The Tie That Binds
by kateydidnt

Summary

RotF verse. Sequel to "Kinship." Sam's trying to juggle his different priorities after the battle in Egypt, from ambassador to Prime to college student to boyfriend, but his biggest challenge is also the tallest: his brother Prime. Canon pairings.

Notes

(Eowyn77): Firstly, many thanks to my collaborators, DarthIshtar and Kateydidnt, for their patience and indulgence with me and this story. Even though most of this story is mine, they have been invaluable sounding boards and without them this story wouldn't be worthy to be the successor to "Kinship." Take a bow, ladies! :) 

This is the sequel to my story "Kinship," which focused on Sam starting to accept that he is a Prime. (As per G1 canon, the Matrix of Leadership was the Autobot equivalent of the Sword in the Stone. It only activated for a Prime and was often the means by which the next Prime was revealed. Sam was able to activate and use the Matrix; ergo, he is also a Prime.) Hopefully that will jog everyone's memory.

As with "Kinship," the only romantic relationships will be between canon couples (and some hinted-at BumblebeexArcee), so don't even bother squinting at the other intense relationships. Love comes in many incarnations, and this is a story that focuses on familial love. "Kinship" established that a brother bond was forged between Sam and Optimus when Sam reignited Optimus' spark.

Also, to complete the story begun in "Kinship," I'm going to have to write two sequels, making a trilogy. This being the middle fic, it'll be a little more somber in tone and won't have
the resolution of the last one. Just so everyone's forewarned.
Prologue: Severed

Blessed be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.
~ John Fawcett (1782)

In retrospect, it should have been Optimus' first warning, the first foreshadowing of the War that was to come. Cybertron had gone to war before, but civil war – the turning of brother against brother – was a concept as alien to him as organic life.

Megatron had been blocking his brother more and more. He knew Optimus disapproved of his plans to expand the size and role of Cybertron's planetary defense forces, and he worked hard to hide them. If that was all it was, Optimus would have left well enough alone and given Megatron the privacy he seemed to want. After all, he still loved and trusted his brother, even if they were having a falling out. But Megatron was genuinely alone – no other spark-bonds to tie him to his fellow beings. If Megatron had a mate or their parents still lived, Optimus wouldn't have tested the strength of the block his brother had put on their bond.

It frustrated Megatron to no end that Optimus could break through every time.

The first blow of Cybertron's civil war struck home in the quiet dark before dawn, while Optimus was in recharge. Memories of the reports he'd received the day before mingled with visions of how the discoveries and incremental advancements could be put to use. His dream-self was in the lab with memories of Ratchet, Arcee, and Jazz when Megatron strode in.

"Brother," Optimus greeted him.

"You no longer have the honor of addressing me so familiarly."

Puzzled for a beat by Megatron's haughtiness, Optimus let him feel his wry amusement. "You are in my dream, brother." What better evidence could there be than a shared bond-vision?

"We are brothers no longer. Bonds are a weakness, a flaw that holds back those who are bound and makes them vulnerable. My spark is my own. Our fraternity dies today."

In the waking world, Optimus' optics on-lined and flew wide. The sharp sensation in his spark, so intense it was physically painful, had him curling in on himself, his hands clenching into fists. No! He reached out across the bond, trying to stop the imagined knife that was slowly, deliberately, carving a piece out of his soul. Why? This is hurting you as much as me!

Because you are weak, Megatron answered, his voice a hiss of pain. You think small and run around with your spark open to all like some embarrassing youngling, and you're the firstborn brother. Pathetic! he snarled. You poison me with your weakness. No more!

The knife in his soul viciously sliced deeper, making Optimus convulse with the pain. You're killing us both!

Don't worry, coward. The patronizing voice was quieter, fading with the dying bond they shared. I've been weakening the bond for a long time now. I, at least, will survive. If you grow up and harden your spark, you will, too. Consider this to be one final favor, brother. The last word was an
insult, a slap in the face, as their bond slowly severed.

The pain was changing, less sharp and more aching, but no less vivid. Optimus was trembling under the weight of it, and deep down, fear chilled him. As the bond was a constant, so would some degree of this pain be. He had no other brother to soften this blow. He couldn't move, not even to uncurl from his protective position.

Dawn found him shaking on his berth in agony and grief from the first loss suffered in the War.

…

Elita One, on the opposite side of the planet for a research project, had sensed her mate's turmoil and had commed Ratchet with the entry code to the quarters she shared with her bond-mate, begging him to hurry. Optimus couldn't even answer when Ratchet called his name, certain he'd cry out in pain, but the medic quickly found him.

"Optimus," he exclaimed and immediately ran a scan. The damage to his leader's spark was obvious. "Is your brother – "

//No longer my brother./ Optimus sent, still not trusting his voice. His fisted hands clenched tighter, straining the struts. //He chose to sever our bond./

"Primus in the Pit!" Ratchet knelt beside Optimus' berth and dug his servos into his patient's chassis, finding the relay he sought and turning off every pain sensor in Optimus' frame.

The big mech vented hard in relief. It left him disoriented when half his sensors were offline, but it was far better than the alternative.

"I need to get you to an infirmary," Ratchet began, but Optimus shook his head.

"I have duties…"

"You have a damaged spark," Ratchet growled.

"I have a…protector of Cybertron to face," Optimus answered, his optics hard. "We meet before the Council today to discuss allotments for personnel. If I am not there, he'll get a larger percentage of the newly-matured younglings for his ranks. He said he severed the bond because I am weak. I will not prove him right."

It was calculated, Ratchet realized. What kind of cold-sparked Pit-spawn would sever a brother-bond to gain tactical advantage? The kind that was currently charged with protecting them and the All Spark. A little shiver ran through his energon lines.

Optimus gingerly sat up and, finding no pain, rose to his feet.

"Infirmary," Ratchet insisted.

Optimus sized him up and then slowly nodded. "I'll give you until the time I must appear before the Council."

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Optimus was purposely early for the meeting, so he was there when Megatron entered the foyer where they were to await their turn to address the Council. The harsh words that had been running through Optimus' wounded spark died before they could be vocalized. It was clear no medic had
attended his brother and he moved carefully, the light in his optics dim as he crossed the threshold. Optimus' spark ached anew at the sight, longing to reach out over the bond to his brother and comfort him.

Megatron's optics blazed brighter when he saw Optimus present and standing in relative ease, and then he scowled as he leaned against the far wall, venting air in a hiss of pain.

"I'm glad to see you here and functioning…" Optimus stopped himself just short of saying the word 'brother.' The new-forming scars on his spark would forever attest that they were brothers, but in public, to his face, that term of address was forbidden. Still, Optimus couldn't bring himself to address him like any other mech, as though there was nothing between them. So he chose a term he hoped would placate and soothe his brother. The bond could never be restored, but perhaps friendship might be. "…sir."

Megatron gave him a guardedly curious look, and finding no sarcasm or anger behind the word, nodded once, accepting the courtesy and fealty it represented but offering nothing in return.

With a spark-broken sigh, Optimus also leaned against the wall behind him, waiting in silence for their summons before the Council.

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The first blow, the first loss, the first battle.

Looking back, Optimus felt he should have realized what was happening that day. The thought crossed his processor tens of thousands of times in the war-torn orbital cycles that followed. Elita eventually helped him learn to forgive himself, though, recognizing that even broken love blinds.
It's just my own observation, but it seems that energon is treated differently between G1 and movieverse. To use a car analogy, in G1 energon was like the gasoline while in movieverse it seems more like motor oil - the 'bots can go without it for a while and it prevents them from rusting (among other things). That's how energon will be treated in my fics, just so I don't confuse anyon

"Sam," Will Lennox greeted me.

It had been a week since Optimus died and four days since his spark was reignited, and by now it was a familiar thing for me and Lennox to be standing together in the aircraft carrier's hallway outside a conference room, waiting for the next meeting. I wasn't sure it was a good thing that it felt comfortably normal to be here like this. My personal aide, Ensign Mohammed Al-Sharif, was with us, too, of course, so I couldn't openly talk about what had happened that morning. Even if we could, I wasn't sure that I was ready to discuss with a human how I brought Arcee back from the dead. I'd barely dodged that bullet with Leo and Simmons just a few minutes ago by insisting that I needed to get to this meeting – the one we were early for. Instead, I glanced sidelong at the major beside me. "So…who's Iron Will?"

Lennox cleared his throat. "He's an Autobot."

In surprise I turned and stared at him. "An Autobot?" As in actual, Pretender Autobot?

Lennox tipped his head. "Similar to…a certain Prime."

My breath whooshed out, and I leaned my head against the wall behind me. He knew. He knew I was a Prime. They'd told him the entire story, probably right down to the Matrix of Leadership particles in my blood and meeting the Dynasty of the Ancient Primes. Did he know about my bond with Optimus, even? I was so going to kill the twins.

"He got his designation from Bumblebee," Lennox added softly, by way of explanation.

It made a certain sense that the Autobots – especially Ironhide – would see Major Lennox as one of their own. Just like me. Looking at him with new eyes, I wondered if he could be for me what Ironhide was for Optimus – a tough, strong, absolutely loyal ally. And friend. I could use a few more of those, especially among the humans.

The humans. Gah! I was already thinking like one of them! "Are there any others I should know about?"

He hesitated for a second and then said, "Iron Will's wife, Spitfire. She's kind of the Autobot den mother."

The Autobots had designated her Spitfire? Funny, she'd seemed so…mild-mannered and motherly that one time I visited Diego Garcia. Maybe it was facetious.

"Those are the only two I'm aware of. Besides the Prime, of course." He looked at me again, sizing
me up, his expression a mix of wonder, disbelief, and maybe just a hint of uncharacteristic worry.

Seeing his expression, I was so glad the Autobots were the only ones who knew that being able to use the Matrix of Leadership made me a Prime. Trying to change the subject, I said to al-Sharif, "Who's this meeting with, anyway?"

"OPEC."

"You're freaking kidding me," I grumbled. "Why in the world are we talking to OPEC?"

"Qatar was where the first major Decepticon assault occurred," al-Sharif pointed out. "And while Egypt isn't in OPEC, it is close geographically and culturally. The enemy seems to have an affinity for the region, so they're concerned."

I gave him a disbelieving look, and he added, "It might also have something to do with wanting to cut a deal with the Autobots for fuel in exchange for technology."

I rolled my eyes and let my head drop back against the wall behind me again. "This is ridiculous! The Autobots wouldn't give their technology to the US or Great Britain – what makes them think we'd give it to them?"

"Because they have a virtual monopoly on the world's fuel resources," Lennox softly grumbled. "They see giant alien robots and think 'marketing opportunity'."

Raising my head again, I snorted at the mental image of a billboard with Optimus holding a can of crude oil like a pop can and giving a thumb-up. "Maybe I should mention that I've fueled up Bumblebee maybe once a month for the past two years? And that was only when he had a hankering for something other than sunlight or had been firing his cannons."

Of course, it took hundreds of gallons of gas to reenergize him after something like that.

Lennox smirked. "I hope you do."

We were ushered into the conference room, then, and began the worst meeting yet. Things began cordially, with the usual questions. I explained that the Autobots were my friends, that their intentions were peaceful, that they were here to defend us. I even brought in al-Sharif's comment that they reminded him of djinn. That got a few raised eyebrows, but the representative from Saudi Arabia nodded in agreement.

But then, as al-Sharif had predicted, they started talking shop – what were the Autobots' fuel needs and what were they willing to barter? I explained that they were able to draw power from multiple sources, including sunlight, and that their fuel needs would not be a burden on the world's resources.

That didn't seem to be what they wanted to hear, and the remaining hour and a half of the meeting was spent just asking the same reworded questions over and over. How much fuel would an average Autobot need in a month? What affected the rate of consumption? Did they have a preference when it came to a type of fossil fuel? Would they assist in developing better exploratory and drilling practices? Would they share or help in the development of green technology?

It was the first time anyone had asked me about something other than military technology, and it was really hard to tell them 'no' on the green tech. I knew the Autobots disapproved of the way we were abusing planet Earth, but they were also acutely aware of how we humans could turn just about anything into a weapon.

When their allotted two hours was up, we ended the teleconference and I looked expectantly at al-Sharif. Checking his clipboard once, he said, "The Russians get you until 13:00 hours our time,
when we break for lunch. Then we'll have a joint meeting with the Kremlin and the JCS. At approximately 16:00 our time, you'll have a teleconference with the EU leadership and you also have a meeting with the British Prime Minister over dinner."

"This is frigging ridiculous," I grumbled. "If they schedule a photo shoot for me to be on the cover of Time Magazine, I'm throwing the entire communications department overboard."

Lennox sniggered beside me. "Don't worry, Sam. They already have the picture from your driver's license. They'll just use that."

The reminder made my stomach lurch and I could see The Fallen's broadcast again – my face, my Social Security number, my home address, my connection to the Autobots, my entire identity – on display for the whole world. It left me feeling naked somehow. And then to know how many people had died because of me…

Peace washed over me, flooding through the brother-bond with Optimus, and I was myself again before Lennox clapped me on the shoulder. "Hey. It was just a joke."

"I know," I nodded and then looked up at him. "I'm okay." To Optimus, I sent my feelings of gratitude and calm.

Lennox nodded once in answer and then glanced at al-Sharif. "Maybe we could put the Russians off until after lunch."

"No," I said before my aide could respond. "I talked to OPEC before them; I'm sure they'll be ticked off enough as it is. Oh! Before I forget, we need to schedule an appointment with whoever can get me back into college. I've missed a week of the semester already, so we'll need to hurry."

The look al-Sharif gave me clearly questioned my sanity, but he nodded and made a note. "I'll research that during lunch and get back to you, sir."

"Thanks."

A flicker of a smile ghosted over his face at my very-civilian gratitude. "You're welcome, Mr. Witwicky."

Unbelievably, the day went downhill after that. The next meeting was with some Russian generals or politicians or something (I had long ago given up trying to keep everybody straight), and right out of the chute, they rubbed me the wrong way. A female politician asked, "You are the alien's pet?"

I glanced at Lennox, but he was stone-faced, completely unreadable. I was on my own for this one. Giving them the benefit of the doubt, I chalked it up to something being missed in translation. "I'm their friend, yes."

"You befriend them how?"

"I don't know," I sarcastically answered. "Going to movies with them. Hanging out together." Destroying their only means of producing energon, condemning them to a slow, rusting death. "I help them."

Her eyes were almost hard. "And they help you?"

This was just kind of weird. I was beginning to remember fondly questions about whether I was creeped out by them. "Yes."
"How?"

I shrugged. "Protecting me. Checking up on me when I'm hurt. Driving me to school."

One of the generals raised an eyebrow at me. "This is no laughing matter."

"You're right," I agreed, "it isn't."

"You mean to tell me that alien robot warriors are your chauffeurs?"

I shifted uneasily in my chair. The man had sounded almost pleased. "No, not like that. I told you, we're friends. Bumblebee gave me a lift and protects me because we're best friends."

The female politician smirked. "I see. And what compensation do they receive for your friendship?"

I frowned slightly, glancing at the translator. "I don't understand."

"How much are they paid?" she asked again.

I froze, blind-sided by that one. They were super-advanced alien robots. It's not like they needed clothes or food or a laptop or something. What would they do with money in the first place?

"They are compensated in-kind," Lennox answered for me. "Fuel, shelter, maintenance are provided by NEST."

"But they are not individually compensated?"

Taking a second, I glanced at the page in front of me. Her name was Alexeyevna Berdyaev. Like I was going to remember that. Her first name was like Alexandra, so I'd remember her as Alex.

"No," Lennox admitted.

"So they are slaves?" Alex asked almost casually.

"No," Lennox answered, his eyes hard. "They are communal with their resources."

I turned expectantly to see what her reaction to that would be.

Alex's smirk grew to a genuine grin. "So they are communists."

"No."

Alex's eyes sparkled in amusement. I'll admit I was new to the whole politics thing, but it didn't take a genius to figure out that when the person who's driving you nuts is grinning, it's a bad thing.

"Not politically, of course," Alex agreed, the picture of diplomacy. "But economically?"

Lennox's jaw clenched, but he grudgingly allowed, "I guess you could kind of describe them like that."

Alex nodded then turned her attention back to me. "You speak for them?"

"Yes."

"How much to buy them?"

"WHAT?" For the second time that day, Optimus hurriedly sent calm my way. "They are not for
sale!

Alex looked almost affronted that I was so upset. "Every man has his price. Or in this case, robot. Don't pretend you're so noble as that."

"I'm their ambassador, not their owner! They are not things; they're people!"

The translator cleared his throat. "I believe what Miss Berdyaev is trying to ask is whether their services may be bought, not them personally."

I calmed down marginally and narrowed my eyes at the woman in the video screen. "Is that what you meant?"

"Of course."

Something about how easily she agreed with me made me doubt still, but treating them like mercenaries was much more forgivable than acting like they were property. I slowly relaxed back into my chair. Taking a deep breath, I looked to Lennox for help on this one.

His expression when he glanced at me was still unreadable, but there was a brief flicker of worry or concern in his eyes before he turned back to the Russians. "The Autobots serve with NEST voluntarily. They have never requested payment and have been content with the compensation offered."

Ignoring Lennox, Alex said to me, "As their ambassador, I charge you with carrying a message to their leader. We value their service more than mere fuel and a bunker to hide in. They would be treated better in the service of Russia, and we would offer them a stipend as well as any goods or services they would require."

But Lennox wasn't about to let it go. "The Autobots refuse to fight anyone but Decepticons. They won't be used as a tool by humans to fight other humans."

Alex's smile was almost benevolent. "Then it will not matter which country hosts them," she abruptly turned to me, "will it."

I knew what I wanted to say to that, but I bit my tongue. The message was for Optimus, not me. And I realized with painful irony that the Russians were the first ones to treat the Autobots like people. To them, I wasn't just part of the sideshow; I was an ambassador representing a legitimate organization of sentient beings they just happened to want to hire.

Since everyone in the room was still looking at me expectantly, I softly answered, "I'll pass along the message for you."

Alex nodded curtly and then looked to Lennox again. "Your government will let them go peacefully if they wished, would they not? Unless they are property?"

Lennox frowned, and I knew that nothing we humans could do, short of a nuclear blast, would stop the Autobots if they really set their minds to something and maybe not even then. "They are sentient beings who choose to work with us. The possibility that they might prefer another home has not even been considered," he answered. "I will bring it up with my superiors."

Again Alex nodded and then deferred to the general at her right. He leaned forward on his elbows. "About these Decepticons. According to the information I have received, the Solar Harvester was destroyed. What is the likelihood that they will attack again?"
Lennox took over from there, and I sullenly sat back in my chair, waiting out the tactical talk until they had another question for me. Would the Autobots go somewhere else? I just couldn't wrap my brain around Bumblebee cruising in Siberia instead of California. And NEST was a coalition of the British and US militaries. The Autobots didn't belong to any single country. But we Americans and English had been close allies for a long time, so I guess I could kind of see why the Russians would be upset that the 'bots fought under the orders of the JCS.

But what was the alternative? Give every country an Autobot for hire? And even then, people would be fighting over who got Optimus. Maybe it was better when the Autobots' existence was a secret. It's not that we humans couldn't handle the truth like Leo thought. We couldn't handle ourselves.
Firstly, I'm pulling from several different TF universes for some of the mythology Optimus mentions here, mostly because Bayverse is pretty thin on anything other than the Primes, though I put my own twist on the stuff I borrowed. The nature of Bayverse protoforms I'm pulling from a helpful article on one of the TF wikipedias. I'm usually a stickler for canon, but trying to keep with the "official" storylines in TF is like fishing with your bare hands.

Secondly, this chapter has a companion fic, Introductions: Keith Black.

As we finally wrapped up with the Russians, al-Sharif cleared his throat beside me. When I saw his military mask of an expression, my stomach sank. Whatever he had to say, it was not going to be good. "Yes?"

"Admiral Black has requested that you join him for lunch. Just the two of you."

"But dinner's tied up with the Prime Minister," I protested.

"Yes. The admiral asked if you'd be willing to make an exception for him in exchange for two meals with your family and friends tomorrow."

I looked to Lennox, but he just shrugged. "I've gone months at a time without being on the same continent as my wife."

"You're no help," I grumbled to him. To al-Sharif, I said, "Fine. But tomorrow's lunch and dinner are ironclad. I don't care if Megatron requests a meeting with me – I'm having two civilian meals."

"Understood."

When I arrived for my mano-a-mano lunch with the bull-headed admiral who hated the Autobots, I was surprised to find an all-meat pizza on the table. As if this meal couldn't get any worse. A rush of memories hit me as I sat down – the maddening whispers of the Ancient Primes, the Cybertronian symbols dancing across my vision like afterimages from looking into the sun, Alice pinning me against the wall, the taste of diesel, sharp steel rubbing my neck raw as she strangled me with her tongue.

"Did you think we'd only eat lobster in the captain's mess?" Admiral Black gruffly demanded.

"No sir." At his doubtful look, I wondered again why we were here like this. Was it some kind of test? After I hunted him down last night and talked him into reducing the restrictions on the Autobots, this was probably some kind of payback or round two or something. May as well keep it honest. "It's just, the last time I was near an all-meat pizza, a Decepticon had her tongue wrapped around my neck. The scent triggered the memory."

"That's not one I've seen in the reports," he drawled before starting in on his pizza.
I picked up my own slice, shuddering at the memory of the screams I hadn't realized were mine until much later. After forcing myself to take a bite, I said (as casually as I could), "She was the one that flushed me out of hiding so Megatron could capture me. My girlfriend killed her."

I almost smirked when Admiral Black choked on that little revelation. Civilians we may be, but Mikaela and I weren't exactly pansies. Especially Mikaela.

"Your girlfriend killed a Decepticon?"

Okay, so I allowed myself a smirk. Even in politics, a cocky grin or two is allowed once in a while. "And she tamed one, too. She's an amazing woman."

He burst out laughing, surprising me. I hadn't thought Admiral Black even capable of laughter. "Maybe we should recruit her," he chortled.

A sudden image flitted through my mind – Mikaela sitting in Chairman Morshower's seat. They wouldn't want her in the military for the same reason the devil wouldn't want her in hell. "Sorry sir, but she's already mine. We get into enough trouble as civilians, thanks."

"True."

I took a drink of my soda, wondering for the tenth time why I was here with just me, Admiral Black, and our aides. The atmosphere now was completely different from what it was last night when I had to fight him to lift some of the restrictions on the Autobots. Something had changed between us – something had changed in him. Getting up my courage, I asked, "So why am I having lunch with just you?"

He frowned slightly. "You don't beat around the bush, do you, kid?"

"Doesn't work with you."

He nodded in agreement and then dropped a bomb of his own. "I'd like to meet your Autobots."

"Sure," I smoothly answered, calling his bluff. "When?"

He sat back in his chair, eyeing me for a second. "Can you walk and eat pizza at the same time?"

He was going to go through with it, then. He really wanted to meet them. I couldn't help but grin. "I'm a college kid – of course. Just let me make sure Optimus is free…" Because we were not going to just waltz down there like they were cars with nothing better to do. Even if they didn't have anything better to do. Al-Sharif placed Lennox's cell in my waiting hand and I texted Optimus, warning him we were coming and to turn off Skid's and Mudflap's vocal processors. The very last thing we needed right now was for them to say something stupid. "We're good to go."

I followed him through the narrow halls of the ship, still half-wondering if this wasn't some kind of trick or something. Why would he want to meet them now when he'd been stubbornly calling them machines for days now?

In the elevator, he asked what I'd told Optimus, and I had al-Sharif read it to him, though he had to explain that "S & M" stood for Skids and Mudflap, and then I had to explain to him why those brats had to have their vocal processors taken off-line in front of polite company.

Admiral Black let me lead out of the elevator, which kind of annoyed me because I would have liked to watch his reaction better. Optimus stood front-and-center in the Autobot bay with the rest of them lined up behind him. Over our brother-bond, I could feel he was curious, and I focused on my own
uncertainty. His feelings shifted to determination and he greeted our guest. "Admiral."

Black's expression was pure military and gave away nothing. "Prime." He took a deliberate step forward. "I know you received word yesterday evening, but I wanted to personally lift the restrictions you've been under. You have been cleared as a threat to this vessel or the rest of my fleet and are free to move about the ship with the same degree of freedom as human civilians."

Optimus' and my mingled shock made my jaw drop, and Optimus slowly knelt so he could look at Black eye-to-optic. He scrutinized and analyzed Black so closely that I found myself reflexively squinting at him. I really needed to figure out how to distance myself a little bit from this bond. It almost felt like I had processors of my own whirring away in my skull, and it was making my head hurt trying to access them.

"Thank you, Admiral Black," Optimus answered, convinced that he genuinely meant what he said – that he no longer considered the Autobots a threat to his ship.

"You're welcome," the human commander said, settling into an at-ease stance that looked really odd for him. Wasn't that sort of thing only used in the presence of superior officers or in formal settings? Or maybe this was formal to him somehow?

"It's purely voluntary," he continued, "but can I ask you a few questions?"

Optimus was instantly wary, and I thought I knew why. Was Black hoping for some kind of inside knowledge about Autobot weaponry, a you-scratch-my-back-I-scratch-yours kind of thing? His voice gave away none of his misgivings, however. "Of course."

"Firstly…what does Autobot art look like?"

Optimus was so taken aback that I started laughing; that, and I was pretty relieved myself. Black must have remembered what I said last night about Cybertronians having art, but I couldn't remember if I'd told him that one of Optimus' roles on his home world was art critic. The admiral had definitely asked the right 'bot! "Four fricken days of brutal questioning, and you're the first to ask anything that wasn't about war or technology. Even I've never thought to ask that!"

The tension evaporated and I knew that, whatever else might happen on this ship, Black would keep an open mind. I walked over to Bumblebee and he happily extended his hand in invitation. Climbing aboard, I settled in. "Go on, Optimus, show us!"

Optimus glanced at me in consternation, and I wondered what his problem was, but after a couple of heartbeats he reached for the projector or whatever it was near his optics. An image appeared in front of us, as clear and vivid as if it was an actual statue, and Black blinked once in surprise at the figure of a mech with his hands and face raised to the sky. It was made of metal to look like a living Cybertronian but the exterior of it was somehow pearlized – not just the paint but the entire exterior. It rotated slowly, and as it did, I saw that a light was radiating from the chest of the statue, sort of like a square halo over the spark.

"This piece is titled The Legend of Alpha Prime," Optimus softly explained. "It was uncovered about a thousand years before the War began. No one is certain who made it, but it is attributed to a sculptor named Iron Wright. Alpha Prime was the first of my race and founder of my clan, according to the ancient tales."

"Why is it so small?" I wondered. It wasn't a whole lot taller than Black, and the Primes I'd met were huge.
"I am projecting it to a human scale. On Cybertron, it stood at twice my height, but an exact replica would not fit in the cargo bay."

Optimus tapped his projector thingy again, and the image changed to a fountain. Lava shot into the air in a high stream, twisting and dancing, to fall with a plinking sound in a shallow black bowl. Just like with that first hologram Optimus showed me when he was trying to explain who Megatron was, we could feel the heat coming off the molten stone.

"Beta Four's interpretation of The Well of All Sparks," Optimus said. I perked up at that. All Sparks…All Spark? "In our myths, this spring is the source of an essential alloy in Cybertronian protoforms. Legend claims it was destroyed in an ancient battle, and the spring of metal was driven underground. The alloy occurs naturally in many streams on my homeworld, all said to be traceable to the Well."

"Was the alloy used in making the Matrix?" I wondered. "Is that why this Beta guy would make art about it?"

"Beta was a femme, and she was named after the founder of the third clan," Optimus explained. "First were the Primes, then the Seekers, and then Beta's clan from whom descended the first of our kind who could transform. Beta Four is a direct-line descendant. And the metal from the Well…" He paused for a moment, searching for the right words to help us squishies understand. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Our bodies are shaped from the metal found in the Well of All Sparks, and it is said by some that we flow back to it when we die. Our spark energy is stamped into the alloy, and each protoform is unique because of that."

And I guess he’d answered my question without really answering it. The Matrix particles in my body were stamped with the same energy signature as Optimus' reignited spark, which certainly sounded like this stuff.

"Does the alloy have a name?" Black asked. "What's it made of?"

"At least two of the metals have not been discovered yet by your people," Optimus answered. "And the name we use for it would not translate well."

Black gave him an expectant look, and Optimus tilted his head ever so slightly, his amusement slipping through over our bond. "The best translation would probably be 'The Stuff Our Sparks Use to Stride.' Under all our armor, we are not just gears and cogs – the alloy in its semi-liquid state is the basis of our forms. We can swap out armor and many parts, but the actual protoform cannot be used by a different individual once it is stamped with a spark's energy."

The admiral seemed to mull this over, and Optimus moved on, projecting a cube the size of a large cardboard box that slowly rotated in front of us. It had six flat sides, but there was a depth to each one that was almost dizzying if I focused on it.

A sound suspiciously like a sigh escaped from Sideswipe, but when I glanced over at him, he was as unreadable as ever.

Optimus didn't seem to notice, though. "You describe your world as having four quarters. For us, it has six sides."

The All Spark Cube, I realized.

Admiral Black leaned forward with interest. "What's it depicting?"

"It is an abstract titled 'Whole' by one of our most talented artists before the war – who is one of our
better warriors now. It was made for me," Optimus said, some odd mix of frustration and affection bleeding through to me, "during one of his stints in the brig, actually. His name is Sunstreaker, and he is Sideswipe's twin."

Black glanced once at Sideswipe. "So if Sunstreaker is your brother, where is he?"

Grief and pity flickered in Optimus' spark – his heart going out to Sideswipe. "His location is unknown."

Understanding dawned in Black's eyes. "Missing in action?"

"Yes."

"He'll come," Sideswipe impulsively said. "He'll get the transmission like I did, and he will come." Sounding uncharacteristically vulnerable, he added, "You'll see."

Several of the other 'bots shifted uneasily or hung their heads. Optimus' pity deepened, and I thought I understood. "Twins are a bigger deal to the Autobots than they are to humans," I tried to explain to Black. "They share a bond that's deeper than anything we can experience. Like telepathy and sharing each others' emotions."

His gaze wandered to Skids and Mudflap who surprised me by actually looking embarrassed as he studied them. "How?"


I shut my mouth, frustrated. I wanted to explain – I wanted him to understand, but Optimus clearly thought we should end this discussion.

Black turned his attention back to Optimus, sizing him up for a second before seeming to come to a decision. "Thank you for your time, Prime." Without another word, he turned and left.

"Slag," Ironhide muttered when the elevator doors closed behind the admiral and his aide. Bumblebee made a sound of agreement.

"What?" I asked, looking from him to Optimus and back.

In a low voice, my brother said, "The twins have been experimented on by Decepticons. I will not permit them to become lab rats for humans."

Oh! I frowned at myself, feeling stupid for not seeing the danger in what I was saying.

"Will knows about twin bonds as a tactical matter," Optimus continued, "but that knowledge does not extend beyond NEST."

Yet another reason, then, to keep my bond with Optimus under wraps for as long as possible. Because he was right – sooner or later some geek with a lab coat and no morals would want to dissect my brain to figure out how I shared my dreams with an alien robot.

"Maybe I should…you know…"

"Do some damage control?" Ratchet snorted. "It's a losing battle with the humans."

"But worth an attempt," Optimus contradicted. To me he said, "Speak with him, Sam. You are a Prime to us, but your fate is that of a human's. Speak with him."
In other words, I was a smooth talker – when I wasn't putting my foot in my mouth. "No pressure," I grumbled. "Set me down, 'Bee."

He did, but his drooping wings and antenna showed his concern. I gave him a half-smile. "I'll be back, don't worry."

Al-Sharif fell in behind me as I hurried to the elevator. I caught up to Admiral Black in his office a few minutes later. He was standing at the window, his back to me as he looked out over his ship and the ocean.

"I've got a briefing in ten minutes," he said in a low voice, "and some bigwig or another wants your time, too."

Ignoring his implied order to leave him alone, I said, "I came to apologize about Optimus' being so abrupt at the end there."

"They don't share their technology," he said, still not turning around. "I was asking about things I shouldn't." He took a deep breath. "Tell 'em I'm not angry."

"Thank you, sir. But I wanted to explain. The twins have been experimented on. As their superior officer, Optimus is…defensive of them. They're really young – just kids – to the Autobots. I shouldn't have…the knowledge about the brother bond is top-secret, but I hadn't realized that."

"Understood. It will not go beyond us." He finally turned, and I was surprised that his expression was almost pained. "I didn't believe you about the family thing." Taking his seat, he said, "I have an uncle who was MIA in 'Nam. We never did find him. He was my mom's baby brother – fifteen years younger than her. I know how that kind of thing eats at a person. Never knowing…if he's alive, if he's so long gone that his bones are decaying somewhere, if he's being tortured, if he remembers you. She spent years and I don't know how much money trying to find him. Sideswipe is the coldest of the lot, but…" He trailed off, studying the stapler on his desk.

"But he loves his brother," I murmured.

"Yeah," he reluctantly admitted.

"Thank you, sir," I answered, just as quietly. At his curious glance, I explained, "For listening."

He snorted, leaning back with hard eyes. "You didn't give me much of an option, civilian punk."

I shrugged. "That's my job."

"Well get back at it with somebody else, then. I'm busy. Dismissed."

Nodding and fighting a smile, I rose to my feet. "Yes sir."
The British Prime Minister had to cut our dinner/breakfast short, so I headed down to the Autobot bay about a half hour before Optimus and I were scheduled to meet. Before the lift doors even opened, al-Sharif and I both heard clanging and a shout or two. My aide gave me a nervous look, but I smiled reassuringly. It was probably just Skids and Mudflap having another tussle. Instead, it was yellow and pink Autobot bodies that were clashing when we stepped off the elevator. Surrounded by their fellow 'bots, Arcee and Bumblebee stood across from each other, 'Bee's hands out and to the ready while Arcee's claws were balled into fists.

Like a snake-strike, she lashed out, lithe and quick, but Bumblebee's hands moved to block her with a clang of metal and sparks. The twins had apparently picked sides because Mudflap was taunting Arcee, saying she hit like a girl, and Skids was giving 'Bee a hard time about letting a femme pwn him.

Al-Sharif audibly gulped beside me and I realized he'd misinterpreted what was going on. "They're just sparring," I said in a low voice. "I've seen 'Bee when he's fighting to kill, and he's not even out to hurt her. She's one of his best friends."

"She?" he weakly repeated.

I chuckled. "Yeah. It's better not to think too hard about it. Arcee is a fembot. Just smile, nod and move on."

"Use your lower torso," Ratchet suggested, and Ironhide instructed, "Side kick."

Arcee nodded curtly and jumped into a kick that Bumblebee dodged and swatted down, sending her face-down onto the deck. Instantly his antenna fell back in dismay and Bumblebee dropped to his knees, his hands hovering over her like he wanted to help but didn't know how. Leaning closer, he didn't have a chance to react when Arcee suddenly drove her elbow into his face, rocking his head back. Several of the mechs groaned in sympathy, and Bumblebee muttered what sounded like a string of curses as he covered the damaged part with one hand. Arcee flipped over and tried to jump up, but she wobbled and hit the deck again, this time on her back. Giving up, she let her helm rest on the floor. "Slag."

"Give it time," Ratchet said as he moved to her side, his hand already transforming into some tool or another. "Your repair systems are still only operating at 40%. Let's get you to the med bay and I'll work on that motor relay system again." He touched his tooled hand to her neck, and she vented hard in what appeared to be relief.

Bumblebee extended his hand to help her to her feet, um, wheel and she gave him a wary look.

He played, "Lean on me...when you need a hand."
Relaxing, she grudgingly took it, and Bumblebee pulled her up. When she was steady again, he playfully swatted her shoulder and she rolled her optics. "Thanks, 'Bee."

"Welcome," he mumbled, grinning.

Arcee froze when she finally noticed me and al-Sharif, and the other 'bots were suddenly solemn as well. "Samuel," she greeted, lowering her head in a slight bow.

"Hi, Arcee," I awkwardly answered in the silence. Clearing my throat, I added, "I was just meeting up with Optimus. How you are doing, though?"

"Well on my way to recovery, thanks to…" her optics darted to al-Sharif and then to me, "Ratchet. He's been working hard to get my motor systems fully functional all day. I owe…him…everything, and I regret that I haven't had a chance to fully express my thanks."

I fought a grimace, knowing exactly which 'him' she was referring to. Hopefully al-Sharif wouldn't pick up on the fact that she was really talking about me. "I'm sure he understands. If he wanted more of your thanks, he would have hung around long enough to get it. Besides, he was just fulfilling his role among the Autobots."

"Seeing you functional is thanks enough," Ratchet agreed. "Now get your pink aft into the med bay."

Bumblebee knelt beside us, glancing once at Arcee and Ratchet before turning his full attention on me and playing, "So long since you've been missing. It's good to see you again."

I couldn't help but grin at his exaggeration. "It's only been a few hours, 'Bee, but I'm glad to see you, too. How are you doing?"

He tentatively extended his hand. "Got a good old friend here with me tonight, and I guess I'm doin' alright."

Accepting the invitation, I climbed into his palm. "Good. As soon as we get to Diego Garcia or wherever we end up, you and I are going to go cruising. I'm starting to get claustrophobic – I can only imagine what it's like for you guys."

"I'm gettin' bugged driving up and down the same old strip. I gotta find a new place where the kids are hip."

I snorted at that. "Beach Boys? Come. On."

'Bee's optics grew brighter in amusement. "My buddies and me are getting real well known. Yeah the bad guys know us and they leave us alone."

I burst out laughing at that one. Maybe we could do donuts or something here in the cargo bay – and then I remembered that the restrictions on the 'bots had been lifted. My mom and dad had taken a tour of the flight deck so why couldn't 'Bee?

"Hey al-Sharif," I called down to him. "See if we can get permission for me and 'Bee to get a little sunshine." What was left of it, anyway. It would be dark in less than an hour.

"Yes sir," he answered, using his cell phone to call the control tower.

Bumblebee's doorwings were straight up and he was fidgeting in excitement. The twins were already grumbling about not getting a turn to go play, but Optimus reminded them that the humans needed
some time to adjust to them and to be patient.

"You have fifteen minutes," al-Sharif announced. "The deck has been cleared for you."

'Bee set me down to transform and eagerly popped open both his doors in invitation. I looked over to al-Sharif. "You coming?"

He swallowed hard, clearly intimidated but trying to get up the courage.

"He drives me and Mikaela around all the time," I coaxed him. "He knows how to safely handle humans."

Nodding once in determination, he marched forward. Smiling to myself, I climbed into the driver's side and he slid into the passenger seat, gently pulling the car door closed. 'Bee buckled both of us in and then peeled out on his way to toward the slowly-opening cargo-bay door. "Be nice," I grumbled at him.

In answer, he played a laugh-track over the stereo. His engine revved as he waited impatiently in front of the doors.

"Bumblebee. Go easy on him."

"I'm gonna tell everyone to lighten up."

I sighed in frustration and looked over at al-Sharif. He was pale and practically braced in his seat, but he was military and didn't flinch when 'Bee launched forward into the fading tropical sunlight. Bumblebee rolled his windows down, and his tires squealed as he went into a donut at over forty miles an hour. Both al-Sharif and I were clinging to the panic-handles on the ceiling, but I found myself laughing despite myself.

"You're insane!" I shouted as he pulled out of the donut fishtailing.

"You might enjoy some madness for a while." Again he swung into a donut, this time going the other direction.

I laughed again as the g-force hit – it was like having my own personal roller coaster. We spun around several times, tires protesting, and I hung on for dear life. When he pulled out of the donut this time, he was aimed right at a line of fighter jets and was accelerating. "Revving up your engine, listen to her howl and roar..."

Great. Just great. The theme song from *Top Gun*. "You can't play chicken with a jet if no one's in it!"

"Watch me!" he quoted.

"Bumblebee!"

He ignored me, singing away as he bore down on the planes. Beside me, al-Sharif shifted nervously, and I was starting to get a little anxious myself, but 'Bee swerved in time, slaloming between the parked jets like he really was Satan's Camaro. We were both tossed around inside, but I could feel that 'Bee was just being playful.

Rounding the last plane, Bumblebee shot down the open stretch of the runway, pedal to the metal, and the wind from the open windows beat against us. My heart was in my throat as I realized the end of the runway was fast approaching. "Bee?"
He didn't respond, and I hollered, "Bee!"

"Slow down!" al-Sharif shouted, and the tires squealed again as 'Bee braked hard and slowed to a crawl.

With both the screaming wind and the roaring engine quieted, I suddenly realized how hard I was breathing in panic. Beside me, al-Sharif actually looked embarrassed.

"Gah! 'Bee! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"I wasn't talking to you," he retorted, and I jerked in surprise. Glancing at al-Sharif in confusion, I realized (by process of elimination) that's who 'Bee must be trying to communicate with. And then I weakly laughed. "He was trying to get your attention," I explained to my shaken aide.

"Well he's got it," he muttered softly. Taking a deep, steadying breath, he asked, "What do you need, sir?"

"You've got a friend in me," 'Bee sang, and that just made me laugh harder.

Sniggering, I said to him, "Scaring a squishy half to death isn't the best way to make friends."

"Worked with you, didn't it?" he quoted from some movie or another.

Al-Sharif's gaze bounced from me to the radio and back as 'Bee and I conversed. I said to my fellow human, "He's trying to show you that..." How to explain it? "...that he'll listen to you. That you're not just background noise or scenery to him."

"But...why?"

"I want to thank you," 'Bee sang, and al-Sharif looked completely and totally floored. When the Autobot added, "Welcome to the team," his jaw actually dropped.

"You're helping me," I explained, realizing what 'Bee was driving at. "I'm kind of important to them, so if you're on my side, you're also on theirs. Bumblebee wanted to make sure you saw it that way, too."

Al-Sharif slowly closed his mouth, still not sure what to say.

"Got a lead foot down on my accelerator," 'Bee finally prompted him, revving his engine even though we were still moving at a pedestrian's pace.

"He's waiting for your say-so," I translated. "How much longer do we have left, anyway?"

He blinked a couple of times before glancing at his watch. "About five minutes." He seemed to study first me and then the dashboard for a few seconds – lost in thought – before he said, "You've got Samuel Witwicky on board. As long as you'll drive sane enough to keep him safe and sound, do whatever you want, Bumblebee."

Bumblebee answered with a round of applause and then peeled out, fishtailing again. When he dove into another donut, he was only going about twenty-five miles an hour, and al-Sharif was grinning with me this time.

…

The sun was just brushing the horizon when the cargo bay doors closed behind us. Al-Sharif still looked pretty stunned as he got out of 'Bee's cabin, but before he shut the door, he said, "Thank you,
Bumblebee. Sir. I'm pleased to be of service to both you and Mr. Witwicky."

'Bee transformed, stretching to his full height, and the ensign took several steps back, apparently intimidated. Didn't he see the happy angle of 'Bee's wings and the way his antennas were perked up? He crouched down to look my aide in the eyes and nodded in acknowledgement.

Al-Sharif clearly preferred Bumblebee in his car form, but he gave a little smile in return. Looking at me, he said, "Because of our…exercise on the flight deck, your meeting with Optimus had to be pushed back another twenty minutes. Misters Simmons and Spitz have both been requesting a meeting with all day," he hinted.

I bet they did after hearing from the twins that I reignited Arcee this morning. "Not a chance. That's a headache that can wait for tomorrow." Looking at the 'bots around me, I added, "Besides, I need to spend some time with old friends." And pick Bumblebee's processors for help with doing something nice for Mikaela. She had been sex goddess, warrior goddess, and a pillar of support all along. I owed her.

Chapter End Notes

'Bee's Songclips:
"Lean on Me" by Bill Withers
"Do You Remember" by Jay Sean
"I'm Alright" by Jo Dee Messina
"I Get Around" by The Beach Boys
"Soak Up the Sun" by Cheryl Crow
"You May Be Right" by Billy Joel
"Highway to the Danger Zone" by Kenny Loggins
"You've Got a Friend in Me" by Randy Newman
"Thank You" by Dido
"Bye Bye" by Jo Dee Messina
The sunset was a low purple on the horizon when Optimus and I headed back up to the flight deck. He sat down in our usual place, holding me in his hand. Before he could drop tonight's conversation bomb, I just had to know, "Will it always be that awkward with Arcee?" She'd been almost stiffly formal all evening. Fortunately, the other 'bots had relaxed after I'd hung out with them for a while.

He chuckled, but there was a wistful edge to it. "Yes and no. You are a Prime, and they will always see that in you. But eventually you'll make some monumental mistake and they will realize that you are, in fact, only human."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I grumbled.

"You asked," he pointed out. "And I speak from my own experience. Except in my case, they realized that I was only a fallible mech like them."

It was weird to talk to him like this – like brothers, like equals – but at the same time, I was so grateful that I had somebody to talk to. How had he managed it all those millennia alone? "What was your monumental mistake?"

"It was a different mistake for each one of them – dreams destroyed, nightmares inflicted." I could feel the brutal weight of loss behind his words, though his voice and expressions only showed a quiet sadness. "For Ratchet, it was when I ordered the retreat from the city-state of Metrotitan. I waited too long to abandon the city and escape routes were cut off. He led the rescue and recovery team after we briefly retook the city and had to deal with the unfortunates who were unable to evacuate."

"For Ironhide," he said, continuing the heartbreaking list, "it was when I allowed the femmes, including Elita and his mate Chromia, to remain on Cybertron to rally the Autobot resistance there instead of insisting they come with us. He held it against me for a long time that I left such tactically-valuable targets so vulnerable. It wasn't until we heard the news from Arcee about Elita that he finally forgave me."

The piercing sorrow in his spark at the thought of his mate's death brought tears to my eyes. I hastily brushed them away.

Burying the grief again, he softly continued, "For Prowl, it was when I allowed myself to be captured by Decepticons. This was early on in the War and Megatron had made an offer of a secret summit to talk about ending the conflict. It was supposed to be just the two of us, but more than a dozen Decepticons ambushed me. It was thanks to Jazz and another Autobot named Mirage that I escaped, though we lost more than eighty of my best mechs in the process. Prowl was disappointed that I had let my emotions overrule both my own good sense and my duty as leader of the Autobots."

"For Jazz, it was when I decided to send the All Spark off-world. He said he wasn't usually against gambling, but the stakes were too high and he didn't like the odds. His last words on the subject were, 'If it's our only choice, then do it. But I won't ever see the Cube on Cybertron again.' His clan was known to have seers, but at the time, I thought he was just being emphatic."

He fell silent then, but his feelings left a trail for me to follow his thoughts. Grief – the loss of a trusted lieutenant and a good friend. Regret – the guilt that came of not heeding words he should have. Hope – the desperate desire that I would be able to bring Jazz back just like I had him and
I didn't want to bring up more bad memories, but he'd left out the most important of his Autobots, as far as I was concerned. "Bumblebee?"

"...is the exception," Optimus answered, warmth replacing the darker emotions haunting him. "Not when his brother fell, not when I made his squad of six solely responsible for the defense of the All Spark, not when I abandoned him in the hands of Sector Seven. Not once has he ever lost his confidence in me as a leader."

I sighed in relief. Maybe Bumblebee would forgive my monumental mistakes if he had forgiven Optimus all those times. If there was anybody who should be Optimus' brother, it was 'Bee. But he had a brother who died? How did I miss that?

"I'm sure you have many questions tonight, Sam, but I suspect that there are some official ones we should address first."

Catching the edge of his smug emotions, I narrowed my eyes at him. "You were eavesdropping?"

"Hacking," he shamelessly admitted. "Jolt was bored. The meeting with the Russians seemed particularly interesting."

I snorted. "Yeah, you could say that. I still think she was trying to buy you like somebody would buy a car."

"Regardless, the official offer is for our services."

"You're considering it?" I realized. He was struggling to find the right words for what he wanted to say.

"We had never considered it prior to this morning, but I have spent a good portion of the day pondering a diplomatic response." Apprehension filled him – the kind he sometimes felt before he threw me for a loop with a question or a tidbit of information. "We Autobots will align with whichever human faction the human Prime aligns with."

I suddenly understood why he was worried. "No pressure, right? Since I'm already your ambassador, why not make me a hot commodity, too? Since I'm not enough of a world figure yet."

"It is a simple truth, Sam," he answered, trying to work me down from the freak-out I felt waiting in the wings. "But we are keeping your identity as Prime hidden from the humans as long as possible. That is why I have struggled to find a politically-acceptable response. My suggested answer is to tell Alexeyevna Berdyaev or anyone else who asks that our services are not for sale at the present time and that we are content with an American ambassador and American military liaison. However, we would welcome working with a truly multinational team and encourage the diversifying of NEST membership."

I nodded. "Very nice politically-correct answer. They'll never go for it, but at least it's diplomatic."

"Thank you," he modestly said, and I chuckled.

His own mild amusement flickered before more somber emotions flowed across the bond. "With that out of the way, the floor is yours. I expect you have a few questions for me."

Yeah, just a million or two. So much had happened since our last conversation. A shared bond-dream, Arcee reignited, my regular 'greet the world' meetings, the whole thing with Admiral Black
and Autobot art, and now al-Sharif kind of warming up to Bumblebee. Again I reclined against his hand, trying to figure out which of my issues was most important right now. With night falling, I realized which one I needed answers for first. "The bond dream – how does that work?"

His optics shuttered once. "I am unsure. The bond we share is different from any other I've experienced. It is very faint for a brother bond. Limited. Usually, a familial bond allows for thoughts and mental images to be shared, not just emotions. Normal bond dreams are just an extension of the bond. Regardless, it appears our bond is strong enough to allow for shared visions. I wasn't sure that it would."

"Can you just barge in on my dreams, then?" The thought was beyond embarrassing. How many times had I dreamed about Mikaela? And not PG-rated dreams, either. The whole idea made me really nervous.

"No. Your mind is very alien, brother. It took several hours to find a point of connection, a place where we could meet."

"Meet? Like…like in the real world, where you just meet up?"

"I could sense you were near, but I could not find you until our minds were dwelling on the same idea at the same time."

I thought back, but I didn't remember any dreams before I found myself standing on the flight deck with Optimus. "What was the idea? The one that was a point of connection?"

His smile warmed my heart. "The future and our place in it."

Huh. I wonder what my dream was, then. "So…the second time, when I went back to sleep?"

"The connection was established almost immediately. You were seeking me out, which made the process very easy."

Dread filled me – my own, I was pretty sure. "But now that you know how to find me, can you see all my dreams all the time?"

Something vividly ached deep inside. I could only guess it came from him, but it was so intense it felt like my own – a knife in my soul. He solemnly answered, "I will only see the visions you wish to share. I will not trespass in your mind that way, not unless it was in dire necessity. But if you are concerned, blocking a brother-bond will also block access to bond dreams. You can lock the door to your mind, Sam, and I will respect that."

I clearly felt what he wasn't saying – that the mere thought of me blocking our bond so thoroughly was hurting him. "I won't shut you out." My words seemed to soothe his pain, and the tightness in my own chest eased. "It's just…nightmares aren't the half of it. We humans have weird dreams, sometimes. We do things we never would in real life or – "

"Point of connection," he interrupted. "I will invite you into our shared realm of thought, and I suspect you can do the same, with practice. As I said, I will not trespass in your mind, not without great need."

I took a deep breath and let it out in relief. "I can live with that. Brother." It was a strange word to speak, and even stranger to use that title for him. But I felt what it did to his spark when I called him that – the heartache or spark-ache or whatever you called it disappeared like it hadn't ever been there in the first place.
"Thank you, Sam."

Sudden curiosity swelled across the bond, and I dreaded whatever question was behind it. If it wasn't embarrassing, he would have asked it already. When he didn't say anything, I finally blurted out, "What is it?"

Optimus blinked once, weighing his words carefully. "I was wondering what that term – brother – meant to you."

He obviously knew the definition of brother, so that wasn't what he was asking. I considered it for a second. "I don't know, to be honest. I've never had one."

He waited expectantly, letting me gather my thoughts.

"I guess it means having someone close to you, someone who has your back. I mean, I know that brothers fight a lot, but I've always thought it would be nice to have a little brother."

Optimus tilted his head curiously, but his feelings were carefully muted, and I realized that there was no way on Earth or Cybertron that I could ever describe him as my little brother.

"Only because I'd be the oldest," I quickly added. "The only way I could have an older brother is if my parents adopted, but I knew my luck. They'd get some kid who would be cooler than me who would date Mikaela and she wouldn't give me the time of day – not that she did to begin with. Or he'd beat on me all the time. I wouldn't trust a brother I wasn't related to by blood..." As the words escaped my mouth, I realized what I'd said and just knew I'd hurt Optimus' feelings. It was incredibly strange to realize I'd never thought much about his feelings until I recognized our bond. Now I did more than just think about them.

"But now you have a blood-brother," Optimus said, and I was relieved that he had made the connection I hadn't.

"Yes." I took a second to make sure he felt just how much I trusted him. "So I guess it's just kind of strange to think about, because I do have a big brother and it's completely unexpected."

He chuckled. "Indeed. I never imagined that I would have a blood-brother, and I am uncertain how to proceed."

"Proceed?"

"I do not know how to be a good brother, Sam. I will need your guidance."

I looked up into those blue lightbulbs that were his eyes, suddenly aware of how ridiculous this whole thing was. A farce. Some joke that an all-powerful being had played on two fools. Didn't the All Spark have something better to do – like save their species? I wasn't sure which was crazier – that Optimus was looking to me for guidance or that this timeless being of metal and power who could crush me with his little finger was talking to me like we were really brothers.

"I have upset you."

"No," I slowly answered. "Just...that's another bomb. Gotta give me a second. My processor is a bit slower than yours."

He nodded solemnly, but I felt his amusement.

"And stop laughing at me," I grumbled with a half-smile.
His humor deepened as his optics brightened. "My apologies."

I snorted. "I shouldn't complain – that is something brothers do, I guess. Laugh at each other."

"And with each other," Optimus pointed out.

"That, too."

"And fight for each other."

"And with each other," I added with a smirk.

But my attempt at humor fell flat. His spark-pain lanced through me again before he cut off the bond. "That, too."

Trying to move the conversation away from whatever was hurting him so much, I said, "What else? On Cybertron, I mean?"

"We are not on Cybertron," he quietly answered, still blocking the bond. "We are on Earth. Which brings us back to my original question."

"You don't ask questions." He tilted his head curiously, opening the bond just a little bit, and I grinned at the surprise I felt coming from him. I'd surprised him for once. "You state what you need, but almost you never ask. Why is that?"

He hesitated, again weighing his words carefully. "If I ask, you are under an obligation to answer. If I make a statement, you volunteer what you wish."

"So it goes back to your freedom of choice obsession?"

He was mildly annoyed at my wording, but he nodded once.

"Huh."

I could feel how it went against the grain for him, but he slowly asked, "What do brothers do together, Sam? Here on Earth?"

When he spoke the question, I finally understood, and it ran deeper than freedom of choice. It left him open and vulnerable somehow. The more important the answer, the harder it was for him to ask. Freedom might be part of it, but it was also a defense. What answer to a question had scarred him that deeply?

I decided to not prod that wound. "Here on Earth? Well…there are holidays, of course. All the family gets together for that."

"Thanksgiving, Christmas, Memorial Day, birthdays."

"Exactly," I answered his not-question, suddenly imagining myself behind the wheel of a flaming big-rig and showing up at my parents' place for Thanksgiving. Shaking off that mental image before it got to my mom's reaction, I said, "And they do stuff together. Things that they both like to do. Watch sports or go to movies or whatever."

"Engage in mutual interests."

Again, it felt like a question even though it wasn't. "Or if it's really important to one of them. So…I don't know anything about what Cybertronians do for fun, but if it was something you really wanted
to do, I would go because we're brothers."

"And brothers support each other." This time it was a conclusion.

"Yep. 'Farce,' I thought to myself. 'Total farce.' But Optimus wasn't the only one with a role to play. "How do I be a good little brother? Because I might need some guidance on that myself."

His excruciating heartache came back full force before he shut off the bond completely. "You need no guidance."

I frowned at him. "Come on. I gave you some pointers."

When he opened the bond again, his affection was almost worshipful. "You died for me. No brother could ask for more."

So he wanted to play it that way? I let him sense the awe of my memories when he declared 'I'll take you all on!' and then the deadly glory as he fought Megatron and the others. "So did you."

He nodded again, his emotions a jumble of sorrow, worry, and distant fury. "That is true. But I owe you much more than just my life restored to me. From defeating Megatron in Mission City to dealing with the human leaders to reigniting Arcee, you are doing things that I can't. It's not something I'm accustomed to, especially when I'm indebted to such a young, defenseless being."

"A child." Because we humans were all children to him.

"A little brother," he gently, warmly corrected. "But certainly not a child. A man with his own dreams and aspirations. Speaking of which, I understand you have expressed your desire to the human leaders to return to college."

Way to change the subject. We were skirting his strange, piercing heartache, and I decided to let it go for now. It was probably some bomb or another and I'd already met my quota for the night. "Yeah. I told al-Sharif to get me a meeting with whoever can pull the right strings to get me back in school. It'll be a stretch to get the university to let me jump right back in when I'll have missed a week and a half – or more – of classes."

"Major Lennox believes your leaders will not permit you. They feel you are too valuable and that it would be too dangerous to let you resume your normal life. Will also confessed that NEST wants you, too."

I wearily rubbed my forehead. I hadn't thought about how everyone would permanently want a piece of my time. I guess I'd taken Bumblebee's assurance to heart – that it wouldn't be like this for long. So I'd been surviving this ambassador crash-course day-to-day, not thinking about the future at all. Of course every political entity on the planet wanted me on their payroll. If I was going to have something even remotely resembling a normal life, it would be a battle every step of the way. "Isn't being able to pull off miraculous victories against overwhelming odds part of the job description of a Prime?"

His slight smile warmed me across the bond. "I'd be honestly surprised if it wasn't. Although the description also includes, 'never flinching in the face of defeat, no matter how devastating.'"

I grimaced. "Thanks."

Sobering, he said, "I hold less sway than you with Earth's leaders, but I offer my full support for your decision, Sam." He lowered his voice, his quiet determination seeping through into my soul. "After all you have given me, I offer whatever you need."
I let him feel my gratitude and absorbed some of his determination for myself. "I appreciate that. The heads-up is particularly useful. And if they're worried about me being in danger…could Bumblebee come with me again? I mean, it's his choice and if you need him for any battles or whatever…"

His amused approval told me his answer. "I would have to physically restrain him from going with you. He's grown convinced that you are safe only as long as you are with him, even though he admits it's illogical. Something about him being your 'lucky rabbit's foot.' He doesn't even trust me with you anymore. After all, I nearly dropped you to your death while we were escaping from Sector Seven and you very nearly died when I did." His amusement deepened at that last statement – apparently Bumblebee had been joking at least a little bit. "He tells me that if I had just let him take you, I wouldn't have died, either. For both my safety and yours, he's informed me that he's the only one allowed to be your guardian anymore."

I chuckled a little, imagining 'Bee telling off Optimus that way. "Okay. That gives me some leverage, then."
Perspective

Mikaela was asleep already when I finally finished talking with Optimus, but she'd left the light on for me. I kissed her hair, murmuring, "Good night, beautiful."

Without even opening her eyes, she mumbled, "'Night, famous."

Yeah, Bumblebee had helped me come up with some great thank-you ideas, and Mikaela was going to like the things I had in store for her. Grinning, I changed into pajamas and killed the light.

…

I was behind the wheel of a big-rig, driving down a highway toward a looming city. The radio was singing, "Round, round, get around, I get around…"

"Finally," a familiar, deep voice rumbled, surrounding me in the cab of the truck. The music abruptly turned off.

"Optimus? Is this you or the all-meat pizza talking?"

He chuckled, making both his body and mine shake. "It's me."

"You were listening to the Beach Boys?"

"I couldn't find you for several hours," he answered almost defensively. "That song seemed to get a reaction out of you earlier, so I tried it. If you hadn't joined me in another fifteen minutes, I would have just given up. Forty-five minutes of that song is torture worthy of a Decepticon."

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I chuckled and then glanced curiously out the window of his alt-form. I couldn't recognize any of the stars, and considering how much I knew about constellations after 'uploading' my astronomy textbook, that was saying something. "Where are we?"

"Cybertron. We're approaching the city of Metrotitan approximately two hundred years before the beginning of the Great War. This particular memory was of the night StarSheen's new art exhibit opened at the city museum. The Legend of Alpha Prime and The Well of All Sparks were both on display then, too. I could take you to see the exhibit, if you want."

I didn't go much for stuff like that, but I could definitely make an exception for alien robot art! And like Optimus said, brothers support each other. Maybe he could even help me actually understand it, with him being an art critic and all. "Sounds great!"

Abruptly we were outside of a building's entrance – we were the same height, just like before in our shared dreams – and I did a double-take when I saw Optimus' base form. I could see very little of the Optimus I knew in the exterior of the 'bot in front of me – just the same coloring of red and blue. He looked surprisingly muscular instead of the boxy shape I knew from Earth. Almost organic. Huh.

A security guard (because even as an alien, I recognized a bouncer when I saw one) nodded in acknowledgement to my brother but apparently didn't see me – because this was a memory, not something Optimus was imagining.

I followed him inside and down a short corridor to a room where dozens of Cybertronians were milling about. Just a guess, but this looked like some kind of fancy hob-nobbing kind of thing. Everyone was polished until they shone, and the gentle murmur of conversation sounded like
something you'd get in an expensive restaurant or something. One of the 'bots, a glossy rose-red femme, ambled over with bright optics and a flirty smile on her face. She looped her arm through Optimus' and whispered something in his audios that made him purr and send pleased possessiveness swelling across the bond. My jaw dropped as I tried to process it – Optimus purring. Then she let her arm slip away and crossed the room to join a conversation, leaving him standing there staring after her like an idiot. The awestruck love I picked up from my brother made me smirk – who'd have guessed that the calm and steady Leader of the Autobots would swoon over a cute little subcompact car (because she would have been even smaller than Skids or Mudflap).

"Elita One, I assume?"

Suddenly remembering me, Optimus looked up and a wave of embarrassment washed off him. "I apologize that you had to see that. I'd forgotten she had shared those images to me tonight."

I sniggered. "No problem, I didn't see anything that anybody else here wouldn't have. I don't think the bond is so strong that I can pick up your comm signals or whatever." Relief replaced his embarrassment, and I added, "Besides, I made out with Mikaela in front of you."

In a very human gesture, he ducked his head a little. "It was nothing as explicit as even that. Just… private."

I sniggered again, and Optimus rolled his optics at me before exiting through a different door, and I followed him into a brilliantly-lit open gallery. We were at the top of a short ramp and everyone turned at our entrance. Something about the lighting gave it a dazzle or shimmer that made everything seem…kind of…golden.

"It's the effect of seeing the world through my optics, Sam," he explained, humor rolling across the bond. "Without additional adaption, we perceive nine spectral colors instead of seven and can tolerate a greater intensity across the electromagnetic spectrum." His humor broadened into a grin. "Any of my race that saw with a human's vision would be considered half-blind."

"Thanks," I grumped, but I couldn't get too mad at him because he was completely right.

The gallery quieted and everyone looked to Optimus. "Good evening," he announced to the room at large, "and welcome to this celebration of StarSheen's legacy. Her works' styles span every era of our people and embody the values we hold dear. And more importantly than her technical ability is her gift in making our own sparks shine in the hue and emotion she desires." He gestured, inviting a tall but willowy-thin silver femme to join him. I was surprised as she got closer that she was covered in bangles and star-shaped ornaments – I guess she had dressed up for the night. It made me wonder how much of the differences in Optimus' armor was his Cybertronian mode and how much of it was him being formal.

Everyone in the room bowed their heads to her for a moment, and if Optimus' feelings were anything to judge by, this was how they were applauding her. When everyone straightened again, StarSheen opened her arms wide. "May you find as much joy in partaking as I did in making."

With that, everyone went back to looking at the paintings or whatever they were doing before.

StarSheen turned to us. "I have a little something for you that I made for the occasion, Optimus. Right this way."

Intrigued, he followed her to a small alcove where several coin-looking medallions the size of my palm were on display. "Metal castings," Optimus murmured to me while StarSheen ignored our conversation. "A common femme adornment."
Looking at the silver Cybertronian, I said, "She looks like a walking charm bracelet." None of her jewelry was as heavy as these castings.

"She is uncommonly frilly," he said, amused. "That's one unexpected convergence between your culture and mine – the artists are all a bit odd."

I laughed, and StarSheen continued, "For your newly-mated beloved." She picked up a… I have no idea what the metal would look like to human eyes, but if iron came with the grain of mother of pearl, that would be this casting. Seeing it through Optimus' perspective, I knew this wasn't just a veneer or plating but a solid metal. StarSheen presented it to Optimus. It was a simple design, even by comparison to the other medallions – just a single tone of metal with a raised rune on it – the Prime glyph. I blinked a couple of times in surprise as I recognized it. "I thought no one could read the language of the Primes."

"They couldn't," Optimus answered me. "But I bore this," he pointed to a plate on his helm that had the same glyph stamped into it, "and so StarSheen made one to match for Elita."

And then StarSheen's earlier words finally hit. "You and Elita are newlyweds here?" Somehow it was hard to wrap my brain around that. Optimus a newlywed? I mean, how does that work when you're a robot – fighting over energon-credit finances and learning to share the same sink when you brushed the dental gears in your mouth before bed?

"You could say that, yes." Turning to StarSheen, he said, "Thank you, dear friend. Elita will cherish this."

She placed a hand on his forearm and patted it once, gently. "I wish you both joy. Will she tour the exhibit with you?"

"In a short while. She's…"

"…Elita. A digit on the pulse of every political energon line. Yes, I understand. Enjoy."

"I'm sure I will."

StarSheen nodded and left, and both of us watched her weave through the crowd, greeting people and happily talking with them.

"How long did you know her?"

"A long time," he said, his optics following her wistfully. "She was the sister of my mother. She… adopted me, I suppose you could say, after the death of my parents. Sibling privilege, it's called among my race. She stands in the stead of her extinguished sister, acting on her behalf. Until she was herself extinguished approximately a thousand years from now." Straightening his shoulders, he said, "But you haven't seen much yet. This way."

We crossed the gallery, and I couldn't help but wonder how hard it must be for him to walk the halls of a city that was now dead. Everybody I was seeing was just a ghost – a memory. I realized I didn't have to wonder – I could look into his mind right now if I wanted, but it didn't seem right. Not after I freaked out about him being in my dreams. He would show me what he wanted me to see and I would respect what he chose to keep hidden.

Optimus led us around a corner into another gallery, and instantly I was pulled out of my reverie. In the middle of the room stood a majestic fountain – The Well of All Sparks, but the hologram Optimus showed Admiral Black and me this afternoon hadn't done it justice. I could see the heat coming off it as one of those colors that's invisible to the human eye, and that vibrant color filled the whole room.
The droplets fell back into the molten pool, resonating and playing with frequencies that sounded like music in Optimus' processors. My human mind would have only heard random ker-plunking, but to a Cybertronian, there was structure and rhythm and harmony.

My brother gestured toward a Cybertronian duo, saying, "Do you see the effect?"

Something about the heat-color created an aura around each passerby, growing stronger as they drew closer.

"What's that…halo thing?"

"It's the other color you can't see, the color of a spark. That green mech is older than I am, but that mech beside him is his younger brother. Can you see the difference?"

I could, though the best description I could come up with was that the younger spark was…whiter? Shinier? More silvery? "I think so."

"We helped NEST create a device that will detect that portion of the electromagnetic spectrum – they call the reading a thermal ripple."

"So we're not completely blind while we're hunting Decepticons?"

He nodded, a hint of fierce protectiveness creeping into his spark. "Yes. But here on Cybertron before the War, it's considered artistic, revealing each spark in the light from the Well."

And I was the only one here without an aura. If the other Cybertronians here were real and not just memories, how would I look to them? Dark? Empty? Like some monster without a soul? No wonder the 'cons saw us as insects.

Optimus glanced over at me, his concerned curiosity plain across the bond. Probably picking up on my feelings.

"It's just…I don't exactly have a spark. I stand out like a zombie at a prom."

He snorted at the description, but determination replaced the worry as he led us forward and around the fountain. "Come with me."

He purposefully led us through two other galleries – one that seemed devoted to landscapes and another that featured mathematical equations. The third gallery was dominated by a towering figure with its hands and face raised to the sky. The Legend of Alpha Prime. Except seeing it from Optimus' perspective was a completely different experience. The light from the statue's "spark" that made a square halo over the chest was a close mimic of the spark-color I'd seen in the light from the Well of All Sparks. In fact the biggest difference was it had that richer hue of an older spark, only much more so. Ancient, that's what that spark-color was, ages-old, timeless. And again, seeing the world from Optimus' perspective, I could see what that pearlized effect was – data. Layer upon thin layer of code that turned into glyphs and pictures and maps in the processors of a Cybertronian like the mosaics made from smaller pictures back on Earth. It wasn't just a statue – it was a complete biography.

Optimus stood before it, musing on the part of Alpha's story nearest the spark. It was more ideas than words of an actual story, images of an empty world – a new world – and communion with the All Spark. There was the glyph for 'alone' interlinked with the one for 'sorrow,' and then blazoned with the primal fire-color from the Well of All Sparks was the glyph for 'joy' surrounded by six large glyphs for 'brother.' And each brother-symbol was itself made up of smaller images and symbols that described them. Servant, intercessor, scholar, seer, friend, hunter. And each of those glyphs was intertwined with other glyphs – warrior, healer, mediator, wise one, singer, explorer. And those
glyphs combined with other glyphs until I couldn't make sense of it anymore and still Optimus was focusing on them, pondering them so intently it started to make my head hurt until I physically tore my eyes away from the statue and turned my back on it.

Optimus was instantly contrite. "I'm sorry, Sam."

"It's okay. I'm just...it was getting kind of overwhelming."

"My apologies," he repeated. "I was hoping it would translate better if seen from my perspective. The *Legend of Alpha Prime* is both our creation story and our personal archetype."

"Arche-what?"

"Archetype," he patiently repeated. "A pattern in stories and myths repeated over and over. You have them in Earth's cultures, too. The Hamlet archetype is one example. The jealous uncle kills the father and the son must avenge him. You see it in everything from *The Lion King* to the Osiris myths of ancient Egypt."

"So what's the pattern in Alpha's story?"

"Sacrifice. Courage and sacrifice."

Of course.

"And the power of brotherhood. The seven of them withstood alone the first assault ever made by an alien species on the All Spark."

"And they won?" I doubtfully guessed.

"No," Optimus answered, humor in his voice and spark. "The All Spark healed their wounds even as they received them, but there were only seven to fight against the hundreds of fighter-ships and thousands of ground-troops attacking them. But seeing their valor and how overwhelmed they were, the All Spark saved them by giving the airships life."

"The Seekers?"

"Yes." Gesturing to a glyph I'd never seen before, he said, "Jetfire's father was the first. They turned on their masters to help defend the All Spark."

"Wait..."

Optimus looked at me expectantly.

"Jetfire is...was *that* old?"

He slowly nodded his head.

"And he sacrificed himself for you."

Awe and gentle grief filled him. "He was a Seeker of the Primes and Air Commander after his father. I can only guess at his motives, but he walked with Alpha," Optimus gestured at the statue, "and there could be no better example."

And here I thought he was just some senile Cybertronian with flatulence issues. "I wish I had known all this when he was still alive."
Optimus had no answer to that, and I looked down at my feet, feeling even more like an ignorant, ungrateful little spinal-cord-based organism.

"Samuel," he softly said, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Look."

I reluctantly lifted my gaze to him.

"Our brother," he said, nodding toward Alpha. "Your brother."

"Uh-uh. That's not possible. I mean…no."

A voice echoed in my mind – echoed through the gallery in Optimus' memories – Megatron snarling, "MAGGOT!"

He raised an optic ridge at me, a strange mix of wry humor laced with pain coming across the bond. "You are in my dream, brother. Megatron's opinions have no place here."

It was enough of a stretch that – somehow, miraculously – I was Optimus' brother. But brother to Alpha? Brother to the person described in this statue? Brother to the being who sent me back from the dead so I could save the world?

"You are a Prime, Sam. It only makes sense that you are brother to the Dynasty of the Primes as I am."

I shook my head, rebelling at the idea. "Having you as a brother is enough." Too much.

His hand fell away, a flash of disappointment making it across the bond before he cut off his emotions. "The walls you build to keep others out will also hold you in."

I frowned as I looked at him again. Yeah, he was probably right. "But sometimes it's safer to be held in." I didn't like the turn this dream had taken. "Can we save the bombs for when we're awake? Because I just don't think I'm ready to handle this yet," I gestured toward the statue, "you know?"

"Agreed," he answered, though it was reluctantly.

"Is there more you wanted to show me here?"

Relief mingled with affection washed over the bond – a hug of the heart. "We have time for at least one full gallery."

I smiled, still a little unsettled but not quite ready to wake up and go back to politicians and nosy generals just yet. "As long as you don't make me look at mathematical equations for the rest of the night, then let's go."
"Wake up, Sam."

I opened my eyes to find Mikaela sitting on the bunk beside me, kissing my face and otherwise happily volunteering as an alarm clock. "Five more minutes?" I murmured around her lips? "Of this?"

She giggled. "You're already late. Al-Sharif's knocked on the door twice in the last ten."

"I guess he lacks your special superpower when it comes to waking up groggy me." Thankfully!

She rolled her eyes at me as she stood, but I could see that she was flattered. "Get up, you!"

Grinning, I tossed the blanket back and rolled out of my bunk. Time to face another day.

I apologized to al-Sharif on my way to the showers and hurried to get ready, but the memory of the bond-dream was hard to shake. Walking the corridors of the ship reminded me of the hallway leading to the room where we saw Elita, and entering the mess hall triggered a flashback to entering the art gallery with Optimus. I felt like I was walking in two different worlds. Maybe it was a good analogy of what I was doing this morning, I thought as al-Sharif opened the door for me to enter a conference room for yet another meeting. Two realities – the Autobot and the human one – would clash in this room, and I had seen and known both.

Our first order of business was a follow-up with the joint military leaders who supervised NEST. It was always easier to talk with Diego Garcia's leadership, both British and American. They already knew enough about the Autobots that we were able to get beyond the usual questions to something more useful.

The first half of the follow-up meeting was mostly Will Lennox talking to them about readiness status, security upgrades, yada, yada, yada. Finally, the British admiral in charge of Diego Garcia turned to me. "It's impossible to deny the existence of alien robots any longer, but some in the upper echelons of world power are reluctant to publicly admit that we've had a contingent of 'tame' aliens working for us all this time."

Yeah, I'll bet. That wouldn't look so good after this last week.

"What is the Autobots' position on the matter?"

It was times like this that I wished Optimus and I shared a more solid bond so I could get the answer from him directly. Instead, I settled for the next best thing – honesty. "I haven't spoken with them about it, so I can't give you an official answer. But I can give you my best guess."

The admiral nodded.

Leaning forward to rest my arms on the table, I said, "They've actually been concerned because their existence wasn't widely known. Optimus is very much an advocate of freedom of choice. Even if it meant getting kicked off planet Earth, he would have preferred that the decision to give them refuge had been made by the whole of humanity instead of by a few powerful individuals. But since that wasn't part of the deal, they've gone along with the secrecy."

A couple of the bigwigs looked uneasy at that. General Morshower explained, "Some people want to claim that the Autobots are human-built robots designed to repel an alien invasion."
Anger – indignation – swept over the bond to hit me full-force, and I realized that Optimus and the other Autobots were probably hacking into the meeting again. "They'll never go for that."

Another US general demanded, "Are you sure about that, son?"

Yeah, pretty dang sure. But not even they knew about the bond I shared with Optimus, so I just shrugged. "In my expert opinion, yes. But like I said, I haven't talked with them about that yet. I will if you want me to."

"Do," the British admiral ordered. I glanced at al-Sharif, and he jotted it down for me. "One other thing," the brass continued. "Your status within NEST."

"Yeah," I answered, mentally flinching. "I know I don't have any authority to order people around. I'm sorry that I had to involve NEST to get Optimus to Egypt, and I take full responsibility. Major Lennox didn't know what they were getting into…"

"Major Lennox had to bail out of a malfunctioning plane," the admiral interrupted me with a perfectly straight face. "He acted properly in both removing his men from danger and in keeping the Autobots under his direct command. The malfunction in the flight systems has already been isolated and repaired."

"Oh."

"I was referring to your future within NEST."

"Has the decision been made to keep NEST active in the long-term, then?" Lennox asked.

"It's looking that way, depending on," the admiral glanced at me, "a few critical factors."

I bit back the choice words that wanted to spill out of my mouth. "Sir, I'm enrolled in college. Whatever future I might have with NEST is on the other side of the stage when I graduate. If I can get everything back on track, that will be in four years. I'd be happy to talk with you about it then."

The admiral's eyes darted to Lennox and then back to me. "We'll discuss this further in our next follow-up."

"Yes sir," both Lennox and I answered.

General Morshower addressed Major Lennox, then. "Assuming NEST stays active, we are proposing to keep the Autobots on Diego Garcia. Even though it's held by only a handful of nations, it's far more neutral than, say, Washington D.C. or London."

"And it's the warhead principle?" Lennox asked. "Keep the biggest military targets away from major metropolitan areas?"

"And keep the conspiracy-theorist nut jobs from stalking them," I added, thinking of Leo's cronies back at school.

"Exactly." Morshower turned to me. "So you see why we would like you to stay with NEST, Mr. Witwicky. We will not be able to keep a contingent of Autobots permanently stationed on the East Coast to protect you."

"Optimus has already granted permission for Bumblebee to accompany me, and he's been all the protection I've needed for years. I'll be okay."
He frowned but turned to Major Lennox. "What recommendations do you have for our proposal?"

"You're aware of the Russian's offer yesterday, so the only real change I recommend is for the Autobots to be granted individual salaries."

A British general raised an eyebrow at that. "They are considering the Kremlin's offer?"

"They'd like to see a diversification of NEST," I hastily explained, "but they're content to remain under the current leadership."

"How diverse?" General Morshower demanded.

I shrugged. "The more the better."

The British admiral from earlier glared at Will. "And what is the pay-scale for alien robot warriors?"

"It's not the amount," Lennox answered. "It's the principle – just to treat them like people."

"I know Optimus considers Major Lennox his equal," I said, hoping I was right to make these negotiations for him. Steadying reassurance poured into me over the bond, and I continued, "Maybe you could give Optimus a major's salary and then figure out the other Autobots' incomes based on that."

The admiral narrowed his eyes at me. "And that will be enough money to keep them on Diego Garcia?"

"No amount of money could keep them there if they didn't want to be," I retorted. "And no amount of money could persuade them to leave if they wanted to stay. It was Major Lennox's idea, not mine, but I can tell you the gesture would be appreciated. They don't really need any money with all the rest being provided, but being treated like fellow soldiers of their human NEST counterparts…that would mean a lot to them."

"We'll take your recommendations into consideration," General Morshower answered, "and discuss them in greater depth in our next follow-up."

Right. Another follow-up. Because this political hell would never end.

…

I snuck up on Mom in the mess hall at lunch, mostly because I didn't want her screaming 'Sammie!' at me from across the room. She was sitting at a table already with the rest of the gang and I managed to get my tray and almost to the table when Simmons blew my cover.

"Alienboy," he greeted me.

"Sam!" she exclaimed, jumping to her feet and glomping me. Al-Sharif rescued my tray and set it on the table for me with a smirk.

I hugged her back. "Hey, Mom."

"I'm so glad we get to see you today! After they stole you away for both lunch and dinner yesterday I was sure that those psychotic aliens had kidnapped you again."

"Ma," I groaned. "They're not psychotic, and when it comes right down to it, they're not that alien."

"Sit down and let the boy eat, Judy," Dad scolded. "The burgers are good," he added. 
"So's the salad," Mikaela chimed in.

"If you'll excuse me, sir," al-Sharif said, "I'll go research the assignment you gave me earlier."

The one about me getting back into college somehow. "Sure."

"I'll come back before it's time to go to the next meeting."

"Thanks," I answered, and an idea suddenly occurred to me. I wasn't just important – I had a little power, too. "And Ensign? Don't let them give you no for an answer or build a wall of red tape. I'm serious about this. I've done everything they've asked, but that's not going to last if they don't give a little instead of just taking. I am going back to college within a week."

He briskly nodded once before heading out.

Mom was sitting across from Dad (who was sitting with Leo and Simmons) and Mikaela was sitting beside her, so I squeezed in between the two girls. I stole a quick kiss from Mikaela, mostly because she was there and I was remembering her 'wake-up call' this morning, but also because I was trying to not look at Leo and Simmons. I knew they'd try to get the truth out of me about Arcee after the twins blabbed it to them yesterday, but I was hoping to avoid that in front of my parents.

No such luck.

"Prime?" Leo casually asked between bites of tater tots. This put him right back at the top of my 'Kill Him and Make It Look Like Decepticons' list.

"Tweedledee and Tweedledum said you were their fearless leader now," Simmons added.

"One alien in the garage is more than enough," Mom snapped.

"They're not coming home with me," I tried to soothe her. "Bumblebee maybe, but definitely not those two." We'd burn the bridge later about Optimus coming home for Thanksgiving.

"What's 'Prime' supposed to mean?" Dad demanded.

I sighed, glaring daggers at Leo. "It's...a clan name. Optimus is a Prime. The Autobots think I'm one, too."

Mom and Dad just stared at me. Mom finally choked out, "So...you're...like adopted by them?"

Adopted. Nice, generic, familiar way to describe it. "Not like 'adopted as their kid.' More like, 'adopted into the clan.'" And then, because the truth would out sooner or later (sooner, at the rate Leo was going), I added, "As Optimus' brother."

They took the news better than I thought they would. Simmons busted out laughing, and Leo kind of snorted, too, though that made him choke on his tots. ('Good! Serves him right,' I thought.)

Mikaela squeezed my knee in encouragement, giving me a sympathetic smile.

Dad was struck speechless, and Mom threw her fork down in disgust. "I'm not letting them, Sammie! They've put you through hell twice now! You almost died at Giza and now they think they can take better care of you than we can? You're in danger whenever you're with them!"

"They're not taking him away," Mikaela jumped in, and I just wanted to kiss her. If anybody could save my butt when it came to my mom, it was my girlfriend. Mom was a force of nature, but so was she. "They just...as a sign of appreciation put him under the protection of the clan. Like an honorary
Autobot."

She was lying, but she was smart and it was something that would make sense to Mom. And it worked; Mom was still frowning, but she visibly relaxed. "Just honorary?"

Somehow I didn't think it would be good to say, 'No, Mom, we're blood brothers now with emotional and mental telepathy.' Sighing, I explained, "It's a bit more than 'just honorary,' but they're not taking me away to fight. Optimus told me last night that he fully supports me going back to college, and he said I can take Bumblebee with me if I need a guardian."

Simmons rolled his eyes at that one. "You think you can go back to college now, Cube-brain? You've got a great big bulls-eye on the top of your head for the Decepticons and every human on planet Earth knows you name, face, and Social Security number. You've gotta disappear. Like, Sector Seven disappear – without a trace."

Echoes of the determination Optimus lent me last night swelled in my soul again. "I'm not going to let them kill my identity. I'm 'Sam Witwicky' and that's not going to change. Besides, even Sector Seven people have to have some kind of identity. Life won't ever be the same, but I've gone back to 'normal' before, and I'll do it again."

Simmons shook his head in irritation, but Leo spoke up before Simmons could think of a snarky comeback. "So was the whole Prime thing why you were in the cargo bay when they brought that other Autobot back to life?"

"WHAT?" Mom shrieked.

I was going to kill him. Seriously. I had the power of every last Autobot weapon on the ship at my disposal. Except Optimus; I doubt I could talk him into using his energon swords on Leo. Sideswipe wouldn't need much encouragement to use his swords, though. Ironhide would have no problem with using his cannons if I asked him. Ratchet and his saws would be pretty cool, too.

"We were both invited," Mikaela archly answered, coming to my rescue again. "I'm friends with Arcee, too. I know her better than Sam does."

"Did you bring her back from the dead?" Mom demanded

"Ratchet repaired her," Mikaela flatly answered. Glancing disdainfully at Leo, she said, "The twins don't know what they're talking about. They weren't even there to see it."

Watching her lie through her teeth – and do it so convincingly – just left me a little in awe of her. I could never pull that off. I know Simmons was just being rude with his 'criminal girlfriend' crack, but watching her now, I realized she had some serious skills because of it. My beautiful, powerful, good-hearted, awesome criminal girlfriend.

"So what's it mean to be his brother?" Dad asked, pulling us back to the beginning of this crazy conversation. "Like, do you have to do anything?"

Just visit alien art galleries with him. "Not really, nothing I wouldn't do anyway. We…we're trying to figure it out as we go, Dad. I mean, how did you be a brother?"

"Wrap my sister up in a sleeping bag and toss her down the stairs," he casually answered. "I'm serious here, Sam. You're our son – "

"And that's not going to change," I interrupted him. "Optimus wants to be like a human brother to me instead of making me like a Cybertronian brother to him."
"Aw crap," Mom grumbled. "So he thinks he's our son now, too?"

I rubbed my hands over my face in frustration. Of course she would figure out the one thing I didn't want her to. "Kind of."

"That's it!" Mom said, jumping to her feet. "I'm going down there right now and telling that robot where he can – "

Dad grabbed her arm, pulling her down to sitting again. "Judy, stop and think. Mr. Simmons has a point – we're going to have to at least sell the house after all this, and just think about how much these alien robots can help us. Pool and a hot tub."

"Gah!" I exclaimed, disgusted. "Why is it always about the money with you, Dad?"

"Money's what makes the world go 'round," he retorted. "And it's not about the money. Money's just another form of power. If you're under the protection of the Prime clan, does that mean we are, too?"

"...yeah? I think so."

"Then they can help us get a place where we'll be safe? Because we're probably collecting fanmail and anthrax by the pound back there. And if Optimus wants to do right by his dear old Dad and Mom, he'll make sure it's a comfortable place, wouldn't he? Especially for the woman who raised his brother?"

And then I got it. My dad wasn't looking for a handout – he was trying to help me buy Mom off. "Oh! Yeah, I'm positive Optimus would want to make sure you're safe and happy. Whatever it takes, Mom."

She frowned at first Dad and then me. "It'll take more than a pool and Jacuzzi to make me put up with having the leader of the psychotic alien robots in the family."

"Why limit yourself to a house?" Leo inserted, enjoying this way too much. "You could get a yacht."

And of course, Mom warmed up to the idea. "Damn right. Who says we're even safe in our own country? We should see if we can get asylum somewhere tropical! Bahamas! Fiji!"

Getting into the spirit of it, Simmons added, "You could buy Isle Esme!"

I stared at him blankly, not getting the reference, but Mikaela sniggered.

Leo eyed his archrival and companion-in-arms in disbelief. "Congratulations. You've just outted yourself."

"You knew what I was talking about, too," he answered defensively.

"I only read the effing books so chicks would think I was sensitive. You probably picked 'em up off your mama."

Simmons pointed a warning finger at Leo. "Don't go there, amateur."

"So," Dad said, trying to break the sudden but baffling tension. "Where else should we ask the government to put us?"

"Draw up a list of demands for the alien SWAT team," Simmons drawled. "Sam can help you. He's good at that sort of thing."
Mikaela narrowed her eyes at him, no doubt remembering (like I was) our conversation on the top of Hoover Dam when I told him they had to erase her criminal record if they wanted me to help.

"What about your heroic roommie who was with you every step of the way?" Leo demanded of me, still smarting from his argument with Simmons. "What does he get?"

"Dismemberment by Ratchet?"

He snorted, thinking I was joking.

"So what have you guys been up to today?" I asked, hoping against hope that they'd let me change the subject now that all the worst bombs had been dropped.

"They're talking about letting us meet the President!" Mom squealed, and I winced at the mental image of that splash-damage. I'd spend the next month cleaning up after it. Oblivious, she continued, "I asked them and they said they would see, but I don't know what I would wear to a videoconference like that. Maybe we should wait until we get to this naval base and I'll be able to buy something new to wear and…"

She rambled on while I ate my hamburger and tater-tots. Every now and then I'd throw a grateful glance at Mikaela or glare at Leo. If Optimus really wanted to be my brother, maybe he could help me figure out what to do about those two.
Lennox was standing outside the conference room for my first meeting after lunch. "Whose toes did you step on, kid?" he muttered.

My eyebrows raised in surprise.

"They pulled me out of my unit briefing to get me up here. They had to work three days to get everybody there who needed to be; they don't mess with something like that unless the situation's desperate. You musta kicked somebody in the nuts pretty hard."

I glanced over at al-Sharif, who gave me a slight shrug. I gave him a forgiving half-smile in answer; after all, he'd only done what I'd told him to. I'd have to pry out of him later what he actually did. Looking back at Lennox, I casually asked, "So did they tell you why you were here?"

"To talk some sense into you. And if I can't manage it, your parents will probably be hauled in here next."

They didn't wait for Lennox to fail before calling in the big guns. Just after we were seated, Mom, Dad, Mikaela, Leo, and Simmons were all escorted into the room. Great. Just great.

The video screen flickered to life, and…I hate to say it, but she looked like that actress who played Professor McGonagall in the Harry Potter movies, but without a sense of humor. She had her hair up in a military-issue bun and looked down at me with steel-gray eyes over bifocal glasses. I think even Lennox sat a little straighter in his chair when he saw her.

"Admiral Marquette," somebody from Communications said, "this is Mr. Samuel Witwicky."

"A pleasure," she crisply lied. Leaning forward on her arms, she declared, "Your request to return to college has been denied."

Not unexpected, but I felt a thrill of fury run down my spine. "Denied. As in, I've been working my backside off answering questions and proverbially shaking every hand on planet Earth and you think I'm just going to roll over and let you destroy my life? That kind of denied?"

She pressed her lips together in annoyance. "It's a matter of preserving your life, young man, not destroying it."

"It's my life to preserve, not yours, and I've already got it planned out. The Autobots have a bodyguard lined up for me."

"Sammie," Mom pleaded, obviously knowing why she was here. "You know you're not safe with them and — "

"I'm never safer than when I'm with Bumblebee," I retorted. Before my dad could toss in his two cents, I said, "You were so proud of me – the first Witwicky to go to college. Are you really gonna go back on that? Because I still want to do you proud."

He frowned, but like he did in the middle of the battle, he nodded ever so slightly. "You come back. That's all I ask."

