Blurring The Lines

by CodenameEternity

Summary

The cost of fighting for the freedom of all is slavery and Hound finds himself alone, bought by a Lord Seeker to serve in his household. Expecting the worse, Hound discovers not all Masters are that bad.

Notes

Right I'm going to say this NOW, all of it, so you are warned! WARNINGS include: slavery, angst, abuse, inequality, rape, sticky mech sex, violence, war. It's going to get adult and stay that way.
This is a mix between G1 and 07 Movie verse. Imagine they look like Movie verse, but many of them will be in G1 colours (like Ratchet). Ironhide will be movie colours but Bumblebee will looked like his G1 counterpart. It's mix 'n match season!
Also the Latin title means - Nothing is an unmixed blessing.
“This way please sir.”

The blue seeker nodded, following the smaller purple and green mech down the long corridor. On either side were glass fronted pens, each housing one individual. Most of them were sat or standing and they watched the pair passing with well disguised interest. Thundercracker studied them all, noting those that took his interest. His guide halted him outside one pen to show off a new acquisition.

“I think you’ll find this mech most useful. He fulfils your criteria for a serving mech, fresh in and already trained.”

“So I see Swindle,” Thundercracker nodded as he read the datafile. “Expensive, but what else would I expect from you?”

“I only offer the best slaves,” Swindle boasted.

The blue mech ignored him, his attention drawn across the corridor to a pen with liquid trickling down its glass front. He crossed the corridor to peer inside and through the haze he could make out a green mech huddled on the floor in the far corner, his head pressed into the ground. All his limbs were tucked in under him, trying to minimise the amount of chassis exposed to the water spraying from the ceiling and it looked highly uncomfortable.

“He’s still being ah… trained,” Swindle gestured at the pen. “New stock.”

Thundercracker picked up the datafile hanging next to the pen and raised one optic ridge. “Prisoner relocation. That is very unlike you Swindle.”

“Ah yes, well, it’s his abilities you see.” Swindle tapped the file entry further down. “Once I’ve broken him in he’ll be extremely valuable.”

The seeker realised that would be true. The mech’s highly calibrated sensors were well beyond the norm and his ability to be able to produce holograms was rare.

“How long has he been here?”

“Three deca-cycles.” Swindle turned his red optics on the slave.

“That is a long time,” Thundercracker mused. “Why was he a prisoner?”

“He was caught stealing information that would have led to a large amount of slaves being illegally released.” Swindle scowled. “He’s a liberalist.”

“How ironic his punishment then,” Thundercraker murmured before saying in a louder voice, “That will be all for now Swindle. I’ll call for you when I’m done.”

The green and purple mech glanced between him and the green mech before bowing. “As you wish sir.”

Thundercracker waited until he was out of sight prior to turning back to the mech in the pen.

“What is your name?”
The green mech stirred briefly. “Slaves don’t have names.”

“Mine do,” Thundercracker replied. “I find it most annoying having to refer to everyone by he or she.”

The green head rolled until Thundercracker could make out one weakly shining blue optic and he could see the mech stare at him before he answered, “Hound.”

“Hound.” Thundercracker nodded. “You intrigue me. What would you say if I told you I’m considering purchasing you?”

“If I had the energy, laugh.” The other mech slowly lifted his head off the floor, sitting up. As more of him was revealed Thundercracker could see he was a ground based mech, blocky and sturdy. “Why would I think it was anything but a bad idea?”

“Because in comparison to some masters, I am fair and reasonable.” Thundercracker folded his arms across his chest. “I know you’ve heard stories, but I do not tolerate that sort of behaviour towards my servants. I would have thought that would be better than this.”

Hound climbed to his feet, seemingly uncaring about the water pouring over him now. “You get used to this. The acid is only mild, not enough to damage but enough to burn.” The green mech studied the seeker back. “You know I’m a liability, why risk it?”

“Because you interest me,” the blue mech responded. “And your abilities are something I could put to good use, though perhaps not in the way you were used to before.”

“It seems your mind is already made up,” Hound shrugged.

Thundercracker called Swindle back and handed over his datapad. “These are the ones I wish to purchase.” As the dealer went through his list the seeker added, “And him.”

Swindle looked up, startled. “But he’s not trained yet.”

“So that will make him cheaper and you know full well I have the equipment and experience to deal with such slaves.”

Swindle frowned. “I had high hopes of selling him at a good price.”

“He’s been here three deca-cycles. There’s no telling he’ll break in time to cover your costs or that he’ll be useful afterwards, if he does.” Thundercracker gestured at the green mech who was watching the exchange steadily, though his helm was tilted forward to keep the acid from his optics.

The slave dealer re-read the seeker’s file, did some calculations and offered up a deal, one that included Hound. “You always were a good client. I take it you have enough collars.” The seeker produced them from subspace and handed them over. “Very good. I will have them brought down to your transport.” Swindle gave Hound a sideways glance.

The green mech gave him a placid smile in return. “I’ll be good.”

The green and purple mech snorted but didn’t respond as he led Thundercracker away. Neither of them saw the way Hound stepped up to the glass partition and gazed after them. Once they were out of sight his head dropped and he sighed. He did want to be out of here, but slavery was the worst fate he could imagine. That’s why he’d been helping trying to free the slaves and there was no way of telling whether the seeker had been telling him the truth. He’d heard the rumours about some seekers, about the slaves they abused and broke, leaving nothing but shells. The green mech
shuttered his optics, not knowing what to do.

It wasn’t long before two of Swindle’s associates came to collect him. He held out his hands, which they cuffed together and joined him to the train of the others. They were all led out of the holding pen area and down into the processing rooms, where their new collars were attached. Hound was last in the line and had time to struggle with his pride and humiliation before they approached him. It was the last symbol of his freedom being taken away and that hurt more than he could have imagined.

The smooth metal collar simply snapped closed around his throat before a metal spike was driven through a seam at the back of his nape to link up with the neural pathways. That granted his new owner the ability to control him, if he so desired; to cause him pain if he thought his slave deserved the punishment. His systems protested at the intrusion but the programme carried codes in it that overrode his defences, forcing him to accept the collar.

Once the collars were secured and tested the newly bought slaves were then taken to their waiting transport. The blue seeker and Swindle were waiting next to it, datapad in Thundercracker’s hand and he noted down each slave as it was led aboard the ship. Hound knew he shouldn’t be looking at his new owner, but something compelled him to stare, to show him the defiance he still carried with him. Thundercracker looked up as he walked past and met his optics calmly, one side of his mouth curling upwards into a smile.

“Slave!” Swindle’s voice barked, and Hound lowered his optics away, knowing there would be pain otherwise.

“Thank you Swindle. Here are your credits.”

“It’s a pleasure doing business with you, as always.” There was clear greed written into the mech’s voice.

That was all Hound heard before he disappeared into the ship. His cuffed hands were linked up to a small ring in one wall before two leg clamps secured his feet to the deck. The green mech noted the other slaves didn’t get that last luxury and felt his face set into a grim expression. They expected him to cause trouble then.

The seeker wasn’t long coming aboard after them and as he walked up the aisle between them, he paused next to Hound, optics glancing down at his legs. One optic ridge rose before he looked up at his face, where he saw Hound’s expression and his own face softened.

“The trip will not take long.” His voice was loud enough to carry to all the other slaves, but he never took his optics from Hound and it left the green mech wondering whether it had meant to be some sort of reassurance. It wasn’t like he could ask. The seeker was already heading to the front of the ship to his seat and it wouldn’t have been appropriate behaviour for a slave, though Hound suspected that Thundercracker already knew that Hound wasn’t going to behave in the right way.

The seeker had been right. It had barely been a cycle before the shuttle touched down again. As the cargo bay doors opened the blue flyer appeared next to Hound, datapad in hand and he waited patiently for mechs from the outside to enter. The green mech noticed they all had collars on so he could study them freely. Two of them led the other slaves out of the transport and out of optic range, leaving Hound alone with Thundercracker and a bulky black mech. The seeker handed over the datapad to the black mech who read it, grunted non-committally, and then set about detaching the leg clamps from Hound. Once they were removed he took the cuffs from Hound’s wrists and gestured out of the open door. “Outside.”

Hound gladly left the confines of the ship to find himself standing on the edge of a wide expanse of
garden that stretched up to and around a stately mansion. He knew he was staring but it was much bigger than he’d been expecting, even though he realised Thundercracker had to have a decent amount of credits to afford all of the slaves he had brought back with him. It was well maintained and the house’s architecture told Hound it was reasonably old, speaking of family money.

“So you like my home?” A voice spoke in one audio, making Hound jump. He found Thundercracker standing next to him, optics regarding the building fondly.

“Yes.”

“Well that’s good.” The seeker glanced at him with a smile. “It’ll make it easier for you to settle in and get down to work.”

The black mech joined them as the seeker starting walking towards the house, forcing Hound to walk too, or be left behind. “The pilot is taking the ship back to the garage now, my lord. Ya dinner will be served shortly, unless ya wish to bathe first.”

“No, I could do with some energon. Ironhide, this is Hound.” Thundercracker gestured to the green mech. “He’ll be your replacement.”

Hound wrenched his optics from the house, startled, to Thundercracker and then across at the black mech, who chuckled. “Untrained I see, my lord. I thought ya were going to find a flyer to replace me.”

The seeker shrugged. “I don’t impulse buy all that often but so far my hunches have been correct.”

“Makes meh wonder where ya find them.”

Thundercracker smiled. “You know me. I have this strange habit of picking up untrained mechs.”

Ironhide nodded, examining the datafile, opening the door for Thundercracker without looking up. “Interesting choice, my lord. Assassins won’t think much to him when his file gets out.”

“That’ll give you chance to bulk his stats up a little.” The seeker dismissed them, heading the other way into another room.

“Alright then,” Ironhide subspaced the datafile. “Ya’re with me.”

Hound followed the black mech when he started walking and tentatively asked, “You don’t mind being replaced?”

“Thundercracker is just looking ahead. I’m getting older and slower. I’ll still be in charge of security here, but just not of his safety outside.”

Hound frowned. “What is your job?”

The bigger mech smiled at him. “He’s really dropped ya in at the deep end ain’t he? I’m Thundercracker’s personal guard. When he leaves this house it is my responsibility to make sure no one harms him. In some situations I, and now ya, will have to be a personal aide as well.”

“But… why weren’t you with him today?”

Ironhide scowled. “Because he’s a stubborn block head. He likes to purchase new servants alone. If ya can persuade him otherwise, ya a cleverer mech than meh. Now, first things first, we need to get that collar engraved, otherwise ya just a common slave.” Ironhide directed Hound into a room.
The green mech glanced around curiously. There were two other mechs present as well as a collection of machinery, including a slanted berth at one side. Ironhide took him over to it and directed him to lie down on it, which Hound did, if tentatively.

“This won’t take long.” The black mech gestured towards one of the other mechs there. “And then ya’ll have a collar like mine.” He tapped his own neck, drawing Hound’s gaze to the intricate detailing there and despite what it represented, the green mech couldn’t help but be impressed with artistry of it. The curving script detailed Thundercracker’s name and Ironhide’s job, his status in effect, to other slaves and masters. As a guard he had more immunity and power than ordinary slaves, so he could carry a gun, but not much more than that.

The procedure was simple enough and Hound only had to put up with the high pitched whine of the engraving tools for a breem before Ironhide was telling him to get up and follow him again. The black mech lead him through another set of corridors, still grand and arching like the ones at the entrance hall. They were all simply decorated, with large striking pieces of artwork placed at intervals along the walls, making their own quiet statement. It also made a declaration about Thundercracker as well. Hound has seen enough by now to know the seeker could be shouting his wealth from the rooftops, but he clearly saw no need and the green mech found he liked the understated way the Lord had arranged his home.

Ironhide stopped by a door. “Now we need to get ya cleaned up.”

“I’m clean.” Hound glanced down at himself.

“Not to Thundercracker’s standards. It’s the rules. New mech comes in, he gets cleaned,” Ironhide smirked. “Don’t worry, ya’ll enjoy this.”

The door opened and Hound walked inside, curiously looking around. The centre of the room was taken up by a huge pool filled with lightly steaming water and flanking it were two more mechs. Cautiously the green mech stepped over to them and when they gestured to the pool, he stepped down into it and found at the centre it was deep enough to come up nearly to his shoulders. He shifted uncomfortably as the other two mechs joined him and proceeded to thoroughly rub him down. Hound had never been to the public washrooms where you could pay to be cleaned like this, rubbed down and waxed until you looked like a new mech. He’d heard rumours that the attendants were extremely good at their job, but he wasn’t a vain mech, so it had never appealed. That, and the silence that reigned as they worked, as Hound was too unsure of himself to try and start a conversation.

Once they had cleaned him, they led him out of the pool and dried him down with specialist cloths. The two mechs then split jobs; one concentrating on all his glass work whilst the other buffed up his chassis, until he stood there pretty sure anyone could admire their reflection on any part of his body.

“Now ya clean,” Ironhide remarked from his position by the door and Hound gave him a bemused smile. “Come on, time for ya tour.”

The green mech followed the bigger mech through the mansion, absorbing every detail, because he was sure he wouldn’t get shown again and would be expected to remember where everything was first time around. Luckily for Hound his photographic memory meant this was no issue. Eventually they came to a corridor where Ironhide stopped outside one particular set of doors without opening them.

“These are Lord Thundercracker’s private suite of rooms. First is his office, then living quarters and then his berth room and washrack. This is where ya’ll be expected to be every morning to go over his schedule. I’ll get what I need from the main terminals now. This will be ya first thing to do
tomorrow.”

“Do I just go in?”

“First thing, yeah, but otherwise don’t until ya given permission. He likes it if ya there first thing, before he is, but don’t worry, he flies around the grounds first thing, so ya’ll always know when he’s up,” Ironhide replied.

Hound nodded. “And if I don’t turn up?”

“Thinking about testing him?” The black mech grinned. “He’ll surprise ya. Don’t think he doesn’t know how to deal with you.”

With that he continued up the corridor until he came to the next door, a single one. “And this is ya stop.”

Hound turned his head to glance back down the corridor and measured up the distance. “I’m next door?”

“Yeah. I’m the other side. We’re protection remember? No good if we’re too far away to do any good.”

“Does he really need us this close in his own home?” Hound blinked.

“No, but ya gonna have to get used to it. He’ll treat ya more like an aide than guard.” Ironhide shrugged. “Another reason he needs another mech. I’m not so good with datawork. See ya tomorrow Hound, and we’ll start on ya training.”

Hound frowned, not really sure what this training entailed, but Ironhide was already striding away, clearly not worried about a response from the younger mech. The green mech gave another nervous glance down the corridor towards Thundercracker’s room before activating his sensors, scanning through the walls until he could detect the seeker’s spark within. Quickly he stopped, wondering if the other mech could pick up the scan and wondering just what he would do if he could. It was an invasion of privacy for a slave to scan their master and Hound knew so little about his new owner that he wanted more information before he started pushing the boundaries.

He pressed the button to open the door and stepped inside. It was just a single room with a berth in one corner, a large window opposite the door and some shelves opposite the berth. Hound only really gave his room a cursory glance over before he was making his way over to the berth in the corner. It was bigger than he’d been expecting, but all he was really interested in was how comfortable the berth was. The last berth he’d recharged on had been his own in his own home, before everything had fallen to pieces, and he sank back down onto it with a sigh of pleasure. Hound hadn’t had a decent recharge in a long time and the day had been full of surprises, so he was more tired than he thought. The green mech spotted a thermal blanket just before he offlined his optics. He wasn’t cold but it was a luxury he could have even if he didn’t need it, so he decided to spoil himself.

Comfortable on his new berth, warm under his thermal blanket it didn’t take long for Hound to fall into recharge. He could worry about his new place in life, his new duties and his new master tomorrow.
Hound woke from recharge with a start, CPU lagging behind whatever it was that had woken him. For a moment he wondered if it was because he was late for a meeting with Prowl or Jazz and he bolted upright on his berth, blanket falling away from him. The sight of the unfamiliar room shocked him back into reality and his hand flew to his neck. The feel of the collar in place brought the previous day’s events back into sharp focus and Hound shuttered his optics against the wave of misery that swelled up inside him.

There was a dull roar outside and Hound frowned, realising what had woken him. He hurried to the window and peered outside to find a blue jet soaring around in the open air, clearly enjoying the sensation of being surrounded by nothing. The green mech watched the seeker twist and flip over for a moment before shaking his head and turning his gaze to the grounds he could see. Different metals were artistically arranged across the floor, arching out away from the house to draw the optic to hidden grottos or statues and Hound was forced to admit it was beautiful. He had always been a frequent visitor to the Praxus crystal gardens and many of the other natural wonders across Cybertron. The splendour outside his window now reminded him of what he’d lost and he drew away from the window in mourning. His tanks gurgled a little and Hound realised it had been a while since he’d last refuelled, but he knew that he was supposed to follow orders and attend to Thundercracker first, before himself.

Hound tilted his head, listening to the sound of the jet engines outside and familiarised himself with their deep roar so that he would know when Thundercracker was flying. Apparently anxiousness about doing something wrong at this early stage had woken Hound to their presence anyway and he doubted he’d recharge through the noise now that he had it associated with the seeker.

Hound glanced around his room, trying to find reason to delay, but he couldn’t put off really meeting Thundercracker forever, so he strode to the door and headed out down the corridor to those double doors. Cautiously he opened them and got a good view for the first time of what lay beyond. The spacious room was lightly furnished with a desk and computer terminal closest to the door. On the other side of the room was a group of loungers set around a low table, with a cabinet behind it and Hound guessed this was where Thundercracker would entertain his closest associates. There was a door opposite him which Hound knew led deeper into the seeker’s private rooms.

He slid further into the room to investigate further, finding the cabinet held nothing but glasses and expensive bottled high grade. Hound then went to desk to peer at the computer terminal, finding it locked and that the datapads stacked next to it were of no real importance. He was still reading one when the inner door opened to reveal Thundercracker. Hound didn’t let himself look guilty and casually put the datapad down as he raised his optics to the seeker’s.

“Come in,” Thundercracker gestured before disappearing back into his room, clearly unperturbed by Hound’s insolence.

Hound quickly stepped around the desk, across the floor and into the new room. This one was slightly smaller and held a single lounger and table by the large windows. One wall was covered
with shelves filled with datapads and holobooks, which impressed Hound who had not pegged the seeker as one who would read greatly. Hound glanced at the bookfiles on the shelves and wondered if he was allowed to read anything in the collection. He wasn’t a vast reader, but it would be a nice distraction from this new life of his. Thundercracker calmly watched the slave as he looked around the room. Hound eventually brought his gaze back to the seeker standing opposite him and met his optics, making the blue mech smile.

“How far did Swindle get with your training?”

“He showed me the basics, he just couldn’t get me to follow them,” Hound shrugged.

“Show me,” Thundercracker instructed.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t let you out the house until I know you’ll behave as you should.” The seeker gestured at the door. “I can’t imagine you want to be cooped up inside for the rest of your life.”

Hound looked away, mouth setting into an angry, thin line, though he didn’t say anything. After a moment his expression faded into a neutral one and his optics were directed down at the seeker’s pedes, before he spoke, tone bland, “I am yours to command sir.”

“I command honest answers,” Thundercracker returned. “Would you defend me with your life?”

He watched Hound struggle. Slaves were not asked for their opinions, but as a slave he was bound to follow his master’s instructions. Any real slave would answer, unhesitatingly, what he thought the master wanted to hear.

“Yes sir.”

“Why?”

“Because that is my job sir, my duty,” Hound replied, voice still pitched in exactly the same way, making it impossible for Thundercracker to read, which impressed the seeker.

“No more, no less.”

“Sir, I do not know you, or of you,” Hound offered. “I have no other reason to base my answer on.”

“So you’re saying in time that you may change your mind as to why.” The blue Lord tilted his head.

“Yes sir.”

“Turn around, slowly.” Thundercracker gestured a tight circle with one finger.

Hound complied, pedes almost stepping out a square as he did so. The seeker really inspected who he had bought, noting the slave’s shape, colours, the way he held himself. For a ground mech, he was built to be solid, like Ironhide, so he was squared off, and had none of the flowing lines the racery ground mechs did. Seekers were notorious for shunning anything that didn’t fly, but the blue Lord could find beauty in most things. Thundercracker liked different and Hound was about as different from him as he could get.

Once the green mech had returned to his starting position Thundercracker had come to the conclusion that he rather liked the slave he had bought, but was careful not to let that show on his face. It wouldn’t do to let Hound know yet.
“What would you do if I was trapped, injured perhaps, and I told you to save yourself?”

“Ignore you sir.” Hound’s voice had a hint of something in it; almost a ‘Do you think I’m stupid?’ quality.

“You’d disobey a direct order.” Thundercracker raised one optic ridge.

“You bought a slave, sir.” Hound’s head rose a little. “One would have thought you wanted someone capable of independent thought, otherwise it would have been cheaper to buy a drone.”

“Very good Hound,” Thundercracker smiled. “What would you do if a guest in this house asked you to do something?”

“That depends on your standing orders and whether it endangers any lives. Other than that,” Hound frowned. “I would be expected to follow their orders as if it were yours sir.”

The blue seeker nodded before turning away, striding across the floor. His voice carried back to Hound as he paced the room. “My orders regarding guests change depend on who it is. Some orders are universal, though only some guests will ever push against them.”

“What do you mean sir?”

“I didn’t think slaves were allowed to ask questions?” Thundercracker queried gently.

“Sorry sir.” Hound glared at the floor. “Please elaborate for me.”

“The two most frequent guests you will see here are Lords Starscream and Skywarp. We will often go to their homes as well.” The other mech glanced at Hound who was following his progress surreptitiously around the room with his optics. “I suspect it will be Starscream that will present the problems. He takes advantage of his position. All my slaves are banned from him, but that doesn’t stop him trying. If you can avoid being alone with him, do so.”

“Sir, forgive me for asking, but what am I trying to avoid?” Hound asked the question because it was easier and quicker to do so. There was also something in Thundercracker’s tone that indicated the seriousness of his words.

“He believes all slaves should be used to their full capacity,” Thundercracker replied, his voice hard.

“I don’t understand,” Hound uttered quietly.

The seeker crossed the floor back to him, closing the gap between their chassis to barely anything. Hound looked up, startled into it, and as their optics met Thundercracker slipped one hand between the green mech’s legs, pushing his fingers against his port covering. It took all Hound had not to step away, though he noticeably stiffened.

“Your stats say you have a port. Starscream has a jack.”

“I see sir.” Hound’s voice was unsteady. “And you?”

Thundercracker tilted his head slightly. “A jack, but you have no need to fear me. I do not interface with my slaves, not unless the feeling is mutual.” The green mech nodded jerkily. “As my slave, you are mine to look after. I look after what is mine with great care.” The seeker took hold of Hound’s chin, making him keep the optic contact. “I told you, you intrigue me. I plan to keep you for a long time and I can’t do that if I don’t look after you.” With that he released Hound and stepped back. The slave almost physically shook himself to settle his CPU and chassis. “I can see you know the rules,
even if you choose not to follow them and I don’t mind the questions, when appropriate and when we’re alone.”

“That seems very… indulgent,” Hound returned, optics curious. He hadn’t lowered them since he had looked up.

Thundercracker felt a lazy smile curve up one side of his face. “You have a lot to learn about me yet.”

Hound stopped himself smiling, feeling strange in wanting to for a mech that owned him. It didn’t make sense in his CPU and, despite of everything, he was still trying to come to terms with his new place in the world. He dropped his optics back down again, finding it easier to cope when he couldn’t see the seeker’s own expression.

“Yes sir.”

At that point his fuel tanks gurgled nosily and Hound winced at the loudness of it in the silence. The seeker merely continued to smile as he said, “I think that’s enough for now. Go see Bumblebee in the kitchens and he’ll sort you out and explain a few things to you. After you’re done come back here and we’ll go over your duties in more detail.”

Hound nodded. “Yes sir.”

