Candy From Strangers

by Bibliotecaria_D

Summary

Wherein this author took Transformers prompt-challenges like, well, you know.

(Pt. 40: Nickel takes over the Warworld, the Worst Customer Ever, Skyfire deals with feral Autobots, Bob is stern in its own way, Playing the Long Odds continuation, revolutions, Brave Police, the aftermath of battle, battlefield flirting, Christmas in the Ark, and Swindle is dangerous.)
Pt. 1

Chapter Summary

Random G1 prompts.

Title: Candy From Strangers
Warnings: Random prompts create random ficlets.
Rating: PG
Continuity: G1
Characters: Many.
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): An open post where I asked for people to please drop prompts for me, and I attempted to write them as fast they appeared.

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_Megatron/Optimus - negotiations_
[* * * * *]

"Yes."
"No."
"Yes."
"No."
"Yes."
"No."
"Yes."
"No."
"Yes."
"No."
"Yes."
"No."
"No?"
"Never."
"Never."
"Yes, never."
"Yes?"
"No."

Soundwave kept his attention on the datapad with the ceasefire terms on it. He had more dignity than Jazz, who was watching the negotiations like a tennis spectator. Back and forth, back and forth.

"Yes."
"No."
"Yes."
"No."
"Yes?"
"No."
"But..."
"No."
"Yes."
"No."

"We're going to be here a while," Jazz murmured.

Soundwave still didn't look up, but a careful observer would have seen him nod.

[* * * * *]

Metroplex - sometimes even cityformers needed a hug

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Technically speaking, it was a difficult procedure. Even without a war going on, sheer size would have made it hard to implement. Coordinating with the strict patrols Red Alert had put into place for this very short time period of vulnerability plus wrangling personnel known for their independent personalities made the whole thing somewhat of a logistical nightmare. Still, anything worth doing was worth doing right, and nobody was going to allow First Aid to do it all himself. That'd be like a plush teddybear trying to turn back an ocean tide: kind of cute at first, but ultimately pathetic and probably lost to undertow. He’d turn up on a beach somewhere, wandering in dazed circles and convinced he could do better next time.

So. Coordination and cooperation, supersized. They were Autobots! Surely they could do this with a minimum of fuss!

The combiner teams tried, bless their contrary little sparks, but combining outside of combat required far more internal cooperation than they were used to. The outside pressure to combine or die just wasn't there this time. Defensor managed, of course, because his combiner team was all about stability. He combined on the first attempt and stayed combined the whole time, although he had a tendency to fuss as First Aid’s worries came to the forefront. Watching First Aid fuss was adorable, but a full-sized gestalt fluttering his hands and twittering, “Oh my, we’ll have to fix that later. Dearie me. Can someone get something from the medbay for us? Please?” was rather disconcerting.
Superion and Computron gave it three separate tries apiece before Defensor somehow got the 'sad First Aid' look down pat and turned it on the Aerialbots and Technobots. Giving up wasn’t an option under that look.

While First Aid was guilt-tripping the other combiner teams like a professional emotional travel agent, Red Alert was working on the other Autobots. Trying to get three gestalts, five Dinobots, and every Autobot not on duty herded in one direction was like trying to sculpt water: yeah, good luck with that. But Red Alert had dragged everyone through security measures tougher than this, and he could deal with it. Even if he had to kick their collective afts one at a time. The procedure had a three-hour time block. He was an experienced aft-kicker. Do the math.

Calculating the speed of aft-kicking divided by acceptable time span squeaked them under the limit just in time. That, after Red Alert had screamed himself hoarse and Ultra Magnus had called on Daniel's puppy eyes as emergency backup.

But they did it. Eventually, everyone latched onto Metroplex, because sometimes even cityformers needed a hug.

[* * * * *]
G1, Cassettes - taking the high road
[* * * * *]
"Is this legal?"

"Do I care?" Frenzy ducked his head and scowled at the display. "Here, hold this."

Rewind jumped a bit as the Decepticon Cassette shoved the removed paneling at him. "Wha -- o-okay." He managed to grab it before it fell, thank Primus, because he wasn't sure he wanted to endure another one of Frenzy's endless mocking sprees. He wasn't clumsy! He was just rattled by the other Cassette's methodology.

Infiltration was nothing new to the Autobot Cassette. Infiltration via forged identification cards and boldly walking through the front door of a Quintesson Consulate took ball bearing diameter Rewind wasn't sure he had the correct measurements for. Blaster had been the one pressing for more planning, but Soundwave’s Cassetticon had been adamant that this was one assignment they could just wing-it on. Infiltrating the Quintessons was always a tricky matter, and Frenzy had argued that extensive planning just allowed for more confusion when the plans failed.

That argument still seemed off to Rewind, but they hadn’t had time. Frenzy and Rewind had gone in with the bare bones of a plan, and now Rewind was stuck holding a computer panel as a Decepticon hacked into the network. He couldn't help but fidget, optics flicking up and down the -- temporarily - empty hallway. They were going to be in such trouble if they were caught…

"Huh." Frenzy had tapped into the building's network, and the look he turned on the Autobot was surprisingly thoughtful. "This is...alright, Autodumb." Rewind let the name-calling pass. Frenzy's mouth ran on automatic on such things. "If we were gonna do this the legal way, what'd be our first step?"

Rewind was a Cassette. He knew that look. "Incriminating data?"

"By the cargo load." The two Cassettes shared a fierce, ugly grin. "I'll stay here and run interference to keep them from dumping the computers."
"And I," Rewind said as he put the paneling down to lean unobtrusively against the wall, "will be a concerned Cybertronian citizen and kindly inform the local authorities that they might want to investigate the Quint Consulate." The vengeful expression wiped away into something saintly, and Frenzy smirked in respect for the Autobot's acting ability. "Oh-so-legally, of course."

"Nice and legal," Frenzy agreed, and that made sticking it to the Quints even more satisfying.

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Grimlock/Optimus, "That does not go there."
[* * * * *

"That does not go there."

Optimus looked up. The proper grammar was almost as surprising as the words themselves, at least when coming from the massive Dinobot standing in front of him. "Pardon me?" Optimus asked, baffled. The table he'd just pushed out into the corridor sat there looking inoffensive. It'd been nicked and dinged but was still functional. The Autobot leader couldn't tell why exactly Grimlock was glaring at it like it had six fingers on its left hand and had killed his father.

"Me Grimlock said -- "

"I heard you," he interrupted patiently. "I simply don't understand why you believe it shouldn't be here." He'd moved the table because Autobots were always leaving miscellaneous Earth objects of interest on his desk. He liked the practice of giving him things -- it was a very appreciated gesture of affection he'd never gotten before becoming so close with this particular crew -- but he wanted to share his collection with the rest of the ship. Having a display table had seemed like a viable solution.

Apparently not, if the glare meant anything. Grimlock started to say something, then just shook his head and stalked forward to grab the table and move it out of the corridor himself. He shoved it back into the office with a grunt.

Optimus stood aside and let him because it wasn't worth fighting over without reason. Which there must be, because Grimlock wasn't one for flimsy whims. "Why -- ?"

Grimlock held up a finger: patience, please.

A minute later, the floor jittered. Both mechs adjusted their stances without even thinking about it. Some things became automatic when one lived with it on a daily basis. The jitter increased to a rumble, and suddenly there were Dinobots turning the corner. Optimus pressed himself to his own office door to get out of the way as three out-sized mechanical dinosaurs stampeded by in complete disregard for whatever might have been in their path. Grimlock just folded his arms and weathered the stampede by standing right there in the middle of the corridor, but then, he was big enough that getting nudged by a brontosaurus was no big deal.

The Prime blinked after the Dinobots, watching three tails turn the next corner. As…they usually did this time of day, now that he thought about it. Huh. "Ah. So it doesn't go there."

“Me Grimlock said so,”

“Indeed.”
Some mechs couldn't hold their highgrade. Frag, some mechs couldn't hold their mid-grade. A few extra cubes, and Prowl would start stifling giggles over the absurdity of life outside regulations. Ironhide tended to get maudlin. Optimus Prime got oddly quiet and stared into space until he passed out.

Nobody ever really thought twice about why First Aid, Hoist, and Ratchet, of all mechs, never once got sloshed. Didn't think about it, that was, until First Aid returned from battle absolutely drunk.

"I don't know what happened!" Sideswipe said as he poured the ambulance onto a repair berth. First Aid promptly slithered off the opposite side and puddled onto the floor, which he then started talking to. The red frontliner's expression of utter panic only deepened as he flailed, trying to catch the tipsy Protectobot before he slid out of reach. His hands snatched empty air. "He took a shot to the chest and just lost it!"

Well, that was slightly worrisome. The hole and associated burn mark seemed far below the spark chamber, but getting ahold of the wrigglesome junior medic to verify that fact took some doing. Ratchet finally enlisted a severely weirded-out Sideswipe and truly amused Bumblebee to coax him out from under the office desk once the Chief Medical Officer managed to corner his subordinate there. Who knew that a cratered First Aid would be so rambunctious?

"Punctured auxiliary fuel tank," Ratchet diagnosed with some relief after opening up the other ambulance -- and swatting said ambulance's hands out of the way. "His holding tank for emergency patient transfers took a hit," he explained when Sideswipe and Bumblebee gave him quizzical looks. The puzzlement only deepened. "All medics have one." See the depth of their confusion, Ratchet? See it? "I don’t suck down so much energon because I have a habit of getting overcharged," Ratchet said dryly. "Anytime we get access to mid or highgrade, we fill our auxiliary tanks with as much as we can. It saves lives out on the field."

That did explain why Sideswipe’s homebrew disappeared in copious amounts at the medic table during parties, anyway. Huh. One puzzled solved.

That did leave First Aid and his inexplicable drunkenness. “Wait,” Sideswipe said slowly. “He took a hit to a fuel tank, and he’s still standing?” Er, slouching. Wavering in a vaguely upright manner. Whatever. Sideswipe’s point was that that dead mechs shouldn’t be managing even that much.

"It should have killed me," First Aid declared seriously, then ruined the scarily true statement by spontaneously hugging both his 'captors' around the necks. "I'm so lucky!"

Ratchet sighed. "Yes, it should have. A direct shot to a fuel tank should have caused a large explosion, not a puncture. You are very lucky."

"What're you going to do?" Bumblebee said over his new neck ornament. "Surgery?"

"Yes, but only after the tank's drained. At the rate it's mixing with his regular fuel, we're going to have an overcharged Protectobot on our hands for at least a day. I could drain it faster, but..." Ratchet gave the Autobot now determinedly squirming free of Bumblebee and Sideswipe a fond pat on the head. "Let him enjoy his luck for now. It’s not every day one of us dodges a bullet with his name on it."
"Yes, or I will use this table to rearrange your internal structures to resemble one of Wheeljack's
design projections, rip out your vocalizer and replace it with Starscream's, put my foot so far up
your aft your teeth with have tires, and donate your helm to a thirsty family in Africa for a bucket."

"...I'll think about it."

"You'd better!"

Troubled, the fiery yellow Seeker stood on the peak of Shockwave's Tower and wondered why he'd
been released. Because he was the Hand of Primus, the tool of holy destruction, but usually
Megatron kept him statis-locked and confined behind security so heavy even a true prophet such as
himself had difficulty escaping. Out of fear of Primus' judgment, no doubt.1

"Go," Shockwave had said hoarsely, sounding strangely gritty as he'd waved Sunstorm out of his
cell. "Defend us."

If there ever was a way to redirect his righteous wrath, a plea for salvation was a quick solution.
Sunstorm's immediate fury had cooled to intrigue, and he'd followed the blasphemous Guardian of
Cybertron's instructions to emerge here.
The wave of sand descending from the sky was a visible, silty rain. The sentient lifeforms were numerous and deadly. They were killing Cybertron, grain by grain. Shockwave had probably meant for the Seeker to attack the waves, turn as much of them to glass as he could, but Sunstorm hesitated. Shockwave’s words came back to him, and they troubled him.

Defend who?

By all logic, Primus had created the sand. The tiny lifeforms were far more closely related to Decepticons and Autobots than anyone would like to admit, by action and deed if not biology. Was Sunstorm to attack Primus’ creations without provocation? Autobots killed Decepticons and Decepticons killed Autobots; murder was no reason for Sunstorm to destroy the sand. Yet Shockwave obviously thought he should.

"What's a religious mech to believe?" he whispered to his God. "Am I to let Your children die by killing others?"

Primus didn't answer.

1 Yeah, because locking up the dangerous psychotic flaming ball of religious ire required a fear of Primus. Right. Whatever. Megatron only got religious when it involved a cult of personality focused on himself.

2 The presumption of any Cybertronian taking on such a lofty title was enough to froth Sunstorm’s foam on a regular day. Add to that the sheer unworthiness of a blatant atheist like Shockwave taking the title, and Sunstorm was reduced to sputtering indignation.

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Bluestreak - human sign language
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If Bluestreak had never been one for sitting still before Earth, he was positively twitchy afterward. He was always moving. His hands fluttered, his doors flicked up and over, his windows raised and lowered, and even when silent, his mouth kept shaping words. He squirmed when he sat, rocked back and forth when he stood, and his hands traced intricate shapes of nonsense no matter what he was doing at the time.

The rest of the Ark crew displayed several similar symptoms when they returned to Cybertron. The other Autobots thought they were restless. Decepticons thought they were nervous.

Truth was, they were really just a bunch of gossips talking behind everyone’s backs.

[* * * * *]
Mikeala Banes - kicking ass and taking names (“The Princess Is In Another Castle” continuation)
[* * * * *]

Ironhide is dead. Ironhide is dead.
It's been years since the Autobots last had any contact with her. She'd dropped off their radar the moment Sam dumped her, and it wasn't like she'd ever been close to any of them. Yet she has loud, clear memories of the bark of guns, the sneer of an alien face as he supervised the firing range. She recalls the kick against her wrists and shoulder until she went home at night hurting, and his half-angry voice shouting insults at her until she picked up the gun again.

Ironhide is dead.

Worse, the other Autobots are gone. She's caught up on the news, staring in pale-faced horror at the antiquated TV set that spewed words it took her three repetitions to finally understand. It was the unbelievable footage of the launch and destruction of the Autobots’ shuttle that shook her from shock into screaming and throwing her beer across the room. The Autobots have left Earth, the Autobots havedied, and the alien planet on the horizon is here. It's here, and Earth’s goddamn leaders are stupid enough to trust the words of Decepticons?!

She's looking out the back door, numb with something she thinks should be grief and feels more like rage, when the spacebridge goes down. The burning curve of Cybertron writhes, oddly flickering like the TV she’s left on inside. The planet inverts like the hemisphere is getting sucked down a drain.

Maybe she should feel pity for the Autobot's abandoned world, but all she can remember is her introduction to it via Optimus Prime's optical lightshow. The planet had been ruined by war. The survivors had left, searching for the AllSpark to bring it back to life. The AllSpark, however, is gone. This 'Sentinel Prime' the news talks about failed before he even began this insane attempt. He was trying to resurrect a dead world using her living world, and she feels no pity whatsoever for his failure.

It twists her heart strangely to watch a world tear apart on the horizon, but she thinks it is revenge. It is a proper ending.

Ironhide is dead, the Autobots are dead, and she will accept Cybertron as their funeral pyre.

There are explosions out in the desert, far above the mountains as the spacebridge flickers. One, then two, and flaming debris plummets downward. She grabs her binoculars, squinting and leaping up to stand on the old couch as she sees...what does she see?

Debris and. Something else. Falling out of control to the desert, to her desert, and even if she'd never worked with the Autobots and fought Decepticons, she'd have recognized those forms as alien.

She runs for her truck, the tools of her trade and whatever else she can fling into the back from the shed before she takes off, and there is cold fire in the very grain of her muscle. It lines her soul in frigid resolve and clicks forgotten knowledge to the forefront of her mind.

Ironhide is dead. But once upon a firing range, he'd taught her how to kill his kind, and Mikeala Banes remembers.

[* * * * *]

Grimlock and Jazz - Music lesson
[* * * * *]

Jazz was mesmerized. "I...seriously? They do that."
He got an irritated sidelong look for the disbelief. "Yes."

Oh, man, why hadn't he gone along to this Lost World island place? Okay, so banishing the Dinobots there in the first place had been a really bad example of the Autobots being bullheaded, ignorant, reactionary -- right, well, they didn't like to dwell on it. The Dinobots were never going to let them live down treating an entire Autobot sub-group like dumb animals.

Justifiably so, really. There was nothing quite like being confronted with one’s own misdeeds to really grind a point in. Prime still got uncomfortable when confronted with Grimlock's right-angle brand of intelligence during officer meetings. Prowl changed the subject, repeatedly if he had to, just to avoid thinking about the whole issue. Ratchet and Wheeljack made sure to bring it up all the time to make him squirm.

Jazz himself had adjusted fairly quickly to the Dinobots' sky-rocketing learning curve as their programming finally stabilized. He was cool with the dinos. Or so he'd thought, anyway, and now he was being boxed about the audios with how he'd personally marginalized the Dinobots. Yup, dumbaft Head of Special Operations went and shut a whole group of disparate mechs right into a small box of assumptions, then didn’t even give them a second thought. Well, paint him red and call him Cliffjumper, because he’d jumped right to a wrongful conclusion without proof.

He'd given some wise-aft comment about how sentience could be measured by its ability to create music, and Grimlock had just put the royal smackdown of unanticipated information down on him. He hadn't really meant to disparage dinosaurs, not really, but he could sort of see how the comment could have been taken wrong considering just who he was talking to. He should have considered that, in fact.

Finding out that dinosaurs had an equivalent of musical sound, however, hadn’t even entered considerations.

"Mating calls?" he hazarded.

Another annoyed look. Grimlock was not pleased with the saboteur at the moment. "Territorial marker."

"Ah." Like howler monkeys? Jazz knew he was bouncing. He knew it, and he hated how he looked when he did it, but c'mon. Music! New music! Different music! Magnified floors couldn’t have stopped Jazz from bouncing. "So...can you..?"

"Yes."

Oh Primus, oh Primus, oh Primus. Grimlock already had a powerful voice, but Jazz had not once thought about what he sounded like in his dinosaur form! "And the other Dinobots?"

"Yes."

Eeeeeeeppeee! "Will you -- ?"

"No."

ARGH.

Jazz turned up the optical lights in his visor and did his best to look like Carly’s kitten pleading for dinner. “Please?”

Grimlock snorted and turned to stomp from the room, obviously unaffected by cute, fuzzy animals as
channeled by non-fuzzy, not-quite-so-cute Autobots. “No.”

Right. Jazz’s visor dimmed and narrowed. This would require some planning. Mission: Get Dinobots To Sing was a go.

[* * * * *
Blast Off/Mirage - upper caste
[* * * * *

The other Autobots didn’t get it. They watched closely, looking for signs of treason, but that's what they didn't understand. There were no signs. There was no communication, at all. No words exchanged beyond the stilted formal lines required of prisoner and guard, no extra glances that might have had deeper meaning. The words they might have been said were left far in the past, and any fellow feeling had been burned by millions of years of war.

The No-Man’s Land of common ground remained, however, war-ravaged as it was.

Mirage simply requested guard duty on the brig whenever Blast Off was captured, and the two mechs...sat there. Blast Off ignored his guard and read the single datapad allowed him -- from Jazz, so it never even passed through Mirage's hands. Mirage relaxed at the guard station with rifle at the ready. They never spoke. They never interacted.

Whatever understanding there was between the two mechs, it was at a level no one else could reach.

[* * * * *
Ratchet/Wheeljack - a series of extraordinary events
[* * * * *

Through a series of medbay incidents that were small individually and cataclysmic when they snowballed together, Ratchet ended up in the past.

Like anyone who'd ever dealt with the weirdness that was life during the Great War, Ratchet was prepared for this moment. Time travel? Pfft. Even boyscouts prepared for that one.

The rule was simple: don't interfere. Be invisible and nonexistent, because everyone knew that messing about with the past only caused trouble in the present. Ratchet was okay with that rule. In fact, he'd helped pound it into stubborn heads among the Autobots for ages. So noninterference was good, and Ratchet set about to obey that rule religiously.

...with one tiny exception. He just had to.

There was a massive engineering complex on the west side of Iacon, separate from the rest of the Iaconian Science & Technology University campus. It was so huge that Ratchet had no trouble blustering his way past security and disappearing into it. Once he was inside, he simply poked his nose into every construction bay and laboratory until he found the one he was looking for.

"Measurements came out perfect,” the young mech inside was saying to his partner when Ratchet finally found him. "Formula seems spot on, and I double-checked the structure. Want to give it a test?"

"Sure. Hold on, somebody's pinging the outer security door." The other mech frowned. "Door's
stuck. Can you go open it? I’ll set the cameras while you’re gone.”

“No problem.” Ratchet waited around the corner until the footsteps faded, then sent another ping for the opposite security door. Which he’d also glued shut. It was a University campus; pranks happened.

"Arrgh. Okay, okay, I’m coming!” More footsteps, and Ratchet was free and clear to do some very, very small interference. Very small. Just a tweak.

"No more blowing yourself up," the medic muttered as he made a few minor adjustments to the experiment. Little things that would make it better and safer, because Primus knew those things were typically left out by this particularly inventor. Unfortunately, Ratchet was in a hurry, and the jostling made something spin and hum deep inside the machine. "...oops."

There were footsteps coming back up the hall, and Ratchet didn't have time, and oh, slag, this hadn't gone how he intended at all!

"I don't understand," Wheeljack said forlornly, standing in the wreckage one breem and an extremely colorful explosion later. "We were so careful."

"Maybe we missed a figure in the schematic?" his partner suggested, sounding just as confused.

Hidden in a storage locker that he wasn’t entirely sure how he’d wedged himself into, Ratchet clenched his fists and resolved again to save Wheeljack from the engineer’s tendency to explode every experiment ever made. Next time, he’d do it right!

[* * * * *]

Shibara’s Nomformers - “The trick was not minding that it hurt.”

[* * * * *]

They already knew they’d take casualties. They’d have to dig deep, use their muscle, push hard, and show their salt. One couldn’t cross Kitchentron’s Great Table of Dinner without injuries. The war of Condimentbots and Foodcons had gone on too long for any open space to be safe. Fork marks and bites would abound.

The trick was not minding that it hurt.

Hamslaught chewed a piece of gristle and eyed the deceptively organized tableware. Bacon Off had already done an aerial survey; the lay of the Table had been set. There were linen napkin drifts, opaque drinking glasses ready to topple on the unwary, and vast empty platters with no cover available at all. The Great Table seemed empty, yes, but soon...yes, soon, the diners would come.

The Comeaticons would be waiting.

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[A/N: This will likely happen again. It was fun. ]
Pt. 2

Chapter Summary

Pharma versus the D.J.D.'s ugly sweater. Some medics indulge themselves with a couple of obliging partners.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 2
Warnings: Interfacing and fluff. Seriously, all of that. Read at your own risk. Here there be robots in ugly sweaters.
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW & G1
Characters: Starscream, Thundercracker, Ratchet/Prowl, Pharma, Tarn
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Kinkmeme and random prompts, this round.

[* * * * *]
Starscream/Thundercracker - “Baby take me back”
[* * * * *]

“You’re being as pathetic as a scientist,” Thundercracker snapped, and regretted immediately.

Not because he didn’t mean it. Primus on a pogo stick and Skywarp teleporting blind, he meant every word he said. It just really, really wasn’t the time to pointedly refer to the brief time he’d actually known Starscream as a scientist. That’d been fresh after his return from losing that giant white shuttle the first time, and stirring those memories after losing him a second time was sure to get a strong reaction. Probably not the one the blue Seeker wanted right now, however.

The mech who whipped around in the corridor to confront him, teeth bared and optics wild, was no Science Academy reject too depressed to walk anywhere straight unless it was to the nearest bar. No, this was the Decepticon Air Commander, who had once upon a time soared through the War Academy like failure wasn’t an option. Thundercracker shouldn’t have brought up anything that reminded this current mech of the past one. It only brought up bad memories and a point to prove.

“Oh?” Starscream queried sharply. “You want this ‘pathetic’ scientist to remind you why you don’t lead the wing?”

Starscream the Drunkard had been a very short phase of the prickly Seeker’s life. Mostly because he’d been too busy running ragged the blue mech he was currently backing down the corridor one slow, threatening step at a time. It’d been difficult to continue drinking after a certain time, at least once Thundercracker stopped his half-sparked attempts to escape. To be fair to the blue Seeker, the drunken, depressed scientist who’d first latched onto him had seemed like the kind of wingmate a flyer avoided at all costs. He’d been intrigued even then, but had still restlessly tried to slip away. The fact that Starscream kept finding him again only made him more interested in the feisty, if drunk, red Seeker.

Catching an unattached set of wings while lolling in the gutter had been a stroke of luck, although neither Seeker would confess as to whether that luck was good or bad -- or who had caught whom.
Keeping those wings had required a great deal of effort and attention. Hence why Thundercracker’s acquaintance with Starscream the Scientist had been so very brief. Designing and placing the tiny trackers on the blue mech had required sobriety, and once Starscream dried up enough, he’d tackled the task of making them into a wing formidable enough to attract a third. The scientist had been buried under fierce, proprietary skill-learning and, eventually, entrance into the War Academy.

Starscream never stayed depressed long. There were always new projects to obsess over.

Recognizing the look stealing the last of the pout from his wingleader’s face, Thundercracker turned and unashamedly fled that obsession.

He wouldn’t get far.

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\textit{Ratchet/Prowl - “topping from the bottom”}

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\textbf{Warning: tactile interfacing.}

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"Yes...like that. Mm. Harder." Ratchet smiled, letting his head loll back between his upper arms. The nips turned to chewing as teeth dug in. "Good, Prowl. You're learning."

"Thank you," the tactician said against his tire, mouth never leaving the rubber. Because he had learned. His optics stayed on his work without straying. Ratchet hadn't told him he could stop, after all.

The medic's hips slowly rose up, leisurely grinding against nothing. His back arched, pressing his chest against an invisible partner. There was no hurry. The gradual swell of arousal through his circuitry built without urgency; just an inexorable surge that ebbed less with every gentle bite into the rubber. The air was cold on his plating, and it felt good. His joints steamed faintly as his frame struts conducted the building heat from core systems, and his vents drew in a long, slow breath. Air billowed over his heated internals in a ripple of comparative chill, adding another flicker of sensation to the mix.

With his hands bound like this, he could only take. He couldn't give. He was a medic; giving was what he did. Here, however. Here and now, he could do nothing but take.

He flexed his vents as wide as they’d go and let his fans go on full. Another cool rush of air flickered over his internals, biting sharp and almost burning. "Lick the rims."

Prowl obeyed, but he took his time getting there. His mouth -- teeth, tongue, lips, even the hot cloud of breath pushed out and pulled immediately back in as if to tease and taste and touch any cranny too small to touch -- explored every groove of the tire he was working on until he reached the rim. Obedience, of course, was a given, but thoroughness was a reward in and of itself. Meticulous attention to detail had brought him this far in the war, and he could devote no less effort to this battleground.

Yet there was a relief in not being in control, in surrendering the planning to someone else. In Ratchet’s strategy, Prowl was only a pawn. A piece to be moved and used however his controller wished. Freedom from responsibility relaxed a knot of tension he carried everywhere, and his doors
haltingly eased downward a bit more after every order.

He was a tactician; control and planning was what he did. Here, however. Here and now, he could do nothing but obey the commands given him.

The medic's engine rumbled, a deep thrum of pleasure. Prowl shut off his optics and devoted even the scraps of attention and energy otherwise wasted on sight to laving the grooves around every rim until the high, sweet rasp of sleek metal-on-metal filled the room. He closed his lips around the recessed lug nuts and sucked, tongue tracing the cracks and probing as if to turn them. His vents pulled in air, and he exhaled it deliberately over his engine, letting the steam cloud the silvery metal and bead tiny droplets of moisture on the rubber.

“Good.” Ratchet crooned as he shifted his hips. “You’re doing so good. Just like that, mmm.”

Prowl knelt between his spread legs, neck outstretched and head cocked to one side to reach the foot propped against his right shoulder. One hand cradled Ratchet’s lower leg, helping support it as he lavished kissed all the way around the circumference of the rim currently getting its share of attention. The Autobot Second’s other hand was lowered to the floor, occupied in rolling the tire on Ratchet’s other ankle. His thumb dragged down the treads, catching in the tracks and popping loose in a steady thuck-thuck that had the tire not quite spinning. The motion wasn’t hurried enough for that. No, he just rolled it languidly, letting his hand cup the rubber with tender care that promised he’d attend to it momentarily. It was not forgotten. It was at the forefront of his thoughts, lined up neatly behind his next idea for the tire his mouth was on right now. He was already thinking how he would to slide his lips along the rim.

Ratchet’s wrists twisted slightly, hands curling with the urge to touch. To…give. The medic pulled on his bound wrists again, fighting the need. To…give. The medic pulled on his bound wrists again, fighting the need. It ramped up behind his arousal, undeniable and deeper-rooted that the lust. He needed. To give. This was so one-sided, and his palms ached to return the attention as a sudden nagging urgency undermined his desire. He swept scans over Prowl and came up with results that had his medical programming sternly kicking him in the back of the cortex. Prowl was barely running warm.

That was wrong, and it rattled him as physically as a punch to the chest. It jolted him painfully like an electric shock under his armor. ”Prowl, let me go. I have to --”

The Autobot executive officer was on his feet in a flash, but not to unbind Ratchet. No, he was standing up to reach for Ratchet's bound wrists and hold them firmly in his hands. ”Ratchet, no,” he said sternly, leaned forward to press his mouth against the side of the medic’s helm. It was less seduction than reassurance. “That isn’t you. Remember.”

It wasn't him. It was his programming. His programming insisting he should give, not ever take.

"Let me take care of you," Prowl coaxed, pushing his thumbs into the medic’s tight fists. They made tiny circles on Ratchet’s palms, massaging and trying to urge him to stand down. To open to accept, for once, instead of constantly give away. “You know it’s necessary. You told me so. You’ve trained me on this. I know what to do, and you’re right here observing me. Let me do this for you.” His lips pressed again to the medic’s helm. A little more was needed. He could feel that ambulance engine sputter anxiously against his chest. ”Doctor's orders, remember? You told me I had to let go of my responsibilities. This is for me. This is for me, Ratchet. Supervise patient treatment by letting me assist you.”

So logical, but it was convoluted rationalization, too. It was a necessary half-turn of the facts to sooth hard-coded programming. Prowl was here to deal with something every commander had to know
about his medical staff, because mechs could only give so much before they were left hollowed out and empty. Burnt out husks, guttering into suicide statistics as despair replaced spent passion because no one gave the medical staff anything to replace what they recklessly, compassionately sacrificed to keep the Autobots alive. The frontliners died in battle, giving it their all, but the medics died by their own hands after doing the same. They required some loving care all their own, but getting them to accept it was the hard part.

And it wasn’t something that could be delegated to a subordinate when the medic in question was the Autobot Chief Medical Officer.

But Ratchet could get loose any time he wanted. This wasn't something that could be forced. Every unit commander knew how to carefully unweave the coding that left Autobot medics stressed to the breaking point. It couldn’t be torn apart. It could be hacked, it could be tricked, but ultimately, that would only snarl things further as combat programming backlashed to cause worse strain yet. The only way to pick apart the tangle of medical programming versus personal needs was to convince the core personality strained by the conflict that there was a way to walk the narrow line between them.

Peacefully, because struggling would bring out the combat programming already at right-angles with medical programming. Both demanded control. One would lash out if it felt threatened. One wanted to sacrifice itself.

It took a deft touch to balance the programs and revitalize the mech caught up in them.

It took understanding to surrender control even when tying someone up.

Ratchet slammed his head back and ex-vented forcefully. Behind offline optics, his mind railed at the directives that hammered need to give in throbbing, headachy pulses into his cortex. The lips pressed against the side of his helm moved until a slick tongue ran over the lines of his helm, up to his chevron, and began to give it dainty little licks. A distraction, yes; a seduction, yes; a patient necessity? Who was the patient? Who was being treated?

The licks gained pressure as worry revved the medic’s engine. Lips ran along the top edge of his chevron, up to the point, then repeated the motion with the tip of a moist, hot tongue. The scans still showed that Prowl wasn’t running hot, but they also showed that his systems were calm. Low levels of anxiety. Fluid pressures finally dropping into acceptable ranges. Fuel tanks full and systems purring tranquilly. All the nonstop weight bearing down on the Autobot Second were temporarily on hold, here and now.

The facts cleared Ratchet’s head enough to get ahold of himself. Yes. The need...it wasn't him. It was part of him, but not what he wanted. What he wanted wasn’t a bad thing. Wanting was not wrong.

He was allowed to take. Sometimes, Ratchet just had to be reminded of that fact.

And, well, sometimes a logical loophole had to be found.

Prowl needed this as much as Ratchet did.

"Give my hands something to feel," the medic demanded harshly. "Now."

Prowl obediently abandoned his chevron and began mouthing the nearest of the medic's sensitive hands. He let go of the other hand and focused on unfolding just one. Ratchet’s hand resisted, still trying unconsciously to fight accepting when -- no. Ratchet heaved, body bucking protest against that entire line of thought. The fingers unclenched, seeking to give, and a cross whine came from the
medic when the cuffs prevented him from reaching for the other mech. Prowl blew hot air over the trapped fingers and lapped at them without getting close enough to be stroked in return.

When it seemed that Ratchet had wrestled his coding down a bit, the executive officer bent close enough for his cheek to be touched before nipping reproachfully at further attempts. He opened his mouth and gathered the fingers in, rubbing his tongue broadly over their undersides. They curled into his mouth and ran over his teeth, and he sucked gently on them. His tongue found the joints, pushed into the chinks where tools unfolded, licked at fingertips and knuckles. A growled command had him switching to the other hand, opening it from the clenched fist it'd tightened into so that he could lap slowly up the palm. Long, slow licks to relax and care for and shower worshipful attention on someone who deserved it but couldn’t accept it unless it was almost forced upon him.

“Tell me,” Prowl breathed against that palm, seeking direction. “Tell me what to do.”

And Ratchet guided him.

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_Tarn & Pharma - “Robots in Ugly Sweaters December”_

[* * * * *]

Vos’ sadism had its strokes of genius at times.

Tarn leaned back in his chair and watched the security monitor contentedly. Usually he preferred a more hands-on approach to dealing with Autobots, but ah. Not this one. This one, he intended to keep around for a while. It’d necessitated a change in tactics, more than Pharma likely suspected but less than would have been actually inconvenient. Helex had put a berth and a table in the brig cell, giving it some of the comfort of a room instead of the bare walls of a waiting chamber. Kaon had reined in the Pet so the thing at least didn’t weasel through the bars and chew on the jet in his sleep. Tesarus remembered to go down and dole out a ration of energon, even.

The crew of the _Peaceful Tyranny_ had toned down their behavior in general, really. They were being positively friendly by their terms, mostly because Pharma reacted so strangely to his captors being polite in the face of his acid hatred. They didn’t let on that they didn’t tend to torture to those not on the List. Murder, yes, but Autobots and other annoyances were killed far more quickly. They didn’t tell Pharma that, however. Their guest was defensive, resentful, and scared out of his mind all at the same time because he feared they were keeping him for nefarious purposes.

Well, they were, but probably not the ones he was afraid of. No, the Decepticon Justice Division just let their guest think Tarn was protecting him from them. Tarn had his own purposes, and keeping the Autobot seeing him as both tormentor and savior served his purposes just fine. The others mostly left the trapped jet alone. The confinement and isolation would eventually wear Pharma down. The medic had already begun reading out of sheer boredom, and Tarn had stocked the table with a selection of Lord Megatron’s most inspirational works. The more Pharma read, the more frequently the D.J.D.’s leader visited the jet to discuss the underlying fundamentals of the Cause.

Tarn played a long game, but it wasn’t like his guest was going anywhere. Escape was not an option. Tarn had made sure of it.

He didn’t mind sharing his toys, however, and Vos did like to play games, even games that couldn’t leave marks. Pharma had complained that the brig was too cold, and Vos had responded with a stroke of brilliance the other Decepticons onboard had to admire. Good hosts would want their guest to feel comfortably warm, after all.

Hence, the most hideously-colored, oddly organic temperature regulator Tarn had ever seen. He
found the thing to be bizarrely fascinating on Pharma, like watching a beautiful work of art be defiled. There was something terribly wonderful in seeing a graceful, appearance-conscious professional like his pet jet be reduced to a horror before his optics. The garish thing covered Pharma from shoulders to hips, including some truly ugly winglet covers with…bobbles of some kind hanging off the tips. The Pet was crouched outside the cell, fixated on every twitch of those bobbles.

Of which there were plenty, as Pharma hadn’t stopped fussing since Tesarus and Helex had forcibly stuffed him into the giant Autobot cozy. The medic had eventually calmed down from verbally frothing at the mouth, but he kept fretting at the sleeves. They extended well past his truncated wrists, and without hands, he had no way to push them up his arms. Tarn wondered how long it’d take before he stooped to using his teeth. It was the only way Pharma would manage to get the gathered ends up over his stumps.

In the meantime, the surgeon kept flicking his be-stockinged wings and glaring dourly at the rather morbid t-cog pattern on the thing cover him. He couldn’t manage to tear it off -- Vos had rather cleverly sewn him into it -- and the floppy sleeves prevented him from using the datapads on the table. Tarn had keyed them to respond to the clumsy, broad touch of the Autobot’s amputated wrists instead of fingertips or a stylus, but the screens didn’t register pressure through the organic stuff the cozy was made of. Pharma had pawed at the datapads for a long while before finally giving up on that.

So not only was the jet humiliated and frustrated (and toasty warm!), but he’d soon be bored out of his helm. Excellent.

Tarn would go down and offer to read to him in a few joors time. By then, Pharma would be half-mad with boredom and willing to tolerate any company, even his.

The tank turned away from the security monitor, chuckling low to himself.

By the time he meandered down to the brig, a cube of energon and a datapad of Lord Megatron’s most profound poems in hand, his lovely little jet had been driven quite crazy. It was the only conclusion Tarn could draw from watching the Autobot tease the Pet with one wing-stocking bobble through the cell bars. *Flick-flick-flick* went the wing and attached bobble, with Pharma watching intently as the undead technimal rolled on the floor right outside the call. The Pet whined, paws swiping at the taunting ball of fluff held just out of its reach.

“"You do manage to keep yourself amused down here,” Tarn commented mildly, mentally congratulating Vos on a masterful move. Pharma had been wary of the Pet since he’d woken up with it drooling on him the first orn onboard the ship. This was an improvement over half-scared loathing. The Decepticon looked forward to the orn Pharma’s attitude toward him also changed.

The Autobot looked up at him and smiled, and Tarn blinked in surprise. Had that time already come? What a pleasant surprise!

Pharma stood, squaring his wool-covered shoulders, and the Pet rolled upright to sit and stare at the bobble held through the bars above its head. “Yes, I do,” the jet agreed, still smiling.

It took Kaon half a breem to pry the Pet off Tarn’s head, Vos half an joor to repair the scratches to his mask, and Tesarus half an orn to stop laughing and rewinding the security footage to watch Pharma punt the technimal straight into Tarn’s face. Helex reported that the Autobot didn’t even struggle when he went down to slap a pair of hobbles on those deceptively long but very slender red feet. He just smiled and thanked the D.J.D.’s walking smelter for the gift, yes, he was nicely warm now.
Tarn glared at the security monitor. Smug gloating was radiating off the medic. He could tell.

Vos offered to find a matching hat and leg warmers.

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“Robots in Ugly Sweaters December” by Shibara
[*** ***]
First Aid is a sweetspark, Chromedome and Whirl are walking spoilers for MTMTE #12, Whirl and Skids are afraid of Ambulon and terrified of Rung, and Pharma wins by losing.

**Title:** Candy From Strangers, Pt. 3  
**Warnings:** interfacing, fluff. Here there be weird things.  
**Show Rating:** R  
**Continuity:** IDW & G1  
**Characters:** First Aid, Metroplex, Whirl/Chromedome, Overlord, Skids, Rung, Pharma  
**Disclaimer:** The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.  
**Motivation (Prompt):** Stuff from kinkmemes and random people.

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There were small feet pattering about on his optic. Only First Aid would tip-toe like this, afraid to hurt him. Him, the cityformer whose optic frames could crush the comparatively tiny ambulance if he narrowed them too quickly.

“How’s this?” the medic asked worriedly, fussing as he carefully placed his feet. “Is this okay? Tell me if you want me to move. I know the weight tolerance of your optic glass is high, but there’s no reason for discomfort when I could just as easily run this scan from on your cheek. As long as that’s alright. Should I move?” Little feet shifted when he didn’t answer, having assured the Protectobot multiple times already that standing on his optic was just fine. Saying it again would be small comfort at this point.

First Aid finally settled down enough to run his scans. “What can you see?”

“I see you,” Metroplex rumbled.

The titan’s voice wasn’t intentionally tuned to deep bass, but his vocalizer was simply so tremendous that everything touching his metal vibrated with it. First Aid had to take a few quick sidesteps to keep his balance, one arm waving. The other was holding his scanner readout. “That’s an improvement, I suppose. I’m getting readings that indicate you’re drawing enough power to see the surface of the moon, however. Recalibrate for zoom magnification of 200% and tell me, um,” he looked up and glanced around before pointing, “what color is the third feather on the flight pinions on that bird’s wing?”

The bird fluttered rapidly through the sky, and First Aid waited expectantly. Under his feet, the giant
optical sensor whirred, a hundred rings of light narrowing and expanding in turns. The beams of light washed over the comparatively tiny Autobot standing above it. Only the thick plating of glass separated the medic from Metroplex’s inner workings. His feet were suspended above a powerful tool of sight.

“What do you see?” First Aid prompted after the silence had stretched on an oddly long period.

“I see you,” the cityformer repeated truthfully, but the pervasive voice had quieted until it was more felt than heard.

Startled, the Protectobot looked away from his readouts to stare downward. A massive optic stared back, functional and fixed on something -- someone -- who filled his sight completely.

After a while, First Aid knelt to gaze back, one hand resting gently on the glass. The touch was barely there to Metroplex’s massive network, yet every sensor was attuned to it.

They didn’t move for a long time.

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Whirl - “handjob” / Chromedome - “gratitude”
[* * * * *]

There was a thing on the Lost Light. A Whirl thing. It didn’t get talked about, but somehow everybody knew about it. Nobody knew who had started it, although whispers attributed the blame -- or brilliant idea, depending on how who was talking -- to Rung. Not that the psychotherapist had ever been in the unofficial, not-talked-about schedule, but it just seemed like a Rung idea. Lessen shipboard tension by dulling Whirl’s sharp-edged personality a bit? It was either Rung or Ultra Magnus who’d come up with it, and nobody could quite picture the Duly Appointed Enforcer subtly suggesting and organizing a sex schedule.

So everybody knew that Whirl was getting laid regularly, and it was kind of helping. He hadn’t torn a strip off of Swerve for shooting Rung, at least, and he’d even seemed to be mellowing toward Cyclonus. He wasn’t exactly a pleasant mech to be around, obnoxious rude glitch that he was, but he didn’t start brawls in the bar and he could reliably be found at Rewind’s movie nights just hanging out in the crowd. He didn’t even actively attack Fortress Maximus’ brig cell anymore.

Huh. It must have been Rung. Ultra Magnus himself seemed vaguely surprised by Whirl’s lack of instantaneous violence nowadays. It didn’t make sense that he’d be surprised by the results of his own work, so yeah. Poor Rung must have set things up.

Knowing about the schedule and getting on it were two entirely different things, however. Chromedome finally tracked down the two main volunteers, mainly by accident. Swerve had a big mouth, and everybody knew that he was good for a roll in the berth, but Chromedome hadn’t know that the bartender had been taking over more and more slots lately until Swerve’s name kept popping up on when the mnemosurgeon tried to find out who was next. And next. And next after that. Trying to find the next mech on the schedule so he could take a slot kept leading him back to the bartender, but Swerve was out of commission until his face was reconstructed.

“When will that be?” Chromedown asked Ambulon impatiently. “Two days from now? A week?”

The taciturn ward manager didn’t even look up from sorting parts. “Three to four days, and two more off-duty to let the welds settle. Why?”

There was little need for fancy wording around Ambulon, of all mechs. “Will he be on his feet in
time for his turn interfacing with Whirl?” the mnemosurgeon asked bluntly.

“No,” Ambulon said back, tone bland. “I can’t take any more slots while the medibay’s backed up like this, either, so Tailgate volunteered.” He looked up at last and let his mouth quirk in an unmused smirk. “Cyclonus was not pleased.”

Chromedome didn’t give a flying wingnut whether Cyclonus had stood up and applauded. The Decepticon could go smelt himself, in the mnemosurgeon’s considered opinion. Ambulon had given him the needed information, so he kept his peace and called it good enough. “When is your next slot? I’d like to take one for – “

“I’m sorry, but no,” that bland tone cut him off, and Ambulon went back to sorting parts. “I’m not interested in giving up any my slots.” The tone might have been bland, but there was iron refusal to discuss the decision lurking in the words. “Try Tailgate. Maybe Cyclonus’ disapproval will make a difference.”

Unfortunately, Tailgate seemed oddly reluctant to give up any of his new slots with Whirl. “Look, don’t take this the wrong way,” he told the taller mech in an apologetic voice, “but I think I could use it more than you right now. You’ve got Rewind, after all.” There was a flicker of covered optics toward the empty side of the habitation suite. “Frankly, I’ve got charge with nowhere to go, and Swerve said – well, there’s a reason why he takes every slot nobody else grabs.” There was a faintly embarrassed air to his EM field, but it was covered by the glitter of anticipation and the fluttery ebb and flow of lusty charge.

Chromedome stared for a moment. This, he had not predicted. For one thing, he’d never thought of this particular mech as a randy ‘bot, but the charge coming off him was enough to arouse a drone. He had to shake himself to get loose of it. “You must be joking. You won’t give me a single slot? For Primus’ sake, you know why I want it!”

“I know.” The newbie Autobot looked a little concerned. “Is that healthy, Chromedome? I don’t know why it’s like these days, but paying off a debt with sex seems a bit…wrong?”

Oh. Putting it that way did cast it in a questionable light. “I’m not trying to pay a debt,” the mnemosurgeon huffed, crossing his arms before he could stop the defensive gesture. “I simply want to express my gratitude in a way I think Whirl may believe more than he did my words.” He’d felt the rotary mech’s doubt even as he’d hugged him. Whirl hadn’t believed he meant what he said even while trying to swamp Rewind’s personal savior with sincerity. He owed Whirl, and he wanted Whirl to know how much he appreciated what the mech had done.

Tailgate shifted uneasily, his charge tempered by concern, and Chromedome reluctantly pulled out the big guns.

“You know, Cyclonus will feel his field on you for at least a day afterward.”

He’d have felt guilty about how fast he got Tailgate’s two slots after that, but Chromedome didn’t do guilt. Especially when it came to the most obvious (and revolting) crush on the *Lost Light*. Rewind claimed Cyclonus had put himself between the memory stick and the bomb, but that didn’t mitigate everything else the fragger had done.

Regardless, he got the slots and watched the time count down to the first appointment with a case of jitters he hadn’t expected. It was just interfacing. A quick screw. He didn’t know what was up with Ambulon and Swerve grabbing slots so often, but nobody had ever mentioned the thing with Whirl being a hideous chore. Except for his less-than-stellar personality, the ex-Wrecker wasn’t a bad sort to look at. He wasn’t all that attractive to Chromedome personally, but through the filters of personal
hero and abject appreciation, he was slagging gorgeous.

When the time came, he patted Rewind’s hand and leaned down to press his forehelm to his tiny friend’s. The shimmering projection of electromagnetic energy off Rewind’s tired circuitry was the biggest comfort he’d ever felt. And Whirl had prevented that weary little EM field from disappearing from Chromedome’s world forever. “I’ve got something I need to do,” the mnemosurgeon murmured. The memory stick was almost in recharge anyway, his body laboring to integrate all the patches First Aid had put on him. “I’ll be back. I promise.”

It was hard to leave Rewind alone for any length of time. He tore himself away and walked out of their habitation suite quickly before he lingered any longer.

He stopped in front of Whirl’s door wondering how he should approach this. Indecision wasn’t something he was used to. It was just that…he’d thought about outright offering to interface with the rotary mech, but Whirl had a way of making every offered kindness seem like an attack. As a rule, Chromedome had noticed that Whirl rejected as pity most things mechs tried to give him. It was like the ex-Wrecker had gotten so used to bad things that he didn’t know how to handle the good anymore.

Freely offered good, in any case. The schedule thing, on the other hand, seemed to be working out. Chromedome tapped the access pad and politely pinged. “Whirl?”

The door opened. “Eh?” For a faceless mech, Whirl managed to look confused pretty well. “Whaddya want, domehead?” He hopped a step back and gave an exaggerated cringe. “No more hugging!”

And that shining personality reared its ugly head. Chromedome narrowed his visor slightly and stepped forward. “I’m here for what you want, actually.” The door slid shut behind him.

He was close enough that he felt the sweep of amusement and bafflement go through the rotary mech’s EM field. “I know this’s a bit obvious, but I feel like I gotta point out how un-Tailgate-ish you’re looking today, Tailgate.” Whirl’s head cocked. “You okay? Have some lousy energon or something? You shouldn’t drink anything in Swerve’s personal stash. Trust me, I know.” He held a pincer to his head to mime a hangover. “You wake up as somebody else, lemme tell ya.”

Sadly, the mech probably thought he was hilarious. Even stark gratitude couldn’t make Chromedome laugh at his bad jokes, however. “Cyclonus apparently doesn’t approve of Tailgate ‘facing you,” the mnemosurgeon said somewhat snidely. “I can’t imagine why.”

Upon hearing that, weirdly, Whirl went very still. He stared unblinking at the shorter Autobot for a long moment, and a cold salting of some unidentifiable emotion spattered his field.

Chromedome stared back, taken off-guard by his reaction. He’d expected the ex-Wrecker to crack another poor joke, maybe mock the Decepticon, not…this. Whatever this was.

After a too long, Whirl turned away and shrugged his shoulders. “Figures.”

Because that wasn’t cryptic at all. “What do you mean?”

“Nothin’.” The tall mech walked over to the nearest berth and flopped down. “So. How you want to do this?”

Chromedome followed, trying to push aside the curiosity and odd case of nerves he still suffered. “Shouldn’t I be asking you that?” Stopping when he was in front of the seated mech, he raised a
hand and put it on Whirl’s cockpit. “This is for your benefit, after all.”

Whirl’s benefit, not his, but interfacing with the big Autobot served his purposes right now. He couldn’t find any other way to convey just how much he owed this mech. The rush of gratitude returned. Under the glass and heavy layers of protective casing beat the V-Positive spark that had the strength of pulse his own didn’t. He was envious of that fact, but so, so grateful for it. Rewind’s spark had been jumpstarted by this spark. This spark had saved the tiny Autobot, and in saving him, had saved Chromedome in turn.

The mnemosurgeon suddenly crowded close, pushing his wordless appreciation through his field as hard as he could as he put both hands flat on the glass in stunned recognition of just how close he’d come to losing Rewind. There but for the grace of Whirl did they live. “Whirl, I can’t tell you how --

“Ambulon screws me,” the ex-Wrecker cut him off, EM field as level as his voice. Although his field held dark, wary shadows his voice didn’t betray. “Puts my legs over his shoulders and drills away so hard and fast the threads once friction-heated so much the berth caught fire.” Chromedome’s head snapped back, and his visor widened until the frame creaked protest. “Swerve uses his mouth until I’m almost done and then lets me screw him, but that’s not an option with you, is it? What with the mask. And I don’t think you’ve got a built-in tap-expander like Swerve does.” Whirl cocked his head. “Do you? I mean, frag, I dunno if whatever you use to ‘face the runt’s gonna work with me --

“That is hardly any of your -- “ A deep in-vent interrupted his reflexive interruption. Whirl seemed to specialize in getting a rise out of mechs. This was positively restrained, compared to how he usually was. Chromedome chalked it up to awareness of this being a volunteer service. “…no,” he said more quietly, but curtly. His tap modifications only made it capable of downshifting, not up. “It will not work.”

It made him think about what would, and his mind was abruptly filled with images he’d never previously considered. Imagining Swerve’s wide, expressive mouth shaping an ecstatic ‘O’ as he overloaded wasn’t a new frag-fantasy, but that same mouth sucking on a screw? That had to be stopped and considered. Vivid technicolor imaginings of that ever-present smile puckering down to a tight hole, broad lips pressing down to flatten against Whirl’s hips. A blowjob wasn’t something Chromedome had ever gotten. It wasn’t a terribly popular thing anyway, what with the charge-shock discharge that came with a happy ending, but the image caught in his mind’s optics. Swerve on his knees, mouth busy but likely mumbling because he probably never stopped talking…mmm. Okay, that was something the mnemosurgeon was going to have to bring up to Rewind later. It was a vision that should be recorded for posterity.

His visor had trailed down to eye Whirl’s hips. He swallowed, picturing them fitting between Swerve’s legs as the rotary mech took the smaller Autobot. Was it hard and fast, or did Whirl try to make it last? He imagined the scrape of metal as a screw spiraled in and out of a barely-compatible tap, the threads rasping and conducting and oh great, speaking of hard and fast, now he couldn’t unsee Ambulon holding Whirl down on the berth. This berth. His visor flicked further down, sizing up the rotary mech’s gangly legs and picturing them thrown over the ward manager’s shoulders. The medic probably folded the larger Autobot in half and traded surges with every piston of badly-painted hips right there in the middle of this berth. Or maybe on the end, with Whirl hanging half off it while Ambulon stood there with his hands planted on the berth surface. Frag, maybe the medic grabbed the edge of the berth for leverage and pulled himself in.

That was a surprisingly hot image, but it wasn’t one he’d ever thought he’d have.
Whirl pointedly reset his vocalizer, and Chromedome jerked his head back up. The palms of his hands were heating as both he and Whirl’s circuitry transmitted the excess charge of arousal. It bounced back and forth between them, and Chromedome did nothing to stop it. He also didn’t stop the pincers closing gently around his hip projections and holding on like they were handles.

Those pincers guided him forward as Whirl moved back on the berth, and Chromedome found himself hoisted up by the hips to kneel astride the same gangly legs he’d been imagining kicking uncontrollably as Ambulon drilled in and out. His knees tightened around Whirl’s thighs, and his chest pressed between the rotary mech’s chest-mounted guns. Increased surface area only boosted the charge transmission, and his hands slid up the glass to rest lightly on Whirl’s shoulders.

“Yeah. So, like I said. How you want to do this?” the ex-Wrecker asked roughly.

It took him a second to find his voice. It was low, and he was no longer nervous. “We’re not compatible, screw and tap. I’m too small.”

Whirl snorted. “I’m too big, you mean.”

Chromedome paused, blinking his visor. “…right. We could make it work if I screw you?” It came out as a suggestion, because he wasn’t sure the ex-Wrecker would be into that. He himself would prefer not to go that route, to be honest. There were ways to stimulate a tap with an incompatible screw, but they didn’t have the expander necessary to fit Whirl into Chromedome’s too-small tap, and Chromedome wasn’t fond of the hip contortions he’d have to do to catch the inner threads of Whirl’s too-large tap. Interfacing that way was too vigorous for his taste.

He tried to keep his opinion on it out of his EM field. Whatever Whirl wanted, he’d be more than willing to comply with. It’d be his pleasure, even if it wasn’t physically pleasing.

“Uh.” The sole optic scanned him. “I was kinda thinking of something else. I mean, if it’s okay. I’m not pushing.” He seemed to realize that he was still holding the smaller Autobot’s hip projections, and a ripple of anxiety went through Whirl’s field. He let go of Chromedome like he’d been burnt. “No pressure!”

That was unexpected. Somebody had obviously put the fear of neutering into Whirl at some point. That was something of a relief for Chromedome. He was a sturdy build, but he didn’t enjoy the rough stuff. It was nice knowing he didn’t have to worry about unwanted attention and ‘no means no.’ “What did you want?” he asked, trying to coax the anxious ripple down with another surge of lust-charge.

Whirl looked at him, then away. No, not away. He was looking to the side at one of Chromedome’s hands.

The mnemosurgeon flexed it, experimenting, and the shudder that went through Whirl was a dead give-away even if a molten flow of charge hadn’t snapped over the rotary mech’s circuits hard enough to electrify his armor. The energy transmitted from metal to metal, and Chromedome jolted on the bigger Autobot’s lap. His circuitry absorbed the foreign energy, and it felt good. He’d forgotten what it was like to have a lover large enough to drown his body in charge. Whirl’s overload would zap him into an overload of his own even if they didn’t screw the traditional way.

That sounded surprisingly good. He was used to being the larger partner now, but that hadn’t always been true. Overloading by electromagnetic energy only was something he hadn’t done in a while, and his interface hardware tingled pleasantly as he remembered past interfacing. The charge would be highest through the biggest point of contact, and his hands? A powerful influx of energy over the specialized, sensitive equipment stored in his hands. That…oh, yes. He’d take that, please and thank
you. Rewind couldn’t produce more than a third of the discharge a mech Whirl’s size gave off.

This could be a very nice bit of stress relief for both of them tonight.

“Handjob it is,” he breathed, leaning forward to nuzzle his facial mask against Whirl’s canopy glass. He pushed a last glow of gratitude through his EM field, still trying to convince the mech of his sincerity, before letting lust bubble up to take over. “Lay back. I’ll take care of you from here.” He wriggled his fingers against blue shoulders, gambling that it was the lack of hands of his own that turned the ex-Wrecker on. It seemed he was right, as every individual touch of his fingertips produced a hot drip of arousal, tugging desire in a crawling climb from Whirl’s pelvic span to coat the large Autobot’s whole body.

“Yeah. Great. So, uh.” Whirl reset his vocalizer again as he leaned back on his elbows, and a squirming hint of embarrassment infected his EM field. Chromedome paused in exploring the underside of the mech’s prominent cockpit. What in the Pit could possibly embarrass an ex-Wrecker? “I get kinda loud,” the spindly Autobot confessed, and his optic glanced away to avoid looking at the brightly-colored mech astride him. “And…specific. I don’t know if that’s going to be turn-off for you or not, but I can shut off my vocalizer if you want.” One pincer lifted up to rub against the side of Whirl’s faceless head, and the embarrassment flattened into a kind of muted anger. It didn’t seem directed at Chromedome; just anger at the universe in general. “You probably will. Just tell me when you get sick of -- yeah. When you’re done.”

What did that even mean? “I’ll be fine,” Chromedome assured him briskly, resolving to shut off his audios before he asked Whirl to shut off his vocalizer. Volume wouldn’t be a problem, but he pondered what ‘specific’ meant as he put his hands back to work.

Whirl hesitated before slowly laying flat under him, letting him do as he wished. The smaller Autobot took his time discovering the complicated workings of a mech more used to pain than pleasure. That was the frustrating yet fun part about being living machines. He could download Whirl’s design specs and still not have a clue what turned the mech on. Cybertronians were forged with body parts that responded in varying ways to stimulus, but it was how they learned to react to that stimulus that determined true reactions. Stroking Rewind’s shoulder spauldings, according to his frametype, should have reduced the little memory stick to putty in Chromedome’s hands, but he only shrugged when handled there. Touch his camera, however, and he’d flare arousal so fiercely certain stations would pick it up as a broadcast.

In much the same way, stroking his palms over Whirl’s stabilizers produced nothing but an interested hum from the mech’s inner workings. Butting his helm against the chest-mounted guns caused the blue Autobot’s interface hatch to snap open. Massaging his fingers around the canopy seals made that heavy-lift engine turn over, thrumming directly down Whirl’s legs to vibrate against Chromedome’s inner thighs, but delicately tracing his rotor assembly sent Whirl’s screw spiraling up to nudge Chromedome in the chest.

The mnemosurgeon took a moment to look at it, letting his hands distract Whirl by prodding into the gun barrels while he gave the screw a critical once-over. It didn’t look all that special. The threads were more prominent than normal, practically ridges standing out from the thin inner diameter, but he couldn’t see this being why Swerve and Ambulon were greedily hording the schedule slots. The thicker threads would create a more uneven charge transmission as a tap with shallower inner threads wouldn’t lock with them. It’d force the energy to build to a certain point before it’d transfer through the sparser contact points, but that wasn’t an uncommon phenomenon when two different frametypes fragged.

Whirl certainly wasn’t standing out as a lover so far. He was mostly just lying there under
Chromedome, which admittedly was sort of what the smaller mech had told him to do, but still. The passiveness was strange.

Then Chromedome took his hands away from Whirl’s gun barrels and applied them to the screw, and…well, then. This was…different.

Different, but not bad at all. He let his fingers slide between the threads, gliding his palms over the crests. His hands deftly gave a half-twist that’d once driven Prowl to stop reading his blasted reports in the berth, and he paused to listen to the result.

Whirl’s voice pitched higher. “ -- have no idea what that’s doing to me. Primus! You’ve got the touch, that’s like nothing I’ve ever felt! Oh, do that again, do it again, you could do this for a fragging living with hands like that. No joke. I’d pay for thisss…ah. Ah. Harder, yeah, mm, down the helix like that. Your thumb! Primus! That’s so good it can’t be legal. You can do those little circles forever yeah, nngh. Forever. Just crook your forefinger right there, unhh, right there, do it again ah. Ahhh. Ah. Do it nmaa-hhh yes! Do it again and I’ll do anything you want. Guh, yes. Yes! Like that, just like that -- “

So that’s what he’d meant by specific. Chromedome was amused, but mostly just wildly flattered. He smoothed and petted, hands working the screw from the blunt tip down and then dragging back-and-forth twists upward to gradually saw his palms over the ridge peaks. He rubbed his fingers down in the grooves, the smooth plating of his hands slicking over the rough metal of the roots and sides of every ridge. A few sparks friction-shiiinged when his fingers scraped too hard, but Whirl didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he was extremely vocal in his appreciation. Chromedome was beginning to see how he and Ambulon had set the berth on fire, if a few strokes filing down Whirl’s thread helix had the rotary mech deliriously praising Primus and praying for harder, better, faster.

Whirl’s voice got louder, going from high squeaks when Chromedome dragged the length of his fingers across the screw tip, to guttural and low when the mnemosurgeon applied both hands to the base. It turned, speeding up as the charge built and it drilled between his hands. The nonstop stream-of-consciousness babble just kept coming. For every blush of rising energy pulled from hard-working systems, Whirl poured another dosage of praise over Chromedome. It was almost as intoxicating as the lap of charge bleeding up the smaller Autobot’s thighs, setting his own body afire with the shared pleasure of a slow build toward the peak.

“ -- broke the mold when they cast your blassted hands, swear to Primus, never felt anything like this. I never want this to stop, I don’t, just keep going, yessss. Like that. Oh Primus oh Primus oh splay me open and do whatever the Pit you want! Just do it!” Whirl writhed and groaned, head thrown back and hips bucking. “Hands made by Primus himseeeeee oh eh yes. That’s incredible. Whatever you just did, please please do it again! Uhhmm like that! That! Fragging magic, I’m not even kidding, is this even real? Is this actually happening -- okay yes, point made, that’s actually your hand on my screw and I’ll take five more of that, please.”

If Whirl was like this every time he got a frag, no wonder Ambulon and Swerve were snapping up every open slot. Chromedome’s visor had dimmed to a sultry gold as he listened, and his body rocked instinctively against Whirl’s thighs, seeking more of the pleasure soaking him. The conversation wasn’t exactly intellectual, but his ego was rolling in it. This was like a soundtrack for future masturbation. How good of a lover was he? Whirl was apparently most happy to tell him, in explicit detail. The narration only got louder when Chromedome scooted back and patted a thigh suggestively. One leg kicked convulsively under him, but the rotary mech’s knees snapped apart.

Heavy panting broke up the words now as every vent fan switched on full and Chromedome’s
fingers started exploring Whirl’s tap in slow, inward-spiraling licks of charge. The rougher internal threads caught even more against his fingertips, and although he couldn’t see the sparks, his fingertips shocked pleasantly as friction scraped them into a tiny internal rain. Whirl arched up on the berth and bucked his hips into the teasing circles, and his fans weren’t keeping up with the heat making his cockpit canopy steam up.

“-- node hasn’t gotten switched on since before the war en-ded unnnh. Yeah, put your finger on that thread and -- so good, that feels so good, uhhfffrigth, okay, the frag-fairy came down and blessed whatever finger you just used to ahhhh. Ahhh, unnnff. Nnggh. Yes. Whatever finger you did that with, do it again. Put your thumb on that again unnnmm. Just like that. Put your hand up my taaaah. Aah-ah-ah-ummmhh. You’re breaking my brain module. It’s broken. It’s coming out my tap. You’ve got your hand so far up me you could pull it out. Just do it. Take it out and throw it somewhere. I don’t need it. Not gonna use it. Just gonna lie here and…twitch. Yeah. Sounds good! Yeeek cold cold, those are coooold -- whoa, hey!” Whirl suddenly went very still. His head tilted enough to see around his own chest, and his optic was very wide. “Are those…what I think they are?”

“If you think they’re my injectors,” Chromedome said, concentrating as he began to stroke down the screw in front of him with one hand and plinked up inside Whirl’s tap with the other, “then you’re right.” The long, thin needles rattled and scraped, swirling and whispering and creating a miniature lightning storm of unpredictable energy transmissions inside the larger Autobot’s tap.

Whirl’s engine screamed. His monologue wasn’t far behind. “-- god of fragging kinky ‘facing, a fragging god! Oh sweet merciful overload take me, I’m so ready nngggh, nevermind, I want more! More, please, yes yes yes yes yesss uhn-uh-ah-uhn yes --”

Forget demonstrating his gratitude. This was self-indulgent pleasure at this point, feeding off the addictive flow of praise and the purring rise of charge rapidly pulsing up their meshing fields in expanding surges that were approaching overload. He’d have to find another way to show his appreciation, because this Whirl thing was like the Lost Light’s hidden porn show. This was getting him off so hard he was going to talk Whirl into another round if the discharge didn’t knock him out.

Chromedome was totally bringing Rewind along to the second slot. This was something close friends shared. Between them, if they brought an expander and Whirl was into the idea. Maybe they could sign up for a regular spot on the schedule, too. Might have to fight off Ambulon and Swerve to do it, but this?

“-- I can’t, I can’t even, I can’t, I just can’t, you’re too good, too good, I can’t deal with it, I can’t, I can’t --”

This was worth it.

[* * * * *]
Rung - “a mean drunk”
[* * * * *]

“Uh…I don’t…what?” For once, even Whirl looked uneasy. He glanced at Skids, then away with every indication of acute discomfort. “Call whoever’s in charge of this clusterfrag and tell ‘em I’ve got conflict of interest.”

Skids stared at him as a break from gaping at the wreckage of Swerve’s bar. “You are claiming exemption from action?”
If the rotary mech were any other Autobot, he’d have been squirming in anxiety and embarrassment. Whirl just glared. “I’ve had this held over my head once on this trip already. I don’t need anyone saying I roughed him up taking him down to the drunk tank!” His voice dropped to a mumble. “Nobody’d believe my side of the story. They never do.”

“Trust me. Right now?” The theoretician looked back into the bar. “I’d back you to the hilt. So come on.” He pushed the door open the rest of the way and sidled in.

Whirl hesitated a minute more before shaking his stabilizers back and clomping after his fellow brute squad member. Time to earn his nonexistent paycheck. He’d insist on hazard pay, but it wasn’t like he was formally part of the Ship’s Guard or anything. Neither of them were. Ultra Magnus hadn’t given Whirl a choice about being recruited into doing the nasty work, and Skids didn’t have anything better to do. Apparently, the Lost Light’s executive officer thought he needed the ex-Wrecker under his thumb at all times, and Skids had proven himself rather resourceful -- if not exactly rule-abiding -- when he’d gone gallivanting about the ship during the spark eater incident. They’d somehow ended up partnered up and working for Ultra Magnus without officially working for him.

Which was fine, because an ex-Wrecker left at loose ends was a bad idea all around, and Skids could kick enough aft when he chose to that he could keep up with Whirl. They got along just fine on-duty, and Skids was probably the only one completely unafraid to hang out with the rotary mech off-duty. Get them a few glasses of engex in, and they went off onto conversational tangents about their basic philosophical differences. Skids made flow charts. Whirl illustrated relevant points with chairs. Mostly to other people’s heads, but usually in good fun, and he never went after anybody who wasn’t halfway toward starting a fight in the first place. It’d been a long war, and he wasn’t the only one on board who looked at an amiable brawl as entertainment. He was just the only one willing to start the fragging things. Everyone else had these self-image concerns, what with not wanting to look like the bad guy. Whirl just didn’t give a scrap.

It’d gotten to the point that Ratchet sent Ambulon after the two unofficial ship marshals any time they got smashed enough to start in on ‘the meaning behind throwing a punch.’ Ambulon might not look like a scrapper, but he transformed into something without interior spaces. He was solid metal and made to support a team of other mechs made of nothing but battle armor and weaponry. He was fully capable of throwing his considerable weight around when he had to. Plus, he had the personality of a lead brick. As in, he used it to repeatedly bludgeon those who invoked his ire.

Mech was built denser than a tank and mean enough to scold the tipsy duo into packing it in for the night. He just had to come in the door to the bar and scowl, and Whirl and Skids scampered back to their respective quarters to snooze off their overcharge peacefully. If they were beyond scampering by the time he arrived, he had no problem dragging their drunk afts through the halls, leaving paint transfers and whipped-cyberpuppy whimpering in his wake. He nagged them the whole way and sent Siren to greet their inevitable hangovers the next morning. Sturdy. Yeah, that was the word. Ambulon was study. Also scary. Scary also worked.

Anyway, usually Whirl and Skids were a relatively fearless pair. However, they were tip-toeing into Swerve’s wrecked bar like they were frightened of the furniture. Strangely enough, their combined bad-aftness was still not enough to face down the source of the mayhem that’d left tables and chairs overturned all over the place.

“We should call the blasted medic,” Whirl muttered, peering over a chair. He wasn’t hiding, no sir, not him. He was merely utilizing his surroundings for maximum defensive camouflage. Kup had taught him about that strategy. He’d never used it prior to this, but there was a first time for everything. “Leg mech to the rescue.”
“We don’t need backup,” Skids said back as he put his back to a table and shot a quick glance over the top. “He’s just one mech. A scrawny one, at that.”

“The optic ridges give him emotional power beyond the ken. Magic wizardry of self-expression.” Pincers waved. “Don’t underestimate the psychotherapist. He’ll look at you, and suddenly you’re talking about feelings.”

“So in other words, I’ll be fine if I just hide behind you?” Skids blinked and took his attention off the other end of the room when silence met his joking question. “Whirl…?”

The rotary mech ducked his head and snarled his engine. “I have feelings!”

“Heh.”

“Go suck Ultra Fragnus’ tailpipe,” Whirl spat resentfully. Forget duck-and-cover. He stood up straight and stormed the bar. “Let’s get this over with.”

The two mechs already sitting at the bar saw him coming, but only one looked alarmed at having an ex-Wrecker in a sulky mood stomping toward him. Rung just looked over his shoulder and smiled, optics placidly amused as Whirl pushed his way through the clutter. “Hello, Whirl.”

"I got him calmed down now, but please, please make him go away!” * Swerve whined through a tight comm. channel. The metallurgist’s smile was supremely forced and more than a little desperate around the edges. He hurriedly resumed scanning the small non-combatant’s hand, holding it between his palms as the equipment in his chest units and forearms swept over orange plating. He looked like the last place he wanted to be at that moment was standing near Rung, even with the bar between them. “I told him I need quiet to analyze the alloys of his hand, but if you set him off again, I’m gonna make a run for it.” * His plea sounded a bit pathetic, perhaps because he knew that Whirl was the last person onboard who’d heed it. “Don’t make him mad.” *

“Ratchet’s standing by to remove the thing,” * Skids soothed, hurrying to catch up with the rotary mech like a physical manifestation of the diplomacy Whirl lacked.

Swerve looked up from his work to give them a sickly grin before looking down again. “Yeah, but how’re you going to get him from here to there? Can you just…knock him out?” *

Even Whirl stopped short at that. His optic blinked as he shook himself through reset, and he twisted his head aside to give Skids a glare that did a barely credible attempt at covering up a helpless look. Knock out Rung? The psychotherapist was literally the only non-combatant he had ever met, at least the only one who couldn’t fight in any way whatsoever. He’d heard the tales. It was half the reason he’d agreed to attend sessions with the shrink. The Wreckers made fun of the gangly head-doctor, sure, but they had to respect a mech who refused a firearm yet opened his door to the most deranged, dangerous Autobots in the ranks. The only weapons Rung had were his words.

To be fair, that’d been enough to send an entire bar of combatants fleeing the room.

Swerve and Rung were sitting on either side of the bar like the untouched center of an explosion. Chairs and tables overturned in every direction away from where they sat. Swerve had been the one to place the emergency call asking for help, but that hadn’t happened until Rung had started laying into the party-goers. He’d never seen anything like it, and he definitely never wanted to hear anything like it ever again.

Testing something meant to bring out the bad side of a mech on someone nobody found threatening might have been a good idea…well, never. In hindsight, yeah, it’d been a really lousy idea. Testing
Brainstorm’s stupid little micro-glitch on someone had seemed like a funny prank, but he should have asked the self-proclaimed genius for details. He hadn’t, and look what’d happened.

He’d slipped the tiny mechanism into the one glass of engex Rung ever allowed himself, thinking he might get to listen to the slender Autobot actually complain for once. His other patrons consistently did. It was great entertainment, and Swerve had figured that Rung probably had either the most mundane or the most bizarre complaints hiding under his perpetual mild exterior. He honestly couldn’t picture the mech haven’t more of a ‘bad side’ than that, despite Brainstorm avidly watching -- like that wasn’t creepy or anything -- from the stool beside the designated test subject.

Brainstorm didn’t do subtle. Rung had been politely ignoring him after asking if there was something he could do for the mech. The psychotherapist had sipped his drink, and his optics had briefly crossed. Brainstorm had -- rather rudely -- invaded the psychotherapist’s personal space he was so eager to observe Rung’s reaction to the device, and even Swerve had stopped polishing the bartop to lean closer. The lithe orange ‘bot had shaken his head as his optics reset, then smiled at the bartender with that sweet smile that normally had half the bar tripping over their own feet to sit by him.

He’d turned and laid into Brainstorm still wearing that pleasant smile.

Rung’s bad side made Megatron look nice. Megatron had the physical threat down pat, but Megatron couldn’t hold a torch to Rung in the mental arena. Megatron couldn’t dissect your mind while you were still living in it, tell you the root cause of all your problems, and make you wither in your armor because of the caustic wit used while describing how intrinsically pitiful you were. Rung had cradled his drink in one hand, smiling, and said the very worst possible thing: the stark, unvarnished truth about things the Autobots gathered in the bar had long tried to bury.

Every mech had something tucked in their personal histories they didn’t want to think about; denials, justifications, and complicated pains they preferred not to bring up. Most of them tried to convince themselves that they were at peace with their pasts, but that was a lie for the majority of them. The lie worked, however, so long as everyone played along.

But Rung had suddenly been in no mood to humor their collectively-fostered self-delusion. As Rewind had once noted, Rung turned up everywhere, watching everything. He was never an active participant, it seemed, but he’d seen the entire war firsthand or via the locked files. He knew truths the Autobots in the bar would have paid money or even killed to prevent being spoken aloud.

Swerve would have been furious with Brainstorm if he hadn’t witnessed the amoral aft cowering on the barstool as the psychotherapist sat beside him and calmly eviscerated him with words. It was hard to be mad at a mech left shivering, sliced to the spark by bitter, achingly sharp words.

After he was done with the ‘genius,’ the psychotherapist had turned and started on the next Autobot he saw. His words had been pure brutality couched in a soft tone. Pipes hadn’t stood a chance. Shock had paralyzed the room through three victims. There’d just been something incredibly difficult to process about the thin, mild-mannered Autobot punching through them. It’d been like being successfully assaulted by a powder puff. There’d been a part of the watching mechs that just couldn’t connect to ongoing events.

Brainstorm had had his face on the bar with his hands covering his audios. Pipe’s had been staring into space, optics vague as Rung’s words continued rattling around in his head and peeling his ego apart one painful truth at a time. By the time Rung had finished tearing a strip off of Sunstreaker, the vain frontliner’s jaw had been nearly in his lap. He’d pushed himself as far back in his chair as he could, and his optics had been wide and dim. Bob had pushed against his legs, whimpering anxiously. The bug hadn’t understood the electric reek of bewildered terror slowly filling the room;
the nice mech with the clever hands and gentle voice had only been speaking in that low and soothing tone he took when he was coaxing Bob to sit by the couch while his owner laid down for a while. It was a good voice. Sunstreaker normally came out of sessions with that voice thoughtful, and Bob would get many antenna skritches while the sunflower yellow frontliner sat and pondered what had been said. Not today, it seemed. Sunstreaker’s vents had all been flipped open, but the fans had stalled out.

The psychotherapist had daintily taken a sip from his glass, poised and ready to verbally spear the next mech who so much as twitched.

*"Ever seen an entire room full of Autobots try to fit through one door all at once?"* Swerve asked sourly as he examined Rung’s hand now. *"Fragging Cosmos got trampled in the stampede. Now knock him out before he starts talking again."*

“You skipped your last session, Whirl,” Rung chided, slipping his hand free of Swerve’s and standing in one elegant motion. He turned to face the two mechs who’d reluctantly come to escort him to the drunk tank, and those impressive optical ridges looked suddenly imposing as he gave a reproving frown to the ex-Wrecker shuffling his feet before him. “You wouldn’t want your progress to slow, would you?”

“Er.” Skids looked between the slight Autobot and Whirl. Whirl was a big, tough mech. Rung was built of thin struts and light plating that’d crumple in the mech’s pincers no problem. “Uh. No?” If there’d been a betting pool, right now Skids’ money would have been on Rung.

“It’s been so gradual already that I fear you’re sabotaging yourself.” That adorable smile flashed, the visual equivalent of the rattletrap warning a sparkeater’s tentacles gave, and Swerve ducked under the bar. “In fact, I know you are. Whirl, I believe we should have a talk about some of your underlying issues. Please,” he gestured at a miraculously upright chair, “come sit and talk with me.”

*"Don’t do it!”* Skids and Swerve both urged over internal comm., but Rung’s politeness only extended to saying the invitation. He actually didn’t wait for his patient to accept before continuing.

The kind expression he wore was a lie. Rung was mean.

Two minutes in, and Skid picked his jaw up off the floor enough to throw Whirl over one shoulder and take off after Swerve, fleeing psychological warfare wielded by an expert in mouth-to-mind combat. Whirl was too stunned to react.

They met Ultra Magnus and his backup outside the bar. Skids plunked Whirl down, and the rotary mech took a few uncertain steps as if testing his own stability.

“Ah. Ultra Magnus. You never visit me in a professional capacity, despite referring my services to many.” Whirl froze and slowly turned to look over his shoulder at the slender orange Autobot who’d followed them out. Rung leaned against the wall, crossing his arms and sweeping a contemplative look around the assembled mechs before focusing on the ship’s executive officer. “I find that strange considering the hypocritical nature of the Accord you live and breathe by. I suspect at the core of you, there is nothing but mindless robotic subservience to it, and that is quite unfortunate considering the fundamentally flawed nature of the Accord. Did I ever tell you that I knew Tyrest?”

Whirl, Skids, and Swerve took off running as that whimsical, lopsided, horrible smile crossed Rung’s face. Ultra Magnus’ optics widened in alarm, but it was too late. The truth could break minds if told cruelly enough, and the psychotherapist was in a bit of a bad mood, one could say.

“Let me tell you exactly what kind of mech your beloved Tyrest really was.”
Brainstorm had a lot to answer for.

[* * * * *

Pharma - “broken toys and sharp edges
[* * * * *

“You are being deceived,” he said, falling, and his voice stayed unnaturally dispassionate.

He fell into the abyss, and only someone with a twisted cause would come looking for him. But only someone using a Cause to serve twisted desires would have made a toy of a brilliant surgeon.

More fool Tarn, to break the toy.

Pharma had endured Helex’s rough hands and Tesarus mocking laughter, but it was Kaon and Vos who had truly tortured him. “No marks,” Tarn had said, turning the Autobot over to them, and they had agreed.

Kaon and his electricity. Vos and his sadism. They had agreed, and although the Autobot’s armor had smoked afterward with the copper tang of burnt circuitry, none of the damage had been visible. Not the first time, nor the second. Nor any time after that, and the times had been many. No, the D.J.D. had had their fun with him, and nobody had come to save him. Nothing had betrayed how they’d played with Tarn’s toy, and they’d released him only on their own terms.

Pharma had limped back to the Delphi Clinic every time with a few more sharp edges where there’d once been rationality, a snapped light behind his optics where the fierce intelligence kindled defiance to burn the fear as fuel.

Perhaps if there had been more time, a less drastic confrontation, Ratchet might have caught on. He was the Autobot Chief Medical Officer, after all, and had volunteered in the rehab clinics before the war even began. He’d seen mechs who finally broke. He might have recognized that repeated, ruthless torture had been what’d twisted the talented surgeon he’d once known.

Maybe he would have held some sort of compassion for the mad surgeon Pharma had become. Maybe he would have seen that the insane hate had driven Pharma to set loose a plague, not a loss of values or morals.

Maybe not. It had been a long war.

Regardless of might-have-beens and maybes, what had happened had happened, and Pharma fell.

Broken toy, discarded. Only a whimsical owner prone to gloating would ever come looking for his rusting, infected body.

And, kneeling by him, Tarn would transform.

“You are being deceived,” he’d say, and Pharma smiled as the pieces fell with him, coming together.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 4

Chapter Summary

Tailgate thanks some people the old-fashioned way.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 4
Warnings: Tailgate. Don’t read if that’s going to scandalize you.
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW
Characters: Whirl, Tailgate, Cyclonus, Trailbreaker, Pipes, Ultra Magnus, Swerve, Skids, Chromedome, Rewind
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): It’s all Shibara, this round. And she wants a continuation of the first set, so I guess the next round starts with her as well. Yes, oh artist, I bend to thy whims, oh artist… The Whirl & Fortress Maximus VS heatvirus ficlets have been moved to If You Can't Stand The Heat.

[*** ***]
Tailgate - "gifts"
[*** ***]

It started with a free drink.

Well, technically all drinks for Tailgate were free. Rodimus had granted him a small allowance, hiring him as the “Ship’s Antique” out of a fit of generosity tempered by pity and his questionable sense of humor. Rung, who’d been behind their young captain at the time, had put a hand over his mouth until he could control his expression. Tailgate still wasn’t sure if the older mech had been smothering irritation or amusement. He himself wobbled between annoyance and gratitude.

For a mech his age, he really wasn’t that old Being called an antique by Ratchet had stung a little, but being officially labeled that by Rodimus was kind of mean. Seriously, he’d been in and out of consciousness for a few million years; he hadn’t actually lived all that time. Cyclonus was as old as he was physically, but the grouchy purple warrior had actually lived the time.

Anyway, he didn’t say anything to Rodimus about it because he kind of needed the tiny credit allowance the, uh, ‘job’ gave him. He hadn’t exactly been poor when he’d signed on to the original Ark mission, but that’d been before civil war collapsed the bank system and economy in one long, terrible go. His credits were long gone.

Tailgate limited himself, saving what he could. It seemed like reasonable money management was a rarity -- he was looking at half the crew on that one -- but apparently the ‘live as if you won’t see tomorrow’ war mentality was still in place. Well, he intended to see tomorrow. Therefore, he saved his credits. He gave them to Ultra Magnus to invest, as the Duly Appointed Enforcer had access to the Enforcer Fund. The investment’s total gain would be slow, but steady. Apparently, the Enforcer Fund was one of the few Cybertronian investments the galactic community as a whole would trade on.

The blue mech didn’t like to think on that. He clearly remembered a time when the galactic
community had fought for access to Cybertronian credits.

In any case, having his credits invested meant that he was limited to one drink at Swerve’s bar when he did go. The money he had just wasn’t enough for more. He was fine with that! Really! He hadn’t been one for much drinking before waking up, and the heavy-duty energon everyone else was used to by now tasted, er...no offense to Swerve or anything, but even distilled, the resulting engex still tasted like swill. One glass was about all Tailgate could stand before it felt like the stuff started to scour his intake tubing.

So to take it beyond the free drink, it really started with Cyclonus. Because like that was news?

“Are you sure you don’t want to come?” Tailgate asked, trying to project warmth toward his hab suite’s sullen co-occupant. “Just for a while?”

“I do not wish to accompany you anywhere,” Cyclonus stated coldly.

The warmth faltered a bit. “O-oh.”

The purple warrior looked up from the desk where he was sharpening his claws. The pinpricks of red optical light skewered Tailgate with a contemptuous glare. “Why do you persist in asking me about such inanities? I have not, nor will I ever agree to voluntarily be in your company. Cease your pestering and leave me in peace.”

Red optics looked back to their work, and maybe if Tailgate had been anyone else, he’d have been offended and hurt enough to ‘take a hint,’ as Whirl so charmingly put it. But Tailgate was only Tailgate, and Tailgate saw things in the Lost Light as no one else could. The history attached to every single person he met didn’t warp his vision one way or another.

He looked across the habitation suite at the proud warrior whom the whole Primal Vanguard had regarded as a hero of Cybertron, and he saw loneliness, bitterness, and anger wrapped around an unbroken spark. He saw power and control never misused, and an honor code from times he’d freshly woken up from himself. Sure, Cyclonus was a Decepticon and older than Tailgate really was, impatient with the Bomb Disposal expert’s naiveté and constant attempts to draw him into the company of Autobots. That didn’t change the fact that he hadn’t moved out of the hab suite he shared with the little mech.

Cyclonus was a bluntly honest mech when he cared to be. Probably the only lie he told himself was that he didn’t want Tailgate’s company.

And usually Tailgate would cheerfully pop up by his elbow, say something that’d dig that point in, and skedaddle off to Swerve’s bar before the warrior could muster more than a furious huff. By the time he’d get back, Cyclonus would have rationalized his grumpy dismissal of all things Tailgate all over again, and they’d repeat the cycle the next time.

This time, however, Tailgate just looked down at the floor and shuffled his feet before turning to leave. He didn’t say anything, and he didn’t turn back to see the red optics look up suddenly as the door began to close. He just walked slowly way down the corridor.

It was something Rung had said to him, in that gentle conversational tone he took with his patients. Tailgate didn’t feel like he needed psychotherapy, but he did need some history lessons. He was catching up on millions of years of his planet and people combusting in civil war. As much fun as movie nights with Rewind were, the information he got from scheduling sessions with Rung tended to be more reliable. It helped that Rung had been a respected therapist long before his time. It made him kind of intimidating in that scarily-smart way some mechs had, but Tailgate liked him anyway.
Unfortunately, Rung had a habit of getting to the heart of matters that the blue Bomb Disposal expert had been trying to not think about.

“You do realize almost every friend you had is long dead?” the psychotherapist had asked, kind and sad. “I can count on both hands the number of mechs from my generation that survived the war.” His absurd optical ridges lowered slightly. “I don’t know how many made it from yours, but statistically speaking...the likelihood of any of your circle of acquaintances surviving approaches zero.”

Urk.

Tailgate had found himself in sudden, urgent need of a stiff drink or five.

Getting rejected by Cyclonus -- again -- had only made the need more pressing. He was going to go to Swerve’s bar, and he was going to drown sorrows deeper than any Ultra Magnus’ horrid regulations had inspired.

So he hopped up on a stool and sucked down his first drink. And that’s about when he actually checked his credit balance.

Fraaaaaag.

“Here,” Swerve said, sliding a mug of engex to knock against the top of Tailgate’s helm. That was currently the only part of him available, as the blue Minibot’s face was planted firmly on the bar. “End of the paycheck, eh?” He’d had customers in the whole cycle sourly muttering about having to cut out early. Half the bar was nursing their drinks to make them last.

A dim blue visor peeked upward. “Yes,” Tailgate muttered, and the bartender had never heard the perpetually-upbeat mech sound so miserable. “I’m broke. Sorry.” He poked a finger at the mug, sliding it back across the bartop. “I can’t pay.”

Swerve firmly pushed it back. “It’s on the house. Mech, you look like you need it!”

That got Tailgate’s head off the bar real quick. “But I can’t pay!” He tried to push it back, looking a little flustered. “I’m fine, I’m fine. Just, um, feeling my age. Swerve!” The mug had been pushed back in front of him. Swerve was pretending to polish things, studiously ignoring any and all attempts to give him back the drink. Sometimes a mech knew when talking was merely a delaying tactic. “But...” Tailgate looked between bartender and drink. “But I can’t...I haven’t the money.”

“It’s already mixed,” Swerved proclaimed. “Can’t put it back in the tanks, so drink up.”

Putting it that way really just made Tailgate feel guilty. Both for refusing the free drink and not paying in the first place, which made him feel terribly conflicted. He turned the mug around in his hands and gave a tiny nod. “Okay. But, um, if you’re giving me something, then I have to give you something back.”

“Why would you do that?” Swerve’s moment of triumph over the surprisingly stubborn “Ship’s Antique” became confusion.

Tailgate blinked at him, taken aback by his surprise. “You mean that’s not a custom anymore? Every gift must be reciprocated, or it puts the gift-taker in the gift-giver’s debt. I mean, it’s only a ritual. It doesn’t actually have to be a big expensive return gift, but it’s the symbolism that -- “ The big blue visor blinked again as Swerve put his hands up. “That’s really not done anymore?”

“Is this another ‘back in my day’ custom?” The bartender leaned on the bartop, sweeping the room with an automatic customer-check. Nope, everyone was still miserly nursing along their drinks.
“Because I don’t think I get this one. If I give you a present, I give you a present. No strings attached, Tailgate.”

The Bomb Disposal expert looked down into his mug and took a sip from the ridiculously curly straw, but Swerve still heard him mumble something. It sounded like, “There are always strings attached.”

“No, seriously.” He propped an arm in front of Tailgate and pointed a finger at the drink. “It’s just a drink. I own the place, y’know? You don’t have to pay me anything for it if I say you don’t.”

That got a sigh. “It’s a social transaction. Every interaction between two mechs can be broken down into give and take. I just don’t like having the transaction scale weighted toward debt.” Tailgate shrugged when Swerve’s face screwed up in a revolted expression. “I know, I know. It’s not a popular social theory, but it’s the one I was taught when it comes to material gifts. I can’t just cast off everything from the past overnight!”

Ah. That had been a tad bit…loud. Inappropriately so.

Tailgate sank low on his stool, well aware that the whole bar was now staring at him.

“Oh-kaaaay,” Swerve said warily, palms flat on the bartop as he leaned away from the unexpectedly feisty old-timer. “Uh. So. If you want to give me something, I, uh, guess I’m okay with that.”

The little blue ‘bot seized on the offer, relieved. “Great! What do you want?”

“Whatever you want to give me?”

Tailgate just looked at him. That had been the singularly most unhelpful answer possible. Swerve beamed back, oblivious. It made the blue mech want to bean him with the mug. Which was empty, now. Huh. When had he finished it? Oh well. It’d been very nice of Swerve to give him the free drink, and now Tailgate had to think of something to reciprocate with.

Oh! Of course. Well, if he was giving free lessons about old customs tonight, he might as well make them hands-on.

“It’s not really traditional, per se,” Tailgate said softly, pushing himself up until he was kneeling on his stool, “but I used to exchange these with my friends when we gave each other gifts. Come here, Swerve.” He beckoned the loudmouth closer.

“What, are you gonna punch me one?” Swerve was far too good-natured to hold a grudge if that were true. He’d probably earned it somehow. He grinned widely and leaned across the counter to meet his friend halfway. “Don’t hit the mouth, eh? I like my smile. It’s my best feat--ahh? Oh.”

Tailgate’s hands reached him first, parting to hold his jawline tenderly between them. Gratitude and a faint overtone of amusement soaked into Swerve’s metal from them, projected strongly as Tailgate touched his face mask to the side of the small Autobot’s wide mouth. He nuzzled sweetly before turning his head slightly to brush cheeks with him. Their helms clanged together quietly. The blue mech’s fingertips were cradling Swerve’s chin, and the dim-visored mech obediently turned his head where they gently pushed. His shock-slapckened mouth got another nuzzle on the opposite side, and another brush of the cheek. Then Tailgate turned his face back forward to press the top of his mask to Swerve’s nose first and forehelm second.

“Thank you for the gift,” he whispered to his friend, slurring just slightly as the engex started to hit his tanks. Woo, that was stronger than usual stuff. His tubes were going to be stripped to the rubber. He carefully sat back down in his stool, folded his hands on the bar, and blinked innocently at
Swerve. “Was that okay?"

It took a moment for Swerve to remember where he’d left his jaw. It seemed to have relocated itself to the bartop.

“Y-yeah,” he sputtered when he recovered enough, hands flailing a bit. “Just fine! More than okay! Uh. You want another drink?”

The empty mug got a considering look. “Um, no. I’m good for now, I think.” The bright blue visor went a little dark, and a ripple of guilt went through the pleasantly light shimmer of Tailgate’s electromagnetic field. He avoided looking at Swerve. He felt bad taking advantage of Swerve’s pity. He felt a little better now, anyway. He didn’t need another drink, not really. “Thank you again, Swerve.”

“My pleasure,” the bartender said on automatic. The server drone buzzed for his attention, but he hesitated a second to reach over the bar to give his buddy a pat on the shoulder. “Feel better, right? You let me know when you’re ready for another round.”

“Alright.” He kept his visor down as the cheerful Autobot went to the other end of the bar to fill the drone’s collected drink orders and chat with other customers. Notably Skids, who was looking in Tailgate’s direction speculatively. The small blue mech looked away, ashamed that he’d been caught staring at anyone. He went back to doodling pictures on the bartop with a tiny bit of spilled engex. He felt better, yeah, but that wasn’t saying much. Primus, all his friends were dead. That was a lot of people.

He’d gone through the Iaconian University three times. He’d come out each time with another degree and a whole crop of new friends and contacts. The university faculty in six different departments had greeted him by name. He’d been a guest lecturer more than once. Now, the students, faculty, and university were gone. Obliterated.

He’d been part of the physical arena, competing in the inter-guard matches for placement in the Primal Vanguard’s championship rankings. Sure, he’d picked a less physically strenuous combat specialty, but everyone had respected him for choosing to go into Bomb Disposal. There were no survivors of failure in Bomb Disposal; mechs either succeeded or died. Mechs in Bomb Disposal had ball bearing diameters that the medibay had to special-order, they were so large. It’d made every mech in the division closer than spark-twins. He suddenly missed them so much it ached.

He’d counseled Nova Prime. He’d been included in some of the greatest scientific and philosophical breakthroughs of his time. He’d dropped his entire life to join the Ark crew, and that’d been an act of selfless courage back in his day.

‘Of his time’ and ‘back in his day’ being the key phrases, there. These times weren’t his time, and weren’t the times of anyone of his time. Just look at Cyclonus. It seemed all the mech could remember were better times long past. Even Rung seemed isolated, forever waiting in his timeless office for those who needed him.

Tailgate heaved a painfully huge sigh and shifted over to prop his helm up on one hand. He discovered that he’d been absentmindedly doodling frowny faces. So much for feeling better.

A glowing blue drink abruptly slid onto his drawing space. “What the..? Swerve, no!” he protested, looking up. The protest was half-sparked, however.

Swerve’s deceptively guileless visor took in the bleak expression on his friend’s masked face and threw said half-sparked protest out the nearest window. Mech needed about three more drinks before
the bartender would start believing that he didn’t actually want another. “Too late,” he informed the blue ‘bot. “See Skids over there?” He pointed, and Tailgate turned to look. Skids lazily saluted with two fingers. “Skids there bought you a drink. So drink.”

“But I -- oh dear.” White hands fussed at nothing, patting down his thigh compartments for credits he no longer had. “Oh, I can’t!”

“I told him about you little gift custom,” Swerve went on, ruthlessly cutting off that angle of retreat. Of course he had. He couldn’t have stopped himself even if Skids hadn’t specifically asked about it. “He’s okay with it. He just thought you’d appreciate a free drink right now.”

“I do, but -- “ Tailgate floundered for words. “I mean, does he really know what I -- no, it’s not that I don’t appreciate it, but he didn’t need to -- I -- “ Thoroughly flustered, the blue Minibot’s scattered thoughts finally slid to a jumbled halt. “…do I really look that bad?” he asked after sitting quietly for a moment stewing in embarrassment and the tiniest hint of gratification that anyone had noticed his mood.

“WEEEell,” Swerve drew out, “I wasn’t going to say anything,” he totally was, “but yeah, you look kinda rough tonight. You wanna talk about it?” Him, hoping for gossip? Perish the thought. He was mostly hoping to help his friend out, with the possibility of gossip lurking on the side.

Actually, he was really just looking for an excuse to hang out around the smaller Autobot right now. Because of reasons. Yeah.

Tailgate’s visor flushed brilliant blue, and the little Bomb Disposal expert looked down into the drink as if looking for a polite way to excuse himself from life. “No. I mean, well, I mean no. But it’s not because of you. I just…no, okay?” He helplessly looked back up at Swerve, pleading with him to understand. This was hard for him to deal with on his own. As much as he liked Swerve, however, the mech wasn’t exactly the most tactful of friends when it came to life advice.

Swerve blinked back at him. Tailgate decided retreat was the better part of valor and slid out of his stool hurriedly, taking the drink with him. “I’ll just go thank Skids, shall I?”

The bartender continued to watch him, struck a little dumb by how fragging cute he suddenly found the small blue mech’s…everything. Everything sounded about right. Although as he watched those rounded thighs and pert aft hustle down the bar, ‘cute’ wasn’t the only description he found himself applying to his friend. Huh.

“Where’s my head been at?” he asked himself, crossing his arms and furrowing his brows as he watched Skids lean down to collect the universe’s sweetest little nuzzles and cheek-rubs from Tailgate. How had he not noticed how absolutely lovable his friend was?

“On your shoulders, I’d say,” Whirl said from behind him, and Swerve just about jumped over the bar in surprise. “Hey, what’s with the snuggling?”

Skids had scooped the little Bomb Disposal expert up onto the closest barstool, stealing a hug on the way. Tailgate seemed embarrassed by the attention and bent over his drink. At the rate he was sucking it down, Swerve would have to bring him another right quick. Then again, from the way Skids was hovering near him as they talked, Tailgate probably wouldn’t be the one ordering it.

“Tailgate’s got this old-style gift-giving ritual thing he insists on doing,” Swerve explained to Whirl, not really caring if the ex-Wrecker followed what he meant. “Skids bought him a drink. He’s just, y’know, paying him back, I guess.”
“Heh. Hey, old-timer!” Whirl bellowed across the bar, and everyone who’d been covertly eyeing the adorable sight of Tailgate getting steadily more uninhibited and responsive to Skids’ attention turned to scowl at the crude behavior. The rotary mech blithely ignored their disapproval. “What’s a mech got to give you to get that ritual into his berth?”

Tailgate turned on his stool and shot back, utterly deadpan, “His hab suite number.”

Dead silence filled the bar. Even Whirl was struck speechless.

“And that,” the ‘tiny ancient dude’ (as Skids had once dubbed him) announced after a second of intense concentration, “probably means I’ve met my limit for the night. I think I just propositioned Whirl,” he said as an aside to Skids. “Have I been drinking too fast?” He looked into his third drink, which was considerably larger than his first but just as empty. “I’ve been drinking far too fast. You’d think I’d know better after the time I took apart a cycled-nitrogen engine and put it back together as the idealized heat engine. I mean, only as a prototype,” he admitted frankly as if he needed to tack on a warning to future scientists that building in an inebriated state wasn’t wise. Public service announcement Tailgate. “I didn’t invent it by myself, and I certainly couldn’t have finished it while overcharged, but slaggit, the company was excellent and the conversation better and it seemed like a good idea at the time and — well, you’re not Nova Prime,” his visor glittered up at Skids as the bar murmured, “but I like you anyway. I think I need to leave before I build something. Or proposition you, too.”

He slid from his barstool and turned to see Whirl advancing down the bar toward him. The big ex-Wrecker was ignoring whatever Swerve was trying to hiss at him. “I’m really not interested, honestly,” Tailgate decided firmly, stomping his foot down and folding his arms. “As everyone on this blasted ship has delighted in telling me again and again and again,” the bar murmured louder, “I am old. Therefore, allow me my old-fashioned values. I am not looking for my conjunx endura. I am not looking for best friends. I’m really not looking for single-frag flings. What this ‘old timer’ is looking for,” in the first aggressive move anyone in the bar had ever seen him make, Tailgate jerked a thumb at his own chest, “is a few mechs as good at giving and taking as they used to be back in my day!”

His voice had gone high and nasal on the last four words, as if he were mocking the sheer number of times he’d had to tack that on to what he said since waking up.

He held the edge-of-angry pose for a moment, but the moment passed. The small, old-but-not mech slumped, looking tired. “But I guess that’s just not how it is these days,” he uttered in the direction of the floor before turning and walking steadily for the door. “Everyone have a good night.”

“Tailgate..?” Later, nobody was sure if it were Swerve or Skids who’d spoken, but it didn’t matter much. Skids had jumped up from his stool to get a hold on Whirl and stop the ex-Wrecker. Whirl wasn’t fighting him. Swerve was standing behind the bar looking a little bewildered.

Tailgate stopped in the doorway, one hand holding the door open. “It’s okay,” he said softly without turning back. “My beliefs have always been stronger than the truth. It just takes a while for me to find how they intersect.” He shook his head and let go of the door, and it slid closed behind him.

By the time somebody followed him out, he had turned the first available corner and was gone.

He wandered for a while, head down as he thought. Old values and beliefs up against the current truths deserved some hard thinking. It wasn’t something he’d wanted to do, but between Rung and Ultra Magnus, he was facing some difficult conflicts of thought. Rung wasn’t letting him take the
unhealthy route and try to bury his past. Instead, he was trying to help the time-displaced mech settle into the present without discarding everything he’d been before. Rung saw value in the past. Ultra Magnus, on the other wheel, had attempted to remake him in the image of Autobot Code. It wasn’t that Ultra Magnus was deliberately dismissing Tailgate’s past or railroading him into changing everything he’d been, but the ship’s executive officer had also made it clear that the Duly Appointed Enforcer saw no room for disagreement with any of the 10,000 pages of the Autobot Code. The Code, like the Tyrest Accord, was Law. Arguing with the Law was not permitted.

Tailgate was more than a bit uneasy with some of the things in the Code, but he hadn’t felt comfortable bringing it up with anyone who was actually an Autobot. And he really wanted to belong.

As Rung had pointed out, all the people he’d belonged with before were long dead. Tailgate was alone.

He usually wasn’t one for moping, but he was in a black mood composed of sad thoughts and drunken logic when he finally meandered back to his habitation suite. He keyed the door open and walked in wearily, not expecting and not receiving any form of a greeting.

Cyclonus was still at the desk. Tailgate stared at the warrior’s broad back for a minute, wanting to do…something. Say something. Anything. Nothing came to mind. He shook his head and went to lie down on the nearest berth. He usually wasn’t one for moping, but he was in a black mood composed of sad thoughts and drunken logic when he finally meandered back to his habitation suite. Hekeyed the door open and walked in wearily, not expecting and not receiving any form of a greeting.

Cyclonus was still at the desk. Tailgate stared at the warrior’s broad back for a minute, wanting to do...something. Say something. Anything. Nothing came to mind. He shook his head and went to lie down on the nearest berth. They never had talked about who got the berth closest to the window. Tailgate had decided to just not say anything and leave it for Cyclonus. The purple mech had gotten far too few kindnesses in return for his bravery, in the little mech’s opinion.

In fact, that was something he should do. Yes. That was a good idea.

He struggled back upright and staggered only slightly as he rounded the berth to approach the desk. His tanks sloshed, unhappily processing highly-distilled engex. “Um, Cyclonus?”

“I did not think you would return tonight,” Cyclonus’ dry voice rasped back as the smaller mech stopped at his elbow. Not that he’d cared, of course. “Swerve’s slagpit of a bar must have been quite full. I am doubly glad I did not visit it tonight.” Not that he’d been tempted. He sniffed and paused in his sharpening. “The drinks must have been potent. You reek of them.”

Did he smell? “Sorry,” Tailgate apologized. “Um, can you look at me? I want to give you something.”

“I want nothing from you.”

“I know. But I owe you.”

“You owe me nothing.”

“I do,” Tailgate insisted, raising a hand to not-quite touch the warrior’s large arm. “We all do. All of Cybertron. So I’m gonna...gonna give you something to help pay down the debt we owe you.”

For once, he managed to catch Cyclonus’ interest, if only because the Decepticon couldn’t follow his line of reasoning at all. The purple warrior turned his head toward him impatiently, optics flaring. “What are you blathering on about?”

Small white fingertips ventured up to touch his jaw, paralyzing him with the tentative flow and ebb of gratitude glimmering over his own EM field. The red pinpricks widened to glowing embers of surprise. “What -- “
“Shhh,” Tailgate crooned, stroking under his jaw with sensitive fingertips as he would an unfamiliar bomb, just getting the feel of what he was doing before starting in. His forefingers made small circles up the side of Cyclonus’ mandible, eventually dipping into the empty space. They hooked over the edge to pull the larger mech’s face down toward him. Not yanking or trying to force Cyclonus down; just persuading him with gentle tugs and pushes of appreciation through his hands. “Let me thank you for fighting for us. Fighting for me.”

Cyclonus was leaning sideways almost without realizing it, face to face with the comparatively tiny Minibot. “I fought for Galvatron.”

“Yes,” Tailgate said simply, without any of the condemnation the rest of the ship would have displayed toward that one statement. He continued to pulse open, pure gratitude through his hands, letting it flow up the sides of Cyclonus’ face and drift into the warrior’s mouth to settle like the finest high grade over his tongue. “You also fought for Cybertron. I never got the chance to thank you in my time -- our time?” His very circuitry throbbed a sudden pulse of sadness, and Cyclonus frowned, unable to understand it. “My time. But I have time now, so I’m going to thank you for giving us your services as one of our warriors. Please,” he whispered, dimming his visor and stretching his neck upward to nuzzle his face mask against the pointed side of Cyclonus’ mouth, “let me give you this in return.”

After a moment, Cyclonus surrendered to the fingers playing in and out of the empty sides of his face, the nuzzle and slide of Tailgate’s mask against his mouth. He surrendered, and for a while in that hab suite on that lost ship, the past became the present as if it’d never abandoned them.

[* * * * *]
Chapter Summary

The D.J.D. meet Nautilator and fall all over themselves; Soundwave completes a mission and collects his reward

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 5
Warnings: Seduction, and awkward angst.
Rating: R
Continuity: G1
Characters: Soundwave/Megatron
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Kinkmeme and random prompts, this round

Note: the Nautilator/D.J.D. ficlet in this part was moved to 'Gone Fishing.'

[* * * * *]
"Soundwave to Smugwave to Sexywave"
[* * * * *

He hadn’t known there was anyone there until red shone out of the dark. Megatron caught it and whirled to -- ah. Point his cannon at the floor once more. “Soundwave,” he greeted his most loyal officer. “The mission?”

The blocky blue form appeared out of the shadows as if they were reluctant to let him go. The whole room seemed to exude the Cassette carrier’s dark glee. “Mission: successful.”

Not just successful, but perfectly executed. No one else could have pulled it off but Soundwave, and now no one would ever know it had been pulled off. No one outside this room, that was. In this room, Soundwave could gloat. He was proud of his success, and here, with this mech, he could let his smug pride in his abilities show. Metal throughout the room vibrated just slightly with the deep tone he said the two simple, secret-laden words with. Soundwave rarely dropped his monotone, and even now his voice carried the metallic tinge of a vocalizer more in tune with computer circuitry than mechs’ audios.

Megatron’s voice surpassed it with a silky purr. “Good.”

The officer straightened, standing tall to bask in that acknowledgement of a job well done. There was a short series of clicks made loud only because of the silence. Soundwave’s self-satisfied confidence hitched and suddenly became something...more. So there was to be reward.

No longer as restrained by propriety, he eased into a slow walk forward with his visor glimmering unspoken gratitude.

His lord set aside the fusion cannon. “Very good.”

Megatron’s optics brightened slightly, surprised, when Soundwave swept into a shallow bow.
“Megatron: permission?”

Loyalty earned its own rewards. Trust was one of the more highly valued, in the carrier’s opinion. His lord and master looked at him for only a moment before slowly nodding. Not asking about permission for what? Merely nodding, because this was Soundwave who asked.

And it was Soundwave who would repay the honor of that highly-priced trust, four-fold. One hip swayed in a manner no one else ever saw, an unexpectedly flexible movement as secret as the mission neither Decepticon in this room would ever speak of again. He reached out and ran two of his fingers around the rim of the cannon. For all its power, its massive intimidation factor rested solely upon whose arm it rode.

Later, as he rode it in turn, Soundwave rather hoped the point was clearly made.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 6

Chapter Summary

Tarn is tortured, but also tortured; Overlord wins.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 11
Warning: Torture, gore, bad poetry, and interfacing robots.
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW
Characters: Drift, Rodimus, Tarn, Fortress Maximus, Whirl, Siren, Cosmos, Powerglide, Blaster, Overlord, Pharma
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Prompts off Tumblr, the Dreamwidth board, and random. The Whirl & Fortress Maximus VS heatvirus ficlets have been moved to If You Can't Stand The Heat.

[* * * * *]

Rodimus and Drift - “sitting around and drunkenly bitching about things” / Drift - “making the DJD hurt”
[* * * * *]

“Oh, Primus.” Drift started to raise his drink, realized it was empty, and set it down. There was no choice left but to endure the pain. He was no longer able to rise and ease the agony via further intoxication. “He’s got another one? How many did they let him do?”

Rodimus felt his pain. He shared it. That didn’t mean he was going to share any of his drinks, no matter the hopeful look Drift gave him. “Heavy-duty miner frame in a poetry club? Not even the bouncer probably dared touch him.” For once, Rodimus had thought ahead. He’d brought a small army of glasses to the table. Most of them were drained already. It helped dull the pain of listening to this. He stared blearily at the projected picture, one finger wagging as if trying to place a tune as the speaker swung into an eerily familiar cadence. “Ha! Got it. Is that ’Take My Spark To Praxus’?”

He waved his hand over his drinks, batting away Drift’s hands. The young captain horded the remaining full glasses of engex to his chest. He could not afford to sacrifice any to the gods of sympathy. Sorry, Drift, but some things a captain was allowed to pull rank on.

Drift understood how it was. Rodimus was a soft Autobot. More drinking was probably necessary for the weak to endure. Not Drift, nope. Drift was hardened, streetwise, and too tough to crack under bad poetry ripped off from an already cheesy song’s lyrics. “What? No way.” He was also perfectly able to scoot his chair toward the bar because, by all that was holy, it really was ’Take My Spark To Praxus’. “Did he even try? Hold on, hold on…” He paused in his chair-scooting and straightened as if to give his own performance. He had to clear his throat of the mingled laughter and screaming from the previous attempt at poetry they’d endured. “’Take my spark to Praxus, my love, and drive the roads above~’ oh come on. I can do better than that!”

Sadly for the wanna-be poet who was immortalized in footage Rewind had dug up from where ‘someone’ had tried to bury it (they had suspicions about who’d buried it, oh yes they did), Drift
likely *could* do a better job at poetry. Frag, he could scoop better rhyme composed by stim-addled drones out of the gutter. He’d still give a better performance than this slag, and yet he couldn’t currently grab a cube off the bar without first poking it cautiously to distinguish the real cube from the three his overcharged optical sensors insisted were piled on the counter.

“He didn’t even change the rhyme.” This was painful, just painful. Rodimus slammed back another full glass of engex. The projection was still in front of him when he came up for air and to wipe his mouth. He cringed a bit when passion -- or inexperience -- made the speaker’s voice crack at just the wrong time. “This’...wow. How many of these you got, Rewind?” the captain asked muzzily, putting the hand holding the empty glass under his chin.

The tiny Autobot beaming the video on the wall for them hummed thoughtfully. Apparently he was immune to their pain. “According to these files, he came back two more nights before the show recordings go back to the regular local poets.”

“Nooooo,” the other two Autobots moaned in chorus.

Rodimus let his chin slip off his hand, and his forehelm slammed into the table. This did not seem to be a problem for him, as he started tapping it in time with Megatron’s badly-rhymed, poorly-written drivel being clumsily (if passionately) performed on the wall in front of him. The physical pain seemed to help distract him. Young Megatron’s public speaking had been very sad in the beginning. Everyone had to start out somewhere, but *ouch*. Rewind seemed to be finding it all fascinating, but Drift and Rodimus had reached the point where laughing mockery became horrified disbelief and then slid downward into prayers for a quick death.

Megatron’s performance was so painful to watch that Drift paused halfway from the bar and scooted back. He made himself at home there, giving up on the return trip to the table. There was no point in pretending this was going to get any better. He contemplated whether it’d be rude to drink straight from the spigot.

He looked over at this private viewing’s guest of honor and was just drunk enough to feel a sliver of sympathy. “Y’want some?” The spigot was waved vaguely in Tarn’s direction. Wait, no. Awkward moment of logistics, here. Drift thought hard and fished a solution out of the muddled depths of his sloshed mind. “Can’t take the vocalizer-lock off, but, uh...I can pour it down an auxiliary intake?”

Even behind the mask, Tarn’s optics had the half-squinted look of someone who’d been trying to flinch only when no one was looking at him. There was subtle shifting as the Decepticon tried to unobtrusively straighten back up and look like he hadn’t been wincing every other word. Drift could sort of understand trying to stand -- uh, sit, in this case -- tall and proud even under this assault of drivel. The leader of the D.J.D. was supposed to be a fanatic loyalist, supportive of all Megatron’s great works. This didn’t really qualify as a great work. It was sort of a bellyflop into epic failure. *Megatron: The Early Years* was probably considered cruel and unusual punishment by galactic standards.

Drift turned his head toward the video and contemplated it with the serene despair of a torture victim. He could respect the amount of strength it took to remain proudly aloof through this record of verbal and linguistic travesty. “Being this overcharged kinda helps.” Drift turned his head just quickly enough to catch Tarn looking. Yeah, those red optics were definitely eyeing the spigot with longing. “Takes the edge off.”

“Drift. Driiiifft.” Rodimus still had his head on the table, but he was rolling it back and forth as Rewind changed to the next video. “Drift, if he compares one more social injustice to ‘the black depths of my darkest night, alone and cold,’ I’m going to purge. I really am.”
“Urgh. Yes.” Just the reminder of that overused phrase had Drift shuddering in horror. Screw manners. Tarn could suffer. It was spigot time in DriftLand.

“Ah.” Rewind paused the video and seemed somewhat apologetic when both drunk (but regretfully still conscious) Autobot officers stared at him. “Shall I get you a bucket, then?”

“I can’t do it,” Rodimus said faintly. “I just can’t.” He contemplated his table full of empty glasses. When had he downed the last of them? “Drift. I need liquid reinforcement.”

“Why bother?” Having guzzled some courage of his own, Drift sat back in his chair and braced himself for the horror to come. There was apparently a reason no one had ever published any of Megatron’s early, early poetry. “S’only gonna come back up.”

“True. But!” The captain raised a finger to emphasize his point. It wobbled but pointed vaguely upward. “Throwing up might drown out some of the worst parts.”

“Oooo, point.” Drift began looking for something to stack full glasses on as the next video started.

Tarn just silently suffered.

[* * * * *]

Overlord & Tarn - “Pharma”
[* * * * *]

Overlord won, in the end. The Decepticon Justice Division tracked him down, they planned it, and they got overconfident. Overlord won. It wasn’t easy, but neither was it the greatest fight of his life.

“Disappointing,” the Phase Sixer rumbled to himself as he dropped the rest of Tesarus’ body to the ground. He’d used it to beat Helex into deactivation, slowly and messily. It had been satisfying, in a rhythmic way. The mech’s head was halfway across the battlefield, where the walking grinder’s distinctive red optical array now impaled Kaon. The blind mech had optics, now, but he still could not see.

Overlord strolled across the torn ground. The damage he had taken himself was not inconsequential, but it wasn’t life-threatening. Unlike the damage he’d done to Tarn, however, it wasn’t enough to disable him.

Tarn lay where he’d been tossed aside, Vos’ altmode still speared through his upper thigh. The gunformer was dead, spark crushed inside its casing as Overlord had joyfully turned him on his fellow D.J.D. members while gradually crumpling the gun’s stock in one cruel hand. The helpless screams of a mech pushed past dignity had been a pleasure to listen to. That shrill voice set against the bass beat of explosions and enraged yells had made for a beautiful fighting soundtrack. Turning Vos against his own had a delicious sense of betrayal to it, even after the mech himself had died and only his corpse could be used.

Overlord had used Tesarus to kill Helex and Kaon. Vos had been used to disable Tarn.

He had won by turning the D.J.D. against each other. It was wonderfully ironic that the close-knit loyal Decepticon fanatics had been their own downfall.

Still, as amusing as this battle had turned out, Overlord found himself disappointed by how easily he’d won. The violence had been far more straightforward than he’d expected. Even the ambush hadn’t caught him by surprise.

But, no matter. The day wasn’t over yet. Tarn was still alive, after all.
“All those threats, come to naught,” he mused as he braced one foot on indented chestplates. He reached down and yanked the twisted gun barrel out in a spray of fluids. “I expected more. Tsk.”

Tarn’s optics twitched behind that ridiculous mask, but the mech tried to show no reaction. He had likely resolved to die a dignified devotee of the Decepticon Cause. Overlord chuckled, bending down again to grasp one dislocated arm. He stood and began walking toward the ship he’d shot down much earlier today. The Peaceful Tyranny had landed mostly intact. It would make as good a place to do this as any. Tarn jerked and coughed as he was carelessly dragged behind the Phase Sixer. A wide swath of leaked fluids marked their path.

“I wonder what your real name is?” Overlord asked idly, not expecting or receiving an answer. He’d punched that irritating vocalizer into spitting static when Tarn first tried that cute spark-trick. If he remembered, he’d ask later, when the stubborn Decepticon became more amendable to participating in conversations.

He would. They both knew he would. He’d be eager to talk, to share any and everything he knew. The D.J.D., of all mechs, knew that pain always triumphed over resolve. Mechs started out determined to preserve their precious self-image. They learned, soon enough. It wouldn’t take Tarn long at all to deny Megatron, deny the Cause, deny anything that he thought would make Overlord happy to hear denied. He’d do anything to end his suffering.

Overlord did hope there was recording equipment intact aboard the ship. He’d rather like to make a nice video of Tarn’s inevitable collapse. The Decepticons on the List might celebrate him as a hero, which would be nothing short of hilarious, and the rest of the simpering ranks could cower in fear to see their diehard figurehead cut down. It would be a potent message for Megatron:

‘You’ve sent your best lackeys. Now come fight me yourself.’

If he had the patience for that sort of game, the Phase Sixer would consider sending what was left of Tarn crawling back to Cybertron to deliver the message personally. That would be a mercy, as Megatron would grant the mech a quick shot through the spark. It was a tempting thought, but if Overlord were that patient, he’d keep the loyalist at his side to witness the final fight. The mech would cease to be amusing long before that happened, however.

“No, I think I shall kill you eventually,” he said aloud as he hauled his victim up the gangplank crookedly extended from the crashed ship.

He paused at the top and lifted Tarn up to press against the ship’s hull. The defeated Decepticon hung by one arm before him. The shoulder joint grated, ball and socket scraping in harsh metallic noises against each other, and Overlord shook him to hear the snap of some cable giving way. The red optics behind the mask – he would have to tear that off later, but only once he had something to record that unmasking for everyone to see -- glared fiercely.

Overlord stepped closer, pressing his helm’s cheek guard to the purple mask. “I will kill you eventually, Tarn, that I promise you,” the exaggerated lips the Phase Sixer was famous for whispered directly into one audio. “I will kill you, but it will not be soon. What is your record? Your darling group of torturers held yourselves as the most fearsome of judges, but your record for torture is so short. Three days, I believe, is it not?” Those thick lips curled into a sadistic smile, close enough to be felt as Overlord turned his face so that they nearly kissed the side of Tarn’s mask. “You will beg for death by the third day, but I won’t grant it. Not even a week will be enough.” His voice lowered to a breathy purr full of sickening anticipation. “My longest record was at Garrus-9. Fortress Maximus, as you probably know. The prison warden?”

There was a faint breath of air against his cheek, like vent fans involuntarily faltering. Overlord threw
his head back and laughed. “You do know! I thought you might. I kept him alive for years!”

Now he did kiss Tarn’s mask, tender and mocking. He laughed again when the smaller Decepticon struggled to head-butt him, broken body giving a pathetic surge of futile effort. A spurt of vibrant green lubricant came out of the mask’s mouth slit as Tarn tried to clear his throat. “Our time together will not be a record, I fear. Garrus-9 did have medical facilities, which certain of my favorite activities do require if you,” he patted a loosely-flopping tread, “are to survive.”

That, oddly, caused Tarn to go still. It was only for a split second, barely enough to catch, but Overlord noticed.

His optics narrowed. “Ah?”

It took some time to find the cause, but they had time. There was no way for Tarn to stop him, and Overlord had every intention of exploring the ship. He took it slow, because the creeping reality of utter defeat needed time to properly permeate through Tarn’s head and devour every lingering hope. Overlord wanted the leader of the Decepticon Justice Division to truly appreciate how low he’d been brought by one of the so-called ‘traitors’ off his precious List. He wanted Tarn to know that there was no possible way to change his fate. Tarn knew the agony was coming, but a real torturer knew to choose the correct method if the victim’s mind was to break before the body.

Overlord made sadism into an art.

Browsing through every Decepticons’ personal quarters got no reaction beyond hatred. Finding the recording equipment he wanted sent his victim rigid in apprehension, but no. No, there was something more. There was something he hadn’t found yet.

Tarn’s self-repair had cleared enough of the slurry of fuel and lubricant off his vocalizer that a gurgling snarl got out when Overlord approached the door of what he thought led to the ship’s medibay. The Phase Sixer looked down at him, optics inquiring, before shifting his grip from one limp arm to the mech’s throat. Tarn grimaced behind the mask. Although Overlord didn’t crush his vocalizer to slag yet, it was clear that his specialized spark-killing voice would not be allowed to speak again.

The massive mech looked down at his victim. The reaction had been unexpected. “Interesting,” he said as he keyed open the door.

It was a medibay. Well-stocked, if in shambles because of the crash. It seemed that an entire cabinet full of supplies had shaken open and emptied onto the floor. Not much appeared to be broken, which might be useful later. How fortunate. It certainly would have been inconvenient if the medic himself had taken injury, after all. ‘Who repairs the repairmech?’ as the saying went.

“I did not know that Autobots were a standard Decepticon medical fixture,” Overlord observed in mild surprise.

Wary blue optics stared back at him over the repair berth in the center of the room, but the Autobot held his tongue. Someone had gone through the trouble of training him, it seemed. From the protesting rasp and flutter against the palm of Overlord’s palm, it had probably been Tarn. Oh, that could come in handy.

The Phase Sixer turned at the door and walked along the wall, studying the medibay itself and letting the Autobot get a good look at him. The mech didn’t move but to keep his optics on the massive invader. Overlord let him stare while he took in what was a very well-equipped if small medical station. There were enough supplies and expensive tools in this room to fill a minor clinic; far more
than necessary for keeping five Decepticons in good repair. Interesting, indeed.

He could see why Tarn would want to prevent him from finding this room, given the implications of having medical supplies on hand -- and even better, a medic. There was the small matter of the medic’s cooperation, but Overlord wasn’t fazed by that. He was quite aware of the aura of menace he gave off, covered as he was in his own wounds and other mechs’ gore, not to mention the fact that was dragging the captain of this very ship across the floor in his wake.

So he felt it would be overkill to bother with threats when it was obvious who was in control here. Instead, when he’d inspected half the room, he simply stopped in front of the Autobot and looked down.

The medic stayed still under his regard: white, red, blue, and pristine but for the tarnished black chains around his arms and throat. From the way his winglets stayed perfectly still, he was aware that he didn’t stand a chance at escape. The D.J.D. must have taught him that difficult lesson first, with their chains and the inhibitor claw Overlord could see clamped onto his back over the main turbine assembly. They had clipped his wings, the poor flyer, and caged him. He had the look of a mech who’d been someone once, before they took him as their own.

Overlord reached out with his free hand and used one huge finger to tip the little Autobot’s face upward. There was only the slightest hint of resistance before blue optics flicked down to glance at the Decepticon dribbling fluids at their feet. After that, the flyer obediently let his head be turned this way and that as Overlord looked him over.

When he’d seen enough, the Phase Sixer made the mech look directly at him. “Do you know what I am, Autobot?”

Blue optics dimmed, fear stuttering through even a medic’s professional stoicism. The chin Overlord balanced on his forefinger dipped against it. There weren’t many who didn’t know the Decepticon Empire’s most terrifying weapons on sight: the Phase Sixers, the undefeatables.

“Do you know who I am?” Another miniscule nod pressed against his finger. Good. This medic might prove to be more than a moment’s amusement for him, then, novel as that thought was. “And what,” Overlord asked, deep voice dropping into a rich darkness where ugly terrors lived, “might you be?”

Those terrors visited the medic, sending the tiniest of shivers through his winglets. His mouth opened, then snapped closed as the question really registered. ‘What,’ not ‘who.’ Overlord approved of that second thought. A medic who thought under pressure was far more useful to him than one who let fear drive intelligence away. A medic who bowed to the reality of his situation might be worthy of being used.

This medic was proving himself more worthy than most. Bitter and terrified, but with nothing left to lose, he met Overlord’s optics steadily before jerking his head at the mech hanging from the Phase Sixer’s fist. Resignation kept his voice from shaking as he quietly replied, "I was his toy."

It was good answer, for a mech who knew how the Decepticons functioned. To the victor went the spoils. He was no longer Tarn’s toy to play with. He belonged to whomever claimed him.

Overlord tapped the smart little thing under the chin, acknowledging the tactful answer with a shallow nod. His hand left the Autobot’s face, and the massive warlord turned his head to look at the broken body he held almost quizzically. “This mech?” He lifted the crippled Decepticon easily, slowly righting him until Tarn dangled by his neck. For someone Overlord’s size, Tarn’s weight was negligible. Fuel bubbled, dripping from split lips and shattered dental molds onto a malfunctioning
vocalizer, and Tarn's defiant snarl turned into a defeated gurgle. Overlord chuckled, letting his amusement roll around the medibay until Tarn drowned in it. "How did he toy with you?" he asked the Autobot.

Blue optics darted between them. This was not rescue. There was no hope. This was a new owner casually inspecting his new property. It was only a matter of if the property were disposed of with the old owner, tortured and killed.

The Autobot’s nervously licked his lips before his face went completely neutral. "Am I to show you?" It was an offer as much as a question. The words came out leeched of anything but bleak determination to survive.

Overlord did like to hear that tone of voice from a mech.

He gave the small mech a leisurely once-over. Blue optics dropped, burning anger-dark but submissive. Polished winglets hiked up before reluctantly fanning out as the Autobot straightened his stance to display himself for the Phase Sixer’s viewing pleasure. The sight was one Overlord fully enjoyed. The chains were a nice touch, adding a lovely sense of helplessness to the overall picture. The D.J.D. had captured themselves a very pretty flyer for their cage.

Beauty had no use to him if there was nothing supporting it, however. "Do the symbols on your wings mean something, Autobot, or are they merely decorative?"

That earned a flinch, and Overlord’s optics watched intently as blue hands curled into fists. Those hands were strange, now that he paid attention to them. They were fine instruments, he could tell, but they looked too new. They stood out, even against the luxuriously waxed state of a clearly pampered pet. The hands of a medic were his pride, but pride became a mech’s weak spot when imprisoned. There was a story in those hands that Overlord intended to hear. Not right this moment, but soon.

"I'm the top surgeon in my field," the Autobot confirmed shortly. His optics dimmed to a dusky hue as if shamed by that fact. Or, perhaps, the circumstances under which he was admitting it. A skilled Autobot surgeon chained to the wall in a Decepticon ship was obviously valued more for abilities other than his skill at surgery.

"I am in need of repairs, as you can see," the Phase Sixer said, gesturing at himself with his free hand. The damage didn’t hamper movement, but still annoyed him. His self-repair could deal with it given enough time, but there was no reason to live with injuries for days when there was a competent medic willing to repair him. Dim blue optics gained a sliver of hope as they looked up at him. "I'm a generous mech when pleased, surgeon. Agree to repair me, and I will spare you." It was a merciful promise in and of itself, if the Autobot knew anything of his reputation.

It seemed he did, as the flyer seemed to shrink into himself. The hope in his optics went hollow. Overlord did not leave survivors. “I will repair you,” the medic said despite his despair, because agreeing meant he’d live at least a short time longer. It was unlikely that this was the first time he’d made this bargain. It couldn’t be coincidence that the D.J.D. had chained him in this particular room, after all. Why waste having a medic on hand to render services?

The Phase Sixer’s laughter boomed through the medibay again, and the Decepticon still dangling from his fist gurgled as fingers worked over damaged components, searching for the right grip. Tarn gasped and feebly struggled as Overlord found what he was feeling for. The Autobot’s optics went wide and mesmerized, suddenly fixated on that hand. Fingers tightened, and the medic strained against his chains, expression starvation-hungry as Overlord took his time crushing that specialized vocalizer into sparks and fire. The mouth behind the purple mark silently gaped open to leak fuel and lubricant instead of sound. Fluids dripped out from under the mask’s cover. Smoke billowed until
metal collapsed inward and smothered the burning circuitry. Tarn gave one agonized convulsion, limbs twitching violently, before going limp.

Overlord locked optics with the Autobot as Tarn was carelessly dropped to the floor between them in a tremendous crash. “You say you’re the top surgeon in your field.” He pushed the weakly moving Decepticon toward the trembling, heavy-venting medic with one foot. “Can you keep this wretch alive?”

Blue optics seared suddenly alight. “Yes. Oh, yes.”

The Phase Sixer stepped over his defeated foe and bent to twist his finger in the chain around the Autobot’s neck. “No matter what I do to him?”

The medic smiled up at him and didn’t even hesitate when pulled forward to meet the looming warlord. “On one condition.”

Overlord stooped to look at him optic to optic, smile to smile. “Do you think you’re in any position to bargain?”

The threat teased over the smaller mech like a stroking hand, and wings flexed sleekly under it. “I want to watch,” he said, breathing the words out as if they were his most spark-felt desire, and Overlord drank in his hatred.

Pretty flyer. Pretty, murderous flyer. This was the kind of beauty Overlord could appreciate: surface-deep because everything underneath was raw, wounded emotion. He preferred his caged pets packed to the brim with useful abilities, yet rotten to the core. If he was careful, this fragile little glitch wouldn’t self-destruct until he was done using the brittle beauty for every ounce of pleasure he could wring free.

Plush lips curved, nearly touching the medic’s matching smile. This Autobot would bend to his will gladly and not even notice he served a new master, because it would give the medic exactly what he wanted. The D.J.D. had brought about their own downfall in every way.

There was a faint scraping at their feet as Tarn tried to drag himself toward the door. A rubbery hiss-pop signaled the seal on a main tube of some kind giving way at last, and they both recognized the liquid sound of energon gushing across the floor. Overlord didn’t look away as he ripped the chain from the medic’s neck. “That can be arranged.”

"Then I’d be delighted to keep him alive as long as you like,” the flyer said, slipping away to fetch the tools of his trade and begin working.

Overlord’s deep, dark laughter swirled around the medibay, burying the leader of the Decepticon Justice Division in defeat. Another laugh joined it a moment later, like bright wings dancing over a grave.

[** * * * * **]
Blaster is a Pokemon Master; young Autobots these days have no money sense; Swerve and Tailgate Do Construction; Cyclonus avoids the aftermath; Octane and Sandstorm go adventuring; Cyclonus and the Armada keep hitting the ‘snooze’ button (until they don’t); Cyclonus hates Soundwave; the combiners can’t figure out why they’re always under supervision; the Primus Adoption Society starts up; 2 out of 2 prisoners agree that Overlord is horrible.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 7
Warnings: Uh…everything? I’m sure there’s something to offend everyone found somewhere in this part.
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW & G1
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors.
Motivation (Prompt): some G1 Season 3 prompts, a few theoretical musings, a commissioned fic, and some silliness.

[* * * * *]
Bob the Insecticon - “Pokemon”
[* * * * *]

Sunstreaker was a jerk.

That wasn’t a surprise. He was also a traitor and a torture victim and had Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder bad enough to make him stand out in a ship full of war-traumatized soldiers. Sunstreaker somehow managed to be special in all the worst categories. It was like winning the award for flattest pancake after a cityformer stomped through. Everyone was flattened, but he’d somehow come out the worst. Yay?

So it wasn’t a surprise that he’d exceeded in the jerk category of life as well. He was still beautiful, but he was a Rodimus Star away from being the top jerk in the faction.

Taking all that into consideration, it wasn’t surprising Autobots throughout the Lost Light stared at him when he entered a room. Red Alert twitched strongly enough to almost qualify as flailing. Ultra Magnus made no secret that the mech was under observation.

Blaster never even looked at him. Because as much as mechs stared at Sunstreaker for everything the golden Autobot had done or was, Blaster wasn’t interested. If he was seen looking in Sunstreaker’s direction, it was because he was staring at his companion. Not that everyone didn’t gape in equal measure at one of the fragging Swarm trotting tamely at someone’s heels, but the Communication Officer had a disturbing glint to his optics.
A disturbing glint of acquisition. Chromedome would have recognized it if he’d noticed Blaster watching Bob. For a while, until Chromedome had all but wrapped himself around his conjunx endura like some sort of protective shield, the boombox had watched Rewind with much the same look. Blaster was a carrier of Cassetticons, but most Cassetticons didn’t start out with that frametype. That made carriers constantly on the lookout for potential reformat candidates.

It wasn’t that Blaster wished ill on Rewind, but he’d discreetly been looking for a chance to ask the friendly, active, always-recording little archivist to consider signing a reforge consent form. It’d never be important if the memory stick’s current frame didn’t become heavily damaged, but Blaster didn’t want the chance to collect Rewind pass through his fingers. Chromedome’s interference and jealous watchdrone routine had made approaching the mech difficult, but he wasn’t going to give up that easily.

Blaster could wait. He was a patient mech. Carriers had to be, when they set out to collect. Soundwave favored unwilling subjects, collecting the ones he wanted ruthlessly, but Blaster patiently stalked those he wanted to potentially reformat.

Well, he preferred to call it ‘courting’ rather than stalking. He knew that it was kind of creepy being tagged for reformat by a carrier, but it was the sincerest compliment possible for those that understood the mentality behind the frametype. There just weren’t many who understood carriers, so it kept being creepy. To be fair, he didn’t force anything. He would never make Rewind sign the emergency medical reforge form, much less hope for the kind of injury that’d result in acquiring a Cassette. He just wouldn’t stop asking, either.

Chromedome couldn’t get in the way forever. Blaster could wait.

In the meantime, he set his sights on another candidate: Bob.

The Insecticon was small. Its construction wasn’t unique in terms of how the mutation had distorted the victims of the Swarm, but it was odd for Cybertronian frametypes. The quadrupedal structure made it unique because it lacked a bipedal transformation. It lacked a transformation entirely, although everyone knew it still had a T-cog buried in its body. It just didn’t connect to anything. Everyone knew, because half the ship had been there talking and patting Bob to keep it calm after Swerve had gotten Sunstreaker utterly fendered that one night so that Ratchet, Perceptor, and Hoist could scan the living bolts off the Insecticon right there in the bar.

It wasn’t that Sunstreaker was unwilling to let his pet be examined -- Ultra Magnus would have never let the Insecticon on board otherwise -- but it was impossible to separate the two, and nobody was comfortable holding a discussion under Sunstreaker’s narrow optics. Bob had refused to leave its recharging master but chittered happily under the attention. That’d been adorable even before Tailgate got it to purr. The analysis group had called on Blaster’s expertise with small builds, and he’d attentively listened in on the discussion while the scans kept running. He’d even snuck in some petting when Ratchet carefully rolled the little guy over onto its back to unfold the spiky legs and prod its belly.

So, yes, Bob still had a T-cog. That was weird for a technimal, but that’s because it’d once been a mech. It just…wasn’t one anymore. Instead, it was some fusion of the two. The mixture was one that Blaster found appealing. The Insecticon was bulky in the forequarters, with menacing, heavy claws, but for all its armor, the thing was little. The way it hunkered down, it was hard to get a good look at sometimes. A mech could get a decent perspective on it if he were willing to spy on Sunstreaker enough, however.

Blaster was willing. Frag, he was practically compelled. Blaster normally went along with his carrier protocols, but the strength of the need to collect had surprised him this time around. The Insecticon --
Bob, and wasn’t that a cute ethnic name? -- was just a tad bit bigger than Steeljaw, but tougher and less intelligent. Blaster’s recognized it as requiring protection and guidance, and he almost ached to provide that. Yet it was obviously useful and more than a mindless beast. Sunstreaker had proven it was both trainable and loyal.

The longer Blaster watched it, the more he could picture how the reformat would work. There’d be some cerebral tweaking, of course, to push it toward the mech side instead of the hive-like Swarm mentality, but it’d be a good Cassetticon. The transformation would be simple enough, making him a thick Cassette shaped more like a brick than a slim disk, but it would change the Insecticon’s rootmode relatively little. The toughest part would be the spikes. Those would probably have to go unless they could be made retractable.

Bob wouldn’t be like the rest of his Cassetticons, but oh, did Blaster want it. It was so small and -- and cute. He could see how it’d fit into his life and a custom-made docket in his chest.

That only left the question of how one went about getting a Bob. Hmm. The creature was loyal, no doubt about that. Loyal to Sunstreaker, which was the difficult part. Sunstreaker didn’t let things go, grudges or people. Blaster doubted that the golden frontliner would let Bob stray, even if Blaster could somehow lure it away.

Across the bar, the stubborn mech in question idly dropped a few energy slips onto the floor. His pet Insecticon immediately pounced upon and devoured them, then daintily cleaned its tiny set of forearms. The delicate arms were groomed carefully, pulled through the grid in front of Bob’s mouth and tugged loose, stripping stray bits of energon from the finger joints. All four optics turned upward hopefully, but Sunstreaker had gone back to watching Whirl badgering Trailbreaker at the bar. When no more treats seemed forthcoming, the Insecticon settled back down under its master’s chair.

Its forearms made small grasping motions as Bob purred into a nap. Purr purr. Grab. Purrpprrr.

The cute was magnetic. Blaster found, somewhat to his surprise, that he’d gotten up and was heading across the bar. Primus, he wanted that little thing. He wanted it so bad. He was a patient mech, but taunting him with a reformat candidate who didn’t need a consent form, just an owner? That was a tease that’d test the patience of better mechs than Blaster.

With some effort, he slowed his hunting stride to a casual saunter before he reached Sunstreaker’s corner table and its concealing shadows. “In the mood for some company, sunshine?” he asked the frontliner, giving a winning smile.

Arrogance couldn’t cover shock, or the uncertainty of a mech who had no idea why he was being approached. It was, in a sad way, sort of endearing. Sunstreaker was a jerk and the failure champion in the worst off-Olympic events. He’d been rather shunned since coming aboard the *Lost Light.* For longer than that, probably. That was kind of pitiable.

“Can’t stop you from sitting down,” Sunstreaker grunted, recovering as quickly as he’d faltered. He tacked an admonishment on when the other Autobot drew out a chair across from him. “Don’t call me that.”

“Whatever you say, Sunstreaker.” Blaster leaned down and chirruped at Bob. “Heeeey, Bob-O. C’mere, you.” Bob’s antenna perked up, and the purring increased as it scurried over for petting. It pushed its head into the boombox’s hand, trying to get an antenna rub. Blaster chuckled and obliged it, pinching the little yellow antenna between his fingers until the critter melted into an ecstatic puddle of chirring. The Insecticon liked attention. Great. He could work with that.

When he looked up, Sunstreaker was watching him with the same starvling look Bob had directed
up at the source of treats. Except that Sunstreaker was a gorgeous example of a mech, not a potential Cassetticon, which raised a whole slew of other options suddenly. The protocols jumping online had nothing to do with being a Cassette carrier. He gave Sunstreaker a sly up-and-down look, and the attention-starved look in the golden frontliner’s optics increased when Blaster tipped him an appreciative nod. The mech was truly as beautiful as he was vain, and as big of a glitchy afthead as he was needy for positive attention.

Blaster’s smile got wider. Maybe this was less of a situation where he lured Bob away from its current owner, and more of the adoption of a lover’s pet.

Bob looked up at its master, and the purring boosted to a constant rumble. Teensy forearms reached out to grasp the fingers Blaster wagged at it, and oops, his hand just happened to be knocked to the side to brush over gold armor. The purr turned to a warble as Sunstreaker noticeably straightened up in pride as the attention soaked in. Ah. So, make the master happy, and the bug was happy.

It was a good thing Sunstreaker couldn’t see Blaster’s face when he cooed at Bob. The disturbing glint had become a full-on greedy gleam, and plans were coming together.

Yes, he could work with that.

[* * * * *]

Smokescreen - “Financial responsibility”

[* * * * *

“If that’s all today..?” Optimus Prime looked around the table.

Only to wince, because Prowl had his doors in tight. That wasn’t all today, it seemed. His executive officer had his helm bent and lips pressed tight.

The rest of the officers followed Prime’s gaze. “What’s the deal-E0?” Blaster asked cautiously from the end of the table. He could always be counted on to break the silence.

Prowl looked up, and the table flinched as one. Narrow, white-blue optics were not a good sign. “Smokescreen has asked Carly and Spike to set up a charity auction at their university for him.”

It took a long minute for that to process. Spike had only recently transferred to Carly’s school, meaning that not everybody was up to speed on what university he was currently at. That whole war thing took a bit more precedence than knowing exactly where their friend went during the week. Not that they weren’t interested in his life, but the Autobots lived on a longer time-scale than humans. Six weeks of absence from the Ark was barely noticeable unless they reminded themselves it was unusual. It seemed much longer for the shorter-lived species.

Then there was the strange matter of a charity auction. The officers’ optics went blank as the whole table had to tap into Teletraan-1 to research the idea. People donating items to be auctioned off, and the proceeds given to a charity? It was an odd concept. Not a bad one -- Jazz immediately added ‘Bake Sale’ and ‘Car Wash’ to their to-do list for Earth public relations -- but an odd one. Perhaps because it’d been so long since there had been organized charities on Cybertron.

Especially ones that focused on an individual. That was a strange idea in and of itself, and puzzled looks broke out across the table as they digested the thought of Smokescreen starting one for his own benefit. Was that…normal? To have a sole beneficiary for a charity auction? Or was he starting it on the Autobots’ behalf? Was he running a charity to donate the money to a cause he championed?

“Smokescreen is not a charity,” Red Alert said as he squinted one optic. “I would know if he were
categorized as an entire organization instead of one mech.”

“I think that means he wants the money raised for himself, not that he’s representing an organization,” Ratchet said, optics still vacant. “Here, I’ve found the flyer Carly made.” Teletraan-I obediently pulled up the files for the others when the medic pinged it to. She had used one of Teletraan-I’s pre-made formats on her computer, so the Ark’s computer now had copies of her work.

“This wasn’t cleared by me.” Red Alert’s high-performance and high-strung engine snarled as he read. “This is not an Autobot function.”

“No, but he got us pretty good, there,” Jazz put in, reading along and following his train of thought. “That’s Smokies’ phrasing, alright. Nice.” His tone clearly conveyed the opposite. This was not nice. This was manipulative, underhanded, and Smokescreen all over. “He’s pulling all our P.R. strings on this one. It’s a grassroots campaign, so we can’t say scrap to stop it because it’s not official.” Red Alert made a disgruntled noise, obviously still caught on the formatting that implied it was official, and Jazz reached out to clap a hand on his arm. “Because it’s being promoted by his friends. He went through Carly and Spike instead of through the university itself. We can’t say anything against it for the same reason; we’d have his friends on the defensive, if only because if we pull the wool away from their eyes, they’re gonna lash out to cover their own embarrassment. And the way he’s phrased it…”

Blaster barked a laugh that was only amused at their expense. “Mech, he be good. I’m tapping him for political weasel- wording in the future.”

The smaller black-and-white Autobot revved his engine and sat back, frowning at his HUD. Smokescreen was good, no doubt about it, but Jazz didn’t have to like it. “There’s just enough twist on the explanation that we’re going to be seen as attacking him if we say anything. He’s got a sudden need for cash, sure, but he’s piled on the pathetic making it seem like this has been sprung on him and he’s not to blame for the cause. Yeah, no. He’s had gambling debt deadlines piling up for six months now. He knew they were coming, but the way this is laid out, it’s goin’ for the human heart. ‘Boo hoo, I need money ’cause this is so sudden and I’ve got so many expenses and I can’t work for money because of this waaaaaah.” Jazz let his voice trail off in a pathetic whine. He shook his head. “Regardless of the fact that he does regular work for the U.S. government and only gives up a portion of what he makes to us.”

“We only get a portion?” Prowl asked quietly. He kept his optics down and voice level as he spoke. He’d brought up Smokescreen as a problem in these meetings so often that he occasionally felt the irrational fear that he was picking on the mech. It wasn’t logical, but there was a discrepancy between what he knew as fact and what others acted like regardless of those facts. When a mech was so enthusiastically liked by the ranks but got on his nerves all the time, it left Prowl doubting the validity of his conclusions sometimes.

Jazz gave him a reassuring flash of blue visor. “50% if we’re lucky, but I’ve never called him out on it. He’s been in counseling about his gambling addiction, and that’s been my only requirement.”

“I see.”

Optimus Prime leaned forward, folding his hands together and resting his chin on them. “So the purpose of this charity auction?”

Prowl sighed air slowly out his vents and pinched one tip of his chevron in exasperation. “Smokescreen is raising money to pay off his debt.”

“And the reason he can’t pay this debt off himself?”
The air came out in a rush, this time. “Smokescreen has money management problems.”

“Gambling?”

“Not always,” Ratchet put in, leaning forward himself to put in his two shanix worth. “He’s addicted, don’t be mistaken, but he’s surprisingly cooperative in seeking aid in controlling that. However, I think the consequence of not gambling as much in the last year -- maybe closer to six months or so -- is that he’s had disposable income.” He spread his hands and glanced up as if asking for help on high. “So he disposed of it.”

“He commissioned Sunstreaker just last week,” Red Alert said, frowning at the files he was pulling up. He had access to all of the Autobots’ records, even their financial ones. “Small light-sculpture to give Mirage, I believe. It wasn’t cheap. How can he justify asking for donations of money when he is spending it on frivolities?”

“Can’t say if he genuinely believes it or not, but he doesn’t see commissioning art as a luxury. Or buying that wax at the import shop in downtown Portland this week. He only kept some of it and gave the rest to Bumblebee and Windcharger. He files that under a gift for morale’s sake,” Jazz said, tapping his fingers on the table. “We can’t say slag-all about it, or it’ll seem like we’re going after Sunstreaker for taking the commission or the Minibots for taking the gifts, and they don’t deserve that.”

Red Alert’s frown deepened the further back in the records he looked. “There’s a game purchase listed here. He and Sideswipe put in a joint order for some specialty shooting video games.”

“I can already hear the excuses,” Ironhide drawled. “Gotta have entertainment, right? Those punks are addicted to their blasted games.”

“How dast we officers try to deprive them of their hobbies? Gasp,” Jazz said, deadpan. “There shall be fainting.”

The Security Director gave him a quirked corner of his lip, amused but not. “I get it. Life is miserable, so seize a windfall when you have it without care for the future, for the future shall be miserable as well. Make your own joy.”

“That was…surprisingly poetic,” Ratchet said, turning to give him an odd look.

“There’s a Hallmark store next door to Sparkplug’s Garage in New York,” Red Alert said flatly. “I spent three days running detection wires through the card stands and securing the premises. I read a lot of trite things while working. Humans have some unrealistic but nicely worded cards for any occasion.” He smiled suddenly. “Happy belated birthday, by the way. There’s a card on your desk from Inferno and I. I figured out all of our frame-dates as part of converting our files to local times.”

Everyone stared at him for a moment. Ratchet reset his optics.

Red Alert looked back to his records. “Then there’s the gambling, of course.”

Like every meeting on Earth, topical whiplash was always a hazard. Jazz dragged his attention back to the issue at hand. “Ah. Yeah. Less than it was, but still there. I know, I know.” He threw up his hands helplessly. “He’ll stick to the addiction argument if I bring it up with him, too. ‘I’ve got to have an allowance for that! I need it!’”

“It sounds like he’ll argue that if anything is said about any of his spending,” the Prime concluded. “Everything he’s spent can be twisted about to be presented to the sympathetic human public as a ‘woe is me’ expense. Why has it gotten this far?” His optics narrowed in a frown. “Surely someone
“Oh, we have,” Ratchet said before Prowl could. “Look, he’s relatively young. Most of this crew is.” Meaning that they hadn’t had much of an opportunity for an actual life before the war began, not that they were considered young in vorns anymore. “Smokescreen wasn’t on his own for long before joining the Autobots. As such, he’s always had external support to bail him out of the holes he digs himself.”

Optimus looked at him sidelong, not quite following.

The medic rattled his plating irritably. “Before the war, what happened if you didn’t have enough money to make rent?”

“You got evicted,” Prowl supplied dryly, still not looking up.

“So what did you do?”

The executive officer shifted to sit straight, shrugging one shoulder. “You stopped spending money on frivolities.”

“Stopped going out to the clubs every night,” Jazz put in.

“ Took more hours at work,” Red Alert said, then smirked at himself. “Well, that wasn’t always an option, considering how much I already worked.”

“My job didn’t have available extra hours,” Ironhide grumbled at him. “If slag went down, I had to lay off the high grade and stick to the cheapest swill I could find. Bargain shopping for energon.” He smiled a little. “Brings back memories.”

“Don’t it just.” Blaster grinned back at the old weapons specialist. “Mech, I had eight Cassettes to support. When I took in the last two, we had medical appointments coming out our audios, and we went bargain-bin scrounging for everything to meet the cost. There were times I thought we’d have to sell my broadcast equipment.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Had to, a couple times. Sucked like a black hole, but frag. It’s whatcha did. You saved up the shanix ’cause otherwise you didn’t have it when you needed it.”

“Right,” Ratchet said, bringing them back to the present by pointing a finger on the table, “but not once we brought all these younglings into the ranks. They never had to face those consequences. Couldn’t make your credit limit? Autobots bailed you out. Spent all your petty cash on high grade and circuit speeders? No backlash. Sure, there’s been short-term punishment, but not enough to grind in that money is real and has to be managed. There’s always been someone to save their afts. These mechs never learned that they have to look after themselves.”

“I think Smokescreen feels he’s entitled to others contributing because of that,” Prowl agreed softly, raising his optics at last. “He’s never learned to control his spending, so when he has no money left, he feels that he’s owed more.”

Ratchet nodded. “We talk to him about what’s going on, but he takes it as an attack on him personally instead of a warning that real life is eventually going to kick his skidplate up between his audios.”

“Someday, some of the humans are going to point out how they’re feeding his irresponsible habits,” Prowl’s doors eased down slowly, “and eventually, there will be more people listening than defending him. He’ll either start huffing about how humans are horrible, or he’ll finally learn. But after so long with the Autobots pandering to him, why would he learn from this species wising up?”
“Because what can we do, mechs?” Blaster put his palms up. “If the charity auction don’t work, he’ll just come to us. And I dunno ‘bout ya’ll, but I can’t help but think it’d look bad if we let one of our own go into bankruptcy and face a human court ‘bout his debts.”

“Hey, it’d be one way to make him face up to the slag he’s trying to get away with.” Jazz cocked his head but smiled wanly when everyone gave him resigned looks. “Yeah, yeah. I know. Wishful thinking.”

“We can take on his debt,” the Prime decided, “if it comes to that. With the condition that all of his future income goes to the Autobot accounts, and he may not spend on credit. All purchases must first be approved by --“

“Can’t do that,” Prowl and Red Alert said at the same time.

“I put that stipulation into effect on Sideswipe upon awakening on Earth.” Prowl scowled at the tabletop, but it was frustration at the red frontliner instead of irritation with the table itself. “Sideswipe immediately began making comments to Spike and Sparkplug about how the Autobots stand for personal freedom. Interpretation through the local standpoint equates ‘personal freedom’ with their own concept of individual rights. By the time I caught on to what he was doing, they’d already conceived a somewhat warped mindset about what the Autobot Cause is.”

That could have been a public relations nightmare. “We’re military, but that would hold little substance with the way Sideswipe angled to present us,” Red Alert muttered tiredly. “The idea of imposing on a mech’s life to control his spending of personal accounts, despite the fact that allowing a personal account is an exception to our standard practices, is apparently looked down upon in the United States. Their military is separate from civilian life due to, ah, circumstances,” as in, because Earth wasn’t embroiled in a world-wide war that eliminated the classification of ‘civilian’, “but their soldiers still have many of the rights of civilians. The USA regards them as inherent. Humans in this country will not accept our social structure as it is. Removing the money from Sideswipe’s -- or Smokescreen’s -- accounts and returning it to our main account will be seen as stealing it from them, and we will be accused of depriving them of an innate right to financial independence.”

Silence temporarily took over the room as the officers did their own research to check on how that worked. Prowl looked vaguely depressed. Red Alert just seemed fed-up with trying to fight it. Sideswipe had outmaneuvered both of them on this issue.

“So what can be done?” the Prime asked after he’d looked up the United State’s Constitution and several different state constitutions to fact-check.

Prowl’s wings cinched in tight again. “Nothing.”

“I’ll talk to him again,” Ratchet said grimly, “but I doubt it’ll help. He’ll react like I’m attacking him personally, and if he’s already got Carly on his side, I’ll be hearing about it from her as well.”

“And lo, your reputation for being a bitter grouch will continue to grow,” Jazz said, waggling his fingers as if performing magic. “Ratchet picks on poor widdle Autobots who are just sooo unfortunate because, oh my golly gee, they need help and Ratchet’s not helping!”

“If it were my job to help every irresponsible idiot who couldn’t manage money, I’d have been broke before the war.”

“You’re not a nice mech.” Jazz pouted. “You don’t give everything to mechs in need.”
Ratchet harrumphed. “Not when they don’t help themselves.” He sighed and shoved himself away from the table. “If that’s it, I’ll just be going.”

Optimus Prime looked around the table. Prowl’s doors were brought in as tight as his lips were clamped together. Jazz wore an exasperated expression. Blaster looked as frustrated as Ironhide, and Red Alert looked like he just wanted to storm out.

“If that’s all today..?”

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Commission fic for GoddamnitRiot - “Swerve/Tailgate - something short, sweet, and happy”

[* * * * *]

Tailgate was being cute again.

To be fair, he probably couldn’t turn that off, just like Swerve couldn’t turn off his swag. Swerve had swag coming out his doors! So much swag he couldn’t contain it! Swag to make Whirl envious of his swagdom!

He seemed to have mislaid some of it, today. Most of it. The majority of it.

Swerve held onto Tailgate’s thighs and grasped after the retreating tendrils of anything resembling swag. Courage, bravery, steel backstruts and iron innards, anything besides this odd shy bluster filling him at the moment. Because he was holding Tailgate’s thighs like anything about lush white curves with that pert blue aft perched on top could be chaste. Why, oh why was he so very close but unable to bridge the distance? A slip of the hand! A suggestive squeeze, or maybe a nice long sweep of his fingers up glossy white curves! That’d be all it’d take. So simple even Brainstorm couldn’t fudge it!

