Too Buff To Buff
by enthusiasticinformedfragging

Summary

A bit of kindness goes a long way. Anger may be insulating, but it's hard to stay angry when someone finally makes the effort to do something genuinely nice for you.

In which Rung decides Whirl has earned a polish and has no idea that it could trigger anything more than a few jabs at his handiwork.

“I’m gonna look ridiculous.” Whirl clicked his claws nervously. “You can polish me all you want, doc—it’s not gonna change this ugly mug.”

Rung continued arranging the containers on his desk, sorting them and stowing them in various secret compartments all over his frame. “There’s nothing about your frame that needs changing.”

“Then why detail me?” Whirl’s optic locked onto Rung’s face, examining the neutral, too-pleasant expression there. “What’s the point?”

“You deserve to feel appreciated,” he answered, and there wasn’t even a hint of a lie in those eyebrows. He practically glowed with sincerity. “The literature suggests that you would benefit from both the physical contact and the positive attention.” The smile softened, suddenly warmer. “You’ve been making impressive progress recently, so I thought it might be a good next step for you.”
Whirl snorted. “What progress?”

“How long has it been since you started a brawl in the bar?”

“It’s no fun when nobody on this ship can put up a half-decent fight.”

“How long has it been since you destroyed—or even defaced—someone else’s property?” Rung got to his pedes. “Just yesterday I saw you actually defuse a fight between Brainstorm and Trailcutter.”

“Yeah, but Teebs was right by the engex dispensers.” Whirl shrugged dramatically. “If he’d thrown his panic bubble, I wouldn’t get any drinks for like an hour.” He had to look away from Rung’s knowing smile; he huffed and crossed his arms. “So why’d you pack everything up?”

“Well, a good detailing begins with a wash. I wanted to offer you the choice—would you prefer to use the communal washracks, or should I ask to borrow the captain’s private washracks?”

Whirl hesitated. On the one hand, Roddy’s washracks were probably super extravagant and he might even wrangle a hot oil bath out of the deal. On the other, he’d spend the entire time wondering which surfaces Rodders had ‘faced somebody on—and who, and how, and that really wasn’t the kinda thing he wanted to think about while Rung was polishing him.

Also, anybody who stopped by the washracks would see him getting all this special attention, and that sounded pretty sweet all on its own. Nobody would trash-talk him while Rung was there. They wouldn’t hurt the nerd’s feelings. Maybe if word got around that the buff and polish was Rung’s work, people would even lay off.

He knew he was gonna look ridiculous. They didn’t have to tell him twice.

“Roddy’s place is probably a mess,” he said. “Let’s hit the normal washracks.”

“Here is my private frequency,” Rung said, sending it out over short-range comms even though he’d given it to Whirl like fifty times already. Not like he’d ever used it. “It’s a secure channel, so please feel free to use that if you’d like to talk.”

Whirl waved a dismissive claw, but he considered the hailing code as they walked to the washracks. Rung probably didn’t actually expect him to do anything with it after all this time. Heh, maybe he could get the nerd to jump. [[Hey, doc!]]

Rung did jump—which was hilarious—but then he turned and smiled up at Whirl like he’d been given a brand new model kit or something. [[Yes, Whirl?]]

[[Nothin’.]] Whirl shrugged, trying to tamp down the ridiculous flare of pride in his spark. There was nothing to be proud of just because Rung acted like talking to him was some big present. The little guy would be sick of him before he’d finished the first rinse.

Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad. Wouldn’t have to deal with everybody making fun of his shiny aft that way.

The washracks were empty when they walked in, which sorta sucked. Nobody would even get to see the special attention before the doc got bored and called the wash good enough. Still, he put on his most flirtatious voice. “So how do you want me?”

Rung huffed—more of a laugh than a sigh, which was something. “I thought it might be easiest to rinse you if you were seated, but I can get a step ladder if you’d prefer to stand.”
A step ladder would get soaked with solvent in no time flat. Rung would slip and fall and break his hip or something. “I don’t mind sitting back and relaxing while you do the work.” Whirl gave an exaggerated stretch and settled on the floor of the stall closest to the door. If anybody came in, they’d get an opticful of him being pampered. “This was your idea, so you’re in charge, doc.”

Rung nodded and squared his shoulders, which was—was so fragging cute. Still, he stopped at the edge of the stall. “May I come in?”

“Uh, yeah?”

Rung nodded and stepped over the threshold. “Would you prefer I close the curtains or leave them open?”

“I ain’t got nothing to hide.” Whirl puffed himself up in mock bravado that he suspected Rung would be able to see through. He pushed forward, trying to imply an eyebrow waggle. “Unless you got some dirty plans for me, doc?”

“Now, now, you haven’t even seen my polishing work yet. There’s no reason to insult it.”

Whirl had to mute his vocalizer to cut off his laugh. Rung’s field remained warm and welcoming as he turned away and began setting up all the containers he’d hidden away in his secret compartments. Not all of them were labeled, but there was definitely more than polish and wax. And there were like four different buffing devices.

“I’m totally in favor of overkill on the battlefield, but isn’t that...kind of a lot?”

“We can stop any time if you become uncomfortable,” Rung said. “If you need something to do while I work, I’ve brought a few datapads with link-up games.”

He couldn’t manage handheld games anymore—claws, after all—but hardline games could be controlled directly with a mech’s own processor, so he could see why Rung would figure it for the better choice, and it was actually pretty thoughtful. Like Rung ever wasn’t thoughtful. But some mechs used those kinds of hardline sims as self-servicing mirrors, and just the thought of the nerd having one of those—he couldn’t resist.

“The fun kind?” Another implied eyebrow waggle.

Rung looked up from where he’d crouched to test the temperature of the solvent. “I rather enjoy the ship-building simulator, but there are other options if that’s insufficiently entertaining.”

Okay, so his attempts at getting a rise out of Rung weren’t getting anywhere. “I’ll probably just talk your audials off.”

Rung just smiled again. “Is this warm enough for you?”

Whirl held out a claw to test it; it was perfect. “I’ll survive.”

“All right. May I rinse your helm?”

If he started at the top, he wouldn’t have to rewash Whirl’s lower half every time the solvent loosened fresh grime and sent it dripping downward. Efficient. If he said yes, he’d definitely be done before anybody got to see him being pampered.

“You gotta start at the bottom if you wanna work your way to the top.” He would’ve smirked if he still had a face.
To his surprise, Rung didn’t stop smiling. His field felt every bit as soft and inviting as before. “Then may I wash your pedes?”

Great. Now he felt like kind of an aft. “You don’t gotta, doc.” Scrap, he sounded too remorseful. Rung would think he was making progress. “This isn’t gonna work.”

Rung shut off the solvent and sat on the floor across from him. Not saying anything—just waiting. And Pit, the little guy could wait with those same understanding optics for hours at a time.

“You’re wasting your time,” Whirl said. “This is—this isn’t gonna work, okay?” He clicked his claws, embarrassed and more than a little nervous. “Look, you think I ain’t heard it before? ‘A can of polish isn’t gonna do a damn thing about your ugly mug,’ ‘Changing your paint job’s not gonna change those hooks of yours,’ ‘Who’re you getting buffed up for? Not like anybody’s kissing that shiny aft of yours.’” He used his claws to make the quotation-mark gesture Ratchet was so fond of and pitched his voice so that it would sound like a joke. “So it’s a nice idea, but it’s—this is me we’re talking about, Rung.”

Scrap, he’d used his designation instead of some flippant nickname, and now he sounded serious. Just fraggin’ great. Didn’t help that his voice had gone sad instead of funny.

“Whirl.” Rung reached out and settled his hand on the rotors in Whirl’s arm—which were sharp enough that he’d lose a finger if Whirl turned them on, but he didn’t seem afraid. “No time spent caring for you is time I would consider wasted.” His field was adamant—completely serious and sincere. “If you’d like to stop, I won’t push—but I am more than willing to continue if you are.” He waited a beat. “Would you like me to wash your pedes?”

Whirl tried to speak and had to reset his vocalizer. “Yeah. That—that sounds nice.”

There was that sweeter-than-borax smile again, frag it all. Rung started the solvent again and brought the showerhead over to Whirl’s pedes. The warm spray felt amazing; he sagged back against the wall and watched Rung with a dimmed optic.

Rung worked up a lather on a soft cloth and began massaging Whirl’s pedes. Thorough and methodical and careful, every micrometer got its due attention; he even gently lifted Whirl’s pede to clean the sole. He asked if Whirl was satisfied before moving on, and—even if the area was spotless—he’d wash it again if Whirl said no, he wasn’t satisfied.

It felt too damn good. He forgot to preen when mechs came into the room; he barely even noticed the room beyond the door. No one had ever washed him with so much care. He only let Rung move on because he knew he’d have to double back to get off any dirt that had made its way down while washing.

His plating loosened—and he hadn’t even noticed how much he’d taken for granted that it’d sit tight against his frame, the way he kept it clamped close and fierce even when he was ostensibly relaxed. But as Rung moved up from his pedes to his legs to his pelvic and abdominal plating, every cable in his entire frame relaxed.

Pits, it’d been months—years—longer than he could remember, honestly—since somebody had chosen to put a gentle hand on him for more than twenty seconds. He threw casual arms around mechs’ shoulders and gave playful punches to sides because otherwise he could go decades without any touch at all. Rung sometimes touched his rotors to reassure him, but never for long.

Rung wouldn’t leave him half-washed—he had at least until the end of this scrubbing to enjoy the contact. And he could drag that out by claiming that Rung had missed a spot here or there—even
when he knew the fleck was actually a scar or something. Chipped paint. Welds Ratchet hadn’t been able to tolerate him long enough to properly smooth over. Not grime—Rung never asked to move on before every last speck of dirt had been washed away. He even used a soft brush to work between transformation seams and clean out Whirl’s gritty joints.

Even without the polish, he’d be cleaner and shinier than he’d been in vorns.

He didn’t even notice his engine had started purring until Rung massaged solvent and suds against his antennae. He almost wondered if he’d ended up in the Well of All Sparks or something—he pressed up against the cloth as Rung stroked his helm. He only barely heard the amused chuckle over the sound of his engine rumbling.

“It’s no trouble at all, Whirl,” Rung said, and it didn’t make sense until Whirl realized he was talking. How long had he been talking?

“This is the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” Whirl heard his own voice murmuring. He almost didn’t recognize it—he never sounded happy. Not—not that kind of happy, at least. Not relaxed and content and fraggin’ sappy. But his vocalizer kept running. “If your ships could talk, I bet they’d tell everybody you’ve got, like, fraggin’ magic hands. This feels so nice.” It did. It really, really did, but that didn’t mean he had to say so. “You’re so nice, Rung. So nice.”

He tuned himself out again as Rung smoothed the soft cloth over his pedipalps. Who fraggin’ cared what he said? As long as Rung kept doing that, he’d say damn well anything. He felt like he was melting. Big ol’ puddle of helicopter. Primus, between the warm solvent and the gentle massage and the soft cloth and the welcoming EM field, he could barely keep his optic online. If he’d ever felt like this, it’d been before the war. Before the empurata.

Nobody touched his helm like this. Even the handful of times he’d gotten ‘faced in the Wreckers, they’d turned his helm away, because the optic ‘freaked them out.’ He couldn’t blame them. He stared a little too much. But Rung didn’t flinch away from touching his mutilated helm. Didn’t think twice about touching Whirl’s pedipalps once he’d given permission.

“There. How’s that? Do you feel satisfied with—”

“Nnnnnnooooooooooooooo,” Whirl whined. “Nooo, please don’t stop.”

The massage resumed, and Whirl couldn’t even feel ashamed of the fact that he’d said please without being asked. He ended up resting his helm on Rung’s lap so he could get better access to the cables of his neck.

“Would you like me to wash your shoulders again?”

Well, he didn’t want Rung to stop washing his helm, but he did want those hands on his shoulders and rotors again… He agreed, resignation edging out the relaxation as Rung made his way back down to Whirl’s pedes.

When Rung had worked all the way back down to the soles of Whirl’s feet, his spark felt heavy. “Okay. I’ve got places to go, mechs to see.” He couldn’t look as Rung washed away the last of the suds. “Thanks for the wash.”

Rung teeked of confusion, hesitating with the showerhead still in hand. “Forgive me, but I’m not sure I understand.”

Whirl gestured at himself. “All cleaned up.” And not wanting to overstay his welcome. He’d already gotten a better deal than he’d bargained for. “I’m gonna head out.”
Understanding broke through the confusion in Rung’s field, and he wrung out the soapy cloth. “I’m willing to stop if you would rather go about your day, but I’m also more than willing to continue with the detailing if you can spare the time for me.”

