blaster summed up. He cheerfully zoomed in on the tinge of fluster that’d broken Ratchet’s professional cool. “Like you and a certain couple o’ construction vehicles, huh?”

Ratchet shot him a mildly annoyed look, then lowered his optics as the embarrassment simmered. “Ahem. Fine. Yes. If Mixmaster and Bonecrusher hadn’t appealed to me strongly enough sexually to turn off my combat protocols, I’d have felt extremely uncomfortable -- “

“Possibly like an itch,” Wheeljack interrupted. “An itch that unwanted molestation can’t scratch.”

“Yes, thank you, because I needed a definition for that,” Ratchet snapped. He shook himself in almost a spasm and looked up from Red Alert’s open helm in order to glare. “I have been interrogated by Vortex before, you know. I have intimate knowledge of what that feels like!”

Even Prowl looked flummoxed as that sank in. Not that Ratchet had been interrogated by Vortex before -- that was old news -- but at the medic’s defensive, disgusted tone over it. An unpleasant moment of realization rippled around the whole table. Most of them had been captured on Earth at one point or another. Even if their value as hostages had kept the Decepticons from killing them or time had prevented actual imprisonment, Vortex had gotten his hands on them for on-site interrogations. Force-downloads always stood out as the most traumatizing part of the physical violence visited upon prisoners, but now the officers were looking back at their interrogations realizing what had flown completely over their heads at the time. Comprehension sank in at long last about what Vortex had been attempting to do.

“I am suddenly finding certain memories of our time on Earth more disturbing than I previously believed,” Prowl said in a very level voice. He turned his head, moving like his neck pained him, to look at Jazz. “Has there been any indication of how coerced consent is viewed by the Decepticons?”
Jazz swallowed, mouth parched as if his oral fluids had mysteriously dried up, and he clung to Wheeljack as his mind reeled. “I don’t -- give me a klik, here.”

The arms around him tightened without even the smallest hint of desire, downshifting from interfacing to cuddling without skipping a beat. Blaster caught the tip of one door as it flicked over the table and reached under it to press the palm of his hand flat across the speaker. It was a small comfort, but a needed one. The smaller Autobot buried his helm under Wheeljack’s chin and shut off his visor, letting himself soak up the contact. He’d endured more than his fair share of interrogations throughout the war. Threat assessment was highlighting a large chunk of physical threat analysis for revision, and Wheeljack held him close as whole vorns tagged in his memory shifted around. New information always caused quick evaluations of past incidents, but this...

His databank archives were going to be a disorganized mess of tags before the night was over. He’d have to make new tags. They weren’t going to be nice tags to make.

“The fragger must have been really trying hard to work me up,” Ratchet said as the medic bent back to tweaking a wire. “He asked me if I wanted to frag at least fourteen times in the space of a cycle. It was so strange because he kept touching me while he was jacked in, but he kept asking as if he wanted me to say yes.” Say yes to interfacing even as the Combaticon interrogator had hardline raped him, he meant. That was the only way the Autobots really interpreted the word ‘interface’. Asking to frag at the same time as Vortex forced a once-sided frag would have been odd, yes.

“If he was trying to prime my body to where I’d give in and agreed to a tactile ‘face, he failed.” A look of revulsion washed over Ratchet’s face for a split second before the professional mask rose again. “He sure tried, though. But without my mind aligned with the sensor feedback, the fondling was just...creepy.” He shook his shoulders as if shrugging off the remembered feel of crawling ‘copter hands, then snorted and repeated, “Itch I can’t scratch,” under his breath like it was a curse.

An aggravated sigh abruptly came from the head of the table, and Optimus Prime unfolded his arms. He laid one hand on Red Alert’s shoulder, which was greeted with a pained grimace that looked nothing like the reassuring smile the Security Director was probably aiming for. ‘I wish ‘no’ to mean ‘no,’ but I feel as if Vortex’s...actions on Earth illustrate a gray area of interpretation on what the Decepticons believe is consent.” His own shoulders went down as Ratchet glanced up at him before returning to work on Red Alert. “If it is the words being said that are important, rather than the manner in which those words are obtained -- yes, I can see how that may yet be a problem. So far, Megatron has not done anything to me physically without some form of agreement beforehand. That is,” he hesitated on the wording, but for once the officers didn’t immediately pounce on the hint of what the Decepticon leader was up to in those closed meetings, “he has asked my permission in a suitably not-asking manner.”

They all caught the wry humor there. Well, it was nice to know that the world as they knew it was still normal enough that Megatron couched requests in demands. What those requests were, on the other hand, made all the difference.

“However,” the Prime continued in a concerned voice that frowned where his masked face couldn’t show it. “I have felt somewhat obligated by duty to allow some, ah, actions I am not comfortable with. My discomfort has grown by how close he -- ah, whenever he --” His voice dropped to an irritated mutter, “This isn’t becoming any easier to say out loud.” The big red-and-blue mech resettled in his seat, an embarrassed shifting his size did nothing to hide, and they gaped at him with varying expressions of dumbfounded surprise as he managed to finish. “By how close he has. Has brought me. To, ah. Overload.”

His optics held a strange sense of accomplishment when he got the words out. Jazz knew that
feeling: speaking up despite how his social protocols were wrongfully screaming at him to just not say it, be quiet, stop stop stop. He felt absurdly proud of his leader for talking despite the audible struggle to get the words out.

A click of a vocalizer resetting, a deep in-vent, and then their Prime shook the embarrassment off visibly. “My reaction toward it makes more sense, now, as does his frustration when I’ve refused to allow the…courtship,” they were all still applying that word tentatively, because it was so strange, “to continue past a certain point. I’ve had the thought that my refusal’s hampered communication, but I haven’t been able to, ah.” The embarrassment tried to swamp him again, but he sat straight and admitted to his own shortcoming with the courage he was famous for. Jazz really had to admire that. “I haven’t been able to broach the subject myself. I...wouldn’t have even known how. Megatron may have tried, but I must confess that I have been the one to change subjects when it seemed the topic might be brought out into the open.”

He sighed quietly, looking slightly discouraged by what he was saying. “This misunderstanding between our factions -- our cultures -- is impeding swifter progress of the treaty process.”

“That’s attempting agreement under duress,” Prowl said on automatic. His hands flew over the console screen as he hurried jotted down notes. “We will need to go over the treaty terms with consideration to your physical and mental state of being at the time of negotiation, now.”

Ironhide sat up in a hurry, face set in a severely unhappy frown that shook him out of the disbelieving stare the officers were giving their commander. “And what the frag? Frag, no. Prime! He ain’t using duty to clang your plating!”

It was a denial of reality, because Optimus flinched and looked away.

Another stir went around the table. That wasn’t right. Shock gave way to an array of expressions, from Blaster’s perplexed smile to Red Alert’s subdued scowl.

“You should not be pressured by your position to concede,” Prowl’s face went briefly disconcerted, “er, physical favors. That is coercion.”

“Hold up,” Jazz said, leaning back in Wheeljack’s lap in order to prop his elbows behind himself on the table. “I’m not saying you’re wrong, but I gotta step in. I’m playin’ rep for the ‘Cons here because somebody has to. Two things, mechs.” He held up two fingers and counted off the first. “We were alright with Screamer being forced into a contract against his will. If contract negotiations are about courtships for, uh, various kinds of relationships, then how’s that different for him? He’s made it pretty slagging clear that he doesn’t want to be involved with me because of personal and officiate reasons, but we didn’t give a scrap. Pit, we’re exploiting it for our own reasons, now.”

He pointed his finger down the table before flipping his wrist in a questioning gesture. “Megatron’s making his officers come courting in the name of peace, but it’s not the same to call our officers up to
the plate? We’re holdin’ ourselves up above the ‘Cons on this one. Why?”

“We’re not doing anything less than they’re offering?” Wheeljacked asked, intrigued. His arms stayed loosely wrapped around the smaller Autobot, hands on Jazz’s back. “Huh. True. They’re not even going after the rank and file, if what Starscream told you is correct: it’s the Decepticon officers negotiating directly with us, their counterparts. So...” When Jazz twisted to face him again, the inventor looked like he’d been handed a puzzle. A social one, true, but Wheeljack did love to solve things. “That is interesting. Why are we afraid to trade ourselves in return for their commitment? Trading the few for the good of the many seems tactically sound.”

Ah, the magic words. The whole table automatically turned to their tactician.

“It is not a fair trade if it is something that requires vast concessions on our part,” Prowl pointed out. He raised a hand as if to mark a scoreboard in midair, or write out an unequal equation. “This is abnormal for us. Whether or not our perception of the...approach to interfacing is correct, the fact remains that we are the ones being required to change. To accept the Decepticons’ courtship, we must play their game by their rules. That is a burden of responsibility placing us at the disadvantage, and that is tactically unsound.”

The Autobot Second was too dignified to sneer, but it was heavily implied when he turned his words from Wheeljack to Jazz. “I would acknowledge Starscream’s unwilling compliance if it were not evidently an obligation of rank within the wider culture of his faction to interface in order to secure political and interpersonal hierarchy. It is his duty, not an unnatural requirement outside the realm of our own cultural norms!”

Jazz opened his mouth. After a moment, he closed it again in a flat, troubled frown. Wheeljack’s hands kneaded the small of his back, but he glanced at the inventor’s quizzical expression and shook his head. There was a taint in among Prowl’s words, an idea threaded amidst the truth that left a rotted taste in his mouth. He just couldn’t quite articulate what it was that soured what otherwise seemed like reasonable piece of logic.

It was apparently part of a Decepticon officer’s job to negotiate using interfacing. That was part of military culture, if contracting determined rank. Tactile interfacing was part of the negotiation process that determined the Decepticon social structure. Prowl was merely pointing out that, in his optics, there was no cause for sympathy toward mechs who engaged in contractual interfacing as a matter of duty, even if Megatron made them court Autobots instead of fellow ‘Cons.

But...that was like an Iacon noble forcibly interfacing a courtesan. It was the courtesan’s job to interface with clients. That didn’t make it any more right for the purchaser to hold the courtesan down and take the goods, so to speak. Megatron was selling his mechs like a peace-pushing pimp, and Prowl was disregarding any denial by the Decepticon officers because they were ‘courtesans’ by trade.

Just because the...profession of a mech implied interfacing was habitual, that didn’t make consent any less important! Orders from Megatron did not mean that the Autobots were permitted to force a frag. That was taking advantage of a threat issued by someone else. Prowl had just said it: using a mech’s position to coerce physical favors was wrong.

Yet somehow, when applied to a Decepticon, nobody spoke up to protest.

A muddle of conflicting feelings and social protocols stole the words he needed, and Jazz didn’t know how to speak up. Plus there was a niggling thought staying just out of reach that circled back to his original point: it was duty for the Decepticons, but somehow not for the Autobots. They were holding themselves above the Decepticons, and that sat wrong with him.
He put his head down and tucked his helm under Wheeljack’s chin while the debate continued down the table without him. There was something about Prowl’s argument he had to dig out, had to frame in a way that the others understood. Changing their current mindset on interfacing practices had somehow switched from being what they should do for their own sakes, into being something imposed on them by the Decepticons. How had that happened? Prowl had framed his argument inside that mindset, and that bothered Jazz in a way he couldn’t quite grasp yet.

Primus, he needed a good, long defrag cycle. Ratchet’s patch-job wasn’t hacking it right now.

While Jazz fought his aching processors, Prime blew a breath out his vents. He leaned forward to set an elbow on the table and rub his hand under the brim of his helm as he responded to Prowl. “That follows my reasoning, for the most part, but I felt the peace process important enough to give Megatron the lead on this.” He let his hand fall and nodded to both Wheeljack and Prowl. “That’s why I agreed to his proposal without bringing it up with you, my friends. My initial protest -- well, Megatron said it best.” Grave blue optics looked at each of his officers. “I’m willing to sacrifice my body for the Autobots in battle, but not in peace?”

“That’s not the same!” Ironhide shook his head, and Prowl was right there with him. The Executive Officer’s face didn’t display anger the way Ironhide’s did, but the stiff angle he held his doors at demonstrated his righteous indignation at the idea of Megatron manipulating the Prime by the Matrix-Bearer’s sense of duty.

“How?” that same Prime asked them. “Is it morally offensive to barter my body?”

Whoa, now that was a weird concept to get a handle on. Jazz wasn’t the only one blinking rapidly through reset. It’s what they had been talking about, but phrased that way, it shook them up.

“Is it so different than battle?” Optimus asked before anyone could interrupt. “The humans have a saying: ‘Make love, not war.’ Both involve a bodily clash, objectively speaking. The humans held one concept as ethically superior, however, and it’s the one that doesn’t involve mechs dying under my command!”

“Hey, now.” Blaster lifted his hands like he was warding off the Prime’s sudden rise in volume. Optimus always got more passionate when reminded of those who’d died under his orders, and the Comm. Officer sat back under the naked blast of emotion. “I’m not sayin’ what’s wrong or right, here! I’m just thinkin’ that forcin’ us to pair off and fuck for peace is a bit much!”

“Freeeet!” someone chirruped as vocalizers fizzled around the table. It wasn’t the most eloquent response, but it served. Jazz’s optical sensors tried to cross behind his visor, which was impossible but was certainly what it felt like.

“Crude,” Ratchet muttered. “Crude, but to the point.”

“Bluntly put, but I agree,” the Prime said a touch sharply. “Force is not something I will condone. I made the choice to permit Megatron to...court me. He may have manipulated me, but I accepted his proposal knowing that it, whatever it might have been, was still better than continuing our Great War. I would rather be pressured into using my body as a tool of peace rather than be forced to use it as a weapon of war. But that is a choice I made for myself, knowing what pressure was being put upon me and knowing, as well, that Megatron was committing his body as collateral. At the time I accepted his proposition, I assumed it was a personal deal between the two of us. Now that I know the...the larger picture, and the errant reasoning behind my underlying discomfort, I will approach this courtship more reasonably.” His optics flickered uncertainly before they hardened to determined blue. “That does not mean that I will allow anyone to be coerced into any act they do not fully agree with!”
“Oh, for Primus’ sake,” Ratchet sighed, but he didn’t bother speaking up. “Can you not see the hypocrisy of that statement?”

“He never can,” Ironhide said back. “Glitching, self-sacrificing, blind martyr.”

Optimus drew himself up and tried to stare down his two insubordinate officers, which probably would have worked better if they were paying attention to him instead of trading exasperated looks with each other. “The burden of duty lies far more upon me than -- “

“Pfffft,” three-fourths the table said in unison. Red Alert didn’t join in, but that was because Ratchet had his head open for surgery, not because he wouldn’t have chimed in otherwise.

When it looked like the Prime was going to launch into a speech anyway, the Security Director managed a muffled, “Piffle.”

Optimus glanced at him, hesitated, but reluctantly deflated.

Jazz’s semi-formed thoughts reached some sort of breaking point, and he found himself swinging a leg over Wheejack’s lap to face Blaster even as he waved his hands at the room in general. “I’m not buyin’ it. Blaster!” The Communications Officer jumped in his chair as the saboteur smacked one hand down on the table and pointed the other straight at him. “Rewind a second, here. Slagging Pit you’re not saying it’s right or wrong. Whaddya think you just did? Mech, take a look at your phrasing! You’re saying it’s wrong without actually saying it’s wrong, but that’s still saying it’s wrong!”

“Whoa!” Blaster reared back, hands up in surrender and defense, but he looked totally confused by the smaller Autobot’s frustrated anger. Instead of fastening on Prime’s self-sacrifice, he was coming after the communication specialist for a passing comment? “Hey, put the brakes on! I didn’t mean anything!”

“That doesn’t -- “ Jazz sucked in a deep in-vent and forced his fans to slow. It hadn’t been intentional. Blaster was a good mech; ignorance had been speaking, not malice. “Whether or not you meant it, picture how that’s gonna come across to a Decepticons who does believe that ‘fucking for peace’ is the right solution. How you meant it isn’t going to change how he hears an Autobot spitting on his -- his, frag, I don’t know.” He flicked his doors as he tried to explain what he felt so strongly it stung his fuel pump. “Culture. Lifestyle. Choices.”

Blaster’s hands slowly lowered as that sank in. “But, I mean… I don’t have to agree with it. Sure, if they want to do their,” his hands rolled over each other, trying to convey all that Decepticon weirdness, “thing. Cool, go do it. I’m down with the ‘Cons fragging each other halfway to Kaon, but -- “

“But I don’t particularly wanna see it,” Ironhide cut in, almost glaring at the saboteur still perched in Wheeljack’s lap. “Allow it, yeah. Talk about it -- hmpmp. If I gotta. I know why, an’ I’ll…deal with it. ‘Cause I should. But that don’t mean I have to put out, and we shouldn’t have t’ put up with the ‘Cons’ version of decency instead of ours!”

Prowl sat straighter, if that was at all possible. His impassive, unemotional default mask didn’t falter, but the officers at the table knew him too well to not see the tiny hints of relief. He practically lit up with it as someone stumbled across the words to put this mess into the right context for him. “That’s exactly my point. Why should we? Some discussion, of course, is reasonable, but we have been discussing this as if the only option we have is adopting their standards. There is a sense that the Decepticons’ way is correct and our own wrong. I do not agree with that. We have our own
standards. How much can we compromise before we are wholesale adopting Decepticon values out of a false sense of progress while dismissing our own because we are afraid of offending someone? There is acknowledgement, and then there is blindly glorifying a different culture over our own!”

“That is not what we are doing,” Prime disagreed sternly even as Ironhide nodded and Blaster made a thoughtful noise.

“We’re trying to meet the ‘Cons halfway,” Wheeljack protested.

“It is not, as I said,” Prowl repeated coldly, “meeting halfway if we are the ones changing our very coding. They are changing nothing. They are offering nothing but what they claim to offer each other normally. We are the ones expected to bend to their societal norms.”

“Have we asked them to change anything for us in return?” Ratchet asked quietly. “So far, it’s been a few ventures into aggressively coaxing us to join in, not us asking them to do anything.”

Jazz spoke at the same time, “Believe me, they’ve changed their normal courtship practices already!” He couldn’t erase what he’d seen of Soundwave’s courtship proposal from his mind.

“Ratchet is right. Your judgment of the situation may be hasty and based on only what we have encountered so far.” Optimus met Prowl’s optics before nodding to his Third, who had his back to him. Jazz was glaring at the tabletop as the argument circled. “To be fair, Jazz, your experience tonight cannot be considered typical of Decepticon customs. I sincerely doubt normal courtship goes to such,” he paused to choose a tactful word, “extremes.”

“Blending in was more important than testing give on boundaries,” the small Autobot said in a flat voice, still facing away. “Smelt me if they didn’t allow for me being an Autobot anyway. Whatever ‘normal’ courtships are like, the ‘Cons are still givin’ us leeway to be stupid afheads.” A blurt of sound that wanted to be a laugh escaped Blaster’s mouth, and Jazz cracked a grin at him. “It’s what I felt like tonight, y’know? Only time Acid Storm got fed up with me being an ignorant slagger was when I got judgmental first. Screamer’s all but said the proposals are being supervised, so they know we’re different. My thinking’s that they want us to participate, but that doesn’t necessarily mean we gotta do it like they do. We’re making peace up; why the frag can’t we write some new rules while we’re at it?”

That got a nod from the Prime. “Megatron has been similarly…accommodating for my inexperience.” Optimus got a few interested looks for that, but he was regarding Jazz curiously when the saboteur did one of those improbable twists that would dislocate a less flexible mech’s backstruts. Wheeljack chuckled as Jazz put his elbows on the table and looked back at their Prime. “We’ve never explicitly spoken of it, but your report on Acid Storm’s reactions make sense of some of Megatron’s stranger mannerisms. I’ve been unable to interpret them on my own. It would not surprise me if he is completely different when approaching one of his own mechs.” The rough rumble of a semi-truck’s engine started, and Optimus’ optics suggested a hidden smile. “It makes me wonder what he is like when being courted or courting a potential officer instead of a potential ally.”

Hellooooo, mental images. Ironhide spluttered. Ratchet laughed out loud, then pretended complete concentration on the inside of Red Alert’s open helm. Prowl coughed, choking on whatever he’d been about to say.

“The Decepticons do not have the right to impose their interfacing preferences on us,” the Autobot Second said when he recovered, and his engine growled under his voice as he stubbornly returned to his point. “Would you have allowed Megatron to molest anyone else, Prime, or is it merely acceptable because you believe the alternative is war?”
That got a flash of conflicted blue optics, and the Prime glanced away.

“If this were a matter of establishing a physical connection to accompany the treaty, then I would expect it to be approached in a manner befitting the seriousness of the topic,” Prowl went on.

“How is this any less serious than their usual approach to each other -- “ Jazz started, but Prowl rode right over him.

“Instead, what I am seeing is a campaign of misinformation -- have you any proof beyond what you personally have gathered?” he demanded when Jazz started to interrupt him in turn.

The saboteur’s visor narrowed at him, but Jazz kept his silence. He let Wheeljack rearrange him to sit more comfortably facing the table this time as Prowl said his piece.

“From the perspective of my function,” the tactician stressed, reminding everyone there that he was the one meant to connect the wider picture and draw a plan from it, “it seems as if the Decepticons are seeking to destabilize us through an admittedly brilliant stab at our social structure. Making the officers the target of the Decepticons’ perversions is upsetting us, and making us the perpetrators of it within our own ranks is serving quite well at turning us on one another. Perhaps the information is correct. Perhaps the blatant rutting among the Decepticons is meant to convey more than a lack of self-control and lowered morals -- ”

“Now see here!” Wheeljack abruptly sat forward, and Jazz ‘ oof ’ ed as his bumper rammed into the table-edge before he could lift it out of the way. The inventor gave him a quick glance of apology. “Sorry. But I can’t let that slide,” he said, addressing Prowl again. “That, right there, attempts to make me ashamed of having my arms where they are right now. Do you see that? Do you see what a slippery slope that is?”

The officers looked at him. That was, they looked at the mech in his lap.

Jazz blinked back at them, refusing to let himself feel defensive over the fact that he was sitting in Wheeljack’s lap. Nothing had changed about that, at least, and the tightness in his ventilation system eased a bit as someone found words for what had been bothering him. Even if Prowl had a point about being wary over Decepticon-derived information, Wheeljack was making his own point.

“You’re extrapolating from a faulty basis when speaking on this subject, Prowl. That needs to change. I can’t, in good conscience, let what I’ve learned today go just because the Decepticons might be trying to use it against us.” The inventor set his chin on Jazz’s shoulder tire and looked around the table from there without a hint of embarrassment. That impressed the smaller Autobot.

Then again, Wheeljack had come into officer cadre meetings still smoking from an explosion, and he’d been totally unruffled by that. He’d only stopped talking when his upholstery started smoldering again. Well, okay, when Red Alert had hit him with a blast of fire suppressant. Cuddling someone in his lap probably didn’t even register on the ‘Weird Stuff I’ve Done In Meetings’ scale for the engineer.

“Regardless of how we fell over finding out about it, our views on interfacing are screwed up, and fixing that isn’t a concession to anybody but our own ethics. You can’t count that as -- as -- “ Wheeljack shook his head, momentarily at a loss. “As anything to do with these courtships, really, except as an issue that should be addressed. It’s not a plot, or a ploy, or anything to do with Decepticons. This is our own bad scrap to recycle. The ‘Cons might have brought it to light, but there is an error in my social protocols, and that can’t be swept back out of the base just because it’s awkward and we don’t want to deal with it!”
Prowl’s doors hiked up at the unspoken accusation that he was suggesting exactly that. “I did not mean that we should ignore whatever errors of logic we discover after checking the facts,” he said stiffly. “What I do not want to see happen is a premature or unfounded change in our perception of the Decepticons based off of information given to us by them.”

Or based off of the observations of one spy who could have, however unlikely it was, walked into a meticulously scripted performance by the Vosian Decepticons. That kind of elaborate mind-frag wasn’t something that could be put past Starscream, the canny schemer. Jazz grit his teeth on the urge to defend his findings because Prowl was doing precisely what the Head of Tactical was supposed to do. As the Head of Special Ops, he could readily agree with tearing apart his debriefing this way, and he could see that both Ironhide and Optimus Prime had shelved their own personal opinions in order to listen to Prowl doing his job.

“What I am watching happen is a valid push for change,” the tactician nodded to Wheeljack respectfully, if a tad frigidly, “be taken advantage of. The Decepticons are using our morals to push us where they want: into accepting that public displays of…excessively sexual activities,” this time, Prowl nodded to Ironhide, who nodded back in agreement, “are normal, and that we are fundamentally wrong if we don’t comply with their version of interfacing. They are pushing us from the idea of forming social bonds through interfacing and replacing it with the version they practice. Whether or not tactile interfacing is wrong or right, there is nothing wrong with what we already practice. It has created an atmosphere of mutual responsibility and trust in our faction. There is no reason that we must change that, as has been urged through this courtship idea.”

With a huff, his doors lowered back into a steadier position as Prowl flattened his hands on the table. “There have been legitimate points raised by Jazz’s briefing. I do not deny that. I am simply calling for temperance on how we react to it. Jazz,” Second and Third exchanged guarded looks, “has accepted the mission to infiltrate and therefore understand the Decepticon viewpoint, but it makes him all the more susceptible to misinformation. Until his reports are verified, we must use caution in what we internalize as facts, especially on a subject as sensitive as this one.”

A murmur of half-sparked dissent and reluctant agreement rippled up one side of the table and back down the other. Even Jazz shrugged under Prowl’s cold gaze. Taking the mission had put him in the position where the deeper he went, the more unreliable he became in the logical mind of Prowl’s tactical processor. That was inevitable. It was a fact of life when one was a Special Operations agent. And Prowl was right in that Jazz’s information should be double-checked.

However, there were some things that just weren’t right. Information assessment had been running in the back of his mind, as it always did, but he’d turned it upon his fellow officers because he’d been trying to pinpoint the errors in his social protocols. Prowl’s words had set off an alert, because the tactician wasn’t reacting according to threat assessment’s revised social predictions.

“I’m operatin’ off of maybes and guesswork,” Jazz allowed, “but you’re reacting instead of thinking, Prowler.”

“It is always wise to urge caution,” Optimus said in a soothing tone. “This is a time-sensitive problem --”

For once, Prowl spoke over his commander. “How so?” he snapped directly at Jazz, and the Prime shut up out of surprise.

Jazz stretched his arms up and curved back, settling his doors against Wheeljack’s chest comfortably even as his smile grew edges. “Run an analysis of what your tactical processor’s working off whenever the word ‘interface’ comes up. Betcha it auto-tags the regs as logical base for your social
protocols -- or, slag if I know, but I gotta hunch it’s the Enforcer Code, probably. You were in a lot longer than I was.”

Ratchet reset his optics, suddenly looking up from his work to stare across the table at the Autobot Second. “Huh. That...would explain the ease in which you’ve adapted. You haven’t.” Prowl shook his head, but his optics were disturbed and his mouth pinched into a strange shape as he ran the analysis. “Self-defense is likely. Even probable, now that I think about it. Your tactical suite runs deep enough to be considered an essential part of the hardware running three-fourths of your standard programs. If you’ve reached your limits for self-modification, it could be rejecting anything that causes inherent contradictions between your accepted reality and new information.”

“What it sounds like from where I’m sittin’,” Jazz said, “is that where we’re all getting slapped upside the head with faulty causation models, your subprocessors are clinging to how the Senate saw Vos.”

That got a reaction. Optics darkening slowly, Prowl twitched and glared icily at the other black-and-white mech. “I am fully capable of recognizing the possible issues we have overlooked in our own ranks. I am already dubious of accepting consent as a reality within the Decepticon ranks, much less a contract-based society based on tactile interfacing. Recognizing problems within our own society does not mean I must promote this supposed Vosian culture as equal or above our own. I refuse to believe that we should allow the Decepticons to paw us because they say it should be acceptable!”

Optimus had a hand over his optics as he tried to think. “I would hardly expect Megatron to allow me equal access through a hardline connection without some form of communication beforehand. Until Starscream’s proposal, I thought of the, ah, hands-on approach he’d taken as a type of physical outlet, redirecting our history of combat into something more acceptable for a new-found peace. A way to forge a connection between us made of more than mere words.”

“Even that stands out to me as manipulation instead of an attempt to create a political relationship. What proof do we have that hardline interfacing ever happens among Decepticons?” Prowl spread his hands as he asked, looking to them for evidence. “We know the Decepticons do not trust each other enough for that. It is sensible that they are leery of us because of how easily we exchange our cables, but this idea of hands-on courtship and negotiation is something new. It is a planned feeding of information to us, but the question is whether it is meant to restart the war through digging a Pit of falsehoods at our feet -- or is it meant to paint the Decepticons in a coat of the merely misunderstood? It’s possible they plan on taking advantage of the confusion in our ranks without restarting the war.”

“I think it’s a little late to try and convince the rest of the galaxy that this whole war was a big misunderstanding,” Optimus said dryly.

“No,” Wheeljack said, “but shorter-lived races might believe it if the ‘Cons keep up the act long enough. Off-world socio-political leverage combined with financial advantages from sympathetic trade agreements could put us in a tricky spot a couple thousand years from now.” Jazz’s armor vibrated gently as the inventor’s engine gave a thoughtful hum. “There are other ways to take over a planet than violence.”

“Third option, don’t forget. They might be honestly tellin’ the truth. Cosmos’ reaction sure seems to back it up,” Blaster offered. “Mech knew what was goin’ down up there.”

“Yes.” There was a disturbing flare of hunger in Prowl’s optics that Jazz recognized. The Prowl-vampire hungered to suck information from Cosmos’ mind. “He will be extensively debriefed. In the meantime, I protest discussing this issue within the mindset that the Decepticons have any right to upset our ranks or destroy of our social norms by approaching us this way. I will also state
irrevocably that Megatron does not have the right to force your participation, no matter our current or future viewpoints on interfacing!"

The Prime leaned away from the finger being pointed at him.

“So you’re alright with them chasing our tailpipes so long as it’s hardline?” Jazz asked sharply. Something slotted into place among the chaotic clamor of his thoughts. “Answer me this, guys.” He looked specifically at Prowl and Ironhide, since Ratchet was keeping his head down and Blaster seemed to be sorting something out in his head at the moment. “If the Decepticons were discreetly looking to hook up with us,” he included them all with a wave of his hand, “in hardline interfaces to make the treaty more concrete through inter-factional relationships -- “

“That is still coercion,” Prowl insisted.

Ironhide stood abruptly to start pacing. Ratchet immediately kicked the empty chair out of the way and took its place to get another angle into Red Alert’s helm, but the old red mech didn’t seem to care that he’d been displaced. “Nah, I see where you’re goin’ with this. I get it.” The old red mech uncrossed and crossed his arms again. “I’m picturin’ it, an’ you’re right. I don’t see it as a threat until I throw out a scenario where a ‘Con touches me in public. Even that, I’d say it’s modesty, but slag me for scrap if I don’t get the same reaction from my protocol’s if I picture it in private.”

“Tactile interfacing is being picked up by threat assessment as a risk?” Prime asked no one. He leaned back as he ran his own scenarios, optics locked on the ceiling. “I -- yes, true. Had Megatron asked for a hardline connection, I would have been startled but more accepting of the idea than this…courtship procedure.”

He was running on observations and what he knew of his fellow officers, but that was apparently enough. Jazz felt reckless and utterly alive in a way he rarely did off the field of battle. He was closing in on a target. “I don’t know, but here’s what I think’s still slipping by us: our perception of hardline versus tactile interfacing hasn’t changed since the Enforcer Code was written. Frag, probably before then! Somebody had to believe it in order to write it, after all.”

“This is sidelining the real issues by talking about interfacing again,” Prowl started, and Jazz stuck his tongue out at him.

“Bolt it, Prowler. With all due respect, your perspective’s just as compromised as mine right now. You spin your back-up plans over there while I lay out what needs to be known right now!” The Head of Special Operations cut the Head of Tactical off at the knees, and their commander’s raised hand backed him up. Optimus didn’t usually support insubordination, but his Second and Third didn’t normally start pulling rank on each other unless it was important. Jazz had no idea how dangerous he looked at that moment, curled forward onto the table and smiling that half-mad smile of the Unmaker’s Advocate, but Wheeljack pressed back into the chair as if to escape him.

The Prime held up his hand to silence Prowl and gave his spy and saboteur his full attention.

“Rewind this conversation, mechs,” Jazz ordered. “The assumption I’m running headfirst into is that tactile and hardline interfacing are inherently unequal. Stop me if this doesn’t sound familiar,” he said half as an aside to Blaster, “but which do you think is a shallow connection? Tactile. No emotional depth? Tactile. No commitment? Tactile. Perverted? Tactile. Filthy lust and base desires? Tactile.” That knife-edge smile turned on the rest of the table. “Now take a look at our attachment to hardline ‘facing.” His visor went wide and angelic, and a lovely, sweet smile took the place of the hardness of before. “Deep and complicated, forever and pure!”

Prowl’s optics reset twice in a row when the patently false look of innocence turned on him. “…yes,
I can agree with that.” A slow downturn worked its way across his mouth. It seemed to take real effort to admit, “I suppose there are faults in that, however.?”

A bark of laughter answered him, but it wasn’t amused. “Even before firewallin’ everything to the Pit and back became the norm, iron ore and scrapyards to that! Sure, the potential for more is there, but most of the time until you get to know a mech, hardline connection’s got as much commitment as it takes to make an access gateway. I do it for duty when I gotta check my operatives in, so how’s that different than how we look at social fragging over in the ‘Con ranks? How the slag is that pure?” He plowed on through the beginnings of an indignant comment from Ironhide. “But that isn’t my point! My point is that we’re takin’ the perspective that tactile ‘facing and everything related to it is lesser. Like we’re offering more, right? Like we’re the ones losing out on this deal instead of us, y’know, offering the same blasted thing back at the ‘Cons. They think we’re crazy for cabling in on a whim; we think they’re disgusting because they touch just as casually.” He shook his head in a violent side-to-side motion as it hit him just how insane their separate takes on interfacing looked when lined up alongside each other. The parallels were frightening for how strong the attached opinions about them were.

“There’s these opinions that go back far as I can remember, all the way before the Enforcer Code gave me the right to arrest anyone caught being ‘indecent’ in public or my instructors warned me that warbuilds are inherently dangerous, like they’re not mechs like you an’ me. And those opinions are rearing their ugly old heads here again.” He stabbed his finger at the table for emphasis as he gave the silent prejudices a voice. “What we’re sayin’ right now is that the Decepticons aren’t as committed, because everyone knows that tactile don’t mean scrap. We’re sayin’ it’s not important that the ‘Con officers are putting themselves on the table, because everyone knows they’re less than we are, so them doing it for duty isn’t as important as us doing the exact same thing. Except we’re doing it by hardline, so naturally it’s more innocent.”

“Slippery slope,” Wheeljack said as he sat forward again to wrap his arms securely around the saboteur’s waist.

Jazz glanced back at him. “Yep. It’s coercion if Megatron does it to Optimus, but who cares if Megatron makes Starscream do it? Everyone knows it’s duty to hardline your own mechs, but the idea of ‘facing them without cables suddenly turns it lewd and crude and just plain rude -- but frag, everyone knows that’s what the Decepticons are like, so of course the idea of forcing them to offer the equivalent doesn’t matter as much to us. It doesn’t register as an equal trade, because we automatically shunt it aside as a poorer trade.”

“Anyone else gettin’ real confused about where this conversation’s goin’?” Blaster asked plaintively.

Ratchet flung a quick scan in the Comm. Officer’s direction. “I need to set up a monitor?” He was already keeping a very close optic Prowl, who was sitting ramrod straight.

“No -- I. No.” Blaster didn’t look happy, but he managed a crooked smile for the medic. “Just venting out loud. I’ve got so many criss-crossed lines of thought running that I’m just waiting to hit a snag. That whole line of questioning,” he said with a pained look to Jazz, “feels like I’m falling down a hole I never noticed under my feet.”

“Hardline interfacing is not the same level of commitment as tactile,” Prowl said, ignoring anything else. “We cannot demand that Autobots submit themselves to the Decepticons for -- “

“Why is it submission?” Prime asked, suddenly curious.
At the same time, Jazz laughed recklessly. “Why do you say that it’s not the same level of commitment? Give me a real reason, Prowl! Something besides your social protocols dead-ending in the Enforcer Code, because that’s not a reason. That’s ‘I think this because this tells me that’s what I should think, therefore I think it.’ Is it somehow a greater calling to offer cables instead of our bodies? Oh, please.” Jazz grinned like dragging these questions to light was all a game. “We send soldiers into battle for reasons we sometimes don’t even explain. Here, we’re not asking the grunts to go out and die for a distraction; we’re asking the officers on both sides to commit their bodies equally, fully informed. No matter their personal feelings, they’re probably gonna see it as a good deal in order to finally end the war, right? That’s why the Decepticons have come courting, yeah? It’s better than the alternative.”

From behind Optimus, Ironhide’s engine rumbled in reluctant amusement. “Pit if I don’t agree with that. Might not like it, but I’d let a ‘Con court me over restartin’ the war.”

“Megatron’s forcing them to court us, not fight us, so you tell me why our bodies are somehow magically more sacred when we meet them outside of combat.” The black-and-white spy threw his hands up. “It’s like -- hey, interfacing’s involved. There goes the neighborhood.”