"I did," I said, smiling a little. "Always will."
"I'd rather have a living coward than a dead hero for a son," Mom said. "I saw you flatline. My baby…"

Beside me, Lennox twitched and I could just imagine what a military man would think of that.

"Mom, I could have been killed a hundred times already. I could have been hit by a car when I was five. A plane could have fallen out of the sky on my head." And his name would have been Starscream, a sarcastic voice added in the back of my mind. "I could have died before I was even born. You could lock me up in a panic room in the middle of the Hoover Dam, and I would still be in danger from the Decepticons. Either I can live my life – however long or short that may be – or I can give up and die right now. Because the kind of life you're asking me to live wouldn't be living."

"You'd still be alive, though," the admiral said, and I put my hand up to silence her (not realizing what I'd done until it was too late).

Focusing on my mom, I repeated, "It wouldn't be living."

She blinked at sudden tears and then looked down, wiping them away.

More gently, I said, "I'm in danger no matter what. Don't you want somebody fully-armed and bulletproof there to jump in and save me? Don't you want me to try and have all the wonderful things you did?" Blushing furiously (because Mikaela was in the room), I moved in for the kill. "Don't you want grandkids someday?"

She looked at the ceiling, sniffling as she tried to control the tears. "Okay," she piteously croaked. "Okay, fine. Go to your damn school. Leave us all alone again. But if you get killed, I'm taking out their leader with my bare hands."

Fear – gut-wrenching, sweaty-palmed, gotta-kill-something terror – swept over me. Optimus. No way was he scared of my Mom, so why was he feeling like this? I just couldn't make sense of my brother's feelings; they were a tangled mess of fear and pain and panic. Maybe something was happening down in the Autobot cargo bay? Wrenching myself away from his feelings, I tried to send calm his way for a change, and after a few seconds, it seemed to work.

He sent embarrassment, apology, and then his feelings over the bond were muted.

Reaching across the table to my still-crying mother, I clasped her hand. "It'll be okay."

"No, it will not," Admiral Marquette interrupted, looking even less amused. "I've lost count of the number of condolence letters I've had to sign over the years. Every young man entering a war zone believes he won't be one of the casualties. You have grown arrogant because you've been lucky so far, but I refuse – "

"You refuse." I glared at her and then glanced at the people around me. "Why are they here if you could just say no?"

I turned my attention to Simmons, but he held his hands up, declaring neutrality. "I always thought you were crazy-stupid, kid. If you're wanna run where angels fear to tread, who am I to tell you 'no'? It's your brain that'll have a bullet through it."

I snorted. "Already had a probe-bot there, thanks. All things considered, I'm not sure a bullet would be worse."

I looked at Mikaela. After the whole 'grandkids' thing, I wasn't sure what I'd see, but her eyes were sparkling in a way that made me feel, in Aunt Shelly's words, ten feet tall and bulletproof. "Go for it,
Sam,” she said without me even needing to ask. A rush of confidence swelled in me.

Turning to Lennox, I asked. "You in?"

"NEST is going to be locked down on Diego Garcia," the admiral answered in a voice that commanded entire fleets.

"No, we're not," Lennox corrected her. "The decision was made just this morning to keep NEST permanently active."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I missed that memo." Turning back to me, she continued, "Even if an Autobot could protect you from your alien enemies, he won't be able to keep you safe from your human ones. A twenty-foot-tall alien robot can hardly attend classes with you."

"So assign me a human bodyguard."

"It's impossible."

My head snapped back like she'd slapped me. "I killed Megatron and brought back Optimus. I don't believe in the word 'impossible.'" Inspiration struck. "Simmons. Agent Simmons. He knows as much about the Decepticons as I do if not more, and he's got the clearance and special-ops training to do it."

Lennox gave me an 'are you nuts?' look, but I ignored him.

"And Leo."

My roommie squeaked a little to hear me mention his name in a discussion of potential bodyguards.

"Mr. Spitz?" she asked, dubiously looking over the rims of her glasses at him.

"He's not a fighter, but he's already in the know and already part of my established life at school. He can keep an eye out for me and be an embedded operative if necessary." Yeah, I was starting to sound like all these military guys, too.

Leo wilted a little in his chair.

"I am going back to college," I declared, staring her down. "I am a human being, and the fact that I'm valuable doesn't change that. It's my choice and my life to risk. If my own parents are willing to let me take this chance, who are you to tell me I can't?"

"I'm the one who will be responsible if you get killed," she answered sharply.

"Responsible to whom?"

She arched an eyebrow at me. "To the President himself."

Unimpressed, I crossed my arms. "Then I think he and I need to do lunch again." To al-Sharif, I said, "Make a note. Whichever meal is most convenient for him today or tomorrow."

"Yessir."

"Anything else you needed to discuss with me, Admiral? Because there's a line at my door."

Her glare would have etched glass. "I'm sure you'll be more open to what I have to say after your lunch with the President."
"Until then." I nodded to the slightly-stunned guy from Communications, and he cut the connection. It wasn't until I looked at the stricken, shocked, or alluringly-impressed faces around me that I realized what had happened.


...

Lennox went back to his briefing, and the guy from Communications stepped out with al-Sharif (hopefully to see about getting me another interview with the President, though I still couldn't believe I'd had the gall to demand a meeting like that). I sat across the table from my Mom still, and Dad had his arm around her, softly trying to comfort her. Mikaela was a little more thoughtful, but she had an 'I could just pounce you' smile for me. Simmons shook his head in disbelief, though his expression made it clear that he really hadn't ever expected me to do something sane. I didn't know him all that well, but I was sure of one thing – he'd want to stay in the action. Leo…Leo was going to be a problem, I could see that already. He was sullenly looking at the table, his hands fidgeting.

"Can you step outside with me for a second?" I asked him.

"What you got to say can't be said in front of your mama?"

"No, I'm more worried that what you're going to say shouldn't be said in front of my mama. Come on."

I went to the door and held it open, waiting for him. He frowned for a second before reluctantly standing up and joining me. There was no one in the hall and I looked at Leo, trying to figure out the best way to handle this. Sure, they could switch me to a different dorm room or even give me a private apartment, but he'd been there. He would understand better than anyone else on that campus what I'd been through and he'd need someone to keep an eye on him too.

He glared at me, that nervous energy making him almost bounce on the balls of his feet. "Just because I saved your butt doesn't mean I'll be your effing bodyguard. They're giving you a chance at another life – one they're not giving me and Mikaela – and you're just throwing it away!"

"Look, Leo," I retorted in a low voice. "I was in the middle of Mission City, and I went back to high school just a few days later. It is possible to get back into something kind of like normal. Yes, this is bigger and badder and the ripple of consequences is just beginning, but if I let them start telling me where I can go and what I can't do…I may as well be in the hands of a Decepticon, you know?"

"No, Sam, I really don't. Because nobody has effing shot at me here. And I'm not looking forward to going back to the dorm room where a fricking Decepticon Pretender strangled you with her tongue. When I die, I don't want it to be as a sitting duck and I don't want it be after being raped by an effing robot!"

"What about your website?"

He froze and then hung his head, drooping in a way that oddly reminded me of 'Bee. "The guys probably think I'm dead."

"Everyone knows now that you were right," I said, shamelessly playing to his ego. "You really gonna let The Man take that away from you?"

He sighed.

"Free ride…" I dangled the carrot. "You'd be paid to go to college."
"I'll think about it."

"That's all I ask. But you won't have forever. I'll need an answer before our next meeting with Admiral McGonagall."

He sniggered once and the tension eased off a bit. "I dare you to call her that next time."

I chuckled and we went back into the conference room to wait for whatever Communications had planned for us next. "You sign on for embedded operative if they offer the job, and you're on!"

... 

Al-Sharif returned less than half an hour later. By then everyone else had been hauled off to do whatever it was they did while I was getting grilled by the bigwigs. I needed to ask Mikaela tonight how she was spending her time.

When I saw my aide, it suddenly occurred to me that they probably had to cancel some other meeting for me to talk with Admiral McGonagall. "What were we supposed to be doing before I kicked over a hornet's nest?"

"Follow-up with the UN Security Council," he informed me. "Communications is rescheduling it for sometime early next week. We have forty minutes until your next scheduled meeting – with the Egyptian President and Prime Minister."

Oh. And he'd said 'early next week' for the other meeting. "What day is it?"

A flicker of a smirk managed to sneak through. "Thursday."

I silently nodded. I'd missed over a week of classes now.

"Permission to speak freely, sir?" al-Sharif asked, his eyes fixed on the wall behind me.

"We already went over that," I reminded him with a grin.

He didn't smile, instead nodding and taking a deep breath. "I was curious about a comment you made."

"Yeah?"

"When I asked if you were a spiritual man, you said, 'not until recently.' I was wondering what you meant by that."

Surprised, I stared at him for a second. "Do you remember everything I say?"

"Only the interesting things," he answered, and with his military mask, I wasn't sure if he was serious or joking.

I sighed and shook my head. "I meant that I pretty much died in Egypt, and that changes a person."

He looked at me expectantly, oddly reminding me of Optimus somehow. Maybe it was that he observed and thought a whole lot more than he spoke. "This is between you and me, understand?"

He nodded crisply.

"I did die." Saying the words – getting them out in the open, even if it was just to one person – made me feel somehow...lighter. And if there was any human I knew who would understand how
important meeting the Primes was, I suspected it would be al-Sharif. "I had flat-lined and the medics had given up on bringing me back." I frowned, remembering. "I…met Optimus' ancestors. They sent me back."

His only reaction was to blink in surprise and then look away, processing it all. After a moment, he asked, "So you believe in an Autobot religion now? Is it an ancestor-worship?"

"No, nothing like that. Optimus' ancestors are just servants."

"To whom?"

"The All Spark."

"Who is the All Spark?"

I frowned, realizing we'd never gone into depth on that one. It was just…there. All I remembered was Optimus saying something about there being lots of different theories about the origin of the All Spark. "You know, I'm not sure. Let's ask Optimus."

"Unnecessary," my aide hastily answered, turning kind of pale.

That decided me – before we left this ship, al-Sharif was going to get over freaking out about the Autobots. "No, it's a good question. We've got time – let's go now."

He swallowed hard but nodded and followed me out the door. When we got down to the Autobot bay, Sideswipe and Bumblebee were sparring with Ironhide looking on and making suggestions. It was kind of hard to watch 'Bee get pinned with Sideswipe's arm-blade over his throat, but Ironhide called him off and 'Bee straightened, his optics blazing behind the battle mask.

I felt Optimus behind me, but al-Sharif jumped when my brother spoke. "Bumblebee is preparing for his assignment. He's been training all day with each of us in turn."

"Even you?" I asked, trying to imagine it.

He chuckled as he crouched down to be eye-to-optic with us. "Even me. We have no idea who he might face, and while Megatron will need months if not years to recover from his defeat, it's still possible that he could send someone after you. Bumblebee wants to be sharper than ever." His worry warred with the trust he felt – for Bumblebee, I assumed.

"I'll be fine. We both will."

He nodded before curiosity got the best of him. "You're here early."

I stepped back and to the side so that I was shoulder-to-shoulder with al-Sharif. "He had some questions for you."

Optimus looked expectantly at my aide.

After a heartbeat or two of hesitation, he said, "If it's not disrespectful, sir, may I ask who the All Spark is?"

My brother blinked in surprise, uncertainty creeping over the bond. I sent him my confidence – he could trust al-Sharif.

"There are many theories," Optimus slowly said, "but some believe the All Spark is a manifestation of our Creator and primary deity, known to us as Primus."
"Primary deity?"

"Yes. Primus is understood to be self-existent, as you humans would say. His brother Unicon is also self-existent and is the antithesis of Primus. He is the Unmaker."

Optimus' words from last night came to mind – the power of brotherhood. The Fallen had also betrayed his brothers. "Another archetype?"

Surprise rolled across the bond, followed by wry amusement. "So it would appear." Turning his attention back to al-Sharif, he said, "Religion among my kind is much different than it is among humans. The existence of both Primus and Unicon is almost universally accepted, but as we have no formal rites of worship, there is little argument about an individual's expression of reverence. The Dynasty of the Primes built a house for the All Spark – the Temple at Simfur – and we spoke of and treated the All Spark with respect. It was tangible proof that something greater than ourselves existed, and it was the source of life to us. Belief was unnecessary."

My aide seemed to ponder that for a couple of seconds. "You speak in the past tense."

"The All Spark was housed in the physical form of a monumental Cube. The Cube was destroyed here on Earth."

"Unmade?" he quietly asked.

Optimus shook his head 'no.' "It took another physical form, which we closely guard. That is part of why I'm inclined to think the All Spark is a manifestation of Primus. It cannot be destroyed, just as He cannot."

Again al-Sharif lapsed into silence, and Optimus prompted him, "Do you have any more questions?"

"One more, sir. Without formal rites of worship, how do you…practice your religion?"

Optimus was pleasantly surprised – Mohammed was asking all the right questions as far as my brother was concerned. "The Dynasty of the Primes was probably the closest we had to priests, but they were killed in battle long ago. They stood between us and the All Spark, acting on its behalf and on behalf of my race."

"But…" I froze, not wanting to blurt out in front of al-Sharif that I was a Prime, too. Choosing my words carefully, I said, "But there are Primes again. You're one."

He solemnly nodded. "Yes."

I was even more slack-jawed than al-Sharif at that realization.

My brother’s earnest encouragement swelled in my soul. "There are Primes again, and their destiny shall be as great as their ancestors'. They only need to accept it." Turning again to al-Sharif, he said, "Our worship was a practical one. Primus is a creator, the All Spark ignited sparks – what some have termed our souls – and we built bodies called protoforms for the new sparks. We helped our Creator create; that was our worship."

"Again, you speak in the past tense."

Optimus dropped his gaze, sorrow and a hint of desperate hope mingling in his spark. "We do not know if the All Spark's new form will be able to grant new life, and even if it can, we haven't yet found the necessary materials here on Earth to create a protoform. Anything Earth-made would be frail and short-lived."
"You need the alloy from the Well of All Sparks?" I asked, finally putting it all together.

"Correct." To al-Sharif, he said, "Cybertron is our Mecca or Jerusalem. We can never truly sever ourselves from our spiritual home."

He nodded, smiling ever so slightly. "I understand. Thank you very much for your time, sir. Prime." As he spoke the word, it was like I was hearing it for the first time – as a title and not just part of a name.

Appreciation and something suspiciously close to approval radiated from Optimus. "You are very welcome, ensign."
Sympathy

The mid-afternoon meeting with the Egyptian President and Prime Minister went well enough, but I was shocked that the US President was able to make time to have his breakfast with me while I ate dinner. After that, al-Sharif informed me that we didn't have any other meetings except the one with Optimus.

When we arrived in the Autobot cargo bay, it was empty, and the doors that led to the flight deck lift were open. A clank and some muttering told us it wasn't completely empty, and I wandered toward the make-shift medbay. Bumblebee was sitting on the ground while Ratchet knelt beside him, working on his neck. His vocal processor, I realized.

Bumblebee's antennas lifted in happiness when he saw me, but Ratchet growled, "Hold still!" and 'Bee's antenna's fell back. I chuckled, and Ratchet finally noticed us. "About time." He rose to standing and retrieved another bag of pills for me. 'Bee ran for safety as soon as the medic's back was turned and put us humans between him and Chartreuse Wrath. "I kept him down here until you arrived since he got extra play-time yesterday," Ratchet explained, handing me the bag. "The others are already on the flight deck."

"Oh hey," I said, suddenly remembering Optimus' strange panic attack earlier. "Did something happen in the cargo bay today? I thought I felt something…weird."

"I'm sure you did," Ratchet grumbled. "Optimus is right to worry about losing a bond brother. He knows better than any of us what the consequences are. Now go get some exercise, all three of you. I expect 'Bee to give your hearts a workout."

My friend silently sniggered before transforming into a Camaro and popping both his doors open again. Al-Sharif hesitated for only a second before climbing in. "Bumblebee, sir?" he said as the Autobot headed for daylight. "If you want to get my attention in the future, all you have to do is say so."

"You betcha," a chipper woman answered, and I grinned as 'Bee revved his engine in anticipation of having some fun.

Bumblebee's tires screamed as he peeled out onto the flight deck where the other Autobots were already in their alt-modes and tearing around. Sideswipe and Jolt were weaving around and between Skids and Mudflap, taunting them, while Ironhide and Arcee raced. We leaped into the demolition derby, coming within inches of broad-siding Ironhide, and then we were off rocketing down the tarmac in a race with Arcee. She was playing with us, too, cutting off Bumblebee to make him brake hard or dodging out of his way when he swerved at her. When we came to the end of the flight deck and circled back, I saw Optimus parked beside Ironhide and Ratchet.

Or rather, he was parked and the two of them were bumper-to-bumper, nose-to-nose, and smoke was rising off Ironhide's spinning tires. Bumblebee drifted to a stop to watch, and Arcee pulled up alongside us on the passenger side.

"Ensign," Bumblebee quoted, and then in the voice of that surfer-turtle from Finding Nemo, he said, "serious thrill issues."

I looked over at al-Sharif and his eyes were wide again as he watched Ironhide throw all he had into making Ratchet move.
"'Bee says to not worry," the femme's brunette holoform said. She was lounging low on the bike so that she was eye-level with us. "It's kind of like they're arm wrestling. Ironhide hasn't beat Ratchet yet, and it drives the old lugnut crazy that he's made everybody budge except him."

"Even Optimus?" I asked.

Arcee's holoform smirked at me. "Even Optimus – a couple of times. It was always after battles but before Ratchet was there to patch them up or stop them."

Even al-Sharif smiled just a little at that one.

This was the most relaxed it had been between me and Arcee, and I took it as a good sign. "So Ratchet's stronger?"

She chuckled, looking over to Ironhide as he backed up a few feet and rammed forward into Ratchet. The medic didn't even rock on his axels.

"He's heavier. And he can tow more than Optimus. So in that sense, yes, he's stronger." Sitting up straighter and revving her engine, she added, "And it drives Ironhide nuts."

I grinned.

'Bee and Arcee leaped forward again, and this time we joined Sideswipe, Jolt, and the twins. Sometimes one of them would partially transform – reaching out a hand to tag another 'bot – but there weren't any rules that I could tell. The Autobots just chased each other around as fast and as insanely as they could. By the time the sun had disappeared below the horizon and we drove over to Optimus, al-Sharif and I were both breathless and a little dizzy. We exited Bumblebee's cab and 'Bee headed back to the cargo bay with the rest of the 'bots.

Time for our brotherly Prime meeting. Optimus transformed, stretching to his full height, and glanced down at me, tipping his head toward the spot on the flight deck where we'd talked for the last few nights. I could feel his casual anticipation.

My aide shifted his feet nervously, and I said to him, "I think I'm good. See you in the morning?"

He nodded in agreement. "Yes, Mr. Witwicky."

With a darting glance at Optimus, he bowed his head slightly to the Autobot and said, "Prime" in acknowledgement before retreating toward the door.

"Thank you, ensign," Optimus answered.

My fellow human froze in his tracks for a couple of heartbeats before half-turning his head and murmuring, "You're welcome."

"He'll warm up to you," I assured Optimus once al-Sharif was out of sight.

"Perhaps," he answered, striding toward our usual spot, but I could feel his doubt. He pushed it aside, happy contentment taking its place. "Thank you, Sam, for your efforts. We were in lockdown three days ago, and today we were granted one hour of unlimited use of the flight deck."

"Huh," was my brilliant reply as he settled in on the tarmac and offered me a seat in his hand. "That's pretty amazing when you think about it."

His happiness grew until laughter was bubbling just below the surface. "The last time Ironhide and
Ratchet butted heads for fun was before you were born. It was good to see them – all of them – enjoying themselves.” Changing the subject, he said, ”I refrained from eavesdropping on your dinner. I assumed it would be a conversation you’d prefer to be just between the two of you.”

He was hinting that he wanted a rundown of my private conversation with the leader of the free world. I snorted, realizing just how crazy that sounded. ”Yeah, well I pulled the same dirty trick I did on Admiral Black – I made an appeal to paternal instincts.” Feeling Optimus’ puzzlement, I explained, ”I pointed out that his girls were valuable, too, and that they still were able to go to school. Why couldn’t I?”

Cautious approval slipped over the bond. ”It will be interesting to see his response.”

I shrugged. ”He said that it would require some policy changes and that he would have to get back to me in the couple of days.”

”I wish you luck,” Optimus diplomatically answered, but he was hopeful inside.

”So, what’s on the agenda for tonight? You eavesdropped on my other meetings, I assume.”

”Yes, and thank you for making the financial negotiations with the NEST leadership. I know you were uncertain, but your approach was exactly right.”

”Thanks.”

”Leo and Simmons will make interesting bodyguards,” he added, ”but they have proven themselves.” With an affectionate glance at the doors to the cargo bay, he said, ”Sanity is not always the most important virtue.”

I chuckled, remembering how crazy the ’bots had all been just a few minutes ago.

Sobering, Optimus continued, ”Your mother was very distraught.”

I shrugged. ”That's just Mom. Ask Bumblebee – she was a basket-case the day I left for college.”

But his mention of Mom reminded me. ”You're not afraid of her, are you?”

Surprise radiated off him. ”No. Why?”

”No reason,” I lied, but his amusement told me he saw right through it. ”Okay, fine. You were upset during that meeting with Admiral McGonagall and…”

Confusion filled him for a moment until the light came on. ”Admiral Marquette.”

”Yeah, her.”

A great big ball of emotion rolled across the bond – fear and protectiveness and affection and ferocity and despair. ”I was seeing you again at the mercy of Megatron. Your mother's words brought that final battle in the forest to mind.”

”Oh.” I wasn’t sure what to say to that and we lapsed into an awkward silence. It was even more awkward because Ratchet's words earlier in the cargo bay were eating at me, and he could tell I was curious but I could tell he wasn't going to ask.

Caving first, I said, ”Can I ask you something?”

”Of course.”
"How do you know so much about brother bonds? Ratchet said something…"

Optimus sighed, looking down and away, and I felt an echo of his heavy heart, er, spark. "I had a brother – another one – once, long ago."

Had. Meaning he was dead. "I'm sorry."

Optimus didn't respond, and the weight on my soul seemed to grow heavier.

I tentatively extended my sympathy and, unsure of what else to say, I suggested, "Tell me about him."

With another deep sigh, he drew on the comfort I was offering and softly said, "I lost him at the very beginning of the War. My spark still bears the scars of losing him."

"But before the War?"

Optimus finally lifted his gaze, his blue optics somehow seeing right into me. "Before the War, we were as close as you and I are, Sam. Closer. We laughed over the bond at our elders when we were young, and when we were older, we teased each other about the femmes who seemed to pay us an undue amount of attention. The connection you and I share only in dreaming we shared every moment of every day."

Again, I didn't know what to say, but I felt some of his – our – sorrow and heaviness lifting as I reached out to him in my heart.

"What happened to him?" I finally got brave enough to ask.

Wry, heartbroken humor tugged at me over the bond. "You killed him."

I sat bolt upright in shock. What? WHAT? I never killed an Autobot! And then my words from earlier in the day echoed in my mind. I killed Megatron and brought back Optimus. A single, strangled word slipped from my mouth. "Megatron?"

Sending soothing peace my way, Optimus gently said, "Yes. My first brother was dead to me long before I left Cybertron, and even though it was painful when he severed our bond back then, I survived it. It was just…difficult to watch him die, to see him torn apart by the Cube's energy. I could not feel his death throes like I would have if our bond was intact, but it was still very…difficult."

I dropped my face to my hands, my mind reeling. Brothers. Megatron and Optimus were brothers? And I killed Megatron right in front of him. Optimus fought his brother to the death for me. For me! Since Optimus was now my brother, did that make Megatron my brother, too? Or ex-brother or whatever? And what had he said about feeling his brother die and severing the bond? "You really gotta warn me before you drop these bombs, Optimus."

He offered his silent apology and gave me the space to think.

I hadn't even thought about it until Ratchet mentioned it, but what would it do to Optimus when I died? Because even if I lived a good, long life, I would still go before him. Looking up, I asked, "You can feel it when your bond-brother dies?"

Optimus slowly nodded. "It is possible, yes, if they are not separated by great distance."

"So when I die?"
"I do not know. I was off-planet on an exobiology expedition when the building my parents were in collapsed, killing them and breaking the bond we shared. There was a sense of loss, of terrible absence, but not the pain of experiencing their deaths. I only know what it feels like for a bond to be severed, though I imagine the sensations to be similar. The pain is both physical and emotional. It… scars the spark."

I picked up the feelings of grief and pain and overwhelming, empty loss he was letting slip through – probably on accident – and I couldn't help wrapping him up in a hug of the heart. Even though he was five times taller than me and made of metal, I felt his soul respond, and I imagined him leaning into the comfort I was offering. He vented a shuddering sigh, and the loss I was sensing from him faded. Some part of me recognized he was clinging to me like I was the only family he had left in the entire universe. Was I?

Deeper, stronger than words could ever be, I felt his gratitude, and I suddenly understood why he didn't just announce from day one that he and I were brothers now. He'd been afraid. He, Optimus Prime, the resurrected leader of the Autobots, had been afraid that I would freak out and deny the bond. He'd lost one brother, and he was terrified of losing another. His panic attack earlier had been at the thought of me dying, but this was something different. Deeper. He knew as surely as I did that he'd outlive me, but he was more afraid that I would sever this tie that bound us. He was afraid I would reject him like Megatron did. Optimus afraid.

"You hide it well," I told him.

"Megatron forced me to," he evenly admitted. "I had to be strong for those who were weaker than me. Some, like Ratchet or Jazz, have seen hints every now and again, but Elita was the only other one who knew as clearly as you do that I grieve him still."

I frowned a little, suddenly realizing that there was a definite down side to having brothers. That same bond that tied us together could be used to drag each other down just as easily as it could be used to lift each other up. "Does Megatron know that you still grieve for him?"

"He has not attempted to use my grief to his advantage in battle for a long time. Perhaps he thinks I have hardened my spark against him."

"But if he knew you and I were brothers…"

Optimus' optics narrowed. "Nothing good would come of it."

"But he knows I'm a Prime."

"Yes, but he does not realize that all Primes are brothers."

Oh. "So that's not common knowledge, then."

"No. And only a few of the Autobots here are aware of our bond. Ratchet, Ironhide, Bumblebee, Arcee, and Iron Will.

Ratchet was the first to discover the Matrix particles that allowed me to bond with Optimus. Ironhide would know just because he was Optimus' right-hand mech. They'd let Bumblebee in on the secret, too, because he was my guardian. Arcee… "Did you tell Arcee because she was brought back, too?"

"No." He blinked and looked out over the ocean, his gaze distant. "She knew. There is knowledge imparted in the moments before being reignited. Her knowledge apparently included the fact that you are a Prime and that we are brothers."
I wondered if she'd met the Dynasty of the Primes, too, and then decided she'd tell me if she wanted me to know. I didn't like blathering about it myself.

"Will knows, too?"

Optimus focused on me again. "There is very little we keep from him. Bumblebee is your guardian, but Will is often placed in difficult positions because of us. He needs to know more in order to effectively bridge our worlds."

Just like I was getting a crash course in being a Prime. Knowledge is power and all that jazz.

"He knows that we share a bond and that you are the older brother – "

"Wait – what?"

His amusement at my surprise deepened and I abruptly realized that Optimus had a very subtle but strong sense of humor. He enjoyed baiting me.

"What did you say?" I demanded.

"Among humans, brothers are bound by blood – a biological brother, the husband of a sister, the brother of a mate. I am aware it is also used as a metaphor, but the assumption is that if you call someone your brother, there is a blood tie somehow. Among my race, family connections are defined by bonds."

"But…you're like thousands and thousands of years older than me!"

Again that amusement. "Hear me out, Sam. There were three ways brother bonds were formed. The first was when the same set of parents created two offspring. The parents' spark signatures were combined by the All Spark into a new spark that resonated in a bond with both parents. By default, any more new sparks that followed would also share a bond with both parents and with their siblings. That was the brotherhood Megatron and I shared. Cybertronian brothers in that sense are similar to human brothers. The second – and much less common way – was when a spark splits to form twins."

"Also like humans."

"Yes. Only the twin bond runs as deeply as the spark-mated couple's bond. And the third brother bond occurred when a mech or femme without a mate used the Cube to create a new spark."

My brow furrowed as I tried to wrap my mind around that one. "So…the son of an only parent would be that parent's brother?"

"No. The bond and relationship are very different. Parental bonds create sparklings because the differences in code between parents and their offspring are much greater when the mech and femme formats are both involved. Sparklings are more dependant and immature. Solitary mechs and femmes create younglings because the difference in code is much smaller. A youngling's coding is much more mature."

"But in Mission City, I dropped the Cube and it created a whole bunch of Decepticons." Was I their brother or creator or whatever?

"Did you sense a bond with them?"

"No."
"Then they were not your brothers. It is the bond that defines the relationship. Sometimes two unrelated mechs who wished to be brothers would create a youngling together, creating brother-bonds among all three of them. In that case, the youngling would have two creator-brothers."

Like a disastrous flash of lightening, I got it. "And since we share a bond and I'm the one who reignited your spark you somehow think I'm your creator?" He had to be playing a joke on me. He had to! I'd check with Ratchet before I turned in for the night. I'd probably learn more about Autobot reproduction than I wanted to, but at least he wouldn't play with my mind like this.

Optimus chuckled. "I'm no youngling, Sam. Obviously, this is different. But in a sense…you could be considered my older brother."

"Gah! Don't do that to me!"

He lifted an optic ridge in a perfect mimic of a questioning human.

I threw my annoyance at him across the bond. "Don't make me out to be something I'm not. Yes, I'm a Prime, and I'm okay with that – kinda. Yes, I'm your brother, which is really cool even if it's overwhelming. But your big brother? Seriously?"

"Not my big brother," he corrected, absorbing my annoyance without missing a beat. His amusement gentled but didn't go away like I'd hoped. "My older brother. Even if you don't look at it from the angle of creator-siblings, you were reignited before I was."

"By, like, thirty seconds!"

"Thirty seconds is still thirty seconds." He spoke with all the dignity and authority of a Prime, but inwardly he was smirking. I could just feel it.

"Fine." I glared up at him for a long moment, not ready to give up yet. "So if I'm your big…older brother, you have to do what I say, right?"

"No," he answered, sounding almost sullen.

"That's the way it works on Earth," I declared with all the Prime-ly authority and dignity I could manage. It wasn't very impressive, by comparison. "I'm the oldest and you have to listen."

I felt the chuckle welling up in him for a few seconds before it finally rumbled out. "If that is the custom here on Earth, then I am at your command, brother."

Crud. I wasn't expecting him to cave like that, but I was a Prime and I was not about to back down from this challenge. "Good. Then…you have to come back to college with me."

He blinked once in surprise, sensing almost as quickly as I did that I actually meant it. "I do not believe I can, Sam." Disappointment fell cold and heavy over me, and Optimus knew it. "But if it is the wish of my older brother…I shall find a way."

"Not…" Not what? Not really? Not forever? Not if you don't want to? "Not if it'll cause trouble."

"It will not cause more trouble than it is worth. You are correct. A week is not enough time, not when the bond is this new and weak."

"Do you think it will get stronger?" Remembering again my wish to have a real bond with him – one where we could communicate in thoughts instead of just emotions – I hoped it would.
"Uncertain. But it has grown stronger in the short time we have been aware of it. It is too soon to part ways." Again I felt his spark reaching out to my heart, clinging to his only living family.

"Too soon," I echoed in agreement. It was far too soon to give up this permanent hug. A lifetime would be too soon.
When I fell asleep that night, the last thing I expected to experience in my dreams was a scorching afternoon sun. Sand, the smell of sulfur and death, and a shattered pyramid in the distance – the battle in Egypt, I realized. Optimus was standing near a small group of his fellow Autobots, and Ratchet was treating Ironhide, whose chest was still smoldering.

My brother looked over to me in surprise. "I did not expect you to find me so quickly."

I shrugged as I came to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with him. "Great minds think alike?"

Half-hearted humor flickered for a moment as he looked over the battlefield. "Where do you wish to go?" he asked, dampening his own emotions.

"Wherever. Here's fine. I never got to see this part – they whisked me off along with Mom, Dad, and Mikaela."

Optimus nodded, accepting my answer, but even with his emotions muted, I could feel how heavy the sorrow in his spark was.

Bumblebee rounded the corner of a bombed-out hut carrying Arcee's pink component in his arms – it was in three pieces. The times I'd seen him drooping in the cargo bay before I reignited her were nothing compared to Optimus' memories. He looked devastated.

Seeing him so broken reminded me. "He lost a brother, too."

Optimus solemnly answered, "Yes. His creator, Goldbug. I never knew him personally. He fell in the second battle of Trypticon."

I frowned, wishing I could give 'Bee a hug of the heart, too.

"We have all lost someone, Sam," he quietly mused, "and most of us, like me, have lost everyone."

It was a sobering thought. I tried to imagine it – everyone I loved dying – my parents, Mikaela, and now Optimus, too. I couldn't.

Bumblebee laid pink-Arcee at Optimus' feet and left without a word, heading back into the wreckage of the battlefield. "To find her other components," Optimus explained.

"She means a lot to him."

"Yes. She means a lot to most of us," he answered, glancing over at Ironhide. "Arcee, Chromia, and
Elita were all sisters, and Ironhide is Chromia's mate."

My brow furrowed as I tried to make sense of it. "So he's like your brother-in-law?" I looked over at the black mech who was grouching at Ratchet.

Optimus sighed heavily. "The bond defines the relationship. I told you this evening about primary bonds – the ones between siblings or between parents and offspring or between mates. But there are secondary bonds. Clan bonds."

Looking down at the broken pink frame at his feet, he said, "I shared the deepest bond possible with Elita, and through her, I had an echo of her bond with Arcee. It was not as strong, but still it was a bond. It was the same with Chromia and through her, Ironhide. Elita is extinguished, and with her death my bonds with Arcee, Chromia, and Ironhide have also been severed. We are no longer kin."

I opened my mouth but didn't know what to say. That was okay, though, because Optimus knew what I was feeling and lifted his head, gratitude and hope swelling across the bond. "If Elita is reignited, those bonds will be restored to me, I believe."

"But you're still family," I blurted out. "Arcee's still Elita's sister, even if she's dead."

"It doesn't quite work that way for us," Optimus sadly explained.

…

Abruptly we were sheltering behind the wrecked truss of a bridge as missiles whistled overhead. Cybertron. Dusk was falling, the colors bleeding out of the world around us. Weapons fire echoed down the remains of the street, light and sound crackling off the broken, imploding buildings. Five other mechs were with us, two of them obviously injured and a third treating them. Ratchet, I realized through Optimus' memories. Unlike last time, my brother's spark and mind were completely open to me, and I felt how Optimus could faintly perceive the medic over the bond-sense. He'd shared a bond with Ratchet!

Optimus?

The word sounded in my soul – Elita worried and reaching out to Optimus over their bond.

I'm pinned down but functional, he answered.

And from her voice – but not in her voice – I heard Arcee. I have a visual.

So faint it was barely more than a whisper, the bond-voice of another femme – Lancer – informed us, Jazz and his contingent are making their way around.

A third femme who Optimus recognized as Moonracer reported, Trailbreaker and his squad will draw fire. Her voice was even more distant than Arcee's but not as faint as Lancer's.

ETA in two cycles, a strong voice – Chromia's – said.

With the same bond-sense that told me when Optimus was near, I could feel Chromia and Ironhide racing toward us as clearly as if I could see them.

Motormaster is leading the incoming wave of Decepticons, Arcee added, and an eagle-eye image of the battlefield flickered in my mind. She was high up – I could sense her in the top of a broken building that looked too fragile to be standing, much less supporting her weight.
Understood, Optimus grimly answered. To me, he said, "Smokescreen is scrambling the Decepticons' communication and sensors, but that also leaves us blind. Bonds are unaffected."

Shouts and the sound of distant weapons' fire told us help had arrived. Moonracer connected us to that contingent, and I could get a faint impression of what she was seeing and hearing. All of Optimus' extended family was silently reporting to him, letting him see how the battle was shifting.

Trailbreaker had taken up position almost exactly opposite us, with Jazz's contingent rallying off to Trailbreaker's left where the Decepticons hadn't detected them yet. They would slice through the ranks there from both sides, cutting off the advancing 'cons and surrounding them. The idea was to break up the Decepticon column into smaller contingents that could be defeated more easily. It was a risky move and was guaranteed to result in casualties, but a refugee base would be overrun before sunrise if the Autobots couldn't slow the 'cons advance. It would take two or three solar cycles to get all the neutrals to safety – time the Autobots didn't have. Optimus was buying lives with lives, but it was trained warriors dying to protect the innocent instead of the terrified and defenseless being slaughtered while the strong left them to their fate. Jazz's and Trailbreaker's soldiers would die, but at least that sacrifice was a willing one. That knowledge tempered some of the ache in my brother's spark.

With blazing clarity, I understood why choice was so important to Optimus – if it was their choice, their deaths weren't his fault.

Chromia and Ironhide would be here in a matter of seconds to wall off that direction of retreat for the Decepticons, and Elita was leading Bumblebee and a handful of his mechs, trying to make it to Optimus to back him up. Trailbreaker's distraction was giving both her and Jazz the chance they needed to get into position to surround the Decepticons.

Through a mix of Arcee's sight and Moonracer thoughts, Optimus and I knew Trailbreaker was producing a forcefield that protected his squad from the Decepticon assault, but he had to lower the shield to return fire. His team moved in concert, seeming to know perfectly when he was going to drop the shield so they could strike at the advancing 'cons.

Almost there, Chromia muttered, frustration in her voice and – faintly – rolling across their clan bond.

SEEKERS! Arcee shrieked – a brief image seen through her optics burning into my mind. Trailbreaker had dropped the shield at just the wrong second and Starscream got off a lucky shot, blowing the armor off a green femme's back. Beside me, Ratchet fell. Just keeled over. Ironhide couldn't budge him in an arm-wrestling match, but he was suddenly down and curled up into a ball, keening. And then Optimus and I felt it. Moonracer had been extinguished.

The pain, the grief, the soul-shattering shock began somewhere beyond Elita and rippled across the web of bonds – multiplying, swelling, dividing across so many sparks. Battle protocols buffered the worst of the recoil – battle protocols that I now understood were written to prevent one bonded spark's death from crippling the whole clan – but I knew through Optimus' memories that those protocols could only put off the loss, not soften it. And then the ripple washed back from spark to spark in choppy waves – anger, indignation, sorrow, heartbroken love, determination that her death not be in vain – until it coalesced into a silent, unifying rally cry: for Moonracer.

Ironhide burst into the no man's land between Optimus and the Decepticons with both cannons blazing, side by side with a blue femme who was as cold and ferocious as her mech. Dozens of mechs roared in behind him. Optimus leapt over the truss we'd been hiding behind, energon blade sliding into place with deadly determination, and I was dragged along behind him without moving a muscle. Elita and Bumblebee rushed forward, too, joining my brother and his four followers and guarding Optimus' flank as they rushed the Decepticons.
I saw my brother use the same hand that held me in the waking world to steady the head of a 'con so he could decapitate him. I saw him slice the wing off a Decepticon Seeker who came too close and fling the severed limb into the enemy's ranks like a projectile. I saw him kick aside or crush the smaller Decepticons who weren't running away fast enough, intent on one thing and one thing alone – Motormaster.

The Decepticon's build was almost identical to Optimus' and he stood with two bared energon blades, arms at the ready.

Optimus never even broke stride. Over their bond, he let Elita see what he planned and she blew off one of Motormaster's arms with a missile just as Optimus leapt at him. Almost like it was choreographed, Optimus caught Motormaster's remaining arm with his free hand and drove his energon sword into the Decepticon's gut, slicing upward and through the spark in a shower of broken blue light. His opponent fell at his feet, but Optimus was already moving, running forward, backing up Ironhide.

One word brought him out of his battle-rage. Chromia murmured, Ratchet.

The knowledge flowed through Optimus like ice; Moonracer had been Ratchet's mate. Memories flitted through Optimus' mind – excruciating spark-ache and betrayal and loss so great he couldn't move, and the medic's firm kindness that contained the pain.

Go, Ironhide wordlessly ordered. He's worth a dozen medics – we can't leave him undefended.

Seeing the Decepticons retreating, my brother ran back to where we'd left Ratchet.

He thought briefly of Arcee, too, as he ran. She and Lancer had together created Moonracer to link their two sisterhoods, and both of the creator-sisters would be stricken with pain now, too. Battle protocols ensured the breaking of the bond wouldn't offline them, but nothing could completely insulate someone from that kind of loss.

We couldn't feel Ratchet over the bond-sense anymore. In the chaos of the continuing battle, it was impossible to know if he was even online until we came within visual range. He was still alive, but he was curled in on himself and trembling, his hands balled into fists of pain.

Ratchet had comforted Optimus in his darkest hour – when Megatron had severed their bond – and it tore at my brother's spark that there was nothing he could do for Ratchet. The tie that bound them had been severed, and Optimus couldn't reach out with his permanent hug. We couldn't feel him at all; Ratchet was a stranger to Optimus' spark now.

Optimus laid a hand on the medic's shoulder and then reached out to Chromia. Tell Firestar that we need Evac and his kin.

His silent order rippled forward across the clan's web of bonds, and while we waited, Optimus explained, "Chromia created Flareup with Firestar to link their two sisterhoods, and Firestar is sparkmated to Inferno. Inferno is from another clan and shares a bond with Evac, who is a medic and a rotary flyer."

Two jets screamed overhead, and I was shocked to see Autobot insignias on their wings. Optimus' memories identified them as Air Raid and SkyBlast. And then the unmistakable sound of helicopter rotors thudded through the war-torn night. When the flyer was a few yards above and behind us, he dropped out of his alt-form and strode over to Ratchet. A few gentle touches from a tooled hand stopped Ratchet's trembling, and Evac looked up to Optimus. "Where are her creator-sisters?"
Optimus pointed to the building where Arcee had been spying for us. "Arcee is up there and Lancer is with Jazz's contingent.

He nodded once, leaping up and into his alt-form.

*We need you, Optimus,* Elita called. *I'm sending Bumblebee and Cliffjumper back to stand guard over the bereaved.*

*Understood.*

We watched anxiously as Bumblebee and Cliffjumper worked their way toward our hideout. They didn't dare just turn and run – they had to move from shelter to shelter, covering each other as they went.

Evac beat them to us, lowering Arcee to Ratchet's side before taking off again to find Lancer. They held each other – Ratchet and Arcee – and shuddered with silent sobbing. We could feel Arcee's grief – how she mourned both Moonracer and the bond she lost with Lancer, how her spark ached for Ratchet's loss – but we could feel nothing from the mech. The contrast was worse than the emptiness across the bond-sense from before.

Bumblebee and Cliffjumper dove behind the bridge truss, and Optimus nodded once to 'Bee before charging back into the fray.

…

I was a little breathless when we returned to the blistering heat of the Egyptian afternoon. It was disorienting, going from the nighttime battle on Cybertron where Ratchet was severed from Optimus' clan to broad daylight on Earth. Bumblebee was helping Jolt load the pieces from Arcee's three broken components into the bed of Ironhide's alt-form.

"Femmes were clan-builders," Optimus softly said. "As a general rule, they had more primary bonds than mechs. Very few sparklings were femmes. Far more often, they were created by their sisters and then took mates and created offspring, linking our society together. Most Seekers sided with Megatron, but most femmes sided with the Autobots."

"Why?" I wondered.

"Starscream sided with Megatron from the very beginning, and he was the Seekers' Air Commander."

That made sense, but…"Why didn't more femmes go with their Decepticon kin?"

"You recall how I could feel so many others through my bonds?"

I nodded.

"Through my brother-bond, they could all feel Megatron."

His name fell cold and hard over both of us.

"And he could feel them," Optimus continued. "He resented that openness; he despised me for having a 'spark open to all.' He hated that, through my openness, his spark was connected to so many others. It left him feeling exposed, intruded upon, and vulnerable. Our parents were long dead and he withdrew from me after I bonded with Elita." Guilt and frustration swept over him. "I trespassed in his mind, Sam. He blocked me and he didn't have any other bonds and I was worried about him, so I
broke through his defenses." It was a confession, and I realized his frustration was with himself. "I
did not respect his choice, and I paid dearly for it. All of Cybertron did."

"It's not your fault," I instinctively answered. "Megatron would have done what he did anyway."

"Yes," Optimus agreed, "but we still paid dearly. To answer your question, Megatron distrusts bonds
and sees them as something that weakens the strength of individual warriors. Since femmes usually
had the most bonds and connected the most individuals, he took particular care to slaughter them.
Until we developed battle protocols to buffer the loss of a bond, killing a femme could kill her mate
and sisters, which could also kill their mates. Extinguishing one femme could cripple or kill dozens
of warriors. The only femmes who remain with the Decepticons have severed their bonds."

After seeing what Ratchet had gone through and picking up hints from my brother's own feelings, I
just couldn't imagine someone voluntarily doing that to themselves, whether they were Cybertronian
or human.

"The irony is that Megatron was wrong," Optimus sadly said. "As you saw, femmes' tactical value
far exceeded their physical strength, though they are highly effective in combat, as well."

I remembered Chromia's courage beside Ironhide and had to agree.

"I am still close with the mechs and femmes who were once my kin," he continued, "but I cannot feel
them like I could before. So many clans have been extinguished that the very fabric of our society
has been torn and shredded beyond recognition. Some clans were wiped out in their entirety, but
most have a few remnants – solitary mechs bereaved of their kin."

From his spark I felt his despair at those words. I was speechless as I began to understand – really
understand – what this War and the destruction of the Cube had done to Optimus' people. Compared
to the Autobots, human family ties were as weak as our bodies were. They hadn't just lost their loved
ones in this eternal war – they lost part of themselves, time after time after time after time. I also
began to understand what he hoped for in the Matrix. Rebuilding his home meant rebuilding the
clans, and I could do more than just create new bonds by creating new sparks – I could reestablish
lost 'bots and their bonds. The Matrix could heal every spark-wound this war had inflicted.

Optimus' gaze roamed to Skids and Mudflap who were making their way toward us. "For all the
aggravation the twins cause us, they are a reminder that not all of us are alone – that there is hope and
something worth fighting for. Some are secretly envious of them."

"Like Sideswipe."

"He is one of many."

"You're one of them, too," I guessed.

"Until recently," he corrected, his spark enveloping my heart in a bond hug. "There are others,
though. Arcee clings to hope, claiming Ratchet, Ironhide and me as kin through sister privilege."

"Like StarSheen did for you when your mom died," I remembered.

"Precisely. Sibling privilege won't restore the lost bond, but it does allow a clan to continue
functioning. Chromia may yet live, and if she comes to Earth, then the bond she shares with Ironhide
will be restored, as well as her bond with Arcee. And Arcee and Ironhide will share clan bonds
again, too. That very well could make them the largest, strongest clan left. If Elita can be reignited,
then we would undoubtedly be the largest clan."
I shook my head, still trying to believe what he was saying. "A family of five would be the biggest clan?"

"Six," he said, affection washing over the bond. "There would be six in our kinship, Sam."

Because I would be included, too. "Of course." It boggled the mind – the idea of having bonds with five different 'bots. They wouldn't be as intense as the one I shared with Optimus, but just having one bond was a lot to keep track of sometimes. Five permanent hugs...

"If you wanted to be," he hastily added, doubt and guilt creeping into his spark as he perceived my feelings. A part of him was still afraid I would follow in Megatron's footsteps.

I put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "I won't do that to you."

He lifted his head, and quiet determination edged out his guilt. "I will not make the same mistake twice. A bond binds the spark but not the mind, and you are free to choose whether you want to be part of a clan."

I half-laughed. "Primes are born, not made, aren't they? We brother Primes need to stick together."

"Even if it means being a priest of the All Spark?" he asked, amusement flickering across the bond. "That conversation with Ensign al-Sharif seemed to unsettle you earlier today."

"Even if it means being the high priest," I retorted, grinning. "I'm the older brother, remember?"

He actually laughed at that one. "How could I forget."
Vengeance

I stood on the deck of the ship, looking at the narrow strip of white sand that was the Diego Garcia Naval Base. It was only a stopover for me, but for the Autobots it was home.

The governments of the world were still reeling, still trying to decide how much to reveal about the Autobots and when. I would be a part of that process to varying degrees, but after five consecutive days of meetings, meetings, and more meetings – and two days on the run plus the battle in Egypt – I had put my foot down this morning and gave myself a day off. "If one day in seven is good enough for God, it's good enough for me!" I'd blurted out to Ensign Park in Communications.

Park had curtly nodded, but al-Sharif unsuccessfully tried to conceal his smirk. I caught the knowing grin and had flushed in embarrassment when I realized how that sounded.

Al-Sharif was now standing at my elbow on the deck, and I was saddened to realize this was probably the last time we'd see each other. Al-Sharif still had his duties with the Navy, and I was going on to, hopefully, a kinda sorta normal life. "I'm not conceited, you know."

"Of course not, sir."

"You get at least one day in seven off."

I didn't have to look at him to know he was fighting a grin. "Yes, sir, I do."

Feeling the stirring of another's presence, I turned to see my brother roll toward us in his alt-form. We were on a much smaller transport ship now, preparing to disembark onto the island, but there was still enough room on the deck for my brother to transform. Once he stretched to his full height, he said, "Ensign Mohammed al-Sharif."

My aide paled slightly and nodded his head in acknowledgement. "Optimus Prime, sir."

"You have been a friend to Sam and to us. Thank you for your willing service."

"You're welcome, sir."

"I have spoken with Major Lennox. Should you ever desire to serve with us in NEST, you would have a place here."

He blinked several times in surprise before answering uneasily, "Thank you, sir. But I will need a while to think about it."

"Certainly. Admiral Black will know how to forward your request, should you choose to join us." Optimus gave no sign of the disappointment that flickered once across our bond. "Sam. It's time."

Time to put my feet on solid ground again. Time to face this new reality. I turned and shook hands with al-Sharif. "Give it some serious consideration. They'll turn your life on its ear, but they're amazing."

"I will, sir. Thank you." In a low voice, he added, "Prime."

My brother heard him anyway and surprise rolled over the bond to mingle with my own shock. He knew. Another, average-Joe human knew I was a Prime, and he probably had a better idea than most what that actually meant. Panic hit me with that realization. If he ever told anyone, I'd end up
on some dissecting table for sure. I just knew it.

Al-Sharif smiled ever so slightly and then formally saluted us.

I know he meant it respectfully, but I couldn't help thinking he'd just gotten revenge on me for all the times I'd led him down into the Autobot cargo bay or made him go for ride in Bumblebee.

Peace washed over the bond – a protective, calm reassurance that wrapped me up and reminded me that I was still safe. I let Optimus feel my gratitude and tried to convince myself that al-Sharif would keep my secret. After all, he'd have to keep all the rest of the stuff about the Autobots secret, too.

Optimus collapsed down into his alt-form, and, still kind of stunned, I climbed in through the passenger-side door. He backed up to Jetfire's trailer painted with the words "Blackbird Weapons and Defense Systems," hooking it up and into his systems.

"Let's roll," I quietly said.

Optimus led out down the gangplank, pulling his trailer. Ironhide came behind him with Will Lennox and Bobby Epps in the front seat of his cab and two smashed motorcycles in his truck bed. Mikaela rode Arcee's third component which was still a little banged up and sporting mismatched pink and blue parts. A little remote-control truck was strapped on to the back seat behind Mikaela, cowering against her. My girlfriend and the femme followed Ironhide and kept pace beside Bumblebee, who was carrying my much-less-freaked-out parents. Sideswipe and Jolt followed next, with Skids and Mudflap driving side-by-side behind them. Skids carried Simmons and Mudflap carried Leo. Ratchet brought up the rear, and even someone who wasn't in the know could probably feel the way he was glowering at the twins, just itching for them to put a side-mirror out of line. Now that one of Arcee's components was fully functional again, he was taking out his bad temper on the little 'bots all the time.

Optimus led the Autobots down the pier and toward their main hangar. It looked pretty much the same as when I saw it a year ago – a hub of activity surrounding a tall but sturdy-looking scaffolding. I hopped out of the cab when my brother stopped, and half a dozen military guys drifted our way.

Once we humans were all gathered together, the Autobots transformed and most of them walked away like they had better things to do. Optimus, Bumblebee, and Ironhide were the exceptions.

"If you'll go with Master Sergeant Epps," Lennox told us civilians, "we'll have a quick briefing and get you settled in for your stay."

"Follow the black guy!" Epps cheerfully hollered, and Lennox shook his head with a smirk. Not that I had a ton of experience, but I'd never seen military men who were so…normal. When they weren't willingly sprinting into combat with Decepticons, that is.

The briefing wasn't bad at all, even considering this was my day off. We were each assigned a military escort (aka personal aide) to help us get where we needed to be and make sure we were taken care of. NEST was kindly putting us up in the R&R cabins on the eastern side of the island, and we were pretty much ordered to kick back, enjoy the beach, and catch our collective breath after the insanity of the last week. It almost felt like a high-class vacation or something – except for the guns. Then they started shepherding us out so we could hop a bus and go get settled in.

I wasn't so lucky of course.

"Sam," Lennox softly said, "stick around for a minute."

Mom looked back at me nervously, but I promised her, "I'll be there soon."
Dad squeezed her shoulder and she went with him.

When the door closed, Lennox patted the back of one of the chairs, inviting me to sit down again. I warily took my seat, and he leaned against the table opposite me. "I wasn't going to break rank in front of Admiral Marquette, but this going-back-to-school thing is stupid."

I half-snorted. "Thanks for sugarcoating your opinion."

He tilted his head. "Just being honest. Figured you've had to put up with BS by the bucketful for the last week."

He had a point. I sighed. "Look, Major..."

"Will. If Optimus can call me 'Will,' so can you."

"Will. How am I supposed to be a good ambassador for the Autobots if I've never gone to college? I mean, right now it's okay that I only have a high-school education, but can you imagine ten years from now? Twenty? If I don't have some kind of letters after my name, nobody's going to take me seriously."

He frowned a little. "Correspondence courses then. For a semester or two?"

"It's not just about the degree. I need to live. You take risks with your life every day. This is no different. If anything, I'm probably the safer one."

"It is different – because you're a Prime."

"And you think Optimus would listen if you told him he was too important to risk his life?"

He eyed me critically for a second, knowing I had him. "Optimus can take on Megatron in a hand-to-hand fight."

"Yeah, and look at which one of us walked away from that battle in the forest," I pointed out. The memory of Optimus collapsing, of his optics going dark, would haunt me for the rest of my life, but I wasn't above using that pain to my advantage now. "Taking risks for the good of all is a Prime thing. They need an ambassador, so I need to learn how to be one. And not just in theory. I need to live so I can relate to other humans. I need to be human if I want to represent the Autobots. Otherwise, Optimus could just do it himself."

He crossed his arms. "Figured I was talking to a brick wall. I just wanted you to know where I stood. In my professional opinion, you're attempting suicide by arrogance. If anything happens to you, at least I'll sleep better knowing I warned you."

I snorted at that. "Glad to know you'll sleep well when I'm dead."

"Oh, I'll sleep well long before that, now that I've had my say. Unfortunately, there are a couple more people who need to have their say before I can send you off to relax with Mikaela and your folks."

I groaned and he clapped me on the shoulder. "No more than a half-hour, I promise. The President of the UN doesn't have any longer than that available on his own schedule."

Great.

Optimus attended the same meeting as me, hovering out of sight while I talked via satellite video and
audio. The President was cordial, and I got the feeling that he was more curious about me than about the Autobots. He also asked a few questions about the Matrix – where it came from, who made it, where it was now. Fortunately, Optimus didn't freak out this time at the questions. I explained that no one knew for sure where it came from but that there was only one. When I explained that the Matrix had been in the top of the pyramid when the Solar Harvester was destroyed, Optimus was hit so hard with a silent giggle-fit I almost burst out laughing. I glared at him ( kinda – his internal laughter was dang contagious) and embarrassed apology rolled over the bond along with a chuckle or two before he blocked it. I cleared my throat and tried to wipe the grin off my face so I could focus again on the President. He paused, watching me curiously for a second before smoothly continuing.

After another five minutes of pleasantries, I ended the video conference with one of the most powerful men on the planet to glare at the most powerful alien on the planet.

"A word with you, Sam," he calmly stated, and I wondered how he could keep the laughter out of his voice.

"Of course," I said, though it was more threat than acceptance. I deserved an explanation after he made me look like an idiot.

He transformed and opened the passenger-side door. Curious now, I climbed in and he drove us to the third hangar over. It was empty except for Bumblebee, who was in his base mode and waiting for us. When I got out of the cab, Optimus transformed again. "I apologize, Sam," he explained, "but I received this transmission during the meeting."

When he turned on his holographic projector, I saw a stretch of beach where Mom, Dad, Mikaela and everybody was climbing off a bus. Several cozy-looking buildings in the background could only be the R&R cabins. The NEST military escorts were pointing people to their various cabins when two drop-dead gorgeous native-looking girls came into view, sauntering down the sand wearing nothing more than grass skirts and bikini tops. Tiny bikini tops. They were both carrying leis in their hands.

I started sniggering in anticipation and Optimus' surprise rolled across the bond. "You are already aware of this."

"I'm the one who suggested it," I answered, grinning. "Now shh."

With demure, coy grins at each other, the young women each gave a lei to both Mikaela and my mom. Then they placed the strings of flowers on Dad and Simmons. My dad blushed, and I guffawed at that one, while the girls silently bobbed their heads in welcome. Mikaela noticed the tattoo on one of the girls’ arms and her eyes flew wide as she dug around in her pocket for her cell phone. When they came to Leo, the young women both tittered and darted glances at each other before silently leaning in. One girl kissed his cheek before placing a lei over his head, and the other shamelessly leaned in to give him an open-mouthed kiss. Then the first girl elbowed her friend out of the way so she could get some action.

"Girls," Mikaela called, and when they didn't stop pushing, she called louder, "GIRLS!"

They froze and looked back at her. She held up her cell phone camera and grinned. "You don't have to fight. I'm sure Leo has plenty for both of you. Now why don't you let me take a picture?"

The girls tittered again and posed for the camera on either side of Leo, who draped his arms over their shoulders and was grinning like an idiot.

"So," he said, after Mikaela was finished. "What do I call you two beauties?"
"Aw, Le-o, my man!," one 'girl' answered in a disturbingly male voice.

"I'z hurt!" the other twin chimed in. "Afta all we's been thru togetha!"

Leo made a retching sound and fell to his knees, spitting reflexively. The twins gave each other a fist-bump before their holoforms flickered out of existence.

I doubled over in laughter and Optimus turned off his holographic projector. His voice was severe even though he was inwardly sniggering when he said, "You suggested it?"

Wheezing for breath, I answered, "Turns out the twins will do anything to get the approval of a Prime."

He actually chuckled at that. "I am well aware. Having twins at your disposal is a powerful – but dangerous – tool."

"And hilarious," I added as 'Bee transformed into his alt-mode and popped open the driver's side door. "Admit it. You practically busted a gut laughing when you saw that."

His only answer to that was an inward grin and chuckle. Instead, he said, "One of these days, you and I need to have a talk about not abusing your authority as Prime."

Slipping into 'Bee's cab, I shot back with, "I didn't tell them to do it. I only told them that they could. It was their choice. See, I'm learning!"

Bumblebee played a laugh track as he peeled out into the light of day, driving me to the R&R cabins and to my brand new kinda-sorta normal life.
Bumblebee brought me straight to the R&R cabins where all us civilians would be staying for however long it took the government to figure out what to do with us. Mom and Dad were already on the beach when I got there, while Simmons and Leo were arguing about something on the porch of one of the cabins.

'Bee pulled up beside them, blaring from his radio, "I kissed a girl and I liked it."

Leo made a gagging sound and bolted into his cabin.

"Wuss," Simmons said disdainfully. A couple of seconds later, the sounds of vigorous tooth-brushing came from inside. To me, he added, "He's been doing that for the last half hour."

I sniggered as I got out of 'Bee's cab. "That was awful," I told the Autobot, and he played a laugh-track in answer.

Mom bowled into me, catching me in the ultimate helicopter-parent hug. "SAMMIE!"

"Don't call me that, ma," I pleaded. "Saved the world, you know. Twice."

"Ugh, don't remind me," she grumbled, but at least she let me go.

"Nice digs," Dad observed, grinning. "They have you bunking with us and Mikaela is in her own cabin, but that probably won't last for long," he added with a wink.

I heaved a sigh, wondering how in the universe I ended up a Prime if it was hereditary and these were my parents.

Mikaela was leaning against one of the porch-roof supports and grinning at my expense. "Come on, famous. Let's get you settled in."

…

That night was the first time in almost a week and a half that I could truly kick back and relax. After hoagies for dinner, we civilians had a bonfire on the beach, and somehow we found ourselves in a kind of spontaneous group-therapy session. We talked about buildings exploding around us and Decepticons who had tried to kill us and what we'd lost and what we hoped for in the future. None of us said everything we were thinking, but it made me realize that my folks understood me better than I thought. It also made me appreciate again just how much I owed Mikaela, and that I probably should change my orders to the twins and not have them kill Leo, even if they could make it look like Decepticons did it.

Our military escorts kept a respectful distance and I pretty much forgot where we were until Lennox and his wife and daughter drove up in Ironhide. Mrs. Lennox and Mom hit it off almost instantly, and even Simmons was won over when she produced a bag of marshmallows and skewers for roasting them. With two-year-old Annabelle Lennox in the crowd, conversation drifted to other things, and in a weird kind of way, that was when it finally ended. The panic and pressure from the world resting on my shoulders and the sensation that I was drowning in international dignitaries and alien memories passed; I finally believed that – somehow – life would go on when the sun came up.

The sun came up way too early, though. I was gritty-eyed when a gruff NEST soldier shook my shoulder. "White House calling, sir," he whispered.
The clock said six in the morning. I slipped out from under the covers and followed the soldier out to where Lennox was waiting with alt-form Ironhide and talking on a cell phone. Seeing me, he said, "He's here, ma'am. Patch him through when you're ready."

I raised an eyebrow as Will pushed the phone into my hands. "It's the White House Pentagon liaison," he hissed.

Right. The "new normal" now included being on the speed-dial for the President of the United States. "Hello?"

"Mr. Witwicky?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Jason Kennedy. The President sends his regrets that he could not speak with you personally, but he wished me to inform you that your request to return to school has been conditionally approved."

"Conditionally." Sounded like there was a fight still ahead.

"Your requested security detail has been approved, pending their acceptance of the position…"

"Wait, I didn't…You mean Bumblebee?"

"Yes. Agents Bumblebee, Leo Spitz, and Seymour Simmons."

Whoa. And just like that – wish granted! "So we're good!"

"Almost. They have to accept the assignment, and we need to convince the Dean of Students to let you back in."

I deflated. Of course. The university wouldn't be too happy with the trail of destruction that began in my dorm room and followed me through the library and around the globe. "We'll burn that bridge when we get there. How soon can you get me stateside?"

"The President felt that negotiations would be best handled through the Department of Education," Kennedy firmly said.

"No. This is my fight and I need to be there; it's harder to say 'no' in person. And that way there won't be any travel delays when he finally says 'yes.'"

"She, Mr. Witwicky. The Dean of Students is Maribel Nightingale."

"Serious?" Who would give their kid a name like that?

"Serious."

"Okay then. How soon can you get me there?"

"I'll have to get back to you, sir."

"Thanks. How soon will I hear from you?"

"Give me twenty-four hours. It's after-hours here."

Right. "Sounds good. Until then."
I ended the call and handed the phone back to Will.

"So?" he asked.

"So we wait." I grinned at him and Ironhide. "What do ya do for fun on Diego Garcia?"

From the cab speakers, Ironhide said, "I can show you around Boom Town."

Foolishly, I agreed to it. I thought 'Boom Town' was a ghost town like the Old Plantation, but no; it was the nickname for the Autobot proving grounds. All of us went there after a light breakfast, and Optimus greeted me briefly before heading back up to the Autobot HQ with Simmons, Leo and Will. I got to see Ironhide engage in target practice, Skids and Mudflap gang up on Bumblebee (and get whupped by him), and Arcee and 'Bee spar again – this time with the femme having two components. (She did much better against him than the twins.) Bumblebee fought everyone again – Ironhide, Sideswipe, Jolt, Ratchet – everyone except Optimus. My brother was conspicuously absent, but I thought I could faintly sense him off to the northwest. That may have been my imagination, though, since I knew he was somewhere off in that direction.

Bumblebee was the one who brought us over to the Lennox place for lunch, but Leo and Simmons beat us there. Mrs. Lennox had fried chicken and mashed potatoes ready for us, and I began to understand why Will had called her the Autobot den mother. Food and a warm welcome were her melee weapons. If it was humanly possible to kill a Decepticon with kindness, Mrs. Lennox would be the one to do it. Still couldn't figure why her designation was Spitfire, though.

Mom and Dad opted to stay and hang out with Mrs. Lennox, but Leo and Simmons came back with me. It wasn't until we were headed back to the Autobot hangar that I remembered my dream from the night before. Unlike the other bond-visions, this one was a lot fuzzier. I just remembered standing with Optimus on the shore near the dock and feeling sad. In that moment, we were physically farther apart than we had been in a week. I remembered it now – sensing that distance. What would it be like when we were on opposite sides of the globe?

'Bee pulled into the hangar and we were greeted by Lennox and Epps again. "Mr. Witwicky," Will deferentially said as I climbed out of the cab, "we have a little surprise for you."

I looked at him curiously and Epps produced a briefcase. "Thanks," I said, but it was only half-hearted. I mean, how many more meetings did they think I would need to go to that they were getting me a briefcase?

Will rolled his eyes at me and Epps sniggered as he popped the latches. Inside was a shiny new Alienware laptop computer.

Bumblebee transformed behind me, chuckling as he did.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Leo exclaimed rushing forward to drool over it.

I elbowed him out of the way and hefted my new toy. Abruptly I glanced up at Lennox. "It's not a 'bot is it?"

I felt Optimus' presence with a rush of joy just before I heard him say, "No." It's kind of crazy, but I felt like…like an itch I hadn't been aware of had just gone away. Turning, I saw him approaching us from across the hangar. "Nor does it have any kind of Cybertronian upgrades. We did not wish to make it a liability."

I returned his hug of the heart for a second before focusing on the laptop again.
"It does, however, have a full range of human upgrades," Lennox bragged. "Satellite internet, tablet and stylus capabilities, top of the line everything, even accessories like a wireless mouse and keyboard."

Mikaela let loose an impressed whistle and Leo was close to swooning.

Will was grinning. "If you'd like, you can bring it back to the cabin with you and spend a little time online. You know, view your email, read the news, check up on your favorite blog…"

"Civilization," Leo reverently murmured.

"I know," I answered in the same hushed tone.

Bumblebee let out a little chirp in invitation, as if to say, "Well?"

"Let's go!"

He collapsed down into his Camaro form (it was still cool to watch!) and all three of us teens dove for the car, but Optimus said, "Leo?"

He froze.

"Your training."

He sighed. "Right." Glaring at me, Leo said, "I get it second."

"Not a chance, sidekick," Mikaela shot back. "I get dibs on second. You'll be fourth or fifth after his parents and Mrs. Lennox."

Leo narrowed his eyes at her, but when Simmons muttered, "Amateur," he frowned and stalked off.

…

Back at the cabins, I had to work hard at it but eventually I found a news article that wasn't about The Transmission and the death toll of the last week. A hurricane hit Honduras while the world's attention was elsewhere and eighty-seven people had died. Same gloom and doom, different story.

My inbox was impossible – as in it was literally stuffed to overflowing. The tidal wave of emails maxed out the storage. "This is ridiculous!"

"Just as well," Mikaela muttered from where she dozed on the bed. "One will be from Miles asking if you're okay and the other quarter-million emails will be hate mail or interview requests."

Frustrated with it all, I finally created a new user account and emailed Miles directly telling him I was alive and so far not being tortured by aliens or secret government groups. Hitting 'Send' suddenly left me feeling bored.

My fingers tapped aimlessly on the keys as I tried to figure out what else to do with my shiny new laptop. Frustrated, impatient, worried…I blinked to realize it wasn't me feeling that way. Not all of it, at least. Reaching out to Optimus, I let him feel my concern and curiosity. He was embarrassed that I'd caught him, and affection grew to mingle with his worry. I realized he was worried about me. Why?

I snorted when I remembered he was training Leo and Simmons right now – most likely my brother was already giving me up for dead. Yeah, they probably weren't most people's first pick for bodyguards, but they'd been with me every step of the way. If Simmons hadn't known about the
symbols and helped us into the Smithsonian, the sun wouldn't still be burning. And Leo was the one who had led us to Simmons. They'd already shown guts and smarts and a willingness to run into battle, so what else was required, really? A little training, that was all. I let my confidence in them – in Optimus' ability to teach them – swell across the bond. I would be okay. I hadn't gone through everything I did – I wasn't a Prime – for no reason. I wouldn't say I was trusting in fate, exactly, but more like I was willing to take the chance.

Gratitude displaced a little of Optimus' worry, and he took firm hold of my confidence before dampening the bond on his end.

Suddenly realizing I was tired, I pushed the laptop toward Mikaela. "Your turn."

The next day, my other evil scheme was finally put in motion, again with the twins' help. No other Autobot would endure what I asked of them, except maybe Bumblebee, but why would I torture my best friend that way? Especially when I had willing goons who would do anything for a thank you from a Prime and when everybody thought I was doing NEST a public service by sending Skids and Mudflap off-island.

I took a nervous sip of the ice water from my goblet. Bumblebee had assured me this would work, but Mikaela was full of surprises. So far it had gone well, though. We were on Diego Garcia's Old Plantation, the tropical sun setting over the lagoon as Mikaela and I shared a luau-themed dinner on the secluded beach. With our leftover roast pork and grilled pineapple pushed to the side, we were enjoying virgin pina coladas and I was trying to find the nerve to bring up the elephant in the room.

Did I mention Optimus was there, too?

His alt-form was parked nearby (Bumblebee hovering in the shadow of the truck) with his holoform seated at the table with us. He'd been there the whole time, eating and sharing casual though awkward dinner conversation. Mikaela'd been really gracious about it, but she'd also pointedly not questioned why Optimus was crashing our romantic evening.

My brother gave me an expectant look and tilted his head at my girlfriend, but frustration rolled across the bond. I could practically read his mind – he was calling me chicken.

Clearing my throat, I said, "So…"

Mikaela faked a smile and said, "So…"

Giving up on me, Optimus said, "I expect you wonder why we are here, Mikaela."

Her smile for him was a little more genuine. "Well you came to Earth looking for the All Spark…"

"True," he answered, his expression neutral though he was amused by her teasing.

"He meant why he's here right now, with us."

She rolled her eyes at me. "I know." With a deep sigh, she finally took pity on me and asked, "Why are all three of us here right now?"

And of course her direct question made me panic.

Optimus was sooo smirking at me inside. "We are here because Sam and I have become aware of a change in his status – one that closely involves you."
Her gaze bounced from him to me and back. "What do you mean?"

"Just the whole Prime thing," I blurted out, and the light bulb came on for her.

"He's allowed to use the Matrix," she remembered. "That is a pretty big deal."

"Yes," he confirmed, "but it goes deeper than that."

She frowned slightly. "How much deeper?"

"To his very soul," Optimus solemnly intoned.

Could he make it any more dramatic? I wanted to smack him. As it was, I threw my irritation at him over the bond.

"What he means is that I'm not just allowed. I'm the only one allowed."

"So what does that have to do with your soul?"

Optimus opened his mouth to launch into what I was sure would be a deep, metaphysical explanation complete with a bomb or two for Mikaela – things like "Your kids will be mystical leaders of our super-race, so get breeding, woman!" I let him feel just how homicidal I would get if he tried talking to her like he did to me, and he paused.

"Okay, backing up," I said, "you remember when we all had lunch together and Leo brought up the whole Prime thing? And you said I'd been adopted as an honorary Autobot?"

"Yeah?" she cautiously answered.

"Families aren't biological with the 'bots."

She delicately snorted. "Obviously."

"And they can't really be adopted, either. They share bonds. Their sparks – their souls – have a connection to each other. Heart and mind."

Her brow furrowed as she tried to take that all in. After a couple of heartbeats, she said, "So... Autobot parents can read their kids' minds?"

Optimus chuckled. "Yes, much to most younglings' chagrin. But the bonds vary in strength. The bond between mates or between twins is the strongest. Sibling bonds are next in strength and still retain both the emotional and mental connection. Clan bonds – extended family you could say – are weaker. Sometimes they are only slightly weaker than sibling bonds, sometimes they only allow for the exchange of emotions but not thoughts, and sometimes they are little more than an awareness of the other's presence."

Putting it all together, Mikaela stared at me wide-eyed. "You can read each others' thoughts?"

"No," Optimus and I answered simultaneously (which really didn't make our denial very believable). Optimus was saddened by the thought; I felt mildly terrified.

"It's just feelings," I continued. "I can sense when Optimus is near and we...share emotions. It's kind of a give and take thing."

"But you said you're brothers."
Optimus thoughtfully nodded, impressed that she had figured this all out so soon. It had taken me days to get through all this. Of course, we hadn't gotten to the part yet where this all hit home for Mikaela. "Because of the way the bond was created, the relationship is that of brothers, though the strength of the bond itself is more like the bonds between distant kin."

Mikaela blushed furiously then. "And this has been going on for how long?"

There was an edge to her voice that made me a little nervous. "Pretty much since the moment Optimus was reignited."

"So when we were…you know…"

And then I understood why she was looking mortally embarrassed and more than a little irritated. I hadn't thought about it either, but then, I think I would have felt it if Optimus was playing voyeur.

"It's also possible to block a bond," Optimus diplomatically explained. "And remembering your feelings about privacy between you and the boy, I blocked it during any…couple moments."

I snorted at the completely pathetic euphemism, but I also sent gratitude Optimus' way. At Mikaela's doubtful expression, I reassured her, "I didn't feel him hanging around – and I would have noticed."

A relieved smile graced her face, and she nodded just a little bit.

"There are only a select few individuals who are aware of this bond," Optimus continued, "though by now even the Decepticons are probably aware that Sam is a Prime."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

I gave her a cocky grin. "Danger is my middle name, baby."

"Uh-huh," she answered, unimpressed. "More like 'scream and run,' baby."

"Ye-ouch!" I laughed.

Optimus shook his head at us, indulgence swelling across the bond. "As I was saying, Sam is much more than an 'honorary Autobot' and that will have significance for you, too, Mikaela."

She was instantly serious. "Like what?"

"My kind takes the choosing of a mate very seriously. We must, because being a mate means literally sharing your soul. While neither of you have committed yourselves to each other on a permanent basis, your fates are closely intertwined. We recognize you as mates."

Again Mikaela flushed.

"And the offspring of a Prime has the potential to be a Prime himself."

"Whoa!" she said, holding her hands up in protest. "Hold on just a second! We're not even talking marriage and you're going on about our kids?"

"No," Optimus firmly answered. "Only about your potential. Sam fears you will turn away from him if you know these things, but I have faith in your courage, Mikaela. I have seen it through Bumblebee's memories – your loyalty, your fearlessness, your resourcefulness. I speak not of what must be but of what could be. You have shown the beginnings of greatness – all I do is recognize that."
I stared at my brother. Why couldn't he have been that nice about it when he dropped bombs on *me*?

She narrowed her eyes at Optimus. "I'm listening."

"If or when you choose to permanently link your fates, I wanted your choice to be an informed one. It seemed fairer to tell you this now than to wait until your relationship had deepened further."

She nodded her head just a little bit.

"It is not certain that the children of Samuel Prime would be Primes themselves, but it is a possibility. The rearing of such a child would be a weighty responsibility, but it is one we would help you bear to the fullest extent you wished."

She smirked a little. "Bumblebee as babysitter?"

From his hiding spot behind Optimus' alt-form, 'Bee let out an excited little chirp at the thought.

Optimus nodded. "If that was your choice. Babysitter, nanny, protector, tutor. Anyway in which we could help, we would. For you to bear our hope would be a great sacrifice, Mikaela. We recognize that as well and would honor you for it."

Her eyes had grown brighter as he spoke until a little smile was gracing her lips. "Thanks," she said in a low voice. "But I'm going to have to get back to you on that."

"Understood," Optimus gravely intoned. "Always, the choice is yours. Consequences, however, are not ours to choose, and that is another reason I wished to speak now, before there were consequences for your actions."

"Thanks," she repeated, glancing my way. "And for the record, Sam, I'm not running away."

I got up and hurried around the table to crush her in a hug. "Love you, Mikaela."

"Love you, too."

For a moment I was just lost in that hug, and then I returned to my seat. "Bumblebee?" I called.

He transformed and stepped closer extending a largish jewelry box to me. After all, this had been his idea. I smiled up at him and he nodded encouragement.

When I turned to Mikaela, her face was kind of frozen as her eyes followed the box. She wasn't scared of 'Bee, so what...Oh. I quickly handed her the box and she gave me a nervous look. "It's not bad, I promise," I reassured her. "Open it."

Taking a deep breath, she loosed the ribbon around it and lifted the lid. And her eyes lit up. "Ooooh!" she exclaimed, lifting the treasure from her box. It was a choker-necklace made of pearl and money cowry shells with a small metal coin suspended like a pendant from the middle. "Where did you get this?"

"We made it. I looked online for designs I thought you might like, and the Autobots put it together."

Mikaela looked from me to Optimus. "*You* made this?"

"Skids and Mudflap did the pearl-diving at Sam's request..."

"Autobot sensors make it easy for them to find stuff like that," I inserted. I'm sure the twins were still belly-aching to Ratchet about what the prolonged exposure to salt water had done to their circuits,
but it had been their *choice*.

"…Ratchet assembled the necklace, and I helped with this." Optimus pointed to the coin.

"It's heavy," she observed. "Platinum?"

"It's a metal native to Cybertron, though it's not available here."

She held it up, looking more closely at the faint etching on it. "An Autobot symbol?"

He nodded. "It would be an understatement to call you an honorary Autobot. Turn it over."

She did, and then her brow furrowed. "I don't recognize this one. Is it Arabic? Or maybe Chinese?"

Her jaw dropped and she looked up to meet Optimus' gaze. "Cybertronian?"

"Yes. The Prime glyph."

"But…I'm not…"

"You are not a Prime, but you have aligned yourself with us and with Sam, who is himself a Prime. You are a member of the Prime clan, Mikaela." In a softer voice, he added, "I gave a similar casting to my mate Elita One many eons ago."

"She was your mate?" Her eyes widened and she impulsively touched her hand to his arm before catching herself and drawing back. "Thank you, Optimus." Looking over at me, she said, "Come on, help me put it on!"

With a sigh of relief, I came to stand behind her and closed the clasp at the nape of her neck.

"How does it look?" she asked when I stepped back.

I grinned at her. "Beautiful."
Happenstance

Bumblebee left on a C-17 a couple of hours after my dinner with Mikaela. It was a matter of 'when not if' I would make a trip to the East Coast and see if I could talk my way back in to my old life. 'Bee was going ahead to clear the road and make sure no Decepticons were waiting for me. I almost never saw Simmons or Leo anymore – Ironhide was wearing them out with his relentless training – and Optimus was cloistered in meetings most of the day, too. It felt like we were all on different paths somehow, and it left me kind of sad.

It still seemed like everybody wanted a chance to talk to me – heads of state, leaders of international organizations, military bigwigs, Katie Couric – but I got a sense that the dust was starting to settle. The news websites were carrying human interest stories now with tales of survival and lost loved ones. The official account of what happened had been decided on – aliens had attacked but had been successfully repelled by a multi-national military team. News of the Autobots would be kept quiet for at least a little while longer. Still, there were some people who insisted it was all a huge international conspiracy and that aliens weren't real.

My third night on Diego Garcia, Optimus found me in my dreams on the deck of the aircraft carrier, and it was almost as clear as it had been in the past.

"It seems this is the best place to meet you," he said in greeting when I strode to his side.

I silently took my place beside him, just enjoying his presence in my dreams again. After a few seconds, though, I got up the courage to ask, "So…what bombs do you have for me tonight?"

He chuckled. "I told you – I have no more bombs."

Relief washed through me and across the bond. "Then…what do brothers do when they dream? I mean, normally?"

"Whatever they wish. Remember. Imagine. Entertain each other. Ease the grief or stress of the day."

"Entertainment sounds good," I said. "I liked visiting Cybertron. No annoying heads of state or generals there."

He nodded once, and abruptly we were standing on a street that couldn't possibly have been on Earth. Mechs of every color, shape, and size were milling about, passing back and forth, or just loitering with the occasional femme among them. I was taller than most of them – which was weird.

"Simfur, approximately three thousand years before the time we launched the Cube into space," Optimus explained for me. "The day of my promotion to head of the Science Division."

I smirked over at him. "You mean you weren't born a leader?"

He gave me an answering smirk. "Of course I was – Primes are born, not made. I just had to grow into it."

We began ambling down the street, enjoying the sights, sounds and smells of the memory. The scent of energon wafting out of the open doors of the occasional refueling establishment smelled especially appealing, which was a little trippy but in a fun way. We paused at the corner, Optimus mulling over where to refuel, and recognized a small black mech lounging against a building. Optimus' bittersweet happiness told me almost instantly who this was. "Jazz." Pushing aside the flicker of memory –
Mission City and his friend broken in Ironhide's arms – my brother buried us both deeper in the past. For a few hours, anyway, he and I could both escape.

"Optimus," Jazz greeted.

"And why might you be here?" my brother asked, grinning.

He shrugged away from the wall. "Just happened to be in the neighborhood."

"With you, nothing is happenstance," Optimus amiably answered. "Keeping tabs on me already?"

Jazz snorted and began walking down the street to our left. "Ya ain't any more important than ya were before, big 'bot. I just happen to know a little out-of-the-way place that makes the best oilcake in Simfur an' it's only a few blocks away. Care to join me?"

"Sounds good," Optimus answered, falling in step beside Jazz.

"Word is your gonna shake things up," the black mech casually said. "Promote Ratchet an' Arcee."

"I was appointed director just this morning," Optimus pointed out, feeling sly, "so whose word?"

Jazz grinned up at us. "It hasn't gone to your processors, then."

Optimus straightened his shoulders. "Of course not. And I fully intend to surround myself with mechs who knew me when I was just a civil engineer – mechs who can keep me humble."

"Mechs like Ratchet," Jazz smugly concluded.

"Yes, him," Optimus admitted. "I'm also considering keeping an annoying little security 'bot with me who doesn't know what 'off-duty' means."

"To be off-duty, ya gotta be on-duty first, Optimus. If ya love your job, details like that fall by the wayside."

My brother just rolled his optics at that.

"Just mechs?" Jazz pressed.

Chuckling, Optimus conceded, "And femmes."

"Femmes?" Jazz repeated, putting an emphasis on the plural.

"Elita has shown promise, as well."

Jazz snorted at that one. "She's Arcee's sister. Ya really wanna mess with her?"

"I wouldn't be messing with her," Optimus indignantly retorted, though he was mortally embarrassed that someone would think he was playing favorites with her. "She cataloged and analyzed the findings on Veetra IV in record time. The science council reviewed her findings because they doubted she could have extracted the data patterns she did in so short a time. Even after spending a dozen solar cycles on it, they came to the same conclusions she had. She's brilliant – of course I want her on my team."

"An' she's a fine figure of a femme," Jazz pointed out.

Optimus narrowed his optics at Jazz, whose grin didn't falter in the face of an annoyed Prime.
"Ya gave it away when ya started rantin', boss. Can't blame a 'bot for payin' attention. An' she does have a certain polish to her."

"Don't call me 'boss,'" Optimus huffed, and barely bit back some choice words about how he'd remove Jazz's limbs if he heard anything else from him about Elita's polish. Instead he changed the subject. "Plain old 'Optimus' has always been good enough for me. Who are you going to bring with you onto the security team?"

"Oh, the usual suspects. Plus I've been eyin' a few mechs over in the defense forces if we can poach 'em from your brother's division. Trailbreaker'd be a solid mech to have aboard, an' wherever he goes..."

An image flashed through Optimus' mind – a large black mech almost as sturdily-built as Ironhide was in an arena of some kind. The mech was back-to-back with a green 'bot about half the size of Ratchet. Together they were taking on another four Cybertronians. I got the impression that the memory flash-back was for my benefit – to kind of introduce me to the 'bots Jazz was talking about.

"...his brother Hound'll follow. Both'd be an asset. An' after that prank Radio Flyer pulled, I'd like to snag her, too."

Another memory flitted through Optimus' mind - a trussed-up Bumblebee being led by a leash past his office door by Arcee and a green femme Optimus recognized as Lancer. Curious, he left his desk and poked his head out into the hall. An off-white, bulky femme met them half-way, and Arcee handed off the leash to her. "Better luck next time, Radio Flyer."

She sighed. "Back to the drawing board, then." Taking the leash, she continued leading Bumblebee down the hall.

Optimus pulled us out of that little flashback when Jazz added, "Any femme with a mind that devious needs to be under my supervision."

"So you can have her help in any future pranks," Optimus concluded.

"Yup," Jazz answered with a chuckle. He looked up at Optimus curiously. "Think Megatron'll go for it?"

In his memory, Optimus reached out across the bond, seeking Megatron's opinion. He was met with the block his brother so often had in place. "I'll have to ask him about it later."

Jazz didn't pry on that one, for which Optimus was very grateful.

We could smell the refueling establishment from a block away. The scent was...chemical and alkali to my mind, but Optimus' processors translated it as sweet in a way that reminded me vaguely of chocolate. My brother and I had to duck to go through the door, and a mech just a little taller than Jazz greeted us, nodding to Optimus in particular when he said, "Sir." He pointed to a table and we silently wandered over. Funny how some things stayed the same between Earth and Cybertron – the table was round with four chairs, just like you'd expect in a restaurant, but the chairs adjusted to a mech's height so that everyone could be eye-level. Everybody had booster seats on Cybertron. Optimus glanced over at me, his spark warm with amusement at the thought.

Jazz and Optimus downloaded the menu and sent comms to the refueling station with their orders. After a few minutes of amiable silence, Jazz said, "I hear Mirage is throwin' a shindig in the next quarter-orbital cycle to celebrate his brother's new sparklin'. Ya goin'?"

"If I receive an invitation, I'll consider it."
"You're head of the science division, Optimus. A' course they'll invite ya. Mirage's family practically runs the commerce sector, an' they wanna have an in with the division makin' all the latest and greatest inventions."

"I can hardly make plans until I know specifics."

"Specifics like if ya can bring a guest?"

Optimus glanced sidelong at Jazz, seriously contemplating whacking the cheeky 'bot. Deciding it would only encourage him, my brother simply admitted, "Yes, as well as time and date. And whether or not I'll need to bring my own security."

Jazz's grin was brilliant.

A rose-red femme stepped into the refueling establishment, and my brother's cool and collected processors were once again reduced to adoring awe. I realized then that Elita was the only one who could reach my brother to the core like that and derail his higher processes. Even before they were mates, she could shake him, and it made me wonder how he affected her. A pink femme I recognized as Arcee was with her, along with a blue femme who was about three-quarters of Elita's and Arcee's height. Arcee waved away the greeter and all three of them made their way toward our table. Elita slid right into the seat beside Optimus. "Congratulations! We just heard."

Optimus gave Jazz a pointed look but answered Elita, "And I wonder how it was you heard the news – both of my promotion and our location."

The black mech just shrugged.

"Optimus," Arcee greeted, "may I introduce our youngest sister, Chromia?"

"Of course," Optimus said, gesturing that she take a seat. Arcee grabbed a chair from an empty table and brought it over to join the group.

"She was brought online a hundred orbital cycles ago," Elita said.

Chromia gave her a sullen look. "A hundred and twelve," she corrected.

"Another thirty-eight and you'll graduate," Optimus observed, diffusing the argument between Elita and Chromia before it could start. "Have you considered where you would like to serve?"

"Planetary Defense Forces," she answered without hesitation.

Elita hissed, "'Mia!" To Optimus, she said, "All the talk about glory and honor that's coming out of the defense recruiting offices has caught her attention. She doesn't want a 'boring' position in the sciences."

"Put her in Wheeljack's office, then," Jazz suggested. "Working with him's gotta be more excitin' than any peacekeeper job."

"I prefer to keep my sisters in one piece," Arcee dryly said. "I'd say her chances are better with the defense forces."

This made the youngling femme perk up. "Really?"

"He's blown up his lab twice in the last orbital cycle," Optimus said, catching on to the game. "Half of the weapons upgrades that have come out of our division in the last ten orbitals are his."
To Arcee, Chromia said, "Do you think I could meet him?"

/Thank you,/ Elita sent Optimus over a private comm, her optics grateful.

/My pleasure,/ he answered.

A server brought the oilcake then. Again my human mind was disgusted – it looked like the baked-on oil spots you see on the ground in parking lots, but it was as tall as Optimus' hand. Layer upon layer of dried-out goo was covered in a syrupy topping that smelled kind of like fingernail polish remover. Processed through Optimus' mind, though, it looked and smelled delicious.

They didn't bother with individual plates or silverware – just transformed fingers into eating utensils and dug in. The conversation continued on about Wheeljack, and Optimus happily avoided the topic of his promotion. He was more than content to sit beside Elita and entertain Chromia with tales of the inventor's combustible exploits. All in all, a perfect evening.

...

When I woke up, the feeling of Optimus' presence was stronger again, and I could clearly sense that he was on the other side of the lagoon in the Autobot hangar. I happily reached out to my brother and felt his answering joy – so much stronger today than yesterday. Apparently, there was a learning curve for my brain and this bond, and the shared dreams sped things up.

Epps was the one to meet me that morning, accompanied by Jolt, and this time the White House liaison had good news. As long as Bumblebee could guarantee that there weren't any 'cons in the area, Dean Nightingale was willing to meet with me.

"When's the soonest we could leave?" I asked Epps.

"Twenty minutes – if there are Decepticons involved. Otherwise, probably about 14:00 hours today."

I took a deep breath. This was it, then. Kinda-sorta normal began at two o'clock. "Guess we'd better start packing."

"After your follow up with the Russians," Epps pointed out.

I sighed.

...

We were done by 11 o' clock with the political stuff and arrangements were made for my meeting with the French President later in the afternoon to be by satellite phone somewhere over the Mediterranean.

"Who's scheduling all this stuff for me now, anyway?" I asked Epps as he and Jolt brought me back to the R&R cabins to pack. I didn't have Ensign Park in Communications to vent at like I did on the aircraft carrier, and it was starting to grate on me.