Cautious hope flickered in his spark. “Well, I guess you did already drag me all the way over here.” He fixed his optic on Rung’s face, looking for signs that he was hiding something. “And you got all that scrap out of your compartments.”

Rung looked—relieved? Pleased? That didn’t make sense. “How about I rinse your pedes one last time and move on to the claying?”

“Claying?” Whirl repeated. That was the kind of work that went into a really high class detailing. He’d never been able to afford that. Most of the clay had to get imported from off-world even before the war. “I just made you rewash everything like eighty times, doc. You knew I was already spotless. You don’t have to keep it up. This—this is plenty.”

Rung looked up at him, his expression too full of compassion—not sympathy. Understanding. Empathy. “I am not in the least tired of you.” How could he say that and sound honest? How did he just know this stuff? “This isn’t just about polishing you up; this is about making sure you feel cared for and appreciated. It doesn’t matter if I’d removed all the dirt; until you were satisfied with the attention I’d paid, it wasn’t time to move on.” He had a smile like sunshine, and frag it killed him. “In fact, I’m rather glad you were willing to ask for more when you needed it. Not many of my patients would have been willing to do that.”

Whirl would’ve gaped at him, but, well, no face. No mouth to gape with.

“So one more rinse and we’ll move on to drying and claying?”

Whirl nodded, not sure he could make his voice flippant. He settled back down on the floor and tried to relax again despite his disbelief. It got easier when Rung started drying him off with the softest cloths ever—fabric so smooth it wouldn’t leave even the slightest scratch in his paint. Even though his paint was scratched to the Pit and back. He wasn’t worth this kinda care.

He pressed his helm insistently against Rung’s servos, demanding more attention nonverbally when all his voxcoder could manage was a clicking whine. Rung’s touch was firm and careful and attentive as he worked over even the smallest details and kibble. He even took the time to dry beneath Whirl’s loosened armor if it was at all damp.

“Do you think I’ve dried you adequately?”

“Yeah, yeah, get on with the claying already.” Whirl tried to make his voice obnoxious and demanding, but he was too damn relaxed to sound like anything other than needy. Not exactly the image he was going for, but he couldn’t exactly take it back. And there wasn’t a mech on the ship who wouldn’t want a detailing that actually involved a real, bona fide claying. Primus, he’d never even seen how claying worked.

His optic fixed on Rung’s hands as he rolled and flattened the ball of clay in his palms. He spritzed the clay with lubricant—the good stuff, stuff that wouldn’t leave streaks on his nice clean armor—and then turned to Whirl.

“I’m going to need to spray some lubricant on you, as well,” he said. “Would you like me to begin at your pedes again?”

Unlike washing, starting from his pedes wouldn’t buy him extra detailing time. He settled his helm
on Rung’s lap again as if it belonged there. “Let’s mix it up and start from the top this time.”

“Would you like me to warm the lubricant first?”

To be honest, all the attention had Whirl running a little hot. Not with charge—his engine had just been idling with contentment for long enough that his whole frame had started warming up. “I can take it cold, doc.”

He could feel the amusement dancing in Rung’s field as he obliged. The cool spray soothed the warmed surface of his helm. Then Rung started rubbing circles with the clay against the slicked area, and he melted. He could feel the mineral deposits that had bonded with the outer layer of his paint coming clean—creating drag before smoothing away. He felt smoother than glass by the time Rung refolded the clay and asked whether he was ready to move on.

Whirl tried to protest this moving-on business, but it just came out as a groan. He had to resort to private comms. [[Keep going.]]

Rung obliged; the second time through, Whirl felt like he could really appreciate just how glossy and smooth his helm must have gotten to allow the clay to glide like that. The massage felt unimaginably comforting—but he didn’t want to look so shiny that everyone mocked him. Well, more than they already did.

So he resigned himself to getting one round of claying and set about savoring every second of it. Rung teeked of confusion every time Whirl let him move on without complaint or protest, but if he could minimize the amount of jokes he ended up being the butt of, he would. Not that it mattered what they thought of him—he knew what they thought of him—but what a hassle hearing it every damn time he turned around.

[[Are you all right, Whirl?]]

“‘m fine,” Whirl slurred. Underneath the relaxation in his voice was something else, though—something unhappy. He switched to text-based comms, which wouldn’t betray him. [[Why? Bored of me already?]]

He’d hoped it’d get a rise out of him, but of course it didn’t. Nothing did.

[[If you’d like me to continue claying any area, you need only ask.]]

Whirl offlined his optic. His fraggin’ field had probably given him away. As Rung got closer to Whirl’s pedes—and at that moment he was actually claying the last of the joints in Whirl’s legs—he’d gotten increasingly despondent about letting him move on. But what was he supposed to do? Admit that he didn’t want everybody hassling him about his detailing? Admit that he figured Rung was sick of him and wouldn’t wanna spend another fifty joors polishing him? Pit no.

[[Nah, I’m cool,]] he lied. [[If you think you’re doing a subpar job, that’s your business.]]

He could feel Rung frowning. [[This is less about your finish than your emotional wellbeing. If you’re at all unhappy with—]]

[[Yeah, yeah.]] Whirl waved a deliberately lazy claw at him. [[It’s a good thing this ain’t about my finish, because no amount of polish is gonna make me pretty.]]

Scrap, text-based comms made it harder to tweak the glyphs to look like a joke. He should’ve stuck with his traitorous voice.
“Would you look at the time.” He forgot to inflect it to sound casual; anybody who heard him would think he was panicking. Running scared from a little nerd like Rung. What a laugh! “Shame about that last leg, but hey, them’s the breaks. Catch ya at our next—”

Rung’s servo against his arm drew him up short. “Whirl.”

Just that—just his designation. It wasn’t a warning; it was worry. Genuine concern. Too bad. He could’ve laughed off a warning.

“Should’ve cleared my schedule, eh, doc? Too bad I’m such a busy mech.”

Busy. Right. His only plans were to go hide in his habsuite and maybe scuff up his paint a little before he could smooth it back over. Making it look natural and unintentional would be the time-consuming part, especially since he kinda felt like just clawing at the shine and being done with it. Not like anyone would notice whether or not any energon was his—and no one would care even if they did.

[[Whirl.]]

Not for the first time, his des sounded like it meant you can run, but you can’t hide. Now that Rung had his comm number—

“Don’t comm me!”

He didn’t expect it to work—didn’t expect the flash of hurt that darted across Rung’s face and field before he could smooth it back over. But Rung took a step back and nodded, giving him space he both wanted and hated.

“Look, this is the shiniest I’ve been in—well, I don’t think I’ve been this shiny in a couple million years.” He awkwardly reached out a claw to pat Rung on the shoulder, trying to telegraph his movements clearly enough that Rung could dodge if he didn’t want the contact. To the nerd’s credit, he didn’t flinch. “Uh. Good job.”

Rung’s optic ridges furrowed, and Whirl retracted his claw, scanning the washracks to see who might’ve noticed his outburst—but no, they were alone. That was some kind of comfort, at least; he wouldn’t blame anybody for jumping to the nerd’s defense against the big bad whirlybird.

“I just—gotta get going.” Pit, why did he have to sound sorry and sad and scared? That was fragging pathetic. Rung had wrecked his vocalizer with all the polishing. He offlined it and lifted a claw instead of saying goodbye, not trusting his voice.

Making optic contact with Rung was a dangerous thing, though; once their gazes had locked, Whirl couldn’t get himself to scramble away out the door.

“As I said in the beginning, there’s nothing about your frame that needs changing.” Rung’s expression was soft and understanding and it hurt to look at that much compassion all in one little frame. “You deserve to feel appreciated.”

“They’re not gonna appreciate the polish,” Whirl said, twisting to look away from the too-honest optics behind those glasses. “There’s a reason I don’t bother. Did you ever think of that?” His claws snapped at his sides, drawn taut with all the tension suddenly clamping down on his frame. “Course you didn’t.”

“I’m afraid that I did fail to consider your reasoning.” Rung’s voice was damnably soothing, frag him to the Pit and back. “If you’re willing to share, I would be more than happy to adjust my plans accordingly.”
Whirl’s voxcoder pinched. He scanned the room again and onlined his vocalizer to speak when the
door swung open and Sunstreaker waltzed in with Bob.

Frag, if anyone would give him as much scrap for a half-finished detailing as for a full polish, it
was the Lost Light’s shiniest aft himself.

Whirl offlined his vocalizer and settled back against the wall with a deliberately casual air. It’d
probably fool anybody out of range of his EM field, at least.

Sunstreaker eyed the containers Rung had arranged on his side of the stall, and Whirl tensed,
bracing himself for the inevitable insult—the why are you even bothering, the got yourself a fixer-
upper on your servos over there, the no product’s gonna hide that ugly mug. He’d heard it enough
damn times. If he heard it once more, just once—

“How’s that type of clay treating you?” Sunstreaker asked. “I got a batch on Hedonia, and it’s got a
little too much grit in it for detail work, so I’m shopping around for a new brand.”

Whirl was glad he didn’t have a face—neither of them would be able to tell quite how stunned he
was to watch them—watch them talk about product like it was the only thing of interest in the
washracks.

Not one barbed comment about his new look.

By the time Rung turned back to him, he felt more confused than anything. He scratched idly at the
only bit of his frame that hadn’t gotten clayed, trying to calm himself down with the repetitive
skritch skritch skritch of metal on metal. He stopped as soon as Rung turned worried optics on the
scratched paint.

All at once, it hit him that Rung was gonna apologize—that he was gonna have to say it out loud
because Whirl had told him to stop using his private comm—that Sunstreaker was gonna hear it.
He didn’t want to deal with Sunstreaker jumping to Rung’s defense. He didn’t want to hear Rung
fraggin’ apologize for trying to be nice to the biggest aft on the ship.

[[This isn’t gonna work, Rung.]]

Using his designation instead of a nickname got the rise out of Rung that he’d been looking for all
day—Rung actually drew up short, those expressive and ridiculous and way-too-cute eyebrows
leaping half off his face. For some reason, it wasn’t as satisfying as he’d expected it to be.

Rung didn’t say anything; he had the patience of a stone, and there was no way Whirl would be
able to out-wait him.

[[You wanted to know my reasons? Fine. Truth is, I have gotten polished since the—]] He made an
abrupt motion toward his helm. [[Right after—I mean, I was broke and miserable and wanted to
look like myself again, so I blew my last load of credits on a polish. And y’know what?]] Words
were easier over text-based comms, but his throat still felt pinched at the memory. [[Dead End’s a
fragging lousy place to pretty yourself up. I got buffed for me, not for some half-zapped frag in an
alley that smelled like purged engex. But they wouldn’t let up! Twenty different mechs tried to
‘face me in the alleys. Called me fraggin’ shareware. What other reason would an empuratee living
in the gutters of Dead End have to get all shined up, right?]]

He couldn’t look at Rung; he looked down at his claws instead. He didn’t admit that he’d still been
integrating his new hardware—that he’d been basically defenseless at the time. He’d learned to
fight them off eventually, but he hadn’t gone for a polish for a long, long time after.
He’d been quoting them at Rung all day. A couple of ‘em had taken it almost as a personal offense that he’d gotten prettied up; they’d gotten mad—like he didn’t have the right to get detailing done. Didn’t deserve it.

Pit, he agreed. Hadn’t bothered with it since.

He vented hard. “This ain’t gonna work.”

If Sunstreaker noticed how staticky and raw Whirl’s voice was from his spot in the far corner of the washracks, he had the grace not to say anything.

To his great embarrassment, he flinched when Rung reached out to pat his shoulder, and of course eyebrows froze up accordingly. Now he wasn’t even gonna get those casual touches because he was too much of a wimp. Frag, that wasn’t what he wanted at all.

“You can—” He broke off, not wanting to ask with Sunstreaker eavesdropping. He shifted the shoulder Rung had been reaching for nervously. When Rung made no move to reestablish contact, Whirl cleared his throat and sucked his EM field close against his frame to hide the way his spark had started sinking. He started to push himself to his pedes. “Comm me whenever, doc. I’ll see you around.”

Rung pinged him with a comm request before he could even turn toward the door.

“Whirl, would you rather continue this detailing session in my office?”

Whirl snapped his claws unconsciously. “What’re you talkin’ about, doc?"

“[If this has brought up too many unpleasant memories and associations, we can stop immediately. But I assure you—] Rung reached out and carefully rested a servo on Whirl’s arm. [[I promise you, Whirl, that I will personally intervene if anyone mistreats you like that.]]

