Battlesleep

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Battlesleep

by Reyairia, zuzeca

Summary

Megatron escaping from prison was, of course, Sentinel’s frag-up. What Optimus didn’t count on was being kidnapped by the warlord on his way out.

Now, halfway across the galaxy, Optimus must discover the reason behind Megatron’s reluctance to kill him, and with it a secret of his species’ biology that may hold the key to peace between Autobots and Decepticons.
Chapter Notes

This fic got its start from some lengthy, long night discussions about the seemingly incomplete in-universe worldbuilding in the TFA continuity, that I desperately wanted to explore. For the most part, the fic will adhere to the canon of the Allspark Almanac, but I will take some creative exceptions, most notably in Cyclonus's character. He has been given a backstory more similar to his IDW comics incarnation for reasons that will be more apparent as the fic progresses.

Thanks to Zuzu, for helping me out so much in this fic and tolerating me as I tried to insert as many of my unfunny jokes as I could.

EDIT: Art by the wonderful Taiyari
Trapped as an Autobot prisoner in a cell barely larger than himself, Megatron only had two things he could rely on: time, and his own processor.

Well, not entirely. Megatron had to give Shockwave credit. The spy had taken the precaution of assassinating the previous Trypticon prison warden, replacing her with a much less competent bot, one that preferred locking himself up in the security room doing sparks-knows-what to taking proper security measures. Shockwave had even tested him out by baiting some grounder that had been imprisoned by being falsely framed as a Decepticon spy into escaping. And if some random unimportant Autobot with little military training could escape, so could Megatron.

That was only the first step, however. Insect, or whatever his name was, had used his small size to his advantage, something Megatron did not have. He did have something else. The ninja-bot back on Earth had somehow managed to slip perfectly good stasis cuffs once. Realizing the importance of this, and recognizing that the insufferable pain in his landing gears was using much of the same techniques his occasional hired help did, Megatron had at some point inquired to Lockdown the secret--after paying a small fee of course.

Ah, what you’re describing is processor-over-matter. I can teach you the basics, for a price, but it takes many stellar cycles of practice. You’re a smart, determined mech though, and might be able to do it anyway. It might just take you a while longer and more focus than an expert in Circuit-Su such as myself.

Megatron had used his time and processor to do just that, slowly and sporadically working on the unmaintained, unchecked stasis cuffs over the last two stellar cycles he had been locked up in this pithele unworthy of his presence. Using the extent of his strength, he could break them open, but it
would be useless if he could not get out of his cell.

And so, Megatron was forced to wait.

Tall, dark, and imposing, all jagged spires and corrosive corners, Trypticon Prison mirrored its inhabitants. Even its windows seemed to glare right at Optimus as the Steelhaven landed at the entrance to the maximum security prison. The setting was almost as intimidating as Sentinel’s bad mood, Trypticon’s angry facade reflecting Sentinel’s scowling face.

“I can’t believe my approval in the polls dropped and people want Ultra Magnus back. He should have retired stellar cycles ago,” said Sentinel. A flash of the electrostorm that always seemed to plague Kaon crackled across the sky, shadows of a dark future where that very thing had happened. “Maybe if he had, he wouldn’t be laid up in the infirmary on spark support. I mean, no one’s denying he was a great war hero, but the bot’s no first cycle protoform anymore. Better to leave leadership to the younger--and stronger.”

Optimus ex-vented wearily. “You mean like you, Sentinel?”

“Well if the tierod fits…”

The door to the hangar bay finally finished opening with a screeching protest, and the ship’s bright lights--one of Sentinel’s tacky “upgrades” when he claimed the Steelhaven for his own--drowned Trypticon’s architectural edges in contrasting shadows. This was a top secret mission taken during cover of nightfall. The Stunticons had come too close to freeing their leader, and so Megatron was to be secretly relocated to a special prison cell built under Fortress Maximus. Even if another Decepticon prison breakout were to occur and be successful, none of them would be able to find the warlord there. It was surprisingly well thought out, at least for Sentinel. Who knew, Optimus thought. Maybe he was learning.

The warden, a lanky, squinty-opticked, green bot with a noticeable overbite and the look of someone who had been interrupted doing something more important than overseeing the highest level prisoner of the Autobot Commonwealth, waddled into the oppressive lights of the ship--grimacing as though trying hard not to make his impatience noticeable--saluting both Sentinel and Optimus so quickly he had to do it a second time.

“Yes. Yes, hello, sirs! I must apologize, I was only informed of this via the extranet a few minutes before you landed. I was, um, ah, doing some…routine maintenance on the prisoners’ stasis cuffs,” the warden said with all the confidence of someone who had been doing precisely not that.

“Don’t worry,” Optimus tried to comfort the warden, extending his servo to shake only to withdraw it, realizing in embarrassment he had spent too long on Earth. Sentinel favored him with a little tch. “This is supposed to be as secretive as possible.” Optimus looked at the conspicuous, lit-up ship that was probably alerting half of Cybertron of its presence at Trypticon. “For the most part.”

A few of the small entourage of Autotroopers behind them couldn’t suppress chuckles. Sentinel, however, ignored the hint. “Is the prisoner ready for transport?”
The warden started to salute again, seemed to recall he’d already done so, and tried to pass off the half-aborted gesture as if he’d been wiping his forehead. “I didn’t have enough time to transfer the prisoner to holding safely before your arrival, so you’ll have to get him from his cell. Much apologies!”

Sentinel leaned chin-first into the anxious warden’s face. “This isn’t acceptable! You need to be prepared at all times and quicker to follow orders. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir, of course, sir! I’ll return to the security room and get out of your way immediately!”

Sentinel huffed and stood straight. “I expect better from the warden of Trypticon Prison. These inmates represent the worst the Decepticons have to offer. Everyone must exercise constant vigilance!”

“Sir, yes, sir!” spluttered the warden, snapping into a salute before scurrying off in the direction of his office. “I’ll uh, get right on that, sir!”

“Hey, wait a second I didn’t dismiss--!” Sentinel said, but the warden was already gone. Sentinel scowled. “I should have him court-martialed for insubordination.”

“Let it go, Sentinel.” Optimus was really hoping that their top-secret mission would stay top-secret and that wasn’t going to happen if Sentinel kept barking out the details at the top of his vocalizer.

Megatron and the other high-level prisoners were kept in the upper levels, close to the central guard station. Mini-Cons swarmed around Optimus and Sentinel’s pedes, beeping to one another in their strange dialect as they zipped about, seemingly oblivious to the larger bots in their midst. Sentinel eyed them with distaste but said nothing as they made their way down the hall where the Decepticon High Command had been imprisoned. Optimus found himself relieved that Sentinel displayed enough sense to keep his mouth shut for once. The last thing they needed was another diplomatic incident, particularly since the last one had ended with the Bhulians pelting the acting Magnus with their excrement.

Their presence did not go unnoticed. Shockwave turned to look as they passed, that single, baleful optic glowing crimson, his antennae twitching. Lugnut’s engine rumbled so loudly that the walls buzzed; fortunately he had his mouth literally gagged shut from the last time the Autobots had attempted to interrogate any of them.

Megatron raised his head at their approach, optics fixing unerringly on Optimus with a stare that promised bodily injury and untold property damage. Optimus didn’t allow himself to feel unnerved though, glaring back. Stripped of the cloak of bogeyman legend that typically surrounded him, Optimus found that he despised Megatron, this petty, cruel creature that slaughtered and manipulated without remorse, that had visited destruction upon a planet of innocent beings in revenge over what amounted to a misunderstanding. Revenge that had resulted in Prowl’s deactivation.

Optimus felt himself droop slightly. As much as he wanted to blame Megatron entirely for Prowl being gone, he couldn’t help but feel that it was mostly a failure on his part as leader to keep his teammate safe. His processor stalled and his optics averted, tuning out Sentinel’s pontificating at the warlord, failing to notice that Megatron was in no way paying attention to the acting Magnus. Fortunately, Sentinel didn’t notice either, averting another one of his angry rants.

“--know that any attempts to escape or attack will be met with deadly force.” said Sentinel, indicating
the squadron behind them. “Now if you’ll just come quietly…” Sentinel stepped up to the scanner on the side of Megatron’s cell and pressed a servo confidently against it. A small beep, a blue light flashed and the door to the cell slid open. No doubt Sentinel had made sure to update all security protocols with his energy signature.

Megatron rose, his movements sluggish from the stasis cuffs. Behind them, the Autotroopers stirred and Optimus heard the disquieted clicking of weapons being checked and rechecked. Megatron scanned across the squadron briefly before turning his gaze back to Optimus.

Megatron smiled, and Optimus’s tank dropped out.

“Weapons!” Optimus shouted, unsheathing his axe, but Megatron was already on him, stasis cuffs clattering to the floor. He batted Optimus’s axe aside bare-servoed and went for his throat, hoisting Optimus up and slamming him against the door to Blitzwing’s cell. Static flashed across Optimus’s vision and his processor spun. Optimus braced himself for another processor-rattling blow, but instead, to his surprise, Megatron ripped the axe from his servos, flipped the stasis cuffs up from the floor with a pede and caught them in his own servos, before snapping them on Optimus’s own. The cuffs were maximum security grade, designed to subdue a mechanism as large as Lugnut, and they did their job perfectly. Optimus fell to the floor, as limp and useless as the cuffs had been a nanoclick ago.

The Autotroopers appeared to have recovered from their surprise and opened fire, plasma bolts flying wildly and bouncing off the doors to the other cells. The Decepticons in them were cheering loudly, including Lugnut, even if you could only make out the mumbles of praise.

It wasn’t entirely unwarranted. Megatron went through the squadron of Autotroopers like a battering ram, swatting bots left and right. Megatron snatched up Sentinel, who had stumbled backwards towards the door in shock, groping for the alarm switch.

Optimus’s spark leapt in terror, certain that Sentinel was scrap. *No, no no not this again. Not again. Not another one.*

Unexpectedly however, Megatron instead turned with a snarl and mashed Sentinel up against the door of Blitzwing’s cell, almost as if he was--

The door slid open. *Of course, Optimus thought, weary. All the security protocols.*

Megatron wasted no time in snapping Blitzwing’s cuffs before shoving Sentinel into his hands. “Free our Decepticon brothers,” he said. “I will procure us a ship. Anyone not aboard it when we launch will be left behind.”

Blitzwing’s angry mode made its entrance. “We should eliminate these worthless Autobots who think they can defy us!” Random then interrupted with a giggle, juggling Sentinel in the air. “The walls could use a repaint~!”

“Don’t bother.” Megatron rumbled, strangely quiet. “They are not worth the effort and we must leave before there is a lockdown. Get Lugnut out immediately. We will need his power if that happens.”

*Don’t bother?* thought Optimus. Don’t bother, as though killing Autobots was an inconvenience that would delay their escape. Megatron certainly hadn’t cared about delays when he was pitching Optimus through the constructed spacebridge on Earth, or stopping to destroy half of Detroit as a test-drive for his Lugnut Supremes.
Optimus’s helm clanged against Megatron’s back as he was hoisted over the warlord’s shoulder, narrowly missing having it impaled on the spiked pauldrons. Unsurprisingly, Megatron did not feel the same attachment to his Earth mode that Optimus did, and had reverted to his original root mode as soon as possible.

Wait... why hasn’t there been a lockdown yet? Surely the Warden would have noticed Sentinel getting pummeled by Megatron.

Blitzwing giggled, opening Lugnut’s cell before skipping down the hall, smashing Sentinel against every scanner within reach. In his excitement, Lugnut used all the strength afforded to him by the stasis cuffs to stumble and flop outside of his cell, wiggling on the ground at Megatron’s feet. Optimus heard the crunch of heavy warframe pedes smashing the stasis cuffs binding Lugnut. There seemed to be some hesitancy in removing the gag though.

“-REAT AND GLORIOUS ME-”

“Lugnut, mute your vocalizer. Try to locate our weapons.”

“At once, my lord!”

Megatron picked up the gag that had been in Lugnut’s mouth, then tossed it to Blitzwing, who caught it expertly. “Use this to keep that imitation Magnus quiet.”

Sentinel managed to look more scandalized than frightened. “Don’t you dare put that on mMMPH!”

“Grounders are prettier when they’re quiet,” said Blitzwing’s Icy personality, before his face spun wildly. “Hush little Autobot, don’t say a word, Megatron’s going to buy you a one-way trip to the smelting pit!” Random cackled. Sentinel somehow still managed to make enough noise to be heard, squirming and fidgeting in Blitzwing’s hands as best he could. Optimus wasn’t sure, but it looked like Sentinel was ineffectively trying to bash Blitzwing’s armor in with his chin.

The small crowd of now-free Decepticons made its way out with no effort to be stealthy or quiet, Megatron among them while Lugnut slumbered off, searching for his and his master’s weapons. At least the Decepticons granted Optimus the small mercy of not taunting him, leaving Optimus to get intimately acquainted with Megatron’s back in relative peace as they charged through the prison, the Trypticon warden nowhere in sight.

The **Steelhaven** shone like a quasar in the dark, a giant and glitzy invitation for the cons to take over. Just as he had predicted, Optimus was certain he saw one or two journalists flitting back to cower into the shadows. For once he was grateful for Sentinel’s lack of subtlety; hopefully the Autobot military would be arriving promptly.

The **Steelhaven**’s cargo hold was standing wide open, a perfect, Decepticon-sized, entrance leading up into the belly of the ship. Megatron thundered up the ramp, bearing a hard right and ducking through a door. “To the bridge!” he shouted behind him.

Optimus really hoped that the **Steelhaven** had some of the same security protocols in place as the prison cells, but no such luck. Megatron seated himself in the captain’s chair with only a little less than his usual dignity, and let Optimus fall beside it in an undignified heap. From the floor, Optimus could only just glimpse the command screen for the ship’s computer leaping to life beneath Megatron’s servos with a cheerful and entirely-too-helpful: *Input Destination?*

“Escape protocols!” Megatron barked.

*Escape protocols: activated.*
Blitzwing, clearly the fastest of the fugitives, skidded to a halt beside the command chair, Sentinel still scruffed in his grip like one of those recalcitrant fluffy organic creatures that Optimus had seen digging up the flower beds of one old woman near the warehouse. “Do you require the little would-be Magnus, Lord Megatron? Or should I snuff his spark?”

Sentinel’s optics went wide and his wriggles took on renewed vigor.

Again, that strange pause. Megatron actually seemed to be hesitating. “No,” he said finally. “I do not require him. Toss him out the airlock like the piece of slag he is.”

Blitzwing’s Icy persona looked a bit puzzled, “The airlock, but I could just--” but then Random intervened. “Tehee, great idea. Time to take out the trash!” Blitzwing disappeared with Sentinel in tow. Arguing echoed from the corridor; it sounded as if Shockwave was trying to bribe Blitzwing in the hall for the honor.

The ship’s engines roared to life and the deck lurched beneath them, sending Optimus rolling across the bridge like the sack of spare bolts he had been treated like until now. The ship rose, nearly scraping the roof of the hangar bay, before rocketing forward at breakneck speed. Buildings rose with frightening suddenness before the viewscreen and Optimus braced for impact, but then the autopilot kicked in and sent them spiraling up into the sky. A few stray plasma bolts bounced off the exterior, pinging warnings in the computer, but none of the few, sluggish Autobot ships that had risen to stop the escape could challenge the Steelhaven in the air. In less than a megacycle, Megatron had escaped from the strongest prison on Cybertron with all his lieutenants, kidnapped Optimus, and commandeered the fastest, most deadly ship in the Aubot navy, barring Omega Supreme.

_Slag it all_, Optimus thought as Trypticon Prison dwindled through the viewscreen. Some hero he turned out to be.

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GENERAL COURT MARTIAL ORDER

FOURTH CYCLE 013

NUMBER 1986

In the general court-martial case of former Trypticon prison warden, designation Slipshot, 000-844-936 Autobot Army

BY ORDER OF SENTINEL MAGNUS [ACTING]:

/ signature /

Leader-1

Trypticon Prison Warden
Hello gentle readers, you can thank Reyairia for this chapter's timely arrival. Work continues to kick my ass, but thankfully she's better at it. xD I'm very glad indeed to see how many people are enjoying this. Happy reading. :3

“An outrage!” thundered Alpha Trion. “That you should have the unmitigated gall to demand we recognize your authority after you allowed the most dangerous war criminals Cybertron has ever seen to escape with one of our greatest military assets--”

“Which is why we should stop dithering over assigning blame,” said Sentinel “and send battalions to recapture the Steelhaven before they escape this star system!”

“Your suggestion is futile,” interjected Perceptor. “The Steelhaven is the fastest ship in the Autobot navy. Between its weaponry and the military might of the Decepticon fugitives aboard it, it would require overwhelming force. Further, the Steelhaven possesses warp core technology. It is likely not still within range.”

“Warp core technology?” said Sentinel. “That was never on the specs!”

Alpha Trion drew himself up, grinding his dental plating so hard that sparks flew. “The blueprints for the Steelhaven were highly classified. So classified that they remained undiscovered by the traitorous former Head of Cybertronian intelligence, despite his best efforts.” Alpha Trion shot a scrutinizing look at Cliffjumper, who ducked his helm and fiddled with a datapad before him. Alpha Trion humphed and turned back to Sentinel.

“The Steelhaven,” said Alpha Trion, “is no ordinary warship. It is all that remains of Sigma Supreme, perhaps the most powerful of the Omega Sentinels. And you, Acting Sentinel Magnus, have let it fall right into Decepticon servos.”

Sentinel opened his mouth, closed it, processor racing frantically, torn between declaring ignorance--perhaps demonstrating incompetence--and accusing the Council of sabotaging him by withholding critical information. “I--”
“There’s no denying that this is an embarrassment to the Autobot Commonwealth,” Botanica said, her voice the only soft thing in the council chamber. “But the theft of Sigma Supreme could have been prevented if the former Warden had been alert enough to employ a prison lockdown, regardless of the actions of the Acting Magnus.”

“A warden who was hand-picked by that slagging traitor Shockwave.” Sentinel said, pouncing on the advantage. “And who was caught reading illegal entertainment material while he was supposed to be on duty. He’s probably a Decepticon too!”

“There’s no evidence that Slipshot was a traitor himself, despite his choice in reading material and incompetence.” Perceptor’s nasally voice stabbed at Sentinel’s audio receptors. “Indeed, his choice is hardly unusual. Anonymous surveys among the population indicate--”

“We don’t really need to discuss widespread perversion, do we?” said Cliffjumper. “Though that slagger Shockwave certainly kept diligent records on how much filth was moving on the black market, the weirdo.”

“Coming back to the matter at hand,” said Alpha Trion, pinching his nasal ridge between two long fingers. “The fact is, Sentinel, the escape and theft of the Steelhaven happened under your supervision. Either of these things alone would be grounds for censure and possible removal from the post of Magnus--”

“Hold on a moment!” Sentinel spluttered. “Shockwave’s lackey makes a mistake and I get the boot?”

“--but taken in combination, and considering your past patterns of behavior, I move for your dismissal.” Alpha Trion looked to the other members of the Council.

“Seconded,” said Perceptor.

“Motion carried?” said Alpha Trion.

Botanica looked at her podium and bit her lip.

“Hold it!” said Sentinel. “Just wait a slagging moment! You can’t dismiss me! You don’t have anyone who can replace me! Megatron and his most dangerous lieutenants have escaped, we’re all but on the brink of war! You need me! Ultra Magnus has one and a half servos in the scrapheap! He
could snuff it any cycle!”

“That,” said a voice from the back of the Council Chambers, “is where you are wrong, Sentinel.”

Sentinel whirled. Just before the heavy doors was a small green-and-white bot that couldn’t have stood any higher than Sentinel’s waist. The bot surveyed the room, helm held high, “I apologize for my late arrival. I had forgotten Metroplex is much more difficult to traverse with shorter legs.”

“How did you get in here?” Sentinel said. “This is a private meeting of the Autobot Council. I could have you court-martialed for interrupting!”

“Stand down, Sentinel,” said Alpha Trion, sounding exasperated. To Sentinel’s shock, he nodded to the small bot. “It’s been some time since I have seen you in that form, Ultra Magnus.”

The Steelhaven really was the flagship of the Autobot fleet. It was probably modeled after the Supremes, oddly enough; Megatron recognized much of its interior design as similar to Omega Supreme’s ship-mode, but shiny-sleek and clearly better maintained than something run by a rag-tag team of maintenance bots. It was certainly warp-capable, making a cross-galaxy jump out of Autobot space and into neutral territory with the same ease with which Megatron had blown off Starscream’s treacherous helm. Megatron could see his reflection smirking back at him from the ship interface. It was almost worthy of himself, almost. Better than a prison cell, at least.

“H-how…?”

A small, strained voice interrupted Megatron’s thoughts, and he looked down beside him at his accompaniment. Optimus Prime stared back at him, gaze unwavering.

“D-did you beat the… stasis… cuffs…?”

Megatron leaned forward, resting his arms on his lap. He could allow himself to gloat a little. “Your little ninja-bot companion had a few useful tricks, didn’t he?” At the mention of his deactivated teammate, Optimus Prime’s optics flashed in agony, or anger, or both. “It’s a shame he didn’t have any left to save himself.”
“You…!” Optimus Prime shot upwards onto his feet like a pit-beast, startling Megatron. He could feel the Autobot’s EM field crackling with charge, biting at his own. From Megatron’s seat in the captain’s chair, Optimus Prime was almost his height. “Shut up…!”

Optimus charged at him, as though to ram into Megatron in retaliation but before Optimus had taken more than a handful of steps, the cuffs caught up to him, and snapped him back into full stasis lock. Optimus stumbled and crashed to the floor at Megatron’s pedes.

That was… unexpected. Even he would have had difficulty performing such a maneuver with the stasis cuffs at that power. Megatron reached down and lifted the unconscious bot, holding Optimus scruffed before him. Strange still to realize how such a small mechanism had beaten him. “Aren’t you full of surprises?”

He turned back to the command console. “Ship’s computer,” said Megatron. “Lock the entrance to the bridge.”

“Entrances, locked. Have a nice day, Sentinel Magnus, sir.”

His fellow Decepticons likely believed he had some grandiose execution or torture planned for Optimus Prime, the bot responsible for his incarceration. The truth was that Megatron simply had no idea what possessed him to take the Prime with him, or--though he would never admit to such--why even the contemplation of having harm brought to the Autobot caused despair to froth from his spark.

It was uncomfortable, this despair, a sensation alien to him, and it reeked of weakness. No one, absolutely no one, was to find out about this, least of all Optimus Prime himself.

A thunderous crash against the hull of the ship caught Megatron off-guard. He almost dropped the Autobot, and once he realized its source he quickly did so, rolling Optimus Prime under the command console and out of sight. Lugnut had apparently come around the outside of the ship and had somehow found himself smashed against the windshield of the Steelhaven, much like an insect on Earth. Lugnut’s Decepticon insignia was flashing, indicating an incoming commlink message, and he was clutching Megatron’s fusion cannon between his thick servos. Megatron ex-vented, before reluctantly unmuting his loud lieutenant.

:-my grand, valiant leader! My apologies for my unconventional entry! While seeking your weapons I nearly missed the launch!: 

For spark’s sake, Lugnut. Couldn’t you have entered through the door like a sane mech?:

That was my first choice, my lord, but I have been clinging to the landing gear since Cybertron and with your weaponry in servo I was unable to reach the entrance hatch!:

Lugnut, why did you not put the cannon in your subspace?:

There was a pause. Lugnut stared unblinkingly at him with all of his optics. Megatron crossed his arms.

I… apologize, my lord. I did not think of it:

Get inside the ship.

At once, mighty leader!

Lugnut wiggled off the windshield with all the determination of a slug escaping salt—a slug that happened to have sharp, metal ends. The noise of Lugnut’s pedes scratching at the glass finally faded from Megatron’s audio receptors, and he was left alone to wait impatiently for his Decepticon subject to verbally assault him with loyalty and adoration once he came in the door. It was too much to hope for Lugnut to get lost in the Steelhaven—though considering this was Lugnut, anything was possible—and besides, Megatron did want his swords and cannon back.

He looked over to the form of Optimus Prime, crumpled under the ship interface system like a discarded doll. Megatron had enough time to work on some tactful presentation, which fortunately, was one of his specialties. He turned the command chair to face the door of the bridge, then grabbed the Prime and arranged his body crosswise before it. Megatron seated himself, placed the heels of his pedes on Optimus’s backstruts, hesitated one moment, and then removed one as he thought about the combined weight causing damage. However this position left him with one leg splayed awkwardly to the side. Frustrated, he removed his other pede and crossed his legs, falling back into the usual posture he employed when he needed to appear victorious and sure of himself.

Megatron most definitely needed to check in with Scalpel. This was beyond bizarre. Had the Autobots done something to him while he was in captivity? He rubbed at his chinguard, pondering. The Autobots weren’t above hacking into a warbuild’s processor to ensure compliance—the Omega Sentinels were proof of that—but it was a long and delicate process, hardly something that could occur without him realizing it. And it was far too subtle a tactic to be employed by Ultra Magnus’s
chosen successor, who, Megatron had discovered from his farce trial, was an intensely paranoid xenophobe more likely to have had Megatron executed in a tacky, public spectacle than shoulder the risks that would come with attempting to yoke a warbuild into servitude.

Megatron leaned back on his seat, as much as the grounder-designed furniture would allow, and peered at the small bot at his feet. It was unlikely to have been something planned by Optimus Prime, despite the Autobot being the one who seemed to be at the center of this newfound glob of discomfort.

Megatron remembered the rumors, which already existed back when he was a barely-sparked protoform. Whispers here and there among his fellow warbuilds that such a thing existed, oil house companions swearing through the cogs that they knew someone who had been affected. Megatron had never really believed them, though they were useful as propaganda. The Omega Sentinels changed his mind.

Either this was some peculiar side-effect of being continuously humiliated and placed behind a force-field in prison…or the Autobots had installed slave coding in him. Further, they had done so without him knowing.

*It would explain Megazarak, would it not? He was never even under the Autobot’s power. If they possess the ability to upload such a thing remotely…*

A chill passed through him.

Megatron was tossed out of his thoughts when Lugnut made his presence known, by crashing into the locked door and subsequently dropping everything he was holding, including himself. *Oh, of course.* Megatron had forgotten about unlocking it.

:`Mas-!:

:`I unlocked the door, Lugnut. Try again.:

The door lifted open, and Lugnut clattered through, still clutching at the arm cannon, with Megatron’s swords sticking out from under his arms. He shuffled the weapons into alignment and presented them to Megatron on one knee. “I have your weapons, my lord.”
“Thank you, Lugnut.” Megatron said, taking his swords and sheathing them, before grabbing the cannon and locking it back into place on his arm. “You are dismissed. Wait outside and I will try to contact a Decepticon ship. With luck, we will be able to reach Armada soon.”

But Lugnut did not appear to be listening. His primary optic was locked on Optimus Prime, its shutters whirring between half and fully open, as he did whenever he was deep in thought. Well, as much as Lugnut could be deep in thought, anyway. And then he grabbed Optimus from right under Megatron and rose.

“Lord Megatron, allow me to dispose of this unworthy filth! He will die slowly and alone in the va-”

“You shall not!”

Lugnut had frozen in place at Megatron’s burst of rage. Megatron, too, was startled at his own emotion, suddenly realizing that he was on his pedes. He in-vented, possible explanations rolling through his processor like holovid credits.

“Do not be so foolish. In space, he would survive just long enough for the Autobots to trace his life signal and lead them to us.”

“But, master, to take him to Armada-”

“Is my decision, Lugnut.” Megatron snatched Optimus Prime from Lugnut’s servos. “Have you decided to question me now, like the traitor, Starscream?”

“No!” Lugnut held his head in his servos as if trying to contain his shame, before falling on his knees. Megatron had to take a step away or else risk his subordinate kissing at his pedes. “No I have not, my glorious master! Forgive me!”

Megatron rolled his optics so hard he was sure he could see the sparks generated by his processor’s circuits. “It matters not, Lugnut. Wait outside.”

“Yes, my glorious, forgiving, heroic-”
“Now, Lugnut.”

This time Lugnut did clear the bridge before he could put his master in an even worse mood, and Megatron slumped into the chair, confused and unusually exhausted. He looked at Optimus Prime, and placed him on the ground so that his back leaned on the console and he was sitting up.

“How is it that even while in stasis you continue to be such a nuisance?”

Sentinel’s processor overclocked, optics flicking between Alpha Trion and the small bot—and no possible way could someone that puny be a Magnus—before he spluttered and shouted, “Explain yourselves, all of you! I am the acting Magnus and I demand some sort of explanation for this nonsense!”

“Nonsense is, by definition, unexplainable,” Perceptor chimed in, despite no one asking him.

Alpha Trion pinched his nasal ridge between his fingers, looking utterly finished with the entire situation. “You will simply have to accept, acting Sentinel Magnus, that there are levels of classified information that even you are not privy to. This is one of them.”

“Calm yourself, Sentinel,” said the small bot, the supposed Ultra Magnus, though Vector Sigma he sounded so much like the commander that Sentinel found himself instinctively standing at attention. “Alpha Trion is correct. Much as the secrecy surrounding the command codes for the Omega Sentinels was crucial to the war effort, so was the concealment of my true form, both in the interest of national security and…” Ultra Magnus looked down at himself with an air of self-deprecation, “appearances.”

Sentinel scowled, “If you’re Ultra Magnus, then who was the commander I followed for a hundred stellar cycles?”

“That was also me, albeit with some specialized upgrades.” Ultra Magnus straightened, a keen look in his optic. “And since I am fully functional, rather than ‘one and a half servos in the scrapheap’ I resume command of the Autobots. So tell me, Sentinel Prime, do you wish to tell me what happened to my ship?”

Sentinel stiffened, swallowing back a surge of shame at Ultra Magnus’s tone, a tone he had heard
directed at dozens of insubordinate soldiers but rarely at himself, and it still cut. He tried to compose himself, to gather what shreds of dignity he could muster, clasping his wrist behind his back in parade ground pose to keep his servos from shaking. “The Steelhaven, formerly one Sigma Supreme, was commandeered by Decepticon fugitives during a prison break, Ultra Magnus sir.”

“I see,” said Ultra Magnus. “And did you also know that the Steelhaven was not only a ship, but all that remained of my dearest friend? A friend who sacrificed everything in the war against the Decepticons?”

Sentinel tightened his servo around his wrist, dorsal struts rigid. “No, sir.”

Ultra Magnus sighed. “I did not train you for a hundred stellar cycles out of idleness, Sentinel. You have potential, if you only care to use it. But as long as you allow yourself to be ruled by ego and eschew common sense for paranoia, you will never be a good leader. Therefore,” and there was something terrible and final in his tone, “you are to be demoted back to the rank of Minor until I see fit to reinstate you. You will answer to Cliffjumper for the time being, as he has his servos quite full. Work hard, reflect on your behavior, and you may yet prove yourself worthy of the rank of Prime once more.”

Sentinel bit his glossa until he tasted energon. He would not shame himself by begging, focusing that energy on staring at a tile on the floor. “Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed. Report to Cliffjumper first thing tomorrow.”

Sentinel turned, stiff, his wrist aching where his servo had bit dents into the metal and dismounted the podium, heading for the exit. Behind him, he could hear the buzz of conversation as Ultra Magnus rejoined the Council. As the massive doors clanged shut, he just caught the sound of Ultra Magnus’s voice, a perfect summary of the madness which had engulfed Sentinel’s life in the last solar cycle.

“This is awkward, can someone please find me a box? I cannot reach the podium.”
To: First Aid, Medical Division
From: Cybertronian Military Record Archive
Cycle 013
Subject: Confidential Patient Information

Found this drafted in my supervisor's folder. Think it was supposed to be sent to you a while back. My bad.

Ironfist, Weapons Development Division

From the Laboratory Notebook of Quark [deactivated Cycle 007] - REDACTED

Cycle 003
Weapons Project: 04659
Code Name: “Magnus Armor”

Subject Designation: Minimus Ambus Ultra Prime
Objective: To determine whether groundframe Cybertronians Autobots may through extensive modification overcome

Specifications: Strength increased by 35.8%, speed by 67.24%, durability 89%. Test combat simulations indicate sub

Notes: Subject specifically chosen for diminutive size and load-bearing speciality which allows them to manually oper

To: Ironfist, Weapons Development Division
From: First Aid, Medical Division
Cycle 013
Subject: Re: Confidential Patient Information

What the slag.

First Aid, Medical Division
“Lord Megatron, why am I not surprised to discover you escaped with the top ship in the Autobot fleet?”

Megatron smiled, almost chuckling. Strika’s wide, familiar face on the communications system was a comforting sight. It was a foolish conceit, but it was almost as if he had still been locked away in Trypticon, and only now was he truly sure of his freedom. “Yes, well it turns out that Autobot incompetence is more of a threat to them than our spies.”

Strika snorted in derision. “Of course they are incompetent in war; they’d rather be at home cleaning and gossipping. Feh, can’t take us in a fair fight, so they have to depend on their toys and gadgets.” Strika’s optics momentarily left Megatron’s, flicking behind him to search for something—well, some one.

“Were you the only one who made it, my lord?”

“No, I believe most of our imprisoned brethren are here. Including that group of fawning grounders, the ones with whom you organized that failed prison break.” Megatron smirked, watching Strika’s face carefully, “Even Lugnut is here.”

Strika’s optics narrowed. “I was not asking about that bag of bolts!” Yet in contrast to her outburst, Megatron spotted her optics dropping as she ex-vented in relief. A beat, and she raised her gaze back to his, the composed general once more. “But that is good news. Saves me from having to train another frag toy.”

“Of course, Strika.” While Lugnut was loyal to the point of annoyance, Strika tended to be more independent and casual about the chain of command, but despite denying it to everyone, including herself, she did have a soft spark for Lugnut. Megatron had filed this knowledge away in his processor as a potential weakness to exploit in case Strika ever decided to turn traitor. While this was unlikely, Starscream’s betrayal had left him paranoid, and well, Megatron himself was living proof that trust was never absolute. “I would like to return to Armada as soon as possible.”

“I will transmit the current coordinates to your ship, but in the interest of security measures, I recommend that you transfer the Steelhaven to New Kaon as soon as possible for a complete overhaul. We have kept our true capital a secret from the Autobots this long, and with the Allspark
“I will take all precautions as soon as I arrive.” Megatron leaned back in his seat, letting out a deep ex-vent. He caught a glimpse of bright red out of the corner of his optic. “I’m also bringing a prisoner.” He grabbed Optimus Prime and lifted him to show Strika.

“Lord Megatron!” Strika had likely expected the Warden, or an unlucky guard. “Is that--?”

“Indeed it is.” Megatron nodded, putting Optimus Prime back down. “I made a grave mistake in underestimating him. If I can sway him into abandoning the Autobots he will become a valuable ally.”

“Or a great security risk,” Strika grumbled. If it were up to his General, civilian frames would not be tolerated among Decepticons, much less allowed entrance into Armada, but Megatron believed they had their uses; warbuilds made terrible medics, for instance. “He has cost us the Allspark and orchestrated your defeat and capture, humiliating and weakening us. The Autobot deserves to slowly burn in the smelting pits of Lucifer.”

Megatron stamped on his intruding discomfort as best he could at this suggestion. “That’s where he will end up if he does not see reason. I will personally be the one to crush his spark, if it comes to that.” Crossing his legs, he nodded to Strika. “Good work, General. You are dismissed.”

“Thank you, Lord Megatron,” Strika said, wisely deciding not to question Megatron any further. The screen blacked out and he was once again alone, save for the little Autobot, who Megatron had a terrible suspicion was going to be the source of yet more upheaval.

The wind seemed somehow colder against Minimus’s plating, a strange sensitivity that First Aid had assured him was likely a side effect of prolonged use of the Magnus Armor and would fade with time. How much time he’d not indicated, but as Minimus had been wearing the armor nearly non-stop for four million stellar cycles, he suspected that it might be a good while before he could shake the disconcerting, stripped-bare sensation. He’d found himself forgetting his altered size, reaching for objects that would have been within easy reach only to miss, stumbling as he relearned the weight of the Magnus Hammer, clumsy in a way that he had never been even at the beginning, when he’d stood defiant before the Council of his time, the whip-currents of electricity writhing around him,
determined to prove to them that his stature had no bearing on his ability to lead.

For the Hammer was a blacksmith’s tool, and Minimus had never needed the Armor to bear it.

Perhaps it had been that twinge of memory, or an electric twitch from within the Hammer itself, that had led him to offer Optimus Prime what alternative he could to being discharged in disgrace. Little good it had done now, with the poor bot in Decepticon clutches.

Maccadam’s Old Oil house was a beacon in the darkness of Iacon’s streets, promising warmth, good fuel, and good conversation. It was also the favorite haunt of the particular mechanism that Minimus sought. He scrambled up onto one of the barstools with as much dignity as he could muster and nodded to the barkeep before turning his attention to the bot beside him. “Ratchet.”

Ratchet glanced sidelong at him and took another swig of his oil. “Commander,” he said under his breath, a touch of sarcasm in his tone.

Minimus sighed and slid a credit chip across the bar. The barkeep scooped it up and set a cup in front of Minimus with a cheerful wink and not a hint of recognition, before bustling away. “There’s no need for formality here. It’s not as if either of us are on duty.”

Ratchet snorted, “You ever not on duty?”

A flash of unbidden memory, red optics, that same sardonic tone. Ah yes, the consummate Autobot Magnus. I wonder what I’d find if I ripped back all those dutiful layers?

Minimus shunted aside the file replay; an old one, and pointless. “Your point is well-taken, but I am not here in that capacity. I come not to give an order, but to ask a favor.”

Ratchet squinted into his oil. “What sort of favor?”

“You know what it is to be a Sentinel’s Guardian.”

Ratchet stiffened. “You sure you want to have this conversation?”
“There is no one else with whom to have it.”

“That’s true enough isn’t it?” Ratchet laughed roughly. “All the others are scrap, vaporized with their Sentinels or drinking themselves into the scrapheap. Your slagging science team didn’t bank on your little leashes getting tangled in some unexplored deep programing, did you? Remind me,” his optics glinted, “how many leave cycles did you take when Sigma got himself blown to bits?”

Minimus’s cup crumpled in his grip. “You would know,” he said, keeping his voice as even has he could manage as he set down the cup, resting his hand next to the spreading pool of oil next to the fractured vessel. “As I believe you signed off on them.”

They lapsed into silence as the barkeep scurried over with a rag in servo. He glared at Minimus as he scrubbed away the mess. Minimus mumbled an apology and tossed him a second credit chip.

“Anyway,” said Ratchet, when the barkeep had left. “What about it? I’m pretty sure you didn’t track me all the way here just to chew the rubber over what it felt like to get your spark ripped out.”

“I wish to rescue Sigma from the Decepticons. Omega is the only one with any hope of successfully tracking and catching them. I cannot send a battalion. I need a retrieval unit, small and competent. Bots that I can have at my back going into Decepticon territory.”

“You want your ship back, eh?”

“I want my friend back,” said Minimus, steely.

Ratchet favored him with a sardonic smile. “That makes two of us.”

“No doubt,” said Minimus. He sighed, “And I feel I owe it to Optimus. Despite what you may think of me, Ratchet, I would not willingly abandon one of my soldiers to torment and death.”

“Good,” said Ratchet, taking another swig of oil. “Because if you were, Omega and I would be the next shuttle out of here to Decepticon space.”
Minimus smiled. “Rodimus Prime is healed and can look after Cybertron well enough during my absence. I have spoken to Jazz already, but I am curious to know which bots you would have at your back.”

“Arcee,” said Ratchet immediately. “And Bulkhead and Bumblebee.”

“A teaching unit, the head technician of the Space Bridge Nexus and a rookie Elite Guard member?” said Minimus. “May I ask why?”

“Arcee’s the best we have with infiltration protocols,” said Ratchet. “Bulkhead may be a bridge tech but he’s nigh on as big as a Decepticon himself, and no slouch in a fight.”

“And Bumblebee?”

“It’s not worth the obnoxious complaining if we told him we were going to leave him behind.”

“Fair enough,” said Minimus, trying not to let the foreboding feeling in his tanks show on his face.

“There is one problem though,” said Ratchet.

“What’s that?”

“We can’t leave until we find a babysitter.”

First it started with a mumble, then a series of pitched noises. Optimus was shaken out of stasis by a sequence of loud, intense rumbles which may have approximated music had it not been sung by a defective meat grinder. He tried to sit up, only to remember he was in stasis cuffs and not in fact having a nightmare.

*Think, Optimus. Think about other things that don’t involve how you’ve been kidnapped by a*
vengeful, evil warlord and how you will probably be mutilated to death in front of a jeering crowd.
Though it was difficult to focus on anything as his body bounced lightly on the floor, and he noticed
the Steelhaven was stopping. Were they docking?

He onlined his optics and groaned, still feeling exhausted. It was almost tempting to slip back into
full stasis, if it were not for Megatron’s knee in front of his optics. Optimus tried to move…only to
flop forward on his face. He had no idea how he managed that.

“Ah, you are awake.” Optimus felt Megatron’s pede nudging his side. “I assume this means I won’t
have to carry you out the door.”

“Well I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” Optimus grumbled. “But I actually can’t walk with
these on.”

Silence.

“Would it be too much to ask for you to take the stasis cuffs off so I can leave with the ship, so you
don’t have to carry me, and I won’t have to be touched by you ever again?”

“Yes, it would.”

Well, I tried. Optimus ex-vented, and tried to wiggle himself into a slightly less embarrassing
position, but was only able to roll himself on his back. “So you’re stuck carrying me then.”

Megatron knelt on one knee beside him, looming over Optimus with a curious expression on his
faceplate and something hidden in one of his fists. “You are quite a sarcastic little Autobot, aren’t
you?”

“Yeah, well, I figure if I’m going to be gruesomely executed, I may as well make it diff-mngh!”

Great, just great. It was Sentinel’s—formerly Lugnut’s—gag, probably one of the last things he
wanted near his mouth. He must have had an awful look on his face once he realized he had been
deceived, because Megatron chuckled. Optimus tried to snarl an insult, but with Megatron’s brand of
censorship, it had all the impact of the bark of a small, asthmatic dog. And so, Optimus felt himself
being hauled aft-first out of the ship, only able to glare at Shockwave and Blitzwing from his perch
over Megatron’s shoulder.
“Aw, look at him trying to glare with those big, adorable optics!” mocked Blitzwing’s Random persona, before switching to Angry. “Tch, pathetic Autobot!”

Suddenly, execution didn’t seem like such a bad fate if the alternative was putting up with Decepticon obnoxiousness.

The noise that maybe only Bumblebee could consider music thudded against his audio receptors as Megatron left the ship, and Optimus was dragged out into what seemed to be a dark alleyway, strewn with refuse.

Of course, Megatron didn’t want any of his Decepticons to see him in any sort of weakened state. He’d probably planned to slip into his city and make his polished, victorious entrance later.

“Shockwave,” Megatron said. Optimus caught a glimpse of flashing neon lights at the end of the alley before he was allowed to drop to the ground. He was really getting tired of being flung to and fro like one of Sari’s inanimate stuffed creatures. “Take Optimus Prime to the Integration Office and register him under my designation.”

“Yes, my lord.” Shockwave peered down at Optimus, looking only slightly more eager about the order than if he’d been asked to flush the Steelhaven’s waste pipes.

“Good. I must get ready before announcing my return.”

“What about us, Lord Megatron?!” That Decepticon who’d led the original prison break attempt, Motormaster, shouted from behind the wall of warbuilds looming over Optimus.

“Do not speak to Lord Megatron unless he addresses you first, grounder!” barked Lugnut.


There was more said, but Optimus focused on Shockwave. Shockwave took out a different pair of stasis cuffs, snapped them onto Optimus’s wrists, and Optimus felt himself pass out for a klik before coming to. Shockwave had apparently swapped his pair of stasis cuffs for ones of a weaker grade,
and Optimus could have almost thanked him for the ability to stand up once again.

A flurry of shifting parts, and Shockwave switched to his civilian guise, his frame melting into the unassuming former Head of Intelligence. “What?” said Shockwave, noticing Optimus looking at him in disbelief. “You are insane if you think I’m going to be seen and recognized with you in tow. Come along now.”

Optimus decided not to expend his limited amount of energy rolling his optics, and walked right behind Shockwave.

And then he realized where he was, or rather, what he was standing on.

The city was a demented jigsaw of ships, some ancient and decorated with the wounds of generations of space barnacles they wore like badges, some more modern—metal reflecting the neon lights of Engex advertisements. Some of them didn’t look Cybertronian at all; Optimus recognized the thorned spires of a Quintesson ship stabbing into the horizon, and a few small Nebulan ships thrown here and there to fill in the gaps. Optimus dared to look below the ship upon which they were perched to see what it was standing on, only to see more ships—layers of them crushed below the surface, and judging from the lights and the silhouettes gliding from one to the next, plenty of them were occupied, though few of them appeared to be well-maintained. Space rust and radiation damage crawled upon most of the ships, like marks left by the giant tentacles of some cosmic squid. What little space that remained was occupied by neon lights of unruly ads that taxed Optimus’s optics—the image of a draconic Predacon slithered across one of the ships on the horizon, splayed on the bow of a juggernaut, roaring “DRAK-ON, THE ZESTY ADDITION TO YOUR OIL” only to be chased out by an eel-like creature advertising a competing product, both likely of dubious legality on Cybertron.

“I hope you enjoy Armada,” said Shockwave. “Because you won’t be leaving.”

From the journal of Minimus Ambus, date unknown

It is a violation of information security protocols to write this, but I must write it. There is no one to whom I may speak. Today I received word from Highbrow that there has been a coup among the Decepticons. Megazarak is overthrown, I...
But that is over. Whatever I saw in Megazarak, it has no bearing on Megatron.

As long as Megatron leads, as long as the Decepticons insist on believing that any sort of compromise or negotiation

M.A.

Chapter End Notes

Armada is inspired by two fictional cities. One of them is the pirate city of the same name in The Scar by China Miéville. The other is Tabula RaSa from Futuristic Violence and Fancy Suits by David Wong. If you are familiar with either or both of those novels - both which I highly recommend - you probably can gather what Armada is like from that alone hehe.

Reyairia
Welcome to Armada

Chapter Notes

And here we have Armada! ... Which is not as idyllic to Optimus as it is to most of the Decepticons.
I have to give a fair warning that this is where the fic really begins to earn its rating.
Because of the way ex-Autobots are seen by warbuild Decepticons, harassment of all sorts is rather common and Optimus will get to experience his fair share of it.

Regardless, Zuzu and I still had a gigglefit writing most of this.

-Reyairia

Sari stared up at Minimus from the entrance of Ratchet’s apartment and wrinkled her nose, “You’re a lot shorter than I remember you being.”

Minimus glanced at Ratchet before entering, and Ratchet motioned for him to take a seat on the couch. “Well you are a great deal taller than I recall, so I suppose that we are even.” He straightened and crossed his arms, “I also do not recall Ratchet ever obtaining permission to bring an--organic might I add--resident alien to Cybertron.”

Ratchet coughed in discomfort, “Well uh, there might be some paperwork that still needs filling out, you know how things get on the energon farms, forms getting lost, misfiling...”

Minimus regarded him steadily, “Our filing system is entirely digital.”

“Deleted files?”

“Besides,” piped up Sari, “I’m not a residual alien or whatever, I’m half Cybertronian! Doesn’t that give me citizen rights or something?”

Minimus humphed at Ratchet and seated himself on one of Ratchet’s battered chairs before turning his attention back to Sari. “Technically, you are a technorganic being, but you are correct, the technological lifeform which formed the blueprint for your existence did originate from Cybertron. However I am afraid we do not currently have any laws on the books concerning technorganics, making this a complex case.”
“Can’t you just make up some sort of special mandate?” said Bulkhead from the energon dispenser on the far side of the room, where he was attempting to balance a small tray of cups and fill them at the same time.

“The legislative process cannot be bypassed for the sake of convenience. Sari would need to go through standard immigration procedures, pathogen testing, decontamination, genetic testing, employment counseling, living accommodations…” Minimus squinted at Sari. “Can she even consume energon?”

Sari’s expression turned indignant. She darted across the room and snatched one of the cups off Bulkhead’s tray before knocking it back in one go.

“Careful!” said Ratchet, “Remember what happened the last time you--!”

Sari’s wet, organic optics glowed brightly and her face screwed up as though in pain. Charge crackled briefly across the surface of her helm and for a moment Minimus feared the small organic was about to explode…

A thunderous clap that made Bulkhead jump and the windows rattle echoed through the room. Ratchet sighed and buried his face in his hand.

Sari drew a deep breath and released it. “Never going to get used to that.” She turned back to Minimus, “There, see? Though it doesn’t hold a candle to a BurgerBot burger and fries.”

Minimus bit back a smile. “Very well, your point is made, young Sari. Though I still doubt that I can expedite the process to secure your citizenship before we must leave for the mission. Legally, you will need to remain under supervision in Ratchet and Bulkhead’s absence.”

“Mission?” said Sari. She rounded on Bulkhead. “You said it was a work thing!”

“It is a work thing!” said Bulkhead in protest. “A work thing...where we kinda, sorta gotta go rescue the Boss Bot from Megatron…”

“Frag it all, Bulkhead,” said Ratchet.
Sari’s optics widened. “Optimus is what? And you were going to do this without me?”

“Sari,” said Ratchet, firm. “This isn’t a ‘Con or five descending on your homeworld, we’ll be going into the core of Decepticon space. It is far, far too dangerous, and Optimus would agree with me.”

“Optimus is a self-sacrificing idiot!” said Sari. Her optics were beginning to shine alarmingly around the edges. Minimus wondered if she was experiencing a malfunction. “I’ve been with you guys since the beginning, I deserve to go!”

“The answer is no,” said Ratchet.

“You guys don’t even have real weapons, I do!”

Minimus frowned; that didn’t sound good. “What sort of weapons?” he interjected.

“Uh, Sari,” said Bulkhead, looking nervously at Minimus, but Sari had already lifted her arms, servos transforming in a burst of light into two long, thin blades. The tiny protrusions on her back unfolded into a broad wingspan and she launched, hovering a short distance above the floor.

*Integrated weaponry,* thought Minimus, a prickle of unease winding its way across his spark. *And flight engines, small, but definitely present.*

Stone-faced, he stood up and turned to Ratchet, “You brought an unregistered, unlicensed warframe to Cybertron.”

“A what?” said Sari.

“Now just hold on a klik–” spluttered Ratchet.

“A Decepticon,” said Minimus.
Sari’s mouth dropped open, her expression flabbergasted. “Are you fragging kidding me?”

“Language,” said Ratchet, in a mutter that sounded automatic, as if unaware of his own profanity moments before.

“I’m not a Decepticon! Those bastards trashed my city and almost killed my dad!”

Minimus frowned, “That may be so, but the fact remains that you possess integrated weaponry and flight capability, something no unmodified Autobot has. Whatever the Cybertronian protomass was that you sprang from, it was Decepticon in origin.”

“Sari’s not a Decepticon!” Bulkhead burst out, storming across the room and snatching up Sari from where she floated. “And I’ll dent the can of anyone who says otherwise!”

Ratchet ex-vented. “Ultra, if you trust me enough to help you locate Sigma, then trust me when I say Sari isn’t a danger to Autobots.” He cocked his helm and looked thoughtful. “In fact, she’s the reason that Omega Supreme is up and ambulatory instead of being stuck as a half-dead ship.”

Minimus did not respond immediately, allowing the gears and circuits in his processor time to turn. Sari stared at him defiantly from her perch in Bulkhead’s arms. “Very well, we will set this aside for the time being, and deal with it as it becomes an issue. But the fact remains, Sari cannot be allowed to be unsupervised on Cybertron, and the mission is far too dangerous to bring her along.”

Ratchet sighed in relief, “My thoughts exactly. Now in terms of babysitters, I was thinking—”

“There is only one mechanism to whom I can legally pass temporary guardianship of an unregistered warframe, and who has some experience with handling unruly flightframes.”

“Oh, you have got to be fragging kidding me,” said Ratchet.

“Language,” grumbled Sari.
Armada was held together loosely—and Optimus meant *loosely*—by a cobweb of different ropes and pulleys and the gravity of whatever unfortunate asteroid likely laid at the bottom of the mess. Everywhere he and Shockwave turned they were bombarded by a cacophony of different advertisements, each one more obnoxious, loud, and overly bright than the next. They seemed to mirror the bots that loitered the city—without any sort of traffic control laws, the warbuilds zipped around in the air and crashed into each other—which led to the three brawls Optimus witnessed in a ridiculously short span of time. Not to say the warbuilds weren’t on the ships either, stomping about as the small percentage of civilian frames ducked in between the gaps in the crowd.

“Ooh, new mesh.” Optimus cringed as he felt a large, greasy hand on his spinal strut. “And on full display too. How much?”

He felt frozen to the spot, afraid to turn around and face the creep, painfully aware of the stasis cuffs still clasped on his wrists.

“Nothing you could afford,” snorted Shockwave, pulling Optimus away. “He belongs to Lord Megatron.”

Shaken, Optimus was almost relieved when he spotted a small group of what he thought were Autobots, civilian frames casually speaking and giggling together outside an oil house in front of them, their brightly colored plating standing out against the dull greys and purples of loyal Decepticons.

Then reality hit Optimus like a punch when he noticed their valve covers were open as he passed by.

He felt sick to his tanks. No wonder Shockwave didn’t want to be seen around him. What in the name of Vector Sigma was wrong with this city?

The Decepticon Headquarters was a ship of incredible size whose origin Optimus couldn’t identify, no matter how much closer he and Shockwave worked and wrangled their way to it. It looked almost organic, similar in shape to an Earth whale, shark, or eel, that had beached and trapped itself among the debris that made up the city. But there was no way an organic being could be preserved that well, and furthermore, there were signs of windows and portholes and thrusters, and it shone an metallic blue that belied it was ever a living, organic creature to begin with. He wondered if even his captors knew what it was. A little bit of hope flared in his spark; if he figured out something the Decepticons hadn’t, maybe he could find a way out from below their olfactory sensors and get out of this dump.

Optimus noticed the difference well before they entered through its gaping maw—the warbuilds exiting and entering had cleaner plating and appeared to be on fewer mind-altering substances,
judging by the fact that they weren’t staggering. It was less crowded too, though that only meant that one con with a black paintjob had shoved him just for the sake of making some insipid point. Inside was startling luxury, mismatched crystal chandeliers hung with spectacular colors that glittered, and once he and Shockwave cleared the entrance area of the mouth and into its insides, marble fountains and glass elevators. The variety of styles made it look as though they had been ripped from their moorings elsewhere and transplanted into the building. Further in, the ship widened into a large open area with a clear view of an enormous throne. The welding around the base looked fresh, and two small civilianframes appeared to be finishing renovations by chiseling Decepticon logos on the armrests.

Definitely Megatron’s place.

One elevator ride and a few turns later and they arrived at their destination, an office large enough to seat several warbuilds.

The Integration officer was a femme who resembled Shockwave with her one opticked stare and purple colors, but that’s about where the similarities ended. Her size and flight engines gave her away as a true warbuild, and her face was unusually expressive for someone, well, without a face. She looked up from her desk as Optimus and Shockwave entered.

“Oooh sparks, finally! I was getting so bored I almost wanted more work!” Despite her size, her voice was almost as high in pitch as Sari’s. “Shockwave, why do you still look like that?”

Shockwave’s optics anxiously slid to the side before transforming back to his true form. “Nevermind that, Locomotion, I have a special bot here. This is Optimus Prime, the one who is responsible,” Shockwave seemed to snort that last word. “…for Lord Megatron’s incarceration, and my own.”

That seemed to catch Locomotion’s attention, and she stared intently at Optimus, leaning across her desk and shoving her optic directly into his face to do so. Optimus glanced down and immediately regretted it. Her desk was a shambles, hatched with gouges from claws or blades, oil cake crumbs scattered about like sand, and a number of alarming energon and oil stains.

“Well…” The way her voice lowered was oddly creepy. “Impressive for a grounder. You might just have what it takes to survive here.”

“Anyway, regardless!” She pulled away from Optimus, high spirits bubbling back to the surface. “The drill is this: we take you to the spires for you to be persuaded into giving us any intel you may have, after that we sell you to the highest bidder, and if you can buy yourself out of that, you are allowed enough freedom to work for pay or start your own business, but you’re never, ever allowed
to leave Armada, yadda yadda.” Locomotion waved her hands, in a way that reminded Optimus of Sari whenever she was getting lectured by her father. “Any questions?”

Optimus stared at her before attempting to motion at the gag in his mouth as best he could with the cuffs.

“Ohhh, of couuuurse.” Locomotion laughed. “Shockwave, take that thing off him before I think you’re into some weird stuff or something.”

Shockwave seemed eager to prove her wrong, probably just as disgusted at the prospect as Optimus was. Optimus worked his jaw, “So you’re saying I’m going to be a slave?”

“Oh no, but of course you’d think that, being an Autobot and all! We prefer the term indentured servitude, very different!”

Optimus failed to see how, so he decided to get to the next question.

“What exactly is this place?”

Locomotion stood up, the light from the large ship porthole behind her silhouetting her body except for the light from her large red optic. She opened her arms dramatically, “This is Armada, the true capital of the Decepticon empire! Here, away from Autobot oppression, we have true freedom, where people can do as they wish without any laws or regulations to keep them shackled!”

Obviously this was very well rehearsed, but Optimus paid no attention to that. “No laws? Not even against murder!”

“Nope! You can kill whomever is ticking you off, or steal whatever you like, provided you can manage it. Much more clear-cut than whatever bureaucratic farce of justice the Autobots use on Cybertron. We do have security, of course, if you happen to frag off somebody bigger and stronger than you, it’s just privatized.”

“I don’t know about that,” Optimus raised an optic ridge. “I'd rather live in a place where someone won't break into my home and murder me because I don't have money to pay bodyguards.”
Locomotion laughed again, placing her hands on her desk. “Don’t be ridiculous, if you didn’t have money why would anyone break into your home?”

This place was thoroughly, thoroughly fragged.

“Anything else?” Locomotion said, flopping down into her seat in a way that made the chair screech in protest. “No? Good. Here.” She opened a drawer, pulling out an injection needle and passing it to Shockwave. “The tracking device.”

Shockwave didn’t bother being gentle, stabbing the needle straight into Optimus’s neck. Optimus flinched in surprise, but didn’t cry out.

Locomotion didn’t look up at them, bent over the console on the desk in a flurry of typing. “Hm, that’s odd, I entered your information….What I told you was the usual thing that happens, but it appears Lord Megatron has already purchased you and wants you delivered to his dwelling immediately.” She beamed at Optimus, “No matter, he probably wants to torture you himself.” Locomotion sighed, resting her head on her hand for a klik, her optic going rosy and distant. “I wish I was there to witness that. I can’t remember Lord Megatron ever working over a new arrival personally. I bet his voice would do that thing it does, you know? When it goes all deep and rumblry?”

Optimus found himself wondering if any torture that Megatron could devise would match being forced to remain any longer in this femme’s presence.

“Also, one last thing; I’ll get you a color changing mod to…”

“I already have one,” Optimus retorted. “And my colors are staying.”

Both Locomotion and Shockwave looked at him in surprise. “You do realize what bright colors mean in Armada, don’t you?” Shockwave said. Slagger probably took him past the pleasurebots on purpose.

“Yes, but my colors mark me as a groundframe and Autobot, and I refuse to change them, regardless of what you twisted creeps think they represent.”

Locomotion looked at Shockwave. “Uh, awkwaaard.” She stood up, lifting a pede onto the porthole.
“Well if that’s all done and taken care of, I’ve got a concert to go to and I’m like, already late soooooooooooo...” She leapt out of the porthole, her high voice lingering bizarrely before fading into the distance as she slowly flew away.

Optimus looked at Shockwave, who seemed to be valiantly attempting to appear dignified and failing. He was also, Optimus noted, sending one of his clawed hands through a repeated, partial transformation into Longarm’s blunt fingers, an incongruous, nervous tic.

“Well,” said Optimus.

“Shut up,” said Shockwave.

“Let’s get out of here,” Shockwave and Optimus said in unison. Shockwave started, and turned a severe look on Optimus, before shoving him out of the door of the Integration Office and into the unknown.

“You have got to be fragging kidding me,” said Sentinel.

“Funny, Ratchet said the same thing,” said the little organic, squinting at him. “I’d say I’d rather be left with Rattletrap, but he’d probably sell me offworld.”

“Don’t tempt me,” said Sentinel.

The organic--Sari, Sentinel reminded himself--snorted. “Huff and puff all you want. I know Ultra Magnus’s orders. You can’t squash me, and you can’t lock me up. I have to ride along with you on missions. Ratchet thinks it’ll be good for ‘climate adjustment’ or whatever he meant.”

Sentinel scowled, not even a megacycle and the arrogant little organic already getting on his nerves. He hated admitting it, but he hoped they found Optimus soon. He was so much better at dealing with these weird organics than Sentinel was, as much as it pained him to admit that Optimus was better than him at anything. “Very well, but you follow my orders to the letter, and stay out from underpede.”
“Yeah, yeah, I know the drill. What is it that you do anyway?”

“I perform crucial work for the Autobot Intelligence Agency,” said Sentinel loftily.

The intercom on Sentinel’s desk beeped. “Uh, Sentinel, if you’re headed to the break room, could you bring back some oil?” said Cliffjumper. “I mean, uh, just if you’re going that way. Uh, sir. I mean…”

“Of course, Officer Cliffjumper,” said Sentinel, through gritted dental plates. Across the desk, Sari smirked at him. “I’ll bring some up right away.”

“Sounds like important work, all right,” said Sari.

“Shut it and help me carry the energon,” said Sentinel.

“Yes, sir.”

To: General Strika
From: Lugnut, Lieutenant to the GREAT AND GLORIOUS EMPEROR MEGATRON, WHO SHALL BEND THE GALAXY:
Subject: An Expression of My Affections

Cycle 003

My Beloved Strika,

We only saw each other briefly during the campaign on Antilla, but you are never far from my thoughts. The memory of our reunion on Antilla is etched in my mind.

Together, we may be Lord Megatron’s right and left hands, held together in our love and devotion to his cause.

Yours eternally,

Lugnut
Lieutenant to the GREAT AND GLORIOUS EMPEROR MEGATRON, WHO SHALL BEND THE GALAXY TO HIS VISIONS

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To: Lugnut, Lieutenant to the GREAT AND GLORIOUS EMPEROR MEGATRON, WHO SHALL BEND THE GALAXY
From: General Strika
Subject: Re: An Expression of My Affections

Cycle 003

Lugnut, I have told you repeatedly this channel is for official communications only. I have no time to be replying to your overblown correspondence.

Also shorten your signature, it is obnoxiously long.

General Strika

----

To: General Strika, and 47 more
From: Lugnut, Lieutenant to the GREAT AND GLORIOUS EMPEROR MEGATRON, WHO SHALL BEND THE GALAXY
Subject: Re: Re: An Expression of My Affections

Cycle 003

My Beloved Strika,

My humblest apologies for disturbing you during the important work you are undoubtedly performing for Lord Megatron. I long to make clear how ardently I miss you and long for us to be together once more. Thoughts of you fill my waking hours.

The signature is very dear to me, it is a constant reminder of the importance of the Cause. I do not feel comfortable changing it, I hope you understand.

Yours Eternally,
Lugnut
Lieutenant to the GREAT AND GLORIOUS EMPEROR MEGATRON, WHO SHALL BEND THE GALAXY TO HIS VI

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To: Lugnut, Lieutenant to the GREAT AND GLORIOUS EMPEROR MEGATRON, WHO SHALL BEND THE GALAXY
From: General Strika
Subject: Re: Re: Re: An Expression of My Affections

Cycle 003

If I occupy your waking thoughts, then those thoughts are not being directed in pursuit of the Decepticon Cause.

General Strika

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To: General Strika, and 47 more
From: Lugnut, Lieutenant to the GREAT AND GLORIOUS EMPEROR MEGATRON, WHO SHALL BEND THE GALAXY
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: An Expression of My Affections

Cycle 003

My Beloved Strika,

Your accusation cuts deep, but alas, I must admit guilt. Clearly I should be punished with all due swiftness. Perhaps

Yours Eternally,

Lugnut
Lieutenant to the GREAT AND GLORIOUS EMPEROR MEGATRON, WHO SHALL BEND THE GALAXY TO HIS VI
To: Lugnut, Lieutenant to the GREAT AND GLORIOUS EMPEROR MEGATRON, WHO SHALL BEND THE GALAXY
From: General Strika
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: An Expression of My Affections

Cycle 003

Nice try.

General Strika

----

To: General Strika, Lugnut, Lieutenant to the GREAT AND GLORIOUS EMPEROR MEGATRON, WHO SHALL BEND THE GALAXY
From: Lugnut, Lieutenant to the GREAT AND GLORIOUS EMPEROR MEGATRON, WHO SHALL BEND THE GALAXY
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: An Expression of My Affections

My Beloved Strika,

It was worth a shot.

Yours eternally,
Lugnut
Lieutenant to the GREAT AND GLORIOUS EMPEROR MEGATRON, WHO SHALL BEND THE GALAXY TO HIS VICTORY

----

To: General Strika, Lugnut, Lieutenant to the GREAT AND GLORIOUS EMPEROR MEGATRON, WHO SHALL BEND THE GALAXY
From: Blitzwing, Triple-Changer Extraordinaire
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: An Expression of My Affections
You two do realize Lugnut has been hitting “Reply All” for every one of these?

Blitzwing

Triple-Changer Extraordinaire
The Sting

Chapter Notes

Ah yes, the illegal dildos chapter. Some people were curious as to where that tag comes from, now you'll get to see.

I'd like to add some info about a few things. First of all, I must repeat that we have pretty much scrapped Cyclonus's canon TFA backstory in favor of an original one that better fits the fic. He's no time-traveler here. What exactly his backstory is though, you'll have to find out.

Secondly, this is something that drives me nuts when reading fic so I'll clear it up. We implied in the first chapter that Cybertronians default to their original altmode after some time. Megatron thus looks like he did in the first episode of TFA. Optimus though, decided to keep his earth altmode, as did Bulkhead and Bumblebee. Ratchet decided to go back to his Cybertronian altmode to better treat patients. IDK about you guys, but for me it's immersion-breaking if I have to figure out what the characters look like, so I'll say it outright. XD

Thirdly, the person who originally strung the words "illegal" and "dildo" together is AndromedaPrime, based on a conversation when Zuzu was writing Old Winds. She, and Kthonos, helped beta this fic several times so far, and I'd like to give thanks to them!

-Reyairia

“I’m boooooooooooored,” whined Sari. She was currently rolling around on Sentinel’s desk in a vertical position that she had called a “barrel roll,” something that humans were flexible enough to do. Frankly, it creeped him out and thus, he was currently putting more effort into ignoring her than he had all day.

It had been a very long day. The only consolation was that between filing paperwork, looking at old cold-cases nobody gave a slag about anymore, and an awkward incident with the Center of Virus and Contamination Control and Prevention when Sari needed to “go to the bathroom”, that cooped up in this office, no one was around to witness his cruel and unusual torture.

And then Cliffjumper had to come in and ruin it.

The bright red helm of the current Head of Intelligence materialized between the opening doors of Sentinel’s office. Cliffjumper entered, spotted Sari leaving organic residue all over the desk, and his brisk pace faltered, his trajectory wavering as he attempted to find a spot both close enough to talk to Sentinel without shouting, and still be a comfortable distance from the organic. Like Sentinel,
Cliffjumper wasn’t exactly a fan of organics either, and after the “bathroom” incident, both of them were likely to check in with Rung sometime later in the day.

“Ahem.” Cliffjumper cleared his intake, tapping on his datapad. He was most likely talking to Sentinel, but his optics kept darting to Sari, who was still rolling on the desk in flagrant disrespect of manners and good sense. Sentinel decided to keep his own optics down, pretending to be busier than he actually was. “A case came up that I think would interest you, si-- Sentinel.”

Sari stopped rolling and sat up, and Sentinel took the opportunity to spray sanitizing solution on the area around her.

“What is it?” said Sari, squinting as the solution likely stung her weak, organic optics. “Decepticon spy ring? Weapons heist?”

*Please, please let it be something bad-aft,* thought Sentinel. *Anything that might help me recover my reputation.*

“Not exactly,” Cliffjumper said, clicking on his datapad, and transferring the file onto Sentinel’s computer for him to see. “Shockwave had masses of data squirreled away on the console on his desk. There was the usual stuff you’d expect, base blueprints, weapons data, lists of probable Decepticon sympathizers--also this weird collection of trashy--” Cliffjumper paused and rubbed his nasal ridge. “Anyway, my point is, there was also a ton of stats data on what was moving on the black market and where it was coming from. He must have been getting it from the vice squad. I cross-referenced it with his list of probable sympathizers--and I got a hit.”

Sentinel pulled up the file and read the first lines.

*Slag it all* .

“Have a seat, Lord Megatron,” said Scalpel, his many tiny legs clinking against the metal of the countertop as he skittered across the surface, ducking between piles of wires and circuits that would have been disturbing if Megatron hadn’t supplied many just like them to Scalpel over the stellar cycles. “I’ll be with you in a moment.”
Megatron seated himself, stepping over the mess that may or may not have been part of someone at some point, and grumbling audibly enough for Scalpel to hear and retort, “Hey, I’m flight-lagged too, you know. Strika hauled the lot of us back in from New Kaon just to be here when you arrived.”

“She permits you to call her Strika?”

Scalpel snickered. “She knows who’s going to be crawling around her insides the next time she gets blown to scrap.”

“Fair point,” said Megatron, eyeing Scalpel. There were those among the Decepticons that called him mad for allowing a grounder to be his personal medic, but Megatron would rather have a medic framed for the task than a Decepticon that had been sparked with guns instead of tools. That said, he never permitted Scalpel to place him under stasis. Considering the medic’s reputation, though, few did.

“Now,” said Scalpel, ceasing his fussing and folding his small, clawed appendages before him, “since you’re not sparking anywhere or leaking fluids on my floor, what seems to be the matter?”

Megatron hesitated, weighing the merits of being truthful against the need to know what was wrong. “I would like you to perform a coding check.”

Scalpel cocked his helm, large binocular optics whirring as they focused and refocused. “A coding check? Are you experiencing any errors?”

“Not…exactly.”

Scalpel waited a moment or so, his expression expectant. Megatron said nothing. At last Scalpel shrugged, “Very well, it’s boring as slag but if that’s what you want. Lie back.”

Megatron pulled himself the rest of the way up and situated himself on the medical berth. Scalpel hopped from the counter and scurried towards the head of the berth, activating a small interface and inputting a rapid series of commands. The medical berth creaked and a small scanner emerged, bathing Megatron’s vision in red light.
Megatron counted his sparkpulses to avoid fidgeting. The scan dragged on and he found himself slipping back into the meditative state which he’d achieved in Trypticon, half on the edge of recharge, trying not to think about what it might mean if Scalpel discovered slave coding, or perhaps some unknown virus, nested in his processor.

Flip Sides came to mind.

The scanner beeped and Megatron let out a deep ex-vent. Across the room, Scalpel looked up from a datapad. “Hm,” he said, dragging a forelimb across the surface of the pad. From this angle Megatron could just barely see the screen scrolling with code. “Nope,” said Scalpel. “I don’t see a thing. No new code, no error logs. Frankly your code looks better than ever. Did you run a self-defrag cycle recently?”

“No,” said Megatron.

Scalpel shook his head and clicked his mandibles in disapproval. “No one ever listens to old Scalpel. ‘Defrag regularly’, I say, ‘stop doing that fragging syk, it won’t actually make your spike bigger’, ‘stop beating each other to scrap five minutes after I repair you’.” Scalpel ex-vented. “You’re not prone to errors anyhow. Why, I remember Megazarak came barging in here millennia ago certain he was having a coding issue, and it was nothing. Anyway, Lord Megatron, your coding is fine. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Megatron sat up slowly, his tanks lurching with unease. “No, I--no. Thank you, Scalpel, that will be all.”

Scalpel froze, forelimb raised above the pad. “Pardon?”

“I said thank you, Scalpel.”

Scalpel stared at him as though he’d grown a second head. “Uh, er, you’re welcome, Lord Megatron.”

The exit to the medical bay slid open as Megatron rose and made his way towards it, revealing the horned figure of Cyclonus. The mech stared up at Megatron, his expression shrewd and his arms crossed.
Megatron frowned. He didn’t trust any mech older than himself, and Cyclonus was ancient, enough to make him look like a barely-sparked protoform in comparison. “Eavesdropping, Cyclonus?” Mechs like Cyclonus had to be closely watched. They were never truly loyal.

“No.” The horned mech said curtly, moving aside to let Megatron pass, but never breaking optic contact. And then, belatedly, “Lord Megatron.”

Whatever, Megatron thought. He had bigger problems to worry about than a rusty old warrior; problems named Optimus Prime and Megazarak, and right now he had to focus on the latter. Restless and uneasy, Megatron strode away, guard up, feeling Cyclonus’s optics on his back plating.

:Shockwave: He said. :I need you to boot up the Communications console in my quarters, check for bugs, updates, everything. Then, hail the outpost in Zarak.: 

:Zarak, my lord?:

:Yes, I must speak…: Megatron ex-vented. After what happened the last time he saw Megazarak, it was unlikely to be easy to strike up a conversation. .... to my brother:

“I know what you’re thinking, Ultra.”

“Minimus Ambus for now, Ratchet,” Minimus said, gazing around the interior of Omega Supreme. Of course, the vessel had spent many stellar cycles as transport for repair bots, but he figured that since returning to Cybertron as a hero, the Sentinel would at least get a wash as a reward. Instead, there were crumpled remainders of Maccadam’s to-go wrappers around the waste-bin, with only a few lucky ones making it inside; scratches and dents created topography on the walls, and even the floor seemed to protest against weighted footsteps. “As far as Cybertron knows, Ultra Magnus is still in a coma.”

“Whatever. Listen here…” Ratchet was unlikely to drop the subject, trailing behind him as Minimus approached the command console. “I’m not so sure Sari is a warbuild.”

Minimus turned the console on, quickly looking over all the necessary software and map updates for
Teletran-1 before initiating the install. “She has integrated weaponry and flight capabilities.”

Ratchet sat himself in the chair next to Minimus and crossed his arms. “She also has a special power that enables her to communicate with non-sentient machinery, hardly something a warbuild would have.”

“Shockwave had no problems with hacking.”

“You’re proving my point, Ambus!” Ratchet made a move as though to hit his fist on the console, seemed to think better, and aborted it. “Shockwave isn’t exactly a warbuild either. You can’t just categorize mechs into two boxes and sort them accordingly. Things are more complicated than that.”