“It’s…” Prowl reset his optics quickly and started again. “A mech’s body is his own -- “

“Except when we’re telling him to fling it in front of weapons’-fire or report for a debriefing via a cable uplink.”

“It’s morally repugnant -- “

“To shoot each other, too. Next?”

“It’s more personal!”

“Prowl, I’ve been elbow deep in Thundercracker’s guts five times in the last six million years. That doesn’t count the several thousand times I’ve shot him, but yeah. Elbow-deep. He screamed then, too, but somehow it’s making him like it that flips the switch in our heads from ‘necessity of war’ to ‘Primus take the wheel, I’m gonna faint’?” The Autobot officer cadre’s smiling demon shook his head, and his grin took on a hard, pained sincerity. “It’s more personal to me, all of sudden, to kill somebody than kiss him. We’re okay with hardline ‘facing. We’re okay with murdering each other. But put more than our minds or our slagging fists together, and it’s the end of the world as we know it.”

“And you know what?” He slid out of Wheeljack’s lap to stand and glare at Prowl. Not because Prowl deserved his ire, but because he was shaking with reaction to his own words, and he needed an outlet for that pent-up emotion. “It’s the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine.”

Because it was about time they’d realized everything they’d known was wrong.

Prowl’s engine turned over, growling angrily as the tactician met Jazz’s narrowed blue visor. That engine hiccupped once, twice -- and Ratchet dove over the table as Prowl crumpled off his chair.

[* * * * *]
End Pt. 23
[* * * * *]

[ A/N: Okay, lots and lots of stuff being talked about in this part. It got so dense that I’m cutting the part in half here to give people some time to digest what the Autobots are bringing up in their own]
minds. The flow and tumble of conversation is hard to follow, sometimes, when a group of people get together to talk about this stuff. Thanks to NK, LadyDragon76, and Shibara for their feedback that helped me edit. And most definitely thank you to Raditz Wyvern, who got me to finish editing this chapter and write the next chapter. Someone wanted to read this story enough that I was motivated to drop everything and write. Realizing that amazes me.]

[* * * * *]

Bonus Scene!

[* * * * *]

[A snippet for DeathComes4U from ZOMGitsalaura, a bonus scene immediately after the close of Pt. 17.]

Thundercracker froze, cracked optics wide and arms suddenly limp in their bonds as shock stole what little strength alarm had given him. Soundwave advanced across the arena, and the downed Seeker gaped as he approached.

Starscream took a step back from his ex-wingmate, drawing the Autobot away with him. Jazz did his level best to cover his own shock and gracefully follow the pull. The hand in the crook of Starscream’s arm felt detached, almost numb. He wasn’t sure it belonged to him anymore, especially not with the way Starscream’s own battered hand covered it. When he glanced sidelong at it, the way the energon-stained fingers laid over his own looked intimate. Possessive.

No wonder the crowd was watching and commenting so excitedly.

It served his purposes, however, so Jazz allowed Starscream to subtly guide him with the flare of his wing and nudge of the closest arm, feet stepping within a comfort zone they’d both thoroughly danced through back at the combined-faction headquarters. From the outside, it likely looked like they turned in concert to face Soundwave. They both knew how to play to an image, and right now the united front they presented to the crowd was that of Emirate and courted, murderous backstabbing hate transmuted into compatible contract. Oh, they knew their roles in this new Cybertron.

The ceasefire called for peace, and Jazz had slapped a bandage over a potential breach tonight. Now they would play nice for the crowd.

The mech coming toward them wasn’t fooled, but Jazz had no intention of giving away any information Soundwave didn’t already know. Some of it had to have been obvious, but the Decepticon Comm. Officer wasn’t omniscient.

He slammed his scramblers up and rolled his head back to smile up at Soundwave as he and Starscream came to a stop as if on cue. The best defense wasn’t always an offense, but striking first in this situation seemed best. “Soundwave!” He let his voice carry and added a dollop of manic cheer. “Fancy meeting you here.”

The Air Commander’s arm shifted, and the hand on his hand stroked the back. The gliding touch had all the idle pride of a warrior admiring his best weapon, and all the intent purpose of a hunter holding back his most savage cyberhound. “Down, intended,” Starscream whispered, well aware that the mech in front of them could hear every word. “He’s not your rival. Not like he was,” he added pointedly.

“Well, then. I like him better already.” Jazz let his smile widen, unconsciously falling into line as if they’d rehearsed this. Second and Third, standing side by side, and despite the damage done by
Starscream’s hands tonight, nobody could tell which of the mechs standing there was the more dangerous at that moment. Starscream’s manipulations had taken a physical turn, but Jazz looked completely untouched for all energon that should stain his hands. Starscream’s possessive hold on the Autobot’s hand held a kind of pride to it, as if restraining the smaller mech from turning on a new victim.

Soundwave’s visor darkened, acknowledgement and wariness. The Jazzmeister had always been a formidable opponent behind the scenes, but the Autobots’ most talented saboteur was out in full force tonight. Somehow, seeing the blue visor out of the shadows made the cold gaze of a killer charming. To see Jazz standing relaxed at Starscream’s side was likely sending alarm bells ringing in Soundwave’s helm.

What Jazz wouldn’t give to know how much the blue communication specialist knew about how fragile this united front was.


“Broken,” Starscream returned, amusement clipped short. “He’s not one of the Armada. If you want him, he’s yours.” The Autobot at his side snorted and muttered something about being welcome to him, and Starscream stroked the hand in the crook of his arm again. “You might want to refuel him if you intend to seek permission to court tonight. It seems my intended,” his hand tightened, “uses his gifts hard.”

Jazz smirked. “What’s the point of a fray-toy if you don’t test it out?” He couldn’t believe he said it even as it popped out, but it was worth it for the wave of laughter through the crowd and Soundwave’s blank stare. How much was acting, and how much was genuinely Jazz? Let the slagger chew on that.

After a moment, the bulkier Decepticon inclined his head to Starscream without acknowledging Jazz’s comment. “Advice appreciated.”

Ignore him? So not wise. Jazz’s giddy thoughts fastened on an idea, and he went for it.

[* * * * *]
End Bonus Scene!
[* * * * *]
Pt. 24

I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 24
[* * * * *]

If this really was a ploy by the Decepticons to disrupt the Autobots’ social structure, Jazz was going to go out and find a hat in his size, just so he could tip it to them.

Ratchet, Wheeljack, and Ironhide bent over Prowl on one side of the table. The Autobot Second had been laid out on his back on the floor, although he’d regained consciousness soon after crashing. It’d necessitated Ratchet running Cybertron’s fastest interception on the mech’s self-modification software, but that’s why Ratchet was the best.

Suppressing modification to Prowl’s coding didn’t delete the protocol backlisting what had been highlighted for change, but it did slow actual changes down to a crawl. The interception itself had caught the change that’d slipped spark and CPU out of alignment before further changes based on it had cemented into place. Ratchet had slammed it into reverse as quick as he’d caught it. The self-mod protocols had immediately begun searching another route around the blockage, and the medic was watching that new pattern of changes like a gyrofalcon.

Prowl had immediately tried to sit up and resume the meeting. Ratchet had caught Ironhide’s optic and pinned the Executive Officer down before Optimus Prime had even needed to say anything.

“I’m operational,” had been met with, “Barely!” and “That ain’t the same as ‘fine.’”

The protests had trailed off into a woozy mumble as Prowl’s lock-away processor transferred control back to main processors. They’d rebooted slower, and the backlog of error hit when the transfer completed. Yes, Prowl had been operational. Prowl could take a direct shot to the head and be temporarily operational as long as half his main processor units remained online enough to operate his tactical suite while his lock-away unit handled bodily survival. That didn’t mean he’d be okay afterward, which was why Ratchet remained hooked in to monitor his self-modification closely. Ironhide had a jack in as well, and Wheeljack had their monitoring output up on his HUD as he kept careful watch over the readings.

Deployed in small units without sufficient medical back-up, Prowl’s survival stats came back in the iffy range. Every time he went out in the field it was a calculated risk. If he wasn’t at the top of the tactical game, the attention paid to one soldier’s survival might have been deemed too much, and he’d have been pulled back to permanent low-risk duty. The Head of Tactical was both too important and too good at his job to have that option.

Hence, Ratchet, Ironhide, and even Wheeljack clustered around him like concerned mother hens. The clucking could almost be heard. Prowl wasn’t going down today, not on their watch.

Meanwhile, Jazz had gone back to his original side of the table to casually lean his hip beside Red Alert. Ironhide’s chair had been kicked aside earlier, and he felt more like standing, anyway. It let him keep his visor on the Security Director’s open helm and still see over the table to where Prowl lay. The other black-and-white Autobot stayed still, one arm over his optics and doors flat to the ground. Visible from under his forearm, his mouth set in an uncomfortable frown. Sorting out the inside of his head after a crash was never fun, but blockading against a slow-motion crash as it
happened felt like staying upright at the same time as falling down. Chip Chase had once compared it to snowboarding down an avalanche: ongoing damage control keeping barely on top of an unstable situation.

Occasionally, Ratchet or Ironhide murmured a question. Prowl grunted a short affirmative or negative, frown steadily deepening. The tactician hated this lack of control over his own mind.

To give them room and time to work, Optimus Prime had relocated down to the opposite end of the table, where he currently had his elbows on the back of Blaster’s chair. They were reading the Cassette carrier mech’s notes on the debriefing so far, speaking in low voices back and forth under the cover of the song Blaster had playing.

Jazz couldn’t help but think that the Decepticons would not be able to relate to this version of a leader. The Prime’s typical nobility was completely absent now. The tall blue-and-red mech who led the Autobots rocked back on his heels, optics intent as he read but wrists idly crossed on Blaster’s shoulder. Just as idly, Blaster’s hand had come up to tap against the back of one large hand. Even as Jazz watched, the Prime’s hands began tapping the same rhythm on the boombox’s shoulder. Both of their heads bobbed to the chorus of the song.

That was as far from Megatron’s violent charisma as anyone could get on any day. Charmed, Jazz smiled down the table. Neither mech noticed, intent as they were on their work in their tiny, music-filled corner of the world.

Beside him, Red Alert rearranged his arms on the table and turned his head until he could put his chin on them. “Talk to me, Jazz.”

The Security Director’s speech, usually as precise as any instrument in his box of tricks, sounded exhausted. It echoed a bit, too, coming up under his helm armor to emerge from the panel Ratchet had levied open for repairs. The lag wasn’t severe -- Ratchet had given his self-modification programming a stern talking-to about parameters instead of blocking it down wholesale -- but it was noticeable. Red Alert wasn’t out of commission, but he was in a temporary repair-state because of the half-installed circuit-bank in his head. It replaced what he’d shorted out earlier but hadn’t yet been integrated into his systems. Ratchet had abandoned him for the moment to deal with the more pressing matter of Prowl’s collapse.

Swiping a topic out of the swarm waiting to be spoken about, Jazz asked, “So what did Screamer do to you?”

Red Alert’s laugh broke in the middle, but that wasn’t from a glitch. Jazz’s spark twinged. That right there was the normal reaction of a traumatized mech. Sadly, seeing those signs surface encouraged him. If Red Alert wasn’t trying to hide the damage, it could be dealt with. The mech had a real avoidance problem.

Back on Earth, the spectacular glitch that had caused the Negavator incident had come from cumulative damage. Ratchet had confirmed it afterward. The increased paranoia Red Alert had displayed up until that final accident hadn’t just been a side effect of running security for the Autobots on a strange planet.

In retrospect, it’d made a lot more sense. He could be an emotional mech, but most of the time, Red Alert channeled his passion into a frightening efficiency on duty. Looking back at his behavior leading to the glitch itself, it’d been easy to see him suffering a breakdown. In this particular case, the physical breakdown had led to a mental one.

This was -- or had been -- war. These things happened. Mechanical failure at least explained why he
hadn’t been able to explain his thoughts even to himself. That hadn’t made Red Alert’s return to sanity any easier. Facing his descent into burn-out had been nearly as traumatizing as piecing together his scattered memories. Owning up to what he’d done while crazy hadn’t been as painful as admitting it could have been prevented.

Ratchet had hardlined into him for the force-download to screen him for Decepticon tricks, but Jazz and Prowl had debriefed him in person separately and together. Jazz hadn’t liked what Red Alert had confessed during those times. They’d gone over the weeks prior to the incident together, and it hadn’t mattered how professional any of them were. It hadn’t gentled the realization that lack of trust had been at the root of the entire thing. Mechanical failure had started it, but not trusting the other Autobots enough to confess his increasing instability had spun Red Alert’s glitch into something that had nearly killed them all.

At the very base of it all, the Lamborghini held a deep distrust of people with mental problems. He had a phobia of having a glitch of his own. Part of it was professional: Security personnel had a well-rooted wariness toward handicaps because the mental ones weren’t easy to spot. The glitches Security couldn’t detect right away were potential risks. Even if they weren’t results of reprogramming or signs of undercover agents, undisclosed glitches were a weakness. The mechs who had them were the ones with notes on their files that forever after stood out as warnings to anyone in the need to know. They had to be compensated for, like any vulnerability.

That was the professional side of his fear, but the personal side was that those mechs were the ones Red Alert could never fully trust. Him, outside of his rank. War had not been kind to any of their minds. They were a species whose entire mindset could change by scanning a new altmode, or die if their minds slipped too far out of alignment with their sparks. Red Alert had witnessed too many changes, too many sudden glitches, too many hidden flaws that were exploited or turned out to be intentional. He feared glitches.

Finding errors in his cerebral hardware had triggered his phobia in the worst way, not helped at all by the software errors tripped by the mechanical problems. Red Alert had been terrified of himself long before his paranoia turned outward on the other Autobots. If a mech’s mind wasn’t healthy, how could he be trusted with any responsibility? He couldn’t be trusted to protect or defend. He couldn’t be trusted not to suddenly flip out. He couldn’t trust himself, much less expect anyone else to trust him. He’d been so afraid of everyone losing faith in him because of dubious mental capacity that he’d convinced himself everyone else had lost it. They’d turned on him, in his mind.

Everything he feared came to pass, but it was a self-perpetuating fear. Seeking help when he recognized the first signs of a problem within himself would have minimized any damage, but no. He’d tried to hide it, eventually talked himself into believing the Autobots were persecuting him instead of him actually having a problem, and the situation had spun out of his control.

Red Alert’s fear of being labeled unstable had ultimately led to the medical file and SpecOps tag on him he’d been so afraid of. They stated precisely what he’d feared. It’d also forced him to talk about exactly what he’d been afraid of: mockery from the ranks, demotion, being avoided or pitied for a flaw instead of repaired, or even the repairs going further than helping and into the realm of actively changing him ‘for the better.’ The very idea of being dependent on medical aid for stability, for sanity, had repulsed him.

Sometimes Jazz hated his job. Watching Red Alert stare down at the floor while spelling out irrational paranoia in terms of personal flaws had been one of those times. Being there as back-up when Ratchet hardlined in to check access gates and processor logs from the inside had been another. But it was reporting Red Alert’s total lack of faith in the Prime that had hurt the most.
Optimus Prime had led the Autobots for over six million years. Red Alert had been his Head of Security for a little less than five million years of that time. Jazz understood not trusting the other officers, because it ran well within Security’s parameters to suspect everyone and everything, just like Special Operation’s had emergency scenarios in place in case of defection or betrayal all the way up to the top. It didn’t matter the person inside the position; in professional roles, even friends became suspect.

But not the top itself. Not the Prime. Optimus Prime couldn’t be separated from his rank. He was the one mech who couldn’t be replaced, whose betrayal would destroy the faction. If they didn’t believe in the Prime, then how could they justify following him into war? Love him, hate him, dislike or feel apathy toward Optimus, yes, but no one in the Autobot ranks could doubt that the Prime would die for them. For the Autobot Cause.

To have fought beside, fought for Optimus this long and gained his friendship, but not returned it? In all this time, Red Alert still couldn’t trust his Prime, his leader, or his friend not to throw him away for showing a hint of weakness.

Prowl could be a cold-spark slagger, but even he had shut off his optics and sighed at that part of the causation report. Red Alert had shrunk inside his armor when the Executive Officer bluntly phrased it that way. Jazz hadn’t been able to keep his smile. Not that anyone had been happy, but he’d been trying to keep spirits up.

Optimus’ optics had gone a sad, dark blue, but he’d shown no reaction beyond that as he’d read. The unfailing kindness he was known for didn’t falter, either, before or after Red Alert’s return to duty.

It wouldn’t. Optimus had been hurt worse than that during the war, but rarely by someone as close as he’d felt to Red Alert. Finding out the relationship had been rather one-sided hurt the way driving through a swamp felt. It sucked a mech down into a muddy, cruddy low. Yet Optimus would never take his pain out on someone else, especially not for something like this.

Red Alert walked on eggshells around the Prime, now. There were things that took so much damage nobody knew where the breaking point lay. The Security Director desperately wanted to repair this breech between them, but there was no magic to make a hurt like that stop overnight. Making amends couldn’t be rushed. Red Alert knew that.

The personal damage had been bad enough, but the professional damage hadn’t been easy to fix, either. Refusing to admit there was a problem in order to avoid all the associated problems had only made the ultimate result worse. In not trusting any of the Autobots with his doubts about himself, the glitch had led to Red Alert trusting Starscream.

The mech’s condemnation of himself had been harsher than any military tribunal’s. He’d lost much of the Autobots’ trust in him, yes, but the mechanical explanation for his behavior gave a legitimate reason for them to return quickly to treating him as one of their own, even if his remorse hadn’t been painfully obvious. He didn’t accept excuses from himself, however. His fearless self-confidence had broken. It’d taken Prowl’s override codes, Jazz’s editing, and Ratchet’s biting sarcasm to weed out everything Red Alert piled on his own file after returning to sanity. He hadn’t even asked before moving all of his personal effects out of his office on the Ark, just automatically assuming that he’d been judged unfit for duty.

That had actually been one of the easiest side-effects of self-doubt to counter; Jazz had made a point of leaving the security monitors unattended, and Red Alert had overhauled the schedule and been three shifts in before he realized the saboteur had just conned him into retaking his own abandoned rank.
The other after-effects were still ongoing. First Aid had been the Ark’s makeshift therapist in cases where Ratchet wouldn’t work -- and after the force-download, he certainly didn’t -- and the Protectobot still spent hours every week just getting Red Alert to talk about trust issues instead of burying his head in duty and denial. Ignoring things wouldn’t help. Red Alert had to deal with what happened in order to put it behind him and begin healing.

After all their time on Earth and the cease-fire here on Cybertron, First Aid had reported to the officer cadre that he believed them to be making progress. Bringing the Nevagator incident back up in this context tore the thin scab over tender emotional wounds wide open again. There wasn’t an officer in the room who didn’t regret the necessity of that.

At least Red Alert wasn’t pretending to be okay. He turned his face down toward the table and huffed another laugh that wasn’t a laugh. “He saved my life.”

“So I gathered from what Ratchet said,” Jazz said. He kept his voice level, nonjudgmental. “Kinda strange hearing that. I would’ve thought we’d have picked up on it before, Red. What’d you two find that makes Starscream your knight in shining armor?” He regretted his word choice even as he said it. Red Alert flinched slightly. He’d known Starscream couldn’t be anyone’s savior without something unsavory going on as well. That flinch told him it was going to be a doozy of a nasty footnote to the story.

“It wasn’t so much what we found but what we didn’t find.” Blue optics flicked toward him before fastening on the cluster of mechs on the other side of the table. Prowl’s motor made grumpy complaints for the fussing, but Ironhide had the smaller Autobot’s shoulder pinned down under one knee. Prowl wasn’t going anywhere until Ratchet cleared him. “My glitch,” Red Alert said in a steely voice as he refused to back down from his own fear, “was caused by overheating of key components in my cerebral wiring. Entire connector circuit boards ceased functioning. I...lost much of my processor communication. Logic associations were internalized.”

Jazz knew all that. “Yeah. I know. So?”

From Ratchet’s report, he knew that Red Alert’s core processor had completely separated from his archives, recent and older. Subprocessors had shut down. His tagging system had only been able to draw from a muddled pool of already-opened files, some important but by and large opened at random before the separation completed. Threat assessment had been scrambled by that. Information assessment had greedily filled in the blanks with anything he could grasp onto. That’d given those isolated logic centers still up and running nothing to conclude but a growing certainty that he couldn’t trust any of the Autobots. Everything else he’d come to believe had been based on whatever Starscream chose to tell him, because he literally couldn’t remember why he shouldn’t trust the Decepticon who’d cozed up to him.

He tilted his head, but the Lamborghini still wouldn’t look up at him. “Red. Red Alert? We’ve gone over this, mech. It wasn’t your fault.” Failure to report himself for repairs had been the only thing Red Alert could have been held responsible for in the whole mess, and he’d been slammed for that. Prowl had run him through the wringer even before Ratchet begun lecturing. Not only had it been about setting an example for those under their command, but about the importance of common sense for Red Alert personally. If he didn’t regard a glitch handicap as a reason against promoting another Autobot, why had he assumed the rest of the officer cadre would be prejudiced against him?

But nobody could chide a mech about not being able to trust others. It’d been a long, long war, after all. Fear didn’t have to be rational to be felt, common sense or not. Red Alert had been taken to task for failing his duty. He hadn’t been chastised for his lack of trust.

However, Prime had delegated Red Alert’s discipline to the other officers, removing himself from an
already painful situation. That had probably made the biggest impression on the Security Director. Prime’s sadness and disappointment should be weaponized. That stuff could melt sparks. It’d turned Red Alert into a little puddle of regret by indirect exposure alone.

The reason Ratchet had hooked him up to a monitor in this meeting had been because Red Alert offered an open port right away. Nobody could say he hadn’t learned from his mistakes.

That didn’t mean he had to be comfortable talking about them. “Starscream...I have a memory, just one. It didn’t make sense, before. Ratchet -- “ Red Alert almost visibly made himself look up and take responsibility. “Both Ratchet and I assumed it was a hallucination because I was -- I had those. Just a few.” Ashamed, he looked down again. “Less than we’d thought, apparently, but some.”

“Red?” Jazz crouched by Red Alert’s chair, putting his hand on the other Autobot’s arm. The mech knew him too well to see it as making himself smaller and less threatening, but going through the motions did help a bit. “Red Alert, I have to know. What’d he do?”

The mech turned his head away and swallowed as if a foul taste were creeping up his intakes. When he spoke, the words came out small. “He bled the heat off my cerebral wiring.”

For a moment, it didn’t make sense. That sounded too simple. Some sort of engineering problem or medical procedure, not something to make his fellow officer suddenly seem so intensely vulnerable. Jazz squinted up at him, turning that over in his head, and tried to connect it to anything.

“Electricity,” Ratchet supplied quietly, and Jazz glanced under the table at him. “Starscream cabled in and absorbed as much of the excess charge as he could from Red Alert’s generator. I looked for signs of access on his processors,” he nodded toward the Security Director without looking up from Prowl, “and it didn’t click that what I should have found going in was a dead mech. There should have been a melted lump of slag where his CPU is. I assumed -- wrongly, and yes, I’m aware I’m an idiot for assuming anything around that featherless chicken -- that the rate of temperature increase slowed between when I last got a reading off him and when we got him back to the medbay. If it’d stayed the same, anything touching a wire inside his helm would have fried, if not melted down to useless slag and caused more damage as it went. Sockets and insulation would have burnt up. There should have been fire, Jazz, not just some sparks.”

The medic sat back on his heels but kept his neck bent to look somberly at Jazz under the table. “Much of the electricity his generator supplied for his processors, archives, and databanks got stuck in an endless loop powering nothing but the essentials in his head, and that charge had to go somewhere. It started radiating heat. I had a rough idea of what had gone wrong by the time we lost him because I was already getting overheat readings. And under stress, it’s not like our generators dial back. He should have fried faster.”

Jazz’s visor narrowed to a thin blue band, but the hand on Red Alert’s arm stayed gentle. “Red...what d’you remember?” He suddenly found the details of this memory very important. He wanted to know precisely how dead Starscream needed to become the next time Jazz came across him.

The armor under his hand didn’t move, but Red Alert’s vents blasted hot air onto him from strained systems. “I remember him kneeling over me and smiling and. And.” A long hesitation. “And he said, ‘Relax. You’ll enjoy this.’”

The saboteur moved not a gear. He stayed motionless for a full minute, processing that, and then he said, low and quiet, “Red?”
If possible, Red Alert tensed further. All the officers did. Maybe Jazz sounded perfectly calm to those who didn’t know better, but everyone in the room heard the intent to murder in that tone. “What?”

“Don’t take this personally or anything, but I’m going to let go of you now and go hit a wall really hard. Okay?”

Plating rattled faintly as some of the tension drained away. He turned a wobbly smile on the smaller Autobot. “Okay.”

Optimus sighed as one of his top officers went to beat on a defenseless wall. “As much as I wish we could straightforwardly condemn Starscream’s actions -- “

“Can’t do it,” Ratchet muttered. He sounded as if he loathed himself for having to interrupt. “The slimy rust-muncher took advantage of someone who couldn’t stop him, but even if he’d asked, I’d have given the go-ahead. As the medic responsible for Red Alert’s health on Earth, knowing what would happen if Starscream didn’t violate him like that, I’d have called medical necessity and begged him to do it. Exposing his brain module wouldn’t have vented enough heat. Bleeding off the excess electricity is exactly what I did when I had him back in a medbay, only I did it via a powerline instead of a hardline cable.” He wiped a hand down his face, giving the angry black-and-white mech shaking in front of the dented wall a troubled look. “Starscream connected to a mech with no internal access to information to exploit, purely for sake of prolonging the functioning of that mech in order to use him for his own ends. But he didn’t have to. He could have chosen to let him stagger along until he dropped, a lobotomized shell, but he didn’t. Red Alert didn’t have anything left in his head he could take, and he still saved him.”

“He got a few hours more out of his new ally,” Prowl said, factual but tired. This was obviously something the rest of the cadre had discussed before Jazz arrived tonight.

“He’s smart enough to have known the Nevagator would have been his before the last of Red Alert’s mind dribbled into nothing,” Ratchet said back, just as tired. “He got nothing from the connection but a boost of charge and Red Alert’s continued company. Maybe he was desperate for allies. Maybe he wanted the leverage for later. We don’t know why he did it, Prowl. All we know is what we got out of a fractured memory file.”

Jazz’s hands hurt. He wanted so badly to wrap them around Starscream’s throat and squeeze. “Let me get this straight. He raped Red,” in front of him, the Security Director flinched down further in his seat and went on pretending he wasn’t being talked about, “and saved him. We owe him as much as we hate him for this slag?!”

“Like I said,” Ratchet said dryly, “the next time I see him, I’m going to punch him out and then do my best to interface him unconscious again once he wakes up. He couldn’t have gotten me into a more complicated knot of ethics if he’d tried.”

“Rusted backstabber probably did,” Ironhide put in.

The medic fiddled with a cable, unplugging it and sliding in another. Ironhide crouched lower, apparently immersed in whatever the change had just brought up. Ratchet backed away a bit to give him room, looked over at Jazz again, and shrugged. “That wouldn’t surprise me. He’s the most manipulative ball of political grease that’s ever picked up a gun.”

“I know nobody wants me to point this out, but technically? He did what he promised,” Wheeljack said without turning to face the table. “There are huge gaps in the readings, of course, but from what we recovered from system logs, there was no pain. Any other patient suffering a cerebral hardware
meltdown would show neural receptors off the chart from direct contact or overcharge. Red’s sensor system wasn’t blocked. No disconnect from physical sensation, or even...well, everything should have hurt more, in fact. I’m not sure he could have sorted out his own systems enough to override anything.”

Jazz flexed his hands and tried to dwell on the pain of battered knuckles instead of what he was feeling. There was no reason for this sense of betrayal. Logically, Starscream hadn’t changed in the last two orns. Uncovering some background on Vos and the Seeker himself didn’t erase the fact that Starscream was a treasonous bastard. He knew that. Using Red Alert this way shouldn’t make Jazz any angrier than the times he’d pulled Mirage out of Vortex’s clutches, violent echoes from a hasty force-download still in the spy’s head. The cease-fire was recent, and they’d all done inexcusable things during the war. Finding out that Starscream’s personal list of war crimes had a few more annotations than he’d known about a breem ago shouldn’t infuriate Jazz this way.

That didn’t change the fact that he wanted to find a copy of the cease-fire and feed it to the Air Commander with his fist still attached. Primus, he was so slagging angry.

A detached part of his mind watched the rage grow, analyzing it. Interesting. Going deep cover on a long-term mission to infiltrate Vos had begun to influence his emotions despite all logic. He had an inexplicable attachment to Starscream, now, and the betrayal of that unreasonable sense of closeness hurt. He made a note for his baseline personality to keep perspective.

He shook the fury off enough to speak. “Red didn’t look like he was in pain.” Despite his dead voice and borderline hostile glare across the table at Wheeljack’s back, it was a question.

Ratchet looked up. Weary as the medic seemed, the slow droop of Wheeljack’s shoulders showed more exhaustion yet. Jazz had to wonder how long they had been combing over and over the data. He doubted it was physical tiredness so much as sheer emotional strain. They were good at partitioning themselves behind professional walls, but that kind of data was always difficult to handle. The closer the people involved, the harder it was to handle events objectively. Red Alert seemed to be trying to disappear into the table. Even at one step removed, viewing a memory as a file from the outside, it had to be a personal ordeal for the Security Director as well as a professional nightmare. It likely hadn’t been any more fun for the mechs forcing him to relive it.

“Aside from the assorted surges that caused the sparking we saw,” Ratchet reported quietly, “by our calculations, the glitch stayed under dangerous levels despite constant build-up. Starscream must have kept it under control through repeated...treatment up until the last attack, when he was forced to use his null-ray and knocked the generator temporarily offline. Back-up batteries supplied far less power but supplied it through different connections, and the shot brought Red Alert’s lock-away processor up into control, finally.”

“No pain,” Wheeljack agreed, just as quiet. “And from the spotty receptor records, the evidence suggests that he, ah. Not an overload, of course, because that would have required him to build the charge past the point it already was at, and that would have melted everything, but think of it like an extended afterglow. The part right after an overload when the charge evens out between you and your partner, ebbing down in controlled wa -- “

“Please stop,” Red Alert said in a shade above a whisper. Wheeljack’s vocalizer clicked off immediately, but the Security Director’s voice could still barely be heard. “Please just...stop. I do not think rehashing this is -- is this necessary?” His helm twitched, as if he’d wanted to turn and appeal to the Prime but stopped himself. “The physical details are not important right now.”

“They’re not.” Nothing else had to be said. Wheeljack had already turned, one hand extended and guilt clear in his optics. Optimus Prime caught his gaze and shook his head before the engineer could
say anything, and Wheeljack’s audio indicators lit a dim violet in apology as he stopped himself from reaching out to Red Alert. Optimus held his gaze. “I’m deeply sorry that we have to bring this up at all, Red Alert,” their leader apologized, engine rumbling under his soothing tone.

If Optimus hadn’t been focused on Wheeljack at that moment, he might have seen the miserable flinch from Red Alert. That sentence would have ended differently before Earth and the Nevagator. Jazz and Blaster exchanged a regretful look. For all their Prime’s notoriously soft spark, he forgave far more easily than he forgot. They honestly couldn’t tell at this point why he avoided referring to Red Alert the way he did the rest of the officer cadre. It could have been because he wanted to avoid pressuring the touchy mech, or because he truly didn’t believe Red Alert to be a close friend any longer. Either way, the miniscule hesitation before substituting Red Alert’s name instead of a habitual ‘my friend’ stood out like a stop sign between them.

Jazz had the clearance to register a blip on the communication network signaling that the Prime had opened a secure channel to Wheeljack. Whether or not he believed Red Alert regarded him as a friend, Optimus would still defend him. The engineer was in for a lecture from the Prime about letting scientific fascination overwhelm tact. Again.

Well, that wasn’t new. Wheeljack had a lifetime supply of lectures on social awareness stored up to recycle for those times when the Dinobots got unruly. The flavor of talking-to directed toward him tended to be titled things like ‘The World Is Not A Test Subject’ and ‘Don’t Experiment On Anybody Without Waivers Signed By All And Sundry, No Seriously, Not Even On Yourself.’ The latter came out of Medical personnel, most of the time at high volume and because he’d just been injured as a result of ignoring the previous medic who’d lectured him. He’d done pretty well at tailoring those lectures into educational series he half-jokingly called ‘Don’t Eat Fellow Autobots’ and ‘Other People Have Feelings, Too.’

Optimus Prime did his own work helping the Dinobots mature. He hadn’t gotten through to Grimlock only by fighting him to a stand-still. Wheeljack’s optics dropped, unable to meet his gaze anymore. Their leader was strong, but his power came from the strength of his convictions, not just his body. That was never more obvious than when he protected someone.

Red Alert shook his head, making himself sit up straight even as Wheeljack mutely went back to helping Prowl. “Don’t apologize. It’s…important information.” There was a pause while he inhaled and pushed the stale air out slowly. His hands moved restlessly over the in-set console screen on the table, pulling up windows to study. It was reminiscent of someone picking up scattered papers and tapping them straight to redirect the conversation back to business. It was a painfully transparent attempt to gloss over the personal side of the Nevagator incident. “What I find to be the most important part is that it throws Acid Storm’s song-and-dance about consent right out the airlock. Between force-downloading prisoners and Starscream helping himself to my cables, I think we can all agree that this courting business isn’t about a fear of hardlining. If they were so paranoid,” bad word choice, but he covered his wince well, “about crossing cables, then Starscream wouldn’t have done it with me. Insane as I might have been at the time, he couldn’t have known until he jacked in that I wasn’t about to hack him. This supposed fear the Decepticons hold for hardline interfacing doesn’t match up with that.”

They went with the distraction, because dwelling on things wouldn’t help him right now. Blaster leaned back in his chair and wavered his hand in midair at the Security Director while Optimus stood up straight and looked thoughtful. “Ya got a point,” the Comm. Officer said, “but you got chunks of memory missing. Could be that you’re missin’ the whole contract process beforehand.” He pulled a face. “Probably for the best, ‘cause from what we’ve put together? Tactile negotiation’s probably about settin’ up a contract for stuff. You don’t wanna remember being pawed at by -- nevermind.”
A quick reset of his vocalizer, and Blaster pushed on before Red Alert could do more than get a pinched, uneasy look. “Anyway, contracts look to be sealed by hardlining. I’m thinkin’ the fear of hardline’s because they don’t do it casually, y’know? It’s like signing a deal is for us. We do all the negotiating, but we don’t do it with our hands, if ya follow me. But we don’t put our names on the line without thinkin’ hard and heavy on the consequences, am I right? The ‘Cons are demandin’ something more than just promises made and a signature. We give our word and some assurances if stuff goes wonky. They cable in, like some kinda lie detector. Dunno if anything we find’s gonna contradict me,” he shot an inquiring look at Jazz, “but the negotiations probably include how much access jacking in gives. The limitations have got to be hardcore.”

Jazz shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know.” No, wait, he did know something. “We sure haven’t seen Decepticons crossing cables all that often. If it’s not done by a medic or an interrogator, I can’t readily pull up any reports from my operatives about two ‘Cons doing anything but clanging armor. I know I’ve got some, but it’s like it just doesn’t exist over on the Decepticon side. They just don’t do it without war dictating it, or -- bolt me.” One dented hand went up to rub at a helm projection. “Run with this for a second. We thought it was a trust thing, but it might be a terminology issue. We’re equating fear of a frag with fear of hardlining, but I keep getting the feeling we’re missing what the Decepticons are really referring to, here. Starscream referred to ‘the frag’ being far off in our future, but he and Acid Storm haven’t made a distinction between hardline or tactile when using the word with me. It’s all been context I’ve been getting my interpretation from. Now think about that. If his current trine -- er, duo? -- contract doesn’t expire until the treaty officially ends the war, then he’s talking about a hardline interface to seal a contract between us.”

“Which hasn’t stopped him from attempting to overload you via tactile.” Optimus folded his arms and nodded. “Megatron has not spelled it out that way, but yes. I agree. The terminology we use is unclear. When we refer to interfacing...” Leaving the sentence hanging, he looked over to the cluster of specialists around Prowl.

“Almost always cables,” Ironhide finished for him. The older Autobot grunted as he heaved up to his feet after disconnecting from Prowl at last. “Yeah, there’s confusion waiting t’ happen there. The ‘Cons don’t say it’s ‘facing when they’re talking about cables?”

Blaster and Jazz wore identical expressions as their attention went internal to run searches.

At the table, Red Alert’s hands worked faster at the console. “Ratchet, you were involved in the last hostage situation on Earth. I apologize for pulling up what must be bad memories -- “

“I’ll cope.” Ratchet’s hands didn’t falter as they unhooked Prowl from monitor wires. The wire were then coiled them up to store in his forearms and side hatches. “Fresh situations are the best for analysis. I know it, you know it. Do it.”

The Security Director nodded shortly and looked up the table at Blaster. The lag in his speech made his words come out slower and more slurred than his normal crisp efficiency, but he was no less alert for the repair lag. “How does the linguistic difference in the shift from NeoCybex to English affect hostile phrasing cross-referenced with sexual connotations?”