"Your new media liaison back at the Pentagon," he said with a wolfish grin. "You'll be meeting up with him later today. Speaking of which, ya better sleep on the plane. Jet lag sucks when you're heading west. Today's probably gonna be the longest of your life."

"If nobody dies, I won't complain," I half-jokingly said.
His eyes were grave as he nodded in agreement.

It didn't take long to pack; all we had were a suitcase each of borrowed clothes. Mom had a sandwich baggie full of seashells she'd collected (the same baggie that had once held the infamous brownies) and Mikaela wore her necklace, but really, those were the only two additions since the battle in Egypt. By noon, we were packed up and ready to go. By 12:15 PM, I thought I would go crazy with boredom, especially since I'd gallantly let Mikaela borrow my laptop so she could spend some time on Facebook. Optimus sensed it and reached out, calming my nerves. A few minutes later, I felt him heading our way – south down the length of the western arm of the island, then rounding the bottom to drive up the eastern arm – just like when Optimus could feel Ironhide and Chromia driving toward us in that dreamed battle. His steadying presence grew stronger the closer he got, and I drank it in.

When he pulled up, Leo and Simmons were with him.

"Hey Cube-brain," Simmons said as they hopped out of the cab, but the way he said it was almost friendly. "Had enough lying around on the beach yet?"

Mom and Dad drifted out of their cabin to see what was going on.

I snorted. "Had enough of Ironhide?"

He wagged his finger at me in annoyance but didn't say anything as he headed over to his cabin to pack.

"If I never see that trigger-happy mech again in my life, it'll be too soon," Leo complained. Pulling the collar of his shirt aside, he showed off a pale blue bruise on his shoulder. "See that? Rocket launcher. He had me firing an effing bazooka! I'm just supposed to be an embedded operative!"

Optimus transformed, and all of us turned to watch in awe. "Ironhide has seen many human soldiers extinguished," he stated. "The intensity of his training mirrors the intensity of his concern for your well-being."

Leo huffed and stalked over to the cabin, turning when he was half-way there to point up at Optimus accusingly. "The only well-being he cares about is his cannons!" Pivoting again, he went inside.

My brother calmly took it all in stride, though he thought Leo was amusing. Kneeling in the sand to be eye-level with me, Optimus said, "Approval has been granted for a ground investigation of the events leading up to…my mortal injury."

Anxiety, ferocity, satisfaction, worry, pain, betrayed despair. His emotions flickered over the bond in quick succession until Optimus reached out to glomp me with a hug of the heart. His spark held my heart tightly as he continued, "NEST will be operating in Pennsylvania and the surrounding area for at least a week. It just so happens that we will be traveling with you back to the States."

I gave him a sly little smile and added gratitude to the mix of emotions. "What a coincidence."

... Green Pennsylvanian landscapes rolled past the windows of the black Topkick we were riding in. Will Lennox was 'driving.' I sat in the front passenger seat, and Leo and Simmons rode in the back. I couldn't quite wrap my brain around the fact that I was going back, but here we were.

I'd said good bye to my folks and Mikaela at the Air Force base in New Jersey – in a private conference room because there was no way I was going to let Lennox and Epps watch my mom
blubber over me. Mom and Dad were heading south to their new home in Florida but promised they would come and visit for Thanksgiving. Mikaela had also said good-bye to me then because she was catching a flight back to California later this evening. We'd taken a good ten minutes kissing good-bye, so maybe that was why I was feeling like I was having an out-of-body experience right now.

I could feel Optimus trailing about two miles behind us, and I knew Bumblebee and Ratchet would both be with him. It had become almost natural now to draw on his steady calm.

"You read the briefing materials, right?" Will demanded, breaking into my thoughts.

"Yeah. We're meeting with Dean Nightingale in…” I checked my watch. "…a little under an hour. Official story is that my involvement in all this was a case of mistaken identity."

He nodded. "Tell me."

I sighed but went ahead with his little role-play. "My great-great-grandfather was an explorer who found an artifact the aliens wanted. All we can figure is that they didn't understand how short human lifespans are and thought I was him. My girlfriend and roommate just happened to be with me when the aliens made a grab for me, and they were as shocked as I was by it all. We hid out in an abandoned jail until some special ops guys found us and hid us somewhere off shore – I don't know where. They told me about the battle in Egypt and how the aliens had been driven off, and so here I am, trying to pick up the pieces and move on."

"Why would they think you were your great-great-grandpa?" Will asked.

Getting into it, I rolled my eyes. "I don't know. Genetic match? Your guess is as good as mine. All I know is what the special ops guys told me."

"She'll never buy that," Simmons warned.

"You'd better hope she does," Ironhide rumbled.

We were a few minutes early to the dean's office, and so her secretary directed us toward a conference room to wait. I just about tripped on thin air when I saw who was waiting for us.

"Sam," Will said, "allow me to introduce the media liaison assigned to you by the Pentagon."

"Al-Sharif?" I incredulously asked, hurrying forward to shake his hand.

"Al-Sharif?" I incredulously asked, hurrying forward to shake his hand.

"Yes sir," he confirmed, grinning.

I looked back at Will. "Why didn't you guys tell me?"

He rocked on his heels. "Wanted to make it a surprise." He strode the rest of the way into the room to take his place beside me. "Al-Sharif wanted to assist NEST but wasn't interested in being permanently stationed on the island. Given his previous experience, he was a natural choice for the position."

Al-Sharif bobbed his head in acknowledgement of Will's compliment. "All media requests will be directed to my office, where they'll be vetted and the best ones will be submitted for your approval. I'll also be managing your political schedule, so make sure you get your academic calendar to me as soon as you're back in."

Wow! I had been dreading trying to juggle the roles of ambassador and college kid, but knowing Al-Sharif had my back with the ambassador stuff was a huge relief. It made me regret the mental cussing
out I'd given him while talking to the French President earlier. Still… "I've got to get back in first," I pointed out.

"Dean Nightingale will see you now," the secretary announced behind us.

Confidence – borrowed from Optimus – swelled in me, and I tersely nodded. "Let's go, then."

We were escorted into her office, and she had beaten me to the punch with the *Harry Potter* allusions. Standing at her chair was a plump, sweet-faced woman who wore pink from head to toe. Right next to a bowl of wrapped candy on her desk was a plaque that read "Hogwarts Drop-out." I'd have to watch myself to make sure I didn't accidentally call her 'Dean Umbridge.'

"Mr. Witwicky," she greeted, gesturing toward one of the two chairs in front of her desk. Her eyes wandered to the rest of my entourage. "I believe I won't have enough seating in here."

We were so not postponing this for cushy seats. I made eye-contact with Leo and nodded him into the chair. Will understood what I was doing and slid over to stand at ease against the wall, with Al-Sharif immediately following suit. A heartbeat later, Simmons joined them and I faced forward again. "We're fine. This is my fellow student, Leo Spitz."

She eyed the three men behind me curiously and then refocused on me. "I must admit, young man, I had some reservations about you returning to our institution. The loss of life alone was a significant blow to our campus – not to mention the destruction of the library. I can promise you that there will be opposition from some in our student body."

I opened my mouth to argue with her, but she held up a cautionary hand. "However, I am aware that you also have support among our student body and among donors to the school. An endowment has been set up in your name by some of our alumni who wish to remain anonymous. That fund will rebuild the library and create scholarships in the names of the victims of that attack. In light of these mitigating factors, I'm inclined to let you return."

My jaw just about hit the floor when she mentioned the library and scholarship funds. Somebody had done all that in my name? For me?

My brother's smug satisfaction gave me a pretty good idea who the 'alumni' happened to be – and why they'd want to be anonymous.

"Before we can consider the logistics of your return, there are a few terms we need to discuss." She pushed a short stack of papers – a contract – my way and glared at me over her spectacles. "First, this shall not happen again. If another alien attacks – if one is even sighted – on this campus, then you will be permanently expelled."

"I can live with that," Leo muttered.

Good thing 'Bee could blend in better than most of the Autobots.

"Second, you will not receive preferential treatment. Your assignments and exams will be due at the same time as everyone else, your tuition and fees will remain the same, and you will be bound by the same standards of conduct. Understood?"

"Perfectly." I'd wanted a kinda-sorta normal school experience, but she seemed bound and determined to make me normal. I suddenly wasn't sure if I could fit that mold.

"Third, you attend here at your own risk. We will not provide additional security for you, nor will we tolerate firearms carried on campus."
I glanced back at Simmons. "I'll be responsible for protecting him, ma'am," he declared, "and I don't need firearms to keep him safe."

"Those are the basics of the terms," she concluded. "Read them over, have legal counsel look at them, and bring them back if you want."

Like I was going to take the time for all that. I skimmed the pages and didn't see anything that looked unreasonable, so I signed my name. "How soon can I go back to my dorm and classes?"

Frowning just a little, she said, "You can begin moving in at six o'clock this evening."

Three hours, then. "Okay. Thanks."

... 

Leo and I walked down the hall of our dorm, each of us carrying a suitcase. It still felt like a dream almost – both being here and all the crises of the last week and a half. The bedroom door Alice had blasted through had been replaced and most of the evidence of the attack here was gone. Only the comforting presence of my brother bond made it feel real.

We walked into our room, and Leo's cronies battered him with questions. They pretty much ignored me (after getting a cursory run-down on my part in all this), which made me feel almost like a normal human being for a change.

Until they pulled up a website on their computer – The Daily Buzz.

There, in brilliant yellow, was a picture of Bumblebee in his alt-form with a blog post about a party that "Spitfire" wanted to throw for "Optimust" to celebrate his return to "the land of the living."

What. The. Frag?

My brow furrowed as I read the user names, trying to figure out who the crap was on this website that I'd never even heard about. An Autobot blog and I wasn't invited? I was a Prime for crying out loud!

"Camaro76" had to be Bumblebee, and "BikerChick" most likely was Arcee. "Optimust" was a dead give-away, and so was "NurseRatched." "Survivor" was going on about spousal abuse from "Spitfire," so those two had to be Will and Sarah Lennox.

One of the roomies (his name was Fassbinder, I remembered) said, "Camaro76 is a bodyguard for this boy – "

"Or he's a creepy stalker pedophile who gets his kicks going on dates with the boy and BeeFF," Sharsky (the other roomie) added, and I choked.

BeeFF was Mikaela, then – and she was in on it! – but did they really think Bumblebee was a pedophile? What was crap was he writing about on this blog?

"So whaddya say, Leo?" Fassbinder continued. "Do we dig for the real effing deal on this, or focus on the Droid of Death?"

Leo glared at me – like I had even known about it! To the roomies, he said, "Divide and conquer. Sam and I will get to the bottom of this…"

Slagging right we would!
"…You guys focus on documenting the attack."
I lay in the darkness and drew a deep breath. I was back. Tomorrow I'd go to my astronomy class again – I didn't want to think about that one – and English 105, which I hadn't even been to yet because I was too busy getting shot at in the library at the time.

Was it even possible to be normal now, after all that happened?

I remembered my experiences after Mission City, and yeah, I found a new kind of normal that was actually pretty good. I did better in school, Mikaela was my girlfriend, and I had a best friend, personal bodyguard, and sweet ride all in one. But it wasn't the same normal. And this was way different from Mission City. Back then, the official story was I was never there and I denied it when anyone asked. I couldn't deny it this time. Everybody knew. And not just knew that I was involved, but they knew my name and address and social security number and...

Optimus nudged me over the bond, and I could sense him as clearly as if he were standing here enveloping me in his permanent hug. I returned his hug, piggybacking gratitude with it. Mild curiosity seeped into his emotions, and I sighed. I could text him, but it would be so much cooler if we had an honest-to-goodness brother bond and I didn't have to communicate with him by cell phone. He tugged slightly on the bond – an invitation – and I knew he wanted me to go to sleep and dream so we wouldn't have to resort to texts.

But that was one of the reasons I was tossing and turning while Leo was happily sawing logs on the other side of the room – I had memories I didn't want Optimus to see now.

I'd taken some time this evening to read a bunch of back-posts on Bumblebee's blog, and at first I was furious. Two whole years they'd had the thing and never told me. After all this hero-worship 'Samuel Prime' stuff, it was like a slap in the face that they'd kept me out. I was still mad about it, but there were two things that kept me from reading 'Bee the riot act: revenge and "Squirrel Slaughter."

The first was simple enough. He'd deliberately kept me in the dark with their little club, but now I was in my own little club with a secret I could keep from him. I'd been out of the loop for two years, so I figured I'd do the same to him. It wasn't hard to swear Leo to secrecy – if the 'bots found out we knew, then they'd shut the blog down and if our roomies learned the truth, well, there went the shaky kinda-sorta normal life I was trying to build for myself. So we agreed to keep our knowledge to ourselves.

The second reason I was keeping quiet was a bit harder to put my finger on, though. The blog post titled "Squirrel Slaughter" just kept running through my mind. I still remembered that day. It was during the summer between my Junior and Senior years in high school and Mikaela and I had gone for a ride with 'Bee and he'd hit a squirrel. He stopped, we got out, and when the poor thing finally stopped kicking, Bumblebee cried so hard I thought he'd sprung a leak somewhere. In fact, he was so distressed that we had to call a tow truck. We never really talked about it afterward – his only response when I asked him about it the next day was 'I don't know what got into me.'

But on the blog post, he explained exactly what happened – the squirrel's death was the straw that broke the camel's back. He'd seen his friends – his entire generation – slaughtered and the squirrel somehow represented all of them. But he pulled it together because he knew I was relying on him. When he could have gone back to the other Autobots and had their friendship and support, he stayed with me. After reading something like that, how could I not forgive him? And if this was the only way I could find out what he was really thinking and feeling, I didn't want to get shut out again. I owed him so much, and this way I could actually be there for him sometimes.
And that's why I didn't want Optimus to know that I knew about the blog.

So far, though, I hadn't shown him any of my memories or even taken the lead in our dreams. Maybe that was just because Optimus had so much more experience with bonds; maybe it wasn't even possible for a human brain to upload memories to an Autobot. I didn't know. I'd never tried to hide something from him like this before, and it brought back so many of my earlier fears. Would he see things I didn't want him to?

With a deep sigh, I decided there was only one way to find out. I relaxed and closed my eyes.

…

I met Optimus on the flight deck, of course, and we were standing shoulder-to-shoulder watching the sun rise. "Why do you think you can only find me here?" I wondered, staring out over the ocean.

"I do not know," he answered, "though I suspect it has to do with the energy networks of your brain."

He felt my curious surprise and glanced my way. "Habit, Sam. Neural pathways. Your brain learned to find me here, and here will always be the easiest place to find each other."

Behind us, helicopter rotors started beating, and the sound startled me. We both turned, but it was just your typical military helicopter gearing up for flight. Still, it was something different – something unexpected – in this dream-space, and it unnerved me.

Optimus sensed my unease and asked, "Where would you like to go tonight?"

I frowned slightly, trying to focus on him despite the rotors that were getting louder, beating in time with my heart. "Cybertron?"

"Any place or thing in particular you'd like to visit?"

"Umm…" I nervously glanced back again at the helicopter before willing myself to turn and look at my brother. Blurtling out the first thing that came to mind, I said, "Your family. Let me see your family before the War."

Abruptly we were standing in the middle of a large room with brilliant, unblinking stars lazily strolling past the window.

"Porthole," Optimus explained. "We're on a spacecraft."

We were also about the same height as the crimson femme who had her arm around my brother. Something about the set of her optics was strikingly familiar, and I realized this was probably his mother.

She was focused on the silver-and-sky-blue mech who was seated across from us, raptly listening as he told a tale to the young silver mech before him.

"...the five-faced demons had survived every protection the Builder Prime had placed around the All Spark temple, so he made a desperate plan. Singing to the Cube, he persuaded it to transform into a compact form that he might hide it in his own body. His hope was that the demons would kill him and leave his empty shell behind where his brothers might find it."

"That's a stupid thing to hope for," the younger mech said in tones that made the hair on my arms raise. Megatron. This was a youngling Megatron. He looked nothing like his older self – boxier and
more…well…human-looking with fingers and a jaw that was more square like Optimus’. With a blink of surprise, I realized what the difference was. On either side of his jaw were two smaller plates that were absent on the Megatron I knew. Round little plates inscribed with the Prime glyph.

The sky-blue mech had gears – inscribed with the Prime glyph – on the side of his head just like Optimus, and they spun now. "The alternative would have been the Cube falling into the hands of the demons."

"There still had to have been a better way."

The crimson femme chuckled. "You're ruining the story, Megatron. Stop baiting your father and listen. You asked why we had to travel all the way out to Lithone during the tournaments, and this is your answer. Now go on, Fortron."

He regarded his femme with affection for a second before continuing the tale. "The Builder recognized that if the Cube came into contact with any of his energy conduits, it would destroy them both, so he did the unthinkable. Not knowing or considering the consequences, he hid it in subspace."

Megatron growled and Optimus face-palmed. "Even second-shell sparklings know better than to subspace energon!" my brother exclaimed, following the path of memory.

I smirked at him for acting like a ten-year-old, and he just shrugged. I'd asked for it; this was his memory and he was going to relive it.

Megatron nodded fiercely in agreement. "No wonder the Primes are extinct -- they were too stupid to live!"

"Not stupid," his mother gently chided, sounding so much like her oldest son, "just inexperienced. Like a couple of other young mechs I know. You've both had a few memorable experiences with energon, ones that landed you in Splice's infirmary."

"Still," Optimus grumbled, "energon is…is energon. It's unstable and dangerous to begin with and its properties vary from one dimension to the next. If you subspace it, there's no telling where it will turn up…"

"…or what it will blow up when it does finally pop into existence again," Megatron concluded.

"And then to go and subspace the whole, compacted All Spark?" Optimus shook his head in disbelief.

Their father Fortron solemnly nodded. "It threw entire galaxies into chaos. As for the Builder Prime's tactic, it worked about as well as you expected. The demons were able to tell that the Builder had All Spark radiation seeping out from every molecule in his body, but they didn't know what had happened to the Cube. So they took him captive and fled."

"Brilliant," Megatron sarcastically muttered.

Ignoring him, Fortron continued, "The Primes were faced with a choice -- find their brother or find the All Spark. They were divided, some arguing that their brother was more important, others that the Cube was. One of them was reputed to be a seer, and he claimed that if they could find the Cube, it would also lead them to their brother. It was his words that swayed them, and they began their legendary search for the All Spark.

"Many tales have been told of the Alpha Prime Expedition when he led his brothers in search of the
Builder and the Cube. The youngest and most powerful of the Primes – the Seeker Commander – marshaled his forces and sent the Seekers throughout the stars, following a haphazard trail of destruction across the heavens. It was easy enough to find where the All Spark had been – galactic convergences tore the systems apart – but it wasn't until the fourteenth decimated galaxy that they first picked up an echo of All Spark frequencies and were finally able to track the Cube.

"While they were gone, though, Cybertron had grown dim and our race began to disperse among the nearby stars in order to survive. It was during this time that space flight for builds other than Seekers was first developed, and many colonies were created. According to local legends, Lithone is one of those colonies."

"So?" Optimus said. "It's just another colony from the Great Dispersion."

"Not just another colony," Optimus' mother answered excitement sparkling in her voice. "Lithone once orbited a dual-star system, but one of the suns was destroyed in a very unusual supernova, and legend states that the power from the star's destruction fed the All Spark. It is said that the Primes dwelt on Lithone for a time and that a minor temple for the Cube was constructed there. That's why we're going to Lithone – so I can study that temple and the ruins that surround it."

"You mean they found it?" Optimus demanded, catching some of his mother's enthusiasm.

"The Science Division unearthed a complex that matches the description in legend and it's from the right time period."

"Wow!" my brother breathlessly exclaimed. "Evidence of the Primes!"

"Wow," Megatron mocked. "A bunch of old mechs maybe lived there. I can't believe we're missing the tournaments for this." Turning to his father, he asked, "Are any of those 'many tales' you mentioned actually interesting?"

Fortron chuckled. "One or two."

The femme shook her head indulgently as father and son continued their discussion of legendary battles. "Come with me, Optimus," she murmured and walked toward a door at the other end of the room.

As we followed, Optimus murmured to me, "Her name does not translate well. Literally, it was 'Color of the Eternal Sun' and was a reference to red dwarf stars. But I think 'Sunset' might be a better fit in terms of the poetry of the name. You may call her Sunset."

I smiled, clearly sensing that Optimus had been a mama's boy. "Sunset it is."

"She is head of the architecture department of the Science Division, and that's why she was specially dispatched to this colony."

Glancing over my shoulder, I asked, "And your dad?"

"Second in command of the Planetary Defense Forces."

"Only second?" I wondered, looking back at Optimus.

"Unlike my former brother, my father did not seek for power or position. He was a phenomenal warrior, but Beta Six was acknowledged by all to be a better strategist."

"Wait. Your dad rode shotgun for a femme?"
Optimus amusement rolled across the bond. "You're fortunate Mikaela didn't hear you just now."

"No, I mean, you said there aren't a whole lot of femmes, but…"

"But I had a mother and a mate and aunt and my father's superior was a femme, yes." His emotions turned more introspective. "Femmes were few in number but great in influence. You know that some words in English are assumed to have gender so that you have to specify if it's different – male nurse, for example."

"Yeah?"

"In our speech, 'average' is assumed to be masculine. And my upbringing was far from average. I had a mother instead of a creator-brother and that alone made both me and Megatron unusual. That both of our parents would be such prominent figures marked us, even though none of us knew the significance of this." He tapped the Prime glyph on his head.

"So in your humble, roundabout way, you're saying you were destined for greatness before you were born?"

Troubled, he glanced back at the room where we'd left Megatron and Fortron. "For great good – or great evil."

"Optimus," Sunset said, drawing both our attention to the kinda-present. We passed through a door onto the bridge of the spaceship. "I thought you might like to see this…" With a silent command, she activated a hologram projector that was mounted on the ceiling, and we were standing in the middle of the excavation site.

"Do you really think the All Spark needs to be fed?" Optimus asked. Images flitted through his memory and my own mind – mechs arguing that such ideas were mere myth.

Almost absentmindedly, Sunset answered, "There's never been a documented instance of such a refueling. Outside of legend, of course."

Worry – both from memory and from the mech in the waking world – flooded over our bond. "But they say that's what the Primes did – it was their whole reason for existing. And we know that fewer protoforms are being given sparks than even a few generations ago. What if it needs to be recharged again?"

"Perhaps this dig at Lithone will reveal how to do just that."

"So you do think it needs to be refueled?" Optimus persisted, trying to pin her down to an answer.

She gave him a sidelong smile. "I'm a scientist, Optimus. Let's just say I keep an open mind."

The rest of the dream was spent looking over and discussing the data from the archeological dig. Normally I would have died of boredom, but just like with the museum, seeing it from Optimus' perspective made it really fascinating. Being able to actually walk around and touch the holo of the excavation site also helped.

... When I woke up, I could feel exactly where my brother was. If asked, I could have pointed and said, "Six miles that way." Six whole miles! And I was grateful for that stronger connection – I'd need it today.
Leo and I were late to my astronomy class and had to sit in different rows because there weren't two seats together, but other than that, it went surprisingly well. Only one snide remark from that creepy prof and one collective laugh at my expense, and then he began his lecture. After class no one approached me to talk, which I was really grateful for, and Leo and I made it back to the dorm without major incident. It was almost too easy.

I got my astronomy homework done in record time, texted Bumblebee to see where he was, and together we drove to join Optimus and the rest of the Autobots. I got increasingly disturbed as I recognized the terrain — we were headed to the forest where Optimus fought to the death for me. Flashbacks of the whole, terrifying experience swam through my memory — Optimus' furiously-thrumming engine as we fled, the throbbing in my wrists and ankles from when Megatron had me pinned, the sharp smell of broken pine.

Comfort mingled with peace over the bond, driving away the images. What would I do when he was out of range for our bond, though?

The Autobots were spread out through the area of that battle, and when I stepped out of Bumblebee's cab, he transformed. Optimus immediately knelt so we were eye-to-optic. "You were worth it, boy. I only regret that I was unsuccessful in protecting you."

This time I was the one who glomped him in a hug of the heart, and his happy relief washed back across the bond. "Have you found anything?" I asked. "What are you investigating, exactly?"

"Officially, we are investigating the breach of security that allowed Alice to gain access to you. The Decepticons must have been stalking you for quite some time."

And unofficially they were here to help me make the transition back to school. I was surprised, as Optimus surveyed the scene with the others, that his emotions were level. This place — the place of his own death — didn't hold the horror for him that it did for me. But I stayed the afternoon with them, mostly talking with Optimus about random things — my first day back, how I missed Mikaela, the forest's various species of trees — while Bumblebee protectively hovered. My English class was an evening one, so I headed back to campus a couple of hours later with 'Bee while Optimus followed us. My brother gave away nothing over the bond, but I suspected he wasn't as unmoved by our return to the site of the forest battle as he let on, and that was why he was hovering, too.

English was even less of a spectacle than Astronomy, and I realized it was probably due to the Dean. I'm sure all my professors had been given the same lecture I had about no special treatment.

The helicopter was there in my dreams again. I asked Optimus to show me the rest of his clan growing up and managed to both escape the stupid chopper and dodge the bullet about The Daily Buzz for the second night in a row. That night I met Beta Three, who had created StarSheen with Sunset to link Optimus' clan with the legendary Beta dynasty.

My third day back went as smoothly as the first two, with both my Algebra and American History professors not even making eye-contact with me. I decided I needed to send some kind of anonymous box of chocolates or something to Dean Umbridge as a thank you. Singlehandedly, she had turned this nightmare of getting back to normal into a dream.

The fourth day was a Thursday, so I had English and Astronomy again, and that was when the illusion of normal disappeared. Not the classes, but the alien ambassador stuff. Al-Sharif called.

"I know you're still getting settled in, sir, so I apologize for disturbing you, but our office has been inundated. Literally hundreds of requests per day for interviews of you, Ms. Baines, and Mr. Spitz. Perhaps a public statement is in order to smooth things over."
"Public statement?" I repeated, my voice cracking in a very un-Primely squeak. Sharsky and Fassbinder returned from their classes and I waved at them as I retreated to the server room. "Smooth things over?"

"If we don't, it's only a matter of time before the paparazzi start keeping watch around your university hoping to catch a glimpse of you."

"Wait, what? I thought you guys gave me a new ID in the school's database and for my bank account and everything."

"Well the wackos who claimed a robot was killing people in the library the day before the Decepticon transmission have been given a little more credence lately."

I snorted, shoving aside my growing panic with a little help from Optimus. The last time I addressed a large group of people was when the All Spark took over my brain in Astronomy. And when he put together the words 'Decepticon' and 'transmission' I realized that they'd be watching my public statement, too.

Al-Sharif continued, "We have speechwriters on staff who can help you draft an inspiring and completely misleading explanation of events, and all you'll have to do is read it. Tell them you're just another average human being who got unwillingly embroiled in all this, ask the media and the masses for privacy, and then disappear again. It will be easy."

"Yeah, easy," I echoed. With a nervous half-laugh, I said, "As long as it gets the frigging idiots from MSNBC off my butt, then okay. But do it soon." Because I didn't want to have time to get an ulcer over this – or to change my mind.

"Saturday morning," he promised.

...

Even in my dreams, though, I couldn't shake the nervousness that started with al-Sharif's call. I actually jumped when the helicopter rotors thudded to life behind me on the flight deck, even though I'd known on a gut level that it would happen. Optimus let me retreat into his most calming memories – gliding through space in his cometary form for the first time and perceiving Cybertron below with senses I'd never imagined, spending a day helping his mother design a new commerce tower – but I resisted his efforts to soothe me directly because the closer he got, the more likely he was to learn that I knew about 'Bee's blog. Besides, he wouldn't always be close enough for me to lean on.

Friday night, he was as edgy as I was when the helicopter started up behind us and, turning, he blasted it with his rifle. By now the thing loomed large enough that we could have ridden in it. It exploded and crashed onto the flight deck, and we both warily stared at the smoldering debris for a few heartbeats. I don't know what I was expecting it to do, but we were both anticipating something.

"What is that?" I finally asked.

"I do not know," he answered.

"You're no help," I grumped back at him.

His worry for me washed over the bond, and he brought me back to memories of his cometary form, taking me on a tour of some of the more interesting planets he encountered while searching for the Cube. It was a good distraction. There's nothing like the cool, blissful weightlessness of space, and no helicopters could find us there.
I was a basket case on Saturday morning, and being heckled by the roomies didn't help. Someone randomly pounding on the door had me just about ready to shoot something myself, but when I yanked it open, it was like one of those cheesy movie scenes where there's a spotlight on an angel. All I could see was Mikaela, who – impossibly – was standing on my doorstep.

She threw her arms around me and pretty much kissed me into oblivion. Even after she got around to talking to the others, I was reeling. Eventually, though, my brain caught up with reality again, and I noticed the jock from the frat party standing almost shyly in the corner. "What the…?"

"Cam asked if he could come along for moral support," Mikaela blithely said. "This is Leo, Fassbinder and Sharsky. Guys, this is Cam Romero."

"Cam...Rom..." And then I got it. Bumblebee. This was Bumblebee's holoform. He must have scanned the jock at the frat party somehow. Belting out a laugh, I said, "Yeah, sure, the more the merrier." He'd obviously tried to find a fitting human name, but seriously, a last name like Romero and blond? It just made me snigger even harder.

Mikaela went on to prove why no one else could be my girlfriend. She was exactly what I needed – someone in my corner who would kick my butt if I deserved it and kick everyone else's butt if they messed with me. Before I knew it, we were in the car and riding with Bumblebee to the Pentagon where I'd be having my hopefully brief and uneventful press conference.

Packed with reporters, the room seemed almost claustrophobic. Camera shutters hissed, sounding threatening in the silence that suddenly fell as I approached the microphone. I could feel Optimus, feel how he was trying to calm me and fill me with confidence, but these slagging reporters were all right here staring me in the face. And then knowing that the bank of video cameras was feeding this to millions of people...via satellite, including one that Soundwave was probably hacking this very second. Decepticons were watching.

The teleprompter turned on, the carefully-deliberated and censored words of my prepared statement ready to be spoken. I sucked at lying under the best of circumstances and I just knew everyone would see right through me now. I took a sharp, terrified breath and jumped in. "Hi. My name is Sam Witwicky."

The words disappeared. My speech. No way would I be able to remember it all! What happened?

And then new text began scrolling across the screen.

Weez in?

Shuddup, bro!

Slag – it was supposed to be just Optimus' comm patched into the network.

He's panicking, Jolt. Fix it.

Weez all talkin' ta Samuel? Hey! Tell 'em what heroes we was!

Ratchet, take them offline if you have to!

With what, Bumblebee? We're under strict orders to stay in our alts.

I'll slag 'em for you, Jolt.
Ironhide, Ratchet, jam the twins' signals if you can but remain undercover. Jolt, I need this connection on a private comm immediately.

I'm trying, I'm trying!

I stared in disbelief as the conversation scrolled in front of me, the expectant faces of the reporters watching me intently on the other side. I imagined red optics narrowing, scrutinizing me. Wincing and forcing a smile, I tried to improvise and ignore the argument the Autobots were having on my apparently-hacked teleprompter. "But you…

Can't you do any better than this?

"…um, know that already."

You try retrofitting this primitive technology, Sideswipe! It's harder than it looks!

"Thanks for..."

Slag it, Jolt, now you've cut Optimus out of the channel.

"…uh..."

I think I've finally got it!

"…letting me talk to you today. I just wanted to...

Slag. Nope.

"…uh..."

All of you stop. I'm imposing radio silence, NOW.

"…clear a few things up..."

Optimus. His holoform sidled in through the back door, his reassuring presence overwhelming my terror.

Again new text rolled across the teleprompter. Would you like my help, Sam? I don't want to impose myself on you over the bond, but I have experience giving speeches and your panic was starting to make ME nervous.

Without a second thought, I gratefully bared my heart to his spark, leaving the door wide open. He stepped in, and his confidence drove out the last shred of fear. I straightened my shoulders. As smoothly as if I'd rehearsed it a hundred times, I read the words in front of me. "We all have questions about what happened and why, especially those who have lost loved ones. To you, I offer my heartfelt condolences. I wish I had answers for you. Even more, I wish that those whose lives were lost were still with us. There are no words adequate to the express my regret that so many innocents were affected by this monumental tragedy."

I honestly can't remember most of what I said. I just rambled on like that, sounding like I'd swallowed a speechwriter's phrasebook and going on about remembering those lost and valiantly moving forward. It was about that point that my brain finally caught up with what was going on and I sent a healthy dose of caution my brother's way. I wished I had a way to write something back to him to tell him to make it sound a little like me. I think he understood because the lines on the teleprompter paused for a moment, and when the words started scrolling again, they were a lot
shorter.

I knew it was almost over when we finally got to the point of this whole ordeal. "As a race, we now share a collective grief that binds us in ways humanity has never before experienced. At the same time, we all struggle with an inexpressible private grief, whether it be the excruciating loss of those we hold dear or the quieter sorrow of lost innocence. I am no different. I lost the place I called home. I lost my ability to lead a normal life. I lost friends to death in this catastrophe. Like each of you, my future has been irrevocably altered. I ask that I be allowed to mourn in private. I ask that you grant me the same gift you want for your own family and friends – a chance at something resembling a normal life. Like you, I'm trying to look forward. I don't have the answers you need – they already exist in your own hearts. My story is your story, nothing more or less. That is all I have to say. Thank you."

With a short bob of my head, I turned and retreated to the side hall, and Optimus released the hold that he'd had on me over the bond. It was almost physical, like dropping a soft blanket that had been wrapped around my shoulders. I felt colder and a little shaky, but my relief overwhelmed all that. It was over.

Security guards whisked me away from the throng of reporters and back to the conference room where Mikaela had watched it all on TV. She threw her arms around me and kissed me just like she had in the dorm room this morning. When we eventually came up for air, Mikaela's eyes were sparkling. "You did great, Sam."

I felt my brother behind me radiating his approval, and Optimus' holoform said, "Yes, Sam, you did."
Rating is stronger for this chapter. We get a Decepticon POV for part of the chapter. Realistic bad guys don't usually fit well in Gen, so this chapter is probably walking the line. If it's a T, it's still a pretty mild one – I just didn't want anyone unpleasantly surprised.

After the press conference, I brought Mikaela back to college with me for the day. I gave her a tour of the university, but it wasn't particularly romantic with Leo beside us and Simmons trying to look inconspicuous behind us and pretty much failing. Still, I held her hand and bought her dinner at the food court on campus, so it was something at least. We went back to my dorm room for a little while, but after the whole thing with Alice, it was kind of weird to have Mikaela there - mostly because it brought back bad memories of being French-strangled by a Decepticon and fighting with my girlfriend.

Bumblebee spoiled us rotten, though. It was an hour drive from my school to the nearest Air Force base. Mikaela, Optimus, and the rest of the Autobots would head home from there (to California for Mikaela and to Diego Garcia for the rest of them) at one o' clock in the morning. When it was time to go, Bumblebee, er, Cam Romero got in on the driver's side and ordered us into the back seat with a grin.

I wasn't about to say no to that; tonight would have to last us for a while. I probably wouldn't see Mikaela again until spring break at the earliest. For the first time in years, her dad was home for the holidays, and so she wanted to spend both Thanksgiving and Christmas with him.

"So," I awkwardly said. "I'll miss you." Sure we'd made out in Bumblebee's cab before, but never when he was sitting there in his holoform smirking at us in the rear-view mirror.

Mikaela wasn't too worried about that, though. She took her seat belt off and slid to the middle of the bench. Bumblebee automatically put that seat's belt on her. "I'll miss you, too."

Biting the bullet, I said, "About the whole thing with Alice..."

"Over and done," she whispered, running her fingers through my hair. "You died on me. It kind of put things in perspective."

My guilt and soon-to-be heartache eased up at her words. "Really?"

"Really. I need you, Sam. I didn't quite see how much until then."

Holding her gaze, I said, "Need you, too." Tentatively I touched her necklace with the Prime casting. "I'd be dead without you. Several times. I owe you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Heck with Bumblebee. He should be watching the road anyway, not us! I leaned in and gave Mikaela a gentle, lingering kiss. She returned it...for the next forty-five minutes.
On our way back to campus, Bumblebee insisted I ride shotgun so I could recline the seat and doze, and I guess I needed sleep more than I thought because I actually conked out.

I met Optimus on the flight deck, and as soon as we were aware of each other, he whisked me away into one of his memories. Still, he wasn't quick enough and the sound of rotors lingered for a few seconds like the terrified pounding of my heart. I slowly calmed down, though, as I took in the sights. We were under a bright blue sun with a wild jumble of otherworldly metal sculptures surrounding us. Some soared to five or six times our height, though most were about half our size. Some parts were delicate – little more than foil leaves – while others looked sturdier than Optimus. "Where are we?"

"Cybertron, in a…I suppose the best translation would be 'forest.' We who can transform were not the only living beings on the planet."

I looked closer at the delicate foil leaf, realizing it was probably literally a leaf. Reaching out, I touched it, and it was sharp enough to give me a paper cut. "Ow!"

Optimus' brooding worry slipped over the bond before he dampened his feelings. "It should not have done that."

I shrugged, frowning thoughtfully at the drop of blood welling up on my finger. "I'm human, even in these dreams."

"Sam…"

I looked over at him.

"I have a hypothesis about the helicopter."

Raising my eyebrows in surprise, I gave him my full attention.

"You are human, and I am not. I apologize – I thought I was doing you a kindness."

"What are you talking about?" He was feeling guilty.

"I do not understand human psychology as well as I thought I did. We do not have nightmares. We don't dream like you do. We don't have an unconscious or subconscious mind, and any processing that goes on unawares is considered a virus. I thought that by sharing my thoughts and memories with you that I would spare you an unpleasant experience."

"You did. Thanks," I said, still completely in the dark.

"Do not thank me. I didn't spare you as much as I robbed you."

What was he going on about? "Just spit it out already. What's the helicopter?"

"I think it is a nightmare – one that you need to have."

I deflated. "You're kidding."

"Here," he said, looking around at the forest, "we are firmly in my thoughts. I control what we see and it is the path of my memory that your neural pathways are following. But when you have any say in the situation…"
Abruptly we were on the lookout with the fading sun disappearing from view. Mikaela was cuddled up to me on Bumblebee's hood while Optimus towered above me at the crest of the hill. This was the night of his first transmission, a month after Mission City. A shared memory.

Flying directly toward us was the helicopter. Adrenaline shot through me and I scrambled off 'Bee's hood.

Just as abruptly, we were in the Cybertronian forest again.

"...your unconscious mind asserts itself," Optimus finished. "While I can't comprehend fully how your psyche works, Ratchet tells me that it is essential for you to deal with this."

"You talked to Ratchet about this?"

"He is our Chief Medical Officer. If any of us can comprehend the workings of an alien organic processor, it is him. He said your unconscious mind does naturally what our battle protocols do artificially. Your species has evolved the remarkable ability to compress and repress emotions under stressful situations until the crisis is over. But it is the unconscious mind that stores and prioritizes the traumatic memories as well as determines when it is safe to recall and process them."

"Really?" He made the whole process sound almost sophisticated.

He solemnly nodded. "And like our battle protocols, eventually a person needs to deal with the... unpleasantness. I have been stealing you away from your dreams. Have you noticed that the helicopter is larger each time we see it?"

"Yeah." It was my nightmare after all. Now I really didn't want him to leave.

"I am sorry."

I snorted, rolling my eyes. "Would you just stop already? So it's a nightmare. I had a bunch of them after Mission City. It's not your fault. It just...is. Not fun, but I always wake up. I'll probably be a zombie in class on Monday – probably for a week or two, actually – but eventually I'll be okay."

Disappointment fell heavily over him before he hid his emotions again, and I studied him for a second. Why would he...? Oh. "You're feeling all guilty because you think this has gotten worse because of our bond."

Hesitantly he nodded. "There's no other logical conclusion. I do not wish to make you suffer alone for my mistakes."

"Wait. So you want to have my nightmare with me?" I stared – just stared – at him stupidly. Honestly, who would want that? Without thinking, I reached out and brushed his emotions, sending swirls of guilt and worry and bone-deep fear back over the bond.

And for the first time, I felt like I really understood my brother as deeply as I did Bumblebee – to the point where we didn't even need words. He was afraid that I would blame him and the bond for what was guaranteed to be a miserable experience. "I told you. I won't do what Megatron did."

"I know," he said, though I could hear the 'but' underlying his words.

"But your spark still carries the scars," I concluded.

Gratitude welled up in him that I understood, and I snorted a laugh – half at how strange Optimus' and my bonding experiences were and half at the fact that he wanted a front-row seat for the
impending horror show.

"Fine." He was probably right that the nightmare wouldn't be *quite* as bad if he was there with me. If nothing else, it'd be an educational experience for him. "If you can figure out how to put me in the driver's seat of this bond-vision, you can tag along."

Abruptly we were on the flight deck again, the helicopter's rotors already thudding the air. This time when we turned, Optimus took a step backward, leaving me front and center. The chopper lifted off and flew straight for me.

And then I *was* the helicopter.

I was flying low above a disgusting human hive of a city, zeroing in on a distress call from our Pretender agent Alice, and then I saw it – a pathetic silver human-built car with a smashed hood. A Prime was in that car, and I knew with some skewed dreamlike insight exactly what he was feeling because I was also him. Or I *had* been him, once upon a time. Dropping a grappling line, I pierced the roof of the car and visciously yanked it into the air. These were the maggots who had killed Lord Megatron. My lord would make them pay for it, but that didn't mean I was going to be *nice* or anything to them in the meantime.

They shrieked and screamed – by the Unmaker, were they really *that* worthless? – and I dropped them through the roof of the warehouse.

And then I was Megatron, rising from my crouch to watch with wicked amusement as the weak organic beings staggered out of the sliced-open car. And Optimus was Sam. I snarled at him. "Come here, boy. Closer. You remember me, don't you."

He remembered. He remembered the pure, determined rush Sam felt in Mission City when adrenaline drowned out even panic. He remembered the fierceness that surprised us both when he defied me, Lord Megatron, on the roof.

But he also remembered things I didn't expect. He remembered how Bumblebee wept to learn he was being left behind. He remembered how Optimus had all but begged for his help and how Sam had brushed the Autobot's pleas aside, knowing as he did so that it was selfish and wrong. He remembered how unworthy he was of any help from his friends – how he *deserved* to die. How he didn't want to. How he *knew* they wouldn't come for him. How he *knew* he was on his own. How he had placed Mikaela in danger, too.

"I did what you said, okay? Just don't hurt us…"

"Shut up," I growled and struck out with my claw, sending Optimus flying to land with a satisfying smack on the concrete. His pain struck at my heart over the bond – his fear and despair and bruises (that were still somehow *my* fear and despair and bruises) – but I took a perverse delight in it. I could know exactly how much he was suffering, could know the feel of his bones as I crushed them. Eagerly I grasped at him, catching his wrists and ankles in my claws. "It feels good to grab your flesh." And it did – I savored the fright that made his heart thunder in my audios like the drums of war. "I'm going to kill you slowly, painfully. But first we have some *delicate* work." His panic was a delicious, heady thing. "Oh, I could just snap your limbs off," I purred. "Doctor? Examine this alien specimen."

My brother squirmed in horror as Scalpel busied himself doing just that. Surprise registered on the other end of the bond as Optimus saw for the first time the writing of the Primes. Scalpel looked up at me. "Ve must have ze brain on ze table. Chop chop!"
Abjet terror shot through Optimus as he struggled under my cruel claws and tried to talk me out of dissecting him. No one would come for him. The only being who could stop me was utterly helpless – an insect at my feet – and I gloated, drinking in his fear as it poured pure and cold over the bond.

His pathetic babbling wasn't even begging for mercy, and I sneered at him. "You're so weak."

And then I was Scalpel, my buzz saw cutting into Optimus' blue helm, slicing open armor and circuits and fuel lines. The light in his optics sputtered as he died by my hand. With his last flicker of life, he begged, "Sam, run."

Abruptly we were on the flight deck again, and I fell to all fours, dry heaving. I had done all that. I was a Decepticon. I was a vile, revolting creature – I was Megatron's brother – and the thought of his spark being part of my soul literally sickened me. And it wasn't just in the nightmare. I killed Optimus! I killed him! It was my screw-up that had gotten his spark blown out in the real world! Shuddering, I heaved again.

Optimus was stunned, a silent "…" rolling over the bond as he stared at me. Eventually, though, compassion overcame his shock and he knelt, placing a warm, gentle hand on my shoulder. Quiet grief – his sorrow for my self-hatred – enveloped me, settling my stomach and releasing the violent disgust that had gripped me. Taking a shaky breath or two, I sat back on my heels. Optimus pulled me into an actual hug even as his spark held my heart close over the bond.

Absentmindedly, I noticed that the helicopter was gone.

I'd never had a brother – never been comforted by someone who was so like me. He'd seen me at the very worst I could ever be: he'd seen me fallen as far as Megatron. And still he had his arms wrapped around me – forgiving me. That forgiveness crept into every guilty corner of my heart, soothing the knowledge that I'd turned my back on him, that I'd caused his death, that thousands of people had died because of my selfishness. He knew exactly what my heart needed because, for that awful ordeal, he had been me. He saw, he felt, he hurt, he feared, he was me.

Over the bond, I could feel his train of thought as he processed my nightmare. Dawning comprehension mingled with his compassion until confusion started creeping in. Eventually, he said, "That…wasn't quite what I was expecting."

I snorted at that. "What were you expecting?"

He let me go as I leaned back, and suddenly it was night, the two of us sitting as we had during the crucial first week after Egypt. Except, of course, we were the same size so I was sitting in front of him instead of in his hand. The dark was comforting, keeping our conversation private.

"I'm not entirely sure, but not that. I didn't expect to relive it all through your eyes." Gravely he added, "It was a terrible, precious gift."

"Gift?" I repeated doubtfully.

"To know you didn't blame me. To understand you better. You've said several times that you aren't Megatron, and even when you were, you weren't." His optics shuttered in a couple of thoughtful blinks. "I shared a bond with him, Sam, and he never felt the revulsion that you did in that nightmare."

I grimaced. "I wasn't feeling any revulsion."

"It was there," he assured me. "It was what ended the dream. Megatron would have happily killed you – or me – and then moved on to Mikaela and Leo."
Yeah, that was probably true. Still. "I killed you. I cut your head open."

His wry amusement found its way back to me. "You warned me – humans do things in dreams that they never would in real life."

It was true. Even if I had a weapon strong enough to hurt him, I knew I just…couldn't. And then a truly horrific thought occurred to me. "I didn't hurt you, did I? I mean, I cut…"

"I felt your remembered pain," he assured me, "nothing more." We lapsed into silence, but his curiosity from earlier just wouldn't sit still. Finally he asked, "What is your interpretation of the dream?"

"Interpretation?"

"Most of Earth's cultures believe that dreams carry meaning, whether it is spiritual or psychological."

I shrugged. "Not every dream means something."

He nodded, accepting my answer, but he fairly radiated anxious excitement.

"What?"

For all his internal eagerness, he was very hesitant. "Would you like to hear my theory?"

And then I understood his hesitation. Here he was – an alien robot who didn't even have dreams – offering an opinion on my subconscious. I laughed at him, the chilling horror of the nightmare slowly melting in the warmth of our bond. "You're Optimus Prime, resurrected leader of the Autobots and my bond-brother. Why wouldn't I want to hear your theory?"

Pleased and vaguely embarrassed, he said, "I believe your unconscious mind was playing out a worst-case scenario, one in which you were exactly like Megatron. The fact that you came out of that nightmare vomiting speaks much of you, boy."

"Sorry you had to see that, by the way."

He didn't dignify that with an answer, brushing away my discomfort with his own acceptance.

"But what about you?" I wondered. "Did you choose to be me?"

"No, it was you who gave me that role. Perhaps it was because your unconscious mind had sensed some of my concern and wished to reassure me."

Frowning, I said, "That was one crappy way to reassure you, then."

He chuckled softly. "No, it was exactly what I needed. As I said, you weren't Megatron." Sobering, he said, "I have been anxious about you accepting the bond since I first realized we shared one. Even in the role of Megatron, though, you embraced our bond. Your unconscious mind is more intelligent than I expected."

A sudden thought occurred to me. "Why did he sever the bond? Why didn't he just…"

"Kill me?"

I swallowed hard and nodded, remembering with sharp horror Megatron impaling Optimus and shooting his spark out. He obviously didn't have any qualms about it like Optimus still did; even after Megatron killed him, Optimus let him escape in Egypt.
"He needed me. He was very competitive, and I was his older brother – bigger, stronger, and more knowledgeable throughout our youth. I was the standard against which he judged every accomplishment. He needed someone to put down, to be better than. That he could kill me suggests he has outgrown that need."

"That…really kinda sucks."

Bittersweet humor rolled over the bond. "Yes, it does. But his opinion has no place in our dreams, brother. Is there somewhere else you would like to go tonight?"

After killing him by vivisection, I kinda felt like I owed him a pleasant scene or two. "How 'bout we go back to that forest? As long as there aren't any Turbotyrannosaurus rexes or anything hiding in there."

Instantly we were under the blue sun again. "Just cybercats," Optimus said, amusement behind his shrug. "Nothing to worry about."

...

I woke up with a crick in my neck. We were back at campus, and the clock on Bumblebee's dashboard said 4:12AM. I stretched uncomfortably, and 'Bee apologized with, "Didn't want to wake you…with your brother…nearby."

"Thanks," I said, stiffly sitting up. My dreams had eventually drifted out of the bond-vision and into something more human, and I knew the NEST planes had carried Optimus out of range again. I was on my own now. Smiling and affectionately patting Bumblebee's steering wheel, I mentally added, almost. He was one mech who would always be there when I needed him.
One awesome thing about Bumblebee was that he knew 'being there when I needed him' sometimes meant not being there. Maybe it was a scout thing. Even if we were driving somewhere together, I could forget sometimes that I had a sixteen-foot-tall alien robot bodyguard and could feel like it was just me and my car again. The alien robot bodyguard might seem cooler, and he is really cool, but a boy and his car, that was like…epic. Universal American experience and all that. A car is the independence of the open road and power and maturity and a way to impress the girls. A bodyguard means there's some danger to guard against, and that means a loss of independence. Leo and Simmons hovered to the point that I wanted to smack them, but Bumblebee knew when to back off. I really wished I could ditch them both and just have 'Bee again, because they were a great big ball and chain in a lot of ways. I couldn't go to the john without Leo coming to check on me.

My bodyguards were just a footnote, though, when it came right down to it. College was freedom – no one could order me to go to class or make me do my homework or smack me for taking a second glance at a pretty girl – and provided plenty of chances to use it. There were clubs and socials and games even on weeknights and then the parties lasted all weekend long. Simmons frowned on all the socializing, mostly because Mr. Paranoia thought they were a security nightmare, but Leo got in his face if he did anything more than radiate disapproval. They were both nutjobs, but they kind of cancelled each other out sometimes.

But the classes were the real surprise – I actually enjoyed them. I mean, yeah, I signed up for this, fought to get here, but mostly I took the college route because it was either go work as a stocker in a store somewhere or get a degree. When I earned the highest grade in my Astronomy class on the test at the end of September (87%, while the next-highest grade was a 52% and the average was 38%), I also got my first real taste of intellectual pleasure.

Academically, high school had been tough and I had to work for every A I go – at least at first. Something changed me at Mission City (looking back, it was probably the All Spark – stupid thing), and science and math in particular became really easy. Too easy – I started to get bored. Back then, acing my classes made me a geek. Here, it made me awesome. Leo was jealous at how many girls (hot, Freshman 55 girls!) were asking me to be their 'study buddy.'

Faithful boyfriend that I was, though, I encouraged Leo to be there for our study sessions and tried to point any lash-flapping hottie his way – partly out of loyalty to Mikaela, but also because, as my bodyguard, Leo had my back and I didn't want him to have any reason to stick a knife in it. Sending geek fangirls his way was an easy way to buy him off.

Mikaela and I had webdates every weekend, and at first it was a lot of "I miss you" and "I love you" and stuff, but when she heard about my sudden popularity in Astronomy, Mikaela started to get creative. We'd do our own version of Mystery Science Theater 3000 and heckle old movies together online or play video games together. (For the record, she's vicious in Halo.) We also just talked a lot, too.

Eventually I had to relocate to a study-room in the library for the dates, though, because of the roomies. They teased me constantly about Mikaela, and the state of our rooms was starting to get embarrassing. I thought my room back home was always a mess – these guys had things evolving in pizza boxes stacked four high. Where was my mom when I needed her? The thing that most helped me stand them, oddly enough, was Bumblebee's blog. It was a riot to hear their theories, never mind the fact that I wouldn't have even known about the site if it weren't for them. Oh, and speaking of the blog, I got an invitation to the party on Diego Garcia two days after Mikaela, Optimus, and the rest
returned home. After seeing the list Ratchet posted of "dos and don'ts," I figured any party for the rest of my college career would probably be dull by comparison.

Al-Sharif kept the whole alien ambassador thing under control, too. The first Saturday in October, he had Bee drive me down to the Pentagon where he basically conducted an interview with the most-requested questions and transcribed it. That way, when people contacted him, he could just trot out the answers and call it good. Every now and then a new question would pop up that he thought was worth forwarding to my email or someone really important was doing the asking, but that whole part of my life gradually faded into the background.

So – all in all – life was good.

Mostly. I was usually too busy to notice it, but there was a…tickle or an itch or something in my heart. I'd feel it when I was waking up in the morning sometimes – a sense that I wasn't feeling something I should be or maybe vice versa. As September cooled to October and October wore away, I'd sense it at odd times. I was in the middle of my American History class and felt so lonely I couldn't help reaching out across my dormant brother bond to find…nothing. Not a big deal, not unexpected, but still it made me feel a little smaller to realize that I really was alone. It was amazing how much I needed my big, younger, alien brother. I thought it would get weaker with time, but it didn't. I'd catch myself reaching out while studying or walking to class or even while brushing my teeth. And then there was the nightmare about standing on the end of a flight deck all alone.

So when I climbed into Bumblebee's cab on the morning of the third Friday in October, I was more than ready to go. Officially, I was heading off-shore for a diplomatic summit on human-Autobot cooperation, but really, Mikaela and I were flying to Diego Garcia to party. (I gave Leo, Simmons, and al-Sharif the weekend off.) Mrs. Lennox somehow persuaded the brass to throw a "Welcome Back from the Dead" celebration for Optimus, but I would have gone for an actual summit. Anything to scratch this itch of the heart.

Bumblebee drove right into the waiting C-17 and we took off. As soon as we were at cruising altitude, he transformed and we settled in for the twelve-hour flight. Thanks to the joys of global travel, leaving the East Coast on Friday morning meant arriving on Diego Garcia on Saturday morning. Of course that also meant that leaving Sunday night meant arriving back at college Monday morning. But the jetlag was so worth it if it meant seeing Optimus again, even if it was only for a day and a half.

Besides, it's not like I wasted the time in the air – Mikaela was there. When we pulled into the plane, she was on one of the crates lining the walls of the cargo hold with the kind of smile that made me grin like an idiot.

"Hey, beautiful."

"Hey, famous," she replied, her eyes dancing with pleasure. Hopping off the crate, she sauntered over to give me a quick, flirty kiss. The feel of her lips on mine eased some of the empty ache in my heart and I pulled her into a tight hug.

"Miss me?" she breathlessly asked.

I realized I was probably holding her too tightly and let her go. "Like you wouldn't believe."

She grinned and took me by the hand, pulling me toward the cozy little corner she'd assembled for us for our flight. Beanbags, pillows, blankets…she made sure we'd fly in comfort this time. We cuddled and talked for hours until we started to get restless and Bumblebee projected a 3-D hologram of a romantic comedy for us. It was kind of nice, actually, to not have a ton of distractions and really
spend some quality time together, even if it was just watching a movie. The webdates were better than nothing, but it wasn't the same as feeling Mikaela next to me.

"Tell me we're not like that," Mikaela grumbled when the credits started rolling and Bumblebee ended the hologram.

"Like what?"

"Like I'm a vapid co-dependent introvert with nothing better to do than wander through life until a man shows up. And like you're a total player who finally finds a reason to settle down."

I snorted. "Well sounds like the gender's backwards for us…"

"You think I'm a player?" she demanded, suddenly sitting up.

"Before you settled down with me," I quickly said. "I mean, you gotta admit that the whole thing with Trent…"

She huffed, grimacing a little in annoyance.

"Besides, no way would our story be a romance," I continued, trying to distract her. "I mean, on our second date Bumblebee fought off the Decepticon cop and you decapitated that creepy little silver guy. We're action-adventure the whole way."

"Sci-fi," Bumblebee quoted, correcting me. His doorwings were twitching with laughter.

Mikaela relented a little bit. "You seriously thought that was a date? I was following you because you were talking nonsense and I was worried you'd finally landed on your head one time too many."

I rolled my eyes at that one, but I was fighting a grin. "Whatever."

She settled back against the bean bag again and cuddled closer. "So which one's the hero and which one's the sidekick?"

"Huh?"

"You know – in the adventure there's the hero and either the love interest or the sidekick. Or both, I guess."

"Oh." I realized I'd better tread carefully on this one. Brushing a strand of hair out of her face, I said, "Hmm…I think Leo's the sidekick, hands down. He makes great comic relief."

"Or Wheelie," she added. "He's a pretty good sidekick, too."

I frowned. "I guess he can be the sidekick, as long as I'm the romantic interest."

Her smile was brilliant. "Just for that, you don't have to sleep on the couch tonight."

Snorting, I said, "Good thing, too, 'cause we don't have one."

She laughed and leaned closer for a kiss. It was supposed to be a little truce-peck on the lips, but it quickly grew to something a lot more intense. And a lot longer. Making up, I decided, was definitely worth the fight.

…
Mikaela got sleepy somewhere over the Arabian Peninsula. Cradling her close, I held her while she dreamed. She'd slept in my arms a few times before, and it always amazed me when she did. That's a lot of trust – just drifting off like that. Mikaela is strong – tough – but when she's asleep all of that slips away and she's soft in a way she never is while awake. Eventually, though, hearing her even breathing started to make me sleepy, too, and so I conked out before we got to Diego Garcia.

It wasn't long before I found myself standing on the end of the flight deck, Optimus at my side. The itch was gone – just like that. Happiness and relief filled my heart and spilled over across the bond to mingle with his.

"Boy," he greeted me.

"Little brother," I retorted, grinning.

"It is good to have you near," he said, his spark clinging to me – his only living family.

"It is," I agreed, returning his hug of the heart.

Optimus was eager to make the most of this time, though. "What would you like to see tonight?"

The memory of Mikaela sleeping in my arms was still fresh in my mind, so I said, "How about you show me more of Elita One? How did you meet her?"

Bittersweet joy flashed across the bond, and then we were standing at the top of a ramp again – kind of like at the Cybertronian museum – looking out over a huge crowd of 'bots.

"A Science Division recruiting rally," he explained. "I was on the second tier of management at the time. Both my division and the Planetary Defense Forces actively sought out the best and brightest of the upcoming mechs and femmes."

"And the financial one?"

"The commerce sector?" he asked. "Real property only passed from father to son on my world, so the landed clans were a build apart and had resources to create wealth that most of us did not. Nobles, I believe, would be a good translation for how we viewed them. The Science Division and the Planetary Defense Forces, however, both operated on merit rather than heritage."

A large silver mech drove up the ramp to join us on the stage – Megatron. When he transformed, the Prime plates on his face were absent now, but he didn't have claws yet, either. "Brother," Optimus greeted him.

"Brother," he answered, though there was a snide edge to the word. "It appears my recruiters have left you only the weak and scrawny ones."

Optimus took the ribbing good-naturedly, though. "The ones who use their energy for processing instead cannons," he retorted, "including most of the femmes from this orbital cycle."

Megatron snorted derisively at that and Optimus' amusement rolled across the bond.

"Well," memory-Megatron said, "are you so ashamed of your division that you don't want to show me around?"

"Hardly," Optimus scoffed. "I'm more concerned you'll blow a processor trying to comprehend what my scientists are saying."
Megatron snorted at that and clapped his brother on the back. "Come on."

We wandered through the maze of displays and booths where each department within the Science Division attempted to catch the attention of the newly-matured mechs and femmes. Space exploration was a big one, and Optimus made a point of showing off both the weapons development and shield technology departments to Megatron.

And then we saw her. She was standing by the archeology department booth, talking with a pink femme I recognized as Arcee. She was rose red and lithe like the pink femme, but her graceful face reminded Optimus of the commerce clans. Queenly, almost. Forgetting Megatron, Optimus made his way toward the table.

Arcee looked up as he approached. "Hello, Optimus."

He bobbed his head in her direction, unable to take his optics off her companion. "Arcee."

The unfamiliar (at the time) femme looked up, too, her optics wide in surprise. "Sir."

"No formal titles," he smoothly said, completely entralled. "You may call me simply Optimus."

"Optimus," she repeated, savoring the word.

"Oh come on," I grumbled. I mean, I owed Optimus – I really, truly did – but this was getting just plain cheesy. "Optics meeting across a crowded room? Can it get any more clichéd than this?"

Giddy with the memory, Optimus muttered to me, "Quiet, boy."

I was shocked at first, until I realized he'd been talking smack with Megatron a few minutes earlier. He was just treating me like a brother.

"May I have the pleasure of your name?" he continued.

"Elita," she answered. Tearing her optics away from his for a second, she darted a nervous glance at the pink femme beside her. "I'm Arcee's sister."

"I see." He also gave Arcee a quick glance. A series of memories flickered through his mind, letting me see that she tended to be a bit...bristly and he worried what her reaction would be. She was shaking her head with a put-out air, and I think that if I'd been there in person we'd be rolling our eyes together at the lovebirds.

"She graduated this orbital cycle," Arcee explained. "I'm trying to talk her into the archeology department."

"I supervise that department," he said, somewhere between bragging and begging her to sign on. "I'm over the entire cultural development and preservation unit."

She blinked, processing that for a second, and then said, "I shall apply for the military-applied or medical sciences. If you'll excuse me. Optimus." Turning on her heel, she walked off leaving my brother pretty much slack-jawed as he watched her go.

"What did I say?" he muttered.

Arcee sniggered, "That you'd be her superior and therefore off-limits if she joined my department. Way to run her off, boss. Better hope the rumor about your promotion is just a rumor."

"Rumor?" Optimus stuttered, his processors still derailed at the 'Did she really say what I think she
just said?' station in his train of thought. "What rumor?"

Full-out laughing now, Arcee waved her hand, brushing aside his question and moving to talk to a young mech who was hovering nearby. "Some of us are working," she called over her shoulder.

I sniggered with her, once again enjoying the way Elita left Optimus as…well…human as the rest of us. "You were so smitten."

Happiness swelled across the bond. "I still am."

"But why didn't she introduce herself as Elita One?" I asked.

Hope and sudden grief warred in his spark. "You recall who made The Well of All Sparks fountain."

"Beta Seven." And then it clicked – direct-line descendent. "You had a daughter? Elita Two?"

"No," he quickly admitted, regret striking like a physical pang across the bond.

Abruptly we were in a room – a lab – on Cybertron surrounded by Ratchet, Arcee, and Elita. Optimus was working at a panel of some kind (he knew what it was for, but I couldn't tell you for the life of me), when a black mech strode into the room like he owned the place. Jazz.

Optimus lifted his head and moved to stand closer to his future mate. "Jazz, allow me to introduce our latest recruit to the Science Division. This is Elita, Arcee's recently-graduated sister."

Jazz smirked at Optimus' protective hovering – my brother was obviously trying to stake a claim – before focusing on the rose-red femme for a second. "Elita – that's an unusual name." After a darting glance at Arcee, he said, "Better make it Elita One, though. You're one of a kind, femme, but you're far from the last."

Abruptly we were back on the flight deck. Remembering something Optimus had said about Jazz, I understood why he'd been torn between hope and grief. Jazz's clan was known to have seers. "You think that he really was a seer? That the whole 'Elita One' thing was a prophesy?"

"I have wondered that," he answered, nodding slightly. "He was correct about never seeing The Cube on Cybertron again. A seer's foresight would also explain some of his uncanny escapes during black-ops missions. And now, with the Matrix able to restore extinguished sparks…"

"Elita One." I would never hear her name again without feeling kind of freaked out and overwhelmed. Thousands of years before I was born – before great-great-grandpa Archibald was even born – that title foretold that I would reignite her. And not just reignite her, but create a sparkling femme for her. For her and Optimus. A single word, spoken in Jazz's jaunty, offhanded way, gave my brother hope that he would see his mate alive again and even have a family. No pressure, right?

Optimus felt chagrinned when he realized I was more weighed down than encouraged. "It's also possible he was just flirting. That would be even more true to Jazz's character, and female sparklings are extremely rare among us to begin with. A dead femme having a daughter defies believability."

"But you still hope," I accused.

After a heartbeat's hesitation, he guiltily nodded.
I jumped awake and looked around wildly at the cargo hold for a second before I remembered where we were. The jolt that woke me up was the plane's tires hitting the tarmac on Diego Garcia. My brother's unmistakable calm presence flowed over the bond, and I took a deep breath in relief. Mikaela stirred in my arms and, smiling, I kissed her hair. "Wake up, beautiful. We're there."

And I was home.
Fun

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once the plane was stopped, Mikaela walked over to a pile of camouflage netting and flipped it back to reveal a familiar metal crate. Addressing it, she said, "We've landed. Are you ready to be polite now?"

From inside the box, Wheelie grumbled, "Are you ready to stop sucking face with Maggot Prime?"

"I told you not to call him that," she scolded.

"And I told you the disgusting slurping sounds make my fuel tanks churn!"

With a dramatic sigh, Mikaela opened the box, and a pair of optics – one blue and one red – peeked out.

"Be good," she warned him.

I glared at the little ex-'Con, and he discretely flipped me the bird before hopping out of his carrying case and scurrying into Bumblebee's cab. But then Mikaela was paying attention to me again and I didn't have a chance to retaliate.

Optimus was waiting for us, of course. He stood in the main hangar along with Ironhide, Arcee (with all three of her components working again and combined into a single 'bot), and Skids, and Mudflap, although it looked like the twins were kind of banged up and my guess was that they were either in trouble with one of the boss 'bots or they were on their way to see Ratchet. Bumblebee drove us down the ramp and into the hangar. Last time I flew to the island, he was the center of the other Autobots' attention, but this time, all optics were on me and there were murmured (or rumbled, in Ironhide's case) greetings of "Hi, Samuel," or "Welcome back, Samuel."

"Hey, guys," I said kind of awkwardly.

Ironhide gave a meaningful glance at the twins and they hurried on their way with him stalking behind them. Yeah, those two were definitely in trouble. Wheelie, however, stuck close to Mikaela.

"Welcome, Sam," Optimus said, kneeling down to see eye to optic. The sense of his presence over the bond was almost as strong as it was when I let him take over during my speech after they hacked my teleprompter. It was like a too-tight hug.

"Brother," I whispered, and he emotionally pulled back when he realized he was kind of overwhelming me.

He was embarrassed that he'd overdone it, but he was too excited to feel that bad about it. "Spitfire informed us that the celebration will be delayed by approximately twenty minutes. Apparently Spitlet had an accident."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Arcee try to talk to Bumblebee, but he brushed her off, instead focusing on our conversation.

"Is she okay?" Mikaela asked, worried.
"She's fine," Will assured her. (He'd been up on the communication center scaffolding when we first arrived and had just now caught up with us.) "Sarah's trying to potty train her, so it was one of those kinds of accidents. But this one was bad enough that she had to give Annabelle a bath."

Optimus lifted his head as a bolt of surprise rushed over the bond. It made me turn just in time to see Arcee launch herself at Bumblebee's back. She caught him squarely between the doorwings and threw him off balance enough to send him crashing to the ground.

"Hey!" Will protested, but Mikaela and I scurried back. Optimus rose to his feet and put himself between us and the brawl.

'Bee half-way flipped, tossing Arcee off his back and to the side, but she landed in a roll and was back on her feet before he was. Watching her warily, Bumblebee held his hands out in a "What is wrong with you?" gesture.

The femme wasn't impressed, and something about the way she stood struck me as familiar. For a split second I was on Cybertron again at a Science Division recruiting rally and rolling my eyes at my brother while Arcee sniggered at her sister. The memory passed, but the sudden sense of kinship I felt with her lingered.

"Whatever," she said to 'Bee, crossing her arms and smirking. "You know you liked it."

"That's enough," Will bellowed, interrupting them.

'Bee pointed an accusing finger at the femme.

"I don't care who started it," Lennox growled. "Go spar somewhere else!"

"We're just having a little fun," Arcee protested.

Lennox spoke over her. "Take it to Boomtown."

With an indignant huff, she transformed into her bikes, taunting 'Bee by running a circle around him with the pink component before heading out. He hesitated just long enough to exchange a glance with Optimus before, whining and protesting with his broken voice, he also transformed and took off after the femme. Like usual, Optimus' expression didn't give away anything, but he felt they were pretty funny.

"It was like this on the boat after the battle in Egypt," Will grumbled. "The last day and a half they were constantly sparring. She gets bored and provokes him or he starts bragging and she tries to put him in his place. They're like cats and dogs."

"Or siblings," I added, remembering Megatron trash-talk ing Optimus at the recruiting rally.

"Or something," Mikaela muttered with a sly little grin.

I picked up on a flicker of curiosity from Optimus as he regarded my girlfriend before he transformed and opened his doors for us in invitation. "They'll be a while, but I'm sure Spitfire would appreciate some help in the meantime."

As we climbed in, I asked Optimus, "So why was 'Bee throwing a tantrum?"

"You are aware of his superstition."

Oh. That's right. He was convinced I was safe only when I was with him.
"Even he needs an occasional vacation," Optimus added. "You could not possibly be safer than while here on Diego Garcia and surrounded by every Autobot on Earth. I asked Arcee to provide a suitable excuse for him to go relax for a little while. I was not aware, however, of the extreme measures she might take to get his attention."

Mikaela giggled beside me and I glanced at her, my curiosity stronger than Optimus' this time. She cleared her throat, trying to act all serious again. "I wonder who'll win?"

"They both will," he confidently answered.

Optimus hauled a flatbed full of 50-gallon oil drums to the Lennox place, while Ironhide followed with coolers in his bed. As soon as we got there, Sideswipe and Jolt began unloading Optimus and a bunch of guys who I could only guess were NEST soldiers took on Ironhide's bed.

"Where's Bumblebee?" Jolt wondered.

"Boomtown," Optimus answered after he disconnected from the trailer and transformed.

Jolt just shook his head and grabbed a couple of the drums, carrying them around the house to the back yard.

For the first time since we arrived on Diego Garcia, Wheelie came out from Mikaela's shadow and scurried over to where the guys were unloading Ironhide. "Yeah, baby, that's what I'm talking about!" he purred, picking up a 1-pound canister of propane and hugging it. Then, looking furtively around, he tried to hide it behind his back and sneak off with it.

Mikaela caught him by the neck and wrestled the canister away from him. "No snitching! This is for the party!"

"All right, all right, don't get your thong in a twist, Warrior Goddess. I was just…uh…helping those guys." He gestured at the NEST soldiers who, like Jolt and Sideswipe, were carrying stuff around to the back yard.

I grabbed a grocery bag with chips and stuff in it from out of Ironhide's bed and handed it to Wheelie. "You wanna help? Here you go."

With a huff, Wheelie took the bag and rolled off. "Don't forget, that's mine," he added as a parting shot, gesturing to the canister in Mikaela's hand.

Mikaela grabbed another propane canister and followed the guys around toward the back yard. Snatching up a couple more grocery bags, I quickly joined her. After all, these guys might be NEST, but they were still soldiers, and Mikaela was still a hottie.

"Going to be a long night," one of the NEST guys said with a British accent.

"Only because Ratchet left you and Quinn in charge of the med bay while he's recovering," an American soldier answered. "I've been looking forward to this."

Mrs. Lennox was in her back yard. "Buck up, Johnston. Today's going to be fun! Sam, Mikaela, so glad you could make it. Welcome!"

Under canopies, several buffet tables were already set up with food, and next to them on the sand were tubs full of ice holding soda and beer. From the aroma of it, there was probably a pig roasting somewhere nearby, too.
On the other side of the yard, about thirty feet away, rows of fifty-gallon drums were lined up, along with a pile of propane canisters and some smaller containers containing random chemicals – paint thinner, Coleman fuel, butane, and oddly enough, jalapeño peppers.

There was no formal start to the party. Before we were finished unloading, Skids and Mudflap arrived followed by a watchful-looking Ratchet. Lennox and Epps were riding with the medic and the twins were loaded up with more NEST guys, bringing the total of humans up to about thirty or so. People started helping themselves to food and drink and Mrs. Lennox grabbed me and Mikaela each by an arm as soon as we had full plates. "Over here, you two. I've got a place of honor for you guys with Optimus."

The mech was sitting in his alt-form next to the house, radiating sheepish embarrassment. Johnston and several other guys were scrubbing him down, giving him the "spa treatment" Mrs. Lennox had promised the 'bots in her post on Bumblebee's blog. They had a couple buckets of warm, soapy water and an assortment of sponges, squeegees, shop rags, and various cleaners and set them up on a table nearby. Even for uptight military types, they managed to throw in some obligatory water-fighting that seemed to perplex a couple of the bots.

Two chairs were set up in the shade close enough for easy conversation. "Hey," I said to Optimus, grinning at his expense. "Having fun?"

"Sam," he said by way of greeting.

"Of course he is!" a man with 'Quinn' on his nametag exclaimed from where he was kneeling beside Optimus' tire and scrubbing it. "We may not have Spitfire's feminine touch, but the 'bots are always lining up for a good wash."

"We weren't able to find a masseuse with high enough clearance for the party," Mrs. Lennox said to Mikaela, "so 'spa treatments' for the humans are out unless you want to let Ratchet have a go at you. He's been studying up on massage therapy."

Mikaela looked over at the imposing Hummer who was currently helping himself to two oil drums of fuel. "I think I'll pass, thanks."

Mrs. Lennox grinned. "Though you might."

Bumblebee and Arcee were the last to arrive.

"Well," Ironhide demanded. "Who came out on top?"

Arcee made a show of rolling her optics before activating a hologram. 'Bee had a knee each on two of the bike 'bots and was pinning the third with his hands. "He did," she allowed, cheerfully adding, "the slagger."

Bumblebee all but danced to "Check on the rep, yeah, second to none!"

Arcee gave his doorwing an affectionate tug that made him stop and give her a curious glance, but she didn't look back, instead sauntering over to sit near Mikaela. Waving at the wash crew, she said, "I'm next, boys!"

With a shrug, Bumblebee went toward the oil drums instead.

"You're not having anything?" Mikaela asked her.

Arcee shrugged. "Somebody's gotta be the designated driver."
"That, and an overcharged femme is probably more excitement than you bargained for," Ironhide said.

"Though it'd be good for you, Arcee," Ratchet encouraged, returning with his third and fourth barrels, respectively. His oil drums were colored a dark green while Ironhide's barrel had been black, so I had to wonder which fuel was stronger. Or maybe it was purely a taste thing. Did that make the gallon ones Autobot shots? Sideswipe had an improvised table set up and was apparently mixing the different fuel types into cocktails.

Arcee picked up a random coconut and beaned Ratchet with it. "Off-lining you would be good for me, too. Shut it."

He took the abuse in stride, carelessly throwing back one of the barrels.

Watching Sideswipe play barkeep reminded me of something I'd read on Bumblebee's blog, and I glanced over at Ratchet. "So…what's this I hear about power lines?"

The Autobot medic practically radiated annoyance. "Nothing."

"Tonight," Optimus quietly promised me, meaning he'd show me it all in living color during our bond-dream.

I grinned. There were some real advantages to having a bond with an Autobot.

Ratchet heaved a martyr's sigh and went back for more fuel.

"So how does a mechanical being like an Autobot get drunk?" Mikaela wondered. "I mean, how does that work?"

"Drunk isn't a good analogy," Arcee answered. "Alcohol is a depressant on a human's central nervous system and that's what causes the abnormal responses. When a 'bot gets overcharged, though, the abnormal response comes from too much energy being available. It tends to leave us aggressive and...uninhibited. We often become uncoordinated, not because our responses are too slow like humans but because our motor systems are responding faster than our processors are calibrated to handle. Eventually, if you're a determined drinker like Ratchet, your systems overheat to the point that you literally blow a fuse and pass out. So...not really like getting drunk at all."

Mrs. Lennox gave both me and Mikaela a sharp glance. "Not that either of you would know anything about getting drunk. Right?"

"Right," I answered innocently. "Just root beer and ginger ale for us!"

"And diet Pepsi," Mikaela added, "when I really want to drown my woes."

Mrs. Lennox raised her diet Dr. Pepper and tapped it to Mikaela's cola in agreement.

During a lull in the conversation, I saw Skids walk up to Sideswipe and say, "Another round, my good 'bot, if you please."

Huh? "I actually understood that."

"Whatcha want?" Sideswipe amiably answered.

"Let's make it a base of jet fuel with some diesel and jalapeño peppers."

"The same for me, please, Sideswipe," Mudflap added, "but aerate it with some propane to give it a
Optimus (squeaky clean now and sitting beside me in his robot mode while Bumblebee had his turn getting the spa treatment) chuckled at my shock and murmured, "The twins are about half gone. They become more coherent the more overcharged they get. They'll be quoting Chaucer in the original Middle English before the evening is over."

"Are they really going to eat the peppers, though?"

"Those are just for flavor," he quickly said. "They'll leave the jalapeños in the bottom of the barrel."

The pig was finished roasting in the early afternoon, and we humans all sat down for an actual meal then. Nobody was really drunk yet; they were all at the "laughing at anything" stage. I spent a lot of time sniggering at how goofy these battle-hardened warriors could be. I mean, who knew that Will Lennox could juggle beer bottles? Or that Epps could be reduced to tears if someone hid his iPod.

When lunch or whatever it was called was done, Sideswipe announced from his improvised bar, "For the boss 'bot!" With great ceremony, he handed off a half-barrel to Bumblebee who delivered it to Optimus with a bow.

Will Lennox stepped front and center, raising his bottle of beer. "To lives lost and to the hope they brought back with them!"

"To hope!" Mrs. Lennox repeated, and everyone toasted Optimus and Arcee. I flushed beet red when Mikaela raised her diet Pepsi to salute me, too.

Optimus must have felt my embarrassment and sent me an amused, tolerant nudge over the bond as if to say, 'Get used to it, Prime.'

Fortunately no one asked for speeches. Unfortunately, they did bring presents. One by one, the Autobots pulled various wrapped packages out of subspace. "What's all this?" I wondered.

"Gifts for the both of you," Will Lennox explained. "You got them all salaries and the money was burning a hole in their pockets." He turned to the assembled 'bots. "So, who's first?"

Bumblebee came forward and placed a wrapped gift in both my hand and in Optimus' – a book by the feel of it. When I pulled the wrapping paper off, it was a photo album with the words "My Family Photos" on the front.

"Open it," he eagerly quoted.

Half the binder was full of pictures of Optimus. Other 'bots were in the pictures, too, and I recognized some of them like Ratchet, Arcee, Elita and Jazz. A lot of the pictures were from when he was pretty young, some showed him in space, and the last few pages were of him on Earth. A part of me was thrilled to have a waking, tangible reminder of my brother – it would help me not miss him so much. A different part of me was terrified of owning something like this. Where could I possibly hide it so that my roomies didn't see it?

"The other half of the album is for you to fill," Arcee softly explained for 'Bee.

I looked up into Bumblebee's blue optics and realized I could store the album in his trunk. It would be safe there, and he could keep both me and the book hidden when I wanted to thumb through it. The thought warmed my heart, knowing that Bumblebee had probably already anticipated all that. He really was the best. "Thanks, 'Bee!"
He bobbed his head with a chirp – his way of saying 'you're welcome' – and I grinned.

Optimus' gift was identical except that the first half of his album was full of pictures of me from the time I was a baby all the way up to the present.

Mikaela's eyes brightened with an unholy light at the sight of eighteen-month-old Sammy in the bathtub. "Oooh! Can I see?"

"Of course," Optimus rumbled before thanking Bumblebee.

Ratchet sidled forward. "My plan for you, Samuel, was a personal energy shield, but I was voted down in favor of an Earth-based theme for the presents. So Optimus is the only recipient of my gift." He handed my brother an envelope.

Curiously Optimus opened it and poured the contents out into his hands. It was a bumper sticker with red words against a blue background that read "Because I'm the Prime, that's why." The word "Prime" was written with the Cybertronian glyph.

"Thank you," Optimus said, amused with just a slight edge to his gratitude. It felt almost like an inside joke, and I got the distinct impression that he rarely pulled rank like that – except with Ratchet. I also got the feeling that Ratchet wasn't usually impressed when Optimus did.

Skids and Mudflap were next with mudguards for Optimus' trailer. Looking at them more closely, I realized they had outlines of Elita One on them in silver. They were mostly plastered at this point, and Skids said, "We wanted to present a gift worthy of our esteem of you, something that you would love," Skids said. Mudflap added, "And we knew you loved her!"

Optimus was torn. The sight of his mate struck him with sorrow, but at the same time, he knew the twins had meant well. Solemnly he said, "Thank you, Skids and Mudflap." They were obviously pleased that he had taken them so seriously, but only I could feel that Optimus' dignity was a cloak for his grief.

Arcee handed me a small present, and I nervously took it. It looked suspiciously like a jewelry box, and coming from a femme…well…I wasn't sure what to expect. The fact that Optimus was smirking at me behind that virtual mask of his didn't help. Unwrapping the gift, I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw it was just a watch. It was made of a steel-gray metal with dual numbers on the face – the outer set was Roman numerals while the inner set was normal numbers. In the middle of the watch face in a gold design was a kind of funny circle sitting on a T.

"That symbol is called an ankh," Arcee explained, "an Egyptian hieroglyph representing the divine gift of life. The gods carried an ankh, especially the sun god. Considering…well, all things considered, it seemed fitting for Samuel Prime to wear one, too. Mikaela explained that human males don't adorn themselves like their female counterparts, and you don't have a uniform, but we figured this would be safe."

The golden ankh-symbol glinted in the sun, and I remembered again how Ratchet was so in awe of me after I brought both Optimus and Arcee back to life. The Autobots weren't quite as hero-worshippy as before, but it suddenly struck home that they were never going to let me live that down. Forcing myself to smile, I looked up at the femme. "Thanks, Arcee."

"You're welcome," she answered in a formal tone. "Jolt inscribed the back for you."

I pulled the watch out of the box and turned it over to see the Prime glyph engraved on the back cover.
"Now your gears match the ones on Optimus' head," Jolt declared.

Optimus' humor swelled over the bond, and I genuinely grinned at the blue mech. "Thanks!"

His door-capes weren't anywhere near as expressive as Bumblebee's, but they twitched slightly in what I was sure was delight. "My pleasure, Samuel."

Sideswipe came next and presented Optimus with a gift-wrapped book that turned out to be about famous bridges. My brother Prime was surprised and deeply touched by the gift, and I decided I needed to ask him about that in our shared dream tonight. There was obviously a story here he hadn't told me yet.

After the silver mech were a bunch of NEST guys led by Lennox and Epps. They hauled out what looked like a portable metal cabinet or chest, but it was the size of a large piano. Once the dust settled, Epps patted the side of the chest with a disturbingly goofy grin. "Here you go, Optimus – an Autobot-sized foot locker."

"You probably need it about as much as you do a salary," Will added with a slight smirk. "Still. Cars don't need personal space; sentient organisms are a different story. So here you go – personal space, or as best as we could manage for you."

Will's words warmed Optimus' spark, and I found myself smiling. It might be completely useless to give a footlocker to a being who had subspace pockets, but it was still a meaningful gesture. And who knows – maybe Optimus could find a use for it.

"And last but not least," Sarah Lennox said, opening her garage door, "is a present from myself, Ironhide, Wheelie, and the NEST motor pool."

Ironhide reached into the garage and lifted out…an enormous oil cake.

"You're kidding," I blurted out even as Optimus was caught up in a swell of emotion. Wistful nostalgia, homesickness, grief, and the warmth that comes from another's kindness all chased each other across the bond.

The oil cake was on what looked like one of those 8-foot-in-diameter banquet tables. Ironhide put it on the sand in front of Optimus and then stood almost shyly in front of him. But all I could see was a refueling establishment on Cybertron where Elita, Arcee, and Chromia had hunted Optimus down with Jazz's help. Ironhide wasn't there, but his future mate was. Kin, I remembered with startling clarity. Ironhide was Optimus' kin. And now mine, too. Kinda.

"Well if you're too scared to do it, I will," Wheelie grumped at Ironhide, dodging when 'Hide swiped at him. The little scavenger returned from the garage a moment later with a small vial in his hands. Hopping up onto the middle of the cake, he upended its contents – energon. A couple tablespoons of the precious liquid dripped onto the top layer of the oil cake and it was instantly absorbed.

"Wait!" Optimus exclaimed too late.

"That's all that was left after repairs were completed," Ratchet softly told him. I had to strain to hear, and I was right next to them. "It wasn't enough to do any good, and Sarah suggested we all have a little fun with what little remained."

Apparently not hearing Ratchet, Wheelie defiantly crossed his arms. "Spitfire said I could."

Frozen somewhere between touched and alarmed, Optimus just nodded his head. "Spitfire is wise." Though he didn't show it at all, I could feel he was deeply troubled. Recovering a little, he looked
out over his Autobots. "Who will join me?"

The mechs and femme crowded around, and Optimus shot me a playfully curious glance.

"Not a chance," I answered him. "You couldn't pay me enough to eat that!"

With great dignity and an internal brotherly smirk, Optimus declared, "You don't know how much I make, Sam."

Sarah Lennox's laughter rolled over me and I turned to see another banquet table, this one with a huge sheet cake on it – a real one. Written in blue frosting was the simple message "Glad you made it, Sam."

I was as touched as Optimus.

Chapter End Notes

Author's End Note: If you'd like to see my inspiration for the watch Arcee gave to Sam, check out this site.
The party lasted until well into the night, but I think Arcee, Mikaela and I were the only ones still sober after dinner, besides Johnston and Quinn of course. Along with Arcee, the mechanics tried to wake Ratchet up enough to get him to go back to the hangar to sleep it off. (He'd managed to drink himself into oblivion a little while after the Autobots gave us the gifts.) Eventually they gave up and just had Optimus load him up onto the flatbed he had brought the 'bot liquor in. A non-sentient semi showed up a few minutes later to haul Ratchet home.

I had to give up and call it a night by about 10 PM, which was way early for me and I could almost hear Leo scolding me for missing out on the party. Wheelie was too…stoned I guess to care. (Arcee may have said 'overcharged' isn't like 'drunk' but it all looked the same to me.) Bumblebee didn't seem to mind turning in so soon, especially when Arcee insisted on escorting us to make sure we arrived safely. She was, after all, the designated driver.

That night Mikaela and I stayed again in the R&R cabins on the east end of the island, and this time we were the only ones there. Alone. It was amazing how quiet it was, especially after Arcee left and Bumblebee went into recharge. Not the purr of an engine or the distant sound of a siren. Not even the hum of a street lamp – just the soft hiss of the waves on the shore. Mikaela stood with her toes in the warm water looking out over the ocean, and I couldn't help walking over to her.

"Want to go for a midnight swim?" I asked her.

"And have you drown 'cause you yawned under water? Bumblebee would kill me."

I pretended to pout, wrapping her up in my arms. "But then you can't give me mouth-to-mouth."

"Who says?" she quipped, her eyes sparkling.

"Party's not over?" I guessed.

"Not if you don't want it to be."

And then, just to prove her right about the drowning thing, I yawned.

…

In my sleep, Optimus was waiting on the flight deck as usual, which kind of surprised me.

"I always come here first," he said as I took my place beside him. "Even when I know I will be alone."

"Me, too," I admitted. "Once, anyway. But I can't control my dreams like you can."
He nodded, accepting the truth of it and feeling touched that I came alone to the flight deck, too.

"So where do we go today?" I asked him. "Er, tonight I mean."

His gaze went out over the ocean again, and I saw that we were with a whole battle group instead of just the aircraft carrier like usual. The wind coming off the water was much colder, too. "The Laurentian Abyss," he said by way of explanation. "Jazz was buried at sea nearby."

"Oh." I'd almost forgotten about that. "How soon will you…be able to raise him to the surface?"

"A GPS device was attached to his coffin but it did not survive at that depth. We are still trying to locate him."

"Oh," I said again, feeling dumb and kind of awkward.

"I do not know if we'll find him before Thanksgiving."

Which was about a month away now. "About that…"

He gave me his undivided attention.

"I don't know exactly what we're doing this year. I mean, my parents' new place isn't home for me, and last I knew they were planning on coming to visit me in New England, if the weather will let them."

"Home is where your kin are, Sam." And he wrapped me up in a hug of the heart, letting me know that as long as we were together, he didn't care where we were for the holiday.

Remembering how sensing the bond again felt like coming home more than anything I'd ever felt, I returned the hug. "You're right. But are you sure you want to brave the cold? We might even have snow."

Abruptly we were on a far-flung planet with bluish-green snow blasting horizontally across my brother's armor. It stole the heat from Optimus' frame and his spark flared hot to compensate. "Methane blizzard," he rumbled.

Just as suddenly, we were back on the flight deck. Internally smirking, Optimus said, "I think I can handle a Nor'easter."

I rolled my eyes at him.

He chuckled before changing the subject. "Where would you like to go tonight, Sam?"

I remembered my curiosity from the party. "What's with the book about bridges? Can you show me that story?"

Instantly we were on Cybertron. We stood in a glass tunnel for a skywalk or something. Across the way, I could see layer upon layer of buildings, all interconnected with skywalks. The skyscrapers were so tall that I had to squint to see their tops, even when seeing through Optimus' optics.

"Look down," he prompted.

Stepping close enough to press my nose to the glass, I did, dizzily realizing I couldn't really see the ground, either. The buildings came together in my view, forming a hexagonal hole in the space between them.
"Polyhex," Optimus said, a swell of pride rolling across the bond. "It was my third professional engagement after graduating in architecture and civil engineering. A commerce clan wanted to convert one of their production districts into a residential development and commissioned me to design the towers. They wanted to fit an entire city in an area large enough for a village."

"You designed this?" I breathlessly wondered. It just seemed weird that Optimus had a day job, that once upon a time he had to earn a living like the rest of us. Of course, it wasn't strange at all that his day job would involved stuff this…this epic.