“I suppose as a medic, you would know.” Minimus decided he was interested in continuing this conversation, and as the console added updates, he had the time. “Do you have any hypotheses regarding the technorganic?”

“There’s nothing much to go on,” Ratchet said, facing out of the cockpit and staring out, as if interested in the dockworkers moving about like antoids. “We know that the Nemesis was carrying protoforms when it crashed on the Earth’s moon. We know that a very small one appeared on Earth almost fifty stellar-cycles later inside Dr. Sumdac’s laboratory. When he interacted with it, it became Sari. No one knew about this aside from the doctor until around the time you left to return to Cybertron.”

Minimus pondered, rubbing at his chinguard. “But how does a protoform from the moon end up inside a building on Earth without detection? Could it have just been transported there by someone else?”

“No, and that’s the strange thing. That laboratory was inaccessible to anyone but the doctor.” Ratchet turned back to Minimus, staring hard into his optics. “The same laboratory in which Sumdac kept Megatron’s remains.”

Minimus frowned. As incredible as that information was, it only seemed to provide more questions than answers. “What else do you know about her?”

“Well,” Ratchet rested a hand on his thigh. “She appeared entirely human until contact with the All Spark. Aged like one, too. Aside from that, you’ve read the reports, I’m sure.”
Teletran-1 beeped happily, indicating completion of the upgrades. Minimus shook his head. “We can go through necessary procedures, and negotiations, when we--hopefully--return.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ratchet laughed. “Hey, Omega, you ready to kick some more Con aft?”

“I believed this was a stealth mission,” said the deep voice of Omega Supreme.

“Yeah well, you know, in spirit I mean.”

“What is ‘spirit’?”

“Nevermind,” Ratchet ex-vented, and Minimus allowed himself to smile. “Let’s just get out of here.”

The appearance mods made Sentinel’s sensors itch, but he would be slagged before he allowed himself to be recognized in this place. As if he’d need to visit such a place to begin with; like all the higher ups, he did his ordering via the extranet, not some greasy shop around the corner. “Stand on the corner across the street and keep watch,” he said to Sari. “And try not to get run over.”

“Sure thing, sir. What is this place anyway?” Sari squinted at the cracked sign hanging over the low building. “Burning Rubber Novelties? Is this some kind of tire store?”

“Something like that,” said Sentinel. “That is, no doubt they carry tires, provided their clientele need them to carry out their little perversions.”

“Perversions?” said Sari. She appeared to be thinking very hard, as though trying to remember something. Her optics rounded. “Oh! I remember seeing stores like this off the highway when Dad would take me up to Long Lake to visit Dada and Dadi. Dad always said ‘I will explain such things to you when you are older, Sari, now please let me drive’.” She sighed in feigned disappointment. “He never did though. I had to look stuff up on the Internet like everyone else.”
Sentinel added that to the growing list of human culture things he wasn’t interested in knowing about.

The shop had glass doors, of all things, which slid open as Sentinel entered, before closing and entombing him in the cesspit. It looked like any interface store, a jungle of dim lights in bold colors, illuminating shelf upon shelf of products, like an obscene museum of anything and everything that one could rub against, use on, or cram up their valve. Sentinel wasn’t looking for the plentiful array of toys and gadgets sitting in plain sight however, what he sought would be further in, tucked away from wandering optics.

He sauntered towards the salesbot slouched over the glass counter at the back of the store, trying to appear casual but nervous, as though he wasn’t supposed to be there. The latter wasn’t exactly feigned. Sentinel leaned against the counter and coughed, pointedly.

The salesbot looked up at him. He was a short, sleek model, orange, with a blocky, awkward helm, stubby antennae, and a mask hiding hiding his features, something that instantly made Sentinel suspicious. Who the slag wore a mask while inside anyway? The salesbot blinked at him, “Ah, a valued customer! May I help you?” His voice practically dripped sleaze and Sentinel’s servos itched for his lance. “I am Volks, humble proprietor of this fine establishment. You seem to be looking for something, no?”

Before Sentinel could ask anything, Volks had brought up five datapads from his subspace, the sort that were small and disposable and thus popular with criminals or those looking to hide something. “These,” he said with a wink, “contain all of DMC-12’s novels, including the latest: Liar, Tempter, Soldier, Spy.”

That novel! Sentinel thought, alarmed. That was the novel with which Slipshot, that incompetent warden who’d gotten Sentinel fired, had been caught reading while slacking off. Slag Perceptor’s statistics, there was definitely a connection between the obscene material in circulation and the Decepticons.

He tried to calm himself; wouldn’t do to lose sight of his objective. He was here for...bigger things, as it were. He tried not to think to hard about it, but made a note to grab one of the datapads later for evidence.

“Er, no actually,” said Sentinel. “I’m looking for,” he paused as he tried to work out how to phrase his question. He’d never been interested in such perversity himself and Cliffjumper had been no help at all. “I’m looking for...the larger stuff,” he hazarded, hoping that Volks might take the hint and fill in the gaps for him. “I have a… membership.”
Volks’s optics twinkled. “Ah, we have a discerning customer here, yes? Very good, very good indeed.” Volks glanced around, confirming that the shop was empty, before reaching beneath the counter and pressing something out of sight.

A second, opaque set of doors slid shut over the glass doors through which Sentinel had entered. Behind Volks, two sections of the wall inverted, revealing a number of valve stimulators, strapped in place and backlit; clearly Volks was making an effort to present them as high-end. It would have worked had he not purchased what looked to be datapad shelves from a bankrupt office supply store.

The contraband material was not what Sentinel had expected, rather plain—if obscenely large, seriously who was even purchasing these—in comparison to the gaudy, elaborate items that lined the shelves behind Sentinel, but nonetheless, they were what he was looking for. He let out a long sigh of relief.

Volks watched him, curious. “None of them are to your liking, no?”

“Yes,” said Sentinel. “I mean, no, I don’t like—I mean,” he grumbled and deactivated his appearance mods, flashing his credentials. “These materials violate the Autobot Anti-Obscenity Enforcement Act, and you are under arrest.”

Volks’s expression plummeted, satisfying Sentinel in a way no toy here ever could.

Autobot Code - 13A: Civilian Criminal Code - Section 13A - 12 - 200.2 - Distribution, possession with intent to distribute, etc., of obscene material prohibited; penalties; distribution of fines.

(a)(1) It shall be unlawful for any citizen of Cybertron to knowingly distribute, possess with intent to distribute, or offer
Zuzu and I have been trying to get our chapters earlier than this, but we both have had a lot of work this week, hence it being slightly late this time around. It is a bit of a longer chapter, though, and I hope that makes up for it!

I must warn that there is strong themes of sexual assault in this chapter, both with Optimus in the third section of the chapter, and in the excerpt at the very end.

“So, uh,” said Bumblebee, leaning over Minimus’s shoulder, “what do we call you now? Ultra Ambus, Minimus Magnus, Mini Boss?”

“Minimus Ambus is acceptable,” said Minimus with a severe look.

“Sure thing, Mini Boss,” said Bumblebee.

Minimus reminded himself that if Optimus Prime was rescued alive and well, Minimus was to personally apologize to him for his assigned teammates.

“Do you know where the ‘Cons are taking the Boss Bot?”

“Optimus Prime has not served as your commanding officer for stellar cycles,” said Minimus. “Why do you still refer to him as such?”

Bumblebee shrugged. “He got us through some pretty tough times. No matter what division I serve in, he’ll always be the Boss Bot.”

Minimus humphed and hid a smile, “To answer your question, Bumblebee Minor, the Decepticons will most likely be taking Optimus to their capital of New Kaon, formerly Pyrovar, so that is where we must begin our search.”

“I’ve never been in Decepticon space,” said Bulkhead, lifting his helm from where he was laid out on the floor of the bridge, resting--Minimus clamped down on the instinct to tell him to sit up straight;
the journey was long and they could use what respite they could get. “What’s it like?”

“Not a pretty place,” said a voice from behind the command chair. Bumblebee jumped and Minimus craned his helm in time to see Arcee saunter into the room and wink at the yellow bot. “At ease, soldier. Take it from someone who did more than their fair share of spying. Decepticon space is lawless and wild, a real mess.” A shadow passed across her face. “And it’s not kind to grounders.”

“Grounders?” said Bulkhead.

“A derogatory term used by the Decepticons for those sparked without flight capability,” said Minimus. “Derived from ‘groundframe’.”

“Huh,” said Bumblebee. “I know the ‘Cons like to lord their flying over everybody else, but I always figured it was part of their sparkling personalities.”

“Not quite,” said Arcee with a wry smile. “The Decepticons consider those of us who cannot fly to be...less. Groundframes on Decepticon-controlled planets do not have the same rights as those sparked for war. Many of them are kept as slaves to Decepticons, and those who aren’t, well...there aren’t many economic options for them. They’re kept under close surveillance, registered with trackers, and if they try to escape...” She cocked her head at Minimus. “Sometimes I think Megatron was getting back at you for the Registration Act.”

Minimus sighed. “The Registration Act was collective piece of legislation intended to keep hold of a situation that had already slipped beyond our grasp. We’d divided too far at that point for our path to end in anything but open war.”

Bulkhead’s optics rounded. “Do you think that’s what happened to the Boss Bot? He’s some kind of ‘Con slave?”

Arcee pursed her mouth and appeared to be thinking. “Do you want the kind answer or the honest one?”

Bulkhead looked nervous, but screwed his face up. “Honest, ma’am.”

A ghost of a bitter smile passed over Arcee’s face. “If Optimus is lucky, he will be assigned to a single Decepticon, and if I know him, he’ll survive long enough to escape or for us to rescue him.”
“And if he’s unlucky?” said Bumblebee.

Arcee cocked an orbital ridge. “He’ll be sent to the brothels.” She shrugged. “Or a smelting pit on Lucifer. It all depends on what kind of revenge Megatron wants on the mechanism who humiliated him.”

Bulkhead looked as though he was going to purge. Minimus only hoped that a miracle might happen twice, that Megatron might tap into some inner nobility as Megazarak had, but mostly that Optimus would escape unscathed.

“It appears that I have something more important to do than simply waste my time protoform-sitting you.” Shockwave turned to Optimus after hanging up his commlink, and Optimus wondered if he needed to worry about his optics malfunctioning from rolling them so often should he be forced to stay in Armada much longer. “Alas, I don’t have the time to track down anyone to dump you on, so you’ll just have to come along for now.”

As if it really made any difference.

Shockwave took him to the largest and most grand of the elevators, the one right behind Megatron’s throne. Optimus nodded to the grounders still hard at work, but they didn’t acknowledge him, or didn’t care to. He guessed that this elevator likely led to Megatron’s quarters, and his assumptions were proved correct. They emerged into a small round room with nothing but two large, elegant doors in the far wall. They were engraved with Decepticon insignias. On the left door was a carving in high relief of Megatron himself, the two moons of Cybertron orbiting behind him. The mech on the right Optimus didn’t recognize, though he looked similar to Megatron and must have been important at one point, as Cybertron itself framed his portrait.

Shockwave pointed at the ground. “Stay there and wait quietly like a good little Autobot.” His singular optic flashed. “I would advise you against trying to flee, as an indentured servant in pieces is hardly useful.”

A placard mounted the metal wall read LORD MEGATRON OF THE DECEPTICONS, and below it was a servo-scanner not unlike those on Trypticon, which Shockwave activated. Optimus managed to catch a glimpse of a room strewn with broken furniture as Shockwave stepped inside. Shockwave groaned. “That slagheap Starscream got in here, didn’t he?”
The doors slid shut and Optimus was left alone for the first time since he’d been snatched from Trypticon. A klik passed, then two, then five more. Optimus looked at the elevator, then at his stasis cuffs, then at the elevator again. Unfortunately for Shockwave, Optimus would rather be in pieces than a Decepticon slave. He remembered the tracking device, and knew he didn’t have much time, but a little scouting couldn’t hurt.

He stepped onto the elevator, a large metal circle enclosed in a long glass tube. He’d half-expected it not to work, but it only chimed and began to descend. Optimus wondered if it was possible that it was taking longer to go down than up, or whether that was just the anxiety burning at his circuits. He looked down at the warbuilds relaxing in the lounges as they grew larger and larger, until finally the bottom of the platform hit the floor. He emerged and looked around, trying to see if there were any signs that pointed to where the corridors led--there likely wasn’t time to explore any further than the Decepticon headquarters for now--but nothing.

Optimus thought that he should ask Shockwave for a pamphlet next time, but he doubted there were any of those either. What would a pamphlet say? “Welcome to Armada, Now Frag Off”?

He decided to approach the two grounders chiseling at Megatron’s new throne. “Excuse me?” They didn’t acknowledge his existence. “I apologize for bothering you, but I’m new here. Would you mind telling me the overall layout of this building?”

One of them, a stocky dark blue bot, stopped and took a cygar from his mouth. How were they allowed to smoke those inside public buildings? “Look, newbie, we already have a contract with the Glitterghoul brothel. If you want any work here, you’re gonna have to sign up with them.”

“I’m not a pleasurebot!” Optimus hissed through his denta. “Wait… why would you have a contract with a brothel?”

The cygar-holding mech paused and took a look at Optimus and his Autobot insignia. “Oh, you really are new here. Fine, it’s easy. We work with the pleasurebots because it means that they get to stay on their backs, which means any creeps get off of ours. They make their credits, we pay ‘em a little extra on the side, and we spend more time at work and less time fending off flightframes that don’t understand the meaning of ‘no’.” He took another long drag of his cygar. “Work I’d like to get back to.”

That made sense. Horrible sense, but sense nonetheless. “Could you at least tell me where each of the hallways lead to?”
“Nope, no time.” The mech leaned down, grabbing his tools. “Look, over there,” he pointed at the direction Optimus was most familiar with. “That’s the Integration Office. Go grab yourself a color changing mod and ask Officer Locomotion for directions.”

That was pointless, Optimus thought. He had recently come from there and Locomotion had left through her window to go to a concert.

Wait. Locomotion had gone to a concert!

“Alright, thank you,” said Optimus, trying not to appear as giddy as he felt at the prospect of digging up intel, intel that would hopefully get him out of here.

It was probably good thing the cuffs kept him from walking any faster.

The flash and flare of camera bulbs burned Sentinel’s optics, and he reached up to rub them. Naturally, this meant that the Autotrooper took a photo of him at that exact moment. Great, he wasn’t even allowed to pretend to be dignified with a background of glittering, light-up interface toys.

“Look, officers!” said Volks from the corner, wrists bound in cuffs, but looking unaffected by the closing of his store. “These are all legal.”

Sentinel ex-vented, and before he could question his life choices any further, he grabbed one of the contraband items and a measuring tape from his subspace. Lining up the tape and the toy, he held it up for Volks to see. “Bad news for you. They are over legal size.”

Volks winked, his smile just as sleazy as his wares. “But they are not interface aids, they are novelty items. We can talk about this, yes?”

Sari, who was perched on Sentinel’s shoulder, had not stopped giggling the entire time. For once, Sentinel himself had to suppress a chuckle along with her. He grabbed one of the DMC-12 datapads from the counter, before striding over to shove it into Volks’s face. “This,” Sentinel said, “was found in the Trypticon Warden’s possession on the night of the Decepticon break-out. The break-out he was responsible for because he was absent from his post and so failed to issue a lockdown.” He threw the datapad at Volks’s pedes, shattering it. “Now start talking before I arrest you as a spy!”
The seriousness of the situation seemed to finally dawn on Volks. “No, no, I am no spy. I am not even a sympathizer!”

“Uh, sir,” Sentinel turned at the Autotrooper’s voice, and stared. At what was probably the most embarrassing item in existence; an experiment Sentinel could only imagine was the product of too many funds and too much time, or perhaps born from mashing Megatron’s cybernucleic acid with a cheap, blank knockoff protoform mold, gaudily painted and...well...he doubted Megatron’s... er... parts... looked like that.

*This line of thought is over. You are not considering... Thought. Over.*

“We found this in the alleyway behind the store,” said the Autotrooper from behind the doll, struggling to balance the unwieldy thing. *Vector Sigma, was it actually to scale? How had they gotten the* --Sentinel forcefully shut down the thought once more.

Sari, meanwhile, had managed to slip off Sentinel’s shoulder guard, and was hovering somewhere near his waist, still laughing. Sentinel was, unbelievably, too busy feeling sorry for Megatron to join her. He turned to look at Volks, not knowing whether he wanted an explanation for the abomination’s existence. Volks, finally, had the decency to look nervous.

“Look, I am not a Decepticon sympathizer, I swear! I merely sell to them, yes? …maybe occasionally give hands-on demonstrations sometimes. You understand, no?”

Despite her diminutive size, Sari’s laughter still flooded the store.

At that exact moment, Cliffjumper decided to make his entrance. As he walked in, all the occupants of the room turned towards him, including the pitiful Autotrooper holding the Megatron doll. Cliffjumper spotted it, turned 180 degrees on his heel, and left in the direction from which he came, all without changing his expression.

Sari went from laughing to howling.

“I think Megatron was too intimidating for much of my clientele, yes?” Volks said, providing Sentinel with completely unnecessary information. “Blitzwing is slightly more popular.”
This was certainly a better idea, Optimus thought. As a captured Autobot, he wouldn’t look suspicious heading to the Integration Office, and he knew for sure Locomotion wouldn’t be there to stop him from snooping around for information. All the office doors were closed, depriving him from the few hallmarks he had seen to guide his way, but an elevator ride, two turns, one wrong turn and… found it!

He tried the door and found it unsecured. On the upside, Optimus figured he looked the part of the apprehensive newcomer as the door slit from the middle and opened.

Unfortunately it appeared the room was already occupied.

A mech he didn’t recognize was there, on Locomotion’s seat with a blissful expression on his face. It wasn’t hard to see why; a bright orange pede poked through the narrow space between the bottom edge of the desk and the floor.

“Harder… I like it hard.” Fully immersed and with his optics offline, the Decepticon didn’t seem to notice--or care--that Optimus had stumbled in, or his hasty exit.

Unfortunately, Optimus had also failed to notice the pedesteps coming his way, and bumped right into something, or rather someone.

“Look what have we here,” the mech behind him grabbed his shoulderplates, preventing Optimus from turning. Over his shoulder, he caught a glimpse of a hulking frame in muted colors and the whiff of old oil. “An Autobot, or a buybot? Tell us which one you are, I wanna know what kind of pounding to give you.”

“As if there’s much difference,” said a different voice, with a shrill snicker.

Slag, slag, slag . Optimus wanted nothing but to run or beat these guys to scrap, but with the stasis cuffs it was impossible. He really should have changed his colors, if only temporarily.

“Hey, I’ve seen this one,” said the third, unfortunately recognizable voice of the weirdo who’d tried to snatch Optimus away from Shockwave when they’d entered Armada. “Said he belonged to Megatron.”
“Pshaw, right,” scoffed the first mech. “What kind of just-protoformed mark are you? If I had a credit for every time some sniveling little buymech tried to sell me on some slag story to wring a little extra energon, I’d be rich.”

The bot turned him around, huge servos clamping around Optimus’s shoulder guards, effectively immobilizing him. The two other Decepticons crowded in, and Optimus found himself painfully aware of his own stature in a way that even going servo-to-servo against Megatron had not made him. Stripped of his weapons and his mobility, he was socked in the tanks by the realization that these bots could do whatever they wished to him and there was effectively very little he could do to stop them.

The snickering mech, a shorter, wide warbuild with the face of an insect, laughed again. “Stasis cuffs? Kinky.”

“Looks like an Autobot to me,” said the one holding him, the tallest, his red optics roaming Optimus’s chassis in a way that made his plating itch. “Still has the insignia.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said the sleaze. “He’s got a good look to him and I’ve saved the creds.” He winked at Optimus, who desperately wished he was back on Cybertron, or somewhere he could wash off, or anywhere but here. “Why don’t we take him on a test run?”

Think. Think.

“Mechs, you’ve got it all wrong,” Optimus said, trying to keep his voice from shaking. “I am a pleasurebot. Shockwave hired me to look the part of an Autobot because… because he has some issues since he returned from Cybertron.” He tried to step back, hoping the mechs would get the hint. “And I’m going to be late, so if you don’t mind…”

It seemed to work. The tall mech seemed to think about it, and the grip on Optimus’s shoulders loosened, but then the sleaze opened his mouth. “Hey, how do I know you’re not lying a second time?”

“Uh…” Frag. Frag.

“Put the Autobot down.”
The four of them turned. It was not in fact Megatron. Instead a warbuild Optimus could only describe as “pointy” glowered at them from the end of the corridor. Purple, with two long horns protruding upwards from his helm and a longsword sheathed on his back, his dark face seemed to get darker as he repeated his demand. “The Autobot has indicated he is not for sale to the likes of you. Take your servos off him and let him be on his way.”

Optimus mentally smacked himself. Of course it wasn’t Megatron, why had he thought that?

“Ey, what’s the big deal?” said the shortest of the trio. “We’re just trying to get some service here. If he isn’t for sale, why’s he all dolled up like this anyway?”

The one holding Optimus tightened his grip before hoisting him off his pedes as if to prove a point. “Yeah, we’re not hurting him none. Nothing wrong with checking out the mesh-market.”

The next thing Optimus knew, he was on the floor, sparks hailing down around him. For a moment he thought he’d been struck, but then realized they were showering from his assailter’s mutilated arms. The purple warbuild had his blade drawn. Optimus hadn’t even seen him move.

“Slag you!” shrieked the snickering one.

“What the frag?!” said the one who’d grabbed him, holding up the stumps of his arms. He looked more startled than upset.

“This ain’t worth it,” said the third. “Motorbite, grab Metalburn’s hands. Can’t think of a worse turnoff than this spawn’s face, anyway.”

“Get smelted, spawn!” hissed the snickering, insectile warbuild.

Pedesteps faded into the distance. Still dazed, Optimus tried to sit up, rubbing his helm. His rescuer knelt beside him. “Uh… thanks?”
“I need access to your commlink,” said the warbuild, clipped.

Optimus blinked, his optics refocusing. “Why?” If nothing else, his short period on Armada had taught him not to trust easily.

“Consider it my reward for helping you keep your valve to yourself.”

Optimus studied him. The mech looked deathly serious, optics and face stern. Perhaps it was too much of a leap of trust, but he decided that commlink access wasn’t a huge risk.

:Fine, you have it. Now what?:

The horned mech stood up, offering a hand. Optimus decided to take it and the warbuild pulled him to his pedes. :Who did you escape from?:

:... Shockwave.:

The warbuild shook his head, expression keen. :No. From whom did you escape? Who is registered as your owner? Who captured you and brought you to Armada? Because if I am right, an Autobot like you would never have come here willingly.:

Optimus’s jaw tightened. :It was Megatron. I guess he didn’t feel like having the bot who’d beaten him into scrap walking around to tell the tale.:

The warbuild’s mouth quirked in a small smirk and there was a flicker in his optic, the look of someone who’d had something that they’d long-suspected confirmed. :Then to Megatron’s quarters we shall return. I will accompany you.:

His rescuer pushed at his back, urging Optimus to walk forward. Despite the brusqueness of the act, the mech was careful to keep his pace slow enough that Optimus wasn’t forced to walk faster than the cuffs would allow.

:My designation is Cyclonus. You are Optimus Prime, correct?:
Optimus squinted up at Cyclonus. Was the other mech referring to the fact that he was the one who helped capture Megatron? But what was the point of that now? Was Cyclonus like Starscream, looking to overthrow Megatron and take over?

:It goes against my interests to help you escape Armada, and you will not receive aid from me to do so.:  

Optimus didn’t have any disappointment to show. It already seemed miraculous that one Decepticon in this cesspit wasn’t a complete worthless piece of slag. At least, it went against his Academy teachings.

:But I am more than willing to help you if a situation like that arises once more, or should you require assistance navigating Armada. You must stay online.:  

He and Cyclonus stepped on the round platform that would take both of them to the entrance to Megatron’s quarters.

:Tell me this: Cyclonus turned to face Optimus in the elevator as it began to ascend, optics fixed on him. Optimus wondered if he ever changed the expression on his faceplates. :For a moment, when I interrupted those fools, did you believe it was Megatron who came to your rescue?:  

Optimus raised an optic ridge. It was a strange question, just as strange as the fact that it was true.

:For less than a klik… yes.: Optimus looked towards his pedes. :I’m not sure why.:  

A slow smile spread across Cyclonus’s faceplates. It did not make him look any less intimidating. :As I thought.:
What does it have to do with anything?: said Optimus, feeling a tad exposed and defensive.

Everything, young Autobot: said Cyclonus. “Now,” he said aloud. “Let us see about returning you to your master.”

Something about the way he said “master” made Optimus’s tanks lurch.

What the slag is going on here?

Intelligence Agency Archives Report: Project Cleansing Shield

Cycle 009

Agent Designation: Packet Capture

Excerpted from In the Servos of the Barbarian by DMC-12 [Pseudonym, author designation unknown]

Work Description:

When ordinary waste disposal unit Skyline signed up for a relaxing vacation on Gorlam Prime, she never expected t

Skyline focused hard on the wall ahead of her, drawing on it with her optics all her thoughts, emotions, and possible

“They think that I am mad,” purred Darksteel. The heat of her chassis was smothering, drugging, and Skyline squin

Skyline shivered. “What are your intentions for me?” she said bravely. “If you mean to kill me, do it!”

“Kill you?” said Darksteel. “No, my little beauty, I have far more...enjoyable things for you in mind.”

Skyline in-vented shakily. “You’d rape me, then?” she said, bold, challenging, full of that fire that had caused Darks

Darksteel laughed, her voice like oil across the surface of a blade. “Rape you? Oh ho ho ho! Oh no, my little beauty
Agent Notes:

In the Servos of the Barbarian presents an interesting challenge to Autobot Intelligence, because while technically
Stepping Into a Mess

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Optimus stared into the interior of Megatron’s quarters. As he had seen earlier, it was a complete disaster. In front of him was a lounge, three couches curving around a short, low table, or rather they would have if they were not torn in at least five pieces and upside down, and said table was smashed into a mosaic decoration of glittering shards on the floor. To the right was a wall of different barrels of oil and energon alongside their dispensers, likely the fanciest credits could buy from smugglers and entrepreneuring organic merchants. They seemed untouched, but the glass dispenser was throttled, malfunctioning and trying in vain to serve nonexistent glasses to a nonexistent being, its contents broken and scattered all the way to the windows.

Optimus ignored the hall to the left that likely led to the berthroom or washracks--he definitely didn’t know what would be out in the open there--shuffling and tip-toeing through the wreckage. The window spanned the furthest wall and more, curving into the ceiling and allowing Optimus to see the cityscape of Armada and the skies above it. He doubted Megatron would broadcast his living quarters and habits to the entire city, even evil warlords had to have some privacy after all, so perhaps the window was a one-way mirror from the outside.

The skies were reddish-brown, the stars all but invisible from the light pollution emanating from the advertisements that littered the city like the uncollected garbage scattered across Detroit during the strange week in which garbage collectors had broken down. Warbuilds, free of traffic laws and good sense, flew around like hungry buzzing insects in one direction, only to get distracted by an advertisement or a drug in their system that would never be legal on Cybertron, and change their course drastically, often downwards. Optimus spotted the route he and Shockwave had taken to get to the Headquarters, along with a few thousand other routes that crawled in and out of docked and stranded spaceships. He found himself with the odd desire to explore them--preferably with his axe, no stasis cuffs, and no Shockwave. Armada was architecturally interesting, perhaps in the same way animals on Earth evolving to use their own waste products for territorial marking was interesting, but interesting nonetheless.

Optimus’s finials twitched slightly at the sound of crashing and colorful swears, emanating from a small room nearby like a bad odor. It seemed Shockwave had decided Optimus could do no more damage than Starscream had apparently already done, and thus deemed his presence unimportant and unworthy of notice. Taking advantage of the relative peace, Optimus leaned against the wall beside the window and offline his optics in an attempt to snatch a small moment of rest at the end of such a nightmarish cycle.
A wave of emotions devours Megatron’s spark; betrayal, sorrow, despair, anger, fury.

He decides to take hold of the fury. He’s felt fury before, knows it intimately, knows how to respond to it.

The atmosphere seems ordinary inside the headquarters, the same mechs, the same slaves. He despises it. His EM field is like daggers, like the claws and fangs of a beast. Mechanisms gasp, whisper, move out of his way. They do not want to be devoured. Good, Megatron thinks. One betrayal is enough. He unsheathes his blades.

Megazarak.

Megatron’s fists clench around the hilts of his swords. He does not waste his time on the elevator, the thought of enclosing himself in that small box unbearable. His thrusters are activated. He flies.

“Megazarak!”

His brother. His twin. Once part of his spark. Megazarak is there. He is seated on the couch, drinking oil, reading a datapad, as if it were just another off-duty cycle. It isn’t.

The datapad is sheared in half. Megazarak has nothing to read but the tip of Megatron’s blade.

Its end trembles. Megatron’s servos are not steady. Megazarak’s optics move upwards, but he does not so much as twitch otherwise.

“Get up.” Megatron’s voice shakes and he despises it.

“Does my own spark-twin betray me?”

“It is you who has betrayed me, and the Decepticon cause. Get up!”

Megazarak does so, slowly, Megatron’s sword following his movements.
“You don’t understand, brother.”

“Do not call me that!” Megatron snarls. “And I do understand! I understand now why you’ve gone soft!”

“Megatron…”

“We were to rule Cybertron together! And you’re giving up all our work for an Autobot whore?!”

Megazarak’s optics flash. “Watch your glossa. Ultra is nothing of the sort.”

“The slag he isn’t!” Megatron slashes at the small table between them, needing the physicality, needing to take his anger, his fury, his hatred, out on something. “Fight me!”

Megatron onlined his optics as memories bubbled and burst their way to the surface of his processor. He looked down from below the moving platform of the elevator, the one that he had taken millions of times before. Perhaps he should have gotten new quarters, better ones, built in a different location of the ancient dead ship, but he couldn’t bring himself to.

He and Megazarak were solely split-spark twins, created when a spark split in two just in time to inhabit separate protoforms. They were not split-protoform twins which shared all but a mind, but even across the galaxy Megatron could feel his twin’s spark beat at the same rhythm as his own. It was only that twinned beat which had stayed Megatron’s servo; for any other Decepticon that had betrayed the cause, the decree would have been death, not banishment.

We were to rule Cybertron together!

The doors slid open to reveal an embarrassing disaster. It didn’t necessarily surprise Megatron; it was likely that Starscream had come back to Armada to try to claim leadership during his absence, only to throw a very Starscream-sized tantrum when said claim wasn’t taken seriously. What did strike Megatron was Optimus Prime, standing tall among the shambles of his ruined apartment, his glossy, colorful back plating tinted with Armada lights.

An emotion Megatron for which had no name swirled over his spark. It burned like anger, prickled
like fear, before ebbing into a shape not unlike the meditative tranquility he’d touched for a moment in that lonely cell.

The crunch of Megatron’s pedes over glass and delicate metal did not seem to alert Optimus Prime to his presence. Or perhaps the little mech had been shaken enough by the events of his kidnapping that he simply wasn’t fazed by the Decepticon leader sneaking up behind him. Megatron had to stand next to the Prime before he turned his faceplates up at him in acknowledgement.

“How has Armada been treating you, Optimus Prime?” It was a sarcastic question, deserving of a sarcastic answer.

“Aside from the fact that I have been kidnapped against my will to be brought here and informed that I will likely be a slave or tortured to death, and that I’ve nearly been assaulted twice in the span of a few hours, I’d say it’s been great so far.”

Oh well, few Autobots did ever come to appreciate the liberating freedom that came with Armada. Grounders did like their safety and rules, after all. Megatron frowned. “Assaulted? Did you fail to inform some mechanism as to whom you belonged?”

Optimus’s mouth flattened and his optics flashed. “Make no mistake, Megatron. You can bind and break me, but I will never belong to you.”

Megatron took great care to keep his movements casual as he turned to avoid Optimus’s accusing gaze, looking out over the expanse of Armada. “No torture, Optimus Prime, but you cannot be permitted to roam free. You need not worry about being sent to the brothels, you will merely be a...” the words tangled in his vocalizer, sour and sick, “...a personal servant.”

Optimus gave him an evaluating look. “What kind of servant? Am I to be a tool to let you...reassert your dominance I suppose?”

Megatron paused for a moment. Optimus certainly had an allure to him, with a nicely shaped frame and bright colors that shone. And, perhaps, getting Optimus Prime to scream his name in pleasure would be just as good revenge as the same in agony. But the thought of forcing this mechanism—even secure in the knowledge that he could do so easily and that no one in the city would care one whit—sent a razor’s edge of discomfort across the edge of Megatron’s spark.

“No,” said Megatron. “No sexual services will be expected of you. No such thing will occur without
your consent.”

Optimus Prime shook his head. “As if I’d willingly interface with any bot here.”

Megatron smirked. “I wouldn’t be so sure, Optimus Prime. I felt the way your EM field fluctuated when the Acting Magnus’s life was threatened.” The smaller mech’s expression turned scandalized, then sour. Megatron snorted. He knew a foolish infatuation when he saw one. He’d certainly felt Megazarak’s. “Perhaps you merely have, ah, peculiar tastes?”

“That isn’t any of your business.” Optimus Prime muttered, his optics downturned. So... Megatron’s hunch had been correct.

“Of course. Now that you’re properly chipped, let me take care of those stasis cuffs. Hold out your servos.” Megatron released his bindings, and Optimus Prime rubbed at his wrists, wincing. His shoulders relaxed slightly, only to tense up once more as Megatron reached into his subspace and withdrew a thin metal collar. “Don’t look at me like that. You should be more appreciative. If any mech comes close to you, this collar,” Megatron lightly tapped the item with a servo. “Will send a signal straight to their HUD indicating to whom you belong, and thus, that you are not to be trifled with. It also gives you instant access to my commlink if that is not enough to deter an assailant.” He decided to omit the information that it would also send a signal to every Decepticon in the area to capture and return Optimus should he leave the designated area of the Headquarters. “Now, are you going to be reasonable?”

Optimus did not answer, but neither did he move as Megatron reached down and collared him, testing the clasp before running his fingers along the edge to test the give. Neither too tight nor loose enough that the Autobot might pry it off or somehow get hung up on something. Idly, he allowed his touch to linger, marveling still that so much spark might be packed into a frame so small. Optimus’s EM field fluctuated wildly, alternating hostility and apprehension, before clamping down hard and dropping to almost nothing. Megatron withdrew, “There, that should solve any problems with overzealous soldiers.”

The Autobot thanked him for it with a glare.

“My liege,” Shockwave’s voice caught Megatron off guard. When was the last time that had happened? Ridiculous, he hadn’t come in here to greet his new slave, after all. He turned his helm to acknowledge his lieutenant.

Shockwave appeared distressed. “I must apologize, my lord, but it appears that Starscream completely totaled the console. It will require several cycles to be repaired.”
As cowardly as it was, Megatron felt a little relief at delaying his conversation with his brother. “Hm, no matter. We shall have it replaced with the one from Starscream’s quarters for now. After all, it’s not as if he has much use for it any longer.”

“A wise choice, my lord.”

“While you’re at it, Shockwave, do get the furnishings replaced.” Megatron paused a moment to tap into the extranet via his comlink and run a quick search. By the Allspark, had the fashions already changed so drastically in the time he had been imprisoned? “I am very fond of the new Gunmetal Black line by the designer VenomGyre. I will transfer the credits into your account, I trust you can get your servos on it and into my quarters as soon as possible?”

“It will be done, Lord Megatron.”

“Good. Keep any credits that are left over and treat yourself. You have earned it.”

As Shockwave spluttered his appreciation, Megatron turned to face his new slave. Optimus Prime seemed less impressed at his generosity, one optic ridge raised in skepticism as his lips formed a pout. “As Shockwave is occupied now, how about I give you the tour of your new home?”

The Decepticon Headquarters, which Optimus learned was also nicknamed “Sharkticon Eater,” “Old Hammerstrike,” “the whale,” and occasionally “ambergris shitter,” were just as convoluted as he had initially suspected. He decided that, for the sake of everyone involved, he would ask Megatron later if he could put framed maps in every hallway, complete with “You Are Here” dots and perhaps with “Abandon All Hope” graffitied over them to retain the atmosphere, but a slave couldn’t really expect any favors.

It really did resemble the innards of an Earth whale though, the more he thought about it. The turns made sense if you thought of them as the beast’s intestines and veins, connected by a series of elevators. The throne room was its stomach, Megatron’s quarters were its brains, and right now Megatron and Optimus were likely traveling somewhere in its bowels.

The comparison wasn’t entirely metaphorical; the halls grew progressively less and less well-
maintained as they continued, with the exception of one clean door, white with a medical insignia painted on it.

“This is the medical bay.” Megatron said. “We Decepticons value our privacy when in the need of assistance, hence why it is well-hidden.”

Optimus nodded, it made some sense in a Decepticon sort of way, especially given the lawlessness of Armada, but at the same time it meant that patients would take longer to get here, hence risking their lives unnecessarily in case of a major emergency.

Perhaps warbuilds really did prefer to be offline than vulnerable.

The medical bays opened, and a shiver of revulsion went up Optimus’s spinal strut. Pieces of offline mechs were scattered about, nearly indistinguishable from the chunks of anatomical models that were the staple of every medical office. Even the medical berths were littered with gore, ten in total, but only three seemed to be vacant enough for a mech to lie down upon. There didn’t appear to be any living occupants in the room, until Optimus spotted a small movement underneath one of the grisly piles.

And then a small, spider-like creature slunk out of the wreckage. Of course, it had to be slagging spiders. Red optics confirmed it as alive and sentient, and Optimus tried to not look too repulsed.

The spider-creature peered up at Optimus and laughed. “Lord Megatron, I know I complained about flight-lag, but this isn’t the service I was hoping for.”

“Nonsense, Scalpel, this is merely my new personal slave.”

Scalpel paused, refocused his optics, and gave Optimus a new look. Optimus tried to subdue a shudder.


Optimus flashed Megatron an uncomfortable look, but Megatron did not respond. “This is Optimus Prime. Once he is settled I would like you to give him a full medical workup.”
“Luckily, moving shouldn’t take long,” said Optimus. “I traveled light.”

Scalpel smiled, a shadowed, unamused expression with far too many needle-thin fangs. “Got a mouth on you, huh? You’ll need it.”

Megatron cleared his intake. “Let’s go, I will show you to your quarters.” He nodded to Scalpel and hurriedly ushered Optimus from the medbay.

The door at the very end of the hallway looked like it hadn’t been open since the Great War. Optimus thought it was his imagination, but he swore he could hear ghastly noises coming from behind it. The light above it was unmaintained, flashing and flickering as it threatened to go out.

“There is a lock installed from the inside, so you will not have to be concerned about others intruding on your recharge.” Megatron gave him a pointed look. “Do not abuse this privilege, however, I have access to all the rooms of this ship.”

Optimus glared at him, but didn’t reply.

The doors opened.

The room was small, dark, and unclean, crammed full of dusty and unused cleaning materials. Optimus supposed at some point the Decepticons probably stopped punishing their officers with cleaning duty, and decided it was more efficient to simply hire civilianframes who actually knew what they were doing. It wasn’t as if he’d expected anything different. It certainly wouldn’t have made sense for Megatron to keep Optimus in his own quarters, within servo-reach of all sorts of items that could be used as weapons.

What he—and likely Megatron, though Optimus wasn’t in the frame of processor to be paying attention to his facial expression—was not expecting, was for the room to already be occupied.

For a moment Optimus thought someone had decided to store a large, convoluted, cleaning apparatus of some sort inside, but then the huge mass of metal moved.

Of all the questions that Optimus could have spent his entire existence without knowing the answer
to, “What do Lugnut and Strika look like mid-coitus?” ranked somewhere near the top, right after “How do humans reproduce?” Something about the constant stress of being on Armada seemed to sharpen his senses, searing the image into his processor. They were belly to belly, Strika pinning Lugnut on his back over a stack of rusted barrels of cleaning solvent, growling into his throat, the bright orange of her hand flashing into view as she...

Optimus’s processor crashed and burned.

The next few seconds were a blur of panic in Optimus’s memories. He remembered Megatron slamming the door, Lugnut’s emphatic bellow of “Yes, yes, my magnificent goddess!” that he would probably be hearing in his nightmares, and then finding himself hiding in Scalpel’s room, because surely a heap of corpses was preferable to, to… Optimus tottered against the door, which he’d slammed behind himself in a futile attempt to shut out this entire, mad situation, and slid slowly down into a seated position.

Scalpel blinked at him curiously. “What’s your malfunction?”

“What’s…” Optimus could barely get the words out. “What is wrong with warbuild valves?!” He wasn’t a prude by any means, he’d even gotten a look at that gallery of images that had caused such a stir at the Iacon Art Museum, but he’d never seen anything like that. At least not outside of a catalog of interface toys.

Scalpel stared at Optimus for a moment, expression incredulous, before he broke into peals of laughter, falling onto his backplates, his little legs fruitlessly trying to grip at nothing. “Oh Vector Sigma, I forgot, you’re a newbie!” He cackled, legs trembling as he rolled back and forth. “Warbuild valves!” he snickered to himself. “By the Allspark, this never gets old.”

What was left of Optimus’s patience frayed. “What the slag are you talking about?”

Scalpel wiped at his face, still giggling, “They don’t have valves, genius.”

Optimus boggled at him, “What?”

“Okay, okay, hang on just…” Scalpel attempted to compose himself, arranging that strange face into
an expression that **might** have been intended to be sympathetic. The snickers which continued to escape him spoiled the effect, though. “Look,” Scalpel rummaged amid his scrap pile, and pulled a disembodied pelvis, iron-grey plating folded back and... *something* emerging from the front of it “You see? No valve, just a spike. Or a connector if you want to get technical, the term has kinda fallen out of favor--hey wait a second!”

Optimus, having reached the end of his chain, decided he was better off escaping this situation, or perhaps just running as far and as fast as he could go before they caught him—though maybe the screaming was slightly unnecessary, as he only barely just manage to hear Scalpel yell behind him; “You forgot your sexual re-education pamphlet!”
Yes, Yes, My Magnificent Goddess!
From: Cliffjumper Prime, Autobot Intelligence Division

Subject: No Subject

Councilor, I assigned our ex-Acting Magnus to Project: Cleansing Shield. Since we know how he likes to stick his o’

Cliffjumper, Autobot Intelligence Division.

Your Interface Array and You [REDACTED]

Now that you’re a healthy adult Cybertronian, you may be wondering about something called “interfacing”. You may I

Now if you’ve had a chance to examine the blueprints for your interface array, or if, like many young bots, you’ve gc

You may have heard the invaginated space inside you referred to as a “valve”. Its proper nomenclature is “port”, but

Warbuild connectors, intended to facilitate linkup with civilianframe ports, are large, penetrative pieces of anatomy tl

[IMAGE REDACTED]

Port lining tears caused by lack of lubrication.

[IMAGE REDACTED]

Warbuild connector fracture.

[IMAGE REDACTED]

Warbuild/civilianframe pair trapped and unable to separate after act of interfacing.

Regardless, whether interfacing is engaged in between civilianframe pairs, warframe pairs, or mixed pairs, provided !

PLEASE REFER TO SIDE B: STAGE 1 INTERFACING ACTIVITIES
To: Cliffjumper Prime, Autobot Intelligence Division

From: Alpha Trion, Councilor

Subject: Re: No Subject

No, don't bother to send any of this to Sentinel. It would just confuse him and I'm sure he has already jumped to at

Alpha Trion, Councilor

Chapter End Notes

Happy Valentine's Day everybody!

Edit: Art was done by Lunarescapades on tumblr. Thank you so much!! <3
Somewhat Related

Chapter Notes

Hello again, readers, Reya and I would like to thank you for your patience in waiting for this chapter. We hope it satisfies. :3

- Zuzeca

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sentinel’s apartment looked as clean and proper as a magazine advertisement, to the point that it was difficult to tell someone even lived there. That was just the way he liked it. It was a modest size, but Sentinel always valued the importance of good location and high quality furnishings over square mechanometers. Besides, he didn’t have the time to host parties or entertain visitors anyway.

“Do you live here, or did you like, literally just buy this apartment?” Sari said.

“I will take that as a compliment,” Sentinel said.

“It’s actually more commentary on how--what did that jerk Powell used to say about Dad--anal retainer you are,” she said, sticking out the disgusting, wet, organic appendage that she had assured him was a glossa. He resisted the urge to spray her in the faceplates, and ignored her comment. He didn’t know what an “anal retainer” was. “The clean rooms in my dad's lab are more homey than this.”

“That’s irrelevant, look.” Sari was already flying around and depositing her disproportionately large amount of luggage on the couch. “There are some rules here. Rule number one, you will use the washracks at least once a cycle. I can’t stand organic stink.”

Sari looked back at him to roll her optics.

“Rule number two…” Sentinel winced as Sari grabbed one of the perfectly placed pillows and began to jump on it. “You will put everything back where it belongs once you’re done with it.”

“I think I get you now!” Sari laughed, still bouncing. “You have OCD, right?”
“I do not have oh-see-dee,” Sentinel said, walking up to Sari and pulling the pillow from beneath her. She flopped harmlessly on her back and grinned up at him. He plumped the pillow up and placed it precisely in the same spot. “Whatever that is. This is my home, not your playground.”

“This doesn't even look like your home,” she said. “What do you even do when you're not facedown in paperwork? Stare at the walls? Rearrange your dishes by size or color? Do you even have different color dishes?”

“Don't be ridiculous,” said Sentinel. “My energon vessels are organized in a strict system based on my fluctuating energy needs. Why would I want to rearrange them?”

“Oh my god,” said Sari. “You are literally making Ratchet sound like a party animal right now. And he thinks nap time is exciting.”

“I lead a perfectly balanced life,” said Sentinel. “My productivity is high, and when I require off-work cycles to avoid burnout, I engage in state-approved activities which have been proven to enhance processor performance.”

“Party. Animal,” said Sari. Sentinel ignored her again -- he was beginning to get good at that.

“Now,” he said. “If we can organize your living arrangements, perhaps we can get back to work?”

“Whatever, Mr. Anti-Fun,” she said, rolling over and rummaging in one of her packs. “Don’t worry too much. Despite Bulkhead’s mother-henning, I can take care of myself.” Extracting a small, brightly-colored brick, she unwrapped it and bit into one end. Crumbs rained from the edges of her mouth. Sentinel twitched. “So, what’s our next mission? More sex shop raids?”

“No, thankfully,” said Sentinel. He retrieved a handful of datapads from his subspace. “Cliffjumper has passed on the remainder of Shockwave’s data from the vice circuit. We’re going to analyze it and search for any patterns which could turn up other possible Decepticon spies. If necessary, we’ll do some fieldwork, interrogation, and if we’re lucky, more contraband seizures--”

“So we are going to raid a sex shop.”

“We are going to be doing serious intelligence work,” said Sentinel. “It’ll require determination, precision, and a delicate touch.”
Sari raised an orbital ridge. “And they hired you?”

“Shut up and read,” Sentinel scowled.

Sentinel wouldn’t admit it under pain of torture, but the data was extremely dull, reams of dense text peppered by incomprehensible charts and diagrams. He was a military bot, not an intelligence one, and sifting through it was a reminder of his punishment.

“This is boring, why would Shockwave give a crap about romance novel sales on the black market?” Sari groaned, letting her helm thunk down on the datapad in front of her and probably leaving a smear of organic residue behind.

“No doubt because most of the contraband would qualify as pro-Decepticon propaganda,” said Sentinel. He frowned, “It still doesn’t make sense, though. Shockwave’s mission was rooted in military conquest; it wouldn't have been his concern to change the sparks and processors of citizens after an invasion, or even to plant the initial ideas.”

Sentinel rose from the table covered with datapads and circled around it to peer over Sari’s shoulder. “There must be something else he was getting from the data.”

“It’s all just titles and sale numbers,” said Sari. “There’s a lot by that DMC guy, wasn't he the one who wrote that novel you threatened the shopkeeper with?”

“DMC-12 has been on the list of banned authors since before I was protoformed,” said Sentinel. “He's not the only one who dares to promote pro-Decepticon sympathies, but he is the most prolific. No one’s ever been able to discover his identity, but he's considered low-risk. Most of his works are drivel anyway.” Sari gave him an assessing look and Sentinel coughed. “Not that I've read them or anything.”

“Too bad,” said Sari, “it would at least be more fun than anything else on these datapads. Have you seen some of this? ‘O Solenoid, how my sword grows keen for want of you!’ Seriously, is he trying to lay her or gut her?”

Sentinel froze. “Wait, what did you say?”
“Is he trying to lay her or gut her?”

“No, don't be foolish, I--” Sentinel’s processor raced. “I know I've heard that somewhere.” He strode over to his console and logged into it. His credentials had been changed, of course, but now he had a higher security clearance in Intelligence than he’d had before.

High enough to access the digital archive of banned texts.

“Sing, o rulers of the cosmos, of the rage of Devron, mightiest of the Destrans, whose sword grew keen for want of energon,” said Sentinel. “It’s a reference to Devron’s Ruin, a song from classical antiquity about the fall of the Destrans, the predecessors of the Decepticons.”

“So that means what, DMC’s shitty and pretentious?”

Sentinel chewed his glossa for a moment.

“No, I think there's something more to it. I think…” The idea was crystallizing--a Decepticon spy, hidden in plain sight for millennia. What better platform from which to dispense propaganda than entertainment? And what better way to regain his reputation than by rooting out a traitor in their midst? “I think that DMC is important, perhaps more so than anyone has ever realized.” He hurried over to another box of contraband datapads seized from that blasted shop. “Here, take one. There must be more clues buried in the text.” He smiled for what felt like the first time in cycles, “Let's catch ourselves a ‘Con.”

“Awesome!” said Sari. “Dibs on The Playbot Gladiator’s Virgin Archivist !”
Megatron spent far too long staring at the blank screen of the console. Shockwave had helpfully
booted up the subspace communicator and left a datapad with the relevant comm code scribbled on
it, the neat, ordered glyphs a subtle remnant of Shockwave's time among the Autobots.
Megatron didn't need it. He'd made note of the code, inscribed it on his processor when rumors began to filter in about Megazarak being spotted on the Zarak outpost, beyond the reach of even the most effective internal commlinks. He knew it glyph by glyph and stroke by stroke.

Megatron let out a slow, deep ex-vent and entered the code. The console beeped and dialed for several long moments as it made the connection.

An image blinked onto the screen: a stout warframe with a missing optic, a cy-gar protruding from the side of his mouth, and a bored expression. The bot jumped slightly, switching the cy-gar to the other side of his mouth and clearing his throat uneasily.

“Ah, Shockwave pinged ahead but I thought the lines might have gone dark. You'll be wanting to speak with Megazarak then?”

Megatron worked his jaw, “Indeed.”

“You don't have to sound so ecstatic, he weren't too happy to hear you'd be phoning in either,” said the bot, raising one orbital ridge.

“Just transfer me,” said Megatron, sullen. It never did well to throw his weight around with the outer rim colonists; most of them were well aware that it would cost more than it was worth to ship them in for discipline.

The bot shrugged, and the image dissolved and reformed into Megatron's own face.

Megazarak looked little different from when Megatron had last seen him. He still wore Decepticon violets; the colors that Megatron could never bring himself to take, unable to bear the optics that looked at him and saw his brother. Megazarak’s plating was clean and shiny, and Megatron felt a bit of surprise at that before dismissing it; once a leader, always a leader--even if a disgraced one--and appearances must be kept.

It was silent for a moment, and Megatron took cold comfort from his brother looking just as awkward about the impending conversation as he himself was.

“You must be desperate to be contacting me after all this time,” and by the Allspark Megazarak sounded the same as he had on that cycle. This time however, his expression was closed off, his
mouth tight.

“Ah…you’re still upset?” Megatron made a dismissive gesture, trying to appear calm and collected. Futile, of course; his brother always could see through him, but it was a habit.

“You did oust me from the Decepticons, a faction which I founded,” Megazarak said, his voice irritatingly mild. “You also drove me from our capital, banished me from Decepticon space under pain of deactivation, and forbade any of our allies to provide aid.” Megazarak cocked his helm. “Is that all, or did I miss something?”

Megatron gritted his denta. Rage would be easier to deal with. It would be more like the Megazarak he knew, the Megazarak that was his brother, than this…this different being that had replaced him.

“I caught you sending salacious messages to the Autobot Magnus!” Megatron hissed. “And don’t try to tell me it was some sort of psychological warfare, Megazarak, because that was my job.”

“I would hardly call a little innuendo here and there salacious, brother,” Megazarak said.

“Well, I would hardly call a query about the Magnus’s interface toy preferences innuendo.”

More silence.

Then Megazarak started laughing, a low chuckle that grew into a loud, ringing laugh. Megatron closed his mouth, trying to turn his gaping expression into a glare, but it was futile. Both joy and sorrow warred in his tanks and his spark. Megazarak’s laughter was contagious, it always had been. Megatron tried to bite back a smile.

Megazarak leaned back in his chair, optics twinkling. Megatron ate his smile and swallowed it.

“My reason for contacting you is…somewhat related.”

Megazarak shrugged. “I figured it was. Why else, why now after all this time? Get on with it.”
Megatron was silent once again. He wasn’t the sort of bot who often found himself short of words, but his conversation partner, and the conversation topic, left him feeling as though his thrusters were malfunctioning.

“You heard about my disappearance and subsequent incarceration by the Autobots?” said Megatron.

“Rumors, mostly,” Megazarak said. “An inside job, a kidnapping.” His optics flashed, “The Autobot Magnus lying in pieces after your agent’s treachery—”

“You would be more concerned about that,” muttered Megatron.

“I could put the pieces together myself,” said Megazarak, as though Megatron had not spoken. “Let me guess, you allowed yourself to trip over your own arrogance yet again? You may not like to admit it, but there was a reason why I commanded battlefield operations and left intelligence and sabotage to you. You do well in shadows, but allow the light to blind you.”

*Tch*. Megatron bit back the urge to blindly counter the attack; angering Megazarak would not help persuade him to divulge information. Megatron forced his processor into calm, calculating equilibrium, a skill which had made him incredibly effective at his former position—much as he hated to admit that Megazarak had been right about anything.

“Brother,” said Megatron, testing the word. It still sounded too right and easy on his glossa. “I am aware that we worked better as a team than I alone. Just as you know that your…exile didn’t happen because I wanted it. You forced my hand. You would have done the same in my place.”

“Once, perhaps,” said Megazarak. “I might have done so. But now? I would not do such a thing to my own brother, particularly not over a correspondence that any dense grunt—let alone the head of Intelligence—could see contained no information which would have harmed the Decepticons.” Megazarak gave him an assessing look. “And despite what you may think, brother, that has more to do with the Autobot Magnus than I’m sure you would like.”

A strange, sickly thrill threaded its way through Megatron’s tanks. He had been right, Megazarak knew something.

“That is why I am coming to you now. During my captivity, I believe I was infected with untraceable coding. Code that is…” He struggled to find accurate words to describe the severity of the situation. “Intended to subdue me, force me to defer to the Autobots. I have reason to believe that
this code may have been what affected you after Antilla.”

Megazarak’s optics flashed. “Coding,” he said, his voice dammingly neutral, hiding something.

“Yes,” Megatron said, leaning forward over the console as he caught the scent of energon. He resisted the urge to demand answers, trying to let Megazarak come to him.

Megazarak let out a quiet huff. “You are correct. In my exile, I did discover something of that nature in my processor.” Megatron bit back an in-vent, he’d engaged in enough of these negotiations to know there’d be a price first. “I also discovered a means of...mitigating it. But before I explain further, tell me, how did you escape? Clearly you must have commandeered a ship, and it had to have been a good one, to outrun the Autobot fleet.”

Megatron gritted his teeth. There was no point in lying. He could never lie to Megazarak anyhow.

“The Steelhaven itself.”

Megazarak grinned, and Megatron’s tanks flipped. He recognized that grin; he’d worn it on his own face often enough when he’d cornered some poor schmuck at the negotiating table.

“I will give you all the information I have, in return for the Steelhaven,” said Megazarak. Megatron opened his mouth, but Megazarak held up a hand. “And I want it completely intact, untouched by any of those butchers you call medics or mechanics.”

Megatron grimaced. The Steelhaven was a steep price; he may as well hand Megazarak one-third of Armada and a colony planet. The study of the ship’s technology could serve as the key to tip the conflict once and for all in the Decepticons’ favor. But what was the point if Megatron himself was a ticking time bomb, an unwilling spy, a tamed creature willing to roll over as soon as he put one pede in Autobot space? Megatron looked at Megazarak intently, trying to spot a foreign ghost behind his brother’s optics. What use was an Autobot slave in exile? But his brother had insinuated that there was a cure. Perhaps the eerily calm behavior was just the long stellar cycles weighing on Megazarak.

He had no choice. Risk or not, Megazarak was his only lead.

Megatron swallowed. “It’s yours. I’ll meet you at the Intel outpost in fourteen cycles. I’ll give you the coordinates once you’re in reach of--”
“Not Intel,” interrupted Megazarak. “Garo.”

Megatron frowned. Why would Megazarak ask for them to meet on a planet so close to an Autobot-controlled world? Was it intended as some sort of trap? Would Megazarak go that far for revenge? Was there anything Megatron could do if he did?

Megatron nodded slowly. “Very well. Garo it is.” He’d have to consult with Strika, make up some excuse about Megazarak having critical information, which wasn’t precisely a lie.

Megazarak made the motion to end the transmission, but Megatron’s tank lurched and unthinking, he blurted, “Brother--” Megazarak paused, hand still extended towards the call termination switch. “Despite everything…it was nice to talk to you again.”

Megazarak gave him another one of those strange, assessing looks before inclining his helm in assent. The screen went black. Megatron stared at the blank console, feeling as though he’d had his tanks vacuumed clean. He leaned back and ex-vented as he stared at the ceiling, gripping the arms of the chair to keep his servos from shaking. Inside his chest, his spark squirmed and pulsed, stretching out across the distance for something it could never reach. He let it.

Even the Decepticon warlord needed some time to mourn his brother, after all.

Excerpted from the Steam4Storm messageboards, Cybertron extranet

User: sproKer
Join Date: Cycle 010
Posts: 21,000
Subject: RIP to my valve

ugh, tfw when you open up the newsfeed and your neighborhood interface toy dealer got his aft arrested for being a D
User: blastingthunder
Join Date: Cycle 008
Posts: >1 million
Subject: Re: RIP to my valve

lol tell it to someone who cares. and hasn't seen holos of your collection. how do you even have space for furniture w

youll live

---

User: pomwire
Join Date: Cycle 012
Posts: 50,000
Subject: Re: RIP to my valve

no way, volks was a con spy? D: but he was so nice! Kept me coming back if you know what I mean. ;)

---

User: pomwire
Join Date: Cycle 012
Posts: 50,000
Subject: Re: RIP to my valve

also now i'll never get my collector’s edition megazarak interface doll rip me

---

User: blastingthunder
volks was too stupid to be a con spy. grapplers to gearsticks the intelligence network fragged up again. every ‘face si

---

User: pomwire
Join Date: Cycle 012
Posts: 50,000
Subject: Re: RIP to my valve

but the illegal ones are the good ones tho!!! none of the approved ones feel as nice, they’re too small :/

---

User: 2fast4u
Join Date: Cycle 010
Posts: 10,000
Subject: Re: RIP to my valve

lol speak for urself, not all of us need something the size of our leg to shove in there

---

User: fieryquills
Join Date: Cycle 013
Posts: >1 million
Subject: Re: RIP to my valve

I cannot believe that you ingrates are wasting space on this forum to complain about INTERFACE TOYS when one o
User: sproKer
Join Date: Cycle 010
Posts: 21,000
Subject: Re: RIP to my valve

this is the section of the forum for ‘facing talk tho?  

User: fieryquills
Join Date: Cycle 013
Posts: >1 million
Subject: Re: RIP to my valve

THAT IS BESIDE THE POINT. Too long have we languished under the shackles of Autobot oppression! It is our duty 

User: blastingthunder
Join Date: Cycle 008
Posts: >1 million
Subject: Re: RIP to my valve

vector sigma, the n00b is quoting My Struggle Against the Commonwealth. that slag was passe when i was protoform

User: 2fast4u
hey n00b u can format your posts without capslock

---

User: fieryquills
Join Date: Cycle 013
Posts: >1 million
Subject: Re: RIP to my valve

HOW DARE YOU. TRAITOR. You besmirch this entire site! Our brother-in-arms is being tortured and experimented o

---

User: blastingthunder
Join Date: Cycle 008
Posts: >1 million
Subject: Re: RIP to my valve

listen up, slagface, i don't like the situation on Cybertron either, but it’s a slagging sight better than it could be. you kr

now if you don’t mind, i’m going to go turn on some of the filthiest illegal ‘con holovids i can find, frag myself raw, anc

---

User: sproKer
Join Date: 010
Posts: 21,000
Subject: Re: RIP to my valve
so is this a bad time to ask for holovid recs or

Chapter End Notes

Addition June 21: Taiyari did some amazing artwork as a commission! <3 Go give her some love on Tumblr
Optimus figured he would have a difficult time recharging that night cycle. For starters, he was expected to recharge on piles of assorted scrap instead of a recharge slab, and secondly there was, well, everything else. He had tried to think of pleasant things, such as driving through Detroit on a clear, calm day, or trussing up Megatron and Sentinel and hanging them up to rust off the edge of Sumdac Tower like hideous Christmas ornaments, but regardless of his efforts, his HUD registered only half the recommended hours of recharge.

He groaned, turning on his side to try to fall into recharge again, but the opportunity was robbed from him by - who the slag else - Megatron.

:Optimus Prime, report to my quarters for your assignment:

:Wh... what?: Megatron’s voice had been drowned by his daydream counterpart’s screams of rage as he spun helplessly among the strings of colorful lights. Not that Optimus would do such a thing, but he was having a bad cycle, all right?

:Come to my quarters. I need you to clean up before my new furniture arrives.:

Optimus groaned and rolled onto his other side, sending a pile of bolts cascading over him, and weighed the relative merits of compliance versus telling Megatron to jump into a smelter. He drew his legs up towards his chest, thought of the brothels and the cacophony of Armada outside the walls of the Decepticon headquarters, and let out an ex-vent.

:Fine, whatever. I'll be there.: 

He sat up, bolts and bits of scrap raining off of him, and looked around his small room. Only the light of his optics illuminated it, turning the piles of refuse into abstract shadows. Optimus rose, only to find himself tripping over the vacuum cleaner and pressing the light switch by falling against it with his helm.

The switch didn't work of course. He groaned. It was going to be a great day. He just knew it.

Optimus took a quick look around the room. By warbuild standards, this was little more than a storage closet. Fortunately, for a grounder, it wasn’t too terrible in terms of floorspace. Once he'd given it a proper cleaning he'd have enough to lay down to recharge at least. It definitely was less cramped without Lugnut and Strika fragging in it.

Ugh.

He considered where in the bowels of the ship the Decepticons might keep their washracks. After all, he'd indicated he'd obey Megatron’s order, but he never said he'd do it quickly.

The washracks were nearly pitch black inside, noisy, and smelled strongly of rust and old oil, which made it rather like washing up inside of an engine block, but the solvent running from the pipes was decently clean. Once or twice Optimus spotted a looming shadow at the edges of the light cast by his headlights, but they always paused before they got too close, before melting back into the rows of washracks.
The collar must have been working. Double ugh. Optimus scraped at his plating, and realized he would probably have to get some cleaning supplies for himself later on. That reminded him that he needed some questions answered, and so far could only think of one mech to contact.

:Optimus Prime, I suspected you would contact me sooner rather than later, though you do not appear to be in distress. What is that noise I hear?:

:I’m in the washracks. Listen, Cyclonus, you’re about the closest thing I have to a friendly face in here, and I have some questions about warbuilds and, uh, warbuild anatomy.: There was a long pause. Somewhere across the washracks Optimus could hear a can of wax being kicked across the floor.

:...Optimus Prime.: Cyclonus responded finally. :I have a conjunx endura.: Optimus paused, reviewed the last few seconds of dialogue, and nearly swallowed his glossa.

:Oh! No! I didn’t—I mean…I didn’t mean it like-like that!: Optimus covered his faceplates with his hands, a blush crawling its way past his faceplates and up his finials. :I just saw Lugnut and Strika and… oh Vector Sigma, I’m just making this worse, aren’t I?: Cyclonus coughed in embarrassment. :No matter, I should have recalled… You must be rather young. I am sure you have some questions that I can likely answer.: Cyclonus sounded less-than-thrilled at this prospect. :Do you have time available when we may meet?:

:Yeah, I think so. I mean, I have to go clean Megatron's apartment first, but then we could try to meet—is there somewhere we can meet?:

:I will contact you with coordinates.: A brief silence, :Are you truly keeping him waiting?: Cyclonus sounded a touch incredulous.

:Why shouldn’t I?: said Optimus. :I've been kidnapped, humiliated, and traumatized, all in less than a decacycle. I needed a wash. It's bad enough I'm his slave, I'm not going to be a good one.: Cyclonus gave a soft snort of amusement. :I truly think you are going to handle him just fine.: Why does that mean?:

:Not important. Finish your wash and your duties and ping me again. We shall talk.: The commline went dead. Optimus sighed and reached to turn off the solvent, switching to the drying cycle.

He should probably stop leaving his master in suspense.

Sentinel chewed the end of a stylus, frowning, before marking out another passage in *Passions of Xanxor* making reference to the site of a Decepticon battlefield. Why this particular battlefield, he wasn’t certain, because it hadn’t been that important in the course of the war. In fact if he remembered correctly it had been a tourist spot eons ago, since razed to the ground during the course
of the War, and rebuilt into its former state. Still, it was obscure enough that it couldn’t be coincidence.

Beside him, Sari’s head clunked against the table, her shoulders shaking as she giggled helplessly.

“Keep it up,” said Sentinel absently. “No time for dawdling.”

“I can’t help it,” she said, muffling her giggles into her forearm. “‘Steelbelt disembarked from the shuttle with the same grace and speed as he would depart from the frame of a lover’—who the hell even writes like this? It doesn’t even make any sense! Is he running away? Reluctant to leave the shuttle?” She wiped her streaming optics. “The metaphor just falls apart.”

Sentinel sighed. “We’re not here to critique DMC’s prose, as…colorful as it may be. Just read and keep an eye out for more references.”

“I don’t know how you expect me to do this with a straight face,” she said. “I’ll take a look at the sales records again, catch my breath, and see if there’s something I missed.”

“If you want,” he said, turning back to his own text.

Sari sighed and took a sip of that disgusting organic liquid that she hoarded. Sentinel had discovered—to his dismay—that it left horrifying, sticky residue of a radioactive shade whenever it spilled. Sari set the vessel down, half out of the ring of condensation that had formed around the base. Sentinel twitched and resisted the urge to hurl it into a toxic waste unit.

They lapsed into silence for a few minutes. It would have never occurred to Sentinel to admit it, but it was actually nice. Sari might be an organic—or, well, half of one—but the company was soothing. He hadn’t really made anything that could be called “friends” since Archa Seven. Not that Sari was a friend, but—it didn’t really bear thinking about.

Sari hummed to herself. “Huh, that’s kind of weird.”

“What is?” Sentinel said.

“Didn’t you say that Com is a Decepticon world?”

Sentinel frowned. “No, Com is under the domain of the Commonwealth. It was Garo, its twin world, that fell to the ‘Cons—why?”

“Because there’s an awful lot of shipments being routed through Com, and they haven’t got the population to buy it even if every bot among them wanted a dozen copies of each,” said Sari. She chewed her lip and flicked through another page of the datapad. “Looks like Shockwave was getting smugglers’ records as well as legit exports. Or I’m pretty sure that anybody named ‘Corso Riggs’ isn’t going to be anything but a smuggler.”

“What are you saying?” Sentinel said, leaning over to her.

“You were looking for a ‘Con connection, right? I’m telling you that these shipments were being smuggled to Decepticon planets.” Sari grinned.

Sentinel leapt up. “And why would the ‘Cons be interested in garbage novels—”

“—unless they had some kind of intel hidden away in them,” Sari finished.

Sentinel in-vented sharply. “If we’re right, this could be the biggest bust since Highbrow uncovered
that ring of energon smugglers on Luna-2.”

“Yeah.” Sari rubbed her servos together. “Man, this sure beats Ratchet’s lessons any day.”

“Come on,” said Sentinel, scooping up the datapad of records. “Let’s report and roll out.”

“Criminy,” said Sari, “you and Optimus did train together, didn’t you?”

Megatron leaned back in his chair, staring out across the city. He fidgeted, stopped himself. He checked his chronometer and snuck another look at the doors.

Still no sign of Optimus Prime.

The delivery boxes were stacked in the entryway, awaiting unpacking. Thankfully, the deliverybot hadn’t dared ask any awkward questions. Megatron looked around the wrecked room and scowled.

The door slid open and Megatron’s commlink sent a proximity ping.

“Where were you?” he bit out.

“Washing,” said Optimus shortly.

Defiance. He’d expected it, but robbed of his usual methods for enforcing obedience, Megatron found himself off-balance.

“I gave you an order,” he said, trying for his softest, deadliest tone.

“And I’m obeying it,” said Optimus, brisk. “If you want better service, get a trained housekeeper.”

Megatron gritted his dental plates. “Just clean.”

A clattering crash of refuse tumbling into a bin met his audials.

“Already on it,” said Optimus.

Megatron caved to the urge to turn and look at Optimus, a cutting remark already on his glossa, and froze.

During the brief and tumultuous tenure of their acquaintance, Megatron had rarely seen Optimus when he was not covered in debris or organic filth of various flavors and colors. Cleaned and polished—which he must be, he’d certainly taken long enough in the wash--Optimus’s plating glowed in the light, vibrant reds and blues. It should have looked ostentatious next to the sensible, muted colors sported by warframes--it should have made Optimus look cheap.

It took Megatron’s breath away.

Often, Megatron had caught his soldiers muttering about how Autobots never camouflaged their plating on purpose, the colorful shades intended to distract and draw the gaze away from weaponry. It was a common excuse to explain failure, and replacement optics meant to subdue color vision in
favor of infrared were rather popular in Armada. It had never affected him, at least until now.

He only realized he'd been staring for several moments when--

“You just going to stand there and stare uselessly?”

Megatron thrummed thoughtfully, deep in his throat. He needed something quick to bite back, “Such snark. You should be more grateful, I’ve given you the privilege of a simple job you were built for.”

Optimus stared at him as though he'd glitched. “Excuse me?”

Megatron shrugged, suddenly uneasy. “Cleaning, organizing and household tasks. Grounders are made for it, warframes for battle. There's nothing wrong with it, it's just the way things are.”

There was a dark look brewing on Optimus's faceplates.

“Warframes make terrible medics,” said Megatron, not quite sure why he did so.

Optimus tilted a crate in his hands, one containing new datapads to replace the shattered ones, and examined it.

“So you know what Ultra Magnus said to me, just before I fought you for the first time?” he said quietly.

Thrown, Megatron said, “What?”

“Don't be a hero,” said Optimus. “It's not in your programming.” He looked up, optics blazing bright, and Megatron felt a chill. “I might not have been made for war, but I was a slagging quick learner, wasn't I? Me and my team.”

Megatron's fingers bit into the arms of his chair and he said nothing.

Optimus upended the box and datapads clattered to the floor. “There, organize them yourself.”

Megatron didn't even think to stop him from walking out the door.

Megatron remained motionless, listening to the silence of the apartment, before rising to retrieve one of the discarded datapads. He turned it over in his hand, using it to check the status of the Steelhaven. It was currently docked in New Kaon, being polished, the workers likely believing it would be sent to Armada to be kept as a personal trophy. How he wished that could be the case.

Well, at least he would be rid of this…this virus--rid of Optimus Prime from himself, and his processor.

He worried if he did not do so quickly, he might not be able to do so at all.

“Vector Sigma,” Cliffjumper groaned into his hands, rubbing his faceplates with them as if washing it with solvent. “Are you saying that some fourth-rate fetish smut peddler is a Decepticon spy?”
“Well,” Sari decided to toss her unwanted spoon into the proverbial energon bowl. “To be fair, DMC’s prose has improved a lot in his last novel. For one thing, he stopped calling valve lubricant illustrious shee-”

“Regardless!” Sentinel decided that Sari was better off not giving a graphic review to the Head of Intelligence. “I don’t think he’s a Decepticon spy. I think he is the Decepticon spy!”

“Please don’t tell me how much pornography you had to read to come to that conclusion.”

Sari looked at Cliffjumper with big, confused optics. “Only a few so far. Is this really considered Cybertronian filth? You should see what humans are capab-”

“Don’t!” Sentinel was forced to interrupt Sari a second time. Cliffjumper was looking distinctly off-color. “That is at the bottom of the list of things we care to know about.”

“Okay, alright, fine.” Cliffjumper ex-vented, looking as if he had walked in on his conjunx shooting the pet cybercat. “Tell me what evidence you’ve found.” He motioned at the seat in front of him. Sentinel sat down while Sari perched on his helm like the world’s most annoying thought.

“You need to stop interrupting me,” said Sari. “It’s rude, you know.”

“Look,” Sentinel said, leaning forward and putting his hands on Cliffjumper’s desk. Sari rolled and grabbed onto one of his helm protrusions for balance. “You said yourself that Shockwave was keeping track of this stuff, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah,” said Cliffjumper, “but what’s the point of keeping sales records?”

Sentinel fished a datapad from his subspace and slapped it on the desk before him. “Look at the export destinations.”

Cliffjumper’s orbital ridges furrowed, before his optics widened. “There are shipments headed for Decepticon space.”

“Exactly!” said Sentinel, triumphant. “Why would DMC be selling fourth-rate smut novels to the Decepticons unless he was using them as a vehicle for intel?”

“Maybe the Decepticons have just as bad taste as Autobots,” Sari said, chuckling.

“She has a point,” said Cliffjumper, leaning backwards into his seat and crossing his arms. “You have a compelling case, but many things are smuggled all the time, I’m sure... entertainment is among that.” Cliffjumper had practically gagged on the word ‘entertainment.’ “Still, it is suspicious, to say the least. I’ll give you permission to investigate DMC’s identity, and it will be moved to high priority.”