“Don’t ask for much, do ya?” the communication specialist muttered, but he’d already taken over the entire end of the table for running the analysis on multiple screens. “Ya want it done right, I’m gonna have to yank everything from Earth to compare, later. Spot-check on Ratchet’s word-by-word’s pullin’ up Vortex spoutin’ some f-words, the Stunties sayin’ it every other sentence, aaaaaand…” He went silent, optics flickering rapidly as he rescanned the data. “One use of ‘mindfuck’ in reference to force-downloading, two more referrin’ to how the rest of us were gonna react to Ratch’ gettin’ captured. A buncha ‘frag’s that’re Vortex asking Ratchet to agree -- buff my aft if that don’t make
more sense in context now -- but Soundwave’s transmitted orders called the interrogation a
‘download.’"

“Odd that ‘fuck’ wasn’t used to talk about tactile interfacing, if that’s what Vortex wanted from him.
But slang use denotes minimal difference between tactile and hardline, language-wise. Intent?” Red
Alert was doing his own scan series, Jazz saw when he approached the table.

“Can’t tell. Judging a whole faction’s language use by a mech whose specialty is messing with our
heads ain’t kosher.” Blaster drummed his fingers on the table. “A frag’s a frag, but not if you’re
Vortex. Vortex frags you, we already know there’s gonna be cables involved. He’s a walking
mindfrag.”

“A frag’s not a frag,” Ratchet disagreed, taking his seat again as Prowl gingerly resettled into his
own. “I say ‘frag,’ I generally mean cables. When Vortex said it to me, I genuinely believe that he
was referring to tactile.” He didn’t look distressed by remembering it. He frowned, but it seemed to
be directed at the current discussion instead of past events. “He was already forcing open an access
gate in my head. Even if he was asking in order to mock me, there had to be miscommunication
going on, there. He wanted me to agree to a tactile, er, interfacing, but if he and I had been thinking
of the same thing, it would have made a lot more sense. He would have clarified what exactly he
meant if he’d realized I didn’t understand on top of not wanting to.” He stopped for a second, going
over what he’d just said, and shook his head. “The terminology is confusing.”

“‘Fucking’ would’ve been a better English word,” Ironhide said as he hauled his seat back into place
beside Red Alert. “More physical.”

“Except that it’s not used exclusively for physical sex any more than ‘frag’ is, not anymore. It’s
become slang for far more than bodily intimacy,” Ratchet countered. “The reason we,” he gestured
around the table, “substituted ‘fragging’ for ‘fucking’ in English was the computer correlations make
it a good equivalent with the sexual overtones of the words, along with some of the crudity of slang.
Although not to the same degree?”

Blaster shook his head when the medic looked to his expertise. “English arbitrarily created a list of
censored words. Sorta a media plus religion plus politics thing, from what I saw. That’s what put
crude overtones on historically common words. ‘Frag’ doesn’t have that ‘cause it’s an English word
for computers that we yoinked for interfacing. Don’t think the humans ever quite caught on to th’
fact we were talking ‘bout us gettin’ it on. They just thought...they just…” His face went utterly
blank for a moment.

“What?” Optimus had been slowly making his way toward the opposite end of the table, but he
stopped when Blaster trailed off. “What is it?”

“Oh.” Red Alert was looking down at a surveillance file Blaster had just pinged over to his screen. “I
remember that. Chip Chase once asked First Aid what exactly we meant when we said ‘frag.’ He
was concerned we were, ah, cursing in front of Daniel Witwicky.”

“Thought it was weird at the time because puttin’ a kid in the middle of Autobot City during a war
didn’t worry anybody,” Blaster said, “but Primus help us if we used bad language in front of him.”

They all stopped to absorb that strangeness. Spike and Carly Witwicky had a unique set of standards
for humans. It came from spending their formative teenage years in the middle of a galactic war, Jazz
thought.

“How’d First Aid explain it?” he asked. He couldn’t remember anything passing his inbox about
this, so it must have been handled without a fuss.
Blaster and Red Alert looked at each other, dawning comprehension meeting apprehension on both sides of the look. “Computer terminology,” Blaster said. “Hardline interfacing’s the only version the humans know, because it’s the only one they’ve ever had exposure to, via talkin’ with us. Never once crossed my mind to say something ‘bout, uh, any way else. I just -- well, kinda smacked me just now that if they’d known fraggin’ can refer to us having sex times they can relate to, we’d have offended a lotta people on Earth. Anything referring explicitly to sex how they know the act is kinda taboo.” He reset his optics twice, unsettled. “Er...not that different than us, really. Just got a weirdly human take on it.”

“It’s our default to refer exclusively to hardline interfacing when we speak of interfacing at all.” Red Alert’s optics were a troubled navy blue. “But if the Decepticons were using the same words to refer to their own standard practices, we know now that they meant tactile interfacing.”

“Why didn’t the ‘Cons pick ‘fuck’ instead of ‘frag,’ then?” Ironhide’s face screwed up in frustration. “Can’t be using the same words in NeoCybex. Right?”

“Nope. They are. Maybe it was the English connotations, or maybe they picked it up from us, but Soundwave’s workin’ from the same NeoCybex I use.” Blaster shrugged apologetically when the red mech threw up his hands in exasperated frustration. “NeoCybex translation comes through pretty equal, or we’d have picked up that we’re talkin’ about different things way before this. We,” meaning the Autobots, “toss the same words around in NeoCybex and English that the ‘Cons do, but we almost always mean hardline.”

“Right,” Ratchet picked up, turning back to Ironhide. “NeoCybex doesn’t have a word with the physical ancestor ‘fuck’ does, but it covers most of the slang meanings despite that.” His voice dropped to a mutter. “When did NeoCybex become standardized? I wonder if anyone knows if Primal Vernacular had different meanings for it.” He shook his head and raised his voice back to normal again. “I might be wrong, however. If Vos’ local dialect used the same word to exclusively the physical side of interfacing, that could have passed unnoticed outside the city-state. Regardless of that, when we talk about fragging now, it’s entirely possible to be referring to tactile or hardline by the same word.”

“It’s got different usage dependin’ on just where it goes in the sentence,” Blaster added dryly. “Trust me, I can have whole conversations with Kup usin’ nothing but different intonations on the word. We all know how to use it depending on what we mean, yeah?” He grinned. “Any grunt in the ranks knows ya don’t say it certain ways to a superior officer unless y’want insubordination slapped on your record.” Ironhide, already reluctantly smiling at the reminder of Kup’s many and varied uses of the word, barked a laugh. “It wouldn’t surprise me at all if mechs used it differently dependin’ on where they came from back before slag hit the fan.”

“We are speaking the same words but speaking entirely different languages,” Prowl said, voice muffled by the way he held his face in his hands. The whirr of his fans cooling his overworked processors could be heard across the table. “That is fascinating, but what does it have to do with the topic at hand?”

Jazz had so many different information threads running right now he wasn’t sure what the topic was anymore. “We need Blaster and Soundwave to go over the treaty tomorrow, together,” he said firmly. The Communication Officer gave him a betrayed look. “Yeah, I know, but we need to get this out in the open with them right away. I doubt they understand our version of the language any more than we get theirs, and pretending otherwise is gonna bust us.”

Prowl looked up, optics narrow, but a hand on his arm forestalled a protest. “This is not warfare,” Optimus Prime said gently. “This is not an advantage to be held in reserve, but a potential pitfall to
peace. If we are to ever reach an understanding, there must be open communication.”

The tactician’s lips set in an unhappy line, but he subsided.

It’d given Jazz the time to backtrack to what he’d been thinking of before fucking derailed everything. He leaned a hip against the table and crossed his left arm under his bumper to support the opposite elbow. His hand splayed open as he spoke to Prowl in particular, the others in general. “What all this has to do with what we were talking about is that we keep using the words without knowing what the actual definition is. Acid Storm talked big about consent, yeah.” He nodded to Red Alert. “But we don’t know what consent is to them. Does it mean just getting a ‘yes’ even if it’s coerced,” he nodded to Optimus this time, and the Prime shifted uncomfortably, “or from someone who can’t make an informed decision?” Red Alert met his visor steadily. Jazz was glad the discussion seemed to have stabilized him again. “Mechs, we don’t know what ‘facing means to them. How can we know what their definition of consent is?”

That silenced the room. Optimus went still. Ironhide leaned back in his seat, scowling, while Prowl looked down at the table as if trying to center himself. Ratchet pushed up out of his seat abruptly and rounded the table to start work on Red Alert’s open helm once more. Wheeljack scooted his chair out of the way as he went, and Blaster’s neck turned to keep track of him.

Jazz pushed off the table, stepping out of the way and back toward the wall he’d beat up. “Look. I had two points, once upon a time.” Back before he and Prowl had squared off and things had gotten heated. Medical emergency and discussion had cut off his second point, but now he returned to it, pulling in the fingers of his free hand and finally ticking off a second finger. “I’ve had it confirmed from three different Decepticons that Vortex and Skywarp are apparently under lockdown. No interfacing unless it’s approved. Didn’t think of it at the time ‘cause of what was going down around me, but that makes me wonder what the legal definition of rape is over on there. They’re so freaked out by showing cables that they claim they gotta negotiate contracts, but how exactly does somebody define rape when you’re down to touching? We define it as, what, jack and port, right?” He glanced to Prowl even though he knew most of the legalities himself. He wanted to make sure people were following him. Prowl was frowning, but that didn’t meant anything significant. Jazz was frowning. “But think about that. That’s by our definition of interfacing alone.”

Blaster winced, his own words coming back to haunt him all over again. “A frag’s not a frag.”

“Not when we’re dead set on defining it as hardline or ‘Eww, only perverts do that,’” Jazz pitched his voice into a nasal whine. He dropped the mocking tone for a dead serious one. “We’ve had whole vorn-long trial cases about somebody sayin’ it was asked for after a night getting overcharged, or force-downloads we can’t prove, and -- frag, mechs! The stigma on rape’s so bad because of the legal hang-ups, who knows how many aren’t getting reported? Add in our code-level reaction to tactile ‘facing, and we’ve made reporting anything gone wrong during anything but hardline an invitation to a reprimand, not help. We don’t have a single law in place covering lack of consent in tactile fragging!”

Ratchet’s hands stopped still as stone, fingers in Red Alert’s helm. “That can’t be right.”

Jazz paced around to the other side of the room in order to see the medic’s face as he said, “It’s implied in our definition of interfacing, Ratchet. You want to define ‘rape’ to a court, it’s jack and port, and that’s it. Nothing else really registers as rape to us. Near as I can tell, we’ve got P.O.W. guidelines sayin’ hands off the ‘Cons, and rules of conduct covering molestation. If something went way beyond molestation into -- oh, fragging Pit.” Jazz winced in sync with Wheeljack, both of their shoulders jerking as their minds went the same place.
“How far does molestation have to go before it’s considered rape? We don’t even know,” the inventor said, twisting in his seat to look back at him. His vocal indicators were a subdued grey. “The Decepticons probably have the legalities down because tactile’s how they define their version of fragging. But we don’t.”

“Right. And if we’re shaming anyone who gets an overload any way but hardline by saying it’s wrong an’ perverted, we’re already telling the victims that they’re gonna have a heap of shame dumped on them for coming forward, and even if they do…Primus.” Jazz rubbed the bottom edge of his visor tiredly. “Can’t press anything harsher than molestation. You know how easy it is to fight a molestation charge. Intent of the accused is a valid defense. The ‘But he liked it!’ argument still makes me hesitate, and I know better!”

Prowl’s helm rose, and his optics were cautious. Ratchet had drastically slowed the absorption of new data into his base structure, but he could pick parts of the conversation apart without trying to take in everything. “Consent in tactile interfacing is slippery.”

“Is it?” Jazz challenged immediately. Because what he’d seen tonight didn’t support that statement. Wondering about consent had led to confused Decepticons who didn’t understand why taking advantage of someone was even a risk. Acid Storm could have been playing him for a fool, but thinking about a society where the fear of rape didn’t exist brought up all kinds of questions about the society he currently lived in. Whether or not the Decepticons based their fragging -- either kind -- on consent, it had opened Jazz’s visor to the fact that the Autobots didn’t.

There was absolutely no communication about this as far back as he could remember. There was only silence, and fear.

Prowl reset his optics at him, opened his mouth, and closed it again into a tight frown. His doors hiked up into a tense V behind him. “What do you mean?” he asked after a moment of reviewing his statement. Tacticians always wanted more information, and despite his distaste for the topic, Prowl knew Jazz had information he needed.

“I mean that our definition hasn’t stretched to actually lay out what consent means, and our prejudice has made us look at that lack as a moral grey area instead of a legal gap that we should have noticed before now,” Jazz said. “Yes is yes, no is no. We’ve got to have the same definition of that, but we’ve never applied that black-and-white moral structure to define where molestation becomes rape. We actively avoid most of the legal gaps around molestation, for Primus’ sake! If it’s tactile, we go hands-off and try not to think about it, or we condemn it. We do everything we can to avoid the issue instead of actually dealing with the slag it dredges up.” He swept the others with a hard look. “You guys telling me you’re okay with the bad mojo a molestation charge digs up? What’s your first thought, right here an’ now?”

“Because surely he could have fought back if he didn’t like it,” Wheeljack murmured. “It was just taken out of context. We were only rough-housing. My hand slipped.”

“He’s just wakin’ up after recharge with a cargobay crammed with regrets,” Ironhide grated. “He was sure into it at the time, sir. Anyway, we were just touching. No harm in a few touches.”

“He didn’t say ‘stop,’” the Prime contributed softly. “I wonder,” he said even more quietly, “how many ever said ‘start.’” The part of Jazz’s briefing packet on explicit communication must have grabbed his attention. No wonder, if Megatron had been chasing him around tables embarrassing him with attempts to open conversations about interfacing.

Red Alert lifted his head, one optic offline where Ratchet had cut the power to that side of his cranial
cavity in order to operate. Full repair lag made his speech slur where one side of his face didn’t cooperate. “I can make it worse. 72% of molestation charges are dropped in favor of minor assault charges because prosecution consuls have a standard script explaining the difficulty of defending a victim in the optics of a jury of peers pre-disposed to blame sexual misconduct on the mech who may have invited the accused to take liberties. The dropped charges are rated as a lesser offense but more likely to end in a conviction. Offenders usually escape with a single shift of punishment detail and an assault tickmark on their records.”

“I’m almost afraid t’ ask how you know that,” Ironhide asked, turning to look at him warily. Ratchet paused to give the Security Director a quizzical look as well.

“Security absorbed judicial proceedings when civil courts collapsed,” Red Alert slurred. “Individual military courts are assembled by a ranking officer according to the Military Judge Advocate Guidelines, but the Code of Interplanetary Conflict mandates a central tracking system for the Autobots as a whole. Security keeps the history of charges as part of the neutral archive of disciplinary records, although I haven’t uploaded them to the archive itself in millions of years due to security concerns.” Namely, that Soundwave would hack the archive and mine it for information on Autobot criminal charges. That would expose too many weaknesses. Someone as rightly suspicious as Red Alert couldn’t allow that, Galactic Council mandates or not. “I have the standard scripts on file. It hadn’t occurred to me to read them until now.”

Ratchet scowled. “That’s how you fried this ‘bank, isn’t it? You brought up every rusted record on file at once and pushed your capacitor over its limits.”

“It’s important!” sounded much less convincing when Red Alert couldn’t even control half his face. “The number of molestation charges over the course of the war -- “

“No wonder you blew,” the medic cut him off with a scowl directed at the problem, not at the Security Director himself. “At least tell me you found what you were looking for.”

The pause before Red Alert replied was not reassuring. “I did. 72% of the charges are dropped to minor assault after advice from the assigned legal consul, because assault doesn’t involve testifying in front of a jury of peers. In molestation cases, the victim must be available for cross-examination. The defense is allowed to question the mental and physical state of the victim in front of the jury, and casting doubt on whether or not the victim ‘asked for it’ is a legitimate defense.” The working corner of his mouth turned down further. “Only 51% of the charges pressed through as molestation ended in a guilty verdict. 36% were dropped by the victim or dismissed after out-of-court settlement of the dispute. 3% were found fraudulent. The rest vary, but overall, there is a 43% return rate of the accused pressing charges for slander afterward just in cases of molestation charges.” He grimaced as the officers made small noises of surprise and disbelief. “Once a charge is dismissed or dropped to a different charge, that change can be used as proof of slander. Even those who changed the charges to assault suffered backlash for the original charges. Overall, victims have a 78% punishment rate unless they’re one of the lucky 51% of the 28% who managed to win a guilty verdict.”

Jazz’s vision swam, and he fumbled his way to a chair to sit down before he dropped. Prowl’s door brushed against his shoulder, but it was Wheeljack who met his shocked look with one of his own. He’d theorized it was bad, speculating off of what he’d observed and what he could recall from hearsay, working with his operatives, and personal experience on juries. He just --

He hadn’t known it was this bad.

Red Alert lowered his head slowly, ignoring Ratchet trying to stop him. “All molestation charges -- even dropped -- are recorded by my division. Unless a guilty verdict was reached, the charges are
wiped from personnel records every 20 vorns, but the case records stays in Security. I have the
history of dropped charges for throughout the course of the war.”

“I’ll have to run a better search later, but…” His forehelm gently met the tabletop, and Ratchet’s
professional mask showed a hint of worry as his fingers suddenly sped a bit faster. “Charges being
raised at all are a blaring sign of something wrong, even if the criminal conviction of rape isn’t
attached. There’s no way it’s just ignorance about boundaries and questionable consent, or every
offense would be a mech’s last as he learned not to do that again.” He rolled his head enough to look
dully across the table at Jazz. “So why is my search returning the same mechs repeat offending over
and over again?”

Appalled silence filled the briefing room.

“Rape is about power,” Ratchet said quietly into it, optics down and words paced in a way that made
Jazz think he was expecting someone to contradict him. Who? “Hardline interface enforces equality
between the people involved. Corrupting that equality is meant to take power over someone else,
whether it’s to cause pain, take data, or siphon pleasure. Tactile rape can’t be that much different.”

“Processors are involved in the pleasure. We know that.” Wheeljack’s optics were unfocused,
seeming to track down thoughts. “But the claim of being unable to stop would be impossible to
verify after the fact. Overwhelming the processor with physical sensation is as possible with pleasure
as it is pain.” The fine mechanisms operating the blast covers around his optics screwed taut. “But
that doesn’t make sense. Pleasure’s not a totally mental choice, but cooperation with it is. If it’s
forced on me, my body will cooperate no matter what my mind says, but that makes me the victim. If
I’m the one inflicting it on someone else, then why do I keep returning to the idea that being led on
or teased is a legitimate reason for..? Oh, this is a slagging mess. Hold on, I’ve got to sort this out.”
The inventor’s optics went blank as he turned inward.

That was a chilling thought. Jazz followed Wheeljack’s train of thought and was unsettled by his
initial agreement. They weren’t mere machines. The idea that rape was a natural function caused by
the body overcoming the mind didn’t add up, so why did his processors so quickly agree that consent
was implied by someone flirting or teasing past some sort of nebulous point of no return? His visor
dimmed to a confounded blue as he tried to track down the logic behind that.

Blaster’s optics did the same, but he made a discombobulated sound consisting of three separate
opening notes from popular songs. “Data assessment is in high gear, but my head’s in slo mo,” the
mech complained.

“Think that’s bad? I can top it,” Ironhide said heavily. “I can. Frag if I want to, but I can. I just
thought about what I’d’ve thought if Screamer had gone through with it and ‘faced Jazz out there.”
The officers who weren’t resetting their processors at the moment looked at him, and he scowled
right back. “Coulda happened.”

“It could have,” Jazz admitted readily. “I’d have let it, if it’d have helped.”

“Right. And what about Ratch’?” Ratchet shot him a glare. The Weapons Specialist shrugged. “You
were in a room full-a Constructicons. It was gonna happen. I’m just thinkin’ what I would’ve
thought, an’ that’s got me thinking ‘bout -- well, how I’d’ve handled it before. What would I say if,
say, Sideswipe came to me complaining that someone’s chasing his tires and won’t leave him
alone?” He looked up and met their optics one by one, his own dark and unhappy. “Go on. Imagine
it happening.”

“You’re a big mech,” Blaster laughed, but it wasn’t the kind of laugh that lit a room. It was the kind
of laugh that waited in dark corners to mug someone. “Take care of it yourself. Just don’t get
caught.”

The older red Autobot looked down the table. “Yeah, that. Or tell him to stop putting himself in the kind of situations where someone could do that to him.”

It took a moment to sink in. Almost a minute total, as even Optimus Prime waited for Ironhide finish his thought.

But the thought was finished. That was the thought. *That was the thought.*

It was so starkly horrible because it was normal. That made it hurt more when the realization about it hit.

“What, what?” Jazz had to shake his head as that one processed. Because it made sense right until he thought about it. Really thought about it, in the context of sudden awareness of repeat offenders and how the Autobots’ own laws had slapped them on the wrist while telling the victims to be quiet by punishing them for speaking up. They weren’t teaching mechs not to molest or rape. They were telling the victims not to be victimized. Responsibility for the crime wasn’t being put on the on the criminals. “Wait, what?”

Ratchet started murmuring in a dead voice that chilled Jazz’s tanks. “Don’t walk alone when you’re overcharged. Don’t drink too much, and don’t take high grade from strangers. Don’t polish your windows if you’re going downtown. Stay in the group. Look good, but not too good. Don’t look like you’re asking for it. Don’t buy the expensive wax unless you’re ready to slap hands away all night. Lock your doors when you go out, and don’t transform out of altmode to unlock it unless the street’s clear. Don’t go anywhere on that street; you’re practically advertising you’re easy if you go down there. Get in the other lane if someone rides your bumper too long. Get off the street if they follow you, and find a group to join. Always tell your friends when you’re going out, and when you plan on coming back. Keep your comm. on the inside of your forearms in case something happens.”

It’d become some kind of chant, the medic’s volume rising. “Stop walking down the back alleys. You were asking for it getting your panels detailed in those colors. Why would you highlight yourself with that color if you didn’t want it touched? No permanent harm, just some groping and grinding. You’ll be fine with a wash and a good recharge. It’s not like it went hardline.”

Optimus was pressed back in his chair, hands flat on the table and optics wide. “That’s…no. No!”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t call the Enforcers, but do you really want to put yourself through that?” Ratchet bulldozed right over him. “They’re going to make a big deal of things, and you don’t have much evidence. Paint transfers aren’t proof. A system log’s going to show you were riled up, too. You should have walked away before it got that hot and heavy. Why were you messing around like that, anyway? You obviously know him well enough that I doubt this is the first time you two have done this; why was this time any different? Did you two have a fight? You’re just emotional. Give it some time, and you’ll calm down. You’re just playing hard to get. Your friend says the guy just put his arms around you a couple times; either you’re lying, or he is. Who are the Enforcers going to believe with a witness there saying you didn’t put up a fight? You shouldn’t have started what you couldn’t finish.”

“Ratchet. Ratchet, what -- “ Across the table from the medic steadily spouting familiar phrases, Jazz shook his head violently. “Ratchet, c’mon, stop. Stop.”

The Chief Medical Officer did, but when he looked up from locking Red Alert’s helm panels shut, his optics were strange. The blue had shadows under the optic sensor lights and the focusing rings were of slightly different sizes. It looked like he was possessed. Haunted. “That’s just from when I worked in Iacon Central’s E.R. before the war. How long have I been blaming the victim?” He
bowed his head. “What are we going to say to the ranks when Autobots start coming forward saying they were taken advantage of according to the definition of a crime we don’t even recognize? Here we are condemning the Decepticons, but we’re just beginning to understand that we’ve been passing judgment on our own victims for millions of years. We have no right say scrap about what the Decepticons consider consent and rape. We don’t have the moral high ground, here. We’re the monsters.”

Ironhide laid his hands flat on the table and looked at them as if wondering what good their strength did him here. Optimus Prime seemed stricken, remorse for what he’d never before seen right before his optics crashing in on him. Jazz drew in a shuddering vent, while Wheeljack put an elbow on the table and pressed the fingers of his hand against his forehelm. At the end of the table, Blaster stared blankly at the screen in front of him like he hoped answers would appear out of nowhere. Red Alert lifted his helm off the table and looked up at Ratchet, repair lag processing out as systems integrated at last, but the medic had turned his face away from the rest of the officers. A furious kind of shame stood out from him like a cloud.

Into the stunned, wounded silence, Prowl spoke. “We are not monsters,” he said, optics as level as his voice. “Monsters might realize their errors, but they would not seek to remedy them. We are Autobots. We have the ‘moral high ground’ by what we stand for, even if we cannot always live up to our own expectations.” Optimus and Ratchet jolted, but the medic standing beside Red Alert refused to face Prowl. The Prime, however, did, and Prowl held out a hand to his commander in open appeal. “I…admit that I am not in complete agreement with everything that has been said, but I do agree that my mindset is compromised. I will provide a more objective perspective on this meeting once my information set architecture and logic algorithms are in alignment for information analysis. What I can tell even without my tactical processors fully online is that this is a pivotal moment for your personal beliefs, sir. We fight for your Cause, because we follow you as Matrix Bearer, leader, and the embodiment of what we wish we ourselves could be. You are an ideal,” he said without appearing to notice that he’d exchanged his normally impassive mien for a frank honesty. The praise presented as fact had his Prime squirming, optics wide. “You are what we fight for, who we want to be like, and we want you to be proud of us. The Autobots, and by extension Cybertron, reflect your image. We are not monsters, because you are not a monster. I do not need a fully operational battle computer to know that.”

“Whoa,” Jazz said, so far under his breath only Wheeljack could hear, and the inventor just nodded his own astonishment in response.

“We have the moral high ground,” Prowl continued, hand still outstretched to the Prime he believed so fiercely in, “because of you. You value life above all else. You would never condone abuse. You value the lives of even the Decepticons.” A rueful grin interrupted the tactician’s earnest expression for a moment. “As frustrating as that can be for the rest of us,” Ironhide snorted wordless agreement, “it is a part of who you are, and we admire your refusal to compromise. We value life because you do. Your beliefs and our trust in them are what drive this attempt at peace. We have our own hopes, but at spark, every Autobot abides by the cease-fire because we fear disappointing you.”

Optimus reset his optics. “I…Prowl, I don’t know what to say. I’m humbled by your faith in me.”

His Second’s smile was small but sincere. “Then look at us, sir, and tell us that you see monsters in your reflection.”

The Prime looked down the table, and Jazz had a sudden impulse to stand and snap to attention. Beside him, Wheeljack must have felt a similar urge. The inventor straightened in his seat instead, and the rest of the table followed his example. Ratchet, the only one already standing, did come to attention, finally turning back to face the others. The officers pinned their gazes to a point just above
their commander’s helm and awaited judgment for their sins.

Somber blue optics studied them. The weight of their Prime’s judgment made Jazz quail inside his armor, and the truth of Prowl’s words hit hard. The Prime’s disappointment and sadness carried such an impact among the Autobots because he was more than their superior officer. He was...he was the Autobot Cause, and -- for Jazz at least -- a personal hero. Those optics carried all of the authority of an official trial and meant more to Jazz than any jury’s opinion of him.

His spark cringed at the thought of Optimus looking at him and judging himself by such a tarnished mirror. Jazz wasn’t the Head of Special Operations because he was a hero. None of them had clean hands after millions of years of war, but he didn’t have a clean spot left.

Maybe Optimus’ optics lingered on him an extra second because of that, but maybe not. The Prime turned his heavy gaze on the black-and-white mech beside him and sighed. “No.”

“Sir?”

A large hand reached out to grasp Prowl’s outstretched hand. “No, I don’t see monsters. I see ignorance, my friend, but that can change. That must change, even if facing our faults is difficult. Learning our wrongdoings will not be easy, and education may be painful -- but it’s necessary.”

Ratchet shivered, and Jazz looked across the table in time to see half a dozen emotions flash across the medic’s face before he regained control. Hope was among them.

Nail him to the floor if he didn’t know what that felt like. Emotional whiplash had just gone around the table, by the looks of it, and he was no exception. His spark felt about a ton lighter, buoyed by hope. Also by determination, because their Prime had the look of a mech ready to fight for what he believed in.

And because Optimus fought the good fight, so would Jazz. Jazz believed, but Optimus Prime personified that belief.

Prowl nodded and clasped his Prime’s hand in return. “Ignorance may be bliss, but that is not an excuse to dwell in it.”

“I sure was happier not knowin’,” Ironhide said in a low voice, but the bitter words had no real emotion behind them.

“Welcome to my world,” Red Alert snipped tartly.

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 24

[* * * * *]

[A/N: This part was for Raditz Wyvern. By which I mean that I was motivated to keep writing this story. I don’t think I can put into words what it means to me that this story is so important to someone that I continued it. It’s just...thank you.

Also, a massive thank-you goes out to the people on Tumblr who responded with their personal tales of what they had been told to do to "prevent rape." It was painful to read, but I tried to put it to good use here.]
Ch. 25

I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]

Pt. 25

[* * * * *]

“I’ve reviewed recordings from the incident in Ratchet’s office,” Red Alert said, and the room tensed.

“Here we go again,” Blaster muttered, turning back to the table, and Jazz’s automatic grin looked more like a grimace. Things were just calming down after Prowl’s tactical processors rebooted, and Red Alert was ready to start the fight again. Fair play to the Security Director keeping them to the debriefing despite two superior officers growling at each other from opposite sides of the table, but Optimus Prime had basically needed to put his Second and Third in time-out.

He’d directed them to separate corners of the room, a hand firmly turning them away from each other before giving a small push and letting go. His exact words had been, “If you two can’t speak civilly to each other, then you will sit there until you can tell me why.”

“But Prime -- !”

“Sir, this is not necessary.”

A raised hand had interrupted Jazz, and their leader had shaken his head gravely. “I believe it is. You’re both behaving strangely, and it would do us all a favor if either of you could give a reason for why you’re attacking each other this way.”

The discussion had derailed rather spectacularly. Prowl’s momentary emotional lapse had disappeared back into a pragmatic mask, and his skepticism over the reliability of Jazz’s report had returned in full force as soon as his battle computer took over again. He’d allowed that Autobot law, if not the underlying social structure that’d created it, had its flaws. The admittance had been grudging and possibly only given because Ratchet had been sitting beside him. The Executive Officer had still insisted on barring Jazz from the entire issue of tactile interfacing within the Autobot ranks.

The saboteur hadn’t handled being told to butt out well at all, considering the fact that -- in his opinion -- Prowl wasn’t mentally equipped to handle anything to do with the problem. At least the tactician made no attempt to hide that he still had massive reservations about the legal and moral connotations of interfacing in general. However, sticking an operative into a mission relying on maneuvering around a sensitive situation and then denying that operative access? Changes to vital information spelled the difference between success or failure on missions like that, and that difference meant life or death more often than not. If Prowl had tried pitching a mission with such whonky parameters at him, Jazz would be fighting him tire and lugnut over it for the sake of his operative. Putting Jazz himself in as the operative in question didn’t make the situation any more favorable. He was good, but he wasn’t perfect.

Oh, he was certain Prowl had his reasons, but the stoic mech wouldn’t elaborate on them. Keeping mute on that kind of proposal was no way to make the Head of SpecOps happy. Any operative
wanted to be involved in interpreting mission intel, but Jazz wasn’t just an operative. He was the operative who was also an officer whose actions mid-mission depended on the usage of that data. Expecting him to hand over intel but not permit him to see or participate in what the other officers did with it was a recipe for disaster. He was their frontline fighter for information acquisition and interpretation in this particular battle right now. Shoving him out in front and cutting him off from support would get him killed by friendly fire even if the enemy didn’t get him.

To put it simply, Jazz hadn’t reacted to Prowl’s demand well in the slightest.

The other officers had slammed back in their seats and watched the two black-and-whites go for each other’s throats in verbal attacks that only two mechs who worked closely together could. The mood whiplash in the room had been shocking in its extremes. Nobody had known what to do, although from the increasingly annoyed look on his face, Ironhide had been inching toward just smacking their helms together and being done with it.

Their commander had put a stop to it before things got out of hand, however. The loud roar of that heavy-duty truck engine had interrupted the fight, silencing the shouting even before he’d risen from his chair. Startled, the two officers pointing fingers at each other as they argued had turned to face him. He hadn’t said anything. Words hadn’t been necessary. The riled engine growl had been a strut-rattling sign of his disapproval, and having him standing over them had served as a reminder that this was their leader stepping in like a sergeant calling a couple of rookies back to order. He hadn’t throttled back until they were silent and standing at attention.

The wordless reprimand had stung. Worse, the interruption had calmed them down enough to see how far out of line they’d stepped. Being glared at by Prime rubbed already sanded areas down to the bare metal, and both officers had dropped the argument when his hand slashed between them as if physically cutting them apart. His orders rubbed their juvenile behavior in their faces, but neither could say they hadn’t earned the indignity.

Jazz had shut his mouth on his protest the second Prime’s hand went up, and he’d lowered his gaze to the table. Ouch. Weaponized disappointment: direct hit to the spark.

Prowl had met his commander’s optics respectfully, but the stiff way he stood made it clear to those who knew him that he felt properly chided by the Prime’s words. The two officers would obey and conduct themselves as mature mechs from then on.

Well, mostly.

Keeping his visor down, Jazz had accepted being turned around and pushed on his way. He’d grabbed his chair to take with him away from the table in order to set it in the corner, where he threw himself into it exactly like a petulant child. “He started it,” he’d muttered as he slouched.

Prowl had already stalked over to his appointed corner. There, he’d folded his arms and stared holes in the wall as his CPU overclocked pouring over the onslaught of new data. “Did not,” spat back before distracted processors caught up. An appalled expression had splashed over his face when they did.

Optimus Prime’s exasperated sigh had helped break the thick tension. Ironhide’s guffaw had freed everyone else to laugh, and the command staff had shaken their heads at the byplay. The meeting had dispersed into a loose gathering as Jazz and Prowl cooled down.

They’d been given plenty of time, according to Red Alert. The Security Director nailed Blaster with a severe look for the flippant remark but went back to arranging windows on his console screen. “It’s relevant and might give us an advantage, so yes. ‘Here we go again.’”
“Of course. What have you found?” Optimus Prime asked when Blaster might have said something else. The Autobot leader was settling himself into his chair, peering over at Red Alert’s work as he did, and the solemn shade of his optics warned that it was time to get back to business.

Shrugging, the carrier mech plopped himself into his chair as the rest of the officer cadre reassembled around the table. Ratchet and Wheeljack only had to turn their attention back to the table at large, but Ironhide split off from Blaster to sit down beside Red Alert again. He tipped to the side a bit to eye the smaller Autobot’s screen. Prowl kept to his feet, arms folded tightly across his hood and doors held close to his back. He walked over to stand at the Prime’s left shoulder in order to see the consoles in the table, but he moved like he had a building girder lodged where it made sitting impossible.

Jazz stayed away. Orders had been to stay in his corner until he could explain why he’d lost his temper at Prowl, so stay in his corner he would. He stood and twirled his chair around so he could sit on it backward, facing the table without joining the group. He needed the space. Arms folded across the back of the chair, he set his chin behind them so they hid his face up to his visor. It gave him an armored barrier protecting him from Prowl’s penetrating gaze. The mech was still watching him, and something about that made him feel defensive. His presence was setting off the Autobot Executive Officer, and the more Jazz thought about, the more his own internal alarms jingled. The way he and Prowl had clashed bothered him, and being watched was still tweaking his temper. Yet there was no immediate reason he could find for the short fuse. Optimus Prime had been right to separate them. Jazz needed to dig out the source of the temper flares, here, and he didn’t think he’d be ready to rejoin the table until he did.

In the meantime, Red Alert held the floor.

“Pardon some assumptions made to speed things along,” he said without looking up from the files he was sorting through. “I’m temporarily setting aside other conclusions in order to pursue the most radical proposition made. That doesn’t mean I’ve discarded them. It means we need to start moving on, and quickly.”

“Good thinkin’. Circumstances change and scrap any plan on contact during battle, but that ain’t ever stopped us from planning,” Ironhide said. His forearms whirred as the weaponry tucked in them shifted, and he tapped a forefinger on one transformation seam in idle habit. His voice fell to a grumble. “Tell me you’re talking ‘bout contingency plans. I’m sick of theories. Hate sitting around doing nothin’ like this.”

Red Alert looked to the side at him. “I’m talking about assessing what information we already know in light of what we’ve found out so far. What we plan from here on out may need to change depending on our assessment.” Ironhide’s plating fluffed and settled as the older mech heaved a resigned sigh, and the Security Director shook his head at him. “Now, we’ve determined that we hold hardline and tactile interfacing at separate levels of importance. Whether or not that is morally right,” Ratchet and Prowl subsided as he stared them down, “it’s what the regs spell out for legal interpretation. The letter of the law holds the separation, even if we believe the spark of the law should be different. This is a potential weak point in dealing with any sort of alliance formed using interfacing -- i.e. ‘courtship’ -- as proposed by the Decepticons. Agreed?”

The Autobots shifted in their seats as he looked around the table at them. Ratchet nodded right away, but Prowl followed suit reluctantly. Factually, that made sense to both sides of the argument, here. Optimus Prime rested his elbow on the back of his opposite hand, bringing his free hand up to rub the fingers against his mask. His optics narrowed in troubled thought, but he nodded agreement when the Lamborghini looked to him for approval.
Jazz kept still and quiet, out of sight behind Red Alert and unwilling to attract attention.