That might be pushing it. Brainstorm could overcomplicate pretty much anything. Although Swerve sort of wished the mech were here just so he’d have a reason to seize the simplest solution possible. As it was, he was about ready to bang his head on the bartop in frustration. Why couldn’t he just slide his hand on up and plink a wheel in suave invitation? Argh.

Instead of flirting, he kept talking. That was his default mode for dealing with awkward silence, and Tailgate, for all his cuteness, had walked in soaked to the visor with quiet sadness. No big surprise there; half the ship must have heard Cyclonus bellowing angrily about the spontaneous hug the little Minibot had sprung on him. Filling the silence seemed like a better idea that letting Tailgate brood and maybe eventually notice how the hands on his thighs were assessing them for potential spots to get a good grip on later. Subtly! But definitely. And Swerve was suffering from an overabundance of choices, too. So many grabbable spots, so little courage to seize them.

'Missing: swag. If found, please return to Swerve at the bar.' Then get the frag out of there before he used it to immediately jump Tailgate.

“-- wanna paint the ceiling to look like Earth’s sky. Ever seen it? I haven’t, but Sunstreaker says he can do it if I can find the paint, and Drift says it’s really neat and Rodimus liked it, and you know, staying on the good side of the captain is always a good thing. Besides, Ultra Magnus was on Earth for a while, wasn’t he? I don’t know if he liked it, but I’ve never heard him say anything bad about the place!” Then again, Swerve had never asked. But not asking things like permission and preferences made it easier to plead ignorance after he was caught, which is how he’d escaped Ultra Magnus brigging him previously, and being ignorant meant he could ask forgiveness after things had already happened. Or rather, it meant he could beg and whine and pester until he got his way and the mech forgave him just to make him shut up. It was an effective strategy, really.
That, and offering free drinks. Those two methods had done well by Swerve so far. He shouldn’t have strayed from them. It was when he only posted a notice and turned off the engex taps that it got rubbed in his face that nobody would come into the bar to help him or just hang out with him. He’d thought that maybe Skids or even Whirl, but nope. It’d just been him, smiling futilely at the door every time somebody walked by outside in the hallway.

The bar renovation party had been a party of one until Tailgate slouched through the door. Swerve was always happy to see his friend, but he’d practically vaulted the bartop to greet the guy today. Party of two made a real party instead of a depressed pity-party! Tailgate’s mood wasn’t helping, but honestly, what kind of friend would Swerve be if he didn’t try to make his pal feel better?

“Seems like blue and white should lighten up the bar a lot, too. I mean, I like the dark look for intimacy, but I don’t want a doom and gloom bar. We get enough of that when Cyclonus walks in the door.” Tailgate stiffened in his hands, and Swerve’s wide smile ticked a tad wider as he registered his verbal blunder -- as usual -- too late. Right, this was Tailgate, one-way best buddy of Cyclonus, the Lost Light’s uncrowned king of personal space issues. “Uh, well, it’ll be like adding you when he’s here! Low lighting and bright cheer at once! Cyclonus on the bottom, and you spread out over the bar!”

...oh, Primus, had he actually said that out loud?

A sound honked from above him, like a snort and a giggle had collided. Swerve grinned against Tailgate’s thigh. Okay, so maybe that hadn’t been as bad a trip-up as he’d thought. Although now he couldn’t shake the mental image. He did like blue, especially the shade right in front of his visor, and he wondered if he could get Sunstreaker to use Tailgate blue in the sky. Tailgate spread out over his bar was a nice thing to imagine happening every day. Ooo, especially happening during working hours.

Mmm, yeah. That. It wouldn’t take much. Just turn and walk a few steps toward the nearest table, bend forward enough for his friend to get the hint, and then catch him with hands on his midriff and the small of his back. Yeah. Right…right on the small of his back. Right where Swerve’s right hand had just strayed to, sliding up from one thigh in the name of balance. Tailgate didn’t object. The white-and-blue mech leaned slightly against the steadying hand, trusting Swerve to keep him in place, and the smile faltered as Swerve licked his lips. There were tasty things parading across his mind’s optics, mostly involving keeping his hand right where it was while he found out just how far Tailgate could arch back over it.

Cyclonus didn’t know what the frag he was doing, pushing the Minibot away. Swerve would shut up for a hug from Tailgate, much less anything more. The curves were tempting enough, but the aura of being untouched by the war made Swerve want to put his hands all over him. All. Over. Him.

“Okay, I’m done with this one.” The old-timer in question dropped the last of the screws he’d been teasing out of their holes up near the ceiling. He tapped the top of Swerve’s helm cowl, and the bartender obediently heaved him up. Both hands clamped securely over white curves? Yes sir, he could do that, sir. “I can walk, you know.”

Yeah, like Swerve was going to let any opportunity to handle Tailgate’s thighs walk away? “It’s quicker for me to carry you,” he cheerfully protested as that nicely shaped aft sat on his shoulder-tire. He used his feet and reluctantly freed one hand to push the stool-on-chair tower toward the next set of panels he wanted to take out. He normally wasn’t one for manual labor, but this sort of felt more like foreplay the longer it went on. “You wanna waste time climbing up and down this thing? Ultra Rule-ness is already gonna pitch a fit if he catches us doing this, and you’re going to fall if you have to keep scrambling up on it.”
Swerve had cleared taking down the wall partition between the bar and backroom with Rodimus, but the problem with only two Minibots doing renovations was that they were really short. Swerve had come up with using a stool on top of a chair in lieu of a ladder to reach the screws. Which required holding onto Tailgate’s thighs to make sure he didn’t fall while balanced on top of the rickety structure. Sure, Swerve could have gone looking for a ladder, but yeah. No. He wasn’t inclined to even suggest it.

His shoulder tire rocked back and forth as Tailgate kicked his heels idly. The axle gave tiny squeaks as it was worked against the parking brake, bouncing off the brake pads in a, uh, supremely distracting manner. Those weren’t sensitive while in his altmode, but the sensor network redirected when he was in rootmode. Tires weren’t modes of transportation in rootmode; they were meant to function as just another part of his body. A particularly bouncy part, as Tailgate was finding out. The smaller Minibot’s aft bobbed up and down in time with the kicking, and Swerve could feel every last bit of pressure being put on that tire!

Swerve swallowed and took his time nudging the chair into place. On the one hand: perfectly innocent. Tailgate was just fidgeting. On the other: bounce bounce dear Primus bounce. Riding his tire like that was less adorable than the heel-kicking. Cute transmuted into something more risque. Broad hands clamped over the white thighs as if to keep the smaller mech from falling, but Swerve was some swag away from less than pure intentions. Did Tailgate have any idea what he was doing?

“You busy tonight?” Swerve blurted, because control over his own mouth was even more difficult than controlling his libido. Swag was not required for rampant exercise of that bodily function.

“I thought I’d help you for a while, if that’s alright?” The rocking continued, settling into a rhythm. Swerve sternly told his ventilation system to stay steady. Tailgate was kicking in time to counting the screws above him, and he didn’t want to mess up the count.

Whoever had built this ship had gone the discount builder route. The two Minibots had been searching for screwholes everywhere, because placement of those was unpredictable at best, exasperating at worst. There had been one way up in the corner that had been glued into place but hadn’t been drilled into anything, which they’d only discovered once they’d wasted time and effort prying it loose. They had a rough idea of how many screws were supposed to be used, however, so Tailgate was trying to do the guess-timating to work out how many more they needed to find.

Swerve leaned his forehelm against the back of Tailgate’s thigh as he set the slightly smaller Minibot on Mount St. Potential Injury again. That aft left his tire, and he missed it already. “Yeah. That’s great.” His voice was as loud and confident as ever, because it was great. More than great. Fantastic. He was in no hurry for Tailgate to leave. Nobody else was coming, it seemed. It was just him, Tailgate’s cuteness, and a lack of swag tonight.

At this rate, he’d have to scrape swag off his interface drive. Frag-flavored Swerve swag to finally make a move on fraggable Tailgate cuteness.

...at this rate, Swerve kind of hoped everyone else stayed away.

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Tailgate - “I work out”
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Cyclonus paused outside his door. He was not usually one for hesitation, especially out of consideration for others, but tonight he hesitated. One optic twitched slightly. Perhaps it was less consideration for others and more a desire to preserve his own mental health. There were two noises coming from outside, and both heralded things he did not want to walk into
the middle of. While he wouldn’t hesitate to walk in and let his undesired roommate cope with whatever consequences resulted in assuming privacy where there was none in a shared habitation suite, there were some courtesies even he understood as polite. The *squeaka-squeaka* of tires spinning indicated an exercise every grounder inevitably engaged in. That was not surprising, and although he didn’t want to witness such a thing, embarrassment was not his first reaction. Annoyance was, actually. He should have anticipated that eventually Tailgate would wish some time alone to spin his tires.

Since he didn’t have another place to be or anything left to do, Cyclonus might have still walked in. He didn’t want to see Tailgate engaged in such a base activity, but ignoring the matter would have been enough for him. However, then there was the second noise. Swerve’s nonstop chatter was audible from the hallway. Tailgate was most definitely not alone, yet tires were spinning. And *that*, Cyclonus did not wish to observe. He did not think about why. He simply turned and continued walking down the hall.

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*Octane and Sandstorm - “meet up again”*

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“Why are we doing this again?” Sandstorm peered around the corner, blaster at the ready. He looked like he was in enemy territory prepared for an attack.

Which was technically true for both of them, but Octane looked far more relaxed. “Because they asked.” He shrugged when his Autobot pal gave him a peeved look. “No, seriously. That’s all there is to it.” He sauntered around the corner holding a rifle propped against one shoulder. He'd borrowed it from the Autobot City armory. He may or may not have asked before borrowing it, something that’d only be politely queried after by Metroplex if the sorta-maybe Decepticon triple-changer tried to make the borrowing permanent. Octane did, after all, have a penchant for ‘finding’ shiny things that didn’t belong to him and hadn’t technically been stolen until someone pointed out that he wasn’t returning it.

Hence Sandstorm scrambling to catch up with him, in fact, but the Autobot helicopter hadn’t yet figured that fact yet out yet. Octane certainly wasn’t going to tell him he had no intention of giving the ‘copter back. “But -- “

“Nope,” Octane interrupted with ruthless cheer. “Cyclonus asked. I’m not interested in being an Autobot -- no offense -- “

“None taken.”

“ -- so that means I still gotta at least pay attention when High Command says jump.”

Sandstorm squinted at him. “Decepticon High Command’s been saying, ‘Come here so we can shoot you for treason!’ for about six months now.”

Ah, yes, good times with Starscream. Even dead, adventures with the former Air Commander had resulted in treason, treachery, and an entire faction out for his head. Octane smiled fondly. Starscream had a way of stirring the smelter, didn’t he just.

“Hey, I said ‘pay attention,’ not ‘obey.’ There’s a difference. Notice how Cyclonus couldn’t call me up fast enough when the slag got hot? High Command says a lot, but frag if anybody obeys it to the letter.” Prudent planning in Decepticon terms meant leaving useful but backstabbing glitches alive because they might become useful. Hence why Starscream had lasted so long despite how many times Megatron had bellowed for his head on a pike. Most of the Decepticons had looked the other
way when Galvatron began screaming, because everyone knew just how useful Octane was.

The joys of being indispensable! Indispensable, that was, under certain conditions and backed up by fine-print spelling out a list of allies as long and tough as Trypticon’s tail. Including the Autobots, because Octane was easy.

As Sandstorm well knew. “Eventually, that’s going to come back to bite you,” he warned the other mech.

“Not as long as I don’t ever officially ditch the Decepticons.”

That got a fond but resigned sigh. Why would Octane join the Autobots when he could get everything he wanted while playing refugee? “And why would you? You can play both sides like the manipulative fragger you are and still come out smelling like you didn’t steal the distillery.” Sandstorm shook his head. “No offense.”

“None taken.” Octane smirked, hoisted the rifle into position, and snapped off a shot. Something up ahead squealed and fell with a thunk, and both mechs jogged up the corridor to investigate. “Woo, that’s a big one! No wonder they called in the professional!” Using the rifle barrel, the triple-changer managed to lever the carcass over onto its belly so they could get a good look at it. “Hmm. Not a clone, I don’t think.”

“It doesn’t match any of my files for the three known Earth Insecticons,” Sandstorm said as he prodded the smoking wound. He went briefly still as he ran a scan through the open hole into what was left of the bug’s head. “Basic processors only. It is a clone.” He knelt and angled so he could see it from the front. Those mandibles looked familiar. “It looks a lot like the other ones we’ve gotten so far, too.”

Octane groaned deeply as he checked the charge on ‘his’ rifle. “Frag. I was hoping it was just a temporary colony, not an infestation.”

“What the difference?” The slightly smaller mech rose to chase after the Decepticon now briskly striding off like there was a fuel pick-up somewhere he had to intercept.

“Earth was claimed as, who was it…Kickback? Kickback’s territory years ago, but the smaller Insecticons could be moving in on the place now that the three head honchos got Unicroned.”

“Unicron’s not a verb.”

“He is now.” Octane flashed a dazzling smile over his shoulder, and Sandstorm had to laugh. “Right, so Trypty-baby here,” he patted a wall affectionately, an absent-minded habit that had been boggling Sandstorm since they’d arrived, “would make decent transport if you wanted to immigrate to a nice new world. Buuuuuut,” he drew out, casually checking around a corner with all lethal habit Sandstorm sometimes forgot he possessed, “all we’ve seen is clones of the same Insecticon. And they’re eating the walls instead of using the place as a homebase, so -- yeah. Infestation.”

Sandstorm caught up with his friend at the next dropshaft and slid into a crouch to check downward as Octane checked upward. “What’s that mean in terms of us running around shooting things?” Those were good terms to be informed of. Especially since those were the terms that Decepticon High Command had urgently unofficially/officially (Sandstorm suspected Cyclonus had somehow bypassed telling Galvatron) requested Octane visit one itchy, irate fortress-former under.

“Means,” they gave identical grunts as they swung out in tandem to start climbing up the dropshaft ladder, “Trypty-baby’s got a parasite. We’ve got to take out whatever Insecticon’s made himself fat
and happy living off my buddy. After that, we’re golden. His self-defense systems should be able to snipe the rest of the swarm.”

Looking up gave Sandstorm an optic-full of Decepticon aft. He was guiltily aware that he was looking up far too often for operational security. There could be twenty Insecticon clones coming up the dropshaft underneath them, for all he knew. “Uh, okay. You seem awful blasé about all this.”

Octane shrugged, but he also looked down and winked. He knew exactly what was being stared at. “We all pick up the odd unwelcome passenger. No point in getting upset about it.”

That sounded kind of like an oblique stab at him, actually. “Oh?” Sandstorm’s voice sharpened a tad. “And what’ve you picked up?”

“You really wanna know?” Darkened optics looked down at him.

By now, he felt sort of hurt by the round-about jab. “Yes!”

Octane looked upward and heaved a resigned sigh. “Sand mites. I haven’t even been in the desert for a year, and I still can’t get them out of my upholstery.”

“…oh.”

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Soundwave & Cyclonus - “jealousy”

[*** ***]

Jealousy is like the wind.

Hot wind, desert-dry air blowing flecks and sand into miniscule cracks. They fester the longer he fails to dig them back out. Even if they are painstakingly cleansed, the weaknesses continue to be exploited. There is no pause for healing, only the relentless air in motion eroding him away. The wind gets into everything, every nook and cranny, and they are never free from the small, stinging pressures that remind him they are there. The wind always continues. There is never an end to it.

It saws over his audios, back and forth in whooshing gusts carrying its irritating grit. This is not the air of Earth with its biological contaminates and variations in composition. The damp sweeps of that planet’s air feels comparatively soft, and it changes depending on the day, the time, the season. The weather on Charr never changes. Nothing ever grows. Nothing ever can. It is a sterile, hostile world, and its wind represents it. Jealousy is its ambassador, and envy its soldier. Violence and hatred govern it.

This world is shaped by that. The heat torches the atmosphere until everything reeks of torment, and the wind stirs that until it pours across him in molten, interminable waves. Rust and flecks of silicon scour his plating as if they would wear him down like they have the landscape. The hollow, inorganic skeleton of Charr yawns greedily toward the sky, empty and consumptive at the same time. He can sympathize.

He can, but he doesn’t. He listens to Charr, he watches it destroy itself, but he refuses to be it. He refuses to be defined by it. He doesn’t, however, deny that Charr’s haunted ruins are his own home. The hungry sky tears him down in inevitable return to its clutches. He leaves, hears other things, but this is where he returns to.

Not to the planet, but to the one on it. What is a follower without someone to follow? He leaves to go where he is led, as the wind comes and goes, chained to the source but freed by it. Galvatron leads
ever onward, and he follows. Galvatron is the reason the wind blows.

Cybertron defines his rival. His rival stands by him even now, and the wind carries echoes of metal and acid rain, long roads and tall towers. He listens, and it’s not the sound of his world. He can hear it soughing through the air, but it evades him. Like the wind, it cannot be caught. Trap it, carrying it to another place, release it -- and the wind has died in its cage. It becomes nothing but air without something to drive it. Cybertron drives his rival, and Soundwave is defined by it.

It is not right that Cybertron stands at his Lord’s hand where Cyclonus should be. Yet that is what Galvatron commands, and so shall it be. Yet the feelings infect him, defying explanation, refusing to be pinned down. They stand together at Galvatron’s beck and call, Cylonus and his rival, and there is always a noiseless background motion between them: an invisible waver in the air, a thing that isn’t, a nonexistent drift of emotion and illogic.

Envy is like the wind, and Cyclonus wonders what Soundwave hears blown between them.

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_Cyclonus & the Armada - “genderswap”_

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It took five days for them to notice a difference between their Unicronian brethren and themselves.

They might have noticed earlier if not for Unicon’s defeat and Lord Galvatron’ disappearance. That sent the protocols into automatic dormancy, which was when they noticed that they even had them. They were both fairly certain that they hadn’t had them before. The function option was firmly set to ‘off’ since their lives were in total upset at the moment, but it was still there. Not that it mattered much, but the option gave them something to puzzle over while resting between searches. Why had Unicon felt the need to change that which they had been?

The Unmaker had, however, changed more and deeper than mere gender. Neither of them remembered enough about their previous lives to feel any sort of dissonance, and there was really only one main function that redefined Cybertronian gender. It wasn’t a function that could be used until there was an element of stability that was currently missing in their lives, just like the rest of Cybertron’s scattered children. The function was dormant, and as puzzling it was to suddenly possess the option of future activation, it was hardly a pressing issue. As long as they could fight the Autobots and search for their Lord, gender wasn’t of any importance.

The difference quickly passed from their minds in favor of the search.

They did, eventually, find Lord Galvatron. Cyclonus and the Armada both heaved twin sighs of relief, then bent to their Lord’s will almost happily. Charr was hardly a glorious homeworld, but mighty empires arose from humble beginnings. It had a sort of bleak appeal, for a sterile planet. It wasn’t metal, but it also didn’t host any disgusting organic lifeforms, either. Cyclonus and the Armada found that appealing. They set about sculpting it and the remaining Decepticons to their Lord’s desires.

Meanwhile, the gender function patiently pinged them every time they felt safe. Security was difficult to find in war, explaining why their gender had been mostly eradicated on Cybertron as the protocols slowly purged in favor of war-related functions, but Lord Galvatron’s very presence was enough to wrap Cyclonus and his Armada in blissful comfort. They debated activating the protocols, but it always seemed not quite the right time for one reason or another.

The aborted function did have outward signs if anyone had bothered to look closely. The Constructicons certainly would have spotted the signs, but they were busy building for the glory of
Lord Galvatron. Or at least for the glory of a roof over their heads.

It took five weeks for the Sweeps to figure out what they were seeing, and that only because the Sweeps got everywhere and into everything. Their claws always itched to dig into others in any way possible. Gossip was as good as bodily damage when off the battlefield. They clustered outside a particular door inside newly constructed Charr base, and they waited eagerly for that door to open so they could confirm their whispered theory.

Cyclonus opened the door, looked at the ravening horde, and his Armada sighed behind him. “Yes? Did you need something?”

“Is it true?” somebody asked from the back.

The Armada sighed again, and Cyclonus stood aside to let the flock in. This would likely be a discussion too long to hold in the hallway, after all.

The Sweeps tittered and invaded their quarters in a flurry of wings. Neither of them felt like attempting to calm the gossips down. They let the busybodies explore and flutter about them, not bothered at all by multiple voices prying for details. The clones meant nothing harmful with their information-greed. They were simply curious about the difference, just as Cyclonus and his Armada had once been. The Sweeps wanted to examine the function protocols and compare, searching their own code in vain hope that maybe one of them was more than a clone, more than an echo of Scourge, but no. Unicron had twisted only three mechs into being. The Armada and the Sweeps were merely shadows of Cyclonus and Scourge, respectively. Since Scourge had no option to activate this function, then the Sweeps didn’t, either.

That didn’t stop them from kicking up a fuss about the fact that Cyclonus and his Armada could. There were no other Decepticons on Charr of the near-vanished gender, and the Sweeps were bored. Avidly pouring over the miniscule difference was free entertainment, in their optics. For a few days, neither Cyclonus nor his Armada could venture anywhere without at least two Sweeps dancing attendance.

There were some things the Decepticons got used to, and a chattering crowd of Sweeps flooding down the halls in someone’s wake was just one of them. Deadly spawn of the Unmaker they might be, but the Decepticons on Charr knew harmless when it giggled and whispered at them. It happened so often during downtime that not even Swindle paid any attention to what exactly the whispers were saying this time.

Therefore, it took five more days for Scourge to notice what his Sweeps had picked up on. "You couldn't tell me?" he asked his superiors, and the two merely looked at him. "...right. Probably not something I should have needed to be told."

"Does it matter?" one of them asked, and Scourge blinked for a moment as he turned that over.

"Not really. Should it?"

They smiled and held their tongues, and the Sweeps continued fluttering. The pings kept coming. Cyclonus and his Armada continued to decline the protocol activation.

Until one day, they didn’t. “Today?”

“Yes.”

It just felt right. Perhaps because Lord Galvatron had decided to strike out in another direction, leaving the Autobots on Cybertron and Earth to their own devices for a while. Conquest of species
other than their own was so much easier, the duo had decided. It was practically a vacation.

That reduced the stress of combat even further. Intensive planning sessions kept them close and comforted by their Lord’s presence and power.

Whatever the reason, it felt right. They let the function online and activated their alternate option. Gender, for their kind and despite Unicron’s strange meddling, was as easy as that.

It still took five months for the other Decepticons to notice. Maybe it was because nothing else changed. Maybe it was because no one recognized the signs any more. Maybe it was because the fluttering was so normal by then that the Decepticons didn’t think twice about why there was an explosion of wings and laughter outside Cyclonus and his Armada’s quarters. The flock swirled and shouted, Scourge wearily waded through his subordinates to try and control them, and Lord Galvatron strutted proudly. All of that was rather normal for the Decepticon base on Charr.

Lord Galvatron throwing a fit because the Constructicons hadn’t already produced frames for the rest of Cyclonus’ Armada? A little less normal. The Decepticon leader seriously didn’t get why his followers’ collective jaws dropped at the news that there were half a dozen new sparks ready for bodies. Turned out that he’d known all along. The other Decepticons felt like blind idiots for not noticing to begin with, but they scrambled to catch up to the obvious quick enough. The Constructicons slapped together frames based on the Armada’s schematics, and life on Charr went on as per usual. Just…with options.

Some information was time-sensitive, life-changing, and need-to-know for a faction trying to take over the universe. Gender? Not so much.

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Cyclonus - “herding combiners”

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He hovered over them constantly, which annoyed them to no end.

“We are not incompetent,” Hook groused, but in an undertone. That untouchable status skill and rank had bought him under Megatron’s regime wasn’t so untouchable anymore. His confidence had been severely shaken by the number of times Galvatron had backhanded him. His distaste for brute force methods was only outdone by his fear of them being applied to him.

“Let him watch. It won’t hurt us.” As much as Scrapper shared his irritation at the flyer watching them from above, he also shared the lack of confidence. At this point, the Decepticons walked very, very carefully no matter their status. The only thing that deterred Galvatron from impulsively shooting someone -- anyone -- who enraged him was Cyclonus.

Cyclonus could stay up there and watch for hours, as far as Scrapper was concerned. Better that than the Decepticon Second deciding to staying out of it the next time Galvatron took it in his head to beat the scrap out of one of the Constructicons. Specifically Hook, who couldn’t control his innate arrogance on a good day, much less on a day when he got his crane line in a twist because their mad leader decided to change something.

Onslaught seemed to be on the same page as Scrapper. “You take one potshot at him,” Scrapper heard the Combaticon leader hiss at Vortex, “and you’re on your own. Like the Pit am I pulling your rotor blades out of whatever hole you dig yourself this time.”

The helicopter snorted. “Like he’d be able to pin it on me?”
Bonecrusher and Long Haul took a healthy step away from Ground Zero. Onslaught turned a burning visor on his insolent subordinate, and behind Vortex, Blast Off’s annoyed sigh was clearly audible. Brawl and Swindle were already taking bets with the Predacons. Swindle appeared to have sold Hun-Grr something small and crunchy to snack on while the show happened.

“Is there a problem down there?” Cyclonus called sharply, and everyone snapped to attention. In Hun-Grr’s case, that involved swallowing a hunk of something improperly chewed and horking loudly as it caught in his throat.

“No sir!” all three combiner team leaders called back up to him. Well, Hun-Grr sort of garbled an approximation of that upward in the midst of his coughing fit.

Cyclonus eyed him critically. “Do you require assistance?”

“No sir,” Hun-Grr wheezed. With one last wretching cough, he hacked up the snack chunk and let it drop to the ground. He heaved, trying to get his ventilation system to assist in unlocking the choked intake, but managed a halfway respectful salute. “Little ben-neath your skillset, sir.”

“Suck up,” someone sneered behind him, and the Predacon leader’s optics went incandescent. He turned with slow menace. Sinnertwin was, unfortunately enough, the only one not paying attention at the time. Hun-Grr vomiting up (and then re-eating) inappropriately-sized items was common enough that the Predacons were used to the sound effects. Sinnertwin had gotten bored and was looking in another direction. Two directions, in fact, which made it look like calculated innocence.

That was as good as a signed confession in Decepticon terms.

Onslaught booted Vortex straight into the fray when Hun-Grr went for Sinnertwin’s throats. Both Predacons promptly turned on the ‘copter, which was justice in the Combinator leader’s mind. Pitching the guilty party in like that was practically an apology to the other combiner team, really. He’d only step in to interfere if Vortex started enjoying it.

Scrapper looked up at the thunderous frown hovering above them and winced. Cyclonus evidently didn’t approve of inter-team discipline a la Onslaught and Hun-Grr.

He winced even worse when Hook sniffed and said loud and clear, “Now, they are incompetent.”

It took Cyclonus and five Sweeps to break up the resulting brawl.

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Human to Cybertronian - “psychological effects”
The Primus Adoption Society or ‘Why Earth Keeps Happening’
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Having the Prime go into a coma periodically was always jarring, but as he himself said wryly enough about it, “When the Matrix calls, the Primes listen.”

“He’s been listening an awful long time,” Jazz said quietly after the third week. Three weeks of cleverly covering for the Prime’s absence was starting to wear on even him.

“Wish he’d listen to me that closely,” Ratchet snapped right back as he delicately adjusted the cerebral monitor he’d installed after the first week. Normally, the Primes meditated for a couple hours or even days, just lightly getting in touch with the artifact they carried. Not Optimus. He conked out, bypassing a shallow meditation for an outright coma every time. It’s like the war made the Matrix decide it had to have the Prime’s complete attention. That left the Prime’s chief medic fretting,
however. “Readings are still good. Whatever the Matrix has to say this time, Optimus is paying attention like nobody’s business.”

Prowl met each of the officer’s optics solemnly. “Last time, Prime came out of his vision demanding to meet with Megatron in person. I think we can all remember how well that went.”

It’d gone about as well as could be expected, given the circumstances of the meeting had been in the middle of pitched battle. Megatron had not taken well to Optimus Prime all but tackling him on the battlefield. Not that he ever did, but that particular instance had involved the Prime wildly shouting something about Primus giving him an ultimatum. Megatron had actually listened -- stunned and unable to believe his audios, admittedly -- before yelling back. It’d devolved into a shouting match, then a wrestling match with lasers and swords, and then somebody had brought out a cityformer, what the frag, that wasn’t even fair.

So, yeah. They all remembered. Things had gone downhill from there. The war had gone downhill from there. Optimus Prime had been depressed for weeks afterward.

He’d refused to tell them why, too. That had been the truly frustrating part. “It won’t help,” he’d said quietly, refusing to look at any of them. “There’s nothing any of you can do that you’re not already doing. I did my best. I can only hope it was enough for Primus.”

Apparently not.

“Get your aft back in medbay!” roared loud enough to be heard on the Ark’s bridge was everyone’s first clue that something was wrong. Ratchet thundered when he wanted to be heard. The Aerialbots all glanced upward when he spoke as if expecting stormclouds. When the medic yelled his head off after someone, that someone knew.

The obscene noise level was met by the usual belated response from Beachcomber. He looked up after a full minute and asked, “Was that Ratchet?”

Everyone else side-eyed him. He peacefully smiled back. It’d take a lot more than Prime bursting through the doors to rattle his composure. The rest of the bridge shift dove for cover or fell into combat stances, but Beachcomber merely greeted him with, “Oh, hey, you’re awake. That’s cool.”

Prime slid to a stop beside the laid-back Autobot’s duty station. “Yes, I am,” he said with a calm totally belied by how he yanked Beachcomber out of the chair. “Excuse me, I have to find someone.”

“No problem.” Beachcomber, unlike Prowl, Ratchet, and half the off-duty Autobots who’d just stampeded onto the bridge in Optimus’ wake, handled the sudden displacement well. The rest of the mechs -- who’d evidently chased the Prime through the Ark to get here -- stood in the doorway looking frazzled. Beachcomber just leaned on the Prime’s shoulder and pointed at the icon for Sky Spy. “It’s already launched, if you’re lookin’ for somebody in particular.”

“I am, thank you,” Prime said absently as the officers descended upon him in a bleating herd, “but not one of us. Or rather, not yet. Or -- that is, she is, but she’s not yet, or -- this is confusing. I know I’ve asked you this before,” Ratchet paused in checking the Prime’s still-open cranial casing as the question was addressed to him, “but why do concepts conveyed by the Matrix seem so obvious then and so difficult to understand now?”

Ratchet eyed him warily. “Because your processors are substituted by the Matrix itself, which so far as we understand, is still connected to the Sigma chambers back on Cybertron. That’s a huge amount of power difference, not to mention processor capability. Vector Sigma may be offline, but there are
at least three others buried but still functional.”

“I know that,” Optimus murmured, still worriedly scanning through what looked like tax census of South Carolina. “In fact, at exactly 3:34 PM today, Eastern Standard Time, one of those Sigma chambers will be facing Earth as Cybertron rotates. If we do not reach one Mrs., ah,” he read off the screen, “Jean Dalia Krogers by then, there will be an incident caused by that convergence. Um.” He hesitated, went back, and rewored his statement. “No, there’s going to be an incident. Nothing we do is going to stop that. I couldn’t -- Primus decided despite what I tried to -- I -- “

The Autobots stepped back as their leader stood up. He drew his shoulders back as if to give an inspirational speech, then deflated. He gave them a helpless look instead.

“I have no idea how to explain this properly,” he admitted, looking rather pathetic for a mech who could normally inspire a rock with one of his speeches. He blinked at the assembly, which blinked back, and drew in a calming vent. He pushed it back out in a long sigh. “Ah...Primus has decided that since we, His children, will not cease fighting and killing each other, then He will not create any more of us.”

There was a short silence as the Autobots glanced at each other. “That’s not really new,” Jazz ventured after a moment. “I mean, aside from our miracle jets here,” he jerked his head at Silverbolt, who smiled awkwardly, “the Sigma chambers have been useless for millions of years. Primus drag you in for an extended lecture on the war?”

“That’s not fair,” Ironhide groused from the back of the crowd. “Ain’t anybody’s fault but the Decepticreeps! Tell Him to go lay ol’ buckethead out in a coma for three weeks!”

“What does this have to do with a human?” Ratchet carefully reached up to finish closing Optimus’ helm, but he paused with his hand still on the Prime’s head. “What? What’d I say?”

Optimus slumped further and mumbled something at the floor.

“He...yeah, he said ‘baby sister.’”

A puzzled murmur swept the Autobots. “You don’t want a -- did you say ‘baby sister’?”

“Why the frag would he say that?”

“You didn’t hear him right. Optimus?”

The Prime winced and repeated himself a tad bit louder.

“...yeah, he said ‘baby sister.’”

The big Autobot heaved another sigh, this one large enough that it came out his exhaust stacks. “Primus has decided that since His current children all want to kill each other, He’s going to adopt. He spent the whole time we were in statis under this mountain negotiating with the, er,” he looked tremendously uncomfortable at this, because most of the Autobots had scoffed in private at the ‘crazy mythologies’ the humans of Earth believed in, “local gods for...for...well, younger siblings.” He tucked into himself at the frankly incredulous looks the Autobots were turning on him. Ratchet’s optics glazed in horror beside him. Jazz’s mouth fell open. Disbelief ran smack up against the fact that this was the Prime, the Prime carried the Matrix, and historically speaking, Primus had spoken through the Matrix to his Primes. Not frequently, but reliably. Meaning that if Optimus Prime said that’s what Primus had decided to do, then Primus really had decided to do it.
Those crazy human gods were *real?* Wait, Primus had *negotiated* with them? For children. Not demanded: negotiated. Negotiated? As in, between gods of equal status? For, what, adoptive siblings to stand beside -- not behind -- stand *beside* the current crop of Cybertronians?

The humans were their *equals*?!

A funny squeeble-wark came from somebody’s vocalizer as that fact hit home. It wasn’t that the Autobots actively looked down upon Earth’s dominant species, but it was kind of hard to regard humans as fully equal sentients when even the youngest Autobot was older than their entire race. There had been…doubts…raised.

But for every doubter, there’d been a believer. Bumblebee’s horn honked triumphantly, although he hid his grinning behind his hand when his neighbors turned to stare at him in astonishment.

Ironhide’s glare wasn’t enough to stop Tracks’ unabashed smile. The vain Corvette silently licked a finger and chalked a sizzling mark on an invisible scoreboard between them, and Ironhide scowled.

Optimus watched the universe tip on its end for half the room and nodded heavily. “Younger siblings who will guided as we once were: directly by our creator. Until such a point that He feels they, too, can be allowed to make their own way in the universe.” He left out the rebuke Primus had sternly laid on him about how the current children of Cybertron had decided that killing each other was the way they wanted to go. It wasn’t like the Autobots didn’t already know that war had torn Cybertron apart, and that Primus thoroughly disapproved of it.

The Prime did nurse a secret glee for just how the Decepticons were going to take the news. It’d been a long, long time since Primus had taken a direct hand in His children’s lives. Megatron was likely going to run head-first into that hand. Optimus couldn’t wait to see *that* happen.

Before that happened, however, there was the slight matter of the new children. Optimus shifted uneasily, which attracted the stunned crowd’s gaze again. New children tended to bring out jealousy in the old ones, and sibling rivalry could invoke parental wrath, in this case. He really hoped none of the Autobots went that far, because this was officially out of his hands.

That probably wasn’t going to go over well, but they didn’t have time for him to break the news gently.

“At 3:34 PM today, Mrs. Jean Dalia Krogers is going to be formally adopted by Primus. It, uh, is going to be more than a bit unsettling for her especially since….ah…” He coughed. Close listeners might have heard a very hurried series of words in the undertone.

Ratchet, who was the only one close enough to have heard, froze. Then he promptly dropped to the floor as his processors crashed.

Optimus looked down at him, pained; that did not bode well for how everyone else was going to take this.

He visibly shook himself free of his worried thoughts and squared his shoulders. “Well. I can’t change Primus’ mind on this matter, and Mrs. Krogers is only going to be the first in what appears to be a long list of adoptees. I was told to, um. Pretty much make way, because we’re getting siblings whether we like it or not.” Primus was a single parent Who’d tolerated enough of this civil war slag from His kids. They’d grown up into a terrible civilization, in His opinion. He’d given that opinion at length to Optimus, who now had to prepare for the arrival of the next batch of (hopefully better behaved) kids.

Speaking of which, they were running rather short on time for the first arrival. “We need to leave,
Optimus Prime strode through the stunned group of Autobots, and anyone who listened closely might have heard him whimper. Ratchet would have sympathized. Brave façade or not, it wasn’t every day that Cybertronians were upstaged by a younger race. Especially when that race became another race, the Cybertronian race, and then won the race, and, oh, hey, congrats on the new Prime who was going to take up the Matrix at approximately 3:35 PM, Eastern Standard Time.

[*****]

“Hmmph.”

“Ah. Daliamus, ma’am?” Prowl peered around the office door. “You’re on the network again.” He ducked, half-expecting to get hit in the face by a pair of hoop earrings. Nobody knew why Primus had chosen to allow His new Prime her earrings, but getting smacked by Cybertronian-sized hoop earrings was an experience no one wanted to repeat.

When the earrings came off, even Megatron ran. Although Starscream had taken up the new Prime’s distinctive Z-snap with his own flair, and she’d laughed hard enough at his imitation that it seemed she liked the Air Commander, now. It helped that they’d held some sort of sass-off wherein Starscream had held his own. He’d lost in the end, of course, but Daliamus Prime could out-sass anybody when it came to Earth standards. Which were the new standards for judging Cybertronians, so Starscream wasn’t quite up to speed, yet.

He’d taken his loss well. He’d still worn that slightly shock-glazed look of disbelief most everyone was wearing, but he was able to function around the universe as he knew it being turned on its head. That put him ahead of a lot of mechs right now.

The Autobots had adjusted quicker than the Decepticons, but that was through constant exposure. And the efforts of the ex-Prime, who’d been the one to push Prowl into approaching the office door today. Otherwise the executive officer would have dithered about outside the officer for another hour trying to reconcile ‘Prime’ and ‘human.’ Also ‘earrings’ and ‘weaponry.’ That was another difficult one to fit together in his processors.

The hands that had been, once again, trying to pry off the new Prime’s face mask lowered, and Daliamus turned wide optics on Prowl. “I am? How can you tell?” Between the voice in her chest from Primus and the voices that randomly spoke to her from communication link-ups in her helm, she often couldn’t tell when someone was specifically speaking to her, or if they could hear her in return.

It seemed the earrings would stay on. For now, anyway. Prowl ventured out from behind the doorway to enter the office. “I don’t think you meant to inform everyone of your wish to have lost ten more pounds before, er,” he paused and censored what she’d actually said into something slightly less acidic, “becoming one of us.”

“Ten pounds? When did I say -- oh.” It had been quite a while ago that she’d bemoaned that. Prowl had been dithering a while. She gave him a look he couldn’t interpret. Human facial expressions, as much as the Autobots could imitate them, had nothing on Primus’ frame designs for His new children. The face mask didn’t stop Daliamus’ optics from conveying an almost impossible amount of emotion. “Were you guys listening to me the whole time?” she asked suspiciously.
Prowl suspected that if he’d been human right now, his face would be flaming in embarrassment. His feet shuffled a bit, and he locked himself at attention to keep from looking at anything but his new Prime. “Not intentionally, ma’am,” he said, apologetic. “You started broadcasting about the time you were, ah, evaluating your bodywork. Ratchet wishes me to inform you that your colors can be changed if you decide on a different palette, ma’am. If that will make you feel more comfortable.”

Anything to make her feel more comfortable in her body would be provided, to the best of their abilities. Ratchet couldn’t give her a face back -- or hair, skin, or human-normal bodily functions -- but the Autobots could consciously choose not to blame her for things she couldn’t control. It wasn’t her fault she couldn’t consciously find or access the CPU commands to get on and off the network. All the Autobots could do was keep informing her when she dropped on in hopes that she’d eventually figure out what she’d done right or wrong that time.

And try not to be embarrassed by what they overheard. Prowl was still working on that one. He found himself looking at the ceiling as he made himself pass on the next message. “For the record, Jazz wishes me to inform you that your, er, aft is not a box.” That was paraphrasing again. Her opinion on what Cybertronian ‘booty’ looked like hadn’t been flattering. “He says that it’s shaped quite nicely for...for our species.”

He winced when he glanced downward. Her optics had gone dark as the reminder caused her mood to plummet. Again. It would be hard to blame her for her anger and depression. Two weeks as a Cybertronian, and Mrs. Krogers still couldn’t tell when she was on or off the communications network. She also couldn’t figure out how to shut her optics off, dial up her audios, or give a crap about Cybertron, its occupants, or its history, much less its war. She was still trying to deal with being a mechanical lifeform instead of, well, what she’d always been.

It was not an adjustment that was happening quickly. Or well.

That initial moment of transformation? The Autobots were lucky Primus was helping out, because they were pretty much useless. Sideswipe had screamed as loud as the new Prime had, and the only reason Prowl hadn’t followed suit was that awe and terror had locked up his vocalizer before the shriek could escape. Ratchet had frozen, hands twitching helplessly as a medical impossibility had occurred right in front of him. She’d proceeded to have a panic attack at his feet, complete with uncoordinated thrashing that’d nearly floored him before Optimus Prime had demanded he do something to help or get out of the way.

The panic attack had been a well-deserved one. From human to metal in 3 seconds flat. Frankly, looking back at it, Prowl was surprised that Daliamus had calmed down at all, much less within three hours.

It’d taken Ratchet turning off every tactile sensor he could with sensor blocks -- he told her he’d ‘doped’ her with ‘painkillers’ because there was no way she could have understood she had a sensory network now, much less how a medic could tamper with it -- before she even got outside her own head enough to realize she hadn’t just gone insane. That her body had changed, and that’s why her mind had gone completely wonky. That this was real.

Yeah, three hours had been fairly short, looking back at it knowing what Prowl knew now. It was one thing to know that humans and Cybertronians were different, and another thing transmuting a human into one of them. The sheer scale of differences between the two races had made Daliamus Prime’s life a total nightmare that she couldn’t wake up from. The Autobots had helplessly tried to talk her through the initial panic, but everything they thought of as normal was sixty kinds of screwed up wrong to a human. They’d only put pressure on her that’d made the panic worse.

Optimus no-longer-Prime had all but promised her the moon in order just to get her to go back to the
Ark with them. The Autobots were alien threats, to her fear-riddled, nigh-insensible mind. He’d coaxed her onboard Skyfire with gentle words.

That he’d failed to deliver on. She wanted to be turned back to what she was. Frag, the Autobots wanted her to go back to what she was! But Primus refused. Three days later, she’d stubbornly walked all the way back to South Carolina. The Autobots had practically screamed in frustration and terror as their Primus-chosen, Primus-made Prime tried her best to reject them. She’d wobbled out the door.

They couldn’t really stop her from leaving them. They had no right to her life or choices. Some of them didn’t even want to acknowledge her as one of them, but Primus had nipped that one in the bud by stripping Optimus of the Matrix and installing it in His new Prime. That didn’t make her any less of a human, however. She was still a citizen of the United States of America. The government kept throwing demands at the Autobots, insisting that she be turned over to her country. Her congregation called hourly to check up on her. Her friends were having fits on her behalf. Her Congressman met her at the South Carolina state border to welcome her home.

In the end, Primus had persuaded her to give the Autobots a chance. Or maybe they’d convinced her of their sincere concern for her well-being during the long cross-country walk. Most likely, her inability to deal with her new body had played a large factor in the decision to return to the Ark. Primus had just been the deciding factor. Having a foreign god talking in her head hadn’t done anything for her stability, that was for certain. She kept calling her pastor for counseling.

Two weeks on, and she still didn’t know how to transform. She was so upset by the changes that she occasionally broke down crying. Well, trying to cry and then panicking when she couldn’t. Robots couldn’t cry. Robots also didn’t sleep in soft beds, eat hot food, drink lemonade, or wear clothing. There wasn’t a single aspect of her life that hadn’t suddenly been warped. Nothing felt okay, and she’d had ventilation glitches for six days in a row until Ratchet spent the seventh day interfaced with her systems teaching her how to unlearn breathing. She still slipped up when she got upset, which was most of the time.

Megatron had backpeddled away from her heaving bosom with horrified looks at both said bosom and the fact it kept heaving. Optimus Prime -- now Orion Pax again -- had gingerly taken on explaining to the Decepticons what exactly had happened, was happening right now, and was going to continue happening no matter how many times Megatron said, “But!”

He said that a lot. Prowl had stopped counting after the first hundred sputtered half-words from the Decepticon tyrant. Orion Pax simply kept patiently reiterating the same thing, for the rest of the Decepticons if not Megatron himself. As Starscream had proven, the facts had sunk in for some of them. Protests aside, the Autobots and Decepticons could do nothing to stop Primus. Humanity was getting adopted.

Not to say Megatron hadn’t tried to put an end to the new Prime. He’d taken a potshot at her, and the Matrix had carefully, lovingly steered the woman through slapping the ever-living bolts off of the tin tyrant.

It’d been alarming the first time. It’d been hilarious the second time, a day later. Sure, Daliamus Prime collapsed in hysterics afterward because somebody else was controlling her body, but her body was so weird now that she’d adjusted to being possessed by Primus relatively quickly. It helped that the Autobots tried to debrief her on Cybertron’s Great War. And by ‘helped,’ that meant she’d been so furious at the whole in-fighting stupid bunch of them that she’d thrown her earrings at Prowl’s head, then threatened to put Megatron over her knee and whale some manners into him when she caught him a third time not twelve hours after she kicked his can the second time.
Apparently, she neither understood the civil war nor cared to try any longer. They were on Earth, now, and the rules had changed.

Everyone present had looked up what the colloquialism had meant. Both factions had stared at each other, speechless, when they figured it out.

Starscream had prudently stepped back from the conflict, an act that the quicker-thinking among them copied immediately. They’d stood on the sidelines watching Primus possess the new Prime and follow through on the threat when Megatron didn’t back down. She’d not only spanked the Decepticon’s leader until he stopped struggling and grunted out a rage-filled, humiliated apology, but she’d told off Astrottrain, Skywarp, Sideswipe, and Cliffjumper for being ‘bad children’ and laughing at the spectacle. Seeing all four mechs shuffling their feet in front of her, shamefaced, had been almost as shocking as watching Megatron limp from a sore aft.

There was something about having Primus glaring at them through Daliamus Prime’s optics that really let the Autobots and Decepticons known that He’d had it with their war. Primus had new babies to take care of now, and the elder children had better get with the program. Or else.

She hadn’t even had to chase the ‘bad children’ down by the fifth Decepticon attack. Megatron himself had fled, but half of the Decepticons lurked around the battlefield until the new Prime demanded mumbled apologies for their behavior. She’d read them the riot act, too. While spitting blue fire and channeling energy from Primus’ Sigma chambers.

Both sides of the battle were scared lube-less of her by the time she’d wound down. Momma Prime had a temper, and Poppa Primus was backing her to the hilt.

That’d made it even more frightening when she’d said, “I should turn you human! See if anyone here wants you, because heck if I do!”

That? That had not been something anyone wanted to hear from their god or the new Prime, who might have been speaking on behalf of their god. Or not. She refused to tell. Either way, the Decepticons hadn’t been seen in battle since. In quick snatches when Autobot scouts were pounced on for updates on what was going on, yes, but not outright warfare. After daily harassment from Megatron, the sudden absence of aggression practically echoed.

Hence, the fear of the earrings coming off. Daliamus Prime still couldn’t walk in a straight line or understand why picking at her lugnuts in public glued everyone’s optics to the ceiling, but the woman could intimidate the lot of them by existing. She was the new Prime, the first of Primus’ adopted children, and she was here to usher in a new era.

New, because even now she was sighing and standing up. “2:56 AM, Indonesia. There’s a -- oh, the poor dear.” Even over the network, because she still didn’t have the faintest clue how to get herself off it, she sounded distressed. Prowl tensed unconsciously. “A nine-year-old street child. We have to get there right away!”

It was too much to hope that the Sigma chamber would transform the child with any semblance of a language database. “Jazz, meet us at the hangar bay. Download as many local languages as you can on the way.” Hopefully, there would be somebody available who could translate if downloads didn’t work.

Prowl was beginning to think that dealing with what the Sigma chambers left on Earth was the Autobots’ penance for nine million years of war. It made him afraid of what price the Decepticons might pay for their half of the war.
He resisted offering his new Prime an arm as she got up and immediately stumbled, taken off-balance by the wheels on her back yet again. He just stood aside respectfully and spoke onto the network.

“Skyfire?”

“I’m here.” The massive shuttle turned the corner and met Daliamus at the door to the office. She’d stubbornly gotten herself that far. “If I may, ma’am?” He offered her a hand gallantly.

She only frowned as she let herself be picked up. Anyone else offering to help her would have gotten a scathing torrent of words in response, but Skyfire had about as much understanding of the war as she did. He had the history she lacked, but he was a pacifist at spark. That made him much more sympathetic to her inability to comprehend nine million years of civil war than the rest of the Autobots. He also had a distinct reverence for Primus that the others were guiltily aware that they were missing. After nine million years of ignoring His will, the Autobots sort of felt like rebellious teenagers finding out their parent had been right all along. They really had messed up big time and irreversibly, until starting over was the only way to salvage their world.

Primus’ will was awesome and vast, but Skyfire believed it to also be right. Instead of wasting time protesting or trying to reverse the effects, he’d embraced the new siblings he’d been given. He’d done his best to help them, and he utterly cherished the four humans adopted by his god in the past two weeks. Skyfire was almost the only one of the Ark’s crew whom the ex-human didn’t shriek in fear upon seeing.

Twin five-year-old orphans from Russia, a middle-aged farmer from Chile, and an 87-year-old woman from Saudi Arabia. Primus’ new children had only two things in common: war was the last thing they wanted to be involved in, and they didn’t have a clue how to live as mechanical lifeforms.

Ratchet had failed so dismally at explaining how their bodies worked that they’d almost lost the farmer, but at least the twins were curious enough about themselves that they’d gotten past the panic and shock stage after their own accidents. They’d been so ignorant that they’d drunk straight gasoline out of innocent belief that it was what their bodies ran on, now. The Chief Medical Officer had pulled them out of simultaneous fuel pump failures with his hands shaking and a continuous prayer for divine intervention spilling from his lips. Orion Pax spent his time mediating between the Autobots and their suddenly very present god these days, and Ratchet could be found with him any time he wasn’t hovering worriedly over his patients. The medic was all but begging Primus for a miracle, at this point. The elderly Saudi woman still moved like her joints hurt, and Ratchet was desperately afraid they were going to lose her because her sons believed her to no longer have a soul. She’d been refusing energon ever since they severed ties with her.

Adoption was never easy, but there was no way adoptions done between worlds could be anything but traumatic. The adjustment period, it seemed, could kill. It was also frustrating, frightening, and had stomped the Great War to a halt in two weeks flat.

Daliamus Prime had made it clear that the only reason she’d come back to the Ark was because Primus had talked her into it. The Autobots were weird, the Decepticons were worse, and no way was she letting them poison her fellow ex-humans with a toxic environment of war and factions. They’d better shut up and listen -- all of them -- before the earrings came off. Primus wasn’t taking any more of their slag. It was either keep up with the new siblings or get left eating Daliamus’ dust.

Prowl jogged after Skyfire, dryly reflecting that this was how the war ended, this was how the war ended, this was how the war ended.

Not with a bang, but a, “Nu-uh, girlfriend!”

[* * * * *]
"What the frag are you doing here?"

Vortex kept his head down and concentrated on the keys. "Shut up, Autobot."

Usually, an order from a Decepticon on this particular shuttle would have Fort Max sullen but obedient. However, he knew a fellow prisoner when he saw one, and the rotary mech was definitely that. Besides, Overlord was on the other end of the ship. "No," he said, although he didn't stop waxing the floor. "Tell me."

"Don't talk," Vortex muttered irritably. He flicked an annoyed look at the Autobot slave and an apprehensive look at the door. Prisoners: both of them. "He's going to find a way to punish both of us. You know that."

Fort Max knew. That was how Overlord played these power games. "What do you care?" There wasn't much in his life that didn't cause pain anymore. He'd take the opportunity to indulge his curiosity, slaggit. "He can't do anything worse to me than he's already done." Hence why he kept polishing despite the careless dismissal.

That got a reaction. Vortex slowly turned his head to give him a flat look. "Overlord can always make it worse."

An incredulous snort cut off in a strange honking noise as something slithered up Fort Max's leg. He squawked and kicked in reflex, but the thing on his leg only tightened. He turned wide optics toward his leg to find that thin, strong cables had snaked through the bridge door and were questing up both legs. "What the frag?!"

"Didn't know he had these, huh?" Desert dry, Vortex's voice had long ago been sucked of everything but resignation. The 'copter let himself be guided out of his seat by his own set of tentacles. He didn’t resist. When they urged him to his knees, he only sighed and said aloud to their absent puppet-master, "I apologize for my misconduct, Overlord sir. Please allow me to make restitution for my error."

The tentacles dragged the struggling, horrified Autobot toward him, and Vortex shook his head. "Like I said: it can always be made worse."

[*****]

The big Autobot's ventilation cycles were erratic, coming in odd bursts more flustered than anything else. Having an audience always humiliated him more than the sordid acts done to him, although this particular audience’s participation had certainly made those worse than usual. Overlord couldn’t make his tap respond on a good day, much less with toys, but Vortex was small and clever and had managed to make Fort Max curl and kick when that fight was lost. It'd left his tap oversensitive, but
Overlord wasn't taking advantage of that for pleasure. He was simply taking advantage of it.

"Why...the fraggeek!" The Autobot clamped his mouth shut on a strained squeak as another tentacle writhed between his thighs, prodding at the mass already bulging out of his tap. "Why the frag aren't you...nhhgh...aren't you gloating?" Maddened optics glared in the direction of the 'copter sitting in a bridge chair once more. "Fragging 'Con!"

Vortex kept his visor on his work. His mask was back in place. At least he had that much to keep the jealousy from showing, although thick envy penetrated the mask just fine. "Not worth gloating about."

"You gooah! Got your circuits off. What more do you want?!" Fortress Maximus gritted his teeth and panted into the floor as that tentacle slid, inch by slow inch, up into his tap to join the twisting, sliding mass. It felt like it was poking directly into his sensor grid. "Don't tell me you're the one slagging rapist in the 'Cons who doesn't enjoy it. I know better!"

It'd been as enjoyable as any forced interface ever was. That hadn't made Vortex ache any less afterward. "You think you have it bad?" he asked, the bitterness tearing the words out of him. The Autobot clawed at the floor, arching as the tentacles spiraled in and out in lewd parody of a mecha not even present on the bridge. "At least he touches you."

He pressed his own thighs together and stabbed viciously at the keys in front of him. The Autobot didn't know how good he had it. Overlord's punishments of Vortex were frustratingly, torturously nonphysical. It sucked the enjoyment right out of the little rape session, knowing it'd been only to humiliate Fort Max. Beyond some directions, Vortex hadn't been touched by those tentacles at all.

Fraggit.

[*****]

"How did you get him to stop touching you all the time?" That's right, Fort Max was just fed up enough to seek advice from a Decepticon. It was a matter of equality between prisoners, really. When a mech had tentacles shoved up his tap as he scrubbed out a storage locker, there wasn't much shame left in him. The tentacles kind of displaced it, along with his composure.

Vortex certainly seemed to know what that was like. He didn’t even look up as the tentacles playfully dragged the slave out of the storage locker for more ‘Quality Time A La Overlord.’

The 'copter knew better, but there was something to be said for fellow feeling. Just...for once in his existence, someone else knew exactly what it was like to be him. Not the exact circumstances, but suffering under Overlord's heel was suffering under Overlord's heel. The triple-changer just chose how to grind his foot down a bit differently on the other mech.

By now, the Autobot was pressed into the wall, shoved there face-first and held up by the tentacles holding his thighs spread so far he was having difficulty supporting his own weight. Two more tentacles waved leisurely in the large gap. The movement of air on bared equipment was enough to have Fort Max tensed in dread, but every once and a while, it apparently pleased Overlord to send those tentacles spanking at the rim of the mech’s tap. Fort Max made a variety of stifled noises when that happened. The tentacles struck and slipped inside to stroke the inner threads, then spanked around the rim again and again until the big mech hissed what would have been whimpers in a
weaker mech.

It’d usually have been a show Vortex would enjoy, and part of him still did. However, having that kind of pleasure-pain inflicted by Overlord inspired envy and sick sympathy as well. Holy rotor blades but did he know what it felt like to squirm and cry out under Overlord’s torment. No matter what he wanted, in the end the torture always won. Overlord defeated him every time, and this Autobot knew what that felt like intimately.

It wasn’t something Vortex had imagined as a relief to have someone share, but it was. Primus, it was. So he sat under his own tentacle -- it had wrapped around his throat early on and hadn’t moved, just resting there as a reminder that he was under Overlord’s constant control -- and spoke quietly at the console he was using. Orders were to stay silent, but Overlord’s energy signature was all the way across the ship. Not that he wasn’t eventually going to screw up and be punished, but the likelihood of being caught whispering was fairly low.

“You know what a gestalt is?”

“Lock -- nght!” Fort Max grunted and swallowed, optics off. “Locked technology. Not supposed to be in-uhn! In use.”

“Yeah. Well, Swindle got his mitts on it, and I’m stuck with the results.” He hadn’t known becoming a combiner team was permanent. The links, he’d understood. He just hadn’t known how deep they went before it was too late to back out. “It’s bad. Then I got sent to Overlord for my…behavior.” No, Autobot, he wasn’t going to elaborate. If Fort Max had any of his secure databanks intact, the mech could pull at least a pre-Earth file on him. “He might be rogue now, but he used to be Me -- Lord Megatron’s breaker.” And how Vortex had broken. Oh, how he’d broken.

He had to swallow an uncomfortable noise himself, this time, just at the memory. “It got worse.”

Fort Max’s mouth was pressed against the wall, an open ‘O’ of half twisted pain and half jolting pleasure as one tentacle lightly traced just inside his tap and the other brutally smacked against the outer rim. “Don'thhhhngn don't see-euhn nm! How! You thnnnk think this isssah ah ah b-better!”

Vortex smiled grimly behind his mask and didn’t take his visor off his work. He’d been told to enter data, and he’d enter data until told otherwise. “Unless he’s messed with your hardcode to make you obedient to his every whim, shut the frag up, Autobot. I’d kill to be where you are right now, if it’d get his fingers out of my head.” The tentacle around his throat shifted, and he gave the door a wary look. The ship still registered Overlord as being across the ship, but a dose of paranoia was healthy when it came to that mech. Limitations were mere trailmarkers for Overlord.

The Autobot fought against the tentacles, but his arms and legs were pinned. He slumped, making small, involuntary sounds as a third tentacle joined the two already between his thighs. Vortex grumbled his engine with envy. Just hearing it made his interface hardware ache.

*”Vortex.”* 

So much for that ache. Another ache swelled up to overtake it. “Overlord sir!” He straightened in his seat, looking attentively at the console speaker.

*”Have you finished your task?”* 

“No sir! Soon, sir.”

*”I see. And have you spoken with my slave while you’ve worked?”*
The ‘copter didn’t so much as twitch. “No sir!”

*”…I see. Tell me, Vortex. Do you know how sensitive my appendages are?”*

His spark sank down to his knees. The Autobot was gasping softly as the tentacles relaxed, allowing him to stand on his own. They still spiraled in and out of his tap, but Vortex could see how the mech had braced his elbows on the wall, hands fisted against his face to muffle any noises that tried to escape as he was violated. The tentacles had to be sensitive to mech handle the Autobot’s tap gently enough not to damage anything, but Vortex hadn’t thought about them beyond that.

“No sir,” the ‘copter said quietly.

*”Your vocalizer has been running away from you.”* The tentacle around his throat squeezed pointedly. It wrapped directly over his vocalizer’s housing. The vibrations must have been pretty slagging obvious. *”Are the consoles so interesting you must speak to them?”*

His spark descended into the Pit. “…no. Sir. I.” What the frag could he say to that? He’d lied. He’d lied to Overlord. Frag his life.

*”Mhmm. You know, Vortex, I seem to remember giving you several sets of orders you’ve now disobeyed.”* Not lying to his officer. Not speaking to his officer’s pet Autobot slave. There were probably more that Vortex didn’t remember and would manufacture on his own just so he could apologize in sufficiently abject detail later. *”Even my slave obeys me better than that. Perhaps some time as his servant will allow you to rethink your poor decisions.”* The Combaticon sat at attention in his chair, every cable taut with horror. *”Consider yourself demoted for the foreseeable future. Fortress Maximus is your new superior officer. Understood?”*

He understood that his life was made of humiliation so intense it made his tanks churn. “Yes sir, Overlord sir,” he said hoarsely, because somewhere on this ship a massive fist held a scrap of plastic that made his knees weak. The idea of not being able to earn it sent his rotor blades clattering against the chair back.

The connection cut, and Vortex sat for a moment more just staring blindly at the console screens. Then he mechanically rose to turn and walk across the room.

The Autobot was breathing deeply, trying to expel heated air as he recovered from the tentacles slowly slithering down his thighs. Vortex’s approach got a cautious glare. That turned to incredulous staring as the ‘copter snapped to military correct attention before him.

“Fortress Maximus sir,” he forced out, snarling the words, “I am yours to command.”

[ A/N: Yeah, it ended up getting far too long, so I cut out the last two I was going to add. Until the curtain rises next time, m’dears.]
Pt. 8

Chapter Summary

Brainstorm discovers hope; Jazz discovers Prowl.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 8
Warning: Also spoiler alert for MTMTE #16.
Rating: PG-13, probably.
Continuity: IDW & G1
Characters: Brainstorm, Chromedome, Prowl, Jazz
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): A couple reactions, two requests, and a thought.

Note: the Cassetticons/D.J.D. ficlet once in this chapter has been moved to ‘Gone Fishing.’

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[ * * * * *]

Brainstorm - “no legacy”
[ * * * * *]

He wonders, even as he speaks, if this time will be the time Chromedome remembers. He doubts it, but he’s already seen Rewind’s message. It’s…a good attempt.

Yes, of course he’d played it first. Why wouldn’t he have? Sentimentality aside, privacy is a luxury that can’t be afforded except as window dressing. Besides, it wouldn’t be a grand, touching gesture if all Rewind’s data slug contains is an emergency purge of classified data to prevent even the remotest chance of Overlord obtaining it. Brainstorm watched the message and passes the data slug on now because this is the third time he’s given Chromedome this speech.

Brainstorm hands the data slug over because however much he doubted Rewind would be the special exception to the rule, he still wishes it’ll work.

Chromedome should remember. It’s not healthy to forget love, no matter how it ends. It’s not healthy that the mnemosurgeon keeps doing this. It’s never been healthy, but Brainstorm has never been enough to convince the mech of that.

It stings his ego that he’s not persuasive enough. If Rewind’s little message succeeds where he’s repeatedly failed, the scientist already knows he’s going to resent the dead flashdrive for that. But he’ll keep his vocalizer mute on it. As much as he hates putting himself second for anyone, even he knows that a conjunx endure comes before a friend.

Chromedome is his friend. Brainstorm wants the best for him even if he can’t be the one to bring it about.

And he’ll resent Rewind a bit, but he’ll be grateful, too. Brainstorm is a genius. He’s left a trail of amazing inventions and brilliant discoveries wherever he’s been. Okay, maybe not on the same level
as Perceptor, but -- no, wait, derailing that train of thought. The point is that Brainstorm will leave a legacy behind when he finally goes.

His hand tightens on the briefcase as the door closes behind him. Oh, yes. He’ll leave a legacy, but he’s always known that he, himself, will be forgotten.

Unless Rewind changes Chromedome’s mind.

[* * * * *]

Prowl/Jazz - “discipline” & “you’ve got to learn a lesson”

[* * * * *]

He’d known the new tactician was into discipline. How could he not know? He was the fragging Head of Special Operations. He jigged a wire in his web, and little gearspiders spies whispered sweet information about everything in his audios. His web went everywhere, even inside his own faction, and yes, Jazz knew the tactician was into discipline. The mech’s unit had been so strictly managed it’d gotten stellar efficiency ratings across the board. That included as much ammunition usage as kill ratios.

Prowl made credit-pinching business owners look lax. He micromanaged his unit until Jazz wouldn’t be surprised if the mech knew more about them than even Jazz’s own spies did. Well, call that guess a solid ‘maybe.’ Jazz’s itsy bitsy gearspiders found a lot of spouts to crawl up, and they were exceedingly clever about not getting flushed out, but Prowl kept a clean house. The webs kept getting dusted away.

Regardless, the tactician made the cut to get promoted to the Prime’s officer cadre. Jazz interviewed him beforehand, of course, both officially and unofficially. Nobody made it up through the ranks without getting vetted, after all, and no way in the Pit was the Head of SpecOps letting anybody mediocre or potentially traitorous into Optimus Prime’s close confidences.

Jazz walked away from the interview -- and other, ‘coincidental’ meetings -- thinking that the mech had a cold personality and a cool head under pressure. Not a bad thing when paired with him, really. Jazz could make coolant envious when he had to, but he’d cultured a volatile public personae on purpose, and he wasn’t about to let this mech close enough to see past the jovial Jazzmeister. They probably wouldn’t manage much of a close working relationship, but Jazz tended to keep away from those on principle anyway. The reason there was an opening in the cadre for a tactician wasn’t because of natural causes, and Jazz preferred to minimize future emotional aches. This was war, not social hour. Prowl seemed like a tactician who could get the job done and likely hit any curve balls Megatron threw at him. As long as the mech could work with Jazz’s peculiar style when taking care of business, this was going to be a good fill all around.

He even seemed to appreciate when Jazz laid that out for him. “I find no reason we cannot work together in a manner befitting our primary functions.” The saboteur wondered a bit cynically if the mech even knew what Jazz’s primary function was. The way Prowl was looking at him made it doubtful he didn’t, and that made Jazz want to go double-check every firewall Special Operations had running. “Our separate priorities are both beneficial to the Autobots. Combining operations, I predict a 25% increase in Decepticons wishing for our demises, individually or jointly.”

That flash of dry humor only showed through rarely, Jazz already knew. That taste of it plus the narrow, dangerous smile Prowl allowed himself made Jazz want to get to know this mech better. Anyone who could make him question the security of his division’s personnel files with a handful of words and amused optics was worth cultivating as a contact, if nothing else.

Yeah, Prowl was a good addition to the Prime’s officer cadre.
More than a good addition, the tactician proved to be one of the best choices the Autobots could have made. His ability to suppress personal emotion balanced wonderfully against Wheeljack’s enthusiasm, Ironhide’s gung-ho anger, Ratchet’s weary sarcasm, and Prime’s ability to care too much. SpecOp’s seemingly chaotic web acquired a center, somebody to feed all the information to while Jazz was freed to scour the wires tangled in forgotten corners. The dangerous black-and-white Autobot Third whispered with gearspiders and returned to weave support around Prowl’s own plots and plans.

Well before the tactician got promoted to Second-in-Command, the Decepticons did indeed wish him dead. Him, and his smiling, visored shadow.

Unfortunately, Jazz was having trouble keeping his distance. “I like you,” he said to the mech as they bent over the display table. “It’s gettin’ to where I wanna keep you alive.”

Prowl looked at him, and the saboteur knew he understood. This was war, and some people in war had to be expendable. Especially the officers, who had to be exceptional mechs slotted into positions like replaceable parts. Officers had to see the mechs in the ranks as faceless numbers, yet balance that against how they were also people. It was the fight to keep that balance, expendable versus irreplaceable, and Jazz was losing his balance. Jazz, of all mechs, had to know everyone but the Prime could be sacrificed if the payoff was rich enough.

“Are you compromised?” Prowl asked, optics calculating, and Jazz smirked faintly.

“Don’t get your aft caught, and we won’t have to find out,” he said back, and behind the cold blue optics, a mind like a mathematician’s smoothly ticked through all the permutations of that. A mathematician of war, a mech standing between sociologist, historian, and machine. It was a difficult place to stand, but no more so than the spot Jazz occupied.

When every aspect of the saboteur’s revelation had been accounted for, the tactician bent his head in a nod. “Likewise.”

Jazz looked back at him, and behind his own impenetrable blue gaze, the part of him allotted to personal thought wondered if Prowl could see the calculations running. In all likelihood? Yes. Mech could see through a steel door if there was something Jazz wanted to hide behind it. It was a skill the saboteur unabashedly envied and admired, although it bothered him that he was so transparent. Only to this mech, only to Prowl, but yet Jazz couldn’t see a single fragging clue in the tactician for however hard he tried.

It was the same puzzle the mech had handed him since their first meeting, so he let it go. They returned to their work and didn’t speak of it again.

If they drifted a little closer, neither commented. If Jazz’s web wove around Prowl a little tighter, the tactician said nothing. If Prowl stood a little more between others and his shadow, Jazz never mentioned it. The gearspiders whispered. The numbers ever changed. The war went on, and the Autobots couldn’t afford the weakness of their Second and Third depending on each other more than necessary.

“How do you do it?” Jazz asked after a harrying rescue mission, leaning his hip against the berth as if his fuel pump hadn’t spent the last three orns hammering wild concern through his body.

The damaged tactician looked up at him as he waited his turn under Ratchet’s hands. Those cold blue optics saw everything. “How do you?”

Their words had no special emphasis. They sounded like they were mildly inquiring after each
other’s technique for testing energon for contaminates. Like every one of their exchanges, it was in plain sight and nobody looked twice, because there was nothing there to stare at. The Head of Special Operations still had his web, the Head of Tactical his numbers, and together or separate, those stayed the same.

“I asked first.”

That got a faint quirk of Prowl’s mouth. The mech was tired and injured. It’d been a long three orns. “You’ve got to learn a lesson.” He looked at the other Autobots in the medibay, ever running his calculations on probabilities and the future. “What is two subtracted from three?”

It was a question with an obvious answer. Jazz gave it due thought even as he flippantly answered, “You rattled your battle-tac? It’s one.”

“Three subtracted from two?”

“Negative one.” The mech’s tactical net might actually be down. Jazz didn’t think so, but he also didn’t get what this lesson was supposed to teach.

Prowl saw his wary regard, and the tiny smile disappeared. “Yes. However, the absolute value remains the same. Take two from three, and one is left standing. Take three from two, and one remains. Those numbers do not change. That is the lesson. We are all numbers, Jazz. In war, we cannot be anything but. As long as one is left to balance the equation, two or three can be taken away. That is how I do it.”

The blue visor looked into blue optics, and the optics saw the shock the casual look contained. Disciplined as always, Prowl’s body language communicated nothing, and his face was a mask. Jazz’s fuel pump stuttered at what he hadn’t seen hiding behind that disciplined front.

Because in absolute values, yes, one always remained. But Prowl wouldn’t have phrased his lesson that way if he didn’t mean to communicate just how much Two valued Three, outside absolutes. If Jazz didn’t return from a mission, the Autobots wouldn’t just lose him. The absolute value would be there. Prowl would not die, but yet he would not survive.

It was quite possibly the most romantic thing Jazz had ever heard from a simple math lesson.

[ * * * * ]
Tarn and Pharma kiss, and Ratchet doesn’t handle labor pangs well.

Title: Candy From Strangers
Warning: Tarn and Pharma canoodling, in two far different degrees of consent. G1 Autobot medics being adorable.
Rating: Pg-13?
Continuity: IDW & G1
Characters: Kaon, Tarn, Pharma, Ratchet, Hoist, First Aid
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): A fantastic picture by FelixFellow (http://felixfellow.tumblr.com/post/50507307518/one-more-kiss-dear), a prompt off Tumblr, and something to help someone calm down.

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Pharma/Tarn - “one more kiss, dear”
[* * * * *]

Tarn had taken his work home again.

Kaon didn’t have to leave the bridge to watch, but he opened the door. He wanted to hear. The Peaceful Tyranny’s surveillance system gave him an optic-full of lovely white wings and slim legs wrapped around Tarn’s hips, but nothing could beat out the sounds. Those, he wanted to hear first-hand echoing down the corridors. Tarn’s voice, as always, murmured in a constant flow that called fuel pumps to pound faster as he swept toward the inevitable crescendo. The dip and pull of that talented, deadly voice sweetly whirled even Kaon’s spark ever upward until the gasps, the stuttering cries, the rolling sobs all dragged into a long, shrieking climax.

Then the purring rumble of a contented, smug tank engine thrummed through the air. The hushed echo of quiet words afterward made Kaon smile. His fuel pump hammered in his audios, his spark reached for a partner that wasn’t there, but Kaon smiled. Because Pharma didn’t leave. He could have, but didn’t, and that made all the difference.

The volume gradually swept higher, and the Autobot’s token objections vanished under the velvet onslaught that teased Kaon’s own spark all the way from here. He could easily imagine what the caress of sound was doing to its intended recipient.

The second round riled the blind mech up further, but it also shattered the incoherent whimpering into begging words spoken through trembling lips. Pharma likely thought he was whispering harsh demands, but Tarn had the surgeon screaming before the exquisite suspense finally snapped and pleasure collapsed down upon them like a crackling avalanche.

The entire ship rocked as overload took the two. Tank and jet engines howled, and the warring vibrations rattled their metal to the framework. Pleasure prolonged until the smaller, weaker Autobot slumped, exhausted, exactly where he belonged: under a Decepticon. Pharma broke to pieces under
the Tarn’s heavy frame. Broke, and was reassembled, and -- biting his lip against the pleas surging over his tongue -- broke again in the brutal, unexpectedly gentle hands of an expert torturer and better lover.

Up in the bridge, Kaon leaned against the door frame and hummed with the excess charge as he rubbed his hand up one electrical coil. It was a glorious ache, waiting like this. Listening like this, as he watched Tarn work Pharma over with all the patience and sadism of honest desire. What had begun as an interesting twist on a bargain had rapidly become an exercise in sincere lust for the vocalist.

Pharma wanted the D.J.D. to leave his precious clinic alone, and for the deal he’d struck, Pharma allowed Tarn his toying. Necessity was the creator of innovation, and Tarn did have needs to inspire him. Carnal desire thrust the tank to new heights of passion, working the surgeon to clawing and wailing against Tarn’s chest, because Tarn didn’t need his little project to stay past the first overload. He just wanted it.

Thus, Kaon got his show.

And afterward, when Pharma’s lusciously slender legs could support him again, Kaon got to watch through the ship’s surveillance system as the surgeon wobbled toward the exit. Sleek wings were held proudly, if tiredly, but Tarn bypassed their tempting handholds to lean down and curl his arms around Pharma instead. Murmurs floated down the corridors. Fine surgeon’s hands pushed impatiently at the sly groping sliding down over yellow canopy glass.

Tarn turned the protesting Autobot in his arms and coyly suggested something before cupping the back of Pharma’s helm in one massive hand. The surgeon blinked, shocked, but had no chance to struggle before the tank bent down. Pharma stiffened into a rigid statue, optics whiting out in sheer indignation. Tarn nuzzled, turned his head, and pressed his mask to slack lips again. His other hand firmly gripped a pert aft and pulled, bringing the short flyer forward to grind slowly. Slow as the kiss, and just as heated.

After a moment, resistance melted away.

”"He’s going to be late,””* Kaon said over the commline. Empty optic sockets hungrily watched blue hands gradually rise to sink skilled fingers into tank treads once more.

”"I do hope so,””* Tarn replied, amused.

Kaon left the door open.

[* * * * *]

Pharma/Tarn - “one more kiss, dear” x2
[* * * * *]

It was possible, although inadvisable, to deceive a Decepticon. Yes, even this one.

He couldn’t have managed it if the lie weren’t preceded by so many truths. When a mech had a reputation, it didn’t take much to keep the façade up even as the exact opposite came true. The last thing anyone would expect was a ‘Con-hating, uptight prude of a medic to have an optic for hefty groundframes with wide tires and loud engines. Combine that with a secret guilty pleasure for being pursued, and Pharma was sold.

There was something terribly exciting in how Tarn’s optics watched him. They were hot and red, carnal and craving in a way that had nothing to do with the T-cogs being bargained over. He’d have
found a way to introduce the idea even if the Decepticon hadn’t suggested it first, but far be it from him to discourage Tarn from thinking he hated the addendum. Oh, yes, it was a filthy, disgusting chore. Mm-hmm, how horrible. He could barely stand to let those broad hands touch him.

It was a perfect little cover for how very much he enjoyed it. Better yet, the Decepticon seemed to believe the only way to keep him coming back for more was to make him writhe in pleasure every time. That suited Pharma just fine. He liked being coaxed from the sky by the thundering purr of an aroused engine, or chased until he finally relented and landed to suffer those hands on him. He liked being handled like he’d flee if not rendered senseless by as many overloads as physically possible.

So the dignified, wary surgeon let himself be seduced by the leader of the D.J.D., nervous wings ever ready to take flight, and Tarn was ever-so-pleased with his repeated, nonexistent conquest. Large hands caressed polished, warm metal, and Pharma feigned reluctance under them. Inside, he preened under the attention, positively reveling in how much effort Tarn put into convincing him to walk into the tank’s arms. The harder he made Tarn work to convince him, the longer the insufferably arrogant glitch kept him once grounded, crying out in helpless bliss as the smug fragger taught him lesson upon lesson about the foolishness of resistance, until Pharma conceded him victory from utter exhaustion.

Then the ‘Con stroked and praised and admired him, gloating but magnanimous in triumph. Every bit of the attention he deserved was turned upon him, pattering over him like a glorious rain, and Pharma soaked in it. Not that he showed it, however. The surgeon sulked in Tarn’s greedy hands, practically twitching in his eagerness to escape and fly away, so of course those hands had to hold him all the tighter, now didn’t they?

Nestled close to that powerful frame, wings vibrating as Tarn’s engine roared, Pharma dug his fingers into those thick treads and held on as Tarn brought him precisely where he wanted to go. It was the best kind of deception: the kind where both sides won, fair and square.

Mutual lust served as a good distraction as well. Tarn would never forget about feeding his sick addiction, but he had a weakness for snarky banter. Once he had a box of T-cogs in hand, he could be somewhat absent-minded, especially if there were flirty wings defiantly keeping just out of reach. Let him get a hold on Pharma, and the box would be shuffled to the side to deal with later. A little recreational struggle to land his prize sealed the deal, and Tarn’s attention would lock on the fluttering pulse of his pretty prey’s spark instead of how many T-cogs were in that box.

It didn’t always work, but Pharma didn’t always let himself be chased down, either. The pursuit was more fun for both of them if the ending were uncertain. Tarn either seized him when he landed, or he got away. Usually that was enough to keep interest high.

Then there were the times when he had to get inventive. One or two shy of quota every few months, Tarn would let pass. Six T-cogs short in one month?

"You wouldn't be delaying, would you?" the Decepticon asked as long-fingered surgeon’s hands whispered across his chest.

Pharma glanced up and away, expression somewhere between coy and grumpy. It wasn’t often that he initiated anything. It was a dead give-away when he did, although the tank didn’t know how deliberate the ploy really was. "Delaying what?"

One finger caught his chin and forced his head up, and Tarn's mask came down to nudge his mouth in a parody of a kiss. Surprised and unsure, Pharma hesitated, and the hand slid back to capture his helm before he could pull away. "Delay me counting your tithe," Tarn said, and the purring whisper poured down the Autobot's throat to pile silken, syrupy pressure on top of the vulnerable spark
The flyer's vocalizer betrayed him, and Tarn chuckled darkly as a moan slipped from Pharma's forcibly opened lips. Instead of attempting to answer in a somewhat dignified manner -- and artfully dodging answering at all -- Pharma dipped down to venture a lick at the mask slit venting hot air at him.

The tank jolted, and the Autobot carefully didn’t smirk. That hadn’t been expected, hmm? Good.

They both played their games, but Pharma rarely showed when he held the upper hand. It caught Tarn by surprise every time, which was exactly how the surgeon wanted it. It couldn’t be exploited often without losing effect, but when he wanted the rank taken off-guard?

His optics hardened, and his jaw worked for a second before the surgeon licked again, catching a slippery flick against a tongue that unconsciously slid out to meet it. Tarn’s optics narrowed to fiery red slits of demand made from liquid desire and a foggy, waking yearning he probably didn’t feel blooming under his armor until the hand on the back of Pharma’s helm softened from a hard hold to a gentle, urging pressure. When was the last time this fanatic killer had kissed someone? That mask was welded on.

Any thought of it had likely been ignored. Tarn wasn’t the type to sigh after what was lost. Possibly he’d convinced himself such intimacies were better pushed aside in favor of duty.

Pharma smirked against the mask. A mech didn’t know what he’d forgotten until the ache of absence was brought back to tease him with.

He opened his mouth further and turned his head to thrust the tip of his tongue through the slit, licking along the inside edge while a larger, more desperate tongue chased, trying to curl around, trying to grasp contact Tarn probably hadn’t even realized he’d missed. It was hunger more than thought, a purely physical craving. Pharma dimmed his optics and slid his lips from one side to the other, cycling deep, hot vents that the Decepticon panted back at him in turn, and sides of their tongues brushed slickly. The fleeting touch rocked the tank, sending that huge grounder engine revving out of control at the exotic, erotic sensation.

The surgeon’s hands came up to cradle that vicious mask, then grab the sides in a vise grip as he plunged his tongue in as far in as it would go.

A nearly pained groan rumbled out underneath the sudden soft explosive whirr of fans switching to full bore. Tarn’s arms dropped to wrap around the flyer, crushing Pharma to him in a possessive embrace. The Autobot shifted inside it, not uncomfortable but pretending discomfort in order to feel how their armor scraped together. The tank’s frame enfolded him in a heated, heavy hold that pulled him closer as if the hint of wanting to escape made him yet more desirable. He was the Decepticon’s captive, and it left his spark excited in a way that other lovers had never managed. Hot plating fit into and against hot plating, and Pharma had to override his own ventilation system to keep his breathing regulated enough to pass off as reluctant.

Badly-repaired lips hidden by the mask mouthed after the moist tongue tip just barely able to reach far enough in to trace over them, and Pharma took quick little licks at them. The sensitive tip of his tongue kept catching on weld-scars, and he kept pressing it to them like he could map out the mech’s concealed face with his tongue alone. Tarn’s notorious vocalizer could only produce a quiet, needy rasp when the surgeon thrust a fraction more tongue through the slit of his mask. Those scarred lips pursed, trying to close on it, catch it, suck frantically on it. When Pharma’s tongue stayed still to allow it, Tarn’s tongue lapped along the underside, against the sides, over every single bit of the
surgeon Tarn could reach like he couldn’t have enough.

Tarn tasted of oily fuel, his energon tainted by the thick lubricants required by his frame. Pharma muffled a groan of his own and yanked the purple mask even closer. He pulled his mouth away despite the immediate, disappointed growl, but the protest cut off when he used his hold to jerk Tarn down to kiss the weld lines, the battle damage. His tongue darted through the optic holes to give tiny licks to the metal around the red glass. It was messy and wet, and the Decepticon made a strangled noise full of raw lust as Pharma tasted him, explored what couldn’t been seen, and raked teeth down the front of his mask in a grating squeal of metal on metal as if to punish what was visible. Engines howled, and it was impossible to tell whose was running harder, now.

When the surgeon’s hands released the sides of his mask and pushed violently against his chest, the massive tank sank back without a fight under the Autobot. Pharma followed him down.

The missing T-cogs were never mentioned, after that.

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De-stressing comment fic
[* * * * *]

“Breathe,” the nurses had told Carly, over and over. “Breathe with me. In, out. In, out. Come on, one more breath. In -- can you breathe in? Good, good. Now out. Good.”

Cybertronians couldn’t breathe, per se, but the three Autobots huddled together were taking the advice anyway. “You’re doing great,” Hoist said, patting Ratchet on the shoulder.

“Of course I’m doing great. I’m doing fantastic. I’m good. Grand. I’m just dandy.” Metal squealed as the Ark CMO gritted his teeth together, and Hoist exchanged a glance over his chevron with First Aid.

Who took over shoulder-patting duties without a hitch. “No one ever said you weren’t,” was spoken soothingly in time with the pats. “Can you give me a deep breath in?”

“Don’t tell me to breathe in,” Ratchet grumbled, breathing in. “Ventilation systems don’t work like that.” Hoist’s cautious tugging eased him a bit further back into the most comfortable piece of furniture they’d been able to find for this. They’d apologize to Prowl later for what Ratchet was doing to his office chair. There were grooves scored down the arms now as anxious fingers had tightened more and more as the hours passed.

To be fair, this wasn’t a procedure Ratchet had endured often. Three times since arriving on Earth, to be precise, and this was the first time it’d been planned instead of a frantic emergency. Turned out that planning ahead didn’t reduce the pain of waiting. Delivery was a tedious pressure spiked by nervous surges of energy with nowhere to go. A new life hung in the balance. The crotchety old mech was tweaked to the Pit and back on helplessness, because there was nothing more he could do to aid that tiny scrap clinging with a fragile grip to life. He’d done everything possible up until this point, but now the actual procedure was in the capable hands of someone other than him, because he was stuck in this chair tensing and relaxing in turns.

Hence the reason First Aid had Ratchet under his patient care, patting away. First Aid was a professional patter. Not that Ratchet needed help to get through this, oh no. Nobody would ever say that (out loud), because nobody was that stupid.

Well, the Dinobots had offered, but the Dinobots had thick plating. They’d also asked when their new sibling would be ready to meet them.
Ratchet’s strained little noises had been accompanied by strangling motions. Swoop, Grimlock, and Snarl had hugged him in response, as a small, suspiciously Wheeljack-like birdie had apparently told them that the expecting medic needed frequent expressions of support to get through what looked like a long, possibly difficult labor. And maybe Ratchet had hugged the trio of supportive Dinobots back, but they were big enough to have kept anyone else from getting photographic evidence so he admitted nothing.

“Good, that’s wonderful,” the younger medic praised him now, definitely not acting as moral support at all. “Again?”

“I’ll show you again.”

“Here, let me breathe with you. In.”

Ratchet sucked in a huge gulp of air, and a bolt pinged loose somewhere deep in his overstressed ventilation system. “I don’t want to breathe! I’m sick of this slag, and tired, and I just want it to be over!”

“I know,” First Aid patted away. All three of the Autobot medics were tired after sitting through this rollercoaster of an event, but Ratchet was exhausted. It was obvious in the slight tremor of his hands. That didn’t surprise either of the medics sitting with their friend. The old mech had poured so much of himself into this frail kindling of hope that First Aid couldn’t even bear to think about what would happen if things took a turn for the worse. In the wider scheme of an eons-long war and two conflicted worlds, one newborn life didn’t seem like much, but it was enough to heal an experience-embittered spark -- or break it. “We all do, but these things need to happen naturally. Now out. Can you breathe out with me? There we go.”

Hoist had bent closer while they breathed, so he was the first to notice. “I see a head! There’s a head!”

Suddenly, Ratchet was no longer a gruff, older model being placated by two young upstarts. Instead, he was a nervous wreck inside a tornado of elbows and more knees than seemed physically possible. “Out of the way! I want to see -- First Aid, move your wheels -- “

“Ah, ah, we agreed,” First Aid said, so calm it was clear he was trembling with excitement. He kept his hands firm, however, pinning his mentor’s shoulders down, and Ratchet squirmed like a mech a fourth his age. “You stay right there, because otherwise you’ll throw things or pick a fight with Ironhide. Remember? Stay down.”

Ratchet nearly whined, “But I want to see!”

‘And you will.” Soothe, soothe, soothe.

Grumble mutter curse. “I’ll fraggin’ well see what I want to see when I want to see it. Who’s in charge here, anyway?”

Hoist ignored them both in order to continue watching, optics shining and a hand outstretched as if afraid to touch a dream. It was illogical, but he feared this moment might burst like a bubble. Instead, he just cooed softly, “Ohh, look at it. So small and new. Ratchet, look what you did!”

Relief swept in to wipe away the anxiety and tension as if it’d never been. The elder medic started squirming again, this time in embarrassed pleasure. “I didn’t do anything. It was all Prime.”

“Prime contributed,” First Aid corrected him gently, refusing to let him brush aside well-deserved
acknowledgement. “You’re the one who went through the effort. You have been the one who stubbornly tried to hide this until it grew too much to carry yourself and you finally let us help. It hurt my spark to see you lash out after the failures, and I was right there with you when everything finally went right. We’ve all seen you bear this burden for months, now, and here’s the fruit of your labor.”

Ratchet looked up at him, optics wide and profoundly humbled by the truth of his words.

Never had an interruption been so well timed to save someone’s reputation as a hard-aft. Not that the interruption helped, as it came in the form of Hoist squeaking slightly, outstretched hand retracting to ball up and press to his face. “Two! There’s two! That’s -- holy Primus, that’s incredible! What’re the odds?”

Megatron himself couldn’t have kept Ratchet down. “Move it!” He sat forward, pushing aside his friend and the calming hands that took to rubbing the back of his neck. Then he looked down and saw, and it knocked the bluster right out of him “Oh. Oh. I…did I...?”

He would never, ever admit to the delicate shell of wonder that spread across his face. One of his own hands fumbled, searching for something secure in the dizzying upsweep as the ground fell out from underneath him, and he flew. There was life, and it was wonderful, and he’d brought it into a wartorn universe that constantly saturated him in death. Guilt and joy collided.

Hoist was right there to hold him steady, both hands holding his own between them, and Ratchet clung to him. He still couldn’t manage keep his voice level. “Are those mine?”

“Breathe,” their younger coworker reminded his fellow medics even as he beamed proudly. “Yes, Ratchet. Those are yours. Yours, and Prime’s.”

On the screen they all stared at so avidly, a man in overalls stepped into view and smiled back at the cluster of mesmerized Cybertronian medics. “Yes, they’re ‘yours,’ Mr. Ratchet, and we here at the San Diego Zoo would like to thank you again for your contributions to the Black Rhino Breeding Program. As you can see,” the sparse crowd of veterinarians and aids clapped quietly in the background as the second baby slid out, “your generous donation has brought another critically endangered species back one step further from the edge of extinction. We’d like to think that makes you the surrogate father to these little pieces of our planet.” His smile turned understanding as the Autobot in the center of the cluster rested shaking fingers against the screen, and the look on the old, old medic’s face was indescribable. “Your adopted children thank you for the gift of life, as does all of Earth.”

Ratchet buried his face in his hands, overwhelmed.

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Pt. 10

Chapter Summary

Optimus Prime puts on an erotic dance in a parking lot; Sunstreaker has magic hands.

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Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 10
Warning: Inappropriate use of traffic cones, Bob cuddles, arousal from being objectified, and xeno implications
Rating: Pg-13?
Continuity: IDW & G1
Characters: Starscream, Megatron, Ratchet, Optimus Prime, Sideswipe, Sunstreaker, Bob.
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): A prompt from a chat, a request from Shibara, a picture from her as well.

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Optimus Prime - “making a traffic cone sexy”
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This wasn’t how prisoner exchanges were meant to happen.

The arrangements were pretty typical, for Earth. The deal was that one single Autobot could approach and release Soundwave, and then Ratchet could be retrieved. Because of Soundwave’s small, vulnerable altmode -- so crushable when in-hand -- Megatron had tacked on an additional requirement: the chosen Autobot had to remain in altmode the entire time. They’d meet in a parking lot, and the Decepticons would keep their weaponry powered down, but the Autobot had to drive to meet them.

As far as precautions went, that wasn’t all that unusual. Or rather, it wouldn’t have been except that Starscream had done an inspection of the Victory’s barracks before Megatron and an honor guard of three Decepticons had left for the prisoner exchange. Such officer duties never put the Air Commander in a good mood, but inspections on Earth were the bad kind of special duty. Booby-trapped berths were the least of an officer’s problems during inspection. Granted, Starscream had gotten further than Scrapper had managed, but he’d still only gotten halfway through the barracks before giving up. That’d been enough to put him in a foul mood, because confiscating anything against regulations here on Earth was a never-ending exercise in frustration.

But he had gotten halfway. Hence the makeshift driving course challenge in the Cost Co. parking lot. It was made of orange traffic cones and yellow construction barricades confiscated from Skywarp’s dubious intentions and illegal ownership. The fuming Air Commander had repurposed them, half to torment the Autobots and half to annoy the black Seeker. Starscream had been in a bit of a huff after storming out of the crew quarters. There were still aqua paint spatters on his thrusters.

Megatron had allowed Starscream his sniffit, in part because allowing his Second a harmless outlet
meant Skywarp wouldn’t have to report to the repairbay to get a traffic cone removed from somewhere it shouldn’t be lodged. However, it was also because making Optimus Prime jump through hoops of diplomatic formalities could be entertaining, but making him carefully navigate an actual obstacle course was even more so. Megatron had watched in some amusement as his darkly-muttering Second had set up an entire maze, complete with obstacles to navigate around and a loading area just barely big enough to fit Prime’s altmode trailer.

His amusement had quickly turned into something less definable. The other Decepticons’ moods had made a similar shift. Skywarp’s seething resentment, Thundercracker’s boredom, and Starscream’s high-pitched and very vocal smugness had all tapered off into silent staring.

Optimus’ reaction had caught them unprepared. Ratchet had grudgingly transformed into his own altmode for the occasion -- airlifting an ambulance in a sling was probably going to be a human competitive sport by the end of the year -- and traded snarking commentary with Starscream during set-up. He’d predicted that the Autobot leader would pause, mildly rebuff Megatron for the unannounced addition to the prisoner exchange, and then simply plow through the complicated course in order to reach the designated loading area. Megatron had snorted a laugh and agreed with the medic.

They’d both been wrong.

Optimus hadn’t said anything about the orderly mass of just-wide-enough traffic guidance paraphernalia. He’d rolled to a stop after making the left turn into the parking lot. He’d sat there idling as he took in the maze. The Decepticons had waited on the other end of the parking lot, relaxed but ready for the standard speech and counter-speech both Megatron and Prime tended to see as necessary. Megatron even had a few snide remarks culled from Starscream’s post-inspection tirade to use tonight.

The speech hadn’t come. Instead, the semi-truck had done an awkward three-point turn in the limited space of the driveway. When he was turned around, he began backing up.

Through the maze. Without disrupting the organized chaos in the slightest. Optimus Prime was backing that wide load up, and the Decepticons had no choice but to stand there, dumbfounded, and watch it slowly wag as the Autobot leader painstakingly navigated the maze in reverse.

Starscream blew air out his vents, exasperated but resigned, and pinged a change to the Stunticon’s training schedule. Megatron absently approved it. Motormaster would throw a tantrum at being signed up for Drivers’ Education courses, but the mech was going to buckle down and practice anyway. This wasn’t trick driving. This wasn’t a high speed chase. Those things, the Stunticons excelled at, but there was no way in the Pit that Motormaster could drive like this. Not all maneuvering could or should be done at high speeds and with as much property damage as physically possible, and the Prime was currently proving that point. As the commander of the Decepticons’ direct-contact fighting unit against the mostly ground-bound Autobots, Motormaster needed to learn how to do this ASAP.

Although...perhaps he didn’t need to take lessons from the Optimus Prime School of Drivers’ Ed. He was somewhat young for that kind of instruction.

Megatron felt his optic frames twitch, lenses spinning out and back into focus on the wide rear end backing toward him. Prime caught on another orange traffic cone. That sleek, thick bumper went into a leisurely dance, as if the Autobot had the all the time in the world to tease himself off the plastic cone. He repeatedly moved forward and then back again, plump tires turning the tiniest amount, back and forth. The trailer end described little, taunting circles that gradually danced him around and off the traffic cone out. It turned it like a top under him, the tip snagged on his undercarriage, and the
Prime’s jigging caused it to rock on its base in a fast half circle, then a slow finish, only to sweep into another rushed circle that nearly, nearly tipped the cone over, but the achingly slow rotation brought it back to the asphalt safely.

When it finally popped free and clattered on the ground, the four watching Decepticons gasped in strained unison. Megatron hadn’t even realized his ventilation system had fallen into sync with the Prime’s delicate wriggling.

Starscream shook his head to snap out of the weird trance they were in. “Right.” He reached down, picked up the ambulance snickering at their feet, and turned Ratchet around to set in the loading area. Now sitting on his wheels facing them, the medic didn’t seem to know what to do. Starscream flicked a finger behind the Autobot. “Go meet him halfway, or we’ll be here all night.”

Emergency lights flashed incredulously. “You’re kidding.”

“No,” Megatron rasped, still staring as the Prime snagged on yet another traffic cone. “Prime’s too much of an honorable idiot to not unload Soundwave before leaving.”

Ratchet grumbled his engine but obediently threw it into reverse. Apparently, Optimus’ precise navigation of the maze was something of a challenge to the medic. He made it to the first tight turn before snagging on his own traffic cone. Softly cursing, he began rocking himself clear, doing his own little dance.

The Decepticons settled in for the show.

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Shibara’s Sunstreaker, Sideswipe, and Bob picture

Picture can be seen at http://shibara.tumblr.com/post/53350048789/picture-commissioned-by-ladydragon76-a-while-ago

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There was a method to petting Bob that nobody else had managed to pick up yet. Oh, anyone could reach down and pat him. That was nice, and the little guy enjoyed it. He nudged and nuzzled, bounced and begged, and crawled into laps and twined around legs for that. But when Sunstreaker did it, the cheeping could be heard halfway across the ship. That was something special, and nobody else could make Bob do it.

Sideswipe had watched closely. He could get the purr. Most mechs could get the purr, if they gave more than five seconds’ attention to the bug. Run the knuckles of a hand hard across Bob’s head and tweak his antenna, and listen to that purr. It was adorable. The way he’d hunch down and push into the petting could melt even Ironhide’s rusted spark casing. The chittering purr and the accompanying enthusiastic aft-wag happened every time, and if a mech did it long enough, then out came the ultimate weapon of cute: rolling over to expose his segmented belly in a bid for tummy pets. That move had gotten Ratchet on camera surrendering to it.

But it wasn't the cheeping.

"Okay, I give. How d'you do it?" Sideswipe hoisted Bob up like a sack of wriggling parts. Bob commenced frantically kicking, trying to gain a foothold on thin air. "Just show me."

Sunstreaker was not smiling. Look at him not smile. However, someone who knew him well might map the incremental upward tilt of the angle of his mouth, and that indicated a good mood.

The golden frontliner reached out to capture one flailing front paw before his pet Insecticon wiggled
free. "It's easy, you ignorant lout." His other hand reached for the most obviously dangerous bit of his pet. The part everyone instinctively avoided, because sharp pointy objects and shins were not friends, and involving hands seemed like a very bad idea.

Seemed like, but apparently wasn’t. "Aw, come on. Seriously?" Sideswipe had to laugh as Sunstreaker rubbed gently at the base of one of Bob's spikes. Two great big yellow optics squinched up in pleasure, and the clumsy front paws were suddenly curling in small kneading motions while Bob’s bitsy hand-claws opened and closed in absolute ecstasy.

“Seriously," Sunstreaker said in a solemn tone as the cheeping began.

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Part 11

Chapter Summary

The Insecticons play with their food.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 11
Warning: stick sticky sex, food porn
Rating: R?
Continuity: G1
Characters: Skywarp, Thundercracker, Insecticons
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn't own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): A challenge, and a kinkmeme request.

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http://tfanonkink.livejournal.com/7561.html?thread=8674185#t8674185 (Insecticons/any - "licking, nibbling, voyeurism, feeding")

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It started, as most of these things do, because the sex was really good.

When a bunch of upstart eating machines and an Elite Seeker got together, what else could be expected? It wasn't like they were hanging out for the conversation, and that wasn't exactly an insult against the Insecticons. Skywarp wasn't known for his intellectual side. His kinky one, certainly, but his smarts? Not so much. Not at all, in fact.

Hey now, not to say he was dumb. He caught on to the longing stares quick enough, and as stated previously, he had a kinky side a kilometer wide. Falling headfirst into a puddle of oil during a mission would have usually resulted in pestering someone to help him get the residue off. Strutting by a drooling group of bugs? That was clever. The little pop he added to his hips when he'd passed by to let them get a good look at his oil-dripping aft was particularly smart.

Let's consider Skywarp, shall we? The Insecticons sure were, at the time. Skywarp, of the sleek black wings and purple trim, two of the favorite colors for the bugs. Hold up and do a slow pan off his aft for a minute, because I know that's where you were staring but those wings deserve a second look. Not that every Decepticon's a bug, but everyone's got an appreciation for a good set of wings. It just so happened that a wide set of wings paired with powerful thrusters added up to great potential mating material for the Insecticons in particular. For those with an insect's instincts and some bestial behavior hard-coded into mechanical criteria, Seekers had it going on.

Not that the bugs didn't know what was making them lust after the Seekers' pride and joy, but this particularly lovely set of wings had dribbles of oil slicking them up. When Skywarp cocked a hip and posed long enough to give them a Come and Get It look, he flicked the wing he glanced back over. Oil spattered. Shrapnel moaned. Oh, those wings. Slippery, gleaming panels of black and the perfect shade of purple! The stripes were just broad enough for an Insecticon's tongue, if that's the
standard of measurement a mech wanted to use, and frag if that standard wasn't in use right then and there.

Add in the flashing trickster's confidence, a dash of fool's carelessness, and that mischievous grin? Mechs, let me tell you -- the Insecticons were sold on Skywarp. He had the attitude, he had the looks, and right then, he had the scrumptiousness of a free treat. He smelled six kinds of yummy and looked twenty more.

There was tasty, and then there was tasty. Skywarp was both, right then.

They totally swarmed him.

Skywarp was brilliant in comparison to some. He hadn't left the safety of the rest of the mission group, which was the smartest thing possible in this situation. Skywarp liked his kinks, but he liked that whole 'safety first' idea, too. Getting eaten out by the Insecticons? Fun. Getting eaten by the Insecticons? He'd like to think he was intelligent enough to avoid that.

Having it happen right in the middle of the oil extraction mission? Perfect. The thrill of being under observation never got old. Every prank he pulled gave him a high off the attention, and right now he was running hot. It might be that he had a reputation as an unrepentant prankster because the fall-out turned him on so much. Skywarp thoroughly enjoyed attention, good or bad. Fuelplay and fun in public were just what the Seeker ordered. Exhibitionism meant safety along with the enjoyment of everyone's optics being glued to the spectacle.

The Insecticons were all for this. Give them an order of that as well. Side order of extra nummies, preferably in the form of energon. Skywarp covered in oil was delicious. Covering him in energon would be like dipping a strawberry in melted chocolate: it got better.

Skywarp was a walking buffet, my friends, and like a buffet, he laid there and let them feast. There was licking and scraping and moans of passion that had nothing to do with Skywarp and everything to do with the food. Truth be told, nobody could expect more from Insecticons. Wave an energon cube at them, and they'd line up to slobber, everything else forgotten. Fortunately, getting their chosen meal off was as simple as a lot of tactile contact and the strategic placement of a tiny cube of pure energon squirreled away in the depths of his cockpit.

He'd put it there himself. He'd wheedled it from Thundercracker after the accidental oil bath, but his wingmate had been willing enough to give it up once he explained why. The application of reason had aided that transaction. Let's rewind to watch it happen.

"Them?" Thundercracker gave the cluster of bugs a critical look. They weren't doing a very good job of hiding how they kept gawping at Skywarp. There were puddles of oil forming on the ground at the teleporter's feet, and puddles of drool at their own. "You want to 'face them?"

"Sure, why not?" Skywarp shrugged. Kickback had adorably teensy little wings, in his opinion, and he wanted to get his hands on the cute grasshopper. That was a decent reason to interface the guy. "It's either they get me clean and I have some fun, or I pester you to help me once we get back to base. Or, y'know, I drag in Blitzwing, but you already know how that's gonna end."

Blue wings shuddered. "Ugh, don't remind me." They'd switched bunks after the Blitzwing incident. Now Thundercracker took the top bunk, because at least if Skywarp broke the bunk again while interfacing the bolts off somebody, they wouldn't come crashing down on him in a rain of fragging. There could be no dignity in being squashed under two interfacing mechs. "I did pick up some audio mufflers after last time," he mused. "Haven't noticed any of your other partners since then."
Skywarp studied the ground intently.

Thundercracker side-eyed him. Avoiding optic contact was embarrassment in Skywarp terms. "What? What is it?"

"Never told you," his wingmate muttered, "but the bunk broke 'cause Blitzy kept kicking the ceiling."

Thundercracker squinted at him. Why would that matter?

It took him a second to translate that into their current recharge arrangement. Blitzwing being a kicker didn't seem like a big deal, but instead of kicking the ceiling, this time he'd be kicking --

Oh. The bottom of Thundercracker's bunk. All the audio muffling in the world wouldn't help there. There wasn't much more awkward than knowing your bunkmate was awake and listening in, except if said bunkmate came crashing down on top of you mid-interface. And it wasn't like Skywarp and Blitzwing wouldn't know he wasn't awake.

Alright, mechs, now let's give ourselves a peek into Thundercracker's head. Blue, thoughtful Thundercracker: theoretically the quietest of his wing. Really, that was a false rumor started by the humans. Thundercracker was actually the loudest of the Seekers current on Earth, despite Starscream's screechy claim to the title. It was only a matter of when such things were measured. Around the other Decepticons, relaxed on or off duty? He thought before he spoke and tended to slip his voice in among the group's to avoid being singled out if someone took offense. On the battlefield, however, he shattered glass and knocked mechs head over wheels. Thundercracker wasn't just loud; he boomed.

The problem was that he did that even when he didn't want to. Skywarp and Thundercracker got a four-bunk room to themselves back at base only because Skywarp was dead to the world when he conked out. That, and they'd converted two of the bunks into an entertainment station, so their quarters were the best in the whole ship. He kind of felt obligated to keep Thundercracker company, too. The blue Seeker put up with him enough that he sort of felt that he owed his wingmate some noise tolerance. Otherwise, Thundercracker would have been banished to the smallest room possible by the rest of the crew, to snore like a drowning Boeing 747 off by his lonesome.

The Constructicons had diagnosed it as an unfortunate side-effect of his sonic weaponry crossed with a persistent ventilation glitch. Skywarp diagnosed it as loud enough to shake the walls, and that was all he had to know about it. Thundercracker just looked vaguely apologetic whenever it came up.

The fact that Blitzwing was willing to put up with the Seeker's wing-shaking background snoring said something about how bad his own roommate situation was. Blitzwing bunked with the Reflector components. Privacy was a laughable. Anything done in his quarters would be broadcast across the ship, likely in real-time.

Thundercracker gave it a feeble last try, "But they're Insecticons." The argument had already been lost, but he couldn't give up without a token protest. Because, well, "They're all...alien."

Techno-organic, he meant. Metallic imitations of squishy things. He couldn't think of anything more disgusting to interface with, unless it was a real squishy.

Skywarp stretched, a deliberate move meant to showcase the oil running down his back. Bombshell thwapped Shrapnel and Kickback upside the helms. "I think it's hot."

"You would." His wingmate sighed defeat and handed over the cube. Skywarp gleefully stuffed it
into his cockpit while Thundercracker averted his optics from his wingmate's exposed port. "C'mon, I don't need to see that!"

"You're going to see a lot worse," Skywarp predicted with a wild grin. When the blue Seeker gave him an alarmed look, he closed his cockpit and gave a weird shimmy. He paused, and then the teleporter hunched over to shimmy again. His expression turned inward, concentrating hard, before easing suddenly into a satisfied smirk. "Guess where they're gonna have to put their mouths to get at it now?"

Thundercracker gaped at him. There was no way -- the cube was too big!

Wait, no. This was Skywarp. Skywarp seriously would modify his own port to expand, just for slag like this.

"But how will they jack in?" Thundercracker winced as soon as it slipped out. He really didn't want to know the details, no matter what his morbid curiosity was insisting.

Mechs, I know you know, but we've got to take a minute to talk shop. Let’s get dirty and review the mechanics of interfacing. Skywarp had the standard flyer set-up, with his port in his cockpit and his jack -- no, we'll preserve his modesty. The Insecticons’ had a different set-up, of course, because their frames didn't have the same equipment placement as a Seeker’s. Regardless of frametype differences, however configuration of jack and port remained the same. The Insecticons were quite a bit smaller, but their equipment matched up. It was a standard set used in everyone but the smallest and largest of frametypes. They'd have to be Minibots or a Supreme before an adaptor became necessary.

Hence the reason poor, now mentally-scarred Thundercracker's mind was wondering how a standard jack would fit if Skywarp had expanded his port to fit the cube inside.

"I'm not expecting them to," Skywarp said over his wingmate's attempt to object at being told the details. "You know them. They're gonna go crazy over all this," his wings flicked, scattering droplets of oil, and tanks gurgled emptily over in his three-mech audience, "and probably forget I'm there. This is just insurance to make sure I get something out of it besides a tongue bath."

Shrapnel picked an inopportune moment to slaver. Thundercracker jerked his optics away and swallowed hard, looking rather nauseated. That, my mechs, was the definition of Too Much Information.

Fast forward to the Feast of Saint Skywarp, who now inhabited the Luscious Pantheon. All devout Insecticons worshiped and dined at the altar of his body. Praise Primus from whom all blessings flowed, praise Skywarp for the oil below. Mmm, yeah.

The Seeker arched off the ground, thighs pushed apart by an impatient beetle. His legs wrapped around the bug, pulling him closer. A grasshopper ardently attended to the neck exposed when Skywarp threw back his head to cry out. Which he did, gasping for cooling air as Shrapnel slithered down his front to lap at the nooks and crannies of his chest. Nibbling marched down the inside of his legs and back up the outside, only to devolve into urgent lapping at his pelvic joints. Hands slid through the liquid covering him and left rainbow-hued greasy smears in their wakes that Kickback went after the moment he sucked neck cabling clean.

Stop here to imagine what it's like to always be hungry. To always have a hollow pit in the core of your being, to be unable to feel a full tank because the churn of organic matter inside digested into insufficient energy. To always have a need for more to consume, because the craving was inbuilt and whenever it might be satiated, the cloning prerogative clicked in to drain the reservoir and render you
empty again. Yet every surging wave of conversion put you on the peak of energy, washing up and
down your body to shiver and shudder on the verge of completion. Every mouthful thrust that warm
uptick down your throat, and every swallow that hit bottom rippled out through your body in a
nearly orgasmic split second of fulfillment that make your optics roll up and joints tremble with the
force of every chewing motion.

Got that? Because that’s what it felt like to be an Insecticon.

Into this all but sexual eating experience walked Skywarp, with his teasing looks and blatant
invitation. Yes, they wanted him. How could they not? He was the finest piece of aft to be served up
on a silver platter.

Bombshell settled between his legs and set to licking his lower half clean. The beetle transformed
into his insect mode, and his horn sought the depths of each thruster for the last drops of oil while
Skywarp squeaked and thrashed at the probing. The Seeker didn't try very hard to get free, and
maybe Bombshell checked and double-checked for oil drops in unlikely places just to get that flush
of heat burning hotter under the large Decepticon's armor.

Shrapnel went for the torso. There were pools of oil along the cockpit latches and in the pectoral
vents. He went after them with a will, all the while tracking that elusive, melting scent of energon.
Somehow, somewhere in this jet, there was energon. Pure, delicious energon, and he intended to find
it. He simply meant to take his time to sip from the collected pools of oil on Skywarp’s chest.

Kickback was the lucky one, because the arms left to him reached out in offering. While he fed off of
mouthfuls of neck cables, slurping the oily film off their slender lengths, hands fondled his narrow
wings in return. He captured one hand in his grip, and the other held his head in place while he
sucked every finger clean. His tanks rumbled online even as the fingers stroked the roof of his
mouth, tantalizing flicks leaving metal and carbon aftertastes. A Seeker’s frame was much larger than
an Insecticon’s; one finger filled his mouth. Two stretched his lips and forced his jaw down. Three
left him unable to seal his lips around them, resulting in a drip of oral fluid down his chin as his
tongue pushed and curled around them. Slick and warm, they plunged in until he gagged, but he
noisily attempted to suck them down further. A deep sound of hunger came from his throat as a
fourth finger attempted to penetrate him as well.

When it failed, Skywarp reluctantly withdrew his hand with a last, lingering stroke of his forefinger
down the center of Kickback’s tongue. The Insecticon lit his visor and gave each finger an extra just-
to-be-sure suck, one at a time, before turning his helm to nip at the other big hand now being offered
to him. The cleaned hand went up to massage his antenna, and Kickback whimper-moaned like he'd
smelled a fresh dish joining the buffet dinner.

Stand back and look, like the other Decepticons on the mission were. Thundercracker kept glancing
away like he didn't want to watch, but there was something irresistible about the way Skywarp
groaned and panted on the ground. Nobody could look away for long. Work stumbled to a halt as
they stood around and watched.

The small swarm of bugs crawled all over him: on top of him, behind him, under one knee and
climbing over the other, eeling beneath one wing and clambering over the tip of the opposite. They
never stayed still. They writhed around him and each other in an undeniably organic twining dance
that was as repulsive as it was attractive. Morphobots had been, after all, an underground
pornographic hit before the war started. Tentacles and bestial rutting were a guilty pleasure no one
there would admit to, but it was certainly what came to mind while watching this display. When the
watching Decepticons next looked for a frag buddy, this was what their lust would hold in its
subconscious.
This was a feeding frenzy, a techno-organic revelry centered on food as a sexual thing. The pursuit of the taste after the first rich layer had been stripped off riveted the attention of everyone involved and fascinated those who weren't.

Shrapnel rode the Seeker's cockpit in short, rocking bursts mirroring how his tongue lapped at the streams of oil freed from air vents and between pleasure-flexed armor plating. He kept licking long after it seemed the oil was gone. Kickback's mouth moved over Skywarps's face, less kissing than vacuuming, but when mouths met, neither participant seemed inclined to move on quickly. Kickback licked and nuzzled, nuzzled and licked, but his path seemed to bounce between Shrapnel and Skywarp, Skywarp and Shrapnel. When he ended up straddling the Seeker's face, Shrapnel laid claim to his lips before they could go chasing anymore oil.

Skywarp chuckled, sounding strained but happy, and Kickback abruptly clawed at the wide chest he half-lay on as the Seeker evidently located where Insecticon frametypes hid their ports. The large Decepticon wasn't known for vast leaps of intellect, but he could connect the dots and make an Insecticon squeal. Kickback's antenna laid back and flicked up in time with the mech's tongue, and Shrapnel reared back in surprise as the kiss became violently aggressive, almost an attack.

That's when Bombshell struck from beneath.

The beetle had mouthed his way up from Skywarp's pelvis, transforming to nestle down in the Seeker's lap and start in on the bottom of the cockpit. It smelled so good. It smelled of energon, sweet and thick, and arousal. Energy-high arousal, potent as it ever was in a mech this big, and swelling higher as Kickback and Shrapnel turned their gluttony on each other. Skywarp's overload was approaching, he could smell it, and the riled heat desire caused in the larger frametype's systems could be sliced like a redwood.

It was intoxicating. It was a frag-tease like none other. It was as if someone had burnt a rainforest and wafted the concentrated aroma of wasted energy straight into his face. Bombshell whined in sheer desperation and dove toward Shrapnel with both hands at the ready, because all that energy he couldn’t have? No! No, he had to have something! If not to fill his tanks, then at least to sample!

Put yourself in their places, mechs. Sure, Skywarp had fallen into an oil vat. That wasn’t a lot of fuel, not split between three bugs. He’d been an appetizer, not a main course. They’d savored him because he was all kinds of tasty, but he hadn’t come close to satisfying their appetites.

The hotter his systems ran, the more aromatic he became as the scent of hot oil rose from his plating. The greasy glimmer of oil became a organic smell denser than the thin, slippery hints of hot lubricant drifting from his joints, or the tank-clenching prickling scent the Insecticons picked up with every beat of the Seeker's fuel pump. Fuel, that delicate here-and-gone whiff of air told them. Plump fuel lines, full reserve tanks, intact joints well-lubricated and waiting to be cracked open, sucked clean, and gnawed upon for the metals you can’t get on this planet. Eat me. Devour me.

Skywarp arched under them as the three Insecticons went after each other instead. Nibbles turned to nips turned to outright biting, and their hands tore at each other as they frantically turned their feeding frenzy into something else. Something that wouldn’t get them shot in the heads by the watching crowd, because Skywarp wasn’t as dumb as he sometimes acted. The watchers weren’t just there to excite the teleporter’s attention-seeking nature. So Bombshell took what he could get without getting shot. He buried his facemask between Shrapnel’s neck and antenna, his hand squirming between cockpit and aft down below, and Kickback’s own antenna were abused as Shrapnel took control of their messy kiss after a deft yank.

And that's when Skywarp popped his cockpit.
The three Insecticons froze. Thundercracker sighed, half a laugh and half an exasperated groan. He knew what was coming. The uncontrolled shudder through the bugs as the smell hit was visible.

One cube. Three Insecticons. One Decepticon’s port. Three eager tongues.

Three voracious mouths, all competing to lick every last smear of energon away...

Y’know what, mechs? Let's fade to black and give them some privacy. I think you know how this story ended.

Happily, if you get my drift.

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Pt. 12

Chapter Summary

Shockwave has had enough of babies; the Dinobots are babies.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 12
Warning: Spark-splitting/newsparks, baby Dinobots.
Rating: PG-13
Continuity: G1, IDW/MTMTE
Characters: Shockwave, Starscream, Optimus Prime, Ratchet, Dinobots, Fortress Maximus, Whirl, Rung
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Kinkmeme prompt/writing challenge, Shibara and her pictures. The Whirl & Fortress Maximus VS heatvirus ficlets have been moved to If You Can't Stand The Heat.
Artist: Shibara (on Ao3 and Tumblr)

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http://tfanonkink.livejournal.com/11776.html?thread=13619456#t13619456
Starscream/Optimus Prime - Spark Splitting/Cold Forging, Nesting, Energy Leeching’’
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There were Seekers on the ceiling again.

Shockwave only had one optic, but he could squint it most expressively when irritated. He gave the cluster of bright wings his squintiest, most disapproving look. He saw that shade of green, Acidstorm. “I sincerely hope you are not doing what my drones have reported you to be doing. Such activities have been banned from the Tower and all outlying buildings associated with it.”

Fourteen mechs talking in the pitch-tuned regional cant of their home city created a distant droning natter. It didn’t even hitch. The flower-like cluster of colored appendages rippled like petals in the wind as the flyers busily shifted construction to the next tier. They ignored the purple Guardian glaring up at them from far below. The ceiling in this room was perfect for the descending layers of a nest, and no mere official protest from squinty-opticked old Shockwave was going to make them stop building. Although Acidstorm had to pretend pretty hard that he wasn’t disobeying orders from his direct commander, no sir, no Rainmaker up here.

Shockwave didn’t need a mouth to harrumph, but he thought it would have been more impressive if he had one. “Hmmph.”

More excited fluttering of wing-petals, and now suddenly the brilliant spray of welding torches igniting as five of the fourteen Seekers started securing everything into place. Six more flyers darted through the door Shockwave could swear he’d secured when he’d entered. Armfuls of new building material, some of them still painted purple on one side from where they’d been pried off the Tower, were airlifted up to join the construction site above. The lumpy armored exterior was taking on the distinctive jagged shape that anyone who’d visited Vos before the war would recognize. The inside would be a protective spiral, the Guardian knew, mean to wind around in the inside in layers of shell-like internal structure. Every layer would be lined with raw metal, ready for consumption by the
forge held in the innermost chamber. Everything in that nest ultimately led to the innermost chamber.

He squinted harder, trying to focus past the swarm of wings to see if the chamber was built yet. He’d have no hope of routing the nesting Seekers if there was already a chamber. The brooding flyer wouldn’t leave that forge once it was constructed, not for anything less than the chosen contributor. Cracking the completed chamber open would only inspire an attack. Vosians were so blasted protective of their newsparks, not to mention their forging process. Outside observation was allowed from a distance, never from nearby. Shockwave was only being tolerated because technically, these flyers still belonged to the Armada. Determined to forge or not, they weren’t so mad as to rebel enough to attack him outright. Ignore, perhaps. Attack? Not likely, not as long as he didn’t try to get any closer.

Therefore, he stood where he was, far below, squinting upward. There was an innermost chamber. Fraggit. He’d gotten here too late.

Shockwave had no lungs, yet he had to sigh.

***

There was a Seeker on the Prime again.

Shockwave ducked behind a console as the expected spray of laserfire hammered the room. The flock of flyers on high jeered him, but the Guardian was no fool. He’d given up throwing drones at the Autobots who kept hijacking the space bridge, because all that resulted in was pieces of drones everywhere. It was a waste of time and effort, as well as resources. Without the help of the Tower Garrison, Shockwave couldn’t keep the Autobots at bay. Most of the Garrison was made of Seekers, who were conspicuously not lifting a finger unless the Autobots dared try and leave the Tower. Then they got vicious, but the Autobots had quickly learned to be content with what access they were allowed.

Not that Shockwave had allowed them anything, but he was one mech. The non-flyer section of the Garrison had been warned off, and the selected nest guards currently in the room weren’t helping either side. That was making Shockwave twitch a little. The Seekers hadn’t gone completely traitor, which was the only thing saving their wretched wings. Being just one mech, the Guardian of Cybertron in Megatron’s absence, he kind of needed the Armada. He couldn’t afford to exterminate the lot of them without actual cause.

He’d settled for attempting to lock individual nest guards out and grounding them when more obedient Decepticons could get a hold on the flighty things. He didn’t particularly want them damaged. Fierce as they were in the midst of a forging, they were sane enough on their own. It was just when the nest was involved that their group mentality got unreasonable.

Take right now. The flock wasn’t helping the Autobots, but they also didn’t hinder. That was the part that annoyed Shockwave greatly. Disobeying his commands in order to protect a completed nest was a cultural thing. If his drones had discovered the nest’s construction before it’d gotten too far, he’d have been able to transfer the whole blasted bundle of over-protective Seekers to a different location. He’d done it before. On his head was the result of not getting the building site on time, and Shockwave understood that his loss of authority over the flyers was a natural consequence.

Disobeying his commands to attack the Autobots was less forgivable. If the flyers wanted to ignore Shockwave in order to protect the nest -- fine. But then they should also protect the nest from the Autobots! If not attack, at least defend the thing! They were practically inviting the enemy to waltz in for visitation!
He sourly thought that wasn’t far off from the truth. The Seekers hadn’t laid out a welcome mat, but their lack of direct hostility was telling.

Shockwave hunkered down behind the shelter of his chosen console and waiting for the excitement to die down. The Prime had stopped bringing so many escorts once Shockwave stopped throwing drones away on attacks. There were more subtle traps making the return to the space bridge a hazardous journey, but the Autobots and the Decepticon Guardian had come to an uneasy truce. Here, in this room, peace eventually reigned.

Peace laced by shrill bursts of Starscream’s distinctive voice, and an equally identifiable baritone voice set in an apologetic pitch as the Prime answered. The Autobots had let two days pass without appearing, and Starscream was enraged. The Prime was properly remorseful, which didn’t stop the Air Commander from verbally flaying him alive anyway. Of course, according to Starscream, the Prime should be doting on him every second instead of returning to Earth at all.

Shockwave tuned out the conversation. Valuable spying, this was not. Starscream started in on a well-worn rant, and the Prime went into a well-practiced, soothing spiel. Shockwave knew the words by spark, at this point. The only thing Starscream wanted from Optimus Prime was close contact and energy. Brooding had turned him into an energy leech, as it did in his frametype. Seekers sought energy. Energon, in the search for fuel; pure energy, in the search for contributors. Vosians, Shockwave had observed, tended to go after large, high-output mechs, and in Prime, Starscream had found the mother lode.

It made sense. Larger mechs required more energy to run, and the war had created energon-gluttons with powerful weaponry that drained fuel even when not in use. Those mechs attracted Seekers like magnets and iron filings. Shockwave had warned off the Rainmakers’ casual advances more times than he could count when the temptation of his cannon became too much. Large mechs had the surface area for Seekers to climb, lay on, and otherwise physically plaster themselves all over in order to expedite the siphoning process.

Optimus Prime was a large mech with a high energy output. The Matrix enhanced the bleed of excess charge off him. Except for that whole Autobot thing, that made him an ideal candidate. And Starscream, headstrong and wily as he was, must have decided to grab for the temptation regardless of faction. However the Air Commander had finally managed to worm his way into the Prime’s spark chamber, he hadn’t wasted the opportunity once it’d been presented. Starscream had smugly gotten himself sparked, and the Prime apparently knew what it took to be a contributor for a Vosian Seeker. The newsparks sucked up energy until they would finally separate from Starscream’s own spark, splintering off to begin the secretive body-forging process Vos had once been legendary for.

The other Seekers were just along for the ride. Meaning that Shockwave’s flyer-infested Tower kept getting invaded by well-meaning Autobots. Attempting to kill them was starting to seem like some sort of logic puzzle instead of part of the war. It was hard to take the Prime seriously when his bodyguards all looked shellshocked, Starscream was perched on his shoulders, and there was a buzzing nest of Seekers observing from up above.

Shockwave really wished Megatron would start answering his calls.

**

There were Seekers on the lights again.

Shockwave knew he was craning his head like a pedestrian at a transport wreck, but he couldn’t stop himself. Shadows danced all around him, reflections scattering over the walls and his plating in glints of white and blue, and the source was high above. He’d turned off the Tower lights on a whim two
days ago, and this had happened. The room had turned into a dance hall. The nest twinkled like a disco ball.

Pretty though it was, the Guardian critically eyed the splashes of light. They were leaking through the shield created by multiple pairs of wings. The flyers had been filling the room with their droning speech for weeks, but recently he’d detected a worried note. He was no linguist, but the only difference between Neocybex Standard and Vos’ regional dialect was the tonal shifts. From what he’d deciphered, the nest guards were concerned about the early collapse of the nest structure. Or they were hungry for fresh lubricant from the center of Cybertron. Shockwave wasn’t entirely sure if he’d interpreted those high tones correctly.

From what he was seeing right now, he rather thought it was the former. The nest’s assigned Seekers had been flitting in and out of the room for days now, evading half-sparked capture attempts by the Garrison in order to continually fetch metal scrounged from whatever wasn’t bolted down. They’d been returning with bundles in their arms and cockpits full, and they’d shoved the whole lot into the nest. That’d been unusual. The nest was meant to be stripped and used from the inside out, hollowed gradually as the forging process consumed the metal. Adding new material didn’t seem to fit the pattern he’d previously noticed in such brooding.

But now Shockwave knew why the change. The nest glimmered and gleamed from within, the fire of a forge and bare sparks visible, and that wasn’t meant to happen yet. The newsparks weren’t meant to emerge until the forging process finished.

Something turned about, blocking one of the major holes. From the barked order that cut through the buzz, Starscream must have turned from his work to notice the lack of light in the room. The Air Commander didn’t like that at all. It exposed the vulnerable spots on the nest. The Seekers already nervously hovering in front of the holes abruptly clustered together around of the worst gaps, covering the open spots with their own bodies.

Shockwave had seen enough. The nest was near falling, ready to drop like an overripe fruit off the vine and split open to release the fully developed frames -- but the newsparks Starscream had obsessively nurtured inside that nest weren’t ready to leave. Likely, the Prime’s overabundant energy contribution to the sparks had resulted in larger than normal frames being needed, or perhaps a bigger clutch than anticipated. If the Prime and Starscream had been ridiculously fertile together, the newsparks could still be competing for resources instead of the strongest spark monopolizing the nest’s raw material. Maybe Starscream’s greedy ambition had splintered true, and his brooding had produced a newspark who wouldn’t be content until it cannibalized the whole Tower to forge its frame.

The alert droning from above had taken on an alarmed buzz when the lights went out. Now the Seekers were beginning to speak louder, and the buzzing roar separated into individual words instead of a distant monotone. The whine of engines and the flare of thruster fire signaled the more aggressive nest guards beginning to lunge out from the defensive huddle in threat. The flock would work itself into an attack soon. Shockwave grudgingly turned the lights back on before Starscream goaded the more level-headed nest guards into attempting to drive him from the room.

With the lights on, the nest didn’t look so cored out. He knew better.

Shockwave also knew he’d regret this, but he went looking for more raw metal anyway.

**

There was a Seeker on the Prime again.
There were five, in fact. Shockwave was beginning to see why Megatron had bluntly told him to deal with the situation himself. He could only imagine what would have happened if Starscream had felt challenged by the warlord’s presence. This was bizarre enough.

The Air Commander was apparently an overachiever in everything he did. In one brood, he’d splintered off who-knew how many newsparks to begin with. That wouldn’t have been exceptional but for the fact that he’d then gone on to successfully nurtured five of them into completed frames. Five. That was the equivalent of giving Soundwave three hours and a handful of scrap metal to create a brand new Cassetticon. Shockwave would have sworn it to be physically impossible, but here the evidence was, talking fast and well above Shockwave’s comfort level for newly forged soldiers as they poked at Optimus Prime.

Five brand new Seekers splintered off during one successful brood, and those five were larger than normal for their ilk. Starscream must have planned for the higher energy output a Prime contributor allowed in his offspring, because those frames bristled with flight modifications and mysterious weaponry. No wonder the nest hadn’t held enough raw material.

Most mechs were wiped out for years after successfully splintering off one spark, and while Vosians were proud of their group effort when it came to the forging process, pulling off the forging of five frames at once was a tad bit beyond the ken even for them. Exhausted, drooping wings surrounded the downed, pathetic shell of a nest. Shockwave had been getting somewhat frazzled near the end there, too, but he stood tall and at the ready. He had to force his shoulders out of a slump more than once.

Starscream, however, was perky and ready for another round, if those fingers walking up the Prime’s windshields were anything to go by. The Seeker was some kind of sparking machine. Shockwave had never seen anything like it, and his scientific side watched in fascination. His Decepticon side was both horrified and amused. The Autobots awkwardly standing about the room were the cause of both emotions. It was a toss-up who felt more awkward standing there watching Starscream work on seducing his way into a second clutch. Ratchet didn’t seem to know where to look when Optimus Prime’s engine coughed into a higher gear. Questionable intentions or not, there was no denying that Starscream had the Prime’s total attention.

Their current clutch, having met, investigated, and dismissed their contributor from their frighteningly intelligent minds, immediately abandoned the flustered mech to stream from the Tower, off to go do whatever devilry their Starscream-spawned sparks inspired them to. Immersed in his flirting, Starscream barely flicked a glance after them. The nest guards groaned tiredly and trudged in their wakes, however.

The newsparks would mature into their completed frames in a matter of days. They’d be able to handle coordinated flight and fighting after some training, and by then they could be assimilated into the ranks of the Armada like every other flyer. Hopefully. Shockwave first impression marked them as dangerous, and the Decepticons might be better off relocating entire wing to a distant outpost far, far away from the Tower Garrison. Until then, the over-large clutch had to be watched over carefully. With any luck, the nest guards would keep the evil glitches from causing any major explosions.

Shockwave gave his narrowest, most squinty-opticked glare as the last Seeker out of the room lingered just a moment too long. He saw that look at Bumblebee, Acidstorm.

If there were Seekers on anything tomorrow, Shockwave was throwing the whole lot of them through the space bridge.
To be perfectly fair, it wasn’t Wheeljack’s fault. It was evidently Optimus Prime’s turn in the corner of shame.

Not that the rest of them didn’t belong there with him, but the other officers were willing to throw him to the wolves to save their own afts when push came to shove. Sacrifice themselves to the Decepticons to save him? Yes, of course. Get between the Wrath of Medic and the appropriate victim?

Optimus was on his own.

“All I said was, ‘can you make them less dangerous,’” he protested when Prowl brought up the totally relevant point of just who was to blame. See Optimus Prime. See Optimus Prime squirm. “It wasn’t an order!”

The other Autobot officers just looked at him. No, he wouldn’t see it that way, would he? Their beloved leader had put his hand to his head after a hard week fighting with Grimlock and cleaning up diplomatic incidents caused by rampaging mechanical dinosaurs. He’d expressed a spark-felt wish out loud. Of course he wouldn’t see that as piling guilt on the Dinobots’ creator. The fact that he’d voiced his not-request to Wheeljack, of all mechs, was pure coincidence.

Yeah, that wasn’t something even Swindle could sell.

“...it wasn’t,” Optimus repeated weakly, feeling the moral high ground slip away like quicksand under his tires. Officers continued to stare and silently judge him.

The big truck shrank in his seat as Ratchet, frigidly silent, tapped on a datapad and utterly refused to acknowledge him in the slightest. For once, the medic was taking Wheeljack’s side. The Wrath of Medic fell squarely upon the Prime, today.

Hey, Wheeljack had pulled off the impossible once again. It wasn’t the engineer’s fault that nobody else knew what to do about it. Ratchet got stuck dealing with the aftermath and finding out what had happened to cause waste to hit the fan.

Prowl heaved air out his vents and read the transmitted message from Ratchet, since the medic wasn’t currently speaking to the Prime. “He says that they are fully sentient ‘bots reduced to childlike simplicity, and -- ah, yes. I see.” The Executive Officer sat up straight and reset his vocalizer in a burst of uneasy static, “He says he will register this as abuse of authority unless they are returned to normal within a week.”

And Optimus Prime, bastion of the freedom of all sentient beings, boggled. “But -- but I didn’t -- “


There was a truck trying to hide under the table. If the Autobots didn’t know any better, they’d have thought a sinkhole had opened under his chair. A small, guilty, “No, I wouldn’t have said that,” drifted from their errant leader. Big blue optics pleaded for forgiveness on his inadvertent stupidity. “I understand. This was all a grave mistake. It won’t happen again.”
Ratchet avoided the begging optics by glaring harder at his datapad. He tapped some more. The rest of the room might have flinched at how hard his finger rat-ta-tapped.

This time Jazz took a turn reading, and that was definitely a flinch. “Yeeeeah. We kinda do that, don’t we?” The Porsche gave the medic an awkward smile -- guilty as charged -- and read the message aloud. “He says we got a bad habit of not seein’ the Dinobots as real people. We keep going to him and Wheeljack like they gotta control ‘em instead of us approachin’ ‘em like equals. And, uh, yeah. We don’t do that.” He coughed into a fist, blue visor turned away from the rest of the table as he added, “Anybody ever get around t’ giving them real quarters instead of that cave?”

A chevroned helm rose, ominously slow. Had that been forgotten? Certainly not. Ratchet got protective over all the Autobots in the crew, but the Dinobots and the Aerialbots were special. A mech messed with them at his peril. Unlike the Aerialbots, the fight for the Dinobots’ mere right to exist had been a long and bitter one.

Nobody dared meet that Angry Mama Bear gaze.

Prowl’s doors pulled high and tight behind his helm, a defensive position against the threat looming from the other side of the table. This wasn’t an easy admission. All the logical reasons he’d once brought against the Dinobots crumpled in his mind before Ratchet’s flat black-and-white argument. There was no such thing as ‘partially sentient.’ Either the Autobots treated the Dinobots as full Cybertronian beings, or they were treating them as less than themselves. There was no middle ground.

That explained why it was so difficult to get his vocalizer to engage. “No,“ he mumbled. “The caves...seemed sufficient.” For the dumb mechanical beasts he’d insisted they were.


Sarcasmtron used Guilt! It was super effective! Prowl joined the Prime in attempting to hide under the edge of the table. Corner of shame for them both.

“I’m sure,” volcanoes rose in much the same way the medic did as he slowly stood up, “that was merely an oversight. That will soon be corrected.” Magma boiled up out of the Earth’s core, pushing the ground up, and the pressure built up and up and up and oh Primus they were all going to die. Death by enraged medic. Megatron would laugh himself sick.

The assembled officers attempted to invoke the protective shield of the meeting table. If that failed, Prime was going to find himself standing alone as the others stampeded for the door.

Perhaps foiled by the table-shield, the volcanic temper melting their courage via glaring turned to leave. “If you need me, I’ll be tending to your victims,” Ratchet spat at the room in general as he stormed out.

Nobody dared move until Mt. Ratchet subsided into distant, fearsome rumbles. They’d just...stay here in the Shame Corner until he told them they could come out. Yeah. Good plan. Safe plan. Less fiery doom that way.

“I will apologize to Wheeljack. And to the Dinobots, once they, er, can understand me.” The weak, hesitant voice from the leader of the Autobots would have been hilarious if the rest of them sounded any better at the moment. Ratchet wielded the Bat of Taking Responsibility For Your Idiocy hard on the deserving.
By Shibara (because she is awesome, obviously)

For all his gruffness, however, the medic turned into a gentle caretaker the second he stepped through the medbay door. “Now, how did you get out?”

The place seemed deserted, but not at ankle-height. Down there, a miniaturized Dinobot had been pawing at the door before it’d slid open under Ratchet’s palm. Now Sludge waddled back, tail wagging with every side-to-side step, and he squeaked. The undersized brontosaurus was all legs and tail and fat belly where the essential systems necessary for someone who should be able to transform had been crammed in higgly-piggly.

That long neck craned backward, trying to see Ratchet’s face from way down there as the towering Autobot stopped before him. A big hand came down, and Sludge’s head bobbed, mouth gaping open. Blunt teeth nipped while the little wriggler tried to evade the big hand coming for him at the same time.
Ratchet bopped him on the snout with one finger, and the bright optics crossed to follow it. “No biting.” Another squeak, and Sludge’s neck whipped about as he tried to follow the finger running down the back of his neck. The medic chuckled as that ended up with the tiny Dinobot losing his balance and falling over. “Silly thing. Come here.”

There was much flailing of stubby legs and overly long tail and neck as the shrunken dinosaur tried to right himself. Ratchet simply scooped him up around the middle, avoiding the moving bits and going for the pudgy torso. Sludge squealed and wriggling violently in alarm at the sudden lift. Airborn! Brontosaurus weren’t supposed to be airborn!

The medic smiled down at him as the thrashing halted the second Sludge started looking around. Fear turned to staring at the room. The new perspective was apparently fascinating.

After about half a minute of looking around, Sludge contorted that long neck backward in order to stare at Ratchet upside-down. Ratchet blinked back at him. The back of his mind calculated just how physically impossible that position was for any other altmode, but the tiny mech seemed quite content. He bumped the top of his head against the back of Ratchet’s hand while he chirruped a question. Curious Sludge was curious.

Curious was good. Curious wasn’t a panic attack. The Dinobots had gone through three hours of panic attacks and/or temper tantrums after Wheeljack successfully shrank them. Even the relatively primitive processors that the Dinobots had started out with didn’t handle being micro-sized well. It hadn’t helped that Wheeljack had been panicking just as badly. Inventions that did what they were
supposed to didn’t necessarily produce results that anybody actually wanted.

Three hours of trying to calm down one full-sized inventor and five micro-sized Dinobots hadn’t done anyone good. Wheeljack had been sedated. The Dinobots had been -- clumsily, but with sparkfelt fervor -- cuddled. These were not circumstances anyone had any experience with, but they were learning rapidly.

So curiosity? Ratchet had learned to encourage curiosity. Hence why he pet Sludge’s neck again and settled on agreeing. “Ah...sure. I have no idea what you’re asking, but sure.” Carefully transferring the little guy to his right hand, he beeped Sludge’s nose with his left hand. “How’re you feeling?”

Sludge immediately sneezed: snit-snit. Snit!

He couldn’t help it. Ratchet chuckled. “That bad, huh? We’ll see about that.”

“First Aid?” His quiet call brought no response. Ratchet tucked the small dinosaur into the crook of one arm and walked slowly to avoid upsetting him. The Dinobots’ equilibrium chips were still set for bodies that were now far too large for their current frames, and they were prone to crying out in confusion because of abrupt movement.

Two days of learning how to Dinobot-sit had taught Ratchet how to carry his charges. Sludge seemed happy to lay on his back on the medic’s forearm, propped up in the elbow joint. Stubby legs waved in the air, and the dinosaur took a few experimental snaps at his own tail. It seemed to have a mind of its own. It evaded capture by curling around the medic’s thumb.

He let his thumb be entangled while he walked further into the medbay in a search for his Dinobot-sitting coworker. The cracked-open door at the end of the medbay gave him the clue he was looking for. It appeared that they’d have to start locking all the doors, if the Dinobots had figured out how to open doors on their own.

“So that’s how you got out,” he said to Sludge, who had caught the wily tail-tip and was chewing on it. “That’s not food. No. Stop that.” Whining started when he pulled the dented tail from a stubborn maw. “I know it seemed excessively long now, but trust me, you grow into it. You’re going to need that, honest. No, Sludge.”

The problem with so much tail and neck was that they could curl around any blockage Ratchet put in their way. Sludge wound into a spaghetti knot around his wrist and still managed to chomp onto that tail-tip again. It was either delicious or the equivalent of a comfort blanket.

Ratchet sighed and let the chewing go on. It probably wouldn’t hurt Sludge once Wheeljack reversed the shrinking. Hopefully, anyway.

He slid the door open and peeked in, expecting to find it empty. Instead, he found First Aid curled under the repair berth, an armload of tiny Dinobots cuddled close. There appeared to have been only one escapee. Formerly ferocious warriors still recharged, ignorant of freedom an open door away. Fortunately. Chasing down Dinobots scurrying in five different directions was not how Ratchet wanted to spend his night.

Four Dinobots remained curled into small balls composed of tucked-in limbs, tailtips over muzzles, and peacefully offline optics. First Aid’s radio played a lullaby involving stars and twinkling, in various combination of words. The Protectobot had zonked out with his charges, however, lulled into recharge by the quiet music and the soft clicking of small systems winding down. A T-Rex no bigger than his forearm lay sprawled across the junior medic’s side, teeth still clamped on one tire. He must have fallen asleep still gnawing on it.
Okay, even Ratchet had to admit that was cute.

In his arms, Sludge stirred. “Eee. Eeeeeeeep.” Ratchet looked down just in time to catch the world’s tiniest sleepy yawn. Four legs stiffened in a luxurious stretch, and Ratchet had to act fast to keep Sludge from falling when neck and tail followed suit.

When the stretch finished, Sludge slowly retracted back into a half-curl cradled in his arms. Dim optics blinked up at him, and there were a few satisfied smacks as Sludge opened and shut his mouth. The low purr of tiny systems slowed. The brontosaurus must have been running on curiosity alone to have outlasted even First Aid’s notorious patient care.

Ratchet didn’t blame the other Autobot for going down in the line of duty. The Dinobots were hard enough to keep up with normally. Like this, if it wasn’t trying to pry Grimlock off someone’s bumper, it was trying to coax Swoop off the ceiling or prevent Slag from headbutting someone in the tire. They went off in five directions at once, and one of those directions was usually straight up.

“Time for you to recharge,” the senior Autobot medic whispered to his current troublemaker. He cupped that fat middle in his hands and lowered Sludge to the floor. The long neck nodded downward, but Sludge jerked back awake with a confused squeak when his nose bumped into the floor. “Shhh. Go on, now.” He nudged the little Dinobot toward the sleeping mound of ‘bots.

Sludge toddled off.
Ratchet supervised. No telling what trouble could befall the tyke before he was safely asleep, after all. So he stood right there in the door and sternly watched to make sure that Sludge climbed up over First Aid’s arm and snuggled down. Yep, just the strictest doctor in the war, right here.

First Aid sighed and, without waking, gathered the whole armload closer, which accidentally up-ended the Dinobot trying to climb into his arms. Sludge’s back legs paddled air desperately for a moment before the brontosaurus pulled his neck up out of the group and clambered into a spot of his own. Ratchet got a perfect image capture of Swoop cheeping and waving one wing before folding it over Sludge’s head and going back to sleep.

Giving the room one last sweep for caution’s sake -- First Aid had removed everything possible to Dinobot-proof it, but just in case -- Ratchet closed the door quietly and went on his way.

Six hours later, he regretted that. “I should have done these while you were asleep!”

Swoop fluttered just out of reach of the monitor lead and cheeped frantically. “Me Swoo! Me Swoo!”

Fraggit, he just needed one scan. One scan! “Oh, for love of Primus...yes, I know you’re Swoop.” Ratchet lowered his hands, trying to lull the excited flyer into a false sense of security. “And you still have errors in your vocalizer files, if you can’t pronounce your own name.”

By Shibara (Bitty Swoop! Eeeeee! /\^o^\(\) /)

Autobots around the room began flinching as that failed to calm the smallest Dinobot down at all.
Swoop’s wings beat a staccato rhythm against the ceiling and walls as he jigged from side to side in an attempt to suss out an escape route around the medic who’d cornered him. “Swoo! Swoo!”

“Okay, okay, calm down! Look, no scanner! I won’t scan you!” He slung the scanner lead over one shoulder and backed away, hands open to show they were empty. The little flutterer battering himself against the upper corner of the common room dropped to hover lower, which was exactly what he wanted. Slamming repeatedly into the ceiling and walls while trying to escape wasn’t what Ratchet wanted Swoop to do.

“Come down,” he coaxed. “No scan. See the scanner?” He bent down and put the entire scanner on the floor, never taking his optics off the scared Dinobot. “No more scanner. So you just come down here, and we’ll get you fed. How about it?”

“Swoo!” Swoop screeched suspiciously. Tiny wings beat the air in a circle, and he kept above the height he knew the medic could reach. “No! No! Me Swoo no!”

“Swoo! Get down here!” Oops, the Angry Ratchet voice was not the one he’d wanted to pull out. He winced the second it was out, but too late.

Swoop zipped right back up in the corner to beat against the ceiling. “Me Swoo! Me Swoo! Me Swoo!”

Suddenly, an elbow jabbed into Ratchet’s side, and the medic ‘oof’ed as he was abruptly bracketed by Aerialbots. “Relax, doc. We’ve got this,” Slingshot said, grinning insolently.

Fireflight smiled and bounced right past the group into the corner. “Aww, lookit the baby! C’mere, babykins! Silverbolt, come look at his teensy wings! Can I keep him?”

Silverbolt gave the slightly offended medic an apologetic look. “Fireflight...Swoop isn’t really a baby...” He seemed to think better of correcting his teammate. “But he is very cute. You can, uh, ‘keep’ him for a few minutes today if you get him down for us, okay?”

The fudging of the truth earned a dirty look from Ratchet, but since Swoop had decided investigating Fireflight’s fingers could be interesting, the medic let it pass. Wings fluttered and folded as the Dinobot perched for a split second on the Aerialbot’s forefinger and took a curious peck. Then it was back into the air to zip in another circle before returning.

Fireflight grinned and flexed his hands in the air. “Okay! Slingshot, aww, you gotta try this. Look at his widdle wings!” Another peck, and he giggled. “It tickles!”

Slingshot subsided a bit under a withering look, and Silverbolt added, “Get him down without frightening the poor thing, please.”

Squashing Slingshot was much easier than attempting to do the same with Fireflight. Fireflight was overeager but not mean-spirited in the least. Slingshot? Sometimes Slingshot could be an aft. This was not the time for aft-dom. Silverbolt would flatten anyone who made a Dinobot so much as sad today. Wrath of Gestalt Leader, quickly followed by Wrath of Medic, if the steely glare beside Silverbolt wasn’t warning enough.

“Yeah, yeah, everybody’s a critic.” Just a touch less arrogant and a tad bit more nervous, Slingshot went forward to join his teammate in coaxing the relatively tiny fellow flyer down. But for all his bluster and callousness toward the other Autobots, anyone who could read a mech’s body language could see the lack of aggression in the Aerialbot’s wings.

Swoop was going to be nestled in their hands in no time.
“#$)(*%ing birdie, get down here!”

...despite all evidence to the contrary.

“Me Swoo! Me Swoo!”

“Your name isn’t @#$ _)%ing Swoo! Who taught you to speak?! Gah! Get off my head!”

……eventually.

Fireflight laughed and tried to teach Swoop to speak like a parrot. With their luck lately, Swoop would pick up Slingshot’s profanity instead. Silverbolt just sighed and moved in to help pick sharp talons off the edge of Slingshot’s helm while the other jet windmilled his arms and cursed the shrilly screeching, gleefully hyperactive pterodactyl now clinging to his head. Fireflight laughed harder.

Ratchet harrumphed and turned back toward the tables. Silverbolt could handle the antics of his own mechs. Ratchet had four more Dinobots to deal with.

At least the chaos at the other end of the common room was confined to one giant shallow bowl of energon and a group of volunteers. Volunteers covered in pink fuel, at this point, but their sparks were in the right place despite the mess. He thought he’d impressed on them the importance of keeping the Dinobots’ struggling, micro-sized systems fully-fueled. It was a major priority. The Dinobots’ shrunken bodies were improperly programmed and kept glitching, making fuel processing hideously inefficient at best, completely rejecting energon at worst.

Seeing tiny cute creatures drop into statis struck most of the Autobots to the spark any time. Describing how it could happen to mechs they knew and were witnessing in an intensely vulnerable state right now...well, Ratchet might have traumatized Beachcomber.

He regretted nothing. If it kept the Dinobots from collapsing, he’d describe every graphic detail of a fuel-system crash. In fact, he had.

There were so many volunteers there weren’t enough chairs to go around. Optimus Prime almost hadn’t been able to find a spot at the table. The mighty leader of the Autobots still kept three mechs between himself and the medic at all times, but he managed not to blatantly hide under the table when Ratchet returned to supervising.

So. Four shrunken Dinobots; eight normal mechs. Good odds, right?

“He swallowed!” Sideswipe crowed triumphantly, and the Autobots cheered. Slag made a hiccupsing hork-type sound, and the cheering faltered. “...he spat it back up.”

“This one, too,” Cliffjumper said. The Minibot sounded morose, but that turned to alarm a second later. He held up dripping hands as Snarl started hiccupsing repeatedly. “I didn’t do it!”

Ratchet strode up to the table like it was a battle to be conquered. “I told you, you have to help them get the air bubbles out or they’ll do that every time! Oh, scrap.”
The entire table watched with wide, helpless optics as the small stegosaurus barfed a glug of energon up. All four legs wobbled before dumping him to his belly on the table to whimper in pain. Cliffjumper looked like he was afraid to touch him again.

“Hold him, you idiot!” Ratchet snapped. “He’s got air bubbles in his tanks, and the intakes aren’t sized properly to work without jogging them open!”

He scooped up Grimlock and held the T-Rex against his shoulder in illustration, patting the miserable Dinobot’s back busily. Wheeljack’s invention had indeed micro-sized the Dinobots, but it hadn’t done it consistently. There were parts of the Dinobots that didn’t fit right, now. Their fuel processing systems were the worst offenders, requiring this.
“Grim Grim Grim,” the wrigglesome little ‘bot draped on his shoulder said in time with the patting. Grimlock latched onto the upper corner of the medic’s altmode roof and kept whining around the mouthful. “Grim! Grim!”

Ratchet patted as Grimlock chewed away. The steady concussion right above the micro-sized fuel intake eventually jiggled it open, but there were teethmarks pressed into Ratchet’s paint before that happened.

“Grim Grim Grim Grim,” Grimlock’s muffled protest continued, right up until the air bubbles finally released. “-- urp!”

A splotch of energon drooled down the back of the medic’s shoulder. But just a bit, which was a huge improvement over what the other Dinobots were bringing back up. “There,” Ratchet said shortly. He roughly shook the teeth out of his armor and passed Grimlock back to Beachcomber and Mirage. “Try again.”

Mirage hardly looked the image of a noblemech now, covered in projectile vomit. Not that it wasn’t recyclable, but he still looked at the pink-stained, very squirmy T-Rex in his arms with much distaste. Did he have to stuff food down this mobile mess’s gullet? Did he really?

That question was written all over his face right up until Optimus Prime kicked him under the table. The noblemech jerked in surprise and looked up, glancing around indignantly. Then he caught the glare being directed at him by Ratchet. Wrath of Medic. Yes. That was a thing, right here and now,
glowering at certain Autobots until they remembered their own reprehensible behavior.

Back to the corner of shame with them!

Mirage meekly bent to burping Grimlock.

Really, feeding the Dinobots wasn’t too difficult. Small, playful mechs who escaped and gallumphed about the common room were more cute than problematic. The Autobots had faced tougher challenges in their time than getting Swoop to stop splashing and preening in the bowl and actually drink his dinner. Even when he started shrieking the nastiest word in Slingshot’s repertoire, over and over again. That was tiresome but not necessarily bad.

It was when the Dinobots’ temperature regulators failed that things took a turn for bad. Patience alone couldn’t solve this problem.

“I don’t have anything in their size!” Ratchet’s famous hands restlessly washed over and over each other, searching for a solution out of their reach. “I could rebuilt one of the Cassette’s regulators, but who’s going to decide who gets that one part? Who’s going to make that decision?” The angry look he seared the officers with poorly covered how he’d fretted down to the spark over this. “They’re dying, Prime. They’re dying, and I can’t do anything!”

He wasn’t even blaming Optimus anymore. His voice held nothing but frantic, sad, hopeless grief. That made the Prime shrink down even more because the guilt lay heavier with every word. Prowl hid behind a datapad. The other officers stared at the table because they couldn’t bear to look at the medic.

“If they stop moving, their temperature spikes to redline. If they move, it drops, but not reliably enough that I could install something to help keep them warm. They’d burn up if I put them into forced statis, but I can’t stop them from playing when they’re awake! I just...they’re going to die.”

The officers watched Ratchet turn and leave the room, and there wasn’t a slagging word of comfort they could give. It’d been four days, and the shrunken Dinobots had caused chaos, panic, and disorder wherever they’d gone. They’d also instilled a deep and abiding determination to right the wrongs that’d led to the other Autobots originally -- if secretly -- agreeing with their Prime basically asking Wheeljack to tamper with the minds of sentient Cybertronians.

The Dinobots were cute like this. Adorable, with a side of picture-perfect moments every other second. They just weren’t...the Dinobots. They couldn’t really speak, beyond a few words. They couldn’t eat on their own. Everything that made them sentient, thinking beings blazed in their absence, and the Autobots were left to deal with the guilt of not seeing those things until they’d been stripped away.

Grimlock had been dumbfounded by Optimus Prime’s color scheme and sat there staring up at the Autobot leader for a good ten minutes before fleeing under a table and refusing to come out for anyone but First Aid. Swoop kept flying headlong into windows. Snarl had to be carried everywhere, since his balance had gotten screwed up by the disproportionate size of his back plating. Slag refused to eat. Sludge was Sludge. Small, dumber, and more roly-poly, but still Sludge.

Ratchet didn’t even have to break out the Bat of Responsibility. The Autobots were lining up to put themselves in the Shame Corner, at this point.

And now the Dinobots were dying. There wasn’t enough room in the corner of shame for that. The Autobots would have to dig a Guilt Hole and bury themselves in it, and that still wouldn’t be enough.
Sparkplug figured out a solution, praise Primus. “It’s winter.”

Ratchet didn’t even take his face out of his hands. “So?”

“So it’s cold outside.” The human mechanic squinted at the temperature fluxuations Ratchet had been tracking. “Main problem is that they’ll overheat when they’re inactive, right?”

“But if they go outside, they’ll be active. If I put them anywhere cold enough to keep them online, their systems go into hyperdrive, and they’ll start playing.” Ratchet wearily looked up. “Core temperatures will drop, and they’ll likely freeze with the weather we’ve been having. I can’t keep them still, and I can’t let them move. It’s a lose-lose situation.”

“It’s temperature regulation that’s the problem. Give them more insulation and a colder environment to start with!” Sparkplug pointed out, growing more excited by his words as he started changing numbers inside Ratchet’s calculations. “Why do they even need an internal regulator? We’ve both stuck on the idea that you have to have a regulator installed! God, I’m thinking like a robot, now.”