Sari giggled. “Can you imagine Megatron reading this though?” She jumped from Sentinel’s head to the desk, and arranged her arms as if cradling an invisible, smaller bot. “I am at your knees, a servant of your desires.” Sari grinned and placed her hands at her hips. “He might just be pretentious enough. Hey, do you think he reads them while he-”

“Quiet!” Cliffjumper and Sentinel yelled at her in unison.
Excerpted from Garbage In, Garbage Out: Consumable Media Reviews for the Discerning Bot

Title: *The Playbot Gladiator's Virgin Archivist* by DMC-12

Review by SwervingTires

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Like many of you, I’ve been hunkered down, eagerly awaiting the release of DMC-12’s latest novel. The void left by 

Thankfully, *The Playbot Gladiator’s Virgin Archivist* fits the bill nicely. Plus SkiddingOnEmpty sent me a copy and tol

*Playbot Gladiator* is a “historical” in the vein of DMC’s previous novels *Tender Pirate* and *In the Servos of the Barbari*

“Optronix watched breathlessly as the gladiator entered, the arena lights reflecting off of every gleaming edge of him.

Aw yeah.

You’ll probably recognize some of the prose from DMC’s previous novel *In the Servos of the Barbarian*. Tronius certa

There’s nothing really special about *Playbot Gladiator*, but it’s not bad. Tronius’s initial, jarring attraction to Optronix is

“Optronix tore away from Tronius’s touch with a shiver. ‘But how?’ he cried, flinging a servo across his optics. ‘How

Tronius grabbed Optronix by the shoulders and turned him, lifting a determined fist. “You will always be here,” he sa.

Optronix looked up at him through shimmering optics, ‘And I you.’”

Be still my beating spark. By which I mean o.O

But since I’m guessing that most of you are here to know if this decent frag material, I’ll not keep you in suspense. T
But you didn't hear it from me!

SwervingTires out!

Chapter End Notes

Wow, there are so many references in here. Who wants to see if they can spot them all? Kudos to Smart Bitches, Trashy Books for all the inspiration for trashy novels and the reviews. We’ve also officially added Ultra Magnus/Megazarak as a ship tag to the fic now that we’re not the only ones writing it.

- Reya
“At the risk of getting us all shot,” muttered Bumblebee, eyeing the cluster of squat organics before them, “Can you remind me why we’re haggling over oil on Devola instead of heading to New Kaon?”

Minimus resisted the urge to pinch his nasal ridge.

As was explained to you repeatedly, we cannot simply enter into Decepticon space. We would be quickly overwhelmed, therefore we need an in. Smugglers are common near the outer rim of the galaxy. Also Devolans may look dim, but they’re astute. And they speak Galactic Standard, so pipe down and let Arcee work.: 

Bumblebee had the grace to look abashed. One of the merchants squinted all four optics at them.

Arcee cleared her intake politely and shot the two of them a brief, poisonous look over her shoulder before turning back to the group of Devolans.

“As I was saying,” she said, in the high, sweet tone that Minimus had learned to fear over the course of the war, “one hundred credits a barrel is simply beyond our means.” She smiled, wide and disarming. “But for such good quality I’m certain we can go as high as sixty.”

The head merchant made a face as though he’d swallowed grit with his oil. “Sixty? That is highway robbery for oil from Altair IV!”

“Oh, I would never presume to insult the quality of your stock!” said Arcee, optics wide. “Altair oil is indeed highly prized. Most have never tried it. I had the pleasure of tasting some when I visited, oh, it must be going on a thousand stellar cycles ago. Such a unique scent and flavor, one might say irreproducible.”

The merchant stiffened, optics narrowing. “What are you saying?”

“Oh, nothing at all, I suppose,” said Arcee, cocking her helm as though pondering. “After all, the memory banks do get a bit rusty with age. Or else I might think that the sample--which you so kindly provided--tasted rather like it had been cut with waste oil from Talos IV.”

The merchant’s optics went wide. “You lie,” he hissed, a touch of panic flashing across his face.

“Now, now,” said Arcee, in a voice that Minimus was certain she must have used on recalcitrant students. “There’s no need to get excited. We’ve no interest in upsetting your operation. We merely want the oil.”

The merchant licked wide, red lips and wiped at the wet folds of his face.

“Yes, the oil, right. That can be arranged, and for sixty a barrel, yes?”

“Oh no,” said Arcee, smiling sweetly, with the look of a Sharkticon that smelled engeron. “I think you can give them to us for forty.”

The merchant blanched a pale orange.
Vector Sigma, said Bumblebee, remind me to never get on her bad side.

You are full of surprises, Optimus Prime. Cyclonus’s voice was dry and a touch amused. If someone had told me a stellar cycle ago that Megatron’s personal servant had walked out on him, I would have searched for their remains in the garbage incinerator.

Yeah, well, Megatron can stuff his…prejudiced helm up his non-existent valve! Optimus huffed. A thought nagged at his processor that he was getting too casual with Cyclonus, and that pretending to be kind to one as vulnerable as Optimus was exactly the sort of thing a Decepticon would do, but slag it, he needed to vent.

Cyclonus had proposed they meet in the stomach of HQ, and helpfully sent him the coordinates. Optimus made his way down hallway past some offices down to a small meeting room. Cyclonus was waiting by the door, and ushered Optimus inside before locking the door with a wave of a battered keycard.

The room was surrounded by glass; anyone could look inside to see Optimus and Cyclonus speaking to one another, but judging from the way Cyclonus had insisted that they keep to commlink chatter until they were inside, it was unlikely that anyone would be able to eavesdrop on the conversation.

“Don’t fret,” Cyclonus said, when he saw Optimus eyeing the door doubtfully. “It’s only locked from the outside.”

Cyclonus seated himself and indicated Optimus should do the same. “Now, what questions exactly did you need answered?”

Optimus opened his mouth, only just realizing he didn’t know where to start, or what questions to ask first. He busied himself with the chair.

“Maybe we should start with the…”he would fling himself off a rooftop before he said biggest—“most obvious?”

Cyclonus ex-vented with the look of someone who didn’t sign up for teaching cyberbiology, pinching his nasal ridge in defeat.

“I can only surmise that the Autobots have covered up our…anatomical differences and they did not teach you any of this as a newspark.”

Optimus nodded. “I had heard…rumors about being interface-incompatible, but…”

“Untrue.” Cyclonus snorted. “We are quite compatible. More than just compatible, actually. Interfacing is only part of the story.”

The answer tugged at Optimus’s processor, a memory of a conversation with Isaac Sumdac—following another, more scarring one with Sari—but he desperately tried to squash it, hoping that Cyclonus had a different trajectory in mind.
With another, heavier ex-vent, Cyclonus said, “Have you by chance spent any time with organics?”

“Yes, the dominant species I met with use interface to reproduce.” Memories of Sari explaining where babies came from warped his processor and fuel tanks. Isaac’s follow-up hadn’t done much to dampen his fascinated disgust. “Or to initiate reproduction at least. But that’s not the case with us, is it?”

Cyclonus gave him a look which answered that question by itself. Optimus felt himself slump in his seat as if the answer were weights on his pedes.

“But,” said Optimus, puzzled, “how is that possible? We animate new protoforms via Allspark energy, channeled through Vector Sigma.”

Cyclonus’s face darkened. “No one knows the true origins of the Allspark, and how such a relic could be capable of bringing life, but suffice it to say I can assure you it was not always that way.”

Cyclonus shook his helm. “I am one of the very few living flightframes old enough to remember the times before the Allspark, before our society began to truly divide. When communities on Cybertron depended on both ground and flight framed mechs to coexist and create new mechanisms together.”

“That’s crazy.” Optimus started to push the chair he was sitting on away from the table, only to realize his pedes didn’t reach the floor and he was in danger of tipping himself over. Slag everything in this city being designed for the obnoxiously tall. “Sar--I mean, the organic I spoke to, she indicated not all organics propagated the same way, but the things she described…” He raised his servos in a helpless gesture. “We’re *robotic organisms*. We don’t have families or do...how does it even work?”

“Adequately,” said Cyclonus. “I will not lie to you and say it was a perfect process. Injury and even mortality were common, particularly in the early days, before my time. Why else would our ancestors have been so eager to streamline the process, automate it? I’m sure Vector Sigma must have seemed a miracle from the heavens.” Cyclonus’s optics narrowed. “But I, and others like me, did not trust this miracle. We kept to the old ways, even in the face of derision from flightframe and groundframe alike.”

Optimus hesitated. “That one guy, when we met, he called you ‘spawn.’”

“A derogatory term to describe ones such as myself, who are the product of a flightframe and groundframe union,” Cyclonus humphed.

“Can two warframes produce a new bot? Or two civilianframes?” said Optimus. “I saw--I mean, it seems like warframes will pair off. And at home, there were couples, committed ones.”

“No,” said Cyclonus. “There is personal preference to take into account for interfacing and cohabitation. But it requires both to reproduce.” A troubled look passed over his face. “Though some have...tried to find other ways, shall we say.” The troubled look smoothed out and Cyclonus smiled faintly. “And as for commitment, reproduction has never been a barrier. There are ballads sung about the love of General Strika and Lugnut.”

Optimus groaned and covered his optics. “I bet.”

Cyclonus chuckled and covered his mouth, optics twinkling. “I suppose that you also discovered that they possess enthusiasm for each other which would shame mechanisms half their age.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Optimus said. He then pressed his palms flat against the table. “But wait, there are both civilianframes and warframes here on Armada, coexisting. Are you saying that Cybertron used to look like…” He gestured all around himself. “*This*? Utter chaos and anarchy? And
for that matter I have yet to see any... offspring here so far.”

Cyclonus let out another ex-vent—this time more sad and tired. He leaned back in his seat and looked at the ceiling, as though examining an invisible holovid projection there.

“No, it did not. It is...difficult to explain.”

Optimus rubbed his orbital ridges. “How do I know you’re not lying? I used to hang out in the Hall of Records in Iacon on my off cycles, and I spent a lot of time digging through chronicles of the War. There are no records of this.”

Cyclonus merely smiled, a light in his optics. “But there are records of the Great Purge, are there not?”

That stopped Optimus.

“Besides, these differences are common knowledge among Decepticons, as those three mechs I rescued you from would have been glad to demonstrate.” The old mech shrugged, before his gaze turned piercing. “I will say this regarding Armada’s chaos; I cannot speak for the Autobots, but the Decepticons are... ill, so to speak. They are deep in Battlesleep. I am willing to help you because I believe you are the key to waking them up.”

“Battlesleep?” Optimus asked, but a knock at the door interrupted them. On the other side of the glass was a civilian-build femme with a helm and face that was strangely feline-like. Cyclonus stood and opened the door.

“What is it, Lyzack?” he said.

“Lord Megatron requests the presence of his slave,” said the femme, her voice twangy and drawling.

“Man,” said Bulkhead, scooping up a barrel under each arm and waddling up Omega Supreme’s entrance ramp. “These things are heavy. Couldn't we smuggle something lighter, like cushions?”

“According to intelligence reports, Altairan oil is very popular on the Decepticon black market,” said Minimus, scrutinizing the large barrel before him. While he wouldn’t be able to match Bulkhead—he simply didn’t have the armspan to carry more than one—he was confident he could assist. Nodding to himself, he grasped the barrel and hoisted it. “Or I suppose I should say the Decepticon market, as the lack of laws renders everything effectively legal.”

“If you say so,” said Bulkhead. “I just hope this fancy oil is enough to keep us from getting blown to bits.”

“Not on its own,” said Arcee, appearing noiselessly in that strange and disturbing way she had. Minimus concentrated on not dropping the barrel. “That’s why we’ll have to play our roles flawlessly.” She pursed her mouth, and looked over to where Jazz and Bumblebee were wrestling another barrel up the ramp. “I’m wondering if we should switch Bumblebee to the role of mute bodyguard. What do you think, Jazz?”

“Hey!” said Bumblebee, slipping and catching himself on the ramp. “I am an Elite Guard member,
“Careful,” said Jazz, steadying their barrel and stifling a laugh. “Cool it down, Little-B, all that energy works great on the battlefield, but spy work is delicate stuff. One slip and we’ll all have our helms on pikes.”

“I can keep my vocalizer muted,” Bumblebee grumbled, shoving the barrel into a corner before strapping it down.

“See that you do,” said Arcee briskly. “Because with those colors and that mouth, the only other option for you in ‘Con space is ‘traveling prostitute.”

Bumblebee choked and looked ill. Minimus positioned his own barrel and took pity on him.

“While it is true this is a high-risk mission, it is also fairly straightforward. Arcee and Jazz will do the real information gathering. The rest of us are merely providing the getaway vehicle.”

“Oh, okay,” said Bumblebee, looking vastly relieved.

Bulkhead patted Bumblebee’s shoulder guard. “It'll be okay, little buddy, we'll be in and out before we know it. *With* the Bossbot.”

Minimus wished he could be as confident, but morale was morale. “Of course we will,” he said.

“Come on,” said Arcee. “Let's get this loaded so we can finalize your disguises. We're all far too colorful to just go waltzing into New Kaon.”

“I dunno,” said Jazz cheerfully. “I've always wanted to moonlight as a prostitute moonlighting as a smuggler.”

He ducked the rusted tool she flung in his direction.

It was interesting, Minimus thought. Perhaps it was that without the Magnus armor, it hadn’t truly registered to his soldiers that he was the Autobot Magnus, but this was the first time in millennia that anyone had behaved so casually around him. He found it strangely soothing, and hoped it wouldn’t affect the mission.

It was difficult to walk back into cleaning duty with Cyclonus’s lecture weighing on his processor, though Optimus supposed it’d be better to bury that somewhere for the time being and dig it back up when he had time on his own to mull it over and analyze it. Otherwise, Optimus might find himself sneaking looks at the shape of Megatron’s pauldrons and backstruts as he trotted back and forth collecting the bits of broken metal and glass strewn about the room.

As Optimus reached down to snag a bit of twisted wire by one of Megatron’s pedes, Megatron shifted, swirling the goblet of oil in his servo.

“You and Cyclonus seem to be getting along,” Megatron said, peering down at him.

Optimus shrugged. “It’s amazing what a polite greeting instead of an assassination attempt does for first impressions.”
Megatron let out an ex-vent that sounded more like an indignant huff, but otherwise said nothing. They lapsed into silence, broken only by the clink of scrap as Optimus tossed it into a box to be emptied down the garbage chute.

“How did the two of you come into contact?” said Megatron.

“I ran into him in a hallway,” said Optimus, casually picking up the larger pieces of what used to be overpriced furniture. “He didn’t try to murder me or assault me, so I figured he’d make an acceptable conversation partner.”

“I see,” said Megatron. “What did the two of you discuss?”

“Nothing of importance,” said Optimus, eying Megatron out of the corner of his optic. He fingered a bit of red glass before chucking it into the bin.

“Cyclonus isn’t the sort to help others from the goodness of his spark, although granted, that would be a fruitless venture in Armada,” said Megatron. “He must have some ulterior motives.”

“I’m sure, but what can he do? Enslave me?”

“While you might be under the impression that you can sink no lower, Optimus Prime,” Megatron said dryly, “I can assure you that without me, your fate would be far worse. Just in case you were harboring any thoughts of subterfuge.”

“Without you, I wouldn’t be here in the first place,” said Optimus, glowering. “Try again.”

Megatron ex-vented slowly before draining his goblet. “You see me as a tyrant, but without me, this city—indeed the entire Decepticon Empire—would descend into chaos.”

Optimus paused and stared up at him. “For someone looking out a window, you don’t appear to be seeing anything.”

“What you see is not chaos, but freedom,” said Megatron. “My soldiers are unfailingly loyal on the field of battle. At home? They can do as they please.”

“Unfailingloyal, huh?” said Optimus, going back to his task. “Did Starscream get that particular memo? And what about Megazarak?”

Megatron stiffened. “And what would you know of Megazarak?” his voice croaked slightly.

“Plenty,” said Optimus. “I used to read old war records in my spare time. I know you weren’t the original founder of the Decepticons. Seems to me that Starscream might have just been following your example.”

Optimus stood up from where he was squatting, looking up towards the Decepticon leader a few paces away. Megatron was unmoving, his expression flat, but a crack snaked upwards from where his fingers cradled the goblet. Optimus narrowed his optics. Of course, Megatron was likely unused to all the back-talk, but that still didn’t explain why he was hiding his anger rather than lashing out at Optimus.

He’d never had a problem lashing out before.

“You know nothing of what happened between me and my spark-twin,” said Megatron.

“Split spark,” said Megatron. “But if you think that made his banishment any easier, you are a fool.”

“I didn’t.” Optimus let the silence drag out for a moment. “I suppose it must have been quite a serious situation for you to banish your own spark twin.”

Megatron stared at him, looking quite surprised by that answer, and once again the room was silent but for the sound of Optimus cleaning. This time, the silence stretched long enough for Optimus to finish—or at least, finish the one room. He still had to bring in the vacuum droid later, presuming Decepticons even had vacuum droids.

“Optimus Prime.” Megatron said, once again turning his back to Optimus to survey his domain. “I will permit you a fifteen click break for every five megacycles of work. Go take it.”

That…sounded almost like a reasonable labor agreement. Optimus raised an orbital ridge ridge.

“And…thank you,” said Megatron. “For not… presuming.”

Optimus frowned, puzzled, but shrugged. “Don’t mention it.” Far be it from him to divine the motives of Decepticon warlords for thanking their house slaves.

He stood and lifted the box of refuse, pausing to take in Megatron’s silhouette, huge and flanged and utterly unlike an Autobot’s. If Cyclonus was right, they were two complementary parts of one species, and yet so radically different they made the differences between male and female humans seem subtle by comparison. How could such a thing be possible?

And then his thoughts trailed off, leaving him behind and then returning back to him. It seemed outlandish but...Prowl had always loved watching nature documentaries, Optimus remembered, with a painful ring of his spark. He and Bumblebee had always ended up fighting over which channel to watch, but a few times Prowl had managed the upper hand--usually by sweeping Bumblebee’s legs out from under him and sitting on him. Optimus recalled a few of the colorful programs mentioning differences in the same animal: the female clownfish being much larger than the male, guarding its anemone while the male tended to the eggs she had laid. The brightly-colored and eccentrically feathered male paradise birds with their plain, brown females. The brutish male elephant seal, so heavy and massive on the beach compared to its female harem.

Optimus’s tank did a slow flip. If Cyclonus was right...this had the potential to change everything.

He needed to know more.

To: Reflector, Chief Producer at Flexpletive Studios

From: Manbearpig

Subject: Infomercial Script: X-treme Opti-X
Hey Reflector, here’s the draft script for that new commercial you’ve been nagging me about. Chill, it was only twelve

Later,

Manbearpig

Script:

[Tidal Wave enters in his altmode, breaking through 5 different ships on Armada, all of which explode. He then transfs]

Tidal Wave: THESE X-TREME OPTI-X MODDED OPTICS ARE SO POWERFUL, THEY WILL ROCKET RIGHT OU’

[Tidal Wave’s optics burst out of their sockets, followed by explosion effects]

Tidal Wave: AND THEN YOU WILL BE SO POWERFUL, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO GRAB THOSE FRAGGERS AND

[Tidal Wave grabs his X-treme Opti-X and tosses them back into his helm, again with explosion effects]

Tidal Wave: I AM SO POWERFUL!

[Tidal Wave then flies in his root mode into an animated star, which then becomes a supernova]

Tidal Wave’s voice: HOLY SLAG!

---

To: Manbearpig

From: Reflector, Chief Producer at Flexpletive Studios

Subject: Re: Infomercial Script: X-treme Opti-X

Exactly how much syk were you on when you wrote this? We’ve told you repeatedly that the POINT of a commercial

Redraft it from scratch and at least include a frame with the product information or the link to Oil Slick’s study on vis

Yours in annoyance,

Reflector

---

To: Reflector, Chief Producer at Flexpletive Studios

From: Manbearpig

Subject: Re: Re: Infomercial Script: X-treme Opti-X

No one understands my art.
Sorry for the delay. Between some writing block, being busy with work, and Zuzu getting sick, we had to take an extra week. I can't take credit for the title though, that was Zuzu's stroke of genius.

-Reya
Despite what the traitor Starscream might have said, Megatron was still well in the prime of his life. It was inevitable then, perhaps, that he would find himself having recharge fluxes of an explicit nature, and that they would be about his pretty new slave.

The subject of the dream was of no particular concern to him, really. He had been quite a playbot back when he and Megazarak still ruled the Decepticons, charming warframes and civilianframes alike into his berth. Since Megazarak's banishment, however, Megatron had become much more wary of interface, as even a loyal subordinate could become scorned lover, and even a satisfied lover would not hesitate to exert undue influence.

And so, his recharging processor wandered to Optimus Prime. His frustration manifested in the red bot on his knees before him, servos bound in stasis cuffs behind him, his faceplates arranged in the same deep glare Megatron had only seen in their final battle on Earth.

This time, however, it was to be Megatron's victory.

Megatron leaned forward from his throne, stroking at Optimus Prime’s finials, his large servo all but enveloping the small, blue helm. Optimus flinched in disgust, but his optics didn’t move from Megatron's. His EM field spat hatred.

“Such a lovely little warrior,” Megatron purred, moving his servo from Optimus Prime’s finials to cup his jaw, pressing his thumb against the seam of those pretty lips. “You fought well, but the battle is over. Why don’t you open up for your new master?”

Optimus didn't respond. Nor did he stop glaring. Fortunately, it wasn’t difficult for Megatron to pry the weakened bot’s mouth open, slowly sliding his thumb in and out through those pretty lips and rubbing against that slick glossa.

“Good, let’s put this to use, shall we?”

His interface panel slid back, his half-erect spike jutting out. Megatron gave it a light pump with his free fist, and pressed his thumb hard against Optimus's glossa.

Optimus Prime’s optics did not move, defiant in their intensity, but he did not struggle as Megatron guided his helm to his spike, humming in pleasure as that wet little mouth enveloped him. Wet, but not willing; Optimus did not move, his mouth slack and unresponsive.

Fine, Megatron could work with that.

“Still so angry?” Megatron said. He cradled Optimus's helm and gave a slow, deep thrust. “Not to worry.” Another thrust. “I will treat you well.”
He offlined his optics and allowed himself to focus on Optimus Prime’s soft lips and the way they rubbed against his spike, and slowly but surely, the smaller mech appeared to want to cooperate. Reluctantly at first, just small licks, pulling off and allowing Megatron's spike tip to rub against the soft, smooth surface of his cheeks. Then, more eager; Optimus Prime taking him long and deep and wanting, and Megatron could let go of his helm and lean back to lose himself in pleasure.

He was nearing his peak, Optimus kissing at the base of his spike as the rest lay against his face, when Megatron onlined his optics to see his handiwork.

His spark froze in his chest instantly, as if he had dunked it in liquid nitrogen.

Optimus Prime was shattered. His plating was dull, and webs of cracks snaked their way across it. One of his optics was dark, missing, a gaping abscess of wires and old energon. The remaining optic was dim, no longer shining with sharp anger but quiet despair.

Broken.

Megatron’s washracks were only a few pedsteps away, but they seemed as far as Hadeen’s core. He made his way there, clutching and clawing at the walls in a nauseated dance until he found the faucet to turn the solvent on, just in time to purge his tanks.

Slag.

Megatron was no fool. He knew there was nothing to stop slaves to be used in any way their masters wished. He personally never understood the pleasure of rape; at best it was like interfacing with a lifeless doll, and at worst like an enraged cybercat. No, he didn’t participate in any such thing, sticking to fellow Decepticons for berth partners; but his warriors deserved pleasure and comfort after a hard battle.

To the victor go the spoils.

At least, that was what he had always believed.

He purged again, only just managing to hold himself upright this time, as though his tanks had rebelled against his thoughts.

:Lord Megatron?:

Megatron heaved again before wiping his mouth roughly and checking his chronometer. It would be an unpleasant time to be contacted even if he hadn’t found himself staring down at the thick black oil swirling into the drain, hoping it would take his nightmare with it.

:What is it, Shockwave?:

There was a small pause, and Megatron immediately knew that Shockwave had picked up that there was something different about his master that morning.

:Are you well, Lord Megatron?:

:It is nothing.: 

:Have you been poisoned?: Shockwave continued as if he had not just been dismissed. :It was the Autobot, wasn’t it? I’ll have his helm for thi--:

:Shockwave!: A small, shocked in-vent on the other side of the commlink. :I am fine. Why did you
contact me?:

Shockwave, likely unconvinced of his leader’s well being, hesitated before answering.
:Blackarachnia has arrived on Armada.:  

“"You know," said Sari, staring morosely at her empty cup of soda. "When Dad asked me why I didn't want to be a scientist, the number two reason I cited was sleep-deprivation."

"Justice never sleeps," said Sentinel, discreetly adjusting his optic sensors. His neural circuitry was beginning to ache.

"Yeah well justice might not, Batman, but I'm pretty sure you do. You haven't scrolled for fifteen minutes."

Caught, Sentinel coughed and flipped to the next page of data.

"There is no time for recharge. Even as we speak, DMC could be leaking unknown quantities of intelligence to the Decepticons."

"Yeah, but what kind of intelligence? So far, all we've found are a bunch of song references and some mention of old battlefield sites. Unless Autobot heads explode when you play the Empyrean Suite backwards or something, I'm not sure how this is going to help the 'Cons."

Sentinel groaned in frustration. "It must be some sort of code. I hated code-breaking back in officer training."

Sari snickered. "You, in officer training? You sure you weren't just stamped out as a drill sergeant?"

"I had to learn, same as the others. Even Ultra Magnus," said Sentinel. "No Autobot is brought online with military coding. We're not Decepticons."

Sari shrugged, "Whatever, Robocop. My point still stands. Unless we can crack this code, all this info is going to be about as useful to us as a combine harvester on an egg farm."

Sentinel was far too tired to parse any of her organic nonsense.

"Ideally we should question DMC himself, as he would have constructed the code--"

"Or herself," piped Sari. "Gender equality also includes criminal activities."

"--but there is almost no information here concerning their identity or personal life." Sentinel frowned at the pad in front of him. "It looks like Shockwave may have been attempting to track them down, but his notes on the subject are limited to ‘Iacon’, ‘clubbing’ and ‘nauseating taste in energon’, which could describe roughly a million Autobots."

"So DMC lives in Iacon," said Sari. "Or comes here to go dancing? What are some good clubs in the city?"

Sentinel opened his mouth and she held up a servo, "Wait, nevermind, I forgot I was talking to Mr.
Allergic to Fun.”

“I’ve been to a club before,” said Sentinel, indignant. “Optimus and I were always getting dragged down to the Wheel Well by Eli--” He broke off and bit his glossa so hard he tasted energon.

Sari stared at him.

Avoiding her gaze, Sentinel shuffled a couple of datapads and swallowed.

“What I’m saying is that there’s a list of facilities and their locations, available through the business licensing bureau.”

She was quiet so long that his tanks twisted.

“We don’t just need a list,” she said at last, mercifully not mentioning his slip. “We need to know what's in, what's popular, who serves the crappiest drinks and plays these songs that DMC keeps shoving in there. We need somebody who frequents these places. And with Jazz and Bumblebee off-planet, that might be difficult.”

Sentinel thought for several long moments. “There may be someone,” he said at last. “But we'll need to visit the medical facility.”

Several cycles passed—at least, what passed for structured time units on Armada—and as impossible as it seemed, Optimus began to settle into a sort of routine. He quit mentally debating whether this was better or worse than the fall he had from from the Elite Guard and into a maintenance team. It certainly carried many of the same dreary responsibilities, as Megatron kept finding new locations in the headquarters for Optimus to clean. Still, the tasks so far had been neither overly difficult nor dangerous, and so Optimus focused his surplus processor power on gathering information to formulate an escape plan.

His trust in Cyclonus had not yet been proven to be misplaced. The older mech had been kind enough to acquire a small cleaning drone for him, even if it was somewhat glitchy.

Alright, really glitchy, Optimus thought, watching it tremble and bubble cleaning fluid under itself like a new-sparked protoform being told about Megatron before recharge.

Optimus had no time to inspect it however, as he found himself subject to a similar sensation in his tanks when he spotted three unfortunately familiar warbuilds heading down the long hall towards him. They all wore identical expressions, which were not dissimilar to three fat cybercats forced to rely on hunting before their lonely owner’s corpse was discovered. Gripping the shaft of his mop, Optimus swiped cleansing fluid from underneath his drone and focused on spreading as thick a layer on the floor as he could, trying to appear as if he didn't notice them.

“Well, if it isn’t the expensive whore,” hissed Motorbite through his curved mandibles. “Cleaning up the mess you made with the Autobot-loving spawn, no doubt.”

Optimus rolled his optics, but kept his guard up and didn't respond. Motorbite’s companions snickered, though Optimus was fairly sure the laughter was half-fake.

Metalburn, who was looking better with his hands reattached, crossed his arms and glowered at
Optimus. “I’m itching for a re-match, mechs. Why don’t we use the doll to lure Cyclonus out?”

“I don’t know,” said the sleaze, whose name Optimus hadn’t caught in the last encounter. “My HUD says he really is Megatron’s new squeeze, and there’s a couple, uh, interesting punishments if we do anything to disturb him.”

Metalburn squinted down at Optimus. Optimus cleared his intake with a cough and tried to look innocent. He didn’t stop mopping.

“Well, let’s not do anything to disturb him then,” said Metalburn in a tone that insinuated he was planning to do exactly that. The warbuild then reached into his subspace and pulled out a bag of what Optimus recognized as energon jelly. The stuff looked about five stellar cycles past its expiration date, and it wobbled semi-sentiently in its transparent plastic container, leaving a film of all the colors except that of the intense magenta it was supposed to be.

Metalburn grinned at Optimus’s disgusted expression. “Why don’t we help him out instead?” He shoved his hand in the gelatinous goop before tossing it to the more reluctant Motorbite. Taking his coated hand, Metalburn wrote PET on the wall in sloppy glyphs. Stepping back, he smirked, clearly pleased with his own wit.

Motorbite grimaced, his disgust making him less creative. He only threw his handful at the wall with a splatter, narrowly avoiding the placard hung next to a nearby office door for some weirdo named Clench. Just enough of the expired monstrosity survived the impact to slowly slide down, settling to the floor like a concussed space slug.

“Come on, Razorwire. Your turn.”

Razorwire, the sleaze, giggled and followed his leader’s example, enthusiastically writing SPAWN-LOVER, WHORE and another word that was too obscene and convoluted to be anything but Decepticon in origin. “How’s that?”

“Fantastic,” grumbled Optimus sarcastically. It was fast becoming difficult to believe that most Decepticons were far older than he was. “Now, protoforms, finger-painting is over, so move along before I have to call your teacher.”

The three mechs stopped snorting to each other over their graffiti and looked over at Optimus. Metalburn took a decisive step towards him. “Think you’re funny, huh, whore?”

“Uh, Metalburn?” said Motorbite, his expression fearful. “What about-?”

“Megatron doesn’t need to find out anything. He’ll find himself a prettier whore and forget about this one in no time.” Metalburn took another step, this time followed by his now less-hesitant companions.

And then, with a yelp, all three of them slipped and fell on their afts, in the cleaning fluid Optimus had spread on the floor in front of himself.

Optimus moved quickly--there was no way a fall would stop them for long. He dashed forward, skating behind them on the soapy layer, and swung at the nearest with his mop as if he were playing the human sport Sari called “hockey.”

Motorbite let out a yelp of dismay as he went careening down the slick hallway down which Optimus had come. Two more quick strikes and Metalburn and Razorwire went sailing after him crashing at the very end of the corridor into a groaning, tangled mess of metal.
Like pit do I need Megatron, thought Optimus to himself with a satisfied smile. Lot of good his ‘protection’ did anyway. Still, just to be sure, he slipped into the office, hurriedly rolling in his cleaning equipment after him--wouldn't do to leave it behind to be smashed by his immature tormentors--and locked the door.

Only to realize, as he turned around and stared at the face of a very startled mech, a boxy warframe with blue plating and yellow highlights, bent over a desk strewn with an extensive collection of valve stimulators and… related items sticking up like an obscene and colorful forest, that he had--for the second time in less than a decacycle--walked in on someone.

The mechanism was frozen, one of the interface toys in one servo and a polishing mesh in the other, clearly in the act of cleaning the toy. “Uh…” the mech said, his expression not unlike an electro-toad contemplating its life before meeting its fate in front of a wheel. “I forgot to lock the door, didn’t I?”

“Yeah,” Optimus shrugged, his sense of embarrassment having been on strike since cycle three of his Armada visitation. He reviewed the placard he’d glimpsed on his rush through the door. “Can’t say I’m ungrateful for it though. Nice collection there, Clench.”

He was trying to lighten the mood, but to his surprise, rather than laughing or making a lewd remark, Clench blanched, optics darting. The jagged fins on his helm twitched and he appeared to be thinking very quickly. “What do you want?” he said at last, voice low.

“Huh?” said Optimus.

“Don’t play dumb,” snapped Clench. “I can’t kill Megatron’s slave, and I can’t have you running your mouth off. What do you want in exchange for keeping quiet and forgetting you ever saw anything?”

Optimus was growing more mystified by the moment. “What exactly am I supposed be forgetting I saw?”

Clench’s optics narrowed, “Is that supposed to be some sort of joke?”

“You mean the ‘facing toys? What do you care? Nothing’s illegal on Armada, right?”

“You grounders wouldn’t understand,” Clench’s tone was growing more alarmed and a touch desperate. “I can’t have my soldiers thinking I’m some hard-up who can’t get a piece of aft!” His huge servos curled into fists and Optimus shifted nervously, eying the door. “I’m a general, I can frag anyone I want!” Clench’s shoulders slumped and he looked vaguely guilty. “I just… want to relax by myself sometimes, alright?!”

“Listen,” said Optimus, edging slowly back while trying to appear as if he wasn’t, “I’m still not one hundred percent certain what you’re on about but I don’t understand why this is a big deal. Who cares if you own ‘facing toys? I’ve got half a dozen at home, or at least I did until that time Bumblebee raided my collection on Earth.”

Well, in all fairness, it was either Bumblebee or Ratchet who had been in his room before they disappeared, Optimus just didn’t want to contemplate a reality where Ratchet stole valve stimulators.

Clench’s optics rounded, “But you’re Megatron’s--how the slag do you have the energy?”

Optimus nearly swallowed his own glossa. “Alright, change of topic! You want me to go away and forget I ever saw anything, I’m dying to escape this conversation, what would you be willing to trade to ensure my silence?”
“What?” said Clench, looking caught off guard.

Optimus shrugged. “You want me to keep quiet. That means lying to Megatron.” He glanced purposely at the floor, eying Clench out of the corner of his optic. “I could end up as scrap. Make me a good offer.”

Clench’s expression shifted to one of dawning despair. “I can’t let you go, it’s not worth my plating.”

“Didn’t think so,” said Optimus. “How about…” He thought hard: something small, something that wouldn’t raise too much suspicion. “A datapad, a blank burner one, hard to trace, and with extranet access. They must exist.”

Clench looked like he’d swallowed stale oil. “I--”

“It’s alright,” said Optimus, smiling in encouragement. “It’ll be our little secret.”

He felt more than a little bad about the way that Clench slumped, his masked and mostly expressionless face somehow managing to look forlorn, but if it got him something that could be the key to his release…

Well, he’d find a way to live with himself. Desperate times and all that. A Decepticon general was far from innocent, anyway.

“Fine. Come back tomorrow at this time,” said Clench. “You’ll have your stinking pad.”

“Thank you,” said Optimus. No reason not to be polite. He listened at the door for a moment. “I’ll be on my way then.”

“Yeah, yeah,” grumbled Clench. “Slag it, Megatron better watch his back with you, grounder.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” said Optimus, sliding the door open. “I’m just a house slave.”

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Excerpted from Venus Magazine

Freezon’s Flotsam

Cycle 013

By Freezon

Prisoner or Pampered Pet? Megatron’s New Slave.

There was much speculation and murmurs at our magazine offices when we received word from an inside source that...
“Like, I have to check on the slaves and stuff, right? And you know, it’s totally boring! Just you know, seeing if any

Well! Either Megatron's taste doesn't lean towards the “painted buymech” variety--a possibility, considering his last fe

“And that's not even the best part. The slave isn't just any Autobot, it’s Optimus Prime. The mech who got Lord Me

Take that in for a moment, dear readers. We certainly needed one to remember how to in-vent properly. Before we co

The identity of Megatron's new slave certainly does throw some interesting new light on the situation. The conflict wit

So what do you think, readers? Was our illustrious leader smitten on the battlefield and just couldn't rest until he had !

Toodles!

Chapter End Notes

Clearly, we're not planning on being very nice to Megatron to kick his aft to character development. Fortunately at least, this was the only explicit noncon scene that will actually appear in Battlesleep, but there will continue to be implications surrounding the dark aspects of Decepticon society, of which Megatron will have to confront about to himself. He's going to have a lot to think about as the story progresses.

Sorry about the lateness as well!

- Reya
Despite the copious amount of leverage he had applied, Optimus did not actually expect Clench to follow through on his promise. Yet when he returned to Clench’s office the next cycle, the Decepticon only scowled at him before motioning him inside.

“Here,” said Clench, once the door was closed. He produced a datapad from his subspace. “Blank pad, just like you asked. It has an extranet hookup.”

Optimus accepted the pad and scrutinized it. “Isn’t it kind of… big?” he questioned; it filled his hands to overflowing, the screen nearly as wide as his head.

Clench looked at him in puzzlement. “It’s standard size.”

Right. Blasted, oversized warbuilds.


“One last thing, grounder.” Clench said, and Optimus paused to look back at him, bracing his new datapad against his chest, just in case he had to sprint out with it. Clench gave him a thunderous look, as though daring him to lie. “Who was the wheelgrinder that wrote that slag on my office wall?”

Optimus hid a smile and feigned a look of confusion. “Uh, I think it was three mechs who came by while I was cleaning. Their designations were Razorwire, Metalburn and…I can’t remember the third.” He couldn’t be too obvious.

“Motorbite,” said Clench, red optics narrowing.

“Yeah, I think so,” said Optimus. “What they did was pretty disgusting. I’ll make sure to remove it.”

“Good. You do that.” Clench stood, and Optimus leaped aside to let his massive bulk pass through the sliding doors. “I’m going to pay those three a visit. Show them what happens when they call General Clench a pet.”

It was petty revenge, perhaps, but Optimus couldn’t help but feel upbeat about it. He hummed a half-remembered tune under his breath as he washed the muck off Clench’s wall before continuing his route from the previous cycle.

It wasn’t until Optimus was on one of the higher, fancier floors, similar to the one Cyclonus had taken him, when the cleaning drone started to malfunction more than usual.

The halls of the Deltaran Medical Facility were rank with disinfectant and Sentinel found himself instinctively relaxing at the familiar scent. Beside him, Sari sneezed, her organic optics leaking.
“Good grief,” she said. “What is that? It smells like senior citizens taking a bath in ammonia.” A disturbed look crossed her face. “Now that I think about it, it smells just like the decontamination room in Dad’s lab.”

“That is the scent of cleanliness and good organization,” declared Sentinel.

“Sheesh. No wonder Ultra Magnus liked you so much. It’s like if I pull your string you’ll say one of ten actual military phrases!”

A door burst open ahead of them and several mechanisms charged through, pushing a gurney.

“Out of the way!” one of the medics barked, and Sentinel barely snatched Sari off the floor as the crash cart barreled past. The mechanism on the cart groaned, turning over and vomiting directly off the head of the gurney, leaving a trail of black oil behind them. They vanished through the doors through which Sentinel and Sari had come, which slammed shut on a thin trail of black pedeprints from the nurse who’d been unfortunate enough to be trailing the entourage.

“Huh,” said Sari. “Now it smells like Dad’s machine shop next to the decontamination chamber.”

Sentinel groaned. “Let’s just find Blurr.”

“What happened to him, anyway?” said Sari. “We never really saw him after he left Earth. I asked Ratchet but he just did that thing where he pretends he’s losing his hearing.”

“Agent Blurr was injured in the line of duty,” said Sentinel. He coughed uncomfortably. “According to his initial debriefing following his removal from a...garbage incinerator, he was nearly deactivated by Shockwave when he inadvertently uncovered Shockwave’s true identity and attempted to alert Autobot High Command.”

Sari’s optics went wide. “A garbage incinerator? How is he alive?”

“Elite Guards are made of sterner stuff,” said Sentinel, puffing instinctively before remembering that he was no longer counted among them. “Though...from what I understand, it was a close thing. Blurr was nearly crushed into scrap.”

Sari blanched. “And no one slagging contacted me? I knew Blurr! I could have helped!”

Sentinel blinked at her. “How could you help? You’re not a medical worker.”

Sari’s face screwed up and she reached under one of those disturbing organic layers she often wore over her chassis, yanking out a small item on a bit of cord.

“With my Key, duh! I can’t believe Ratchet would keep this from me!” Sari said.

“Medical Officer Ratchet wasn’t privy to the details regarding Agent Blurr’s retrieval,” Sentinel said automatically, even as he squinted at the object in Sari’s servo. It did look distinctly key-like. “What is this thing? What does it do?”

Sari shrugged. “Whatever I want it to. I mean, sort of. Sometimes it does what it wants. But I can heal bots with it! I did it all the time on Earth!”

Sentinel boggled at her. “Where did you get something like that?”

“Well, it used to just be a keycard, but then I found the Allspark--”

“The Allspark ?” yelped Sentinel. “Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?”
Sari made a face. “Yeah, yeah, Optimus already gave me the rundown about a million times. ‘Sari that's dangerous.’ ‘Sari we don't fully understand what it does.’ ‘Sari stop upgrading your toys into low-level nuclear weapons.’ I can be responsible you know. And if Blurr's hurt, I wanna help!”

Sentinel stared at her. If she was telling the truth, this miniature technorganic was potentially packing more firepower than a Decepticon. She was a threat to public safety. She should be confined, quarantined from the general population, according to what every rule and regulation told him...

Sari looked up at him, her expression earnest and innocent, and Sentinel felt his tanks turn. What was he thinking? She was a youngling, exuberant and unthinking but not dangerous. She was like...

Like the Twins.

“Hello?” said Sari, waving her servo at him.

Sentinel coughed sharply to cover his lapse. “Fine. If Optimus was too much of a coward to use a tool that presents itself, far be it from me to follow his example. We’ll try your Key, if Blurr agrees.”

Sari broke into a wide smile and launched herself ahead of him. “Come on.”

Say what you would about Decepticon meetings, but they were hardly boring. They were, however, expensive. The windows of the conference room would have to be replaced again, Megatron thought, as the current ones shattered outwards under the weight of Blitzwing’s chair, which he'd been aiming at Blackarachnia. He’d missed, of course; the femme had ducked before transforming into her spider mode and scuttling up the wall, crowing and taunting the triple-changer.

The rest of Megatron’s elite military officers were currently engaged in egging Blitzwing on, arguing with each other, or otherwise hurling insults at no one in particular in hopes of impressing each other or Megatron. They needn’t have bothered; at this moment, Megatron would have found a synchronized group of dancing scraplets more impressive.

Megatron silently thanked the Allspark that at least Straxus wasn’t here. The mech had been appointed Lord Governor of Lucifer--a hastily invented title that Megatron had pinned on him to get him off Armada, which mysteriously decreased the number of assassination attempts levied against Megatron by half. Ever since then, Straxus had been getting...stranger, if that were possible.

Moving his legs aside to allow the delivery bots to install a new table--he’d put in a call as soon as Blitzwing’s face had spun into red--Megatron found himself in the strange circumstance of feeling annoyed by his officers’ behavior.

It was a peculiar sensation; before, he probably would have taken bets.

Resting his elbows on the new table, Megatron folded his fingers together and surveyed the chaos. He resisted the urge to rub his helm to soothe the ache he could feel nipping at his circuits. “That is enough,” he said at last.

He had to give his officers some credit; the room immediately went quiet, aside from Blackarachnia’s skittering steps as she crawled across the ceiling.

“Blackarachnia, if you please,” Megatron said, his tone making it clear it was not a suggestion. The
femme appeared displeased, but she was not a fool, and she immediately dropped from the ceiling to seat herself at the end of the conference table.

“Next on the agenda, I believe,” Megatron nodded to Magnificus, who was taking minutes, “is for you to report your whereabouts after you left Earth.”

Blackarachnia eyed him with a sour expression, no doubt considering what to tell him.

Megatron scowled and answered the unspoken question. “The truth.”

“It was the sniveling little Autobot fool, Shockwave’s chump,” Blackarachnia said. “I convinced him I could give him the power to get revenge on the Autobots if I turned him into a technorganic with transwarp energy. He didn’t like the results. Next thing I know, the slagging idiot explodes, and I wake up in some spark-forsaken backwater planet at the aft-end of the galaxy.”

Megatron frowned. “And I am to believe you hitchhiked back to Armada?”

“Pretty much,” said Blackarachnia. “I wasn’t the only bot on that planet. Ran into some idealistic back-to-nature types. Ugh, they were insufferable, worse than Op--worse than old friends. But they had a ship. I helped them repair the transwarp core and they dropped me off on Kobol on the way to wherever they were going, and none too soon. If I had to listen to that insufferable gearshaft Primal read another passage from his botany monograph, I’d have disabled my audio sensors.”

Beside Megatron, Shockwave stiffened slightly. “Primal, did you say?” Shockwave’s tone was distinctly uneasy and his field spiked with agitation.

“Yeah, what of it?” said Blackarachnia. “It’s not like they were soldiers. Primal told me they were on an exploration mission and got stranded.”

“Did this Primal have a title?” said Shockwave.

Blackarachnia’s many optics narrowed. “Maybe, I don’t remember.”

“Try,” said Megatron.

Blackarachnia let out a put-upon sigh. “I don’t know, maybe Major, Minor, something like that?”

“Primal Major,” said Shockwave, his tone flat. “I don’t suppose you caught the name of the ship?”

“You are entirely too much of a pest for someone with no actual flight engines,” said Blackarachnia, her tone venomous; Shockwave’s servos clenched, claws gouging tracks into the surface of the table. “I think it was the Axalon or something, alright?”

“At least I am a Decepticon by choice, rather than convenience,” Shockwave spat back. “Come here and say that to my--”

“Quiet!” said Megatron. “Shockwave, explain.”

Shaking with rage, Shockwave leapt to his pedes. “This worthless turncoat is clearly a traitor to both causes. The Axalon was the codename for the first fruits of Project Omega: Alpha Supreme. He was bonded to Primal Major and lost during the Silvart War, thought destroyed when he was sucked into a black hole.”

Blackarachnia’s optics widened. “What? Are you joking? That grass-smoking monkey was an Autobot general?”
“Not only an Autobot general,” said Shockwave, “the key to controlling an Omega Sentinel. A key which you had right in front of you and yet did not even attempt to seize.” His optic glowed and his field flashed with smug triumph.

“Uh… oops?”

The Autobot flagship and an Omega Sentinel in less than a stellar cycle, and they had both managed to slip through his grasp. The threatening twinge in Megatron’s circuits bloomed into a full-on ache. “Sit down, Shockwave.”

Shockwave did so, with a haughty sniff. “This is always what happens when you allow grounders into the ranks.”

“Hilarious, coming from you,” said Blitzwing. He was mid-way through switching personas to laugh, but was thrown from his chair when Shockwave shot him in the faceplates.

“Enough,” said Megatron. “If I have to replace this table again in the next cycle, you will both be assigned cleaning duty.”

“What sort of cleaning is there left to do?” cackled Blitzwing. “Your little Autobot has done it all! He just needs his maid outfit.”

“Autobot?” asked Blackarachnia.

“I will not stand here and be degraded by a science experiment!” said Shockwave.

“How dare you talk back to the great and glorious Megatron!” Lugnut burst out and stood, his need to defend his beloved leader apparently overwhelming his need to obey Megatron’s orders when he’d told the lot of them to hush.

“Lugnut, quiet!” ordered Strika, and Lugnut obeyed, although it had likely less to do with her command and more with her kicking him in the pedes. The room exploded with shouting once more.

“All of you be silent!” said Megatron. The room rang in the wake of his shout and he pinched the bridge of his nasal ridge. “What is done is done. Strika, please pass on the information that the Autobots may have access to another Omega Sentinel in the near future, and adjust any defense stratagems accordingly.”

Silence greeted his statement. Megatron looked up to find all of them staring at him.

“Uh,” said Strika. “Lord Megatron, are you well?”

Megatron’s spinal struts prickled with unease, feeling as though he’d somehow made some kind of error.

“I am perfectly well, Strika,” he said. Across the table, he saw Strika and Blitzwing exchange a glance and he straightened, arranging his faceplates into a severe expression. “And I do not believe I misspoke.”

“Of course not, Lord Megatron,” said Strika, after entirely too long a pause. “I shall do so right away.”

“Hold the commline,” said Blackarachnia. “What were you saying about an Autobot--”

She was interrupted by an explosive noise and Megatron’s vision went white. He clawed at his
optimics, half-thinking he'd been blinded in some kind of acid attack, when he realized there was foam on his servos and everything smelled strongly of cleanser. He wiped his face and caught a glimpse of the other attendants staggering about the meeting room, shouting about an attack and firing blindly into the foam. Mostly the latter. Megatron ducked to avoid a plasma bolt, scanning among the thick jungle of bubbles for the source of the extreme hygiene.

“Assassins!” Lugnut bellowed. “Get down, Lord Megatron!”

*Oh, slag.*

Megatron managed to fling himself from his chair just in time to avoid his boisterous lieutenant’s “life-saving” tackle, falling to the ground as the half-blind Lugnut flew over him and left a massive hole in the wall behind him.

Even as Decepticon staff meetings went, this was becoming more chaotic than usual.

And then he found the origin of the chaos: Optimus Prime, fighting a losing battle with a rebellious cleaning drone. The Prime had the drone leashed with his hoses, struggling to bring it to heel. For a moment it seemed he might succeed, but he slipped and fell on his faceplates. The drone whirred and beeped in victory, and shut down a klick later, oozing a last few squirts of its soapy ammunition.

Megatron laughed.

He couldn’t remember the last time he had done so with such joviality, but he couldn't help it. Sprawled on the floor, covered with suds, he laughed and laughed until his vocalizer ached and his vision buzzed with static.

It was then he realized that the room was utterly silent. Megatron looked up.

Around him, the battle had ceased, the suds settling into broad white drifts on the floor. Every mechanism, to a one, was staring at Megatron.

“Optimus?”

Every mechanism save Blackarachnia.

Megatron’s circuits iced over. In a moment his battle computer had made a dozen calculations: evaluations of the room’s climate, his officers’ varying threat levels, the risk that he might be put at if he did not manage to salvage the situation and maintain his composure.

Across the room, Optimus turned in Blackarachnia’s direction and his optics widened. “Eli--”

: *Quiet.* :

Optimus actually flinched and Megatron modulated his voice across the comms, scrambling, his processor in disarray, aware only that this was not the time for...whatever this was. :You may speak to her later,: he said hastily, uncertain why he did so. :For now, keep quiet and come here.: 

Optimus narrowed his optics and he seemed to swell with rage. Half panicking, though he could not have articulated precisely why, Megatron did the only thing he could think to do.

He strode over and scooped Optimus off the floor.

The small mech’s field radiated many different emotions, none of them pleasant. Megatron made his way back to his seat, placing Optimus on his lap and pasting a smugly superior smile on his own
faceplates. Optimus Prime’s field buzzed with rage and humiliation, as uncomfortable against him as the spikes of a harinezumi’s back, and Megatron’s vents hiccups slightly at the contact.

“Well, it was most certainly an unorthodox way, but I think we can thank my little slave for giving us a wash. Some of us sorely needed it, isn’t that correct, Gutcruncher?” said Megatron, nodding to the large green warframe. “Lugnut, place the table the right way around.”

Gutcruncher stammered, likely dazed at being cleaner than he had ever been since the day of his forging. His lack of hygiene had been a common complaint, meaning that it had resulted in the deaths of at least six mechs of which Megatron was aware. Despite his own feigned nonchalance, Megatron was more concerned with Blackarachnia, who was poorly concealing her rage. She was smiling, but the fake expression was strangled, and all four of her optics were wide.

She knew Optimus Prime, clearly. How? And Optimus had addressed her, or at least begun to address her, by another designation.

*Perhaps this might explain Blackarachnia’s...preference for certain shell frametypes in her work on Operation: Doppelgänge.*

Despite Megatron’s misgivings, the meeting continued in relative peace by Decepticon standards, which meant only one mechanism left requiring an appointment with their medic. Optimus Prime’s field softened from spines to a faint prickle. With no small amount of relief, Megatron dismissed his officers.

Blackarachnia was the last to leave, her gaze switching between Megatron and Optimus, as if unable to decide who to glare at, transforming and retreating into the safety of darkness. Megatron burst a brief command to Shockwave to keep an optic on her, before letting out a great sigh and lowering his gaze to the Autobot in his lap.

“You may leave now if you wish,” Megatron said. Optimus Prime rose stiffly, as though recently woken from recharge or deep thought. For a moment Megatron felt the urge to keep Optimus beside him, but Optimus’s field snapped out, a sharp bite against his own, and Megatron remembered himself.

Optimus slipped off his lap and stood, and Megatron leaned back in his chair, letting out a quiet sigh as he watched the bot go. He was thankful that he had concocted a suitable explanation for trading the Steelhaven to Megazarak, and that Starscream was no longer around to poke holes in his orders and explanations, but Megatron was under no illusions about the precariousness of his current position.

The effect Optimus Prime had been having on him was intensifying. He needed a solution, and he needed it fast.

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The following are the minutes from the Decepticon Staff Meeting.

Meeting facilitator was Lord Megatron, Lord of the Decepticons.
Item 1: Call to Order

Lord Megatron called to order the regular meeting of the Decepticon Generals and Officers of note on 013:7:026.

Item 2: Roll Call

Officer Shockwave conducted a roll call; the following officers were present:

- General Strika
- General Clench
- Lieutenant Lugnut
- Lieutenant Blitzwing
- Lieutenant Gutcruncher
- Lieutenant Deathsaurus
- Lieutenant Scrash
- Lieutenant Skystalker
- Officer Shockwave
- Officer Blackarachnia
- Officer Oil Slick
- Officer Magnificus

Generals Starscream and Straxus were deceased and "a creepy fragging afthead", respectively, and thus were excused from the meeting.

Item 3: Approval of Minutes from Last Meeting

All attendees were advised to “shut their exhaust pipes and listen up” before Lieutenant Blitzwing rose to read the minutes. He did so in rhyming verse, after which he advised the attendees form a conga line. The minutes were approved as read.

Item 4: Organizer's Remarks

Lord Megatron rose and addressed the attendees, giving a moving and complimentary speech that simultaneously re...
Item 5: Announcements, Issues and Questions

Attendees were congratulated on the absence of Decepticon fatalities in headquarters during the last stellar cycle. Th

Lord Megatron announced the capture of the Steelhaven, flagship of the Autobot fleet, a piece of plunder that will surr

Blackarachnia rose to make an announcement, only to be interrupted by Blitzwing, who inquired why a “slagging grou

Blackarachnia rose and detailed the events which led to her return to Armada. It was revealed that she had hitchhiker

Item 6: New Proposals from the Next Stellar Cycle

Following an attempted assassination by a slave wielding a cleaning drone, General Strika outlined her new proposal

Item 7: Additional Business

Officer Shockwave levied a complaint regarding the destruction of the suggestion box. Lieutenant Lugnut indicated th

Item 8: Adjournment

Lord Megatron adjourned the meeting. Lieutenant Scrash had to be aided by Lieutenant Skystalker in leaving soon aft

Minutes submitted by Magnificus.
Minutes approved by all officers present.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the lateness, Zuzu and I were in the middle of planning and going to Monterey.
Also since it came up during the beta reading, this would be a harinezumi: http://tfwiki.net/wiki/Harinezumi
Blurr's room was located on the top floor, as indicated to Sentinel and Sari by the severe-looking medibot manning the nurse station. She'd proceeded to spend a good ten klicks explaining to them the behavioral requirements for visiting the trauma unit, staring at them disdainfully down a nasal ridge that would have put the crags of the Manganese Mountains to shame.

“And if I so much as think that you might overexcite the patients,” she said, “I’ll feed you your own badge!”

The last remark was clearly aimed at Sentinel, who had been waving his badge at her since she’d started to turn irate. He didn't have a clue why; maybe some bots just had trouble with authority. Nevertheless, he drew himself up, fully prepared to read her the riot act.

“Madam, I--ow!” A sharp pain in his leg sent him down on one knee.

“Excuse my partner, Medical Officer Retractor,” said Sari sweetly, digging her elbow further into Sentinel's knee joint. He kept forgetting she had a proper metallic endoskeleton under those layers of organic gunk. “Of course we understand the rules. Thank you so much for explaining. We'll just be on our way then?”

Retractor humphed. “Fine. But keep a leash on that one. It's a senior officer’s job to get the rookie to behave.”

Sentinel spluttered. “I am the senior--ouch!”

“What is it with you, Sentinel?” Sari said, her voice a harsh but clearly audible whisper. “She isn’t an enemy. Hasn’t anyone ever told you that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar?”

“Anybot can be an enemy,” Sentinel declared. “What are honey and vinegar anyway?”

Sari raised an eyebrow. “Better not tempt people into becoming your enemies then. You hear yourself there, Batman? Anybot?”

Sentinel looked away, trying to organize his ruffled thoughts. It galled him to admit it, but he had been behaving like a rookie.

“Stubborn bag didn’t want to give me any direct answers,” he muttered.

Sari glared at him, but thankfully didn’t say anything further. They proceeded to Blurr’s room in silence, up another lift and down a corridor.

“Okay,” said Sari, “second, third, fourth, here’s the one!”

Sentinel reached for the control panel just as the door whooshed open, and he jumped back, nearly colliding with Sari. A surprisingly familiar bot emerged, the doors shutting behind him.

“Kup Major, sir!” Sentinel said, snapping into automatic parade stance before he remembered that he hadn’t been Kup’s recruit in a million stellar cycles. “What are you doing here?”

“At ease, soldier,” said Kup, mouth pursed to the side as if he still held his ever-present cygar
between his lips—he was likely forced to give it up before entering the hospital. “I’m here same as you, to pay my respects to a fellow soldier.” He eyed Sentinel doubtfully. “That is why you’re here, ain’t it?”

“Um,” said Sentinel, feeling himself wilt under Kup’s evaluating stare. He looked down at his damningly empty servos. “Of course! It’s uh, our duty as Autobots to support our fellows in times of need.”

Sari buzzed around with a loud, high-pitched greeting, but Kup didn’t seem perturbed by her presence. He merely tipped his helm at her before focusing back on Sentinel.

Kup shook his helm and sighed. “Sentinel, you were no good at lying in boot camp and you’re no better now.”

Sentinel stared at the floor. “We’re here on Autobot Intelligence business,” he said. Even though he’d technically outranked Kup for stellar cycles, he hated how the bot could still make him feel like a squeaky-wheeled recruit.

“Ain’t nothing wrong with that,” Kup said, “but you could have at least brought a card. Now, everyone’s always judging old Kup for the way his memory banks are going, but even I know you and Blurr were in boot camp together, back in the day. Though I recall you mostly hung around that one femme and the kid who was right handy with an axe. What were their designations?”

“Optimus and Elita, sir.” Sentinel almost felt offended on their behalf that Kup would forget, but the old bot always did have terrible memory circuits. “Optimus had the highest score on record in the Decepticon battle simulator.” At least until Rodimus, but Sentinel found that little hotshot even more obnoxious than Optimus.

What in the name of Vector Sigma had possessed him to say that? Sentinel was always the first to tell Optimus when he was being a useless waste of space, but to hear Kup overlook him felt somehow...wrong. As much as it made Sentinel feel overshadowed, Optimus had taken on several Decepticons, in close combat no less. Optimus had even rescued Sentinel when he’d gotten on the wrong side of that horrible organic with the habit of beheading bots, and been polite enough to keep his mouth shut.

“Ah, yes. Those were the ones,” said Kup. “My point is, you could have at least brought a gift.”

“We did!” piped Sari, tugging out her Key and displaying it to Kup.

The old bot squinted at it without comprehension. “Well, at least it’s something,” he said. “Be nice to him now, the kid’s in rough shape. I gotta head out. Itching for a smoke and the nephew’s in town, so we’re headed down to the old greasy gasket for a drink.”

“Of course,” Sentinel said through gritted dental plates.

Kup waved at them and took off down the hall. Sari watched him go, frowning.

“What did he mean by ‘nephew’?” she said. “Did he use the wrong word? I’ve never had trouble understanding you guys, but Ratchet said my datatracks for Galactic Standard might be kind of buggy with the whole ‘technorganic thing’. Personally, I think that was code for ‘I have no fragging idea how you function so I’m just going to keep praying and patching you up until something breaks.’”

“I never really got it either. It was an old joke to guess what a ‘nephew’ was, back in boot camp days.” Sentinel shrugged. “Just assumed he was old and fried in the circuits.”
“Huh,” said Sari. “Optimus always said you guys didn’t have families.” She smiled to herself. “He seemed to have no problem being part of mine though.”

Sentinel decided he didn’t really want to know.

The windows in the trauma unit were narrow and the lights dim, Sentinel guessed it was to avoid aggravating sensitive optics. Aggravation awaited them when they entered Blurr’s room anyway. The bot clearly had friends, and not the sort that contented themselves with writing insipid get-well cards. Hanging on the wall were two paintings of that awful type of abstract art that Sentinel could never wrap his processor around. They consisted of little more than a few splotches of blue and black, and a *Get Well Soon - Sunstreaker* was splashed across the lower right in bold, angular glyphs revealing the artist’s identity. It figured. Personally, Sentinel hoped Sunstreaker would get deported off Cybertron one cycle; his last gallery showing of ‘cityscapes’ had clearly been nothing more than a parade of obscenity disguised with a few strategically placed buildings.

A large screen had been mounted on the wall of Blurr’s room, displaying an endless slideshow of condolences, inappropriate pick-up lines, and hospital-related jokes. The colorful lights painted the room in a way that Sunstreaker would be proud of; the crystals littered across the windowsills and end tables, in their colors even more varied than the flashing lights on the screen, intensified the vomited lightshow.

A small whirring noise attracted Sentinel’s attention, and he spotted a small floor fan standing in the far corner. *Your Biggest Fan - Sideswipe* was written at its base. Alright, that was actually somewhat funny, Sentinel had to admit.

The cheerful decorations stood out in glaring contrast to the bot lying prone on the medical berth in the center of the room. Agent Blurr’s face was turned upwards, optics fixed on the ceiling. A thin sheet of insulation was draped over the lower half of his body, the twisted outline of his legs visible through the opaque covering. His colors were an unhealthy, dull shade, and cracks ran through his chassis like miniature canyons.

Sentinel didn’t think he’d ever seen Blurr so still.

“Are you going to stand there until the stars burn out, or are you going to state your business?” said Blurr. Sentinel had always thought his rapid-fire mannerisms were one of the most irritating things on Cybertron, but to hear him speak at normal speed was somehow worse.

“Um,” said Sentinel, scratching at the back of his helm.

Sari was less restrained, and clapped her servos over her mouth before zipping towards Blurr with all the enthusiasm of a short-lived species, perching on the edge of the berth. “You look terrible!” she burst out.

Blurr actually raised an orbital ridge and his optics slid in her direction, his expression a touch incredulous.

“Considering that I have spent the last stellar cycle being hammered back into normal shape following *near-deactivation*, I find your surprise at this fact to be somewhat incredible.” He glanced in Sentinel’s direction. “Sentinel Prime,” he said, “I don’t believe I know to what I owe the pleasure?”

Sentinel coughed. “This is still somewhat of a secret, but Ultra Magnus has recovered, and he has transferred me to Cybertron Intelligence for the time being until I, uh, that is until the mess that resulted following Shockwave’s exposure is sorted out and I can get reinstated with the Elite Guard.”
He wasn’t technically lying. “We’ve been on the trail of an author who we suspect is a Decepticon informant. DMC-12, perhaps you’ve heard of them?”

“The weird porn guy,” Sari said.

“There are a lot of ‘weird porn guys,’” said Blurr. “So many that it’s impossible to keep track of them all, not to mention somewhat unethical to spy on citizens for their sexual preferences, especially sexual preferences that cause no harm to others and are entirely within the realm of the fantastical. Of course, I understand the concern when those sexual preferences shift towards Decepticons.” Blurr paused, fidgeting as if uncomfortable with his words. “However, yes, I am familiar with DMC-12. Before Longa- before Shockwave sent me to Earth, he, ah, gifted me with a copy of DMC’s latest novel.”

Sentinel blinked. “Why would Shockwave have given you a gift?”

Blurr’s optics slid away and he seemed to be considering his words carefully.

“I can only surmise that it was part of his cover, as we were carrying on an affair at the time,” he said stiffly. “In retrospect, based on the title of the book, and...other aspects of our—let us only say that I was a fool to not suspect something.” His tone was bitter. “Perhaps it was because part of his persona was appearing so young that I was led to...overlook some of his behaviors.”

Sentinel nearly swallowed his glossa. “You were ‘facing your commanding officer?’ he yelped. He reviewed this statement. “You were ‘facing a Decepticon and didn’t realize it?’

“If I may remind you,” said Blurr through gritted dental plates, “no one suspected Shockwave’s true identity, until I accidentally blew his cover. I merely supposed that Longarm possessed some….unusual predilections regarding personal relationships.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” said Sentinel.

Blurr’s optics flashed. “Those details are beyond what I owed Autobot High Command in my debriefing, and as such, absolutely none of your business .”

“Ookay,” said Sari. “Clearly there’s some hurt feelings involved here and, uh, we’re kind of getting off-topic.” She flashed a wide smile at Blurr. “How about some better news? I brought my Key, we can try to fix you!”

Blurr stiffened, “I beg your pardon?”

Sari grabbed the Key and pulled it off her neck. “Bumblebee never said anything about it? I was always patching him up on Earth.”

Blurr stared at her. His jaw worked.

“I was told,” he said carefully, “that my speed matrix would likely never recover, and if it did, the gravitational forces exerted on it during maximum running speeds would be enough to crack it once again. That is to say, the condition is irreversible if I understand correctly. Are you implying that you can offer better medical care than the staff at the best hospital in Iacon?”

“Sure!” said Sari. She tossed the Key in her servo and caught it. “And hey, if I fail, you won’t be any worse off than you are now!”

Blurr did not look comforted by this idea in the least, but he sighed. “Very well.”
Sentinel stepped forward, immeasurably curious at what she was about to do. Sari clambered up on Blurr’s chassis and reached down to slot the Key into a space that, Sentinel was massively disturbed to see, actually opened itself in Blurr’s plating. She slid the Key in and turned it.

A burst of blue light came from the artifact, and Sentinel squinted against the bloom. The strange fringes that emerged from Sari’s helm were splayed out in a wide halo and her optics were glowing. The room crackled with power.

A prickle worked its way down Sentinel’s spinal struts. His circuits itched. The Allspark had been lost to Cybertron long before Sentinel was protoformed, but he’d heard veterans of the Great War speak of it: a mysterious relic of incredible, unknowable power from beyond the stars.

For the first time, Sentinel wondered if they should have thought a little harder about exactly where it had come from.

The light faded and Sari let out a deep breath, her optics normal once more.

“Give it a go,” she said to Blurr.

Slowly, painfully, Blurr pushed himself up on his elbows and sat up, staring down at his legs as though afraid to pull back the insulation. His mouth went tight and he snatched it back.

His chassis was whole, complete; it was impossible to tell that he’d been so severely damaged. There were still a handful of scars on Blurr’s chassis, but his superstructure appeared wholly intact once more.

*Slag me*, thought Sentinel. *Now I know why Ratchet kept so quiet about her.*

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Optimus managed to control himself until the hallway had cleared of Decepticons. Blackarachnia had disappeared in the rush, and he hurried down the corridor in what he hoped was the same direction she had gone, scanning frantically for her.

A servo clamped around his wrist and he yelped as he was yanked hard to the side. Doors swished closed behind him, and he stumbled to keep his pedes in the sudden dim.

“Hey there, handsome.”

He jerked, whirling. She eyed him from the shadows; her arms were crossed, one pede braced on the wall behind her. Her smile was venomous.

He swallowed hard, “I thought you were dead.”

“Come now, big guy,” she said. She straightened as she stepped towards him, and he stiffened, taking a reflexive step back. “You of all bots should know that I’m not that easy to kill. Now, why don’t we start asking the really interesting questions. Like what Mr. Model Autobot is doing in this particular Decepticon hive of scum and villainy.”

“There was a breakout from Trypticon prison,” he said. “Megatron captured me on his way out. I thought you knew.”
“Oh, I know the official story,” she said. “Can’t swing a dead turbofox without hitting a gossip column speculating what Megatron and his new Autobot squeeze are up to.” Her four optics narrowed. “An Autobot who hasn’t changed his colors. No, what I want to know is your side of the story. Because I’ve been here a long time, and I know precisely the kind of use those big, lumbering brutes would get out of a tarted-up little bot like you.”

Optimus nearly swallowed his glossa. “Uh, no, I mean. I’m fine. Not fine but Megatron hasn’t—uh, you know.”

She shot him an unimpressed look. “Uh huh. And what exactly does he have you do, if not ‘you know’? Play hax with him?”

“Cleaning, mostly,” said Optimus. “That’s what I was doing when the drone got out of control.”

All four of her orbital ridges crept skywards. The effect was quite unnerving.

“And when you’re not cleaning? Optimus…” She stepped in, uncomfortably close, and he jumped as she slid her arm around his waist and leaned in next to his audio sensor. “I can find a way to get you out of here,” she murmured, almost too quietly for him to catch. “You frag me off, big guy, but I’ve seen what they do to Autobots here, and nobody deserves that.”

“Um,” Optimus swallowed, trying to slow his racing spark and quell the urge to reclaim his personal space. “It’s okay, really.”

Blackarachnia pulled back, puzzled, and searched his face. “Wait. It’s consensual? Damn, Optimus, I didn’t know you had it in you. I mean, I knew about your bad taste with Sentinel and all, but—”

Optimus choked. “No! I mean! No, I mean it’s not consensual—not not consen—we’re not—There’s nothing happening! I don’t want to get you in trouble and…” He covered his face with a groan as he struggled to organize his thoughts. “There’s something going on here, something that...I think I need to stay for now.”

He regretted the words almost as soon as they left his mouth. What was he saying? If Blackarachnia could get him out of here, by hook or by crook, he should be leaping at the opportunity. But he thought of Cyclonus’s cryptic words and Megatron’s strange behavior, and curiosity pricked at him. He also couldn’t have Blackarachnia risk her position here, she’d have nowhere to go if she was caught aiding him.

Blackarachnia frowned. “I don’t know if you’re nutsmad or just naive, but trust me.” She gestured with her free arm. “This? What you’ve seen of Armada? I can guarantee you haven’t even scratched the surface of the bad things that go on here.” Her optics narrowed. “We’re ‘Cons, big guy. We don’t play nice.”

“You weren’t always,” he said pointedly.

Her mouth flattened. “Irrelevant. You want a ticket off this junk heap or not?”

“No,” he said, firm. “But I wouldn’t say no to seeing you again. I’ve been worried about you, Elita.”

“I told you not to call me that,” she said, her expression turning sullen.

“Blackarachnia, then,” he said. “And it doesn’t change the fact that it’s been slagging lonely here with only Megatron’s floor wax for company.”

She muffled a snort of laughter. “I don’t know. Last thing I need is a jealous Decepticon warlord.
dismantling me for scrap.”

“Jealous of what?” he said. “He spends most of his time assigning me jobs in other parts of Headquarters. He’s clearly not interested, thank Vector Sigma. The thing in the meeting was just… pretend.”

Blackarachnia gave him a disbelieving look, but didn’t protest this assertion. “Fine, whatever. Besides, a colorful little bot like you, you’ll need some help keeping the dimsparked idiots who don’t know the difference between ‘no’ and ‘take me, big boy’ off your aft.”

“Sounds like you’ve had experience,” he said.

She gave him a charming smile that showed entirely too many needle sharp fangs. “Let’s just say there’s more than one warframe on Armada who’s had to take a trip down to Scalpel’s office to have venom sucked from somewhere sensitive.”

“That’s not what I was… Blackarachnia, are you… okay?”

“Course I am,” she said brusquely. “I’ve had a lot more practice at this than you. Unless you’ve forgotten how many stellar cycles it’s been since Archa Seven.”

A small silence fell over them, only broken by the skitterings of a small creature in the vents whose identity Optimus decided he did not want to know.

“You think I deliberately avoided saving you to get you out of the way, don’t you?” he said.

She looked at him and said nothing.

Optimus ex-vented. “Yeah, that’s what Sentinel thought too. Even I started to think so after a while.”

“Ugh.” Blackarachnia pressed her palm to her forehead as if trying to contain a helmache. “I am not in the mood for this slag, not this cycle, not ever. Forget I said anything.” And before Optimus could stop her, she transformed and flipped onto the ceiling, scampering off into the darkness.

Optimus sighed, his mood plummeting. He’d been a fool to think she’d warm up so quickly.

His commlink gave a small ping.

He groaned. It was likely Megatron, incapable of leaving him alone and telling him to get back to cleaning, but when he opened it, he blinked in surprise.

It was Blackarachnia’s communications code.

A smile tickled at his lips. Perhaps Armada didn’t just mean madness and fear; perhaps it could mean repairing old relationships as well.

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Cost-Benefit Analysis, by Blitzwing

There once was a mech on Armada
Who drank a bit more than he oughta
And one day while sloshed
He overlooked costs
And his blaster wound up shooting nada

I once met a femme from Benzuli
Who spurned my advances quite cruelly
And although she laughed
The curve of her aft
Matched up with her net demand truly

In the First Cybertronian War
The treasurer's job was a bore
He made compensations
For public relations
And tradeoffs for engex and whores

The Autobots have a tradition
For cadets on their initiation
Involving three shots,
Some marginal costs,
And a risk measuring competition

Chapter End Notes

The wonderful limerick in our excerpt was written by our beta-reader kthonos back when they were editing Ch12! Zuzu and I loved it so much we put it as our excerpt for this chapter, lol.

Speaking of, feel free to make suggestions for any future excerpts. I can't promise that we'll use all of them for plot reasons, but ideas are rather welcome.
-Reya
Sentinel watched as Blurr ran a third rapid lap around the room, stretching his newly reconstructed limbs, and tried not to fidget with impatience.

“So,” Sentinel said, “do you have any intel regarding DMC?”

Blurr materialized beside him and Sentinel jumped. Across the room, Sari muffled a giggle.

“I can do you one better,” said Blurr, optics bright and posture erect. “It just so happens that I was on the tail of a Decepticon spy -- that is to say a Decepticon spy besides Shockwave, but I digress-- before being sent to Earth. I was still in the initial stages of information gathering, but I had managed to ascertain that the spy was residing on Cybertron itself, and that they were involved deeply in the entertainment industry. I had even given this spy a code name, as I lacked any sort of proper designation and I despise not having proper nomenclature with which to do my filing, and thus I dubbed them Flipsides for organizational purposes.”