With that he turned and headed for the door, aware of Thundercracker watching him leave and he was grateful to be alone out in the corridor after the door shut. He leant back against the wall briefly, shuttering his optics, fighting the urge to march back into the room and push Thundercracker, to test his limits. The blue mech confused him. He was a Lord, a seeker, a master and every one of those things would have Hound thinking negative things, yet here was the mech himself telling him to ask questions, to be unslave-like.

The green mech pushed the worries away for the moment, and thought back to the tour of the house. Ironhide had mentioned Bumblebee at one point and Hound’s CPU produced a map of the house from where he stood to where this Bumblebee would most likely be, and it didn’t take him long to find the room. It was a vast place, deep within the mansion and the door he entered through was only one out of at least ten. The room was filled with storage facilities and dispensers for all sorts of materials. Hound just stood and stared at it for a while, not realising that a place this size needed so many different items to run efficiently.

“Hello,” a cheery voice greeted him, and then a yellow minibot stepped into view.

“Hello,” Hound smiled. “I’m Hound. I was told to come down here to see Bumblebee?”

“That’s me!” the other nodded. “Welcome to my domain Hound. Well the whole house is, but this is where you’ll generally find me. I’m in charge of making sure this household runs smoothly.”

“I’m… well, I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be,” Hound admitted.

“You’re Ironhide’s replacement, we all know that.” Bumblebee waved that away.

“You all seem very… blasé about that.” The green mech frowned uneasily.

“Don’t worry about it. Lord Thundercracker had a long talk to Hide before he even considered buying another slave, which he didn’t need to do.” The minibot shrugged and Hound nodded, still feeling a little like he was intruding somewhere he didn’t belong. “Anyway, basically energon rations are served first thing in the morning, when I take Lord Thundercracker’s his so we can
discuss anything that needs doing. They’re also served last thing at night, though that is dependent on your job. Your refuelling times will change frequently, depending on what you’re doing. For you now, Lord Thundercracker comes first in everything.” The yellow mech gathered together a stack of datapads, sorting them into smaller piles on the table in front of him. “I guess Ironhide has already talked to you about that.”

“Yeah,” Hound rubbed the back of his neck, still getting used to the collar there. “Bumblebee…”

“Call me Bee, everyone else does.”

“Ok Bee. Did Thundercracker talk to you about… Starscream?”

The smaller mech’s head shot up. “Of course he did. Why?”

“I just had that talk and I was wondering…”

“If they’re as bad as all that?” Bumblebee interrupted and Hound nodded. “Yeah, they’re that bad, Starscream in particular. Nothing has ever happened to one of us, Lord Thundercracker has been very careful but we’ve heard stories. The worst thing, though, is seeing the slaves they bring with them. The last one Starscream had, a tiny fragile looking femme…” Bumblebee shook his head. “There were always new marks on her chassis, but she never said a word about what he did to her. She was so quiet, she never spoke to any of us and if anyone raised their voice, their hand, she’d flinch. It was spark breaking.”

“Why didn’t Thundercracker do something?” Hound asked, a blend of outrage and shock in his voice.

“What could he do? She hadn’t said anything and even then, she’s another mech’s slave, it takes more than just one mech to complain for anything to be done.” Bumblebee regarded him carefully. “You haven’t been a slave very long, have you?”

“No. This is my first time… out.”

“The slave-pens?”

“Yeah and Swindle’s place,” Hound admitted.

The yellow mech whistled softly. “How’d you get to deserve that?”

“The other slavers couldn’t get me to do as instructed.” Hound smiled lopsidedly. “Swindle thought I was worth more effort than they did.”

Bumblebee frowned. “Why?”

Hound thought for a moment before raising his hand towards the table. A tiny, but perfectly to-scale replica of Praxus shimmered into life across its surface making Bumblebee gasp and stare at it in wonder.

“Is that a hologram?”

“Yeah,” the green mech regarded it fondly, lowering his hand. “I used to make them for a living.”

“It’s amazing.” The minibot tentatively reached out and touched a tower. “It’s solid!”

Hound nodded, “Not everyone can manage that trick.”
“I can see why Swindle wanted you,” Bumblebee admitted before he smiled. “You should show Lord Thundercracker this. He’d love it.”

The hologram abruptly disappeared and Hound looked away. “Everyone seems to like him.”

Bumblebee tilted his head to one side. “Why wouldn’t we? He’s a fair master... oh I get it. It’s because you’re new to this. You miss your freedom.”

“Don’t you?” The green mech shot the other a look.

“‘I was born into slavery,’” Bumblebee shrugged. “But I like my job and it’s nice here. I’m still working for someone, like I would be if I was free.” The yellow mech regarded Hound. “Give him a chance.”

Hound poked at the edge of the table, trying to both to ignore that last statement and totally unsure how to feel about it. In a normal situation he’d be the first to give a mech a chance to prove how nice they were, being an open and friendly mech by nature, but he was in turmoil about offering a mech, that had freely and willingly paid credits to own him, the same chance. A cube appeared in front of him and Hound glanced back up at the minibot who had placed it there. Bumblebee gave him a smile and then went back to work on his datapads. Hound drank his energon and found it was of good quality. It was something else to add to the list stacking up in the seeker’s favour.

Once he had finished it he said goodbye to the minibot and made his way back to the seeker’s rooms. He regarded the doors, wondering whether he should knock like he was supposed to or not, but in the end he did rap his knuckles against the metal, because it was a politeness he would extend to anyone. Thundercracker’s voice told him to enter and Hound found they were not alone this time. The other slaves that had been bought from Swindle’s were arranged in a line across the space in the centre of the room and Thundercracker indicated he should join them.

“No, Thundercracker.” Hound’s tone carried a warning and some of the other slaves shifted nervously. The mech next to Hound shot him a disbelieving look, but kept his head bowed so as not to show Thundercracker.

“No.” Hound balled his hands in fists, continuing to stare at his Master.

By the time Thundercracker reached Hound, the green mech was adamant he wasn’t going to do anything the seeker wanted and kept his head raised. The blue mech met his optics and Hound felt a flash of apprehension at the sight of his expression, but kept it buried.

“Hound.” Thundercracker’s tone carried a warning and some of the other slaves shifted nervously. The mech next to Hound shot him a disbelieving look, but kept his head bowed so as not to show Thundercracker.

“No.” Hound balled his hands in fists, continuing to stare at his Master.

There was a few intakes of surprised breaths from further down the line of slaves and Thundercracker glanced down the row, his optics narrowing but Hound could tell it was him he was irritated with. As a master he couldn’t let any slave publicly disobey him. It put his ability to control in doubt and the fact that these were all new slaves meant they knew little of what to expect from their new Master.
“You are all dismissed,” Thundercracker announced abruptly and the rest of the slaves bowed respectively before filing out. “Not you, Hound.” The green mech scowled, but stayed behind out of curiosity about what was going to happen. The seeker folded his arms across his chest as he studied the smaller mech. “I realised that you would not make this easy for me, but I had presumed, wrongly as it turns out, you would at least give me a day.”

“I will not show you my spark just because you demand it!” Hound snapped. “Even if it’s just a slagging ‘inspection’.”

“I will use the collar, Hound.” Thundercracker’s voice was hard. “Don’t mistake my willingness for you to retain your personality as weakness.” The green mech thrust his chin out belligerently, turned on one heel and strode for the door. “Stop.” The seeker’s voice was flat, but not angry.

Hound jerked to a halt as Thundercracker used the collar to override his servo control of his legs and the green mech balled his hands into fists at his sides. Thundercracker calmly walked up to his side and then passed him to the door, not pausing in the slightest.

“What… What about me?” Hound realised that without the seeker, he couldn’t move.

The blue flyer lingered in the doorway for a moment. “It’s your choice.”

Hound gritted his denta. “Apologise or stay here, you mean.”

The red optics met his own. “No, I know you meant what you said. I don’t want a false apology. It would gain me nothing, except denting your pride, which would make you like your situation less. No, what I want is for you to understand is you still have choices, though you may not like them and they may not be the same as they were before. I could force you to do what I wanted.”

“But you don’t.” Hound looked away, CPU in turmoil. “What choices?”

“The little things in life,” the seeker replied. “Whether to use the thermal blanket at night, whether to go into my library and borrow those datafiles you’ve been curious about, whether to spend more of your free time outside even though it is a painful reminder of before.”

Hound couldn’t help but stare at the other mech. “How did you know that?”

One side of Thundercracker’s mouth twitched upwards. “You still have a lot to learn about me yet. Do you want to find out?” The green mech nodded hesitantly and abruptly he felt the control of his legs return to him. Thundercracker gestured to him. “Your choice.”

“It’s still not right,” Hound folded his arms over his chest, optics on the floor.

“No, perhaps not,” the seeker agreed. “If I promise never to do an inspection on you, will you try to obey your orders? This is your life now Hound, whether you like it or not.”

Hound nodded miserably, forced into facing the truth of that statement. Thundercracker smiled slightly before opening the door to reveal Ironhide outside, who glanced between them curiously and then raised an optic ridge at Hound’s despondent demeanour. The blue mech smirked at him as he passed him.

“Good luck.”
Dis aliter visum

Chapter Notes

Title translation: The gods thought otherwise.

Hound kept his word and Thundercracker abided by his. Ironhide continued to train the green mech, teaching him how to use a gun and to recognise signs of danger from other mechs as well as some defensive moves that would neutralise bigger transformers, if it came down to a hand to hand fight. At first Hound was awkward, never having been armed before: Even when he’d worked with the Enforcers he’d been strictly unarmed civilian help, and he never liked much having to fight, but he accepted it was part of what he had to do now. Also he knew everything he learnt of these techniques would increase his chances if he was ever offered the chance to escape.

Soon Ironhide was prepared to admit that Hound was learning quickly and wasn’t so unwilling to name a date when he would fully hand over Thundercracker’s personal safety to Hound. He’d already, and almost impatiently, handed over aide duties to the green mech. This Hound found easy to adapt to, having run his own business before, and he discovered the seeker was not unreasonable in his demands of him. His CPU was excellent at absorbing many details at once and he rarely needed telling twice.

Thundercracker was pleased at Hound’s progress. Since that first day the slave hadn’t really argued over his duties and he seemed a first-rate choice for a personal assistant. After a deca-cycle the seeker decided to offer Hound a sign of his conviction and a reward, of sorts, for doing a good job. It wasn’t a usual thing to offer a slave but Thundercracker had discovered a few intriguing details out about Hound and was even more determined to keep Hound’s bright personality intact. He would willingly admit to enjoying spending time with a mech that didn’t constantly defer to his choice, or, as with the other Lords, constantly attempt to get information, credits or favours out of him. The seeker came from an affluent line, but was the only heir and sole member left, so it meant he had access to a very comfortable life and that meant the sycophants were never far away.

The green mech’s reward was his first unaccompanied trip outside the house grounds into the city beyond them. Granted he was purchasing things for Thundercracker, but he was trusted not to attempt to run away. Whilst Thundercracker may have had control over him at a large distance, without actually being able to see what Hound was doing, there was no way of knowing whether he was obeying his orders.

Hound had been grateful to be allowed out alone at last and he hated that fact. Appreciative for something that should have been a right and had been until recently, but he refused to let that spoil his time. He cruised the streets, enjoying the drive in his alt mode and the feel of the wind running over his chassis, remembering the past, until the melancholy grew too much. Sadly he pointed himself in the right direction, bringing himself back into line and going to do what he’d been instructed to do. The thought of making a break for it had crossed his CPU, but he knew in a place like this, one he didn’t know, he wouldn’t get far, not with the collar on. That would have to come off first.

He spotted the market he needed, transformed and meandered his way around the shelves, taking his time. Perhaps he’d get in trouble for being late back, but he could live with that for a longer break
from the house walls, even if this excursion was threatened by his misery, but Hound tried not to live in the past and what had been, it wasn’t his style. The list wasn’t an extensive one and soon he had everything he needed, boxes balanced carefully in his arms, as he made his way through the store to pay. Hound waited patiently in line with the other mechs, some free, some slaves, but all of them it seemed were willing to queue together. All but one.

“Get out of my way!”

One big hand pushed Hound roughly, making him stumble and one of the boxes escaped his grasp, crashing to the floor. The sound of breaking glass was audible from within.

“Hey! You want to watch where you’re going!”

It was out of his mouth before he even thought about. It wasn’t until the much bigger mech swung round to look at him that he realised what he’d done, but by then it was too late and Hound was looking right at trouble. Suddenly all the orns of suppressed anger and retaliation bubbled to the surface and Hound didn’t care what he was doing.

“What did you say slave?”

“I said you wanna watch where you’re going, you overgrown lump of scrap!” Hound snapped back. Maybe he should have seen it coming but the fist that connected with his face came as somewhat of a surprise. It was hard enough a hit to make the green mech stagger, all the rest of his items scattering across the floor and when his fingers touched the side of his mouth they came away slick with energon.

“Apologise for speaking to me like that! Now!” The big black and purple mech was fuming and one digit stabbed into Hound’s chest.

Hound spat energon out onto the floor before raising his optics to meet the big mechs, who snarled and his other fist came sailing in at Hound’s face. The green mech threw up an arm and got it in between, before he pushed the fist away. He was not suicidal enough to actually lay a hand on the mech, but he would be fragged if he was just going to let the mech beat him.

“I’m going to make you pay for that!”

There was a ring of mechs and femmes watching them now, most looking on with disapproval, which Hound noticed was mainly aimed at him. Sense was beginning to settle back in again. He’d never been a mech to get angry and stay that way for long and he realised that he was seriously out of line, however much that chafed. Hound stepped back from the black and purple mech, watching warily and unsure how to put an end to this, because he was pretty sure the mech wasn’t going to just let him apologise now.

“Move! Come on. Move out of the way!” A voice shouted from somewhere near the front of the store. The gathered crowd parted and let two mechs through. Hound instantly recognised the insignia on their arms that marked them as Enforcers and froze in place. He’d seen enough of them in his time in prison and in the slave rings, to know that as a slave they had the right to do pretty much whatever they wanted to him.

The purple Enforcer looked at the pair of them, optics narrowing. “Onslaught, clear this crowd.”

The other nodded before bellowing, “You heard Cyclonus! You’ve got half a breem to clear this store or I’m going to arrest you for loitering!”
The crowd disappeared like smoke at that. The purple mech, who Hound guessed was in charge, gestured at the black and purple mech to come over. “Your name and explain yourself.”

“Motormaster. I was heading for the check out when this slave accused me of barging past him. He spoke out of turn and dared to meet my optics!” The biggest mech left in the store pointed an angry finger at Hound.

“Regardless you created a disturbance so you will have to come down to our local station to give a statement,” the Enforcer told him.

“I demand compensation from his owner!”

“And once we’re at the station I will contact his owner to talk about that,” Cyclonus nodded. “Now go with my colleague.”

The purple mech strode over to Hound, who stared resolutely at the floor, and said in exactly the same voice he had used with the free mech. “Explain yourself.”

“Sir, I did speak out of turn but only after he pushed past me and knocked one of my boxes to the floor,” Hound admitted.

“I see. Who is your master?”

“Lord Thundercracker sir.”

Cyclonus didn’t react to the name but drew a pair of cuffs out of subspace. “Hold out your hands.”

Hound did as he was told, hiding the wince as they were tightened in place. The purple mech then attached a chain to the cuffs which he linked to his hip, locking Hound to him so the green mech couldn’t run. Not that Hound would, not anymore. He’d tried it on one occasion; making a distraction, slipping the cuffs and running, just like Jazz had taught him. Once they’d caught him again he’d been made to regret his decision immensely and Hound’s priorities had shifted slightly more towards self preservation. He refused to give up on fighting back, however passively, but he needed to be alive and well to stand a chance to regain his freedom.

The walk back to the Enforcer’s station wasn’t a long one but Hound could feel everyone’s optics on him and his plating burned with shame and embarrassment, even though he knew it shouldn’t. He kept his head down, staring at Cyclonus’ heels the entire way, even when they entered the building and he was chained to the wall like some stray pet turbo fox. Hound could hear Motormaster’s voice still going, complaining at full pitch and he could tell Onslaught was getting a little irritated by the sharper, yet still polite, responses.

Roughly two breems later Cyclonus reappeared at his side. “Your Master is on his way to collect you.”

Hound opened his mouth to ask what would happen and then shut it again when he realised he was in enough trouble already without annoying an Enforcer. Cyclonus saw it nevertheless and nodded at him. “Lord Thundercracker seemed quite disappointed, though he tried to hide it from me.”

The green mech shuttered his optics, turning his head slightly away as guilt made itself known. The purple mech tilted his head. “I can see you at least care about the trouble you caused, which is more than can be said of your attacker.”

Hound looked up then, stopping his optics just short of the red ones of the Enforcer. “Sir, that is very generous of you to say. I believe the law is on Motormaster’s side in regards to my actions.”
“Yes, but many mechs would have discovered who your Master was before laying a hand on you,” Cyclonus explained. “Your Master has far more power than any average mech and if we had not arrived when we did Motormaster could be facing charges about property damage.”

“Property damage.” Hound meant his voice to come out level but the bitterness was audible.

“You are walking a thin line slave. Take more care,” Cyclonus warned before striding away, leaving Hound with his thoughts and anticipation over whatever Thundercracker would do.

In the end he didn’t wait long but felt his tanks drop when he the seeker strode straight past him to the main desk. Ironhide didn’t speak to him either but met his optics with a sympathetic smile as he came to stand by his side. Thundercracker was accompanied back by Cyclonus who freed him from the wall and his cuffs, effectively turning him over to his Master. Thundercracker took the lead back outside, Hound following miserably and Ironhide behind him until they were clear of the building, where the blue mech stopped.

“I will see you at home Ironhide.”

The black mech nodded. “Understood my lord.”

Thundercracker finally took his first look at Hound but didn’t say anything before he stepped away, transformed and took to the air, the blast from his thrusters making Hound sway on his pedes. Both ground mechs watched him go before Ironhide grunted, “C’mon. We’ve got to get ya home now.”

“Ironhide…”

“I know,” the bigger mech nodded. “But ya in trouble and I’m not going to get ya into more by standing here listening to ya.”

With that he initiated his transformation sequence and Hound reluctantly copied him. The drive back to the mansion was taken in silence, Hound unsure what to say and Ironhide worrying over what was to come for Hound. Whilst he was a kind Master, generous and prepared to listen, no slave that Ironhide had ever know in the seeker’s care had ever been arrested by an Enforcer. That was big trouble and very public too. It would go on Thundercracker’s record, despite even his status as a Lord, which normally afforded him a screen of protection.

Once back at the house Ironhide led Hound through the house and then down into the underground chambers which were mostly used for storage. There was one small room which was reserved for special occasions such as this. Ironhide couldn’t remember the last time he’d secured a slave in the holding cuffs on one wall in this room and wondered if the cleaning staff ever ventured in. As it was, it was as clean as the rest of the house and Ironhide watched Hound stare around the room, his face falling further.

“Every house as big as this has a discipline room Hound. Ya had to have guessed,” the black mech told him quietly.

“Another thing to see it though isn’t it?”

Ironhide nodded, stepping over to the cuffs and adjusting their height to suit Hound. The green mech came over to him without being asked and raised his hands so they could be locked into the cuffs, level with helm, leaving him facing the wall. Ironhide rested a hand on his shoulder briefly. “He won’t be long.”

Hound listened to him leave and the silence that fell afterwards. Down here the temperature was a few degrees cooler than the rest of the house and was so very quiet. The green mech tilted his head...
as he listened and realised with a sinking feeling in his tanks, that this room was soundproofed. Whatever happened in here was going to be just between him and Thundercracker then.

Ironhide was right though, it didn’t take Thundercracker long to join him and shut the door behind him. Hound didn’t remove his gaze from the wall and the seeker took some time in walking those last few mechanometers to join him. Even then the silence lasted as the green mech felt those red optics stare at him.

“Hound why, why did you do it?” Thundercracker’s voice was gentle, but demanding.

The chained mech shifted his head, rubbing it against the cuffs on his wrists. “Bad day. There was too much in that market that reminded me of life before.” He looked up at the seeker then. “I just suddenly couldn’t bear it any longer.”

The blue mech crouched down next to him. “Is it really so bad here?” Hound tried to lift his hands but couldn’t, so ended up leaning forward until he could touch his fingers to his neck and the collar it bore. Thundercracker’s expression saddened. “Those are the rules. Do you understand Hound? I don’t want to have to do this, but what you did, you did in public. There has to be a visible punishment. If you’d done this at home, I would have just talked with you.”

“I know.” Hound met Thundercracker’s optics, displaying that very un-slave like behaviour again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to cause you trouble.” The blue Lord stood up again and opened up a connection to Motormaster. The vid screen flared into life to reveal the black mech who scowled at Thundercracker in greeting. The seeker ignored that as he spoke. “I see you finally agreed to the punishment.”

“Not very good at it are you?” The bigger mech sniped. “Ill trained slaves should not be allowed out like that.”

“That is my decision, not yours.” Thundercracker narrowed his optics slightly. “I have agreed to let you witness this, even though there was nothing commanding me to do so, which you well know. My rank out stretches yours by so far that this is a favour I will not forget.”

Motormaster snarled, clearly still angry.

“As I told you before,” Thundercracker replied calmly. “No one touches my slaves but me. They are my responsibility and therefore I will punish them.”

“Not very good at it are you?” The bigger mech sniped. “Ill trained slaves should not be allowed out like that.”

“Not my decision, not yours.” Thundercracker narrowed his optics slightly. “I have agreed to let you witness this, even though there was nothing commanding me to do so, which you well know. My rank out stretches yours by so far that this is a favour I will not forget.”

Hound watched the other mech sit back in his chair, a sullen air surrounding him. Thundercracker turned away, picking up something that Hound couldn’t yet see but that made Motormaster’s expression change into one of anticipation and pleasure. The green mech waited warily, most of his face hidden by his raised arms, but he watched the blue seeker with one optic and stiffened when he saw what the Lord held. The energon whip hummed into life when Thundercracker activated it, though the seeker didn’t look pleased about holding it in the least.

Hound knew this was standard punishment for what he’d done. He knew what a whipping felt like too, but it didn’t make this easier to stand nor would it take away from the stinging pain either. The whip wasn’t set high enough to cause any damage to his plating but the residue ache would last for days as a reminder of his wrong doing. Hound turned his face away from the room, staring at the wall he was cuffed to instead, waiting for that first strike to fall.

In some ways he felt he should be fighting this, protesting, anything but silent acceptance, but he was sorry for what he had done in the market. He had dragged Thundercracker into a personal problem,
stemming from his inability to accept what had happened to him. Granted the seeker was now his owner, but any master would have been met with the same problem. What made it worse was that Thundercracker had been decent to him. It was nice here, the other slaves were good mechs, and Hound was a gregarious bot by nature, so their welcoming attitude had been something the green mech had been drawn to.

So caught up in his own thoughts Hound had missed Thundercracker moving across the floor to stand behind him. The first warning of the whip moving was the hiss as it sliced through the air the nano-second before it cracked against his back. It loosed a small noise of pain from Hound before he clenched his jaw shut, hands balling into fists above the cuffs. There was a moment’s pause before the next strike fell, though this time Hound remained silent. As the blows continued to fall in a steady, even way Thundercracker was taking care not to land the energon whip in the same place on his back. His whole back ached, right from shoulders to aft, but if the seeker had wanted to, he could have made it worse by striking the same place time and time again. Even on a low setting, a prolonged whipping over the same spot could tear the metal plating, if the whipper had a good enough aim.

After twenty strikes Thundercracker stopped and Hound couldn’t stop himself from glancing up towards the screen. Motormaster had a look of satisfied pleasure on his faceplates and it made Hound feel sick, though apparently Thundercracker didn’t like the look either because he cut the vid screen feed without a further word. He uncuffed the green mech’s hands, letting him step back from the wall so he could lower his arms.

“Slowly now,” Thundercracker told him.

Hound winced as his shoulders protested at the movement, however easy he took it, but once his arms were at his side, he felt better. He kept his optics on the floor though, because he didn’t want to know what sort of expression the seeker had on his face, even as he could feel the other’s optics on him. Hound felt exposed after his punishment and was trying to push his emotions back inside the wall of safety he had built to protect himself.

“I will see you tomorrow at the normal time,” Thundercracker spoke up.