That got a slow blink. “Uh...Sparkplug -- “

“I didn’t mean that like it’s a bad thing,” the man waved a hand impatiently, “but it kind of is for this. Look, humans don’t have internal regulators like you do. When our bodies can’t do enough, we have to change our environment or use different clothing. When I’m cold,” he explained to the medic, “I put on a sweater. When I’m hot, I take it off. Why can’t the Dinobots do the same?”

Ratchet opened his mouth to reply and lost his answer before it came out. There was no reason why not.

And that’s how there came to be five tiny Dinobots playing in the snow under Ironhide’s guarding optics and a variety of knitted objects. The thrift stores in Portland were going to need time to recover from being raided by Autobots on a mission to save their pint-sized comrades. The mechs had trekked back to the Ark toting enough second-hand clothing to make five appropriately-sized blankets, plus a custom-fitted T-Rex sweater-vest, a hoodie meant to cover a triceratop’s horns, a stegosaurus cocoon, a snuggee big enough for a brontosaurus, and an over-wing cape. Not to mention booties and hats.

Somehow the hats had all acquired bobbles. It was a scientific mystery how that had happened. Perceptor was intrigued.

It’d taken a massive cooperative effort to piece together the clothing. Grapple had thrown together rough patterns; Jazz had organized construction teams; Prowl had planned the thrift store runs. Every Autobot had done a round of emergency sewing. However ridiculous the resulting baggy, shabby, and otherwise ragged layers of cloth looked -- they worked. The blankets and clothes could be taken off quickly and buttoned back on just as fast, and that was all that mattered.

The Dinobots were wrapped in shapeless swatches of cloth, but even Sunstreaker had looked down and smiled at Snarl and Sludge curled up around each other in a huge patchwork puddle of ugly colors.

Ratchet watched Slag run around in the snow, blanket flying out behind him like the tiny bitlet was Super Slag. Grimlock had lost one galosh in the snow, and Blaster had his hands full trying to wrestle the bootie back on the T-Rex when said T-Rex was much more interested in chasing after Super Slag. Swoop cheeped and hopped about nearby like a moving pile of rags. Despite his attempts to hop away, Silverbolt scooped him up and poked him in the tummy to screams of happy profanity.
Slingshot was never going to live that down.

Gears came out the Ark’s front door. Ratchet heard him coming and turned. The Minibot opened his mouth, and the medic tensed.

If the fragger said one thing, one measly complaint, about the effort they’d gone through to save the Dinobots’ lives, he was going to snap the mech in half and feed him his own feet!

A large, very Prime-like arm shot out of the door and dragged Gears back inside before a single word got out.

Ratchet relaxed. Turning back to the Dinobots frolicking in the snow, he resumed watching. Wheeljack had sworn he’d have the machine reversed and the Dinobots back to normal in ten hours or less. Ten more hours, and Ratchet would release everyone from marinating in their guilt over in the corner of shame.

Juuuuuuust in time for Grimlock to get his revenge.

But he wasn’t going to warn anyone about that.

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Pt. 13

Chapter Summary

You are Astrotrain, Starscream, Optimus Prime, Star Saber, and Brainstorm.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 13  
Warning: Sex and burning alive, Academy functions, a sulking Seeker, the gentlest domination possible, gambling to lose, falling in love despite everything, and reveling in voyeurism.  
Rating: R?  
Continuity: IDW and G1  
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.  
Motivation (Prompt): A prompt challenge on Tumblr. Bring it on.

Note: the Nautilator/D.J.D. ficlet once in this chapter has been moved to ‘Gone Fishing.’

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Sunstorm/Astrotrain - ‘hot, dirty, smut anon’  
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It’s hot.

Not so hot it hurts, but it hurts nonetheless because that heat splits in two and clamps down on your lower lip. Brushed across the surface in brief touches wouldn’t have been bad, but this? This is metal burning on either side of your lower lip, and your metal responds faster than your systems do. It’s softer already than healthy from the sheer output tempering your plating into a purer form of desire.

You’re armored for space travel, but your face hasn’t the protection your shuttlemode does. There are no ceramic tiles or heat shields against the stress of re-entry. And yet you let him close enough to do this, knowing he’d strike for the vulnerable point.

Stupid.

Clever, in a base way. You congratulate yourself and scream in the same second, because lust is its own torture. You’re clever in a way that results in fingers raking scorching heat up either side of your jaw and dragging the black, charring marks down your neck. It could have been a punch. It could have been the full blast of his radiation, the starbright flames of his God and glory, but instead it’s molten metal dripping down the inside of your lower lip. Can you taste yourself? Can you taste his breath?

He breathes in space. Not like you, never like you, not even in something you two should hold in similar. You are both Cybertronian, but right now you are something very different. What pulls in and out of his vents shimmers yellow and deadly, generated by a spark and a weapon that you invited closer. You practically pull it into your arms, and it clings to your armor. For a moment, it feels good. It’s warm when the vastness of space is bitter cold. It’s substance out in the void.

But like the unnatural softness turning your mouth to slick metal and burns, this warmth also becomes too much. The radiation sinks into the joints, to the gaps, into you. It is warm, but then it is
hot, and it’s too late to recoil. It singes whatever it touches. You are covered in it. The Light of Primus will burn you alive, he will take you and consume you in his fire, and stupid you, you held out your arms.

Where are your survival instincts, idiot? Didn’t anyone ever teach you not to put everything you find in your mouth? Stop picking up the shiny objects and run away, you fool!

Maybe it’s too late. If you flee, he’ll pursue, and the orange optics simmering so close to you will be those of a hungry predator instead of a sated one. He’s feeding from you. Don’t make him kill you first.

You open yourself to him like the stupid drunkard you are, and when you gasp, you taste suns and light across your tongue before the extreme heat crackles over it like liquid lightning. Undiluted energy pools at the back of your mouth. When you swallow, you swallow him, and it ignites the fumes of high grade in your tank. Just a flash, a bang that causes you to hiccup in surprise, and you jerk as emergency intakes shoot closed before anything else catches fire.

For a second, you both breathe licking flickers of flame in space.

Luminous orange optics light when your own optics click back on, shock or self-preservation kicking you in the back of the cortex. When did you take your optics offline? Why did you decide it was a good idea to wrap the pretty herald of godly wrath in your arms? How, with lips sticky as the surface metal melts to his, can you mold your mouth to the shape of his kiss? Do you deliberately go out of your way to embrace destruction?

Apparently. Call it stupidity, foolishness, perhaps a death wish -- but you’re not dead. He kisses you like he will strip away your body and free your spark to twine with his, and the pulse of chained power vibrates every sensor in your body until you make small sounds of helpless need. They die in the airless void, but he smiles as if he heard you moan. Pooling low in your tanks is a heat that has nothing to do with temperature. The edges of your armor turn cherry-red, but the slick feel of his mouth over yours drives you crazy even as the pain drives you mad. His tongue sweeps in and chars pleading words to ash before they are more than thoughts mouthed against his lips, and he hums satisfaction as he tastes them.

He pushes down on your shoulders with his hands, pulling himself up your body, but he pushes down with his mouth as his wings rise above you like the sun dawning around a planet. He is a rogue star, and you are caught in his gravitational pull. You cannot help but give way beneath the pressure of his hand, turn your face up into his kiss.

You are fluid. You are freed. You are molten and melting, and your hands pull brilliant yellow danger further into the open wound you have become. He damages you by existing, and you throw yourself open to whatever he wants to inflict upon you. He will kill you, and you will die screaming his name in praise.

It’s not a bad way to go.

His hands sear prints of black and buckled metal into you, leaving a road map of greed and giving in their wake. His mouth ravages yours, turning and taking and never still. The metal softens, hardens, and softens again. You taste a runnel of the outer layer on your tongue when passion flares and he lingers too long in one liplock. He licks your metal off you and pulls back to smile with you stained across his mouth. His body invades you, permeates you, and even as his radiation sends vital systems shrieking, you scream for more because of what it does to your sensor network. That is a different burning, and it feels the way you deliriously wish it always would.
You held out your arms, and he came to you. His lips bear down like he’ll conquer you, suck on your tongue a last time as if in goodbye, and then he’s gone, a shooting star of violent sunbright destruction.

He leaves you on the edge, throbbing and whimpering, biting your abused lower lip in a vain attempt at recapturing what he abandoned you to deal with on your own. Was that an attack or a tease? Does it matter? You retain just enough common sense not to chase him, either way.

While you’re still trying to bend pained, tender finger joints into position to ease the near-pain he inflicted on you, there’s a fiery blast of radiation as the distant yellow light goes nova. And suddenly you understand why he left you crying out for more.

He left you alive. Had he overloaded in your arms, however...

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“Hunt with me” - Mirage/Starscream

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He sure won’t be winning any awards for pick-up lines. You’ve seen more subtle blunt object projectiles.

To be fair, you won’t be winning any awards yourself, especially for your voice. The Science Academy’s made it very clear you won’t be getting any for your accomplishments. What’s a pick-up line, really, but a statement of interest? It’s more than you get on a regular basis from anyone but Skyfire, and he’s certainly never made a pass at you. A pick-up line is almost an accomplishment. It’s more than you should expect to get from sneaking into an Academy function tonight.

You shouldn’t be here. Skyfire told you not to try and get in, but you couldn’t resist. Not after your grant proposals were turned down three times in a row in favor of the inane, fawning idiots here tonight. Those gearheads are lining up to buff the skidplates of the rich, and you have to be here to witness. It could have been you. It should be you, but it’s not, so you’re at least going to see what you’re missing.

You disarmed the security measures on the top floor of the Micean Tower -- it is only another type of science, the sort where information technology can be used in practical terms -- and breezed into the room like you belonged. For all that the noblemechs looked twice at your build and your public credentials ID, your attitude never made them question that you belonged. You have the degree and the snooty, haughty, better-than-thou expression to squash the idea of actually checking your name against the invitation list. You lurk on the edges of the crowd, however, because the professors and Board members holding court at the feet of their patrons would blow circuits if they spotted you.

You, the disgrace. You, the warbuild who dared defy his function and, worst of all, be good at it. They wish you’d be content to stay in a lab, tucked away from public view, until you die from an unfortunate lab accident.

“There are better proposals,” they tell you every time they deny you grants, but you’ve read the winning numbers up in the aft-buffing lotto going on tonight. He who can kiss the most skidplate will be chosen to fund, not he whose proposal will push the most boundaries, discover new materials, or explore different worlds.

“You don’t belong,” one of the more honest of your professors bluntly informed you. “It’s about charming money into the Academy. We need to persuade our benefactors that our laboratories will enhance their images and return in profit what they risk on us in face-time.”
The honesty stung, but it was appreciated. So you came here tonight, although you shouldn’t have. Not because you’re bitter enough to ruin the whole Academy’s chances through a spoiled tantrum -- it’s tempting, but you do have a career ahead of you -- but because you desperately need to see what’s beaten you out. Every scientist in the Academy is part of a competition, and you lost the game before you started, just by being who you are. Some feverish desire has to know what traits you lack. You castigate yourself, but you need to know.

You came. You saw. You still see.

This slip of a noblemech saw you, in return.

In his optics you see the truth of what the Academy lost in its stolid refusal to gamble on one warbuild and his proposals. Every experiment runs through a calculation of acceptable risk, but the Academy blinded itself to the odds, here. There will always be the Towers nobles who look for someone more exotic and wild, and those are the ones willing to throw everything into supporting that outside chance.

“Hunt with me,” Mirage commands as if you would perch on his arm and soar when he launches you into the air. It’s a demeaning image, but no less so than the clipped-wing cage the Academy keeps you in. At least you’ll get to fly, and if he’s anything of a hunter, he’ll know to follow where you fly but protect you when you land.

From the subtle gleam in his optic, he might just ask whereabouts you nest.

Depending on how he asks, you might make room for two.

You do like to hunt.

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Thundercracker - “Jealousy”

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It was the last thing either of you expected. Although, well, don’t look at you, because this isn’t your fault. You didn’t know the mech before last night and don’t have a clue how he is normally.

“He’s not usually like this,” Skywarp says, optics wide as he stands on the balcony and stares thirteen stories straight down. You suppose he would know, but then again, this is Skywarp. “I don’t know…I mean, I do know why -- he said why -- but it doesn’t make any sense!”

Thirteen stories down, the movers have transformed and taken off with their meager load. Not that Thundercracker didn’t meticulously label everything he owns for the movers to find and take out, but Skywarp owns the apartment and most of the major furnishings. Thundercracker apparently doesn’t collect material belongings, that’s all.

The telling part is that a flyer hired a ground-based moving team to do the moving. That’s the part neither of you expected. Skywarp’s ventilation system glitched this morning when the complex’s door chime sounded instead of the balcony. You and he spent the whole night planning to ambush Skywarp’s wingmate with reason and soothing nonsense the second he came through the balcony door, and the blue Seeker neatly avoided the trap. The mech knows Skywarp, no lie.

You admire that, in a way. You thought you knew the idiot, and look how that had turned out. You don’t know Skywarp at all!

Bonus points to Thundercracker for outmaneuvering you both. It makes you feel like a graceless
fool, but you can give the mech a begrudging nod for style.

“This was a bad idea,” you mutter, and Skywarp whirls to give you a hurt look. You sigh and meet it head-on with a pissy glare of your own. “It was,” you insist. “I knew the second I met you that you’re trouble, and if I’d known you were this stupid, I would have never gone to the registry office in the first place!”

Hurt skids rapidly toward betrayal, but you’re already striding for the balcony door. Hope lights his optics for a moment -- what, does he seriously think you’re going to comfort his idiot aft? -- but then you brush past him and take a running step onto the steps, the launch rail, and out into the open sky. He yells something after you. You ignore it. You also ignore the increasingly urgent pings hammering your personal commlink. A clean break is best here. Maybe he’ll learn something from your parting words, but you doubt it.

He can teleport to catch up to you, the original thing that caught your optic in your first meeting. He zipped up into the sky to introduce himself rather persistently while you tried to get away that day, and he kept warping to keep up with you. He probably didn’t realize in the subsequent chase you led him on that you were sounding out the extent of his abilities. He can catch you, but only if he knows where you are.

You figured that out as soon as you realized he intended to get you on his wing. Call it justifiable pessimism, but you predicted even then that you’d need to be able to evade him. So you punch on your afterburners and use the speed that he claims to love to get the frag out of scanning range before he can lock up the apartment and attempt chasing you.

As soon as the immediate danger of being spotted is over, you drop back to normal speeds and merge into morning air traffic. If you stay in the mid-building smog, your colors won’t stand out to any Seeker searching from above. Trying to hide is when having a bright color scheme puts you at a disadvantage, but you’re confident there’s enough haze to cloud Skywarp’s optics. Mid-building’s not the fastest strata of traffic, but it’ll keep you hidden and get you where you need to go today. Which is, in order: 1. away from Skywarp, and 2. to the registry office.

You brood while you fly. It’s become a familiar thing since returning to Cybertron without Skyfire. Getting exiled from your chosen career field will do that to a mech, you’ve found.

All right, Skywarp is an unmitigated disaster. Time to backpedal so fast you leave a sonic boom. That does leave you right back where you started, however.

Entrance into the War Academy requires a full wing. As annoying as Skywarp is, you’d thought he was the answer to your entrance woes when he popped into your flight path and wouldn’t leave you be. But, no, turns out that he already has a wingmate. He never bothered to inform said wingmate when you entered the equation. What a shining example of stupidity.

That doesn’t exclude you, basking in the rays of stupid as you were. You have your own set of communication issues, mostly of the mind-to-mouth filter variety. Your initial thought after the shock of walking into the apartment was, “Can you even keep up with a formation weighted down under all that armor?”

Thundercracker’s built, you must admit. A hefty chunk of armor protects him from both the sonic weaponry he uses and slower speeds that result from using it. Something you’d have known if you kept your mouth shut and accessed the registry during that vital first minute. Instead, you insulted him.

Not your finest moment, you admit.
He was suitably miffed. Your first impression of ‘not very impressed’ changed to ‘could be interesting’ during the resulting blow-out between him and Skywarp. The mech, politely enough, asked you to stay out in the common room while he dragged a suddenly apprehensive Skywarp into the next room for an argument. You demurely kept yourself on the couch as requested, but even straining your audios didn’t let you eavesdrop on anything more than a dark, plating-rattling rumble of anger underneath Skywarp’s steadily more strident protests.

You’ve argued with Skywarp a few times. The way he whines tries the patience of the very air he vents, you swear. The fact that Thundercracker didn’t resort even once to raising his voice elects him for sainthood in your personal pantheon of flyers. That kind of control is an excellent plus toward a potential wingmate, in your mind.

Too bad he has as much interest in joining your wing as he has in making up with the troublemaking Seeker you both hold in common. Thundercracker could have frozen lubricant when he stalked out of the room and began labeling his belongings. He refused to so much as look at you.

You could easily get angry at him for that, but you’re more intrigued. There aren’t many mechs with the presence of mind to set all the blame squarely where it belongs, and where it belongs is on Skywarp. You’re guilty of not making a good first impression, nothing more. Thundercracker recognized that. You like that.

Ah, well. There could have been something there, but the whole deal is off. You’re going to cancel the wingmate registry now.

Maybe Skywarp can salvage Thundercracker from the ruins of that relationship, but it’s not your problem anymore. Fortunately for your peace of mind, your emotional commitment to that nutjob is negligible. You’ll miss the praise and play and the beginnings of a decent working wing. You were on the verge of committing to a wing, but Skywarp himself? Meh, who cares. You truly cannot see why Thundercracker got his cockpit stuck over someone else infringing on his wingmate’s time. Or Skywarp flitting about looking at other wings. You’re really not sure how that relationship worked.

You should look up open wings while you’re at the registry. You’ve been rather set on the idea of finding another free flyer and seeking your third together, but perhaps if you start with a stable duo actively looking for their third already, things will unfold smoother. Especially if you insist on meeting as a trine. No more secret wingmates in a closet somewhere. It’d avoid these kind of complications, you’re sure.

A thrum warns you from above, and you roll out of the way just as someone a shade larger and far heavier slides down into your space. Speaking of complications. “He’s all yours,” you transmit, trying to keep your exasperation out of your voice for the sake of Skywarp’s evident inability to communicate clearly. You don’t envy this mech having to deal with that. “I’m on my way to handle the official business, now.”

Blue wings slide closer to your own. Crowding you, much? Yeah, you don’t take well to the silent treatment, nor to unspoken threats. This mech can just fly back to wherever he came from.

You slip into the next lane and flare your flaps to break speed, bringing your target lock up on his thrusters as a quick barrel roll lines you up behind him. His running lights flare in surprise, but you are the fastest flyer Vos ever built. It’s not your fault if he didn’t do his homework before trying to intimidate you. Test you. Whatever the frag he thinks he’s doing right now. You have no idea, and you don’t care.

Your voice sharpens. “Back off.”
He hesitates, likely weighing the pros and cons of you pushing you further, but he eventually leaves. Not without a parting shot: your canopy rattles under a solid boom as he whirls away into the opposite lane and takes off.

Hint hint. Stay away from his Skywarp. Also: speed isn’t everything.

In his opinion, anyway. You’ll let him keep it, since you’re on your way out of his life. You do like that the quiet dignity hides someone that feisty.

You’re chuckling when you land at the registry office.

You fill out the forms to cancel your prior registration. When the attendant informs you there’s been an error and the cancellation will be delayed until further notice, you’re not worried. You just move on to browse the registry for duos while you wait.

While you’re there, you make the decision to put out a single’s notice. It’s common enough for a sole flyer to advertise his availability, and this allows you to attach your full resume. That’s something you’ve deliberately kept off your public ID ping here in Vos. You wanted a chance to settle back into normal life and look for a potential wing without the baggage of your past, despite the resounding accolades that same past would earn you. The War Academy’s next entrance examination is relatively soon, however. You want to start training with a wing before the deadline hits.

It’s been a lousy morning, but an accomplished afternoon. When you leave the registry office, you’ve sent in the cancellation form, filled out a single’s notice, and are confident you’ll start getting interested replies by nightfall.

Which you do. By the cargo load. Mostly from one duo in particular, signed by one mech in the duo. Some of them are invitations. Some of them could have been nice to accept if they didn’t make you slightly suspicious as to why Thundercracker is so certain you’ll get near him after your non-confrontation earlier.

You send an inquiry. The registry office sends you an explanation of the error. No wonder your cancellation still hasn’t gone through. Thundercracker sent in his own wingmate registration at the same time. There’s a conflict. All clarification requests to Thundercracker are coming back with stubborn affirmations attached. The cancellation can’t go through until he stops insisting, “He’s mine.”

When you open your balcony door in the morning, there’s a small pile of belongings on the landing ledge. Guess who’s sitting on it? He must have gotten your address from Skywarp.

You’re not even surprised.

[* * * * *]

**Optimus Prime - “Dominate Me”**

[* * * * *]

So this is defeat. Sprawled out on your front, humiliated and seething over the betrayal that rendered you helpless. Of all your numerous enemies who could have sent you to this personalized Pit, it’s your closest confidant’s quick thinking that pulled the tarmac out from under you. You fell, and now you’re down, crushed under the feet of your foe.

Ratchet’s laughter echoes, still. He laughed, when you looked at him with betrayed optics. You trusted him. Why? Why would he did this to you?
“Turn over!”

You obediently turn over, because there’s no point in resistance. You’re a broken mech. You know it. The hands that approvingly pat your windshield control you, and you surrendered to them. They are gentle but firm in their careless confidence, assuming that they have total power, and you’re not about to disprove that power today.

Not today, not tomorrow, probably not ever. Ratchet made sure you knew your place, and your place is under the hands tracing intricate patterns across the armor-grade glass on your chest. The light contact tickles, and you squirm until you’re ordered to stay still.

It comes in the form of a slap to the glass. “Stop it!”

You stop.

The hands could be pushed aside. They are weak compared to yours, but most are. You’re used to knowing you are strong enough to defeat any Autobot or Decepticon you fight, but this isn’t a fight. This is a rigged battle. Ratchet softened you up, and the smile turned on you now exterminates all willpower left over. Inside you, the spark of defiance suffers a fatal chill and snuffs out. The urge to fight dies.

Much as your pride will when Daniel finishes scribbling on you with that bar of soap. He is illustrating his own personal vision of your many battles against Megatron. There are stick figures, and your stick-self seems to be strangling a suspiciously bucket-helmed stick-mech. When he moves on to your other windshield, he starts drawing you standing atop a pile of Decepticon stick-figures like some sort of glowing hero.

You can only imagine how many pictures the other Autobots will take.

[* * * * *]

**Star Saber/Jazz - Busted**

[* * * * *]

You will likely be executed if Tyrest finds out about this. You do it anyway. You are a purist, but you have your small sins. No one can be perfect. Compared to the good you have done, this infraction barely registers. You will be forgiven for succumbing to base desires this once.

You’re aware you’re justifying something that’s inexcusable. You’re not sure why you bother. Perhaps it soothes your conscious if you convince yourself the weakness is a tiny lapse in judgment instead of a repeated, growing problem.

“Fold,” the short black-and-white mech crows. You don’t know why he’s so happy to give up until you get a look at your own cards.

Such slag as you have never held. “I fold as well.”

The next round is somehow worse. You have the feeling you should not be a betting mech, as you could have sworn nothing could be worse than your last hand. Jazz grins at you, however, and you gamble that his hand is just as bad. Nothing risked, nothing gained.

“Ante up,” he says cheerfully, and you do.

He glances at his cards, and his visor glows that fascinating blue you should not find so interesting. He throws another three shanix on the table, and you follow his lead despite not having a leg to stand on. Anything to kick that vivid blue up another notch. It is the color of an oxygen-rich world, a
world full of water, and the exact shade of the crystals that spear a mech through the spark and yet let him live. You have seen it. You have seen where crystal and spark flickered together, and they were that color. It is a beautiful color. The color of life.

It looks back at you for a good half a minute before you realize you’ve been caught staring, cards hanging slack from your hands. The urchin grin under the blue glow widens, and you can’t look away.

When he slithers onto the table and crawls across it toward you, you drown in the light. He is everything you should lash out against. He works his way into your mind, widening the crack in your conviction.

“Star Saber,” he whispers against your mask, and your hands press to the table because you shouldn’t be doing this. Tyrest will make an example of you to all criminals, and you will confess your sins at your trial because know you are wrong. Yet you can’t turn away when Jazz looks at you from so near.

“Star Saber,” he repeats, and you make a muted noise indicating you’re not a completely functionless lump of metal. It’s followed by a squeak when one hand walks down your chest and under the table’s edge. “I call.”

You really shouldn’t bet. It just doesn’t work out for you.

[* * * * *]

“Love” - Brainstorm
[* * * * *]

You love. More than you should, in a war. More than most mechs think you can.

Love happens. Chromedome is a living testament to that fact. You want to scream and hit him with something every time he shows up wearing that same dopey look, because love happens to him the same way a train wreck does. You see it coming a mile away, but you can’t put the brakes on because you’re not in control. You can only be there to pick up the pieces afterward, put him back on track, and give him the same warnings you did last time. And then off he trundles while you claw the air at his back because, Primus spare his spark, it's only going to happen again.

If you didn’t care about him, it’d be easier. But, as you know full well, love happens.

Love sneaks up on you like an exquisitely-planned theft. You arrogantly sneer against the possibility, but you don’t dare ignore the threat. Precautions must be taken. When it happens, you know, the thief will be so skilled that your defenses will be useless, but what other choice do you have? You can’t just open your spark and invite it in. That’s not your style.

You barricade every important part of yourself off from easy access, and still it gets through. It’s never blatant. It picks the locks, disarms the blaster, pours base liquid into the acidic, climbs the spiked wall, glides across the fake flooring, finds the hidden latch in the ceiling, searches out the real entrance to the actual inner sanctum of your spark -- and when it gets that far, you’re done for. It’s gotten past all your tricks and taken a tour of you on the way. You’ve got nothing left to fight it off with. It knows you inside-out by then.

It stays. It breaks through all your defenses and sees through every diversion, and it keeps on until it’s you, just you, who’s left. It seizes your spark as if that were the prize, but the real theft quietly happens while you’re struggling in its hands. The thief stays. It sets up shop right there where you can’t ignore it.
Your courage disappears without a trace, right when you need it the most.

You don’t see love coming. You never see your courage go.

Yet here you are, left with one but not the other.

It hardly seems a fair trade.

[* * * * *]

“Lust” - Chromedome

[* * * * *]

You play.

There are hands on your shoulders, wide and pushing you flat. A knee nudges between your own. Your hips strain when it works up between your thighs, and your legs look small as they bend around it. He drenches you in energy, sparking hard and fast through you in a soft explosion that knocks your circuitry for a loop. It bursts from him and washes across you, spreading over your plating and crackling into the seams.

Tiny flashes of lightning crawl along the undersides until you arch up into the culmination, the electrocution of his overload, and a scream swells from your spark as it shocks him back.

You rewind.

He is beautiful in reverse, head bending back down toward you in slow motion. His visor furrows gradually, frame by frame, until the expression of utter release contracts into one of concentration. The bright flare of gold darkens down to a gorgeous somber yellow that focuses on you, only on you, but as the film goes back, you see him withdraw into himself. The energy eases down, down, and down, until it is barely visible. Flickers of charge dissipate until they flirt against your chest.

The curve of his neck curls down further, the perfect arch reversing and then bending as he returns to humming at your spark. That inward-turned focus on his rising charge leaves no attention to spare, and his mask shows the rest of the world what he really feels. To you, it’s a look of naked adoration that makes him look bashful, as if he’s revealing a secret desire, a torrid need to touch you that he will never say aloud anywhere else but here.

You play.

The hand cupped under your aft lifts your entire lower half as he pays homage to your chest like it’s the center of his universe. He hums to your engorged spark, promising it every rich jolt of energy his larger frame can deliver it. Earnest words strive to convince you that he will keep his promises, he will make you feel good, he will love you until he’s a burnt out husk, and even then, he will throw his body over you to protect you from the rest of the world.

The other hand is near your helm, close enough that the thumb idly plays with the side of your camera. It rubs tiny circles in time with his words. The tender gesture is small, seemingly insignificant, and you wouldn’t pay any attention to it if didn’t mean so much.

You rewind.

Fingers stroke up the small of your back and slide between your shoulders. They linger there for a moment, reveling in the vulnerability of the spinal strut you loosen your armor to let them at. Then they return to their path and retreat upward. They settle on your neck, where they began. The massage starts light, a gentle touch meant to seduce you. Do you want to go further tonight? Yes,
you do.

In reverse, however, the fingers press down harder. They push into the ache you’d originally complained of, lifting their relief away until your helm throbs with pain and they are just starting their attempt to ease it. They leave your neck.

You play.

Knees on either side of your waist hem you in, and the hands come back. You feel incredibly safe despite the pain in your helm. Chromedome hovers over you. He’s more than twice your size, and you idly plan to take advantage of that size momentarily, once the fingers slipping under your neck from either side work their magic. He has such sensitive hands. It won’t be difficult to get him in the mood.

Really, he already is. All you have to do was roll your helm back and show your throat, show that you trust him to put those dangerous, wonderful fingers where they can do the most harm.

You rewind.

He stands up, an overwhelmed collapse in reverse.

You play.

“Are you recording this?”

“Yes.”

You don’t explain why.

He doesn’t ask.

And you start at the beginning again.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 14

Chapter Summary

You are Whirl, Skyfire, Chromedome, Brainstorm, Tailgate, Perceptor, Prowl, Tarn, Jazz, and Rung.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 14
Warning: Drunken flirting, sadness, objectification, abuse of a hung-over jerk, BDSM play, sad Matrix.
Rating: R?
Continuity: IDW & G1
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Prompts from Tumblr.

Note: the Nautilator/D.J.D. ficlet once in this chapter has been moved to ‘Gone Fishing.’

[* * * * *]
Rewind - “Scarf: borrowing/stealing clothes from the other”
[* * * * *]

Are you allowed to get mad at the pipsqueak? You’re probably not allowed to get mad at the pipsqueak. If there isn’t a law against it in Ultra Magnus’ handbook, there’s definitely one in Chromedome’s.

You sort of like Chromedome. He hates Cyclonus and therefore, conditionally, sides with you against the purple geargrinder in every argument. You like that in a mech. He also hugged you that one time. Sure, it was because you saved the pipsqueak after a teensy guilt trip, but still. A hug.

…it’s not often you genuinely feel like a hero. Chromedome made you feel like one that day, despite all the slag that probably negated any heroism.

You choose not to think about it that way.

But it means that getting mad at Chromedome’s pipsqueak is off the table.

You glower across the bar. Rewind pulls the fuzzy hat with the trailing audio covers down lower as if he feels you glaring. The thing practically covers his whole rusted head in orange and red layers of weird organic knitted ‘yarn’ stuff. The fluffy ball on top waggles at you. It’s mocking you. Rewind’s mocking you.

Okay, Rewind seems to be giggling as Chromedome ties the strings on the sides of the hat into a cute bow under his chin. You interpret that as mocking. Adorable and mocking.

You’re not mad at the pipsqueak. You are happiness-handicapped. Yes, that’s it.

The runt stole your gorram hat, and you can’t say anything because nobody knows it’s yours, and you’re not about to confess in front of the whole slagging bar. You managed to sneak it onboard
after buying it at the gift shop without anyone noticing. If you say anything, everyone will know the fluffy ‘Jayne-style’ hat belongs to you, and then they’ll look at you funny for wanting it at all.

It looks cool! They can suck weapons-grade nucleon! You don’t care what they think anyway!

You get to wear it in your quarters where nobody can see you, and that’s just awesome. It’s a better secret than keeping a bunch of Sweeps nailed to the walls. You think so, anyway. Maybe you should ask Rung about that sometime.

Sometime after you get your hat back.

This might require a Plan.

Your plans don’t have a habit of working out as planned, however.

Just in case, you’d better find some grenades.

[* * * * *]

“Date” - Cosmos/Skyfire

[* * * * *]

Your date meets you in orbit and asks a very important question. You know it’s a very important question because he keeps asking you.

He has to, because you forget what he’s asking halfway through the question. Look, there are a lot of words and only so much processor space left over to deal with them, what with your processing systems clamoring for your attention like this. Plus, you’re in space. Humans keep launching things up here and leaving it floating about. The amount of shiny debris drifting around up here is so distracting.

So when Cosmos keeps repeating his question enough times to finally register in your cortex, you know it has to be important. Just don’t ask you why, because you are so not up to that level of thought right now.

What were you doing?

He patiently repeats his question again, and you give it some thought. Is he asking for actual measurements, or for a more vague quantifier? Who knows. It’s a moot point, because you don’t really know the exact measurement.

Vague amount is a go!

“Very,” you say, proud that you manage not to slur.

Cosmos turns as he circles you. It’s not easy for you to watch at the moment. He’s a disc, spinning around his own axis, while he flies in a circle around you, while you both orbit Earth. That’s far too many round trajectories for your high-grade sodden mind to handle. Some part of you stubbornly tries, however, because science.

Unfortunately, that steals whatever processor power is leftover from automatic functions and shiny things. Add in some words, and he’s destroyed you intellectually before you even register what he says.

You sort through the words. It doesn’t do you much good. They’re so very wordy. Resigning yourself to your fate, you brace yourself and ask, “What?”
There are more words involved this time. He’s asking a more difficult question than ‘Just how drunk are you?’ you can tell. Primus spare your overfull tanks, because you might end up having to think past warm fuzzy feelings and the freedom of too much high-grade in too short a time. You’re not sure you’re up to that at the moment.

Oh, wait! You know this one! Yay.

“Starscream,” you declare. Your answer catches up with you a second later, but oh well. Too late to take it back. You wiggle your wings at the other spacefarer in an apologetic shrug. “We were doing science. Study of plugs.” The giggle-snort sneaks up on you and blurps air into space from your vents, a visible sign of just how funny you think you are. “Mine are bigger, but he just has to know for sure. You know how you test a plug’s size?”

Cosmos either doesn’t know a leer when he sees one, or you’ve forgotten how to leer in altmode. Starscream knew, but Starscream can set forests on fire with a single twitch of his lips. Smokey the Bear hates when Starscream flirts. Only you can prevent forest fires!

You trail air again, laughing helplessly at the images flitting pell-mell through your thoughts. Cosmos swings out of the way of your laughter, grabbing your attention again.

“No more science tonight,” you croon as the little green Autobot stops his inspection of you and skids on ahead. You get the feeling he’s not happy with you for some reason. “Just want to fly. Want to fly like only you and I can, up here. Want to…” What do you want? Dreamy and languid, you roll until your cockpit reflects the planet below. “I want to turn over and let you land on my belly, tractor in tucked and secure, and feel how warm you are against me when the rest of me is cold. It’s cold. Aren’t you cold?” You roll once more. Your underside feels exposed, and your voice turns coaxing. “We’ll watch the sunrise soon, and I want you to be here on me when it does.”

Cosmos slows, almost hesitating. Earth is dark beneath you, but it turns. The sun will peek around the curve of the planet, and it’ll hit your armor in a blast of light and radiation that will warm everything it touches. Everything in shadow will still be bitter cold.

“Sunlight’s nice,” you tell your date, “and science keeps the body hot, but only you warm my spark.”

You roll, inviting him closer, and it turns into a nice date indeed.

[* * * * *]

“Snow” - Chromedome
[* * * * *]

It’s cold out here. The temperature never bothered you before, when Rewind was at your side.

Rewind is here. The ship continues on, but you know he is still nearby. It’s a relatively small distance when you take into account the vastness of space. It will only grow larger as the ship moves on, so you are here, by yourself out in the cold. You are out here because Rewind is out here, and soon you will have to go inside while he stays out here.

You will leave him. He will be here, but you will go on and leave him here alone.

You tell Skids you’re out here looking at the stars, but you don’t tell him you’re imagining that Rewind is still at your side. Distance is relative, in space. Compared to the distance that will soon be between you, Rewind is almost in the shelter of your arm right now.
It’s so cold out here, and it bothers you now as it never did before. You will go inside soon. You will be warm again, and you will forget the frozen pain.

But the cold will keep Rewind forever.

[* * * * *]
“Nurse Me” - Brainstorm
[* * * * *]

“Oh, you poor little thing,” you coo when you pick up your newest paramour. That lovely bit of a thing, lying out in the open like that? Just asking for it, in your opinion. “Such a shame someone left you in this condition.”

Yes, such a shame. Hmm, not really. Now you get to put your hands all over, however you like. The gash splays open, and you shake your head. Why, it’s positively lewd how you can stroke your hand up one side and dip into the damage. If you shiver a tad while you do so, well who could blame you?

All in the name of some tender loving care. “Tsk. Well, I’ll just have to do something about this.”

You go home. You clean up. You nurse and tend and patch. Your hands slip from serious business a few times, fondle here and there, but you keep your mind on the job. Mostly.

“It’s going to be alright,” you say, even when you’re not sure. It’s quite the repair job, even for a genius like you. But everything worth lingering over afterward needs a down-payment of effort beforehand.

The self-doubt and effort is totally worth it when your finger finds the trigger and curls. The recoil is perfect. It’s like you two were meant to be.

[* * * * *]
“Don’t Leave Me!” - Tailgate
[* * * * *]

Energon leaks from huge splits in purple armor. The pink threads trickle from cracks and gush in a river from the hole blasted into his chest, pooling together into punched-in spots on his plating until the pools overflow and cascade in a thin sheet off his side into a spreading puddle. Swirls of green lubricant and oily sheen wind across the surface. So much vital fluid. So, so much. More than you’ve ever seen outside of the fatal accident between the --

No. That was a long time ago, this is now, and you refuse to think this is the same. He won’t bleed out under your hands. You’ve seen how much energon’s in a mech. Frag, you’ve seen it splashed around with joy and abandon right in front of you today, and it’s more than what’s currently beneath you. You’re sitting in a puddle that’s getting larger by the second, but you try to objectively judge how much bigger it can get before you really have to worry.

You have time. You think. You hope.

Your arms tighten around the one-horned helm in your lap, as if that could stem the steady seep of vital fluids. “Is anyone going to help him?” Your voice quavers, but you’re upset. You’re allowed to sound tremulous when your friend -- not really your friend, but he’s someone you know and like -- is pumping bodily fluids out at a steady rate.

Ambulon is tending to poor Rewind, but you’re surprised when he doesn’t at least glance toward you. He doesn’t even look up. His optics constantly move, assessing the Autobots seated or laid out
around him, but they don’t turn in your direction.

“Hello? Ambulon?”

You’re quiet because you’re a little afraid to speak up. Nobody looks toward you. They never do, if they can avoid it. The dark stigma they’ve surrounded Cyclonus with has blotted him from their sight, and you? Well, you don’t really exist in this age and time. As important as you’ve tried to make yourself seem, you just don’t matter. You’re a no one. You’re a nothing. Worse than a has-been, you’re a never-was. You’ve a blank spot in the shuttle, holding onto a black hole.

Your arms tighten further. This is your fault. You can’t pierce the Autobots’ antipathy toward Cyclonus, and you can’t make them care about you. You wish you could, but you can’t.

In addition to that failure, you actually did bring about the explosion that damaged Cyclonus. The blame belongs to you on every level.

It’s either take action or let it go. You don’t stand out in any way but your attitude toward this one mech, the mech you’ve laid low. You can try to fix this, or you can walk away and blend into the background just that much more.

When the ship lands and everyone exits, you wait, hoping on one last whisp of faith in their inner compassion. Nobody looks back. They automatically expect you to follow, if they even acknowledge your existence. It’s like you’re not even there, and Cyclonus will just disappear, another unfortunate casualty of a senseless war you don’t fully understand.

You don’t let go.

[* * * * *
“Drink” - Perceptor
[* * * * *]

It was a terrible night. No wonder you are feeling testy, this morning.

Your mood fails to improve when you enter the laboratory. There appears to be a drunken sot on your workbench.

“Move,” you order shortly. “Your weight distribution is putting undue stress on my jondular calibration module, and furthermore, that cannot possibly be a comfortable position no matter how much high-grade you’ve pickled your brain in.”

Brainstorm makes a strange honking noise as you shove him aside. He attempts to stand and promptly flops into a heap on the other side of the bench. He dribbles trail of regurgitated fluid across the surface, because his mere presence is not disgusting enough. It occurs to you, not for the first time, that tolerating him is some form of penance for a crime you do not remember committing. Or perhaps his existence is the universe providing a lesson about the perils of not keeping your own ego in check.

After a moment of calm, rational thought, you decide you simply must have your rifle at hand right this second in case of further mysterious karma visiting, or an outbreak of Decepticons. One never knows what will happen next on board the Lost Light, and you should be prepared for violence. Retrieving your rifle does, naturally, necessitate the rattling every piece of equipment in the laboratory as you systematically search for the keypass to the weapons locker in the corner. Surely you left it there. Perhaps here? Over here. Ah, no, up there.
Nothing breaks, of course, because you are not a clumsy oaf. It is, however, a long and loud search.

“Oh, Adaptus. Please stop,” bleats pitifully from under your bench. A pathetic lump crawls toward a chair. You don’t deign to call it a person.

You drag the chair away, deliberately resting just enough weight on it to cause the feet to screech across the floor before you begin stacking things on it in a noisy clatter. A feeble whimper protests. You find glassware to clink and clank together. There’s a faint groan. The locker door hinges probably should have been oiled, oh, approximately any time before you yank them open. How thoughtless of you. You are appropriately shamed and exclaim over the clamor of metal screaming. No better time to fix that but now; the hinges shriek and screech as you work the oil into them.

Brainstorm sobs and curls up to clutch his head, crossing his ankles and trying to hide his helm between his knees. “Please. Please stop. I didn’t mean to do it,” babbles weakly at floor-level.

You hum thoughtfully and rummage about in the locker for your rifle. You are not certain who he’s talking to. You are fairly sure he could not currently locate you with a map and a guide, from the distended look of one optic behind the glass. He garbles out more excuses for his poor behavior in your general direction. That may be because he is already facing your direction, not because he knows you are over here.

You regard him for a moment, mouth set in a grim line. He did not mean to send the crude texts to you in the middle of the night? He did not mean to catcall you as you patrolled the corridors? Or did he not mean to end up on top of your workbench, drooling tank-rejected high-grade across research more valuable than any weapon he has every constructed? You will believe his excuses in the realm of never.

The mech is mad. Obsessed, incompetent, sloppy, and mad. He remains convinced that he will eventually invent a device so clever it will drive you to envy and uncontrollable lust. When he is inebriated enough, he skips the actual work phase and attempts to incite envy and lust through touting his accomplishments and self-proclaimed genius in your face.

As last night prove yet again, that does not work. It never works.

You lift a hand. Unfocused as he is at the moment, Brainstorm retains enough focus to catch sight of your fingers. He fixates immediately, because your fingers are fine-tuned instruments of science: long, elegant, and yes, you are quite aware how he loves them even as he hates them. He stares, confused by the slight smirk you are wearing. You rest your hand on a particular box, and comprehension hits him right between the optics.

He whimpers a sad attempt at an apology.

“Pardon me?” you ask sweetly as the box tips over and precisely 298 empty metal bullet casings rain down onto the metal floor in a resounding, merciless hail. “What was that? I could not hear you over the sound of your overcharged antics keeping me from my work.”

You feel better already.

[*** ***]
“Thease me” - Prowl
[*** ***]

Chromedome can always take you by surprise. Be it a touch to the inside of your elbow or an amused glint of his visor when he glances at you, it’s an unexpected thing. The blush of heat rising in
fat coils through your internals startles you every time. You can’t predict what he’ll choose to set you off, nor your response to his signal. Lust rushes into you at the fleetest glimpse of desire, a hint of more, the promise that he’ll follow through.

You can’t pin down what he does to you. The cause and effect doesn’t annoy you, not really, but the lack of control you have in the connection between the two bothers you. Information is a mild obsession of yours. You feel that you have all the pieces laid out; it’s you who’s failing to see the pattern. That failure bothers you.

You smirk one night, under the blindfold, and his hand pauses on your throat. “What?”

“I’ve got it.” Confidence relaxes you. You found the connection. You’ve found your footing again. Good.

Suddenly untroubled, you tilt your chin up despite the earlier order to stay still. That violates the rules of tonight’s game, but your lips tug into a smug smile. According to your calculations, he will react with irritation and a stinging slap, just enough to make the nerve circuitry glow and run a pulse of charge under your plating. He knows how much you can take, and how far to push you into completely losing it while screaming his name. He seems to know you better than you know yourself, in this. You’ve been shocked over and over by why you can not only tolerate, but enjoy. You may be his superior on the job, but you’re definitely under him here and now.

But not this time! This time you’ve got the numbers down, and you know what he’ll do.

You brace for the slap, still smirking because you got it. He can’t surprise you anymore.

He grunts. There’s a soft pat to your shoulder, and then footsteps walking toward the berth. “Well, if you’ve got it, then there’s no need for me to finish up here. Have a nice night.”

You blink behind the blindfold. That isn’t what you predicted. At all.

Your smirk twists into a sour scowl.

Fraggit, he’s done it again.

[* * * * *]

Drift - “Nightmare”
[* * * * *]

This is the worst day of your life.

Guilt constricts your spark, and you know -- you know -- that you should be overjoyed. Your Lord is happy. There is a fierce light to his optics that you have only ever seen in the heat of battle, when the tide turns and the Autobots’ defenses scatter. It is a look of triumph. It’s a look that quickens your fuel pump, or it should, but today it runs liquid nitrogen through your lines until your pump slows to a sluggish thump in your chest.

Lord Megatron stands proud and tall, conviction radiating from every move he makes. The gathered soldiers cheer, carried by his confidence and soaking in his words as gospel truth. Meanwhile, you shrivel inside your armor. Far be it from you to doubt the unparalleled genius of your leader, but…

“ -- and it is fitting that one of my Decepticons’ finest officers be finally recognized with the command he has earned! This is why I have chosen to reward you,” a familiar hand comes down on a white shoulder paldron, and you gag at the indulgent pride in that gesture, “with the command of my elite. My standard-bearers. You shall represent my law and seek out those who would attempt to
violate their oaths to me!"

Oh, Primus. A quick flash of red toward you, and your spark sinks down to hide in your fuel tank. You’re being summoned. This is the moment you’ve dreaded since Lord Megatron informed you of his will. Not that you protested, but you’re sure your Lord is aware of your silent horror. Perhaps that’s why he chooses to inflict this on you, as punishment for doing anything but completely supporting his decision. It’s a public relations move, you know. A tactical strike against Autobot morale. It’s meant to inspire Decepticon soldiers and sneer in the face of traitors, but it feels like a slap to the face.

Because Lord Megatron’s favor is fickle, and you no longer have it.

‘Humiliation’ is not a strong enough word for what you feel as you slowly climb the dais stairs. You keep your optics on your Lord, who wears the narrow, savage smile that normally weakens your knees with the passion you feel for his vision. In your mind, you repeat the facts. This is not meant as insult. This is not meant to unseat you from your place as a weapon of the Empire. This is simply meant to honor someone who has served Lord Megatron more faithfully than you. You did not fall short; your new commander simply exceeded all expectations.

Shame still sizzles through your lines. Suddenly, your fuel pump is absolutely hammering. You want to throw yourself at your Lord’s feet, ask what you have done wrong, plead that your actions be praised half as much as this usurper’s --

“ -- bear the stigma of joining the Autobots, only to return to my side and lead my Justice Division.”

The crowd roars. Pain saws into your spark, misery sinking it low, but you keep your head up. It’s small and flickering, but you have some dignity left. What pride isn’t blubbering over your demotion keeps your shoulders squared.

Your step remains steady when you reach the top of the stairs, and you offer a perfectly correct bow to your master. “Lord Megatron.”

And then, hating your life and terribly conflicted, you salute your new commanding officer. “Commander. It is an,” argh no this is horrible, “honor.”


This is the worst day of your life.

[* * * * *]
“Save me” - Jazz
[* * * * *]

It scares you the first time you hear the voice that isn’t a voice. You’re sure you’ve gone crazy. No one else can hear it. You don’t dare mention it to anyone else, but you’re sure no one else hears it, because you know what it is that’s speaking to you. If it were a real voice, someone would have done something by now. A real voice from a real item pleading for help this long -- someone would have helped long before you entered the picture.

Right?

You ignore it as hard as you can, wishing it away, but still it speaks. And you become less convinced that nobody else hears it, but more convinced that it’s talking directly to you. You don’t know why.
You don’t know what that means.
You do know what it wants.

It speaks, when the bullets fly. *Save me.*

When you give up on ignoring it, you talk back. You don’t know why you think you’ll get a response, but you can’t pretend it’s not there anymore. “From what?”

It never replies directly. It just pleads, again and again. *Save me.*

In the silence of covert operations, the words are wistful. It speaks as though it is pained and weary, but gentle. It is gentle, asking for gentleness in return, and that grates on you.

You are not gentle. You are not kind, and it tries to appeal to a kindness you don’t have. Why should you be the important one? You maim, sabotage, kill, and fight, and you wash the lives from your hands grimly satisfied that you’re not what it wants you to be. You’re no chosen of Primus. You’re Special Operations, not special. Everything you really are, you splay open before the voice that isn’t a voice, and you wait for silence.

Instead, there is hope. *Save me?*

That hurts, strangely. How dare it act like it sees more than a trained killer? How dare it make you think of potential? You are who and what you are, and nothing more!

Hurt feeds an irrational anger at it, and you start to sneer your side of the nonexistent conversation. Snide remarks carry you through most of the war. “From what? From who? Like I can. Really, you’re gonna ask this now? Why me? You’re pretty slaggin’ saved, if you ask me.”

*Save me.* Passion isn’t lessened by the lack of volume. Ever quiet, ever calm, it begs you for salvation. It is never discouraged, and even when you’re at your worst, it only waits out your hateful words and pleads again in the quiet afterward.

Eventually, it wears you down. “I don’t know how,” you admit.

Your dismissive contempt changes as your skepticism fails. Your concern for your mental health fades away gradually, and your concern for a real situation grows in turn. You check on it. You check again. Everything looks fine. It’s been where it is since the beginning of the war, and no one has spoken up to say that the status quo is wrong. On the surface, it’s fine. That bothers you, the longer you watch. It didn’t before, but now you can’t stop the doubt creeping up inside you.

The only difference between then and now is that now you’re listening to what it says. You hear a voice denying that all is well, and it makes you reconsider what you see. Obviously, of course, all is not well -- there’s a war on -- but that voice keeps talking. You check, and check again, and the checking lengthens into surveillance. The Prime is your responsibility anyway, but now you obsessively watch him.

You notice things, now that you think to look for them. Optimus Prime isn’t…right. He’s deaf to the voice that isn’t a voice, or so used to ignoring it that the pleading doesn’t register you. It troubles you, now that you understand.

Because you see that flaw, it’s easier to see the larger picture. He isn’t what a Prime should be. A leader, but a leader of a divided world. A Prime shouldn’t just lead one faction. No one should point to him as ‘the Autobot Prime.’ There is no ‘Autobot.’ ‘Autobot’ is a made-up term used to divide Cybertronians into neat little categories that turn against each other because the divisions are there.

The lines are drawn. Unity cannot happen during war over boundaries and separations. Optimus
Prime isn’t responsible for the war, but the longer you watch him, the more troubled you become.

*Save me.*

“Save us first,” you snap back, but your spark isn’t in it. You’re lashing out because you feel helpless.

You don’t lie. You don’t make excuses. If anyone knows how to end the war, they’re not speaking up. It’s an ancient artifact capable of miracles. Can’t it just spare one? If Optimus can’t be blamed for a war, can Megatron? Two sides have to be involved in a fight. Someone made the divisions.

If it could save itself, it wouldn’t need you. You try to blame it, but the voice still whispers into the back of your mind. *Save me.*

There has to be a way to end the war. There has to be a way to make a divided world whole again. Autobots and Decepticons can’t just get along; they have to be one. ’Til All Are One.

There is a way. There’s a way, and you’re horrified when you see it. It’s not an option, but it really is.

To a certain mindset, war is caused by the defender. If the defender doesn’t fight back, the aggressor will just take what is wanted and claim it as rightfully owned. Wars don’t begin when someone attacks. Wars begin when someone fights back.

Cybertron is split by words and morals. The war could end if the factions were eliminated, but that would require taking away the root of the division. Either the Autobots have to give way, or the Decepticons must cease pushing, but even then? Even then the division won’t end. All will be one only end when the words are gone.

The Autobots have spent millions of years trying to stop the Decepticons. The easiest solution, now that you see the problem, is to stop the Autobots.

You can’t. You can’t help. You can’t do that. “I’m sorry.”

*Save me.*

“No. I won’t.”

It becomes so quiet. And you suspect that now you know why no one else responds to the voiceless voice. How many mechs have come to the same conclusion you have? Pretending not to hear a real voice pleading for help you can’t give is simple self-defense.

You wish you were better at ignoring the pleas. As things are, you try to push them aside until they’re the softest whispers. *Save me.*

The only scream you hear from it is when Galvatron takes down Ultra Magnus. *Save me!*

“I can’t,” you cry back in useless apology.

Unicron attacks Cybertron. Rodimus Prime arises. This time, those who tried not to hear its pleas beg it in turn. “Save us!”

It does save you. It saves all of Cybertron.

The words are still there: Autobot and Decepticon.
It’s there, too, speaking directly to you again. *Save me.*

You are silent. The voice that isn’t there dies down again, slow and sad. You don’t encourage it.


On the edge of hearing, fading into despair, it speaks to you. *Save me.*

“I’ll try,” you say at last. Someone has to.

You’re trying to reassure a sadness deeper than the Pit. Your words disappear into the void. That’s enough. Sometimes, the power of an infinitely small sip of hope can revive what’s nearly dead. *Save me?*

Optimus Prime returns, and you think this is the end. This is when the war will truly be over. All your preparations are in vain, and isn’t that great?

Except there are still Autobots and Decepticons. Still two sides of one planet. You look at your Prime, and the same though returns: there is something not right in him. You’re not sure what, but he’s wrong.

It’s such a plaintive stir of sound at the back of your head. A stir, a ripple, and nothing more. *Save me.*

You make a promise, and you mean it. “I will.”

You steal it, when the bullets fly. The Prime goes down, and neither side will ever know who did it. You retreat into the silence of covert operations, vanish under the cover of confusion, and disappear into the underworld of a broken planet. There are no divisions here. No Autobot or Decepticons. There is black market and law, and that’s a slippery boundary that you pass back and forth through without leaving a trace behind.

There is a way. It’s a less horrifying path than you’d thought before you set foot on it. Once you commit to driving this road, it makes total sense. Options open, and you must have been blind not to see them earlier.

Makes you wonder why it took a thief to end the war, when there have been Primes and strategists and warlords aplenty. Maybe they were so busy blocking out what they didn’t want to hear, they stopped being able to think along the route you’ve chosen.

Words nestle close, quiet and grateful in your mind. *Saved me.*

You smile. “That I did.”

And Cybertron unites to hunt you down.

[* * * *]

“A Little Sleepy” - Rung
[* * * *]

It might be a side effect of the attention deflectors, but that’s only a theory. If that were true, after all, he’d be less aware of you than he is. He’s usually very aware of you.

He finds it easier to rest when you’re there.
“Shhh,” you soothe absently, and Red Alert’s optics flick online for another nervous sweep of your office. “I’m here.”

“You’re always here,” he says, but his factual tone blurs under the onset of recharge protocols. “You’re always in the background, no matter where my cameras turn. You’re here, and everywhere.”

His optics dim despite himself, and you keep your optics on your work. You make another calm, background-type noise that indicates you’re listening. Paying more attention than that would trigger him, and he’s so close to falling asleep that you wonder if this time he’ll shut down. It will be real, measurable progress on his case if he does.

You are at your desk because this isn’t a session, per se. Red Alert finally agreed to start meeting you in your office instead of in place he considers more secure. It’s progress enough that you don’t mind how he tosses your place every time before a scheduled session. Showing up outside the scheduled times is meant to take you by surprise, and it does, but you don’t mind. He plans ahead. He’s yet to impose on anyone else’s time slots, which is the only reason you’d protest. If surprising you or analyzing your office down to the last stylus helps relax him even the slightest amount, than you won’t protest.

It’s not recharge, per se, but he’s resting, now. The level of exhaustion he considers normal saddens you. He’s confessed to you that he never truly shuts down. You wonder what it would take for him to finally do that by himself, much less in the presence of someone else. You’re determined to help him find the peace within himself to allow it.

Years later, you’re startled and exasperated when Swerve laughs about what he gets up to when Red Alert’s asleep. Paranoia shouldn’t be played with that way.

There’s a twinge of professional pride in you, nonetheless.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 15

Chapter Summary

You are Dinobot, Chromedome, Soundwave, Ultra Magnus, Starscream, Silverbolt, Whirl, Skids, and Tailgate.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 15
Warnings: Dreams, groping, torture, hugs, and fanfiction.
Rating: R?
Continuity: Beast Wars, IDW, Shattered Glass, and G1
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Prompts from Tumblr.

Note: the Nautilator/D.J.D. ficlet once in this chapter has been moved to ‘Gone Fishing.’

[* * * * *]
Dinobot - “Nightmare”
[* * * * *]

You dream.

The Transmetal technology stripped the flesh off your beastmode, leaving bare metal where bones should be, and the dinosaur has been stamped out by the change. Where the skin should be, you wear loyalty. Where blood should course, veins of advanced technology push you beyond what the initial explosion did to Maximal and Predacon. Muscle has been replaced by alien strength. The pulse of a spark crackles where a heartbeat should be, and although you wield its power, it tastes foreign in your mind. It is not your spark. This is not your body.

Something of the animal remains. The cloning process has remade you, yet you dream. Inorganic as Megatron has remade you, corrupted you, something lingers in the recesses of your body. The animal instincts meld to your metal and control the twitching of your claws. When you walk, your killing claw taps the ground in a pattern no Predacon programming created. When your head ducks and whips around to confront the other half of your spark, your entire spine curves into a sinister threat more sinuous than angled. It is instinct, and it is part of you.

Rampage stares you down, but he cannot intimidate you. In your optics, he is a menacing threat contained by your spark. In your mind, however, he is seafood.

You do not fear him, and that baffles him.

“I cannot feel fear,” he says slowly. One hand still on the floor where he fell, downed by spark-torture, he squints up at you. “But you, Dinobot. You fear. Not me, but I’ve smelled it on you.” That puzzles him, you can tell. That you can fear, but not fear him -- then what do you fear? “If you were a part of me, you would not, either.”

He senses you, as you sense him. You are not his clone. You are half his spark, but Megatron cloned your body from someone else. Twisted you, tamed you, but this body is still a clone.
The crab’s other hand reaches out toward you, and you eye it in confusion. It’s not a threat. When he touches the tip of your serrated snout, it is a gentle exploration as if he could discover your secrets through his fingers. “Who are you, Dinobot? Are you someone under what he’s created?”

Your head snaps back, neck coiling into a wary ‘S’ ready to strike. “I am Dinobot,” you inform him coldly. “I am what the traitor could have been, had he not betrayed Megatron.”

Flesh cannot regrow. Bones have gilded, strengthened, and been bound to service. You are a skeleton of what you once were, and the dead cannot rise. Not even here, or now, or under alien technology.

Rampage stares at you through hard emerald optics, unfeeling as the gems they resemble. “You were Dinobot. You are Dinobot.” He rises to tower above you, but you are not afraid. The scent filling your mouth and nose is rich and vulnerable: metal, mechfluid, and seafood. You and he both know you could tear him down, but he is not afraid. He reaches out to touch your head between your eyes. “What will you be?”

The dead cannot be anything. There is no future, for the dead.

Then again, the dead cannot dream. So what does that make you, if not alive?

You hiss and turn to leave, bladed tail cracking against his arm and throwing it aside. “Fool.”

He laughs as you leave.

That night, you have your first nightmare.

[* * * * *

"I Kind Of..." - Chromedome
[* * * * *

You don’t know what to think. This is -- well. This is the last thing you ever expected him to say to you. To anyone, really.

He’s the worst narcissistic, self-absorbed, intellectually vain scientist with a superiority complex you’ve ever heard of, much less met. Describing him turns into a litany of redundant terms all pointing to a mech who puts himself first and can’t think of the world in terms of other people on equal footing with him. You can’t stand him.

But you hang out with him, anyway. You’ve never seen him around anyone else outside of work, and you pity him a bit for that. His attitude drives everyone away, and then he doesn’t get why nobody acknowledges him.

He infuriates you, too, but he’s also funny. He goes out of his way to be unexpected. He has insecurities that make his insufferably smug knowledge of his own genius kind of a pathetic sham.

He’s so awkward around standard social structures that you know he thinks himself above them. Yet from the way he keeps trying to fit in, you know he knows better. He believes his own propaganda but he doesn’t quite trust it. He turns to you for validation more often than not.

Sometimes, you think he tries to make you laugh. You know you’ve startled him with your own dry humor.

He seeks you out, then tries to make it look like it was your idea.

This, however, can’t be foisted off on you.
“I don’t know what to say,” you say at last.

Brainstorm fidgets. His hands open and close, searching for tools as if he could hide behind inventions and forget he said anything. “Is this going to change anything?”

Unspoken, he’s asking, ‘Are you going to walk away?’

You wonder who abandoned him in the past to wedge that thick slice of vulnerability into his voice. “No!” The automatic denial is irritated, and his wings relax a fraction at your indignant glare. “That’s stupid. Why would it..?” You shake your head to dismiss the though. “It’s just, um, you surprised me. Most mechs don’t just walk up and drop that on someone.”

His optics brighten nervously at the confirmation that’d he’s screwed this up. “But I do kind of love you!” he protest anyway, because Brainstorm doesn’t know how to back down once he’s decided to go ahead.

And you laugh, because what else can you do? “And I kind of love you back.”

He relaxes again, but tension still has his wings up. He still thinks you’re going to drop him. “Okay. So. Friends?”

You clasp the hand he holds out to you, because you won’t do that to him. “Friends.”

[* * * * *]

“Dominate me” - Vortex & Soundwave

[* * * * *]

The whip falls, and you flinch. It slices into your armor, tears into your wires and tubing, and draws away amidst a splash of liquid pink. One more lengthy gash opens among the wounds already clustered in the small of your back. This one tears through three other welts, however, searing into the raw nerve circuitry network between abused individual sensors.

The gasp that bursts from you is involuntary and loud, and Vortex’s visor gleams when he hears it. “Mm. Let’s hear that again, Soundwave.” The lash comes down, crossing over the fresh gash, and you make a muted noise he savors right in front of you. “Ohhh, I like that. That’s nice.”

His pleasure in your pain oozes over you like a living thing, lapping up every small sound that escapes with intense relish. It curls around you and gnaws at the base of your spark, biting in time with the whip. You shudder again and turn your helm away from the unsatisfied desire in that red gaze. It pierces your armor as if it weren’t there, and he will take what he wants from you just as easily.

As he’s chosen to for the last half hour, he faces you while standing an arm length away. Not that your arms could reach him, as he’s bound your wrists above your head. The statis cuffs are just a little too tight, just enough to dig into your wrist joints and stress your shoulders. You have to pull yourself up, hands straining to wrap around the chains and take some of the weight off your feet. Red-hot pokers of pain prickle no matter how you stand, but it’s worse if you give up and let your feet take all your weight. He laughs every time you shift your balance from the inside or outside of your feet, trying to ease the pain even a little. The crackling whine of your vocalizer breaking lock-down amuses him immensely.

You lost control of your ventilation system and vocalizer when he was working over your feet. He’s good at his job, you’ll give him that. An interrogator knows how to find a weak spot and exploit it,
and he’s gone for purely physical torture to crack you. He took his time turning your feet into useless wrecks, slicing into the bottoms one precisely-timed whiplash at a time until you howled. Primus, that hurt! When he forced you to stand, to put your weight on the fresh cracks, your fans began to sputter. When he chained you like this, your vents panted.

Your situation hasn’t improved since. A prisoner in Vortex’s hands is a prisoner slowly lowered, inch by screaming inch, into a smelting pit. Every second that passes accumulates more pain. Your vents take in great gulps of air and release it in dread-laden stutters as you try to hold your breath. The mounting tide of pain will drown you soon, no matter how you try to hold out. You’re too weak to hold your head up anymore. Your helm rests on your elbow between lashes, of which there have been plenty.

Vortex slips the tip of the whip under your chin, and you tremble violently as you force your chin up before the point of contact burns. He’s content to turn you this way and that, the whip directing you, but you don’t have the strength to play his games. He chuckles darkly when your neck wobbles and the hot, sparking tip of the whip singes your throat.

“No? I thought maybe you were done with this, but sure. I can keep going. All day. All day. Just for you, I cleared my busy schedule. Busy busy.” His visor gleams again. “I was going to sharpen that saw, but if you’re so eager to get on with things, we can skip that break I was going to give you while I worked on it. You’re sure you want a dull saw?”

Your vocalizer spouts a tiny, pathetic noise, and you twist desperately as if the rest of your body could somehow lend your neck strength. Metal warps in your wrists, your shoulders strain, and Vortex sighs contentedly as your chin still drops against the whip. Failure means punishment. Success means punishment. There is no way you can win. It’s only a matter of whether he chooses what to do next, or if he graciously allows you to pick. The anticipation is half the pleasure, for him.

“Well. If you insist, Soundwave. I wouldn’t dream of disappointing you.”

You try to brace yourself for the next hit. You fail. The whip falls, and it wrings a cry from your vocalizer. Your throat closes around it, your visor sees static, but the high-pitched sound still comes out. Vortex’s rotors turn eagerly, and he tilts his head toward you. You manage a feeble head-shake at the predatory look, but the denial’s on reflex.

His voice is cordial, the most genteel of concern as he responds to your wail like you are capable of anything coherent at this point. “What was that? More? Why, but of course. I live to serve.”

His wrist flicks, and fire rips down your back in a long line that blazes like nothing you’ve ever felt. You arch forward wildly, survival instinct screaming at you to flee, but you go nowhere. You’re trapped here, and all struggling does is jam your damaged feet into the floor just that much harder until your vocalizer shrieks feedback in a yell that ends in a soft whimper. Your helm meets your elbow, and your vents sob as the fans suck in cooling air that does nothing to help.

The room is saturated in fear, oily satisfaction, and Vortex’s power. You choke on the reek of your own burnt fuel. Visor offline and hidden in the crook of your arm, you stand and shake. You keep thinking that you can’t take any more of this, and then Vortex proves you wrong. You can take so much more pain than you believed you could bear.

The whip falls. Your throat intakes seize up, and you convulse under the power of a sweeping cascade of blinding agony that floods you and immediately drains away, taking your sad remnants of
strength with it.

“You make the loveliest noises,” Vortex tells you over the sound you make. You can’t even manage a proper plea. Your back rages in a constant acid burn, consuming and vicious, and you’re too eaten by pain to unclog your vocalizer enough for actual words. What gets out is a muffled wail, all vowels and white noise.

You’re done. You’re finished. You surrender. Please, please, let this be over!

“Luscious,” whispers against your audio, and Vortex slaps the whip against the criss-crossed stripes marring your back. Small snaps, not enough to break the metal again, but enough to blister your paint and send you writhing in panic. “I could listen to you forever.”

He steps away again, and the aching fear he leaves behind blots out the agony he inflicts on you. No! No, this can’t continue! He can’t keep going!

You can’t go on. You can’t, you can’t, you can’t.

He lets you thrash until you’re exhausted and hang limp. You’re not going anywhere until he releases you, and if you’re still able to protest, then you’re not ready to be released.

“I’ll want a copy of this recording,” he says, and you scrape up enough strength to nod.

Professional or not, right then you hate the interrogator for knowing you better than you know yourself. He’s knows the difference between finding a breaking point and actually breaking someone, and he’s ruthless enough take you to that edge. You can hold out further. You don’t want to, but he’s not going to let you back down until he’s pushed you to the brink of shattering, just to test how long you’ll last.

You’re hiding in the inside of your elbow again, shuddering as you try to pull yourself together. Your plating clatters, shivering in dread.

A hands pets the back of your helm in a mockery of gentleness. “Good. I’ll look forward to listening to this again.” The whip falls. “Eventually. When I’m done with you today.”

The secrets of a wise and learned Second-in-Command are passed down from Second to Second in a ceremony consisting of lots of high-grade and a hands-on demonstration. It would be solemn and sedate but for the copious amount of drinking to loosen everyone up. You’ve never seen Prowl so relaxed.

You’re too nervous to relax. This really isn’t what you expected when Prowl asked you to join him for a training session. You were expecting to go over preventative measures in case of attack and tragedy, true, but -- this doesn’t quite fall into a category you can easily define. A duty, certainly, but not one you believe yourself equipped to handle.

You make sure to pay close attention. Duty is duty, even if you don’t quite think you’re the appropriate mech for the job.

“Are you sure this is necessary?” you ask when Prowl shows you and Jazz what to do. You’re still
not sure why you’ve been included in this odd ceremony. You can’t picture yourself as Optimus Prime’s Second. You’re sure Jazz will be promoted to the position, since he’s logically the next in line. “It seems very…” Your chair shifts as you straighten in it. “Intimate.”

Prowl nods firmly. “Completely necessary. You’ll understand when you’re in my place that there are times the Prime needs to relax, and you may very well be the only one he can trust.” Jazz covers a smile, and the dignified tactician glares at him. “Despite underhanded rumors implying there is more to it than that.”

What rumors? You haven’t heard any rumors. Clearly, Kup needs to pass on some of the more interesting tidbits he hears, if you’re missing rumors about what the Prime’s Second is up to behind closed doors.

You give Prowl an interested look that attests to the amount of high-grade you yourself have consumed.

Jazz’s grin breaks free. “Mehinks the Second doth protest too much,” he says in an aside to you that isn’t very aside.

Prowl sputters.

Years later, and you understand why he got so defensive. You’re feeling pretty defensive about the necessity of this rite, too.

There are no antenna to lick, but that’s easy enough to compensate for. Prowl did emphasize improvising with what you have on hand. Rodimus Prime has that wide spoiler on his back that used to be nothing but a sign of Hot Rod’s vanity. Now your fingers move over it, touching and caressing, and it’s useful. It’s a tool you can use to turn him around in the chair, away from the desk of work that he’s attempted to tackle all day. You ease him to the floor with nothing but the pressure of fingers carefully sliding to the tips, and rubbing your thumbs along the bottom edge encourages him to slump over your lap to give you better access. You debate moving to the floor, too, but he seems so comfortable kneeling like this that you’re loath to disturb him.

His engine idles, and you listen as the strained whine that’s built throughout the day finally subsides. Your shoulders slowly ease down. You would have never guessed how much stress on your Prime affects you before you found yourself soothing that stress away. You feel so much better, knowing he’s relaxing.

That’s the secret of a true Second. This is why Prowl trained you.

The systems humming against your legs are turning over deep and steady, almost cycled into recharge. That’s enough for duty, but your hands keep moving. They pet your Prime, and he breathes slow and peaceful under their touch.

Prowl instructed you to move on and pretend it never happened, encouraging the Prime to see it as simply something that happens. The leader of the Autobots can’t break, but neither can he be dependent. No emotional ties, no physical investment, no encouragement or disapproval implied. Your duty is to allow a moment of controlled weakness.

You can’t let go of him, however. You stay.

When Rodimus looks up at you, optics tired, you return his smile. “Why?” he asks you softly, and you betray the secret of every Second for the trust he shows you.

“Because I care.”
He hurts you, and he expects that to be enough. It’s laughable, in a way, and your breathless scorn enrages him. He hurts you, he makes you scream, and you give him the noise he wants. Why not? You know how to play your role, here, bound and tortured. You shriek under his hands, you break under his whips, you *shatter* beneath his implements of pain, and he doesn’t understand in the slightest how superficial pain has become.

“Such a pity,” he mocks in that scratching baritone. He could be someone else if you offline your optics and think of the endurance test that is war.

You light your optics, and it’s not him. The colors are wrong, the gestures utterly mad. He is violence and insanity personified. Every move he makes advertises that this mech lost his processor somewhere on the battlefield. He is Optimus Prime, but he is not. He is the Prime as he should be, re-imagined by the war that destroyed Cybertron and the deaths on his hands. He is powerful and terrible, glorious and profane.

You rather like him like this, to be honest. You’re not just running hot from damage and pain.

He frustrates you at the same time. How can he look at you and be blind to your similarities?

He touches you with the gentlest stroke of his forefinger down your cheek, and he totally misinterprets your look of bemusement. “You chose wrong, little Seeker,” he tells you, arrogant and sure. “You chose to join the Decepticons, and what has that brought you?” One hand pulls on the ragged stump of a wing, and the other clamps onto your chin, preventing you from turning your head away as the backlash hits. “Nothing but pain.”

You grit your teeth, and surprise flashes through that mad optics as he realizes that it’s not a rictus grin of agony you bare your teeth in. “Pain is a gateway to victory,” you snarl through a broken jaw and lacerated tongue. Your words are unintelligible, but you grind them through his gloating like a dull knife. They come out in sheer, undiluted defiance of bodily harm. “I am a Decepticon. If Megatron’s words couldn’t break me, what can your paltry fists do to me?!”

Anger lights him incandescent, but your split lips twist into a sneer a second before, still quicker than any Autobot no matter how strange, you lunge against the chains and pain to *bite*. Your jaw grates painfully, but you clamp down as hard as you can. Fists batter you, but you wrench and pull, buck and fight. It is pain, nothing more.

He hurts you. You bend, you come apart, and you suffer. He thinks he wins, but now he knows it’s not enough.

When they tear you off, you take a memento to remind *him* that hurting you had not changed you. Tossing your head back, you swallow his finger whole. Then you laugh in his masked face for daring to touch you with anything approaching tenderness.

“I choose pain,” you say through a spill of vital fluids.

“You chose wrong,” he repeats, but there is a fixated look you recognize in that gaze. You laugh again, piercing and hysterical.

Like Megatron before him, Optimus Prime looks upon the smoking ruin you’ve become and sees that you are truly beautiful.
“There’s something wrong with you,” Slingshot says. The tone is kind of odd, coming from him. He’s trying to convince you, and it’s working better in this voice than the yelling he usually employs. “You’re a flyer. A jet. You were made to fly. Of all the stuff we face in the air, you get scared about the ground?” He shakes his head and crosses his arms, a disgruntled look coming and going across his face as he ponders that. “Decepticons, I could get. Guns? Frag, we’re all scared of guns. Guns can bring us down, and there’s enough people aiming them at us every time we go up. I could even,” he admits somewhat reluctantly, “get it if you were afraid for us. I mean, if you got in the air and started fussing about us going too fast or pulling stunts -- sure, yeah. Okay. It’s kinda your job to worry about us.”

You look away as he squints at you. “But heights?”

“I do worry about all of that,” you protest quietly, but your spark’s not in it. “And you’re very important to me.”

“But not important enough to save,” he says, and that’s the accusation he’s been building up to. The fact that you’ll break off a dogfight if it goes too high, because you just can’t take looking down and seeing the world spin so far below.

Decepticons and guns and concern for the trouble your wingmates get into are fleeting risks that come and go according to the shift of battle. The ground is always a threat. You can’t take it, you break off, and you leave your gestaltmate fighting alone above you.

Slingshot glares at you, and your guilt seeps in through the holes his anger tears into your spark. “There is something,” he enunciates precisely, dropping every word like he knows how badly they burn, “wrong with you.”

He gives you one more nasty look for good measure, losing the reasonable voice for his normal caustic yell. “Get Ratchet to fix you!”

What can you say to that? He’s right.

You hang your head and say nothing as he stomps away.

“It’s a phobia,” Ratchet tells you, but you know it’s deeper than a simple mental skip. He wouldn’t be speaking this gently to you if it were a physical problem, so there really is something wrong in your mind. “I can’t fix that.”

“I can…face it?” you ask, and you hate how your voice shakes at the idea. “Confronting phobias is a thing, right? It’ll help?”

“Sometimes it does. Not always. And Silverbolt,” he puts a hand on your wing as if to support you, “it’s not a good idea to try during combat. I don’t want you freezing up in the air.”

The older officers treat you like glass. You hate that, no matter how much you appreciate it. There’s something wrong with you, and it fell on Slingshot to tell you how everyone knows and wants you to start pulling your weight on the team. War is a life or death struggle. You can’t put your gestalt at risk.

So you gather your courage and talk to Optimus Prime about separating you out from the other
Aerialbots, to keep you from endangering them. Not during combat, of course, because Superior is needed, but other times. You have to stamp this phobia out.

While the other Aerialbots train with Ironhide, filling the gestalt bond with frustration and flashes of excitement, you spiral up from the mountain again and again. Each time, you convince yourself you’re higher than before, no matter what the numbers say. Skydive tells you afterward that he had to sit out of practice because he couldn’t concentrate.

When Air Raid finds a movie, you encourage the others to join him in watching it in the common room while you take a patrol. You fly high, higher than ever before, and you are terrified the entire time. Fireflight goes to the medbay complaining of headaches while you’re gone.

You ask Skyfire for a favor and step blindfolded out of his hold at the maximum altitude your engines can function at. Fireflight collapses, Skydive walks into a wall, and both Slingshot and Air Raid tear aft out of the Ark looking for you, blind with your terror and horrified that they’ve driven you to what they see as suicidal idiocy.

“Skyfire was right there,” you assure them, confused by their behavior. “I was scared, but I knew he’d catch me if I fell.”

You don’t understand the look they give you. “Idiot!” Slingshot hisses, and he turns toward the door as if Skyfire were right outside. “Idiot!” he yells.

“You never said anything,” Skydive says. Air Raid burrows into your side as Fireflight tucks into the other. “Why didn’t you come to us?”

Slingshot’s hands curl into fists that shake, but he doesn’t turn from glaring daggers at the door. You look from him to Skydive, then down at the other two. “There’s nothing wrong with you,” you explain the obvious. “It’s just me.”

When you stand up, you have to disengage your hands from the three sets suddenly holding on to them. You don’t understand why they’re reacting this way, and it fills you with warmth that they care. But you persist, because there’s something wrong with you, and for their sakes, you have to fix it. You can’t expect them to follow someone who can’t fly where they go. That’s like expecting Fireflight to call down the lightning. It’s just backward logic, expecting jets to do what they weren’t made to do.

“I’ll be okay.” You pat Slingshot’s shoulder in passing, and he flinches. “I’ll get better, you’ll see.”

You turn at the door to give them a smile you hope doesn’t falter around the edges. “You’re very important to me.”

Slingshot’s stricken look is the last thing you see as the door closes. It makes you all the more determined to conquer this fear. A good leader gives his mechs no cause to doubt how much he values them.

[* * * * *]
“Treat” - Rewind
[* * * * *]

You’re being chased.

It’s not the most epic chase of all time -- well, maybe. You are involved, after all -- but nobody can say you aren’t giving it your all.
You zip through the bridge with a quick, “Is that aft up to code? The subject merits close inspection!” at Rodimus’ behind when nobody is looking. Normally your impressions are pretty good, but you gave that one everything. You’re under a console and out the other door before anyone can make the connection between fugitive ‘copter on the lamb and the words that made Rodimus’ jaw drop. Ultra Magnus is standing stock still in a spreading pool of laughter. Hopefully nobody’ll figure out who actually said it in the next minute, because your pursuer’s a curious little glitch. He’ll stop and investigate why Rodders is staring stupidly up at the Duly Appointed Enforcer, who is looking absolutely everywhere but at the captain.

Meh, Ultra Fragnus will recover soon enough and start spouting rules and regs left and right. He’ll probably try and arrest you later. The write-up will be a fun read. Impersonating an officer? Disrespect for architectural code? Improper timing of honest appreciation?

Woo! Cuffs! What everyone needs to look forward to in their evenings.

The distraction in the bridge won’t last forever. You head for the bar. “Hey, Skids! Has Swerve told you about his idea for you shutting him up, yet?” you call through the door. “Here’s a hint!” You make an obscene gesture only possible because pincers have two parts to them. It still takes both your claws to pull it off, but the mime gets the whole bar hooting.

Swerve starts talking, which only makes things worse. Everything according to plan. You like Swerve, but the mech can’t bluff to save his life. He’s been after Skids’ skidplate for weeks. If you’re lucky, causing a ruckus in the bar tonight will let him get lucky. That’d be cool. Swerve really should learn to shut up the fun way, and Skids is kind of awesome in an extreme sport referee sort of way: diplomatic but insane at the same time. He can keep up with you. There aren’t many mechs who can.

One of whom is still chasing you. Slag, what does it take to ditch this guy?

Right. Onward to the labs. If Perceptor can’t delay the pipsqueak through a flood of unnecessary wordage (it’s a word, you swear), then you’ve only got one option left to you. It’s not one you want to pull out for less than a threat of incarceration, but you’ll do it if you have to.

Sneaking into the laboratories without being seen isn’t exactly difficult. The science geeks are busy arguing. You could shake your guns while strutting up and down the lab tables, and they’d just tell you not to touch anything without breaking optic contact with each other. Can you spell sexual tension? Oh, yes you can. One sneaky pinch to Perceptor’s aft right when Brainstorm turns to grab something off the counter, and the snarking commentary turns into a screaming fight complete with accusations of past molestation. Either you’re not the first mech to pull this trick, or Brainstorm’s a bit of a grab-aft in the lab.

Note to self: don’t get locked in a lab with Brainstorm. He makes some fabulous guns, but you’re not about to let him pull your trigger.

Unless it’s a really big gun. Maybe for that. Call it being emotionally compromised, but you’d do a lot for a nice gun.

Anyway.

You duck out the other door and snicker to yourself at your cleverness for a while. Only to nearly get caught when the door swooshes open after you. Scrap!

You haul rotors down the corridor while small feet patter determinedly after. Slaaaaag. Time to pull your ace out of the hole.
Down to Rung’s office you skitter. Mechs forget how fast those lanky legs of yours can go until you’re past them in a stream of verbal abuse. You leave half the ship confused, inexplicably turned on, yet irrationally angry with your passage. Normal day in the life, really.

When you hit Rung’s door, you’re expecting salvation. Rung is like the ‘Get Out Of Jail Free’ card in the Autobots.

“But why won’t you let me in?” you’re whining not a minute later. You know you’re whining, but you can’t stop yourself. Primus, you sound so nasal. Even Ratchet hasn’t been able to explain how you can sound nasal without a nose. “I need help! Assistance! Succor me, doc!” See, you know big words, too.

”I’m sorry, Whirl, but it’s for your own good,” Dr. Eyebrows says calmly through the intercom. “Facing the results of your actions is a necessary part of personal development, and I feel it’s time you stop trying to dodge consequences. You’re not in the Wreckers any longer. There’s no one and nothing here to shield you from the aftermath of what you’ve done.”

“That’s right!” a bright voice says from about knee-height, and you fragging well try to climb the wall to escape, but it’s too late. He’s got you. “Now bend down here and take your hug like a mech,” Rewind orders you. “You saved my life, and it’s only right that I get to thank you.”

Hemming and hawing, you eventually run out of excuses. He stands there and waits out the bluster until you bend down and, gingerly, pick him up so he can put his arms around your neck and hug you half to death.

You catch a glimpse of a little red light.

Gah! He’s recording this!

[* * * * *]

“Candle” - Skids
[* * * * *]

You want to remember. You do.

Individual memories flicker, small flames amidst the darkness. One memory lights another, bursting out of the nothing into something, a spreading ocean of single moments that shimmer on the edge of a coherent whole. A thousand words per picture, every picture a second in time, all the time you’ve lost breaking apart into little tongues of fire in the back of your mind. There’s something there.

You almost have it. You can almost see it. The light rises into a crackling wave about to break, about to sweep over and through you, and --

“Skids? Yo, Skids? You okay?”

-- and you’re shaking so hard your drink has spilled, so hard your plating clatters and your teeth rattle together. You set the glass down slowly, trying to control your movements, and blink at the hand on your other arm. “Swerve?”

The smile he gives you is worried but game. “Lost you for a second there, buddy. Where’d you go?”

You can only look at him and repeat what you already say too often: “I don’t know.”

[* * * * *]
Optics rest on you. Dark, heavy optics.

Normally, you’d cringe under the weight of them and stop whatever it is that you’re doing. Now, however, you duck your head and giggle. Rewind brushes his mask against yours, and you whisper in his audio. He resets his vocalizer and sings the words. It comes out as a weird warble that sounds even funnier than when you try.

You bury your face into his neck and laugh so hard your wheels shake. He cracks up as well and nuzzles into your shoulder. “What? Did I pronounce it wrong?”

“Yes,” you manage through the heaves of air. Oh, you needed that. “The ‘aaah’ is a ‘aaoh’ sound. You have to,” a snort-giggle interrupts you, and that sets off Rewind again. You both shake, visors squinting in amusement. “Right! Yes! Gotta clench your vocal tubes on the second half of the word.” It’s something Cyclonus didn’t know how to explain, since he has an actual mouth. You’re much more confident explaining how to pronounce the old tongue to someone else with a full mask.

“Ohh, like the ‘ow’ in ‘now’?” Your teaching efforts gain you a playful hug.

You hug him back. “Not quite. Kind of more like the ‘o’ in ‘no.’”

He hums against you, mask to mask, and you can feel the minute vibrations of him flexing the tubes leading from his vocalizer. Mechs with mouths have full throats, but you and he have vocal tubes separate from your fuel intake tube. Lacking a mouth limits you in some ways, but this isn’t bad.

“Again?” Rewind nods, and you whisper the phrase again.

He croons it back to you totally off-key, sounding like a lousy bar singer, but his pronunciation is spot-on. You celebrate by handing the flashdrive his drink while you take a deep swallow from your own. Your visors meet over the engex, and suddenly you both just lose it, sputtering and giggling at the total ridiculousness of what you’re doing. Because, seriously, who gives singing lessons with your student sitting in your lap, legs wrapped around your waist? Can anyone be taking this seriously? Really?

“Is he still watching?” you ask breathlessly, just barely whispering in Rewind’s audio.

He peeks and nods vigorously. “Yep! Swerve’s down to sending the serving drone. There’s some kind of,” his hand waves in illustration, “black cloud of doom over his head.”

Oh, wow, you can’t believe it. “What about Chromedome?” You don’t dare peek. That’d give the game away.

Rewind wriggles against you and positively beams. “Don’t worry about him. He thinks it’s hot.”

You look at each other and collapse laughing a moment later.

“So,” he says when you recover, “what’s the next line?”

[** ** **]

“Join Me” - IDW cop Orion Pax
[** ** **]

“Join me, stalwart citizen!” Orion Pax boomed grandly. “Fight against the rising Decepticon
menace! Fight the fearsome Megatron! Defeat our foes and solve mysterious crimes! Jump from impossibly tall objects and look dashingly heroic at the same time! With you at my side,” he said, putting a hand on his much shorter but conversely brave companion’s shoulder, “Cybertron will be restored to its former glory. Your courage and intellect will be a shining beacon of what a true Cybertronian can be when given the opportunity -- “

“Are you writing Orion Pax fanfiction again?” Swerve asks from behind you.

You scramble to cover your datapad. “N-no! Why would I do that?!”

He turns from cleaning the table to give you a Look. It’s halfway between bored out of his helm and highly entertained. “Because that’s what you did that last time I let you stay past closing.”

You tried to blot that night from your memory. Your greatest literary work ever? Nope, but Swerve still insisted you read it aloud before he unlocked the door to let you out.

You have the sinking feeling he’s going to insist again.

“Is there porn in this one, too?”

You hiss in embarrassment. “No!”

“Just sayin’. I’ll help you do the voices if there is. Y’know. If your story goes that way.”

Oh. Well…oh.

Alright, then.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 16

Chapter Summary

Someone sent in a frag buddy application. You are Blurr, Kup, and Chromedome responding to it.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 16
Warning: Petplay, sexual military rank, and potential orgy.
Rating: R?
Continuity: IDW & G1
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Prompts from Tumblr.

[* * * * *]
Name: Blurr (IDW)
Availability: Available except when slagging 'Cons with my Wrecker buddies.
Soft or Rough? : Both
Dirty talk? : Yes [x] No []
Dominant or Submissive? (Or both.) : Submissive.
Some (Or all) of my turn on’s : Exhibitionism, being bound, previously kept as a pet, so collars are fine, so are cages or 'beatings' if (read: when) I misbehave.
Other thing’s you should know : I have light plating, so adjust your strength accordingly.

[* * * * *]

It was a miserable failure on your part. The single’s advertisement seemed like a brilliant idea at the time, but the problem with writing an ad in the heat of the moment is that you can’t alter it when circumstances change. Namely, the fact that Autobots and Decepticons are trying to get along, now. Obsolete information doesn’t vanish just because it’s old. Putting out a new ad will only encourage people to do a little research, and that’ll pop the old ad up. You’re a little desperate, and you know it, but you’re not stupid.

That ad’s been circulating for months, and you’re getting used to the way your fan slats flutter when someone walks into the restored bar, looks at you, and…orders a drink. Hope died a while back. You just wish it’d stop the death throes. You keep waiting for someone to walk in, give you a look, and just go for it.

Surely somebody in the city likes your type? It can’t be just because of…well, it could be. You’ve got a bit of an attitude problem, yes fine okay, but it bothers you that you can’t get anything beyond a one-night stand. Even those are few on the ground, lately. There aren’t many Autobots who’ll put a hand on you anymore. Getting around to what you really want in the berth drives the couple of repeat flings you’ve got out the door before you can explain beyond the word ‘pet.’ A single’s ad seemed like a genius way to just lay it right out how you want to be treated.

Problem is that you were riding high on attitude at the time you wrote the ad, and that line about slagging 'Cons isn’t exactly politically correct. Neutrals are avoiding you. Decepticons are avoiding
you. Autobots are looking at you funny. Anybody who thinks the idea of toying with you is hot? Referring to the Wreckers and killing the mechs you share a bar with now kind of destroyed your chances there.

If you could take it back, you would. But you can’t.

You have a collar, up in your apartment. It’s slender and glitzy, lined by the slimmest of designs in scrolling neon lights. The ring in the front is perfectly sized for four hanks of decent rope, or a couple of fingers from someone your size. Just one, if the mech’s bigger than you are. That’d be nice. You like the idea of being pulled into someone’s lap, wrists caught in one hand while the other snags your collar to drag you in for a kiss. Something light at first, letting you know you have to ask for more. You like the idea of being pulled into someone’s lap, wrists caught in one hand while the other snags your collar to drag you in for a kiss. Something light at first, letting you know you have to ask for more. You know yourself: you’ll try to get around that. You’ll nip and nibble, giving your biggest pleading optics and best pouting look. It’s all part of the play, being a naughty pet without quite disobeying. Punishments are almost as fun as rewards. But when you finally lose your pride and beg, Primus. Being bent back, a large hand in the small of your back to force you into an arch while your hip joints complain about straddling thick knees, a mouth heavy on yours and a tongue pinning yours to the roof of your mouth…

The collar’s upstairs because you’re down to self-servicing in order to burn charge, at this point. You can’t count the number of times you’ve buckled it on yourself and knelt on the floor, bent back, and grabbed your ankles. It’d be better with the cuffs and the smooth cables you’ve got in place of rope, but fantasy can’t untie you afterward, so you make do. It’s still good. You can squirm and struggle, optics off, and imagine you’re being watched. After hours, your owner would expect you to hurry upstairs and prepare yourself for him, maybe while he goes about his own business and only idly keeps an optic on you. You’d belong to him until the bar opens the next day, and your mind fills in all the fantasies that time could hold.

Jazz walked in on you once, collared and leashed to a table in the bar while you pretended. You were cleaning before opening, tethered as if your owner had left you there under orders to make everything within reach sparkle. Jazz walked in, and you nearly choked yourself before the leash snapped and you darted up the stairs to hide.

That had been an awkward conversation.

Would have been worth it if Jazz wanted to play, but he doesn’t. He doesn’t swing that way. If he did, it’d just be a matter of convincing him that you don’t mind whose face he sees when he looks at you. You’ve had stranger employer/employee relationships in the past, and the benefits of a steady frag buddy outweigh the idea of an actual relationship. He has the hands of a musician, and you daydream sometimes about how he could play you anytime.

Then everything goes to the Pit with Megatron’s return, and your bar is a wreck. What the riots didn’t do, Arcee did. It’s up to you to clean it up, of course. You pick unbroken bottles out of the trash and grumpily wonder where your clientele wanders off to when the real work begins.

You’re so set in your grousing that there’s a set of hands delicately shaking the glass and windowframe from a familiar circlet of neon and metal before you realize Swindle’s standing in the street evaluating your collar.

He does evaluate it, holding it to the spotty light like he’s looking to buy. “Copper…platinum lining. Is this crystal?” One finger taps the neon design. “Quartz or standard glass cover, neon gas interior, minimum power requirements.” The design gets extra consideration from the artistic perspective, but Swindle sniffs a dismissal. You’re oddly offended by that. He does seem pleased when he discovers the light colors are controlled by body temperature. “Easy evaluation of arousal and mood! Nice
After giving a thorough going-over, he regretfully holds it out to you. “If I had the credits on me, I’d make an offer. I know someone who’d enjoy wearing it. Will it be available for purchase later?”

You take it on automatic, because your mind stumbles over that phrasing. That isn’t the phrasing of a collector of oddities; that’s the phrasing of someone who knows how it’s used. “It’s available,” you say, and your voice comes out embarrassingly husky. It’s suddenly occurred to you that Swindle hasn’t had access to that horrible mistake of yours, and he knows that you acted to save Decepticons and Autobots alike. And he knows *something* about the lifestyle, or knows somebody at least, and that’s more than you’ve got right now!

He’s a connection. Terrible advertisement aside, *this* is what you were looking for.

Surprised by your tone, he looks straight at you. Your optics drop from that look -- it’s the same evaluating look he gave your collar, and you can *see* him matching collar size to your neck -- and catch on his hands. The sensitive hands of a mech who speaks with them more often than not. They’re small but strong, dexterous enough to to open up a weapon or forge a signature.

You kind of hope he’s more than a connection. Maybe he’s…into the lifestyle himself?

That’s a thought you never thought you’d have about a Decepticon. Former Decepticon. Whatever he is.

“I’m not in the market personally,” he says, neutral and careful, “but I’m always on the look-out for collars to train. Got a bit of a business supplying leash accessories to interested parties in the market for high-class berth decorations.” Your vocalizer sticks. That’s the most diplomatic way you’ve ever heard a trainer say he supplies masters with pets. He flashes that conmech smile to dazzle you, and you are suitably dazzled. “What, did you think the other Combaticons were picked at random? Gestalt technology relies on the mechs involved knowing how to deal out control and submission to each other.”

He reached out and brushes fingers over the collar clutched in your hands. “I know how to play to power dynamics. So. Let me know when you’re interested in selling?”

Now *that* is an innuendo-loaded question.

You nod dumbly at his back.

[* * * * *]
Name: Grimlock

*Availability*: Not busy. Him Prime’s orders stupid, and me Grimlock’s not doing them.

*Soft or Rough?*: Grimlock is Dinobot! Rough!

*Dirty talk?*: Yes [x] No []

*Dominant or Submissive? (Or both.)*: Grimlock King!

*Some (Or all) of my turn on’s*: Me Grimlock likes a mech that moves a lot and makes lots of noise.

[* * * * *]

Oh dear. And this is what they hand you when you get off the ship from Cybertron. Millions of years of wrangling troops, fighting off planet and playing the diplomacy game on planet, and this is what your reputation gets you. Welcome to Earth, have a handful of regular applications and *this*.

It’s nice to know they think you can handle anything, you suppose.
“...right.” You’ve seen worse. Not that you can say that about attitude so far, but the accompanying picture is attractive enough. The application reads oddly, but it could be a language impediment like Warpath’s. The mech seems rough around the edges, sure, and he certainly is a big ‘bot, but there are some who like big ‘bots and cannot lie. You just have to figure out where the mech’s mind fits in the scale of 0 to I’d Frag That.

You give this Grimlock’s creation date a second look and nearly fritz. “Does he even know what half these questions refer to?” you half-yell at Ultra Magnus.

The city commander has the frazzled look of someone who’s had to deal with Grimlock before. “We’ve been unable to determine that.”

Which is not an acceptable excuse in your books. Someone had to give Grimlock the application. Was a little follow-up so much to ask for?!” “So he, what, filled this out in a void? Did anyone help him?” Yes, you’re yelling. Primus, no wonder they handed you this when you stepped onto Earth. This pushes all your buttons and then some.

“We tried to evaluate the Dinobots’ interfacing education level,” he tells you. What a stuffy mech. He’s probably stressed to the Pit and back, with the job he’s got. You absently clear a place in your schedule for some education of his own, because Optimus Prime sent you to Earth to spread your experience around to all the troops. “Ratchet insists he explained interface systems, but Wheeljack similarly insists that the behavioral guidelines are coded to activate upon practice, not theory. A poll of the prior Earth crew indicated a lack of partners. We haven’t been able to get a clear answer about experimentation within the unit itself.”

“Do they act like they’re ‘facing each other’s tails off?’” Not everybody has your keen optic for this sort of behavior, but this Grimlock mech doesn’t seem like the subtle sort. You doubt it’d be that hard to tell if the Dinobots are sexually active.

His expression closes in on itself. You add an extra hour onto the Ultra Magnus Personalized Education Class. This mech needs to unwind before something blows.

“The Dinobots, as a group,” he says stiffly, “are difficult to understand.”

“I’ll bet,” you mutter, drumming your fingers on your thigh. “Reminds me of the time I bent the Midgreer ambassador over an oil barrel -- “

“Ah.” Great, now he looks uncomfortable. What’d you say? “Pardon the interruption, but this is as good an introduction as any. About your official post here in Autobot City…”

“What?” You give him a suspicious look. You’re the Duty Officer. You’ve always been the Duty Officer. Everybody goes to the Duty Officer, and everybody knows the Duty Officer. Why change what works? And what does that have to do with telling an appropriate story for the situation?

“The humans are a rather repressed species, and in the interests of preventing problems among the younger of our new colleagues, I’ve had to alter your normal responsibilities. Nothing has changed in practice,” he assures you. Yeah, he saw that appointment pop up in his appointment queue. “On the surface, however, you are being assigned to the rank of Sergeant. Humans don’t sexualize any portion of military rank, so we are changing the public portion of your responsibilities to a more human-friendly role. It will allow you to mingle with the ranks as needed and pay special attention to -- “

“Hot Rod,” you sigh. “I noticed he’d been moved to Earth. Any problems so far?”
Ultra Magnus coughs as if to loosen his vocalizer. “Nothing but the usual, for assignment to an alien planet.”

You eye him wryly. “Run-away cases of xenophilia among the crew, eh?”

Another cough. You wonder if you’re going to have to unpack a bunch of your more exotic stories tonight, just for his edification. How many stories about soft species do you have on file? Hmm.

“A few. Mostly on the level of friendly fascination, but, ah. That may change.” A nod to you and your ability to unlock interfacing desires. You are the best of the best, after all.

You shake your head and push it aside for discussion during his appointment slot. “Sergeant, huh? I can play that part. Might be good just for dealing with this bunch.” Grimlock’s profile flashes on the screen as you lift the datapad. You sound as exasperated as you feel. “Younglings. I’m probably gonna have to start from the beginning with them.”

“Will you be able to handle it?”

“Please,” you scoff. “I’ve been doing this how long, now? If I couldn’t guide a bunch of ignorant goons around, I’d retire.”

Ultra Magnus smiles, suddenly relieved. “Thank you, Kup. I knew we could count on you.”

You fail to be surprised when, later in the preliminary interview, Grimlock shows you the Dinobots’ mudpit. He sloshes about talking about the various kinds of dirt he likes.

Yep. From the very beginning.

[* * * * *]
Name: Rewind
Availability: Noncombatant, generally free when I’m not making records for posterity or editing footage.
Soft or Rough? : Both
Dirty talk? : Yes [] No [x]
Dominant or Submissive? (Or both.) : Both
Some (Or all) of my turn on’s : Directing, theatrics, mood lighting and music, audience participation, enthusiasm.
Other thing’s you should know : I’m almost always recording, but if the subject might be sensitive I’ll still ask permission.
[* * * * *]

“Frag me frag me frag me frag me -- excuse me! -- fragging glitch of a speedbump! No, I’m sorry, that wasn’t directed at you. Pardon me, coming through, please just move, oh frag my life…”

Still chanting a rain of curses down on your own stupidity, you corner in vehicle mode and transform without dumping a fraction of speed before you hit the stairs. Any doubt you’ve ever had on whether or not Prowl is trying to sabotage your relationship is long gone. It isn’t so much that he showed you the personal ad; it’s the smart aft look on his face when he did so. That’d been the look of a mech who got his way but won’t gloat about it until your back is turned.

You’d turned it, all right. You left tiremarks on the floor of his office.
“Open, you slagging piece of -- “ The door pops open, and you skid inside throwing your resident ID code over your shoulder at the persistent security mech who chased you up the stairs. “Here! Take it and go! Jumped up tin whistle, I don’t pay maintenance fees for you to harass me, so get lost!” The mech draws himself up and huffs indignantly, but you don’t care. You know you’re being rude and disrespectful, but he can go recycle exhaust. You’re slightly more concerned with the whereabouts of Rewind.

“Oh, Primus.” He’s never been big on material possessions, but you can tell in a single glance that what little he moved in has now been moved in. Your knees weaken, and you lean against the doorframe. “Oh, Rewind. No.”

Your protest is as weak as your knees, because you know this is your fault. You promised him you wouldn’t inject again.

Prowl came to you with that proposal, and he appealed to the fact that you’re one of the only mnemosurgeons he trusts to work on his cases, and you knew -- you knew -- it was wrong to help. It was wrong because you’re a specialist and a consultant, now. You’re an Autobot. The Autobots don’t require you to inject. You left that life behind because it was killing you, and Rewind saved more than your sanity by taking you away from it.

In return for that salvation, all he asked for was your promise.

You promised.

You promised, and then you broke your word. Not just once -- oh, no. That’d be forgivable, and you’ve secretly marveled because he’s forgiven you anyway. Over, and over again.

He’s gotten mad every time, but you’ve always managed to patch things up with the proper application of groveling under his tiny feet and some deft shifting of blame onto Prowl. It’s Prowl’s fault most of the time. Rewind understands that. Or, at least, he understood it.

Looks like you’re not getting off the hook so easy this time.

“Wait!” You whirl and sprint down the hall after the sulking security mech. “Wait! Did you see where my partner went?! He’s only a small mech, the flashdrive, you know him? Do you remember him? You must have seen him moving out!”

The mech meets your gaze and deliberately closes the lift door in your face.

Okay, you deserved that.

Swallowing your pride, you take the stairs two at a time going down. You reach the ground floor as the lift opens, and the blasted thing is empty. Argh!

It takes you a couple minutes to find the building directory and locate the security office. When you arrive, the door’s locked. There’s a friendly sign up telling you that all security personnel are currently on patrol or assisting fellow residents. They have to earn their exorbitant wages paid by your maintenance fees, after all. Busy people, security personnel!

Now, come on. That’s just uncalled for.

You’re going to owe buckets of apologies to everyone by the end of the day, you can tell.

It’s no use asking around the rest of the building. They’re all civilian consultants for the Autobot military, and most of them are working at the moment. That leaves you, a load of guilt crushing your
squirming spark, and a personal ad all but designed to set up a porno shoot. Rewind is probably being bombarded by eager applicants right now, and knowing him, he’ll be setting up an orgy just to film it. If he particularly feels like grinding you under his little heel, he’ll participate. If he’s feeling vengeful and wants to make you beg and crawl, he’ll transmit the filming to you live.

This isn’t the first time he’s threatened to leave you and take up filming again. It *is* the first time he’s carried the threat through. You’re dreadfully afraid that he’s not going to settle for just one shoot, either. He didn’t leave a forwarding address or contact information, and if you can’t talk him out of being angry, he’s going to stay righteously pissed off at you for breaking your word yet again.

You are not looking forward to watching his new films, but you’re going to have to. If you’re really, really lucky, you’ll recognize the location. Maybe if you hang around outside the studio, he’ll let you follow him to his new apartment like a lovesick groupie.

Maybe if you show up already on your knees, he’ll let you apologize and beg forgiveness before he sends you home alone.

[* * * * *]
Chapter Summary

You are Ramjet, Rattrap, Starscream, Shockwave, Chromedome, and Onslaught.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 17
Warnings: Completely inappropriate questions, bartered favors, porn, BDSM talk, and roleplay.
Rating: R?
Continuity: IDW & G1, Beast Wars
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Prompts from Tumblr.

[* * * * *]

Optimus Prime - “When did you lose your virginity?”
[* * * * *]

“I can’t believe you submitted that!” Thrust hoots, toasting you. You reach across the table and tap cubes with him, grinning like a loon.

“I can’t believe the Autodorks have an open Ask box!” you caw back, one hand still on the keyboard as you browse the official Autobot homepage. The humans are only just getting with the idea of a worldwide information network, and of course the squishy-loving Autobots are right there helping set the thing up. Their profiles page is the most toned-down useless thing you’ve ever read, but their ‘Causes of the Great War’ essay had the common room in stitches when you read it out loud. Discovering an Ask box at the bottom hadn’t calmed the hilarity down. “It’s just asking to be taken advantage of! C’mon, the whole ecosystem on this dirtball’s based on sex -- I couldn’t have sent in the first question!”

It really does boggle your mind. There’s no guidelines, no banned question list. The Autobots just have a blank box inviting ‘Everyone On Earth’ to ask any question. Not even any relevant question, or restricting the species of the asker. Like, what the slag? You’re on Earth. Thrust is on Earth. Whoever set this up either didn’t think about the obvious loophole, or they’re prepared for a barrage of rude questions from bored Decepticons.

You can see Thrust get the idea the same moment you do. “We gotta tell Megatron,” you both say at the same time, matching evil grins spreading across your faces.

Sure, it’s a potential information leak if someone can use it to hack into Teletraan-1, but you doubt it’ll be useful for that. More importantly, you’ve just got to see what Megatron asks. He may scare the wings off you as a commander, but anyone capable of taking Starscream’s ego down in five words or less will love this little ask box.

The portable keyboard on the table pings at you, and you grin. “Whoa, look! They answered! They actually fragging well answered!”

Six chairs overturn in the rush to cluster around you. “This is going to be good.”
“Think their Security Director’s set up automatic ‘frag off’ messages yet?”

“What’s the Prime’s diplomatic version of ‘you should be ashamed of yourself for asking’? This I’ve got to see.”

You click open the message, and it’s fortunate you’re not acutely claustrophobic with the way everyone swoops down around you to eagerly read.

Dead silence fills the common room.

After a while, you realize your jaw is in your lap. “Uh…I wasn’t…at least he’s honest?” Honesty was an Autobot trait, supposedly. You just didn’t know it applied to stuff like this.

A distinct humming noise comes from directly behind you. Thundercracker doesn’t even notice when you twist to stare at him. He’s still reading, optics glazing as lust slowly heated him. Three more sets of fans hum on. Your neck hurts from turning back and forth to gape.

Fair enough, it’s a good story. Definitely not one you expected the Prime to admit to.

There’s only one thing you can do in this situation. “Somebody go get Soundwave. I want an image capture of him when I hand this over.”

[* * * * *]

Blast Off - “Do you have any unusual kinks/fetishes?”

[* * * * *]

You twitch. “Wh-what?” Is this guy serious? You’re applying to a warehouse position, not one in a brothel!

The shuttle interviewing you won’t meet your incredulous look. “Do you have any -- “

“I heard you the first time!” For love of money and ammunition, he’s serious. “Why is that relevant?!” Oops, maybe you should have denied having any before asking why it’s need-to-know information. But you’re really kind of rattled at the moment, because who the frag asks that during a job interview? For a non-brothel job, anyway.

You knew you should have sent your resume in to the road maintenance crew instead.

A sigh. “I realize this is a slightly…discomfiting question to ask you at this point in our relationship -- “

“What relationship?” you ask in a shrill voice. When did reality turn on end? “I applied for hauling stock and loading transport vessels, not covering you in flavored oils and taking you down to the Red Light district for dinner and show! What is this?!” Fumbling in your haste, you paw at your side storage unit until you find the flimsy with the job information. It makes a disproportionately loud noise as you slap it down on the desk between you. “Am I in the right office?! Is this Orbital Transport Inc., or did I take a wrong turn downstairs?!”

His vents click open and closed audibly, and now you know what a flustered shuttle looks like. It’s not a bad look on this guy, but you’re a bit too out of your comfort zone to appreciate it right this second.

“I, ah, oh.” He tries to cover it, but mask and visor don’t stop his heat shielding from clamping tight to his body in visible alarm. You see the faint orange lines of a heads-up display as he apparently pulls up his schedule, and suddenly he’s standing and covering the world’s most embarrassed
stammer as he reaches across the desk to pull the flimsy toward him. “I-I -- My apologies. The office secretary switched my schedule around so that I now work the first shift instead of the second, which is when I assumed the job interviews are -- well, they’re normally scheduled then, and this time was scheduled for a more personal interview that I -- I, uh. A different sort of -- of -- I really must apologize!”

“No no, it’s okay!” you blurt without thinking, partly because you get secondhand embarrassment far too easily in these situations but mostly because your chance of getting this job out of sheer mortification on the interviewer’s part just shot up. Hopefully you won’t have to work with this guy directly. “Maybe we can start over?”

His visor, pale from fear of the sexual harassment legal case he’s probably picturing being brought down on him, goes blank in relief. “Yes. That -- that would be good. If you don’t, um, feel too awkward being interviewed by me..?” One hand reaches toward the desk intercom as if to call in someone else to conduct the interview.

Slag no, you’re not going to give up your advantage. “No, this’s fine.” You want a glowing review of you and nothing less, or you’re going to this shuttle’s boss. A sexual harassment complaint will look really bad on his employee record, you’re certain he’s highly aware of.

He swallows and settles back in his seat. “Very well. I’m glad you, ah. You still want to work with us,” he says somewhat lamely. You do feel a little bad for him. He’s just got that attitude of a high-class mech about him, and now he’s trying to regain that. It doesn’t work so well.

“As I said earlier,” cue the awkward hitch in his voice, “my name is Blast Off, and I’ll be interviewing you today.” There’s a brief hesitation. “For the position in the warehouse.”

It’s kind of cute how he tries to cover just how nervous you make him by sitting across the desk like nothing happened. Yup, this is you being all professional. Perfect potential employee, here.

The interview stumbles along, although it smoothes out ten minutes in as Blast Off recovers. You’re qualified for the position, and you think you conduct yourself well considering the circumstances. If you don’t get the position, you’re not above blackmail. He probably knows that, too.

It’s nice that you understand each other. You like working relationships like that.

He does surprise you when you leave, 45 minutes later. You expect him to stand up and walk you to the door, because that’s polite. You don’t expect the hand on your shoulder, not after the distinctly personal beginning to the interview. Tensing a bit, you look up at him warily.

“I look forward to working with you in the future, Brawl,” he says formally, and you relax. “Perhaps we’ll find we share some interests.”

You twitch.

[********]

Rattrap - “Most embarrassing thing that’s ever happened to you during sex?”

[********]

Whichever the spiders sent the virus, you’ve got to admit it’s entertaining. It doesn’t do anything beyond print the occasional embarrassing question across the main screen, but its timing can sometimes be grand, depending on who’s sitting in front of the screen at the time.

You lean against the wall and laugh, because you really just have to. “Ehh, Spot’s embarrassin’ thing
is that his hand got tired!"

Cheetor yowls protest -- it’s the only word that fits -- while Optimus whips around to give you an appalled look. “Rattrap! That’s uncalled for.” He’s on the verge of demanding you apologize, you can tell, but sometimes the ape’s got your number. “Fine, if that’s how you want to play this, then you can answer.”

Yeah, okay, that’s why you follow this guy, not just because he can toss you around with one hand. You grin and shake your head. “You sure y’ want me fillin’ little fuzzy ears wit’ dis?” You quirk your optic ridge at Cheetor, who’s now watching you in eager anticipation. “Hnn. Why not? Fairly recent one. See, I get scramemin’ somebot’s name during, if y’ know what I mean, but when y’ scream da name of a dead human poet during? Holy Cheese, I ain’t gonna just let that slide! So I -- “

Optimus Primal’s voice is completely level. “Shut up, Rattrap.”

You just have to laugh.

[* * * * *]
Rumble & Frenzy - “Is there anybody right now you’d like to have sex with?”
[* * * * *]

He stands by your station for a few minutes before you decide his patience really is infinite. He isn’t going to just bugger off and leave you alone. So much for wishful thinking. “What.”

“Cassetticons have completed infiltration.”

“Imagine my joy,” you mutter. In actuality, that’s rather good news and you’re deeply interested in what the debriefing will uncover. It’s in your best interests to wring every scrap of information from the scraplets, because it’s going to be your aft on the line when the attack happens. That doesn’t mean you have to be gracious about the personal update. It’s weird, standing there until you stop what you’re doing for his announcement. You’re a busy mech, and he interrupted you.

Plus, he’s still not leaving you alone. “You couldn’t have just sent a notice?” you ask when the Communication Officer fails to go away.

Of everything you expect from Soundwave, a low whisper doesn’t make the list. “Appropriate reward for dangerous mission has been approved by Lord Megatron.”

You turn and give him a sharp look for the odd tone, and then another one for the actual words. Megatron’s policy of assigning reward levels to particularly dangerous missions has always rubbed you the wrong way, because avoiding damage to yourself and your unit should be a given, not a rewards-driven goal. It’s just one more point of contention between you and your beloved leader, however, and you’re not in the mood to start in on Soundwave over a system he administers. The other officer annoys you, but he didn’t set up the system. You’ll reserve your ire for Megatron.

For today, anyway.

Urgh. “What level?” you sigh, leaning in. You’re aware he’s lowered his voice to manipulate you into this, but he pulls off the feeling of a conspiracy so well.

“No damage incurred, all detection by Autobots avoided,” he says quietly. “Information on troop deployment and artillery resources retrieved and found to be up to date. Retrieval done without disturbing files. No indication given that Autobots aware of compromised status.”
You’re immediately distracted by that. “Forward the data to me as you process it,” you order, turning back to your console to call up the wingleaders. Plans need to be drawn up sooner than later, to give you the most time to integrate them into Megatron’s tactics.

It takes you another couple of minutes to realize he still hasn’t gone away. “What?!”

He resets his vocalizer pointedly. “Highest reward level achieved. Cassettes have chosen time slots.”

You blink. Time -- ? Ah, yes. Three hours with someone of the mech’s choice, to do anything within that time frame. Within limits, of course, because one Decepticon’s reward can mean another one’s torture. “Fine. Who and what?” You are going to move the time slot if it’s one of your wingleaders. The fragging Casseticons can have their fun after the attack.

Did you see that correctly? Did Soundwave just fidget?

Not only was that a fidget, but this time he leans toward you. “Frenzy and Rumble: requested interfacing session.” Well, lah dee dah. Good for them. “Request made for same individual. Combined time slot granted.” Ugh, that’s more than you need to know about the Casseticons’ sex lives. Yeah, you’re playing the ‘necessary personnel’ card and getting your mech out of that one. Six hours of fragging can wait until post-battle celebration. Might be a nice reward from your hand, if you present it wisely. “Requested individual: Starscream.”

Your wings flare out, stiff with shock. “I…do not have to comply.” Megatron has gone along with the requests on his time, but you’re not so stupid. Your rank makes you a target, and you’re not above pulling rank to get out of this.

“Compliance optional,” Soundwave acknowledges in that same low voice. “Casseticons: adamant. Soundwave has been sent to negotiate on behalf of Rumble and Frenzy.”

You open your mouth and can’t think of a single thing to say.

But Soundwave is patient. He’ll stand there waiting all day.

[* * * *]

Shockwave - “Do you watch porn?”

[* * * *]

You are the Guardian of Cybertron. You are the temporary commander of the Decepticons. Most of whom, out of necessity, you placed into statis in order that they might survive starvation conditions here on the planet. Then you barricaded yourself and your command in a Tower to search for a solution to the energy crisis and wait for Lord Megatron’s return.

Those who remain conscious on Cybertron are either Autobots or subordinates.

What kind of question is this? Of course you watch porn.

It’s the only logical solution to four million years by yourself.

[* * * *]

Rewind - “Do you like to be dominant or submissive?”

[* * * *]

This is the first relationship in a long while where you definitely need him more than he needs you. He has a life. You tried to take your life. He’s a mech with a mission and a level of determination to
carry it out that you admire more every day. He’s tiny, cute, and has a core of titanium. You’re desperate to seem calm, cool, and sophisticated instead of a suicidal wreck.

Therefore, you have no idea how to respond to his answer.

All right, you doubt you’ll scare him off this easily, not with how you two met. Communication is better than false assumptions.

“What do you mean by that?” you ask cautiously. It hits you that he might be offended, so you rush to reassure him, “There’s nothing wrong with being submissive! I just…don’t get why you think submissives have the power in a relationship?” It comes out a question, because you’re honestly confused. You haven’t seen a submissive yet who isn’t a beaten, cringing thing standing in the shadow of a dominant. It’s why you’ve been dancing around his hints that he’d like to try different power dynamics in the berth.

He gives you a Look. One of those really speaking ones that make your spark lurch in your chest. You’re reaching out for his hand before you even realize you’ve moved, and if Brainstorm were there, you already know he’d be commenting on the stupid goofy look you’re wearing. You can’t help it! This little flashdrive makes you feel like a pile of goo just by ducking his head and looking up at you! When he reaches his hand to meet yours, you’re already bending down like you’ll shelter him against the world.

You are so smitten. Brainstorm is going to mock you for eternity.

“Oh, Domey,” Rewind sighs, entwining your fingers. Primus, your hand is huge compared to him. How can you bear to abuse him? How can he like it that way? “Sometimes it’s so easy to tell you’ve only ever been exposed to the bad side of certain things.”

You’ve been a cop and a mnemosurgeon. The only people you’ve ever worked on in this particular context have been criminals and Decepticons. “There’s a good side?” you ask.

He reaches out to cup a hand on the side of your mask, drawing you down for a nuzzle that leaves a tiny tingle of charge. It melts you. Total goo. “Yes. There’s a good side.”

Holding him close like this as he climbs into your lap and nestles in, you’ll believe anything he tells you. “Okay,” you say dreamily.

He laughs and wraps his arms around your neck while zapping you with another nuzzle. “I’ll teach you, don’t worry.”

“Looking forward to it.” Calm, cool, and sophisticated? Meh. For him, you’ll be the happiest, sappiest dominant ever.

[* * * * *]

Chromedome - “Have you ever had a threesome? If not, would you?”

[* * * * *]

A tickling sensation wells up in your throat, which is interesting because you don’t even breathe through that particular tube. You cough anyway. Some circumstances apparently require an uncomfortable cough, and the quota must be met somehow, since neither Prowl nor Rewind are jumping in to do their part.

In fact, neither of them looks upset by this question at all. They slowly turned to glare past you at each other, instead.
Coughing was a bad idea. The mutual glare turns on you.

“Chromedome,” one or the other of them starts in a deceptively nice voice, and the other finishes, “what was that you just said?”

That’s when you know you’re doomed. Adaptus save you, it’s your private erotic dream come true, and it’s been a nightmare in disguise all along. There is no way on Cybertron you can escape this unscathed.

“…maybe..?”

[* * * * *]

Onslaught - “Favourite sex position?” & “Something that will never fail to get you horny?”

[* * * * *]

“Bet I can,” Vortex says, stretching his arms above his head lazily.

You don’t bother looking away from your work. You may be the commander of a gestalt, but Soundwave’s subtle indication of your actual rank was to assign you a blank stretch of corridor as your office. It’s either the common room or the closet masquerading as the shared Combinicon quarters for workspace, and the common room is currently quieter. Blast Off and Brawl are on a mission to get revenge on the Coneheads for their rash of petty pranks, and you’re not about to try working around those two interfacing as loud as they can. Between a tank and a shuttle, their engines can rattle loose bolts in the walls, and that’s not counting the speaker system Swindle loaned them. Somebody named Yoko Ono’s been playing on repeat, and the feedback is guaranteed to give passersby in the hallway processor aches. The neighbors? Ha!

It’s the small things in life that you savor. The three Coneheads trying to recharge next door will regret pranking your team.

That does put you in the common room, however, and that’s where Vortex entered your afternoon. Because he’s writing a report, and you’re combing through technical manuals, and neither one of you has an office to work in. Therefore: common room. Sharing the table, even. And this is how you end up fending off Vortex’s insistence that he can manipulate you.

It’s not worth dignifying him with a response. You know him better than ever because of the gestalt bond, and giving him a response is the worst thing you can do.

His visor gleams at the challenge. “You forget, Onslaught,” he says lightly as he stands up. “I’m in your head, too.”

That bothers you a bit. It’s true, but you’re not sure if it’s applicable to this situation or if he’s just trying to mess with your concentration. He walks away, taking his report over to one of the couches, and you glance up long enough to give his back a narrow look. The rotor blades give you no answers. He slumps down and gets back to work. Hmmph.

After about five minutes, Swindle comes sailing in, which is odd. He shmoozes with other Decepticons, but off-duty time is spent in dealings that don’t generally happen in front of witnesses. You give him an inquiring look, but he only waves before he goes over to the couch, too. That’s suspicious. Swindle doesn’t spend his off-duty time around any of the team.

It’s even more suspicious when he looks over the back of the couch and grins, slow and malicious. “Sure, Vortex. I’ll get that for you,” he states, voice clear and cheerful. A few of the nearest Decepticons glance his way. He stands up again and, oddly, picks an empty tray someone
abandoned on the sidetable. He balances it on the fingers of one hand and the edge of his shoulder, while his other hand goes to his hip like the classy serving mechs the upscale bars in Kaon used to hire instead of buying serving ‘bots. When he turns, that hip sticks out in a sassy sashay you’ve never seen him pull before. “I’ll be right back,” he sing-songs.

“You promise?” Vortex asks, and your visor narrows when his hand shoots out to pinch the conmech’s aft. “I might come looking if you’re gone too long.”

You only realize your vents are coming hot and heavy when the infuriating ‘copter puts one elbow on the back of the couch and looks at you. A look that smug deserves to be punched, but you can’t stop staring at Swindle doing his little servitor act. He takes his time crossing the room, and it’s getting far more attention than just your own. There is hip swishing, and he bends unnecessarily low to put a cube in the dispenser. His knees bend one at a time, provocatively waving that aft from side to side, hip joints turning and skidplate popping. And then he stands there fussing at the buttons, and Primus frag you sideways, how did Vortex know --

Mechs are staring. Swindle ‘accidentally’ splashes energon down his front and turns to face the rest of the room wearing the cutest little moue of distress. You heave air, having stopped breathing temporarily when that aft had been up.

“Oops! Silly me!” That…should not be legal. He doesn’t look legal. Especially when he runs his finger up through the fuel and sucks it clean, purple optics sparkling mischief. “How will I get clean now?” he giggles.

“Fetch me a drink, baby!” Skywarp catcalls. It’s just like the bars in Kaon, right down to Swindle winking and biting his forefinger at the Seeker. You suffer sudden vivid memories of the servitors getting flirty right before closing, seducing that last drink order out of the last patrons, and you stayed late every time you went because oh sweet Primus he just licked the tip of his finger.

“Only if you tip,” Swindle teases, and suddenly there are credits being waved by the Reflector trio and, scrap, is that Bonecrusher beckoning?

Fan overrides fail, and you gulp air as your ventilation system hums onto its highest system.

Vortex stands up and saunters after Swindle as the conmech plays the room. Drink orders and credits in hand, aft scuffed from a pinch here and a sly grope there, the little Jeep sways past him and heads for the dispenser again, still wagging that aft. Vortex follows like he’s on a leash, but he spins the smaller mech around and leans in to put a hand over his shoulder, braced against the wall. “You took too long. I want a refund,” he says in a voice that doesn’t belong anywhere outside a berth.

And Swindle sets his aft right on the dispenser shelf, one leg hiking up to wrap around Vortex’s hip and pull him closer. “Well, the customer’s always right, but a refund goes against policy, you know. I’ll just have to ensure customer satisfaction some…other way.”

What the frag. What the frag. Did Vortex somehow mainline into your fetish scenario hindbrain when the Combaticons combined?! This is not fair!

The ‘copter puts both hands on Swindle’s legs and runs them up until he gets a double handful of the house specialty. Your fans spin erratically as you wheeze a bit, losing control entirely over your body. Neither of them look in your direction, but you can feel the gestalt bond ping you just to make sure you’re paying attention as Swindle reaches back and flicks the dispenser on, dousing aft and hands alike.

“Hey, we have to get rations out that!” someone yells.
“Shut up!” the rest of the room shouts back.

You look at Vortex pressing Swindle into the wall, Vortex’s fingers in Swindle’s mouth and a mess of fuel spilling over the Jeep’s thighs. They’re legs and arms and purring engines as they banter back and forth, and Vortex was absolutely right. He can manipulate you.

You whimper quietly.

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**First Aid** - “Would you prefer sex in the bath or sex in the shower?”

[* * * *]

“Both are highly dangerous, and I urge you to be more cautious in your sexual encounters! Fantasies are all well and good, but in reality? No, no, combining sex and copious amounts of slippery fluids is a horrible idea!” Worried, he gives you the widest visor you’ve ever seen. “Please don’t.”

What can you say besides, “Uh…yeah. Okay?”

This is the worst reaction to a pick-up line you’ve ever gotten. It’s hard to picture yourself interfacing with a mech who cites statistics from dangerous locations people choose for a quick frag. Ten minutes of that will kill anyone’s charge.

You sigh and settle in for another night of platonic company.

[* * * *]

**Prowl** - “Weirdest place you’ve had sex?”

[* * * *]

“They are rather brazen,” Optimus says, and he sounds almost like he admires the Decepticons.

You read the latest crude question and shake your head. “Indeed. Let me handle this.” You type for a second and submit the answer, and Red Alert and Ironhide both burst out laughing.

“Nice, my mech,” Blaster chokes out around his own case of giggles. “Nice. I can feel Soundwave having a paranoia attack from here.”

You smile. “I rather hope Megatron jumps right out of his command chair.”

Optimus laughs. “Would it be overkill to send a gift-wrapped bottle of bleach?”

“Hm. He might appreciate the help sterilizing **everything** in his office. I didn’t, you notice, specify what surface I was on.”

[* * * *]
Pt. 18

Chapter Summary

Rewind and Chromedome from beginning to end, snapshots of different characters, and the God-King passes judgment.

Rewind & Chromedome from beginning to end, snapshots of different characters, and the God-King passes judgment.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 18
Warning: Angst, alternate endings, different beginnings, and glimpses into the middle.
Rating: PG-13?
Continuity: IDW & G1
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Prompts from Tumblr.

[* * * * *]

Rewind & Chromedome - “what happened immediately after their meeting in the relinquishment clinic”

[* * * * *]

They spent hours talking. Hours. Chromedome’s head felt emptier than it had in ages, in longer than he remembered, and Rewind’s returning energy had an odd effect on him. It buoyed him. It was an uplift like he’d been injected with helium, making him lighter than air.

He wondered if the little mech felt similar, but he wasn’t sure how to ask. How did an aborted suicide ask a pseudo-grave robber about a connection that might be one-sided? He’d never believed in love at first sight, and a stubborn portion of his mind cited all the scientific facts denying anything beyond a euphoria from stimulated neurocircuitry. The floating sensation wasn’t love. It was the first-contact high from meeting a compatible mech whose electromagnetic field resonated right, and who seemed to have an agreeable personality.

Rewind looked up at him, exuberance filling his visor. “I can’t tell you how much it’s helped me, talking to you tonight,” the flashdrive said, and Chromedome jolted in surprise. “Searching for Dominus Ambus...well, it’s been so long.” He sounded wistful. “Every time I think I’ve found a lead, the crash is harder. Hope hurts when it lets go, you know? When you found me -- not to sound trite, but I truly felt burnt out. I was on the verge of giving up.”

The awkward shrug that accompanied his words made Chromedome think he’d averted a fate more severe than Rewind just going home for the night. He’d heard too many traumatized Autobot soldiers say those words in much the same tone of voice. He’d said them himself.

“Good thing I stumbled on you, then,” he said, striving for a less cynical voice than the one he used naturally. It was instinct by now to find the worst in everything, but Primus. Primus help him, he
wanted to ignore that part of his head dissecting Rewind down to liabilities and flaws.

He didn’t want to go down that road, so he quickly continued talking. “You changed my evening, too,” he blurted out, but then he flinched when he realized what exactly he’d just said.

It didn’t take much thought to connect the dots. The only people in a relinquishment clinic were patients or practitioners, and a practitioner wouldn’t have been free to immediately walk out the door with somebody randomly found digging among the former patients.

Rewind laughed.

The sound shocked Chromedome. It had the electric spark of a floodlight. It practically lit the abandoned building they’d found to sit in after leaving the relinquishment clinic. It pierced his strangely weightless spark and set him on fire.

For a moment, the crushing depression and desperation completely disappeared. He literally could not remember a single reason to die. This tiny mech -- Rewind, archivist and relentless friend to the long lost -- laughed, and Chromedome wanted him more than he’d ever wanted anything in his entire life. More than he wanted to die, he wanted to live just to have this person in his life.

The bright visor looked up at him, amusement and a peculiar sadness in its depth, and he couldn’t even care that the pathetic, broken-down Autobot reflected in the blue glass wore his face. “I,” he started, not a clue what he could say, only that he had to say *something* to make this personal miracle stay even for a few minutes longer.

“Want to go home with me?” Rewind interrupted him.

“Yes,” Chromedome agreed in a breathless rush. “Yes, please.” It didn’t matter that he didn’t have a home anymore. He’d gotten rid of all of his belongings and told Prowl the apartment was his before going to the clinic. He’d have abandoned everything from his former life just for this offer.

His home was wherever Rewind took him.

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Rewind - “Delerious”
[* * * * *]

He was delirious. He was seeing things. The last thing he’d heard was the crashing boom of the bomb exploding, and now he was imagining Chromedome’s voice in his last second alive. He got to see his conjunx endura in the last moment of life. That…that wasn’t so bad. Rewind could think of worse ways to go, really.

Maybe Primus was a merciful god. Adaptus sure had shortchanged him, anyway.

[* * * * *]
Rewind - “take a joke”
[* * * * *]

"...were you really that angry at me?" Rewind asked afterward, after First Aid cleared him, the crew had visited to congratulate him, and Chromedome finally, *finally* got him alone.

The flashdrive waited until they were by themselves before asking, because he had to ask. His last
memory of Chromedome before waking up was one of rigid backstruts and a stubbornly turned-away visor. It always infuriated him that the mnemosurgeon refused to acknowledge his own score of broken promises while lambasting him over the few times Rewind broke his word. It wasn’t different, but Chromedome still insisted on justifying every time he used his needles. He insisted and insisted that his broken promises were necessity and yet Rewind’s chances to find Dominus Ambus were fool’s errands.

He’d turned his back on Rewind in the drop shuttle, and Rewind had been hurt.

Now Chromedome stared at him, shuddered, and hugged him so tight he squeaked. Unsteady ventilations puffed against the back of his neck, but the larger Autobot said not a word.

Rewind stood very still in his arms, one hand coming up to lay on of the arms around him. “Chromedome? Domey? Aw, Domey, not the silent treatme -- joke, Domey, joke.” Both hands rose, and Rewind drew Chromedome’s shaking helm down to rest against his chest above his spark, warm and alive. “Shh-shh,” he whispered. “Just…it’s okay. It’s okay, Chromedome.”

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Chromedome - “aftermath”
[* * * * *]

He wouldn’t let the smaller mech out of his sight for days. The minute he lost him in Swerve’s bar -- Whirl cut between them, and Rewind was just gone -- Chromedome’s visor blazed a frantic yellow. He whipped around, searching, but there was no one there. Rewind was gone. Rewind was gone, and he hadn’t even had the chance to say goodbye, say he was sorry, say all the things an entire lifetime wouldn’t be enough to say.

A thousand regrets choked him in a building pressure that would break apart at the seams.

And then a small figure at the bar turned around to wave, and Chromedome plowed through anyone in his way to Rewind’s side, never once looking away.

[* * * * *]
Rewind - http://lesnee.tumblr.com/post/60102088663/commission-for-the-evil-friend-i-had-this
[* * * * *]

Time runs away from him.

How far does time slow down in the chamber? The door seals, and Rewind puts his hand against the glass. “I’m sorry, Domey. I’m sorry things didn’t work out.”

He’s not talking about the attempt to jettison Overlord. He’s talking about the two of them. Chromedome promised they would talk about this later, talk this out like it’s just another hitch in their relationship, but that’s not going to happen. It’s another promise broken. Another promise among too many, at this point, and Rewind’s not apologizing for doing what he has to do to save the rest of the ship. He’s an Autobot. He won’t apologize for doing his duty.

He’s far beyond angry for the fact that he has to do this particular duty because of Chromedome.

He’s sorry for a lot of things, but boiled down to simple terms, Rewind’s sorry that they didn’t work out together. Their relationship has been sweet at its best but a turbulent thing full of trouble the rest of the time. Too many broken promises, Chromedome. This time Rewind’s trust snapped on the
rebound, and there won’t be a chance to repair that damage. Not this time.

No time to talk it out and smooth it over until the next broken promise, because isn’t there always another one?

The door’s sealed, and Chromedome’s still desperately trying to tell him something when the temporal dilation field engages. Rewind looks up, visor huge, as Overlord rises to tower over him.

When he looks back through the window, the ship outside the cell is in fast forward. The light in the cell is red, it’s slowed down so much, but the cell detaches in regular time. Chromedome zips toward the stairs before the cell drops away, and Rewind wonders where he’s going.

He’s always been the one wondering that. He wondered back on Cybertron, when it turns out Chromedome injected for Prowl all along. He wondered on Hedonia, when Chromedome ended up running weapons for Rodimus. He wondered on the ship, and now look where he is. Chromedome goes away, and Rewind wonders where he went until the answer’s suddenly and painfully there.

Call him an optimist for not wanting to believe the worst of Chromedome until the airlock clicks closed between them.

The shadow of a monster looms over him, and his shoulders hunch. An entire archive of atrocities pop up tagged with Overlord’s name.

There’s nowhere to run. No escape. Just another unrecorded, horrible fate adding another weight to his unforgiving judgment of Chromedome’s sins.

The cell drops away, and all he can see through the window is the bulk of the ship and the black of space. Seen too fast through too slow time, the universe outside tumbles. The stars whirl in streaks of light. In here, time has slowed to a crawl, and he feels every creeping second. Tick tock. Tick tock.

Overlord’s systems growl, and the massive Decepticon laughs as if he knows why Rewind trembles. Perhaps he does, and wouldn’t that be the ultimate cruelty? To die knowing his murderer did it to punish the one who betrayed him? To die used, like the disposable thing he was once told he was.

The Lost Light spins by outside the window, and Rewind tenses. For anyone else, that glimpse wouldn’t be enough, but Rewind is an archivist. He knows what he saw. The faint glow of warming blasters had been there. The ship’s guns take whole minutes to warm up. That’s plenty of time for a slow death.

In here, that’s mere seconds.

Rewind turns and drops to his knees, grabbing for Chromedome’s hand the only way he can. Cold shadow darkens the floor around him, but he feels no fear. Not anymore. There’s only a sense of relief that lightens the leaden pain around his spark.

He can’t forgive this. There’s no time. A thousand suspicions coalesced, and hundreds of broken promises came to mind. Forgiveness needs time in order to wear the edges off sharp betrayals with memory and words.

But for a flash of mercy, a shot to end the suffering…he can try.

Overlord reaches for him, and Rewind hugs Chromedome’s arm tight. “Thank you, Do -- “

Time runs out.
They got him back. Damaged. Broken. Irreparable, in the most hurtfully trivial way. When everything else could be fixed and this was what was lost.?

He'd ask what he'd done to deserve this, but he was guiltily aware of just how much he'd done to deserve worse.

"Go slowly," First Aid counseled him. "He's not the Rewind you remember."

"The databanks aren't there. He doesn't remember you. He won't remember you, and there's nothing you can do to change that." Ambulon had an interesting idea of what a bedside manner consisted of. It was easy to tell he'd once been Pharma's ward manager, with that attitude. "If you liked who he was minus his involvement with you, you'll still like him. The question is whether or not he'll like you."

If Chromedome didn't know better, he'd think the mech suspected something. Or maybe Ambulon got that sharply defensive about all his patients. Pharma hadn't always been a madmech, after all.

Ratchet was blunter yet. "If you needle him," the CMO said, "I will know, and I will bring so many mental abuse charges against you that you'll never see him again. Got that?"

Chromedome studied his feet intently.

Ratchet relented. He turned to knock gently on the isolation room's door. "Rewind? You have a visitor."

"Good. He’s a different person. You have no right to manipulate him into being whom you want him to be. That person is dead." A long, edge-of-angry look, because Chromedome had killed that mech, indirectly or directly depending which Autobot was asked.

Chromedome studied his feet intently.

Ratchet relented. He turned to knock gently on the isolation room's door. "Rewind? You have a visitor."

The mech behind that door was a stranger.

It took time to realize that. It took more time to turn realization into reality, stop fighting hope, and accept the truth. Chromedome struggled every day with seeing the familiar, beloved shape who didn’t have a single memory of him in return.

What Rewind knew about him came from what he learned now, instead of something built up over a long relationship. And watching the flashdrive learn about him was a painful experience.

The smallest thing was what Chromedome had taken for granted, and it was taken away from him forever. Rewind didn't like to be touched by him. Somehow, that hurt worse than seeing the little
mech looked him indifferently.

It wasn't that Rewind wasn't curious, but it was the same curiosity he felt for every new mech he met. There was nothing special there. Chromedome visited, and the blue visor turned toward him with a stranger's impersonal watchfulness. When the mnemosurgeon tried to reach for him, however, even just a slight touch of his fingers to the back of one tiny hand -- that was when Rewind treated him differently.

The smaller Autobot moved away. He avoided Chromedome. The ever-observing visor flicked toward the offending hand, then back up to Chromedome's face, and there would be a little shake of the head that said Rewind didn't want that, thank you.

It hurt to withdraw his hand, time after time, but he did.

Rewind never said why he didn't like Chromedome to touch him. Maybe it was the hopeless longing in the bigger mech's visor that turned into a sick craving as time passed. The mnemosurgeon covered it in a stiff mask of politeness, but it fit poorly. Underneath lay the look of an addict denied a fix every time Rewind politely bid him goodbye. Every visit created a deepening need, but Chromedome was too scared of the answer to ask why Rewind refused even the lightest touch. He didn't know what he'd do if his former conjunx endura only tolerated his visits out of politeness or pity.

Maybe Rewind didn't want Chromedome to touch him because someone -- probably Whirl, maybe Tailgate, but even Chromedome's seething hatred couldn't blame Cyclonus -- had told him how events had happened. Overlord, and the explosion, and how the archivist had lost his memory in the first place. Not all of it, of course, because Fate had a sick sense of humor. Just the priority tags had been destroyed, most of which concerned one dearly beloved, Chromedome by name.

Without memory, getting to know him again hurt.

"So you lied to me?"

Chromedome clamped his knees closed around his hands, because it made it easier to keep from reaching toward Rewind again. It also concealed the way his hands shook. "Yes."

"Repeatedly."

"Yes, Rewind."

The truth built up each visit, like bricks of facts. Unlike memory, there were no mitigating explanations or excuses or emotions to dissemble the wall as it went up. Facts just kept stacking higher between them. It was the unvarnished truth, and Chromedome choked every time he tried to say something that would make no difference to the camera recording his reaction.

So the mnemosurgeon stared at his hands and quietly answered Rewind's questions. They weren't really questions. They were mostly just tests of whether he would try to deny the truth. Rewind wasn't standing judgment. He was the prosecuting lawyer for a dead mech, laying out the facts in a coolly dispassionate voice. Chromedome was judge, jury, and defense watching as the crime unfolded in a series of ruthless questions.

"You made multiple promises to stop, you broke every one of those promises, and I forgave you?"

Something thick and heavy crushed his vocalizer, but Chromedome managed, "Yes." Rewind sounded so skeptical. Primus, it hurt to hear that laid out so starkly. Because why would someone forgive serial betrayal?
The little archivist fell silent for a while, just watching him. Then he reached up and toggled his camera off. He looked out the window of his new habitation suite as if searching for something. "You know Brainstorm?"

Of course. Brainstorm was his close friend. But how would Rewind know that? Chromedome winced at the reminder that the little mech had forgotten absolutely everything about him. "Yes."

"Hmm. Well, he showed me something I apparently threw at Fortress Maximus before everything went to the smelter." Chromedome's visor went wide; Brainstorm had done what? "It was a message from me to you. He explained that I had apparently been trying to convince you to not to operate on yourself. You have a habit of erasing your memories of painful events. Loved ones who hurt you by dying just," he flicked his fingers as if brushing away something, "go away. You make them go away, and then you go on with your life without the hurt of living with what happened."

Stunned, Chromedome couldn't find the words to protest that utter absurdity, and yet he could almost feel the solid heft as the wall of truth built another layer higher between them.

Rewind gravely turned to look at him until he awkward withdrew the hand he'd been reaching toward the smaller Autobot. Only then did Rewind continue.

"I've been thinking about it, and this 'accidental deletion injury' story Ratchet's fed me doesn't quite add up. It's too specific, and what Brainstorm said about your habit makes too much sense."

Chromedome's spark seized into a knot of terror as his mind made the immediate leap. "I would never -- not to you!" He snatched his hands behind his back as if hiding the needles would make them go away.

Rewind shook his head. "I didn't think you did, but even if you had, I expect you would have a perfect line-up of rational reasons why it was your only choice. That seems to be the pattern in our relationship. I catch you, you rationalize your wrong-doing, and I give you another chance. Over and over again."

Ugly truths he didn't want to see were stacking up before his visor, and Chromedome felt like he couldn't breathe. All his vents had stuck closed. "What...what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that from what I've learned of us," he gestured between them, "and you, I think I finally understand your point of view. You were the one who hurt me, however, and you didn't do it by dying. So I didn't wait until you were dead to erase you." Rewind slid away from the hands desperately reaching for him, but calmly, as if he were avoiding a spill of engex at the bar.

He hopped off the end of the berth and looked up at the trembling mech trying to grasp something no longer there. "And now I can go on with my life without the hurt of living with what happened."

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Rewind, Chromedome, and Brainstorm - Apocalypse AU
[* * * * *]

Brainstorm opened the door without knocking, because this was no time for niceties even if he didn’t care about being polite the rest of the time. But it didn’t matter, none of the rules mattered. “Chromedome!”

His fists clenched around their burdens. For a split second, he honestly wouldn’t have been able to say which was more important. That was a first. He’d never thought anything could be more
important than what his briefcase held.

He didn’t stop to think about it.

“Chromedome!”

“I heard you the first time.” His friend turned around, ungainly and off-balance. That arm had to be fixed. Why the frag hadn’t he gone to the medibay yet?

Brainstorm knew why, and it made him angry. No, truth be told, his inability to change Chromedome’s mind about this, of all things, made him angry. He was frustrated, and his spark ached for the only friend he had as he stormed toward the stubborn, infuriating, grieving mech.

“They didn’t you -- you -- “

He stopped. Stubborn and infuriating Chromedome might have been, but that wasn’t the desolate look he’d come to dread. The grief was gone.

Bright energon dripped down long needles, extended and forgotten. They made small stains on the floor. Chromedome would look down eventually and wonder how they’d gotten there.

His hand clenched tighter, and Brainstorm shook. “You already did it.”

The baffled look hurt to see. Death should mean something. It should be remembered, returned to, learned from, and grieved. It shouldn’t be erased as if it’d never been. Chromedome rewrote history and took the pain away. He’d not only wiped the end of his lover from his memories, but he deleted the entire world of context into nonexistence.

Chromedome never needed closure because there was no opening. In the beginning, there was nothing. He played god in his own universe. When one world didn’t work out, he just made it disappear. Story open, story closed, and then the story disappeared altogether. Once it was gone, he moved to the next world and started over again.

Shaking, furious beyond words, Brainstorm turned on his heel and walked out of the room. In his hand, Rewind’s message burnt against his palm, evidence of a lost world that had once been and now never was.

Right there and then, no more precious a treasure existed in all the universe, but yet there was no one left who cared.

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Prowl - “Guardian”

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Emotions were a weakness. Denying their presence would be opening them up for exploitation by the enemy, so he labeled them as illogical but present. They created the difference between mechanical being and machine, or perhaps they were a symptom. Either way, exterminating emotion would create mental illnesses in far excess to the weakness they caused when still present.

So he didn’t eliminate his emotions. He just controlled them, tight and merciless. Channeled into tactics, they made him ruthless. Rerouted from personal affairs, they made him cold.

He stood between his leader and the war, his faction and their atrocities, and he guarded their weaknesses by making a shield of his own.
Megatron - “Trend”

The Senate called the gladiators a fad. The violence of the underground and the deaths in the ring were a passing fashion to the elite in Iacon. Kaon rocked to the sound of the crowd. The quick, liquid slice of a blade moving through metal could elevate the whole city to elated screams or render it silent in respect for the dead, but Iacon dismissed the gladiators as temporary.

They were entertainment, in the optics of the Senate. Soon enough, the dull-minded simpletons that populated the world outside the Senate walls would find a new source of amusement. The gladiators would fade away, celebrities past their fifteen minutes of fame. They would burn and gutter out, and Cybertron would move on.

Too late, the Senate realized that Megatron was no trend.

Cyclonus - “Accent”

The language corrupted.

It was inevitable. NeoCybex was the result of an evolution of language, but it wasn’t an ending point. Language didn’t reach a certain point and stop. Linguistic drift caused by time and changes continued. The NeoCybex of today was millions of years beyond where it had been, and Cyclonus rolled the modern tongue around in his mouth in disgust. The vowels were too shallow, the consonants too soft. The rich depth of sound had disappeared, and the words lost meaning in consequence. The clipped, hard endings were too glottal for Cybertron now. Sharp syllables stuck out like right angle corners in the middle of words, and they turned too quickly for out-of-practice audios to catch.

Tailgate wasn’t as naïve as he sometimes appeared, whatever his age. Cyclonus knew the waste disposal worker simply hadn’t adjusted to hearing everything in the new sounds of their old dialect. Unfamiliar alternate meanings for familiar words flew right over his head, but he was adjusting fast. He’d get the hang of the new-old language.

Already, slang had crept into his vocabulary. His accent disappeared as fast as he could erase it.

Cylonus refused to adjust his speech. Let the Autobots mock his accent. They were the ones who’d degraded.

Whirl - “Urge”

The Senate had trained him well. Whirl hated to admit it so he didn’t, but that didn’t change the fact that they’d gutted a watchmaker with gentle optics and long fingers for this…this thug. That’s what he was, now. It’s what they’d wanted him to be, after all, and he knew full well that what the Senate had wanted, the Senate had gotten. They’d used violence to train violence, beating the urge to fix out of him. Or maybe they’d just mangled it into another urge.
Rung seemed to think so, anyway. “Some things are root programming,” the skinny orange Autobot told him, standing by his shoulder in front of the table. “It can be twisted, but not deleted entirely. They turned it into a desire to take things apart, but at the core of you is still the original code.” He patted the rotary mech’s shoulder, but instead of standing over Whirl’s shoulder in watchful echo of the Senate’s threatening surveillance, Rung went back to his desk. He sat down to work on his own model ship.

Surprised, Whirl stared after him for a second. Then he looked down at the scattered pieces of a half-assembled gunship model. The little guns were perfect to the last detail: a ship meant for violence, but a model requiring delicacy and dedicated attention to put together. It’d require far less effort to just smash the whole project to bits.

His pincers twitched.

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Blurr - “Monster”
[* * * * *]

Others feared Megatron, Starscream, Soundwave, or a thousand other Decepticon specters. They feared a violent death or pain.

Blurr feared slowing down. Simple and straightforward, he was afraid of what he was without his speed.

That’s it.

[* * * * *]
Sunstreaker - “Order”
[* * * * *]

They whispered behind his back.

They said he was a terrible creature. They said he was a narcissistic sociopath. They said he’d feel nothing cutting down his own faction, and maybe they were right. Who knows?

Truth be told, he’d probably feel nothing during the actual act, but he refrained from thinking about it. He wouldn’t ever go down that path. The temptation was there, but Sunstreaker had been a particular kind of artist. Everything had its place in his creations because that was how his mind worked. He saw the universe in separate colors: blue and green, yellow and red, black and white. There could be no shades in between, not through his optics. It was either all or nothing.

Sunstreaker was an Autobot. He would not mix.

[* * * * *]
Rung - “Judgment”
[* * * * *]

He found it difficult to take a stance, sometimes. A lot of his work depended on being receptive to his patients’ beliefs or thoughts. He had to hold strong opinions, but sequestered away from the outside where it could influence duty. Partitioning his personal thoughts were what made him so effective as a psychotherapist, but it did make him rethink every time he made a definite decision.
When he wasn’t hired and it wasn’t a patient, however, he found it easier to make judgments. He was still afraid of the consequences, but wasn’t everybody? The ones who didn’t fear were the ones who needed his help -- and his judgment -- the most.

As Rodimus discovered.

[* * * * *]
Drift - “Apathy”
[* * * * *]

He didn’t care how many rules he broke. That’s what Rodimus, Ratchet, and even Chromedome didn’t understand. Brainstorm might have. Prowl certainly did. Drift didn’t care about the rules. He cared about lives saved, but in an abstract way. He knew that the numbers were important because they represented actual people, although he occasionally had to remind himself that the statistics meant more to others than they did to him. They saw the lives, not just marks under ‘Casualty’.

He went along with Prowl’s plan because the numbers tallied, in the end, and came out balanced. Deception in return for information. A good trade.

Ultimately, however, he didn’t care what rules he broke. Because they were Autobot rules, and he still had trouble seeing them as real.

[* * * * *]
Swerve - “Instinct”
[* * * * *]

He opened his mouth.

They came at him with guns and implacable featureless faces, and Swerve opened his mouth.

Hey, a friendly voice took mechs off guard more often than not. Sometimes it diffused the situation. Tell a joke to get the room laughing, and mechs could forget their grievances. A voice of authority could make them rethink what they’d been about to do. A whiny complaint could break the tension.

Worse came to worst -- which it did this time -- a loud, stupidly distracting monologue gave him time to dodge for cover.

[* * * * *]
Jazz - “Nightmares”
[* * * * *]

Third-in-Command of the Autobot army, saboteur and killer in his own right, and Jazz was creeping down the hall in search of reassurance after a nightmare. Every shadow got a critical look. Unexpected creaks from the floor froze him for seconds at a time. Strange shapes in the dim light made him jump. This was no confident Head of Special Operations. This was a scared mech.

Okay, okay, don’t rub it in.

He eased to a stop by the right door and glanced both ways, scanners on high. Nobody. Inside, he could just barely make out a single lifeform. A quick hack of the door code, and Jazz slid inside to check for certain that Optimus Prime was okay. Yes, good. Excellent. One Prime: too heroic for his
own good, still alive, slightly less than mint condition.

Jazz disappeared from the room as if he’d never broken in, relocking the door and everything. Then he headed down the hall to check that Prowl really was on duty like the roster claimed. Better to check in person right now, eh? He wasn’t in the mood to trust anything less.

Because he’d had a nightmare that both Prime and Prowl were dead, and Jazz…well, Jazz didn’t want to be in command.

[* * * * *]
Starscream - “Loyalty”
[* * * * *]

He was attached. Devotedly attached to the point of obsession, although he felt no form of affection for Megatron. That wasn’t a requirement. All loyalty required, in the technical definition of the word, was that attachment. He undeniably had that.

What form that attachment took didn’t matter, yet still they called him disloyal.

[* * * * *]
Soundwave - “Urge”
[* * * * *]

He could change the direction of an entire world. Soundwave had mastered manipulation eons before humanity ever existed. He had archives of music older than their entire species, but the humans had evolved to the point that they might be able to appreciate the complications of an older race’s music. And they were so easily influenced by sound. Songs, artists, musicians, and celebrities could occupy whole subsets of major populations. The masses followed the brightest stars and marched to the tune of their whims. Lyrics, profane or sacred, launched crusades.

Soundwave could sway Earth through the beat of an alien world’s ancient rhythm, and humankind would embrace the invasion. They would love him for it.

He could do it. He could conquer a planet where Megatron’s grandest plans had failed. He could control the media, and through it, the listening minds.

Earth would adore their master, and even those who hated him would tap their feet along.

[* * * * *]
Onslaught - “Trend”
[* * * * *]

They were convenient. Reliable, at least if he paid Swindle on time and played Vortex’s sick little games enough to keep the chopper interested. Blast Off and Brawl, well, he has his own tricks to keep them in line. Since he had them, why not use them? So he used them.

Again, and again, until they worked together like a well-oiled machine, as if they’d always worked this closely. The time Onslaught devoted to coordinating four dissimilar mechs folded over into working on plans to take advantage of how easily they read each other’s actions. He barked an order, and the four of them were already calculating how each one’s separate abilities slid into the places.
They were becoming a special operations military unit in all but name, but of course some had to buck the trend.

Swindle and Vortex came back one night together, and he didn’t remember sending them out.
“Where have you been?”


“All about, even,” Swindle finished with a grin.

“That’s not an answer,” he snapped. His even tone cracked like a whip, and soldiers everywhere would have jumped to attention under it.

“You don’t own me,” Swindle said back, just as level and twice as vicious. “I may be a Decepticon, but you may have noticed that we’re not anything official.”

Vortex lounged on his companion’s shoulder. “Swindle had a job for me. I took it. I can do that, you know.” The amusement in his visor dared Onslaught to make an issue of that fact.

Because they weren’t soldiers. They weren’t part of the military. They were mercenaries who only went where the payroll led them, as far as the contract limitations spread.

Onslaught stood there long after the two went their own ways, fists vibrating at his sides.

[* * * * *]
Ratchet - “Laugh”
[* * * * *]

Laughter was not the best medicine. Laughter was a result, a symptom, a moment of rejoicing, or a bitter sign of failure. It was a false cover slapped over a wound, or a genuine expression of relief.

But medicine? Laughter couldn’t weld cracked armor and replace a burst hose. It couldn’t soothe a dying spark or ease the pain during surgery on the living.

Laughter had its uses, but it was no medicine.

[* * * * *]
Tarn - “Natural”
[* * * * *]

Had he served Megatron as he began life, Tarn would have been useless. His natural forging gifted him with a head for the right ideals, a spark powerful enough to follow a strong leader, but his body had been lacking. Fortunately, there were ways to make up for that lack. It just required rejecting most of what he’d started as.

Tarn served Megatron, but he wasn’t the Tarn he had been at the beginning of the war. There wasn’t much of that mech left.

[* * * * *]
Rung - “the God King”
The God-King was a quiet mech. Small. Unassuming. The exact opposite of the imposing sculptures and images of the Thirteen, or of Primus.

Perhaps that was why Fortress Maximus didn’t recognize him at first. The God-King was old, older than the war, older than the Senate, as old as the Primes. He hid in plain sight, and only the mad saw him for what he was. Or perhaps it was in recognizing him that the mad returned to sanity. He had a reputation for that. They came to him insane, moths zeroing in on the brightest light, and he redeemed them.

Under his guidance, even Whirl might regain his balance.

Let Rodimus wear his bright flame colors and crowning crest, fling himself about in hectic action trying to be a hero. Rung dwelled in a palace of age and power, words a weapon he wielded to cut down the heroes and the humble alike. He accepted the disrespect of the young. He bent before military might and threats.

Fortress Maximus had held a gun to his head. He’d ripped Rung’s thumb off. His violence had led to the orange mech’s head being blown off.

Rung hadn’t died.

It was in the cell, staring down at the hands that had torn, that had failed to protect, that Fort Max understood who had held him. It had been a sacrifice in the form of shelter. The medics cited medical statistics, the crew whispered of miracles, and Fort Max stared into the certainty of his own death. A shift of Swerve’s arm, and Rung had taken the killing blow. But he hadn’t died. Because the God-King wouldn’t die of mere mortal wounds.