Sentinel attempted to process this. “So what you're saying is that you think this Flipsides character and DMC-12 might be one and the same?” he hazarded.

“Correct!” said Blurr. “I had not yet managed to determine which arm of the entertainment industry that Flipsides might be involved in, but it stands to reason that the most logical location in which to plant a spy to disseminate seditious rhetoric would be within the writing guilds, where they could both stay out of the spotlight and have their propaganda accessed by a large audience.”

Sari frowned. “Hold the phone, we still can't even figure out exactly what DMC is trying to accomplish. Unless everyone’s having such bad sex on Cybertron that they'd join the Decepticons if someone suggested they might get laid there, I don't see how DMC’s novels would be effective recruiting material.”

Blurr paused at this, considering.

“It’s more complicated than that,” he said at last. “Which is to say, not exactly like that, but it’s somewhat true. There are entire message boards and groups online who believe that the Decepticons are misunderstood or even victimized by the Autobot Commonwealth, and at the heart of their ideas is the poorly written literature. It isn’t even so much the pornography itself, but the frame narratives that paint them as such. Thus they technically count as Decepticon propaganda. Inadvertently or not, DMC-12 has created pockets of sympathetic Autobots that are ripe for recruitment.”

“There’s nothing inadvertent about it!” said Sentinel, indignant that this was even a question. “National security is enough of a mess without these would-be spies running rampant. They should be rounded up and deported!”

Blurr looked troubled. “I fear that way of looking at the situation is far too simplistic. While it is true that Decepticon sympathizers present a significant threat to security, their sheer numbers make imprisonment or deportation unfeasible.” His jaw worked, as though he was considering his next words with great care. “Not to mention unethical. I venture that the problem is not that Decepticon sympathizers exist--anyone with the time and inclination to mine the military archives can discern that the roots of the Great War run deeper than many would like to think, and that the conflict
between Autobot and Decepticon has not always been clear-cut. The true issue is that works like DMC’s novels oversimplify the situation, and gloss over, rationalize, or glorify Decepticon acts that did cause conflict.”

Sentinel narrowed his optics. “That sounds like seditious talk. And coming from someone who had an admitted affair with a Decepticon spy, no less.”

Blurr shot him a poisonous look. “Make no mistake, Sentinel Minor, I know exactly what the Decepticons are capable of. I’ve been doing fieldwork as far as the Outer Rim for a hundred stellar cycles. I’ve seen the smelters, the factories, the worlds stripped of life. The real problem is that most of the Autobots on this sheltered little planet haven’t.”

Sentinel stiffened, but bit his glossa.

Sari held up her servos in a placating gesture. “Easy there, boys. No need to turn this into a nationalist dick-measuring contest.”

Blurr humphed. “I don’t know what the Autobot Council expected. They’ve tightened security for hundreds of stellar cycles, always certain that the ‘Cons were just around the corner. No one likes to admit it, but without our spacebridge technology it’s likely we would have lost, and lost badly. But the newer generations of Autobots have no memory of the horrors of the war. They’ve never seen a Decepticon. Rodimus was the first to be infected with Cosmic Rust in eons. Punitive measures against sympathizers will only serve to prove their point.”

“Then what do you suggest?” said Sentinel through clenched dental plates.

“We find Flipsides, this DMC,” said Blurr. “And we have a chat with them.”

“A chat?” Sentinel said, unable to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

“DMC is a bot, just like any other,” said Blurr. “A key tenet of intelligence work is to remember that your assets are sentient beings, just as you are, whether their opinions are vastly different or not. It’s not beyond the pale that DMC might listen to reason, or even be recruited for security purposes.”

Sentinel made a face. “I don’t like it.”

“I think it’s a great idea!” said Sari. She laughed. “You could flip Flipsides!”

“Regardless, we have to find them first,” said Sentinel. “Where would we start, Blurr?”

Blurr’s expression turned reflective. “Have you been able to discern any clues to DMC’s identity from examining their work?”

“Only that they have terrible taste in music and energon,” said Sari.

Sentinel coughed, “Shockwave was apparently also investigating DMC’s identity, and his notes indicated that DMC almost certainly resided in Iacon, and may have frequented local dance clubs.”

Blurr’s face closed off and his posture stiffened. “I see,” he said, tone unreadable. He turned abruptly and began to pace.

Sentinel raised an orbital bridge but didn’t question the suspicious behavior. “I remembered that you liked to go clubbing back in boot camp. I thought you might know the names of clubs or other places that someone like DMC might frequent.”
“I’m thinking,” said Blurr, his voice clipped. “Frankly I haven’t frequented such an establishment in at least five stellar cycles—a perhaps futile attempt to clean up my image when Ultra Magnus indicated that promotion might be imminent—and while there are clubs that are known to be preferred by those with Decepticon sympathies, the locations are closely guarded secrets and I had never actively pursued gaining access.”

Sentinel slumped, “So you can’t help us.”

“I did not say that,” said Blurr. “It is more of an...open secret, if you will, that such clubs require a code word to get in the door. These code words are changed frequently to protect the patrons’ identities and the changes—as well as the locations—are passed from patron to patron via extranet messageboards that cater to Decepticon sympathizers. It would only require that we infiltrate one and convince a member to share the information.”

Sari leaned forward. “It still floors me that there are entire messageboards just for Decepticon sympathizers.”

“As I said earlier, yes,” said Blurr. “Autobot Intelligence has been monitoring them. For the most part, they stick to discussing ideology and venting about their dissatisfaction rather than actively planning subversion, but it still bears keeping an optic on them.”

Sari and Sentinel looked at each other, and then back at Blurr.

“Well,” said Sari. “Any recommendations?”

“Steam4Storm should be having a new registration session soon,” said Blurr. “I need to sort out the paperwork to get myself removed from medical leave, so it might be best if you two engaged with the boards. But keep in mind, its members may be Decepticon sympathizers, but that does not mean that they are stupid. Be polite, be calm, and above all, be subtle.”

“Don’t worry,” said Sari. “Subtlety is our specialty.”

Optimus was in the dark washracks, a ritual that he had to admit he hardly needed after the incident with the drone. That was when his collar flashed, blinding him—his optics, which had recalibrated themselves to the low light, struggled to compensate. Cursing, he clapped a servo over them.

:Optimus Prime?: said Megatron. :Please join me in my quarters immediately:.

Optimus opened his mouth to tell Megatron to go frag himself, and paused, considering. While it was true that Megatron’s habit of tossing out casual demands and expecting they be obeyed did grind Optimus’s gears, he also strongly suspected—if the reactions of Megatron’s officers had been anything to go by—that he was the first bot to hear Megatron use the word “please” in four million stellar cycles. Further, he hadn’t been lying to Blackarachnia when he confessed his suspicion that there was something deeper at work here, and what better way to shed some light on the subject than by observing Megatron and his increasingly strange behavior?

Even though he was hoping to have some time to think and go over the events of the cycle without Megatron’s presence to nag at him.
To his surprise, Megatron was seated when he entered the apartment, leaning back on a sofa, facing a generously sized holovid screen. The shift left Optimus off-balance; Megatron was usually standing when he saw him, no doubt in an attempt to be an intimidating slagger. On occasion, Optimus had liked to imagine that it was because Megatron hadn’t forgotten Optimus had beat him to slag once, and wanted to be battle-ready. Still, this was strange.

“Come. Sit with me, Optimus Prime,” Megatron said, flicking his wrist in invitation.

Not taking his optics off Megatron, Optimus obeyed, seating himself and leaving a generous margin between himself and Megatron. The sofa was oddly soft, and as Optimus sat, he realized too late that Megatron’s heavier weight created an incline that forced Optimus to lean towards him. He was acutely aware of Megatron’s mass beside him, the heat of his engines and the flicker of his field, muted and unreadable. He was struck with the strange realization that he’d never been this close to Megatron outside of battle and shook his helm sharply to clear the intrusive thought.

“Are you afraid?” said Megatron.

Optimus thought for a klik before answering. “No.”

No, no he wasn’t. That was the problem. He was parsecs from Cybertron or any Autobot allies, deep in Decepticon territory, in the clutches of the bot who--how had Bumblebee put it--ate Autobot protoforms for breakfast, but he felt strangely calm. This was exactly what he wanted the opportunity to reflect on. He wanted to think about Cyclonus’s information and explore what it might mean in the context of Megatron, despite Blackarachnia’s warning echoing in his processor.

“Then relax,” said Megatron. “I will not harm you.” He swung his arm onto the back of the couch, behind Optimus.

Optimus wanted to retort that there was no way he could relax in the presence of the slagging Decepticon leader, but he couldn’t help himself.

Perhaps he was just tired, or the couch was just soft.

Megatron engaged the screen with a sweeping gesture, and it began to project a holovid. The vid had to be either pirated or smuggled from Cybertron; it was a feature Optimus recognized from before he was expelled from the Academy. He’d forgotten the title, but it was one the ones Sentinel enjoyed: an action flick with a mindless and easy-to-follow plot, incompetent villains, and narcissistic heroes who were never wrong and never got their plating scratched despite an explosion every other klik. Critics hated it, audiences loved it, but everyone would forget about it after a few stellar cycles.

“What is this?” said Optimus.

“A holovid,” Megatron said, chuckling. “Surely your shackles of Autobot oppression aren’t so thick that you’ve never seen one.”

“You know what I mean,” said Optimus, rolling his optics.

Megatron turned to look at Optimus, looked away and let out a low hum. Optimus realized he could feel the vibrations it left in the air; slag those massive engines.

“I felt as if we need to clear the air after the… incident earlier this cycle,” said Megatron.

Optimus tensed and his spark roiled in his chassis, but he didn’t argue. In a way he understood that Megatron was protecting himself, and by giving the appearance that they were fragging, Optimus was less likely to be assaulted. Nobody wanted the Decepticon leader’s rage directed at them, aside
from the grandly stupid.

Optimus swallowed back his annoyance and sighed. “It was humiliating, but I suppose I get it.”

What was this though? Megatron couldn’t think Optimus was so weak-willed as to confuse lack of cruelty with kindness. Megatron was the Decepticon supreme leader, a slaver, and a conqueror; he was directly responsible for the deaths of thousands of Autobots, including Prowl.

Nausea crawled in Optimus’s tanks. In the holovid, the villains’ mooks were attacking a replica of Fortress Maximus, but Optimus tuned out the sounds. Fortunately, the holovid was bad enough that he could focus on his own thoughts.

Optimus was still curious about Cyclonus’s words. An opportunity to bring peace between Autobots and Decepticons? Was that even possible? So many of the Decepticons were so… evil, deranged, violent, slave-owners, and even those that weren’t flat-out rapists and murderers displayed a rather horrifying disregard for other life forms, including their fellow Decepticons. And yet Cyclonus himself had demonstrated none of those behaviors, had even implied that they might not be a permanent state of being.

Battlesleep, he had called it.

If peace were possible, billions of lives could be saved, both Autobot and Decepticon. And Optimus’s unfortunate encounter with Lugnut and Strika had provided solid evidence—convincing evidence, slag it all—which lent credence to Cyclonus’s argument that they were truly two halves of one species.

He tried not to think too hard about certain implications of this.

Regardless, perhaps it was too good to be true, or too late. Blackarachnia had implied as much.

I can guarantee you haven’t even scratched the surface of the bad things that go on here.

And then there was Megatron.

Officer Locomotion had said that Optimus was most likely to be brutally tortured, yet no such thing had happened. Underneath his chafing at being denied his freedom, Optimus knew that being a cleaning slave was no more humiliating than being a maintenance bot, even if the pay was worse. There was no torture, no threat of rape, and aside from some casual degradation, nothing overtly or physically hurtful from Megatron. He could literally rip Optimus to shreds without repercussion to soothe his hurt pride—something he’d proven himself more than capable of on Earth—and yet he hadn’t.

Instead, here they were, watching a movie together as if they were friends, and Optimus…

Optimus felt safe. He hated it, all his logic and experiences went against it, but something in the bottom of Optimus’s spark calmed in Megatron’s presence. It told him that Megatron would not hurt him, that he wasn’t constantly at risk of attack here like he would be on the rest of Armada.

“Optimus Prime,” Megatron’s voice resonated, close to his audio sensors, and the deep sound sent vibrations up his finials. Optimus turned to look at him, fighting against gravity to lean away from Megatron.

“Are you enjoying the holovid?” said Megatron.

“Of course not,” said Optimus. “It’s terrible.”
Megatron let out a short, raspy laugh. “That is true, I chose it to give you a feeling of familiarity without distracting you too much from me. Which is to say, we must speak.” He looked at Optimus, his helm tilted, an amused glint in his optics.

Optimus thought that if the Decepticon was flirting, he’d punch him in the faceplates and stomp from out the room, potential torture be damned.

Megatron stood up abruptly and crossed the room, picking up two goblets of oil Optimus hadn’t noticed on the counter and returning with them. He offered one to Optimus; Optimus eyed it suspiciously, but decided that if Megatron wanted to poison him, he would have already done so. After a few sips, Optimus realized belatedly that it was probably stolen from the unfortunate denizens of a conquered planet. The oil had a sweet aftertaste and tingled the back of his intake, probably high quality, though Optimus wasn’t enough of a connoisseur to say for certain. He sighed and tried not to think too hard about its origin as he sipped at it.

“You are a smart, capable bot,” Megatron said. “I gather you have deduced that I have been… protecting you here in Armada.” The word protecting came out as a gritted sigh, as if Megatron couldn’t decide whether to be angry or disappointed in having to say it.

“Protecting me would have been you never bringing me here as a slave to begin with. I’m not going to thank you for not torturing me, if that’s what you’re expecting,” Optimus said, but he could only muster a sense of annoyance. “Don’t do me any favors, Megatron, I’ve seen first-hand how much of a monster you can be.”

Megatron shrugged. “Fair enough,” he said, sipping at his oil. “I will not attempt to explain to you my reasons for doing so. I’m only warning you that I am planning to leave Armada for a short time to take care of… some business, and I cannot guarantee your safety during my absence.”

“If I had my axe…” Optimus said, pointedly.

Megatron snorted. “Returning your weapon would mean that I trust you not to attempt an escape or damage any of my soldiers. Do not expect such foolishness from me.”

So his axe hadn’t been destroyed. Good to know, perhaps Optimus could find it. He gave a quick, cursory glance around Megatron’s quarters but nothing stood out to him, no hiding places or handles conveniently jutting from behind furniture.

“Which sort of holovids do you enjoy then, Optimus Prime?” said Megatron, and Optimus quickly turned his helm to face the other bot, trying not to be too obvious about it.

Optimus ex-vented in exasperation. Trust Megatron to ignore the fact that he had Optimus here under duress and treat this like a casual conversation. “I do like the action type, but the ones that have a sort of mystery behind them, thrillers?” he said at last. Optimus shrugged. “I don’t care so much for the genre, a good writer can make anything worth watching.”

Megatron smiled, and Optimus felt a prickle at the base of his spinal strut. He did not have good associations with Megatron smiling.

“I understand,” said Megatron. “I have similar preferences. Megazarak and I always disagreed on that.” Megatron’s field receded quickly with a crinkle of unease, then came back like the gust of air after a sad sigh. “He would say that he wanted to watch holovids to avoid thinking, because he did enough of that.” Megatron held up his servos in mock exasperation. “I told him that if a holovid was too tiring for his processor, then it obviously was not very powerful. It did not help that he had a taste for terrible, cheaply made monster films. Sharkticonado or They Came from Skuxxos and the like.”
Struck by the image of the two lords of the Decepticons fighting over holovids like newsparks at Arcee’s kindergarten, Optimus couldn’t help himself. He laughed, a startled, hiccuping chuckle that sounded a little too hysterical to his audio sensors. Out of the corner of his optic he caught a glimpse of Megatron grinning.

“Back then, it was difficult to obtain good holovids in Kaon,” said Megatron. “So you must imagine me as a gladiator, coming from the coliseum in full armor, and bartering with a vendor for Attack of the 50 Mechanometer Quintesson. I must have been quite an interesting sight.”

The holovid--the bad one--paused in the middle of yet another badly rendered fake explosion and switched to a different vid. The title Iacon Lights faded in, the words rippling as if they were painted on a long, swaying banner.

“Are you familiar with it?” Megatron asked.

Optimus shook his helm.

“It figures,” said Megatron. “The main characters are all warbuilds, so it was likely censored during the war. I heard there was a remake, but by switching out those characters with civilianbuilds much of the original context is lost.”

“Why not fund your own remake?” said Optimus.

“No reason to, the original is perfectly fine on its own.”

Iacon Lights was, surprisingly, a very good holovid. Optimus was kept at the edge of his seat by the intricate plot and unfolding mystery, characters with subtle relationships yet deep chemistry, and most novel of all, the images of mechs and femmes, warbuilds all, flying--flying peacefully-- over Iacon. Even changed by the stellar cycles, Optimus recognized the skyline; this was no set piece. It had been filmed in Iacon, these warbuilds, these Decepticons had flown through Iacon skies, maybe even lived in Iacon buildings and worked with Iacon civilianframes.

He was startled by the sudden, rolling credits, his processor sluggish from being so deeply engrossed. He blinked and straightened, drawing in a deep breath to clear his thoughts, and turned to Megatron.

Only to find Megatron staring straight at him.

A shiver ran down Optimus’s spinal struts. He groped for a banal comment, a cutting remark, but found he had none. He swallowed hard and turned back to the film, pretending to read the scrolling wall of glyphs.

Megatron said nothing further, until he dismissed Optimus to his room.
When I blackmailed Decepticon General Clench for this datapad, I was somewhat disappointed with what I found on it. I'm sure if I have time to dig deep enough, I may find something actually useful—such as where the slag Armada even...

I'm sure when I return to Cybertron, Sentinel will demand reports out the exhaust port--to make up for the ones blockii...

I suppose I could start with the basics. As it stands now: Megatron is in control of the Steelhaven, I have been captu...

And, of course, Megatron himself.

It's strange. Some part of me knew clearly he was a mech, despite the propaganda for and against him that says oth...

I can imagine Sentinel now. "Optimus, Megatron's favorite holovid is not important intel!" But he would, as usual, be r...

Anyway, back to Megatron.

It isn't just me, even other Decepticons seem to be perplexed by his protective attitude towards me. Yes, treating me...

Even if I could ever forgive him for Prowl's deactivation.

Regardless, it's late and I'm tired and Megatron is leaving next cycle, so I suppose I should relish my vacation from t...

OP

Chapter End Notes

Wow I'm surprised to have cranked out this one in a week. Hopefully we can keep it up.
/nervous laughter.
Thanks to 12Drakon for the excerpt idea!
Mirrors

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

:Stop fussing with your optic-patch,: said Minimus, directing a sharp glance at Bumblebee as the other bot passed him on the gangplank on his way to retrieve another barrel of oil. Minimus was preoccupied with trying to keep his own optics off the three hulking Decepticons negotiating with Jazz at the entrance to the hangar. Crowds of warframes moved through the streets outside, the dark dust clouds that hung over New Kaon swallowing their shadows as they moved from pool to gleaming pool of factory lights.

:Can’t help it,: said Bumblebee. :The slagging thing itches :.

Minimus rolled his optics. :You were the one who asked for it.: 

:Well, duh,: said Bumblebee. :What kind of pirate doesn’t have an optic-patch?: 

:We aren’t pirates, bolts-for-brains,: snorted Ratchet over the collective comm channel. :We’re smugglers.:

Bumblebee looked momentarily crestfallen.

Ratchet sighed aloud. :Like Pitne For from Interstellar Conflict IV: A New Devastation :.

Bumblebee perked up. :That guy was awesome!: 

:He also knew when to keep it together and keep his optics on the prize,: said Ratchet pointedly.

:Right, right,: said Bumblebee. He eyed the massive rust orange jet standing to Jazz’s right, and blanched when the warframe winked at him. :When’s Arcee getting back again?:

:When she has acquired the information we require,: said Minimus, steely.

Some distance away, Jazz laughed, his tone just a shade forced. “Man, you guys are a riot! Just for that, I’m tempted to give you another ten percent off and buy you a drink to boot.”

The Decepticons perked up visibly. Their leader, a top-heavy soldier with a helicopter alt and blue plating, regarded Jazz with appreciation. “Now that’s what I’m talking about. That’s a better price on Altairan oil than I’ve seen in a megavorn. There’s a good watering hole around the corner, how’s about we buy you a drink instead?” He glanced beyond Jazz, gaze sweeping over their group. “All of you.”

Jazz smiled widely, his expression unwavering. :Boss?: he said, his voice steady over the commlink.

Minimus hesitated, his processor racing. Ideally they should stay put until Arcee returned, but she wasn’t due back for at least a megacycle. They might glean something of use.

:Do it.: he said, before he could change his mind. :We can always slip away or fight our way out if we must. The boon of the smuggler disguise is that they’ll expect us to be armed.: 

“Sounds like a date!” said Jazz. “Lead the way, Bugly, my mech.”

:Ratchet stays with Omega,: said Minimus.
“Socket, you hang around and clean the ship up,” said Jazz, without missing a beat.

:You sure you want Thing One and Thing Two along for the ride?: said Ratchet.

:It should be fine,: said Minimus. :Best case scenario, they see more of the real world. Worst case scenario, we have backup.: 

:If you say so,: said Ratchet. :I’ll keep the engine running.

The Bent Gasket was not what Minimus himself would consider a “good” establishment, or even one worth feeding the cybercat in. It was filled to the brim with excessive grime, excessive noise, and an even more excessive number of drunken Decepticons hooting at the one large holoprojector upon which a gladiatorial match appeared to be in full swing. Bugly ushered them inside, muscling his way through the crowd and up to the bar, and Minimus had to keep a sharp optic out to avoid being stepped on or crushed.

Vector Sigma help him, all those vorns in the armor and he’d forgotten how slagging big Decepticons were.

“Hey barkeep!” bellowed Bugly over the noise. “Engex on the rocks all around!”

The mechanism behind the bar had the face and slouch of a zap-mule on its way to well-earned retirement. He shouted something inaudible over the cacophony, but produced a handful of cups and a hose, from which he squirted the engex into the vessels in a practiced motion before sliding them across the bar.

Minimus dared to take a sip. It tasted like the collective crushed corpses of rustbugs, and was tepid to boot. Beyond the silhouette of Bugly, Jazz was talking a hundred mechanometers a klick with an animated expression, while Bulkhead hunched uneasily over the bar, and Bumblebee sat slouched in his shadow. Minimus tried to look casual as he set his glass down and turned to the rust orange jet whose designation he’d forgotten.

“So,” he said, and paused, groping for something to say. It occurred to him that he’d never actually spoken to a Decepticon aside from Megazarak outside of battle, and diplomatic small talk had never been his strong suit to begin with. “How are the local current atmospheric conditions?”

“Huh?” said the jet.

“Nevermind,” said Minimus quickly. “Any planetary news? It’s been awhile since we’ve been able to deliver anything to New Kaon.”

“Oh, loads!” said he jet. “Everybody's still celebrating a bit, what with Megatron breaking out of prison and all.”

“Ah, yes,” said Minimus. “I, er, heard he snatched some prize ship right from under those pathetic Autobots’ olfactory sensors.”

“Sure did!” said the jet with a laugh. “Flagship of the whole slagging fleet, I heard! We start cranking out some of those, we’ll be mowing down the Autobot Navy in no time!”

Minimus’s tanks turned and he quickly raised his glass. “All hail Megatron,” he said.

“Hear, hear!” said the jet, taking an enthusiastic swig. Minimus used the moment to cover up the fact that he did not imbibe.
“Kinda weird though,” said the jet, his expression turning a touch sober.

“What is?” said Minimus.

“Well, we usually would have gotten some orders by now. Buff up the warships, stock and supply, you know the drill.” The jet contemplated his glass. “But nothing's coming from the higher ups. Megatron's been quieter than a glitchmouse lately. Plus the tabloids have been saying all sorts of strange slag 'bout him.”

Minimus frowned. “What sort of slag?”

The jet shrugged. “Mostly about him and that new Autobot slave he hauled back from Cybertron. Just last decacycle, he vetoed a proposal for incursion into the Benzuli Expanse that Strika had been drafting for a vorn, too. Some of the gossip mags think he lost his head over the little tart. Going soft or something. That's why we haven't mobilized.” He coughed uncomfortably. “Not that I've been following the story or anything.”

Minimus stared, his processor racing. Strika was as notorious for her meticulous battle plans as her consort was for his absolute loyalty. If Megatron had turned down an invasion proposal she drafted, he either had a very good reason or…

Or something fundamental had changed.

“Like Megazarak,” he muttered to himself, his spark whirling with this new knowledge. This was how it had started. First the offensive strikes had slowed to a trickle, and then…

Vector Sigma, this can't be coincidence.

“Huh?” said the jet, squinting at him in sudden suspicion through the haze of engex. “Megazarak? What do you know about him?”

Ice crashed through Minimus’s lines. Stupid, stupid, what had he been thinking? He tried to shrug it off.

“Same as everyone, he was the leader ages ago. Went soft and Megatron kicked him out.”

The jet’s optics narrowed into crimson slits. “If you know the same as everyone, you know that only fools talk about him. Fools, or maybe spies.”

“Spies? Don’t be ridiculous,” Minimus forced a laugh, and made a self-deprecating gesture intended to encompass himself and his companions. “Do we honestly look like espionage agents?”

“Maybe not,” said the jet, his gaze sweeping over the others. “But here’s the funny thing. We get a lot of comm chatter from Devola, keeping an audio sensor on the oil market. Mostly organic slag, but we did get a group of merchants a decacycle or so back, complaining about how they’d been swindled by a bunch of grounders.” His gaze fixed on Bumblebee. “Only thing is, those grounders were wearin’ Autobot colors.”

:Jazz, we need to get out of here.:

Jazz’s helm jerked up, turning sharply in his direction. The jet was looking the group of them over with new scrutiny.

:Now.:
On it, Mini Boss, said Bumblebee suddenly. Bulky?

Bulkhead leapt to his pedes, spun on his heel, and, to Minimus’s utter shock, punched the nearest Decepticon face that he could reach.

“Barfight!” Bulkhead bellowed.

Pandemonium erupted. Decepticons shouted and threw themselves on each other. Minimus ducked as a glass went sailing past him, dousing him with foul smelling energon. He narrowly avoided being crushed as the jet, who was still staring at Minimus as though he could see the Autobot badge through the paint of his disguise, went crashing to the floor as Jazz smashed an energon can across his helm. Across the room, Bulkhead roared and hefted a startled Bugly above his helm before flinging him over a nearby table.

“Come on!” Bumblebee shouted directly into Minimus’s audio sensor, grabbing his servo.

They ran.

The streets of New Kaon were not what you would call organized, but thankfully most of the Decepticons they encountered seemed fairly oblivious to their presence. They skidded up to the hangar, gasping and covered with foundry dust.

“What the--” said Ratchet. “What the slag happened to you?”

“We have to leave immediately,” said Minimus. “Where’s Arcee?”

“Waiting on you,” said Arcee, materializing at the entrance to the cargo hold. Her mouth flattened, her expression turning suspicious. “What did you do?”

“Wasn’t my fault this time!” said Bumblebee.

“It was mine,” said Minimus. “Or perhaps yours as well. Apparently the gossip circuit in the oil trade is very swift indeed. We’ve been discovered, and while I’m hoping that a combination of distillate and Jazz’s kindly application of blunt force trauma will dull that Decepticon’s memory, I doubt it.”

Arcee cursed and pinched her nasal ridge. “Get in the ship.”

They crowded aboard Omega, but as the gangplank began to rise, Bulkhead stopped to voice an objection at the last minute.

“Wait! We can’t go without the Boss Bot!” He said.

“Optimus isn’t on-planet,” said Arcee shortly. “I’ll explain later, but suffice it to say that Optimus is nowhere on New Kaon.” She leveled a look at Minimus. “And neither is the Steelhaven.”

The Skystalker was not like the Nemesis, as a yacht was not like a cruise ship, but it was all Megatron needed. He would use the Steelhaven to warp to Garo, with the Skystalker in its warp field. After the meeting with Megazarak he would return to Armada on the Skystalker, get treated by Scalpel with the cure to his ailment, and get his red and blue problem taken care of once and for all.

He decided not to think about other meanings of the term taken care of. Nor the soft, shy way
Optimus Prime had looked over his shoulder the previous night cycle, catching Megatron staring at him before Megatron had forced his gaze away. He could pretend that such an innocently intimate moment had never happened.

He had other things to think about than Optimus Prime right now.

Seated once more at the command console of the Steelhaven, Megatron couldn’t help but feel a sense of excitement at the prospect of seeing his brother again. As he reflexively talked to the ship’s interface and manned the controls, he thought about questions to ask, which he would no doubt forget as soon as he saw Megazarak’s face, and rehearsed conversations that would make him shake his helm in shame if he heard them from another mechanism.

“Lord Megatron.” Megatron turned to find a mech with more teeth than face. “Do you wish to tell us something?” Sky-Byte said. “Meaning no disrespect, but the three of us?” He gestured at the two mechanisms behind him: a tall, white mech with a face too gentle for his oversized frame, and Cyclonus, who had a glint of alarm in his optics just visible through his deadpan expression. “We aren’t usually sent on missions together unless it’s a suicide mission. Is there something we don’t know about this Mudder’s Milk run to Garo?”


The three mechs looked at each other, their expressions far too conspiratorial for Megatron’s comfort, and quickly exited.

Megatron knew immediately who was responsible. He hammered the comm button.

“Strika!” he said, as soon as her face--half obscured by a cube of energon--flashed up onto the screen and she jumped, half falling out of her chair. She quickly recovered and composed herself, rubbing at her rear end.

“I suppose I should have expected you’d call,” she said, placing the cube somewhere out of sight.

Megatron ignored her. “What is the meaning of this, Strika? Did you think I wouldn’t notice whom you’ve put at my back? Am I to interpret this as an attempted coup? Answer me!”

Strika crossed her arms and squinted at Megatron, but did not laugh or display any of the behaviors that Starscream had during his twenty-three attempted assassinations.

“That is my question, Megatron,” she said. “Ever since you came back from the Autobot prison your behavior has been quite… suspect.”

She pulled out a disposable datapad and held it up to the screen. On it, Megatron could see a brilliant yellow background with enormous, ornate glyphs. Freezon’s Flotsam, it read; a magazine article that, from what Megatron could skim, detailed fantastical and prurient theories about himself and Optimus Prime.

Smoothing out his expression, Megatron attempted to give off an air of nonchalance. “Gossip columns, really? I thought you knew better than to read such nonsense, Strika.”

Strika’s optics widened and she actually looked embarrassed. “Th-that’s beside the point… Lugnut has a subscription!” she said.

Strika tossed the datapad over her shoulder strut, sending it crashing out yet another unfortunate window that Megatron glimpsed behind her. At this rate the Decepticons were going to have to annex another desert planet to keep up with demand for transparisteel.
Pushing his advantage, Megatron drew himself up and did his best to project his most intimidating expression.

“Explain yourself,” Megatron said, tone cold.

Strika’s expression hardened. “What I’m saying is that you’ve had an Autobot prisoner, the Autobot prisoner — unless you have the Magnus himself stashed under your berth — in your grasp for two decacycles. You have not only not executed him, you’ve practically turned him into a pampered cybercat!” She sat back in her chair, arms folded. “Perhaps you’ve already forgotten what the Autobots have done to us, but the rest of the Decepticons have not. Either the little glitch takes the brand, or he needs to be given punishment—punishment that you seem to be incapable of providing.”

At the thought of Optimus Prime in the interrogation rooms, Megatron couldn’t hold back a snarl, leaning forward over the console and baring his fangs at Strika’s image.

“You will do no such thing to Optimus!”

Strika’s optics narrowed and she glowered. “You are only reaffirming my suspicions, Megatron! You are threatening me, one of your best and most loyal generals, over an Autobot prat who would sell you to the Quintessons for a ride back to Cybertron? This is like Megazarak all over again.”

“I am not Megazarak!”

Strika’s expression spoke volumes.

With a dry swallow, Megatron tried to collect himself, falling down back into his seat. He’d made a grievous error, broken the first rules of negotiation like a just-sparked protoform. Strika wasn’t trying to have Megatron assassinated, but she had Optimus in her power, even if it was out of not-so-misguided loyalty.

And now she knew that Megatron valued him.

And Cyclonus, Sky-Byte and Skyfire had been sent with him — the three mechs who openly admitted to having been born instead of constructed, despite all it implied — to keep them from interfering with her plan.

“Strika,” said Megatron, trying to keep his voice even and calm, reasonable. “I am thankful for your loyalty, but I cannot answer your questions regarding Optimus Prime because I do not have the answers. It is, in fact, part of my mission to find this out.” He made sure to keep optic contact for his next words, his tone meaningful. “Until then, it is crucial that no harm whatsoever befalls him.”

He kept his optics on her, praying that she understand, would buy it.

After a klik of consideration, Strika ex-vented lightly and rubbed her helm as if containing a helm-ache.

“Fine. He won’t like it... but he won’t get hurt.” She pointed an accusatory finger at Megatron. “But when you return I want a solution.”

Megatron gritted his denta, but decided this was the best he could hope for so far. “You will have one. That is all. Dismissed.”
Optimus was visited by Locomotion early the next cycle. ‘Visit’ was perhaps a stretch, as he was woken by an explosive noise that sounded like a dynametal duck being sucked into a jet engine, or perhaps a sharticon having a root canal.

By now Optimus had come to expect such things from the Integration Officer. He had even heard mutterings here and there that she would be a general, had she been only half as clumsy or one-third as lazy. Optimus could believe that. After all, he was the one who’d had to clean up the resulting mess when a mech coming to pick up a slave had insulted her extranet blog and she’d splattered the unfortunate creature in the main elevator of Headquarters. Scalpel had gleefully accepted the new additions to his cadaver pile.

“I, like, still can’t believe Lord Megatron allows you to have a lock,” Locomotion said, holding up the remains of said lock. Her tone was condescending, despite a deep dent on her helm, which had to be painful and looked to have been inflicted by an inanimate object. “I mean, he has access to all the rooms in Headquarters of course, but like, still.”

“Doesn’t keep him from slagging me off,” said Optimus, sitting up and brushing off the debris from where she’d torn through the door, and deciding to mourn the last remnant of control over his functioning later. “What do you want?”

“Ah, sparky sparky!” Locomotion giggled. “Nice once in awhile, but around here we don’t like grounders who don’t know when it’s time for them to be quiet. Anywho!” She tossed her datapad over her shoulder--directly through a small window set in the door across the hall--which shattered. Optimus gaped.

How did she do that?

“Your custody has been temporarily passed to General Strika until Lord Megatron comes back,” Locomotion said, holding up her servo before her face as though reading from the datapad now in ruins behind her. “She orders you to clean the entirety of Headquarters, inside and out, before Lord Megatron returns in seven cycles.”

Optimus’s attention snapped from the broken window--her aim was really quite impressive--and up to the Integration Officer.

“What?” he said, running a frantic review of the halls and rooms he had seen so far. “That’s impossible! It would take at least twenty cycles to do that.”

Locomotion giggled. “Guess you won’t get much recharge then,” she said. “Oh! And General Strika instructed me to tell you that if you fail, or refuse, you’re to be hauled straight to the smelting pits. Toodels!” With that, she activated her thrusters, smashing into the ceiling and grinding her way back the way she had come in a hail of sparks. She flashed a rude gesture at him as she disappeared from sight.

Optimus stared, a creeping sensation of horror spreading up his spinal struts. His first thought was to comm Cyclonus, but he only received static in reply. Clearly the mech was somewhere out of range of the short range comms, and who knew when he’d return.

As much as he hated to admit it, Megatron had been right.

And now, Optimus was going to have to survive the next seven cycles alone, weaponless, in a city of mechanisms that would like nothing more than to dismantle him piece by piece.

Or worse.
To: Ultra Magnus, Autobot Commander

From: Megazarak, Lord of the Decepticons

Subject: Antilla

I suppose that it is foolish to believe that you will do anything other than delete this missive, but I feel I must send it. Our encounter; that sounds so obscene. You defeated me. You're an Autobot, yes, but a grounder--not built for war, r

It needles me, a splinter in my neural net. I cannot say how I am different than I was before Antilla, only that I know I want to see you again: It would please me if you would find it in yourself to answer. I wish to know if I am the only o

Mz

--

To: Megazarak, Lord of the Decepticons

From: Ultra Magnus, Autobot Commander

Subject: Re: Antilla

I am not going to ask how you obtained this communication line, as I doubt you'd be so kind as to divulge the position. To answer your question, I feel little difference since our encounter on Antilla. There are perhaps some echoes of what Was there any other reason you contacted me, or was it only to waste my time with pointless rambling?

UM

--

To: Ultra Magnus, Autobot Commander

From: Megazarak, Lord of the Decepticons

Subject: Re: Re: Antilla

Curious. Yet I suspect you know more than you are letting on, Ultra.
To: Megazarak, Lord of the Decepticons
From: Ultra Magnus, Autobot Commander
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Antilla

I do not believe I ever gave you permission to use my designation. Magnus or Ultra Magnus is acceptable.

UM

--

To: Ultra Magnus, Autobot Commander
From: Megazarak, Lord of the Decepticons
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Antilla

My apologies, Ultra Magnus. Such a powerful designation for an Autobot. From what I understand, you are given names...

Mz

--

To: Megazarak, Lord of the Decepticons
From: Ultra Magnus, Autobot Commander
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Antilla

That would be precisely none of your business.
To: Ultra Magnus, Autobot Commander
From: Megazarak, Lord of the Decepticons
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Antilla

Such a spitfire. Let me guess, you did something quite outstanding with that hammer of yours? Would you like to do -

Mz

To: Megazarak, Lord of the Decepticons
From: Ultra Magnus, Autobot Commander
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Antilla

This conversation is over.

UM

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to Lunarescapades on tumblr for drawing art for this fic! I have added it to chapter 7, so be sure to check it out there and on her tumblr. She's amazing!

- Reya
“Lord Megatron.”

Megatron tensed, shooting a look over his shoulder. Cyclonus stood in the entrance to the communications room; his posture was relaxed, if a bit wary. Megatron’s processors pinged something novel in his voice. It was intensely neutral, Megatron realized, the harmonics unstained with wheedling fear or bombastic gloating. He couldn't remember the last time another Decepticon had spoken to him with such calm tones.

“May I come in?” said Cyclonus, an unusual glint in his optics as he scrutinized Megatron. Yet it was not the look of a mechanism evaluating a potential target, or even the penetrating expression when he’d encountered Cyclonus in the hall outside the medbay. No, Cyclonus was looking at him as though he already knew what he would see, but that it pleased him nonetheless.

It was strange, but Megatron sensed that he might have an ally for now.

“You may,” Megatron said with a grunt, straightening in his chair as he tried to compose himself. It hadn’t done to lose his temper as he had in front of Strika. He nodded coolly to Cyclonus in acknowledgment as the other mechanism entered.

“I presume there is no assassination attempt?” said Cyclonus, indicating the communications console. “We are not en route to the heart of a nearby star? No bomb hidden in the ductwork? No poisonous corrosives in the emergency sprinklers?”

“Correct. You can reassure your… companions regarding that.”

A few moments passed but the glitch didn’t leave, despite his clear dismissal. Instead, Cyclonus looked at him as if he was owed an explanation. Megatron opened his mouth to point out his insubordination, but Cyclonus beat him to the task.

“This has to do with Optimus Prime, does it not?” said Cyclonus, watching him carefully.

Megatron made a throaty, frustrated noise--that likely gave Cyclonus all the answer he needed--before biting down on his glossa. He forced himself to elaborate.

“Strika erroneously believes that there are guidelines to the way I must treat my own slave.” He crossed his arms. “Never mind that such things would make Optimus Prime less efficient in the ways I choose to use him. Apparently my choice not to beat, rape, or publically humiliate him means that I am…growing soft.”

Cyclonus nodded, moving from behind Megatron to stand at his side, and Megatron decided that he would not scold the older mech for insubordination. For now, at least.

“Ah, much the same accusations that you leveled against Megazarak, if I recall?”

Megatron froze, caught, but Cyclonus’s voice and field remained mild and unthreatening. The stark difference again distracted Megatron. Once he would have called such harmonics weak, perhaps beaten the offending mechanism, but now he felt strangely safe. Despite Cyclonus’s words, Megatron knew in the core of him that the other mechanism was not a threat to him. Yet he was so
close to getting rid of this blasted coding. Decepticons should not behave like Autobots.

“Watch your words, Cyclonus.”

Cyclonus inclined his helm and did not press. “Lord Megatron, there is still one mech on Armada that would be willing to help you keep Optimus Prime safe.” He indicated the communications console. “One whom Strika overlooked in her roundup.”

“You must be joking. Silverbolt is not reliable,” Megatron groaned, pressing his face into the palm of his hand.

“Perhaps,” said Cyclonus, with an edge of unease in his expression that was less than comforting. “But for now he is our only option.”

Like the poorly-paid, strut-breaking work that Megatron and his twin had been forced to engage in, scrabbling for existence amongst the then-ruins of Kaon, Silverbolt was one of those aspects of his past that Megatron would prefer to forget.

Though Megatron and Megazarak had been barely more than newsparks, they were not exempt from the curiosity surrounding civilianframe mechs. And so, young and goaded by the oblique, knowing jests of older warframes, they had counted their credits in order to hire one of the few that would venture into Destron territory—a buymech.

They’d both agreed they wanted a nice looking one—clean, with all their dental plating intact, their paint smooth, and able to give consent without a syk-fueled dampener. They’d finally found what they were seeking in a pretty blue femme, easily half their size.

She’d given her designation as Moondancer and Megatron had always wondered whether it had been her real one.

She’d brought them back to her rooms—more of a bolthole, really—and even put on an appearance of hospitality. The energon had been sour and had rust flakes in it, and Megatron had had to seat himself on the floor while she engaged Megazarak.

He hadn’t been able to keep from stealing curious glances. He’d heard the stories of course, but it was one thing to hear and another to see.

Moondancer had looked absurdly small next to Megazarak, on her servos and knees, glancing over her shoulder and cooing encouragement as Megazarak fumbled with her.

Megazarak had let out a strangled noise and Megatron’s servo had already been on his sword, sure that it was some kind of Autobot trap. Instead he’d seen Megazarak bent over her, an uncomfortably blissful expression on his faceplates. Moondancer was making encouraging sounds that did familiar if also uncomfortable things to Megatron’s spike.

And then it had been Megatron’s turn.
“They’ve got some kind of...hole down there,” Sunwrecker had said, when Megatron had worked up the nerve to ask. The old gladiator hadn’t exactly been gifted with words or an excess of decorum. “You just stick it in and go to town.”

Megatron would not have described what he found between Moondancer’s legs--once he’d changed places with Megazarak and awkwardly scrambled atop the berth--as anything nearly so simple.

Moondancer’s valve had been lined with blue biolights, stippled with raised, glowing sensors, encircled by soft folds of protoform that made her gasp and squirm when he touched them. Megatron had been embarrassed in retrospect at how long he’d spent touching her there, fascinated by the noises she made.

He’d thought for certain she’d be too small to take him, but she’d accepted Megazarak with what seemed like ease, so he’d finally urged her helm down against the berth and followed Sunwrecker’s crude instructions.

He’d realized then why Megazarak had made the sound he had.

“You two are so kind,” she had said when they were finished and wiped up, claiming each of their servos in turn and stretching up to give each of them a kiss across the knuckles, before heading off with a wink and an arresting little wriggle.

He wouldn’t learn until much later how to make a grounder overload--some derided it as as pointless sentiment, but it always gave Megatron a sense of accomplishment--or that his own performance that cycle had been less than impressive, or even that Moondancer’s kindness had been mostly performance for the sake of customer satisfaction. But he still found himself returning to the memory from time to time, his optics drawn by bright blue colors and small frames, even wondering what had become of her.

“You two were so kind,” she had said again, several stellar cycles later, at the cusp of their revolution. Somehow, Moondancer had managed to evade a layer or two of security to approach Megatron and Megazarak. They had barely recognized her; she had traded her shiny blue colors for dull ones, literally painting herself as a Decepticon sympathizer, her perky shoulders and faceplates stiff from stress. She’d been carrying a bundle in her arms, a lump enveloped in a mesh blanket.

Impulsive as usual, Megazarak had snatched it from her before Megatron could protest--never considering that it could be a trick, another bomb, another possible assassination attempt--and whipped back the blanket.

For a moment Megatron had thought it was a toy, a bipedal mechanism formed in miniature. Then the tiny, oddly proportionate little thing had beeped in indignation, kicking its limbs and squinting strangely large red optics against the light, and Megatron had realized its identity with a surge of shock.

A mechling.

It was the first and last time Megatron and Megazarak had ever seen such a creature, and the two couldn’t help gaping at it. One of the oldest warbuilds had attempted to explain their existence to Megatron, but the idea that some of their race began life as a type of stunted Minicon before growing into a full sized mechanism had confused him. The warbuild had eventually given up and indicated that it hardly mattered, as there hadn’t been a mechling born that anyone knew of in stellar cycles.
“His designation is Silverbolt,” said Moondancer, wringing her servos as she watched Megazarak nervously. “His sire offlined in the last Autobot attack. I…” She made a sound as if she was choking on her own vocalizer. “The Autobots will kill a warbuild mechling if they ever find him. Please, I beg you, I didn’t know where else to go. Please keep him safe.”

Megatron still didn’t know what had possessed them to agree, they had no use for a mechling. Perhaps it had been curiosity, perhaps some lingering pity for the femme.

Whatever it had been, it was the only reason Silverbolt still functioned.

“I am not asking that worthless malfunction for aid.” Megatron scowled.

“You do not have to, Lord Megatron,” Cyclonus said, pronouncing the last two words as if he had an itch inside of his intake. “I shall.”

He stepped closer and reached past Megatron—once again demonstrating an irritatingly insubordinate attitude—and punched a series of buttons. The console sprang to life, revealing a room that would be considered disgustingly clean by Decepticon standards, in that it only had three piles of scrap visible from the camera. It even had a wastebin.

“Silverbolt,” barked Cyclonus. “Respond.”

A silver mechanism with gold accents on his wings—he looked to have painted them in a strange, tessellated pattern—stuck his helm from an open door on the other side of the room. “Huh?”

“Lord Megatron has a task for you,” Cyclonus said, indicating Megatron.

Silverbolt blinked, startled, and then scrambled into the room, snapping upright and saluting.

“Yes, sir! Of course, sir!” He paused, looking a bit bewildered. “Uh, what sort of task, sir?”

Megatron bit back a groan. “Bodyguarding,” he said shortly.

“You recall the Autobot slave that Megatron brought back with him from Cybertron?” said Cyclonus. “His designation is Optimus Prime.”

Silverbolt’s optics brightened. “Ah, I remember him! I recalled wondering how a buymech had wandered into the main hall.”

Megatron shot Cyclonus a look, but Cyclonus appeared unperturbed.

“That’s the one,” said Cyclonus. “He is without protection at the moment, and without Lord Megatron’s presence to enforce his edict that the Autobot not be harmed, I fear that some of the rowdier ruffians may be tempted to overstep their bounds.”

“I shall be his benevolent and faithful knight!” he said, straightening. “None shall lay servo upon him!” He was beaming, a somewhat disturbing glint of excitement in his optics.

Cyclonus nodded gravely. “I am glad to hear it, Silverbolt. Lord Megatron is counting on you. Now
hurry off to your quest.”

“Yes, sir, Lord Megatron, sir!” Silverbolt saluted again and scrambled for the door, tripping over a crate as he stumbled into the hall. A crashing noise was heard, followed by the hooting and barking of a few mechanimals in response.

Cyclonus cut the feed, and turned to face Megatron’s glare.

“*Quest*?” Megatron said, unsure whether rage or incredulity was the appropriate response.

Cyclonus shrugged. “He *was* raised by Sky-Byte,” he said, as though this explained everything. Megatron had to admit to himself that, in a way, it did.

Megatron groaned and hung his helm in his servos.

“Optimus is doomed.”

“C’mon,” said Sari, bouncing on her pedes. “I want to see if we can crack this nut.”

Sentinel ignored her, trying to concentrate on routing the extranet traffic from his console through a server in Althiex, one of the handful that Jazz used—–that Sentinel knew about—for when he needed an additional layer of invisibility. But hacking had never been Sentinel's specialty.

“Give me a minute, we don't want them to see us coming out of Metroplex.” The server finally connected with a ping. “There, thank the Allspark. I was beginning to think that this one had been removed from service.”

He punched in the navigation instructions and watched the Steam4Storm site flash up on the screen, the design entirely uninformative regarding the site’s purpose. Beneath the header was a neat line of glyphs: *Click Here to Register.*

“*Kind of ironic when you think about it,*” Jazz had told him once, following an investigation into a smuggling ring that had used another such site as a customer farm. “*The one thing no self-respecting Con would ever do is register for anything.*”

Sentinel swallowed, his tank turning, and clicked the link.

A new page popped up, glyphs blinking.

*Enter Username*

Thrown, Sentinel stared at it. Right, he'd need to construct a persona. He felt foolish for not considering it, but he found his processor suddenly blank.

“What does it say?” said Sari. “My glyphs are still really basic. Is it asking your name?”

Sentinel cleared his intake. “It wants an identifier,” he said. “For the forums.”
Sari shrugged, “MegatronLover?”

Sentinel made a face, but punched in the glyphs.

*Username Unavailable*

“Try MegatronLover1234,” said Sari.

*Username Unavailable*

“MegatronLover24601,” she said, without missing a beat.

*Username Unavailable*


“What does that even mean?” said Sentinel. His language conversion chip had indicated it translated to something like ‘arrogant prostitute’.”

Sari shrugged. “You know, like somebody who's popular with femmes.”

“Why would they be popular with femmes?” said Sentinel.

“Well, I'm only going on hearsay, but I'm guessing because they're hot? Good in bed?”

“Wouldn't that make them popular with everyone?”

“Well, I mean, I guess. But they only want femmes, so…”

“Why would they only want femmes?” said Sentinel slowly.

Sari actually looked embarrassed. “Because they've got different…” She waved her servos vaguely. “Squishy bits?”

Sentinel’s orbital ridges furrowed. “Are you talking about interface hardware? Surely Ratchet must have shown you diagrams. Femmes don't have anything different from anyone else, despite rumors among younger bots.”

Sari stared at him for a moment before her gaze darted away.

“They don't?” she said. “You mean you, uh, look the same, um, down there, as somebody like Arcee?”

“Of course,” said Sentinel, mystified that this was even in question. “Our interface hardware isn't used for reproduction, unlike some organic species. Interface is used purely for social bonding.”

Sari’s mouth hung open. “Are you seriously telling me,” she squeaked, “that Cybertron is a planet of lesbians?”

More confused than ever, Sentinel gave up attempting to follow this line of dialogue and impatiently turned back to the screen. Various combinations of *ConLover* and *StruggleAgainst* proved equally futile. He groaned and put his helm down on the desk.

“I don't know if I'm more depressed that there are this many users, or annoyed that they took all the available names,” he said.
Sari seemed to snap out of her dumbstruck stupor and seated herself beside his helm.

“Skip the Con bait, just try SergeantHardaft456 or something.”

Sentinel groaned but complied.

*Welcome, SergeantHardaft456. Please select passcode and confirm sentience.*

Sentinel bolted upright. “It worked!” A small timer flashed up in the corner of the screen above an image of a garbled mess of glyphs. “Slag it all.”

“What does it want now?” said Sari.

“They're trying to make sure I'm not a sparkless machine,” said Sentinel. He typed in a line of glyphs. “It's a fairly simple--”

*Access Denied*

Sentinel gaped. The glyphs rearranged themselves. The timer continued to count down.

Embarrassed, he squinted at the twisted glyphs and re-entered the code more slowly.

*Access Denied*

Frustrated, he reloaded the code and tried again, stopping before each glyph to evaluate it.

*Access Denied*

“Shouldn't we hurry?” said Sari, looking nervously at the timer.

“I'm trying, I'm trying!” said Sentinel, frantically reloading the glyphs in search of something he could read clearly. He entered and entered and--

*Access Granted*

“There!” said Sentinel.

*Please Select Password*

The timer was still counting down.

“Think of a password!” said Sentinel.

“We’ll come up with one later, just use ‘password’!” said Sari, and Sentinel scrambled to comply.

*Invalid Password*

“Password1234!” shouted Sari. “Password1234!”

*Registration Complete. Welcome to Steam4Storm.*

Sentinel sat back in his seat and stared at the screen. They’d done it. They’d made it in. The main page of boards sat revealed, with thread names like ‘Manifesto Discussion’ and ‘Legal Matters’ and, disturbingly, ‘Who’s the Hottest Con?’.

“Huh,” said Sari, after a moment of stunned silence. “I would have thought they’d have a more stringent screening process.”
“They would have a hard time finding new recruits that way,” said Sentinel. “The Decepticons prey on the young and impressionable. No doubt there will be moderators who observe new members. We’ll have to be careful.”

“I suppose,” said Sari. “But seriously, how hard can it be to impersonate some dipshit newbie on a forum?”

“We’re about to find out,” said Sentinel.

User: MegatronLover24601
Join Date: Cycle 011
Posts: 100,000
Subject: Dance Party Y/Y?

yoooo, any Iacon bots here up for a dance party at the usual spot? Work’s a drag and i’ve got a hankering for cheap é

-

User: pomwire
Join Date: Cycle 012
Posts: 50,000
Subject: RE: Dance Party Y/Y?

i’m down

-

User: blastingthunder
Join Date: Cycle 008
Posts >1 million
Subject: RE: Dance Party Y/Y?

why the slag not?
User: sproKer
Join Date: Cycle 010
Posts: 21,000
Subject: RE: Dance Party Y/Y?

Get enough Latta Collins in me and forget dancing, I'll swing off the slagging chandelier.

User: roseybot8491
Join Date: Cycle 010
Posts: 18,000
Subject: RE: Dance Party Y/Y?

Y

User: EnronHubble
Join Date: Cycle 008
Posts: 500,000
Subject: RE: Dance Party Y/Y?

Consider this my RSVP

User: fieryquills
Join Date: Cycle 013
Posts: >1 million
Subject: RE: Dance Party Y/Y?
It makes me sick to witness the dilution and degradation of our once-proud organization. We are a nation of covert we

User: capsizeonmythighs [MODERATOR]
Join Date: Cycle 007
Posts: 10,000
Subject: Re: Dance Party Y/Y?

sure, i'll be there

User: blastingthunder
Join Date: Cycle 008
Posts >1 million
Subject: Re: Dance Party Y/Y?

then why not go witness something else instead, n00b? seriously, just go cram your manifesto datapad up ur valve an

User: fieryquills
Join Date: Cycle 013
Posts: >1 million
Subject: RE: Dance Party Y/Y?

INGRATE!
User: SergeantHardaft456
Join Date: Cycle 013
Posts: 1
Subject: RE: Dance Party Y/Y?

Yes hello I would also like to engage in dancing and drinking energon among fellow Decepticon sympathizers.

-

User: MegatronLover24601
Join Date: Cycle 011
Posts: 100,000
Subject: RE: Dance Party Y/Y?

Radical! The more the merrier! ;)

-

User: SergeantHardaft456
Join Date: Cycle 013
Posts: 2
Subject: RE: Dance Party Y/Y?

This will be my first party. Not my first party, obviously. My first party among fellow sympathizers. What is the protocol?

-

User: blastingthunder
Join Date: Cycle 008
Posts >1 million
Subject: Re: Dance Party Y/Y?
listen, atfaced, I’m getting slagging tired of you sticking your overgrown nasal sensors in every slagging post. Go back

-

User: fieryquills
Join Date: Cycle 013
Posts: >1 million
Subject: RE: Dance Party Y/Y?

MAYBE I WILL!

-

[PM] User: sproKer -> User: SergeantHardaft456: Hey if it’s ur first party u gotta PM the organizer u feel me? they’ll ç


[PM] User: sproKer -> User: SergeantHardaft456: no biggie :)

[PM] User: sproKer -> User: SergeantHardaft456: soooo, how’d u hear about us?

[PM] User: SergeantHardaft456 -> User: sproKer: I searched for an enclave wherein my radical ideas would be accep

[PM] User: sproKer -> User: SergeantHardaft456: right, right. U know, it’s not all revolution and thunder. Some of us c


[PM] User: sproKer -> User: SergeantHardaft456: u into some military kink maybe?

[PM] User: sproKer -> User: SergeantHardaft456: u wanna cyber?
Chapter End Notes

Friendship? What is this Autobot SJW bullshit??

- Reya
An Unexpected Fall

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As impossible as it seemed, their escape from New Kaon gave Minimus a fresh appreciation for the importance of warp technology in a way he hadn’t experienced since his earliest campaigns, when the Magnus Armor was still a strange and confining irritation.

He clung to back of his seat as they breached the gravity well of New Kaon, those Decepticons that had surfaced from the haze of drink and distraction mobbing their flanks like hungry Sharkticons. Plasma fire rocked them, splashing across the viewscreen with violent bursts of light and drowning out Ratchet’s bellowed commands and encouragement from where he stood silhouetted against the captain’s chair.

All in all, as a undercover mission, it was a decided failure.

“Hold on!” said Ratchet, his voice almost inaudible over the screams of jet engines. “Cybertron’s too far, but we’re gonna make the jump to Com!”

Omega’s deck lurched beneath them, and as his warp engines engaged, they were surrounded by a sound like the universe screaming in protest as it was forced to bend in ways it was far too old and arthritic to accomplish comfortably. The blackness of space fissured and they were momentarily blinded by the flash of negative space as Omega plunged into the breach.

Minimus could only think it was perhaps a mercy that they were officially still in open war with the Decepticons, as this would have made a spectacular diplomatic incident.

Then the universe snapped back into place with a resonant sound that made Minimus’s bolts rattle and they were floating serenely in empty space, systems ringing with the aftershocks. The twin planets loomed large through the viewscreen, the towers of Com rising like harinezumi spines, Garo’s seething smelters glowing like jewels beneath a layer of smog.

Somewhere behind him, Arcee groaned.

“You,” she said. “Are the worst spies in existence.”

“I dunno,” said Jazz. “Remember your first mission on Intel?”

“Hush, you,” she said. Her heels clicked against the deck as she circled around Minimus's chair. “And you, Fearless Leader, did you gain anything of value from your stunt?”

Minimus opened his mouth and then closed it, hesitating.

“Give your report first,” he said finally.

Arcee raised an orbital ridge, her optics keen.

“Very well,” she said. “As I mentioned, neither Optimus or the Steelhaven were on-planet. It looks like Optimus was never there, but according to the mook in the main spaceport, we just missed the ship.”

“Slag it all,” said Ratchet. “Where would they have taken him, if not to New Kaon?”
“Armada,” said Minimus, the word heavy on his glossa. “Meg--intelligence reports from the beginning of the war indicated that the Decepticons were in the process of building a mobile battle colony. Projections and reports indicated they'd likely finished it, but it has never been used in a campaign, and no Autobot has seen it.” His mouth thinned. “None that have come back, that is.”

“Hard enough to infiltrate a fortress crawling with Decepticons,” said Arcee. “Harder still when it's never in the same place twice.”

“So we don't even know what sector the Boss Bot is in?” said Bulkhead, his tone anxious.

Arcee shook her helm. “Knowledge of Armada’s cycle-to-cycle location is limited to upper level Decepticon command. And even with precise coordinates, our ability to mount a rescue with so little intel would be…dubious.”

From his perch on another chair, Bumblebee buried his helm in his servos and groaned. “Slag it all. So we just, what? Leave him there to end up some 'Con chewtoy?”

Minimus mulled his next words over carefully. “Optimus is no doubt in danger,” he said. “But his circumstances may not be quite that dire.” He turned back to Arcee. “What news of the Steelhaven?”

“That's the interesting bit,” she said. “Procedure--or the closest Decepticons get to procedure--is that the Steelhaven would have been stripped for parts or reverse engineering, but the ground crew was told not to touch it. Then just a cycle ago Megatron himself came with a few underlings, snapped up the ship, and rocketed off.”

“Rocketed off where?” said Bumblebee.

“Foremech didn't say,” she said. “But the rumor was he’s going to exchange it for intel.”

Minimus’s tank turned. “Intelligence from whom?” he said. “The Nebulons? The Vestal Imperium?” Vector Sigma, could Megatron have made a deal with the Quintessons?

Arcee gave him a hard stare. “Megazarak,” she said.

Minimus’s spark contracted sharply. It was true, then, Megazarak still functioned. But what information could he possibly possess, to convince Megatron to hand over such a valuable asset?

Vector Sigma, maybe that drunken ‘Con was right.

“I think,” Minimus said at last, “that perhaps it is time we had a discussion.”

Dangling above the seething streets of Armada--forced to rely on rusted chains and a corroded harness of which he did not want to consider the origins--Optimus scrubbed at the massive expanse of transparisteel that formed the “optic” of the whale of Decepticon Headquarters. He had long since stopped muttering to himself in frustration and anguish, instead focused on the mindless rhythm of his work.

He didn’t know why he was bothering; it was a futile endeavor. He’d already been working for three cycles nonstop and he was still no closer to completion.

And three cycles closer to the smelter.
It was when he was cleaning one peculiar grime spot in the shape of Sentinel’s head that he found himself musing about his old team back on Cybertron. What were they doing now? Were they worried about him? Were they in the middle of hatching a poorly-conceived plan to rescue him? Optimus hoped not. He wouldn't wish this place on his worst enemies, even if, appropriately enough, it was already filled with them.

He draped the cleaning rag over one pauldron and swung around in his harness to take out his datapad and note down a reminder to ask Megatron—or at least eavesdrop—for any information pertaining to Bumblebee and the rest. After all, it was probably Bumblebee who would try to pull a “Mission Impossible” as he liked to call it.

Optimus ex-vented, returned his datapad to his subspace, and leaned back against the slick surface.

A small screech from the metal of the harness was all the warning Optimus got before it snapped.

Only a small noise of surprise escaped his vocalizer, processor racing to catch up, to register that he was falling, that the seething lights below were rushing towards him at alarming speed, that he was going to offline in a pathetic way, in a pathetic place, as a pathetic mechanism.

He had already died in this way once before, remembered the rush of air, remembered the crushing weight of his own chassis against the unforgiving ground, the pain of his spark guttering.

This time, there was no Sari to bring him back.

And then, impossibly, he was caught.

Optimus’s processor spun, his queue spitting frantic messages: DANGER, DANGER, HOLD ON. He clung fiercely to whatever his hands could find, his servos slipping on pleated, overlapping plates.

“Woah, hold on there!” Optimus’s leverage said. “That’s actually kind of sensitive!” His rescuer yelped and Optimus reflexively released his hold.

Only to find himself plummeting towards the ground once more.

He jerked to a halt and heard something snap sickeningly inside his shoulder gimbal, arms screaming at the sudden application of his own weight. He could hear his captor or savior--Optimus was withholding judgement until he was safely on the ground--humming something, which sounded suspiciously similar to a tune from a movie Sari liked involving a flying human floor decoration. Though, to be fair, Optimus might have misheard over the sound of his own screams.

“PUT ME DOWN YOU FRAGGING--AAARGH!”

Why did Cons have to turn even a rescue into an opportunity for grievous bodily harm?

He'd no sooner thought this when something sticky lassoed him by the ankle, yanking him out of the ‘Con’s grip. The most primal part of his processor, which had been dutifully activated by the need to escape danger as fast as possible, was only capable of registering the sensation as slightly familiar before he found himself flung up like a yo-yo wielded by a clumsy child. He crashed against a drunken warbuild and an errant advertising drone carrying samples of janick jaAm--which promptly exploded everywhere--on his way up, processor ringing with the impact, before gravity yanked impatiently at his gyros and he was falling again. One of his flailing limbs hit an unattended cage of a dozen helio-hamsters sitting on an open sill of another building, sending it flying. The helio-hamsters scattered, only to be gleefully used as target practice by a few pyromaniacs in the flying traffic before they could truly savor freedom.
Finally, Optimus landed mostly intact on an--unfortunately hard--surface, and began to slide down, only to be brought up short by the jaAM that had clung to him during his unexpected acrobatics.

Onlining his optics, Optimus realized that he’d managed to land on the Decepticon Headquarters. He was on one of the mirrored windows on the upper levels, no less, and by the shadow from his own helm blocking the light he could see through it.

Straight into Megatron’s apartment.

Optimus had mostly avoided thinking about Megatron’s quarters except in the context of ‘places to avoid’, but now, splattered against the window that he was sure was blastproof, he could see the empty apartment from a new angle.

In what he suspected was typical Decepticon fashion, it was designed with paranoia in mind. Doors built like walls, walls built like the armor of, well, a warbuild. Plenty of cover.

Even the wet bar on the far side of the room looked like it would hold up in a firefight.

Perhaps it was the trauma to his processor, or perhaps he’d had enough of this, but Optimus had an idea.

The ringing in his helm receded into the background hum that had never ceased since he’d arrived on Armada--though maybe that was just the awful advertising, Vector Sigma, how did those mechanisms not living in a sub-basement recharge?--and was replaced by a few snatches of hushed, furious conversation from somewhere behind him.

“Look what you’ve done, you malfunction!” hissed a low, familiar voice. “Now we’re going to need a spatula to scrape him off!”

Blackarachnia?

“Me?” The second mechanism sounded affronted. “I was merely taking necessary action to save him from certain annihilation! You’re the one who interrupted my rescue!”

“I had everything under control, you--”

“Some help here?” Optimus interrupted.

“Shove off, you overgrown puppy,” snapped Blackarachnia—though Optimus guessed the insult was not directed at him—and then scurried towards him, her long, pointed legs clinking against the transparisteel. “I’ve got it covered.”

The Decepticon growled, a sound eerily like those Sari’s mechanical drone Sparkplug would make.

“I was given this mission by Lord Megatron himself.”

Blackarachnia ignored him and slashed the sweet abomination binding Optimus. He automatically reached out a servo to steady himself against her as he sat up, only to realize that she was still in spider mode. He froze, servo still resting on her abdomen.

He felt her stiffen beneath his palm and his tank turned in mortification.

“I’m sorry--”

“Shut it,” she snapped. “Get over yourself and hang on if you want to get down.”
He obeyed, clinging inelegantly to her abdomen as she began to back them down the wall towards the street below. The Decepticon flitted around them, and Optimus turned his helm to get a better look at his dubious rescuer.

He was small for a warbuild—which meant he was still a whole head taller than Ultra Magnus, and might need to use both his hands to pick up an Autobot instead of just one—and his plating was gleaming silver with golden accents. The strange, overlapping plates that Optimus had grabbed formed the trailing edges of his wings, a pattern that strongly resembled the feathers of Earth birds. His face was blunt and rounded, his expression cheerful, but when he spoke Optimus could see the flash of warbuild fangs.

As friendly as he looks, he’s still a Decepticon, Optimus thought.

“Hello, my ward,” the mech said, with an exaggerated bow, rather ineffectual as the warbuild was zipping around Optimus like a hummingbird on drugs. “My name is Silverbolt.”

Optimus ex-vented. And you could always trust Decepticons to be obnoxious.

Minimus paced the deck of the bridge, trying to determine how to begin. This would be dipping into information he had revealed to no one, information that was deeply personal; thoughts he had buried away inside himself, much like his original form inside the Magnus armor.

There was also the small issue that it was technically treason.

“Let us begin at the beginning,” he said at last. “Ratchet, Arcee, you both would remember the campaign on Antilla?”

Ratchet raised an orbital ridge. “Well, the memory circuits are a little old and fried, but it would take more than a few megavorns to forget the way you sent Megazarak flying over the prow of his own ship on the end of the Magnus Hammer.” He smirked. “The expressions on the ‘Cons’ faces were priceless.”

Minimus coughed, “Yes, anyhow. Some time after the end of that particular campaign, I received a private message on an encrypted channel. From Megazarak, the then-leader of the Decepticons.”

“What did he want?” said Bumblebee. “A rematch?”

“No,” said Minimus. “He...he wanted to talk. We exchanged messages for approximately a stellar cycle. We were discussing the possibility of a ceasefire.”

“Wait a klik,” said Bulkhead. “This Megazarak guy just contacts you out of nowhere after you kick his aft, and suddenly wants to talk peace? Why would he do that?”

“It was not so quick as all that,” said Minimus. “But yes. We had also begun to forge an...acquaintanceship, of sorts.”

“Just an acquaintanceship?” said Arcee, her tone arch.

Minimus glanced at her sharply and she shrugged.

“If there was no personal connection,” she said, “I suspect you would have surrendered the messages
to Autobot Intelligence when he broke contact. Ergo, there was something else going on.”

His fellow mechs looked at him. He ex-vented.

“It did become somewhat of a personal friendship, yes, but also remember that while a gesture of peace would not have been of consequence to me, it may have put Megazarak in further danger. His processor was open to peace, while popular Decepticon opinion was not.”

Minimus bowed his helm. “I had a sliver of hope that Megazarak could wrench control back from Megatron and make it possible for us to form a peace agreement—a true peace agreement—even if it had to be done slowly over time. A slim chance, yes, but under Megazarak it was a possibility, under Megatron it would never come to pass.”

“You sound pretty sure of that,” said Jazz. “If Megazarak was willing to reach out, what made you adamant that Megatron wouldn’t?”

“I have reason to believe that the reason behind Megazarak’s exile was that Megatron discovered our correspondence.” Minimus narrowed his optics at Jazz. “Megatron was willing to fight and exile his own twin brother as a traitor rather than contemplate peace.”

Unease passed over their faceplates at this. Most knew at least one pair of spark twins, split or branched spark, and knew how unusual it was to see them separate. It was unthinkable that such a rift could occur between two mechs that once came from the same spark.

Minimus hesitated. Should he bring up his suspicions about Megatron and Optimus? It would likely be unwise to voice them without more information, but it was also unfair not to offer his mechs, his team, hope when they thought there wasn’t any. He had to be careful with his next words.

“During our correspondence,” said Minimus. “Megazarak gave certain indications that made me think that there may have been some sort of...fundamental shift in his outlook. At first I dismissed my suspicions; what did I know of Megazarak’s personality? But I believe that some change occurred, though I cannot say why.”

Minimus paused, struggling to articulate his thoughts. “Megazarak still sounded the same, brash, irreverent, perhaps a bit impolite, but his behavior did not match up with my experiences of him on the battlefield. It lacked some edge of cruelty, one I did not feel I was aware of until it was missing. And during that period, the Decepticons were much quieter...much as they have been since they regained Megatron from us.”

“Uh, Galactic Standard, please?” said Bumblebee. Despite his flippant words, Minimus could tell the yellow bot was nervous, swinging his legs from his perch on the console, his gaze fixed on the floor as if he could find Optimus Prime concealed there.

Minimus bit his glossa. “I am reluctant to speculate too deeply, but based upon the gossip I gathered in that Decepticon bar, Megatron may very well be keeping Optimus from harm, and if so...perhaps Jazz is right, and peace is possible.”
Title: **Sharkticonado**

Reviewed by: FlamingAilerons

Quintessons. Killer atmospheric conditions. Sharkticons. Enough fake energon to drown Lieutenant Lugnut. When

When ex-bomber Turbine (played with scenery-chewing gusto by Shaft, whom some of you might remember from the

Let’s face it; compared to your average modern Armada flick, this is an award winner. Maybe not on par with *Full Met*

Blowing Out Your Audio Sensors Rating: 7/10

Explosions Per Klick Rating: 9/10

Buckets of Energon Rating: 11/10

Single-Glyph Summary: “Sharkticonado”

Chapter End Notes

Would Sharkticonado be an apt metaphor for Armada?

-Reya
Of Poetry and Home Invasions

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter has taken so long, a lot of stuff happened that made both Zuzu and I rather busy.

- Reya

The streets of Garo looked much as Megatron remembered them: narrow and blanketed with smog, the buildings a hodgepodge of proper metal structures and squat, low bunkers constructed of gritty brown stone mined from the ground below them. The crowds were sparse so close to sunrise, but here and there Megatron still glimpsed grounders filtering among the passing warbuilds, far more frequently here than on Armada.

Above the horizon loomed the bristling curvature of Com, with ships swarming the towering spires of its spaceports like hungry gnats. It was strange to be this close to Autobot territory with nary a warship in sight.

Megatron and his entourage exited the Steelhaven; the small crowd which had gathered to watch the descent gave them a wide berth, as was appropriate. Megatron spotted a few mechanisms scattered in the crowd whispering amongst themselves. He let out an internal sigh, making a note to brace himself for yet more ridiculous rumors on the Decepticon extranet, but such was the price of leadership.

Whatever the gossipmongers said, it could hardly be worse than the lurid speculation about what he was—or rather was not—doing to Optimus. And considering Megatron’s current predicament, he could not even dismiss the rumors with his usual aplomb.

If anything, his condition was worsening. Just a decacycle ago he’d found himself thumbing through an old datapad, half absorbed with thoughts of penning a new passage in the ever changing file that was half-manifesto, half-journal. Instead he’d opened up an entirely new file and set stylus to pad. Words flowed, but the current had changed. It was all metaphors, meanings, and… feelings.

The crowd in front of them parted to allow a towering mechanism passage, and Megatron tensed.

Megazarak swept across the hangar with the same easy grace with which he had always carried himself. The hilts of his twin swords, mirror models to Megatron’s own, protruded upwards from behind the sharp curves of his pauldrons. His sigil was obscured with black paint, but his plating was still a defiant shade of purple. Megatron couldn’t help but notice that in spite of this obvious sign of Megazarak’s exile, those warframes in the crowd still made passing—if subtle—gestures of respect as he moved through them. Regardless of his status among the Decepticons, their race had long memories, and it would take more than a few hundred stellar cycles to forget the shadow that Megazarak had cast on the battlefield.

“Brother, welcome,” Megazarak said as he approached—the insufferable slagger, as though they were not standing on land that Megatron owned, on a planet that was part of Megatron’s empire.

His brother had always been a show-off. It was a good part of why so many warframes had eagerly
rallied around them in the beginning, impressed by Megazarak's battle prowess and theatrical flair, along with Megatron's oil-sweet words.

By the Allspark, he had missed the fragger.

Megatron realized he was staring and had yet to respond, and hastily cleared his intake.

“Of course,” he said, painfully aware he must sound like a fool. “There must be a place where we can speak.” He glanced at the crowd, a number of whom had shuffled closer to them, listening intently while trying to appear as if they weren’t listening at all.

“In private,” said Megatron with a pointed scowl.

To their credit, everyone in the crowd took a polite step back.