Hound blinked. “Yes sir… You don’t require my services anymore today?”

Thundercracker’s pedes, which Hound was staring at, shifted slightly. “You will not concentrate with your back like that. Get what rest you can. Hound.” Here the seeker paused. “I know your back will still hurt tomorrow…”

“Sir,” Hound interrupted bravely. “You don’t have to say it. Thank you.”

The green mech glanced up and caught the tail end of the look of surprise on the taller mech’s face, which was swiftly followed by a smile. Thundercracker reached out to lay a hand briefly on Hound’s shoulder before he turned and left the room, leaving Hound feeling a little bemused. In some ways, the seeker’s hesitation had been almost comforting, letting the green mech known Thundercracker had been as uneasy about meting out the punishment as Hound had been about receiving it, but it was also confusing as the flyer was normally so self assured.

Thundercracker himself was currently debating what had just happened himself as he strode back to his rooms. He had thought, before this, that Hound had been settling in well, had adjusted enough to what Thundercracker required, and it upset him that he had judged the green mech wrong. Hound was better than most mechs in keeping his more negative emotions locked away, after that initial day. The seeker had tried to avoid the punishment, which was something Hound didn’t know, but Cyclonus had been well within his rights to demand he did dish out appropriate punishment with
other witnesses to see. The blue mech knew how the system worked and how to play it to gain the best of any situation, but generally he just tried to avoid it all together.

He had always intended to give Hound the rest of the day off. A freshly whipped slave may have been more alert to his every move but they often struggled to bring all their attention to bear on whatever they were doing. It had been the fact that Hound had picked up on his hesitation and knew what he had been debating saying. He hadn’t wanted to actually say the words, because he was worried Hound would take offence at them, but to have the green mech thank him… The seeker smiled suddenly. Oh yes, he liked Hound more each passing day.

Hound fidgeted outside the door to Thundercracker’s suite of rooms. He was due in but through yesterday’s free afternoon Hound had spent most of it caught in a swirl of thoughts. Even though he’d been punished for doing something that came naturally, protesting against bullies, and that hurt, Hound knew that the seeker had been remarkably lenient and kind towards him over the whole incident. He could have seriously damaged Hound, which the green mech suspected Motormaster would have agreed to with a vengeance, and no one would have cared less. Thundercracker could have made him work straight afterwards instead of letting him rest. Yes his back still ached but in comparison to the previous mega-cycle…

Regardless of what could have happened, Hound felt he owed Thundercracker some sort of thanks and, no matter how much he had argued with himself, that was why he was nervous about seeing the seeker this morning. It wasn’t that Hound was a particularly prideful mech, but his world was still in disarray and he had yet to settle on what he should be feeling now. It felt wrong to be thanking his Master, but on a personal level Hound knew he’d feel guilty if he didn’t.

“Hound.” Thundercracker’s voice was muffled through the door. “Come in.”

The green mech jerked but did as he was bid. Thundercracker was sat behind his desk already, having shortened his morning flight because of pressing business, but he didn’t seem perturbed that Hound was not already inside his personal quarters as he preferred. The blue mech looked up as the door slid shut and greeted Hound amicably. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Hound nodded.

“Good. I have a lot of work to do this mega-cycle and will need that sharp CPU of yours.” Thundercracker gestured at one data-pad on the desk, which Hound came forward to retrieve and then felt one corner of his mouth twitch upwards. Complex calculations scrolled down the screen before his optics. Thundercracker always tried to avoid these when he could and whilst they weren’t Hound’s strongest point, he had a decent enough grasp of the subject to find it easier than the seeker did.

Hound finished his data-pad and returned it to the desk before waiting to be told what to do next. As he idled his gaze darted around the room again, taking in the big and probably very expensive artwork across the walls. Something caught in his CPU and Hound thought back through what he’d seen in the rest of the house. It could work out well as a thank you.

“I noticed you have a lot of art and holoscapes of Praxus and Iacon,” Hound abruptly said.

Thundercracker stopped what he was doing for a moment, blinking at Hound, before he continued, replying, “Yes, I think those are the best two cities to fly through, especially at night when the towers are lit.”
Hound bit his lip nervously, optics darting across the floor to size it up prior to him raising his hand. Iacon shimmered into life in the room, the towers stretching higher than the seeker was tall and lights glinted on their surfaces. Using images from his databanks, Hound built up the rest of the city in complex layers, adding detail everywhere he could, but he left it unsolidified. It took much more effort to do that on a hologram this size. Only once he was finished did Hound dare to look at the seeker.

Thundercracker was staring at the projection in amazement, but the green mech watched that change to appreciation and enjoyment. He dimmed the lights and both of them watched the way light played across the room in silence.

“I knew your record said you were one of the best on Cybertron,” Thundercracker spoke up quietly, like he was afraid to break the magic. “But I had no idea anyone could make something so realistic, so beautiful.”

“Given more time and space I could do more,” Hound admitted.

“Do you have a limit?” Thundercracker asked, finally taking his optics off the Iacon in his office.

“I could make you an exact, solid replica of your house and grounds.” The green mech frowned. “I have never tried anything bigger than a single building or similar expanse of ground in actual scale.”

“How long can you keep this up for?”

“This?” Hound glanced at his hologram. “Now it’s constructed and if I didn’t leave the line of sight, more than a mega-cycle, but I’ve never had to keep something going so long by myself. I generally transfer the image out to another power source if it’s going to have to last that long.”

Thundercracker rose from behind his desk to wander through the towers and lights and could find no flaw in them from any angle. Hound hadn’t cut any corners to make this image and the seeker appreciated that the green mech was trying to say something. He had understood that the instant the hologram had appeared, but this much detail indicated that Hound thought it was worth some considerable effort.

“Why?” Thundercracker turned back to Hound, who shifted on his feet.

“I owe you a thank you, for yesterday…”

“No you don’t.” The seeker raised a hand, cutting Hound off, before stepping through ‘Iacon’ to his side. “I did what I did because you needed it. I have still to earn your trust and without that I cannot be sure that you would protect me with your life.”

Hound didn’t believe Thundercracker had been that self motivated, but wasn’t sure enough of him to voice it. “So giving me time off lets me appreciate you as a better master.”

“If you will.”

Hound flicked his glossa across his lips nervously before admitting, “Bee said to give you a chance… that you weren’t as bad as what I’d heard.”

“Heard about me?” Thundercracker asked, voice curious.

“Seekers in general.” Hound watched the blue mech frown and then sigh. Thundercracker rubbed his forehead briefly, clearly thinking.
“What did you hear?”

Hound explained the horror stories that he’d heard, both before and after his imprisonment, studying the seeker for his reaction but Thundercracker gave nothing away as he listened. He waited patiently for Hound to finish before nodding. “And that is why you said what you did before. You thought I was like that.”

“I had my doubts.” Hound shrugged. “There were things that didn’t add up, but I thought maybe you were hiding something.”

“That is reasonable to think after what you’d heard, but I thought I’d been honest enough with you for you to see through that.” Thundercracker looked slightly hurt.

“You are hiding things,” the green mech replied, shaking his head. “Everyone has something to hide.”

The blue mech looked away then, back at Iacon, before he headed back to his desk and the work he’d been doing. Hound frowned, puzzled by the seeker’s behaviour. The silence was unusual, but in not answering Thundercracker had also avoided lying or telling him anything he thought worth hiding. That meant there was something to hide and that piqued Hound’s curiosity more than he thought it would. Now he wanted to know what it was.
“Good morning Bee,” Hound greeted the yellow minibot as he picked up his energon.

“I wish,” Bumblebee muttered.

“What’s the matter?” Hound frowned at the normally jovial mech.

“Guests.” He looked up. “The worst ones.”

“What?”

Bumblebee shot him a look that said he ought to know. “Starscream and Skywarp.”

The green mech had heard what the others had said of the other seekers and Thundercracker’s warning had done enough to make Hound apprehensive about meeting them anyway. The minibot sighed, putting down the datapad he was reading to switch it for another.

“Can I help?”

“It’s alright.” Bumblebee motioned to the datapads spread over the table. “They’re both just fussy about things and despite what Lord Thundercracker does, if we get it wrong they will take it out on us and as I’m in charge of running this household, that will come back to me. It’s my responsibility to get this right.”

“So do you know what I’m supposed to be doing?” Hound asked, peering at the datapads without touching them. “Ironhide hasn’t officially retired yet.”

“I suspect Lord Thundercracker will do one of two things,” Bumblebee answered whilst still reading. “Hide you away so neither of them can push their luck with you, as they always do around new slaves or have you at his side all the time, because they’re going to meet you sooner rather than later.” The minibot glanced up, a small frown between his optics. “Actually I’m surprised you haven’t already, since you’ve been here nearly three deca-cycles.”

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“Do they normally see more of each other then?”

“Yeah, here or at either of their places, but as far as I’m aware there has been no invitations except this one.” The yellow mech tapped something out on the pad, a pleased looked crossing his face briefly. “If Lord Thundercracker had gone out then he may have taken Ironhide instead of you, since you’re new and haven’t had that experience yet.”

“And my ‘problem’ two deca-cycles won’t have helped.” Hound pointed out, referring to the event with the Enforcers by the name the gossip in the household called it. The green mech hadn’t made friends with his little outburst, since all the slaves thought well of their Master and were trained to consider his needs above anything else. Bumblebee was one of the few exceptions, along with Ironhide, that seemed to understand why Hound had lost control of his temper. The black mech had
his own temper to manage and the minibot just genuinely seemed to be that nice a mech.

“I’m sure that doesn’t bother Lord Thundercracker.”

“Nice of you to say,” Hound grinned at the yellow mech who flashed him an answering smile.

“Go and ask him then.”

“You’re encouraging me to ask a question of my Lord and Master?” Hound raised one optic ridge. Bumblebee shrugged one shoulder. “Everyone knows you get away with things we wouldn’t.”

Hound frowned. “You do? But doesn’t that make you angry?”

The smaller mech raised his head then. “He’s our Master, he decides who can do what.” His expression drew in a little. “Some other mechs have been saying you’ve been interfacing with him to get special treatment, but considering how much trouble you’ve been having following orders, I don’t think that’s happening.”

Hound shook his head. “How could I do that? How could anyone?”

“Quite a few slaves would willingly interface with their Masters,” Bumblebee returned levelly and the green mech shook his head again, not understanding. “Hadn’t you better be getting back to him anyway?”

Hound sighed, nodding. He finished his energon and departed the slave hub of the household, making his way to the set of chambers where he spent most of his time now. On the way he past a few other slaves and wondered if they were the ones that thought he served the seeker on his berth, but he tried to push those thoughts to one side. He didn’t want to become suspicious of everyone around him when he knew better than to listen to rumours.

When he entered Thundercracker’s room the seeker was busy organising things for his guests. Hound was well aware that there were other mechs to do some of things that the blue mech was engaged in, but Thundercracker seemed set on doing them himself. The green mech went to the desk and picked up the strewn datapads, organising them into neat piles.

“You’ll need to put them away,” Thundercracker’s voice told him from the other side of the room. “Skywarp is too nosey for his own good.”

Hound nodded, opening the storage space next to the desk. “Am I meeting them?”

The seeker glanced across at him. “Yes. Both of them mentioned you last time I talked to them.”


“With much delight,” Thundercracker muttered. “Starscream told me I was too soft and he could break you in a day.” Hound snorted inelegantly at that. “Oh I don’t doubt he wouldn’t try, maybe even succeed.” Their optics met as the smaller mech looked up in consternation and Thundercracker smiled slightly. “But I doubt it.”

Hound felt a smile quirk the corner of his mouth upwards and looked away again. Thundercracker was crediting him with a force of personality that wouldn’t give in, which was true enough, but he was also putting him before a fellow seeker and supposed friend. He was giving him permission, as it were, never to change into a proper slave, at least in this household.
The pair of them worked in silence for another cycle, until Thundercracker suddenly looked up, tilting his head to one side. Hound stopped what he was doing, frowning slightly as he concentrated. On the edge of his hearing he could just make out the sound of jets, ones that sounded very similar to Thundercracker's.

“They’re nearly here,” the blue mech announced. “We better go greet them.”

“You can hear that?”

“Not so much hear as feel.” Thundercracker gestured between himself and the empty air in front of him. “Seekers feel a pull to be near each other. We don’t know quite why, but it might have something to do with why we can fly so well together.”

With that he left the room, Hound following, to the grand lobby area, where Thundercracker positioned himself directly in front of the doors, but not too close. It would allow those entering to get a good view of him without Thundercracker looking like he was over eager to see them. The seeker gestured to Hound to stand at one side of him, a step or so behind and the green mech did so, optics studying the tips of his pedes.

“Do you remember what I said about them? Leave as soon as you can.”

“Yes,” Hound nodded. “That bit about not being alone with them has stuck particularly well.”

Thundercracker’s mouth twitched at the deadpan tone. In some ways he would love to encourage Hound to be himself around the other two seekers, because it would be beyond amusing to watch someone stand up to them, but he also knew Starscream, in particular, would take very badly to the idea. Also keeping that flash of personality all to himself pleased the blue mech immensely. It made Hound that little bit more special.

Thundercracker’s optics ticked right in a glance at the smaller mech. If he could, Hound wouldn’t even be here. He would be locked away somewhere safe, away from everyone. The seeker realised that wasn’t an option; Hound would protest far too much and many mechs had heard about him now, so he’d have to settle for the others seeing, but not touching and that made the blue mech smile. He had nothing against parading something to say ‘look what I’ve got and you don’t’.

Hound fidgeted beside Thundercracker. The expectation of what the other two seekers would be like had driven his CPU into overdrive and the apprehension was bubbling just under the surface. He didn’t want to disappoint Thundercracker, or receive any sort of punishment for doing something he shouldn’t, but he also didn’t want to be here. There was a chance this would turn into a confrontation and Hound avoided those as much as he could.

A pair of slaves at the doors swept them open before the arrivals could knock, well trained to know the exact moment when the guests reached the threshold. The parting doors revealed a white, red and blue seeker on the left and a purple and black seeker on the right, followed by a slave each. It had been explained to Hound which mech was which, so he knew Starscream was the more brightly coloured one of the two.

Instant recognition flooded through Hound, though not at the sight of the seekers, but at their slaves. It took everything he had not to go running over to their sides but he couldn’t help staring. The mech behind Starscream never lifted his optics from where they were fixed on his Master’s heels but there was a flash of blue as the slightly smaller mech behind Skywarp tilted his head slightly in acknowledgement of Hound. It also let him see the gleam of metal from the collar at his throat and his world dropped sharply.
Thundercracker didn’t notice as he was too busy greeting the other seekers and all the slaves were ignored. Hound didn’t listen to what they said, though he was aware when the guests glanced his way and let loose a few derogatory comments. Thundercracker brushed them aside, ushering the others through the house to his private rooms, where Starscream and Skywar instantly relaxed on the loungers. They dismissed their slaves to stand outside the room when Bumblebee seemed to appear from nowhere to serve them high grade and treats. He was silent, barely seeming to register on the seeker’s attention and once he was done he disappeared out of the room again. Hound got the impression he was glad to have escaped.

Thundercracker hadn’t dismissed him, so Hound put himself in a corner where he could see all the seekers, but he wasn’t in Starscream or Skywar’s direct optic line and waited. The Lords were apparently catching up on business and gossip, clearly at ease with each other. Starscream seemed particularly interested in anything surrounding the latest technology but as soon as Skywar mentioned their Prime and High Lord Protector, everything else paled into insignificance. Hound listened curiously, but didn’t hear anything that wasn’t just rumours, though he did notice Thundercracker took more of a back seat in these conversations.

A few breems later Thundercracker’s computer terminal chirped and the blue mech turned his head to Hound slightly, motioning for him to answer the call. Hound moved to the screen and activated the vid screen. Ironhide’s annoyed face appeared and he scowled. “Sorry to interrupt but there’s a message at the door for Lord Thundercracker and the mech won’t give it to anyone but him.”

Hound nodded and Ironhide cut the communication. The green mech glanced up at the seekers who were still talking, having taken no real notice of the call. That meant he had to interrupt and he never had worked out how to do that as flawlessly as Bumblebee or any of the other slaves. He approached Thundercracker cautiously and was grateful when he looked up straight away.

“Excuse me sir. There is a messenger at the front door. He will not give anyone but you the message.”

“Slagging messenger bots,” Skywar snorted. “They always think their job is so important.”

Thundercracker sighed, rising from the lounger. “This won’t take long.”

The blue mech swiftly disappeared from the room. Hound was slower on moving, only realising that if Thundercracker left it would just be him and the other seekers in the room, when Thundercracker was nearly gone.

“Did I say you could go slave?” Starscream said, voice demanding.

Hound stopped dead, turning back to the pair of seekers. “No sir. I was following Lord Thundercracker’s orders to leave when I was done.”

“Well you’re not done yet.” The seeker pointed at the table in front of him. “Refill my glass.”

Hound wanted to argue, complain he wasn’t a serving slave, but he couldn’t and it wouldn’t hurt to get this over and done with. The green mech bobbed his head before he stepped back over to the pair on the loungers, bending to pick up Starscream’s glass.

“Mine too.” Skywar didn’t even bother to look his way or make the slightest move.

Hound gathered that glass up too, being careful with them because they were extremely fragile and his blunt fingers were not designed for finesse. He took them over to the decanter set on the sideboard and filled the glasses with the expensive energon. One whiff of it told Hound’s senses this
was probably the most refined energon he had ever seen or was likely too. The decanter was more than likely to be worth more than his life and Hound used excessive care not to spill any on the way back. After he set them on the table Starscream tapped the floor with one pede. “Sit.”

“Sir,” Hound managed to stop himself making it sound like a question, but the last thing he wanted to do was sit at the seeker’s pedes like a pet. It was degrading and it would leave him vulnerable to the flyer behind him.

“Don’t make me repeat myself.” Starscream’s voice took on a particular tone which Hound realised was as close to a warning as he would get. Hound turned to fit himself in beside the table and lounging, taking care because the gap really wasn’t big enough for him. Everything in him was screaming to disobey and get the pit out of the room.

Abruptly, before Hound could do something he’d regret, the door to the room opened and Thundercracker reappeared. The seeker noted Hound’s position and smoothly instructed, “Leave us now Hound.”

“Sir,” Hound nodded, grateful, but Starscream’s voice had him freezing in place.

“Thundercracker, we deserve a little entertainment.”

The blue flyer was, by this stage, at Hound’s side and he stared down at Starscream. “And you know he is not here for that.”

Hound inched away from the seekers, trying to be surreptitious about it. Thundercracker’s hand brushed his hip as he passed, sliding around his waist slightly, but Hound couldn’t look up to check his expression and was left wondering why. The seeker had never really touched him, so it had to have been deliberate. Maybe it was just reassurance, but for whom? He had to know Hound was grateful for his chance to escape.

“I still don’t understand why you let them keep their name,” Skywarp’s voice said somewhere behind them.

“Because it’s easier,” Thundercracker replied. “How else do you get one particular slave’s attention in a room full of them?”

“They’re supposed to know,” Starscream scoffed. “That’s their life.”

Hound gratefully let the door slid shut behind him, taking up his position to one side of it. Across the corridor stood the other seekers’ aides and the green mech checked they were alone before he spoke. “It’s good to see you Prowl, Jazz.”

Prowl’s optics flicked to him and he gave him the barest of nods before returning his gaze to the door. Jazz shot the other black and white a closed look prior to talking to Hound.

“Good t’ see ya Hound. We didn’t know where ya’d gone.” Jazz shifted on his pedes briefly. “Someone took great pains t’ hide ya when ya disappeared into the slave system.”

“I guessed as much,” Hound shrugged. He wasn’t angry at the lack of rescue, it was a known risk. “But what are you two doing here?”

Jazz was silent for a long moment. “’Bout the time ya got arrested, someone set Prowl up ‘n got ‘im sent straight into the slave-pens. I was gonna get him freed when they stopped movin’ ‘im but then Screamer pick ‘im up ‘n I knew there was no gettin’ out o’ that one.” The smaller black and white glanced at his motionless companion. “Ya know the rumours ‘bout Screamer.”
“They aren’t rumours,” Hound shook his head.

“Ya tellin’ meh,” Jazz muttered disgustedly. “I disobeyed a few orders, but some others were willin’ t’ help meh. I couldn’t get into Screamer’s household, next best thin’ was Warp’s.” His visor glinted and Hound got the distinct impression Jazz was trying to glare a hole through the wall to the seekers beyond him. “I couldn’t leave Prowl alone, not with ‘im.”

“Instead you put yourself at risk.” Prowl’s voice was soft. “Something you know I didn’t want.”

“Stuff it Prowler.” Jazz shook his head. “I’ve got the know-how t’ deal with this, ya haven’t ‘n ya mean too much t’ meh t’ let Screamer… do that.”

Prowl slowly turned his head to meet Jazz’s visor. “You can’t stop that.”

“Not all the time, maybe,” Jazz agreed. “But when I’m there, ya know he likes fresher mechs ‘n Warp ain’t nearly as bad t’ be around.”

Hound kept his vocaliser mute as quiet, dawning horror made him realise his life here was a relaxed walk in the park in comparison to the life Jazz and Prowl now led. They didn’t have to say what happened, they way they had said what they had was enough. That and the way Prowl was so distant. He may never have been the most social and outgoing of mechs, but he was never so rude as not to talk when someone included him in a conversation, nor did he ever carry himself so stiffly, like he was ready to move at a moment’s notice.

“So Hound, what’s Thundercracker like?” Jazz asked abruptly.

The green mech blinked. “Not bad… actually he’s nice… really nice.”

That felt wrong, saying that, but it was the truth and he couldn’t lie Thundercracker was anything like the other two seekers. Jazz tilted his head. “I ain’t heard anythin’ bad ‘bout ‘im, ‘cept the company he keeps.”

“Seekers feel a pull to be in each other’s company,” Hound explained. “He can’t help that.”

“How’d ya know that?”

“He told me,” Hound replied, shrugging.

The smaller black and white frowned. “He told ya?”

“I’m not…” Hound searched for the right word. “Broken in, as it were. I behave in public, around company, but otherwise, around him… I’m difficult. More than I would normally be.”

“He lets ya get away with that?” Jazz sounded truly surprised.

“Yeah. He’s pretty much said I can do that around him. Ironhide does it too, but he doesn’t question him, always addresses him like he should.”

“But ya don’t,” the other’s voice carried a note of disbelief.

“We argue quite a bit.” Hound shifted around, feeling almost guilty to admit this to someone who gave up their freedom to help their friend. “I guess he lets me do that because he wants me to defend him more willingly than I would if I were just a slave following orders.”

“Is it workin’?” Jazz asked curiously.
The green mech hesitated slightly. “I guess so.”

“Then it’s just another way to change you to what they want.” Prowl’s voice was still a whisper but Hound could nearly taste the bitterness in it. It also hit home hard. Prior to his enslavement, Hound was willing to respect those slaves that enjoyed their lives, even if he disagreed with slavery as a whole, but he would never believed that he could become one of those mechs. He had vowed to fight his slavery when he had first found out he was being sent to the slave pens but Prowl’s words made him realise he was no longer doing so.

The green mech felt abruptly sick to his tanks. He had accepted his slavery, however much leniency Thundercracker chose to give him, because he was more willing to defend Thundercracker’s life with his own and it had been done with barely a protest from him. It was a comfortable, relatively easy life and he slipped into the routine, grown accustomed to it and hadn’t thought once to fight back.

“Hound, don’t ruin it.” Jazz’s voice brought him back to the corridor. “Maybe Prowl’s right but maybe Thundercracker’s one o’ them mechs that isn’t out t’ do that ‘n if that’s the case, ya’d be a fool t’ blow it. Ya make do ‘n grow with what ya’ve got.”

Just then they all heard the footsteps approach the door and drew themselves up straight, optics directed to the floor, behaving like the well trained slaves they knew they weren’t. Skywarp was first out, followed by Starscream and then Thundercracker. They were still talking amongst themselves and all three slaves fell in behind them as they headed up the corridor. The talk was about a large upcoming party and the rumour both Prime and the High Lord Protector were going to be in attendance, which instantly meant Skywarp and Starscream would have to be seen there. Thundercracker seemed to reluctantly agree to go, but consented nevertheless.