Whirl looked away. His claws were too close to Rung to snap without risking hurting him. “Okay, if you’re gonna repaint me anyway, there’s no reason to stink this place up.” His optic curved in a frown. “Or your office. I gotta sit there for how many hours a week? No way. There are like fifty thousand empty rooms on this fraggin’ ship; pick one and we’ll get back to work.”

The EM field against him pulsed with gratitude, but Whirl thought he still felt a little concern in there.

“Give me a moment to pack my things, and I’ll be right with you.”

Whirl nodded, still not looking back at Rung. Sunstreaker had caught his optic from across the room. He braced himself for a barbed comment while Rung was distracted with the bottles and buffers, but Sunstreaker didn’t say anything.

Pressure mounted in Whirl’s chest, digging into his spark. The longer he waited, the more time Sunstreaker had to think of something really nasty to say.

Whirl onlined his vocalizer to beat him to the punch—to insult himself as a joke before Sunstreaker could make it real—but he wasn’t fast enough.
“It’s a good look on you,” Sunstreaker called. He—had to be joking? But the nod actually looked appreciative. “Rung’s got a steady servo; you could probably ask him for detail work like a good camo pattern to make you harder to spot in the sky.”

His voxcoder clicked uselessly in his throat as he tried to figure out which part was supposed to be the insult. Maybe the insult was supposed to be that he needed to—hide? That didn’t make much sense, since Sunstreaker had seen him in battle. He always flew in like he had a deathwish; everybody knew that.

Well, nobody actually knew that he’d literally attacked Cyclonus because he’d been in the middle of fragging offlining himself and a battle seemed like a way better way to go, but that would really make Rung worry.

Pit, when had he started caring about scrap like that?

“I was thinking I’d go in shiny enough to blind ‘em, actually,” Whirl said, deliberately curving his optic into a grin. “My ugly mug only blinds ‘em the first few dozen times; gotta shake things up, y’know?”

There—Sunstreaker couldn’t get in a dig because Whirl had gotten there first. It was easier to take if he made the jokes; at least he could control the insults. Put them in his own terms.

Sunstreaker wasn’t laughing, though; he looked kinda sad. “Like I said. Good look.”

Maybe it wasn’t an insult—maybe it was a proposition. He broke optic contact immediately and vented to steady himself. A better proposition than the kind he’d gotten on the streets—that had usually been more along the lines of pawing at his interfacing panels or just grinding up against his polish. Not so much asking as assuming. It’d been like that with the Wreckers, too; they’d always told him he should be grateful. Take the pity frag already.

He was tougher than anyone these days. Nobody was gonna go shoving him against walls and pawing at—

A servo settled on his arm, and Whirl scrambled away so abruptly that he fell with a crash, scratching up the nice shine on his whole fraggin’ right side. He knew—that he was probably venting way too hard, but his audials were ringing, and he couldn’t hear the words Rung’s mouth was shaping.

When he didn’t respond, Rung teeked of distress and switched to private comms. [I’m so sorry, Whirl, I thought you heard me finishing up—]

“’m fine,” Whirl lied. It took too much effort to push himself back to his pedes. “Look, I’m fine. I —slipped. On some solvent.” He managed a laugh—weak and a little frantic, but still a laugh. Better than his last attempt. “You’re stronger’n you look.”

Rung’s field still burned with guilt, and Whirl’s spark twisted in his chassis. He covered it by taking a few steps away and transforming, popping a door open for Rung.

“Get in, doc; you’re getting an airlift before you break a hip. Slipping in that solvent. That I slipped in.”

Rung gave him a piercing look, but he obliged. He asked permission before buckling in, before closing the door, before everything. It was kinda nice and kinda humiliating at the same time. Nobody had ever asked—but he should’ve been tough enough to take a tap or two. He’d taken a Pit of a lot worse.
Not a good thing to think about with Rung sitting right in the middle of his EM field.

He refocused on escaping the washracks. It was a narrow fit to get out the door to the washracks in his alt-mode, but he managed.

“Where to, doc?”

“Wherever you would be most comfortable.”

Whirl hovered in the hall. A place had come to mind, but it was the only room on the ship where nobody came to look for him. He went there when he needed to punch walls or scream for a joor or two; it was far enough away from literally everything else on the ship that nobody ever heard him down there. Nobody ever went in there and noticed that the dents in the walls had energon from his claws.

Rung would know—if he saw, he would definitely know that Whirl wasn’t making this so-called progress he wanted so much that he’d started to imagine it. Maybe he’d get scared of Whirl again. That was safer—he knew what to expect when mechs were scared of him.

For some reason, the idea didn’t appeal to him as much as it should’ve.

Still, it wasn’t like he had any other ideas.

"Hang on to your eyebrows, doc!” He pumped his voice up with false cheer and revved his engine to make it seem like he was about to gun it, then set off at a leisurely pace. Amusement pushed back the guilt in Rung’s field, which was more of a relief than Whirl was about to admit to. “So what else have ya got in store for me?”

“Well, after dusting you off and finishing claying you, I had planned to offer you the choice of getting a fresh coat of paint or moving on to buffing out the scratches.”

Whirl thought for a moment, taking a drop shaft down to the level he wanted rather than bothering with the elevators. Most scratches and paint transfers on mechs didn’t cut all the way through the color nanites on the surface of their frames—and even if they did, standard medical procedure usually included a quick spritz of nanites to compensate for damage done.

He was a pain in the aft for the medics, though, and they didn’t usually see the point in bothering with the nanites when he was just gonna come back even more beat up the next day. He’d had whole limbs replaced more often than he’d had his paint touched up. His autorepair was supposed to take care of details like that, but he usually had more important tasks for it to handle, and he’d probably killed off at least a third of the nanite colonies he was supposed to have on him by being reckless.

“I don’t think all the scratches would buff out,” he admitted. “If I get a whole new paintjob, though —” He offlined his vocalizer. It was gonna be bad enough with just a polish.

“I’m sure I could mix a paint color identical to your own,” Rung said. “If you want a subtle change, that would also be well within my abilities. I have a number of more complex examples that could wait for future detailing—”

Whirl’s engine stalled out—he only kicked it back into gear after dropping five feet. “What?”

Rung’s servos had a fierce grip on the armrests of his seat—considering the drop, Whirl couldn’t blame him. “I apologize. I shouldn’t make assumptions.”
He’d never been great at using finesse to hone his field, but he figured that’d just make it easier to shove the feeling of a frantic headshake at Rung without a helm to shake. “No, it’s just—I thought this was a one-time deal?”

The landing ended up being gentler than the, uh, turbulence. He settled down carefully in front of a door that looked just like the last thousand they’d flown by. Rung probably wouldn’t even be able to track the room down again.

“Only if you don’t wish to repeat the experience,” Rung said, slowly prying his fingers off the armrests. Whirl wasn’t gonna point out the little dents—he’d told the little guy to hold on—but Rung ran a servo over the marks with a fresh surge of guilt.

Before he could apologize, Whirl popped the door open for him. “Hope you enjoyed flying Air Whirlybird! Always a one-way ticket to the Pit, free of charge.”

Rung hopped out, and Whirl transformed back immediately, but neither of them moved toward the door. Now that they’d arrived at his secret hideout, he was having second thoughts.

Ugh, second thoughts. He’d been wimpy enough already. He crushed the doubt threatening to get him to beat a hasty retreat and strutted through the door—which opened automatically for him.

When Rung didn’t immediately follow him inside, he glanced back. “You can leave the door open.” Yeah, that probably wasn’t enough to make this qualify as a Good Idea on the doc’s part—remote part of the ship in a room nobody would know to search? He turned his back on Rung so he wouldn’t have to see any worry and fear in that trusting face. “Might wanna comm somebody your coordinates, too. Get that thumb recording.”

It’d be the smart thing to do, at least.

“I could do so if you would find that reassuring,” Rung said—and he didn’t sound scared, but he hadn’t sounded scared with a gun to his head and his thumb ripped out. “In truth, I was just getting my bearings; I seldom have the opportunity to fly. May I come in?”

Whirl hit the lights and cast a look around the room. Maybe Rung wouldn’t recognize the dents in the walls. Still, there was a little more energon staining them—and the floor—than he remembered. He didn’t always pay attention after working out his—emotions. Maybe medics had a point about not bothering with paint nanites; a good half of the deep scratches in his armor were his own fault right now.

But maybe Rung wouldn’t recognize that Whirl had been the one punching the walls. Maybe he wouldn’t actually get scared.

Though it would be smarter to be afraid. Really would be.

“C’mon in,” Whirl said brightly. He spread his arms wide. “Welcome to my home away from home! Looks about as good as I do, don’t it?”

If he made the dig first, Rung couldn’t make it serious on him.

“Home away from home?” Rung repeated. When Whirl glanced back, he could see him scanning the room with interest and—was that worry? Well, that was kinda like fear. Healthy thing, fear. Maybe he was finally worrying about what he’d gotten himself into.

“It’s quiet.” Whirl gave a deliberately nonchalant shrug. Time to change the subject. “Doc, if you try to buff out my paint until it’s smooth, you’re gonna buff right down to my protoform.”
“If you like, I could send you a few examples of the options you have to choose from,” Rung offered, already pulling cans and jars and bottles out of his secret compartments again. “The choice is entirely up to you.”

Whirl settled down in the middle of the room, where Rung would have the easiest time dusting him off and getting back into claying. He was conveniently outside of EM field range, so Rung wouldn’t be able to teek how nervous he was. “Send ‘em on over and I’ll see if any of ‘em are good enough for me.”

Rung obliged, sending over a data packet immediately. Whirl didn’t open it until Rung had finished setting up and begun dusting off the new blemishes on Whirl’s frame from his fall. He would’ve opened it sooner, but he didn’t want a repeat of that—he was startling way easier than usual.

When he did relax enough beneath Rung’s servos to open the datapacket, he almost wished he’d opened it while Rung was still out of reach—the examples were high-definition photos of paint swatches that had clearly been put together specifically for Whirl. He could see Rung’s desk in the background along with a stack of discarded metal plates.

These weren’t reference pictures Rung had gathered from the datanet or his own experiences. They were meant for Whirl, specifically. Who did that? Who made thirty different swatches—all of ‘em fraggin’ gorgeous—for somebody like him? And there were more swatches with slight imperfections sitting out of focus in the corners of the shots. How many had he done?

If Rung noticed how shocked and touched Whirl was, he at least spared him any commentary on it.

“Did the room come pre-dented, or did you have to take care of that yourself?”

Whirl snorted, some of the anxiety easing. “The walls put up a better fight than half the mechs on this ship.”

Rung made a soft, indistinct sound that was probably meant to encourage him to keep talking, but Whirl’s attention had narrowed to a single data point. A swatch with brushwork that could only be called exquisite—he’d been a craftsmech; he knew these things. It looked like someone had cut a square out of an ocean somewhere. A lake, maybe—it was clear and blue and he could see the faintest ripples catching the light. He had the feeling that he could sink into the depths of the swatch.

It didn’t look like it could possibly be flat, but the next shot showed it from the side—smooth and definitely two-dimensional.

“You painted this?” Whirl demanded, sending the photo back to Rung to clarify which one he was talking about. “No way.”

“I spent some time on a planet that had a great deal more water than Cybertron,” he said. “I found listening to the waves immensely soothing.”

“I’m not exactly a soothing kinda mech.” Whirl ran a claw along the floor, still contemplating the look. “And I’m not a submarine or anything.” Primus, it looked beautiful. It wouldn’t look like that on him. It couldn’t. “I’m not gonna believe this until I see it with my own optic.”

Rung didn’t even hesitate; he drew the swatch out of subspace—or a secret compartment, Whirl wasn’t sure—and held it out with the hand not holding the microfiber cloth he’d been using to wipe Whirl down after the last round of claying.
Whirl *knew* he was supposed to take the swatch from Rung, but he stared instead. If he touched it, he’d *ruin* it. His claws weren’t made for delicate work; they were meant for *breaking* things. That was what he’d been good at; that was what had made him a Wrecker rather than a watchmaker in the end.

The Senate had remade him in their image, and it hadn’t been a pretty sight.

Rung seemed content—if a little confused—to keep holding it out, though, so Whirl wouldn’t have to wreck it. Destroying pretty things had always been and would always be too easy. It looked as if Rung was offering him a handful of water. It was flawless work.

It’d be a complete and utter waste to do him up like that—like detailing a turbofox. Worse than detailing a turbofox, even, since there’d been turbofox breeders back before the war who tried to get ‘em to look shiny. The contrast between the gorgeous paint and, well, the not-so-gorgeous frame beneath it would be more than hilarious or humiliating. It’d be downright painful.

“Okay, I believe it.” His voice was too soft. He reset his vocalizer. “Let’s just—let’s stick with the paint I was forged with.”