Megazarak nodded. “My humble abode should suffice,” he said. “I own a flat a short walk from the hangar. Come, brother.”

Megatron resisted the urge to roll his optics. Megazarak's show of deference and humility was ridiculous when paired with with his haughty tone and high-caliber weaponry. Also--

“Wait a moment,” said Megatron. “How do you still own real estate here? All your personal property was put up for auction and only Decepticons are permitted to own property under the Empire.”

Well, all of Megazarak's personal property save for some bits and bobs squirreled away in a chest in Megatron's apartment, but he wasn't about to tell Megazarak that.

Megatron cast a suspicious look at the crowd around them. While it was true that the Decepticons had few laws, and even fewer governing the regulation of commerce and ownership--mostly pointless to include when the law of the land was take what you can grab, and frag the consequences--but even the greediest and most liberal of Decepticons should have known better than to sell Megazarak an apartment. Even here, on the rather liminal space of Garo, grounders and non-Decepticons were forbidden from owning property.

Megazarak gave him a charming smile. “Let us just say that there are those in the Empire for whom the balm of monetary incentive is more than sufficient to soothe the wound of disloyalty.”

Megatron opened his mouth, and closed it. He found his optics caught by a nearby building and the sign poking over the top of it, the wheeling colors of the advertisement flashing through the clouds of smog with the same coquettish flair that a fishmonger might use to hawk their wares.

Let's Get Swindled! Realtor and Arms Dealer Extraordinaire! No Home Too Bombed-Out, No Budget Too Low! Comm Today!

The lift to Megatron's apartment rose with a quickness better suited to Ratchet when his joints were acting up again. Optimus watched the floors slide by as the capsule ascended in the transparisteel tube, and did his best not to fidget.

It wasn't easy; his processor ached from lack of recharge and his circuits strained, occasionally

He ignored them. It was stay awake or be smelted.

At last the lift slid to a halt, the doors rolling back with a soft chime. He emerged into the round room and approached the doors. Megatron must have keyed something in his collar to unlock them because there was a click as he approached.

*Thank the Allspark,* he thought, and pushed, only allowing a tiny wisp of annoyance into his processor that Megatron did not think of him as a threat to his living quarters.

The doors were heavy, yet another annoying accoutrement designed with larger frametypes in mind, but Optimus managed to squeeze into the narrow gap between them. They thudded shut behind him and the lock clicked shut.

He leaned against the doors, let out a deep breath, and looked around Megatron's apartment.

It was dim inside, illuminated by the lights of Armada twinkling through the huge transparisteel window, with deep shadows cast by the oversized furniture. It felt strangely safe without its usual occupant, the cacophonous noise of the city muffled by the walls.

Optimus pushed himself away from the entryway and ventured off to explore.

Megatron's possessions were surprisingly minimal and almost obsessively organized for a Decepticon, in that they were organized at all, but Optimus supposed he had someone else do that for him. He moved from room to room, rummaging through crates and cabinets in search of his ax--or barring that, anything that could be used as a weapon. He found datapads, a variety of waxes and cleansers, and a servoful of odds and ends, but nothing in the way of weaponry.

*He probably wants to keep it out of the servos of any potential assassins,* Optimus thought sourly. *Or he has it secured elsewhere.*

Like the berthroom.

Reminding himself that Megatron was parsecs distant and incapable of misconstruing Optimus's desire to be anywhere near his berth, Optimus hurried down the hall to the large door at the end, trusting that Megatron's arrogance would outweigh his paranoia in favor of recharging in the most obvious and luxurious room.

The berthroom was locked, of course. Optimus prodded at the sensor pad beside the door with no success. Groaning, he kicked the door--which appeared decidedly unimpressed by this display--before slumping against it.

"Slagging piece of junk," he said.

*Voice Lock Activated,* said a preprogrammed voice. There was a soft chime and the door slid open, sending Optimus tumbling back onto the floor.

To his embarrassment, it took Optimus several moments to pick himself up--and to stop wondering how it was that Megatron had managed to obtain a voice print for him--rather than lie on the floor and slip into stasis. Frag it all, but he was *tired.* Clambering to his pedes, he peered around the room.

He was struck again by the simplicity of the setup. A berth, some shelving scattered with datapads and knickknacks--much less organized than in the main living area, evidence that this was
Megatron’s private space--and an open door through which Optimus could catch a glimpse of a washrack. No torture chamber, no oil pool.

And no weapons.

There, a long chest at the end of the berth. He knelt beside it, surprised to find it unlocked, and flipped back the lid.

*Jackpot.*

His ax gleamed atop a pile of miscellaneous weaponry: blasters, an ion cannon that looked older than Optimus, and a curved knife with a purple hilt and a Decepticon sigil set in the handle. Tucked around them were datapads, much older and more battered than the ones lining the shelves of Megatron’s room.

He picked up his ax and let out a breath as his servo closed around the handle, letting the weight of it ground him, before turning his attention to the the rest of the chest.

He dismissed the other weapons almost right away. While it was tempting to arm himself to the dental plates, the reality was that nothing in here could give him an advantage over someone like Strika. He had no ship to escape and no chance of taking down a planetoid’s worth of Decepticon soldiers, even if he’d still had the Hammer in his possession. He was outgunned, outclassed, and outnumbered.

He had to play this smart.

Gripping his ax, he started to rise to his pedes, but paused. Nestled in the pile sat a datapad, old and scratched, with a very familiar symbol stamped into the back.

It was a stylized gear, interwoven with glyphs for knowledge and writing--the company logo for Sixshot and Solenoid, a Cybertronian manufacturer of portable datapads that dated from before the rise of the Destrons.

Optimus had used a similar model at the Academy.

What was Megatron doing with one?

Optimus hesitated, painfully aware of the ticking timer, but his curiosity got the better of him. He picked up the pad, flipped it over, and activated it.

A file list sprang up on the screen. He recognized one near the top immediately as *My Struggle Against the Commonwealth*, Megatron’s manifesto, which had managed to sway hordes to the Decepticon cause despite being full of logical fallacies, terrible prose, and possessing a distinctly...disturbing bent.

Optimus had read it, of course, as part of the Military History module of his work in the Academy, and while it was technically banned for the general public it was not terribly difficult to acquire a copy on the extranet. There were even forums where bots gathered to argue over it and debate its merits, although the one time Optimus had signed up for such a forum he’d quit after a cycle. He’d found it to be overrun with immature mechanisms, flush with fantasies of revolution--most of whom had never seen the inside of a warship, let alone a Decepticon.

There was also the small matter that none of them had seemed to grasp the darker implications of Megatron’s creed. They were all certain that in this brave new world where the strongest took the spoils, of course* they* would measure up; of course* they* would conquer and take, rather than fall and...
Armada was living, seething proof that they had been sickeningly wrong.

Optimus started to close the pad, when a file at the very top caught his optic. It was much smaller than the manifesto, titled *An Unbearable Lightness of Spark*. It seemed a gentle and anomalous thing, perched atop *My Continued Struggle* and a copy of Devron’s *Nebulon Wars*. Frowning, Optimus opened it and stared.

It was poetry. Some were snippets, mere images penned in colorful prose; others more rambling, tangled, unruly skeins of free verse. Optimus had never been a connoisseur of poetry, but he did not recognize any of them as classical or modern work.

Had Megatron written them?

*For when the battlefire has faded,*  
*And the ozone-scent of plasma blown away by wind off the Rust Sea*  
*We find ourselves poured out*  
*Empty vessels*  
*The blank protoform shell longing for the inspiring*  
*Spark*

Optimus’s own spark gave a strange turn within his chassis. He felt almost embarrassed, to be rifling through Megatron's personal possessions, but curiosity drove him onward. Many of them were war poems rich with metaphor, or meditations on the frenetic jungle of Armada, but they all shared one thing in common.

They were all dated since Megatron's escape.

His processor churned, the ache intensifying. What could it mean? Megatron spent two stellar cycles in an Autobot prison and started writing poetry?

*Let the dark fall upon you*  
*Let your optics be the only brightness*  
*Two moons in a dark night*

Optimus’s neural net prickled and a queer feeling rippled across his spark. Of course, if Megatron was writing poetry it would stand to reason that some of it would slant to that oldest and most classic of subjects; but it felt surreal, intimate in a way that was uncomfortable and yet appealing, to read it.

*My shadow covers yours, consuming, devouring*  
*Your optics burning*
Optimus swallowed hard. Ridiculous, he knew--in an intellectual way, and it would remain intellectual, thank you very much--what Megatron must be packing. He'd even made use of something that had to be very similar from the little toy box in his apartment back on Cybertron--although a legal variety thank you very much, and Vector Sigma, not thinking about that right now--but to see it laid out so bluntly, to think of *Megatron* of all beings in that context, made him squirm, like those weirdos on the forums--he really should have put two and two together earlier--made him wonder what it must be like, to have a Decepticon between his legs--

Optimus dropped the pad a bit too hastily into the chest and shut it. He needed to focus, and this line of thought was not productive.

Back in the main room, Optimus pushed Megatron’s precious new couches against the door with some help from his alt mode, a few grunts, and a couple of intricate new swears he had picked up from the Armada extranet. The slagging things were even heavier than they looked, intended to survive a minor tantrum from living weapons of mass destruction. Still, desperation gave his struts strength, and he soon had them lined up, blocking the inward-swinging doors.

Panting, he straightened, hefting his ax and turning his attention to the wet bar.

The stools collapsed beneath the blade in a hail of satisfying sparks. The bar itself proved a great deal more troublesome, but finally gave, a large chunk cracking off and tumbling to the floor. He waited for a few moments in tense silence before realizing that it was probably more suspicious for there to be silence in a place like Armada, and tossed the chunk on his makeshift barricade with a clatter of metal on metal.

*Leave it to Megatron to design his bar with assassination in mind.*

When all the furniture he could lay servos on had been reduced to the hodgepodge barricade, Optimus headed to the storage area behind the once-bar and returned with his arms full of several small barrels from Megatron’s exotic collection of oils. They were labeled with their planet of origin, and included some Optimus had never heard of: *Lilleth Tears, Lightscatter, Quantum Pulse* … all very elegant names, and each barrel was elaborately engraved.

He popped the bung on the first one and upended it onto the floor.

It took maybe twenty klicks and half a dozen barrels--likely worth more credits than he would see in his functioning--but at last he had a wide swath of the floor coated. Anyone who bashed their way through the barricade was in for a slippery surprise.

With an ex-vent, Optimus shoved the last barrel across the floor, sending streams of dark liquid out behind it, and tried to focus on the next task through his blurred vision and glitching, slow processor.

Meditation wasn’t the only thing that Prowl had taught Team Prime. Optimus doubted that the
Decepticons had any idea how he could combine the ordinary cleaning chemicals they’d given him without a second thought.

Optimus smiled grimly. Strika had ordered him to clean, so clean he would.

To: Blax Wrex Renovations
From: Megatron, Decepticon Head of Intelligence
Subject: Congratulations.

As you may understand, as the leaders of the Decepticons, my brother and I face many challenges for even our basic needs. We have decided to construct an apartment on one of our largest ships, and we expect prompt services from your company.

Your Lord Megazarak has sketched up this design, to which I have added some details, and we expect your services promptly.

Megatron
“To put it simply, brother,” Megazarak said, beckoning Megatron into his modest apartment with an infuriatingly magnanimous air, “What you are experiencing is not a virus, but a cure, in a manner of speaking.” His words were almost casual, but his posture was controlled and alert. “But I cannot blame you for your bewilderment. Oil?”

Megatron frowned, but had accepted the cup, swirling the dark liquid to check for contaminants before taking a small sip. Megazarak’s awful taste in oil hadn’t changed one iota over the vorns. As to the answer to his question, well, perhaps in another reality, he would have calmly, but firmly, demanded that his brother elaborate on what in the slagging pits of Third Quintessa he meant. In another, he would have hurled the glass of oil at Megazarak and held him at swordpoint for attempting to slip such a ridiculous fabrication past him.

In this one, however, he found himself leveling a scrunched, puzzled look at Megazarak--if anyone else had seen him at that moment, Megatron would have instantly lost all the respect of his Decepticons, most aliens, and perhaps some non-sentient plant life for good measure.

Megazarak laughed. “Perhaps calling it a cure is a bit of a misnomer. The code which is causing your symptoms is not even foreign in origin. It was there the whole time, merely inactive.”

“Scalpel failed to detect anything,” Megatron muttered.

“Precisely,” said Megazarak, seating himself on one of the low benches and taking a sip from his own cup. “Your coding is functioning as it was meant to, rather than under... well, let us call them ‘emergency protocols’.”

Megatron raised an orbital ridge. “What sort of emergency?”

“I have not been able to determine that,” said Megazarak. “But the code itself is ancient, so the conditions which activate the protocols have no doubt been in place since long before Cybertron was a properly civilized planet.”


“They are not flight-locks, brother,” Megazarak said, optics narrow at the distant memory. So his twin had not forgotten their origins after all. Megatron did not know whether to feel anxious or relieved at that.

Megazarak studied Megatron over the rim of the cup. “You were always so paranoid.”

“And you too careless. How many times did I save your skidplate because you brought the wrong whore to your berth in New Kaon? Or you forgot to test your energon? I was the one who had to put
you back together in the Kaon arena every time you underestimated your foes.”

“Stop your imaginings of slave coding and conspiracy and take stock, brother,” Megazarak said a little too loudly, as though he had not heard. “Do you feel fundamentally different now than before? Are you not yourself?”

Megatron groaned and buried his faceplates in his free hand. “You are an insufferable aft.”

“And you are a manipulative glitch,” said Megazarak. “What is your point?”

Megatron growled. “Clearly I retain enough of my personality to come to you instead of groveling at the pedes of Autobot Command.” He resisted the urge to toss the remainder of his oil on Megazarak out of spite.

“Then what is the problem?”

“Everything!” Megatron burst out, leaping to his pedes and nearly spilling his drink. “Everything is wrong, brother! I turned down Strika’s plan for an incursion into the Benzuli Expanse! I expressed gratitude to an underling! Twice! I have an Autobot tarted up like the flashiest Armada whore in my apartment -- the very Autobot who has defeated me, humiliated me--and the thought of any sort of retaliation against him makes me physically ill! You do not understand the gravity of the situation, I am writing things that make no sense! Nonsense about Armada and the beauty of the stars and him -- what exactly is so funny?”

Megazarak had sagged back against his seat, pauldrons shaking uncontrollably as he laughed. His cup was wobbling dangerously, threatening to tip. He seemed to be trying to form words, but every time he nearly succeeded, he dissolved into helpless peals of laughter again.

Megatron growled. “I fail to find this humorous.”

Megazarak wiped at his optics. “To the contrary, it is extremely humorous. And the most humorous thing about it is that you--the paranoid spy--never took the time to fully examine our meeting place.”

Megatron almost snapped at him again, but then paused, looking around very slowly at the living arrangements surrounding them.

The walls were not the standard manufacture color of the rock beneath them, nor even one of the flashy roll-ons available at the shops in abstract patterns and swirls of hyperactive color. They were painted, but clearly painted by servo.

The vast, colorful swirl of a nebula stretched across the ceiling and down one wall, bumping up against a desertscape that Megatron recognized as Antilla. Ships, Autobot and Decepticon, replicated in stunning detail, zipped across the expanse through asteroid fields and around moons. Bots and organic aliens populated the scenes, some little more than abstract shapes in the distance, others larger and stretched at odd perspectives, as though the painter had been experimenting.

Megatron stared. “Who did this?”

“I did, brother,” said Megazarak.

“But why such… grounder folly?”

Megazarak eyed him. “What makes it folly?”

“The… pointlessness of it,” Megatron struggled to find the appropriate words. “We always thought
Megazarak shrugged. “It satisfied something unquantifiable in me. Why write your nonsense?”

Megatron stopped, tank turning, thinking of the battered datapad buried among his personal effects like the filthy secret that it was. “Because I was compelled to, because I--” He paused, taking in the shapes of a painted rock formation, flowing up over the sill of the window and onto the transparisteel. “Because something in my spark burned to write it.”

Megazarak smiled, an infuriating expression, as though he knew some amusing secret. “Then what is the problem?”

Megatron was silent for a few kliks, his processor gathering his memories, concepts, beliefs and assumptions like a crystal gardener collecting a harvest.

“If we are subject to the same foolish desires as grounders--as Autobots--controlled by weak sentimentality, then how are we any better than they are?”

“Obviously, my brother, we are not.”

At those words, Megatron’s emotions rose and shattered like ocean waves against merciless cliffs. Decepticon superiority was the core of everything they stood for. That was what granted them right to rule Cybertron, to bring every Autobot and every grounder to heel; to take what they wanted and frag the consequences.

Anger, sorrow, loss, and disbelief swirled in his processor, bleeding together and blending so intensely he didn’t know what he was feeling, nor how he should be feeling.

Anger fought to the surface, conquering his emotional turmoil. He had known it all along, known that this would happen when he discovered whether or not his spark twin was truly gone.

Megatron laughed, a humorless bark of a laugh, and unsheathed his swords from their scabbards.

Megazarak’s expression was disappointed, and not a little resigned, but completely lacking in surprise.

“Violence against me will achieve nothing, brother,” he said.

“Why, because you lost your bearings along with your badge?” Megatron pointed one of his swords at Megazarak, shifting his position to a defensive stance. “Prove to me you’re not lying. Prove to me you have not become an Autobot cyberdog.”

He crossed his swords before him. “Fight me, brother.”

“I don’t slagging think so!” The timer on Bumblebee’s patience seemed to have gotten to zero, and he jumped off of his perch as if he had explosives strapped to his aft. “What are you saying? That we should just abandon Optimus because Megatron might have gotten nicer? Because of what, exactly? Because you were swapping pen pal letters with Megazarak?”
“Hang on a klick there, little budd--” Bulkhead began to protest, reaching out to snag Bumblebee as he made a dash at Minimus.

“Cram an actuator in it, Bulkhead!” spat Bumblebee. “We already lost Prowl. We already lost Prowl!”

Minimus did not let his expression change; he had long lost count of how many unruly and short-sighted subordinates he’d gotten similar reactions from over the millennia, especially before he had received his Magnus armor.

“You don’t talk to a superior officer that way, Bumblebee,” Ratchet said. He paused, appearing to rethink his words. “At least not to ones that aren’t Optimus Prime.” His words had an ironic lilt to them, but there was a serious undertone nonetheless.

“Yeah, exactly!” said Bumblebee, before slipping out of Bulkhead’s grip, and pointing right at Minimus. “He’s spent so much time locked up in Fortress Maximus he doesn’t know us or care about our team! Trusting Megatron? About anything? Are you out of your processor?!”

“Bumblebee, I don’t--” Bulkhead attempted to cut in.

“We all know you’ve wanted to get rid of Optimus for stellar cycles! And guess what? You’re getting what you wanted. How many of your soldiers have you sent to offline because you decided they weren’t meant to be heroes, Ultra Magnus?”

Minimus frowned. “Are you referring to Optimus’s expulsion from the Autobot Academy?”

“No slag I am!” said Bumblebee, optics blazing. “I mean, I get why Sentinel-fragging-Hardaft booted me out of there, but if you stand here and try to feed me some slag about Optimus doing something to warrant that, I’m gonna knock your dental plates out!”

“Bumblebee, you slagging moron.” Ratchet grumbled with a shake of his helm.

Minimus stared at Bumblebee. “You,” he said, “are a fool.”

“Yeah, I just said that…” Ratchet muttered.

Minimus drew himself up to his full height - something not as effective without his Magnus armor--and leveled a severe look at Bumblebee. “Let me make one thing perfectly clear, young bot. I have always had faith in Optimus Prime’s abilities. But he left me little choice. He was the acting commanding officer on the mission to Archa Seven, and with nothing but his testimony and that of Sentinel Minor, my servos were tied. He could not remain in the Elite Guard. To have done otherwise would have shown favoritism, and could have had unpleasant repercussions for us both.”

Minimus shook his helm. “And you of all bots should know that Optimus would never have flourished or reached his true potential within the structure of the Guard. Some bots prosper in it--Sentinel would be a prime example--but Optimus has always worked more effectively outside the rules. I saw it in the battle simulator when he was only a recruit, and I saw it in his leadership of your team.”

“But…” said Bulkhead, scratching his helm, his expression puzzled. “You said being a hero wasn’t in Optimus’s programming."

“Y-yeah!” Bumblebee spluttered in affirmation.

“That I did,” said Minimus. “But the truth--” He paused, hesitating over how much would be
appropriate to reveal. “The truth is that no Autobot is programmed to be one. That is part of why the Decepticons have always underestimated us in battle. We are not warriors programmed, but shaped. And Optimus needed the opportunity to learn how to earn the respect of a team, and to learn to respect himself. That would not have happened if he had remained on Cybertron, working a desk job at Fortress Maximus, or laboring on the energon farms. A ship and a crew were all I could offer, and the rest was up to him.”

“But--” Bumblebee interrupted again, but his voice had lost most of its bite.

Minimus squinted at him. “Additionally, Optimus Prime allowed his personal feelings for Sentinel Minor to sabotage his assigned mission, and a teammate offline as a result. It was his mistake, to which he admitted. That is my final say regarding that matter.”

Silence fell, heavy, like a curtain over a stage.

“Well,” said Jazz. “I bet Optimus’s audio sensors are just burning from all this gossip. I mean, really, Sentinel?”

From across the bridge, Arcee snorted. “Oh, sweetspark,” she said. “I don’t think somebot who fell helm over pedes for a bounty hunter in a junk poncho should talk about embarrassing crushes.”

“We had one date!” said Jazz, his usual cool facade cracking. “One date!”

“Seriously?” said Ratchet, his tone so deadpan it barely came out as a question.

“It was back in the Academy! I was a newspark, I thought I could change him.”

“Dumbaft,” snickered Bumblebee.

“How the slag did you find out about that, Arcee?” said Jazz, the indignant look painted across his face barely hidden by his visor.

Her mouth quirked in a small smile. “The things I know would curl your capacitors, youngster.”

Minimus was glad that at least it wasn’t his love life being scrutinized. That would be a threat to Intergalactic Autobot Security. He let out a small sigh and pinged Arcee politely over private comms. :

:Thank you :; he said.

To her credit, she didn’t even twitch. :The young bots mean well :; she said. :They just don’t understand what it was like, open warfare. :

Minimus’s mouth tightened. :Hopefully they will never have to learn. :

Megatron gripped the crossed hilts of his swords and shoved, sending Megazarak flying backwards into a bank of filthy clouds, wobbling until his thrusters stabilized him. His brother recovered quickly, swooping in to take a swipe at him, and Megatron twisted to avoid the edge of the blade. Reality bit at him, sharper than any blow. As he often did in times of trial, he found himself dissecting Megazarak’s words in a subroutine, examining his motivations and the thousand cues which spelled the difference between truth and lies.
If Megazarak was lying and they had both been poisoned by Autobot code, this would mean that Megatron had lost his brother, forever, and was on the fast track to losing himself. If so, the best he could hope for was that both of them would fall in battle.

If Megazarak was telling the truth, however...

Megatron would still have his brother, but every certainty he had ever known everything his world had been built on, would be a lie. It could mean losing the war. It could mean losing his Decepticons.

Worse, it could mean he’d eventually grow to desire that loss.

Megazarak had led them far from the city for their fight in order to avoid any “casualties,” goading Megatron and flying away to draw him from the densely packed buildings and into the barren wasteland of the suburbs, before luring him into the sky. Feh! As if it hadn’t been Megatron who had been the one to lecture Megazarak about unnecessary collateral damage. As if Decepticons had civilians to worry about.

As if civilian casualties were something to worry about, he reminded himself.

Even now, Megatron struggled to hold onto the point of it all--what was the point of the war, Armada, or the strife and the hatred and the bloodlust that had perforated and sewn together the last four million years, if the only two mechs whose fates Megatron had ever cared about disapproved of him for it?

Because, slag it all, he had come to care about what happened to Optimus Prime. It sent an overwhelming wave of despair through him to think of that intense blue gaze snuffed out forever. The memory of Optimus’s optics pricked deep into the recesses of Megatron’s spark--surely a mirror of the bright spark inside that sinfully red chassis.

It was this thought which caused Megatron’s grip on his sword to waver, a slight distraction as it slipped in his hand against Megazarak’s own blade.

Megatron didn’t even have time to blink; a flicker of movement caught his attention and then Megazarak’s pede slammed into him, sending him tumbling from the air onto the rough, gritty earth of Garo.

“It’s time to wake up, brother,” Megazarak said as Megatron staggered to his pedes. The light from the sunset, rendered a deep golden hue by pollution, seemed to light Megazarak’s armor and weapons as it gleamed off them. It satisfied Megatron, in some small way, to see that Megazarak was also venting hard. “It’s obvious that I am not an Autobot puppet.”

“So you say.” Megatron put his swords up, crossed in defense, but there was little spark in it. Megazarak struck quicker than the optic could properly follow and, in two quick maneuvers, crossed Megatron’s blades between his own and wrenched them from his grip.

Clearly, exile had not dulled Megazarak’s skills. Megatron braced himself.

To his shock, Megazarak flung his own swords away, and punched Megatron right across the face.

Megatron lost his footing, going down hard on one knee.

“That,” Megazarak said, “is for being a jealous fool, and exiling me.”

Megatron snarled and put his own fists up in retaliation, but Megazarak did something even more unexpected.
His brother dragged him from the dirt and embraced him.

“And this is because I truly thought I would never see you again.”

Megatron went rigid, but Megazarak paid him no heed, enveloping him in one of those obnoxiously overwhelming hugs of his, a perfect match for his obnoxiously overwhelming field, and Megatron knew.

It had been foolish, really, to believe Megazarak had somehow been manipulated and made into an Autobot puppet. Autobots would have wasted no time bending Megazarak to the work of war, increasing casualties in battle, or even forcing Megazarak to deactivate him right here and now.

Wouldn’t they?

“I’ve missed you too, brother.”

Megatron returned Megazarak’s embrace. After so many millennia, it was like coming home.

“Come back to Armada with me, Megazarak,” said Megatron, on foolish impulse, trying to keep a pleading tone from slithering into his voice. “We can rule the Decepticons together again. I will tell them... I--”

It pained him when Megazarak pulled away, studying him with a strangely inscrutable expression. At last he shook his helm.

“You do not understand just yet,” Megazarak said. “When you fully wake from your Battlesleep we will talk again. Until then, go back to Armada, and to your ward. It is not safe there for a slave, not even your own.”

As if acknowledging Optimus’s situation tempted the forces of the universe, a notification from Strika popped up in Megatron’s HUD with a subject line clearly concerning the slave in question.

Megatron laughed, and his twin looked at him with a perplexed, but amused expression.

“In a way, brother,” Megatron grinned, weary, and uncertain if he wanted to laugh or howl in despair. “He reminds me of you. Significantly smarter, however, but the same creative knack for causing trouble.”

To: Megatron
From: Strika
Subject: One Sneaky Little Fragger

Lord Megatron, I must insist you allow me to punish that little slagger you call your personal slave. He has gone bey
While I am unable to understand your attachment to this Autobot, I have done my best to be respectful of your wishes, but regardless, this has gone too far.

Deal with it, or I will.

Strika,
General of Destruction

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To: Strika
From: Megatron
Subject: Re: One Sneaky Little Fragger

My orders are clear, Strika. Optimus Prime is not to be harmed in any way.

But I am interested in hearing what sort of mischief my slave has been up to. You must admire his resourcefulness

Megatron,
Supreme Leader of the Decepticon Army

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To: Megatron
From: Strika
Subject: Re: Re: One Sneaky Little Fragger

Lord Megatron, this is serious! We are even considering destroying your personal quarters to catch the little malfunc

Strika,
General of Destruction

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To: Strika
From: Megatron
Subject: Re: Re: Re: One Sneaky Little Fragger

Surely you are exaggerating, Strika, but regardless I will be on my way soon.

Megatron,
Supreme Leader of the Decepticon Army

---

To: Megatron
From: Strika
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: One Sneaky Little Fragger

I only wish I were exaggerating. On a scale from one to Lugnut becoming inebriated, the damage the slave is causir

Strika,
General of Destruction

---

To: Strika
From: Megatron
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: One Sneaky Little Fragger

Make sure he is well-fueled then.

Megatron,
Supreme Leader of the Decepticon Army
The sleepy, red sun had begun a lazy ascent in its task to warm Garo when Megatron finished recounting his tale to Megazarak: everything from the war, to his absence on Earth, to bringing his would-be imprisoner back to Armada.

Megazarak listened--something rather unusual for him--only interjecting enough inane commentary to relieve Megatron’s suspicions that something was not right once and for all.

Even if the Autobots had been capable of reprogramming his brother, no being in the universe could replicate Megazarak’s obnoxious personality.

“And let me guess,” said Megazarak, grinning. “Despite behaving like a perfect gentlebot, you have yet to bring this little firebrand you’ve been mooning over to our side? Or even into your berth? When you have never had trouble doing so before?”

Megatron scowled, moving from his side to his back on the berth for what probably was the hundredth time that night cycle, and shook his head. “Too smart. He saw our--my--true ways on the human planet. One of his teammates was deactivated in our struggles. You know how attached grounders can get to their subordinates.” He wasn’t about to admit, even to his brother, that he was badly out of practice when it came to luring others into his berth. Megatron’s gaze slid back to his Megazarak, whose red optics still outshone the intruding sunrise. “The true mystery is what you have been up to since… your exile.”

Megazarak’s grin broadened. “Oh, you know how it is. Exploring planets, sampling foreign oils, introducing Autobots to my spike.”

“Brother!”


Megazarak ex-vented, and Megatron immediately knew there was more.

“What is it?”
“Over the cycles, I’ve grown more and more suspicious of the Allspark.” There was an intense look in Megazarak’s optics, but he was quiescent aside from the hum of his flight engines. “You and I both know that flightframes and groundframes are complementary types. We and the Autobots were intended to coexist. Prior to the discovery of the Allspark, the continuation of our species depended on it. Then—somehow—we discover an artifact that renders that partnership obsolete, and by extension the differences in frametype so? Leaving of course the only remaining question, if we do not need each other, why coexist at all?”

Megatron stayed quiet. Part of him still balked at the idea that grounders might serve as an equal half to a greater whole, but he was curious to hear more.

“Perhaps I have become paranoid in my exile, paranoid without my spark twin, but it occurs to me that, well, there are almost no records of the Allspark’s origin—none that I can find anyhow—and what better way to invade Cybertron than to divide and conquer?”

Megatron frowned. “You believe the Allspark was a weapon meant to be wielded against us?”

Megazarak’s jaw worked—his old habit of chewing his glossa when deep in thought—and it jarred Megatron to recognize it. “I do not know, precisely. Maybe it is nothing.”

His optics focused back on Megatron, and Megatron felt a small chill in his neural net.

“But I do know that if the Allspark is what our enemies discard, are willing to give up to us, then perhaps we are right be worried.”

Sentinel tweaked his colors for a third time and scrutinized himself in the mirror. The electronic paint had been a rush job, but the bots at Dipstick’s Detailing seemed to have done the install properly. He snapped his mask closed and turned to Sari, sitting on the edge of the small end table next to his berth, another of those disgusting organic drinks between her servos. “How do I look?” he said.

She raised an orbital ridge, “Like a robot?”

Sentinel sighed. “Like a different robot?”

“Well yeah,” she said. “Aren’t those colors a little flashy though?”

He’d gone for something lower on the spectrum than his usual blue, shifting the paint to reflect predominantly yellow light, with highlights in teal, to mostly blend in with his biolights. “Not at all,” he said. “El—an old friend of mine used to go out clubbing regularly. It’s far more noticeable to be too subtle.”

Sari rolled her optics. “These are Decepticon fans,” she said. “Wouldn’t they use Decepticon colors?”

“Doubtful,” said Sentinel. “They’d still have to travel to the meeting place after all, and electronic paint isn’t cheap. They’d likely be questioned, or at least garner some odd looks.”

“If you say so, Mr. Roboto,” she said. “How are we doing on time?”

“I would have thought Ratchet would have helped you calibrate your internal chronometer to
Cybertron’s rotation by now,” he said.

“Yeah,” Sari said, shrugging. “But do you know how creepy it is to have to look at the inside of your own eyeballs to check the time?”

“Do I look like I possess eyeballs?” said Sentinel. “Never mind, we should leave now if we want to make the opening set.”

“Don't want to be fashionably late?” she said.

“With the distance we've got to go,” said Sentinel. “We will be.”

The Leaky Valve was a little hole-in-the-wall down near the shopping district, jammed between a pawn shop and an establishment that claimed to offer a variety of artisanal oils, at least one of which Sentinel was certain was imported from a planet currently under trade embargo with the commonwealth. The thought made his circuits itch, but he forcefully ignored the storefront and marched up to the bouncer, attempting to project the air of casual geniality that Optimus had always made look so effortless.

The bouncer, a squat, chartreuse bot about half Sentinel's height, eyed him as he approached, expression not unlike an electro-toad right before it stuffed a glitch mouse down its gullet with zero regard for petty matters like the limits of construction parameters.

Sentinel swallowed and pasted a smile on his face. “Hello there, my good chum. I am here to partake in the evening’s entertainment.”

The bouncer rolled a wad of what had to be oil tar in his mouth, looking unimpressed. “Designation?” he said.

“Uh,” Sentinel hadn’t been given the precise protocol for this situation, but the organizer had assured him he wouldn’t need to give out his actual designation. “Hard...aft?” he hazarded.

The bouncer squinted at him, optics flickering as he reviewed something. “You’re on the list,” he grunted at last.

Sentinel let out a vent he hadn’t known he’d been holding. “Capital! I’ll show myself in then?”

“Yeah, yeah,” said the bouncer, waving him through. As Sentinel passed, he leaned over and spat a bit of oil onto the pavement.

“Fragging, shut-in weirdos,” he muttered, just loud enough for Sentinel to hear.

Sentinel resisted the urge to stop and chew him out. He was a fully productive member of society, thank you very much. Just because he preferred the peace of his own apartment to the bedlam of the club scene, just because it took him a full astrosecond to retrieve the memory file of his last recreational excursion, just because he was spending his off cycles tailing a Decepticon spy by infiltrating and befriending a gaggle of ‘Con sympathizers, didn’t make him some kind of, of...

Vector Sigma, maybe he was a shut-in weirdo.

This disturbing line of thought was interrupted by the ping of his commlink.
Eagle One to Mr. Roboto, come in Mr. Roboto,: said Sari.

Don’t startle me, you’ll make me blow my cover,: said Sentinel, suppressing a flinch as he bumped into one of the gaggle of bots loitering near the entrance. He muted his vocalizer before he could yell at them for their undisciplined behavior and instead mumbled something that might have been mistaken for an apology in the hubbub of the club, before pushing past them, scanning the room as he made for the bar.

The venue was intimate, a small stage set just above a scattering of tables and chairs around a slick, tiled section of floor clearly intended to serve as a dance floor. A small femme, pink plating turned warm and rosy by the spotlights, occupied the stage, her expression distant as she fiddled with an amplifier on the instrument slung across her body.

“Can’t believe they got Rosanna to play tonight,” said a bot seated at a nearby table. “Her shows are booked solid for the next two stellar cycles.”

“Do you think she’ll play ‘Warrior’s Lament’?” said another. “I’m gonna need another drink if so; that song always frags me up.”

The first bot snorted. “And here I thought you’d be calling for ‘Streetwalker’ or ‘Collision on the Dancefloor’.”

“I can appreciate classical music!” replied the second, indignant. “I just prefer something you can dance to!”

“You mean flail uselessly about to,” snickered the first.

The house lights went down and the bots lapsed into a flurry of harsh whispers. The pink femme, Rosanna, leaned forward and cleared her intake. “I’d like to thank you all for coming tonight,” she said. “It’s so wonderful to see such numerous faceplates. I’ve got a great set lined up for you, so tune up your audio sensors and let’s get this show on the road!”

Half-listening, Sentinel scanned the room, absently wandering out into the open floorspace, scrutinizing each bot in turn while attempting to appear like he was doing no such thing. There was a surprising variety among the patrons, every frametype was represented, from minibots to a hulking mechanism with flat, tread tires at the back of the room, their hot pink plating barely visible in the dim light.

See any likely suspects?: said Sari.

Sentinel frowned, his processor working frantically. There was nothing about any of the audience that stuck out to him. Ordinary colors, ordinary expressions, ordinary bots.

The synthetic notes of Rosanna’s instrument rang out, the rapid, opening chords to a song Sentinel didn’t know. Several dozen of the bots leapt to their pedes, converging on the dancefloor--converging around Sentinel --and began to dance.

An uncomfortable realization washed through Sentinel. He’d assumed that he could spot a Decepticon spy on sight. That they’d have some posture or sigil or attitude that he could pinpoint, like spotting a syk dealer slouching on the corner of an intersection. But this crowd looked like they could have been milling about the streets of Iacon. Above the writhing mob, Rosanna crooned out another line.

“...harder than a bad bot’s dream, ooh yeah~”
It felt as though a band were tightening around Sentinel’s tank. How was he supposed to track down DMC-12 in all this mess? His optics flicked from dancer to dancer with increasing alarm, their frames pressing in around him, too close, too close, too close! His processor spun, he hadn’t been this close to this many other bots since--stop thinking about that! Vent. Extricate himself. He pushed off from a minibot half his size that had been obliviously grinding back against him, and tried to escape the crowd.

“Let me out,” he said, his voice lost in the roar of the music, muffled behind his mask. “Let me--”

Sentinel shoved harder, squeezing between two large, round frametypes, their colors invisible under the flash of lights. Someone staggered into him, crushing his pede. Panic spiked. The band around his tank wound tighter, tighter…

“Get off me, you giant hunk of scrap metal, before I have you arrested!”

The bot immediately to Sentinel’s left stopped dead, turning wide and horrified optics onto him, and Sentinel knew he was completely fragged.

“Cop!” screamed someone in the crowd. “Cheese it!”

Bedlam ensued.

The crowd around him scattered less like scared zap-mice and more like disoriented titanium moosebots, leaping over tables, sending chairs flying. Sentinel didn’t think, just charged after the nearest one, bellowing, “Stop, in the name of the law!”

Surprisingly, and in rather poor taste, the bot did not comply with Sentinel’s very best drill sergeant roar, but flung another chair behind them, beaning Sentinel directly in the face. He flung the chair aside and raced up a set of darkened stairs after them.

Sentinel! Sentinel, what the hell is going on? It sounds like somebody let loose a fox in the henhouse over there!:

Sentinel did not have the processor power to devote to wondering what Earth fowl domiciles had to do with police raids, and flung himself around the bannister, clawing his way after the vanishing pedes of the escapee. Up and up and up they went and then--

There, a door, open. He hurled himself into the room just in time to see the bot vanish out a window and flung himself through it without taking the time to consider the fact that they were four stories up…

Gravity, thankfully, was only too glad to remind him of this fact.

Sentinel flailed, shrieked something about having everyone arrested, and fell. Unfortunately at that moment, the only law that applied was gravity.

He plummeted, the night air gleefully slapping him in the face like an obnoxious older femme who thought he was charming in some manner. He pinwheeled, reaching out in vain hope for a servohold.
He was brought to an abrupt halt as something flexible and bumpy struck him in the faceplates. Then another something, poking almost painfully against his side. He yelped, reaching for a hold, servo closing around something long and cylindrical. He kicked, trying to swim through the strange, loose objects, his pede clanging against a metal wall.

Squirming, he tried to turn himself over, blinking at the bright yellow logo splashed across the vertical metal surface near his helm.

_Iacon Municipal Waste Disposal Service_

He was in a dumpster.

He felt strangely relieved by this. While a dumpster wasn’t the most dignified of landing sites, it certainly beat contact with the pavement. Someone had even been kind enough to fill it with these...objects, whatever they were. Sentinel blinked and held up the cylinder in his servo, squinting at it under the dim, yellow light of the streetlamp.

He froze.

He was holding one of those--those, _abominations_!

Sentinel flung the object away from him with the same enthusiasm he would have a live explosive, scrambling to escape the dumpster, realizing too late that they were _everywhere_.

With a garbled shriek and the utter collapse of his remaining dignity, Sentinel dragged himself over the edge of the dumpster, collapsing to the pavement in a wave of interface toys.

:Sentinel? Sentinel, I’m seriously getting worried over here! Everyone went running and screaming out of the club! Are you hurt? Do you need a medic?:

“Try writing that into your report, Losertrooper!” shouted a voice in the distance.

Sentinel groaned and covered his face. :Just a psychiatrist.:
Ping Me Maybe

by Rosanna

Just a little archivist cog
Watching the arena fog
I looked at you all agog
Bereft of what to say

Reason tells me I’m naught
To not seek more than I aught
I looked at you as you fought
And knew differently

Your red stare was holding
Stained sword
Energon showing
Hot nights
Smog a’blowing
Show me of your struggle maybe?

Hey I just met you
And this is crazy
But here’s my com code
So ping me maybe
And I know, you struggle daily
But here’s my com code
So ping me maybe

Hey I just met you
And this is crazy
But here’s my com code
So ping me maybe
And all the other bots
Try to chase me
But here’s my com code
So ping me maybe

Bots fell in droves to your maul
I fell right into your thrall
I feared that I was too small
But you looked back at me

Awakened to the call
Someday to rise above all
I knew I must fall
But you would catch me

Your red stare was holding
Stained sword
Energon showing
Hot nights
Smog a'blowing
Show me of your struggle maybe?

Hey I just met you
And this is crazy
But here's my com code
So ping me maybe
And I know, you struggle daily
But here's my com code
So ping me maybe

Does the spark serve the code or the code the spark?
Does code serve the spark?
(Serve the spark)
Does the spark serve the code or the code the spark?
Do we serve the spark?
The spark spark spark~
So ping me maybe

Chapter End Notes
Sorry for the chapter being shorter than usual, hopefully we will make it up in the next one when Minimus gets a surprise ping. ;P
By the way, I'm going to have a booth at the Artist Alley at Kumoricon under "birdsoup," so if any of y'all are there, come around and say hi!

- Reya

EDIT: art is done by agentblurr on tumblr!
As Minimus expected, Bumblebee followed him back to his quarters after Minimus dismissed the lot of them, the young scout’s field a storm of conflicting emotions. Minimus kept his own field utterly level; it wouldn’t do to lose composure, and he did not engage in petty arguments with his soldiers.

Not when he could help it, at least.

Minimus paused outside his door, resting a servo above the sensor pad. “Can I help you, Bumblebee?”

Bumblebee worked his jaw, his expression somewhere between sulking and worried.

“I still don’t like it,” he said.

Minimus raised an orbital ridge. “I am afraid I am going to have to ask you to clarify.”

Bumblebee scowled. “I still don’t trust that Megatron’s turned over a new solar panel or whatever. And even if he has had some kind of change of spark, are you trying to say that every ‘Con in that hive of scum and villainy has too?”

“Bumblebee, if he hasn’t truly changed, Optimus Prime would have likely been deactivated by now,” said Minimus.

Bumblebee’s faceplates crumpled and Minimus relented. “However, do not forget, Optimus is a capable and cunning soldier. It is reasonable for us to believe that he is planning his own escape. And if not… perhaps he has found a reason to stay put for a time.”

“Or he’s locked up and being slowly starved to deactivation,” Bumblebee said in a deliberately loud mutter.”Or he’s already been smelted down and used for spare parts. Or he’s getting passed around in some ‘Con brothel. Any of that sound ‘reasonable’ to you?”

Minimus opened the door to his temporary quarters, and Bumblebee stomped in after him with feigned casualness. Clearly he had no intention of allowing anything—even gossip of Jazz’s previous romantic tastes--get in the way of answers this time.

Minimus suppressed an ex-vent. “That is a possible scenario,” he said. “Unfortunately, even if that were the case, there is little we can do. I will not risk your lives unnecessarily without a realistic plan of action, and Optimus Prime would agree with me, is that understood?”

That seemed to finally get through Bumblebee’s helm, because he slumped, looking dejected. “Our first step must be to obtain further information,” said Minimus, as kindly as he could manage. “Until then, we can only hope for the best.”

Bumblebee opened his mouth as if to protest further, but Minimus held up a servo as his personal commlink burst into a flurry of chirping. Once he was certain Bumblebee would not interrupt, Minimus raised his servo to his helm. :I copy, Jazz. What is it?:

:Uh, a bit of an unusual situation, Miniboss. Minimus resisted the urge to pinch his nasal ridge in exasperation. Of course Bumblebee’s undignified nickname would have gained traction. :We’re
getting a transmission from Cybertron, directly from the Rod Bod--uh, I mean Acting Rodimus Magnus:

Minimus was not going to ask how Rodimus Prime had earned that particular nickname, and in fact wished he had never acquired knowledge of its existence in the first place. :Regarding what, if you please?:

:Well,: said Jazz, as though he was thinking how to phrase this delicately. :Apparently he got a transmission. This morning. From Megazarak.:

A frisson worked its way down Minimus’s spinal struts. So he does still function . :What sort of transmission?:

:Won't say apparently,: said Jazz. :But he was asking for you. Won't speak to anyone else. Sir, you, uh, might want to get to the bridge.:

Minimus bit his glossa. :I will be there momentarily. Thank you for the report.:

:Sure thing, Miniboss.: Jazz disconnected the commlink and Minimus took a deep intake of air, trying to slow his racing fuel pump.

Bumblebee was eyeing him. “What's up?”

Minimus offlined his optics and composed himself. “I believe we may be about to acquire that information I just spoke of.”

“Hold still!” said Sari. “I'm never going to get these scuffs buffed out if you keep wriggling.”

Sentinel huffed and grumbled, but complied. He would have vastly preferred to go to a professional to have this done, but that meant questions and he would be slagged before he filled out a detailed accident report for this little incident.

Fragging degenerates, he thought sourly. Why couldn't they just stick to the legal vices? It wasn't as if the selection of interface aids was lacking. Elita had owned catalogs of the slagging things. And most of the ones he'd seen— in the evidence locker thank you very much— hadn't looked comfortable in the least. As far as Sentinel knew, the laws were there for safety reasons; he had no clue why injuring oneself with oversized interface toys was associated with pro-Decepticon anarchy.

Sari swooped under his arm and began buffing on a long scratch the size of his servo. That one hadn't happened in the fall, but rather as he'd tried to claw himself free of the dumpster from the pits.

“So,” said Sari. “What do you do after a mission failure?”

“Same thing as after a mission success,” said Sentinel. “Paperwork.”

“Riveting,” she said. “Do you think DMC-12 was there?”

Sentinel didn't want to admit that he had no fragging clue. Or that they'd most likely tipped their servo and might have driven DMC further underground. “Maybe,” he said. “No one stood out though. The lights were distracting, and there were too many bots there, and that slagging music --”
“You mean Rosanna?” said Sari, her faceplates lighting up in excitement. She zipped across the room and scooped up a datapad. “I looked her up on the extranet. I had no idea you guys made music!”

“Of course we do,” said Sentinel. “We’re not drones. Some of us just have better taste than others.”

Sari shrugged and poked the screen of the datapad. Music started to play, some mindless upbeat tempo blasting through the room. “I don’t know, I kind of like this one!”

Sentinel clapped his servos over his audio sensors. “Turn it down!”

But Sari was already swooping down to land on the table, her small limbs flailing wildly as she started to dance. “C’mon, didn’t you say you used to go clubbing?” she shouted.

“Not willingly,” he shouted back. “Why would I subject myself to loud, aggravating noises and other bots in my personal space?”

“Because it’s fun!”

“--someday to rise above all--”

“It is not fun!” sputtered Sentinel. “And these lyrics are seditious!”

Sari cackled and pumped the datapad above her head. “Yeah, but they’re catchy as shit!”

“--your red stare was holding--”

Sentinel froze. “Wait!” he barked. “Play it again, from the beginning!”

“Oh, now you want to--”

“Just do it!”

Sari shrugged and complied. There was a moment of blessed silence and then the opening strains again.

“--a little archivist cog--”

“Pause it,” he said, sharply. “Did you hear that?”

Sari blinked at him, her expression mystified. “The line about the archivist?” she said. “What about it?”

“Pull up that trash novel, the one about the archivist and the gladiator,” Sentinel frowned, his processor racing.

Sari raised an orbital ridge. “Didn’t you say that if you had to read any more of that ‘slag slurpee in story form’ you’d have a processor meltdown?”

Sentinel scowled. “Just give me the pad.”

She stuck her glossa out at him and tossed him the pad. He pawed through it for several moments. “I swear that I saw--here it is.”

He cleared his throat. “But how can I?” said Optronix. ‘I am an archivist, no more than a cog in the Great Machine. How can I dream so far above my station? How can any of us?’” He looked up
at her. “See?”

“So... Rosanna reads trashy pro-Decepticon novels?” said Sari.

Sentinel frowned and gnawed on the tip of his thumb. “Probably,” he said. “That imagery is very specific. Then again, so do a lot of bots. Could be coincidence, but…” He trailed off, thinking. “Blurr did say that he thought Flipsides was in the entertainment industry.”

Sari’s optics rounded. “You think the most famous pop star on the entire planet is a Decepticon spy? That's like the opposite of inconspicuous.”

Sentinel actually found himself hesitating. It did sound ludicrous.

“Second most famous, but maybe not,” he said. “Still, I think it might bear further investigation. She may provide a lead if nothing else.”

Sari’s face split into a wide grin. “You know what that means,” she said. She swiped the datapad from his fingers and spun it around. “Time to listen to all forty albums of Rosanna’s discography!”

Sentinel groaned and buried his face in his servos.

Minimus’s spark swirled so fast in its chamber that he was afraid the other Autobots would somehow be able to hear it, no matter how seriously and stoically he presented himself. He feared against all logic that every emotion unbefitting of a Magnus which he felt for the former Decepticon leader would be laid bare.

How irresponsible of him.

But then again, his entire entanglement with Megazarak had been irresponsible.

Towards the bridge once again, his pedes feeling heavier than they ever did with the Magnus armor. At that moment, Minimus sorely missed its protection, the literal and metaphorical shield it provided between himself and often painful and inconvenient interactions with others. Now he felt his small size, felt the other Autobots loom over him as he pressed the necessary controls that would allow him to see his… well, what truly was Megazarak to him?

His spark answered that question when the exiled former leader’s face showed up in the projection screen. Megazarak’s initial expression was stern, but quickly melted into joyful surprise.

“It has been a long time, Ultra Magnus.” The warbuild cocked his helm to the side, accentuating the smirk hidden in the corner of his mouth. “Or should I say, Minimus Ambus?”

Minimus forced his expression to harden. “How did you obtain information pertaining to my current status? Officially I am still in hospital.”

“Bah,” Megazarak waved his hand dismissively. “The change of Acting Magnus was a clue, but I only had to drop proof that the Steelhaven was under my possession to get confirmation.”

Minimus drew in a sharp breath. That Decepticon was right. “So you do have it,” he said, his voice even. “Is it intact?”
Megazarak glanced behind Minimus, an evaluating expression on his faceplates. “He is,” said Megazarak at last. “A few superficial marks only, and a few upgrades made in poor taste. I doubt it was you who added the multicolor high beams, however.”

Minimus tried not to allow his consternation to show on his face. Sigma’s fate was not something he had ever shared with Megazarak, but since the Decepticons had allowed him to make off with the ship, they hadn’t known its secret. “I see,” he said. “Perhaps we should cut to the chase then. What do you hope to exchange for its return?”

Megazarak gave him a long look, letting the silence dangle, and Minimus suppressed a shiver. Megazarak looked little different from when they had met on the battlefield on Antilla, and it was all too easy to go back. To recall that fear, that exhilaration, the weight of the Hammer in his servos, the new and strange encasement of the Magnus Armor.

“It is an edge, no more,” Perceptor had told him. “To let you meet them on their terms. To give you the strength and reach to challenge them. The cunning, the quickness, those are all yours.”

He hadn’t been prepared for the heat and immediacy of battle. The hissing of pistons as a punch landed. Watching red optics go wide with shock as a Decepticon soldier went down. The shockwaves as the armor absorbed force that could have crushed him. The ringing stroke of the Hammer on Megazarak’s swords.

Few things in the galaxy could rival the power of a Cybertronian warbuild, and Ultra Magnus had gotten a taste of it. It was little wonder Decepticons were as entitled to violence as they were; it was intoxicating when you were good at it.

Equally intoxicating—he was ashamed to admit—had been the way that Megazarak had looked at him after their first altercation. Reevaluating him, as though Megazarak saw something unexpected, but something he liked. Minimus had thought it had been because violence and power were the only thing warbuilds respected, and perhaps it started as such, but as they had conversed...

This was no time to lose himself in thoughts.

“Well,” Megazarak said, a mischievous glint in his optics, as though he could track the trajectory of Minimus’s thoughts. “My first request is to meet up with you in person. I do not wish to burden your soldiers with the minutia of negotiations between leaders, current or otherwise.”

“Where’s Optimus Prime!!” Bumblebee blurted out, apparently incapable of holding his silence any longer. Minimus allowed himself a solemn moment of mourning for it.

“And how do we know this isn’t a trap?” Bulkhead added.

“Exactly!” Bumblebee said. “How do we know it’s not a--ow!”

“My apologies,” said Arcee smoothly. “I appear to have stepped on your pede. At my age you can’t always see where you’re going. Or keep your vocalizer muted.”

“Thank you, Arcee,” said Minimus, resisting the urge to look behind him and give them all his most practiced severe look. Returning his attention to Megazarak, he said, “Perhaps that could be arranged, but we would need to agree upon an acceptable meeting location. Decepticon space is, I think, out of the question.”

“That is something you and I can both agree on,” Megazarak’s expression was sour at that sentence, and Minimus could not blame him. “I have made landfall on Garo. What is your current trajectory?”
Minimus blinked, startled. “Garo? We are only a short ways distant. We are currently orbiting Com.”

A genuinely pleased smile tugged at the edges of Megazarak’s mouth. “Fortunate. It appears we are currently very near. However, as you hold higher office than an exile, I will be the one to make my way to Com. With your permission, of course.”

Minimus huffed, but could find no reason to protest. Com was safe enough, and friendly to peaceful non-Autobot visitors, no matter how... intimidating they might appear.

They would also be much safer if it did indeed turn out to be an ambush.

“It will be done. Once I communicate with our stationed Autobots, I will have them send you the coordinates for a meeting location,” Minimus said, and quickly cut off the transmission, the activated lights dimming along with Megazarak’s voice and image.

It was best to end the conversation abruptly before he could allow himself any emotional reaction, such as doing something as foolish as bidding Megazarak farewell.

Taking a moment to compose himself, he turned to face his small team. “It appears we have made some progress.”

Arcee raised an orbital ridge. “Is that what the young bots are calling it these days?”

Minimus gave her a severe look and she smiled sweetly at him. Beside her, Ratchet muffled a laugh into his servo behind a fit of coughing.

Minimus nodded to them all and exited the bridge once again, this time without interruptions or nagging followers. Behind him, he swore he caught Ratchet telling the others to “not frag this up,” but perhaps he had only imagined it, as he was too busy reading the small datapacket Megazarak had been able to send him in such a short distance via his personal commlink.

[I look forward to seeing you again.]

*That fragger* , thought Minimus uncharitably. *How did he know I hadn’t changed my commlink code?*

[I imagine you were too worried about me to change your commlink code, am I correct?]

It was only many millennia of military discipline and the knowledge that Omega Supreme was as alive as he was that kept Minimus from kicking in the nearest wall.

The following is the transcript of the Armada news broadcast *Red Glow*:

*Reporter Triton*: Breaking News! Ten Decepticon soldiers, including Lieutenant Shockwave, have been injured after a bomb went off at... out through his nasal ridge.” No word on whether or not Lieutenant Shockwave does indeed identify as a leaky valve.

*Reporter Triton*: Injuries like these are common on Armada, commemorating former Lord Megazarak’s suggestion th...
**Doctor Scalpel:** This better be worth getting out of recharge for.

**Reporter Triton:** Would you happen to know if Lord Megatron's rebellious slave had anything to do with this particular

**Doctor Scalpel:** Pshaw, that slave is a built-up Autobot. I'm certain that's the only thing he wouldn't bomb. No, the complaint box is often subject to pranks. The one before this involved stuffing it full of astro ticks. I would know, I'm the one who had to pull the things out of everyone's backides.

**Reporter Triton:** Coming back to the subject at hand, would you have any medical advice on injuries from similar bombs?

**Doctor Scalpel:** [stares directly at the camera] Walk it off, you leaky valves.

**Reporter Triton:** Thank you, Doctor Scalpel. Next on Red Glow, we'll show you how to construct a pipe bomb yourself.

Chapter End Notes

Things are starting to get kind of gay.

- Reya
Omega Supreme set them down on the fringes of one of Com’s northern cities. They’d caused a bit of stir among the radio chatter flying back and forth when they bypassed the main spaceport, but a quick message fired off with Ultra Magnus’s official seal of business quickly quieted it.

The sun was setting, illuminating the jagged spires of the city skyline to the south of them, flashing on the edges of buildings like small tongues of flame. The air was chill and dry, the perfect temperature for mechanical comfort, and the sky above them hummed with interstellar traffic.

Megazarak had beat them there, and Minimus would have had to have been blind to miss the blunt silhouette of the Steelhaven a short ways distant, its edges starting to blur into the creeping darkness above them. He spotted the jagged, unmistakable shape standing before it, almost invisible in the shadow of the ship, and wavered a moment on the edge of Omega’s gangplank.

It galled him, but he was more uneasy at the prospect of meeting Megazarak now than he had been when the former Decepticon warlord had been out to crush his spark. Back then there had been clear boundaries and expectations: Autobot, Decepticon.

Now... Minimus did not know what to expect.

The rest of the crew crowded behind him, their energy fields a riot of bright, colorful emotions. He held up a servo.

“Stay here,” he said. “I will return when our business is concluded.”

“Are you sure you do not require protection, Ultra Magnus, sir?” Omega Supreme’s voice came from all around them, deep and droning. “My scanners indicate that you currently are not contained within your exosuit armaments.”

“Yeah, Mini-boss,” Jazz agreed. “No offense but you’re, uh, not as big as you used to be.”

“You may not be old enough to recall this, Jazz,” Minimus said, “but I did face Decepticons on the battlefield before the creation of the Magnus armor. I am a loadbearer, and while Megazarak might outclass me, I am confident in my ability to knock him back should the need arise.”

“Well, I don’t think any Con can be negotiated with,” Bumblebee grumbled.


“I care!” Bulkhead protested.

“I will keep my commlink activated,” said Minimus. “And I will not hesitate to signal for assistance.”

“We’ve got your back, Miniboss,” said Jazz. “For all that it’s worth.”

Minimus nodded stiffly and set out across the open field towards the Steelhaven. The sun had set as they squabbled, and above them the stars were blinking into life.

Minimus stopped a few paces away from Megazarak so that he wouldn’t be forced to look too far up to meet his gaze. Megazarak’s stance appeared relaxed, not combat-ready, and Minimus eyed him,
making note of the absence of Megazarak’s swords, before nodding his head in greeting.

Megazarak actually smiled, the expression only barely lit by the red glow of his optics. “It is good to see you once again, Minimus Ambus,” he said, and gestured towards the lowered gangplank of the Steelhaven. “Shall we? I assume you will want to ascertain the ship’s intact status yourself.”

“Naturally,” said Minimus. “After you.”

Megazarak submitted to the blatant display of mistrust with grace and made his way into the belly of the ship. Minimus followed.

When he passed into the cargo hold it was as if a great weight had been lifted from him. Around him he could feel the warm hum of Sigma’s energy field, sleepy and unresponsive as always, but still present, still alive as it were. Minimus could not stop from resting his servo on the wall of the hold, if for no other reason than to reassure himself.

*Old friend*, he thought. *Please forgive me*.

Minimus knew that if Sigma had been dismantled by the Decepticons, regardless of who was at fault, he would have never forgiven himself.

Minimus regrouped and found Megazarak watching him with an unreadable, but strangely soft, expression on his faceplates.

Minimus cleared his intake in embarrassment. “Ah, you indicated you had some terms you wished to discuss?”

“I do,” said Megazarak. “But not here. Shall we retire to the upper decks? Somewhere we can sit and have a drink?”

Oh, that was a *supremely* bad idea, but Minimus found himself unwilling to protest. “Of course,” he said. “Second deck is the mess hall. There will be oil there in the stores, or energon.”

He very pointedly didn’t mention that his usual quarters when he was onboard the ship were also on that deck.

It felt strange in the extreme to enter the mess, pour the oil into two standard issue cups, and sit down across from Megazarak as a host. Any physical proximity between them in wartime had been marked by hostility. Even when they had not been at each other’s throats during their strange communication, there had been a sense of distance, an air of unreality to the whole situation.

There was no distance now. Megazarak was *right there* and Vector Sigma Minimus could hear the throb of his systems, the growl of flight engines, see the minute twitches and changes in his expression.

And he was still as handsome as ever, blast him.

Minimus swirled his cup of oil and took a small sip. “So,” he said. “Have things gotten so bad between you and Megatron that you would not only refrain from telling him of the Steelhaven’s true identity, but return it to his enemies’ servos?”

“To the contrary,” said Megazarak, taking a draft of his own oil. “Things between myself and my brother have greatly improved.” The ex-warlord smiled, though his optics dimmed. “He has even asked me to return to Armada with him.”
Minimus raised an orbital ridge. “That is surprising news. And yet you are here, and not in Decepticon space.” Quite a relief, the reunion of the two brothers would present a grave threat to Cybertron.

A smirk tugged at the edge of Megazarak’s mouth. “I have been in exile long enough to realize that there are certain...advantages to working outside the system. I can see the glyphs on the wall, as it were, and I suspect that change may be upon us, perhaps sooner than we think.”

Minimus sat back in his chair and regarded Megazarak. “I see,” he said. Questions crowded in, numerous and insistent, but there was something he burned to know, a missing puzzle piece to the deepening mystery that was Megazarak’s changing behavior.

“How did you uncover Sigma’s identity?” he said. “You were long gone before the building of the Sentinels.”

“Sheer accident,” said Megazarak, unconcerned. “I was exploring the ship and found something rather like a spark chamber in appearance and content. Few records record the fate of the Sentinels once they were disabled in battle. Factor in your own...attachment, and it was not hard to divine.”

Minimus cocked his helm. “And why bring him back to me? What could you possibly need which would require you to leverage something so precious?”

“Well,” said Megazarak, leaning back. “I could lie and tell you I had a big, noble cause all along. The truth is, when I came up with this plan I wanted the Steelhaven for two reasons. One, I needed Megatron idle, not spearheading an invasion of Cybertron at the behest of his generals. Two,” he grinned. “I wanted to see you again… under more amicable circumstances.”

Minimus didn’t manage to suppress his surprised jerk completely, and he felt the small dribble of oil drip down the back of his knuckles as it sloshed over the rim of his cup.

Slagger. He’s testing me. Are we just going to pretend we never said anything to each other outside of battle? That our correspondence never happened? Or is he waiting for me to do it?

“Clearly I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw Sigma’s spark chamber,” continued Megazarak, more serious now. “Such a prize would have forced Megatron back into open war with the Autobots.”

“ Forced?” said Minimus, disbelieving. He really, really needed to clean his servo but that would mean acknowledging and drawing attention to what happened.

Megazarak drank from his oil, and glanced down at Minimus’s cup. So he had noticed. Slagger. “It appears that the same coding that activated in myself following our...altercation, that ties Sigma to you, has activated in Megatron for Optimus Prime.”

By the Allspark. Minimus thought. This could mean… this could mean everything.

“Protector coding?” Minimus said. “I thought that was something exclusive to the Supremes.”

Megazarak shook his head. “No, it is something intrinsic to all warbuilds. It just doesn’t usually lobotomize us, unless tampered with.”

Megazarak raised a pointed orbital ridge at him, and a wave of guilt swept through Minimus. True, the creation of the Sentinels had been anything but ethical, but times had been desperate. Megazarak had been gone, and Megatron had already proven willing--in unleashing the cosmic rust plague upon ally and foe alike--to turn the conflict into a war of attrition.
“You seem surprisingly willing to accept the situation,” said Minimus. “Are you not concerned that your brother will become an Autobot slave?”

Megazarak waved a servo carelessly. “The records I had to work with were spotty, leftover works from before the age of the Destrons, but they were consistent both with each other and with my own experience. The coding is clearly not slave coding.”

“Our scientists indicated that the purpose of the code was to control warbuilds,” said Minimus.

“Your scientists had a translation error,” said Megazarak. “The records I found which described the code used the glyph for ‘control’. Can you hear the difference?”

Minimus frowned. “It sounds familiar, but I wasn’t a scholar. What do the inflections mean?”

“It’s a personal tag, referring back to the self,” said Megazarak. “The coding wasn’t intended to exert external control, but rather internal. You can find the same glyph used in old translations of Devron’s Ruin, to describe a ‘warrior’s inner peace’.”

Minimus’s frown deepened. “What happened, then? Did the code become corrupted in some way?”

Megazarak shook his head. “Not corrupted. It was never activated in the first place. Protector coding is something natural. Without it, growing warbuilds develop a range of symptoms. Lack of empathy, emotional instability, irrational thought patterns and behaviors… does any of this sound familiar?”

Minimus worked his jaw. “It might,” he said tightly.

Megazarak regarded him. “The coding used to activate as nothing more than a byproduct of emotional attachments developed by living in a mixed society of flight and groundframes. Any emotional attachment would be rooted in respect, admiration, love, or some combination of those. It’s truly difficult to say, since my sources of information were all so vague, but one thing was clear: since our factions were divided, our behavior as a species, Autobot and Decepticon, has become distorted.”

Minimus was about to argue with him, but he paused, considering the ramifications. If warbuilds could, literally, change their mind…then there was hope not only for permanent peace between the two factions, but also the possibility of integration. Except…

“Wait a moment,” said Minimus, unable to keep the indignation out of his tone. “Are you implying that our behavior has become distorted?”

Megazarak snorted into his oil. “Shall we go into just why the records I had to work with were so spotty?”

Minimus bit his glossa. “Quite,” he said.

Megazarak actually chuckled and winked. “Oh, Ultra Magnus, you don’t know the half of it.”

Minimus suppressed the urge to throw the cup he was holding, the oil can in front of him, and the table holding it up at the ex-Decepticon leader. What was it about this mech that made him lose patience so quickly?

He took another drink, rather than comply with his baser urges. “Was that the only function of the coding?” he said. “To keep warbuilds on an even keel so you did not take it into your processors to tear off all our helms?”
“You wound me, Minimus,” said Megazarak dryly. “And no, my research indicated that was not the coding’s only function.”

Minimus set down his cup, ignoring the dregs. “Well?” he said.

Megazarak smirked in a way that Minimus recognized all too well. “Shall I give you a demonstration later?”

“Megazarak,” Minimus glared. “This is not the time for your flirtations. They are neither as intimidating or as patronizing as you have intended.”

“Patronizing?” said Megazarak, surprise splashed across his face. “Hardly. In fact, I--”

Minimus jumped and barely bit back a curse as his commlink chirped. “A moment,” he said.

:What is it?: he said.

:Hello to you too,: said Ratchet. :What’s the matter? Old Tin-Can leaking oil in your energon?:

Minimus sighed and resisted the urge to bury his helm in his servos. :The negotiations are proceeding as normal. At least they were, until we were interrupted. :

:Eh, don’t blame me,: said Ratchet. :Arcee and I wanted to leave the two of you to clang things out, but we got outvoted.:

Across the table Megazarak toyed with the rim of his cup, smirking, and Minimus tried very hard not to swallow his glossa. :You outrank two thirds of the crew.:

:What can I say?: said Ratchet. :I got a soft spot for democracy. How are you holding up?:

Megazarak set aside his cup and settled forward in his chair, a disturbingly mischievous glint in his optic. Minimus eyed him warily. :Considering what you’ve seen first hand, Ratchet, I would think you’d be less relaxed about the situation:

:Any time he spends drooling over you is less time he can spend coming up with new and unique ways to murder us: said Ratchet, sounding not a little resigned. :I’d still suggest keeping an optic on him, but something tells me you’re not having that problem.:

Minimus’s optics rounded as Megazarak actually reached across the table and took his servo, the one onto which he’d carelessly spilled oil. His own servos were massive, nearly engulfing Minimus’s. :I assure you, Ratchet,: said Minimus, struggling to keep his voice steady as he debated whether to snatch his servo back. :My behavior has been entirely professional.:

:Yeah, yeah,: said Ratchet. Looking entirely unconcerned, Megazarak leaned down to examine his servo, casting a long shadow across the table. Glancing up at Minimus, he smirked.

_Oh Vector Sigma_ , thought Minimus in a panic. _He’s not going to--_

Megazarak smiled at him through a mouthful of fangs and licked straight across the back of his servo.

Static whined in Minimus’s audio sensors and he struggled not to choke.

:--so just hurry it up before we all rust to pieces or Bumblebee blows a circuit breaker with sheer desire to beat up a ‘Con.:
For a moment Minimus feared he would blow a circuit breaker, but Megazarak only set his servo down as gently as he'd picked it up, and leaned back in his seat, an amused and not a little smug expression on his faceplates.

:I’ll--: stuttered Minimus, and swallowed hard. :I’m headed back.: 

:Roger, see you soon.: 

Minimus shut off his commlink with a speed he generally associated with escaping mortal danger and tried to steady himself.

Megazarak raised an orbital ridge. “Well?”

“I…” said Minimus. “I need to go.”

Megazarak’s expression actually fell for a moment before it closed off, his features suddenly as impassive as a titanium wall. “I see,” he said. “My apologies then, for overstepping.”

Minimus’s processor seethed, overflowing with questions, with words, with emotion, a tangle of anxiety and conflict he feared he might never be able to untangle or articulate, underpinning one clear, uncomplicated desire.

He never wanted to see that expression on Megazarak’s faceplates ever again.

“I need to go,” Minimus said. “But I will be back.”

To: General Strika, and 47 more

From: Blitzwing, Triple Changer Extraordinaire

Subject: Video Removal

General Strika,

I must insist that you order Shockwave to assist me. There is a video which has been recently uploaded to the BoobyTrap extranet site which violates their Terms of Service and it

Blitzwing
From: General Strika
Subject: Re: Video Removal

Blitzwing, just because a video surpasses yours in Likes and Views does not mean it is to be removed. Further, this Additionally, since when do any Decepticon-run extranet sites have terms of service?

General Strika

-

To: General Strika, and 47 more
From: Blitzwing, Triple Changer Extraordinaire
Subject: Re: Re: Video Removal

IT WASN'T APPROPRIATE USE OF STAFF RESOURCES WHEN LUGNUT DESCRIBED THE CONTOURS OF YOUR SPIKE OVER THE PA SYSTEM EITHER, YOU GLITCH

Blitzwing

-

To: Blitzwing, Triple Changer Extraordinaire, and 47 more
From: Shockwave
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Video Removal

If I wouldn't remove the reposts of that video you decided to upload of yourself dancing in a conga line on Nebulos with
Also, I know you put that pipe bomb in the suggestion box. Kindly frag off.

Shockwave

-

To: Blitzwing, Triple Changer Extraordinaire, and 47 more
From: Blackarachnia
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Video Removal

Why don't you three take your “inappropriate use of staff resources” somewhere else. Or better yet, go work off your frustration somewhere else.

Blackarachnia

To: Blackarachnia, and 47 more  
From: Blitzwing, Triple Changer Extraordinaire  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Video Removal  

I’LL SQUASH YOU, YOU FRAGGING BUG

Blitzwing

To: Blitzwing, Triple Changer Extraordinaire, and 47 more  
From: Locomotion, Decepticon Integration Officer  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Video Removal  

FRAG U BLITZAFT IM NOT LETTING U TAKE CREDIT FOR THAT I WORKED FRAGGING HARD ON THAT BOM!

Locomotion, Decepticon Integration Officer

To: Blitzwing, Triple Changer Extraordinaire, and 47 more  
From: Locomotion, Decepticon Integration Officer  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Video Removal
slag how do u delete a sent message

Locomotion, Decepticon Integration Officer

To: Blitzwing, Triple Changer Extraordinaire, and 47 more
From: Blackarachnia
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Video Removal

It’s been sixty stellar cycles and you’re still not over the fact that I rejected you?
Oops, silly me, I just sent that to all the Decepticon staff. Now everyone knows.

Blackarachnia

To: Blitzwing, Triple Changer Extraordinaire [MESSAGE NOT RECEIVED], and 47 more
From: Megatron, Supreme Lead of the Decepticon Force
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Video Removal

I would argue an inappropriate use of staff resources would be destroying your personal console yet again, Blitzwing.
I will be arriving to Armada shortly, hopefully the destruction will not exceed the vornly Collateral Damage Budget.

Megatron

Chapter End Notes

"do they even budget for anything other than collateral damage
Item 1: Direct Damage
Item 2: Collateral Damage

that's it that's the entire budget"

- kthonos, beta reader
Diplomatic Relations

Chapter Notes

This chapter is late due to reasons that involve fighting a GPS during a trip to Seattle, Zuzu being too flustered to write smut in front of her girlfriend, and petsitting a clingy kitten with awful timing.

Hope everyone had fun these holidays! Now take a break from the religiousness with some robot porn.

- Reya

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite the fact that Minimus was far older than the lot of them, not to mention much higher ranked, under the curious optics of his crew he felt like a new protoform having been caught using a grit removal pump as an interface aid. That is to say, a mix of terror and embarrassment.

“So?” said Bumblebee. “What did he want?”

*Shall I give you a demonstration?*

Minimus’s processor blanked momentarily and he blurted, “What?”

“For the ship,” said Bumblebee. “What did he want for the ship?”

“He wanted,” Minimus said thinking desperately, realizing only now that in his distraction he'd failed to ask Megazarak the *one thing he'd gone there to inquire after*, “he wanted some information. Classified information.”

Arcee frowned. “What sort of classified information?” she said.

Belatedly, Minimus realized this was the worst possible lie he could have told in front of this particular group of bots. “Highly classified information.”

Her orbital ridges furrowed. “Regarding?”

“Personal information,” said Minimus, grasping at filaments. “Highly classified personal information.”

Arcee gave him a look that spoke volumes. “You realize your interfacing preferences are not considered classified information?”

Minimus bit his glossa to keep from choking and gave her a severe look. “That is not an amusing insinuation, Arcee. Suffice to say that the information was not the sort which would place Cybertron at risk.”

Her expression was unimpressed, “Respectfully, Ultra Magnus *sir*, it’s my job to evaluate the sorts of information leaks which might place Cybertron at risk.”
“And it is my job to negotiate with foreign heads of state,” snapped Minimus. “I promised and revealed nothing of great note. Megazarak’s interest was largely personal, and I would appreciate if you would respect my authority and not pry into my personal affairs.”