A quick glance at the rest of the table to ensure they were following along, and Red Alert moved on. “However, the potential to turn that weakness into a strength is there. Don’t think of it as a trap,” he hurried to say before the Prime could object, and Optimus’ fingers relaxed into a curl again. “I’m not suggesting we attempt to turn this into a weapon. What I’m suggesting is that we capitalize on our vague, roundabout method of addressing interfacing. Stop demonizing how we as a culture fail to speak about interfacing, and start using it as an advantage.”

“Wait, wait.” Ratchet shook his head, mouth opening for a long moment before words organized enough to come out. “How would that even work? We can’t even interpret what we mean talking about fragging, sometimes.”

“But they don’t know that. The Decepticons may be under the impression we hold all types of interfacing at the same level.” Rapidfire tapping of his fingers brought up a specific record, and Blaster’s optics fastened on his own console as it pinged over. “Play that back, if you would.”

“Right-e-o, Director-o.” Playful as the words were, the mech was all business as he hooked his inbuilt speakers up. His voice fell into a formal cadence. “Playback of V-HQ-2, O-9/A-CMO, timestamp 20.035.”

A small, uncertain voice asked, “So how do they negotiate? A blindfold and a dartboard with the terms on it?” Bonecrusher sounded odd speaking like that.

“Their social negotiations are nonbinding, as I understand it. Unspoken agreements instead of actual defined contracts.”

Playback ceased when Red Alert held up a hand for Blaster to pause. “I can guarantee Soundwave has a current copy of Autobot rules and regulations, but what Starscream said in Ratchet’s office indicates that his understanding of our approach to interfacing is that we leave everything we can unspoken.”

“We can use that,” Prowl mused. “If nothing else, contact with the…bluntness of the Decepticons can be used as an excuse for why we may choose now of all times to set our own legal matters in order.”

“Heh. It’s all their fault.” Ironhide pretended to scroll through an invisible datapad, shaking one fist at
imaginary Decepticons like they were skateboarding on his lawn or something. “’Look at all these fraggin’ rules you got. Well, slag. Now we gotta write down our stuff so all ya’ll ignorant Decepticreeps can see how we do it over here.’” Red Alert’s elbow jabbed into his side in disapproval of the faction slur, but he didn’t repent. He did scoot his chair out of reach of another hit as he dropped the act. “Yeah, we can paint it up like a choice instead of a mistake. Also gives us an excuse why we ain’t sure how to play by their rules. Or even if we want to play their game.”

“Let them persuade us?” Wheeljack wavered a hand indecisively. “That still lets them take the lead. Do we want to keep giving them that much control over this?”

“But it gives us a solid base instead of startin’ in the wrong,” Ironhide pointed out. Ratchet’s engine growled, and the Weapons Specialist held up his hands in defense. “Not sayin’ we’re not! Just sayin’: advertising a weak spot’s a good way t’ get shot.”

“This isn’t battle,” Optimus Prime said, so softly that half the table didn’t hear him speak. Jazz’s visor flicked to him for a moment. The Prime was often quiet in debriefings to absorb the processed information fed to him by his staff, but the utter stillness he’d adopted this time made Jazz wonder what he was thinking. Was he staying out of things in order to allow the officer cadre to talk without his influence, or was he keeping his thoughts to himself for another reason?

Prowl’s optics caught Jazz’s visor as it left the Prime, and concern zipped between Second and Third for a split second before the saboteur looked away. Wariness swelled in the back of his mind. He didn’t trust Prowl, and he didn’t know why. The flashes of temper weren’t getting any easier to understand.

“I thought of that, but that’s not the only reason why I brought this up.” Red Alert opened his hand up toward Prowl as if offering an idea for consideration, and the tactician’s attention snapped to him. The Security Director’s sat forward on his seat as he peered at his superior, and his voice took on a canny tone. “His interpretation of our laws is that we hold hardline and tactile at the same level. Think about that.”

“That’s interesting,” Wheeljack said, which were words to alarm anyone inside the blast radius. Or outside it, depending on how excited he was. At the moment, he seemed more thoughtful than inventive. He set his elbows on the table and tucked his knuckles under his chin while he pondered. “Blaster, play that again.”

The officers listened to the short playback a second time, and pale yellow lit the table as the inventor’s audio indicators brightened. “Listen to what he’s saying about the Decepticons. He’s saying that it’s a foreign, Autobot practice to not negotiate, to not form a contract, and to settle for an unspoken, vague agreement over physical and data exchange.” After ticking off a finger for each point, Wheeljack pulled them back under his chin. His indicators dimmed to a somber blue. “The implications from that and everything else tonight,” he nodded in Jazz’s direction, “is that tactile interfacing is part of negotiations among Decepticons. He’s saying that the ‘Cons have different levels of consent than we do.”

Ironhide hiked his elbows up over the back of his chair, splaying his hands in a So What? gesture. “We knew that.”

“Ah, we knew that, but.” Wheeljack raised one finger to wag at the Weapons Specialist. “But! What that means on their side is that they don’t hold the two kinds of ‘facing at the same level. One is done only after a drawn-out process of negotiating a contract -- and the other isn’t.” Rolling his head to rest the side of his jaw on his hand, he pointed his finger at Ratchet next. “We’ve been so weirded out by their aversion to hardline and preference for tactile that we haven’t stood back and seen how
tactile’s a means to an end for them. Starscream -- scrap, the Constructicons, right there in the office with you! -- pretty much laid out that trickery is par for the course in negotiating favorable terms in a contract.”

“They really hyped up consent in tactile fragging from where I sat,” Jazz put in, but part of his attention stayed locked in his own head. There had been an instant surge of defensiveness that wanted to make that statement aggressive, argumentative, and it tugged on the part of him that wanted to defend the Decepticons’ approach to interfacing. Out of nowhere, he felt a distrust toward Wheeljack that he hadn’t felt before. What by Primus’ rusty crankshaft was going on, here?

He chased the wariness back through his processors. Where had that come from?

“They would.” Ironhide rolled his head back to look over his arm at him. “Autobot watching? Better change the game plan so’s to make the audience cheer f’r the home team.”

That hit a whole symphony of chords in Jazz’s head suddenly, and his visor widened. That. That was a key to something. He gave it over to information assessment to track down in the background of his thoughts, because he was finding this discussion too important to tune out.

Red Alert took the floor back. Resetting his vocalizer, he glanced around the table at the other officers. “That’s possible, or the Decepticons have created a system of different consent levels that we simply don’t have anything within our own laws to compare to. We keep attempting to match our ethics to a faction that’s proven to have their own moral rules, twisted to fit their own ideals.”

He spared a look over his shoulder as if double-checking, but Jazz had nothing to say contrary to that. The Decepticons had no problem killing ‘lesser’ beings to harvest energy for Cybertron, or slaughtering any Autobot that’d gotten in their way before the cease-fire went into effect. They believed they were doing the right thing, too. Trying to justify that in Autobot terms didn’t work. It never had. It was one of the fundamental differences between the factions that nobody quite knew how to bridge. So far, the Autobots had put themselves between the Decepticons and vulnerable races as representatives in the cease-fire and treaty, but it was a collective effort the Decepticons seemed to be going along with to avoid setting off more violence.

Eventually, they wouldn’t be able to dodge talking about it. Everyone hoped the cease-fire would survive broaching the topic when it happened, because there was bound to be conflict between ‘Freedom is the right of all sentient beings’ and ‘Peace through tyranny.’

The Security Director nodded and turned back to the table when Jazz only shrugged at him. “The idea of using physical molestation to influence consent to tactile ‘facing is wrong to us. We see it as coercion, but yet that’s exactly what Vortex did during interrogations, when he was apparently given free rein in his methods. The idea of Vortex going after someone outside of his official function, however, skewed Acid Storm’s reactions toward unease, even revulsion.”

The saboteur burrowed further behind his arms as everyone looked to him. “Add Motormaster and Skywarp to that, and he was ready to call out the cavalry,” he confirmed softly. “Though thinking back on it, I’m not sure if he was asking ‘bout rape in terms of inappropriate tactile or hardline attempts. He asked ‘bout anything other than verbal harassment, so I’m thinking either would’ve had him up in arms. But Acid Storm said something ‘bout Vortex’s cables being locked down, and from what I heard ‘bout Skywarp’s contract, he’s kinda in the same shuttle. There’s...” Information assessment had its subprocessors whirring away on six separate problems, but it forked over the connection he’d been chasing. “It sounds like there’s internal controls slapped on that kinda behavior. Like mechs know who’s prone t’ throwing their weight around in dubious consent territory, so their commanders...suitors?...fellow ‘Cons take steps t’ yank ‘em up short.”
“It seems at least somewhat frowned on prior to contract. Listen.” Red Alert swiftly pinged table consoles with a file record for review.

Blaster played it out loud for Jazz’s benefit. “It was kinda a dirty trick, but it’s just courtship. We’re not at agreement of contract yet!” Bonecrusher sounded adamant, but Mixmaster’s “We’d never take a mech into contract against his will!” was frankly indignant.

“They admit that it’s a ‘dirty trick,’ but also that they wouldn’t do it to apply pressure to take a contract.” Red Alert shook his head. “I’m inclined to say their dividing point between acceptable and not is when coercion to influence a minor decision becomes coercing contract terms.”

“That’s an extremely fine line to draw,” Ratchet said into the silence as they thought that over. The medic’s optics narrowed with thought and no little embarrassment. “They had me on the verge of overload, but my agreement to allow things to progress that far had nothing to do with the contract?”

“Starscream said permitting him to court me allowed him ‘physical intimacy,’” Jazz said slowly. “What if we’re looking at their different levels of ‘no-means-no’ being strictly bound up in courtship? Like, whether or not negotiations are in progress determines how hard they can push. He said courtship was a commitment on his end, an acknowledgement on mine, and he leaned on me t’ get me to agree. Once he got me to say yes, he was far more int’ putting his hands on me -- but he also kinda backed off on the pressure.”

“That was backing off?” Blaster laughed incredulously. “Bolt me, mech! I saw that footage. You two set the floor on fire. I’ve fragged with less passion than he dances!” Half the room went stiff with shocked embarrassment, but Wheeljack laughed out loud and Optimus shook his head, amusement in every line of him. Blaster’s optics popped wide in embarrassment that he’d spoken without thinking again despite the laughter.

Jazz lifted his chin up to set on top of his arms so he could grin at the boombox. “Trust me, Screamer’s been taking this slower than slow if what I saw tonight’s a typical courtship.” That thing with Thundercracker and Soundwave had been erotic, violent, and fast. A well-oiled machine of courtship, negotiations, and contract agreement, which made sense if it was a standard process in the Decepticon military. And unless an Autobot knew what he was looking at, the rough frag looked absolutely nothing like a formal proposition and acceptance of anything, much less something important. “We haven’t hashed out terms or anything leading to swappin’ cables, but give us a break. We’ve been busy with other things.” He shook his head and tipped a nod toward Ratchet. “My point is, it sounds like the Constructicons fudged hearin’ what you said in order to...influence whether or not you gave permission to court. And then they backed off once they got that.”

“Securing permission is worth any cost?” Wheeljack hummed to himself a bit as Jazz gradually sank behind the shelter of his arms once more. Ratchet looked through the files Red Alert had sent to his console, frowning, but Wheeljack didn’t open anything on his own screen. He leaned back in his chair, wiping one hand down his face mask as he thought. “Asking permission, you aim for loopholes and skid around rules, but permission granted implies you’re both committed enough to relax? Or it binds you to certain rules of behavior, perhaps? Cue a changeover in tactile, heh, ‘tactics.’”

“Outside of courting, anything goes? Could be. Might be.” Information assessment subprocessors puzzled over the theory, fitting bits of intel to it. “It fits. It’s like the real crime in the ‘Cons is hardline, but dabblin’ in foul play to get you to agree t’ go for a spin is fine and dandy. So long as it doesn’t go t’ cables.” Jazz narrowed his visor into a thin blue line above his arms. “No hardline. That’s out of bounds.”

“So they’ll tactile-frag ya even if ya don’t want it, but only how you want it when you’ve agreed to
talkin’ ‘bout the nitty-gritty.’” Ironhide pushed his hands against the table edge and drummed his fingers on the surface. “Reeeeal fine line. But...I kinda get it all th’ same.” Prowl and Ratchet both looked at him sharply, Wheeljack’s curious gaze next in line, and the old Weapons Specialist shrugged. “Goes back to a buncha warbuilds tryin’ to get along. If this’s how warbuilds got along inside their own kind,” he cocked his head with a crooked smile, “and believe me, I’m still pullin’ up archived memories on the Enforcers dividin’ frametypes, so I’m gettin’ this crazy idea they’re over there lookin’ at our set-up the same way we’re doin’ to them.” Dismissing that sidetrack before they could roll down it, he went on. “I can see how it coulda translated to the ‘Con ranks. Their ‘might makes right’ slag shoulda had the whole faction infightin’ straight t’ the Pit long ago. This contract scrap’s gotta be controllin’ it, or they wouldn’t work at all. Put it as a larger picture over the backstabbing and nasty Pitslag we’ve seen close-up, and it starts makin’ sense of why they ain’t collapsed into chaos.”

He shifted, hands leaving the table to close into fists as if fighting an imaginary foe. “Fight me into a contract I don’t want, and I ain’t gonna honor it. Plus, this contract stuff’s all leadin’ up to crossin’ cables t’ seal it, right? So you bust my aft up t’ get me to agree to your slag, and I’m gonna do everything I can to wipe the floor with ya when I get in your head. So if you wanna get another warframe int’ a binding deal, you gotta get him oiled up and happy. Make him want t’ cooperate. Do what he likes, how he likes, and the stuff he agrees to is gonna be the bargain ya both agree on. We’re all equals in hardline.” His fists flattened out on the table. “Well, less they twist that up, too.”

“No idea,” Jazz admitted freely when the older mech turned to him for input. “But it makes sense, going along with Red’s ideas.” Barely moving from behind his defensive fort of forearms, he nodded to Red Alert., “Screamer’s saying we call tactile and hardline equal ‘cause we don’t negotiate how they do. So the ‘Cons look at us and can’t see when our version of their fine line goes into effect. All they’ve probably picked up from spyin’ on us is that everything’s hidden and private, nothing’s talked about, and we blur the line between business and friendly fragging in a way they don’t.”

“So they have rape,” Ratchet said quietly, feeling the idea out as he said it. “They have the attitude that rape is undesirable and pursuing an unwanted ‘face is repulsive, but they also take what they want because those with the strength can have anything they can keep. Yet the concepts of negotiation and consent are deeply ingrained into them via their -- what? Military structure? I don’t…” Resetting his optics, the medic massaged thumb and forefinger against his chevron. “I can’t say I even remotely understand how the two ideas can exist side-by-side. Rape can be done by the strong, but the Decepticons don’t accept anything less than consent at the same time? That can’t possibly work!”

“So dude, wait, no. I can see this clear as day.” Blaster threw his hands up in surrender when everyone goggled at him. “Not, like, everything, but c’mon. I got responsibilities you guys just don’t. My Cassettes, mechs. Yeah? I don’t own ‘em, but we got this symbiosis that’s half our bodies and minds all the rusted time. We can’t let it go, y’know? Ain’t none of us ancient, but we didn’t wake up one day, like whoa --” he wiggled his fingers, miming shock, “-- bam! Insta-team! There’s history and some tradition every carrier mech an’ Cassettes fall back on, at least when we’re gettin’ up and going. Helps make sense of how this stuff works even outside the dependency thing. It’s a structure we were part of even ‘fore we sorted our own deals around being separate peeps. You seein’ the parallels here? Naw, we don’t got a contract quite like,” he wiggled his fingers, “all this, but me and my buds’ve had to work out agreements, folks. We’ve talked stuff over nobody wants to, but -- yep. What we got? It’s a legit solid body/mind thing that pre-dates us joinin’ the ‘Bots.”

He cast a searching look around the table as if hoping they were following. A plaintive tint entered his voice when he didn’t see what he was looking for. It was obvious he couldn’t quite dumb it down enough for them to understand his explanation. “Get it? When a carrier mech takes in a Cassette he didn’t start with, that structure’s still there for us to use. We take this thing we’re made in
and build it up to what we are now using our words, mechs. It works. The history and traditions are there already, and it works, so you don’t mess with what works ‘less you gotta modify it to fit some kinda huge change.” Prowl was still blankly staring at him from further up the table, and Blaster fuffed his vents in frustration. “It’s like what Screamer said about transplanting Vos’ social structure to the ‘Cons, okay? The framework’s there to be set up, and then you just…plug new mechs in. Show ‘em the ropes, tie ‘em up, and they’re as caught as you are. Doesn’t matter how awful the new guys are. Stuff pulls both ways once you’re in, see?”

Jazz sat up, visor fixed on the Communication Officer. The others exchanged speaking glances, information shuffling about as Blaster’s idea kicked a new perspective onto the floor. A Cassette-carrier bond wasn’t the same as a cable connection, but the Decepticons did seem to regard the severity of a contract on the level of a semi-permanent legal bind.

“I’m suddenly picturing the Decepticons as a collection of Cassette carriers,” Optimus Prime said, optics a thoughtful shade of blue. “Far more interconnected, but...hmm.”

“That interconnectedness would explain why it has been so difficult to predict whether or not a unit would collapse after taking out the perceived ‘leader,’” Prowl added. His own optics were vacant as he evidently scanned something on his HUD. “The ‘carrier’ is not as easy to pick out as it would be with actual carrier mechs.” He shut down whatever he’d been reading and blinked to refocus. “In addition, without knowing if the contract is, perhaps, a social or business contract, it is impossible to know if someone could step into the opened military position or if the dead mech had created stronger interpersonal bonds than could be easily renegotiated.”

“You sure don’t mess with Soundwave’s Cassettes,” Wheeljack joked. “You know how that connection works!”

“Nah, mech, you’re still not following!” Blaster looked up at the ceiling as if rolling his eyes, heaved a sigh through his vents, and squinted at Wheeljack. “Cassettes are small. Throw them into the Decepticons, and apply some of that ol’ ‘might makes right’ you’re talking about.” He flung a hand at Ironhide. “What’d you expect to see? Huh? You’d expect Soundwave to be three little glitches down in four hours, right? And downhill from there, am I right? Any smaller, weaker mech thrown into the ‘Cons should follow that formula, but that’s what I’m talking about -- we don’t see that! ‘Cause you put a buncha carrier mechs together, and all the Cassettes and carriers walk on glass around each other. We got our old structure in place. New carriers, new Cassettes? Don’t matter. You don’t do scrap to me or my buds without askin’ first, because there’s code covering my right to call in help if you’re too strong for me to go up against on my own. That’s, uh, like contracting for defensive purposes.” The red-and-gold mech shrugged. “’cept us ‘Bots don’t set those terms down. I know I’ve got friends to call on here, but the ‘Cons got it all formalized an’ scrap.”

“Rape…doesn’t happen because of power dynamics?” Ratchet scowled. “That’s twisted. It’s a house of…” He cast about for the word. “A house of cards. The paper kind. Vent on them wrong, and the whole structure falls over!”

“Not if the foundations are as old as a city-state, and upheld by a large population who knows and lives by the rules,” Jazz said suddenly, and silence struck as that hit.

Prowl met his visor and nodded slowly. “Carry over the established structure of an entire city, and it might serve to support even the rot and dregs of whatever criminals get recruited to the Decepticon Cause,” said the tactician.

Blaster barked a laugh. “Told ya! See? Now you get it. You wanna know why the ‘Cons are all up in consent even when they’re grabbin’ for all they can get? Take it outside the official channels,
where it’s about mechs and their fists.” His hands closed into fists on the edge of the table, and the cheerful boombox sobered as he looked down at them instead of at the other officers. “My bunch has had their share of flings, lemme tell ya, and I’ve always kinda known I’m the only one who’s got their backs in this stuff. Never thought about it like that, really, but yeah. Yeah. We’ve had to lay out what is and isn’t allowed when somebot frags my Cassettes t’ Praxus and back. We’ve got down what’s too far, just in case.” His voice rose. “Whoa, hey! It’s cool, nothing’s happened. It’s all good! Honest!”

Ratchet sank back into his chair, relaxing down from sudden alarm, and even Wheeljack had to take a moment to cycle air. Prowl frowned at Optimus, who gave him apologetic look as he handed back one of the datapads he’d just knocked into disarray. Ironhide closed his vents and transformed his gun back into his left hand.

Lowering his arms from waving their concern away, Blaster tapped his fingers on the table before giving a Why Not? shrug. The amiable Communication Officer tipped his chin down. “It’s just, y’know.” He looked like murder incarnate as he smiled, pretty as a picture and completely unhinged. “I’m more conscious than most that if slag goes down on my buds, I’m not waiting for any trial. Wouldn’t surprise me in the least if the ‘Cons are the same way.”

Even Optimus Prime lost his calm façade and stared down the table. Ratchet’s mouth dropped open slightly as he bent forward a bit to see around Wheeljack, who’d turned in his chair to gape. Ironhide and Red Alert both sat up ramrod straight in their seats, heads turned toward the end of the table.

“Blaster!” Prowl recovered his wits first. Jazz could practically see him scrambling through incident reports for any evidence that Blaster might have taken the law into his own hands on behalf of his Cassettes.

“You go, Master Blaster,” Jazz said softly, and that too-wide smile turned to flash, crazy and vicious, toward him.

“Jazz!” Clearly, Prowl could not be any more scandalized by the notion that the Third-in-Command of the Autobots might support vigilante justice.

“Prowl!” Jazz mimicked. He waggled his doors at the tactician. “They’re part of him. With the way our laws are set up, the only one who might believe anything happened would be him. Can’t blame a mech for acting to protect his own.” Not that he wouldn’t have intervened if he’d known anything happened, but at the same time, he might not have. He knew what he would have done if someone went after one of his operatives that way, after all.

“Nah, y’ still ain’t listening,” Blaster interrupted again before the two black-and-whites could go at it. “That’s my point. It’s a dependant bond, not a contract, but it’s got some of the same stuff attached. A real…I don’t know.” His hands worked, trying to pull a concept into words they’d understand. “A tangible thing, not like me and you,” he said, gesturing between Wheeljack and himself, then Ironhide and himself as he turned to the other side of the table. “Friendship’s not a measurable thing. Mechs, I’m imaginin’ a whole army -- slaggit, imagine a city! -- based off of measurable, binding agreements between peeps instead-a, I dunno, emotions. Feelings. Stuff we can’t quantify. I mean, think about it like a battle! You shoot Skywarp down, who y’ gotta worry ‘bout?”

“Until tonight, Thundercracker. Starscream as well, although it always seemed incidental that he might interfere,” Optimus Prime said thoughtfully. He’d sat back in his chair as he looked down the length of the table at the boombox speaking so passionately at the other end. “On a wider scale, the other flyers as well.”

“Right! And Dirge?”
“Thrust and Ramjet,” Prowl answered this time. “Then the rest of the flyers.”

Blaster winked one optic at the tactician still eying him warily. “Got it in one. Shoot an Insecticon, and you know to watch out for the others. Constructicon? Look out for the rest of th’ bunch. But combiners aside, how many ‘Cons we know that don’t bunch up in units that somehow get nicknamed? You know if you down one mech, ‘specially one of the officers, you gotta watch out for the rest. They swarm, mechs! It’s not real obvious down in the grunts ‘cause they’re cannon-fodder and tend t’ group up for protection, and we don’t mark ‘em like we do officers, but look at the wider groups. Y’know exactly which ‘Cons are gonna gun for you if you take out a Seeker, or a shuttle, or, frag, a Cassette. Scrap iron and metal -- look at us!” He made a wild gesture with his hand that Wheeljack dodged. “We get a bunch of us together, and we’re still individuals. Shoot me, and you know who to keep an optic out for. Shoot you,” he pointed at Wheeljack, who gave him a friendly Why Me? glare, “and there ain’t nobody definite to watch out for. We don’t have the bonds in place that the ‘Cons do. Not contracted, laid-out-an’-signed-on bonds. We already know what t’ watch for on the battlefield, but now we’ve got context outside of units and war for it!”

He shook his head, amazed but still smiling. “The stuff I’d do outside the law would be legal, in that camp, ‘cause everybody’s got a contract protecting ‘em. You negotiate the frag, any type of frag, because you ain’t pushing some scared loner in a dark alley who don’t dare go tattlin’ to an Enforcer. You’re pushing someone bound t’ somebody else, who’s probably got another contract to a higher officer, who’ll probably get called in t’ whale on your aft for darin’ to take what wasn’t willingly offered. How far you’re willing to take dirty tricks and duckin’ rules depends on how far y’ think the others he’s contracted to will let it go, and probably depends on how far your backers will cover your aft.”

Ratchet stared at the Comm. Officer, and Jazz could almost see him re-evaluating what had happened in his office. Probably much the same way Jazz himself was. “They couldn’t backtrack fast enough the moment Jazz stepped in as reinforcements,” the medic said.

Jazz picked that up. “And they looked to Screamer for support before they figured out he was behind me. Whaddya bet they don’t toe the line again because they know you’ve got back-up ready to call ‘foul’ and step in?”

“I would wager that is why Starscream chose you.” Prowl set one finger on the table as if pinning a point down as he caught Jazz’s gaze. “You have a whole division behind you in military terms, but he is gambling that you will not call for their support if he challenges you professionally or provokes you personally. You won’t call for anyone’s support. He will push you until he finds the point he is called out on his -- how shall we call it -- ‘rude’ behavior. He does not know exactly whom or when someone will come to your defense, but he can manipulate you into lowering those defenses for him. Then, he will use you as the example for how far and hard the other Decepticons can twist this courtship to their advantage because none of us dare protest for fear of offending them. After all, you allowed it.”

A defensive swell of emotion bubbled up Jazz’s intake, half-formed words and ideas, but he reset his visor as his visor bleached pale. Prowl’s optics went the same sky blue as the same thing blindsided him. Sudden realization smacked them in the back of their helms in a realignment of events that clicked their vents in protest against the nearly physical yank down another path.

Jazz blinked again. Prowl blinked back at him.

As one, they looked at Optimus Prime.

Who didn’t notice, lost as he was in his own epiphany. Their leader stared at the table without seeing
the console screen.

“Prime?”

“Sir?”

“Cybertron to Prime?” Blaster added, and both black-and-whites shot him identical suppressive looks. “Whoa, hey!” He lowered his voice to an unnerved mutter. “It’s eerie when you guys do that.”

“It fits what Megatron’s done,” Optimus said without acknowledging any of them. He sounded deep in thought but a tinge off-kilter. “I don’t want to see what he’s done as suspicious or harmful on the surface, but the potential is there. He has not pushed me into anything I haven’t found…” His optics glanced up abruptly, and away as fast as they rose. “Pleasurable.” Tires spun, although the Prime didn’t squirm. “He’s kept our, ah, interactions within nominally acceptable behavior. He has grown bolder, however, as I’ve adjusted, and the potential is there to use our closed-door meetings as permission to conduct Autobot-Decepticon courtships in private, open to exploitation, under our own social pressure to keep interfacing of any kind as secret or shameful.”

“Anything th’ ‘Cons do can be turned against us.” Ironhide reached past Red Alert to knock the knuckles of one hand against Optimus’ forearm. The Prime looked up at him, brow furrowed, and the Weapons Specialist shook his head at the disturbed look. “Anything. That ain’t new. This ain’t the end of the world.”

“Now that we are aware of it, we can turn it around on them.” Prowl nodded and tapped a new window open his console. “I am going to need you to detail everything Megatron has done to -- or with -- you, sir. I apologize if it this is a personally embarrassing process,” he added when his commander looked absolutely taken aback. “It is necessary to catalogue what we will need to counter in the future.”

Red Alert was opening up his own set of files across the table from him. “Blaster, how would you go about identifying the, umm, network. The network surrounding a strange, possibly hostile Cassette or carrier?”

“What, besides just askin’?” Blaster blew a puff of air out when that got him a Du$h look. “Hostile. Right. Prrrrrrrobably get them to identify the bonds themselves? So a trick of some kind.”

“Identifying a Cassette carrier mech is easier than sorting out this mess,” Ratchet grumbled. “I doubt it’s as easy as matching Cassette to Cassette dock.”

Wheeljack raised a hand to get attention. “I’d like to point out that we’ve fallen right back into the mindset that this is war. Just saying,” he said when Prowl and Red Alert glared in his direction. “I’ve got nothing against precautions or making sure our afts are covered, but you’re all talking like the Decepticons are the enemy and trying to get around the cease-fire to attack us. Right or wrong, I’m pointing out that there is zero trust,” he looked away from the disgruntled tactician and Security Director to nod to Jazz, “or faith entering even our best-case scenarios.”

Ironhide’s helm rocked back, he scoffed so hard. “Strangely, I’m alright with that.” But Optimus’ smokestacks slumped a tad, and the red mech saw it. “Aw, f’r Primus’ sake -- Prime! No!”

“Where is it to start, if not with us?” their leader asked, optics shadowed and troubled.

“It can start when the Decepticons are trust-worthy,” Prowl answered immediately.
“So approximately the end of, oh, never,” Ratchet said, voice dry as his deadpan expression. “Realistically, I’d trust a ‘Con as far as I could see, if not less, but let me ask a question, here.” He cocked his head at everyone’s attentive looks. “Is there any reason the courtships have to happen right away? According to Starscream himself, his current contracts don’t end and open him up for binding any new contracts until the treaty is officially signed. That gives us some time to work out our ‘example’ courtships.” Jazz and Optimus Prime sat up on cue, glancing over at each other as if wondering what the other thought as the medic nodded to them. “No one’s said anything about making us accept their proposals if we don’t feel we’re ready.”

“A control group!” Wheeljack exclaimed, delighted, and Jazz cracked up.

Ratchet gave his friend an irritated sidelong look. “A control group implies it isn’t an experiment just forming it.”

“A future control group?” The inventor’s fingers open and closed over nothing, eager as always to work and tweak and do things. Ratchet and Blaster eyed him and leaned away. “It’s a brilliant idea! Keep the experiment small enough to be contained if something goes wrong. Limiting the number of participants will allow for observation and ensuring everyone has the same starting knowledge. Better propose a change to the experiment parameters soon, or the Decepticons in charge of running it on their side of things will let it grow out of control before we can set our own lab up.”

“That’s a very good idea,” the Prime said, and Prowl nodded agreement. “I will bring it up with Megatron in the morning. It may be best to allow the Decepticons to draft a proposal of what Autobots they are interested in approaching first.” Prowl’s nodding stopped cold, and he gave his superior a narrow look. “We don’t have to agree, but offering a small concession on participants will give me something to bargain with.”

The Executive Officer was most unimpressed by this logic. His mouth pressed into a thin line.

“Noted,” Blaster said, still eying Wheeljack like he’d explode. “It’s on the To-Do list for tomorrow, now will you please stop talking about us like we’re one of your thingamajigs?”

The inventor had begun humming with contained energy as his CPU flipped over into regarding this whole situation as an ongoing experiment. Prowl’s engine revved protest on Ratchet’s other side as the medic invaded his personal space to escape the growing SCIENCE! bubble surrounding Wheeljack. The tactician didn’t otherwise protest, however. In fact, he let the heavy weight of wary ambulance against his side inch him further toward the head of the table.

Wheeljack didn’t even notice how everyone was pushing back, away from him. “What we’re already seeing are instances of political maneuvering within the Decepticons surrounding the courtships. For instance, the Vosians fighting over even the possibility of an open contract with the Air Commander.” He leaned forward, hands open like he wanted to grab their minds and shake them until they were as excited as he was. “But think about it! This is our opportunity to observe their current contracts at work in a contained situation! If we limit who or how many courtships can be in progress, we can watch the Decepticon officers determine who can propose by who has priority, or maybe even by who’s considered important enough to court us knowing that we’re putting them under scrutiny. Giving them a limited choice of whom they can court means that we’re allowing their attempt at peace while giving us the opportunity to study their social structure!”

“A trick,” Blaster said softly. “Find the network by tracing it through their infighting now that we know what to look for?”

“Do we have to make it subtle?” Jazz asked suddenly, and he grinned when the officers turned to look at him. “We don’t have to make it a trick. Put some of it out in the open. Make ‘em explain
their connections to us in the plainest terms possible.”

“How do you propose we do that?” Prowl asked flatly. “Ask nicely?”

His grin grew. “How many Constructicons asked permission to court you, Ratch’?”

The medic started to answer, caught himself, started again, and stopped again. Surprise flickered briefly across his face before a thoughtful look replaced it. “…two.”

“How many did we assume asked him?” The saboteur threw his arms wide and cackled in glee for seeing the logic gap. The officers stared at him, Blaster shaking his head and Red Alert muttering a vicious oath. “We didn’t even spot it! We think of the ‘Structies, and we think six mechs right away! But why? We assumed!” He draped his arms over the chair back, and his grin grew fangs as he set his chin on them. “And they assume we’ve assumed, too. Problem is, we shouldn’t assume anything. If it’s not laid out for everyone to see, we could be assuming wrong. They wanna make a big deal about openness and consent and whatnot, we just gotta call ‘em on that.”

The fingers of one hand described a delicate question in midair, and the Head of Special Operations put on his most innocent expression. “So. Only two Constructicons asked permission to court..?”

Ratchet sat back in his seat and folded his arms, meeting Jazz’s angelic smile with his own smile. Although his had definite overtones of the Unmaker lurking behind it. “And I only granted permission to two. So who’s going to be making an assumption, now?”

There was a beat of silence. Ironhide broke it by snickering. “I’d love t’ see their expressions when the other four show up and ya say y’r not interested in them courtin’ you.”

“I would like to see them attempt to explain why you are or are not obligated to accept suite from the combiner as a whole,” Prowl said.

His voice was less prim-and-proper than Jazz had expected, and he looked at the other black-and-white curiously. The low level wariness he felt toward Prowl still simmered in the back of his mind, but that was a tone that interested him. “What’s up?”

The tactician seemed to be reading something on the console before him. When Jazz spoke, he looked up, but only to glance at him before turning his head to give the Prime a considering look.

His commander gave it right back. Jazz stared at them both, visor widening. Sometimes, those two could communicate on a level constructed entirely on eons of experience working together, mutual trust, and deep respect. There were some slagging good reasons the Decepticons feared the Prime and his Second working together as a team. Add in Ultra Magnus and Elita One, and Megatron would move armies to keep them occupied while his own officers scrambled to sort out what plot had been hatched.

Without looking away from Prowl, Optimus asked, “Blaster, do we know where Bonecrusher and Mixmaster are right now?”

“Uh…” The Comm. Officer looked up into thin air, where all facts were stored. “Not right off the bat. I’d say they’d be tending Starscream, but First Aid’s tellin’ me the medbay at HQ’s empty as anything, so they could be in Tarn or back at the Decepticons’ hideyhole here in Vos workin’ on him.”

“Sideswipe says they drove off at shift end,” Red Alert reported. “Direction’s right for a return to the Decepticon base. Should I,” he swallowed distaste, “ask Soundwave for their location?”
The corners of Prowl’s mouth turned up. “No. Ask him for their personal comm. frequency.”

Optimus’ optics smirked just as effectively as a visible mouth as he set his forearms on the table and folded his hands together serenely. “Ratchet, how do you feel about asking nicely?”

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 25

[* * * * *]

[A/N: This part was for Raditz Wyvern. Again, I really don’t have words for how much it means that someone wants to see how this story progresses.

Also, Shibara drew a joke image for how she pictures the end of this chapter:

Ratchet Makes a Call]
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]

Pt. 26

[* * * * *]

The meeting dissolved into multiple groups at that point.

Normally, Jazz would have been right in the middle of the tight cluster of Optimus Prime, Prowl, and Ratchet. That was his place, both as Third-in-Command and Head of Special Operations. Using Ratchet as bait for an information trap temporarily rolled him over into the SpecOp’s Division, which wasn’t a first and -- peace negotiations willing -- would be the last time for him. Being that this wasn’t the medic’s first rodeo, however, Jazz bowed out of the briefing for the moment. Prowl and Optimus Prime were still communicating on a level beyond him, and the probability of his presence disrupting what those two had going on wasn’t worth being in on the initial planning stage.

They’d descended on Ratchet moving like one mech. One of the medic’s optics had lit noticeably brighter than the other when they’d sandwiched him between them at the table. It’d been too late for the ambulance to flee. Doom. Doom had sat beside him wielding logic and mischief in equal measure to their superior ranks.

While Jazz and Prowl could successfully freak out their fellow Autobots by pulling a seamless teamwork act, they tended to fall into a Good Cop/Bad Cop routine. The trick was telling whom was which, because even Blaster couldn’t tell how and when they swapped roles once they got going. They didn’t do the Borg mindmeld thing the Prime and his Executive Officer had going on right now, but their routine could send people diving for cover. The two black-and-whites became polar opposites when working together, and they sort of switched roles at will. It was why Decepticons feared going into an interrogation with Jazz but were weld-snapping terrified when both Second and Third showed up. Professional mindfrags scared the scrap out of mechs.

Regardless of how they could work together, this wasn’t the time to involve himself. Jazz had removed himself from the equation because Optimus Prime and Prowl had something going that he didn’t want to disrupt, and he would. Prowl's expression held a peculiar distance every time he glanced toward him, still. Jazz knew things weren't right between them.