He nodded, pointing toward a skywalk across the way. "The bridges are the key to the whole development. Like honeycombs on your world, Polyhex consisted of over a hundred six-sided residential towers, hence the name. Normally, structures this tall would be too unstable, but by strategically linking each building, they support each other. Polyhex was remarkable even by Cybertronian standards."

"I can see that," I replied. "And one of the advantages to having all these bridges is you can get from one side of the city to the other without having to go all the way to the ground, right?"

His approval warmed my heart. "Yes."

"Wow."

Optimus chuckled and then turned toward the nearby entrance to the bridge. "Greetings, Master Mirage."

A youngling mech just…appeared. Rather than swooping up, his doorwings flowed down and back, looking vaguely like a cape. Rich colors, finely detailed, adorned his blue paint, but something about the way he stood was either sullen or disappointed. "Optimus," he coolly answered.

"You are becoming adept with your cloak, if I may be so bold, young master."

"You may," he said, lifting his chin a little (even though he was almost straining to look up at my brother).

For reasons I just couldn't understand, Optimus felt this snobby kid was kind of cute. "For such a short time in your third shell, you have excellent control of the energy shielding."

He tilted his head. "Of course."

My brother fought a grin. "Even sound was effectively contained within your cloak."

The youngling narrowed his optics slightly, and Optimus kept his expression neutral with great effort. Inside he was ready to burst out in laughter.

Finally, the youngling's composure broke and he all but whined, "How did you know, Optimus?"

"Far be it for me to give away the secrets of my clan," Optimus gravely intoned in answer, though he was feeling pretty pleased with himself.

"Oh, come on! You're the only person left who can tell when I'm there. I even snuck up on Megatron a few solar cycles ago, so don't give me a load of slag about your mysterious clan."

Optimus crossed his arms in defiance. "You have insulted my kin, Master Mirage."

With a roar of frustration, he stomped his foot. "I command you to tell me."
Silently, Optimus cocked an optic ridge at the tantrum-throwing Mirage.

After huffing and stomping a few more times, the youngling hung his head. "Please tell me, Optimus. Please, good sir?"

"Knowledge is a hard-won prize," Optimus answered, feeling indulgent. "But it is also meant to be shared." Leaning close and darting his optics back and forth to make sure they wouldn't be overheard, he whispered, "Physical displacement. Your cloak will hide you, but it doesn't send you into subspace like a warp. The air molecules know you are there, and I myself designed the circulation system in these towers. You must move with the world around you, not against it, if you want to blend in."

"But…" The youngling frowned thoughtfully for a second and then disappeared.

"Um…who was that?" I wondered.

He turned his optics to me and wry humor and sorrow mingled in his spark, as it did much too often. "That was Mirage, the lone member of his clan to join the Autobots. It was his… grandfather, I suppose you'd call him, who commissioned Polyhex, and when the war broke out Mirage's clan sided squarely with Megatron. Polyhex became a Decepticon stronghold, before it was destroyed."

Optimus glanced at the empty space where Mirage once stood and a sort of fondness swelled across the bond. "Mirage was both curious and mischievous at this age and drove his elders mad at times, especially once he discovered his cloak. They sent him to bother me when they tired of him, and he found me a bit more interesting and harder to control. He learned to respect me for who I was and what I knew, not for who my progenitors were. Eventually that respect grew into friendship. And for the record, that was the fourth time that day in which I caught him. Normally he was much better behaved."

"Did he ever sneak up on you?" I wondered.

"Eventually, yes, and in a spectacular way. He followed me into my office and de-cloaked right in front of my face. I didn't have the slightest idea he was there and I bellowed so loudly that Jazz came running with weapons drawn."

I tried to imagine Optimus screaming like a girl startled by a spider…and couldn't. "He's lucky you didn't take his head off."

My brother chuckled. "I was just Optimus then. No title of Prime, no energon swords. Had he been foolish enough to attempt the same prank now, he would not be alive to tell the tale, which would be lamentable."

"He's still alive, then?"

Optimus nodded, cautious hope filling him. "As far as I know, yes. He was in excellent hands when we parted last." He looked out over the city again, shaking off the waking world and losing himself in memory again. "All of Cybertron's surface was owned by various commerce clans with one exception – the Temple at Simfur that housed the All Spark. That belonged to our race as a whole, and all the bounties belonged to us equally as well. Anyone could visit there at any time, and anyone could produce a protoform and bring it to the All Spark in hopes of life being granted. Anyone could come and receive a ration of energon. On the same grounds, a council composed of representatives of every clan met to govern the affairs of my people."

"So anyone could get energon anytime?" I interrupted him. I knew from Jetfire that energon was
crucial to the Autobots' functioning, so it seemed strange that they would just give it away.

"Within reason," Optimus said. "Because energon was only produced at Simfur, it became the city's most important export, but because it was so readily available, its value in trade was not as high as you might think. It was worth less than gold is worth on your world."

"Huh."

Anxious worry crept over Optimus' spark. "Now there is none left."

"None on Earth, you mean. Right?"

The weight on his spark grew until it was heartbreaking. "No. The very last of the energon known to exist was ingested tonight. Ironhide had held it in reserve all this time."

The knowledge was like a punch to the gut. "So if you and Megatron made a truce right this minute, your race would still die out?"

I was surprised at how stoic he was when he answered, "Yes."

My own despair was much worse. "And all that talk about hope for Elita and Jazz is pointless, too."

"Perhaps," he admitted, though hope pulsed in his spark. "Perhaps not. There is something I would like to attempt with you, brother." He opened a compartment in his hip. The Matrix of Leadership glimmered softly in the pocket. He retrieved it, and I knew that somehow this wasn't just a memory or a thought of my brother's or even a dreaming version of the Matrix. This was the real thing in Optimus' hand.

"The Cube produced energon," Optimus explained. "I want to attempt extracting energon from the Matrix."

The thought blew me away. "How?"

Frustrated, he answered, "Uncertain. I was hoping that you might have an idea."

I looked at it for a second, staring into the blue light shimmering in Optimus' hand. "How did you make energon from the Cube?"

"It condensed on ceramic surfaces. Large vessels were kept under the Cube and were spontaneously filled."

My brow furrowed. "Ceramic surfaces?"

Mild amusement crept into his mix of emotions. "Ceramic does not react with energon. If the Matrix operated in the same way, Iron Will would have given up coffee long ago."

I snorted a half-laugh, and then an idea hit me. "What about the Dynasty of the Primes? Do you think they could help?"

"I have not attempted to contact them," he admitted. "I had not thought to. Come with me. Matrix particles flow in your blood, Sam. You arguably have a closer connection to it than any Cybertronian."

I let him feel my annoyance at that. "Don't you start the hero-worship thing, too, Optimus."

He shrugged. "It was merely a statement of fact. Come with me into the Matrix, brother," he
repeated.

With a sigh, I nodded. "Fine. I'll try."

He rested a hand on my shoulder, and the halls of Polyhex faded into brilliant blue.

…

I jumped awake, terror making my heart race. *I couldn't feel him!*

Throwing off the covers, I staggered into my clothes, tripping over things in the darkness, before Mikaela was even awake enough to realize something was wrong. "Wha?" she finally mumbled, turning on the bedside lamp.

"I can't feel him, Mikaela. Something's wrong with Optimus."

"He's probably drunk, Sam."

"No. This is different."

Worry crossed her face before she grimaced and then staggered out of bed, too. "Let's go."

We rounded the bottom of the island, passed the checkpoint to leave the restricted area, and headed back up toward the Autobot hangar. I could feel the emptiness – the nothingness – on Optimus' end of the bond. It didn't hurt like I expected. I just felt…like I was drowning. Sinking, swallowing, drowning in nothingness. Each heartbeat and breath felt like a grinding weight pushing me deeper into that void where Optimus used to be.

Bumblebee must have commed ahead because Ironhide, and Arcee were waiting for us in the hangar next to Optimus' alt-form. The femme was doing some fancy things with her sensors – zooming her optics in and out and moving her hands around like she was taking readings.

"Are you getting anything?" I demanded.

"Nothing dangerous," Ironhide answered.

"Yet," Arcee corrected crisply. "Frag Ratchet to the Pit and back for being overheated right now. Optimus' spark rhythms have slowed and his processors are completely off-line."

"He's brain-dead?" Mikaela demanded.

"No, just…there's no human equivalent."

"He's not here," I said, trying to beat down the panic.

"He's not," Arcee agreed, her hand transforming into something pointy. Lying down beside the passenger-side door, she reached under his chassis and jammed the pointy tool up into Optimus' engine compartment.

Bumblebee's speakers crackled to life. "…an out-of-body experience."

I stepped closer, placing my hand on Optimus' grille, and only then did I feel a flicker across the bond. I couldn't even tell what it was a flicker of, only that he wasn't dead. It was enough to ease the sense of nothingness.

"How did you know?" the femme wondered.
"Hmm?" I answered, focusing on trying to feel that flicker again.

"How did you know Optimus was in trouble? We'd still be in recharge if it weren't for you."

"The dream," I absently said. "He wanted to make energon and so he brought out the Matrix and then…went into it, I guess. I tried to follow and couldn't."

"He what?" Arcee shrieked. Skittering to her feet, she pointed a commanding finger at Ironhide. "Lift him up on his side. We can't wait for Ratchet to come around."

Worry filled me – I was pretty sure it was mine, though a hopeful part of me thought it might be Optimus.

Ironhide reached under Optimus' running boards and tilted my brother up so Arcee could scramble underneath him. She broke into all three components, each one working individually to remove armor and peel back plating, tearing a hole into his undercarriage. Bumblebee stepped closer to Optimus and opposite Ironhide so that, between them, Optimus was steady even though he was almost on his side.

"What are you doing?" Mikaela asked, trailing behind Arcee with fascination plain on her face.

"Removing the Matrix," the pink component firmly answered.

"Why?" I demanded.

"Something is wrong. If we remove it, I'm hoping his systems will reset."

That didn't feel right. "But…I don't think…"

"I've been in the Matrix, Samuel – when I was dead," pink-Arcee interrupted, viciously ripping out a panel to reveal wiring and tubing. The blue component reached up to push back the electrical guts.

"Oh." The drowning-panic came back full force. What if he was dead? What if I was the last Prime? For a split second I was in Mission City again, Megatron crawling toward me, Optimus disabled behind me, the All Spark in my hands. Alone. The fate of the world rested squarely on my shoulders and mine alone.

But now I was responsible for two worlds and not just protecting them but leading and spiritually guiding and serving and saving them. The very last of the energon was gone. And if Optimus was gone and I couldn't find a way to get some from the Matrix…

Arcee worked in tense silence, her purple component half-climbing into the hole she was digging into Optimus' chassis. "I've almost got it, but I'm out of hands."

"I can help," Mikaela volunteered, squishing into Arcee's mass of arms and legs. "What do you need me to do?"

"Just reach up through here and…"

Alarm shot through me and I blurted out, "No! Wait!"

Energy sizzled and surged, throwing Mikaela down and away from Optimus' frame. Disaster. Tonight was just one horrific disaster. I ran to her, but she wasn't moving and an icy thrill of terror ran through me. "No, no, no, Mikaela, come on! Wake up!" I bent over her parted lips and felt the soft brush of her breath against my cheek. Breathing. She was breathing. Still worried, I pressed my
fingertip against her neck, looking for a pulse, but…I moved my fingers, searching and not finding.

"Samuel, her heartbeat is irregular and weak. Come get the Matrix and then I can stabilize her," Arcee urged.

But I couldn't leave Mikaela – not when she had never left me.

"Hurry, Samuel," Ironhide added.

I tried to find the will to walk away.

"You're a Prime. The Matrix won't harm you," the femme said, misunderstanding my hesitation.

But she was right – I was a Prime, and that meant hard choices. Forcing myself to my feet, I ran to Optimus and scrambled up Arcee's components until I could see the Matrix. It glimmered faintly, even in the dark cavity of Optimus' frame. I reached in and grabbed it, and it flared blindingly bright. For a wild second, I thought maybe I did go into the Matrix.

Arcee lifted me down and then recombined to rush over to Mikaela without a backward glance. She rested her hand over Mikaela's heart, murmuring, "You'll be fine, little one."

I could…feel a throbbing, I guess, coming from Arcee, and my heart fell in rhythm with whatever she was doing to Mikaela. It was calming. Reassuring. Ironhide and Bumblebee carefully lowered Optimus to the ground again.

He still didn't move and I stood there in the space between him and Mikaela feeling stretched tight and completely alone. Optimus lost his brother and his mate. Looking at the Autobots in the room with me, I realized they'd lost their loved ones over and over and over until they were truly alone.

"You'll be fine, little one," Arcee cooed again to Mikaela. "It's not your time yet. Strong heart, brave heart, you'll be fine. Just follow me."

I reached across the bond, but Optimus didn't respond, and I felt the pull toward the suffocating emptiness. I couldn't feel panic this time, not with Arcee holding my heart rate steady, but my worry was almost overwhelming. Why wasn't Optimus coming back online?
Trust

Chapter Notes

There's a moment with Ironhide in this chapter that will have a lot more depth if you're familiar with my fic *Kindred Minds*, though you'll understand it just fine even if you haven't read it.

"Sir?"

I whirled at the sound of woman's voice behind me. A NEST officer was standing a few, hesitant feet away from me and from where Arcee was still trying to stabilize Mikaela. "Mr. Witwicky? I've called paramedics for Miss Baines, but not all of them have the same technology clearance we do." Her eyes darted to the Matrix in my hand.

And then I realized that we weren't the only ones in the hangar. SLAG! Besides the officer, there were three other people huddling together at one of the work stations lining the wall and watching us anxiously. They'd heard everything about the bond dream and going into the Matrix. And more humans were coming.

"Right," I said, trying to gather my wits. I couldn't exactly put the Matrix back into the compartment on Optimus' frame, not after Arcee ripped it open. I glanced up at Bumblebee, but he shook his head 'no.' After what happened to Mikaela, I was sure that no other Autobot would store it for me, either.

"Find him a rucksack, Thomaczech," Ironhide ordered.

"Yessir," she crisply answered and one of the other humans hurried over to a supply closet. A tense, silent moment later, he returned with a military-green backpack like the ones I'd seen Lennox or Epps wear. Considering the last time I had to haul the Matrix along, it had been in a sweatsock, I figured this was probably an improvement. I dropped the Matrix into the backpack and swung it up onto my shoulders.

Red and blue emergency lights reflected off the planes outside the open hangar door, but the ambulance was silent when it pulled into the hangar. Four men hopped out, two of them retrieving a gurney. The other two hurried over to Arcee. "Status," one of the medics demanded.

"She was on the receiving end of a power surge of spark energy," Arcee calmly but quickly answered. "She's been unconscious for the last four and a half minutes. She never stopped breathing but her heart rate was erratic. I delivered a therapeutic electrical charge to the heart to defibrillate it and have been rhythmically stimulating her heart-muscle cells for the last four minutes."

"Like a pacemaker?" the medic who seemed to be in charge asked.

"More or less."

He pulled a stethoscope out of his gear and Arcee moved her hand out of his way. She remained on her knees beside Mikaela, though, ready to help again if needed. The throbbing stopped, and my own heart rate began picking up again. After a few anxious seconds of listening to her heart, the medic said, "She seems stable for the moment. Well done."
Arcee hung her head and didn't answer.

The medic nodded to his assistant, and they put an IV in Mikaela's arm. Then the assistant gestured toward the guys with the gurney, and they brought it up alongside Mikaela. Arcee finally rose to her feet and stepped aside so the humans could gently move Mikaela onto it.

They were taking her away, and I was torn in two. Part of me needed to be here with Optimus, but Mikaela needed me, too. I looked up at Bumblebee, and his antennae fell back as he realized my dilemma.

"Go," Ironhide ordered. "Meddling has caused more harm than good. We'll comm Bumblebee the astrosecond there's a change in Optimus."

I nodded, realizing I'd probably sense any change over the bond before they saw anything. "Just for a little while."

'Bee transformed, opening his driver's side door in invitation, and we followed the ambulance to the hospital.

The trip to the hospital was short and quiet, but a triage nurse with "Brandy" on her nametag intercepted us in the emergency room. "And you are?"

"Sam. Sam Witwicky. Mikaela's my girlfriend."

Comprehension dawned in her eyes, and whatever her security clearance was, she knew enough to realize I was a VIP. "I see, Mr. Witwicky. I have a few questions for you then."

Story of my life.

Nurse Brandy led the way to a small room and began reviewing some questions on a clipboard, things like Mikaela's height and weight and blood type. Then she pointed us to a couple of uncomfortable-looking plastic chairs against the wall. "I'll have to ask you to wait here for the time being."

"Okay."

A doctor approached us about a half-hour later. "Mr. Witwicky?"

I rose to my feet. "Yeah?"

"I'm Mike Freemont, Diego Garcia's chief surgeon. Can I talk with you for a minute?"

"Of course," I answered and fell in step with him as he led me to an exam room. Bumblebee followed us in.

Leaning against a counter there, he said, "Tell me again how Ms. Baines sustained her injuries."

"Um…"

"I have Autobot clearance," he added, nodding toward Bumblebee's holoform.

"Right." That made things easier. "She got shocked while messing with an Autobot's internals. Arcee was helping her."

Dr. Freemont looked to Bumblebee. "I don't suppose you know anything about the strength of the shock?"
Bee shook his head no, but added with a quote, "...I've never seen anything like it!"

The doctor snorted at that one. "Happens more often than not on Diego Garcia. Well, if an Autobot has never seen anything like it, then I'll tell you flat-out that I don't know what to make of her condition, either. She has second-degree burns on about three percent of her body, mostly on her hands, knees, and feet. Frankly, I've seen worse sunburns, so the burns don't worry me too much, but her continued unconsciousness has me concerned."

Just like Optimus, she wasn't waking up when she should.

"Would you like to see her?"

"Yes," I immediately answered.

...Bee and I stayed by Mikaela's side for the next hour or so in a private hospital room. Mostly Bumblebee stood guard, keeping a certain little remote-control truck over by the door where it should be. I caressed Mikaela's face and talked to her, hoping the contact would bring her around. Finally, finally, her eyelids fluttered.

"Bumblebee?" I urgently said.

He glanced at her and a huge smile lit his face. She was waking up!

"Mikaela?" When she didn't even twitch at the sound of her name, I tried the old standby of raising my voice. If nothing else, she might wake up enough to say some people were trying to sleep here. "Mikaela! Do you hear me?"

She opened her eyes wide and then focused on me, her expression melting from surprise to relief. "Sam!"

"Doctor Freemont!" I hollered in the direction of the door and he came hurrying into the room. The doctor spent a few minutes checking her vitals, testing her reactions, and asking about her pain levels. After making sure she was relatively comfortable, Dr. Freemont shrugged a little and said, "Call me if you need anything."

Only then did I believe that she really was going to be okay. "Hey, beautiful," I said once we were the only humans in the room.

"Hey, famous," she answered with a little smile.

"You had us all worried."

"I'm fine, I promise."

"And I can't believe Arcee put you at risk like that."

Mikaela shook her head at me. "How was she supposed to know, Sam? You know tons more about the Matrix than any of the rest of us."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

She quietly laughed. "Do you have any idea how much you sound like your mom right now?"

I snorted. "To you, Mom might say something like that. To me, she'd ask if I OD'd."
"Of if you were having a little too much 'happy time,'" she added with a smirk.

Bumblebee wheezed a laugh and Mikaela turned to him. "You haven't been wasting time here too, have you?"

Still grinning, he shook his head 'no' and patted her bandaged hand.

Her eyes sparkled and she blushed a tiny bit. "Thanks, 'Bee."

Turning her attention back to me, she asked, "Hey, Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"Did the Primes look like Autobots? Or were they more like The Fallen?"

That was an odd question. "They were more like The Fallen with a lot of poky things. I doubt they could transform." And then I remembered that I hadn't told her about meeting them. She had no way of knowing that I'd actually seen them. "Why do you ask?"

She closed her eyes, still a little weak. Or maybe she was trying to remember something. "Just...I had a weird dream, I guess. I don't remember much, just you standing in this rocky place talking to a bunch of humongous mechs. They had red optics, but they seemed...gentle and I wasn't scared for you. One thing was really strange, though. The lighting was funny, like it was shining through a waterfall or something."

I blinked in surprise. "Did they talk to you, too?"

"No. Or at least, I don't remember them talking to me. Just you, off in the distance." She opened her eyes again, worry making them tight. "Do you think it means anything?"

She saw that vision after getting shocked by the Matrix? How could that not mean something? "Yes," I admitted, "but I don't know what." Patting her arm, I said, "Don't worry about it for now. I'll..." I was going to say 'ask Optimus' but I had no idea when or even if he'd wake up. The emptiness pulled on me, and I forced myself to focus on her again. "We'll figure it out later. I just need you to get better."

She half-laughed. "I had worse after Mission City." Worry flitted across her face again. "Optimus?"

I shook my head. "No word."

Frowning, she seemed to consider for a second. "You'd better go back to the hangar."

"I can't leave you."

"Puh-lease, Sam. I'm fine! Trust me. Just go. You need to...do whatever you Primes do. Get him back."

She was right, and the emptiness pulled so hard it almost hurt. I needed him back. "I'll just go check on him. I'll be back before you know it."

"Don't worry, Warrior Goddess," Wheelie declared as he transformed and hauled himself up onto her bed. "I'll stay with you!"

I grimaced, but Mikaela chuckled. "I'm sure you will. But you'd better stay in your alt or you're going to give some poor nurse a heart attack."
Wheelie obediently returned to his toy truck mode, content now that he was up on her hospital bed. Relaxing into her pillow again, Mikeala said to me, "See you soon."

Stealing a quick kiss from her (and throwing one last glare at Wheelie), I stood and left the room.

... The sun had just cleared the horizon when Bumblebee and I drove into the Autobot hangar. The same NEST people were still there, along with Will, Epps, and a few more random soldiers. No more Autobots had joined the group, though. Lennox hurried over to me while 'Bee transformed. "Mikaela's fine," I blurted out.

"Good." And then he turned his commander's glare on me. "Tell me what happened."

Well, here went nothing. "Optimus decided last night to make more energon from the Matrix but we didn't know how. He…" I couldn't remember how much Lennox knew, and if the Autobots hadn't told him, then I shouldn't either, human Prime or not. "…I…"

"Listen to me," he all but snarled. "I've fought alongside Optimus. I brought him to Egypt 'cause you told me to. Have a little trust in your fellow humans, okay? I need to know what happened because Thomaczech had to detail the basics of what happened in the morning report, and the JCS is going to panic if I can't give them some kind of answer."

The void on Optimus bond pulled painfully at me and I huffed in frustration, taking it out on Will. Hissing through gritted teeth, I said, "You want the whole story? Fine! You know I'm a Prime? Well all Primes are brothers, just like Skids and Mudflap. There's this mystical dynasty of Primes who were in charge of the All Spark and Optimus is their last descendant. So Optimus decided to try to commune with his dead ancestors to figure out how to make energon. He invited me along over our brother bond, but apparently I got lost or something because I just woke up and Optimus isn't responding. I think he's having an out-of-body experience and from what I can tell, I'm the closest thing the Autobots have to a shaman to get him back. But I have no more idea how to do that than I do how to contact the Dynasty, so you figure out what to tell the JCS because I have bigger problems on my hands right now!"

I wanted to add "HAPPY, NOW?" but that seemed inappropriate considering he wearing a sidearm. The six-foot-plus warrior who had survived Qatar and personally assaulted Decepticons rocked back on his heels. "Okay, then. I'll leave you to the brother-Primes-saving-the-universe stuff and tell the JCS Optimus is malfunctioning and Ratchet will fix him when he wakes up."

"Thanks," I snapped as he walked away.

Epps stood just close enough to catch that last bit and un成功fully tried to cover his snigger as he fell in with Lennox. The rest of the NEST humans made a point of going about their business.

In the meantime, Arcee had drifted closer. "Samuel?"

I sighed, deflating (and the emptiness over the bond pulled me just a little bit deeper in). "She's fine, Arcee. Second-degree burns on a few places but nothing super serious. The doctor taking care of her was actually surprised that her condition was that good."

Arcee nodded. "Thank you for informing me. I wanted to inform you that we have observed no change in Optimus' condition since you left."

Having been around Optimus enough, I recognized her implied question and answered it. "I haven't
felt any change either."

She nodded again, resigned this time.

Side-by-side, we walked toward my brother's alt-form, Bumblebee hovering close by. "What do you normally do when a mech gets stuck in a bond dream?" I wondered.

"It's very rare for that to happen because internal chronometers alert the brothers when they need to come out of recharge. In the highly unlikely event that both brothers lost track of time, resetting the chronometer is the only treatment I'm aware of."

"And you tried that?"

The guilt in her voice grew thicker. "After you left with Mikaela, yes."

"Hey," I said, looking up at her. "Feeling bad isn't going to fix anything."

Her blue optics regarded me for a moment. "Neither will your forgiveness," she quietly answered. "I've tried everything I can think of and can do nothing more, Samuel. I'm sorry. You might be able to help him still."

"How?"

She hesitated. "I'm no Prime."

"But…"

"Normally I'd say try reaching across the bond toward him. But there's nothing normal about this."

That was cold comfort, but it was better than nothing. "I'll try."

Optimus' doors were locked (I mentally facepalmed after trying both doors – why on Earth would he keep them unlocked?), so I ended up sitting on one of his running boards, my head in my hands and eyes closed. Focusing inward, I mentally circled the bond, wary of the giant black hole where Optimus used to be. It pulled at me hard, but I managed to pull away. Optimus wouldn't force or frighten me into following him, so whatever this thing was, it wasn't him. The Matrix? Maybe. But it didn't exactly care whether I followed Optimus or not, did it? It's not like it had a soul like my brother…The All Spark! Optimus thought it was a manifestation of Primus, and the fact that it made me a Prime, like it or not, kind of fit with the whole idea of a god who couldn't care less that its creations were fighting themselves to extinction. It was also exactly the kind of deity who wouldn't think twice about sucking the life out of Cybertron's last Prime.

I frowned at that void on the other end of the bond. *Oh no you don't! You're not sticking me with saving the Autobots!*

A ghost of something brushed against my mind – wry humor that I'd know anywhere.

*Optimus!*

There was no answer from the other end of the bond, and I dared to mentally tread closer. *Give. Him. Back! Understand? We need him! I don't know if you care or if you can even hear me, but these Autobots need him! I can't be him – I can't fight Megatron and I can't lead the mechs and I'm even worse with the femme. I'm just Sam.*

Another familiar, feather-light whisper of emotion flickered in my mind. This time it was the unique
mix of disappointment, disbelief, and amusement Optimus felt when I said something like that.

It made me braver, feeling him a second time and knowing that he still felt that way about me. I don't know what your plans are for the Cybertronians, or if you even have plans, but if you want any kind of hope for them, we need Optimus alive and well. Send him back!

There was no response this time, and I frowned deeper. Hear me?

It was like yelling in a padded room – the sound was just swallowed up in the emptiness. I tried again, off and on, for the next hour or so, but I never got another response from Optimus.

I'd almost given up when, out of the blue, there was a flicker, and then a pulse, and then I felt Optimus' permanent hug slowly envelop me. "Sam," he softly said.

I jumped to my feet, my pounding heart holding his spark tightly. "You scared me, big guy."

Sounds of transformation began deep in his frame and I stepped back to give him room. He transformed slowly, almost wearily and then crouched down to be closer to my level. "Why didn't you follow me?"

"I tried. I couldn't. I just woke up."

Puzzlement crept across the bond. "It is the right of a Prime to seek guidance from his brothers, and they hailed you as one."

"No, they didn't," I corrected, still clinging to his spark with my heart. "They just said they'd been watching me for a long time. They didn't say anything about me being their brother."

Sudden doubt filled both me and Optimus. Had we been wrong about me being a Prime? The fact that Arcee was alive again to feel guilty about Mikaela was answer enough to that question. Maybe I was just Optimus' brother and not theirs? Maybe the bond was just a side-effect of using the Matrix? Maybe they should be calling me Accidental Prime.

Optimus sent me a soothing nudge over the bond before turning his attention to the hole in his hip where Arcee had dug out the Matrix. Other pieces of armor moved forward, patching it, but it was obviously just a temporary fix. With rebuke in his voice, he said to Arcee, "That was unwise."

Arcee hung her head. "Yes, it was."

Optimus stepped closer, his emotions a mix of disappointment, annoyance, mild betrayal, worry, and that affection he had for all his Autobots. Resting a gentle hand on the femme's shoulder, he simply said, "Trust me."

She looked up into his optics and slowly nodded. "Always."

And with that the rift was healed. I realized that, after sharing clan bonds for who knows how long, Optimus and his kin didn't need much in the way of words. Even with the bond severed, they knew each other inside and out – probably better than I knew my brother.

Optimus turned his attention to the other humans in the room, and I turned around, too. Lennox wasn't looking at Optimus, though. Instead he was looking at me with something in his eyes that was hard to read. Awe? Envy? Relief?

"Major Lennox," Optimus said, "I am aware we are not to be left unobserved, but I need to speak with my Autobots alone. Will you trust Sam to be sufficient as an observer?"
Will blinked once in surprise before turning all professional again. To the other NEST soldiers below, he said, "Lunch break. Everyone to the mess hall."

They filed out with the occasional curious glance, but no one looked upset, and I realized they all trusted me, every last one of them. The thought was a little frightening, though I'd never admit it.

Ironhide and Bumblebee closed the hangar doors, and when the human-sized door was closed and locked, too, Optimus turned his grave optics on me. "This is my task alone, but I would still have you with me, brother."

"You mean it worked? You contacted them?"

He nodded. "My brothers entrusted me with the knowledge I sought. They also instructed me that I may only perform this rite when the need is great." To Ironhide, he said, "You were the guardian of the energon vessel."

He straightened his shoulders. "Still am, Optimus."

"I require it."

Ironhide's massive chest armor began to move, eventually opening up a compartment in his torso. From it, he removed a small cube even more heavily-armored than he was and placed it on the ground. 'Hide passed his hand over the top of the cube and it began transforming, the sides rolling back to reveal a ceramic jar that might hold three gallons. Gingerly, Optimus picked it up and opened it.

"It's empty," 'Hide sorrowfully reminded him.

Optimus didn't answer, instead transforming his free hand into an energon blade. Bumblebee looked slightly alarmed, but I could feel the thrill of hope and determination that raced through Optimus and across our bond to fill my heart. This had to work!

Optimus raised his sword and began cutting a circular hole in the ceiling of the hangar until the piece fell to the cement floor with a clang. The morning sun came streaming in at an angle to shine directly on my brother, reflecting brilliantly off silver and chrome. He retracted the sword, replacing it with his hand, and then lifted both the energon vessel and the Matrix. For a split second, it was like there were two images in front of me – one of my brother raising his hands to the sunshine and the other of the statue from the art museum on Cybertron, *The Legend of Alpha Prime*. Despite our bond, this was my first, fleeting glimpse into the mech my brother really was.

I wasn't sure what to expect when the Matrix in Optimus' hand was touched by the rays of light. Blindness wasn't it, though; the room went completely black. I blinked against the darkness, trying to make my eyes adjust. Bumblebee made a worried little chirp beside me, so I knew I wasn't the only one who couldn't see.

Finally a glimmer became visible high above me, and I would have thought it was the Matrix except it was green. It gradually swelled larger until it abruptly winked out and then it began the process again. This happened four or five times before I realized what I was seeing – energon. As my eyes adjusted, I could make out a faint light that was the source of the energon. It was the Matrix, and the light inside really was green.

Waves of awe, joy, hope, and humility (from Optimus' side) washed back and forth across our brother bond. Drop by giant drop, the Matrix wept energon and Optimus caught it in the vessel.

It wasn't until a shuddering shiver ran through me that I noticed how cold the room was, which was
crazy because, even with the air conditioning blasting, the NEST hangar was never what you'd call cool. Bumblebee must have noticed my shiver, too, because I heard him move closer and felt the welcome warmth radiating off him.

I had no idea how much time passed in that eerie, frigid darkness, but eventually Optimus lowered the Matrix and the sunshine returned. Squinting against the light, I saw him place the vessel back in the armored box.

It was full.

A soft sigh escaped Arcee and beside me Bumblebee dropped to one knee and bowed his head, his wings and antenna lifted in joy. Ironhide and Arcee knelt at almost the same time, again with heads bowed. Applause, I remembered from the museum on Cyberton. Instead of clapping hands, they showed respect and applause by bowing their heads.

Optimus was...well...blown away is probably the best description – amazed, relieved, ecstatically happy and more than a little overwhelmed. I thought I understood why he was blown away, too. This was the first time he'd actually used the Matrix of Leadership. Up until now, he'd been a great leader and a fierce warrior, but you didn't have to be a Prime to do either. Making energon, though...not even I, his brother Prime, could do that.

For once, I had experience with something he didn't and I smirked at him like a good older brother should, pouring my unsurprised approval into the bond. Of course Optimus Prime could use the Matrix. If anybody could pull off something like this, it would be him. Obviously. Out loud, I simply said, "Prime."

Optimus' amusement bubbled up through that blown-away feeling, quickly followed by gratitude. "Prime," he answered, acknowledging me as one just like I had acknowledged him. To the others, he said, "Brothers, sister, rise. Do not kneel before me again."

They stood up, but their optics remained locked on him, though that didn't surprise or unnerve Optimus. "Tell no one of this," he instructed them. "I will inform Ratchet that we again have an emergency store of energon, but for the time being, I do not want that to be common knowledge. Ironhide, I commit the vessel to your keeping."

Still a little stunned, the black mech half-bowed as he accepted the sealed jar from Optimus and closed the protective box over it again. Once Ironhide had it safely stowed in his chest, my brother turned to me. "What is Mikaela's status?"

"They say she's going to be okay. She...had a strange dream while she was unconscious, though."

"You must tell me about it later," he answered.

Yeah. Later. Because Primely stuff probably shouldn't be blabbed about, even in front of Optimus' kin.

"Bumblebee can bring you back to the hospital so that you can stay with her until she is released. But perhaps we can discuss the dream at the R&R cabins afterward."

"Sounds good," I said. Bumblebee transformed and I headed toward his open door.

Optimus moved on to other business. "Arcee, please inform Major Lennox that we would welcome the humans' presence again."

I could almost feel the magic of the moment slipping away, drab old normal swallowing what had
just happened. It was inevitable, but I didn't want it to fade away like some dream. Optimus had used
the Matrix! And the Autobots had energon again – energon the Decepticons didn't have. I paused in
the middle of buckling my seatbelt as the realization hit me. This was a turning point in the War,
even more than the destruction of the Cube, even more than Optimus' resurrection. Whoa!

Lennox was the first human through the door, and through Bumblebee's rolled-down windows, I
heard him demand, "You cut a hole in the roof?"

Embarrassment flared across the bond and I started chuckling. As 'Bee drove us toward the hospital,
The doctors were pretty much waiting for me to arrive to release Mikaela, so we were on our way in about fifteen minutes after I walked back into the hospital. They wanted Mikaela to use a wheelchair since she had burns on her feet and the damage to her hands wouldn't let her use crutches, either. Not my Mikaela. She put an arm around both me and Bumblebee's holoform and hobbled out to his alt-form, Wheelie leading the way. Once we were safely inside 'Bee's cab, I told her that Optimus had come around, and she insisted on returning to the Autobot hangar before going to the R&R cabins to rest like the doctor had told us to.

"What happened?" she murmured. "It was like there was an eclipse or something."

"You saw that too?" I demanded. How much of Earth had blacked out when Optimus used the Matrix?

"Uh-huh. The power went out at the hospital and everything. It has something to do with Optimus, doesn't it."

"Yeah. He's awake now. Came out of it on his own. But if you want the whole story, you're going to have to get it out of him."

She shifted, relaxing into Bumblebee's seat. "Just promise me Decepticons weren't attacking and I'll be cool with it. For now."

I gave her a weak smile and stroked her arm (since I couldn't hold her bandaged hand). "I promise, no Decepticons were involved."

Rounding the corner into the hangar, it was impossible to miss Optimus, stretched to his full height and welding the circular piece of sheet metal back onto the roof. Skids and Mudflap were both awake now and watching in silence that meant they were either awestruck that the boss-bot got in trouble or simply hungover – I wasn't sure which. Lennox was standing a safe distance away, supervising Optimus with crossed arms. Bumblebee refused to unlock Mikaela's door, so she stayed in her seat and glowered at him, but I hopped out.

The feelings I was picking up from Optimus were odd – a mix of hope and dread. When I sent him my curiosity, he blocked his end of the bond, startling me. A few seconds later, though, he opened it again with a rush of both relief and disappointment. I made a mental note to ask him about that at the R&R cabins.

I stepped up next to Lennox and he said, "That's the last time I leave you to babysit!" Then his eyes darted to Mikaela and Bumblebee. "I need to talk to you. Now. Just you."

Yeah, I bet. Mikaela probably wasn't the only one who saw the sky go dark. Reluctantly, I followed
the soldier out of the hangar, glancing back at my girlfriend on my way. Skids and Mudflap were crouched down talking to her through 'Bee's open window, so I figured she'd be okay for a few minutes.

Will stalked down the NEST hallway, and I hurried to keep up with him. "Arcee's on top of the roof, getting ready to tar it when Optimus is done. If it were any other 'bot, I'd have just written it off as a prank, but him..." Will shoved open the door to a conference room where the officer from this morning was standing at attention.

"I want some answers," Will declared, shutting the door behind us. "Thomaczech refused to tell me anything beyond what's in the official report."

I glanced at her, but her expression was stone-still. "What is the official report?" I wondered.

Will crossed his arms, glaring. "What we talked about before. Optimus was malfunctioning, Arcee attempted repairs, Mikaela tried to help and got zapped, and so we decided to table Optimus' repair until Ratchet came around. Except Optimus came out of it on his own, asked me break one of the most fundamental NEST codes and to trust both him and you, the lights go out, and then he cuts a hole in the roof! What in the PIT is going on?"

To the officer with the unpronounceable name, I curiously said, "Why didn't you tell him?"

Her gaze finally flickered, darting first to me and then to Lennox before staring straight ahead again. "You are an Autobot, sir. A Prime. I don't know exactly what that means, but I do know it means you outrank both me and Major Lennox."

I half-laughed in disbelief at that, but Lennox glared at me in a way that vaguely reminded me of Optimus – he was annoyed with my own lack of self-confidence. "Even if that's true," I allowed, "Major Lennox is also Iron Will."

"You were upset that we were there. We heard things we weren't supposed to. Better to let you explain than to say things I shouldn't, sir."

Impressed, I looked to Will. "Are all NEST officers like this?"

"They wouldn't be here if they weren't. So tell me straight – what the hell just happened?"

I reached uncertainly across the bond, but Optimus was feeling amused and mildly chagrined, and my guess was he wasn't eavesdropping on this conversation. Not for the first or last time, I wished I had an honest-to-goodness bond with him. Focusing on my fellow humans, I told the female officer, "Tell Will everything you remember."

She remembered a lot; all the stuff I didn't want her to. She remembered that I'd met Optimus in a dream, that he'd wanted to make energon and had ventured into the Matrix, and that I was a Prime. Like the others, she'd also deduced that only Primes could handle the Matrix.

By the time she was done, Will was staring at me in amazement. "Is that accurate, Sam?"

"As best I can tell, yeah. But all top secret still, right?"

"Right, Thomaczech, dismissed."

She saluted both me and Lennox and left. He sagged to sit on the table. "Did it work?"

Optimus didn't want it to be common knowledge, but this was Will. He'd left when Optimus asked
and now it was his butt on the line because of it. I made an executive, Primely decision. "Yes, it worked. But don't tell another soul or spark. Optimus, Bumblebee, Arcee, 'Hide, and me are the only ones who know. And I guess he'll tell Ratchet whenever he wakes up. But that's it – no other 'bots, and not even the JCS. This gives us an edge over the Decepticons. It's a tactical secret – one that needs to be guarded even more closely than the location of the All Spark shard."

He nodded, respect in his eyes. "You've come a long way since Mission City, you know that?"

I sighed deeply, realizing it was true and not entirely sure how I felt about that. "Guess so."

A crash of thunder rang from the direction of the Autobot hangar, along with a flash of pain and aggravation across the bond. Will drawled, "Sounds like Ratchet's awake."

By the time we made it back to the hangar, Optimus was flat on the floor and Ratchet was looming over him, menacing him with an array of saws and welders. "You did what?" he hissed.

"This is hardly the circumstances to discuss this, Ratchet."

"While you knew I was unavailable, you did WHAT?"

"I'm fine, Ratchet," Mikaela insisted from where she sat perched in Bumblebee's palm. "It's not his fault!"

The medic whirled on her and, while every 'bot in the vicinity flinched away, she didn't even bat an eyelash. "You! I don't let my hand-picked human repair team mess with active internal wiring, not even when they're in protective gear! You waltz in here with your flip-flops and earrings and loose hair and climb up into that lugnut's guts?"

"If you hadn't been so plastered we couldn't wake you up…"

You could feel the way the air suddenly froze – no one was breathing or cycling air through their vents. Ratchet's optics actually fritzed a little. From behind the shelter of Bumblebee's foot, Wheelie growled at Ratchet in true Chihuahua style.

"All I'm saying is," she carefully continued, "don't blame Optimus, don't blame Arcee, and don't blame me. And stop blaming yourself, too. I'm fine, he's fine, Sam's fine – the only one having a cow is you."

He narrowed his optics and his saws slowly drifted to a stop. "Fine? You received a spark-energy jolt of unknown potency and you dare to tell me you're fine? Did no one think to check for head trauma in all this?" With a huff, he stepped closer to Bumblebee and gently scooped Mikaela up in his hands. "I want a full scan of your brain waves over a twenty-minute interval and then we'll talk about who's fine!" As he strode past Optimus, Ratchet added, "Don't go far – you're next."

It wasn't until the medbay doors hissed closed that everyone was able to breathe again. Optimus' joints creaked as he slowly rolled to his feet and I stepped back a couple of paces to give him room.

"Ratchet strikes again," Will muttered.

"Again? He what…he took you down?" I asked Optimus.

"Ratchet is one of the few Autobots who would last for any length of time one-on-one against Megatron," he rumbled in answer, his emotions a mix of amused, chagrined, and annoyed.

"But…he's…he's like a doctor."
Arcee answered, "Which only means he has a dangerously accurate knowledge of Cybertronian physiology."

"He know where da hit hurt da most," Skids solemnly agreed.

"Like a shiatsu massage therapist gone bad," Epps added.

I couldn't help but grin at them poking fun at Ratchet.

Optimus ignored them. "Every now and again, he cares to remind me of that fact."

"Mostly whenever our Prime does something stupid," Ironhide huffed.

"What you did…" I paused, not wanting to say too much. "It wasn't stupid. I'd say it's pretty awesome."

Optimus made a sound suspiciously like clearing his throat. "I haven't informed him of that part yet. He didn't let me get far enough."

'Bee laughed a single chirp at that, and Optimus' feelings became a little more good-natured. Crouching down, my brother said in a low voice, "Tell Mikaela thank you for me when you get a chance."

I nodded, grinning as I realized what she'd done. Just like fighting off 'cons and standing up to Simmons and deflecting Mom for me, Mikaela had come to Optimus' rescue, too. "Will do."

... 

After lunch at the mess hall, Optimus brought me and Mikaela back to the R&R cabins. Wheelie was pretty ticked off at being left behind, but he calmed down when Optimus informed him that Bumblebee wasn't coming, either. We'd have to leave for me to fly back to school right after dinner, and we'd have plenty of time to spend with Bumblebee and Wheelie while we were in the air. This afternoon was a Prime thing.

Mikaela and I dragged a couple of porch chairs back behind the cabin so that we could talk to Optimus and be out of sight a little more. We settled in, but she was obviously unnerved.

Transforming, he crouched down and said, "Tell me what you saw, Mikaela."

She shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "Nothing, really. Just…Sam and the big 'bots talking. They didn't say anything to me."

"They didn't speak to Sam last night, either," he pointed out. "Describe for me the setting."

She frowned thoughtfully and closed her eyes, trying to remember. "I was in a tunnel, and at first I thought I was near water – a stream or a waterfall or something – because the light was flickering all around the walls of the passageway. I kept going until the tunnel opened up into the mouth of a cave. That's when I noticed Sam. He was kind of silhouetted against the light. I almost said his name, but then I saw the…them."

"The Dynasty of the Primes," Optimus murmured.

"Yeah," she admitted, her gaze darting up to look at him. "That's it, really. I saw them and stopped, first because I was afraid and then the way they moved…their optics were red, but they seemed so gentle and…and then I didn't say anything because I was trying to hear what they were saying. I
heard Sam asking something about if he was dead, but I couldn't hear their answer. And then I woke up."

Optimus and I exchanged a curious glance, but he was just as stumped as I was by that one. I looked at Mikaela. "So...you saw them but never heard them."

"Right."

"Did they look at you or acknowledge you in any way?" Optimus wondered.

"No. Just Sam. They only talked to Sam."

"But you saw it."

She nodded, her eyes troubled. "What does it mean?"

"We don't know," I answered her.

"I wondered," Optimus admitted, "if it meant you were bound to the Prime clan, too, but I cannot sense a bond with you."

The regret in his spark bled across the bond and into his voice. "I'm sorry."

A sister for him, I realized, suddenly remembering him blocking the bond and afterward feeling both relief and disappointment. If Mikaela did have a bond somehow, that would make her kin to Optimus, and I'd felt firsthand how deeply he longed to have a clan again. But, come to think of it, it probably was weird enough to have a bond with one human. It was just like I was kind of overwhelmed at the thought of being bond-kin with Ironhide and Arcee. I could see why he'd been relieved, too.

"So I'm not part of the clan?" she asked, though it sounded more like a conclusion.

Optimus weighed his words carefully before answering, anxious to not disappoint her. "Not directly. Or so it would appear."

"Meaning?"

A flash of frustration hit me over the bond when he answered, "It means I do not know. I cannot imagine it being coincidence that you saw that vision, nor do I think my brothers acted on a whim, but they didn't bother to inform me of any plans while I was in the Matrix last night."

She blinked in surprise, mouthing the word "brothers," and I realized there was a lot I'd forgotten to tell her. "Um...yeah. While Optimus was dead, he learned a few things. Like his family tree. It's kind of complicated."

Optimus was puzzled by my statement. "All Primes are brothers," he informed her. "I believe Sam's bond with me is grounded in that fact. I am descended from the Dynasty, but since I am a Prime, they are my brothers as well."

She tried to wrap her head around that one for a second and then finally gave up. "Complicated," she agreed.

... 

I tried to sleep right away on the flight home, but my schedule was so off from the jetlag that I couldn't and so I missed out on one more bond-vision with my brother. When I finally drifted off, it was a dreamless sleep that left me feeling tired even though I'd snoozed across the entire Atlantic.
Once we were on the ground, I kissed Mikaela good-bye, kicked Wheelie's carrying crate when he made a rude comment about organic noises, and climbed into Bumblebee's cab. An hour later, we pulled into a parking space on the street nearest my dorm. The sun was rising on a crisp autumn morning, and it was almost like the last three days hadn't happened.

"Thanks for the lift," I told 'Bee as I staggered out of the cab and stretched. I thanked my lucky stars for Bumblebee. If he weren't here, I'd probably worry I was delusional or something.

"Anytime," he quoted before popping his trunk so I could grab my backpack and clothes duffle.

My dorm room door was locked, and I banged on it until Sharsky finally regained consciousness enough to holler at me to shut the hell up. I briefly reflected on the fact that, if Lennox was like Ironhide for me, Fassbinder and Sharsky were like Skids and Mudflap – only smarter. Deciding it would be faster to just let myself in, I fumbled with my keys until the lock finally clicked and the door swung open.

Fassbinder groaned and buried his head under the pillow. "Are you always this pissed after being kidnapped by aliens?"

"Depends on the aliens," I quipped and snorted as he sat bolt-upright and stared at me owlishly.

He recovered enough to try to sound casually curious. "What kinds of aliens are there?"

I faked an innocent grin. "Legal and illegal?"

Sharsky threw his pillow at me and pulled the blanket up over his head.
Life fell back into its slightly schizophrenic rhythm. My life was occupied by Astronomy, English, American History, and Algebra during the week, and then Mikaela and I had our webdates on the weekends. Bumblebee and I would go for Sunday drives, and every now and again, al-Sharif called to keep me up to date on the publicity and politics end of things – like the whole thing with the eclipse Optimus caused by using the Matrix. Except it wasn't an eclipse as much as it was a...funnel for the light, I guess. Al-Sharif read me a report by some geek about it, but it was over both our heads.

Luckily, the black-out wasn't a global thing and only about a 1000-mile radius from Diego Garcia was darkened. And even then, the further you got from Diego Garcia, the more light had remained. The only other side effect was that some unusually strong thunderstorms popped up when the heat got pulled out of the air, too. Pretty much anywhere else in the world, this would have been a problem, but since we were in the middle of the Indian Ocean at the time, the whole incident pretty much flew under the radar, according to Al-Sharif. The nearest cities just happened to have cloud cover and rain that day anyway, so it never even made the local news. How was that for luck? (Or maybe the Dynasty of the Primes was smarter – and more aware – than I thought.)

I missed my brother, of course, but the party on Diego Garcia had been the last weekend in October and he would be coming here for Thanksgiving, so I only had to make it through a few more weeks. Things seemed to be in a pretty good balance, all in all.

Midterms rolled around, but Leo and the roomies couldn't be bothered with that – they were too busy setting up a gambling conspiracy for the big rivalry football game. And I mean conspiracy, with hacking and lapel cams and sending Sharsky undercover to the stadium to sell some disgustingly cute Sports Kitties calendars.

Pretty much against my will, they hauled me off to the pre-game bonfire which turned out to be a complete nightmare. The alcohol was flowing freely and people were so plastered that girls were even hitting on Sharsky. They had a bunch of soda for the freshmen since we weren't legal to drink, but it really wasn't much fun after they torched an effigy of the opposing team's mascot, a geek bobcat. My roomies and I left about half-way through.

Even worse, though, was that Bumblebee didn't know the difference between root beer and the real thing, and so he told all the Autobots on his blog that I'd been out drinking. Mikaela woke me up on Saturday morning with an irate tirade about me being so stupid. She was so mad, in fact, that she wouldn't let me explain and I finally ended up apologizing and promising her it wouldn't happen again. That was what tipped me off about Bumblebee tattling on the blog for something I didn't even do and so instead of sleeping in, I got to read everyone's opinion on the fact that I was supposedly an underage alcoholic. Ratchet was on the warpath about it (ironically enough), and especially after seeing how he took down Optimus, I was grateful he was on the other side of the planet. BrassEagle overruled Ratchet's order to Bumblebee to blast any alcohol near me, which made me hopeful that I...
wouldn't soon be face-to-face with a furious Hummer.

Frustrated, embarrassed, and all-around pissed, I marched down to the street where 'Bee was parked and thumped him on the hood with my fist. A vicious part of me hoped I was pulling him out of recharge for this. Walking around to the driver's side, I said, "You and me, we need to have a little talk!"

After a second's hesitation, he popped the door open for me and I climbed in behind the wheel. He started his engine and pulled out onto the street, driving nowhere in particular.

"Google 'root beer,'" I ordered.

After a couple of seconds, he played a sound clip of "Oh..."

"Yeah," I snarked back. "Mikaela woke me up having a total hissy fit about me going out drinking. How could you live on Earth for years and not know that root beer isn't real beer? Seriously, 'Bee!"

"What can I say?" he quoted.

But I wasn't done. "If you thought I was out of line, you should have said something to me. Next time ask before you get me in trouble!"

"I'm sorry, so sorry..."

I was about to pounce on that, to tell him sorry wasn't good enough, that he owed me. But then I had the mental image of him and me in an old prison yard, hiding from the world after Optimus' death. Bumblebee's mistake was nothing by comparison, and he'd stuck by me through it all. Even if he did owe me for this one, I owed him way more. "Just..." I sighed, frustrated that I couldn't even be mad at him. "Don't do it again, okay? You and me, we've got to stick together. Right?"

"Right," a chipper female voice answered.

"And no more tattling without taking it to first."

"I promise."

I grimaced a little, annoyed still, but I couldn't do anything about it. It's not like I could make him take it all back on the blog – he didn't know that I knew about it.

"I'll make things right...with your girlfriend," he said with two different clips.

That was the most important part, I guessed. After all, she was the one angry enough to actually make the phone call. And he'd probably set the record straight with Optimus, too. "Thanks."

He pulled into one of those diners that serve breakfast 24 hours a day and his Cam Romero holoform flickered into existence beside me. With a tentative smile, he nodded his head at the restaurant, inviting me inside.

I sighed again, this time in defeat. "I can't. I've got a paper in American History due in a week, and I don't even know what I'm writing it on."

"I can help!" his radio cheerfully offered.

Yeah, he probably could, come to think of it. Besides, he was trying to do anything he could to make it up to me. How could I turn him down? "Alright. But you're buying."
He grinned ear to ear. "That was the plan."

... 

When I got back to the dorm, Leo, Fassbinder, and Sharsky were all crammed together around a computer. "New trailer come out?" I asked as I tossed my jacket on the bed.

"New post on *The Buzz,*" Fassbinder eagerly answered. "The pedophile is local! He's a Trouts fan!"

"Yeah," Sharsky added. "He was at the bonfire last night and he said he'll be at the game today!"

Leo gave me a conspiratorial look. "We're going to see if we can spot him in the stadium. He's obviously military, so I'm betting he'll be in fatigues."

I smothered a smile at Leo's obvious red herring and nodded my head in agreement. "Probably. I wonder what branch of the military he's in, because they all have different uniforms."

"Air Force?" Fassbinder speculated. "With all those travel logs, he's gotta be jetting it."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean anything," Sharsky retorted. "They've all got planes. With all the secrecy and everything, I was thinking he's a Navy SEAL."

"Mechanized cavalry?" I suggested, and Leo tried to cuff me.

"Gotta be a Marine," he added after I ducked.

Sharsky looked vaguely panicked. "I don't know anything about the military – what uniforms and rank badge-thingies they have."

"Get researching, muchachos," Leo ordered. "If Sharsky's gonna make first contact with Camaro76, we better know what we're talking about."

Now that Leo had the roomies completely looking for the wrong guy, I decided I needed to work on that paper while everything was still fresh in my mind. Grabbing my laptop, I sat in my bed and settled in to write.

They threw themselves into it, and I started sifting through the transcript 'Bee had made of our conversation and emailed to me. About five minutes before Sharsky had to leave for the stadium for his special-ops calendar sales, I got sucked back into the bizarre game of baiting the roomies.

"What should I say if I see him?" Sharsky whined. "I mean, I can't just walk up to him and say, 'Are you Camaro76? 'Cause I'm you're biggest fan!'"

"Be discreet," Fassbinder retorted. "I know that's not in your vocab lists, but you can't make a big deal out of it or he ain't coming near us ever again."

"Would that be so bad?" I asked, unable to resist. "We don't know if this guy is stable."

"We'll never know unless we try," Sharsky pointed out. "I'm all for going in."

"Wait a minute," Leo interrupted, trying to throw the guys off even more. "Do we even know if he's a he?"

Fassbinder immediately started scrolling through the posts. "There are a thousand references to The Boy and hints of a relationship with BikerChick and maybe even BeeFF, but there isn't really any concrete proof either way."
Sharsky nodded sagely. "Even NotTheToothFairy's crack about masculine pride could be him treating Camaro76 as one of the boys instead of him actually being a guy."

"Don't ask, don't tell?" Leo drawled.

"I can't wrap my head around the alternative," I admitted, remembering again Bumblebee's blog entry about being female for a day. "He's definitely not a GI Jane."

"Definitely not," Sharsky agreed.

"There's a greeting. 'Hi, Mr. Secret Agent Man. You'd make a really hot chick,'" I said, sniggering at the mental image of how badly that one could turn out. What would Sharsky do if 'Bee took him up on the suggestion and switched to a girl holoform?

"Add that to the list of top ten ways to earn a restraining order," Leo snorted. "I thought we were going for discreet."

"Discreet it is," Fassbinder said in the interest of getting us back on topic. To Sharsky, he said, "We'll keep you informed on the earwig and steer you towards any likely candidates. We'll leave the timing up to your discretion."

"But take it from me," I added. "Don't glomp him or anything." That was Arcee's territory, and I doubted Sharsky could take it or dish it out like the femme did.

…

We lost. Not that I was big into football, but it was pretty embarrassing. Even Sharsky, when he finally dragged himself back into the dorm, was a little shell-shocked from the final score. Honestly, though, I think the guys were way more bummed about missing out on meeting the elusive Camaro76. Too bad they didn't realize that, when Sharsky almost got caught in minor brawl, 'Bee's holoform Cam Romero was smack-dab in the middle of it.

Fassbinder eased the pain of getting walloped by our state rivals by turning to technology. Typical. I went back to writing my paper.

A few minutes later, Leo made all of us jump when he shouted, "BINDER! LAY OFF THE PERCUSSION SECTION!"

"Shut up," Binder snapped back. "I'm thinking."

I wasn't sure which was more shocking – that he would mouth off to Leo or that he was actually thinking.

Finally Leo broke the stunned silence. "Care to enlighten us?"

Leo's sarcasm was apparently lost on Fassbinder. "Last Buzz post," he said. "This guy isn't just local. He's playing the field."

Sharsky flew to Binder to read over his shoulder. "You're kidding! That narrows it down even more."

"Not really," Leo said dismissively. "This is college. Everyone with a libido is trying to play the field. Some of us chamacos are just experts in that field."

"Well, pedophile isn't doing too bad," Fassbinder retorted. "Check this out: 'And speaking of up-
close and personal, the final score of assaults inflicted on me by female fans is a staggering five slaps to the face, three beers thrown at me, two phone numbers suggestively slipped into my rear pocket, and one knee to the groin. Either my new look was based on someone who's a total player, or the enemy has a lot of co-ed Pretenders on campus. The knee-er certainly felt strong enough to be one."

Sharsky was dying of laughter, and I facepalmed at the 'knee-to-the-groin' thing. I mean, sure, he was in his Cam Romero holoform, but I was positive the things weren't that close to human anatomy. Were they?

"What did BikerChick have to say to that?" Sharsky wheezed.

Oh jeez – this was bound to be good! Someone knocked at the door, but I was still catching my breath at Arcee's rant about 'Bee standing up for himself, so Leo hollered, "Come in."

…and in walked the blogger himself. CRAP! I made a grab at his arm, trying to drag him out of the room before he could see. "Bee! Let's go get some air."

It was like trying to grab a statue. His eyebrows furrowed as he looked at me curiously, and then he glanced at the computer screen. He froze for a heartbeat and then bolted from the room.

*Slag!* I ran after him, out into the hallway and down to the stairs that weren't usually used. He was leaning against the wall, doubled over at the waist and silently shaking.

"Oh man," I muttered, kneeling down so I could see his eyes. He wasn't so upset he was crying about it was he? "Hey, 'Bee," I soothingly said.

He lifted his head with a brilliant grin and started shaking again – with laughter. Slapping his knee a couple of times, he straightened, and I studied him closely. "You're not mad?"

Bumblebee shook his head no and his shoulders started bobbing up and down in laughter again. Patting the top of my arm reassuringly, he tipped his head toward the stairs, inviting me outside. To his alt-form, I realized, so we could talk more freely. I nodded, a little relieved smile creeping over my face, and he all but skipped down the stairs.

I followed to where he was parked and climbed into the driver's side. As soon as his windows were dark enough, his holoform disappeared. When we were cruising, I repeated my earlier question. "You're not mad?"

"Well that's a relief!" a female voice answered through the radio speakers.

"You're relieved?" And then I remembered how they were trying to get 'the boy' clearance but there was a backlog on paperwork. "You've been trying to let me in for a while, haven't you."

"Bingo!" an older man exclaimed, and another, younger woman said (sounding like she was talking to her child), "No, I could never hate you."

I grinned.

He played my own question back at me. "You're not mad?"

"I was at first," I confessed. "But it was actually kind of fun to go back and read the earlier posts. I still remember the whole thing when you hit that squirrel, and it's kind of nice to finally understand why you were so upset about it. I'm sorry you've had such a rough time with the War and everything."
The seat under me moved in a gesture I recognized as a shrug.

"What's his opinion?" a military-sounding guy asked.

"Whose opinion?"

"All of them," another guy clarified.

"Oh, the roomies!" I grimaced. "Well…think about it, 'Bee. In one of the earliest posts you were going on about 'what me and the boy share' and all that, and they thought you're an adult human."

He didn't answer for four or five blocks, and then he asked again, "What's his opinion?"

I headdesked on the steering wheel. "They think you're…attracted to me. That we're in a relationship."

His engine kind of choked and died and he drifted to the side of the road for a second. "Not you 'Cam Romero' but you 'Camaro76,'" I tried to explain. "Having all these different forms and names confuses me sometimes, and I'm in the know! They haven't figured out yet that I'm 'the boy."

And then his frame started shimmying in a roar of laughter. I grinned, even more relieved that he'd taken this news well. I was sure he'd freak out – which was part of why I'd been reluctant to let him know I'd read his blog.

"Are we human?" the radio sang after he settled down a little bit and pulled back into traffic.

"Yep. They think you guys are all pretty weird, but they have no idea that you aren't native. So good job on that."

"Sweet!" a little kid exclaimed over the speakers.

"But I guess you'll have to shut the blog down, now, huh?" We cruised in silence for a few seconds, but knowing him, I thought he was kind of bummed. "Of course, they don't have to know that I know, do they? Lennox or BrassEagle or whoever? Because everybody's having fun with it. Even Sharsky and Fassbinder. They check your blog like daily and know your personalities and everything."

"I think he's on to something!" 'Bee quoted, spliced with, "Welcome to the club."

"The club? You mean the blog?"

"Affirmative, captain…We're not leaving you behind!"

"But…"

"I won't tell if you won't," a woman coyly said.

And then I got it. "We don't have to tell 'em how I found out, and that way I can still get a user name. 'Bee, that's devious."

"Why thank you," he answered in a cowboy's drawl. He reused the clip from earlier, saying "All of them," and then adding, "Can I see it, Mom? Can I? Can I? Can I?"

'All of them' meant the roommates… "You want to see the guys as they read your blog?"

His own, mangled voice came over the speakers in an eager, "Uh-huh."
"Why?"

"PSYCH!" 'Bee exclaimed, his engine vibrating in a chuckle.

"You wanna mess with their minds?" I asked, breaking down in giggles. "Okay, that's just too much fun to pass up. How are we gonna make it work, though?"

"Leave that to me," he said with Darth Vader's voice.

"But you can't talk," I protested.

"Old football injury," a man explained.

I sniggered. "They'd buy that one, I think. Alright, let's do it!"

... 

The guys were all on their computers when Cam Romero and I came back to the dorm.

"NewEgg's having a sale on video cards," Fassbinder announced.

"I'm gonna order some of those Bags O' Crap off Woot," Sharsky countered. "Mom never let me get those back home."

"Dude, it's crap," Binder pointed out.

Leo looked at Sharsky disdainfully. "You let your ma tell you what you couldn't buy online?"

"Didn't have a credit card, and after I hacked into her PayPal account she swore she'd never cosign with me."

I cleared my throat and Leo glanced up from his online shopping. "Yeah?"

"You guys all remember Cam, right?"

"You mean Bee?" Fassbinder corrected.

Oops. "Yeah, that's his nickname," I floundered.

"It's a weird nickname for a jock," Sharsky bluntly said.

"Yeah," Leo chimed in. "What's the story behind it?"

I could have smacked him for that one, but Cam just gave them his best dorky grin and made a show of fumbling with his cell phone for a second. The ringtone sang "...buzz like a bee..."

Nice recovery! "And that's all we're gonna say about it," I added. At the roomies' confused expression, I explained, "Cam lost his voice in a football accident back when we were both in high school. He's had a few surgeries, but the best he can manage with his real voice is mumbling. So he can write his part of the conversation or he has his cell phone programmed with a lot of different sound clips that express what he's trying to say."

'Bee moved his hands in what was obviously sign language, though I didn't have a clue what he was saying. "Or that," I added.

"Man, that sucks," Sharsky sympathetically said.
"Yeah. So anyway, it makes it kinda hard for him to socialize; that's why he hasn't been hanging out with us before now. But when he saw you guys were following a blog about football…"

Fassbinder narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "So a jock wants to hang with us?"

"Yep," I answered. "I let him in on the secret that it's really a government blog you guys hacked and he wants to hear all about it. He thinks it sounds even more exciting than sports."

It finally dawned on Leo what 'Bee and I were doing – keeping *The Buzz* up and running. He grinned and crowed, "You're effin' kidding me!"

"Nope," I grinned back. "Cam's really cool that way."

Looking like a kid on Christmas morning, 'Bee's holoform plopped down into an office chair, looked expectantly at Sharsky and Fassbinder, and tilted his head toward the computer monitor.

"Go on guys," Leo encouraged with a laugh. "Tell him everything."

Chapter End Notes

Bumblebee's Song Clips:
"I'm Sorry" by Brenda Lee
"Are We Human" by The Killers
When I called and confirmed with Al-Sharif that my folks were coming to visit me for Thanksgiving instead of the other way around, he asked what they were going to do for accommodations.

"I'm not sure. I was hoping we could pull from your budget to get them a hotel. I mean, if you have one…"

"We do have a per diem reimbursement fund for your travel expenses," he admitted, "but they're earmarked for you."

"Is there any way we can swing it to put my parents up in someplace fancy? Because…” I took a deep breath, already having visions of how badly the holiday weekend could turn out. "…Optimus is going to be here, too, and I just know my mom is going to freak out, probably a lot. If she has someplace really nice to retreat to, then there's an outside chance we'll all still be sane come Monday."

"Are you willing to downgrade some of your future accommodations?" he asked.

"I'll sleep in a tent if that's what it takes!"

He chuckled. "Or in the cab of an Autobot?"

"That, too. Just get her someplace with a Jacuzzi in the room. Please!"

"I'll do my best, sir."

And knowing him, his best would be good enough. I hoped.

…

One huge advantage of having an Autobot for a best friend was that I could always find a parking space. Other mere mortals had to drive up and down the aisles of the parking lots looking for an empty spot or stopping traffic while waiting to see if the lady with three kids was coming, going, or changing a diaper. Not me. Bumblebee could calculate the speed and direction of all the pedestrians in the lot who were headed back to their vehicles, plan a route that would get us there ahead of any other cars and intercept the parking spot before the other driver put their car back into "drive."

So I was particularly grateful for my best friend on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. The airport, which was always a pain in the neck no matter when you got there, was packed but he managed to find a spot only two aisles away from the elevator. (Of course, we were on the fifth floor of the parking garage, but still.)

This was the reason he was coming shopping with us Black Friday, too – that and the fact that Mom said she could use someone with cannons to back her up.

"Thanks 'Bee," I said, patting his roof as I got out. He cheekily beeped and activated his car alarm in answer.

My parents' flight from Florida was originally supposed to arrive at 5:30 in the afternoon, but thanks
to an over-fueled airplane, they were running more than an hour behind. So 'Bee and I had found some fast food, fueled 'Bee up, and hit a car wash while we waited. I was still about fifteen minutes early. Of course, it would probably take me that long to find the right baggage claim, especially with an extra fifty-thousand people in the airport tonight.

When I finally got to the right spot, the marquee said that their flight had already arrived. Sure enough, a minute later I heard "SAMMIE!" shrieked above the babble of voices around me. Mom was kinda-running toward me in her high-heels, skirt, and blue-and-white Hawaiian shirt and shouting the whole way. I started walking toward her just to make her shut up sooner. "Jeez, Ma, can you get any louder?" I mumbled when she glomped me.

Dad followed, a grin splitting his face, and he threw an arm around my shoulders when Mom finally let me go. "It's good to see you, son."

I nudged him a little, grateful he missed me after practically kicking me out of the house, and said, "Glad you made it."

Mom's head swiveled as she looked at the people around us. "Where's that nice young man Leo?"

"Back at the dorm," I quickly said, not mentioning that 'Bee was refusing to give Leo rides as long as Leo was being obnoxious about 'Bee hanging out in the dorm. My human sidekick kept complaining that it was a lot easier to **not** blow my normal-college-kid cover when the aliens weren't **right there** with our roommates all the time. To be honest, I think he was more ticked off about the fact that the holoform "Cam Romero" got more coeds' phone numbers in the last week than Leo'd gotten all semester. The "lost his voice in an accident" excuse had gotten him a lot of sympathetic cooing from the Freshman 55, too.

"Oh," Mom mumbled.

... "Bee drove us to the hotel, and it was such a fancy place that, even riding in Bumblebee (who had upgraded in October to a scan of the newest model year), I felt kind of low-brow when we pulled up to the front door. A bellman came to help us with the luggage and 'Bee hurried off to avoid the valet as soon as we closed the trunk. Mom actually gasped when we entered the lobby, which was gold everything and open to the ceiling five stories up. Dad was so awestruck that he didn't start griping about 'taxpayer dollars hard at work' until we were in the elevator, though Mom smacked his shoulder for saying something like that in front of the bellhop. His grumbling abruptly ended when they stepped into their room, an elegant presidential suite with a gas fireplace and a freaking baby grand piano.

I so owed al-Sharif! Tipping the bellhop (al-Sharif had warned me to do this), I hurried him out of the suite before my parents said something incriminating.

Speechless, Mom wandered into the living room (the one with the piano, not the sitting room with the fireplace) before whirling on me. "If your aliens are trying to buy me off, it's not going to work."

"Works for me," Dad mumbled under his breath, hauling their luggage into the bedroom.

"This was my idea, not Optimus'," I insisted. "It's coming out of my government office's budget."

She sank weakly onto the couch. "**Your** government office?"

I fidgeted, frustrated that this was already backfiring, and hurried across the room to sit down next to
her. "I just wanted you to be someplace nice, okay? I know that everything's different now…"

"Different," she flatly said. "Sam, 'different' is when you go to school and your dad and I are empty nesters. 'Different' is when you eat fish eggs with a fancy name. This…"

Dad supportively slapped my shoulder. "This is great!"

"Ron, he has his own government office!" The way she said it made it sound like I had head lice.

Curiously looking out the window, he said, "Well, at least it's better than the psychotic aliens."

"RON!"

"Alright, Judy, alright." He plopped down on the couch across from me and mom. "Your own government office, huh? What do they put that under? Homeland security?"

"Whatever the other ambassadors are under, I think."

Mom frowned. "I thought it was over, Sam. You saved the world, you got into college, you put all this behind you."

Optimus. My brother bond suddenly came to life, and I felt his eager happiness as the connection warmed between us.

"What?" Mom demanded, noticing my sudden sigh of relief.

"Optimus is here," I murmured more to myself than her.

Dad sat up straighter, worry crossing his face. "What do you mean he's here?"

"I mean his plane has landed and he's on his way to join us."

Mom's jaw was on the floor. "Join us?"

I nodded. "We talked about this way back on the aircraft carrier, Mom. He's trying to be like a human brother to me, and that means holidays. I thought that's why you wanted to come here."

Throwing her hands in the air, Mom jumped to her feet and started pacing angrily through the room. "Well that's just great! You've got your own government office, and a thirty-foot deluded alien who thinks he's your brother wants to join us for turkey and stuffing!"

"It's more than that, Mom," I said, suddenly grasping how little they knew. I'd forgotten how much time had passed and how much I'd learned since the battle in Egypt. "He...he's lost his whole family. Everybody – his parents, his brother, his..." I almost said 'mate' but realized they wouldn't understand how much that word meant. "...wife."

She stopped and stared bug-eyed at me. "His wife?"

I shrugged a little. "Kinda. She was a female Autobot who...well...it's complicated. But yeah, they were mates, which in human terms translates into husband and wife."

"Did they have any kids?" Dad asked, fascinated now. "Little toasters or whatever?"

"They're called sparklings, and no, they didn't." The words made me remember Optimus' grief about Elita One never having an Elita Two, and I uneasily recognized my parents really had no clue what I was – what I was destined to be. I'd been eased into this, and I had done my fair share of freaking out
along the way. My imagination provided a pretty good scenario of what my Mom's reaction would be to the news that there was an Autobot prophesy about me. I decided right then that anything related to the Matrix was off limits for them.

Mom watched me, her face pinched and looking…well…old. "He lost everybody and so now he's trying to muscle his way into our family?"

"No! I invited him, Mom. It's tradition – families get together for Thanksgiving, whether you like each other or not."

"You invited him," she retorted. "Since when do you decide who comes home for Thanksgiving?"

Since Thanksgiving was in my town? I thought, quickly followed by, Since he became my brother? I tried a different approach. "Do you really want to fight about this, Ma? I don't want this to ruin the holidays." Trying to smooth things over, I added, "Christmas will be just us – you, me and Dad. I'll explain to Optimus and I'm sure he'll understand."

Mom grimaced a little and gathered me into a tight, overprotective hug. "Well if he's already here, then I'll go along with it only if I have you for all of Christmas." After a beat, she asked, "How did you know he was here, anyway?"

Crap! "I, uh, my cell phone's on vibrate and I felt a text and assumed it was him. I guess I'd better check though, huh."

Dad gave me a half-smile. "Yeah, guess so."

…

Holoforms are a funny thing. All Autobots could make holoform drivers in the same way that all humans can sing (some better than others). They hadn't used holoforms much when they first arrived on Earth because it didn't seem particularly useful, just like we would have felt pretty silly singing opera-style while talking to them. But when they saw how we humans reacted so well to them, all the Autobots had worked harder to refine their holoforms.

I'd seen Optimus' holoform before, of course, and it fit his alt-form pretty well – a tall, forty-something, physically fit truck driver with a cowboy hat. My folks had been there to witness the famous incident with Leo and Skids' and Mudflap's hula-honey holoforms, so they understood the concept, too. I knew a holoform was pretty much a puppet, a way for the 'bots to communicate more easily, so I didn't think too much about them (except for their use in pranks). Even if I had thought about it more, though, I don't think anything could have prepared me for my mom's reaction.

We were at a restaurant, getting them some dinner, when Optimus pulled up. Mom left the table to go chew him out, and Dad and I rushed to catch up with her. Between the two of us, we could probably keep it from coming to blows.

Out in the parking lot, she was all but bouncing on her toes and spoiling for a fight, but when Optimus' holoform stepped out of his cab, she rocked back on her heels. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "Oh my," she murmured with this weird little smile.

What the crap?

Optimus sensed my dismay and looked quizzically at first me and then Mom. Surprise chased amusement across our bond, followed by that calm confidence he always seemed to have. He strode closer, towering over Dad, and extended his hand. "Mr. Witwicky," he said by way of greeting.
Dad kind of numbly shook his hand, saying, "Hi there."

Then he turned a charming smile on Mom and extended his hand. "Mrs. Witwicky."

She gaped like a fish for a second and then snatched his hand. "Hello…um, what do we call you?"

"'Optimus' will do, or 'Prime.' I will even answer to 'son' if it makes you more comfortable."

"Oh you're far too old to be my son!" Mom exclaimed.

"I could make my holoform look Sam's age," he offered.

"NO! No, you're just fine the way you are."

I couldn't believe what I was seeing – Mom was swooning over Optimus. "Gah, Mom! Can we just go back inside so you can finish dinner?"

Now Dad was the one staring bug-eyed. "Judy," he muttered.

"Right, of course." She tried to look all gracious as she said, "Won't you join us?"

"Yeah, son," Dad said to Optimus. "Come on in."

"Thank you," Optimus rumbled in answer, feeling pretty pleased with himself.

Dad put his arm around Mom and pretty much dragged her toward the restaurant. Optimus fell in step beside me.

I glared at him and hissed, "Son?"

"I've negotiated this minefield before, Sam," he said almost smugly. "Several times, in fact."

"What minefield?"

He nonchalantly shrugged, though his amusement practically glowed across the bond. "A committed femme finding me attractive."

"But not with humans – with my folks!"

"True," he allowed, flashing a rare smile at me. "It should be an interesting four days."

"Yeah," I half-heartedly agreed. "Interesting."

Over the bond, he pulled me into a hug of the heart. "It is good to see you again."

How could I resist something like that? I returned the hug, grudgingly forgiving him for bowling over my mom. It wasn't even his fault, really – it was just the hum-drum holoform he always used. With the age he'd chosen, no one could accuse him of trying to be a chick-magnet. I guess he just didn't expect women Mom's age to be on the prowl. Or maybe he never expected to spend a ton of time with women my mom's age. Or, even more likely, women just didn't figure into his holoform design, period.

Despite it all, though, I'd rather have him here than not. "It's good to see you, too," I agreed.

…

As part of the deal Al-Sharif and I hammered out for the government to pick up my parent's hotel
room tab, I had to sleep at least part of each night there. This left Leo stuck back at the dorm alone, but he didn't exactly seem broken up about it, muttering something under his breath about putting his non-overcrowded room to good use. (I didn't want to even think about what he might mean by that.)

So naturally, Mom invited my brother up to the hotel suite after dinner since he was "part of the family." To keep things casual, Optimus asked what my parents liked to do in their spare time. Mom mentioned gardening and he managed to keep her going for quite a while on that topic, pulling Dad into the conversation as much as Mom would let him. After a couple of hours, I caught myself nodding off but Optimus appeared engrossed — I guess faking you're interested isn't that hard compared to faking you're human. Of course, from what I was sensing over the bond, Optimus wasn't exactly faking. I kept forgetting that the resurrected, ferocious, awe-inspiring, warrior Prime was once just Optimus, architect, art connoisseur, and head of the Science Division. For all I knew, he used to have a Zen garden or something back on Cybertron.

Eventually, though, Optimus excused himself, pretending he was worn out from the jetlag. Mom saw him to the door, but I got settled in to camp out on the couch by the baby grand piano. Since I was still showering and everything back at the dorm, I was able to pack light — my iPod and some good headphones. I brought them intending to drown out my dad's snoring — I didn't expect to need them because my folks were arguing. Especially over Optimus.

Grimacing, I hit play on the iPod and closed my eyes, hoping it wouldn't take me long to fall asleep.

When I did, Optimus was waiting for me on the deck of the aircraft carrier, just like usual. "Boy," he greeted me.

"Brother," I answered, unable to hide how happy I was to be sharing a bond-dream again. After a companionable minute, though, I broke down and mentioned the elephant in the room. "You really kicked over a hornet's nest. I think my folks are still fighting."

His amusement rippled across the bond. "Their bond has survived this long. I am confident it will recover."

"You mean their marriage?" I asked, confused. It hadn't felt like he was talking metaphorically.

"No," he corrected. "Their bond." Sensing I was about to protest, he explained, "Humans form bonds as well, after a fashion. It took us months to recognize the markers, but once Ratchet identified the ones between parents and children, it didn't take long to see them elsewhere, too."

I just stared at him for a second. "Like, bond bonds?"

"As in a consistent chemical and electromagnetic reaction by one individual to a different, specific individual. Physical contact provides the strongest reaction, though remote reactions have been observed as well. Frequently, the reactions occur even when the individuals have no conscious knowledge of the other's presence."

"Really?" The idea was just hard to wrap my head around.

He chuckled. "Really. Humans have observed this, too. Mother's intuition, I believe is the term occasionally applied to the parent-child bond. In some other familial relationships, that connection is as strong."

I felt his next bomb coming, though it wasn't as bad as I was afraid it would be.

"Humans also have what Ratchet calls anti-bonds, in which they have consistent chemical and electromagnetic reactions to someone to whom they have an aversion. We first observed those
between Sergeant Epps and Galloway, though Major Lennox has a weaker anti-bond with the liaison. It's a fascinating phenomenon that we haven't observed in any other species."

I snorted at that one. "I bet Mikaela and Simmons have anti-bonds, too."

"Not that I've observed, but I haven't spent much time observing them," he admitted. "So where do you want to go tonight, Sam?"

I shrugged. "Where do you want to go?"

His sudden anxiety hit me over the bond, making me shift my feet uneasily. "Well, what is it?" I demanded.

"I am curious..." he hesitantly said. "I have learned the history and the cultural traditions surrounding Thanksgiving, but I have never observed one first-hand. And I understand that each family has its own, unique traditions for this and every holiday."

I let go the breath I'd been holding. "That's it? You just want to see a Thanksgiving?"

"Your memories of your own past holidays."

"Ah." That explained it. "For the record, I don't mind sharing my memories, as long as you ask first."

His relief made me grin when he said, "I can certainly do that."

Eager expectation swelled on his end of the bond and I frowned thoughtfully. The only other time we'd left his memories was for the nightmare, and my subconscious had practically elbowed itself in for that. "I've never done this before. I mean, are you sure you can even get into my head?"

"With your consent, I believe I can access your memories."

I shrugged. "Well then, go ahead."

He stepped closer, placing his hands on my shoulders and touched his helm to my forehead.

Moving around in my head was a lot harder than in his. He experimented at first, trying to randomly jump to where he thought my Thanksgiving memories were stored, but we ended up at a birthday party when I was nine and then doing homework when I was in high school and then a memory I didn't even realize I had of getting a bath in the kitchen sink when I was a baby.

"Okay, stop," I said, feeling a little dizzy and stretched out of shape after the baby-bath one. For being so old, the memories were really vivid. "That's not working."

"Agreed."

He hesitated, and I poured in my encouragement over the bond. It wasn't his fault my brain was cluttered compared to his, and I knew how important this was to my brother. Okay, so I didn't know know, but I had a pretty good idea and I didn't want him to give up.

"I can try a different approach," he suggested.

"Alright."

This time he began with the present and zipped backward in time, skipping like a movie on a really fast rewind. Going that way, he got us back to last year's Thanksgiving at Aunt Shelley's house. Well, Aunt Shelley lived there now, but she'd inherited it from Grandma and Grandpa and so
Optimus and I were standing on the sidewalk leading up to the house, and Mom and Dad were walking ahead of us and kind of snipping back and forth at each other the way they always did after a long trip. "I kind of drove them to that," I confessed to my brother as we ambled up the sidewalk. "I wanted Mikaela to come with us, but Dad said 'no' and that I wasn't allowed to make somebody else endure his family unless she already had a ring on her finger. And then Mom added, 'Or you got her knocked up.' So I kind of hassled them in revenge."

Optimus looked at me curiously and I snorted. "No, that's not traditional, any of it, though it is pretty typical for us. But anyway, here we are..." I caught the screen door and held it open for him.

We followed my parents into the house and Aunt Shelley came running up to give Dad a big hug. "Ronny! So glad you made it! How was the drive?"

The adults rambled on while my cousins sat sprawled out on the couches in the living room, glued to the football game. Pointing to the TV, I said, "Now that is traditional. And not just on TV. Mom's side of the family has a big football game while the turkey's cooking. All the kids in the neighborhood come over for it. We trade off, going to Mom's side of the family one year and Dad's side the next. Same thing for Christmas, but opposite."

He nodded, soaking it all up, and his awe seeped across the bond. It must have been a long time since he'd been able to just hang out with his kin – his family. "What are their names?" he asked.

"That's Aunt Shelley, my dad's kid sister, and the guy in the living room is her husband Lance."

A flicker of a memory flashed across the bond, a femme named Lancer talking with Elita. I grinned and said, "I never thought about that one. Anyway, their kids, oldest to youngest, are Brent, Boyd, Brian, and Blaine." Sensing his disbelief, I said, "Don't ask me. I don't know why anyone would do that to their kids."

Blaine, who was five, came running in to hug me around the waist. "Happy Thanksgiving!" he shouted. "What's your name?"

"Sam," I answered, trying to peel the little guy off of me. "I'm your cousin."

"Oh." He bit his lip thoughtfully. "What's a cousin?"

"Your mom and my dad are brother and sister," I tried to explain. "And that makes us cousins."

He still looked confused, so I said, "I'm part of your family."

"Oh!" That seemed answer enough for him, and...the path of my memory would bring me into the living room with Blaine and the rest of the guys to watch the football game. A better idea occurred to me. It wasn't even hard, really, to move from memory to imagination.

Blaine turned and looked directly at Optimus. "What's your name?"

Stunned speechless, he took a second to answer, "I am Optimus Prime."

"Are you my cousin, too?"

"I am your kin," Optimus answered, the warm truth of those words suddenly striking home for him. His overwhelming happiness made me grin, and I was glad I had done this for him.
Blaine's brow furrowed in confusion. "What's 'kin'?

"It means family," my brother explained. "I am part of your family, too."

"Oh," he said with a little laugh and ran back to the living room.

The light of Optimus' optics was grudgingly pleased when he turned to look at me. "You did that."

I shrugged, reaching across the bond to give him a hug of the heart. "Seemed like the right thing to do. You've got your official welcome to the family. Now come on, I'll give you the grand tour." I passed through the dining room and said, "First stop, the kitchen, an antique with vintage 1980's appliances."

He ignored my jab at ancient technology and took a deep whiff. My own stomach rumbled at the aroma of turkey and rolls that was suddenly at the forefront of my mind. His surprise slipped over the bond. "That smells...remarkable."

Was he really that deep into my mind right now? "That smells different from you holoform?"

"My holoform is still only an extension of me." With a swell of warm apology, he added, "Only through our bond can I truly step outside of myself and my race."

Realizing he thought I might resent the intrusion, I half-smiled and answered, "Now you know how I feel." I remembered all those times I'd wandered wide-eyed around Cybertron feeling both alien and at home, and now here was a chance to return the favor. "Come on, there's lots more to see!" I said with a grin. Turning, I led him back through the dining room and down the stairs to the den, saying "My dad used to bundle Aunt Shelley up in a sleeping bag and roll her down these stairs. They both thought it was great fun until Aunt Shelley broke her arm."

For an astrosecond, we were on his homeworld in a large arena, Optimus worrying over something he'd broken on his younger brother...Megatron...while playing a game. "I'm sorry," Optimus said to me when we were back in my memories. "He has no place here."

I shrugged, keeping myself firmly grounded here instead of in Mission City or the forest battle or Egypt as I continued down the stairs. "Guess some things are universal."

In the basement, Optimus looked around curiously. "What is that?" he asked, pointing.

"A foosball table."

"A foosball table," he repeated in that not-quite-a-question way of his.

"Can't you just Google it?"

"Not while I'm in recharge."

Hmm. That was interesting. "It's a game kind of like soccer. You use the little guys on the post-thingies to kick the ball into the other guy's goal," I explained and then, feeling almost as surreal as when I was in the memory of bathing in the kitchen sink, I asked, "Do you want to play?"

My brother's expression didn't give away much, but he glomped me over the bond. It wasn't hard to figure out why – brothers played together, sometimes against each other and sometimes as a team. Even I knew that. And we hadn't really had a chance to play anything together. Outside of these bond dreams, he was way too big for foosball, and I was sure I didn't carry the necessary hardware for Autobot games. And regardless, we were too busy dodging Decepticons and saving the world.
when we were together in real life. But we could play like brothers here. The thought warmed my heart.

Chuckling, I grabbed a set of handles on the table and said, "I'll take that as a yes. Now here's the rules…"

Chapter End Notes

For the curious, if you'd like to see the fine young man who inspired the appearance of Bumblebee's holoform, visit [this IMDB profile](https://www.imdb.com), especially the portrait of him in the black shirt. And yes, Aaron Hill was the frat boy whose shirt doesn't come any tighter in RotF, hence Bumblebee's misadventures at the football game.
I woke up and stared blankly at the baby grand for a good long minute in confusion. Aunt Shelly didn't have a piano! After a few more seconds, I realized that was last year (or last night, I guess) and that I was in the snazzy hotel room I'd managed to arrange for my folks. I rubbed my eyes and leaned back into the couch again, trying to make sense of my rearranged memories. I beat Optimus twice in foosball and then he spanked me once before he won a nail-biter at the end. Then we zipped back another year to play some football with Mom's side of the family. Somehow, it had been a lot more fun to relive those memories with Optimus than it had been to make them in the first place. I smiled to myself to realize it was having a brother that made all the difference.

Judging by my dad's snoring, it was a safe bet they were still asleep. Stretching, I found a pad of paper and jotted down a note telling them I'd gone back to the dorm to shower and to call me when they were ready for me to come back. Then shrugging into my jacket, I headed for the door.

At the front desk, the valet asked about my car and I told her I wanted to stretch my legs. The sense of Optimus over the bond was very quiet and I suspected he was still in recharge, but I could also sense he was close enough to walk to him if Bumblebee wasn't in the parking garage. I'd just stepped out the front door when a familiar yellow Camaro drove up.

As I got in, he played a clip with cheering crowds and marching-band music in the background. "Happy Thanksgiving!"

"Been watching the parade, huh?"

"Uh-huh," he answered with his real voice as he pulled out onto the street.

I grinned. "It's been years since I watched it – mostly I sleep in. Glad you're enjoying it."

Leo was out cold still when I got to the dorms, so I just went about getting ready. I whistled in the deserted showers and was dressed and combing my hair when Optimus finally woke up. Happiness followed by hesitancy flowed over the bond, and I suspected he was wondering if he should try to get closer to campus or just stay where he was. *Wait there, wait there,* I chanted in my mind as I ran down the dorm stairs. I knew he wouldn't hear it, but I hoped he would understand anyway. When I was close enough to 'Bee, I said, "Tell him we're on our way!"

When we pulled up next to Optimus, his holoform was already lounging against the massive engine compartment. "Boy," he greeted me.

"Little brother," I grinned back as I got out of 'Bee's cab, nudging him affectionately over the bond. "Sleep well?"

"Exceptionally," he answered, amused. "Thank you. I am curious, though. Most Thanksgiving traditions are centered around the afternoon activities, but your parents will not be preparing their own dinner."

"So what are we going to do in the meantime?" I finished for him. "Well, for starters, Mom's going to want a newspaper, so we need to round one up."

Optimus' confusion crept over the bond.

"For Black Friday," I explained. "She needs to make her battle plan."
"There are many online resources for formulating this battle plan, as you put it."

"Yeah, but it's not the same. She spends most of October and early November on the websites finding out what's hot, but she doesn't really whittle down the list of what she's getting for who until Thanksgiving Day."

"Some stores are open today," he pointed out, still trying to wrap his processors around how our day of gluttony worked with our day of greed.

I shook my head 'no.' "We're allowed to buy a newspaper, but that's it. Mom has already said a bunch of times that Thanksgiving Day is for family, not shopping." And especially with Optimus now being included in 'family,' I figured she wouldn't want any unnecessary distractions today. Ugh!

Optimus opened the passenger-side door for me, and I climbed in, Bumblebee following us as we pulled out into traffic. "Speaking of your mother," Optimus said, "I have been wondering what the best form of address is for her and your father."