Distantly, Fort Max wondered if this was what insanity felt like. He’d gladly trade his sanity to make the guilt stop. What was a God-King? How long had he known about it? How could he know about it?! There was no data in his files, nothing came back in his searches, and yet --

And yet --

He knew. The slender orange psychotherapist had been the one he’d homed in on. A ship full of Autobots, and he’d returned to a small office tucked away at the far end of the ship. He hadn’t even know where he was going until he’d hammered the door open and stumbled inside, crazed optics target-locking right past Whirl to focus on Rung. Of everyone he could have gone after, he’d chosen the seemingly most harmless as captive, but Rung’s worth had been far above his appearance.

Only the mad could see the power in that slight frame. When the veil of sanity lifted, that was when mere optics could peer beyond metal reality into what existed underneath. That was when a paranoid mech could find a bright spark worthy of trust; when a shattered rotary could collect himself enough to focus on a friend; when an amnesiac could recall there was something about this one person.

When a traumatized warden could see the God-King looking back at him.

In the off-cycle, when the lights dimmed and most of the Decepticons stopped their howling, Fort Max kept staring at his hands. The hands that had harmed the God-King. Sinful hands, attached to a sinful mech stuck in a brig cell with no way to atone for his sins.

He was afraid. Afraid for his dubious sanity -- God-King? Rung? Primus, what was wrong with him? -- but more afraid of the night when a silent shadow stopped before his cell. Fort Max shuddered and looked up, already knowing the optics that met his were equally mad. They were all
mad, here.

Perhaps he dreamt that Skids escorted him out of the cell. Part of him knew that he slumbered, that this was nothing more than a particularly twisted dream, but it didn’t feel like recharge. It felt like he trudged the halls, wrists cuffed behind his back and guard at his side, until he unerringly found the right hall and the right door. He didn’t wonder where they were going; he knew.

He quietly waited as Skids knocked. The door slid open. Skids regarded him narrowly but let him enter alone.

The God-King was a quiet mech. Small. Unassuming. Fort Max had never been more certain that he was insane, but alongside that certainty grew a dread because this was real. A hallucination, a dream, but also as real as the bars of his cell, the cramped berth he recharged on. This slender orange mech was a psychotherapist, a nobody Autobot maybe a little older than the norm. That didn’t change the fact that Fort Max fell to his knees before him because Rung was the God-King, a figure of respect and authority that ruled star systems, ordered planets into being and dismissed entire species with the wave of his hand. Those who served him knew his favor and those who displeased him suffered unimaginable torment.

“Mercy,” Fortress Maximus whispered hoarsely. He didn’t deserve it. He couldn’t possibly earn it.

Those inordinately expressive optic ridges turned down. The much larger, far more insignificant mech cowered before that slight motion, and Rung sighed. “You have already paid your penance, Fortress Maximus. You are here for final judgment, not for further punishment.”

He didn’t understand, and terror crawled through his tanks. “I -- what penance? How can I -- “ His vocalizer cut off, because he already knew there was no way he could pay for what he’d done.

Rung regarded him evenly. “Overlord.”

Fort Max stared, struck dumb for a long moment and unable to understand. Overlord?

Enlightenment smacked him between the optics hard enough to hurt. “N-no.”

“Yes.”

What was time to the God-King? What torture could be cruel enough for the mech who’d held a gun to the God-King’s head? Overlord. Overlord had been Fort Max’s punishment. Would still be his penance. Had been because of his crime.

Fans stuttering, vents opening and closing in gasped sobs, he bent to the floor. The grieving keen he gave after pressing his face to the floor betrayed the agony inside him as every memory were relived as if they happened here and now. Perhaps they did. Time and space were nothing to Rung.

The warden writhed, moaning, and begged in whispers against the floor that it might finally end. Let the end judgment be now. Please, please, God-King of old and new, empty spark chambers and ignited hotspots, have a shred of pity on him at last.

Rung did. But it was the worst torture, all the same.

Fortress Maximus woke up.

He numbly looked at the cell bars, sat up on the narrow berth, and knew that he’d forgotten something. Something wonderfully, horribly important that could have changed everything, that had changed everything, but…was gone.
Since he was awake anyway, he started composing an apology for the therapist, what was his name? Rang, or something like that.

He couldn’t quite remember.

[* * * * *]

Chapter Summary

Skyfire marries Megatron, the Combaticons regret many things, Cliffjumper fights zombies, Starscream saves Jazz, Swerve makes things interesting, Getaway is confounded by life aboard the Lost Light, and assorted weirdness.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 19
Warning: Erogenous zones, demons, dead people, Las Vegas, a strip club, dead people who don’t stay dead, angst, slavery, and a fairly specific kink.
Rating: R?
Continuity: IDW & G1, HooKup snippet.
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Prompts from Tumblr.

Skyfire/Megatron - Arranged Marriage AU

The natives had widely disparate body types based on gender. Megatron’s frame, unfortunately for him, matched up with their version of the receptor. A ‘female,’ although they recognized it more as the carrier of eggs, since another of the four recognized genders of this world cared for the eggs once they were laid.

The Decepticon tyrant’s hostile actions endeared him not at all to the natives in the short while he’d been free on the planet before they’d subdued him. It took some quick talking from Skyfire to convince them that Megatron’s rampant destruction was an offshoot of a breeding cycle. Returning him to Skyfire -- and thus immediately disappearing into a speck in the sky as the shuttle took him and got the frag out of there -- would calm the mech down. It was a Cybertronian thing, honest. Really. They could trust him. They just had to hand Megatron over to Skyfire, and the natural course of things would sooth the wild Decepticon.

He felt like a cad for using their cultural stereotypes to deceive what were otherwise polite, civilized beings, but it was a matter of death or lies. Megatron was facing execution. Several important Autobot hostages were relying on the safe return of the Decepticon leader to Soundwave. Hence, Skyfire was going to do whatever it took to get Megatron off this planet alive.
Even agree to a ‘wedding’ celebration so the native xenobiologists could slake their curiosity over Cybertronian mating habits. He felt slightly less bad about lying to the slagers after that. He was not an animal to be observed!

So he had no problem with completely fabricating a mating ritual. “Go along with it,” he muttered to Megatron as he nuzzled his face between the bound mech’s thighs. “Their primary reproductive organs are located approximately here on their own bodies. They’ll see what they expect to see if you play along.”

“I’ll play along with this degrading spectacle long enough to get off this world,” Megatron gritted out, hunching forward a bit as a tongue probed between pelvic plating and heavy thigh armor. His fists clenched behind his back in the cuffs. “I promise nothing after that.”

“Hmm.” Skyfire’s neutral hum of non-agreement had an unexpected result. The vibration transmitted directly into the main tensile cable in the vulnerable joint, and Skyfire blinked, surprised by the armor suddenly gapping wider. He hummed again, experimenting, and tongued the wiring. It heated up. It grew alarmingly hot when he licked it out enough to close his lips around it and suck.

Megatron’s strangled little noise had nothing to do with playing a part. Apparently the natives weren’t the only race that had sensitive parts located in this area of the body.

Skyfire hesitated, wondering if pushing this farce further was ethical.

Thighs clamped around his head. “If you stop, I will destroy this planet once I am free.”

Oh. Well, then.

[* * * * *]

Demon AU - Combaticons
[* * * * *

The thing about pissing off a sorcerer of sufficient strength: karma always made sure a demon paid his dues. Which was how five of the Character Traits came to be in the basement of a particularly sordid sect of black magic practitioners, demonic manifestations trapped within a cage of magic. The Traits were bound to the physical plane. They were bound to the bodies. And they were enslaved to serve via invisible chains on mind and body.

Magister Megatron left them in the pentagram to brood on their new fate.

Greed and Strategy had met in passing before, usually brushing shoulders in casinos where those Greed sat beside attempted to harness the other demon. Greed had no qualms about seducing those who summoned Strategy first, however, so there was no love lost in that relationship. The two demons sat in their separate points of the summoning glyph and pretended the other didn’t exist.

It wasn’t surprising. Despite his jovial nature, Greed was always a loner. He was as selfish of himself as anything else in life, and he’d sell anyone and anything for the jingle of a coin.

Now, Strategy and Violence had a long and amicable relationship. Strategy employed Violence to good ends, and Violence tended to do better when Strategy held his strings. Violence didn’t always like being controlled, but he did like having someone else be responsible for the bigger picture. Strategy nodded to his fellow demon, who waved in return. They would have no problem working together.
Strategy and Precision had a similar relationship. If anything, Precision preferred working with Strategy to working without him, although he would never say so. Especially not now that they didn’t have a choice in the matter. Precision stood staring determinedly at the nearest wall in the basement, refusing to acknowledge any of the others in the pentagram. Just because he had to do this didn’t mean he had to do an iota more than required of him.

Sadism had, at one point or another, hovered over all of them. His shadow was cold but his gaze unbearably hot. The only one who could meet it for long was Greed, but they were distant branches of each other’s Trait. Where business and pleasure collided, they often met and worked cordially side-by-side. A polite working relationship within the family, as it were; cousins many time removed, if demons had cousins.

They had brothers now, it seemed. Artificially created ones, summoned and bound together under the will of Magister Megatron by the treacherous word-weaving of Starscream’s sharp tongue and the beautifully wicked science of glyph-craft as wielded by Shockwave. They really shouldn’t have gotten on the Magister’s bad side. The Decepticons weren’t said to practice black magic because their wands shot pretty sparkles, after all.

Five demons. Five Character Traits. One pentagram.

Strategy sighed and began working out a way to get back into the Magister’s good graces. It involved talking to the other demons. What with the way Sadism kept eyeing the others, that was going to be a tough sell.

[* * * * *]
Drift - Criminal AU
[* * * * *]

Orion Pax excused many things, but he couldn’t let this slide. For politeness’ sake, he did wait until the addict sullenly left Ratchet’s clinic. A few blocks on, he simply stepped from a side-street and clapped cuffs on the mech.

To Deadlock’s credit, he didn’t struggle. He looked as if he’d been expecting the cops to arrest him. The timing didn’t matter; the addict seemed to have accepted that arrest was inevitable. Staying in the Dead End had been a half-sparked attempt to stay out of the way of the law. If a mech wasn’t found, he couldn’t be caught. Now that he’d been taken out of anonymity as any other homeless addict, arrest wasn’t surprising.

The cop accepted his bitter glare and urged him down the street toward the station. “I’ll have a word with the judge. With any luck, you’ll go into a rehab center instead of the prison system.”

Deadlock sneered, but it was a tired expression on a world-weary mech. “Do I look like I have luck?”

Orion Pax patting him gently on the shoulder and didn’t think about him again after the judge did indeed send the addict to a good facility. A facility that turned out to be a front for a relinquishment clinic, exposed later on for the corrupt places they were. The judge had been on the Senate’s payroll.

Later, much later, Orion Pax was part of the raids that freed the few remaining experimental subjects and illegally imprisoned mechs from what facilities the police could find.

Deadlock couldn’t be found, but then again, who bothered searching for an addict who hadn’t wanted to be found in the first place?
It was easier to slip through narrow openings without his wings. That’s the only thing he could say in favor of what had happened, but the past was over and done with. Starscream pushed the wish for his missing wings from his mind with practiced ease and slid through the crevasse.

“Autobot?” The light in the center of his palm brightened, lighting his way. “I came back.” Jazz was in the far back corner of the cave. The beam of light found him before the faint gleam of a blue visor betrayed his location. Even now, years after defeat and so much death, the saboteur’s habits didn’t change. Never give away his location to the enemy.

Even if the enemy carried fuel and small unnecessary items that made an unbearable life easier, if not exactlybearable. Jazz uncurled only enough to lunge upward and swipe the cube of energon from Starscream, hand passing through the shadowed mist that had once been an arm. It resisted before the tissue paper consistency and transparent shape gave way with barely a whisper under the Autobot’s hand, only to re-form once it’d passed through.

Of all the things Starscream missed about having an actual body, it was the wings that popped into his mind the most often. That didn’t mean he didn’t miss being alive. He’d just grown used to the constant craving for life he no longer had.

He watched the small, battered mech curl up again, this time sucking voraciously on a corner of the cube. The energon inside was low grade. It wouldn’t keep the Autobot powered long, but he’d been somewhat worried he’d been gone too long as it was. Sometimes it was best to return with whatever he’d scavenged than risk staying out too long.

Starscream turned to go back out into a Cybertron that’d killed him and everyone like him. There was more fuel out there, somewhere. He just had to find it. Then he’d bring it back here, as he had been for years now. The light in his palm swept back toward the entrance.

From the darkness behind him, a soft, hoarse voice asked as it always did: “Why?” Dead and gone, the ghost paused. “I suppose for the same reason the humans put rare animals into zoos. If they’re to have a chance at survival, it would be in safe shelter. If they die anyway, well.” He shrugged. “At least someone witnessed the last death.” And Jazz still had no answer for that.

“Was I this...glittery, before?” Vortex blinked at his own arm.

Sadly, none of the others had to ask, “Before what?” Before Las Vegas. Oh, Primus. Before Las Vegas! A mystical time period before the flashing glare of neon lights and bright, bright sequins. So many sequins. And the feathers, yes, not to forget the feathers. They were trying to forget, and it wasn’t working. Vortex had an entire ostrich farm pasted
to his rotors, like some sort of absurd plumage display. He looked like a chorus line dancer who’d escaped to planet Cybertron.

None of them were any better off, however, so they didn’t say anything about the massive amount of fluff. “No, you weren’t,” Onslaught said shortly. “Stop picking at it. We’ll get it off with the rest of,” he gestured, unable to point to one specific affliction among the many, “this.”

Vortex left off blinking at his bedazzled armor to look at his unit leader. He took in the cannon barrels that had obviously been repurposed as stripper poles at some point in their ill-advised field trip to Vegas. See, this was why none of the other Decepticons had bothered trying to absorb any human culture. It resulted in scary amounts of bling stuck to places bling should clearly not be stuck to. Onslaught should not be that shiny.

Something was missing. Onslaught was, uh, scandalously -- if scantily -- clad in swathes of Mardi Gras beads and sequined fabric, but there was no loud laughter at his predicament. Vortex’s narrowed his visor and gave Blast Off’s newly redecorated interior a suspicious look. The plush red velvet cushions everywhere concealed a variety of military equipment, and the drapes did a lot to hide everything but the brothel-esque feel of things, but there was nothing but glow-in-the-dark stick-on stars behind them when he checked. Well, there were strings of LED lights, too.

“Wait, did we forget Brawl?”

They had, indeed. It took them another two hours of whining among themselves to finally get up the nerve to go back and get him.

He didn’t appreciate the effort it’d taken for them to confront their just-discovered phobias of faux jewelry and slot machines. He even had the audacity to complain. “I was having fun!”

Vortex and Onslaught stared at him. Brawl, war machine and Combaticon, pouted back at them. He didn’t seem to care that he was still wearing a toga.

Swindle, of course, was already waiting back at base, because he was a fragger and did this every weekend.

[* * * * *]

DJD - Strip Club AU

[* * * * *]

The club was rocking. But wasn’t it always? The Justice Division had a loyal following any night, and tonight of all nights, when the stars took center stage? Nobody wanted to miss that.

“Welcome to the main event!” Kaon crowed into the microphone as the lights cut. “If I could have your attention -- and your libidos, please!” Optic ridges waggled, and muffled snickers swept the room.

Back by the bar, Helex and Tesarus were off bouncer duty in order to lend their extra hands to the harried bartender. Their exterior lights blinked on to illuminate their work in the sudden darkness. Tesarus mixed three pitchers of cocktails in one go as his torso tunnel turned on. Helex was ladling perfectly heated Iaconian engex out of his smelter already. Flirting customers leaned on the bar and tipped extra.

On the other side of the bar, dual spotlights stabbed the main stage. The curtain rippled. “That’s right, one and all, it’s time for legends to walk.” A slender leg peeped out from behind the purple fabric,
extending slowly at the knee until the foot ended in a delicate point. Clapping started. “Treads to touch ground.” The distinctive sound of a transformation as someone went through his signature quick change, and the room ‘ooood in anticipation. “And torture of unimaginable extremes to begin.” A large purple hand slid sensuously up that slender leg, palming the thigh and walking the fingers up until they closed around the small foot. “Hold on to your fanbelts and turn up your pain tolerance, folks, because tonight -- !”

The curtain whipped aside, spinning Vos out in a dancing whirl of slim limbs and sly looks that ended in a coy kneel on the edge of the stage. The intimidating, luscious bulk of Tarn stood behind him like some sort of contrasting backdrop, folding his arms in slow drama, and Kaon’s voice climbed up above the sudden wild cheering.

“Tonight -- the. Masks. Come. Off!”

[** * **]  
Cliffjumper - Zombie AU  
[** * **]

The Decepticon base had never been quieter. Cliffjumper could clearly hear water pressure causing metal to creak throughout the base. No sounds of footsteps or working ventilation fans. Those that were able to flee already had. Those who couldn’t had eventually caved and begged for help from the Autobots.

Because there was science in the name of war, and then there were abominations caused by war. It was a thin line. Even Shockwave tread it cautiously, and never lightly. Killing a foe was acceptable. Torturing him to death was fine, at least in Decepticon terms. Reanimating the corpse via a biomechanical virus able to infect new hosts on contact? No, that was not a good idea.

Not a good idea at all, and the Quintessons had reintroduced themselves to Cybertron using it. Luckily -- or not, depending on if a mech had been friends with him -- the Autobots had gotten wind of their ex-slave-masters’ return and sent a spy to investigate. He’d found everything he could, but he’d been infected in the process. Knowing that, the Quintessons had allowed him to escape.

The Decepticons, not knowing any better, had spotted the spy’s shutter returning to Earth. An opportunity to catch Mirage? Awesome! They’d swooped in to seize the unconscious mech, transport shuttle and all.

Then he’d died.

That had confused the Constructicons mightily, as he’d been perfectly healthy upon capture. Except for the whole unconscious thing, but they’d assumed he’d put himself into statis to avoid interrogation. Vortex had jacked in anyway, prior to death. He’d complained of a headache and uncoupled himself to go recharge for a while. Mirage had died not long after that.

Onslaught had reported soon afterward that Vortex was in statis.

And then Mirage had come back to life.

Everything had gone straight into the smelter. Whatever else Mirage was now, he still had access to his invisibility. A savage, undead, infectious, invisible thing broke out of the repair bay and started attacking anyone unfortunate enough to look vulnerable to a bite, claw, or full-on gnawing.

The Combaticons had promptly made everything worse when Vortex died. Because, well, death.
And then not-death. Undeath. A zombie Vortex rose in the midst of the chaos caused by an invisible Autobot spy doing most-Autobotly things in the halls of the Decepticon base. Zombie Vortex was no calmer and far less controlled than his predecessor, Regular Vortex. He was, however, still a Combaticon. To their horror, the other Combaticons discovered they were still gestalt-bound to him.

Cue the Autobots finally catching on to what was going on, because a screaming, panicking Bruticus slowly and painfully becoming one of the undead was a huge neon sign of This Ain’t Right. Tearing the gestalt into his component pieces hadn’t stopped the conversion. It’d actually seemed to make it more agonizing. Vortex hadn’t gone down easily, and the other four Combaticons had been no help whatsoever as they scrambled in blind fear to get away. But they hadn’t been able to escape themselves.

Onslaught had asked to be euthanized shortly after Blast Off and Swindle succumbed. Brawl had already been a shrieking zombie thing at that point.

Now, two days later, Cliffjumper eased the repair bay door open. Six shaking Constructicons stared fixedly at the opening as if they could spot Mirage by sheer willpower. “It’s clear,” he told them.

“You don’t know that,” Scrapper said faintly. “That’s what the others said.”

Cliffjumper didn’t have to ask who the others were. The only thing that’d kept Kickback and Bombshell from doing more than hissing and eerily screeching at him was the fact that Mirage had apparently torn all their limbs off in a frenzy. Mercy-shooting those two hadn’t been pleasant, but Ratchet and Perceptor hadn’t found a cure. Even if they did, they couldn’t bring back the dead. The Insecticons were already dead, and Cliffjumper had just re-killed their undead corpses.

“Jazz and Bumblebee are on either end of the hall with scanners.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “You want out of here, or you want us to leave you? ‘Cause this isn’t anything more than you deserve, in my opinion.”

Scrapper’s arm tightened around Scavenger, and Long Haul nervously edged behind Bonecrusher. Hook looked at his leader and reset his vocalizer as he stepped toward the door. “That won’t be necessary. If you’re certain the hall is clear…did you, ah, check the ceiling?”

The surgeon did a good job hiding most of his fear, but Cliffjumper noticed that his hands were shaking. The short red Autobot frowned and commed the advice to the other Autobots in the base. Ceilings. Yeah, that would be a good thing to check. Mirage wasn’t the only corpse still moving, and not all of the undead were accounted for. He was just the one that couldn’t be seen.

The Constructicons had good reason to be afraid.

Cliffjumper checked with Jazz and beckoned the Decepticreeps out of their safe haven. “Come on. We’ve only got a little time before the charges go off.” The base was quiet, so quiet, and it creaked as the water pressed in on it. Soon, that water would rush and crush this place for good.

Somewhere far off, someone screamed. It wasn’t a sound anything alive made.

He prayed the water crushed everything.

[* * * * *]
Tailgate & Cyclonus - “Translate: banana and dragon”
[* * * * *]
Not everyone could see it. Tailgate was a banana: pliable but freed from his original grouping, and hiding under a peel. He wasn’t quite right: bent but grown that way. And he was new. He was hard where time had softened others, and he had green where he simply hadn’t had the time to ripen. Sure, there were hints of a strong yellow showing what he’d be like once he’d matured, but that time was somewhere off in the future. He needed to be coddled a bit until he grew up all the way, but not too much. Keep him in the dark, and he’d stay green until he rotted.

Cyclonus, however…Cyclonus was a dragon: old and craggy. Time had warped a stern expression into a stoic look more scowl than impassive. He’d eat Tailgate right up and spit the shiny new peel back out when he was done. That was what dragons did. That’s what everyone saw when the dragon stood over the banana. Nobody knew that the hints of yellow were gold to the dragon. He saw gold blooming where no one else looked for it, and dragons treasured gold in all its form. Even in bananas.

Tailgate might be a fleeting treasure, but more valuable for how little time Cyclonus had him.

[* * * * *]
Swerve - “Translate: Disaster”
[* * * * *]

Swerve kicked his foot against the counter and glared. The bar looked like Whirl had gone on a bender and let loose in a free-for-all fight against Brainstorm’s brawl-deterrent system for the fun of it. Bullet holes riddled the walls. More than usual, that was. Those fragging drones hadn’t gone easy on the place. Tables were overturned everywhere. Prowl in a snit couldn’t have done better.

A pang of grief went through him for that, because the mental image came directly from Rewind. He missed the little guy, still.

Now in an even worse mood, Swerve started trying to push the counter upright. He couldn’t open with the place looking like this, and people were all kinds of mopey right now. They needed a place to gather, and some banter to cheer them up.

Okay, no lie, Swerve needed the company himself, but he didn’t have any friends of his own to turn to. The best he could do was get his bar open again so that other people would come in with their friends. At least then he wouldn’t be alone.

“I knew you’d be in here.”

His head whipped around, visor wide. “Skids! What’re you doing here?”

“Some welcome,” Skids drawled. Beside him, the new guy who wasn’t a new guy -- Swerve was sketchy on the details because he’d been kind of rattled in that cell -- peered into the disheveled depths of the bar as if searching for meaning in the spilled engex. “Ratchet kicked me out to deal with the real casualties, so I figured I’d come help you clean up. Since, well.” He rubbed behind his neck uncomfortably, suddenly looking away from the minibot staring at him from across the utterly destroyed room. “I…kinda caused all this.”

Technically that was true, but Skids and blame just didn’t connect in Swerve’s mind. Chief Jerk Tyrest’s nest of crazy conspiracy theories and theology had left him firmly in the camp that believed the mech had brought trouble on everyone regardless of what went where for whom. The Legislators had been following the orders of a nutjob. “Yeah, sure, but there’re parts of the ship worse off than here. Mags has a list.” Because Swerve’s mouth hadn’t gotten the memo about accepting help
gracefully, apparently. “Not that I don’t appreciate the offer or anything,” he backpedalled verbally, already knowing he’d screwed up the chance for company and some willingly offered help. “It’s just that, uh, I’m not really feeling like joking all that much, hard as it is to believe, and I know that’s why people hang out around me, so…”

Skids looked directly at him, optics serious. “Swerve. Do you really think that, still?”

The words died off, and Swerve blinked. “…yeah?” What was that supposed to mean?

Getaway stopped poking through the scrap on the floor to give him an incredulous look. “Mech, he hasn’t stopped telling me about how you came for him at the oil reserve since we got back. You saying he dragged me out of the medibay to introduce me to a buddy who isn’t even his buddy?”

Swerve’s mouth slowly dropped open. He stared at Skids, who fidgeted. A tentative smile crossed the tactician’s face, and Swerve’s mouth snapped shut in a wide grin.

Getaway glanced between them and shook his head in amazement. “This ship…”

[* * * * *]
Ratchet - “Translate: Desolation”
[* * * * *]

There had been something here on Luna 1. Something strange, profound, and so full of hope it’d hurt to see. It’d been wonderful. The dull edges of resignation had crumpled as Ratchet watched it happen, and beauty looked like life and hope from where he’d stood.

It broke Ratchet’s spark to stand in that same place and see the empty ground where a hot spot had been.

[* * * * *]
Whirl - “Translate: Carbonatite”
[* * * * *]

“This is outside my area of specialty,” Swerve warned them as he ran his hands over the outcropping. “I’m a metallurgist, not a geologist.”

“It’s more than the rest of us have,” Skids called back from where he’d taken guard position. “Just tell us what you can.”

“In short words!” Whirl clarified, shaking a pincer at him. “I don’t know what anything over two syllables means. Three, if it’s about weaponry somehow.”

“Yeah, I’ve got your short words for you.”

“What was that, short stuff?”

Swerve turned from examining the carbonatite outcropping to give the rotary mech a sweet smile. “I said you’re spathic, Whirl.” That lone optic conveyed belligerent confusion quite well. “Hey, that’s two syllables. And it’s because I can see your seats through your canopy,” the minibot added when Whirl continued staring at him.

It took two days for Hound to cave and explain to Whirl what the term meant. Swerve hid behind his bar when he heard, “What do you mean he said I have good cleavage?!” bellowed down the hall.
“It’s a lost cause, isn’t it?” Getaway asked, sudden realization dawning in his optics.

Across the room, Skids looked up from inspecting -- but not touching, no no, mustn’t touch, somehow everyone on the Lost Light mysteriously all knew not to touch, and how exactly had that happened when even Skids admitted he didn’t remember ever being explicitly warned not to do it? -- at the crossbow rack. “What’s a lost cause? Rodimus’ quest? Eh, it’s not that bad.”

“Your paintjob?” Atomizer asked at the same time. “Don’t worry! I like it, it’s just difficult to match given what I have on hand.”

Getaway looked at Skids, who seemed totally unfazed that Atomizer had nabbed him the moment he’d gotten a habsuite assignment. Getting the place decorated by Atomizer was yet another one of those things everyone on the Lost Light knew about and accepted as normal without any warning to outsiders. Frag, Getaway had managed a moment alone with Fortress Maximus to ask about all the weird stuff he kept running mask-first into, and the new Enforcer of the Tyrest Accord had looked at him like he was the crazy one.

So Getaway just shook his head and gave up dignity altogether. “Nothing. I like the pink. Can we use the pink around the window?”

“Sure.”

“A weak laugh answered him, and Getaway raised his hand. He was holding an arrow. “I was feeling a little rusty, so I figured I’d see what happened.”

That was certainly one way to enter a room. Skids grabbed a gun in one hand and, well, he still had a datapad in the other, but in his hands knowledge kind of was a weapon. That counted toward arming himself. “What? What happened?” He darted across the room to brace himself on the wall next to Getaway, who’d flattened himself to the wall beside the door the moment it opened. “Who’s going to kill you?”

A weak laugh answered him, and Getaway raised his hand. He was holding an arrow. “I was feeling a little rusty, so I figured I’d see what happened.”

Skids looked at the arrow. He looked at his old-sorta-new friend. He had the blankest expression possible. “Tell me he doesn’t know yet.”

A shrug. “Might have left a note behind.”

“Might this note have ‘bomp’ written on it?”

“It might.”

“I see.” He really did. Skids blew stale air out, keyed the door opened, grabbed Getaway by the shoulders, and steered him out. “You’re going to die. I suggest prolonging the inevitable by hiding in
the ventilation ducts for a while.”

Getaway stood in the corridor, optics wide. “But -- but -- “

“Nope. You touched Atomizer’s bow.” Skids shook his head at the mech’s folly. “Good luck.”

He went back into his room and didn’t bother locking the door. That never stopped anybody onboard this ship.

[* * * * *]
Swerve - “watching me”
[* * * * *]

"You want to see?" Swerve smiled and spread his legs, setting his feet and shifting his aft around until he was comfortable. Yeah, he knew this was what his watcher wanted to see. "You want to see how much I can drink, huh? Like this?" He leaned his head back and opened his mouth under the tap, sticking his tongue out to lick the nozzle. "I can swallow pretty fast."

Then he wrapped his lips around it and turned it on.

A strangled noise assured him that the show was appreciated. Swerve smiled around the tap but kept swallowing when his watcher couldn't take it anymore.

He made a half-sparked protesting noise when the mech soundlessly crept between his legs and lay on the floor, audio pressed under his chest. The engex flowed down his throat almost faster than he could swallow. What with the way the mech’s head pressed to Swerve, every sploosh of liquid hitting bottom had to be clearly audible. Swerve could feel him shudder a tiny bit every time he swallowed.

A long flowing gurgle as his main tank topped off, air pushing up as engex bubbled to the brim, and Swerve swallowed hurriedly to keep it down. He eased back on the tap just enough to lick his lips and gasp. Every panting breath to cool overworked intakes jostled his full tank, and even though he couldn't see it, he could feel as a hand joined the head pressed to his abdomen.

The fingers kneaded at the metal as if they could feel the tank fuel to bursting underneath. "One more."

Swerve let his head roll back, smiling with his optics off as a coaxing finger pressed against his lower lip.

"One more mouthful, Swerve. Just one more."

Another hand reached over his shoulder to cradle the back of his helm, bringing his head up a bit, just enough for the finger on his lip to guide the nozzle in.

"One more. Please?"

And it turned on. What else could he do but swallow?

[* * * * *]
First Aid’s foot fetish, the gestalts rank themselves via interfacing combat, Starscream makes Soundwave’s day via a command performance, and Soundwave wishes those slagging eggs were his.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 20
Warning: Foot fetish, coercive programming/dubcon, spanking, domination/submission, gore
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW, G1, Shattered Glass, Bayverse (pre-‘Dark of the Moon’)
Characters: First Aid, Ambulon, Combaticons, Constructicons, Motormaster, Starscream/Soundwave
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors.
Motivation (Prompt): Random ideas, and two commissions by the wonderful Baiku! Thank you!

[*** ***]

Foot fetish - Whirl

[*** ***]

He knew all their specs, the public data and some he shouldn't have even known. He'd given Pharma the sweetest cyberpuppy visor until the clinic Head grumbled something and let him into the locked records. That probably hadn't helped his case any when the evaluation on his mental health came along, but oh well.

The point was, he knew what every Wrecker's feet looked like in design specs and pictures. He’d even combed through back issues of the fanzine for fanart, copying and cropping out the best pictures.

They still couldn't hold a light bulb to seeing Whirl's tiny stabilizers in person.

First Aid played it cool. He played it calm. He was never so glad to have a visor as when Whirl went clomping through the corridors of the Lost Light, gangly legs as thin as those feet on the ends. Of course, the visor didn't hide how his fans clicked on, but Ambulon was used to it. The ward manager looked at him, looked after the ex-Wrecker, and sighed.

Then he smacked First Aid sharply upside the head. "Reboot and get over it, for Adaptus' sake! You'll be seeing plenty of him from now on, if I know a trouble-maker when i see him, so try not to slobber too obviously every time he tip-toes through the door."

First Aid had been ready to smack him back right up until that mental image. Tip-toeing. Turning
spindly joint so the foot eased forward, the delicate overlapping segments clicking. The narrow points at the tips scraping over the floor, and the heel spurs dragging after. Oh, those heels spurs. He'd spent hours back on Messatine scrolling over a zoomed in design spec, reading the measurements in a low whisper. Combined with the stick-thin ankle joint, the whole foot composition took his breath away. How could something that looked so delicate be so tough?

Ambulon shook his head and smacked him again.

[* * * * *]

Hierarchy of Harems - the hierarchy between combiners teams is decided by how well the leaders can clang the other gestalts. ‘Attacks’ are measured in pleasure, as the point is to make the enemy ‘harem’ climax until they can’t recover, or lose the match trying. The objective is to drain their stamina and render them unable to continue.

[* * * * *]

Onslaught wasn't normally one for pacing, but the flashes of surprise and bliss through the gestalt links came at just infrequent enough intervals that he couldn't anticipate them. It kept catching him off guard. That made it difficult to sit still. The Combouticons worked under the narrowest openings possible on their gestalt links, but that made the antsy feeling worse. With the links crimped down, he should have felt nothing.

To feel anything, especially this strongly...

He doubled over and gasped, suckerpunched by a wave of pleasure that started in a small eddy and clawed across his entire sensor network in a riptide. Was that -- how was -- had Scrapper made the whole team overload at the same time?

He had. Oh, he had. Well before the Combaticons straggled back to their joint quarters, leaning on each other and shamefaced, Onslaught knew they'd lost the match. Even if he stood up to Scrapper from now on, his team wouldn't be able to. They'd be at his back avoiding Scrapper's gaze, gestalt links pinging memories of what the Constructicon leader had done to them and their bodies priming for a repeat.

Vortex came back carrying his rotor array, for Primus' sake. How was Onslaught supposed to compete with that?!

[* * * * *]

It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

Bonecrusher clawed at the floor and squealed as that punishing hand came crashing down on his aft yet again, sending a powerful, juddering shock through his whole body. The impact slammed his skidplate against his already sensitized nervous system wires, blasting pressure across the nodes and sending hot flashes through him that should have been damage reports but weren’t quite enough to trip the sensation that far. Something just under pain seared through his body in huge jolts of charge that should have been pain, he wished it was pain, but it wasn’t.

The hand slammed down again, and he cursed the shrill shriek his strained vocalizer produced instead of the protesting shout he’d tried for. His heels kicked up, feet leaving the floor, but the hand on the center of his lower back was strong. The mech holding him over his knee was powerful. New, with systems more advanced and metal alloys stronger than his own. Bonecrusher should have seen this coming -- but how could he have? It wasn’t supposed to be like this!
His vocalizer shorted out as the next spank scooped at the base of his aft, hitting his thighs as well as his already hot, shaking skidplate. The metal skreeled for him, and his heels kicked again.

The Constructicon’s fingers tried to get a grip on the floor, tried to haul him away, but he succeeded no better than Long Haul before him, or Mixmaster before Long Haul. Those two already sat on the Stunticon common room’s couch, hands tucked under to cushion their sore afts. They wore expressions of stunned, exhausted, emptied arousal, memory still lingering long after they’d stopped being able to summon the charge for another interface.

Speaking of which, Bonecrusher went from struggling to bowed over Motormaster’s knee as the charge finally peaked and obliterated his hazy thought processes. The pleasure only spiked higher when the truckformer delivered a series of sharp blows throughout the overload, and the demolitionist moaned little staccato sounds in time. The pleasure only spiked higher when the truckformer delivered a series of sharp blows throughout the overload, and the demolitionist moaned little staccato sounds in time.

When he went limp, whimpering quietly in the afterglow, the spanking finally stopped. For now. This wasn’t over yet. The Stunticon pushed him around his lap, snarling his engine irritably as he rearranged the larger mech into a better position to resume the spanking. Bonecrusher twitched feebly. A big, broad hand rubbed across his dented aft, thumbing the scuff marks, and he made a low sound of pleading.

Motormaster was a rough fragger in every sense of the word, but he’d turned out to be better at this than anyone anticipated. He actually paused to ask, “Had enough?”

The hand felt large and burning hot as it pressed down firmly. Bonecrusher wished frantically that it wasn’t sending thrills of that near-pain across his circuits. “No,” he admitted in an embarrassed, cowed whisper. Scraper was going to be so disappointed in him. He was supposed to be stronger than this, stronger than Motormaster, because Motormaster was the upstart newbie team leader.

But the hand on his aft felt confident and very, very good, and he yelped as Motormaster started smacking him right back up toward climax one more time.

[* * * * *]

Up against the wall, visors pale and hands involuntarily held behind themselves like pathetic defenses against the inevitable, Hook and Scavenger watched the brutal spanking resume. Their systems were already simmering in a state of constant desire, interface systems jumping in sympathetic shocks with every loud clang of hand meeting aft. Scavenger stiffened, swallowing a soft sound as he peaked right there. His port and jack crackled quiet traces of electricity in bolts of yellow and blue over his hatch.

Hook shuddered into his first overload not long after, visor pained and lower lip caught between his teeth as he jerked and twitched, sensor-rich hands pressing to his own aft as if to feel the heavy impacts on his plating. It left his port latchkeys clutching and jack throbbing behind his hatch. He felt achingly empty and already building toward another climax as his fuelpump thumped hard enough to shake his body. The insides of his thighs pressed to each other, but he contained the urge to squirm. Scavenger didn’t bother. Hook felt vaguely ashamed to be associated with the fidgeting mech. He also kind of envied him.

Bonecrusher cried out again, trapped somewhere between agony and ecstasy, and bucked into another overload. Motormaster held him down and spanked his skidplate in hard smacks that made the pained sounds break into short, begging squeals under every blow until the demolitionist slumped at long last, gone limp in the euphoric relief of being wrung utterly dry of charge. It was the final release. They could all see it in the way he lay over Motormaster’s knee, no longer struggling and just meekly, tiredly accepting the hands on his back and aft.
This newbuild had won the match, dominating and driving them into the ground with pleasure without even a touch to port or jack. He hadn’t even fingered their interface hatches, and not for lack of trying on their part. The three Constructicons already bent over his knee had tried to offer their jacks and sockets multiple times, anything to spare their raw sensor networks, but he’d refused to properly frag them. The end result was total victory. Hook and Scavenger had come while merely standing here against the wall, well before Motormaster even yanked them over his knee. Mixmaster and Long Haul were on the couch watching, stamina drained. Bonecrusher was breathing deep and harsh, defeated.

Not one of them knew how they’d be able to face this mech again without the memory of this hitting so hard it’d bring them to their knees. Which was sort of the point of establishing just who was in charge of the combiner teams, but Motormaster had managed the feat in a particularly cruel manner. He hadn’t actually interfaced them. The lack of sexual contact meant that the next time he even looked at them, the rush of sensor memories could very well overload them on the spot.

The Stunticon commander’s big, strong hands brought so much pleasure it hurt. They’d remember that.

Right now those hands pet over Bonecrusher’s skidplate in a way that wasn’t gentle -- oh no, in no way was Motormaster gentle -- but nonetheless soothed the Constructicon. The stroking grounded him after the loss of charge. Soon enough, Motormaster would settle him on the couch between Long Haul and Mixmaster, sore after wincing away from the seat but obediently sitting where ordered.

Then it would be the next Constructicon’s turn.

Scavenger fidgeted. Hook clenched his hands. Neither tried to get away.

[*** ***]

Motormaster and Scrapper stared.

“You…didn’t even try,” Scrapper repeated, piecing the words together. He sat back from the table and look over at Motormaster, who was holding up the wall nearby. It was an automatic thing honed by eons as a gestalt commander. The new hierarchy put him under Motormaster, and therefore he looked to Motormaster first. That was how it was.

Except Motormaster’s acceptance of that role was one of construction. He’d been forged into a combiner, every strut and string of code unwaveringly aware of the rules of their insular society and his place in it. Confused, he frowned at Onslaught. The gestalt commander’s role was to determine the hierarchy. He knew that. Scrapper knew that. Actual lust had nothing to do with it, just as the subordinate team members cooperated with the matches without a second thought.

So to hear Onslaught say he hadn’t tried to dominate the Stunticon team because none of them were his type boggled Motormaster and Scrapper’s minds. Type didn’t matter. A gestalt commander interfaced as a ritualized combat. Pleasure was a weapon to determine the hierarchy. If a mech couldn’t sustain charge, he lost. In Motormaster’s case, he’d ruthlessly taken advantage of alternative methods to make sure he could exhaust the Constructicons without depleting himself. He’d expected Onslaught to be his major rival in this battle because of the tactician’s reputation for seeking out weak points to exploit, but…apparently not.

“Maybe it has to do with how you were made,” Scrapper mused. He rubbed his chin, squinting at nothing as he thought the problem over. “Motormaster’s the new leader,” no question there; his Constructicons were still wincing over their stinging backsides, “but perhaps a secondary match for second place?” He didn’t want to offer up his team for another round when they’d been so soundly
trounced by Motormaster, but this was unsettling. Onslaught was supposed to fight for a place in the hierarchy, not show up at their meeting and flatly declare he’d take whatever ranking was left.

The Combaticon leader’s visor went distant as he pictured the match. “…no. I -- they’re still just… no.” He made a helpless gesture. “No offense meant, but I don’t find your team attractive at all. I can’t see myself interfacing with any of them. I’d rather not.”

The other two commanders exchanged another bewildered glance. “We can’t force you to interface,” Scraper said.

“Puts your mechs in a weird spot, though.” Motormaster pushed off the wall and strode over to stare down the larger Decepticon. Onslaught looked away first. Motormaster smirked, but there was still a conflicted look in his optics. Onslaught hadn’t even tried. “Send ‘em over. I’ll make it official.”

Onslaught nodded and silently left, accepting the dismissal and his place with an almost audible sigh of relief. His team wouldn’t be happy, at least not at first.

They probably would be after Motormaster was done with them.

[* * * * *]

Blast Off held in a sigh as Vortex all but vibrated beside him. “Spanking. I haven’t had a spanking in ages.” Likely since the interrogator started getting his reputation for turning the tables on his partners. Woe was him. Behold the burden of being a sadist as well as a masochist.

Blast Off gave his teammate an unimpressed look. He had no sympathy.

Vortex vibrated back at him. “Long Haul’s still limping! This is gonna be great!”

Behind them, Swindle shifted uncomfortably. Blast Off stopped himself from doing the same. A spanking didn’t sound enjoyable in the least to them, but neither of them enjoyed extremes.

Vortex, however, lived for them. “Spaaaaanking,” he whispered. He might have been trying to freak them out, but Blast Off thought it was genuine glee. The thought of being bent over Motormaster’s knee and abused until his nervous system overloaded from the built-up stress had him floating in a happy little masochistic cloud.

Blast Off faced the door and tried not to think about enduring his own turn. The gestalt programming wrapped his thoughts in a submissive cloud -- Onslaught had already resigned them to their place -- but it didn’t help ease his apprehensive thoughts. The programming wouldn’t do much beyond enhance the pleasure once he was dominated. He clung to the weary knowledge that his body would become aroused enough to slide his mind through this. He didn’t expect anything more than that.

No way would this be as simple as last time. Er, maybe not ‘simple.’ ‘Easy to endure,’ perhaps. They’d walked into the match with no idea how the ritualized gestalt combat even worked, and they’d left staggering and punchdrunk, still buzzing with the afterecho of multiple overloads. Scraper had seduced them, sneaking lust up on the Combinations until they found themselves trembling in exhaustion afterward. Blast Off had been pleasantly surprised by how strongly he’d reacted to the deft handling of an experienced gestalt team leader.

Motormaster? Ha. He could only hope the gestalt programming would accept his lack of desire as a lack of charge. He wanted to get this over with quickly.

“How a mech fights is no measure of how he interfaces,” Onslaught had said as if imparting wisdom. Brawl had laughed in his face, because Onslaught fought like the tactician he was but apparently
couldn’t plan his way through clanging four stupid Stunticons. Motormaster fought in brash, blunt violent surges. Blast Off really couldn’t see that translating to anything but a brute-force approach to the berth.

When the Stunticon leader -- new head of the gestalt hierarchy, as their programming informed them all -- opened the door, the Combaticons braced for attack in the mech’s signature style.

He looked at Swindle and smirked. “I’ve got some good money laid on you finishing first.”

Swindle frowned but had to ask. His greed compelled him. “How much money?”

“Check.”

The conmech’s optics went blank as he pinged the betting board. “…that’s a lot of money.” Purple optics widened. “That’s in my name.” Swindle’s jaw slowly dropped as it hit him what it meant. Blast Off could almost hear Motormaster’s gambit snap into place, because that was indeed a lot of money. Money that Swindle would only win if he overloaded over and over until he couldn’t overload any more.

The smallest Combaticon slumped, optics bewildered as greed steamrolled him. “That’s not fair.”

“You magnificent bastard,” Vortex said, openly admiring. Swindle’s fans switched on at a loud hum, and the Jeep’s hands went to his seams, stroking hard. “I’ll take care of it,” he said in a strangled voice.

Motormaster smirked some more. “Yeah, I thought you would.” His optics went past him to focus on the other Combaticons. One down, three to go.

Blast Off suddenly got the feeling that this was going to be nothing like he’d expected.

[* * * * *]

Vortex talked big, but he had the stamina of his altmode: quick turn-around but a hard crash when he went down the final time.

When Motormaster stapled the manacles to the wall, they held Vortex’s wrists far enough over his head that the ‘copter was forced face-first into the wall. He pulled, excited that the chains didn’t give. Two per cuff, and an extra one for the collar choking him. He thought about resisting when the Stunticon rammed a knee between his own, but he wanted those anklets. He wanted to be held helpless while this mech dominated his body to screaming climax after climax.

Sure, Motormaster had handled Swindle in a quick turn of events. That didn’t mean the mech wasn’t fantastically brutal most of the time. Oh, frag, he was looking forward to this. He’d been running hot since Onslaught reported that Motormaster would be making the hierarchy official tonight.

Vortex let his feet be spread and fanned his rotors out hopefully. He was so turned on his vents were whistling. Yes, please. Brutalize him.

Clamps pinched the tips of his blades, and he wriggled, since that was the extent he could move. The chains had him spread out and powerless. It felt fantastic, and it was getting better yet. Motormaster was attaching the straps on the clamps to winches on the wall in preparation for bending his rotors forward over his shoulder. He couldn’t be more thrilled with that plan. His interface system whined arousal as his temperature rose another few notches, and Vortex tried to peer over his shoulder at the smaller Decepticon. He could barely see Blast Off and Brawl from here.
His teammates were watching, visors a bit alarmed by the amount of hardware dedicated to restraining him. Vortex squirmed happily. He was quivering at the ready, interface hatches popped open for easy access. His ports ached in anticipation of a blast of charge pouring into them, shocking and overpowering. He was getting hot and bothered over just the idea.

Motormaster dragged a hand down his rotor assembly, pushed into the small of his back, and settled it on his aft. Vortex arched as much as he could and tried not to moan too loudly because they hadn’t even started yet and he was beginning to overheat.

The hand left his aft.

“You, shuttle. Come here.”

Wait, what? Vortex twisted, trying to see. “Hey, what are you doing? Where are you going?”

The blur at the edge of his vision sneered. “To ‘face someone else.”

No. No, he couldn’t. He wouldn’t! Vortex’s plating was tingling he was so charged up, and -- and --

Well, frag. And here he was, the sadist who got off on the sounds of torture, stuck banging his forehelm on the wall as he was forced to listen to sounds that were eerily similar taken out of context: the quiet pauses where a victim breathed, shivering in dread; the cries and hushed whimpers; the low moans of surrender. All the sounds of mechs being tortured -- or building toward overload.

All sounds bouncing back to him off the wall as Vortex writhed, listened, and begged for a touch, just a single hand to grind against, a jack plugging his port. Anything! Primus, Unicron, anyone! Please, please frag him, please!

By the time Motormaster brought Blast Off to the shuttle’s first climax, Vortex had his forehelm against the wall while gasping to cool himself. He wasn’t going to last long. He was on his fourth overload already. This was a private Pit. He was stuck in the Pit enduring an eternity of hands-off, delicious interface as his imagination worked him to the pinnacle repeatedly without even a whisper of relief even in the midst of the shuddering pleasure of overload. Blast Off groaned, sounding so tired Vortex’s vents sobbed over how perfect the shuttle sounded in exhaustion.

The Stunticon commander leisurely wandered over to winch down one blade, and Vortex wailed.

He didn’t last long at all, and when he crashed, he didn’t get back up again.

[* * * * *]

(For Baiku) Shattered Glass Soundwave/Starscream - fluffy holiday + dominate Starscream

[* * * * *]

"I just don't get it. You and him. He's just so...and you're so not...and yeah." Cliffjumper gestured in vague hope that explained what he didn’t understand.

Starscream didn’t look up from the program code on the screen, but it only needed a few more tweaks before he’d finish. He could multitask and talk to his friend at the same time. His smile was all for the displaced Autobot. "You're not the first one to say that." Although he might have been the most blunt about it. Bombshell had made gentle inquiries into their wellbeing once it became clear he and Soundwave were involved in something longer than a mere cable-swap, and Megatron had of course made a point of congratulating them only after asking if they were both happy.
Cliffjumper, Starscream feared, still looked at them and saw the Decepticons of his own universe. The differences were plain to see via optics, and the red minibot did try. The Decepticons all gave him some leeway, knowing he had to fight millions of years of battle-honed instinct. In that light, Cliffjumper was doing rather well.

There were some things he had more trouble accepting, it seemed, and Soundwave and Starscream were one of them. As a couple, that was, since separately they were nothing at all like their counterparts and he knew it. It wasn’t the mechs involved so much as the idea of Decepticons deeply committed to each other in a loving relationship. That left him blinking. Starscream could practically smell processors overheating from here.

So the flyer tried to explain with as much plain sincerity as he could pack into his voice. "It’s not really so surprising. I’m not as outgoing, and he’s not as scientifically minded, but we fit together. Once you get past the boisterous exterior, Soundwave’s ember is filled to the brim with that soft, sweet fluff the humans like…" Looking up at nothing as he tried to recall the word, Starscream had no idea how soft and sweet he looked in his own right, smiled in absent fondness as he thought about his lover.

Cliffjumper looked at that silly, infatuated expression. Somewhere inside him, his mental constructs of two mechs also named 'Soundwave' and 'Starscream' shrieked in melodramatic distaste, withering away as they were doused in the lovey-dovey reality before him. Primus, he’d never be able to look at his universe’s Decepticons again without imagining this.

Which was actually kind of funny when he thought about it. Yeah, he could live with that. "Marshmallow," he suggested, trying to contain his grin. If only Starscream’s evil counterpart could see this version of himself.

Blue optics blinked in his direction. "Oh, yes! His ember's filled with marshmallow. The warmer it becomes, the larger it grows, and before you know it -- " White hands spread in helpless amusement. " -- he's got you! You're stuck."

"A horrible fate," Cliffjumper said, still grinning.

That got a slightly confounded look before the flyer realized he wasn't being serious. Sarcasm sometimes passed the Decepticons of the negative polarity universe by. Cliffjumper knew that, and he made sure to add a wink to clue the bigger mech in.

Starscream relaxed and smiled back at him. "Just terrible. I’ll never escape his clutches. However, my terrible fate has been going on for exactly two hundred and sixty vorns as of 6:18 AM this morning, so if you'll excuse me," he saved the program he’d been working on with a final, triumphant click of keys and turned it off with a flourish of wide shoulders, "I need to go make my ooey-gooey captor's day something to remember."

Cliffjumper looked at him for a long moment. Starscream stood tall and glittering in red and white, a vision of sleek plating and streamlined armor. This mech was six kinds of heroic before breakfast, twelve before noon, and the Autobot burst out laughing. It was too surreal for words.

"Happy anniversary," he gasped out when his friend dropped the noble pose and took a step forward in concern. A flailing hand waved him out the door. "You two have fun. Tell me how it goes."

Tensed wings relaxed down. Ah. Incredulous laughter, not malicious laughter. That was the laughter of Cliffjumper being unable to reconcile the disparities between their universes. Starscream smiled kindly at his small friend. "I shall." He gave an extravagant bow and strode toward the door while Cliffjumper shook his head after him.
The halls of the Nemesis seemed deserted as he walked toward the common room, but the feeling of abandonment only lasted until he logged onto Yatter. He’d kept off social networking sites in order to finish that program code, but the other Decepticons had been posting updates on their (unclassified) doings all morning. From the look of things, they’d been busy.

None so busy as Ravage, at least in terms of internet activity. 'Ravagekitteh' was always the busiest Decepticon online, however little he got done in reality. Today, his account had been particularly active posting excited blurbs about his friends’ activities.

7:00:00 “gmorning zzzz wanna sleep moar.”
7:00:54 “dun wanna get up but hihihihi.”
7:03:36 “no 1s here. Breakfast timez?”

The updates continued until the hyperactive Recordicon finally got his morning ration and bounced fully awake in the space of two minutes. Starscream could tell because of the time stamp. There were suddenly more capital letters scattered through the posts.

Now awake, Ravage had tracked down his carrier, and thus began his adorable take on the special day. Starscream skimmed the Yatter feed and chuckled.

7:45:16 “O HAI do U no what day 2day is?! 2day is teh best day!!!”
7:46:03 "S0undwve is all teh happies 2day LOL!"
7:58:39 [Picture removed for violation of Yatter posting policies] “Can U C me?? Im waving! Look what S0undwve got *scream!! So cool!”
8:01:04 “awww S0undwave takes teh pic down bc *scream might C teh prezzi b4 it’s wrapped”
8:02:01 “@SirRadical LOL srry S0undwve.”

Starscream quickened his pace, charmed and a little exasperated. Soundwave had gotten him a present? It was Starscream’s turn to give a present this vorn, something that they had agreed on long ago due to Soundwave’s resemblance to a marshmallow in armor. Once exposed to the heat of love and romantic passion, something piled on in spades in the privacy of their quarters, the white-and-blue Decepticon melted. Completely and totally melted into the softest emotions imaginable. If Starscream hadn’t gotten him to agree to an every-other-vorn gift schedule, the flyer would find himself inundated with presents by his doting lover every vorn, at the middle of every vorn, and probably in between as well.

It made coming up with gifts for the communication mech a tad bit difficult. Starscream knew he shouldn’t feel pressured -- Soundwave would never put pressure on him for anything -- but he already felt somewhat guilty that his sense of discretion kept them from the public displays of affection Soundwave loved to indulge in. When his lover went to such lengths to find many presents for him and made his adoration of him obvious at every turn, it motivated Starscream to pick his own gifts with care. The presents he gave had to be extremely thoughtful, if not perfect. Even if giving one such present made him feel uncomfortable. Not unduly so, but Starscream had to pause on the common room’s threshold to pull in a deep breath. Right. Showtime. He could do this. If he could act the part of Megatron’s Second-in-Command despite his many doubts as to his worthiness of the position, he could act this part. Soundwave would never outright ask him to play it, and that’s what he hoped would make it a great surprise.
The role closed around him in a poor fit. Flexing his wings, he exhaled slowly. It was only one day. He could play the confident, take-charge mech for Soundwave if that’s what would turn his lover’s fans. Surely the behavior wouldn’t feel too odd.

Really, he never thought of himself as diffident or a recluse. Starscream was more inclined to say he knew his limits and approached them with humility. He still protested Megatron appointing him as Second, but that was because there were patently more talented flyers and tactical minds in the ranks. He wasn’t shy; he liked people and enjoyed being with them. He just had a lot to do in the laboratories and tended to get caught up in his work. Starscream knew himself.

That’s what he thought, anyway. Everyone else in the Nemesis knew better and would grin at each other in shared mirth behind his back to hear his description of himself. He was too humble for his own good, honestly.

The scientist didn’t recognize his own greatness, and while Soundwave had fallen in love with him as he was, the carrier mech also held a deeply-buried secret. Soundwave desired to see him take on the appearance of the powerful, swaggering lord of the air he could have been. A bucketload more pride and arrogance, and Starscream could have ruled a city.

Soundwave fantasized about that mech. Not often, but once and a while. It wasn’t that Soundwave wanted his lover to become a pretentious braggart who kicked him around as a lesser being, but… well, Soundwave’s typical attitude toward hierarchy was that the titles were nice but everyone was a bro waiting to happen. In the Decepticons, ignoring rank for the people inside was almost the standard affair.

The thought of really being treated as beneath Starscream’s rank, trapped under those lovely thrusters and ordered about as his subordinate? It sent an illicit thrill shooting through him. They were equals, lovers and friends, but Soundwave kind of wanted to have the power taken from him by the suave, cruelly confident mech Starscream could have been.

Thanks to little birdie (of the hipster Recordicon variety), Starscream had found out about that secret wish. The violation of privacy made him uncomfortable and the false persona felt strange, but the flyer straightened up and held his head high. He could do this. If it fulfilled a deeply-held lust held by his selfless, wonderful second half, then Starscream would strut into the common room projecting self-importance on all fronts.

Even if half a dozen mechs immediately looked up to stare. They didn’t matter. Er, no, they did, but not right now. The only one who mattered was the royal blue Cassette carrier sitting at the table taping a collection of bed sheets into elaborate wrapping paper for the box in front of him.

“Soundwave! Where are you?” His tone demanded attention, right here and now, and Starscream looked down his nose at his lover when the mech spun around at the table. The box was shoved behind the mech’s back in a sad attempt at hiding it, but Starscream concentrated on glaring for the moment. “There you are. Where have you been?”

Shock smacked the yellow visor wide. Soundwave faltered, outstretched hand falling as he took in the haughty look, the pricked wings, and that tone. He’d never heard Starscream speak like that, even at his angriest or most righteous.

It was sort of hot.

“Screamer, uh, I’ve been, um, here. Working. Sort of.” He shifted, still trying to hide the box. “Wh-what’s the haps..?”
Starscream sauntered toward the table and leaned down, ignoring the question in favor of picking up the end of Soundwave’s bandanna to wind around his fingers. “Working. Here. I see. And here I expected the most gorgeous Decepticon on the base to dance attendance on me today,” hinting heavily that he deserved it, of course he deserved it, he deserved it the most, “but no. I had to hunt you down. How do you think that made me feel, Sir Soundwave?” He sneered lightly. “It’s our anniversary, and I had to go searching for your pretty self. You’ve lowered me to manual labor.” He leaned over further, pulling the bandanna tight until Soundwave’s stunned visor stared directly into his own optics. “Naughty naughty.”

“I -- uh -- I -- “ Fans kicked into high gear. Starscream had rarely seen Soundwave at a loss for words, but he could get used to it. The flabbergasted look was a good one, but he was of the opinion that Soundwave looked good in anything.

He used the bandanna to turn Soundwave’s head and ex-vented a slow stream of warm air into one sensitive audio. It earned a shudder. “I believe you owe me an apology,” he whispered, “Sir Soundwave.”

People were gaping. Starscream refused to acknowledge them. Instead, he flicked his tongue out for a quick lick over that hidden audio receptor.

Soundwave melted into a puddle of goo. “Oh wow, Screamer. This’s -- I can’t even tell you how -- just -- dude. You are hot stuff.” That was a major compliment in flustered terms. Starscream smiled, turning the flattered expression into a smug smirk at the last second, and heat poured out of Soundwave’s vents. The carrier mech fumbled on the table amidst the bed sheets and thrust a box of energon goodies at him. “Sorry I wasn’t -- “

“That’s Lord hot stuff to you,” Starscream interrupted, because hearing an actual apology would make him feel very bad. This was just play, after all. “You may give me these to make up for your mistake,” he decided, tapping a finger on the box. His tanks would hate him later for feeding them goodies without having his ration first, but it’d be worth the ache.

Besides, he’d feel better if Soundwave could fuss over him later in private. Then they could snuggle and cuddle without all the other Decepticons staring at them. He was looking forward to that, even if he wasn’t looking forward to the sick surge in his tanks from feeding them goodies on empty.

This was about Soundwave, however, not him.

The flyer threw himself into the seat beside his lover. Tipping the chair back, he set his feet on the table and went for an insufferably arrogant pose. It felt embarrassing and rude. He was certain he looked foolish.

He looked like a prince. Soundwave’s fans whirred, a mechanical moan, and he almost fell out of his chair to kneel beside him. “Lord hot stuff, yeah, you’re that. You’re totally that.”

Visor and optics locked together for a long, long minute, seconds ticking by as yellow and blue met. They gazed into their past and future and how much they meant to one another. Some things didn’t change, no matter the current act. Starscream’s nerves smoothed into soft warmth in his chest at the naked adoration in Soundwave’s visor.

Without looking away, Soundwave opened the box and selected a single goodie. Starscream’s optics stayed level, his expression coolly distant, but he opened his mouth to allow his worshipping lover to feed him the goodie. Fingertips lingered on his lips and stroked over his tongue. He closed his mouth enough to suck them clean, and his lover made a small wanting noise at the tiny lick that promised so much more later.
The back of Soundwave’s fingers brushed down a pale cheek when they withdrew, and Starscream turned his head enough to press his lips to them in passing. It wasn’t a kiss. It was more of an acknowledgement, and optics smoked dark twilight blue as he tilted his head back in a luxurious stretch.

Something not just watched but *memorized* by the mech kneeling at his side. “You rock my world,” Soundwave said in a shaky voice.

“I know,” Starscream purred.

One hand felt around in the box for the next treat because Soundwave couldn’t tear his visor away from the long length of jet stretching in front of him. Handfuls of shining armor waited to be explored, but not now. No, he’d be verbally smacked down if he laid a finger on this magnificent mech right now. Restraining himself under Starscream’s knowing gaze ramped him up into burning, and it was a glorious fire.

He needed this jet, and today was the anniversary of how long he’d had him. The gift was in the wrapping, this vorn.


[* * * * *]

(For Baiku) Bayverse Soundwave/Starscream - dominant, egg-brooding Starscream + envious Soundwave + rough/gory sex

[* * * * *]

No one wanted a connection. No one expected a connection.

That in mind, his first conclusion was the logical one. The flyer had gone crazy. “You’re insane!”

He had no time to do more than shout, because momentum won where height failed. Thrusters sent them skidding across the floor, both mechs fighting to stay on top as they rolled in a violent flurry of punching and raw battle fury. His attacker doubled over, backward-jointed legs folding in partial transformation to get between them and *kick* in a savage squeal of rending metal as the sharp talons on the tips of trisected feet dug into Soundwave’s wide back.

An elbow flung back to crack into the flyer’s face, but Starscream seized it by the forearm and slammed it forward again. Two fists crashed down on top of the egg racks, but one had a fistful of the others’ tensile cables. Serrated claws dug in and began to slice.

Soundwave struggled, his larger frame gaining enough advantage to turn halfway over before the smaller flightframe on top of him kicked once more, thrusters jumping on for a split second right before gravity brought Starscream slamming back down. He clawed up Soundwave’s side, uncaring of how sharp-taloned toes ripped through armor on his way up. He met the communication specialist’s outraged roar with an enraged shriek, and his talons dug into internal parts under the armor.

The roar became a shrill creel of shock and pain. Starscream’s optics narrowed as he dug into Soundwave’s waist, threatening far worse, and his hand stayed clamped tight. He had the advantage and no intention of giving it up.

The satellite altmode Soundwave had adopted for the Earth mission was relatively huge. However, most of it collapsed in on itself transforming back to rootmode. The panels spread to an
intimidatingly broad width behind his shoulders, but the metal sheets were thin. They were rich with
data receptors and circuitry instead of thickly armored. The shifting panels merely covered vital parts in
multiple layers instead of actually protecting them. Soft internal tubing, vulnerable data transfer
cables, and important hydraulic systems were easy to expose and easier to exploit once exposed.

This altmode was meant to gather and assess the information of Earth via hacking, not combat. On
the other hand, Starscream was streamlined for fighting, every part of him armored into a defensive
shell. That shell had then flung himself on the offense against Soundwave’s weaker bodyframe.

The outcome of this conflict could have been a toss-up if Soundwave had seen it coming, but an all-
knowing communication specialist didn’t know much without any communication. Starscream had
hurtled into him claws-first from above the moment he hacked the door and stepped inside, and the
flyer’s thrusters had tumbled them across the hatchery. Wide, thin paneling obstructed more than
helped while attempting to fight in the midst of a rolling scramble. He hadn’t stood a chance.

By the time Soundwave managed to stagger upright, his altmode panels were dented and in disarray.
Most of the transformation hinges were broken out of alignment. Ropes of internal parts hung loose
from his waist, spurting hydraulic fluid and oil to the floor.

It made the footing treacherous. It smelled like butchery and war.

Still clinging to his back, he could hear Starscream inhale deeply. His visor widened. He braced
himself, but the hand closed around his wrist yanked the cables.

Claws sliced. Metal sheered. White noise blotted out the snapping *ping-ping-schlurch* of cables
cutting and pressurized hydraulic pipes popping. Mechanical agony screamed through the hatchery
as Soundwave spat feedback and binary curses in equal measure. The hatchlings shifted restlessly in
their egg sacks as if they could understand him.

Soundwave’s hand went limp, and he hissed his frustration and pain. Starscream had nearly severed
his wrist through; between that and his gutted abdomen, the fight was lost. Prolonging the inevitable
would only provoke the insane flyer to kill him instead of perhaps letting him crawl away to a medic
after surrendering.

“Yield.” His voice sizzled through the gloom, full of static and futile rage. “Soundwave: surrenders.”

More fluids gushed out of the broken joint to slick the floor. His fluids pumped out onto the eggs,
and Starscream hissed fury at the taint.

Reality skewed to the left as Soundwave analyzed the sound. It wasn’t one of insanity. He knew
insanity. One couldn’t comb through millennia of war information without recognizing insanity.

That was possessiveness.

The eggs were unidentifiable as one carrier’s or another’s once they were fertilized. The Fallen had
taken the Decepticons capable of spark generation and implanted them with tiny fragments of his
ancient Primacy, glittering descendant offshoots of the AllSpark. Their sparks had responded by
spawning. It had been a bizarre, even alarming method of reproduction that none of the Decepticons
had known about prior to the Fallen calling for the carrier mechs.

Those who’d hosted the tiny budding bits of light and life had found their sparks accepting the
Fallen’s implantation. They’d generated new life. Some had been repulsed by the process, some only
exhausted and irritated by the labor as their bodies provided for the newsparks’ development. One or
two had been fascinated.
Regardless of their feelings on the matter, each carrier obeyed the Fallen’s command, because no Decepticon who’d survived this long was going to be stupid enough to defy him. They’d seeded the egg sacks with the teensy sparks when he decreed and suffered the implantation process to start carrying again. The hatchery filled, one newspark at a time.

That should have been the end of it. The newsparks gradually assembled raw materials filtered out of the nutrient fluid in the egg sacks, gleaning flecks of metal and energon like the forging process magnetized them. Up until the hatchlings unfurled their tight balls of rough metal into limbs and functioning joints, they weren’t recognizable as young Cybertronians, much less as descended from any particular carrier. The carriers shouldn’t have been able to identify which eggs they’d fertilized, so feeling a connection to the eggs should have been ludicrous.

So no one had said anything alluding to that when Starscream took over the hatchery. He turned it into his own personal domain, strictly limiting contact with anyone but the Fallen, but the Decepticons whispering about it in the halls decided that made a kind of sense. The newsparks were supposed to be the next generation. The Fallen ruled the ship and spoke about Megatron as if he were still alive, but Starscream would seize whatever power was offered. Or anywhere he could steal it. Controlling the next generation’s development granted future influence over the mechs.

Soundwave had thought it that simple. Now he didn’t. The Air Commander clawed more of his internal parts out of his frame, infuriated that he had dared touch the hatchlings by even a spray of fluids, and insanity wasn’t the answer. A connection to the hatchlings no longer seemed ludicrous, not while Starscream tore into him a second time for the sin of bleeding on the blasted things.

This was instinctive rage. This was protective anger.

Soundwave re-evaluated the situation as pain strung his mind out like the tubing spilling down his legs in long loops.

“Commander!” Flattery. Starscream was the acting commander of the Nemesis, only technically his superior officer. At this moment, Soundwave would call him Lord and mean it. “Take care, Commander, or you will damage the hatchlings with my frame.”

It took effort to keep his voice level, but it came out a mild reproof. The warning cut through the violence better than a shout would have. It caught Starscream’s attention.

The flyer stilled. His talons flexed in the holes punched through Soundwave’s thin plating, feet restlessly shifting him from side to side on the larger mech’s back as his claws kneaded the larger mech’s broken wrist joint.

Soundwave stifled a hoarse yell at the stabbing streaks of pain going up his forearm. His gutted abdomen continued to seep vital fluids, but he stayed as motionless as the pain let him. It seemed like a bad idea to provoke the possessive code of a mech evidently Pit-bent on protecting his…offspring.

Offspring. Newsparks, eggs, and hatchlings. Foreign terminology for a repulsively organic method of procreation. Soundwave reset his optical system and stared at the transparent egg sacks in front of his face. Which newsparks had been carried by Starscream? Did the flyer even know? Could anyone tell? The whole lot of them were barely living as of yet, alive at the core but still forming bodies around themselves. They registered as skittering flecks of data across the periphery of his sensors. Their energy fields were thin skins over rough metal.

The energy tasted like the Fallen to his sensors.

A pale reflection of Starscream’s possessive fury curled through Soundwave’s spark like smoke from
his kindled temper.

The carriers had generated newsparks via implantation by the Fallen. He hadn’t really known about the process, or what it would entail. The mission to find the Star Harvester and revive Megatron had kept Soundwave away from the Nemesis for long periods of time. The hatchery had been just set up the last time he’d been onboard, and the Fallen’s plan had inspired nothing but indifference in him. Perhaps some gratitude, that Starscream would be kept occupied. His own frametype and spark couldn’t carry, but Starscream’s could.

By the time Soundwave returned, Starscream was firmly entrenched in brooding the eggs. To his disgruntled surprise, the communications specialist had found that he was barred from the room. While he could hack the hatchery’s lock open, the fact that he had to meant that Starscream had used locking codes his own command codes couldn’t override. That was intentional. That meant the doors were specifically locked against him.

Starscream considered him powerful in arms and information, a worthy successor and ally. He also considered him a threat to these little Pitspawn, it seemed.

A threat Soundwave would have made real if he’d known how the things reeked of the Fallen. Starscream had been taken by the ancient Prime, and these hatchlings were the result. He did not like the implications of that at all.

Objectively, he’d known the implantation process was intimate. He hadn’t fully realized what that meant until he was face-to-egg with the hatchlings. He’d been replaced. The Fallen had taken Starscream’s spark for his own purposes. Starscream had bowed to the Fallen to the point that he regarded anyone outside the hatchery as an enemy. His will, body and mind bent to protecting the newsparks.

The flyer had been taken from Soundwave, used and changed to the Fallen’s specifications. These things were evidence of his infidelity. Proof of submission the Air Commander had never even offered to Megatron. Living beings that awakened protective coding so dormant that it was unnatural for a mech to have it.

It revolted Soundwave. This was sick and wrong, a perversion of the natural order! All of this: the Fallen, Starscream’s submission, the newsparks. Bitter loathing welled up in his mind like the fuel creeping up the back of his throat.

He shifted once in Starscream’s grasp and froze at the high-pitched whine of hydraulics engaging. Claws and talons alike tightened around his plating as hands and feet shifted for a better grip. Metal crumpled slightly. The pinned mech relaxed a bolt at a time, broadcasting surrender through his body until Starscream went back to growling against his neck. The flyer didn’t quite seem to know what to do with him without damaging the hatchlings.

A frustrated grating screech of grinding gears came from deep within Soundwave’s chassis as he waited for a decision. He was unable to anything more. He glared at the egg sacks directly in front of his visor, hating them and everything they stood for. Starscream belonged to the Fallen, not to him, and these were the result.

They dripped his fuel, mocking him. The liquid didn’t so much as stain them. It slid from the egg sacks, and the Fallen’s energy signature assaulted Soundwave’s sensors again. He took it as a personal insult.

Affronts to nature or not, he wouldn’t hate them so much if they didn’t reek of the Fallen’s total dominion over Starscream. Even covering them with his internal fluids hadn’t been enough to mark
them as Soundwave’s instead. That would have been at least marginally better than swallowing down submission to the Fallen’s will. If he could somehow make these accursed things his instead of the Fallen’s -- but he couldn’t.

The Fallen had created the hatchery, spawned the eggs inside it, and crafted a single-minded guardian out of the Air Commander. What did that leave Soundwave?

He was Starscream’s sole lover, had been for most of the war, and yes, he had made certain he alone interfaced with the flyer. He watched Starscream closely for the sake of his absent leader, but also because he would not be upstaged by whatever conniving Decepticon thought to curry favor via a berth. The few idiots who’d tried hitting on his lover had found their ends soon afterward.

The flyer was his.

His vicious possessiveness had always amused Starscream. Loyalty to him as a lover instead of as a leader was still loyalty of a sort. He’d found that more than acceptable.

But now Soundwave was spurned for egg sacks and an ancient Prime. All of his lover’s attention centered on the hatchery and the newsparks, and the whole situation stung his sensors with the Fallen’s supremacy. Starscream would interface with him, work side-by-side under Megatron with him, command him as a soldier, yet didn’t trust him around newsparks that belonged to someone else.

Smart mech. Soundwave snarled silently at the eggs.

“Why are you here?” Starscream demanded suddenly. “State your purpose. What do you have to tell me that could not have been sent in a data packet?” His hands found better holds and dug clawtips in to rake over the nerve sensors hidden under Soundwave’s thin armor. The hands of a lover could be efficient weapons of pain when used to punish. Soundwave’s vocalizer clicked in agony as sharp claws abused sensors they’d often caressed.

There was only one solution to this problem, only one thing Soundwave could claim that the Fallen hadn’t already taken.

He pressed into the claws maiming him and lowered his voice until the static purred in the voice of a mech driven mad by desire. “Must you ask, Commander? I would think it obvious.”

At his waist and the sides of his hips, a dozen ports abruptly flipped open. Thin crackles of charge already dribbled from their open mouths. Some had been torn free by Starscream’s talons, but they sparked fitfully where they hung loose. Beneath the long loops of leaking internal tubing, his pelvic span transformed as his interface array came online. The solid front plating folded out, the equipment structure behind it pushing out as the wiring underneath winched taut. The circular bracer ring snapped into place as concealed data transfer cables uncoiled from their redundant support positions secured around his hip joints. They snaked out between parted plating, writhing through the bracer ring as strong magnets pulled the thread-thin data cables forward.

The surging throb of magnets over sensitive circuitry sent waves of arousal across his nervous system. Power conduits clicked free of his sensor network when the charge reached a tripping point, and bundles of wires squirmed out, drawn by the magnets out through the bracer ring until cables and wires formed a heavy skein that zapped white flickers of electric charge up and down their lengths. The ring’s magnets powered down as the slight tug of magnetic plugs began. They called their matching prongs to slot in, forming thicker cords twined from power conduits, sensor circuitry wire, and data cables.
The electric scent of ozone rose around Soundwave’s frame as he arched back into Starscream’s hands and moaned a static-ridden note he didn’t even have to fake. “Commander…” The coiling mass that had been his pelvic span clicked into place one chirping ready-light after another, spitting charge as his body heated. His interface array writhed together through the leaking tubes and parts of his gutted waist, cords wrapping about themselves to form a twisted pillar tipped by twitching jacks and multi-pinned connectors.

He moaned again as clawed hands raked down his sides to hover over the open ports right under his chest. “Yes,” he hissed. “Now, Starscream. Take me now.”

His feet spread apart to brace him for the first scalding rush of charge, and he smirked grimly at the egg sacks in front of him. The Fallen had Starscream’s submission, but Soundwave? He would have Starscream’s dominance. If he could not own the flyer, then the flyer would own him.

The mere idea sent his array questing, connection pins seeking out receptive ports impatiently. His interface equipment was charged and ready, excited for a rough frag. Heat and charge cycled through it, transferred back and forth through the braided structure but contained by the bracing ring. Twice the size of the others, the main cable finally emerged from its sheath to worm through the center of the pulsing mass like a hot, liquid conduit straight into Soundwave’s mainframe. His electromagnetic field throbbed in time with its cycling, and Soundwave dropped his head as connector pins nosed into place along the thick length. It slaved the other transfer cables to its much larger jack, and his torn abdomen gushed more fluids as he jerked in reaction when the bracer ring tightened, forcing the woven cords together.

Set back and under the cable array, between his legs, a separate structure pinged completion as the last socket components snapped into place. His jack tip rubbed against the pliable surface of an egg, transmitting the sensation up braided wire-cable-conduit cords before feeding right back into the thick main cable. The soft pressure went straight into the achingly empty socket behind it.

A socket whose edges expanded in anticipation when Starscream’s weight shifted. Soundwave tilted his aft up, uncaring of the fresh spill of internal fluids that spattered to the floor. All he needed was Starscream’s cords twisting up against him, around him, filling his ports however he wished because the communication mech had thrown himself wide open to whatever --

Ah?

“I will take you when I wish and not an instant sooner,” the Air Commander said, his distinctive raspy vocalizer smoothing the words through it like shibari rope through experienced hands. The claws that had been tracing delicately around crackling ports withdrew, trailing gleaming charge for a moment before it evaporated in white bolts of light.

Soundwave groaned, then grunted in surprise as Starscream’s arms embraced him from behind. What could have been a lover’s gesture turned into an attack as both hands dug into his opened gut with a savagery normally reserved for the battlefield. Before he could scream, handfuls of tubing were ripped free in one brutal yank.

“Perhaps later.”

The larger Decepticon went down in a massive clatter that shook the entire hatchery. Damage reports and error warnings blared across his vision, but the pain burnt through him front-to-back in a pulling drain that stretched up into his chest and pulled at the base of his interface equipment. Literally pulled, since Starscream still held the dripping handfuls of internal parts as he stood above Soundwave. When he backed away, Soundwave could feel fuel processors shut down, his generator seize, and gaskets burst as hoses snapped.
“Commander, stop!”

“Perhaps now,” Starscream said, reversing his stride. He knelt by the downed mech as if nothing had happened.

Soundwave looked into his optics and muted a garbled plea before it could escape. He had been this Decepticon’s lover for a long, long time. He knew that look. “As you command,” he wheezed instead, spitting oil. Leaking reservoirs had flooded his throat.

Despite the damage -- maybe even because of it, because it came from Starscream’s hands and as long as they were covered in his fluids they were his -- he pushed against the floor. His arms shook but held, wrist flaming agony. Soundwave lifted his aft and parted his knees, sliding them through puddles of his own fluids.

The glaring red read-out tracking his fuel levels dropped as warm liquid ran down his chest and legs in response. His exposed socket irised further open between his thighs, anyway. The ports deep inside dribbled charge and flexed their rim latchkeys in eager anticipation of being plugged. Building arousal sang need down his wires, overwriting pain with sheer lust for the connector tips slipping out from behind Starscream’s pelvic armor. Soundwave saw them weaving together when he glanced back, and his ventilation system gurgled protest as it fought how his temperature spiked.

Yes. Yes, mount him. Take him like this, on all fours beneath the flyer’s shorter frame. Cover him with the shadow of those wide wings and the swamping lust of his domineering EM field. Plug his every port and overwhelm him with an onslaught of electric heat and charge.

The Fallen would never have Starscream this way. He would never scream helplessly against the floor as writhing cords worked slowly inside his socket and whipped against his receptor ports in teasing spanks. They wouldn’t connect until he surrendered control and begged, and the ancient Prime would never do that. He would never shiver between pain and pleasure as Starscream’s main jack slid slow and excruciating around his empty port, feather-light pressure blasting his interface array with a torrent of transmitted charge even though only the tip touched the rim. His deepest ports would never dribble embarrassing blurs of electricity as connector pins split off from Starscream’s cords to torment them like the many mouths of a hydra licking him out from the inside.

The Fallen would never allow himself to be bound by his own internal parts, much less welcome the restraints: soft tubing twisted around broken wrist joints and snapped cabled repurposed to leash his neck to the nearest egg rack so he couldn’t look away. He’d never shriek pleas as his interface array was pried apart, cords pulled loose from their bracer ring and forced back on themselves to plug into his own receptor ports. The charge redoubled immediately, and Soundwave shrieked in blissful pain as it shocked him again and again. The main cable’s insulation sheath cracked as Starscream bent it, carelessly pulling prong tips out of its length and smacking the cords away while Soundwave panted and shook. The larger mech, now tied on his hands and knees, keened agony as Starscream brought the thick cable up and around in a sadistic knot that just fed his rampant charge back in on itself.

“Starscream! Mercy!” The words came out incoherent, but his pleading tone transmitted loud and clear. If that weren’t enough, he ground back into the twisted cords bulging from his socket, flaring his energy field as open as he could splay it.

He begged, but he begged for more. Take him. Take him, for AllSpark’s sake!

Starscream wasn’t done with him, however. Not yet. Smirking, he sank his claws deep into the wide planes of Soundwave’s altmode paneling and peeled them apart. Soundwave’s overtaxed, damaged fans howled even as the wounded mech screeched, but the flyer ignored it to slit open the sheaths hidden underneath in the shoulder mechanisms. “Oh, what’s this, then?”
Soundwave bucked once. Starscream crouched just enough to put his powerful knee joints into the thrust of his hips, and Soundwave spat static as his ports were shocked by the fleeting contact of multiple connector tips hitting their rims over and over again until the larger mech meekly lowered his chest to the floor and stopped resisting. Two more thrusts punished him for the rebellion, turning pleasure to pain and pain to pleasure until the charge glistened in translucent, evaporating smears around the rim of his straining socket. Deep inside him, Soundwave’s wanton ports gaped, hungry for a connection they’d only get when Starscream was good and ready to jack in.

When he was satisfied Soundwave understood his place -- and Soundwave thoroughly did, needy and savoring what he and he alone would suffer under his lover -- Starscream resumed pulling out the tentacles tucked away in the mech’s altmode. They were hacking cables, meant for data absorption from the Earth networks. As soon as Soundwave scanned a different altmode, he’d lose them.

Well, they’d obviously just have to play with them while they were here to be played with.

Soundwave whined thinly as claws pinched the sensitive tips. As reward or punishment, Starscream’s leaned forward over his back and gave another violent thrust, forcing another three cords squirming into his straining socket. Soundwave cried out as the pain zinged closer to ecstasy. He couldn’t keep the two separate anymore, and it felt unbelievable. High-powered charge cycled out through his main cable, surging through the knot and zapping into his own ports. It was a cyclical torture that brought him achingly close to the edge in a burning build that wouldn’t bubble over. Electric charge pooled deep in his socket, trapped and unable to leak past the tight bundle of cables and wires caressing his port rims. The main jack dipped into a receptor port for an occasional shallow thrust that left him needing so much more.

Fingers slid under his chin from behind right as Starscream gave one tentacle tip a strong suck. Soundwave’s vocalizer fizzled, and he could only blearily stare at the egg in his face.

“These are mine,” Starscream said at his back, and Soundwave only realized the choked protest came from his throat when it earned him a sharp bite. He screeched, and Starscream licked the bitemarks before repeating. “These are mine. Not the Fallen’s. Mine.”

Soundwave had enough processor power left to snarl at the slagging thing. It stank of the Fallen’s energy. Nothing of it felt like Starscream, he himself had no part in its creation or nurturing, and he hated it because of that.

Starscream nibbled down the length of one tentacle. He dropped it to pull the other free and give it the same treatment. The snarl became a weak whimper, and Soundwave’s glare at the egg became a squinting, desperate expression of conflicted pleasure. No. He would not accept this! He would reclaim Starscream from the Fallen, not accept that these were anything but a travesty of the natural order of the universe! To accept these as Starscream’s meant accepting that Starscream had been subsumed by the Fallen, indistinguishable and an extension of him. In that acceptance, he would lose the flyer to the ancient Prime despite everything he’d done to take him back.

“These are mine,” Starscream said again, mouth moving against the tentacle tip. “Say it.”

Binary swore furious denial at him.

A long, hot breath over a wet patch, and metal glided through the narrow pivot point of the segmented tip. Soundwave faltered.

“Mine.” A nip, and the larger mech jumped. A moan fought out of his abused throat, and Starscream chuckled. “You’re mine, too. Mine,” his fingers balanced Soundwave’s chin, pushing his face into
the soft skin of the egg sack, “and mine. You belong to me. You do as I say, and I say they are mine.”

That jack circled and nosed into a receptor port deep inside him, probing in shallow thrusts, and Soundwave shuddered. His latchkeys spread wide, eager to snug home at its base, but it withdrew. A dozen other connector tips spanked at port rims, and his shudder became a continuous shiver of little jerking movements as his hips danced in time to the sparking zaps of charge. He moaned quietly in hopeless hate.

That was one thing most Decepticons forgot about Starscream. He outranked Soundwave because he beat the communication mech at power games in the end.

Starscream slipped the tentacle tip into his mouth, and his tongue slicked over it.

Soundwave lost.

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Pt. 21

Chapter Summary

Brainstorm faces Chromedome, Tarn faces Pharma, Optimus Prime faces the aftermath, and the Constructicons face Prowl.

Title: Candy From Strangers
Warning: references to rape, xeno, mild petplay.
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW, G1
Characters: Brainstorm, Chromedome, Tarn, Pharma, Optimus Prime, Constructicons, Prowl, Reflector, Megatron. Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Prompts from Tumblr, and one from the kinkmeme.

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Chromedome - “past loves”

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He didn’t care what he was drinking tonight, only that it was strong and plentiful. “Keep them coming,” he told Swerve before staking out the back corner booth. He defended it from anyone who dared approach by glowering mightily. Not tonight, Trailcutter. Frag off, Perceptor, now was really not the time, and since when did Perceptor the Prude grace a bar with his presence? Ugh.

Nevermind, just leave him be. No, Skids, he did not want to talk, wasn’t interested in talking, and would find a way to weaponize words if not left alone immediately. Yes, right this instant, now go away.

Whirl would have bickered with him over it just to be contrary, but Brainstorm was in no mood for the ex-Wrecker tonight. He told him if there was a bar fight tonight, official tester status for those nice shiny new weapon designs would be revoked permanently. Not surprisingly, Whirl cleared out of the bar so fast a small dustcloud was left in his wake.

“I didn’t know you were that close to Rewind,” Swerve said while setting down the first of what Brainstorm intended to be many drinks. “Didn’t know you were close to anybody,” he muttered, because funerals could only subdue his motormouth for a little while.

Ouch. Brainstorm sucked down the drink in the gulping guzzle of a mech who didn’t have to share a fuel intake with a main air vent. “Another,” he demanded as soon as he hit bottom. “And no twirly straw this time.” It was only when Swerve put up his hands in surrender and scurried away back toward the bar that he slumped over the table, chin on his hands and hands on his briefcase. “I’m close to someone,” was said under his breath, but it was less a statement and more of an attempt to make himself believe a dubious fact.

He could build seven impossible things before morning shift, but color him a skeptic right now. Just… why. Why?! Why did it always end like this? Why did Chromedome never listen to him? Why
did it always have to end in a lie? A real friend. The kind of friend that told the same lie every single time, and then that horrible blank look.

No point in getting mad at him, either. Chromedome didn’t remember why Brainstorm was angry.

The second drink went the way of the first, but Swerve had the service drone programmed in a loop. It swooped off to pick up the next drink as soon as the weight of the glass left its tray. Brainstorm lifted the now-empty glass in the direction of the bar in a half-sparked toast. More drinks, more and more drinks, downed one right after another as fast as his tanks could handle them. Clearly, this was his most genius plan yet.

He didn’t bother lifting his chin as he drank. Depression wasn’t normally something he dealt with on more than a theoretical basis, but it seeped under his thoughts tonight.

He was close to someone, and that’s why it hurt so much. Yeah, he and Rewind hadn’t been best buds. They didn’t even get along. That hadn’t meant Brainstorm had wished harm on him. He wasn’t Prowl, to resent change he couldn’t control. Tumbler had been more dependent, easier to manipulate because he trusted fewer mechs and had less to lose, but Rewind touched far more lives. Just as Brainstorm knew and accepted -- had known, had accepted, everything in past tense now and Primus did he need another drink -- Rewind because of Chromedome, Rewind’s many friends and acquaintances had done the same for Chromedome. Rewind had been a lodestone of interest and excitement. A focus of memory, making sure everyone remembered.

Brainstorm jealously guarded his few friendships, but Rewind and he had come to a sort of mutual ceasefire not long after the relationship started. Tumbler loved intensely, with everything he was. That wasn’t new. Oh, that wasn’t new. Brainstorm knew it so very well. It should have made him dislike the small flashdrive, or consider this the inevitable outcome, but Chromedome had been happy.

There and then with Rewind, Chromedome had been happy. It’d changed him. Moment by moment, Chromedome had changed.

Tumbler lived ever in the now. It was a painful fact that Brainstorm had tried yet again to fight, tonight.

Brainstorm leaned back in the booth and thunked his head against the wall behind him, optics dimming. Pivot. Mach. Scattergun. Tumbler loved deep and strong, but his past loves evaporated, erased for the present time. Of all of them, Rewind deserved to be remembered the most simply because of what he’d been, but no one deserved to be forgotten. Not by him, and especially not by Chromedome.

Once upon their own times, they’d been Tumbler’s present. They should have been his past, but those memories were gone. The changes disappeared, the happiness evaporated, and Brainstorm’s friend would reset back to baseline: a borderline depressive, thoroughly miserable mnemosurgeon who dreamed dead mechs’ dying seconds and who couldn’t remember how he’d changed. He could be easily twisted by the strings of old affection, because the frayed threads smoothed out when the memory of time and betrayals and differences all…went away. Prowl would be smugly pleased. Tumbler defaulted to relying on him every time.

Another drink arrived, and Brainstorm knocked it back, optics still off. In the darkness behind them, he added Rewind’s tiny face to the line-up and burnt it into his memory. That line-up haunted them. They were past lovers of his recurring friend, like friends once removed. He hadn’t been their friend directly, but he mourned them for the friend they shared. He remembered them with a pain that had changed, over the long years. It never went away, but it changed.
Like Tumbler, it changed. It reset every time, too.

Brainstorm’s shoulders shook once, the reflex of a flyer testing a loadbearing harness. Could he carry the new weight? Yes, but it wasn’t comfortable. And it hurt. That wasn’t a surprise. It wasn’t the first time he’d hauled this load.

With time, it would become something tolerable.

Tumbler lived in the present. Brainstorm remembered the past. It wasn’t fair that this kept happening to his friend, nor was it fair that Chromedome kept doing this to him. Yet, somehow, he couldn’t hold it against Tumbler. Chromedome took away everything when he reset, reverting to who he’d been. All the promises, the lies, they went away. Tumbler had the innocence of a wiped mind, leaving Brainstorm burdened by the deaths of lovers that weren’t even his.

The bar hushed, and he didn’t even need to online his optics to know who’d walked in. The sick churn in his tanks increased, but Brainstorm groped for the next drink recklessly. He didn’t care. He wouldn’t care. This time, he wouldn’t even ask.

Another face looked at him from his memories, forgotten and gone, and he blindly brought the straw to his intake.

“What’cha got?”

He finished the drink before he even considered replying. “If you ask’n me why I’m gettin’ fendered, I’ll punch you through ther wall.” Hmm, he was slurring a bit. Good.

There was a short silence. Brainstorm brought his optics online and blinked until the room stopped swimming. Chromedome sat opposite of him, nursing a drink along. Stupid mech. Brainstorm swiped it out from his loose grip and sucked it down, snarling his flight engine in angry mutters. He wouldn’t ask, he wouldn’t.

His friend -- just a friend, only a friend, repeatedly and nothing but a friend, over and over again because every death erased away even if the death hadn’t been confirmed, even if the past was still alive and coming back the memory files were still deleted -- watched him drink. “Okay. I won’t ask.”

Brainstorm snorted, blearily satisfied by the quiet answer. He wouldn’t say it this time. He wouldn’t ask, and therefore someone else could get that terrible stare right before Tumbler asked why he’d be anything but fine. It was the worst look.

Pain jolted through Brainstorm just remembering it, but he did that. He remembered. Because they deserved to be remembered, by his friend more than anyone else, but since Tumbler wouldn’t do it, Brainstorm would remember Rewind for him. Rewind, Pivot, Mach, Scattergun.

The pain wouldn’t go away, of course it wouldn’t, but eventually it would become something else. Another part of a different relationship. A constant burden, like an invisible briefcase shackled to Brainstorm’s other wrist, but full of packed away feelings that belonged to a different mech. The Chromedome who had once been but no longer was: knots tied in his personality carefully picked back out until he unraveled, and only Brainstorm had the memories of the latest pattern to disappear. He’d add it to his memories of what the whole had looked like before the parts separated, and the particular Chromedome he’d loved, once.

Thank Primus, thinking about this stuff got complicated but somehow easier when he was totally drunk.

The tabletop was cool against his forehelm, and the booth swayed under him. Brainstorm keened,
very quietly, way in the depths of his vocalizer where it could barely be heard. Eventually, the pain became something a mech could live with. Take it from someone who knew.

He knew all too well.

[* * * * *]

Pharma/Tarn - "Tarn has some other medical problem aside from tcogs that he stubbornly refuses to tell Pharma and it causes a problem"

[* * * * *]

Typically when a Decepticon made a threat involving physical harm to a weaker mech, that mech did anything in his power to evade the consequences. That was perfectly logical. The more fine-tuned that pain was to the particular mech, the more such a consequence was avoided. It made sense. The sadistic leader of the Decepticon Justice Division threatened intensely personal pain upon one paltry Autobot surgeon, and all expectations were that the surgeon would bend over backward to avoid said pain.

He’d made it simple for Pharma: deliver a certain number of T-cogs to him on time every month, or suffer under him in the berth to make up for welching on the deal. The bargain set high terms for an ethical doctor, but not unattainably so for a practical one. Tarn had wanted the Autobot to be able to deliver, after all. He wanted a steady supply of T-cogs to feed his transformation addiction, and Pharma wanted to save his clinic and Listed employee. Everyone benefited.

Failing to deliver had been expected, and Tarn had been prepared to deal with the defiant little jet. He had the confrontation planned out.

Vos would haul the Autobot out if Pharma wouldn’t meet him voluntarily, and Tarn would inflict enough pain on him to make it seem like he would follow through on the berth threat next time. Because Tarn was gracious, and Pharma would be sullenly grateful to be let go this time. He’d make the surgeon thank him for that mercy. Pharma would almost certainly fall over himself to promise there wouldn’t be another missed quota. ‘Or else’ would hover in threat over him as he scurried free.

A rough frag by a rival or enemy was a legitimate disciplinary tool in the Decepticon ranks. It was better than being sentenced to a beating and over with faster than a stay in the brig, although he understood the Autobots considered it worse than many corporal punishments. That was why he’d chosen to use it as a threat against Pharma. He’d expected fear, disgust, and a pompous medic who’d deflate into frantic desperation when faced with an actual rape. If anything, Tarn had expected the surgeon to try making a run for it if he missed quota.

He hadn’t expected Pharma to be as inured to war conditions as a hardened Decepticon soldier.

“What are you waiting for? Get this over with.” Pharma folded his arms and glared at the floor under his feet, refusing to look up at the tank. One foot tapped, jittering his knee, but he kept his thighs spread and panel retracted. Typical of his meticulous nature, he’d clearly prepared for his punishment. His valve had the unnatural glisten of synthetic lubricant smeared liberally around its rim. It left slick blotches on Tarn’s berth.

Tarn stood there in the middle of his own room feeling completely unprepared for this. None of his plans covered this. Struggling, yes; running away, yes; attempts to bribe or threaten, yes. Outright insisting that his side of the bargain be upheld? Uh. Well, scrap. Hadn’t thought about that.

The Autobot had shown up at the ship grimly composed, admitted he couldn’t uphold his side of the
bargain this month, and bluntly stated that he’d reported for the penalty as ordered.

Kaon had been dumbfounded enough to ask, “Why?”

To which Pharma had looked at him like a microbe that’d crawled out of a sterile operation kit. “Because I wouldn’t put it past you Decepticons to take any hesitation to mean you should raze Delphi to the ground. Where is he?” Tarn had rounded the corner right then and walked mask-first into a bristling, aggressively defensive wall of wings and disdain. “You! I’m here. Get your slagging panel open and spike me. I don’t have all night, and I’d rather not think about any part of you touching me any longer than I have to.”

The rest of the D.J.D. had stared in appalled silence as Pharma marched over and almost climbed their leader, panel already open and clearly prepared to be interfaced in front of all and sundry. Tarn, of course, had backpedalled in confusion at first, then shock as Kaon transmitted an infopacket containing a briefing of the three minutes since Pharma had stormed on board.

“Open, fraggit!”

“I, ah.” Dignity had drawn around Tarn like a cloak, but he couldn’t quite manage his usual condescending amusement. Not while Pharma had been prying at his equipment panel in angry determination. “Your enthusiasm is noted, but I think we should retire to a more private location.” He’d brought his arms up to wrap around the jet as much to stop the fingers worming behind his panel as keep Pharma in place. “If you’ll excuse us…” he said to his mechs, who seemed just as baffled as he was.

“Why bother?” the surgeon had complained as Tarn turned to carry him toward his quarters. “They’ve seen worse.”

That was entirely true, but the tank had jostled his passenger to shut him up. “Perhaps I have some molecule of modesty in my body, unlike certain surgeons I can name. Have you thought of that?”

Pharma had gotten his vents working again after being compressed by tank treads and immediately resumed needling his captor. “You, shy? That’s something I never would have thought of, no.”

“Modesty is not the same as shyness.” Curse the jet for taking advantage of Tarn’s lingering surprise.

“Pssht.” One aristocratic hand had waved. “Semantics. You’re taking me back to your quarters to violently rape me because you’re modest, oh yes, I can see it now.”

Even dumping Pharma on the berth hadn’t rattled the jet’s blasted composure. There he sat, thighs open and valve ready, and Tarn was still left in the lurch. “What’s the matter, can’t pressurize under pressure?” And now they were down to immature taunting.

His mind raced behind his bored tone as he said, “I don’t particularly find you attractive. Interfacing an Autobot requires a certain mindset.” That was true in a way, but not what sent him pacing in long, lazy strides back and forth across his quarters. Primus and Adaptus on a hotspot, the mech wasn’t supposed to do this! He was supposed to be more terrified of forced interfacing than a beating, because Pharma wasn’t intimidated by damage to anything but his precious hands, and Tarn needed those hands to keep the T-cogs coming.

Yet here the surgeon was, blowing air out his vents in an exasperated sigh. “What a weak excuse. Serial rapists like you don’t pick their victims because of how attractive they are. They want a power imbalance. Here I am, your victim.” He stretched out on the berth and let his voice fall to a bland tone as his hands curled gently above his helm. “Get on with the ravishing, you sick piece of
pitspawn.” He spread his legs.

Tarn didn’t miss the flicker of fear in blue optics when he turned to face the good doctor, but those optics gave his interface panel a calculating look. Pharma was probably more afraid of how big his spike was, not whom it was attached to. It actually felt somewhat demeaning to be reduced to that. The surgeon had a way of looking at him that separated him out to important components, and right now it seemed that Pharma didn’t consider Tarn himself to be worth acknowledging. He was ready to get down to business, and his business was with Tarn’s spike and that spike only.

With the unfortunate problem of Tarn’s hydraulic systems for his spike being faulty due to his frequent transformation. He suffered from what could be termed ‘premature depressurization’ at best, ‘erectile dysfunction’ at worst. He preferred using his valve for a multitude of reasons, but mostly because any treatment to allow him to use his spike would require him to give up his addiction first.

There wasn’t a chance in the Pit that he was going to let Pharma know any of that.

But the surgeon was already getting suspicious. He could see it in Pharma’s expressive face. The medic was an excellent surgeon. He’d have Tarn diagnosed and a laughingstock any minute now.

Quick! Improvise!

“Hmm. I can see you regret your infraction,” Tarn said, bringing a hand to his chin as if pondering Pharma’s sincerity. “If you’ve learned your lesson, I might be persuaded to let you go with a warning this time.”

Pharma stared at him in disbelief, because there wasn’t a shred of regret anywhere about him. Yeah, Plan A to H for dealing with a broken bargain just didn’t apply in the slightest to this situation. “There is no way I’m letting you put me further into your debt. Take your price,” his legs hitched further apart, “and call it even.” He waited a moment, but Tarn had never been very good at improvising on the fly outside of battle. “Your sarcasm is wasting my time,” the surgeon snapped after a second, deciding he was being teased. “Frag me!”

One optic squinted in a suspicious glare.

Scrap. That was the look of a medic thinking about symptoms. Distract, distract!

“Oh, Pharma. I never said I’d be spiking you,” Tarn purred in a low, seductive tone.

He had to offline his vocalizer to prevent a squeak from following the words out as he processed what he’d just said. That hadn’t come out right. He’d meant -- he hadn’t -- the half-formed thought he’d been trying to articulate was that he intended to call in one of his subordinates to frag Pharma in his place!

Funny how one word emphasized wrong could change a whole sentence.

Pharma’s mouth worked, and his optics went wide. “But…you said I’d be under you. I. You can’t mean -- !”

He couldn’t take his words back without looking indecisive and weak. Fragging Pit. No, no, he could salvage this. He just needed to twist the conversation around until Pharma revealed something he could turn to his advantage.

That relied on Pharma talking, however. The surgeon just stared.

Then he rolled his helm to look up at the ceiling, blank-faced. Two clicks sounded unnaturally loud
in the silence as a valve panel closed and a spike panel opened.

And Tarn really was no good at improvising off the battlefield…

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Peterbilt ad (http://flutterbyesandpollywogs.tumblr.com/post/85635282150/suddenlycomics-thefingerfuckingfemalefury)

[* * * * *]

He wouldn’t have considered it, but she dared ask. None of the other women Spike dated tended to feel welcome among the Autobots, although not because they didn’t open the ranks. It was just that the Autobots had a hard time telling the women apart. They tended to have longer hair, curling at the ends in a soft bounce, and even the hair shaded between light brown and blonde. Spike had a type, and the type looked an awful lot like Carly.

The Autobots had, after the fifth time they’d embarrassed his dates by saying the wrong name, decided that staying distant but friendly was the better route. It made the women uncomfortable, but to be honest, they were uncomfortable anyway. None of them fit in the way Carly had. Spike had friends among the Autobots, and Carly loved technology in a way that transferred easily to sentient mechanical beings irregardless of whether or not Spike was there with her. The other women that hung off Spike’s arm weren’t there for the Autobots or for friends. They were there because their boyfriend brought them.

When he stopped being their boyfriend, they stopped coming. They left, one of a parade of similar-featured women with their hair all pretty and their smiles slowly growing more strained.

Spike wasn’t a very good boyfriend. The women realized it before too long on their own, but the way he dropped everything the moment Carly called certainly clued the Autobots in.

So Optimus Prime escorted Lisa to the park because she asked, but he wasn’t surprised when Spike didn’t show up. A discreet commcall to the Ark a half an hour after the picnic was set up told him what he already knew: Carly had shown up in Ratchet’s medbay to ask about something for one of her college courses. Spike had been sucked into the conversation. Lisa sat in the park, forgotten.

Optimus Prime didn’t want to tell her. He wanted her to give up on her own. He wanted her to be angry or disgusted. He wanted her to grow furious enough to see how she was being used as a placeholder, not a person in her own right. She should dump Spike and grow as a person, away from him.

Instead, by the end of the first hour, her smile was still there, still at the ready. Just in case. The sun was setting, and tears were slowly glittering down her cheeks, but she smiled.

Spike wasn’t a very good boyfriend, but he had a habit of finding women better than he deserved. Lisa waited two hours, smile fading into a trembling line as her lips quivered and those big eyes of hers kept gleaming bright with liquid sorrow. Optimus Prime wished she had gotten angry. It would have been easier than this painful suffering.

When the moon rose, he transformed. There was nothing to say, but actions were a kindness he could offer. He knelt beside the blanket and held his hand down, optics sad. It was dark and getting colder. It was time to go home at last.
Her hands shook where they clenched in the blanket, but denial only went so far. He didn’t mention the soft sobs that shook her shoulders, but a huge metal finger stroked gently down her back as she tossed everything up onto his hand. She looked up at him with the vulnerable eyes of a hurt animal, and he sighed.

“I don’t want to go home,” she said, throat closed but trying to sound normal despite the tears still on her face.

“You don’t have to.” He checked the local movie theatre for times and gravely extended his free hand. “Lisa Atwood, I would honored if you would accompany me on a date. There is a movie I believe we might enjoy together.”

Shock slapped the sadness off her face, and she numbly set a hand on his. It was a tiny point of warmth against his metal. “I…I…” Swallowing hard, she straightened and sniffed mightily to clear her nose of crying. Regal as a queen, she tipped her chin up and gave him a firm nod. “I’d like that, Mr. Prime.”

These humans. They lived a fraction of his life span, but they weathered an entire lifetime in their lives, and they would come out the other end of crushing defeat ready to fight. It was inspiring and quite admirable. Spike had no idea what he was missing tonight, and he wouldn’t get another chance at this young lady’s steel core. Optimus Prime would make sure of that.

His optics smiled for him, and he bowed formally to the woman before him. “Call me Optimus.”

In the end, the picnic did get eaten, if only by one person while watching a movie. And maybe it wasn’t what Lisa had planned by asking the Autobot along, but she didn’t get home until dawn. She told her mother she slept the night with the Autobot leader as her escort, and no, she wouldn’t be speaking with Spike Witwicky ever again. The cad. He’d stood her up.

So she said. Her clothing might have been suspiciously rumpled despite that.

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"Prowl/Constructicons"

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Okay, this wasn't what they'd expected when Prowl summoned them to his office. "I have a job for you, report immediately," didn't typically mean, "I'll be sitting on my desk waiting for you."

They piled through his door in their usual jostling pack, elbowing each other and laughing over some comment Long Haul had made that they forgot the moment the door closed because there Prowl was. He...he was certainly there, alright. Doors outstretched, chest pushed just a bit outward because of the twist of his hips, and those hips. Those hips were perched on the edge of the desk.

Even as they gaped, Prowl uncrossed his legs, one foot flicking out quick and elegant to recross the other direction. His heel rolled down the opposite leg's shin, a brief up and down that did nothing but shift his weight and make those hips rock on the desk.

"You have a job to do," he said, cold and commanding despite the narrow smirk cut into his face like a wound. Amusement bled from it. They could feel the heated air venting from him all the way across the room. Something had him hot and wanting, and they could only hope it was them.

"A job?" Hook said, voice a bit higher than usual.
Prowl ran the back of his middle finger down his thigh without breaking optic contact. "Yes." Down near his knee, the finger stopped to circle.

The Constructicons couldn't stop staring at the little gesture. Why, oh why, was that so suggestive. It made no sense. None.

"I want you," circle circle, "to get on your knees," circle circle, and the finger started its journey back up Prowl's thigh, "and clean the floor of my office."

"You want us to -- " There was a collective shudder and blink as that broke the spell. "What?"

"Do I have to repeat myself?" Prowl uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, hands braced on the desk between his knees.

"...um."

This was not what they were expecting, and yet here they were.

Prowl’s hips rocked the tiniest amount on the desk edge. “Well?"

“Fragging Pit, boss, this is cruel!” one of them said, and yet they all knew that floor was getting cleaned.

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Pt. 22

Title: Candy From Strangers
Warning: Patently false Tru Fax about Cybertron and its inhabitants ahead. The sillier, the better. Not really any stories in this round, so skip if you’re looking for that. Some gore, some hints at sex.
Rating: PG-13
Continuity: G1, IDW
Characters: Anyone from Cybertron
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): A meme where people gave me one word, and I made up a “true fact” based on it.

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Part 22: Tru Fax of Cybertron

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Defenestration

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Cybertron used to have a worldwide kind of Olympics competition event. The Decepticons and Autobots attempted to keep it as a perennially recurring peace treaty thing for a while, it was so important. The sporting events kept getting weirder, however, and things got touchy when competitors stopped representing areas and just flat-out represented their factions. There had always been riots after particularly important games, but the riots turned far more violent when the winners and losers were clearly defined by faction lines. Also, there were rumors that the Decepticon competitors faced execution if they lost.

Everything dissolved during the last of these meetings, possibly because of the war just reaching the point where peace treaties no longer worked. It certainly wasn’t helped by the Autobots attempting to introduce competitive silence (literally, the Quiet Game) and the Decepticons tried to bring in defenestration.

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Square

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Frag, mech, dem angles.

Humans think curves are where it’s at, but not so the Decepticons and Autobots. Angles bring these mechs to the yard, and the sharper, the better. Wings holds a high place on the scale, and flyers covet acute-angled wingtips because of it. Cosmos occupies a space on the other end of the scale because of his obtuse, fat angles and curves. His personality is wonderful, but his frametype is widely seen as unfortunate. Soundwave, on the other hand, is a gorgeous specimen of a mech because of he is made of corners, but he’s still fundamentally flawed because those corners belong to rectangles.
The ideal shape for beauty on Cybertron is a perfect square. Equal length of the sides, right angles, *unif!* There’s a reason the AllSpark is a cube and the source of all life in several Transformer universes. And G1 Optimus altmode was bangin’, everyone knows. Square grill, square windows, and square headlights, all within the square cab. Dat cab, mm-mm. So boxy.

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*Scream*

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Nobody alive has ever heard Starscream scream. Really, truly *scream*. It’s not well know because slagging everybody’s heard him lose his temper on the battlefield before, but it’s a technical difference. He’s shrieked. He’s yelled. He’s shrilled. He hasn’t actually screamed.

At least, not anywhere anyone remembers. He has a reputation for turning on his own, doesn’t he? Strange how everyone knows not to trust him, knows to neutralize him, but yet he’s alive. He’s walked out of situations no one expected him to survive, and haven’t you wondered how he lived when everyone else died? Haven’t you wondered how entire fortresses, whole battalions, the wide expanses of a battlefield lie devastated, but he manages to escape?

Ask how Starscream got his name, and see Skyfire’s optics go glassy and blank with memory. Ask Soundwave why he’s only Third-in-Command, and why he doesn’t challenge for Second. Ask Thundercracker why he, of all mechs, got stuck in the lead trine, and how deep his sonic boom can thunder.

Ask Skywarp how far he can teleport when madness enters Starscream’s optics and the Air Commander opens his mouth.

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*Ice-cube*

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Skyfire doesn’t talk about it, but he has never recharged as peacefully as he did while in statis in the ice. He wasn’t actually asleep, but there was just an immense sense of *rest* that he’s never experienced in real recharge. It’s that busy mind of his. Even in recharge, it doesn’t wind down completely. It’s always active.

The ice shut down all but the lowest tiers of his processor, and for the first time, Skyfire did not think. It was incredible.

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*Blue*

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On Cybertron, the three primary colors aren’t red, blue, and yellow. They’re not even cyan, magenta, and yellow.

It’s a matter of terminology. While color theory remains the same between Earth and Cybertron (well…mostly), Cybertronians would never refer to those colors as ‘primary colors.’ That term is reserved for something else entirely.
Cybertronians regard primary colors as a concept of the self. In the beginning, there was the spark. Then the spark had a shell, and the shell was gray. Only once spark and dead metal have combined do the secondary colors appear, and thus mixing may occur to create the changing colors of a mech’s paintjob.

The primary colors of Cybertron are the black of the void, the gray of lifeless metal, and the brilliant white-blue of a new spark.

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Carapace

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Lobsters don’t age. They grow older and correspondingly larger, but their bodies don’t age as other creatures on Earth. The breakdown doesn’t happen. Theoretically, there are lobsters out there who simply keep getting bigger and bigger, never dying.

It’s actually not theory, but the Decepticons aren’t going to enlighten the humans about Frank. Frag, they don’t even tell the noobie ‘Cons from Cybertron about him. The veterans can tell somebody just found out by the panicked yelling. There’s usually money passed around for the standing bet on reactions before the losers go out to pry Frank’s new toy out of his claws.

First rule of the Decepticon base is, “Enter by the launch tower.”

Second rule is, “If you’re on Frank-feeding duty, don’t be late.”

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Power

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Shrapnel doubles as a TV antenna if you’re stuck on outpost duty with him. He also provides the electricity to power the TV. Just don’t ask where he plugs it in.

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Afraid

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The entire SpecOps division of the Ark is terrified of Carly’s newborn son. It starts out with uncomfortable shifting away from her when she introduces him, but even Jazz comes up with an excuse to leave the room as she gets closer. Mirage’s stiff formality cuts off almost rudely when she gets too close for his comfort.

Carly’s smart; she figures it out. Soon enough, the other Autobots are treated to the sight of the Ark’s most badaft and/or aloof fraggers stampeding down the hall away from a woman with an evil grin and a sleeping baby. All attempts at casually moseying away die by the third ambush. They’re straight-out fleeing by the fifth time she pops up asking for one of them to hold the baby while she gets a bottle ready.

They’ve been at war a long, long time, and they’re arguably the unit that’s got the most lives on their hands. They run because they’re just that afraid they’ll somehow add Daniel to the kill list.
Humans are awed by many aspects of Cybertronian life. They think it so highly-advanced that parts can be replaced when they wear out, that mechs can change altmodes, that spacebridge technology even exists. When they don’t understand something, they chalk it up to something being alien and beyond their comprehension, but somehow better than anything produced by humanity.

Like the road system on Cybertron. The first time a human saw the remains of the highways, it looked like a muddled mess, but that human looked at the Autobots and thought, 'They’re a highly advanced race of sentient mechanical beings. It must be that cars understand roads better than mere humans.'

Nah. Turns out that the government before the war on Cybertron was just as stupidly bureaucratic as any government on Earth. Traffic jams everywhere. Ridiculous tickets for parking despite the lack of No Parking signs. Laws that made no sense whatsoever even by the people who passed them. Ticket quotas changing the speed limits apparently at random.

Better than Earth? Nonsense.

On Cybertron, paramedics double as mechanics. They have to. Imagine responding to a crash call, arriving on the scene, and being unable to tell where the patient ends and the vehicle begins.

Medics have been known to lurk around engineering academies and repair shops to poach workers and students. The hospitals have to do it. Their EMT unit turnover is brutally high. Most mechs don’t think about become an EMT without someone urging them, and paramedics quit at astounding rates on Cybertron. There’s nothing that can prepare a mech for the screaming when he’s forced to make that split second call on which is which — and he chose wrong.

The final frontier! These are the voyages of oh frag no. Except for certain science enthusiasts and weird fetishists, most of Cybertron wavers between uncomfortable and rampantly xenophobic around off-worlders. Shape is everything to Cybertronians, and most of the races they’ve met don’t change. Monoformers at best, organic and foreign at worst. Ew.

It’s why there are no other races ever seen on Cybertron, and why the Galactic Council is so unsympathetic toward the planet. Cybertronians reluctantly turned their attention outward to expand, but their colonies tend to look exactly like the homeworld for a reason. Colonists even get treated different, if they’ve been away for long. They’re just…different.

Different carries a stigma.
Cybertron’s speed limits sucked, like whoa. Everything in the upper levels was highway, and everything in the lower levels was cramped, twisty, cluttered streets. Mechs had to be racers to get access to the tracks. There were no open roads to go full throttle on, and most mechs never tried to open up. The fines for violating the speed limit were bad enough, but then the ticket automatically slapped a label on the offender’s medical record about being a danger to the self and others.

It wasn’t until the war that most mechs found out their top speed wasn’t what was posted beside the road.

It’s something of a game among the Autobots. The goal is to see what will make ‘bots with sirens bleep, either from surprise or…something else. Sirens just weren’t something anyone used on Cybertron. Earth’s altmodes have hilarious extras, as far as the Autobots are concerned, and everyone’s curious how the things work.

First Aid’s sirens go off if he swears. It actually covers up his words. He has an automatic censor system.

Hot Spot can’t accelerate hard without setting off his sirens. That’s right, his automatic systems goes ‘zooom’ for him.

Ratchet wakes up with his sirens on if he’s startled.

Streetwise snores. That is, his sirens cycle in a hilarious Doppler effect with his breathing as he recharges. It is the loudest, most unintentionally obnoxious Earth side effect any of the Autobots have ever seen.

Prowl’s ticklish.

You can fry an egg on an Autobot’s hood after battle even during the winter. They run hot.

During the summer, post-battle, the entire returning convoy’s been known to chase down ice cream trucks to cuddle up to.
Without a sun to base their time structure by, Cybertron in general doesn’t have a cyclical conception of time. There is no first-second-third shift because there is no day. Work shifts and time are set by a planetary clock which continually goes forward in a line of numbers. Telling someone the time can take a while if common shorthand isn’t used.

This flattened version of time made adjusting to Earth interesting, as mechs suddenly discovered their bodies adjusted to the light or lack thereof in unexpected ways. They hadn’t, until they’d come to Earth, known there was such a thing as a morning or night person.

Megatron is such a morning person, it’s unbelievable. Evil should not be that awake at 7 AM. (The Decepticons also discovered that they’re affected by the tides, but that’s another story.)

Sleep

Cybertronians don’t associate ‘sleep’ and ‘death’ in any way. The first time someone talked about putting their pet to sleep, the Autobots were convinced that they’d put their pet into statis so that repairs could be made later.

The Autobots found out eventually.

Yeah, that wasn’t a fun conversation.

Ornate

The mark of age among Cybertronians is how simple their transformation is. The technology just wasn’t as advantage way back when, and the younger generations have more and more complete transformations, little bits and pieces sliding and compacting and mass shifting. Compared to modern models, the older generations look simplistic and often gracelessly clonky.

So the older mechs tend to pick up strange bits of ornamentation to add to themselves. Some of it sticks when they reach the level of really ancient (ex. Alpha Trion’s facial ornaments), but most of the time, they lose the weirdest bits (ex. Kup ain’t got time for that).

The mark of a midlife crisis is picking up something stupendously gaudy. Nobody even blinked when Starscream went straight for a crown and cape.

Medic

The Constructicons have it worse than Ratchet, Hoist, and First Aid due to lack of correct medical exposure, but human medicine gives them all the heebie-jeebies. It’s so confoundedly organic and
unpredictable and squishy and chaotic. It took the Autobot medics a while to get over their reflexive horror when confronted by it, and the Constructicons collectively flinch. It’s just so messy.

Open up a Cybertronian, and the parts are all comfortably normal.

Open up a human and augh why is it squirting goo no stop that.

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Prime

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Optimus Prime sometimes feels like he’s only valued for his position, not for who he really is. He tries to hide it, but the other Autobots eventually find out. It’s kind of sad seeing their leader depressed but trying not to show it.

There wasn’t much the common soldiers could do about it back on Cybertron, but everyone’s in close quarters on Earth. They’ve only got the one base. He pretends to be in good spirits, but the Autobots know. They come up with their own ways to deal with their leader feeling like a leader instead of a person.

The most popular one is piling into his trailer when he’s not looking. Sometimes he pretends not to notice and hauls them around for a while, stifled giggles leaking out of the trailer the whole way. Other times, he has to coax them all out while they insist, no, they’re comfy, he can’t make them, they’re fine in here, it’s okay, they’ll just be living in here from now on.

This is especially effective if the soldiers can talk the officers into playing along. Prowl and Red Alert bring their desks.

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Lagomorph

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The first Autobot to hit a bunny on the road was Mirage.

Everyone expected him to be appalled by the mess, but they didn’t expect the wide-opticked look of apprehension when he showed up in Prowl’s office with the roadkill in hand. Property owners are important people, to noblemechs. He was utterly convinced he’d committed a crime against the USA by killing one of its animals.

He insisted on writing a formal letter of apology to the state. The other Autobots aren’t sure he’s quite gotten the idea of free-roaming, unowned wildlife through his head yet.

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Vacation

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Cybertronians didn’t really do vacations. The cyclical calendar of Earth allows for perennial holidays from work or school, but Cybertron has a straight timeline. The idea of tourism didn’t really catch on, either. The cities kind of all looked similar. Costs differed. The people were sometimes different.
Luxury activities were a thing, but traveling for fun? Not a big thing. Real-time sensory broadcasts brought the world to their fingertips. A shuttle could zip people halfway around Cybertron in a shift.

Earth, however. The Autobots and Decepticons discover vacations on Earth.

Several of the Autobots do tours through the carshow season, buying tickets to scope out the new models. A bunch of the Decepticon flyers follow various migratory flocks, especially the Monarch butterfly migration, because they are absolutely charmed by the dense clouds of tiny flyers. All of the shuttles can be found mid-summer in the sunniest deserts on Earth, sprawled out blissfully in the hot sun with their solar panels deployed and plating fluffed to take in the harmless heat.

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Zombie

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Humans don’t understand how scared Cybertronians are of their horror genre. There are certain things you don’t joke about on Cybertron, and undead frames is one of them. It’s a legitimate fear in the gloomy streets; a real, documented medical problem that sometimes assaults mechs going about their business. There are outbreaks that turn entire sectors into ghost towns, only the ghosts come back and wait for living prey to come into reach. Isolation protocols work to keep the outbreaks contained once they’re caught, but they still happen despite all precautions: parasites, creatures who take advantage of Cybertronians’ mechanical natures to use their dead bodies, even mind control that continues once the spark is gone.

It happens. It’s real and scary, so the horror genre on Cybertron doesn’t include many zombie references.

Then the Decepticons and Autobots arrived on Earth, and it’s a living horror story. Everywhere, humans use machines. Everywhere, bodies that look just like them drive the streets, but they’re not alive. They’re empty bodies.

That was bad enough, but the humans have their horror genre as well, full of pseudo-science theories and just-probable-enough twists on what Cybertron actually has roaming the dead sectors. The zombie category is rich with nightmare-inducing tales.

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Mardi-Gras

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This is the most important holiday after Halloween to the Decepticons. The Autobots, of course, try to spread their cultural appreciation out over the world and not favor any one country’s holidays, but the Decepticons saw the tinsel during Christmas. They do love them some shinies, and thus was their fascination with American holidays born.

The idea of being able to go out and in disguise as anything they wanted for a day and people would play along made Halloween an instant hit. Never have so many aliens descended on K-Marts and Walmarts than during the month of October. The Decepticons really would dress up in ridiculous human-inspired outfits, just because they could. They were allowed to, and the humans would play along.
The shadow of Functionalism is long.

Mardi-Gras is straight out shiny appreciation. Seriously, these humans are throwing handfuls of obviously very shiny things into the crowd, and the Decepticons get 50 kinds of excited over this. Don’t the humans know how valuable that stuff is?? Most of the Decepticons came from the lower classes. Shiny and gaudy were a way of covering poverty, a way of showing wealth, and a comfort rolled all into one.

That one day in New Orleans, the Decepticons will agree to whatever ceasefire terms the Autobots demand, just to celebrate.

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Pansexual

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The first time a Cybertronian heard this term, he incorrectly assumed it meant “attracted to pans.” Well, dishware and kitchen paraphernalia, but yeah — pans. He didn’t look for any deeper meaning than the obvious word-association. Pans made perfect sense to him. Transformers, right? There was an Autobot right there on Earth who transformed into a toaster, after all, and it made no more or less sense than the other labels humans liked to slap on their sexuality.

For a brief, wonderful couple of months, the dirty joke going around both factions on Earth was that sex with a human was just an altmode away.

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Whale

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The Decepticons are weirded out by Frank the giant lobster.

Omega Supreme is enchanted by Durella. It might seem like the Autobots neglect him by leaving him on his lonesome, but no, they’re just leaving him to his fun. He spends most of his time tracking ‘his’ blue whale around or attempting to construct an aquarium to contain her. He really, really wants a whale for a pet.

Optimus Prime is at a loss for how to explain that it’s not a good idea and the humans might object. After all, human celebrities keep strange, exotic animals as pets all the time. Why can’t Omega Supreme keep a whale?

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Onomatopoeia

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Humans and their many languages dumbfounded the Autobots and Decepticons for the longest while because, despite what humans thought, Cybertron’s language didn’t have onomatopoeias. The idea of creating a word was already enough to boggle them -- they didn’t do that, Cybertron prided itself on changing its language as little as possible and therefore was in great denial over the fact that it inevitably did -- but then to make a word whose sole meaning was the sound blew some of their minds.
Thundercracker dropped his Cybertronian name immediately, because it no longer *sounded* right. The meaning was there, but the sound was wrong.

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*Nina Joy*]

*Seahorses*

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The English language is full of puns. The Autobots were not aware of this at first. Then somebody asked about the seahorses, and Beachcomber said, “I don’t see any horses.”

He was very confused when all the humans laughed. They had to explain that they thought he’d told a joke.

The Autobots wouldn’t stop punning for a month after that.

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*Carmen Joy*]

*Regret*

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Regrets are a choice among Cybertronians. They have memory files, and all files can be edited. It’s frowned on but not unusual to simply erase people and events that cause negative feelings. Why be miserable about things that can’t be changed? Why suffer trauma any longer than one must? It’s over. It’s done with. Erase it.

Humans say personal growth isn’t possible without experience, but Cybertronians live so, so much longer than humans. That’s plenty of experience. There’s no harm in weeding out the bad experiences.

Or there might be, but it gets deleted, too.

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*Joy D. Tank*

*Baths*

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Showers, washracks, sprayers, sponges, squeegees, and wipes. A standard wash on Cybertron doesn’t include immersion. Enough liquid to submerge in would be far too expensive, and then there’s the logistics of transporting liquid to a suitably large tub and disposal of the used liquid. Plumbing wasn’t a necessity in Cybertronians buildings.

It honestly didn’t occur to the Autobots to try immersion until the Dinobots made a mud wallow and attempted to bury themselves in it. It’s not that they were so grubby a bath was the only solution -- power sprayers work wonders -- but Wheeljack looked at the optics blinking at him, tails wriggling under the mud, and bubbles blowing up from nostrils under the water, and something clicked in his head. Right. Water. Earth was covered in water.

Meanwhile, the Decepticons had been doing cannonballs off Niagara Falls for years, happily splashing around trying to drown each other.

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The Autobot Special Operations Division isn’t outclassed, but it’s handicapped. Its undercover agents are mostly one-use plants whose covers often get blown to save lives. Compromising between immediate life values versus projected lives saved down the road takes a coldness of spark the Autobots aren’t known for. Rescues and taking out vital Decepticon officers are important, but we, the viewers, know who the Autobot agents are.

That should tell you how deep undercover the Decepticon agents are.

The Autobots who survived the Battle of Autobot City were bewildered when Daniel’s parents started taking him to therapy sessions once a week. The vivid flashbacks to several of his friends and heroes dying in front of him weren’t going away. The Autobots were distressed that therapy was necessary, but they understood and supported him as best they could. Nothing brought home how adjusted they were to war than damage done to an ally. They’d become inured to their own injuries.

Daniel, being young and helpful, solemnly attempted to spread around the help he was getting. The Autobots, somewhat bemused but mostly just touched, listened to his instructions. They even tried to follow through, however awkward it felt at first.

Hugging therapy became a very popular activity in Autobot City.

The human taboo on cannibalism makes no sense to Cybertronians. While it’s not particularly a great topic to talk about in good times, it’s fairly understood that when things get bad, new parts won’t be popping out of nowhere. Resources are finite. Draining a corpse is just a standard practice. Recycling the dead is a time-honored tradition on Cybertron.

Waste not, want not.

The Decepticons actually thought humans were a pretty tough species after they had time to learn some human history. The oceans were very, very big, and humans were extremely small, yet they had figured out how to exploit the vast expanses of water for food, travel, and profit. That impressed the Decepticons.

Kind of scared them, too. Given 10,000 years, this tiny race of organic creatures had conquered the
How long before humans turned their attention to the stars?

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Weather

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Cybertronians do not fear the weather because weather has always been an explainable phenomenon for them. Gods often spring from the idea that things that cannot be explained are controlled by magic. Well, Cybertron has always excelled at explaining nature. Weather is a science, to them, and one of the easiest to explain. There was never mystery about what caused the rain. Cybertron’s gods do not command clouds or make the sun shine.

The Rainmakers belong to a long line of mechs who controlled the weather on Cybertron. It was a duty. A low-paid, low-ranking chore that had to be done. Until the acid rain became powerful enough to be used as a weapon, they were mundane workers among the Decepticons.

They could have been gods on Earth.

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Secret

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The best way to broadcast a secret in the Decepticon base is to not have one. Acting like you don’t have one doesn’t cut it. Something will inevitably give you away, and once one person knows, everyone will find out. If Reflector doesn’t sniff you out, Soundwave will sic his Cassettes on you, Swindle will offer to buy it, Vortex will threaten to extract it, and Starscream will just somehow know it.

The best way to hide a secret in the Decepticon base is to forget you even have one -- and kill anyone who knows differently.

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Nostalgia

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The reason Kup tells stories about the past is that time makes the spark grow fonder. The past seems better than it really was. He’d rather dwell on it than on the present. The present is so horrible.

It always is, in war.

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Maintenance

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It does not mean what the humans think it means.

* It does not mean what the humans think it means. 
But like fun is anyone going to be telling them differently, because Ratchet gives the best lube jobs and Hook’s oil changes are enough reason to put up with his attitude.

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Music

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Cybertron used to judge people hard for what they listened to. Actual court-and-legalities judgment. Think humans get irrational about pop music, rap, and country? Think again. The slag the lower classes had to put up with from their ‘betters’ judging their music was incredible. There used to be bans, censors, and outright raids on illegal music houses. Getting caught playing unapproved music was bad enough, but Primus help people if they downloaded stuff that wasn’t state-sanctioned.

It was the Functionalist political movement. If a mech’s form wasn’t designated as part of something, he couldn’t do it. The government decided who could compose, sing, play, and produce. Anyone else was illegal and could be charged with appropriation of function.

Out of that world of stifled creativity, Jazz chose to name himself after a type of music that would have never come into being on Cybertron, born as it was of the poor, the downtrodden, and those who could improv change on the turn of a dim. That should tell you what he thought of the system he came from.

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Religion

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Humans have this strange tendency to look upon Cybertronian culture with awe and respect. That includes their religion.

Cybertronians have the mind-boggling tendency to look upon Earth’s culture and think, 'We’re not alone!’

Religions hating other religions, persecuting fragments of themselves, controlling governments, oppressing people, sometimes helping them, but overall, religion being a tool. People use it for their own ends. Cybertronians think Earth’s varied gods and religions are kind of whacko, but they sympathize so much with that whackiness. It feels like home.

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Victory

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It’s the worst name for a crashed spaceship in the history of ever. Megatron knows it. The Decepticons all know it. The Autobots definitely know it. It’s like some sort of mean-spirited ongoing joke. It’s a name that exists purely to remind the Decepticons what it failed to live up to.

The thing is, what can they change it to? The Defeat? All the choices for new names are just plain depressing.

So. Everyone kind of avoids talking about it, and the Victory it stays.
Cybertron is never completely dark. There are always stars, and the stars are always visible because there is no sun. The sky is a glittering field of black and white, sometimes blue and reds as space flies by. Go down into the depths, and there is darkness, but Cybertron’s surface is never dark.

All the same, Cybertron is never light, either. There’s no sun, and the stars don’t really provide daylight. Neon lights and headlights pierce the gloom without lifting it. The planet is in perpetual twilight: not quite night, but definitely not day.

Earth orbits a sun. Both sides of the war clearly remember their first sunrise on the new planet because, for the first time in a long time, there was no darkness.

In car safety testing on Earth, there’s something called a ‘crumple zone.’

The Decepticons were morbidly amused by that when they found out. What the humans call a safety test, they call attempted murder. The crumple zone is the kill zone. The deeper the crumple, the better chance of a kill.

The Decepticons immediately acquired all the crash test safety footage for the Autobots’ new altmodes.

Coffee is a suspension in liquid, organic material in water. Organic material can be converted to energy. Therefore, theoretically, coffee can be processed into energon.

At which point in the conversation, Wheeljack politely interrupted and dragged Perceptor away by the scope because even he realized this was a very bad idea.

Humans register spicy as a hot sensation, a burning like fire. For the record, Cybertronians have a higher tolerance for temperature than humans do, and they didn’t quite understand that the connotation for spicy is pretty much centered on the taste. Mouth, tongue, and lips, right? Flavor. But they just assumed it was a tactile thing in general, like most fire-related words in English. Someone can be fiery, feisty, and smokin’ hot. These can be talked about openly with friends.
Spicy? Not so much.

Saying one of his fellow officers was spicy caused every human in the conversation to blush madly, and Prowl hid in his office for a week when he understood what he’d just publicly admitted to doing.

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Scripture

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The Autobots are too polite to bring up religion with humans, because most of the holy Scriptures on Earth seem to rely on a creation story. Perceptor would have a field day explaining the actual creation of the universe if the Autobots weren’t convinced Earth’s religious fanatics were dangerous. Look at the fate of scientists throughout human history. They didn’t want to be the next ones at the stake.

The Decepticons think human scriptures are hilarious reading, but Soundwave’s been known to mess with local humans by twisting their scriptures to the Decepticons’ advantage.

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Ash

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Cybertron reeks of ash. The atmosphere is thin enough that the smoke dissipated, the haze of burning disappeared, the fires are all out -- but the ash remains. Metal itself doesn’t burn, but the impurities in it do. The paint on it does. The plastics and rubbers and energy sources do.

Or they did, anyway. They’re long gone, and all that remains is the ash.

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Vial

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The best bars on Cybertron are ones run by chemists. The place might not have the atmosphere a dockworker’s looking for, but the drinks can’t be beaten. Anyway, most mechs have two bars in their lives: the one they go to for a relaxing drink with friends, all dingy and kind of horrid, but they really only realize how run-down it is when they try to bring a new coworker there. Then there’s the bar they go to when they’re going out for the night. Mechs don’t talk to the bartenders at those bars expecting normal topics. A chemist is just as interesting as anything else.

So the good bars hire chemists, and some chemists take the jobs for the fun of it. The field is as competitive but the work environment completely different. A lot of science-minded ‘bots go into the Academy looking for a career that they discovered they hated. The people-persons and the casual learners bomb out quickly, driven out by isolated labs and peer rivalry, or just the workload of higher education. What’s a mech to do?

No reason an inventive chemist has to stop doing the work he loves just because the workplace sucks. An experienced bartender has at least one year at the Science Academy on his resume, on Cybertron.
Memorabilia

When the Decepticons left Earth after winning Cybertron, they took certain things with them:

TV series. Sets of Twister. Dr. Arkeville.

You know. The essentials.

The Decepticons on Cybertron were suitably impressed by this collection of memorabilia. For as many worlds as the Decepticons had conquered, for as many places as they’d been, rare were the species that fought them off and, in fact, invaded their world more successfully than their own attempt had been. The Decepticons pored over these little bits of memorabilia and treated them like treasure.

Earth quickly forgot the Decepticons as anything more than vague outlines of evil villains.

The Decepticons remembered Earth long after the last human colony died out. Through them, humans lived on through ancient movie references, Boardwalk and Park Place, and Bollywood music. Humanity was an organic species none of them had ever met but all of them could describe.

The Decepticons took Earth with them.

Litter

Early on, Hound rescued a dog. He found the loyalty of dogs to be charming, as well as their tenacity and sounds. Yes, he liked the sound of barking.

Understand that this was before the Autobots really understood much about Earth. It was an innocent mistake on his part. He hadn’t realized that this dog wasn’t so willing to follow him home just because she liked his smell. She also liked how comfy his interior was when he let her sleep inside him while he was in altmode. So he took her home and fed her, and he was happy when she plumped up immediately.

Well, things went as most humans would expect. Twelve healthy puppies and one very embarrassed Hound reported to the medbay for a vet check-up and upholstery sterilization respectively.

Not having the experience of humans with animal reproduction, Ratchet took one look at the dog and her pups -- twelve carbon copies of the mother -- and immediately accused Wheeljack of building a cloning machine.

Twin

There are spark twins. There are frametype twins. They are identical and/or similar in spark or frame,
of course. The second is more common than the first, but both are fairly rare this far along in the war. The war has not been kind to them.

There is a third kind of twin. It’s the twin of long experience, of fighting the same battles and surviving side-by-side, day by day, until you’re not sure who’s in which frame. Until you can feel your twin’s spark no matter how many of the enemy’s cut between you, until your fuel pumps beat at the same rhythm as you fight toward one another again. When one of you reaches for a gun, the other’s already throwing over an ammo magazine; when one of you ducks, the other’s already firing. You fight as one mech, your back always covered, and banter’s unneeded because the words are unnecessary. You don’t even finish each other’s sentences anymore. When your mouth opens, your twin’s speaking your words at the same time, in the same tone of voice, and your lips shape your twin’s smile, identical in every way.

The first two kinds of twins are rare, and becoming rarer every day of the war. The third kind of twin pops up more and more often, now.

[*** ***]

Gang

[*** ***]

Several major cities throughout the world contacted the Autobots for help during the ’80s and ’90s. Common gang signs had started taking on a disturbing trend: Decepticon colors and propaganda were turning up. Strange technology showed up in the hands of the more dangerous punks, but even more benevolent gangs centered on neighborhood improvement and such were receiving Decepticon support.

The Autobots grimly set about blocking that support. They knew whom the Decepticons sympathized with, and they knew how easily a revolution could grow if left unchecked. Megatron had headed a gang once, after all.

[*** ***]

Kiss

[*** ***]

The dramatic dipped kiss wasn’t something the Autobots or Decepticons had every encountered before. It looked very fun! Very passionate, quite romantic, and so over-the-top that of course everyone rushed to try it.

Uh, yeah. The reason nobody had encountered it before was because a lot of mechs on Cybertron had back-mounted altmode kibble. That whole dramatic leaning-back-over-someone’s-arm required a delicate balancing act, or both mechs crashed to the ground. Very passionate, extremely over-the-top, but not really as romantic as they’d been hoping for.

[*** ***]

Riptide

[*** ***]

Seaspray will spend all day playing in a riptide when he finds one. He calls them ‘rollercoasters of
the sea.’ He just paddles in, floats out, and paddles back in.

The other Autobots didn’t get it until the Aerialbots discovered hurricanes. Sometimes it’s fun to pit yourself against nature. It never gets tired or hurt by the struggle, and it’s not actively out to destroy you. What better test of limits is there outside of battle?

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\textit{Fish}

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When the Autobots scoped out the area around Autobot City, they didn’t notice the lake. It was of no real strategic value during battle. It was too shallow to hamper anyone but Soundwave’s Cassetteables, and the river that fed it wouldn’t provide enough hydroelectric energy to power a lightbulb. It didn’t matter during the building and fortifying of the city.

It was there, however, and therefore eventually everybody got around to exploring around it during their off-duty time. Rumor had it that something special happened if a mech stood in the water for ten minutes without moving, too. Nobody would say what. Mechs like Tracks and Sunstreaker scoffed, but everyone got out to the lake at one time or another.

Any human watching would have been baffled by what they saw. The Autobots waded into the water and just stood there. The water stopped rippling after a while. The birds returned. The water spiders resumed skittering about on the water near the shore. Even the most skeptical, jaded, restless Autobot stopped folding his arms and sighing at about five minutes in. Instead, he would stare into the water at his feet.

A human wouldn’t understand. Mechanical aquatic life is not cute and harmless. It is not wriggly and tiny. It fights tooth and maw to kill or be killed, and Cybertronians are familiar with the cautions if one should fall into the domain of such lifeforms: don’t stay still, get out immediately, hide if escape isn’t an option.

The minnows in the lake shallows swarm Autobots if they hold still enough, and teensy fish mouths kiss metal plating as they nibble. Every Autobot had to try it at least once.

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\textit{Ghosts}

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The Decepticons and Autobots of Earth have utmost respect for places believed to be haunted. They know that data cannot be fully deleted once it goes beyond the control of a single system. Memories linger, and temporary backups made on automatic are as effective as a full save -- except they are beyond conscious retrieval.

Ghosts are real, and the dead haunt the living. Nothing but an all-system wipe of the universe will clear them away for good. “You can’t stop the signal,” Mr. Universe says in \textit{Firefly: Serenity}, and Cybertronians understand that all too well.

There are good reasons why so few communication mechs are still functional and/or sane.

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Mirage and Wheeljack don’t have racecar altmodes because they are fast. Other Autobots are faster, and their altmodes are more practical. Mirage and Wheeljack picked their altmodes out of the mistaken assumption that humans shared their love of dance: the tweak of wheels, the graceful veer as they make a turn, the weaving as one’s partners round the track.

It should be noted that Cybertronian dances differ quite a bit from Earth dances. Their racing looks different, too.

Wildrider totally doesn’t get why Mirage and Wheeljack think he’s an uncultured heathen for trying to race them, but then again, Wildrider only knows Earth’s customs.

Earth has no idea -- no idea -- how hard Cybertronians side-eye the various attempts from political, religious, and whatnot groups to define and control erotica. Censorship, from a planet overflowing in advertisements that lovingly pan over car curves, mechanic shops whose garage doors open right up into the street, and oh those strange little humans and their double standards.

Taboos change depending on the culture. Cultures can grow up around any group of people. Thus the taboos of the Autobots in the Ark are different than the Autobots left on Cybertron, and the Decepticons on Earth don’t even know where to start with the weirdness that is Shockwave’s Tower.

Some taboos are easily explained. For instance, everybody knows that touching Ironhide’s guns is forbidden because guns and Ironhide are enough of an explanation for anyone. Go ahead and try to find an explanation for why it’s taboo to talk about Red Alert’s giant teddy bear-print blankie, however. Just try. It’s there, it’s piled in the corner of bridge, but nobody talks about the Security blanket.

It’s taboo to bring up Shockwave’s incredible losing streak to the Autobot femmes’ guerrilla tactics. Considering how many genericons he shot before the troops started shutting up, the reason for this taboo is well known. Less well known is the reason for the ban on mentioning that Elita One’s location is well-known whenever she leads her unit in a daring raid of the Tower’s washracks, yet no one takes advantage of this information. It might have to do with them holding at gunpoint whatever unfortunate Decepticons were in the washracks at the time, forcing them to help in the post-wash buffing. Sometimes there’s a line to be held prisoner.
[*** ***]

Vortex is a sadistic, psychotic caricature of a cartoon villain. He violates every standard there is and goes so far his own faction is terrified of falling into his hands. They don’t even like being in the same room as him. He is barely under control at any given time. He cackles and giggles and kills. His job as torturer and interrogator was really just tacked on to how he is normally. Might as well make us of what they got, went the Decepticons’ reasoning.

Ask Vortex who he’s scared of, and he won’t answer. His visor will flicker if Jazz smiles across the battlefield at him, however.

Vortex is afraid of Jazz. Laughing, smiling, friendly Jazz, whose faction depends on him and whose comrades actively seek his company. That Autobot makes Vortex’s rotors twitch for flight and his hands open in surrender as he backs away, preferring to flee instead of fight.

So you tell me. Who is the monster?

[*** ***]

Candy

[*** ***]

Energon goodies aren’t really the candy of Cybertron. Cybertronians don’t register taste the same way as humans. ‘Sweet’ isn’t a sensation they get.

On the other hand, the rush of pleasure from getting a tiny, special package translates well between human and mech. Goodies give mechs that rush, even if the taste isn’t sweet.

[*** ***]

Pomeranian

[*** ***]

The most popular pets on Cybertron before the war were round balls of metal that floated. It was the shape that mechs like. They were just so...grabbable. They could be held in the palm of a mech’s hand. It was cute the way they’d hum happily when cupped in someone’s hands.

Get them excited enough, and they’d bounce around the ceilings out of reach while embarrassed owners asked for help catching them. Pedestrians were often charmed by the sight of such pets being taken for walks, floating along overhead while their owners held onto the leash like a human child with a balloon. Adult pets were large and dully polished, but the tiny bubbles were the cutest, following along in swarms bobbling around the adults.

Irresponsible owners who didn’t keep their pets on a leash caused too many accidents when flyers hit the poor things midair.

[*** ***]

Supercalifragilfragilisticexpialidocious

[*** ***]

Decepticon scientists were convinced for years that this was a real word with actual scientific
significance, because Perceptor doesn’t sing. He just says the lyrics in a deadpan voice while working. Soundwave’s spies picked him up saying it all the time in his lab on Earth. They couldn’t figure out what he was referring to, but it had to be important.

It had to be. It had so many syllables and he kept on talking about it and arrrgh what the fragging Pit is Supercalifragilfragilisticexpialidocious?!

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Hero

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Heroes are the stuff of legends among the Autobots.

Heroes are the stuff of mockery among the Decepticons.

The Decepticons don’t consider sacrifice of the self to be noble. They consider it stupid. Taking on insurmountable odds is idiocy, not admirable. Standing your ground is suicide, not sacrifice.

Cowards are laughed at, too, but survivors are the ones doing the mockery. Cowardice is at least practical. Say what you will about the Decepticons’ underlying ethical system, but listen. There are no heroes chiming in to defend themselves when the mockery starts.

That’s because they’re all dead.

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Muppets

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At one point or another throughout the war, every mech has lost his voice. Some mechs get creative while it’s gone.

Optimus Prime hones his ability to communicate via body language. The Disappointed Look (TM) really became a thing, then.

Starscream can communicate entire volumes of contempt through his wings. The Decepticons actually prefer his voice. It’s less cutting.

Megatron can speak with his hands. Most of it’s short commands learned in the close confines of the mines, where drilling equipment deafened everybody, but he has a certain poetic flair that takes it beyond mere commands.

Jazz does interpretive dance. He doesn’t even need to have his voice gone to do that, however.

Ratchet holds up premade cue cards. Pray they don’t become scattered during surgery.

The Constructicons interpret for each other, which is less helpful than one might think when Long Haul is complaining through Hook, or Scavenger is trying to explain to Megatron what Scrapper wants to say.

Soundwave has his Cassettes. He’s a priority for vocal repairs, just because of that.

Red Alert and the alarm system. Enough said.
Skywarp uses sock puppets.

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Titan

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Excuse you, don’t you have any manners whatsoever? Don’t talk about the relative sizes of people. It’s rude.

Cybertronian’s are usually taller than the aliens they meet, but they really hate it when they’re on the small side. Nothing bothers them more than looking up at another species. They will go out of their way to avoid systems populated by larger beings.

Yet, oddly, most of the Autobots haven’t figured out how that filters into how they, in turn, treat smaller people. It’s good manners not to talk about relative sizes, but the unspoken assumption is that bigger is better. After all, upgrades always make a mech bigger and bulkier, right? It’s even there in the language of labels, spoken or not: a small mech is a minibot, but a huge mech is a Supreme. It doesn’t get much more obvious than that which one is considered better.

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Smooth

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Swindle is something of a legend on Cybertron. Even the Law Enforcers from back before the war have grudging admiration for him. He can bargain his way out of anything. He’s so smooth charges slick right off him. The Autobots have a saying: “The cuffs can’t close.” Rumor has it that it came from Swindle charming his captors over and over again into letting him off the hook.

The mech has a warning label as a name, and yet he continues to be Cybertron’s best businessmech. Conmeh, quite frequently, and buyers are left cheated more often than not, yet still people keep returning to him. He has everything or can get it for a fee, and nobody can resist him in the end.

He’ll talk Death into lending him a few more years when his life comes due. Not one person doubts he’ll set up shop selling air conditioning units in the Pit when he arrives.

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Syringe

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Humans are afraid of needles, sometimes. It’s something about the pinch of pain, but mostly it’s the psychological factor of seeing a sharp metal tube piercing the skin, raising it up over the metal as it slides under, the feeling of cool, smooth violation while the sharp point seeks the vein. It can be easy, smoothly thrusting into the vein and barely leaking any blood. There’s a trace of red where the skin has opened, and the vein is punctured instead of ripped, so withdrawal is a quick, painless procedure more of the silvery slip of metal pulling out than nerves registering anything. A cotton swap pinched over the wound, and it heals with only a small scar.

Then there are the bad pokes. The skin is too tough or the needle is too dull; flesh tears instead of slices. The needle sinks too deep or probes around under the skin like a grotesque eel searching for
prey. The search can drag on and on, every movement of the needle pulling the hole wider. Veins roll under the skin, disappearing into the flesh, and the needle noses into raw nerves looking for blood, looking for entrance. When it’s finally found, blood can balloon out from an improper piercing, creating ugly, violent bags of bruises under the skin. Inject instead of draw, and whatever’s supposed to go into the vein will run cold and menacing through the bloodstream, chilling the heart and creating its own lump over the needle.

Even if everything goes well, there’s still the fact that the needle is there to take or add something to the bloodstream, and the poor human impaled on the end of it might not be in control of what.

Cybertronians sympathize with the humans who fear needles, but their own fear isn’t of physical fluids pumping in or out. Their fears collect under a single term: mnemosurgery. A mnemosurgeon can inject new thought patterns, change behaviors, add ideas. A really good mnemosurgeon can take away a mind, and the terror would wipe clean away as needles plunge into the brain module.

Oh, yes. Cybertronians understand the fear of needles.

Sometimes, they even remember why.

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Illness

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Cybertronian illnesses are mostly engineered.

They’ve mutated, of course, let out into the population to acquire code the way transmittable viruses in sentient beings always do. The early illnesses of Cybertron were devastating in their time but are mostly harmless by now. It’s only when automatic updates fail or a mech’s antivirus crashes that they become a concern. Most of them still aren’t that bad. Mutations and advancements in technology have neutralized a lot of them. How threatening is a virus that deadlines cable hook-up to the entertainment block? That stuff’s wireless now. And the virus that used to send droves of mechs to the clinics with locked axles now gave people the giggles for days as their axles became ticklish until the virus ran its course.

That doesn’t make engineering the original virus any less of a crime. Cybertronians dislike viruses that target their computers, but it’s an attack when it actually targets their bodies. Computer viruses are really only a mutated piece of code from turning into something capable of infecting a sentient mechanical being. That slag isn’t even remotely funny.

Earth doesn’t make them happy. Human technology is just primitive enough to be underestimated, and some of the squishes consider it entertainment to practice hacking and virus-engineering. Entertainment. Nobody but a murdering sadist considers viruses a viable pastime for amusement’s sake. The Autobots and Decepticons learn the hard way that some humans will attempt to make them sick just for the fun of it. To find out if they can do it, to see how the aliens react, to test their skills against living mechanical minds.

Never have there been such strong antivirus programs created for the sole purpose scanning email attachments.

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Luminous
Carly and Spike got married on a perfectly lovely day full of thunder, lashing wind, a downpour of rain, lighting everywhere, and don’t forget the tornado warning.

It was a small enough ceremony that everyone could make it despite that, although the women arrived with their dresses soaked to the thigh and the men looked strangled by their ties. Central Iowa was used to it, however. Everyone took a turn through the church’s small bathrooms, and they were ready to begin.

Then, fifteen minutes before the ceremony was supposed to begin, the power went out. Someone sighed. Someone else laughed, because what else could you do? Spike looked downright depressed.

Bumblebee patted him on the head. “Don’t worry. We’ve got this.” There were benefits to having a best man who was actually a robot. Bumblebee delicately picked his way down the aisle and tapped on one of the huge windows. Those were the reason Carly had agreed to have her wedding in her hometown, because she and Spike had originally wanted to have the ceremony in the Ark.

Instead, the attending robots had clumped together outside the windows to watch. It wasn’t quite being in the audience, but the original plan had been to have the reception as a picnic outside. So much for plans.

That didn’t mean everything was ruined. It just meant the plans had to change.

Even as the minister returned with the Christmas candelabra lit to a gentle candlelight glow, light flooded through the windows. Headlights, biolights, running board lights, and a lone hurricane lamp Wheeljack had picked up from somewhere. Carly walked down the aisle lit blue and red from the emergency vehicles crowding the windows on one side of the church, and she’d never looked so beautiful.

The Autobots were obscurely pleased by the whole affair, weather and all. Cybertronian ceremonies feature light more often than not, and the wedding felt so much more real when they could share the light with their friends.

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**Gay**

The official politically correct term is ‘homosexual.’ That’s what’s used in polite company, so that’s what the Autobots learned. It took years for Blaster to catch wind of the slang.

By then, Raoul had been dealing with street harassment for years, nodding and laughing off the comments of being, “gay for his car.” Tracks hadn’t thought anything of it. Raoul never seemed offended, and Tracks thought it only fitting his company made the human so happy that everyone commented on their gaiety.

He himself was too dignified to ever mention Raoul’s presence made him equally happy. He assumed the man knew. He would certainly be miserable if they were separated. He was “gay for his human,” as the catcallers might say.

Blaster found out the real meaning of the word. He told Tracks. Stunned Tracks asked Raoul if it were true.
Rauol gave him a perfect look of, “Well, duh.”

For that matter, most of the Autobots gave him that same look.

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Legos

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There aren’t toys on Cybertron, not how Earth knows them. Things like Legos don’t exist.

It may not be possible to describe how excited the Constructicons got when they discovered the building toys of Earth. There were things! That could be built with! That were real, and not diagrams, and weren’t mock-up models! That were explicitly meant to be turned into creative constructs! That could spread as far and wide as imagination allowed! That came with tiny figurines to be played with!

Not only could the Constructicons build entire worlds, but they were actually meant to play god.

Yeah, the reason the Constructicons didn’t appear at first in G1? They were off playing with Legos.

[* * * * *]
Overlord is still scary, how the D.J.D. work, variations on Starscream and Soundwave’s beginnings.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 23
Warning: Spoilers for RiD and MTMTE, probably. Torture, secondhand embarrassment, BDSM.
Rating: R
Continuity: G1, IDW, Kre-O
Characters: Overlord, Fortress Maximus, D.J.D., Megatron, Drift, Rodimus, Starscream, Soundwave.
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors.
Motivation (Prompt): Tumblr mayhem and madness, plus commissions.

[ * * * * ]

"Size doesn’t matter" - Overlord, Fortress Maximus

[ * * * * ]

"Did you really think you could overpower me, Max?" The chuckle was deep, rich with amusement, and devoid of pity. "You are weak. Size means nothing."

Short, sharp gasps jerk out of Fortress Maximus' vents, and he curled in on himself. The way it pushed his face into the floor, it looked like he was bowing to the tiny feet standing before him. He couldn't care. The beating had been brutal enough, but the burning pain of contaminated energon forced into his tank made his body turn on itself. Size didn't matter. Overlord could and had defeated him easily. Again. A handspan tall, and the mech could throw someone Fort Max's size around, pin him down, and make him scream.

Small, absurdly strong arms lifted his face off the floor. "Tsk, tsk. Look at me, Max." Pain made him obey, and his optics blurred as the shrieking feedback from his fuel processing plant unfocused the lenses. Overlord's smile was still easy to pick out of the blur. "One would think you'd learn eventually, but perhaps more training is needed."

An involuntary shudder wracked him. Frame-level horror triggered by those words had his vocalizer skreeking distressed noises through a clenched jaw.

A pink cube was held before his nose. Tiny and pure, it smelled divine and was held by Pitspawn. "I was going to give you this to flush your systems, but..." An artful pause, and the cube smelled absolutely wonderful, like a cure for all the agony. Fort Max discarded the poor remnants of pride and whimpered little needy noises. "Oh, you do want it? From your behavior, I'd have thought you'd defy me to the last."

The tubing in his neck stiffened slowly, lubricant contamination freezing up his joints and fuel lines clogging with the slag this fragger had been force-feeding him. It hurt to move his head, but the
downed mech set his chin on the floor and used it to lever himself forward an inch. The pathetic sounds coming out of his mouth turned pleading, apologetic. He was…sorry. Look at him be sorry. So sorry. Now give him the blasted energon!

His tanks clunked heavy and painful in his midriff, and Fortress Maximus’ begging turned to a keen that would have been a scream if he could have pried his teeth apart. He curled violently, helm slamming into the floor and leaving scrapes as he writhed and kicked.