Fortunately -- or unfortunately -- he had an inkling of why.

Hence the reason why he’d stolen Ironhide away from talking with Wheeljack, who hardly noticed that his audience had been hijacked. Ironhide, on the other hand, seemed relieved to have escaped the SCIENCE! waiting to happen. It hovered over Wheeljack in an ominous cloud full of lightning bolt ideas, and the sparkling blue optics underneath watched with far too much interest in how they’d strike. Anyone who’d ever worked around him knew that look. They knew to seek shelter before things started flashing, because Wheeljack’s audio indicators were the least frightening special effects he could produce.

It was never just 'science'-science with Wheeljack. Perceptor did that kind of science. Pure science, the sort that could remain strictly theoretical or stick to computer models. The microscope mech was some kind of ideal for that whole career field. People like Brainstorm could deny their jealousy all
they wanted, but the moment Perceptor even looked like he might want a lab partner, the line of applicants told a different tale. That open space had caused defections from the Decepticon Science Division up until the war fully consumed Cybertron. He'd been the tipping point for much of Neutral science community when the time came to take sides or flee Cybertron. Even after the faction lines were drawn, the slightest cooperative effort between the factions required his inclusion, as there wasn't a science-minded mech on either side of the war who didn't respect his opinion.

Then there was Wheeljack: envy of many, terror of most. The galactic science community had him labeled as a menace to society and a planetary treasure, and that had been before the war plunged everything into chaos. People named discoveries after Perceptor; survivors named catastrophes after Wheeljack.

The fact that he'd stepped forward to represent Engineering in the peace talks had gotten half a second of absolutely no reaction from the Decepticon officers, which was as telling as a dramatic gasp. It wasn't that they were unaware of the Autobot officer hierarchy. Rather, Jazz had gotten the impression that they'd expected Perceptor and his levelheaded approach to spearhead the Autobots over in that secondary government building back at inter-factional HQ. He had a much more respectable reputation, after all.

The problem being that the Medical Division outstripped the Science Division in the Autobot faction. That was reversed among the Decepticons, meaning that an equivalent ranked medic hadn't even been brought in yet to stand beside the Constructicons. Ratchet, on the other hand, had been in charge of the Autobot side of things from the first day. He reigned over the combined Medical/Engineering building and the Autobot team that worked there, both as ranking officer and Chief Medical Officer. He'd used his authority to pull in the most brilliant minds he could that were able to work in his team. Defying Decepticon expectations, Perceptor hadn't made the cut.

He worked alongside the Constructicons as part of the cooperative effort between the factions, but they had the advantage of a gestalt bond. Those Ratchet pulled together for the main representative team had to be able to work that closely. Perceptor and Ratchet didn't do too well when forced to work together too closely. They clashed. Their strengths of personality and undisputed authority within their own arenas meant that they could collaborate quite well but failed spectacularly when pressed into a close working relationship. Neither of them disliked the other, not exactly, but opposites didn’t always attract. Perceptor and Ratchet ended up at odds more than they didn't outside of life-or-death circumstances. Sometimes even then, considering how coldly pragmatic Perceptor could be. Medics didn’t tend to like his version of efficiency when applied to their patients. He understood that, but Perceptor wasn’t as good with social rules as he was the laws of science.

Ratchet hadn’t picked Perceptor for the slot for precisely that reason. Perceptor headed a large number of the non-engineering sciences within the Science Division, but Wheeljack had greater flexibility when it came to dealing with people instead of lab equipment. He’d been promoted to the head of the division not because of comparable ability, but because he was officer material. Perceptor was many things, but an officer he was not.

He was still among the Autobots on the diplomatic team here in Vos, of course, because he did hold every scientist’s respect. A lack of officer rank and responsibility didn’t mean he couldn’t be useful to the negotiations. Ratchet had tapped him as part of the nightshift skeleton team that staffed the shared HQ after the main diplomatic meetings and projects were finished for the day.

Ratchet had hauled Wheeljack onto the dayshift so fast the mech's speedometer had maxed out, but officer or not, the engineer was a walking minefield. Right now, he was muttering to himself intently as he filled his console screen with open windows. The quick glance Jazz had taken over his shoulder made absolutely no sense of the mish-mash of information pulled up for review. Possessing
a functioning sense of self-preservation, the saboteur had gotten the frag out of there. Anyone who
didn't know what was going on in Wheeljack's general vicinity at any given time should flee to
safety.

Anyone. It was some kind of universal rule. The Decepticons had known about it even before the
ceasefire put them in close proximity to the mech for working purposes. The Autobot science team
had started getting awed looks by the third explosion. Their acceptance of Wheeljack's methodology
came from long experience, but it was unnatural how they'd just duck behind the nearest large object
without interrupting their own work. At least flinch, mechs!

Jazz and Ironhide leaned against the wall opposite to Wheeljack and observed in the way of
experienced bomb-handlers. Aw, look at the little explosion waiting to happen. Look at him. So
animated, digging into a new experiment like this. He looked fairly harmless, if one went by
appearances on these things. Busy, productive, and not at all like he built things like the Dinobots at
the drop of a hexagonal nut. The sudden zap of inspiration could light the fuse at any moment. The
hard part was predicting when to dodge.

The two watching Autobots leaned a bit harder into the wall. That cloud of SCIENCE! over his head
was beginning to coalesce ideas into lightning bolts ready to strike. They knew the signs. He took
notes, switched windows, took more notes, and made gestures at no one. From the flickering of his
audio indicators, the conversation had gone to internal commlink. The bobbling of his icon on the
communication network made it something between a conference call and a round robin.

Jazz had seen Wheeljack at work in a laboratory full of other scientists before, and it looked a lot like
what his icon was currently doing. Then again, so did some old arcade games from Earth. The
communication network turned into Pinball as Wheeljack's icon jumped from mech to mech in a
hyperactive pingpong bounce: here a quick hit from Perceptor, there a backhand from Brainstorm, a
parry from Perceptor swatted him again, and Wheeljack's icon bounced down to plink against
Ratchet's icon in multiple connection requests one on top of the other.

Plink-plink-plinka-plink nonstop pestering, until the medic put up a Busy status to shoo him away.

The inventor's icon bounced on its way. Blaster had a division network set up to close the distance
between outposts, and Wheeljack’s icon flicked from scientist to scientist within it. Sure, commcalls
this close to Soundwave ran risks, but so did communication farther away from him. Sometimes a
mech really did just have to call halfway around the planet to check some facts. Wheeljack more than
most, but hey, Blaster didn’t sit across the room from his rival all day just to look decorative. The
Autobot networks were as secured as he could get them, despite whatever subtle attempts to hack
them Soundwave slipped in against the terms of the ceasefire.

Wheeljack’s icon jumped up and landed on Swerve to do its plinking dance of 'Talk to me. Talk to
me now. Now now now.' The hailstorm of connection requests began.

The gregarious mech's icon had been Offline, but it popped Online after about six pings. Jazz's visor
went cerulean in amusement as Wheeljack's icon finally settled like a mosquito finding a perch to

Beside Jazz, Ironhide crossed his arms and looked moderately disgruntled. His optic frames crinkled
at the corners, however, betraying his own amusement with the officer cadre's resident bundle of
energy vibrating in place at the table. Windows flashed and scrolled, the information uploading
directly into the inventor’s processors as the multiple threads his frametype typically used to calculate
speed and routes during racing whirred into utilizing information assessment in a totally different
way. Wheeljack’s altmode wasn’t a muscle car because he lacked for enthusiasm or speed, that was
for sure. Sometimes it was incredibly obvious why someone who could almost keep pace with Blurr
seemed content to stay buried in labwork. The whole universe was Wheeljack's laboratory, and he would somehow manage to do All The Things in it. Creatively, dangerously, and possibly while repurposing his brakes for ‘more important’ uses in the zoom onward.

Jazz had a bet with Bumblebee that Ratchet had drafted Wheeljack into the representative slot just to keep an optic on him. Wheeljack was perpetually five projects ahead of his self-preservation instinct, which was a testimony to his genius but also what made him such a hazard. There was no scare quite like walking in on a live test where the engineer running it had collapsed into recharge after driving himself to exhaustion.

It had to be a science thing. The Autobot scientists all had their various quirks. From what Jazz knew about their counterparts, those quirks only got more extreme the less ethics got in the way. His faction had gotten off light on the egomaniac Dr. Frankensteins that seemed to populate Decepticon labs.

“It’s alive,” he whispered to Ironhide.

Without leaving the intense discussion on security he had going with Red Alert, Blaster shifted his playlist to overly dramatic ‘dun dun dunnn’ horror music. Jazz’s engine sputtered, and he bit the corners of his mouth to keep a grin contained. Of course Wheeljack didn’t notice, but Red Alert’s head turned so narrow optics could glare at the Communications Officer. Blaster lowered the volume.

“Break out the torches and pitchforks, and Primus help us all,” Ironhide whispered back. “Any klik now, Grimlock’s gonna bust the door down.” Jazz’s engine coughed again, but the laughter died when the older Autobot gave him a sober look. “Whatcha need?”

His visor stayed on Wheeljack, but Jazz shifted his attention to the Weapon Specialist. One elbow rubbed into a dent he’d put in this wall. It served as reminder that the ceasefire didn’t mean the war had ended. The Decepticons were far more dangerous that friendly fire could be, even Wheeljack’s version of it. If he was wrong about this, then the peace process could be jerked to a standstill right here and now.

The saboteur kept his gaze forward and spread his hands, unobtrusive but careful that they were both visible. “I might be compromised.”

At the table, Blaster didn’t miss a beat. The music didn’t change. His superior audios had caught the admission, however, and suddenly the communication network was gone. The HUD overlay showing network activity disappeared in a wash of static before a blank 'Error: Access Denied' screen replaced it. The network hadn’t been relocated to an entirely different router, or Jazz’s comm. suite wouldn’t be able to find it instead of merely not being able to access it. Blaster’s security lockdown had kicked him out.

He still had an open line to the network allowing access other Autobots, but that line fed directly through the communication specialist. Any frequency he pinged would be strictly monitored from now on. The Head of SpecOps being everything his title said he was, that was as far as the benefit of a doubt would buy Jazz. An open line was still enough connection for an operative of his abilities. He and Blaster could engage in a nasty bit of hacking warfare over that line. Until Ironhide cleared him, the Communication Officer assumed that could be Jazz’s intent accessing the network from here on out.

Five nanokliks to switch from fussing about the security required to go through the Decepticons’ communication network to locking one of their own out of the Autobot network. Slag, Blaster was good. And he didn’t even hint to Red Alert that there might be a traitor standing at their backs. Not
that the alert wouldn’t hit every officer if this came to that, but Jazz had said the magic words to the appropriate mech.

Ironhide’s weapons systems never spun fully offline; he kept them at standby. Now his forearms whined softly as the inbuilt cannons charged. The blue of his optics scattered into pinpricks of navy and teal as his targeting systems took over and separated the optical sensors into sections for threat assessment scanning. A useful feature for focusing on different parts of a battlefield, but more than a bit intimidating when directed at a single small Autobot.

Jazz hands! As in, Jazz’s hands, in plain sight and rock steady. Not moving in the slightest, because he wasn’t going to so much as twitch anytime soon without Ironhide’s permission. Not up in obvious surrender, either, because he was attempting not to interrupt the other officers’ work until a verdict had been reached, one way or another.

“Ya wanna explain that, Jazz?” Ironhide’s voice stayed low, conversational, and granite-hard. That hadn’t been a suggestion.

The potentially dangerous weapon in his sights understood completely. He’d invoked the Weapon Specialist to handle him.

He kept his explanation short, words clipped. “Prowl and I are at odds, you might’ve noticed. Went looking for why I’m reacting funny. Found an entry that might be the source. Don’t remember changing it, but I gotta hunch it’s why we’re buttin’ bumpers.”

The charging whine became a subsonic thrum, and Ironhide’s feet slid apart to brace for the kick of cannon discharge. Jazz kept very still and offered a wry smile when Optimus Prime glanced up. Blaster’s music covered the quieter sounds of weaponry, but war had tuned their audios for battle. The Prime’s gaze sharpened when he saw Ironhide’s stance. Jazz leaned against the wall, more relaxed than the red mech on the surface, but he’d frozen into a statue that didn’t dare move.

He couldn’t see the ping, but his communication suite was still online. He sensed the network come to life as the Prime asked what was happening.

“What kinda entry?” Ironhide asked. His optics didn’t shift a single sensor behind the glass. Jazz knew because he could feel target-lock crawling over every micron of his plating. The buzz of an active comm. frequency at the edge of hearing didn’t mean Ironhide was distracted.

“Personality profile entry,” he said quietly. “I got Vos as my place of origin.”

The threatening growl of a heavy-duty truck engine stalled out for half a second, although the tough old-timer didn’t otherwise show a hint of surprise. “That’s what’s got ya snappin’ at Prowl?”

He risked turning to look up at him, visor meeting that startled look head-on. “It’s in my root profile, Ironhide. I didn’t put it there -- I entered it for my mission profile.”

Surprise faded into grim concern, and Ironhide reached out a hand. “Show me.”

Jazz slowly bent his neck to open up access under his helm, making no sudden moves because the older Autobot’s other hand stayed at the ready to transform and shoot if necessary. His visor dimmed, no longer trying to appear casual as Ironhide linked in. His body stayed motionless, but his mind flung an access gate at his handler the nanoclick the connection clicked into place. Opening access like this made for dirty data, less reliable than what was pulled from him during a full interface where Ironhide went in under his defenses, but it was fast. Faster than what he was fully prepared to submit to if Ironhide had any difficulty finding what he was looking for, or if there were any doubts
about what he turned up.

Data entered into a mission profile shouldn’t have touched his root profile. Jazz could become his mission profiles spot-on, his mind one of the rare ones possessing a near-perfect ability to generate an adaptive profile to fit any situation. It wasn’t partitioned, parallel processing; Jazz only had one personality. He simply became the cover personality for a while. It was what made him so good at his job. It was also why finding any trace of a mission profile tainting his root personality called for holding him at gunpoint.

Root profiles leaked into cover personas, giving them the sheen of genuine believability, but that didn’t work the other way around. Mission profiles infiltrating a root personality compromised agents. Changing a root profile changed deep data. That kind of change wasn’t done casually, and too much change could cause that drastic divide between CPU and spark leading to a crash.

Beyond the possibility of error and accompanying health concerns, a change that deep was a massive security risk. It could reflect the root personality syncing agreement whatever mission profile it current ran. It could indicate a shift from mask to reality as an agent’s base persona became the cover. Such changes weren’t unheard of. Jazz zeroed in on that when sounding out a Decepticon spy for a turncoat, in fact. The more an agent understood a disguise, the better developed it became, and the easier it became to sympathize instead of just infiltrate.

And here Jazz was, with a base profile slot full of Vos.

Ironhide rifled through him as only his handler could, and Jazz repressed his defensive protocols and firewalls ruthlessly. They didn’t have time for niceties. Trace social protocols back to their basic causation models, and the root personality profile laid the foundation weighty decisions were based on. Entering Vos as his city-state of origin had triggered a reaction to Prowl that he could only understand in the wider context of his mission profile: ‘Jazz; Autobot; Vosian; intended of Starscream; potential government authority figure.’

That Jazz prioritized his desirability to Vos over everything but serving the Autobot Cause. The end justified any and all means. That Jazz had to think that way. It was part of the mission to become Vosian enough to fit in, and Vos had gone to the Decepticons. In order to appeal to Vos -- to be Starscream’s intended -- he had to become one of them. His mission profile had started as a copy of Jazz as shown to the Decepticons, but he’d soaked himself in the culture, ideals, and thoughts patterns around him all night, altering it as quick as possible to fit Vos as it’d been presented to him.

That Jazz was an agent of, not part of, the Autobot officer cadre. He’d only picked up on that difference because he recognized hostiles when they spoke to him. Most of what had been discussed tonight fit his current mindset or stirred uneasy, angry feelings to begin with, so nothing had toggled him as wrong right away. It’d taken standing opposite Prowl and resisting the tactician’s arguments against all things Decepticon -- and therefore Vosian -- to recognize that threat assessment had labeled his fellow officer as enemy instead of ally. The minor difference sitting at the root of Jazz’s social protocols had magnified disagreement into discomfort, unease, and irrational anger.

Now that he’d discovered the cause, fear appeared in the mix as well. Jazz splayed his processors open under Ironhide’s examination because he didn’t trust himself. He’d changed. The key question was whether the change was incidental, or had he been compromised?

If the change had come about by happenstance, a self-induced alteration that Ironhide could track back to a definitive timestamp pointing to Jazz as the editor, it carried some complications but meant Jazz hadn’t been hacked. It’d still need to be dealt with, but not with the same sense of urgency.

Compromising an operative, especially this one, was an act of war. He was an officer, Third-in-
Command of the Autobots, and acting as the equivalent of a good-faith ambassador by permitting Starscream’s courtship. If he’d been hacked, by whom, when, and how? The answer to those questions could end the peace process in one fell swoop.

Tampering with any Autobot violated the ceasefire terms, but tampering under the cover of practices the Decepticons claimed were vital to their society would be an unforgiveable breech of negotiations. It’d reveal everything that had happened in the last two days as an elaborate hoax, one more attempt to deceive the Autobots. One of a dozen other mockeries of diplomacy throughout the course of the war that had proven to be nothing more than Decepticon plots, poisonous bit of treachery hidden under false attempts at peace.

It didn’t require more than half a nanoklik of thought to see how easily Starscream could have fooled him, how the Decepticons could have fooled them all.

Jazz waited for Ironhide’s verdict in stillness and silence. This was out of his hands. The only thing left he could do was pray.

Let it be incidental. For the purpose of ending the Great War, let it be Jazz’s own processors playing tricks on him.

Please, Primus. Please.

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 26

[* * * * *]

[A/N: This part was for DeathComes4U. Thank you so much!]
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]

Pt. 27

[* * * * *]

Ironhide disconnected.

The access gate went dormant, the port latchkeys spiraled open to release the jack they held, and Ironhide drew his jack out of the back of Jazz’s neck. A dozen security checks immediately ran on both sides of the closed connection, scanning firewall integrity and download caches for viruses. Nothing showed up. Jazz hadn’t expected anything on his end other than the expected warning pop-ups informing him what information archives had been rifled through.

In turn, he hadn’t had more than a trickle of access to Ironhide, as to be expected in an interface lacking a reciprocal cable. What he’d sensed had been filtered through heavy isolation protocols keeping him out of his handler’s mind. That left him in the dark as to what Ironhide had found.

Moment of truth. Jazz lifted his head, visor seeking judgment in blue optics.

They held no expression whatsoever as the Weapon Specialist coiled and stowed his cable. He took his time. Once it was put away, he shut the storage hatch and only then cocked his head to regard the smaller Autobot.

Jazz’s vents closed. Okay, now was the moment of truth.

Forearm weaponry whirr-clicked, and the saboteur nearly shied away in skittish caution as Ironhide raised one hand toward him. Here it was; he’d been compromised by that fragging backstabbing Seeker, and now he had to be taken down for his own good. The first shot of the next battle had been fired. The war went on --

Uh, please stand by for more information.

“Ironhide?” This was not what he expected. Marched at gunpoint, maybe, but not poked in the shoulder until he turned around, and then poked between the doors until he walked. “Hey, what -- “ Poke. “C’mon.” Poke poke. “What’re you doing?”

Doors waggled in protest as he resisted the prodding, but he didn’t dare turn and confront the mech. He wasn’t sure if he was prisoner or peer at the moment. Fingers tapped on his windshield before Ironhide’s palm settled on the glass and shoved. The mech had Grade A shoves, applicable to herding grouchy Dinobots or bodyguarding self-sacrificing Primes alike. Jazz’s heels scooted across the floor. Any more force, and he’d leave skidmarks.


Grumbling the whole way, the smaller Autobot let himself be shoved back toward the table. The hand on his altmode’s roof steered him around his chair when they got there, and it pushed down. Jazz dropped into the seat and peered over his shoulder. He’d sit where directed. Now what? Judgment before everyone?
A big hand patted him on the helm before turning his head forward and letting go. The Weapon Specialist took up guard behind him. Jazz twisted to give him a quizzical look, but the hand returned. Thumb and middle finger delicately trapped one sensor-dense helm projection in their grasp and used it to turn him facing forward again like a teacher twisting a brat’s ear. ‘Pay attention to the meeting, kid.’

Jazz, of course, didn’t take the treatment quietly. ‘Owww.’ Whining, he kinked his neck up to keep pressure off his antenna. ‘Noo, I don’t wanna be an officer! I wanna infiltrate the Decepticons and blow things up!’ Ironhide’s fingers dug in and lifted a bit to shake him. Stern teacher didn’t like bratty behavior, which only made the brat-saboteur fuss more. ‘Don’t pinch! Ow, ow, stoppit!’

It didn’t hurt that much, not when he could easily dial down the receptors for his scanner suites, but the fussing got Ironhide to frown in that way he did when hiding a smile. Guards didn’t smile over prisoner antics.

That wasn’t spoken confirmation, but the deep tension coiling Jazz’s cables into knots relaxed one right after another. Far inside his chassis, a cascading subsonic clicking could be heard as tiny moving parts resumed normal functions. Tightened tank gaskets opened, skreeing softly. His fuel pump rate steadied out, and transformation joints gave a quiet hiss of hydraulic pressure easing. Stress bled off his body in a wave of released electricity as threat assessment dialed systems back from high alert.

None of which could be felt or heard from further than an arm’s length away. The wriggling and complaining hid any hint that he’d been dead-center in Ironhide’s targeting sights. The mechs prepared to take him down saw it anyway. Blaster and Optimus Prime stood down without showing how close they’d been to activating their own weaponry, and the Prime’s optics crinkled in a smile at the same time Blaster snickered.

The cadre stopped what they were doing to watch Jazz bat uselessly at Ironhide’s hand. Red Alert’s disapproval radiated from the stiff set of his shoulders. Across the table from the Security Director, Prowl’s lips tightened fractionally, and the tactician turned back to work. Dual waves of wordless reproof washed through the room. This was no time for play.

Therefore, it was the perfect time for play. Everyone in this room had been keyed up for far too long, and Jazz was the unofficial Autobot morale officer. Secondary function: activate!

Jazz whined some more. He whined at Blaster for help, but the carrier mech golf clapped for Ironhide. Ironhide sniggered at the genteel applause and shook Jazz some more. Whining at Red Alert got him a lack of help somehow flavored strongly by the opinion that the impromptu discipline was well-deserved. A cold glare from Prowl ended the appeal for aid before it began, and Jazz redirected to whimper at Ratchet instead. How the medic managed to roll his optics in response was a mystery. Prime shook his head at him, still smiling.

Finally, Jazz stopped whining and just sulked. Fine. He’d be a good Third-in-Command. He’d sit here and pay attention to the meeting like every other boring officer here. Would that satisfy the meanie holding him captive?

Ironhide gave him one more shake before releasing his sensitive equipment, and he winced. “Now I know what the humans mean when they say someone has ‘em by the short hairs,” he said in a resentful mutter as he rubbed his abused helm projection. He promptly had to fend off Ironhide’s hand when the older mech barked a laugh and pinched his fingers in mock threat. “Ah-ah! No. You stop that. Shoo!”

“You do not have any hair, much less any of a shorter length. Why would -- oh, I see.” Prowl cut
himself off before anyone had to explain the idiom to him, but it was too late.

Jazz collapsed onto the table to giggle into his forearms. Ironhide’s hand lay warm and reassuring between his helm projections, vibrating in time with the loud guffaws behind him. Blaster’s brighter, higher laughter wove through theirs, underscored by Red Alert’s exasperated grumbling. Ratchet’s laughter had an edge of hysteria, perhaps because Optimus Prime sat beside him staring at the ceiling as if it held the answers to life, the universe, and everything. Their leader was Not Laughing so loud he shook in contained amusement.

Prowl reset his optics and his vocalizer twice in quick succession as he caught on, but the expected frown faded into a contemplative look. One side of his mouth quirked up as he watched the laughter die down. When he struck, it was with the swift precision one would expect of a master tactician. “I have to disagree, Jazz. I believe the ‘short hairs’ are what Ratchet will have the Constructicons by.”

A low sputter of semi-truck engines signaled the end of their Prime’s ability to deal. Dignified leader or not, he folded his arms and brought a hand up to shield his optics. It failed to hide how they glittered laughing blue, overflowing with mischief. “Better than a parking brake,” came from under that hand, and Jazz hiccuped as a surprised gasp met a burst of shocked laughter coming out.

That was too much. He wheezed into his arms while Ironhide roared helplessly, big hands falling to his shoulders to squeeze in shared mirth. Blaster seemed in danger of falling off his seat. Even Prowl’s optics widened, although his expression stayed near deadpan.

Evidently, Ratchet was picturing the same thing they were. The medic threw himself back in his seat and make a winding gesture, rolling his wrists. His grin twitched, the laughter hitching his vents struggling to escape his control, but he kept his voice fairly level as he said, “C’mere, fraggers. We need to chat.”

He looked pleased when their esteemed commander flailed his free hand at him, the sputtering laughter of his engine making wide shoulders shake. One of Prowl’s optic ridges went up in speculation at the flicker of Optimus’ headlights, and his head tilted forward in an attempt to see under the Prime’s cupped hand. It clamped down over blue optics to hide their betraying expressiveness from sight. Prowl peered closer. Ratchet leaned in on the other side, grinning, and Optimus flailed at his too-curious friends again as his engine gave away just how hard he was laughing.

Blaster laughed harder and much louder, dignity tossed aside. He said something about, “Save a shuttle, ride a chemist,” but Red Alert drowned him out with a strident demand for whatever script the trio across the table had come up with.

The Security Director’s patience had come to an end. They were up to something. He could tell. Prowl and Prime were scheming. That was almost as bad as whenever Prowl and Jazz plotted. He demanded an update on their nefarious doings right now!

Someday, the mech would catch on to the way they hung around him whenever they surrendered their respective plots and schemes over to his tender mercies. Tactical and Special Operations might cause mischief and mayhem in their own ways, but Security did contingency planning. It sounded like a curse when Jazz said it and a sigh of relief when Prowl did.

If there was any justice in the afterlife, the Pit had a special place reserved just for Security mechs. The opposing faction’s tacticians and operatives had certainly sworn to send them there post-haste if they ever got their hands on the gearheads, anyway. Jazz had often wished fire and smelting upon whomever did Red Alert’s job over in the Decepticons. Nobody could match the Lamborghini,

Cue agents shuddering in collective horror, visions of compromised missions haunting their recharge.

Boogeyman to Decepticons, bane of existence to the SpecOps Division, asset to Tactical. Red Alert could pull apart anything they gave him, find the weak spots, and nail planks of backup plans and reinforcements in place.

An unholy gleam entered his optics when commander and Second-in-Command shared the current scheme, but the scolding began immediately. “How did you expect this to pass? No. No, rewrite this, I won’t have it!” Quick fingers flicked over the table’s inbuilt console screen as he sent open windows across to be reviewed. “This gives away our position on the subject. Phrase it in neutral terms.”

Prowl accepted the windows with a tap of his fingers on console but said, “Keep in mind that it is an outline to be worked from during the actual conversation, Red Alert.”

“Which makes a neutral starting point even more important! They’ll seize any opportunity to take the lead in the conversation, and exposing our opinions invites questioning into the motives behind them. Rewrite it.”

An excellent point, and one Jazz noted for his own use. Prowl simply inclined his head in acceptance of the scolding. “Very well.” Optimus Prime rumbled low beside Ratchet as they leaned in to read the screen in front of him when he started making changes.

The scraping whirr of overworked fans and quiet conversation filled the room as the humorous interlude closed. Business resumed. They were calmer for it, pump rates reduced by a few beats and minds refocused after the short respite. Information assessment subprocessors kicked it over to threat assessment, which passed approval for Jazz’s secondary function to deactivate. The danger had passed.

Morale wasn’t just about lifting everyone’s spirits into a more upbeat attitude when they were down. Sometimes it was about anticipating the build-up of tension and making sure it didn’t reach the breaking point. Ironhide’s hands slid around to sit on Jazz’s shoulder tires as the smaller Autobot sat back, duty fulfilled, and they watched their fellow officers conspire the way the Autobots generally watched the Dinobots charge into a fight: somebody was going to get an aft-kicking, and thank Primus it wasn’t them.

It was a strangely satisfying scene.

“‘Cons aren’t gonna know what hit ‘em.”

One side of Jazz’s mouth stretched in a lopsided grin. “Nah, they will. We’re going to be so open, just the most open of open communication happening, here. It’ll be all the worse that way.” Seeing the artillery incoming before it blew their plans open would inspire a flurry of panic, with any luck. The Autobots wanted to see how the contracts worked, and the point of this was to study how the Decepticons reacted.

That didn’t mean he wasn’t above enjoying some petty revenge, however. Maybe that was why he felt a tad smug watching the others plot. He did so hope that Starscream lost his cool seeing these weird courtship rules turned around on him like one of Megatron’s grandiose weapons gone wrong, back on Earth. Serve the slagging Seeker right. The Autobots were going to be nice, polite, and ruthless while smacking the Decepticons right between the optics, and Jazz wanted to see Starscream’s know-it-all mask shatter.
Across the table, Wheeljack emerged from the strange Twilight Zone of science enough to finally notice that things had happened here in the real world. The engineer looked up from his work and glanced about, cataloguing the differences. Everyone had shifted around. Blaster had been abandoned by Red Alert, who’d gone around to the other side of the table. The boombox was now drifting down the table to join the group not blatantly up to mischief and mayhem.

Wheeljack reset his optics at that bunch before moving on, and his optics caught on Jazz. Specifically, he saw the red mech looming behind him like a sentry. Audio indicators flashed a dim inquisitive pattern, a discreet ‘Should I be worried?’ Jazz shrugged, which probably was less helpful than Wheeljack wished.

However, Ratchet let rip a cackle worthy of the Wicked Witch of the West, and that distracted the inventor. His helm whipped around. The group down the table from him had rearranged to allow Red Alert at the consoles they were using, and the Security Director had both hands flat on the table, framing something on the screen for the others to read. Whatever it was, it had the Prime’s optics sparkling and Ratchet doing a credible imitation of someone out for Toto’s blood. A faint smile teased over Prowl’s lips as he read. It was not a sight for the weak of spark.

“I didn’t do it,” swore Jazz when the engineer looked back to him, accusation clear.

“I didn’t do it either,” said Wheeljack. It came out thoughtful, if not a little wary. So much for the usual suspects.

The meeting wasn’t in Kansas anymore, he could tell. The plan had swept them clean away, and they were officially somewhere in Oz. Nobody knew the Chief Medical Officer like Wheeljack did; they’d been friends for ages. Wheeljack knew things had gotten weird: right now his friend was having far too much fun. Instead of retreating into the medbay in a cloud of cranky refusal to play along, Ratchet was sitting there rubbing his hands together. The medic only got that into things when the choice became giving up entirely or working with the weirdness.

But when Ratchet played along, he played to win. The only way to deal with strange happenings was to one-up the strangeness. His mad cackling would alarm anyone who knew he wasn’t being serious. The overdone evil act was a platoon of flying monkeys away from going completely over the top. Swoop would do. After years of rolling with the chaos of Earth, the pterodactyl would hop into the role without even blinking.

For that matter, any Autobot who’d been on the Ark mission would join up without questioning what was going on. They’d learned that when the slag hit the fan, fighting the flow didn’t work half as well as riding it. That was why most of the Earth Autobot crew had ended up as the diplomatic team, even those who weren’t specialists. They were a working team that knew how to handle random craziness. Earth had strained their self-modification program protocols, but stretching the limits of their ability to adapt had given them flexibility even the surviving war-veteran Cybertronians lacked.

It’d become a point of pride. "I've seen stranger!" cried the mechs from Earth, whatever the oddness they were called in on.

That battlcry had been in full effect tonight. The Autobots on the network earlier had charged in, ready to save the day despite not knowing what was going on. Having a script for what they were acting out wasn’t required; they could ad-lib. For that matter, Jazz owed Mirage a commendation for how he’d walked in on the hallway debacle between him and Starscream. Instead of shutting down the show, his operative had gracefully played off whatever slivers of information he’d put together on his own. Sunstreaker deserved even more credit for following the spy’s lead. Blind faith and good acting alone had kept the duo from causing a scene.
More of a scene. A worse scene than he and Starscream had caused on their own, after everyone got out of their way.

Actually, thinking back on it, events might have taken a far different turn if Mirage and Sunstreaker had separated them. The ceasefire might not have been put in such peril, at the price of Jazz almost certainly missing out on the showdown in Tarn. Which might not have happened at all, if the tension in the hallway had stopped at a purely sexual level. Hmm. Well, nothing gained by thinking about might-have-beens. What was done was done. Mirage and Sunstreaker had played along, as Jazz would have expected of any Autobot who’d faced down the strangeness of Earth.

Really, in context of the stuff that had happened on Earth, seeing the Decepticon Air Commander and Autobot Head of SpecOps locked in an intimate embrace wasn’t all that weird. They’d probably seen worse. Mirage had regularly spied in the Decepticon underwater base, and Jazz had read his reports. The hallway incident likely registered as a solid six on the spy’s personal Scale of Ridiculous. Sunstreaker was a frontliner, so he probably rated it at an eight or nine. It definitely didn’t score into Purple Griffin territory.

It took a peculiar mindset to deal with events that went that far. Flat refusal to recognize anything as too bizarre to be unreal gave those mechs a matter-of-fact perspective on things that had the rest of the Autobots gaping. Their CPUs threatened to crash, blotting out what was in front of their optics, but some mechs could take anything they saw in stride and adapt to it. It was a skill most of the Earth crews in both factions had picked up. The Dinobots excelled at it. The Aerialbots weren’t far behind. The Stunticons had a natural talent at causing the insanity in the first place, to the point they didn’t even seem to notice mind-boggling weirdness as out of the ordinary.

The infamous Giant Purple Griffin had been one of Megatron’s more brilliant weapons intended to take advantage of that inability to deal with things seemingly too strange to be real. It had been met by blank stares by the Autobot officer cadre. They’d had no idea how to respond.

Fireflight, on the other hand, had taken one look at the screen and quoted out of nowhere, “I gotta tell ya, from up here the local flora and fauna are quite remarkable.” Because, obviously, the only sensible solution to the absurdity had been to call upon the A-Team.

It worked. Instead of freezing up from the bombardment of incongruous events, flat acceptance that this was the new normal balanced them. Adapting let them react. Backwards as it seemed, joining the ongoing nonsense somehow worked.

Once upon Planet Earth, Laserbeak had gotten into the Ark. There had been no way -- no way -- the Cassetticon could have gotten past Jazz and Blaster’s joint efforts. While Jazz and Blaster had stood there in speechless, indignant stillness, literally unable to process what they were seeing because they knew it couldn’t be happening, Red Alert had looked at Laserbeak, accepted that countermeasures had failed against all logic, and moved on to dealing with the situation as it was instead of how reason told him it should be. He’d picked up a giant flyswatter and chased Laserbeak from the Ark.

It didn’t matter how crazy things got. The Autobots of Earth armed themselves with basketballs, laserpointers, and flyswatters alongside the standard weaponry. They’d been fully immersed in Oz on Earth, and there wasn’t anything on Cybertron that could scare them anymore. Bring on the Yellow Brick Road. They’d hit it accelerating on all four wheels.

From the warm rumbling in Optimus’ direction and Prowl’s suppressed smile, they were careening down it at well above the speed limit.

Ironhide shook his head when Wheeljack gave him an accusing look. Nope, he hadn’t done it, either. Jazz directed a suspicious stare of his own at Blaster, but the boombox concentrated on shining his
halo. He’d sat back down in his seat, and now he poured on the meltingly innocent expression. Who, him? Why suspect him? He’d done nothing. There were no troublemakers down here at the end of the table. Only Saint Blaster sat here. Behold his innocence.

Wheeljack’s vents huffed, scoffing at the same moment Jazz’s did.

They looked at each other in mild surprise, then glanced to the side as one. Blaster pumped the holy light of innocence up a notch. They looked back to each other. After a moment of mutual blinking back and forth, Jazz raised both shoulders in a baffled shrug. Nobody here but acolytes to Saint Blaster the Innocent; move along, move along.

Amused, Wheeljack shook his head at him before diving back into his work. He was oblivious to the world again within a klik.

Jazz grinned ruefully. “Sooooo,” he drew out as he tipped his helm back. The top thunked under Ironhide’s bumper, and he looked up, barely able to see his handler peering down at him over the van grill and windshield in the way. “I’m clean?”

A snort of vents clearing answered the baby blue visored version of Blaster’s innocent look. One big hand came down to cover it and push his head down to face forward again. “Nobody’s tampered with you.”

“Amen.”

Nobody looked up at the fervent gratitude, however oddly it was phrased. Neither Ironhide nor Jazz had raised their voices beyond a level conversational volume, and the rest of the table was occupied. Optimus Prime had temporarily taken center stage in the scheming at the head of the table, while Red Alert supervised and Prowl looked skeptical. Ratchet broke into another witch’s cackle. Wheeljack was buried in science, icon dancing about the communication network like a hyperactive ping-pong ball.

That’s how Ironhide and Jazz wanted it to stay. This was a minor security issue. No need for alarm, and no one else needed to be involved if it cleared up as easily as a verification scan. An operative’s handler was meant to take care of such things, after all.