By the time they re-entered the lobby Hound, Jazz and Prowl all knew they were going to see each other again at this party, even though nothing of the sort had been said to them. Each of them knew enough to know that one attending slave was allowed to be brought to these functions by each Lord and so far none of them had angered their Masters enough not to warrant not going.

As the seekers bid each other goodbye Jazz caught Hound’s optics and whispered, “Take care.”

Hound nodded once, slightly. “You too. Both of you.”

Jazz smiled slightly. “I’ve always got Prowl’s back. See ya around.”

Hound watched them go until the doors were shut behind them, taking them from view. He was so deep in thought that he missed Thundercracker stepping up to his side until he spoke.

“You did well today. I expected something to go wrong.”

“Thanks for the faith in me,” Hound muttered.

The blue mech laughed, laying a hand on Hound’s shoulder briefly. “I didn’t mean it as an insult, not to you at least.”

Hound turned to look at the bigger mech. “Starscream, you mean.”

“You’re not his type, really, but you’re a challenge he’s not allowed to take.” Thundercracker gestured at the door. “I’m sorry I didn’t dismiss you before I left the room. I had to know if he’d take the bait.”

Hound shrugged, ignoring the ‘bait’ bit of Thundercracker’s apology. “It’s not like anything
happened.”

“Not this time.” The seeker’s voice had a slight warning in it. “I will try not to let a situation like that happen again. You’re mine to protect.”

Suddenly Hound wanted to ask why Thundercracker had touched him when he had dismissed. Coupled with those words, it made him seem almost possessive over Hound. Once Hound had been perfectly capable of taking care of himself, Starscream would never have been a problem, and that made the seeker’s sudden protectiveness grate a little, but it was also weirdly comforting. The mech had more power than him, he was physically bigger and he seemed to care what happened to Hound. Perhaps, after his conversation with Jazz, that should have made Hound want to pull away from Thundercracker, but Jazz had said that you learn to make more out of the situation you find yourself in. If this got him closer to freedom, got him back to a place where he could fight to get Jazz and Prowl out of where they were, then he was going to take the chance with both hands.
Life continued pretty much as normal for the next few orns, with Thundercracker coming and going to social and business meetings. Ironhide still, generally, took over from Hound when the seeker went outside his home and the blue mech seemed to accept his guard’s decision on that, for now. The black mech had been told Hound had to be ready to accompany him to the biggest party of the season at the end of the deca-cycle, which had made him worry Thundercracker was dropping Hound in at the deep end of it all. Protecting the Lord whilst out and about was far easier than going to such gatherings, where there was not only his safety to consider but also the social and political manoeuvres that went on. Something which Hound had not proved himself capable of yet.

Ironhide pretty much took over any free time Hound had and even began eating into time assigned to Thundercracker, which the seeker had begrudgingly allowed when Ironhide had, politely, argued his point. It made Thundercracker take the time spent with Hound a little more seriously as he found he missed the green mech’s bright personality when he wasn’t there. It also made him aware of just how much time he actually spent with Hound. Most of the cycles in a mega-cycle were spent in each other's company, much more than he ever had with Ironhide, but the blue mech tried to put that down to the fact that Hound was much better at datawork than the black mech. It had nothing to do with the increasing amount of time he spent watching Hound move, watching those lips shape words and wondering what they’d be like to kiss…

Thundercracker wrinkled his nose plates up in annoyance at his wandering thoughts. He could admit to himself that his fascination with Hound had grown into physical attraction but the flyer was also well aware that any move on his part in that direction would get one pit of a negative reaction from Hound. Sometimes he’d forget himself and lay a hand on the green mech’s shoulder, but he quickly reminded himself he shouldn’t. The seeker paused in typing. Hound had never objected, any of those times, so maybe he didn’t mind. Maybe he wouldn’t mind more.

Red optics returned to the other mech in the room, once again reminding himself he should really get Hound a proper chair so he could work beside Thundercracker on his desk. It was certainly big enough and would put him in closer proximity.

“Hound,” Thundercracker said, taking a little delight in the instant way Hound responded to his name. “I need you to make a note of this list and then make a trip out for me. Bumblebee won’t have touched this as it’s personal.”

The green mech made his way over and Thundercracker stood, shifting to one side, like he was making room for Hound, but in reality it put him in more of a position to take advantage of their closeness. The smaller mech slotted in next to him, between the desk and his wing, optics going straight to the computer screen, leaving the seeker free to softly inhale his scent and shiver slightly without Hound noticing. Thundercracker shook his head to clear his clouded thoughts and started speaking.

Hound stood next to Thundercracker to read the list he was detailing out. The seeker pointed out some key items and Hound made a mental note, trying to ignore the occasional touches of the
seeker’s wing against his back when Thundercracker leant forward. The other mech didn’t seem to mind, so he could put up with it as well. It was when the seeker’s hand came to rest on his shoulder that Hound wondered what was going on. He soon worked it out when that hand slipped off his shoulder and wandered lightly down his back, brushing across his aft before it disappeared. The green mech said nothing. What could he say?

Surprisingly it didn’t make him feel uncomfortable, like he thought it might, when he couldn’t complain. It reminded Hound how he’d feel when some mech he liked the look of paid him a compliment, or looked his way in a crowd, and that was more disturbing because he’d never thought of Thundercracker in any way but the mech that owned him.

Hound blinked rapidly, trying to keep his attention on the seeker’s words but his CPU was now demanding he think about the seeker himself. Did he find him physically attractive? Well he wasn’t Hound’s usual type. Hound normally went for mechs more like himself, toughly built ground-based types, but had enjoyed flings with the faster, racing types. He just didn’t know that many flyers as they didn’t mingle with groundies much.

His optics flicked briefly to Thundercracker, catching a look at him in profile. He was all sweeping lines and curves as benefited a creature designed for speed and flight, which was pretty much the exact opposite to Hound himself. The first thing to catch any optic looking at Thundercracker was that glorious expanse of blue wing metal, tapering down to his waist and across to his shoulders. The yellow glass ridge running down the centre of his chest added a stunning contrast to his blue and white paint.

When the seeker shifted on his pedes Hound glanced down momentarily. Thundercracker’s pedes were small in comparison to his big flat ones, with added height from the thrusters drawing Hound’s optics up his legs again. There was a flare of heat in his systems but the smaller mech buried it, refusing to look away until he was done assessing the blue flyer.

“Hound?”

“I’m listening,” the green mech reassured him and Thundercracker went back to the screen.

With his optics now on the seeker’s face Hound found himself watching him talk and found his mouth to be more sensual than he’d realised. It matched his slim, long face and bright red optics, which were looking straight at him. Hound abruptly realised Thundercracker wasn’t talking, just gazing at him, a smile curving those lips up into a very pleased expression and felt a flush of embarrassment heat his cheek plates.

The door chimed suddenly and Ironhide’s voice called through the intercom. “Sorry to interrupt, but I’ve come to collect Hound for training.”

Thundercracker tried not to look disappointed as he gestured towards the door. “You better get going then.”

“What about these things?” Hound glanced at the screen and then at the seeker.

“You can collect them afterwards,” the blue flyer explained. “I’ll need them in a couple of mega-cycles’ time when we go to the ‘event of the meta-cycle’.”

Hound grinned at the optic roll Thundercracker did to go with the last bit of that sentence and nodded, stepping away from the desk and heading for the door. The seeker watched him go, saddened to be losing his company but thoroughly enjoying the view. One corner of his mouth curled upwards again, remembering how he’d been sure that Hound hadn’t been paying his words
much attention and how turning to him had revealed Hound staring at him. That look on his face had been one Thundercracker had never seen before, one of physical interest and it gave the seeker even more hope that the smaller mech could return his attraction. It might require Thundercracker to do a little more work, but he wouldn’t be adverse to that.

““How come you don’t want me doing this?” Hound asked as Ironhide grumbled about time, preparation and guns, referring to the grand party he was supposed to be guarding Thundercracker at. “Am I still not good enough?”

“Ya as good as any mech I’ve trained at this stage,” the black mech shook his head. “It isn’t ya shooting skills that worry me, it’s the politics that’ll be floating around in a place like that.”

Hound stared down at the floor as they walked to the armoury that Ironhide held the master key for. He knew he wasn’t good at not reacting to what was said or done, but this would be an unparalleled chance to see what these parties of the upper echelon of society were really like. There was another reason to go and that came in the form of a big red and blue mech with more power than nearly every other mech on Cybertron.

“Is it really true Optimus Prime is going?”

“That’s the rumour,” Ironhide snorted, pausing to key in the code to open the armoury door. “There are rumours like that all the time because he doesn’t come out to these things all that often, but this one hasn’t been rebuked, which normally happens, so yeah, there’s a good chance.”

The bigger mech pulled out a selection of guns from the racks around the room and then a bunch of cleaning supplies. Hound set to dismantling the guns. Ironhide had drilled him well about the care of weapons before he was even allowed to fire one. The black mech took his job very seriously indeed.

“Have you seen him?” Hound wondered if Ironhide had been present at Thundercracker’s side during one of those occasions.

“Across a room,” Ironhide nodded. “He’s a big mech, got something about him…”

“You’d like him,” slipped out of Hound’s mouth before he could stop himself.

“Ya’ve met the Prime?” Ironhide asked, surprised.

Hound swallowed. There was nothing he could do to take that back now and glancing at the curious expression on the black mech’s face, Hound decided to take a risk. He did desperately want to talk to someone without lies or secrets.

“Yes, a few times, when I was working with the Enforcers.”

“What’s he like?” Ironhide leaned up against one pillar next to the table. “I mean I know what the reports all say about him; even-tempered, kind, generous, noble, but he can’t be all stars and sunshine.”

Hound shrugged. “He kinda is. I mean I know some things make him angry, but that’s things like violence and inequality. Normally he’s willing to listen to everyone and he doesn’t shout or use his authority to push other mechs around.”

Ironhide snorted. “Can he fight?”
“I’ve never seen him fight, but he’s a big mech, you said so yourself. He could be something to reckon with if he did know how,” Hound answered, curious himself.

“He got something to do with why ya’re here?” Ironhide’s attitude was casual but Hound tensed at the words. “I’ll take it from that he does.”

“It wasn’t his fault,” Hound found himself defending Optimus. “He doesn’t ask anyone to do anything they wouldn’t do willingly. I went to that place because someone needed to and... there was no one else.” He had nearly said Jazz had been too busy, but he was going to be careful about how many names he used. Incriminating Optimus was bad enough, but as Prime, rumours like this could be easily brushed aside. They had been very careful not to let Optimus have contact with mechs that could taint his authority. Prowl had been the prefect cover before someone had blown it. Hound wondered briefly who he talked to now.

“Hmmph,” Ironhide grunted. “Glad to see our Prime isn’t just some political, credit grabbing mech.”

Hound raised one optic ridge. “You don’t have a very high opinion of him do you?”

“Not him in particular, the Primes in general,” the black mech snorted. “I’ve seen enough come and go in my life time, speaking grand speeches, getting nothing done. He’s the youngest yet.”

“He isn’t a push over, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Ironhide studied him for a moment before shrugging. “We’ll see won’t we?”

The black mech exchanged one gun for another, taking it apart with practiced ease and laying it out on the table so he could clean each part. Hound followed his motions with another weapon, wondering, not for the first time, why Ironhide had quite so many guns. He had to admit cleaning the weapons was quite soothing, in its repetitive actions, and they worked their way through several more, letting Hound’s thoughts wander. Normally he enjoyed these quiet times where he could think without worry but that cycle he found his thoughts heading straight back to Thundercracker, regardless of what he did.

It was like, since he had realised that the seeker was an attractive mech, he couldn’t stop thinking about him like that. Nothing had changed; Thundercracker was still his owner and he was still enslaved. Just because Thundercracker had subtly indicated that he physically liked Hound didn’t mean he had to reciprocate, regardless of how much it highlighted just how lonely the green mech felt. There had been no one in his life romantically for some time before his incarceration and certainly no one during it. Hound tried to reason having anyone show an interest would be received the same way.

“Ironhide,” Hound started hesitantly. The black mech grunted to show he was listening, but didn’t look up. “You’ve heard the rumours about me and our Master...?”

The other mech didn’t stop from cleaning out the barrel of the gun he was working on. “The interfacing ones, sure. Ya want to know if I think they’re true?”

“No,” Hound shook his head. “Is there a reason for the rumours? Has he interfaced with slaves before?”

“Once or twice,” Ironhide met Hound’s optics, trying to understand what the green mech was getting at. “He’s never done it more than once with any one slave though, since most of ‘em use it against the others. If ya worried he’ll try something, ya know he wouldn’t touch ya if ya didn’t want him to.”

Hound shook his head again, this time a little unsure, since Thundercracker had touched him, albeit
tamely, when he hadn’t encouraged it, but then again he hadn’t discouraged it either. If that’s what
the seeker wanted, how else would he broach the subject with Hound, who had made it abundantly
clear he wouldn’t hesitate in standing up for his beliefs.

“Unless, of course, ya want him to be interested…” Ironhide suddenly smirked, optics gleaming.

Hound glared at him, or tried to, but his own confused feelings on the matter meant it lacked the
weight behind it to be effective. One optic ridge shot up Ironhide’s face plate, clearly showing he
hadn’t been expecting that sort of response.

“Ya do.”

“I don’t know,” Hound ground out, slamming the gun down on the table.

“Why’s it so bad?” Ironhide asked. “Ya wouldn’t be fretting like some femme if it was anyone else.”

“Because he owns me!” Hound said like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“So? Ya not going to take advantage of the way he treats ya round the rest of us. Ya would have
done that already. What’s wrong with getting a little pleasure in life?” Ironhide reassembled the gun
Hound had been cleaning, surreptitiously moving it away from any more violent actions from the
green mech.

Hound stared at him. “But he owns me…”

“Get past that Hound,” Ironhide snorted. “Ya still a mech. Lord Thundercracker hasn’t been that bad
a Master. In fact I know ya wouldn’t find a more tolerant one anywhere on Cybertron. So ya want
him to frag ya CPU out, so fragging what?” Hound spluttered, embarrassed by the blunt words. “Tell
him that and get it out ya system!”

The big black mech gathered up the guns on the bench, swept them into one arm and marched away,
leaving one confused Hound behind, gaping at his back. He knew Ironhide could be blunt, but that
had shocked him utterly. Never once had he thought the other guard and slave would encourage him
to interface with the mech that could terminate them at his own whim.

Somewhere inside Hound a little voice piped up saying Ironhide was right, what was wrong with
getting a little pleasure when, anywhere else, he’d be denied it and especially since it was with an
attractive mech. Hound groaned, covering his face with his hand. He’d had enough of this line of
thought this mega-cycle.

When he dropped his hand again the green mech noticed Ironhide had left one gun on the worktop
and Hound smiled. There was one thing that the black mech had taught him and that was blowing up
drones on the target range was a good way of blowing off steam. Hound snatched the gun and a few
spare clips out of the storage area and headed outside to the range. Once there he activated his
training programme that Ironhide had built for his skill level on the computer and set to destroying
the drones that appeared. After a few run-throughs Hound had calmed down enough to start
concentrating on making his shots count, rather than spraying fire at anything that moved, but then he
started hitting less drones.

Hound frowned at the target. Ironhide had obviously been out and increased the difficulty when he
hadn’t been looking, making him miss more than he was comfortable with. He reset the arena,
reloaded his gun and took up his position. At least he didn’t have it set out like Ironhide, these drones
didn’t shoot back. Yet.

On his next round he got his scores up to seventy percent, but that still wasn’t high enough. If this
was a real threat to Thundercracker then he could well be injured or dead with a percentile hit rate like that.

“You’ll get better,” a voice told him. “Ironhide spends too much time out here for you to compare yourself to him.”

Hound turned to find Thundercracker watching him and he redirected his attention back to the drones, feeling a little uncomfortable to find himself the centre of attention. “But I’m the one who’s supposed to be protecting you.”

The seeker crossed into the arena to stand at his side. “And I trust you to do that.”

Hound shook his head as he reset the arena again and took up his position. Thundercracker tilted his head, staring at him hard enough that Hound looked up at the seeker. “What?”

The blue mech flashed him a quick smile, amused by the lack of any honorific in Hound’s address, let alone that he’d asked a question. “Just had an idea. Come here.”

Hound stood back up, stepping over. Thundercracker turned him around until he was side on to the rest of the arena, instructed him to raise his gun and then wrapped his hand around the back of Hound's. He closed the gap between their chassis, curling his other hand around his hip plate, so his front was to Hound’s back.

“Relax. You know the basics about this and it should come instinctively now, so you don’t need to use the two-handed hold anymore. This is quicker, allows you sight down your arm whilst letting you pick out your next target.” The seeker rested his cheek against the side of Hound’s helm.

The green mech tried not to fidget in the other mech’s grip. He could feel the heat off the other's chassis and could feel his rising in return, reacting automatically to the closeness of another after all this time spent alone. Hound forced himself to concentrate on the seeker’s words rather than the way Thundercracker felt along the line of his back or the way his fingers were almost absently stroking his hip.

“Ready?” When Hound nodded, Thundercracker said, “Computer, start programme.”

With the seeker guiding him, Hound did relax and he could suddenly calculate the drones' movements much quicker. His hit rate rose to eighty percent and when they were done Hound found himself smiling. Thundercracker let go of his gun hand. “See? Now let’s get this perfect shall we?” Hound nodded, determination rising to the challenge and the seeker chuckled. “Alright, now you can shoot like that, we’ve got to get some movement in there. A fight is always changing, you can’t stand still otherwise you’re too much of a target.” With that both of Thundercracker’s hands tightened on his hip plates. “I’m going to guide you, just step with me.”

Hound twitched, CPU playing out a different scenario that involved these positions and Thundercracker’s hands just where they were. Hastily the green mech banished the thoughts as Thundercracker ordered the computer to start the programme again. The seeker started out slow, just taking a step back or forward every so often, but Hound found he could sense when the mech behind him was going to move before he actually did and that meant he didn’t stumble. The blue mech seemed to realise this and began to step up the pace as well as changing direction, even making Hound lean back at one point, though he kept them balanced.

The smaller mech was surprised when the programme ended, announcing a ninety eight percent accuracy. He’d been so caught up in the flowing movement and shooting that he hadn’t really registered how many drones he’d hit.
“Didn’t I say you’d get better?” Thundercracker murmured in one audio.

Hound turned slightly, enough to see the red optics. “Thank you.”

“Any time,” the seeker replied. “I can’t have my guard being anything but the best now can I?”

“How do you know so much?”

“Part of my education was learning how to handle weapons.” Thundercracker hadn’t let go of his hips yet so Hound had to stay still, pressed against the seeker. “Turbo fox hunts are part of society here and whilst I don’t go on many hunts, I keep my hand in with Ironhide. He insisted I kept up with training in case I ever found myself in a situation that needed me to shoot someone. Now I have someone else to train with.”

Hound nodded mutely, trying not to move in the slightest, trying to force his CPU not to wander, not like the black fingers on his hips. They slid up and down the line of one transformation seam one each side of his black plating, but they kept to the surface of Hound’s body, when he would have quite liked them to dip below and tease at the wires. When he realised quite what he was thinking Hound blurted out the first thing that came to mind to get his thoughts off those fingers.

“You must be good then, if you never miss a shot on the hunts.”

Thundercracker laughed, releasing him. “That was an exaggeration.”

“By how much?” Hound gratefully stepped away, though he tried to make it look like he wasn’t hurrying either.

“Oh, not that much,” the seeker smirked, a hint of arrogance in his attitude, and the smaller mech found it suited him. It seemed to spark up his whole personality, making him more vibrant and alive. It went well with the cant of his hips and angle of his head as he watched Hound to see if he’d believe that.

“Perhaps you should show me,” and the gun was held out between them. The seeker’s smirk didn’t change as he slid his hand over the gun, brushing his fingers across Hound’s, who could feel his face plates heating in embarrassment and tugged his hand free as soon as he knew Thundercracker wouldn’t drop the gun.

“Of course,” the blue mech returned smoothly. “I would love to show you how good I am.”

Hound swallowed at the double entendre, hiding his discomposure by going back to the computer and re-setting it, deliberately upping the settings. Thundercracker watched him do it all with that arrogance and smirk in place and waited until Hound had finished and the computer was about to start the training run to say, “And I do like to play hard too.”

Hound paid very little attention to the seeker’s score as he stared at him. Every time he hadn’t turned his advances down or away this mega-cycle, it had seemed to encourage Thundercracker further. He had been bolder today than he’d ever been and Hound had not once told him no. Did that really mean he consider interfacing with him? Did he truly like him that much?
“And I thought your place was big,” Hound whispered, optics trying to take in the sprawl of the one massive building.

Thundercracker laughed softly. “I think you’re right, it is too big.”

“I’d have thought you wouldn’t have said anything was too big.” Hound shot him a look, mindful that all the other mechs around didn’t see him do it.

The seeker’s smile broadened and one optic ridge quirked upwards as he returned the gaze of his companion, deliberately misinterpreting Hound’s words. The green mech hastily looked away but Thundercracker didn’t miss the spike in temperature as Hound understood and was promptly embarrassed. Time and time again Thundercracker had deliberately made a play on words or twisted what Hound had said to turn it into some sort of innuendo. So far Hound hadn’t replied in kind but he certainly hadn’t told Thundercracker to stop and the seeker found his awkwardness to be endearing and just a little bit cute.

“Come,” he instructed. “We must get ourselves situated in our rooms before this all gets too chaotic.”

“Too chaotic?” Hound muttered. That was putting it mildly. There were already a great deal of transformers moving in every direction, though you could tell who was important and who was a slave by the pathways cleared around the Lords. The green mech pushed aside his wonder and bewilderment to concentrate on his job. This would be an ideal spot for targeting someone as you’d never be able to track down the assailant but the crowds also offered some measure of protection.

Thundercracker led them to the main doors and into a grand sweeping foyer, bustling with activity, Hound at his side. The smaller mech spotted the reception desk along the back wall and guided the seeker to an empty spot next to its counter, the gun on his hip clearing its own path. Thundercracker carried a high enough rank that talking to the staff here was considered below him, so that left Hound to catch someone’s attention, which wasn’t an easy thing to do. His polite ‘excuse me’s were ignored so Hound put his hand out instead, summoning up a hologram so a hand twice as large as his own appeared in front of one mech walking past him.

“Excuse me,” Hound said, again. The mech, who had jerked to a halt, stared at him with a shocked and angry expression but Hound beat him to speaking. “Lord Thundercracker would like to access to his room.”

The mech’s optics darted across to the seeker and hurriedly bowed. “Forgive me my lord, I didn’t realise who you were. Please bear with me one klik.” He hurriedly disappeared into a back room to gather the necessary details.

“Nicely done Hound,” Thundercracker murmured next to his audio.

“You don’t think it was over the top?” the green mech returned.
“It was non-violent but the others that noticed were impressed by your hologram and that in turn leads them to think more of me.” The blue flyer smiled. “Everything is about appearances and you’re making me look good before we’ve even started.”

The receptionist was back again and he deposited a keycard on the counter surface. “Would you like any refreshments brought up to your room before the event sir?”

“No thank you,” Thundercracker replied, ignoring protocol to get through this quicker.

“Perhaps I could interest you in a little entertainment,” the mech glanced at his datapad. “It is on the house of course. We have a good selection of mechs and femmes, sir, if you’d care to…”

“No thank you,” the seeker couldn’t stop himself glancing at Hound, something the receptionist saw. “I won’t require that.”

“Of course sir, my apologies,” the mech nodded. “Then if you could just sign here then.” He laid the datapad on the counter top and Thundercracker scrawled his glyph down in the appropriate place. “The turbo-lifts are to your right hand side and you are on the third floor.”

Hound collected the keycard and together the seeker and slave headed for the turbolifts. Some how they got one to themselves which gave Hound a chance to ask. “What did he mean, entertainment?”

“Places like this will get you anything you want, included pleasure slaves,” Thundercracker shrugged. “Credits will buy you anything.”

Hound wrinkled his faceplates in disgust before frowning. “Why did he apologise then?”