Overlord sighed, exaggerating his disappointment. “Max, I really expected better of you.” He strolled around the warden’s head to stand in front of his face where Fort Max had turned his head. The Autobot tried to turn away further, but he couldn’t. Fort Max drew in gulping breaths through his teeth. When Overlord bent to look into his optics, it didn’t matter how small he was in comparison. In that moment, he loomed. “Now, I think we can do better than that. Don’t you agree?”

Pained optics locked on the tiny cube held out of his reach. There was just enough energon inside to liquefy the solid mass of poisons burning through him. It wouldn’t wash the contamination away, but it would dilute the worst of it. Fort Max fought not to spasm again and managed a nod. He’d be good. He’d do better.

“Good. Say ‘ahhh’.” The catch being, of course, that Fortress Maximus was in the midst of system lockdown, the impurities sending random shocks of electricity firing across his networks. Overlord pet the warden’s trembling lips with one small hand and smiled benignly. “Open, there’s a dearspark.” Still petting, teensy fingers slipped between his lips and smoothed back and forth along the inner surfaces. The backs of knuckles *tink-tink* ed against teeth, hinting. “I said open.”

The smile turned on him was still wide and charming, but Overlord was at his ugliest when he smiled the widest. Fort Max wanted to snap his teeth, wanted to --

No. Size didn’t matter. He’d learned his lesson for the day, and right now, he couldn’t take any more. The pain had to stop.

His jaw cracked as he forced the stiff joint to move. It hurt, and not just physically. His body ached, but it was his mind that cringed in humiliated pain.

It was either confidence or cockiness that stuck Overlord’s hand into his mouth. Fort Max didn’t want to admit that it was likely the former. He just shut off his optics and prayed this would be over quickly, before he lost his mind and bit down. He didn’t think he’d be able to tolerate what would happen if he did that.

Prayer didn’t work against Overlord. The hand in his mouth found his tongue despite how it drew back, and fingers pinched to pull it forward. The miniature Phase Sixer was terribly strong and impossible to win against. Fort Max squirmed as his tongue was pulled back into place and stroked like a good pet that’d done a trick. The hand ran up and down the center of his tongue, making it curl involuntarily from the pressure and sheer hatred.

Overlord chuckled as he watched Fort Max’s face scrunch up in a disgusted grimace, and he palmed the tip of the mech’s tongue. It tried to evade him, but he took it in hand and squeezed lightly, warning. Fort Max swallowed hard, mouth working around his arm.

“That’s better, yes?” he cooed to the warden. A faint gagging sound came from far back in the mech’s throat, and his smile turned cruel. “That’s what I thought.”

Only once he had Fortress Maximus cringing did he pour out the energon little by little and, slowly, let the far larger mech lap it from his hand.
What might happen: Take One

“It’s an easy choice.”

Tarn’s hand was huge, and it looked even larger than normal as it slid down the helm of his prisoner. Black sucked the light in, dark against gleaming white armor. It was disturbing, how clean that armor was. The D.J.D. had treated their bargaining chip frighteningly well, because in doing so it emphasized just what they could have done. What they could yet do if their bargain wasn’t met. Terror and helpless anger stared out from under the petting hand, well aware of what the stakes were.

“A simple trade. I rather thought you would agree that he deserves more than you gave him.” A pointed look toward the camera, and Tarn’s hand curled under his prisoner’s chine. “Or did that promise to make amends not apply to your scapegoat? You are responsible for this,” black tightened on white, a large hand around a too-vulnerable throat, “and now I’m asking you to make a decision that is quite obvious.”

Rodimus glared at the screen, breathing hard and fists clenched at his sides, while Ultra Magnus stood frozen beside him.

Behind them, Megatron’s silence wanted to be confident but held confusion, a hint of uncertainty. Tarn didn’t look at him. He hadn’t even said a word to his former leader. This was about him, but a traitor’s input was not welcome in bartering for possession of him. The Justice Division had planned this deal out very carefully. One traitor for another, but this one mattered. This one was important. This one might have enough owed him that a crew would turn on their unwanted ex-Decepticon captain.

No, Tarn wasn’t speaking to Megatron. This call was about Rodimus and Drift.

Victory came at a cost to everyone. The winners paid the price and still came out on top. The losers, well, they just paid.

Soundwave’s feet could barely reach the ground, and his shoulders strained from the way his arms were bound. The statis cuffs behind his back wouldn’t have kept him restrained enough, so Starscream had forced his elbows up by a chain from the ceiling. It ran under them and suspended him, putting most of his weight on his shoulders. The rest fell on the tips of his feet.

Anytime he lost his balance or shifted his feet, his weight went against the collar welded around his throat. Wide and thick, it ran from collar faring to his chin, allowing him to turn his head but nothing more. Even that was difficult with how he had to balance some of his weight against the leash attached to collar and ceiling. If he turned his head at the wrong time, the top of the collar pinched off a major fuel line. That made him dizzy and, in turn, meant he lost his balance more easily.

Something that happened more often the longer he was kept in this position. It had hurt to be bound
like this, chains and straps forcing his joints at unnatural angles and holding them there for far too long. Sharp pangs jolted from his shoulders and wrists at any twitch, and he stayed as still as he could, bent and awkwardly balancing on tiptoe. He refused to make any noise.

Three days later, and pain had blossomed to a rich agony that permeated his entire upper body. It was almost a living thing. It curled lovingly around his rasped-raw neck, nosing into the sore groove worn under his chin from the slide of the collar’s edge. It toyed with his shoulders, sharpening its claws in the joints as if it were pulling his nerve system out in long strings. The pain popped loose across his shoulders in sharp bursts like firecrackers, unraveled the back of his neck until he wanted to scream, then stole his voice through the lengthy, slow draw of his nerve endings coming loose from his backstruts and lighting on fire in the process. His hands were pressed together by the cuffs, but the agony licked short pains up his forearms when he flexed them. His fingers stretched and curled, rolling against the cuffs as best they could, and it hurt.

Everything hurt. After three days, his nerve sensors were firing at random, set off by excess signal strength from their neighbors. The pain had started out sharp and focused, but it had bloomed through his body. It was a simple, effective torture.

Soundwave teetered in the center of the room and suffered. He couldn’t relax. He couldn’t recharge. The second he lost focus, he had to stagger to regain his balance. His main fuel line pulsed, scored and bruised by the collar constantly taking his weight every time. He was halfway convinced it would split open any moment now and leave him senseless, bleeding vital fluids until he hung dripping. Alone in this room, forgotten, he could drain out and die here.

He wasn’t surprised that Starscream waited three days to revisit this quiet cell. Time and suspension had done the work of a torturer on his body. Isolation had worn away at his mind. The Seeker didn’t need to do anything but wait, and Soundwave ripened for the picking.

Something he clearly knew. “Comfortable?” Starscream laughed as he entered.

Soundwave knew better than to turn his head at this point. Cruel agony laid down his back in a purring, waiting presence, and he wouldn’t rouse it by a foolish reaction.

It was difficult, however. Starscream strolled around him, turbines clicking on the floor, and Soundwave had to stop from automatically turning to keep him within sight. The communication mech breathed deep, ventilation system straining against the agony-creature’s legs. They wrapped lovingly around him, claws set and ready to rip into him. He stared straight down at the floor and didn’t move. His visor strained to keep Starscream’s feet within sight as much as he could.

Nimble fingers danced over the statis cuffs. For a second, Soundwave dared hope they would be taken off, but no. No, the Seeker was merely checking them. Those fingers went on to pet his hands in a peculiarly claiming gesture that infuriated the bound mech, and he repressed a rough sound to warn the unwanted touches away. A warning would only serve to guide Starscream to where Soundwave least wanted him. He kept his hands as relaxed as possible, refusing to acknowledge the petting.

Starscream didn’t like being ignored. His hands smoothed up Soundwave’s forearms, and the communication mech’s tanks screwed into tense knots because he knew what was coming. Despite himself, he drew subtly into a preemptive flinch.

The agony nipped at him for that, but it sank a deep bite into his shoulders as Starscream gently, ruthlessly pressed his elbows inward. The chain clinked, and Soundwave muted a yell. He could ride pain and let it roll by underneath him, but this was agony. It twisted, turned, and tossed him off. He could endure it, but eventually he would reach his tolerance. Agony was like that. It lingered, it
festered, and it preyed on his confidence.

Fear had infected agony’s clawmarks, grown in the bites. What his body could handle, his mind no longer could. Soundwave swallowed another yell, this one closer to a scream, and trembled from more than pain. Deny it as he might, he was afraid.

Like a beast, Starscream could smell his fear. The Seeker gave the chain winch a turn, and Soundwave’s legs went stiff as he rose that much further into the air. His feet barely scraped the ground now, and his visor went incandescent with pain and panic from the creaking groan of shoulder joints taking the extra weight, the collar pressing the main fuel lines of his throat nearly shut.

“That’s better, don’t you think?” Starscream cooed, returning to press and prod at his prisoner’s elbows again. Soundwave swayed, taken completely off his feet by the lightest push, and dignity wasn’t enough to keep him from pawing for the ground desperately as Starscream played with him.

Which he did, slowly spinning the captive mech like a top as he pushed him here and there. The muffled sounds of pain were leaking out, and the more he played, the louder Soundwave’s involuntary little noises became. The kicking, paddling feet stopped and pointed, but keeping his legs stiff in hopes of reaching the floor was worse. The tips of his feet brushed over the ground in passing like a tease of what he couldn’t touch.

By the time Starscream brought him to a stand-still, the trembling had turned into an all-over quiver of pain. Agony had ripped his nerve system to shreds. The weak, uncoordinated kicking had started again, and Starscream couldn’t tell if the prisoner was trying to kick him or just couldn’t deal with the fire burning his nerve sensors to crisps. The tiny sound of relief Soundwave made when allowed to regain his balance turned Starscream’s satisfaction molten and heady. It pooled in his gut.

“So proud, Soundwave. You know how easily this could be stopped,” the Seeker said in a disturbingly intimate way, leaning in to whisper against the side of Soundwave’s helm. Still shaking, Soundwave glared at the floor. He wouldn’t turn his head against the collar and inflict that pain on himself. “Is refusing to surrender worth this?” He gave a tweak of the chains, and a whimper came from somewhere under that stubbornly offlined vocalizer. “I know you, Soundwave. You look out for your own interests first. You’ll support the winner to ensure your own place at his side.”

The communication mech kept glaring at the floor. Starscream had won, but there were many kinds of victory. Soundwave wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of triumphing as planned. He would hold out from pure spite.

Starscream straightened up and looked down at the back of his helm thoughtfully. “Perhaps I’ve just not given you sufficient motivation to believe you are truly at risk,” he said at last. “You might still believe you can get out of here with a compromise instead of surrender. You still think you carry enough influence that you have leverage.”

A sharkicon’s grin split Starscream’s face. “You poor, delusional fool. Let me show you where your place is right now. Mayhaps you’ll rethink your bargaining stance.”

Starscream dropped and delivered the blow with brutal precision and force, fist flashing up in an uppercut --

-- that bypassed Soundwave’s wide visor and punched into the glass of his deck.

This time, Soundwave screamed.

This time, Starscream wasn’t playing. Paint peeled as he jammed his forearm in after his fist, scraping
through the broken glass while Soundwave futilely struggled, kicking and wriggling. His struggles didn’t stop the Seeker. The Cassetticons weren’t here, but they weren’t what he was after. His hand groped, finding and following one of the cassette heads up inside that empty chest.

Empty of Cassetticons, but not completely empty. There, in the back, behind the wide docks for the Cassettes, were the thin archive reels for hard storage.

Pressed up against Soundwave, nearly face to face, Starscream smiled. His arm drew back slightly before punching forward, yet deeper, and Soundwave’s outraged, angered, frightened snarls turned into a thin, high shriek. That red visor was wide in horror touched by true fear, and Starscream chuckled as he drew his hand out.

Soundwave’s shriek turned into gurgled, garbled binary. Headless of the pain and light-head from cut-off fuel lines, he craned his head against the collar trying to see. The slippery, stretching sensation of unspooling tape cut into the part of him that cared more about survival than loyalty or pride, and his vocalizer crackled in a shout. “Stop. Stop!”

He wished he couldn’t see when Starscream obliged his prisoner’s limited mobility by bringing a handful of tape up and out into view. “I wonder how much priceless data I’m holding right this moment,” the Seeker mused, studying the glistening loops wound around his knuckles. “Your archived memories of whatever Pit you crawled from? Enough blackmail to topple an empire?” He looked at Soundwave and smiled sweetly. “And this is how much I care.”

His fist closed tighter, and he gave a solid yank. Soundwave could feel how the tape sawed against the broken glass, and he thrashed again.

“Enough!” More than enough. His dock heads were spinning, frantically trying to reel the tape in, but this was a fight he couldn’t win. Soundwave went limp and panted, agony fighting for control of his voice. He managed to keep his tone level. “Starscream: desist.”

Starscream sneered, voice cold. “Do not presume to give me orders.” Panic chilled his spark, but before Soundwave could rephrase himself, another yank snapped a score of the tape. An uncounted number of layers sliced apart over broken glass.

The shrill, mechanical protest came again, and Soundwave froze, visor staring down at the mess of tangled tape discarded to the floor. A few, pitifully thin pieces twisted up into his chest, still attached to their reels. He could…he could fix this. The knots could be unpicked and smoothed out. Most of the slices were clean. He could splice them back together. The snapped tape would have stretch damage and might be irreparable, but he could still regain most of the data recorded onto the rest.

A single finger turned his helm to the side, making him look up at his captor. Starscream gave him an arch, expectant look, and Soundwave shuddered as he made the choice that wasn’t a choice. This time, he didn’t even try to keep the pain and defeat from his voice.

“Soundwave: surrenders.”

One optic squinted. “Hmm.” A turbine whined as it turned, and Soundwave strained to see flames from the corner of his visor.

No! “Soundwave: will serve!”

The turbine cooled as fast as it’d heated, but Soundwave couldn’t see from this angle if the threat had been followed through on. Had his precious tape been reduced to crinkled, melted ruin or not? He didn’t know, and he didn’t dare fight Starscream’s hold in order to look. Obedience was the only
Self-satisfied arrogance settled around the Seeker’s shoulders like a cloak, and he smirked down at his now-cooperative prisoner. “I should give you time to think about your position. No need to be hasty, after all.” He stepped back, and Soundwave obediently kept his visor on him. “Take some time to really decide what you want to do, Soundwave. I’ll be back.”

With that, he strode from the cell, leaving Soundwave to look down upon the price that the losers paid.

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Alternative punishments

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It was something of a point of pride for the Decepticon Justice Division that each of them had their specialties, and they used them all to great effect. For instance, the prior Vos had his hooks and drills, obviously put to excellent use during the public execution broadcasts, but he also had quite the way with words. For a while, he did the introductions and the reading of the List for the opening of each broadcast. He had a way of turning a phrase that struck to the spark of the matter.

That incarnation of Vos might be gone, but his work lived on. The D.J.D. relished the opportunity to break out his stash of special works. It required a very peculiar kind of crime to merit that, however, something in obvious need of punishment to discourage repetition among the ranks but without treasonous intent that would make it an actual severe crime necessitating execution. These were Decepticons who weren’t traitors but deserved to be punished.

Sometimes the D.J.D. was called on to administer that punishment, to really bring the point home. How narrowly had execution been dodged? So narrowly that the Empire’s most fearsome executioners were brought in to punish the criminal.

The Justice Division found these punishments useful. They felt that the faction as a whole learned an important lesson in loyalty whenever this kind of broadcast went out. They intended today’s audience to take as much away from the punishment as Turmoil did.

A commander whose subordinate went and switched sides couldn’t be allowed off the hook. ‘Drift,’ as he called himself now, would be dealt with in due time. In the meantime, Turmoil’s discipline would serve to demonstrate to the rest of the Decepticons why policing their fellow Decepticons and dealing swiftly with traitors on their own was strongly encouraged. One wouldn’t want to fail and be called on by the D.J.D., hmm?

It wasn’t a subtle threat, but it was an effective one. Turmoil shifted sullenly in his chair, hating that he was to be the example and refusing to show anxiety over his unknown punishment. He grunted, “Get on with it.”

“We will, we will,” Kaon hummed as he checked the camera equipment. Broadcasts were tricky things to set up with no buffer time, and he wanted everything to run smoothly. “We’re live in two, Tarn.”

His boss nodded and continued paging through the datapad. This was cutting it close, but Turmoil had been put on the List Addendum at the last minute. He hadn’t had much time to think about the proper punishment. “This one?”
Helex read the first paragraph and laughed. “Yeah. That one works.”

“Good. Then we’ll start with it and judge whether more should be added on as we go.” Turmoil eyed them warily, contemptuous but slightly unnerved by events. He had no idea what was going to happen here, but the D.J.D.’s reputation was enough to make him wonder if he’d survive.

Tarn downloaded Vos’ masterpiece to a reader that would present the words line by line instead of by the paragraph. They’d found that it made the experience much more painful that way. Then he paced toward the lone chair set up in the center of the room and presented Turmoil the reader with a flourish.

“Your sentence, Commander Turmoil,” his rich voice turned the title into a sneer, “is to read this in its entirety. If you stop, you will be beaten until you continue.” The current incarnation of Vos unrolled a frighteningly long sheaf of whips along the side wall. Turmoil refused to flinch. “Every hesitation and delay will be tallied toward further extension of your sentence. I will refrain from repeating how you have earned that sentence.” Since Turmoil’s sentencing had already been filmed and was broadcasting as the introduction right this minute. “Do you acknowledge your guilt and understand your sentence?”

Not that he had a choice, since the trial had passed. Turmoil had been lucky to escape with his rank intact.

The massive commander glared at the equally massive executioner and grated out, “Yes.”

“Very well. Then you may begin momentarily.” Tarn turned and gazed into the camera as Kaon counted down on his fingers. 5…4…3…2…1…live! “Loyal Decepticons, greetings.”

While Tarn went through a short spiel about loyalty and consequences, Turmoil clicked the reader on. He broke from glaring at the tank’s back in order to read the first line he’d be speaking. He suspected this would be some kind of warped Decepticon Story Time. If he had to tell a fable about a captain losing control of his vessel due to lax control, he might just throw this slagging reader at the camera.

Tarn stepped aside with perfect timing, and the camera caught the prisoner’s remaining optic popping wide. A single, choked sound of shock got out.

“Begin,” Tarn ordered.

Turmoil’s head whipped up to stare at him in disbelief. Off to the side, Tesarus gleefully displayed a hand-sized timer and clicked it, counting the delay. Vos selected his favorite of the whips. They weren’t joking. They weren’t even remotely joking. They were the D.J.D., and they used everything they were and had to punish traitors to the Cause. Some punishments were simply more unique than others, and debatably more painful.

Looking down at the reader, Turmoil sucked in a deep breath and tried to begin. “’Releasing his codpiece, Neutron looked down upon the defeated Secondarious Prime around his -- “ He swallowed. “’His mighty’ -- this is ridiculous,” he burst out, and Vos snapped the whip across the back of his neck. A wince, and the commander hunkered down over the reader, trying to fast forward and finding that the reader would only let him push the Advance button so much before stopping. “’He plunged his silvery length into the Prime’s -- the Prime’s hot, tight, dr--dripping -- ’” Another wince, this one purely from mental pain as his mind squirmed at the trite, badly written but far too detailed image that he was being forced to describe. In front of witnesses. On a live broadcast to the entire Decepticon faction.
He cast a desperate look at the camera. Did he really have to do this?!  

Vos cracked the whip again. Tesarus smirked and let the seconds click by on his timer until Turmoil choked out another few words of the universe’s most transparently disguised Megatron/Optimus Prime frag scene.  

“Ten shanix he begs for death in two minutes,” Helex whispered to Tarn.  

His leader rumbled amusement. “I have this ready in case he doesn’t.” He held up the next story. The former Vos had true talent at this kind of thing.  

Turmoil might just die of humiliation on camera, no matter what his sentence said.  

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**Soundwave/Starscream Kre-O - Commission for Baiku**  

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Bitty legs hustled. There was no getting around the fact that running left them scurrying. The shorter the legs, the faster they scampered.  

Dignity was a lost cause. Rumble and Frenzy scurried at the smallest scurry of all, and no wonder. Everyone could hear Starscream yelling for their heads.  

“Yeah, you better run! When I find you, I will pop your torso off your legs and put your twin’s legs on top. See how much you can get into joined up like a mutant toy block!”  

Soundwave looked down at his own legs, which were the size of his Cassettes. There was no hustling going on here. He was in absolutely no hurry to deal with whatever mischief had been managed. Unfortunately, the pattering sound of tiny feet rushed his way, and he knew he was in for it.  

Twin yelps of “Heeeeeeeeeeeeelp!” came right before Rumble and Frenzy skittered behind the shelter of his legs. Soundwave sighed. Not even a pretense of dignity between the two of them.  

At their heels rampaged the Air Commander, arms upraised and somehow managing to storm despite his own stubby legs. “Soundwave! I demand you turn those miscreants over to me immediately! Right this minute! Now! Pronto!”  

Four exclamation marks in a row. Dramatic, much? Soundwave tilted his head in inquiry. What exactly had the Cassettes done to earn such ire today?  

Long experience interpreted his silence as a question, and Starscream bent back to shake his hands at the sky. “They defiled my privacy! They invaded my space! They have voided the sanctity of my personal property!”  

More exclamation marks. Ooo, Soundwave might actually have to take him seriously this time.  

“We took his bowling ball,” Frenzy whispered from behind Soundwave.  

“Hid it in Megatron’s room,” Rumble added.  

Ah. Well, then. Nevermind. False alarm on the seriousness of the situation.
By now, of course, Starscream was pacing back and forth, too into his ranting to notice that the Cassettes had A. admitted to their crime, and B. confessed what they’d done with his stuff. Instead, he was waving his hands in the air as he stomped around yelling. He was well and truly off in diva land. Decepticons were gathering to watch the show.

Soundwave gave the slightest shake of his head at the Cassettes. Shame on them. It’d been such a quiet day, too. They sniggered, unrepentant.

“Decepticons! I have a plan!”

“Those are words to give me nightmares,” Starscream muttered, distracted from his own fit by Megatron’s announcement. Everybody turned to look.

At the stolen bowling ball being waved above the tiny tyrant’s head like it was some sort of prize. “We will take over the local bowling alley and develop a weapon to launch the pins at the Autobots, destroying them once and for all!”

“Yeah!” the crowd cheered.

Then silence fell.

“…wait, what?”

A high-pitched growl startled the nearest Kre-Os, and Soundwave sighed again as Starscream took out his frustration in chasing Rumble and Frenzy around him. The Cassettes shrieked in excitement and kept just ahead of the angry Air Commander. Soundwave silently saluted his commander’s bowling alley plan butsettled in for the show. His Cassettes were having fun, and it wasn’t often he was given a front row seat. The view was incredible.

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Soundwave/Starscream - G1 ‘How they met’- Commission for Baiku

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Occasionally, that brief stint of time between quitting science and entering the War Academy came back to haunt Starscream. The grants from he and Skyfire’s work dried up quick, and he’d raised money for the entry tuition any way that he could.

Yes, it sounded as bad as it was. Although it’d been easy enough work for someone like him, who fit a niche not many of his ilk did. Something about being pretty, demanding, and firmly straddling the line between dominant and submissive meant that a certain kind of clientele already lined up to buy his services. Throw in a masochistic streak a mile wide, and the line became an eager crowd. He could afford to choose his clients. He picked them from his breathlessly waiting fans, and they adored him for letting them make the cut.

Some of the customers into humiliation got their thrills from his rejection of them. He was particularly good at that kink.

It wasn’t exactly the sort of job one bragged about in polite society, so Starscream had done his best to shed his past going into the War Academy. The reputation stuck, however. Sometimes he got a call from Purring Motors reminding him that although he didn’t want to remember his past, they remembered him. They weren’t afraid to remind others, either.

Those were the nights he discreetly ducked out the back gates of the War Academy. A mech should
never cut profitable ties, especially ones that might retaliate with blackmail. Besides, spending money was nothing to sneer at.

He strode in like he owned the place. “Who’s this ‘difficult client’ and why should I care?”

The flashy grounder in reception knew him well. The attitude just got a sigh. Nobody could tell how much of Starscream’s attitude was stage personae and how much was real person, and nobody at Purring Motor was about to interrupt someone’s act. Riftrider tossed the Seeker a polishing cloth to buff his plating back to a gleam after the flight. “Newbie. Real interested in bondage scenes, but his reputation got to us before his credits did.” He gave Starscream a serious look. Stow the attitude for a moment. “Telepath looking for practice subjects, the Master figures, or maybe he’s just into soaking in the pain secondhand. Sadist or masochist or observer. Frag if we know, and none of us are willing to risk it.”

Leaving them no choice but to call in the professional mindfrag. Starscream had tied tough customers into knots of intellectual interest by their interface arrays, but never a telepath. That was new.

The Seeker tilted his head to the side and smiled slowly, intrigued already. “He ask for anything in specific?”

Riftrider spun a datapad around on the desk and listed, “Cuffs, collar, gag, spreader bar, and chains for suspension as needed. Node clamps, shockers, and a slicer.” Two painful tools, and one that would genuinely leave marks as well as hurt like the Pit. No wonder the offer had gone straight to Starscream. This client promised to be painful and risky, plus the fact that there would be no way to hide what happened tomorrow.

The price of wearing whiplashes to class tomorrow had been met, or the Master wouldn’t have called him in. Starscream was top shelf product. He wasn’t taken down for handling unless the bidding was serious.

“He knows what he wants?” he asked almost idly.

“Ha! I took the call.” The receptionist had an audio for this sort of stuff. “It’s more like he’s looking for what he likes and is just throwing everything at the problem in hopes he’ll find it.”

“Interesting.” Starscream turned his focus inward, asking himself if he could take it. The low, eager part of him that craved attention immediately agreed. It took smug satisfaction in knowing everyone would be watching him tomorrow, envying whoever had left his wings criss-crossed. The thrumming part of him that craved pain uncoiled and snarled for it. It’d been too long since he’d had a good beating to heat his plating, bring his sensor network fully online, and make him feel alive.

His practical side took a quick look at his finances and passed final approval. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to bolster his savings. He was making a tidy profit tweaking other Academy cadets’ weaponry, but this looked to be a good chunk of money for a single night of effort.

Telepathy was the wild card. That, and sounding out a newbie to painful desires and needs. If the mech barely knew what he wanted, it might take them half the session to figure out what would get his engine running hot and fast.

Starscream prided himself in his ability to guide his customers, however.

“Safeword’s a triple ignition.” If he lit his turbines three times, the Master of the establishment would send the bouncers to break down the door if they had to. A flyer’s subroutines were far enough into subconscious that he didn’t think a telepath could access it without him knowing.
“You’ll take the client?”

Starscream smirked. “You doubted?” Oh, please. Like he would have come all this way to turn back now?

Still smirking, he stopped to get geared up before making his lazy way to the appropriate room. Most of the time he’d fling the door open and make an entrance, but the effort would be wasted on a telepath. Instead, he slipped through the door and turned to close it quietly behind himself. Only once it was closed did he pose against the door jamb for maximum display of his, ahem, ‘assets.’

Displaying himself also allowed him a good look at the one he was displaying for.

The client was a boxy blue carrier mech. Somehow, he hadn’t expected that. It hardly mattered, but he noted the oddity. The Seeker gave him a frankly lascivious up-and-down before deciding boxy and blue met his approval. He let his approval fill his thoughts as he stepped away from the door and to the wall. One of his better talents was the ability to immerse himself in the present. Even if what he was didn’t bring his clients running, the fact that he dove sparkdeep into every session would have them throwing money at him. He’d forgotten whom he was outside of this room and become this customer’s Starscream, no one but his Starscream, however he was wanted.

He raised his hands and braced them against the wall at a convenient height for tying. ‘Well? Get on with it,’ he thought as loud as he could. He wanted his surface thoughts to be picked up. Rather than trying to hide anything, he intended to project. The client probably hadn’t been expecting things to go this way. Lurking in the shadowed corner was either shame or an attempt to intimidate. Neither had any hold on someone as shameless and jaded as Starscream. His loud thoughts on what the customer should get on with stabbed into the shadows, and a rattle of plating betrayed a startled jump. He experimented with a few different scenarios, noting the one that drew the client out to stride forward.

The mech had to touch his arms and wrists to loop the cable around his wrists. Starscream let his thoughts delve into filthy ideas of just what they could do from here. He could actually feel heat flush across the circuitry under navy armor.

Starscream fancied he could feel a tingling presence picking at his thoughts, too. He tossed his helm back and smiled. ‘As much as I don’t mind you spending the extra credits by wasting time on the preliminaries, I’m getting bored. First level safeword’s a single snap of my fingers.’ He imagined the sharp sound and how he expected the client to back off. ‘Second level’s a double snap. That means stop. You don’t stop, you’re in trouble.’ Because he’d ignite his turbines, but he wouldn’t tell a client that. ‘Understood, or do I need to start talking out loud to preserve your little pretense of not combing through my head?’

The cable pulled extra snug around his wrist. “Understood,” a toneless voice said at the same time a buzzing, ‘Understood,’ echoed through his head. “Orders: my turn.”

The Seeker rolled his head back against the collar and chuckled. He had a pretty good idea of what turned this client’s fans. ‘You sure you want to be the one giving orders?’

Soundwave looked at the flyer bound helpless to the wall, and his mind filled with orders Starscream could give him. The difference between being in charge of a weaker person he had power over, versus having all the power yet being under someone’s command.

His fans quickened.
'That's what I thought.'

This wasn’t what Soundwave had expected at all. His hands shook as he picked up the slicer.

'Right wing first, and make it hard.'

His arm fell. Paint burnt. Metal sheared.

'Is that the best you can do? Harder!'

It wasn’t what he’d expected at all. It was better.

[* * * * *]

Soundwave/Starscream - IDW ‘How they met’ - Commission for Baiku

[* * * * *]

Fast.

Soundwave had adjusted to society more, by now. He didn’t automatically lose his focus and center when outside thoughts flickered through him, but this quick torrent took him off guard. He almost staggered from the unexpected burst.

It was entirely out of place. The party was full of the languid ocean of rich and powerful, moving in casual motions over hidden intentions. He was adept at monitoring those. Eddies and whirlpools of power shifted throughout the rooms as people met, parted, exchanged information, and revealed too much. His sensitive audios caught much that those whispering didn’t think he could. His mind picked far more out of the scheming.

This, however, he couldn’t catch. He could barely stay standing through it.

He’d been a politician’s aide for too long to react. He disguised his loss of balance by taking two steps out of the way of a passing VIP as if he’d intended that all along. Only after making a final notation on the senator’s schedule and nodding respectfully to a benefactor (notation: also contributing to rival senator, thinking of cutting donations to Senator Ratbat, must investigate further) did Soundwave turn to look around the room. Nothing stood out.

Cautious, he extended his mind outward to search for the source.

Another river of thoughts streamed through him, fast and too disorienting for him to attempt to fish something out to decode. He locked his knees and did his best not to sway. The rush bowled him over, mentally, and washed through his mind in a blast like a cold water pipe bursting deep in the workings of his head. He sputtered. He gasped. He was drowning.

It was oddly exciting.

On the outside, he concentrated on updating his notes. It was a front. He couldn’t read the notes he’d already made on his datapad.

Fast. So very fast. Alarmingly quick, reversing course apparently at random and weaving into patterns he couldn’t follow. He tried, tracing the weave and digging at the quicksilver, but there were no handholds. This mind was a slippery, glittering waterfall of water flowing over ice. There was a peculiar beauty to grasping at what he couldn’t touch, and Soundwave grew more enamored the longer he failed to follow it to the source.
He glanced up, scanning the crowd visually since he didn’t dare immerse himself further. Nothing stood out, still. It was the usual gathering of those who gained invitations to such events. If half the city couldn’t I.D. a mech on sight and that mech couldn’t buy half that same city, then he probably wasn’t invited.

Wait. Now, that was different. Who exactly was that flyer in the corner, assembling a court? He wasn’t in Soundwave’s files, which were extensive yet somehow included no information on him. Red and blue, sleek and charming, with a smile that could stun and a body that had gathered admirers. The small eddy of power around him had become a whirlpool in the time Soundwave had spent looking for other things.

Other things which might be over in that corner. Soundwave was tempted to probe at the flyer’s mind, but he couldn’t afford to completely lose his focus if his hunch was right.

His senator was idly drifting into the social currents that would eventually take him into that whirlpool. Soundwave narrowed his visor and set out to steer Senator Ratbat into another current. When he encountered that flyer, it would not be accompanied by the senator. He didn’t intend to be occupied by playing aide, not with the flicker of thoughts zipping by at dazzling speeds. He wanted to grasp those thoughts, hold onto them, slow them down and conquer their confounding pattern.

Things were moving too fast for business.

[* * * * *]

_Soundwave/Starscream - Oops - Commission for Baiku_

[* * * * *]

“Boss, we can’t do this anymore,” Rumble said flatly as he came through the door.

“It ain’t right,” Frenzy muttered from right behind him.

Soundwave gave them both an inquiring look. “Reason for statements?” He assumed there must be a reason. The twins had never had a problem spying for him before this.

They exchanged a glance and shrugged. “You’ll see.”

He caught them as they transformed and jumped for his chest, and he settled back in his chair as the playback began.

Iron control kept his ventilation system from sighing. Ah, yes. This was the best one yet. He would have to ask the Cassettes how they’d gotten such a good angle on the washracks, because the Air Commander was a glistening, solitary figure in their combined camera feeds. Wide wings fanned back into the solvent, shining and dripping. Starscream’s hand moved the sponge in slow, sensual circles across their broad surfaces. If Soundwave didn’t already know the mech moved like a seduction 90% of the time, he’d have thought Starscream was putting on a performance. Those hands moved off the wings, spilling suds and translucent suds down his torso as the Air Commander meticulously washed himself.

Down the front of his body, turning golden glass to liquid sunlight. It gleamed a warm invitation to touch, but the only one smoothing hands over it was Starscream himself. Those lucky hands moved onto the powerful thighs, and Soundwave throttled down his fans as fine fingers teased down the inside of sleek thighs. Powerful but not bulky, something that could sum up Starscream’s entire body.
Soundwave fought the urge to lean forward in his chair. He wanted to get closer to the show, even though the show was recorded and played back on his HUD. He couldn’t get any closer.

Starscream turned and bent, on hand wiping the sponge on his foot while the other one swept upward, fingers stark against the back of a thigh. When Starscream straightened, his fingers dragged up his body. It was a tease. Soundwave had to open his vents as his internal temperature climbed.

Then coy optics looked over one wing to pin the spying mechs where they hid. “You know, the rule isn’t ‘look, don’t touch.’ If you keep spying on me like this, I’m going to change the rule just for you: ‘If you look, you must touch.’”

Soundwave’s visor went wide. Well, then.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 24

Chapter Summary

Spanking, far too much intimate information about everyone, the Constructicons are unhelpful, Grimlock’s kinky adventures, and extreme BDSM.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 24
Warning: Is “all of them” an option? There’s a bunch of little ficlets in this one, and they’re all over the place. Spanking, a whole list of TMI questions, pain and torture.
Rating: R
Continuity: G1, IDW
Characters: All of them.
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): So many Tumblr memes. SO MANY.

[* * * * *]

Spanking challenge

[* * * * *]

Swindle propped his foot against the exposed piping in the wall and hauled Vortex over his knee by one rotor blade, snarling at the helicopter’s startled blurt of static. “You want to mess with my deals, then you pay the price! One,” his free hand smacked down hard enough to dent, and the other Combaticons graduating from staring to gaping, “for every lost dollar. Stop moving!”

Onslaught took a step forward as if to intervene, because Vortex seemed shocked immobile by Swindle’s unexpected aggression.

“You try and stop me, and you’re next!”

Onslaught quietly stepped back.

**

The hand came down with surgical precision, which was probably accurate considering it was attached to a surgeon. Wheeljack arched and squealed, wriggling, and Ratchet spanked him twice in a row, hard and quick. “I said I’d do this if you blew yourself up again, so stay down and take your punishment!”

Why did he think he’d done it? Wheeljack stifled a chortle and made a moan into a barked cry as that hand cracked across his aft again.

**

“You,” smack, “got,” smack, “us,” smack, “caught!” Smack-smack-smack, and Rumble wailed. It was muffled against the flat slab serving as seat and berth in the brig. That was gross enough, but the
way Frenzy had him pinned made it impossible for Rumble to struggle loose, leaving the other Cassette free to rain punishment down on his aft in painful strikes that had him crying out. Oral fluid kept dribbling down his chin, and every time he tried to close his mouth to swallow, another harsh crack across the back of his thighs had him hiccupping and opening his mouth again to protest in an inarticulate jumble of spit and choked words.

His chin smeared across the berth, wet and totally undignified, and nobody was going to come help him. Frenzy had been at it long enough that he knew that already.

Didn’t stop him from yelling for help, but Frenzy just spanked him harder for that.

***

It was a quiet day. A slow day.

It couldn’t last.

One quick slap in passing, and Jazz had his entertainment for the day.

He tore out of the Ark with a police car on his bumper, sirens blaring.

[* * * * *]

Wheeljack / Scrapper - ‘Autobots lost the war just as it was starting’!AU

[* * * * *]

On a scale of 1 to 10 for how this decision had turned out the way he’d wanted it, Scrapper judged this to be an 11. The former Autobot was feisty, inventive, creative beyond any of their ken, and dauntingly enthusiastic once they’d seduced him into cooperation.

There were unexpected moments, however. Scrapper rated it a solid 7 for how the decision had turned out in Wheeljack’s favor, in the end.

The Constructicon leader looked up and wished he had a mouth, just so he could bite a finger. Maybe it would help him find some control. “Oh, Primus, he’s doing it again.”

Bonecrusher didn’t even look up. “You wanted him as an auxiliary member of the Constructicons. I remember this, I was standing right there listening, you can’t weasel out of responsibility!”

The lack of mouth meant that Scrapper’s fist pressed to the front of his face mask. It looked ridiculous, he knew it did, but he couldn’t care as he stared across the worksite and breathed hard. “I didn’t realize he’d be so fragging hot when he works with combustibles.”

“Stop whining and take your optic candy explosions like a mech.”

[* * * * *]

Prowl - Strangest/most unique place you’ve interfaced? How about self-servicing?

[* * * * *]

This interview was not going as planned. Prowl clenched his hands out of sight in his lap and rearranged his expression into something more neutral than a poisonous glare. The officer of the Prime conducting this interview had a reputation of genial comradie among the troops, something
Prowl had anticipated as making him a pushover. He wasn’t entirely clear on what the mech’s official rank was, but it couldn’t be that important if he was greeted with smiles and waves whenever he entered a room. Discipline obviously wasn’t a priority at whatever level this mech ranked at.

Prowl was a rising star in the Tactical Division, aiming for Head, and he was one of the candidates for position for Assistant Head right now. Jazz was lending the current Head a hand filtering the candidates. This interview should have been an easy pass. Jazz wasn’t exactly a physically intimidating mech, and people seemed to like him. Prowl had planned for some formal questions and a lot of casual banter that would annoy him but serve to pad the mech’s ego.

He hadn’t anticipated how easily Jazz could turn words into a trap. Three questions in, and this interview had gone so far off the tracks Prowl had no idea where it was headed anymore.

“I…was reprimanded for that,” he said stiffly, forcing the admission out. “It was off the record, however.” How the frag Jazz had discovered that long-ago infraction was the question.

A question Jazz ignored, instead choosing to lean forward and smile a frighteningly sharp-edged smile at him. “And why was it off the record?”

Prowl ground his teeth. “My partner at the time was scheduled for a transfer into a different department. Our supervisor didn’t want a black mark on his record right before transfer.” Tumbler had gotten them both off, and then off the hook afterward. Prowl had never overloaded so hard while so embarrassed in all his life.

Jazz smiled, however, and he wondered if the record would stand for much longer.

[* * * * *]

Megatron - Do you like your aft?

[* * * * *]

They were doing it again. Three highly-placed officers, three entirely disparate personalities, and most of the time, they were rivals. Their place was behind him, and he wanted them at each other’s throats, fighting for the pride of second place. It was when they clustered in a trio grouped together at his back that he worried.

Like now. The tense atmosphere usually between the three officers had dissolved into a peculiar kind of comradie, and he worried.

Not that they were scheming. Starscream stood between Shockwave and Soundwave, and neither would ever conspire with him. However, Megatron’s sensors picked up the way both of his cooler-headed officers leaned in toward the fiery flyer, one at a time and paying close attention to the small gestures made at his back. His hands moved to clasp at the small of his back on automatic. He had to stifle the urge to casually slide his hands down to hide his aft.

Three officers nodded in rare agreement, and Megatron twitched.

[* * * * *]

Jazz - Do you like the way your interface array looks?

[* * * * *]

His lovers always got the same look on their faces. He knew why. After all the hype -- and there was
hype, even if he wanted to stop the rumors he wouldn’t have -- he didn’t look very impressive. He had an industry-standard jack, smooth and blunt, and a port that could have come directly from the medbay spare parts bin.

It had, in fact. He’d stopped tricking himself out after the third time his entire array had to be replaced due to damage from a mission. War wasn’t kind to special mods. Demand was still there, but skill, time, and supply were long gone. It was more important to be functional than dazzling, he’d found.

It wasn’t about how it looked, anyway. His lovers got that confused, slightly disappointed look on their faces, and Jazz just smiled.

And set his speakers to pound the bass, vibrations channeled straight into what mattered most.

[* * * * *]
Starscream - Do you find your interface array physically attractive, or weird/gross, or not feel strongly either way?

[* * * * *]

He didn’t care, honestly. Who had time for fragging, or the trust? The medbay had at least one casualty of a fling gone wrong every day, and that was just among the lower ranks. He’d been a massive target for manipulation and assassination attempts even as a cadet in the War Academy, and interfacing was when a mech was most vulnerable. After a few incidents in the dormitory barracks, Starscream developed and implemented a celibacy program. It would have been groundbreaking work if he’d bothered to share it.

He didn’t. He just installed it and went on with life. It was a life far improved, as far as he was concerned.

The program detected when his body felt lust, and it systematically shut down the processor threads attempting to influence his mind. Attraction happened, and his mind viewed it without being influenced by it, an observer to arousal. The program allowed him to use his body as a tool instead of his body turning him into one. That didn’t help when he genuinely felt intellectual interest, but that rarely happened. There weren’t many mechs on Cybertron that his mind lusted after.

His body might, but bodies were weak that way. He knew that he was beautiful, all of him was, and he used that beauty on weaker mechs.

He didn’t feel any sort of attraction to himself.

[* * * * *]
Vortex - Your most embarrassing sexual experience?

[* * * * *]

“I’m sorry, sir, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. It wasn’t intentional!” Vortex flinched under the lash of the loyalty programming, cortex twisting in on itself. He was unable to enjoy the pain inflicted by the blasted program. It was the most effective torture ever inflicted on him, and he hated how weak it made him.

Megatron didn’t even acknowledge his apologies. The ‘copter flinched again as he tried to regain his feet and at least stumble along with the hand pulling his rotor array. Bending forward under the tyrant’s hold wouldn’t be much better, but it wouldn’t be quite as humiliating as being dragged
through the halls. Curious, sadistically amused optics were peering out of rooms and around corners after them. There wasn’t much that could shame someone as shameless as Vortex, but this fell square onto a tender spot inside him.

The programming curled around his vocalizer, shocking down his backstruts again and again, and he had to speak. The Lord of the Decepticons was furious with him, and the programming compelled him to seek forgiveness. Worse than that, sheer embarrassment had his insides knotting up in appalled little ball. “Sir, please, I can do better. It’s not you -- eh-heh, n-no, I didn’t mean that you could ever, you wouldn’t, I, uh, it’s not, ah, um.” He eventually stammered to a halt under the hot red glare directed down at him.

Only once he’d stopped trying to talk, free rotors wilting down in submission, did Megatron resume stalking through the halls.

Vortex miserably slid along at his heels. He really wasn’t looking forward to reporting his failure to the other Combaticons, which was apparently what Megatron intended. Because what was a lesson learned if the rest of the students didn’t share the learning experience, right?

[* * * * *]

Ultra Magnus - Spit or swallow?

[* * * * *]

Probably the most telling fact was that he didn’t have to stop to think about it. He didn’t even hesitate. “Swallow. Spitting is against regulations.”

“What, seriously? Where’s that written?”

A sigh. “Am I truly the only one who’s read the Autobot Code?”

[* * * * *]

Onslaught - Have you “sexted”

[* * * * *]

Space was a lonely place. It was a huge, cold, barren void where a mech had no one but himself for company. So lonely. Very lonely. A very, very lonely place.

Swindle banged on the open door of Onslaught’s office and grumbled, “He’s at it again.” He didn’t bother to go inside. He didn’t bother to explain, either.

He didn’t have to. Onslaught stood up and followed him toward the communication hub of the Combaticon base, already aware of everything he needed to know. Vortex and Brawl were there, bickering over the console. It blinked with a series of messages that were incredibly pathetic in their own way. Understandable, but pathetic.

Blast Off spent a lot of time in space by himself. He was an aloof mech by nature, but that didn’t mean he could deal with constant isolation, especially not with the gestalt links pinging him for stimulation all the time. Onslaught didn’t know how he’d handled away missions before the gestalt, and it probably didn’t matter. What mattered was that Blast Off had reached his limits yet again, and he’d started sending messages. Stupid little check-ups, annoying nothing questions, observations, anything that’d get someone back at base to talk to him. Without actually saying that’s what he wanted. The messages were just there, appearing on the screen, an unending demand for
their time and attention.

The other Combaticons hadn’t understood the game at first. They hadn’t even thought to discuss it amongst themselves. They’d all had their turns on shift in the command center, volleying irritating floods of nonsense communication back and forth with Blast Off.

Eventually, however, they’d discovered they were all doing it. And it wasn’t like they could stop, because Blast Off was a teammate in distress, and the gestalt links got fragging persistent when they tried.

So they’d figured out a way to make him shut up. Basically, satisfy his need for contact via satisfying him, and he’d log off for a while. It was better than dealing with the constant pesterering, but not by much.

“I did it last time,” Brawl said as soon as Onslaught stepped into the room. “It’s his turn.”

“I’m no good at it,” Vortex snapped back at him. “Dirty talk isn’t my thing.” He flicked a glance at Onslaught as if appealing for help. “Innuendo’s fine and good, but this is way beyond that.”

“I’m busy,” Swindle said before Onslaught could even say something.

Excuses in place, the other three Combaticons turned their collective peer pressure on their commander, and Onslaught groaned. He wished he could make the others do it, but having an argument about who had to get the shuttle off would put everyone in a sour mood and do nothing for their teammate.

It really didn’t help that Blast Off had a subordinate kink. He liked getting orders.

Everybody here knew that Onslaught liked giving orders.

The argument was lost before it began.

[* * * * *]

_Rodimus - Have you ever attempted (or succeeded) to give yourself oral?_

[* * * * *]

Ultra Magnus could have happily lived his life without this information. “I asked for a list of your accomplishments, not a blatantly embellished story of your life,” the Duly Appointed Enforcer of the Tyrest spat as he sorted through the poor excuse for a resume he’d been handed. “This is false. I was there for that, and it didn’t happen that way. Do you have a witness for this? I will not count it without a witness. Drift doesn’t count. A reliable witness. This isn’t physically possible. This contradicts that. Not only is this one obscene and doesn’t belong on an official document in any form, but I refuse to believe -- “

“No, see, I can prove that one right now.”

“Get off my desk!”

[* * * * *]

_Optimus Prime - Have you ever had your ceiling node stimulated?_

[* * * * *]
“What kind of question is that?”

Sideswipe gave Kup a cocky grin. “Aw, c’mon, you can’t say you’ve fragged him, so how would you know?”

Kup gave him another incredulous snort. “Kid, your Prime used to work the docks.” He took a sip of his drink while that processed. “Dockworkers used to use the lift cranes between loading gigs, and when I say use, I mean use. Asking if he got his sensors properly buffed is like asking if water’s wet.”

[* * * * *]

Tarn - Are you into anything under the BDSM umbrella?

[* * * * *]

His head turned, blindly seeking. His wrists twisted but stopped before he pulled them apart. He had been ordered down, hands placed behind his back, and he would obey. The thrill was in the obedience. Against everything his body screamed for, against all logic pertaining to their relative sizes and the power of his dual fusion cannons, he obeyed. His systems roared their arousal under that control.

The briefest touch of fingers against his mask. Tarn’s mouth parted, lips soft and desperate for contact, but discipline remained. The mask was a symbol, but also a restraint. It was rarely used as such.

But when it was, he trembled beneath it.

[* * * * *]

Vos - What is the quickest you’ve ever brought yourself (or been brought) to overload?

[* * * * *]

He’s a weapon. His altmode is a rifle, but not of the energy form. The ammunition he uses can vary, and he has spent a considerable amount of time and effort crafting his own sadistic takes on bullets. His workshop has examples of his work lining the walls, a timeline of progressive sadism. When Tarn chooses him to perform the final execution on a List name, Vos will bring the latest models out.

He will take them out of their display box one by one, holding them up in front of terrified optics to consider them. Some of them are self-explanatory. Some of them, the other D.J.D. members will explain via vividly described stories of past executions. Eventually, he will choose what ammunition he will use, and Kaon will shoulder him for the final shots. They like to see how many they can inflict on a victim before death grants its mercy.

Vos enjoys being fired multiple times. Kaon strokes his trigger over and over, and the bullets burn out of his barrel until Vos isn’t sure who will collapse first: him or the dead mech.

They don’t call it discharging a payload for nothing, after all.

[* * * * *]

Prowl - Do you ever “edge” (repeatedly stop and start) when self-servicing?

[* * * * *]
Only when a lesson needed to be taught.

He rose up on his knees, fingers trembling and pressing a hard pattern like they’d break a code and unlock his body. Liquid tension drained from under his spark, pooling in his joints until they stiffened and shook, right on the verge of bursting the strained surface tension and sending pleasure in a flood across him. His vents closed, fans stuttering.

He had to gasp for air as he forced his hand away. His fingers trembled, cupped over the throbbing circuits that begged for the final push, but he refrained. Again.

A snarling whine came from next door, and multiple fists pounded on the wall between their quarters. “Come on, Prowl! That’s not fair!”

“We said we were sorry!”

“Fragging smeltwaste bumper-eating glitchheaded -- “

“Primus, will you just finish?! This is cruel, and you know it!”

The Constructicons’ voices were hoarse with strain and lust. He judged them not hoarse enough.

He settled back on his heels and breathed deep, bringing his temperature down. Soon enough, his fingers lightly brushed in. Pleasure melted the cool relief back into a fluid pulse that set him on fire. His hips began to give minute thrusts in time with his fingertips again.

“Please!”

[* * * * *]

Drift - What does your spark chamber look like?

[* * * * *]

It looks like broken promises.

The Decepticon emblem used to be made from the metal of a mech’s spark chamber, back when it was a life-oath instead of just a formality. The branders would yank pieces off, and a mech would scream or not depending on his pain tolerance, and the metal would be melted down. When it was ready, the branders let it set just enough in the mold not to run, and then they’d torch the contact areas until the metals fused. That was how a Decepticon got his insignia at the beginning of the war.

It was part of his spark chamber brought out into the open, the only truth outside a shell of lies. The sparkchamber was the only part of a mech’s frame that could determine what he could or couldn’t be.

Drift isn’t Deadlock. He reneged his oaths to the Decepticons, but the metal is gone for good.

His spark chamber betrays what can no longer be seen on the outside. The shell still lies, and there is no truth in sight.

[* * * * *]

Tesarus - When you ejaculate, do you more shoot or dribble?

[* * * * *]
Shoot, unfortunately.

Tesarus laughed high and nervous as he turned. “H-hi, boss. Didn’t see you there.”

Tarn slowly wiped a hand down his mask, bits of traitor sticking to his chest and dripping in messy globs to the ground. His glare spoke volumes for him.

[* * * * *]

**Overlord - Have you ever had sex in a public place?**

[* * * * *]

Oh, yes. Many, many times, with partners both willing and not. He could name names if he wished to list the sweetest frags, the funniest, or the most painful. They were all enjoyable. Being watched was quite a turn-on, for him.

Yet when he took a mech, it never touched the needy ache far down in his core that remembered how it felt to be the one being taken, gasping and shuddering as he was overpowered and forced down to be someone else’s reward. There was exactly one mech who’d ever won that right, earned it and taken it. Overlord vividly recalled being under Megatron, and he wondered, deep down inside, if he would feel the same submissive thrill under anyone who used him.

It was a perverse curiosity that haunted him. He dearly wanted to know.

To the victor goes the spoils, yet he kept winning.

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**Rewind - Does your valve have any modifications?**

[* * * * *]

Chromedome sputtered, half-formed words spilling out of his vocalizer, and Whirl laughed. Rewind sighed between them. This wasn’t about him, and he knew it. Whirl was needling Chromedome for the fun of it. Whirl had no problem talking to him as a person most of the time -- honestly, Whirl was one of the few who seemed to have no size or function bias whatsoever that he could tell -- but Chromedome had been purposefully talking over the ex-Wrecker’s educational level to Rung, and Whirl had cut the legs out from under him in turn by diving straight into crudity.

“I don’t have a valve,” Rewind said, clear and calm through the laughter and outrage volleying over him.

The bar stopped dead.

“I was a disposable. We weren’t built for anything but work. Why would we need something like that?”

Whirl twitched. Chromedome cringed, looking around the bar and hovering as if he’d shield the much smaller mech from the stares, but Rewind turned a level gaze and recording camera on Whirl.

“Giving a valve to someone like me would be like giving hands to someone like you. What a funny idea.”

The camera light stayed so steady.
“Go ahead. Laugh.”

[* * * * *]

**Galvatron - Have you had or do you want to have a threesome (or foursome, or more)?**

[* * * * *]

Their lord hit the command deck like a bulldozer, smashing through and leaving wreckage in his wake. Decepticons fled in every direction. Soundwave shook in his altmode against the far wall the whole time, hoping to be ignored, and he was.

The other Unicronians didn’t retreat. They didn’t fight back, either. They did fling themselves into the fray, however, and that was how their lord liked it. He never seemed able to tell the difference between a battle and a frag, but the Sweeps didn’t mind. Especially when his lieutenants were at his side obeying orders and pulling flanking maneuvers no Autobot had ever seen.

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**Ratchet - Are hand jobs boring, or underrated?**

[* * * * *]

He used to say that it depended on the hands. Now, however.

Blue hands closed and opened, and Ratchet bowed his head. Now he knew it depended on whom those hands belonged to.

[* * * * *]

**Grimlock - When you ejaculate, do you more shoot or dribble?**

[* * * * *]

Does it matter? By the time that mountain of teeth, fire, ferocity, and sheer unbridled passion has finished you off in a pounding, writhing grind, you’re hardly going to notice how he finishes.

And if you’re still able to pay attention, then he’s obviously not finished yet.

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**Starscream - Have you self-serviced for or with someone via webcam?**

[* * * * *]

“This is the weirdest thing I’ve ever done.”

Octane paused, head turning toward the vidfeed. “That’s quite a claim.”

Busy setting up his end of things, Starscream shook his head without looking up. “If you say you do this regularly, I may have to rethink having you as a friend.”

The tanker grinned and flopped down in the chair now that he’d cleared the junk off it. “Aw, come on. You have to have done weirder things. You fly with Skywarp.”
“Skywarp,” Starscream deadpanned, “is so uninterested in interfacing that he recharges through Thundercracker’s orgies. So no. I have not done anything weirder.” He didn’t seem to register the fact that he no longer considered orgies weird. It was Thundercracker, however, and the mech had a way of normalizing the strangest things until nobody thought twice about weldmarks in odd areas.

Finally getting the camera at the angle he wanted, Starscream sighed and sat back, hitching up one leg to rest on something out of sight on the feed. “There. Can you see?”

Octane greedily drank in the sight of miles of sleek plating. “Yeah. Yeah, I can see.”

“Then pay attention. I’m only going to do this once.”

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**Tailgate - Have you ever had sex in a public place?**

[* * * * *]

Although they didn’t bring it up to his face, Tailgate’s many grandiose lies about who he was and what he’d done were still a hot topic amongst the crew. Even the new members were interested in how far Tailgate’s lies had gotten him.

“I’m surprised he didn’t claim he was ‘facing the Prime by the end,’” Smokescreen scoffed.

There was a beat of silence as various people glanced at each other. “Um…”

“Did he ever claim to be ‘facing anyone?’”

“I don’t think so.”

“That’s a little weird now that I think about it.”

“Yeah, he said he’d done everything else.”

“Huh.”

“. . . I always thought he was doing Cyclonus.”

“What, seriously?”

“No way.”

“That ain’t right.”

Nightbeat cocked his head. “Based off of the amount of lies he’s told and how far he went in telling them, he either hasn’t interfaced at all or has, for some reason, chosen that one detail of his life to pull a veil of privacy over.”

They all thought about that.

Getaway chuckled. “Only one way to find out. Who wants to see how experienced he is?”

[* * * * *]

**Swerve - How big is your spike?**
Ratchet stared straight ahead, every inch a professional. “Repairs will be completed by tomorrow, but the cutter’s down for now.”

“What’s that mean?” Swerve laughed nervously. “I’ve got to get back to my bar, Ratch’. You know leaving Whirl there without me is a Bad Idea. He doesn’t listen to anybody else telling him to get off the bartop.”

“It means you’re without,” the medic gestured, “for now.”

Swerve blinked. He blinked again. “But…I need to get back to the bar.”

“Close the bar.”

“Whirl’s already inside. You know he won’t leave until closing time.”

“Not my problem.”

“Ratcheeeeeet,” Swerve whined plaintively. “Help!” He watched the medic turn to return to whatever it was that medics did when they were deliberately ignoring mechs with strategically missing pieces of armor standing in their medibays. “Maybe if I just stay behind the bar,” he mumbled to himself. “And stack the glasses really tall. Yeah. That’ll work.”

He left, still muttering plans.

For some reason, Swerve’s was really busy that night. Ratchet showed up and was thoroughly unsurprised by the crowd casually leaning on the bar, optics glued on what swung free on the other side.

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Skyfire - Do you indulge in sparkplay often?

[* * * * *]

The snow wasn’t always there, blocking the sun. On the warmest days of summer, the ice was bare. It sparkled into blinding shards of light as the sun reflected, a suncatcher throwing the spectrum of colors up into the air.

When the sun went down, light still glittered from deep inside the ice. Under the ice, a lone spark played with starlight and memories, thousands of years gone.

[* * * * *]

Bluestreak - Are you into anything under the BDSM umbrella?

[* * * * *]

Three Decepticons, one Autobot. Three mechs nearly twice the size of the fourth. All the threat of the war that’d just ended hung over the hulking mechs as their leader leaned down to purr their question at the little cutie that’d caught their optics. It was a leading question. The tone it was spoken in heavily suggested that the Autobot confess his erotic fantasies, because they were about to all come true.
Bluesteak blinked up at them, a bit frightened but mostly just confused. “No? I mean, I know what that kind of stuff is and I’ve tried a lot of it, but nothing beats a nice fluffy frag in my opinion. Slow and steady wins, as the humans say! And the humans say a lot of stuff, not all of it about sex, so there’s lots of versions of that saying.”

The Decepticons exchanged a glance as he babbled on. “I’m still game,” one admitted under his breath. Wasn’t what they’d expected, but, well, the Autobot was really slagging cute.

“Me, too.”

“Think he’d at least agree to a gag?”

[***]

Drift - What is the quickest you’ve ever brought yourself (or been brought) to overload?

[***]

Drift ducked his head and muttered an answer to the floor under his feet. Ratchet waited. The swordmech flicked a hopeful glance at him, but the medic didn’t move. No, he wasn’t off the hook. Spill.

Heaving a sigh, Drift admitted, “I can’t. Haven’t been able to since -- well, since way before you saw me the first time. And trust me, I’ve tried,” he added a bit defensively, as if Ratchet doubted him.

Ratchet didn’t doubt him. “It’s a common side-effect of the stuff you were doing back then. I’m not surprised.”

Drift was kind of surprised at the casual acceptance. He blinked and looked up at the medic. “So, uh, what’s the treatment?”

“There isn’t one.” A glimmer of sympathy got through Ratchet’s gruffness, but it went away. “Now you know why I warn everyone anytime stims or circuit boosters come up. Nobody ever thinks about the permanent consequences until it’s too late, and I’d rather no one else suffer.”

Drift nodded slowly. “I understand.” He did, he truly did.

It was just one more mistake he was still paying for.

[***]

Skids - What are you more into (or like more about yourself), valve or spike?

[***]

Instead of being embarrassed by the question, Skids threw his arms wide open and laughed. It was a carefree, happy laugh. “I don’t remember! It’s great! Talk about a quest,” he said, toasting Swerve. “A real journey of discovery, here.”

Beside him, Getaway wiped his shock away, glanced at Chromedome’s curious look, and shook his head. Whatever Skids used to prefer didn’t matter anymore, and it’d be kinder to say nothing.

[***]

Fort Max - What do you like best about plug-and-play?
His fingers shook, but they were steady enough for this. It’d be different if someone else were pressing the prongs into him, or pulling his cable out, but these were his fingers. The hands were his own. He was doing this himself, when he wanted, with whom he wanted, and one quick yank could end everything the second he lost his nerve or just changed his mind.

Some mechs preferred to shut off their optics to feel the data pulse start, but not Fortress Maximus. He needed to watch his hands slot the plugs home. He needed to know this was reality, not the memories that still twisted through his nightmares. This was real, and this was now.

In IDW canon now, it's established that Prowl is a repeat offender in muttering.

“Hrzzfrazzlemrrfft.”

Optimus Prime barked, “Prowl! What did we say about the muttering?!” How many times did he have to warn the mech before Prowl stopped making comments under his breath?

But then the Constructicons chimed in to say, “He said that you never use the brain Primus granted you, more’s the pity!”

Cue dead silence. Prowl froze stiff, unnerved and hunted. On one side, Optimus Prime dropped into quiet, angered glaring. On the other, the Constructicons were the happiest, most helpful guys ever. Wasn’t it nice of them to have repeated Prowl’s mumbled comment? Of course it was.

Optimus Prime certainly found them helpful, anyway. “Did he, now."

"Yeah!"

"Thank. You. Mixmaster."

100% hint not taken. Mixmaster perked up. “He said you should just go ahead and join the Decepticons earlier. Did you hear him?”

Optimus Prime turned a heavy stare on his fellow Autobot, voice deep and painstakingly neutral. "No, I didn’t. How interesting."

"We don’t think it’d work, but he was complaining about how you’re only helping Megatron out and basically handing Cybertron to the Decepticons."

"Really. Prowl, I think we need to have a word in private."

Prowl shuffled files on his datapad. He could feel the Prime’s optics boring a hole into his helm. "Ah…in a minute. I need to go, er, organize my desk."

"We’ll take care of that, Prowl!"

So helpful, the Constructicons.

A kink fic entirely in Grimlock’s voice. Narration as done by him Grimlock.
Then me Grimlock tell him Optimus Prime to get down on him Prime’s knees before me Grimlock. Him Prime refuse, but him Prime need a firm hand. Me Grimlock’s hands are the firmest. Me Grimlock grab him Prime by the back of him Prime’s neck and make him Prime kiss floor. Me Grimlock make him Prime kiss floor until him Prime say he Prime is sorry and wants to kiss me Grimlock’s feet instead.

Me Grimlock think about it, but him Prime been disobedient. If me Grimlock not stern, him Prime never learn. So me Grimlock make him Prime go fetch him Prime’s harness instead, and me Grimlock strap him Prime into restraints. Me Grimlock will leave him Prime tied up like titanium turkey for the rest of night.

Maybe me Grimlock let him Prime kiss me Grimlock’s feet in morning if him Prime learn lesson.

Me Grimlock think about it, but him Prime been disobedient. If me Grimlock not stern, him Prime never learn. So me Grimlock make him Prime go fetch him Prime’s harness instead, and me Grimlock strap him Prime into restraints. Me Grimlock will leave him Prime tied up like titanium turkey for the rest of night.

Maybe me Grimlock let him Prime kiss me Grimlock’s feet in morning if him Prime learn lesson.

Him Prowl tried to put us Dinobots back in the cave. Him Prowl say us Dinobots don’t need individual rooms. Him Prowl think us Dinobot are drones, me Grimlock think.

Me Grimlock say, “Okay, me Grimlock show you why us Dinobots need separate rooms,” and him Prowl get look on him Prowl’s face like when him Mirage talk to him Sludge. Him Sludge stupid, but know when him Mirage treat him Sludge like him Sludge is stupid. Me Grimlock not like being looked at like me Grimlock is stupid. Me Grimlock need to teach him Prowl a lesson about intelligence. Me Grimlock know smart words, too. Me Grimlock just not care about making him Prowl think me Grimlock is smart.

Me Grimlock take him Prowl into cave with us Dinobots, and them other Dinobots watch while me Grimlock pin him Prowl’s legs against cave walls way up high, so him Prowl couldn’t touch the ground. Him Prowl tried, too. Him Prowl’s arms very short. Him Prowl loud while trying to order me Grimlock around. Him Prowl try to kick and struggle. Me Grimlock ignore him.

"Okay," me Grimlock say. "Us Dinobots all here watching you Prowl. You Prowl need education," and me Grimlock put me Grimlock’s palm across him Prowl’s aft. Him Prowl go still. Him Prowl stop breathing. Me Grimlock’s hands are very big. Me Grimlock’s hand could squeeze him Prowl’s whole aft, but me Grimlock just pat as me Grimlock sound out long word. Ed-u-ca-tion. Good word. Means ‘learning,’ only larger concept. Longer words doesn’t mean smarter word, but this long word is a good word for situation. Makes point, me Grimlock think.

Me Grimlock careful. Me Grimlock could hurt him Prowl, because me Grimlock is strongest Dinobot. But me Grimlock just pat him Prowl’s aft and say, "Me Grimlock doesn’t educate," ed-u-cate in careful pats, not too hard, “Autobots in front of other Dinobots. They Dinobots think it too funny. They Dinobots need separate rooms, or you Prowl never learn.”

Them other Dinobots snicker, and me Grimlock drop him Prowl. “You Prowl assign us Dinobots rooms like Autobots,” me Grimlock say, and him Prowl sit on the floor and stare up at me Grimlock for a while. Him Prowl keep rubbing him Prowl’s aft.

Me Grimlock think him Prowl gets me Grimlock’s point. Him Prowl assign them other Dinobots new rooms.

Me Grimlock still live in cave, but it okay. Him Prowl asks for more ed-u-ca-tion sometimes, and me
Grimlock have more privacy in cave.

**

Me Grimlock think him First Aid not know about us Dinobots. Him First Aid say he First Aid want to ‘play doctor’ with me Grimlock, but me Grimlock think him First Aid not know what he First Aid just said. Him Ratchet look like him Snarl just head-butted him Ratchet.

Me Grimlock very amused by them Protectobots. Them Protectobots cutest siblings. Someday, him First Aid figure out what he First Aid said, and me Grimlock will laugh and laugh.

**

Him Optimus Prime treat self worse than them Decepticons. Me Grimlock fed up with him Optimus Prime’s martyr complex. Him Optimus Prime can’t go one week without sacrifice.

Me Grimlock put him Optimus Prime into restraint harness, and then me Grimlock go find volunteer to haul him Optimus Prime around like dead weight. If him Optimus Prime going to keep being useless bag of cogs and actually use him Optimus Prime’s head, then me Grimlock going to use him Optimus Prime’s body before him Optimus Prime’s body is ruined. Him Brawn good at hauling dead weight. Him Brawn volunteer right away.

Him Optimus Prime give me Grimlock petrorabbit optics, but me Grimlock think petrorabbits delicious. Very crunchy.

Me Grimlock sit back and let him Brawn drag him Optimus Prime around until point is made. Me Grimlock think this take a while.

**

Me Grimlock seen a lot of things. Us Dinobots always seen more than they Autobots wanted us Dinobots to, but me Grimlock seen even more.

They Autobots not talk about how they Autobots treat us Dinobots at first. Us Dinobots remember. Me Grimlock enjoy making them Autobots squirm, trying to smooth over it past.

Him Red Alert squirm the most. Him Red Alert think us Dinobots dumb drones for longer than most. Him Red Alert let us Dinobots see things him Red Alert not want them Autobots to know, and us Dinobots remember. Him Red Alert used to visit cave when him Wheeljack lock us Dinobots away on him Optimus Prime’s orders. Him Red Alert used to lean against cave wall and do things to self that other Dinobots laugh at. Me Grimlock didn’t laugh.

Me Grimlock learn interesting things from watching him Red Alert watch us Dinobots and do things to self.

Him Red Alert like big, powerful machines. Him Red Alert like to think about what machines could do if machines were alive. Us Dinobots not machines. Us Dinobots alive.

Him Red Alert very embarrassed, later. Him Red Alert even more embarrassed when me Grimlock talk about what him Red Alert used to do.

But me Grimlock see him Red Alert do things to self when nobody but me Grimlock can see, now. Him Red Alert squirm if me Grimlock walk up and put a foot on him Red Alert’s roof in altmode, and him Red Alert squirm more if me Grimlock tell him Red Alert what me Grimlock saw him do. Him Red Alert not stop doing things to self. Him Red Alert just stop doing it in front of other
Dinobots.

Him Red Alert only do things to self in front of him Grimlock, now. Me Grimlock seen a lot of

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Wherein I try to sleep, and my brain wouldn’t shut up. I blame people on Tumblr for turning this into more than an outline.

[* * * * *]

It was an Autobot staff meeting. Most of the mechs at this table are well known for their contributions to the Cause, both as officers and good mechs. The soldiers admire and respect them. They're serious and professional, but snarky and warm. The mechs at this table are friends as well as colleagues.

Except there's something wrong at the table tonight. They're tense. They're...afraid. Jazz is wound tight in his chair, visor a dark blue slash peering out from under his helm. Beside him, Prowl has his hands flat on the table. His optics are locked on them, and he breathes slow and steady to hide how his doors shake. In contrast, across the table from them, Red Alert averts his face. It hides his expression, but his fingers tap a nervous tempo on the table. Wheeljack can see his face, but he has his own concerns. He trembles finely while shifting about in his chair. Between the engineer and Jazz, Ratchet has his hands under the table to protect them, his face forced neutral and optics locked straight ahead. He knows how to deal with this. He used to tend Senators.

Ironhide's the only one who sits completely straight, chin up and jaw set in defiance, but maybe his courage is false bravado. Maybe he can only keep his back straight because the Prime has focused on Blaster. Blaster, whose grin has turned sickly as he huddles in his chair, shrinking down to be submissive and small. Ironhide can afford to look defiant because Optimus Prime paces past him to stand behind the communication mech instead.

“When you are chosen as an officer, you accept the responsibilities of the position. You acknowledge that you serve the Autobot Cause above all. That means you sacrifice your time, your desires, even your sense of self to your rank. An officer incapable of devoting himself to his position is unworthy of it, because on that rank rests the lives and well-being of the Autobots under him. An officer who cannot devote himself is a weakness. An officer who serves himself over those he commands is not an officer, but a parasite. He is a disgrace to the Cause, a traitor to the Autobots, and,” the Prime heaves a sigh carrying all the weight of responsibility, “my mistake. Those who fail their duties fail me, but more than that, they are my failure. I promote you. I choose you. I read your reports and judge your abilities. When I fill an office, it is my decision to make. If you are unable or unwilling to fulfill the rank bestowed on you, then it’s my error to have trusted you. I cannot forgive those who fail their responsibilities until I forgive myself for entrusting them with what they weren’t worthy of.”

He walks around the table, speaking softly about what it means to serve the Autobot Cause, to serve him, and what it means to fail. Shoulders hunch as he approaches, shudder as he pauses behind each mech, and misery paints their bodies even though their faces show nothing. He moves on, but his words are pointed. They remain speared through guilty sparks.

“Autobots have died, my friends. Soldiers paid the price for our failures. I’ve failed them. And you? Are you innocent?”

Blaster scrunches lower with every word. When the Prime stops behind him, one hand clamps down
on his shoulder, and he freezes like a deer caught in headlights.

The entire table flinches when their leader says, as if to them all but painfully, excruciatingly to Blaster, ‘‘There are no innocent mechs in this room. Not while the dead fill the morgues and are solemnly recycled, their only worth now in the parts of their bodies. We have failed them. I have failed them. I promoted officers who aren’t worthy of their ranks.’’

He takes the blame himself, including them all only as a footnote for his own guilt, but Blaster seems about to break because -- because, oh, had those words hit home. It’s not the Prime’s fault. It’s his. He’s to blame. It’s not fair that Optimus Prime blame himself when Blaster deserves every acid drop of shame and guilt.

There’s no time for courage or shame to spur him to speak up, however. He’s had time to marinate in the consequences since the battle ended. What did he do? He avoided it. It takes their leader to make him face it.

‘‘Get up,’’ the Prime says, ordering him out of his chair. The orders keep coming, implacable and stern. He’s ordered to be silent. He’s told to stand by the wall. He’s commanded to listen and watch as a witness.

It is the greatest punishment a communication mech can suffer, and Blaster’s vocalizer bleeds a thin trail of static as he obeys. He will fulfill his function and duty now, as he failed to do during the battle. He won’t be weak this time. He won’t falter. He is an officer of the Autobots, a servant to the Prime that served them all.

Blaster stands against the wall and forces himself to do better.

One Autobot’s failure is a sign that discipline has become lax. An entire cadre? Officers cannot afford to fail. Their failure costs lives, and the death toll of the latest battle hurts their Prime deeply. The Autobot officers flinch as he gently reminds them that it is a Prime’s duty to protect the people.

‘‘I am their protector. When I fail them, I bear their deaths as my own. I’ve failed them.’’ His hands come down, fingers feathering over Wheeljack’s shoulders softly. A shiver wracks the engineer, but he doesn’t shrug the barely-there hands away. ‘‘I’ve failed you all, and there is no forgiveness to be had until those I’ve failed forgive me -- but there is no forgiveness for officers who cannot commit themselves fully to my Autobots. Only those who can serve are worthy.’’ He sweeps his optics around the table, and only Ironhide can meet them. Optimus Prime speaks directly to him, as if the words were meant just for him, but they’re too aware of their failures. ‘‘Autobots are dead. Who will pay for their lives? Who was meant to command them in my stead? I put you in place to lead them, guide them, and save them, and now they are dead. I grieve them, old friend. I grieve for the lives lost to carelessness and your inability to commit to the Autobot Cause.’’

Ironhide drops his gaze first, but only because the Prime regards him kindly. Anger would have been easier to face. ‘‘I serve even the dead,’’ their leader tells them. ‘‘I am their protector, and although I’ve failed them, there is one last thing I may do for them. I can make sure those who failed them are punished.’’

He cannot spare the rod, as it were. They shudder and, one by one as he stops behind them, hand on their helms, they agree.

‘‘Yes, Prime,’’ Wheeljack says.

Yes, he should punish them.
Ratchet clenches his hands under the table and bows his head under the hand on it. “If you must,” he agrees gruffly.

Yes, they deserve it.

Jazz twitches away, warily twisting around to look up at the taller mech standing behind him. He snorts out his vents and mutters, “Yeah, can see you’re real broke up over it, Prime. Really blaming yourself. Way to take one for the team.”

“I am a vessel for those I serve, just as you should have been. If you didn’t fail your duties, held all your responsibilities without breaking, then there is no need to repair the vessel.” The Prime’s kindness doesn’t falter, and Blaster whines low from the end of the room. Jazz flicks a look at the tormented communication mech standing witness. Standing witness instead of being ‘repaired,’ as if the Prime believes that punishment sufficient to guide him back to the path of service and duty.

He’s their leader. If they won’t follow him, then he will discipline them. They, in turn, won’t fail him again.

In disciplining them, he disciplines himself.

Optimus Prime rests his hands on the back of Jazz’s chair and looks down on him. “Have you failed, Jazz? Or were the lives lost in battle due to overwhelming odds, attacks that couldn’t be intercepted or anticipated, or bad luck? Did you do everything you could, or,” he leaned close, “did I make a mistake choosing you to be one of my officers?”

Jazz doesn’t answer, but across the table, Ironhide and Red Alert are unable to raise their heads. Prowl’s doors wilt down until they show his submission.

Please, Prime. Remind them of the price of failure. For every soldier who fell, make them pay.

Their leader shakes his head, disappointed by their behavior, their lack of regret, their failures. That is a lash of shame across their sparks, but then he circles around the table and speaks to Blaster in a quiet murmur. The normally upbeat mech presses back into the wall and turns his head this way and that like he could avoid the request. He can’t. He begins to recite the list of the dead.

It is a long, long list.

Optimus Prime stands by his side for a while, staring off into the distance as he remembers each fallen soldier. It reminds the officers that he knows every Autobot in the ranks. Even if they only met once, the Prime remembers at least one detail about every Autobot. When Blaster hesitates, vents stuttering for air, the Prime comments aloud on the last name, personalizing the list that little bit more. The officers wince lower in their seats. It hurts to put names to the numbers.

Blaster’s vents hitch and drag more often, but the communication mech blurs out name after name, unable to handle any more details.

After a while, their leader stops interjecting agonizing pieces of dead soldiers’ lives, but he said enough. By the time he stands at the head of the table again, the officers are asking him to hurt them. Jazz says nothing, mouth set in a sullen scowl, but the others earnestly ask for justice for the dead. They failed. They were inadequate to the tasks he gave them, and they must be punished for failing their duties, their responsibilities, but most importantly, for failing the Autobot Cause.

The battle is over. The dead deserve compensation.

Give the officers their penance, as is his duty. Let them earn forgiveness, so that he can forgive
himself.

He gives them what they ask for.

He strikes Red Alert with his open hand, heavy slaps across the face that power through the feeble attempts to block him. The Security Director reels, falls back in his chair, blinks dazedly between hits, and eventually can't focus enough to restrain his pained cries. He hides behind shaking arms, helm tucked down, and begs the Prime to stop.

He doesn't. It isn't until Red Alert is stammering apologies to dead mechs and swearing he'll do better that the Prime moves on.

Ironhide is beaten into the floor. There is no subtlety. He gives the old soldier no opportunity to prepare. The Prime roars fury and engages him in combat that the Weapons Specialist can't win. Defiance dies before shock. He can't fight back, not against his Prime, so he can only defend and block, retreat until he can't retreat any longer, and then he must surrender. He goes down and doesn't try to get back up. He suffers the blows, grunts with the pain, and tries to make himself a small, boring target.

The Prime is merciless, however, and Ironhide cracks. He grates out pleas that are ignored, the angered Prime shouting, “You, who trained soldiers to die, beg mercy? Why? Why should I grant your pleas? No Decepticon did! Where are the soldiers you trained? Where are they? I’ll face them in the Matrix, and what will I say, that I excused you for letting them die? The Autobots you trained might have survived if you’d hardened them, but no, you’ve gone soft! My error was in having faith in your training. I believed that you would give me competent, confident Autobots, and you broke that trust. I sent half-trained soldiers into battle to be killed, and now you ask me to stop? What stopped you from preparing them for war? What stopped you from saving them? What selfishness excuses you from their deaths?”

Had he failed to train them? No, no, of course he hadn't, no, he wouldn't have filled out the ranks with cannon fodder, but Ironhide is stricken by the accusations because aren't they what he's been thinking? Aren't they what he's already said to himself deep in his doubts? His denials cut off halfway out, and he curls into a defensive ball more focused on what he did than what the Prime does to him.

He is a shaking, mourning pile on the floor when the Prime kicks him aside in disgust. Physical weaknesses are nothing compared to the psychological ones. He has inflicted more damage with his words than he did in his attack, and now Ironhide must live with the pain.

The internal weaknesses are the greatest vulnerabilities. Those are the wounds the Prime lances in sharp, stabbing words as he turns on Jazz. Jazz, who knows every mindfrag in the book and has stood up to every torture there is. But Jazz couldn't bring back the right information, could he? Arrogance for his abilities far outstretched actual results. Humility is a skill he sadly lacks in. If he's cool, confident, and undefeated, then why are there dead soldiers in the morgue right now?

“All image and no substance,” the Prime says grimly. Disappointment

Fine. Then let him be a smiling demon, since that’s the image he’s so proud of. The Decepticons are said to fear him, but it’s the Autobots who should fear him more, because he’s supposed to be their protection from the shadows. “All image and no substance,” the Prime says grimly.
spirals down into bitter cold disapproval, and his optics are ice as they pin the saboteur in his seat.

Jazz is no longer huddled or wary; he watches his commander with a blank face that gives nothing away despite the words slashing through his ego.

“They relied on you, and you failed. You failed them. You failed us.” The Prime sweeps an arm, indicating the room. He lets it fall and looks down at his Head of Special Operations. “You failed me. Because you care more for your image than for the lives of Autobots.”

“So smile.” Let him smile. Let him laugh. The Prime casts a shockwhip down the table, and it spins to a halt in front of an officer who can no longer even look up from under his helm. Jazz’s face shows nothing, but he can’t meet his Prime’s optics. The coldness in Optimus Prime’s voice chills his spark. “Pick it up, and use it. You’ve had your chance to see the damage caused by your ineptitude, your attitude, but you keep that image up. If that’s the most important thing to you, then there is no forgiveness for you. Pick it up, because I have another task for you.”

Jazz reaches out to grasp the hilt uncertainly.

Whatever the Prime stops to murmur in Prowl's audio, it makes the tactician jerk upright, optics whiting out and a denial stamped on his face. Another murmur, and Prowl freezes, protest melting. The urge to fight the accusation slams flat against truth. Agonized revelation bursts open, raw and exposed while the Prime flays him from the inside out. The tips of his doors quiver, and slowly the motion spreads until he is cringing away from the whisper in his audio. He shakes like a leaf in a hurricane. His optics dart left and right, searching for escape. The need to flee is almost visible in how he sits taut on the edge of his seat, but the Prime gives a final whisper.

Defeat takes everything but surrender from him. He gives the barest nod in agreement.

His chair slides back as the Prime steps away, and Prowl never raises his optics. He bends forward over the table, elbows taking his weight and one hand clasping the opposite wrist.

“Jazz.” He drops his helm and swallows guilt. Jazz looks up sharply, glancing between Prime and Second, but Prowl's voice is as firm as it is low. “Administer a disciplinary beating. Punishment for failure to anticipate that the city was a trap, and for the loss of life caused by my lack of foresight.”

This is what he deserves. It was his plan that failed. He needs to pay for his failure before he can be forgiven. Blaster still drones on at the end of the room, arms crossed tight across his midriff as he rocks back and forth, reciting name after name. Every soldier lost deserved more than a simple apology for an error made. Optimus Prime chose Prowl to create a master strategy, and Prowl -- somehow, somehow, and it is a blindness he curses himself for -- failed to fulfill that duty. Other Autobots paid the price for that.

An apology isn’t enough. He must suffer for their forgiveness.

Jazz stands at the Prime's imperious gesture, but he seems unsteady for a second. Only a second, however. His face smooths into a smirking mask, and he steps behind Prowl to raise the whip and begin. The flash of impact snaps across the room in bright light that makes the other officers flinch in reaction. The harsh thuds of the whip against armor will become loud cracks as Prowl gasps and demands more through gritted teeth.

Ratchet vents out hard when the Prime stops behind him, but his leader is compassionate. “You did your best,” the Prime says, and the medic’s throat aches as he has to break that faith.

“I didn’t,” he forces out.
“You didn’t?”

“I…could have done more.”

“Ratchet.” Optimus Prime turns his chair and makes him look up at the kindness that can kill. Kindness understands, but it is merciless in its understanding. It will listen to the facts and try to believe the best of them, but a Chief Medical Officer who lost so many in his medbay doesn’t deserve that. He deserves condemnation, and he deserves the anger of the dead he couldn’t save. “Ratchet,” the Prime repeats, “tell me what you’ve done.”

He obeys. He stands and gracefully sinks to his knees like a penitent sinner before a priest. And, like a priest, the Prime leads him to confess.

The Prime isn’t a priest so much as he is judge and jury. For every botched repair, every casualty triaged as too far gone to save, every life that faded on his surgery table, the heel of the Prime’s foot grinds into Ratchet’s hands. They are flattened against the floor before him, fingers spread wide in humble offering. There’s no attempt to defend himself or lessen the punishment. The dead can’t forgive him. He lost so many lives, failed his duty and his Prime, and he wants this penance.

Ratchet presses his chevron into the floor and recites the names and times of death. He whimpers his apologies. The Prime shifts his foot and grinds down again, and the wreck that should be his Chief Medical Officer stutters that there wasn’t anything more he could do, he swears it.

“He was almost dead! He was dying, there was nothing more I could do. It was either take him off the machine and let him die a few minutes faster, or lose another patient before he died anyway! I had to make the call. I didn’t have a choice,” he promised fervently. “I didn’t.”

“Do you know exactly what would have happened in those last few minutes of his life?” the Prime asks, relentlessly gentle, and that’s what has haunted the medic since he made that call. It is the uncertainty of not knowing that makes Ratchet scream and beg forgiveness, promising that next time he won’t sacrifice the living so easily, and the Prime asks him with pitiless kindness if that’s what he’d done. Does he truly believe that’s what he’d done?

“Yes,” Ratchet whispers, although he has to fight the words out, knowing what it will earn him. The Prime’s weight comes down, and the medic screams again.

But in the back of his pain, Ratchet wonders. Is it what he’d done?

His screams overlay the gasps and pained groans from Prowl, who’s taking his beating well. He not only accepts it, he welcomes it. The pain is buying redemption, one lash at a time. The lives lost to his failure can’t be brought back, but he can pay for his mistakes. He stretches out his doors despite how they tremble in dread, offering them fully to the lash. The metal dents and cracks. The flash of the shock electrocutes the circuitry underneath. Arching his back to meet the pain, he stifles his cries in his throat and concentrates on making this his apology.

He should have saved more. The plan should have been perfect.

The pain stripes his back, missing not an inch of plating as it moves down. Over the sobbing of his vents, now, he hears Wheeljack wildly speaking. He starts to turn his head before reminding himself
that he can only earn his own forgiveness. He will not fail his Prime and his Cause again. Prowl clenches his hands together as if in prayer and pushes his face into the table. It doesn’t block out the half-articulated explanations falling out at the Prime's feet to be trampled on. Wheeljack is frantic to explain himself, but his excuses dead-end in guilt.

The words turn into a keen, then a screech, followed by a moan that hold more internal pain than anything a fist could inflict. The Prime says something, but Prowl can’t hear it over the snap of the whip. Wheeljack babbles garbled words and nonsense, and the Prime baritone growls reproach, turning his words back on him. Prowl grinds his face into the table and remembers the way the Prime's words can cut.

They need his sharp mind turned back on them. They need to be cut by their own words parroted back at them through his perspective. An abscess has festered in them since the battle, and it has scummed over past their own attempts at self-medication. Their treatment plans have failed, and their Prime has stepped in to care for them since they can’t care for themselves. The swelling growth inside them is ripe with a pussy mass of repressed guilt, lost lives, and perfect hindsight. Optimus Prime speaks, and the mess opens.

Now the infection oozes free, everything out in the open and grossly obvious, but he plunges both hands into the weeping wound to purge the source.

The whip falls, and Prowl looses his first scream. It overrides Blaster’s guilt-ridden recitation of dead mechs, but only temporarily.

It'll be a while yet until Jazz finds his own absolution, dropping the whip and throwing himself down to hold the tactician. His image will be completely destroyed by how he pulls Prowl up and tries to convince him it was his faulty information that lost the battle, it's his fault. A plan can't be expected to work when it's built on false info. He'll try to shake sense into Prowl, beg the assembled officers' forgiveness, and finally crawl to the Prime, seeking pardon and re-entry into a Cause he’s utterly convinced he’s failed. Self-doubt has become a palsy, shaking him to the core, and his attitude has been as much of a scab as a symptom of the disease.

The Prime will speak his words, quiet and leading, and he will rip the wounds open to drain. Jazz will writhe at his feet, bleeding, but the infection must be burnt out. Punishment will be brought down upon him until Jazz himself judges it enough. Forgiveness of the dead can only be granted when they stop believing they must beg it, or earn it, or otherwise be cleansed. They will be forgiven once they forgive themselves.

Their method of seeking that forgiveness from themselves is brutal, but it was a hard battle. Their Prime will give them what they asked for, no matter what they ask. This punishment is the medicine they asked him to administer, a brutal dose of playing the persecutor until the illness has been scoured and a new, tender scab can form. Only then can they start to heal.

It's not a cure. But it is treatment, and Optimus will care for them in the aftermath soon enough, assuring them that they never failed him, never disappointed him, and served to the best of their abilities. He is proud of them, so very proud, even when they couldn’t accept the good in themselves. No forgiveness is needed.

That will come later, once they’re ready to believe him.

For now: pain.

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Chapter Summary

Explaining why only the femmes have lipstick, and Perceptor has a crush.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 25
Warning: Spoilers for MTMTE and RiD. Trying to explain an annoyingly stereotypical human design on Transformers.
Rating: PG-13
Continuity: G1, IDW
Characters: Nautica, Brainstorm, Rung, Megatron, Perceptor, Wheeljack, Skyfire.
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors.
Motivation (Prompt): Lipstick Challenge 2014 and a couple commissions.

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Lipstick challenge - Why?

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“No, I mean,” Nautica shrugged, “what part of me are you paying the most attention to when I talk? We knew when we left Caminus that our accent might make it difficult to understand us. We wanted people to pay attention to how our mouths moved to shape the words. It’s why our original party didn’t have anybody with face masks. I was almost disqualified because of this.” She plinked a finger against her optical screen. “They finally ruled it transparent enough to allow people to easily pick out my facial features.”

Most of Swerve’s bar had been drawn into the discussion by now, and faces were being made around the room. Not faces of disbelief or disgust; mechs were testing where their optics fell as they talked. It made so much sense Ratchet had his face in the palm of his hand, muttering to himself about age affecting his optics and brain module. He wasn’t alone in that. Everyone had noticed her accent. Nobody, it seemed, had made the connection between that and going out of her way to make sure they understood what she said.

Nautica went back to applying the cosmetic layer of paint around her mouth, sticking to the natural outline of her lips. She’d had to explain why the tubes of paint were called ‘lipstick.’ She’d had to explain everything, really. Most of it was blindingly obvious in retrospect.

“Doesn’t that layer get chipped off by even, y’know, just talking?” Swerve had asked when she was swilling back her third drink. He was polishing paint transfers off her second glass, slightly frustrated that it wasn’t coming off as easily as he’d expected. Paint transfers didn’t just wipe away. “Looks nice or whatever, but I don’t know how you keep up with the scuff marks.”

“Of course it chips off,” she’d said. “Makes it easy to tell which drink is mine.” A meaningful nod down the bar indicated those who couldn’t be so certain and Whirl, who was taking advantage of that fact to argue that the fuller glass was his. “But it’s not hard to fix. I just put on another layer real quick,” she popped out a mysterious tube and used the side of her glass to see her face as she
smoothed on purple paint, rubbed her lips to spread it, and smiled, “and there we go. Done. And it looks fantastic, thanks for noticing.” She put down her glass and blinked. “What? Why’s everyone staring?”

Silence had fallen around the bar. Everyone had, indeed, been staring.

“…why do you do that?”

“Frag why. Do it again.”

“No, seriously, what’s up with the mouth paint?”

So she’d explained, and now the entire bar was trying to keep track of where their optics naturally fell during conversation. It wasn’t working well because they were too aware of what they were trying to do, but Nautica was enjoying their efforts. She even got a round of thoughtful nods when she successfully ordered a drink by silently mouthing the words instead of speaking aloud.

“I didn’t even know I could read lips.” Swerve was impressed despite himself. “Drink’s on me.”

Everyone at the bar immediately had to try it after that.

Half an hour into the Great Mouth-Watching Experiment, Skids plonked himself down in the seat beside her. “Okay, do me.”

Nautica swept a glance down him. “Not your best line, I hope.”

He coughed. “Ah, not really what I was trying for, but maybe later. Anyway, I meant,” he pointed at his lips. “Paint me.”

She turned her tube of lippaint over in her hand and frowned. “It’s not really your color.”

“Well, I have some touch-up paint. Would that work?”

Nautica took the little jar and shook it. “This’ll do. You got something to apply it with?”

“The smudge-tip won’t work?” She gave him a dry look and mimed pushing the smudge-tip on the jar over her mouth. “Right. No.” Not unless he wanted a flat streak of color smeared across his mouth instead of the contoured lips she’d drawn on her own face. “Hold on, I’ll go find a brush.”

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Lipstick challenge - Other whys

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“I like it.”

Nautica raised an optic ridge at Brainstorm. “There’s science involved. Of course you like it. You know how much testing went into assembling our team? We had to have visible optics, mouths, and be able to speak at least two languages apiece besides having a field of specialty each.”
Brainstorm spun his glass around and pretended not to see Swerve glaring at him for ignoring the ‘No Briefcase’ sign. “Is that why Windblade’s face is painted that way?”

“Partially. Some of it’s just how her old paintjob was before we scored placement in the group.” Nautica dipped her head to see the scientist’s expression. “Why?”

He pretended not to care. “I liked the paint around her optics. The point must have been to make her expressions easier to read, I would guess. A pattern of lights transmitting mood would have been just as effective for longer ranged communication, but the interference with her sight could have made that more difficult to implement. Although there are ways to get around that,” he mused. “Some filters on the optics, like those on mechs with brighter headlights.”

She saw right through his attempt at casualness. “Brainstorm, do you want me to show you how to make up your optics?”

“Pfft, I don’t need help with that. It’s a simple reproduction of image captures using whatever paint I find complementary of my paintjob. Easy to the point of simplicity. Something more difficult would not only look better but provide a challenge!” He half-rose off his barstool, already excited. “Take that, Perceptor, and your blasted red lips!” Those pretty, pretty red lips that could mesmerize him even when talking about safety procedures he found totally unnecessary and redundant. But he’d show Perceptor. They’d just see if the stiff scientist could resist Brainstorm when his optics were painted attention-catching patterns and colors.

Nautica just watched him. She just had to see where this went. She’d paint his optics up for him once he calmed down enough to hint that an example to work from would be welcome, but in the meantime, she wanted to see where his mind took him. After listening to him plot for a while, she grinned and popped out her lipstick to put on a fresh, slick wet coat. “You can have lips, too.”

Brainstorm broke out of his inventor’s trance to blink at her. “How could I possibly -- “

Wet lips pressed to the side of his face mask, leaving a perfect purple print. “There.”

The bar went silent. One hand shot up to hover over the lipmarks, afraid to touch, but Brainstorm’s optics were painfully wide and bright as they stared at Nautica.

“Awesome.” Whirl said into the silence. “We face-less mechs can join in the fun, too. Everybody kiss me.”

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Lipstick challenge - Why not?

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“But why did it go out of style?”

Megatron wished now that he hadn’t commented on the lipstick fad going through the Lost Light, but it was too late to take back his words. It wasn’t an odd thing to comment on, since it’d become a rather obvious change to everyone’s paintjobs. It worked, for the most part, but then there were mechs like Swerve who just couldn’t seem to get the hang of how to paint on the lips instead of around them. Or at least how to stop talking long enough for the paint to dry between applications.

Everyone had been marveling at Rung’s perfect application technique, and Megatron had commented that it was probably because mouth-painting used to be a standard part of paintjobs.
Hey, there was poetry dedicated to the colors used by famous people back in older times. Of course Megatron knew about it.

And of course Rung knew about it. He gave Megatron a gently pained look across the bar that made the ex-Decepticon regret even stepping into the place, much less commenting on the current topic. The psychotherapist sighed and answered, “The Functionalist Party is mostly to blame. It began to set standards and popular fashion as it grew in power. That’s why many of the professions of the time are color-coded, still. Think of medics,” he pointed out when the people around him looked confused. “The only medics who break the color-coding for their profession even now are Decepticons.”

“Ambulon.” Ratchet looked extremely uncomfortable under everyone’s optics, but he’d already spoken. Too late to take it back. “I tried to tell Ambulon he didn’t have to paint over his natural colors, but apparently Pharma made red and white the Delphi Clinic standards. I’d like to think it’s so the miners knew who to flag down during emergencies, but.” He shrugged. Pharma’s mental snap could have started long before he knew.

“Yes,” Rung agreed. “Back when the standards were first being enforced, someone whose frametype didn’t belong to a profession involving public speaking or management could be put under scrutiny by the Functionalists for wearing lippaint.” He rested his fingertips against his own painted lips. “Nautica paints her lips to draw attention to how her mouth shapes words, for our benefit. She reminded me that the words we say, and how we say them, denote a power that has long been stripped away from many of us.”

Megatron could have slipped back out of the room now that attention had shifted to the slender orange mech, but he had to comment on that. “I can tell you why it never came back into fashion among the Decepticons,” he volunteered gruffly. Optics snapped toward him, and his smile was grim. “Overlord. Who in the Pit wanted to look like him?”

He knew about what had happened aboard this very ship. He rather thought they’d agree with his statement.

Hopefully, that would head off the fad before Rodimus painted himself up and started bothering him to create a matching look. He’d go back to his gladiator paint before painting himself up to match Rodimus.

Instead of alarm, however, a wave of consternation rippled across the bar. “You mean he did that on purpose?”

“Slag, mech. Now I want to know what he looked like without the lips painted on.”

“Aw, frag, I forgot. You know that Atomizer has been doing contour shading on his mask? I was going to try it to make my lips look fuller.”

“What? Why?”

“I just like the look, okay?”

“Huh.”

Megatron frowned and resigned himself to being pestered by his co-captain.

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Scribe Protra Commission - Skyfire
Dragging Perceptor’s attention off his work happened at infrequent intervals that usually required a Decepticon attack and three Autobots. That’s not to say he was oblivious, oh no. Perceptor simply possessed the ability to become completely absorbed in whatever project he applied himself to.

Lately, however, the sheen of light off pristine white plating and the subsonic thrum of interstellar flight engines sent his concentration skittering away to the corners of the laboratory, whereupon he couldn’t retrieve it no matter his best efforts. His useful, if single-minded, ability to block out everything but his work evaporated. His focus tugged away, constantly dividing his attention between work and more personal concerns, and absorption into scientific endeavors evaded his exasperated mental grasp. Concentration broke and slipped through his fingers, and his optics continually strayed toward the unusual fellow scientist sharing the laboratory.

The Ark had insufficient space and equipment to allow for multiple laboratories catering to each scientist among the crew. Wheeljack had wedged an engineering workstation among the detritus in the medbay’s machining room, but he shared the main laboratory with the others as well. The common work space between all of the scientists, engineers, and medical personnel did culture cooperation and a tolerance for interruptions, but Perceptor had increasing difficulty shutting out Skyfire’s mere presence. The shuttleformer stifled his natural friendliness and kept to himself when he saw others were occupied, yet Perceptor couldn’t ignore the towering Autobot.

Distraction became a more frequent occurrence the longer the microscope attempted to redirect his wandering mind. Repeated attempts not to think about what he was dwelling on intensified the need to think about it. What began with the occasional evaluating glance developed into lengthy studies that scanned from the floor upward in detailed analysis of thick radiation shielding, upswept wings, and the inherent difference of a scientist who had never endured the limitations war and survival required. The pure pursuit of knowledge still lit Skyfire’s face when he chanced upon some tidbit of information that inspired curiosity and a fresh excitement to chase that information wherever it led.

Perceptor prioritized war-applicable research. He had to. He’d learned the limitations of war the hard way. Death and destruction had chipped away at an initial resolution to preserve science for science’s sake inside himself, despite the war. As much as he prided himself in remaining a scientist whose most significant breakthroughs were for the sake of the greater good and expansion of the collective knowledge, he was entirely aware of the fact that his value to his chosen side of the war lay in what could be turned against the other side.

The less sophisticated Autobots who favored immediate physical results had no compunction about voicing their opinions on him. They saw no worth in his theoretical work or research. His fighting ability alone held his value to them, and while he took no satisfaction in harming anyone, the evidence for possessing basic combat skill was compelling. He’d reluctantly trained for war, and he recognized eons of warfare had changed him. It’d changed them all, warping how they moved and what they thought.

That was the differentiating factor that made Skyfire stand out from the rest of the Autobots but especially from the scientists he should have resembled the most.

Those scientists were more than half warrior, now. They resembled Skyfire far less than they wished.

Perceptor moved through a laboratory, but part of him existed in the alertness of a war-hardened veteran. He remained ready for the battlefield. Most of the time, he could pretend his purpose in the laboratory was the joy of discovery, but the reminders were small and not always subtle. On occasion, the light off a glass beaker made his target sights spin up through his vision. The click and flash of burners igniting tensed his knees in preparation for dodging the explosion. His trigger finger
bent off of anything he picked up, automatically protecting it in case of accident. He stepped lightly, cautiously, and whipped around in a crouch at certain sounds.

Wheeljack was twice as reckless as the most foolhardy frontliner, but he moved through the laboratory like it was another battle to be won. Perceptor and he didn’t need to exchange a word in order to fall into a synchronized rhythm, standing back to back and trading equipment like they were passing ammunition under heavy fire as they operated with the cool-headed efficiency of mechs ruled by logic instead of emotion. They shared space the way veterans shared a foxhole, splicing their individual pieces of personal space together into a union of ability and movement that the other peripherally observed and responded to at a subconscious level trained into them by war.

Skyfire had none of that instinctive awareness. He was highly conscious of everyone around him, but because of his relative size, not because of combat awareness. He stepped aside and checked for clearance as a courtesy, not from defensive reflex clearing way for someone’s shot or looking for snipers. Manners had trained him in making a cautionary stop before entering a room; he was avoiding bowling over anyone emerging instead of taking that brief stop in order to scan the entryway for ambush. Someone coming up on his blindspot made him start and automatically excuse himself for getting in the way, not reach for a pistol or brace his feet.

Perceptor awkwardly started and stopped around him, unconsciously reaching to mesh with a fellow fighter and coming up against something he hadn’t encountered since the early stages of the war: a scientist. A gentle pacifist who’d taken up a weapon under duress but had the inner steel to refuse to surrender his morals even after the shock and loss of nine millions years frozen on Earth. Starscream could and had poured persuasion into the audios of dedicated Autobots and successfully converted them to the Decepticons. Skyfire had the wherewithal to staunchly refuse that seduction.

A former noncombatant had refused the Decepticon Air Commander, rejected one of the most deadly mechs on either side of the war, and survived. That was a wonder in and of itself, but perhaps most marvelous of all was Skyfire’s reaction to accessing and processing further information on the war he’d been thrust into. The shuttle had come to understand the war, understand what his former coworker and friend had become during the years he’d been gone, and yet he retained his hope. He approached his duties as an Autobot from the mindset that he worked toward a near future where the war would end without the extermination of Decepticon or Autobot. He firmly believed in co-existence of the factions.

He had viable plans for it. The upper ranks of the Autobots had uneasily received his suggestions and been dumbfounded by them. An outside perspective on the war was rare enough to leave everyone sputtering from the presumption and naïveté in one.

Perceptor had read the plans. There were plenty of arguments that could be made against Skyfire’s ideas, and just as many to be brought forward to support them. It was utterly disarming that someone had brought forth the suggestion in the first place. Fundamental differences between the factions made an equal solution impossible, and yet...

And yet. Skyfire had questioned facts the Autobots had long accepted as immutable. Perceptor’s first response to analyzing the plans died into thought that turned his assumptions in on themselves as they were revealed to be exactly that: assumptions. He didn’t seriously consider Skyfire’s plans viable, but the courage it took to hold onto unpopular beliefs against the Autobots’ oft-abusive responses to them made Perceptor think further on a subject no one else would dare raise.

Other Autobots considered Skyfire a fool for holding onto hope. Their initial impulse was to lash out against what they were no longer of capable of imagining, but as skeptical as Perceptor was, he could only admire the a spark that hadn’t been beaten down into pessimism by war. Itglowed
through Skyfire’s every motion, giving him a purity and innocence that then directly contradicted the shuttle’s dry wit and bitingly bitter sense of realism.

Skyfire seemed an idealist at first, but Perceptor knew better. The shuttleformer’s dearest desire was to resume working with Starscream as the Seeker was now. He didn’t nurture a dream to magically change the mech he’d once known. He only wanted to reach and work with the part of Starscream that had been there when he’d thawed out of that ice block.

It took a peculiar kind of mech to accept nine million years of changes and strive to rebuild anyway.

That was the trouble. Skyfire was a unique person. A brilliant scientific mind packaged neatly with an indomitable spark might have drawn Perceptor’s optics, but what made his gaze linger was the shell both inhabited.

To put it in laymech’s terms: Skyfire was gorgeous.

Attractive, yes, with glossy armor protecting powerful engines and a smile that could stop a mech’s fuel pump. His careful attention to detail translated into how he touched people, meticulously cautious in pressure applied to the more fragile plating and small joints. It didn’t take a great associative leap to imagine how those big hands might feel under other circumstances. Perceptor shivered whenever he passed his fellow scientist something, perpetually divided between drinking in the play of hands untainted by combat training or staring deep into crystal blue optics as if he could find and harvest the forgotten source of optimism hidden in Skyfire’s spark. Every time their arms touched, he spent the rest of the day replaying the accidental brush of plating.

White armor gleamed, sterilized and polished, and Perceptor had to yank his optics back to his work forty times in five minutes.

If Skyfire wasn’t so dead-set on waiting for the end of the war and whatever potential relationship he might someday resume with Starscream, he couldn’t have avoided noticing the way Perceptor mooned after him. As it was, it seemed impossible that he hadn’t noticed anything at all. Wheeljack was starting to make uncouth jokes about it. Perceptor could only conclude that Skyfire was politely ignoring his somewhat improper crush upon a someone technically under his command.

A command that would, of course, be terminated upon the end of the war, but then Skyfire would be dedicated to courting Starscream back into his laboratory and embrace, one and the same. There would be no consideration given to other relationship options.

Unless, of course, those relationship options included expansion and inclusion instead of exclusion. There was plenty of Skyfire to go around, and Starscream was undeniably beautiful.

Perceptor began exploring something for his own sake, prioritizing discovery for his own purposes and applying the acquired knowledge on something other than the war. It was selfish, but wasn’t research for the sake of research a kind of selfishness in and of itself? The war had interfered with the urge to want something for himself, as opposed to for the Autobots. This was nothing that he would have embarked on if the war hadn’t happened, but he wouldn’t have questioned his freedom to do so.

He needed to start looking up ways to open communication, alternative interfacing techniques, and the logistics of entering into a relationship of more than two mechs. It would be difficult, a continual balancing act, but worth the effort if the experiment paid off in an actual relationship with the stunning scientist who’d thawed out and walked into his professional life to remind him there was a universe to explore outside of war.
With so much on his mind, no wonder Perceptor didn’t have a lot of attention left over to pay to his work these days.

[* * * * *]
Chapter Summary

Megatron loses, the D.J.D. can’t turn down a drink, Prowl goes straight to the point, and Chromedome’s emotions break through.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 26
Warning: slavery, drunk and disorderly massacre, spoilers for MTMTE
Rating: R
Continuity: MTMTE, TFP
Characters: D.J.D., Trailbreaker/cutter, Prowl, Scrapper, Rewind, Chromedome
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Various weird prompt, a comic from a fun artist.

[* * * * *]

TF:Prime - comic by Herzspalter (http://herzspalter.tumblr.com/post/95224599575/yknow-when-i-was-7-years-old-i-didnt-expect-to)

[* * * * *]

The frustrating part is that he can’t even blame Soundwave for switching loyalties. He was, according to everything Knock Out and Soundwave’s efforts could discern, completely mind-dead. With the rightful leader of the Decepticons in a coma without hope of recovery, Soundwave switched loyalty to someone that even Megatron had acknowledged as his successor. The rest of the faction had already done so. Soundwave was a hold-out.

It would have been a touching gesture of loyalty if Soundwave returned to supporting Megatron upon the tyrant’s miraculous recovery. Switching loyalties is understandable; refusing to go back on his new oaths of loyalty when Megatron recovered isn’t. That, Megatron can and does blame Soundwave for.

The truly humiliating part is that Soundwave still doesn’t speak. When Megatron’s glares and growls finally get an answer, it’s in the form of an illustrated argument for why Starscream is the better Decepticon leader, and how Starscream has driven the last of the Autobots into full retreat.

Words are easy to argue. Stark images of success are more difficult to muster convincing arguments against, especially when they’re followed up by a montage of videos and report clips that Soundwave apparently collected the entire course of the war, all pointing out how half the war could have been avoided if -- as Soundwave concluded -- Megatron wasn’t absolutely obsessed with Optimus Prime.

Starscream will end the war, so Soundwave is supporting Starscream. He followed his ex-gladiator compatriot for lack of options and sentimentality for long enough. All hail the new Decepticon leader.

Leaving Megatron at the mercy of said new leader.
Waking up disoriented and chained down on a repair berth was a bad experience. It went downhill from there.

He grimaces when the distinctive clicking of Starscream’s heels approaches the area designated his pen. The Vehicons are too used to his chained presence to react to his various snarling noises anymore, but they prudently clear that half of the bridge as their new leader makes for the limits of Megatron’s reach. Not that Megatron can really do much with inhibitor claws welded directly into his motor control centers and sense enough to know the consequences of treading on Starscream’s temper while so hobbled will only bring the Decepticons down on his helm. Still, as much as the limits of the heavy chain attached to his collar are his pen, they’re also his territory.

Megatron is grudgingly adjusting to his position as some kind of strange pet, prisoner, and trophy. That doesn’t mean he has to be gracious about it.

Yet Starscream’s smirk is broad as anything as he sits on the lead block serving to keep Megatron down. The only time the chain on his collar unhooks from it is when he pleases this blasted Seeker, and he knows it. That didn’t stop him from biting Starscream’s foot the last time it was shoved in his face like this.

The fool never learns. Megatron glowers from under his helm and controls himself while the dainty heel scratches gently down his face.

Starscream smiles, sweet and menacing. Rather than waiting for the order they both know is coming, Megatron growls and grabs for the foot, intending to give it the same treatment as last time. Starscream wants his foot kissed? Fine. It’ll come with a deep set of teethmarks again, then.

“Oh-ah-ah-ah,” comes from over his head as Megatron presses his mouth to that impossibly delicate foot. “I think my attack dog best learn from last time, or I’ll need to have the good doctor train him not to bite the hand -- or any other body part, you fragger -- of his owner.” The aloof warning lost a little something from the muttered clarification in the middle, but Megatron glances across the bridge warily.

Knock Out looks put-upon to be dragged into anything, at any time, but he’s brandishing a pair of clippers at Breakdown like they’re the most exasperating thing he’s ever held. Breakdown just looks bored.

Clippers?

Megatron doesn’t immediately get it, because he’s already muzzled. Soundwave disabled his vocalizer on Starscream’s orders.

But Starscream reaches down and taps a pointed claw under his optic. When Megatron tilts his head to look up, suspicious, that claw trails down to click across his teeth. “Misuse those teeth again, and you won’t get another chance to use them,” the Seeker says.

Ah. So Starscream did learn.

Megatron’s lip curls in a snarl, but he obediently pulls his mouth back without delivering the sharp bite he intended to. Starscream leans back on his hands and smiles, arrogantly confident in his power.

Inhibitors or not, Megatron’s hands are strong enough to bend the prongs of Starscream’s heel into a single point.

“Oh! Stop that!”
"Trailbreaker was probably drunk when the D.J.D. showed up"

"Ah, Kaon?"

Against the backdrop of battlecries and screams, Tarn’s voice held a strange note that made the D.J.D. as a whole pause. “Yeah?”

"Autobot. Just less than two-thirds my height. Seems to have an impenetrable forcefield."

Kaon ran the description through the Peaceful Tyranny's database and came up with a name. “Trailbreaker. He'll run out of energy eventually, but otherwise don't waste your time trying to break it.”

"Yes, well, you see, he’s put the forcefield around the bar."

"There goes the schedule," Helex muttered, slugging somebody aside. "I don’t see Overlord yet, either."

"That’ll take a while to drain," Kaon agreed. "See if he’ll overexert himself trying to protect his friends?"

"I would, but he’s apparently too drunk to even notice I have the bartender hostage." Tarn hesitated, voice going a little high and odd. "He’s rather insistent about buying me a drink."

This time, the pause came with a break in the fighting. There were certain rules Decepticons adhered to: 1. obey the Decepticon Cause above all, 2. don’t trust Starscream, and 3. never turn down a free drink. Never. No, seriously. Don’t ever do it. More mechs kicked it after refusing a free drink — ‘it could be your last’ — than science could ever adequately explain.

The D.J.D. wasn’t superstitious, but they certainly weren’t stupid. There were legitimate reasons that the only place Autobots and Decepticons could even remotely communicate was in bars.

"He’s trying to buy ‘you and your friends’ a round," Tarn said numbly. He sounded like he had no idea what to do, which he didn’t, because what the frag. What the ever-lovin’ holy frag was this, some kind of Autobot SpecOps move done drunkenly in a bar?

It wouldn’t have stopped a serious assault, but technically, they’d only attacked this ship because Overlord was detected onboard. What else was a killer Decepticon death squad do? Obvious solution: attack and destroy. But they hadn’t actually seen any evidence that Overlord was free, which made it a prisoner-exchange situation if they had to back off, which they would because now there was an Autobot drunkenly insisting Tarn pull up a chair and be his new best bud, and there. Were. Rules.

Fragging Pitslag cogsucking clever Autobot glitches.

Vos facepalmed, snapping his mask back into place. Kaon just put his face in his hands. Tesarus dropped the Autobot he’d been about to stuff into his torso, and Helex reluctantly let go of the mech he’d been about to crumple like tinfoil.

"…I’ll take a Sheet Metal with a twist."
"The bartender says they have Nightmare Fuel."

"Dibs!" All reluctance fled, and the only Autobot injuries inflicted after that announcement was when Pipes didn’t get out of the way of the stampede fast enough.

Off in the background, a shaking white Autobot vanished, never to be seen or mentioned until the attackers-turned-drinking buddies went away again, slightly more inebriated than they’d arrived.

And they lived happily ever after.

(Except for Overlord, but none of the Autobots cared about him.)

[*** ***]

"Prowl walked into a bar..."

[*** ***]

If Scrapper had a mouth, he’d have spat his drink out.

The black-and-white surveyed the room coolly, optics passing over the various Decepticons gaping at him. While technically there was no particular reason why an Autobot couldn’t be present on the supply depot at the same time as the Decepticons, factually speaking, it’d never happened. The Galactic Council had bans against Cybertronians in place. This supply depot still sold to Cybertron, but they were pretty on the fence about it. The Decepticons tried not to push them.

Getting both factions here at once was pushing it. It meant that the Autobots were aware this was a Decepticon resource, and/or the supply depot was also selling to the Autobots. Either way, things on this asteroid had just gotten a whole lot tenser.

Nobody was going to make the first move, however. Scrapper’s supply order was stuck in processing while a funding glitch got sorted. He couldn’t build without it. He certainly wasn’t going to go back to the main formation and report failure to acquire supplies.

That left tolerating the Autobot.

It could be a difficult task, considering the fact that Prowl headed right for his spot at the bar. It might be the three drinks talking, but Scrapper couldn’t summon any moral outrage over that fact. The Autobot was polished to a fair-thee-well and looked like a floor model ready for display. It took a cold look and a biting comment to shut down the two overcharged Decepticons who made a pass at him on the way to the bar. The sole sober pass at him got a curt dismissal followed by a baffled look as the flirting warrior persisted in handing over his commcode.

There was tolerating the enemy, and then there was appreciating a fine piece of aft when it walked into the bar. Hey, if a mech couldn’t beat the Autobot, there was always joining him -- in a bed, in the alleyway out back, pressed up against a wall somewhere in a dark corner…

Primus, those headlights. It was enough to give a mech ideas.

Scrapper turned back to his drink and sucked it down to shore up his decaying moral fiber. Mission: acquire supplies. Return to the main formation. Build.

A small body inserted itself into the thin space between Scrapper and the nameless grunt Scrapper no longer gave a bolt about unless he moved, because moving would mean Prowl wasn’t pressed up against his side that way. The Constructicon leader concentrated firmly on his empty drink. The
bartender, optics wide, sidled over to ease another one into his tensed hands.

Prowl gave a wriggle that had to be illegal. “I admit that I’m unfamiliar with the protocol, but typically this would be the point that you offer to buy me a drink.”

“I…what?” Scrapper’s visor reset. Had he heard that right? Dumbfounded, he looked down at the delicious bit of shiny glued to his hip. And thigh. And – okay, Prowl was definitely pressing closer than required. The other Decepticons were giving them a discreet buffer zone, most of them looking into it with the resigned faces of envious lesser beings.

“A drink.” An elegant hand waved at the waiting bartender. “Buy it for me.”

Scrapper looked at the bartender. He looked at the Autobot. “Why would I do that?” Something wasn’t quite processing right about this situation. He didn’t know what was happening, but he had a feeling that he’d been outmaneuvered already.

Prowl sighed. “I was voted the most able to pump you for information on your project. I’m here to do exactly that.” Scrapper made a little muted sound of utter shock. “In the interests of cutting out the inefficient portion of the evening where I flirt until your processors are overridden your interfacing hardware, I propose we skip directly to a quick drink and finding a relatively private place to consummate the deal.”

He almost asked ‘what deal?’ but then it hit him what exactly Prowl was proposing.

Blunt, to the point, and Scrapper’s interfacing hardware came online in an embarrassingly whir. This pretty, polished Autobot was here to do everything and anything his depraved imagination had been dreaming. All Scrapper had to do was accept that the mech wanted information in return. A transaction, as it were.

It…it wouldn’t be the first time a Decepticon had been seduced like this. Popular theory was that Autobot SpecOps dedicated entire training seminars to how to frag a mech to talking. This was the first time Scrapper had ever heard of someone being this open about it, but he was having a hard time being offended or getting defensive over it.

The efficiency turned his engine something fierce, to be honest.

“Shouldn’t you be buying me a drink?” he said somewhat feebly, still trying to wrap his head around it. Which wasn’t in any way a refusal of the deal, no no. It was a very appealing deal.

Prowl smiled slow and burning. “I don’t see why. I’m the one who’s going to be doing most of the work.” He gestured at Scrapper’s untouched drink. “Drink up. You’re going to need the energy.”

[* * * * *]

"the Constructicons never figured out why they found Prowl so attractive"

[* * * * *]

He should have woken up cold, groggy, and full of regrets for the night previously.

Instead, he woke up ready for another round.

Scrapper’s plight was helped along substantially by the hot body laying over him in a relaxed drape of limbs. Those limbs were beautifully flexible, as he well remembered. They were also black, white, and eminently gropeable. His hands were sliding down a sleek back before his sad defenses had
more than a chance to register the missed opportunity to activate.

He hadn’t expected the Autobot to still be here. He hadn’t expected the Autobot to be studying him through drowsy optics, half-asleep and languid.

Prowl stretched. He didn’t hurry. Scrapper occupied himself filling his hands with bits of chassis exposed by the widened gaps in the armor. There was something terribly fascinating about knowing this sweet bundle of black-and-white was scheming his way into Scrapper’s plans.

He sincerely hoped the rest of his gestalt wasn’t impacted by this fling.

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"Belated"

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Eventually, they had to go inside.

Megatron granted him a kindness, although it boggled Rewind’s mind to look back at it. He’d been ready to die. All he’d wanted in that last moment before death was the distant, comforting thought that when reality edited itself, the final footage had Chromedome still living in it. After everything he’d witnessed, after everything that’d happened, it was Chromedome’s death that’d killed him. He’d only wanted a good thing to die for.

“You’re inseparable,” Megatron had said, easy and smirking like it was a joke. Like they were so close even he thought it was amusing.

That was a version of reality worth being erased for.

Then Rewind hadn’t died, and Skids hadn’t explained anything -- he was excellent at skimming through things without actually explaining them -- except that Megatron had lied. In the reality the quantum engine decided to keep, Rewind had died when Overlord got loose. That was the extent of Skids’ explanation.

People started appearing in the Rod Pod, and Rewind had needed a moment to himself. The first wide-opticked look of shock rasped him raw, and Ratchet’s dropped jaw had him dodging out of sight before Swerve and Tailgate recovered enough to see him. The others had slid their gazes past him as he stumbled for the ladder to the outside. He’d just needed some time to recover.

He didn’t know whose kindness sent Chromedome out to him. He doubted it was Megatron’s, but the mech had surprised him that way already.

They sat together for a while. They sat closer and closer out in the cold of space until the only warm spots were where their armor pressed into one another, and even then they weren’t close enough, couldn’t be close enough. Rewind felt cold. He felt frozen. The arm around him wasn’t enough. The side pressed to his didn’t grant enough surface area.

They did have to go inside, however. Reluctant, he started to stand.

Chromedome pulled him into his lap. Rewind didn’t even get a chance to see the flash of panic pass through his visor before the arm around him tightened and he was swept off his feet to straddle Chromedome’s legs. The magna-clamps engaged, feet tamping to the Rod Pod’s roof, and Rewind blinked as he was enfolded in a hug that would put a compactor to shame.
“Don’t,” Chromedome whispered hoarsely over shortwave comm. frequency. “Don’t leave me again. Don’t ever leave me again.” Arms tight around him, his hands came around to close on Rewind’s battered shoulder pauldrons, fingers rubbing and slipping over the damage as if trying desperately to absorb the feel of him. The side of his mask nudged and rubbed just as urgently against the side of Rewind’s helm. “Don’t ever do that to me again. Please, don’t ever do that. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

Surprised, Rewind pushed his hands against Chromedome’s shoulder tires. “Domey, no -- “

If anything, Chromedome’s grip tightened. His helm turned, pulling back until he could nuzzle at Rewind’s mask. Frantic, paint-scraping nuzzles as he kissed all over his miracle’s face. “Re-Rewind,” he stumbled over the name like he didn’t dare say it aloud, “oh, Primus. Rewind!!”

That distance back was enough for Rewind to see Chromedome’s face, and the wide look of near-terror in the yellow visor lurched a sick memory among the fresh footage in his databanks. His hands stopped pushing at tires and instead spread gentle fingers over pristine glass. No cracks, no reflections but stars behind his own distorted reflection. Smooth, flawless glass, warm and alive.

“Domey…”

“I love you,” Chromedome blurted. “I love you! I didn’t say it, I was so stupid, I didn’t say it. I didn’t say it, and you -- you -- I love you. I love you. Please don’t leave me again. I love you. I love you I love you I love you I love you,” it settled into a steady chant, a sparksick mantra as he held Rewind close, rocking them back and forth.

Rewind’s hands stroked over his face, disbelieving but wanting to believe. When those little hand pulled him close to nuzzle and kiss in matching neediness, Chromedome met him halfway.

They could go inside later.

[* * * * *]
Chapter Summary

Random things, various characters finding porn fics, a quick death, Shattered Glass D.J.D., and some strange AU.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 27
Warning: Embarrassment, porn, suggested nonconsensual, voyeurism, xeno, scandalized Phase Sixers, spoilers for MTMTE, death, justice.
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW, G1, Shattered Glass
Characters: Everyone.
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Silly memes off Tumblr, continuing ideas from others, stuff and sundry.

[*** ***]

"Ratchet - medic’s hands"

[*** ***]

Blue and red entwined, sensitive to the pressure they put on each other.

Pharma’s hold always started delicate, testing out Ratchet’s limits. His hands held red hands lightly, a barely-there pressure that served to tease instead of satisfy. Ratchet had more confidence; he gripped firmly and rolled blue knuckles between his fingers.

Pharma’s optics flashed, and he buckled forward to dig sharp chevron tips into Ratchet’s shoulders. The older medic smirked and capitalized on the advantage before the flyer recovered. Pharma had always been such a sucker for dirty talk and flattery, and Ratchet did so love to make the mech lose his composure with nothing but the filthy language. Experience counted for a lot when talking with one’s hands, after all.

[*** ***]

"Fortress Maximus - a group of ‘Cons"

[*** ***]

They looked up at him. They looked at the way he pounded his fists into each other.

No amount of money from Pharma was worth what they saw thundering toward them.

He charged. The two Decepticons dropped to their knees, forehelsms to the floor, hands tucked to the back of their necks, and every interface and access hatch popped open in utter, blatant offering. It
was complete surrender made in the most obvious way, Decepticons throwing themselves at a superior’s mercy by making it absolutely clear they’d do anything to save their miserable lives. Their body language screamed, ‘Please please please don’t kill us,’ combined with ‘Look, you can use us, please use us, we won’t stop you.’

The room held its breath.

Fortress Maximus came to a dead stop standing over them, and nothing made it more terribly clear how thoroughly outclassed they were than to have feet the size of their bodies stomping down beside their helms. They cringed lower but arched to present their arrays. This was the very worst place in the universe to be standing, so they wouldn’t be getting to their feet for all the money in Delphi. Not unless or until they were ordered.

It was a mercy when he reached for them.

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"Rewind - secret footage"

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“What are you watching?”

“Nothing interesting.”

Chromedome was immediately interested. “You only say that when you recorded something really good. What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Not a thing. And nobody.”

“Nobody?”

“Nope.”

“Nobody at all?”

“Of course not. Would I record anyone?”

“No, no, what was I thinking,” Chromedome murmured. “So we’ll be watching nobody and nothing when, exactly?”

“Tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“It might set the mood.”

“Oh, I see.”

[* * * * *]

"Tarn"
He knew there was something off the moment he got the file. It was the wrong size for a report, unless the traitor had been particularly significant. There would have been a broadcast of such an execution, however. How strange.

Soundwave scanned the file, curious but cautious. It came up clean, nothing but text and a lot of it. Huh.

Five minutes after he opened it, a second message from the Peaceful Tyranny arrived. It was one of Tarn’s verbose, rather florid messages, this one apologizing for the mistakenly sent file and requesting he delete the previous message because this message had the actual report Soundwave had requested attached to it. The other file was something unimportant. Nothing business-related at all. He could just delete it. Tarn’s was most apologetic for the small mix-up.

Soundwave ignored the message.

A third message arrived a minute later. More ornate language shaped a profuse, humble apology for the first message and wasting his time, so sorry, Soundwave should just erase it. Immediately, if he would, and send a confirmation that Tarn’s little faux pas was forgiven. Forgotten, even. Ah hah hah, no harm, no foul. Tarn felt terribly ashamed for having wasted Soundwave’s time by mistakenly transferring such an unimportant file like that.

This was beginning to entertain him.

The fourth message dumped into Soundwave’s message queue soon after. It was interesting how far Tarn could strain his linguistic skills to write formal, persuasive, civilized ‘Should I be apologizing? Give me a clue what you’re doing over there? Please?’ messages when he was quite clearly starting to panic.

Soundwave didn’t even bother reading the fifth message. He attached the edited first pages of the pornography he was slogging through and sent it back.

Tarn took it well. There was nothing like brutal spell-checking and grammar-hacking to cut a mech down to size. The sixth message was a cringing, debased apology that crawled into Soundwave’s inbox like it could feel disdain pouring down upon it. Soundwave’s commentary on the feasibility of the next chunk of badly-written sexual acts stomped all over that apology and kicked it back to Tarn in a bedraggled, humiliated mass. Bad enough that Tarn had sent him porn, but it was just insulting to have been sent porn of such low quality it was nothing but poor research and a lack of understanding of how interface equipment worked.

To be honest, Soundwave was enjoying himself by the time the seventh message oozed into his inbox to prostrate Tarn at his feet via words, but he wasn’t going to let Tarn know that. The leader of the Justice Division was a lot more manageable like this.

He decided to hint that he might be passing this thing on to Megatron. Maybe Tarn would implode from shame.

"Onslaught"

“He’s my boss,” Vortex said, wary.
“Yup.”

“No, look. He’s my boss.” The Combinicon looked at the eager fingers wriggling over the keypad. Reflector usually did entertainment for the Earth-stranded Decepticons using visual media, but there was a portion of the faction that preferred reading over watching vids. What they preferred to read was what had trapped Vortex here, in a far too small a room, brainstorming ideas for stories that he’d rather not come into existence.

Duty was duty, however. Megatron’s word was law, and Vortex was scheduled to be Reflector’s flunky for the next six shifts.

The ‘copter covered his visor with his hand and groaned. “What I’m saying is that I’ve never fragged him, and he’d never frag me even if I offered. I don’t have anything to tell you other than that one time we pretended to make out in an alleyway to shake the Enforcers chasing us. It really didn’t go anywhere other than -- “ Reflector was already writing. “For Primus’ sake, nothing happened! He didn’t even sneak a grope of my rotor hub!”

They gave him eerily synchronized smirks. “He will have by the time we’re done.”

Onslaught was going to kill him for this.

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"Grimlock"

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“Someone stop him!” someone yelped on the Autobot side of the battlefield, and it drew a few curious stares from the Decepticons. Being that this was during the middle of a battle, they quickly went back to punching and shooting. Someone always needed to be stopped during battle. That was why they were fighting, after all.

It drew more attention when Bumblebee cannonballed out of nowhere, tossed across the battlefield by Ironhide, and hit Megatron in the chest. “You dare!” the silver tyrant roared, staggering back under the sudden weight that scrambled and climbed, refusing to sit still or get off.

A disturbance started on the far side of the battlefield. The fight parted before it like water before the prow of a ship. Even flailing at the Autobot climbing him, Megatron could tell the Dinobots were on the move.

Bumblebee grabbed him by both sides of the helm and ordered, “Run. Now. You don’t want to know what he’s going to do to you,” right as Grimlock reached the base of the hill and transformed.

Oddly, the Dinobot leader didn’t seem to be armed. He was, however, holding a pair of handcuffs and some jumper cables.

Megatron didn’t stick around to find out why.

[* * * * *]

"Starscream"

[* * * * *]

Skyfire hit Starscream like a boulder falling from the sky, slamming the smaller flyer down in a
punishing, *crunching* crash. Starscream slammed into the ground so hard he didn’t wake up until after repairs back at base.

“What’d you do?” Skywarp asked. “Usually you two ignore each other. I thought you guys were, y’know, eybering it up.”

The Air Commander shot him a black look, because in theory that was a secret and in practice everyone knew. They all wanted in on the virtual sex. Starscream had a way with words, alright? Soundwave looked scorched about the vents anytime he intercepted a transmission.

The disapproval slid into a sly grin. “He was using his size in ways I didn’t approve of.” Optics glazed as the eavesdropping mechs in the repairbay happily imagined that.

“So?”

“So I decided to cash in one of my ‘interface toy’ cards.”

Oh Primus, there were cards. Everyone knew there were rules and whatnot between those two, but what were the cards? Details, please!

Except that Starscream’s smile was viciously self-satisfied, and that never ended well. “He didn’t appreciate me choosing ice as the toy.”

[* * * * *]

”Tracks”

[* * * * *]

It’d been a long, long time since Ratchet had needed an instruction manual for interfacing. It’d been even longer since he knew the author of the manual he was perusing. He sternly told his fans that they weren’t needed, so please stop spinning. He wasn’t some kind of pervert getting off on a second-hand account of how to frag a human. He was a medical professional being called upon for his services in a potentially delicate situation.

That Tracks and Raoul had well in hand, apparently.

“Everything feels okay?” he said after resetting his vocalizer. Oh dear. That didn’t seem physically possible, but if Tracks had written it into the guide, then it’d already been done.

“Yes.”

“Raoul’s been to see a doctor?”

“The hospital was most accommodating. His physical came back clean. Not even a bruise.” Tracks preened, proud of himself.

“Then I’ll just…file this.” In case other Autobots wanted to frag a human at some point in the future.

Considering what he’d just read, the future might be soon in coming.

[* * * * *]

”Whirl”

[* * * * *]
Rung sighed, letting stress disperse through his vents until he felt calm enough to speak again. “That was not what I meant by engaging in a team-building activity,” he said quietly, “but I suppose as long as it was well-received, there is no actual rule against it.”

“Not yet, but he’s working on it.”

He tried not to look disappointed in his patient. Whirl had, after all, done as he’d requested. Admittedly, he’d done so in a typically Whirl way, but he’d stuck to the letter of the request by writing something meant to engage the interest and positive attention of someone else aboard the ship. Rung had emphasized the ‘positive’ part. Whirl had made a point of having perfect grammar.

That was progress, of a sort. The piece was crafted well, researched and written with an optic for detail that did catch interest, even if it then used that interest to sucker the reader into reading explicit pornography. And, as Whirl said, there wasn’t actually a rule against sending Ultra Magnus such a thing under the guise of cooperating with counseling.

It might even explain why Ultra Magnus had pinged him with an appointment request at long last.

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"Prowl"  
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“This is a bad idea. This is a really bad idea. He’s going to murder us in our sleep. He’s going to string us up by our tires.” Scavenger cringed as Hook hit the ‘Send’ key. “Noooooooo. We’re gonna die. We’re gonna die.”

“But what a way to go, eh?” Bonecrusher slapped him on the back. “We’ll be fine!” Yet the Constructicons were carefully keeping their backs to the nearest walls, Scavenger noticed.

Walls that they abruptly plastered themselves to when the rigidly indignant form of their reluctant sixth appeared in the doorway. There might have been a couple of involuntarily, terror-fueled transformations. A few. Five, at most.

Glacial blue optics swept over the alarmed, scared-motionless herd of construction vehicles before settling on Scavenger. “You!” Prowl barked, stabbing a finger at him, then at the floor in front of himself. “Here. Now!”

A pathetic, frightened little noise bled from his engine as he obeyed. It sounded a lot like, “I don’t want to dieeeeee.”

Prowl turned on a heel tire and stomped off with Scavenger rolling in his wake.

Two hours later, the Constructicons were nervous, jumpy, and ready to storm Prowl’s office. Not a peep had been heard from their fifth and sixth since judgment and doom had descended on the team. They’d have felt it if Prowl murdered one of them, right? Right?!

Then Scavenger limped back to them.

“What happened?” Long Haul demanded the second they were sure he wasn’t about to collapse.

Scavenger blinked up at them blearily. “Chapter three.”

Dead silence.
“…what, all of it?”

Scavenger managed a nod.

“…you…you might want to lie down.”

“Thanks,” Scavenger mumbled right before he passed out.

They couldn’t blame him.

[***]

"Thundercracker"

[***]

“Um.”

Thundercracker checked to make sure Buster wasn’t under his hand before clenching it into a fist.

“Um.”

Now that he read it, that was a much more authentic interfacing scene between humans. It was just… unexpectedly personal reading what Josh Boyfriend was doing to Susan Journeyer, and Thundercracker shifted around, fidgeting the further he read. Making fanfiction about a show was what human audiences did, but he hadn’t really expected the humans to do -- well, this.

He’d never thought about Josh Boyfriend that way, and now he couldn’t stop, and Thundercracker couldn’t keep himself and Susan Journeyer entirely separate in his head and desires anymore.

[***]

"Constructicons"

[***]

The Stunticons were a lot of things, young and insane being the most noticeable. They were also shiny, sleek, confident, and the newest technology available for gestalts and ground models. They made head turns everywhere they went, and it wasn’t always because the person was turning to yell, “Shut up!” at them.

When they merged, all hope was lost. Devastator was in love.

Well, lust. But that was close enough to love among the Decepticons.

It was something about the helm spikes, or how the muscle cars that made up Menasor’s limbs were so temptingly curvy while attached to the brutal, blocky strength of his torso. Sure, he was psychotic, but who didn’t get a little crazy during battle? Really, it wasn’t like Devastator wanted him for his mind.

Menasor only combined for battle, which made courting the other combiner rather difficult. Megatron would heartily disapprove if his two powerhouses went at it on the battlefield, especially if they went at it the way Devastator wanted. There was a way around that, however! Part of Menasor’s psychosis came from the fact that he was a conglomeration of the Stunticons’ minds instead of a separate personality. Devastator, being more stable, was a personality of his own that
slumbered in the back of the Constructicons’ heads until a merge woke him.

He slept restlessly, these days. The Constructicons started merging outside of battle, their standard method of figuring out what was wrong with their team dynamics. It didn’t generally give them insight into each other’s minds, but Devastator could figure out what was going on and settle them down one at a time once they were merged.

Or he could write filthy dirty smut and send it to the Stunticons under their names. That was also an option.

And the Constructicons, who weren’t conscious while Devastator was awake, had no idea why the Stunticons were suddenly eyeing them speculatively.

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"Overlord"

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“Phase Seven Warrior Elite? Oh, that seems like a poor idea,” Overlord murmured, and Sixshot and Black Shadow were immediately interested.

It wasn’t often that the three of them were in the same solar system, much less peacefully sitting about in circumstances where they didn’t want to murder each other on sight. They’d been scheduled for maintenance before deployment, however, so here they were. There was only one medibay set up to handle the Empire’s super soldiers. Sharing space would have to be tolerated for now.

The other two Warrior Elite slid up behind Overlord’s chosen seat, not-so-subtly peering over his shoulders at the datapad in his hand, and they went still and silent as they read. It seemed the Empire thought them capable of sharing a lot more than a waiting room. And that certainly went above and beyond tolerance.

“Where did you get this filth?” Sixshot asked, voice a little strangled by indignation. Unexpected mental images were doing things to his mind that his mind didn’t really know what to do with.

Overlord barely glanced up before continuing to scroll down as he read. “Convenience store outside the docking tube. I don’t think they expect anyone above a grunt rank to walk into those, but I do believe I’m going to make a habit of it from now on. There was a whole display rack of these novellas. The cover art on the download tab alone was worth the price.” He jerked his head at the tab discarded to the table his elbow rested on.

Black Shadow tore his optics away from the screen long enough to look at the tab, and then he couldn’t look away. “I don’t -- I can’t --“

“I’d rather not know if you do or can, thank you,” Overlord said drily. “According to the last chapter, all of us apparently can and do rather frequently.”

“What am I even reading?” Sixshot squeaked as indignation was overrun by stark disbelief.

“Repopulation of the Empire, as done by the three of us. Four.” Overlord’s optics widened fractionally as the next chapter came up. “Twelve.”

[* * * * *]

"Sixshot"
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Fragging Pit. Overlord had been right.

Sixshot walked past the frozen enegex snacks and pushed through the group of genericons bickering in the ammo section to get to what looked like an interfacing aid display right next to the check-out. The apathetic clerk grunted a vague question -- “Whaddyawant?” -- in the style of bad customer service everywhere. He didn’t even look up from the game he was playing on his commpad. Sixshot probably registered as a blur of ‘customer; not currently throwing purchases on the counter or shooting at me; safe to ignore.’

Sixshot was rather glad to be ignored. His visual field flickered erratically as he took in the display. Aside from an assortment of cheap toys, luridly colored and flavored lubes, and a holoprojector chock full of erotically posed mechs with…nonstandard equipment…there was also an array of download tabs for novellas.

He noted, somewhat disturbed, that the slot for the novella Overlord had shown him was bought out. There were plenty of other options, all well-stocked. Sixshot picked up one tab to read the summary on the back and nearly swallowed his vocalizer. He and Ratchet? Who would put him with an Autobot, much less the Autobot Chief Medical Officer?! That was sick! Wrong!

The clerk didn’t bother to look up as he rang up the purchase.

* * * *

"Black Shadow"

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This all started with a bad idea, but it got progressively worse from there.

Bad idea: reading the thing Overlord had bought.

Worse idea: talking about it with each other. In their defense, they had been stuck in a waiting room with nothing else to do. Their choices for entertainment had been slim. Discussing lousy pornography probably wasn’t any worse than any other idea they could have come up with.

Except they then went on to the worst idea: mocking the novella until Black Shadow stupidly called Overlord out on one flamboyantly condemning phrase, whereupon Overlord did indeed insist that he could write something better. A claim that neither Black Shadow nor Sixshot believed until they got it in their inboxes in all its engine-sputtering glory. He could indeed write better.

At the end of the story, of course, was an insufferably smug dare from Overlord to top that.

There should be a law somewhere against daring mechs like them. They were unable to back down from challenges.

* * * *

"A quick death"

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“Don’t do it. Don’t,” Drift pleaded from where Tesarus’ machine hands held him helpless. It’d
started out as a demand, an order, then choked down to this quiet, earnest, hopeless plea. “Don’t. They’ll kill us all anyway. Don’t do it.” He didn’t think he’d change Ratchet’s mind, but he had to say it. He couldn’t accept this.

Beside him, held in Helex’s grasp and equally helpless, Hound trembled violently. He seemed unable to process the deal Ratchet had brokered out of grim, desperate determination. He’d been knocked out for the first few minutes of negotiations, dragged behind the walking smelter after losing his fight. The blurry memory of a crowd of gurgling, gasping, feebly twitching Autobots clearly left to die made him think he’d been chosen for this simply because he was still coherent.

Tarn wanted Ratchet willing to do anything. Using Drift hadn’t been sufficient motivation, he felt, because a traitor just didn’t have the ethical impact of using an innocent mech. Threatening to punish Hound alongside Drift had done the trick nicely.

Despite what Drift was trying to tell him, Ratchet was very well aware the D.J.D. would kill the three of them in the end. As he lifted his chin for the collar, he kept his face impassive, not even acknowledging Drift. He hadn’t tried to bargain for life. He knew the D.J.D wouldn’t honor that agreement. He’d gone for the one thing he thought they’d agree to: a quick death. Grant them a quick death, and Ratchet would serve.

He’d do what Tarn wanted, however he wished, for as long as Tarn told him to, and he’d do it because the alternative was unthinkable.

“There you are,” the despicable creature masquerading as a mech purred, voice rich and satisfied. There was a flare of heat at the back of Ratchet’s neck as Vos welded the collar shut. “Much improved, don’t you agree?” An edge to that voice said he’d better agree or else.

“Sure, whatever,” Ratchet said through gritted teeth. “Are you going to get on with it sometime today?”

Drift grunted. Hound’s vents made a distinct whistling noise, air rushing in against the fans, although he didn’t cry out.

Ratchet dimmed his optics and cycled air. When his optics lit again, his face had drained of all expression. “Forgive me. Of course it’s an improvement, master.”

“Good pet.” The words were viciously sweet but directed over his head at the two Autobots struggling behind him. “Chief Medical Officer, pet of the Decepticon Justice Division. Perhaps we’ll keep you.” It was a tormenting sliver of hope that struck home if Drift’s strained whine was anything to go by.

He didn’t turn to look. He didn’t resist in any way as his chin was lifted on a curled forefinger. Optics unfocused, he just accepted the little touches to his helm, his face, down his back, over his hubcaps. They were meant to mark him, claim him. Show the helpless ex-Decepticon forced to watch that the Justice Division could and was making his companions suffer for his crime.

Ratchet cooperated, because he’d bargained hard that the suffering of the other two Autobots be limited to humiliation and helplessness. Drift and Hound would watch what Ratchet willingly submitted to, and they would know it was for their sake. And, in the end, if Tarn honored the bargain, their deaths would be relatively swift. Considering what the other option was, it was a merciful bargain by the D.J.D.’s standards.

Vos began to pry between armor plates, looking for a reaction as much as just inspecting their prize. Ratchet relaxed as much as he could and tried not to feel the first minor pangs of pain. It would get
worse before long, he was sure. Kaon murmured approval of the hands that turned to grasp his, and Ratchet kept his mind detached from what the mech guided his hands to do.

He could ignore the pain. He could imagine his hands busy in some sort of surgical procedure, the sighing groan a patient responding to the stroke of a finger, but the hand that’d been playing with the collar demanded his attention.

Tarn made him look up, far up, until their optics met. “Now, pet, what kind of tricks do you know?”

A thumb came to rest on his lower lip, a hint that might as well have been an order. It wasn’t like he had a choice.

“Don’t,” Drift whispered behind him. “Ratchet, please. I’m -- I’m not worth this.”

Without breaking optic contact, Ratchet opened his mouth.

[* * * * *]

"Shattered Glass AU"

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When the Decepticon Justice Division came for a mech, there was no escape. Run and hide as they might, no one could evade the D.J.D. forever. Their tenacity was notorious. Their trials made traitors tremble at the mere thought. There was nothing quite as horrifying as judge and jury hunting the guilty down.

They were excruciatingly fair. Judgment was the result of weighing the evidence and taking the Decepticon’s own testimony. The D.J.D. were so known for their unimpeachable honesty and solemn vows of due process that even the Autobots called them the cruelest unit in existence. Nothing in the universe was more agonizing than making a guilty conscience endure the torture of Tesarus harshly grinding down the defendant’s arguments, one at a time.

Helex did his best, scrupulous representing the worst mech’s case as neutrally as possible, but usually in vain. By the time a Decepticon was put on the List, the evidence was overwhelming. More than one List mech broke while on the stand giving testimony, confessing to the crime and begging the court’s forgiveness for what he’d done. It was why Kaon had a reputation as the hot seat.

Vos gave careful consideration to all new testimony and evidence brought by the Decepticon on trial, and after consultation with the rest of the Justice Division, he would pronounce the verdict. Rarely was it ‘Innocent.’

He wasn’t sadistic. If anything, his compassion made him more fearsome, because he believed that it was never too late for redemption. A death sentence provided nothing but cheap revenge. No one learned from it. The rest of the Decepticons would only learn terror and distrust if ‘justice’ were only a synonym for ‘death.’

Tesarus always took responsibility for holding the judged Decepticon during the sentencing. “I can’t prosecute a mech and look away when I win,” he’d said when first accepting the position as prosecutor. For a similar reason, Helex always stood beside him. The defendant’s advocate would see the case to a close.

Sometimes that required being at a condemned mech’s side until the very end. The D.J.D. was no stranger to crimes that turned good mechs’ tanks, and Vos’ compassion couldn’t save everyone. There were times that Tesarus pressed for a death sentence, and Helex couldn’t plead the court’s
mercy every time. Justice sometimes had no other outlet but that of execution, even after other options were explored.

Their executioner took his duty extremely serious. It was said that he covered his face in a mask out of shame, but the Justice Division knew better. “I serve the Cause,” he’d said to them in his odd, spectral voice. Their sparks shivered to hear it. “I am no one behind this mask. This is my face, now.”

Tesarus and Helex averted their own faces when he came forward. In Tesarus’ hands, Black Shadow shuddered in long waves of grief and fear. His trial had been a painful thing, dragged out by the sheer amount of evidence that had to be presented. He’d stopped protesting his innocence while on the stand, just shutting up mid-sentence as it finally began to sink in what he’d done.

So many lives lost. So few survivors. Nothing would bring them back, and his guilt had stacked up until it crushed him as Tesarus ruthlessly piled names of the deceased on his bent head. When Kaon released him, Black Shadow had simply slumped to his knees. He didn’t confess. He didn’t protest. He just accepted.

Helex hadn’t wanted to, but he’d solemnly passed on Black Shadow’s request for the death sentence. Vos had agreed only after extensive debate over rehabilitation options. The court didn’t normally let a criminal determine his own sentence, but Black Shadow was utterly certain death was the only way he could pay for his crime.

Now Tarn guided him to the ground, kneeling down beside him. The rest of the D.J.D. stood back and respectfully didn’t listen to the whispered conversation.

It was mercifully brief.

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"Hound/Anybody - Pen Pals!AU"

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A scout didn’t typically get much attention in a war, but this wasn’t war yet and Hound wasn’t a typical scout.

He was good at his job. One of the best, for sure. The rebellion had many uses for a hologram projector attached to such a skilled user.

Building toward a civil war, however, his greatest usefulness actually came from his connections. Turned out that this scout had pen pals far and wide, most of a nature that the Decepticons often intercepted and read their letters closely but let them through the postal system in the end. The ‘Cons didn’t want to cut off their supply of well-written porn, after all. The Autobots wouldn’t be surprised if Hound’s missives were being expedited through in order to speed up replies.

Red Alert stiffly thrust the latest letter at the scout, standing rigid beside the table. “Mail’s here,” he barked.

Hound looked from the letter to the guy in charge of scanning all mail. Red Alert was dedicated to his job. He must have forced himself to read it all.

“Good one, huh?” Hound asked.

“Just take it!” The mech’s optics bleached further as he almost threw it at Hound’s head before
turning to stalk from the room.

Hound grinned at his back. Mirage must have been at the top of his game, this time.

Still grinning, Hound took himself and his letter off to SpecOps territory to get it decoded. Oh, those clever pen pals of his.

[* * * * *]

" Tarn/Pharma - Met In Detention!AU"

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“I swear to the Cause, I’ll have your helm for a desk tidy if you move from that chair!” Tarn swore, pointing a finger across the room at Black Shadow. “Kaon! He doesn’t get out of here until he stops whining and accepts his sentence!”

Black Shadow’s optics went wide as cruel hands clamped down on his shoulders and yanked him back into the chair. Kaon gave him a disturbing smile and nodded to his boss. The hands didn’t let go. Black Shadow wouldn’t be moving from the chair until Tarn judged him to have had enough, and even then, there would be one of the notorious lectures to endure before he’d be allowed to crawl free, thoroughly chastised.

The group of rejects milling about the desks in the middle of the room wouldn’t be cornered so easily. “We shouldn’t be here!” Misfire was protesting, and Helex and Spinister snarled at each other as emphasis.

Krok was glaring at Vos, both of them equally pissed off. “You do not have the authority to drag us in here, much less keep us,” the group’s leader bit out, icy and pointed. “We’ll be leaving now, thank you very much.”

“No you won’t,” Tarn snapped back across the room, then promptly lost interest as white and red wings walked in escorting a mech who put on a brave face but clearly wanted to be anywhere but here. “Ah, Pharma! Bringing us our List to detention personally, are we?”

“No.” The doctor stuck his nose in the air and stared down at it. “This is my new ward manager. I’m aware of his disciplinary record and his place on your wretched List. Ambulon, Tarn. Tarn, Ambulon,” he said, mockingly courteous. “He has immunity as my employee. You will not be attempting to detain him,” Pharma glanced around, openly scornful of the messy room and its variety of twitchy, sullen, and outright scared offenders, “here.”

Tarn didn’t even seem to notice Krok’s crew slipping out the door. “Doctor, you are going to have to provide us more incentive than employment. Why should we respect that?”

Pharma narrowed his optics. Time to bargain.

[* * * * *]

" Tarn/Tesarus - Prison!AU"

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“How did he even escape? It makes no sense!”

Tarn was overworking again. Megatron was off arguing the politics of the Cybertron Penal Facility
with the Guard Union and that insufferable Prime guy who had taken over the Senate-appointed bureaucracy that had formerly controlled the Facility. That left the mech’s top officers trying to coordinate the prisoner rebellion, and that meant Tarn was busy policing the prisoner population. There were always guard moles and rebels even among an inmate population that should be united. The inmates wouldn’t be taken seriously if they didn’t present a solid front. Someone had to keep the traitors and weak from straying.

It was a lousy job, but someone loyal had to do it. Thus Tarn and his mounting stress levels.

Tesarus might be only a minion, but he had a duty to his Cause and his boss. “You can worry about it tomorrow, Tarn. You should rest.”

The soothing tone got an irate glare. “Stop talking like that.”

“Get your aft into recharge before I sit on you.”

“Ah. Well.”

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”Silas/Ralph - College!AU”

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Interdepartmental bureaucratic warfare didn’t typically descend into fisticuffs, but the memos had been flying fairly heatedly before the University Dinner. Silas’ tolerance for alcohol was tricky at best, a clusterfuck at worst. Tonight, according to his luck, things had skewed toward the clusterfuck side of things.

Hence the reason he’d been dragged off the Sports Director by some old football star-turned-professor, both of them still yelling at the other and bleeding. Breakdown had immediately stormed out, predictably whining for his pet department medic as he went.

Silas was the one without the personal doctor friend. He got stuck with the University doctor, who’d been there to witness the whole fiasco.

That might have been how the split lip and black eye got joined by a knock on the back of the head and a sore toe when Ralph got sick of his drunken, angry grumbling. Silas didn’t really remember the rest of the night, but he woke up with a healthy respect for the intimidating man. They might have met at an official University function, but Ralph had apparently dragged his protesting ass home afterward and made him take two aspirin before stuffing him into bed. There weren’t many people willing to do that, much less able.

It was the start of a beautiful relationship.

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”Starscream/Prowl - Camp Counselors!AU”

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“I’m king of the A-G cabins!” Starscream crowed as he came into the counselors’ messhall. The rest of the counselors scoffed. It turned into laughing when they realized he was still wearing his cape and crown from his self-done coronation. Whatever they personally thought about his leadership style, the guy certainly made camp interesting every summer. “They’re already throwing stuff at me
when I walk by.”

The laughter picked up, mixed with a few groans from people who’d lost money in the betting pool. “That’s one out,” Optimus Prime said, reaching into the jar to remove the slip labeled ‘Throwing Slag At Me.’ “I thought for sure you’d have it first, this year.”

Megatron rolled his optics and grumbled without looking up from his meal.

Prowl came in behind Starscream looking ready to murder a glitch. It got him some curious looks.

Arcee gleefully danced in behind him. “He won the pot, fraggers! Pay up!”

Dead silence ruled the hall. Rodimus looked three seconds from an apocalyptic fit. He’d been trying for the pot since he’d gotten cabins L-T, and all he’d gotten so far was mockery and chaos.

Starscream just gave Prowl an impressed look as Optimus, dumbfounded, dug the appropriate slip out from the bottom of the jar. “The whole cabin?”

Prowl peeled a lip up to sneer. “All five of them.”

“Declaration of eternal devotion, right there in front of the campfire.” Arcee shaped a fire with her hands, grinning like a maniac. “They just loooooooove him!”

“I hate you all,” Prowl muttered.

Starscream laughed and laughed.

[* * * * *]

” Prowl/Chromedome - Magic!AU”

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“It’s not that I don’t trust you with a hacksaw near my internals,” Prowl said, looking between the box and his partner. “It’s just that I don’t trust you with a hacksaw near my internals.”

Chromedome hefted the hacksaw. “Aw, c’mon. If you won’t go on stage with me, I’m going to have to find another partner.”

“Pfft, like you could.”

“Someday, I’m going to figure out how to do that.”

“Probably about the same time you find someone else to put up with your sleight-of-hand and grandstanding during a show.”

“It could happen!”

“As I already said: pfft.”

“Says the guy who levitates desks for his act. Figured out how to make them spin in midair, yet?”

[* * * * *]

” Rewind/Chromedome - Brand New Step-Sibling!AU”
Chromedome had no mouth, and yet he had to swallow hard. The Autobots in the shuttle looked at him, varying expressions of caution, interest, and mischief across their faces. Skids looked like he expected him to explode.

Rewind, his Rewind, a Rewind missing an arm and possessing of a shattered visor and missing camera, looked at his twin. Who was, in a way, also his Rewind. Just not his-his, because there was a Chromedome who had died horribly, and now another Chromedome who had both Rewinds.

Nautica said it was impossible. She was spinning out quantum theories left and right trying to explain how both Rewinds could exist at the same time.

Honestly, Chromedome was too happy to react yet, but when he could, he intended to tell her he didn’t give a scrap how it’d happen.

He’d gotten his Rewind back. The other was just a bonus.

He didn’t even have to look up from his paperwork. The door mysteriously opened for him as he walked toward the shop, and footsteps ran past him to return to behind the counter as he walked in. The line was fairly long, but Prowl just kept reading as he waited. When he got to the front of the line, he registered the cashier as a vague blur at the corner of his vision. He grunted in its direction and held out the gift card Bombshell had made him accept last Christmas at the office party.

The card was deftly plucked from his hand, swiped, and slid back between his fingers. “One regular energon, venti-grande-extra-extra large, one shot of stims on the side. Microchip?”

It sounded like an endearment, but when Prowl glanced up, eyes narrowed suspiciously, the mech behind the counter gave him a limpid, innocent gaze. The microchip he held out was the perfect excuse.