Now I was the one confused.

"Under more typical circumstances, I would address them as Mr. and Mrs. Witwicky. But given our bond, it seems too formal. They are, after all, the parents of my brother. On my world, that would mean I address them with the same terms that my brother does. However, human step parents are frequently not called 'mother' or 'father' by their mate's children, so I am uncertain if parental terms are the correct ones. Human etiquette is ill equipped for Cybertronian family structures."

I could only imagine Mom's reaction to him calling her 'mother.' "Better go with their first names, just to be safe."

We found an open grocery store without too much trouble, and I got one of the last newspapers. It was a good thing we'd done that first. On our way back to the hotel, I got a call on my cell phone from a number in Michigan. I wracked my brains, trying to figure out if I knew anyone in Michigan, but drawing a blank, I gave up and just answered it. A familiar voice was on the other end, though: al-Sharif.

"Hello Mr. Witwicky. I hope I'm not calling at a bad time."

"No, not at all. What's up?"

"I just wanted to make sure the rooms for your parents were acceptable."

I knew he was fishing for some praise, but he totally deserved it. "Yes, the room is awesome! Mom's warming up to it, but Dad's the one who loved it. Kind of surprised me there. But yeah, you did great!"

"Thank you. I'm glad it worked out."

He sounded much more relaxed and casual, and it suddenly occurred to me that, with the Michigan phone number, he was probably on vacation right now, too.

"So...um...what are you doing for Thanksgiving this year?"

He chuckled. "Laying low, mostly. We're visiting my fiancée's family in Dearborn and she is picking a fight with her parents as we speak. We may not make it to the turkey, which would be a shame because finding one that is halal takes some looking."
"You have a fiancée?" I blurted out without thinking.

He chuckled on the other end of the line. "Yes, Ayesha. Once I was stationed state-side, I was able to propose to her. She comes from a much more conservative family than mine." The grin in his voice came through loud and clear. "She wore a designer hijab that she special-ordered just to annoy them today. A hijab is a headscarf," he explained when I didn't say anything for a second. "The Muslim women who wear them usually go for fairly simple ones, but Ayesha found one with feathers and sequins…"

I didn't quite catch myself in time from choking on that mental image.

"I managed to talk her out of the leopard-print one," he deadpanned.

Sniggering despite myself, I said, "Good luck with that."

He chuckled back. "Thank you, sir. I'll need it. Feel free to call me if you have any concerns."

"Thanks. I'll talk to you later."

I sighed as I hung up. "That's a great American tradition I'd like to avoid this Thanksgiving," I grumbled.

"The out-of-control family fight?" Optimus replied, laughter lurking just below the surface. No doubt he was remembering like I was the shouting match Aunt Shelley got into with her son Brent last year. "Isn't it already too late for that?"

"Naw. Traditionally it happens somewhere between the yams and the apple pie."

His amusement flooded the bond in answer.

…

Bumblebee grudgingly picked up Leo about 2PM and met Mom, Dad, Optimus, and me back at the hotel. Their restaurant was having a Thanksgiving buffet, and Mom was going on about how she'd like to do this hotel thing for Thanksgiving every year – it saved her all the toiling away in the kitchen for hours. Dad rolled his eyes and said, "We'll talk about it, Judy."

As we entered the hotel restaurant, Optimus inhaled deeply and a wistful feeling crept over the bond. I gave him a knowing grin – it just didn't smell as good in his holoform. He quirked a small smile in return.

When the hostess greeted us, Optimus surprised us when he said, "We have reservations under the name of Witwicky" and slipped her some cash. "No need for a receipt."

Dad scowled at that, but the oblivious hostess led all six of us to a secluded table. (Apparently, when Optimus had made the reservations, he also made sure we'd be isolated enough that no one would be able to easily eavesdrop on us. And since our dinner conversation might include matters of interplanetary security, it was probably a good idea). Then it was just a matter of filling our plates.

Mom was the last one to sit down, and she caught me mid-bite when she said, "Shouldn't we say grace?"

Dad and I exchanged a stunned look. Mom was hardly the religious type, though it was kind of traditional to pray over Thanksgiving dinner at least, but in a restaurant? Leo shifted uneasily in his seat and glanced around. No one was near us, much less paying us any attention.
Dad cleared his throat. "I didn't exactly prepare a..."

"Oh, that's fine, Ron. I did." She gave Optimus a warm smile before clasping her hands and bowing her head. Leo gave me a disbelieving look, but I shrugged and set down my fork, pressing my hands together under the table where no one else would see.

"Amazing grace," she solemnly intoned, "who art in heaven. We just wanted to express our gratitude that Sam is still alive after all the craziness this year. The kitchen tried to kill him, and then there was that little spider thing that wanted to dissect his brain and then every government on Earth was gunning for him and then if that wasn't enough, he got dropped in the middle of a war zone and had to sprint across the front lines and..."

"MOM!" I muttered.

"Oh, right. So yeah, grateful that Sam's alive, and Bumblebee, and Leo. And Optimus – we're very glad that he's still with us..."

"Judy!" Dad hissed.

"And we're glad that Ron and I made it, too. Please bless this delicious feast. Until all are one. Namaste."

For a stunned second, we all just kind of stared at Mom, until Optimus said, "Thank you, Judy."

Dad glared at him.

I sighed and reached for a roll. Happy, happy, joy, joy. It looked like we'd have a traditional Thanksgiving after all.

"So Leo," Mom eventually asked to fill the awkward silence, "why didn't you go home for Thanksgiving this year?"

He shrugged. "Couldn't afford it. I figured I'd save my money for Christmas and fly home then. My folks aren't rich enough to jet around for the holidays."

"Well we're hardly rich enough for that," Mom protested. "It was Sam who flew us up."

Leo gave me a look that clearly said, 'You've been holding out on me!"

Mom continued, oblivious. "We blew all our money on our second honeymoon – the one those metal monsters interrupted. They even ruined that fancy French lingerie – "

TMI, Mom!

" – I could just kill them for that." Her eyes darted to Bumblebee and then Optimus. "Present company excepted, of course."

"Of course," my brother graciously rumbled. Bumblebee smirked and shook his head ever so slightly – he'd kind of come to expect this sort of thing from Mom.

Leo glared at me. "So why didn't you fly home? You could afford two tickets to anywhere with your massive cover-up money from the government. Including California." His home state – I could have flown us both home for the holiday.

I didn't realize I was projecting my aggravation and grief until I felt Optimus' soothing calm flow over the bond. I sent a wave of gratitude back his way. "Because Florida isn't home," I muttered.
"My home has been demolished – partly by those kitchen-cons and the rest by the government to make sure we didn't leave any trace behind."

Bumblebee fidgeted, and intense grief and sympathy bled across the bond. Looking at my best friend and my brother, I realized their home was gone, too, but in a far worse way than I would ever (hopefully) understand. Now I totally felt like crap for being so self-centered and mopey.

Sensing my guilt, Optimus said, "Home is where your family is. And we – all of us – are here now."

Between his words and the kind acceptance he was sending my way, I managed a smile. "Thanks." Trying to rescue what was left of the dinner, I turned to (hopefully) safer topics. "So school is going pretty well. I'm acing Astronomy."

"Good for you!" Mom said and then launched into an interrogation of my school life.

...

Mom and Dad were fighting again when I went to sleep on the couch in their hotel room. Dad was criticizing Mom for springing the whole saying grace thing on us and for announcing to the world that the two of them were broke. Mom argued back that Dad was feeling threatened by the fact that I had more money than him and that I was growing up so he wouldn't be the head of the household forever. Then Dad told her to stop comparing him to Optimus and they started that whole argument again.

Sleep couldn't come fast enough.

Optimus was on the aircraft carrier like usual. "You're two for two, you know," I told him.

His surprised curiosity flowed over the bond, and I explained, "Mom and Dad are at it again."

"Still arguing about Judy's crush on me?" he asked, amused.

"Not really, though that did come up. Mostly it was the money thing. You should have let Dad pay for the dinner."

Confused at my irritation, he said, "I was the one who flew them here. They were my guests."

"Yeah, but Dad's the breadwinner."

He was completely stumped, and I remembered he didn't have WiFi in our bond dreams. "He's the one who provides financially for our family. Your paying for dinner is trespassing in his territory, you know? Add Mom's crush to that, and you really are stepping on his toes."

He blinked once in surprise before chagrin crept over the bond. "I had not considered it in that light."

"And where did you come up with the money to fly them up, anyway? I thought they paid their own way!"

"You negotiated our salaries, Sam," he reminded me, "and we had an independent source of income before that."

"Wait...what? You're independently wealthy?"

His embarrassment swept over me. "Not exactly. It's all in Spitfire's name, though she tracks our funds in separate trust accounts and we have unrestricted access to our individual monies."
I crossed my arms and glared at him, somewhere between amazed and annoyed. "Okay, spill. I want to hear this one."

He mentally shrugged. "About a year ago while Arcee was visiting Spitfire, she saw that Spitfire was managing her investments. Arcee suggested she sell a particular stock based on a variety of factors. A week later that company's value fell dramatically and Spitfire saved about $1000 by selling when she did. She gave half of that money to Arcee as a thank you, and we've been investing it wisely."

Floored, I demanded, "You're playing the stock market?"

"Several stock markets," he corrected nonchalantly. "It's just a matter of probabilities and data assimilation about the various companies. For an Autobot, that's sparkling's play."

Remembering the mysterious scholarship donors and Optimus' smug satisfaction at the time, I accused, "You're the one who bought me back into college!"

"It was a communal effort. We each contributed about a million dollars."

I choked and Optimus actually chuckled at my surprise. "Money is power, boy. We who have survived so much for so long are wiser than to leave ourselves at the mercy of treasury bureaucrats."

"A million bucks a piece?" I stuttered.

"I told you I would support you in your decision to return to college."

"But… a million bucks a piece? You had that much?"

"Most of us had at least double that," he answered. "And of course, it's been several months since then, and we have our own salaries to invest now."

"Even, like, Skids and Mudflap?"

"As I said, sparkling's play. Sideswipe is the only one who ever loses any significant amount of money – he likes to dabble in the riskier investments."

My breath whooshed out. "You guys are rich."

Again he mentally shrugged. "It is only money. It will not allow us to restore you to your home or to your former anonymity."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. But you could buy pretty much anything for yourselves that you wanted."

That intense grief from dinner came back full force. "It cannot buy us the things we most desire. Our home. The lives of our lost kin. Peace."

And boy did I feel shallow right then.

Over our bond, I felt his indulgent forgiveness, and he gently said, "You have much to be grateful for, not the least of which are your parents, even though they are quarrelling."

"Yeah." Looking down, I remembered that he'd lost both his parents.

"Despite your feelings now, you will miss them when they are gone. Whole generations were lost on Cybertron in the War, and with their death, we lost much knowledge and wisdom."
Surprised, I looked back up at him. "I thought you meant your...sparklings and stuff. Your kids."

He nodded gravely. "Many of our young were also lost, though not to the same degree as the older generations – the Decepticons could more easily turn the younglings. Understand, Sam, our parts can be replaced, so long as the spark endures. It is rare for a Cybertronian to die a natural death and even Jetfire would have been healthy and whole if he'd had access to energon. We took our elders for granted because they were always there. Ironhide and an Autobot named Kup are the only two mechs living who were from my parent's generation. And the generations before them are completely gone now."

I hadn't thought about it like that. When you're practically immortal, the loss of your grandparents and great-grandparents hits home to you just as much as your parents. The whole cycle of life thing didn't apply to them.

"I am sorry, brother. I did not mean to burden you." He deliberately changed the flow of emotion over the bond and, trying to cheer me up, he asked, "Where would you like to go tonight?"

I carefully considered that. I'd probably be depressed by seeing Cybertron now, even if it was before the War. And even if he could find a memory he liked from my past, I would probably be depressed there, too. Then a thought occurred to me. "I want to see what you'd spend a million dollars on – besides scholarships. Or military stuff like weapons upgrades or whatever. I want to see what you'd buy here on Earth just for you. A million dollars' worth."

That seemed to please him. "Agreed, on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you show me the same as well." He surprised me by giving me a teasing poke over the bond. "Tomorrow is Black Friday."

"Oh no you don't! For one thing, Leo would kill me if I showed up after Christmas break with that kind of loot. And besides, I don't have a million dollars to blow on you."

"Hypothetically, then. And you can show me some smaller-ticket items as well, in the $5000 range."

"Ha. Ha. You gotta keep my real Christmas gift to a hundred bucks, okay?"

"Agreed," he grudgingly answered, and we were abruptly in a book store.

"Seriously?" I demanded as I followed him through the stacks. "You – with your processors and comms and everything – you would spend your money on books?"

"Not all information is available online," he pointed out, stopping in front of one section in particular and pulling out a thin volume. "And comics are notoriously well-guarded from online distribution."

I snorted and his optics brightened with humor.
I looked at the comic he'd picked up. "Spiderman?"

He felt my...just complete disbelief, and his wry amusement washed back. "Heroes define a culture, Sam. They embody the attributes, behaviors, and characteristics a society values."

I snorted, gesturing to the wall of comics in front of us. "This can't say much about us humans, then."

He lifted the volume in his hand. "On the contrary, the evolution of the legends told about a hero is very enlightening. Three generations have read and told stories about Spiderman, and some comics like Superman have been in circulation for even longer. The 'Mutt and Jeff' comics ran from 1914 to the 1980's. It is fascinating the aspects that have changed and the things that remain. The Spiderman adage 'with great power there must come great responsibility' is an enduring truth."

"Did you seriously just use 'Spiderman' and 'enduring truth' in the same sentence?"

He jutted out his chin, the slightest hint of defensiveness leaking across the bond. "Comics and graphic novels can be serious storytelling, despite the format. Even major religious texts have been reproduced as graphic novels."

Sniggering, I said, "Admit it. You just like them."

"One of my roles on Cybertron was that of art critic," he archly reminded me.

"Art critic?" I gave him a skeptical look. "Uh-huh."

Venting a sigh, he sheepishly said, "I'm not the only one."

Abruptly we were in Ratchet's med bay, but the scale was all wrong. He was taller than us. "This is a memory Arcee shared with me," Optimus explained, sensing my confusion.

Panic hit me like a freight train – I hadn't thought about the fact that their memories could be shared like an mp3 file.

Steadying assurance poured through the bond. "I will never share the memories I make with you in the bond dreams, Sam. Not without your consent. They are too precious."

I nodded my head, settling down a little in the wake of his calm, and the scene around us sprang to life.

"Have you SEEN this?" the medic passionately ranted, shoving a comic in front of our faces. "GoBots! Fragging cyborgs! The narrow-minded squishes think you have to have an organic brain to be sentient! And then look at this!" He manically flipped through a couple of pages to a scene where the robots were apparently transforming. "Where did the tractor-trailer go? Honestly! And then with that Cy-Kill, the wheel floats off like it's got a processor of its own. What do they think transforming is? Magic? These idiot humans don't know the slightest thing about robotic physiology! Same thing with everyone just flying around without any means of aerial propulsion – do they think we're all superheroes? Why don't they just give us fragging leotards and capes? And that transform sequence! It would break half his struts if that jet were to actually try
transforming that way!"

By this point, I was desperately holding back the sniggers.

Filling the role of Arcee for the memory, Optimus looked over the comic, fighting a grin. "Maybe you should write a comic about humans, Ratchet. Put their knees on backwards and see how they like it."

He ignored that and, with a wordless snarl, flipped back a couple of pages. "And then look at this! The Guardians' noble leader is a jet while the Renegades have a cybernetic tyrannosaurus rex and a vicious femme is their commander's right-hand-bot. Those are thinly-veiled references to Grimlock and Elita One! It's Decepticon propaganda! They even purposely omit the faction symbols. Starscream's behind this, I tell you!"

I burst out laughing at just how…how ridiculous it was. Why would Decepticons even care about comics? We were just insects to them.

Optimus cocked an optic ridge at him. "You do know you're sounding like Red Alert, right?"

"Fine!" Ratchet grumbled, subspacing the book and throwing his hands in the air in frustration. "But Optimus should know about this."

Abruptly we returned to the bookstore, but the mental image of Ratchet having a total cow about comics would have me randomly giggling for a week.

...

Mom shook me awake. "Come on, sleephead! Early shopper gets the steal!"

I pulled the blanket over my head. "I like the virtual shopping better." For one thing, spending a million dollars in Optimus' head wasn't anywhere near as dangerous.

"We'll hit the deals on Cyber Monday, too," she blithely answered, pulling the blanket off of me. "Now come on! It's almost four-thirty already!"

Groaning, I hauled myself up off the couch. I'd slept in a pair of sweats to make things easier this morning, but I looked with bleary-eyed surprise at my dad, who was also dressed and ready. "You're going, too?"

"Yeah," he grudgingly answered. "Black Friday is a family affair."

In other words, he wasn't going to leave Mom alone with Optimus. My head was already pounding. "Red Bull?"

Mom shoved a covered coffee cup into my hand and I winced as she tried to do a Major Lennox impersonation. "Come on! March – two – three – four!"

Bumblebee and Optimus were both idling by the hotel's front door. "They were here all night?" Mom asked.

"Um…no, they must have noticed on their sensors that we were awake," I lied. Optimus would have instantly known we were awake when I'd suddenly left the bond dream like that. For the longest time, I hadn't been sure what I'd spend all that money on. I already had the coolest car imaginable, a full-ride scholarship to college, and thanks to the NEST team, a laptop that made even the Geek Squad drool. What else was there to life? Eventually I settled on the experience stuff – rock concerts
and Disneyland and Baja California. We'd just popped in on Vegas when Mom woke me up.

"You mean they were spying on us?" Dad demanded, creeped out. Mom had a little smirk and was eyeing Optimus' alt-form in a very disturbing way.

*Think, Sam, think!* I told myself. It was hard to do this early in the morning. "No, like they had a door alarm on our room."

Changing the subject, Bumblebee popped his doors open for us, and we all kind of hesitated. I always drove 'Bee, but Dad was already having 'man of the house' self-esteem issues with this whole trip. No way would Mom sit in the back, either, not when she was in charge of this expedition.

I could ride with Optimus and let Dad drive 'Bee, but then I just knew Mom would want to ride with me and Optimus – bad idea. With an aggravated sigh, I walked around to the driver's side, letting the two of them duke it out over who got to ride shotgun. Mom won, and Dad got banished to the back seat.

Mom chattered away in the front seat, giving 'Bee his marching orders about which stores we needed to be at and at what time to maximize our chances of getting the best deals. The first couple of places weren't too bad. 'Bee got us a parking spot in record time and Optimus met us by the front doors. The stores handed out little tickets to people in line, so you knew going in if they had what you needed in stock and there was no brawl in front of the video game counter. Optimus and 'Bee's holoform Cam Romero stood on either side of me unless we had to squeeze through an aisle or something, in which case Optimus went in front and Bumblebee brought up the rear. Dad followed as the beast of burden pushing the shopping cart. It wasn't until about twenty minutes of this that I realized my brother and 'Bee were playing bodyguard.

I poked Optimus over the bond. "If you're going to keep an eye on somebody, watch out for my mom. She's a terror."

"You are my first concern," he solemnly answered. 'Bee's cell phone speakers played, "What he said!"

I shook my head before trotting a little to catch up with Mom, the two of them staying with me like little (okay, big, because they were both taller than me) shadows. "You're gonna regret it."

The third store was a sporting goods place and we were in and out with our tennis shoes and yoga gear in fifteen minutes. While we were in line, I caught Optimus glancing curiously at an air-hockey table and I leaned closer. "I promise I'll teach you how to play that tonight."

"I will enjoy that," he blandly said, but the warm delight over the bond made me grin.

In electronics at the fourth store, we were too late for the Blu-Ray player Mom wanted, but she grabbed two fistfuls of jump drives. "There's a limit of two on these," Dad reminded her, looking over the newspaper ad.

"Well there's five of us, which makes a total of ten," she beamed and then resumed stalking the ever elusive Black Friday deal of the year.

Dad heaved a sigh, tossed a glare at me and my 'bots as if this were somehow our fault, and then pushed his cart along behind Mom. We snagged a couple of 75% off blankets that Mom insisted on getting, even after I told her it was going to cost more to ship them home than it would have to just buy them in Florida.

She just tisked at me and tossed them in Dad's cart.
Then we were off to the clothing section. People were standing three-deep around a couple of tables of jeans. Mom grimaced, and I tugged at her elbow. "Come on, let's just skip this one."

"But I already missed the Blu-Ray player" she protested.

"Judy," Dad nagged.

Mom looked at me sharply, a sort of manic gleam in her eyes, and slipped her coat off. "Just hold this for a second for me, 'kay?" And then she dove in before Dad could stop her.

"There she goes!" he hollered, unsuccessfully trying to grab her hand.

I tried to squirm in after her, but the sea of deal-shoppers had closed in behind her and I had to kind of jump to even see her head.

Dad shouted, "Dammit, Judy, get back here!"

Mom didn't even grace us with an answer.

Before I realized what was happening, a group of teenage girls were crushed up against me as the crowd around us all tried to reach the jeans.

Optimus wormed his way in to try to rescue me, murmuring "Excuse me" and "Sorry," the entire time. Just as he reached me, I heard Mom's voice rising above the babble. "I had them first! My Sammie needs these!"

Through gritted teeth, I muttered, "No I don't, Mom!"

"Bitch!" a much younger, soprano voice shrieked, "This is the only thing my boyfriend asked for for Christmas!"

"Those are mine!" Mom shouted back.

"Gah! Mom!" I rolled my eyes because we were packed in too tightly for me to facepalm. Looking at Bumblebee's Cam Romero alter ego, I wished I was a holoform so I could just flicker out of there.

The babble of voices rose to a dull roar in a sound that was all too familiar – like the sound of a ring of spectators when a fight breaks out at school.

Optimus huffed in frustration, and I may have heard him say "Slag" under his breath. He sure felt it even if he didn't say it. Looking over his shoulder at the blond holoform behind him, he simply said, "Bumblebee."

Cam nodded brusquely, catching my arm as Optimus pushed deeper into the mob, and hauled me out of that mess to where Dad was standing by the cart. Recalling a quote from Sharsky, Cam's cell phone said, "Da hell?"

"This is why I don't go shopping with her on Black Friday," Dad grumbled, his head swivelling as he tried to find Mom in the crowd. "She was on her best behaviour trying to impress him but I guess she just couldn't do it anymore."

Giving me a hard look, 'Bee quoted, "You. Stay." Then he dove back in to the melee.

A few seconds later, 'Bee hauled my staggering mom over to us. Her hair was a mess that was beyond help, though she was able to more-or-less straighten her clothes. Triumphanty, she tossed a pair of jeans into the cart. "There. Now we can go! We have what we came for."
Optimus managed to extricate himself from the mob, too, which had settled down quite a bit since the combatants had been separated. I gave him a weak smirk. "Told ya."

"You did," he evenly answered, chagrin and amusement mingling over the bond as he and 'Bee took up flank positions on either side of Mom.

We made our way to the check-out line and waited twenty minutes to get to the front, though all things considered, that was lightening-speed. All the while, Mom was going on about how crazy this girl was who tried to wrestle the jeans out of her hands and gushing about how heroic Optimus was for breaking up the fight. My brother was trying to act all humble and talk up Bumblebee's contribution, but Mom wouldn't be deflected and just kept cooing over Optimus, who was increasingly embarrassed. From the grin on his face, Cam Romero thought this was hysterical. Dad looked about ready to puke.

Finally, finally we made it outside, just as the sky was turning gray with the dawn. Dad piled Mom's loot into 'Bee's trunk, and we climbed into my best-friend-and-bodyguard's cab. I was almost giddy with relief when 'Bee backed out of our parking spot and headed out of the teeming lot toward the traffic light.

'Bee was glad to get away from the insanity, too, so maybe that was why it happened. Maybe he wasn't paying attention. Maybe it just would have been impossible to avoid the impact no matter what. Something white slammed into the front driver-side engine panel. Air bags deployed, and Mom shrieked.

For a couple of stunned seconds I sat blinking and waiting for red optics to peer through the windows. When no Decepticons materialized and the air bags had deflated, I looked over at my folks. "Everybody okay?"

"Yeah," Dad murmured from the back seat. "I think so."

"What hit us?" Mom wondered. We staggered out of 'Bee's cab to see what the damage was.

A white minivan had rammed 'Bee, and it was totaled. That whole "crumple zone" thing they design into cars was smashed up like an accordion. 'Bee had a cracked headlight, and I noticed that he had even slid sideways a bit, probably on purpose so the impact wouldn't be as bad for us or for the people in the minivan.

A brunette stormed out of the driver's side, and the first thing you noticed about her was that she was taller than Mom but with at least twice the mass. "Where the hell do you think you were doing? Don't you have eyes?" she demanded, stalking around her destroyed car and revealing a very prominent baby-bump. The fact that she was pregnant somehow made her look more dangerous, not less. Like she was already in momma-bear mode. A teenage girl with black hair and bubble-gum pink accents climbed out of the passenger seat and pointed an accusing finger at Mom. "That's her! That's the bitch who scratched me up!"

"YOU TOUCHED MY BABY?" the Amazon roared and started cussing out Mom so thoroughly that my ears burned.

Bubble-gum Girl was all but dancing in fierce excitement beside her, but my mom wasn't about to back down, especially not when Optimus' alt-form pulled up behind Bumblebee. My exasperated brother activated his holoform again and hopped out of the cab. Striding over with his best 'leader of the Autobots' aura, he commanded, "Break it up."

"Or what?" the Amazon snarled. "You gonna take a swing at me?"
"Hardly," Optimus intoned, caught somewhere between insulted, surprised, and vaguely amused.

"Why not? Because I'm a woman? Because I'm pregnant?" And then she started cussing out Optimus and calling him a coward. She even shoved him once.

Dad looked at me in disbelief, so he missed the woman balling her hand into a fist. But I saw what was coming and yelled, "Optimus!"

He looked my way, concerned curiosity flooding our wide-open bond, just as the crazy Amazon sucker-punched him, popping him in the eye.

I felt it.

I winced reflexively, covering my eye that was now watering. The pain was gone as abruptly as it had come – Optimus must have blocked the bond – but my body was convinced I'd just been hit.

"Sam?" Dad demanded, his hand on my shoulder. "Son, are you okay?"

Mom flew into a rage – someone had assaulted her crush – and I blurrily saw her jump on the Amazon's back, pulling her hair. She started shrieking and Mom was passionately swearing right back at her. Never, in eighteen years of pushing my mom's buttons, had I heard her rip into someone like that. Could this get any worse?

Stupid, stupid, stupid thing to ask. Bumblebee's speakers blared out, "It's the coppers! Run!"

The store security must have noticed the catfight and they were literally sprinting our way. "Judy!" Dad yelled, pulling her off the woman and all but diving for 'Bee's cab. His tires were peeling out and he took off before the door was even closed. The other woman tried to kick at his alt-form but he was already out of her reach. Optimus' holoform had disappeared, but his alt pulled forward, putting himself between me and the Amazon. I climbed into the cab and he took off, too.

After a stunned few seconds, I snorted a disbelieving laugh. "Ever been the getaway car before?"

He grim humor flowed over the bond. "Once or twice, but only when escaping from overwhelming numbers of Decepticons with a damaged brother-in-arms. I've never before had to run away from a pregnant organic femme."

Exhausted, I leaned my head back against the seat and weakly laughed.

Chapter End Notes

If you'd like to see some of the fallout from this incident (along with Bumblebee's reaction), please see "Black Friday" (chapter 18) in our fic The Daily Buzz.
Kith

Optimus and Bumblebee drove around for a good twenty minutes, no doubt trying to shake any potential pursuit, before heading back toward the hotel.

The bellhop helpfully loaded our Black Friday loot onto his little cart and hauled it upstairs for us. Once there, though, Dad sat both me and Mom down on the couches. Looking me straight in the eye, he said, "Son, I want to ask you something, and I want the honest truth."

"...okay?"

"Are they experimenting on you?"

Mom and I shared a confused look, and she protested, "Ron, don't be ridiculous! Optimus would never..."

He held his hand up to quiet her, never looking away from me. "You flinched."

Aw crud.

Reading my expression, he said, "I knew it."

I rolled my eyes. Of course he would figure out the one thing that nobody was supposed to know. "It's not like that Dad. The Autobots had nothing to do with it."

"With what?" Mom demanded, shocked.

"So the Decepticons experimented on you?" Dad asked, ignoring her.

"No," I firmly answered. "No one has experimented on me. No one has done anything to me."

"Then why did you react like that loony hit you instead of Optimus?"

Mom's gaze bounced from Dad to me and back. "What the hell is going on?"

"That's what I want to know," Dad said, still staring me down.

Optimus felt my panic, of course, and he was sending calm my way along with a mix of supportive and curious. I could almost hear him – did I want reinforcements?

Did I?

Deciding that having him here would probably only make things worse, I sent him a good dose of feeling dismissive. When I focused on Dad again, the thought suddenly struck me that being a Prime was genetic. Great-great-grandpa Archibald was fated to find Megatron. Archibald Prime. And here was my dad, part of that same bloodline. I decided that he, at least, should hear the truth. Mom would freak no matter what anyway.

"You know how Optimus considers me his brother?"

He was staring steadily at me, his expression carefully neutral. "Yeah."

"It's more than just 'considers me.' It's more than just adopted into the tribe."
"It's that whole Prime thing!" Mom exclaimed, starting to put the pieces together.

"Yes and no," I said, still looking at Dad. Taking a deep breath, I said, "With the Transformers, family ties aren't defined by blood like they are for us humans. Families – clans – are tied together by bonds. Essentially, a bond is a…kind of … well…psychic connection, I'd guess you'd say, between their souls."

Mom scowled. "Oh for pity's sake, Sam, tell us in plain English!"

Here went nothing. "I can feel what he's feeling, and vice versa."

"Wait, what?" Mom shrieked. Dad, however, remained focused on me.

"It's something that's controlled," I continued. "It can be blocked on both sides – his and mine. So when he got hit, I felt it, too. He blocked our bond almost immediately, but that's why I flinched."

Dad sat back against the couch, looking quietly thoughtful and taking this news waaaaay too well for my comfort. Mom's jaw dropped, her mouth moving every now and then like she was about to say something and then changed her mind. Finally she blurted out, "How did this happen?"

"It was…a side-effect of using the Matrix in Egypt." At Mom's confused look, I added, "You know, the Matrix? That thing I used to bring Optimus back from the dead."

"How do you turn it off or cut the ties or whatever?" Dad asked.

"You can't," I answered, and it was almost true. "Usually the only time the bond breaks is when one of you dies."

"Usually." He pounced on the word.

"It is possible to sever a bond. It happened to Optimus once before, but it hurt them both and it could have killed them."

"Shit," he growled and started pacing the room.

"Dad…it's not…"

"It's not what?" he demanded, wheeling on me. "You're telling us your soul is all tangled up with… with that thing in the parking lot and it's not a big deal?"

"It is a big deal – that's why I'm telling you! There's only a handful of humans who know, and I didn't exactly have clearance to tell you, but to hell with all that. You're my dad. My parents." I narrowed my eyes at him, protectiveness swelling in my soul. "And he's not a thing – he's my brother! And on his world, that makes you his kinda-dad."

That did it. His eyes bugged out and his jaw dropped and he sagged back onto the couch. Mom was speechless again, too.

"Do you get it now?" I demanded of them both. "He's not going away, not unless I do, too. And I'm okay with that. I don't want him to go away. That was my fatal mistake last time." The memory of Optimus impaled on Megatron's bayonet took all the wind out of my rant and I felt again just how little sleep I had last night. "Look…nothing's changed, not really. It's been this way for months. Just…now you know. Optimus really is my brother."

"But what does that even mean?" Mom all but wailed.
"That's what we're trying to figure out," I answered. "It's not like this has ever happened before. But I know it means everything that having a human brother means – someone to watch out for you and for you to argue with sometimes, someone who'll always love you even if he's ready to slap you."

"Why not Bumblebee?" Dad demanded. "Why him?"

"Because of the whole thing with the Matrix. That and he and I are both Primes and all Primes are brothers."

Mom threw her hands up in the air at that, while Dad paled. "How many are there?"

"Just one, well, two I guess if you count me. All the others are dead. Optimus is the last of the Dynasty of the Primes."

They both fell into stunned silence again, and I waited impatiently. The longer the silence stretched, the louder the snap would be when it ended. "So…any questions?"

"What does he expect us to do?" Dad finally managed to ask. "You said he thinks of me as his dad – really his dad, not just adopted or whatever."

"No, not really. Just kinda. You're the father of his brother and…" I realized this would require a lot longer and more-complicated answer than I was ready or able to give. Me and my big mouth. Optimus apparently sensed my frustration because he nudged me over the bond again, and I thought 'why not?' This was going to go splat anyway. Besides, our connection wasn't strong enough for me to play middle-man. I tried to send a balance of pleading and acceptance over the bond.

Optimus' holoform flickered into existence. Both of my parents jumped. Turning to them, I said, "Why don't you just ask him?"

He looked at them expectantly.

The silence rang loudly in the room for several seconds, and Dad finally blurted out, "You think of me as your 

"dad?!"

Baffled, Optimus glanced my way.

"You said you weren't sure what names to use," I prompted him.

Understanding dawned across the bond, quickly followed by a mix of exasperation and amusement. "It would be traditional on my world for me to address you with a parental title, yes. Sam informed me that calling you by your first names would be most appropriate in your culture."

"But you're…" Dad blinked a couple of times, still trying to wrap his head around it. "You're Sam's brother. Really his brother?"

Optimus was confused again, but his voice and expression were carefully neutral. "Please explain."

Mom jumped in. "Sam said you're really brothers – that you've got some kind of alien soul connection or something…"

"It's called a 'bond,' Mom!" I muttered.

"…yeah, that."

His disbelief deepened (I assumed it was because I'd told my parents all this). "It is true – Sam and I do share a brother bond."
"So what does that mean for us?" Dad demanded. Apparently the little recap helped him sort it all out a bit.

For the first time ever, I sensed Optimus feeling completely out of his depth. Dad managed to drop a bomb on him—guess I had Prime blood running through my veins after all. Optimus being Optimus, however, he fell back on the old standby of freedom. "It means whatever you choose for it to mean."

"Meaning…?" Mom prompted.

I sniggered at just how absurd this was getting. "This is the strangest 'define the relationship' conversation ever." For my mom, I translated Prime-speak. "It means that if you don't want to ever set eyes on him again, then he'll leave you alone. It also means that if you want to call him 'son' and buy him Christmas presents and chew him out for forgetting your birthday, he'll go along with that, too." But no way was I letting her know Optimus was rich—I'd go from favorite son to 'Sam who?' in three seconds flat.

Dad's brow furrowed as he mulled that all over. Mom looked even more stunned.

"Look," I cut in when the silence had stretched too long again. "It's not something you have to decide right this second."

Dad twitched his head 'no' and rose to his feet to stand opposite Optimus. "You can't break this bond without hurting Sam?"

"I cannot."

Taking a deep breath, Dad said, "Then I guess you're a Witwicky." Something hardened in Dad—hardened in a way I've never seen before. He wasn't angry or anything—just intense. "You call him your brother—and brothers watch out for each other." It was a command, an accusation almost.

"I will do everything in my power to ensure that no harm befalls him," Optimus solemnly promised.

With a smile that didn't quite hide the grimace, Dad said, "That's the best I can ask for…son."

They stood there for a few seconds, both of them looking like they weren't quite sure what to do next and the tense silence stretched tight again. Maybe it was because I was so exhausted, maybe it was just some kind of crazy inspiration, but I said, "So…family game night?"

They all stared at me like I'd just grown another head or something. Even Optimus. That made me nervously babble even more. "After we all get a nap, of course. And I need a shower. But yeah, the game center is open on campus today and it won't be crowded since everybody went home for the holiday and it beats sitting around watching TV and I promised Optimus, unless you guys wanted to do more shopping…"

"No!" Dad and Optimus both said. Dad threw him an unreadable glance but continued, "Game-night sounds good."

…

One shower and two hours of napping later, I was feeling a little more human and walking down to the dorm lobby with Optimus, Bumblebee...er Cam Romero, and Leo. Leo pulled on my sleeve, making me fall back to walk behind the 'bots. "You're effing kidding me!" my roomie hissed at me. "You're taking the leader of the kick-butt alien robots and your kamikaze mother bowling?"

"Kamikaze?" Optimus wondered, reminding him that they had better-than-human hearing.
"I saw the vids, dude. She was crazy to jump that pregnant chick. Practically had a death wish."

Dismayed, Optimus gave 'Bee a stern look, and his holoform ducked his head in embarrassment.

"Just let her win in skee ball and nobody dies," I deadpanned.

Mom and Dad were waiting downstairs, and we walked together over the to game center. Dad paid for all of us, and Optimus didn't say a word, though he did give me a knowing look, and understanding flickered across the bond. If we had this many inside jokes when we'd only shared a bond for three months (and most of that time was spent on opposite sides of the planet), I could only imagine what we'd be like a couple of years from now.

For bowling, we played teams on two lanes. Originally we were going to play Mom, Dad, and me against Optimus, 'Bee and Leo, but Leo got talking smack about having two "upgrades" on his team and Dad decided we needed to split up the 'bots.

"Well, keep most of the Witwickys together," I said. "You guys take Optimus and it'll be us kids against you."

Mom and Dad exchanged a vaguely queasy look and Optimus sent a healthy dose of cautiousness my way, but I looked on the bright side. At least Mom wasn't swooning over Optimus' holoform anymore.

With a defeated sigh, Dad said, "Sure, why not? Come on, Optimus."

We each chose our bowling balls, but when we got ready to roll, Optimus asked, "Which team should go first?"

"Youth before wisdom," 'Bee quipped.

My brother turned to Mom. "Ladies first?"

Giving him a tentative smile, she nodded. "Sure."

Surprisingly, Optimus and 'Bee didn't smoke us humans. My brother had promised they'd both stay within their holoforms' natural limits, and besides, Dad had the most experience. He won ahead of 'Bee, but only by a couple of points.

"Another game?" Dad offered, more at ease now that his manly self-esteem was starting to recover.

I shared another inside-joke look with Optimus. "They have an air hockey table..."

He turned to Dad. "Perhaps another time."

"I hear you're wicked at skee ball," Leo said to Mom, trying to make nice with the kamikaze.

"Damn straight!" She swaggered toward the machines, and Optimus and I headed over to the cashier to get some quarters.

"Thank you, Sam," he said as we walked toward the table.

"For what?"

"For suggesting this. You are much wiser than your years."

Coming from Optimus Prime, that was quite a compliment. I shrugged, but I'm sure he felt my grin
over the bond. "Well, you know, big-brother Prime and all."

He chuckled, the warmth of it spilling over from his spark to my heart.

"So...rules..." I said as I picked up my paddle.

"Hit the puck into your opponent's goal, don't touch it with your hand, and don't cross the center line with your mallet." A touch of smugness sparkled in his eyes. "Google."

I tossed my paddle and caught it, smirking back at him. "Experience before internet access?"

He gestured that I should go first. "By all means."

I laid the puck on the whirring table and gave him a taunting look. He practically radiated a 'Bring it!' attitude, so I whacked it his way. The thrill of play – of challenge – washed back and forth over the bond to the rhythmic plinking of the puck.

He won. At least he didn't skunk me – I got four points before he reached his seven. Still, when the puck slammed into my goal for the last time, I groaned and threw my hands up in defeat. Optimus was openly grinning.

Leo, hearing my pain, came over to gloat and I handed the paddle off to him. "Fine. If you think you could do better..."

'Bee drifted over, eager to watch the two of them face off. To my deep satisfaction, Leo lost, too, by one to seven. I gave my brother a triumphant high-five.

By then, Mom and Dad had finished with their skee ball games and came over to see what everyone was cheering or moaning about. They each took a turn against Optimus, too. (Judging by his emotions, Optimus threw the game with Dad, but only by a point.) Then it was Cam Romero's turn, and I was surprised by the sudden mischief Optimus felt.

"No holds barred," Bumblebee's phone drawled, and my brother nodded in agreement. There would be no nonsense about 'natural limits' of their holoforms in this game, and I fidgeted in anticipation. They didn't disappoint. From the first hit, Bumblebee was lightning quick, but Optimus was faster still, slamming the puck back at 'Bee with a staccato plinking as it bounced off the table's railing. Before either of them could score, though, the puck caught air and ricocheted off the wall, clipping a picture of the library and sending it crashing to the floor.

We all kind of stared for a stunned second, and then Mom giggled and we all broke out laughing. Dad retrieved the puck, which was cracked now. "Who gets to keep the souvenir?"

Optimus chuckled and gestured toward 'Bee. "Youth before wisdom."

Dad tossed it to him, and 'Bee caught it, flipped it once in the air, and then pocketed it. "I gotta get me one of these!"

... 

When Optimus and I met on the aircraft carrier that night, I was surprised he was feeling both touched and a little concerned. "Sam, thank you for this evening, but it is enough for me that you have accepted our bond. Your father is not kin to me, and I do not wish to cause friction in your family."

"Yeah, well, they were the ones freaking out. Dad started putting the pieces together when you got
hit and I was the one wincing. Besides, I kind of remembered that whole thing about Primeliness being inherited. If it was fate for Great-Great-Grandpa Archibald to find Megatron, then Dad's part of the Prime clan, too, right?"

"The bond defines the relationship," he reminded me, "and I have never shared a bond with your father."

"Maybe not, but I'm a Prime, and with humans it's blood that defines the relationship."

That made him pause, considering.

"I don't know – it was just a thought I had."

"Perhaps it is a valid intuition. Only time will tell," he answered, his spark enveloping my heart in a hug. "But I gave you time to accept what you were, and that took a while even in the face of undeniable proof. Your father may take much longer than you wish or expect."

"Yeah, yeah. You're right."

Trying to cheer me up, he straightened his shoulders, "Of course I am."

I snorted and chuckled. "That's my line – I am the older brother, after all."

Heartbreaking humor crept into the flow of emotions over the bond. "I cannot help but wonder what my parents would think of having an organic son."

"Did they even know what an organic was?"

"Yes, there were non-metallic lifeforms known to us, though all of them were even more primitive than humans."

"Gee, thanks," I drawled, making sure he knew I was teasing.

Abruptly we were in a room on Cybertron, an open space with a pretty amazing view of the city. Some of the furnishings looked different, but I was pretty sure we were in somebody's living room.

A femme was standing near the window – Sunset. "How can we even know, Mother?" he asked her.

"The characteristics of life are universal," she softly answered, "as should be the characteristics of sentience. Tell me, Optimus. What would define it?"

"Some say a spark is necessary, but that hardly applies to an organic. Self-awareness is another answer I've heard. But studies have shown that turbofoxes recognize themselves in mirrors, so that hardly qualifies."

"Why do you say that?"

He frowned thoughtfully, turning the question over in his mind. "That's just one piece of the puzzle. Communication is another – they have to communicate somehow. Underlying intelligence would have to be there, too. A sentient race would need code and hardware for problem-solving, creativity, and the ability to comprehend logic."

"But organics have neither hardware nor code. And turbofoxes communicate with body language."

He vented a frustrated sigh.
"You seek for a clear division, Optimus," she said, her gentle amusement flowing freely over her bond with him.

"Perhaps the paradigm is one of degrees, then," he answered.

She chuckled at that. "My dear little mech" – she said that wryly since Optimus towered over her – "you think too hard. The solution is simple."

"And it is…?"

"If it can understand the question well enough to answer with something more than 'yes' or 'no,' then the being is sentient."

His affection for her swelled across their bond, and I deeply wished I could have felt a bond with her, too, just for a day. And then I realized I had the next best thing. Deciding to shake up Optimus' world again a little bit, I stepped forward and imagined that she could see me. "Hi. I'm Sam Witwicky."

Optimus and Sunset both stared at me with wide optics. Giving Optimus an encouraging poke over the bond, I added, "To answer your question, I'm sentient. Or at least, I think I am. I hope so, anyway, since I guess my freedom is kind of riding on the answer."

My brother seemed to understand what I was doing and, after another stunned second or two, played along. "And that is answer enough," Sunset said, recovering. Looking to Optimus, she said, "And where did you find this…individual?"

"Human. Sam is a human from a distant world called Earth. He is kin."

Her optic ridges rose high in surprise and I felt it as she ran a scan. "You have a spark?"

"No…not really. To be honest, we don't really know how come I have a brother bond with Optimus."

"With Optimus?" she exclaimed, tossing a mother's glare his way. "That makes him more than kin! Son," she gravely said to me, "you are welcome here."

"Thanks," I answered, surprised as I felt an unfamiliar echo of emotion over my brother-bond. Optimus was recalling her real feelings from a real time and splicing them into this imagined scene so I could sense her first-hand. I hadn't thought to do something like that with Blaine.

"Fortron!" Sunset called. "Come, quickly!"

The mech – a Prime, I realized, who would have also been my brother had he lived – strode into the room. We'd never shared a bond, so technically we weren't kin, but Fortron and Sunset were something to me. I just wasn't sure what to call them.

"Organic kin?" the big mech asked with a grin (since Sunset would have undoubtedly brought him up to speed over their bond). "What does your younger brother look like?"

"It's complicated," I answered, not sure if Optimus or I could keep up with trying to imagine explaining this to them. "We didn't create any brothers together – the bond kind of happened on its own. And I can't stay for long. Optimus just wanted to introduce me to my new clan."

Sunset practically radiated excitement. "Megatron – "
"Sam has already met Megatron," Optimus quickly cut her off. "It is you he wishes to meet now and to learn more of our clan."

Fortron gave us a puzzled look but nodded in acceptance. "What would you like to know, son?"

I snorted a laugh. "Everything." Reconsidering, I said, "Mostly I wanted to find out what you thought about this…situation. Having an organic addition to your clan."

Fortron gestured for us to have a seat. "Well it's a surprise," he said, and another unfamiliar, imagined spark poked me over the bond – Fortron, trying to make sense of me.

"Tell us about your species," Sunset invited. "Do you have clans? Oh, and what do you use as fuel?"

Recognizing mothering when I saw it, I said, "I'm not hungry. Besides, I don't think there's anything on Cybertron that I could even eat. It's all…” I floundered, looking to Optimus to try and explain food to someone who had never seen Earth.

"Native energy sources," he answered for me. "Stationary, organic solar-energy collectors called plants as well as more primitive mobile organisms that also subsist on plants."

Revulsion flickered from Sunset at that explanation, though she tried to hide her shock. "You derive your energy from other lifeforms?"

I rolled my eyes. Like I hadn't gotten the PETA speech while growing up in California. "Yeah. Not everyone's a meat-eater, though. Some of us are vegetarians."

"But plants are forms of life, too, are they not?" Fortron asked, uneasy himself.

Huh. I hadn't thought about it like that before. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Humans are well-evolved to the resources available on their planet," Optimus said in my defense.

Sunset diplomatically tried to move on. "What of your society?"

I remembered I hadn't answered her question about clans. "We have families, which are pretty much like clans. We have genders and kids, but we don't need the All Spark for all that. Genetics are the basis of our families – we're related by blood."

"Who is your clan leader?" Fortron asked with interest.

"My dad, I guess. But it's really just the three of us – me, my mom, and my dad. So there's not much of a clan to lead."

Sorrow and compassion I didn't understand flowed in from Sunset. "May I ask what became of the rest of your clan?"

Like before, I bumped nose-first into my own biodegradable nature. "We're pretty short-lived, I guess. My grandparents and everyone who went before me are dead."

"Everyone?" Sunset weakly repeated.

"How long to does your species live, Sam?" Fortron asked, a stern edge to his voice and emotions.

I helplessly looked to Optimus again, having no clue how time converted from Earth to Cybertron.

"A vorn, approximately," he answered.
And because I was seeing them through my brother's optics, their expressions of horror were plain to see and feel. They sat there gawking and staring at me just like Mom and Dad did only a couple of hours ago.

Pity welled up in Sunset's spark and poured into my heart. Fortron was almost angry, though. "A vorn? Optimus, you went and bound yourself to a creature who only lives a vorn?"

"Fortron," Sunset firmly said, reining him in. Something passed between them and he relented a little. "My apologies, Sam," he murmured.

"No offence taken," I promised. "And it was an accident. I didn't realize until it was too late just how deep a bond runs. Not that we had any say in it – either one of us."

"How long can you stay?" Sunset interrupted, whispering again, "Only a vorn."

"For a while. Until sunrise."

She reached out to lay her warm hand on mine. "Then let us enjoy the time we have."
After Black Friday, I figured Saturday had to be an improvement, right? Stupid assumption.

Since I was still showering and everything at the dorm, I headed over there first thing in the morning. Leo surprised me by being wide awake and sitting bolt upright in bed, hair plastered up the side of his head from sleep.

"'Sup?" I asked.

Figuring domestic terrorists hadn't figured out how to send anthrax digitally (yet), I fired up the laptop. Among the spam and my Facebook updates were two emails worth reading. The first was from al-Sharif informing me that I was invited to the Autobot blog along with Leo and Simmons and giving me my login and password. The second email was from Fassbinder titled "Revelations." Apparently the same girl who had hacked the Buzz for them had started to see the obvious – not everyone on the blog was human. Crud!

Leo was already on the phone, trying to figure out how much his minion had figured out.

I texted 'Bee. /Hack my email. Binder's on 2 us./

In a blink, Cam Romero was standing in the middle of the dorm room. His mischievous little smile had me worried.

"What?" I demanded.

"Roll with it, baby."

Leo put his phone against his shirt to muffle the receiver. "Are you effing crazy?"

"Indulge me," he quoted.

"Seriously?" I demanded. "You want us to play along with them?"

He nodded, grinning from ear to ear. "Are we human…Who's in charge around here, anyway?"

Understanding, I sniggered and then translated for Leo. "He wants to see if they can figure out which of the Buzz followers is human and which ones are alien."

"You are effing crazy," Leo hissed back, but then he talked to Fassbinder again, promising that he and I would start doing some org charting and that we'd all powwow about it tomorrow night. When he hung up, he glared at 'Bee. "You like to live dangerously."

'Bee gestured at himself as if to say, "This is me we're talking about."

"He lost his voice to Megatron the first time and to Starscream the second," I pointed out. "What's Fassbinder and Sharsky compared to that?"

Leo nodded, acknowledging the truth of it.
After everyone was awake and presentable, we drove to downtown Philadelphia to take in all the Revolutionary War tourist sites. I could hardly have Optimus on vacation on the East Coast and not see the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, even if it was blustery and kind of cold. Even with the place being pretty much empty, it took more than half an hour to find him a parking spot close enough to use his holoform on the tour, but it was so worth the effort!

When we got to the room where they had copies of the Declaration of Independence on display, his profound awe caught me by surprise. I mean, this was Optimus Prime who reverently touched the glass display case. He was thousands of times older than the words in front of him. He personally lost more in his own war than all of the revolutionaries put together. So why were his emotions making me get all choked up? When we were back outside, I leaned closer and quietly asked, "What?"

Wry humor crept over the bond even though he was still moved. "The analogy of insects isn't entirely inaccurate – humans are short-lived, frail, primitive, and prolific. But I have rarely read in any language such eloquence on the rights of sentient beings. The spark of freedom burns brightly in the human soul. I defy any Cybertronian – Decepticon or Autobot – to call humans insects after reading that second paragraph in particular."

I gave him a sly smile. "It would have sealed the deal for Sunset and human sentience?"

Bittersweet tinged the bond. "I cannot be certain, of course, but I…imagine so."

We went sight-seeing and shopping for the rest of the morning (because Mom still wasn't shopped out because her Black Friday spree had been cut short), but by noon all us humans were wiped out. We caught lunch downtown and the headed back to the hotel for a good nap. After we were all awake, though, I spent a good two hours answering questions about the bond for my parents. Optimus wasn't there, thankfully (he and 'Bee were off doing…stuff, I guess). I would have been embarrassed if he overheard some of the things I said, and there was some information he might have volunteered that I didn't want my parents to know yet. (I just couldn't see my folks reacting well to the knowledge that Optimus wandered around in my memories and had been hugged by Blaine.)

Eventually, though, I felt my brother close by – felt how nervous he was, actually.

"Optimus is here," I announced just before there was a knock at the door.

Mom was bugged-eyed at that and Dad was more weirded-out than I'd ever seen. I guess they hadn't actually seen the bond in action before. I rose to answer the door.

"Forgive me for interrupting," he formally said, "but it's approaching dinner time."

Which was his not-question way of asking us to join him for dinner. Or asking if he could join us, I guess, since he didn't really need to eat. I opened the door wider, inviting him in.

I glanced back at my still-creeped-out parents, worried what their reaction would be. Mom swallowed hard and then rose to her feet. Marching up to Optimus, she asked, "What do you think of Somali food?"

"I've never tried it," he admitted.

"Me neither. Let's go." And then she continued out to the hallway.
"Yes, femme creator," I muttered under my breath and my brother smirked at me. That expression on his face made me do a double-take, which made him grin.

Dad placed a hand on Optimus' shoulder that was probably meant to be friendly. "She found the restaurant on her phone's GPS. I'm glad you guys are here because we'd be halfway to Detroit before she'd admit the damn thing got her lost. Again."

I was worried that Optimus might take it the wrong way to be compared to a (highly accurate, granted) GPS, but my brother understood the feeling behind my dad's words and nodded with a smile and a sense of ease over the bond.

I wasn't exactly sure what to expect from a Somali restaurant, but the food was surprisingly good. We were just starting to debate whether we wanted dessert or not when I got a text.

I reflexively read it – it was Leo. /sharksys spazzing big on im/

He knew I was having family bonding time, so this must be something important. It slagging well better be! To my folks and Optimus, I said, "Sorry, I need to check something out." I pulled up my mobile messenger.

Leo: Dude, what's up? Did you forget to take your meds again?
Sharsky: DUDE, don't dude me. Isn't anyone watching CNN?

I snorted at that one and typed: Do we ever?

Leo: Word.
Sharsky: SOMEONE turn on a TV.
Fassbinder: No can do, bro. Mom will want to know why I'm not working on my paper.

I looked around the restaurant, but it didn't have any screens mounted on the wall or anything. Optimus gave me a quizzical look and I said, "I need a TV. Something about CNN?"

My brother held his hand out toward my phone. "May I?"

I gave it to him and he closed his hands over it then opened them again. He had a cell phone in each palm. He returned mine to me and activated his own (holographic) cell phone, pulling up the news feed.

CNN was showing footage of a smoldering building, and the headline screamed, "Meteor Smashes the Luxor Hotel!"

Mom sighed, but there was a shakiness behind it. "Not again!"

I furiously typed: Oh, this is NOT good.

Sharsky: See what I mean? Like hell that was a meteor! Binder, you still on vid duty?
Fassbinder: I'll c/c the vids from two years ago, see if there's any connection.
Leo: There has to be one. What kind of meteorite hits the frigging LUXOR? It has to be an alien.

At that I looked up at Optimus. "One of yours?"

A tangled mess of hope, anxiety and determination rolled across the bond. "Not with that landing site – not unless it was absolutely unavoidable. However, if it is not…one of mine or one of Megatron's, it would be a highly improbable coincidence."
I sighed, worry twisting a knot in my stomach. "Right." I glanced at the frantic conversation in front of me, but it was interrupted by a text, this time from al-Sharif. /The President requests your input./

Of course he did! And just like that, the political hell reared its ugly head again. I texted back, /call u in 5/

Then I went back to the IM conversation.

Fassbinder: I'll keep an eye on our international channels, too. No telling if they're spreading out.
Leo: Right. If anything bigger than a pencil falls from the sky in the next 24, I wanna know about it. Me entiendes?
Fassbinder: Got it, boss.

I had better come up with a good excuse to not be part of this for a while. I sent: I'll park on the blog, see if they have anything to say about it.

Leo: Good call. Binder, call me if you have anything major to report. Sharsky, good call, mijo.
Sharsky: Thanks, dude. I'm out.

"Sam," Optimus said, and the heaviness in his spark sobered mine even more. "I am being recalled." Sensing my confusion, he added, "I am the nearest available soldier – NEST has ordered me to investigate and intercept, one way or the other."

"Bumblebee…"

Fierce protectiveness (the kind he felt whenever we talked about the forest battle) rushed over the bond. "…is staying here with you."

I glared at him. "You're going alone."

With all the finality and authority of a Prime, he declared, "Yes." Then he rose to his feet. I scrambled to standing, too.

Optimus looked at my stunned-speechless parents. "Ron. Judy. Thank you for…" His emotions flitted across the bond in a dizzying kaleidoscope. "…for everything." Turning to me, he placed his hands on my shoulders and touched his forehead to mine, just like in the bond dream when he accessed my memories. "Stay safe, brother," he murmured, his grim encouragement flowing into me.

"You, too."

Then he quickly strode toward the exit and turned the corner, disappearing from view. Gone, just like that. He'd even muted the bond. I sat down again, a little breathless at how quickly everything had been turned on its ear. "Guess the holiday's over."

"Sam…" Mom started, and then she seemed to stumble over whatever she was going to say next.

Still a little shell-shocked, I said, "I need to call al-Sharif. Some bigwigs want to talk to me. I'm sorry."

"We're coming with you," Mom insisted, but Dad said, "Do what you need to, son. When will we see you next?"

"Ron!"

Dad and I both ignored her. "I have no idea, but I'll text you. Hopefully 'Bee and I will be able to
drive you to the airport, but if we can't, I'll let you know in time for you to catch a cab."

"Sammie!"

I left my seat again, this time to kneel next to her chair and hug her. "I'm perfectly safe, Mom." In a lower voice, I said, "If you're going to worry, be worried about Optimus. We have no idea if that meteor is friend or foe, and if it's a Decepticon, we don't know what kind of Big Bad we're dealing with. I just have to play alien ambassador – he's the one rushing into battle."

Her eyes searched mine. "But that means you're not safe, doesn't it, if he could be hurt?"

I clenched my jaw, more aware of that fact than ever. "Guess so. But distance makes it weaker, and it's not something I would change even if I could." If I could, I'd make the bond even stronger.

My phone buzzed with another text from al-Sharif. /5 minutes, sir/

"Gotta go. I'll call you as soon as I know anything," I promised, and then I followed Optimus' footsteps out the front door to where Bumblebee was waiting in his alt-form, engine running.

As soon as the door was closed behind me, I dialed al-Sharif. "Hey."

"Mr. Witwicky. Are you aware of recent events?"

"Yeah, Optimus and I were watching the news when you called. What's going on, really?"

"The President is hoping you could tell him."

"All I know is what I saw on CNN," I protested.

"Can Bumblebee bring you to the Air Force base in New Jersey? The JCS would prefer you to be in a less-exposed position right now. I can give you a briefing over the phone while you drive and you can offer your analysis when you meet with the President and his Cabinet."

"What, just them? Not NATO and the UN?" I sourly answered. With a defeated sigh (it wasn't his fault all this was happening), I said, "Sure. Can you call Simmons and Leo and fill them in?"

"Of course. I'll send a car for them, too."

"Thanks. So what do you know?"

He didn't know much. About fifteen minutes before Leo texted me, a meteorite slammed into the Luxor. Eye-witnesses described its size ranging from about three feet in diameter to roughly the size of a large pickup truck. Of course, no one really got a good view of it. So far, there hadn't been any signs of the meteor itself or of alien life, though the human body count was still rising. People had fled the scene in vehicles, though, so a Cybertronian could have escaped.

"I'll need a few minutes to mull this over," I told al-Sharif.

"Of course, sir. I'll meet you on the base."

"I thought you were in Michigan."

He coughed politely. "The visit to Ayesha's parents was cut short."

"Sorry, dude," I commiserated, though I couldn't quite keep the snigger out of my voice. "I'll see you on base, then."
When he hung up, I said, "So what do you think, 'Bee?"

His speakers practically growled, "...don't run from cold, bloody war..."

"Yeah," I agreed, "the Decepticons run to it. But Optimus still hopes...

Some cheesy sci-fi music was the backdrop for his next quote. "Sensors are down! We're flying blind!"

I nodded. If an Autobot were damaged, he might have hit the Luxor, but that was a big if.

"Whatcha gonna do about it?"

I sighed. "Not much I can do. If you guys don't know what this means – whether it's an Autobot or a Decepticon, whether it's just a scout or another invasion – how in the world am I supposed to know?"

In Simmons' voice, he said, "One man – alone!" followed by a random girl saying, "It's not like I'm intruding or anything."

Yeah. If the 'cons were going to invade, they'd do it in numbers. "So your professional opinion as a scout is that this is another scout?"

In his own voice, he answered, "Uh-huh."

"So if it were an Autobot, who could it be?"

We talked about that for a while and about which Decepticon scout it might be. There were so many possibilities, though, that it was impossible to really narrow it down, especially when we didn't know the new guy's MO, how big he was, or even what color he was painted.

Even with the bond muted, I could sense that we were getting closer to my brother, and I belatedly realized that we were probably headed to the same place. 'Bee was speeding, and I was pretty sure it was so we could catch up with Optimus. It wasn't long before we pulled up beside him, and I reached out over the bond to nudge him. He relented and opened up the bond – a mix of worry and hope and annoyance all rushing through. It was kind of overwhelming, to tell the truth, and it did nothing to help my own state of mind.

'Bee didn't talk any more, and I think he understood that I needed this heart-to-spark with Optimus. It wasn't just the whole ambassador hell where everyone was wanting answers that I knew I wouldn't have. It was worry about my bond-brother's safety. It was hard enough to lose him last time, and that was before we had a bond. And even though I knew that, logically, he would probably be fine, there was this niggling little worry that the 'cons would get him again, that the Matix wouldn't work twice on the same 'bot, that this might be the last time I would ever see him. Maybe it was stuff like this that was making Mom so clingy.

And then I felt Optimus draw on that inner calm and confidence that made him a Prime. His peace strengthened me and I took a deep breath, drinking in his confidence. It washed freely though the bond, through me, and awakened that same dogged determination from the Tomb of the Primes. In that moment, I knew we'd both be able to do what needed to be done.

I just wished that our vacation hadn't ended this way.

...
Even after driving all the way to the Air Force base, my meeting with the President and his Cabinet was by video conference (since they were all apparently in a bunker somewhere). Their biggest concern was whether we were looking at another invasion, and so I relayed 'Bee's opinion about it being a scout. We went the rounds on that, and thanks to Bumblebee, I was able to toss out the names and general specs of a few Autobots and Decepticons who might fit the bill, but in the end, we didn't know anything more than the schmucks on TV.

They wouldn't let me go home after the President was done with me, though, not until Optimus reported in. So al-Sharif walked me to an empty conference room where I called my folks and let them know that I wouldn't be coming back to the hotel tonight and that I'd call them in the morning. Mom still wasn't happy, but I promised her I was fine. Leo and Simmons were shown into the conference room before I hung up.

"So," Simmons began as soon as I was off with Mom. "Who's the Big Bad this time?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," I answered. At their matching doubtful expressions, I added, "No, really. I don't know this time."

Theatrically, Leo plopped into a chair. "I had a date tonight, too."

"End of the world and you're worried about hitting on chicks."

"Better than what's keeping you warm tonight," Leo muttered and then pointed at his unwelcome partner in crime. "He's loaded. They gave him a gun when we got here."

"What?"

Simmons glowered at me. "We're off campus and I'm not gonna take a bullet for you if I don't get a chance to shoot back."

Leo snorted and I shifted uneasily. I'd chosen Simmons, true, but he wasn't exactly what I'd call stable.

"So you don't know nothin' and I don't know nothin' so why are they keeping us here with Robowarrior the butcher?" my roomie demanded, nodding at Simmons.

"Thanks for the mental image," I snarked back.

Leo just looked at me expectantly.

"I guess we're waiting to hear what Optimus finds out. He left the restaurant…" I paused, glancing at my cell phone to see what time it was. "…about two and a half hours ago."

Al-Sharif piped up with, "His estimated ETA in Las Vegas is 23:00 hours our time. We expect a report around midnight."

"Great!" I groaned, that niggling worry trying to creep back in. I sent it away with a good shove of Optimus' peace and confidence. "We're stuck here another four and a half hours? I so should have stopped for my laptop on the way!"

Leo gave me a wolfish grin and held up his cell phone. "We got clearance, right? So let's get together with good ole' Cam and put a Buzz post together."

If I was going to be locked in here with an armed Simmons, I needed something shiny to distract him from looking for Decepticons around every corner. That, and I could use a distraction, too. Having
him help us with a post would be perfect for that. "Sure, why not?"

... 

It was almost 1AM before al-Sharif's phone rang. He answered and after a couple of seconds, handed it off to me.

"Hello?"

"Sam," my brother said, and all my worry drained away.

"Optimus." I reflexively tried to pour my relief across the bond...but it was empty on the other side.

He got right down to business. "Agent Graham and I arrived on the scene forty-five minutes ago. We found trace readings of a Cybertronian, but whoever it was has fled."

"Any way to know whether it was ours or theirs?"

"No, but I believe he was a Decepticon, given the landing site and his refusal to answer hails. We will be pursuing the new arrival as soon as reinforcements have arrived."

Reinforcements. "Reinforcements are good!"

"Indeed," he answered, and I heard his amusement even if I couldn't feel it.

"I am concerned about you, Sam. You are isolated and there is a likely Decepticon known to be roaming the continent. I support your decision as I ever have, but I wish that either you were closer to Diego Garcia or I were stationed on the East Coast."

And that was as close as my brother would ever come to begging me to reconsider. But all the things I said to Mom and Lennox were as true as they'd ever been. I needed to live my life. I needed to have an education if I was going to represent the Autobots. I knew going in that this would be potentially dangerous, but I really felt like I was where I needed to be.

My bond ached again for my brother to be here so I could really communicate this to him. It would be so much easier to find the right words when they didn't have to be the right words. "Bumblebee's right – I'm safe with him. He knows just like Jazz knew. And I've learned to pay attention a little better to both you and 'Bee."

"I understand," he evenly answered, but I knew him so much better now. If he were anybody else, he'd be worried sick.

"Agent Graham and I need to continue our investigation, but I will see you again at Christmas," he said in reassurance.

"Yeah."

"Stay safe, Sam."

I took a deep breath, drawing on the peace and strength he'd given me. "You, too. Bye."

'Bee and the others were looking at me curiously, and I felt just how late it was. "Show's over. The 'con ran off and they can't go looking for him until morning." Turning to al-Sharif, I said, "I'm going back to my dorm. I haven't slept in my own bed for days. Anybody who has a problem with that can call me after 10AM tomorrow, got it?"
"Yes sir."

And I knew he'd be able to pull that off, too. "Thanks." To the rest of 'em, I said, "Let's go."

...

It was almost 11AM when I woke up Sunday morning, acutely aware that I couldn't feel Optimus. He'd been there every morning for the last three days and I just missed him.

My folks' flight left at 3PM, but they needed to be at the airport pretty early, so I dragged myself out of bed and got dressed. (Leo was still out cold.) I had to see them off at the airport and then pick up first Sharsky and then Fassbinder.

The wind had stopped, but it was still pretty cold. It was one of those times when I was really grateful my ride was an Autobot. 'Bee's cab was warm and welcoming when I climbed in.

"Hey."

"Glad to see you," he quoted in answer, though the words were pretty subdued, mirroring my mood.

"Bummed?"

"I'm worried about you."

I snorted. "Don't be. I'm safe with you, remember? It's Optimus we should be worried about."

"Prime, you're one tough fragger," Bumblebee growled with Ironhide's voice.

"Did he seriously say that?" I half-laughed.

"Uh-huh," he replied, his engine shimmying in a chuckle.

"I just thought…all the Autobots were really respectful to Optimus. You know, obeyed him and all."

Bumblebee's engine just roared with laughter, and I couldn't help my little smile. "I take it there's a story here…"

"Darn tootin'…I'll have to show you sometime."

"Sometime like when we're stuck at the airport waiting to play taxi?"

"Bingo!"

I smiled for real this time. No matter how bad things got, 'Bee could always make me feel better. He was just awesome that way.

Chapter End Notes

If you'd like to read the story Bumblebee's going to show Sam about Optimus and Ironhide, please see the first chapter of our fic Precursors: Kindred Minds.
Blood

Chapter Notes

Introductions: William Lennox could be considered a companion piece to this chapter. You'll understand the chapter just fine on its own, but there will be an added dimension to it if you've read the Intro first.

The stories *Undercover* and *Adventures of a Blue Police Box* tie in with the meteors.

On the Monday after Thanksgiving, Simmons pulled me out of American History to tell me that another meteor had landed, this time clipping Big Ben in London before disappearing without a trace, and 'Bee whisked me and my bodyguards off to the Air Force base again. I felt kind of rude, but I had to cut short my meeting with the British Minister of Defense to rush back to campus for an Astronomy test. Any other subject and I would have totally bombed it running in 10 minutes late without studying.

Thursday night (or Friday morning, technically), Cam Romero woke me up at 1AM. "...and so you're back from outer space..." his cell phone softly sang.

"Again?" I groaned.

He nodded and handed me some clothes to change into. I threw a pillow at Leo as I rolled out of bed. "Come on, roomie. Another landing."

"Go away," Leo muttered as he rolled over, pulling the blanket over his head, and I gestured at 'Bee to take care of it. He narrowed his eyes at my lazy, good-for-nothing bodyguard and, before I could get my jeans on and my shirt over my head, he had him trussed up neatly in the blanket. 'Bee tossed the struggling and protesting Leo over his shoulder, quoting, "Don't forget to leave a note."

I snorted, mock-writing in the air, "Guys – Been kidnapped by aliens. Will call after looking stupid in front of the President. Don't wait up." To Leo, I said, "Shut up – you're going to wake the whole dorm. We're being called in again."

He toned it down to hissing his threats of bodily harm.

Bumblebee's shoulders shook with laughter under Leo as we stalked down the dorm hallway.

On the way to the base, al-Sharif brought me up to speed. This time somebody, or some 'bot I guess, put a dent in the Rock of Gibraltar. The Portugal Tourism Office hadn't discovered the damage until yesterday, and a NEST team confirmed just 45 minutes ago that it was a Cybertronian, though the readings were at least five days old. I didn't have any more answers for the Portuguese than I did for the Brits, though. It appeared to be a single individual, and even though this was the third in a week, it still didn't amount to an invasion. Besides, this made it look even more like scouts – they could have all arrived at the same time and place, but they didn't.

It wasn't until Sharsky alerted us to a series of UFO sightings on Saturday that I realized a fourth Cybertronian had landed. This one was different – he apparently zigzagged across Europe Friday night before disappearing over the Gulf of Aqaba. Because no major landmarks were destroyed,
nobody official noticed before my crazy roommies. Just like with the other three new arrivals, though, Optimus' hails went unanswered.

The public was understandably edgy, Fassbinder and Sharsky were convinced we were looking at a repeat of the battle in Egypt, and even Leo wasn't convinced by 'Bee's reassurance that these were just scouts. But I had to agree with 'Bee, and that was the story I kept telling the world's leaders. These were a series of scouts, not an invasion, and while it wasn't something to just ignore, it wasn't time to panic (yet) either.

After a couple of weeks without any more meteor strikes, mainstream media had moved on to the next political scandal and only people like Fassbinder and Sharsky and Lennox were still talking about The Invasion That Wasn't.

Cam Romero waltzed in to my dorm room on a blindingly-bright, snow-covered morning with a grin that was waaaay too huge for how cold it was outside. I so didn't want to go to class, but it was the Algebra review for the final and I didn't dare miss it. "What?" I demanded.

"Eureka! We found…jazz!"

"Serious?" I grinned as big as him. "That's awesome! So we can do this over the Christmas break?"

"Affirmative, captain."

I nodded, already imagining the "Welcome back to the land of the living" party the 'bots would throw for Jazz. Now I just needed to get through my exams.

Thankfully, Primus or Fate or whoever had mercy on me, and all of reading days and finals week was alien-free (not counting Bumblebee who really wasn't an alien anymore no matter if he was made of metal and had a spark instead of a soul). Before I knew it, I'd staggered out of my last final and was cruising south to Florida. Bumblebee came with a built-in fuzz buster and autopilot so I spent most of the drive catching up on the sleep I lost while cramming. (Mom would have killed both me and 'Bee if she knew we'd made the 15-hour trip in 12.)

The first week and a half of Christmas vacation was just me and my folks – Mom made me keep my promise. I think it was mostly because she was convinced that the farther Optimus was from me, the safer I was from Decepticons or crazy shoppers. She didn't want anything hurting me and, while Optimus clearly wasn't out to get me, he doubled my chances of something bad happening. Sooner or later she'd figure out I was a legal adult, but until then, this attitude of hers sucked.

December 30th couldn't come fast enough. 'Bee drove me to some military base or another where we were loaded onto a C-17 headed to Diego Garcia. It was weird not having Mikaela on board – she had always made this trip with me before. 'Bee offered me an in-flight holo-movie, but instead I asked him, "Show me some of your memories about Jazz." Pretty much everything I knew about him was from my brother's memory, but I figured 'Bee must have a memory or two worth sharing. When I fell asleep somewhere over the Mediterranean, my ribs were sore from laughing so hard.

I guess our sleep schedules weren't in sync because Optimus didn't join me in my dreams, and I woke up to 'Bee gently poking me. "We're on final approach," he quoted.

"Thanks," I yawned, wrapping myself up in the permanent hug of my brother bond with Optimus. His relieved happiness mingled with my own.

Lennox and my brother Prime were both waiting for me in front of the Autobot hangar. "Sam,"
Lennox greeted me.

"Hey."

"Since it's just you this time, quarters have been arranged for you here at the base," he told me, "though there's an R&R cabin available for you, if you'd prefer."

I looked up at Optimus. "Shouldn't we...you know? Get the reason for my visit taken care of first? No sense in making everybody wait."

"Agreed."

Lennox flashed me an approving smile and clapped my shoulder. "Come on."

I followed him to the next hangar over. Every Autobot was here this time, and when they saw us, they all stopped talking. The solemn silence echoed in the enormous room. Will stayed with us, too, after locking the doors behind us. A raised platform was in the middle of the hangar – a medical berth, I realized, when Ratchet stepped away from it. There was a set of stairs like the kind for disembarking from a plane that led up to the platform. When Optimus gave me an encouraging nudge over the bond, I crossed the distance and climbed them.

It was strange, seeing Jazz laying there. More than two years had passed, and I'd only seen his face for a few minutes. I knew him better from Optimus' and Bumblebee's memories than I did from my own. Ratchet had worked hard to repair him and he was in perfect condition – I could easily believe he was simply recharging. It was also strange to realize he died to protect us when I'd only heard him say, what, three sentences? Four? Long before everyone knew I was a Prime, long before we humans and Autobots had learned to really trust and care about each other, he died defending Mission City.

I was embarrassed to admit (even just to myself) that I had pretty much forgotten about him – the first Autobot to be extinguished here – until after the battle in Egypt. I hadn't known him well enough to really grieve, and so many things had changed that day. Life just seemed to sweep us all on our way, but I understood now that it wasn't like that for the Autobots at all. Jazz had been part of Optimus' team for as long as Ratchet and Arcee. He'd stood by my brother's side longer than Bumblebee, longer than Ironhide, and through thousands of years of war. Two measly little years were nothing to them; the grief of that loss was still fresh in their sparks.

The silence and all the optics on me were making me nervous, but Optimus filled my heart with peace, and I sent my gratitude in answer. *I've done this before – twice now,* I reminded myself. Taking a deep breath, I nodded up to Optimus. His hip-armor rearranged itself, opening the compartment where he kept the Matrix of Leadership. Autobots don't gasp, but the silence became deeper when the Matrix flared brilliant blue in his palm. Pretty awestruck myself, I took it from his hand, and it didn't dim as I picked it up. In the light of the Matrix, it was impossible to deny the kinship between us.

Instantly I was aware of power in all its forms – the sun outside, the swell of the ocean waves, the sparks surrounding me. Optimus stepped back, acknowledging this as my role alone, and I turned to Jazz's open chest.

A feeling of dread filled me, an emotional weight that made me hesitate. It almost felt like another's feelings were spilling over into me via a bond, but I could clearly sense Optimus sending confidence and calm my way. I didn't have a bond with anyone else, did I?

Gathering my resolve, I shifted my weight to step toward Jazz.
I froze at the thought that was *not* my own, spoken by many voices in unison. I knew those voices, had heard their maddening whispers those first few days at school. The Dynasty of the Primes. But I could still feel everyone's expectant eyes on me, waiting for me to work my magic and revive Jazz, so I took a step forward.

*NO*

This time, there was a silent undercurrent of authority behind their words that I'd never heard or felt before. The sense of power was cut off, even though the light of the Matrix still shone brightly in my hand. The silence of the room was broken by quiet murmurs. Even Optimus' composure slipped, and I felt worry radiating off him. "Sam?"

The dread I'd felt earlier drained away, and I stared at the Matrix, tongue-tied.

How could I not? How could I turn to them – to Optimus, to Bumblebee – and say I wouldn't even *try* to reignite Jazz? That I was essentially killing him again right in front of them because the voices in my head told me so. I would risk my own life and others' to bring Optimus back, but I couldn't do what the voices said if it meant *killing* someone else. The Autobots thought I was a Prime, that I had some kind of mystical power and a connection to the All Spark. What would they think in the face of this?

Acceptance washed over me – yet another gift from Optimus – but he couldn't completely separate the grief from it. He understood at least the basics of what was happening, and he extended his hand, silently asking me to return the Matrix. "His fate is not ours to choose."

I hesitated, feeling the weight of their optics, the weight of their hope. Wasn't that what I *did*? That's how Ratchet said it – I spark hope. That was what I was supposed to do as the human Prime. Had I just lost that right? When I ignored the voices out of pride and fear and the power shut off – had I just fallen?

Again my brother tried to comfort me – compassion, understanding, forgiveness. And again the grief leaked through – deeper, darker than before, though he filtered out all he could.

What else could I do? Turning my back on Jazz, I stepped closer to Optimus to return the Matrix, and the sense of power returned. Bitterness filled me, and at that point I didn't care whether Optimus felt it or not. What good was it to be a Prime if all it did was make me *fail* and hurt everyone all over again? I dropped the damn thing into Optimus' palm.

The Autobots found their voices again. "Optimus?" "What's going on?" "I don't understand." "Samuel?" A soft trill of confusion from Bumblebee.

I closed my eyes and wished that I could somehow shut my ears, too.

Optimus cut them off. "A Prime is a servant, not a master. Jazz's fate is not ours to choose."

My heart squeezed painfully tight.

Ironically, one of the twins was the one to put it all together. "He ain't comin' back."

Optimus clamped down hard on the bond, trying to spare me his own grief, when he answered, "He is not."

Silence. Stunned, disappointed, heartbroken silence. My blood pounded loudly in my ears and I
choked out, "I guess that's it." Eyes stubbornly staring at the ground, I climbed down the platform and retreated toward the human-sized door to the hangar.

Bumblebee tried to intercept me, but I shook my head at him, unable to meet his gaze. Not yet. From behind me I could feel Optimus radiating kindness, and I fiercely shoved it aside as I slammed the door open. It led to the sun-drenched outdoors, and I looked around, trying to get my bearings as I blinked against the sun.

Major Lennox was beside me in a heartbeat. "Look, kid –"

"I don't want to hear it. Just get me someplace I can be alone. Just for a few minutes. Away from them."

"Okay," he softly answered, walking parallel to the hangar toward the next building over. I fell in step beside him, hurrying to keep up. We passed through the doors into some kind of office building. Flashing his ID to the woman in uniform behind the desk, he said, "I need a private conference room immediately."

"Yessir," she smartly answered. I followed them not really seeing where we were going.

She led us to a room and opened the door for us. It was a generic conference room, if you didn't count the ocean view. Will nodded once and she left, closing the door behind us. Heartsick, I sank into one of the chairs, resting my head in my hands. Wordlessly, he crossed to the other side of the room and took a chair opposite mine.

The silence stretched taut between us. "What do you want me to say?" I finally asked.

"Nothing," he gruffly answered.

I sighed and shook my head still resting in my hands.

"You may be a soldier, Sam, and a Prime, but you're only nineteen. You're just a kid…"

"I saved the world," I answered sharply, lifting my head to meet his gaze. "The Primes spoke to me and I believed and I convinced you to disobey orders and …"

"And you're still just a kid," he repeated. "No one expects you to –"

"You're wrong," I interrupted him, rising to my feet and angrily pacing the length of the room. "That was last time. No one expected me to stop The Fallen. No one expected me to work a miracle and bring Optimus back. No one expected me to make everything right. But now they all look at me and think 'He's Samuel. He's got the power of the gods at his beck and call. He can turn back death itself,' and I never said I could! I never promised that!" I turned in my pacing and met his ice-blue eyes.

"No, you didn't, Prime."

It was like a bracing slap to the face, hearing him use the same title for me that he did for Optimus.

"You never promised to bring them all back from the dead," he steadily continued, rising to his impressive height. "But you're a leader. When you decided to find the Matrix and bring Optimus back, you made a promise to do your damnedest for them, and it's not the sort of promise that's temporary. It's the same promise I make every day when I put on my uniform. And I've lost men. Every single mission I've been on with the 'bots, I've lost men. People die at my command, and the survivors still follow me. It's a brotherhood of blood and I'm going to join them one day, but until
then, I've got a promise to keep."

I just stared, blown away by his words that echoed in my mind. *People die at my command.*

"Jazz is part of that brotherhood," he continued. "Call it energon or spark-fluid or whatever, but it was blood he spilled in the line of duty while he ordered *me* to fall back. That kind of sacrifice happens all the time, and that doesn't make it any easier or any less...honorable. But my point is it's normal in a screwed-up kind of way."

"It shouldn't be," I muttered. "It shouldn't be normal."

"Shouldn't," he retorted, reminding me for a second of Ironhide, "but it is. Others have died in the line of duty for Jazz, and he didn't flinch when it was his turn. And not everyone gets a miracle, Sam. Not all of us are Primes."

"So, what?" I snapped. "Jazz just becomes collateral damage?"

"No." His eyes flashed in fury. "No life lost is ever just collateral damage. A victory or a tragedy or a reason to keep fighting, but never just collateral damage."

I swallowed hard in the face of his anger, remembering that this man had personally taken down Decepticons, and decided to rein in my temper. Besides, I didn't really want to fight with him. What I really wanted to do was yank the All Spark out of the Matrix and strangle the stupid thing into submission so it would let me bring back Jazz and face the Autobots again. Resuming my pacing, I demanded in frustration, "I brought back Optimus and Arcee. Why can't I bring back Jazz?"

"I don't know," he answered levelly. "But I do know this. No one expects you to be God; they only expect you to do your best. Considering who you have for a brother, I realize that's an awful lot."

I snorted at that one.

"But you said it yourself. You're a tool of the Matrix, not the other way around."

Sinking back into my chair, I said, "But I failed them. Optimus..." As I said his name, I realized I couldn't sense him and hadn't since I shoved aside his attempts to cheer me up. So that was how to block a bond.

"Optimus will understand better than anyone," Will declared as he leaned against the table, misunderstanding my silence. "It was because of his choices that Jazz was on Earth to begin with. That's the way of command. It was because of Optimus' choices that Jazz was left to lead the battle at Mission City while Optimus fought that Decepticon on the highway. He's not going to hold this against you. That you could bring even one of them back was more than we could have hoped for."

And yet they *had* hoped. *He* had hoped to the point that he'd risked his career and his own life and the lives of his men. I had given that to them and now... His cell phone vibrated in his pocket, and he tried to ignore it, but he shifted and his eyes darted down.

"Go ahead," I grumbled. "It's probably them and they want to make sure I haven't cracked or thrown myself off a bridge or something."

He smirked, but there was a grimness to it. "There aren't any bridges on base." But he pulled the cell phone out of his pocket and glanced at the display screen. "Just Optimus, wanting to make sure I didn't need back up."
Relenting, I reached out to my brother's spark, trying to focus on reassuring him, but I knew he'd feel all the other crappy emotions that I couldn't filter out. To Will, I gestured at his cell and asked, "Can I?"

He handed it over to me. "Sure."

I sent, /im not megatron jst giv me a few min/

/Understood./ And I felt a flicker of that understanding in my own soul before he blocked the bond on his end, giving me some privacy.

Taking a deep breath, I looked up at Will again. "Thanks for buying me a little time. Give me just a little bit longer to pull myself together and I'll be able to return to the hangar. I need a couple of minutes to myself."

"Sure, kid," he gently said as he moved toward the door. "I'll just be out in the hall."

I sank back down to the table and rested my forehead against the hard surface.
A hand rested on my shoulder, and I lifted my head from the desk to look into the eyes of Ratchet's holoform. He didn't say anything, just held my gaze. I quickly looked away.

I had no idea how long I'd sat here wallowing, but apparently the medic had decided it was time for me to pull myself up by own bootstraps and start acting like a Prime.

He pulled out a chair and sat opposite me, and when I looked at him, he was watching me carefully – sizing me up.

"Don't even start," I grumbled, rising to my feet and pacing again. "I'd be hanging out with Optimus right now if I wanted a pep talk."

"You want to grieve."

Thunderstruck, I stopped and slowly turned to stare at the holoform. How'd he know? How could he put a word to it when I hadn't even realized it myself…?

"The remarkable thing," he continued, as if he hadn't seen into my soul so clearly he may as well have used a bond, "is that you even feel the need. Will's team honored him with a moment of silence, more out of respect than true grief. You genuinely grieve Jazz now."

Defeated, I plopped into the chair opposite him. We sat in silence as the words hung in the air. He had thousands of years as a medic, and at least some of that had to involve psychology or whatever it was called among the 'bots.

Was it grief, then, that drove me out of the hangar and into hiding? Or was it embarrassment and shame? I searched my heart – acutely aware of Optimus' absence – and tried to decide. Was it a delayed but selfless grief at the loss of life or was it selfish wallowing in my failure? Maybe Ratchet was even smarter than I thought because it felt like it was a little of both, but he was giving me a vote of confidence by calling it grief. But then, he'd been the confidant of a Prime for a long time. If Lennox was like a human Ironhide for me, I fleetingly wondered who could ever hope to take Ratchet's role.

I lifted my eyes to his. "I guess so."

His gaze was still piercing. "I have seen humans grieve, but I won't bore you with all the details of the process. No doubt you are familiar with it already. I came here to thank you."

"To thank me," I numbly repeated.

He nodded solemnly. "For sparking hope."

I crumpled under the words and grimaced as I fought tears, hiding my face in my hands. He let me struggle with my emotions for a few minutes, not commenting.

Part of it was selfishness. I knew myself well enough to recognize that. I was embarrassed and felt like a failure. But I now realized that part of it was also grief, though not really for Jazz like Ratchet thought. It was more that I grieved not knowing him. I grieved that I never got the chance to really
know this mech who was so important to my brother and all of the Autobots. I grieved that my only real memories of him were borrowed ones. I grieved that so many hopes for a changing of the tides in this war were dashed – no matter what Ratchet said. I grieved that the magic didn't extend to someone who deserved it so much.

I also grieved for myself, that I couldn't control the Matrix, that I wasn't as powerful as the 'bots needed me to be. Optimus had hardened his heart because he had to be the military leader his race needed, but what could I do in the face of this? How could I rise to the occasion and save the day? That was last time, not here and now. Here and now, I had failed them. How could I possibly face…?

"Calm down, Samuel," Ratchet said almost irritably. "Your core temperature is rising and your body's stress hormones are going crazy."

I grimaced but tried to focus on calming down. It would have been easier with Optimus' help, but I couldn't add my grief to what he must be feeling now.

"You misunderstand me, I think," Ratchet continued, when his scans finally showed that I wasn't freaking out as much. "To spark our hope and to realize our hope are two different things."

"I failed you." I lifted my head to meet his gaze. "You specifically. You worked hard to put Jazz back together. You're the medic, the one who's engaged in hand-to-hand combat with death…"

With an almost acid sarcasm, Ratchet said, "Samuel Prime, do you think I follow your brother because of his string of endless successes?"

I blinked in the face of that question, realizing that Optimus had lost more battles than he had won. Far more. It was almost shocking to think about – countless lives had been lost because Optimus refused to stop fighting his own brother. Their world had been torn apart; their race was on the brink of extinction. Many must have decided he wasn't worth following, not when his dogged determination to stop Megatron was causing so much damage.

Taking the bait, I asked, "Why do you follow him?"

"Because there are some things worse than death. That might be difficult for you to understand – you humans are surprisingly idealistic sometimes, especially when young – but I have seen some of those things. I have seen the tortured shells of those who fell into Decepticon hands and treated those who were unlucky enough to survive. My race does not often suffer from nightmares, but I still relive scenes from the fall of Metrotitian." He shook his head, trying to banish the memories. "I follow your brother because he is willing to put his own life on the line to fight such evil. He gives me hope that, one day, the only wounds I treat will be accidents, not violence."

"But in the meantime, you lose mechs like Jazz," I said, still frustrated. "And femmes like Moonracer."

He flinched at that. "How…?"

"Optimus. He showed me in a dream once. I'm sorry," I added, not knowing what else to say.

He nodded, accepting my condolences, but didn't let me derail him. "We have suffered losses," he steadily answered, and his frown twitched deeper. "And I will probably lose my own life in this war someday. But Jazz's was a quick, honorable death. I miss him, but I do not grieve for him."

I looked down at the table, trying to wrap my mind around what he was saying.
Gently, he continued, "I don't follow Optimus because he gives me peace; I follow him because he gives me hope for peace. And I follow you, Prime, not because you bring us all back to life at the drop of a hat, but because you give me hope that this war is not all in vain. You sacrificed your life to give Optimus back to us, and today's events do not change that one whit."

It felt like my heart stopped at his words when it finally clicked. They were disappointed that Jazz wasn't coming back, but they weren't disappointed in me. I was still a Prime in their eyes…optics…whatever. They had suffered deeper losses and worse setbacks. They didn't understand why it wasn't Jazz's fate, but they didn't need to because I was Samuel, a Prime by birth and Optimus' brother. Optimus was alive because of me and that was all they really cared about when it came to judging me.

When I reached across the bond for Optimus again, he was there with his permanent hug, waiting. I lifted my head, meeting the holoform's gaze. "Okay. I can go back to the hangar now."

He nodded once and flickered out of existence.

…

They were all waiting for me – still, again, I wasn't sure which. Bumblebee was the only one who dared approach me, crouching down to search my eyes. "I'm okay," I murmured, holding his gaze. I glanced at Ratchet and then Optimus. My brother was careful to not impose his emotions on me, even though I could feel how anxious he was. I let my gaze drift to Ironhide, Arcee, Jolt…all around the room.