“Because he assumed you were here with me in a similar capacity,” the seeker told him and Hound stared at him. “I could have dissuaded him of that idea of course, but it’s easier to let them think otherwise, so they don’t keep offering the ‘entertainment’.”

“They think I’m here to… pleasure you?” Hound meant for his voice to come out outraged, incredulous, but he squeaked over the word pleasure, making that pleased, arrogant smile appear on the flyer’s face. Thundercracker turned to face him, leaning down slightly so their faces were the same height and Hound froze, determined to stand his ground, despite the hammering pump in his chest.

“No there’s a notion,” the blue mech drawled lazily, optics wandering over Hound’s frame, showing his appreciation for what he saw.

The turbolift dinged as it reached their floor and Hound bolted for the relative safety of the corridor as soon as the doors opened, covering his move by checking the corridor for threats. Thundercracker followed him without protest, giving the green mech time to compose himself and he let him check their room thoroughly, noting the way he kept casting looks back at the sprawling berth in the corner. The one and only berth in the suite. The seeker smiled again as Hound announced it was all clear, waiting for a moment, until he got asked, “Where am I recharging?”

Thundercracker tilted his head to one side, like he was considering his answer, giving time for Hound to consider all the alternatives. “They expect you to recharge on the floor, perhaps if you’re good, the settee, but then again, from the impression of the mech downstairs, they’ll probably be expecting you to be warming my berth.”

From somewhere the green mech seemed to draw on some courage because he scowled at the seeker. “You are not helping this image.”
“Why would I? It should be fairly obvious where I stand on the idea by now,” Thundercracker risked saying, curious to see how far he could push Hound before the green mech told him to back off.

Hound nodded. “Very obvious.”

The seeker wasn’t sure whether he hid his surprise at Hound’s response. He had been so sure Hound would react negatively to his very open statement and it confused him. No, more than that, it intrigued him. Thundercracker would think he’d get Hound all sussed out and then he went and said or did something that opened up a whole new side of him. It only left Thundercracker with one view that Hound didn’t mind his advances and, perhaps, welcomed them.

His silence gave Hound the chance to change the subject and he pulled a displaycard off the table next to him and held it out to Thundercracker. The blue flyer already knew what it would said and gestured at Hound to activate it as he wandered across the room to discover just what was provide on the house. A femme’s voice filled the room, bright and cordial, welcoming Lord Thundercracker to the gathering before she explained where the main party was being held, on the ground floor, and some of the events that he might like to attend whilst he was there. Hound listened and watched the display until it was over, curious to know just what was going to happen, but finding the whole thing a little vague.

Once the screen darkened again, the green mech put the displaycard back down on the table and his optics landed on the seeker across the room. He seemed to be going through a collection of bottles on the table, opening them and waving them under his olfactory sensor. Some he instantly pulled away from, making a face of disgust, until he settled on one.

“It is nearly time to be heading down to the gathering,” Thundercracker started, coming across the room to Hound. “There is just enough time to polish up before we do.”

“Sir?”

Thundercracker handed Hound a wax and cloth. “It’s always best to make a good impression.”

Hound took the items, frowning at them slightly before setting to work. He started at Thundercracker’s helm, working his way downwards. The seeker shuttered his optics and Hound could tell he was enjoying every klik of the attention. The green mech tried to ignore the way the seeker’s engine purred into life as Hound cleaned out Thundercracker’s intakes, but it wasn’t until he began buffing up the large expanse of wing metal that the seeker started making noises from his vocaliser.

Hound glanced up to find Thundercracker staring at him with half shuttered optics and he could feel the heat rising off the chassis. He had made no pretence about his attraction towards Hound, though he had never pushed at Hound. The seeker had only touched him in passing caresses, enough to be noticed but not enough for Hound to truly feel uncomfortable, until recently. Now the smaller mech was having to deal with his own feelings and the way his own body was reacting. It had been a very long time since anyone had shown interest like that in him and he couldn’t help but crave the contact. He didn’t want it, or hadn’t to start with, but it was becoming more and more difficult not push into those touches.

Hound realised he’d been staring at Thundercracker and hastily got back to work. Thundercracker just watched him finish his work, though sometimes he made small pleased noises and arched just a little into Hound’s hands. The green mech was being to feel turned on by them and was fighting not to let it show. It took him some time to polish everywhere, but once he was finished, Thundercracker glowed faintly under the lights and Hound had to admit he looked good.
“All done.”

“Mmm so I see,” Thundercracker took the cloth and wax off him. “My turn I believe.”

“Sir?” Hound was confused.

“You’re coming to this party too, so you’ve got to look your best as well. It will reflect on me if you don’t.” Thundercracker smiled lazily.

“But surely, I should do that myself?”

“But you can’t reach everywhere like I can,” the seeker drawled the instant before the cloth touched Hound’s bumper.

The green mech froze. The seeker made a satisfied sound and got to work, though Hound could swear he lingered over his more sensitive spots and he couldn’t stop his engine from kicking into life was the seeker applied more pressure to his wheel wells. Thundercracker looked up from where he was knelt at Hound’s feet and the smile that curved across his face sent a visible shudder through the green mech.

“Turn around,” the blue mech’s voice had a predatory edge to it now and Hound stumbled as he did as he was told.

By the time Thundercracker had made it all the way back up his chassis to his shoulders Hound was trembling, bleeding heat and trying not to make desperate little noises at every touch. He did let out a surprised gasp when Thundercracker suddenly pressed himself to his back and his hands slid over his chassis.

“Sir…”

The seeker pressed the fingers of one hand into the glass of a headlight whilst the other stroked the metal plate covering his interface port. Hound made an unintelligible noise and arched into those probing digits. His own hands made useless fists at his sides, unsure whether he should be touching back. Thundercracker didn’t mind as he was pleased that Hound was just letting him touch him and drew out more noises from the mech under his hands until Hound broke.

“Please I can’t…”

“Let go,” Thundercracker murmured in one audio. “You’re safe.”

“I…” Hound twisted in his grip, his own hands finally coming up to grip at the seeker’s arms, as he felt his overload beginning to threaten.

A loud chime from the door startled both of them and Hound came abruptly back to himself, realising what was happening. Thundercracker scowled at the door, snapping, “What is it?”

“Excuse the interruption sir,” a voice replied through the metal. “But I was told to come and inform you that the party will be starting in a klik.”

“Thank you.” The blue mech’s tone was curt, but the moment was gone and Hound was trying to pull out of Thundercracker’s grip.

“Sir, we don’t have time for this now.”

Thundercracker reluctantly released him and watched the green mech staggered away from him a
little before he drew up the courage to turn around. The seeker had to smile when he met Hound’s optics. He would get another chance. Hound had been too willing and hadn’t tried to stop him in the slightest and Thundercracker was sure he would have done if he truly minded.

The green mech tried to calm his still racing systems and remember that they really didn’t have time for this. He should have seen this coming, but he was thrown by just how quickly he’d reacted to Thundercracker and that the seeker had seemed intent on overloading him without making him reciprocate. The broad, intensely pleased smile on the flyer’s face spoke of just how much he had enjoyed touching him and Hound knew this would happen again.

“We have a party to attend.” Thundercracker motioned at the door. “But we will have time later.”

Hound shivered. He half wanted there to be time later, but some of him was protesting. It was that part of him that had fought to free slaves and restore rights to equality. Hound’s problem was the part of him that hadn’t been touched like that in so long was clamouring for the seeker’s hands to be back on him and just now had proved they’d win the argument.

Thundercracker led Hound back to the turbolift and down to the ground floor without another word, content in the knowledge of what he’d achieved with the other mech and that it could be done again. The seeker stepped out proudly, head held high and Hound noticed, with a surge of amazement and self-doubt. He could provoke such a reaction by merely letting the bigger mech touch him like that? The green mech was forced to put his emotions to one side when they reached a set of grand double doors, outside which stood three mechs. Two were clearly there to open the doors, whilst the third held a datapad in his hand.

“Good evening sir,” the last mech bowed. “May I introduce you?”

“Lord Thundercracker,” the seeker replied, watching him tick his name off on the list.

The mech flicked his fingers at the two other mechs and they swept open the doors. As soon as Thundercracker was revealed to the room beyond the announcer called in a loud voice, “Presenting Lord Thundercracker!”

Every optic in the room beyond turned to watch them enter the room, assessing and inspecting, before they went back to their conversations. The blue seeker drifted into the room, looking for mechs he knew, but he was stopped by a blue and grey mech that he vaguely recognised. Thundercracker wished he didn’t.

“Tracks.”

“Lord Thundercracker!” The mech smiled broadly. “I always said you polished up well.”

“Do you now?” Thundercracker replied, bemused, optics glancing to the mechs with him. Tracks didn’t seem to notice as he continued to extol the benefits of being a good looking mech in high society, leaving his companions to stand in silence, until one of them directed his attention elsewhere. They soon left when it became apparent Tracks hadn’t talked to them yet, leaving Thundercracker with the other mech, one he hadn’t been introduced to.

“I have heard your interests include turbo-fox hunting.” The blue and white mech spoke for the first time, indicating he knew something of the seeker.

“Occasionally.” Thundercracker tilted his head in acknowledgement. “Though it was more my creator’s pleasure that I learnt to please him, Lord…”

“Mirage,” the smaller, slender mech replied. “For someone who professes only a passing interest in
it, I have heard others claim you never miss a shot. Perhaps you would indulge me by joining me for a hunt on my lands.”

The blue seeker smiled slightly, recognising the name. “I would be honoured. I know your lands contain some of the best hunt runs on Cybertron.”

Hound suppressed the urge to yawn at the talk. He disapproved of the hunts, but it was the thinly disguised compliments and threats in every conversation Thundercracker had that he hated more. No one here seemed able to just talk. His optics met the blue ones of Mirage’s attendant and the little red minibot, very similar to Bumblebee but without the slave collar and a gun on his hip, rolled them expressively, knowing Mirage couldn’t see him. Thundercracker did though and he discreetly prodded Hound to warn him not to encourage anything he shouldn’t be getting involved in.

Skywarp abruptly joined them, interrupting the conversation without the hint of an apology, which made Mirage turn his nose up in disgust at the rudeness. The black and purple seeker didn’t even notice, he was too busy talking. “Did you hear about it?”

“It,” Thundercracker replied, voice droll. “Which it? There are quite a few.”

“The new movement, the underground movement.” Skywarp’s red optics were bright with excitement at the rumour.

“That is merely heresy,” Mirage dismissed it. “If there is such a thing it will be quickly quashed by the Enforcers and it will certainly never touch us here at The Towers.”

Skywarp pulled a face at the other Lord as he turned away to find more interesting conversation, before pouncing on Thundercracker. “I’ve just heard it’s not a rumour and the Enforcers can’t stop it! The Kaon pit gladiators are joining in.”

“And just how do you know that? You’ve not been again have you?” Thundercracker folded his arms over his chest.

Skywarp snorted. “Not since you got us kicked out.” Thundercracker glared at him, indicating to Hound it had been Skywarp’s fault, not his but the other seeker kept talking. “And anyway, I’m not going to tell you where I get my good stuff, you’ll poach them.”

“Warp…” Thundercracker said, exasperated.

“You would too.”

“Have you told Starscream this?”

“Of course.” The other flyer threw up his hands. “He told me I wouldn’t know real from fantasy if it came and smacked me out the air when I was flying.”

“He believed you then,” Thundercracker smirked.

“Oh yeah,” Skywarp grinned. “He’s useless at pretending he’s not interested.”

“But even so,” the blue seeker frowned as he thought. “Why are you so fascinated by all these rumours? It’s not like you’d go fight with them.” Skywarp looked away, shrugging noncommittally and Thundercracker grabbed his arm, hard. “Warp, please tell me you’re not considering this.”

The other seeker’s red optics blazed brightly as he looked at his friend. “But it’s so… so different. I heard their leader is going to be giving another speech soon, to anyone that will listen and he’s
supposed to be so…” Skywarp waved his hands around, searching for a word.

“Evocative?” Thundercracker had heard that one too.

“Yeah, that,” the black seeker nodded rapidly.

“It just doesn’t feel right to me.” The blue mech shook his head. “There’s something off about all this.”

“Ahh it’s just a glitch in your circuitry,” Skywarp snorted. “You should get that grouchy medic of yours to run a test on you.”

“He’s better than yours,” Thundercracker returned. “At least he doesn’t creep everyone out.”

The other seeker laughed loudly, before abruptly stopping, optics going across the room. “Oh, just the mech I wanted to talk to.” And with that he was gone.

“Does he do that a lot?” Hound asked, taken aback, and Thundercracker nodded, a distracted look on his face, making the green mech draw up alongside him. “Do you really think he would join?”

The blue flyer glanced at him, surprised that Hound would care enough about his relationship with the other seeker to ask. “I don’t know. Skywarp flits between so many things. Short attention span,” Thundercracker smirked briefly. “But he can be tenacious about wanting some things, especially when he knows he shouldn’t.”

“Sounds like a general seeker trait to me,” Hound replied, suppressing a smile.

“Did you just make a joke?” Thundercracker raised one optic ridge.

“I was just comparing some actions between the only seekers I know,” the green mech replied easily, making Thundercracker relax, putting his worries over Skywarp aside for the moment. He cast around the gathering, watching mechs and femmes interact with each other, noting who was talking to who and who was doing a little more than talking in some of the darker corners.


The green mech narrowed his optics slightly. “There is too much high grade here, too many mechs indulging. There are slaves here that have seen better times and it shows on them.”

“Like Starscream’s aide.”

Hound’s optics found the black and white mech in the crowd instantly. Whilst he carried himself tall and proud, door wings held high, there was something in his optics that spoke of trauma and the loss of his individuality.

“Yes, but watch him with Skywarp’s slave.”

The only other black and mech present at the gathering drifted slowly over to the slightly taller mech. They both greeted each other cordially and then stood side by side, seemingly silent and indifferent to all around them, but as the blue seeker observed, their hands brushed softly.

“They see a lot of each other,” Thundercracker explained. “Skywarp and Starscream frequent each others houses often.”

“And both take abuse from both masters,” Hound muttered, anger rising.
“Hound.” Thundercracker’s tone warned him not to let it show. “What else?”

“I don’t like the way that big grey mech has been watching you all night.”

Thundercracker’s optics glanced towards the imposing mech at the far side of the room. He found him watching Skywarp at the moment but knew Hound was right. The big mech he hadn’t met yet had been watching all the seekers at the party all evening.

“I don’t like him at all,” Hound gave him head a little negative shake.

“You’re not alone.” The seeker gestured with one hand, concealing the gesture by placing his empty glass on a passing waiter’s tray. “The Prime does not seem to like him much either, though he does his best to be polite.”

Hound shot Thundercracker a glance, quick and unnoticed, because slaves were not supposed to look at a free mech’s face. There was this burning urge to tell him something from his past, something to do with their Prime and just why he had met him before all of this, but he was torn. He’d sworn secrecy about whom else was involved in freeing the slaves, and kept it despite methods used to get the information from him, but Thundercracker was so different to what he’d expected. His spark was telling him to trust the seeker and he desperately wanted to confide in someone, but he still didn’t know if he could fully trust him.

“Can I ask…” Hound started.

“Always,” Thundercracker smiled, taking another glass from a passing tray.

“You’re not drinking, not like the others.” Hound nodded at a group of mechs that were clearly over charged.

“You want to ask why not?” The blue seeker curled his lip. “This is a gathering where no one knows everyone. I am not drinking heavily because I do not know everyone here or rather their intentions. Plus being that over charged is crass.”

“Am I not supposed to be here to watch out for the other mechs?” Hound asked.

“Alright then.” The bigger mech shot him a look. “Who has hit your radar?”

Hound returned the look oh so briefly. “The group of triple changers in the corner are physically more imposing than either of us and drunk. Prime and the grey mech are bigger, but neither is drinking. There is something about the red and yellow pair by the window that tells me they could both be quite capable of being dangerous. Beyond that, everyone is a possible threat.”

“I see Ironhide’s paranoia is being to rub off,” the seeker chuckled softly.

“It’s not paranoia,” Hound returned, trying not to smile himself. “It’s merely being careful.” His smile faded. “And if I failed to do my job I don’t want to guess where I’d end up. I know a good thing when I see it.”

The seeker had to look at Hound then, to see if he meant what he said. “You think being my slave is a good thing?”

“In comparison to being someone else’s, yes.” Hound didn’t take his optics off the crowd, but nodded.

Thundercracker knew he shouldn’t, not in public, not to a slave, but it needed saying. “Thank you.”
The green mech did turn back to the seeker when he said that, when Thundercracker put his hand on his shoulder and when their optics met there was a flash of understanding. When they lingered like that the look turned to something more heated and Hound quickly wrenched his gaze away. The flyer hid a knowing smile and removed his hand from Hound’s shoulder. He had worried tonight would be boring, these events never interested him much, and that his plan to seduce Hound would be too much, too soon. Apart from that interruption, everything had gone exactly as he wanted it to with the smaller mech, and his company here was a balm on the irritation that normally built up inside him during these events. All in all it was turning out to be a very good mega-cycle.

The party continued into the dark rotation of the planet, with mechs coming and going as they fancied, or someone else took them. Thundercracker agreed to business deals at a later date with some mechs, but wasn’t drawn into any firm contracts then, due to all the high grade around. He also didn’t get introduced to Prime or the big grey mech, for which Hound was grateful.

The green mech had spent every moment at the seeker’s side, only nodding his greetings to Jazz and Prowl, but it was enough to have seen them. He knew Prime had seen all three of them, but not meeting them gave them all less chance of dropping any pertinent information. It kept Optimus safer, which was a priority to all of them. The grey mech just made his plating crawl.

When a number of the party-goers started drifting away, signalling the end of the party, Thundercracker announced they should retire to their own room. He chatted casually to Hound on the way back, relaxed and calm, whereas Hound’s CPU was whirling. Hound knew he was going to have to make a decision before reaching their door, and was unsure of what to think. He knew what Thundercracker would want, there was only one berth after all, and there had been clear intent to finish what they started. He unlocked their door, thoughts playing on his mind, and watched Thundercracker make his way over to the berth, sighing in pleasure as he sat down.

The blue flyer patted the berth next to him in invitation. “Hound?”

“I’m going to recharge on the settee,” the green mech replied. When desire wasn’t coursing through his systems, Hound could think and it made stepping over to Thundercracker impossible, however much he knew he’d enjoy it.

“I won’t touch you, if that’s what you want,” Thundercracker told him.

“Really?” Hound shook his head. “No I’m just going to remove the temptation.” With that he settled down on the couch, which wasn’t that far away from the berth but far enough that Hound felt comfortable enough recharging in the same room as the seeker. Thundercracker watched him power down his systems before getting comfortable himself. He was disappointed that Hound had chosen to stay away but he understood it too. Before he had pushed Hound further than he thought the green mech would go at this stage and didn’t want to risk repeating it again for fear of scaring him away. Like he’d said they would have time later and then he would get to see just how hard he could Hound to overload.
“Could you fetch me the datapad with my business details from three meta-cycles ago?” Thundercracker glanced up from his work, frowning. “It’s in the next room on the shelves.”

Hound rose from his seat next to Thundercracker with a nod, disappearing deeper into Thundercracker’s personal rooms. He spent a couple of klik’s searching for it but realised it wasn’t on any of the shelves he could reach and looked upwards. That was the problem living with a seeker, they could reach all the way up the ceiling by hovering, which they did without thinking about.

“You get lost or something?” Thundercracker asked as he came into the room.

“It’s on the top shelf somewhere.” Hound pointed up.

“Hmmm.” Thundercracker glanced between him and the shelf in question. The next moment he was behind Hound and slotting his arms around his waist, pressing his front to Hound’s back.

“What the…?” Hound began but that’s as far as he got before the flyer activated his thrusters and lifted them both clean off the floor. The green mech squeaked before he got a lid on his surprise and clung onto the black hands around his middle. They may only have been a few mechanometers off the floor but Hound distinctly preferred his pedes to be on the ground.

“There you go,” Thundercracker hovered alongside the right shelf. Hound could hear the amusement in his voice and that made him prise his hands free of their grip on the seeker and reach out to the shelf. It didn’t take him long to find the right datapad and Thundercracker didn’t tease him by holding him off the floor any longer. He gently set them back down, lingering in the embrace, nuzzling the side of Hound’s helm, before stepping back, taking the datapad from Hound’s hand.

That caring side of his personality made Thundercracker harder to resist each mega-cycle but somehow Hound couldn’t bring himself to make the first move. He was almost certain now that, if the seeker asked him, he would willing interface with him, but finding the courage to look into those red optics and say he wanted Thundercracker was something different.

“I could have got that myself.” Hound hid his feelings by grumbling.

“Yeah, but where’s the fun in that?” the blue mech grinned before it faded as he studied the datapad.

“Something wrong?”

“With all the mining closures I have to redirect some of my finances,” the seeker replied. “Everyone seems to be on edge about putting their credits anywhere for any amount of time. Makes investing tricky.” Hound’s mouth twitched and Thundercracker shot him a look. “What?”

“You, talking about business. You always get so serious.” Hound let the smile grow.

The seeker fidgeted slightly, embarrassed for some unknown reason. He loved making the green
mech smile like that, but would rather the attention wasn’t drawn to himself in the process. It wasn’t that Thundercracker was shy, but he preferred to work behind the scenes rather than be centre stage, especially around Hound.

His way out came in the form of Skywarp abruptly appearing in the middle of the room, his back to them. Hound swore in surprise, before clamping his hand over his mouth and shooting Thundercracker an apologetic look. The blue flyer shook his head, half indicating to Hound not to worry about it and half in exasperation at the other mech’s sudden appearance. Skywarp swung around to face them.

“Oh there you are!”

“How many times Warp? Use the doors.” Thundercracker scowled at him. “I could have been in a private meeting.”

Skywarp snorted. “Doors are for ordinary mechs.” With that he walked out of the room to the blue seeker’s outer office.

“What was that?” Hound whispered.

“He can teleport,” Thundercracker answered quietly. “Generally into things, but he does like using to drop around uninvited. You better tell Bumblebee and mention the new batch. He’ll know what I mean.”

Hound nodded, opening up his comm system to the yellow minibot as he followed Thundercracker into the other room to find the purple seeker rummaging through the cabinet. Thundercracker sighed, made his way over to the loungers and slouched down onto one, red optics waiting for Skywarp to straighten up. When he did the green mech could see a high grade bottle held, somewhat inelegantly and precariously, in one hand, which Skywarp then saluted Thundercracker with, grin on his face.

“Skywarp, put that back.” Thundercracker waved at the bottle in the other seeker’s hand.

“Why? I wanna relax.” Skywarp attempted to pout at the blue flyer.

“Get overcharged you mean,” Thundercracker snorted. “Yeah I know that. You always come to my house to drink all my high grade when you want to do that.”

“So?” The black seeker waggled the bottle.

“So wouldn’t you prefer to try my new shipment I’ve just had in?” Thundercracker raised one optic ridge.

Skywarp moved quicker than Hound had seen him move before, putting the bottle back on the cabinet and sitting on the other lounger in a blink of an optic. The green mech shook his head, going for the door so that Bumblebee could come straight in to serve the new energon. The yellow minibot didn’t keep them waiting long and served the drinks swiftly and silently before exiting the room, taking Hound with him. Hound halted Bumblebee when the doors had shut behind them.

“Does that happen a lot? Skywarp just appearing?”

Bumblebee smiled and nodded. “Yeah. He’s been here less than normal recently, but he used to be here at least once an orn.”

“What am I supposed to do now?” Hound glanced at the door. “I normally stay.”
“Stay here, or your room,” Bumblebee shrugged. “They’ll get overcharged, Skywarp will go home and Lord Thundercracker will probably go back to work, what with that party of his not far away now.”

“When he’s overcharged?” The green mech quirked an optic ridge.

“He won’t be as bad as Skywarp,” the minibot shook his head. “He’s still with it and he knows what he wants for this party of his.”

With that Bumblebee left, going back to his other duties. Hound stood outside the door for a couple of kliks before heading back to his room. He’d still be close enough if Thundercracker summoned him, he knew the blue seeker trusted Skywarp and there was that interesting holobook he’d been meaning to read sitting on his berth.