“So it’s an affair now?” said Ratchet.

“Personal matters,” Minimus ground out, resisting the bizarre urge to hide his servo behind himself. “Now, if you do not mind, it is late and I am tired. Megazarak gave his word that the exchange would occur tomorrow. I suggest we all get some recharge.”

Arcee looked as if she wanted to object, but Jazz placed a quelling servo on her arm. She let out a small, derisive noise, and said “Suit yourself.”

Turning on her heel, she disappeared through Omega’s bridge door.

Minimus congratulated himself in keeping his expression neutral as he marched to his quarters for the second time that offcycle.

This time no one tried to stop him.

Palming the sensor pad beside his door, Minimus slipped inside. The door swished shut and he leaned against it, before allowing his legs to bend and slowly sliding into a seated position.

Despite the lack of actual danger, he felt like shaking.

He remained there, listening to the sounds of the ship, the bustle of the crew as they readied the craft for nightfall and one by one returned to their quarters, the quick patter of Bumblebee, the slow tramp of Bulkhead, Ratchet’s pede scraping as he limped slightly, the almost noiseless scratch of Jazz’s pedes.

Silence.

Minimus rose, climbed onto his berth, and reached up to test the strength of a shelf mounted on the wall above it. Satisfied that it would hold his weight, he hefted himself up, braced, and reached for the mounted ventilation duct above him.

He might not have been in the Intelligence division, but he had a few tricks in his trunk.

This was ridiculous. This was immature and risky and downright madness. And yet Minimus found himself sneaking out from under Omega Supreme’s shadow, his optic lights dim and his small size perfect for darting unseen between patches of light. He, Ultra Magnus, leader of the Autobots for several million stellar cycles, was sneaking off to see a Decepticon.

He felt flustered and angry. How dare Megazarak bamboozle him into forgetting the one thing he was supposed to do? Slaghead piece of garbage.

:Let me in: Minimus commed. Yes, on top of everything, he had to ask permission to enter his own ship.

:Minimus?: Megazarak sounded startled and a touch bleary, as though he had been recharging. :What are you doing here at this hour?:

:I said I would be back, did I not?: said Minimus.
I assumed you meant in the morning,: grumbled Megazarak. :Come in, the cargo bay is open.:

Where are you?: said Minimus as he scrambled aboard and palmed the sensor pad to close the gangplank. Thankfully the ship still seemed to recognize and respond to his energy field.

Second deck,; replied Megazarak. A pause. :In your quarters.: He actually sounded a touch embarrassed.

Minimus couldn’t decide if he was affronted or atrociously aroused by this information. :I--nevermind. You, in all your half-forged attempts at seduction, failed to inform me what you required as an exchange for Sigma.:

Wait,: said Megazarak, :is that why you returned?:

Of course not!: said Minimus. He rounded the corner and made for the lift to the second deck. :Now what is it you want?:

Well,: said Megazarak. :I rather thought that was obvious when I licked--:

For the ship! : hissed Minimus. He mashed the button for the lift. The door slid open and he walked briskly--he was not sprinting --down the corridor.

Oh,: said Megazarak. :Well, I had hoped to put in my bid to get your word on a certain matter of clemency, but--:

Minimus slammed his servo against the sensor pad for his quarters. The door hissed back, revealing Megazarak, half-sitting up in Minimus’s berth--the slagger must have reconfigured it--like the protagonist of one of those torrid novels that Volks was always displaying in his stores, if said protagonist had been several mechanometers tall and bristling with fangs and spik-- sharp edges .

Minimus pointed an accusing digit at Megazarak. “You,” he said.

“Me?” said Megazarak.

“You--you, you made me forget to ask for your terms of negotiation!” Minimus spluttered. “I had to lie to my crew and tell them I’d given you classified information!”

“You can still give me classified information,” said Megazarak, a fatal grin curling around his mouth.

“I’m not going to give you classified information!” snapped Minimus. “You are going to tell me what you want. And then, by Vector Sigma, you are going to make good on your ridiculous flirting!”

“Oh,” said Megazarak, his optics going quite round. “Well, you see I--”

“Now!”

Minimus nearly regretted his outburst a moment later, as he was swept off his pedes by several tons of sharp, moving metal. Megazarak hefted him up to optic level, grinned at Minimus through a mouthful of fangs, and said, “As you wish.”

Minimus had only a moment to question his position before he was being kissed.

Megazarak kissed like he fought, relentless, aggressive, and devastatingly skilled. Minimus clutched at the spikes of his helm, tasting energon as he cut his glossa on Megazarak’s fangs, and made a concerted attempt to wrap his legs around Megazarak’s torso, only to realize too late that they were
far too short to manage this.

Megazarak laughed against his mouth and then there was a dizzying moment of vertigo as he dumped Minimus onto the berth. Minimus struggled up on his elbows as Megazarak loomed over him, optics hungry.

Minimus swallowed hard.

“So,” said Megazarak, voice full of dark promise. “Do you still want to know what I want for the ship?”

Minimus gaped at him. Megazarak threw his helm back and laughed.

“I jest, of course,” Megazarak said, optics twinkling with amusement. “I’ve waited close to five million stellar cycles for this. We can discuss my terms after I frag you into the berth.”

A million inappropriate—and a few intimidating—thoughts flew through Minimus’s processor regarding Decepticons, Megazarak himself, and perhaps a few trips to Volks’s store that Minimus himself may or may not have made without the Magnus Armor. “I—would prefer to, er, minimize the damage as it were,” he said.

“Damage?” said Megazarak, his expression suddenly sobering. “The gap between us is vast, true, but I have no intention of doing you any damage.”

Minimus squinted. “I apologize for my presumption, I don’t regularly interface with warbuilds.”

“Well, that can be changed,” said Megazarak, a smile tugging at the edges of his mouth.

Minimus raised an orbital ridge. “Are you suggesting I engage in all diplomatic negotiations this way?”

Megazarak scowled. “I should certainly hope not.”

His confidence burgeoning, Minimus lifted his helm. “As I said, I do not doubt your intentions but I am…” He could not bring himself to admit ownership of the illegal interface aid ferreted away amongst his private belongings back on Cybertron. “...out of practice, as it were.”

Megazarak’s optics narrowed. “Out of practice with whom?”

Minimus resisted the urge to pinch his nasal ridge. “With no one, you great, lumbering barbarian. Now lie down before you do yourself some damage.”

Megazarak seemed to consider this a moment before complying. Minimus scooted back along the berth to give him some space and Megazarak joined him, his armor clanking as he settled into place, optics bright, watching Minimus.

Minimus took a moment to breathe, to collect himself, reaching out to trace the shapes of Megazarak’s armor, marveling at the way his small servos were quickly lost among the tessellations of sharp steel, delving into crags and valleys to stimulate sensors and touch wires. Familiar territory, unfamiliar purpose. Megazarak shivered under his servos like a nervous mechanimal.

“Lift me up,” said Minimus, hoarse.

Megazarak did so, easily, but for once Minimus did felt no unease at being mech-handled thus. He settled atop Megazarak, legs braced wide on the platform of his chassis. Megazarak’s servo rested on
his thigh, encircling it, digits so, so close to where Minimus ached to be touched.

Minimus shivered, ran his servos across the expanse of Megazarak’s chassis, scraping across the obscured Decepticon brand. “Open for me?” he said.

He felt more than saw Megazarak reply, heard his faint ex-vent of relief. He groped behind himself, reaching for what he knew would be there—

Big. Big, and slick and heavy in his servo, crackling with heat and charge which he knew from the old medical reports would help to open him up, loosen the mechanisms of his valve until they would unfold to accept—as he himself had discovered, with time and endless patience—even something that seemed as impossibly big as this.

Minimus swallowed hard and felt his valve throb.

Megazarak’s breath was stuttering, servos dug into the berth beside him, optics wide.

Minimus scooted down Megazarak’s chassis and bent low, bracing his helm and urging Megazarak’s spike up until the shaft rested against his belly, jutting between Minimus’s legs, pressing into his pelvic span.

Minimus offlined his optics for a moment, grounding himself. While he badly wanted to, he couldn’t let himself get carried away.

“As much as I would love to,” he managed. “I cannot return to my crew bow-legged and limping. But, if you are amenable, I believe I have an idea.”

“As I recall, many of your ideas were quite brilliant,” said Megazarak, his voice level, even as his frame shuddered when Minimus gently squeezed the head of his spike.

Minimus bared himself, felt the kiss of the cold ship’s air on the slick aperture of his valve. Squirming into position, he hiked himself down, pressed his valve against the underside of Megazarak’s spike, and slid himself up the shaft.

Megazarak’s optics rounded and his pelvic span gave an aborted jerk, digits screeching as they raked furrows in the metal below them. Minimus steadied himself, readjusted, and continued.

It ached unbearably, to have Megazarak so close and yet not have him inside, but the pressure of the shaft and the flowing lubricant and charge activated all the sensors around Minimus’s valve. He ground himself down, desperately seeking satisfaction, fingering the head, tracing the divot of the transfluid line.

“Can’t hold on,” growled Megazarak below him.

“Just a bit longer,” gasped Minimus. He could feel himself nearing— “‘Ah!’” His valve convulsed, a rapid yet overwhelming hiccup of ecstasy, and he moaned, his pace slowing, his fuel pump loud in his own audio sensors.

At the edge of his awareness he heard a snarl of satisfaction and then the world upended as he was being rolled, pressed onto his back and for a moment he thought he would be crushed, but then his legs were being hiked up and Megazarak was thrusting between them, the broad head of his spike grinding against Minimus’s valve at the apex of his thrusts.

“Can I?” said Megazarak.
“What?” said Minimus, dazed. His legs tightened as his valve spiraled open and the tip of Megazarak’s spike slipped inside on the next thrust.

“Can I overload inside you?” said Megazarak, more urgently, a razor’s edge of desperation in his tone.

Minimus couldn’t clear his processor to think, but the suddenly the idea of Megazarak doing so sounded capital indeed. “Yes,” he said, squeezing down on the tip of the spike as it left him again.

Megazarak’s servos tightened on his thighs and then he was pressing in, only a fraction as deep as Minimus wanted him, but then there was fluid, and fluid and fluid, hot pressure like the aid had never been able to provide, flowing up inside him.

Megazarak sagged over him, bracing himself to keep from collapsing atop Minimus. “By the Pit,” he gasped. “I do believe that may have been worth the wait.”

Minimus blinked up at him. “I should certainly hope so.”

Megazarak laughed shortly and flopped down beside him, sending Minimus bouncing slightly into the air. For a moment they were both silent, listening to the hiss of cooling systems.

“So,” said Megazarak. “Now do you want to know what I want for the ship?”

Minimus groaned and covered his face. “Please tell me you want me as your interfacing slave, and not something of actual value.”

Megazarak snickered. “Nothing so distressing. As I said, I want clemency.”

“For yourself?” said Minimus, surprised. “You’ve already been off the official books as a Decepticon for a million stellar cycles.”

“For my brother,” said Megazarak.

Minimus stilled. This was no mean thing that Megazarak asked. Clemency for Megatron meant that not only would the Autobots no longer be officially hunting him, but that if conflict should arise, Megatron would be guaranteed more than the typical treatment of a prisoner of war.

Minimus chewed his glossa. “And you are certain? That the coding is active? That the coding is effective?”

“Of course I am,” said Megazarak. “I confirmed it in a way my brother would never have considered or suspected.”

Megazarak smirked. “I asked, of course.”

Minimus sighed deeply. Despite the sense of languid satisfaction lingering about his frame, he felt the beginnings of helmache. “What are the terms?” he said.

“I want Megatron handed over to me, should he be captured,” said Megazarak. “I do not care whether you chose to keep any of his generals imprisoned, but those are my terms. Your ship, for my brother.”

Minimus gave him a shrewd look. “And you truly believe that Megatron is changing?”
Megazarak’s expression was deeply serious, “I know it to be true. I also know that the changes will not be nearly as effective without his little Autobot around.”

Minimus scrubbed his servos across his faceplates. “Very well. I will put Megatron on the books as ‘only non-lethal force authorized.’ If he is captured, he goes to you. All that remains is convincing Optimus's erstwhile crew not to mount another rescue mission.”

Megazarak gave him a toothy grin. “My deepest gratitude, Ultra Magnus.” His optics slitted and his energy field took on a teasing bent. “Now,” he ran his glossa along the edge of his fang and glanced meaningfully at Minimus’s pelvic span, “I believe I may have left a bit of a mess that requires cleaning.”

Minimus shot him an arch look and spread his legs. “I would expect nothing less.”

In the design of their personal apartments—his own work of course, Megazarak never had the processor for espionage—Megatron had primarily concerned himself with design elements centered around siege resistance, and in case that failed, escape. So it followed that those elements designed for escape—like say, the multiple hatches and attached tunnels—were not strictly speaking intended to be used in reverse.

Megatron grunted in discomfort, his shoulder guards knocking against the insides of the narrow shaft as he made his ungainly ascent. It would have been preferable to use the front door, but the little Autobot—Optimus, his oh-so-helpful processor reminded him—had managed to form a formidable barricade, and if the annoyed yammering of his various generals and soldiers was anything to go by, the thing was well booby trapped. In addition to uncovering Megatron’s cache of stored explosives, it seemed Optimus had managed to brew a handful of ordinary cleaning supplies he kept around the place into an accelerant perfectly capable of propelling shrapnel from a homemade pipe bomb.

Truthfully, Megatron posited he could have vaporized the barricade with a handful of well-placed blasts from his cannon, but frankly he didn’t feel like having to stay in some seedy little motel, or Vector Sigma forbid Lugnut’s quarters, while the structural integrity of the top floors was restored.

And so that left the escape tunnels. Megatron only thanked whatever galactic deity that was listening that he and Megazarak had never gotten drunk enough to mistake any of them for the garbage chute. Though perhaps a little refuse would have improved the climbing conditions; the slick metal screeched and slid under his digits and he could only make his way slowly upward. In an ideal world, he would have engaged his flight engines, but he’d quickly eschewed that plan when the narrowness of the tunnel, and his inability to see all the way to the top of it, had resulted in him smashing his face into the side and grinding his way upwards.

At last he arrived at the hatch and spent a couple of uncomfortable cycles trying to get the computer to acknowledge his presence and allow him entrance, all the while dangling from the single bar on the side of the shaft beneath it.

On the upside, if he happened to flop on his faceplates onto the floor of the hallway after crawling through the hatch, there was nobot around to witness it.
He wondered how Megazarak got through his cycles now that casually murdering anyone who saw him act foolish was off the table. Well, he supposed he could find out…more than he already had on the human mudball, anyway. At least Megazarak had developed coding towards Ultra Magnus; Megatron himself was inexplicably stuck with a small Autobot whose only talent appeared to be figuring out new and interesting ways of making him look and feel foolish.

Megatron checked to see if there were any witnesses. Fortunately there were none, aside from his sense of shame, which was currently asking for benefits and longer vacation time for what it had been through in the last few stellar cycles.

He stood up, dusted himself off in the most dignified way possible for someone of his station, and surveyed the damage.

Surprisingly, it was less than he was expecting. Sure, there seemed to be a barricade, but that just meant things were neatly stacked onto each other. Ropes criss-crossed the area like one of Blackarachnia’s webs, in what was clearly a set trap. Any unfortunate Decepticon smashing through the usual entrance to the apartment would have to face the wrath of many tons of used and abused furniture. Optimus must have run out of the apartment’s furnishings at some point and instead stolen crates, desks, and other knick-knacks and brought them back in to supplement the trap, and Megatron suspected that there were whole floors of offices missing their crucial components.

Not that his officers ever really used them anyway. And inspection usually meant a good swift kick at objects, or a swear word or two if one was too inebriated to do the former.

Out of the corner of his optic he spotted Optimus, slumped over against the shattered remains of Megatron’s entertainment center in a heap of bright red and blue, helm propped against his ax, and his spark lurched uncomfortably. Cautious, Megatron circled around to the front of him.

Optimus didn’t budge.

He knelt down and gave the Autobot Prime a good stare. No response. Slowly, slowly, he reached out and touched the tip of one digit lightly against Optimus’s helm.

Nothing.

Is he recharging?

It was beyond the realm of Megatron’s comprehension that a mechanism could be so deep in recharge as to not notice the proximity of an actual threat.

But you’re not a threat to him, are you? Not anymore.

It was not nearly as uncomfortable a thought as he would have preferred.

Optimus’s helm lolled, slipping from where it rested against the blade of his ax and Megatron caught him without thinking, Optimus’s small crest resting in his palm.

It was a disturbingly pleasant feeling, a little bit of intimate contact without Optimus glaring at him and on guard. A lean became a topple, as if Optimus in his recharge agreed with him, and the grounder literally fell into Megatron’s arms.

Megatron wondered if he should pay another visit to Scalpel, as he was sure sparks were not supposed to jump and vibrate like his just had.

He debated waking Optimus, but decided against it; clearly the Autobot was much more agreeable.
when in recharge. Crouching, Megatron lifted him up, pausing to look at the barricaded door once again.

*Is the entire apartment like this?* Megatron thought in a panic. Furniture could be replaced, but even Starscream had not dared to rifle through his personal possessions. Megazarak’s room was not to be touched or disturbed--

The access pad to his brother’s room was smashed, a handful of crates stacked in front of it. Megatron kicked them away, sending ball bearings scattering across the floor. His anxious processor had a single moment to be impressed before he slung Optimus over his shoulder guard and bent his strength to the door.

It screeched and complained on its track, but finally gave way. He shoved it open a little further and stuck his helm inside.

He stared, and breathed an exvent of relief. The room appeared untouched, just as it had for the four million years of Megazarak’s absence. Every carelessly arranged trinket and speck of dust where Megatron knew them to be, except--

Megatron frowned. In the center of the floor was a storage chest he recognized from his own quarters, a long box he’d kept at the end of his berth for extra weapons storage and the datapad on which he’d been composing his...creations since the beginning of this madness.

Had Optimus moved it here? For what purpose?

Troubled, Megatron shouldered his way into the room, trying to ignore the way he ducked to avoid bashing Optimus’s helm against the lintel. Stepping over the small bits of scattered refuse--Megazarak had been a model Decepticon and his room had reflected it--Megatron set Optimus down on the berth and stared at him, as though he could will the answer from his unconscious body.

The smaller mech was still deep in recharge, which begged the next question, of how long the Prime had gone without any recharge before his processor forcibly shut down. Strika had already retired by the time Megatron had touched down at the spaceport, but he clearly had a few additional questions for her at the debriefing in the morning.

Which left a third, very uncomfortable, question. He needed recharge as well, and his berth, if it was in the condition he suspected from the trail of broken metal and transparisteel shards he’d spotted in his doorway, was unusable.

Megatron looked at the berth, and the tiny Autobot he had carefully placed in it.

_Slag. Me._

There was nothing for it, he supposed. He scooted Optimus over and settled down beside him. At least Optimus’s weapon had been left on the floor of the living area, so it was unlikely he would be awoken by an ax to the face.

He folded his servos over his chassis and stared at the ceiling. They weren’t touching, but from this distance Optimus’s energy field flickered and fluctuated against his own, rife with restlessness and anxious energy despite being saturated with exhaustion.

Curious, he probed lightly with his field, extending it outwards to blanket the area around him. To his surprise, Optimus’s field smoothed out, the harmonics dropping to a lower, constant register.

Harmonizing with his own, he realized, and his spark gave another tug.
Megatron shifted to look at the recharging mech next to him, and again his spark gave an aborted
shudder. It had been mostly beneath his notice on the battlefield, but Optimus Prime was a
surprisingly attractive mech, with his bright colors and full lips. Megatron’s gaze lazily swept across
the Autobot’s chassis, memorizing all the little angles and shapes of him. His field trailed behind like
a lost turbohound, dancing in close to feel the way that Optimus’s field fluxed in response, before
withdrawing to feel the way that Optimus’s reached for his.

Perhaps this wouldn’t be so bad, perhaps Optimus Prime didn’t have to be a nuisance or a weakness.
If he had learned something from Megazarak, it was that his little dilemma with Optimus Prime was
not about to go away, but he wouldn’t be the Decepticon leader if he couldn’t be flexible. So,
Megatron thought wryly, a confident grin finding itself on his faceplates, why not make an ally out of
the Autobot? His efforts might even throw Strika off the scent—even if she’d seemed doubtful in the
past that his powers of seduction were sufficient to change political affiliation.

And who knew, maybe Optimus Prime would crawl into Megatron’s berth on his own accord.

____________________________________

*From the personal archives of Rung of the Pious Pools, Psychiatrist:*

Confidential report, page 7 of 7

Considering the above findings, it it recommended that Sentinel Prime participate in remedial leadership training progr

- Individuals made to supervise Sentinel Prime in his new duties should be made aware of events leading to his demc

- This individual in learning how to assess situations which may call for his rare style of handling, and then rigorously

- Those making the final decisions in regards to Sentinel's career in the military should refer to the fitness for duty ev:

Rung, MD, Ph.D

Consulting Psychiatrist

**Confidentiality Note:** This report is intended for use only by the individual or entity to which it is addressed and may

**Post Personal note:**

I believe that Sentinel Prime is, at spark, a good individual.

However, he is also a weenie.
I plan to recommend that he is returned to duty, and suggest that he see a counselor to alleviate some of his paranoia.

**Post-Post Personal note:**

I'm not going to be that counselor. I'm not paid enough to handle *that*.

Chapter End Notes

Today's Excerpt brought to you by StarlightCaptivator. I would have no idea where to start with psychiatric notes.

Alternate titles for this chapter include:

Interfactional Relations Part 1
Guaranteed Neutral Territory: A Berth
Diplomatic Stratagem
Body Language Diplomacy
10 Ways You (Yes You) Can Fuck For Peace
Fuck or Die (Through Continued Warfare)
How the Key to Finding Peace Fell Into My Lap (Literally)
Advanced Insertion Techniques for the Continuation of Interfactional Peace
Doing It, Diplomatically
Dicklomatic Relations
Are you wearing space pants? Because your ass is breaking several interstellar regulations
Impaling Autobots (but the sexy way not the murder way)
We All Know What The Big Sword Is An Allegory For
Both the Pen and Sword Lose to This
It's the Great Pumpkin Dick, Minimus Ambus!
Minimus Ambus: Magnus of the Autobots, Queen of Size
Megazarak Gets to Stick It In
Sticking It To the Man, Decepticon Style
Minimus Gets Stickittothemanitus
What Not To Trade For Your Warship: An Anthology by Minimus Ambus

You all know who you are.

- Reya
A liquid haze submerged Optimus’s overclocked processor, smothering and gumming the components, his mind a jumble of error messages and hallucinatory visions. He twitched, fighting against the crushing weight of system shutdown. Shadows materialized and loomed, lingering on the edges of his blurred vision before winking out of sight.

Something lurking behind the barricade, the scratch of claws, a predator!

He whirled. Nothing.

A large, round shadow resolved, the glitter of bright optics.

Strika!

He groped for his ax. His servo, empty. His fists came up.

A couch, overturned. Transparisteel shards, everywhere.

Where was his ax?

Not here. Do I not need it? Where am I? Cybertron?

He was flat, servos empty, soft surface. A berth.

Am I dreaming?

The gentle flux of an energy field, rippling against his own. Calm washed through him, like a shot of high grade or a dose of sedative.

Is someone there?

Who would be sharing his berth on Cybertron?

Embarrassed excitement warred with exhaustion.

...Sentinel?

He couldn’t gather the threads of his conscious processor routines well enough to make helm or tailpipe of the harmonics, but he was flat and all was quiet and there was a soothing field blanketeting him, coaxing his overstrained processor to settle and Optimus couldn't hold on to even the semblance of consciousness any longer.

Need to rest, need to...

The field was relaxing, egging him to fall back into deep sleep. It was, in a way, what he had always imagined it would be like being between Sentinel and his shield. Something nagged him, a faint itch, a prickle in his processor telling him that the signature was most definitely not Sentinel, but everything told him safe and that was enough to keep Optimus from fighting to stay awake.
Unfortunately for Minimus, the journey back to Omega Supreme involved a small hiccup.

But as he stared at a startled-awake Bumblebee in the hall to his quarters, a small hiccup was all that was really needed for a mission to fail, Minimus thought.

Bumblebee peered blearily and not a little suspiciously at him. “Something up, Miniboss?”

Oh, slag it all, thought Minimus. He was millions of stellar cycles older than Bumblebee and hardly a wilting newspark. If he wanted to go out and commit high treason by interfacing the former leader of the Decepticons, he was slagging well going to do so.

Sexy high treason, snickered a voice that sounded entirely too much like Megazarak.

“Something is up, Bumblebee Minor,” he said, in his best formal Magnus voice, crossing his arms. “Tonight I snuck out to the Steelhaven, where I met up with Megazarak and we fragged each other’s processors out in between diplomatic negotiations.”

Minimus almost, almost lost his composure when Bumblebee’s jaw dropped and his optics rounded, spiraling open wider than they should have been able.

“W-what?” Bumblebee spluttered. “Are you serious?”

“Completely serious,” said Minimus.

“But...but,” Bumblebee looked as if he was about to experience a processor meltdown. “Why are you telling me this?”

Minimus drew himself up to his full height. “Because,” he said. “No one will ever believe you.”

Bumblebee’s mouth opened, but for perhaps the only time in the young bot’s existence, nothing emerged.

Minimus managed to retain his dignity until the door to his quarters slid shut, before crumpling over as he was overwhelmed with helpless laughter. It almost went to a roar when he heard Bumblebee kick his locked door and yell “You’re worse than the cons!”

Leaning back against the door, he muffled the sounds of his laughter into his servos and, on impulse, pinged Megazarak with a small data packet.

[Back safe. No one the wiser. Rest well.]

The packet Megazarak sent him in return made his spark flip like a bot half his age.

Strika had clearly not recharged as well as Megatron, if her hunched posture, scowling expression, and the steaming cup of dark oil that smelled strongly of stimulant additives within easy reach, were any indication. She grunted at him and gave a weary, seated salute as he entered the staff room.
He felt almost tempted to make an excuse and go back to his berth. Optimus Prime had gotten downright cuddly during his recharge, but he forced the desire from his processor.

Megatron did his best to keep his field and expression cool and collected as he seated himself across from her. There was a strange sense of emptiness in the room with just the two of them, and Megatron wondered for just a moment if he should have sat beside her instead, in the interest of fostering camaraderie.

He did, after all, respect her.

He only hoped, for the first time that he could remember, that respect went both ways.

“The Autobots are up to something,” said Strika, taking a swill of her oil as she scrutinized the datapad engulfed in her other servo.

“Do you mean more so than usual?” said Megatron.

She shot him a sardonic look and turned the datapad, displaying the screen.

The pad was open to a BoobTube extranet page. The jerky holovideo showed a round, stocky, green groundframe, colors further muted by the dim lights above him, hefting a shocked helicopter warframe above his helm. With a bellow half-drowned by the shouting, brawling mechanisms around him, the groundframe flung the helicopter over a nearby table. The clip ended.

Megatron stared. “Was that Bugly?”


Megatron squinted at the holo, his tank turning with strange dread. “That… Autobot looks familiar.”

“Lugnut confirmed the ID,” said Strika. “Bulkhead, top spacebridge technician and former crewmember under one Optimus Prime.”

Ah yes, the bot that Megatron had manipulated and leveraged to build his own spacebridge. It figured. “What would he be doing there? And smuggling oil?”

“Not entirely clear,” said Strika, flipping the pad back to face her. “Bugly indicated they left their entire shipment so I’m inclined to think they were after intel.”

“On New Kaon?” said Megatron. “They would be hard pressed to glean anything of value there. Our main operations haven’t taken place there for millennia.”

“Not that the Autobots know that,” said Strika.

Except...

“Optimus Prime’s team has proven quite loyal to him in the past,” said Megatron. “It’s possible they were trying to mount a rescue.”

Strike made a noncommittal noise. “Well the reports indicated that they were routed fairly quickly. What reports I could compile. Between the engex and the confusion there was a lot of conflicting information. No prisoners taken either, more’s the pity.”

Megatron grunted, secretly relieved. He could just imagine the fuss Optimus Prime would raise if one of his crewmembers ended up a slave on Armada. And it would look suspicious indeed for Megatron
to request yet another slave under such unusual circumstances.

“Is there more to it, Strika?” he said. “Tell me what’s on your processor.”

Strika drummed her digits against the table. “Perhaps. But,” she fixed him with a piercing look, “my
additional intel, if it is to be believed, hinges strongly upon the answer to the mystery you set out to
solve. Tell me, did you learn what you needed from Megazarak?”

Megatron hesitated. While it was tempting to spill his confusion and uncertainty--and wasn’t that
massively disturbing in its own way--the paranoid voice that had kept him alive for millennia as the
head of a seething mob of warframes, some of whom would just as soon behead him as look at him,
warned that Strika was ambitious and intolerant of weakness, and that the warm flush of camaraderie
that Megatron was currently experiencing was likely not mutual.

“I did learn what I needed,” said Megatron. “But more important was my contact with Megazarak
himself.”

“Oh?”

“Indeed,” said Megatron, his confidence growing as he began to construct his tale. “The exchange of
the Steelhaven was a steep one, but there will be other opportunities to capture Autobot ships. And I
have reason to believe that Megazarak can serve as an ally once more.”

Strika cocked her helm, “I see. Has exile taught him a thing or two about the dangers of allowing
weakness?”

“It has,” Megatron said. “And he was quite keen to acquire the ship. I have no doubt that he could be
persuaded to rejoin us--at an appropriately demoted position of course--which would bring the ship
under our control once more.”

Strika hummed and slurped her oil. “Impressive. You always did have a knack for talking
mechanisms into things.”

“Do not get me wrong, if Megazarak were not my spark twin I would not be as forgiving.”

“No doubt,” said Strika. “Well, no one can deny that you made good use of the ship, but I must insist
that we nail down what is to be done about your little slave. He’s caused quite a ruckus in your
absence and needs to be dealt with.” She shook her helm. “And I confess I can’t quite fathom why
you’d want a slave so belligerent and dangerous when there are plenty available that are more
attractive and quieter.”

Megatron forcibly stopped himself from doing anything so stupid as commenting on Optimus
Prime’s attractiveness. “Perhaps I have gone about this the wrong way. When I removed Optimus
Prime from Cybertron, it was not with the intention of making him into an interface slave. I have
plenty of willing partners to choose from if I desire. Instead, I intended that he serve as a political
hostage, as a blow to Autobot morale. Thus the threat of damage is far more powerful than actual
harm. The Autobots have already proven willing to brave New Kaon to rescue him; if need be, he
can be used as leverage.”

Strika actually looked mildly impressed. “That makes good sense. I admit I didn’t think you’d
thought it through in quite that much detail.”

Megatron leveled his best smugly superior look at her. “Of course. You didn’t think I would have
flung an Autobot over my shoulder without having considered the tactical advantages, did you?”
“Especially when the Acting Autobot Magnus was standing right there,” said Strika.

Megatron didn’t let himself twitch. “A blithering fool or the hero of the people, it was an easy choice.”

Strika shrugged. “Fair enough. Keep him under better control in the future, will you? Shockwave’s been whining endlessly about having to redo the budget to repair the damages.”

“I will find him another task,” said Megatron. “Clearly cleaning is not sufficient to keep him out of trouble.”

Strika set her cup aside and fiddled with the controls on her datapad. “There’s one more order of business. The intel’s always a bit spotty from that sector but, let’s just say I have a hunch.”

Megatron frowned. “What sort of hunch?”

“Straxus is up to something,” she said.

“When is he not up to something?” said Megatron.

Strika vented a noise not quite a laugh and not dissimilar to unoiled gear cogs. “Of course. However he is apparently making plans to return to Armada.”

Megatron grimaced. “And here I’d hoped he was keeping himself busy with stolen experiments.”

“Seems like he wants to try a servo with yours,” Strika sipped more of her oil.

Stark, visceral rage surged in his tanks and spark at the thought of Straxus being anywhere near Optimus, blindsiding him. Megatron bit his glossa so hard he tasted energon, focusing on keeping his expression unconcerned. “Straxus has proven repeatedly incapable of keeping his toys intact; it would be a waste of resources to provide him with any more.”

Just the thought of such a thing made him want to rip Straxus’s spark chamber out and present it to Optimus as a gift.

Strika, thankfully, did not appear to notice his conflict. “Well, it’s not as if he’s proven any more successful with the fruits of Project: Doppelganger than Blackarachnia, not that I’d trust him to report in if he had,” she said.

Megatron swallowed the energon pooling in his mouth and tried to modulate the pulsing of his spark. “Strika,” he said. “Why do we fight?”

She looked up in surprise. “What brought this on?”

“Why do we fight?”

“For Decepticon superiority,” she said, smooth, practiced, and automatic. “But what--?”

“What is Decepticon superiority?” Another canned question, the taste of it unfamiliarly sour on his glossa.

“Strength,” she said, falling easily into the dogmatic back-and-forth. “The strength to take what we want, what we are owed, to crush any who resist and assume our rightful place.”

“What is our rightful place?”
“As rulers of Cybertron,” she said. “As rulers of the Autobots.”

“What does that look like?”

She paused. This question was new. She appeared to consider it for a few moments.

“Like Armada,” she said at last.

“Of course,” Megatron said. He felt suddenly, strangely weary. “Thank you for reminding me.”

She eyed him. “Are you feeling well?”

“Quite well,” he said. “Is there any other order of business or shall we adjourn?”

She set aside her pad and cupped the oil between her blunt digits. “Nothing pressing. Other than watching your backstruts when Straxus comes for a visit.”

“I always do,” he said, a reminder to her as much as a bland pleasantry. “Now if you’ll excuse me.”

He was nearly at the door to the meeting room when he heard her comment, almost offhand.

“It’s too bad those drunken slaggers on New Kaon didn’t manage to snag that Bulkhead fellow. He’s impressively strong for a grounder.”

Optimus groaned and rolled over to the right, where in both his apartment and the ship’s cabin, a comforting wall would typically be present, only to end up flopping onto his front. Startled, he blinked away his recharge and stared through the system messages splashed across his optics.

[Defragmentation cycle: completed]
[Core temperature: nominal]
[You have (46) Unread Messages]

Where am I?

The size of the furniture immediately ruled out anywhere on Cybertron. Lifting his helm, he glanced out the window. The Armada skyline. Light attempted to fill the room, and yet failed miserably, the nearest star too far away to provide more than a tinted twilight. So he was in Megatron’s apartment, but the room itself was only vaguely familiar.

Then he spotted the chest near the door, and the scrapes in the dust where he himself had pushed it through.

Was this Megazarak’s room? How had he wound up here?
Optimus had dared not touch anything in it. When he first had entered it he had been startled at its condition; clearly untouched for millennia, maybe even longer than his forging. He had quickly backed out and barricaded it after leaving the chest in there; entering this room felt like crossing a line, breaking a barrier, involving himself with Megatron in a way that likely neither of them would appreciate. Had he come here to sleep in his delirium? Optimus really couldn’t be sure.

And how was he still alive? He never thought General Strika would be the kind to bluff about violence. Had he really tortured himself for nothing?

Well, he thought, recalling with a certain amount of vague satisfaction his sabotage of Headquarters, maybe not for nothing.

Optimus Prime stood up, giving the room one last glance before leaving it. He checked his chronometer and paused; he had slept for over an entire cycle. Should he worry? If Strika hadn’t come to off him yet it was unlikely she would try at all.

Metal fragments crunched under his pedes as he crept down the hall. He needed a new plan of action, and perhaps he should answer Blackarachnia’s and Silverbolt’s worried comm messages, as he had avoided doing. If Optimus was in a hopeless situation, there had been no reason to damn others too.

A wall of calculations and theories rushed through Optimus’s processors, only to be brought to a grinding halt as the door to the apartment screeched open, followed by the sound of much larger pedes.

His empty servo clenched and he half-considered going back to search for his ax, but the steps were already approaching. He stepped back, gaze going automatically up.

Megatron appeared just as surprised to see him as Optimus felt in that moment. He was unarmed, insofar as a warframe could ever be unarmed, and carrying a datapad balanced on one servo, and a slightly dented box with silver flashing and the words Lil Orbit’s Fine Confectionery splashed across the side in large glyphs, in the other.

The dissonance of seeing Megatron doing something so prosaic as carrying a takeout box rendered Optimus momentarily speechless and he required a good astrosecond to kick his processor into working again. Clearing his intake to cover his slip, Optimus nodded at the box. “What’s that?”

“Ah,” said Megatron. “Well, seeing as you destroyed the majority of my stores, I decided to pick up some takeout.” He paused, as if to review his words. “For the two of us.”

Optimus had no idea what the rules of polite engagement entailed for accepting sustenance from his jailor, but he was hungry and his processor felt scraped hollow from the stresses of the previous decacycle. “There’s no table,” he said.

“I was…” Megatron paused, as though trying to pick up the thread of a script he had lost. “I was bringing it to you. In the berth. I supposed we could sit there.”

Optimus’s processor strenuously objected to this suggestion, but his spark still failed to give him any signals that Megatron presented a threat.

He suppressed a sigh.

“Fine,” he said. “Lead the way.”

Optimus hadn’t refueled on a berth since he was newly protoformed, when Elita would sneak into
his dormitory after shift with a cube of high grade and Sentinel in tow. They were warm memories, a sweet and nostalgic association, and while he wasn’t sure if he wanted Megatron to taint them, his fuel tanks overruled him. He seated himself gingerly on the edge of the berth, opposite from Megatron, making sure to keep his pedes quite firmly off the berth so as not to give the impression of lying down in it, for all that his pedes didn’t quite reach the ground.

Megatron set the box on the berth and flipped it open one-servoed, revealing several familiar rows of dense, dark rings, sprinkled with brilliant blue shards. Oil cake, molded and dusted with crystallized energon.

They were Sentinel’s favorite. Optimus suddenly remembered what his imagination had stirred in his sleep and his tanks twisted themselves into knots as he realized that he had been cuddling up to Megatron. He looked at their respective positions with fresh optics and realized with a sinking spark that he had almost certainly given entirely the wrong impression.

He decided his processor didn’t need this right now. If Megatron was trying to...woo him or something with oil cake -- how ridiculous -- at least it meant a full tank.

And then the smell hit him and his olfactory sensors banished all thoughts from his processor aside from the need to cram as many pastries into his intake as he could. Before he could think better of it, he reached out and snatched one of the confections. It was the perfect solidity and slightly greasy to the touch, and he wasted no time popping it into his mouth.

It crumpled on his glossa, oil gushing, and he had to swallow hard to keep from making an embarrassing noise. He gulped the rest of the collapsing confection hastily and reached for another.

It was only when he’d finished his third that he thought to look at Megatron.

Megatron, to his surprise, appeared to still be working on his first cake ring. He was sitting strangely still, the confection half in his mouth, an entirely inappropriate way to eat oil cake, as the liquid inside had oozed out and down the back of his servo. Optimus frowned. Had Megatron never eaten oil cake before? Didn’t he know it was better to consume them whole?

It was then that he realized that Megatron was staring at him, optics just a shade too round.

What’s his malfunction?

Optimus eyed him suspiciously, but his tank was still pinging him urgently. An ingrained sense of politeness held him back, but slag it all, he was hungry. Wasn’t Megatron? Why had he taken only one, and Vector Sigma why was he lingering over it?

Optimus glanced down at the box again and back up at Megatron, who was still staring at him, though thankfully he’d finally swallowed the cake ring. Optimus cleared his intake meaningfully.

Megatron’s processor seemed to reconnect at this, and he smirked. “Good, aren’t they?” he said. He licked one of his digits. “Though a bit messy.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” said Optimus. He hadn’t really paused to savour them. His optics narrowed as Megatron picked up another pastry, eating it very slowly, to the point of ridiculousness, as if he had never eaten anything so delicious before, actually closing his optics for a moment and letting out a small grunt. Was this some new torture method? Was Megatron taunting him? Did he mean to withhold the confections now that Optimus had gotten a taste, reliant on Optimus’s good manners to hold him back?

Megatron swallowed the next cake ring, again directing that infuriating smirk at Optimus. “There’s
no need to hold back,” he said, his voice dropping into a lower register that set Optimus on edge. “Why don’t you take what you want?”

Optimus raised an orbital ridge. What was Megatron playing at? “Are you certain you want me to do that?” he said.

“Oh, I am quite certain,” said Megatron, the expression on his faceplates so glowingly smug it could have lit a small city.

Optimus narrowed his optics, before allowing his expression to smooth out. “Alright then,” he said.

He picked up the box, lifting it to faceplate level so he could look Megatron in the optic, and slowly, deliberately, stuffed a cake ring in his mouth. And another. And another. And another.

There were almost too many to manage the whole box, but the slight twinge in his overfull tank was more than worth it for the expression on Megatron’s faceplates.

Optimus set down the empty box between them like a challenge.

Megatron stared at it a moment and then, to Optimus’s surprise, burst out laughing. Optimus couldn’t hold back a little smile of his own even if he didn’t understand what was funny -- like walking in on some friends laughing and using his own imagination to fill in the joke.

“Optimus Prime,” Megatron said, his laughter simmering to a small chuckle. “You continue to be full of surprises.”
To: Reflector, Lancewing

From: Manbearpig

Subject: Infomercial Script: X-treme Opti-X

Hey Reflector, I decided to bypass you and go straight to messaging both you and the CEO with my draft script. I als

{{1 attachment: bestscript4ever.txt}}
Later,

Manbearpig

---

To Manbearpig

From: Reflector, Chief Producer at Flexpletive Studios

Subject: Re: Infomercial Script: X-treme Opti-X

I've met space barnacles on helium with more sense than you. Not only is your script terrible, but to waste Lancewing's time? He's got better things to do. At least make a second draft.

Get a grip,

Reflector

---

To: Manbearpig, Reflector

From: Lancewing, CEO of Flexpletive Studios

Subject: Re: Infomercial Script: X-treme Opti-X

Reflector! I don't know what sort of sparkless mech you are to have passed on this! This is brilliant, loud and odd and ... It's genius. I want Manbearpig hired as lead writer for our future commercials. This may even become one of those memes.

Lancewing

CEO of Flexpletive Studios

---

To: Lancewing, CEO of Flexpletive Studios

From: Reflector, Chief Producer at Flexpletive Studios

Subject: Re: Re: Infomercial Script: X-treme Opti-X
Consider this my resignation letter.

Reflector

Chapter End Notes

Listen, just because I haven't watched Brooklyn 99 yet, doesn't mean I can't make a reference to it.

- Reya

EDIT: spookysmokes on tumblr made some adorable art of the donuts. Now I want some too!
“So,” Optimus said, his mouth still full of pastry, waving the last bite at Megatron in lieu of pointing. “What’s the occasion?”

“You mean aside from you destroying almost everything in my apartment?” Megatron answered, though his voice bore no hint of resentment. “You have been quite a source of trouble for Strika, I’m sure you are aware.”

Optimus leveled a look at him. “My apologies. I forgot the part in the Prisoner of War Manual where it stated that I was supposed to behave like a good little drone.”

“Do not get me wrong, Optimus Prime,” Megatron returned his look, though with a hint of his previous amusement still written on his faceplates. “Do you think I would have allowed you access into my apartment without knowing what sort of trouble you could brew?”

Optimus looked away, resisting the urge to pout. He didn’t understand Megatron, didn’t understand the last donut he held in his hand -- his appetite was gone -- didn’t understand why he was still functioning, still allowed to talk back to his supposed master. “Tortured slave” was a narrative Optimus could understand. This was not.

“What exactly do you want, Megatron? Apparently you don’t want revenge for what happened on Earth, but it doesn’t seem like you want me to betray the Autobots either.”

Megatron ex-vented, a deep and lengthy noise that made Optimus suddenly aware of how large the berth, the room, the mech next to him were. Megatron stood, turning to face away from Optimus. When he spoke, his voice seemed disproportionately quiet.

“The truth is, Optimus Prime, I am not quite sure what I want from you either. You have caught my attention, that is certain, and I should hate you, for imprisoning me, for foiling my plans at every opportunity, but I do not.”

Megatron turned around, towering over Optimus. His height and mass sent a twinge of fear through Optimus’s spark. To his shock, Megatron actually paused, before slowly getting on one knee. Even like this Megatron was still huge and looming, but it appeared as if this was an effort to not intimidate him, and Optimus found himself wondering just what expression on his face had clued Megatron in.

“If you can keep a secret, for both our sakes,” Megatron said, his optics dimming and his EM field just close enough for Optimus to sense; it was an independent verification of the sincerity of his words. The warbuild calmly hooked his hand around the back of Optimus’s neck. “Perhaps I have become somewhat... fond of you.”

The effort of admitting this seemed to make Megatron deeply uncomfortable.

With a small snap, the collar at Optimus’s throat fell away into Megatron’s servo.

“Are you…” Optimus did not dare to hope, but focusing on leaving Armada was easier than contemplating the strange sentimentality Megatron had just displayed towards him. “Are you saying I can leave?”
“No.” Megatron said, his uncomfortable look deepening, optic ridges furrowing. “I cannot risk a loyal Autobot soldier escaping from Armada, especially one acquainted with the architectural secrets at its head. However…” Megatron stood up, offering Optimus his servo, and it took a second to understand the gesture was meant to help him off the berth. He considered snubbing Megatron and refusing, but decided against it.

Megatron’s servo was warm under his. “I can offer you some limited freedom.”

“You mean a longer leash,” Optimus retorted, only noticing after he’d spoken that his servo was still engulfed in Megatron’s. He tugged it away from its captor.

“If that is what you wish to call it,” Megatron shrugged. “I won’t degrade you by pretending it’s anything else. If you wish to stay a cleaning slave here, I won’t argue, I am merely giving you another option: one where you earn your own credits and your own housing.”

Not escape or freedom, but a close second. There had to be a catch, some subtle manipulation, the deception that Megatron was so well known for.

*What was all this?* Was Optimus really supposed to believe that after millions of stellar cycles of war between Decepticons and Autobots, led by the mech in front of him, the same mech responsible for so much death and destruction -- that Megatron would, out of nowhere, grow a spark for *him*?

Megatron was slagging out of his processor if he thought he could make Optimus bend so easily, and his hand, the same hand which had just been held so tenderly in Megatron’s, balled into a fist. Still, he could take advantage of this situation to find a pathway to escape, to take all his knowledge of Armada and its joke of an existence back to Cybertron. He would just have to pretend to be a naive little grounder for now and take advantage of the opportunity so “generously” provided.

“All right, Megatron. I’m interested.”

*A little pretend kindness will not make me forget what you are, Optimus thought. A power hungry tyrant, and a liar.*
Sentinel was fairly certain he was going to be hearing Rosanna’s inane music in his recharge for the rest of his very long life.

It hadn’t actually taken them that long to review and catalog Rosanna’s albums, separating out the various tracks and singles into categories of ‘Possible Clues’, ‘Unhelpful Slag’ and Sari’s favorite ‘If You Play That Again I Swear I’m Evicting You’. Despite the breadth of the project, it had only taken them a few cycles.

Unfortunately this was entirely due to Sari insisting that they listen in a continuous flood.

“Cheer up,” she said, patting his helm where it had sunk onto the table in a futile attempt to snuff himself from the misery of his own existence. “What happened to ‘Justice never sleeps’?”

Sentinel groaned. “I am not getting paid enough for this.”

“You’re getting paid?” Sari asked.

“You’re not?” said Sentinel, before kicking himself. Of course she wasn’t being paid, she wasn’t officially a Cybertronian citizen.

He lifted his helm and frowned at her. “If you aren’t getting paid, where are you getting the credits for energon?”

“Um,” she said. “Well, Ratchet gave me a bunch of numbers and told me to input them into the extranet sites if I needed to purchase anything. Or give them to a merchant, but the only physical store I’ve visited since I got here was that sex shop.”

Sentinel stared, the gears in his processor turning. “Ratchet gave you his credit identification?”

“Uh, well, he gave me someone’s…” Seeing his expression, Sari cringed. “Hey, don’t look at me like that! I thought you guys were some kind of futuristic utopian society where money didn’t exist anymore!”

Sentinel let his helm clunk back onto the table. “This is so many levels of illegal I think I may blow a gasket.”

“More or less illegal than giving a non-citizen access to classified information?”

Sentinel covered his helm with his servos and groaned. “We need to get you some official documentation.”

“Good luck,” she said. “Ratchet’s been trying for a stellar cycle. They see the suffix ‘organic’ and chuck the whole application.”

Sentinel lifted his helm and rested it on his servos. “Normally, you’d need a special exemption from the Magnus, but…” He pondered for a minute. “I might have a way around it. We’ll get back to it when we’ve sorted out the Rosanna situation.”

“Wow,” she said. “Look at you. I thought hell would freeze over before you’d suggest doing anything shady to get me papers.”

Sentinel coughed with discomfort. “The system is... outdated, and does not allow for exceptions.
You’re clearly Cybertronian, it makes no sense to deny you citizenship. We take care of our own and there is no reason you should work without pay.”

She was staring at him, a strange expression on her face.

Feeling hunted, he ducked his helm. “What?”

The next moment he had a faceful of squishy, organic limbs.

He let out a muffled yelp and tried to withdraw, but she was relentless, hugging his head so tightly that his antennae creaked.

“Thank you, Robocop,” she said. “Optimus was right about you. Whatever’s up your exhaust port isn’t really that big.”

Tentatively, he raised an arm, trying not to think too hard about how this looked, and lightly hugged her back.

Then her statement registered.

“What’s that slagger been saying about stuff in my exhaust port?!!”

---

Despite only having a few cycles of recharge, Minimus felt better rested than he had since before his promotion to Ultra Magnus. The old aches were gone, replaced by deeper, more pleasant ones, in no small part thanks to Megazarak.

Quite a large part, actually.

Bumblebee, on the other hand, looked like he hadn’t slept a wink. His optics switched between being too dull or too bright, his servos fidgety as they added stimulants to his oil, and he wouldn’t stop looking for Minimus, no doubt questing for an excuse to pick a fight.

Minimus smiled at him knowingly, before changing his expression to his default, more serious one to address the rest of his crew.

“Megazarak and I reached an agreement,” Minimus said, his voice echoing through the bridge. The other mechs all immediately gave him their undivided attention, and even Bumblebee seemed to straighten up.

“I thought you already d-” Arcee started, but Minimus quickly cut her off.

“Never mind that. This is different, but this… arrangement is not one I can make on my own, as it is related to Optimus Prime.”

“Boss Bot? Is he okay? Did Megazarak have any info about him?” Bulkhead said, worry tainting his voice.

“Of course he’s not okay, Bulk!” Bumblebee said, snappishly. “He’s a Con slave!”

“According to Megazarak, Optimus Prime is as safe as he could ever be in the company of Decepticons, but since he has been your commanding officer and you have joined this mission as a
rescue effort, I cannot finalize our agreement without your consent.”

Minimus Ambus began to pace despite his best efforts. “One of the conditions in exchange for the Steelhaven is for us to cease our search for Optimus Prime.” He stopped, holding his hand up to show he was to continue at the chorus of angry yelps this provoked. “That is to say, the agreed-upon condition is that we cease searching openly for Optimus and sending soldiers into enemy territory.” He gave each of them a hard look in turn. “While I understand your concern, such tactics could easily erupt into open warfare once more, which is something we cannot risk. Not for any mechanism.”

Minimus sighed. “Additionally, on a practical note, we have no knowledge of Armada’s location, so any further attempts to rescue Optimus Prime would essentially be shots in the dark.”

“What about Megazarak?” said Ratchet. “Doesn’t he know where it is?”

Minimus shook his helm. “Officially, Megazarak is still in exile and not privy to such intelligence.”

“Great,” grumbled Bumblebee. “So we get to do what, go back to Cybertron and sit around with our servos up our exhaust ports?”

Minimus considered him for a moment. “Perhaps not,” he said slowly. “While it is true that one of the conditions was to cease trying to rescue Optimus, I made no agreement to stop searching for him altogether.”

Tapping his chin, Minimus turned to Jazz. “As I recall, the radio telescope at the facility on Luna-1 is the most powerful one we have, correct?”

Jazz’s visor brightened. “Yeah, that’s the one that Cosmos is always using to update the star charts.”

“Excellent,” said Minimus. “Then it will be a simple task to assign the group of you to the facility. Your task, should you chose to accept it, will be to search the galaxy for evidence of Armada’s passage. Once we pinpoint its location, well, we may revisit the subject of a rescue.”

“I hate to drop acid rain on this parade,” said Arcee. “But doesn’t Armada have a jamming signal in place? Picking up anything in the way of radio chatter from them is going to be next to impossible.”

Minimus pondered this. “True, but while Armada may have a silencer in place, the rest of the galaxy does not.”

She frowned. “Meaning what?”

“Even in the vastness of the galaxy, the movements of something as large as Armada will not go entirely unnoticed by those around it,” said Minimus. “It would merely be a matter of picking up the chatter provoked by the city, rather than produced by it.”

Bulkhead, as a technician with experience dealing in large numbers and the vastness of space, spoke up. “Even narrowing the search area to Decepticon space, this could take stellar cycles, and if it’s constantly moving … we’d not only have to find it, but figure out its trajectory and stuff.”

“That’s why I’m choosing you for this assignment, Bulkhead. It won’t be easy, but I am certain you will be able to aid our astronomers in this.”

“And what about me?” said Bumblebee. “What am I, slag slaw?”

“You will accompany Bulkhead,” said Minimus, without missing a beat. “Think of it as a training
mission.” He cocked an orbital ridge at him. “Or perhaps a lesson in patience.”

Cowed, Bumblebee backed down, though not before muttering a barely audible comment that might have concerned Minimus’s interface habits.

“Jazz, Arcee,” said Minimus. “You will be needed back at Metroplex. Ratchet, you should join these two on Luna-1, for supervisory purposes.”

“Just as well,” said Ratchet. “I’ll need to get Sari back from the tin can with the oversized chin that’s babysitting her. And we’ve already got a makeshift headquarters set up in Bulkhead’s old barn.”

“Excellent,” said Minimus. He found himself wondering briefly just how Sentinel was faring with an immature warframe at his heels. Sentinel’s reports, usually frequent enough to be helmache-inducing, had all but ceased, and those that did come through had been only a sentence or two in length, glyphs clipped and unininformative, and occasionally attached to maddeningly vague budget receipts for things like ‘Collateral Damage’ and ‘Discretionary Spending’.

While Minimus was not a superstitious mech, he could not help but wonder if Sentinel Prime not sending a fully itemized receipt was a sign of the apocalypse.

“I just hope OP can hold on long enough for us to find him.” said Jazz.

Minimus couldn’t help but feel a twinge of guilt, as if he was deceiving Megazarak. But his foremost duty was still to ensure the safety of his people, and while he longed for a cycle in which they could meet in peace, that did not erase the current danger. Although perhaps... if the ex-Decepticon was correct, then by the time Armada was found Optimus would be free to return to Cybertron by himself, if not delivered willingly by Megatron.

What a thought that was.

“Never fear,” said Minimus. “If I have learned anything about Optimus Prime during my time as his commander, it is that he has a limitless potential for achieving the unexpected.”

Shockwave’s Log, Cycle 013.6102.12

This is maddening. Scalpel informs me that it will take at least twelve megacycles to fabricate the necessary parts for Vector Sigma, I am so bored.

Shockwave’s Log, Cycle 013.6102.17
That worthless slagheap Blackarachnia sent me a 'get-well present' containing nothing but a datapad preloaded with three... when I upload that holo clip I managed to nab of her shaking her disgusting, organic parts to Autobot popular music.

They aren't even the good DMC novels, blast it all.

- 

Shockwave's Log, Cycle 013.6102.19

Have read all the novels in the datapad, twice. Very difficult to do without servos. Bored again.

- 

Shockwave's Log, Cycle 013.6102.23

That half-glitched excuse for a medic stuck me with something because, to quote, he was “tired of all the bitching and... and quiet”. Slag, slag, slag, oh Vector Sigma this is a disaster everything is getting very weird around the edges--

- 

Shockwave's Log, Cycle 013.6102.33

Frame heavy. Processor feels like someone poured gelled energon in the gears. So tired.


Blurr was always playing music

- 

Shockwave's Log, Cycle 013.6102.36

It was such a stupid thing to do, giving you that novel. I might as well have shouted my identity in your faceplates. I
Had to deal with my beta nerding out about fraunhofer lines for 10 minutes for this. Hope it was worth it.

-Reya

EDIT: Art by the great Taiyari!!! ;A; We don't deserve her.
While the atmosphere of Headquarters couldn’t exactly be described as peaceful, Optimus found to his dismay that he had entirely forgotten the vomitous flash and discord of Armada’s streets. He trotted along in Megatron’s wake, already having difficulty keeping up with the Decepticon’s longer strides without being torn between the urge to stay on high alert and the urge to mute his audio sensors entirely.

Megatron had offered to carry him and fly to their destination, but Optimus had refused by way of pointedly exiting the building, heading in entirely the wrong direction, falling into a narrow crack in an aging ship, and then having to be extricated after the inebriated mech onto whom he had fallen on decided to pick a fight.

Megatron instead parted the crowd in an effortless way that almost seemed elegant, like an oxide shark through a school of robo-minnows. Much as it galled Optimus to admit it, it was nice not to have to fight to advance every few mechanometers, but at the same time his position behind the warlord made him the center of every mech’s attention. The itch of red optics against Optimus’s plating was almost as uncomfortable as the constant shoving and pushing.

He kept his own optics fixed on Megatron’s ridiculously broad backplates, refusing to stare at his pedes even under the weight of their stares. Consequently, he missed the moment when they crossed one of the winding streets and passed into a more subdued segment of the city. Granted, ‘subdued’ by Armada standards meant that there was only a strip club on every other corner, and he was fairly sure that the few mechs strewn about the street were simply passed out and not deactivated, but Optimus still felt himself let out a sigh of relief when the ambient noise from the holographic ads decreased from helm-smashingly loud to merely “screaming human offspring” loud.

Megatron led the way with a confident stride that indicated he’d likely been here before, guiding them to an absurdly tall and narrow building--constructed, it seemed, from the remnants of some sort of ground-to-surface missile, though the outside was so heavily scratched it was impossible to tell its origin--squeezed between a furniture store and what smelled like a tire fire.

Optimus coughed and turned aside, covering his intake as a cloud of black smoke belched from the open door of the mystery shop. “What the slag is that?”

“Vulcanite,” said Megatron, without batting an optic. “Intoxicating compound,” he clarified, when Optimus gave him a blank stare. “It’s actually rather pleasant, once you get past the smell.”

“I think I’ll pass,” said Optimus, grimacing. “Where are we?”

“I promised you a task to engage your processor,” said Megatron. “And after some deliberation, and
sending out feelers to ascertain whether there were any proprietors in the area looking to sell--”

Alarm bells pinged in Optimus’s processor. “Who exactly did you threaten?”

Megatron laughed shortly. “Why, no one at all. Business has been slow and my offer was more than reasonable. The owner was happy to sell, inventory and all.” He palmed the sensor pad beside the door, which slid half way open, only to grind to a halt.

Optimus raised an orbital ridge. “I can see why.”

Megatron muttered something that sounded like an exasperated curse under his breath, and Optimus had to bite his glossa to keep from laughing at his expression. Grumbling, Megatron shoved the doors apart in a faintly disgruntled but entirely effortless display of strength, which Optimus promptly kicked himself for even noticing in the first place. Straightening, Megatron cleared his intake and gestured at the doorway. “After you.”

The inside of the shop was entirely dark, although thanks to the light spilling in through the open door, Optimus could discern that the floor hadn’t been swept in ages. Megatron stepped off into the darkness, dimming to a hulking silhouette. Optimus could hear him fumbling about, mumbling something about a fuse box.

“So this is a retail establishment?” said Optimus, stepping further inside and peering up into the shadows. Above him he felt the impression of great height and the movement of air, as though the entire length of the missile was open, rather than being divided into floors, as he might have expected. “What does it sell?”

He heard the thunk of an enormous switch being thrown and a crackle of sparks, and a massive string of lights burst into life, winding their way up the interior of the missile. It reminded him of a glowing reversal of those organic candies that Sari would consume at Christmas time.

Optimus stared.

The entirety of the missile was lined with shelving units, many of which only seemed to be accessible via a number of large, rickety looking ladders or a very suspect pulley system which was strung throughout the inside like the cobwebs of a great spider.

And every one of the shelves was stuffed with datapads. Hundreds of them, in a rainbow of colors and sizes, some of the spines glittering with preset holographic animations. Here and there, Optimus could spot the sharp edges of plain metal sheeting, the acid etchings that predated portable datapads.

Across the store, Megatron lifted his helm and smirked at him.

“It’s a bookstore, Optimus Prime,” he said, and Optimus found he only half-wanted to smack him for the smugness of his tone. “A poorly cataloged bookstore that specializes in rare finds. I trust you will find this work sufficiently stimulating.”

“T’m thinking,” said Sari, tapping her chin as she surveyed the stacks of datapads like a garbage compactor bot sizing up their next load. “That all of this is going to be useless unless we get
“If I have no idea what domesticated Earth animals have to do with this investigation,” said Sentinel, “but if you’re suggesting we interview Rosanna, that would be the next logical step.”

“Awesome,” Sari rubbed her servos, her expression gleeful, popping a bubble with the disgusting organic paste she had been chomping on for the last megacycle. “Do we get to pretend to be journalists?”

“Maybe?” Sentinel scowled as Sari popped another bubble, then went back to chewing loudly. “I can’t focus with all that noise you’re making!”

“This?” said Sari, popping yet another bubble, which burst over half her face. She then proceeded, much to Sentinel’s disgust, to lick it off her face with her weird prehensile glossa and warp it back into her mouth.

“Yes, that--would you just swallow your organic nourishment already? I have a very specific meal plan for the week and I can’t afford to throw up.”

Sari blinked at him. “My gum? But you don’t swallow it. That’s kind of the point.”

“That doesn’t even make any sense!” Sentinel said. “Ugh, whatever. I don’t want to know. Just get rid of it, it’s annoying and gross.”

“Oh, okay,” said Sari, a disturbing glint in her optic. She grinned, took the wad out of her mouth, and stuck it on Sentinel’s leg.

After the half-megacycle in the washrack required to keep himself from peeling off his own plating, Sentinel emerged to find Sari perched on his personal console, orbital ridges furrowed.

“What are you up to now?” he asked, circling up to her warily in case she had any other nasty, organic missiles tucked away somewhere.

“I found the commlink code to contact Rosanna,” she said. “The official one, at least. Your phone system is really--oh, there it goes.”

“I don’t think--” Sentinel began, but he was interrupted by the beep of the connecting commlink.

“Greetings,” said an automated voice simulator. “Welcome to the official switchboard and fan comment line of…” There was an audible click and a second, completely different voice spoke. “Rosanna. Entertainer. Twincast Productions Ltd.” Another click, and the first recorded voice was back. “Please listen closely as our menu options have changed.”

“Sari--” Sentinel said.

“Shh!” she said, waving her arm frantically.

“For Galactic Standard, please press one. For Neocybex, please press two. For Primal Vernacular, please press three. Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn, please press four. Please be aware that option four may cause your commlink to ooze unidentifiable organic matter during the conversation. For 001100- 010010- 011110-100001-101101-110011, please press five. For Velocitronian dialect, please press--”

Sentinel buried his faceplates in his servos as Sari dutifully pressed a key.
“Thank you,” droned the voice. “If you would like to purchase tickets to an upcoming Rosanna event, please press one. If you would like to place an order for a Rosanna album, please press two. If you are a press correspondent looking to arrange an interview with Rosanna, please press three. If you are interested in joining a Rosanna fan forum, please press four. If you have become disillusioned with the current Cybertronian government, please press five. If the sound of Rosanna’s voice is the only thing that gives meaning to your monotonous existence—”

“Wait just a slagging minute--!” Sentinel squawked, but Sari was already punching in the press correspondent option.

There was a lengthy pause. “Thank you. If you are government-sanctioned journalists licensed by the entertainment guild, please press one. If you are unsanctioned, please press two.”

Sari snorted. “Like I’m falling for that. Unsanctioned, duh.”

Alarm blared through Sentinel, “Sari, wait a moment! You have to--”

But it was too late. The commlink hummed and clicked and then…

“Answer, incorrect. All journalists on Cybertron are licensed by the entertainment guild. Response indicates that you are not affiliated with an official press organization. Please stand by as your number is blocked and communications are terminated.”

“What the--!” Sari yelped. “What kind of freaking--”

“Additionally, impersonation of journalistic personnel is a Class H1 felony. Autotroopers have been dispatched to your current location. Have a nice day.”

“Slag!” Sentinel leapt at the console but the screen had already blinked off. He fumbled with the touch interface awkwardly around Sari, who was still clinging to the edge, her pedes dangling above the floor. “They bricked the whole console!”

“What the--how the slag can they do that!” said Sari.

“They must have transmitted a signal to the automated anti-sedition system,” said Sentinel. “There’s not an actual bot on the other end of it, just a drone with instructions to remove offending messages and silence communications channels until an investigation can be launched.”

Her optics widened. “Not gonna lie here, Robocop, that’s pretty messed up. Are they really coming here right now to arrest us?”

“Yes,” Sentinel groaned. “Again, it’s drones. The actual processing is done by sparked bots, but arrests were automated stellar cycles ago. The drones are impossible to reason with. They’ll break down the door and pursue us.”

“Are you serious?” she said. “Should we run? Is there someone we can call and explain the situation?”

“If I could get through to Metroplex then I might be able to call off the arrest, but I don’t have another communications….” Sentinel trailed off. “Wait, I have an idea.”

He spun and charged into the washracks. “Quick! Every habitation module is wired up with hidden monitoring devices! We need to raise someone!” He grabbed the spout of the washrack and shouted into it. “Help! Police! Emergency!”
“Your apartment is wired with what?” Sari shrieked. “I showered in there!”

Sentinel raced into the living room and clambered onto the table, reaching for the light fixture above his helm. “Come on! They’re usually in decorative devices or appliances! Try the energon dispenser!”

“I am not going to--” Someone pounded on the door to the apartment and Sari yelped in alarm. “Shit, they’re here! I’m too young to go to jail!”

“Open up!” shouted a muffled voice through the door. “In the name of the law!”

Sentinel tried to leap down from the table, misjudged, and tumbled flat onto his faceplates. Staggering up, he limped towards the door and yanked it open, summoning up his best drill sergeant voice. “What in the name of Vector Sigma do you think you’re--”

He froze. Leaning against the lintel of the door, his pauldrons shaking with helpless laughter, was Blurr.

“By all that’s holy,” Blurr wheezed, his voice practically at normal speed as he struggled to remain upright. “You should see your faces.”

Distracted by the shiny, opalescent foil of an ancient etched book--brilliant enough that he could almost see his blurred reflection staring back at him--Optimus was already several steps up a nearby ladder when Megatron’s words registered. “Did you say a book store?”

Optimus turned, only to glimpse Megatron stuffing a few datapads into his subspace as quickly as a common pickpocket swiping credit chips. “Yes, what of it?” Megatron said, his back still facing Optimus as he went back to skimming the datapad ends for whichever ones were of interest to a Decepticon warlord.


Megatron stopped to peer over his pauldron back at Optimus. “Is it such a difficult concept for you, Optimus Prime?”

Optimus frowned. “I… no…” he said, then shrugged. “We just don’t sell books on Cybertron. They’re in libraries, available to all.”

Megatron huffed and went back to his search. “Truly, Cybertron has suffered without strong leadership.”

Optimus’s optics narrowed. “How do you mean? Knowledge should be free and available to all. If books were to be sold, profit would become more important than accuracy, and those with more credits could hoard knowledge and make it inaccessible to everyone else.”

“Perhaps,” said Megatron, not bothering to forgo his search, though he had seemingly stopped adding datapads to his subspace collection. “But it means that the Autobot Commonwealth has complete control over what can or cannot be read, instead of allowing the public to decide for themselves. Imagine all the criticism of their governance which they have the power to suppress.”
Optimus crossed his arms. “You can’t expect me to believe you don’t suppress the voices of your critics, Megatron.”

“I find drowning them out with alternative information and opinions favorable to me more effective, and as you know, we aren’t exactly mechs to partake in such things as peaceful protests. Actions speak to us, words only give them motivation.” Perhaps giving up on his hunt, Megatron turned around to look at Optimus with a grin that bled from his glinting fangs. “And I am not sure I deserve a lecture regarding suppression of knowledge from a mech who, until recently, did not even know what a spike was.”

Optimus’s faceplates heated up so intensely, so quickly, that he had to cover and rub them to relieve the discomfort. “Th-that’s not--! It’s different--I mean… ugh!” He stuttered out, trying and failing to ignore Megatron’s deep laugh at his embarrassing reaction.

Optimus determinedly turned back to the shelves, rolling his optics. In the glow of the strung lights, dust motes flew and danced, as if the ship were their own private club. Optimus thought about all the little edges and dark corners and hidden crevices he would still have to clean, yet the thought didn’t bother him. It would be far too easy to get comfortable here, and perhaps--Optimus frowned as his gaze wandered back to Megatron and the warlord approached his ladder perch--perhaps that was the point.

The perspective shift was jarring; he was almost of a height with Megatron like this, and Optimus felt his faceplates heating up again, current buzzing beneath the surface. Megatron smirked at him, smug as ever, his optics glowing brightly enough that Optimus could see the irising shutter underneath the crimson glass.

“But, Optimus Prime,” said Megatron. “You are lucky enough to be an Autobot I am interested in listening to. Perhaps the only Autobot.”

With a tug that was far too gentle, Megatron reached out and took one of Optimus’s wrists, loosening his servo’s grip on the ladder and forcing him to turn and face the larger mech directly, easily supporting his weight when the shift knocked Optimus momentarily off balance.

Megatron smiled, his optics twinkling, and Optimus felt something lurch dizzyingly in his tanks. “And I suspect we may have much to learn from one another, don’t you agree?”

Excerpted from Alternity Today, Vornly Horoscope Section, by Brainstorm

Xal

Expect trouble in your love life. Avoid impulsive investments and making travel plans while Yggdrasil remains in opp.

Famous Xalians: Longrack Major, Sky Garry

Chronarchitect

Expect temporary separation from someone important in your life, but remember that even the vast void of space car
Famous Chronarchitects: Perceptor, Ultra Magnus

* 

The Void
Take time for self-reflection to avoid disappointment in pending endeavors. Alternatively, take up drinking andcreating ill-advised artwork in a quiet room. Your word of the vorn is: “misery.”

Famous Voidians: Megazarak and Megatron, Former and Current Leaders of the Decepticons

* 

Shokaract
Ward against health problems by tightening security and avoiding suspect energon, suspicious business dealings, an

Famous Shokarians: Rodimus Prime, Rosanna

* 

The Core
Cast aside prejudice to realize your full potential and form a meaningful tie with another. A missed connection is a gre

Famous Corians: General Dai Atlas, Optimus Prime

* 

Serpent O.R.
With the Void in conjunction, now is the time to powerlink with a new partner. Make sure you purchase new grounds t

Famous Serpentians: Sensei Yoketron, Botanica

* 

Yggdrasil
Engage in personal growth by taking up a new hobby. Maybe word puzzles or Morphobot gardening. Please note that

Famous Yggrians: Alpha Trion, Grandus

* 

The Key
Reduce personal anxiety to allow for clarity of mind. Perhaps engage in some state-approved self-interfacing. Remerr

Famous Keyvians: Agent Highbrow, Sentinel Prime

* 

Golden Disk
Lose yourself to find yourself, Diskian. Maybe not that much. Actually, come back, Diskian, we seem to have lost yo

Famous Diskians: Primal Major, Cosmos

* 

Aquarius
Expect travel in your future when your glossa becomes attached to the back of a speeding bus. It is advisable to fill t

Famous Aquarians: Charger Dicky, Annulus “M” Roll

**Please call the main switchboard with questions, comments, or if you find it inconceivable or at the very least a bit
While returning to the *Steelhaven* brought with it a sense of ordered comfort, it unsettled Minimus in some unquantifiable way to watch Megazarak move away from the ship. Jazz, Bulkhead, and Bumblebee had already headed up to the bridge, leaving Minimus to linger on the gangplank. In the background he could hear the hum of Omega’s engines as the sentinel prepared for liftoff and the faint murmuring of Jazz’s voice over the comms as he relayed with Ratchet and Arcee.

“Will you be alright?” Minimus said. “Without a ship, that is?”

Megazarak turned back to him, startled. “Of course. They’re convenient for deep-space travel, but it isn’t as if I *require* one, strictly speaking. And I can always pick up another starhopper from the shipyards.” He winked at Minimus. “Megatron didn’t make off with *all* my assets.”

Minimus coughed in embarrassment. “Megazarak, why don’t you get yourself and your *assets* on board? Consider it a diplomatic courtesy.”

Megazarak raised an orbital ridge in surprise. “Are you certain? I wouldn’t want to give the little yellow number a spark attack.”

Minimus looked up towards the entrance from the gangplank where Bumblebee had returned to check on them. The scout scowled, put two fingers up to his optics and then pointed them towards Minimus in the universal language of ‘I’m watching you’—though coming from Bumblebee, it had all the intimidation factor of a constipated space slug—before scampering up into the ship.

“Bumblebee is a professional,” said Minimus, amazed at himself that he could say such a thing now with a straight face. “And I am his superior. He will deal with it.”

Megazarak didn’t seem to buy it, his expression turning reluctant.

“Megazarak, you yourself told me that our war may be in its final stages. If so, my soldiers will have to get used to non-hostile warbuilds in their presence.”

Megazarak seemed to consider this, his optics darting back in the direction of the city, and Minimus found that a strange lump had formed in his intake. He extended a servo.

“Forget diplomatic courtesy,” he said. “Please come aboard?”

Megazarak’s optics rounded, an uncharacteristically startled look crossing his faceplates. “You’re serious.”

Minimus nodded, unable to speak.

One step, then another, and Megazarak’s servo engulfed his own.

“Very well,” Megazarak said. “I suppose it will be an interesting ride.” The soft look in his optics belied the flippant words and the smirk tugging at the edges of his mouth.

Minimus gripped his servo tightly, exerting just enough of his loadbearer strength to make Megazarak wince. “I should think it always is,” he said, keeping his expression neutral, but allowing
his field to convey his amusement.

The simultaneously smitten and poleaxed expression on Megazarak’s faceplates was worth every potential whining complaint from Bumblebee. Minimus pulled his lover aboard his ship, and for a brief time at least, felt everything settle into place.

Even knowing it wouldn’t last, it lightened his spark.