Blaster leaned in to make sure, however. He’d heard everything they had said earlier, and he hadn’t called anyone else’s attention to it because the first action Jazz had taken was the correct one for an agent suspecting he’d been compromised. Ironhide would have taken the next step in security measures if those suspicions had turned out to be correct. Still, it was best that Saint Blaster take a holiday, leaving Blaster the Communication Officer to double check that the the situation was under control. “We cool, mechs?”

The hand resting on Jazz’s helm ruffled his sensor projections, and his engine made little complaining sputters as he batted at it. “Timestamp checks out,” he confirmed. “We’re good.” Debatably so, as that left a whole new problem to deal with.

Ironhide spread his fingers to grip the top of the black helm, rattling it back and forth as if answers would pop out an audio if he shook hard enough. He said, “Far as I can tell, only mech t’ go in there’s the mech who’s supposed to. Leave’s the obvious question, though.” That big hand pulled the smaller Autobot’s helm back, and the stern frown of a Weapon Specialist taking someone to task was turned on him. Even upside-down, it looked more troubled than angered. “Why’re you I.D.ing as one of them, now?”

Relief weakened his struts to rubber for a brief instant. What was that saying about how almost only
mattered in horseshoes? Being fairly certain and having definitive confirmation were completely different things when it came to explosives and Special Operations agents, and for much the same reason. Hearing Ironhide actually say the words out loud erased lingering doubt. He hadn’t been tampered with.

Jazz dimmed his visor and took the time to pull in a deep breath. Fresh air flushed his ventilation system of stale fear, and he reveled in the luxury of having the confidence in his surroundings to feel safe. This was what it felt like to trust. If not himself, then he trusted his handler to have him under control. He was in good company, and that meant he could let his guard drop.

The hand on his helm supported it as the tensile cables in his neck relaxed, and a lazy smile stretched his cheeks at Ironhide’s puzzled look. A touch confused, but not alarmed. Trusting comrades-in-arms was something the Decepticons would never understand, not with their terms and conditions for every relationship.

So why was he identifying as a Vosian, now, if he wasn’t a Decepticon? “Not sure,” he said as he cycled the air out. “Have some theories, but I hadn’t gotten past the shock factor to start thinkin’ yet.”

“What’s your gut feeling?” Blaster asked.

Time to start throwing the theories out in hopes of hitting something. “I’m mainly pinning it on turning this into an op outta nowhere. I’m assemblin’ a deep-cover profile based on the me Screamer’s already seen and interacted with. I gotta be officer and operative. Can’t change too much, or it’ll start to show in how our ‘Bots react to me. Threat assessment’s spittin’ up warnings against taking off the mission profile in case of observation, even here at the base. I gotta play both sides of thi, anytime and any place. The closer I keep this profile to real, the less likely I’m gonna get caught slippin’ up during the peace talks.” He frowned, vaguely discomfited by this train of thought. “I gotta be a Vosian right there with everything else I am, everywhere.”

Ironhide’s thumbs slid along his forehelm while the red mech mulled that over. “Infiltratin’ them out in the open, as one of us. Gonna be a long-term run, here.” Jazz straddling the faction lines during the entire length of the peace negotiations painted a precarious picture. He was their best saboteur, one of their best undercover agents, but this operation was right out in the open where the risk of someone exposing his cover personae only increased as he built it up. It had to fit over his real personality like a paintjob instead of fake armor welded over on his real plating. Nothing false, just new colors. “Could be seein’ why that flipped your baseline into playin’ one of them for real.”

Jazz saw it, too. He dug, following the path of rifled files that Ironhide had already searched through. “Could be. From what I can tell…” What he found tightened his lips into something less a frown and more a disturbed, unhappy non-expression. “Yeah. I might’ve jumped the gun on this one. Root profile looks like it’s integrating in line with mission priorities.” Playing his cards this close to his chest meant showing the same game face to everyone, even his allies. He wasn’t compromised; he was just undercover, still. Even here, even now.

That didn’t explain why he hadn’t known about it. That bothered him.

A thoughtful hum came from Blaster’s direction. “Right hand ain’t talkin’ to your left hand, or did the string get cut between the cans?”

His fans stuttered an incredulous laugh. “Cutting you outta the loop on this is a Bad Idea, capital letters included and extra emphasis on the bad. Whatever’s up in here,” he tapped the side of his head as he rolled his helm to the side to look at the Comm. Officer, “I want everybody in this room in on it.” Outside of this room, only Jazz the agent could be out and about, but playing it this close to real put him in a particularly dangerous situation.
It took more effort to ease his doors down this time, and Jazz bent his head forward to stare at the tabletop. Running deep cover on his main personality profile shoveled major responsibility onto his shoulders. He had to keep the act and the real mech separate even though his base profile might start adopting more and more foreign elements to further his disguise. Worse than that, he’d witnessed firsthand how charming and persuasive Starscream could be. The Seeker could turn Autobot agents, given the opportunity, and Jazz would be right there beside him playing a Vosian for a long, long time if this mission panned out the way it was supposed to. Oof.

A thumb rubbed one helm projection, steady pressure against the sensitive receptors as Ironhide stood like a rock-solid support behind him. It soothed some of the worries that had jumped to mind. Jazz wasn’t in this alone. There would be one safe place where he could remember who he really was, and a group of officers who’d help remind him who he was. Success would mean the ceasefire became an actual treaty, and if he had to be the last undercover agent in a dead war, then it would be worth any sacrifice, even that of his self.

Mind elsewhere, Jazz leaned into Ironhide’s hand and sighed. “I’m not intentionally keeping myself or any of you in the dark. It could be as simple as needing t’ power down and get a real defrag going. Internal communication between my processors’s gone straight to the Pit. I can see it now that I’m paying attention.” Some of his subprocessors were still lagging from pulling up tags for the debriefing packets, and that had been over a cycle ago. The sheer amount of files being shuffled about and re-evaluated were bogging him down as background programs pulled processing power.

As alarming as not remembering the change was, the frustrating fact could be that the edit notice had been buried in among the hundreds of files already pinging updates at information and threat assessment. One of his subprocessors had probably approved it without drawing conscious thought to it, just like any non-vital decision made under the surface of his mind while he was busy. More important things had been happening at the time, or so information assessment had decided for him.

Frag, he hated getting overwhelmed. It happened infrequently enough that he didn’t recognize the signs before they hit him like this. Too many things to do, too many threads of information to follow. He was only one mech, after all. It didn’t help that this fit none of the situations he knew to watch out for. Eons of war, and navigating the rush of information generated by the peace process was what swamped him.

Leaving him with a profile slot full of Vos. “Should ya change it back?” Ironhide asked. The question came out unsure, as well it should.

A change made based off of subconscious cues could be consciously fought, but not without possible backlash. Mind and spark might fall out of sync. This was a relatively minor change, unlikely to cause a crash, but any type of base information change needed some serious thought applied to the cause of the shift. It was the kind of thing that mechs learned to pay attention to before a minor subconscious change became a major conscious decision down the road somewhere.

After all, changing his city of origin might someday mean that he’d change allegiance to it as well. Considering how strongly Vosians seemed to feel about their city-state, that wasn’t such a farfetched future. Deeply rooted ties could put him in conflict with the Autobot Cause.

Jazz shimmied his shoulders, shrugging off the chill that suddenly ran down his backstruts. His doors flexed up and down as he worked himself down into his chair, arms crossing over his bumper once he was comfortable. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea. There’s nothin’ to change it back to,” he said, pushing the words out slowly. “Slot’s been empty since before I got promoted. Not even my personnel file’s got my city of origin in it anymore.” He should know. He’d tracked down and erased every copy out there.
Blaster frowned at that, but Ironhide shrugged. Higher level operatives tended to delete any information that could be used to create accurate psychological profiles. It was standard practice, and an ongoing battle between Security and SpecOps. Jazz’s back-ups had his agents’ full files, but he kept those under such heavy encryption even he had trouble accessing them. Red Alert staged occasional raids into SpecOps’ secure files trying to get them. That gave the division good practice in case of hostile hacking, but there were times Jazz wanted to strangle Security mechs with their own professed concern for plugging leaks. Exposing his agents’ backgrounds was a security leak. The more personal details they could filter out of their personnel files and base profiles, the more realistic their cover profiles were. Manufactured out of thin air, a cover looked solid as the real thing when there were no incriminating facts hidden underneath.

“I’m gettin’ the idea that the slot filled because of the city itself.” The saboteur’s fingers tapped restless patterns on his sides. Explaining what the back of his mind had cooked up meant taking it out into the light to study, and what a strange twist of thought it looked like out in the open. “Turn my axles if Screamer isn’t right. Vos had -- has? -- somethin’ only a couple of the other major cities had. The more I think about it, the more it stands out. Picture goin’ undercover.” One hand untucked to splay in front of him, opening up an imaginary mission profile. “I slide most cities into that slot, and it’s adjust an accent here, know a few details there, and memorize a factory address. Here’s where I used to hang out, here’s where I used to work.” He clapped his hands together. “Boom. I pass.”

Blaster cocked his head, optics distant as he thought that over. “Yeah. Yeah, know whatcha mean.”

“He managed the missions because he was a professional, but the mission profiles had itched in the mechanisms over his spark like a rust infection. His base profile came in at right angles to most of the assumed changes. Conversely, that was why his Praxian cover had been one of his best. None of the Decepticons had anticipated a spark like his being able to warp that far under the mental shift required to pass as a Praxian.

“Passing as an Iaconian…” He grimaced. “I’ve done it. I’ve got zilch common ground with the upper class there, but I’ve filled in as the help before. Mirage gets called in for the snob-ops.” Lower class servants were easy to mimic, but the servile ever-present awareness of status or lack thereof repulsed him. Passing as a noble had been harder yet. He could borrow some of the pretentious mannerisms of the noblemechs, but Iacon had been a world in and of itself. His Iaconian cover profiles had been uneasy fits at best.

“Dunno if there’s an oven out there big enough to bake me some of that upper crust,” Blaster muttered. “But I get what you’re saying. I’m trying to wrap my head around claiming to be from the Vos jet set, and I got a fat lot of nothing.”


Jazz gestured at nothing, helpless. Look at all the things he knew. “Don’t look at me.”

Blaster nodded. “Flyers and ‘Cons, and that’s about it for me, too. Nothing about accent or rules or hobbies or anything but flying. Flyer and Decepticons. I could either infiltrate that with my optics off -- or blow it ’cause I’m blind to what it takes to be one of them.”
“Huh,” all three of them said, stumped.

Jazz pored over their lack of information versus the bucket of it he’d been doused in tonight. “So I’m finding it’ll take more to pass as Vosian than I thought, and all these things I’m learnin’ aren’t…bad. I mean, other than the obvious, I’m agreeing with a lot of what I heard. How likely is it that this’s a case of my mind fillin’ a void?” The obvious part being, of course, the fact that this city-state structure talked up at him belonged wholesale to the Decepticons.

Beyond that, however, the culture he’d tripped over tonight was difficult to argue against, much less outright disagree with. If his profile’s open slot had scooped up the first decent fit his mind found, he’d rest easier. A search program that had found a compatible fill for an open spot, nothing more or less significant? He could work with that. He’d intentionally left the slot open for the course of the war, but his self-modification program protocols hadn’t been tweaked past trying to occasionally fill it.

Ironhide drummed his fingers on the black helm under his hand when it turned, Jazz looking up at him for an opinion. “Nah. You’ve used your home as your cover ‘fore this. It didn’t auto-fill your base profile.”

The Weapon Specialist was squinting into the middle distance, so he didn’t see the momentary stillness that froze the expressive blue visor turned up toward him. That line of thought depended on Jazz being compatible with his city-state of origin, now didn’t it?

“It’s not this mess of politics an’ culture an’ slag,” the red mech said, shaking his head. Waving a hand to dismiss Jazz’s suggestion, he moved from the spot behind the black-and-white Autobot and pulled out his own chair. He sat down in a creak of old joints and dry gears and leaned an elbow on the table to face the other two officers. “Might seem like ya understand Vos, but that’s surface agreement. Slot wouldn’t fill just ‘cause you like a few ideas.” He pointed at Jazz, optics narrow. “You’re not one to go off half-cocked. It’s coincidence that the timing fits like a nut and bolt, nothin’ more. Check things over after a good long defrag, and grease me if it ain’t your subprocessors paintin’ you up pretty for the flyboys.”

Filling a root profile slot for purposes of camouflage alone sounded crazy, tampering with his base personality in order to pass as someone he was but wasn’t. It was risky as assigning a top officer a covert mission right under Starscream’s nosecone.

In that light, it was probable. Jazz prodded at the theory looking for the weak point, but it felt solid. It was entirely possible, if eerily convenient, that his subprocessors were making him look like a Vosian for the duration of the mission.

It seemed impossibly simple. Too simple.

Then again, it really would be that simple if the city resonated with his core.

Ironhide’s assurance came up against the instinctive distrust of an experienced infiltrator, and he wondered. Too simple, too easy, but convenient enough to use for now. Threat assessment took his caution and made a note. A slight shift in beliefs could change allegiances, and stable footing could turn to treacherous ground. The biggest threats were the hidden ones, especially the ones masquerading as something benign.

In his own mind, Jazz suspected himself.

“So, what now?” One hand wavered mid-air, indecisive, and Blaster followed that by leaning forward to open both hands at Jazz. “How should we play it? If this is just part of your cover, we got
it. No problemo.” When the smaller Autobot avoided his optics, he laid his hands flat on the table. “Hey, keep it cool, cat. It’s going to rattle our cages having a wolf in the fold, but that ain’t all bad. Sure, you and Prowler will snap and bite at each other, but we got this. Cover is cover, and he’ll keep it in mind. ‘Sides, somebody with an inside perspective might be a good thing, y’know? Steal a look in their minds.”

“See what th’ Decepticreeps want us to think?” Ironhide mused. “Could work.”

Blaster’s grin was sharp. “Sheepicrons got themselves a wolf-shaped blind. Use him to see what they want to show us, and use him to show them what we want ’em to see.”

“Baa baa,” Ironhide drawled, a sly smile blooming to match Blaster’s.

“Whoa, hold on, here. I don’t want to be some kinda,” Jazz cut himself off, lowered his voice, and spelled it out, “e-x-p-e-r-i-m-e-n-t.”

The three Autobots automatically glanced across the table. Wheeljack continued chortling quietly to himself. Windows flashed on his console screen and lit his face from below in an unnerving fashion. He looked like a mad scientist at work. His favorite word hadn’t caught his attention, thank Primus.

Regardless, they drew closer together in a defensive herd against any predatory science that might try to pick off a stray. A familiar scent was on the nonexistent breeze. Science was nigh. They could all but hear it stalking them. They were armed, dangerous, and would flee like spooked rookies the nanoklik Wheeljack asked for volunteers to test whatever he was working on.

“No, we can use this,” Blaster said out of the side of his mouth. “Prowler’s got to take things slow for his own sake, but you know how he is. Even if he agreed with an ideal Decepticon Frag-U-topia -- “

“Never thinkin’ of it as anything else from now on.”

The Comm. Officer exchanged smirks with Ironhide before they both went back to watching Wheeljack warily. “Prowl’s a stick-in-the-mud on a good day when it comes to this kinda stuff. He’d slam on the brakes no matter if he believed the info or not, so this’ll work out fine. We got advocates for the extremes. You pedal-to-the-metal pro-Vos and knowin’ it,” he pointed at Jazz, then at Prowl, “and him anti-Con and dragging his heels.”

Jazz narrowed his visor, the glass sliding into a dark band that only lightened a few shades as he thought. “Don’t think I’m gonna go that far with the Vos thing, Blaster.” He hoped not, anyway. Running a hand under his chin, he rubbed the knuckles of his forefinger along his jaw. They felt like they always had. Had anything really changed? Could he be sure? He could become his greatest enemy, and he’d think it was his own idea the whole time.

But Blaster was right. “It wouldn’t be the first time we’ve been on different sides of an issue,” he agreed eventually, hesitating over the words. “I’m just not quite sold on it. We start a fight that goes too far, and we’ll be at each other’s fuel lines before anybody else can -- ”

“Eureka!” Wheeljack shouted, rocketing upright in his chair, arm thrust up.

“Fire in the hole!” Ironhide bellowed, and the command staff hit the floor in vertical three-car pile-ups a split second later. Optimus Prime lunged over the table in an impressive leap to take shelter on the other side, back braced against a chair.

“I’ve got it!” Wheeljack’s hand fell from pointing at the ceiling, and he blinked around the abruptly
deserted table. “I’ve…uh…was it something I said?”

“No, no, of course not.” Every inch their dignified leader, the Prime straightened from his reflexive crouch up to his full height and dusted himself off casually. “I’d like a word with you, Ironhide.” As if that were what he’d suddenly relocated for.

The old red mech took his extended hand, and Optimus heaved him to his feet. “Sure, Prime.” Like nothing at all had just happened, they turned their backs to the table and began talking in low voices.

Leaving Wheeljack blinking at their backs. He looked to the side at the group of mechs piled on the floor right as Prowl sat up with every scrap of dignity not currently being used by Optimus Prime. “I fell down,” the tactician said curtly. “My knee joint stuck.”

Freed from Prowl’s weight, Ratchet sat up in a disgruntled rev of engines. “Fixed it.”

Wheeljack stared. He blinked. A confused series of clicks came from his vocalizer. He didn’t seem to know how to respond to the blatant lies.

Blaster’s hand came into sight over the edge of the table. “I found Waldo!”

“He’s a security risk!” Red Alert’s helm projections popped up over on the other side, and suspicious blue optics glowered. “No one has ever informed me how they keep losing him. Where was he? Has he been debriefed and cleared to be in this meeting?”

“Oh, lost him again.”

“Blaster! That’s not funny!”

Jazz rolled out from under the table on Wheeljack’s side and sat up to rest his elbow in the inventor’s lap as Blaster and Red Alert bickered. By the time they were done arguing about whether or not Waldo was a Decepticon spy, they’d have smoothed over the part where they’d have to awkwardly explain why exactly they’d ducked under cover for no good reason. Wheeljack didn’t even have his toolset out anymore. He wasn’t that hazardous.

The walking danger zone looked down at the black-and-white mech in his lap a bit mournfully.

“What’s your excuse?”

He propped his chin on his hands and smiled upward. “Ironhide and Blaster landed on top of me.”

Wheeljack looked at the two Autobots and their larger frametypes. Jazz was many things, but big he was not. “Good excuse.”

“I thought so. Whatcha got?”

Just like that, the inventor went back to vibrating with excitement. “The highgrade Starscream gave you came from a batch made within the last deci-vorn.” One side of Jazz’s visor went up in question as to why that was significant, but Wheeljack clamped a hand on his forearm like he’d shake the excitement into the smaller mech. “It’s fresh, Jazz! Very fine quality, really a decent gift under any circumstance,” he mused, speculation taking him off on a tangent. “Someone’s got a sophisticated refinery set up to produce something like that. It isn’t crude-compressed midgrade energon. It’s filtered and distilled, the very highest grade. This is someone with actual equipment turning midgrade into highgrade like we used to have. Kind of a nice sentiment offering something like it as a gift during the peace process. I wonder if he was inviting you to drink it with him?”

“I don’t know,” Jazz said, patient but pointed. “Why would it matter? It’s just highgrade, even if it’s
the good stuff. Why’s it got your tires spinning? Is it poisoned?” That had been why he’d turned it over to Wheeljack in the first place. He’d hoped otherwise, but considering how hostile things had gotten, it wouldn’t have surprised him if the tests came back positive. It only counted as hostile action if Starscream force-fed it to him, after all. Drinking it without testing beforehand counted as an act of stupidity, not war.

Audio indicators flickered bright denial when Wheeljack shook his head, however. “No! I took a sample and sent it to Perceptor for analysis, and it came back clean. He noted the age, and that’s what made me think to look at the composition.” He said it as if that one word revealed everything.

It revealed nothing. Jazz looked up at him blankly. “And?”

If he could have, Wheeljack would have grinned. “I pinged the composition analysis off Swerve and Perceptor, even Brainstorm, and they all agreed. There are trace elements of Rutherfordium and Francium. I almost couldn’t catch samples of them. They decayed during the refinement process, although the brewer obviously went through a lot of effort to preserve them, presumably as a rare flavoring.” He tapped a finger on his chin, speculating out loud. “Probably either to impress if it was given as a gift -- it really is a neat trick, so well done to him on that because I am thoroughly impressed -- or drive up the price if the batch was meant to be sold. As soon as I opened the cube, the preservation statis-lock broke and decay resumed. The elements hit their half-life only a klik or two after I ran the analysis. Swerve’s fascinated. He wants the whole cube to study, if you’ll let him have it.”

Most of that had been gibberish to him, but Jazz got the feeling it was important somehow. “Why’s he so interested?” he asked.

“He’s a metallurgist and, well, an amateur brewer in his own right. He wants to test the highgrade for both professions.” Slightly more somber, the engineer looked down at Jazz. “Those elements aren’t found on Cybertron, Jazz. I used the Earth names for them because we don’t have our own names for them. Of all the elements we’ve discovered, some of them have been unique to planets other than our own. Earth had a handful of elements we hadn’t seen yet, and those are two of them.”

He had to think about that for a moment before he understood, and his visor widened when he did. “The Decepticons left Earth over two deci-vorns ago. Where’d they get it?”

“Exactly my question.”

“You said the batch was made within the last deci-vorn,” Ratchet said as he sat down in the chair next to them. Prowl stopped beside him. “Is it possible that the elements could have stayed intact in statis this long?”

Wheeljack shook his head. “Statis technology has short and long-term effects we can measure. That’s how Perceptor could tell how long about this batch was cubed. There was discernible decay based on the quality of the energon grade. The midgrade it started out as must have been shipped in statis to begin with, and the refining process had to have been a tricky process, trying to distill the energy without lifting the statis completely. Whomever it is who made the batch has to have some specialized tech-skills to build a distillery like that.” Ratchet looked interested -- of course he was, the party ambulance -- but Prowl’s doors twitched impatiently. Wheeljack moved on. “So, no. Not a chance.”

“Swindle has likely been importing illegal goods from Earth. He could have smuggled it,” Prowl suggested, but by his frown, he already knew the answer.

“It’d take better statis technology than smugglers have to keep these elements intact to the point
they’d still be detectable now.” Wheeljack glanced at Jazz before looking back to Prowl. “Starscream got that cube from somebody who distilled it from midgrade made on Earth. Recently.”

“That ain’t good,” Blaster said. Sometime during Wheeljack’s explanation, the carrier mech had sat down in his seat again. Ironhide and Optimus Prime had come around the table to stand near him as well. The Weapons Specialist leaned his hip against the table, and Blaster leaned forward to see around him. “You absolutely, positively sure on this?”

“No,” Wheeljack said. “It’s possible that the Decepticons found another source. Not likely, but possible. The bad news is that highgrade’s pretty much pure energy, and concentrating the energy burnt off most of the defining characteristics of the midgrade it was distilled from. I can’t tell you if those two elements came from Earth or not.”

Prowl’s doors were high and tight. “The good news?”

Wheeljack’s fans flipped on and off in a quick buzz. “We can’t pinpoint the two rarer elements as being from Earth on their own, but we can analyze the rest of the cube as a whole. Earth has a fairly unique elemental make-up. With the right equipment, we can theoretically reconstruct the original midgrade’s molecular composition, and that should tell us whether or not the midgrade came from Earth. Well,” he shrugged, “or Earth’s solar system, I suppose. I doubt the Decepticons could have set up energon production under the Earth Defense’s watch, but it’s not any less likely than shipping it directly from Earth.”

Silence filled the room as the officers absorbed that. On Earth or not, the implications of the Decepticons having access to Earth without their knowledge carried ugly connotations.

Optimus Prime broke the silence at last. “What equipment do you need?”

“Perceptor is assembling it now, but this isn’t his specialty. I’ve sent Slingshot out to deliver part of the sample to Swerve to see what he can do with it, but what we really need is a master chemist.” The inventor tilted his head to the side and flickered his audio indicators at his best friend, optics dancing. “And it just so happens we know of one, hmm? One who’s maybe going to want a certain concession we aren’t inclined to hand over without seeing what he’s willing to offer us.”

Ratchet stared. He reset his optics when the hint got through, and a scowl pulled at his mouth. “Buying my favors?”

“More like auctioning them off,” Wheeljack said cheerfully.

“It could work,” Prowl said. “We have what they want, and setting a price they can pay will test how willing they are to negotiate over their…courtships.”

Ratchet’s lips pressed into a thin line. The medic looked distinctly peeved at being discussed like a commodity. “What happened to just informing them they can’t have what they wanted and seeing what they did?”

“They did not have anything we wanted. Now they do. If they meet the price, it will not harm our position for you to accept suite from all the Constructicons instead of merely two.”

“For frag’s sake, just slap a ‘For Sale’ sign in my window and be done with it.” Prowl looked down at him, unimpressed by his ire, and Ratchet threw his hands up. “Staple a price tag to my aft while you’re at it!”

Wheeljack hurried to assure him that, “We won’t sell you cheap. Bargain bin chemical analysis
won’t help us any.”

“Oh, well, thank you. I feel so much better.” The sarcasm was strong with this one.

“You’re welcome.”

Jazz hunched over Wheeljack’s lap and stage-whispered to Blaster, “I’d like to open the bidding at three test tubes…”

“Will you shut up!” Ratchet swatted at the mech sitting on the floor before folding his arms and harrumphing in moody acceptance. The scowl on his face hid amusement, but like the Pit would he show it openly. “Fine. Sell me off like an old jalopy. Nobody wants to buy this rusted body of mine anyway.”

“Ratchet,” Optimus Prime said, gentle and grave, “we need to know where that energon came from. But if you truly find this unacceptable, my friend, we will find another way. Perceptor and Swerve will provide us with an answer.” Perhaps not a reliable one, but Optimus’ optics were kind. He understood Ratchet’s protests.

The medic looked at him for a long while. When he looked away, he could meet no one’s optics. His voice fell to the gruff tone of someone flustered and trying not to show it, but everyone pretended not to notice. “Call Mixmaster. Let’s get this over with.”

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 27

[* * * * *]

[A/N: Thank you, DeathComes4U!]
Pt. 28

I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]

Pt. 28

[* * * * *]

“Jazz.”

If it weren’t for utter exhaustion weighing him down, Jazz would have climbed the wall. “Waaugh! I don’t -- I can’t even -- “ Visor wider on one side than the other, he leaned away from the other black-and-white. “Don’t do that to me, mech.”

Disapproval for his dramatics stared him down. Sometimes Jazz thought even Prowl’s chevron communicated in severe frowns.

“You startled me,” he defended himself, but Prowl’s frown didn’t abate.

Prowl’s systems ran near-silent. He could run quieter than most SpecOps operatives simply by squashing anything but his high-priority functions, because his tactical mods were his highest priorities. The rest of his body could practically shut down to a whisper while running his battle computer at full power, and that meant he was one of the few mechs who could consistently sneak up on Jazz.

Not that he did it often. Just enough to leave Jazz totally unnerved when it happened.

“When have I ever been able to surprise you?” The mech’s tone was drier than the Sahara.

The hint of humor settled the saboteur a tiny bit. “Whenever you want, ya fragger. Whatcha need?”

Prowl still frowned, and not at the disrespectful address. He’d have pulled the other officer aside inside the briefing room if this were a formal matter involving their respective ranks. “You reacted as though I were an enemy. Even lagging behind, your scanners should not be labeling me as a threat.”

Eh-heh, yes, well, Jazz was just going to pretend the vibro-blade concealed along the inside of his forearm hadn’t been pulled. “You’re a quiet mech on a bad night. What’d you expect, a spontaneous fandango demonstration?” An assessing look swept the tactician from chevron to floor, sizing him up for dance class. “That’s more Hot Spot’s style.”

Taking a large step back out of reach didn’t ruffle Prowl’s calm. A prudent planner, through and through, able to avoid intent to boogie without skipping a beat. “I did not expect defensive measures of this magnitude.” Yeah, he’d seen that knife. He’d also seen the speculative sparkle in the innocently-wide visor. Nothing could be hidden from the all-seeing optics of Prowl. He was an expert reader of Jazz’s subtle motions.

The jig was up, minus any gettin’ jiggly with it. Jazz sighed and tweaked his wrist to turn the vibro-blade off. It clinked back into its hidden compartment. Prowl ignored the slight movement, although Jazz noticed he didn’t re-enter the might-be-danced-with zone around him.

He let it go. Tempting as it was to borrow Hot Spot’s default method for covering a moment of
fright, not everyone could be Grimlock or Optimus Prime. Grimlock was a credible dancer when bemused enough by the ambush results to go along with it. Optimus Prime, of course, had been apologetic for scaring the young gestalt commander in the first place. Prowl would probably lock his gears up and start glaring if Jazz tried it. Best to stand his ground and let Prowl approach him. Under the circumstances, venturing too close might be misinterpreted as aggression. Crowding could aggravate the situation, and he didn’t want to risk pumping more tension into the mix.

That was a recipe for starting something he wasn’t sure he’d be able to finish, and he wasn’t talking about the fandango. He’d learned that front to back in case of startled Protectobots.

Jazz stayed on his side of the hall, waiting for Prowl to make the first move.

The problem being that Prowl seemed equally wary of him in return, and his wariness didn’t spring from mere fear of dancing. The Do Not Touch Me vibes were offset by the distinctive cast to his optics that Jazz had reacted on instinct; the peculiar focused/unfocused look gave away that his battle computer was up and running. He’d already categorized Jazz as a danger.

Fair enough. Jazz’s subprocessors were churning out dire scenarios of their own as threat assessment calculated the likelihood of attack. The longer nothing happened, the more likely an attack became. Their weak attempts at humor hadn’t eased the tension between them, and neither knew when it would snap.

They faced off, not quite challenging each other but defenses at the ready, and only the empty hallway witnessed their stand-off.

**"Break it up. Now, or so help me Primus, I’ll throw ice water on the two of you,"** barked through their commlinks.

Scratch that. The empty hallway and the ever-present security cameras.

Prowl’s doors twitched. Jazz blinked. They glanced down the hall, but the rest of the Autobot command cadre had gone their separate ways. Red Alert’s icon glowered at them, a stern, forbidding presence on the comm. line that just dared them to misbehave. There would be no more shenanigans tonight, and definitely no more courtship-related antics. His patience had reached its limits.

The two black-and-white officers looked at each other, and one of Prowl’s optic ridges rose in question.

Jazz met that question with a Why Not? bob of his head. “Rowr, ffffft,” he said, testing.

The comm. line all but vibrated as Red Alert’s ire intensified. **"Don’t push me. I’ll do it."**

Prowl’s fingers curled into a credible cat’s paw at his side, making a stealthy little clawing motion in Jazz’s direction.

**"Prowl, no. Bad."**

They knew full well that they’d been each other’s main fuel line a moment ago. It wasn’t like they’d forgotten. It was more that if the Security Director was going to treat his superior officers like squalling alleycats on a fence, then they felt morbidly obliged to find out if he’d follow through.

Prowl curled his upper lip. Jazz hissed. Their armor fluffed up in tandem.

**"That’s it, I’m getting a bucket!"**
A brisk walk around the premises sounded like an excellent idea, all of a sudden. The two black-and-white mechs turned, perfectly synchronized, to hustle down the hall. They weren’t outright fleeing, but they were most definitely heading at speed in the opposite direction from Red Alert. A chuckle might have floated in their wake, but that wasn’t surprising. Jazz was known for his sense of humor. Someone would have to put the security footage under a microscope to catch the uptick at the corner of Prowl’s lips.

Immature as baiting the Security Director was, it served its purpose. The deadlock was broken. Given a fraction of common cause to connect over, they’d gratefully seized the distraction and rolled with it.

It wouldn’t surprise Jazz in the slightest if that was why Red Alert had done it.

They were moving, which was better than posturing at each other outside of the briefing room. They still stuck to the walls, leaving most of the hallway between them. This building had been renovated for use by average-sized Autobots, meaning that the halls were broad enough for Silverbolt but not for a triple-changer on Astrotrain’s scale. The two groundframes skirting the edges of it were in uncomfortably close proximity, passive scans feeding constant updates to active combat protocols as they kept a watch on one another without appearing to look across the hall.

Violence hovered near the surface. Prowl shaved fractions off the space between them with every step, alerting Jazz’s hyperactive sensors. They screamed at him to evade. The saboteur lengthened his stride, but ‘escape’ meant more than ‘outrun’ to an infiltration specialist. Most mechs didn’t survive exposing an undercover agent.

The whisper of a knife hilt falling into a hand cocked Prowl’s helm toward him, program-windows busy shadows behind his optics as his tactical mods updated and spun out solutions. Attack would be met by counter-attack.

Jazz had to consciously remind himself that this was a fellow officer, not an enemy. Prowl knew he was undercover, and that was okay. He wasn’t compromised.

Threat assessment did not agree. Threat assessment thought he should shoot before the enemy did.

“We’re not doing so hot,” he murmured, more to himself than to Prowl, but it got him a nod.

“No, we are not. I dislike reacting this way to you.” Below the level of conscious thought, that was. Rationally, Prowl understood the conflict between own stubborn processors and Jazz’s current mission parameters. Being unable to control or predict those parameters placed them at odds. He knew that.

Jazz often took the more liberal, enthusiastic stance on things. That didn’t mean he supported them wholesale, just as Prowl’s more cautious approach didn’t necessarily mean opposition. They’d played these parts before, although normally in the context of the Special Operations Division deliberately taking the Unmaker’s Advocate role to snipe at weaknesses before plans finalized. The Tactical Division used SpecOps and all its functions, but that required giving SpecOps the freedom to turn Tactical on its collective heads. Jazz had a part to play, just as Prowl did. Prowl had to be conservative unless or until he was fully convinced, otherwise the underlying strategy for the war would be yanked around like a hooked fish every time new information came in.

The ceasefire had done a number on that strategy. Call him a skeptic that the Decepticons were provoking another huge, abrupt change in the name of peace.

His sudden switch to plotting with the Prime during the meeting had only been a minor tactical sally,
a hurried use of an opportunity before this courtship thing spun out of control. It’d been reconnaissance for further information. He’d watched Ratchet bargain with the Constructicons the way he evaluated a battle plan unfolding during a simulation.

What he had seen hadn’t convinced him. Supporting negotiations wasn’t an option, not for him. Prowl didn’t approve of rash action based off of what could be a ruse. Jazz knew that. He knew the tactician’s reasons. He still voted for meeting the Decepticons halfway on this courtship stuff.

The Autobots had to act now. Dithering over doubts and reservations on contracting only gave the Decepticons more of an advantage. The peace negotiations couldn’t be put on hold while the Autobots did research and caught up. The Decepticons seemed to regard contracts as part and parcel of ending the war.

Prowl stubbornly kept returning to whether or not the support for Jazz’s intel on those contracts was an elaborate ploy. Jazz just as staunchly countered that by pointing out that there was no contradicting evidence. Neither of them could prove the other wrong. They both thought themselves correct.

It was a lot like figuring out if a mech was a plant. A solid cover personae used the truth as much as possible. As long as a spy was careful to avoid contradicting what was there to begin with, it created a plausible background for a lie.

Hence the reason the rest of the command cadre wanted Prowl and Jazz to argue. Nobody but the Decepticons knew if this was all a trick, a lie using the truth. It wasn’t comfortable, it put them at odds, but Jazz and Prowl had equally valid points to make and invaluable perspectives to offer from standing opposite each other. They’d certainly torn Ratchet’s call to the Constructicons apart between them, debating over details the other officers had missed until Optimus Prime finally dismissed the meeting to give everyone time to think.

It’d been an eventful night. Everyone needed time to process what had happened. In Ratchet’s case, he needed time to plan out a game of Dodge the Constructicon. Nobody was under any illusion about what Bonecrusher and Mixmaster would be out to do if they caught him tomorrow, alone or in company. Their version of persuasion had no shame. An audience wouldn’t stop them.

The good news was that having Prowl’s narrow, emotionless optics analyzing every single move they made curtailed long-distance efforts on their part. He seemed to have unsettled Bonecrusher and Mixmaster something awful. They’d initially been thrilled to get a call from Ratchet, smiling until the vidfeed cleared on the Autobots’ end. Then they’d seen the table of Autobot officers sitting behind their intended.

Goodbye, smiles. Hellooooo, apprehension.

Ratchet had stood in front of the camera. Prowl had given the medic a nod, and he’d squared his shoulders, chin tipping up with the confidence and dignity of someone who hadn’t quivered helplessly in the hands of these very Decepticons. He’d delivered his line in a studiously neutral voice.

“For the purpose of ending our Great War, this is a courtesy call to prevent any future confusion. I’m confirming my permission to allow courtship from the Decepticons Bonecrusher and Mixmaster.”

It’d taken a klik to sink in. The two Constructicons had started to nod, obviously relieved that this was only a formality to make sure they were all on the same file. After the incident in Ratchet’s office, repeating in front of witnesses that his consent was voluntary and given without coercion was a sensible precaution.
Maybe it’d been the way Wheeljack’s fingers wriggled, itching to take notes, or maybe it’d been how closely the whole group watched them. It could have even been their own experience in contract wording that clued them in; Jazz didn’t know. Prowl’s impassive stare certainly hadn’t given anything away, and the other officers were a blank wall of nonexpression. Every vent in the briefing room had been closed, however, anticipating the moment the wording hit home.