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Rung hesitated, torn between reassuring Whirl that it would be no trouble to repaint him like that and leaving well enough alone. He’d already triggered at least one serious flashback so far, however; it might be too soon to push. He’d had moments with other patients who stared into the middle distance, totally unresponsive as terror shredded their fields, but not Whirl.

It had been particularly jarring after the way he’d positively *flourished* under the care taken during wash. A nonstop torrent of sparkfelt gratitude in a voice so sweet an eavesdropper wouldn’t have recognized it. That kind of vulnerability wasn’t something Whirl had ever shown in their prior therapy sessions. He’d had a joke ready for every serious topic.

He could reassure Whirl that the crew of the Lost Light wouldn’t treat him the way mechs he’d described had treated him. But was it true? The mechs on the Lost Light certainly called him names. So far as Rung had gathered, no one ever *chose* to spend time with Whirl. No one sought him out. The medics did slapdash repair jobs on him to get him out of their medbay as quickly as possible. If someone *did* harass Whirl, Rung felt suddenly unsure that anyone would come to his defense, aside from Rung himself.

No, he really hadn’t given enough thought to Whirl’s potential reasons. He’d made assumptions of his own. Much as he wanted to reassure Whirl, it would certainly be better to wait and see what mechs did when they saw him gleaming. He fervently hoped that it would be more in line with his own expectations than Whirl’s.

As he moved to return the paint swatch to subspace, though, Whirl’s optic followed it. A wistful sadness rippled through his field. Rung paused, then carefully set it on the floor nearby, where Whirl could continue looking at it.

Rung offered Whirl a smile. “I think I can manage that. I’ve developed quite a skill for matching paint.”

Then he hesitated, looking at Whirl’s frame. With the wash and clay, the worst of the roughshod medical patches had become even more obvious. Had Ratchet *really* thought it was acceptable to let him leave the medbay with a weld that hadn’t been smoothed down at all? When Rung went in for repairs, Ratchet always took the time to make the patches virtually invisible, and he added a
healthy dab of paint nanites to help the job along, besides.

Some of these injuries had been around weeks, perhaps months; there was no indication that Ratchet had given them a second look after the initial patch.

“I might need to buff some of the rougher edges to begin with; would that be all right?”

He’d gotten the mineral deposits out of the way, so stray dirt wouldn’t grind deeper scratches into Whirl’s paint with a little buffing; a quick, cheap, and efficient tactic for a repaint that stung, in Rung’s experience. With clean armor, it ought to feel more like a massage—especially with the materials Rung had on hand. Hopefully.

“Sounds great,” Whirl said. “Just tell me how you want me.”

Rung chewed on his lower lip as he thought it over. He’d need to approach the task from a number of different angles if he hoped to smooth welds and rough edges of chipped paint enough that the new coat could lie smooth and flat. In truth, no single position would do.

Still, Whirl was surprisingly cooperative as Rung got him settled, and he adjusted position as often as Rung indicated. The areas stripped entirely of paint needed to have any lingering wax removed first and foremost—an easier task than it should have been, since apparently Whirl’s autorepair hadn’t been maintaining the protective barrier against rust and casual injury.

He quashed the thought that it might have maintained it if the medics had properly treated Whirl before letting him leave their care. He’d take it up with them later.

With the wax removed, he next had to chip away any loose paint. Most had come away while washing and claying him, but Whirl had started worrying away at the paint on one leg after Sunstreaker interrupted them, and anxiety could cause paint to peel.

From Whirl’s outward demeanor, Rung wouldn’t have guessed that he was stressed enough that half the paint on his frame seemed ready to flake off. He took the greatest care with each scratch—particularly those on Whirl’s claws. He did his best to match the grit of the sandpaper to the task in a way that would minimize discomfort. Injuries could be particularly sensitive. Having seen Whirl’s ‘home away from home,’ he could see that the abrasions he’d taken for battle damage were self-inflicted.

The walls certainly had enough energon on them to indicate that someone had bled on them; no mech on the Lost Light would hesitate to tell Ratchet if Whirl had been battering them against the walls. But instead of fighting, Whirl had been battering himself against the walls. That was something that, as Whirl’s therapist, Rung should really have noticed. Carefully wiping down the bare metal of Whirl’s armor, he tried not to allow guilt into his field.

“Somebody know where you are, eyebrows?” Whirl’s voice didn’t quite have his usual cheer.

“Well, surely you know where I am.” He tuned his field to be sure it came across as a friendly jibe, which usually set Whirl at ease.

This time, however, Whirl shifted uncomfortably. “It’s not a good idea to go off into dark corners of the ship without telling anybody the big bad whirlybird’s gotcha, doc. You gotta look after yourself better.”

Rung disguised his hesitation by turning back to find the cannister of primer he’d brought with him. “If I had any qualms about this situation, I wouldn’t have suggested it. I assure you that I feel quite safe.”
“You ain’t scared of me?” He could practically feel the piercing gaze of that yellow optic focusing on the back of his helm.

Rung couldn’t afford to pause and debate the best response; he had to trust his gut. “There is very little you could do to frighten me, Whirl.” An honest answer, although not one Whirl would likely believe. He’d avoided saying it before for fear that Whirl would take it as a challenge and set their progress back, but now—now it seemed like the only possible answer.

Sure enough, Whirl leaned in close, disbelief prickling in his EM field. When Rung turned back with the primer in hand, he found his entire field of view filled with a narrowed yellow optic. “You sure about that?”

The voice was supposed to make him feel threatened, but Rung could feel the undercurrent of fear in his tone and field alike. Rung’s face never changed, and his field remained warm and welcoming despite his own concern.

“I am over eight million years old,” Rung said, letting the time sit on his shoulders for just that moment. It sometimes seemed like an eternity; it often exhausted him. It took a moment to shed its weight again. As it left him, he decided to take a leap of faith. “Would you like to know something about me that few mechs know?”

Interest practically vibrated in Whirl’s field. “Bet you say that to all your patients, doc.” When Rung waited, he huffed. “Yes, okay, I wanna know the nerd’s dirty secret. Come on.”

“The first part isn’t so much a secret,” Rung said, opening up the primer and gesturing Whirl back to his spot on the floor. “Rewind interviewed me about it, in fact—the Functionists subjected me to every test imaginable. I think most viewers took ‘another thousand tests’ as hyperbole, but I think you know better than anyone, Whirl, that the Senate never did anything by halves.” His optics dimmed, and he took a moment to steady himself. “I say that there is very little you could do to frighten me because there is very little that has not already been done to me.”

For any other patient, he would have considered sharing this information unprofessional. But asking Whirl to trust without being shown any trust had made their progress slow and unsteady. It was still a gamble. As he looked up, Whirl’s optic had dilated wider than Rung had ever seen. He’d hoped, at most, to foster a safe space for sharing traumatic incidents. Instead, as he spread a coat of primer over each exposed patch of metal, Whirl’s field flooded with more concern than he’d ever felt from him.

“Frag the fraggin’ Senate.” Whirl’s voice was soft but vicious. “No right. They had no right, Rung.”

Rung laid a deliberate servo on Whirl’s claw, pausing in his work. “No,” he said, serious and emphatic. “They had no right.”

Whirl stilled, but the fear and concern in his field gelled into something fierce—something almost protective. When Rung turned back to his work, Whirl vented hard, letting him work in silence for several long kliks. He didn’t speak again until Rung moved to set the primer aside.

“You’re a tough little guy, ain’tcha?” His voice sounded fond as his optic curved into a soft smile. “You still oughtta make sure you got an escape route. Never know when a mech’s gonna turn on ya.”

Rung returned the smile and offered a carefree shrug. “I suppose. Would you be willing to help me escape should I find myself in further danger?”
The answering snort of laughter as Whirl brought his claw up to cover his optic filled Rung with hope. “Get back to work, eyebrows. Frame’s not gonna paint itself.”

Rung squared his jaw, giving Whirl a determined nod. He’d had a great deal of experience mixing paint for his models; he could match paint colors that hadn’t been produced in any regular quantities since pre-war days. Why bother when mechs’ paint nanites would adjust the color as necessary? Battlefields weren’t beauty contests; there’d been no market for high-quality paint.

Reflecting on Whirl’s comment—frame’s not gonna paint itself—he wondered just how depleted those nanite colonies were. If they were strained enough, color adjustment would be beyond them. An exact match would be easier on Whirl’s systems.

If Whirl had opted for the more elaborate paintjob, he would still have had to match the color before he could put down the protective layer to separate it from the detail work. That was what left Ambulon peeling—low quality protective spray and lower quality sealant.

He had offered to touch up Ambulon’s paint, but he was far too busy to spare the time a full dual-coat repaint would take, and anything less than that would result in, well, further peeling.

Well, Whirl’s paint wouldn’t peel. He set about mixing paint immediately. He teeked Whirl’s surprise as he tested it on himself rather than on Whirl; examining the thickness and texture of the paint. Thick paint would take longer to dry, but it would afford him more time to wet-sand it to a glow, but the pigment needed enough binding agent to keep the texture smooth rather than chalky.

He finally settled on a thickness that suited him after thirty-seven adjustments. Nodding to himself, he tilted his arm to catch different angles of the light. The next task would be matching the color.

It occurred to him that Whirl had been sitting in silence for more than an hour, and he nearly dropped the successful batch of paint.

“Forgive me for my distraction.” His face was burning with embarrassment. “I should have offered you something to entertain you while I—”

“No, no, it’s cool.” Whirl’s optic remained fixed on the can of paint. “Never seen anybody make paint before. I figured you just, y’know, had extra. Or something.”

Was that awe in his field? Rung scrambled to regather his composure. “Oh, no, model work requires very small amounts of any given color; it’s much more cost-effective to mix my own.”

“This the most you’ve ever made at once?”

He nodded, looking down at it. “It’s much easier this way—more wiggle-room for getting the color right. Although I may need your help mixing it to be sure the color comes out evenly.”

Whirl heaved a put-upon sigh. “Gotta make me do everything, huh, doc?”

Rung fought down a smile as he began trying different pigment ratios. “My most sincere apologies.” He furrowed his brow and cleaned the wet paint from his arm so that he would have enough room to test the color mixtures.

It took another hour of holding up an arm coated with different streaks of blue to find matches for both Whirl’s main color and his secondary highlights, but the effect was perfect; the color was completely indistinguishable from Whirl’s own. His autorepair wouldn’t need to make any adjustments—or at least not many.
“Is this color satisfactory?” he asked, unsure he could do any better.

He’d expected another dismissive quip from Whirl, but instead he got a mute nod and a field full of—yes, that was most definitely awe, which was incredibly flattering, if Rung dared to admit it.

“This will take quite a while.” He worried at his lower lip. “Would you like a datapad to pass the time?”

“Nah, I’m cool.” Whirl’s voice was softer than Rung had ever heard it, and if the awe in his field had been flattering, it was nothing to hearing it aloud. “You’re just gonna have to deal with me talking your audial off, eyebrows.”

The false cheer in Whirl’s voice had never been more apparent. He wouldn’t have thought even a day prior that ninety percent or more of Whirl’s attitude was deliberately manufactured, but he’d never gotten even a hint of the vulnerability that polishing Whirl had thus far generated.

“I’m always happy to listen to you, Whirl.” Rung bent to test the primer on Whirl’s claws, which had dried completely during his time fussing over the paint. “You were saying that the walls put up a better fight than half the mechs on this ship?”

Whirl’s optic narrowed, and suspicion clouded his field until the first brushstroke eased across his claws. The tension left him with an almost audible hiss, and the piercing focus of that yellow optic wavered.

“It’s a hassle, is all.” Whirl remained perfectly still as Rung set about his work. “Everybody wants to get a good punch in, but then they’re too scared to finish the job.”

Rung inflected his field to remain warm and welcoming despite the surge of disquiet that accompanied Whirl’s words. “Oh?”

“Like Cyclonus. Primus, you’d think he’d do something, already. It’s always, ‘There’s no before or after to our “relationship”: I’m still going to kill you. All that changes is the manner of your death, which grows more elaborate and protracted by the day.’ And he’s had his chances and he’s just not taking them. Pit, you’d think out of everybody on this ship he’d be the one to actually go for it, but nope. Just as wimpy as the rest of them.”

The impression was meant to get him to laugh, but Rung doubted his ability to fake it well enough not to set Whirl further on edge. Combined with the self-destructive behavior he’d started to unearth and what he’d seen of Whirl’s recklessness in battle, this painted Whirl's constant attempts at picking fights in a worrying new light. Did Whirl want someone to ‘finish the job’?