Blurr, once he had managed to stop laughing—no easy task, apparently, as each time he’d looked at Sentinel’s scowling faceplates he’d dissolved into a fresh bout of chuckles—rummaged about in his subspace and produced a small item that resembled a credit chip. Flipping it around to show the opposite side, he offered his servo. “I was on my way when you two decided to activate the anti-sedition network,” he said, optics twinkling. “A warrant for us to search Rosanna’s apartment and interview her.”

“Wait, you guys actually serve warrants?” said Sari. “You don’t just grab anyone who looks suspicious and send them to talk to the nice bots with guns?”

“Yes?” said Sentinel, unable to keep from pouting.

Blurr rolled his optics. “Some of the higher-ups can get more than a little over-zealous,” he leveled a challenging look at Sentinel and Sentinel coughed awkwardly. “But Cybertronian citizenship comes with the right to due process, even if the legal system is a bit…” He seemed to weigh his next word, “convoluted.”

“If it’s anything like your switchboard, that’s an understatement,” Sari said under her breath.

“Well, we’re not ‘Cons,” said Sentinel, testily. “The closest thing they have to a legal system is a gladiatorial arena. You wouldn’t be any better off there than with the Quintessons. Anyway, when are we going?”

“Now,” said Blurr briskly. “Rosanna is in Iacon for the moment, but she’s scheduled to leave for a performance in Althex in seven megacycles. Her manager insisted that if we must engage in, I quote, ‘this farce of an investigation,’ then we should do so as soon as possible to avoid delaying her schedule.”

“Then let’s get going!” said Sari, springing to her pedes.

“I hope I don’t have to impress upon you the importance of being discreet regarding our true intentions,” said Blurr. “Officially, this warrant regards nothing more than the disruption at The Leaky Valve, and the allegation that the gig itself was arranged by and paid for by a group of Con sympathizers.” He eyed Sari severely. “Rosanna has friends, and fans, in high places. It took a great deal of wire-pulling to even get this much. We have one shot at this.”

“In other words,” said Sentinel, “you should let me do the talking.”

“No,” said both Blurr and Sari.
“Let me get this straight,” said Sari, during the awkwardly long lift ride to Rosanna’s top-floor apartments. “We have to interview her without you?”

Blurr rubbed his nasal ridge. “For a brief period,” he said. “Our window for the interview is very narrow, and Rosanna’s apartments are quite large. Among us, I am the only one with sufficient speed to search through her belongings and still have enough time for questioning.”

“In case anyone was wondering,” said Sentinel, through gritted dental plates. “I did complete the interrogation tactics module, same as every other member of the Elite Guard.”

Blurr groaned. “I am well aware of that. But, with all due respect, there was a reason that you were rarely assigned for questioning. Interrogation is a delicate process, requiring keen observational skills and a more-than-rudimentary understanding of psychology.” He eyed Sentinel, “Not to mention tact. Some bots simply lack the knack for it.”

Sari muffled a giggle into her hand. “Why is it that whenever someone says ‘with all due respect,’ they really mean ‘kiss my ass’?”

Sentinel glared at them. “I assure you that I am more than capable of handling a standard interview with a pop star.”

“A pop star,” said Blurr, “or a Decepticon that has been able to hold onto her cover despite the constant scrutiny of show business and celebrity status? I can assure you that is no easy task.”

“For your information,” Sentinel huffed, drawing himself up to his full height, “I have already formulated a plan for questioning Rosanna. So will you stop patronizing me and wasting our time, and let me do my job?”

“Fine, fine,” said Blurr. “It should only take me about a half megacycle to complete the search anyway.”

The lift slid to a halt and the doors slid open with a chime, ejecting them into a small foyer decorated in tasteful, understated colors, with a large chandelier hanging from the ceiling. A short bot, their plating a severe muted green that brought to mind a sticky floor in a seedy motel, stood beneath it, tapping a pede.

“Greetings,” said Blurr, stepping up before Sentinel could open his mouth. “You must be Flim Flam; we spoke on the comms.”

“Quite,” said Flim Flam, surveying them with distaste. “As I indicated, I will be monitoring your search of Rosanna’s possessions very closely, and so help me, if you bend so much as a wire, you will be hearing from our barrister about an insurance claim.”

Blurr smiled. “Of course. Lead the way.”

Flim Flam sniffed and indicated the hall behind them. They followed the green bot, down a long corridor and into a sitting room, again in those same bland colors, a handful of low-set chairs--all of which looked like they could have cost more than Sentinel’s rent--scattered about.
“Sit,” said Flim Flam. “And by Vector Sigma don’t touch anything. Rosanna will be with you shortly. Come, Agent Blurr. Let’s get this over with.”

They shuffled out of the room. Blurr shot Sentinel a slightly strained smile and followed.

Sentinel perched awkwardly on one of the chairs, feeling it squish strangely under his frame. Not the standard foam coating. Nearby Sari flopped onto another chair, her limbs splaying out carelessly. Granted, she still only took up about half of it at her miniature size.

“This place smells like old lady,” she said.

“What?” said Sentinel, momentarily distracted by the bright glint of light above him - another chandelier, identical to the first.

Sari waved her servo. “You know... like hard candy and weird perfume? Eh, nevermind.”

“No, I don’t know,” said Sentinel. “And sit up straight. We need to look professional.”

“I think that ship has already sailed,” said Sari, but complied, sitting up and dangling her pedes off the edge of the chair. They didn’t quite reach the floor.

The door slid open and a svelte bot, in pleasingly contrasting shades of pink, swept through it, a little yellow cybercat at her heels. She smiled at them from under a broad optical visor, her full, dark pink lipplates curving. She seated herself on one of the chairs, crossing her ankle joints, the cybercat curling up at her pedes.

“Welcome,” she said, in a soft voice which belied the volume that had left a faint ringing in Sentinel’s audio sensors following their marathon perusal of her discography. “I’m Rosanna.”

To his embarrassment, Sentinel found himself blinking gormlessly at her for a good astrosecond. She was a standard 09262-8765-001 frametype, almost strangely standard really--plating distractingly shiny, servos elongated and so delicate it seemed they’d snap at any moment, and certainly if she’d attempted to wield a weapon. The perfect ideal of civilian beauty, at least according to some.

Sentinel adjusted himself uncomfortably on the chair and tried to kick his processor back into gear. She was attractive, certainly--Sentinel had always found himself drawn to smaller framed Autobots, but up close her delicacy carried with it an air of artificiality that disturbed him, not like--

Elita swirled her cup and knocked back the last of her energon. “So you’re telling me,” she said, tossing her cup lazily to the side. “That you see nothing appealing about getting ravished by a big, strong ‘Con?”

“Oh course not!” spluttered Sentinel into his own high grade. “The very idea is seditious!”

Elita snorted. “Trust me, big bot, your array doesn’t care one way or another. What, you base your interface fantasies on what’s socially acceptable? Bo-ring.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” said Sentinel. “I just see nothing appealing in the idea of being bothanded about by an oversized brute with more weaponry than basic manners! Optimus knows what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

“Oh no,” said Optimus, busying himself with his cup. “I’m not anywhere near overcharged enough to get involved in this conversation.”
Sentinel huffed in exasperation. “Traitor.”

Elita giggled, leaning back into her berth and crossing her legs. “Let me guess. Your type is one of those little skinny bots, like you see behind the counter at Solenoid’s. With the high voices? The ones that look like they’ll break in half if you look at them wrong?”

“I--” Sentinel jerked his optics away, but couldn’t wipe the image from his processor of her legs, the sleek plating and solid curves that could both fit in the palm of his servo and send her pede smashing through a wall with very little effort. “It’s none of your business!”

“Chill out, Sentinel,” said Optimus, stretching. “You like what you like, and there’s no shame in it.”

“That makes sense coming from you, Optimus,” Elita smiled, although something about it felt off. Optimus looked as if he wanted to drown in his glass of high-grade.

Sentinel frowned. He hated feeling like there was something in the conversation he was missing. And he hated the stupid, soft look in Elita’s optics when she looked at Optimus even more. What did he have that Sentinel didn’t? They were practically the same frametype, even if Optimus had prettier optics, and those stupid, long gorgeous legs that--

Sentinel nearly inhaled his energon and was overcome with a coughing fit. Once he could breathe, he pulled back and glared at his energon as if it had betrayed him. “This is stupid,” he mumbled.

“Yeah,” said Elita, her smile turning brittle. “Better get back to your rooms, boys, it’s gonna be an early morning.”

Pain flared in Sentinel’s glossa and he realized he had bitten it.

Rosanna cleared her intake, smile not moving.

Sentinel coughed. “Of course, my apologies. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Sentinel...Minor, and this is my associate, Sari. We’d like to ask you a few questions.”

Across the room, Sari was giving him a look somewhere between concern and exasperation. Sentinel scrambled to recall his original plan of action.

“Flim Flam indicated as much,” said Rosanna, in that same warm tone. She shifted in her seat, recrossing her ankles. “Something about an investigation into Decepticon sympathizers, I believe? How positively frightful! Did Shockwave’s exposure not traumatize us enough?”

“I assure you, Shockwave has been taken care of,” said Sentinel, unable to think of an answer to this. “All we’re looking to ask about is your recent performance at the Leaky Valve.”

“Ah!” said Rosanna, visor lighting up. “You mean the one that was raided by a rogue Autotrooper?”

Sari muffled a coughing fit into her servo. Sentinel stiffened slightly. “Yes, that one,” he ground out.

Rosanna rested her faceplates in her servo, tapping her cheek with one delicate digit as she appeared to think this over. “Well, it was a fairly normal cycle I’d say. Flim Flam notified me of the time to be backstage. I compiled my set list that morning. I met the proprietor briefly while the drones did setup. I played, and then, well…”

“Did you receive any information about who was hiring you?” said Sentinel.
Rosanna shrugged elegantly, letting out a little laugh. “Oh, I never bother with such things. I concern myself strictly with the songwriting and music composition. Flim Flam tells me when and where to be, and I go.” She recrossed her ankles again.

Sentinel frowned. “Let’s talk about your songs then.”

“Oh?” she said. “Are you a fan?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Sentinel.

“Only because he doesn’t have any taste,” said Sari. Sentinel shot her an irritated look and she smirked.

Sentinel cleared his intake again. “Are you aware that some of your songs could be interpreted as… seditious, under the current Autobot Codes?”

“Yes,” said Rosanna with a careless wave of her servo. “But each one has been vetted by the proper authorities before it’s put into circulation. Art sometimes requires one to be a little,” she paused and looked Sentinel up and down, “shall we say, provocative.”

Her tone was distinctly sultry, but something about it put Sentinel’s dental plates on edge. “Well, seditious or not,” he said, “they are very interesting. Where do you get your inspiration, if you don’t mind my asking?”

She tilted her helm. “Oh, it just comes to me, I suppose. I’ll see something beautiful or hear a lovely piece of music. I like making happy music that bots can dance to.”

“Really?” said Sentinel. “What about your free time? How do you fill that? Any other creative pursuits? Reading? Do you have some sort of lonely doom fortress where you go to take vacations?”

Rosanna looked puzzled. “Doom fortress? Whatever do you mean?”

“Yeah,” said Sari, frowning. “What do you mean?”

Sentinel continued as if he hadn’t heard. “It’s much healthier for bots to regularly engage in state-approved activities to prevent burnout from overwork. There’s quite a variety of them. For instance, some bots choose to decorate their frames with various designs. I myself was considering adding some crimson flames to my pauldrons. What do you think?”

Sari and Rosanna stared at him, identical expressions of bafflement plastered across their faceplates. Sentinel tightened his servos on his knee joints and forged ahead doggedly.

“As for vacations, I hear that Rivets Field is lovely this time of year. You can watch Luna-2 rise over the glowing fields and against the silhouette of the plateau. Doesn’t that sound appealing?”

“Uh, Sentinel?” said Sari. “Are you feeling okay?”

Sentinel bit back a growl of frustration and broke away to glare at her. “Yes, Sari, I am perfectly fine and you are interrupting--”

“Affirmative,” said Rosanna, her voice strangely flat.

“Huh?” said Sentinel, turning back to her, only to discover she’d gone rigid in her seat, limbs stiff at her sides, staring blankly into space.

“Affirmative,” repeated Rosanna. “Project Doppelganger initiative activated.” Her visor focused on
Sentinel. “Objective: destroy all Autobot hostiles within range.”

And then she vanished from her seat and Sentinel found himself lying supine on the floor, with a blade at his throat.

Optimus Prime
Cycle 013, Armada
Journal Entry 5

I suppose Megatron must have tired of all the havoc I was causing and decided to drop me off at this dusty old book store. I still can’t wrap my processor around such a thing, but only Sentinel would refuse to hear any logic in it. I do wonder what Sentinel, Ratchet, and the rest are doing now. There’s got to be some way to get some news from them.

How to Properly Woo a Civilian Frame
Your Spike and You: A Guide to Good Health
Helicarrier or Helicopter? A Guide for the Completely Unwashed
You Aren't Dying, You Crankshaft: A Guide for a Warframe's First Tingly Civilian Encounter
That Sure Is a Small Opening: An Interfacing Instruction Manual for Weenies
Spikes and You: Ways to Prepare for the Big Debut
You Are in Fact Capable of Some Manners: Basic Etiquette to Land You a Date
How to Properly Seduce Your Enemy
Interfacing a Cityformer: One Titanic Job
Pick Ups for Pickups

I thought about tossing them out as garbage, but then what Megatron said came to mind;

*It means that the Autobot Commonwealth has complete control over what can or cannot be read, instead of allowing...*

Frag it all, maybe there is something of worth in all of these. It wouldn’t hurt to look.

Chapter End Notes
Once again, thanks to the dirty minded jerks on the Battlesleep discord server for the title ideas in the excerpt.

- Reya
The Bots are Back in Town

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter has taken so long! Zuzu has had a hard few months at work, and I have had the adulthood I've been avoiding for years show up and kick my ass. I'll be moving to Olympia at Evergreen college soon so my schedule will normalize and hopefully that means that we can organize ourselves better around each other to work on this BS.

-Reya

Despite Megatron’s assurances that he did indeed possess the legal right to operate a business on Armada—insofar as there was any legality involved on Armada—Optimus did not honestly expect any customers. Instead, he set himself to cleaning up the place, reshelving datapads that had been left out by the previous proprietor, checking the lighting fixtures for damage or electrical shorts, and scrubbing the floor to a mirror shine.

And if he sometimes thought he saw the shadow of spindly, jointed legs cast across the windows, out of the corner of his optic, when he turned to look, there was never anything there.

Optimus set aside his bucket of solvent and surveyed his work with satisfaction. A floor this clean had earned him a stasis nap, Optimus decided. The checkout desk would have to do for now, he was used to sleeping on hard surfaces anyway.

_Slag Megatron’s cushioned berth_ , Optimus thought, offlining his optics. He didn’t even have to bend his joints to sleep on the warbuild-sized desk; he only had to avoid some awkward craftsmanship that curled one of the corners upwards and into a sharp point. _Slag him and his stupidly nice EM field_.

He had finally found some relaxing thoughts not involving the aforementioned EM field and was drifting into a pleasant stupor when his peripheral optical sensors pinged, notifying him of a sudden sharp drop in ambient light levels. Startled, Optimus jolted upright and only barely managed to keep from tipping off the checkout desk, blinking in bewilderment at the sudden darkness.

Then he saw the optics: multiple pairs, glowing and red, staring at him unblinkingly through the portholes in the body of the former missile.

Optimus opened his mouth, intending to ask what the slag whoever it was thought that they were doing looking in his windows from several stories up, but what emerged was something closer to “Argh!”

He leapt off the desk, his spark whirling in agitation, spinning around in a fruitless attempt to keep all of them in view, groping automatically for his ax. The optics vanished.

The door to the shop chimed, and he flung himself over the desk without thinking, ducking behind the barricade it provided and running a few hurried calculations on the effectiveness of datapads as weapons.
Silence.

Clasping a datapad in his servos—something hideous chartreuse with *In the Servos of the Barbarian* printed across the shell in needlessly elaborate glyphs—Optimus peered over the desk.

Cyclonus stared at him, arms folded across his chassis and a bemused expression on his faceplates. Silverbolt hovered behind his shoulder, two other warframes of varying sizes and frametypes clustered behind him.

“Optimus Prime?” Cyclonus said, sounding doubtful, as if *Optimus* had been the one behaving erratically and Cyclonus hadn’t been spying through his windows just moments earlier.

“Uh,” said Optimus, eying the other warframes, unwilling to put the datapad down yet. “Can I help you?”

“I was so relieved to hear someone had bought this place!” effused one of the warframes, a broad mech with plating of a surprisingly vibrant blue with golden accents. He grinned as he looked around, unveiling a mouth filled with rows of razor-sharp dental plates that Optimus was certain he was going to be seeing in his ever growing list of nightmares. “Platen complained so often about how slow business was. I was sure he was going to close up shop.” He bustled over towards the rows of shelving on the far wall, optics alight.

The other strange warframe, a mech with clean, white plating who frankly dwarfed the other three, had to duck to avoid smashing his helm on the doorframe.

“Sky-Byte!” he said, in an admonishing tone. “It’s not polite to barge into a shop if you’re not certain that they’re open!”

“Oh pish,” said the first mech. He was already sifting through the shelves of datapads, squinting at various titles and muttering to himself. “And who cleaned out your poetry section? I swear Platen said he was getting a copy of *I Sing the Chassis Electric* in soon.”

“Sky-Byte!” Optimus blurted, bolting to his feet as if switch-operated. “As in, Sky-Byte, the poet who wrote *Lighthelm* and *Sonnets to the Manganese Mountains*?”

“Don’t remind him,” said Cyclonus, who didn’t seem to mind that his existence had been forgotten for the last minute or so.

Sky-Byte puffed in indignation. “Bah, *Sonnets* was trite at best. Too sentimental by far.” He paused and rummaged about in his subspace, producing a datapad that looked absurdly small in his huge servos. He trotted over and slid the pad across the desk towards Optimus. “*Try Holos of a Gone World* instead. I’ve improved substantially, if I do say so myself.”

Optimus stared, lost for words. It was true that there’d been a handful of works by a Sky-Byte that were taught at the Academy as part of the general coursework, but none of the texts had mentioned that he was a warframe several mechanometers tall with jaws that looked like they could bite axles in half with very little effort.

*This* was the mech Ultra Magnus and Alpha Trion frequently quoted? The mech who’d written of ‘reachless seascape spaces’ and ‘shimmering rust clouds rolling along along the plateau’?

Vaguely disturbed, Optimus pretended to wipe the surface of the datapad he’d grabbed, like he’d been about to reshelve it. Cyclonus wandered towards the desk and peered at it.

“Interesting choice,” he said, tone edged with sarcasm.
Optimus bristled slightly. “I stock a full inventory,” he bit out. “And if the population here is anything like Cybertron, these are very popular.”

Cyclonus hummed in acknowledgement. “I suppose that in both war and peace, the love for garbage is a universal constant.”

“It’s…” Optimus paused, torn between the urge to argue and the refusal to admit that he’d heard more than his fair share of drunken, giggling passages read by Elita-One from texts just like this one. “Everyone has different tastes,” he said at last.

“Indeed,” said Cyclonus. “Do you have any historicals available?”

Optimus blinked, thrown by the sudden realization that this was a completely normal question to ask the proprietor of an establishment. Said proprietor being him.

“I’m pretty sure there’s some around here. Hang on a moment.”

He left Cyclonus at the desk and scampered up a nearby ladder, pausing a moment to survey the group of warframes which had invaded his shop. Sky-Byte and the largest warframe, who looked, by the flanges on his altmode, as though he might be a shuttle of some sort, were browsing the shelves on the far wall. Cyclonus stood relaxed in a posture that Optimus recognized to his surprise as a parade ground stance, while beside him Silverbolt sidled closer, his optics fixed on the sickly green-yellow datapad that Optimus had left behind, trying to appear as if he wasn’t looking at it.

The scene was so strangely normal that it threw Optimus for a loop. None of the warframes were smashing furniture, or threatening to murder him, or monologuing about murdering him. None of them even had any weapons out, and while arguably they were all living weapons, Optimus found himself less on edge than he’d been in decacycles.

Flustered, he turned to peruse the historical datapads, trying to focus on the titles. He was evaluating two accounts of the Quintesson Rebellion when a thought struck him.

Hadn’t there been more than four pairs of optics?

More than a little disturbed, he comforted himself by slipping a copy of The Spymaster’s Femme into the stack of datapads for Cyclonus.

Sentinel barely had time to register that he had been-- totally slagging right about Rosanna holy slagging--before he was clawing at her arms as he tried to pry her servo, and the blade in it, away from his face. She was stronger than expected, her spindly limbs exerting crushing force belied by her blank expression as she repeated “Destroy Autobot hostiles” again and again in a totally emotionless mantra.

“Sari!” squawked Sentinel, struggling to avoid being beheaded a second time. “Help me!”

“On it!” said Sari, her tone panicked. Sentinel glimpsed her bright plating over Rosanna’s shoulder and heard a grunt of exertion. The blade moved slightly away from him.

“Holy crap,” said Sari, “didn’t you say you guys weren’t designed for battle? I can barely move her!”
Sentinel opened his mouth to suggest she call for backup, only to find himself being strangled by Rosanna’s other servo. He choked on the words, flailed and tried to kick her. Somewhere above him, Sari yelped in surprise.

“Hey, watch it!”

Dizzy, Sentinel did the only thing that came to his processor and bashed his helm straight into Rosanna’s visor. He immediately regretted this when pain exploded in his head and static burst across his vision, but Rosanna’s grip loosened slightly. He shoved a knee up into her chassis and began attempting to leverage her off of him.

Sari was at his side suddenly, pulling at Rosanna’s arm and the blade in her servo.

“Careful!” said Sentinel, filled with a strange, sick feeling of fear at the thought of Sari near Rosanna’s weapon, shoving at Rosanna with a new burst of strength. “She’s—!”

But Rosanna was behaving as if Sari wasn’t even there, pulling mindlessly on her arm in a fruitless attempt to retrieve her blade even as her slender digits bit dents into Sentinel’s throat.

Sari cursed, and somewhere out of Sentinel’s line of sight he heard the unmistakable sound of transformation. There was a horrific screeching sound, the unmistakable noise of metal shearing metal. Sparks flew.

Rosanna’s grip went abruptly slack and Sentinel kicked out, sending her body skidding across the floor.

Her head, on the other hand, dropped straight onto his chassis, no longer attached to the rest of her.

Sentinel froze. Very slowly, he turned his own head and craned his neck to look at Sari, who was standing beside him, long blades extended from where her servos had been, a sheepish expression on her faceplates.

“Um,” said Sari. “Oops?”

“Destroy Autobot hostiles,” said Rosanna’s head, in precisely the same tone as before.

Sentinel stared, the cogs in his head turning very slowly as he registered that Sari, the tiny technorganic that had admitted to toting around an Allspark-powered artifact, was sporting integrated weaponry.

Not a dual-use tool like Optimus’s axe, not a mere ability like Jetfire’s flames or Jetstorm’s cyclones. Those were literal short swords sticking out of her arms. Weapons.

Like Safeguard’s.

Like a warbuild’s.

Sentinel’s first, inane thought was: Holy slag, she’s the tiniest Decepticon I’ve ever seen.

The second was: Oh, Vector Sigma, does Ultra Magnus know?

Sari was looking at him with a sheepish expression and Sentinel’s tanks lurched unpleasantly. What the slag was wrong with him? She didn’t set off any of the typical alarm bells that being in the presence of a Decepticon had in the past. It must be the technorganic thing; surely the mix of organic and robotic life was bound to have a few strange side effects.
That was right. Everything was fine, she wasn’t a threat. She’d saved...well, not his life, precisely, but she’d certainly saved him from a massive inconvenience. Though speaking of inconveniences...

Sentinel groaned and covered his face.

“Vector Sigma,” he said. “This is going to be so much paperwork.”

Sari’s faceplates broke into a relieved grin. “Don’t worry,” she said, striking a dynamic and mildly threatening pose. “I’m sure Ultra Magnus will cut you some slack.”

“Destroy Autobot hostiles,” agreed Rosanna’s helm.

The curve of Garo’s surface, its smoking smelters appearing as glowing embers swirling in an industrial fog, filled the view beyond the Steelhaven’s gangplank as it extended out into the void of space. Minimus lingered on the plank, resisting the urge to look down over the edge into the endless freefall below them. Before him, Megazarak ran cursory servos over his own armor as he completed the pre-flight diagnostic upon which Minimus had insisted, his expression amused.

The vacuum around them prevented audible speech, but Minimus scowled and spoke over the comms. :Smirk all you like, but I’ve no intention of letting you burn yourself out in the upper atmosphere.: 

:Of course, sweetspark,: said Megazarak, his voice colored with entertained sarcasm.

Minimus crossed his arms. :And don’t call me that, you sound ridiculous.: 

Megazarak turned to face him, optics gleaming. :Oh? Do you prefer Mini Boss?:

Minimus groaned, clapping a servo over his faceplates. :Spare me.: 

Megazarak chuckled and tapped his forearm guard lightly. :There. All done.: 

Minimus pulled his servo away and observed Megazarak with trepidation. :Where will you go, do you think?:

Megazarak hesitated. :I’ve been offered pardon among the Decepticons,: he said. :Presuming my erstwhile brother keeps his word. But as I was already this far out, I was considering finding a ship and making the jump towards Intel. He crossed his arms and stared out in the direction of Garo’s surface. :I’ve kept my audio sensors to the ground and there have been...rumors of Quintesson activity on the edges of the star system.: 

Minimus frowned. :What sort of rumors?:

Megazarak looked troubled. :Just small things. Ship movements outside of Quintesson space. Strange disappearances. Nothing unexpected exactly, but they seem to be growing bolder.: 

Minimus’s neural net prickled in alarm. :Are they preparing for war?: 

Megazarak shook his helm. :Impossible to say at the moment. But whatever they are up to, it cannot be good.: 

Minimus rubbed his faceplates. :I see.: 
Megazarak sighed. :Perhaps nothing. Perhaps it is only the paranoia of an old soldier. But I’ve seen far too many of the squids’ tricks to make the mistake of underestimating them.:

:Understood,: said Minimus. :I will...well, it might do well to have someone scanning that sector a little more closely.:

Megazarak nodded. His gaze tracked over Minimus’s shoulder guard and he smirked. :Maybe you could give the task to one of your soldiers with a bit too much free time on his servos.:

Thrown, Minimus glanced over his shoulder only to spot Bumblebee eyeing the two of them suspiciously from the entrance to the ship. While he wouldn’t be able to hear them over the privacy of the comms, his presence radiated all the awkwardness of a newly sparked bot trying to clean its own oil tank without having read the pertinent manuals.

Minimus sighed, already feeling the throb of an ache behind his optic sensors. :I suppose that is my cue to depart,: He bowed to Megazarak, pointedly ignoring Bumblebee. :Remember,: Minimus said, clasping his servos behind him to stop them shaking. :Aviate. Navigate. Communicate.:

Megazarak paused, optics going round with wonder. :Did you know that already, or did you have to look that up?:

:My first commander had worked with warbuilds in his youth,: said Minimus, trying to hide his relief that Megazarak had not laughed at him. :During the Quintesson Wars.:

Megazarak smiled, wide and genuine. :Then I will keep those words in mind.:

Bowing in return, he leapt off the gangplank into empty space, thrusters engaging and propelling him towards Garo’s surface. Minimus watched as he shrank to a tiny speck, then turned back and reentered the ship.

:For the record,: he said to Bumblebee as he passed. :We were discussing battle strategies.:

:Sure thing, Mini Boss,: said Bumblebee. :And I’m a Decepticon helic.:

______________________________________________________________

Video excerpted from The Autotrooper’s Guide to Lucifer, Cybertron Extranet, Archived and Hosted in the Iaconian Hall of Records:

FADE IN

AN EMPTY OFFICE, AUTOBOT Highbrow seated behind the desk

Highbrow

(salutes)

Greetings. If you are watching this, you have been recruited to Autobot Intelligence following your completion of...
What’s that? Oh, of course, back on topic. It is the responsibility of all Autobot Intelligence agents to familiarize them...

While no Decepticon outpost may be considered pleasant, Lucifer is categorized as the most dangerous of them all.

Make no mistake, while some Decepticon outposts were conquered for their strategic value, or the resources they contained, never been so great to make this a regular occurrence. Know this: Autobots who go into Lucifer rarely, if ever, come out.

Lucifer is governed by General Straxus, possibly one of the most tyrannical Decepticons ever sparked. And I do not say this lightly. His only purpose is to cause pain. Even his own soldiers are known to hate and fear him.

It is unlikely that as an Autobot spy you will ever be called upon to infiltrate Lucifer. It possesses little in the way of strategic or resource value, at least from our perspective. It will only be in times of the most dire need. And you’d best make peace with whatever power you believe in. Highbrow out.
Some Interludes Aren't Meant For Relaxing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was less of a relief than Minimus expected to warp back into existence in Cybertron’s orbit and plunge back into the flood of comm chatter, as military and civilian crafts zipped back and forth on the Steelhaven’s viewscreen. He paused a moment to take in the sight, mentally settling himself back into the role of Magnus, as though he were donning his armor once again. He was returning to a delicate situation and he needed to be every micrometer the cool and collected leader, particularly since he was going to have a few... difficult conversations with other members of the Council.

There would be dissent, no doubt; unlike Megatron, Minimus did not have the luxury of physically battering his fellow politicians into submission, for all that it might be the more expedient option.

No, it was only from a position of unity, however grudging or tenuous, that they would have any hope of working towards a lasting peace.

A light on the console blinked, signalling an incoming transmission. No rest for the weary. Minimus ex-vented and answered it.

Rodimus Prime’s face flashed up on the viewscreen. He looked physically well, but his expression was deeply harried, and there was a nervous twitch to his mouth that Minimus recognized from his Academy cycles -- a tic Rodimus displayed when he was in over his helm and desperately wanted to ask for advice, but was either too prideful or too embarrassed to do so.

“Ultra Magnus, sir,” said Rodimus, saluting more smartly than Minimus had seen him do on parade grounds. “I see that I should offer congratulations on the success of your mission?”

“Rodimus,” said Minimus in greeting. “Your congratulations are not misplaced, thankfully. But while it is good to see you, I admit I thought you would wait until we docked to hail us. Nothing on fire, I hope?”

Rodimus actually winced. “Ah, about that…”

“Was there an incident?” Minimus furrowed his brow.

“I...suppose you could call it that,” said Rodimus. “We...by which I mean Cybertron Intelligence, uncovered another spy.”

Minimus’s tank lurched sharply. Visions of the debacle with Shockwave flashed through his memory core and his superstructure ached fiercely.

“Is anyone hurt? What data was compromised?”

Had Megatron already ignored his brother’s pleas and decided to move against them?

“No!” Rodimus raised his servos placatingly. “No, nobody was hurt, well not exactly, but I mean...argh, I’m not explaining this well.” He lowered his servos, his expression vaguely embarrassed. “The spy, well, more of a sleeper agent actually, was uncovered as a side result of another minor investigation underway in Intelligence. They are, the sleeper that is, a… disturbingly prominent public figure, so, not unexpectedly, the public isn’t too happy about this. I’ve been doing damage control all decaecycle, my inbox is maxed out with--er, well, anyway. Again, no one was hurt
or killed. Apparently the sleeper became violent when activated, but the agent on the case managed to neutralize them before they did any damage.”

Minimus stared at him, a strange feeling of foreboding creeping through his circuits.

“What did you say the agent’s designation was? The arresting agent, specifically?”

“Uh,” Rodimus rubbed nervously at his helm. “Well, you see…”

If Optimus had found offering Cyclonus datapad recommendations to be the height of surrealism, then finding himself sitting among a veritable council of strange warbuilds squabbling over a variety of banal topics ranked somewhere around vacationing on Junkion in terms of sheer strangeness.

Half of the arguments even rhymed.

He hadn’t meant to land himself in this situation, but he couldn’t exactly offer Cyclonus a chair and not Silverbolt, who hovered around them both like an intoxicated hummingbird. Skyfire had lumbered over and taken a seat then, and suddenly Sky-Byte was there, and before Optimus knew it he had an impromptu warbuild book club going.

“I apologize if I am being rude,” Optimus craned his neck to look up at Skyfire, who was leaning over him in a vain attempt to comment quietly. Cyclonus looked up from the datapads he had been judging—and it was then that Optimus realized he had been a little too nervous over said judging. “But I am curious about your altmode, as it does not appear to be Cybertronian.”

“I didn’t even know civilianframes could change altmode,” grumbled Sky-Byte as he swiped through a datapad, something called *Blasts, Cries, Laughter* that Optimus had never heard of, with a careless servo. “News to me.”

“We can,” said Optimus, glad to engage in discourse over differences between their two… factions that did not involve intimate anatomy, world-shattering revelations, or the relative morality of murder. Or all three at once. “We just need specialized equipment to do so, and we still have to implement overrides to prevent our frames from reverting to our default root modes after a while.”

“So you have chosen to stay in an alien altmode beyond the required time?” Cyclonus asked, curiosity subtly speckling his face.

“Hence my question,” nodded Skyfire. “Changing altmode is useful on offworld expeditions for the purposes of stealth, such as in the wars against the Quintessons, but surely an inconvenience to maintain beyond that. Why keep yours?”

Optimus stayed quiet, his optics falling downward once again, searching for the right words and an appropriate answer to give them.

“I apologize if I overstepped.”

“No, no. It’s fine.” Optimus shook his head at Skyfire. It wasn’t an offensive question in the least, and in truth he had already been asked enough times on Cybertron for him to form a response. “It’s just that I spent a lot of time on Earth, where I acquired this altmode, and…”
Even as he rocketed through the blue skies above Detroit, Optimus knew he would offline, whether on the receiving end of Megatron’s increasingly frantic blows or when the Lugnut Supreme finally exploded. He was already beginning to weaken, the Magnus Hammer becoming heavier in his arms, but it didn’t matter. He had stopped Megatron from doing any more damage to Detroit, frustrated him so much that he’d bothered to learn his insignificant, Autobot, designation. The only thing that stopped him from grinning in giddy, morbid glee underneath his mask at the warlord’s ire was the need to concentrate for just… three… two...

And then he was grabbed -- sudden disorientation. He was somehow… unharmed?

“I gained a lot there. Learned a lot... lost a lot.”

Prowl had loved Earth.

“It’s kind of a reminder of that, I suppose.”

Skye-Byte and Skyfire shared a look. Silverbolt made a noise as though he was about to say something--no doubt ridiculous or insensitive, as Optimus had now come to expect--but Cyclonus interrupted.

“Megatron,” he said, his expression neutral, but with an edge that felt uncomfortably knowing.

Perhaps dejected, with his attempt to be impressive and gentlemanly ruined, Silverbolt instead spun on his chair and whined like a cyberdog runt. Fortunately, this only made it marginally more difficult to ignore him.

“Yeah.” What obscenity had Fanzone used in the aftermath of the Lugnut Supreme attacks in Detroit? A real shitshow. Optimus didn’t feel like translating though. He shrugged. “Pretty much.” He leaned back in his seat, arms crossed in challenge. “So you could try explaining why I should have reason to believe you’re any different from him--or scrap, even Blitzwing or Lugnut.”

“Why, you wound us, young Autobot!” Sky-Byte said, throwing himself into the back of his chair while holding a hand over his spark casing as if he had been injured there. “Comparing us to Megatron’s pedenippers? Too cruel!!”

Cyclonus only tsked while Skyfire laughed. “Such dramatics.”

“I agree with Cyclonus,” pouted Silverbolt. “You can be a cascade of theatricality.”

“You’re one to talk,” bit out Skyfire between giggles.

“Me? You little twerp!” said Sky-Byte in clearly feigned offense. “This ain’t nothing. Give me some high-grade, a stage, and some musical accompaniment, and I’ll show you true entertainment!”

Optimus did not doubt it, but would rather have stayed on the topic at hand. He cleared his intake.

Sky-Byte rubbed his servos eagerly. “That being said, young Optimus, despite what you may think, what you want is not an explanation, but a story. A very old story, and one which I have not had the opportunity to tell for far too long.” He grinned, a slightly disturbing glint in his optics and on his bristling fangs. “But first! Empty tanks make for distracted audiences! Helitaco should do the trick, I think,” he said, likely already using his comm system to dial for delivery.
“Sky-Byte,” said Cyclonus, sounding as if he was fast approaching the end of his patience. “If I recall, the last time you ordered from them, we found you taped to the antenna array on the roof of General Strika’s apartment, covered in your own efflux.”

“Thank all that’s holy that I intercepted her call to the repair company inquiring why her terminal was experiencing interference,” muttered Skyfire.

Sky-Byte waved a dismissive servo at them. “Nonsense! It was a mere mixup on the part of the delivery drone. You don’t think I actually requested my order be laced with Vulcanite? Now,” he leaned towards Optimus, “how do you want the bill sent to you?”

*Vector Sigma save me*, thought Optimus, and braced himself for what promised to be a terrifyingly interesting evening.

---

The shouts of the angry crowd outside made the windows of Fortress Maximus buzz. Sentinel stood stiffly in parade stance beside Ultra Magnus, right wrist clasped behind his back in his left servo. He was pretty sure that his digits were leaving dents.

Ultra Magnus—or perhaps Minimus, Sentinel was never entirely sure what to call him these cycles, particularly now that he was back in the armor and looking larger and more intimidating than ever—looked like he was nursing a headache of massive proportions. He clasped the podium, cleared his intake, and nodded out at the small group of agents who had bothered to be present, seated and sprawled across the open pews of the main meeting hall. Their expressions seemed to be split evenly between glee and consternation. Blurr was sitting bolt upright, one of his pedes twitching; Cliffjumper was gripping his small courtesy cup of energon so hard that Sentinel was sure it was going to fracture at any moment.

Looking towards the far wall, Sentinel met Sari’s optic and she gave him a double gesture with her servos which he was fairly certain meant ‘go frag yourself’ in at least one dialect of Galactic Standard, but which she had assured him was an Earth expression of encouragement. He quickly looked away.

“Many thanks to all of you for joining us,” said Ultra Magnus gravely. “While it is true this is largely a formality, I can confidently state that Sentinel appreciates your presence and support.”

Sentinel fixed his gaze on a lighting fixture and wondered if any of the previous Magnuses had the foresight to install escape tunnels in the meeting halls in case of hazardous levels of awkwardness and misplaced embarrassment. Why hadn’t he done that himself, back when he had the chance?

“Mistakes, and by extension consequences,” Ultra Magnus continued, “are an unpleasant but unavoidable factor of life. However, it is only through these mistakes that we are given the opportunity for growth and redemption.” He nodded to Sentinel. “Sentinel Minor, you were stripped of your rank and removed to an unfamiliar arm of our organization. It was my hope that you would have time to reflect on the consequences of your actions, and to test your flexibility in an unknown environment.”

Ultra Magnus paused, as though struggling to phrase his next words. “I admit that I did not expect you to... accomplish such an unprecedented breakthrough during your time in Autobot Intelligence,
but nonetheless, it cannot be denied that your work has proved invaluable in removing a grave threat to Cybertron’s safety. Therefore, it has been recommended by the Council that you be restored to your former rank of Prime.”

A murmur rippled through the room.

Ultra Magnus cleared his intake for silence. “With that being said, the... identity of the threat in question has undeniably caused a great deal of... dissent among the public, to the point where there have been concerns expressed in our organization regarding your continued safety.”

A crushed oil can clanked against one of the exterior windows, leaving a disturbing brown smear as it slid out of sight. Ultra Magnus didn’t blink. Sentinel stared more intensely at the light fixture.

“Thus, I have decided that the best course of action would be to promote you.”

Sentinel turned, startled, helm jerking back in Ultra Magnus’s direction, blinking his optics rapidly against the afterimage of the light source which remained on them.

“You are to be assigned as a precinct captain,” droned Ultra Magnus, “responsible for the safety of your entire team and the division which you will oversee. Enforcement, arrests, reports; no issue will be too large or too small to fall under your purview.”

Sentinel let out a little vent. Unexpected certainly, but the assignment didn’t sound too bad. Perhaps he would be assigned in Rodion or Deltara, at worst one of the suburbs of Iacon; he’d work his way up and be back in Fortress Maximus in a vorn’s time, a string of star arrests on his docket. Captains did so all the time...

“And as luck would have it,” said Ultra Magnus. “A position has just opened up. The current captain has been growing slower in his twilight vorns, and has petitioned for retirement. You will replace him.”

He turned to face Sentinel and extended a servo. “Welcome back, Sentinel Prime. I am certain you will make an excellent captain of the Luna-1 precinct.”

Sentinel already had Ultra Magnus’s servo in his own when the words registered. He froze, joints locking up in horror.

“Chin up, Sentinel,” murmured Ultra Magnus, leaning in close to give them a moment of privacy. “There aren’t many murderous Rosanna fans on the moon, after all.”
Hey bots and bobs, I know everybody’s plating is ruffled because of the Rosanna thing, but let’s keep the speculation corralled to this thread, okay? Thnx sweetsparks~

- 

User: MegatronLover24601  
Join Date: Cycle 011  
Posts: 150,000  
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

i’m just...shook u know? i know the council didn’t like her music much but they always left her alone, yeah? are they

- 

User: blastingthunder  
Join Date: Cycle 008  
Posts >1 million  
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

source in military says they’re pretty sure. Like she up and attacked the investigator sure. Doesn’t look like a Shockv

- 

User: MegatronLover24601  
Join Date: Cycle 011  
Posts: 150,000  
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

Too early for what?
User: blastingthunder
Join Date: Cycle 008
Posts >1 million
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

That's the million-cred question, ain't it?

-

User: MegatronLover24601
Join Date: Cycle 011
Posts: 150,000
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

...did she hurt anybody?

-

User: blastingthunder
Join Date: Cycle 008
Posts >1 million
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

doesn't look like it

-

User: fieryquills
Join Date: Cycle 013
Posts: >1 million
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

A pity.

-  

User: blastingthunder
Join Date: Cycle 008
Posts >1 million
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

shove it up your exhaust port, zealot. it’s not that she WAS there that bugs me, it’s what she is

-  

User: fieryquills
Join Date: Cycle 013
Posts: >1 million
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

Back at you, HERETIC. Why should you be pleased that the agent failed in her mission?

-  

User: blastingthunder
Join Date: Cycle 008
Posts >1 million
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

because, BOLTS-FOR-PROCESSORS, i don’t advocate wholesale slaughter. I want political change, not a fragging r
But the weird part is: where did she come from? Longarm was a disguise, but Rosanna...word from the top says she’s

User: fieryquills
Join Date: Cycle 013
Posts: >1 million
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

And?

User: blastingthunder
Join Date: Cycle 008
Posts >1 million
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

THINK about it, dipstick. Rosanna is a Bot, but my source says her construction records are faked. She wasn’t spark

User: fieryquills
Join Date: Cycle 013
Posts: >1 million
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

What the slag does that mean?
did your source say anything about the frequency code of her spark?

-

uh, yeah, i think? looks like it was about 7000A. why?

-

She’s a drone.

-


With all due respect, I doubt it? She kept up a complex fake identity for vorns, with a public persona on top. show me a drone that can do that. I'm telling you, I think the 'Cons built themselves a slagging Bot.

User: MegatronLover24601
Join Date: Cycle 011
Posts: 150,000
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

...what does that mean?

User: blastingthunder
Join Date: Cycle 008
Posts >1 million
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

...tbh, I don't know yet

User: MegatronLover24601
Join Date: Cycle 011
Posts: 150,000
Subject: RE: Official Rosanna Arrest News Thread

slag me, all i wanted was some fun, edgy music i could dance to. Radiohelm’s gone down the tubes since their third ;
Frag you! No Cogs in the Machine are ARTISTS!

Chapter End Notes

Once again, apologies for the shorter chapter, but we've got enough to make the next one quite long.
Stay tuned for more shit BS coming from us.

Hahaha I made the joke with the acronym first now my enemies can't use it against me
ahahaha [farts maniacally into the night]
Sky-Byte fished a dented flask from his subspace and took a deep draft from it. Wiping his servo across his mouth, he cleared his intake and leaned forward, optics twinkling.

“Well,” he said, through a mouthful of gleaming, razor-sharp dental plates. “Shall we begin? Once upon a time, in a far-off galaxy…”

“It wasn’t a far-off galaxy,” interjected Cyclonus. “It was this galaxy, just a bit closer to the center.”

“And it wasn’t that long ago,” said Skyfire, in an amiable tone. “Only about seventy million years by my count.”

“As I was saying,” said Sky-Byte. “About seventy million years ago in a galaxy not-so-far-away, the evil Quintesson Empire-—”

“Quintesson Pan-Galactic Co-Prosperity Sphere,” said Silverbolt, beaming.

“The evil Quintesson Empire,” gritted Sky-Byte, “ruled over the denizens of Cybertron with an iron tentacle.”

“Only one tentacle?” said Cyclonus mildly. “By my recollection, it is peculiar indeed to possess only one.”

“With many thousands of tentacles,” said Sky-Byte. “The number of tentacles could not be overstated. The point was that the Quintessons had set out to enslave the galaxy, and we were their first target. With a robotic army at their disposal, they would spread their sphere of influence across the oceans of space like an angry school of Sharkticons. But the citizens of Cybertron-—”

Optimus raised a servo. “By this you mean the Autobots and the Decepticons?”

Sky-Byte waved a servo impatiently. “There were no such terms in use. All the citizens of Cybertron rose up and overthrew their Quintesson masters. Oil and energon and squid-fluid flowed like an endless river of...well, a river anyhow. A very dirty, polluted river of evil, and misplaced destiny.”

“Moving on,” said Cyclonus.

“The rebellion lasted for a million years,” said Sky-Byte, as though he had not heard. “After many a difficult battle, at last the citizens of Cybertron threw off the shackles of their oppressors and ejected the tentacled menace from their planet.”

Optimus was pretty certain he’d heard “throw off the shackles of our oppressors” used at least three dozen times during his reading of My Struggle Against the Commonwealth. He wondered if it was some sort of cultural phrasing, or if Megatron was just unoriginal and repetitive.

“But alas!” said Sky-Byte. “All was not well. For on Cybertron, there existed two arms of one people. Those who took to the skies, and those who rolled upon the ground.”

Cyclonus sighed impatiently. “Can’t you simply use groundframe and flightframe like a normal mechanism?”
Sky-Byte spread his servos before him. “Both arms,” he declared, “were necessary to hold up the planet.”

“Wait,” said Optimus, holding up his servo once more. “When you say both arms were necessary to hold up the planet…”

Cyclonus pinched his nasal ridge, optics offlineing as if in pain. “What Sky-Byte is trying to say,” he said, “is that both groundframes and flightframes kept society in balance, as well as facilitated propagation of the species.”

“By all that’s holy, you sound like a slagging science text!” snapped Sky-Byte. “Have you no sense of poetry? Of romance?”

“Some of us don’t require overblown declarations of affection for romance,” said Cyclonus testily. “Some of us have been waiting millennia with no word—”

“Please, please,” said Skyfire, cutting them off, his servos raised. “Perhaps we’re getting a bit off-track?”

Sky-Byte glared at Cyclonus, but turned his attention back to the center of the circle.

“But then….” Sky-Byte leaned forward, his voice going low, and despite himself, Optimus felt a twinge of excitement. “Disaster struck.”

Above them, a window exploded.

A shadow descended on them, glass raining down, and an audio-splitting screech pierced the air. Alarmed, Optimus leapt to his pedes, snatched a datapad off a nearby shelf, and flung it at the intruder.

A direct hit--there was a shower of sparks and the object, which Optimus now recognized as a sparkless drone, crashed to the floor. It split, disgorging several bright, metallic packages, one of which rolled across the floor and came to rest against his pede. Optimus frowned and picked it up.

It was warm. A strong, delicious scent hit his olfactory receptors, like spiced energon. It smelled like food.

Gingerly, he tugged back the edge of the packet, which appeared to be wrapped in thin metallic foil, exposing what looked like energon crystallized into sharp points.

It was food.

He looked up to find his companions staring at him.

“What the slag did you do that for?” said Sky-Byte.

“Uh, tactical miscalculation?” Optimus said weakly.

“Tactical--that was lunch,” Sky-Byte offlineed his optics. “Never mind. Pass me a taco, will you?”

When at last they were settled back into their seats, Optimus with a warm packet of crisped energon spread across his lap, Sky-Byte leaned back in his seat, staring into the middle distance.

“Disaster from the skies,” he said, with the air of a pronouncement, and stuffed a bite of taco in his mouth. “Doom disguised as deliverance. The Allspark.”
Optimus frowned. “Wait, the Allspark? As in the source of life for all Cybertronians?”

“Not all,” said Skyfire, biting into an energon crisp. “Not spawn like us.”

“At first it seemed a blessing,” said Cyclonus. “Reproduction is... shall we say, rather arduous, even dangerous. An easily-regulated, consistent source of fully-grown workers and soldiers? Many touted it as the peak of efficiency.”

Optimus’s frown deepened. “I mean, it is logical, but what do you mean by ‘fully-grown’?”


Optimus opened his mouth, and paused, recalling Sari and her explanation of how little humans could grow bigger.

*Vector Sigma.*

“Indeed,” said Skyfire cheerfully. “They, or rather we, once emerged rather small and formless. Hence the term ‘spawn’, though I admit to not being overly fond of the description.” He rummaged about in his subspace and extracted a datapad. “It’s quite fascinating to grasp how something so relatively simple can grow into the myriad diversity of shapes you see in our species. Here, have a look.”

He held out the pad and Optimus took it, peering down at the image on the screen. A round, bright-opticed blob stared into the camera, its face nearly devoid of features, one servo stuffed into its mouth. It looked bizarre. It looked nothing like an Autobot or a Decepticon.

It was the most adorable thing Optimus had ever seen.

“Hey!” spluttered Silverbolt. “You can’t just go around showing that willy-nilly!”

“Oh, hush,” said Skyfire. “You were a marvelous, healthy mechling and you should be proud to show off your early holos.”

Optimus stared at the enormous, scowling warframe and back at the image on the pad. “This was you?”

Silverbolt scowled at Skyfire. “Put that away! It’s embarrassing!”

“Would you rather I show him the one of you as an awkward juvenile before you grew into your snout?” said Cyclonus mildly.

Silverbolt sunk back into his chair, looking thoroughly traumatized at this prospect. Optimus examined the holo once more, tilting the datapad to examine the creature’s image, the blunt limb buds and wide optics that looked too large for its head. If he looked carefully, he could see tiny protrusions jutting from its back: proto-wings.

He wondered, faintly, if an Autobot mechling of the same age would have round, raised reliefs which might eventually form into wheels.

In many ways, it looked similar to the holos he’d seen of Autobot protoforms; instead of a sleeping blob of protomass which could then be poured into the plating mold of a frame to take on the shape of a prefabricated body, though, the mechling appeared to already have plating, small and with large gaps between them, but present.
Almost as if the plates were intended to spread and grow.

Shaken, he handed the datapad back to Skyfire. “So you… you were all like this?”

“Yeah, why don’t you show your mechling holos?” Silverbolt managed to whine out through an impressive pout.

“Destroyed.” Sky-Byte shrugged. “In case you haven’t noticed, us spawn aren’t treated too well amongst other Cons. It was only when I rescued you from Megazarak, nigh on four million years ago, that it came to light that I was clearly familiar with mechlings.” Sky-Byte shook his head. “A good thing too,” he muttered. “The big oaf was dangling you upside down. Your carrier must have been very desperate to hand you to them, but that figures.”

“Four million—you’re older than I am?” Optimus couldn’t help but be a little surprised. Silverbolt had an immaturity that reminded him of Bumblebee.

Silverbolt’s pout deepened. “See? Now he thinks I’m an idiot. Thanks a lot.”

“I figured you were young.” Cyclonus nodded to Optimus. “You were part of a post-war population restoration?”

Optimus frowned. “I’m not young, I’m still a couple million years old. There were mechanisms on my team who didn’t have half that.”

“I think we’re just old.” Skyfire smiled, leaning back in his chair. “Between the boom at the beginning of the Age of Expansion and those of us lost during the War, there’s hardly enough of us ‘grown’ mechanisms to fill a good-sized transport.”

“And why aren’t there more of you?” said Optimus. “If Autobots—er, groundframed mechanisms—are required to replicate, well, I’ve seen plenty of them on Armada. Many of them seem to be…” He trailed off and studied the floor a moment, trying to think of how to phrase his point delicately. “…regularly interfacing with warframes. Are you telling me that there have been no new mechlings produced in several million years?”

Cyclonus and Sky-Byte exchanged a look. “Well, not none…” said Sky-Byte, slowly. “Or at least we presume there might be a few, here and there. But the vast majority of such activity does not produce new mechanisms.”

“Warbuilds are sterile when in battlesleep,” said Cyclonus. “Not to mention that the process is rather intricate… or perhaps intimate would be a better term, and, well…” he waved a servo vaguely in the direction of the city around them, as if to say ‘have you seen this slag?’.

That term again. Cyclonus had been reticent to explain the specifics, but now he knew that it had something to do with the population standstill among the Decepticons.

And, no doubt, their desperation to obtain the Allspark.

Silverbolt made a face. “Please, can we not have ‘the talk’ again? Once was scarring enough.”

Sky-Byte snorted. “Only because you have no sense of romance, you little malfunction.”

“It doesn’t have to be romantic!” Silverbolt waved his arms. “A warbuild and a civilian mech meet, they find respect for one another and possibly love each other, the warbuild falls out of battlesleep, puts his spike inside the civilian mech, they spark-merge, and there’s a mechling. It’s that simple.”
Optimus’s processor helpfully offered him graphic details of the last couple of warbuild spikes he had spotted, attached to several dozen tons of enthusiastic Decepticon generals, and he promptly squeezed his legs together. Sure, they had roughly resembled the interface aids he’d made use of back on Cybertron, it was only logical, but the size was absurd! Discreetly, he tugged the foil energon wrapper to cover his pelvic span—which was a perfectly normal size for an Autobot, thank you very much!—and tried not to wonder too hard about how such acrobatics would even work.

Slag, what would Ultra Magnus think if he was here?

In a desperate effort to distract from the current line of discussion, Optimus leaned towards Skyfire. “Do you have any more holos of Silverbolt as a mechling?”

Skyfire brightened. “Of course I do! He was quite the active little slagger, got into all sorts of trouble.” He fished out the datapad again and swiped at the screen. “Here’s the time he took apart a cleaning drone and ended up covered in suds.”

“Oh please, no more,” groaned Silverbolt, covering his face.

Fortunately for Megatron, small private offices were not difficult to find in Armada HQ. They were, however, inconvenient to get to and occasionally strayed too close to leaking drains and dusty vents. Fortunately, this was one of the rare functional ones, but that was difficult to appreciate with a frustrated Decepticon general before him.

Strika slapped a datapad on the table before Megatron with the same force she would use to crush a space barnacle she’d found infesting her plating.

“Look,” she said. “At this.”

Even before he read the glyphs, Megatron could make out the optic-smarting yellow of the typeset. He groaned and rested his servo against his nasal ridge.

“Again with the gossip mags?”

“Gossip mags which are still speculating over your pet Autobot, well over a decacycle since your return,” said Strika. “In Armada gossip mag span, that’s practically a megavorn. Mechanisms are beginning to take notice.”

“And what of it?” said Megatron, standing and shoving back his chair, which went clattering to the floor. “Have you heard word of a challenger? Do you want to take a go at command of the Decepticons?” Growling, he unsheathed his sword and stabbed it into the surface of the table. “Tell me whom I need to deactivate so you can stop fussing over this.”

Strika eyed the ruined tabletop. “Cool your jets, it’s not a specific challenger—although if I had to take a guess, Lucifer has been far too quiet as of late. The point is, between the Autobot and your… extended absence, it’s only a matter of time before you have a challenger.”

“Then I’ll kill them,” said Megatron.

“More will come,” said Strika.
“I’ll kill those as well,” snapped Megatron.

“A waste of time and resources,” she said impatiently. “What you need is a display. A gesture, and a grand one at that.”

“What sort of gesture?” said Megatron, optics narrowing.

“It doesn’t need to be complicated,” said Strika. “A gladiatorial match will do, just a small one. No need to alert everyone in the galaxy that you’re going through a mid-megavorn crisis. But if you can wipe the arena with a couple of heavyweight bruisers, it’ll remind the rest of Armada to toe the line.”

Megatron paused. It actually was a sound idea. He hadn’t participated in a proper match since before his crash landing on Earth, and prior to that he’d begun falling out of the habit, his power unquestioned and so the pressure to demonstrate it almost nonexistent.

“That is a logical proposition,” he said grudgingly. “When did you have in mind?”

“Soon,” she said, her tone grim. “In my opinion, this has already been left set far too long.”

Megatron sighed. “Very well, work your machinations. I don’t suppose I even want to ask whether you’ll have difficulty finding challengers.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Strika said blithely. “I’ll find someone. And if I don’t, I can always toss an Insecticon in the ring with you.”

“Marvelous,” said Megatron.

At Strika’s retreat, Megatron’s attention fell back to the ruined desk once more.

Well, at least there were no broken windows this time.

__________________________________________

Bureau of Autobot Defense, Intervention, Deployment, Enforcement, and Analysis > Forms > Safety Control Regarding Organic Organisms

Region 4: Luna-1

Application for Captive Organic Registration (O-C Partner), Cycle 013

Renewal ____ New __ X__ Associate ___ Special X_ Dual ____ Life___

Handler’s Designation __ Sentinel Prime ___ Com Code_ +01010.867.5309

Station: __ Luna-1 Central ___ Construction Cycle: ___Third Cycle 003___

Agency __Autobot Elite Guard___ Cycles Employed: ___10000___
Rank: __ Rookie __ Assignment (Handler/Trainer/Admin/Retired): __ Trainer __

O-C Designation: __ Sari __ O-C Species: __ Human __ O-C Planet of Origin: __ Earth __

O-C Age (Please Convert to Stellar Cycles): __ 0.005 __

Patrol Trained: ___ Narcotic Trained: ___ Explosive Trained: ___ Other: ___ Combat Trained ___

Is Your Organic:

Vaccinated: __ X __ Sterilized (10 credit fee if NO) : ___ Microchipped: ___

Death Beneficiary Information for Line of Duty Death Only:

Beneficiary Designation: __ Professor Isaac Sumdac of Earth __ Com Code: __ N/A __

Station: __ Sumdac Enterprises, Detroit, Earth __ Relationship: __ Progenitor __

Please submit electronic copies of:

__ This Form
__ Your Organic’s Vaccination Records
__ 10 credit fee if the Organic is unaltered, Made Payable to Bureau of Autobot Resource and Finance

ATTN: Organic Safety Officer

Bureau of Autobot Resource and Finance

Iacon, Cybertron, 10001

Chapter End Notes

This chapter brought to you by Stone Crusher’s Window and Furniture repair, shitty references, and shittier acronyms.

- Reya
Bad Dog!

It turned out that there actually was a berthroom in the shop, located at the very top of the cavity which would have housed the missile’s fuel tanks, accessible through a hidden trapdoor. Finding it was almost like being a newspark again, searching for ‘secret areas’ for a club meeting. As an Autobot on Armada however, Optimus suspected that keeping the entrance to one’s berthroom secret was definitely on the ‘must have’ list for homes. The berthroom even had its own washrack, albeit an extremely tiny one; Optimus found to his frustration he could fit maybe half of his frame under the spray at one time. It didn’t help that the solvent pressure in the pipes wouldn’t have blown a bit of dandelion fluff off his plating.

Additionally, its defensible position notwithstanding, it would have been nice to know of its existence before he had spent two cycles constructing a berth--a reading nook really--behind his desk. He was wedged in that nook, folded into the least ergonomic position he could manage, reading--or well, attempting to read, it was difficult to stay focused when he kept stopping to roll his optics at the contents of the datapads--when he got an unexpected transmission.

The helm-splitting screech bore an uncanny resemblance to the emergency alarm system on their base on Earth, or Bumblebee trying to test out Optimus’s jet pack, neither of which were positive noises. It sent him rolling out of his perch with a shout. He hit the ground, transforming on reflex, his wheels revving.

Nothing. No murderous Decepticons descended from the ceiling. No errant piece of ammunition came hurtling through the windows. The transmission continued to screech at him. An automated message, then, programmed for maximum annoyance--no doubt to minimize the chance that an oblivious or intoxicated recipient might ignore it.

Feeling foolish, Optimus transformed back into his root form. Besides the obvious fact that he was no longer on Earth, he should have realized that A) Bumblebee had stopped ‘borrowing’ his jetpack after the incident with the geese, and B) that if Armada had any kind of siren system, it would be on indefinitely and would literally just be air traffic control.

The message--delivered directly to his HUD, lucky him--was...loud, by every definition of the word. It flashed a riot of colors across half his visual field until at last he opened it, expecting a virus, a rootkit, some sort of elaborate scam to convince him to send credits to an Ejoornian “prince”, a free subscription to the Galactic Examiner; nothing would surprise him anymore.

Instead, it appeared to be an advertisement of some sort. Holographic glyphs scrolled down his viewfield, so rapidly he could barely catch them.

ROYAL RUMBLE

X-TREME RULES FATAL 5-WAY

NO. ONE CONTENDERS MATCH

LIVE, CYCLE 09.8000.013

MAIN ARENA
Optimus had to read it twice before he realized it meant number one, and not “no one”. Some sort of Decepticon entertainment then. He wasn’t quite sure what a “fatal 5-way” entailed, but as it sounded either brutal or obscene or both, he couldn’t imagine anything less to his taste. Scowling, he deleted the message, vowing to run a full defrag and strengthen his firewalls posthaste.

“I would say that I couldn’t believe I could get spam sent directly to my HUD here,” Optimus muttered. “But that would be a lie.”

Fragging Armada.

Sentinel sat on the edge of his couch, looking about his pristine living room—he was purposefully ignoring the small pile of organic food containment wrappers that Sari had arranged in a festive pile on the low table in front of the couch—feeling entirely overwhelmed. The technorganic herself was flitting about the living room, shoving the few items she’d brought with her into a metal box or into her intake. Sentinel watched her in disbelief. How was he supposed to decide which of his possessions to pack and which to leave behind for recycling? In general, excess attachment to material goods tended to be frowned upon in the Elite Guard, but these were his things, chosen for maximum efficiency and because they satisfied something unquantifiable in his processor. Could he be certain they’d have equivalent quality goods available to furnish his apartment on Luna-1?

No, he was being foolish, there wasn’t any reasonable way to cram all his furniture onto the lunar shuttle. He’d have to go with what he could tuck into his subspace.

Realization hit him with the force of a speeding tank and he groaned, burying his face in his servos.

“What’s wrong?” said Sari, from around what sounded like a mouthful of some organic nourishment.

“I just remembered,” said Sentinel, not removing his servos. “The case is still open; I’m going to have to bring all of DMC-12’s novels with me.”

In the end he managed to cram the equivalent of optic filth in datapad form, as well as most of his personal effects, into his subspace, with the exception of a set of fancy energon containers that he rarely used anyway. He stood looking over the pitiful remains of his apartment, and couldn’t keep from wondering if he’d ever be back.

“You coming?” said Sari. She was hovering near the door, a crate balanced in each servo, squinting at him over the heaping piles of her possessions.

Sentinel swept his gaze across the room, landing on a pot containing a sprouting lattice of alum crystals, the results of several dozen vorns of growth on the miniature seed that he’d received while he was still a recruit, as a gift from… well. It was too big and delicate to fit in his subspace, and both reason and convention dictated that he should leave it behind.

His mouth tightened. He strode across the room and scooped up the pot, sticking it under his arm, careful not to crack any of the thin spires.

“Yes,” he said, helm held high. “Yes, I’m coming.”
They arrived at the shuttle launch platform only to find a small entourage waiting for them. Ratchet was there, of course; and Bulkhead, Sentinel presumed, to take custody of Sari again.

The thought was surprisingly uncomfortable.

But the real surprise had been Bumblebee, standing there in that slouched posture that always made Sentinel’s inner drill sergeant grumble, a cocky expression on his faceplates. Sari bounced up to him, of course, her organic optics shining.

“Hey there, stranger!” she said. “How was Conlandia?”

“Dirty and full of aftholes,” said Bumblebee. His optics flicked up and landed on Sentinel. “Course, that’s not much different from home sweet home.” He cocked his head and rested one servo on his hip, grinning widely at Sari. “But I totally kicked the crankcase out of a bunch of Cons.”

“He sure did,” said Ratchet, lurching up behind Bumblebee. “That’s why there’s a clip on BoobTube with one billion views of Bulkhead chucking a helicopter over a bar table in New Kaon.” He produced a datapad and swiped at the screen before displaying it to their little group. “Make that one and a half billion. Oh look, you can actually see Bumblebee screaming and running in the background.”

Bumblebee scowled and Bulkhead reached over to pat him. “It’s okay, little buddy,” he said solemnly. “We all know you can kick plenty of Con aft.”

Bumblebee grimaced and glanced over at Sentinel, who eyed him with suspicion. “Something I can do for you?” Sentinel said, stiffly, with as much dignity as he could muster with a potted crystal jammed awkwardly under his arm.

Bumblebee’s features twitched in annoyance. “Well, that depends,” he said. “Way I hear it, you’re gonna be the big boss up at the the Luna-1 station. I got a top-priority mission from Ultra Magnus on Luna-1... you see how there might be a connection?”

Sentinel scowled at him. “What sort of mission?”

“Reconnaissance,” said Bumblebee, tapping the side of his nasal ridge in a gesture that Sentinel didn’t recognize. “All very hush-hush, nothing for you to worry your big, ugly head about.”

Sentinel twitched. “And if I’m to be the ‘big boss’ as you say, exactly why would a reconnaissance mission involving a bot operating out of my precinct not be my business?”

Bumblebee opened his mouth and closed it again. “Well, slag,” he said. “You’ve got me there.”

“It is sort of classified,” said Bulkhead.

“But only ’sort of’, ” said Ratchet, his tone chipper. “Ultra Magnus knows better than to give this lot a highly classified one.”

Sentinel sighed; he could feel a helmache coming on. “We’ll discuss it on the moon.”

They crowded into the shuttle, along with a few other commuters. Sentinel found himself leaning against the wall to shield his crystal from being crushed as the shuttle launched and rattled its way
into the upper atmosphere. A conductor bustled amongst them, wielding a scanner with the same enthusiasm as a Sharkticon scenting spilled energon.

“Passports please,” droned the conductor, a spindly bot with enormous, lamplike optics.

To his left, Sentinel saw Ratchet blanch and stomp forward, shoving his bulk in front of Sari and, most likely not coincidentally, blocking her from view.

“Passports!” Ratchet said, in the same tone Sentinel imagined he’d say ‘space barnacles’. “What’s all this slag? We didn’t need passports to go to fragging Luna-1!”

The conductor squared off against him, looking down a pointed nasal ridge at the shorter medic. “Sir, in light of the recent jailbreak, not to mention Decepticon infiltration, I think it’s more than reasonable that we review the credentials of our passengers.”

“That’s ridiculous!” said Ratchet. “Why should I have to bother to get credentials for a slagging day trip? Why, back in my day--”

“Sir,” said the conductor, pinching their nasal plating between two digits. “If I am not badly mistaken, you are a fully licensed medic. Your medical license will serve as your credentials, so unless you’ve removed your cranial module lately, I cannot fathom why you are causing a scene.”

“I’ll cause whatever scene I want to!” Ratchet declared, nudging Sari back in the direction of Bulkhead.

Too late, the conductor’s optics flashed, and he craned his helm to peer over Ratchet’s shoulder. His optics narrowed with suspicion. “And what, pray tell, is that?”

Sentinel’s fuel tank lurched in panic. Sari’s optics went wide with shock and anger and she seemed to swell with indignation.

Thinking quickly, Sentinel shoved in next to Bulkhead and clamped his free servo over her mouth before she could spit out an indignant retort. He loomed over the conductor, scowling.

“Sentinel Prime, Autobot Elite Guard,” he said, in his best parade ground voice. “And that is my partner, citizen.”

The conductor’s enormous orbital ridges furrowed. “Your partner?” he said. “They don’t look like a bot.” Sentinel could practically see the gears in the other bot’s helm turning. “They look like a....”

Sentinel removed his servo from Sari’s mouth, praying that she wouldn’t blurt out anything incriminating. “OC Partner Program,” he announced, juggling the pot so he could extract a datapad from his subspace. “You’ll find that all the paperwork is in order. She’s combat trained, a necessity due to the egregious lack of personnel in the Luna-1 precinct.”

Baffled, the conductor took the pad and swiped through the form. “I--I mean, it’s unusual, we aren’t really rated for transport of organics…”

“Am I to take it that you intend to impede an officer going about his duties, then?” said Sentinel.

“No, no of course not!” The conductor cast a desperate, doubtful look at Sari. “But I mean, as far as I understand it, the OC Partner program is intended for non-sentient organics, isn’t it? I know there’s a few officers in Polyhex with Hellhounds they keep around for narcotic tracking.”

Sentinel froze, processor churning frantically. He cast a despairing look at Sari, who looked like she
was about to explode and take the entire shuttle with her. Ratchet was glancing between all of them, his expression frozen in a kind of horrified fascination.

After a long, tense moment, Sari drew in a long, slow breath through her nose, and looked up at the conductor defiantly.

“Woof, woof, motherfucker,” she said, utterly without inflection.

Sentinel’s universal translator had no idea what to make of any of these words, but the conductor swallowed uneasily and handed the pad back to Sentinel. “Right,” he coughed. “All in order, then.”

Sentinel didn’t remember to ex-vent until the conductor had disappeared among the other commuters. He started and nearly dropped his pot when one of Sari’s servos clamped around his wrist, squeezing tighter than he’d thought was capable for something with organic tissue.

“I,” she said in an undertone. “Am going to kill you.”

Sentinel gulped and stared out the lateral viewscreen as Luna-1 loomed into view.

Optimus was starting to relax again. It was a slower than usual day—which meant he only had to hogtie one mech and fling him back out into the street—and then there was that dreaded bell sound that meant he had to pretend to give a scrap about anything outside of the existence of his novel.

It wasn’t a particularly easy thing to do.

“Again, Silverbolt?” asked Optimus, only just bothering to peel his optics off his datapad to acknowledge the mech’s existence. “I already told you I haven’t exactly sampled Armada literature well enough to give you recommendations.”

“No, no, I mean,” Silverbolt said, placing his servos in front of him as if to ward off a stray missile. “You know like the other day we sat down and discussed novels some, before the, uh, before Skyfire decided to bring out the holograms?”

“You mean like a book club?”

“A what now?” Silverbolt’s snout wrinkled in puzzlement. “Yeah, that. I guess that.” Silverbolt grinned, leaning—well, looming—over the desk. “I mean, it’ll be easier for you to become more knowledgeable about your garden of information if we both go through it together!”

Optimus spun his datapad in his servos, pressing his mouth together in thought. “I mean, we could do that but…” He stopped twirling. Silverbolt looked just a tad dazed. Had he been hypnotized by it or something? “Don’t take this the wrong way but…you’re a Decepticon soldier, right? Don’t you, uh… have to worry about duties, drills, missions, that sort of thing? You’re in here a lot.”

Silverbolt’s grin faltered and he grimaced slightly.

“It’s not really…that kind of army,” he said, studying the floor. “‘Organization is the the poison that crushes the spark of the truly free’ and all that. They—we, I guess, are programmed for fighting, so we don’t really train much.”

Silverbolt expelled a huff of air, the curves of his face deepening into a petulant expression. “And,
uh...the higher-ups don’t trust me on missions,” he said.

The bell sang again. Optimus glanced up absently, and froze.

“But, I mean,” fumbled Silverbolt. “I bet it’s because they’re all afraid that I’ll show them up.”

“Uh, Silverbolt…?” said Optimus, struggling to telegraph warning signals with nothing but his optic-brows.

“Yes, that’s it,” said Silverbolt, picking up steam now. “I bet Megatron is scared I’ll be a better fighter and leader than h--”

Silverbolt only had time to yip before one of Megatron’s massive servos closed around one of his wings. Without a word, and with what seemed like very little effort, Megatron hefted and and swung him—an impressively well-aimed throw, Optimus noted—out one of the few remaining intact windows. It shattered in spectacular fashion, shards clinking down on the floor of the shop in a glittering rain.

“Seriously, Megatron?” Optimus grumbled. “Did you give me this store only to destroy it? It’s a genuine question. Now I have to sweep the floor again.” He studied the shattered transparisteel and the now distorted framing, and frowned. “And Silverbolt better be alright.”

“I’m okay…!” Silverbolt shouted from somewhere outside. “Just need to weld my wing back on. Blackarachnia is fine t--no, don’t shush me! I will not be silen--mmmmff!”

Megatron looked down at Optimus, who noted that, unlike Silverbolt, Megatron didn’t have to lean in to cast a thick shadow over him. “You rejected an important invitation,” he said, one optic ridge raised.

“I rejected a what now?” said Optimus, sneak-reading another sentence out of his novel.


“A gladi--Oh! Was that what it was?” Optimus shrugged. “I thought it was just spam. Some sort of tacky public advertisement that they send out to everyone.”

“Tacky? Hmph.” Megatron crossed his arms. “Of course Autobots wouldn’t know art if it hit you in the faceplates.”

“Of course we know art,” said Optimus, scrolling through his datapad again—he refused to hurt his neck joints looking upwards at the glorious Lord Megatron. “It’s calming, serene, and actually makes sense. Your art is loud and obnoxious, the equivalent of a guinea pigatron having a panic attack at an upcoming dental appointment.”

“If I may contest that, Optimus Prime,” Megatron said, grabbing the top of the distracting datapad and pushing it down, forcing Optimus’s attention back towards him. “Art isn’t always about being serene and calming. Sometimes it’s about expressing your feelings as best you can, to better understand them, and that is not always going to be calming or pleasant.”

Optimus blinked at Megatron, surprised by the reflective sentiment and the… un-Decepticon-like words. What in the name of Vector Sigma would someone like Megatron know about expressing feelings?

An uncomfortable memory tugged at the back of his processor; a wrecked apartment, another datapad, a half-glimpsed poem.
His sparkbeat spiked and pulsed and Optimus tightened his grip on his own datapad, the phantom sound of his fuel pump ringing in his audio sensors.

Megatron, for his part, appeared to suddenly have difficulty holding his gaze.

After a moment, Optimus ex-vented and placed the datapad on his desk. “All right,” he said. “An invitation. Since we’re talking about feelings, any thoughts on why I should feel any inclination to accept said invitation?”

Megatron opened his mouth, and closed it, looking embarrassed and at a bit of a loss. “I have none,” he admitted. “Save that I would be appreciative of your presence at the event.”