“No, thank you,” Prowl said slowly, still eyeing him.

“Are you sure?” The packaging rustled as the mech tried to entice him. “Mixmaster made this batch special.” The way he said it implied it’d been made special for Prowl in particular, but there was just enough plausible deniability that Prowl couldn’t accuse him of flirting.

It still made Prowl less than inclined to indulge in the treat. “No.”

The mech smiled and nodded without skipping a beat. “Okay. Go ahead and sit down, and we’ll bring your order out when it’s ready.”

The rest of the line watched in confusion and envy as Prowl did exactly that. The other customers had to stand there and wait for their orders to be called out, but not Prowl. Prowl could sit down and get some work done, because when his order was up, it was carried out and laid out on the table for him. Napkin here, packet of powdered silica positioned just so, a spoon slipped under the hand resting on the table.
Also a microchip packet. Prowl didn’t look up while the barista fussed at the table, but he noticed the packet when he reached for the cup at last. It got a blink. The five mechs behind the counter were watching him without watching him when he glanced up, wondering if they’d screwed up his order.

They looked so slagging hopeful.

He sighed and tried the blasted microchip.

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"Skyfire/Starscream - Royalty!AU"

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The day their esteemed lord and master the king exercised his right to lay with any of his subjects, Starscream knew he had to topple the mech. It wasn’t the violation to Skyfire, although the shuttle returned somber, hand held over his chest as if something hurt inside. Starscream did hate that.

It was the way Skyfire never even protested that set Starscream’s tanks on fire, and the fact that he, personally, was not even taken into consideration in any way, his claim on the shuttle never acknowledged, that made the Seeker ready to murder.

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"Starscream/Jazz - Mundane/Domestic!AU"

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One house. Two mechs. A history.

It should have been chaos, if not deadly. There should have been arguments, screaming fights, traps left in the hall, and a perpetually empty storage cupboard.

Somehow, that never happened. Oh, they argued, but mostly they avoided each other. Everything else just sort of developed from there.

Starscream couldn’t stand clutter, so the first floor was soon cleared of rubble, and any personal effects that accumulated were neatly shelved. He had enough of a sense for interior decoration that Jazz found himself more agreeable than expected over that.

Jazz, in turn, needed to always have his next ration on hand. Not only was the storage cupboard always stocked, but he had a habit of impulse-buying whatever new flavors appeared. If they disappeared from the cupboard quickly, they were restocked just as quickly. If they stayed forever and ever, he’d end up consuming them himself and not restocking the lousy ones.

Starscream had to have everything neat. Jazz kept buying more stuff. Gradually, things slotted into place around the house until Starscream started looking up furniture for the first floor. He left a catalog open, and soon enough they were leaving passive-aggressive notes in it about which one they preferred and which one they’d burn if it showed up downstairs.

It took them a while to come to an agreement, but agreed they did. And that just kept happening.

They had a history, and history was always in the making.

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Pt. 28

Chapter Summary

**Scenes from “An Accidental Love Story” and “Call of Duty.” Overlord and Trepan face off.**

**Title:** Candy From Strangers, Pt. 28  
**Warning:** Injuries, ponyplay, taking an excuse at face value, and Overlord. Overlord’s a warning in and of himself.  
**Rating:** R  
**Continuity:** IDW, G1  
**Characters:** Cliffjumper, Mirage, Ratchet, Jazz, Hound, Overlord, Trepan  
**Disclaimer:** The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors.  
**Acting Motivation (Prompt):** Random fic continuations, and a joint fic-pic commission from Vintage-Mechanics. Shibara’s accompanying picture is viewable on Tumblr. Thank you!

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"An Accidental Love Story" - Ride 'em cowboy

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Despite expectations generally built off of plot points in dramatic movies, spies weren’t the ones who got hurt the most. A spy had an all-or-nothing mission risk: either he got in and out without detection, or he got caught. A good SpecOps agent had enough training to make an escape despite being detected. However, outside of specific missions utilizing their unique skillsets, most operatives weren’t put in the ranks as normal soldiers. A spy dating outside the division was the one who spent his time worrying.

Earth meant that Mirage fought as a regular soldier more often, now, but not so often as Cliffjumper, and never as a frontliner. Every time the Decepticons attacked, Cliffjumper was one of the heavy hitters put in their way. Mirage was the one left behind, or ghosting around while the Autobots’ distractions kept him safe. He was the one who didn’t get caught, because if the Decepticons caught him, he’d be executed on the spot. If he’d gotten caught before this, he’d be dead.

Cliffjumper, on the other hand, was just a soldier. He wasn’t marked as a particular threat or a valuable hostage. If the Decepticons caught him, they’d use him to bargain with the Autobots for resources because they didn’t really care if the little red minibot lived or died. At least with Mirage, there was a kind of certainty to capture. Like pitched battle, there was no all-or-nothing risk to the danger Cliffjumper faced.

Cliffjumper worried about him when he left on a mission, but it was a vague, apprehensive prayer to Primus for his safety. It balanced against Cliffjumper’s firm belief that Mirage could pull off any mission.

It wasn’t that Mirage didn’t trust Cliffjumper. It was just that Cliffjumper went into battle every time, took damage every time, because battles weren’t like the espionage the noblemech specialized in.
Tactics could only get the Autobots so far before it became a contest of who could take and inflict the most damage. Mirage couldn’t remember a battle without casualties, even if the injuries were minor. Cliffjumper nearly always took damage. That was just what happened to soldiers on the front line.

Mirage worried. He had every reason to worry.

Across the medbay, Ratchet shot another amused look at the slender, elegant spy hovering like a fretting nannybot over Cliffjumper. The attempt at aloofness had been made. Ratchet had issued threats at empty corners until Mirage sheepishly deactivated his invisibility mod. Medics didn’t like spies in their territory. It was horrible for patient privacy, and it made Ratchet’s chevron itch something fierce. Nobody but SpecOps knew what it did to Hoist, but then, Hoist was a friendly, jovial medic even while asking squirm-worthy invasive questions no SpecOps mech wanted to answer during routine maintenance checks. No spy dared hang around medbay during his shift, or not more than once, anyway.

First Aid had Streetwise. The first time Jazz sicced his division on the medbay to use First Aid as a training run, the medic responded to the spying by letting his fellow Protectobot loose on SpecOps in return. Prowl had been impressed by how fast Jazz zipped into his office demanding the investigation into his mechs’ pasts cease and desist right away, right now, immediately.

Technically, uninjured personnel weren’t supposed to be allowed into the medbay. Ratchet bent the rule today. Mirage had his cables in such a twist that he was violating the unspoken rules about spying on the medbay. As long as he stayed respectful of the other patients, Ratchet would allow him to be at Cliffjumper’s side.

Which Mirage knew. He was being quiet and staying out of the way. That didn’t stop him from looking about an inch from jittering around in a worried frenzy. Oh, he played it cool, but those long fingers of his were studiously entwined on the berth, so absolutely still it was clear they wanted to restlessly dance over fresh welds and broken glass.


“Don’t move too much,” Ratchet heard the noblemech caution, but Mirage seemed somewhat relieved that Cliffjumper wanted to sit up. The medic kept a narrow optic on the two, but Mirage fussed until his small lover had sufficient support to stay sitting up. “There. That will do.”

“But I wanna go.”

“No, you don’t. Access your HUD damage readout if you don’t believe me.”

“Ohhh, hey, yeah. Forgot I lost all that.”

“Yes, you -- yes, you did. I, ah.” Mirage paused, and Ratchet bent back to his work on Tracks as the spy glanced his way. Whatever the blue mech saw, it made him lower his voice and lean down to continue speaking closer to Cliffjumper’s audio. Mirage’s expression was as neutral as ever, but Ratchet knew how to read the subtle tension in his hands and the time spent standing motionless at the minibot’s side.

Ratchet nodded to himself. Plenty of lust in that pairing, but Mirage had it bad. The noblemech wouldn’t have changed the rules of courtship as he had if he didn’t want Cliffjumper so much. Ratchet didn’t think the red minibot knew how deep it pained Mirage to disregard the culture of the
Iacon Towers, but he wouldn’t be the one to tell Cliffjumper. The choice was up to Mirage, always had been, and if Cliffjumper was ignorant of the rules bent to court him, then Mirage was equally ignorant of how far Cliffjumper had toned down his usual vigor in response. Mirage might think he wanted Cliffjumper, but Ratchet would bet his welding tanks that the noblemech would have vanished like a spooked turbofox if Cliffjumper acted the way he had even two years ago.

Earth had changed a lot of things. Cliffjumper and Mirage were two of the more obvious things. The block-headed rock had met the proud immobile hard object, and it was actually working out for them.

A sudden yelp and crash startled Ratchet out of his work, and he spun around just in time to see Mirage’s shock-widened optics right below Cliffjumper’s muddled, circuit-lagging grin. “Hi-yo, see-thru! Away!” the small red Autobot crowed, whirling an arm above his head and hauling back on the improvised bridle on Mirage’s head. “Giddiyup!”

Mirage didn’t seem to dare move. His mouth worked around the tube laid across it, half a gag but mostly a bit. Cliffjumper appeared to be using the rest of the tube as reins to steer him with. The spy’s hands were held before him, fingers curling. Cliffjumper’s knees were tucked up under his arms, not easily dislodged even if he were willing to throw the injured mech off and risk further damage.

A moment later it didn’t matter, as Cliffjumper’s optics went dim. Metal scraped as he slowly poured to the floor in a limp pile.

Ratchet darted across the medbay to catch him before he hurt himself. That meant he was right there to hear whirring fans desperately dumping heat.

The medic shot Mirage an amused look. “I can’t tell. Do you have a Lone Ranger kink, or is it the ponyplay?”

Mirage blinked at him, face slack in bewilderment. “I have no idea what just happened.” Or why it turned him on, evidently.

Ratchet grunted as he heaved Cliffjumper back onto the repair berth where he belonged. “That’s no surprise. You say that a lot, lately.”

An embarrassed smile worked its way across the noblemech’s face. “I suppose I do,” he said, looking down at Cliffjumper.

Strangely, he didn’t seem worried about it.

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"Call of Duty" - scene that wanted to be written but didn’t fit the fic

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“Prowl?”

*Jazz.*

Jazz slumped against the wall of the building and covered his visor with his hands, although only his voice shook. Not counting his legs, of course. His legs were shaking pretty violently inside the armor where all the struts and cables felt hot and overused. “You know that phrase you refuse to say to me?”
There was a long pause on the other side of the line. *Yes.* A clicking sound that was likely Prowl putting down his work and folding his hands on the desk to devote all his attention to the conversation. *Why?*

“This would be an appropriate time to say it.” His fingers tightened over his visor in miserable anticipation of words to satisfy an itch that Prowl’s order-loving spark had been waiting an entire war to get scratched.

Startled silence stretched out for a minute before Prowl finally said, oddly hesitant, *You are a bad person and should feel bad.*

A surprised laugh huffed out his vents. “Not that one! It, huh.” He had to stop and blink for a second. “Well, okay, that works, too. But, uh, I meant…” Why the frag was he dragging this out? He couldn’t possibly get any more humiliated. He’d already lost every bit of dignity he’d ever had.

It was currently dribbling down the inside of his thigh in a nearly invisible leak that was more felt than seen, but that just made it worse. His spike hadn’t even extended. From steeling himself against arousal to coming in less than five seconds; that had to be a record.

Not one he’d admit to. Going off and shuddering through some kind of not-an-overload overload wasn’t anything to be proud of, especially since he’d done it right in front of his friend, who’d done nothing more sexual than pick up a hose and smile at him. Aw, fragging Pit, what did that say about him that he had so little self-control? He was scum. He was gutter-spawn.

He’d never objectified someone like that before, and it opened a yawning hole full of self-loathing in his tanks. He’d essentially walked in and jacked off to a mental construct of his own lusts instead of seeing his friend. For a split second, all he’d been able to think about and see was the fantasy mech he used to pant over back in the day. He’d totally lost it.

He couldn’t even imagine what it felt like to have a trusted comrade suddenly ignore everything but one previously-unknown and unimportant aspect of his past, then go one step further and publically spurt one right then and there. It’d be like walking up to Optimus Prime and breathing heavily while staring fixedly at his chest, spike out and leaking in hand. There used to be laws against that kind of scrap.

It was an internal betrayal so shocking Jazz felt about an inch tall.

He cringed against the wall as his hips jerked despite himself. His unpressurized spike throbbed insistently, pulsing in waves of stymied pleasure like an overload blocked right before its peak. It was a struggle not to pop his panel right here and now to release it, and shame washed through him on the heels of every joint-melting wave of pleasure. He had no more control than a rabid turbofox in heat. He could master what his face showed, but the best pokerface in the galaxy strained around the edges when a mech’s knees turned in, hips thrusting forward.

His engine had roared. If that hadn’t been enough to give him away, Jazz had twitched and turned to retreat at a hurried hobble, the evidence of overload drizzling down his thigh as he went. Walk in, overload, and scoot straight back out the door. Gearsticks and muffler systems, he was an aft!

The only solution he could think of was calling Prowl for help. He’d screwed this one up so bad he needed back-up. “I went in without a plan, Prowl.” His voice was small, shamed, and begged his friend to put him out of his misery. “It blew up in my face, and I don’t have a way to salvage anything outta this.”

After a moment, Prowl said, *I see. In that case, I told you so.*
Jazz’s doors splayed wider, sinking him down further down the wall. Prowl’s vague puzzlement and definite alarm just didn’t carry the impact he’d been hoping for. To his frustration, the crushing sense of guilt failed to be blotted out by the burn on his pride. He’d wanted it to sting him into action, but it’d already been well on its way to crispy crunchiness. Prowl’s words were confirmation instead of a dare.

He pressed his visor into his hands harder as shame, humiliation, and a vast amount of guilt drenched the inside of his armor in cloying, syrupy glurps that had his spark squirming. There wasn’t an escape. There was just recent memory, total embarrassment, and a growing sense of desperation.

“Louder?” he whispered, ashamed that he was asking but Primus damn him to the Pit if he didn’t deserve worse.

Prowl’s unease came through the brisk business tone he used. *I told you so.*

“Again.”

*I told you so.*

It still didn’t help. Jazz’s engine whined his distress, and he shuddered where he stood. Confession was painful. “Prowl, I fragged up.”

Bless infinitely calm mechs who weren’t involved at all. Prowl shifted into damage control without missing a beat. *Is this personal?*

If only. “Yes?” he ventured, because for some reason he had to try.

*Jazz.* Prowl wasn’t buying it.

His hands were starting to shake, but he wasn’t sure if it was because of panic or because of the pulsing, taut pleasure kneading his spike into a hot pressure waiting to pop. He slouched against the wall outside the shop because he couldn’t walk any further than that, and he certainly couldn’t transform. His knee joints were jelly and rubber, so much so he’d have crashed to the ground if the wall weren’t holding him up. He was an idiot. He was a weak-willed, spike-led piece of rusted junk not fit for recycling.

What he couldn’t say through the shame but knew he should was that Prowl needed to come fetch him, throw a lock on his spike hatch, and drag him down to Ratchet’s clinic for counseling. He was one of those mechs.

Under the humiliation for his own behavior roiled a bigger fear. He couldn’t protect his friend against himself, but worse, “I screwed somebody over. Soundwave’s gonna ruin his life, and I didn’t help. I made things worse. I -- “

And the confession tumbled out, faster and faster. “I -- oh, scrap, I don’t know what to do. I don’t know.” His voice fell to a hoarse, strained agony. “I don’t even know how to apologize, how to begin to make this up to him. He didn’t do anything, I was just -- it was me, it was me being a slagging cog sucker. He didn’t ask for this, I just pushed it all on him like the worst kind of -- I -- I was curious, okay, and I didn’t think about how maybe I shouldn’t’ve helped find him because now Soundwave’s gonna expose him, and he’s got a life, mech’s got a whole different life now. He’s still a lot like he was, but it’s not fair that anyone try to make him do anything, he would’ve said or done something if he wanted to be like that again, and I should’ve played stupid. Primus, I’m such a moron. I should’ve kept my tires outta the whole thing, but I wanted to know where he’d gone, I just didn’t think, I didn’t slagging think, and I’m just --“
He’d gone in cocky and ready to spring a loaded question on his buddy, swaggering in with a grin and a laugh, but had that ever backfired on him. *Maybe* he’d hoped to get first dibs on a legendary ‘face, but instead he’d become a preview to what he’d opened his buddy up to. If Jazz couldn’t control himself, how could he trust other Autobots -- or worse, Decepticons -- to not do worse?

This was exactly why Prowl had always disapproved of him going off without a plan.

How could he face anyone again? That reputation as a reliable, professional ex-officer? Utterly destroyed. Gone completely. Jazz cringed a little further into himself, picturing his music career going up in flames, and he couldn’t say it was undeserved. He’d *lost his fragging mind.*

Jazz had always thought of himself as a decent switch, giving and taking without bias, but turned out he was nothing but a degenerate. Everything, every derogatory comment ever made about spike mechs, it was all true. Every snide remark about how valve mechs had to keep it under wraps because spike mechs would stiffen at the hint of a hole? He’d overloaded at a *fantasy.* The sneering sniffs at how little self-control they had? The Decepticons were going to write up the public indecency laws again just for Jazz. Every laugh because spikers had no discrimination or sense of modesty? He’d just proved the rumors 100% true. The lack of respect for others wishes and desires? Who knew if Hound’s frozen smile had been protest, disgust, or violation too deep to articulate.

Sure, Jazz hadn’t popped his hatch and pressurized for everyone to see, but he recognized exactly who was to blame for acting like an entitled gearhead. From friend to object to lust over in the flicker of an optic. Way to go, Jazz. He’d ignored who Hound was in favor of whom he’d once played the part of. His buddy was nine million years away from being Sarge, and anyway, that’d been a stage persona. Porn was a highly staged, scripted, unrealistic fantasy that had nothing to do with real life and absolutely no relation to how the actors should be treated. Jazz would be highly skeeved out by anyone who nagged him for free music, much less demanded he play something for them. That was his job, not his life, and he didn’t owe anybody a freebie outside the bounds of work.

He’d known that, and yet here he was in a back alley after doing the same sleezy thing to a friend and former subordinate.

But he still wanted nothing more than to open his interface cover and finish himself off.

“I’m a bad person, and I feel bad,” he almost whimpered.

Prowl’s concern reached through the commline and tried to shake information out of him. *What happened? Will it help to call Optimus Prime? Jazz, talk to me. Jazz?*  

“Jazz.”

The former saboteur flinched, helm ducking between his shoulders. His hands fell from his face to dig the fingers into the wall behind him. It was as much to restrain himself as stay upright. He didn’t trust himself in the slightest anymore. “I’m so, so sorry.”

A sigh, and Hound came all the way out of his shop. “I’m not angry at you.”

He should be. Jazz had so little control over his interface equipment that he’d seen a perfectly modest businessmech smile, just a crooked smile at the sight of a friend, and lost it.

An avalanche of remorse buried him when Hound leaned on the wall further up the alley. He was staying out of reach. Jazz had screwed everything up in one fell swoop. “I’m gonna see Ratchet, I swear,” he promised, wires twisting with shame. “I’ll keep away. I’ve never -- honest t’ Primus, Hound, I’ve never done this slag before. You know me. I don’t -- “ His doors scraped down the wall
as they dropped, because listening to his own babble of excuses left a sour film in his mouth. Frag him sideways with a stop sign. He sounded like every pervert he’d ever caught rubbing on someone.

Yeah, sure, he’d lost control to his spike like a brainless lusting turbofox. They had solutions for slavering technimals humping everything in sight. Holding pens and deactivating the overactive ‘too powerful’ interface array topped the list.

He swallowed the urge to defend himself and started dishing out the humble pie in king-sized portions. “I’m sorry. I did something unforgivable, an’ I know it. You don’t gotta pretend it’s okay.” The ground was in dire need of staring at. Jazz got to it with a will. “I’d say I don’t know what I was thinking, but what I was thinking was that it’d be okay if I took you by surprise and treated this like a joke, but it’s not. Soundwave’s looking to out you as -- as your old job. As, uh, as Sarge. And I helped him find you.”

Whatever Hound’s face looked like hearing that, Jazz didn’t want to know. The soft, dismayed, “Oh,” was enough.

“Look, if you want to…bring this,” one hand came free from the wall to make a helpless, vague gesture at himself and the hot mess he still was, “int’ public view, I’m not gonna fight it. It might help, mech. Make it clear you won’t stand for anybody treatin’ you like shareware, and maybe the worst of -- of us,” he forced himself to be included in that category, “will lay off. I’m just. Hound, I’m.” He hid his face behind the inadequate shelter of his hand. “I’m so sorry. Please, please forgive me. I’ll stay away. I’ll go to Ratchet. I’ll even turn myself in if y’want me to.”

Even as he said it, however, the armor over his midriff flexed. The throbbing ebb and flow of near-overload still turned his knees weak. The pleasure made this some kind of terrible nightmare where the shame and humiliation of his own lack of control kept running headlong into warm, liquid heat with no release in sight. His spike kept trying to pressurize.

Hound sighed, oddly resigned, and Jazz dared peek between his fingers. “What did I do to set you off?” the former scout asked.

He couldn’t even pretend he hadn’t been set off. “You didn’t do anything,” he mumbled.

“I know it’s your responsibility, but quite frankly, spike mechs are the excitable sort. It’d help if I knew how to keep you under wraps.”

Jazz’s spark compacted into a tiny, humiliated ball in the back of its chamber. This. This was the stigma every mech who preferred his spike had to go up against, and Jazz had always considered himself a swinger because of it. Spike mechs were weak. Spike mechs had to be corralled and disciplined, or they’d go wild. Sluts and berth-hoppers, ready to go at a wink of an optic. Hard-ons incapable of seeing people instead of walking, driving valves.

He reset his vocalizer and studied the ground. “You didn’t do anything different. I had a moment, y’know? Just realized outta nowhere that you’d never stopped doin’ the porn thing.” The smile crumpled as soon as it crossed his face. “You probably have all sorts of reasons for liking Earth. It’s just what I thought.”

There was a beat of silence, but Hound laughed. Surprised, Jazz looked up.

“Yeah, you caught me.” Hound grinned and shrugged. “Organic worlds are full to bursting with sex. It’s why I got into gardening.”

The people who objected to spike stereotypes said that people couldn’t expect a cyberhound to not
lunge for energon when it was in reach. Jazz had scoffed at that objection before, because that’s what training was for. Anyone who didn’t have the self-control and responsibility to train himself to keep it under wraps deserved to be treated like a cyberhound.

Now he bit his lip and started constructing a training schedule for himself. He wasn’t sure it’d be enough, and he was fully prepared to submit to Ratchet’s external controls over him. He’d seen Hound probing a flower for pollen and lost it. Usually he wouldn’t compare mechs to technimals, but right now he felt that a leash and blinders would be better than…this.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, but Hound didn’t step any closer to him.

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Commission for Vintage-Mechanics to go with Shibara’s auction picture

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“Tell me what’s real,” Trepan said.

Lush lips curved up at the corners. “Give me something to work off of, and I will.”

“Who says I haven’t? Look around you, Overlord. Is this real or not?” The mnemosurgeon turned in place, hands spreading to indicate the empty room. It looked like an open, easy gesture, but his elbows stayed tucked in close.

Overlord was bound on his knees. That didn’t mean much, considering how strong the Decepticon was. Trepan wasn’t convinced the massive mech wouldn’t lunge to his feet, break the cuffs, and dismember him. There was no rhyme or reason to Overlord’s tortures, as far as he could tell. Violence happened without warning.

After battle, the superwarrior would enter this room still smoking, the smell of death pouring out from under his armor and spilt fuel dripping from his plating, but his hands were gentle on Trepan’s shoulder. He would speak quietly. His voice fell to its lower ranges, straining to soothe, but it couldn’t pull off a rich, comforting tone. The words rasped through his vocalizer and came out unnaturally calm. It served to carry a threat no matter the words. Maybe that was the point. Trepan was never quite sure.

He was grateful for the reminder of danger, because there were other times. Overlord would unlock the door and enter freshly polished, waxy sweet and clean. He acted the part of a visiting friend, often carrying choice news or refined treats. The talk centered on mundane things, as if talking were the only reason Overlord had kidnapped him, and the blank room did things to Trepan’s mind. When the only break in the monotony of a cell was Overlord’s small talk, he started to look forward to the visits. The repetitive days wore down his defenses.

He had to remember that charm did not make Overlord less likely to lose interest and murder him. The Decepticon imprisoned and manipulated him by keeping him confined to this empty room-turned-cell. By his whim, Trepan lived. It seemed to be another whim that Overlord wished to learn from him, but Trepan wasn’t fooled. Overlord’s whims were fleeting but consumptive. He remembered the news reports, the bodies found lined up where Overlord had obsessively practiced one execution technique over and over until he grew bored.

Boredom was a death sentence. Trepan’s profession would protect him only as long as Overlord’s interest lasted. It behooved a mech in his position to not only cooperate, but strive to make lessons continually interesting. He had to keep the attention of someone who broke his toys after he tired of
them.

So Trepan taught Overlord mnemosurgery, but not how he’d taught Tumbler. Tumbler had been a student hoping to one day be a neurospecialist in his own right. Trepan had taught him the formalities and proper procedures of mnemosurgery done under sanctioned circumstances, because that’s how a master taught an apprentice the craft. That was how an aptitude became a career, and Trepan had been ushering a talented individual into the profession.

Underground or not, the New Institute wouldn’t hire anyone who couldn’t pass the exams. Unlike Tumbler, Overlord would never pass the altmode-exempt bar to sit the exam at an accredited medical institute. Overlord would obliterate the bar meant to judge if his mind outstripped his frametype. In Trepan’s experience that’s what the Decepticons did: they ripped out any sign of Functionalism in Cybertron’s society. Overlord was the Decepticons’ superwarrior. Trepan could teach him the skills and learning required to sit the exam, but he’d probably light the exam on fire rather than answer the questions. A practical exam would be a murder scene.

Trepan taught Overlord the showmanship, the cruelties, and the seedy shortcuts experienced and underground mnemosurgeons learned. He’d have smacked Tumbler upside the helm if his apprentice tried pulling half the tricks he now taught Overlord, but it worked. It worked to keep Overlord entertained. It worked to keep him interested. It was quick and dirty, nothing like the gradual build of knowledge before experience, but it was tangible progress. That was more important than comprehensive knowledge of theory and medical background.

He wasn’t teaching Overlord to be a mnemosurgeon. He didn’t know what he was teaching the mech to be, but if it meant living another day? Then Trepan would keep doing it.

The lessons were fast and entertaining. Trepan ruthlessly tore out anything else. He didn’t want to be destroyed, and he reminded himself that this wasn’t the time for arrogance. He was more intelligent, more intellectual and far more experienced, but over-confidence would lead to lectures, to talking down to the Decepticon, to boring him. Trepan couldn’t afford that. The slow frustration of education, testing, and then, finally, observation and tutelage under a master of the craft would lead to death, so he skipped them entirely.

Oh, Overlord had a certain cunning intelligence to him, too smart to risk underestimating, but he wasn’t book-smart. He was street-smart, able to think on his feet and around opponents. His mind worked best in the midst of hard action, not studying. He’d have flunked out neuroscience courses, through impatience or just lack of understanding. Here and now, the Decepticon would kill him the first time Trepan gave him a failing grade.

Overlord was too impatient and proud to stoop to learning as a student should. He wanted results now, and he didn’t accept that failure was a result. He was a petulant bully in a powerful body. Petty tyrants killed out of spite and boredom. Trepan didn’t want to be the next corpse found because Overlord threw a tantrum over flunking a test.

Overlord hated failure. Trepan watched for the creeping tension whenever he had to correct Overlord, and he learned to talk around the Decepticon’s failures, couching it in vague terms and encouragement. Violence hovered near the surface as Overlord gritted his teeth over mistakes, and Trepan quickly rearranged the lessons to minimize any instance where Overlord might fail. Lose. Not win.

Someone had trained Overlord to fly into a rage over failure. If Trepan didn’t know any better, he’d say the mech was afraid to lose, even against a test.

Whenever Trepan started to feel confident, started thinking he could stay ahead of Overlord’s strange
game, he remembered the unhinged look in Overlord’s optics over a missed answer. He remembered how fragile his hands looked in Overlord’s crude paws after the pop quiz. Overlord hadn’t threatened him, not directly, but Trepan’s hands had shaken in his grip because the threat was unnecessary. The superwarrior had held the little doctor’s hands in perfect calm as he made his ‘request’ for no more boring comprehension quizzes. He’d known that Trepan would take it as the order it’d been. He’d known that everything would come around to what he wished.

Everyone did what Overlord wanted -- or he destroyed them.

No more tests, no more dull study at all, ever. Trepan had needed to revise the curriculum again.

Now he spread his hands and smiled, pushing every bit of self-assurance he could fake into it. Challenges were interesting; lessons were not. “Well? Is this real or a figment of your compromised mind?”

The plush, lazy smile melted away. Overlord actually had to think about that, and Trepan saw him looking at the room. The implications of Trepan’s words were alarming. Trepan knew they were. No matter how strong a mech’s body, that strength was useless once he got his needles in. The Decepticon was smart enough to know that. Perhaps not smart enough to fear it, but that’s where the delicate balance between raw physical intimidation and subtle mental manipulation lay.

Overlord looked around the room with keener optics, searching for anything to indicate this was an illusion. He’d agreed to the particulars of this lesson (or had he?). He’d knelt to allow Trepan to click the cuffs closed on his forearms (he remembered that, or at least he had the memories). It’d been a funny setting for an otherwise straightforward lesson in operating technique.

That had been the idea, anyway. Now the superwarrior studied the room, and doubt crept in to question everything. Had the room always been so dark? Had he spread his knees this wide? Had the door been on that side of the room all along? Did Trepan seem taller than he should be?

A good mnemosurgeon could implant anything he wanted into a perforated brain module. Overlord could be in a waking dream right now, remembering things that had never happened, but he’d think everything had been his own idea.

Trepan could almost hear the thoughts fly, and his smile slide into a smirk. Yes, he was dangerous. Not a fighter, but a killer of minds. Megatron himself had been terrified of him once, although he would never tell Overlord that. The mech had an obsession with the Decepticon leader that Trepan had no intention of feeding.

He meandered over to the low table by the door, normally empty but covered in trinkets today. Little things, random things, things that Overlord had been amused he’d request. “I’m waiting,” he sing-songed as he picked through the selection. “Is it real or imagined, Overlord? Am I in your brain controlling your thoughts, or..?” Or was he justifiably afraid of even attempting the deed?

“You pose a dangerous question,” Overlord said from behind him, and Trepan snorted to himself at the Decepticon’s confidence. He honestly couldn’t tell if it were a front or not. “Maybe you shouldn’t be asking me if it’s real.”

“Oh? What should I be asking?” Trepan clenched his hand around the crop as he turned around. He would not be frightened. He would not.

A resolution made easier by the wave of astonishment that swamped him. Overlord’s chest split down the middle, armor opening up and interior plating shifting apart. The layers of protective metal over his spark moved aside. “You should be asking what you’ll do if I take control of it,” the
superwarrior said in a husky, rasping purr that sounded less intimate than predatory. A poisonous green light glittered through the next layer, and Trepan stared. “If this is real, then I’m going to think we wasted valuable flirting time with mere shop talk.” Red optics flicked to the whip in the mnemosurgeon’s hand. “If this isn’t real, then you are catering this dream right in line with my fantasies.”

It took a second to regain his footing. Trepan allowed himself a single startled blink before squaring his shoulders and sauntering back toward the kneeling Decepticon. “Ah, but it’s not hard to find such fantasies and tweak them. I can’t recall the number of perverts like you,” the crop slapped Overlord’s cheek, hard enough to sting even his thick metal, “sent to me for…adjustments.”

The huge mech leaned into the sting. If anything, his smile widened. “Really. Why did the Senate send its tame neuro-flunkies after perverts like me?” He put the same emphasis on the words that Trepan had, but his optics gleamed as the crop came to rest against his lips. “Seems like a waste of resources.”

A kernel of something like fear, resembling terror, not-quite nervousness quivered in Trepan’s core. “Ah, but you see,” he crooned, tilting his head up to look down at Overlord’s smile, “it’s kinky slagers like you that expose your sparks to the wrong people. Disposables opening their spark chambers? Who’ll see but another disposable? Who cares, they’ll be used up and gone before they think to wonder if frames outside their classification house sparks that look the same. Mechs like you are the type who find someone outside their class to give them a little,” the crop smacked Overlord’s other cheek, “discipline.”

He’d liked that. Overlord’s optics went smoky, dimmed in pleasure and anticipation. “I see. Creates an awkward predicament to see the same sparks in different frames, does it?” He chuckled and let his head roll to the side under slight pressure from the crop. “Functionalists can’t have even the perverts questioning why frames determine the social order while the sparks are all the same.” Trepan pushed down, and Overlord bowed his helm to allow the crop tip to tease over the exposed back of his neck. It gave the superwarrior a look at the light now pouring out of his own chest. “Most of them.”

“Yes.” Trepan eyed the green light. A Point-One Percenter. That explained a lot about Overlord, mind and body. Loadbearers were always different in some way. “Yes, well, a few tweaks here and there in your head, and you’ll never be foolish enough to flash your spark to someone again. It’s not healthy, you know. So many studies support that.”

“Functionalist-funded studies, I suppose.”

“No no no, it’s a fact that exposing yourself is unhealthy. Do it enough, and the Senate will send you in to be saved from yourself. One visit to the New Institute, and you’ll be fixed up, I guarantee.” Trepan tried for an innocent expression and knew he failed when Overlord threw his head back, laughing.

The crop tapped under the Decepticon’s chin when he finally stopped. Trepan looked down at him. “What is real, Overlord?” he repeated. “What is true and what is false?”

He looked up at the mnemosurgeon. Around them, the room was dark and empty. There were no clues. It could be real. It could be in Overlord’s head. It could be figment, a moment before erasure, or it could be exactly what it seemed.

“I don’t know,” Overlord said, smiling. His chest spread fully open, and the crop dropped toward the light. “But you can tell me later.”

[* * * * *]
His fingers proclaimed him out of place in this base, in this faction, even before the lock on the door clicked shut. His smile might be greasy, his words ingratiating, but his fingers didn’t fit the picture. Long, delicate, and entirely removed from the life Overlord had lived for so long, they declared their owner in a separate class. Those hands weren’t made for manual labor, would break in a fight. The joints couldn’t bear the wear and tear of it. Trepan was a specialist, and his hands locked him into his specialty as much as Overlord’s hands locked him out of it.

In a Functionalist society, the only interaction someone from the dark underbelly of Kaon would have had with a mech of Trepan’s frametype would have been brief, brutal, and forgotten by the end of their meeting. A gladiator like Overlord would have been stripped bare and defenseless in the Institute for Trepan to have had his way with. Overlord found turnabout to be deliciously forbidden, tasting the power. The taste had to sour in Trepan’s mouth. Fear had a bitter aftertaste all its own, and anger, ah, the anger. Trepan had to be furious beneath the terror for his life. He’d been taken from a position of power, and he had to hate Overlord for that.

Trepan could pay the polite games, face blank as his mouth said whatever would obtain his survival as a captive. His mouth smiled at Overlord, self-confident even as the little mech bent to imprisonment, but he couldn’t hide his hands. They were what Overlord observed on the monitors, live feed from the room serving as Trepan’s cell.

It was a nice enough room, as far as these things went. The other Decepticons on the base didn’t set foot in it. When battle required Overlord’s presence elsewhere, the impersonal, distant rotation of the stockade guard tended to Trepan in his stead. The Decepticons assigned to the rotation weren’t known for their curiosity or imagination. There was no conversation with prisoners, and they didn’t care who the person behind the door was. They knew their orders, and their orders were to shove prepackaged rations through the slot near the floor until Overlord returned to deliver those rations personally.

The mnemosurgeon sat through it all, calm and patient as he waited for Overlord to visit. Perhaps he was glad for the monotony when Overlord was gone, or perhaps he was bored by the unbroken tedium of isolation. At least when Overlord was at the base, something happened. Did he stare at the door in apprehension or anticipation? Overlord wasn’t sure. Trepan’s face gave away nothing, not rage or fear, but his hands fidgeted. Their small, involuntary twitches were what the Decepticon watched when they spoke. They were Overlord’s barometer of the mnemosurgeon’s real thoughts, but they didn’t actually tell him what those thoughts were.

Spidery fingers curled into the palms as Overlord entered the room, and fluttered over Trepan’s knees if the silence drew out too long. They betrayed fear in tinny taps on the mnemosurgeon’s thighs whenever he stood over the shorter mech. They clawed into those same thighs if Overlord sat beside him, and every bird-quick flick of those elegant hands told the Decepticon how helpless his little toy felt in his hands.

Overlord’s hands were heavy tools of industry, tweaked through rebuild on top of rebuild until their industry was the gladiator ring, and they his weapons of choice. By Functionalist rules, he was meant for combat. By those same rules, Trepan was not. Their hands both dealt out fear, however. Overlord never forgot that as he watched the nervous movements of Trepan’s hands, listened to the rapidfire clicking of fine joints shifting about in anxious little motions. Trepan’s hands had little physical strength, but they manipulated minds to wipe away memory, thought, and self.

Different as their hands were, the difference between Overlord and Trepan wasn’t as large as it
seemed. The mech relied on others to bring about the brute force necessary to restrain his victims, but they were still his victims. Overlord had chosen to take him -- not the other mnemosurgeon, not the injured and possibly more biddable subordinate surgeon -- because the way Trepan had stood over Soundwave had struck a chord in the killer. He wanted the best teacher possible, but more than that, he’d wanted the fearless cruelty he’d seen in a slender, weak mech.

Even trapped in the Decepticon base, reduced to an amusement for a superwarrior, that strange confidence lurked in Trepan. Overlord could see it. Oh, Trepan was no fool. He knew that his fragile hands held his only value here, and he wisely feared the raw power in Overlord. The Decepticon had no finesse. What he wanted, he took. If he wanted it faster, he threatened and hurt and shook until he either got what he wanted, or the source broke.

He feared the violence, but he didn’t fear Overlord himself. It was important distinction to make, and plain to see once the massive Decepticon deigned to allow the cuffs. On his knees before the slender mnemosurgeon, Overlord smiled, and Trepan smiled back. This time, those graceful fingers didn’t contradict the sly expression. This time, they traced languid shapes in the air as Trepan spoke. This time, the casual ease in his narrow face was echoed in his thin hands. Overlord had been bound, and the fear evaporated from Trepan’s optics.

In its place, confidence lit. Trepan no more feared Overlord within mnemosurgery than Overlord feared Trepan in a fight. Absolute power, of course, corrupted absolutely, or maybe they were just rotten people at spark. Their smiles even looked alike.

Overlord’s electrical system ran higher voltage than normal as temptingly vulnerable fingers dancing lightly, unfettered, over his armor. “Bold, aren’t you?” He tilted his helm to the side, well aware that it exposed the back of his neck to the hand spread across his collar armor. “I fail to see what groping me has to do with tutoring.” Unless student and teacher were into that kind of classwork, which Overlord rather thought he might allow himself to be tempted into. Those lithe hands were giving him ideas that heated his wires.

“Neurosurgery is no place for impatience,” Trepan said, as if that were an explanation. “Patience, Overlord. Patience.” His hands were unnaturally long, thin but oddly alien if a mech studied the length of the fingers for too long. Even with that extra length, he couldn’t get a grip around Overlord’s throat. Instead of bringing his other hand up to join the first, he merely extended his needles and turned his wrist to drag the sharp points up.

The tips scraped the finish over armor microplates, screeching metal against metal. It was a skreeeling, hissing noise, high-pitched and too screechy to be musical. There was something hypnotic about the sound, a snake charmer’s song matched by the quicksilver play of needles along Overlord’s throat. They picked between armor sheets to pluck at cables, and one pierced a soft tube somewhere out of Trepan’s sight. He felt the needle go in, the resistance and sudden give, but the connection pinged incomplete. No circuitry available to connect to. Liquid pulsed over the prongs instead, rushing into the hollow needle points to flow over his connectors. He’d hit a fuel line, evidently.

If it hurt, Overlord didn’t seem to notice. “I’m being patient,” he rumbled, the low tone rattling Trepan’s fingers as it ran up the needles. The Decepticon tilted his helm the other direction, almost trapping one needle between contracting plates, but Trepan had been doing this job a long, long time. The needle retracted. “Patience alone won’t educate me.”

“No?” The mnemosurgeon pulled his needles out of the bigger mech’s neck, uncaring of the pink drip of fuel from the end of one. “I’m learning quite a bit.”

Deceptively mild optics narrowed. Trepan took it as the warning it was.
“I’m learning how far I can push your temper,” he said. “I’m learning that you enjoy playing dangerous games, and that you haven’t gone under the needles before. Despite that, you know to be more interested in my hands than my words.” Thin wrists twisted in illustration, and Overlord jerked. Trepan smiled wide as the mighty warrior visibly resisted the urge to tuck his head down into the shelter of armored shoulders. “I’m learning that you’re not the brightest student I’ve ever had.”

That earned him a look that sized him up from helm to feet like Overlord searched for the right spot to begin pulling him apart. Trepan’s smile didn’t falter, but his hands gave him away. Overlord felt the needles resting in a row of sharp pinpricks down the back of his neck, ready to plunge in and up into the vulnerable brain module. Not as confident as he appeared, hmm? They both knew the cuffs wouldn’t keep a superwarrior subdued, not without Overlord’s consent.

Overlord smiled back at him, lazy and unafraid. “And I am learning that you will push as far as you can,” the killer said. “You will take whatever you think you can get from me, but you’ll manipulate me into giving it to you. I do believe my first lesson is that guiding my victims to give me what I want is far easier than forcing them.” Said the Decepticon on his knees in cuffs, being tutored by the mech he’d kidnapped. Demanding lessons would have gotten him nowhere, but Overlord hadn’t demanded. He’d suggested, only suggested.

If the options were the suspended tension and empty locked room, or doing what Overlord had brought him here to do, well. Trepan had set his conditions, but Overlord had allowed him to, and somehow the suggestion had become a reality.

Thin needle points left threading trails of peeled finish as Trepan pulled them around to whisper under Overlord’s chin. “I think you knew that lesson before you brought me here,” he said wryly. Needles dented through surface polish, prickling unarmored mechanisms. “No, this is your first lesson, Overlord. Mnemosurgery is a connection that goes both ways. Control is an illusion.” He applied a burst of pressure, puncturing metal. Overlord lifted his chin on the delicate points that could hurt even him at this range, and while he smiled in amusement at the danger, he still shivered from the tickling glide of needles down his throat cables. Trepan leaned in to finish, “You must maintain it, or find that you are the one being pushed. You are the one being taken from.”

Thoughtful optics looked into Trepan’s face, so confident and in control. So very in control, now that Overlord was bound and on his knees, helpless in the realm of the mnemosurgeon’s area of specialty. Those hands would have betrayed if Trepan was afraid, but the slender mech was close to fearless because the huge, powerful warrior had been neutralized. Overlord posed no physical threat.

At least, not here. Here, in a place Trepan held the advantage.


Behind the Decepticon, the cuffs didn’t unlock. They disappeared as if they’d never been, because they never had, and Overlord slowly brought his hands forward to cup over the back of his neck. Thin, expressive hands went absolutely still in his grasp. Pain stabbed through up his neck as he pulled the needles out and brought the fragile hands down to cradle in his palms.

The tips of the needles were pink with his fuel, and they bled faint glowing trails across his plating. Only now did he remember the pain as they slid in, and Overlord’s mouth turned down in a thunderous frown. Wet, leaked trails from burst lines under his optic frames slid down his face to join the spatters already marking the floor.

“There. It didn’t take you too long to figure it out.” Trepan smiled, to all appearances genuinely pleased. “You fought as hard as you could, but it’s not about how hard you fight.”
It was about control, and keeping the victim believing that Trepan had it all. Physical power had
gotten Overlord absolutely nowhere. This was a battle that had to be fought through mind alone.
That was a necessary lesson by itself, for this Decepticon.

The frown smoothed away gradually, until Overlord merely looked up at the mnemosurgeon looking
down at him, and smile-to-smile, they studied each other.

"Not my brightest student," Trepan murmured, "but I’ve taught worse.”

In Overlord’s hands, fingers trembled.

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Chapter Summary

Megatron breaks things, Reason #643 is crossed off the list, Rewind has a good time, and Prowl can think about Starscream’s motivations later.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 29
Warning: Mindfragging, torture, misunderstandings, judgment, an orgy, manipulation, and actual fragging.
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW, G1
Characters: Starscream, Megatron, Soundwave, Combaticons, Rodimus, Ultra Magnus, Rewind, Constructicons, Prowl, Chromedome, Starscream
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Acting Motivation (Prompt): Things I felt like I had to write, and a couple of Tumblr prompts.

[* * * * *]

”Broken”

[* * * * *]

“You do good work.” The compliment was grudging. He gave it out of a sense of duty. He didn’t enjoy feeding Starscream’s enormous ego, but the compliment was owed, and offering it might head off some of the problems of the recent past.

He could recognize, after the fact, that some of his own behavior had driven Starscream’s madness. Only Megatron brought out the peculiar wild brilliance in Starscream, out beyond the borders of sanity. Their edges rasped against each other, but their clashes served to sharpen them both. They had always that way. It was only when Megatron stopped meeting Starscream halfway that the sharp edges bit in. His Air Commander had a hardness then, a cutting purity that served to remind the Decepticon commander why this particular flyer was irreplaceable. It was once the sharp edge turned on him that Megatron saw how his lax response had turned Starscream back on him.

No surprise to the troops, the Air Commander resumed his rank without further punishment after the Combaticon incident. That was how he and Megatron worked, commander and second-in-command, and why Soundwave’s subtle powergrabs failed to seize a single iota of Megatron’s favor from the Seeker.

Megatron knew about Soundwave’s frustration with Starscream, but it was tempered by loyalty to Megatron himself. Like Shockwave, loyalty tempered the communication mech’s thirst for power and favor. Let Comm. Officer and General jockey for third-in-command, Starscream’s place at Megatron’s side was secure. The Seeker’s insecurities and irrational reactions to Megatron’s words and actions sometimes made that place explode, but it would remain his spot even while on fire and empty. No other mech belonged in the blast zone. Starscream would return to it, sooner or later.

Even after attempting to murder his leader, Starscream earned his place. He brought a worthy gift
when he came back, which of course he did. As fast as Starscream escaped, cowardice paled before his pride. He would never abandon his rightful place.

Megatron accepted the peace offering for what it was: one more ceasefire in their tumultuous working relationship. The Combaticons were an accurate representation of their mutual, respectful contempt.

They also represented the pettiness. Starscream had deliberately restored the gang of traitors that had almost taken Kaon from Shockwave. Their rebellion had nearly cost the Decepticons an entire city. Megatron had been infuriated by the need to divert resources from fighting the Autobots in order to put down an internal rebellion. He’d authorized the harshest punishment possible for the traitors, more merciless than straight execution. Seeing Onslaught’s rebels resurrected and revolting against him again had enraged Megatron beyond all reason, as Starscream had known it would.

Banishment had been an unwise choice, but Megatron had been too incoherent with injuries and shaking anger to want more than to get the subversive lot of them out of his sight. That should have been the end of it, but of course something involving Starscream couldn’t be that simple. The Combaticons had popped up yet again, this time on Cybertron in an attempt to wrest control of the entire planet from him. Megatron had been furious enough to have even Soundwave tip-toeing around his temper.

Starscream’s loyalty program implantation had soothed what would have otherwise been an undignified but extremely satisfying tantrum. Megatron didn’t have the patience for drawn-out torture, but slowly melting the Combaticons alive in the smelter pools wouldn’t have been enough. He’d had a vague thought of letting the Insecticons loose on their legs before Starscream presented his hasty plan. The Air Commander’s fast talking alone had saved the traitors from fates worse than execution.

Now Megatron watched Onslaught on his knees scouring rust marks off the floor in the lower levels, and he gave Starscream grudging credit where credit was due. Not only had the Decepticons gained a valuable new combiner team, but the former traitors were now slavishly loyal to Megatron’s every word.

The smirk and oh-so-sweet, “Why thank you, mighty Megatron!” in return was worth tolerating. Of course Starscream was smug. He’d done it yet again.

The glitch.

A glitch who delivered. Megatron leaned back in his throne and watched the monitor as Onslaught stopped working in order to glare at Frenzy as the Cassetticon sloshed a bucket of salt water down the hall. A fish flopped onto the Combaticon’s helm. Megatron smiled.

He didn’t smile later.

“Frenzy: extensive damage to tape reels, right arm, and face,” Soundwave said in a monotone. Rage cold as ice ran under the lack of expression, however.

Behind him, wrists cuffed under his rotors at the small of his back and shoulder held in Bonecrusher’s ironclad grasp, the unstable helicopter Combaticon twitched and giggled. Megatron would have thought him terminally insane if not for the extensive file on Vortex’s many and varied interrogative skills. A horrible person might lurk under the crazed mask, but the worst of Vortex’s behaviors were a sham to unsettle and deceive others. If Megatron hadn’t had his suspicions and Soundwave’s growing file of similar incident reports, he might have fallen for the act.
However, Vortex had made a mistake in striking at Soundwave, indirectly or not. This hadn’t been a random act of violence, or even boredom. This had been a calculated act done make a statement, but the ‘copter had erred in whom he targeted. Megatron would stand aside for his Comm. Officer’s justice.

Vortex had been out of the war a long, long time. He might have been a top interrogation specialist at the time of his boxing, but Soundwave had progressed well beyond his level. Besides which, Soundwave had Megatron’s permission to speak as his voice. Between Soundwave’s skill and the loyalty program, the Combaticon didn’t stand a chance.

Vortex hadn’t been prepared for them to be less interested in discipline than ferreting out what he was up to. His visor narrowed to a wary slit as the first honest answer was forced out of his vocalizer by the loyalty program, and from there it became a tormenting exercise in pinning an experienced interrogator down until there was no more room to squirm. Soundwave was very good at asking the right questions. Vortex evaded through rewording and ‘misunderstandings’ for a time, but such tricks only stalled the inevitable.

Megatron leaned back in his throne to watch Soundwave carve the Combaticon’s defenses down into nothing. It wasn’t a physical punishment, but it was wonderfully satisfying to watch, all the same. Resistance was futile, and the lesson Megatron wanted taken away from turning interrogation on Vortex was that it was also a public spectacle of defeat, humiliation, exhaustion, and submission. One would think the Combaticons had already learned the bitter taste of that lesson, but apparently not. Megatron had authorized Soundwave to force another helping down their throats since they were such slow learners. Vortex was gagging on it, but Soundwave wasn’t going to give him a choice but to swallow.

Onslaught stood at attention at the back of the room the entire time, silent and helpless. Megatron had ordered him there, ordered him to witness.

“Onslaught,” Vortex admitted at long last, heavy venting bursts coming out with the words. He sagged in Bonecrusher’s grip and glared at Soundwave. “It was Onslaught. Onslaught passed a message to me through Astrotrain, because we’re not allowed to talk outside of battle, and it insinuated that he wanted me to beat the midget to scrap metal.” He didn’t seem to notice that his rotor blades and arms were shaking slightly. He looked as if he’d been pushed to his limits and then beaten past those, but hatred simmered hot and bright in his visor. “I don’t know why, ‘cause I didn’t ask why. I don’t care why.”

“You know why,” Megatron said, speaking up for the first time. Vortex’s visor shot to him. It bleached paler as a touch of apprehension woke in the mech’s mind. Megatron had noticed that the loyalty program kicked the Combaticons in the CPU in his presence, especially if he spoke to them directly. He enjoyed their stiffness around him as its increased activity made them hyperaware that they had to obey his every command. “Dare you lie to me, Vortex?” he said, dangerously soft, and the ‘copter went still as stone.

“No, Lord Megatron.”

Megatron met Onslaught’s painstakingly neutral gaze from across the room. “Really.”

“Yes, Lord Megatron.”

“Then why did Onslaught order you to attack Frenzy -- and the others?” he asked pointedly. Yes, Soundwave, he had read those reports.

“He…he didn’t order me to do anything.” But Vortex faltered. The loyalty program, keyed by
Megatron’s order, jumped into the forefront of his CPU, and he seemed to shrink into himself. It began to actively combing through thoughts and motivation, searching for an answer to the command.

The ‘copter looked sick, visor staring blindly ahead of himself as control over his mind and body stripped away. Megatron could just imagine the way his trapped thoughts scrambled to present less incriminating, less disloyal things for the program’s approval, but Starscream had done excellent work. It didn’t matter what Vortex wanted to say; the program had taken that option away.

“I am to be the threat to ensure the other Decepticons treat us as superiors instead of inferiors. The rest of my team cannot respond to attacks or insults personally, but punishment doesn’t matter to me,” Vortex said, mechanical and frustrated in one. “It is becoming known that lashing out against us will result in retaliation from me.”

“Mmhmm.” Vortex gulped air, blinking rapidly as the loyalty program disengaged its search and report function, but Megatron wasn’t through. “Now tell me why you obeyed Onslaught’s order over mine.” He smiled, baring his teeth at the Combaticon leader.

Who knelt, graceful in defeat. He bowed his head before Megatron as his minion woodenly admitted to supporting Onslaught’s attempt to bypass the loyalty program by not-quite-disobeying the orders to submit to and not antagonize the other Decepticons. Onslaught’s voice didn’t waver as he confirmed this as true when Megatron forced him to admit it. Ordering the two Combaticons to confess to any other borderline disloyal actions resulted in a spill of minor incidents that Soundwave took careful note of.

After the pair finished vomiting up their crimes, purged of disloyalties by the programming making them shake and shiver, they concentrated on the floor. Onslaught was dignified and Vortex a masochist, but neither of them had a single illusion left about who had the power, here.

Their commander, leader, and master let them dwell on that for a terrible length of time before passing judgment.

“You are found to be disloyal, Onslaught,” Megatron permitted Soundwave to say, still speaking as his voice, and punishment began as a twitch of Onslaught’s fingers. Soundwave didn’t move, but Megatron knew the deep red of his visor conveyed satisfaction with Megatron’s handling of the situation. It avenged Frenzy’s pain as well as dug out potential treason at the source.

While Soundwave watched Onslaught burn from the inside, the screams gradually fighting through the chokehold the loyalty programming put on the Combaticon’s throat, Megatron returned his attention to the helicopter still standing before him. “As for you.” He beckoned, and Bonecrusher physically picked the mech up to move him closer to the throne.

Vortex stared at the floor, arms bound behind him, and flinched the smallest amount as Onslaught screeched static, panted a hoarse, “A-all hail Megatron,” and shrieked again. The cycle would continue until Megatron deemed him repentant, and the Combaticons had no reason to expect their leader to forgive them anytime soon.

“You enjoy being punished?” Megatron asked, almost idle.

“Yes, Lord Megatron.”

“How long does it take for the pleasure to become pain?”

Vortex hesitated, fighting the compulsion, but he had to answer. Megatron’s lips curled in a cruel
Smirk at the resistance. “Three to -- to six hours, Lord Megatron.”

“What would be a more effective punishment for you?”

A tinge of horror passed through the red visor as the loyalty programming dug into his thoughts. “I don’t -- I don’t know, Lord Megatron.” That was honesty, stark and raw, but Vortex risked a pleading look up for half a second before returning his gaze to the floor. He didn’t know how else Megatron might punish him, but he wasn’t fool enough to think the Decepticon leader would stop at a mere beating. Megatron’s wrath was to be feared, even by someone of dubious sanity and masochistic tendencies.

Megatron leaned back in his throne and contemplated the problem. His first thought was to assign the mech to be Frenzy’s servant, but Onslaught and Vortex had already proven adept at worming around the wording of his orders. Frenzy would likely end up dead of an ‘accident’ or manipulated into doing Vortex’s bidding. That didn’t even take into account the rest of the blasted team. These two had admitted to their crimes, but plenty of Onslaught’s forced confession had involved Blast Off, Blaster, and Swindle.

Clearly, if Megatron wanted to end the threat of these traitors, he had to break them up. Although breaking up a combiner team was more of a mental enterprise than a physical one. The physical isolation had done little to stop them, after all.

If there were minds and loyalties to be fragged with, there was only one mech to call.

Starscream had a solution ready to hand over by the time he swept into the room. He sidestepped Onslaught smartly as he entered and strode over to give Megatron an absentminded salute that meant he had more important things than mockery on his mind. “I would think this would be the obvious solution, but I realize not everyone is a genius,” he commented as he handed over the plan.

“Get out of here, you fool. I don’t have time for your egotistical ranting.” Megatron took a swipe at his Second’s head. It wasn’t meant to connect. In the unspoken dialogue between them, it was practically an acknowledgement of a job well done.

“Hello, pot? Kettle calling,” Starscream laughed on his way out. He kicked Onslaught in the head as he went.

Megatron read through the plan, nodding to himself. Good. Starscream had taken every injury, every threat, every shove and glower reported by Onslaught, Vortex, and the Decepticons as a whole, and he’d written it into a timetable. This was good work, and yes, Megatron would admit it to be brilliant, if twisted.

“Your orders,” Megatron said around his smile, and Bonecrusher’s hands clamped down as he stopped the ‘copter from cowering back from him, “are to target Swindle.” He held out the timetable, nodding to Bonecrusher. The Constructicon uncuffed his prisoner, and Vortex reluctantly reached out to accept the timetable.

“You may not say why, hint at your reasons, or otherwise communicate that you’re doing so for any specific cause. Make it look like you’re amusing yourself at his expense. Make it look like your own idea. Let no one know this is at my command. Any suspicion on the part of anyone else that this was done on orders will be considered disloyalty, and shall be punished accordingly for a time of 48 hours, if not more.”

Vortex stared at him, visor unseeing as the loyalty program wrote the orders into his priority directives. Across the room, Onslaught was beyond overhearing them. Over-stimulated pain sensors warred with the dredging of the loyalty program re-educating his mind from the base code up. He choked on screams and affirmation of loyalty. Bodily agony traded off to mental subjugation and
back again, over and over.

“Tell me how you can get around my command,” Megatron ordered, and Vortex started to answer. “Overwrite those methods until you can no longer disobey in any way.”

A pathetic little whimper got out of the ‘copter.

Megatron relaxed in his throne. He’d give a few more commands to guide the loyalty program into trapping Vortex into a corner, and Soundwave would follow up to make sure it actually worked, but Starscream’s plan had merit. Swindle had always been the loose card. He’d snap eventually, and the fall-out would shatter Onslaught’s team for good.

“All hail-ail-ail M-Megatron,” Onslaught croaked. His scream tore the air afterward, ugly and long. It was a wonderful sound.

It would take the rest of the night shift for the Combaticon commander to crawl through the base, hitching and crying out while the Decepticons looked on in amusement. By tomorrow morning, Megatron could count on hearing the sweet sound of exhausted surrender outside his door. Pride couldn’t stand up to the loyalty programming, and in seven hours, Onslaught wouldn’t be able to, either. The mech would grovel on the floor to beg his forgiveness, swearing undying loyalty and promising the Combaticons would prove their worth.

As satisfying as it would be to condemn Vortex to the same torment, it would be far better to let Onslaught wonder why the ‘copter was set free. One more crack, one more doubt. And then?

Then the Combaticons would break. They might not be voluntarily loyal to him, but they would never be loyal to each other once he was through.

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"Rodimus the virgin (is not a desperate loser)"

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“I’d totally clang that,” the captain said confidently as Skids’ aft disappeared into the ventilation shaft over the bar.

Ultra Magnus added another tick mark under Reason #643 in his ongoing list entitled Why Rodimus Is An Unsuitable Captain. It was one of many reasons with multiple tick marks, but only combining the captain’s various offenses against ship furniture would rack up the sheer number of marks equal to that single reason alone. Reason #643 was in a category all its own in terms of lack of decency, however. The number of mechs Rodimus expressed a wish to interface with on a daily basis would shock a more respectable captain. The number of times Red Alert caught Rodimus emerging ruffled and grinning from random room suites shared by multiple mechs would have earned a court-martial if this were an actual respectable ship.

As it was, this was the Lost Light. Ultra Magnus kept his list, but he couldn’t delude himself into thinking fraternization regulations existed for anyone but himself. Hence Reason #643’s massive amount of tick marks but zero amount of consequences.

“I’m just having a little fun!” Rodimus said the few times the Duly Appointed Enforcer brought it up. “Nobody’s crossing any lines! I spread the love of Rodimus through my fanclub evenly, y’know?” He flashed that infuriating grin. Ultra Magnus squinted against the bright glint. “Drift’s cool with checking my boundaries anytime I spend a few hours with somebody. It’s all good.”
Did the captain really delegate checking the consent of his partners to *Drift*? Firstly, that was a hideous slight against the chain of command, which clearly dictated that if this was an official -- if nonstandard -- part of the captain’s duties, then he should be delegating to Ultra Magnus as executive officer, not Drift as third-in-command. Secondly, that was not something that should ever be delegated to a (pardoned) criminal, and especially not a (former) Decepticon. Thirdly, consent was not something to be checked by a third party *after a few hours*.

What Rodimus had said was all kinds of wrong, and Ultra Magnus wrote a furious series of memos to him on the subject. He suspected they were never read.

Making it more confusing yet was the surprising ease in which Rodimus carved a swathe through the crew. He’d always been a popular, personable mech, but Ultra Magnus had never suspected him of using interfacing as a bribe for continued loyalty. Someone with Rodimus’ casual reputation was more likely to bore his fanclub after a time with the same repeated trick, yet the captain bounced from berth to berth and seemed to have an open invitation to return. Drift trotted after him, checking up, knocking on doors, and generally soothing wounded egos in the wake of a self-centered mech with no care for how it damaged people’s pride to have their lover abandon them in a split second.

Or at least that’s what Ultra Magnus assumed. He didn’t actually want to know. He decided to stay as far away from the disaster zone of his captain’s love life as possible and just kept making black marks under Reason #643.

That changed after Overlord. More accurately, it changed after Tyrest. Ultra Magnus had wanted Rodimus dealt with, his unsuitability as a captain used to smack him down. He’d wanted Rodimus humbled.

Executing the young captain was as unacceptable as any reason on the list, however. More so, in fact. Ultra Magnus’ attempt to change Rodimus took a far different turn that he’d ever imagined, and the consequences went far beyond interfacing habits.

Afterward, it amazed him that Rodimus wanted him back as Second. Despite making the list, despite acting on the list, despite still believing and confessing to that belief in all the reasons *Why Rodimus Is An Unsuitable Captain*, the captain of the *Lost Light* wanted him as executive officer. And, despite adding tick marks every hour, Ultra Magnus still wanted to be his Second.

Tyrest had started the list *Why Minimus Ambus Is An Unsuitable Ultra Magnus*. Minimus Ambus had been ashamed of that, but after passing on the mantle of the Duly Appointed Enforcer, the list kept getting longer without any repercussions. He was strangely okay with that. He might be unsuitable, but he was still Ultra Magnus. He was finding out that the lists didn’t really mean as much as he thought they did. Their importance was subjective.

Some of the items depended entirely on perspective, for instance. “Why do you need me to call you in two hours?” he asked carefully.

His captain smiled weakly. “Sorry. I know you hate it, but it’s -- well, it’s Skids. He gets grabby when he’s overcharged, and he’s excited over getting out of repairs, and I think he invited Getaway, and Getaway doesn’t know how stuff on the ship works yet.” He rubbed the back of his neck and looked as though he really wanted to doodle on whatever was nearest.

Ultra Magnus had noticed that Rodimus was making an effort not to destroy furniture in his presence anymore, although he could tell the carving continued. It was a nice gesture immediately canceled out by the rest of the captain’s behavior. “You want me to call to make certain that you have done nothing they don’t agree to?” Ultra Magnus still had trouble with Rodimus’ backward logic when it came to interfacing.
in case, Drift always kind of called to make sure I was still okay. People do weird stuff when they’re
fendered sometimes. It’s not like I can’t take care of myself, but you know how people are.” He
gestured awkwardly. “Some Autobots only act like ‘Bots ‘cause they know somebody’s watching
them.” His grin turned cocky again. “And who better to watch then the guy who already polices us
day in and day out?”

Ultra Magnus had the feeling he was missing something. He’d though that was what he’d said, but
something about how Rodimus reacted didn’t sit right with him. And whatever else the captain was,
he was an Autobot through and through.

He agreed, cautiously, to Rodimus’ bizarre request. In exactly two hours, he called the captain’s
personal comm. frequency, bracing for an image of debauchery and at least one broken shipboard
regulation. The things Rodimus asked him to do were offensive in so many ways, and witnessing
fraternization make him flinch preemptively.

“Rodimus?” He couldn’t make himself use rank, not in this situation. It was too improper.

His arm projector popped up a sleepy, contented face, relaxed in a way he’d rarely seen Rodimus.
“Mm? Heeeeeey.”

Ah, he must have caught them post-interfacing. That was marginally less horrifying. “Are you well?”

“S’all good.” Rodimus shifted, and someone murmured under the microphone, close enough that
recharging systems could be heard purring at the subsonic level. “Woke me up. We pretty much got
in and crashed. Getaway’s cool.” The murmur came again. “Not even a grope. I’m fine.” The smile
seemed to take effort, curling against sleep that pulled Rodimus back down. “Thanks. Gonna…”

Ultra Magnus ended the call after a minute of steady ventilation confirmed that Rodimus really had
fallen into recharge in the middle of the call. Well, then. That had been unexpectedly easy.

It was less easy when Rodimus catcalled, “Frag me, on Aisle Four!” down the hall at someone, and
Megatron frowned.

“Is he always like that?” the new captain (co-captain) asked Ultra Magnus. “That constitutes sexual
harassment from a superior officer, if I recall correctly. I didn’t know Autobot regulations were
different in that regard.”

The list loomed. Reason #643 had tick marks Ultra Magnus wouldn’t have even known about if he
hadn’t become his (original) captain’s spotter. Rodimus had avoided scandalizing him openly during
the check-up calls; so far, he hadn’t seen anything through the projector that didn’t happen regularly
at the bar. It was still improper.

“Yes, Rodimus often pursues the crew openly,” he said slowly, but didn’t elaborate. It didn’t feel any
more proper to speak about one captain’s proclivities to the other.

Megatron gave him a look that combined confusion, surprise, and thoughtfulness that told him the
ex-Decepticon leader understood far more than such a short answer should have given away.
Perhaps it did because it had come from him, of anyone.

He should have known Megatron would do something. Both his captains were mechs of direct
action, but Megatron seemed dedicated to involving himself in the crew. Protecting the crew fell into
that realm.

“I’d do you both, at once, upside down and sideways,” Rodimus crowed at Cyclonus and Tailgate
for no more reason, it seemed, than to see Cyclonus stiffen and make Tailgate giggle.

“I don’t think you capable,” Megatron said, cool voice cutting through the bar chatter.

Rodimus glared, immediately offended. “I don’t think I care what you think.”

“Maybe you should.”

Ultra Magnus started to rise, uneasy with the tension and uncertain how to dissipate it. Rodimus was so clearly in the wrong, and he would be forced to say so if Megatron’s challenge went any further. That would do nothing for the authority of either captain. Ultra Magnus considered neither of them suitable for the rank, but the rank itself should be respected.

But Rodimus’ optic caught on his frown, and the fiery captain grinned. “I’d show you, Megs, but alas!” He clutched his hands over his spark. “I’m saving myself for Ultra Magnus!”

The bar stared in amused disbelief as Rodimus zipped over to swoon dramatically against the much taller Autobot. Ultra Magnus looked down at his armful of Rodimus and wondered what had just happened. Megatron seemed more amused than confused, but there was a faint aura of puzzlement throughout the whole bar for the rest of the night. Rodimus clung to Ultra Magnus, swearing eternal devotion to make people laugh, but he also didn’t hit on anyone else. It was…strange. Ultra Magnus would have protested being made a figure of fun, but the twist of rank and respect held him fast.

By the time he left the bar, he put it down to a rare occurrence of common sense. It did happen to Rodimus occasionally, usually crossed with the mech’s more typical, inappropriate humor. It was why he didn’t protest the captain skipping out at his side, blowing kisses in mournful farewell to his many crestfallen swains. They mocked him as he left, and Rodimus paused on the threshold to make a rude gesture back at them. Laughter followed him out.

Ultra Magnus wasn’t sure what to do when his captain followed him all the way back to his hab suite. “What do you want?” he asked at last, turning to confront him at the door.

Rodimus shrugged and leaned against the wall, lopsided grin in place. “Nothing I haven’t offered before.”

“That is against shipboard regulations.”

“I know.” For a moment, the younger mech looked frustrated and almost tired. “Says you, anyway. I don’t get it. It’s not against the rules. I checked. I read all those memos you sent me, uh, eventually,” he shifted his feet, “but you interpret fraternization so broadly. Nobody else does that! Nobody! You consider everything fraternization! It’s like officers have to stay in a little box and can’t touch anybody outside it, in your world.”

Ultra Magnus stared. That made no sense whatsoever. “Fraternization is the -- “ He paused. “How would you define it?”

Put on the spot, Rodimus wasn’t nearly so confident. “I uh. Sexual contact? Like, fragging and stuff.”

He didn’t have to be confident to render Ultra Magnus speechless. “Then what are you offering?”

Rodimus stared up at him. “Same…thing I offer everybody?” He recovered enough poise to wink. “Although you’re special. I wouldn’t say that to just anybody.”

“You say it to everyone,” Ultra Magnus said on automatic, but his mind whirred behind the words.
Things were suddenly breaking apart and realigning in different patterns inside his head. “Rodimus, what **exactly** do you want to do with me? Details, please. Give me an agenda for the next two hours if I accepted your offer.”

Two days later, Megatron again attempted a confrontation after Rodimus yelled, “Dat briefcase!” at Brainstorm. Rodimus proclaimed his undying devotion for Ultra Magnus once again. Ultra Magnus stoically acted as a fainting couch. The crew looked between the two captains, trying to figure out what was going on. Megatron seemed more intrigued than confused by everyone’s reactions.

“You’re more tolerant than I was led to believe,” the ex-Decepticon said to Ultra Magnus afterward.

He could have said that he had a list, one each for himself and Rodimus. He could have pointed to Rung and therapy. He could have said he spent a night discovering that he hadn’t understood anything about what he’d been judging for over two years.

He could have, but he didn’t.

Ultra Magnus escorted Rodimus from the bar and gravely retired for the night, and not a mark blackened their names.

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*Decepticonsensual said something about seeing Prowl with the Constructicons as an alternative pairing to him and Chromedome, and I realized something. This Rewind might not know about the Constructicons and Prowl yet. He certainly hasn’t met them.

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Another day, another ridiculous crisis. This one necessitated Optimus Prime hunting down the *Lost Light* for consultation, finding them planetside after a search of the quadrant. A bar didn’t seem like an appropriate setting for such a meeting, but really, considering the circumstances? A bar was perfectly fine. Mechs had been dragged into the meeting as needed, and the booth had gradually become jam-packed by too many people in too small a space.

A more possessive person would have been right there at the table. A more jealous one wouldn’t have insisted on sitting between Prowl and Chromedome. A more insecure one would have refused to let Chromedome go over there at all.

Rewind still needed enough space that he’d been frankly apathetic toward the whole meeting. It got him away from Chromedome’s hovering presence for twenty minutes, and it wasn’t like he couldn’t see the way Prowl’s optics occasionally strayed toward the shift of Chromedome’s hips on the bench. They jerked away instantly but inevitably meandered back. Chromedome’s arm twitched as Optimus Prime talked, restrained from elbowing his former partner in the side at some relevant point. All the hallmarks of a long, intimate partnership were there in plain sight, plastered over by more stiff formality than usual.

Rewind put his elbow on the bar and slumped, hand propping his head up just barely. Something had gone down between those two, again. He sighed. Chromedome never did like telling him when Prowl did something underhanded and got caught. Rewind could take the mech out of a parted partnership, but he couldn’t take the partnership out of true partners. The more mechs had died in the war, the more important the history -- any history -- between the survivors became. Rewind understood that. He just didn't like seeing Prowl remember Chromedome’s hot spots and Chromedome pretend he saw nothing.
Honestly, it wasn't as though Rewind wasn't used to seeing them dance around their gaping holes of hurt emotion. They'd never get back together, but sometimes he thought they were a push and a shove away from giving it a try.

"Heeeeeey." Speaking of shoves, Rewind was jostled in his seat by five very large mechs suddenly making themselves at home around him. Five drinks and an extra plonked down on the bar in front of him. "So you're the -- uhhh, you're Chromedome's," the name was pronounced in tones of great disdain, "conjunx endura. The replacement."

Oh, now that stung. If Rewind hadn't been surrounded by Constructicons, he might have said something about it. "What's it to you, Decepticon?" he snapped back without any of his normal tact. Forget recording. This was personal.

A significant glance was passed around the group. "You know who we are?"

Rewind looked downward in a plea for patience from Primus. "How can you even -- yes, I know who you are. Everyone knows who you are."

"No, I mean," five construction builds leaned in, "do you know who we're with?"

Rewind hesitated. There were things Chromedome hadn't told him about what happened back on Cybertron, and he knew he was missing some recent history. "The Decepticons..?"

"Naw, mech. We're with him." Large hands waved over toward the table of bigshots discussing important things and trying not to fall into old habits of flirting and fighting. Since Megatron and Optimus Prime were also at the table, that applied to most everyone there. "The boss. Prowl."

"Prowl." What the frag had he missed?

"Yep. We're gestalt, now."

He'd missed a lot, apparently. "I, um. Alright, then." He rallied. The drink they'd brought over for him helped in that. "Why are you over here telling me about it if --"

"We've got a proposition for you."

Frag him and his curiosity. "Oh?"

It was certainly worth hearing them out over. Two more free drinks in, and he was in the mood to think about it, too. It helped that Prowl had noticed his fan club relocating to surround the little mech, and he was looking unbearably smug about whatever bullying he thought was going on in their corner.

Until Rewind slammed back another drink and accepted Bonecrusher's delicately proffered hand, sliding off the barstool and sweeping out of the room like a queen escorted by her courtiers. Grinning, chortling courtiers. Prowl's optics popped wide, and he grabbed the side of Chromedome's hip in a bid for attention that had nothing to do with old, ingrained habits. Chromedome, to his credit, shot him a glare before catching on that this wasn't Prowl getting on Rewind's nerves. He got one good look at five wide green backs and a tiny form in their midst before the bar door closed behind them.

By the time Prowl and Chromedome had struggled out of the booth and scrambled after them, the group had disappeared into the port traffic, well on their way to finding a room for the night. The Constructicons broadcast amusement, mischief, and lust down the gestalt links. Rewind transmitted a soundless video to Chromedome, a video mostly made up of looking down his own body as five
looming Constructicons sorted out who went where while touching what. Neither former detective remembered whose fans clicked on first, or at what point they gave up trying to muffle the incriminating whirrrrr.

It took them half the night to track their errant other halves down, and they were in quite a mood when they finally knocked on the right door. The video and broadcasted sensations never stopped; under that assault, even the hardest metal would melt. The only reason they were keeping their hands off each other was the Fear of Rewind, and that ended when Long Haul ambushed them at the door by grabbing them by the scruffs of the necks. He hoisted them up in front of the debauched pile on the bed as if for judgment.

Prowl twisted and nearly got loose, of course. "Put me down!"

Chromedome just hung there and stared at the tangle of limbs and sated smirks. "Rewind..."

"Now kiss!" someone in the pile yelled. Rewind made a crude gesture that wasn't much better than the yelled command. Chromedome fizzled oddly, unable to believe it, but Long Haul pushed the two smaller mechs together hopefully.

Prowl, frustrated beyond reason, seized his ex-partner's helm and yanked him into reach.

"That's unexpectedly hot," Rewind murmured, staring and recording for all he was worth.

"I know, right?" Scavenger sighed happily. "Now the real party can get started. But remember: this was all our idea. They'll never go along with it if they think we're only doing it because of them."

"I'm not doing it because of them," Rewind grumbled. "I'm doing it because of me and Domey."

Hook leaned over from the other side, still watching the show. "And we're doing it because of us and Prowl. But a good engineer makes use of the supplies on hand." His hand squeezed Rewind's leg.

He couldn't really argue with that logic.

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*Decepticonsensual said something again.*

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The wall groaned beneath the impact as Starscream slammed Prowl back into it.

Prowl curled forward over the helm immediately ducking to draw a warm, wet line down the center of grill. His voice stayed level, but his fans screamed on high. "There does not have to be a reason."

"But you’d be happier if there was one," said Starscream, or he would have if his mouth hadn’t been occupied. It’s not like it mattered. The grill his lips molested was parting, which meant Prowl had talked himself into believing he knew what the Decepticon was up to.

"You’re doing nothing but sewing chaos. You don’t have a particular reason in mind." A grounder engine whined high and shrill above the roar of a flight engine. Prowl made a muted sound in the back of his throat. Starscream was taking his time today, and it wasn’t chaos being left in his wake right here and now. No, that was a very focused, needing purpose rising up through Prowl’s core.

"My reason is that it’s hot, and I enjoy it."
"So -- you say!" Prowl grunted as he was picked up and slammed back in to the wall again, temporarily stunning him.

That gave the Decepticon enough of an opening to release him. Starscream sank to his knees in order to concentrate on his favorite shiny thing of the moment. “Mmhmm.”

Prowl might have continued speaking, but Starscream humming agreement against the armor of his spark chamber diverted his attention to more urgent matters. Speaking was not included in such things. It might even detract from reaching his current goal, something hovering just out of reach while Starscream very deliberately breathed a long, noisy, forceful rush of air over sensitive components. Oh dear Cybertron and all its little Primes, shut up and get on with it!

Starscream smirked against his spark chamber. Prowl would go back to figuring out why later.

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Pt. 30

Chapter Summary

Prowl dresses up, recreational fingernomming of all types, and Tarn does his duty by Overlord. Sort of.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 30
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW, G1
Characters: Prowl, Constructicons, Astrotrain, Skywarp, Soundwave, Starscream, Megatron, Blurr, Swindle, Tarn, Overlord.
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Various Tumblr things.

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Hemline

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They got to Earth and lost Prowl.

Look, it was Japan. It wasn’t like a bunch of construction vehicles could easily get around Japan of all places. They weren’t exactly inconspicuous. People actually kept track of construction sites and abnormal vehicle movement, here. They had to obey traffic laws and forge a lot of permits for parking. Even so, Long Haul was too wide for a lot of alleyways. Hook nearly got stuck when they took a wrong turn. They had to travel by themselves or in pairs to avoid suspicion.

They knew Prowl would have an easier time fitting in, which was a relief. Having somebody able to scout for them was kind of nice. He found them a buildsite for the night and assured them he’d park nearby once he finished investigating. They made their careful, cautious way to the site throughout the day and assembled to wait.

When night came and they didn’t see a copcar anywhere, the Constructicons realized they’d been making a lot of assumptions. They’d assumed he’d been honest with them. They’d assumed he’d be safe. They’d assumed he’d be as eager to stick close together as they were. They’d assumed he’d check in if something went wrong.

10 PM on a Wednesday night, and five heavy-duty construction vehicles were fretting where they parked. Bonecrusher and Long Haul wanted to track Prowl down right away. Mixmaster and Hook wanted to wait another few hours for him. Scavenger just rocked back and forth, whining anxious blurs of static as he watched the empty streets. This was a residential area. It was dead silent except for the rev of their engines. The last car had gone through half an hour ago. Every family with a garage had their cars tucked away for the night, and those without room had their cars locked and covered, parked neatly on the tiny slips of driveways in front of the narrow houses. Every car had been meticulously cared for and readied for the morning commute.
It made it really obvious that Prowl wasn’t coming.

The Constructicons’ whispered worries got louder. By 10:30 PM, Hook had smacked Bonecrusher twice with his crane arm to prevent him from transforming and heading downtown. The buildsite had a night guard onsite somewhere they had to be wary of. None of them had seen him yet, but when they’d pulled in, his car had already been parked and covered for the night. Mixmaster had hurriedly passed out some construction company papers to leave on all their dashboards, just in case the man came looking. They’d parked in the middle of some mud puddles to discourage any snooping.

Revving motors would give them away in no time. Hook swung his crane arm about, threatening another smack until Bonecrusher backed down. “I’m sure he’s fine!”

“Yeah, he’s Prowl,” Mixmaster said loyally.

“But -- “

“But -- “

Static whined, shrilling feedback through all their audios. They froze, windshields facing every direction. That had been loud. The guard had to have heard that.

“Sorry,” Scavenger whispered.

Across the buildsite, a motor turned over. Under the thick car cover, headlights flickered on.

They froze again. Aw, frag, they’d been found out. The guard was going to call the cops, and the humans would come swarming. Their cover was blown --

“Settle down,” Prowl snapped. His usual cool voice had a tinge of annoyance, and who could blame him? He’d just been woken up. “I expect you ready to move in six hours. This may be the last rest we get for days, so take it!”

Five construction vehicles did very good impressions of losing their jaws, despite not one of them actually have a jaw in altmode to lose.

Headlights flashed sternly in their direction for a moment more before fading again.

Leaving them staring at their boss draped in a form-fitting cloth garment they’d never even imagined him wearing. It was one thing to watch the humans in this neighborhood pamper their personal machines -- rub them down, clean them out, and cover them for the night -- and something else entirely to see Prowl dressed up. They hadn’t even recognized him. They hadn’t even recognized him. They were gestalt, and the cloth muffled his appearance so much they were suddenly studying every inch of him like he was a stranger.

A very attractive stranger. Hmm.

For all that they couldn’t see more than a teensy hint of his hubcaps under the hemline of that cover, the way it hugged his hood looked absolutely scandalous. The wrinkles where cloth rested on his bumpers were a tease. The cloth turned sleek curves into a vague suggestion of shape, and the Constructicons were mesmerized. From concerned to captivated in a minute flat.

Lost, all of them.

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“I’m not getting in trouble for fragging on duty again.” Astrotrain shot a look at the door and made sure to nudge the Seeker away. Hot piece of aft or not, there was a time and place for a pounding. It wouldn’t be the good kind of pounding if he got caught one more time. “Can’t you just…hold it?” He poked a finger dead center on Skywarp’s cockpit and extended his arm, pushing back. Shoo. Duty now; frag later.

Skywarp was oblivious to subtle deflections, but he was just as likely to look straight through blunt refusals. Today was apparently a day for ignoring any and all protests. He parked his hot piece of aft on the console and grabbed the hand holding him away from the lap he’d been aiming for. “Nope. I need something in my mouth like now.” Except the words came out, “Nope, I need sumfing uhn muh mouf hwigh ow,” as he shoved the first three fingers of Astrotrain’s hand into his mouth. He happily set to sucking on them.

Astrotrain shuddered in his seat, optics dimming. Skywarp winked and kept talking muffled nonsense between attempts to stuff the shuttle’s hand up past the knuckles.

Well, it didn’t technically count as fragging, right.?

Recreational Fingernomming: Blurr and Swindle

Swindle said a version of it every night. Blurr kept track.

“I like to keep my hand in.”

“I’m keeping my hands busy.”

“I’d help, but my hands are full.”

“Opportunities like this make my palms itch.”

“Proper dealing takes a bit of sleight-of-hand.”

“Hands off the goods.”

Tonight’s version came early, but Blurr had already had his fill. “Don’t touch that spigot,” he said, sliding up before Swindle could look up from rummaging on the wrong side of the bar.

The ex-Decepticon almost fell off his barstool. “H-hey!” Both hands went up, and Swindle gave a great big slightly nervous smile. “Just looking for a curly straw! No sticky fingers here!”

Yeah, he couldn’t pass that up.

Blurr reached over the bar and curled his fingers around one raised wrist. He drew it firmly toward himself, gentle but inescapable, and large purple optics widened. Swindle swallowed but gamely surrendered his hand.

The racer turned bartender studied it closely for a moment before dipping his head. His tongue drew
up the hand, broad and flat. It explored across the palm in a wide, warm swath. A narrow tonguetip slid a teasing moisture between fingers, tasting their sides as Blurr licked slowly up their length. The bar dropped to total silence, quiet enough that Swindle’s stuttered fans could be heard out in the street if anyone had been listening.

Swindle’s fingers trembled against his lips as Blurr pulled his tongue back in. He smiled, lips curving under their barely-there touch. “Nope. Not sticky at all.”

He turned calmly back to work. “Straws are under the icebox,” he tossed over his shoulder.

Swindle didn’t move.

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Recreational Fingernomming: Megatron and Soundwave

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His teeth were as sharp as any weapon. He was a weapon.

Soundwave flinched as he bit down, but the visor locked on him never faltered. The energon bleeding from crushed plating and ruptured microlines pulsed out at the steady beat of a calm fuelpump. Megatron smiled, teeth buried in black armor, and sucked the first gush of pink away. When he took his fingers out of his mouth, they were clean for the short journey to Soundwave’s own armor.

Then they dripped, vital fluid drizzling down glass as Megatron flattened his hand to the Cassette carrier’s chest. He dragged it down, marking Soundwave in energon. Energon, the ultimate source of energy for their species. The Decepticons had chased it across the galaxy. Megatron covered Soundwave in it, fresh and hot from his body, sacrificing energy and pain to paint a visible symbol for everyone to read:

This soldier was more than a soldier. This soldier was as important as energon to Megatron. He was part of him. He was life and body, driving force and fuel to burn one and the same.

Megatron’s fuelpump stayed absolutely steady, and his broken fingers painted a reflection of the loyalty given him.

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Recreational Fingernomming: Starscream and Soundwave

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To Starscream, Soundwave’s hands tasted forbidden. Dusty, dry, their touch fleeting as fingertips ghosted across his plating. What time they stole for more than passing glances promising shared fantasies was never enough. Split loyalties divided them. It could never be, not unless something changed, and what had to change was what kept them apart. The time they had was precious but censored by the awareness that they couldn’t do this.

This is what they could do:

Soundwave could lean against him, forehelm to forehelm, visor as dim as Starscream’s optics. They swayed in forgotten corners of the base, slow-danced for a brief second before continuing past each other in empty hallways, rested with Soundwave’s chest pressed between Starscream’s wings. Navy
arms embraced brighter colors for just a minute, two at most, and Starscream entwined their fingers over his cockpit. He lifted one hand, Soundwave’s cupped over his own, and pressed his mouth to the back. Open-mouthed, he tasted the plating, dragged his breath over the knuckles, and kissed the fingers one by one.

When they separated, they didn’t look back, and the flavor on Starscream’s tongue reminded him that he shouldn’t have done that.

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Of all the duties the head of the Justice Division was responsible for, this was the most personally repugnant. Tarn understood why it fell to a loyalist and not a random soldier; volunteering for the duty meant that nobody was forced into it. He knew that. It’s why he volunteered. He would dutifully devote his body to the Cause no matter what form that devotion took. That didn’t mean he enjoyed being someone’s reward.

He wished Lord Megatron would volunteer himself, if only for rewards to the higher ranks. Then again, some of the things Tarn was called upon to do as a reward weren’t exactly dignified. The D.J.D. already had a reputation for doing whatever it took. Tarn had no shame. His pride could be sacrificed in the name of the Decepticons. Megatron, however, carried the dignity of the Cause on his shoulders. Polishing the feet of a no-name grunt who’d distinguished his lowly self in some momentous way wouldn’t do the Cause any good.

Thus, polishing feet and sundry unpleasant duties were left to those loyal Decepticons willing to lower themselves in Megatron's name. Tarn had no problem leaving his pride at the door. He’d done a lot of things for the Cause he wasn’t exactly ashamed of but didn't want to talk about a whole lot afterward, either.

He couldn't imagine he'd want to breathe a word of today's assignment. Overlord had managed to earn a reward. A reward, and Megatron's favor. Those two things combined gave Overlord something above and beyond a commendation. He'd been given access to the List.

No, not that List. The other List. The short List of volunteers who could and would volunteer their services in every sense of the word. Tarn had gotten a glimpse of the names above his own, once, although Soundwave had quickly closed the browser window before he'd been able to see more. Soundwave himself had been listed above him, which did explain the drunken karaoke request that one time. At the time, Tarn had thought it rather strange that Soundwave had mysteriously happened to show up, but he'd been too fendered by then to ask what was going on.

That night had ended in bad music sung in horrible off-sync time with Soundwave, and someone laughing at them. Tarn’s memories were very blurry. He hadn't tried to clear them.

What confused him now was that Overlord had requested him. If Soundwave was available, why hadn’t Overlord chosen him? Those two had never gotten along. In contrast, Tarn barely knew Overlord. He knew of him, of course, but the Warrior Elite were on the front lines of the war. The Justice Division was an internal organization. The only time they crossed paths was if a Decepticon soldier turned and ran from the carnage Overlord wrecked when set loose. Their brief encounters weren’t social in nature.
Tarn remembered a sadistic, bored killer with the lush lips of a pleasure drone. Overlord was a good fighter, one of Lord Megatron's most persistent challengers in the gladiator pits, but he wasn't a good soldier. He'd struck Tarn as too impatient for tactics. The only thing he seemed to care for was the excitement of battle. Things he'd said made Tarn think he was borderline disrespectful of the Cause, as well.

Tarn had written off the passing commentary as a result of casual disregard for a former gladiatorial rival. Megatron valued Overlord, he knew that. He'd made a mental note to watch Overlord in the future if those around him caught the attitude, and then gone on with chasing down actual traitors.

Overlord apparently remembered Tarn much more favorably. It was a mystery.

As if that weren't strange enough, Lord Megatron had delayed Tarn's arrival by two hours. The leader of the Justice Division had been prepared to get Overlord’s reward over with, but Lord Megatron had sent word for him push the appointment back. The Decepticon leader had personal business with Overlord, it seemed. Unusual as it was for Lord Megatron to concern himself with a single Decepticon, this was Overlord. He wasn't a common soldier, and they were old rivals. Perhaps they were talking the old days. Maybe they were training.

Tarn didn't know. What he did know that cooling his heels for two hours waiting for them to finish their business didn't make him any happier. Being Overlord's reward looked to be a tired refrain from a familiar tune. He'd read the request form. Some of that equipment required a carpenter to install on the berth beforehand, and while he didn't mind blindfolds, a bit-gag was a pain in the welds to get on behind his mask. The collar and chain didn't have him greatly enthused, and a spreader bar for his ankles merely made him huff, unimpressed. Some mechs had no originality.

At least he'd had two hours to loosen up to the point of restlessness. If Overlord wanted him resisting and tense, he'd be out of luck. Tarn had used every speed on his vibrator and three of his own fingers while he waited, languidly rocking his hips on the chair in front of his console. Taking Overlord's spike sounded just fine, right now. He was probably big. Satisfyingly thick, if his equipment matched his frametype. Tarn had only used three fingers, so there might be a decent stinging stretch if Overlord were any good at this.

He doubted it'd be that easy. These rewards weren't about what he himself wanted, and he rarely found any pleasure in what happened. Tarn told the aching emptiness between his legs not to get its hopes up as he walked briskly toward the assigned room.

Wait, where was he? These didn't look like habitation suites. Had he gotten turned around somehow?

Tarn stopped and glanced back down the hall, wondering if he'd gone the wrong way. A hazard of going from base-to-base in a constant search for the List was not always knowing the layout of any given base. The numbers on the doors checked out, but he'd just passed the gun range. Nobody would want to bunk near the gun range. The armory was across the hall, and nobody put their living quarters by the explosives. Yet that was the door number he was looking for. Tarn double-checked. One door down from the gun range, Room 84-C-Deck: the training rink.

He lifted his hand to knock, hesitated, and decided to just palm the access panel. It was a public room, after all. The door opened, and --

"Lord Megatron!" Tarn snapped to attention, optics wide. "I apologize for the interruption! Central informed me the appointment had been moved to now. I wasn't aware that you were still busy."
His leader held up a hand to calm him. "You're not interrupting. You are, in fact, right on time." A smile curled one corner of his mouth, and his optics narrowed in savage satisfaction. "As ever, you’re an example of a Decepticon at his finest."

Pleasure flushed heat through his systems. Compliments from Lord Megatron weren’t given lightly. “Thank you, my Lord.”

He belatedly realized the rattle and hiss he heard was from Lord Megatron’s overtaxed fans, and his commander was only now reattaching the mighty fusion cannon Tarn had modeled his own weaponry after. Having been trained by his leader, Tarn recognized the signs even before Lord Megatron cleared the door -- Tarn had stepped aside in deference, of course -- and revealed an utterly destroyed sparring floor. He felt a pang of fond memory and remembered awe. Lord Megatron in action embodied a peculiar brutal beauty, all the more so when one was the focus of that brutality.

Lord Megatron waved him into the room with a flourish, still smirking. "Overlord is ready for his reward. Tell him I sent you." He turned to stride away, tossing a final comment over his shoulder. "The loser takes whatever the winner chooses to give him."

Mystified, Tarn managed some semblance of acknowledgment before Lord Megatron turned the corner. He stared after him for a moment. How strange. He wasn't sure how he felt about being ‘given' by his leader. The reward system wasn't anything new, but bluntly phrasing it to objectify Tarn like that felt like a shocking bluntness.

He shook his head and stepped through the door.

Obviously, Lord Megatron and Overlord must have been sparring until Tarn arrived. He swept the wrecked room with a look, and another shock pushed Lord Megatron's strange words from his mind. He'd been expecting a berth and equipment best used with one's eager lover, but...well, there was the equipment, and a tumbling mat had been folded up into the approximate dimensions of a shipboard berth. The wall fixtures were even in place. The part of his mind not stunned blank pictured the poor carpenter dodging fighting titans as hooks and rings were bolted into place. Or perhaps the carpenter had worked while gaping at Lord Megatron beating Overlord down, wrestling him into position, and gearing him up.

Carpenters must lead interesting lives in this base.

Lord Megatron's parting words suddenly made much more sense. Tarn blinked rapidly as the past couple of minutes reorganized in his head.

Overlord shifted on his knees in front of him, growling low and angry deep in his chest. The sound came out muffled by the bit-gag forced between generous lips. The spreader bar between his ankles clinked against the floor as he moved, but his hands rested quite tamely between his knees. Angry as he sounded, Overlord knelt like a good pet waiting for directions, blindfolded optics downcast. The leash attached to his collar was dropped on the floor where Lord Megatron must have thrown it carelessly as he left.

The collar itself looked welded on. Professionally closed, and the thick silver wedge of solder was ground down smooth. Tarn wondered if the carpenters in this base had special training or something. Extra pay bonuses for keeping their silence, at the very least.

Overlord’s head tilted suspiciously as the door closed, and Tarn’s valve sent an excited throb through his belly. It pulled at the base of his tanks in hungry pangs of empty need. Tarn blinked again.

Then he smiled. Dropping his voice into the silky tones of an orator, rich and factual, he told
Overlord precisely what the Warrior Elite waited to hear: "I've been sent by Lord Megatron. It seems he's chosen to reward you tonight."

Overlord's hips rose just slightly, bucking. The growl faltered, becoming a thin whine.

"No, I don't think so." Tarn walked forward to circle the kneeling mech at a leisurely pace. "You'll take what he gives you and be grateful he spared you any attention at all." He found a particularly deep dent in the shape of a knuckle and sank his fingertips into it, cruelly pushing the bent metal further down into the sensor network underneath.

Overlord's whole body convulsed, rising up into the pain, and Tarn seized him by the back of the collar. He bent down faster than light to hiss, "No. Do you want me to leave?" Overlord froze, but Tarn set his chin on the bound mech's shoulder to pour honeyed, poisoned thoughts into his audio. "If you won't be properly grateful and do as you're told, I could simply bind you to the wall. Leave you spread-eagled for the next off-duty shift of bored soldiers to find. You're a Warrior Elite, but your reputation won't stop them for long. They'll call their friends once it's clear you've been left for anyone to use. You know what the rank and file are like. They'll call everyone. And soldiers run in packs, you know that. They're used to working together. They'll have your feet so far apart you'll walk bow-legged for weeks. You'll be exposed for everyone to see until the bent-back covers over your spike and valve pop back in enough to close. They'll peel you open, stuff you full, fight over who gets to mount your spike or drill your ports. Their friends will all be from the same unit. Closeknit friends. They'll share you among themselves. I believe they'll figure out how to fit three spikes in you. It's all logistics, you know."

The words glided out of Tarn's vocalizer and coated Overlord in satin-sleek filth, dripping like hot oil. Fans whirred, and Overlord's knee guards screeched softly across the floor as his thighs widened for an imagined crowd of takers. Tarn had heard his panels snap open early on. He didn’t worry about having to force those open, but pretending was part of the point, wasn't it? Overlord savored the threat of what might happen, bound and blindfolded like this.

Tarn stroked a hand down Overlord's back, squeezed his aft in passing, and stopped his fingers just short. Overlord whined again, aft tipping up and back in an attempt at encouraging them, but Tarn chuckled throatily in denial. His fingers traced the rim of Overlord's valve with the lightest touch possible. Overlord's chest heaved, ventilation system spasming for more air as internal temperature bolted into redline.

"You'd like that. It'd almost be enough, wouldn't it? Ah, our Lord Megatron won't deign to take you himself," it was a guess, but Overlord's tortured moan told Tarn how accurate it'd been, "but three spikes thrusting and grinding into you might take the edge off. They might be big enough, but it's the pain you want. You want him to split you open. I can feel how badly you want him." He gave Overlord a single finger to clench and squirm on. His own valve reminded him of its emptiness. "I should leave you for that."

"Nnngh." Overlord made a more guttural noise, lower and rougher, but Tarn stirred his finger. Another finger teased over the slick rim. The Warrior Elite’s little noises cut off cold. He gasped once, sucking in a deep breath and holding it. His hips bucked, chasing the elusive taunt of Tarn’s fingers. They pulled out, and Tarn cupped his hand over Overlord's valve, feeling how heat bathed his palm. The bound mech's head rolled back to thunk against him.

A tiny whimper pleaded for the return of even one finger, just one, one was better than none. Tarn gave it to him, thrusting it in with excruciating slowness despite how Overlord desperately rocked his hips. Unbound hands left the floor, grasping at nothing, and Tarn stopped moving immediately.

His voice crackled icy disapproval. "No."
Both hands slapped back to the floor as if magnetized, and Overlord shook heavily for a moment. Tarn waited patiently for him to regain control. It took a while. Overlord rolled the bit between his teeth, champing, but Tarn’s patience paid off.

Eventually, Overlord hung his head in defeat. He’d be good. He’d already lost, after all. He’d take what he was given and appreciate that he’d been given anything.

Tarn let his finger move in and out a fraction of an inch in reward for the good behavior. The delicate, gentle stimulation woke a tremor in powerful thighs. The longer Tarn kept his fingertip just barely dipped in, dabbling short strokes, the longer the pauses between Overlord's breaths grew.

Overlord was sobbing, lips slack around the bit, by the time Tarn decided he'd had enough. "Am I going to have to leave you here?" he asked sweetly.

The bowed head shook a violent negative. Overlord almost fell into position under Tarn's hand, valve exposed and begging for more than whispers of touch. Tarn simply laughed and stood up. The mech at his feet cried out, frustrated past dignity.

Tarn gave him the toe of his foot to rut against for a moment, just to watch how frantically the mech grabbed onto any substitute. Overlord fought the spreader bar to get his legs far enough apart to rub his valve over Tarn's foot, and Tarn shook his head at the frankly pornographic writhing. Overlord's hips twisted and rolled, but no matter how he scrabbled at the floor and flexed his ankles against the spreader bar, he just couldn't get the right angle to get the friction he craved. The frustrated, needy sounds were starting to slide into pleading moans.

"No? Then you'll take what Lord Megatron's given you." Tarn took his foot out of reach, and Overlord yelled protest behind the gag. Tarn knelt and yanked him up by the collar, purring in a practiced tone, "And what Lord Megatron's given you is me, so don't think you're getting off that easy." His voice caressed Overlord's spark, soundwaves hitting like the lash of a whip.

For most mechs, that meant pain. For Overlord, that meant something completely different. The yell became a scream, full-throated and loud.

Tarn stood, hand on the mech's collar. The chain leash still lay where Lord Megatron had let it fall, and the loop at the head of the makeshift berth was giving him ideas. His valve felt far too empty, and he had a perfectly functional toy right here to fill it.

Time to see how obedient a pet Overlord truly was.

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Astrotrain and Perceptor are in debt to Swindle, Rodimus doesn’t give up on Drift or Ultra Magnus, Overlord gets his aft handed to him (twice), Black Shadow gets eaten and eats out, and Impactor and Megatron have a small moment together.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 31
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW, G1
Characters: Perceptor, Astrotrain, Reflector, Swindle, Drift, Rodimus, Ultra Magnus, Mirage, Black Shadow, Tarn, Overlord.
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors.
Motivation (Prompt): Some old stuff, hassling Tumblr RP blogs.

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Viking
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The Stunticons had built the place so they’d have a land-bound base to race from, but on Megatron’s orders the relatively small facility had been abandoned as a waste of time. Popular theory was that the Decepticon cars had pissed him off that week, and taking away their fun had been the silver tyrant’s response. That didn’t mean the Stunticons didn’t occasionally sneak off to make the highways around their base a hazard, but the entire gestalt team was tied up in a raid somewhere in Europe today.

All three of the robots in the room — well, five if one wanted to be technical — thanked their lucky whatever that the base was deserted. They’d each made sure of that before even agreeing to meet here, for a whole slew of reasons varying from the practical to personal. Astrotrain had refused to budge from the underwater base until the Stunticons were on their way. Even then, he’d checked the main base scanners to make sure the sidebase was abandoned for real.

But abandoned it was. He’d checked and double-checked, but his procrastination had come to an end with one preemptory radio summons. He’d sneaked out of the base with a leaden feeling in his fuel tanks. What he was doing bothered him, and not in a Skywarp’s-rigged-the-door kind of way. It was a deeper issue.

There was no question of his loyalty to the Decepticon cause. Or rather, the one who dared question it would soon find himself abandoned somewhere in deep space with every hope of rescue disabled. Astrotrain took the Decepticon cause seriously. His loyalty to Megatron could be somewhat… negotiable at times, but he’d never wavered in his loyalty to the faction itself.

While Reflector’s components were hard to get a read on, they had always seemed to show more loyalty to the tyrant than the cause. That made Reflector one of the things Astrotrain noticed like a fleck of space debris on his wings on re-entry: it annoyed him, but it never caused any serious friction for him to worry about. It was a difference in opinion that they’d never worked closely
enough to argue about. That could describe three-quarters of the Decepticon forces. As long as they weren’t actively shooting each other in the back, Astrotrain and Reflector casually ignored each other.

Honestly, they would have been quite happy to remain on passing terms. Unfortunately, a set of crimson fuzzy wrist and ankle manacles plus a length of heavy black, crude iron chain had ever-so-awkwardly twisted their lack of relationship into an embarrassing direction.

Oh, yeah. Factional issues aside, this was one Pit of a humiliating situation. Not that he could forget that, what with the cuffs and chain intertwined like alien script on the floor between them. Astrotrain had the morbid feeling that if he could read them, the strange, flowing shapes would spell out the universe laughing at him. He couldn’t force his optics away. Meanwhile, Reflector’s three components studiously looked everywhere but at the items on the floor.

The cuffs were gaudy, true, and certainly embarrassing, but the reason Astrotrain couldn’t look up shifted in similar discomfort across the room. If he looked up, he’d attack. Decepticon cause, loyalty, all that. He wondered vaguely if Reflector was having the same problem. It wasn’t like the two (four?) Decepticons couldn’t destroy the other robot without a problem. Astrotrain could probably do it himself, lack of flying space or no. Perceptor’s design spoke of a science lab, not the battlefield. They could take him.

Under normal circumstances, that was. However, their hands were effectively tied.

Astrotrain winced internally at that thought. Well, they weren’t literally tied, at least not yet.

From the look of things, they would be. That grated on him, much as his helplessness did. Like Reflector and the Autobot across the room, he wasn’t here because he wanted to be. They were all here because there was a substantial amount of debt hanging over their heads like an axe. It almost made him want to start a conversation with the other two (four?) Cybertronians, just to find out what they were in for. They were stuck here whether they wanted to kill each other or not. Might as make the best of a lousy situation, right? Money could make allies of any faction. If nothing else, they could unite in hatred against the one they owed.

The door at the end of the room opened, and Astrotrain’s lip curled. Speak of the devil.

“I suppose you want to know why I called you here today!” Swindle said jovially, his typical nervous body language replaced with the confident gloating of someone who has sufficient blackmail. Five angry glares speared him in response, but he just chuckled. “Well! Let’s get started, shall we?”

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Perceptor could not remember any time in his life that he had been quite so embarrassed. Angry, perhaps. At some point he must have felt the same level of hatred toward Megatron or his like, but the hot-cold rush of humiliation through his circuitry was unmatched. Although he knew it was only a trick of his overwrought emotions, his shoulders unconsciously rotated in an attempt to ease what felt like a blocked relay down his back.

Unfortunately, that pulled against the leather straps wrapped over his chest, and his thoughts stalled into yet another dead end of ‘Dear Cybertron, I look a fool.’
Analyzing his situation didn’t distract him from the fact that he was stuck in it.

His uncomfortable shifting brought an amused, brisk reprimand from the other side of the room. “Stop moving. You want this to take all day? Lift your chin and look over there again.”

The Autobot frowned lightly and turned his head back into position. He wasn’t entirely sure if he was grateful the ridiculous thing covering his head cut off his usual visual range. He didn’t really want to see the others in the room, but at the same time, he didn’t want to let them out of his sight. “Our agreement implicitly states that you would finish before my comrades question my whereabouts. Therefore, it would be against our verbal contract for this event to last longer than three hours.”

A harsh bark of laughter told him how seriously that contract was being taken. “Look, buddy. You owe me. You can leave anytime you want to,” Swindle invited, “and I’ll send a bill to Optimus Prime. Howzat sound?” Perceptor’s head whipped around, the strange helmet balanced over his helm falling off with the abrupt motion, and the Decepticon smiled so slimily it seemed odd his face was actually made of metal. “It’s not my problem if you have to explain why you needed 30 ‘dirty nuke’ warheads on short notice.”

The con artist had him, and he knew it. Prime wouldn’t object to the nuclear weapons once Perceptor explained why they’d been necessary, but bargaining for them from a Decepticon would ruin the Autobot scientist’s credibility. Shady dealings had a way of coming back to bite.

Perceptor’s optics narrowed to angry slits. He picked the odd, horned helmet up with a jerky movement quite unlike his usual efficient manner.

As the Combaticon called out instructions for the next pose, Perceptor reined in his temper. He supposed that he should be glad Swindle hadn’t wanted money in some form. Money, he didn’t have. The size of his debt had concerned Perceptor, but the promised results had simply been too much for his curiosity to bear. The benefits for the Autobot-human alliance would be extraordinary, of course. At the beginning of the experiment, he’d put off worrying about how much he owed Swindle. It wasn’t the first time monetary concerns came in second to his professional passion, but this time he felt something close to regret for giving in to his calling. He’d had to discretely work off a debt before, but never like this. This…this defied description.

Alright, so he could describe it. He just didn’t want to.

He’d always know that there were, ah, gray market areas for imagery of the illicit arts, but he’d never had any personal experience in them. Aside from rumors heard in passing from his cruder fellow Autobots, it had never been openly admitted to in his limited social circle of intellectuals. Buying such things bordered on taboo.

Besides, the war had accelerated science’s combat specializations and leached away any inclination he might have had toward kinks. What he found interesting or pleasurable came in second to his work. Soldiers, especially scientist soldiers, rarely had free time.

In a way, he mused as he changed poses, it would make sense that such desires would be catered to in the midst of the war. The rare breaks a soldier got would be filled with a nigh-starving search for entertainment to distract from the reality of war. Escapism was a legitimate pursuit, and providing soldiers their escape had to be a profitable enterprise.

Hence, Swindle’s demand for payment. Although what creature, Cybertronian or otherwise, would pay for images of an Autobot dressed in an outlandish costume of textured animal hides and metal buckles…
Distaste twisted Perceptor’s face before he could smooth it out, but the Decepticon profiteer brightened visibly. “Hey, yeah! Keep that expression!” The Autobot’s blue optics conveyed an eloquently skeptical message, and Swindle shrugged, comfortably ignoring Perceptor’s indignant, humiliated anger. “It makes you look more savage. Goes with the outfit, see?”

Perceptor didn’t see. In fact, he’d willfully blind himself to prevent seeing if he thought it’d help. He nearly opened his mouth to express his opinion in terms that would strip paint off the walls, but iron self-control clamped down before he could lower himself to acting like the barbarian he was dressed to appear as. Instead, he refocused his optics on a spot on the ceiling and shut his mouth into a grim, disapproving line. Swindle had the upper hand.

The Decepticon was going to sell pictures of him to the highest bidder on an interplanetary gray market, pictures that would likely come back to haunt Perceptor when he least needed it. Surely it wasn’t too high a price to pay?

“No, no! You’re doing it all wrong! Turn your hip toward me, and try to look less like a wimpy Autobot, would you? Geez.”

Yes. Yes, it was.

Probably the worst part about the whole debacle was that he, Perceptor, one of Cybertron’s few geniuses, was being reduced to a picture. A novelty item noted for how he looked instead of how brilliant he was. Yet for all his intelligence, he couldn’t think of any way to get out of this situation without dire consequences. Mere humiliation wouldn’t ruin his reputation like admitting debt to Swindle would. The Combinicon had -- at Perceptor’s insistence -- signed a contract which would prevent anyone from finding out who exactly had shot the photos. If another Autobot found the photos somehow, it could be passed off as a private endeavor. Personal scandal aside, it wouldn’t hurt the Autobots as a faction.

Coldly fuming, Perceptor turned a poisonous look on Swindle before a fresh rush of hot ice skitter along his relays at the sight of the robot looming behind the smaller Combinicon. He jerked his optics away, embarrassed all over again. Dear Cybertron, he looked a fool.

Astrotrain, cuffed in fuzzy restraints, seemed just as embarrassed. He didn’t seem to be able to take his optics off Perceptor, however. From the way Swindle kept checking the shuttle’s reactions, the sly conmech had already found his first buyer for the Autobot’s photoset.

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Drift

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Rodimus championed lost causes. It was a thing he did. Whatever deep well his excitement came from, it fueled a great push of enthusiasm for causes other people would have long given up on. When sane people gave up, he kept fighting. He enjoyed it.

“I hate this. I hate that I can’t get this. I can get it!” He batted Drift’s hand aside and repositioned his arms, this time so he wouldn’t accidentally chop open his own head. “Okay. I got this.”

He swung. He missed. He swore a lot. He was having an awful time doing basic sword moves.

Drift suppressed a grin and moved in to help. Rodimus swore at him, too.

He tried not to take it personally. Rodimus’ language was no more colorful than the abuse regularly
spouted between Decepticons, and it was said with better humor. The bright obscenities tended to use more creative grammatical structures, but they sounded almost juvenile compared to what he was used to. He didn’t find it funny, not quite, but Rodimus would be confused if he took it as more than a joke.

Ultra Magnus, of course, had no audio for the difference. He visibly repressed the need to chastise the captain’s language as he approached, and Rodimus heaped some foul language on the universe in general at the sight of the stack of datapads in his hands. Drift found that more entertaining. Even Decepticons knew that filework required the ritual application of verbal abuse.

“Captain, these need your urgent attention.”

Yeah, Rodimus wasn’t falling for that six times in a row. He kept the sword up and eyed his second-in-command from around the inside of his elbow as if debating whether or not to use the sword as a defense against the evil datapad swarm. “Urgent as in ‘we’re all going to die,’ or urgent in your perspective?”

Drift bit down on the inside of his lip to keep the smile to himself. Laughing would only make Ultra Magnus dislike him more. A few months acquaintance as they worked together had given him insight into the Duly Appointed Enforcer’s selection of disapproving frowns. For as much stern intimidation was packed into that particular frown, it still looked like a pout to his experienced optic.

“They are important documents that need to be reviewed for safe operation of the ship!”

“Ah-ah!” Rodimus slung the sword back on his shoulder. Drift gingerly removed his slightly-sliced fingers as soon as the captain realized he’d nearly buried the blade into said shoulder. Rodimus looked at the cuts with wide optics -- Drift closed his hand to stem the bleeding -- and roughly reset his vocalizer. What had he been doing? Right. Sword (carefully!) on shoulder, finger wagging in Ultra Magnus’ face. “Immediate crisis or stuff that can wait?”

The glowering rock met the irrepressible hard object. Drift pretended to be invisible.

"They can wait," Ultra Magnus admitted reluctantly.

"Great!" The sword almost chopped into his throat as he whipped his head around to beam at Drift. "Let’s try this again."

Ultra Magnus flopped into a chair nearby as Drift repositioned Rodimus’ hands and arms. It was the most relaxed Drift ever saw the Duly Appointed Enforcer, and he couldn’t help but dart quick glanced sidelong as him. Any time Drift talked to him, Ultra Magnus stiffened up like a board. Drones had more relaxed stances. Crew members reported a phenomenon of petrification: every word they spoke somehow caused Ultra Magnus to become harder, his armor clamping close and struts straightening until he marched in rigid disapproval throughout the halls. One day, they fully expected to find an Ultra Magnus statue in one of the shuttle bays, frozen forever with arms folded and scowl in place.

It wouldn’t surprise Drift, anyway.

But then the weird thing happened, the thing that nobody else on the crew got to see. Drift rather thought that the only reason he knew it happened was all the time he spent around Rodimus.

Ultra Magnus stomped into Rodimus’ presence, and the captain popped his pressure valve.

Drift couldn’t put it any other way. It was amazing. The Duly Appointed Enforcer of the Tyrest Accord would storm up to the bridge or into Rodimus’ office, usually demanding that something be
done, and Rodimus deflated him.

It wasn’t the dismissal. It wasn’t how Rodimus laughed in Ultra Magnus’ face over the trivial misconducts that the Enforcer insisted were crimes. It wasn’t ignoring his wants and needs. Rodimus did all of that. He did it, but he also worried about whether Ultra Magnus was right. He asked about Ultra Magnus’ health and tried to get him to take time for himself. His callous disregard for other people’s feelings became part of his charisma in a mysterious meld of personal charm, self-centered egoism, and real concern. Rodimus thought Ultra Magnus was the anti-fun of overreacting, rule-bound authority figures, but at the same time, he glommed onto the Duly Appointed Enforcer.

It was a backhanded respect, but it was respect.

Drift wrapped his hands around Rodimus’ wrists and watched Ultra Magnus. The mech slumped in his seat to brood, a storm of unaddressed concerns darkening the air around him, but every once and a while, Drift caught him paying attention to the sword drill. The thick lines creasing the seams between his facial plating eased as Magnus relaxed a fraction. The tension inside him lightened, if just a tiny amount. His fingers fell out of their dents bent into the arm rests. He watched Rodimus screw up and curse like a dockworker, and for a few minutes, Ultra Magnus looked curiously at peace.

Drift didn’t smile at Rodimus’ swearing or Ultra Magnus sitting on the sidelines. He didn’t want to draw attention to what might be unintentional on both ends. He was never really sure, when it came to Rodimus’ lost causes. So much of how Rodimus captained felt like a sanitized, Autobot interpretation of Decepticon leadership. Was it an awkward attempt to put him at ease, include him more? Did Rodimus just fit in better somewhere between the factions?

Insult those closest to you. Never directly show concern. Always put yourself first. Open, undiluted emotions were a weakness.

“I hate this! I hate you!” Rodimus yanked away from him and immediately waved away his own words. “You know what I mean. Magnus! Here, we should trade.” Drift almost jumped in shock, but his surprise had nothing on Ultra Magnus’. Rodimus zipped over to pull the datapads out of big hands, and Drift dove after him as the sword was shoved in to replace the pile.

“Careful!”

“Rodimus!”

Their captain didn’t even look up from the top datapad. He just waved a hand at them. “You guys train. I’ll do this.” He didn’t appear to notice or care that Drift had another cut across his palm, or that Drift was now all but in Ultra Magnus’ lap.

Ultra Magnus immediately stood up and dumped him to the floor, but Drift was okay with that. “Captain, this is hardly -- “

Rodimus did one of those impossible jointless moves Drift swore he’d copy one day, and Ultra Magnus’ chair became property of the captain. “Mmm. You want me to work on this or not?”

Drift nailed the corners of his mouth down. That was a pouting frown. Deeeeeeefinitely a pouting frown. Poor Ultra Magnus.

Poor him, for that matter. “Uh…would you like to learn?” He wrestled his smile into an appropriately sympathetic Our-Captain-Is-Making-Us-Play-Nice-Together expression. He honestly couldn’t tell if Rodimus was trying to help them get along or if the captain just didn’t care about how
much Ultra Magnus disliked ex-Decepticons in general and Drift in particular. With Rodimus, it could go either way.

Armor puffed up, rigid with irritation but moving. The peculiar pressure-release of Rodimus’ immaturity put Ultra Magnus in that strange mood where he didn’t quite know how to handle the curveballs of life aboard the *Lost Light*. Which might have been Rodimus’ plan all along. Drift didn’t know. He got the distinct feeling he was one of the captain’s lost causes, too.

He slid into a stance as Ultra Magnus peered down at him. If Rodimus wasn’t going to give up on them, then the least Drift could do was play along.

“Uggegggh, I want to trade back,” Rodimus muttered two minutes into the lesson. “This is so boring.”

Drift corrected Magnus’ grip and didn’t smile. It hurt his face a little.

“I don’t even get why front hull needs a patch. Didn’t we just get that repaired?

Magnus frowned at the comparatively tiny sword in his hands, but his annoyance was tempered considerably by splitting his concentration between keep his hold and answering Rodimus’ question. “A temporary patch is not the same as permanent repairs.” And he was off, explaining the whys and wherefores and reasons and *budgeting*, which had Rodimus lying upside-down on the chair clutching his head as Ultra Magnus droned on. The captain whined complaints the whole time.

Lies. Rodimus was enjoying himself. Drift was sure of it.

[* * * * *

*Decepticonsensual asked for, “post-war, Decepticons won AU. Mirage went undercover as a member of the DJD, and then got stranded by the abrupt Decepticon victory and is now basically stuck playing his role until he can find a way out. Meanwhile, Tarn somehow ended up with Prowl as a plaything to reward him for his loyalty to the Decepticon cause (or [insert plot excuse here]), so Mirage has to deal with the fact that his ex-boss is chained up in the next room and Tarn is determined to break him psychologically. With loads of worldbuilding about the post-war Decepticon regime, and a Scavengers or Combaticons cameo. And Overlord! Covered in chocolate!”*

[* * * * *

Mirage almost jumped out of his armor when the door abruptly relocated to the far end of the room, kicked in by --

The shape seemed to be that of Overlord, but this was not an Overlord Mirage knew. "You," the dripping monstrosity roared, pointing a gooey finger at him. Multicolored sparkles flew out of his mouth. "Vos! Where is he?!!"

"Uh..." There was only one person Overlord could possibly be looking for if it wasn't Vos' boss, who was half out of his seat at the moment, staring incredulously at the walking mess. If it wasn't Tarn, it had to be *Mirage's* boss, and Mirage was far more reluctant to hand his actual boss over to sticky, sparkly fury.

"What happened?" Tarn was a skilled vocalist. He managed to disguise a gut laugh in appalled disgust. Almost.

It earned the leader of the D.J.D. a glare hot enough the chocolate should have ignited. Some of the
sparkles did, but unfortunately, it just made the spray of sparkles look like pretty confetti. "Your blasted pet Autobot tactician fooled us. That accursed pony planet wasn't even finished with Phase One, much less ready for Phase Six!"

"Ah..." Tarn worked his mouth for a moment. "I, ah, take it that the invasion failed?"

Overlord turned and slouched back the way he'd come. "No, I just decided to keep this paint job for the shock value."

"Is he serious?" Helex whispered. "I can't tell."

Mirage turned apprehensive optics toward Tarn. If Prowl really had managed to deceive everyone, the enslaved Autobot would be facing discipline Vos, much less Mirage, could spare him from. That could be bad, very bad.

From the way Tarn was staring after Overlord, however, Mirage honestly wasn't worried.

[* * * * *]

Tarn the cook

[* * * * *]

An invitation to Tarn’s kitchen had been a surprise, but in the sense that Overlord hadn’t thought of Tarn as a cook. He seemed the type to savor food, not make it. Cookies and main courses were to be enjoyed, not labored over. It was mildly shocking to find out that the loyalist considered himself a gourmet chef.

"Why is it so surprising?" Tarn asked as Overlord took a tour around the room. "I take care of my unit. Health & Safety isn’t just the mandate of a few medics."

That made a kind of sense. It did smell rather delightful in here. The fluffy pink foam creation on the far counter must have just set, and Overlord wanted a slice. If Tarn made things like that regularly, his unit must be pampered between missions.

Overlord pulled out a drawer and studied the contents. "Where do you get your supplies?"

"Here and there. I have a list."

"Cute wordplay." Tarn cocked his head at him. "'List,' yes, very funny. I get it." Tarn snorted softly at his guest’s dry tone, but Overlord had turned away already. He picked a utensil out of the drawer to admire, testing the nasty dual prongs on his fingers. "If I didn’t know better, I’d say this was a torture chamber. Tools of torture in the drawers -- "

"That a fork."

"Like there’s much of a difference? I use forks, too." He mimed jabbing the prongs into a joint and twisting. Tarn shrugged to concede the point. "As I was saying, tools of torture, lots of counter space, a convenient center slab -- "

"It’s called an island."

"It’s a repurposed medibay slab."

"It’s in a kitchen. It’s a counter island. Get it right."
Overlord poked the fork in Tarn’s direction. “It still has magnetic restraint locks on the corners.”

Tarn walked over to scowl down at the maligned kitchen island. “It does not.”

“They’re clearly right there. Look!” Overlord shouldered the shorter mech aside, ignoring how Tarn immediately grabbed his elbow, and slammed his hand down on the lock. “They probably still -- “

The maglock clicked.

“ -- work.”

The kitchen was very quiet, suddenly. Overlord’s systems winding down could be clearly heard.

Overlord stared down at his trapped hand, completely calm. “I walked right into this, didn’t I.” It didn’t even phase him that the elbow Tarn had grabbed was now numb from the joint down. One arm numb, his other arm magnetized down to a solid slab, and the fork clattered to the floor as dull numbness slowly crept up his arm.

Tarn stepped back and laid the syringe on the decorative platter holding the foam cake he’d made earlier. “You did. Would you like to lay down now, or do you prefer me to toss you up on the slab once you’re unconscious?”

Whatever he’d been injected with, it acted fast. Dreamily detached from his rising sense of rage and panic, Overlord sat down on the slab. Every piece of him that touched the slab immediately locked to it. He remembered the feel. If it weren’t for the drug in his tubes, he’d have had a chance of tearing the slab up and fighting free, but short of breaking it apart, he wouldn’t be going anywhere until the maglocks released.

“You were being serious,” he realized. “You do have a list. The List.”

Tarn nodded. “It wasn’t wordplay.” He rescued the fork from the floor and eyed it for damage. It seemed fine. “I get most of my ingredients from List mechs, but only those that deserve it. There’s something poetic in recycling the dregs of the ranks into a more useful form for the Decepticons.” A smile stretched behind his mask. “Waste not, want not. Only the freshest ingredients for my unit. The ones that scream the most taste the best.”

He really should care about this. Overlord regarded the idea of being turned into food with no interest. Disconnecte}d from reality, he watched Tarn putter around getting a large, shallow pan out and testing the broiler. “Is that a marinade?”

“It is. Would you like to hear how you’ll be prepared?”

Overlord laid back on the slab and offlined his optics. “Why not?”

“First course will be the last prepared. I’ll drain your innermost energon. I have a drill that should get through…anyway, I try to keep a small reserve of innermost energon to offer the others on special occasions. It has a unique taste, as I’m sure you know. I haven’t decided yet if I should remove your entire spark chamber and pass it around with a straw, or just drain it. Presentation is important. An entire spark chamber is rather macabre, but it does make a bold statement. An opening salvo for the meal, so to speak.”

“Sounds nice.” He felt like he was floating. Locked down, unable to move, but floating.

Metal scraped on metal. When he lit his optics, wearily curious, he saw that Tarn had a carving knife out. Sparks flew as he sharpened it.
“It takes skill to cut slices without a saw. Skill, and a very sharp knife. It’s important to have clean edges, however. No melting, and no saw. I can’t risk igniting the rest of you while I take the prime cuts out of your torso and legs, and ragged edges spray when sawing.” Tarn shook his head. “It has to be a knife. I want a slow welling of fluids as I cut in, and a good dripping as gravity pulls it down. I’ll catch most of it in the tray,” he gestured at the pan, “to use with the marinade. It’s a high-acid marinade to penetrate that ununtrium coating of yours. Quite a delicacy, that. I’ve been working on a recipe to complement it since you were put on the List.”

Oh, well now he just felt special. “Will I get a taste?”

Tarn tested the blade and kept sharpening. “Perhaps. I intend to take some fillets from down your back while the second course is marinating, and drain you a bit. Natural bleeding is best, of course. Hanging you to drain after death doesn’t give everything the same taste. A working fuel pump makes all the difference. In any case, a quick sauté in a sauce of your own fuel to blister the paint and heat the metal should be enough. If you make it through preparing the second course, that will cook fast enough that you should get to try the third as well. Fourth course…”

He stepped closer and leaned in to check Overlord’s optics. The lenses were fully dilated. “Fourth course, I may use a saw after all.”

“I like saws.”

“Then you’ll enjoy this.” Without touching Overlord’s magnetized metal, Tarn drew a line across his forehelm. “Open up your helm and let everyone have a taste of your brain module. I might just take off your whole head and present the dish inside your cranial cavity,” he mused. “Crude decorations, but they’ll appreciate it.”

Overlord wanted to nod, but he was too tired to fight the maglock. “Can I have a slice of foam?” It still smelled really good.

“It probably wouldn’t be a good idea to put anything in your tanks before we start.”

“That’s too bad. It smells very good.”

Tarn brandished his knife. “Don’t pout. I’ll let you try yourself later.”

Alarm fluttered briefly in Overlord’s chest, but it soon went away.

[* * * * *]

A form of cannibalism + vore (eating and eating)

[* * * * *]

This was ridiculous. This was ridiculous, and humiliating, and was probably going to get him killed. Crunched up, swallowed, and killed. Game over, end of the road. Chewed to death: what an epitaph.

Black Shadow peeked around the inside of Tarn’s shoulder tread. One thing in Overlord’s favor: he definitely wasn’t here for the company tonight. Staring at Tarn evenly, he laid back on the berth and spread his legs. That wasn’t a view Black Shadow had ever realized he needed in his life, but he stared avidly. He knew that look, strange though this angle and, uh, exposure was. Overlord was tense, but it was a toss-up between anticipation of what might come and dread of the same.

Sort of how Black Shadow felt at the moment.
Tarn knelt, purring something to the taller mech on the berth in that low, dark voice. Black Shadow’s wings rose as a thrill went through his own spark. Nice. Overlord took in a deep breath as pleasure stirred, but then Tarn was between the mech’s thighs. One hand went to the panel already waiting, hot, and it slid back. Moist heat wafted into Tarn’s mask, rich and heady.

Black Shadow inhaled and fidgeted. Also nice. So far, so good.

He looked up as Tarn turned his head to peer at the tiny-fied Phase Sixer hiding on his shoulder. “Eager, are we?” His free hand rose to pluck the little mech free, keeping the motion relaxed as to not alert Overlord. The slow, tormenting tease of fingers on the rim of Overlord’s valve probably helped with that. Overlord was plenty distracted.

“No peeking,” Tarn sing-songed at the reclining mech. Overlord started to snap a reply only to grunt, interrupted by a few fingers pressing inward.

The purple Decepticon mask clicked. Black Shadow would have tried to memorize the face underneath, but he couldn’t seem to look away from the mouth alone. Scarred lips parted. Oh, Primus, they were really going to do this!

He squeezed his optics shut as he was brought to parted lips. Crunch time.

Except there was no crunch. Soft, pliant mechanisms surrounded him, the microscopic joints of facial plating astonishingly flexible as Tarn’s lips closed around his lower body. A comparatively huge object nudged between his legs, and Black Shadow’s optics popped open, paling in shock. Wet, rippling pressure slid around his legs. Tarn’s tongue curved, cradling him in the center. It bulged up a second later, dragging up between his legs and laving his whole lower body in moving, liquid heat and pressure. One lick was enough to activate most of his nervous system. Black Shadow’s pleasure sensors lit up in electric shocks under his plating, flashing like pop rocks in Tarn’s mouth.

Oooo. Okay, this? Put this in the ‘Nice’ category, too.

Tarn chewed gently, hard teeth closing just enough to move the tiny Phase Sixer around. Black Shadow grabbed wildly for something to hold onto, but all he could do was go with the ride as tongue, lips, and teeth turned him about. The tongue between his legs suddenly lapped between his wings, then up his front, and he found himself lying on his front, feet spread to brace against the inside of Tarn’s dental moulds. Metal flexed as the intake just behind him opened and closed in a swallow.

Oral fluid swished under Tarn’s tongue. Right, because holding a squirming little morsel in his mouth was probably causing him to salivate. That made sense. Freaky but natural side effect. He could deal with it. Black Shadow hugged Tarn’s tongue and stared at the teeth just barely parted in front of his nose.

He wondered what he tasted like.

Tarn’s voice heard from inside his mouth, by the way? Totally worth the chewing risk. Black Shadow’s feet lost their footholds as the rumble and dip of soundwaves washing over him made his interface array snap open. His knees clamped around Tarn’s tongue, and he whimpered, rutting against the wet, moving surface.

A vast chuckle answered the intent bitty humping, and Tarn opened his mouth wide. Black Shadow bit his lip and blinked in the light. He squinted, looking out.

Ah-ha. This had been why they’d come up with this plot in the first place. Overlord was expecting
the best oral of his life. Tarn wanted to deliver. Black Shadow wanted in. It was a creepy plan all around, but right now, Black Shadow couldn’t care how unnerved Overlord might be in the aftermath.

Tarn moved forward, tongue carrying the tiny mech along, and Black Shadow reached out with his hands at the same time he opened his own mouth. Eating on eating was a go; he repeated, eating on eating was a go.

[* * * * *]

vore

[* * * * *]

One thing nobody ever said about being eaten alive: it was a fragging rollercoaster.

He splashed into the primary fuel tank screeching in excitement. Low fuel levels meant he went under but popped up a moment later, whooping. Pink energon sloshed everywhere as his wings popped loose, finally freed from the tight confines of intake tubing. The intake itself had held him powerless while Overlord choked on him, sputtering and complaining about all the sharp angles, but he’d gotten down. Repeated swallowing had wriggled him free, although it’d taken a while. Then had come the full-body massage of rubbery tubing bracketed by machinery meant to move liquids and well-masticated solids down into the processing tanks. Everywhere, from every angle, warm, stretchy tubing had rubbed over him. He’d been smothered in kneading and felt up all over, turned around and around and pushed down down down until he fell free.

Rollercoaster. Yeah.

Black Shadow grinned and waded toward the nearest wall, avoiding the suction pulling fuel down in the center of the tank. That would take him toward the processing center. He didn’t want to go there. Instead, he pounded on the wall of the tank. “I made it!”

The loudest yelling his tiny-fied form could produce was more like a squeak, but Overlord was supposed to be listening for him.

A dull, hollow reverberation answered him as finger tapped a reply.

“I want to do it again!”

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"You're not looking too hot." + TFP Smokescreen

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His fingers slipped through leaking fluids. “Oh frag, oh no, don’t -- don’t say that -- “ It didn’t matter what he looked like!

Fans rattled, a deeply unhealthy sound from somewhere far inside a torso smashed past repair. Optimus Prime coughed his throat clear of mixed fluids, catching it in his mouth before letting it dribble out. Resignation to the inevitable made even the splattered mess dripping off his chin strangely graceful. “It’s alright, Smokescreen,,” he rumbled. The damaged fans chopped his voice into broken soundbites, wheezing between every syllable, but he still sounded impossibly gentle, distantly sad, past judgment as he looked up through clouded optics at the young mech frantically patching wounds too big to be mended.

“No, it’s not,” Smokescreen choked out. Words crowded to get out of his grief-tight throat, rushing to be heard, but too slow, Smokescreen. Too late.

Labored fans had already stopped, and Optimus Prime was gone.

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"Can you hide me?" + Sludge

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The use of proper grammar got more of a reaction than the actual request. Kup hoisted a vaguely impressed eye ridge, visibly thought it over, and grunted an affirmative. He jerked a thumb behind himself.

Sludge scampered behind him, at least as much as the Autobots’ resident behemoth could scamper. Thunder, more like. Galumph, if he really scooted his wide load. There might have been galumphing going on in this case, since it was Prowl chasing his tail. None of the Dinobots respected or feared
Prowl normally, but these were hardly normal circumstances. Prowl had been on the warpath since Grimlock decided ‘Catch the Police Car’ was the way to coerce him into playing tag with the Dinobots. ‘Catch the Police Car’ was a great game, with the only real downside being that police cars came equipped with brakes and Dinobots…did not.

Prowl had thought he was clever. The Dinobots had thought the floor suddenly lumpy. Both had been wrong.

Prowl wasn’t exactly thinking straight, post-squashing. He’d evidently decided to go after the Dinobot who’d compressed his shock absorbers into giving up the ghost.

Hence Sludge hiding behind Kup.

It wasn’t much of a hiding spot, and Kup didn’t attempt to turn it into more of a poor attempt than it already was. He simply leaned back against the Dinobot’s broad side and went back to sharpening the sword he’d been working on. When Prowl stormed around the corner, he didn’t even look up.

“!?” Prowl said, one optic offline and the other burning bright white in deranged thirst for vengeance. His chevron seemed to have been bent into bull horns aggressively pointing outward in sync with the forefinger pointed accusingly at the big Dinobot cowering behind Kup.

Who still didn’t look up. “You don’t need to see him,” he said evenly, raising the hand holding his whetstone in a sweeping motion.

Prowl paused and blinked. “?!”

“This isn’t the Dinobot you’re looking for.” Another sweep of Kup’s hand.

Much suspicious squinting. Prowl blinked a few more times. “..?”

“You can go about your business.”

Sludge barely dared vent. Prowl looked terribly confused. “…”

Kup finally looked up. He flicked a few fingers at Prowl. “Move along.”

Prowl glared at the Dinobot for a second before giving a curt dismissive gesture. He spun on his heel and stomped back the way he’d come.

[* * * * *]

"How much was I supposed to add?" + RP Armada Megatron and G1 Astrotrain

[* * * * *]

“Not that much!” Astrotrain hissed, hands nearly shaking as he tried very, very gently to push on the human’s…chest. Sternum. Airbag storage area.

Megatron would have helped, but he was being territorial-cat hissed at by a shuttle-train having a panic attack. Besides, the universe would be a better place if Silas didn’t make it. Oh, he hadn’t drowned the man on purpose, but he wasn’t going to mourn if Astrotrain couldn’t manage to manually empty Silas’ lungs. Or if he accidentally pushed too hard. In fact, Megatron would record the sound of breaking ribs to replay for his own personal, vicious satisfaction for years to come.

He did not like the leader of M.E.C.H. Overlord’s amorous reward for ridding them of the nuisance
would likely make up for Astrotrain’s misled but genuine rage during the grieving process. Their mutual object of affection made a habit of growing attached to inappropriate creatures.

He sighed and dumped the half-full cube of water. “I know humans require large amounts of water to survive. You told me to give him water. Those were your instructions.”

Astrotrain hissed at him again.

[* * * * *]

"And that's why I'm scared." - Starscream

[* * * * *]

Four Autobots, three neutrals, six Constructicons, and a handful of random Decepticons stared at him. Scrapper’s hands were shaking. Perceptor’s optics flickered rapidly as he ran and reran and prayed the numbers would come out different this time, but his mouth shaped blasphemous curses in sharp motions as lips and tongue turned against whatever god had turned against them first. Optimus Prime seemed torn between reaching out and drawing away, distress in every line of his body, and Onslaught absently put a hand on his upper arm to restrain him when he took a step toward the Air Commander.

Starscream stared at absolutely nothing, optics seeing but not registering. He was at peace shattering the blindness all around him. He’d seen too much to care if nobody else had noticed.

When he smiled, it was the most frightening expression anyone in the room had seen for all the fear it shared.

[* * * * *]

"I found you're diary" + Sixshot

[* * * * *]

“I, um. How’d you know it was mine?” There was no writing. No commentary. It didn’t even look like a diary of any kind. The box in Sixshot’s hand was full of scraps of, well, scraps. Organic rags, micromesh, metal springs, slabs of armor, dried vegetation, even dirt. Not a single glyph in sight to incriminate him.

Sixshot gave him a greatly pained look. “My sense of smell is extremely acute. I can smell what each of these,” his mask worked in visible discomfort, “mementos are meant to record, and who the other mechs involved are.”

“Oh.” Yeah, that -- that was pretty incriminating. Aside from other Terrorcons, the vast majority of those scentmarkers were of Sixshot and him. Interfacing, mostly, but there was at least one awesome make-out session he remembered by --

Burning heat swept under his armor as he snatched the box from Sixshot’s hands. “Thank you,” he squeaked, and then he turned to flee, because oh dear Primus, Sixshot could smell his private moments wafting out from under the lid, and he was going to die of embarrassment.

[* * * * *]

"I guess you did know what you were doing.” + Sixshot
Dumbfounded silence met Hun-Grrr’s babbled explanation. He didn’t actually explain much of anything, but the flood of panicked words did temporarily derail the wrath that had been about to descend on his helm. Cutthroat’s mouth hung open, too many indignant words fighting to get out at once. Rippersnapper kept starting to say something and losing his train of thought. Sinnertwin was holding a debate with himself.

“He really didn’t mind?” Blot asked at last.

Hun-Grrr shrugged, helpless confusion plastered across his face. “No? I mean, of course he minded! I bit his,” he shut his mouth and swallowed hard. His mouth still tasted like severed spike. “That. I did that. But he didn’t seem surprised, y’know? You’d expect screaming, gunfire, immediate death, but he just,” he shrugged, completely baffled, “said it like he’d been expecting worse.”

“Wait, worse? How bad are you are blowjobs?” Rippersnapper asked.

“Has anyone actually given him one yet?” Sinnertwin asked before Hun-Grrr could start punching. “‘Cause you know what he was like when we were just feeling him up to overload.”

They thought that over. Prior to the Terrorcons, they’d collectively gotten the impression that Sixshot had zilch experience in any form of interfacing that didn’t involve explosions, bodily harm, and at least one period of unconsciousness. Coaxing him to enjoy fragging for the fun and pleasure of it instead of the violence and gore had been an exercise in time and creative methodology. So for Sixshot to consider someone biting his spike off to be standard during a blowjob -- urk.

Hun-Grrr looked sort of queasy. “Did I just live up to his expectations?”

Cutthroat slapped a hand over his visor. “Oh, Primus, how’re we gonna fix this one…”

*I blame Black Shadow* + Cutthroat

Sixshot grunted. It was a neutral sound, neither confirming or denying where he’d gotten his negotiable standards from.

The Terrorcons flashed smug looks at each other. They knew they’d find the right bribe eventually if they just kept trying.

The other Decepticons on the station were terrified someday soon there’d be a mystery murder solved by everyone discovering it was Sixshot, in the main hall, with his bare hands. Meanwhile, the Terrorcons were bound and determined the mystery be Cutthroat left in a puddle of limp limbs in the middle of the armory, too exhausted to move, and everyone could just wonder how Sixshot did it.

Adjusting to life as a Cassette after a lifetime as a miner required some compromises on both ends. Soundwave showed respect by not browsing his new symbiotes’ thoughts on a whim. Rumble and
Frenzy returned that respect by not peppering him with a nonstop obnoxious parade of lewd observations on their latest crush. Their thoughts could get pretty loud when intentionally projecting. Soundwave’s core body temperature was a function somewhat beyond his control when under an internal assault, as it were. After the third time his fans kicked on, Soundwave withdrew from their minds, and they stopped dwelling on the way Megatron’s caution paint was flaking.

Second compromise was made over sibling roughhousing. Soundwave agreed to let them out when they told him they needed out, and they agreed not to start fights while actually inside him anymore. There was a time and place for exerting control over the twins, and it was not when Rumble’s piledriver was poised to punch through the front of the tapedeck.

[* * * * *]

(•̀•́)TFP Smokescreen

[* * * * *]

The part no one thought about when considering a post-war Cybertron was the lack of fighting. Of course, there was no one left to fight. Just one young Autobot cadet wandering the surface, abandoned and forgotten, eternally searching for someone else.

No one else remained.

[* * * * *]

(•̀•́)Black Shadow

[* * * * *]

They were all killers at this point in the war. Indirect murder or hands-on death, every single mech from Cybertron had dealt their share. Even the neutrals who’d fled hadn’t left with clean hands. They touted themselves as free of faction, but Soundwave had targeted them. There wasn’t a neutral left who hadn’t fought himself free. Running and hiding hadn’t been enough when the pogroms started.

It was slaughter or be slaughtered, no matter how it was dressed up. War stopped being a clean-cut argument of causes and principles about the time the first shot flew, and nobody gave a scrap what faction symbol they aimed at if the one wearing that symbol was between them and living. The rank and file of the Decepticons didn’t care why they were fighting anymore. They just wanted to stay alive another day. The officers had a pretense of official reasoning plastered over their orders, but it all evened out into, “Do as you’re told and try not to die.”

“What are you in for?” the weary cargoloader at the airlock joked with the newest transfer to the muddy, muddled mess that was today’s frontline.

The mech heaving his footlocker out from under the dropship’s excuse for a seat paused to give him a bemused look. He was used to being unrecognized. Overlord and Sixshot had their distinctive overpowered and psychopathic auras, either distantly aloof or gleefully murderous around the grunts. Black Shadow tended to go out on assignment, come back, and find the nearest barrack’s card game to join. By the time rumors and witnesses filtered back to base, nobody made the connection between Warrior Elite and cardshark in the center of the largest cluster of soldiers.

Why should he stand out? They were all killers, here.

So he just studied the unnamed mech assigned to help him get all his gear out of the ship, then
smiled. “I’m in to get you out.”

“That’s what they all say,” the cargoloader scoffed. He swung through the airlock and gave the strapped-down pile of armaments a jaundiced one-over. “How much of this is yours?”

“All of it.”

[* * * * *]

■ ⋅ ⌜ ■ “Owl”

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“Who?”

“Whom, actually,” Perceptor corrected. “This method of connection was brought to the attention of the Autobots by the late Brightshift, upon whom it was practiced.”

“Who?”

“The Decepticons, of course.”

“Who?”

“Ah, forgive me, I speak in general terms. To be perfectly accurate, the technique was employed by Shockwave, someone I believe the majority of Decepticons would consider as somewhat set apart from their main ranks.”

“Who?”

“There are, believe it or not, Decepticon scientists that refuse to compromise their professional ethics in the way Shockwave regularly persists in doing. While not a close personal acquaintance by any means, I grieved for Topshelf.”

“Who?”

“Topshelf was famous within a limited circle for his stunning work in light manipulation.”

“Who?”

“What, although I can easily see why a creature of Earth would be confused by the difference between a noun and a proper noun. Cybertronians do tend to favor names in a different manner than current standard English linguistics allows for.”

“He does know it’s not really talking, right?” Wheeljack whispered to Ratchet in passing.

The medic put a finger across his lips to hush him. “It’s keeping him occupied while I weld his legs back together. That’s all I care for.”

“You’re not the one who’s going to have to repair his neurocircuitry later if he’s that rattled in the head.” They glanced across the clearing to the makeshift repairberth the scientist had been laid on. Perceptor happily continued to talk to his late-night visitor in the tree above him.

[* * * * *]

■ ⋅ ⌜ ■ “Run away”
“Our choices are fight -- “


Krok pointedly ignored the hollow laughter. “ -- or flee.”

Five pairs of hands went up, the fifth because Misfire had Grimlock’s hands in his own. “Flee.”

Well, someone note down his lack of surprise on that one. “Flee it is.”

They were supposed to be fighting. One would think, given who was involved, that getting a fight going would be a simple thing.

However, Cliffjumper had endured so many talks since the thing with Mirage that starting a fight with him involved forms in triplicate. This was not an exaggeration. He had forms. He demanded three copies. By the time Autobots returned with the required forms filled out and duplicated, they’d already fought with Red Alert (personnel details were a security concern!) and the Dinobots (the only copier in the Ark was in their cave). Most of the fight had been fought out of them.

“I know what you’re doing~” Jazz sing-songed, leaning over the couch and red minibot alike.

Cliffjumper smirked. “I’ve got a form for that.”

Jazz stood up rather more quickly than he’d bent down. “No thanks.”

Six Decepticons in the unit, and not one of them was willing to take the shot.

“Out of ammo.”

“Wrong ammo for the gun. What a shame.”

“Gun’s jammed.”

“Blind! I’ve gone blind!!”

“Oh, yeah, totally blind. Then how come your optics are bugging out like that?”

A hand hit the back of the smart mouth’s helm. “What’s your excuse?”

“Ouch. Helm injury. I’m seeing double.”

The Decepticons paused to give that due consideration. Two of their current target?
“Lucky fragger.” Their commander folded his arms across the piece of building they were lined up behind. “It’d be a crime to shoot that.”

Halfway across the ruined city, Sunstreaker straightened into a stretch that turned him into liquid gold in the dim glints of sunlight. The Decepticon unit sighed their appreciation. They didn’t even pretend to care that the famously beautiful Autobot was probably hunting their afts, not so long as they had a bead on his aft.

[* * * * *]

[] “Fighting words” (Playing the Long Odds Prowl/Smokescreen)

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“Them’s fightin’ words,” Jazz teased.

Prowl opened his mouth, considered, and surrendered with all the grace of a mech cuddled into complacency. “I cannot think of a decent response,” he admitted. “You will have to imagine your own reason to be offended.”

“Am I about to be fought over?” Smokescreen wondered from between the two black-and-whites.

“Winner takes all!” Jazz whooped irreverently.

“No,” Prowl contradicted him simply. He didn’t bother sitting forward. He just reached over, turned Smokescreen’s face toward himself, and leaned in to claim a kiss. Smokescreen blinked once before melting into the gentle contact. Nobody would be taking him away any time soon.

Behind his helm, Prowl made a very specific gesture. Jazz choked on nothing.

[* * * * *]

[] “precious”

[* * * * *]

In another universe, at another time, if things had somehow gone differently, an old medic from an obsolete faction in a finished war knelt by one of the sparks glittering on the surface of a fertile moon, and he smiled. It was a stiff kindness fighting through eons of gruff defending of his own tender spark, but it was genuine. If anyone deserved open affection, it was this feisty beeper.

Little arms and legs wiggled fiercely up at him, barely grown enough to bend. A half-formed, tiny face scowled ferociously. In a still-open chest, the spark of a warrior flashed and spun. It had missed the war, and Ratchet was glad. This youngling would live to separate naturally, bubbling energy spent on stealing metal from the field around it until one day soon a mech would stand up and, surprised, find that he could carry the fight to his noisy neighbors. By then, his mind would have developed curiosity to go with the aggression, and he’d be ready to leave the field and learn.

For now, Ratchet gave the wriggling bit of protometal and spark his finger to chew. Across the field, the handful of crew on spark-sitting duty stopped and started, bending to check progress or soothe a restless crier. Whirl seemed to be telling his lot stories, which Ratchet objected to the topic of but gave a free pass for the moment. It’d do the hot spot no harm to hear a loud voice and harmless sound effects.

He’d just make sure Whirl was kept far away once this little squirmir grew cogent enough for
memory retention.

[* * * * *]

\[ \text{Primus} \]

[* * * * *]

The Decepticons stood around looking upward after Galvatron launched himself off to confront Unicron.

“Look,” one of the Constructicons said unsteadily after a suitable period of staring at the Unmaker devouring their planet’s moon, “I’m not much of a religious mech, but it seems like a really bad idea to side with…that.”

“Why?” Astrotrain asked. He sounded like he knew he was playing the part of straightmech.

The Constructicon still glanced at him like he was crazy. “When’s the last time a mortal sided against Primus and fragging well came out the winner?”

The assembled Decepticons gave that their consideration. Some of the audience compared notes. Despite Starscream being a pile of charcoal and Galvatron being a herald of Unicronian power, the eventual conclusion of their collective knowledge of myth and legend was that it was better to be in Starscream’s place than Galvatron’s. Primus could afford to be patient. No matter how long a Cybertronian lived, after all, the afterlife stretched far, far longer.

And Primus’ vengeance, the old tales all agreed, was far more terrible than Unicron.

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They had been fighting for a very, very long time by the time they met in the midst of battle. Not just in terms of a war. They’d been awake, on their feet, and fighting for two days and part of a third by this time, and it felt like even longer than it actually was. Ratchet was fairly convinced Optimus Prime was powered by stimulants alone at this point, and the toxic swill he was forcefeeding his leader between clashes was a mix of stimulants, superboosters, and a terrible slurry of acid-neutralizers meant to save the bottom of the poor mech’s tank from just plain giving up the ghost and melting out. He had no idea what his counterpart over behind Decepticon lines was giving Megatron, but by the chaos following the Decepticon leader’s charge, it had to be some good stuff.

So when Decepticon and Autobot leaders pulled out ahead of their respective factions to fight, their subordinates took it as a moment of relief. At least if those two were fighting each other, nobody else had to attempt to keep up with them.

The battle sort of petered out, tired soldiers taking potshots at the most obvious movement but otherwise just flopping down where they stood to stare in dull-opticked exhaustion at the smoke overhead. The longer nobody did anything, the more people slid into recharge. Whole battalions snoozed in buildings, a mere street between them and their enemies, who snored even louder.

At some point, Starscream appeared out of the dim haze of grit. It took a few minutes for Jazz to power up his visor and take notice.
“Gahh!”

The Air Commander was too worn-out to care that he’d just scared the tires off the resident SpecOps boogeymech. He squinted at the little Autobot sprawled at his feet and grunted once he I.D.ed Jazz. “You. C’mon.” He sounded as though he’d gargled half the ash in the air right now.

“Uh…okay?” Jazz stared at the back blatantly turned on him. It’d be so easy to take the shot.

Except the Second-in-Command of the opposite faction didn’t walk across the battlefield to snare the nearest officer for no good reason. Jazz wobbled to his feet and limped after the glitch.

Starscream led him to a building near the epicenter of the battle. He paused on the threshold and gave the Autobot following him the most long-suffering look seen on-planet since Kup transferred out. “I’m hoping you have some mystic Autobot solution to this problem.”

Jazz blinked at him. He peered into the gloom-filled building.

That was indeed a problem.

“I got nothin’, mech.”

Starscream heaved a sigh. Dust flew out of his vents. “I was afraid of that.”

The two officers stared wearily into the building. Inside, Megatron shifted, hiking his cheek up to lay more comfortably on Optimus Prime’s shoulder. The Autobot leader’s arm slid further down, upsetting the balance yet again, and the two mechs crumpled further together, propped up but collapsed. It was a little disturbing how well they fit against each other. Megatron’s cannon arm wrapped around the Prime’s waist in what might have been a grappling hold before he shut off. Optimus’ hand at his neck had eased down until the Prime’s whole arm was wedged on his shoulder, the back of the forearm now a rest for the Prime’s forehelm. Even their vent fans ran in slow sync, one blowing out as the other breathed in, trading air in warm blasts back and forth.

Starscream turned to slide down the doorframe, wings scraping all the way down. Jazz put his back against the opposite side of the doorframe, crossing his arms loosely. It didn’t seem to matter that he was standing slumped between Starscream’s legs, or that the Air Commander was leaning back to rest, optics flickering offline. There wasn’t anything to do here but wait. Jazz nodded off soon after.

They had been fighting for a very, very long time.

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(■  `
ˈ  ` ■) “Knuckle sandwich”

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Decepticon flyers weren’t brawlers. They weren’t the heavyweights, the powerhouses when it got down and dirty on the ground, rolling out under an onslaught of fists and body blocks instead of shots traded in passing or sniping from above. They were the ones who hit and run, not the stayers and takers.

Which is why the Autobots were taken completely surprise when Astrotrain, Blitzwing, and Blast Off blew a crater in the ground as they landed, a loud whump of displaced air and earth. A cloud of dust billowed out from them, and when it cleared, every flyboy ever mocked by the ground pounders they faced stood waiting, hands curled into fists and smiles sharp as weapons.
They weren’t the brawlers, but they were here to fight.

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( □ ᵃᴗ ᵃ ) "Rawr! (Very tiny. Much vicious. Wow.)" (Breeder AU Tarn)

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It didn’t seem physically possible to fit so much mech into so small an area, but Tarn wasn’t about to let the laws of physics stop him now. He was a tank on a mission, and that mission was hiding his fat aft in the washrack.

Now, Misfire would have bet real money said fat aft couldn’t have fit, but Tarn had had a long talk with physics and it was giving him a free pass for the day. It was the voice.

“Told you he got scary.” The jet leaned against the washrack doorframe, preventing the door from closing.

“You didn’t say he got homicidal,” Tarn hissed back at him. Twin cannon barrels jerked, trying to aim at the annoying pest but coming up short against the wall of the rack itself. “Or suicidal. Overlord has far less self-control than I, and last I saw, that crazed bomb was set to blow up at him!”

Misfire shrugged. Didn’t surprise him any. “Good job sticking up for him. Huuuuuuge courage shown. Maybe you’ll get a medal.” He tipped his helm back and stared at the ceiling, smirking at nothing in particular as he dropped his voice. “And you call him a coward? Pfft.”

“Misfire.” Tarn was going to defy physics again if he had to. “Shut. Up.”

[* * * * *]

( □ ᵃᴗ ᵃ ) Skywarp

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The annoying part of being considered the base prankster was that nobody took him seriously. Push Ramjet down an open shaft? Hilarious hijinks. Trip Starscream in front of Megatron? Momentary distraction. Backhand Motormaster? Ha, what a riot!

Skywarp sulked into his quarters at the end of the day, having sewn chaos, panic, disorder, and laughter throughout the base, and not one single person offered him a decent fight. If anything, he’d been a welcome diversion. The laughter had followed him the whole day as if mocking his best effort, and good-natured acceptance of every nasty trick he pulled had driven him half-mad. Argh!

Outside the room, a base full of Decepticons smirked congratulations at each other for having pulled off a prank on the base prankster.

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( □ ᵃᴗ ᵃ ) Cyclonus

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He would never defy the Tyrant of the Cosmos. What Lord Galvatron wished for, duty dictated Cyclonus provide. More than duty compelled him, however. It was an honor to serve his lord, an honor Cyclonus felt in a tightening deep in his workings.
What his master wanted today was a fight. The tension inside him creaked and burned, twisting in on itself as he dodged blows and desperately fought everything he was, everything he needed to be. Lord Galvatron wanted a fight. Cyclonus was duty and honor bound to provide it.

It physically hurt to lash out, but his lord’s wild, unhinged laughter rewarded the unnatural action. The pain felt so good.

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(■ ▽ ₋) Fulcrum

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The Autobots weren’t supposed to attack. They weren’t even supposed to be here, but here they were, charging forward in a flurry of explosions and screams.

“Hold the line!” someone bellowed.

The line was made of technicians, construction works, and support staff. They were less of a battle line and more just accidentally present. As the head of the team, Fulcrum should have been right there in the center, yelling at his subordinates and rounding them up to repel the Autobots.

He stood up, chin set at a stubborn angle as he faced down the charging enemy.

…for about two seconds.

Then he turned to run, and the line collapsed around him.

[* * * * *]

(■ ▽ ₋) IDW Blurr

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“…you’re feisty today.”