As he dipped the paintbrush in the bucket again, he found he couldn't even protest Whirl's assertion that everyone wanted to punch him. He'd seen ninety percent of the crew dress up as Whirl for one of Swerve's theme nights—when they were told to costume themselves as the mech they'd most like to punch.

Whirl had laughed it off at the time, but, in retrospect, he hadn't put on any costume at all.

“Do you miss fighting?” Rung watched Whirl’s optic shutter as he smoothed another layer of paint over bare metal.

“What’s to miss?” Whirl huffed, his voice going foggy as he sank down. “Primus, that feels good, doc.”

“The rush, I suppose. I’m a noncombatant, but I’ve heard that battles can be thrilling.”
“You wanna know what a real fight’s like?” Whirl’s attempt at making his voice dangerous and threatening was undermined by the groan that chased the words out. “You don’t wanna know about that, doc. Believe me.”

“Try me.”

Whirl didn’t speak for several long moments; Rung managed to get the first coat of paint down on every stripped patch of Whirl’s claws and had started working up his arms before Whirl so much as onlined his vocalizer for anything other than a needy whine.

“Not every mech’s got a use as ambiguous as yours, doc. They had to test you to figure out what you were, but ain’t nobody ever had a question what my function was. I lived in Dead End; a mech’s gotta fight there. Fight or starve. And they saw me fighting, and they knew what I was good for. And it sounds like you know how they felt about getting told no.” He stared blankly into the middle distance, and Rung gentled his brushstrokes, concerned. “Never underestimate the persuasive powers of empurata, doc.”

He vented hard, and tension started creeping back into his field.

“A wrecker’s use is right there in the title. We wreck damn near everything.” He turned away. “You wanna know what a fight’s like? You either prove you got a use and get to live, or you get sent straight to the Pit. Guess I’m useful. Or was, anyway. Who the frag needs a weapon when the damn war’s done?”

"You were a chronosmith before you were a Wrecker."

Though Rung had tried to make his voice as gentle as possible, Whirl flinched hard enough that fresh paint streaked across his chassis, and panic flooded his field. "A link-up game don't sound half bad. Whatcha got for me?"

Guilt flared in Rung’s spark, and Whirl flinched away from that, too.

"Primus, eyebrows, you didn't warn me painting would tickle." He forced a tinny laugh and shifted awkwardly. "Be assertive, dammit! Show that paint who's boss!"

"My apologies," Rung leapt on the change of subject with relief. "I'm afraid that I'm used to delicate models, not top-tier warriors."

That settled Whirl's nervousness somewhat, although something sad and wistful lingered in his field. "Damn straight, nerd."

They worked in silence for several long minutes. Bit by bit, Whirl's frame relaxed again. As Rung slowly tapered off on the pressure, going back to the soft strokes he’d started with, Whirl’s optic dimmed.


If Rung had been asked to guess what a vulnerable Whirl might say prior to the detailing session, nowhere on the list would he have predicted nonstop praise. But the gratitude just kept pouring out of Whirl’s voxcoder, sleepy and awestruck and happy in a way that made all the glee he’d ever exhibited seem flat in comparison. Certainly Whirl made himself into a character whenever he spoke, enough to offset the monotonous effect empurata had on pitch, and Rung had taken it at face value, but this—this made him second-guess his initial impressions. Whirl had done this in the showers, as well. As soon as he was shown the slightest gentleness or care, the floodgates opened.
He’d said that he had to fight or starve in Dead End. This kind of softness—well, Rung had worked in Rodion. He’d seen what happened to mechs who dared to be soft or thankful on the streets. Assumptions that got made.

‘Twenty different mechs tried to ‘face me in the alleys,’ Whirl had said. ‘Called me fragging shareware.’

And he’d seen, too, how ‘shareware’ got treated. He’d thought Whirl would have escaped the worst of it, given his size and battle prowess, but he’d admitted to learning to fight in Dead End. Cybertron hadn’t been at war during his academy days; he’d been taught to fly, not fight. Immediately after losing everything—after daring to try to feel like himself again with something as small as a polish—he would’ve still been vulnerable.

Little wonder fear kept crackling across his field when he stopped to think about how the ship might react. No wonder at all that terror had fairly eaten up his field when Sunstreaker walked in on them and responded with appreciation rather than a jibe.

Rung could only imagine what compliments about his looks had meant for Whirl in Dead End. In Garrus-1. In the Wreckers.

He’d taken too much for granted. Listening to Whirl’s overflowing gratitude—the overwhelming tide of praise and appreciation—he felt as if he’d never really known Whirl at all.

“I am so proud of you,” Rung found himself murmuring. Thoughtless—absolutely thoughtless. He half-expected Whirl to flinch away again. Instead he went very still and quiet, disbelief in his field.

“Ain’t nothin’ to be proud of,” he said. “Anybody can sit still for a paintjob, ‘less they’re a newbuild.”

Rung managed to chuckle at that—just a little, just enough to relax Whirl again. “I’m about ready to start the second coat. How do you like the coverage so far?”

Whirl twisted to carefully examine himself, craning his long neck. “That was faster’n I expected. You’re pretty damn good, eyebrows.”

He couldn’t help flushing with pride. “I still have several coats left to apply. After that I’ll be able to wet-sand it and move on to polishing your existing paint. How does the first layer suit you so far, though? Any color adjustments?”

Whirl settled back down, venting over the wet paint to get it to dry faster. “That’s the ticket.”

Soft, careful brushstrokes left Whirl practically melting on the floor, looking less guarded than Rung had even known he could. It took all of five kliks for Whirl to settle back into his nonstop stream of praise for Rung’s work—less than after the previous misstep.

Perhaps it would be worth taking a risk.

“Did the walls put up a half-decent fight, at least?”
Whirl laughed. “Can punch a wall for two hours straight and it won’t cave on ya. Can’t say that about anyone else on this damn boat.” He dimmed his optic. “You can really get a rhythm going. It’s fraggin’ fantastic. Ain’t nobody gets hurt, either—ain’t nobody goes running to the Hatchet to get somebody tossed in the brig. Just you and the wall and the burn in your claws.”

“Is that the best part?”

“The best part is getting your fraggin’ brain to shut up.” Whirl huffed. “None of the usual scrap. Nothing about hey-aren’t-you-the-one-what-started-the-worst-war-ever or you’re-glitched-if-you-think-I-wanna-see-your-face—” The laugh that followed was jagged. “And, hah, joke’s on them, ‘cuz I ain’t got a face.”

Rung couldn’t make himself laugh; he made a vague noise to indicate he was listening instead and gentled his brushstrokes further.

Whirl’s optic offlined altogether. “Nobody tellin’ ya that you’re gonna go back to prison for fraggin’-ever for punchin’ walls.”

Rung fought the instinctive urge to go still. Whirl had never spoken to him about his experiences in Garrus-1—at least not while he was conscious. He’d watched Rewind’s video of the story that had brought him out of his coma, and the little Whirl had said on the time had made Rung deeply concerned.

“Prison sucked exhaust.” Whirl’s field clouded with distress, even though he sounded as if he was three-quarters of the way to recharge. “Rung, you’re not gonna make me go back, right? I—I know I ain’t making the kinda progress you want me to make, but I’m trying, I swear.”

“We’re here because I can see all the progress you’ve made.”

“And you can see the energon on the walls and the fraggin’ dents and I’m not—I’m not right, Rung, I know it, but you can’t send me back. I can’t do that again.”

“That?”

“You’ve got five minutes—ten if I hear him screaming.” It took Rung a moment to recognize it as a quote, but Whirl didn’t wait for acknowledgment. “I put half those mechs in prison when I was a cop. They remembered me. Every wannabe Decepticon remembered me. Pax saw me on a good day. Saw me between cellmates.”

Rung didn’t miss the way Whirl’s claws had curled in front of his interface arrays, the way he suddenly seemed taut as a coiled spring, ready to snap.

“I can’t do that again.”

His voice cracked, and that seemed to jolt him back to the present; he yanked away from Rung and forced a laugh.

“Really got ya going there, huh, doc. Betcha feel real bad for the whirlybird now.”

There was no appropriate response that wouldn’t shut Whirl down again—Rung was half-tempted to pretend he’d been so absorbed in painting that he hadn’t heard Whirl. Instead, he set the brush back in the paint and took a moment to steady himself.

“I said that there is very little that has not already been done to me, and I meant that.” Rung vented hard and forced his gaze up to meet Whirl’s. “I may not understand the specifics of your situation
and experienced, but I do know how much I personally loathe being pitied. You’ll find nothing of that sort from this quarter, Whirl, I assure you.” He felt his expression soften as he took in the panic from Whirl’s field. “You know, I still have recharge feedback about those times, even though it’s been millions of years.”

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Whirl felt sick to his spark; he had to twist away from Rung. “That—sucks,” he managed. Real comforting, there, Whirl. Definitely the right thing to say to that.

But he wasn’t about to admit to his own recharge feedback. What was he supposed to say? It was one thing for Rung and another for himself. Rung was a noncombatant. He was small.

“I coulda fought them off.”

Rung didn’t ask who or how, and Whirl was grateful for that. “I don’t doubt that.”

He swallowed the words that tried to escape. He had fought ‘em off, a couple of times. But then they’d just gone for easier targets. Mechs smaller than Rung. Small as Tailgate, some of ‘em. He hunched in on himself as he remembered the guards had carried the minis out in pieces because he’d said no.

He’d stopped saying no.

“I was a mess, anyway. Not like anybody fraggin’ cared where the dents were.” No, that was too close—too honest. If anybody knew how scared he was of the clink, they’d know just how to twist him. He’d be at their mercy. And one thing he’d learned in Dead End? No such fraggin’ thing as mercy. “It doesn’t matter. Why the frag are we talking about this? I thought this was a detailing session, not a pity party.”

“I apologize; I didn’t mean to make this about myself. Would you like a datapad?”

And Whirl’s spark clenched in his chest because it was true—the little guy hadn’t pushed him to spill the truth. Great fraggin’ work there, Whirl.

“Nah. We can—talk about you.” He hesitated, turning to look back at Rung nervously. “You—get recharge feedback? Is it an all the time kinda thing?”

“At least twice a week,” Rung said, settling back down.

“Least it’s not every time you recharge.” That was better than Whirl could say. “And what they did—it still hurts? Like. Your frame, but also I mean your—” He gestured vaguely.

“My joints have never been the same.” Rung tapped the paintbrush against the side of the bucket, and Whirl scooted back over to let him resume his work. “And yes, my spark hurts sometimes, too.”

“Well, the things they said and the things they did—that was scrap, okay? You didn’t deserve it.” Whirl clicked his claws nervously. He could still feel charge getting forced down his lines, could still feel a pede on the back of his neck. Take the pity frag already. “You deserve better.”

The gentle brushstrokes soothed some of the crackling under his armor, driving back the phantom touches. Just him and a nerd who’d been through too damn much.

“You deserve a Pit of a lot better.”
His voice had come out too soft and serious, but *dammit*, it was true.

“Do the nightmares get ya real bad, then? And the—aches?” Pit, *he* still ached half the time; he hadn’t had his interface arrays looked at by a medic in thousands of years. He reset his vocalizer. “Anything I can do?”

“I have a calming exercise I use when the recharge feedback gets to be too much for me.” The brush remained perfectly steady on his side; Rung’s servo didn’t falter for a moment. “Would you mind if I talked a little bit about it? I find it comforting.”

“Yeah, sure, go for it.”

“I in-vent like so and count to four—will you try it with me? I feel a little embarrassed demonstrating on my own.”

Whirl obliged him, drawing in air through all his vents while the doc counted to four. Then they held still for another count of four, not cycling any air at all. And then a slow and steady ex-vent for another four, and another round of stillness for the last four.

It was—kinda nice, actually, especially in concert with the brushstrokes. Not that Whirl would ever *say* so. He didn’t object when Rung wanted to repeat the ‘square venting’ a few times, though. Let the little guy have his weird venting patterns if it was gonna settle his old spark.

“Feeling better, shortstuff?”

“Much, thank you.”

Whirl puffed up a little, even though it had to be the smallest contribution *ever*. It was something. And Rung felt better for it—he could feel the contentment washing through Rung’s field, and *he’d* done that.

It was something, at least, even if it didn’t really feel like *enough*.

“Nobody gives you scrap these days, right?” Whirl tapped a claw against the floor, suddenly worried. In Garrus-1, he’d learned that if *he* said no, somebody else was gonna suffer for it. It’d been like that in the Wreckers, too—how many damn times had they made jokes about hazing the newbies, ‘breaking them in’? He’d been an outlet there, too.