Optimus stared openly at him, letting the silence congeal in the air. Megatron did not look at him, and bizarrely, Optimus felt a faint tug somewhere around the region of his sparkchamber. A little, tender pain, like pity, or a mild spark attack.

He really hoped it was the spark attack.

At last, Optimus sighed and pinched his nasal ridge between two digits. “Fine,” he said. “Explain to me what I’m signing up for, and we’ll go, if you help me reassemble my two friends first.” Placing the datapad down, Optimus jumped off his chair.

“Unlike you, I actually like them.”

And for the first time since he’d encountered the Decepticon Lord, Optimus Prime was treated to the sight of Megatron’s optics lighting up with something other than murderous rage.

*This is...a terrible idea.*

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**Autobot Intelligence Division**

**Evidence Chain of Custody Tracking Form**

**Case Number:** 0013-0100001001010011

**Offense:** Dissemination of Obscene Materials in Violation of ACCC 13A-12-200.2

**Submitting Officer:** (Designation/ID#) Sentinel Minor (1S-A-W33N13)

**Victim:** All of Cybertron

**Suspect:** Volks

**Date/Time Seized:** 013.6090.45

**Location of Seizure:** Burning Rubber Novelties, Downtown Iacon

**Description of Evidence**
Item #: 1
Quantity: 15
Description of Item (Model, Serial No., Condition, Marks and Scratches): Interface aids determined by the submitting officer to violate ACCC 11B-4-300.6. All items in clean and intact condition, thank Vector Sigma.

Item #: 2
Quantity: 35
Description of Item (Model, Serial No., Condition, Marks and Scratches): Datapads containing works of fiction determined by the submitting officer to violate ACCC 3C-4-100.1 under the Anti-Fraternization Act.

Item #: 3
Quantity: 1
Description of Item (Model, Serial No., Condition, Marks and Scratches): Life-size replica/interface aid which appears to be a Decepticon. Probably a violation of ACCC 11B-4-300.6 AND ACCC 3C-4-100.1. Appears to have been previously used.

Chain of Custody

Item #: 1
Date/Time: 013.6112.38
Released By (Designation/ID#): Agent Blurr (N07-21|D|DJ)
Received By (Designation/ID#): Sentinel Prime (1S-A-W33N13)
Comments/Location: Release for transport to Luna-1 Precinct for use in ongoing investigation into Designation DMC

Item #: 2
Date/Time: 013.6112.38
Released By (Designation/ID#): Agent Blurr (N07-21|D|DJ)
Received By (Designation/ID#): Sentinel Prime (1S-A-W33N13)
Comments/Location: Release for transport to Luna-1 Precinct for use in ongoing investigation into Designation DMC

Item #: 3
Date/Time: 013.6112.38
Released By (Designation/ID#): Agent Blurr (N07-21|D|DJ)
Received By (Designation/ID#): Sentinel Prime (1S-A-W33N13)
Comments/Location: Release for transport to Luna-1 Precinct for use in ongoing investigation into Designation DMC
Final Disposal Authority

Items #: ______ on this document pertaining to (suspect): Velcro DMC-12
___ is (are) no longer needed as evidence and is/are authorized for disposal by (check appropriate disposal method)

__ Return to Owner __ Auction/Destroy/Divert

Designation and ID# of Authorizing Officer: _______________________ Date: ____________
Designation and ID# of Witness to Destruction/Lawful Owner: ___________ Date: ________

This Evidence Chain of Custody form is to be retained as a permanent record by the Autobot Intelligence Division
Recent events notwithstanding, warframes who’d tried to murder him on multiple occasions showing up at Optimus’s private residence could not broadly be interpreted in a positive manner, so Optimus thought he could be excused for attempting to chop off the enormous servos that were attempting to pry open the shop doors--in blatant disregard of the hastily constructed ‘Closed’ sign he’d hung on them.

Then again, Lugnut had never held much regard for anything or anyone except Megatron, and this was Armada.

“Lord Consort!” bellowed Lugnut. “I would like to be allowed in!” The behemoth of a Decepticon lieutenant saw no irony in the fact that he was already mostly inside, standing on the shattered remains of what had been the door, although he at least had the decency to look embarrassed once he followed Optimus’s pointed gaze to the pile of metal scrap.

Even if it didn’t stop him from from further crunching it as he shifted his weight.

“I’ll send you the bill,” said Optimus, crossing his arms.

“Um… of course.” Lugnut said, in what was probably the quietest voice he could manage. He cleared his intake. “The great and glorious Lord Megatron has sent me to prepare you for the Gladiator match tonight, and I bring with me the most luxurious of decor fit for such an event, Lord Consort!”

Lord Consort. Optimus pinched the bridge of his nasal ridge and offline his optics. Did Megatron have to make him sound like some kind of swooning captive from one of those crappy datapads? Unbelievable. “Optimus Prime is fine, Lugnut.”

He brought his optics back online, and immediately regretted it. The box Lugnut had produced seemed disproportionately tiny in his huge servos, covered in gaudy black and gold plating in overblown Decepticon fashion. Lugnut reached out and swept a pile of datapads off of a nearby short table, setting the box down atop it. Optimus felt an orbital ridge twitch compulsively. He had just organized those.

Lugnut flipped up the lid, revealing—to Optimus’s infinite surprise—several tiered rows of what looked like thin, open bits of metal. A memory tugged at his processor: Sari showing him pictures of herself and Isaac Sumdac in the kitchen. Cookie cutters, she had called them, metal designs that she used to shape some sort of gelatinous organic nourishment into facsimiles of trees and snowmen.

Lugnut brought out a tool, a little machine with a series of hydraulic presses and a long tube with a pointed nozzle on the end. He slid open a drawer at the base of the box, uncovering rows upon rows of little metal bottles—paints, in a wild assortment of different colors. With great reverence, Lugnut
selected a bottle of absolutely optic-smarting purple and screwed it into the machine. He pumped one of the presses and pressed a button on the nozzle. There was a little burst of air and a spray of paint erupted from the end, splattering a few droplets on Optimus’s clean floor.

“What are you doing?” said Optimus, certain that he would regret asking.

Lugnut plucked a stencil shaped like a series of repeating rhombuses from the box in triumph. “Adding designs to your paint job, in proper Decepticon purple of course! You must reflect well on our glorious leader!” He wheeled on Optimus, stencil in one servo and the nozzle of the airbrush in the other, all five optics glowing with terrifying enthusiasm.

Alarmed, Optimus took several steps back, debating whether he should go for his axe.

“Uh, hang on, hang on. You’re going to put that color on me? It’ll clash like a six lane pileup! I’ll look ridiculous!”

Lugnut paused and glanced at the airbrush, suddenly doubtful. “But purple is the traditional color of our proud revolutionary history! It would be an affront if you were not to wear it!”

_Exactly_, Optimus thought grimly. “Let me put it this way,” he said aloud. “I can either follow tradition and embarrass your glorious leader by looking like a fire truck that got caught in a grape juice factory explosion, or we can scrap this whole purple thing and do, uh, something else?”

Preferably nothing.

To Optimus’s infinite relief, Lugnut lowered the airbrush after several tense moments, his expression actually a little lost.

“I have never done anything but the purple,” admitted Lugnut, sounding a bit embarrassed himself. “I...am not certain where to begin. But Lord Megatron was most insistent that you have some decoration.”

Optimus bit his glossa to keep from scowling. “I’m sure we can find something that will look good,” he said. He wracked his processor for several minutes. He knew some bots decorated themselves, but the culture at the Academy had discouraged it and so he’d never had the opportunity to go to a salon. But then again...he had seen some of the ways humans on Earth decorated their vehicles and a few had been surprisingly appealing.

“Do you have orange, red, and yellow paints in there?” he said.

Lugnut turned, a lumbering mountain of metal, and peered into the drawer. “It appears so, yes.”

“I want flames,” said Optimus firmly. “Here,” he indicated both his forearm guards. “And here. And on my legs.”

All five of Lugnut’s optics widened. “...are you-- _flames_?”

“Yes,” said Optimus. “As bright as you can manage.”

“I--” Lugnut hastily turned back to the box and ruffled through it, his enormous servos clinking against the stencils. “I...do not appear to have the outline for them.”

Optimus shrugged. “So paint them free-servo?”

Lugnut glanced back at him, a surprisingly naked, dumbfounded expression—insofar as he could
make any expression—on his faceplates. “Do...what?”

“Paint them without one?” said Optimus, shifting in discomfort. “It can’t be that difficult. Bulkhead painted all sorts of things while we were on Earth.”

“Bulkh--ah!” Lugnut turned around, attention caught. “The pitiful Autobot who was part of your team? The one who flung Bugly over a table bare-servoed when he was recently caught invading a bar on New Kaon?”


But Lugnut was already rummaging in his subspace for a datapad. It was as proportionally large as Lugnut himself, and he quickly manipulated the screen before turning it around to face Optimus.

Optimus stared.

It was Bulkhead, alright. A seven-astrosecond holo of Bulkhead, atrociously lit, hefting a Decepticon at least twice his size over his helm before launching him over a table and into a group of startled bar patrons. A tinny roar, the kind Bulkhead rarely made unless sufficiently motivated, echoed from the speakers.

“Despite best efforts,” said Lugnut, turning the pad around, “he and his small band of Autobot spies escaped.”

Optimus struggled to restart his processor. “Was that...is that extranet site limited to Decepticon servers?”

“Oh yes,” said Lugnut. “BoobTube is available to the whole of the glorious Decepticon empire!” He studied the pad. “But I believe this holo was copied and re-uploaded by a user on Armada, so this is probably local traffic.”

Optimus’s optics creaked as they attempted to expand past their rated specifications. “Armada watched that holo three billion times? ”

Lugnut actually looked mildly embarrassed. “Our empire holds a deep appreciation for battle prowess,” he said stiffly. He looked at the pad again. “And you say he paints?”

Optimus groaned and buried his face in his servos. “This entire quadrant of the galaxy is off its crankshaft.”

_and what in the name of Vector Sigma was Bulkhead doing on New Kaon?

“That settles it!” said Lugnut. “If your Autobot warrior can do this, then so can a Decepticon lieutenant!”

Optimus looked up just in time to see Lugnut subspace his pad and swap out the purple paint in the airbrush for a brilliant orange that seemed entirely unused. He fished out two other bottles, a bright yellow and a fire engine red that was very close to Optimus’s own paint job, and held them between two thick digits in his opposite servo. With a disturbingly excited glint in his central optic, he wheeled on Optimus, nozzle in servo.

“Come forth, Optimus Prime!” he said. “Let us make you fit to be seen with the great and glorious Lord Megatron!”
I’ve made a horrible mistake, thought Optimus, as Lugnut advanced on him.

The Luna-1 precinct was depressingly small, an office maybe large enough for four bots to occupy. It also appeared entirely deserted, a thin layer of dust already gathering on the desks and cabinets. Sentinel stopped to survey the room as they entered, taking in the scuffed floor and shabby walls with an almost physical pain.

“Not bad,” said Sari, struggling to peer over the boxes in her arms. “In comparison to your apartment, it’s almost got character.”

“It’s not supposed to have character,” said Sentinel, scowling at the floor. “It’s supposed to be a clean, orderly representation of Elite Guard authority.”

“Well, you can clean yourself silly in a little bit,” said Sari, hopping up on one of the desks. “Hypogravity, nice.” She set her boxes down and seated herself on one, looking up at Sentinel. “How about you sit down a minute and we’ll have ourselves a little chat?” Her voice was sweet in a way that immediately set Sentinel’s internal alarms clanging.

He swallowed and did so, setting his potted crystal on the nearest desk before tugging out a chair and seating himself. It put them nearly of a height, her optics boring into his, a disquieting mix of electric glow and liquid organic shine. For a moment he was suffused with a sense of unbalance, of being caught in a vast cosmic ocean of changes he barely understood, sweeping him along whether he was prepared or not; he looked at the desktop, trying to ground himself. Someone had etched a message into it in bored, messy glyphs:

*To look into the sky is to look into the spark. Except when the sky is clouded, then it’s more like looking into the fuel tank. Vector Sigma, when is lunch?*

“So,” Sari said, bringing Sentinel back to the moment. “You want to tell me why you registered me as a dog?”

“A what?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, the glint of her dental plates reminding him suddenly of the fact that she had blades half as long as her arms hidden behind her servos. “Do you prefer the term non-sentient organic?”

Sentinel glanced at her and away, fidgeting. “Strictly speaking...you don’t have Cybertronian citizenship. So...you can’t officially be hired by the department.”

She stared hard at him. “You’re telling me, with all the infinite layers and layers and layers of bureaucracy you’ve got regulating every aspect of your damn lives, you don’t have a single fucking form for citizenship application? Or a damn work visa?”

He coughed uncomfortably. “One may exist, somewhere, but in general the laws are structured to...discourage non-citizens from traveling or working on Cybertron.”

She groaned and pinched her nasal ridge. “That’s ridiculous. We’ve got stuff like that on Earth and we’re literally just one planet. Ratchet’s been telling me there’s a whole gumball machine’s worth of sentient worlds within spitting distance of Cybertron, and you’ve been around for millions of years.
"Literally no one’s ever immigrated here?"

“Some have probably tried,” he said. “But the process is, uh, prohibitively complex. The current laws were written to make it all but impossible.”

She scowled. “What incredible genius thought that up?”

Sentinel cringed slightly. “Uh...I did.”

Silence reigned in the office.

“I was, uh, brand new in the Elite Guard,” said Sentinel, suddenly desperate to break the quiet. “There was...something had happened while we--I was on an early mission. My team...was dissolved.” He stared at the scratched desk, his fuel tanks turning uncomfortably. “I ended up behind a desk, drafting legislation.”

It felt strange, to speak about it. He’d been debriefed of course, as mandated by the department. But the official report hadn’t included the pain and terror, the blinding, strut-crushing shockwave from the explosion, the grip of Optimus’s servos on him, ripping him away from danger, the sound of Elita’s screams suddenly cut off--

He jerked his optics from where they’d fixated on the desk graffiti, in-vented, and looked up.

Sari was sitting, slumped forward on her crate, servos braced on her knees. There was a sort of...numb resignation in her optics.

It reminded him so sharply of Optimus that he wanted to empty his fuel tanks.

He looked at the dirty floor and bit back the itch to get on his servos and knees and scrub.

After several long moments, Sari sighed.

“Well,” she said. “I suppose this is karma from when I was four and told Dad I wanted to be a dog when I grew up.”

Sentinel was saved from having to concoct an answer to this by a door bursting open. This in and of itself might not have been strange, except that it was not the door to the precinct, but instead an internal door to what looked like some sort of maintenance closet. A round Autobot stumbled out, the same dark green as Bulkhead, with paired protrusions jutting above his shoulders and his bright red helm encased in transparisteel. Holding back several mops that were trying desperately to escape, he shoved the door closed behind him and leaned against it.

They all stared at each other.

“Hi,” said the bot. “Uh, are you the new captain?” His gaze panned over both of them in turn. “One... of you?”

“Woof,” said Sari dryly.

“I am,” said Sentinel. “Sentinel Prime, Elite Guard. And were you recharging on duty in that maintenance closet, officer?”

“No on duty!” said the bot, audibly distressed. “My designation’s Cosmos, and I’m not really an officer. I’m a deep-space surveillance specialist. I don’t think there’s any other officers assigned here at the moment.”
“None?” Sentinel boggled at him. “Then who does the policing?”

“Er,” said Cosmos. “I mean, Captain Charon did most of it, I think.”

“All by himself?” said Sentinel.

“Wow,” said Sari. “I think I jumped the gun there nicknaming you Robocop.”

Sentinel shot her an exasperated look.

“Well,” said Cosmos. “He processed citations, licences, went down to Old Yottabyte’s farm when he and Overclock got into a fight over who’d accidentally knocked over the other one’s energon collector...yeah, I think he covered it all.”

Sentinel stared at him, a faint sense of dawning horror creeping along his circuits. “That’s...that’s all?”

Cosmos blinked at him, wall-opticked. “I think so?”

“He didn’t...you said you were a deep-space surveillance specialist, right? Don’t you search for signs of Decepticon activity?”

“Oh!” said Cosmos. “Yes, of course.” He shrugged. “But it’s usually pretty quiet, so most of the time I’m just gathering data for the Astronomers’ Guild. Reporting on stellar storms, nebula activity, stuff like that. I do keep a running transcription of any intercepted Decepticon radio chatter but, uh, it’s a bit overwhelming to have someone monitoring it constantly and most of it is of, shall we say, limited value?”

He gestured to the desk at which Sentinel had seated himself. There was a small, cubic console embedded into one corner, and it obligingly blinked to life when Cosmos smacked a servo across the top of it. The screen scrolled with a deluge of text, moving so rapidly that Sentinel could barely follow it. He caught waves of barely translatable glyphs, the emotionless descriptors of embedded holo images produced by the graphic-to-binary interface, and excessive amounts of profanity.

“Are those...?”

“BoobTube comments,” said Cosmos, with a kind of weary solemnity.

“Wow,” said Sari. “I see what you mean by ‘limited value’.”

Sentinel watched the constant stream of commentary with numb fascination. What in Vector Sigma were the Decepticons arguing about all cycle? It was surreal to imagine them bickering over mundane minutiae like those Autobots on the forums...

Sentinel’s sense of duty called a halt, reviewed this statement, and marked down Sentinel’s processor under a list of potential traitors. Sentinel twitched his helm sharply, as if shaking off the thought. “Unacceptable. Such intel should be observed more closely. It’s a matter of Cybertronian security.”

Cosmos’s optics tracked down to the screen just in time to see DEACTIVATE YOURSELF WE NEED A SLAGGING HEALER FOR THIS MATCH AND YOU DREW THE SHORT WIRE scroll past.

Wait, was that one of Megatron’s top lieutenants debasing himself over a meaningless video game? Sentinel scrutinized the TripleTank01010 username, thinking that surely it couldn’t be, but his paranoia needled him and he made a mental note of it. He cleared his throat. “Deputy Sari, perhaps
you can review the transcripts for valuable intel in between your other duties.”

Sari eyed the console doubtfully. “I mean, sure, but you haven’t exactly assigned me other duties.”

Sentinel cast about the room, optics landing back on the maintenance closet. “I think our first order of business should be getting this office back in shape.” The dust on everything was starting to make him twitchy. He leveled a look at Cosmos. “You too.”

Cosmos, surprisingly, only saluted and smiled broadly. “Yes, sir. I suppose things could use a good scrub around here.” He turned back and flung open the door to the maintenance closet, sending several mops and bottles of cleanser—unused bottles, Sentinel noted, his processor threatening to throb—scattering across the floor. Cosmos scooped up two of the mops and spun one like a baton before thrusting it out in Sari’s direction like a lance. “Shall we? Ah, I’m sorry, I don’t believe I got your designation.”

Sari’s optics lit with interest and she took the mop. “It’s Sari, technorganic extraordinaire.” There was a faint, challenging edge to her voice.

“Are you really?” said Cosmos. “How utterly fascinating! I haven’t interacted with organics personally since they stopped sending me on deep space missions, but I used to greatly enjoy conversing with them on planets I was surveying.”

Sentinel blinked at him. “Deep space missions? Exactly how old are you?”

“Oh, not as old as you’re thinking, I’m sure,” Cosmos said, turning to spray the wall and part of the floor with cleanser before attacking them with the mop. “I was constructed just shortly before the end of the Great War. Scouts were in short supply.”

So older than Sentinel, by a wide margin, but not as old as Ultra Magnus. The idea of commanding a bot so much older than himself was surprisingly disconcerting, for all that he’d enjoyed bossing the Council about. He wondered if this was an additional challenge tossed his way by his former mentor. Vaguely disturbed, he retrieved a bit of mesh and began cleaning the desks and cubicles.

Sentinel’s predecessor had apparently forgotten to clean out their desk before they’d left, and he found himself sorting through a mountain of odds and ends. Taped beneath the top of the desk was a battered keycard that looked like it had been recently removed and replaced. Puzzled, Sentinel turned it over in his servo, examining it. Keycards were practically archaic technology.

“Oh,” said Cosmos. “That’s the keycard for the evidence locker. I had to open it up a few cycles ago for a delivery from the surface, but I did not tamper with anything inside, you have my word!”

Sentinel stopped halfway through subspaceing the item. “Delivery?”

“Ah, yes. An Elite Guard member, I’m sorry but I don’t recall the exact designation, stopped by with a shipment of evidence that he said was relevant to your current open case?”

Sentinel froze. No. It wasn’t possible. There was no way.

The layout of precincts was fairly invariable, and so Sentinel made it to the back of the room in three long strides. He slapped the keycard against the side of the door and it beeped, obligingly clicking open.

Sentinel stared.

Dildos. Floor to ceiling shelving, lined with dildos. There were stacks of luridly colored datapads on
the floor, knee-deep; and in the back of room, slumped haphazardly against one of the shelving units, was that abomination that they’d pulled out of Volk’s shop, looking for all the galaxy like Megatron himself had gotten blind drunk after a botched facial reconstruction surgery and passed out somewhere he had no business being.

Sentinel didn’t know how long he stood there, gaping in horror, until Sari came up behind him and peered around his frozen form.

“Huh,” she said. “Well, they were thorough. You think that’s everything?”

Sentinel slammed the door shut with such force that the windows of the office rattled.
To Optimus’s surprise, and perhaps Lugnut’s—judging by the way all five of his optics seemed to glitter with what might have been pride -- Lugnut had done a great job at the decaling. It wasn’t quite professional; if one were to squint they could see that the brush strokes were not perfectly blended, but since it was barely visible until you got closer than Optimus had any intention of letting most bots, it was unlikely anyone would notice.

It didn’t escape Optimus’s notice that his decorations didn’t resemble much of anything he’d
encountered on Armada thus far. For a city so rich in light and color and flash, it was surprisingly devoid of anything that looked to have been servo-created, most ads and public displays consisting of exaggerated holos.

The flame decaling stretched from his wrists up his arms, and from his pedes to his thighs. The overall effect was quite impressive--the curving of the fiery wisps, the tiny cinders of the details, and the hint of blue at the hearts of the flames that glittered like the inside of a spark.

It really was a good job. Even if it took several rounds of assurances before Lugnut would stop fussing over them.

“Alright, already,” grumbled Optimus after he struck what was probably the fifty-ninth pose of the morning to allow Lugnut to scan for as many tiny mistakes as he could find. “It looks great, Lugnut. Now can we get on with this fragging afthead’s ego trip?”

Lugnut stilled at Optimus’s words. “You must not speak of Lord Megatron’s glorious presence in such a manner!” The giant warbuild loomed over Optimus, menace glinting in all five of his optics.

“A consort without loyalty is worthless!”

Optimus considered refuting the term, but arguing excessively with someone capable of exploding both you and your entire establishment seemed...unwise. Additionally, he’d figured this might come up, and after reading so many of those terrible novels he had actually thought of a comeback. Trying in vain not to look as ridiculous as he felt, he struck what he hoped was a vague, flirty pose and winked at Lugnut.

“Have you ever considered that your glorious Lord Megatron might *enjoy* me calling him names?”

Lugnut froze, his shadow still looming over Optimus.

Optimus hid a smile and pretended to look contemplative. “I was a bit surprised myself. I mean, I always assumed that the Lord of the Decepticons would be a bit more…” He purposely trailed off. “But who am I to argue with Megatron’s desires?”

Lugnut did not react. Optimus was almost, almost disappointed; he had thought he would get a at least a small tantrum. But then he heard a small pop, followed by a fizz and a faint, alarming smell of acrid smoke. Optimus only had time to let out a little yelp and dive to one side before the massive mech fell over helm-first, with a heavy thud that sent several datapads flying off their shelves.

After a moment of composing himself, Optimus looked at the unconscious mech.

“Uh, so does this mean I don’t have to go?”
Our usual beta has been going through some serious shit lately, so in lieu of their absence I have to thank StarlightCaptivator for looking over this chapter instead this time. <3 Hopefully things get back to normal soon eve

Blame chapter lateness on life and suck.

-Reya

EDIT: Art by the fabulous lunarescapades on tumblr! <3
2k+ kudos?? When did that happen?? And what's wrong with y'all???

Optimus did, in fact, have to attend this farcical fencing match. No amount of strenuous negotiation would budge Lugnut—although, in all reality, very little in the known galaxy could budge Lugnut. At last, rather than be subjected to the indignity of being hauled bodily through the streets to the coliseum, Optimus opted for following at Lugnut’s side and holding the most inappropriate conversation he could conceive of, at a volume just loud enough to be heard over the hubbub of Armada streets. After navigating the obstacle course that was the Decepticon capital, including high jumps, rope pulling, and other maneuvers which would have put his training in Autobot boot camp to shame, they arrived at a towering junk heap which Optimus presumed was the coliseum.

It was rather different than most of the structures that made up Armada’s poor excuse for dwellings; instead of being an old ship hastily modified into apartments, it looked like whomever had constructed it had instead decided, much in line with Decepticon thinking, to blow several ships up and build on top of the resulting slab of melted metal. While the walls were coated with several layers of black paint, Optimus could see—through the shadows of eager mechs—what used to be pipes, levers, elevators, and computers all welded together in unique patterns that betrayed their former roles.

The crowd inside was much the same—mechs of diverse sizes and shapes awash in Decepticon colors merged their shadows together in the dim lighting. Yelps and punches were thrown, and drink glasses clanged against each other; salesmechs took advantage of the small and heated quarters to get a helm-start on credits. Just when Optimus tried to mentally prepare himself for more tugging and pulling and uncomfortable half-steps, however, Lugnut appeared to have come up with an idea.

“You must all need replacement optics!” Optimus caught a glimpse of Lugnut’s arm cannon powering up. “Out of my way!”

A very Lugnut idea, surely, but it was still an idea.

After the act of senseless violence was done and he felt that it was safe to investigate, Optimus peered out from behind Lugnut—or, rather, from in between his legs—and saw that there appeared to be no casualties. No lethal ones, anyway. The mechs who looked like they would have to play an unconsenting treasure hunt for their limbs probably thought otherwise. Their groans and muttered complaints were drowned out by Lugnut’s thundering footsteps.

Blitzwing’s cackle cut the air behind them. “Oooh, I’m telling Strika you’re harming the rabble!”

Optimus turned around just in time to see the Decepticon’s face spin from wild black to the more neutral blue. Blitzwing seemed almost surprised to see him, pausing before smiling, if the small, cold expression could be called that.

“Looks like you brought the prize too.” His face spun again to red. “Is Lord Megatron finally going to let the rest of us get a piece?”
Lugnut huffed. “He belongs to no one but Lord Megatron, and will remain undefiled by anyone else!”

“I do not belong to anyone,” Optimus objected loudly, glaring at the two morons seemingly eager to produce even more chaos. “And if you don’t stop saying otherwise, I’m walking right o-oomph!”

“Sure, sweetspark.” Blitzwing had interrupted, yanking Optimus aloft by his arm. His further protests were drowned out by Lugnut’s complaints that Megatron had entrusted him with Optimus’s safety.

As he was hauled into the crowd of Decepticons, hanging helpless between two of Megatron’s most trusted officers, Optimus had a fleeting moment to wonder just how many Autobots had been in a similar position and survived.

A ground-shuddering jolt and an explosive curse from the ground floor of the barn sent Sentinel rolling out of his berth into a crouch, braced on one servo with his shield already deployed. Baffled, he blinked around the empty room, taking in the almost-bare storage shelves, the desk with his potted crystal. From below him there was another crash, like half a dozen energon cubes falling over.

“Vector Sigma, Counterweight!” Ratchet’s voice scraped across Sentinel’s audio sensors like space debris on a shuttle. “Watch where you’re going!”

“Sorry, sorry!” Wheels spun audibly amid the sound of a transformation. Counterweight, presumably, sighed. “And I had them stacked so neatly.”

“Everyone okay?” Bulkhead sounded bizarrely cheery for a mech that Sentinel knew for a fact had spent a quarter megacycle every onshift trying to roust himself out of bed while he was in boot camp.

“Fine,” grumbled Ratchet. “You can help Forker here restack these, I’m going back to the house for some oil. Make sure to tell the angle-grinder upstairs that breakfast is on the table.”

“Oh, right!” said Bulkhead. “Hey, Sarge! You awake up there?”

Helm throbbing, Sentinel deactivated his shield and rose. He walked over to the hatch in the floor and flipped it open, exposing the ladder leading down to the main floor. Bulkhead stood at the bottom of the ladder with an energon cube, balanced in one servo as though it weighed nothing at all, and a grin on his faceplates.

“No,” said Sentinel, in the dryest tone he could manage. “I’m still in recharge, thanks to your melodious morning melody of hurling heavy machinery every which way.”

Bulkhead cocked his helm at him, bemused. “Does that mean you don’t want breakfast?”

Sentinel didn’t bother answering. He descended the ladder at a dignified pace, jumping the last few rungs to remind them that he wasn’t yet rusted to scrap.

Bulkhead shrugged and turned to place the energon cube on top of a nearby stack of other cubes. “You gonna need help with the collectors later, Counterweight?”

“Nah,” said Counterweight. He was nearly as wide as Bulkhead, with toxic yellow plating, and the prongs of his forklift alt mode jutted above his helm like the horns of some mythical beast. “The
remote sensors say everything’s good, and I can do cube pickup in recharge.”

Bulkhead clapped him on the shoulder with a sound like a minor traffic accident. “Good mech! If you spot ‘Hide on the rounds, ask him if he’s going to be headed to the bar later?"

“Sure thing, boss,” said Counterweight. He transformed and rolled out of the barn, whistling to himself over the rumble of his engine.

Bulkhead shook his helm and chuckled as they watched him go. “‘Boss’, huh?” He glanced at Sentinel. “You ever think you’d see other bots calling me that?”

“Can’t say I did,” said Sentinel, then almost winced when he realized how tactless that had sounded, but Bulkhead only laughed.

“Yeah, I was a bit of clunker at the old Academy,” he said, rubbing one huge servo across the back of his helm. “But, hey, I haven’t blown up a space bridge yet! I mean, not accidentally at least.”

“No bot with any sense should expect you to,” said Sentinel stiffly. “Your astrophysics scores at the Academy were the highest in millennia.”

Bulkhead blinked at him, optics going round. “They what?”

“The Elite Guard keeps statistical data on recruits, going back to before the end of the Great War,” said Sentinel. “It’s so that we can provide feedback to the Ministry of Education. I saw the flag in your file.”

Bulkhead looked a bit poleaxed, but shrugged. “Huh.”

Eager to escape where this conversation was headed, Sentinel took a step towards the barn door. “Breakfast?”

“Oh, yeah!” said Bulkhead. “We better hurry, Sari will be up by now.”

Sentinel checked his chronometer. “Vector Sigma, you’re right. Quick, or there’ll be nothing left!”

They jogged across the yard, Bulkhead wheezing with laughter as he tried to keep up, their pedes crunching on the rough metal. Luna-1 unsettled many bots, Sentinel included, due to its somewhat disordered nature when compared to the rest of Cybertron. Sentinel had once heard Alpha Trion describe the moon as a microcosm of Cybertron as it had been at its inception; wild and untamed, a molten forge from which the earliest life had sprung.

Bulkhead’s farmhouse sat on a raised metal island in the center of great, spiraling rows of energon collectors, their flowering satellite dishes pointed towards the dim light of the sun. It was a two-storied affair, designed to house workers, with open, utilitarian living spaces on the first floor and barrack-style berthrooms above. Sure enough, Sari was hunched cross-legged on the surface of one of the long metal tables, a bowl of what looked like crisped energon in one servo, which she shoveled with systematic speed into her mouth with a metal implement. Ratchet was sitting to her left, drinking from an enormous mug of energon. They both wore identical, disgruntled expressions.

“Last of the liquid’s mine,” said Ratchet, before either of them could get a word out. “You two get what’s left of the sprog’s crisps.” He took a deep, deliberate draft. “Either of you don’t like it, you get an electromagnet up the exhaust pipe.”

Sentinel peered into the large bowl at the center of the table. The crisps still sent a faint waft of heat up towards his faceplates. They looked like they’d sit in his tank about as comfortably as a rock. Yet
before he could even ask about containers and utensils, Bulkhead reached past him, grabbed a fistful of crisps in one huge servo, and stuffed them into his own mouth.

“Not bad,” he said, his mouth full.

“Just don’t grab any from the smaller bowl,” said Sari. “Those are mine, I licked them.”

Revolted, Sentinel left empty-servoed and resolved to make a cup of hot oil when he got into the office. “I’ll see you at the precinct in a joor, deputy.”

Sari saluted him with her tiny, metallic utensil. “Yes, sir, Robocop.”

Early oncycle on Luna-1 was surprisingly lively and the roads were lined with bots trundling along, hauling cargo. Sentinel wound up in an honest-to-Vector-Sigma traffic jam, the natural result of the main highway being half the size of any normal road, and to make matters worse he’d gotten trapped behind a tractor with a trailer so huge it completely blocked any view of the road. Sentinel revved his engine and tried to keep his internal pressure from rising.

When he finally stormed through the door of the precinct half a megacycle later, he found Sari waiting for him. She’d already managed to figure out how to operate the hot oil machine and was filling a mug for him.

“How did you get here so quickly?” he said, taking the mug and trying to modulate his temper. After nearly a whole cycle of going without it, the oil tasted heavenly.

Sari looked at him. “I flew,” she said, as though it were obvious. “Ratchet said it should be fine if I went the long way around. It’s only collector fields out that way.”

He had no answer to that.

Sentinel spent the early part of the cycle sorting through the files on his predecessor’s console while Sari—as she’d agreed, with surprisingly little fuss—scrolled carefully through the endless Con comm chatter transcripts. His predecessor’s console, as Sentinel had suspected, was a hotbed of disorganization and poor record keeping practices. Files were scattered through subfolders of subfolders, and the labeling system was all in Primal Vernacular—which Sentinel had never been particularly good at—so he was reduced to opening up each file and adding a more informative sublabel. Assuming, of course, that the files themselves weren’t also in Primal Vernacular, in which case he finally just put them into a giant repository labeled “Slag For Later” and progressed to the next one.

He was absorbed in a spreadsheet of what was probably arrest records, but could easily have been a playlist of greatest hits of Music So Old You’ve Never Slagging Heard of It, when the console beeped shrilly, sending up a full screen icon that indicated there was an incoming message. He flailed, fumbled, and managed to hit the answer command.

At first there was nothing, just a blank screen. Sentinel frowned. “Hello? You have reached the Luna-1 police force, is anyone there?”

There was a burst of static. No image, but a garbled bit of audio. “—ing. Chain—”

Sentinel gave the top of his console a sharp rap. “Hello! This is Sentinel Prime, Cybertronian Elite Guard. Respond!”
The signal disconnected. Sentinel stared at the screen.

“What do you think that was?” said Sari, sounding as if she were right next to his audio sensor.

Sentinel managed to turn his startled jump into a purposeful leap to his pedes. “Clearly a lunar citizen is in need of our assistance!” he said. “We must make haste to the scene of the crime!”

Sari cocked her head at him, puzzled. “Is there a crime? All I heard was some guy mumbling about a farm.”

Sentinel put on his best parade ground voice. “We must be prepared for the worst! It is the job of the Elite Guard to be ever-vigilant! Perhaps the old bot was captured by nefarious kidnappers! Sky-runners who are even now holding him hostage! Perhaps his commlink was damaged defending himself and he was only able to relay this small message!”

Sari’s optics went wide. “There are drug dealers on the moon?”

“Crime knows no boundaries!” said Sentinel. He could feel himself getting into the swing of things. “Come, we must get to the farm!”

“Got it!” said Sari, leaping to her own pedes, a big grin on her faceplates. “Do you know where the farm is? Or which farm it is?”

“Come, we must ask a local for directions!” said Sentinel, not missing a beat. He hurried out the front door to the yard and transformed. “Get in! We’ll find a local on the way.”

As Sari scrambled up into his front seats, Sentinel could feel a burgeoning sense of warmth within himself. It was almost like being back in the main complex. Here, he could push back against this lawless frontier outpost and restore proper Cybertronian order!

Things were surely looking up.

Decepticon VIP seating was relatively nice, given the circumstances, but importance of any sort was not the feeling imparted by the deep glower of Strika’s optics. Under the femme’s shadow—even seated in a chair that gave him more than enough space to sit cross-legged—Optimus felt even smaller.

Strika let out a low snort like a struggling engine. “Lord Megatron is losing his processor more and more every cycle.” She turned away, dismissive. “Especially if he lets you go out looking like that,” she muttered, almost inaudibly.

“Hey,” said Optimus, indignant. “I didn’t ask to be here.”

Strika’s EM field prickled dangerously, but she didn’t look at him. “I was not aware decor could talk.”

Blitzwing snickered.

Optimus clenched his jaw until the hinge joint ached. Whatever, Strika could have this one. Optimus
had other more important things to worry about than overblown egos.

*Where was Megatron?*

Optimus took in his surroundings. The seats were cushioned in a variety of distractingly bright shades and decently clean, though the floor was scummy with multicolored stains of unknown origins. He was stationed between Strika and the largest seat—notable in its throne-like appearance—which, by inference, could only be intended for Megatron himself. The small cluster of seats was covered by a rounded sheet of transparisteel, which seemed to be polarized, for it filtered the exterior lights which sprayed from the rest of the stadium like fluid from a burst hose. Through the enclosure, Optimus could see what seemed to be the entire population of Armada above and around them; an undulating mass of dull greens and purples and grays, broken by the occasional fleck of bright red or yellow.

Below them was what could have only been the arena itself, an open expanse of bare floor that bore the recognizable wear marks—recognizable to Optimus at least—of harsh cleansers and years of hard use.

*How old is this place?*

Based on Lugnut’s urging, Optimus had thought the matches were set to start soon, but they appeared to have been going for a while. Two Decepticons that Optimus didn’t recognize were currently sparring, circling and feinting with sword and flail respectively, as an announcer jabbered away in Galactic Standard so swiftly that Optimus could barely parse the words.

But still no Megatron.

It figured. So much drama to get Optimus to come, and Megatron was the one fashionably late.

The roar of the crowd brought his attention back to the ring. The match had concluded with one of the Decepticons beheading the other. The victor stood over his fallen opponent, laughing and pumping his fist as the defeated Con scrambled after his head in a vain attempt to reaffix it. On Optimus’s left, Blitzwing’s Icy persona leaned forward and tapped Strika on one massive shoulder guard.

“That’s my match,” he said. His face spun and his glossa lolled. “Pony up, you pathetic peashooter!”

Strika grunted and shoved a credit chit in his face. “Eat it, then, you failed flightframe.” She leaned back in her seat with an annoyed huff. “This is boring anyway. We haven’t had a decent fighter on rotation since Ballista decided she wanted to go into filmmaking instead.”

Blitzwing’s face spun again. “Can’t exactly blame her. Sharkticonado made five billion credits galaxy-wide. The sequel looks like it could make half again as much.”

Despite himself, Optimus cocked an audio sensor. “There’s a galactic audience for Decepticon movies?”

Strika gave him a smug look. “Most of the galaxy has a taste for Decepticon media. Why do you think Scoreboard is yakking in Galactic Standard? This is being broadcast live.”

Trying not to let the surprise show on his faceplates, Optimus craned his helm. He couldn’t see the announcer, but he could hear him, words like rapid fire bullets, whipping the crowd into a frenzy.
“—now the referee says there’s no time for more, but I think he’s wrong! I think there’s one more match to go and we need to tell him that we want it!”

The crowd howled, a collective roar that sent vibrations buzzing along the transparisteel around them and up through Optimus’s seat. A strange tingle shot up Optimus’s backstruts, a strange, anticipatory hum in his neural net.

“Yes we’ve got a special treat for everyone today! The one! The only! The original Decepticon!”

Optimus’s gaze was drawn inexorably to the doors creaking open on the arena’s far wall.

“Megatrooooooooooooooooon!”

Megatron strode into the arena as if he had all the time in the world, each step fluid and deliberate, helm held high. His plating had been scrubbed to a high shine and his optics were brighter than ever. His servos were empty, but the twin hilts of his longswords protruded over his spiked pauldrons. He reached the center of the arena and halted, drawing both swords and saluting the crowd. Or it looked like he was saluting, but he also appeared to be scanning the stands…

Optimus’s tank lurched disquietingly as those bright optics locked on his.

Oh, frag.

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Excerpted from the server logs of “Amassed Chaos” Massively Multiplayer Online Experience

**TripleTank01010**: Alright minions, do we attack this boss or do we bypass it?

**ChaaredBl@ster**: Call me that again and I’ll blast straight through the floor and vaporize your yayoffice.

**Lt.POKE909**: I AM ONLY THE MINION OF THE GREAT LORD MEGATRO

**Flyin_L0c0**: um like, didn't you need something from it?

**TripleTank01010**: ThE NeO BIAsTer!!

**ChaaredBl@ster**: Of course you do.

**TripleTank01010**: ALSO I’LL PULVERIZE YOU WITHOUT ANY EFFORT.

**Flyin_L0c0**: Yea yea mr im compensating for something. We already like, fritzed Shockwave’s internal circuitry onc

**ChaaredBl@ster**: You can't reasonably expect him to play with you if you keep demanding he show you his chestp

**Flyin_L0c0**: omfg like overreaction much

**Lt.POKE909**: I FAIL TO SEE WHY ANYONE WOULD DESIRE TO SEE HIS PATHETIC CHESTPLATE WHEN HE

**ChaaredBl@ster**: ...go on

**TripleTank01010**: CAN WE GET BACK TO THE GAME YOU SLAGGERS

**TripleTank01010**: This boss will require a coordinated effort. Bl@ster, I recommend you and L0c0 fan out while Lt. 1
ChaaredBl@ster: While you’re bombing it? Won’t you hit us?
Flyin_L0c0: i knew i shouldn’t have picked a brawler class, they don’t get any of the cool toys
TripleTank01010: Not at all, all we need to do is TAKE A CRUISE TO NEBULOS AND LEARN SHUFFLEBOARD !
ChaaredBl@ster: Frag, what is he doing?
Flyin_L0c0: he’s launching a frontal assault holy slag he’s going to get pulverized i gotta see this
Lt.POKE909: THEY DON’T STAND A CHANCE AGAINST MY FRONTAL ASSAULT
ChaaredBl@ster: oh great
Flyin_L0c0: he’s running in hahaha slag how do you keep a leash on him
ChaaredBl@ster: si-LENCE
Flyin_L0c0: oh look you do know how to use emote tags
Lt.POKE909: im dead. Rez pls
TripleTank01010: *dead emoji*
ChaaredBl@ster: Now we’re all dead. Thanks a lot.
Flyin_L0c0: tbf it was hilarious
TripleTank01010: at least I have jaAm.
Flyin_L0c0: so when Lugnut’s fragging you do you call it a "FRONTAL ASSAULT" too????
Lt.POKE909: :)

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Server Disconnected--
It was a shame that Megatron could only just make Optimus out behind the pane of glass. The reflections dancing upon it only allowed him to view Optimus’s silhouette, bright blue optics, and a servo moving in what might have been a wave or a rude gesture. Megatron cursed his past self for his impulsive decision to install polarized dark glass into the Decepticon High Command arena box. Ah well, Megatron mused, it was not as if he wouldn’t see Optimus later. And, he thought, he was clearly engaging Optimus’s attention, as the Autobot was now using both servos in an unambiguous filthy gesture.

The announcer’s voice brought Megatron’s attention back to the arena. The floor had been cleaned of energon from the previous match to reduce slipping hazards—or rather to reduce potential handicaps which might influence the betting pools for matches staged later in the cycle—but the ground was still stained with a grisly mix of hot pink and jet black. The grisly mix of hot pink and jet black reminded Megatron of some abstract human artwork he’d once come across while endlessly surfing the Earth extranet in Professor Sumdac’s lab. Only to this piece, Megatron himself had scrupulously contributed.”

Megatron scanned the empty arena and idly drew one of his swords. He twirled it in an easy motion and resheathed it. The crowd roared.

Armada was here for a show, might as well give them one.

Across the arena, two of the hatches set beneath the stands were rising. Beyond them, Megatron could just hear a chorus of infrabass snarls and growls, barely audible beneath the chants of the citizens.

One of the hatches stuck with a squeal of distressed metal. Huge, clawed paws shot from the gap which yawned beneath it. There was a ripping noise, the scream of hinges dislodged from their tracks. An Insecticon easily twice Megatron’s size tore through the gap in hurricane of snapping jaws and buzzing wings.

The Insecticon skidded to a halt some distance from Megatron. It spread its dual pairs of vertical shearing jaws, each of which could easily fit Megatron’s head between them, and bellowed a challenge.

The Insecticon charged.

Megatron watched its approach. He could cross the arena and disable the creature in moments, true,
but that wasn’t the point of this. He needed to remind Armada just what their leader was capable of doing.

The Insecticon was perhaps half a mechanometer away when Megatron moved.

One of his swords was immediately in his servo and he darted at the creature, ducking to the side. His sword flashed and he bolted towards the far side of the arena. He felt the swipe of the Insecticon’s paw, the narrow miss nearly taking off his head.

He didn’t need to turn to watch one of the Insecticon’s jaws drop to the arena floor in a splash of energon. The screams of the crowd told him he’d found his mark.

He smirked.

The public was so easily pleased.

He wheeled just in time to catch the Insecticon’s claws with the blade of one of his swords. His second sword was out, driving up pommel first to strike the Insecticon beneath the chin. The creature reeled, roared and tried to grab him. But Megatron was already gone.

He danced out of reach just as the Insecticon turned, seeking to gut him. He could behead it here and now, but that was hardly impressive. Instead he lunged forward, driving the blade of one of his swords down at the last moment, sinking it into arena floor between the Insecticon’s grasping claws.

The crowd gasped as one, sure that he’d missed, that he was about to be maimed. Megatron grinned.

Using the planted blade as a fulcrum, he launched himself over the Insecticon’s helm.

Releasing the hilt of his sword at the top of the arc, he landed lightly behind the Insecticon, so close he could feel the heat of its frame. In a single movement, he grasped the hilt of his remaining sword and drove it backwards. He felt it go in, heard the death shriek.

The crowd howled. He spun on his heel and beheaded the creature.

:How is Optimus Prime?: Megatron commed Strika as he flicked his sword to shed the energon clinging to it. Above him, he heard the ominous drone of buzzing wings. The second Insecticon had launched itself into the sky and was circling, preparing for an aerial assault.

There was a slightly ominous silence. :With all due respect,: Megatron could so easily see her judging squint. :You still have another to worry about:.

:One is unlikely to be a problem, and I killed the larger.: Megatron retrieved his second sword, glancing skyward as the Insecticon’s shadow swept across him. This one had folded, recurved forelegs, lined with talons the length of Megatron’s digits, that it carried close beneath it as it circled.

:He’s shiny enough that several mechs in here haven’t even so much as glanced outside to see you.: A deliberate dig, to distract him. She was testing him, though he knew it should concern him more that she felt the need to do so. He had let things go for far too long.

As long as they look and don’t touch, Megatron thought. :I didn’t ask about them, Strika, I asked about Optimus Prime.:
Optimus Prime, in fact, was not really having a good time.

Sure, watching Megatron fight was... enthralling, especially as Optimus studied the movements of his feet, the way Megatron’s fingers gripped and swung with his swords, and where his optics lay when he attacked. Yes, Optimus had every reason to focus in on Megatron. Unfortunately, a few obnoxious mechs in the booth behind him were making that rather difficult.

“Dang, if Lord Megatron doesn’t pop that valve every cycle, it would be a waste.”

“I don’t know, mech, I think I like them more when they have their natural colors.”

“ Shut up, there’s a literal puddle of oral lubricant on the floor from your drooling.”

Don’t they have anything better to do than gawk and make pointless commentary? Optimus’s servos itched to pull his axe from subspace and engage in what Sari had affectionately coined his “lumberjack impression”, but that would result in nothing more than him being crushed beneath a pile of trigger happy mechanisms several times his size. He kept his faceplates pointed forward and pretended the noise of the crowd rendered the jeering words inaudible.

“At least he’s reasonably sized. Not like some I could name.”

Behind him, Optimus heard a faint clink of metal that he recognized from many, many years of repetition as a discomfited shift.

The other speaker snorted. “Why bother? He’d rip your spike off even if you didn’t break it off trying to frag him first.”

“That’s assuming he’s even got a valve under there.”

Mystified, Optimus canted his optics to the side, trying to appear as if he wasn’t turning his head. Out of the corner of his optic he caught a glimpse of Shockwave sitting ramrod straight, his optic fixed unblinking like a traffic signal on a highway to the Pit.

Shockwave’s optic flicked down and met his own for a fraction of a second. The optic slitted and the faint prickle of Shockwave’s energy field went jagged. “Eyes front, Autobot filth.”

Optimus hid a frown and faced front once more.

The second mech behind them snorted audibly. “Nobody’s that desperate. There’s plenty of real grounders in the red light district.” A thoughtful pause. “Or maybe Lord Megatron will finally get bored enough to share.”

Optimus quietly ground his dental plates and then sucked on his glossa, thinking. He cast another doubtful glance at Shockwave. Strika looked to be busy with a datapad, apparently thoroughly bored of all of them.

“Shockwave,” said Optimus, as quietly as he could manage over the noise of the crowd.

“Shut up,” said Shockwave.

Optimus rolled his optics. Fine, if that was how it was going to be, then Shockwave could just roll with the punches.

A brief glance down at Megatron seemed to suggest he was toying with the second Insecticon and likely would be for some time. Affecting a bored sigh, Optimus stood and stretched, trying to mimic
the movements Elita-1 would use when she was trying to get one of the other recruits to buy her
drinks at Maccadam’s Oil House. He guessed he’d made a fair approximation, because the
commenting mechanisms immediately fell silent. One of them let out a low whistle.

Once he felt certain their optics were firmly on him, Optimus sauntered over towards Shockwave’s
chair, and before the mech could eject a scathing comment, vaulted over the armrest and directly into
his lap.

Thankfully the chair was facing away from the two spectators, because Optimus narrowly avoided
being launched out of it by a silently irate Shockwave. He latched onto Shockwave’s arms and
pasted what he hoped was a flirtatious smile on his faceplates.

“Sit still, Deceptiloser,” he said sweetly. “Why don’t we watch the match together, hm?”

He felt Shockwave hesitate, his field pulsing with conflict. At last, his optic narrowed. He slipped an
arm under Optimus’s knees and arranged him across the chair so that his brightly painted greaves
dangled enticingly over the armrest, in full view of the two behind them.

“Nice,” said Optimus under his breath.

“Get bent,” said Shockwave.

Optimus snorted quietly. “Such a sweet talker. Were you this nice to Blurr?”

Shockwave went rigid under him. “And how the frag would you know anything about that?”

“I actually didn’t know, you just told me,” said Optimus. He ducked behind Shockwave’s large helm
and favored him with a sardonic smile. “Oops.”

The expression on Shockwave’s faceplates would have been priceless, if he’d had actual features. As
it was, the naked shock in his field had Optimus suppressing a laugh.

“How could you possibly have inferred that in the first place?” Shockwave hissed.

Optimus shrugged and theatrically laid his helm against Shockwave’s pauldron so he could get a
peek behind them. The two mechanisms who’d been so gleeful earlier now wore identical
disgruntled expressions. Strika had actually paused in her work and was watching them with mild
interest. “Bots talk,” he said. “Blurr and I were in boot camp together. He had a vain streak, but I
never saw him polished as nicely as I did after you started working in the office.”

“Says something about you Autobots that you can figure that out but not my real identity.”

Optimus shrugged. “Don’t look at me. I’m just a janitor.” He eyed Shockwave, the edges of his
mouthplates tugging in a disapproving frown. “To be honest, I didn’t think much of you, but Blurr
made his own decisions. Of course, when I thought he’d end up crushed by the experience, I didn’t
think it would happen literally.”

Shockwave’s optic blazed and his field went jagged with rage, but he didn’t reply.

“Nothing to say?”

“Decepticons have no need of softer sentiments,” said Shockwave, his tone stony.

“Of course not.” Optimus sighed, his processor awash with images of glyphs on datapads, of boxes
of pastries on berths.
They watched the arena in silence.

“Blurr was too clever for his own good,” said Shockwave tightly. His field bubbled and boiled with emotion that belied the tight control over his vocalizer. “If he had been as stupid as the rest of you, he’d still be alive.”

Optimus started slightly, but Shockwave was still speaking. “And if I had been a better agent, there would have been no need for him to die.” He sounded bitter. “They may consider me half a grounder, and yet the only thing I have ever truly succeeded at was cleaning up messes.”

Optimus drew an in-vent, and released it. He studied Shockwave. From this distance it was almost impossible to conceal the fluctuations of one’s field. A skilled bot with good emotional control could manage it, if Optimus recalled his espionage modules, but Shockwave, currently, was anything but.

He focused behind them, noted Strika’s attention had returned to her datapad. He thought about Cyclonus, about Megatron. “Well,” he said quietly. “I may have good news then. You’re scrap at that as well.”

Shockwave froze. Optimus tapped a finger against the side of his helm. “Optic front,” he reminded.

“You lie,” gritted Shockwave.

“Sometimes,” said Optimus. “But not this time. The results of your cleanup remain to be seen, but he still functioned, last I heard.”

It said a lot about Shockwave’s state of processor that he didn’t punt Optimus across the floor when he hooked an arm up behind Shockwave’s helm in something which would look for all the world to anyone sitting behind them like a tender embrace.

And if Optimus’s servo just so happened to form itself into the universal sign for ‘frag off’, well, maybe it was an accident. It wasn’t as if living in Armada hadn’t helped him practice using it.

Without the aid of the World Encompassing Extra-Net Intraspace Electronavigation System, they surely would have missed the location of the distress call entirely. There certainly weren’t any visual indicators which they could use to distinguish it; the farmhouse looked approximately the same as the last hundred they’d passed, with its squat, utilitarian shape and bristling array of energon collectors. A low row of blue crystalline hedges wound its way around the perimeter and two silver storage silos loomed over the building like overbearing bodyguards, their round-capped roofs glinting even in the faint stellar light.

Sentinel rolled to a halt in front of the place and Sari poked her helm out of his window. “Is this it? I don’t see anybody?”

Sentinel scanned the front of the building. “I can’t detect any bots in the vicinity. Get out and let me transform.”

Rather than opening his doors, Sari wriggled out of the window and hopped to the ground. Sentinel transformed and frowned at the building. “The location identifier on the call matches the one assigned to this address. Be on your guard. There may be hostiles.”
“Are there Autobot hostiles?” said Sari. “Because I gotta say, so far I’ve just seen that sex shop guy and G.I. Barbie. Not exactly an episode of Cops in here.”

“Of course there are,” snapped Sentinel, bristling. “At any time any Cybertronian on the planet could be—”

Sentinel chalked it up to his constant vigilance that it occurred to him to duck first and ask questions later. He hit the ground just in time to avoid being beheaded for the second time in his functioning. A monstrous, glowing object catapulted through the space he had been occupying and hit the ground behind him with a buzzing roar like an angry Insecticon.

“Hit the deck!” shouted Sentinel, a little too late. “Incoming missile fire! Call for backup!”

Except Sari wasn’t calling for backup. She was approaching the object, still buzzing and vibrating against the hard ground. They both stared at it.

It was a hedge-trimmer.

Without a word, Sari reached down and switched off the ignition on the buzzing thing’s handle. The engine sputtered and died, the spinning teeth grinding to a halt.

Sentinel opened his mouth, when from somewhere beyond the hedgerows, there was a great shout.

“I’m telling ye, Tiller, ye great sack of slag! If ye so much as turn yer optics in the direction of my fragging hedges again, I’ll take yer helm off with yer own trimmer!”

“Ah shove off it, Harrow!” barked another voice. “You’re only throwing a fit because we all know you grind up the damn crystals and use ‘em to flavor your oil!”

Frowning, Sentinel got to his pedes and made a concerted attempt to brush away the dust from his overhasty attempt to hug the ground.

“Should we...take a look?” said Sari, and Sentinel immediately remembered that he was supposed to be in charge here. He squared his pauldrons and stalked in the direction of the voice with his best parade ground march.

As they rounded one of the silos, Sentinel caught sight of two bulky bots, rust-orange and ultramarine blue respectively. They were in each other’s faceplates, fists twice the size of Sentinel’s head clenched like lob balls as they snarled at each other. Behind them stretched a number of crystal hedgerows, the majority cut at bizarre angles, as though a ballerina wielding a chainsaw had decided to dance a rendition of Cyber-Duck Lake among them, leaving behind a strange city of shard spires.

The ultramarine bot spotted them first. “Oy!” they shouted. “Finally, the fuzz! Arrest this miscreant!”

“Oh, aye, a ‘miscreant’,;” said the orange bot. “You learn that one on the crossword or off the logo stamped on your slagging tires?”

“I am Sentinel Prime, new captain of the Luna-1 precinct,” said Sentinel, in his best ‘I am the authority in this situation, so slagging take me seriously” voice. “What appears to be the problem?”

“Nothing but a bot with too much rust between the ears,” sneered the orange mechanism.

“This, this, vandal,;” spluttered the blue one. “Went and cut my fragging hedges to pieces! Look at them! Everything is ruined!”
“They’re half my hedges, you worthless incompetent! I can cut down whatever I please!”

“You…” said Sentinel. “You...contacted the police because of an argument over hedges?”

Both bots looked at him as if he’d said something phenomenally insane.

“Well of course,” said the orange one. “Who were we going to call, the slagging plumber?”

“What was that you were saying about hostiles?” Sari muttered at him under her breath.

“Shut up,” responded Sentinel, between dental plates gritted in what he hoped was a winning smile.

Excerpted from The Offcycle Comedy Joor with Bluestreak, Punchline Productions, Cybertron

Hey, I’m your host Bluestreak and if you smell that you know it’s time for our segment YA SMELTED

[List on the side appears, full of names]

Rodimus Prime
Autotroopers
Governmental Recording Devices in My Apartment
Rosanna
Maccadam’s
Sunstreaker

Rodimus Prime. You may have been called the Chosen One back at the academy, but all Ultra Magnus chooses you

Autotroopers. I don’t understand why Fortress Maximus decided that y’all have to give up your frames and be stuck ii

The recording devices in my apartment. Ok, for the sorry slagger listening in on me, you’re a fragging snitch. Sure, I i

Rosanna. Who would have guessed that the music torturing our audio shells for stellar cycles was actually intended t

Maccadam’s. Your menu is too long, your location too hard to get to, and the service is still too good for me to decide

Sunstreaker’s art. Listen mech, you can’t just take a waste disposal unit and call it a fountain. Sure, you put more th

Chapter End Notes
So apparently in comedy, working "blue" is working NSFW, and "cursing up a bluestreak" is cursing up a whole bunch, so why not take Bluestreak's name and run with it and into the ground? :D

- Reya
Just some rebellious attitudes

Chapter Notes

It's been... how many months? No wonder I feel so shitty, I needed my dose of Validation™ from this fic.
School sucks, but I'm graduating and moving in with Zuzu... so not that many excuses from now on. XD

- Reya

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After a few kliks, sitting on Shockwave’s stiffened lap was becoming even more uncomfortable, especially when Optimus had to balance himself and be able to throw a library of subtle rude gestures at the Decepticons behind them.

“It doesn’t matter what sort of rapport you think you can foster between us, you know. I still won’t let you get away with this..,” said Shockwave, his single optic dilating but otherwise showing little reaction. This was likely a wise course of action, considering that they were surrounded by many tons of heavy armaments, most of which rested in the servos of mechanisms who would probably take the first opportunity to vaporize them. Optimus was slightly impressed, but he supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised. Shockwave had managed to conceal himself on Cybertron for all that time, surely he was at least competent at disguise?

This thought was preferable to the alternative, which was that literally no one had noticed Shockwave the entire time. The Academy curriculum really did need an upgrade.

“With what?” said Optimus. “I didn’t plan to be on Armada, if you remember correctly.”

“I learned too late not to underestimate you, but no longer. And you wouldn’t be the first Autobot to bring down a Decepticon leader.”

Optimus opened his mouth to scoff, only for a thought to well unbidden to the forefront of his processor.

You know nothing of what happened between me and my spark-twin.

Optimus flinched, recalling the memory of Megatron’s tense posture and the growing crack in his goblet. The previous Decepticon leader was clearly an unspoken subject, the mere mention a silencing curse among Decepticons.

“You mean Megazarak?”

“Lord Megatron… was forced to banish his own spark twin.” Shockwave’s voice was sorrowful, though Optimus was unsure of whether it was for Megatron or for the loss of Megazarak. “If I had not been loyal before, I became so then. If Lord Megatron could bear to lose his brother, then… then I could give up my... connections as well, for the sake of the Decepticon cause.”

Optimus frowned. “What did that have to do with an Autobot?”
Shockwave managed an impressively disdainful expression for a mechanism with essentially no features. His field prickled jaggedly against Optimus's own and Optimus shifted with discomfort, grimacing at the little stabbing sensations, ghosts along his superstructure. “I shouldn’t have to explain anti-fraternization laws to you. I’ve seen the Autobot statutes.”

Optimus boggled at him. “You mean you’ve... actually read those? All nine hundred volumes?”

Shockwave actually looked embarrassed for a moment, but blustered onwards. “That is not the point—”

“No, but I mean, seriously,” said Optimus. “I had to read the volume on clemency for the course on law and it nearly melted my processor. And that’s one of the shorter ones.”

“It behooves one to know their enemy,” said Shockwave loftily. “Besides, I was planning to become a lawyer once we crushed the Autobot menace.”

Optimus gestured in bewilderment in a way he hoped encompassed the general...Armada-ness of everything around them. “That...that makes almost no sense. Does Armada even have lawyers?”

“Of course we have lawyers,” said Shockwave. “Their tools are the pamphlet with the Decepticon Code and their weaponry of choice. Sometimes extra copies of the pamphlet to affix to the bodies of the defendants.”

There was a lengthy pause.

“Well,” said Optimus. “I won’t deny, that would probably shorten legal proceedings.”

Optimus fell silent. His mind wandered to that dusty room he had woken up in, locked away for millennia. Megazarak might be gone, but his presence, or rather the lack of his presence, was a hole in the Decepticon leadership; unmentioned and avoided, but visible within the pathways they walked, like the cycling of planets around a black hole. And his downfall had been caused by an Autobot?

What exactly had happened to Megatron’s brother?

---

:He appears to be making himself quite comfortable, Lord Megatron: said Strika dryly. :Even if his choice of seating is perhaps a bit unorthodox.: 

Megatron hid a frown, optics flicking up to track the circling Insecticon. :Seating?:

Strika chuckled, a tad unpleasantly. :I admit I wondered why such a cold, unwelcoming mechanism had caught your optic, but he seems to warm up quite easily.: 

Megatron bit back his immediate response, which was to demand who and where and who dares? He was unable to control his field, however, charge surging to the surface of his plating and spidering across his superstructure. Static crackled over the commline from the interference and Strika hummed with interest.

:Optics up, Lord Megatron.: 

Attention split between his budding rage and the unusual anxiety that the crowd—or at least Strika—
could detect weakness, smell it coming off him in waves, Megatron missed the moment the Insecticon dived.

He caught the massive creature in time to bear it to the ground, too close for the blade of his sword. He hooked an arm around the Insecticon, grappling for handfuls of elytra. One of its curved hook forelegs shot out and struck him in the solar plexus, sending his gyros reeling and venting all the atmosphere from him at once. The other caught on his armor and scraped down it with force, producing a strut-rattling squeal of vibration. He twisted, straining not to lose his grip, optical feed flickering static snow. His visual feed was a maelstrom of snapping chelicerae and mandibles and far, far too many optics. One of the Insecticon’s mandibles struck him across the faceplates, and Megatron caught the heat and scent of spilled energon.

Groping blind across the thorax, he found a servoful of wing, and ripped.

From this proximity, the Insecticon’s scream was deafening, but it did not let go. Megatron bared his dental plates, rage welling in him; rage at the Insecticon, rage at Strika, rage at the blasted Autobot. Rage at Megazarak for leaving him in this position, rage at himself. For weakness, for jealousy, for his failure at playing even this simple, necessary role in this whole sordid affair.

Snarling aloud, Megatron snapped his helm up, driving with full force into the tessellated abomination of the Insecticon’s faceplates. Spitting and shouting against the deafening whine in his audio sensors, he struck again and again, felt exoskeleton crumple against the bludgeon of his spiked helm. Energon sprayed, blinding him, and he dug his digits into the Insecticon’s thorax, delving, digging for the vital parts.

The Insecticon fought him, of course, but he slipped from beneath it as it flailed and screeched, forcing the downed and wounded creature under him. He’d lost his swords somewhere, but he latched onto the head and twisted, straining, straining…

Energon gushed down his front, and with a noise like the wheeze of an engine run down, the Insecticon went limp beneath him, its limbs continuing to bend and grasp at nothing. Ex-venting hard, he clutched at the dismembered helm, digits hooking in the wicked spines of the mandibles. He staggered to his pedes, drenched in energon, pooling and clotting in abstract patterns on his armor.

The crowd was eerily silent.

He hefted the Insecticon’s helm in his servo, displaying it as he bellowed for all present: “Who are you?!”

“Decepticons!” howled a smattering of voices from the crowd, and a roar of agreement swelled from the stands.

“Then, Decepticons!” He thrust the Insecticon’s helm higher, raining droplets of energon onto himself. “Who is your leader?!”

The screams were deafening: “Megatron! Megatron!”

:Impressive,: murmured Strika into his commlink. :And here I was worried you were going to do something slagheaded.:

Megatron cast aside the helm and strode for the nearest of his dropped swords. He lifted the weapon and sliced at the air, a warding gesture, before pointing it at the box in the stands in which he knew contained his officers—as well as Optimus. The battle rage buzzed hot and red in his neural circuitry. But it was his spark, clawing and writhing in his chassis, that drove him onwards.
“Megatron is your leader!” he spat. “And you know, all of you to a mech, the consequences of laying servo on what belongs to me!”

:Uh, Lord Megatron? I don’t think that this is the—:

“So I ask you, Decepticons!” roared Megatron. “If one among you would challenge me for what is mine, then come forth!”

:Oh for the love of—:

Optimus didn’t know exactly when he had stood, until he found himself with his hands pressed up against the transparisteel, processor and optics transfixed on Megatron below him.

“If one among you would challenge me for what is mine, then come forth!”

Optimus’s processor crash-landed back into his helm. The words stuck in his spark. What was Megatron’s? Wasn’t he still technically Megatron’s? He certainly wasn’t free to leave Armada, at least. Megatron’s facial features showed offense with a tinge of embarrassment, as if someone had insulted him, and he had not just ripped a fully grown Insecticon apart with his bare servos.

Unless… Optimus looked at Strika, who was peeking through her fingers at him in what otherwise would have been a full-blown facepalm.

Nah.

A quick glance around showed that everyone in the bubble was staring at him, not at Megatron. Okay, perhaps he did look ridiculous glued against the transparisteel like he had been… worried or… nope. Processor not going there.

He focused back on Megatron, who was still staring up at the box with the kind of intensity that made Optimus very glad he’d apparently never had blaster beams installed in his optics, which he’d heard one Decepticon, Heatseek, had done near the height of the Great War. While laser optics were one of those features that sounded much better in theory than in practice, Heatseek had still managed to destroy half a squadron before accidentally glancing at a rock caught in his treads and vaporizing half his own frame.

Optimus didn’t have the foggiest idea what Megatron was on about with his ‘challenge me for what is mine’ nonsense, but then again…he was looking directly at the box. And the only thing in the box that belonged to Megatron, strictly speaking, was…

Oh, you have got to be slagging kidding me.

Optimus gritted his dental plates, felt his superstructure hike, armor plates lifting. Where did the slagger get off on saying that? And why? Was he…jealous—no, not jealous, possessive? Quite possibly, but possessive for what reason? It wasn’t as if Optimus had been flinging himself at any Decepticons, and since the whole unpleasant business with the collar, no Decepticons had bothered coming anywhere near Optimus. Megatron clearly had waste oil buildup in his processor.

Still, Optimus realized. Megatron might be onto something.
Megatron had invited someone—presumably this Decepticon he thought was honing in on Optimus—to challenge him for possession of Optimus. Which, as far as Optimus could grasp, meant that Optimus would belong by law—insofar as Armada had any—to the winner of the match.

Which meant Optimus himself might have just been handed an unexpected opportunity.

A potentially suicidal opportunity, but an opportunity.

Optimus shrugged, and pulled his axe from his subspace. It felt ridiculously satisfying to have the weapon in his servo again, and he gave it a twirl, in the spirit of the Armada custom of being ridiculous and overdramatic. Slowly, he turned his helm and gave the rows of silent Decepticons behind him a polite nod.

“That’s my match,” he said, and bolted for the door.

Granted, Optimus’s sprint out of the room almost ended prematurely. Slipping on a questionable liquid may have taken away from the gravity of the moment, but slaggit, he was not going to miss an opportunity to get off this trash heap. At the very least, it would be fun to frag with Megatron.

The unmuted noise outside of the VIP area buffeted Optimus, like a belch from Bulkhead after he’d consumed too many of those energon patty things he’d tried making after seeing Isaac and Sari barbeque. He could hear jeers and cheering and arguments, and here and there, rising out of the unintelligible mess, the occasional clip of someone shouting: what the slag is Lord Megatron talking about? Around him in the stadium, the bulk of Armada’s population melted into a swirl of muted grays and purples.

The stairs were, predictably, blocked by mechs who had been smuggled in with cheap no-seat and no-fire-safety tickets. Behind him, Optimus could hear the indignant shuffling of Shockwave and Lugnut, arguing with each other on who got to retrieve Megatron’s pet Autobot. Optimus had to make a move to get down to the arena quickly.

Up above, the stadium lights shone like the suns Armada lacked. Optimus bit his lower lip as he made some calculations in his processor.

“Hey!”

Locomotion’s shrill voice sounded way too close. A glance to his left and Optimus spotted her, stomping her way towards him. “I know you! You’re not part of the refreshments or the entertainment! Where’s your protoform-sitter, you little runaway!”

Of all the times for her to suddenly start doing her job.

Make that very quickly. With a muttered curse, Optimus vaulted over the stair railing.

He dropped like a lump of lead. It was only a few mechanometers at best, but the fall was still sickening. The atmosphere whipped past his helm and he heard the yelps and shouts of a dozen startled Decepticons as he whizzed past. He managed to keep his pedes beneath him as he struck the floor and staggered, lashing out with his axe and digging it into the ground to stabilize himself.

He stood, and looked up just in time to see Lugnut charging down the stairs after him, bowling over row after row of Decepticons, all of whom were hacking at his shins with the kind of fervor usually reserved for removing space barnacles.

Optimus slung his axe over his shoulder and booked it.
Up ahead he could see the hallway to the arena proper, a glowing circle of light at the end of a long, dark corridor. He charged towards it, heard the shouts behind him, and launched himself into the blinding light.

The floor of the arena was far more disgusting from up close. Standing amid the colorful collage of fluids and various other exuded materials, Optimus could smell the rot and rust. Doing his best to ignore it, Optimus slogged for the center of the arena, towards the figure standing there.

Megatron looked very similar, and yet utterly unlike how he had looked before, on Earth, when he’d torn so easily through the ranks of Optimus’s team. His spiked armor gave him an air of a relic from the past, a gladiator of a distant age. He turned towards Optimus at the sound of his pedesteps, taking him in, optics flickering over his frame, lingering in a way that Optimus didn’t feel like analyzing, before settling on the axe in his servo.

Optimus was strangely gratified to see the tiniest hint of shock in Megatron’s optics.

He gripped the handle of his axe in both servos and brandished it.

“I challenge you!” he shouted, hoping that he could be heard over the roar of the crowd. “I challenge you, Megatron, Leader of the Decepticons, for what is yours!”

Megatron was not what could be called a young mechanism. He had lived many ages and seen many things, ugly and brutal, ridiculous and profane, transcendent and beautiful, for all he’d not been able to articulate or understand the latter. He was not a mechanism given to surprise or being taken off guard.

And yet the sight of Optimus Prime, storming towards him, brandishing a weapon, a hurricane of intense and exquisite colors, floored him.

Optimus’s colors were already what was considered ostentatious: brilliant, saturated hues more often favored as advertisements, vivid contrast of blues and reds. But to this he’d added decorative patterns in bright orange and yellow and gold, designs of flames that wrapped along his limbs and seemed to move and flicker as he charged. His axe was held two-servoed. It was a fighting style Megatron recognized, in which the handle pulled double duty as a shield. His helm was held high, his optics bright and determined.

With adrenaline working its way through Megatron’s entire circuitry from both his previous battle and the splendid sight before him, he put all of his fangs into a grin, flight engines roaring.

“So be it.”

To: Blackarachnia

From: Cyclonus
Subject:
Did you attend the arena match today?

---

To: Cyclonus
From: Blackarachnia

Subject: Re: Use a Subject Line Fraghole
Yes, I frequently attend public events in which I have no interest, and which I know will be occupied by hundreds of loathsome Attendees. It's a good way to blend into the crowd, unnoticed and unmemorable.

---

To: Blackarachnia
From: Cyclonus

Subject: Re: Re: Why Should I?
I spotted Straxus in the upper stands. He’s arrived on Armada.

---

To: Cyclonus
From: Blackarachnia

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Because It Makes You Look Like A Serial Killer
Fragging perfect. Not like this city has an excess of sadistic slauger who's only creative capacity comes from devising new torture methods.

---

To: Blackarachnia
From: Cyclonus

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Blank Subject Lines Reduce Security Risk
It’s still unclear what his motives are. He’s surely scheming but he’s always scheming. Something must have drawn him out of Lucifer.

---

To: Blackarachnia
From: Cyclonus

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Your FACE Is a Security Risk
Who cares? Maybe he just got bored and wanted to check out the new Sharkticonado sequel? I bet Lucifer just gets bored and plans to check out the new Sharkticonado sequel?

---

To: Blackarachnia
From: Cyclonus

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: This Is a Subject Line to Satisfy Blackarachnia

Have you told Optimus Prime about your work in Operation: Doppelganger?

---

To: Cyclonus

From: Blackarachnia

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT SLAGGER

Optimus knows about Toxitron, and Nemesis was stolen by Straxus. What’s the point? “Oh hey Optimus, I was craz3

You’re right, Cyclonus. That’ll in no way cause a slagshow whatsoever. Remind me to listen to you more often.

--

To: Blackarachnia:

From: Cyclonus

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: THAT’S NOT WHAT I MEANT SLAGGER

Nemesis wasn’t stolen. He was kidnapped.
Chapter End Notes
Art by soursoppi on tumblr, who somehow managed to predict a pissed off pretty Optimus ready 2 fite.
https://soursoppi.tumblr.com/post/177265609977/

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!