"I'm sorry," I said, and my voice – surprisingly calm – carried in the stillness. "We all had hopes for today, for Jazz. I'm sorry I couldn't bring him back." My gaze wandered back to Ratchet. "Thank you for giving me a while to deal with my own grief for his loss. You didn't have that luxury, I know, so I really appreciate it."

The words were stilted, awkward, but I didn't know what else to say. For a few seconds, the absolute silence of the hangar rang in my ears.

Finally, Optimus said, "We will make arrangements for his shell to be laid to rest again."

I reached out to him in gratitude, and he glompled me over the bond, his relief so strong it took my breath away.

…

Lennox led me back into the main Autobot hangar and crossed through to the human side of NEST, showing me to my quarters. As we walked, the humans around us were still really into the holiday spirit, preparing for New Years Eve, and it just struck me as wrong somehow. Two mechanics, a Brit and an American Southerner from the sound of their accents, were arguing about the music for the celebration that night.

"You can't have a New Years' Eve party without Auld Lang Syne," the Brit was saying.

"It's a stupid song," the Southerner drawled. "Nobody even knows what it means."

"Of course they do," the Brit archly answered. "It's just written in a Scottish brogue – you Uh-mare-i-cahns" he drawled, mocking his friend's accent, "would say 'for the good old times.' And I'll have you know it's played at everything from funerals to military graduations in England."

I wondered if they knew Jazz was supposed to be reignited today. I wondered if the 'bots would tell them what happened. Maybe they'd try to hide it. I couldn't find the emotional energy to care right then.

... 

I sat on Bumblebee's hood, staring out over the ocean at the setting sun. I was tired, worn out with jet-lag, and today kind of sucked all the emotion out of me. Optimus was still careful to give me a little distance, and I knew I'd really upset him. I just didn't have it in me right now to make it up to him. Besides, that was probably something that would be better to work out in a bond dream.

Ratchet's words and Lennox's mixed and jumbled in my mind, and a part of me wanted to just shut it all out and go to sleep. But it was still all too raw – the grief and frustration and…and denial, I guess. Jazz's second chance at life shouldn't end with a shrug and everybody going back to what they were doing before, but I didn't know what else to do.

Randomly, the conversation between the two NEST mechanics drifted through my worn-out brain, and I asked 'Bee, "What does that stupid song mean, anyway? The Scottish one they play at New Years?"

He pulled up a version of the song that was a lot more English-sounding than Scottish. "Should old acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind?"

The song was old – so old it was a cliché. You couldn't have a New Year's scene in a movie without it. I knew the tune just like any other American (or apparently anybody else who spoke English), but I don't think I'd ever really listened the words before.

"For auld lang syne, my dear, for auld lang syne, we'll take a cup of kindness yet, for auld lang syne."

As sure as I was breathing, I knew what I needed, what we all needed. I hopped off 'Bee's hood and hurried over to his door. "I have to talk to Optimus."

My brother had sensed the change in my mood, and he tentatively reached across the bond toward me. My grief was still there, but it was laced with determination now, and he didn't even try to hide his curiosity. 'Bee and I found him alone in the hangar with Jazz's shell.

I opened my heart to his spark, hoping he'd understand what I was still trying to find words for in my own mind. "We need to have a funeral for Jazz. No, I take that back. We need to remember him."

"A memorial service," Optimus said in his not-quite-a-question way.

"Yes."

"Will and the others honored him…"

"No, I mean all of us – humans and Autobots."

Puzzlement flickered across the bond, followed by wistful gratitude. "We do not burden others with outward expressions of grief, Sam. It is not our way."

"But you can't grieve," I blurted out. "Not in the way you were made to. The clans…you grieved when you lost Moonracer, but you grieved as a clan. But you can't anymore. There are only two bonds on Earth right now." I glanced up 'Bee. "You do burden each other – and you strengthen each other. We grieve that way, too, but we have to kind of…do it externally. We don't have Autobot
bonds, but we still grieve together."

Optimus glanced at 'Bee, uncertainty creeping across the bond, and I had a feeling that they were talking it over via comm.

"I want to do this," I reminded them both. "You were going to have a party for Jazz tonight anyway, right?"

"Yes," Optimus answered, aching weariness plain in his voice and in the bond.

"So let's still make this night about him."

He gave me a guarded look. "It is a major holiday. I don't believe a memorial service would be appropriate."

I grimaced. "Like anybody's going to party tonight, Optimus. It's going to be about him anyway. Let's do it right."

"Sam, we have no funeral traditions beyond grieving as a clan. Before the War, a shell simply was returned to the Well of All Sparks."

"But I thought it was underground."

"All molten streams originated in the Well and were considered extensions of it."

No wonder they didn't have a problem with Jazz – or Megatron, for that matter – being buried at sea.

Bumblebee played a clip from some commercial or another. "There's so many to choose from!"

I snorted at that. Yeah, there were tons of different ways that we humans remembered our dead. "I guess...go with whatever Jazz would have wanted. If he could have chosen his own memorial, which tradition would he go with?"

Optimus slowly nodded. "I must speak with Will and see what can be arranged."

"We...we need to toast him, too. With energon."

Optimus blinked in surprise.

"Well, not me, obviously, but you guys."

He was still hesitant. "The others do not know..."

"Well maybe they should," I retorted, cutting him off. "I couldn't deliver hope today, but you can."

"Only when the need is great," he reminded me.

"When's the last time you were able to grieve – really grieve – as a clan?"

He looked down, radiating a sense of defeat.

"I'd say the need will be great tonight. If we're going to do this, we need to do it right and in ways that will mean something for all of you. Knowing...knowing that you're not all going to rust to death might be comforting for them, since the Matrix is...isn't going to work every time."

"You are right, brother." He glanced once at Bumblebee and transformed – going to talk to Lennox.
Bumblebee reached down, offering me his hand, and I climbed on. He held me close to his chassis, and I realized researching human funeral traditions probably reminded him I wouldn't live forever, either. "I'm sorry," I mumbled.

"Hush now," he quoted, then "I'm glad you're here with me, Sam."

... 

Autobots were quick and efficient at just about anything when they put their minds to it – whether it was mobilizing for battle or, apparently, planning social functions. The party-turned-funeral was supposed to start at 11PM and I caught a nap back at my temporary quarters during the two-hour wait. Now that I knew things were being taken care of, I could finally sleep.

'Bee drove me back to the hangar, and a brassy, upbeat version of 'Just a Closer Walk With Thee' was blaring from some speakers inside. "What in the world?" I demanded.

"Dixieland jazz," 'Bee answered, and I half-smiled. Of course.

I wasn't too surprised when I saw Will Lennox in the hangar, but I hadn't expected his wife to come tonight, too. They were standing near Arcee, and all three of them were next to a crate that looked a lot like the one Optimus got for his "welcome back to life" party. Come to think of it, it might be the same one. The femme was projecting a hologram of Jazz and her. It was a quiet memory of them hiding in a ruin somewhere, and I guessed Autobot eulogies came in 3D.

Optimus approached us and knelt to be closer to me. His grief was bittersweet now instead of just defeated, and I knew I'd been right about this. "Sam."

"Hey." I glanced at the booming speakers. The song had changed to a cheerful, bouncy rendition of 'When the Saints Go Marching In'. "Quite a party."

"It is not our way, but...Jazz would have enjoyed this. He was always enthusiastic about other cultures and he would have embraced this, I believe."

Behind me, Bumblebee made a chirp of agreement.

Arcee finished projecting her memory, and Ironhide took a turn, projecting an image of him and Jazz training together and Jazz running circles around him. I grinned to see just how quick the little 'bot was.

Jolt was next, and his memory was of the two of them crawling through maintenance shafts somewhere. Jolt got stuck and Jazz had to drag him through a tight spot, but they successfully completed their mission of gluing all of the furnishings in some poor Autobot's quarters to the ceiling.

"Whose quarters?" I asked Optimus, but Jolt was the one who answered. "Prowl's. Only Jazz could get away with pranking him."

"My second in command," Optimus explained. "Jazz was the third, when we were all together, but he was my second on Earth."

Bumblebee stepped closer to the crate and projected a memory of him sitting in a run-down restaurant with bombed-out windows. Jazz was telling jokes and the two of them were roaring in laughter.

I didn't realize Arcee had stepped closer until she spoke in my ear. "That was the first time 'Bee laughed after his brother died."
All the Autobots' memories, it seemed, were laced with sadness. I glanced back at Arcee and noticed 'Bee lay a hand on her shoulder. Something about his stance reminded me of that morning on the aircraft carrier when I reignited her, and I realized he must be even more grateful she was alive after Jazz wasn't brought back. She laid her hand over his and gently squeezed once, and he let her go.

The night went on like that as they each shared a memory of Jazz. Even Lennox took a turn, talking about how the only words he'd ever heard Jazz speak were an order to fall back while Jazz sacrificed himself so the humans near him could escape Megatron. I hadn't heard that whole part of the story before – I'd been too busy running away from Starscream at the time.

Sideswipe shared the memory of a time he and his brother had been captured by Decepticons and Jazz had pretty much single-handedly rescued them. Optimus projected the memory he'd shared with me in a bond dream, the one when Jazz had bought an oilcake for Optimus and Elita and her sisters.

Five minutes before midnight, the music stopped and Optimus nodded to Ironhide, who produced the energon vessel. All the Autobots stopped talking and stared in surprise.

Optimus reached down and removed the lid so that everyone could see that it was full.

I almost laughed when I saw Bumblebee pick up a tray of oversized coffee mugs and carry them over to Ironhide. I guess they didn't have time to get something more Cybertronian-ish.

"Is that…?" Ratchet wondered, trailing off as he suddenly glowered at Optimus.

"Yes," Optimus calmly answered, the slightest hint of a smirk tinting the bond. I guessed that Optimus never got around to telling Ratchet about the energon – probably because it served him right for losing his temper.

"...How?" Sideswipe began.

Ironhide huffed. "Doesn't matter. All that matters is that we have it again."

With a peace I hadn't felt from him since I arrived today, my brother turned to his amazed friends and said, "It is not the hope we had planned for tonight, but Sam wished to still give us hope." Gesturing toward the brimming vessel, he said, "In the human tradition, we take a cup of kinship tonight to remember Jazz. A toast."

Like before, he gave me an encouraging nudge over the bond and then gestured toward the energon. He wanted me to do the honors.

But that wasn't right. He was the one who was giving them hope tonight – not me.

He nudged me again, more firmly this time, and I sighed as I caved. This was a human tradition, after all. The tray of mugs was sitting on the ground, but I also noticed a pair of leather work gloves and a ceramic pitcher for coffee creamer on the tray – to protect my hands and to make sure that not a single drop of energon was wasted.

Once I had the gloves on, I dipped the pitcher into the energon vessel and poured the green liquid into the cup. Looking up, I wondered who should get the first helping – but only for a split second. "Optimus," I called, offering him the mug.

I filled seven more mugs, giving them to the 'bots as I went. When I was done, Mrs. Lennox gave me a champagne flute and we all turned to Optimus.

He raised his energon, and an echo of his feelings from when Moonracer was extinguished washed
over the bond. "To those whose lives have touched ours, bound to us by friendship, by oath, and by the spark." He paused, reaching deep into his spark, into a well of peace and wistful affection. "To Jazz."

A clock tolled midnight. I looked around in surprise until I realized that the sound was coming from the speakers. I guess it was kind of a lot to expect them to come up with a grandfather clock on such short notice...while in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

The speakers began to play 'Auld Lang Syne,' and I wrapped my brother up in a hug of the heart. His peace filled my heart as he returned it. Sorrow still tinged the bond, but there was acceptance, too.

The Autobots stood in silence, savoring their energon. As they finished, they approached the crate – Jazz's casket – one by one and pressed their hand to it for a second. Optimus nudged me again, and I nodded to the Lennox's. If they were here tonight, they were part of the clan, too, and should pay their respects like the rest of us. I was surprised when Mrs. Lennox teared up a bit when she touched the crate. Catching my expression, she looked at the casket and whispered, "Without this, I wouldn't have Will. Annabelle would never have known her father."

So that's why she was here tonight.

Optimus was the last to approach the casket, that peace and wistful affection his strongest emotion now. Resting his hand on top of it, he bowed his head and murmured, "Until all are one, old friend." Then, with a deep, soul-shaking sigh, he stepped away and transformed down into his alt.

Ratchet lifted the crate and placed it on a flatbed trailer so Optimus could pull it, and they all transformed. Bumblebee popped his door open, and I climbed in to the sound of a woman singing a jazzy version of "In the Sweet By and By." We followed Optimus in formation, driving at a slow, stately pace down the island toward the docks.

A crew was waiting and they quickly loaded Jazz's casket onto a small cargo ship. The song from Bumblebee's speakers changed to one I didn't know.

"Moon river, wider than a mile,
I'm crossing you in style
Someday…"

The Autobots stayed in their alt-forms, and I asked Bumblebee, "Where are they going with him?"

"He'll be buried...in the harbor."

Close to home, then. Good.

The song eventually ended, and we waited for a little bit longer in silence. Eventually the ship left the dock, though, and the Autobots turned around, headed back to their hangar. A bright, up-beat instrumental Dixieland jazz song started up. I found myself moving to the music a little bit and felt the tiniest bit disrespectful until I realized that Jazz wouldn't have wanted us to be sad anymore. The 'bots knew that, and that's why they'd chosen this tradition for his memorial. He'd done his part, gone on to something better (or at least, that's what they all seemed to think), and it was time to celebrate life again. That's what he would have wanted.

That didn't mean I was happy with not being able to bring him back, but at least he wasn't just forgotten.
If you'd like to look up the songs on Youtube that I referenced they are:

- "Just a Closer Walk With Thee" as performed by the Canadian Brass Band

- "When the Saints Go Marching In" as performed by Louis Armstrong.

- "In Memoriam Juanita Brooks: In The Sweet By And By" (especially the chorus and 2nd verse)

- "Moon River" as performed by Louis Armstrong

- "Tiger Rag" performed by Nicolas Payton

Also, if you're unfamiliar with a New Orleans jazz funeral, I highly recommend you look up that phrase on Youtube, too. Words can't do it justice
Wisdom

I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling. Thanks to my nap and the jetlag, my internal clock was all messed up and it took me forever to wind down. I kept remembering how 'Bee held me close and thinking about how much it would hurt him when I eventually died – him and Optimus both. Morbid thoughts, especially for a nineteen-year-old with no good reason to expect a visit from the grim reaper anytime soon, not counting the Decepticons. But they had been slaughtered months ago, and everyone seemed to think it'd be a while before they would get up to anything again.

I kept thinking that I wanted a closer bond with Optimus, but here in the dark, it seemed like a really selfish thing to want. Unless Decepticons happened to him first, I'd go before Optimus. A long time before him. It wouldn't hurt me to have an actual brother bond with him, but it was pretty much guaranteed to hurt him.

…

In my dreams, Optimus was standing on one of the smaller cargo ships, like the one we used to actually land on the island back in September. We were in Diego Garcia's harbor, and he was staring down into the water. Like most of today, his emotions were carefully held in check. It reminded me of how much I could hurt him – how much I did hurt him.

I stepped up to his side, and I could see down through the water to Jazz's crate. I knew the harbor was deep enough to handle any type of ship – several of any type, actually – but it was crystal-clear when seen through Optimus' optics. It didn't feel like he was imagining it, so I asked, "This is a memory?"

"I went to the harbor at dawn," he explained. "To honor his courage one last time." A churning current of grief, respect, affection, and loss washed across the bond.

"It's hard to let go," I said, remembering that I couldn't let go of Optimus, back when Megatron killed…

His emotions across the bond shifted in response to mine, ebbing into that permanent hug, only this time it felt more like a hesitant arm around the shoulder.

There was no easy way around this, so I took a deep breath and blurted out, "I'm sorry about blocking the bond earlier."

He nodded in acceptance, but he was really…cautious. "I have blocked you before. It would be unfair of me to protest it when you do."

"Maybe." Awkwardly I stepped closer, putting my hands on his shoulders and touching my forehead to his. He felt a little uncertain, but this was Optimus; he was nothing if not brave. He let me nudge my way past the block he'd placed on the bond, and I wrapped him up in a hug of the heart, pouring reassurance and understanding across the bond. "But I've never had a brother turn his back on me."

After he'd opened my memories for us once before, it only took a couple of seconds for me to figure out how to do it again. We were back in the hangar right after the Dynasty of the Primes told me to not reignite Jazz. I let him deep into my mind, showing him that it was embarrassment and frustration that made me accidentally block the bond, not anything he did.

Relief – and embarrassment at that relief – washed over the bond, and I smiled a little, glad that we could share our thoughts and feelings this way. It made these hard things so much easier to say.
"Thank you, Sam, for showing me that," he said, and I could feel how deeply that memory had reassured him.

"Anytime." And I meant it, I realized. I trusted him enough now that I really would let him into my mind anytime to see pretty much whatever he wanted. He wouldn't search for anything he didn't actually need.

"You made the correct choice today," he said.

I knew he was telling me that to make up for my frustration when I blocked the bond. It didn't really help, though. "I thought you'd be more upset," I admitted, "when I couldn't bring him back. I mean, the Matrix didn't work. What if I can't bring anybody back? No Elita, no clans…"

I hadn't realized how much I was expecting to be able to reignite them. It seemed unfair – wrong – that the Matrix could heal every wound from this war and just chose not to. The idea that Primus didn't really care about the Cybertronians was one thing – that he would refuse to let the All Spark fix things made me furious.

I was also kind of surprised at how strongly I felt about it considering I'd never personally met any of these 'bots.

That tangled mess of emotion rolled across the bond – loss, affection, grief, respect. But he didn't let any of that show, instead squaring his shoulders. "Then the consequences of our choices stand as they ever have."

That made me even more frustrated. "You literally have no kin left, Optimus. I'm it, and I'm only human."

His annoyed disbelief mingled with his amusement – the way he always felt when I said something like that about myself.

Ignoring his feelings, I added, "How can you be so…so slagging calm about it all?"

"Because this was a lesson I learned a very long time ago."

Abruptly we were on Cybertron, me riding in his cab. His engine roared as he raced across the rough terrain. Missiles rained down around us from the Seekers above, rocking the ground with brilliant flares of light in the darkness, and he dodged the blasts. I was so deep into his memory that I could feel the heat from the explosions and the scouring sand across his battered finish. A half-dozen other mechs surrounded us.

Across the comm, a mech he recognized as Prowl barked, /Get out, Optimus! There are seven squads of Decepticons in pursuit./

/I'll get him there safe/ Jazz promised as he paced beside Optimus.

Another barrage of artillery rocked us, and a ripple of grief and pain swept over his clan bond – Elita from Arcee from Moonracer from Ratchet.

"Splice," Optimus breathed, realizing which mech had just been extinguished. He transformed, skidding to a halt like that one time on Earth when he was fighting a Decepticon on the highway. Seeing the twisted and smoldering frame of his friend, a thousand memories flickered through his mind as fury blazed bright in his spark. Splice had served as his family's physician since before Optimus was even sparked. His was the voice of kindness and the easing of pain. He was the medic for Optimus' squad. He was Ratchet's creator-brother.
Optimus drew his ion rifle from his shoulder, returning fire at the Seekers who were harassing them. He didn’t even know the name of the jet who had extinguished Splice, but he shot at them all with a cold, deadly accuracy. Jazz was cussing beside us, trying to pull Optimus out of his battle rage, and more Seekers were coming to reinforce the trine my brother was shooting down.

"Frag it all, Prime," Jazz growled, "get out of here!"

A group of a couple dozen Autobots tore past us. Optimus recognized them as Wreckers, and he eagerly transformed to follow them.

Another unfamiliar voice came over the comm, but my brother knew him: Alpha Trion. /Prime, retreat. Now./

There was authority in his words and my brother finally realized how hot the battle was becoming.

/They are racing into a suicide mission to protect their Prime/ Alpha Trion continued, reprimand in his tone. /Do not let them make their sacrifice in vain./

Those words finally cut through the battle rage and Optimus swung around, tearing out of the uneven fight behind him. Grief drove him, then – grief and shame and heartache – as Jazz wove behind him, covering their retreat.

Abruptly we were in a rundown room with a group of mechs and femmes. I recognized Elita One, Jazz, and Starsheen, but the others were unfamiliar.

Optimus sensed my confusion. "This memory is from relatively early on in the War – part of the same series of events in which I first disappointed Prowl."

I frowned until I remembered that conversation. "You mean the time he figured out you were a fallible mech just like him? When you walked into Megatron's trap?"

He nodded and gestured to a mech with sensor-cables covering part of his face like some kind of beard and to a femme who stood near him. "Alpha Trion and his mate Beta Three. Beta and Starsheen were Sunset's creator-sisters."

"So he's like your uncle?"

"In human terms, yes. Also, his granddaughter Beta Five created a sister named Corona with Elita One."

I squinted as I tried to wrap my head around that one. "So he's her kinda grandpa, just like my parents are your kinda Mom and Dad? He's related to you both?"

He was a little amused at my reaction, but the seriousness of the memory weighed him down. "Yes. Femmes were clan builders, especially the Beta dynasty. The other mech is Prowl."

"The one whose furniture got glued to the ceiling by Jazz and Jolt?"

He nodded once before setting the scene in motion.

"What were you thinking?" Elita demanded of her mate, her anger slamming into him over their bond.

Alpha Trion laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "You know full well what he was thinking when he left, daughter. And your spark was the same when Corona fell."
Still fuming, she looked down.

Beta Three turned to Jazz, and her voice was strained when she said, "I owe you the life of my Prime."

"Naw, it was the Wreckers."

A pang of grief and shame pierced Optimus again.

"You also stood by him," Beta reminded Jazz. "But I believe Optimus and Alpha Trion should review this mission report alone." She also gave Prowl a pointed glance.

"Yes," Alpha quietly agreed.

Jazz gave Prowl a glare that Prowl carefully ignored as they both headed out. Elita's panic and worry lashed out once across the bond, wordlessly promising Optimus that this wasn't over, before she, Beta Three, and Starsheen left.

Optimus drooped like the weight of the world was on his shoulders, and he stared unseeing at a computer monitor.

"I read Prowl's mission analysis," Alpha Trion said almost casually.

Shame swelled in my brother's spark. "As did I. It's amazing he can be so clinical and so scathing at the same time."

"You made a foolish choice by sneaking off to meet the leader of the Decepticons without assistance or even telling us where you were going," Trion evenly answered. "And Prowl does not suffer fools."

Optimus' fist clenched in frustration. "I had to try. We had the opportunity to end the war today. That wasn't something I could just ignore."

"You let your spark guide you at the expense of your processors, Optimus. You wanted to reconcile with your brother as much as you wanted to end this confrontation. And Megatron did want to end this fight today – by ending your life."

"I know," my brother snapped. Reining in his temper, he corrected, "I understand that now. Splice paid the price for my stupidity, and now his entire clan regrets my mistake, too."

Alpha Trion's voice took on an intensity I hadn't heard before. "Have you read the casualty report?"

"Prowl's analysis was all I could handle at the moment."

"Process it now. You owe them that much, Optimus."

My brother pulled up the report, scanning over the names until one chilled his spark. Focusing on Alpha Trion, he asked, "Alpha Tetron?"

Tightly hiding his emotions, the older mech answered, "Keep reading."

Near the end of the list was another name that made Optimus' spark lurch in distress. "And Torque, too." Both of them sons of Alpha Trion. Both of them dead.

"Alpha Tetron led the diversionary team that allowed Jazz and Mirage to free you. Of the ten squads under his command, all but two mechs were extinguished."
The words wrung grief from Optimus' spark, but Alpha Trion was brutally calm – like he was holding back something frightening, or at least something very strong. "Torque was a squad-leader in the Wreckers. No one from the squads sent in to cover your retreat survived."

I'd never felt my brother more shaken than when he looked into the optics of his friend and kinsmech and knew that his bad choice had cost Alpha Trion two of his sons.

Sorrow and pain began to creep into Alpha Trion's expression, even though he was fighting hard to hide it. "They went in knowing the risk. They died protecting you because you are their Prime. Never neglect to read the casualty report at the end of a mission."

Struggling against the rush of grief, Optimus stuttered out, "But…"

"Let our clan do the grieving, Optimus. Your grief will do nothing for the dead; focus on the living. You are our Prime. You must make the difficult choices, the life and death choices, but just as importantly, you must learn to live with those choices. If you do not, then you may as well surrender to Megatron and make slaves of us all. You will not be strong enough otherwise."

"How can you say that?" Optimus roared, finally finding his voice. "You of all mechs! How can you stand here with two broken bonds and expect me to just ignore the death of my kin? To leave destruction in my wake and not care?"

Alpha Trion gave him a half-hearted smile that was both sorrowful and affectionate. "No. I know you do and will care. That is not the difficult part of the path ahead of you, Optimus. Caring is hard-coded into you. I expect you to be wise."

The fight drained from Optimus' spark and he hunched again against the grief. "Wise."

"Wise enough to accept others' choices, even when it costs them their lives. Wise enough to understand that the Prime is worth dying for, even if you think Optimus is not. Wise enough to understand that a Prime is not Primus." He placed an earnest hand on Optimus' shoulder, making my brother's gaze meet his. "I expect you to stand when others fall and to acknowledge the honor of their courage. Others may grieve those who are extinguished, but your sorrow tarnishes their sacrifice, Prime. Your choice may be wrong or right, but my sons acted out of amity for you and love of freedom. Learn from their loss, but do not regret that love or its consequences."

Optimus understood then what Alpha Trion was trying to say, and seeing it all through his optics, I began to understand, too.

"You stand here at the head of a grieving clan and comfort me," my brother said in his not-question way.

"You are my Prime," Alpha Trion simply said.

Abruptly we were back on the cargo ship, and I remembered something back in Mission City that seemed kind of weird at the time. When Ironhide gave Optimus Jazz's shell, my brother simply said, "Aw, Jazz," but he said it almost…affectionately. He really didn't seem upset at all. I realized now that he was spark-broken about it, but he was following Alpha Trion's advice and not letting his grief ruin Jazz's sacrifice. Jazz did what he did all along because he loved and was loyal to Optimus and my brother couldn't bring himself to regret that friendship and loyalty, even though it cost Jazz his life.

And then there was that whole line about "You honor us with your courage." It had seemed almost cheesy at the time – that he would thank us puny humans for helping out – but now I got it. Jazz had
honored Optimus with his courage, too. Living and dead, we had made sacrifices and Optimus was acknowledging that.

"What happened to him?" I wondered. "Alpha Trion?"

That unique mix of emotion – respect, grief, affection, and loss – poured across the bond again. "Alpha Trion and his entire clan were extinguished in the War. Though we did not know it at the time, he was of the Prime lineage. He had twenty-two offspring – one daughter and twenty-one sons – plus their youngling creations and his sons' and daughter's own offspring. All of them, including Beta Three, died before we launched the Cube from Cybertron. He was the last to perish. He fell beside me at Simfur in a battle that was merely a distraction while Bumblebee evacuated the Cube."

He died fighting for nothing. But then, Bumblebee couldn't have done what he needed to without that battle.

Optimus' wistfulness crept into the bond. "He never witnessed the loss of hope. It was better that he fell when he did rather than watch us discard the All Spark."

"He was a pretty great mech," I guessed.

"Yes. He was what you humans would call a Renaissance man – statesman, scientist, warrior, medic. He repaired both me and Elita several times, essentially rebuilding us at one point. He became a surrogate father after my own parents died."

"And he called Elita 'daughter.'"

Optimus nodded. "She was created by her sister but he became a father-figure to her. He loved and was loved by us all.

...

'Morning' came at about 1 P.M., or 13:00 hours depending on what clock I was looking at. Bumblebee was waiting in his alt outside the building they had me in, and I staggered out to him even before showering.

"Hey, 'Bee."

He popped open his door in answer and I crawled into his welcoming cab. "Sorry – I'm pretty smelly. I just..." Why was I here, really? "...I wanted to say I'm glad you're my guardian. You've done an awesome job, you know? For the record. I don't know if I've ever told you before."

"You feeling all right, son?"

I half-smiled; I needed to thank him more often. "Let's just say last night gave me a lot to think about." Both waking and dreaming. "Anyway, thanks. I'm gonna go shower and try to get it together, I guess, but I'll see you in half an hour?"

"Aye, aye, captain!"

I lightly thumped his steering wheel as I climbed out – our equivalent of a fist bump.

By the time I had cleaned up and was dressed and everything, I realized I was hungry. Really hungry. As soon as I got on the island, I had gone to reignite Jazz and then I really didn't feel like eating after that. When I climbed into 'Bee's cab again, I said, "Please tell me there's someplace around here to get a pizza. I'm starving!"
A couple of seconds later, he answered, "There's a…mom-and-pop place just up the road."

"Sounds great!"

I wasn't sure what to expect from a little diner in the middle of the Indian Ocean, but I realized I shouldn't be surprised when the Lennox house came into view. "You sure about this, 'Bee? I mean, they were up late, too."

"Sarah…already…up with the baby."

Oh. Yeah, Annabelle would probably get up at the same time as usual. "Okay."

Mrs. Lennox opened the front door to greet me when I climbed out of Bumblebee's cab. "Hi, Sam. Come on in."

As I followed her through the front door, I realized she was pretty mellow, and last night was probably wearing on her in more ways than one. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to just barge in…"

She gave me a weary smile over her shoulder as she led the way to the kitchen. "Not at all. There's really not much in the way of dining options on base and…" She shrugged. "You're welcome here." She grabbed a Tupperware of cookies from a cupboard and handed them to me as proof. "I'm kind of between meals, and pizza would take a good 45 minutes, but if you're willing to go with leftovers, I could set you up with grilled chicken and cheesy potatoes or lasagna or I could whip up an omelet for you."

"They all sound so good," I muttered.

She grinned – for real this time. "Well then, which one do you want first?" I tried to protest, but she waved the words away. "Chicken first, since it will heat quickest, then the lasagna, and by then the omelet will be done. Have a seat," she said, though I swear it was more of an order. "Milk with your cookies?"

My stomach was growling and I just gave in. "Sure."

She worked quietly, popping the leftovers in the microwave and then starting a cast-iron frying pan heating on the stove. I ate my cookies and drank my milk, trying to come up with idle conversation. "So how old is Annabelle now?"

"More than two years," Mrs. Lennox answered, carefully cracking a couple of eggs into a shallow bowl. "She's taking a nap right now, but I'm sure she'd love to play with you when she wakes up."

"Um…thanks."

She gave me an amused smile. "Oh that's right – you're a college guy. The 'bots all love to get down on the floor with her and I forget sometimes that not everyone thinks the terrible twos are cute. Ham and cheese okay for the omelet?"

"Sure."

"I've got canned mushrooms and some green onion, too."

"Sounds great."

Going back to our earlier conversation while she worked, she said, "You're welcome to stay once she wakes up, and I won't even make you play peek-a-boo."
"Seriously? The 'bots play peek-a-boo with her?"

She chuckled. "Arcee, Optimus, Ironhide… yep. Sideswipe and the twins don't, though. They like to toss her in the air or run around with her on their shoulders. I don't think they have the patience for peek-a-boo."

I sniggered at that and then remembered her list at the beginning. "Optimus plays peek-a-boo?"

Carefully poking the leftover potatoes to make sure they were heated through, she answered, "He loves her almost as much as Ironhide does."

"Hmm." I wasn't able to talk for a while after that, though, because she set the first course of leftovers in front of me and I forgot about anything else.

True to her word, she kept the food coming and I ate for about a half-hour solid.

Leaning against the counter with her arms crossed, she watched me cut into the omelet with my fork. "Gonna want another one of those?"

Yes, but I didn't want to eat her out of house and home. "Naw, I think that'll tide me over until dinner."

She kindly patted my shoulder and then started cleaning the kitchen.

I finally pushed away my plate, sighing in satisfaction. "Thanks."

"My pleasure," she answered, tossing me another grin.

I wasn't sure what to say after that. I felt like I should get out of her hair, but I didn't want to just eat and run, either. I hmm'ed and hawed for a minute until she finally said, "I'm a good listener, if you ever want to talk. For the record." She didn't look over her shoulder or anything, just washed the omelet bowl and rinsed it, patiently waiting for me to answer.

One question did occur to me, though, and it was especially important since I was taking the risk of going to college even though my brother was worried about me. The fact that more Decepticons had landed only upped the ante. "Do you ever get mad, when Major Lennox goes on a mission with the 'bots? I mean, he's pretty much gambling with his life."

She glanced at me, sizing me up, while she cleared my plate and brought it back to the sink. "Mad at who?"

I shrugged, even though she couldn't see me. (Then again, she was a mom, so maybe she had eyes in the back of her head.) "The Decepticons? The Autobots? Major Lennox?"

She sighed, her shoulders sagging a little. "Will is a package deal, and I knew that going in. Besides, he's out there protecting a lot of people, myself and Annabelle included. How could I get mad at him for that? Though sometimes I wish someone else could take a turn for a while."

"The 'bots?" I pressed. "Do you ever get mad at Optimus?"

"I can't pretend that I don't sometimes, but those times are very rare. Like Will, he's just out to protect people." Tossing me another quick smile, she added, "Besides, this is Optimus. Can anybody stay mad at him for long?"

"His brother did," I muttered and she froze.
Crap! She didn't know about Megatron and all that.

Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to go back to scrubbing the plate. "I didn't hear about him. But I think only Decepticons could ever really stay mad at him, and I bet even they have a healthy dose of respect in there somewhere when it comes to him."

I was impressed when she didn't try to weasel the whole 'Optimus' brother' thing out of me. "You are a good listener." She reminded me a little of Ratchet.

She paused again, and her voice became very serious. "I'm close enough to the 'bots to know there's something special about you, Sam. I don't know exactly what happened...yesterday, but you're carrying a load that a lot of experienced soldiers would have a hard time with. You're important to the 'bots, which means you're important to a lot of people. You're needed, and that's tough sometimes. Trust me, I know – I'm a mom. And the best advice about parenting that I ever got was to take care of myself. There are too many people depending on me for me to not to, and I have to take care of myself before I can take care of anybody else. That means mentally and emotionally as much as it does physically. Find someone you can talk to."

"That's good advice," I admitted. Especially considering I hadn't eaten in more than 24 hours.

"My mom's a wise person."

I grinned at that. "'Bee is a good listener – not that he has much of a choice."

There was relief in the smile she gave me over her shoulder. "He'd be a good choice no matter what." She dried her hands on a towel and turned back to me. "And speaking of something special, half the base is probably looking for you. If you're full, you might need to be getting back."

"Yeah, probably." I rose to my feet, but I wasn't sure what to do next. With Mom I would have just walked out, but Mrs. Lennox didn't have to take me in and feed me today, unlike my parents. Shaking her hand would be too formal, and it wasn't like I had cash on me even if I thought she'd accept payment for her kindness.

She solved my problem by stepping in and giving me a hug. "Make sure you get a few of these, too," she said, squeezing me tighter in emphasis.

I grinned as I hugged her back – it was impossible to not like Mrs. Lennox. "Mikaela has an unlimited supply." But Mikaela was in California. And while a hug of the heart was even better than a physical one, I wasn't around Optimus all that much.

"Good man," she answered, letting me go and walking me to the door. "Call ahead next time you want pizza and I'll have it ready for you."

And she would, too. "Thanks," I repeated and headed back to Bumblebee.
Halcyon Days

It was proof of how hungry I was before going to the Lennox house that I hadn't even thought about finding Optimus over the bond. I could sense him, could tell exactly where he was (in the Autobot hangar, not that that was a surprise), but I hadn't felt his…awareness yet. "Is Optimus okay?"

"Shift work…eleven to seven…"

Huh. I'd never thought about the fact that they probably needed round-the-clock Autobots. And Optimus did say that he'd been down at the harbor at dawn. "Just sleeping in, huh?"

"Affirmative…wake up…any minute now."

Things were quiet when 'Bee and I pulled into the hangar. Epps gave me an emotionless nod, but I wasn't sure if that was because of Jazz or if it was because he had to work the morning after New Year's Eve.

"Big Buddha said to wake him up when you got here," he said, nodding toward my brother's silent form and walking me over to him.

"How?"

In answer Epps gave his tire a good, hard kick.

Optimus jolted out of recharge and transformed, and it didn't register that he was battle-ready until I noticed my own hands and jaw were clenched. He seemed to realize it the same time I did and calmed down, sending wordless apology my way.


"Happy New Year," Optimus dryly responded.

The soldier grunted before he ambled off, though we both managed a little smile to hear Optimus say something so…human.

"Sam," my brother greeted, kneeling down to be eye-level with me.

"Hey." It was kind awkward after such intense dreams last night. How do you make small talk with someone who had just shown you some of the most important struggles of his whole life? "So… um…what's on the agenda for today? I mean I'm here for the next two weeks, so…"

"You and Bumblebee have access to most of the island. There are recreational boats available, as well as the private beaches by the R&R cabins, even though you are not staying there."

"But…what about you?"

Determination washed over the bond. "I have intelligence to analyze and orders to issue regarding these new Decepticons. As soon as we can trace them, we will hunt them down." In a lower voice, he said, "If you are half a world away, the best way to keep you safe is to keep the entire planet free of Decepticons."

I half-smiled at that – the hunt for the 'cons was a little more personal this time. A part of my mind whispered that I shouldn't put him through that, but another part insisted I needed to be at college. It went against anybody's common sense to be out there with only 'Bee for protection, but…I just knew
it was where I needed to be. Not wanted to be or should be – needed.

He straightened and held out his hand for me to climb onto. As soon as he had me in-hand, he strolled toward the open door of the hangar. "I have, however, been able to secure 'vacation time' to spend with you. Ratchet's been annoyingly gleeful I'll be on minimal duty for the next several weeks." Feeling my confusion, he slyly added, "He feels that I have been working myself too hard for the last several millennia."

I chuckled despite myself. "Okay, then. So 'Bee and I go play in the water and wait for you to get off work?"

"Major Lennox is currently in a meeting with the JCS, and then he, Agent Graham, and I will speak with NEST's superiors in the British military. With one of the Decepticons landing in London, they are rightfully concerned. After that meeting, I will be free to join you."

I wrapped him up in a permanent hug, and he set me down next to 'Bee's waiting alt-form. "See ya soon, then."

"Yes," he agreed.

...

For a private beach, the area in front of the R&R cabins was packed. I guess everyone on the island who could be on vacation right now was, and that meant in the water. Fortunately there was plenty of parking for 'Bee – everyone else was ferried across the mouth of the harbor to get here since only people with pretty high security clearance were able to drive through the restricted area.

Some people were snorkeling and there were a couple of rubber rafts further out, too, but most of the others were just sunbathing or swimming. With a sigh of bone-deep relief, I headed out to the water like everyone else.

When I finally had my fill of swimming and playing in the surf, I spread my beach towel out on the sand and closed my eyes, completely at ease. I relaxed under the warm, tropical sun, letting the heat work deep into my muscles.

It wasn't until I glanced over and saw Optimus – the same size as me – resting comfortably on the sand beside me that I realized I'd drifted off. That and the beach being empty and peaceful was another give-away.

If he was here, he must be recharging in real life. "Boring meeting?" I teased.

"It was over for all intents and purposes. I sensed you falling asleep and made an excuse that Will would understand but Epps would not."

I shifted my shoulder blades, settling more comfortably on my beach-towel. "Thanks for keeping it on the down low."

"Of course, brother."

I smiled, closing my eyes again. Even in my dreams, the warmth was soothing. It took me a couple of seconds to realize we had met up on the beach instead of the aircraft carrier. Not that I was complaining – it was just kind of surprising. Still, I reluctantly guessed, there was a lot to see and do.

"So where did you want to go?"

His contentment rolled across the bond. "Here."
My smile became a grin and I sighed in my own contentment. "Sounds good."

We rested like that for a long time, just comfortable basking in the warmth of the sun and of the bond. The two were a lot alike, come to think of it.

Eventually curiosity started seeping into the bond, though he didn't let me in on what he was itching to find out.

Well if he wouldn't ask, I would. "Yes?"

"We can relate to enjoying the warmth to an extent," he said, his deep voice a relaxed murmur. "It soothes you, but it energizes us; regardless, basking in the sun is pleasant. We can also appreciate the pleasure of being washed clean, though again for different reasons. Even a massage and the Earth indulgence of a good car wax have enough similarities to be understood as pleasant. What has always baffled us is the human enjoyment of playing in corrosive water."

I chuckled at that. "Want to find out what's so fun about it?"

Eagerness and caution raced each other across the bond, and I huffed in annoyance. It was the only thing that could get me to move from my beach towel. Climbing to my feet, I extended my hand and hauled him up to standing, too. (And wasn't that a weird experience! Even buried in a bond-dream, I mentally did a double-take.) Focusing on my own confidence in him and peace with the idea, I said, "You want to go swimming? Come on, then. Rifle around in my head until you get over this. I said 'anytime' and I meant it."

Gratitude washed back to me as he placed his hands on my shoulders and touched his forehead to mine. He only had to go back a little while in my memories, but they were more vivid when processed through his mind than through my squishy brain.

Abruptly I was climbing out of 'Bee's cab, the heat rising from the sand under my flip-flops. The back of my neck was damp with sweat when I crossed to the shade of a palm tree. The smell of the ocean reminded me of home and my parents and of all the things I'd lost in this insanity. But it brought me back in time and made me nostalgic instead of sad, and I enjoyed the scent and the memories. Dropping my towel and water-bottle in the shade, I dutifully slathered sun-block over my skin (knowing Ratchet would have my hide if I came back to him sunburned). Kicking off my sandals, I hurried across the burning beach to the water.

Dry and hot sand became soft and cool underfoot before a wave washed up and over my toes. I could almost see Optimus mentally blink in surprise as the sensation hit his processors. The water was just warm enough to be inviting and cool enough to be refreshing.

Grinning like I had back then, I waded in, letting the water rush between my fingers. The power of the waves gently nudged me, rocking me back and forth, before I took a deep breath and dove under the next rolling swell. Cool water embraced me and playfully pushed against me as I pushed back.

This time, Optimus' surprise filled me and I barely surfaced before breaking out in laughter. Without even thinking about it, we jumped track and went from memory to imagination. He stood beside me in the waist-deep water now, but he was feeling what I was feeling – sensation for sensation – just like any other human would.

"That is…astounding," he finally managed.

I couldn't resist the urge to splash him. "So do you see why we crazy organics have a thing for swimming?"
He flinched away from the water, turning his head to protect his face. Looking back to me with bright optics, he answered, "Yes…partially. The sensation isn't as overwhelming as the…context, I think. May I?"

He was mentally inching us back out of my imagination and into memory.

"Sure, why not."

And then we were flying backwards through my memories, skimming over hours and days and years until I started to get dizzy. We blew past my earliest recollections, flitting through mental images of me crawling and drinking from a bottle until the memories were fuzzy even to him. It was little more than sensory impressions, really. It wasn't dark or light or warm or cold. A heartbeat was all I knew – the only thing that changed here. That and the sense of motion, floating…

Abruptly we were back at the tropical beach, waist-deep in the water.

"Now I understand," he declared.

I shook my head a little, trying to knock all my wind-swept memories back into place. When my mind finally was convinced we were where I thought we were, I was able to put two and two together. "You think it reminds us of being in the womb? And seriously – you can rewind my memories back that far?"

He shrugged in a borrowed human gesture. "You witnessed the evidence."

"Yeah, kinda, I guess. But still…I really didn't want to associate 'mother's womb' with 'midnight swim with Mikaela.'"

Humor swelled in his spark. This time he splashed me, and I realized we were so deep in my mind that I was rubbing off on him. That evolved into a full-blown water fight that had us both laughing and me gasping for breath before we were done.

Eventually we went back to solid ground and lay down in the sun to dry off. That brought us full circle, out of my memories and into the shared dream-space of our bond. As my heart rate slowed and my body began absorbing the warmth again, a comfortable peace flowed back and forth over the bond.

Conversation wasn't exactly needed, but I asked, "You haven't gone swimming in your holoform?"

"It didn't seem appealing." A twinge of mild regret crept into the bond.

"Take Annabelle sometime," I told him. "I hear she's quite an extrovert. She'd probably love playing on the beach."

He gave me a puzzled look, so I added, "Peek-a-boo."

Giving away none of the bashfulness I felt coming from him, he simply said, "Perhaps I will. Though…"

"...it's just not the same in your holoform," I finished for him, remembering how Thanksgiving turkey smelled differently to him in his holoform than it did in my memories.

His approval washed over me – he was pleased I understood. "It is not."

Before I could answer, we were interrupted by the feeling of someone shaking me out of my dreams.
Bumblebee’s holoform Cam Romero was kneeling beside me, worry written all over his face.

"What is it?"

"*Burn, baby, burn…*"

I let my head fall back onto the towel, still reeling from the sudden change of scenery. "I already put on sunscreen."

He huffed and stalked over to the shade, picked up the bottle, and brought it back holding it so I could read the label. The directions said, "Provides 80 minutes of protection in the water."

Autobots – they were so overprotective!

With a groan, I rolled to my feet and staggered back to the shade, taking the bottle from 'Bee so I could coat myself again. Then 'Bee insisted I drink my whole bottle of water. By the time I finished with that, I was way too awake to sleep again, which was kind of annoying. At least I had tonight’s dreams to look forward to – two whole weeks of them, actually.

Bumblebee brought me down to Boomtown, and I got a ring-side seat while he went the rounds with everybody again – Arcee, Jolt, Sideswipe, the twins, Ironhide, even Ratchet. I sensed it when Optimus came online, his exasperation diluted a little by patience. I guessed that he knew Bumblebee had been the one to wake me up, and he probably even knew why.

Eventually I felt him heading toward us, and I could sense he was pondering something that – against all odds – felt *fun*. He must have sensed my confusion, and his sudden surge of mirth made me laugh out loud. He was *plotting* something!

Ratchet and Bumblebee paused in their sparring to give me a curious look, but I shook my head at them. Technically I didn't know what was going on either, though I was grinning like an idiot when Optimus drove into view pulling his Blackbird armor behind him. Taking his time, he unhitched the trailer and stretched to his full height.

"Sam," he solemnly greeted me, giving away none of the mischief he felt.

"Optimus," I answered, trying to smother my grin.

He turned to where 'Bee and Arcee were sparring (again). "Bumblebee!" His voice rang with challenge in a tone I'd only ever heard him use with Megatron.

'Bee perked up, his doorwings sweeping up and back and almost quivering with excitement, and with a soft chuckle, Arcee moved back to join the other 'bots. It looked like it was Optimus' turn to go the rounds with 'Bee. That wasn't what had Optimus feeling all sly, though. He radiated a real affection for Bumblebee and was honestly looking forward to training with him. The sly part was about something else.

Optimus wasn't serious about the sparring – I could *sense* it – but all I could see was him and Bumblebee circling each other like mortal enemies. I had a flashback to a flight deck with Optimus holding me in his hand and telling me that The Fallen was also a Prime. Back then, I had tried to imagine Optimus killing Bumblebee the way The Fallen had killed his brothers, and the thought had made me feel sick. It was ten times worse now to *see* it.

Optimus straightened out of his fighting crouch and turned to me, concern radiating from him. I fumbled to block the bond, but he gently nudged past my attempt, soothing me with acceptance and subdued reassurance. He wouldn't fight 'Bee.
Bumblebee made a questioning chirp and Optimus glanced back to him. "Perhaps another time."

His gaze flickering to me, 'Bee nodded and walked to my side. He offered me his hand and I hopped onto the seat he offered. When I glanced up at him, there was concern in his optics and I gave his cheek-strut a reassuring pat.

"Up to sparring with me?" Ironhide challenged Optimus.

"That wasn't the plan," my brother indifferently answered, but that happy mischief bubbled across the bond again.

"Then why'd you bring your Blackbird armor?" he demanded. "You can't beat me without it."

Optimus' chin jutted out defiantly. "I put you in Ratchet's med bay often enough before. But that wasn't the plan."

Ironhide and patience don't go so well together, and I realized Optimus was baiting the weapons specialist.

"Then why the slag did you bring it?"

"Target practice," my brother rumbled. "You haven't shot down a Seeker in eons. You're getting rusty, old friend."

Ironhide's optics flared bright and his cannons whirled to life. "I'll show you rust!"

A fierce joy swelled in my brother's spark and, collapsing down into his alt-form, he hooked his systems into the trailer. One dizzying transformation later, he roared into the sky. His thrill jolted through me, a rush as powerful as the wind across his plating must feel. He had to really concentrate, I could sense that, and I realized that trucks weren't exactly born to fly. After who knows how long of living and fighting, this was something new for him to learn. I grinned at the thought. Old dogs and new tricks, I reflected as I watched him execute a barrel roll. You're younger at spark than you probably realize.

Ironhide raised his cannons, taking aim at my brother.

"He's not really going to shoot, is he?" I murmured as I glanced up at 'Bee.

His whole expression was lifted in a grin, and he shook his head no. "Target practice," he quoted Optimus, then spliced together, "Trying to get...a target lock."

There was a competitive edge to the feelings across the bond now, heightening the thrill of flight, and I spent the next hour and a half or so tagging along with Optimus as he raced the wind and Ironhide's sharp targeting computer.

…

Like usual, jetlag threw me all off, but with Optimus working the night shift, we were more in synch than I had expected. About an hour before sunset, I crashed and 'Bee brought me back to the room where I was staying. I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow, but I wasn't alone in my dreams for long.

"So…" I hinted when Optimus joined me on the flight deck. "Test flight?"

That sly humor welled up in him again, and I realized his plan all along was to give me a chance to
fly like that. He placed his hands on my shoulders in invitation. "Come with me." I rested my forehead against his helm, mentally stepping forward into his memories.

Suddenly we were soaring, engines roaring in defiance of gravity, as we screamed through the brilliant blue sky. Faster, further, and it never seemed to end. Up, down, scattered to the four winds, there was no limit to where we could go because Seeker wings were as comfortable under water as they were in the dark night of space. Processors raced to adapt to this new dimension, because ground-pounders didn't truly understand what 'depth' meant.

We were so aware, focused on the subtle changes of wind and warmth and how the slightest command to motor relays sent us reeling into a new course. Little subroutines prompted him on what to move and how much – all of it written in the language of the Primes and with a faint, familiar Seeker voice.

System warnings flashed through our minds, telling us Ironhide was zeroing in on us, and a fierce, competitive pleasure flared in our spark. Optimus was a being of deep peace, but he was also incredibly strong, and he enjoyed testing that strength against another. We worked to get a target lock on Ironhide, and from the distance and speed of a Seeker's flight, it was harder than I thought it would be. We managed it a couple of times, Ironhide cussing us out soundly, but 'Hide caught us a couple of times, too. (Okay, we got him four times and he got us five, but who's counting?) Minute by minute, I relived the time they spent training in the afternoon.

When I woke up about four hours later, I couldn't remember how it physically felt to fly, but the thrill of it stuck with me all day (well, night technically, but I was still on US time, so that's what it felt like to me). Optimus was the one who picked me up from my VIP quarters and we drove back to the Autobot hangar in contented silence. Once there, he transformed and sat down in the sand so that we could look out over the ocean. He extended his hand, and I climbed aboard.

It felt exactly like when we were back on the aircraft carrier right after the battle in Egypt. "So, here we are again," I said.

"Yes."

I braced myself with a deep breath. "Let's get the bombs over with, then."

Quiet humor rippled across the bond. "I have no bombs for you tonight, boy."

I blinked in surprise. He meant it. "Then why are we here?"

My brother wrapped me up tight in a hug of the heart, and that was all the answer I needed. He missed me, and he wanted to spend time with me. This was his vacation.

"Tell me about your classes," he invited. "I understand that final exams are an event unto themselves."

"Don't remind me. History was brutal and we won't even talk about Lit…"

Despite my protests, we did talk about my Lit final, along with anything and everything else – school, Mikaela, theories about the recent Cybertronian landings, what Mom and Dad were doing with the rest of their holiday break. The subject didn't matter, not really, we just needed to talk. And even the talking wasn't as important as the ebb and flow over the bond that communicated a thousand times more than what we could ever say. He absorbed my remembered exhaustion from finals and soothed it away with sympathy. I felt and shared his unspoken hope that more Autobots would follow the Decepticons who had landed six weeks ago. Back and forth, hour after hour, and I
never got bored once.

I started to get hungry, though, about 03:00 hours, and so we went to the almost-empty mess hall. Optimus joined me in his holoform there and we talked some more. He asked me how 'Bee was holding up with being so far from the other 'bots; I asked him to tell me more about my guardian's history and what he was like back on Cybertron. Optimus had no memories of him from before the War, and so he could only describe things second-hand, and that took up most of the rest of his shift. (We saved the first-hand stuff for while we were asleep.)

The one exception was we didn't talk about what happened with Jazz, not even in our bond dreams. Optimus was being stoic, but I knew him pretty well by now, and that calm was just another kind of battle mask. Like Alpha Trion had taught him, Optimus didn't want to burden me with his pain. At the same time, it felt pretty childish to dump all my added baggage on him by ranting about how it wasn't fair that I couldn't control the Matrix. So I followed his lead and we left that grief behind in the waking world, instead spending our bond-dreams trying to cheer each other up.

In that shared dream-space, Optimus was waiting for me, more eager than he wanted to let on. As I took my place beside him, I nudged him with my elbow, my humor flowing freely over the bond. "Nobody here but us Primes, you know. You don't have to be the impressive leader of the Autobots all the time."

His own amusement washed back. "No one to impress but my older brother."

I rolled my eyes and ignored that. "So where are we going tonight?"

"I was curious about something you mentioned in our last bond-dream."

"Yeah?"

"You said that I should bring Annabelle to the beach. It reminded me of another puzzling human behavior."

"What's that?"

"Playing in mud. It appears to be almost universally enjoyed, especially by pre-adolescents, though older humans seem to enjoy it, too."

Yeah, if saltwater seemed weird to them, then mud would probably make them shudder. "You sure you want to face something as terrifying as that?" I teased.

"I believe I will survive the horror of it," he answered (with slightly more snark than I thought him capable of).

Turning to place my hands on his shoulders, I said, "If you can find a muddy memory, it's all yours."

He touched his helm to my forehead and we flew backwards through my memories, skimming over days and years to a warm early-summer afternoon when I was about thirteen years old. A thunderstorm had rolled through, drenching everything and even knocking power out for a while. Miles came over to my house because Mom was home and his folks were at work, and he was bored without the TV to keep him company. The dirt path that went from the back door to Mom's garden was a giant puddle, and Miles and I were stomping in it, splashing dirty water up on each other. Eventually, Miles grabbed a fistful of mud and threw it at me, and then it was war and we were laughing hysterically until Mom came out to see what was going on and just about had an aneurism.

The proverbial light-bulb came on in Optimus' mind, and he pulled us out of the memory before
Mom actually took the hose to us.

"Well?" I demanded.

"The pleasure is in the mischief," he declared, "though the sensory input was energizing if not actually pleasant."

I suddenly remembered how he felt before playing Cannon and Seeker with Ironhide. (Or, I thought, maybe that should be 'Hide and Seeker?) Mischief was something Cybertronians totally got.

... 

The rest of my stay on Diego Garcia fell into that rhythm: night after night under the tropical, summer stars talking with my brother, sleeping through the afternoon, waking up in time for a 7:00 PM breakfast, and then starting the whole cycle again. Conversations and dreams wove us more and more tightly together. I showed him what a rainbow looked like through human eyes and let him hear what rain on the roof sounds like.

One night, I took him along in my memories to Disneyland for roller coaster ride. The 'bots just couldn't figure out why we would pay for intentionally-frightening experiences. After seeing it all through my eyes, Optimus kind of understood it, though it was one of those things that just didn't translate well. All along they'd assumed adrenaline equaled battle protocols, but Optimus said it was more primal – and complex – than that. Instead of just readying a person's systems for quick action, the whole fight-or-flight thing produced (as he put it) an addictive, high-inducing, performance-enhancing substance.

In the next bond dream, Optimus shared with me Ratchet's reaction to my brother's observations. "It's a wonder those squishies survived this long!" the medic ranted. "They're hard-wired to be thrill-seekers! Flirting with death is fun as far as their warped and twisted instincts are concerned! What kind of evolutionary strategy is that? Idiots!" Under his breath, Ratchet added, "That does explain a lot about Will Lennox, though."

My brother had a good chuckle with me at that one before we dove into another night of live-action nostalgia.
In our dreams, Optimus and I stood together on the aircraft carrier flight deck. I'd been on Diego Garcia for ten days now, and I only had three more nights left. Our brother-bond had gotten as strong as it probably ever would, but I still had so much to learn about him, and I really enjoyed letting him know more about me. When I wasn't pointedly ignoring the fact that I'd have to get back to real life soon, I was dreading going back to campus and winter. I wasn't about to waste a single second.

"So…any other simple human pleasures you're curious about?"

In the morning light of our shared dream, he only paused for a beat. "The role of chocolate in your society."

"Chocolate?"

"We have all regarded humans' reaction to it as something…curious. As a stimulant, it is much milder than other substances humans consume on a daily basis, likewise with the addictive properties. Chocolate requires significant sweetening to mask the underlying bitterness, and yet it is regularly given as gifts, especially at certain holidays."

In other words, what was the big deal? "Mikaela could answer that question better than I could," I pointed out.

"I do not have a bond with her," he reminded me.

"I do not have a bond with her," he reminded me.

"Well…you've tasted it, haven't you? In your holoform?"

He paused. "No."

I sighed at him, pretending to be resigned. "But it's not the same in your holoform anyway. You probably want me to remember some death-by-chocolate cake or something, huh."

"Perhaps something a little less extreme," he dryly answered, "but yes, I'm curious."

I smirked and then tried to remember my favorite chocolate ever. "Christmas, three years ago," I told him. (He was beginning to kind of map out my memories, so he could jump around a little better now.) "We had these truffles that were amazing. I probably gained ten pounds that year."

He brought us to New Years Eve – the first one I spent with Mikaela – and then drifted backward a couple of weeks. We were at my house (back before the Kitchen-cons and 'Bee managed to destroy it) and Mikaela presented Mom with a box of Christmas chocolates. "For all of you," she said almost
shyly. "You've really made me feel at home. So...thanks."

Mom just glomped her in a hug, while Dad 'helped out' by grabbing the box before Mom could drop it. *He* wasn't shy about opening it up and sampling.

"It's an assortment of truffles," she said, plucking a milk-chocolate-and-hazelnut one from the box.

Eyes sparkling, she sauntered up to me and fed it to me – slowly. Back then, it was probably the sexiest thing that had ever happened to me. With my brother watching, I was wishing for a fast-forward. He didn't need to associate chocolate with *that*.

Like I had for the last week and a half, I could feel Optimus in the back of my mind soaking it all up – savoring the taste and smell and texture. I was paying more attention to the giddy butterflies in my stomach that Mikaela would be paying any attention to me, much less *this* kind of attention.

Mom promptly stole the box back from Dad and extended it to Mikaela. "Give him another two or three," she suggested with a dramatic wink. "Ron and I will be out back."

"MA!" I whined around my mouthful of truffle.

Mikaela broke out in giggles and instead handed the chocolates back to Mom before winking at me. "That's just a little taste to tide you over to Valentine's Day. Until then, you have to share."

Optimus and I resurfaced from that memory, and I was grinning like an idiot. That was one of the best parts about all this back-and-forth – reliving all these great memories. It was like having awesome dreams all night, every night, for a week and a half.

"Well?" I demanded from Optimus.

"The contrast between sweet and bitter is pleasant," he admitted.

"But it's all about the context again, huh?"

"Not entirely, though there were obviously some positive associations with that particular box of chocolates." Thanks to the bond, he made even that boring, grown-up sentence seem like something a teasing kid brother would say.

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Any other human things you want to experience?"

Abruptly we were on the lookout back home, someplace we hadn't visited since before that nightmare with the Decepticon helicopter. This time, though, it was a peaceful place again with the brilliant sunset. We were in his memories, so we stood side-by-side looking on while Mikaela and I made out on 'Bee's hood. I guess I hadn't realized how...oblivious we were to everyone else back then.

He didn't ask. Of course he didn't. Even under the best of circumstances, he mostly only hinted or suggested. This wasn't exactly the best of circumstances. I turned and stared at him, just... incredulous. "Seriously?"

He shrugged, and if he were human, he would have been blushing to the ears. "You asked."

I stared back down at myself and my girlfriend. (Talk about an out-of-body experience!) "You want to...kiss Mikaela?"

"No!" Catching himself, he more calmly answered, "No. I wondered what *you* felt kissing her.
Physical displays of affection aren't something engaged in publicly among us."

Huh. His words got bigger the more embarrassed he felt. "So you think us squishy organics are just a
bunch of animals going at it in the street?"

"I think our species are very different in this regard," he diplomatically corrected, still hiding behind
the formal wording. "We don't have anything truly analogous. Like playing in seawater, it is…
incomprehensible to us."

I snorted, imagining Autobots trying to kiss and getting locked together like a couple of kids with
braces. "Yeah, I bet."

Despite the awkwardness of it all, his curious expectation nudged me over the bond. "You were
obviously comfortable with this display in public."

I figured that it might hurt his feelings if I pointed out that 'making out in front of four kick-butt alien
robots' didn't count as 'in public.' Instead I focused on the other reason this was one of his few Not
Smart ideas. "Mikaela would kill me."

"It is true that she would be very upset if she knew." He was very careful to not put an emphasis on
'if.'

I started sniggering at the sly mischievousness rolling off of him. "You are so trying to get me in
trouble!"

"Hardly."

"Arcee will blab to her. Or Wheelie."

"Only if they knew." And this time he was careful to not put the emphasis on 'they. '

I sobered up a little bit. "No file-sharing with Ratchet for this memory?"

The mischievousness vanished, replaced by something that was both earnest and amused. "I promise.
This will remain just between us brothers."

"Alright," I recklessly agreed, "but you have to show me some mushy stuff between you and Elita."

"Mushy?"

Since he was lacking superhero-grade WiFi to Google it, I explained, "Something romantic. You
might not have anything really like kissing, but what was the first thing you did to show her you
liked her? First date or whatever?"

"Femmes are the ones who initiate relationships among my kind."

"Fine – show me the first time she let you know she wanted something more. Because I'm gonna
need some back-up blackmail in case Mikaela finds out."

A snigger rolled across the bond, though it only came through as a slight smirk in his expression. "I
would expect nothing less from you, brother."

This just might actually be worth the risk. "Deal?"

"Deal."
If seeing us making out was enough to make Optimus twitch, I decided feeling it might actually make him glitch. Besides, this was our first kiss. If Mikaela did find out that these bond dreams involved kiss-and-tell, I wanted it to be something a little less important to her.

I started with this memory of the night of Optimus' first transmission and skipped forward a few weeks. We were sitting in front of the school on a warm spring afternoon, waiting in an empty parking lot for Mikaela to get out of suspension for fighting. (It had been a very long week.)

'Bee had suggested that I get her some flowers, and so here I was with a purple bouquet. It had been the right thing to do – she loved them – even though she teased that she was breaking up with me. Then she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me.

I absentmindedly sensed my brother in the background, analyzing every sensation and emotion, and filtered through Optimus' vivid processors, the kiss was amazing. I was aware of every inch of her body against mine. Her lips were soft but eager, and her arms held me tightly. Her scent was clean and fresh, but there was an underlying…richness I'd never noticed before. My heartbeat thundered and my breath quickened. Awe filled me, stronger than I'd felt in a long time, that the girl of my dreams would like me enough to just kiss me like this.

Eventually though, we paused for breath and Mikaela looked up at me with bright eyes. "Guess you changed my mind."

"Must be my Witwicky charm."

She giggled and inhaled the scent of the flowers again.

Abruptly we were back on the aircraft carrier, and I exhaled with a low whistle. "That was even better than I remembered."

"I can see why you enjoy it so much," Optimus agreed, and while he'd never admit it, I could feel that he'd enjoyed it a little bit, too.

I nudged him over the bond. "Your turn."

Abruptly we were in an enormous, hexagonal-shaped indoor…something. There were wedges of different terrain all pointing toward a large, flat, circular space in the middle.

"An arena," Optimus clarified for me, "for the tournaments."

"Like that memory you showed me when you and Megatron were little and he was complaining about missing the tournaments when you had to go to that archaeological dig as a family?" And here I'd been thinking Cyber-soccer or something.

"Exactly."

I took in the…the scale of the whole thing. Even being as tall as Optimus, it was like standing in the middle of a football stadium.

"Cybertronian builds varied much more than human' and so the arena terrain was varied to accommodate the majority of ground-based builds. The first is Plains." He pointed to the smooth-surfaced wedge of terrain we were in and then to the right at a wedge with rolling sandy hills. "Dunes. Forests." That section was scattered with metal tree-like pillars stretched three to four times Optimus' height. He continued counterclockwise. "Badlands." The wedge there was full of craggy boulders and broken terrain that no Autobot could drive through. "Quicksilver," he said, pointing to a section full of islands set among a rippling liquid. "It's mercury. In human terms, it could be..."
considered a water hazard."

I snorted at that, remembering how weirded out he'd been about seawater and kind of understanding now. He pointed to the last section, a gorge as deep as the Forest section was tall. There were handholds on the gorge walls, and there were a bunch of pretty solid-looking clouds strategically placed in the expanse above and between. "Sky."

"The rules of the game can get complicated," he continued, "but essentially there are six teams of two or four Autobots, depending on the league. Each team has a goal disk that they hide somewhere in one of the different terrains, and the other teams must find it and return it to the dueling ring at the center of the arena. While searching for the disks, the teams all try to prevent the others from finding their own disk by eliminating the other players from the game. You can be eliminated in one of three ways: being tagged multiple times with your opponents' lasers, falling to the bottom of Sky or by being physically pinned. The game goes on until a goal disk is returned to the center or until only one team is represented in the arena."

I tried to wrap my head around it all. "So…paint ball meets capture the flag?" He gave me a puzzled look, but I waved it away. "They're just a couple of human games, but it doesn't matter. Google it when you get a chance." I was too curious to bother explaining it to him right then.

Optimus nodded in agreement and went back to explaining the game. "Ranged attacks were allowed in Forest, Badlands, and Sky, but not in the other three."

"This is really cool, but you still owe me the mushy stuff," I reminded him.

"Impatient," he rumbled, though there was laughter behind the word. "Generally, femmes only teamed up with their sisters or their mates. For this tournament, though, Elita invited me to participate as her teammate."

"So it was practically a marriage proposition," I said, grinning.

"It was an unequivocal sign of interest, yes. We met here to practice together for the first time." Then he set the memory in motion. We turned to see Elita enter the arena behind us. She was wearing a thicker armor that covered more of her frame – game gear. It made her look bulkier, but in Optimus' mind, it made her look stronger, and he really liked that in a femme, apparently. She was inspecting what looked like a gun of some kind as she walked in, though she subspaced it when she caught sight of Optimus.

"What is your preference?" he asked, gesturing toward the arena in general.

"I favor Sky and Quicksilver, personally. You?"

"Plains, Dunes, and occasionally Quicksilver."

She gave him an appraising look that was more intense than someone just playing a game. "Terrain where strength and prowess have the advantage."

He nodded modestly.

"Well, then, let's see how we do. A lap around the arena to get a feel for each other and then we'll get down to training?"

"Yes."

Elita led out toward Dunes, Optimus hot on her heels. They both sped over the hills, sometimes on
foot and other times on wheels, getting the feel for how each other moved. As in other bond dreams, I was swept along behind Optimus. In Forest, Elita was smaller and was able to transform into her alt and weave among the pillars, but my brother didn't have the room. It didn't slow him down much, though, and he moved with surprising stealth for his size, almost flitting from pillar to pillar to cross the section. Elita was lighter and faster again in Badlands, but Optimus was able to step or hurdle over most of the obstacles there. Even to me it was obvious that he'd do better in Badlands than in Forest.

Quicksilver was awesome to watch. Part of it was the color – they were drenched in the shimmering liquid as they splashed through it – but part of it was also that most of those little islands floating around weren't actually islands. The smaller ones weren't anchored and bobbed around like boogie boards or inner-tubes as Optimus waded by. Elita didn't bother with wading, though. She leapt from island to floater to island, sometimes skimming over the quicksilver like she really was surfing. Optimus tried to not stare at her, adoring the way she moved and delighted in the mercury. She didn't make it easy on him, though. She kept deliberately coasting in front of him and laughing when he dodged around her. It became a game, and I realized this was their training. My brother was strong and tall enough that he could run through the quicksilver without trouble and he got ahead of her. She couldn't shoot him here, and I wondered how a 'bot Elita's size could possibly pin an opponent in this terrain.

She suddenly shouted, "Optimus! Vault!"

Instantly he turned at her words and she jumped toward him. He laced his fingers together almost like a stirrup in time for one of her feet to land in his hands, and he sent her flying forward. She flipped mid-air to land facing us in a catlike crouch on the largest (anchored) island.

So that's how she could help pin an opponent – let Optimus use her as a projectile weapon.

He just stared as she straightened, mesmerized as the quicksilver slid down over her rose-red armor. In a color humans couldn't see, she seemed to glow with warmth from the exertion and I let out a low whistle of appreciation, since my brother didn't seem to be coherent enough. Elita might not be human, but still... she was something else. The awe pouring in from his end of the bond probably helped me along with that opinion.

Elita smirked at him (though seeing her through my brother's perspective, I noticed that same intense light in her optics from earlier). "We'll do, I think."

Shaking himself a little, he again tried to gather his thoughts. "I agree. We'll make a competitive team."

She chuckled softly at his understatement. "Let's see how you do in Sky. Vault me again on our way out, though. I want to see how far you can send me."

Optimus heard the challenge in her words and braced himself as she coiled and then launched herself at him. With all the determination of a male trying to impress a female, he put everything he had into that vault. She soared across the distance, giving a little yelp and splash as she fell into the liquid near the border between Quicksilver and Sky. Apparently he'd overshot whatever he'd been aiming at. Dying of embarrassment, he ran through the knee-deep quicksilver, but she was laughing when he arrived to help her to up.

"I apologize, Elita."

"Don't!" she giggled, shaking off shimmering droplets. "I asked and now I know. You can vault me a quarter of the way across Quicksilver in a pinch, as long as I don't have to stick the landing." She
gave him another of those intense, speculative looks. "Impressive. I've never had a teammate with that kind of strength."

Tongue-tied, he finally managed to answer, "Thank you."

Grinning up at him, she said, "Come on. I want to see you in Sky."

With the same ease she'd shown in Quicksilver, Elita dove off the edge of the gorge toward one of the "clouds." I couldn't help but think of Super Mario Brothers as she caught the edge of it and swung herself up.

I muttered to Optimus, "If you get a power-up mushroom on this level, you so should sue Nintendo for copyright or something."

Laughter bubbled across the bond. "No mushrooms, just dents. This is by far the most brutal terrain for a mech with my build." He needed a running start, but threw himself into the air, aiming at (and catching) a lower cloud-platform. He used his momentum to swing onto another one deeper into Sky and moved across the gorge like a kid on a set of monkey bars.

"Just how good are you in this terrain?" Elita asked from a cloud above us, not quite managing to sound nonchalant.

That competitive part of my brother's spark flared stronger. Having an inkling of where this might go, he moved faster across the platforms, trying to get out from under her.

"I assume you saw the last tournament for the department heads," he answered.

"I may have heard about it," she teasingly allowed, leaping and swinging along above and behind Optimus. "You eliminated a mech in Sky. It was Prowl, if memory serves."

"You believe you can fare better," he observed, pausing and looking up at her.

"Perhaps." She steadily met his gaze, though her optics were bright. "Care to find out? A little friendly competition to help us work better as a team?"

He consciously reined in his thrill at the thought. "Agreed," he answered, drawing what looked like a pistol from subspace and taking aim.

Flashing a grin, she ducked out of sight, and I realized his weapon and the one she'd subspaced at the very beginning were their virtual paint guns. Game on!

Unlike when he was flying with his Blackbird armor, he didn't have to focus entirely on getting from Point A to Point B. He planned as he moved, tactics shifting as Elita tried to outmaneuver him. I didn't understand all the rules, so I didn't get much out of his strategies other than trying to not let her get a clear shot and trying to sneak onto her platform-level. The problem was, he was big and heavy and Elita was light and quick. He never even saw it coming when he tried to swing to another platform and she swooped in to kick his hand away.

Pretty much by accident, he grabbed her when he missed the platform. For a split second, they hung there – him holding onto her and her holding onto a cloud – before they were both tumbling down through the platform layers to the bottom of the gorge.

The rough landing rattled Optimus' processors for a few seconds, and so the fact that Elita had landed on top of him, her breastplate against his, didn't immediately register.
She lifted her helm, a little dazed herself. "Looks like it's a draw."

"No, you pinned me first," he countered, trying to be the gentleman (or gentlemech or whatever a polite male is called on Cybertron). "You win."

Apparently Elita finally realized that she was cuddled up against Optimus right above his spark.

"Hmm?"

Optimus suspected what was distracting her, and that left him feeling so flattered that he was practically smug. He repeated, "You win."

She finally focused on him with all the intent he'd seen in her optics earlier. "Then what's my prize?"

Optimus was no more oblivious than he was cowardly, and his spark surged warm and almost giddy (for him) with hope. "We never agreed on one beforehand," he admitted. "Maybe loser gets winner some oil cake?"

"Hmmm," she thoughtfully purred, relaxing against him again. "How about winner gets loser…" Her voice trailed off as she tried to decide.

Mischief in his spark, Optimus rumbled back, "I can live with those terms."

Elita sat bolt upright, her optics flashing bright in surprise and then dim in embarrassment. "Oh! No, I didn't mean…"

Her protests were drowned out in my brother's deep, delighted laugh that echoed back and forth across the walls of Sky. Though her faceplates had warmed in embarrassment, she smiled a little to hear him laugh like that.

When he settled down, he said, "Come on. I know a place that serves the best acetone oil cake in Trypticon." He reached for her at the same time, intending to set her back on her feet beside him.

She leaned forward, dodging his hands and laying breastplate to breastplate again. "I thought I got to choose. I am the winner, after all."

Optimus tipped his helm slightly, acknowledging that she had a point, and then resigned himself to being cuddled by the femme who sent his processors spinning. I could sense how warm she felt to him, but it was more than just the heat of exertion. Seen through his processors, I knew that warmth was from her spark, too, and it was blazing behind her rose-red armor.

In that moment he realized just how deeply he cared for her and that, if this really was the beginning of their courtship, he would gladly welcome her into his spark. He stroked her back and drank in everything about her – scent and smooth armor under his hand and the inviting weight of her frame against his.

With a contented sigh, she rested her helm on his chassis, idly tracing patterns on his armor. In all the memories Optimus had shared with me, I'd never really understood that his frame wasn't just a machine – he was a being of living metal. Her fingers left trails of warmth on his plating just like Mikaela's touch did on my skin. For several long moments they lay there and caressed each other, listening to the soft sigh of cooling vents and the occasional ping as metal cooled.

Elita finally suggested, "How about winner gets to entertain loser with a consolation game of Hexagons and mid-grade?"
"In your quarters?" he asked, blown away by the thought.

"Naturally. Unless you mind being alone with me, since Arcee's working her shift and Chromia and Firestar are out doing something together."

Speechless. She managed to make him completely speechless with that one. It took him five of my heartbeats to pull it together enough to answer, "I don't mind at all."

Elita lifted her head and met his gaze with bright, warm optics. "I'm in no mood to train any more. Are you ready to finish practicing?"

The double-meaning wasn't lost on Optimus. "Yes," he rumbled. "I'm ready."

Abruptly we were back on the flight deck, a bittersweet affection saturating his end of the bond. "I'm sorry," I stuttered out, suddenly realizing how much it must hurt him to remember things like that, now that she was dead.

He glanced at me curiously. "For what?"

"For putting you through that."

He puzzled over that, and so I added, "Remembering when you know she's…"

"Memories are all I have left," he softly explained. "I cherish them. But you have nothing to apologize for. I was the one who inquired about you and Mikaela."

…

Two weeks in paradise ended too soon. I could almost physically feel it when the bond went dormant somewhere over the Indian Ocean – like a part of me was literally shutting down. Worse, it was snowing and dark when Bumblebee and I landed in the States. Even in the warmth of my best friend's cab, I felt chilled. I knew this was where I needed to be, but I also knew in my bones that this would be a long semester.
Danger

Leo and I were in the campus food court, huddled over a map of the school and nursing a couple large orders of chili cheese fries when our roommates found us.

"So whatcha got?" Sharsky asked as he sat down beside us. Fassbinder was right behind him, and both of them were loaded up with textbooks they'd just bought from the madhouse of a campus book store.

Sharsky dropped what looked like a ton of Biology texts and lunged for something cheesy; Leo possessively pulled the fries away from our roomies, snarling "Get your own!"

I rolled my eyes and pushed mine toward Sharsky and Fassbinder. Skids and Mudflap could give Leo a heart attack, but come between him and his chili cheese fries and he was downright dangerous. Too bad Decepticons were more interested in energon – Leo might actually be *useful* next time. *Next time.* The words made me shudder.

"Plotting our route between classes," Leo said (edgily because he was still in defend-the-fries mode).

"We should so do that," Sharsky said to Fassbinder around his mouthful of food. "Give ourselves options to tailing the hotties like you guys."

That was the excuse we'd given the roomies last semester: multiple routes meant we had more opportunities to scout out cute girls. There was no way in the Pit that Leo and I were telling them the real reason. Ironhide had repeatedly told Leo and Simmons in their training that habits could be deadly. So each day I had to choose one of five different routes and leave our buildings from different doors.

The problem was the Linnaeus Life Science and Jefferson buildings were on opposite sides of the campus, and my Bio 122 and Art History class were back-to-back. Last semester, all of my classes had been more or less clustered together near my dorm, but now I had to hike all the way across campus and back. With a sigh, I vowed that next semester, I was going to take travel time into account when I put together my class schedule. Even the most direct route between the two buildings barely let me get there in time. We didn't have the luxury of wandering around campus five different ways, so I basically made a Primely executive decision and said we only needed three routes. It's not like Decepticons really *needed* to catch me between class breaks to get to me, and paranoid mechs would just have to learn to live with that.

"So how were your holidays?" Fassbinder asked.

"Well, you know, I could tell you but then I'd have to kill you," I answered, only half-joking. Fortunately, the roomies had gotten used to all the alien and conspiracy cracks and just rolled their eyes anymore. "How 'bout you?"

"Yeah, Fassbinder" Sharsky chimed in. "And how were your dates with…" he paused to waggle his eyebrows at him, "…Lian?"

He blushed and Leo and I laughed at his reaction. "Come on, *mijo,*" Leo prodded him. "Details!"

…

In mid-January, it was dark for only a half-hour longer at college than it was back home. Leo looked it up for me when I whined one time too many that the day was a whole hour shorter. Still, it *felt* like
I'd lost a lot more daylight than that. Maybe it was because it was so slagging freezing all the time and so I didn't spend any time outside even when the sun was up. I hadn't minded as much in December because there were finals to focus on and Christmas break (and time with Optimus) to look forward to, but now I just felt like I'd been banished to Siberia. Having just spent two weeks on a tropical island probably didn't help – the contrast just made the cold, dark depth of winter that much more miserable.

Day after day I buried myself in sweaters, bundled up in my hooded parka, hat, boots, and ski gloves and hunched myself against the bitter wind to trudge to class. I'd tried going out without doing an Eskimo impression, but I decided I was in danger of freezing to death between buildings if I didn't. It made me really appreciate the fact that we still had a sun – Earth would have been even colder and darker if it weren't for Jetfire and Optimus.

A cold snap kicked in the third week in January in which Fassbinder declared that his nose-hairs had icicles on them. (It was gross, but true.) The fourth week in January warmed up enough that I ventured outside with my hood thrown back, soaking in the bright but weak sun.

That Thursday, Leo and I had to really hurry between the Linnaeus and Jefferson buildings because Bio 122 ran a few minutes late. The positive side to being late, though, was that moving so fast warmed us up.

There was the sound of sharp crack and puh-zing and I reflexively dove to the side, crashing into Leo and sending us both into a mound of snow. Three thundering heartbeats later I realized why – what I'd heard was a gunshot.

Leo tried to shove me off him. "What the hell are you doing?"

Something exploded on the roof of the Franklin building. I flinched and rolled away, my feet moving on instinct. Crouching down I scrambled through the crowds to get inside. People around me were screaming and shouting "Shooter!" and "Lockdown!"

Another Decepticon. It was surreal. Impossible. A bad dream. This couldn't be happening. Not again. Not again!

On pure reflex, I kept moving. Behind me, I heard Leo chanting, "What the eff! What the eff! What the eff!"

People were streaming through the doors around and behind me, and I kept going straight through the lobby, my mind clear and sharp with adrenaline. *Upstairs is a death trap, same thing with the basement. Elevator's a flying coffin. Gotta be able to run, gotta have a window or door.*

My cell phone rang, and I looked to see it was from Simmons. "What?"

"Where the hell are you, Cubebrain?"

"In the Curie Science Building."

"Get to your car!" he roared. "I've got a visual on the shooter – must be human or another Pretender. I'm tailing him now." He hung up.

I slid to a stop (the snow on my boots was melting) and Leo bounced off of me. I grabbed a hold of his coat and hauled him down a narrow side-hall. "Bee! We have to get to 'Bee!"

"Where – "
"Dorm parking lot." I led Leo to a little-used door, swimming upstream through the panicked crowds. Two more sharp cracks and more screams let us know the shooter was still alive and out there.

My phone chimed with a text alert. It was from 'Bee. /On my way. Stay put./

The side-door was in sight, so I sagged down against the wall, crouching behind one of those blocky old drinking fountains.

"We can't stop here," Leo babbled beside me. "The hall is all stone and marble. He doesn't even have to aim. The ricochets will tear us apart."

My mind and heart were racing.

Optimus… what would he do? Battle mask and energon blades in the forest. *I'll take you all on!*

Sarah Lennox, making omelets in her kitchen. *Take care of yourself.*

Alpha Trion, his hand on his Prime's shoulder. *Stand when others fall.*

My classmates didn't have a choice, though. No choice, just like the refugees when Moonracer fell… Optimus fought, but he had backup then.

Backup!

What could I do with my backup? I had no idea what would happen to 'Bee if he took a bullet to the brain while in his holoform – the things were so real. But there had to be something we could do!

"He took that shot from the roof," Leo continued to rant, face pale. "The report wasn't loud enough for a .50 caliber – probably more like an assault rifle. There's nothing in this building besides a wall that would stop that bullet at close range. Even the classroom doors would shatter. He wouldn't have to aim there, either. If he's got a shotgun, too, just put the barrel of the rifle against the door to blow a hole and then empty a load of buckshot into the room. Stupid POS buildings. They're all just a bunch of big kill-boxes."

"What makes you think the shooter is human?" I demanded.

"Hear that?" he answered, nodding toward the door. "Nothing's exploding. He's only firing one or two shots at a time. Humans have to worry about how many rounds they have on them. 'Cons don't."

I looked at him, wondering when the hell he became an expert on all this.

"Ironhide," he growled in answer to my unspoken question. "He has a thing for weapons and a morbid imagination."

It wasn't just that. He was channeling Sector 7, John Wayne and maybe a little General Patton right now. Before Leo could go into lecture mode again, I tugged on his arm. "Come on. Outside."

"Are you effing kidding me?" he hissed, sounding like himself again. "We're even more dead out there! Anybody who isn't already a goner is inside. He's gonna shoot anything that moves. We need to get to the center of the building. He could be going anywhere now."

"I've got enough blood on my hands," I retorted, "and I'm not going to let entire rooms full of people get shot while I hide."

"So what, you wanna go wave your hands and yell 'Here I am, come kill me!'" He rolled his eyes
dramatically. "They effin' said you would do this. Touch that Matrix thing and you wouldn't have any sense of self-preservation left. I ain't taking a bullet for you – they're paying me for my survival instincts, not so I can be a meat shield. You can count me out of some last-stand Trench Run Braveheart blaze of glory shit."

I ignored him and pulled out my phone. To 'Bee, I texted, /decoy image, projection of me NO HOLOFORM, lead gunner toward Founder's Hill – 0 casualties! Meet u there/ As an afterthought, I copied Simmons for the text, too.

Founder's Hill was a wooded area on the south end of campus – less chance for stray bullets to hurt someone and easier for 'Bee to reach since Campus Parkway skirted the edge of it. If 'Bee could lure the shooter there, he could put himself between whatever this thing was – Pretender or human – and campus. I didn't like the idea, but I really didn't see much of an alternative. Punching 'send,', I straightened to peek over the drinking fountain again. No sign of anyone now – the halls were eerily silent as people hid in locked classrooms.

Crouching low, I muttered, "At least it's not in the desert. Let's move."

"Did you listen to anything I said? I ain't pulling no…"

"We're heading for 'Bee and his bulletproof cab. Come on."

With a frustrated huff, he lunged to his feet.

I was almost to the door when both my cell phone chimed with another text. I set my phone on vibrate before reading it. It was from 'Bee. /Hold your position. Shooter on south side of Curie. Decoy deployed. Wait for my signal./

A prickle at the base of my neck made my hair stand on end – we were by the Curie's south doors. I flattened myself against the wall, my pulse ringing loudly in my ears. Beside me, Leo's mouth was noiselessly moving in either more profanity or a prayer – probably a little bit of both. It was as silent outside as it was in the building, and I was on a razor's edge, my breath coming in sharp little gusts. In the back of my mind, I took a little comfort in that silence. No more people were dying. Not now. Not yet.

I jumped when my cell vibrated in my pocket. The text was from 'Bee again. /Hold position. Shooter spotted decoy. Heading west./

The next text was from al-Sharif. /where r u?/

I ignored it and let my head thud back against the wall. Great. It was only a matter of time before Mom and Mikaela (and probably Optimus) started in on this, but I couldn't turn my phone off because I needed 'Bee.

One shot and then another snapped in the distance like firecrackers.

/Shooter's at the top of Founder's Hill/ 'Bee texted me. /Line of sight with decoy necessary. Meet me behind the testing center./

The testing center was the next building south of the Curie. I met Leo's gaze and nodded. He grimaced but followed me as we dove out into the brilliant cold. It was blindingly bright, but we dashed forward anyway, keeping our heads down and not waiting for eyes to adjust. The sidewalks were slippery with a half-melted mix of salt and ice, and I went down once as we rounded the corner of the Curie. Leo grabbed my arm in a bruising grip and dragged me a couple of yards through the sludge until I regained my feet. I didn't care – 'Bee was there.
We sprinted in a crouch toward him, and his door opened wide. The front seats were tilted forward and we dove into the back seat, too freaked to care when our skulls cracked together.

"Lay low," he told us. He started rolling forward, but it was slowly, like he was trying to be stealthy. For a brief, insane second I wondered if Cybertron was yellow during the war because Bumblebee's paint job and stealth just didn't work.

Despite his instructions, I poked my head up between the two front seats to see what was happening.

In the distance I could see a hologram of myself duck behind a tree trunk for cover. 'Bee crept closer, stalking up on the shooter, and I had to agree with Leo that the gunman didn't move or act like a Cybertronian. The hologram dodged to the cover of another tree, drawing a shot from my would-be assassin. He followed the hologram across the road and down into the woods. 'Bee leaped forward, throwing me and Leo against the bench seat, and rammed into the gunman with a crunch that would have been sickening if it hadn't been so satisfying. Then we were skidding backwards down the snow-covered slope, and I saw 'Bee reach out, partially transforming to dig his fingers into the ground.

The shooter rolled to his side, scrabbling for a rucksack, and pulled out a strange large-barreled gun. He fired and the front of Bumblebee's hood erupted in flame. I flinched and shrieked, and 'Bee lurched forward.

A blood-curdling scream made my hair stand on end, and for once it wasn't Leo. It was coming from outside and under the car. More shots rang out, and I could hear the ping as they made the floorboards beneath us jump.

He was shooting 'Bee from underneath! My gut clenched tighter in cold fear and I pounded against the driver's side door, yelling at the Autobot to let me out. He was hurting 'Bee, and I'd kill him myself! 'Bee's head was hidden under his hood – what if he ended up with a bullet in his brain anyway?

The air conditioning roared to life with a blast of cold and then 'Bee lurched again – backwards and forwards. I pressed my nose to the driver's side window, trying to figure out what was going on. Was he actually killing the gunman?

The guy screamed louder and shriller, but it was the only sound now. After a couple of seconds, the door opened and 'Bee said, "No more...bullets...in the chamber," he reported.

"No more...piss...in bladder," Leo mimicked frankly.

I climbed out, the adrenaline making me shaky, and saw that 'Bee had the shooter pinned under him, his right arm crushed under a rear tire. The empty gun lay on the ground by the human's left hand, and his clothes were scorched and covered in the mud from the melting snow.

'Bee was still burning. The flame was dripping like water from his frame and it was making his paint bubble. I tore my parka off and tried to smother the fire with it, but all I managed to do was burn my coat, too.

"Zero fatalities," my guardian proudly said over the gunman's continued screams.

Simmons' near-continuous stream of profanity finally registered in my mind and I looked at the crest of the hill. He was trying to reach us, but he'd slipped in the snow and was half-running, half-sliding down the slope. The right side of his jacket was splattered in blood.

For an eternal second I stood there, stunned, not sure what to do next. Not sure what I even could do.
"Napalm," Simmons growled, glaring at 'Bee as if this was somehow his fault. "Douse it in the dirt, already! We've got to get out of here!"

'Bee rolled forward off of the gunman, who was wheezing and…and tears were streaming down his face. He was still crying out in pain, ranting about how I killed his Sam and that I was dangerous to the whole world and that if I cared at all about humanity I'd do myself in. Grimacing, I turned my back on him.

Bumblebee didn't transform like I expected him to – he swung around so he was facing downhill and then kind of did a somersault, end over end, and the snow sizzled wherever it met with 'Bee's blackened armor. The melted snow mingled with the churned up dirt and turned it to muck. I swallowed down a lump in my throat at the violence of it all - the burns, the torn-up turf, the groaning metal. Climbing back up toward us, he did the same thing again, this time coating himself in the mud.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Simmons said behind me. Furious that he'd write off Bumblebee's injuries, I rounded on him, but he didn't mean 'Bee. Leo was shakily holding a blood-soaked bandage to Simmons' wound, and that was who he was talking to. "He just grazed the top of my shoulder," Simmons continued. "If it was something really serious, I wouldn't have been able to make it here. But I left a trail, and the SWAT team is going to be here any second."

'Bee rolled down the muddy slope again, this time on his side, and then climbed back up onto the road. One good thing about that – he was unrecognizable. Even if someone saw us, they'd never think he was a shiny new yellow Camaro.