On the Lost Light, things weren’t so bad. He’d caught a couple of mechs making comments about putting Swerve’s mouth to better use and had talked them into berth with him instead, but they weren’t vicious like some of his past berth partners. None of ‘em had taken any bites outta his spike, at least. Possibly because they’d never seen it.

But he knew that not every creep showed their stripes ahead of time, and Rung was *small* and *weak* and—

“Because if anybody’s giving you scrap these days, you just say the word. I’ll take care of it.” He hesitated. “And not by sendin’ ‘em to the medbay, ‘cuz I know you’d hate that. I’ll just. Take care of it.”

He might end up in the medbay, himself, but it wasn’t like Ratchet would think twice about it. He’d make it look like his injuries were from trying to self-service with claws, and everybody would recharge easier for it.

“No one has given me any trouble,” Rung said, but his optics narrowed, and anxiety pulsed in his
field. “Has anyone given you any trouble, Whirl?”

Whirl snorted. “The Pit are you talking about, doc?” He tried not to think about the ‘facing he’d gotten since being trapped on board the Lost Light. Tried not to think about being twisted to face the ground, not getting asked what he wanted once they’d gotten him alone. He had a reputation; everyone ‘knew’ he liked it rough. No one had to ask. Why would they ask? He was the one who’d invited them into his habsuite. He’d known what was coming—or should’ve, anyway. Not like anybody wanted to befriend him. “I can take care of myself.”

Rung frowned, his field going sharp and serious as he withdrew the paintbrush. “You shouldn’t have to.”

All the practice in the world couldn’t effectively convey an arched optic ride without a face, but Whirl did his damnedest. “What?”

“I don’t want you to have to face—” Rung’s voice started out strong before he drew up short, “anything like what I went through. Not alone.”

Something about Rung’s tone rang false, but Whirl couldn’t get a word in edgewise before Rung was talking again.

“I, personally, would have wanted support. Even if I’d been able to defend myself, I wouldn’t have wanted to bear it alone. So I don’t believe that anyone should have to.”

“Look, doc—it’s just me.” Whirl tried to laugh around the lump in his throat. “Who the frag cares?”

“I do.”

Whirl remembered Rung staring down a gun barrel while refusing to spill a single word about Whirl’s past to the much-bigger mech holding him hostage. “Not that damn duty of care stuff again, Rung.” Frag, he’d used the nerd’s name. “Eyebrows, look, that nearly got you fraggin’ killed. I ain’t worth a buff and polish, let alone—” He swallowed the end of his sentence. “Ain’t nobody givin’ me scrap, okay? Just. Leave it.”

Rung went quiet for a long moment. “Anyone who would hurt you could very well hurt someone else, Whirl. Even if you don’t believe you deserve justice, anyone who would do something like that needs to be stopped.”

Whirl froze. “I got it under control, four-eyes.” Damn his shaking voice. “Look, if they’re busy fragging me, they don’t have time to go after anybody else.”

The brief flash of terror and panic in Rung’s field set Whirl’s armor on edge, but it was even worse when the field retreated altogether. “And do you want to interface with these mechs, Whirl?”

“More’n I want ‘em going after Swerve’s big mouth.” Scrap, that wasn’t what he’d wanted to say; anxiety clawed beneath even his protoform. “Look, it’s no big deal. So I get fragged a couple times a week. So what?”

“Do you want to interface with these mechs, Whirl?” Rung reached up and pulled off his glasses, and Whirl couldn’t look away from that concerned expression. “If you didn’t believe they posed a threat to others, would you take them to berth?”

Whirl’s voxcoder clicked feebly. He wanted to lie, but it was like a fraggin’ magic power—he couldn’t lie when the glasses came off.
“It doesn’t matter.” That wasn’t enough; Rung was still looking straight into his spark. “It’s not like I fought ‘em off!”

“Have you told them no? Have they respected it?”

“They like safeword play.”

“Have they respected your safeword?”

“Hard to safeword around a gag.” Whirl tried to crack a laugh, but the churning sickness in Rung’s field threw him off. “Look, you’ve heard how much I talk! Nobody wants to put up with that. Fraggin’ everyone wants to mute me.”

“And if these mechs muted me and ignored any protests over short-range comms—”

Whirl was on his pedes before he could even register he’d moved. “Who, Rung, who, I’ll fragging well kill them, they wouldn’t dare—”

He froze with his claws raised as his guns started heating up, onlining themselves without his permission. Rung shrank back against the floor, finally terrified—smart thing, fear, a good idea—and he felt everything pour out of him in a rush.

“They said they were leaving everybody else alone, just wanted to play Wreck the Wrecker—and they’re not the first and they won’t be the last and I don’t fragging care but if they hurt you, Rung, I swear to Primus—I swear to fraggin’ Unicron, Rung, if they’ve been hurting you, I’m jettisoning them out the airlock. Are you okay.”

Rung mouthed wordlessly at him, and Whirl's panic spiked high enough that he heard his guns whining, desperate to fire on the invisible threat.

“Whirl, it was a hypothetical situation. No one—I honestly meant it when I said no one has given me any trouble. I'm fine, Whirl, I promise.”

Whirl thought Rung's armor was rattling, thought the terror couldn't possibly be his own, but Rung's servo was steady and comforting as it came to rest against one of his rotors. Rung wasn't trembling—_he_ was.

“If you're lying to protect their sorry hides, Rung.” Whirl swallowed hard and reset his vocalizer to dispel some of the static. “I swear I won't actually kill them, okay? My claw to Primus. You can tell me if they hurt you, and I'll make sure they don't hurt anybody else.”

“Including yourself?”

“Don't fragging matter. Ain't nobody ever given a damn about what happens to me. Least of all me.”

“No one's hurt me.” Rung rubbed a reassuring circle against Whirl's rotor, apparently unafraid of the fact that it could lop a servo off if he wasn't careful. “Whirl, look at me.”

Rung's face was blurred when Whirl forced his optic to meet his. Still, he could feel the surprise and guilt warring in the field against his own.

“I'm fine, Whirl. If someone had attacked me, I would have taken the matter to Ultra Magnus.”

“Standard procedure never did scrap in the Wreckers.” His voice was cracked and hoarse. “Never
did scrap anywhere. Only thing you can do is make yourself exactly what they don't want, and then they just go after somebody weaker. Somebody who can't fight 'em off if things get too bad. And I ain't about to let that happen again, okay? If Speedblast and the others come after you, just—just ping me. I can persuade them I'm more fun. You don't gotta take it, Rung, okay? Ain't nobody gonna mute you or Swerve or anybody and ignore a no on my watch.”

His entire frame hummed, armor rattling against protoform like stones in a windstorm. His optic burned.

“Whirl, it would help me feel much better if you would vent with me. Can you help me keep time?”

Whirl barely heard him over the roar of energon in his audials, couldn’t parse the words that did get through. “They said they weren't going after nobody else.” He tried to look away again and couldn't. “Just wanted to play Wreck the Wrecker.”

“They might have told other vi—berth partners similar things.”

That horrible whining and clicking couldn't possibly be coming from his own vocalizer. “I—no, I keep an optic on them, they ain't gone after anybody else. Soon as they start talking scrap, I make myself available, and—and they ain't got time to harass other mechs.”

“Whirl, if it would be wrong for them to mute me, ignore my protests, rough me up, why is it any different when they're doing it to you?”

“I can fight 'em off if it gets too bad.”

“And if they bind you?”

“You think I can't break outta some rusty ol' cuffs, doc?” He couldn't, actually—not the stasis cuffs that numbed sensory relays. Not when they snapped an inhibitor to the back of his neck to make him pliant. The glasses were still off; he forced a laugh rather than lie to that genuine concern. “I think I oughtta head back to my place. Let the paint dry.”

Rung startled, looking down at the paint as if he'd forgotten about it altogether. “I'm so sorry, Whirl. I let my concern distract me from the task at hand.”

“Concern?” Whirl repeated, the word raw with static. “What're you concerned about, doc?”

Rung gave him a look that was equal parts care and grief before he could mask it with his glasses. “I'm concerned about you, Whirl.”

He onlined his vocalizer to object, but he'd seen Rung stare down a gun rather than compromise his privacy. As if Whirl even deserved privacy. “I'm tough. I can take a Pit of a lot worse than a few rounds of Wreck the Wrecker.”

He could've pointed out the time he'd been impaled on the floor of Rung's own office, pinned through the abdomen like a collector's robotterfly. Rung had seen what he could take, had seen him take it unflinchingly.

The field against his was soft and warm and welcoming and unafraid. That was the scary truth about Rung—he had never been afraid of Whirl. It was easier when mechs were scared of him. Predictable. This—this duty of care thing? That meant Whirl couldn't guess what Rung wanted from him, and that made him dangerous. He’d assume he wanted the same kinds of favors most mechs wanted from him, but those were the same ones he was objecting to.
“I know you can.” Was that pain in Rung’s voice? “That doesn’t mean you should have to. If no one deserves this treatment, Whirl, why should you?”

“It doesn’t mean anything to me.” It was easier to lie to Rung’s glasses. Easier still to lie to the dented wall. “Not like it does to other mechs.”

Silence hung between them for several long moments before Rung onlined his vocalizer again. “I’m afraid I don’t believe that, Whirl.” His voice was too soft, too sad, too goddamn knowing. “I think it matters, and I want you to know it’s all right for it to matter.”

“If it matters, it hurts.” Frag, frag, frag—that was too honest. If anybody on the Lost Light figured out he could be hurt—actually hurt—“Let me laugh it off, doc. Please.”

“I’m sorry, Whirl. I—this was supposed to be a reward, not an interrogation.” Rung’s field flickered with guilt again. “I think the paint has dried enough to apply the second coat. May I?”

He didn’t want any servos on him, even if they were the tiny, delicate servos of a noncombatant who couldn’t fight his way out of a wet paper bag. “Sure.” He forced himself to keep his voice light as he settled down in front of Rung. “How many coats is this gonna take?”

“Three will be plenty, I think. I can touch it up in a few weeks if need be.”

Whirl snorted. No way was eyebrows gonna have him back around for another detailing. Wasting a whole day of his on buffing up a paint job uglier than a rusted trash can? As if.

“I’ve been giving the schedule more thought, actually.” Primus, the brush felt so sweet on his aching armor. “Would you like weekly washes and monthly detailing sessions? If you’re in the brig during your scheduled time, we’ll have to skip that round, but that should leave you well-maintained.”

Whirl’s optic sparked. That—that was too much to hope for. Soft, caring touches that he could stop with just one word. Somebody keeping an optic on his wellbeing.

Frag, he’d notice the marks Speedblast and his gang of afts invariably left. He hadn’t thought anybody would care about those. But if they met every week for a wash, Rung would see cuts and dents Whirl couldn’t have gotten from battle, and then there’d be more questions, and—“Ratchet’s keeping me maintained; I fight just fine.”

To his surprise, fury burst across Rung’s field before he tamped it back down into neutrality. “Oh, believe me, I’ll be taking up Ratchet’s maintenance with him later.”

“Hey, hey, don’t be too hard on the old stick-in-the-mud,” Whirl said. “It’s hard to keep me in the medbay.” Not that Ratchet really tried, but who the frag cared?

Rung made a noncommittal sound, and it hit Whirl that Rung meant it. This waifish nerd who didn’t even properly come up to Whirl’s chest—this tiny noncombatant who’d been stuck listening to Whirl crack terrible jokes for hours on end and whine about stuff that didn’t matter and generally make next-to-no progress—he was acting protective. Of the big bad whirlybird.

It was such a horrifying revelation that he was glad he was already sitting down for it, or he probably would’ve scratched up his newly shiny aft by falling on it.

“It’s not a good idea to care about me, doc.” Too late for lies; if Rung already cared, it was too damn late for just about everything. All he had left was the truth. “You oughtta knock it off before you get yourself hurt.”
Maybe Rung noticed the abrupt change of tone; surprise certainly flooded his field. “What?”

“You’re supposed to be scared of me, but you’re not. That’s no good, Rung. You gotta have a better sense of self-preservation. People on this ship care about you. Don’t you know that?”

“People on this ship care about you, as well, Whirl.”

“They don’t.” He didn’t see the point in mincing words there, but Rung seemed unconvinced. “Put up a poll and ask who folks would jettison out an airlock if we were a little too heavy to escape a gravity well. Ask who they most wanna punch. Ask anybody and everybody and you’ll get the same damn answer. And y’know what? It’s better if nobody gives a damn about me.” Whirl turned to focus his optic on Rung, not quite looming, but getting close. “You’re better off going soft-sparked over literally anybody else on this ship. I’m an aft, I know I’m an aft, and being an aft keeps mechs from getting too touchy-feely, but it also keeps ‘em safe.”