Nearly a joor later Hound heard a loud crash from next door and hurried back to find Skywarp sitting on his aft on the floor, a broken glass crushed beneath him and Thundercracker laughing uproariously at the other seeker’s expression. The purple mech climbed unsteadily to his pedes, indignantely turned his nose plates up in the air and warped out of sight. The blue flyer caught sight of Hound standing in the doorway, one optic ridge quirked upwards and quietened enough to say, “He’s going to teleport himself into something more solid than his head. I’d put all my credits on it.”

“So touching, your concern for your friend,” Hound replied dryly.

“He chose to come here and drink my high grade,” Thundercracker shrugged. Hound came further into the room to survey the damage and as the seeker didn’t seem inclined to get off his own aft to clean up the mess, Hound knelt down to pick up the pieces of glass. The green mech could feel Thundercracker watching him but ignored it, concentrating on getting all the sharp fragments off the floor. It didn’t take him long to gather them all and dump them into the refuse container next to the desk.

Hound turned around to face Thundercracker, about to ask whether there was anything else he needed, when he stopped dead. The seeker’s red optics were unnaturally bright, probably to do with the amount of high grade he had ingested, but that wasn’t what warned Hound what was coming. That was his expression of sheer, unadulterated lust, and it was directed solely at the green mech as Thundercracker rose from the lounger.

He didn’t know what his own expression was like but he had no resistance to offer up as Thundercracker grabbed him, one hand sliding down to grab his aft, the other gripping the back of his helm. The seeker paused with their faces barely apart, optics meeting Hound’s and the green mech knew that this was his chance to say no. When he made no move or sound Thundercracker kissed him, hard.

It was their first kiss and Hound was overwhelmed by the bigger mech’s forceful passion. The seeker pushed his glossa deep into Hound’s mouth, stroking it down the length of Hound’s glossa, inviting it to play, which the green mech did tentatively. As the kiss continued Hound raised his hands to rest them on the seeker’s shoulders, fingers grazing the intakes. Thundercracker made a pleased noise into his mouth, encouraging Hound that he was doing the right thing, and his own hand stroked the edge of Hound’s hip before he dug the tips of his fingers into the seam. A jolt of pleasure shot up Hound's side as the seeker found some wires to play with.

The green mech ran his palm down the side of one intake, rubbing his fingers around its curves, beginning to feel more secure now as the other mech continued to touch him. The seeker moaned softly as his hand migrated from intake to the leading edge of his wing, indicating, yet again, just how sensitive the appendages were. Hound let his other hand match its partner’s movements on the
other blue expanse of metal and Thundercracker shivered in pleasure.

He broke the kiss to utter, “Harder,” before burying his face into Hound’s neck to bite down on the cables and lines there, reinforcing his own statement. The smaller mech gasped, tilting his head away to give the seeker more access and involuntarily his grip tightened, which in turn made Thundercracker’s fingers scrape across the headlight he’d been tracing. Hound arched into the fingers, his body taking over from his head, seeking the pleasure. The blue mech dug his fingers in under the bumper, finding a little band of exposed wires that had Hound crying out.

Thundercracker didn’t care that Hound wasn’t really reciprocating as much as he was receiving because the seeker had already been desperate for him before he touched him. Hearing and feeling Hound respond to him was driving deeper into territory that didn’t involving thinking, one that had already been pushed at by the high grade. Being in charge, the driving force to this encounter meant Thundercracker got the chance to do exactly as he wanted, exploring and reaffirming all Hound’s hotspots.

The seeker pushed him back against wall, one hand lifted one of Hound’s legs to curl it around the back of his hip plates. Thundercracker growled in one audio, voice rough and low, “Give me access.”

Hound shuddered at the tone. The cover over his port slid back without any real thought from the green mech and black fingers dipped inside, pressing against the sensitive walls, making Hound cry out. Lubricant had already started to make the walls slick in readiness for interfacing but Thundercracker’s probing made the liquid flow quicker.

“You want me,” the seeker hissed.

“Yes,” Hound gasped, fingers tightening on the blue shoulders.

Thundercracker caught Hound’s lips up in a kiss again as he moved his hips, his jack sliding out in anticipation. With one hand wrapped under Hound’s raised leg and the other gripping his hip plates he shifted forward, burying his jack in the ready port with one easy movement. Hound keened, high and long, his own hips jerking in Thundercracker’s grip. It had been meta-cycles since he’d last granted anyone access to his port and he forgotten just how good it felt to have another mech inside him like this.

The blue mech groaned, resting his head against Hound’s before he adjusted his stance slightly. He drew his hips back, nearly pulling free before driving his jack into Hound again, feeling the way the port shuddered and clung to him, both protesting and inviting the intrusion. Hound broke the kiss as he arched his back, head thudding back against the wall, encouraging Thundercracker to pick up his pace. It wasn’t like he could resist the way Hound felt around his spike or the noises he made anyway.

The smaller mech clung to his partner, struggling to think straight over the sensations as the seeker penetrated him deeply with each movement of his hips. The black hand on his hip held him tightly, keeping him in place and the black hand locked behind his knee joint gave Thundercracker easy access to his port. Little flashes of pleasure fired from his port as the clustered sensors at the end were stimulated and Hound gasped, trying to cool his overheating chassis.

Thundercracker growled, face plates screwing up as the heat and desire built up inside him. The blue flyer’s movement became more forceful and erratic as he neared his overload. Every little cry of need he jolted from Hound made Thundercracker more desperate for release but he was determined to overload the green mech first. He threw his head back, fighting for control and the green mech whimpered, drawing his optics back to him. Blue met red and Hound could read the intense desire
burning in Thundercracker’s gaze, all centred on him. It was too much to take and Hound’s chassis bucked between the wall and Thundercracker as his overload overtook him.

The flash of heat from his partner blasted over Thundercracker and he arched up sharply, burying himself deeply in Hound as he overloaded, filling the waiting port with transfluid. The seeker groaned, slumping forward slightly, letting go of Hound to brace himself on the wall as he came down from an incredibly intense high. Somehow he’d known being with the smaller mech would be powerful and it had lived up to every expectation he’d had. They stood there, panting, trying to cool their racing systems, when the seeker raised his head and looked Hound right in the optic.

“I’m never going to be a gentle berthmate, Hound. If you’re looking for that, then walk away from this. I won’t blame you and I won’t chase you, but I’m not going to change. I may not be like Starscream, but I still play rough.”

The green mech watched his face for a moment before shaking his head. “I think you missed something.”

“What?” Thundercracker asked curiously.

“I enjoyed that as much as you did.” Hound suddenly smiled; a cheeky, impish smile. “I play to the same rules.”

The seeker growled, optics flashing. “Be careful what you say. I might just change those rules.”

“Only if I can too,” the smaller mech responded, fingers lightly dragging down the blue back. Thundercracker’s engine purred softly in response, all the energy he could summon up at that moment. The intense overload on top of the potent high grade had pulled the seeker’s systems into a sluggish state and he knew he either needed recharge or some normal energon to pull him back around. Looking at the mech pressed between him and the wall made recharge seem stupid because there were better things to be doing with his time instead of lying around offline.

Thundercracker could tell that the time he would normally be using to organize his creation day anniversary would be filled with other, far more interesting events. Hound had taken to his advances more than he could ever have hoped and now he wasn’t so buzzed on the high grade, which had been remarkably good; the blue flyer knew he wouldn’t have been so forceful or direct with Hound if it had not been for the high grade. Perhaps he should send Skywarp something in thanks for getting him into this state because that had been one pit of an overload and Hound had barely touched him. Thundercracker couldn’t imagine what it would be like when the smaller mech really got comfortable with him.
Hound heard the door open behind him but could tell from the step pattern that it was Thundercracker, who he was expecting, so he didn’t look up from his work, continuing to transfer information from the datapad to the terminal.

The next nano-second the datapad clattered to the table as Thundercracker pressed his lips to Hound’s windscreen on his back and Hound groaned, throwing his head back, optics shuttering. The blue seeker stroked transformation seams as his glossa traced the edge of the windshield, pushing Hound forward slightly so he braced his hands on the desk. The green mech widened his stance in invitation and one of the seeker’s hands slipped between his legs to his port, probing and stroking, testing Hound’s readiness to receive his jack.

Thundercracker nuzzled at the back of Hound’s neck as his jack extended and he settled his hands on the black hips, drawing Hound back onto the spike. The green mech made a low noise in the back of his vocaliser, hands balling into fists on the table, fingers scratching the surface as Thundercracker’s jack penetrated him. The rhythm started out in almost a leisurely fashion but the seeker couldn’t ignore the needy little whines Hound was making and his body’s movements sped up in response.

Hound gasped, pushing back against him as he tried to lengthen the amount of time Thundercracker’s spike was inside him, but the seeker was in control of the pace and deliberately kept Hound wanting. It didn’t stop the overload building in the green mech, but Thundercracker kept pausing every time he reached the very brink, until it was all Hound could do to remember how to stand. Even though every system in his body seemed to be flashing warnings at him, all Hound wanted was more.

Thundercracker made a low noise behind him and it was all the warning he got before the pace suddenly picked up. The seeker’s spike slammed into him, jolting the responsive cluster of sensors right at the end of Hound’s port, making his whole chassis shake in response to the stimulation and he whimpered with each thrust, desperate to overload. Lubricant was sliding its way down his thighs now and it almost felt like it was burning his plating.

“Overload,” Thundercracker’s rough voice commanded, and Hound cried out as his body stiffened in pleasure as a fiery overload raced through him. The seeker echoed him and Hound could feel his port fill with transfluid as the mech emptied himself into him. He slumped forward on the desk, onto his forearms, as he fought to cool his systems and a little choked off noise escaped him when Thundercracker pulled free.

There was a waft of cooler air across his hips and legs before Hound twitched in shock and then moaned when two fingers pushed their way into his port. They scraped against the sensitive walls prior to being pulled free and then Hound heard a soft suckling noise which had him turning to look back over his shoulder. Thundercracker was crouched on his heels behind him, fingers in his mouth as he cleaned them of their combined fluids, optics locked onto his leaking port. Those red optics darted up to Hound’s face as he pulled his fingers free and watched intensely as he plunged them
back into the open valve. The green mech couldn’t help but push back against them, biting his lip in
pleasure as they repeated their earlier movements.

When the seeker removed them this time he stood up and held the glistening digits to Hound, who
turned over, sitting on the edge of the desk. He wrapped one hand around the black wrist, drawing
the hand closer until he could close his mouth over the fingers, sucking them clean as his optics
stayed locked on Thundercracker’s. The red optics darkened in lust and the blue mech’s free hand
closed on Hound’s hip as he stepped between the spread legs. Hound knew what he wanted and laid
back down on the desk, taking Thundercracker’s fingers with him.

Thundercracker’s grip tightened on the black hip as he thrust into the mech spread out under him,
making the both of them moan. For Hound his port was now doubly sensitive with Thundercracker’s
transfluid still within him and for Thundercracker it was just heat and friction and so very tight.
Hound bit down on the ends of the black fingers in his mouth as the cluster of sensors were
hammered again and the seeker jerked, scraping Hound’s port with his spike. The green mech cried
out, legs clamping down on the white hips as his body spasmed in pleasure. Thundercracker’s
control wavered as Hound’s value contracted around his jack and he growled, pulling Hound’s hips
off the table. He freed his hand from Hound’s grip so he tilt his hips up and really pound his spike
down into the other mech’s port.

All of the smaller mech’s back arched off the table’s surface as he overloaded again, loudly voicing
his pleasure and Thundercracker couldn’t hold back any longer, not with that sight spread out before
him. He slumped forward over Hound as he tried to regain his energy, withdrawing his jack gently.

The seeker pushed himself upright and glanced down at them both. Lubricant and transfluid coated
his jack and was smeared across his crotch as well. There was more of it on Hound; across his crotch
and thighs, with his port still freely dripping the thick mixture. Implausibly Thundercracker felt desire
curl through his systems again and couldn’t believe the way Hound affected him. He dropped to his
knees again and pressed his glossa to the far, trailing edge of the lubricant, before dragging it up the
metal all the way from knee to hip. Hound’s intakes hitched and the seeker saw the black hands grip
the edge of the desk.

With great care Thundercracker cleaned every inch of Hound’s plating that had any evidence of their
interfacing on it, until all that was left was the port itself. Hound cried out, hands distorting the edge
of the table as Thundercracker thrust his glossa deep into the value. His whole chassis trembled as
the green mech fought to keep still but it wasn’t long before another overload crashed through him.

Once Hound could remember how he turned his optics back on to find Thundercracker looming over
him, lips and chin glistening with lubricant and Hound dug his fingers into the seeker’s chest seams
to drag him down for a kiss. The green mech moaned as he tasted himself on Thundercracker’s
glossa and he broke the kiss so he could wash the seeker’s chin as well. The blue mech felt those
hands push at him and then turn him until it was his back to the desk. Hound slid off the desk to his
knees so he could return the favour, cleaning every inch of dirty plating, but leaving the jack
untouched.

Thundercracker clung on to the edge of the table to stop himself grabbing Hound’s head and pushing
it towards his spike, which was now dripping transfluid. The green mech leant back a little so he
could survey the hard jack straining towards him and his optics turned upwards to meet
Thundercracker’s before he took the spike in his mouth. The seeker groaned heavily at the sensations
and from watching his jack disappear into that hot, wet mouth. He could feel the way Hound curled
his glossa around it as he slowly guided it deeper and Thundercracker fought not to thrust forward, to
increase the pace.
Hound clasped his hip plates and hummed gently when he had taken the jack in until it touched the back of his throat. The blue mech couldn’t help the jerk of his hips then and realised that’s why Hound had hold of him, to control him. The green mech looked up again and when their optics met, he nodded slightly, giving Thundercracker permission to move. The seeker knew Hound would stop him from pushing too far and thrust forward gently, one hand going to cup the back of the green helm. Hound shuttered his optics, concentrating on the jack in his mouth and just what he could do to make Thundercracker gasp and moan.

It didn’t take long for Thundercracker to overload again as he was running on empty now but his optics flared brightly when he saw Hound swallow the transfluid without hesitation. He drew the green mech to his pedes to kiss him thoroughly, tasting the heavy taint of transfluid and fainter beneath it the bitterness of lubricant. Thundercracker broke the kiss, but didn’t move his face away as he murmured, “Would it be wrong to say I want you again?”

Hound shook his head slightly, unsure where this mad desire had sprung from, but he didn’t want to say no to it. He drew back a little, catching sight of the desk and he chuckled. Thundercracker turned somewhat to see what had amused him and couldn’t help the little snigger that escaped him. The datapad Hound had been using was badly cracked and flickering fitfully, whilst the edge of the desk itself was bent and warped from the hands that had used it to hold on.

“Hmm.” Thundercracker tapped the edge of the table. “I think I might have to have words with the manufacturer.”

“Oh I don’t know,” Hound shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “I kind of like it.”

“Doesn’t make it easy to work at,” the blue mech pointed out.

“It seemed to work very well just now.” Hound’s optics sparkled mischievously.

“I’d ask for another demonstration,” Thundercracker smiled. “But I think I need to refuel before that.”

“And I really should finish what I was doing. Your party is in less than three cycles.” Hound leaned around the seeker to scoop up the dying datapad. Thundercracker nuzzled the side of his helm affectionately and the green mech shivered, trying not to get draw back in towards the bigger mech, but he didn’t tell him to stop either as he opened up his communications system.

‘Bee, Thundercracker wants some energon.’

‘Just him?’

‘If you don’t mind, I’ll have some as well.’

‘Sure thing. Be right with you.’

Hound shut down the communications before he turned to look at the black fingers tracing along the edge of his chest grill. “Bumblebee is bringing us some energon.” The seeker grunted a vaguely positive noise as he concentrated on spelling out his name in glyphs across Hound’s bumper. The green mech watched him for a moment before saying, “You should stop that.”

“Why?” Thundercracker moved onto the wheel arches over Hound’s shoulders, delving into the seams.

“Because.” Hound gritted his denta. “If you keep that up Bee is going to see things that should be kept private.”
When Thundercracker didn’t stop Hound forced him to by stepping away from him and holding the datapad between them, a warning look on his face. It was only slightly marred by the faint glisten of lubricant trickling down one thigh from his open port. The seeker didn’t move, only watched him with intense optics and they stayed like that, optics locked until the door chime sounded. Hound turned to face the door so he didn’t give the game away by his expression and made sure he pressed his legs together.

“Come in,” Thundercracker commanded and Bumblebee entered the room with two portions of energon on a tray. He bobbed his head at the seeker and Hound held out his free hand for the tray, not wanting the minibot to see just what they had done to the table. Bumblebee gave him a confused look but handed over the tray nevertheless and Thundercracker was quick to move up behind Hound to claim his off the tray. The blue mech’s free hand groped Hound’s aft where the yellow mech couldn’t see and Hound very nearly dropped the tray.

“Is that all my lord?” Bumblebee asked, trying not to frown at the way Hound was fidgeting.

“Yes, thank you Bee.” Thundercracker smiled pleasantly as he worked one finger between Hound’s white thighs, searching for his port.

The green mech tried to give the confused minibot a similar smile but knew he failed when the frown deepened between his optics. Bumblebee bowed to Thundercracker and left swiftly. As soon as the door closed Hound shuttered his optics and muttered, “You are trying to embarrass me aren’t you?”

“I was just wondering how long you could pretend to concentrate whilst I did everything I could to distract you,” the seeker replied smoothly before taking a swallow of his energon. His other hand was still trying to part Hound’s thighs. “Shouldn’t you be working?”

Hound forced himself away from the teasing fingers and headed back to the terminal he’d been working at before Thundercracker had jumped him. He put the datapad and tray on the table before picking up his own energon and downing it quickly, but even so Thundercracker closed the gap on him. His single free hand ghosted across his windscreen and down his aft before Hound stepped away, exchanging empty cube for the dying datapad, deliberately making sure not to look at the seeker.

They circled the table, Thundercracker following Hound so that every time he paused by the terminal the bigger mech caught him up. After three trips around the desk Thundercracker had finished his energon, deposited the glass back onto the tray and the next time he caught Hound he didn’t let him go. He wrapped his arms tightly around the white waist, pressing himself firmly to Hound’s back and the green mech didn’t fight him.

“Are you finished?” the seeker murmured.

“Does it matter?” Hound asked, letting himself lean back into warmth and strength behind him.

“No.” Thundercracker buried his face in the crook of Hound’s neck so his next words were muffled. “I think we should give the desk a break.”

“Do you think we’ll make it as far as your berth before your will disappears?” Hound fought to keep his face straight.

“No, but I don’t think that matters, do you?” the bigger mech smirked, pushing his hips forward against Hound’s.

The smaller mech turned his head so he could see the seeker and smiled at him warmly, pleased by
the other’s affections. Thundercracker was more than delighted to see Hound look at him like that. It was different to being in the midst of interfacing and it made the blue flyer want to do anything to keep the expression there. He risked asking, “You’re happy?”

Hound nodded and simply said, “Yes.”

Thundercracker let out a little, involuntary, pleased sigh. “Good.”

Somewhere in the back of his processors Thundercracker had been worried that Hound would have rejected him, given time to think, after that first interface, despite what he had said, but the green mech was proving to be a willing and enthusiastic berthmate. So far he hadn’t made the first move on the seeker, but Thundercracker found he didn’t mind being the instigator, not one bit.

Hound, for his part, had finally admitted that a little pleasure in life wasn’t so bad, even coming from Thundercracker. The blue mech was a powerful force to contend with and that meant every time they came together Hound could let go of his worries and be carried away by the pleasure. It was a relief to forget, for a little while, his position in life. That, and Hound had never, ever experienced such intense interfacing in his life. If he’d been the bragging sort, Thundercracker’s name would have been echoing in every corridor.
Hound sat up, stretching out the stiffness in his backstruts after another bout of enthusiastic interfacing and swung his legs off the berth, ready to leave.

“Stay with me,” the seeker whispered over his shoulder.

Hound froze, CPU abruptly in turmoil. So far in this strange relationship Hound had not stayed in Thundercracker’s berth when he’d entered recharge. They may have interfaced in his berth, but the green mech couldn’t stay afterwards. The idea of curling up with the blue mech and recharging with him… It seemed to be far more personal to Hound and more like a real relationship, which he couldn’t have, not with Thundercracker…

“Would it be so bad?” Thundercracker interrupted his thoughts. “Please stay.”

Hound swallowed. The seeker made it so hard when he spoke so softly and the smaller mech knew enough to know that it wouldn’t affect him like it did if there wasn’t some small part of him that didn’t want to stay.

“Why do you want me to?” Hound asked, afraid of the answer.

“Because I want you to,” Thundercracker told him, sitting up behind him.

“That didn’t answer the question.”

“Neither did you.” The blue mech hovered mere millimetres behind Hound, radiating comforting warmth. Primus, if he touched him now then Hound wouldn’t be able to say no. “You’re shaking.” Hound clenched his hands into fists when he realised that was true, unable to think of anything to say. Two warm hands slid over his shoulders, bringing him back to rest against Thundercracker’s chest. “Hound, what’s wrong?”

The smaller mech mutely shook his head in response and the seeker changed his grip, settling Hound even closer by wrapping one arm around his waist. The free hand reached out to the clenched fists and gently the blue mech ran his fingers over the joints, like he was trying to soothe them open. Hound bit his lip, hard, trying to stop himself from thinking, from feeling.

“You told me you were happy, with me, doing this,” Thundercracker reminded him, voice wavering slightly like he was fighting hurt.

Hound hated that, more than anything, and uncurled his fists to let the seeker hold his hands. “I was… I am. The interfacing is the best I’ve ever had.” Hound could feel the way Thundercracker perked up a little at that. “But it’s…”

The flyer waited, but when nothing more was forth coming he nudged his partner gently. “But…”
“This isn’t a real relationship,” Hound blurted out, before wincing at how blunt that was as the seeker tensed behind him.

“Have I not been treating you like an equal?” Thundercracker asked, clearly concerned. “I want us to be equal in this. Please tell me if I’ve been doing something wrong.”

“No, it’s not that… well it is, but it’s not your fault.” Hound tried to pull away but Thundercracker refused to let go.

“Hound…”

“Look, it never can be real, not when I’m a slave and you’re my Master, can it?” Hound shuttered his optics as he admitted what had always troubled him.

“Why not?” The seeker started and then roughly shook his head. “No, I know why not. You can’t forget that you’re a slave, you can’t forget that I hold the keys to your chains. I’ll forever hold power over you like this.”

“Don’t say it like that,” Hound pleaded. “I didn’t mean…”

“Yes you did.” The seeker let go of him finally and Hound slid off the berth, hugging his arms to him, but he met the red optics of the other mech. Thundercracker somehow looked angry and understanding at the same time. “So you can take physical pleasure from this, but nothing more.”

“Primus, you make me sound evil.” Hound dropped his head miserably.

“No, I just want to know where I stand.” The seeker watched him, expression closing down. “I can touch you, do everything we’ve always done, I just can’t ask you to recharge with me.”

“I…” Hound paced restlessly, at a loss as to what he wanted to say, what he wanted from this conversation. He wanted to apologise for hurting Thundercracker, even though he’d done nothing but tell the truth. The truth… Hound grimaced, unaware of the expression on his face and that the blue mech saw it. The green mech knew the relationship had changed between them the instant he hadn’t said no when Thundercracker had approached him. He should have said no, because there was no way to have a purely physical relationship without getting attached, not for him at least, not when he saw the seeker everyday and enjoyed his company. Now, with Thundercracker pushing for more from him, Hound was at a loss on what he wanted. “You must hate me…”

“No.” Thundercracker remained where he was, unable to work out what Hound wanted most. The seeker may have been very self assured but he didn’t want to risk whatever there was between him and Hound. That meant he couldn’t say what he really wanted to say, in fear of losing Hound. He would live with less instead of that. “Forget I said anything.” Hound looked at him sharply, trying to gauge the seeker, but Thundercracker’s face was blank. “We should be preparing for the gathering anyway.”