Blurr bounced on his heels and glowered in the direction of the pair of NAILs he’d just kicked out on their wheels. “People come into my bar to start slag? Frag yeah I’m going to be ‘feisty.’” The bar counter was in dire need of a sudden attack of cleaning. He wiped it down furiously, muttering, “Think people forget who I fought with.”

Swindle blinked at him, then at the rest of the bar. Not many patrons had noticed the minor kerfuffle, given that it’d lasted approximately nine rude comments and a shouted order to get the frag out. Decepticon bar conversations generally happened overtop of random screams and gunfire, after all. Since most of the patronage tonight was overwhelmingly of the Decepticon and ex-Decepticon variety, Swindle saw little reason anyone would have looked up.

He looked at the bartender attempting to scrub a hole through the bartop. One lone Autobot (ex-Autobot?) in a bar full of ‘Cons? Blurr probably had no idea how conscious everyone was of what side he’d been on. They were out to make sure he didn’t close the bar doors on him. The NAILs who’d walked in had had no such compunction to behave, and who’d bristled to the Decepticons’ defense? The Autobot. The insults had been ignored, and the problem had been taken care of before someone’s temper snapped.
Something was going right in this bar. Starscream and his politics aside, the post-war world society growing on the streets had to start somewhere, and Swindle intended to be here watching it grow.

“You push the racer image more than the Autobot one, nowadays,” he said tactfully.

Blurr threw him a glare that abruptly reminded Swindle of the other reason Decepticons didn’t start slag at this bar. “Wrecker,” Blurr spat.

Swindle paused, drink halfway to his mouth. “Bartender.”

The glare disappeared. “Hmmph.”

“Noisy bartender.”

Blurr bounced on his heels.

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Trailbreaker

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Hunger cramped his tanks.

It was a living thing inside him, always demanding more. Always greedy, always needing, always guzzling every drop he scrounged for it, and never, ever satisfied. He pictured himself as a shell around a ravenous monster. He’s the forcefield guy. That was his only use, his sole purpose for any mission, and that’s the only reason the Autobots tolerated him for the yawning creature screaming in his gut. As long as he took risky missions and sacrificed himself for other people, more valuable people, Autobots who mattered, it was more cost efficient to fuel him than starve him. The monetary value was tipped marginally in his favor, so he had a cube of energon for the day, another right before he’d be sent out.

That’s a cube and a half more than most mechs got these days. He was an oil-guzzler in the middle of an energy crisis, and keeping him fed was depriving other Autobots. He knew it, even if nobody ever said it to his face.

The hunger in his tanks growled, scenting fuel. Trailbreaker wanted to fight it.

It ate him from the inside out.

[* * * * *]

Overlord

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On the days Megatron chose not to leave him a scrap of dignity, the Decepticon warlord cut him down brutal and often.

Those were the days Overlord could look back at their previous matches and see, really see, how arrogance blinded him. Megatron accepted the smaller hits, allowed him his bragging, and gave him just enough rope to hang himself. Overlord’s inherent confidence was the only thing that interpreted silence and dodging as weakness or surrender.
The days Megatron lost his patience, he went straight for the kill. “Get up,” he said when he knocked Overlord down. “Get up and fight.”

Overlord shook his head, dazed from the last blow, and bright energon dripped from split lips. “I…”

“Get up.”

“Get up.”

“Get up.”

“Get up!” Megatron ordered, until Overlord’s knees stayed down to the floor and the faltered half-words became a snarled surrender to the lord of the Pit, his better and master yet again.

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(╯°□°）╯︵ ┻━┻ (‘White Lies’ AU)

[* * * * *]

They understood that their days were stressful, and they knew that their boss -- ex-boss -- tried to give them extra consideration for the double-shifts and hard labor. Kaon and Vos faced their own problems on the job, either by discrimination or flat-out exclusion. Helex and Tesarus had been there for Tarn coaching their smaller teammates through the reams of filework necessary to apply for decent positions. After years of Decepticon bureaucracy, Tarn had some kind of mastery over the mysteries of filework in the opinion of the D.J.D.. He’d been the one to help Tesarus and Helex jump through legal flaming hoops to land them their semi-secure recycling plant jobs, wearily refreshing the page over and over as the too-small auto-correcting blanks timed out and erased all their information yet again. He did the research necessary to find out what legalities they’d have to skirt to get Vos a teaching certificate and Kaon an electrician cred.

They understood that Tarn didn’t work like they did but knew how hard they labored. They’d watched him fold his pride into a little box and apply for job after job that fired him for ridiculous reasons. Stupid reasons. Reasons that did nothing but beat him down one position at a time while he swallowed everything that made him Tarn in order to be whom the managers wanted.

Helex and Tesarus stumped in after another long day to find Vos quietly studying on the windowsill. The flat’s one rickety table was in pieces against the far wall. Kaon was reassembling it, but in the slow, regretful way of someone who knew it was a useless gesture. Tarn was nowhere to be seen, and neither of their smaller teammates brought up his absence.

They understood.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 33

Pt. 33: Prowl and the Constructicons, Sixshot looking for the Terrorcons, Heretech looking for help, Overlord looking for Megatron’s approval, the D.J.D. on good days, Megatron has a few bad nights, Brave Police: J-Decker, a Quintesson Santa Claus, Jenga Championship of the Universe, the Kupacolypse continues, and Tracks/Raoul.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 33
Warning: Stalking groupies, bondage, mnemosurgery, torture, awkward, religion, alien sex, xenosex, sad.
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW, G1, TFP
Characters: Prowl, Constructicons, Sixshot, Chromedome, Overlord, Heretech, Fortress Maximus, the Decepticon Justice Division, Black Shadow, Nickel, Megatron, Optimus Prime, Starscream, the Brave Police, Jazz, Astrotrain, Silas, Kup, Tracks, Raoul.
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Various Tumblr things.

[* * * * *]

"Prowl, Constructicons "Never, ever say it could be worse.""

[* * * * *]

“Could be worse,” one of them said, broken in the aftermath. Scrapper was a raw end snapped off their minds, still bleeding, but they were alive.

“Could be worse,” somebody said as they looked at the Autobot Bombshell had chosen for them.

“How?!” somebody else said, because it was an Autobot, a mismatched patchweld over melted slag that had been a connection. They were making due in order to survive, and the Constructicons knew it.

Then Prowl joined them, and they swam in how lucky they were. He fit, he fixed, he tore them open and mended the hole. And maybe he kept the edges sanded rough so they never healed together, but at least his damage completed theirs. In the liquid level of shared circulation hoses and linked fuel tanks, they loved him as they loved themselves, and he was part of them, loving them back.

“Could be worse,” they told each other, dizzy in the wreckage of their first disassembly.

He ran, Autobot that he was, and they pursued, gestalt that they were.

“Could be worse,” someone whispered in the darkness of the wilderness, beaming in joy that they’d found him. Sure, he’d rejected them, but he hadn’t gotten away, and he wasn’t dead. He was still one of them.

“Could be worse?” they offered in hope when the only other option was annihilation, and he merged with them reluctantly.

“Never say that,” the part of them that was Prowl said. “It always could be.”
Five heavy construction frames versus one frail window shouldn’t have even been a competition. Really, it shouldn’t have. The glass was lucky to have survived Shockwave’s attack, but it wasn’t set quite right in the frame anymore. One good punch would probably knock it loose even if the glass itself didn’t shatter.

They didn’t break the window, however. If they broke the window, they’d have to face the consequences of interrupting their gestaltmate’s recharge cycle, and none of them were willing to do that. Prowl recharged infrequently enough. They didn’t want him to lose whatever sense of safety had allowed him to retire tonight. Usually, some pressing urgency caused him to work through the night with only a short break taken with the door of his office locked against their greedy hands.

Their greedy hands had learned restraint. Tonight, they were gentle. They pressed to the glass carefully. They wanted it out of the way. They wanted their hands on him. They wanted to grasp handfuls of sleek black-and-white plating. Their fingers curled in longing for the touch of his electrical field against their circuitry, muted output of his basic structure unable to avoid mingling with theirs beneath the level of conscious thought. Their hands ached empty, longing for the deceptively smooth feel of his armor in their palms. They wanted to gather him into the center of the group where he belonged. He was one of them. They were Devastator more than they were individual mechs, and part of Devastator laid in front of them right now, out of reach but within sight.

For the sake of being able to see him, they refrained from breaking the glass. Better to see him rest than pace restless tracks outside a locked door.

Five Constructicons shouldered each other aside, quietly fighting for room to push their faces to the glass. Hook swore under his breath, working sensitive fingertips under the glass. This wasn’t a window meant to open, but the frame was loose. Mixmaster and Scavenger held the top and sides of the glass pushed up as far as the loose frame allowed. Their vents closed, not daring to so much as breathe while Hook slowly coaxed one hand into the tiny gap.

Into, and gradually, a micron at a time, through. Hook’s fingertips inched into the room, pinched but triumphant. The Constructicons stared through the window at the back turned to them. So close. So far. They could see him with the glass in the way. They couldn’t touch him, although their hands itched to reach out.

Hook could manage this much, a crumb for starving mechs though it might be. He had his visor shut off, forehelm leaned against the windowsill as he rerouted all power to the barest tips of the fingers crammed through into the room. He batted at the hands turned on him, exploring his back and neck. Excuse them, but he was concentrating. He’d always had the most sensitive hands of the bunch, the hands of a surgeon, and right now his hand was close, so very close, close enough to just barely sense the outer ripples of electromagnetic energy given off by dormant systems.

When he was awake, Prowl held his energy field in to just above his armor. It made the air around him cold as ice to people accustomed to feeling another person’s EM field once they came into range. Prowl radiated chill because of the lack of personal energy around him.

In recharge, that tight control relaxed. His systems radiated ambient energy, slow pulses of electric charge bleeding off him in warm waves. Hook’s fans caught, and the surgeon froze, the very edges
of his own field teased by unconscious recognition from Prowl’s circuitry. Asleep, Prowl knew him for a fellow part of Devastator, and sleepy welcome pushed the Autobot’s energy out to mingle with what was another piece of himself. Hook shuddered.

The glass rattled in the frame, and four pairs of Constructicon hands frantically fluttered around it, ready to catch it if it shook free. Hook simply shut off every other sensor and dwelled in Prowl’s presence at the limits of perception.

On the other side of the glass, Prowl inhaled long and deep. His doors just slightly bobbed, and Hook’s fingers *reached*, trying to meet the waft of Prowl-flavored energy halfway. The other Constructicons pressed themselves to the glass and whimpered soundless need for what was held out of reach.

A pity he slept with his back to them. In his sleep, Prowl smiled the smallest fraction, watched over and safe.

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"Wait your turn" - Constructicons/Prowl

[* * * * *]

It should have been humiliating. He’d been *collared*. There was a collar *around his neck* and that was a *leash*. He’d been put on a *leash*.

The humiliation never happened. They’d seen into Prowl’s mind. They understood. Prowl looked like an Autobot on the outside, black and white and self-righteous all over, but inside? Inside, Prowl was pure Constructicon green. Hook had bent his helm to allow small hands to buckle the collar at the back of his neck, and he’d looked up into a foreign-looking face with familiar thoughts behind it as it closed. He felt no humiliation. No embarrassment, no shame, not the slightest hint of distrust or fear that the cold metal locked around his neck would be used to harm him.

Hurt him, yes. Oh Primus, yes. Hurt him, because their bodies were as different on the outside as they were the same on the inside. Hook’s frame thrilled to the sting of bites, the hot gush of pierced fuel lines. It set his wires ablaze to be hauled down onto his knees by the leash wound tight around Prowl’s fingers. The show of force turned him on where gentleness failed to. Scrap and rust ground into his knee joints, and the tubes in his neck pinched under the hard metal pull from the collar. Prowl backhanded him, and Hook gasped, engine revving punchdrunk pleasure for the sharp crack of impact. Beat him, bruise him, grind him under wheels. Force him to scream from the pain, and the pleasure united them.

Under their surface differences, they were the same, they were one. Prowl’s hands inflicted the pain, Hook’s body felt the pain, but their minds were Devastator’s. One body gave, the other took, and both felt the pleasure. It was a complete circuit between them. Give, take; thrust forward, pull back; offer, receive; back and forth in a physical climb to the peak, a dance where one led and the other followed but each would get there at the same climatic moment as Hook howled release and Prowl growled, their forehelms pressed together, Prowl’s bared teeth inches away from the soft, broken shape of Hook’s parted lips.

The collar and leash might have humiliated anyone who didn’t understand self-restraint, in the literal sense of the word. As it was, Hook merely felt a blush of embarrassment that he couldn’t hide the wide, trembling smile beaming his adoration up at Prowl.

“Wait your turn,” Prowl said to the other four Constructicons, uncollared and free of leashes but
bound nonetheless, and they had seen into his mind. They knew what cruelty he intended their wait to be.

[* * * * *]

"Prowl: wild side."

[* * * * *]

This might have been their stupidest idea yet. Quite possibly one of their most brilliant, too.

Scavenger dodged under the bridge, pausing to heave air. The hot night air on Cybertron didn’t help cool his overheated engine at all, but he couldn’t stop to flare his armor for better heat dispersion. He had to keep moving, keep running, keep hiding.

Hunger sought through the gestalt bond, the murky sliver of Devastator active in the back of his brain module, and it had a hunter’s optics. It peered at him with a predator’s grin, and Scavenger bolted for the next piece of cover already knowing it was too late.

Blue and red lit the night up, and Prowl burst out of altmode at sufficient speed to tackle the heavier mech to the ground. Battle-honed reflexes went up against an Enforcer’s skill with cuffs. Truth be told, Scavenger might have hesitated to fight back. Having a hot, panting gestaltmate pressed along him from chest to knee inspired all the wrong kind of urges. The last thing he wanted was to get away.

Cuffs slapped onto his wrists, stapled through to the ground to secure him. Scavenger bucked and fought them uselessly, but he was caught. Thoroughly caught. It’d been a good chase, but it was over.

The fierce kiss Prowl claimed him with told him this had been the best idea the Constructicons had ever had.

A second later, the black-and-white was up and running down his next target.

[* * * * *]

"Cybertronian language spoken to human ears"

[* * * * *]

Prowl didn’t understand why Jimmy Pink kept warbling, “When the moon’s in your eye like a big pizza pie, that’s amoooooooonore!” every time one of the Constructicons checked in with him. He thought it was a particularly obnoxious comment on how obvious the gestalt’s crush on him was, even speaking NeoCybex instead of English. He had no idea it was because of the NeoCybex itself.

The Constructicons thought Jimmy Pink had an atrocious accent.

[* * * * *]

"Phase Sixers Try To Socialize With Normal Guys and Fail. Miserably."

[* * * * *]

It was a bar. He could do a bar. Bars were easy to do. People did them every day. They went inside, did bar things, came out drunk and hanging off each other. Social magic happened during the
drinking part, he was fairly certain. It was drink-magic. The more a mech drank, the more social happened. Surely. Yes?

Sixshot glanced over his shoulder, covering uncertainty with a cool check for snipers. He’d come all this way looking for rumors of the Terrorcons, and a place full of engex and snacks was the most likely spot to stake out for hungry walking fuel tanks. All he had to do was go inside and blend in, and his prey would walk right into the trap.

Seemed like an easy enough series of steps:
1. Find bar.
2. Walk into bar.
3. ??
4. Terrorcons.

Okay, so he was still a little iffy on what exactly #3 would be. He’d have to improvise. He squared his shoulders and walked in.

A room full of smirking, smiling, laughing faces looked up, spotted him, and congealed.

Sixshot regretted this plan immediately.

[* * * * *]

"Chromedome going through Overlord's mind when he spots something very weird even for Overlord."

[* * * * *]

He’d been combing through Overlord’s memory for a while now, planting the subliminal trigger and searching idly. He wasn’t in a hurry. He had the entire quest to familiarize himself with Overlord’s mind. He’d find what Prowl wanted eventually.

Mnemosurgery wasn’t a straightforward as running a search on keywords. A mnemosurgeon had to actively learn the individual quirks of each patient’s brain module. Chromedome had been patiently getting to know the twists and turns of Overlord’s memory archives over the past weeks. Following thoughts would lead him to what he wanted to know sooner or later.

Letting random thought association happen brought him into a lot of strange memory files. Most of them were combat-related, or starred Megatron. Some of them included Trepan, which unsettled Chromedome. Overlord had done a lot of things in his lifetime. Chromedome had thought himself experienced in digging through the most perverse of criminal minds, but Overlord still managed to unsettle him at times. Even a tiny prod from Chromedome’s kinder thoughts retrieved disturbing images, sometimes.

One day after a particular stunt by Rodimus, a passing thought from Chromedome must have included the lithe ripple of his captain loosed onto an obstacle course: part race, part dance, part gymnastics, part fight. Rodimus gleamed like temptation and moved like sin.

And suddenly, Chromedome was in a memory of Overlord that didn’t just compare but overwhelmed. He couldn’t shut it down fast enough. For days afterward, the memory of Overlord dancing for Megatron was burnt into the back of his optics, playing on repeat.

He was more careful with his searches after that.

[* * * * *]
"So, what if Overlord got exceedingly drunk on G9 once, and started blubbing over Fortress Maximus.
I mean, “Why doesn’t Megatron just call me, MAx?! -Hic-”

[* * * * *

This part of captivity never got any less confusing. It got easier, of course. Less than a year into Overlord’s patented brand of torture, and Fortress Maximus found this particular quirk of his captor to be the easiest to tolerate. Didn’t make sense, but oh well. A lot of what Overlord did made no sense to someone with rudimentary ethics or even sanity. Fort Max found it easier to endure once he gave up trying to understand.

A year into captivity, and the smell billowing ahead of Overlord into the torture chamber brought a shudder of relief to Fort Max’s frame. No pain or interrogation tonight, that smell told him. Overlord indulged in the occasional celebratory drink to savor exciting matches or just for the taste, but when he wanted to get drunk, he went all out. The mess of a monster staggering into the room reeked of highgrade. His optics weren’t just on different brightness settings, lenses dilated; they were actually different colors, he was so fendered. He must have forgotten how latches worked a while back, as every one of his gun hatches were flipped open with the barrels snagging on things like doorframes, control panels, and the table.

The funny part -- in a twisted version of funny -- was that Overlord had no control over his temper when he was sober, yet when fendered, he dropped straight through more turbulent emotions to dwell in melancholy. He wanted nothing more than someone to hold him and tell him everything was okay. Unfortunate, as a Decepticon superwarrior unable to walk straight scared everybody out of his path just by existing. That left the strapped-down Autobot on the table to weather the storm.

Legs missing, one optic pried loose, still recovering from the last hacking attempt, Fortress Maximus found himself making soothing noises. It beat screaming.

“I mean,” Overlord slurred without raising his forehelm up off the table, “why doesn’t he just call me, Max? I’ve been gone forever. He gave me an ultimatum, and I,” his systems hiccupped, “and I turned him down. Why’s he ignoring me?” Differently-colored optics peered woefully over one forearm at the Autobot. “He always does this. That -- that jet snubs him, and he’ll tear through planets to pound him back into place. I challenge him to his face, an’ it’s, heeeeeeey, look, now’s not the time, we’ll talk later.”

Disgust and terror iced Fort Max’s fuel lines as a friendly hand patted his strapped-down arm. “It’s what I like about you, Max. You’re a -- a -- a captive audience!” Overlord attempted to stand up, grandstanding for attention, only to tip over and crash to the floor. A distressed system hiccup came from out of sight.

The Autobot stared patiently at the equipment overhead. It wasn’t as though he had a choice in the matter.

Eventually, the thrashing from floorward became less upset. Overlord laid quietly on the floor beside him, probably face-down since his voice sounded muffled. “Wish I could take him captive. Wish I could tie him down like you. Hold him down where you are. Make him scream for me. Fight him every day until he admits I’m,” he faltered, “that I’m worth fighting. That I might beat him.” His voice fell to a mutter, talking to himself. Attempting to convince himself, perhaps. “I can beat him. I beat you. I defeated all of Garrus-9. Megatron’s nothing.”

Metal clinked and clanked as the big Decepticon sat up gradually. Mismatched optics came into view
over the table, and Fort Max suffered the petting of his arm again as Overlord mumbled reassurances to himself. He’d had no idea Overlord had the self-confidence of a prison glitch. It was a well-hidden weakness, at least until the engex flowed.

Unbeatable Decepticon superwarrior’s confidence shatters under engex, obsesses over one opponent! News at 11.

“Should just…stick with you. My captive audience,” Overlord said. Drink thickened his voice. It slowed his reflexes, too. He underestimated his own strength as he stood up and accidentally pitched forward onto his prisoner’s pried-open chest. “Urk! Oops. I’ll show him I don’t need him. I’ll show him, Max. Everyone will see. He’ll come.”

Fort Max grimaced at the new flash of pain in his chest and waited. Slowing fans stuttered and restarted. Yep, and there went Overlord, back around the depressive cycle. The Autobot added an extra note to his soothing noises. Overlord buried his face back in his arms on the table by Fort Max’s hip, keening wildly. What a mess of a mech.

“What did I do wrong, Max? Why don’t I deserve a call at the very least?”

Overlord always asked so earnestly. Megatron opinion meant so much to him. Fort Max just sighed and stared upward some more. None of this made any sense to him, and it wasn’t like Overlord would listen if he said anything. The Decepticon came staggering in here looking for someone who couldn’t run away or reject him. It was disturbing, but it didn’t hurt.

Fortress Maximus: teddy bear.

center>[* * * * *]

"Heretech trying to get the Warriors Elite to cooperate."

[* * * * *]

Overlord was easy. Heretech commed him with a simple, “Megatron said you couldn’t do it.” It got done, and then Overlord demanded an evaluation report be sent directly to Megatron to be filled out, preferably in person, and Heretech pretty much just got out of the way of that trainwreck. It handled itself, most days.

Black Shadow was simple enough, if he got his bonus check. Heretech had a series of financial rewards set up in accomplishment tiers. Black Shadow happily met any goals set in order to get his shanix. A fast shuttle to the Monacus casinos, some leave time coinciding with Blue Bacchus, and Black Shadow was under control.

It took Heretech a while to get the hang of Sixshot. Sixshot didn’t seem to want anything. He never seemed interested in anything but combat, and he just grunted at any attempt at conversation that didn’t involve a mission briefing. Heretech ended up setting up a tab at a local bar. It seemed to work out okay.

The other Warrior Elite, believe it or not, were more difficult yet. Heretech could confidently say that nobody else could or wanted to do his job, despite the desperate way he attempted to foist it off on various people throughout the war.

So eons later, when the D.J.D. tracked him down and condemned him, it actually came as somewhat of a relief.
“I should know this song.” Kaon drummed his fingers on the console. “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star?”

“Bet Bet Black Shadow?” Tesarus asked at the same second.

“It’s the tune for the glyph song,” Tarn said, glancing over. “He’s not singing the right words, though.”

“What is he singing?”

“I can’t quite make it out…” Tarn zoned out a bit, trying to listen. After a while, he shook his head in frustration. “I can’t hear. The screaming’s too loud to understand the tonals.” Stupid List mech was too loud to hear over. It figured. Now it would bug him until he asked Vos later.

“It’s going to be stuck in my head all day,” Tesarus muttered.

“How do you feel?”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“If you’re filling out a blank on that blasted form, Tarn, I’m going to file it up your cannon barrel.”

“…it’s part of my job to report on the well-being of my subordinates after injury or --”

“Tarn!”

“I think I’ll retire to my office. Call if your condition changes.”

“I’m…more of a singer,” Tarn hedged, looking at the electrobass in open unease. What was he supposed to do with the strings? He hadn’t been to a stage show in ages, and he’d never been one for the kind of music that didn’t have a full orchestra accompanying it.

Helex narrowed his optics at him. “We know that. But you’re the one who made hobbies a requirement of our personal development plans, and Kaon likes music.”

“Singing is perfectly acceptable music.”
“Sure, but that still leaves the electrobass open. I mean, unless you want to nab the next guy on the List to play.”

Tarn glared at him.

“Didn’t think so. Come on. Give it a try. I have to try this thing, so give me a break.” Helex hefted the circuituba. “You can’t sound any worse than me. And Vos has that thing with the reed, so don’t be too self-conscious. We get to listen to him squeak during the solos.”

[* * * * *]

"Nickel waking up the D.J.D in the morning in true "mom" style."

[* * * * *]


Tarn could hear the poor mech’s ventilation system whirring away from all the way over where he leaned against the cargohold wall. That was sort of amazing, since he could have sworn he couldn’t hear anything over the alarming clamor of his own pumps and fans. Lord Megatron have mercy, he hadn’t even known there were that many red lights on his HUD. Where had they all come from? “I beat my own transformation record,” he offered when Kaon fell to sobbed, pained breaths. “Didn’t know I could change shape that fast.”

Tesarus just continued to sprawl on the ramp where they’d hauled him, their combined efforts barely enough to heave his huge bulk up into the launching ship. He’d never been a quick runner, what with his stubby legs. He’d managed to throw Helex that last distance to hang off the lip of the slowly closing ramp by four hands and a prayer, and Vos had followed, whistling through the air like a spear to transform, hitting the ramp and scrambling spider-like toward the ramp controls. Kaon and Tarn had dragged them in the rest of the way.

Pelting pell-mell toward their own hijacked ship had been the worst wake-up call the D.J.D. had ever had, especially knowing the consequences if the hijacker actually got away with it.

“Am I going to have to place that call to Cybertron informing Lord Megatron that his elite internal police unit is so out-of-shape I beat them handily?” a highly amused and terribly acidic voice asked through the intercom.

Speaking of consequences. “Don’t you dare,” Tarn tried to thunder. It came out more of a whine as his engine sputtered.

“Please don’t,” Helex pleaded. Everyone gave him a slightly appalled look for stooping to pleas, and he lowered his voice to hiss, “Look, I don’t want anybody else knowing she took us out. Think about it! If they know she can do it, somebody else will figure out how.”

Good point. Tarn swallowed, suddenly very uncomfortable. Vos flattened himself to the nearest wall in paranoia. Tesarus just oozed somehow flatter.

“Am I going to have any more trouble giving you your maintenance checks?” Nickel asked, poisonously sweet.

“No ma’am,” the D.J.D. mumbled, shamefaced and squirming. Health & Safety was important. They
hadn’t realized it capable of kicking their collective afts.

“Good.” The cargohold door unlocked. “Then welcome aboard.”

[*** ***]

[*** ***]

"Black Shadow and being touchy feely"

[*** ***]

This was not the afterlife the Decepticon Justice Division had envisioned. There were certainly a lot of their victims waiting for them, yes, and many of them had the eager expressions of mechs about to get revenge, but nobody surged forward to begin. Even Overlord -- both of him?! -- were standing back to watch, amusement splashed forward across his exaggerated features.

“Ha! You’re here!” And here was Black Shadow, one of their victims. One of their latest victims, behind that ship of Autobots, except every one of them was standing about in the background grinning their damn fool heads off. There went the theory that revenge happened in chronological order.

“We’re here,” Tarn agreed slowly. He glanced around, waiting for the ambush. His optics kept coming back to the duo of Overlords. That was just not right.

“Come on, come on. Join us! We thought we’d sit down, get to know you.” Black Shadow beckoned, jovial and bright, and the menacing crowd of evil smirks sort of herded the nervous D.J.D. forward. “Take a seat.” A dozen hands clamped down on each mech’s shoulders, just in case they had any ideas about not sitting where they were told.

The seats were plush. Comfortable. Kaon flexed his hands, twisting against the wrist manacles, and swallowed in uneasy recognition.

The jolts of electricity didn’t happen, however, or any other torture. As soon as they were situated, the D.J.D. were left to their comfy seats. They faced a big blank screen. It didn’t look too threatening. The surrounding area faded to darkness, and the screen lit up.

“What’s this about?” Helex asked, since Tarn was glaring at the Overlords in confused silence.

Black Shadow flopped down beside him and slung an arm around him, smiling cheerily. “It’s about getting to know me! And everyone else, but we figured we’d start with me since, y’know,” he clicked something in his hand toward the screen, and a grainy picture popped up, “my slide collection is the largest. But don’t worry, we’ll tell you all about our many, many vacations. Now, this is me and Blue Bacchus at the Grand Heights Casino. Or was it the Celebration Casino? We had the best time, let me tell you…”

[*** ***]

“Megatron and a party”

[*** ***]

“Well, you do have to admit it. They throw one Pit of a party.”

Megatron couldn’t actually tell which one of his paralyzed soldiers gave the wry comment, but he would hunt the fragger down and make him eat it, one word at a time. As soon as he got loose of
these blasted restraints, of course. He had an entire party agenda laid out for after he broke the restraints around his wrists…and ankles, neck, knees, elbows, and pretty much every point on his body capable of bending. The rest of the Decepticons were paralyzed with inhibitor claws and stasis cuffs, staked out for the cameras like captured butterflies on a giant display board, but not Megatron, Lord of the Cosmos, Tyrant of the Firmament.

No, he had to be mobile enough to be moved, unlike his pinioned soldiers. He had four guards all his own, just in case he thought he could do something with the wiggle room his pinkie finger had left. Any moment now, he’d hop to freedom.

“Wish they’d share the high grade,” another soldier said, whining unattractively as several drunken Autobots sloshed their beverages out of reach of the thirsty prisoners. “No disrespect intended, Lord Megatron, sir, but if there’s going to be a party, I’d rather go with it.”

Megatron growled low in his muted vocalizer. He didn’t want to admit it, but the first impudent soldier had been right, and he was slowly coming around to the second’s way of thinking the more the inevitability of his situation sank in. This was a tear-up of a party, and he’d rather be completely fendered by the time it hit the highlight of the night.

Being drunk would make his execution easier, if slightly less dignified.

[* * * * *]

"A childish argument between any universe Megatron and Optimus on the battlefield that has everyone amused.”

[* * * * *]

“I can’t believe you painted yourself like that.”

“What? I thought you liked black.”

“You deliberately did this just to annoy me, didn’t you?”

“Stop thinking you’re the center of the universe, Megatron. I painted myself for reasons all my own.”

“You did it because those are my colors.”

“Primus alive, how arrogant are you? You can’t own colors!”

“You did! You did it on purpose!”

“Oh, I did not.”

“You! Tell me why he painted himself black and purple.”

“Don’t involve my officers in this!”

“I demand a straight answer!”

“What are we even fighting over?”

“Repaint yourself immediately!”

“I like these colors.”
“Ha! You’re a Decepticon sympathizer. Er.”

“The automatic accusation doesn’t work so well against me, does it.”

“No. No, it doesn’t.”

“I hope you feel as foolish as you sounded.”

 “…I might.”

“This is what I meant. You can’t own two colors. Painting myself black and purple changed nothing about my sympathies. Your perception, perhaps, but -- ”

“So you did do it on purpose!”

[* * * * *]

"Conveniently" invisible gods"

[* * * * *]

Early on in the war, Megatron managed to obtain the Matrix. It was before Optimus Prime gained his almost supernatural fighting ability, you see, and there was an ambush. The Matrix was torn from his chest by a unit of particularly enthusiastic Decepticons. The Autobots fought them off, but the Matrix was promptly carted off into Megatron’s clutches.

Optimus Prime merely sighed, almost relieved. “It’ll be back,” he predicted.

He was right. Two months later, a demand -- never a request, Megatron never requested -- for a temporary ceasefire came down the line, and Megatron informed the Prime of where they would meet to exchange certain Autobot concessions in return for the Matrix. Optimus cheerfully informed him that he’d be taking the Matrix back, no concessions made thank you very much, and Megatron could just suck it up. Stony silence was the only reply.

“Maaaaybe you shouldn’t be twisting his tail, eh?” Jazz said. He seemed a little nervous at the continued silence from Darkmount. The frontlines were as hot as ever, but the big player was Megatron, and Megatron had been absent from public appearances since the Matrix had been taken.

Optimus leaned back from the meeting table and stretched, hands above his head and back arched in a long, leisurely display of actively not caring what had Megatron’s gears in a bind. “Mm. Don’t worry. He’ll be there.”

He was. Megatron looked downright haggard, too. He tried to pull off impatient haughtiness, standing there alone at the meeting point with his arms folded and foot tapping, but Optimus knew him too well. The leader of the Autobots pulled up and transformed, but made no move to begin any sort of negotiations. He knew what this meeting was really about. The Autobots wouldn’t be making any concessions here today.

“How can you stand it?!” Megatron burst out after half an hour of stubborn silence.

“It accepted me.” Optimus shrugged. “But if you’re referring to the constant watching: I grew used to it.”

A mutter that sounded like, “I tried that,” came from the Decepticon leader. His clenched fists betrayed how well that had worked out for him.
“If you were less concerned with amassing personal power, you could have allowed a more worthy vessel among your followers to take it up,” Optimus said mildly. “Surely there is someone the Matrix pulled to among the Decepticons.”

If there was, Megatron either wouldn’t say or, more likely, had destroyed. The silver mech’s lips thinned in displeasure, but strain showed around his optics. “It refused to release me.”

“I’m sure you tried to destroy it.”

Megatron looked away.

“I see. Well, if it won’t release you, then there’s no point in me being here…” Optimus feigned turning to leave, and Megatron’s cannon whined online. The Autobot leader’s optics crinkled in a laugh as he glanced back. “Oh? Was there a reason I’m here?”


Optimus’ optics crinkled further. “Very well.” He stepped forward, hands up. “Shall we?”

Invisible to all but them, Primus’ many, many optics watched as Megatron reluctantly surrendered the Matrix to its rightful holder.

[* * * * *]

"Do Cybertronians dream of turbosheep?"

[* * * * *]

Megatron dreamt of peace.

He dreamt of silence, the ringing quiet after bombs dropped and guns emptied. He dreamt of the last of his foes fallen at his feet, dead or surrendered, and it was peace. Peace through tyranny, but a peace that lasted. It was the peace that didn’t dissolve into bickering, backbiting chaos leading to conflict. It was the peace of one road instead of many divergent paths. He dreamt of that peace. He dreamt of everyone following in his footsteps, even if he was the last one standing and he strode across endless graves.

Starscream dreamt of triumph.

He dreamt of the last shot, the glorious final word, the ultimate action that would give him the recognition he deserved. All would turn toward him. He would lead, bathed in adulation and admiration. They would aspire to be like him yet despair because reaching his pinnacle of being was impossible. He dreamt of being invincible and wholly visible, someone no one could ignore or cast aside, doubt or criminalize. He would be the end-all authority on everything, even if he had to end everyone else.

Both of them woke very confused from dreams of fluffy steel-wooled creatures frolicking through battlefields. It was a strange day for everyone in the Decepticons that day.

[* * * * *]

"Mars is a treasure planet of energon because reasons and is cyberformed into a new home for Transformers. Humanity reacts."

[* * * * *]
“This is the best show.” Thrust shoveled foil balls into his mouth and chewed vigorously, spilling bits of foil everywhere.

Ramjet didn’t care. He was busy stealing a handful for himself to gobble just as sloppily. “I know, right? What a disgusting bunch of ugly critters.” He thumbed the remote, and the purring narration for the documentary -- Tarn was a lot of things, but Soundwave had the right idea using him for voiceovers -- turned up until the rest of the rec room looked over. There was an immediate scramble for seats now that Swindle’s Game Show was over.

“Nature channel’s awesome.”

“Starscream says we might be able to set up a zoo.”

“I thought Earth was some kind of nature reserve already?”

“Yeah, but it’s hard to visit.”

“Oooo, look, that hive started another war with the bigger hive.”

“They’ve got spunk.”

“Nukes, too.”

“I totally want a zoo. Or a Mars Rover of my own. Megatron’s got that one on a leash, and it’s sooooo cute.”

[* * * * *]

“Decker actually telling a joke”

[* * * * *]


Power Joe’s sputtering couldn’t be heard over everyone else losing it. It’d been a long day.

[* * * * *]

“someone young and impressionable being told religious stories for the first time”

[* * * * *]

“I… I am honestly shocked that this… I…” It wasn’t often Prowl floundered for words, but the Witwicky’s had the honor of seeing him reduced to flummoxed staring. After too long, he seemed to realize their disapproval was only growing. Religion was no laughing matter among middle class Americans in their day and age, and oh frag how was he even supposed to navigate this? Religion was a minefield of sociopolitical tension on Earth!

Jazz stood behind the offended parents making stifled little desperate motions urging him to do something, and Prowl shook away the surprise, scrambling up from his chair. He came around his desk to kneel down closer to their height. “I can only offer my most sincere apologies, Spike, Carly,” he nodded to them in turn, too distressed to keep his dignity. “Our apologies, as Autobots and your friends. We apologize to you both, and to Daniel. I will speak with everyone involved, and I can
promise that there will be -- ah -- “His optics darted toward Jazz, begging for help, but Jazz threw up his hands. Frag if he knew what could be tendered in return for giving a five-year-old crying nightmares for a week.

“I think we’ve been fairly accepting of your religious beliefs,” Carly started, practically spitting ice, and both Autobots cringed at her tone, “but I draw the line at telling our child your version of Earth religions.”

“Or about religion at all!” Spike amended, because he knew Wheeljack and loopholes. “Leave religion to us, the parents. You know, the ones who have to live with no sleep all the damn time, now?” The Autobots nodded, shamefaced.

Carly glared at them harder, willing her sleepless nights and terrified child upon them. “I don’t care what you believe about Quintessons and their meddling ways taking over vulnerable worlds. It is Christmas, and you will not corrupt Santa Claus or his elves for any other child. Is that clear?!”

“But Santa Claus isn’t even a religious -- “ Jazz started, only to gulp and take a quick step back as Carly whirled around.

“My child currently believes that a slaver alien exists on the North Pole waiting for him to be naughty so he can be abducted!”

“Right. Right, I’ll just…shut up now.”

“Damn right you will!”

[* * * * *]

“ Astrotrain wasn’t even SURE how he and Silas got into this situation in the first place”

[* * * * *]

“What do you mean you’ve never played this before?” Astrotrain hissed, red optics ringed orange in panic. “It’s like a universal constant! I know Earth had it! I mean, I kinda suck at it,” hello, brick fingers here, “but I know how to do it! How can you not know? Do you at least know what the rules are?!”

“Of course I do.” Silas had a vague idea, anyway. More importantly, however, “Explain to me how exactly Jenga’s a universal constant.”

Astrotrain’s shoulders slumped in something like relief. “Okay. Okay, we can work with a newbie. You’ve got little fingers. Good…ish balance for your species, right? Right.” He seemed to be talking to himself, ignoring the irate little human’s question with all the nervous energy of a clumsy-fingered oaf handed the Jenga championship deciding the fate of the universe.

Good, because that’s pretty much what had happened.

And Silas was his partner. How had this happened, again?

[* * * * *]

“Jazz vs. Kup”

[* * * * *]
The Autobots had a general consensus about Jazz. The consensus pretty much centered around his dangerous rep as Head of SpecOps, with a large side portion of how that fed into his smooth, suave persona off the field. He was the coolest mech, shiny as all get out. He straddled the perfect balance between scary and desirable.

Basically, everyone figured he was the best lay in any given base at any given time, natural talent spiced by training that had no name. His various lovers had nothing to contribute to the discussion but vigorous nodding.

So when Jazz attached himself to Kup’s side like an adoring, hopeful limpet, puzzled optics gave the old timer a one-over trying to figure out what the deal was. A leave of absence apparently took place the moment Kup arrived, self-assured spy and saboteur, officer and unofficial morale cheerleader disappearing into the distance. The more Kup impatiently pushed his black-and-white groupie away, the closer Jazz stuck himself. Dignity didn’t seem important. Nobody had seen somebody so thirsty for interfacing since the Decepticons did the prisoner exchange for Octane.

“Y’ don’t understand,” Jazz said when somebody finally scraped up the bearings to ask what was going on. “He’s…Kup. He doesn’t have th’ generators they installed in mechs like us. He’s got his originals from the assembly line.” Jazz licked his lips in unconscious lust. Brilliant blue, his visor looked off into memory, fantasy, or both. “He’s still a sergeant, yeah? He’s at that kinda connection level. He can power a whole unit when slag starts slinging. He’s like ol’ Ironhide, except that generator output doesn’t go directly int’ weapon mods. It just builds up, an’ -- an’ he’s got these batteries.” Definitely memory. Jazz didn’t seem to realize his hands were making unfocused groping motions in thin air, sculpting the shape of battery packs crammed to the brim with stored charge ready to be accessed. “He doesn’t like hookin’ up ‘less he thinks he’ll have time to recharge ‘em, but awww mechs. Mechs, I gotta be there when he’s in the mood.”

He smiled a wide, wistful smile. “Y’ don’t understand ‘til he’s pumping you so fulla charge your generator shuts down an’ he’s your life support an’ it’s overflown’ into the berth, and he’s pullin’ six other mechs into the hook up but it feels like he’s still so deep inside y’ nothin’ else matters.” Worrying his lower lip, he dimmed his visor and shuddered in remembrance. “He didn’t even touch my firewalls, but he owned me.”

If he hadn’t been so blatantly into it, the description would have skeeved off most of his listeners. As it was, his words spread like a horror story. Autobots who heard it for the first time recoiled in fear, scared by the control aspect. Horror tempered to caution in people who’d been around long enough to see Jazz nestle up beside Kup in the common room, hand grasping the old timer’s in open plea. Caution heated to something liquid when Jazz took Kup’s hand and brought it to his throat, both of his own hands holding it wrapped around the vulnerable tubes and cables. Open want filled Jazz’s face as he pressed into the light hold. A brief squeeze made him squirm, bliss turning his visor gleaming blue.

Kup gave him a few minutes to make a spectacle of himself, panting as he eeled into the old mech’s lap, but eventually the hand on his neck let go.

“I’m busy,” Kup said in brisk dismissal.

“Y’ won’t be busy forever.”

“Not now.”

“So later, then?” Jazz fixed a hopeful look on him.

Kup seemed more amused than exasperated, which fed the hope. “I’ll think about it.”
Jazz shut off his visor to shiver. “So’ll I.”

And now so was everyone else.

[* * * * *]

"Tracks - the morning after"

[* * * * *]

Helpless amusement filled Tracks’ voice, however much he wished to hide it. “You won’t have any sort of reaction. It’s merely another type of mechanical fluid. I doubt you can purchase it as you do motor oil at an auto parts store, but Spike and Sparkplug have handled it without adverse reaction.” Raoul gave him a look with the whites of his eyes showing all the way around, and Tracks tried very hard not to chortle. “Ratchet did not tell them what they were topping up in us, I believe, but no. No reaction. I would suggest washing your hands before eating, but your skin should be fine.”

“Yeah, sure.” The man still seemed unnerved. “You enjoyed that, right? That was, like, coming? Acabada? ‘Cause that’s the weirdest face I ever seen you make, man. And you, like, gurgled.”

He was going to laugh and laugh on the drive back to the Ark. “Yes, it was very enjoyable.” Praise Primus but yes, yes indeed it had been.

“You shut down, Tracks.”

“That is a common reaction.”

“I ain’t never seen anything like that.”

“You don’t have sparks or circuitbreakers, so I would sincerely hope you haven’t.”

“You gurgled, man. You gurgled, and your face, like, I don’t even got the words.” Raoul gestured, hands hesitated between the familiar jerking motion and the strange twisting pull now trained into his wrists, forearms corded by heavy lifting now turned to a different purpose. Tracks had a flutter in his tanks remembering it. Raoul’s small hands had already been in his fantasies lately, but last night had given him fuel for future dreams. He’d expected warm, but for some reason it’d utterly escaped him how the softness of skin would feel rubbing, attempting to pinch and twist, failing so many times but when Raoul got it right, oh, yes.

From the way his human more-than-friend was frowning, however, it might take all of Tracks’ persuasive skills to make next time more than a lustful wish. It wouldn’t help his case if he laughed. No laughing.

*Thanks for Shibara for translation.

[* * * * *]

"Prompt: Jazz actually being uncool”

[* * * * *]

He thought he’d done the right thing. It was freakish, right? Totally uncool. Against the laws of nature, be that nature of man or metal.
So he’d intervened, done his officer thing, made a judgment call, and laid down the law. Humans were neat, don’t get him wrong, but they weren’t from Cybertron. Open practice of xenophilia was pushing the adaptation protocol too far. He passed the word for mechs to chill that slag back to cold metal before anything heated out of shape. Somebody would get burned if it went too far.

Humans didn’t even have sparks. Seriously, that just curdled his tanks. It wasn’t his thing to the point where he couldn’t even picture it being somebody else’s without wanting to shiver and rinse his filters.

Years later, he looked at the request form on his desk. Time had passed. Things had happened. People had changed. The facts hadn’t, but his perception of them? Maybe. Jazz looked at the request form and pondered the right thing. The right thing would be to support the no-contact rule he’d put into place years ago. Consistency was part of military life.

Tracks wasn’t allowed to see or contact the human, not since…well. And he wouldn’t, technically. Never again. It was a funeral, closed-casket.

Jazz hesitated over the request form, thinking about it. In the end, he marked it denied, and hurt for how wrong the right thing could be.

[* * * * *]
Deadlock snaps; Skids is sorry; Whirl prays, gives advice, and gets a date; the Lost Light celebrates an old festival; Rung helps; Bob isn’t what other people think; Megatron shows restraint.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 34
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW, G1
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Various Tumblr things.

[* * * * *]
"welding"
[* * * * *]

Long after Drift became Deadlock, he remembered the medic. Of all the things the corrupt government of the Senate had done to him -- the abuse from police and the pain of starvation, the grief and rage of losing people he called friends -- it was the medic who made the Autobots a personal offense to him. Deadlock was already a fearsome fighter in the rebel movement, but the day he recognized Ratchet among the Autobots was when the switch was thrown. Deadlock fell beyond loyalty, surpassed fighting, and skidded out to the fringes where he saw every single Autobot as a moving target. He became the Decepticons’ most notorious killer because of the compassion of a medic operating a charity clinic down in the Dead End.

Megatron had put the need for revolution into words. Megatron’s speeches finally put into words the injustices Drift had suffered but had been unable to see for what they were. In the Dead End, people lived or died without thinking there was something fundamentally wrong with how they just accepted their treatment. ‘The way things are’ wasn’t an adequate excuse. Megatron taught them, taught Drift, to recognize the privileged few as abusers. Megatron turned the logic games on their heads, showing his followers the sense of entitlement. Nobody inherently deserved to be treated better or worse. The system was so rigged it had to be destroyed. Their oppressors had to be overthrown.

Drift became Deadlock as a Decepticon, and as a Decepticon, he could sneer at his oppressors, but then there was Ratchet. It was the contrast. The contrast made the betrayal more painful. It twisted the knife into his spark. He’d understood how the Prime and his Autobots had to be brought down, but seeing Ratchet as one of them snapped his mind.

Ratchet had welded him. Hundreds of medics had worked on him since, welding him after thousands of skirmishes and battles, but it was Ratchet he thought of. Ratchet hadn’t hurt him. He remembered that, and it fragged with his mind. It physically hurt trying to reconcile the cold cruelty of the Senate’s corruption with the gentle hands that had repaired him. How could someone so kind belong to that system? Support it?
Drift used to think of Ratchet as pure and good. The medic’s hands had put him back together. He remembered the smoky smell of welding, the freshness of an open flame paired with the tarry black bitterness of old, grubby, rusted metal melting. The impurities burnt away in the blue flame of the welder. He’d watched it purify him. The filth of his natural metal heated to orange, then white, and Ratchet had bent close as he worked. The metal had bubbled, pure white, and the welding torch’s blue-white flame had sheeted off the dabs of added, built-up filler metal in spurts of orange. The weld pool had glowed red-hot as it cooled, the bubbles subsiding, or they’d suddenly burst, hissing and spitting. Ratchet had moved along Drift’s side, sparks spraying from the welding in stark, straight lines that spat frayed stars of light at the ends, and it had been beautiful. Painless and beautiful. Drift had been half delirious with withdrawal, but he remembered that. He’d loved the firework glitter of sprayed sparks. He’d been mesmerized by the liquid white of his own metal, melted to raw boiling that Ratchet guided along with a stick of filler, dabbing white onto melted white in the midst of the welding torch’s blue fire.

Ratchet had repaired him, and his kindness broke Deadlock. Realizing that Ratchet was one of the abusers, the users, the dead weight elitists…that hurt. He either was one or supported them. Deadlock had jointed the Decepticons believing that there could be black and white. Ratchet, however. Ratchet, his pure white idol of encouraging words and the scent of welding, turned out to be black with stains of gray.

Bad people were still capable of being nice to their victims. The niceness made it more difficult to accept the rest. It made their victims ready to turn a blind optic. Deadlock refused to be one of those victims. He wouldn’t make excuses. He wouldn’t cling to the image in his memories, bright and kind.

Some day, he vowed, he would confront the medic. He would point his gun at the Autobot symbol next to the medical insignia, and he would demand an answer. He would demand a resolution to the painful confusion, and Ratchet would show him. Ratchet would reveal himself as one of the Senate supporters who’d done so much to Drift. Deadlock would finally be able to see the abuse and the kindness as one person. He would shoot Ratchet like any other piece of Autobot scum, and feel no regret for pulling the trigger.

And after that, he would forget.

[* * * * *]

"A mournful song no one else was supposed to hear."

[* * * * *]

Skids sank back against the wall, hand over his face, and shook. How? How could he have neglected his friend for so long? Could he even call himself Swerve’s friend? He’d never offered the mech more than a pat on the shoulder in passing, a grin as he sailed past, a wave as he left the bar. He couldn’t even remember where Swerve lived. He’d never gone over. He’d been invited. Everybody had been invited, one after another but never more than once, desperation masquerading as a search, but nobody had ever accepted.

Nobody had been supposed to notice how much Swerve needed company. Nobody else ever asked for it like he did. Asking wasn’t necessary for anyone else. Anybody who needed support had friends to haul them out of their habsuites to the bar, or the oil reserve, or out onto the hull of the ship. Skids felt like a heel of the first degree for not sparing a thought for the one person who never left the bar and was always in company without an actual companion.
His thumb rubbed over the empty spot where he used to show his faith. Skids dropped his hand and looked up at the ceiling, feeling the empty spot like it had hollowed him out. Whatever faith he’d once had, he felt unworthy of belief in a higher power. He hadn’t been the one to save Swerve. That had been luck, or guidance from an exasperated higher being tired of a pathetic excuse for a friend missing all the hints.

Swerve hadn’t meant anyone to find him. Skids felt guilt that it’d taken him so long to figure it out.

[* * * *]

"Someone who's normally not religious saying a prayer."

[* * * *]

Pincers were far more useful than mechs with hands assumed. Whirl knew that better than most. He’d had a whole war to learn what he couldn’t and couldn’t use his pincers for. Certain locks? Couldn’t do it. Shooting guns? Frag yeah, he could. Picking up shotglasses at the bar? Woo! Surgery on a companion? Not so much.

Especially when the poor slob had his spark ripped out. Eaten, too. Nobody could do much for that.

Whirl looked down at the ruin that had been his roommate. Everyone else had taken off, chasing after what had to have been a spark-eater, and he’d have blown the scrapheap to smithereens if Trailbreaker hadn’t stopped him. Wasn’t much of a send-off for Animus, but he’d tried. Whirl had tried. Revenge was usually the best he could offer, but they’d stopped him from even that.

The others had up and left the body here on the floor, however, and Whirl squatted beside it clumsily, feeling as though he should do something. Take the body to the morgue, maybe? He hadn’t been part of a regular crew for so long he didn’t really know how normal people functioned around death. What was he supposed to do with a dead body?

He might as well take it to the medibay. He knew where that was, at least. Old Ratchet could figure out what to do with it from there.

Whirl slid his pincers under the body, vaguely proud that they could do this. It felt normal. It felt okay. He could do this, even if he couldn’t kill the spark-eater.

Animus felt curiously light in his arms. He peered down at the hole where the mech’s spark had been as he walked. Funny how one missing part could change someone.

“Primus spare your spark, buddy,” he said.

[* * * *]

“Spark sex with great swords”

[* * * *]

It wasn’t every day Whirl had a stalker. Haters, of course, he got a new one daily, it seemed. Haters by the handful. When he was feeling particularly self-delusional, he insisted he had admirers as well. Rung usually gave him a tolerate smile and complimented him on his confidence, those days, and Whirl kind of missed Rewind. Recording his un-vincible self had been a fun ego-booster.

Having Ratchet stalk him around the ship was more unnerving than ego-boosting. Whirl was really, truly not used to having the CMO eyeing him from across the medibay with anything other than an
open glare. The speculative look got under his plating like nothing else. While he was generally kicked out of the medibay the second he was functional, this time Whirl took it upon himself to skedaddle the moment the good doctor turned his back. He didn’t like the weird looks. Last time someone stared at him like that, Chromedome had hugged him.

Come to think of it, Ratchet had given him a watered-down version of that look that time, too. Huh. All the more reason to play Dodge The Medic. Whirl could handle potshots and catcalls. He didn’t know what to do with genuine gratitude and physical displays of affection.

Which was, although he didn’t realize it, the reason Ratchet had been reduced to stalking. Cornering the wild Whirl for an actual conversation was far more difficult than yelling at him for being a moron. A mech couldn’t just walk up and expect to be taken seriously. Whirl was a caustic nutjob on a good day. Attempting to set up a real discussion with him took…effort.

Ratchet eventually settled for sending enough free drinks over to float Riptide. Whirl sucked down so much engex he couldn’t run away when Ratchet slid into the opposite chair. His rotors buzzed, scooting his chair back a bit, but the mech himself couldn’t have found the exit to save his life. It wasn’t Ratchet’s greatest solution, but it’d have to do.


The medic’s left optic twitched, but he elected to ignore that comment despite an immediate sick curiosity about what was Whirl’s type. Instead of asking, he leaned on the table and came right to the point. “How did you know Cyclonus could save Tailgate that way?” He and Swerve had been at their wit’s end trying to devise a cure, and Whirl had come up with a solution no one else had even dreamed of. It had been driving Ratchet quietly mad ever since it happened.

Whirl blinked at him. “Buh?”

“The sword! How did you know Cyclonus could do an instantaneous spark transfusion to Tailgate via the sword? Did one of the Circle of Light tell you it was possible? Is it a common practice among them?” He hadn’t thought of Whirl as a particularly good people-person, but apparently Whirl had passed on something he’d learned from Dai Atlas onto Cyclonus, and Ratchet needed to know what else that sword could do. “Is stabbing the best method, or could he have caused more damage than he cured? Tell me, mech!”

Whirl stared at him a moment longer. “Uhhhh. I didn’t…but doc, I didn’t tell him to stab the shortstop.”

It was Ratchet’s turn to blink. “You didn’t?”

“No? I said, er, I said something about the sword and whatnot, but I said he should, y’know.” He made an awkward gesture with both pincers. “With it. And Tailgate. Would have done the job, I think. Right?”

It took Ratchet a second to interpret the crude gesture. His mouth drooped slowly open.

Whirl shook his head and grabbed one of the drinks on the table. It took him two tries. “That Cyc guy’s just big on drama.”

[* * * * *]

"It's a date"
As with a lot of things Whirl did with intentions, those intentions tended to be interpreted as bad. The problem, of course, was that while he’d intended to make Getaway a laughingstock and possibly humiliate the escape artist in front of Skids, he hadn’t intended it badly. Directly. He didn’t hold any ill-will toward Getaway, anyway. The prank wasn’t any more or less malicious than Whirl’s usual barroom grandstanding.

The prank wasn’t the point, in any case. The point was that giggling about his intentions within hearing distance of Cyclonus alerted the dour mech to his plan, and that plan, quite intentionally but not in a bad way, was to use Tailgate as bait. Cyclonus being Cyclonus, he gravitated over to glower at Whirl with a look that held dire doubts as to the rotary’s intentions. Even with whatever wall Getaway was constructing between Tailgate and Cyclonus, there was obviously some feeling of responsibility and/or attachment there.

“You will not.”


Red optics narrowed dangerously. “Do not involve Tailgate.”

“Well, I need somebody to hold the bucket,” Whirl whined.

Cyclonus hesitated, just barely. Ha!

“…I will accompany you to make certain this does not get out of hand.”

Heeeheheheheheh. “So you’re going to hold the bucket? Awesome.”

If Cyclonus narrowed his optics any further, he’d be better off just closing them. “You don’t require Tailgate.”

“Nope. Just somebody to hold the bucket, but I picked Tailgate ‘cause,” Whirl shrugged, deliberately and offensively casual, “they’re so cozy they’re a package deal these days. I mean, used to be if you were involved he’d be toddling after, but not so much anymore, huh?”

Red optics widened slightly. Oh, had that hit home? It had.

Cyclonus turned and strode away, fists clenched at his sides as Whirl cackled at his turned back. “See ya there!” the rotary called after him. He knew he would be. He might not have bad intentions toward Getaway personally, but he knew them when he saw them. Cyclonus was itching for a chance to take Getaway down a peg or two. Whirl was simply providing a convenient opportunity -- and a scape goat for Getaway’s anger afterward. Reckless, out-of-control Whirl made a great target. It wasn’t a role he minded.

Not with the intentions he really held.

He admired the back turned to him as it walked away. Perfect. Phase One of the plan had finished without a hitch.

Frag, the things he had to do to set up a decent date around here.
Figured that the only time Rodimus turned traditional was when it came to the more ribald festivals. Then again, Ratchet really wasn’t one to talk. The Festival of Creativity had long been a favorite of medics, and he’d…missed this. He wouldn’t admit it, but he had. It was undignified. It was unfettered hedonism. It was everything he, as an officer and old-timer, should loath. He should be speaking up against this senseless worship of creativity, making, healing, and life.

He really should, but he wasn’t. They’d been fighting to the death too long for him not to grab this chance by the sides of the helm and drag it in close. Ratchet shut off his optics, cocking his head to the side as he kissed the living spark out of whomever had reached the head of the line after Rodimus. Warm, eager lips met his own. A heady burst of engex met his seeking tongue, and Ratchet chuckled into the kiss as he drew back. He’d needed that pick-me-up.

“Thanks,” he said roughly, and Drift grinned at him before bouncing to the back of the next line.

The officers had evidently come as a group. Ultra Magnus knelt before Ratchet could do more than give him a sharp look, but the Duly Appointed Enforcer of the Tyrest Accord captured one of his hands when the medic reached for those tempting antenna. “Drink,” he ordered Ratchet, pressing a vial into the captive hand. “Gifts must be accepted,” he added when Ratchet persisted in attempting to pull him down into reach for a kiss. “It is an integral part of -- “

“Yeah, yeah, I know the rules.” Ratchet snapped the top of the vial. Slugging it back, he paused with it pooled in his mouth, optics half-offline as the lenses dilated. The energon sat on his tongue. It could stay there until he remembered how to swallow.

The energon itself was nothing inordinately special, although a higher grade than standard rations. What had Ratchet frozen in bliss was the gentle exploration of his other hand by Magnus. It seemed that Ultra Magnus chose to honor one of the lesser forms of the Guiding Hand by worshiping Ratchet’s hand. Most of the crew had swarmed in for kisses, groping, the occasional treat or moment stolen to polish him to a fine gloss scattered throughout events, but Ultra Magnus held Ratchet’s palm to his mouth as if nothing else mattered. There was nothing overtly erotic about what he did, but Ratchet’s throat worked without functioning despite that.

Warm breath curled over sensitive pads. Ultra Magnus shifted just slightly, and his lips whispered across Ratchet’s palm. The medic shivered. A nose nudged his thumb, moving it with the drag of air as the mouth on his hand opened. The barest pressure of air puffed out. His plating immediately cooled on the inhale, air rushing in from the sides to be gently blown back into the center of his palm. The sensors under his plating spangled electricity, hot and cold shooting in a minor lightning storm through his wires. Trembling chills ran down his circuitry. Large fingers wrapped around his wrist held him still, but a muted gurgle testified to what it felt like to have a slow lick send his keyed-up nerves haywire.

Ultra Magnus lit his optics, sparing a molecule of concentration from properly worshiping this form of Primus’ blessing upon Cybertron. Ratchet represented Adaptus’ understanding of their bodies, Solomus’ wisdom of age and experience, and the life that Primus gave His children. These hands should be celebrated. They were, in fact, one of Rodimus’ most compelling arguments for honoring the festival today.

Brainstorm, honored for his creativity, was in the center of his element getting one and all to test even his craziest inventions, sans supervision. It’d been all he’d wanted, today. Ultra Magnus turned his
optics away. Best he not look too closely, there.

Perceptor currently had Drift in his lap, fingertips lightly tracing the ex-Decepticon’s helm finials as he accepted a lingering kiss in honor of his intelligence. That was Rodimus’ statement for what the scientist and sniper was being honored for. Ultra Magnus made a mental note to follow his fellow officer’s example later.

Hoist had vanished under a pile of enthusiastic mechs, laughing in disbelief as they bickered over where the line started. His shock at being recognized as a medic worthy of honor was a grave statement of how far the Autobots had fallen from consideration of their most precious creators.

There were others, scattered through the room. Back in the corner, Ultra Magnus saw a flash of golden yellow. He almost turned his gaze away. He understood why Rodimus had insisted on picking out all creators, but Sunstreaker had a history. Although perhaps that was the purpose of the festival. After so much death, destruction, and betrayal, maybe the point of a celebration of life-affirming work was to remind soldiers that they could be something else.

Ultra Magnus squinted, suspicious. Sunstreaker wasn’t isolated in that far corner. A slim orange mech cupped his face in a tender hold, serious gaze steady on the hesitant, disturbed expression in the former artist’s optics. As Ultra Magnus watched, Rung leaned forward slowly, giving Sunstreaker time to bolt if he so chose. For a moment, it looked as though he would. At the last second, blue optics screwed shut, and Sunstreaker lunged forward to meet Rung with a violent fierceness even Ultra Magnus could tell covered fear.

Rung accepted the biting kiss and gentled it, mouth moving against the warrior’s. By the time they parted, it was with a meltingly sweet smile from the psychotherapist and a dumbfounded blink as Sunstreaker’s optics came back online.

There was one creator Rodimus’ announcement had missed, Ultra Magnus noted. Strange how no one seemed to remember Rung.

Ratchet moaned in front of him, and the Duly Appointed Enforcer returned to what he was doing, dismissing the matter from his mind. To complete a task was to focus entirely on the work at hand. In his hands. On Ratchet’s hand.

Taking his cue from Rung, Ultra Magnus pressed the medic’s hand to his cheek, turning his face into it to nuzzle and breathe. Simple contact, but full and nonthreatening. Worshiping in its simple acknowledgement, full of gratitude for what this hand had done. Opening his mouth to lip at the base of Ratchet’s fingers inspired a full-body shudder, and Ratchet’s mouth snapped shut, the energon going down in a loud gulp. Ultra Magnus pushed his tongue to the metal of those fingers, not licking but just letting the wet, hot feel of it penetrate the sensor-laden expanse. Ratchet’s chevron dug into his chest as the medic’s head tipped forward. A throaty sound welcomed his efforts. He brushed his lips down to lay a chaste kiss on the inside of the medic’s wrist, then turned the hand in his hold over to start on the back.

It took time to properly acknowledge one of the festival guests. Ultra Magnus had no intention of rushing this.

[* * * * *]

"Rung - Forge"

[* * * * *]
Constructed cold or taken from a hot spot, every mech made their own personality. They built their hopes, dreams, thoughts, and beliefs, and life molded them into successes or failures, ever molten as one changed to the other. Back and forth, reformed or cast aside, abandoned or discovered, they made themselves.

The universe was an open fire, burning out of their control. As much as any mech could manage it, in a moment it could destroy all their work.

He brought them to the forge. He couldn’t force anyone there. He couldn’t make the universe stand still for anyone, or manipulate life into something calmer, easier to understand, simpler to navigate. What he could do was shine a light on what they had made, and he could help them change themselves. He brought them to the forge, guided them in how they could hammer out a knot here, sever a tie these, fold a scar until a weakness became strength.

The Functionalists never figured out what he was. Rung knew what he could do, and it had everything to do with what he’d made of himself in the fire.

[* * * * *]

"Bob - Disdain"

[* * * * *]

They had the wrong idea. Bob hadn’t started out the way he was today. Nobody understood that, looking at the wriggling bug eager for their attention. Bob bounced around the Lost Light on the end of a leash, straining to run faster, jumping up on people he thought had treats, and wagging his aft at even Ultra Magnus.

Bob hadn’t been a stray Sunstreaker took in out of pity. Bob had been a wild creature. Bob had been one of the Swarm, for Pit’s sake. Separated out, yes. Isolated by Metroplex’s arrival, and running terrified from a threat he couldn’t understand, but Bob hadn’t been some kind of cyberpuppy burrowing into Sunstreaker’s arms.

Out in wildness of Cybertron, the Swarm had reigned supreme. They were the apex predator, and Sunstreaker, when Bob first saw him, had been a particularly large example of their preferred prey. Alone, Bob hadn’t stood a chance of taking him down. That didn’t mean he didn’t draw himself up and look down upon the Autobot like he just didn’t want to chase the mech right now. Sunstreaker had never had anyone -- Autobot or Decepticon, before or since -- look upon him in such total disdain.

Bob hadn’t been a stray Sunstreaker adopted. Bob was a feral who deigned to accompany Sunstreaker.

Sunstreaker never forgot that, as he wrestled his rambunctious bug through the halls. He lunged to cover Bob’s audios when Siren spoke. He put himself between the D.J.D. and his pet. He did it all without hesitation, knowing that the warm, cuddly Bob everyone else knew was a measure of how much this feral, savage beast trusted him. For that trust, Bob would be Bob.

Betray that trust, Sunstreaker knew, and the Swarm would break the leash in a sparkbeat.

[* * * * *]

"Megatron - Restraint"
He didn’t know what he expected. Something less visual, perhaps. There was something profoundly startling about so much of one color in one location, and it shook him to the core in a way he hadn’t anticipated.

He had stood in the smoking ruins of battles that devastated hemispheres watching piles of body shift as they burnt, yet this made more of an impression. He didn’t know why. Maybe it was harder to take in shredded bodies as individuals once he’d adjusted to the sight. The first one, two, dozen battlefields had been shocking. After that, his vision adjusted. He scanned the mounds of dead for signs of snipers or tactical value, pausing only if he recognized a face.

It was like scanning a list of casualties. After a certain point, the names stopped registering. They were just numbers.

That was what had made the Senate monsters. When individuals disappeared into a bureaucratic summary on a list, numbers shifted around to best advantage. The people doing the equations didn’t even see what they were doing as affecting actual living beings. They simply counted, and that was the monstrous part.

The flowers reminded him of what he’d become. There was nothing to tell them apart. There were no names, no markers, no faces, no lists. There was only an overwhelming blaze of blue, petals fluttering in tiny starbursts of residual spark energy glittering across the hills as a breeze moved them. Megatron stood on the hill, surrounded by the dead, and the compartmentalizing, dismissing, strategic tricks his mind had learned over millions of years of war were useless here. He knew how to cope with confronting the living and the dead. This was a memorial. It was almost an art installation, open to interpretation, silently visual, and he hadn’t been prepared for it.

It demanded respect how numbers didn’t. He walked softly, placing his feet with care to avoid crushing the flowers. He’d taken less care in morgues.

Even so, the petals brushed against his ankles. Spark signatures flickered at his archives. The lists of names tried to cross-reference. I.D.s pushed into the forefront of his mind. Impatient, he ignored them. It wasn’t that they didn’t matter, but the red insignia on his chest said all he had to say about shouldering responsibility. Guilt had a conflicted relationship with him. It would take more than facing the dead to drown him.

He kept his sensors open to the flowers, however. There were names he looked for.

Near the base of his statue, close observers might have seen him flinch, one hand rising to flatten over the Autobot insignia on his chest. Well. That answered one question, at least. Frowning, he looked down at the flower. He didn’t shy away from taking responsibility for anyone’s death, but the spark signature in the flower did make him wonder what criteria determined it. Although his immediate reaction was to deny it by arguing technicalities, and what that said about him disturbed him slightly. His fingers dug in around the red face.

Megatron narrowed his optics and moved on.

The Necrobot found him some time later. “Please don’t pick the flowers. They belong where they are.” Neutral observer or not, there was a weary wariness in his optics. He probably feared the ex-leader of the Decepticons was plotting to seize the potential of the residual spark energy abundantly present on his planet.

It would be a massive resource, but Megatron had no intention of making that fear a reality. He kept
his hand cupped around the single flower he’d finally found but didn’t pluck it as he looked up at the Necrobot. Even without the updates from the *Lost Light’s* comm. frequency down here on the planet, Megatron would know who this mech was. Considering how he’d lost track of time searching among the flowers, he thought himself lucky none of the crew had found him first. Ravage would muddle his trail for a while, but Rodimus was persistent. Annoying as well, and lacking any sense of tact when it came to respecting privacy.

This mech was impartial enough the flare of defensive embarrassment in Megatron’s spark ebbed away to nothing. If it was true that the Necrobot worked out who was responsible for each Cybertronian’s death, then Megatron had no reason to hide like this was a secret. It wasn’t.

It was an old, old pain.

Out of respect for the memorial, he asked instead of demanded. “Please,” Megatron said simply. The fragile petals in his hand predated the war and held a spark signature he had missed longer than that. It warmed the palm of his hand and crucified him with a guilt he’d mistakenly thought he’d come to terms with.

The Necrobot stared him down, level as a judge. “Leave it be.”

Anger twinged in his spark. Shame unfurled cool blue shadows across it. “Please,” he asked again.

“It is where it belongs,” the Necrobot repeated, and under his steady neutrality, there might have been something called compassion. Megatron refused to call it pity. He was Megatron, former leader of the Decepticons, murderer of most of his own kind. He knelt among a sea of his victims. No one could pity him.

He wanted to ask if the Necrobot was absolutely certain. He wanted to find the list Rewind had found Dominus Ambus on, look down every name until there was no doubt, but that would be splitting technicalities. Nobody had ever found the body, but Megatron had long known who held responsibility for the cut rations, the threats, the disappearance. Denying his guilt on the final blow wouldn’t spare him it. If he told himself he accepted responsibility for a sea of blue flowers but balked over just one, then it only cast his indifference to sheer numbers into stark, merciless light.

Let it. He gazed down at the flower sheltered in his hand. A war’s worth of the dead surrounded him, spark signatures spilling over the hills and pooling in the valleys, and he’d trade them all for what he held. For one more day in the mines of Messatine, he’d have fought the war to the last soldier.

The Necrobot waited. Megatron ran his thumb over the flower, an apology he’d said aloud many times, but it changed nothing. The flower still stood at the base of his statue. His hand tightened.

But he let go.

“Are you ready to return to your friends?” the Necrobot asked, impassive.

Megatron rose to his feet slowly, optics on the flower. “They’re not my friends. But yes,” he turned to leave, “I’m ready to leave.”

For the second time in his life, Megatron left Terminus behind.

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Pt. 35

Pt. 35: Prowl isn’t sure what he feels; Ratchet takes care; Jazz teaches the Dinobots manners; Bumblebee picks up the pieces; the Combaticons honor the dead; Shattered Glass MTMTE gets religious in an extreme way.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 35
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW, G1, Shattered Glass
Characters: Prowl, Ratchet, Grimlock, Jazz, Wheeljack, Bumblebee, Combaticons, Deadlock/Drift, Wing, Ratchet, Pharma, Ambulon.
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Various Tumblr things.

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"Prowl - Judgment"

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He rolled his head back, optics offline. He couldn’t see anything behind the full mask clamped over his face, anyway. It clanked as he worked his jaw from side to side. The plug lodged in his mouth nestled against the back of his intake, compressing his vocalizer. He couldn’t recoil from it to relieve the blunt pressure, only push with his tongue to ease some of the discomfort caused by it. It sat directly on the main speaker. While that didn’t mute him, exactly, it did muffle his voice considerably. Trying to speak made a dull ache grow in his throat, and with the plug stretching his lips wide, he couldn’t articulate what little sound he managed to force out.

The mask kept him from seeing or speaking, but the rest of the restraints kept him mostly immobile. Whatever pinned his doors back was flat on the inside, compressing them together instead of hooked on them some way. The restraints were featureless, giving him nothing to strain against but solid pressure and no catches holding onto his door to somehow slip free of. They were as impossible to escape as the cuffs capping his forearms. They encapsulated his arms from the elbows down, forcing his hands into small, smooth bubbles barely large enough to hold them if they were in tight fists. There was no texture to focus on. There was no give. The forearm cuffs were sealed together behind his back at an angle that kept his shoulders on the edge of pain. His doors were then pushed up by how the cuffs lodged underneath them, straining the hinges. The combination gave him no room to struggle, even if he could deduce where to start.

There were no weak points. The restraints simply held him in place at the limits of joint extension where he had no room left to struggle. Held by his own weight, he couldn't shift forward or back on his feet without losing his balance and tumbling in an uncontrolled, painful fall that got him nowhere. His only option was to stand motionless, ankles braced at the ends of the spreader bar forced between them, and wait.

It was almost peaceful, except for the occasional frisson of apprehension and anticipation. He steadied his ventilation system against showing it.
After a timeless period he couldn’t measure, something touched his bumper. With most of his sensor suite disabled or blocked, his analysis processor grasped at straws. His HUD threw out a tentative information set that told him not much of anything:

Room temperature.
Larger than a hand.
Softer than metal.
Firmer than known atmospheric elements in the immediate area.

At least he knew it wasn’t a figment of his imagination or a chance breeze. It existed, whatever it was, and it was running into his front grill. Were it warmer, he’d conclude it was groping. Cooler, and he’d think it was liquid. The way it touched him was just random enough that he couldn’t tell if it was sentient. However, that might be a ploy. It would certainly be how he’d throw someone off in this situation.

The lack of certainty made him quiver. He didn’t know when, he didn’t know how, he didn’t know what. Hostile or benign, conscious or at random, he was at the mercy of his captor. Nothing he could do would change his fate. There was no more information to be drawn from his circumstances, and even if he deduced one fact, he could do nothing with it. All the data analysis, strategic planning, and advanced tactics programmed into his mind couldn’t help him, here.

A click brought a single communication line up. "Is this enough?" he was asked.

His teeth bit into the gag, and he gurgled an answer: Almost. Almost.

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"Ratchet - Visible"

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There wasn’t much of Prowl visible to judge his condition by. Between the mask over his face and the restraints pushing his doors together behind his back, Prowl’s body language had been gagged as effectively as his mouth. Not even his hands were visible, covered by the smooth ends of the full forearm restraints Ratchet had put on him.

Ratchet leaned his elbows on the desk and frowned at the live broadcast on his console screen. The steady whirr of fans gave him nothing to work by, but Prowl’s control only extended so far. The mech’s body wanted to respond. Ratchet had locked it down until involuntary motions were the only give-aways. He had to watch closely to catch those before Prowl caught the telltale signs. Judging Prowl’s condition took experience. He studied the width of vent slats, how they shivered as they opened wider and were immediately closed.

Prowl rolled his head back. That rocked him as much as the spreader bar locking his ankles apart allowed. Any further attempts at moving would result in an undignified topple to the floor. It was an experience Ratchet knew Prowl didn’t enjoy, especially since leaving him there in an uncomfortable sprawl made such a good punishment for the misbehavior. Why scold when the consequences taught Prowl a lesson?

The small shifting was a decent sign. Prowl was prepped.

A remote manipulator arm unfolded from the wall. Ratchet guided it down Prowl’s front, watching
the reaction closely. The first touch earned a twitch before Prowl stiffened, mind spinning a thousand conjectures on who or what was fondling his grill. Ratchet had stripped away most of his senses. He’d limited the input, and that limited processing. Ratchet’s frown deepened. They were searching, he and Prowl, looking for a strange balance between helplessness and surrender. Too much of one, and Prowl panicked. Too much of the other, and Prowl became restless and bored.

Ratchet opened a comm line as the tiniest quiver racked the Prowl’s bound form. "Is this enough?" he asked in monotone voice.

A gurgle answered him.

Hmm. Prowl needed something else, something more. Ratchet drummed his fingers on the desk as he picked through his options. There were certain things Prowl responded to, positive and negative, but he wanted to keep everything physical locked down for this session. Prowl’s mind focused on analyzing facts at the expense of the mech himself reacting to them, more often than not. Ratchet needed to set a fire under Prowl, not Prowl’s processors.

His frown twisted into something wicked. “For the record, this call is being recorded for quality control.”

Another, more urgent gurgle. Prowl’s head made a small motion, turning as if he’d frantically opened his optics behind the mask to search for observers. The manipulator arm withdrew, only to return and tickle a barely-there touch on one knee joint. Prowl squeaked, head jerking around the other direction.

Ratchet’s smile grew. “The video’s being recorded for my supervisor’s viewing pleasure.”

With so much of him covered, it was hard to see Prowl overload. Good thing Ratchet was watching so closely.

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"Grimlock - Guest"

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When the leader of the Dinobots invited you over for anything, you went. It didn't matter if it was for a sleepover, to look at etchings, or tea and crumpets. You went.

Jazz perched on one of the rickety chairs clearly hauled from the storage closet the rest of the Ark used as a dump, and he wished for tea and crumpets. "Yeah, so, uh...I like the decor."

Most of the Dinobots studied him like a strange artifact from another world. They didn't respond. Grimlock cocked his head to the side. Jazz both hated and admired that. He wished he could master the art of looking like he was about to take a bite out of someone just by a small motion of the head. It'd help to have a mouthful of really sharp teeth, but Grimlock didn't even need to be altmode to make Jazz nervous.

"You Jazz mocking Dinobots?" Grimlock rumbled.

Danger! Danger! "No! A'course not, Grimsy!" He laughed big and loud, projecting good humor as hard as he could. "You fixed it up good!" It hardly even looked about to collapse anymore. Why anyone had thought it was a good idea to give Wheeljack dynamite, he’d never know.

The predatory light in Grimlock's visor died. "Hmmph. Good."
Jazz rest his vocalizer and rocked on the chair. It had one short leg. Clonk clonk clonk. "Right! So, ah, what's up? Whatcha need from little ol' me?"

Suddenly, all the Dinobots were giving him that look. The one with extra teeth. "Him Mirage say you Jazz master of 'chang-a-ble et-ti-quette,'" Grimlock pronounced with extra care, and Jazz's tanks sank down to the floor. "Us Dinobots talk with him Mirage and him Ratchet. Us Dinobots decide us Dinobots need lessons. You Jazz teach us Dinobots."

Jazz stared. Oh, what he wouldn't give for tea and crumpets.

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"Jazz - Visible"

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“I get why Ratch’ sent them to Mirage,” Jazz said out of the side of his mouth. “Manners. Etiquette. Makes perfect sense, y’know? He’d be my first choice. Grimlock says he wants them Dinobots t’ learn it, Ratch’ sends ‘em to Mirage, and I can see it.”

Wheeljack made a noncommittal sound as he pried up a lid. He was more concerned with stirring the paint inside than listening to Jazz grumble.

“What I stall out on is Mirage passin’ it on to me. I’m no expert!”

“Neither is Mirage,” Wheeljack said mildly. This can was good. Shiny black was a go. He looked up into the shelves lining his workshop, searching for a nice matte white.

“Yeah, I get that. Nobody here’s an expert in French court etiquette.” Jazz viciously organized his notes. Wheeljack blinked at the blur of pictures as slides shifted and slid into a different order. “But why me, mech?”

Wheeljack didn’t know, but he had a theory. “He’s an expert on Iaconian Towers etiquette, but that’s not anything to do with what Grimlock asked him to teach. When it comes down to it, who is a better infiltration expert: you or Mirage? I mean in terms of adapting to the point of being a visible agent, not by literally being invisible,” he clarified.

Jazz shot him a look. From the pinched look of his visor, he already knew where this was going and didn’t like it one bit.

“You,” Wheeljack answered his own question. “You’re more capable of becoming what people expect to see. You learn foreign mannerisms faster and apply them to blend in. You can mimic a different culture’s social mores perfectly. You do your research.” He nodded at the tablet Jazz had his notes on. “Mirage referred the Dinobots to you because you’re better at changeable etiquette. I’m sure he could teach them Towers etiquette, but that’s not what they want to learn.”

Jazz’s visor narrowed, and he gave Wheeljack a peeved look. Logic had defeated him once again. “Still got no idea why they wanna learn -- “

“Does it matter?” Oops. A bit of defensive creator might have shown through, there. Jazz cleared his filters and busily sorted notes. Wheeljack harrumphed, going back to opening paint cans. “They want to learn. Personally, I think it’s nice that they’re curious about the humans.”

“Yeah,” Jazz agreed, if only not to start an argument. But Wheeljack did have a point. Even if he didn’t: defensive creator. A mech crossed Wheeljack at his own risk.
When the leader of the Dinobots asked you to teach a course on old French court etiquette, you better have a good reason why you won’t teach it. Grimlock wasn’t the one who’d wield guilt like a baseball bat against your head. The Autobots owed the Dinobots too much for Wheeljack to let it slide.

So Jazz plastered a smile on as the Dinobots tromped into Wheeljack’s workshop. “Okay! So, uh, we left off at formal makeup last time. Ya’ll wash your faces? Masks. Whatever.” Dinobots nodded eagerly. “Yeah. Right, so, I’m gonna need my volunteer ladies over here, and my volunteer lords over there, and Wheeljack, you got th’ stencils for beauty marks? Great.” Jazz covered a resigned sigh, opening up the first slide. “Just great.”

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"Bumblebee - Worth"

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He had fought in a war millions of years in the making, millions of years in the fighting, millions of years in the waiting. He had been there, done that. He had lasted through it.

None of it was worth anything held beside a handful of minutes in the company of an alien species, on a world far from home, doing nothing but living. Talking, driving, even just sitting on his wheels with the Witwickys nearby, listening to them, watching them.

When the war took them away, they weren’t that much against the millions of years before and after. Humans lasted such little time, like flashes of lightning in a storm. They were fragile fragments of life tossed in amidst the fighting, torn to pieces and thrown away.

Bumblebee treasured those pieces more for being broken.

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"the Crypt"

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“I’m not saying that we shouldn’t be doing this. I’m saying it’s odd that we have to be the ones doing it.” Blast Off compared the schematic in his hand to the one inside the foot of the statue he’d just opened up. As he’d suspected, somebody had cannibalized the fuel and fuel lines, leaving a series of missing parts he scribbled down on the list for repairs. “This level of vandalism is sacrilegious. I’d be shocked if it were worth the effort.”

“It’s never worth the effort, with you. Need help?” Onslaught shouted toward the back of the Crypt.

“I’ve got this!” Holding a beacon of holy light aloft in one hand, Vortex hacked at the shadows with the flaming sword held in his other hand. Amazing how replicas of the Star Saber could be fabricated on demand when one told the Constructicons what it was for. Even more amazing that Soundwave had coughed up the relics of an ancient AllSpark shrine. Vortex remembered that shrine. He handled the glowing AllSpark shard with all the reverence it deserved, switching hands when he had to punch the shadows in their slimy, gibbering, darkness-concealed faces.

“If you say so.” Onslaught shrugged. He dipped his brush back in the bucket and went back to scrubbing the floor. It wasn’t glorious work, but somebody had to do it. “I can believe this level of vandalism,” there was a war on, after all, and half the graffiti in the Crypt was blatant Autobot
propaganda, “but what I don’t understand is how they could have neglected it this long. It doesn’t take that much effort to send a cleaning detail down every century or so.”

Blast Off closed up the panel on the statue and moved on to the next. “Shockwave seemed surprised we remembered it was here.”

“He did, didn’t he? But someone has to be sending someone to top up the lamp reservoirs,” Onslaught mused. He wrung out a rag and tossed it to Blast Off to use wiping down the access panel.

“Half of them don’t have reservoirs left anymore,” Blast Off grumbled as he shielded his face with his free hand, using the other to swipe gingerly at the seams of the panel. Gearspiders hissed, skittering away from the solvent. A few jumped toward him, and he had to suppress his weapons systems. Full powered blasting of many-legged critters the size of his thumbpad was frowned upon.

Vortex cursed and chased something that flowed like smoke across the Crypt. “Begone to depths unseen, eldritch horror! I banish thee to the Pit to smelt in torment, reaching unto the light of the Matrix, blessed by Primus, where all my brethren dwell as one, joined in light!”

Blast Off and Onslaught didn’t even look up. It was an old, familiar battle cry. Not one that they’d heard lately, they had to admit, but there weren’t many priests on Earth. There was probably a temple in Shockwave’s Tower. They should visit later and invite the priest to bless the place in case Vortex’s blasphemy somehow nixed all their labor bringing the Crypt back into shape.

They did look up as Swindle trudged by dragging Brawl by one leg. The tank clawed at the ground. “I’m not dead yet!”

“You’ll be stone-cold dead in a minute.” Swindle braced his feet and heaved, scraping his larger teammate across the Crypt a fingerlength at a time.

Neither of his other teammates moved to help. “I have to wonder if Starscream even told Lord Megatron why we were assigned to Cybertron this month,” Onslaught said as he returned to scrubbing. “If we get in trouble for this later, I know who to blame.”

“Why would we get in trouble for doing this?”

“Not everybody honors the dead.”

Vortex roared challenge in the background. Brawl whined as Swindle tried to stuff him into a too-small coffin.

“Can’t imagine that, personally.”

Something cold ran up the backs of their necks. A second later, a flaming sword sliced it away. Onslaught shook it off and handed Blast Off a rag for the next statue. “Neither can I.”

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*Shattered Glass - "something with Drift and the potential religious implications of Optimus being Prime, or Rodimus having bonded with the Matrix"*

[*** ***]

The Decepticons rejected Deadlock for going to the lengths they wouldn’t.
He remembered that, when he was born again into Wing’s hands in Crystal City. The Decepticons had overthrown Functionalism. They denied it, insisting that a mech’s form didn’t dictate his function. Yet then they tried to put their own rules and regulations on the chaos left by the removal of the underlying structure of an entire planet, and they were too soft. Too changeable, always altering depending on who was in command or the planet they were expected to adapt to.

Deadlock took Turmoil at his word and became what he assumed he was supposed to be. This was war. He became Megatron’s weapon, a specialized killer feared by both sides of the battle. His name became known as a synonym to terror, and it was his purpose. That was he was supposed to do. He had a form without an assigned function, a past as a dead-end addict wandering the Dead End. Megatron gave him a Cause to fight for. Deadlock latched onto it. It became his entire world.

And the Decepticons rejected him for it.

Out of that rejection came Wing and Crystal City. He remembered the Decepticons’ rejection, and Crystal City’s reluctant acceptance of him. There were so many stipulations on his stay in the city. Wing oversaw the dictates of the city, gentle but uncompromising, and Deadlock had never been guided like that. The strict rules were everything he’d been craving, under the automatic hatred he felt toward the old ways. What had done the old ways of Cybertron ever done for him? The Primes had sat up there in pretty temples, fat and happy, indulged in every way while the poor starved down on the streets. Sweet ceremonies once a year dispensing blessings and energon treats to beggars hadn’t touched the real problems of Cybertron. Deadlock had come to Crystal City hating the Autobots, the Prime, and everything relating to Primus.

Wing reeducated him. Harshly, at times, but mostly with the brutal simplicity the believers of Crystal City were known for. Ascetics all, they lived and worked in a militant commune set up in a rigid hierarchy. It was based on their belief that Primus walked beside them from day to day. Dai Atlas was said to hear Primus’ voice in his prayers. Crystal City existed under a theocracy, one they believed to be a pure version of what Cybertron had once been, and they had no tolerance for Decepticon contempt for the supremacy of the Primes.

“The Senate corrupted the purity of the Primacy,” Wing told Deadlock during one of their many educational spars. Deadlock gritted his teeth and endured, pinned beneath the better hand-to-hand fighter. Instruction always followed defeat, in this strange version of imposed training. “Before the Senate interfered, Cybertron embraced the One True Form, not Functionalism. Your form doesn’t necessarily dictate function, but Primus reserves determination of form. It is his will that you are shaped how you are. That form is your own. Function is what can change, and it is determined by society, for the good of all.” Wing draped a warm, loving hug over him. “You are what you are, and I will never deny you that, Drift. What you must understand is that you can become anything, no matter your form.”

Anything, he meant, as assigned by a priest. Religious dispensation of grace would be what forgave him his sins of independent violence and slot him into a proper function within the city. Then and only then would he become as one with the others.

That was the purpose of religion in Crystal City. It gave purified social structure where the Senate’s politics had rotted Cybertron.

“Never saw a Prime down in the gutters,” Deadlock growled, baring his teeth in feral, hostile denial of Wing’s preaching.

Wing sighed regretfully right before knocking him down for further reeducation. “Have you ever seen one of use rejected for doing what we were told?” he asked after slamming his captive disciple’s face into the floor several times to ensure better listening skills. Deadlock twitched and muffled a
pained whine. “By submission, we are accepted. We must join together, taking our roles as given until all are one.”

‘Till all are one. It was a phrase he heard repeated again and again in Crystal City. Even after he left as Drift instead of Deadlock, it haunted him. It echoed in his thoughts. It gave him something to cling to when he joined the Autobots. One of the hardest things he’d ever done was crawl to the Prime’s feet as penitent and petitioner, desperate for a purpose the Decepticons had given and denied him. Optimus Prime granted him that purpose.

That was enough to make a studying, doubting student into a believer, but truly Primus smiled on him. One day, a speedster with the fire of a living god reflected in his paint job smiled at Drift, and belief burst into devotion as Rodimus said, “‘Till all are one.”

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"Shattered Glass - "Catholic indulgences"

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Ratchet fell against the medibay door. Pain pulled his face into an ugly grimace, but he held his tongue. His usual manic cheer had no place here, not now. He was no longer the favored Chief Medical Officer of Optimus Prime. The Matrix was gone, shattered, and Rodimus Prime led the pilgrimage to find the Knights of Cybertron. Optimus Prime had been of the old religion, the old Primacy. That made Ratchet one of the old guard, and if Rodimus’ assumption of the Primacy had taught this old medic anything, it was that the new leader was more likely to execute than respect those reluctant to follow his lead.

Ratchet knew his history. Primes had strong personalities. Their charisma turned Cybertron to Primus like iron filings to a magnet, but no religious leader could stay ruler of Cybertron without cultivating a cult of personality as a power base in politics. Optimus Prime had relied on strength of arms as much as personality. Rodimus, so far, drew on the resurgence of religious fanaticism following the end of the war.

Hence the *Lost Light* and this pilgrimage. Honestly, working aboard this vessel was like being aboard an enclosed monastery. Ratchet’s irreverence toward Primus stood out like a search beacon at midnight, and he no longer had Optimus Prime’s favor to protect him from the consequences.

Optimus was out there, somewhere. He had rejected Primus, and Rodimus Prime had declared him rejected in turn. Knowing his chances of survival in current politics, Ratchet had thrown his lot in with the new Prime. It was almost his duty. Ratchet had been the personal medic for the Primes his whole life. He had served Sentinel. He had endured Zeta. He had bowed to Optimus. Despite how his youthful religious fervor was disrupting the sober gravity of the Primacy, Rodimus Prime had enough grasp on ceremony to accept Ratchet’s fealty as one of the trappings of office.

But Rodimus Prime kept him close. Ratchet’s presence was a status symbol -- see, the old guard supported the new Prime -- and security. As long as Ratchet was kept close, he couldn’t sneak off to rejoin the disgraced former Prime. Ratchet knew and accepted that. It was good politics.

However, it left him under uncomfortable scrutiny from a Prime intent on rejecting every time-worn religious routine Cybertron had fallen into during the lives of the previous three Primes. Rodimus was young, energetic, reckless, and utterly ruthless. The mechs of the *Lost Light* practically worshiped at his feet, or at least followed his lead in fervent belief of Primus, the Primes, and a new age for Cybertron. Nobody intervened when the young Prime passed judgment on someone, not even if it was their CMO being judged.
Ratchet’s casual sacrilege was no longer overlooked, and it was proving a hard habit to break. He dimmed his optics and drew in a shuddering breath, waiting for the pain to pass. Ultra Magnus’ hand on the whip had been mockingly hard, striping his back in muted amusement that Ratchet was the one suffering out of favor while he, formerly the pariah under Optimus Prime, stood at the new Prime’s left hand. Ultra Magnus didn’t believe in Primus the way the rest of the ship did, but he hid his atheism under a stoic façade. Ratchet did believe, but he kept slipping.

It could have been worse.

“I spoke for you.”

Ratchet ignored Drift, instead turning to put his shoulder against the door while he typed the passcode.

The speedster looked at him in open misery. “I spoke for you to Rodimus.”

“Don’t let him hear you call him that,” Ratchet muttered without turning around. It was no secret Drift and Rodimus had a casual friendship, but it was dangerous to rely on the friendship of a Prime. Ratchet knew that full well.

“Ratchet…” Drift stepped forward to key the door open when the medic’s shaking hand missed the code for the third time. “I did speak for you. You didn’t have to take the penance. I bought you indulgence.” He gave Ratchet an earnest look. “I said the prayers.”

“Good for you.” He set his jaw and strode into the medibay on shaking legs.

Drift followed him. “Why didn’t you take the indulgence?”

“I wanted the penance.” Ratchet headed straight for the one medical berth without restraints.

“Why?”

“You know me. I’m not one for prayer.” He flexed his hands, trying to work some feeling into the numb joints. Treating his own lash marks was going to be a glitch and a half, he could tell. Rolling his wrists created loud crackling noises, and he flinched, tucking his chin in. His hands hurt worse than the whip had, and that was the point.

“But…”

“Leave it, Drift!” he barked, shooting a glare at the warrior monk. “You’re the one always preaching about finding ways to Primus. You ever stopped to think that this is mine?”

Drift stared at him in astonishment. It obviously hadn’t.

After a minute, his optics dropped to the medic’s worn hands. Ratchet made a conscious effort to stop rubbing them. When the staring grew too intense, he shift about to sit on the berth, back turned to the stupid, caring idiot who desperately wanted to save the medic who’d once saved him. Religious salvation wasn’t the same, not in Ratchet’s book, but he had to give the kid credit for trying. Drift still thought of him as the laughing prankster setting off his sirens in the hospital chapel. He didn’t realize that Ratchet hadn’t been an atheist since Zeta Prime.

Nobody survived the war as a medic and didn’t know Primus stood at his shoulder. Ratchet just had difficulty respecting his mental image of Primus to match Rodimus Prime’s particularly severe version of the god. Irreverence and a volatile new religious leader didn’t mix well.
Drift didn’t need to buy him indulgences. Ratchet had his own plans. He was old, older than he should have been, and the war was over. It was time he stood aside and let a new mech fill his position, but in time-honored tradition. Positions like Chief Medical Officer weren’t ordained like generals or priests. Medics were elevated. And when they fell, it was as saints and martyrs, kneeling before their Primes to die, instantly accepted into the Matrix to live their rewards eternal. Fading away softly, indulged into rust and forgotten memory? Ratchet wouldn’t accept that fate. It was a tempting, painless death, and he didn’t want it.

Thinking about it reminded him of something he’d been meaning to do.

“Speak with the Prime,” he said suddenly, and Drift jolted behind him. “I’ve received some strange messages from Messatine.”

“The Delphi Medical Convent?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s there?”

Ratchet flexed his hands and didn’t answer.

[* * * * *]

Shattered Glass - “Ecstasy of Martyrdom”

[* * * * *]

Pharma’s smile was beatific. He didn’t even feel the agony of the sword passing through his wrists. Beyond serenity, he met Ratchet’s rust-clouded optics with a look of utter ecstasy. Ratchet met it with horror, but it wasn’t his salvation Pharma fell for. Oh, he’d tried, but Ratchet had disappointed him in the end. A shame, but not a total loss. The surgeon fell into the clouds below with his face twisted into a blissful smile, and he left his hands behind as testimony of true belief.

The Delphi Medical Convent had always followed the tenants of suffering. Through pain, they were purified. Through suffering, they found their true selves. Through endurance, they were cleansed. Through sacrifice, they were saved.

Pharma, Surgeon Superior of the convent, holiest medic of the covenant, died a martyr for his beliefs. Pharma had sent the followers of his fanatic cult to the Matrix as one, pared down to their most basic selves by his Red Rust. First Aid’s faith had wavered in the end, but Pharma had welcomed the test of faith. He’d seen the light. He’d recognized the path laid before him by Primus. To him fell the task of goading Ratchet into the final sacrifice, that of surrendering even friends and loved ones to Primus’ care.

“Ratchet, please,” he’d commanded, almost coaxed, as he hung from where he’d flung himself. Hanging by his hands over the clouds, he’d never felt so alive, so at peace, so at one with the universe, as if by losing everything he’d found where he belonged. “You can’t leave me hanging here forever.” Take the shot, he hadn’t said. Sacrifice even this worldly attachment in humble submission to their god. The bonds of friendship had to be given up in perfect surrender and all-encompassing worship. He had burnt his followers to the last mech, tested Ratchet and the newly arrived Autobots from the Lost Light with a contrived play of blame, and it’d come down to this.

Ratchet had turned away. Pharma’s optics had narrowed in religious fervor, the killing disapproval of a true believer bringing his shoulder guns to bear, but Drift. Oh, Drift. The dying Autobot had
thrown himself between the two medics, expending the last of his life in agony and desperation, a prayer on his lips and a weapon in his hands. Pharma had felt it in the way the swords went through his wrists, and it was beautiful. It was everything the tenants of suffering preached. In one second, Drift had condensed the most brutal of Optimus Prime’s lessons of war into a glorious moment of transcendence.

This was why Pharma had lived. This had been his purpose. Drift’s salvation was the pinnacle of Pharma’s function, fully realized.

He fell to his death smiling, one more martyr buried in the Messatine snow, elevated forever beyond its cold into glory.

[* * * * *]

Shattered Glass - "Druid"

[* * * * *]

The Lost Light changed when the Delphi contingent boarded. It wasn’t just the sick miners. The few left had to be forced back into living and put on suicide watch, but nobody considered that a hardship. Their refusal to refuel was considered a denial of worldly needs, and mechs standing guard over them considered it a high honor. It wasn’t often that martyr’s were brought back from the brink. Drift visited them for daily prayers, pleading with them to live in order to lend their faith to the quest.

Fortress Maximus was an enigma. No one knew what to do about him.

First Aid’s cowardice and underhanded betrayal of Pharma branded him wherever he went. Everyone knew about his lapse of faith. He knelt in the stocks outside the medibay before and after his shift, visor lowered to the floor in shame. Forgiveness would be a long time coming for his sin.

The entire pilgrimage had a different aura to it, now. It wasn’t just the miners, or Fortress Maximus. It wasn’t First Aid’s ongoing penance. It wasn’t even designating Delphi a shrine, although Rodimus Prime celebrated that as a landmark part of his Primacy. His first appointed shrine was important, of course. He was also acting to quickly canonize Pharma as a saint, but the realm of medical miracles grew somewhat questionable when it came to talented surgeons. It might be a longer process than the Prime wished.

What really changed the Lost Light was Ambulon.

Ratchet hissed into the piece of sheet metal twisted between his teeth, but the scream tore out after a moment. The heavy weight holding his forearm down shifted, and cold optics regarded him distantly. Ratchet looked away first. Ambulon’s contempt for his weakness was clear. Pharma had been Surgeon Superior, leader of the Delphi Medical Convent, but Ambulon’s faith had no peer. He had severed the bonds of gestalt to walk to Optimus Prime, kneel, and state his calling as priest, medic, and Autobot.

The Prime, in his wisdom, had recognized the sacrifice inherent in Ambulon’s simple words. He’d appointed him a ward manager.

A ward manager oversaw patient’s religious lives as much as their medical wellbeing. Ambulon ran triage and services. He determined whose sparks deserved to survive, and he labored to make the living worthy of Primus. He had been a living example for the miners of the convent, and a being of incomparable faith here on the ship. There was no suffering that could be greater than what he survived every day. There was no more beautiful pain. He embraced it, and what it made him.
He had stepped aboard the *Lost Light* holding Pharma’s hands like the holy relics they were, and Rodimus Prime had asked for his blessing.

The medibay had transformed overnight. While Ratchet had run it efficiently enough, whim had ruled. The CMO had a flighty attention span and tended to act on impulse. Ambulon had grim purpose. He took control of it from the CMO, faith above and beyond rank as any proper theocracy should be run, and the medibay became a temple to pain, to suffering, to healing. Ratchet’s manic cheer was no longer tolerated.

“Pray,” Ambulon ordered him now, and Ratchet wanted to demand a decent pain patch. But that wasn’t the way, not under the tenants of suffering, and look where protesting Pharma’s fanatic beliefs had gotten Ratchet so far: held down, wrists flaming in excruciating pain as Ambulon slowly soldered connections into place. To Ambulon’s mind, it made perfect sense that if Ratchet would not abide by Pharma’s beliefs, then he would at least continue Pharma’s work.

Ambulon had known what the stiff flex of Ratchet’s hands had meant. He’d known why the CMO had come to Delphi.

This discipline was as much a reminder of faith as a warning. Ratchet had wanted Pharma to take the title of CMO so he could retire properly, but Ambulon? Ambulon had no tolerance for weakness. Ratchet wouldn’t be *allowed* to die, not while his faith remained weak.

Ratchet snarled silently at the holy mech torturing him. If he prayed to Primus after that, the words he used would have earned him far more than the stocks.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 36

Pt. 36: Continuations for Wolfsong, Portion Control, Miners & Holes, Burden of Proof, Backstage, Domestic Electronics, and Gone Fishing.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 36
Warning: Short one, this time. Continuations of other fics.
Rating: PG-13
Continuity: IDW, G1
Characters: Sixshot, Terrorcons, Impactor, Megatron, Kup, Cliffjumper, Nautilator, Ratchet.
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Various Tumblr things.

[* * * * *]

"Wolfsong, solely because "Pen" for some reason convinced [reader] that Sixshot had hidden the notes in his own frame and then offed himself and the Terrorcons had eaten him."

[* * * * *]

He traveled with them. They internalized him. He was inside them: his strength became their strength, his stubborn refusal of weakness their own. Perhaps it was self-delusion, but wasn’t every narrative they told about themselves? They’d named themselves the Terrorcons despite the laughter of the other Decepticons. Imagining his presence standing in their shadows as ghostly company wasn’t a huge extrapolation from that.

[* * * * *]

"And the old saying goes "Do not poke a sleeping phase sixer"

[* * * * *]

Poke.

Blot folded his arms.

Poke poke.

More arm folding. He tapped his foot for good measure this time.

Poke poke pokedy-poke poke.

“Get uuuuuuuup.”

“Ngrle.”

“Sixshot.” Poke poke poke, and the thrill of touching his hero was somewhat mitigated by said hero’s refusal to get off the berth so he could squeegee the mess away.

“Mmph.”
Poke.

“Mmph!”

“Move it.” Poke poke.

Sixshot curled into a stubborn ball. Blot sighed.

“You’re asking for it,” he warned. The sixchanger on the berth stayed unmoved by poking and warning alike.

So Blot opened his mouth wide and slobbered a giant tongue across him. “Maaaaaaaaaaah!”

There.

[* * * * *]

“Sixshot - A coping mechanism headcanon”

[* * * * *]

His back hurt.

His front hurt.

His everything hurt.

Sixshot woke up hurting all over. He heaved a sigh, too tired to even wince from the immediate cramp that seized up his ventilation system. It cranked through him like a solid mass through air shafts, forced along a painful lump at a time until it finally petered out into a vague ache in his fan hubs. Exhaustion followed in a terrible wave. He wished he could just fall back into recharge, where he could at least rest in uneasy, shallow, pain-echoing stasis. His body never really relaxed into deep defragment. There was simply too much input from his smashed body, constantly filling his queues with sensory data that had to be processed no matter what his cringing CPU thought about acknowledging the pain.

He used to think of pain as a cocktail, dangerous but a dash of something different. An acquired taste indulged in during missions. Now he thought of it more as a thick sludge he spent every waking moment wading through. It sucked him down with every step, until he gasped barely above the surface on bad days and trudged along in knee-deep agony on good ones.

Today wasn’t going to be a good day, he could already tell. It hurt too much.

Fortunately, somebody was in the next bunk. Sinnertwin appeared to be reading a bookfile of some kind. Sixshot squinted. Was that a cookbook? That would certainly explain why one head was drooling while the other appeared to be mouthing an ingredient list. The Terrorcons did seem the type to consider a recipe a good bedtime story.

“Mmmngh,” Sixshot slurred. His vocalizer didn’t want to boot up.

Both heads glanced over.

“He awakens!” and “Need anything, Sleeping Beauty?” were said at the same moment. Sixshot thought other people might find Sinnertwin’s speaking habits confusing, but he didn’t have the slightest problem making sense of the doubled voice anymore.
Fingers twitched in the world’s weakest beckoning gesture. “Mmhm.”

“Yeah? Coming,” and “Hold on, I need to save my spot.” Multiple optics blinked as the bookfile closed down, and then Sinnertwin transformed, two heads condensing into one.

Sixshot approved. One mouth was easier to deal with for what he had planned. He beckoned feebly again.

“Alright, whatcha need!”

Lunging up off the berth hurt like blazes, but this kiss was going places. Pain-free places. Very soon, at that. Sixshot had every intention of making sure nothing at all hurt by the time he was done, and Sinnertwin surprise melted rapidly into equal enthusiasm for this plan.

[* * * * *]

"Miners and Holes, Megatron and Impactor after they leave the gloryhole bar"

[* * * * *]

Impactor’s nose set straighter than Megatron’s, even after they stopped under a neon sign to try setting it again. “Owww!”

“Wuss,” Impactor threw an arm around his friend’s shoulders, laughing. “Can’t take two hits without fah!” He doubled over.

Megatron rubbed his already dented knuckles, smirking at Impactor gasping like a grounded Sharkicon. “Sucker.” His optics popped wide as the other miner lunged. A broad shoulder took him under the armor of his chest, a bigger suckerpunch than the one he’d landed, and the breath rushed out of him in a loud, “Oof!”

“Yeah, I’ll show you a sucker.” Impactor straightened with some difficulty against the ache in his midriff, and Megatron yelped as he was suddenly yanked off his feet, flailing over his friend’s shoulder. “Find us an alley, and you’re gonna be the sucker.”

Megatron laughed breathlessly but didn’t deny it.

[* * * * *]

"Impactor - MORE!"

[* * * * *]

Gentleness didn’t come naturally to him. Slow, steady contact wasn’t part of a miner’s life. Miners specialized in sharp, brutal movements, thrusts and digs and hammered fists on rock and metal. His hands were calibrated for dealing with mechs in heavy protective armor, passing battered, thick equipment down the line until the gears stripped and somebody with better training took it away to fix it. Fingertips whispered over exposed circuitry wasn’t an arena he’d done rounds in.

“More,” Megatron moaned under tentative fingers, face twisted in something close to but not agony. The panels on his head sparked, teased to trembling sensitivity, and he writhed, pushing for more.

Impactor smirked. “Y’know, I think this is good.” He had to practice, after all.

[* * * * *]
"Another bot for Burden of Proof"

[* * * * *]

For all that Cliffjumper was a mouthy spitfire the rest of the time, he clammed up in the berth. It was probably a defense mechanism. Moaning like a holovid porn star was erotic as the Pit, but it likely didn’t fit his projected image. He hated not being taken seriously.

Kup bent over him, listening closely. The little minibot’s optics were dimmed, staring sightless at the wall his bunk was attached to, and his mouth hung slightly open. The rest of him trembled tense on the verge of overload, but his lips were slack as he concentrated everything he had on keeping his vocalizer offline. Kup smiled. Good.

His hand worked Cliffjumper’s plug, and the minibot’s throat jumped around stifled sounds. Kup shook his head at the mech’s stubbornness, but he had to admire it. Breaking Cliffjumper wasn’t the point. The point was to have a good time. A really good time, if he had anything to say about it. Dipping down, he pressed a kiss to one adorable red audio horn. Then he continued further down. The horns were cute, but he wanted a plug in his mouth. It felt too good in his hand not to try it out anywhere.

Cliffjumper never got any louder, but he didn’t need to be.

[* * * * *]

"civilian Decepticons from Backstage"

[* * * * *]

“Which one’s he?”

“Skywarp.”

“Potential?”

“A link to the Air Commander, who still has Megatron’s favor, believe it or not.” They sipped their drinks, watching the soldiers being doted on. After centuries of the current level of servitude, adoration from their native slaves had become a background noise. Seeing the reactions of the newcomers made the settlers aware, again.

Most of the newcomers marveled at their attendant flocks of worshipers. The purple Seeker, on the other hand... “Watch him. I don’t like how he uses his attendants. If he stoops to abuse for amusement, assign his servants elsewhere. I won’t have him setting a precedent that disturbs our colony.”

“Of course, governor.”

“And speak to the biology department. I want at least one city population adjusted to a higher level of devotion. If this ‘Skywarp’ is an example of common attitudes toward organics, there will be more visitors who treat them as disposable. Culture a hierarchy that instills the belief that sacrifice in service is an honor. I want slaves without fear set aside in an obvious group of high status, highly desirable to our visitors, and the rest of them aware of their safety because of the presence of these sacrificial servants.” The governor tapped his fingers against his glass. “Perhaps rules should be established dictating common sense visitor laws.”

“I'll add it to the negotiations list.”
“Who’s the blue one?”

“Thundercracker, also linked to the Air Commander.”

“Xenophobe?”

“He doesn’t appear to like close contact with organics.”

“Ah. Remind the attendant handlers to conduct lessons on how slaves should approach masters without tolerance for other species.”

“Consider it done.”

[*** ***]

“Domestic Electronics”

[*** ***]

The day started out as a fight between Whirl and Megatron. After Ultra Magnus released Megatron from his packaging, that was. That by itself took a while, as Rodimus spent a long time arguing with Bob about putting the former D-line flagship model in charge of his side of the aisle. Rodimus didn’t share shelf space well. Ultra Magnus didn’t look too happy, either, but I’d never seen him happy so who knew if his face even did positive emotions.

Anyway, yeah. Megatron activated and took his first stroll down the aisle. All the Transformers gaped at him. He very deliberately didn’t kick aside the iRobots.

Then Whirl barreled into him, and things seemed briefly more like normal. As normal as the Domestic Electronics aisle ever got compared to, say, Housewares. Everybody liked working Housewares. The toaster ovens didn’t hold fist fights daily.

I wasn’t there for Megatron turning around and rescuing Whirl from the D-line counter-attack, but Bob told me about it later.

“They’re D-line demo models,” he said, putting his elbows on a washing machine as he bemoaned his area to me. “None of them have the upgrades for this season installed. They automatically obey him, still, right? So Whirl attacked him, but he’s ordering the D-line to keep Whirl alive, and they’re listening. Like, this is screwing with my head, man. I thought I had my seasonal aisle chart mapped out. Carl approved it and everything, but now I gotta rearrange everything!”

“Why?”

“Geez. Okay, so, they tried to stage a rescue. The D-line,” Bob added when I looked clueless. “They tried to get Megatron back over to their side of the aisle, and he just stood there staring at them. Magnus twist-tied the whole group and threw ‘em in the ‘fridge, and Megatron just stood there watching. That’s fine for now, but what happens when they get their updates? He kept the D-line in order. Now he’s A-line. The next time, they might be attacking him instead of rescuing him, and he’s gonna cream them.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh.”

“So you’re saying I shouldn’t tell Tarn about this.”
“God no!”

[* * * * *]

"Gone Fishing"

[* * * * *]

“I don’t get it.” Nautilator gave Ratchet a blank look. “You mean everybody thought he was… dumb?”

“Not sentient, yes.” Ratchet frowned at him. Now that he thought about it… “You didn’t?”

The Decepticon gave him a look that radiated incomprehension. “Mech, I’ve never had a conversation with a drone. I’ve had lots of conversations with Ten. Is it the language thing? ‘Cause I got stuck in a POW stockade with this Autobot guard once, and I swear to Primus, he spoke in sound effects. Loud sound effects. He made explosion noises randomly in the middle of talking instead of whole phrases, and nobody in my cell block had any trouble understanding him. You just kinda,” he made a gesture with his glass, trying to explain, and that actually spelled it out better for Ratchet than anything else, “interpret body language. It ain’t that hard to talk to Ten. He’s not really smart, but c’mon. I know what my med file says ‘bout my intelligence stats. I don’t have any room to talk.”

“I suppose you have a -- wait, how do you know what’s in your medical file?”

Nautilator wasn’t all that smart, but even he knew when it was time to change the subject.

[* * * * *]
Pt. 37

Pt. 37: Romantic tropes rewritten in not entirely romantic ways; how the hierarchy functions; MTMTE 47 spoiler; Vos goes down; an extreme body swap; an excommunication rite for a spark beyond salvation; Jazz dances in snow.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 37
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW, G1
Characters: Astrotrain, Laserbeak, Impactor, Megatron, the D.J.D., Optimus Prime, Ultra Magnus, Prowl, Chromedome, Sunstreaker, Jazz, Raoul, Pharma, Onslaught, Vortex, Rewind, Cyclonus, Tailgate, Bob the Insecticon, Starscream, Soundwave.
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Various Tumblr things.

[* * * * *]

Astrotrain - "Fake dating"

[* * * * *]

Astrotrain was reluctantly dragging himself out of recharge when everything went to the smelter.

“What the frag?” Hands braced against the silent wave of energy that smacked into him, he swayed and blinked rapidly. The sleazy dive this hotel rented as a room spun dizzily around him. EMP were nasty, especially a blast at that power level, and the lights flickered as the power grid recovered, failure sweeping behind the wave and immediately popping back online as failsafes kicked in. Whatever hit him had knocked half his instrumentation offline and screwed up a few gyros. The horizon wasn’t supposed to dip that way. It wasn’t a nice experience anytime, but it was severely unpleasant for a mech suffering a hangover from engex overindulgence last night.

Locking his intakes against a purge, Astrotrain swung his feet to the floor and grabbed the edges of the bed to ground himself. It helped a little. The room still swam as his instrument panel reset.

“What. Hey, what? What happened?” Some kind of weapon, maybe? What kind of weapon sent out a pulse that big? Anything large enough to temporarily take out a city power grid qualified as a full scale attack, and he didn’t hear any alarms.

The queasy energy flux passed as fast as it’d come, and that’s when the sirens started. Of course.

“Uh-oh.”

Sirens were bad news for him and his mission. He was usually nothing more than a glorified spacebus for troops, but sometimes he got more exciting jobs. Today’s version of the same old scrap involved retrieval of an undercover spy, and keeping said spy’s cover intact throughout retrieval. It wasn’t as exciting as it sounded. Retrieval meant a boring mission, but until the sirens went off, he’d thought it a fairly safe one. Retrieval on the down-low meant keeping his head down and staying in a bargain-cheap hotel room in a lousy district of an alien city until the spy found him. Extraction
involved more busting down doors, guns blazing, to get the little glitch back.

He was so not up for an extraction. His processors were so hungover they were processing memory files from last night, still. “Frag. Hope that wasn’t us,” he muttered as he wove across the room, staggering slightly. His head throbbed in time with the rise and fall of the sirens. Checking the door lock, he drew his gun and got ready for an emergency extraction. His passenger had become a wanted criminal. Sometimes, a mech just knew these things. The likelihood of a city-wide alert not involving his mission in some way, shape, or form was pretty slagging low.

His life had just become a lot more complicated than playing tourist and making his departure slot. Astrotrain didn’t know how Laserbeak had gotten to the planet, or how long the little Cassette had even been here. It didn’t matter. His job had been simple: arrival, distraction, then departure. He’d landed yesterday night, done some ‘sight-seeing’ in half a dozen Cybertronian-friendly bars, and crashed here overnight. Today was supposed to be filled by an eventful, pre-booked schedule of touristic stuff requiring him to travel all over the city, big and obvious and mostly sober. There was a café. He had orders to be seen at it, as it was a hugely picturesque place every tourist visited while in the city. There would be hundreds of pictures by other people taken with him visible in the background if anyone got suspicious, proving that he was there as a peaceful tourist, the exact opposite of a covert agent.

He’d insisted on Soundwave’s booking him tickets to the Flight Museum, too. If he had to suffer through sipping overpriced frilly energon from fragile teensy cups, then he wanted to see the aliens’ history of flight mechanics.

Anyway, the point was to be seen doing peaceful things far away from where Laserbeak was gathering intelligence. Vacation over, he’d head back to the spaceport in two days to depart, and nobody would be the wiser that the Decepticon with the interest in alien flight technology had picked up a passenger before he left.

A passenger he expected to squawk for help any moment now.

Astrotrain nearly shot the window when something hit it at high speeds. Since part of him had been almost waiting for it, however, he didn’t take the shot. “What’d you do?!?” he hissed as he opened the window instead.

Laserbeak wriggled through the opening. He gave the big Decepticon a glare, beady optics narrow, and a packet of information so organized it burned cold on his sensors hit Astrotrain’s comm. line. It opened to a dozen pictures at wild angles.

They confused Astrotrain until one of the accompanying links opened to a text file of current police orders broadcast throughout the city. “Aw, slag, I hate assassinations.” Laserbeak gave him another look. “I mean when we’re not the ones doing them. These guys spotted you? Enough to ID you?” The Cassette flapped over to the bed, far enough away to train his own weapons on the window in case of followers. Astrotrain had the door covered. This wasn’t their first time pinned down, after all.

Laserbeak tilted his head and sent another couple of pictures to the shuttle. Astrotrain squinted at them on his HUD. Between the excessive amount of gore -- automatic guns using projectiles splashed those meatbag guts everywhere, didn’t they? -- he could barely see the assassins. If Laserbeak could barely see them, then they probably hadn’t seen him very well, either.

“Are they going to try and pin this on you?”

Laserbeak fluffed his wings in a shrug. He didn’t know. All he knew was that the assassins had come in, made a mess, and gotten caught. He’d escaped in the confusion, but the government was in
an uproar. The sirens were only the tip of the iceberg. The military and local police were out in force looking for a small mechanical creature somehow involved in the assassination of their leader, and when that sort of description came up, everyone around turned suspicious eyes on Cybertronians.

Astrotrain came to the same conclusion a moment later. “They’re going to question me,” he muttered. A Decepticon in the city? Yeah, the police would hunt him down in hours, and while he could use the hotel front desk as an alibi, he’d bet his stabilizers he’d be kept under close surveillance until he left the city. “No way I’m getting off this planet with a passenger they don’t know about.” Shaking his head, he looked at the spy. “What do we do? You got a bolthole?”

Laserbeak ducked his head, beak opening in a silent cackle as he sent another set of pictures.

“…what the frag.”

More pictures.

“No, I get it. They won’t be looking for somebody out in the open. We’re ‘Cons. It’s probably the last thing they’d expect of us. But…”

The Cassetticon cocked his head inquisitively. A wicked twinkle glittered in the optic he turned on Astrotrain. He knew what the big shuttle was hedging around saying. Their frametypes could be compatible, given some finagling and a few adaptors, but it wasn’t something outsiders automatically assumed when they first saw two mechs like them together. This was going to require some major acting on both their parts to get past that hurdle, and that was going to get awkward real fast.

“Nevermind. You just keep Soundwave from killing me over this later, ‘cause you know it’s going to get back to him.”

Laserbeak laughed that quiet screechy caw of his. Astrotrain blew air out his vents and resigned himself to getting pummeled by an overprotective carrier model. Somehow, he didn’t think it’d be as easy as the birdbrain’s pictures made it look.

Half an hour later, he was wishing it was harder. He hadn’t expected it to be easy. He didn’t know what to do about it being easy.

Leaning his elbow on the table, he held his hand at optic level and smirked. “Pretty birdie.” Laserbeak’s feet tightened threat on his forefinger for the cooed words, but his smirk widened. The pinpricks on his finger kneaded response to the increased thrum of his engine, and Astrotrain chuckled, crooning, “Aaaaall mine.”

The Cassette preened under the attention. Metal wing flaps ruffled as he stroked a finger down the tiny Cassette’s back. Astrotrain lowered his voice to a vibrating rumble and purred, “Who’s a pretty birdie? Is it you? Yes it is. Yes you are. Who’s my pretty birdie?” Laserbeak’s beak caught his finger, and Astrotrain couldn’t help but grin at the nibbling slide of sharp metal over his blunt fingertip, grooming him.

Laserbeak caught his expression and chirped a question.

“What? Just admiring you.”

Ruffled flaps clicked back into place as he pet them down, and Laserbeak arched into the caress. The little mech was a warm, responsive presence under his finger, less than a handful, and Astrotrain felt caught between protection and respect. He knew how deadly Laserbeak could be, but then the Cassette cocked his head from side to side to focus on him, and it was utterly adorable. Astrotrain brought another one of the ridiculously small energon treats up to offer to the cutie perched on his
forefinger, and the café staff sighed adoringly from the other side of the counter. Was anything so sweet as honeymooning conjunx endura?

One thing in favor of overpriced cafes where everything was too small: the staff was slagging attentive. The manager actually apologized when the city police insisted on interrupting the happy couple’s meal, and every waiter in the place testified that the two Decepticons had been there for hours. Astrotrain did his best to look indignant that his honeymoon was in jeopardy. Laserbeak played the sad bird, drooping his wings and ducking his head, cheeping teensy sounds that had the other customers looking guilty and offended on his behalf. Tourists took pictures. The café manager pointedly dropped a receipt on their table in front of the police investigator, the entire meal complimentary as an apology for the rude interruption.

Eventually, the police went away, pressured by disapproval from all sides, but only after their investigator swore they’d be keeping a ‘close watch’ on the couple.

Let them watch. As long as they let Astrotrain depart on time with his passenger safe, he didn’t care. He put his elbows back on the table and went back to cooing at Laserbeak. Laserbeak fluttered back at him. Astrotrain hinted at going back to the hotel room. Laserbeak stretched short, fragile wings, taking to the air in the world’s most blatant Catch Me If You Can that kept just out of reach as the shuttle chased him down the street. People d’awwed at them.

The Cassette let himself be caught at the next intersection, coming to rest on Astrotrain’s forearms with a massive hand cupped over him, thumb petting his head and back in a slow massage. Astrotrain knew the expression on his face betrayed how revved up the pursuit got him, but he kept his hold light as he strode toward the hotel.

Two days of this sounded like a great plan. Maybe they could go tour the Flight Museum tomorrow.

Astrotrain intended to have his vacation, one way or another.

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Megatron/Impactor - “Time travel”

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“Who was that?”

Impactor wiped his mouth on the back of his fist, not noticing or caring about the bright smear of energon it left across his face. Considering the state of the rest of his face, it hardly mattered. “No idea,” he slurred through a split lip and broken nose. “An ex? Maybe? Dunno.”

His current partner gave him a skeptical look barely visible in the dim lighting of the mines. “You let a mech like that get away?” His tone held all the disapproval in the known universe, because mech. Mech, really. Really? He let someone that shiny walk away? If the face wasn’t handsome enough, they’d gotten one Pit of a good look at that aft as the mystery mech stormed away, and fraaaaaag, Impactor knew he wasn’t all that good with relationships, but what had he been thinking to let that one get away?

Must have been a fling. Surface time. Drunk off his drill. Mistakes made and now regretted.

He wiped his mouth again, feeling the echo of that kiss burn into his punch-rattled central cortex. Primus. A mech who could kiss like that was worth getting into a fist fight with over whatever idiocy Impactor had committed while black-out drunk. Trading punches added a little spice to the affair,
honestly.

“What’re you waiting for?” one of the miners down the opposite tunnel called. Laughter came from the other tunnels. “Go after him, ya glitch!”

“Yeah.” Impactor pulled himself back to his feet. A wild grin stretched his split lip wide. “Yeah, think I’ll do that.” He took off down the main tunnel, cheered on by miners whooping from every branch.

But Impactor never found the mystery mech. It was as though he never existed.

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\textit{D.J.D. - “Casual lap-sitting”}

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The \textit{Peaceful Tyranny} was a full ship. Not a shuttle, not a courier ship; an entire starship, complete with individual habsuites, an armory, and a roomy command bridge with all the amenities including cushioned seats and cupholders.

So why by all things Megatron did it have a messhall the size of a closet?

“Scuse me.”

“You are excused.”

“Tesarus!”

“Sorry! Sorry, just gotta turn -- “

“#)*(&%!!”

“I said I was sorry, Vos! Yeesh. And frag you, you watch your own elbows before you say slag ‘bout mine.”

“…hmr.”

“@#)(*%%%.”

“It’s fine, Vos. I should have expected as much.” Tarn looked into the puddled remnants of his ration with something approaching regret. “Sharing meals together isn’t doing as much to team build as I’d hoped. Ah, well.”

The rest of the Justice Division exchanged somewhat panicked looks. They knew that tone. Whenever Tarn used that worn, weary tone, he inevitably spent the next day coming up with a Bigger And Better plan to help them bond as a team. While they weren’t strictly against the idea of working as a close-knit team, he was disturbingly gung-ho about teambuilding activities. The idea before this one, there had been a chart. It had been color-coded. Various shades of purple, true, but still: color-coded.

Right. They needed to do something before he started thinking.

Helex grimaced at Kaon. Kaon shrugged at Tesarus. Tesarus threw up his hands, disgusted by everything, and gave Vos a similarly disgusted look. Vos looked at the Pet and hummed
thoughtfully.

The Pet, having scrunched itself improbably small to somehow fit into Kaon’s lap to avoid being trampled by Helex, didn’t look at anyone. It was busy snuffling at Kaon’s chest in wistful hunger.

Vos carefully, very carefully, stood up. With all the care of a bomb technician at work, he picked his way through the clutter of too many feet in too small an area.

Tarn blinked when the slender mech stopped in front of him. He blinked even more when Vos just as carefully climbed up to perch on his knee. “Ah...what?” Had he missed something? He’d been preoccupied thinking about teambuilding plans, and now suddenly he had a teammate in his lap.

He gave the others a baffled look, but they were abruptly busy relocating themselves. Kaon pushed the Pet away as Helex lifted them up, one per set of hands, and Tesarus claimed their spot, letting turbofox and teammate settle across his lap. Tarn stared.

Vos snapped two fingers in front of his face and pointed imperiously at his spilled energon once Tarn looked at him. There. Team built. Space managed. Time for the meal. No other plans necessary.

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_Megatron/Optimus - “Touching foreheads + Casually sitting on one's lap in a group scene”_

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Rodimus had been making remarks again. It was the only reason Ultra Magnus could think of for why Megatron apparently felt the need to up the ante in incendiary incidents.

Other than pure madness, of course, which was a distinct possibility but didn’t explain why Optimus Prime hadn’t immediately pushed Megatron out of his lap. Optimus Prime was many things, but not mad. At least, not mad in the same exact way as Megatron. Although now that he thought about it, Ultra Magnus could see how those two might share a mental breakdown. They did seem to communicate in a manner similar to telepathy.

Rationally, he knew that their ability to predict and respond to each other came from a long history of war wherein they’d become closer than two enemies rightly should be. Irrationally, he was starting to feel that nobody had gotten out of the war completely sane. Watching Megatron make himself comfortable in Optimus Prime’s lap served as something of a confirmation of this feeling.

The disgruntled look of surprise on Rodimus’ face didn’t mean anything for Ultra Magnus’ sanity. The urge to giggle at it did. He marked himself down for a psych-evaluation later.

In the meantime, he did his best to ignore how the Prime looped an arm casually around Megatron’s middle, hand coming to rest on one thigh. It could have been an innocent gesture. It probably was. The two of them were likely playing along in order to make Rodimus spontaneously combust. Megatron was sitting in the Prime’s lap to silently laugh at the captain’s sputtering. Co-captain. Senior captain?

Ultra Magnus dragged his straying attention back to the conversation.

Only to derail spectacularly as Megatron leaned back in a relaxed slump against Optimus Prime’s shoulder, head tipping to the side. At the same moment, no more planned than the weather and yet just as inevitable, the Prime’s helm tilted to meet him.

Rodimus’ mouth hung open, empty of speech. Ultra Magnus leaned across the table and shut it for
him. Innocent. It was all innocent.

Megatron’s hand somehow ended up covering the Prime’s on his thigh.

Alright, maybe not so innocent.

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Prowl - “Undercover as lovers”

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It wasn’t the first time Prowl had been called down to the precinct’s Personnel Office, and it probably wouldn’t be his last. He took his customary seat in front of the desk and folded his hands calmly in his lap. “You wanted to see me?”

Back Up eyed him with scant favor. “There’s been a complaint made against you.”

Ah, yes. He’d been waiting for this since Chromedome stormed out of the office last night. How ridiculous but predictable that his partner was so flustered he felt the need to file a complaint to soothe bruised pride. “May I ask who made it?” Prowl asked, cool as ice. He wouldn’t be rattled by Chromedome’s overreaction.

Back Up opened his hands in a plea for divine help. “Oh, for -- who else?”

“I see.” He nodded. He really did see.

The glare directed at him didn’t faze him. “Okay, what’s with the attitude? I don’t think you understand how much trouble you’re in right now. We’re not talking a minor complaint. He’s filed a full complaint against you, the whole department’s lining up to back him on it, and you? You, what? You think you can just shrug this off? You’re going to be lucky if you walk out of here with your badge!”

Prowl’s optics reset. “I merely called a transparent bluff. Chromedome is the one blowing this out of proportion,” he pointed out, slightly perturbed.


Prowl sighed. “Really, this is totally unnecessary. I’m sure you’ll agree that in context, it made perfect sense. Chromedome’s simply suffering from a pricked ego. I saw through his coy ploy.” The wordplay pleased him. ‘Coy ploy.’ He filed that away to snipe at his partner once this complaint non-issue was smoothed over.

Back Up stared at him for a long moment. Prowl refused to let the silence pressure him. That would be undignified, and an interrogation technique he’d employed himself many times.

After too long, Back Up leaned back in his seat and waved a hand. “Alright. I’ll bite. What’s the context?”

So Prowl explained the painfully transparent set-up of the so-called uncover mission. An undercover mission that just so happened to put the two of them alone together, completely by themselves, for three weeks at a resort pretending to be new lovers absorbed in each other. They were supposed to investigate a drug cartel using the resort as an exchange point, all while using doting on one another
as a cover. Yeah, right. Chromedome hadn’t even bothered researching a plausible drug cartel. The name in the file he’d handed Prowl last night was from an offworld ring shut down two hundred years ago.

The entire charade was pointless. Cute, at least insofar as knowing his terminally shy partner had a crush on him the size of Luna 2, but it was mildly annoying that Chromedome needed hugely scripted deceptions to act on attraction. Prowl had also been irritated that he hadn’t picked up on Chromedome’s crush earlier, and even more irritated that his partner thought him such a fool that he’d fall for a trick like this. He’d decided to not play along.

“So you kissed him.”

“I kissed him.” Prowl didn’t do shrugs, or he’d have shrugged. “It seemed like an obvious solution. Looking back on it now, of course, I should have chosen a more private location. The witnesses must have caused this backlash.” Plus, a private location would have been conducive to interfacing the shyness out of Chromedome, and they could have reported to work this morning in a relationship instead of at odds.

Really, it was a shame it’d come to this. Prowl had spent the night planning out a more-than-partnership with his partner, and all the scenarios he’d imagined were lovely.

Back Up had his head cradled in his hands, however, elbows braced on the desk. “Prowl…you idiot.”

What? “Pardon me?”

“Did you even bother reading the rest of the briefing packet?”

Prowl stared across the desk. “No. Why?” Why bother reading it? The mission summary had been so laughably silly he’d set it on the desk, stood up, and walked around to take Chromedome’s head between his hands and --

“You owe Chromedome an apology like you wouldn’t believe,” Back Up said quietly. Without raising his head, he pushed one of the tablets in front of him toward Prowl. “Read the whole thing. The whole,” he overrode Prowl’s protest, “thing. Now!”

Prowl resented the waste of his time, but he kept his protests to a scowl and started to read.

Two pages past the mission summary, he began to sink down in the chair.

By the end of the request from offworld enforcement for a pair of the department’s rookie investigators to use in the mission, he was upright in the chair only because his doors were caught on the armrests. A rookie request, used when a criminal had inside information enough to know the more experienced Enforcers, and that’s exactly what was suspected in the resurrection of the drug ring. Prowl and Chromedome, the Enforcers’ newest investigators and conveniently already partners, had been volunteered by the precinct captain for the mission.

Chromedome hadn’t been informed of their role more than an hour before Prowl had returned. It hadn’t been a trick. It hadn’t even been his idea.

Prowl had kissed his partner in full view of the rest of the department on an assumption made from hopeful speculation and foolishness.

His hands shook a tiny bit as he set the tablet back down on the desk. It took resetting his vocalizer twice to make his voice clear. “This complaint…”
Back Up gave him a wry look. “Yeah?”

Prowl swallowed. Hard. “No contest.”

“You’re up for an official reprimand, two weeks docked pay, a black mark on your record, and I hear the captain’s thinking about demoting you back to street-sweeps.” Back Up shook his head at the subtle flinch the last one got. Prowl had worked hard to make the promotion to investigator. “Last but not least, Chromedome’s put in for a transfer.”

That last part was the worst consequence of all. “I…no contest.” Prowl bit his lip and looked down at the hands clenched together in his lap. Maybe he could salvage something yet. “May I speak with him?”

Back Up shook his head again as he stood up to walk around the desk. “Does ‘speak with’ mean ‘apologize for being a know-it-all exhaust pipe’?“ Prowl gave him a miserable look, thoroughly chastised, and Back Up chuckled. “Yeah. Not supposed to do this, but the front office has been telling me your partner’s been hanging around out there having second thoughts about filing a formal complaint. You convince him to drop it, and the captain’ll probably let you off with a lecture about inappropriate professional behavior and the docked pay.”

Prowl ducked his head in a nod as he scrambled to his feet and for the door.

“Oh, and Prowl?”

The black-and-white investigator hesitated at the door.

“You might want to actually stop and think about why the captain thinks you two can pull off an undercover mission as lovers. Chromedome might not be the transparent one.”

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_Prowl/Sunstreaker - “wearing each other's clothes”_*

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For all that they looked nothing alike, their bolts were the same diameter, threaded at the same angle. They were different sizes, different models with different shapes, but their insides had cross-compatibility. They were similar enough to swap parts when it counted.

Ratchet didn’t bandy it about that Prowl could use Sunstreaker’s circuitry, and Sunstreaker didn’t say anything about the amount of times he was called in for an emergency organ transplant. Numbers were cruel things. They dictated how one life meant more to the war effort than another, and by their cold calculations, Prowl’s life won the numbers game over Sunstreaker’s.

The golden Autobot was a frontliner. He had back-ups installed for his back-ups by this point in the war. He didn’t particularly like acting as a mobile organ bank, but better Ratchet tear an extra fuel pump out of his chest than Prowl die from lack of one. Sunstreaker, vain as he was, understood that.

He understood the value of repairing as well as destroying. He’d been at this fighting thing long enough to learn field repair. Emergency medical care wasn’t something he enjoyed any more than being called across the battlefield to donate body parts, but it was something he could do, so he did it. He didn’t talk about it, but he did it.

“Stay still,” he snapped at Prowl. Laserfire streamed by overhead, beautiful but deadly, and the downed officer seemed captivated by the show. It was a sign of how much damage he’d taken.
Sunstreaker let him stare. It kept him quiet while the golden frontliner worked.

The hood hinges were warped. He pulled the bullet-riddled chestplate off Prowl, tossing it aside like the useless garbage it was. Acid hissed as it continued to eat through the metal, safely away from internal parts. Frowning, Sunstreaker bent down to look for what he could fix. There wasn’t much he could do with basic field repair. Vital parts sparked in Prowl’s chassis, but most of it was beyond Sunstreaker’s abilities and small field kit. He had to get the officer to a real medic to fix this.

That meant heading through the battlefield to the closest Autobot EM site. Sunstreaker frowned some more as he eyed Prowl. The brunt of the damage had been taken by Prowl’s hood, which was what was supposed to happen, but leaving the vulnerable parts exposed wasn’t an option.

His frown became a scowl. Only one thing to do, then.

Sitting up, he set to work at his own chest piece. The hinges were in perfect working order, of course. It came off without a problem.

The fight went on, missiles streaking through the colored lights filling the sky. Prowl blinked up at them. His was a slow return to awareness. In the time it took for his processors to reboot, Sunstreaker had clumsily but securely jammed his hood into place. It covered more than Prowl’s chest, sticking out weirdly in front, but it was thick and strong. It’d take another wall of bullets to get through. Sunstreaker should know. He’d walked through worse and come out intact.

Prowl looked down at it as Sunstreaker tightened the bolts. Compatible, not the same. “Will it hold?”

“Long enough,” Sunstreaker said. His voice had hoarse gruffness to it, a wary junkyard dog growl. With his chest armor missing, he was a dangerous creature made vulnerable, on the lookout for threats to tear apart before they got him first. His optics scanned their surroundings, constantly in motion as he forced a curve his own chest didn’t have into Prowl’s new makeshift hood. “It’ll get you where we need to go.”

Prowl accepted the hand held out to him, using it to pull himself to his feet. “Then we should get going.” The bright gold covering his chest was a beacon calling to anyone searching for a target from above. They should move before anyone with missiles got any ideas.

Arm wrapped around Sunstreaker’s waist for balance, Prowl started hobbling back toward the fight.

Sunstreaker didn’t say anything about holding him up. He just did it.

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Jazz - "Undercover as lovers"

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“Don’t suppose you could say something to him.”


“I noticed that wasn’t a ‘yes, Jazz, I’ll save your aft.’”

Another hum, this one shading into a negative. Nope, that sure hadn’t been agreement. Save Jazz? Why would he do that? He’d been conned into escorting one Porche with some nonstandard extras, Jazz by name, to a car show to pose as a total car lover. Which wasn’t an inaccurate term in the least.
for him, but come on. Jazz, of any Autobot? They both knew Jazz had put himself at the head of the volunteer list for this show for less than crime-fighting reasons. Prowl was the one working with the FBI to nail the suspected thief scoping out cars at these events. Having an Autobot on the ground in the show was a just-in-case scenario. Anyone would have done the job.

Hence why the human tending Jazz right now was in no mood to play nice. The Autobot sent to the show was not the one Raoul had agreed to escort back when this plan had been hatched.

“C’mon, man. I swear I didn’t know you were helpin’. Thought for sure it was Carly.”

“She’s got tests.”

“Yeah, I know that now, but I didn’t! Hand to Cybertron, I didn’t know!”

A disbelieving snort, but that was all Jazz was given for his pains. Oh yeah, he was in the doghouse over this. He’d be safe the course of the carshow over this. He’d be safe the course of the carshow. He’d get his pampering. Admiring humans would fuss over him to his spark’s content, and Raoul would give him mondo TLC the whole time, just like he would any nonsentient car.

And then he’d drive Jazz back to the Ark to face Tracks.

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Pharma & Tarn - “Locked room or small space”

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Flight-capable frametypes were full of themselves. However, Tarn conceded sourly, at times it would be a distinct advantage to be one.

**”Are you still down there?”**

Stuck in his altmode, buried by an avalanche, and taunted by an Autobot. Could his life get any worse today? “Yes, I’m still down here,” he grumbled into his comm. pick-up, hoping the snow wouldn’t muffle him past hearing. “You could call my unit and actually help me, you know.”

**”Now that I know for certain you can’t get loose on your own, I definitely don’t think I’ll be doing that.”**

He wanted to smack himself for giving away how the layers of snow and ice had him entombed. It also blocked him from long-distance communication. He could almost see Pharma’s smirk. That smug little flightframe was probably dancing about in the air over the settling avalanche, gloating.

Rallying his best persuasive tone, he purred his engine into the connection before saying, “You realize our agreement will be null and void with the next Tarn. I doubt you’ll find an…appeasement that would spare your clinic.”

**”No doubt.”**

“Then why don’t you cut the gloating short and call for back-up? I’m hardly in a position to stop you from bringing this up to lord over me until the end of time.” He injected the humility he knew Pharma wanted to hear into his voice. Pride was a small price to pay in the present, since he could easily win it back the next time they met. “It’s the price of being a groundframe. We’re vulnerable to such things.”*
"Heh."

"Pharma…"

Pharma sighed gustily, extremely put-upon. "If you must know, I haven’t called for your despicable minions because I’m allergic to small locked rooms."

Tarn’s treads ground, unable to spin in the snow packed around him. “Do tell.”

"Hmm, yes. I’m deathly allergic to prison cells, you see. Right now I’m attempting to think of how either one of us can get out of this situation without coming down with a fatal case of execution for treason. If I call for help, the miners will wonder who they’re digging out, and I will come under suspicion. If I summon your lackeys, I assume they will be terribly curious as to why an Autobot is saving your life."

Ah. Well, there was that. Come to think of it, Tarn had a similar allergy to his dear Autobot surgeon. Good diagnosis, doctor.

"But don’t worry. I’ll think of something."

Tarn rocked back and forth in the snow, sighing. That wasn’t flightframe arrogance. That was all Pharma.

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Onslaught & Vortex - "locked in a room or trapped in a small space"

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His chronometer told him his body had been offline for less than three hours. Vortex wasn’t sure if he believed it. It didn’t matter if he believed it. Even if it was true, it hadn’t felt like three hours.

It’d felt like a million years. Three million. A billion.

He’d been locked in The Box forever.

At his side, Onslaught shuddered back online in much the same way Vortex had: gasping and reaching for something to hold. One hand flailed out, hitting him, and Vortex had no fight left in him. It pulled, and he went. Sliding across the floor, he huddled on top of Onslaught in an awkward one-armed hug that he couldn’t coordinate his arms enough to return. Limb control felt beyond him, at the moment. He was still twitching, rotor blades juddering as his spark reintegrated into his frame.

They clung together on the floor, shaking. The convulsive tremble gripping them eventually synced up, their armor clattering until the loud rattle became a rapid tapping and then simply the sound of their fans straining. Onslaught kept making those soft gasping noises as his visor searched the ceiling for something only he could see. Vortex had all but shut down in fear-frozen paralysis, his hands curled around Onslaught’s shoulders. They didn’t fit together well, not like this, but there was comfort in armor corners poking into uncomfortable spots. At least they could feel that.

Another minute ticked by, an entire eternity in sixty seconds. Vortex watched them fly by, morbidly mesmerized by the passage of time. It didn’t feel real yet. Maybe he was suffering a delusion, one that would shatter if he moved, and it was cruel because he wanted it so much. He wanted to feel Onslaught shivering under him. He wanted to feel terror pulse cold coolant through him too fast, chilling him to the struts as his systems fought to calm him down. It was physical, it was sensation, and Vortex buried his visor in Onslaught’s chest to hide from recent memory/non-memory of
suspended functions. Of being nothing but a helpless, body-stripped spark in a box.

Onslaught stirred first, this time. His hands shook violently. He didn’t push Vortex away, but he gave the rotary mech a nudge. They had to move. Vortex could no more let go of Onslaught than his fellow Combaticon could let go of him, so they sort of rolled and balanced themselves in a moving back-and-forth that gradually worked the both of them up onto their knees.

Where they stayed, clinging together like a picture of misery, heads bowed before their master.

His feet, all they could see from their position, shifted. They tensed. He merely chuckled. “I trust my Combaticons find following orders much more agreeable now?”

At the back of the throne room, cuffed and utterly scared out of their wits, the other three Combaticons nodded with frantic haste. Onslaught and Vortex cringed closer to the floor as they nodded twice as fast.

“Y-yes, Lord Megatron.”

“We live t-to serve, Lord Megatron.”

They sniveled, thoroughly broken, and they didn’t even care. The Boxes were at the corner of their vision. They’d agree to anything if it’d spare them going back.

As far as lessons from Megatron went, the other Decepticons considered this one quite merciful. Onslaught and Vortex saw it as a sign of how ruthless the Lord of the Decepticons had become.

They never stepped out of line again.

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Rewind/Chromedome - "finishing each other's sentences"

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“We could go back to the beginning. Everything can unfold from the very start.” Chromedome sank to his knees in front of Rewind, and their hands reached out that the same moment to cup each other’s faces. Leaning forward, they set their helms together, visor to visor. “What would we change, given the chance? Where would we pause? Where would we fast forward? I can edit. I can tweak the past until it’s what we want, and we can start at the beginning again. I can make it happen. Our history will become whatever will make you happiest. I’ll make it happen, I promise.”

Needles fanned out around Rewind’s helm, glittering red in the light from the recording camera, and it didn’t matter which one of them spoke the words out loud. They were both thinking it, and both could see the promise through. They had the power to change history, in their own ways, and a willingness to do whatever it took to make one another happy.

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Megatron and Optimus - “undercover as lovers”

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It wasn’t often he conceded that Optimus Prime had a better idea than himself, but what Megatron wouldn’t give to have a face mask right now. “Tell me again why I’m tolerating this,” he said through gritted teeth.
“The Galactic Council has incredible influence and a lot of guns.”

Two very good reasons, yes. Megatron fastened them to the forefront of his mind as if they were guidelines stapled to the inside of his helm. Organized, overpowering threat from outside Cybertron’s borders. The Galactic Council’s vote of exclusion had necessitated a ceasefire between Autobots and Decepticons since…three weeks ago, actually. ‘Peace through spite’ wasn’t much of a slogan for the Decepticons, but it’d have to do.

The Prime nodded pleasant greetings to a delegation of alien freaks no true Decepticon should allow to gawp at his personage, and Megatron concentrated on the reasons he had to put up with it. No snarling allowed. He didn’t have to smile, but Soundwave had coached and coached him on the lack of open hostility.

Come to think of it, Soundwave had a face mask as well. It was a conspiracy.

Starscream had just laughed at him and said, “Finally! Cosmic revenge for all those times I had to stand at your shoulder!” Then he’d snickered something about a betting pool on whether or not Megatron could rein in his temper long enough for the blasted PR campaign to get Cybertron out of the Galactic Council’s sights.

Megatron was going to pull of this Lord Protector act if it killed him, just to prove -- frag, he didn’t even know what he was trying to prove to his treacherous Second, just that he was going to do it. Was it too much to ask that his own Air Commander look supportive and respectful of his authority while giving a speech? No. Of course not. So Megatron was going to stand at the slagging Prime’s shoulder looking intimidating and not like he was actively at war with the road-muncher. Supportive and respectful might be outside the scope of his acting abilities, but he could manage neutral. Militant toward outsiders. Vaguely cooperative.

Look, he wouldn’t haul off and punch Optimus in the masked face in front of a bunch of ambassadors. Beyond that, he promised nothing.

No scowling. It was important to look like an intelligent, reasonable sentient being. Radiating contempt and disgust apparently didn’t foster good will. How shocking. See, this was exactly why Megatron preferred exterminating lesser creatures. They couldn’t gang up on his planet if he killed them first.

Lacking the ability to murder the Galactic Council en masse, however, he’d have to settle for deceiving them. Hence remembering not to scowl. He could do this. It was acting. He could act. The whole thing stank of politics, but it was a stench he had to tolerate. It helped that Optimus wasn’t any happier to be here than he was, despite the flawless composure the Prime displayed now.

Behold Cybertron’s Lord Protector and Prime, joint military and civilian leader, showing up at the Council as diplomatic heads of state. Let the negotiations and mindnumbing social events ensue.

“Stop glaring,” Optimus murmured between inane conversations with aliens. “They can tell you want them dead.”

Megatron really needed a face mask.

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"power tower"

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It’s a careful hierarchy. It’s a military structure built on rules, regulations, political bureaucracy, religious belief, old traditions, and war. Mostly war, these days, but all its predecessors still flavor how the Autobot hierarchy works. Physical power doesn’t make the system work. Respect does. The hierarchy is an artificial construct made of respect for those above, and obedience to the same. The few could not control the many without that respect in place, and the few in charge are interconnected in checks and balances to keep any one person from amassing too much power, becoming too corrupt, or taking rule via fear instead of leading through service.

It’s a careful social agreement, this hierarchy. Lose respect, and all support disappears. The network underneath the surface is kept in shadows and secrecy, knowing that. There are no open trades made or bargains negotiated over. Subtle petitions and vague connections navigate the spaces between in the Autobot hierarchy, and it’s not talked about. It’s felt out, and it changes depending on those involved.

Sideswipe doesn’t barge into Prowl’s office and sprawl on the desk, chest plates slammed open in blatant offering. Sideswipe’s offers are done more quietly than Wheeljack’s, but then, Wheeljack cashes in on the leeway his inventions buy him. Sideswipe’s offers are more varied, and usually made in smaller chunks than entire battles won by whatever Wheeljack pulls out of nowhere. Wheeljack is more polite than to bust into meetings, throw down his demands, and whirl out in a rush of energy. He could, but he doesn’t. His good nature makes him a bit of a pushover in internal politics.

Sideswipe isn’t a pushover, but he has less to bargain with, most of the time. Sideswipe asks for favors in hints, sideline offers made by the tiny crack he allows his chest to open while standing before Prowl’s desk. Sparklight flickers a sultry promise if only Prowl might, maybe, possibly reduce Sunstreaker’s sentence to a week in solitary instead of four, but he never outright asks. He never outright says, and afterward, no one outside the office will be able to say for certain why Prowl changed his mind.

Jazz doesn’t put his glitches on a leash gathered around his feet in the common room, but he could. He could lean back in his chair like it’s a throne as they fawn about him, hands on his thighs and faces upturned in adoration. If he said to, they would obey, because he owns so many, so much. He controls them through whispers. They walk freely but listen for the faintest call of their master cashing in what they owe him, and owed him, and will owe him in the future.

Optimus Prime never recharges alone. It’s never obvious if his many lovers are sincere companions or business transactions. Those who can’t put on the right, respectful act in the halls to support his image won’t gain the opportunity to get closer. It’s all about appearances.

The Decepticons operate on a different level. For them, physical power makes the hierarchy fluid. There is no shame in offering favors, much less accepting them. A person seeking a deal might be laughed at, but negotiating for however much is traded for what is an open process done by spelling out what’s for sale. Pride is dearly bought and easily discarded when it comes down to bargaining. Skywarp will drape himself on Thundercracker, and both jets occasionally flirt at the Coneheads when they want something. Hook will step aside after surgery, face blank, and Scrapper will bend over Soundwave on the table, fingers tracing a delicate opening bid around the communication specialist’s Cassette dock.

Not surprisingly, Swindle is a consummate dealer of favors, trades, and IOUs. Starscream, as well. Soundwave excels at tracking and exposing others’ trading. The sneaks and the charismatic thrive as easily as the physically intimidating. Even Megatron has been known to abandon the threat of raised fist and fusion cannon in order to sweep his Air Commander’s hand up to his lips, giving it a teasing kiss as mischievous optics peer up to charm Starscream’s fickle interest to his favor.
The Decepticon hierarchy is a solid thing. It moves in concrete chunks slotting in where they are moved through clear negotiations or power grabs. It isn’t an artificial thing respect makes soldiers play along with. Every Decepticon knows why they obey their officers, and they know what steps have to be taken to change circumstances to their advantage. Onslaught can call in favors Vortex has collected to counter Shockwave’s influence on Megatron’s opinion of his team. Scavenger can find anyone anything if the Constructicons need to pull Bonecrusher out of a bind, and he’ll make his offer openly, bluntly asking what it will take to win his teammate free.

Among Autobots, such things aren’t done. It would collapse the invisible fiction of respect and image keeping the Autobot ranks in line, but most of the deals work out to be the same. It’s only the setting that changes how they’re made.

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"destroy all feels"

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The world is light and noise. It is fear and seizing dread. It is the sound of rapidfire impacts on breaking armor, and it smells of burning energon.

The corridor roars, a hundred flashing streaks of light exploding on the walls around them, but the dull cracking thuds shudder through them like the beat of a fuelpump. No, faster than that. It’s a panicked flutter at an unhealthy rate, a pace no one’s body could sustain, and Cyclonus’ body won’t. Tailgate can feel the pulse getting stronger, strong enough to make them sway, or maybe the gunfire is tearing through the barrier made by purple armor and protective arms.

Cyclonus sways but doesn’t stumble forward. Stoic as ever, he stands and endures. The arms around Tailgate close tight, holding him safe. Once, they crossed over the broad chest as if barring him from access, but Cyclonus opened his arms, opened them and gathered Tailgate up, and the wall they create protects the minibot inside them.

Tailgate huddles against Cyclonus’ chest, straining to hold on as tight as he’s held, and his hands curl useless between them. The needles scrape but don’t pierce. He can’t think of anyone less needing of an anti-villain virus, anyway.

A hole spurts into being on Cyclonus’ chest, just missing Tailgate. The sudden gush of liquid pink spatters over white and blue metal like a gift of innermost energon, and Cyclonus jerks noticeably amidst the pounding beat of impact.

The world is light and noise. It is terror building to realization of what he’s done and what it’s cost. It smells of something ending, and it is the sound of a soft whisper.

“Goodbye, little one.”

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Vos - "accept defeat"

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“Sit down,” Kaon whispers through the commlink. His voice is low. Raspy with damaged filters, breathless from a ventilation system without working fans, and soft, so soft, as his power generator winds down. He is stuck in altmode as he descends toward stasis lock, and he knows can’t help Vos.
There’s nothing left to electrocute, no backup to call in, and he’s losing power. Given enough time, he’ll self-repair to the point his generator will kick back in. He’ll be able to transform again, but that’s at a point in the future past when his colleague will bleed out.

Vos can’t make his joints lock. Loose-limbed, he wobbles toward Kaon, intending to collapse on top of him. Any other time, Kaon’s seat is dangerous. A punishment. Right now, it’s sanctuary. It’s a place to rest. Not a place to recover, it’s too late for that, but somewhere dignified to sit while he loses fuel. He’s scorched and fading fast, but he has a few hours left in him. If he’s lucky, the ship will return in time. Kaon will recover. Something will happen, and he won’t die.

If he’s not lucky, death will seep into him as vital fluids seep out.

“Sit down,” Kaon whispers, but Vos’ legs won’t support his weight. “No. No, come on. You can do this.”

He can’t. Melting to the floor in a sprawl, Vos wryly consigns his dignity to the ether. He wanted to sit down, but it seems he must lie here on the floor. Ah, well. He tried.

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"Body swap"

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After two days stuck in this wretched freak’s body, Megatron had come to realize the amount of things he took for granted in his processor. His regular processor, that was. The Insecticon’s warped, regressed ruin of a Cybertronian’s processor didn’t have the capacity for what Megatron’s normal brain module did, and it was making Megatron’s life difficult.

He couldn’t write. He couldn’t read. The glyphs swam into a confusing jumble of lines that infuriated him because he knew, he remembered that he should know what they meant but he couldn’t understand them any longer. He could even understand spoken words, which was enough to make him roar angrily. The processor in this body just could not take audio input and sort it into coherence.

Speech. Of course speech was impossible. The Swarm had more in common with technimals than mechs anymore, so Megatron hadn’t been surprised that he couldn’t speak anymore. Emotions were easy enough to convey, at least. The chittering, clicking growls coming out of his throat clearly told everyone around him that the bug in their midst was frustrated, angry, and liable to bite if touched, even if he couldn’t actually yell at them to back off.

It’d also clued the vicious yellow Autobot frontliner that there was something wrong with his pet. Megatron had braced for a fight when the yellow mech -- what was his name? -- ignored the warning growl and strode toward him. Instead of violence, however, the mech crouched at his side to study him, a muted concern in shadowed blue optics. It disgusted Megatron. How could anyone become attached to one of the Swarm, much less a pathetic runt like this one?

The Autobot spoke, and Megatron found there were certain things the Insecticon’s processor carried over. Apparently the attachment ran both ways. While he couldn’t understand what the Autobot said, the collection of sounds cued strong emotional and physical reactions. A peculiar tone perked his antenna up despite himself, and he shook his head irritably, laying them flat again. The Autobot reached for his helm slowly, and Megatron tensed against a need to push up into the hand. He tensed, defensive, angry, and ready to bite, and the Autobot barked something sharp.
Megatron’s aft hit the floor on automatic. What the frag..?