“I’m afraid that I don’t see the danger—”

“Thing is, if they wanna hurt me, they can’t. They don’t know what makes me tick, doc. They don’t know that I’d put myself between you and the fraggin’ DJD if they came calling. But once Speedblast figured out I cared about keeping Swerve safe—about keeping Tailgate safe, and other mechs who couldn’t fight him off no matter how hard they tried—well, once he figured that out, they ended up in more danger than ever. See, if I tell him no, what’s he gonna do? I’m untouchable. I could kill him with one claw ripped off. But he knows who matters to me, knows I’ll get fragged up if he starts talking about—hurting them.”

His chest hurt. He expected Rung to say something—anything—while he pressed a claw up against his spark to steady it, but Rung was silent.

“They realize you care about me, and it’s one step too close to them knowing I give a damn about you. They know I’ll roll over and show my belly to get them to keep their paws off Tailgate—Tailgate, who after three years on this boat with me still literally thinks my name is Nutjob!” He forced himself to laugh. “They figure out I matter to you? It’s a death warrant, doc, no question. And I’m—I’m not having that, okay? Frag, it was bad enough watching Max hold a gun to your helm, and I knew what buttons to push to get him to keep it trained on me. With Speedblast—”

Whirl choked. How many times had he fragging given up the name? What the frag was he gonna do if Rung decided to give Speedblast a piece of his mind?

He froze as Rung’s servo came to rest on a dry patch of paint on his rotors. “Whirl, you don’t need to protect me. It’s my job to protect and look after your emotional well-being as best I can.”

Was it possible for a spark to freeze? Whirl’s felt like it had crystallized in his chest.

“Doc.” Scrap, his voice couldn’t crack like that. If he was that weak he wouldn’t be able to protect anyone. He couldn’t even raise his helm to face Rung’s gaze rather than that too-gentle hand. “Doc, no, you don’t understand, he’s got like thirty mechs behind him, you can’t—you can’t.”

“I have a duty of care—”

Whirl’s optic snapped up of its own accord. “Rung.” The name drew him up short, just like he’d hoped. “What do I have to do to get you to promise to stay the frag away from him?”

Rung’s mouth opened and closed repeatedly, just slightly out of sync with his resetting vocalizer.

“Sure, fine, duty of care, I get it. Duty done. Done—done way better than anybody else ever did.”
He clicked his claws—the ones nowhere near and still far too close to Rung. Agitation, distress, simple stimming; Rung could make whatever he wanted outta it. “That duty don't put you anywhere near Speedblast. You got that?”

“I won't approach Speedblast about this without your consent. Everything we discuss is confidential.” He looked sparkbroken. “If you would like, I can help arrange the paperwork for pursuing action against them?”

Why did he have to sound so fragging hopeful? “Can we just—next session, I don't care, fine, but not. Not now. Okay?”

He only narrowly stopped himself from tacking on a 'please' at the end.

“Yes, of course.” Rung’s concern didn't fade from his field. “I believe you've dried enough for the final coat?”

Whirl sagged with relief, though his cables remained taut and his armor stayed clamped against his protoform. He couldn’t let go of the nagging fear that Rung would take on Speedblast and—and Rung was tough, Whirl could handle Speedblast’s preferred style of play, but Rung? Sure, the little guy had survived damn near everything, but frag if Whirl wanted him to relive it.

“Yeah, I think I’m good for the last coat.” He’d wasted the first two freaking out and spilling way too much info to Rung, enough info that it could get Rung killed if he decided to follow-up without backup. “How do you want me?”

He couldn’t help tensing as Rung drew close to him—his protoform crawled beneath his armor at the thought of being touched. It was only because he couldn’t imagine the soft and gentle touches not being followed by—something worse. Mesh memory insisted that Rung was going to go for his interface array next under the guise of polishing it. His autonomic systems started prepping him for assault—lubricant to make it hurt less, redirecting charge to his input/output hardline array to get it over with more quickly even though that particular array had been all but ripped out and hadn’t seen use in years.

Try as he might to convince his body that no, Rung wasn’t going to do that, wouldn’t even be interested in that, his frame didn’t listen. It knew this song and dance. No one—absolutely no one in five million years—had touched him gently without expecting a rougher payment later.

“Whirl?”

Whirl prayed that the lubricant wouldn’t be obvious; his frame had chilled to the point that condensation had started beading up on his extremities. Rung wasn’t going to hurt him. He wasn’t.

“Yeah, eyebrows?”

“If you would like to reschedule the final steps—”

Frag the worry in the doc’s voice. Frag Whirl for caring. It took way too much effort to pitch his voice into a cheery sing-song tone. “I knew you’d get sick of me eventually.”

Rung hesitated, and Whirl realized that it was because Whirl’s armor had started rattling at the approach of the paintbrush. “Whirl.”

He sounded too serious. Whirl’s throat tightened around his voxcoder, swallowing his reply. He was too tired to lie. He felt stretched thin and sick and he just wanted Rung to sound like Rung again. “S’nothing, doc. Just. Not used to gettin’ anything nice without there being certain
Rung vented hard, shock rolling off his field in waves, and Whirl was glad that his cockpit kept him from being able to check whether he was visibly lubricating. No charge in his lines, no heat—just dread. Hopefully Rung would recognize that, at least.

“I—that’s not why I—” Rung’s voice cracked.

“I know. It's my fragging frame that doesn't.” He hesitated, realizing abruptly that they were alone in the belly of the ship and he’d admitted he'd do all sorts of things to keep Rung safe. What if that had sounded like an offer? His voice dropped, embarrassingly small and afraid. “I mean. You—you won't, right?”

“No!” Rung had gone completely rigid. “No, absolutely not! I would never—I genuinely intended this to be a positive—”

Frag, he was going to start apologizing even though Whirl was the one fragging everything up!

“Then we're fine.” Whirl hoped his voice sounded confident and unworried. “Just fine. Totally fine.” He reset his vocalizer to clear the static around the edges of the words. “Nothin' to worry about other'n getting the paint even.”

Rung onlined and offlined his vocalizer in rapid succession; when he finally spoke, Whirl was grateful that he’d taken the change of subject. “The wet-sanding should smooth it, but I would be happy to touch up any problem areas later.”

“So what say we get the last coat on so we can get to the massage already, eyebrows?” He deliberately curved his optic into a grin.

“Would you like a link-up game to play meanwhile?”

Whirl huffed a laugh. “I got one last secret for ya, doc, but I’m only gonna tell if ya promise not to go all mushy on me again.”

Rung’s expression sharpened behind his glasses before he nodded assent.

“Doc, truth is, I can’t play link-up games.” Whirl tapped a claw against the cover protecting his hardline array. “I got a diagnostic port, sure, but only medics get to play around with that. The fun plug and port? Yeah, that got ripped out a long time ago. Nobody was clanging me, and it meant I was less of a liability when I went behind enemy lines, so I never bothered to get ‘em replaced.”

Well, the medics had assumed he wasn’t gonna use them anyway, and he hadn’t seen the point of fighting them on that.

“But earlier—you said—”

“That a game didn’t sound half bad?” He’d nearly forgotten about that particular ploy to escape the conversation. “Was gonna pretend to plug in. I’m a pretty decent actor when I gotta be.” He shrugged and onlined his vocalizer to add something flippant—the empurata had flattened out his voice so he really had to work to get it to sound light-sparked—but then he teeked Rung’s—fury?

“Okay, so when I said I didn’t wantcha to go mushy, that wasn’t code for ‘I want you to get steaming mad,’ okay?”

Rung did seem to be steaming; the electromagnetic field surrounding him had grown heated enough that it distorted the air around him. That was the kinda rage you saw before a berserker tore
up a battlefield, and it kinda stung wherever it came into contact with his own field—even though Rung’s field usually felt calming enough to be a sedative.

“If your diagnostic port is active, then that means Ratchet would be aware of the damage.” His voice was colder and sharper than Whirl had ever heard it.

“No medic linked with Whirl, even to treat him. “He just poked around the bits that got shot at and blown up and fixed those. I ain’t been shot in an interface array for years.”

Two years, to be exact—right at the start of their little jaunt through space. But that’d cauterized itself and only twinged sometimes, so he’d left Ratchet alone about it. Still technically true. Speedblast just liked his gunplay with loaded guns, and with a muted partner, well—wasn’t like Whirl had been able to scream about it. And what was he gonna say? He knew the exact kind of reaction he was bound to get from literally anybody he mentioned it to—of course you’d stuff a gun up your valve—and frag that. He hadn’t wanted to try the gunplay, but once the inhibitor had been clipped to the nape of his neck, there hadn’t been much he could do.

“Whirl?” From the worry in Rung’s voice, it wasn’t the first time he’d called Whirl’s name—at least his field had softened a bit.

Part of Whirl—a much bigger part than he’d expected—wanted to spill everything. He hadn’t been able to tell anybody any of this scrap for millions and millions of years. Nobody had cared. He hadn’t wanted anyone to care, because it left them scrapped or tortured or fragged eight ways from Iacon.

But nothing he said seemed like it was gonna make Rung stop caring, and by Primus, Whirl had been alone for-fragging-ever.

He’d made the mistake of forgetting to be angry. Anger was insulating—it kept mechs away. But now Rung was here and Whirl couldn’t gather the energy to fake it anymore.

“There’s stuff I don’t talk about, but—I don’t got the words, doc. I don’t know how to talk about it.” He hesitated. “If—look, this isn’t something you gotta do, but it seems like ya wanna know the nitty gritty details that got me all fragged up, and.” His voxcoder got stuck and needed to be reset. “I can’t put the words together, but.” Why was it so fragging hard to say this? “If you want the compressed memory files, I could put a packet together for ya. Since ya got that confidential line an’ all.”

His spark itched with sudden anxiety. Rung was staring at him as if he’d never seen Whirl before—and, honestly, Whirl had been doing his damnedest to make sure Rung didn’t see him.

“I find that sharing memories of difficult times makes the burden easier to bear.” Rung’s voice was cautious, his field awestruck. “If you believe that I would be able to support you by sharing these memories, then yes, I would be glad to.”

“It’s not all excitin’ stuff,” Whirl muttered, but he’d already started zipping up data to send over. It was gonna be a massive file—he didn’t think he could relive each and every one right now to weed out the ones Rung wouldn’t wanna see, and he’d lose his nerve if he waited. Properly compressed, Rung could burn through all five million years in about five kliks. “I’m just—sending everything, so skip anything that’s too boring.”

He practically threw the folder across the encrypted line, and giddiness and terror jumbled up in his spark until he wasn’t sure which was which. There was no way to tear his optic away from Rung’s
“Should I view these later or—”

“Now.” Whirl’s armor was rattling again, his claws shaking. “I can’t stand the suspense, doc.”

If anything could get Rung to stop caring, it had to be the naked truth. He’d see what a rusted mess Whirl was on the inside—he’d realize there was no way to fix him. There wasn’t gonna be any progress. He was a lost cause.

Rung would see him spending four million years desperate for death, see Cyclonus promise him death and then deny him, see Megatron admit that he’d given an order denying him that small mercy, see Whirl going down into the belly of the ship to fight himself because he wasn’t allowed to die but it fragging hurt to live—

Rung’s face went blank and distant as the memories started playing. Whirl had let him have the good ones, too—being born under the stars in a glowing field, teaching himself his craft, building a shop from nothing. It’d make it hurt more when the heavies smashed it to glittering dust and left him homeless in the Dead End. Rung would see him learning to fight off his attackers and learning that saying no got other mechs hurt—and saying no to the wrong person could make the bottom drop out of rock-bottom.

Oh, he’d tried to say no after empurata. He’d lasted a few weeks in the Dead End without hands and had come crawling to them when he’d been reduced to running on fumes. That was when they freed the hidden lock on his proboscis so he could finally start refueling again.

He’d see the persuasive powers of empurata—feel the phantom limb sensations, the need to relearn how to process visual data to compensate for the flatness of a single optic, the lingering pain that no amount of medical treatment ever eased.

Was Rung watching his time working for the Senate? Or had he already dared to tell them no, he wouldn’t murder a poet-miner chained up in a cell when he was the kinda mech who cowered under tables during a fight? When Whirl fought, he shot to kill. In that cell, he’d been loud—he’d hoped the punches would get someone’s attention, the loud clanging of metal on metal.

He’d hoped the Senate would kill him. They’d sent him to Garrus-1 instead. He hoped Rung skipped most of that—and most of the rest, too.

At the end of five kliks, Rung’s optics abruptly refocused on Whirl, tears pooling behind his glasses.

“Aw, don’t go all mushy on me, doc.” Whirl tried to keep the fear out of his voice. “If, uh. If you don’t wanna bother with me after all that, I wouldn’t blame ya.”