The look on the Constructicons’ faces had been worth the wait.

“Wait, that’s not -- what? Hey, no. What about the others?”

Ratchet could play stupid with the best of them. “What others?”

“The other Constructicons.”

“Oh, them. What about them?”

“They’re courting you, too.” Bonecrusher had said it like he’d state a fact everyone knew and accepted, because surely this was all a misunderstanding. Ha ha, good thing Ratchet had called! Good job. Great idea. Wow, that could have been awkward.

“Hmm,” the medic had folded his arms and drawn it out, “mmmmmmmmmno. No, I didn’t give them permission. I’d remember doing that. Did I do that?” he’d asked over his shoulder, and Prowl had consulted his notes before shaking his head in the negative. “Didn’t think so. I only said ‘yes’ to you two.” He’d pointed at the Constructicons gaping at him.

“What?! You can’t do that!”

“Why not?”

“…uh.” Mixmaster had opened his mouth, but no sound had come out. Bonecrusher’s hands had risen into view shaping strange shapes that failed to express how thoroughly dumbfounded he’d been by that simple question. So many unfounded assumptions made about what Ratchet had agreed with. So many.

Ratchet didn’t agree with scrap. Nobody had told him. He hadn’t been informed.

How the Constructicons responded to his ignorance depended on how badly they wanted a contract with him, now didn’t it?

Prowl’s optics had gleamed almost as bright as Wheeljack’s as the experiment really kicked into high gear.

Relying on the Constructicons for accurate information was folly, but their reaction to the call had backed up everything Jazz had found out about Decepticon contracts so far. There was coaxing, appeals to reason, and attempts at logic traps, but no threats or demands. When Ratchet denied them, they respected that denial. Kept wheedling, of course, but they seemed to recognize his decision as a roadblock instead of speedbump. They treated it as something to be lifted or gotten around, not run over.

Cue the sweet talking. Ratchet hadn’t even need to imply that he might accept a bribe. As soon as Bonecrusher and Mixmaster figured out that he wouldn’t let them ask for permission on behalf of their absent teammates, they’d poured on the silky-smooth charm. Surely they could persuade their dear intended with a small gift, if he’d only hint what he might like from them..?

The command cadre had taken the Constructicons’ bargaining posture into consideration.
It’d only served to make Prowl warier. His wariness bent full-force on Jazz himself.

As the operative’s handler, Ironhide had laid out to the other officers how deep Jazz’s cover now reached, but understanding that Jazz was deep-cover and reacting to him as a compromised agent hit at different levels. The massive shift in social paradigms tonight had taken its toll on his emotional suppression software, tangling it up, and it was too great a personal and professional conflict for Prowl’s battle computer to parse on its own.

Rumor had it that he took nothing personally, and that rumor wasn’t unfounded. The cold-sparked executive officer image was more than a role played to contrast against Optimus Prime’s compassion. Emotional separation from duty was coded into his software.

Running an emotional response underneath his tactical mods created unreliable output. Other people dealt with the coexistence of logic, reason, and emotion all the time, but other people didn’t have Prowl’s battle computer. Living his personal and professional life at the same time sent his CPU into chaos as too many processor threads fought for priority -- and power. The emotional suppression software wasn’t just there for his peace of mind. It was there because it freed up valuable power for his battle computer when it needed it the most.

Then along came Jazz-the-Vosian, who was also Jazz-the-Autobot-officer, and separation of duty and self went out the window. The nature of the issues brought up over the last two days didn’t sit right with Prowl in any way, shape, or form. Social protocols were firing off at random, stalling his suppression software, and worse, his spark was troubled by the rapid shifts. Ratchet had him on remote surveillance even now in case his spark and CPU fell dangerously out of alignment.

Suspecting Jazz had become a focal point, something Prowl could return to puzzling over whenever his processors started to spit out errors and spark integration wobbled. He’d sensed something off about Jazz and distrusted it below the level of rational thought. Ironhide’s announcement had only given a name to what he’d already picked up on. They knew each other too well for even miniscule changes to slip by.

Relatively benign as it could be, Jazz’s undercover persona meshing with his real personality could also be a formidable threat to the Autobots. Prowl couldn’t tell which was the real Jazz versus the cover this time. There was a vast difference between maintaining a cover story and deliberate, malevolent deception, but that difference could be hidden under a smile and flash of charm. Nothing Jazz said or did could be trusted, in that light, because this particular spy could be a spy for either side at this point.

The urge to discard everything he said warred with Prowl’s need for information and the possibility that Jazz was telling the truth. Ratchet and Jazz had confronted him over the conflict and forced him to recognize his software rebelling, but that didn’t make his suspicions magically go away. His concerns were real. There was just an uncontrolled personal element to them, and he couldn’t currently take a step back to see where the separation should be.

He was aware that he wasn’t thinking as clearly as he believed he was, which made him second-guess himself. Which made him obsess. Which made him wonder if he’d stepped over the fine line between legitimate suspicion and paranoia. Which made him question himself again.

It was a vicious cycle. Red Alert knew it well.

Prowl had little experience doubting himself like this. It was easier to doubt Jazz.

Jazz understood that. How could he not? His own adaptation sequences were aching, phantom pains from social protocols being ruthlessly revised, and it would be easier -- incredibly, immensely easier -
- to doubt the Decepticons. Support the status quo. Let suspicion win, and stand back instead of stepping forward to defend what he’d seen tonight.

Considering how much more flexible his spark was in comparison, he didn’t resent Prowl acting out of instinct. Part of it could be chalked up to sheer self-preservation, at this point. Things were changing too fast, and shooting the messenger could delay the onslaught of strange news. It wasn’t nice, it wasn’t pretty, but survival often wasn’t. The tactician’s mind protected him by throwing up barriers against using or processing the information brought back from Vos.

It would be simpler if Jazz were strictly an operative, removed from influencing the command cadre. An active agent was usually taken out of decision-making processes as more than a source of intel, and Prowl’s kneejerk reaction was to insist on following that protocol. Jazz had a biased perspective. The data brought back from the mission so far was of dubious nature, and letting Jazz present and argue it meant allowing the influence of someone who might be compromised on a deeper level than any of them knew. The Autobots desperately needed to understand what the Decepticons were doing, but the quickest way to fall into a Decepticon trap was to blindly follow a Decepticon sympathizer into it.

Jazz knew that. He knew all of it. Prowl wanted him out of power, out of rank, out of any position that could be used against the Autobots. The Autobot Second-in-Command wanted him in a safe, guarded box with defined boundaries and careful monitoring. Jazz understood how he felt. He put every one of his agents into that box. It removed them from the position of ‘friend’ and even ‘person,’ making it easier to analyze and control both them and everything around them.

Lacking the permission to contain Jazz as an agent, Prowl had to deal with him as a fellow officer, friend, and potential spy. It made him a disorienting, dangerous bag of contradictions, and Jazz didn’t trust himself. He preferred Prowl wary and ready to take him down over relaxed and unprepared. The alarming possibility that he’d been turned into a plant among the Autobots was real. Prowl’s fixation on it was an overreaction, but Jazz would rather Prowl suspect him than accept a traitor.

Even if he wasn’t an agent of the Decepticons, he was still the anti-Prowl at the moment. Not anti-Autobot, not a Decepticon, but someone who was voluntarily adapting to Decepticon culture, then turning around and trying to convince the rest of the Autobots of what he’d learned. Jazz the intended of Vos was adapting himself to what he’d learned so far of Vosian culture and thought, taking what he’d discovered with a grain of salt but assimilating what the Decepticons were telling him far faster than caution dictated. He had to for the mission. It was his job.

He got why Prowl was watching him like an armed bomb. Really, he did.

Now reverse Prowl’s distrust and paranoia, because Jazz had the other side of the equation. A big, fat target rested on his back, because if or when Prowl made a final decision on this ‘bomb,’ the tactician would be the one pulling the strings to take him out. Jazz would never see it coming.

Thus, he never took his scanners off the mech. Whatever else he might be right now, he didn’t want to be dead. Or disarmed. Or even detained, honestly. He had too much to do.

Leaving them with the last thing the peace negotiations needed: two officers so at odds they couldn’t even look at each other without threat assessment screaming alarm.

The worst part being that threat assessment was correct. They were each other’s greatest threat.

Besides the Decepticons, that was.

…except that Jazz could be a Decepticon agent.
Even he wasn’t trusting himself at this point. This was some kind of doubt-lined whirlpool sucking them into the Pit of distrust.

If this had all been part of Starscream’s plan, then the Air Commander had outdone his treacherous self this time. The flyer had the entire Autobot officer cadre side-eying each other over interfacing, of all things, and Jazz and Prowl had only just managed to play nice for the camera. Presenting a united front during the conference call had strained their attempt at civil behavior, and no wonder.

The Constructicons had blustered and failed to explain why Ratchet should honor the combiner team’s contract, but everyone had noticed that Bonecrusher and Mixmaster had looked to Jazz when it became clear they needed an ally.

“What’re you looking at me for?” Jazz had asked, faux-innocent. “You’re negotiating with him, not me!”

Look at the little birdie who’d whispered in the Autobots’ audios a rumor of an idea of a thought about contract terms and limitations. Little birdie, come back to roost with the flock. Little birdie, little spy, courted but not yet one of them. Jazz didn’t owe the Constructicons slag.

Yet the Decepticons looking to him for help had set off alarm bells inside Autobot heads. Prowl in particular had heard a cacophony. Little birdies could tweet to anyone, after all.

So here they were. They could play their parts in front of a mutual enemy, but it couldn’t last. Something had to give.

Prowl stopped. Jazz swung about to face him as if a rope connected them, and they stared at each other across the hall. It a short distance that could have been from here to Luna 1 for how close they actually felt to one another right then. Optics dark with suspicion met justified caution in a narrowed visor. Magnified, it reflected back.

Jazz had faced Starscream in a hallway much like this one, and he’d felt more confident about his ability to handle the Air Commander. The glass of his windshield itched between his doors. He was a target, he was marked, he was on defense before the fight had even begun. Tank gaskets skreeled shut deep inside him in preparation for a fight. He didn’t move a gear, but every part of him was tensed, ready to dodge.

Someone had to diffuse the situation. Someone had to…

Oh.

It came down to faith, again, didn’t it?

Two hallways, two mechs in a stand-off, and his spark twinged as Jazz compared the strangely-similar situations. There could be no trust, not when both sides had every reason to distrust the other, but things would only escalate if they stayed balanced on the edge of action. Despite every reason not to offer even a flash of vulnerability, one of them had to. For the purpose of peace, someone had to have some faith.

It was more or less a challenge, if he chose to look at it that way. The Decepticons had done it, and the Jazzmeister wouldn’t be outdone. It just wouldn’t be easy. Perhaps that said something about how difficult it’d been for the Decepticons, but he had other things to worry about right now.

It took effort of will to ease the tension out of his joints. The stiff way he held himself announced his distrust to anyone who could read body language, but at least he wasn’t poised to run anymore. Prowl watched him closely as he uncrossed his arms and rolled his shoulders back to loosen them.
He held his visor steady on the mech in turn as doors shook back. It took the tactician longer to work the aggression from his stance. His hands opened slowly from tight fists, knuckle joints creaking, and he cycled his ventilation system in a prolonged, forced inhale/exhale as if he could expel the tension with the air.

"Jazz," Prowl said. He took a single step forward.

Any infiltrator who’d survived this long knew the feeling of pursuit, and red flags popped up urging survival. Pulling a vibro-blade was automatic, the first level of engaged combat protocols, and Jazz had to clamp down on that reaction. Prowl was a hunter, but Jazz was not prey.

Threat assessment disagreed, warnings streaming through his processors. He’d been found out. The spy was uncovered. An empty hallway like this one triggered threat assessment in a big way, sending violence and the need for safety clawing into his mind. Since he refused to attack, that left running. Run, run, run.

While everything in the saboteur shrieked to escape, to run, Prowl’s fan rate remained steady. If Jazz ran, he’d be chased down, and Prowl’s systems wouldn’t skip a beat. The former Enforcer had been built for pursuit. He was perfectly calm, standing there balanced on the verge of taking Jazz down like a petty thief running from arrest.

The hand extending toward Jazz hesitated for a fraction of an instant.

His scanners caught the tiny pause. Threat assessment subprocessors immediately spat out a dozen reasons for it. He didn't look at Prowl’s hand directly, keeping most of his attention locked on the tactician’s face. His passive scanners gave him a picture of the hallway, Prowl's position, even the vague locations of the mechs recharging behind the doors lining this hall. If anything changed, he'd be ready.

But they didn't. Prowl stayed guarded, just a shade too aggressive to be neutral. He stood in the stance of an authority figure trying not to ride someone's bumper, an Enforcer merely chatting with an acquaintance instead of confronting a suspect.

He looked terribly out of practice. Prowl had never been very good at small talk. He’d always been more comfortable issuing orders than observing social niceties.

It was an attempt to bridge the gap between them, and that meant more to Jazz than the somewhat pained look on the Prowl’s face. However awkward it was, the hand extended toward him was an attempt to meet him halfway. It was an effort to treat him as something other than a possible traitor.

Jazz tamped down his jitters and let him approach. One step, and then another, until Prowl's outstretched fingertips brushed his upper arm. His vents closed, fans taking slow, shallow sips of air as he waited, wondering what the tactician was doing.

The hand slid down to cup his elbow in firm hold. Not a restrictive one, but when Prowl pulled him forward, it was clear the mech meant for Jazz to come closer.

"Jazz," Prowl repeated, as if he were at a loss for words. Perhaps he was searching for how to begin.

He drew the slightly smaller Autobot toward himself, optics dropping to trace over the miniscule scrapes left from the night. Some were from Starscream, far earlier in the day. Some were from Thundercracker, namely the mussed polish on his hood and the scorched paint across his face. The dent on his bumper came from Ironhide resting his weight on him, and from the false alarm earlier. Ironhide and Blaster combined were a lot of weight to crash on top of one relatively small mech. Jazz
wasn't a Minibot, but he wasn't that far out of the model class.

Jazz reset his visor as Prowl's other hand came up. Careful as a Dinobot given Carly's grandmother’s tea set, the tactician smoothed that hand over the marks, one at a time. He paid meticulous attention to each one. His fingertips lingered to really feel the dents and the slight roughness of marred paint. Even Ratchet hadn't examined the Porsche’s armor this closely.

The light, almost tickling touches skimmed over his hood, down his grill, and across his bumper. Jazz’s fans began pulling more air for an entirely different reason. When a thumb deliberately rubbed around the rim of one headlight, his helm cocked to the side. It didn't conceal how he pushed into the touch.

The hand on the saboteur's elbow tightened, asking a silent question.

Jazz swallowed, cramming his first response down under responsibility. He knew the unspoken rules, but he'd spent the whole night thinking about them. He couldn't abide by them anymore.

Knowing the reasons to violate them didn't make actually doing it any easier. Fear for Prowl's response knotted his cables. That, if nothing else, was reason enough to speak up. He should not be afraid to say this out loud.

"You thinkin' we should patch things up the old-fashioned way?" he asked, keeping his voice to a quiet whisper. The part of him afraid to break the silence was hoping the question would be seen as intimate. "You want to hook up, Prowl?"

Doors twitched, and Jazz's chin jerked up as an active scan swept over him. Okay. Right. Fair enough. The scan hadn't been directed at him. He was willing to bet Prowl would have been back across the hall in a split second if the only other people on proximity radar weren’t in recharge behind sound-muffling doors. As it was, slightly-widened blue optics darted left and right, visually checking that they were alone.

Once he was sure no one else was there to witness Jazz’s impropriety, Prowl gave the smallest nod. Jazz would have missed it if he hadn't been looking straight at the mech. That still counted as an open answer to a question blunt enough to make Autobots squirm. He knew it was that blunt because his own tanks were a nest of insecurities writhing about inside him.

And that was even before he outright asked, "Do you want to interface with me?"

A more demonstrative mech would have flinched. Prowl only looked away, and the suggestive thumbing of Jazz’s headlight subsided to a palm resting on his hood. It was a warm presence. It made Jazz ache, because it didn't feel like a threat. Never was a friend more missed than when he was an enemy.

He pressed into it. "I need an answer," he almost begged. He needed Prowl to understand this. Even if the rest of Autobot Command decided the information he'd brought back tonight was dangerous and a Decepticon ploy, Jazz needed them to understand that he couldn't personally compromise on this.

The burring rumble of an engine turning over came from Prowl's own chest, matching the strained idle of Jazz's motor. Despite that, Prowl's voice stayed calm. "I have thought about that. It...does not sit well with me to discuss such things in public. Ironhide also mentioned his aversion to it. Is there a particular reason you feel that we -- Autobots in general, but I mean the two of us specifically, right now -- need to reach an agreement to -- to interface?" He glanced up and down the hall again. "Here? I would prefer to conduct such a discussion in private."
"I, uh, guess there really isn't?" Jazz hazarded, thoughts going a bit wonky. Why exactly did he feel that a public agreement was required? The Decepticons were blatantly public about their interfacing, but the Autobots weren't. Decency, or their version of it anyway, kept all talk of it behind closed doors or swathed in discreet language. Was there actually a reason he kept defaulting to Decepticon behavior?

He blinked as it suddenly hit him that the Decepticon probably negotiated via interfacing in public so everyone involved in them via other contracts could see what was happening. Agreements made in public were probably harder to go back on. It might be a sign of how little the Decepticons trusted each other that consent and fragging was done in public so nothing beyond the agreed-to interface could be slipped in.

Then again, for all he knew, someone consenting to a frag in public was a point of pride. A *That's right, I'm just that good* mark for both sides, maybe. Or, rust and iron, it could be a kink. An extremely common one, in that case.

He couldn’t think of a reason that the Autobots had to copy the behavior. He wanted to change the idea that talking about interfacing was filthy and degenerate, but forcing people to be tank-churning uncomfortable about it didn’t sit right with him. "So long’s we do the talking bit and you don't take this as skippin' to the good stuff, that's, um." Jazz chewed the inside of his lower lip. "Yeah. That's cool with me."

Prowl relaxed so abruptly there were visible signs. "Good. Privacy will...help, I believe." The sudden change was startling, but sort of reassuring. It was nice knowing Jazz wasn't the only one trying to pick his way through a minefield of half-rewritten social protocols.

Jazz pasted on a lopsided grin and finally moved his own hands. Prowl’s optics snapped to them, instantly cautious, but the saboteur kept his movements steady. One hand pushed under the hand on his hood, twining their fingers. The tension pricking the Datsun’s doors up melted back down, and Prowl’s other hand dropped to meet Jazz’s.

Simple, metal-to-metal contact. Already more emotional than normal, Prowl had no defense against it. Anyone who’d ever interfaced with him before knew what he truly yearned for, and Jazz wasn’t above ruthlessly exploiting Prowl’s needs in order to calm the mech’s suspicions.

Truth be told, he could really use a hug or ten at this point, too.

"Alrighty then," he said. "My room or yours?"

“We should -- “

Prowl’s head whipped around, hands springing open like Jazz had burnt him. Survival instinct had the saboteur dancing back out of reach. Active sensors swept the hall, and what pinged on their proximity scans froze them into shocked statues.

Red Alert rounded the corner, sloshing bucket in both hands and irritation stamped over his face.

The two black-and-white officers, he would tell them later, didn’t look like cats on a fence at all. *Deer in headlights* would be the exact phrase he used to describe them.

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 28
[A/N: This part was for the ever-awesome and infinitely patient Jeegoo. Thank you so much for your patience.

If you caught the reference to PlaysWithWorm’s Protectobot fics, well done. If you didn’t, go read them until you spot it.

Bonus picture from Shibara!]
What d'you expect, a spontaneous fandango demonstration?

Thank youuuuu
Pt. 29

I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

[* * * * *]

Pt. 29

[* * * * *]

**Times and Measurements** (from TFWiki)

- *vorn* = 83 years
- *decivorn* = 8.3 years
- *meta-cycle* = 13 months
- *stellar cycle* = ~7.5 months
- *deca-cycle* = ~3 weeks
- *mega-cyle* = 93 hours
- *orn* = 1 Cybertron day
- *joor* = 6 hours
- *cycle* = 1.25 hours
- *breem* = 8.3 minutes
- *klik* = 1.2 minutes

*mechanometer* ~ *meter*

*kil* ~ *kilometer*

[* * * * *]

**Pt. 29**

[* * * * *]

“There is ice in my wheelwell.”

“Don’t look at me, mech. Blame him.”

“I am blaming him. I am also looking at you.”

“Yeah, I can see that. Stoppit.”

“No.”

“C’mon, how’s this my fault?”

“This would have never happened if you were not involved.”

“If you think he’d wouldn’t of done it to you alone, then you don’t know him.” A smirk pulled at Red Alert’s mouth, although the Security Director didn’t look up from reading a datapad. Jazz chased another puddle with his squeegee. “Dunno if he would of make you clean up afterward, but fair’s fair.”
On the other side of the hall, Prowl sighed and pulled his own squeegee along the floor. “I suppose.” He’d argued for fetching a vacuum, but Red Alert had come prepared. Not only did he have Optimus Prime’s backing to order two superior officers clean up the mess of spilled water, but he’d brought squeegees along so they could split the labor equally.

Thus did the Autobot Second and Third-in-Command get on their knees to work the puddle of water toward the nearest drain. Every building in Cybertron had at least one in the floorplan. Acid rain had a nasty tendency to make its own leaks. This wasn’t acid rain, thankfully. Red Alert had drawn a bucket of water off the tank distilled for human use, and the ice had come courtesy of a shot from Ironhide’s liquid nitrogen gun.

Jazz wasn’t looking forward to the day the ice formed from the weather instead of artificial means. A chill lingered outside in the mornings and at night, but Vos’ position near the equator might save it from more than a mild winter. The planetary poles weren’t so fortunate. The temperature had dropped in the north and risen sharply in the south as soon as Cybertron settled into orbit. That would have been novel enough, but the planetary poles had collected cloud clusters throughout Cybertron’s journey through the galaxy. Settling into orbit had mucked with whatever weird rules of gravity had ruled the planet, and the clouds had been freed.

The storm clouds around the poles were spreading without the aid of the Rainmakers lately -- and despite their deployment. For the first time since the planet left its original orbit and the weather technology was originally developed, Cybertron’s weather defied management. Clouds formed, leaving the Rainmakers jetting across the planet to herd them, except lately they were arriving just in time to watch the storms disperse naturally.

For the Autobots, that meant they had to be more diligent about watching the sky during travel or on patrol, but that wasn’t a hardship. They’d never had control of the weather overhead. The Decepticons had the raw end of the deal as their weather-tech failed them.

The learning curve for rain-watch was steep. A mech was lucky if he got a second chance at it.

The Autobots knew very well what casualties of acid rain looked like. It was hard to be sympathetic that the Decepticons were finally taking damage from their own favorite weapon. They’d been immune for so long that Jazz felt bitter satisfaction every time a storm formed. It was wrong of him to feel that way during peace negotiations, he knew it, but was nice to see the rain fall on the bases down south for a change. The whole war, the clouds had avoided Decepticon troops and Decepticon territory.

Each city-state core used to have a storm-repulsor, a way to deflect and control atmospheric changes, but what hadn’t been destroyed in the fall of the city-states had been dug out and stolen by enterprising mechs. The ones not sold off-planet had found their ways to Decepticon hands to shield major bases and cities. Jazz had it on good authority that those old installations were in poor repair these days, ill-maintained due to the shift to mobile weather management technology. They wouldn’t stay functional too much longer. Prowl had every Decepticon center currently under cloud cover marked down. The day Darkmount and Kaon took storm damage, it’d confirm the last of the storm-repulsors as broken. The Rainmakers would be permanently reassigned to keeping acid rain at bay in the south.

Meteorology tech was ancient. The Decepticons were understandably reluctant to hand over even broken storm-repulsors to the Autobots for study, and their own scientists had been unable to duplicate the machines. That left the Rainmakers to corral the spreading storms, and while they were doing what they could, storm-chasing wasn’t their intended function. The weather modifications installed in the Rainmakers were the latest in acid rain management technology, not generalized
weather control mods. The Seekers were more effective at seeding acid rain over a battlefield than herding storm fronts away from populated areas.

Acid Storm was stationed in Vos for the time being to keep the city clear of stray clouds during the peace negotiations. So far he had spent most of his time at nearby Decepticon bases, on-call for emergency response to cloud formations. Before tonight, Jazz hadn’t had cause to think how much political clout that gave the Rainmaker. Acid Storm might turn out as influential by holding control of his unit’s tech-mods. Weather management could end up being a powerful tool for peacetime negotiating, at this rate.

Shockwave and Perceptor had released a theoretical schedule of Cybertron’s new seasons as caused by the tilt of the planet’s axis and the length of its orbit around the sun, but nobody could make any sort of long-range forecast for actual weather. The flux in planetary gravity was one of many unknown factors contributing to the chaos. The planetary core had been the only reliable source of heat for the surface inhabitants for untold ages, but now a sun warmed the ground. Regular days and nights created a difference in air and ground temperature, and it varied wildly depending on altitude and time of day.

It had been a long, long time since anyone but off-world expeditions had encountered natural weather. The Autobots in Iacon reported frost. The Decepticons in Kaon had morning dew. They were all terribly alarmed by precipitation appearing on things overnight. Rain, yes, they knew how to react to acid rain. What the frag was this stuff? Condensation? Why wasn’t there an alert system in place for this yet?!

The Autobots who’d been to Earth had been amused by the panic until they realized the condensation was still acidic. Frostburn was a literal thing on Cybertron. The Autobots who recharged in cold air woke up surrounded by surfaces etched by morning frost. The Decepticons hadn’t elaborated on what damage the dew caused, but the Autobots could speculate.

Meteorology was going to surge back into the news real soon, now. Weather forecasting was a lost science. Things like predicting the morning’s dewpoint or bringing sensitive equipment inside because frost was forecast for tomorrow would be important information. The moonbases were already getting used for impromptu weather radar until a satellite could be put in place. That satellite was on the joint-faction To-Do list, along with everything else that had to wait until peace didn’t feel temporary. Acid rain might be life-threatening, but it was more important to halt the rain of bullets.

Shockwave and Perceptor both agreed that naturalizing Cybertron’s atmosphere should start as soon as possible after a peace treaty went through. Aside from an atmospheric filtration project on a scale even the combined factions couldn’t support, naturalization was their best plan for how to deal with the massive amount of pollution. War had weaponized an already tainted atmosphere.

Kaon had long experience with industrial waste hanging overhead, as Cybertron’s poles had collected clouds even before the acid rain got bad enough to kill. The shining Tri-Peninsular Torus States area had shunted its plumes away toward poorer city-state areas. The smog had drifted and been pushed down to the other pole, away from Iacon, where the dense plumes were thickened by Kaon’s low industry standards. The war had only worsened the industrial waste, and air pollution from battles had overtaken even that. Battlefields burned for deca-cycles, sometimes smoldering on a stellar cycle or more until nothing remained to burn and the fires smothered under foul air.

War had made the weather a weapon, and the Decepticons had used it. The more they’d used it, the worse the pollution had become. That had made it a better weapon, to be used more. It had turned into a self-perpetuating cycle of ecological destruction.

Peace alone would do a lot to stop the cycle. Both sides would take sources out of use, troops
mobilization and munitions factory output slowly shutting down. Joint efforts to decrease further environmental pollution and reverse the effects would gradually change the acid content in the clouds. Increased natural weather formations would help as well, thinning the smog layers out. Particulates and gasses would gradually settle and disperse once the artificial seeding for acid rain halted.

It would be a long, long process, but not so long as the war had taken. Some day, the Rainmakers would be unnecessary. Some day, the rain would only dull finish, not hiss and melt through metal. Some day, humans would be able to walk Cybertron’s surface without face masks and a guardian Autobot at the ready to shield them if the wind shifted.

As a sign of hope, or perhaps just as a touch of home, the Earth Embassy had an umbrella stand near the door. The first Decepticon to notice it had been amused by the thought of the little structure of thin plastic and wire stopping Cybertron’s acid rain. He’d picked one up to examine it. Some quick-thinking staff member had snapped a picture and shoved a release form at him.

Too amused to think better of it, he’d signed.

That poor, poor shmuck. It wasn’t for nothing that the Autobots got along so well with humanity.

The Embassy staff had let him keep the umbrella, but he’d probably chucked it into a disposal chute once he found out why they’d given it to him. Too little, too late; they’d suckered him into being the Decepticon face of the ceasefire on Earth, and he couldn’t stop them. On the Earth Alliance’s pro-peace posters planetwide, a baffled but charmed, fully-armed Decepticon soldier grinned from underneath an open umbrella pinched between thumb and forefinger.

Decepticon High Command had promptly transferred him to Earth. While nobody could be entirely sure every Decepticon had left the planet during the official exodus decivorns ago, the soldier was the sole Decepticon officially sanctioned by the Earth Alliance and the Autobots. The reason, according to High Command, was to maintain a Decepticon diplomatic presence in Autobot City as part of the peace negotiations, and also perform regular upkeep work on the old underwater base. Legitimate reasons, true, but the real reason was public relations.

The Earth Alliance had turned that Decepticon soldier into a symbol, and half the planet now knew him on sight. Decepticon PR just ran with the idea for their own purposes. It was rather rare for humans to know a Decepticon from somewhere other than anti-Decepticon warning posters from prior to the ceasefire. The soldier provided a nonviolent image for humanity, something to bolster post-war Decepticon-Earth relations. Let it never be said that the Decepticons didn’t know how to turn propaganda to their own advantage.

It embarrassed the soldier greatly, according to all accounts. He spent a lot of time hiding in the undersea base or looking out of his depth standing beside the Autobots at diplomatic functions. Different countries took turns presenting him with bouquets of umbrellas on the anniversary of the ceasefire.

The Decepticons still didn’t know how to treat humans. They painstakingly walked the fine line between indifferent xenophobia and fascinated interest, because Earth was a filthy mudball planet absurdly rich in energy and addictive pop culture, but its inhabitants were squishy and icky. However, the current draft of the peace treaty classified the species as ‘Sentient aliens, Autobot allies.’ That might someday translate to treating the squishy creatures as equals. What was a superior mechanical species to do?

Borrow their weatherman, apparently. Nobody could accurately predict the weather without a satellite, so it was down to guesswork and whatever scraps of information the moonbases could pass along.
Humanity was used to working with uncontrolled weather, plus nobody was allowed to shoot the
guy doing the forecast if the forecast was wrong. That was a distinct improvement over weather
report duty among the Decepticons. Kaon had been clamoring for the Earth Embassy to broaden
their news reports to include weather forecasts.

More weather forecasts, that was. They did a local weather forecast for Vos. A wider weather
forecast would be a useful feature to tack on after the treaty news. Everybody already tuned in to
watch the Embassy’s news broadcasts, anyway.

The humans made a point of inviting a mech from each faction to read the publicly released updates
for the peace negotiations, which sometimes opened up a can of worms on air if the two selected
mechs started bickering. Throwing punches, if the Autobot and Decepticon had strong opinions on
the update, and they often did. Blaster swore he didn’t know how Cliffjumper had gotten on the
schedule in the first place, but luckily, Sixshot hadn’t been offended. He’d been more impressed that
a Minibot dared take a swing at him.

The Earth Embassy kept requesting that Brawn return, despite what had happened last time his turn
came up. He and Brawl had been forced to apologize at length for what they’d done to the news
studio. Swindle’s latest anonymous poll put the Decepticons and Autobots in favor of making them
the permanent reporters for the update.

The Autobot command cadre was split on it. Violence wasn’t conductive to peace, but it’d been
strangely satisfying to watch Brawl pitch his datapad at a wall and declare, “Whoever wrote this
frazzlin’ thing’s a pompous aft!”

Brawn had glared over his own datapad at the Combaticon. “Pretty sure it was Shockwave."

“Pretty sure that just proves my point!”

It’d actually been a fairly good report up until the fight. The two grouchy mechs had exposed several
missed problems during their reading of the update list. Their shared impatience for fancy wording
meant Brawl lost his temper and Brawn descended into snippy commentary whenever the treaty got
too technical for the average mech to wrap his head around. The two of them griping and rephrasing
the negotiation progress as they understood it, in plain and profanity-laced language, had highlighted
several unnerving errors that had somehow been missed by the collected politicians on both sides.

It was amazing how many potential misinterpretations could be found by handing the update list to
two dedicated demolitionists. They’d performed a valuable service for the peace process.

Well, except for the fighting part. That hadn’t been a service. Their insults had steadily worsened,
and Brawn had pulled Brawl’s last straw. He’d said something about a cannon barrel and an
impromptu cork that made every tank on the planet wince.

Brawl’s glare should have set the Minibot’s helm on fire, but he’d kept a civil front. The news crew
had wisely listened when he called to the studio manager behind the camera, “You. Squishy lady
with the microphone. Respectifically and all that, I think you better go back to the weather, ’cause
this Autobot here’s so short he’s probably gotta different climate going on down there.”

Ironhide had been on his way to break up the fight halfway through the show, and Onslaught had
shown up so fast Blast Off might have done an orbital drop to get him there. Neither of them had
been in time to prevent the studio from getting trashed, although to hear Brawn tell it, the fight was
mostly over by the time the officers busted in and busted them up. The demolitionists had gotten
distracted comparing payloads on a particularly large piece of munitions.
Lots of apologies from both mechs after that. Buckets of them.

Much like Jazz and Prowl shelled out to Red Alert, despite the bucket being in the Security Director’s hands. A formal, “I apologize for my juvenile behavior. It was meant to antagonize you, and I will accept discipline as befits my lack of respect,” from Prowl was an effusive expression of sincere regret.

Jazz regretted nothing. “Sorry, Red.”

Peeved optics peered over the datapad at him. “I’m sure.”

“I’m sorrreeeeeeeey,” whined from the saboteur. He squeegeed the last of the water into the drain and sat back on his tires to give Red Alert a soulful look of appeal. “Prowl seduced me with his wicked ways.” Prowl choked on thin air beside him, and Red Alert’s forearm armor clamped tight. “You know me. Usually I’m better than this. I got class.”

From the sound of it, Prowl had inhaled an air filter.

Jazz’s coy, pretty posing was wasted on Red Alert, who had endured almost a vorn in close quarters with Sideswipe, Jazz, and Optimus Prime. Earth had taught him many things. Suspicion of anyone who made Prowl sputter like this was one of them. “You stop that,” Red Alert said, shaking a finger. “You stop that right now.”

In Jazz’s defense, it’d been a long night and his social protocols looked like a ball of yarn after Steeljaw found it. He tuned his vocalizer to breathy excitement and leaned in, still on his knees. “You gonna make me?”

Indignant Spluttering in C Minor: a duet.

Red Alert stopped mid-denial, one optic turquoise as thin green lines of data crawled up his HUD. “Mirage is currently monitoring the Security room.” The at-home version of the joint base’s shared room, remotely connected to the monitors there. “He’s inquired as to what’s going on.”

**”Not to ruin your fun,”** Mirage murmured, icon drifting up to nudge Jazz’s on the comm. network, **”but I hardly think that’s decent behavior for a public location.”**

Nothing else could have poured ice down Jazz’s back quicker, including the ice Red Alert had already dumped on him. Prowl shot to his feet at his side, but the saboteur didn’t move. Somber and quiet, he turned his head to look the nearest security camera in the lens. **”Y’sure about that, Mirage?”**

To the spy’s credit, he hesitated. Jazz knew his mech. The noblemech made uptight look easygoing when it came to following proper protocol, but he’d been there for two of the more heated, ahem, exchanges between Starscream and Jazz. Even without a briefing on what the Decepticons were up to, he had to have an inkling that Jazz was bumper-deep in it.

**”…have a nice night, sir.”** Mirage’s icon retreated up to hide among the on-duty crowd.

Jazz gave the camera an approving nod. When in doubt, trust the boss to handle it. Or at least get out of the danger zone and observe from distance in case back-up or a witness was called for later.


“What’m I thinking of?” No harm in playing along with Red Alert’s hunch. He was, as usual,
Suspicious optics studied him. Jazz tilted his head to the side.

“Whatever it is, it’s going to make the rest of my shift awkward as the Pit,” Red Alert concluded after eying the innocence painted across Jazz’s face.

Prowl wasn’t the only one who could read his mind, it seemed. “Maybe.”

Red Alert looked down at him. An empty, hollow sort of despair opened up behind his optics. “This is going to be another instructional diagram thing, isn’t it.”

Prowl flinched. Jazz’s angelic smile turned lopsided and a bit apologetic. “Aw, c’mon, I didn’t do that,” he protested without much hope that anyone would believe him.

One diagram didn’t seem like much, but it had resulted in Tracks not speaking to him for three months and the rest of the Autobots on Earth developing a cough no medic could explain anytime Astoria visited Powerglide. The diagram hadn’t targeted anyone in specific, of course, and definitely hadn’t featured an Autobot, but that didn’t make anyone less aware that the instructions could apply. The general idea had been to highlight Safety First in the most excruciatingly educational manner possible for maximum embarrassment.

Everybody knew a few Autobots had dallied with humans back on Earth. It’d been a carefully avoided topic. The Decepticons, however, hadn’t been granted the same courtesy, and everybody knew everything about who’d gotten some cross-species action. It’d been wildly scandalous and not talked about in polite company, which meant that nobody had spoken above a furtive whisper while gossiping.