"Get this man to a doctor," my guardian declared, popping his doors open again.

The gunman howled even louder in pain and rage. I hunched against the sound.

Together Leo and I helped Simmons to his feet and brought him around to the passenger side. 'Bee didn't seem to think twice about the bloodstains to his upholstery. Leo was staring with bug-eyes, but he climbed into the back seat and put pressure on Simmons' wound.

I sat in the front seat this time and 'Bee squealed his tires as he swung around, hurrying away from the broken body of my almost-assassin.

"Don't take me to the hospital," Simmons ordered through gritted teeth. We were coming up on University Parkway (the main road leading off campus). "Too suspicious. Gotta go to the base."

"That's an hour away!" I protested.

"I'll make it," he grimly answered. "I've survived worse with Sector Seven. Besides, your Autobot might need a medic, too."

"I'll make it. I've survived worse with Sector Seven," 'Bee quoted him, and I winced.

"Do you record everything I say?" Simmons snarled.

"Yeah," he belligerently answered, quoting Simmons again.

"Stop baiting him, 'Bee," I scolded.

"Aw shucks…I'm just here to help…keep him out of…shock."

"Yeah, well, don't get my heart-rate up too high," Simmons grumbled. "You'll do more harm than
In a soft voice, I asked, "Are you okay, big guy?" And then I felt stupid because of course he wasn't okay. He'd been firebombed!

"Just a flesh wound," he insisted. "...can barely feel a thing."

"It's true," Simmons agreed through a hiss of pain. "They can turn their external sensors down if they need to. That's part of what makes them so dangerous – you have to really hurt them for them to even feel it."

"And you would know this how?"

Simmons didn't answer and stared out the window instead, though he did have the decency to look grudgingly ashamed. He hissed briefly as Leo applied more pressure to his shoulder and I slunk down in my seat as the wails of sirens could be heard in the distance behind us. None of us spoke for several long minutes.

"Message from Starfleet, Captain." 'Bee broke the silence, making me jump and stomp on the gas pedal.

"Sorry," I muttered, when he choked a little. "Who's calling?"

"Mother...father...girlfriend...captain...EVERYBODY." Bee spliced it together managing to sound irked even through digital clips. I swore and fished my phone out of my pocket. It was even now still vibrating – I hadn't noticed in my adrenaline fueled panic that it had been going off pretty much constantly.

My mind boggled at my phone's 75 new texts, 43 missed calls, and 18 voicemails. Deciding it would take me the next month to answer them all, I instead dialed al-Sharif directly. He was the least likely to fly off the handle or burst into tears, and probably the most able to pass along messages to everyone having a panic attack – human or Cybertronian.

"Al-Sharif," I barked out.

My voice was met with a burst of Arabic that I assumed was either him chewing me out or praising Allah that I was alive.

There was a pause and I heard him take a deep breath and then he spoke in a normal, even, voice, "What is your situation?"

"I'm fine. Bee got hit with freakin' napalm, and a bullet grazed Simmons' shoulder. We're on our way to the base. I'd guess ETA 30 or 45 minutes." I gave what I thought was all the most useful information and then added as an afterthought, "The shooter might be dead back there. I have no idea."

"SWAT and EMTs are on site there. I'm getting the direct feed on their chatter. I will be at the base by the time you get there. JCS is coordinating to bring some of our NEST people over. Unfortunately we don't have any C-17s at the moment to bring any of our other friends. There are not a lot of people on the base who have clearance so just...let me handle any talking."

"Gladly," I agreed. "Could you..." my hands were shaking and my voice suddenly came out in stutters, "c-c-c-all ev-everyone."

Leo spoke up from the back seat, "Yo, Sam...?" he couldn't apparently put it into words but his tone
was plainly worried.

I shakily waved a hand, which apparently wasn't all that reassuring because I suddenly felt Leo's hand on my neck and I scowled at him. "Enough commentary." Taking a steadying breath, I tried again. "Call everybody. Let them know I'm okay. Especially...."

"The Prime?"

"Yeah." As awkward as it was sometimes, I was glad right now that he knew there was something Primely between me and Optimus. "And my folks. And Mikaela. And..."

"Yes?"

"Just...everyone. Tell 'em I'm sorry about not returning their calls."

"Yes, sir," al-Sharif said, "We're actively tracing the GPS on your phone. If there are any delays or detours you need to take please contact us."

I was relieved that he seemed to understand I was not in any shape to continue a conversation right now, even though I was too keyed up to do much of anything else either.

The rest of the drive was spent mostly in silence, punctuated by the occasional groan from Simmons, muttered swearing from Leo and my own fidgeting. I had my phone with me and my wallet, and that was about it. I vaguely wondered where my backpack and books had ended up – possibly somewhere in a snowdrift between the Curie building and Founder's Hill.

We pulled into the base checkpoint and I showed my driver's license, which normally wouldn't have gotten me into a US military facility, but I guess al-Sharif had already cleared us and the guards waved us through.

'Bee seemed to know where he was heading, but I grimaced when we pulled up right in front of what looked like a hospital. Al-Sharif and a couple of medical people were waiting for Simmons with a wheelchair, and my aide/press secretary had his hand on the door latch even before Bee could open the doors.

The knot in my stomach loosened a little bit as they helped Simmons out and got him into the hospital. The seat-back upholstery was covered with blood, and I wondered if 'Bee could ever get it out or if it felt sticky to him or something.

"You'll need to come in with us, sir," al-Sharif said to me through the open door, "and Mr. Spitz. Your friends with NEST are insisting on a complete and thorough examination."

Ratchet, I thought as Leo climbed out and immediately tried to fend off everyone with exclamations that the blood wasn't his. It was such a normal-Leo thing for him to do, and I felt a rush of relief. I took a moment to rub Bee's dashboard and murmured, "Thanks, 'Bee. Not that it really means anything, but...thanks."

The engine revved a little as al-Sharif held the door open for me and, to my chagrin, another wheelchair was brought out – this time for me. Rolling my eyes, I climbed out of the driver's seat, but before I let them shepherd me into the hospital, I stopped and glared at al-Sharif. "Don't forget about 'Bee. He's..." I was going to say, 'the hero here,' but like 'thank you' it didn't seem enough. "He needs someone to watch out for him, too."

Al-Sharif solemnly nodded, and I knew he'd take care of my guardian just like he took care of me.
I was grateful for the wheelchair when they rolled me into the hospital. As soon as I sat down, I felt ready to conk out and sleep for the next week. I was exhausted!

Even if I didn't have doctors getting ready to poke and prod me at Ratchet's request, and even if I didn't owe Optimus (if no one else) a phone call, my stupid knee wouldn't have let me sleep anyway. It was throbbing, and when I glanced at it, I saw that my pant leg was bloody. A wave of vertigo hit me at the sight.

"Sir?" al-Sharif anxiously asked.

"Knee," I blurted out. "I slipped on the ice running to 'Bee."

He frowned at the hospital helper-guy, and they both picked up their pace. Or maybe the world was just spinning faster. (What were the guys in scrubs called again? Not nurses…I couldn't remember – I was too dizzy. Maybe I was breathing too fast. Or maybe I wasn't breathing fast enough.)

The wheelchair lurched to a stop inside. "Evaluate him for shock," somebody said.

"No, no." I waved them away, or at least, I tried to. My eyes rolled back. "Just worry about the knee."

It had felt like this before. A drifting memory floated through my mind, me staggering to my feet – staggering back to life – in the Egyptian desert and grabbing the Matrix. My knee had hurt a ton at first but was better by the time the human medics had got to me. The pain started out the same this time, but it was getting worse.

"…you with us, Mr. Witwicky? Sam?"

"Hmm?" I didn't open my eyes. It was too much of a bother. I was shivering too hard.

"Can you lift your leg?" somebody asked me.

I thought of Mojo. "You really want me to?" I mumbled.

"Yes. Like this." He held my foot and lifted it a little bit.

Oh. Yeah, I guess that made more sense. I held my foot up in the air.

"Good. How about –"

I yelped in pain when he bent my knee, my eyes flying open. The shivering got worse.

"Injured patella," he muttered as he straightened my knee and gently lowered it back down.

I was laying on a gurney in one of those curtained-off exam rooms under a couple of toasty-warm blankets, and I realized I had no idea how I got here. "Where's Simmons?" I weakly demanded. "Where's Leo and al-Sharif?"

"They're fine, sir," he assured me. "They're all receiving treatment here in the hospital, with the
exception of Mr. al-Sharif, of course. He's making some phone calls."

I half smiled as I relaxed a little, grateful yet again for al-Sharif. If he hadn't volunteered to help me
way back on the aircraft carrier, I'd have to put up with so much crap and red-tape and all that. He
just took care of it all. I idly wondered if Optimus had ever had a mech like al-Sharif, somebody who
organized everything and could just get stuff done no matter what. My brother must have, I realized,
because he couldn't focus on the whole Prime thing without a right-hand mech like that. I'd have to
ask him who it was when…whenever I saw him next.

I grimaced at the realization I had no idea when that would be and the sudden ache it brought.

"I can get you something for the pain," the doctor (or whatever he was) offered.


The doctor nodded. "I'll call for him, and you can speak with him until we're ready to x-ray that
knee." Then he stepped out to go do whatever else he needed to.

A couple of minutes later, al-Sharif joined me in the exam room. "Sir."

"How's…" I remembered that we were surrounded by curtains instead of walls and chose my words
carefully. ". . . everybody?"

He twitched a smile, understanding who I really meant, and said, "Everybody was very agitated,
according to Major Lennox, but is slowly calming down now that a certain doctor with NEST by the
name of R. Hatchett is downloading your medical chart. Everybody would like to speak with you,
sir, but cell phones…"

"Yeah, have to be turned off in hospitals."

"As soon as they have you in a recovery room, I'm sure you can talk to everybody, sir. Major
Lennox made me promise to have you call, actually. He made a comment about everybody wanting
to fly off single-handedly to come see you."

Despite my throbbing knee, I couldn't help but grin at the thought of Lennox trying to keep Optimus
from suiting up into his Blackbird armor. "He must be a fast talker."

Looking amused, he added, "The major said something about preferring to not get trampled."

I snorted. "Op… everybody wouldn't do that."

"Maybe not. But Major Lennox is a soldier, sir, and a survivor. It's second nature for him to
recognize, analyze, and defuse threats. Even if everybody didn't mean to be threatening."

I'd seen Optimus desperate, worried, furious, and in full battle mode, but somehow, a panicked
Optimus would probably be the most terrifying of them all. "Yeah, I guess he kind of would be
scary, huh."

"Unintentionally, of course," he agreed, not quite smothering his smile.

I returned his smile – he knew all about the 'bots being unintentionally terrifying. "Of course."

The doctors came for me and so I didn't get to talk to al-Sharif until they'd done the x-ray and
showed me the hairline fracture on my kneecap. But instead of just splinting it and releasing me like
they normally would have, they stashed me in a recovery room until they figured out exactly what to
do with me. Apparently that pushy Dr. Hatchett with NEST was insisting on a CT scan and some 
blood-work, too. I sighed theatrically but didn't fight them on it. The only way to keep Optimus from 
abandoning his post or whatever was to convince him I was okay, and the only way to do that was to 
let the humans poke and prod me until Ratchet was satisfied. He could keep Optimus in line if it 
came to that, but I doubted he'd pull medical rank (and whatever ninja-bot moves he used on 
Optimus last time) unless he was sure I was okay.

And Optimus was the only person I was more worried about than Bumblebee.

"How's 'Bee?" I asked as soon as al-Sharif stepped through the door into my recovery room.

"He's currently in the hospital parking lot and refusing to leave. I'd like to at least get him cleaned up 
before the NEST contingent arrives in about five hours, but he doesn't want to leave you 
unguarded."

That was Bumblebee, I thought with a lopsided grin. Protective to a fault. He was yet another reason 
to hurry this whole process along by cooperating with the medics (both human and Autobot).

"Who are they sending?" I wondered. "And why didn't they have any C-17's on base? It seems kind 
of stupid to leave them stranded like that."

"The planes are undergoing some urgent retrofitting and aren't cleared for use until it's complete. The 
NEST personnel who are coming include Master Sergeant Epps and two humans who have been 
trained to help CMO Ratchet."

"So they can treat 'Bee?"

"Yes," he assured me.

"I want to see him."

"As soon as the doctors release you, I'll bring you to him."

That set my mind at ease enough that I could move on to the next big crisis. "I want to talk to 
Optimus."

Al-Sharif nodded and stepped over to the phone to make the call. He apparently had to dial the 
Pentagon first and then they patched us through to NEST. "Major Lennox, sir," he said, "Mr. 
Witwicky is available now." Then he handed the receiver off to me and discreetly let himself out of 
the room.

"Hello?"

"Sam," Optimus said, worry bleeding into relief in that single word. "It is good to hear your voice."

"Yours, too," I answered.

"I would come to you, but…"

"But you're on duty," I supplied. "But you wouldn't have gotten here in time to do anything anyway. 
But you had to be the Prime, even when I'm in danger…"

"But there was concern that it might be a trap for me."

A spark shattering in the forest. Megatron growling, "You're so weak." Optimus falling. "Sam, run."
My breath whooshed out – I hadn't even thought about that. All I'd thought about was the guy trying to kill me. I hadn't really considered that there might be more to this. The Decepticons knew I was a Prime now, and even if they hadn't connected the dots to realize we were brothers, they'd still figure I was kind of important to the Autobots generally, if nothing else. 

(In the back of my mind, my ego pouted that I was apparently just the bait this time around. I mentally flipped it off.)

"Stay where you are, then," I told him, ignoring how exposed I felt as I said the words. "If some humans were trying to kill me, I'm safe now. If Decepticons were trying to kill me, then Megatron's really stooped to an all-time low and it didn't work anyway. And if somebody was trying to flush you out of hiding, you coming here is doing exactly what they want you to. No one tried to catch me. It was just that one human taking potshots. You don't have to come rushing here to save me, okay?"

Silence.

I could almost see the way his optics were narrowing and feel the way he was terrified and wanted to catch me in a bear-hug of the heart. "I'm safe, I promise. I'm perfectly okay, if you don't count my kneecap, but they said I won't even need a cast. It was just me being stupid – I can't even blame it on the gunman. I just have to be careful with it for a while. So don't worry about me, okay?"

Silence.

"Please?" In a lower voice, I added, "I don't want it to be my fault again."

He vented a sigh. "It never was, boy. But for now, I'll stay at my post, as you put it."

"Thanks." Trying to turn to more-cheerful topic, I said, "Bumblebee totally deserves a medal or something. He did everything exactly right. It's thanks to him that more people weren't hurt."

"Bumblebee has proven himself time and again," Optimus agreed, his voice warming a little with approval. "I would not have trusted him as your guardian otherwise."

Al-Sharif poked his head into the room. "Three minutes," he whispered.

I nodded, and he shut the door again.

"Even with Bumblebee to protect you, this was a close call," my brother pointed out.

I frowned – like I needed reminding. "But still. I'm where I should be. It's…" I tried to find the right word for it. "It's my fate, I think. I need to be here."

"Perhaps." The way he said it sounded like we weren't quite done with that topic, but then he said, "Ratchet tells me our conversation is delaying your CT scan."

I chuckled despite myself. "How did you put up with him for so long?"

"With great effort and restraint," he deadpanned, though anyone who hadn't shared a bond with him probably wouldn't have heard the humor. "Be careful, boy." He was deadly serious this time.

Boy, son, brother. I remembered one of his many hugs of the heart and wrapped myself up in it. It was the best either of us could do right now. "You, too, Prime." Prime, kin, brother – I hoped he heard those unspoken words.
"We will speak again soon."
"Sounds good."

... 

It was after 10 o'clock at night when they released me. Unfortunately, my mom caught up with me while I was being held captive by the base's medical staff (on Ratchet's orders) and so I had to endure a good 45 minutes of bluberring. Mikaela called me, too, just a few minutes before I was released.

After the usual greetings, she said, "Al-Sharif told me it was just a human."
"Yeah, that's what it looks like right now, anyway."
"Are you sure, Sam? Because I had a stand-by ticket for a flight but it was full. I'm trying to get there."
"I've got 'Bee here – I'll be okay, I promise."
"I worry about you."
"I know. But you don't need to this time. Optimus isn't even coming." Only because he was having as much trouble as her catching a flight. A really horrifying thought hit me – if I was the bait in a trap for Optimus…

Megatron in the abandoned factory. Mikaela and Leo huddling together. Me begging, "I did what you said, okay? Just don't hurt us!"

"Stay there," I pleaded.

There was a pause while she processed that. "You don't want to see me?" she asked coyly.
"You know I do, beautiful. But there's really no reason to think Decepticons are involved this time."
"Except that it's you who got shot at," she pointed out.

Yeah – there was no way that was a coincidence. But if there was any possibility of danger… "You can't come flying across the country to save me all the time. For one thing, it's expensive, and for another thing, doesn't your dad need you?" Inspiration struck. "Because if he doesn't, I know an apartment complex that's got openings right now. I can help you find a great place – I know the area now."

She sighed. "Sam…"

"I know, I know. But if you really need to be there, then stay. Maybe you can come out for spring break and we can spend some real quality time together – just you and me. No parents…"

"No eavesdropping 'bots…" she happily agreed. "Except 'Bee of course. He can always tag along."

I grinned. "I'll be looking forward to it."

Al-Sharif let himself into the room with one of the medical staff right behind him.

"Hey, I gotta go, but I'll call you once I'm back at the dorm, okay? But it won't be until tomorrow at the earliest. " As an afterthought, I added, "You can text me anytime, though. You know that, right?"
"Yeah." In a quieter voice, she said, "I love you, Sam."

It still made my heart swell when she said that. "I love you, too, Mikaela."

"Bye, Sam."

"Bye." I blushed a little as I hung up. The (female) nurse was grinning openly at me.

"Good news, sir," al-Sharif announced. "They're ready to release you."

FINALLY!

Simmons was out of surgery but they were keeping him overnight, so that was another worry I could push off until tomorrow. 'Bee was waiting for me at the curb, and he looked so much better now that al-Sharif had talked him into getting cleaned up. They had washed away the mud and the soot from the burned paint. His finish was completely gone on most of the hood, making the metal look raw and probably sensitive, but that was the worst of it. No scorch marks or anything. I did wonder if the light snow would make him rust or whatever, though.

His Cam Romero holoform was behind the wheel while Leo was forced to ride shotgun. "About effin' time!" my roomie grumbled.

"You – move to the back," Bumblebee's speakers ordered while Cam gave him an impatient glare. With a dramatic roll of the eyes, Leo climbed into the back seat, and I sniggered as the orderly (that's what the guys in scrubs were called – I remembered it about dinnertime) helped me hobble into 'Bee's cab. Leo and 'Bee had nobody but each other for company through most of the day, and it would probably be a miracle if Leo lived to whine about it later.

Al-Sharif knocked lightly on 'Bee's tinted window beside me and it rolled down. Leaning in, my aide said, "We have first-floor accommodations for you in VIP quarters –"

"I'm staying with 'Bee."

"But…Sam…your knee," my guardian protested. "No…camping out."

"Not in your cab, I guess, but…" I looked over at al-Sharif. "We can arrange something, right?" The man could arrange anything.

He calmly nodded. "I'll do my best, sir. We were going to house Bumblebee," his gaze darted respectfully to the holoform, "in a heated garage. That might get too cold for you, though, sir. Any other time of the year would be fine, but this is January, sir."

"What he said," 'Bee chimed in.

"I ain't sleeping in a garage," Leo protested.

"Nobody asked you," 'Bee quoted in answer.

I sniggered again at those two. "Okay, VIP for Leo and I'm sticking with 'Bee. Right?"

"We'll be with Bumblebee, sir," he corrected, "after I get Mr. Spitz settled in."

'Bee cleared his throat. "On one condition."

We all looked curiously at his holoform, but his attention was on al-Sharif. Cam smirked and said, "You drive." And then he blinked out of existence.
Al-Sharif froze for a second and then leaned back ever so slightly, like he'd forgotten he was resting his arms on a sentient, spark-and-steel alien.

"'Bee isn't going to let Leo drive," I pointed out to him, trying (and failing) to smother a grin. "I can't really, either. So it's you behind the wheel or nobody."

Straightening his shoulders and his uniform, he said, "Understood, sir." Walking around, he let himself in on the driver's side and buckled his seatbelt. His sudden burst of courage only brought him that far, though, and his hands hovered a couple of inches above the steering wheel. I couldn't blame him for being chicken – both me and Mikaela were afraid to sit behind Bumblebee's wheel that first time and that was after he'd come to our rescue.

"Just make it look like you're driving," I prompted him. "'Bee will do the rest."

"Yessir. Thank you, sir."

'Bee's engine revved a little in a chuckle and then he pulled out onto the street.

It didn't take us long to ditch Leo, and just like I'd come to expect, al-Sharif managed to put together a great little base camp in the garage, with sleeping bags and couple of cots and a lantern and portable heater and everything. He even had a bottle of water for me to wash down the horse-pill pain killers the hospital pharmacy had given me. I'd hoped to never see those things again.

As the drugs started to take effect, I stared at the nondescript rafters and murmured, "All we need now are some glow-in-the-dark star stickers and we'd really be camping."

"If you can find some that are regulation, sir, I'll install them," al-Sharif deadpanned.

I smiled but fell asleep before I could think of an answer.

I woke up to the sounds of transformation and human voices – al-Sharif's and what sounded like a Brit and a Southerner. I rubbed at my eyes, trying to get the grit out so I could see straight.

"Anything we should be aware of in terms of hazmat, Quinn?" al-Sharif was asking.

"Just gotta treat it like you would shellac or tar, sir," the Southerner drawled. "Protective gear and good ventilation. And no smoking."

"We brought our own first aid and clean-up kits," the Brit added. "Ratchet insisted."

"Hey, kid," said another voice I recognized, and I opened my eyes to see Epps towering over me. "You gonna get up anytime soon or should we just have 'Bee stick you up on a shelf? Quinn and Johnston need to get to work."

"Huh?"

"Wakey, wakey." 'Bee quoted, looming above Epps.

"I'm up! I'm up!" I protested, and 'Bee's whole frame lifted in a grin. And speaking of his frame… with him in his base mode, I could finally see exactly where he'd been burned. Most of it looked like it was on his shoulders and chassis. Reading my expression, he held his arms out and turned in a circle once to let me see just how little damage he'd taken.

"See…just a…sunburn," he declared.

The British NEST mechanic – Johnston, I assumed – rolled his eyes. "A bit more than a sunburn, I'd
say, but still nothing that Quinn and I can't handle."

"I want to be the one to treat him." The words just fell out of my mouth, but the thought of anyone besides me taking care of Bumblebee just felt wrong.

Johnston and Quinn exchanged a Look.

"If it's just a sunburn, I could handle it, right? If it's really not a big deal?"

Quinn gave me a frustrated scowl, like he knew I'd caught him.

Al-Sharif cleared his throat. "Mr. Witwicky has the same standing among the Autobots as the Prime."

"Yeah, but even Ratchet pulls medical rank on Optimus," Quinn snarked back, not at all surprised that al-Sharif would put me and Optimus in the same league. That worried me.

Johnston ignored them and instead handed me a bundle of clothes – protective gear. "I wouldn't deny Optimus, and as you say, this is a very simple treatment even for us humans. Simpler than car repairs, certainly. All we're doing is helping along the healing process, essentially applying Autobot antibiotic ointment and a Band-aid. You're welcome to join us, so long as you follow our instructions exactly. Remember that Quinn and I will be answerable to Ratchet if anything happens to you."

I nodded, trying to wrestle down my worry over my Autobot, and got into my gear. Bumblebee was quiet through the whole exchange, and I hesitated. "You okay with that, Bumblebee?"

"I'd trust you…with anything…Sam," he said in strangers' voices. It reminded me that not all of the Autobots' damage was easily repaired.

I frowned but had to put that thought on the back burner. Johnston started giving me instructions, and I had to pay attention so I could do this right. It turned out that the treatment was almost as simple as they'd said. First there was a cleansing layer we had to spray on, and then we had to wipe that off after about 2 hours. Next, we had to rub a thin layer of something they called nanite gel over all the bare spots and let him absorb that for about 18 hours. And then, just because Ratchet was making doubly-sure Bumblebee would be okay since he was pretty much alone on this side of the planet, we had to put a protective paint on him. It dried a little bit quicker than normal car paint, and as soon as it was ready, Bumblebee and I were free to go. With a little luck, we'd be done by Saturday.

Johnston handed me his spray-can. "If you'd like, sir."

I pulled on my elbow-length leather gloves and moved the protective mask down over my face. "Thanks."

…

Five hours later, the guys from NEST went to find some lunch, now that we were just waiting for the nanite gel to dry. (The stuff was clear and made me think of some kind of really foul Jello.)

I texted both Mikaela and Mom to let them know I was spending one more day at the base. Al-Sharif got a text saying Simmons was ready to be released from the hospital, but I wasn't leaving Bumblebee's side, and he couldn't go out in the weather until after the nanite gel was covered by the paint. With an understanding look, al-Sharif nodded and offered to pick both Simmons and Leo up and bring them back here so I could see them.

After he left, I sat on one of the shop's padded stools. For a couple of minutes, it was silent as I tried
to sort out the mess of emotions making my stomach churn. Guilt was the easiest one to peg. "I'm so sorry this happened, 'Bee."

"T'weren't your fault," he said, trying to comfort me.

I wasn't going to let him pull that crap. "Yes, it is. If I had been on Diego Garcia, this wouldn't have happened. No human could have got at me so easily, and Optimus or Ironhide would have been the one in the line of fire, not you. You got hurt because I chose to be here. So it is my fault....eventually."

"They're just...parts...they can be replaced."

"Like your voicebox?" I demanded, shifting my foot and trying to ease the ache in my knee.

"This is different."

"How?" My frustration suddenly took the driver's seat. "How is this any different from Tyger Pax? You got hurt doing some half-baked stunt that a Prime asked you to do."

"I won't even...lose the part," he pointed out. "This really is just...a sunburn...for a machine."

"You're not a machine," I snapped. "Don't you ever call yourself that again."

In a series of clips that included Optimus' voice, he said, "I am...an Autobot...and it's still just...a sunburn."

"Knock it off," I grumbled. "Stop trying to make it seem like this was just some unimportant random accident. I screwed up again and you know it!"

He vented a sigh, lowering on his axels, and we sat in silence for a minute. With the volume quiet, he said, "Wish we had...a bond...like a brother...you would see I'm okay...just a flesh wound...like your knee."

After all I put him through, he wanted a brother-bond with me like I had with Optimus. I wilted, tears welling up in my eyes. I was tired, drugged up, and hurting and this was just one thing too many. The one bond I did have practically throbbed with longing. It wasn't hard to imagine what a hug of the heart would feel like from 'Bee. It would be like a hug from Optimus, but without that wryness in his humor or the heaviness of spark that came with being a Prime. A bond with 'Bee would be... amazing. But he wasn't a Prime, and the only reason I had a bond with Optimus was because we were brother Primes and I had Matrix particles floating around in my blood. Still... "Thanks, 'Bee," I choked out. "I wish we were brothers, too." And I meant it.

"You with the sad eyes, don't be discouraged
though I realize it's hard to take courage
In a world full of people, you can lose sight of it all
and the darkness inside you makes you feel so small..."

I swallowed down a lump in my throat.

"I screwed up," he quoted me, then said, "I should be the one apologizing...that you got hurt."

I grimaced. "Aw, 'Bee, don't even start with that."

"Then you...stop it! I'll feel better...before you do."
That was probably true, and it did make me feel a tiny bit less guilty. "Still makes it my fault. You got firebombed because of me, and nothing I can say or do will change the fact that you're hurting right now." The guilt writhed around in the pit of my stomach. Bumblebee – the meh who would do anything for me, who gave Optimus a run for his money when it came to sacrificing himself for me – was burned so raw his skin pretty much instantly peeled. "It's like Sector 7 all over again but worse."

In a cheesy sci-fi movie-voice, he said, "Sensors at…minimum."

A smile twitched somewhere in my heart, knowing he was trying to turn it into a joke, but it never made it to my face. "Even all this," I gestured at the cans of alien chemicals, "doesn't actually fix anything. I screwed up, Simmons got shot, you got hit with freakin' napalm and I can't fix it!"

"You don't have to…"

"Yes, I do!" I interrupted him. "I'm the human Prime, remember? I save the world. I bring Optimus back to life…"

"He's just a boy," he said in the voice of a woman pleading for her son.

"Have you ever believed that, 'Bee?"

His guilty silence was all the answer I needed.

"Stop trying to make me feel better. Prowl totally reamed out Optimus that one time when he deserved it," I grumbled.

His front end lifted a little in sudden eagerness. "You can't fix it…so then why not…make it up to me?"

I froze and then snorted. "Don't know how to say 'sorry you got roasted.' I don't exactly think there's a greeting card for that."

He waited in expectant silence.

"What?" I demanded. "What do you want me to say? I can't fix this with words!"

"…can't…make it up to me…with just words."

My shoulders slumped. "Fine. Whatever. I can't make it up to you with just words, either."

"So do something!"

"Like what?" I sourly asked.

"Hmm…I don't know," then with a clip from a spa commercial or something, "pamper away the pain."

I had the sudden mental image of him reclining in a terrycloth robe with cucumbers on his optics and some crazy lady trying to manicure his metal hands. For the first time since hearing that gunshot, I laughed. I laughed and I snorted and I cried and all that churning emotion got mixed up until I came this close to throwing up.

Bumblebee's holoform flickered to life in front of me and pulled me into a hug as tight as Mom's and as powerful as Optimus'. It made me feel like such a pansy, but it also felt…safe. I was safe, 'Bee was safe, Simmons and Leo were safe, everybody (including Optimus) was safe. It really wasn't the
end of the world this time. We'd drive out of here in a day or two. It was going to be all right. We were going to be all right.

We were going to be all right.

After a minute I drew a shaky breath and 'Bee let me go, though he hung on to my shoulder, holding me up in more ways than one. He gave me a cautious look and I tipped my head in a half-nod at his unspoken question. "Yeah, I'm okay now."

He nodded decisively before giving me a half-hopeful smile. "Sarah…gives the guys…the spa treatment…If you really want to…make it up to me…"

The mental image of Optimus taking 'Bee's place at the salon flickered through my mind but I pushed it aside before it could trigger another weird breakdown. "So what exactly does Mrs. Lennox do to you guys?"

With a bright grin, his holoform disappeared again and my cell phone vibrated with a text. It was a list of cleaning supplies – tire cleaner, windex, carpet shampoo, wax, upholstery cleaner. I frowned thoughtfully at the list. I wouldn't want to touch the exterior stuff for at least a couple of days after we were out of here, but I could definitely clean his seats and windows. It wouldn't actually make it up to him that he'd taken a napalm strike for me, but at least it was something I could do. I had to help him heal because I was the one who got him hurt in the first place, but detailing his interior was an actual apology. Or the beginnings of one, anyway.

Simmons and Leo arrived with al-Sharif a little while later (and he also brought me a sub sandwich). They said 'hi' and told 'Bee he looked a lot better, but I think they could tell I wasn't really in the mood to hang out. Leo was still twitchy because he'd left his cell phone in a snow bank on campus after I tackled him and was going through web withdrawal. Again al-Sharif came to my rescue and offered to take them to an office where they could both have internet access. Simmons declined, though, saying he still needed some rest.

I asked Johnston and Quinn about the list of cleaning supplies, and they were able to scrounge up everything I needed to give Bumblebee the Autobot spa treatment. I spent a couple of hours awkwardly maneuvering around on mechanics' scooters trying to reach everything in his interior. They had also picked up on my not-wanting-to-socialize mood and pretty much hung out on the other side of the garage with Epps while I meticulously cleaned 'Bee. Even the fusebox under his dash gleamed by the time I was done with him, and if it was making my knee hurt even more, then that only served me right.

Chapter End Notes

For the curious, the song 'Bee quotes is "True Colors," and in Eowyn77's head, it's Phil Collins' rendition. In Ish's head, it's the Glee cover, and in Kateydidn't's, it is the Sarina Paris version. Take your pick, as long as it's not Cyndi Lauper.
Recovery

Bumblebee insisted I stop giving him the Autobot spa treatment when dinnertime came. Al-Sharif and Leo returned with more food for me (Mexican this time), and Epps and the mechanics headed out to find some dinner of their own. I reluctantly plopped down on my cot and wolfed down the chimichangas. I also silently accepted the pain killer al-Sharif gave me.

"So what's going on out there?" I asked after I'd swigged down the horse-pill.

He pulled up one of the garage's stools. "Lockdown was lifted but the campus was evacuated as a precaution. Some of the students returned to their dorms, but many stayed in hotels last night. Classes were canceled for both yesterday and today, but they're scheduled to resume on Monday."

"And the shooter?"

He fell silent, looking down.

"But he was alive," I protested. "He was shouting at us as we drove away."

"He was, sir," al-Sharif quietly confirmed. "They managed to keep his heart going all the way to the hospital, but he had a living will."

My brow furrowed in confusion. "A what?"

"A living will – directions on what medical providers should do for you if you're ever incapacitated. It included a 'do not resuscitate' order. He flat-lined, sir, and they were obligated to let him pass away."

I frowned and glared at the wall. On one hand, that spared everyone having to go to trial and everything. He got what he deserved. But I didn't like the thought of having a hand in yet another person's death.

"None of that is public knowledge," al-Sharif admitted. "The Autobots have been quite thorough in their research."

"I bet." It was all they – and especially Optimus – could do from the other side of the world. If this was a conspiracy, they were going to throw themselves into getting to the bottom of it.

"Would you like to read their findings? I can forward the reports to you, sir."

I was too tired, physically and emotionally, to go through that. Reclining on the cot, I said, "Just tell me the highlights version."

He nodded. "His name was Dr. Packard Larsen and he was injured in the library when…" He struggled to find the right word.

"When Alice attacked."

"Alice, sir?"

"Basically a Decepticon whose alt-form is a human."

He paled a little at that revelation but soldiered on. "His son, Samuel Larsen, was killed in that same attack."
I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. *My Sam*, he'd shrieked. He'd been in the library – he and his son both, I realized. The memories returned to me – Alice blasting through the bookshelves, tables overturning, people screaming. He'd been there when his son died and I ran away.

Like Alpha Trion's two sons, Packard's Sam was just another senseless casualty. I didn't want that mental image – the gunman who shot Bumblebee with napalm being side-by-side with Alpha Trion.

"The younger Larsen had all the usual digital identities – Facebook, a blog, memberships on numerous message boards. He had declared robotics as his major and was fascinated with the Autobots. He participated on several alien-related websites including those run by Mr. Simmons and Mr. Spitz. Optimus feels it's very likely Packard Larsen recognized Bumblebee on sight thanks to his son's interests.

"As for the father, he was a surgeon until he was wounded," al-Sharif quietly continued. "There was head trauma, and it left him with hand tremors and apparently damaged the part of the brain that controls impulses, rule following, that sort of thing. He was in the hospital for months and was released just before Christmas."

The guilt settled thick and heavy over my heart. I'd gone on with my kinda-sorta normal life while he had to go through the hell of getting hurt and losing his son. Sudden fury hit me. I didn't want to feel this! I didn't want to sympathize, to understand, this man who tried to kill me.

*Optimus*, a voice in the back of my mind whispered. *It's what Optimus would do. He's rubbing off on you.*

"Details about Packard himself are relatively thin. He was a 54-year-old widower from Kingdom County in Vermont. He'd been in practice there for more than twenty years. He was an alumnus of your school and was here dropping off his only son for his freshman year at college."

And now Packard was standing side-by-side with my dad. The guilt sank deeper, making me queasy. "Stop."

Al-Sharif fell silent, and I closed my eyes, reminding myself why I didn't care what his reasons were. He shot at me. He wounded Simmons. He firebombed Bumblebee! He killed… I looked up again. "How many did he kill?"

"None."

I blinked in surprise. "None?"

"I can only guess, sir, but his son was collateral damage. I imagine that he would not shoot indiscriminately. He had a suicide note on his person, but I haven't been able to obtain a copy. That might also shed some light on his motives."

I already had a pretty good idea. He was after me – just me. He had been hunting me like an animal. Because I was dangerous to humanity, he said. Because I'd gotten his only son – his only living family – killed. My heart reflexively reached out over my brother bond and I cringed away from the nothingness on the other end.

"The rest can wait until later," al-Sharif sympathetically said.

"Yeah," I bitterly agreed. Unlike some people, I actually had a tomorrow to look forward to.

A few minutes later, the NEST guys returned, and I helped Johnston and Quinn apply extra nanite gel to the places on 'Bee's hood that were already dry. "That's where he got burned the worst,"
Quinn explained. "Those spots just need a little extra TLC. But y'all are worrying about nothing – he's gonna be fine."

"Yep," I grimly agreed behind my protective mask. He would be, eventually. But he never would have gotten hurt to begin with if it weren't for me. Same thing with Simmons. I was finally beginning to understand that they weren't the only ones.

"You're brooding," Epps observed, once we'd finished the application and had peeled out of our protective gear. "I've seen the big guy do that, too."

"Yep," I curtly admitted. Walking over to my cot, I climbed into my sleeping bag and faced the wall.

"It's a bit early, isn't it?" Johnston said.

"Yep."

They left me alone after that.

I closed my eyes, unable to keep the memories at bay. Thousands dead just on that one aircraft carrier. The numbers had been mind-boggling, overwhelming. But I had other things to worry about – being on the run, getting Optimus back, and then the whole Prime thing. Even after the dust had started to settle, the damage to the library had been small beans by comparison. That's mostly how I'd thought of it – damage. I hadn't thought about the lives lost. And I especially hadn't thought about the people who were hurt or just grieving. There were more people like Packard out there – people whose worlds had been shattered, who were still in hospitals, who were getting surgeries, who were brain-damaged, who were maimed for life. People who lost limbs, who lost brothers, sisters, parents, children…

I instinctively reached out over the brother bond to hold on to Optimus, but he was too far away to stop the downward spiral of my thoughts.

Was Packard right? Would they all be better off if I wasn't alive? Maybe Megatron wouldn't have been able to find the Matrix. If that creepy Decepticon spider-doc had succeeded, if I'd never been born, if I hadn't survived Mission City…so many ifs. Who would still be alive if I were dead?

But if I hadn't found the Matrix first, everybody would be dead. Somehow, I doubted that would be a comfort to people like Packard.

What about now, though? Was he right? Was I still a danger to humanity?

Yes.

I knew it, could feel the truth of it pressing down on my heart. As long as the Autobots were here, Earth was in danger. Maybe we were in less danger with them here than with them gone, but still, the entire planet was at risk in ways it never had been before, at least, not in human memory. No matter what, though, as long as I was alive Optimus would stay here, and that meant the war between the Autobots and Decepticons would stay centered on Earth.

I wasn't going to off myself like Packard wanted – I had at least that much survival instinct left, despite what the Autobots might think – but I couldn't deny the fact that I was a walking magnet for big, bad alien disasters. Why was I still here? And would those disasters keep getting bigger each time?

I'd done my Primely thing, hadn't I? Optimus was back, they had the All Spark back in the form of the Matrix of Leadership, and Megatron had been pretty soundly whupped. It's not like I was able to
bring Jazz back – it looked like Optimus and Arcee were it.

So…what now? I didn't like the idea of just aimlessly wandering the planet for the rest of my life with a great big bulls-eye on my head, but that's really all I could see. Just…hanging out. Hanging out and living as long as I could for my brother and then leave him all alone again when I died. What did it matter, really, if it was one year or a hundred? There wasn't going to be a happy ending for this kinship no matter what.

I ground my teeth. It was just like the All Spark or Primus or whoever to let this happen and leave so many 'bots hurting or dead. If it cared so little for its own creations, we humans were probably just maggots to it like Megatron said. When we humans bombed a building, who cared if the cockroaches in it died? Why did the Primes even put up a fuss to begin with when The Fallen tried to kill the sun? Did they really have more morals than their god?

I remembered Optimus' words, way back on the aircraft carrier after Egypt. How could the Creator of sparks – of souls – not have one?

I wriggled deeper into the sleeping bag, hunching against the cold and my dark thoughts. The drugs couldn't kick in fast enough.

…

Johnston and Quinn applied the protective coat of paint to Bumblebee's hood before I even woke up. Then it was literally watching paint dry for a few hours. After that we would all – me, 'Bee, Leo and Simmons – head back to campus.

Just sitting there was letting me think about things I didn't want to, so I decided I could clean Bumblebee's tires in the meantime.

I didn't miss the concerned looks the NEST guys and al-Sharif kept sending my way and exchanging with each other. They murmured together in low voices, but with the bouncing echoes in the garage, I'd catch the occasional phrase or two.

"…gotta do something…"

"…unwise to interfere…"

"…Lennox is the wannabe shrink, not me…"

"…he can handle it…"

"…can't report this…"

Eventually Epps pulled up a stool beside me. "I've been through a lot, working with the 'bots," he said. "If you need to talk…"

"Not really."

"Come on, kid," he half-grumbled, half-pleaded. "Ratchet's gonna have my hide if I go back there and tell him I left you in a funk like this. At least talk to me a little bit. I've been there."

No, he hadn't. He had no idea just how deep the guilt ran. But there was one thing that had been bugging me. "How'd Packard get his hands on napalm, anyway?"

"It ain't that hard to make, if he really wanted to," he quietly answered. "Probably was just a wicked
home-brew, come to think of it. Napalm's kind of a generic term. It's any solution that can make burning gasoline stick. They use it in flame-throwers, too."

When I didn't comment for a minute, he said, "War is hell, ain't it? Even got brimstone."

"No, war is worse," I grimly answered. "You don't get sent to hell if you're innocent."

Under his breath, he said, "Ratchet's gonna have fits."

"Ratchet can go to hell, then, too."

We sat in silence again, but I refused to look at him. Finally he said, "Optimus ain't gonna be happy, either."

Was it coincidence that he mentioned my biggest weak spot? Probably, I decided, since he mentioned Ratchet first. Still…I sighed. "Look, it's just…post-battle nerves or whatever you call it. Give me another couple of days and I'll be fine."

He studied me for a few seconds and frowned. Doubtfully, he answered, "Whatever you say, kid."

…

It was a quiet ride back to campus. Al-Sharif was trying to arrange another meeting with the Dean for me. I just knew they'd try to kick me out, and we were hoping to nip that in the bud. Mostly, I wanted to crawl into my own bed and sleep for a week. 'Bee was okay – or at least he looked okay and everyone was telling me he was. Like him, I wished we had a bond so I could know for sure, but that was just another one of those impossible things.

We dropped Simmons off at his apartment and then headed up to the dorms. It was before noon on a Saturday when we finally got there, so I expected our roomies to still be passed out cold somewhere, sleeping off a Red-Bull-and-P'Zone binge. But when I unlocked the door, Leo's computer chair swung around to reveal Sharsky lounging in it like some kind of James Bond villain.

"So..." he demanded over steepled fingers, "you wanna say this is a case of effin' mistaken identity?"

Fassbinder poked his head in from their dorm room to the shared 'server room.' And jumped. And launched himself at us.

"OMYGODYOURENOTDEAD IHAVEN'TSLEPTINTHREEDAYS IHADTOGETBYON REDBULLANDFIVEHOURENERGY THEYSAVYOU'RE BUTOMYGODOMYGODOMYGOD SOMEONEGETTHEMANACUPOFTEA"

I flinched away from my panicked roomie and Cam had to jump out of the way as Fassbinder slammed the door shut behind me. Leo scowled as the slam knocked a Boba Fett figure off his shelf. The door locked with a frightening finality, and I wondered if they'd let me open it for Al-Sharif when he finally got off the phone with school administration and came upstairs from the lobby. I should have known that Fassbinder doing a scarily-accurate impersonation of my Mom after my first fender-bender was a trap, but even with me cornered, he kept on blubbering like a teenage girl.

Sharsky ignored the gibbering Fassbinder and snapped his fingers before pointing decisively at the nearest desk chair. I was so not in the mood for this, but Leo and I had resignedly took our seats after shedding our parkas. Better to get it over with so I could crash. Cam just kicked back in his chair and pulled out his cell phone. Sharsky narrowed his eyes at him, but 'Bee was as impervious to glares as he was to bullets and started unconcernedly texting. My roomie was at a loss for a second, but he recovered and went back to the steepled fingers and suave evil voice. "We have a new powerpoint
"Do you expect me to edit?" Leo deadpanned.

"No, Mr. Spitz, I expect you to..." He cut off in mid-quote and glowered. "Shut up and listen to the slideshow."

With a click of the mouse, he pulled up a new version of the org chart from before. They didn't bother with the fetish list this time, instead cutting right to the chase.

"Military structure," Fassbinder unnecessarily read, his tone still a little more perky than any sane or safely-caffeinated person's would be. "Because we have a few new theories for you..."

And the scary thing was, they were almost right.

General Morshower was still the top dog as BrassEagle, but they had Optimus right under him, followed by Lennox, Ironhide and Arcee. Skids and Mudflap were at the bottom of the heap, with Wheelie right above them. They had figured out that the four newbies (Leo, Simmons, Epps, and me) were human, but they kept Mrs. Lennox as an alien, probably because they were too in love with the idea of some guy somewhere really being an alien sex slave. To my relief, they moved Camaro76 over into the human column, too. I guess 'Bee did a better job impersonating humans in real life than he did online.

The roomies lit into us, demanding to know what was really going on. I tried to explain that no aliens were involved (for once), but Fassbinder leaped at the computer and manically pulled up a video clip. It looked like surveillance footage from... My heart sank. The testing center. A hologram of me wandered into view, wandered through a tree, and then blithely continued on its way despite the bullets pock-marking the stone walls. Cam's texting paused and he fidgeted beside me, looking chagrined.

Sharsky did his Bond villain impression again, and since they weren't buying the truth, Leo started telling something they might believe. I backed him up but we drifted close and closer to the truth about our little alien excursion back in September. Leo thought I was going to actually tell them about Diego Garcia and yelled, "STOP!" just as someone knocked on the door behind us.

A heartbeat later, the wood panel exploded and al-Sharif stalked through the door he'd kicked in.

We all lunged to our feet in shock. Leo and I both just stared as my mild-mannered administrative-assistant-in-a-uniform growled, "Not another word."

"B-b-b-but they already know practically everything," I stammered. "We didn't do it!"

Cam's cell phone helpfully played, "We've been ratted out, boys," followed by, "I ain't going to jail for this!" And then the holoform winked.

It was a set-up, I abruptly realized. Al-Sharif had been conscripted to play the bad cop. My brain did a 180 and peeled off in the right direction, I hoped. "Damn," I breathed, playing along. "We signed our lives away - and they can collect."

Leo apparently missed the byplay. "Yeah, whatever. You've got those aliens wrapped around..."

Al-Sharif grabbed Leo by the scruff of his neck and, without comment, hauled him out of the room.

'Bee turned his holoform away from the roomies so they couldn't see his brilliant smirk, and I don't know how he kept himself from actual giggles. After he'd recovered a bit, his cell phone played a
clip of, "What's up, doc?"

I rolled my eyes at him and started clearing off my bed. Two nights sleeping on a cot in a military garage in January...I was going to get a nap come hell or high water. The dorm mattress actually appealed to me.

Fassbinder was all but bouncing out of his shoes. "DUDE!" he shouted. "The Man has Leo!"

"Eh, they'll just rough him up a bit."

Cam's grin of pure joy at the thought made me snigger half-heartedly. Those two had spent way too much unsupervised time together during this latest crisis.

"Aren't you going to stop him?" Sharsky demanded.

Still playing it up, I said, "Um...hello? Fricking badass military thug breaks down the door and hauls him out for saying too much? You were the ones who said you wanted the truth. You guys should know better than anyone that the truth has strings attached."

They stared – horrorstruck and looking more than a little lost – at the shattered doorframe.

"So...what did I miss?" I asked, trying to change the subject.

Fassbinder was the first to respond, sounding a little weak like he was coming crashing down off the mother of all caffeine highs. "Great game last night."

Sharsky punched him on the arm for getting off-topic so easily.

I picked up the fifty-pound lit book off my bed and with a sickening lurch remembered that my paper had been due the day before. Muttering swears under my breath, I scrambled for my computer and booted it up. The room had gone strangely silent and I looked up to find Sharsky giving me a confused half-glazed expression. "Paper!" I said, "My lit paper!" I wouldn't have been half so terrified if this had been a different class. I was close to bombing it already, and my lit professor had made it clear the first day (and everyday thereafter) that unless you were dead, there was no excuse for turning assignments in late, and there would be absolutely no leniency. Even almost-shot-dead wouldn't get me off the hook - I was sure of it.

Fassbinder rolled his eyes dramatically. "Chill, I hacked your comp..."

"You hacked my computer?" I demanded, ready to send al-Sharif after him.

He ducked his head a little. "Well, yeah. I was looking for evidence of the mothership in case they decided not to let you go this time. But anyway, your prof sent an email saying that unless you were dead, that your paper was still due despite the lockdown. So I fixed that jackass thesis on Gatsby and submitted it something like nine hours before the deadline."

I blinked, feeling strangely touched. "You wrote a Lit paper for me?" I'd only had the thing half written when everything went down, and it didn't help that I read one-quarter of the way through the book and then used Wikipedia and Sparknotes to fill in the rest. He could totally hack my computer anytime if this was the result.

"I can use my powers for good," he pointed out.

"Above and beyond, man," I said, half-tempted to hug him, fist-bump or bow to his greatness. Our budding bromance was interrupted by the arrival a weirdly meek-looking Leo. Behind him, al-Sharif
sauntered in doing a very good Arabic John Wayne impersonation. I'd only ever seen him stand at attention or at ease, but this time he looked like he was at a different kind of attention – alert and ready to deliver a killing blow if necessary. To finish the act, he glowered at my soon-to-be-pants-wetting roommates and repeated in a low voice, "Not another word."

To anyone who didn't know he was my secretary and aide, it was terrifying. Even to me it was a little scary. For a man who thought a lot more than he spoke and disliked raising his voice at all, he was being impressively menacing. He swept the room with one last beady glare and then turned on his heel and marched out through the smashed doorframe.

I looked at the door hanging loosely on its hinges, and it occurred to me that this was the second time in as many semesters that we'd destroyed the thing. "There goes the security deposit," I muttered.

"Again," Leo agreed.

I went back to clearing off my bed.

In a hushed voice, Sharsky whispered, "Who was that?"

I shrugged, focusing on straightening the blankets because a straight face was out of the question. "Some guy I know. He just shows up when things get dicey. They assigned him to be my handler back in September, and trust me, you don't want to get in his way." Peeling my boots off, I climbed into bed and pulled the blankets up over my head. I gingerly stretched out my wrapped knee, trying to find a comfortable position for it.

Leo took the hint and told the guys to come to the server room with him, and he'd tell them all he was allowed.

I woke up a couple of hours later. Cam was still kicked back in his chair, but I couldn't hear any voices coming from the server room. I groggily rubbed my eyes before accusing 'Bee, "You called him in, didn't you."

He shrugged, but his grin gave him away. Rising to his feet, he tipped his head toward the broken door and extended his hand to help me up. I sighed, not wanting to go out in the cold again even if it was just to his cab so we could talk, but I stomped back into my boots anyway.

To my surprise, al-Sharif was waiting for us in the lobby. He seemed more like his usual calm and reassuring self, standing conspicuously at ease among the slouching college students and giving me a slight, respectful nod in greeting. I nodded back and he held the door for me so we could go outside. Bumblebee took the lead and al-Sharif fell in step beside me. Giving him a sidelong look, I asked, "Was that really necessary?"

"Bumblebee seemed to think so, sir," he answered, sounding sheepish. "His exact words were 'They're giving away everything! Reinforcements!' Then he requested that I 'Break down the door like some conspiracy theorists' worst nightmare.'"

I sniggered and 'Bee turned around to walk backwards, openly grinning at me.

Al-Sharif's eyes danced with humor and said, "I hope my performance had the desired effect, sir."

Yeah, he was totally fishing for praise, but in this case he deserved it. "Even I was creeped out. I think my roommates might never recover."

He smirked ever so slightly and then got down to business. "I was able to get in contact with Dean Nightingale. She's willing to see you today, despite the fact that it's a Saturday. You have a penciled-
in appointment for 4:00 this afternoon."

"She's willing to talk about it? Why?"

"Yes, sir. She indicated that the decision to expel you had not been finalized yet. She did not state a reason."

Four o’clock, then – do or die.

"Is there anything I can help you do to prepare, sir?"

"Yeah," I decided. "I need some lunch – we can hit a drive through – and maybe you can help me think of some comebacks to her reasons for kicking me out."

…

We met with the dean in the same office as before, after Leo joined us. She gestured us to the same seats and cut right to the chase. "You're both on the verge of being expelled. I let you back into this institution with the understanding that there would be no further incidents. We're still recovering from the first attack and you brought even more violence to this campus."

"This wasn't our fault," I firmly told her.

"This would not have happened if you hadn't been here."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "You can't know that. It was a crazy gunman on a college campus – it's happened before."

"Are you asserting you had nothing to do with this?"

I hesitated, knowing I sucked at lying, and tried to shoot for the truth. "I didn't do anything to bring the bastard here. He might have come onto campus even if I wasn't here. He was crazy, and I just happened to be his excuse."

She cocked an eyebrow at me and I inwardly cursed when I realized what I'd admitted. Her hands stilled on her desk. "When campus police apprehended him, he had burns over most of his body and he was shouting about the alien robot running over him."

"There was no robot," I cut in.

"There was an alien."

"You can't prove that."

"No?" I glared at her, and she glared right back. "There were tire tracks in the snow that passed over his arm. There were multiple bullet casings near him and the snow was broken up."

"We didn't fire a shot!"

Leaning forward, she sighed and then lifted her icy gaze to mine. "The conditions were no firearms and no aliens on campus…"

"You know what?" I angrily interrupted her. "That was the difference last time! Bumblebee wasn't with me and the Decepticon who attacked back then didn't have anyone to stop her. My alien would have taken her down before she ever left the dorm. He might have been able to stop her before she even got that far. And do you know what the killer part of all this is? We followed your damn rules.
We didn't fire a shot and no robot was spotted on campus – just a yellow car. Not a single student was hurt – no staff, no faculty, just the shooter and one of my bodyguards. 'Bee even let the gunman live.'

She blinked as she took that in, and I saw a glimmer of hope.

"I know you're not exactly thrilled about me being here, and I know that I'm kind of a magnet for danger, but it really is true that this might have happened anyway. Without 'Bee and Leo and Simmons, this guy could have stormed into any classroom and taken out a dozen people. Having them here saved lives."

"Lives you put in danger. And then you ran."

"Because I've had to run through two war zones! I kind of get skittish when there are guys with guns nearby."

"So you ran to your alien robot bodyguard who thereafter hunted the shooter down."

"We drew him away from the middle of campus. We…" I hesitated again, picking my words carefully. "…let him see me."

She wasn't buying it, probably because she'd seen the surveillance footage too. I frowned thoughtfully, weighing how much to tell her. "Fine. Bumblebee figured out that this guy was probably coming after me personally. We realized that if he saw me outside, then he'd have no reason to go inside. That is why I ran."

She leaned back in her chair, eyeing me. The seconds stretched long, and eventually she sighed. "The Board of Trustees will be meeting on Monday morning to discuss all this. I will speak with you again afterward, at 1pm."

I nodded and glanced over at Leo, who also eagerly nodded.

"Don't let me detain you, then," she said with poisoned sweetness and al-Sharif quickly opened the door to let us out. Once we were safely outside again, I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding, and the mist hung in the frozen air.

The rest of the weekend was almost unbearable. Between the hours I spent on the phone with Mom and Mikaela and the whispered but constant questions from my roommates, I couldn't help the nervousness that had me strung so tight I was twanging most of the time. I honestly don't remember anything from my classes on Monday, and I couldn't eat at lunch. When the time finally arrived, Leo, al-Sharif and I went to the dean's office ten minutes early. She made us wait for fifteen.

When her secretary finally ushered us in, Leo and I took our seats across from her.

For a long moment she simply sat there, studying me. Eventually, she said, "The…anonymous donors who rebuilt the library heard about this incident and are again intervening on your behalf. They wish to make a sizeable contribution to the school to improve campus security, but only on the condition that you be allowed to return."

Unexpected warmth filled my heart – even after all this, Optimus was supporting me in my decision to go to college.

"The Board has weighed the pros and cons as well as your direct involvement with the situation. Because no one but the gunman was officially wounded and there is no reason for anyone to suspect aliens, they believe the terms of our agreement continue to be met."
"Yes!" Leo breathed.

She leaned forward, resting her arms against the desk, and gave me the most menacing smile I'd ever seen. "However…if I have any reason to see you in this office again, it will be the last time you set foot on this campus. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I immediately said, and Leo added, "Perfectly."

"Have a good day, then."

I all but lunged for the door and even beat al-Sharif to opening it, and I didn't stop until we were all the way outside. I couldn't shake the feeling that we'd escaped by the skin of our teeth, but Leo burst out laughing and punched the air. "Yes! We beat The Man!"
Over the next week, some of the details the 'bots had dug up about the shooter were released to the public. Eventually al-Sharif sent me an email with a copy of the suicide note attached. For a good week I let it sit there in my inbox, dreading to read it but not quite able to make myself delete it. Did I really care what he said? It wouldn't change anything. Both him and his son were dead now. His whole family, gone.

Before I had this bond with Optimus, I wouldn't have thought twice about deleting the note, but I knew what it felt like to lose every single person you loved because Optimus had felt it. I knew what it felt like to when your entire clan was destroyed. I'd seen a first-hand glimpse of what genocide looked like.

And so I went back and forth until finally I decided I would read it. The Decepticons may have been the ones at fault, but I was the reason the Larsens got shot. They deserved to have me read it. I wasn't sure what to expect, but it was rambling for the most part, more eulogy than mission statement. He talked a lot about his own son, an outdoorsy kind of kid who was going into robotics.

One part really hit me, though.

"I'm not doing it for revenge. Revenge doesn't do anybody any good. 'Thou shalt not kill', among the oldest of laws. 'Do no harm', the oath I took. Two wrongs don't make a right. I taught that to my boy. To my Sam, my son. My Sam died because the other Sam lives. Because the other Sam was ever born. I don't know why those monsters want him. But they do.

"All this death. Over one boy. One insignificant boy, who has no idea how much suffering he has caused. I don't blame him. I could see him, that day in the library. Scared, confused, a pawn. A prize. But selfish. Cowardly.

"The robots want him. If he wasn't here, they wouldn't be fighting over him. 'If you can't share, I'll take it away, and then you can't fight over it.' Those are a parent's words. These robots are fighting over Witwicky. If he's gone, they'll have nothing to fight over. They'll leave, and they won't kill any other sons.

"I'm sorry for what I'm going to do to his father. But Sam Witwicky must die, for the good of the world. I'm sorry, boy."

Boy, brother, son. But others had called me 'boy,' too. From Megatron, it meant maggot, insect, vermin. The brass and the politicos really meant inexperienced, ignorant, fool. Now I could add coward to the list.

Which boy, though? His Sam or me? Was he apologizing to his son? That his boy died? That he didn't die when his Sam did? That he'd take another life? Or was it to me, apologizing that I was too dangerous and cowardly to live?

'Crazy old man,' I tried to remind myself. 'Campus shooter – he had a bunch of screws loose.'

But I couldn't shake the feeling that, at least on some things, he was dead right.
January bled into February with dull grey skies and more cold and snow.

It was a lot easier to pick out Valentine's Day cards for Mikaela this year when I didn't have to exclude the ones that said, "I love you." I sent three of them, actually, just because I could and I missed her almost as much as I did Optimus. I got a package in the mail from her a couple of days early but didn't open it until we were both in front of a webcam.

"Go ahead," she encouraged, almost achingly beautiful on my computer screen. She'd gone out of her way to be gorgeous today. I really wished she was here. Focusing again, I opened the box, and she added, "The one in red paper is for today. The other one is for your birthday."

The red present was a small box…a jewelry box?

"It's just bling, 'kay?" she suddenly rambled, sounding almost like she was channeling me. "It's not like a proposal or anything because I know you're so not ready for that, and neither am I – we just barely started saying I love you – but you gave me the necklace, and at Christmas I realized what I wanted to give you but I thought of it too late and ran out of time, and it seemed like Valentines would be a better time to give this to you anyway."

I blinked and stared at her. "Did you do that on purpose?"

She blushed a little. "Not really, no. I guess you're rubbing off on me."

I chuckled and anxiously opened the box. It was a ring. I blinked in surprise. That was…weird.

"Just bling," she repeated. "Your mom said you would like it."

I rolled my eyes. "You're taking fashion advice from my mother? I guess the world really did end."

She gave me a nervous smile.

I looked at it more closely – it was gold and silver in a kind of checkerboard pattern, but some of the squares were larger than others and the biggest silver square was set in place of a jewel. But that square was divided so there was a big diamond-shaped section in the middle. And stamped into the silver diamond was a Prime glyph.

I looked up sharply and she smiled a little. "Do you like it?"

My jaw fell open and I looked back down. On the other, smaller silver squares, more Cybertronian glyphs were etched. I recognized they were modern ones, not the language of the Primes, but beyond that I had no idea what they meant.

"'Bee and Wheelie helped me with it."

"Great," I sarcastically muttered.

"I promised to torch Wheelie if he put any funny stuff in," she assured me. "Have 'Bee translate it sometime."

"You're not going to tell me?"

She bit her lip, either nervous or embarrassed and possibly both. "I guess Cybertronian languages are really precise, even though there's the cultural stuff like how a Prime means so much more than just the name of a clan."

"Okay…?"
"They don't have 'I love you.' It's too ambiguous. They have 'I cherish you,' and 'I admire you,' and 'I would die for you.'"

I looked more closely at the ring, lightly brushing a fingertip over the glyphs.

"So yeah…I guess if I'm kind of a maybe-Prime-in-law, you should have something from me that was Primely. In return for the necklace."

_No words for 'I love you.' _A prickle ran up the base of my skull. The All Spark was stowed away in my brain back then – during the whole time between Mission City and Giza. Was it really that I was scared? I could tell her every other way…

My head snapped up. "Why did you do it? Last summer…at my house…when we…"

She rolled her eyes. "You are such a little girl. When we had sex for the first time?"

I frowned at her tone but said, "I hadn't even told you I loved you."

She looked down, biting her lip again. "I was kind of hoping, but…” She shrugged.

Hoping that I would tell her afterward? I'd wanted to, but it had felt…wrong. Like the wrong thing to say, like it would just drive her away if I said something as meaningless as those three words after something as powerful as that.

_Meaningless because it meant nothing in Cybertronian._

The words I'd _wanted_ to say had been too scary – that she would always be a part of me, that I wanted to be part of her, and that I couldn't live without her. They were words bondmates might say.

Fury welled up in me. The All Spark had now officially screwed up my relationship with my girlfriend, too. Was there _any_ part of my life it wasn't going to ruin? Looking up, I blurted out, "I love you." Tapping the ring for emphasis, I said, "I adore you, you're the best thing that ever happened to me, I would do anything for you."

Her eyes widened as she understood.

"I'm so sorry, Mikaela. I _couldn't_ say it I guess – not until after I died and got rid of the stupid thing. I mean, I probably could have if I tried really hard, but it was hanging out in my subconscious and I didn't realize…"

"The All Spark."

I nodded. _"I love you," _I fervently repeated.

Tears welled up in her eyes and she bit her lip, obviously trying to hold back tears. I cursed the distance between us. Mikaela rarely showed weakness, and I would have given a lot to be able to put my arms around her. She was so _strong_, and it was with a soul-jarring jolt that I realized _she_ needed _me._

"I'm so sorry…"

She managed a weak smile and brushed away the half-formed tears. "You really do mean it, don't you – the 'I love you' part."

"Yes! All those times I couldn't say it, I meant it then, too."
She nodded, looking down thoughtfully for a second before meeting my gaze again. "Is it really
gone this time?"

I sighed. "I think so? I hope so, anyway. But…"

"Yeah, but…" she commiserated.

"I love you," I hopefully repeated.

And this time some of that sparkle returned to her eyes. "I love you, too."

...

On February 17th, my birthday dawned bright and surprisingly warm. Wisps of a dream lingered in
my memory: Optimus standing beside me on the aircraft carrier with one reassuring hand on my
shoulder. Usually dreams about Optimus were depressing because (just like in this one) I could see
him but not feel him, but this one left me feeling more upbeat than I had been in a long time.

My email inbox was stuffed full of e-card well-wishes (forwarded from my government office
courtesy of al-Sharif) from random people who liked Alienboy for their own mysterious reasons.
Mikaela’s package was joined by one from my mom. They’d obviously coordinated – Mikaela got
me a bunch of extra-warm acrylic socks and Mom got me these really nice rubber-soled leather
slippers. If I just needed to run down to the cafeteria, I could pull those on instead of having to find a
pair of clean socks and my boots. (Yeah, Mom knew how lazy I was. Or maybe she just didn't want
my feet to get cold if I had to run away from Decepticons in the middle of the night.) It was like the
Eskimo version of flip-flops.

Between the dream, the sunshine and being buried in drifts of birthday cheer, I was actually smiling
when I hiked up onto campus after lunch. Classes went well, but on the walk back Leo ranted about
a text Simmons had sent him half-way through the final lecture of the day. Some mystery shipment in
Boston had gone missing. Apparently a car imported from England had driven off in the middle of
the night and he was sure it was the 'con that had landed in London.

The news should have been worrying, but for some reason, Leo was just cracking me up – all
intense and waving his hands over something that was probably just a really good car theft. He was
in his element, wildly spinning tales of conspiracy and mayhem, and it was all I could do to not laugh
at him.

Bumblebee texted me when I was within sight of the dorm. /Happy Birthday! I've got a surprise for
you – but ditch Spitz./

I snorted and waved Leo ahead. "Cam's got a birthday present for me."

"If it's cake, save me some."

"Dream on."

He rolled his eyes and went inside, but I continued down to the street. Bumblebee’s grinning
holoform stood leaning with his back against the Camero, his arms crossed, as he looked at the
brunette in pink camo beside him. "That girl is so dangerous…" his speakers sang.

She chuckled and rolled her eyes like he'd said something flattering, but that…wasn't…possible?
And then I recognized her – Arcee's holoform. An identical twin to the 'girl' talking to Cam leaned
against a nearby blue motorcycle wearing a steel-blue bomber jacket. The pink motorcycle was
nearest Bumblebee but the purplish-red one was empty. Interesting. Everything looked cool, but I
nervously glanced around once.

I walked closer, and Arcee's holoform looked up, her smile fading. She pushed away from the car body she'd been leaning against and took a step forward to greet me. "Samuel."

"Arcee. Why are you here? Is something wrong?" Reflexively, I glanced around again.

"Nothing's wrong," she answered, shifting her feet almost like she was embarrassed. "But...we're the smallest of the Autobots; catching a flight is a lot easier for us. Your brother wanted us to speak with you. Is there a place we can go to be alone? A park or someplace where we won't be seen or overheard?"

That was odd. "Sure." I half-smiled. "There's plenty of cover over on Founder's Hill. I'm sure we could find a quiet spot there."

She nodded and climbed aboard her pink bike. I walked toward 'Bee but his still-smiling holoform didn't move away from the car door, instead gesturing toward the empty motorcycle. Really confused now, I went to the rose-red component and climbed aboard. "We'll drive, if you don't mind," she said as she tossed me a helmet.

I snorted a laugh. "I'm used to Mikaela – she never lets me drive her bikes."

Flashing me a genuine smile, Arcee fired up the engines on all three of her components.

Cam climbed into the car and followed us, the holoform flickering out of existence as 'Bee darkened the tint on his windows. My curiosity grew with each passing minute as we drove. Bumblebee followed us, but only at a distance. It was kind of strange for me to be riding with another Autobot. Not that I had anything against Arcee, but 'Bee didn't even trust Optimus to keep me safe. And why did she need to talk to me alone? What would she need from me that she couldn't talk about in front of everyone else? A truly frightening thought occurred to me. Did she want me to use my Primely power to create a new...sparkling or youngling or whatever? It was bad enough that I couldn't bring back Jazz – what if all their hopes for me creating new Autobots were empty, too?

There was a bicycle ramp so students could take a short cut up onto campus and avoid all the cars. Motorized vehicles weren't supposed to go on it, but that didn't stop Arcee. 'Bee parked on the street while she drove me up a ways and then turned off the ramp onto a jogging path that followed an artificial stream. A little further on was a stand of evergreens that would shield us from the view of anyone at the bottom of the hill, while the slope shielded us from view from above. She stopped and I climbed off, returning the helmet to her.

She transformed, first into her bike-bots and then those components came together to form a single bi-pedal femme.

"Sorry," she said, lowering to one knee so she was closer to eye level. "Will tells me it's disconcerting when I talk in the plural, so I thought it best to go somewhere we could speak privately."

Ah, that explained it. "That's fine," I answered, not quite sure what to say. After a few awkward seconds, I said, "So..."

"Yes?"

"...why kidnap me?"

"If now's not a convenient time..."
"No, it's fine. I'm just wondering."

She looked down, her fingers fidgeting for a minute. Finally gathering her courage, she looked up to meet my gaze. "I need to tell you about my death, Prime."

I blinked a couple of times in surprise – this was the last thing I'd expected. "Your death."

She nodded, looking down again, tilting her head almost like she was embarrassed. "Optimus is worried about you. So is Bumblebee. I've talked with them both, and they think you need to hear what I have to say."

"Okay," I hesitantly answered.

Lifting her gaze to mine, she said, "Firstly, I don't want you to think it was your fault. It wasn't. Will sent me with Ironhide to find you, but only because he knew I'd want to be part of the search team. You understand that, right?"

"Yeah."

"Good." She looked away, staring at the swirl of water under the film of ice on the stream. An awkward few seconds of silence passed before she continued. "Optimus said that he met his fellow Primes when he died. That he spent time with them and learned a lot."

"Yeah, he mentioned that," I told her encouragingly.

Her gaze darted to mine. "It was like that for you, too?"

"Yeah…? Wasn't that what happened to you?"

She snorted and looked down. "No. I'm not a Prime, Samuel."

Oh. And then I huffed a chuckle at my own ignorance. Silly me, I'd just assumed that all death-and-resurrection experiences were the same. "Sorry," I said when she glanced warily at me. "You were saying?"

She squared her shoulders with resolve. "I'm not a Prime, and neither is…was Jazz. Optimus is worried that you're still blaming yourself and I think I might know why Jazz didn't come back."

"What do you mean?"

"Unlike Optimus, I was given a choice."

I just stared at her for a second, trying to wrap my mind around what she was saying. "You mean like someone actually asked you?"

"Yes. My creator-sister, Aren. She had died in an accident before the War started. I remember seeing her, talking with her, but I don't remember much about what was actually said. It was about the future, though, I think. Or what could be. I also learned from her what you were and who your brother was. The only actual words that clearly stuck with me about our conversation was her telling me that I could stay with her or I could go back to the fight and join her again later. She asked me what I wanted and I told her that I wanted to be where I'd do the most good."

When I didn't answer, she added, "It wasn't my fate to come back, Samuel. It was my choice."

Her words slowly sank in, and I remembered what the Ancient Prime said about reigniting Optimus. 'It is and always has been your destiny.' I'd assumed that reigniting Arcee had been my destiny, too.
Optimus himself said it was my fate…wait, no he didn't. He only said it wasn't *his* fate to ignite others' sparks. "So you think Jazz *chose* to stay dead?"

"Not really," she said with a half-smile, looking down at the stream again. "Jazz loved life more than any other being I've ever met, but maybe he was having more fun on the other side? I honestly don't know. But Optimus was surprised when I told him that I'd been given a choice and he thought it might help you not take it so personally. I truly believe it has nothing to do with you. You are a Prime, Samuel, and a true brother of Optimus would not take away another's choice."

I could kind of see where she was coming from, and she was right that it did make me feel a little better. Still, Jazz *didn't* come back, even though she did. I couldn't help but wonder, "Were you tempted to stay with your sister?"

Her tone was wistful as she stared at the swirling stream. "Of course. It was peaceful there. Happy. There was no war, and I was in one piece again."

"One piece? But…" I glanced over her frame, wondering if she felt buyer's remorse. "Ratchet said it was an upgrade."

"No human thinks otherwise and I'd prefer to keep it that way, but you are a Prime." Hesitating like she was gathering her courage, she softly said, "My 'upgrade' was involuntary."

She glanced up to watch my reaction and I suddenly understood. "Decepticons."

Arcee nodded, holding my gaze. "They captured me and split my spark." She nervously looked down again. "Ratchet's figured out a work-around so I can recombine into a single 'bot, but I'll never be able to take a single alt-form again. At my request, the others refer to it as an upgrade because I was a victim once and I refuse to let the 'cons keep me that way. I'm a *survivor*. I don't want to be pitied. I don't want people to look at me and think about my spark being violated that way – I want them to see *me*. So we all call it an upgrade, and I scrap anyone who tries to insinuate otherwise."

Again Arcee's gaze flitted to mine, and too late I tried to hide my horror. She could never fully recover from that assault. Every time any of the 'bots looked at her, they'd see how the 'cons had literally taken her spark and broken her.

"It *is* an upgrade in some ways," she insisted, "especially now that Ratchet's put me back together again more or less. I've turned the Decepticons' violation of my spark into an even stronger weapon to use against them. But I'll never be the same – at least, not while I'm alive. So yes, it was tempting to stay there and in one piece."

"But…?"

With a wan smile, Arcee glanced down the hill to where we both knew Bumblebee was waiting and standing guard. "But I had friends who would miss me and be left to fight alone. Thanks to Aren, I understood you were a Prime and Optimus' brother, and I just couldn't leave things as they were and never know if you survived that battle. But at the same time, it was so peaceful. I hope…" Her optics darted to mine and away again. "I hope that being a Prime means you'll get to go there someday, Samuel, even if you are human. I didn't want to leave, but I didn't feel like I should stay, either, not yet. So I told her I wanted to be where I would do the most good, and here I am. But Jazz may have given a different answer. He might not have been given a choice. I don't know."

I nodded and dared to put my hand over hers where it was resting on her bended knee. She didn't want my pity, but she did have my compassion. "Thank you – for telling me and for coming back from that peaceful place when I needed you."
Arcee looked up at me in surprise, and it was my turn to give her a smile. "I don't know how I could have handled it if I hadn't been able to bring you back. I wouldn't see myself as a Prime, that's for sure."

"Primes are born – "

"Not made," I interrupted her, letting my hand fall away from hers. "But how long did Optimus live before he knew he really was a Prime and not just called one out of respect? Being powerful and knowing you're powerful are two different things, and I don't have as much time to waste as he does."

She nodded with a little smile. "Thank you, Prime. Especially for giving me some of your time today of all days."

I glanced down the hill toward Bumblebee and muttered, "Don't worry about it. I think it was a present for me."

After Arcee brought me back down the hill, I rode with 'Bee on the way home. We spent the short drive back to the dorm in contented silence, at least until I caught sight a flame-painted semi. **OPTIMUS!** The thrill raced along my spine and I lunged at him over the brother bond that I only now realized was wide-awake even if it was blocked. No wonder I'd been in a good mood all day! I shoved hard against that block, and my brother threw it wide open. His surge of joy made me burst out in laughter. "You punk!" I shouted, half at 'Bee and half at Optimus (even though he couldn't hear me). "This was my real present, wasn't it!"

"Uh-huh," 'Bee said with his own voice, still managing to sound happy and smug despite his injury.

I leaned back in my seat, grinning like a maniac, as Bumblebee cruised past Optimus' alt-form.

"Wait!" I protested. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see," he answered. "Upstairs."

'Bee parked in his usual spot by the dorm, Arcee pulling into some nearby motorcycle parking spaces. I ran inside, taking the steps two at a time, not bothering to see if the 'bots followed me in their holoforms or not. I threw open the door and skidded to a halt. My room was decked out with streamers and balloons and a cake. And in the middle of it all was my brother.

Waves of his happiness and satisfaction and excitement swept over the bond, and I just stood there, soaking it all up. Then his affection swelled strong and deep and enveloped me in that soul-satisfying permanent hug.

"Optimus," I murmured, surprised and overwhelmed. I'd felt a lot of things from my brother, but this sheer delight was something new, and it left me grinning like an idiot.

He chuckled as he greeted me. "Sam."

I caught him back in a hug of the heart, holding him so tight I could barely breathe. And all the while, any random passerby would probably think we were stoned or something just standing there on opposite sides of the room, looking at each other without really seeing. All of our attention was focused on the bond. I took a minute to convince myself that this was real, that it wasn't another dream, and that my brother was really, truly here.

Eventually he rumbled, "Happy birthday."
Breaking out of the trance or whatever, I crossed the room to catch him in a physical hug. Surprise flickered across the bond, but he squeezed me tight before letting me go, even though we still latched on to each other over the bond. "Wow," I said, laughing as I looked around at his handiwork. "How long did this take you?"

"Not long," he answered, his smug satisfaction swelling stronger.

Faster than any human could hope to move, then. I was grinning so big that my face was starting to hurt as I imagined it.

All that changed in a heartbeat: Fassbinder and Sharsky walked into view through the still-open door. Great. My conspiracy-nut roomies. They were the last people I wanted to have making small talk with Optimus.

They poked their heads in and warily looked at the streamers before zeroing in on the cake.

"Mine," I preemptively said.

Thwarted there, Sharsky focused suspiciously on my brother as he edged into the room. "Who are you?"

"Guys, this is Op...timus," I said, not realizing the danger until it was too late.

"Uncle?" Fassbinder guessed, following Sharsky as they stalked closer to the cake.

"Blood brother," Optimus said before I could come up with a better explanation.

The roomies stared at me owlishly. "Long story," I said, hoping they'd let me leave it at that. Turning to Optimus, I asked, "You want to go get something to eat?"

"Yes," he simply answered, nodding good-bye to the guys.

"But...but...cake!" Fassbinder protested.

"The cake is a lie," Sharsky immediately deadpanned.

"After I get a decent meal," I countered. I didn't want to have cake for dinner in front of someone who could report to Mom (or worse, Ratchet) about my sucky eating habits.

"You touch, you die," I added, and casting me dirty looks, they wandered over toward their computers. "I promise to share when I get back."

"I make no promises," Sharsky grumbled ominously. "So you'd better hurry."

"Deal."

We went to the food court on campus since Optimus didn't want to lose his parking space. I got a burger and fries, but Optimus didn't order anything, and we slipped into an out-of-the-way booth where we could easily talk.

"Thanks for decorating my room," I said before diving into my fries.

"My pleasure. How has your birthday been?"

We talked about it – the presents Mom and Mikeala sent, the really odd fan-mail birthday wishes, and how I had bombed the last lit test. On the bright side, Fassbinder's 'edit' of my paper got me an A
on it, and that was keeping my grade afloat. All the while, I soaked up every flicker of affection and warmth I felt coming across the bond. It was at once strange and comforting to make small talk with Optimus, resurrected Prime, leader of the Autobots, and my younger brother.

About the time I was ready for a refill on my pop, we were interrupted by Bumblebee's holoform sliding into the booth seat beside Optimus and ducking his head low like he was hiding.

"Hey," I greeted him, surprised.

"Arcee is in pursuit, I assume," Optimus said, giving 'Bee a severe look but radiating amused approval over the bond.

"O-oh here she comes/ she's a man-eater," 'Bee confirmed.

"You provoked her," my brother guessed.

Bumblebee's answering grin was positively goofy and he ducked his head: guilty as charged.

Turning to me, Optimus explained, "It's a more grown-up version of hide-and-seek. Slightly more grown-up, in their case," he added, glancing at 'Bee with an almost paternal indulgence. "Both Bumblebee and Arcee are scouts and often pit themselves against each other to keep themselves sharp. He's masking his spark signature and hiding his alt-form while Arcee's trying to find him."

Addressing him, Optimus added, "I assume it's only two of her holoforms against your one." I could sense his unspoken 'you both had better be playing fair.'

"Only two?" I challenged.

"If they stay within their holoforms' natural limits, he has a distinct advantage."

To illustrate, 'Bee flexed his muscles – repeatedly.

I chuckled at his obvious playfulness. It was good to see 'Bee so happy.

"So Arcee gets to use two of her holoforms to even things up?" I guessed.

"Pshaw," 'Bee said with his actual voice, grinning even wider. "Can't touch this!"

"It was a bold move," Optimus pointed out, "coming to check on Sam. She no doubt anticipated it."

'Bee nodded, and his cell phone squealed, "Run away! Run away!" His eyes sparkling with laughter, he solemnly shook hands with first Optimus and then me, gravely saluted and slid out of the booth to stealthily make his way toward the exit. He didn't have to say the clichéd 'It's been an honor serving with you' for me to hear it loud and clear. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him this playful.

"He likes her, doesn't he."

"Yes," Optimus admitted. "They have protected each other for a long time – successfully, which is saying something."

It was another reminder that, no matter how happy any of the Autobots might seem, their lives had been brutally heartbreaking.

"They are a good team," he continued. "An excellent one, actually. But Arcee does not wish to distract Bumblebee from his obligation to protect you. Only now, with me here, did he feel he could relax a little with her."
I wanted to protest – to tell Optimus and 'Bee and Arcee that they should take a vacation or have fun whenever they wanted – but I couldn't. The price of my kinda-sorta normal life was their freedom. How did I miss that until now?

Optimus reached out to me over the bond, his permanent hug soothing my guilt and reassuring me I was worth it. Reaching back, I took hold of his feelings and held them tightly in my own heart. I'd missed this. Judging by his feelings, he'd missed it, too.

We decided that if I wanted to have any cake left, we'd better head back to the dorm, and we walked side-by-side through the chill night.

I didn't want to know the answer, but I eventually asked, "How long will you be able to stay?"

"Until tomorrow afternoon. Officially, Arcee and I are here as representatives of the company that will be installing the security upgrades for campus."

"So I'll have 'bot-level tech keeping an eye on me?" I asked, caught somewhere between amused that they'd start letting humans handle their technology and touched that I'd be the reason.

"Among other things, yes." He muted the bond. "I will also be meeting with someone in the FBI. There is an investigation open on Packard Larsen and the agent wished to hold a meeting with me."

"Ah." That explained both the visit and him hiding his emotions. I reached out over the bond, wrapping him up in my reassurance that I was okay, and he eased the block aside. It was hard to not just open the floodgates and unload all the emotions I'd been bottling up for...weeks. I mentally counted...it had been almost two months – the longest we'd been apart so far – but I didn't think I could handle it if we went that long again. I realized now that my melancholy wasn't due the weather or being depressed about someone trying to kill me. It had been homesickness, and home was wherever my brother was. "When do you think you'll come back?"

"Perhaps over spring break," he answered. "We could spend more time then."

Knowing when I would see him again eased some of the ache at the thought of him leaving, even if it would be another couple of months. "Sounds good."

"You have been troubled," Optimus observed, his easy calm soothing me even while the words made my anxiety ratchet up.

"I thought you couldn't sense me on the other side of the globe."

"Bumblebee has acute audio sensors. You have had nightmares again."

I sighed, walking in silence for a few seconds while I gathered my thoughts and my courage. "Not that I'm complaining, but do you ever wonder why the All Spark sent us back?"

"We were needed," he answered, puzzled by this turn in the conversation.

"But...why us? The Dynasty of the Primes stayed dead. And getting something organic back to life had to have been a trick for something that kind of specializes in machines. Originally the All Spark randomly chose me to be a human Prime – why didn't it just choose another kid?"

We walked in silence again as he mulled it over.

When the quiet stretched too long, I said, "Jazz didn't come back, so it's not like there's this magic-wand happily-ever-after ending for everybody. I just...while you were dead I felt like I had a
purpose. I knew I needed to bring you back somehow, and...and that's what I was living for. And then you were back and you...the Autobots had their Prime and the humans had theirs and that was my purpose – to be an ambassador. But this..." It was hard to say the words, but I forced myself to. "...this assassination attempt just made me wonder. Do I have a purpose anymore? For the All Spark, I mean. In the epic Primely leader kind of way."

He let me finish rambling and continued to ponder for a few heartbeats. "I do not know what purposes the All Spark might have for us still, but I do know this." His spark held my heart tightly. "You are as much a Prime for the Autobots as you are for your own species. You are needed."

I sighed, taking comfort from that hug and returning it. "Thanks. But I just can't help but wonder what's so important that the All Spark would go to the trouble of bringing us both back when it hasn't apparently bothered before. It kind of makes me nervous."

His wry humor swelled across our bond. "You have faced death, Sam. You have survived it."

"Yeah, but..." I huffed, frustrated.

"But this is the unknown," he supplied, his understanding and acceptance filling my heart. "And the unknown is even more fearsome than death."

"Yeah," I lamely agreed.

Squaring his shoulders, he said, "Whatever we may yet face, boy, we face it together. Our fates are bound, of that I am certain."

_Boy, son, brother._ I took hold of his fierce confidence, clinging to it. "Together." In life, in death, and in endless political meetings. I half smiled. "Thanks."

Chapter End Notes

A special thanks goes out to IronRaven for his help in developing Packard's character.

Bumblebee's song quotes:

"Dangerous" by Akon
"Maneater" by Hall and Oats
"U Can't Touch This" by MC Hammer
Laughter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When we got to my dorm, 'Bee was already there in his holoform, and judging by the looks my three roommates were giving him, I figured he was probably standing guard over the cake.

"About effin' time!" Leo grumbled when he noticed me and Optimus.

"Nice," I grumbled right back. "Glad you're so excited about it being my birthday."

Thanks to the bond, I knew Optimus was amused by the snarking. I really wasn't.

"Yeah, yeah," Fassbinder said dismissively. "Where's a knife?"

My brother felt a flicker of curiosity and anticipation – him asking permission. I relented, letting my resignation seep into the bond.

Optimus rummaged in a bag of what looked like decorating supplies and produced a box of plastic silverware and a package of plates. Leo tore into the box and triumphantly brandished a knife.

"Hey!" I protested, snatching it away from him. "Mine! I get to cut it!" Optimus chuckled, his humor good-naturedly nudging at my annoyance. He'd done all he could to make this a good birthday for me, and I decided I wasn't going to let them ruin it for us. Giving in and soaking up Optimus' mood, I smiled just a little. Glancing pointedly at him, I declared, "He brought it – he gets the first piece."

Jostling and protesting, my roommates tried to form a line of sorts, and 'Bee, er Cam, piped up with "Three's a crowd...I'd have to pack my things and go."

"Yeah, let's take this to the computer room," I agreed. Once we were more spread out, I served up generous helpings of cake starting with Optimus. Cam brought up the rear, and then I helped myself, too.

I murmured in surprise with the first bite; this was no grocery store cake! He must have gone all out and got it from a real bakery. My appreciation flowed freely over the bond, and his gratified happiness washed back.

We were all working on our second helpings of cake when there was a knock on Sharsky's and Fassbinder's bedroom door. Cam suddenly lunged to his feet and bolted for my bedroom. We humans exchanged confused glances, but Optimus gave away nothing on the surface. Inside, he was on the verge of laughing.

Sharsky went to answer his door, and a woman's voice demanded, "Where is he?" Without waiting for an answer, Arcee's two holoform-components stalked into the server room. One was in pink camouflage fatigues, and the other was in a blue bomber jacket. Her components' eyes swept the room in opposite directions with a weird kind of synchronization, and then she strode into my bedroom, not sparing us a word. One of the Arcees kicked the door shut behind her.

We could barely make out the sound of muttering, and intrigued, we all leaned a little closer to hear. Leo and Fassbinder even stood up to put their ears to the door.

"Boys only? You idiot!" Arcee growled more loudly, her voice muffled by the door. "They're
college guys – of course they want femmes in their room!"

A slap and a shriek sounded from the other room, making Leo jump, but my brother's feelings gave no indication of alarm or even surprise. Not even when Arcee started saying things I couldn't quite make out but that sure sounded like swearing.

Fassbinder finally had enough with the little mystery-drama and yanked open the door. "What the eff?"

I elbowed him out of the way to find 'Bee and Arcee in my bed, but in the last way I expected. They were sparring. In my bed! Blue Bomber Jacket was laying on her belly, her face buried in my pillow, with 'Bee sitting on her. She was kicking and trying to nail 'Bee with her elbow and shouting things like 'fragger' and 'afthead.' Pink Camo currently had her arm twisted up behind her back and was bent over one of Bumblebee's knees.

Leo stood with Fassbinder and Sharsky in the doorway, their jaws on the floor.

Pink-Arcee took advantage of the distraction they provided to bite the back of 'Bee's leg. He jumped and gave a wordless shout and the component on the bed squirmed out from under him. Bracing herself against the wall behind my bed, Blue-Arcee sent him onto the floor with a hard kick to the kidneys. He lay there for a second, groaning, while the Arcees stood shoulder to shoulder in front of him, smirking with arms crossed. "We'll visit the boy's dorm room whenever we feel like it. Deal with it."

He gave her a sheepish grin and held his hands up to her. Each component took a hand and hauled him to his feet, but he used the momentum to slip an arm around both of the components' waists and knock them backward. Since they were thrown off balance, he was able to scoop them up horizontally against his sides, carrying a component under each arm. Blue-Arcee managed to wiggle free – landing on all fours like a cat. Pink-Arcee was still kicking and shouting as he hauled her up and over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and bolted for the door, running off with her. The roomies scattered out of his way and Blue-Arcee ran after him, adding a few human expletives to the Cybertronian ones she'd been using. After a few seconds, the sound of shouting faded as 'Bee retreated and Arcee chased him. Then stunned silence.

Looking shell-shocked, Fassbinder repeated, "What the eff?"

Sharsky gave me a severe look. "Twins? Kinky, karate-bodied, wrestle-my-clothes-off-please twins? Dude, you've been holding out on us!"

"Triplets, actually," Optimus corrected.

Leo facepalmed.

'Bee returned, dramatically dusting his hands off in a 'job well done' gesture. I shook my head at him in disbelief, but he was grinning too happily for me to really get angry with him.

Arcee, however, was a different story. We could hear her (them, whatever) shouting up to us from outside under our window. "You are so dead, 'Bee!"

He sauntered over to the window and threw it open, poking his head outside and flipping her off.

"Yeah?" Pink-Arcee taunted, holding up a car key. "See this? See this? You can kiss your finish good bye!"

'Bee's eyes flew wide and he bolted for the door, running to stop her from keying his alt-form. Both
of the Arcees grinned and took off toward the parking lot.

"That's low," Optimus murmured, with a chuckle.