What had to be another command was spoken, and Megatron fought his first instinct to lie down. Distress sparked in his chest. It didn’t belong to him. He wasn’t upset because he disobeyed. It wasn’t him. It was code-deep training that told him --

Told him he was being bad. Disobedient.

Megatron recoiled in absolute disgust. He was no pet, frag this Autobot to the Pit, and he refused to act like one! Let the Autobot punish him. He felt the fear in the bug’s chest, a building dread the longer he resisted the commands repeated to him in increasingly stern tones, and he knew what that meant. He’d felt this fear before. He’d seen it in the optics of his fellow miners. It was the fear of a resistance, of a powerless being refusing to be pushed around any longer but knowing the consequences of defiance.

Let the Autobot do the inevitable. Megatron could tolerate pain. He would suffer it and fight back rather than lie down as a slave. All masters showed their true colors in the face of resistance.

The yellow Autobot stared at him, optics slowly narrowing. Megatron braced himself. A hiss, part fear and part anger, warned the mech away.

To his surprise, the warning was heeded. The yellow mech stood up and backed away, going to the other side of the room to rummage in a cupboard. Megatron watched him warily. Who knew what kind of punishment tool the mech used on his pet to force obedience. It was probably a whip. Maybe a chain. He’d discovered through studying his reflection in the mirror that this Insecticon body wore a collar.

If body-instinct weren’t so insidious, Megatron would have never hidden away from the Autobots in this particular room. He hadn’t realized it was where the yellow Autobot lived. Now the door was locked, and what had originally reassured him as a safe place now felt like a trap. He backed into a corner, growling as the mech turned around. Here it came. Pain and punishment, slavery all over again, and he couldn’t even vent his helpless rage through written word later once he’d been left to ‘learn his lesson.’ Poetry was stripped from him, words and language out of reach of primitive processors, and this stupid Insecticon body and mind wanted to cringe on the floor, whine its distress for disobeying its master, and creep to the Autobot’s feet to repent.

Said Autobot crouched again and reached out, brandishing a --

His thoughts stuttered to a halt, shocked quiet by a sudden, swamping wave of desire. A tiny, glittering bit of pink pinched between thumb and forefinger, offered just out of reach, and Megatron’s foreign, oversensitive nasal sensors flared their vents to their widest. Fans whirred a deep inhale of an absolutely divine scent that went straight to his tanks. His mouth dropped open behind the guard grill without his consent.

The Autobot watched him carefully but didn’t get any closer. He said something, coaxing.

Megatron didn’t want to respond. He truly did not want to.

Except that he really, really did. The Autobot was offering him energon, a concentrated bite-sized thing that smelled delicious. The Insecticon’s memory core flung out pleasure-filled files connected to the scent, tagged with amorphous sensation instead of words, and every tag promised the tiny bit of food tasted as good as it smelled. This body’s sense of taste seemed to be on par with its enhanced sense of smell, and Megatron couldn’t say he wasn’t tempted.
He knew it was a trap, a way to get him to walk tamely into the Autobot’s hands for punishment, but his tanks rang empty and his mouth champed at nothing. He had to maintain his strength. He had to get out of this room. He could endure any pain. All he had to do was cooperate through the Autobot’s demeaning demands. If he got energon out of the deal, all the better.

He hated himself even as he reasoned his way into the trap.

The body he was in wanted to creep close to the floor. Megatron forced it to stand straight on all four limbs, marching forward to growl his own demand at the Autobot. Fine. He was here. Feed him, punish him, get it over with.

The Autobot sighed. Raising the treat out of range, he said something in a quiet voice. Megatron felt his antenna flatten without knowing what it meant, or why a shamed rush filled him. One finger rose, and the Autobot’s voice suddenly cracked like a whip, full of authority.

Megatron’s aft hit the floor again.

Frag it!

The Autobot said something else, however, praise in the tone of his voice, and Megatron froze as an almost-physical tidal wave of pleasure rippled down his back.

He didn’t have time to recover from the unexpected reaction to obedience. The treat descended in immediate reward, praise and positive reinforcement. The nodule of energon was held out to him on an open palm, and he lunged forward before he could think.

Pit and smelters, it tasted every bit as good as body-memory promised.

He didn’t even know he was purring, multiple optics off -- and hadn’t those been interesting to adjust to -- until the Autobot spoke again. He blinked his optics back online a little fuzzily, blearily braced for the pain that had to follow, the yellow mech had to be ready to punish him now. He’d disobeyed and knew what mechs like this one did to helpless subordinates.

Another treat glittered between thumb and forefinger. Megatron choked on a needy whine.

The Autobot chuckled and used the coaxing voice again.

Megatron resisted the urge to lie down. No. He wasn’t that weak. Hunching his shoulders around his audios, he ducked his head and growled. Now would come the first blow.

The treat hiked further into the air, held that much higher out of reach, and the Insecticon’s body lurched after it as though pulled by a chain. The whine repeated, louder, and Megatron was appalled to realize it’d come from him. He had no control over it. What was going on?! He’d held in screams through beatings that left him unconscious on the ground, and here he was whimpering because he wanted a tasty tidbit? It was a treat!

It was a blasted torment. The Autobot patiently held the treat above him. He didn’t change expression as Megatron gave in and jumped on him like a beast. Attempting to climb yellow armor got Megatron nowhere. The mech stood up, stepped back, and pushed him down, but he still didn’t hurt him. The Autobot simply repeated the command, over and over, holding the treat there to be seen.

Seeing it but not being allowed to eat it was torture! Not painful torture, just -- it had been so good, and this body loved it so much, and the longer the Autobot stood there wearing that disappointed look, the more Megatron felt the tightness in the Insecticon’s chest screw into a fearful knot. The
slagging bug wanted the treat, but it wanted this mech’s approval just as much, if not more. It wanted the words of praise. It wanted the Autobot to feed and reward it.

It had been trained, Megatron knew, but there was something off about its reactions. He couldn’t quite pin down what was pinging him as strange.

In the spirit of experimentation, he finally laid down. No other reason. No, really.

The fluttering rush of pleasure flooded down his back again as the yellow mech bent right away to praise his obedience, and the treat tasted wonderful. It was obscenely good how praise and food felt in conjunction. A hand was held out, bare of energon, and Megatron eyed it warily.

The fear he was waiting for didn’t manifest. That was the strange thing. That was what he’d been expecting. That was the instinct this body should possess, and it puzzled him that it didn’t. The Insecticon should want to cringe away from the Autobot’s hand, knowing what was coming, but it didn’t. If anything, the urge to push into the hand kicked up another notch.

Megatron didn’t like it, but he allowed the hand to descend toward his head. Best to get it over with, whatever was coming.

Braced for pain, he had no defense against an antenna massage.

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"Excommunication"

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The Autobots will retreat from Iacon in the cold hours before sunrise, in the densest darkness just after moonset. It won’t conceal them from targeting lasers or the Decepticon satellites glinting up among the stars overhead, but their armor will be at its coolest. The ruins of the highways will have cooled all night, and cold metal against cold metal blurs on thermal scans. Not even Decepticons can see perfectly in the dark. The Autobots are counting on that.

Iacon is finally falling. It isn’t a violent triumph with Decepticons storming through the barricades, kicking aside hastily constructed walls made from collapsed buildings and public transports rendered useless from the rail bombings. Megatron won’t enter the city at the head of a brigade of ruthless warriors slaughtering the Autobots left and right.

Combat thrilled the Decepticon, as if a body count was their method of measurement. The Autobots won’t give their enemy the kind of victory used to rouse morale before the next battle. Dusk falls over the city quietly, and by dawn tomorrow, the fall of Iacon will be complete. They will abandon their last city stronghold in a silent retreat, spending no lives and leaving a hollow victory for the Decepticons to venture into at their own peril. Traps riddle the city everywhere, mines under the streets and explosives wired to the doors of old apartment buildings. Megatron will take the city, but he won’t dare occupy it. If the Autobots can’t have Iacon, then no one will.

The Decepticons brought down the Towers first. Mirage survived, and the noblemech’s grim optics never waver as he sets the charges, hands steady. He fumbled, back when the Towers came down, shaking with nerves and inexperience, but not anymore. He’s survived too much, and determination holds him stable. His city will not be a Decepticon fortress. It’ll be a hole in the ground before he allows that to happen.

It is Mirage’s calm mask Optimus Prime holds in his mind. So many Autobots lived through so many
terrible things, and the Prime asks them to perpetrate this one themselves. They no longer have the numbers to stand up to the Decepticons in open war. It’s time for different, more ruthless methods: slash and burn, hit and run, acid pit traps and carefully weakened support pillars under key structures. Guerilla tactics that give their enemies nothing to shoot at but ghosts as trickery nibbles away at the Decepticon ranks.

Traps, misdirection, and small strikes. No victories, but no defeats. The lack of outright fighting will do more to Decepticon morale in the long run than the Autobots. The Autobots will stay alive, after all. A single operative sacrificed to take out a supply train kills more than one Decepticon.

Perhaps that’s why the Prime has come here, picking his way through the burnt-out remains of what once was the High Temple of Iacon. Tactics meant to demoralize the Decepticons are little moves in a wider strategy. A thousand tiny markers collectively shifting into a pattern, like the subtle flickers of emotion across Prowl’s face as he bends over the holographic projector. Assemble the pattern, follow it, and one can see the wider effect, a trickle starting an avalanche far down the line, and some day fiercely hungry optics will look up from the glowing map, and Prowl will smile. Then, and only then, will all the pieces make a picture, and they will be ready to topple Megatron.

But that is the future. This is now, and Optimus Prime is here.

By itself, the ruined Temple is a worthless location, already destroyed. It reeks of the priests who died here, their lives spilled to seep into the cracked floor tiles. Smoke lingering like silent mourners among half-fallen pillars. Further down where the fire missed more, drips of energon glow dim between the staircase joints. A large splash provides gruesome illumination at the base of the stairs, a wobbly outline of a body gravity brought out of the fire to leak to death. In the end, the priests had nowhere to run.

The Prime pauses at the edge of the stain to bow his head in respect. A cynical part of him wonders how long it will be before the Empties, the Neutrals, even the Decepticons scrape the partially processed fuel from the wall, lick it from the floor. No one has dared, yet, or more likely, no has gotten this far into the otherwise ransacked Temple. Everything else of worth has been taken. Desperation will drive the starving back in at some point, however, and this last evidence of what had been will disappear down someone’s throat.

If it will keep someone from stasis lock a few minutes more, he won’t begrudge the cannibalism. The priests of the Temple probably wouldn’t approve, but they didn’t approve of much of what Optimus Prime did in the brief time they knew him. The High Temple burned soon after his ordination.

As Jazz said: “Good riddance.”

Of course, the saboteur followed the spat comment up by noticing the Prime standing in the doorway and nearly falling out of a chair apologizing in frantic haste. Seeing him lose his suave smoothness was a rarity, but so was insulting the religious institution that the Matrix-Bearer represented on Cybertron.

Optimus Prime neither forgave him nor agreed with him. In either case, it wasn’t his place to say anything. The Matrix chose him, not the priests. Given their way, the holy relic would have been pried from his chest and passed to a more politically correct candidate. The Temple became synonymous with corruption well before his time. He feels no connection to the Temple that stood in his way at every opportunity until it fell, freeing him to act as the leader the Primes were meant to be.

But he doesn’t hate them. If nothing else, they are dead. He pitied them for how they died.

They’re not why he’s here. He’s here for something they left behind, part of the institution. Every
institution has rules, regulations, order. The Autobots live by military rules, now. Some thrive inside it. Some rebel against its constrictions. Optimus Prime isn’t used to the conflict-centered approach of the structure yet, but he’s used to functioning within a framework of laws. Everyone is adjusting. Even those who don’t enlist know how the regs work. The war has woven into the life and culture of Cybertron in a pervasive web of complicated knots tightening every day as peace grows a more distant memory. One doesn’t have to live by combat to be affected by it.

The Temple operated in a similar manner. Religion underlay so much of Cybertronian life that years after the priests died or took up arms, medics still mutter prayers when the medibay doors slam open. Atheists know basic rites, everyone swears by Primus and the relics, and while only active practitioners might know the words to the verses, every soldier can sing the chorus.

Religion is a formality more often than not, a nod given to past ideals, but it’s there. One piece, potentially part of a larger whole.

Optimus Prime uses his headlights in the dark under the Temple, one hand on the wall to guide him along. He doesn’t have to go far. Despite rumors from treasure-hunters and the great dreadful weight of solemn ceremony, the Altar to Primus isn’t hidden. The Temple is built on top of it, but there are no doors. The guards are long gone. The hallway stretches on forever from an illusion built of darkness, not reality.

The ornaments that decorated it before the fire are slag, puddles of melted and hardened metal dotting the surface and running down the sides. Optimus is somewhat glad for how his headlights fail to show more than narrow spots at a time of it. The dribbled pools look disturbingly like the remnants of the priests he stepped over to come down here.

He keeps his gaze fixed on his work, lighting the flare and putting down the tablet. It doesn’t hold a holy text of any kind. He wanted it to, but downloads are risky these days. Soundwave’s viruses eat mechs’ minds as easily as computer files. Instead of the Book of Primus, the tablet holds a copy of Toward Peace.

Like religion, in its purest form Megatron’s rhetoric seems like something Cybertron can live by. By creating an institution around it, it became corrupted. Its leader has used it to rule, not guide. Absolute power has corrupted Megatron absolutely.

It could have been holy. The Prime rests his hand on the tablet almost sadly, his fingertips trailing sorrow and regret over the words filling the screen.

He draws in a deep vent full of dust. It smells of old smoke.

Holding it, he draws himself up to his full height, squaring his shoulders as he speaks into the listening silence, voice a low rolling baritone as solemn as Mirage’s vow of revenge, as purposeful as Prowl’s plan, and as damaging as Jazz’s words. He holds the audio of Him who has come before and will never leave, and as the voice of his god, he speaks to the audience of their entire world.

“Wherefore in the name of Primus of Cybertron, Creator, Matrix, and All-Spark, of the Blessed Primes, thirteen in all, and of all the Matrix-Bearers,” Optimus Prime recites in all due ceremony, “in virtue of the power which has been given us of binding and loosing in the Matrix and on Cybertron, we deprive him and all his accomplices and all his abettors of the sanctuary of the All-Spark and Matrix of Our Creator, we separate him from the society of all believers, we exclude him from the spark of our Holy Union as One in the Matrix and on Cybertron, we declare him excommunicated and anathematized and we judge him condemned to eternal smelting in the Pit with Unicron and all the reprobate, so long as he will not burst the fetters of war, do penance, and satisfy the Temple; we deliver him to Unicron to mortify his body, that his spark may be saved in the day of peace.”
The flare sputters as he finishes. Optimus Prime bends his helm over it. Exhaustion, bitterness, and a strange horror mingle in his chest as he cups his hand over the small flame. White light softens and dies in his palm. Once it’s extinguished, he takes the tablet up. He reads the first line, shakes his head, and sets the flat of the screen against the front corner of the altar. The Altar of Primus isn’t much to look at, but it’s strong enough for this. He shuts off his optics as he pushes. The tablet snaps in half.

Kneeling in the dark, he sets three bombs on the floor before the altar, lining them up among the rough puddles of destroyed decorations. They’re not powerful, but they don’t have to be. They just have to be loud. Setting the timers, he turns and strides away down the dark hallway, back toward the dim distant hint of light. He has plenty of time to leave.

The Autobots will be gone by dawn, and as the Decepticons move in to take Iacon, three explosions will rock the city, one right after another.

Far away, Optimus Prime will whisper three times, once for each distant knell closing the rite, “Until all are One.”

And maybe some day Megatron will understand what he has lost in winning.

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"First snow"

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The world doesn’t exist until Jazz dances. It is muffled, smothered, buried. A blanket of clouds covers the sky, and silence coats the world in dim, frigid flurries more danger than beauty.

Then: let there be light. Spotlights, headlights, biolights, the pearlescent white light reflected from a frosted moon overhead, turning the night sky to diamonds and twinkling sequins dotting the stage that is Earth. The grey clouds roll back, loosing fluffy, dazzling snowflakes like glistening jewels that float lazily to the ground as if in apology for the fierce storm, and the air is crackling crisp, sharp and hard to inhale.

Black and white whirls amidst snow that glitters and glimmers in his headlights, a dusting from the clouds that already moved on, and Jazz gleams among the snowflakes. He is night and snow under starlight, a picturesque scene when at rest but right now a glorious force of nature spinning in the wind like a leftover piece of blizzard winding down. Silver steam billows in languid trails that trace his motions like afterimages in blurred photos, a dozen vents opening and closing on cue to release heated air into a pattern using the winter chill. His fingers flick, his arms snake, cutting through the sparkling ghost of his breath to shape whimsical arabesques, artwork alive for only seconds before it disappears, simply vanishing off his plating as if revealing him emerging from the ether, and it is unreal. He is unreal.

Heavy breathing to cool internal systems pushed to their limits beads moisture around his vents, freezes, melts, and slowly the stop-and-go drips crystal icicles in sprayed patterns that adorn him in fragile gilding as ethereal as the backbend he throws himself into, arching back to an impossible angle, silhouetted against the snow. Blue flashes, his visor suddenly brighter than the moon, mirrored in a thousand falling snowflake facets, and he drops into altmode to swirl the moonlit snow up into the air to sift down over him again. He is dancing, moving, never still.

Black ice glitters over the road as Jazz drifts along it, turning a spin-out into a lithe quicksilver transformation, in and out in time to the rhythm of traffic, or perhaps to whatever tune he hears in the
harmony of his pounding fuelpump and pulsing, excited spark. Hands and tires touch down just long enough to slide off frictionless ice, and there’s a timeless moment where the world holds its breath, caught in the split second where he might not save the move, but it isn’t a move: it’s an entire unchoreographed acrobatic show of long limbs and effortless grace. He launches back into the air almost before he lands, feet kicked up to play in the falling snow as much as on the ice, but it is on the dark, glassy, frozen surface of the road that he shines. He twists and skates, metal sleek on sheer ice and rubber skidding, but he never falters, never fails, always one step from falling, but falling and missing the ground is flying, so he dances in defiance of gravity.

He spreads his arms and turns, embracing the endless expanse of starry midnight, the shimmering moon above that paints him in obsidian and milky pearl. His visor and accents are picked up in startling clarity by the lights, the lights that seek him as he stars in them, steals them, belongs to them as much as the shadows. The attention, he basks in. He dips, one leg sweeping out and then up, bent behind him so he can twirl on the tip of his foot where it seems no one could balance and yet he does.

The heat built up under his armor escapes in wisps, angel wings evaporating off his doors as he rolls his helm back and laughs at the universe. It is giant, larger than comprehension, but he is here, he is now. He’s brought this one world, this one moment into being, and the universe is his audience, his lover, his enemy. All that and more, every potential opportunity hidden but waiting for him to dance them into possibility in the empty voids between the lights, the lights, the lights.

Jazz dances, and winter comes alive around him.

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Not expecting a sudden armful of previously calm patient, Scrapper went over backward. Metal clonked against metal as he was nuzzled ardently, electromagnetic energy cresting like a wave to crash onto him in a dizzying rush. Surprisingly deft fingers explored his midriff, fumbling a bit but otherwise finding plenty to touch touch touch if they missed whatever they had originally been aiming for. Swamped by amorous intent, Scrapper’s own EM field floundered helplessly, slowly tainted by the stronger, more pervasive (and persuasive) flood of energy drowning him.

Hook peered over the empty repair berth, visor wide and shocked pale by the violent fountain of lust rocketing toward the ceiling. This kind of loopy reaction wasn’t that unheard of, but the sheer enthusiasm their patient was attacking Scrapper with was certainly unusual. “I’d usually recommend restraints at this point, but he’s likely to get more excited. Mixmaster! What have you got on hand for sedation to work with the gas he’s already high on?”

“Why sedate when you can party?” Mixmaster asked rhetorically as he rummaged for a canister.

It was a mistake to ask at all, rhetorical or not. Vortex took it as a suggestion. “Party!” he cheered. He stumbled to his feet and reeled toward the door, flailing his arms for balance. It turned him in circles, but the helicopter was strong with this one. The dizzy circling covered a surprising amount of ground. The Combaticon was out the repairbay door and away before Scrapper even thought about getting up from bed of carnal sin Vortex had been attempting to turn the floor into.

“Get back here!” Hook yelled, giving chase down the hall.

“I hate repairing him,” Scrappermuttered as he got up to follow.
“We have to get them away from each other,” someone said. It didn’t matter who, since they were all thinking it anyway.

Prowl had met Prowl. The meeting hadn’t gone well. Instead of cooperating together, they’d taken immediate and intense dislike to each other, and neither could or would explain why. After an hour, it’d devolved into one single exchange the rest of the Autobots and Decepticons of Earth would forever treasure as how to tell their Prowl from the rest of the Prowls of the multidimensional universes.

“Those cogsuckers are mine!” the Other Prowl had snarled, somehow offended by the presence of the Decepticons, or rather, the Constructicons in specific. Scrapper had backed away uneasily from the poisonous glare attempting to stab him through the spark, and the rest of the combiner team clustered at his back as if hiding behind him. Fear and intrigue had stared back at the Prowl in equal measure. Under what circumstances did an Autobot lay claim to the entirety of the Constructicons?

Their dimension’s Prowl had snorted, stepping in among the Autobot ranks to spread his arms.

“Glitch, please. These are mine.”

The Autobots looked at each other. Yeah, sounded about right. Sideswipe stepped forward to sling an elbow up onto Prowl’s right shoulder as Optimus Prime laid a hand on his left. Cliffjumper and Bumblebee cut in front of him to grin fiercely at the imposter. Nonimposter. Other.

Speechless with affront, the Other Prowl stared at them united against him. Almost coincidentally, the way he stood blocked Scrapper from their sight. Five Constructicons peered curiously around him at the Autobots. It seemed fitting.

Oddly enough, Swindle was the one they called first. “Reclamation and Recreation!” he chirped cheerfully as he picked up the comm. An unknown frequency might mean new business, after all, and he was all about finding new business right now. The pickings for a retired weapons dealer on a post-war Cybertron were pretty slim.

So he was fairly optimistic about the call right until he recognized Fat Tankor’s voice. He listened for half a minute, looked to the ground in a plea for patience from Primus, and managed a polite, “It’s not my bar. You have fun with that.” And then he hung up.

Tall Tankor called not a minute later.

“Heeeeey, Octane, buddy.” Swindle listened without actually paying attention as a bucketful of woes was poured out over the line, ending in a pathetic plea. Tall Tankor took his drinking seriously. Swindle wasn’t taking him seriously, however. “What makes you think I can do anything? Good luck getting back in. Bye!”

Two Dinobots, Wheeljack, and fragging Waspinator later, Swindle had given up on actually getting
any work done. He leaned back in his seat with his arm over his optics to block out the world in general. The door opening didn’t make him so much as twitch.

“You realize your clientele’s gathered outside the bar begging for you not to close, right?” he asked his visitor.

Blurr sullenly plonked himself down in the chair across the desk. “Let ‘em beg.”

“You’re not really going to close.”

Vents click-clicked in irritation, but Blurr didn’t answer.

Swindle sighed. “So they started a fight. That happens in bars. You can’t just lock the door and give up on a business just because someone throws a punch or breaks a chair over Slug’s head.”

“Swindle…” Blurr didn’t look up at the merchant as Swindle peaked under his arm, curious at the apprehensive tone in the bartender’s voice. The lanky ex-racer was leaning back in the chair, arms crossed and a frown on his face as he stared at the floor, optics trouble. “You ever read ‘Toward Peace’?”

“Uh.” Sure he had. Ex-Decepticon and all that, although he’d mostly skimmed through it to get a feel for how the market would run under Megatron’s dictatorship. “I guess. Why?”

Blurr met his optics. “You remember how the war got started? Not the Senate or Functionalists or anything like that. The first real action that led to Megatron’s arrest and everything leading to him going underground to start advocating violence instead of a peaceful revolution.”

“Yeah, sure. It’s practically legend.” Swindle frowned and leaned forward on the desk, hand spread. “He went for a drink and -- “ He stopped, optics wide.

A grim smile crossed Blurr’s face. “And got in a fight at a bar. So you’ll excuse me if I’m a tad oversensitive about fighting in my bar.”

Swindle had no ready reply to that.

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"Motormaster and Skywarp arguing"

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Skywarp stared. It wasn’t often the base prankster was caught flat-footed, but it wasn’t often that his prank suppliers were yoinked, either. Everybody on Earth knew better than to touch Supply Closet 19. That was his stash. Consequences were prolonged and devious upon those who messed with his stuff.

So he’d been out for someone’s metal when he noticed his paint supplies were tampered with.

Checking the surveillance cameras had enlightened him as to the culprit, but bursting into the Stunticons’ quarters hadn’t ended in confrontation or violence.

Confused, he said, “You’re not supposed to use that.”

Motormaster glared at him just long enough to be sure Skywarp wasn’t going to attack him before going back to touching up his paint. “Why not? It’s paint.”
“But it’s…house paint.”

“It does the job,” the Stunticon commander grunted. “It’s the right colors, it dries quick, and I don’t have to keep it polished.”

“That’s because it’s not supposed to be polished,” Skywarp said. He blinked, taking in the truckformer’s matte color scheme. Black and purple, like his colors, except Motormaster had apparently decided going to the Constructicons for paint touch-ups was too much of a hassle. The tint was strange, however. To Skywarp’s optics, able to see many more wavelengths of light than a human’s organic orbs, the paint looked as foreign as a coating of grass stain. “You don’t look right,” he said a little helplessly, wondering if he should do something. There was nothing technically wrong with using Earth paint on their frames, but it pinged him as all kinds of wrong.

Motormaster determinedly ignored him, dabbing paint over a chipped spot. “I look fine.”

“No you don’t!”

“Feh. Go back to the clouds, flyboy.”

“You look like you used house paint!” Skywarp insisted. “Couldn’t you have at least used the stuff the humans use for their cars?”

“This is what you had,” Motormaster growled. “I’m not going to go out and get more just because you don’t like the look of me. You already don’t like the look of me. You’re a jet. It comes with the territory. I don’t like your paintjob either, but you don’t hear my horn going off in your audio about it.”

Skywarp shifted from foot to foot. “But…”

“Scat, airhead!”

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"The fetish in the fandom seems to be idealized genital piercings"

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This was the moment Tarn had been waiting for. He’d waited all this time to bend the arrogant Autobot surgeon over a table, bare his impressively decorated spark, and --

“Megatron dancing with the stars!”

Unfortunately for Tarn’s ego, the one yelping the high-pitched blasphemy wasn’t Pharma. Pharma startled so badly his cockpit screeched across the table. “What? What?!?”

Tarn grimaced behind his mask, both hands scrambling to pin the squirming mech down. “Don’t move, blast you!”

“What? Why?” Pharma twisted, one of those improbably flexible moves Tarn would have admired under any other circumstances. Right now, it did nothing but give the piercing caught just beyond his valve rim a sharp tug. Tarn yipped like the Pet. “What the…are you caught?”

“You said you didn’t have any mods,” Tarn blurted in his own defense. He fumbled between them to ease the barbell free, twitching as the pain stopped.
Pharma managed to prop himself up on an elbow to look back at the flustered, angered Decepticon. “That’s not a mod, it’s just regular valve mesh.”

“Ah. Well. It, ah, happens.” Tarn reset his vocalizer. Awkward. “Shall we?” He reached around to take advantage of something he’d taken note of at the front of the surgeon’s valve, hoping to slide past the issue, but Pharma got a strange look on his face. “What?”

“That really doesn’t do anything for me,” Pharma said, almost detached. Tarn’s fingers paused, delicately pinching the captured ball ring between them. “I got it for looks. My… lover at the time had a thing for piercings, and since I’m not very sensitive there to begin with, it seemed like a good idea at the time to get it pierced.”

Well, that was disappointing. “It looks nice,” Tarn said dutifully, because it was true, but, “What if I rub harder?”

“Oh!”

That answered that. “Nothing at all?” he asked a touch sadly as he withdrew his hand.

“No!”

“Hmm.”

Pharma gave him an exasperated look. “If you must know, get a vicarious glee from watching new nurses search endlessly for where the jingling comes from as I walk by.”

Oh. That did sort of fit his prickly Autobot’s personality better than a node piercing for pure pleasure. Tarn smiled, oddly pleased by the answer, and Pharma chuckled at his amusement. Somehow, that threw them back into the interrupted mood, and Tarn was more careful navigating the rim of Pharma’s valve with his spike piercing this time. Things were getting truly heated, all huffing and grunting and the whine of flight engines. Excellent. Wonderful.

A little too good, as Tarn grew too enthusiastic in plunging into Pharma’s tight valve.

This time, they screamed in chorus.

Catching a barbell on a ring? Not fun. Not fun at all. The mood was effectively ruined.

But then, as they untangled themselves while sniping sourly back and forth, things got even worse.

*tink*

They both froze. It was a tiny sound, the tiniest plink of metal falling to the ground, but their audios were fine-tuned to hear that sound in pitched battle, if necessary. Horrified optics met for a split second.

Autobot and Decepticon tumbled apart, gazes locked on the floor and fingers feeling up their equipment even as they searched. There wasn’t a moment to lose. Barbell ball or captured ball for the ring, those suckers could roll forever if they let them escape, and good luck finding another piece of jewelry out here on Messatine. It wasn’t like that stuff could be mined for, and anything they could confiscate from anyone living out in this isolated region probably wasn’t up to sanitation standards. Sticking unhygienic ornaments into interface equipment resulted in graphic illustrations in a medical textbook somewhere. And like fun were they going to let the holes close. Good piercers were rare, and good piercings cost a lot in time and money, an investment in short supply during a war.
They did find the barbell ball eventually. Tarn shifted uneasily as Pharma knelt to carefully screw it back on. It should have been an erotic experience, what with Pharma handling his spike, face only inches away, but mostly it was nerve-racking as the ball kept slipping. “I hate how the angle has to be precise,” Pharma muttered, breath warm on Tarn’s spike. “I’ve done surgery that’s been less precise than ah-ha! Got it!” He tightened it, and Tarn squinted through the tweak of pain, a necessity to get the thing as tight as possible.

The surgeon climbed back to his feet, and Tarn sighed. “Next time -- ”

“I’m not taking out my ring. That thing’s a glitch and a half to put back in.”

“You already said you don’t get anything from it.”

“I like looking good!”

“Oh, come on. You don’t really want me to take out this.” Tarn thrust his hips forward proudly. “You loved how it felt inside you.”

Pharma coughed, looking away. Tarn snapped to attention, suddenly suspicious, but the surgeon shrugged. “It felt fine. Good, I mean!” He put his hands up against Tarn’s narrow glare. “I’m not complaining about that. But, uh, every time you tried grinding against me…”

Tarn stared at him for a moment before covering his mask with a hand. “Right. Not sensitive?”

“From a certain angle it can feel pretty good once I get going, but rutting like that, it’s just pressure.” Pharma shifted from foot to foot. “I’m feeling kind of abraded. I think we probably should have talked about this beforehand.”

“Agreed.”

It seemed the moment should have been waited for a bit longer.

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“Good leaders”

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The Combaticons, it should be noted, did military hierarchy well. Contrary to popular thought, all their individualistic quirks smoothed into a cohesive whole when slotted into a unit. Onslaught’s strategies required thought, sometimes too much thought, the kind of thinking that could trap someone in their own mind, and it balanced against Brawl’s tendency not to think at all. Blast Off’s chill disdain for everyone and everything in existence gave Swindle’s slimy shmooze substance, firming them both. Vortex filled in the cracks like the random, easily-distracted maniac he was.

There was a reason their plot against Shockwave nearly succeeded. They worked well together.

Shoving them into a combiner team did things to that hierarchy, however. The military hierarchy cemented into place around them, but the internal structure of the team became strangely...liquid. Inside the structure of the military, their unit had become a prison cell containing only them, and they were inside each other, doing whatever it took to keep their odd group going. Bruticus turned their team into something more permanent and consequently more intimate. Whereas before they had voluntarily worked together, now they had no choice. They couldn’t go their separate ways if there was an argument. They couldn’t be reassigned, either. They had to make it work.
Before, losing Onslaught as their commander would have meant Blast Off taking over the team, uncontested. Worst case scenario, the Combaicons would have fractured and gone their separate ways. Which, given Blast Off's apathy toward leading, would have happened fairly quickly.

Now, they had to stick it out. And that meant ignoring rank. Technically, Blast Off was next in command. In reality, Blast Off wanted absolutely nothing to do with the job.

"I hate you," he said to the common room in general. He turned and left without another word.

The remaining three Combaicons blinked after him. "He really doesn't deal well with forced social contact, does he?" Vortex asked drily. "I guess that means he doesn't want command."

"He couldn't lead us out of a paper bag," Swindle muttered.

"Well, I ain't doing it!" Brawl said. Nobody had looked at him, but he felt the disclaimer was necessary. He wasn't great at planning, but even he could see where this was going. "I'd have to talk to Mags, urgh, Lord Megatron, and file reports about everybody instead-a just me, and 'k, ordering people around can be fun, but, uh, think we all know I can't get Onslaught outta this." Unease filled his visor, because he was Decepticon and hated admitted exploitable weakness but he was a Combaticon and knew they already knew what honesty compelled him to admit. Gestalt links sucked, sometimes. "Somebody's gotta come up with a plan. I ain't good with plans."

Plus what would likely be weeks of being in charge before they ever got a go-ahead to go after Onslaught. Weeks of leading three other Combaicons, and representing the Combaicons back at Decepticon HQ, and weeks of the small busy-work required to keep the Combaicons functioning. Half a week on their own, and Soundwave had already reamed Blast Off for failing to submit an after-action report, a medical requisition list, and completely missing the fuel pick-up. All the little details Onslaught managed on automatic, only keeping them in the loop if it involved them.

Well, Onslaught was gone. It was just them. Individually, then one-to-another, they had pooled some of their knowledge and figured out some of what they should be doing. It was chores and duties broken up between them, all of them functioning on their own under Onslaught's supervision, while he did frag-knew-what-all in his office like a hub coordinating them.

Blast Off wasn’t any good at being a hub. It involved too many people for his limited patience.

"He has to do it," Brawl complained. "He ranks us."

"Yeah, but nothing’s gonna get done if we rely on that," Vortex said. "You want Onslaught back? Then we gotta work on working together."

"Then you take charge!"

"Um."

Swindle was already out the common room door before Vortex had come up with a response for that. The mildly panicked look in Vortex's visor told him the answer, anyway. An interrogator by nature, irresponsible for fun, Vortex had no ability to command. He abused power too easily. Given subordinates, he'd spend more time tormenting them than getting anything done.

Something that Vortex realized, fortunately. If it were under any other circumstance with any other unit, he'd be positively gleeful taking command. That didn't work so well in a situation where he had to take the job seriously. He didn't want to admit the gestalt links locked him into giving a frag about the other Combaicons, but they did, so he had to.
Explaining why Swindle got a knock on his door late that night. He didn't answer, of course. He wasn't stupid.

The 'copter outside sighed, forehelm thunking against the door. "Swindle...come on. You know what I'm gonna say."

Silence from inside.

"I'm not Onslaught. I can't make up answers on my own. I can get answers from other people, but that's not what we need. We need somebody who can do the everyday stuff, and make big plans. It's business, right? You're good at business. You can look at us like employees and run the unit like it's a McDonald, and I know you already think of reports to HQ like sending letters to corporate."

More silence. Stubborn, unanswering silence.

Vortex banged his forehelm lightly against the door. "Come ooooooooon. It's not permanent! Blast Off will do all the ranking stuff as long as somebody's handing him everything he has to file and whatnot, and I talked to Brawl, he's fine with taking orders as long as we get ammunition shipped in on time, and fraggit, I don't want the job! Swindle!" He pounded on the door with one hand. "Swindle, get your tires out here so I can salute you!"

But the silence continued until Vortex finally just broke down the door. Not surprising, since Swindle wasn't actually in the room. No, he was a little too clever for that.

Vortex looked around, visor narrow. "...right." See, this? This, he could do. He knew how to lay a trap. Run a unit, not so much, but cornering mechs, he could do.

He also knew how to make the mech in question want to stay in the trap.

"Here," he said grimly as he stalked through the door of the common room. He shoved a bucket onto the table between Brawl and Blast Off. "Spare change. Now."

"Uh..." Brawl exchanged weirded-out looks with Blast Off, then shrugged and dug into his storage. "I've got sixty bucks and twelve shanix."

Blast Off wordlessly poured a handful of miscellaneous alien currency into the bucket. Vortex emptied his own limited funds into the blasted thing, too. It wasn't much, but it was something, and he left a note with an IOU promising double the amount as a completion bonus once they got Onslaught back.

Six months later, their commander walked through the door into his office looking entirely disoriented by the whole rescue experience. There was a tale there, one of hostage negotiations carried out by a smirking, ruthless little glitch he'd barely recognized as one of his teammates, but it was a tale for another day, preferably after he had time to defrag. For now, Onslaught had more immediate concerns.

"Where's my chair?" he asked slowly, glancing around his office. It was frighteningly organized. The chair behind the desk was too small to belong to whom it should.

Blast Off stood stiffly in the doorway. "Common room."

"Where's your chair?"

"Not here."
"I...see that. Is there a reason it's not in here?"

"Because I wasn't in here."

Onslaught stared at him, processing that. "Does this have to do with why Swindle was the one negotiating for my release?"

"Yes."

He really hadn't missed trying to pry information out of Blast Off. "Am I going to have to check the unit's budget for embezzled money?"

"Likely."

"And you allowed it to happen."

Blast Off looked away. "He at least knows how to balance a budget."

Well, there was that. "Anything else I should know?"

A strained look crimped the bottom edge of the shuttle's visor. "If you see a large entry marked 'command bonus,' it's supposed to be there."

Onslaught slowly felt a few dots connect. "Did you bribe Swindle to do your job?"

"Perhaps."

He stared at the shuttle. The shuttle avoided looking at him. "Does this," Onslaught said at last, "have anything to do with the...new paint job?" He gestured gingerly at the red and yellow color scheme. There were few things more strange than coming back home to a combiner team painted in bright, cheery colors. Red and yellow assault tank. Red and yellow shuttle. A smirking red and yellow Jeep. Red and yellow helicopter with friendly little ‘M’s painted on the tips of his rotor blades.

Blast Off heaved a sigh. "In a way. Vortex might have said something he regretted later."

Onslaught was quite sure they all regretted it. "I see." He nudged the too-small chair out from behind his desk out and took a seat. There was a very low, sarcastic mutter of, "I'm lovin' it."

Blast Off hated him, too.

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"G1 Prowl - numbers, calculations"

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In times like these, Prowl tended to run the numbers slowly. It wasn’t from an overwhelming amount of input. The rec room was a wreck, chairs skidding out of the main fight to slam into walls beside brawlers already out of the fray, but Brawn was still going strong. That was to be expected, however. As often as the high-strung Autobots of the Ark riled each other up, Prowl didn’t find loud, furniture-breaking arguments made with fists and feet to be particularly alarming. He’d been tracking the rising emotional tide in the ship all week. It wasn’t surprising in the least to walk into the midst of the breakage as everyone angrily, joyously, explosively let off steam in one rowdy no-holds-barred fight.
The numbers clicked over slowly because Prowl enjoyed running them. They added up in neat, proven totals well within in the spread he’d predicted. Nothing had gone wrong. Nobody had done the unexpected. Everything was within parameters, and he savored the glow of satisfaction that he’d read twenty separate personnel files right yet again. He knew what these people would do. He knew what to expect from them, in this at the very least.

They, in turn, had played this game with him before. They knew what to expect. His reaction was as unsurprising as their poor behavior, and as anticipated. Even now, those paying enough attention spotted him. Optics flashed, excited. Grins spread like an infection.

He ran the numbers, checking tallies for accuracy.

Sideswipe: 7.
Sunstreaker: 10.
Cliffjumper: 7.
Mirage: 2.
Jazz: a private, strongly-worded lecture. Prowl wasn’t so easily tricked.
Brawn: 9. Prowl had warned him against finding an aluminum chair their size.
Windcharger: 3.

The list totaled slowly as the fight wound down, word spreading through the participants that law and order had arrived to judge them. Prowl noted names and numbers, extending the list.

Once the fighters were finished making fools of themselves, he’d read them the riot act. Ironhide would get most of them after he was through, but that would happen only after he claimed one of the chairs for his own and dealt out individualized punishments, calculated down to the force used to bring his palm down on their backsides.

Discipline, Prowl believed, was best dealt out by someone capable of making delinquents do as they were told -- or at least behave as predicted.

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"Evil Decepticon Tea-Parties of Doom"

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“Y’know, I always wondered how those two ever stopped shouting at each other long enough to rule an Empire.”

The mumbled comment brought Brawl over from decorating the cake. With explosives. Because they were Decepticons, fraggit, and the filling had to be fitting. It wouldn’t take anyone’s head off, but everyone expected something special in the party centerpiece, and Brawl was pretty slagging good at demolitions. Now he ducked a bit to peer through the prep area’s counter window into the main room, where Vortex leaned on the counter staring at Megatron and Starscream.

Most of the other Decepticons milled about, exchanging pleasant small talk and small arms fire. It was an entirely civilized setting, the exact opposite of their normal demeanor. Whereas the common room usually resembled a gigantic free-for-all orgy crossed with an ongoing game of Beer Pong played with hand grenades, the room at large was clean, tidy, and full of the low murmur of conversation. Peppered by the occasional laugh and/or gunshot, the party was a tremendous success.

That’s what happened when two strategists, three tacticians, Megatron, and Starscream collaborated. Throw in Mixmaster planning the refreshments, and it was no wonder even the Stunticons behaved
themselves. Nobody wanted to miss out on Soundwave’s patented special blend of energon. Served in elegant little cups, it was poured out mere sips at a time. It earned applause when the delicately curved pots were carried out. Genteel applause, soft pats of metal hands on palms instead of war whoops and shouting.

Unnerving to those who’d never seen it. Just plain strange to the reawakened Combaticons thrust into the middle of it, but what the frag. They’d always known High Command and the Elite were up to something. Megatron and Starscream seemed out for each other’s vital fluids every other minute of the week, so this made a sort of sense of how the Empire had gotten this far.

Vortex had heard that the Decepticon parody of high-class Towers’ parties were driving that one noblemech Autobot absolutely bonkers. He approved. Sympathized, at least anytime he saw Megatron pick up a teensy glass with his pinkie out, but approved.

Vortex sighed and hefted his tray. “Refills on Table #3,” he said, resigned.

Brawl pushed the steaming kettle of energon across the counter, and Vortex painstakingly poured it into his little serving pot. It stayed at ideal warmth if it was ferried out to everyone in tiny amounts. It also required someone to play server every week, and Soundwave insisted on scheduling him, Scrapper, or Hook. Nobody else had the hands for measuring the right amounts, according to him. Mixmaster would do, but Mixmaster made the solid-sculpted energon for the parties. This week it was a cake. Last week, it had been sliced piles of different-textured and flavored energon. He’d called them ‘sandwiches.’ Everyone else called them ‘tasty’ and attempted to stuff their maws in the most aristocratic stuck-up manner possible.

Serving duty wasn’t a bad job to pull. He and Brawl would get to take all the leftovers after the party finished.

“What’s with the frilly thing?” Motormaster sneered as Vortex bent over Table #3 to pour energon in a thin, steaming, superheated stream. It was all about presentation. He had to admit it was kind of fun watching everyone try to calculate the angle as he raised and lowered the serving pot, stopping at just the right moment to not spill a drop. Sometimes Vortex really loved this job.

Then there was putting up with the obnoxious idiots who didn’t understand what presentation even meant, much less why Vortex was part of it. “It’s an apron,” the Comboticon said primly. There were rules. They had to be observed, or the violators would be dragged outside to have better manners beaten into them.

A tug on the edge of his apron definitely violated one of the rules. “Whatcha need an apron for?” Motormaster asked, grinning. He apparently thought himself above consequences.

Visor narrow, Vortex straightened to glare down at him. “In case of spills,” he said in a perfectly deadpan voice as he dumped the entire serving pot into Motormaster’s lap, scalding energon and all. The Stunticon commander went rigid, optics popped wide. The scent of burning wires drifted up as the energon began to sizzle, melting anything that wasn’t covered by thick armor. “Oops,” Vortex said, not sounding sorry at all, “I’m so sorry.”

Quiet, polite applause followed him as he flounced back to the prep area.

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“mechs with beast alt modes can't fully enjoy interfacing outside of alt mode”

[* * * * *]
“You’re sure you’re okay with this?” He wasn’t nervous, he wasn’t. He was simply well aware that his altmode was kind of strange and came packaged with nonstandard equipment that squicked out a lot of Cybertronians. It wasn’t his fault his standard interfacing equipment was linked into his altmode set! He hadn’t had a choice about a beastmode altmode, it was what he’d been forged with, so he wished people would just get over the whole ‘ewww, you interface like an organic?’ thing.

Sixshot must have heard something in his voice, even if it wasn’t nervousness. He twisted his neck to look up and around at the mech perched awkwardly over his hindquarters. “It’s fine.”

He wished he could just take that as reassurance. “Does that mean you’re fine with it because you don’t care, or you’re fine with it ‘cause you like using your stuff, too?”

Finding someone with compatible equipment was rare enough. Finding someone who actually liked using it was rarer still. Beastmode sex was kinky as frag. It wasn’t something every mech liked even if they’d scanned an organic altmode who could actually rut like his did.

Sixshot just gave him a look. It was a look that said, ‘Do I look like someone who tolerates being used?’

Right. On to rutting it was.

[* * * * *]

"Tarn - the type to have competitions over who can recite more lines of ‘Toward Peace’ in bed” + “noncon where the valve/input-module-of-choice is the aggressor”

[* * * * *]

“Have you remembered any more?”

The flash of fear in Overlord’s optics was involuntary, and therefore all the more satisfying. Overlord felt intensely but in short bursts, ego and boredom eliminating permanence. Megatron had taught him humiliation, but he’d the lesson he’d learned was how to recover quickly, not how to stay down. He erased any lesson learnt at their Lord’s hands with anger. Indignation covered the indignity of loss. Sheer self-confidence had deleted justifiable fear.

So for Overlord to feel fear, however fleeting, meant that Tarn had chosen his torture well. It was progress, slow but satisfying.

“Of course not,” the former Decepticon spat. His fingers curled as hatred wiped away the fear. “I’m hardly going to remember something I’ve never read!”

Tarn tsked, shaking his head in mock sorrow. “No wonder you failed. Knowing your enemy is the first step to defeating him.” He took the last step forward and let his own fingers curl in easy familiarity around a thoroughly defeated enemy. “It seems we must begin again.”

Words were still a weapon Overlord used well, but this was hardly their first time doing this. Tarn had rules. Overlord either cooperated as best he could, or the shameful humiliation was made worse. There were ways to make it worse. As of now, being shared among a team was merely the first torture of the day. Being shared with an entire battalion, or worse, a film crew...

Overlord stared grimly at the ceiling, full lips pressed tight, but there was only so much defiance could under the circumstances. His ventilations began to stutter soon enough. Tarn’s hand filled, the pounding pulse of laboring hydraulics hitting his palm as arousal toppled whatever mental resolution the prisoner had tried to keep in place today. The magnetic clamp pinched at the base, cold enough to
cause a flinch and tight enough that Overlord wouldn’t overload with it on. It was a familiar restraint. Overlord knew exactly what it would and wouldn’t allow, from long and painful experience.

Tarn idly let his hand continue working. There was a level of desperation he found he enjoyed in Overlord. The twitches of his hips as he tried to keep control, perhaps. The way he occasionally gave in, attempting to turn the tables by thrusting in violent cooperation into whomever rode him, but the D.J.D. usually responded with loud appreciation that their frag-toy had joined the fun. It tended to rile up the rest of them, seeing the one currently on top having such a good time, and Overlord’s endurance, while impressive, couldn’t outlast all of them. He ended those sessions on the ragged edge, regret in the self-inflicted bite marks on his lips and optics exhausted as he dully stared up at the mechs taking turns using him.

By the time Tarn settled on top of him with a purr of engines, Overlord’s teeth were clenched against stifled gasps. His hips gave short, aborted thrusts into Tarn’s hand, and he groaned far back in his throat as his torturer slid down his length.

Tarn rocked in place, valve pleasantly full. His optics were dim behind his mask as he studied the mech helplessly pleasuring him. Leaning down, he pressed his mask to the side of Overlord’s face. “I will spare you the others today if you can remember but one more sentence, Overlord. Surely you can remember one sentence more,” he coaxed, the promise a mockery.

Overlord grimaced and turned his head aside, optics offline. The valve around his spike squeezed, washing nausea through his tanks as his body almost glowed in poisoned pleasure that would be agonizing by the end of the day, and he knew resistance or even passive acceptance would get him nowhere. The rules existed to give him just enough hope to crush his will. Hope was the idea that if he did as he was told, did better, he would be spared worse. Hope made him try even when he wanted to give up.

“Begin,” Tarn commanded, and Overlord strained to remember even one word more.

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“someone (consensually) getting choked. Bruises, raspy voice, etc.”

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“Why do you sound like that?” they asked him. They always asked him. It made no sense for someone to sound like gravel on metal after walking out of full repairs.

And true to form, the first time he fell into the Constructicons’ capable hands, they asked. They stared at him in blatant disapproval when he woke after battle, and Hook said it. “This could have been fixed years ago,” he added, pinging a finger against the scuffed, crimped vox box in the Seeker’s open neck.

Starscream smiled, optics dim and lazy from repair lag. His hand rose slowly to wrap around Hook’s wrist, repositioning the surgeon’s hand until it covered his throat, the Seeker’s own fingers pressing Hook’s into place. “Why fix what I want broken?” he rasped as he closed their hands around his throat.

The Constructicons stared. Hook swallowed, visor wide and locked on the way tubes compressed, cables bowed, wires bent. Starscream’s pleased hum broke into static. Hook’s fans kicked in.

[* * * * *]
Six hundred vorn since Megatron told the Senate to screw themselves and set off into the galaxy, leaving Cybertron behind, the Decepticons were doing pretty good for themselves. The Empire consisted of six colonies of various sizes, but it was better than nothing. Sure, they missed their homeplanet. Who wouldn’t? But abandoning Cybertron to self-destruct on its own had meant freedom for them. They’d embraced the tenets of ‘Toward Peace’ and Megatron’s other teachings, and the Empire was growing, slowly but surely. They might not have the strength of arms -- yet -- to conquer the known universe, but they had a manufacturing base, a service industry, and were even exporting goods, now.

Besides, Cybertron had done fairly well in their absence. The new Prime had kicked political aft and taken names, at least in a diplomatic way that had kept the planet from outright war. It hadn’t been the revolution Megatron had called for, but the Prime had ideas and put them into play. The Senate lost power. The Prime had made sure of that.

It’d gotten to the point where Megatron had lifted the ban on business contracts with Cybertron. The Empire needed investors and money like any interstellar political entity, and the new Prime had indicated a willingness to trade with them. The Galactic Council was still too squishy-friendly for mechanical beings not to ally with each other first.

All of which meant Scrapper wasn’t about to pass up the chance to hit on the black-and-white sitting at the bar. A. that red chevron was cute as frag; B. he wore the red stamp of the Autobots, meaning he had government connections back on Cybertron; and C. everything about him screamed ‘foreman’ to a buildmech like Scrapper. Anybody in charge of anything back on Cybertron was somebody he wanted to cultivate. Even if the mech was nothing but a office supervisor, he was still somebody to get to know.

Hey, Scrapper knew how to network. If he wanted to get his team’s name back onto Cybertron, then he had to start somewhere.

“Excuse me, mechs,” he said as he started to stand, only to nearly bump helms with Hook and Mixmaster as the two of them rose at the same moment. “Where are you going?”

The surgeon frowned at him. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I have plans for tonight.”

“Same,” Mixmaster said.

“Oh?” Scrapper’s visor narrowed in suspicion. “That’s news to me.”

Hook huffed out an exasperated breath before jerking his chin to indicate the Autobot at the bar. “I wanted some civilized company.”

Mixmaster shot him a startled glance. “Me too?” he said almost uncertainly.

Suspicion became surprise. “I…was just on my way to make his acquaintance.”

“Well, there goes the plan to buy him a drink,” Bonecrusher muttered, and the three of them turned to stare at him just in time to catch Long Haul’s rueful nod of agreement.

Scavenger deflated beside him. “Aww, frag. I won’t stand a chance next to any of you.”

Scrapper blinked at them all. “This is beyond coincidence.”
“Ah. Well.” Hook slowly resumed his seat. “I admit that I have ulterior motives.”

Mixmaster glanced between him and Scrapper, then sat down as well. “Yeeeeeah, that’s not just coincidence. I was heading over ‘cause he smells like he’s been in a lab recently, or at least hangs out around somebody who does my kind of work. I figured I’d see if he could pass my name on to whoever he knows back on Cybertron. Get back on the radar in the Academy, if I’m lucky.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Holy frag.”

“What?”

The Constructicons stared at each other. “He’s been in the background of every media photo of the new Lord Protector of Cybertron,” Bonecrusher said eventually, when it was clear nobody knew where to start. “Didn’t recognize him until he sat down.” He elbowed Long Haul. “We didn’t know if he actually knows Ironhide or not, but a connection’s a connection. Military respects buildmechs, and they always got contracts for offworld sites.”

Hook worked his mouth a moment. “Ah…the same for the attending physician for the new Prime. It wouldn’t be anything official, but if Ratchet were looking to approach anyone about healthcare advances in the Decepticons, an unofficial connection would be valuable for him to nurture.”

“He looks like a foreman,” Scrapper said when they looked at him next. “And he’s my type.” Small, authoritative, and very, very shiny.

Scavenger shrugged as their gazes shifted to him. “Yeah, I just thought he was kinda adorable with those bitty doors.”

The whole table turned to look at the bar. Prowl continued to sip a tall glass of something layered and potent. He looked mildly irritated, if not outright bored. A promising attitude for the plan niggling into being at the back of Scrapper’s head. “Does anybody object to sharing?”

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*Tink. Tink. Tink. Tink.*

It was a sound the Decepticons were alarmingly familiar with. The common room froze, ever optic turning toward the door, and a mass flinch swept the room at the sight of the blue mech blocking the door. And, not so coincidentally, their escape route. Hoooo boy, something was about to go down.

There were various sound effects for how screwed a Decepticon was, depending on which officer was fragged off. Starscream shrieked. Megatron roared. Soundwave folded his arms, fingers tapping. The speed indicated how much slag had hit the fan.

*Tink. Tink. Tink. Tink. “Swindle.”*

What had been a defensive cluster at the biggest table burst apart as every mech near Swindle abandoned him en masse. “The frag you’d do this time?” Vortex hissed from under the table.
“Onslaught’ll murder you if you sold our ammo again!”

Swindle swallowed hard before pasting a wide smile on. “How can I help you, Soundwave?”

Soundwave’s narrow visor saw all and was thoroughly unimpressed by everything. “Explain.” He transmitted a packet. It unzipped into a series of photos taken from several museums.

The part that betrayed him was the fact that Swindle didn’t need a language pack to translate the writing on the slabs. “Look, not every customer’s right, no matter what the popular thinking is these days -- “

*Tink-tink. Tink-tink.*

The Decepticons found convenient corners to hide in. Soundwave’s visor narrowed further. Swindle’s smile faltered.

“Swindle. Explain.”

The connmech blinked at him for a moment, trying to figure out what he wanted explained if not the complaints themselves. Maybe the collection? “I like keeping a record of customer complaints,” he hazarded, “and clay tablets were really kind of the communication standard back then. It’s not that surprising they made it this long if you think about it, they’re more durable than you’d think -- “

*Tink-tink-tink-tink.*

Oh, Primus. The furniture acquired Decepticons hiding behind it, two deep in places.

“Swindle. Tablets: are 4000 planetary years old. Swindle: in Detention Centre. On Cybertron.” The blocky communication officer drew himself up, visor blazing disbelief and wrath in equal amounts. “Explain.”

Swindle gave him a particularly blank look, smile dropped. “Well…yeah, but there was a market. Babylon. Lots of open commerce. I couldn’t miss out on that action.”

Dead silence, of the kind that usually resulted in dead bodies. Even Soundwave’s fingers had ceased their drumming. Vortex’s visor attempted to bulge as he stared at his gestaltmate.

Swindle just blinked, confused. What? He didn’t get it.

Finally, Soundwave brought all his fingers down in one, definitive tink as if deciding something. “Soundwave: not surprised,” he almost grumbled, and turned to leave. “Ea-nasir. Monitor duty.”

“Aw, come on, it was a long time ago and I didn’t even make that much money!” Swindle scooted his chair back in order to reluctantly trudge after Soundwave. “And it’s pronounced Ea-nasir, thank you very much.”

Soundwave spun on his heel to glare. *Tink. Tink. Tink. Tink.*


[* * * * *]

"Mantis, or Peacock Shrimp inspired a hilarious thread on Tumblr, and the Oatmeal did a strip on them. Go look ‘em up.”
Base security honestly wasn't that big a concern for the Decepticons. With the exception of the Launch Tower, which was guarded, the only other way into the base was through the ocean. Quite frankly, if an Autobot made it through the variety of bizarre Terran wildlife outside on the ocean floor, nobody wanted to mess with that Autobot. If it wasn't Frank the Lobster, it was the Peacock Patrol.

"Sweet merciful spires!" someone said in a kicked-in-the-diodes voice from down a side hall, and Brawl reversed a couple steps back to look. He didn't know that voice.

Oh. He didn't know that voice because it belonged to an Autobot. A dripping wet, tattered-around-the-edges blue Autobot he vaguely recognized as the arrogant upperclass aristocrat superspy who was supposed to turn invisible and all that. Right now he just looked like he wanted to disappear into thin air as he looked up at Brawl and froze, caught.

Brawl wasn't too quick on the uptake, but he knew what somebody coming in that particular airlock with holes like that meant. "The shrimp got ya, didn't they," he said.

Optics still wide, Mirage nodded. Slowly, as if not really believing what he himself had just lived through.

"Yeah. Nasty little fraggers." Brawl took another step back to fully block the hall and planted his hands on his hips, sighing. "Ya better let me take ya prisoner, now."

"And why -- " Mirage swallowed, resetting his vocalizer back to pre-shrimp attack levels. "And why would I do such a thing?"

"Uh, 'cause usually when they swarm a mech, a few get into yer internals?" Brawl scratched his helm like it'd help him think, and maybe it did. "You're an Autobint. Ain't ya got passenger space? They like that. Me, they get into my barrel, and that's easy 'nough to clear, but they got into Vortex's cockpit once. Took out his control panel, and the glass, and part of his heel, and then we had to run 'em down inside. Ended up hauling him back out into the water to try and flush the last one outta his leg, and the slagging thing blew out his knee getting away."

The Autobot stared at him. His optics seemed rather pale.

Brawl edged down the hall. "I'll take ya to the 'Structies first thing, 'cause ain't nobody around here want one of those critters loose in the brig. Okay?"

Mirage swallowed again. His optics paled further. "That does seem...wise."

"Yeah, so, ya gonna give me any trouble?"

Thin wrists extended out in surrender. Brawl carefully took them in one strong hand. Autobots were so small compared to Decepticons.

"Yer lucky ya don't have more than the blue on ya," he said conversationally as he pulled the captured spy along.

Mirage winced, stumbling, but the Combaticon was being more considerate of his injuries than most prisoners could hope for. "Do tell," he said dryly. He couldn't imagine why his paintjob made him lucky. This all seemed the furthest from lucky he could get.

Brawl shot him an amused look. "Ya get too colorful, they stop attacking."
The Autobot almost visibly filed that away as important information, but the Combaticon snickered.

"Ever been courted by a swarm of killer shrimp?"

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"Kup - G = Goofy (Are they more serious in the moment, or are they humorous, etc)"

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Any other Autobot with the Second-in-Command of the Decepticons between his thighs would have had a smart remark about putting Starscream in his place. Even another Decepticon would have smirked and sniggered a comment under his breath about how the Air Commander had gotten pretty high by being so good down low. There was a reason Starscream only got his knees for those who overpowered him, after all.

Kup never even smiled. He had Starscream’s mouth so busy no insecurities could preemptively get out to poison anyone’s mood, and Thundercracker had no idea how, but he’d somehow known about Skywarp’s intense need to get something -- anything -- in his mouth the moment the black-and-purple flyer got the slightest bit revved. Skywarp had been allowed approximately three seconds to see the small Autobot straddling Starscream, just enough time for the image to register with his libido, before Kup had all but shoved three fingers into his mouth. It had certainly stopped any commentary from Skywarp’s side of things. No way was Skywarp going to surrender such good toys, not even to needle Starscream.

Enthusiastic sucking commenced.

Thundercracker was perfectly fine keeping his mouth shut if he was just allowed to…kind of…sidle up behind…and…mmm. Yes.

Kup raised his head from silencing Starscream and leaned back into the big Seeker folded around him in a looming, purring, hot layer of ready-to-go Decepticon warrior. “Like what you see?” he breathed into Thundercracker’s audio. For some reason, the teasing question made him shiver all the way down to his thrusters.

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"MTMTE now has canon baby robots, and those baby robots will inevitably be written into fic. There’s already fic of de-aged or child characters being molested or doing the molesting, and tons of fics with characters traumatized by history of the same, so the canon baby robots won’t be left out long. But having seen the baby robot in canon, my brain went, “How would that even work?” Once I'd thought that, my imagination decided I’d challenged it, and it gave me a scenario. It’s not nice, it’s not pretty, and I can’t slap enough trigger warnings on it.”

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Hot spots had become much less important since cold construction went into full automatic, shooting out the waves of new soldiers. Shunt a spark from the freezer into a body and out onto the battlefield in less than a day versus carefully nurturing a field through full forging? Freezers could be moved. Fields were hard to defend. Besides, who had time to raise a newspark to maturity? That took a couple weeks. Compared to downloading faction indoctrination and some battle information directly into a constructed body, it was inefficient and prone to error.

Neutrals were the only ones to camp out at the hot spots after the freezers opened. The Autobots and
Decepticons, after varying amounts of justifications and tactical analysis, just outright destroyed the places. Better to burn the forges than risk the newsparks replenishing the enemy ranks.

Which also meant that the ignited sparks were less than disposable. They were actively dangerous, marked to be exterminated. And when a spark -- a person -- reached that status, nobody cared what happened to them. In fact, to certain fanatical ways of thinking, taking execution further than a clean triple tap was almost expected.

But there was always someone who took it yet further than that. Sometimes it sucked being the unit’s demolitionist. Brawl had seen some fragged up slag in his time, and then some.

“‘You got this?’ called across the hot spot, and he looked up. Gutcruncher. Why did it have to be Gutcruncher?

“Yeah, I got this,” he grumbled. “You just keep a watch out for Autodorks, and I’ll take care of wiring this place to blow.” It wouldn’t take much. Sentio metallico didn’t cool until forging ended, and that made it pretty reactive stuff. A few well-placed explosives could turn a hot spot into a violent chain reaction. A mech just had to know where to place the initial charges.

Gutcruncher, of course, always pushed the limits, on sanity, good taste, and even the questionable ethics of war. “Scanner’s clean,” he called casually across the field, kicking about among the protoforms as if looking for something. “I figure that if you’ve got this, I can grab a little time. And a little one, if you know what I mean.”

Oh, Megatron, what Brawl wouldn’t give not to know. The demolitionist tried not to look up, but the temptation was too strong. Yep, there was Gutcruncher prying a large, last-stage protoform out of the ground. Poor thing had already begun to separate. In a few days, caretakers would have been standing watch for a face to form, then hints of an altmode. At this phase, however, the blob was still shaping around its spark. Not even really sentient yet, although sentient enough to feel pain, to wiggle in uncoordinated attempts at struggling, to be recognizable as Cybertronian.

To be a victim.

Something any Decepticon in the ranks knew not to set himself up to be. “Whatever,” Brawl said, keeping his voice carefully neutral. He hesitated, hands on the bomb he was laying in, and debated with the feeble kick of his conscience. He settled for a protest that sounded more like a complaint: “It doesn’t even have plating yet, mech. What kind of fun is that?”

Unfortunately, Gutcruncher took the complaint as interest, and he shot a lecherous grin over. He didn’t stop yanking the protoform out of the soft birth metal, but he made a couple illustrative gestures at chest and groin. “I can make a hole. I can make a hole anywhere I like. You ever tried one of these babies?”

Ugh, no. The demolitionist zeroed his attention back to the bomb and pretended he was too busy to talk.

Not that Gutcruncher took the hint. “I like ‘em still warm. Small ones are tight, but big ones buck around. Like this, ha! It’s really good when they’re far enough along to have a face. You should see it, frag, you should get on the other end…wish I could find one, but this field’s not old enough. Get a newspark who’s never felt pain, force ‘em open, take ‘em hard. Nothing,” he grunted suddenly, “like it. Sometimes they’re old enough to dissemble for parts afterward. It’s,” he grunted again, and the protoform screeched a shrill, binary wail of primitive pain response that scratched up the Brawl’s back struts like sharp needles, “a waste to level the place when we could harvest the bodies.”
“You’re sick,” the demolitionist said softly, but Gutcruncher wasn’t listening. Brawl kept his optics on his work. He didn’t want to see.

It was bad enough hearing the rhythmic grunts growing louder, every binary shriek prompting Gutcruncher to go faster. Brilliant light glittered at the edge of Brawl’s sight, and he turned his head. The newspark flared bright, panic and pain making the corona burn the wrong colors, colors that made his tank clench. Gutcruncher’s grunting picked up speed, his thrusts thudding instead of clanging against soft, heated sentio metallico. He was a dark shape against that bright light, moving intently. The protoform keened, too young to understand, too confused to know what was happening. It wasn’t old enough for a vox box, too unformed to actually scream, but forged to the point it could express pain. It cried for help.

The demolitionist bent over his work. The quicker he got this over with, the sooner the protoform would be put out of its misery. He knew the pain wouldn’t end once Gutcruncher was finished. Pain like that never did. It didn’t heal, not without help, and Brawl couldn’t provide the help even if he knew how.

The only thing he could do was make the pain stop.

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Chapter Summary

Soundwave is good at his job; officer dynamics aboard the Lost Light; on the shuttle; what Whirl has become; join the D.J.D. and shovel snow; Tarn likes pets; the reality of this new Cybertron; the limitations of before the war; The Curious Case of Too Many Hounds; Bob and the vet appointment of doom; Chromia’s reason for betrayal; What Ifs and Alternate Universes; Prowl’s desk; Optimus Dies Again; the Party Ambulance; height discrimination.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 39
Warning:
Rating: R
Continuity: IDW, G1
Characters: Constructicons, Soundwave, Megatron, Rodimus, Drift, Ratchet, Whirl, the D.J.D., Knock Out, Ratchet, Blaster, Jazz, the Coneheads, bunches of Hounds, Sunstreaker and Bob, Chromia, Starscream, Optimus Prime, Wheeljack, Bumblebee,
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Various Tumblr things.

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Alabama - "hyper-competent!Soundwave mindfuckery"

[* * * * *]

Strangely, Hook’s pride, Mixmaster’s insanity, and Long Haul’s apathy didn’t start the trouble. It was Bonecrusher taking a swing at Rumble.

“Scraplet,” the Constructicon grunted. “Get the frag outta the repairbay ‘fore I turn you into spare parts.”

Rumble dodged the punch easily but bristled at the dismissal. “Hey! I can be in here if I want!”

Bonecrusher eyed him, amused but irate. It was a common mood for him. “Not if I say you can’t.” He kicked at the Casseticon as emphasis.

Rumble could dodge his slow blows all day, but that wasn’t the point. “Frag you, bolthead. I’m surveillance. I can be anywhere I wanna be,” he said. He sounded as cranky as he felt. This whole living-in-close-quarters thing here on Earth was turning into an ordeal. Soundwave liked having his fingers in everyone’s cube, living like this, but Rumble hated being forced to share a base with all these losers.

“Scram,” Bonecrusher ordered.

Losers with big weapons. Rumble zipped out of the repairbay, heels singed and language blistering audios.
Complaining to the boss wasn’t a great strategy for his pride, but frag that scrap. Usually mechs weren’t stupid enough to take a shot at one of Soundwave’s minions. Seriously? What in Cybertron’s rusted understructure was going on in Bonecrusher’s empty head?

So Rumble tattled to Soundwave, who gave him an unreadable look but called Scrapper, expecting an explanation involving an annoying prank pulled on the Constructicons. That was understandable. Rumble and Frenzy had a habit of getting bored and taking that boredom out on people they really shouldn’t. Some threats were to be expected, in that case.

Scrapper didn’t bother with any sort of explanation. He went for full-on dismissal. “Shortstuff shouldn’t have been in my repairbay,” the Constructicon leader said curtly. “Anything else?”

Soundwave gave him the unreadable look this time. Scrapper took that as the end of the conversation and hung up.

He hung up on Soundwave.

Frenzy and Rumble stirred in Soundwave’s chest, and across the room, three pairs of wings suddenly spread in a call to action. Ravage melted out of the shadows to cock his head at the blank screen. Soundwave’s hand fell to his back, and master and symbiotes hummed on a frequency most mechs simply weren’t formatted to hear.

Scrapper found every one of his projects deluged by an unprecedented amount of filework in triplicate, every supply list randomly deleted items upon submission, and a thousand errors afflicted his blueprint archives. It drove him half-mad attempting to sort out. That would have been annoying and frustrating, but the file glitches were frankly dangerous. Bonecrusher’s personnel file kept disappearing from the base’s security database. Four increasingly severe injuries from the automatic security system had Bonecrusher wary to leave the repairbay at all anymore.

No help came from the base’s technical support. Messages left for Soundwave vanished into the ether. In-person demands to fix the problems went nowhere, as the surveillance room was oddly empty any time he stormed up to confront Soundwave. Megatron, of course, witnessed none of these errors and tolerated no ill word against his most loyal follower. He regarded Scrapper as one would a whining complainer the two times Scrapper dared raise his voice on the issue during meetings. Starscream just shook his head at the Constructicon, a smile showing just how much he enjoyed the mech’s frustration. Soundwave ignored everything said during the meetings and disappeared afterward before Scrapper could catch him.

It was the Cassetticon’s fault. It had to be. Neither Scrapper nor Bonecrusher were stupid. If someone was dancing a merry jig with information control, then Soundwave was on the other end pulling their strings.

Despite Hook’s disapproval and Mixmaster’s giggling, Scrapper took Scavenger aside to assign a personal mission. Scavenger liked to collect useful items, and Scrapper had some things he’d like collected. “I could use some parts,” Scrapper said casually, handing Scavenger a list of parts that just so happened to match the schematics of one of Soundwave’s flying pests.

Scavenger lit up like one of those Christmas tree things he’d decorated their quarters with. Off he ran. Scrapper threw the nearest security camera a smug look. Well. That would sort this out. One thing every Decepticon knew: don’t mess with repairmechs. They were the ones who had to patch fighters up after battle, and so many things could be pulled out of a wounded mech while they were
on the repair slab.

That was the intended message, anyway, but somehow the wires got crossed during delivery.

Long Haul had declared, “Not even going there,” and walked out when Laserbeak came in unconscious, but Scavenger started digging for parts. Ravage sprang off the overhead light and bit right through the back of the unlucky Constructicon’s neck, dropping him where he stood.

Bonecrusher sprinted into the room just in time to see the Casseticon claw skeins of wires, cables, and bleeding tubes from Scavenger’s throat, tearing into him. Ever try to punch a tiny moving target? Brute force didn’t stand much of a chance against Ravage’s speed, and the technimal grabbed his downed compartment mate to take with him when he finally bounded out of the repair bay.

“I didn’t even see him up there,” Scavenger croaked after he woke up.

“I couldn’t hit him!” Bonecrusher said.

“Next time, try harder,” Scraper ordered.

“You’re all idiots,” Hook grumbled as he patched Scavenger.

Scraper argued with the surgeon, but his spark wasn’t in it. As much as he seethed, Soundwave had made his point. Surveillance and espionage specialists might depend on repairmechs to keep them healthy, but the Constructicons couldn’t live their whole lives checking every single corner for cameras, every high point for a watcher, every vent for an ambush. Soundwave held the advantage.

Unfortunately, he also held a grudge. Bonecrusher learned to restrain himself, and Scraper muted himself to silent fuming during meetings, but the filework problems continued. They multiplied. Plus, Scavenger started getting the daylights scared out of him every other hour as shadows growled, ceilings rattled, and cameras turned to watch him pass. His terror was starting to make the whole team paranoid, and the situation continued to worsen the longer it stretched on.

“Somebody’s watchiiiiiiing,” Mixmaster cackled, undisturbed by the jittering of the other Constructicons. “Watch watched watching! Hand me that chloride.”

Scraper handed it over without objection, too busy watching the door of the repair bay for uninvited guests to care that his subordinate was ordering him around. “Fine. How do we get him to stop watching us?”

Mixmaster shrugged. “Like I know?”

Long Haul gave him a bored look. “Try apologizing.”

“Erk,” Scraper said, because that’s what pride and an apology sounded like when colliding in his throat.

“No,” Bonecrusher shouted from across the repair bay.

Scavenger shrieked right then, tearing out of the back room as though he’d seen a ghost, and Bonecrusher flinched.

“…maybe.”

Hook trained his visor on the ceiling and sighed. “I cannot believe I have to fix your mistakes. Again.”
“Why you little -- “

“I’ll handle this,” the surgeon said as he strode for the exit.

“What’re you going to do?” Scrapper called after him, a little afraid to know.

Hook turned at the door to snort contemptuously. His hands flexed in illustration of acts best left unknown. “There is little in life that can’t be solved by a massage.”

The Constructicons couldn’t meet each other’s optics after he left, because he was right but they could have lived without having that mental image.

But at least the harassment stopped.

[* * * * *]

“counterpart”

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Something Perceptor had said during the two hour lecture -- he swore Ultra Magnus was a sadist practicing vigorously upon him by sending him down to the laboratories -- stuck with Megatron. It grew in his thoughts like a rust infection. It itched. It bothered.

He finally opened his mouth to ask during the late shift when it was just himself and Ultra Magnus on the bridge, not a flame-painted maniac in sight. “You were there during the shut-down of Tyrest’s machine.” A machine he’d had trouble believing, simply because of the scale of ridiculously unchecked madness it implied. He had trusted Tyrest, trusted him enough to believe in that Accord and follow its rules, and that had been the mech’s goal? A madman on a galactic scale, and he’d trusted him?

He shook away the thoughts as Ultra Magnus nodded. “Of course.”

“I was told Rodimus’ participation was vital to shutting down the killswitch,” Megatron said. Ultra Magnus nodded again. “What I don’t understand is why that’s so. It was the Matrix that canceled out the killswitch’s effects. Why was it necessary for Rodimus to have put himself at risk that way when he could have simply taken out the Matrix?” Half the Matrix, anyway. He still wasn’t clear on why Optimus had kept the other half.

Ultra Magnus considered him for a moment as if judging how or if this information could be used against the Autobots. “Perceptor thought it likely the Matrix would refuse to interact with his machine, if taken out of Rodimus,” he said slowly. “It is surprisingly inert outside of a Prime. Thunderclash is the only one I can think of that it has responded to other than Optimus Prime and Rodimus.”

“Ah. I see.” That made sense. “Wait.” No, that made no sense. “Rodimus is -- you’re telling me that -- “ Megatron turned and stared at the captain’s chair, which only last week had been spraypainted with flames to match the immature fool’s paintjob. “He’s actually a Prime?” He knew his optics were wide in shock, but he thought it justified.

Turning, Ultra Magnus set down the tablet he’d been working on. The conversation seemed to have finally earned his full attention. “Of course. He did change his name at one point, but then he gave the Matrix back to Optimus Prime. I believe he dropped the title to pay respect to Optimus Prime. Then there was the breakage, and he confessed to feeling uncomfortable under the title when he didn’t bear the full Matrix. Now we continue to call him Rodimus out of respect for what he was
and, perhaps,” a twitch at the corner of his mouth signified as much of a smile as the stoic mech ever gave, “knowing the quest so far, what he might be again.”

Megatron kept staring. “I was under the impression he’d changed his name because he’s a conceited twit.”

“That is a reasonable conclusion,” Ultra Magnus conceded, somehow managing disapproval for the insult and rueful honesty in just five words, “but that has little bearing on the rest of us agreeing with the change. Many Autobots change their names, but few of them can manage to persuade everyone else to call them by their new names. It takes common agreement or a persuasive person to make that kind of change stick.” Megatron looked away, remembering a cold grey corpse down in the morgue, but Ultra Magnus appeared not to notice the sidelong reference to Trailcutter. “Hot Rod had some of both to aid him.”

Megatron said nothing more about it.

However, walking to his quarters later, he glimpsed a laughing riot of red and gold sprinting across an intersection up ahead, and he remembered Ultra Magnus’ explanation. It had stuck in his mind as stubbornly as what Perceptor had said.

Rodimus had given the Matrix back. He didn’t have to. He remained a Prime, and potentially could still take up the Matrix once more.

Megatron found himself murmuring, “There, but for the grace of Optimus Prime…”

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Minnesota - "Megatron/Rodimus"

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Of all the things he expected of the baby Prime, he hadn't thought to brace against cruelty.

He should have. Historically, or at least in Megatron’s experience, it had been a trait of all the Primes, but Rodimus didn’t seem one to continue that legacy. Maybe it was because Rodimus was something of a buffoon. He hadn’t thought Rodimus capable of hurting him because after so much war and so many injuries, nothing but words could truly affect him anymore. The previous Primes had been great wordsmiths. Optimus Prime was capable of cutting-cruel words toward Megatron, their long enmity and his skill of oration giving him the power to carve grooves into Megatron’s spark using nothing but the sharp edge of his tongue.

For all his charismatic presence and ability to inspire mechs to follow him into the Pit, Rodimus wasn't a good public speaker. Optimus Prime was known for his speeches. Megatron had begun a revolution through the power of his own words. Rodimus...

Rodimus had had Drift write his speeches. On his own, he fumbled for words. He used 'like' and 'um' and 'cool.' Grammar was an option. The slang and cant of Neocybex was more familiar to him than literature in any form. His poetry was street grafitti. He could verbally mix up using 'their' and 'they're', which seemed impossible to detect and yet drove Ultra Magnus up the wall every time he somehow, impossibly and inexplicably, managed it.

The first time Rodimus read Megatron's poetry aloud, it was the most painful torture a Prime had ever inflicted on him. The words flayed open his spark.

The cadence was all wrong, some of the words were mispronounced -- the words Rodimus had
likely only ever seen written instead of spoken -- and the fool stopped in the middle of a verse to argue about how stupid it was to write a poem about such a lame-aft subject. Megatron looked down his nose at the baby Prime and curtly told him to keep reading, but inside he bled.

Oh, he bled.

Rodimus was cruel. His cruelty wasn't the deliberate torture Optimus Prime had turned on Megatron, twisting their familiarity into pain. When he actually attempted to hurt Megatron, Rodimus said quick, biting things, off-hand comments never regretted because the effects failed to really penetrate, and Megatron shrugged them off. Rodimus rarely meant to do more than wound the surface. The deep pains, the true hurts, never left his lips intentionally. It was when he didn’t try that he tore Megatron apart and ripped out his core.

Megatron folded up to sit silently beside him, and Rodimus’ callous, bright smile faltered. The kindness tucked underneath the glittering egomaniac personality came out to peer up at him, concerned. The baby Prime wasn't intentionally cruel, but that made it hurt worse.

Rodimus read Megatron’s poem aloud in the voice of an uneducated mech forced into a function he'd never had a choice but take up. All options had been stripped from the baby Prime just as they'd been taken away from the miners. Just as they'd been taken from Megatron, long ago, and he heard all his decisions read back to him as if down an echoing tunnel lined in a war that hadn’t changed anything. Cybertron had been brought full circle in a tablet held in someone's hands, and it was cruel how he ground Megatron’s face in his mistakes.

"Did I say it right?" Rodimus asked, trying not to look as though he needed the approval, and what could Megatron say? Rodimus hadn't meant to reopen old wounds so deep Megatron bled an entire abandoned life out on the floor between them.

"You read it right," he said at last.

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Texas - "Rodimus - Drift"

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Rodimus missed Drift on the turns.

As long as he drove straight forward, he didn’t have to look back. That was the thing Ultra Magnus and Megatron didn’t get when they scolded him for rushing ahead. Yeah, he was impetuous. He ran on before everyone else. He hurried. He sped out the door before instructions finished, before cautions were handed out, before anyone could stop him, and it wasn’t that he didn’t understand it was foolish. No, seriously, his audios worked just fine, he didn’t need a medic to check them out for the third time, intellectually, he even understood that his refusal to stop put people at risk sometimes, including himself.

It was just that…it had taken so long to convince Drift that Rodimus trusted him. Drift had naturally stepped in to pick up the pieces whenever Rodimus cut and run. It had become Rodimus’ default tactic for forcing Drift into the middle of things with him. Rodimus sped out the door deliberately, and it made Drift throw rigid rules out the door and just deal with what was there, taking up the slack. Ultra Magnus never really understood that was what Rodimus was doing to him, so focused on the violation of duty that he never recognized the training he was receiving on the job, but Drift
had caught on eventually.

Rodimus led. He was the fastest. He hit the track, accelerating until all his gauges hit red, recklessly throwing himself headlong into the straights, but there was a method to his madness. He had a plan, and every part of that plan involved a team.

Drift wasn’t as fast on the long stretches, but he was greased lightning on the turns. He drifted without slowing, whereas Rodimus had to hit the brakes or he’d go tumbling off. In a race, they ended up in heated competition for the winning spot. Rodimus took off from the starting block strong, but Drift caught up on the turns.

That was where Rodimus missed him. He hit the turns, turning almost sidelong to the track behind him, and suddenly Drift would be there. That’s how it was, right? That’s what it took forever to convince Drift to be. To be there. To grab everything Rodimus dropped at the starting line, catch up at the turns, and join him. They’d race together, but Rodimus led, Drift followed up, and far behind them, Ultra Magnus had all the back-up plans, leftover information, and probably enough infrastructure in his trailer to construct a lecture machine when he finally arrived at the finish machine to join them.

Rodimus made the turns now, looking back, and no one was there. Just disapproval from far back at the starting line, two disapproving figures standing there with their arms folded, united in disliking how he led the pack. They blocked the rest of the runners, organized them, and took over the running of the race. Instead of a team effort, Rodimus was left waiting up ahead, looking a fool, feeling foolish, and missing the presence that should have been between him and them.

He slowed down on the turns, waiting for someone to join him, but Drift wasn’t there anymore.

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Texas - “Drift finding Ratchet’s little Drift action-figure”

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It’d never have happened if Drift had respect for people’s boundaries, but Drift’s respect for boundaries started and ended in the metaphorical sense. He wouldn’t trespass on someone’s beliefs, even if he poked fun at Ratchet by putting little crystal clusters everywhere in the shuttle and meditating in the co-pilot’s seat. Beyond that, he had a healthy respect for other people’s thoughts. The mind was the last place anyone else could claim in a mech, the fortress where a last stand could be made.

Stuff, however, was another story. His regard for material ownership hadn’t developed much past ‘If I grab it, it’s mine.’ The Decepticons had refined that street mentality into an entire system of morals. His enthusiasm for the difference between Autobot and Decepticon rules couldn’t be faulted, but, well. Ratchet found the little meddling pest digging through a locker which most definitely didn’t belong to him, busily investigating Ratchet’s things.

“A-hem.”

For all that they weren’t mobile, tall white helm finials gave every impression of sleeking back like a technimal’s audio receivers. Drift looked up nose-first, optics huge. Bam. Caught.

“Uh…I can explain.”

Ratchet folded his arms slowly, more entertained than he let on. Drift fidgeted, still shoulder-deep in
the locker. The medic firmly buried the part of himself that liked seeing Drift curved into a lithe
crouch on the floor to access the lower shelves. “Explain why you picked the lock and are going
through my things?” He waved one hand. “This I have to hear. Alright. Let’s hear it.”

Fidgeting shifted Drift on his knees, although the speedster kept his hands inside the locker. That did
nothing to make him less guilty. How strange. “I, um, wanted to organize your -- “

“Weren’t you a Decepticon? Please. I expect a better quality lie from someone with that kind of
faction name.” It was rough humor, harsher than he usually used around Drift, but this was giving
him a weird sense of nostalgia. He’d caught Ambulon investigating everything in the medibay more
than once, especially new shipments of supplies. The ward manager had been good, very good, but
Ratchet had a feel for when people delicately picked through his things. He’d come into his office
many times, taken one look at his desk, and stepped back to nail Ambulon with a speaking glare.
Ambulon had generally ignored him.

It was that ‘If I grab it, it’s mine’ street sense again. Applied to a medibay, it spelled out how little
Ambulon had cared about who was in charge. If something was in the medibay, he’d considered it
part of the inventory and therefore available to use in case of emergency. Locking it into the office as
one of Ratchet’s personal belongings had made no difference to Ambulon.

Plus, the mech had been one of the most suspicious, wary fraggers this side of the faction line. He’d
just hid it in a far different way than Drift. Drift had a happy-go-lucky hippy mask pulled over
Deadlock, and that mask had no way to defend itself when confronted by the owner of the things in
the locker.

Nervous blue optics darted around the shuttle cargobay. “Um. Kind of out of practice in lying.”

The lie stung slightly at Ratchet’s spark. He wished it was true, but Drift buried himself in lies among
the Autobots. Sighing, Ratchet unfolded his arms and reached out to put a firm hand on the locker
doors. “Then either don’t get caught or practice more.”

Drift hastily scooted out of the way of the door, but he came out of the locker holding something --
oh. That made more sense of why he’d been reluctant to get out of the locker before.

Ratchet and Drift spent a long moment avoiding each other’s optics.

“So…”

“What?” Ratchet thrust his chin up, optics just daring him to say something. “It’s a medical device.”

Drift blinked rapidly. A second later, he caught the half-sparked joke and grinned. “You gotta work
on your lies, Ratchet.” He handed over the, ah, ‘medical device’ gingerly, holding it extended by two
fingers. “Guess you’re already working on your endurance.”

“Har har, yes, very funny.” The medic opened the locker door to throw the thing back where it
belonged: out of sight in the depths of a box that shouldn’t have been opened by anyone but him. “A
mech has needs.”

When he closed the door, Drift was waiting on the other side, holding another one of his belongings
up. This one was almost as embarrassing. “Needs, huh?” the speedster asked lightly, optics full of
hope as he leaned forward. “What do you need this for?”

Ratchet reached out to wrap his fingers around the little figurine. He refused to break optic contact.
“Guess.”
White helm finials perked, he could have sworn it, but Drift leaned in further before Ratchet could make sure.

Where had their boundaries gone?

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South Carolina - “Whirl - sensitive”

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The Functionalists had removed his face and his hands to punish him for refusing to conform. They’d assumed it would destroy his life entirely. They hadn’t been far off. He’d lost his job, his friends, his beliefs, and eventually, his freedom. Empurata had taken away almost everything that made him who and what he was, and what was left was grateful he looked different.

Whirl wanted his hands back, but he didn’t fool himself. He wasn’t who he used to be. Getting back what had been taken away from him would destroy him more assuredly than losing it in the first place. He told Cyclonus he kept his pincers and mono-optic lack of face as an excuse to hold onto his anger, and it was true. There wasn’t much holding the recycled scrap of this old clockmaker together but an overabundance anger. Strip away the form his violent urges were barely contained inside, and he’d fly to pieces.

If he regained his face and hands, he’d have to look himself in the optics, face to face with what he’d become. Whirl was surprisingly self-aware. He knew he couldn’t confront himself without breaking apart at the seams at last. The expression of disgust and hatred he saw would wear his face, reflect off every shining surface, and the finger pointing blame at him would be his own.

He’d self-destruct like a star collapsing inward, burning out as it consumed itself.

Sometimes he wistfully took an optimistic view, usually when Rung sat beside the couch looking at him as though he’d wait through another war to meet the person he believed Whirl wanted to be. Whirl wasn’t even sure who that person really was. He certainly didn’t want to be who he used to be, at least not when he thought about it realistically. He could never go back in time, stripping away the war and empurata as if they’d never happened, and what kind of personal growth would that be, anyway? Pssht. Rung didn’t want him to revert to who he’d been. Rung wanted Whirl to be a person at peace with what the mirror showed.

Rung wanted him as he was during the good sessions, the better times when Whirl found the banter naturally turning to interesting conversation. There were topics they talked about that ached without stinging him to the defensive, and it felt as though he might rebuild a real person inside his war-battered, self-abused, Functionalist-discarded body. It felt like he could be someone who didn’t loathe his own reflection for what it had replaced. Rung didn’t want him to revert to who he’d been. Rung wanted Whirl to be a person at peace with what the mirror showed.

On Whirl’s more optimistic days, he asked Rung what the mirror showed the psychotherapist.

“Potential,” Rung said quietly, absurd brows tipped down in Serious Mode. Whirl knew what Serious Mode meant. Rung really meant what he said. “We’re all in the process of changing. The war’s over, and this is a brand new situation in an old universe for all of us. Even you, Whirl.” He smiled as if he knew something Whirl didn’t, which Whirl always hated because most people judged him by what they saw on the surface. Whirl put more effort into his surface than he let on. It wasn’t fair that Rung could see past it into what he was trying to hide.

Then Rung smiled that smile, and Whirl was grateful someone could still see past the bristling
weapons and massive, fragile ego to the scared clockmaker crouched on the floor of a ruined workshop, surrounded by broken glass as the Senate goons kicked in his door and windows to take him away. The mono-optic head and twisted claws had warped him, the anger and loss had infected him like a terminal disease, but Rung smiled past all that, all the way down to the spark that had hurt, had hated, but hadn’t been destroyed.

The Functionalists had wanted empurata to destroy Whirl, but he was still Whirl. He looked different, unrecognizable as Whirl-who-was, and that was fine. The old Whirl wouldn’t have survived. That Whirl couldn’t live now.

Whirl treasured his past, however. It fueled him in the present, fire licking ever closer to the present until, someday soon, he’d probably combust. It’s not as though anyone would be surprised by that. He was a burning, open wound, and he plunged up to the shoulders in his own injury to throw his energon on the flames. It took a special kind of crazy to do that.

Rung looked at Whirl, smile turning sad, and put his hand into the fire.

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Missouri - "something fluffy with the DJD"

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“‘Join the Justice Division,’ he said. ‘Good healthcare,’ he said. ‘Lord Megatron’s personal appreciation,’ he said. ‘Show traitors the fear and pain they’ve brought down on themselves,’ he said. ‘Be famous! Notorious! Make the Empire a better place!’ Fragging glitchhead cogsucking morphing-addicted cannon-junky clunker.”

The complaining temporarily halted while two pairs of hands took a brief break, flexing to work the ice crystals out of their joints. Of all the scrap Tarn had spouted about joining the D.J.D., one thing he’d completely failed to mention had been the distinct lack of a functioning heating system in their base on Messatine. It’s was cold enough to freeze a mech’s lugnuts outside in a minute and a half, and five indoors.

Hence why Helex was the one shoveling out the east gate. Storms from the east always jimmied the stupid thing open enough to create a snowdrift indoors, and the thing usually froze into a solid icebank if left overnight. The miners sure couldn’t clear it themselves. They could gear up and tromp around outside once he got the blast gate clear, but sitting still for any length of time was practically a death sentence for the poor guys. Digging out the gate would kill them.

The Decepticons put their deadbolts on lousy duty, not imprisonment awaiting execution. Their refuse and rejects were shipped to the mines, and then they didn’t even need the D.J.D. planting their headquarters square on top of the mines to keep the fraggers in line. The deep mines were warmth traps. The only place the miners could safely move around without cold weather gear was down in the shafts. Topside in the base, they were okay so long as they kept moving at a brisk pace. Outdoors, they were goners. But they did like to see the sun, and there wasn’t actually a reason to keep them locked up underground all the time. If the miners wanted to get outside, then the D.J.D. would dutifully clear the doors to give them access.

According to Lord Megatron’s own writing, Messatine hadn’t been quite as extreme when he’d mined here. Helex wasn’t one to doubt his leader, but it was hard to believe this frozen exhaust pipe of a planet had ever been anything but an icy backwater. It was especially hard to believe when he was the one hugging himself for warmth as the winter wind smacked into him like a fendered ice effigy of Optimus Prime. Bam!
“Augh!”

At least the slagging gate was clear.

Muttering angrily to himself, Helex stomped back into the more sheltered internal areas of the base. “I know exactly why you recruited me!” he yelled down an intersection after catching a glimpse of purple, but Tarn knew better than to cross his path the day after a storm. The nigh-undefeatable commander of the fearsome D.J.D. made himself scarce while slightly louder mutters announced Helex’s bad mood, opinion on Tarn’s smooth patter, and various reasons why Messatine sucked greasy crankshafts.

As soon as he reached his quarters, Helex transformed. Say what they will about him after a torture video was broadcast to the Decepticons, but nobody on Messatine denied that he had the best altmode in the history of this planet’s weather.

Perking up to a higher temperature, Helex settled down to thaw out his extremities. If a couple teammates snuck in later to lie on top of his lid to absorb some heat, he kept his peace and turned up his smelter to share.

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**Texas - "Tarn and Pharma"**

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If he has a weakness, it’s that he keeps rescuing pets. Pets to keep, to coddle, to protect, to use. For their own good, really, and Tarn doesn’t feel a shred of guilt over opening their optics to the greater war, but he does hold them close to prevent that war from destroying their bodies. Their sparks and minds need the blunt force of reality. He doesn’t shelter those. He relishes watching realization strike those, in fact.

The weakness is why he does it. He saves his pets to keep from snapping. The things he does are horrible. As lightly as he treats the atrocities he commits, as little as he cares for the Autobots and traitors sent to torture or the smelter, some part of who he was knows exactly what he does.

Sickening acts done for the Cause are still sickening acts, and guilt burns so cold under his spark the frigid chill will turn him into an unthinking, murderous sociopath worse than anyone he’s put down over the years. He has to care about his pets because if he doesn’t care for something, he will stop caring entirely.

So he collects pets. He rescues them from around the war and protects them in his own way. He saves Autobots in prisons like Grindcore. He puts together his unit once he takes command of the Justice Division. He finds Pharma when he arrives on Messatine.

As always, the pet thinks he exerts some control over the relationship, like a mouse feeling entitled to a piece of cheese in return for running a maze. It didn’t understand yet that its punishments and rewards came at the whim of its owner.

Tarn smiles behind his mask and leaves Pharma the delusion. It won’t last.

It never does.

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**Alaska - "TFP Knock Out/Breakdown"**
Knock Out’s favorite color was blue. Not a light, clear blue of Earth’s sky, or the bright strong true-blue Optimus Prime had sported. It wasn’t a rich blue, or a quick blue, or a deep blue that invited waxing of words or hands. It was the strong blue that faded easily to navy, then black. It was the kind of color that disappeared into back alleys and didn’t stand out in a crowd. It was the mass-manufactured blue formula that somebody in Supplies had discovered best endured scuffs, scrapes, and, in extreme circumstances, fire. If torched black, the burn marks didn’t look horrible against the rest of the plating so long as that plating was colored the same blue. It did well with a matte finish and never quite polished to a real shine.

That was the color blue Knock Out chose as his favorite. He didn’t like it, not in an ‘I enjoy this’ sense, but it was his favorite.

The Eradicons knew why. It wasn’t really a secret. Vehicons who’d worked with Breakdown knew what his favorite color had been, too. They knew why the flash of glossy red plating had made him look up and smile.

Blue tended to make Knock Out irritable. He grew louder and prone to snide insults when he caught a glimpse of it. He hadn’t always, but it wasn’t a secret why that had changed.

Maybe in time he would quiet down. Maybe age would rub the edge off his defensiveness toward the pain. Someday seeing a utilitarian blue mech walking down the street would only make him pause as nostalgia ached in his chest. He might stare for a moment into the past, all the colors of the rainbow blurring through the years between them, and then the glimpse of blue memory would turn a corner, and Knock Out would be left in a future without it.

Ohio - “Smokescreen/Knock Out”

Smokescreen frowned and settled back slowly on his heels. “But…you’re an Autobot.”

“No, I’m not. I’ve never and will never take your stupid Autobot oath.” Knock Out sniffed contemptuously, although mostly from habit. He didn’t even feel much anger for the pressure to give in, anymore. He understood that his presence disturbed the newbie recruits. He even understood that it would make his life less difficult if he’d give up being a neutral party and joined the Autobots formally instead of just working alongside them as Cybertron slowly came back to life.

Tough. If having an unrepentant ex-Decepticon in their midst upset them, good. He wouldn’t let the issues that started the war be swept under the rug, as the humans said. Ultra Magnus would slagging well sit and listen to him every time he felt treated like a second class citizen, even if he had to shout through a megaphone and file his complaints in triplicate. He’d borrow that ugly old codger Ratchet’s siren to make sure everyone heard him coming on the complaint train.
Arms went around him from behind, and Knock Out stiffened, startled out of his increasingly dire thoughts. “You promised you wouldn’t start trouble,” Smokescreen mumbled against his back, sounding unhappy, and he knew the silly youngling would be all sagging doors and sad face if he turned to look.

So he refused to. “I won’t be the cause of a problem,” he repeated for the umpteenth time, because Smokescreen did care and Knock Out didn’t want to lose him. He’d been a very good ex-Decepticon in an Autobot society, and he wasn’t about to ruin a good thing by going out and starting trouble.

But by Primus, he would finish it.

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"TFP Ratchet starving himself for reasons and trying to hide it's killing him"

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He’d had uneasy tanks since the synthetic energon. It wasn’t an excuse for what he was doing, but it made it easier to actually do it. His fuel gauge just didn’t register regular energon anymore. He always felt hungry no matter how much energon he put in his tank, but normal energon upset his systems in a queasy roil. Being physically full meant he felt hungry and sick at the same time. It was unpleasant enough that he’d been habitually running as close as he could to empty well before this.

This being a hunger strike.

He had his reasons. Before the Decepticons’ defeat, it’d been to ensure the more valuable Autobot fighters had the power they needed. He was the least valuable member of team Prime in terms of combat. Giving himself the smallest amount possible was just practical rationing.

After the Decepticons were defeated, after most Cybertronians returned to their homeworld, Ratchet had another reason: the Eradicons. The Autobots were perfectly willing to use the Decepticon troops for manual labor, especially for energon mining back on Earth, and the humans agreed. However, neither of Autobots nor humans were willing to grant the Eradicons enough energon to fuel a potential rebellion.

Ratchet understood that, but there was a vast difference between measured rations and starving prisoners. His original protests had fallen on deaf audios and ears alike. Well, fine. Then he’d give them a graphic example of what happened when someone they knew and cared for tried to exist on starvation rations. Ratchet had been intaking exactly the allowed amount of refined energon that the Eradicons were allowed. It felt no different than normal for him, and the weakness of systems shutting down into powersave mode was easy to hide from a distance. The point had to be made in dramatic fashion, not by stumbling in front of Ultra Magnus. They wanted to starve living Cybertronians in the name of a dead war? Then he’d show them a starved mech.

Hopefully someone would notice he wasn’t around before he slipped into stasis lock, but if they didn’t, well, more fuel for the more valuable Autobots.

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Texas - "Jazz and Blaster, prewar"

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He wasn’t supposed to do this. Jazz craned his neck to see the speakers Blaster was carefully wiring into his doors, and Blaster was reminded once again of how illegal this was. Jazz was the wrong frametype for a sound system this juked. Form determined function. The only people on the broadcast system should be mechs built like Blaster, masters of the frequencies, channel surfers extraordinaires. Somebody pumping up their body with extra mods for the sheer love of music was a freak, a dangerous one at that, and Blaster shouldn’t be helping him.

The brightness of Jazz’s visor calmed his unease, however, and the communication specialist took another swig of high grade to bolster his courage. Jazz’s offerings weren’t worth much in cold hard shanix, but the engex went down smooth and the mech knew how to make a little stretch a long way. “Tell me ‘bout the beats, m’mech.”

Jazz didn’t wriggle, though his grin ticked up a notch. “Street’s kickin’ that new song by Biolight Night. You know the throwaway line? The bass drops for half a klik.”

“Critics hate it,” Blaster said, neutral. He liked the change, but official talking heads on the music shows condemned it. He couldn’t risk his job disagreeing.

“Pffft, critics.” Jazz waved a hand. “Love it, love it, love it. Two clubs on my schedule rock a playlist of remixes usin’ that line.”

“Toss me a download.”

“You got it.”

This was the real pay for Blaster. This was why he fixed a street artist up with illegal sound mods. Jazz performed without a musician’s license in underground nightclubs Blaster couldn’t attend, and he had access to music the official channels never carried. The download added flavor to his life. He didn’t starve on a diet of state-sanctioned music, but it was so terribly bland. The rhythms sounded the same. The lyrics were recycled. There was no message beyond the usual sparkbreak over love never meant to be -- and submission to authority. Always, always submission to authority.

“Naw, Blaster, you gotta listen closer. That song’s gotta deeper meaning. The beat falters,” Jazz said as he twisted to test the wiring Blaster had just hooked in. “It’s sarcasm. He says, ‘Hold your head up,’” he sang, accent disappearing into the original singer’s cadence, “‘Take a bow / You’re scaling up the charts now,’” his voice dropped back to normal, “‘but what he means is that acting right is more important than singin’ well.’”

Blaster tweaked Jazz’s handle, making the whole door twitch. “Biolight Night doesn’t take those kind of chances. He plays it safe.”

“Yeah, but that’s why he don’t just say it. He put in that little dip, and nobody not listening for it would hear it.”

“You’re giving him too much credit.”

“Y’ ain’t listening!”

The mesh cover clicked on over the speaker, and Blaster patted it. “Alright, test that. Play me the song, and I’ll tell you what I hear.”

Jazz turned to grin, ready to jam, and Blaster didn’t care that it was illegal.

[* * * * *]
Arkansas was a weird state.

It didn't really look that different in terms of humans, but that wasn't saying much. Ask a Decepticon to describe a human, and he'd be clueless; ask him to describe what the human had been driving, and the Decepticon could probably describe it down to what brand of tires it sported. The Decepticons couldn't really keep track of humans. There were pasty colored ones, and less pasty colored ones, and then it didn't matter because they all turned red when opened up.

So the Decepticons on this mission didn’t know anything about Arkansas’ local human population, but they’d decided that state sure had a thing for Autobots. One particular Autobot.

Thrust squinted at the road. "He's orange this time."

"Oh, come on!" Ramjet and Dirge put down the sheet metal they'd been heaving around for the Constructicons and stomped over to join him. Sure enough, there was Hound. "How many times does he have to fake blowing up before he gets that we're not falling for it?"

"He's pretty good at this," Dirge said grudgingly, looking down at the wreckage of the other Jeeps they'd shot up. "He even projects the fires burning out."

"Wonder how much it takes to keep a hologram like that up for hours like this?" Ramjet shaded his optics with one hand. "Ugh. What a fugly color. Hey, Autobot!" He cupped his hand around his mouth to call down the hill. "This is for your own good!"

"Saving Autobots from poor color choices since the dawn of the war," Thrust muttered as his wingmates took off to bomb the fragger. Again. Sixth time today. "Isn't their stupid ship that color? They gotta fire their decorator."

Half an hour later, Thrust stopped sorting screws to look at traffic again. "You're kidding me. Another red one, guys!"

"You tried that one already!" Ramjet yelled down the hill without stopping what he was doing. "Do yellow!"

"Blue!"

"But not navy blue!"

"Why not navy?"

"Don't like it."

"Fair 'nough."

Joint exasperation kept the Coneheads glaring down the hill, and to their surprise, the Jeep bumbled on his way, weaving past the gutted skeletons of its brethren still smoldering on the road. Huh. Must be a scout thing.

"We're probably going to have Autobots on our afts any minute now," Thrust said as he went back to sorting. "Definitely recon."

"Yeah."
"We should get ready to fight."

The three Coneheads dithered for a while. They took potshots at the black Jeep that zipped by, catcalling Hound's choice in colors. "It makes you look fat!" Dirge sneered at the swervy little fragger. "Sit still and blow up like a good 'bot!"

"Wide aaaaaaaft!" Ramjet crowed.

"Oh, now that's not even original anymore," Thrust said, looking down the road where a convoy of Autobots had suddenly appeared. "What happened to the purple? I liked the purple."

"Yeah, c'mon," Dirge said as he looked around his wingmate at the oncoming Hound and friends. "That looked good on you."

The Autobots slowed warily. Hound hung back among his friends, unnerved by the critique of his color choices as done by enemy forces. Also the plethora of burnt-out Jeeps around their feet.

"You should try those racing stripe things."

"What? Are you serious? Look at him, he's a box on wheels. Putting racing stripes on that would be like gilding Ravage: totally missing the point."

"A secondary color could look pretty good on him, gotta admit..."

"Lose the stars, though."

"Pfft, like that was even a question. What's next, painted-on flames? Groundpounders do some slagging tacky paintjobs, you ask me."

"I didn't ask you!" Hound yelled at them, and the Coneheads made piffling noises at his objection. "Obviously you should."

"Looking at you, the last mech you asked 'bout your paint was blind."

"Saw on a spectrum unknown to Cybertron."

"Can't do worse than asking your worst enemies for advice -- oh wait, you already did worse. So you want that advice now or later?"

Hound went very quiet, even his engine dropping to a growl so low it was more felt than heard. "Someone," he said after a moment, "shut. Them. Up."

The Coneheads jeered at him.

"Now!"

Optimus Prime jolted on his tires. "Autobots, attack!"

Thrust just had to get the last word. "About fragging time."

Ugh, Arkansas. Too many Autobots, most of them looking like Hound.

(The Decepticons never did figure out they were down the road from a Jeep dealership. Shh. Don't tell them.)
He had a plethora of choices, honestly. In a ship of over 200 people, somehow they’d ended up with three actual medics and two makeshift ones. Four, if one counted Perceptor and Brainstorm, but anybody who went to those two for repairs was asking for trouble. Tripodeca came out of Perceptor’s lab somehow signed up to be his rifle support, and Whirl came out of Brainstorm’s lab cackling madly. The latter wasn’t unusual, but it did alarm people that there was no visible reason for Whirl’s glee. Brainstorm’s visible weapons weren’t nearly as frightening as his invisible ones.

That eliminated those two from the pool Sunstreaker was delicately testing. Lancer was okay but was only pulled into the medibay during emergencies. Sunstreaker actually liked Hoist, but the engineer insisted he was only on-call as a last resort. He refused as soon as Sunstreaker said it was a medical issue. Ratchet…well, Sunstreaker wouldn’t voluntarily face Ratchet without an entire room full of Autobots to cushion them. Their past issues made the situation awkward and tense, he felt. He had no idea how Ratchet felt. He didn’t want to find out, frankly.

The choice ended up being between First Aid and Ambulon. First Aid seemed somewhat okay. Ambulon kept to himself. Neither had been on Cybertron during the Swarm, so there was a good chance either one would give Bob a chance. There wasn’t exactly a veterinarian he could take the bug to, after all, and technically, under all the forced mutation, Bob was still a Cybertronian mech just like any of them.

It took him a week to choose. It took him a day to negotiate an appointment with Ambulon, who seemed like the kind of mech incapable of being shocked by something in his ward until he lost his slag. Sunstreaker almost ended up asking First Aid instead, but Ambulon had sucked in a deep breath, nodded briskly, and bent to shuffling the medibay schedule with ruthless efficiency to fit the appointment in.

Sunstreaker needed an hour to coax Bob into the medibay. Seriously, how did the bug even know?? Sunstreaker had taken him into the medibay for his own maintenance appointments. How had Bob figured out that it was his turn for a check-up?

“Daffy bug. Get in here!” Sunstreaker leaned back, hauling on the leash. “Here! Here, boy!” Frag, he’d have to mention to Rung in their next appointment that he was slipping into Earthisms again. Or rather, he’d have to mention that it didn’t bother him when he did it, if it was related to Bob in some way. It was becoming a strange coping method, according to Rung. All Sunstreaker knew was that yelling, “Bad boy!” at Bob got the point across better than scolding him by name.

Bob’s antenna laid back, and all four optics widened pitifully. Cringing, he crept forward to sniffle and nudge Sunstreaker’s knee, giving his most pathetic, apologetic look all the while. Sunstreaker felt like a heel, but if he gave the slightest bit, Bob would run right over him.

“No. Bad. Bad Bob. Now, come here or no treats.”

A mech would think he’d just threatened to slaughter Bob’s entire Swarm in front of his optics. No treats? Oh, the horror!

“You heard me. Get in here.”

Ambulon busied himself across the room preparing a row of antivirus boosters. Muffled vent-bursts
came from his direction, as if he was attempting not to laugh at Sunstreaker shaking his finger at a whining Insecticon. Being the ship’s vet was obviously going to have its perks.

[* * * * *]

*Florida - "Windblade and Chromia"

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The City Speaker had a bodyguard. It was unheard of on their homeworld, because who would dare attack a City Speaker?

The fear was that foreigner would offer threat to Windblade. Especially, she was cautioned, on Cybertron. Cybertron had long been embroiled in the fierce hatred of a war against its own. Who knew how that would impact a City Speaker turned envoy?

Chromia worried more that the impact was more psychological. Windblade’s sudden in-depth involvement in politics had her rubbing wingtips with the acknowledged Traitor with a capital ‘T’ of Cybertron. If such a position was granted by popular vote, Starscream would have won by a landslide. As it was, he won as a politician, which was almost the same thing. Chromia thought it utterly bizarre that the Cybertronians saw nothing strange about the open acknowledgement that their leader was a lying, scheming, underhanded, backbiting, cowardly, treasonous heatsink of a slimy mech. They actually seemed vaguely puzzled she didn’t see the inherent symmetry of appointing him their leader.

“Politics,” even Swindle said, shrugging at the rest of the bar, “am I right?”

Everyone nodded, toasted him, and seemed strangely content with how things were.

“He at least knows how to lie convincingly,” Blurr said, as though that mattered. Although, given his description of the last Senate and its appointed Prime, caring enough to tailor the lies to public sensibilities sort of did mean Starscream wasn’t a complete loss. From their way of thinking, apparently. Chromia still thought it was insane.

“He’s fun to complain about,” the Tankors explained. Considering the state of faction relations after the war, it seemed Autobot, Decepticon, NAIL, and badgeless alike found complaining about Starscream’s leadership a uniting factor. Again, it made sense, in an extremely backward way.

“You ever notice,” Wheeljack said slowly, tracing something complicated in the spill from his glass on the bar, “that he’s actually doing what he said he’d do? Despite everything he was and is, he’s actually doing a good job. It’s just that nobody seems to notice through it all.” The ‘all’ meaning Starscream in general.

And that was what worried Chromia. She’d been sent to bodyguard her City Speaker, and what worried her was what she couldn’t guard against. These weird ways of thought, backward and violent and contradicting, made a kind of sense to Windblade. Windblade considered them how Cybertronians thought, and she tried to understand them. Chromia couldn’t stand Cybertron’s strange thought patterns. The people here were warped by war, and what they were doing to her City Speaker surely had to be harmful.

She had to get Windblade home before the effects were irreversible.

[* * * * *]

"Optimus - What-ifs/Alternate Timelines ”
“Slag!”

The hissed comment from the shadows drew a sharp look from the winged shape at the mouth of the alley. “Keep it down.” Starscream scanned the street, but the street lights showed no one drawn out of their safe evenings at home to investigate the sudden clatter. The people around here knew better than to look too closely into dark alleys.

After another look, he stepped back into its shelter himself. “Is there a problem?”

The little groundpounder he worked with grimaced, straightening up from the body. “I know y’ don’t like cops, but I knew this one. An actual good guy, if y’ believe it.”

Starscream didn’t, but he kept his peace. He’d never seen anything close to regret on Jazz’s face before. Sometimes, the innocent got ground up in the start of a revolution. He didn’t believe the cop they’d take out was one of those innocents, but sometimes the wrong person ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Jazz knelt a moment more by the boldly colored police officer, then sighed and shook it off. When he looked up at Starscream again, the purple emblem on his chest gleamed in a stray beam of light from the mouth of the alley. He shook his head again. It was a shame.

And the two Decepticons melted into the night, leaving the body behind.

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"Megatron - Scars or painful spots"

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He didn’t take his helm off anymore. There were many reasons why, perfectly rational reasons, enough to satisfy any asker, but they weren’t the real reason. Soundwave knew the real reason. Soundwave was the one to delicately hint at and eventually bluntly state that it would be wiser to keep his helm on.

Understand, the helm wasn’t a natural part of Megatron’s body. It started out as safety equipment in the mines. It became a piece of his combat armor in the gladiatorial arena, but it’s not part of him. His native metal ended where the helm begins. Latches held it on.

His helm covered his real head, frail petals of a powerful communication array folded up under the heavy metal like origami. Flared at full extension, its mere existence was a direct defiance of the Functionals. They demanded he keep it tucked tight. They covered his head with a blocky safety helm and sent him to the mines where his body belonged, if not the extravagant aberrances that contradicted it.

Why did he have an array if not to use it, however? It could catch signals through snow, rock, and metal. He could communicate with someone across half of Cybertron if he tuned into the right frequency, but his training in using his own equipment is spotty and rough. It took him discouragingly long find whatever channel he searched for. He could do it, however, if he kept trying. And he did.

Explaining why Soundwave told him to keep his head covered. Every time he stretched his array, he exposed a weakness. He opened himself to injury. He frequently sought an answer only to be met by silence, but he kept trying. Megatron searched endlessly, the petals of his array quivering as they
strained to find a familiar voice amidst the chatter of a thousand open commlines. Eventually, someone would notice he wanted to find something. Someone. A missing person he'd been looking for so long he'd do practically anything to find them. Megatron couldn’t help but comb Cybertron for one transmission, a single answer to a ping. Anything.

It was a weakness the Decepticon leader couldn’t afford to show. Soundwave advised against it.

The helm stayed on. He was less vulnerable this way.

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"Thundercracker - What-ifs/Alternate Timelines"

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“I hate you all.”

So stated the Autobot Air Commander. As per usual, and therefore nobody took much offense. They kept monopolizing the television, watching local news while ignoring the clearly superior soap opera marathon happening on Channel 13. The miserable slagger. They knew he was writing an AU fanfic for last week’s plotline.

Thundercracker glared across the common room at the damnfool Prime and his honorable pack of well-meaning idiots. Well, except for Jazz and Prowl. They were okay. Sometimes he could almost tolerate them, but then he saw their wheels and shuddered to himself. *Grounders.*

He stalked across the room like a dark blue shadow of miffed sensibilities to retrieve his cube of high octane jet fuel. Sideswipe immediately looked his way. Thundercracker met his gaze, saw the greed in it, and downed his ration in one go. Sideswipe made a face at him, and he smirked back. No sneaked sips for him. Yeah, how about them oranges. Apples? The humans had an idiom for this situation. He really had to work on sorting their weird little bits of slang out if he was going to get Sharon’s voice right in the fic.

Thinking hard, he drifted over to his usual table and sat down to ponder human vernacular.

“Megatron’s made a ground team,” the Terrible Two said in tandem as they slid in on either side of him. He twitched toward freedom, but Ratchet had him by the left wing and Wheeljack was already pushing what looked like blueprints in front of him. “What do you think about a counter gestalt to throw against the Stunticons?”

Thundercracker looked down at the blueprints -- ‘Superion!!’ the label proclaimed with two exclamation marks, a smiley face, and hand-drawn fireworks -- and reminded himself there was a reason he hadn’t joined the Decepticons. Yes, even though he hated working with all these wishy-washy civilians groundpounders. “Narnia help us, as the humans say,” he said dryly.

Ratchet and Wheeljack exchanged an amused look but didn’t correct him.

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Prowl - “Dark secrets/skeletons in the closet”

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It was Spring Cleaning day in the Ark! Bring on the overabundance of Windex, dithering over whether or not they really needed to throw that away, and the funky smell of an entire spaceship
closed up tight for four million years. One would think giant robots wouldn’t produce a nasty stink, but the Ark itself festered with mold in dank corners, the odd animal infestation here or there, and Beachcomber’s artificially-lit greenhouse.

Actually, the greenhouse smelled pretty nice. Hound attempted every spring to bribe Beachcomber to move it closer to his room to combat the bat guano reek.

In any case, Spring Cleaning had been embraced by the Autobots as a ritual of sorts. It meant Wheeljack really did have to decide which, if any, he needed to keep of all his half-finished projects, and Perceptor hummed happily as he organized the living frag out of anything he came across. Nobody could deny someone that happy to clean. Optimus Prime suffered the artifact in his chest to be carefully dusted by Ratchet. The Protectobots stampeded back to the Ark from their homebase like a joyful tide of Clean All The Things. Blaster made a ‘Cleaning to the Oldies’ soundtrack that had been outdated before the Golden Age.

And then there was Sunstreaker, who got stuck on paint detail. All those scuffed corners on furniture? The edges of doors where the bare metal was showing? The scraped areas on the walls down where people’s hubcabs kept rubbing? Those all had to be touched up. It was a tedious job that involved crawling around on the floor a lot, but he had a good optic for catching the tiny patches. Besides, it gave him a handy excuse to go into everybody’s rooms and snoop around. While looking at furniture and walls to fill in the worn spots, admittedly, but it was a more entertaining job than doing inventory in the medbay and didn’t involve talking with people.

Jazz shoved a brush and a can of paint at him, and Sunstreaker wandered off to go be a nosy fragger in the name of duty.

Which brought him to Prowl’s room. It was about an unexciting as rooms came. To be honest, he hadn’t expected anything different.

Except something was different, and Sunstreaker blinked when he figured out what it was. The desk showed a surprising amount of wear around the edges. The whole top surface was scuffed and dented, and all four corners were buffed down to shiny bare metal. The edges had been worn down so far they were rounded. The entire desk looked as though it had already been brutally cleaned.

Sunstreaker ran his thumb over some of the weird scrapes marking the desktop. There had been paint transfers deep in these scratches before someone had stripped the incriminating details away, mark his word. He grinned. Interesting. Not his business, but he made a mental note to keep his options open if Prowl started looking antsy.

Shaking his head, the golden Autobot opened the paint can and set about concealing the evidence a bit better.

[* * * * *

Krok & Fortress Maximus - "What-ifs/Alternate Timelines"

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“He killed ten thousand of us at Simanzi,” Krok said thoughtfully, squinting in the weird pod. The whole ship was weird, but the containment areas full of what were supposed to be mechs were well past just normal levels of weird. The one holding Fortress Maximus looked like a stasis pod. He knew how to operate one of those.

The others were panicking, but they caught on quick. Spinister moved in, briskly evaluating the life
support stats on the control pad. “Misfire, how many of those boosters you got left?”

“Errrr.” Misfire leaned back and checked Flywheels’ storage pack, because nobody in their right mind trusted him to hold the boosters himself. At least not more than once, as he’d immediately downed more than a few and been high as a kite as a result. “Ten vials? Ten…eleven.”

Spinister eyed the stasis locked Autobot in the pod. “I’m going to need them all.” A booster-high Autobot powerhouse versus the Decepticon Justice Division? This plan was going to get them all killed. It was still their best chance of surviving.

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“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh frag.”

That did seem like an accurate summation of the situation. All this because he had the bad judgment to see how Demus was getting on and hoping for a job to pull his group through a tight financial spot. Using the Triple M to network for employment was a decent use of contacts, normally, but come on, how was he supposed to know Demus had gone full-on evil business mogul?

“Are you sure you didn’t know about this?” Fulcrum hissed, optics narrow, and Krok awkwardly motioned a negative. He hadn’t known, he swore it!

“Grimlock’s going to track us down no problem,” Crankcase said into the comm frequency. “Misfire, I’m worried he’s gonna find out about Fort Max.”

Two minutes later, the Duly Appointed Enforcer of busting up heads took off on a rescue mission to rescue a mech who drove through walls in tank mode more often than not. Five minutes after that, the Scavengers pelted after him. Time to rescue their already rescued charity case Autobot from being rescued.

Oi. What a slag day.

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"Optimus dying"

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“Fraggit.”

Well, there went another life down.

Optimus reached into his subspace and fished out his Frequent Die-er card, optics squinted up at nothing in particular as he tried to recall just what had ended him this time. Megatron? Galvatron? Unicron? He usually remembered. Something unusual must have happened. Probably someone whose name didn’t end with ‘ron’ had gotten him this time around. Hot Rod came in at close enough.

The ticket machine beeped at him impatiently. Someone was already fading in behind him, ready to log out. Life didn’t give the round-trip tickets often, but Optimus didn’t even think about it as he swiped his card for one. “Starscream?” he mused to himself. “It better not have been Starscream.” He wasn’t sure he wanted to remember if that was the case.

Pushing the door to the next life open became a long effort as the hinge rotated, turning the whole thing into a revolving door. Optimus Prime walked back out to where he’d started looking a little
different but mostly the same. As always.

“Here I go again,” floated wryly in his wake.

[* * * * *

“Ratchet/Wheeljack”

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The reputation for kicking aft on the battlefield didn’t stop the Party Ambulance from gettin’ down with his bad self when the shifts ticked over. Off-duty was free time, and nobody gave half a scrap about Behavior Unbecoming Of An Officer once the duty board showed said officer was done for the shift. Sure, Jazz’s voice could crack like a whip the second he had to step in somewhere around the ship, and Prowl’s expression could chill from a smile down to an ice block if he had to assume the mantle of Responsible Officer while he was officially off-duty, but if Jazz wanted to open a kissing booth in the common room or Prowl went chasing after the Dinobots with his sirens on once they were properly off the clock, well, that was their business. The war had been going on too long to tell the survivors they couldn’t enjoy what life it left them.

Therefore: Party Ambulance.

Party Ambulance teaching himself to salsa?

Wheeljack poked his head out of the lab just in time to catch a sweet optic-full of Ratchet’s aft cha-cha-ing from side to side as the medic didn’t a quick step-return-turn. Shoulder up, shoulder, down, and Ratchet’s hands splayed out in a back-and-forth push-pull in time with whatever beat he was dancing to.

Sunstreaker leaned against the wall by the door, his bright gold having alerted Wheeljack to the ongoing spectacle. Familiar as his frown was, the frontliner seemed more puzzled than angry at the moment. From the look of him, he couldn’t quite get the hang of the dance steps. Wheeljack recognized the aborted twitches. Somebody would be practicing those moves later in his quarters. Heh.

Entertained, Wheeljack stepped out into the hall. That was close enough to catch the faint, breathy hum as Ratchet provided his own music at the lowest volume, obviously listening more to whatever he heard in his mind than giving a rusted fender if anyone else wanted to hear. After a second of nodding along, Wheeljack deliberately stepped to the side, leading with his hip.

Ratchet’s shoulder echoed the scoop and shimmy almost on instinct, and suddenly they were dancing together, delighting in the company of a private party.

Sunstreaker could just stand there and watch. He wasn’t invited.

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“Bumblebee and Optimus Prime’s first meeting”

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“Prime.” Jazz had his face in his hands, for once in his life so embarrassed he couldn’t laugh it off. “Prime. Boss. Boss, don’t do this to me.”

Optimus Prime rubbed his wrist in total, awkward fail at what he could do to smooth this over. “I...I
apologize. I…simply…” Why, of all days, of any time, did all his skill as an orator choose to desert him? Primus save him now.

Jazz refused to look through his fingers at his stammering leader. “I don’t know ya. Who’s this mech, and how’d he get promoted? Nope. Don’t know.”

Sometimes, Optimus didn’t know, either. “I’m so sorry,” he apologized for the fourth time, helpless to explain further. It wasn’t as though he could explain to the little scout that he used to be a lot shorter. Orion Pax had gained quite a bit of height in becoming Prime, and he used to have a field of vision that didn’t require actively looking down to see minibots. Jazz was short. Optimus had automatically assumed the scout Jazz was introducing him to today would be in the same size class.

“This’s Bumblebee,” Jazz had said.

Optimus had promptly glanced around and asked, “Where is he?”

The minibot standing there looking up at him had politely reset his vocalizer and said, “Down here,” whereupon Jazz had begun disowning the Prime every which way from Iacon because what kind of size discriminating mech was he? Seriously?

“He’s not usually like this,” the poor guy weakly tried to excuse his boss. Bumblebee looked skeptical. Optimus kind of wanted to disappear. Jazz threw up his hands and gave up on words.

Not one of the Prime’s best first impressions, that was for certain.

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Pt. 40

Chapter Summary

Nickel takes over the Warworld, the Worst Customer Ever, Skyfire deals with feral Autobots, Bob is stern in its own way, Playing the Long Odds continuation, revolutions, Brave Police, the aftermath of battle, battlefield flirting, Christmas in the Ark, and Swindle is dangerous.

Title: Candy From Strangers, Pt. 40
Warning: Death, stress, feral behavior, war, cuddling.
Rating: R
Disclaimer: The theatre doesn’t own the script or actors, nor does it make a profit from the play.
Motivation (Prompt): Various Tumblr things.

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Pt. 40
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[* * * * *
"What if"
[* * * * *

Choom! Choom! Choom!

The mass intake of air robbed the battlefield of air. Temporarily, of course, and it came back out in a babble of a hundred shocked, wordless exclamations as stunned-motionless Decepticons stared in disbelief at the spray of interior parts now painting the ground. A stray piece of brain module bounced to a gentle halt, teetering for a second before it stopped.

Three bodies slumped down atop it, the noise of their collapse lost in the general outcry.

“And that,” Nickel said in a no-nonsense tone made all the more frightening by the tight anger-lines bracketing her mouth, “is that. It’s over. Done.” The meter in her forehelm didn’t even tick as she climbed back to her feet. She had the titanium nerves of a forged medic. Once the prognosis was clear and excising faulty parts became the obvious solution, she wasn’t one to dither over surgery -- or regret the cure. She wouldn’t waste time mourning the malfunctions she’d rid the Decepticons of.

The rifle in her hands quivered. It might have been shock. It might have been fear.

Deathsaurus’ startled backwing had launched him upward, but his feet crunched back onto the ground in a loud, awkward thump he turned into an enraged step forward. “What have you done?!”
She glared up at him in microsized fury. “What you wouldn’t, you coward!” Her voice raised even as he advanced on her, and it carried over the remaining ranks of the Warworld’s crew. “You sacrificed your mechs for that? That?! She stabbed one indignant finger toward the pathetic trio of headless bodies. “Your mechs died so Tarn and Overlord could make a show. I could have taken the shot at any time, but you heard him. You heard him! He didn’t give the order until he’d built Megatron’s confidence by killing your crew, just so those two boltheads could have their moment of glory cutting him off at the knees. You stood by while they sent Decepticons to the slaughter, so I did what I had to end it! I ended this madness! Me. Not you. You coward.”

She slung Vos up against her shoulder, barrel pointed to the sky, but her other hand clenched into a fist brandished before her. It was a gesture of aggression, but also one of disdain. Deathsaurus hesitated, struck by how that tiny hand grasped the suddenly free-floating threads of power loosed by the headshots she’d taken. That Vos had allowed her to take. Much like Deathsaurus had allowed Tarn to use the lives of his Decepticons, exactly as she’d pointed out.

Publically, which made this suddenly a rather awkward situation for him. The rogue commander could already hear the murmur of anger starting in the ranks as the truth of her accusations spread. The little fragging glitch had seized the moment, and Deathsaurus had but a moment to seethe in admiration, fear, and rage before bowing to the inevitability of defeat. What scraps of authority he had left as realization dawned in the ranks had to be used to save his own neck. It was either concede or be torn apart by his own troops.

His fingers curled in to dig the claws into his palms as he knelt slowly before his new leader, the new Empress of Destruction. “I…was a fool. Tarn led me astray,” forced out between gritted teeth, and he lowered all of his optics in humility. “I can see that now. You did what I couldn’t, and I swear my loyalty to you.”

She snorted into the tense silence after a moment. The Decepticons waited for her to either accept Deathsaurus’ surrender or throw him to the ranks. Right here and now, it was her decision to make. She held his life in a miniscule fist.

She merely muttered, “Don’t do me any favors,” as she turned to march down across the battlefield.

Deathsaurus was left on bended knee, uncertain if he’d been spared or simply dismissed. His crew stared at the medic as she made her way toward the three mechs she’d shot down. It was telling that Vos stayed still and silent against her shoulder.

Further back on the battlefield, Tesarus and Helex exchanged speaking looks. Neither one of them glanced toward the body of their former leaders, but they made no move to stop Nickel as she bent to prod Tarn, then Megatron. Both bodies stayed limp and grey.

Overlord still had some color to him when she kicked his side. Most of his head was gone, but a groan creaked out over the silent battlefield from the ruins of his throat. It seemed ununtrium made him harder to kill than even the legendary Megatron.

Nickel unslung Vos and fired, pointblank. The body jerked once, twice.

Overlord greyed.

The tiny medic tossed Vos aside, allowing him to transform, and he backed away hurriedly as soon as his feet touched ground. His optics fixed on her face as if he didn’t dare turn away for a second.
She turned to survey the battered Warworld crew, the surviving Justice Division, and Deathsaurus, still kneeling in submission as he awaited her judgment. They all waited. Traditions were a powerful force among the Decepticons, and anyone who claimed the job had to crown herself.

Almost thoughtfully, Nickel declared, “I, Nickel, now lead the Decepticons.”

For a second time, the battlefield emptied of air.

Deathsaurus surged to his feet, his voice part of the resounding shout of, “All Hail Nickel!”

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Starscream/Prowl - “Role play”

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Of all the places Starscream expected to spot an Autobot agent working undercover, it wasn’t in the snack stall at a neutral spaceport. He had to do a double-take when he saw the flash of black-and-white. The distinctive red chevron was there, but it was over artificially bright optics and a customer service smile too wide to be real. That was kind of creepy to someone who knew the mech in question, and customers behind Starscream started muttering as the Air Commander stopped in line to stare shamelessly.

The doors Starscream could identify from half a battlefield away were muffled by stretchy restraints, food service regulations demanding their broad spread be pinned back to operation standards. Prowl deftly assembled an order of frail lithium crystals into a crisp bag bearing a logo, smiled at the customer as his coworker accepted payment, and chirped, “Have a nice day and come again!” as he handed over the bag, his free hand automatically reaching to accept the next order coming down the tiny stall’s assembly line. He looked as though he could do the job in his sleep.

He also, Starscream noted, looked as though he had been there since he was last allowed to sleep. Run-down didn’t begin to describe the people working this stall. All of the food service stalls, really, but Starscream didn’t give a scrap about what filthy aliens looked like when rested and healthy. All he knew was that Prowl had scuffs underneath hastily-applied polish, and a dull, glazed look of exhaustion beneath the unhealthy gleam of optics turned up above natural levels.

Thoughtful, Starscream stepped forward with the line, letting the people ahead of him hide his presence. Prowl didn’t look aware of his surroundings, but one of Optimus Prime’s high-ranking officers didn’t magically end up in the indentured servitude that was the service industry in these neutral spaceports. An awful lot of what happened in these places was exactly as it appeared, but Starscream didn’t trust what was in plain sight. What was Prowl looking to accomplish, here?

Living paycheck to paycheck didn’t allow for the freedom to progress, but vanishing in among the downtrodden made for a great cover. Nobody would question his presence. Nobody would ask about his past. Nobody would give his future a second-thought. So long as he didn’t stand out, it was the perfect place for a spy to hide in plain sight.

Unless, of course, an equally high-ranking Decepticon got a craving to stretch his wings and pick up the worst junkfood imaginable at the nearest stall once he landed. Starscream was off-duty and away from back-up. One meant he could indulge his curiosity. The other meant he probably shouldn’t.

He came to the head of the line quickly. Smiling wickedly, he said, “Never been here before. You!” He pointed even as Prowl’s head whipped about from smiling after the last customer. “What would you recommend?”
The expression on the Autobot’s face couldn’t be described. Prowl’s coworker apparently took it as a symptom of a slow, work-addled brain failing to process. “Answer!” he hissed at Prowl.

Prowl opened his mouth twice before his vocalizer engaged, but his optics stayed locked on Starscream’s. “I…like anything with the secret sauce on it.”

Starscream assumed the secret ingredient was poison. “Then I’ll take one of each.”

“What? But -- “ Both front employees looked at the long line of impatient customers waiting behind Starscream. He enjoyed watching them swallow their protests. Money was money, after all, and so what if one customer put the entire line in a bad mood because he ordered half the menu? Corporate didn’t give minions like them the power to deny him.

He waited until the cash register chimed with his total before tapping his chin. “No, wait, I don’t like silicon flakes. Do any of them have silicon flakes?”

“Uh…”

“I believe some of them do.”

“Can you check?” Starscream simpered, and Prowl gritted his teeth, optics slowly narrowing at the Seeker’s too-earnest expression.

“Yeah, no problem,” the cashier said, and Prowl twitched because it was an enormous fragging problem during the rush hour.

Starscream already had two more requests lined up by the time the Autobot returned from checking ingredients in the back. Prowl looked steadily more ready to snap. Starscream was enjoying himself immensely, and whether or not this resulted in a fight and/or information on the Autobot’s mission, he just knew he wasn’t getting out this spaceport without a fetish for the cute little hat perched on Prowl’s head.

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"Feral behavior"

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It wasn't what Skyfire expected when Perceptor told him the other Autobots had been reduced to basic instincts, but he blamed it on nigh-constant interaction with the humans. Human ideas were infectious things.

This was, however, what he should have expected of feral behavior from his own kind. Well, a certain subset of his own kind.

"This is beneath you," he said gently to the police cruiser flashing its lights at him aggressively.

Prowl continued to try and herd him, showing dominate behavior through the rules coded all the way to his base code. To his primitive processors at the moment, Skyfire was disobeying every rule of the road and had to be either driven off the road or prodded back into proper driving. He bumped his front grill protector into Skyfire’s ankles, red and blue lights cycling faster and sirens beginning to wail angrily.

The noise summoned the convoy leader. Skyfire couldn't help but smile as Optimus Prime drove around the corner, deep bass rumble of a powerful engine overriding Prowl's frustrated revving. The
police cruiser reversed into a quick three-point turn that brought him bleating siren blips to the dominant truck. Skyfire chuckled at the strident complaints.

"Hello, my friend." Not wishing to threaten or challenge his commander, the shuttleformer knelt to bring himself down into what the Prime's basic instincts could interpret as a parking position. It calmed both vehicles somewhat, although Prowl continued to disapprove of his choice of parking spot. This was clearly a road, not a parking lot!

Optimus rumbled his engine, commanding Skyfire move, but there was a method to Skyfire's refusal to stand. Nudges and sideswipes did nothing to move him, and eventually the Prime reached the conclusion Skyfire had been waiting for: Skyfire wasn't moving. Perhaps Skyfire wasn't able to move.

Prowl tore off in full flight to fetch the nearest ambulance. Roadside assistance was needed!

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In retrospect, it made perfect sense. A convoy stampede was the natural extension of the Autobots’ current behaviorism. Of course the Autobots’ vehicle modes, designed by and adapted to humanity, retained metal memory of drivers. Worse, they remembered car salesmen.

Spike and Sparkplug dressed in what was clearly some kind of uniform, even if Skyfire hadn’t observed a car salesman to ever dress how they did. Regardless, humans walking into their midst was enough to alarm the whole convoy. Startled by the sudden appearance of their altmodes’ natural enemy, the more timid domestic models had sped off down the road while the commercial models hunkered down on their wheels. Sirens flashed warning while Optimus Prime’s deep diesel engine revved threat.

Spike stumbled back immediately. “Whoa!”

“Hey, big guy, what’s wrong?” Sparkplug held up both hands in a placating gesture. Unknown to him, it was a wise choice. Open hands showed the lack of control devices otherwise known as carkeys. His son didn’t follow his lead, and the Prime rumbled warning at him.

Circumstances required Skyfire to diffuse the situation before he could chase down the fleeing cars. “Spike, Sparkplug, I must ask you to retreat. My comrades aren’t thinking clearly, and right now you’re causing them distress.”

The two humans looked between him and the group of vehicles. “Us?”

The Autobots had backed into a defensive half-circle, Optimus Prime up front in the center facing the humans directly. His engine growled when Spike didn’t back away. First Aid and Ratchet grumbled, tweeping their sirens as if telling the evil salesmen, “Yeah, you better run!” while Inferno and Hotspot howled their sirens angrily. Red Alert seemed to be scanning for an escape route and guarding their rear.

Spike and Sparkplug backed away slowly, looking up at Skyfire in doubt but trusting his judgment. Skyfire sent Perceptor a message to explain things to them better than he could currently.

The ambulances showed a surprising amount of aggression as the dangerous humans retreated. They tweeped and tweedled, mock-lunging at these squishy beings their coding told them were enemy. Prowl and Streetwise hung back, which seemed odd until Skyfire connected their uncertainty to their function. Aww. The policecars couldn’t figure out if the humans were enemy or must protect. It made Skyfire wonder what would happen if the ambulances encountered a wounded human.
Skyfire had just accessed SkySpy to start the search when Optimus Prime’s engine truly roared as only a truck’s could. Police sirens howled into full protest a moment later as both police cruisers registered the lack of convoy, and Skyfire had to physically pick Prowl up to prevent him from accelerating into the hunt.

“No. I’m not going to lose the rest of you,” he scolded the irate car even as he sent Perceptor another message explaining the situation. It ended with, “I need a pen of some sort to contain them.”

“Oh dear. I suggest a garage. Blades has not left the helicopter landing pad I sent up for him, and their instincts may be similarly soothed by an accepted resting area. Give me 5 minutes to locate an area to use,” Perceptor sent back.

The reply came while Skyfire was still shuffling about to keep the Prime from accelerating forward. The truck kept nudging him sternly but wasn’t willing to ram him. Prowl revved angrily, tires spinning, but that worked to Skyfire’s advantage. Drawn to the sounds of distress, Inferno rolled over and extended his ladder at the police cruiser as if to help. When Skyfire turned to the side, Inferno backed up and went around to that side to try again. Red Alert escorted him, sirens chirping instructions to the firetruck.

Meanwhile, the rest of their convoy was missing and it was the end of the world.

Turned out that ambulances didn’t take being by themselves well at all. They only functioned in a pack. They were good protectors and better caretakers, but separate them from their herd and they utterly lost their slag. Streetwise circled them, distressed by their distress but intent on keeping them from senseless flight. Apparently the herd instinct was strong in a gestalt member, even reduced to base code. He helped nudge the ambulances into Perceptor’s hastily set-up garage.

Fortunately, the garage worked as predicted. Upset engine noises putted down into shutdown as surroundings registered. Optimus Prime lasted the longest, cabin lights flickering in slowly dimming awareness as he gradually shut down into standby. Leader of a missing convoy or not, the parking urge was strong. Vehicles did not run inside garages.

It freed Skyfire to go search for the rest of the Autobots, but by then it had been a good hour. A bunch of cars running down the roads didn’t stand out by then, and he had no idea if they’d gone straight to the nearest cities or scattered down various turn-offs along the way. A futile three-hour search using SkySpy and his own scanners turned up neither tire nor bumper.

This was, however, where he should have expected the convoy to gravitate to. It made perfect sense to the part of their primitive processors currently most active.

"I know you have your spark set on taking one home," he said gently to the desperate Lamborghini he knelt beside, “but this dealership won’t accept courtship offers. They take only cash or credit.” He’d asked, once Perceptor finally got a clue to where their missing comrades had ended up via a bemused phone call to the Ark asking if the herd of hopeful cars belonged to them or not. The Portland car dealerships had seen weirder, but purring sportscars nuzzling up to display models and some bizarre courtship displays by some others in the herd -- Hound and Beachcomber would never live this down -- had been beyond strange.

Sunstreaker crooned another low engine noise at the admittedly very pretty Corvette inside the display room. Skyfire was glad Sunstreaker hadn’t broken the window in his desperation to reach such an ideal parade partner. Mirage was already posing beside his chosen model, skipping courtship in order to assume that of course a Ford Thunderbird wanted nothing more than to be seen with him.
Tracks appeared to be attempting to groom a Taurus. The convoy wanted badly to add to their numbers, because nothing looked better than a fine group of vehicles rolling together.

At least, Skyfire hoped that was all there was to this. He didn’t want to think about vehicle base code mixed in with a Cybertronian attempting to interface.

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"Bob ficlet"

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Bob didn’t understand much about this bizarre Swarm his master had joined, but he understood dominance and submission. The Swarm functioned as one, but within that one there were many. The one would be a jumbled mess of many instead of one if the many didn’t cooperate. The many slotted into place inside the one via an elaborate hierarchy of dominance and submission, every Insecticon responsible and responsive to the other in a firm social ranking that determined place and function.

So Bob understood his master’s prickliness. His master had been submissive to the rust-red mech for as long as Bob had been submissive to his master. Their relationship confused Bob, but his master had seemed to be an adoptive pupa, not quite a larva but definitely not an adult. The inability to walk had been indicative of his master’s immature body. Now that his master had grown out of his wheeled shell and started walking, the rust-red mech had lost interest in the growing pupa. Bob remembered that stage of development well. It was lonely, walking by himself after so long as a larva doted on by the Swarm caretakers.

It was an uncertain stage of life, too. His master was not an adult, but he was getting there. Now was the time to learn the hierarchy and search for his place within it.

The problem, as far as Bob understood it, was that his master didn’t follow the Swarm’s cues. It was obvious to Bob that the rest of the mechs didn’t want his master among them. Their body language was stiff and borderline angry. The subtle cues of a dominance battle lay underneath every chirping social interaction his master had in the Swarm, but his master wasn’t responding right. His master wanted to be dominant. None of the Swarm submit to him. His master tried and tried, but he lost every confrontation.

The proper response, in Bob’s mind, was submission. That’s what his master’s place in the Swarm was, as such a low-ranking Insecticon. He had been put there by group decision. It’s how the one worked. If the many didn’t cooperate, the Swarm would fall apart.

His master, however, didn’t submit.

Bob decided he’d have to force the issue. The next time his master started showing aggression, started puffing up with juvenile pride against one of the Swarm’s adults, Bob pounced on his feet.

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Repairing his reputation wasn’t going so well, especially when Bob started being cute. Sunstreaker attempted to shake him off without breaking optic contact. The Insecticon curled around his foot and chirred.

Ratchet looked down first. “What’s your bug doing?” he demanded.

Having a ball of cute wrapped around his leg didn’t reinforce the image of a strong frontliner. A frown pulled Sunstreaker’s mouth down in an unattractive bow. “He wants attention.”
Tiny forepaws kneaded at his shin. It was hard to resist the adorable. Ratchet smirked as the traitor lost his tough-guy image and knelt down to pet Bob. So much for fear and respect. Sunstreaker would have to settle for ‘sucker.’

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*beyond Playing The Long Odds*

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“You and Optimus?! I, uh. I never.” He’d never even guessed. Optimus had always softened around his friends, but Smokescreen hadn’t noticed any special treatment toward Jazz. Which was pretty ideal for a relationship on the down-low between officer and commander, but it made him a little sad Optimus had never had the chance to tell him about it himself.

Optics falling to the side, Smokescreen spoke with just a hint of humor. “I guess that explains why you didn’t scare him.”

Because Jazz scared the paint off everyone else, as demonstrated when the saboteur all but teleported across the room to seize Smokescreen by the upper arms. “Are you sure? Are you -- stop screaming.”

“I can’t help it! Don’t do that to me!” Smokescreen tried to back away to get some room, but Jazz had the strength of 10 bears or at least a Dinobot.

And he shook the Praxian again. “Are you sure? Really sure?” He asked with an intensity that would frighten someone who couldn’t see the desperation in his visor, or who hadn’t seen the grief in the stillness of his expression a minute earlier. “Smokescreen, I need to know. Was he scared of me? Ever?”

Smokescreen grabbed him by the forearms just to stop the shaking, but it turned into a mutual clinging somehow. “Jazz, I…no.”

“I didn’t intimidate him?”

“You intimidate everyone,” Smokescreen said, but he frowned down at Jazz for the stupid question. “What’s this about? What are you trying to ask?”

“I…Smokes, you’d know, right?” Jazz searched his face. “You’d know if he felt…threatened into -- “

“He wasn’t.” Optimus hadn’t lived long enough to tell him about dating, or his first relationship since Elita One, or whether or not Jazz was more than a six-week fling, but this Smokescreen knew. He gripped Jazz’s arms hard enough to dent the plating and crammed fierce denial into every word. “He didn’t feel threatened by you. Not ever, Jazz.”

For a moment, Jazz stared up at him. The world held its breath.

Smokescreen caught the smaller mech as he crumpled, relief finally overcoming guilt, and grief consuming what should have been joy. He bowed his head over his friend, holding on as Jazz let go.

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*Revolutions Hope*
Revolutions hope.

They dream. They wish. They tear down the old to build something new.

The Decepticon Cause isn’t a revolt. It’s not a fight to end or to destroy. It is a fight to begin and to create. It’s a revolution to remake Cybertron into a better world, a world Megatron speaks of passionately. His vision of war isn’t a power-hungry fiction spread for propaganda purposes. It’s a fervently held belief, and the Decepticons will die for it.

No promise of peace is worth anything unless it’s in the future they fight for.

"The Braves get Transformers toys"

Yuuta held up Decker’s toy and frowned. “It doesn’t even look like you!” The colors were all wrong. The Japanese version was better, in his opinion, but the Japanese versions were officially licensed ‘Brave Police’ merchandise that donated the proceeds to charity. The American knock-offs were called ‘Transformers’ and had hilarious not-quite-right names. Optimus Prime? What did that even mean?

“Constructicons?” McCrane and Dumpson were eyeing their own knock-offs dubiously, but Power Joe was enjoying himself. “We’re so cool they had to split us into 5 bots!”

“I think they’re bad guys, though…”

“Aw, really?”

Dumpson shook his head and picked up the Bonecrusher toy. He liked the look of the guy, but he was pretty sure the toys with the purple symbols were evil. “Think so.”

“Huh.” Power Joe recovered quickly from the news, mostly because he couldn’t take Americans seriously. The toy bios on the side of the boxes had obviously lost something in translation. He squinted at the Constructicons’ box and sounded out the combined form’s name slowly. “Deee…no, Duh. Duv-vuh-stah-to-are. Diva-stay-tore?”

“Devastator,” Gunmax corrected, then hunched over his desk almost defensively as everyone looked at him. Reports! More reports to write! Less English reading! He refused to do anymore translating today!

“Devastator’s a neat name.” Yuuta traded toys with Decker, who’d been comparing the Jazz and Prowl toys with Shadowmaru. They couldn’t decide who was supposed to be whom, but Shadowmaru was leaning toward Prowl being his knock-off, and maybe Jazz being Gunmax’s. Yuuta liked the Prowl toy better, anyway. “Hey, Gunmax, what’s Devastator mean?” the boy asked innocently.

Gunmax’s optic twitched behind his shades as the Build Team perked up, immediately interested. He was a jerk, but he wasn’t that much of a jerk. “It means ‘take down a building carefully.’” Dumpson and Power Joe grinned, happy with the answer, but McCrane kept looking at him as if suspicious. Gunmax buried his attention in reports.
“Bet you can’t get him to relax.”

Smokescreen laughed. “Cheap shot, Jazz. You really gotta be hitting the bottom of the barrel tonight.”

Jazz leaned against the open medbay door and smiled, but weariness hung around him like paint fumes. He’d been running ragged since a week before the battle even happened, his division pulling out every trick in the book and writing extra chapters on the fly to buy the Autobots whatever advantage they could. Now that the battle was actually over, he was crashing hard.

So a cry for help in his own particular way wasn’t too surprising. Smokescreen took the comment as such. “How much you wanna bet?”

“How ’bout a full duty shift?” It sounded more like a suggestion than a wager, and Jazz sagged a little further down the doorframe as Smokescreen took a second look at him. “He’s been workin’ nonstop, Smokes. You get him to relax, you can take as much time off as he does.”

The gambler looked across the medbay at Ratchet. “That’s a bet I’ll win,” he promised, and one more responsibility dropped from the heavy burden Jazz carried. He nodded gratefully and pulled his exhausted self together to walk off down the hall.

Six hours later, he finally stumbled into the officer barracks, feet dragging and visor blurred static-white around the edges. He sought his bunk by memory instead of sight. All the lights were dimmed anyway. He could hear Ironhide’s engine snorting and grumbling in recharge already, muffler long offline, and the faint whistle of Wheeljack’s vents came from the same side of the room, which was unusual. They usually bunked on opposite sides of the room. Huh. Odd.

Jazz knew the sound of the barracks on his off-shift. He found the steady noise a comforting backdrop to his own recharge, these days. Hearing the others sleep meant they had made it another day. He came to his own bunk and stopped short. With his visor mostly offline, he was only able to see vague shapes in the dark, but he could still count more than one person in the bottom bunk. That wasn’t right.

It hurt his head, but he rebooted his visor, forcing power in to see who -

Oh. Oh, yeah. Okay, that worked.

He smiled, letting the power fade again. Feeling his way forward, he tried not to wake either of his bunkies. Ratchet looked out of it. Jazz kind of envied him the cuddle-buddy, to be honest. It must be nice to be wrapped around someone warm and alive right now, arms full and hands held tight up in another person’s grip. It wouldn’t make reality go away, but maybe it would help with the nightmare of memory he knew awaited all the Autobots tonight.

As he slung himself onto the ladder to climb up to his own bunk, Smokescreen stirred. Jazz glanced down at him. “Sorry, didn’t mean to wake ya.”

“Mm, s’kay. Where you going?”

“Up top.”
Smokescreen barely lit his optics, just reaching out blindly to fumble for a handhold. “No. Meant… why you going up there? C’mere.”

Jazz blinked a couple times, too tired to get it for a moment. Smokescreen took the opportunity to get a hold on his knee. He obviously wasn’t going to leave his snuggly burrow in Ratchet’s arms when he could drag Jazz in via insistent tugging on the closest body part.

Who was Jazz to fight? The pull was too strong. He was defeated.

With a low groan, Jazz surrendered to the power of cuddling, and Ratchet engulfed him once he was in range, too. Sandwiched between them, Smokescreen dimmed his optics again, just waiting for Jazz to power down before he slipped free and left both officers cuddled into sleep. His next mark was off-shift in an hour. Optimus Prime had bet him he couldn’t get Jazz into a dreamless sleep, but Prowl had bet him he couldn’t get Red Alert to sleep at all. Smokescreen intended to win that bet. He’d already won the bet with Ratchet over Ironhide and Wheeljack.

It was a cheap trick, but everyone knew he loved a good bet. It helped when the bet was for a good cause.

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“Octane/Sandstorm - Flirting in the battlefield”

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“Hey, baby. Come here often?”

Sandstorm didn’t hesitate. His fist smashed into the side of Octane’s face, throwing the Decepticon to the ground, and only then did he take the time to respond. “On a battlefield fighting double-crossing sentient slime-molds masquerading as mechs? All the time.” Fists clenched tight at his sides, he stood ready to attack.

Hand over the dent in jaw, Octane looked up at him. His smile was lopsided and sickly, a forced cover for something a more charitable Autobot might label worry. Maybe shame, but Octane was shameless. Sandstorm knew that full well. Why else would the mech have returned to Galvatron’s side, showed up in the Netherlands to fight the Autobots, and still have the audacity to try flirting with him?

Octane tried to say something else, but Sandstorm was done listening.

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“Unopened gifts”

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Christmas had unanticipated benefits. Decorating for the sheer joy of tinsel had left the entire Ark in a good mood for the rest of the week, for one thing, and for another, it established a tradition of dressing up in silly human outfits for the holidays. Optimus Prime would wear almost anything a ‘dad’ traditionally wore, which was delightful, and there was usually at least one other officer mellow enough to dress as the ‘mom’ counterpart. Ratchet volunteered to be Mrs. Clause the first year, and everyone loved it. For some reason, robots in disguise in further disguise just tickled the Autobots’ collective funny struts.

Then there were the presents.
Gifts were grand any time of the year, but the wrapped presents at Christmas turned up something unexpected. To start with, the Secret Santa thing became a giant Us vs. Red Alert game for the whole faction. The goal was to get the gifts wrapped and under the tree without Red Alert knowing A. what it was, and B. who it was from. There was a point system. Red Alert graded attempts. Mechs set up elaborate schemes involving delivery services, hidden pass-offs in the halls, mechs playing interference, and in one notable if not very wise occasion, a drop-off by Lazerbeak.

With the sole exception of the Lazerbeak Incident, Red Alert actually found it fun. “It’s not life-or-death,” he told those who dared ask. “I mean, except for Wheeljack’s gift, but otherwise it’s quite relaxing.”

Turned out that Wheeljack’s present exploded that year. Sideswipe appreciated the gesture, even if the timer malfunctioned and the tree ended up on fire.

The other side-effect nobody saw coming was that Prowl…didn’t unwrap his gifts. The box from his Secret Santa sat unopened on his desk for months after Christmas, and nobody knew what was inside it. Including Prowl himself, which was apparently the point.

“You know I was your Secret Santa, right?” Bumblebee ventured at the end of January. “It’s safe to open it. It’s not a prank or anything. I think you’ll like it.”

Prowl regarded the bright package on the corner of his desk with intent optics. He’d taken it out from under the tree as if it was a precious treasure, and he was greatly pleased by its presence. “I’m aware that you’re unlikely to prank me. Thank you for your concern, but please don’t hint further. I would like to prolong the mystery. The human tradition of buying gifts based on the gift-giver’s perception of what gift is wanted is totally unlike any of our own practices, and guessing what you thought I might like is…” He searched for the right word. “Intriguing. I have never gathered intelligence related to this topic, and my tactical suite is in a pleasant state of upset over the lack of data.” He fixed his optics on the present and nearly smiled. “I can’t predict what’s in the box. Thinking about it is entertaining.”

And obviously, giving it thought made him happy. ‘Child-like,’ Sparkplug called it, but in a fond, affectionate way. He compared Prowl’s contemplation to a young child’s examination when parents aren’t looking: pick it up, shake it, weigh it, check off what it could possibly be and not be, wonder, long-for, pick at, grin over, wish for…

In that light, it did sort of make sense that Prowl never opened his presents. The anticipation thrilled him. He didn’t know what to expect, and that was exciting for a mech who predicted whole battles.

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“Swindle selling his teammates”

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They never said it aloud, but it unnerved them. Swindle had sold them. He hadn’t even had the decency to carve them up into spare parts and pretend he at least wasn’t selling his gestaltmates whole. No, it had been done with his optics wide open and the rest of the Combiners dimly aware of his voice haggling for the best price.

That haunted them. Vortex was unhinged, Brawl was rather stupid, Onslaught was manipulative, and Blast Off was detached. Swindle, however, was a cold-sparked slaver without remorse. Even Bruticus wasn’t enough to overcome a sale. The others realized after a short time that being in a combiner team overrode individual traits, putting their components beyond the reach of sacrifice,
violence, mindgames, and even disgust, but Swindle sailed right past all the emotional and physical attachments that entrapped them. The only thing - the only thing - keeping their team together was the loyalty program. Megatron’s orders forced Swindle to get along.

When Megatron died, it took time to realize the implications. By then, the Combaticons were so used to obeying orders like good Decepticon soldiers that freedom didn’t feel free. They could leave, but where would they go? What could they do?

It chilled their sparks that Swindle had an answer to every question. He could go anywhere. He could do what he’d always done: buy and sell, sell and buy. And he didn’t need them along for the ride.

“One of us is with him at all times,” Onslaught said quietly in the dusty corner they’d claimed as their own. His visor was grim. “If he bothers to ask, it’s safety in numbers. If he tries to run, alert the rest of us immediately.” He couldn’t be allowed to flee. They’d never get him back if he did.

Onslaught said nothing about the danger they were in, staying close to Swindle. They already knew how much they were worth to him.

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