“I—I know you wouldn’t, Whirl.” Rung’s voice creaked ominously, but it didn’t break, thank Primus. “But I assure you that the last thing on my mind is—I apologize, but may I take a moment to gather myself? That was quite a lot to take in.”

Whirl’s helm snapped down to face a crack in the floor, his optic burning. “You—I said you could skip stuff, doc.”

“I know.” Barely audible. “I have just one thing to say to you, Whirl.”

Whirl tensed, bracing himself. “Yeah, and what’s that?”
He jerked backward so sharply that he nearly fell over. "What was that, doc? I—I think I misheard ya." Maybe it was ‘that was so incredibly rude of you’ or something like that. It’d sure make more sense.

But Rung’s expression was adamant. “I have never in my functioning felt this proud of anyone, Whirl.” His field was burning again—this time with the force of his sincerity, so pointed and sharp it felt almost vicious. “That your reaction to all of this trauma was to focus on keeping others safe marks you as a good person, Whirl. I would prefer if your methods were less self-destructive, but anyone going through what you’ve been through would develop self-destructive tendencies.”

“It wasn’t—” Whirl’s voice curled up in the face of Rung’s skepticism. “Was it really that bad?”

“I can see now why you said you hadn’t the words to talk about it. I haven’t the words to do justice to your experiences.” He shuttered his optics and reached up to pull off his glasses. “I am honored that you trusted me with this, Whirl.” His servo shook as he went to wipe the cleaning solvent from his eyes. “And I—I believe that it’s high time I actually get to work and finish detailing you. You’ve more than earned it.”

Whirl wanted to believe him, but even the sincerity radiating through Rung’s field couldn’t quite convince him. “But I—but you saw, right? You saw that I locked the door on Cyclonus when the bomb was going to go off—”

“And he had just threatened your life—specifically promising a drawn out and protracted death, which, for our kind, could very well last millennia. Hardly a light threat, either, given what you knew of him at the time.”

“Rewind was still in there.” Whirl’s spark churned with guilt. You saved two lives today, Chromedome had told him. Those words still made him feel sick in the middle of the night. Nobody—honest-to-Primus-nobody—had said anything like that to Whirl before or since, not in that tone of voice. Nobody had looked at him like that. And he only had the chance to save Rewind because he’d been the one who nearly killed him. Little wonder he hadn’t had the stomach to let Chromedome do anything to thank him.

“You’d seen at least one minibot hurled out the door; you assumed they’d both been tossed clear of the blast radius.”

“Cyclonus shoulda tossed ‘em both clear.” Whirl clicked his claws in agitation, guilt still gnawing at his core. “What the frag was he thinking?” He vented hard. “What the frag was I thinking?”

“You were thinking that the last time somebody promised you a protracted death, you spent four hundred stellar cycles being vivisected and assaulted in a dark room far underground. And they still failed to deliver the promised death before rescue came.” Rung shook his helm. “Much as it may seem selfish of me to say, Whirl, I am glad you were denied death. I am glad I had the chance to meet you—and the chance to get to know you.”

Whirl’s voxcoder clicked, refusing to produce sound. He wanted to say you can’t mean that and doc do you have any idea how many mechs I’ve killed and don’t lie to me and his fragged-up optic sparked and burned as cleaning fluid pooled against it. It hurt. It felt like something inside of him had cracked and started leaking without the anger to insulate it, and those words were a battering ram against his spark. He felt shattered.

“You shouldn’t say nice things to me.” Whirl’s vents hitched and his vocalizer blurred the words
with static—for once he was glad that the empurata had taken the depth and emotional range from
his voice, because he couldn’t sound this broken. “Frag it, doc—frag, you saw everything. You’re
supposed to be smart. You’re supposed to be scared.” His voice cracked. “What the frag is there to
be proud of? I’m a weapon. I’m the—the best damn weapon there is!” He stared down at his claws
and—not for the first time—fought the urge to rip them off. “I don’t keep people safe. I don’t. The
only thing I’m good for—good at—is killing. At best I’m a distraction.”

“Ninety-five percent or more of the mechs on this ship have killed someone during their
functioning. None of you are weapons for it.”

“But they—they went back to normal after the war ended. Me—there’s nothing left. What good’s a
gun when there ain’t gonna be any more fireworks? I shoulda offline before this ship even—”

Rung’s servo coming to a rest on his rotor made him go still and silent.

“All right, let’s say you are a weapon. The Functionists would have said that was your purpose;
they would have considered decommissioning you as they did so many ‘disposable’ mechs before
measures like the Ambus Test made it harder for them to do so without public reprisal.” Rung
looked right up at him through the blur of cleaning solvent. “I don’t typically like to use this type
of language, but needs must. Frag the Functionists.”

Whirl couldn’t help it—he was so startled to hear Rung curse that the next sob caught in his
vocalizer and morphed into a laugh. “What?”

“I said, and I’ll only repeat this once, mind you, frag the Functionists. Just because your build and
skillset make you an excellent fighter doesn’t mean that’s all you’re good for. A use doesn’t give a
mech meaning. Simply by existing, you matter. You have intrinsic value, Whirl.”

“That’s fragging ridiculous.” Whirl still didn’t pull away from the too-gentle touch. “Why do I
matter? You’re not making any sense, eyebrows.”

“Let me rephrase. Do I matter?”

Whirl bristled with alarm and panic. “Of course you matter!”

“I don’t have a function; if one needs a use to matter, then it stands to reason—”

“Do you have any idea how many mechs on this ship care about you?” Whirl gestured pointedly
with his free claw. “Half the ship would throw themselves in the line of fire to keep you online.
Anybody ever makes you feel like you don’t matter, Rung, you just let me at ‘em, and I’ll
straighten ‘em right out, you got me? You fragging well matter. I’ll fight anyone who says
different.”

Rung’s expression turned fierce. “Then why don’t you matter, Whirl?”

“Because nobody would give a flying frag if I got blown to smithereens tomorrow. They wouldn’t
even have a memorial for me—and if they did, no one would show except to spit on my coffin.”

“I would mourn, Whirl.” There was real grief in Rung’s field. “And I believe others would mourn
with me.”

“You’re my therapist; you have to say that.” Whirl’s voxcoder glitched and trailed into static. He
hurt right down to his spark. “Name one.”

“Tailgate is alive today because of your suggestion to Cyclonus. They would both attend.”
“Cyclonus would only show up to make sure I’m actually offline.”

“And Tailgate?”

“He’d cry over a drone.” Whirl’s spark pinched, though. Would Tailgate cry? No—no, of course he wouldn’t. “He doesn’t even know my name, Rung. He’s been calling me Nutjob from day one.”

Rung looked at him and crossed his arms, amusement flaring in his field. “And I’m eyebrows or glasses or Ring or any number of different butchering attempts at my name. If the litmus test for caring involves name recall, that bodes quite ill for me.”

Whirl flushed with embarrassment. “Okay, fine—fine! Sheesh, doc, how is it that you can get me all turned around like that?” He huffed. “My point was—” He couldn’t say that he was a weapon; that’d be a dig at Rung’s alt-mode. He couldn’t say he didn’t have a use; that’d be a dig at Rung’s own frustrations with the fraggin’ Functionists. He couldn’t even say that he didn’t matter, because that would be a dig at Rung’s honesty and duty of care and all that scrap, which the doc took way too seriously. He let out a long, drawn-out groan. “My point was that the paint’s dry and you oughtta get back to work before it goes from being wet-sanding to straight-up sanding, which wouldn’t look nearly as good, would it?”

To his surprise and relief, Rung laughed. “My apologies! One last coat of paint, coming right up.”

Whirl relaxed as Rung wetted the brush with paint and brought it up carefully, smoothing cool blue over Whirl’s leg—the spot he’d picked at nervously in the showers. It was almost bizarre to think about the fact that only a couple of hours had passed at most, and now Rung knew—well, everything.

And he was still just doing his best to give Whirl the nicest detailing of all time. The paint felt so smooth and reassuring against his armor that he dimmed his optic to focus on the sensation, cutting off other sensory feeds. From the way the paint warmed immediately after contact, Whirl had a suspicion that Rung had added autorepair nanites to the mix; he felt the micro-level damage melting away.

His nanite colonies had gotten so depleted that even a small increase felt substantial. Not to mention incredible. He’d been too stressed to appreciate it before, but the way the chilly paint warmed and soothed lingering aches took the tension right out of him. He sagged forward until his helm rested against one of his knees, the cables in his neck and back going slack.

A good twenty percent of his paint job had been scratched down to the underlying metal, and Whirl was by no means a tiny mech; Rung had a lot of surface to cover. It wasn’t like the washing and claying—he couldn’t get more of the sensation just by asking. There was only so much paint, and if applied too thick it’d be a serious hassle to sand back down.

Still, Whirl watched the final brushstroke sadly. It's been nice while it lasted.

"Now I just have to apply a clear coat." Rung had started ineffectually mopping up the blue paint splatters with a rag. "That's a spray, though, to help with consistency. Is that all right?"

"Sure thing, doc. How long we gotta wait for this layer to dry?"

"Not long. I—though I'm hesitant to broach the subject during what is supposed to be a reward, I admit that I am deeply concerned about the long term damage you experienced in your memories. I was wondering if I could possibly, well, if I could call Ratchet down here to do an actual diagnostic report?"
Whirl vented hard and offline his optic. The peace had been so nice while it lasted, too. "If it were a big deal, he woulda noticed it any of the hundred times I've been in his medbay. What makes you think anything's different now? I sure as frag ain't planning to share any memories with him."

"What's different now is that I fully intend to advocate on your behalf." For a skinny little straw of a mech, Rung looked almost shockingly determined and confident. His field felt like a physical presence in the room, sharp and fierce. "If I call him in, Whirl, he'll come. And if he says anything to the effect of blaming you for the damage to your valve, I will smack him myself."

"You're gonna do more damage to your hand than his hide if you hit him." Whirl rolled his optic. "Bad idea, doc."

"I'll have him fix up my hand after the fact, then." Rung shrugged. "Injuries like those can develop rust infections if not treated properly. And you haven't been treated properly—not once."

"Aw, the doc took decent care of me when I was on the streets of Dead End. I used to go to the Den all the time." He hesitated. "Well, until they took my face and all. Senate had too close an optic on me, and those other mechs needed him. Doc probably never even noticed I didn't make it to my follow up."

Rung already knew that, or he wouldn't have been able to admit it. At least he didn't have to follow the thought to its conclusion: Ratchet had recognized greatness in Drift on the streets, had remembered a short conversation for so long it'd made it into the story they'd told Rung. But Whirl? No, Ratchet had never recognized Whirl as anything at all.

"You're long past due for that follow up, Whirl. I mean it when I say I hate to bring this up during something I'd intended as a reward, but..." He chewed his lower lip. "I can offer you more rewards in the future. I would be remiss if I didn't at least /try/ to help you seek appropriate medical care."

Whirl felt so tired that he wasn't sure he'd be able to protest. Wasn't sure he even wanted to protest anymore. "Okay."

"Your health is of the utmost—" Rung drew up short. "I'm—I apologize, but I believe I may have misheard you."

"I said okay." He looked down at his still-blotchy paint—uneven, half wet enough to shine—and actually grinned. It'd be a lot less unnerving walking around like this than walking around with a full polish, even if he did look shinier than before. Test the ground under-pede before taking wind under his rotors. "And I think I like this look. Let's try it out until the next time you decide you wanna shiny me up."

"But—the wet-sanding—?"

"Would be followed by polishing and then waxing, right?" Whirl snorted. "That's gonna take hours. I thought you wanted to take me to go see the Hatchet?"

Rung's brow furrowed. "I don't want that to be at the expense of..." He tapped his chin thoughtfully. "At least allow me to seal your paint, even if I can't take the time to wax it. It should reduce your risk of rust infection and keep your paint from peeling."

Whirl deflated somewhat. "Then I'm gonna look all shiny."

Rung caught on immediately, which both made Whirl feel abruptly relieved and also like a total aft. "I have some lower quality sealants that won't leave you especially glossy, although I'll need to give you a proper detailing in about a month to redo it. If at that time you find you prefer the less
glossy look, I can try my hand at a matte finish."

Matte finishes took special care to maintain—nobody bothered with them, not even mechs like Sunstreaker and Starscream. Still, it wouldn't scream shareware like a heavy polish—and anyway, he had time to think it over. Pit, he could talk it out with Rung. He'd never had somebody who knew, somebody who understood.

He was tired of putting up a fight. Rung had told him he didn't have to take it alone, and, well, maybe the little guy was right.

"Sure." Whirl grinned. "My schedule's wide open."

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