"Let me guess," Fassbinder said. "The girl in the bomber jacket is majoring in gender studies."

"And the one in pink camo is in the ROTC," Sharsky added.

"You're not too far off," Leo muttered under his breath.

"So…" Fassbinder glanced at the open door. "Were they a birthday present too?"

"Not unless somebody thought I needed another bodyguard or two." I gave my brother a pointed look.

"You mean…they're not strippers?" Sharsky pouted, looking utterly heartbroken.

Optimus blinked as he researched the term and then burst out in a rumbling laugh that rushed across the bond, too.

I could only imagine what Arcee would say to that suggestion. On second thought, I decided to not imagine. "No!"

Sharsky heaved a disappointed sigh.

Fassbinder shifted, catching Sharsky's attention, and gave him an expectant look.

Sharsky suddenly brightened. The two of them shared a worrying smile and, with darting glances at Optimus, they sauntered into the computer room.

Leo and I exchanged a worried glance. "Why do I have a bad feeling about this?" he hiss-whispered at me.

"They're your groupies," I pointed out, as if that was all the explanation needed.

Frowning, he followed them with me and Optimus on his heels. Sharsky and Fassbinder were on one of the servers. Giggling. Like little girls. My heart sank – there was no way this would end well.

"What's so funny?" Leo snapped.

"Nothing," Sharsky answered, but he was looking at Optimus. "Just reading a post on The Daily Buzz."

Time stopped.

Leo cussed under his breath.

A spike of surprise flickered across the bond.

"You've heard of the blog, haven't you Optimus?" Fassbinder demanded, his grin somewhere between conspiratorial and just plain evil.

Uncertainty (with maybe just a hint of betrayal and worry) crept across the bond and I didn't even try to hide my helpless despair.

"There are several blogs with that title," my brother finally, evenly answered.
"Yeah, but this one is awesome," Sharsky pressed, turning the monitor so we could all see Bumblebee's alt form plastered on the blog's home page.

"I don't believe I'm familiar with that one," Optimus smoothly lied. His spark was in turmoil, and I had the distinct impression I was going to have some explaining to do tonight. "It seems to amuse you, though."

"Yeah! We've been following it for months. It's a real eye opener."

"Interesting" was all Optimus said. His protectiveness was coming to the fore.

My roommates were spared a Prime's wrath by the sudden return of Cam, who burst through my bedroom door and then slammed it shut behind him. He wildly considered the window, but he was too late. Vengeance in Pink Camo threw open the door and stalked forward, flanked on either side by the blue component and a new, third one – a triplet in a rose-red PVC mock-turtleneck that zipped down the front. Pink- and Blue-Arcee both had dripping-wet hair, and all three of them looked ready for murder.

Fassbinder watched them in wide-eyed teenage-male fascination, all thoughts of 'baiting the maybe-alien' scattering like leaves.

From his pocket, 'Bee's cell phone sang, "Hey, Soulsister...the way you move ain't fair, you know."

"Oh, we know," Pink-Arcee growled as her components spread out to surround him.

He backed up to the wall and crouched down to the ready, but he never stood a chance, not when he had an oblivious-human audience who had to remain ignorant. The three components moved in an eerie synchronization – the blue one feinting to draw his attention while the pink one caught him in a headlock and the red one knocked his feet out from under him. They had him on the floor and pinned on his back in three seconds. Still, 'Bee put up a valiant fight, kicking and struggling so that Red-Arcee had to sprawl over his legs and the pink and blue components were forced to sit on his shoulders.

"It's like mud-wrestling, but with PVC!" Sharsky hissed in excitement.

"You know what comes now," Pink Arcee mock-growled, fighting a smirk. "In war, if you get caught, you get tortured."

He thrashed even harder, but Blue-Arcee lay down across his upper chest and shoulders to hold him there, while the pink component scrambled to kneel beside him. She yanked his shirt out of his waistband, baring his belly, and blew a loud raspberry on his stomach.

'Bee howled in mechanical laughter, but he was still thoroughly pinned and Pink-Arcee kept at it until he was out of breath and Sharsky was about to swoon.

"Do you give up?" she archly demanded.

Still wheezing with laughter, he nodded yes and the three components climbed off him and straightened. It took him a few more seconds to stop laughing enough to get up, and even then, he held his hands out to Arcee for her (them, whatever) to help him up. Rolling their eyes – again with the eerie synchronization – Red- and Blue-Arcee grasped his outstretched hands and pulled him to standing. He was face-to-face with Pink-Arcee, and she gave him a smug, affectionate grin. Bumblebee caught all three components in a huge group hug, and they returned it, though awkwardly because there were so many limbs.
I cleared my throat, and all three Arcees simultaneously turned to look at me in that weird, perfect coordination. My gaze darted to my slack-jawed roomies and it finally dawned on her that she had an audience.

All three Arcees disentangled themselves from Cam, their smiles fading a little. "Oh. Hi, guys. The name's R.C. Well, actually, it's River Christiansen, but R.C. fits a little better. These are Lita and Mia," she added, nodding to the purplish-red component and then to the blue one. "We're sisters."

"Really," Sharsky eagerly said, graciously taking one of Pink-Arcee's hands in greeting and shamelessly trying to hit on her.

"So...River was it?" Fassbinder asked, grinning as widely as when they were reading the Buzz in front of Optimus. "You like motorcycles?"

All three Arcees simultaneously gave the fawning Sharsky a confused look and then glanced blankly at Optimus. A couple of heartbeats later, Pink-Arcee focused on Fassbinder again. "We all drive one, yes," she answered him. "Now if you'll excuse us, we need to go dry our hair."

Blue-Arcee glared at 'Bee's holoform. "Cam, you're with us."

Yeah, he was as busted over the Buzz as I was. Ducking his head, he followed her (them, whatever) out.

"I'm sure you have homework," Optimus said to me, feeling like it was time for him to beat a retreat, too, presumably before the roommies started in on him and the Buzz again. "I'll leave you to your studying, and we'll talk again later."

His emotions left me feeling pretty ominous about what would be discussed 'later.' Sensing my worry, he poured his exasperated affection over the bond and then wrapped me up in a hug of the heart. With that, he nodded farewell and left.

Chapter End Notes

Bumblebee's song clips:
"Hit the Road, Jack" by Ray Charles
"Hey Soulsister" by Train
I hadn't been so nervous to fall asleep since the whole thing with the helicopter last fall. It took forever, and Optimus was already on the aircraft carrier. He'd muted the flow of emotion over the bond, which couldn't be a good sign, and it probably didn't help that I'd kept him waiting.

I hesitantly walked to his side and he turned to look at me. Well, 'look at me' is kind of an understatement. What little I could feel over the bond was probably best described as brooding, and his gaze felt...heavy. Like he was pinning me under it with all the quiet authority that was the essence of my brother Prime. I was like a deer in the headlights of a very annoyed truck.

"Before you say it," I protested, "I wasn't the one who started it. Fassbinder and Sharsky hacked it back at the beginning of the semester."

Optimus didn't answer, just crossed his arms and continued to silently, expectantly stare at me.

Soo not good. After just a few seconds, I started to physically squirm. "You're way too good at that 'glaring at you until you spill your guts' thing, you know?"

He didn't answer.

"This is probably how you interrogate Decepticons, huh. Just sit 'em down and glare until they crack."

Optimus cocked an eyebrow at that and I exploded with "Dammit! What do you want me to say, Prime?"

His shoulders relaxed a little then, and his hands fell to his side again. The block on the bond eased away, and he was every bit as upset as I thought he was. "I want you to be honest with me."

"Okay," I said, feeling so relieved it was embarrassing (especially since he could now sense it, too).

"You knew that at least two people without clearance were following the blog, and you did nothing to stop them."

"Um...how exactly was I supposed to do that?" I said, already on the defensive. "They hacked in first."

He was not impressed. "You didn't report it when you found out."

"Neither did Bumblebee," I said. "And it's his blog."

"Bumblebee is not a Prime," Optimus pointedly answered, irritation and disappointment flaring across the bond. "And humans are your domain."

Oh, he did not just say that! "So this is somehow my fault? Like I'm responsible for what every organic on this planet does?"

"Not all of them."

"Well that's sure what it sounded like to me!"
His irritation bubbled hotter. "You're misconstruing what I'm saying."

"You said humans are my domain and I should have stopped them. Seemed pretty clear to me!" I growled back.

A flash of fury burned across the bond before Optimus drew in a long breath of cool air through his vents. With effort, he deliberately calmed himself, pulling that familiar, profound peace from the depths of his spark and letting it seep into the bond. Even though I knew it was petty, I refused to grab hold of that calm like I normally would. My brother's sudden worry flickered once before he damped the flow of emotion on his end.

"You were not the one who hacked it or who let others in on the secret," he allowed once he was more in control of his emotions. "But it was dangerous to permit it to continue, Sam, and it still is."

"Oh, come on, Optimus!" I protested. "It's just been for laughs; it's not actually hurting anybody. Besides, we've got this. 'Bee kind of blew his cover a couple of months back, but Leo and I totally threw them off the scent."

"We don't know who else may have hacked it, and even if it is just your roommates, it's still a grave security breach. You should have told us. You should have told me."

And there was the heart, the spark, of this argument: trust.

Unfortunately for him, that dagger cuts both ways. "Well you didn't tell me about it. How do you think I felt, finding out that you guys have all had a blog about me for years. You were laughing at me behind my back for a lot longer."

Like a light being extinguished, my entire sense of him…disappeared. Not like severed disappeared, but like hiding.

He turned away, facing out over the morning-bright ocean.

*Crap!*

For a long moment, I just stared at him, but when he didn't look at me, I glanced at the sunrise to see if maybe I was missing something. Nope. It was just the same memory, eternally frozen in our shared memories: the true dawning of our brotherhood.

What was so wrong with what I said that he would react like *this*?

"We never laughed at you," Optimus finally declared, each word deliberate and resonating with an intensity I clearly heard even if I couldn't feel it. "We should not have excluded you, but we never mocked you."

I scratched the back of my head, realizing that's kind of what we – all us humans – had done while reading the blog. But he got one thing right; they were wrong to keep me out of the loop for so long. He knew it, too, and when I finally stopped feeling defensive long enough to catch up with what was going on, I realized he was scared. I'd scared the slag out of him, probably, judging by how tightly he was clamping down on that bond.

I was so not good at this sort of thing. "Hey." I shifted my weight awkwardly, reaching out over the bond only to hit that stone wall of a block. "Look…it's…"

He bowed his head. "Among my many failings as a brother – "
"Knock that off!" I burst out.

He looked at me sharply.

"Drop the block," I ordered him, exasperated with all the hints and riddles. "You wanted me to be honest with you? Okay. But you need to be honest with me, too. I don't care if you're angry. I don't even care if your anger makes me angry."

He narrowed his optics at me. "You don't know what you're saying."

"If this is going to be our first brotherly fight," I spoke over him, "I want to feel it when I hurt you, and vice versa. Because unlike Megatron, I won't do it on purpose."

Optimus' optics darkened. "I might."

"No," I reflexively answered. "Never."

"You are too short-lived to say never, Sam."

Abruptly we were on Cybertron in a tournament arena again, watching as Megatron strode in through the entrance. The silver mech looked much more like the youngling who begged his father for stories than like the warlord I knew on Earth. Unlike the memory from the family space-trip, though, the two mechs were the same height.

Optimus grinned at Megatron, letting his approval wash across their brother bond. "Congratulations on your adult frame. It suits you."

Megatron rolled his shoulders, stretching and (Optimus thought) showing off his new, bulkier mass. "We'll see about that. I need to put it through its paces and find out what improvements need to be made in the design."

"That's why we're here," Optimus agreed, his competitive streak growing stronger. "Team play against drones?"

"Duel," Megatron answered, smug challenge rushing in through his end of the bond. "I bested you often enough in a smaller frame. Now I'm going to wipe the floor with you."

"Upgrade in frame, downgrade in processors," Optimus teasingly quipped, dropping into his alt-form and racing to the dueling ring in the center of the arena. Once there, he rolled out of his alt, pulling a blunted metal sword from subspace and brandishing it. He blocked their bond, and I realized that you'd have to be an idiot to leave it open while fighting against someone you're bound to, even if you were just playing. "I'll take you on, brother."

With an almost manic grin, Megatron charged. Just like when I'd witnessed their real battles, Optimus and Megatron trash-talked each other while playing, too, though Megatron was throwing out most of the insults. I think it was supposed to be more fencing than fighting, but the longer they went at it, the more frustrated Megatron was that Optimus was still holding his own. Eventually the silver mech managed to catch my brother's blade, pinning it between the ground and his own sword, and body-checked Optimus. The move didn't throw Optimus off as much as he probably had hoped, but then it was hand-to-hand and Optimus began to take the blows personally. It was kind of hard not to when Megatron landed a right hook on Optimus' chassis that crunched up dangerously close to his spark. It was a low blow, and it awoke a cold fury in my brother. He'd already recognized that Megatron's wild fighting style wasn't up to the new, heavier frame. He took full advantage of the fact, and it wasn't long before Megatron was face-down on the stone floor, pinned by his older brother. Gloating, Optimus threw open his end of their bond and forced aside Megatron's block. I'm
"going to mop the floor with you, Optimus mocked.

"No, no, NO!" Megatron roared, but that fierce competitiveness kind of took over and Optimus dragged his brother halfway across the dueling ring, scraping up and generally ruining the finish on Megatron's new frame.

The silver mech tried to retaliate over the bond, but Optimus met him halfway, bearing down on his younger brother and mentally and emotionally wrestling him into submission. The sheer power behind that assertion of dominance surprised Optimus, but he was too caught up in the fight to really think about it.

"Are you done?" my brother demanded.

"No!" Megatron hissed, thoroughly pinned in both frame and spark.

"Then get that frame-designer to build something decent and I'll let you have a rematch." Optimus stepped back both physically and over the bond. His systems running hot with exertion, he turned his back and gingerly headed for the door, holding a protective hand over the damage near his spark.

Abruptly we were on the aircraft carrier and the block on his emotions was sealed shut again. My brother kept stubbornly staring out over the ocean.

"So…what?" I scoffed, still feeling that fierce competitiveness from his memories. "I'm supposed to be intimidated or something? Whatever happened between you two back then is ancient history. Literally. It doesn't matter now."

He looked over at me, and I felt the weight of his glare again, but this time I recognized it for what it was – the powerful mind of a natural-born Prime. For a split second, I felt like I could see into his spark, and he was far more like Megatron than he wanted to be. In that moment, I understood just how strong his will was and how much power he could unleash on his kin.

"I shaped him, Sam, and have come to regret it," he quietly said. He'd opened the bond just enough to make his point, but through that chink, a thin ribbon of guilt spilled out. "My convictions about freedom were hard-won."

Without thinking, I levered that chink wider and shoved my way into his mind. We were both shocked – I'd never done anything like this before – but I pushed forward. His mind was…uber organized. It was like walking into the biggest library imaginable and trying to find a book without a map – it was easy to get lost because the whole place was the same. Giving up on looking for the memory of him returning to life (that had been my first impulse), I pulled on my own will, my own determination that had moved heaven and earth to bring him back from the dead, and declared to his face, "I can stand up to you."

I could feel him push at my soul, trying to get me to back off, but I dug in.

"Sam," he pleaded, his anger all but gone now. He was so afraid to fight with me.

"No." I mimicked what he'd done to Megatron, grappling with his will, his fear fueling my own desperation to prove myself to him. "You can't drive me off. We're duking it out now."

He didn't resist.

I ground against his will, his pride, his spark until it all crumbled and he physically collapsed to all fours. Stunned, I recoiled back out of his mind and into my own. "I'm sorry," I instantly said, dropping down to kneel beside him. What the hell had I just done? "I don't…I'm sorry."
He bowed his head in alarming defeat, and the bond remained as open as I'd forced it. He held his grief and worry in check with his own spark-deep peace rather than barricaded behind the bond. He didn't say anything.

I was shocked, unable to speak myself. Did I seriously just…? Even more disturbing was the fact that I could have done that in the waking world. Without even raising a finger, I could take him down. He would let me do that.

"Don't," I finally said. "Just…get up, Optimus. Brother. I didn't mean to…" I helplessly trailed off when he didn't even look at me.

He was torn, his anxiety swirling with a confusing sense of duty. I could also feel him resisting the urge to close the bond against me.

Only an idiot would want to leave it wide open while fighting with kin, but that's what I was demanding and so he gave me what I wanted. But I was as horrified as he was scared.

"Freedom can only exist in the eye of the storm," he softly said, more to himself than to me, "in the tension amid conflict. And freedom is your right." He lifted his head, lifted his gaze to mine.
"Anything less reduces us to tyrants or slaves. I was a tyrant to my brother, long ago, but I would not yield and allow myself or anyone else to be his slave."

But he had yielded to me.

"I do not wish to fight you," he continued, the fear in his spark laid open for me. He needed me, and feeling first-hand just how much shook me to the core, too. "I do not wish to be to you the brother I once was to Megatron. Please know this, Sam. But I will not destroy your freedom, not even at the cost of our brotherhood."

I caught a glimpse of what he was saying. He would do anything to keep our bond, but letting me walk all over him would also, in his words, make me a tyrant. He loved me too much to let me become that. The depth of his wisdom and willingness to sacrifice his own happiness for my freedom left me a little awestruck. Then I half-laughed, wondering if I was expecting anything less from my ages-old, godlike Prime of a younger brother.

I reached out over the bond and pulled him into a hug of the heart. Despite it all, he leaned into it, letting my soul and his spark say everything that we just didn't have words for. Fear – both his and mine – mingled in the bond, fear of loss and fear for each others' physical safety. My longing bled in – wanting to be accepted despite my constant screw-ups – and was met by his need for a brother, for kin. Affection flowed freely, diluting the frustration that neither of us had given up all the way yet. But deeper and stronger than any of that was the solid, reassuring peace that was Optimus' presence. No matter what he might think about him teaching Megatron how to be a tyrant, Optimus never was nor could be one. It wasn't a matter of me being too short-lived and short-sighted to see otherwise. He was there for me and always would be, and we had proven that not even death could overcome that.

The thought was mind-boggling and a little terrifying, like standing on the edge of a high cliff, but I felt it soul-deep in the bond. We were really, truly bound to each other in the epic Primely kind of way. Whatever might be in store for Optimus, I would be a part of it.

"I'm not Megatron," I repeated for what felt like the hundredth time. "I've got my own screw-ups, but I really will not sever this bond. It doesn't matter what you throw at me."

He narrowed his optics, but I beat him to the punch. "I do understand what I'm saying." I rose to my
feet and extended my hand to help him up. (Even now, it was weird to do something like that.) "You aren't Megatron, either. So come on. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were chicken."

"It is good that you know better, then." He took my hand and stood up, and his grim resolve made our hug of the heart fall away.

I mentally braced myself. It was going to be a lot less heated, but this argument was one we just had to have. It took me a second, though, to remember what our original fight was about. "I might be a Prime –"

"You are a Prime," he firmly insisted.

I ignored that. "But that doesn't make me some kind of world-leader for the humans. Got it?"

He straightened his shoulders, a stubborn irritation rolling over the bond. "I see greatness in you, Sam. Do not fault me for believing better of you."

I looked heavenward, rolling my head a little at the fact that we were going to have this conversation: the one I'd had with both my parents, with Mikaela, with the guidance counselors at school… "I get that, okay? You see my potential and guess what, it's going to frustrate you from here to Cybertron and back that I'm gonna disappoint you sometimes. I'm gonna fail you sometimes. I already did, and it cost you your life. Get over it before it happens again."

He planted his hands on his hips and his heavy glare pinned me again. "I will not 'get over it.' Everyone makes mistakes, but I will never think you incapable of learning from them."

My own determination burned brightly across the bond, and I was rewarded with a flicker of surprise on his end. "Learning is one thing. Expecting me to control other humans is something else!"

That brought him up sharp, all his other emotions overwhelmed by excitement and a kind of 'aha!' sensation. (It was weird to feel it without knowing what the insight was.) Close on its heels was a… relaxation, I guess. He started to calm down, and it helped me a little bit, too. "I do not expect you to control them, Sam."

"Then what?" I demanded.

He chose his words carefully. "You stand as a human Prime by destiny and by choice. I expect you to consider that fact in your interactions with them. Not the entire human race," he quickly corrected when he felt me about to protest again, "but with those around you. It is not only the Autobots who are compromised by this hack. Your roommates are potentially exposed to danger now. It was your choice to stand idly by, and choices have consequences."

I frowned, my own guilt seeping into the bond.

"I expect you to let the fact that you are a Prime guide you as you face those consequences."

I snorted. "So handle it like you would."

"No," he answered, contrite. "I am one Prime among many, and you are the only Samuel Prime."

"So I should…what?" I challenged. "Do some soul searching? Meditate with Fassbinder's New-Age hippie mom?"

That familiar wry amusement finally resurfaced – the exasperation he felt whenever I put myself down. "You should do what you know in your heart is right. And part of being a Prime is protecting
the beings around you – mechanical, organic, or otherwise." Drawing on his strut-deep courage, he wrapped me back up in a hug of the heart. "I see greatness in you, Sam," he repeated. "Use it."

And despite it all, I couldn't resist that any more than he could. I relaxed into that familiar peace and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Wait," I blurted out, suddenly realizing what he'd said. "Mechanical, organic, or otherwise? What 'otherwise'? What's that supposed to mean? What else is there?"

His humor nudged me over the bond. "Over spring break, if I can arrange it," he promised. "We can visit as many different races as you'd like." His mood shifted, again turning more serious. "But I had another purpose in coming besides celebrating your birthday."

"Yeah?" My heart fell in anticipation of the other shoe dropping. "Can we...um, take a break or something?"

He shuttered his optics in surprise.

"I mean, we've got all night, right? 'Cause I don't know if I can handle any more bombs right now."

He pondered that for a second before nodding in decision. "You said you and your roommates have enjoyed reading the Daily Buzz. I would be interested in seeing that," he suggested, not quite letting me off the hook but still delaying the really intense conversation I could feel he wanted to have.

Figuring I should take the compromise, I said, "Alright, but only if you promise to not let Mrs. Lennox know what they think of her. Because it'll be worse than Arcee if she found out about the whole stripper thing."

I felt his growing curiosity and took that as a yes. As I went to place my hands on his shoulders, his awe and surprise swelled across the bond. I could only guess it was at the fact that I still trusted him enough to let him in, and I grinned as I rested my forehead against his helm.

We skimmed back to that day in September when I first found out about the blog. He saw my reasons for not 'fessing up then and how much I enjoyed seeing what the 'bots were all really thinking. We relived Bumblebee's reaction to finding out that I knew about the Buzz and his glee at our little conspiracy. Optimus' own amusement crept in, and I got the impression that he understood 'Bee's motives far better than I did.

We continued forward through the start of the new semester, and I let him see how the roomies helped keep that 'normal kid' side of my life alive and how Fassbinder had even come to my rescue when Larsen's attack happened right when my lit paper was due. And whenever they made some comment about Spitfire being an alien mother dominatrix goddess or something, Optimus mentally sniggered right along with me.

When we at last caught up with the present, Optimus stepped back and out of my mind and memories. Acceptance and understanding wove their way into the bond - he got it now, and he knew it wasn't just stupidity or spite that made me keep quiet about the Buzz being hacked.

"What do you think I should do?" I asked. Now that he'd walked a mile in my shoes (literally), I was honestly curious. "If I told on them, it'd be the end of The Buzz, right? I mean, I can't imagine BrassEagle keeping the thing alive if everyone thinks it's such a big security risk. And if that happened, then what about Bumblebee? He needs this, doesn't he?"

"He does," Optimus agreed. "He is a scout, accustomed to always being alert and in motion."
"And now he's my guardian," I realized. He was tethered to me with nothing better to do than freak out about Santa Claus and throw himself in front of napalm for me.

"The cognitive stimulation of playing all three sides of this – the Autobots, your roommates, and you – has been good for him, I believe."

"I don't want to just slam the door on him by shutting down the Buzz. Not after that whole thing when he hit the squirrel."

He nodded. "Perhaps we should simply insist on better encryption."

"Do you honestly think Fassbinder and Sharsky would just give up?" I demanded. "They'd probably quit college and live off Ramen and hacking jobs for the rest of their lives if this went off the radar."

"True," he admitted. "But knowing what you shared with me, my greatest concern is for them. The more any human knows about us, the greater the risk. Decepticons aren't the only ones who might target them. I am certain there are other rogue human groups like Sector Seven in existence, but perhaps with fewer moral constraints."

"Honorary Decepticons," I muttered.

"Choices have consequences," he continued. "Letting your roommates continue on this path will only place them in greater danger."

"Then don't they deserve a chance to make a choice? An informed one, seeing how they've already kind of stumbled into this mess already?"

I had him with that one, and we both knew it.

He tried to glare at me, but he couldn't, not when that wry humor was giving way to the real thing with each passing second. At last he said, "I will do what I can to mitigate the damage when you inform General Morshower about the security breach. Arguably, introducing ourselves to Fassbinder and Sharsky will help us better prepare for the day when we make the world aware of our presence."

There was a finality behind that statement, though, and I knew our little break was over. Time for the bombs to begin. I sighed dramatically. "You're not going to let me avoid this any longer, are you."

"I'm afraid not," he admitted. "We only have this one night before I have to leave again."

I nodded, giving in to the inevitable.

"You said that even as a Prime, you are not some kind of human world-leader," he said without preamble. "What responsibility do you feel for them?"

"Responsibility?" I echoed, surprised. This wasn't the chewing out I'd expected.

"Responsibility," he confirmed. "You will never be expected to lead them into battle. You will not seek power over them. I agree that you are not to be held accountable for every evil done by your species. But you are a Prime. What do you believe your responsibility to be?"

I didn't have to think about that one for very long. It was the sort of thing that came to mind every time I remembered a 'chemical spill' in Shanghai or the demolition of a college library in Pennsylvania.

"First, do no harm," I quoted.
"The Hippocratic oath," Optimus clarified after a moment of consideration. "You consider yourself to be responsible for their healing?"

"Not exactly," I corrected him quickly. "My first responsibility is to make sure that the stupid human things I do don't endanger others."

A spark shattering in the forest. "You're so weak!" "Sam, run!"

His optics flared for a moment, and he pulled me into a tight, soul-soothing hug of the heart. I emotionally leaned into it, and his spark just held me like that until he was sure I'd left that painful memory behind. "A duty that you performed admirably in the recent attempt on your life."

"A duty I performed that still got someone killed," I quietly countered.

Optimus would understand that this was something I had not said to 'Bee, that I could never say to my guardian. 'Bee had done the absolute right thing in neutralizing the threat, but my guilt would do him more harm than good.

"It is better for one to perish than many to be harmed," Optimus replied.

"And I get that." I had the absurd urge to pace and gave into it. "That doesn't mean I have to like it."

"You would not be my bond-brother if you did." He watched me walk back and forth, letting his spark-deep peace saturate our wide-open bond. I was grateful for that, but it wasn't enough to stop my nervous pacing. Finally he said, "What responsibility do you feel to the assassin?"

His first question had been easy to answer. This one had a thousand possible replies and no easy answers. I struggled to even put a thought together that expressed what I felt, but in the end, I knew that I had words inadequate to the task.

"I'll have to show you," I said at last.

The memory was a distant one from not long after 9/11 happened. For 6th-grade Social Studies, we had to write a report on something we'd seen on CNN once a week. One week, I had picked a report on President Bush's visit to a military hospital. There wasn't any sound in the memory—I couldn't have told you where he was or what he had said at the press conference that followed, but I remembered him stopping in the room of a veteran who was getting used to a prosthesis. He had shared a smile and a brief joke with a woman recovering from surgery. He had no medical qualifications and he couldn't have fixed things even with all the resources at his disposal, but that wasn't the point.

A mental flash came across the bond of Optimus visiting Ironhide in a similar situation. Of course he was no stranger to this scene. And maybe that was how this could be explained.

"I remember being impressed," I commented, when we returned to the present of the bond-dream. "No, Bush never drove a tank into Afghanistan. He wasn't at Ground Zero, pulling people to safety. But he was a leader who felt responsibility. He knew that he couldn't fix everything. He couldn't stop bad things from happening. But when bad things happened, he had compassion for those who suffered on his watch."

Optimus was silent for another space of time. He was either contemplating what I had said or waiting for me to go on.

When he didn't comment, I quietly said, "I wonder if Larsen had anyone like that. I wonder if this could have been prevented if someone had shown compassion for his suffering."
"You feel guilt for his demise." It wasn't a question, just a reference point. "You feel you should have been able to prevent it."

"I wish that it hadn't come to that," I agreed. "And I feel like..." I owed it to him – Optimus – and myself to know exactly what I meant. "I don't think anyone should have suffered the way he did. The only good thing about this is that he isn't suffering anymore. He's with his Sam and that might have given him peace. But..."

"He died suffering," Optimus finished my thought.

My mind went back to the image of a Commander-in-Chief among those who followed his orders into hell. And to the words of Larsen's final letter.

"I wish that I could have talked to him."

"Even if he meant you harm?"

"I don't blame him for that." I blamed a hell of a lot of Decepticons for that. I blamed myself for that sometimes. "I don't blame him, but I wish I could have let him know that I was sorry for what he had suffered. I don't even care if it would have helped me, but if in some way, it helped him..." I gestured helplessly. "I'm not good at explaining this," I apologized.

A dozen memories passed between us, either from his own storage or what he had shared with me. My brother was no stranger to this kind of guilt and even without the bond, I would have had no reason to doubt that.

"I understand," he said truthfully.

"Does it ever go away?" Stupid question. "I mean, how do you cope with it?"

"You are the only Samuel Prime," he reminded me. "Your human psyche operates very differently from mine."

"But..." I prompted him.

He nodded, and abruptly we were in the backyard of my now-destroyed home. Bumblebee's memories, I realized. Through an open window, we watched as Mom, Dad and I ate dinner. It was a generic scene – it could have been any day from even before the Autobots showed up.

"That's it?" I wondered as Dad said something that made Mom laugh and she playfully slapped his shoulder.

Wistful not-quite-grief rippled across the bond. "That, Sam, is everything: kin. Megatron destroyed that not only for me but for my entire race. He would destroy it for you, too, if he could, because your happiness enrages him as much as it brightens my spark."

I half-laughed. "So you're living vicariously through me?"

"Perhaps," he allowed. "But I like to think of it as countering the guilt by acknowledging the other, better consequences of my choices." He turned those bright optics on me. "For you, brother, you need look no further than the sunlight and everything it touches."

I was about to protest that it wasn't me who blew up the solar harvester, but he could feel that coming and his Primely stubbornness blocked it. Deciding it wasn't worth a fight, I said, "Backatcha."
Sharsky and Fassbinder spared me the trauma of telling everyone the blog had been hacked – they ratted themselves out. Spectacularly. And despite Simmons' demands, they didn't mysteriously disappear in the middle of the night, either. I guess Optimus took our little conversation to spark.

The semester actually went more smoothly once all the conspiracies were revealed, which was good because classes were getting difficult enough by that point that I really needed to focus.

As luck (or something) would have it, Optimus was able to come for spring break and we spent the time a lot like Christmas break. We were constantly bonding, both face-to-face and in our dreams, and Optimus kept his promise to take me sight-seeing on various inhabited planets. When we weren't trying to keep Sharsky from hitting on aliens, that is. But that whole week is a story all its own.

Chapter End Notes

No, really. Before you break out the energon swords about me skimming over spring break, our fic "Undercover" is all about that week, though it's not exclusively from Sam's or Optimus' point of view. (I have to leave a few things in suspense for The Daily Buzz.)

Also, I apparently need to clarify something. One reader found the "politics" in this chapter rather off-putting, while others have given me a hard time for Sam's observation in Kinship that Obama "is the coolest president ever." There was some collaboration in this chapter, and the person who contributed Sam's observations about 9/11 and its aftermath is also the same person who declared after the last presidential election, "I've never been so proud to be an American." I, who wrote the line about Obama being cool, did not vote for him. Making a realistic character means writing more from his perspective than from ours, and that would include historical and cultural forces. Whether you ultimately like Bush or not now, at one point he had a 90% approval rating, and those historical events would have an impact on Sam's childhood just like Obama's tremendous popularity would also make an impression. Politics is generally something we avoid discussing at our Botosphere dinners precisely because we have very differing views on the subject. I think it's rather ridiculous that I have to make an official statement, but the Botosphere is politically neutral. I doubt the reader who took such offense at Sam's perspective will ever read this, but in case anyone else is wondering, I thought I should make our position clear.
Memories

Like last semester, the run up to finals felt like a rush. Bio 122 had a unit test the Friday before reading days, and my art history project was due the following Monday. That wasn't as bad as it might sound, though, since Mikaela had been more than willing to help me. My CS 115 class was a total cakewalk given who my roommates were, but Lit was going to kill me.

"My brain hurts," Leo complained as we left our Lit class for the last time.

It was the final review, which was basically the teacher showing us all of her Powerpoints from the last semester in one sitting. I didn't recognize at least a third of them, so basically I spent the hour getting more and more depressed about how many classes I'd skipped.

"I'm so flunk-ing!" My voice flipped in surprise when a hand grabbed my shoulder and yanked me toward a side hall. I only got as far as the spike of adrenaline before I saw it was just Cam Romero. Leo looked as wide-eyed as I felt.

"Jeez, 'Bee, give me a heart attack why don't you?"

He scowled and held up his cell phone, shaking it a little with a "Duh!" expression on his face. Then he strode toward the nearest exit. Leo and I exchanged a glance and dove for our silenced cell phones, running to catch up with Cam. There were fourteen voice mails and more than fifty texts for me.

Beside me, Leo cussed as he looked through his messages.

Al-Sharif, Lennox, 'Bee, Ratchet, even Morshower had all left me texts. The previews were all along the lines of "Get here NOW!" and "Where are you?"

"What's going on, Cam?" I demanded.

"Pack your bags," he quoted. "Seven days six nights in paradise. Your brother is in the hospital. Unconscious."

"Again?" If I weren't so panicked, I would have rolled my eyes.

My phone was still on silent-mode from when I was in class, but the screen lit up with an incoming call. It was al-Sharif.

"What's wrong?" I demanded instead of saying 'hello.'

"There's been an incident on the island. I don't have many details yet, but you and Bumblebee are being called there immediately. We need you on base as soon as possible."

"If I don't stop to pack, I can be there in like 45 minutes," I told him.

"Half hour," Cam corrected in spliced quotes. "I took the liberty of packing for you."

"The sooner the better," al-Sharif ordered.

"Right." I hung up and looked at Leo. "Gotta go to the island. Something big is going down with Optimus."

"What about finals?"
I huffed in frustration. Of course he would get himself…whatever he did during finals week. I remembered his comment about fate rarely calling on us at a time of our choosing, but did it have to go out of its way to be inconvenient? I didn't have a choice, though, not really. My bond-brother needed me. If I had to re-take the entire semester – if I flunked out and had to go to a different school – I'd still go to Diego Garcia now.

"Stay here," I told Leo. "I don't know if I'll be able to make up my finals or not, but if I can't, there's no sense in you failing, too."

"Go to the mattresses - I'll hold down the fort for you. If it looks bad on the grade front, me and my boys will rig something for you."

It was almost touching. "Thanks."

When we arrived on Diego Garcia, Bumblebee drove us straight into Ratchet's med bay and popped open the driver's side door for me. I had fidgeted nervously for the entire fifteen hours we were in flight. 'Bee suggested several times that I get some rest, but whenever I dozed off, I dreamed I was standing on the end of the aircraft carrier's flight deck by myself. I hadn't slept a wink.

The Decepticons who had landed last fall had somehow made it to Diego Garcia and mounted their attack while I had been sitting in class reviewing Chaucer. They were all small ones, infiltrators and assassins, and they had caught Optimus in a surprise assault. He wasn't severely damaged, though; he wasn't even moderately damaged. When the other 'bots arrived, he'd stood up and started to talk to them and then just dropped into stasis for no apparent reason. When nothing they did pulled him out of it and Ratchet's scans didn't reveal anything either, the medic had resorted to opening my brother's spark chamber. It was then that they discovered that Optimus had hidden the Matrix of Leadership in his spark chamber at some point. Nobody dared to touch the Matrix except me, so they were all waiting for me to come pull it out of Optimus' spark chamber in the hopes that it would fix whatever was wrong.

I climbed the stairs to the platform beside the repair berth. "How is he?"

Ratchet gave me a piercing look. "I had hoped you could tell me."

I frowned, worry and guilt writhing in my gut. "The bond's not…" I couldn't describe it – it froze my heart to even try. In a small voice, I said, "It's like last October when he went into the Matrix. I can't feel him." Also like last October, I could feel that same void where the bond was, that black hole trying to suck me in.

He looked back at Optimus. "He's unresponsive. There was only minimal damage, all of which I've repaired. Physically he's fine. But…" Ratchet touched some kind of data port in Optimus' wrist and the spark chamber slowly opened. "This." The medic gestured helplessly at the Matrix now lying at the back of Optimus' chamber. "This is beyond my expertise."

Which was why I was here. "How am I supposed to…?"

He pulled some doohickey or another out of subspace and, attaching it to the outside of Optimus' spark chamber, tinkered with it until a mini force-field looking thing caught the spark in a bubble. "Emergency containment field," he said by way of explanation. "It won't perfectly shield the radiation, but it will keep the both of you from being mortally damaged."

Nodding at that less-than-reassuring comment, I scrambled across my brother's chassis and lay down
next to the chamber. I could see the Matrix all the way behind his spark. Even with that emergency force-field, it was hot in there. I reached in, careful to not let my arm get too close, and the irony was not lost on me. Last time I'd been driving the Matrix into his spark and now I was trying to pull it out like a sliver.

Carefully, hissing against the scorching heat, I slid the Matrix to the edge of the chamber and inched it up the wall until I had it all the way out. (Fortunately it was cool to the touch - probably because it was designed to hold millions more times energy than Optimus' spark.) Ratchet and I both breathed a sigh of relief when it was safely out. Then the medic released the force-field and sealed up Optimus' spark chamber again.

I tried to hand the Matrix to Ratchet, but he held his hands up and stepped back. "No, Samuel."

Grimacing, I awkwardly climbed back over to the platform with the Matrix in hand. Stupid superstitions. If I fell and cracked my head open, I somehow knew he would still blame me. Once there, I turned again to look at my brother. "Now what?"

It was a full fifteen seconds before Ratchet admitted, "I do not know."

I huffed in frustration. They would expect me to fix this – I wanted to fix this! – but I honestly didn't have a clue how. Glowering at the Matrix, I said to Ratchet, "Can I at least get a backpack for it again?"

A minute later, Ironhide came in and offered me the backpack in one hand. In the other, he held out a basket full of Tupperware boxes. I gave him an incredulous look, and he simply said, "Eat."

Taking the backpack and stowing the Matrix in it, I answered, "I don't have time for a four-course meal."

"Sarah Lennox's orders," he rumbled in reply.

Grumbling under my breath, I took the food and plopped down on the top step of the platform. I wolfed down as much as my worry would let me, and then I shoved the basket back in Ironhide's direction.

"Just…give me a few minutes, 'kay?"

Bumblebee nodded and collapsed down into his alt-form, but he backed into the space under the med bay's other repair berth and powered down. Ratchet and Ironhide exchanged a glance and did the same. Deciding it was better than nothing, I sat down on Optimus' shoulder-armor and stared at his empty optics for a long moment. "What's going on in there?" I murmured to him. "What happened to you?"

I slid down, sitting on the berth beside his head and leaning against one of those blue antennas. "And why do you keep doing this to us?" I complained.

I closed my eyes, searching inward and reaching out him over the bond-sense. I was met by that void pulling painfully at my heart, and I warily circled it, looking for my brother. No echo of humor, no calm reassurance. He wasn't there.

"Where are you, brother?" I asked him, slumping down and resting my cheek against his helm. Maybe I should sleep – maybe I could find him that way. I closed my eyes.

"Sharp, irritating pain all up and down my back armor. I swing my hand-blade, hot with energon and fury, behind my back trying to slice the Decepticons off. One screams, but they don't let go."
Their symbiote-flyer's piercing, tearing claws dig into my hip, but he swoops away, out of my blade's reach. I stagger, and the Matrix tumbles out. The Matrix! They're after the Matrix!

The flyer wheels in the sky, diving for the relic and I leap forward to sprawl on the ground, covering it with my frame. Let the Decepticons come – my Autobots are on their way.

Blades hack at my neck, and I flinch, trying to shake them off. It hurts. But moving means surrendering the All Spark again. Sam would die first – I will be like my brother.

I am vulnerable. The All Spark is vulnerable. Shielded by my frame, I open my armor against the sand and release the seal on my spark chamber, shifting until I can work the Matrix inside. I close my armor around my spark again with fierce satisfaction. Even if they kill me, they will have to literally tear my frame apart to steal it. The human phrase "over my dead body" comes to mind.

The sound of a Corvette's familiar engine – purring with the pleasure of battle – reaches my audios moments before the screams. The Decepticons flee, and harboring the Matrix as I am, I feel it when two of their sparks are extinguished. Ironhide's cannons make the earth tremble, and a third Decepticon falls. I can sense no other enemies near, only the sparks of my friends. Ratchet is beside me, fretting. I do not dare say that to his faceplates, but it is accurate.

"I am not severely injured," I tell him.

"That's for me to decide," he growls.

I rise to sitting, the ache in my shredded hip suddenly stinging. Searing agony grazes my spark...

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I realized this was a memory. Optimus' memory. I'd found him, but he wasn't dreaming.

Sharp, irritating pain all up and down my back armor. I swing my hand-blade behind my back trying to slice the Decepticons off.

Their symbiote-flyer's piercing, tearing claws dig into my hip, but he swoops away, out of my blade's reach. I stagger, and the Matrix tumbles out. The Matrix! They're after the Matrix!

The flyer wheels in the sky and I leap forward, covering it with my frame. Let the Decepticons come – my Autobots are on their way.

Blades hack at my neck, and I flinch, trying to shake them off. It hurts. But moving means surrendering the All Spark again.

I am vulnerable. The All Spark is vulnerable. Shielded by my frame, I open my armor against the sand and release the seal on my spark chamber, shifting until I can work the Matrix inside. I close my armor around my spark again with fierce satisfaction. Even if they kill me, they will have to literally tear my frame apart to steal it.

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"I am not severely injured," I tell him.

"That's for me to decide," he growls.
I rise to sitting, the ache in my shredded hip suddenly stinging. Searing agony grazes my spark…

The dream was repeating I realized. Like the infinite loop Sharsky had griped about in his code once. Over and over and over. For how long?

Sharp, irritating pain all up and down my back armor. Their symbiote-flyer's piercing, tearing claws dig into my hip, but he swoops away, out of my blade's reach. I stagger, and the Matrix tumbles out. The Matrix! They're after the Matrix!

The flyer wheels in the sky and I leap forward, covering it with my frame. Let the 'cons come – my Autobots are on their way.

I am vulnerable. The All Spark is vulnerable. Shielded by my frame, I open my armor against the sand and release the seal on my spark chamber, shifting until I can work the Matrix inside. I close my armor around my spark again with fierce satisfaction.

The sound of a familiar engine – purring with the pleasure of battle – reaches my audios. The Decepticons flee.

Ratchet is beside me.

"I am not severely injured," I tell him.

"That's for me to decide," he growls.

I rise to sitting. Searing agony grazes my spark…

I jolted awake, hair on end and heart pounding. The dream – the memory – was changing!

"Bumblebee!" I shouted at him, stumbling to my feet. He transformed out of his alt-form to look at me with hope in his optics. Ratchet and Ironhide were half a heartbeat behind him. Ratchet strode over to Optimus' side. "What is it, Samuel?"

"He's stuck. Like an infinite loop. The same memory over and over, but it's changing."

"Explain," Ironhide brusquely ordered.

"Okay, I tried to find him in our dreams like usual, but he wasn't there. I just kind of…landed, I guess, in one of his memories and I was reliving it like I was him. But each time there were fewer details, like he was losing parts of the memory."

Bumblebee's doorwings fell in disappointment and Ratchet glared at Optimus like my brother had done all this on purpose just to annoy the medic.

"But he's in there, right? I mean, there was the memory at least."

Ratchet dismally shook his head at my question. "He's in stasis, Samuel. The only processor activity is in the sectors controlling autonomics – energon circulation and cooling systems, primarily. He's not accessing his memory files."

"But…?"

"It's a spark-memory," he explained. "We are not mere computers, and some things leave imprints on our sparks themselves."

"Things that scar the spark," I murmured, suddenly realizing that Optimus hadn't been talking metaphorically.
Ratchet tilted his head in a curious glance. "Yes. There was a time when most spark-memories were good ones, but since the beginning of the War..." He vented a sigh, shaking off his impending melancholy. "Usually a loop like that occurs in frame-memories when there is a code virus or damage to processors, but we don't have either scenario here. And it's a spark-memory. My only conclusion is that his spark-memories have been damaged somehow, though I've never even heard of such a thing happening."

"The Matrix," I realized. "It was near his spark." The 'bots just stared at me for a second. "Come on! – it's the All Spark, right? It downsized from the Cube to the Matrix but it's still the same basic thing."

"You would know better than we would," Ironhide finally said.

It made me feel a little better having an idea of what we were up against. Now that I thought about it, putting the Matrix of Leadership in his spark chamber was a really stupid thing for him to do, especially after he saw what happened to his brother. Terrified, I beat back the mental image of Optimus' spark being ripped apart like Megatron's.

"Do you have a proposed regimen of treatment?" Ratchet archly demanded.

I should have known the Autobot CMO wouldn't be happy about me solving a problem he couldn't. I wasn't sure if he'd be any happier knowing I didn't know how to fix it. "Not really, but it gives us a working theory. So…the Matrix did something to his spark that messed up the memories he keeps there. But everything else about him is okay?"

"As far as I can ascertain, yes."

"So…" I shifted, irritated at the logical conclusion to this. "If the All Spark broke him, the All Spark is going to be our best chance of figuring out how to fix him."

"Sure, Samuel," Ironhide sarcastically said, edgy with frustration. "Locate the All Spark on your comm system and let us know what it tells you."

I frowned at him, but I realized there really was only one way for me to reach the All Spark, and that was through the Matrix. Optimus had gone there at least once, and as hated to admit it, I knew I had to go there now, too. I didn't want to tell them and get the Autobots' hopes up, though. "I need to…sleep some more, I guess."

"You're lying," Bumblebee quoted in a sing-song voice, calling me on my cowardice.

Of course I wouldn't be able to slip anything past 'Bee. He didn't need a bond to read my mind. "I think…I think he's in the Matrix, and I need to go there, too."

Bumblebee's wings spread wide in alarm, Ratchet threw his hands up in the air, and Ironhide menacingly crossed his arms, all three of them talking over each other. "Stop!" "Are you mad?" "Hold on a second."

"Need I remind you, Samuel," Ratchet said, somehow managing to snarl and sound like a snob at the same time, "that you are human? Your bond is extraordinary, but it does not change who and what you are. To venture into the Matrix, into the…the Hades of our race…” Again he threw his hands into the air in disgust.

I half-smiled. "I'm a Prime. Selfless, death-defying acts of stupidity are part of the job description."

'Bee scolded, "Sam!" He lowered his helm so we were eye-to-optic, but he didn't say anything. He
didn't have to.

I rested my hand on his cheek-strut. I wanted to tell him it was all going to be okay, but I couldn't make that promise. None of us knew if it was even possible for me to follow Optimus, much less if I could get him back. I searched my heart, trying to find an answer for both 'Bee and me, but all I could feel was that painful void. Swallowing hard, I said, "Fate, right?"

He shook his head 'no' and rested a gentle finger on my shoulder.

"I have to, 'Bee," I murmured. "I…I don't know if I even can live without him. He's my brother, you know?"

His whole frame drooped, curling in on itself in sorrow, and I felt about two inches tall when I remembered he'd also lost a brother long ago. But he nodded in understanding.

Ironhide harrumphed, and it had the same effect as clearing his throat. "You are more than a Prime, Samuel. You are brother to my clan leader. You are kin's kin." It was the first time any of the 'bots besides Optimus had claimed me as family, and I swallowed down a lump in my throat. "I've beaten sense into him before – kin to kin. Don't make me do it to you."

"Ratchet wouldn't let you," I started to say, but the medic interrupted, "I'll hold you down for him."

"Some healer you are," I grumbled. I sized up Ironhide for a second and, sliding the backpack to the floor, pulled out the Matrix. It warmed as it flared blue in my hand. "What does this make me, then? Because, honestly, I'm still trying to figure it out myself. None of this was my idea."

His arms stayed crossed, but his shoulders relaxed a little. No challenge there – so far, so good.

"You don't always knock sense into him," I pointed out. "Most of the time you follow him. Because you trust him."

"Kin," he stubbornly repeated. "I knew his spark – his mate was sister to mine."

"But I don't have a spark, which means I'm not really kin, right? So how can I convince you to trust me? Or maybe I never can, no matter what this" – I lifted the Matrix – "means for any of us."

He drew himself up a little taller at that like I'd hit a nerve, but he surprised me by simply saying, "You have my trust, boy."

Boy, son, brother. My heart warmed.

"We'll stand by you," Ironhide declared, though it was more of a threat than a reassurance, and he made himself comfortable by sitting down on the other repair berth. 'Bee met my gaze for a split second and then turned away, giving me privacy without actually giving me space. Ratchet shook his head at them both and, muttering, went to tinker with the mostly-healed wound in Optimus' hip.

I held the Matrix, slowly turning it over in my hands, and tried to ignore the 'bots who were not quite able to ignore me. The black hole on the other end of my brother bond pulled at my soul, and I clenched my jaw against it. I was beginning to think that might be the way in to the Matrix – to step into that void and let it swallow me. Instinctively, I knew I could (and probably would) get lost in there and never find my way back out. Then the Autobots would be left without any Prime.

I remembered Optimus' comment that I'd faced death already, but that wasn't like this at all. When I died, it was on accident and maybe it had just been a…limbo or something. Like an out-of-body experience instead of dead dead. This time, though, it was a choice. If I did this then it would be a
deliberate journey into the darkness.

I also remembered my Lit professor's Powerpoint about The Inferno. In the semester review, she'd said that in the realm of myth and poetry you only can visit the underworld once. Orpheus wasn't able to go back, and Dante's was a one-time shot, too. Was Giza my once-in-a-lifetime thing? Or was it now? Maybe Optimus was the one who couldn't come back – this was his second time in the Matrix, if that's really where he was.

I was afraid, I finally admitted. Last September, I knew what I had to do to reignite Optimus, but this was about as blind as faith could get. I was out of options, though; I had to do something. It had been more than a day and a half now with no response from him and no answers.

Taking a deep breath, I stuffed the Matrix into the backpack and slung it over one shoulder. Then sitting beside him, I leaned against my brother and closed my eyes. The black hole loomed. Steeling my resolve, I let go of the living world.

... 

The first thing I became aware of was a haze of smoke and dust. The scent of sand and sulfur told me where I was before I could really see anything: the Battle of Giza. But it was eerily quiet and still. I slogged through the uneven sand, trying to get my bearings. "Hello?"

No one answered – not other Autobots, not NEST soldiers, not Mom or Mikaela. So this wasn't a memory, then, because they would have if this vision was my doing. "Optimus?" I reached out across our bond, trying to feel my way to him. Staggering around a burned-out wreck of a building, I saw him lying on the ground like he had that day – motionless and empty. Terror and denial surged through me. "Optimus!"

I ran to him as fast as the shifting sand would let me, and it was a shock that we weren't the same size. We were always the same height in our bond dreams. His optics were dark, and there was a gaping hole in his chest again, but he turned his head when I yelled to him, and his mouth moved when he said, "Sam."

I fell to my knees beside his head, slinging the backpack off my shoulders to reach for the Matrix, but it wasn't there.

"Not this time," he softly explained. He sat up, and I hurried out of his way, unable to tear my eyes away from the…thing…zombie of my brother.

"I came here in search of my brother Primes," he added as he stood. I could see the ash-grey sky through the wound in his chest. "I was hoping to find a point of connection with them. I'm surprised you were able to find me, though I'm glad you did."

"Me, too," I softly answered, and it was true that I was glad to see him, even if it was in a nightmare.

"Nightmare," he mused, looking around. "Light in the darkest hour."

I didn't know what to say to that. "Why can't you wake up?"

He gestured toward the mangled remains of his spark chamber. "There's not enough of me left."

I swallowed hard. The idea of a world without Optimus was just…incomprehensible. "I brought you back once – I'll do it again. With or without the Matrix."

Humor – the wry humor that was so familiar coming from him – weakly rippled across our bond, so
faint I almost couldn't feel it. *There's not enough of me left...* It drove home his words in a way that nothing else could. He nodded. "Strong words from a strong heart. But there is nothing for us here. Where else did you encounter the Dynasty of the Primes?"

"Here was the only place. Unless you count all the times I heard voices or saw the symbols."

"Where was that?"

"At college, mostly, and..." I froze, remembering one other time I felt a presence that I hadn't recognized at the time for what it was. A presence, and the soft whisper in my mind that there was a purpose to what I was doing, filling me with the confidence and courage to go on. "The Tomb of the Primes."

Abruptly we were there, standing outside the enormous doorway. A movement in the shadows behind the doorway caught my attention, and I looked up...and up to see one of the Ancient Primes.

"Brother," Optimus greeted him.

"Optimus. Sam."

"What's going on?" I asked the Ancient.

"The Matrix grazed Optimus' spark," he answered. "It was never intended to come in contact with a power still living."

My heart sank at his words, remembering Megatron's spark literally being ripped apart by the Cube.

"Take courage," he continued. "Energy can neither be created nor destroyed – only transformed. The power of your brother's spark returned to its source and is held there with the sparks of all those who have been extinguished in your plane of existence."

My brow furrowed as I tried to make sense of it all. "So...Optimus' spirit lives on? Is that what you're saying?"

"In the Well of All Sparks, yes, as I and my brothers do, and as all who came from the All Spark will when they leave your realm."

"So...why doesn't he come back, then? Ratchet said there is no reason for him to be in stasis still. Physically, he's fine!"

"He is being overwritten."

Why was it that *everything* related to the All Spark had me ready to kick something? "So what am I supposed to do about it?"

He seemed surprised and watched me expectantly.

"Oh come on! All this, for nothing? He's right here! There's still time. There *has* to be. So what do I have to do to get Optimus back?"

"You must face death..."

"Been there, done that."

"And life..."
"Dude, are you listening?"

"Are you?"

My mouth snapped shut, but I glared at him in impatience.

"If you undertake this, you will be overwritten, too."

And suddenly I realized where Optimus got it when it came to dropping conversation bombs. He'd inherited it, apparently. "What, exactly, does that mean?"

"It means that to follow him, you must have what he has."

"Meaning…?"

"You must have a spark."

My breath whooshed out in surprise, but I refused to think about it too deeply, focusing instead on the, erm, mechanics. "How? How can a human get a spark?"

The Prime refused to answer, and I nodded my head, thinking 'par for the course. "Okay, fine, whatever it takes. Now tell me what I need to do."

He extended his hand, gesturing me forward, and I climbed up through the doorway to join him in the shadows.
Fraternity

Chapter Notes

We don't know the names of any of the original Primes in the movies (the Primes from the War for Cybertron, etc. don't look anything like the RotF Dynasty, so I'm treating them as something different). Because of that, the names I give them here are completely my invention. The idea that all Primes have unique roles to fulfill in their service to the All Spark is cobbled together from canon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the room outside the Tomb of the Primes, I stood and dusted the dirt off my jeans. Straightening, I just about jumped to realize I was the same height as the Ancient Primes in front of me. All six of them were there now. The shock sent my heart to my throat; even Optimus wasn't as tall as these guys. Something about being so big – so larger than life – was terrifying.

"Well met," the closest one said, his red optics piercing me. "I am Alpha Prime, the eldest of our race and protector of the All Spark and of Cybertron."

I looked around the room, wondering what else had changed besides my height. The hole Bumblebee had blasted through the wall was way too small for me now. Trying to keep both hands firmly on the wheel of this little nightmare, I asked, "Well, Alpha, what now?"

"Now we will try you." They all started converging on me, and I forced myself to stand still and not back away. I admit it helped that I wasn't human-sized anymore, but they were still really intimidating.

Once I was surrounded, Alpha raised his hand to gently place it on my head, bowing his own. Just like Optimus had, he skipped through my memories, searching, until I was clinging to a fragile statue above Mission City, Megatron menacing me with his mace. "I'm never giving you this All Spark!"

"Oh, so unwise," Megatron purred, and the stone beneath my feet exploded.

Alpha Prime removed his hand before Optimus caught me in the vision, and again I was in the Tomb of the Primes. He nodded once, stepping back. "Courage and sacrifice. Well done, brother."

"Brother. When he said the word, I felt it settle down deep in my heart, coming to rest next to my bond with Optimus. I couldn't feel Alpha over that bond-sense, but I knew I'd been marked as… something.

Another of the Dynasty stepped forward. "I am Seneschal Prime, steward of the All Spark and the household of its creations. Under my direction, and with the labor of my own hand, the Temple at Simfur was constructed to house the All Spark. I oversaw the production and distribution of energon." Placing his hand on my head, he also searched my memories, pausing on the moment when I gave the Cube sliver to Mikaela. Removing his hand from my head, he said, "Well done."

"Huh?"

He tilted his head to the side curiously. "Do you not know why you didn't give it to your guardian?"
"I…” My brow furrowed as I again relived the memory, trying to understand my reasoning. "I'm not sure. She was the only one I could trust with it, and then I kind of forgot that I gave it to her. Looking back now it doesn't make any sense, but…"

"But?"

"But it…felt right." It sounded so lame when I put it that way, but then it was a pretty lame thing to do.

Seneschal radiated approval, though. "That was right, Samuel, and Optimus relinquished the Shard to human custody on that same instinct. Our race has fought itself almost to extinction over control of the All Spark. It is great power, but it is less significant to your kind than to us. It was better served by remaining with humans. You obeyed its will as perfectly as I did, even though it was illogical." He repeated, "Well done, brother."

I actually blinked in surprise at his praise, and again the word brother sank right down into my heart. The next Prime stepped forward before I could wonder about that. "I am Amicus Prime," he said, "the mouthpiece for the All Spark to foreign species and ambassador for our race. I oversaw the exploration and colonization of space, sharing command of the Seekers with the one who became The Fallen."

He laid his hand on my head, and I was back on a concrete viaduct, Sector Seven goons wrestling me to the ground while Bumblebee let them swarm and freeze him – for me. "Look, he's not fighting back!" I screamed. I watched in horror as the cold overwhelmed him, slowing his responses as he called out my name. Breaking free, I ran and yanked one of the cold-pack things away from the guy holding it, turning it on him before being tackled again. And then Amicus skipped forward to Hoover Dam, where I led the charge into the torture chamber or whatever Sector Seven called it, shouting at everyone to stop freezing 'Bee. And while he was swinging his whirring and primed cannon around, I never felt even a moment of fear, instead telling him, "The Cube is here, and the Decepticons are coming." I was the one reassuring him, praying that I was right when I pointed to Lennox and his team and said, "No, no, no, don't worry about them. Right? They're not going to hurt you." And then tormented 'Bee, surrounded by the beings who had injured him, actually stood down on my say-so.

Amicus stepped back. "Between your race and mine, you have created bonds of understanding and friendship. You stand with a foot in both worlds, as I did. Well done, brother." Another touch on my heart, and I realized it felt kind of like Optimus' weakest kin-bonds. They were claiming me as kin.

The next Prime stepped in front of me. "I am Stromancer Prime, and knowledge was the dominion given me by the All Spark. I am the one who developed the written language of the Primes and incorporated our clan-glyph into the build of all our descendants." In a now-familiar gesture, he placed his hand on my head and searched my memories.

"Only a Prime can defeat The Fallen," Jetfire declared under the Egyptian sun.

"Optimus Prime?" A memory, clear and sharp: the glyph on Optimus' helm. The symbol was burned into my mind with the others, but only then did I recognize it for what it was.

"So you've met a Prime? You must have met a great-descendent! Is he alive? Here? On this planet?"

"He sacrificed himself to save me." Like the Dynasty did for this entire world.

"So he's dead. Without a Prime, it's impossible. No one else could stop The Fallen."
I couldn't stop The Fallen. I couldn't elude the Decepticons forever. Those were impossible things without a Prime. But with Optimus...

If I could get him back, if I could undo my mistake, he could finish the job his ancestors started. The thought felt right, like it was a done deal. It wasn't a matter of 'if' but of 'how.' I just had to figure it out. The answer was already in front of me, I could feel it. How could I reactivate a shattered spark? I didn't understand any of the anatomy of the 'bots, but even I knew It would take energy - more than any earthly power plant could produce. Even solar energy...

I froze as an idea took hold. "So this same energy that's going to be used to reactivate the machine, could that energy somehow be used to reactivate Optimus and bring him back to life?"

"It was never designed for that purpose, but it's an energy like no other."

Meaning it was possible. And if it was possible, I would do it. A sense of purpose settled over me, as strong as the guilt and more driving than the fear. I knew what needed to be done. It didn't matter what happened to me anymore. Earth needed a Prime and anything else was just details. This was bigger than me.

The Ancient Prime released me from the vision. "With an intuition worthy of my own descendants, you knew the power of the Matrix. Well done, brother." The word was like a fingerprint on my soul.

He was followed by a Prime who could have been his body-double. "I am Augur Prime, the first of the seers. I read the stars and the patterns the All Spark weaves into our lives." He laid his hand on my head and brought me to the Tomb of the Primes, where the Matrix of Leadership disintegrated in my hands.

Sympathy in her eyes, Mikaela said, "You can't bring him back, Sam. There's nothing left."

"Look!" I sharply answered. "Look around you! I mean, we didn't just go through everything we went through for no reason at all, to just have it end like this. There is a reason that we are here. The voices and the symbols in my head led us here – for a purpose." I knelt, scooping up the dust – the Matrix particles that would find their way into my blood and bring me to stand here among the Dynasty of the Primes. "Everyone's after me because of what I know…and what I know is that this is going to work."

When Augur Prime stepped back, real approval shown in his optics. "You saw hope in the darkness and heard wisdom despite despair. Well done, brother." And again I felt it when he claimed me as kin.

The next Prime stepped forward. "I am Paraclete Prime, and I was the one called upon as an intercessor between my kind and the All Spark when a youngling or sparkling was wanted." He, too, placed his hand on my head and sifted through my memories, pausing at the moment when Optimus gave me the Matrix so I could try to reignite Jazz. Again I felt the dread that was a warning from the ancient Primes. Again, I felt the Matrix cool in my hand and realized I couldn't reignite Jazz. In the vision, I returned the Matrix to Optimus, knowing it was the right thing to do and hating it.

Paraclete removed his hand from my head, bringing us back the kinda-present. "Well done…"

"Why couldn't I reignite him?" I interrupted.

"The giving of life is as weighty an act as the taking of it. It is not your fate to reignite him. Had you gone forward, he would have been restored to life, but it would have been contrary to the will of the master all Primes serve."
I frowned a little at that, half-baked plans of reigniting Jazz as soon as I got Optimus back fizzling out as I looked into the red optics of Paraclete. Another memory flitted through my mind – my protests that I wasn’t a god to go around handing out life like candy. Primes were servants, and it would be as wrong for me to tinker with giving life as it was for Megatron to corrupt the Cube. Still, the whole thing bothered me. "But…why? I won't defy the All Spark, but why can't I reignite him?"

"Brother of my mate." Her words settled deep into my soul like the Primes' had, claiming me as kin, and I turned to see a familiar rose-red femme. She was as tall as the others and stood optic-to-eye with me, though she was on the other side of the ring of mechs who surrounded me.

"Elita!" I breathed in surprise. Even though this was technically the first time I'd seen her, she was as familiar to me as Arcee or Ratchet.

"Sam," she greeted me.

"But…you're here?"

She tipped her head with just a hint of a smile. "Yes. Though I am fully severed from your plane of existence, my spark was one with Optimus' and he is a Prime."

"Oh." I felt kind of dumb for not realizing that sooner.

"Jazz was given a choice," she continued, "and he made it with the wisdom inherent in his clan."

"His clan? You mean he really was a seer?"

She gravely nodded. "His original clan leader was created by Augur. He was a younger brother – not an heir – and so his descendants are not Primes. Some of his clan members have retained the seer's gift, though. Jazz saw patterns. He still does."

"What does that mean?" I demanded, since she was apparently a lot more willing to give answers. "What did he see?"

Both Stromancer and Augur turned their heads to give Elita a stern look. She defiantly jutted out her chin, as regal as Optimus ever was. "He saw that it would cause you and all the Autobots great harm and sorrow were you to reignite him."

"What do you mean? What harm?"

"He made his choice, Sam, knowing things you and I do not. I trust him. Optimus trusted him. Will you not also trust him?"

When she put it that way, I really couldn't argue anymore. Grudgingly I sighed, "Yeah, I guess so."

Paraclete gave Elita a grateful little nod and then met my gaze again. "Well done, brother," he said, and again the word sank deep into my soul.

With that, they had come full circle, and I was eye-to-optic with Alpha again. "All have saluted you as brother," he solemnly declared. "Well done."

I blinked in surprise at the abrupt change in our surroundings. We were again in that vision-place from when I died in the Egyptian battle, the one with the flickering light and the sculpted, sharp rocks. Before, the Dynasty had stood between me and that faltering light, now I was on the other side of them, and I could see the source. A pale sun hung low on the horizon, glowing unsteadily like it was shining through moving water.
From behind my right shoulder, Alpha said, "The Fallen's role was that of Hunter, one who balances life with death. He was tasked with locating stars to feed the All Spark."

I frowned – he made it sound like the All Spark was some kind of sun-eating monster.

Either he read my expression or sensed my feelings because he added, "Destruction is simply another step in creation, Samuel. The energy of those stars was not unmade, but rather, they were transformed into the spark of Optimus and every other Cybertronian you know. A Hunter is not evil unless he so chooses. Since the first Hunter's fall, there has been no one to feed the All Spark, and it has grown even weaker with the Cube's destruction."

"It's running out of power? It's dying?"

Stromancer reminded me, "Energy is neither created nor destroyed, only transformed. The All Spark has taken the form of the Matrix, but the power available for it to act is diminished, yes."

Abruptly, the flickering sun was gone and I lifted my eyes to a night-black sky, stars glimmering above me. The Three Kings, Orion the Hunter. A shooting star streamed across the constellation like an arrow launched from a bow and I was yanked into the heavens following it, tearing through space at a nauseating, dizzying speed. In the way of dreams, years passed in the blink of an eye, and a part of me knew that I travelled a long distance from Earth, even by outer-space standards. A brilliant blue sun reeled beneath where my feet would be if I had them, and then I began to fall, still tethered to the shooting star. The blue sun grew brighter until it filled my vision and I could feel the heat of it as the molten surface boiled.

The shooting star pierced the skin of that blue sun, and a ripple of color rolled away from the impact – blue bleeding to green to yellow to orange to red. And in the center of that growing ring of red, a thread of white-hot light shot out. Just like with the shooting star, I was dragged behind the thread of light, flying toward a large asteroid in the middle of a debris field. Again I fell straight toward it, and I wondered if it felt anything like this when Optimus first landed on Earth.

The cratered surface seemed to race up to meet me, and though I didn't slow, I landed without even a jolt. Taking a steadying breath of non-existent air with non-existent lungs, I finally could make sense of what I'd seen from above but hadn't understood in my panic. In front of me reared a mountain of metal – a solar harvester. The white thread of light was a beam of power streaming from the distant, dying blue sun. It illuminated the ground nearby, and I saw Optimus thirty yards off, standing in his Blackbird armor and nodding in approval as the harvester killed the sun. Other mechs moved among the rocks and debris around him, but even though the area was awash in brilliant white light, I couldn't make them out.

Then we were back in the vision-place, staring at the faltering sun. Amicus said, "The All Spark is conserving its strength until a new Hunter fills The Fallen's place."

"...And that would be Optimus." Turning to my brother Primes (how weird was that?), I asked, "So how do I get him back so he can be the Hunter Prime?"

Alpha nodded toward the flickering sun again. "Look."

Staring into the light, I saw Optimus – again in his Blackbird armor – handing me the blue-glowing Matrix. I accepted it, holding it in one hand and passing the other one over it to turn the inner light red.

"The Fallen had too much power," Alpha explained when I was again in the vision-place. "Even our combined might was not enough to stop him in the end, so the All Spark has chosen the weak to do
the work the strong could not. Optimus alone is not the Hunter. He cannot kill a sun without you first activating the Matrix; for you too are a Prime with a role to fill for the All Spark."

My brow furrowed as I looked from Alpha to the sun and back in confusion.

"You are the Human Prime," he continued. You are the voice of the hunted to the hunter, to remind him that our race is not the only worthy one."

"But you can trust Optimus."

Amicus cut me off. "We have lost one brother, and we will not lose another. It is better for Optimus to have greater limits than it would be for him to abuse his power as The Fallen did."

I remembered then the first bond-vision I shared with Optimus, when he explained that he couldn't use the Matrix to reignite his friends and mate without running the risk of falling himself.

"The Fallen forgot that he was not simply a destroyer," Augur added, "but that he was one who kept life and death in balance."

Alpha nodded in agreement. "If you undertake this work, your life will be tied to Optimus' even more deeply. You will be not only his bond-brother but will share the same energy in your spark, Samuel."

"We'll have a stronger bond?"

"You will have a stronger bond. You will need it to bring him back to your plane of existence. But accomplishing this will require sacrifice."

Of course. Courage and sacrifice – that's what being a Prime was all about. "What do I need to do?"

"You must be overwritten as Optimus is," Stromancer explained. "The power surge from contact with the Matrix is essentially restructuring his spark."

"What? Like a computer's hard drive being wiped?"

"In a sense," Stromancer said. "It's not the best analogy, but it is one you'll understand. Who he is has not been lost, but merely overwritten in his frame. His spark can no longer recognize its physical home."

"Okay, but how does that work for me?"

Seneschal said, "The energy that makes you unique must also be transformed to make it fully compatible with Optimus' own, if you wish to help him. You must divert the energy surge that is overwritten him into your own organic frame. In doing so, you will receive a spark that will be distributed throughout your body."

"Sounds painful," I muttered.

"It will be," Paraclete assured me. "The electrical activity in every nerve and synapse must cease before the spark energy replaces it."

"Like Mikaela?"

"The energy discharge that struck Mikaela was merely a warning. You, however, would die and be reborn with a spark. Otherwise, the burns to your nervous tissue would be irreparable."
Naturally.

Stromancer continued, "But if you choose this path, the burns will heal in a few short days, and your unique energy will be in perfect harmony with Optimus'. Knowing the feel of your spark as surely as he does his own, he will be able to follow your bond back to wherever you are."

"And we'll be able to replenish the All Spark."

A thrill ran down my spine. Maybe then I could reignite sparks again. Even if Jazz couldn't come back… I glanced over at Elita, whose optics were sparkling with amusement, almost like she could read my thoughts. She and Optimus could be together again. And there just might be an Elita Two someday, too, like Jazz had predicted.

Stromancer looked to Alpha, who nodded. "Yes, but we do not ask this of you. You sought us out and requested this knowledge. This is your choice, Samuel."

I half-smiled. "And my destiny. Am I right?"

Augur radiated approval and pride. "He begins to understand."

Giving them a puzzled half-frown, I asked, "Why didn't you guys just take care of this the last time I died?"

"Optimus' spark had been extinguished," Paraclete pointed out, "and he could not receive a spark from you. Your frame is too weak to contain that much power."

Amicus added, "Would you have accepted any of it? Bonds can be broken, as Optimus knows well."

I thought back to that first week and how freaked out I'd been about the whole thing. It wasn't until Christmas that I'd actually trusted him enough to give me free rein in my head, and that was after months of warming up to the idea. If we'd had a full-blown bond from the moment he was reignited…

I pushed the what-if's aside, knowing the Dynasty was right though I'd never admit it to anyone else. "I'll do it," I said. Right here and now, I couldn't make any other choice, no matter how painful the process might be – and that's what made it my destiny. "So how do I get overwritten?"

Stromancer gestured toward the faltering sun again. "Look."

I didn't see anything this time or hear anything really, either. I just knew when I opened my eyes in Ratchet's medbay that I somehow had to get the Matrix in contact with my nervous system – merge it with my own body's power, as…my brother Primes would say. I couldn't think those words – my brothers – without kind of mentally stuttering, even though I knew it was true.

Bumblebee and Ratchet hovered nearby, while Ironhide still sat on the neighboring berth – keeping watch over me and Optimus.

"Well?" the medic demanded.

Grabbing the backpack and unzipping it, I said, "I know how to get him back now but it's not going to be easy and you guys are gonna have to trust me because it'll look like I'm crazy, but I'm not, okay?" Then I picked up the Matrix and held it out to Ratchet. "I need you to stick this into my spinal column."

"What?"
Bumblebee hummed in agreement with Ratchet, while Ironhide creaked to his feet. "Whoa, Samuel, slow down."

Ratchet interrupted him. "We already have one Prime in stasis, and I am not going to jam a pointy relic of unknown power into your central nervous system!"

"There's not much time," I tried to explain. "So you're just going to have to trust me. The Matrix needs to make contact with my nerves somehow."

"Absolutely not," Ratchet declared, drawing himself up to his full, imposing height.

Giving up there, I turned to 'Bee. "You'll help me, won't you? To save Optimus?"

His antenna fell back in dismay and his wings drooped, but he shuffled closer. I knew he'd help me no matter what – 'Bee was awesome that way. I extended my hand with the Matrix in it, but he shook his head. Right, because they thought only a Prime could handle the Matrix. "You touched the Cube," I reminded him. "You coaxed it into shrinking down."

"NOT the NECK!" Ratchet insisted in exasperation.

I huffed in frustration, knowing that Optimus was still being overwritten as we argued. "Fine. My palm?"

Ratchet hesitated, and I seized the moment. With my empty hand, I reached for Bumblebee and he stepped closer, letting me grab part of his wrist and lead him over to Optimus' frame. Looking to Ratchet, I ordered, "Open his spark chamber, and no force field this time." Because Optimus and I had to share the same spark energy – that was the whole point.

Grudgingly Ratchet went through the medical sequence to peel back Optimus' armor again and open the chamber. Climbing up over his chassis, I lay stomach-down next to his spark. I placed my open hand as close to the searing heat as I dared, and then I looked to my best friend. "Take the Matrix. It needs to merge with my own systems, so you need to strike a nerve, understand?"

He nodded, brokenhearted but obedient, as he picked up the Matrix.

"Ready?"

He chirped yes.

Shoving my hand into Optimus' scorching spark, I screamed, "NOW!"

Fire flashed through my body consuming thought and time and all other feeling but pain. And then darkness fell over my heart and mind.

…

The first sense to return was the bond-sense. My brother…my brothers. I could feel them all now – all seven Primes. Optimus?

*I'm here, Sam.*

I tried to follow him, but I was still too far gone myself. *Well this sucks.*

He chuckled in the blind silence. *I find myself thanking you again for saving my life.*

*It's not saved yet.*
Stromancer's...spark reached out to mine. I could feel that he and Optimus were together, while something else stood between me and them. Yes, brother, it is saved. The medic will be waking you up soon. This will be our last meeting for a while.

Thankfully. Crap. I said that out loud, didn't I? I realized, embarrassed.

Optimus chuckled again, and I could feel the affectionate relief rolling off him. The others were more baffled than amused, but at least they weren't upset. Even the bond dreams hadn't allowed for this close of a connection.

Yes, Sam, hopefully we will both remain in the same dimension for a while now. This makes twice in less than one year's time you've had to save my sorry aft, as Epps would say.

Paraclete's spark was the next to find mine. The medic is reviving you now, Human. Bring the Hunter back with you.

How?

Lead.

If I was connected to my body, I'd be frowning in confusion, but since I wasn't...I had to use my imagination. Across the divide that kept Optimus with the Dynasty of the Primes, I called, The future, and our place in it.

Abruptly, Optimus and I were again on the aircraft carrier where we had spent the first few nights of our brotherhood – the place where our minds still met in dreams, when we were close enough.

Eye-to-optic with Optimus, I said, "Alright, this is one we haven't covered yet. How exactly am I supposed to lead?"

"You already know the answer to that."

"I do?"

"I have led the Autobots for two years on Earth, boy."

Boy, son, brother. Understanding, I let him feel the amity and affection I felt for him, and he responded by opening his own emotions to my soul. Placing my hand on his shoulder, I invited, "Follow me, Optimus."

The second sense to return to me was touch, or whatever sense it was that told you you'd just been struck by lightning. Groaning, I tried to figure out where my eyelids were and failed miserably.

"He's coming around," somebody said, and I realized it was Bumblebee speaking through a quote.

Beside me, I heard the soft whirr of Cybertronian systems, but I felt in my bones who it was. Opening my eyes by sheer force of will, I looked toward the sound, seeing the familiar red-and-blue of my brother.

Across the bond, I could sense he was near, but it was like he was searching for a hidden door.

"Lay still, Samuel," Ratchet soothingly said, stepping closer. "It's a miracle you're alive after a stunt like that."

Not listening to him, I reached out to touch Optimus, to make contact with his frame, and I saw that my hand was completely encased in bandages. My other hand was, too. Crap!
Sam?

For the first time, I heard my brother's voice in my waking mind...my spark. It was like I was hearing him in every cell in my body, not just my head. *Optimus? Follow me back!*

Ignoring the pain in every nerve, I scrambled closer, resting my forehead against the warm, living metal of his chassis. 'Lead, Sam,' I told myself. Reaching out with my spark, I tried to wrap him up again in a hug of the heart to drag him back. He slipped away.

*Not by force,* he softly instructed. *I can't follow if you're pushing back like that.*

Frowning at myself, I tried again to do the hug thing without being so eager to see him alive. This time I felt him respond, leaning in to me. *Found you!* I practically crowed in triumph.

*Tag, I'm it?* he deadpanned in answer, surprising me.

But the happiness made me goofy, too. *Catch me if you can.*

Suddenly his frame moved, and I sat up just in time for him to scoop me up in his hand. *I've got you, boy,* he smugly chuckled.

... I sat on Bumblebee's hand, listening as Optimus tried to explain to the others what had happened. Ratchet kept scanning both me and my brother, trying to make sense of how I now had a spark that was virtually identical to Optimus', but Ironhide was more interested in the news about us trying to build a new solar harvester. "Are we leaving Earth then?"

Optimus glanced at me, the sudden heaviness in his spark weighing my own down. "No. At least, not without Sam. We cannot use a solar harvester without him."

"*When you've only got a hundred years to live,*" Bumblebee sadly sang.

"He's right. We're under a time constraint here," I said. A whisper of Optimus' sorrow crept across the bond before he could block it.

"The easiest way to find another star would be to use a space bridge," Ironhide pointed out.

"You need a Seeker to be able to open one," Ratchet retorted, crossing his arms.

"And the Decepticons hold the nearest space bridge," Optimus added, forcing himself to get back on task.

This was news to me. "*Where is it?*

"*There's one close to Mars, but we don't have the necessary forces to successfully drive them away from it, even for a short period of time.*" Optimus didn't add aloud, *And we'd still lack a Seeker – both to open the bridge and to find a suitable star.*

"How long does it take to build a solar harvester?" I wondered. "*And could you get what you need on Earth to make the parts?*

"If we could salvage parts from the one in Egypt..." Ironhide began.

"*Not a chance.*" I knew enough about the way the political world worked to know that there would be major freaking out if the Autobots started stripping it for parts.
"If we had the necessary science contingent, it would go much faster, but with who we have here…" Optimus frowned, discouragement and hope mingling in his spark. "Years. If not decades." He glanced at me. **What is your opinion, Sam? The task seems hopeless, and yet we must make an attempt.**

I smiled back at him, determination welling up in my heart – my spark. **Do you even know how to build a solar harvester?**

He drew strength from my determination. **No, but we do have the wreckage of the one in Egypt we can study.**

**And maybe eventually we can come up with an excuse to salvage parts. But you're right – we have to at least try. Isn't 'achieving victory in spite of overwhelming odds' part of the definition of Prime?**

He gave me an affectionate mental nudge before looking back to the others. "We first need to start with producing a solar harvester. That will be the most time-consuming task, and another means of quickly travelling to another star may present itself. If we are not prepared when the opportunity arises, we may miss our best or only chance in Sam's lifetime."

Bumblebee nodded in crisp agreement. "**Every second counts on the clock that's tickin'…**"

"**We'll need everyone to help,**" Ratchet murmured, already deep in thought, but Ironhide added, "**We can't let the humans know what we're doing. Samuel's right – they'd panic.**"

"**NEST will need to know.**" Optimus looked at me again, hope and hesitancy wrestling across our bond. **How much do we tell them? It will allay their fears if they know your consent is necessary to activate the harvester.**

Panic hit me at just the thought, and Optimus sent a wordless apology in answer. But I remembered my promise to Lennox. **Will can know. He'll kind of need to if you guys are all going to be manufacturing and stockpiling parts here on the island. But no one beyond him can know about my part in all this – not even Epps. Because you'd have to explain that I'm your spark-twin, too, and I don't know that I ever want that to be public knowledge. I've already had one crazy human try to knock me off, thanks. I don't need people trying to kill you by shooting me.**

Worry filled him at that thought, but he nodded in agreement. "**Iron Will can also be informed of our plans, but no other humans.**" He cast a curious glance at me. **Mikaela?**

I sighed – she didn't even know that Optimus had been nearly overwritten, much less all the rest. **Yeah, Mikaela needs to know, too. Don't suppose you'd be willing to help me break the news to her?**

**Don't drag me into the middle of it,** he almost laughed. **She's your mate.**

Coward.

He actually chuckled this time, and the other 'bots looked at him curiously. **Guilty as charged.**

Aloud, he declared, "**We have hope as we have not had since before we left Cybertron. Autobots… let's roll.**"

…

When I showed up at Mikaela's garage driving Bumblebee, her first reaction was to look over her shoulder for trouble and her second was to kiss me so thoroughly that I pretty much forgot why I was there.
Eventually Bumblebee let loose a wolf-whistle, followed by "Get a room!" and him opening his doors in invitation. Mikaela sniggered once and hugged me so tight my ribs ached. "What's wrong?" she asked in a low voice.

"Oh, just the usual," I said, stroking her hair.

"Death, danger, and destruction?"

"Two outta three." I nodded toward 'Bee, and she silently climbed in, hollering over her shoulder to her father, "I'll be right back."

"So?" she demanded as soon as we were safely inside 'Bee and on our way.

"Well…you know about the bond I share with Optimus."

Her face went white – cold – and she nodded stiffly.

"There was an accident and Optimus'…code I guess you could call it was being overwritten. The only way to save him was for me to…well…die."

"What?"

"Calm down; it's okay. Over and done."

"Calm down? You died...again. And I didn't even know?"

"It all happened really quickly." I took a deep breath, dreading this part but knowing it'd get over quicker if I just blurted it out. "A side-effect of the whole saving Optimus thing is that we have an even closer bond now."

Her eyes started tearing up and she looked away.

"Mikaela."

"I've heard a lot of lame excuses, Sam, but being dumped for a robot…"

"What? No! It's nothing like…gah!"

Bumblebee started playing a laugh-track, his whole frame shaking.

"No," I repeated, raising my voice to be heard over Bumblebee's laughing and thumping his dashboard. "It's a brother bond, Mikaela. We're practically twins now." The idea of what she'd been implying made me shudder, and she half-smiled when she saw it. "We can hear each other's thoughts and see each others' memories, and…" And this was the hardest part. "…and it'll kill part of him when I die. But I really am a Prime now. And I can help them. When I destroyed the Cube, I destroyed their only hope for a future. Now I can help them find a different star – one without life – and harvest it."

Her brow furrowed as she thought this over. "So they're going to turn you into an Autobot to do all that?"

"No. I…it's because I'm human that I can help. I have to stay human to do my part."

She sighed deeply in relief. "So why did you look like you were going to break up with me?"

"I did?"
"Yeah," she half-laughed. "All nervous and not meeting my eyes and only half-heartedly kissing me back."

I chuckled. "I was worried you'd break up with me when you found out I've got an alien spark that's mystically linked to the leader of the Autobots."

"Seriously?" she asked, twisting in her seat to stare at me in amazement. "You've got a spark?"

I nodded, feeling a little less scared now. "It has the same energy signature as Optimus'. But instead of being a ball of energy in my heart, it's replaced the electrical energy in my body. That was the part where I died. But only for a second," I hastily added.

She chuckled weakly. "Sam…just don't make it a habit to die for Optimus, okay?"

"I promise."

Her voice was thick with emotion when she added, "I need you too much to lose you to him."

My heart sang at her words and I stole a quick kiss. (After all, I had to at least look like I was the one driving.) "I need you too, Mikaela."

Chapter End Notes

Bumblebee's Song Clips:
"100 Years" by Five For Fighting
"Live Like We're Dying" by Kris Allen

Regarding space bridges, I use the term to refer to technology like that used in G1, TF:A, and the RotF comics. I'm not referencing the planet-moving monster-sized space bridges in DotM or TF:Prime, just so we're all on the same page.
In my dreams that night, I stood on the aircraft carrier, shoulder-to-shoulder with Optimus. I knew that, in the waking world, he was on Diego Garcia and I was on a plane hurrying me back to college so I could make up my missed finals (thanks to yet another generous contribution to the school). "I could sense you still," I told him.

"Where are you?"

"When I fell asleep, we were somewhere between Chicago and Philadelphia."

He nodded his head, his approval warming me. "I could sense you, but not hear you. Your spark's power output is not very high, by comparison."

I nodded, saddened that we wouldn't be able to communicate like this all the time, but it looked like we'd at least have the bond dreams. "Maybe they'll be able to move you off of Diego Garcia eventually."

Abruptly we were on the island, imagined research labs and manufacturing facilities sprawling out over the sand. "We will have more freedom of movement here, and we'll be better able to keep our secrets."

I nodded again. "Come visit?"

"Often," he agreed. "But do not worry about me, Sam. I have been alone for a long time. That I have another brother – even one so alien – is more than I could have hoped for. And our sense of time is different. Seeing you twice a year is frequent for me. Not that I won't miss you."

"I'll come visit whenever I can, too." I glanced over at him, suddenly remembering another surprise of a visit. "You were with Elita, weren't you, during those three days."

My brother hung his head, knowing I meant the time that he was dead, and the guilt and grief and longing was barely hidden at all by the block he tried to put on our bond.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I demanded. We'd shared everything over the last several months – or so I'd thought.

"What good would come of it?" Looking up, he held my gaze. "Would you be happier knowing the price I personally paid to save your sun? Would it have comforted you to know that I left half my spark behind when I returned to you?"

I frowned and looked down. "I guess not. But…you made that sacrifice for us…""She's still there, Sam, and I will join her again someday." The longing swelled stronger than anything else.

"Maybe she'll be joining you," I pointed out. "She told me Jazz wasn't coming back but – "

"She told you?" His amazement almost bowled me over.

"Yeah. I met all my brother Primes, and she's half of you. If I had one foot in the grave, can you
imagine her not showing up to meet me?"

His longing was tinged with eagerness, and he didn't even need to ask. I nodded and he rested his helm against my head, and he skipped backwards through my memories to that moment. Like some of our other experience-sharing, he slowed down, savoring every detail of how she looked and sounded.

Hope was coursing through his spark at the thought of Elita being reignited, on top of his other hopes about recharging the Matrix and rebuilding their home. In all the time I'd known him - in all the memories he'd shown me - he'd never been as excited about the future as he was right now.

When he finally was able to pull himself away from the memory, he asked, "What else did you see when our brothers tested you?"

I brought him to the lookout above Tranquility; it was dark out and the stars were bright above us. "It started with Orion," I said, imagining the night sky rotating above us until the constellation was in full view.

"What!" Optimus was almost alarmed.

I glanced at him, curious about his reaction, and answered, "The constellation in the vision the All Spark showed me was Orion the Hunter. Or Osiris, the god of resurrection in Egyptian mythology."

He was stunned speechless, and feeling a little insulted, I said, "Astronomy 101, remember? It's not that impressive I know all that. But anyway, we don't need a Seeker to find a star for us because the All Spark already showed me which one it wants us to use. The journey began with Orion. We just need to figure out how to get there."

And then his entire frame shook with laughter. It rumbled on for several seconds – a belly laugh almost. Or maybe an engine laugh? When he eventually caught his breath (in a manner of speaking), he said, "Before I was Optimus Prime, I was Orion."

A prickling sensation made the hairs on my arms stand up. "Huh?"

"It was my sparkling name, like a nickname that only my mother and father used." Humor made his optics bright. "There are only a handful of Autobots still functioning who know that. I am Orion."

I thought about the three stars of Orion's belt being the 'kings' that had pointed to the Matrix and Optimus' resurrection. "And apparently Osiris, too."

His humor faded into something more solemn, but there was still joy in his spark. "Apparently."

"Huh."

"Can you recall the vision for me?"

The meteorite streaked across the constellation above us and we raced after it. It was like I had a photographic memory of the whole thing. When we saw the blue star, though, the vision released us and we were back on the lookout.

"Fascinating." Optimus looked at me. "The journey was surprisingly precise. It shouldn't be difficult to calculate the location of that star. I'm impressed your mind could hold all that."

"All Spark gunk in the brain," I reminded him. "I think I'll always have a knack for astronomy."
His humor washed through me before there was a little tickle in both our minds. "Your flight is due to land in twenty minutes. Internal chronometer," he explained before I could ask. "The flight staff will be waking you in a few minutes."

He placed his hands on my shoulders and touched his helm to my forehead. "Thank you, Sam, for everything. I will see you again soon."

"Like tomorrow night," I wryly answered, wrapping him up in a permanent hug. "And thank you, Optimus. Brother."

I woke up a minute later, reassured that I could still feel him. The dream was over – it was time to get back to school and on with my kinda-sorta normal life. Whatever fate held in store for me and my brothers, I knew in my spark that I had a few human tests to pass first.

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of *The Tie That Binds*. Its sequel (and the third story in the Kinship Trilogy) is currently in the works, but I won't start posting it for a while yet.

In the meantime, you might want to read my fic *Introductions: Annabelle Lennox* since some of what happens in her story influences the events in the final story. Also, the Botosphere's collaborative fic *The Daily Buzz* dovetails with Sam's life at school as told here in *The Tie That Binds*, and *Undercover* is all about the Spring Break I had to skim over. Our story *Reunion* also fills in some of the gap in Sam's story between this installment and the next. Hope you enjoy!

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