Hound opened his mouth to apologise but Thundercracker was already getting up off the berth and he didn’t know what to say. He knew he couldn’t leave it there, so he reached out to the seeker instead, stopping him from leaving. Hound curled his arms around the other mech, holding him close in silence. Thundercracker tensed briefly before he relaxed with an audible sigh, his own embrace tight around Hound. The blue mech laid a gentle kiss on the top of the green helm, knowing he was pushing at his luck, but Hound didn’t object.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” the green mech whispered.

“I know.” They stayed in that hold for a long klik, both with their own reasons for not letting go,
until Thundercracker sighed, loosening his grip. “We’ve got things to do.”

Hound stepped back, nodding silently, and both of them remained motionless for a moment before Thundercracker summoned up the courage to turn around and walk away. Hound’s words had made it very clear to the seeker. There was only one chance to gain Hound’s full trust, and that was his freedom, but Thundercracker was under no illusion that it would take more than just himself to keep Hound here. He had been fighting for a bigger cause before being enslaved and was that sort of mech, to believe in putting his life towards something that would benefit everyone as a whole, rather than just one mech. Utter selfishness on Thundercracker’s part made him unwilling to free Hound. He couldn’t lose him, not when…

The seeker shook his head, stopping his thoughts and redirecting them towards his creation party that was less than a joor away. His guests would be arriving soon and there were still a few things that had to be attended to before that, though Bumblebee had pretty much everything in hand. Ironhide, who had seeded his role as personal guard to Hound, was still in charge of household security and everything was being double checked, with the black mech throwing in surprise spot checks when he felt like it. It wasn’t that Thundercracker expected trouble, but this party was not just a celebration his closest associates and friends were attending. There would be mechs he hardly knew there, but that presented business opportunities he couldn’t pass up on.

After Thundercracker had disappeared off to get himself cleaned up, something Hound had guessed he’d be doing himself, before their conversation had taken place, the green mech found himself pacing the private suite of rooms restlessly. There were things he was supposed to be doing but he couldn’t bring himself to settle. Some mega-cycles he felt almost comfortable with his life, knowing there was little he could do to change it and he enjoyed his time with the seeker, but some mega-cycles something would disturb his routine and Hound found himself lost again.

He had taken both Jazz and Ironhide’s advice to spark, and was trying to live life to its fullest within the constraints of being a slave. There were information that he had learnt here that he knew could be used to free slaves and the he hoped could be used one day, but that meant he had to be free to tell mechs it. The green mech’s optics flicked to the door. Thundercracker had never given any indication that he ever planned to free Hound, though there was no doubt he knew that’s what Hound wanted most in life.

A thought struck Hound then. Why would Thundercracker free him when he was getting what he wanted from Hound? There was no reason to give it up, no cause to, when the seeker had to think his slave would just vanish if given his freedom. Hound rubbed his face as his thoughts spun in circles. The blue flyer wasn’t unkind and confrontations like their latest one would start occurring more if Thundercracker kept pushing Hound for more. Perhaps he would risk letting Hound go if he stayed…

Shock made Hound freeze. He couldn’t stay, not here, not when he had promised his life to righting the wrongs on Cybertron. The green mech shook his head abruptly. There was no way out of this. He knew he couldn’t stop the physical interactions between them, he craved them as much as Thundercracker seemed to, but he couldn’t let the seeker closer, not when he planned to leave one day. That was cruel and manipulative, which was something Hound could never pull off successfully and wouldn’t want to either.

With a sigh Hound pulled himself back together and got on with his work. Life went on regardless of how you felt and where you wanted it to go. The cycles seemed to pass quickly and soon the house was filled with guests. They all wished Thundercracker well on his creation anniversary, giving him gifts and in return the blue seeker laid out his best high grade and energon goodies. The atmosphere was relaxed as mechs chatted casually with each other, which made Ironhide marginally less grumpy
about them all being here.

Hound remained at Thundercracker’s side throughout, glad that the flyer seemed to have relaxed and treated him no differently than he had before. In moments alone the seeker flirted with him, just like he normally would, smiling for Hound in a way he didn’t for other mechs, letting it touch his optics before he hid it when guests appeared. Right at this moment Thundercracker was in deep discussion with a red, streamlined mech who had a ready smile on his face. Hound recognised him from that first party he had attended with the seeker.

Sideswipe, as it turned out the mech’s designation was, happened to be an affluent business bot, with extremely good connections and he was interested in building a relationship with Thundercracker. The blue flyer had the credits to invest and the red mech was busy trying to entice Thundercracker to place them with him.

“Obviously this requires a more detailed look at my stocks and exactly what you want,” Sideswipe replied, appearing nonchalant, but Hound could read the concealed interest in his optics.

“Of course,” Thundercracker nodded. “My aide here knows my schedule, perhaps we can find a convenient time for both of us.”

The blue mech’s hand landed on Hound’s shoulder in a gesture so that Sideswipe knew just who to talk to. The fact that it lingered for longer than strictly necessary or that it trailed down Hound’s back as it went, didn’t go unnoticied by another mech and he smiled viciously. The green mech continued like it had never happened, pulling a datafile from subspace to call up Thundercracker’s calendar as he listened to the red mech recall his own free dates. It didn’t take them long to agree on a date, time and place to discuss business.

“If you’ll excuse me then,” Hound bobbed his head at Sideswipe and Thundercracker. “I will enter this in the main computer and send a message out to the relevant mechs.”

With that he headed out of the collection of rooms where the seeker was holding the gathering and through the house a short way to Thundercracker’s office. Once there he quickly uploaded the date to the household calendar and composed a series of short messages to send. Hound was nearly finished when he heard the door open and a glance over his shoulder startled him. It wasn’t Thundercracker, or any of the other servants. Starscream stood there, smiling at him and the green mech did his best to cover the shudder that went through him as he turned to face the seeker.

“Sir, what can I do for you here?”

“It’s only a little thing.” Starscream wandered further into the room, door sliding shut behind him, as he made for Hound. “Thundercracker seems so… taken with you, I was just wondering why that was. It’s not like you’re an attractive mech.”

“Sir, I don’t know what you mean.” Hound stood his ground, but didn’t know how this situation was going to pan out.

“Don’t play coy slave.” Starscream stopped next to him, close enough that Hound could feel his body heat radiating from him and smell the high grade on his breath. “I know Thundercracker frags you every chance he gets. I know he hasn’t played the field since he bought you and I want to know why. You must be good to keep his attention and all I want,” Starscream pushed his face into Hound’s, making it difficult for Hound not to make optic contact, “is a little taste.”

With that he tried to kiss Hound but he pulled away, backing up across the floor. “Please, sir, I am not a pleasure mech. I am merely Thundercracker’s guard and aide. This isn’t appropriate
behaviour…”

“Shut up!” Starscream snarled, storming after the still retreating Hound, cutting him off from the door he’d been aiming at. “How dare you tell me what is appropriate or not! You are a slave and you will do as you are told!”

“Sir, you are a guest in this house….”

“Thundercracker is nearly a brother, what’s his is mine.” The bigger seeker caught up with Hound and slammed him into the wall he’d nearly got to anyway. “And I’m taking what’s mine!”

Hound squirmed, turning his face away from Starscream. Inside panic was building fast. He couldn’t fight back because he might hurt Starscream and that was punishable by death because he wasn’t defending anyone but himself. It would also reflect badly upon Thundercracker and Hound struggled to admit to himself that was holding him back just as much. The green mech knew what was happening, Starscream’s hands were all over him and he couldn’t break free, but he wasn’t going to make this easy, so he kept struggling.

“Stop wriggling!” the seeker snarled angrily, curling one hand into a fist and ploughing it into Hound’s side viciously. The smaller mech cried out in pain and the white mech cackled, doing it again. Hound tried to push Starscream away with his hands, CPU going blank to the moves Ironhide had shown him, but that just incensed the flyer more. He spun Hound around to slam him face first into the wall, hard enough to split one cheek plate open and he pinned him there, pedes barely touching the ground, with one arm pressed across his back.

“Please… sir…”

“Shut up!”

Hound squeezed his optics tightly shut, trying to stop the fluid building up there from escaping. Pain radiated across his face and now from where hip and aft plate joined his crotch plate because the seeker prised them away from his chassis because he was refusing to open his interface port for him. It didn’t matter. Starscream seemed to know what he was doing and was strong enough to achieve it.

The green mech did start crying when the seeker finally got what he wanted. It hurt so much, burning because his port was dry, though it automatically started producing fluid once Starscream’s jack entered him. All he could hear was the seeker’s lusty grunts from behind him and he just wanted it to be over so he could go curl up in some corner and never come out again.

“Starscream! Let go of him now!”

Hound let out a gasp. He’d never been so relived to hear Thundercracker’s voice. The mech holding him against the wall was abruptly torn away from him and he crumpled down the wall, trying to turn to see what was happening. Thundercracker was standing between him and Starscream, who had energon smeared up the front of his crotch plating and was sneering at him. Both wings carried a hand print along their top edge.

“What’s the matter? I was just enjoying your hospitality.”

“You are a guest in this house,” Thundercracker returned coldly. “You do not take what isn’t offered and I would never offer you any of my slaves, let alone him. Get out of my house. Now!”

“You’re just…”

“I said Get. Out!” Thundercracker raised one hand, pointing at the door. “Take your things with
Starscream snarled at him but left. Thundercracker was already opening up his comms. ‘Ironhide. I want all of the guests out of the house now. Send them home and get my medic here immediately.’

‘Sir? Are you…’

‘It’s not me. Now get them out!’

‘Right away.’

The seeker turned to Hound, hurriedly crouching at his side. “Oh Hound, I should have been here earlier.”

“You didn’t know…” the green mech shook his head, trying to hide his tears and pain.

Two black fingers hooked under his chin and turned his face to the seeker’s. “I am sorry. I will never let him touch you again. My medic will be here soon and then you’ll feel better.” The red optics dropped down his chassis to his bent and torn plating and the energon seeping out from it. Hound watched the anger burn in them, though it didn’t show on the seeker’s face, before he looked back up again. “Let’s see if we can’t get you onto a berth.” He gently wiped the tears from Hound’s face.

“You shouldn’t do that…” Hound protested weakly, whether over the berth or tears Thundercracker couldn’t guess.

“You’re not arguing with me are you?” Thundercracker raised an optic ridge before placing one hand on either side of Hound, just under his arms. “This is going to hurt.”

Thundercracker hauled Hound to his pedes, taking his weight when he cried out and staggered. He curled over, hands pressing into his lower abdomen plates. The seeker, wrapped arms around his shoulders and gently guided him through his office, into his spacious living quarters and then beyond into his own berthroom. The walk had never taken them so long before and Hound left a splattered trail of energon behind them. He didn’t seem to realise where they were until Thundercracker was urging him to lie down on his berth.

“This is your berth. I shouldn’t be here…” the injured mech looked around worriedly.

“Hound, I’m going to look after you. I can’t do that anywhere else.” The seeker pushed him down until he was lying on his side.

“You can’t do that…” Hound protested.

“It’s my fault this happened. You are in my care as my slave.” Thundercracker sat down next to him, taking one hand. “It is my responsibility to keep you safe and for this to happen in my very own home.” His optics narrowed. “Starscream is going to regret crossing such a line he knows not to cross.”

“You can’t do anything, not over me.” The green mech shook his head.

“That is my choice, not yours.”

Further conversation was halted by the appearance of a blocky white mech in the doorway, who took one look at Hound on the berth and was pushing Thundercracker out the way.

“My name is Ratchet,” he started, dumping a bag on the floor next to the berth. “I’m going to take
you offline to repair you.”

Hound nodded, looking forward to not being in such pain. Once he was unconscious Ratchet paused, optics landing on the blue seeker. “What in Primus’ name happened?”

“Starscream,” Thundercracker supplied. “He caught him alone and by the time I got there he was already interfacing with him.”

“Raping him,” Ratchet snarled angrily.

“Ratchet,” Thundercracker held up a hand, making the medic pause. “I am not letting Starscream get away with this. Will you document the damage and stand by it in court?”

“Of course, you don’t need to ask me that.” Ratchet shook his head as he started work. Thundercracker never left, but kept quiet, knowing his medic well enough that he liked silence when he was repairing someone. Once he was finished, and he had used the washing facilities to clean himself up, he came back into the room.

“He will take an orn, maybe two to heal fully. Interface systems are delicate. I could tell Starscream was not the only mech to have access recently so I would ask you to wait before you interface with him again.”

“Of course. I won’t do anything until he’s ready to do so and he tells me that.” Thundercracker gave Ratchet a level look.

“I’ll give you some pain medication for him because he’ll still be sore for quite some time.” The medic dug around in his supply bag. “He will also be traumatised by this. He needs someone to talk to about this.”

“He can talk to me.”

The medic raised both optic ridges. “Most slaves don’t talk to their masters about things like that.”

“He’s not a normal slave and we… share more things than is normal,” Thundercracker admitted. Ratchet’s expression softened. “You care for him. Have you told him that?”

“What would that achieve?”

“At the moment, a lot to reassure him.” The white mech glanced at the recharging mech. “I don’t need to tell you how vulnerable he’ll be feeling now, especially since as a freed mech he would never have let that happen.”

Thundercracker scowled. “No, you don’t need to tell me that.”

“Don’t get snippy with me,” the medic snorted. “You’re the mech that’s harbouring feelings, not me.”

“You’re fishing in the dark Ratchet. Leave it alone.” The seeker folded his arms over his chest stubbornly.

“Fine, don’t tell me then,” the white mech shrugged. “I’m not the one that needs telling but I’d feel a lot more reassured if I knew someone cared deeply for me.”

Thundercracker had a brief glaring match with Ratchet before the white and red mech shook his head, muttered something about glitching processors, scooped up his equipment and left. The blue
mech showed Ratchet to the door into the hall before he turned back to be with Hound. The green mech was curled up on his side, in recharge now, but as the seeker drew closer he could see Hound was shivering and realised shock would be setting in, regardless of whether he was awake or not. Quickly the blue flyer dug out a thermal blanket and covered Hound in it, tucking it in around him. Hound twisted around for a moment, hands clenching into tight fists. Thundercracker took them in his own hands, stroking the tense digits. “It’s ok now. You’re safe.”

He kept up the touching and gentle words until Hound relaxed but when he went to stand, to leave, the green mech whimpered, his own hands reaching out to him blindly. Thundercracker sighed and decided he couldn’t stay kneeling on the floor next to the berth so he climbed onto the berth behind Hound and drew the recharging mech back against him. Hound quietened instantly, hands grabbing hold of his arm, and the seeker settled himself down, one wing hanging off the side of the berth. His front, from chest plates to crotch and most of his legs, were tightly pressed against Hound and Thundercracker found he intensely liked the feeling. Thundercracker tucked his face into the back of Hound’s neck and initiated his own recharge cycle. He’d deal with what needed to be done tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Rape.

For anyone who might be interested in the future, there is a companion fic being written that details the story of Sideswipe and Sunstreaker. It is being written by my beta xRae Asakurax, who can be found on ff.net, but it is very much still a WIP.
Hinc illae lacrimae

Chapter Notes

Title translation: Hence all those tears shed

Movement drew Thundercracker out of recharge as he was unused to sharing his berth with another mech. A small sob of terror had him wide awake instantly and he found Hound shaking in his arms, liquid glistening on his cheeks. Overriding concern had Thundercracker sitting up slightly, still holding the smaller mech to him, so Hound could see his face. Wide, blue optics met his and the seeker watched Hound relax slightly as he let out a noise of relief.

“You thought I was him didn’t you?”

Hound froze, betraying his answer, before he nodded jerkily and Thundercracker felt guilt course through him at not being awake before Hound was.

“Don’t…” Hound said shakily, seeing the way Thundercracker’s expression changed. “I just… I knew… wasn’t but… you’re… behind me…and…”

The blue mech shushed him gently, understanding, and stroked his helm softly, before shifting position, climbing over Hound, careful not to jostle him, until he was lying facing him instead. “Better?”

Hound was still for a moment before inching forward to press himself against Thundercracker’s chassis and nodding when the seeker couldn’t see his face. The blue mech curled his arms around the other mech, thermal blanket and all, and quietly waited for Hound to make some move or sound, but eventually anxiousness and curiosity had Thundercracker speaking. “How are you feeling? Do you need some more painkillers?”

Hound shook his head, which the seeker guessed was at the second question, and he was about to ask his first one again when Hound whispered, “I feel… dirty. I’m making you dirty. You shouldn’t….”

He started trying to push away from Thundercracker but the seeker was stronger and more determined to keep a hold of Hound than he was to get away.

“No you’re not,” Thundercracker told him firmly, but softly. “You’re not dirty and you’re not making me dirty.”

Hound shivered, going back to clinging onto the seeker’s front. He felt exposed and guilty, like this was his fault, that he’d encouraged it somehow. Thundercracker held him tightly and Hound was thankful he wasn’t treating him like something fragile that was about to break, however much like he felt like that inside.

“Do you think you could manage getting to the wash room?” the seeker asked.

Hound thought about it for a moment, weighing up how he felt against how much the sound of cleaning away traces of the previous day appealed to him.
“Yes.”

“Alright then.” Thundercracker released him and sat up, sliding backwards off the berth. Hound slowly pushed his upper body up, wincing as more pressure was exerted onto his healing plates. Thundercracker’s hands were still on him, though they were uselessly fluttering up and down his arms as the seeker was at a loss of how to help. Biting his lip Hound shifted his legs around until the hung off the berth. The pain had changed from an ache to little flashing stabs and the green mech knew, without a doubt, standing would be even worse.

Thundercracker was determined to do more so he placed Hound’s hands on his shoulders and braced his own under the green elbow joints.

“When you’re ready.”

Hound nodded, shuttering his optics as he pulled himself forward. Pain flared up his body, making him cry out and stagger forwards, but the seeker caught him instantly and seemed to decide enough was enough. He abruptly picked Hound up, trying to ignore the way he whimpered, and carried him to the wash room. The smaller mech buried his face in the crook of Thundercracker’s neck and just held on, riding out the waves of pain.

The blue flyer was gratefully that he’d had the voice activated controls installed as he ordered the floor to transform, taking away the wash rack to one side so the floor could part and sink. It formed a stepped pool which filled quickly with warm water. Thundercracker left out the cleansing solution because it would sting Hound’s wounds and stepped down into the water until it swirled around his lower legs, covering the lowest step by just half a mechanometer. Gently Thundercracker set the injured mech down on this projection, wincing in sympathy at the small noises of pain he made.

“Is this ok?” Hound nodded, trying to get used to sitting and trying to let the warmth of the water soothe him. The seeker stood back up, glancing around. “I’ll just get a cleaning cloth.” He sloshed back to the other end of the pool to retrieve one from the shelves that were in handy reach before returning to Hound to find him with tears making wet tracks down his face plates. The cloth fell into the water as shock and empathic sadness welled up in Thundercracker.

“Hey, hey.” Thundercracker knelt down in front of him, wiping at the tears on his face. “What’s this for?”

“You broke me,” Hound whispered.

“What?”

“When Starscream was… when he was… All I could think of was how I couldn’t fight back because I’d hurt him and that would hurt you. I couldn’t hurt you. No free mech thinks like that… No one let someone do that to them without a fight…You finally broke me in.” More tears flowed down his cheeks.

“Hound no,” the seeker shook his head. “How many slaves would tell their masters that? They wouldn’t. You’re not broken. Don’t you think you could have thought like that because of what would happen to me, to my reputation, if I defended you? Because you know I would. That’s the way mechs think when they care about someone.” The green mech tried to turn his face away but Thundercracker refused to let him. “Answer me this then. Do you want to see Starscream prosecuted for what he did?”

Hound nodded jerkily.
“That’s good then, because that means all I have to ask you is this. Could you stand in a court and give evidence?”

Hound looked at him then. “But my word doesn’t mean anything in a court.”

“It does if I pledge your word as mine. In essence it would be like Starscream attacked me, you are simply speaking in my place, though the weight of the sentence won’t be as great,” the seeker explained.

“But that’s… If I lied or said anything that… It would hurt you so badly,” Hound realised.

Thundercracker gave him a gentle smile. “I don’t think I need worry about that do I? Can you do it? Starscream will be there.”

Hound shuttered his optics as he thought. The idea of seeing the abusive seeker again sent shudders of fear through him, but if he was getting a chance to speak for himself, to have his words heard, then it would be like he was free. It would be an illusion, but he could live with that, use that to face Starscream again. He opened his optics and nodded.

“Good.” The blue mech smiled fiercely before his expression faltered slightly.

“What?” Hound asked warily.

“I want to kiss you. I would have done it before, without thinking,” Thundercracker admitted before growling. “Starscream’s got a lot to answer for.”

Hound leant forward and pressed his lips to the seeker’s before he could start on a tirade. The seeker kissed him back, but didn’t seek to deepen the contact nor hold it when Hound moved back.

“I never let him do that,” the green mech whispered. “It’s not… tainted.”

Thundercracker froze for a brief instant and Hound saw that burning rage in his optics again. Somehow, that made him feel a little safer. Somewhere inside, he knew Thundercracker would never have let Starscream touch him if he’d been close enough to prevent it. Hound was all broken up inside, with that safe place everyone carries inside them blown wide open, leaving him alone and exposed. His defences had been badly battered through the loss of his freedom but the seeker crouched in front of him had begun to help patch those hurts.

Hound didn’t have an excess of pride, but he had enough that it was hard to admit that the mech that owned him could do that, could mean anything like that to him. The green mech dropped his gaze to his hands and shuddered slightly. He did have to admit it though, because otherwise he would have never have let Starscream do what he did.

“No more thinking,” Thundercracker’s voice told him firmly. “I can see it on your face. Let’s get you cleaned up and back on that berth.”

The seeker picked up the cloth he’d dropped when Hound had broken down and set to cleaning the green metal. He started at his pedes and worked his way up, bypassing the upper thighs, crotch and hips plates entirely, without asking. Hound slowly relaxed under the gentle, circular motions, letting his optics shutter in trust and he drifted, not thinking until the flyer called his name softly.

“Hound, you awake?” He blinked a couple of times and nodded. “Do you want me to clean the rest of you or do you want to do it?”

Thundercracker was holding out the cleaning cloth between them and Hound took it hesitantly. He
couldn’t clean himself properly sitting down and he’d only really just got used to the pain in this position. Either way, he was going to have to stand up. Hound looked down at the seeker still kneeling at his pedes and handed back the cloth before reaching out to put his hands on the top of the white intakes. They were just the right height for him to lean on when he was standing, but the green mech knew he would have to be careful not to tighten his grip too much as they were sensitive.

The blue flyer didn’t protest at being used as a prop. He just steadied himself as the other mech used him to haul himself to his pedes, though it was hard to remain still when Hound whimpered in pain. The green mech swayed slightly, optics shuttered tightly as he fought against the pain that made him want to sit right back down again. Neither of them said anything for a klik until Thundercracker asked, “Hound, you ok?”

All he got was a tiny shake of the head but he took that as his go to start cleaning. Tentatively Thundercracker wiped down the white thighs and then the front of the black hips, trying to be very gentle and not knock Hound in any way, but he also knew he’d have to turn Hound around to get at the back, which was where the most damage had been inflicted. The smaller mech seemed to realise that too and shuffled awkwardly around, still clinging to one of Thundercracker’s intakes, in the end leaving him side on to the seeker.

The cracks, scratches and dents were still startlingly vivid on the black plates of Hound’s aft and it took a lot of the blue flyer’s control not to let that fury rise again. He didn’t know exactly what had happened before he’d gotten to the room but the marks told their own story, which Thundercracker’s imagination played to well enough. Starscream had crossed a line that he knew Thundercracker had but the blue seeker hadn’t realised he would react like this. He would have been angry had it been any slave under Starscream’s hands, but see Hound like that, pinned to the wall, suffering, had made Thundercracker’s world go black with rage. Vaguely he’d been surprised he hadn’t beaten Starscream to a mess pulp on the floor right then and there, but Hound was infinitely more important. Without realising it Thundercracker reached out a softly stroked Hound’s aft, sad because he’d always loved that part of his chassis, but the flinch from the green mech shocked the flyer back into reality.