Jazz had been targeting Decepticon morale, plastering the underwater base in diagram posters. The two posters he’d hung in the Ark’s common room had been an afterthought, nothing more. The ‘responsible parties’ had still been given a stern warning lecture at assembly called by Optimus Prime and Prowl.

In contrast, the Decepticons had thought it a great joke and left the posters up for weeks. Two more Decepticons had set up accounts on OKCupid. All in all, it’d been one of Jazz’s least successful sabotage projects.

Huh. Come to think of it, he couldn’t remember where he’d gotten the original idea from anymore. First Aid had been involved in giving him the relevant information, he knew that. Streetwise had helped design and print the posters. Jazz had really only been responsible for drawing the diagram and doing distribution.

It dawned on him that he’d been had, and had but good. That sneaky medic and his team had tricked him into dispensing actual useful medical information no Autobot would ever dare outright ask about, all under the guise of a malicious prank on the Decepticons.

No wonder Tracks had gotten over it so quickly. For a mech who could hold a snit for vorns, three months was nothing.

“Someone remind me to talk to First Aid later,” he said out loud. Red Alert and Prowl glanced at each, then at him, wary. “For now, er, yeah. Sorry, Red Alert.” He climbed to his feet, grinning an apology at his friend and fellow officer. “Not gonna draw anything, but we gotta get some questions going ’round here tonight. Call it a practical demonstration.” Prowl took a prudent step away. Jazz’s apologetic look turned wry. “And Prowl don’t exactly drive down those roads, and he’s off-duty,
“Soooooo.” He needed somebody on-duty to prod people toward thought instead of reaction.

Red Alert gave Prowl a betrayed look before steeling himself for the saboteur’s approach. “Primus spare my spark,” he muttered, leaning away. The last time Jazz had wanted people to start thinking, he’d propositioned Ironhide in front of the command cadre. It’d worked, but frag if Red Alert wanted to be the one getting the funny looks this time around. And the shouting. There would be so much shouting.

Mirage didn’t raise his voice often, but if Mirage was in Security, then his back-up couldn’t be far away. Homebase internal patrol stayed in constant contact with Security. If Jazz remembered right, Cliffjumper was on the docket for tonight.

Jazz intended to detonate a social bomb in the Security room. By briefing time tomorrow, the explosions might have rattled something loose inside people’s heads.

Leaning wasn’t enough to avoid inevitable capture. The mighty hunter wrapped an arm around his prey’s waist to keep him in place, and the Security Director grimaced, resigned. “I got a list of pointy questions you can poke at ‘em with,” the small black-and-white holding him offered as appeasement. “C’mon. It’ll be fun. You know what you’re doing compared to them.”

True. Red Alert hunched his shoulders and spat, “Fine. Get whatever it is,” his mouth twisted around the words, “over with before I lose my nerve.” His voice fell. “My head’s killing me.”

Jazz could sympathize, and he wouldn’t have to put up with Hurricane Cliffjumper and the Mirage Ice Blizzard about to hit the Security room. Talk about extreme weather. “Don’t sound so excited,” he said, reaching up. His hand cupped Red Alert’s cheek.

The jaw joint tightened under his fingertips. So that’s where this was going.

Jazz dropped his engine down to a smooth purr, but he had to ask. He had to. “Alright?”

Sighing, the taller Autobot forced the tension out. “Fine. Whatever.”

“We don’t have to. I can make a diagram.”

“Don’t even joke about that.” Red Alert shuddered. “Just do it.”

That wasn’t the most enthusiastic of consent, but he let Jazz guide him down with nothing more than slight pressure from the thumb against his jawline. The shorter mech pushed up to meet him halfway.

After a minute, Red Alert’s hands rose. Metal scraped quietly as they touched Jazz’s sides, stroked down to his waist, and felt their way in a slow, meandering path around to splay over his back. One hand slid up his roof and settled between his doors. They gathered him in, gathered him up, until his feet nearly left the floor and Red Alert’s head bent over his.

Uncomfortable as he’d been even speaking of interfacing in the hallway with just Jazz and himself present, the public, openly passionate kiss disturbed Prowl all over again. He shifted, doors hitching up in discomfort. His optics wandered the ceiling as he looked everywhere but the two officers in front of him. From the way his lips pressed into a thin line, he was repressing the urge to break up the indecent display.

Fans whirred in the silence. A faint, silvery sound accompanied the parting of their lips, and Jazz smiled hazily up at Red Alert. The taller Autobot’s expression had closed off. Impassive, he looked down at the officer cadre’s resident troublemaker as Jazz’s hand left his face, fingertips tracing along his jaw to fall off his chin.
“That should do it,” Jazz said.

Red Alert’s face stayed blank for half a klik. The arms wrapped around Jazz tightened briefly before relaxing, hands pulling back as if loathe to leave black and white plating, and they settled behind his elbows. Jazz glanced down, curious, but the Security Director seemed to hesitate.

“If you’re going to do it,” Red Alert said slowly, “don’t do it halfway.”

The fingers on his elbow joints moved, getting a better grip. Jazz narrowed his visor and didn’t tense up. The metal under Red Alert’s right optic twitched once, twice -- -- and the larger mech threw him into the wall, doors and back slamming flat. “Do it right.”

“What -- ?” The wall interrupted him, smashing into his helm. “Stop!”

He had no time to recover from the impact. Red Alert was on him in an instant. The soft pressure of their mouths turned abruptly hard, scraping through polish, paint, and down into the metal as Jazz kicked and squirmed under harsh hands pinning him to the wall. Red Alert had him by the shoulder, other hand forcing the opposite arm to the wall, and he twisted to crush the smaller mech using the side of his body as a barrier, hip pushed into Jazz’s midriff. Struggling got the saboteur nowhere.

They both knew he could fight loose if he wanted. Red Alert specialized in many things, but hand-to-hand combat wasn’t in the top five. It sure didn’t look like a fair fight, however.

Jazz snarled into the violence, biting at the tongue daring to flirt past his lips. Past the moving, shifting, blocking mass of his attacker, he glimpse rounded blue optics. Conflicted horror paralyzed Prowl. He stared on the sidelines while Red Alert pulled Jazz forward and slammed him back a second time, denting wall and mech alike.

Red Alert wrestled Jazz into submission, prompting a pained noise as their mouths crashed together in renewed passion that could have been lust or fury. He didn’t give Jazz a chance to speak around the shrill creel of metal-on-metal. Jazz kept flailing. The muffled sounds he made could have meant anything.

Prowl averted his optics, obviously embarrassed, but the scene was magnetic. He stared again, looked away, and started to turn away as well. He stopped two steps down the hall. Joints creaked as his hands clenched into fists. His doors locked in a straight horizontal line that screamed how tense and unhappy he was with the spectacle they were making. Absolutely everything about this twigged him.

It was perverted. Obscene.

Over that, worse than that, somehow different, it was wrong.

He turned around, and the blue optics Jazz caught glimpses of around Red Alert hardened. Prowl’s social protocols tangled his mind in updates and error messages, but the situation called for action, not theory.

“Red Alert.” His voice froze words into icicles to stab them with. “Stop.”

The corner of Jazz’s mouth split as Red Alert’s lips yanked off his own. “He started it,” the Security Director snapped, just as cold but furious as well. “I’m finishing it.”

“The Pit you are.” Jazz licked at the cut and bared fuel-stained teeth. His visor held Red Alert’s frigid gaze. “Get off me.”
Red Alert sneered in contempt. “What, you’ve changed your mind? Ha! Don’t think you can fool me. I know better.” He leaned, grinding against the smaller mech. “You want it.”

Prowl’s optics flared a pale blue, and his heel-tires squeaked on the floor as unease drove him a step back, away from them. This was intensely personal. This was nobody’s business but their own. Jazz could almost hear Prowl’s circuits overheating from here as conflict solutions collided head-on in his processors. Intervene or withdraw. Take a side or get out of here. The easiest solution would be to simply order them into a room to sort themselves out in private.

Vents opened to suck air, perhaps for courage. “Red Alert. I -- he gave you an order.”

“Hmmph. Prowl, you know he was asking for it kissing me like -- “

“Release him immediately!”

That voice could have frosted the walls. Under the steel mask of an officer, anger and agitation simmered. The bizarre situation had Prowl off-balance, but his optics were glacier cold.

Red Alert and Jazz cut their fans at the same time. Prowl blinked as they separated, not a hint of anger between them. “If you’re going to do something,” Red Alert repeated to Jazz as if nothing had happened, “don’t do it halfway. Do it right.”

Prowl looked from one to the other, confused all over again. “What…are you doing?”

Jazz smiled at him, a bit sad. He recognized that confusion. His overworked social protocols had to be bombarding him with nonsensical alarms at this point. “Why’d you stop us?” he asked, neutral as he could. The question was meant to provoke thought.

It got two blinks and a wordless movement of Prowl’s mouth.

“More useful to my purposes tonight, why didn’t you stop us before? What was the difference?” Red Alert gave the security camera a penetrating look.

Jazz did, too. So many questions could be asked about what they had just done, and about Prowl’s reactions to both. Prowl was already thinking it over, the furrow under his chevron deepening as his optic ridges drew together. Red Alert had been right to take the demonstration that drastic step further. Jazz pulled silly stuff to get morale up, but that second kiss went far past a prank. It couldn’t be ignored.

If Jazz set the fire, then Red Alert would feed the flames. The Security Director had burnt out circuits retrieving files on the topics raised tonight. Distrusting the Decepticon agenda didn’t mean that he couldn’t connect the dots on his own. He’d seen the ugly picture drawn in Autobot history.

Prowl didn’t know what he’d seen. He looked back and forth between them, unable to articulate what he’d done, much less why. Red Alert and Jazz shared a concerned look. They had their own reasons to worry, but there was enough overlap to make them allies right this moment. It felt odd to stumble over a common purpose, but it shouldn’t, it really shouldn’t be that difficult to describe what consent was and wasn’t. They’d provided two graphic scenarios one right after another, yet Prowl had barely been able to look at them, much less judge if there was consent. The Autobots were so used to censoring anything related to interfacing that Jazz doubted Prowl could accurately or impartially describe what he’d just witnessed. Jazz had struggled and demanded to be released, but he’d bet his hubcaps that the kiss preceding the violence had created an aversion so strong Prowl had trouble separating the two kisses as different incidents, one willing and one not.
That provided a ten-course dinner of food for thought, both in personal implications and actual law. The full impact of Jazz’s debriefing would take everyone a while to digest, but Red Alert now had a smorgasbord of topics to feed anyone on duty tonight.

“I may have preferred another diagram,” Prowl said. He looked between the other two officers a last time and shook his head. “If we are done here..?” A slight fear entered his optics. Oh no, what if they planned to do more?

The corner of Red Alert’s mouth pulled up in a tired smirk. “For now.” Mirage’s icon hadn’t moved on the network, but it fairly quivered among the on-duty icons. Yeah, he’d seen everything. A mix of indignation, apprehension, revulsion, and unease had to be turning the noblemech inside-out. He knew Jazz was up to something, but Jazz doubted he could guess what it was.

Red Alert stooped to gather up the forgotten squeegees from the floor, gave Jazz and Prowl a brisk nod each, and strode away down the hall. “Goodnight,” he said.

The Security room was going to be an interesting place tonight.

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 29

[* * * * *]

[ A/N: For the ever-awesome and infinitely patient Jeegoo. Thank you! ]

Shibara drew a thing. I laughed helplessly over it. It’s so perfect.]

http://shibara.tumblr.com/post/103540647059/sketch-for-an-actual-scene-in-the-next-chapter-of = "Shibara_Coming to Terms Ch. 29" />
I’m not reposting all the warnings. If you didn’t read them in Pt. 1, then on your head be it.

**Times and Measurements** (from TFWiki)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>vorn</td>
<td>83 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decivorn</td>
<td>8.3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meta-cycle</td>
<td>13 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stellar cycle</td>
<td>~7.5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deca-cycle</td>
<td>~3 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mega-cycle</td>
<td>93 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>orn</td>
<td>1 Cybertron day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joor</td>
<td>6 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cycle</td>
<td>1.25 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>breem</td>
<td>8.3 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>klik</td>
<td>1.2 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

mechanometer ~ meter

kil ~ kilometer

Jazz turned his head under the direction of the hand cradling his chin. It slid back up to resume petting his helm. Soft micromech pushed into the metal of his face, rubbing circles. They spiraled in and out, concentrating here or there as a stubborn smudge of soot clung to him. Self-repair had already regenerated most of the paint, but the color nanites weren’t all settled in. Rough gray a fraction darker than his usual silvery color peeked out from under the soot in places as Prowl meticulously polished off the burnt layer.

Humans polished their vehicles to bring them to a shine. Cybertronians polished themselves for the same reason, often, but every medic doubled as a detailer for a reason. Regenerating paint took energy; better for a medic to paint on a layer of nanite-rich paint to spare a wounded mech’s depleted nanite stores. Every decently-supplied medbay held a nanite colony or two where the medics cultured excess nanites. While a mech’s self-repair system regulated his internal nanite colony, frequent small injuries from skirmishes or even sparring could drain a frontliner’s colony as fast as life-threatening damage. The medbay’s colony served to repopulate exhausted stores during surgery, after battles, and especially via preventive measures.

Everyone knew that chemists mixed the best drinks, but medics were the most generous. Full tanks kindled a primitive trust no matter how wary the mech. Even Rung, the furthest thing from a physical doctor the title allowed, used feeding energon goodies to his patients as a way of establishing a connection. Ratchet, Jazz swore, had Mirage-level stalking abilities when it came to finding Autobots who needed a nanite boost. First Aid could be counted on to ply anyone who looked peaky with a warm mug of energon so thickened by nanites it barely qualified as liquid. Hoist skipped the mug and used the nozzle on his arm. The humans had been extremely uncomfortable watching *that*, but, “Fraggit, Jim, I’m a doctor, not a cow!” had become his standing joke with Sparkplug.
If it was a patient and needed fuel, then a medic would provide a cube chock-full of supplements, boosters, and nanites. Rumor had it that the Decepticon medics barely waited for dead patients to die before siphoning their energon for processing. The dead were then used to refuel their living patients. Flatline didn’t have such a gruesome reputation just because he transformed into a hearse. Decepticons still trusted him enough to take the fuel, however, so that likely said something about how much trust feeding actually bought.

Medical-grade energon: tasted like slag, worked like a charm.

Keeping their patients topped up between battles helped, but medics had other means to help. Repainting was one. Externally supplying the nanites for self-repair meant a mech didn’t have to tap his internal stores. It was easy to tell how bad a unit was doing supply-wise by how battered their paintjobs were. Everyday life put its nicks and dings into people even outside of combat. It was part of the price metal beings paid for existing. Emergency medbays on the frontlines typically slapped a layer of nanite slurry on bare metal, leaving mechs looking weld-scared for longer periods because hasty batches of paint lacked color pigment. The thinner their supplies stretched, the less nanites were added to each batch, and the patchier the unit looked.

Applying a coat of any color paint over bare metal spared self-repair the energy of generating the color coating, but the wrong color paint took more energy than the right color. The closer a color matched, the less energy a mech’s self-repair system had to invest in tweaking the coat of paint. That didn’t take into consideration a mech’s patience, since conversion could be a spotty, prolonged process that made even the prettiest paintjob look awful. Sunstreaker hated looking even temporarily off-color, so he violently abhorred applying paint in the wrong shade.

The Earth crew had had the luxury of customized cans of paint colors produced by the humans. Given the time and resources, Ratchet been able to grow a separate nanite colony to supply each mech, colonies transplanted into and stored in their color-matched paint after synthesis. It didn’t resemble the paint the humans sold them once he was through culturing each can, although the naked eye wouldn’t notice the difference. Human eyes couldn’t see the telltale signs of nanites swarming through the liquid. Spike had once commented on the gritty texture of the paint Ratchet had been using, but the liquid felt smooth and inert to a human’s senses. Nanites in paint activated upon contact with living metal, not human skin.

A human -- or machine -- could be painted, but Cybertronians had personalized surface coloration that was as part of them as the raw metal underneath. The painted-on nanites synced up to a mech’s self-repair system over time, becoming part of the mech. Paint never integrated into a machine or human the way it did for a mech, and Cybertronians generated their own surface coloration if they didn’t paint it on. Painting on inactive nanites was the more energy and time efficient method, as self-repair ate a small but steady amount of energy to power the cycle if a mech didn’t use paint.

Without external replacement, a mech’s own nanites built a new shell of coloration under the old, smoothing away the scuffs of everyday life, but it could take a while. Replacement speed varied by health, age, and programming, as well as fuel levels. In ideal conditions, a mech naturally cycled through his top coat pretty fast as the nanites spent out their lifespans. Dead paint flaked away, revealing the next coat down in a natural cycle of replacement much like a human shedding dead skin cells.

Although comparing Cybertronian biology to a carbon-based lifeform wouldn’t lead to many friends. Perceptor had seen the link immediately, of course, but the idea alone made Jazz’s paint crawl, and he liked humans. Just…skin and paint. Not the same thing, nuh-uh. Intellectually, he understood the similarities between polishing and exfoliating, but Carly had done exfoliating as part of treating herself to a spa day. Polishing was for health as well as looks. Jazz could concede that exfoliating
dead skin might be healthy for humans, but he’d yet to see a human doctor do it as a standard part of maintenance treatment.

Hoist had heavily approved of the Autobots’ frequent trips to the nearest car wash. The water washes felt amazing -- hey, mass amounts of solvent of any form had been an unbelievably expensive indulgence before the war destroyed city plumbing -- but it was the hot wax spray and rub-down that were medic-approved. The less energy paint-nanites had to suck off their host’s systems, the more battle-ready that host was. Heat and friction supplied a great deal of the necessary energy. Autobots on the casualty list after battle were painted and polished by the medic on duty as a matter of course, and rub-downs to slough off dulled paint and shine up were advised for everybody.

There wasn’t an Autobot from the Ark mission who didn’t have fond memories of their human friends polishing them any time they asked, if they even had to ask. Humans had a huge weakness for shiny, fancy cars. The Autobots had quite enjoyed taking advantage of that.

It had been easier than complicating relations aboard the Ark. Trading polishes between mechs had entirely different connotations than letting a human pick up the buffer. Crewmates trading a buffer could stray into inappropriate territory if they did it too often in public. Polishing didn’t have anything sexual about it, but a casual observer could find intimacy where there was none to see. It depended on the mechs involved, the situation they were in, and sometimes, the rumors surrounding them.

Prowl polished Jazz, and nobody would dare make anything of it. Rank protected him. His icy, stern personality discouraged even the thought.

In public, at least. In private, he could let the other aspects of his personality come through, and the person under the officer craved contact. Ratchet had cleared Jazz for duty without cleaning him up, and the Porche had gone into the debriefing looking like he’d come off a used car lot. His seams were jammed with grime from Tarn. Dirt and superficial damage like burnt paint didn’t need urgent medical attention, but Prowl had pounced on it. Polishing Jazz up was the perfect excuse for him to sit with Jazz’s head in his lap, one hand idly stroking the side of the saboteur's helm while the other dabbed at the soot left by Thundercracker's spark.

Said saboteur didn't object in the slightest to this treatment. Offline, his visor was a dark band across a contented expression. His fans spun in a sigh, pushing out stale air as the micromesh left his face for a moment. A tin rattled, and Prowl went back to rubbing small circles a moment later. Fresh wax smoothed over the cleaned areas. Silky warmth bloomed in its wake as Jazz's nanites fed off the friction and heat of Prowl's finger to fuel their own efforts.

Blackened, dead flakes of paint flecked under steady pressure, rubbed at again and again until the soot loosened. Prowl's hand left his face to move the cloth to a clean spot, and it returned to rub wax into the bare metal. Repetitive motion stimulated nanite activity in the area. It wasn’t a coat of paint, but it did help.

Jazz’s doors hung lax over the edge of the recharge slab, utterly relaxed. They shivered. The sigh became a low moan, and his doors perked up slowly as a stretch ran the length of the prone mech. It started in his knee joints, gears turning, and tensile cables tightened in a spreading wave that straightened his legs. They parted slightly, stiffened to full extension, feet pointed and hips twisted flat on the slab, and the stretch continued up his torso as his hip twisting dragged kinked abdominal plating, cables, and wires out past his model specs. Metal creaked protest. Extras built into his frame groaned into extension. His shoulder tire pushed into the bed, supporting the sharp arch of his back, an arch pushed far past what his official medical files said he should be able to reach. Ratchet would fail to be surprised by that. He’d also fail to correct the record, which would spare Jazz the effort of
hacking into secure medical files to change the numbers back to what he wanted seen.

Axle, shock absorbers, and brakes all ached pleasantly as his shoulder tire took his weight, and metal in his neck clicked as he burrowed the side of his face into Prowl’s lap, shamelessly using the leverage to roll his hips some more, really stretching the joints. His chest pushed forward, a fraction sharper angle on the curve of his back, and his doors squeezed together to slide up onto the slab. Every part of him tensed for one brief, glorious moment of the stretch.

Prowl obligingly paused to let him finish.

His shoulders relaxed first. His back struts softened into a loose line. His doors spread, sliding slowly back off the slab. The saboteur went back to resembling a slumped sack of spare parts someone had dumped out on Prowl’s recharge slab.

“Hedonist,” Prowl chided. He went back to polishing.

Jazz hummed agreement. It was barely audible over the sound of his engine purring. That hardly mattered, since Prowl hadn’t spoken out loud. The mild scold had come in packets of data transmitted through the cables connecting them, and Jazz’s agreement cycled back the same way. The wash of energy from Prowl’s end carried none of the chastisement of the actual word said aloud, and affection flavored by mischief skittered alongside the machine-level hum of contentment from Jazz’s side.

Pleased gratification radiated back through the cycle. It wasn’t physical pleasure, but Jazz reveled in it as if it were a hug. Hugs were good, too. He hadn’t been expecting a flare of charge, anyway. He was hooked up to Prowl, not Ironhide. Different circumstances and a different partner meant a different interface.

Interface cables were rated for a high enough for full, nigh-immediate synchronization. The pleasure in interface came from delaying the build up to that point. Clicking in was just the beginning. Cabled in, a mech’s processors went through the security rituals of transmitting recognition codes before computer access to the port was granted, and that waiting could turn into a tease of pinging recognition codes back and forth. In good company, friendly transmissions pulsed over receptors in an electronic touch as subtle as exchanged caresses. Transmitting a recognition code in a tripped rhythm set the mood as much as opening himself to a lover’s code did, in Jazz’s experience.

Then his processor had to locate and ask access at the correct gateway, guided there by his partner’s permission. Access wasn’t guaranteed. Tiny bursts of charge tapped on closed gateways like walking down a hallway trailing his fingers over closed doors. ‘Are you behind Door Number One? May I come in? Please let me in.’ Data rippled through the energy, pinging off the closed gateways as if searching for the lock one particular set of codes keyed, but denials were another cycle of transmission/reception. ‘Not that door, hmm? Are you sure? I’ll just press into the door and feel you listening to me on the other side.’ Nonsense code and data packets of varying sizes tested the locks. Unpredictable transmission rates sharpened the experience, and transmission was only limited by port rating. Reception felt like anything between a continuous flutter teasing the wrong gateways or a heady pound on the right gateway, all the force and lust of interface teasingly withheld by passcodes correct to within one digit.

Done right, energy poured down the interface cables into a whirlpool of stymied data flow stirring on the borders of their cortex. Transmission speed built the more lovers pushed into the exchange. With nowhere to go, capped on either end, the cycle could only blur faster as they thrust more in, waited out the return surge, and thrust in again.

When the gateways opened at last, the pent-up queue of data would cascade into a mech’s cortex. A
throbbed crackle of electricity would spread throughout a his body at the exact same time. That was the moment when lovers felt each other. Processors met, set up a cycle, and pushed to achieve synced dataflow. Thought, physical sensation, and sheer machine-level feeling streamed in time, CPU to CPU. Software intertwined. Compatible ones meshed. Hardware strained to operate as one being. That was the real pleasure of interface. That was the homestretch before the end goal of overload.

Unless, of course, a mech took steps. Firewalls cut into the free flow of data. Security codes locked down software. Hardware buffers diverted or delayed energy transference. Lowering firewalls to a trusted lover turned the rush toward overload into a striptease, revealing pieces of a mech’s mind in tantalizing glimpses of revealed self. The stop and start of hardware buffers titillated through physical jolts of amped-up charge. A swift, smooth acceleration toward synchronization, reset, and overload turned into a stepped climb of discharge and rebuild, rush and wait, until both lovers were on the cusp of tearing at their cables in frustrated, wanting, needy pleasure that grew tighter, hotter, and faster but never seemed to end until it did --

Come to think of it, one of the things Jazz had noticed in the back of his head as strange -- not as strange as whipping someone to overload, but strange -- had been how long it’d taken the Decepticons to interface. His spies had brought back a ton of videos of Decepticons fragging anywhere, anytime, but having watched things happen in the arena tonight, he had to stop and think about the length of time. There had been some quick tumbles among the spectators, yes, but nothing compared to crossing cables. It had taken a comparatively long time to bring Thundercracker to overload, and Jazz had no idea if that was unusual or not. If the Decepticons defined fragging as physical contact leading to overload, their interfacing took a whole lot longer than crossing cables did. Ironhide had said he considered the tamer tactile touching and such to be foreplay, but Jazz had cabled with Ironhide before. Even adding in the things they did before they jacked in, it had been over and done with fairly fast. The interface Jazz and Ratchet snuck in back in the medic’s office had been over with in less than a klik once they stopped fooling around making out. They’d gotten too impatient. Tactile interfacing felt too slow. Sure, a cable frag felt like forever on the inside. It wouldn’t be worth doing with a partner as often as the Autobots did if it was only about clicking in a cable: snap-overload-done. Jazz could sync up to a porn download to self-service and get a quick overload if he wanted fast and cheap. Quality porn made the fantasy mech’s systems a mirror to the real thing, but an imitation wasn’t the real thing. Even with an external battery or generator, it always took more effort on his end, and that messed up the timing. It felt fake. Plus, he hadn’t hooked up to a pornload yet that had a good discharge simulation. He liked feeling his lovers overload as much as he liked overloading. The backwash of physical pleasure through the circuit felt like a doubled overload, an echo almost as strong as his own climax.

It was more satisfying to plug in to a real person. A tactile frag might be slower, building charge through external means instead of internal energy trade, but isolating his mind and body might make it less satisfying as well. It had been plenty exciting at the time, but looking back over his memories of the night, he wondered if tactile interfacing would feel like sluggish, dragged-out self-servicing. It might be novel at first, but it could be boring.

Then again, Jazz never got bored of interfacing with Prowl, and there wasn’t an overload in sight. Lack of interest wasn’t quite as physically effective as an adapter plugged in place between jack and port, but it’d do in a pinch. As it was, most medbays had a selection of adaptors for pure mechanical compatibility issues. Even if Prowl didn’t have his own, he could have gone to the nearest medic and asked for one. Jazz knew for a fact that First Aid carried an entire skein of them rolled up in a tidy little holder he pulled out in the most matter-of-fact way possible the second an embarrassed
mumbling Autobot asking about safe interfacing sidled in.

Most of Special Operations had adaptors built into their interface cables. Security mechs had the luxury of being able to keep force-download equipment in external storage, but Spec Ops had to keep it ready for use at any time. Field interrogation and information retrieval waited for no one, much less for equipment retrieval. They kept it packed out of sight, of course, but eventually their regular partners found out one way or another. It was one of the unsavory aspects of being the Autobots’ dirty fighters. Just having built-in adaptors fed the wariness many Autobots felt toward the division as a whole. The adaptors could be turned off at will, but they were still there.

Outside of an operation, Jazz’s default setting for his adaptor was offline. Threat assessment could kick it online, and it had been thoroughly unpleasant the times that happened. Fragging without system sync tended toward one-sided tampering that echoed overtones of brutal interrogation. There were too many Autobots in the ranks who’d gone through a force-download, either as a prisoner or by their own faction, same as Red Alert. Jazz’s agents had triggered more than their fair share of those poor mechs.

Firewalls and partitions delayed system sync. Adaptors gave the person on the other side a false system schematic to match data and energy input/output to, and it felt completely different. It’d be syncing up to a pornload except that there was someone on the other side of the adaptor, and generally the adaptor wasn’t used with an overload in mind. The mech with the adaptor had protection, pushing out a measured level of charge and whatever data packets he wanted, and he only had to accept what charge and packets he wanted to pass through the adaptor. It made it easy to give nothing and download everything. Anyone without an adaptor was vulnerable to that one-sided interface.

Ironhide had used user permit overrides to tamper with the interface to Jazz, and Jazz used the same on his agents, but Jazz had allowed Ironhide into his cortex to slip the transmission in. An interrogator forced connection and hacked a gateway. That kind of interface was an invasion from the start. Tricking someone into an open connection via trust eliminated the time-consuming first step of a force-download. It wasn’t nice, but it got the job done faster. Faster gave the victim less time to throw up defenses against a one-sided hardline, and it left less of a mess if a medic examined the victim later looking for traces of a hostile interface. Jazz couldn’t count the number of mechs scarred on the inside where a supposed ‘friend’ betrayed them, but everything looked to be in order to a medical scan.

There were enough Autobots chary of his agents that he could understand why the Decepticons thought all cable interfacing to be rape. Jazz couldn’t imagine what it would be like if distrust between mechs in his faction was the standard instead of the exception. It made his processors complain trying to picture cabling in as an act of interrogation, of war, or even of business, not a pleasurable form of intimacy. He obviously didn’t really get where the Decepticons were coming from on this. That wasn’t what interfacing was at all, to him.

The confusion was probably just as thick over on the Decepticon side of things. He was currently hooked up to Prowl. Someone like Vortex, who kept doing his utmost to seduce the prisoner he was interrogating, would look at the two of them right now and probably think they were hardcore soldiers in a mental deathmatch.

This whole situation made Jazz’s head spin.

The delicate tendrils of foreign file retrieval paging through his temporary file cache paused. Prowl’s fingers stopped, too. They stayed where they were, resting on burnt paint as the processor connected to Jazz’s cortex backtracked. Prowl weaved through the hazy freeform train of thoughts that had
passed him by, tracing through the various tags pulled up by Jazz’s mind. Part of the saboteur’s convoluted maze of a CPU was sectioned off by a slow defragment running in the background, but the rest of him was open to Prowl. Wide open.

“I would like to interface with you. May I connect?” the Autobot Second-in-Command had asked. Discomfort had bled off him, but he’d asked as promised. Even with just the two of them there in the privacy of his room, the question came out stiff, formal, and deeply perturbed. Explicitly asking permission just wasn’t done.

Jazz had forked over his cables the nanoklik Prowl asked. “Yeah. Please do.” Sense of propriety aside, Prowl still hadn’t felt that Jazz could be completely trust-ed, and Jazz couldn’t let that stand. Not as the Head of Special Operations, not as an operative, not as a fellow officer, and especially not as a friend. The Autobots couldn’t afford Prime’s right and left hand mechs estranged from each other.

Prowl had been somewhat taken aback by the cables thrust into his hands, but Jazz had simply flopped onto the recharge slab and waited. Faith took effort, but somebody had to have it. His adaptor had been offline, firewalls disabled, and processors at the ready for access. His training as a spy had screamed through threat assessment at him, straining to bring up his defenses, but faith was trust without proof. If he didn’t have it, then they’d get nowhere. The unease sitting under the surface between them would molder into suspicion all too soon.

Jazz would not let lack of trust endanger the peace negotiations. Prowl had linked in to his cortex, full access at his fingertips, and Jazz hadn’t asked for reciprocation. He didn’t trust the tactician, but he did have faith.

Faith that paid off. After a moment of astonishment at the wide open interface, Prowl had recovered his dignity and gone about getting out his polishing supplies. It was a polite fiction to give his tacnet time to pick through the implications of Jazz exposing himself like this. By the time he settled down on the bed to get to work, he’d decided on a reaction.

Jazz now had full reciprocal access to Prowl’s processors. Admittedly, Prowl’s adaptor acted as a barrier by matching their specs, but the tactician wasn’t hiding behind it. If Prowl hadn’t lowered all his firewalls and opened access routes through the adaptor and into his own cortex, it might have triggered bad memories of interrogation, but there was a complete circuit open between them. Choked down, yes, but interfacing with Prowl always felt different. Matching specs from the start meant that there was no adjustment period. Systems didn’t change during a matching interface.

What Jazz felt while syncing up to Ratchet or Ironhide was passion. This? This wasn’t passion.

He stretched again, content with the gentle paging through his files. He was more than half-dozing. Shutting down into actual recharge tempted him, but running defragmentation on his processors gave him the rest he needed while letting him stay awake to ping his own fetch requests down the line. He didn’t do it often. Prowl’s occasional pause to chase down a tag he found particularly interesting merited Jazz’s attention. Prowl sorting out social algorithms and organizing information wasn’t going to give him anything but a headache if he tried to meddle.

They weren’t interfacing to mine each other’s heads for information. They were doing it for the feel of each other entwined through the cables, dataflow and en-ergy matched together as Prowl polished the Jazz to a glowing shine. The smaller Autobot had begun the interface sprawled on the recharge slab, Prowl perched on the edge at the limit of their cables’ reach, but the familiar pulse through the cables had been as much of a lure as the wax spread over his plating. Friction warmth and touch lulled him into a hypnotized trace of total relaxation. A stretch here, turning over here, a popped knee and rolling his shoulders across the bed, and Jazz had oozed across the bed to puddle into Prowl’s
Amusement washed through him. It had an aftertaste of exasperation as the saboteur nudged into Prowl’s hands, urging the rubdown to continue. Oh, that just happened to deposit part of Jazz into the tactician’s lap. Look at that. What a coincidence. Black-and-white plating curled up improbably small as Jazz scrunched more of himself into the limited space.

Prowl’s amusement deepened. Jazz broadcast smugness back at him. Pet the spy, that’s a good mech. The Jazzmeister was pulling off another impossible mis-sion. He deserved a nice polish as a reward, yes he did. _Prr-prrr-prrr._

Prowl, secret cuddle-bug that he was, gave his ridiculous behavior a pass. Jazz was being a demanding brat, but the silliness covered a more serious demand through their connection. His processors sought reassurance. Prowl wanted the physical contact his rank and duty deprived him of, and the assurance that his fellow officer and friend wasn’t a Decepticon plant. Jazz wanted to know that he was trusted.

He’d gotten out of the meeting thinking that he wanted to fall into exhausted recharge alone. Wrapped in Prowl’s presence, warm and needed, Jazz revised his wish list. He was starved for touch. Every hand laid on him tonight had been guided by an agenda he couldn’t predict, and it had wound him tight as a spring. If Prowl hadn’t nabbed him outside the meeting room, he’d have likely staggered out of his bunk and gone crawling into Optimus Prime’s sometime before dawn.

The Prime gave awesome snuggles. If anything could convince Jazz that he hadn’t been tainted or tampered with tonight, it was Prime-snuggles. He’d have felt ashamed of his weakness and guilty as the Pit for waking his leader up, but _Prinus_. Jazz hadn’t realized how far into his role he’d gotten until he tried to find the exit.

A light brush of curiosity touched the sense of weary calm they’d been holding steady for the past cycle.

Jazz stirred. “What?”

Words formed slowly, emerging from data packets conveying a gradual build of squirming unease. “Could you sit up? I would like to try something.” Half-formed images transmitted, and Jazz frowned. Images of Smokescreen leaning on a table, trademark seductive smile in place. Images of Ratchet’s hand sliding up behind one of Wheeljack’s audio indicators. A single blurry image of Jazz himself, by the angle a picture from the security camera in the hall where he and Starscream had done their dance of politics and misunderstandings.

He groaned as he sat up. “Gravity got heavier. Right here. On me. Natural phenomenon that happens every time I’m comfortable, I swear.”

Prowl accepted the attempt at humor but didn’t cheer up. He didn’t disconnect them, however, so
Jazz took it as a good sign. The images clogged Prowl’s out-put, growing fuzzier around the edges as tension pushed the tactician’s charge higher. Jazz caught the data on the increase even though none of the energy increase got through the adaptor to him. The images became…disturbing. They weren’t anything worse than Autobots necking in the halls, but attached to each image was a kind of dread that bristled almost aggressively. He was seeing them how Prowl did, as if they were subtle attacks. They crowded in on him in a hostile invasion of images pressing in from every side.

“Prowl?” What the frag was going on? Why would Prowl see this stuff as an attack? *When* had seeing scenes like this started to feel like an attack? Jazz had groped his aft before, but the joking around had been met with annoyance, not this. Whatever this was. What was this?

His surprise and worry bled into the connection, ramping up the tension in a cycle of climbing emotion, but Jazz couldn’t -- didn’t want to -- shut off the interface.

The tactician braced himself. Jazz felt it. Synced up as they were, they squared their shoulders at the same time and drew in a vent of cool air, doors forced down. It was a strange sensation. Determination boomed through the connection, blotting out the images and every other emotion as Prowl turned his head to look Jazz right in the visor.

“May I kiss you?”

[* * * * *]

End Pt. 30

[* * * * *]

[A/N: For Comebackzinc. Thank you!]

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!