“Slag, I’m sorry Hound. I didn’t mean…”

“It’s ok,” the other mech’s voice was quiet. “I didn’t mean to... do that either.”

Thundercracker got to his pedes to look at Hound’s face closely. Tight, tired optics met his and the seeker could see the haunted look beneath the surface.

“C’mon, let’s get you some pain meds and back into recharge.”

Hound nodded and didn’t even protest when Thundercracker picked him back up, striding back out of the pool and into his berth room, uncaring about the wet prints he left behind him. He settled Hound down on his side on the berth before fetching one cube of energon and his medication that was placed on a tray next to the berth. Someone had been in whilst they’d been in the wash room to leave the energon and Hound hadn’t once heard them. The seeker sat on the berth next to Hound, measuring out the green liquid into the energon according to Ratchet’s instructions, before handing the cube to Hound. He watched the green mech drink, insisting he take it all, despite the lingering aftertaste and then sat with him until he fell into recharge.

The mega-cycles past that way; Thundercracker doing all he could for Hound as he recharged and refuelled his way through his recovery until he was well enough to start moving around. At first he didn’t leave the two innermost rooms of Thundercracker’s chambers, which they pretended was at the seeker’s insistence that he didn’t over stretch himself, but in reality it was because both of them
didn’t want to face up to that moment where Hound had to confront the place he’d been attacked. They both knew it would have to dealt with soon, but the seeker was doing his best to get Hound back to the mech he’d been before the attack, or as close to it as he could get, before they tried.

Hound couldn’t express how grateful he was to Thundercracker, especially when he could smile again. The seeker treated him just like he guessed he would if he was his bonded partner, caring for his every need, despite Hound’s protests. Thundercracker couldn’t be dissuaded from it and had once, quietly, admitted that he enjoyed doing it, but that had come close to touching on a few home truths neither of them was willing to bring up yet.

In the end it had been a game, a hologram and laughter that brought Hound those last few steps into the outer most room. He barely registered where he was as he sought to decorate the seeker with holographic pictures, made more difficult by the fact Thundercracker wasn’t going to stand still to let him do it. The blue flyer eventually conceded defeat, but stole a kiss from Hound as his reward. As the green mech smiled up at him Thundercracker whispered, “I’m proud of you, you know that right?”

Hound looked away, embarrassed, and stared across the room from the safety of the other mech’s arms.

“It’s not as bad as I thought it would be. I think there are too many good memories in here for one bad one to ruin it.”

“Mmm,” the seeker murmured, resting his chin on the top of Hound’s helm. “Very good memories.”

The smaller mech stayed quiet, lost in his own thoughts. Before Starscream he had been scared of letting himself get closer to Thundercracker, of it being more than interfacing. Afterwards, now, the blue flyer had never stopped caring for him and he had ended up closer regardless. The recharging together had happened because Hound couldn’t face his nightmares alone, along with all the other little things Hound hadn’t let them do together before. It had been almost a relief to have the other mech fall into the role of carer, to take that burden off Hound so he could fight his own demons with someone at his side silently encouraging him.

Now Hound realised that whilst he was still worried about his relationship with the seeker, he knew it know longer terrified him to let Thundercracker closer. The flyer had been right, he no longer treated Hound in any way like a slave; even in company he asked Hound to do something, instead of ordering him. He sought out excuses to keep Hound with him, to be in his presence and the green mech was beginning to realise he liked being held so high in Thundercracker’s esteem.

Hound turned his face up to the other mech, making Thundercracker move so he could see his face. The affection clearly showing in the seeker’s face made Hound wonder how he could care so much for Hound when he knew he’d been deliberately difficult, obtuse and had kept secrets. The fact that this warmth had stood up to a seriously traumatic experience made Hound almost feel guilty. He’d offered so little back to the seeker, never making the first move, holding them back from going any further into their relationship. Now he felt like he should, he could.

“I’m tired,” Hound murmured. “Would you mind…?”

“Of course not,” the blue mech nodded. “I think this has been your longest, most active day in a long time.”

Hound smiled slightly and stepped back from Thundercracker, heading back towards the berthroom, trailed closely by the seeker. He was aware that the other mech could be no where near tired, yet still accompanied him and the green mech was grateful he didn’t have to ask for him to come with him.
They got to the berth, which Hound stared at for a nano-klik before turning around to Thundercracker and studying him.

“What?” Thundercracker asked, bemused at Hound’s behaviour.

“I haven’t had chance to say thank you properly.” Hound held out his hands to Thundercracker to stop him as he went to complain. “You’ve done more than you had to. No master shares his berth with an injured guard or aide. No master bathes them. I need to thank you.” The green mech bowed his head as he knelt down at Thundercracker’s pedes. “My lord.”

Thundercracker stiffened. Hound never called him that, had never crossed the line beyond sir and the seeker hadn’t argued with it, but now it was like those words turned Thundercracker into pure lust. Coupled with Hound’s display of submissiveness, the bigger mech was instantly aware of the heat rising within him. He would have thought it wrong, before, to see his normally vibrant personality like this, but because Hound was doing this just for him, it was a massive turn on Thundercracker didn’t realise he had.

“Hound,” he rumbled.

The green mech looked up at him without really raising his head. “I am healed my lord.”

“You don’t have to do this…” Thundercracker fought against the urge to grab the mech at his pedes, but he wanted so badly.

“I want to.” Hound climbed to his pedes, keeping his head lowered. He stepped back to the berth and slid onto it before he laid back on it, spreading his legs. Thundercracker growled as he watched the mech slide open his interface port and dip a single digit into it. When he withdrew it, the black surface glistened. “See my lord? I am ready for you.”

Thundercracker trembled, optics shuttering. Hound couldn’t know what he was doing to the seeker…

“I’ve missed you.” Hound’s voice was soft and pleading. “Please.”

That broke every resistance in Thundercracker. He was on the berth, looming over Hound in a nano-second. Hound ran his hands down either side of his chest, optics meeting his and Thundercracker could see the need for him burning in them. The seeker gritted his denta as those clever hands teased at sensitive transformation seams. His desire was building too fast for his control to last.

“Hound… If you keep that up… I’m… I’m just going to take you,” Thundercracker admitted, in between gasps of pleasure.

“Yes,” the green mech murmured. “Take me. Banish the memory of him, please.”

Thundercracker dipped his head to kiss Hound, to stop him bringing Starscream into the conversation. Both of Hound’s hands caught his helm, holding his head where it was and it was a desperate thing they shared. Thundercracker captured the black hips in his hands, holding them down, as he lined himself up. He thrust into Hound, arching his back so he didn’t have to break the kiss but still get the power behind it. The green mech cried out into the kiss, hips trying to push up into the intrusion and his hands clamped down over Thundercracker’s aft.

As the seeker began to find his rhythm, he moved his fingers over the front of Hound chassis, stroking softly. He broke away from Hound’s mouth, lifting his head enough to meet those blue optics. Something there made him change his position slightly, bracing his weight on one arm next to the green helm, still moving his hips, forcing little noises from Hound’s vocaliser. The blue flyer
gently ran his free fingers over Hound’s cheek, which made the mech beneath him shutter his optics.

“Hey, look at me,” Thundercracker called softly and Hound opened them again. “You feel that?” He deepened the angle of thrust, making Hound cry out, fingers tightening on his aft. “That’s me and it’s always going to be me.”

“Thunder…cracker…” Hound stuttered. “Please.”

The seeker stared at Hound. He had never before heard the green mech say his name, not to him, and he didn’t realise how good it felt to have him say it. He drove himself a little harder into Hound, shuddering as the overload he’d been pushing to the back of his CPU in favour to making Hound feel better was suddenly trying to overwhelm him.

“Hound,” the seeker gritted out before he caught him up in a kiss. Black hands urgently stroked seams and teased at wires as the pair of mechs sought to make the other overload first.

Thundercracker tried to be gentle with Hound, to be different than his last experience which was all about power and dominance, but he struggled to remember that when those black hands were driving him to distraction.

Hound could tell the seeker was doing his best to comfort him and the green mech hadn’t realised, until Thundercracker had touched his face like that, that he desperately needed not only this physical assurance, but the emotional one too. He had thought, over the past deca-cycle since his attack, that he had gotten that, but to see the seeker trying to be so caring, in the midst of interfacing, changed something in Hound’s spark and it scared him, badly, but his body was too far gone for him to protest.

“Primus Hound you…” Thundercracker threw back his head, optics shuttering as he fought against overload.

Hound made a low noise in his vocaliser at the sight of the seeker arched out above him and his overload slammed through him, catching him by surprise, forcing the other mech’s name from his lips. “Thundercracker!”

The blue mech’s response was instantaneous. He overloaded with a cry at the sound of his own name coming from the mech beneath and Hound watched him as he rode out his own overload, marvelling yet again at how beautiful it made the seeker. Thundercracker sagged back down against him when his energy left him and Hound wrapped his arms around him, holding him close, so that Thundercracker couldn’t see the expression in his face. The one where he was struggling not to panic at how much he needed the other mech and just how much his world revolved around anything the seeker did.

Hound wasn’t stupid. He knew Thundercracker cared deeply for him, he’d known that before Starscream had attacked him, but he’d been ignoring his own feelings because it tore him up inside. It was like the two halves of him were at war. His CPU demanded he push Thundercracker away because he was a Master, someone who supported the system Hound had been trying to bring down, but his spark was telling him exactly the opposite. It ached when the seeker wasn’t around and it sang when he was close. He had always been a sensible mech, when it came down to difficult decisions, but he’d never felt like this about anyone before and wished it could have been anyone else, rather than the one mech that confused him more than he ever thought possible.
Thundercracker lifted his head as he stepped out of his private shuttle to look up at the grand building rising above them. The Praxus Court was one of biggest buildings in the city, designed and built by none other than the Constructicons, within The Assembly itself. Only those with a high status position or hugely public cases came to these court rooms and Thundercracker couldn’t shake the uncomfortable feeling he got in this place.

Ironhide strode past him, blue optics taking in the other bots in the area before he grunted an all clear. The black mech had taken back up his duties as Thundercracker’s personal guard again until Hound felt confident enough not to quail in certain situations. The green mech in question was hovering uncertainly behind the seeker, trying to stay close but not closer than the rules dictated he could. Thundercracker hadn’t told him much about what was going to happen. In truth he hadn’t really wanted to know before, but standing in front of the intimidating building Hound wished he’d pressed for more information.

With Ironhide leading the way, his broad form clearing them a pathway, Thundercracker and Hound followed him into the foyer of the Court where they found their lawyer waiting for them. The slight blue and yellow mech was engaged in a heated argument with a black and purple mech, who was jabbing his finger at the collection of datapads between them.

“Is there a problem?” Thundercracker asked sharply, optics narrowing.

“No problem,” their lawyer returned quickly. “Only this idiot trying to access information he’s not been granted yet.”

“My client has every right to know what charges are being held against him,” the other mech snarled.

“This is a closed court proceeding,” the yellow and blue replied. “You will be told that when we get into the court room, as you well know, Spinister.”

“Which you are delaying by arguing.” The blue seeker folded his arms over his chest.

“Which he has every right to do,” a thin voice spoke from behind them and Thundercracker stiffened.

“Starscream.”

Hound had frozen to the spot at the sound of the white seeker’s voice and little tremors shook his frame. Starscream came gliding across the floor, face set in a sneer and optics trained on the green slave. Thundercracker stepped between them, one hand dropping behind him to touch Hound in reassurance and the other flyer stopped.

“You’re a weak, pathetic fool. He’s property, something to be used, yet you stand there and treat him like he matters,” Starscream derided.
“He does matter,” Thundercracker said, voice low and threaded with anger. “And I’m going to prove to everyone in that court room that he matters more than you do.”

Thundercracker had been so caught up in worry about how Hound would react to seeing Starscream he’d never even given any thought to what’d he’d do, but in the instant he’d heard the other seeker’s voice he’d had to call up all his control not to turn Starscream into a mess pulp on the floor. Seeing him stare at Hound, enjoying the fear he provoked had turned that anger into a deep rage that had wanted to hurt Starscream in all the ways he had hurt Hound and Thundercracker. Only the touch of the other mech behind him had stayed his anger. The need to comfort Hound had overridden his other desires. Thundercracker knew, in that instant, that deep down inside he could be capable of terrible things if he was pushed to it, if he lost his reason for control and that was a wake up call on his senses.

“A slave versus a Lord?” Starscream waved one hand. “Ha, we know how that will end. I'm surprised the Court even let it get this far.”

Thundercracker smiled suddenly. “Emirate Xaaron asked for this case specifically.”

“Emirate?” Starscream’s confident demeanour changed instantly to one of apprehension he tried to cover with anger as he turned to his lawyer, Spinister. “Why didn’t you tell me the judge was Emirate Xaaron?”

“I…”

Their lawyer stepped away from their opposition, leading Ironhide and Thundercracker away. Hound followed automatically when the blue flyer moved away from him, staying so very close to Thundercracker as his CPU struggled to settle.

“Nightbeat, how is it looking?”

The blue and yellow mech glanced at Hound before his gaze settled on Thundercracker again. “Interesting. There’s never been a case like this, which is why Emirate Xaaron asked for it. I’ve done what you asked, but there’s no guarantee it will work.”

There was a loud screech of fury from Starscream behind them and Hound noticeably flinched, despite the fact that he couldn’t see the other seeker as Ironhide was conveniently blocking his line of sight. Black fingers wove through his and Hound tightened his grip almost painfully on Thundercracker’s hand, optics welded to the floor. If he’d been himself he would have asked what Nightbeat had meant. As it was, the lawyer was watching the seeker’s interaction with his slave with optics that missed nothing and Thundercracker, for his part, was ignoring the stares they were attracting.

“Hound.” The green mech looked up at the call of his name. “It’s time to go to the Court now. If you can’t do this, we’ll walk away.”

Hound swallowed, half liking the blue flyer’s suggestion, before saying quietly, “We can’t do that. I know what you’d do and I won’t risk that.”

Thundercracker was aware of the optics that landed on him then, trying to ascertain what Hound meant and he forced himself not to give himself away, surprised Hound had guessed what he had planned if the court proceeding didn’t go their way. Starscream was going to pay one way or another. Gently he laid a kiss to the back of Hound’s knuckles, raising a soft smile from the smaller mech, one that Hound wasn’t even aware he was giving.
Nightbeat silently turned and headed towards a set of doors that rose all the way to the high, vaulted ceiling. Hound forced himself to let go of Thundercracker’s hand for two reasons. He had to be strong enough to walk into the court room by himself or he could never face questioning and he wasn’t unaware of the looks of disapproval being aimed their way by the other free Cybertronians present. Thundercracker may have been blasé about his reputation but Hound knew it would affect his life if others didn’t respect him. Starscream would already be slagging his once-friend off to everyone within audio range.

Two mechs flanking the double set of doors stopped the party to check their identity and there was a moment of disagreement about either Hound or Ironhide being allowed inside. After a moment Thundercracker agreed to the conditions of Ironhide remaining outside. The black mech nodded at Hound in his show of support before going to stand at one side of the doors, a dark imposing shadow. Nightbeat led Thundercracker and Hound to their table and the seeker wasn’t surprised to see the public gallery was already packed with mechs and femmes.

Nightbeat had done well. Thundercracker had asked him to find as many as possible that would come, in particular those who supported the rights of slaves, and he wondered, briefly, if Hound recognised anyone there. He knew he’d be in for a shock later, as he hadn’t told Hound just who he had found to take the stand in their defence.

Starscream wasn’t long in following them in but Thundercracker had deliberately sat Hound as far from Starscream’s table as was possible. The other seeker and his lawyer had only just gotten settled when the court usher called for them to rise for Emirate Xaaron. The yellow and silver mech strode sedately into court, sat and bade them all to follow.

Emirate Xaaron nodded, before gesturing for Nightbeat and Spinister to come join him at the front of the court, where he had a short, quiet word with them, telling them to keep it civilised. The lawyers both agreed, though Spinister shot a look back at Starscream with a little trepidation, before they retreated to their tables.

“This court is now in session,” the usher announced. “Everything now spoken will be recorded.”

“This court brings to order the case of Hound, vouched for by Lord Thundercracker, versus Lord Starscream. Defence, how do you plead?” Emirate asked, going through the formalities.

“Not guilty,” Spinister replied.

“Very well. Prosecution, please call your first witness.”

Nightbeat glanced at Hound. “We call Hound to the stand.”

Thundercracker touched the green mech’s hand as he rose, but Hound didn’t react, just mechanically walked to the stand, optics on his pedes. He settled into his seat and Emirate turned to face him. “Everything you say before this court is honoured as your Lord’s words. Do you understand what that means?”

“Yes sir,” Hound nodded.

“Very well.” Emirate Xaaron turned back to the main court. “Prosecution, this is your witness.”

The court mech sitting next to Thundercracker stood up and walked across the floor to stand in front of Hound. “Could you detail to me the events of the mega-cycle in question?”

“Lord Thundercracker was holding a gathering at his home for a close circle of friends and potential business partners. There were roughly ten guests present in the house at the event.”
“Lord Starscream, the defendant, was amongst them?”

“Yes sir.” Hound couldn’t bring himself to look across at the seeker. “Lord Thundercracker had just arranged a meeting with a mech called Sideswipe and I was detailed to inform the relevant bots and enter the date into the household diary. To do that I left the main party area and went in Lord Thundercracker’s office, which had the nearest, private terminal.” Hound clenched his hands together as he paused. He’d been over these words a thousand times, but it was hard when he could feel everyone optics boring into him, searching for lies or a mistake. “I had nearly finished when Lord Starscream entered the room.”

“What did he say to you?”

“He asked why Lord Thundercracker was so ‘taken’ with me,” Hound answered, glancing at Thundercracker, who had never heard exactly what had taken place in his office. “I told him I didn’t understand what he meant.”

“He then approached you?” The court mech gestured at him to continue.

“Yes sir.” Hound tried to control the tremors starting in his hands. “He told me he knew Lord Thundercracker interfaced with me and wanted to know why. Lord Starscream told me all he wanted was ‘a little taste’.”

“A little taste.” Their lawyer glanced at Starscream who sneered at him, unrepentant. “According to your statement, this is when you say he tried to kiss you.”

“Yes sir. I turned away. Lord Thundercracker had informed me I was not to entertain his guests in that manner. Lord Starscream grew angry and refused to let me leave. He told me that Lord Thundercracker was nearly a brother, what was his was Lord Starscream’s and he was taking what was his.”

“At this point, he pushed you into the wall and held you there?”

Hound abruptly sought out Thundercracker’s optics, seeking reassurance there. “He hit me twice and when I kept struggling, he… he forced me to face the wall, where he… he…” Thundercracker gave him the smallest of nods and Hound the strength to get out the last of his words. “He forced apart my plates so he could… rape me.”

There was a hushed muttering in the court which disappeared when the judge narrowed his optics at them. The lawyer waited until there was silence again before he spoke. “Lord Thundercracker came in not long after this?”

“Yes sir,” Hound nodded. “I think he pulled Lord Starscream away from me and ordered him to leave, before calling for a medic.”

“The medic’s report is Item five,” the lawyer announced. “It details the damage done during the assault and states that this was indeed a rape.”

With that he returned to his seat. Now was the part that they had no control over and was the part Hound was most dreading. Starscream’s lawyer rose to his pedes after a long moment, intended to make Hound even more nervous.

“Lord Starscream was a frequent guest at Lord Thundercracker’s house before this alleged incident?”

“Yes sir. Along with Lord Skywarp, he was the most frequent visitor,” Hound agreed.
“In all of this time before then he had never shown any interest in you?”

“No to my knowledge,” Hound frowned. “There were many occasions I was not present at Lord Thundercracker’s side when they were talking privately.”

The mech waved his hand dismissively. “Are you and were you at the time of this alleged incident, interfacing with Lord Thundercracker?”

Hound just about stopped himself glancing at the blue seeker. They were well aware that this would probably be asked and Thundercracker had not been bothered about it coming out in court. He had told Hound he was not ashamed of their relationship.

“Yes sir.”

“Has Lord Thundercracker interfaced with anyone else during this time?”

“Objection!” their lawyer spoke out. “Relevance to proceedings. Lord Thundercracker is not on trial here and his personal life has nothing to do with these questions.”

“I am simply trying to validate what my client said during this alleged incident,” Starscream’s lawyer said smoothly.

“I’ll allow it, but don’t stray too far,” Emirate Xaaron warned.

“Answer the question.” The questioning mech turned his optics back to Hound.

“Not to my knowledge sir.”

“If you had to guess.”

“No sir.”

“So Lord Starscream was correct with his assessment of the situation. Lord Thundercracker does appear very ‘taken’ with you.” The mech tilted his head to one side as he studied Hound. “Before you became a slave, what was it that you did?”

“I was self employed,” Hound replied. “I used to make holograms as personalised gifts for special occasions and was on call to the local Enforcers to help them track down difficult targets.”

“So a respected mech in the community then. Can you tell the court why you were arrested, imprisoned and made into a slave?”

Hound’s mouth tightened into a thin line briefly. “I was caught attempting to steal information that would have been used to free illegally imprisoned mechs.”

“Including a mech that was in Lord Starscream’s household, one you met when working with the Enforcers.” The lawyer slapped a datapad down in front of Hound, showing details of the information Hound had been after. “This information is Item 7 and amongst the list is Lord Starscream’s personal attendant.” Hound picked up the datafile and found Prowl’s details on it.

“I didn’t know he was on there.” Hound looked up. “I never knew.”

“So you say.” The mech lifted his nose into the air. “For all we know this was an elaborate plan to illegally free a mech you failed to free before.”

“No, I…”
“And further more, I submit to this court, that this slave was one of those mechs that believed my client’s outrageous reputation as a master that abuses his slaves.” The lawyer turned to face the public section of the court, spreading his arms wide.

“I didn’t know…”

“Which would mean,” he turned back to Hound, finger pointing, “that this accusation was brought about under false pretences and has no validation whatsoever.”

“I…” Hound faltered, unsure now and beginning to fall apart.

“Objection!” His own lawyer stepped in. “Where are the questions? Speeches are given at the end of the hearing.”

“Agreed.” Emirate Xaaron glared at the prosecution, for the moment ignoring the whispers from the public gallery.

“No further questions,” he smiled, sliding back to his seat.

“I call for a recess before the next witness,” the defence submitted after Thundercracker touched his arm.

“You have a breem.”

Hound shakily made his way out of the questioning booth and across the floor. Thundercracker met him halfway before leading him into their private room at one side of the court. He stopped Nightbeat at the door as Hound paced into the room, arms wrapped around himself. “Give us a moment.”

Once he was gone, the blue seeker shut the door and crossed the floor to the green mech where he caught his arms, halting the nervous pedes. Hound looked up at him before wrenching his gaze away. Thundercracker pulled him into a tight embrace. The green mech was stiff for a moment before he threw his arms around him and held on like his life depended on it.

“I’m sorry,” Hound sniffed.

“Why?”

“I froze up there.”

“We didn’t expect him to start on your past so soon, but we knew it was coming. It’s alright. It’s just their job, to twist everything like that,” the seeker murmured.

“I really didn’t know about Prowl.” Hound shook his head, rubbing his face against Thundercracker’s shoulder.

“I know. It’ll be alright. We’ve got more witnesses to call and no mech is going to intimidate Ratchet,” Thundercracker told him.

They stood there for a little while longer until Hound eased back out of Thundercracker’s arms. He paced the floor a little more but the seeker realised he needed to. There was clearly something on his CPU. There was plenty on Thundercracker’s, many new questions from hearing Hound describe the attack.

“Ask,” Hound spoke abruptly. “I know you want to.”
“How long…?” the seeker clearly didn’t want to ask, but wanted to know. “How long did he have… access before I got there?”

An unbidden memory leapt up in Hound’s mind and he violently shifted, like he wanted to move away from it, but he harshly stopped himself. Facing it for Thundercracker was the least of all the evils.

“Not long…”

“But long enough.” Thundercracker realised he wouldn’t get a real answer to that question. He’d learnt more in the last klik than he had before and his anger towards Starscream had grown, but in the face of Hound crumbling out in the stand had pushed that emotion away in favour of being strong and calm for him. It also wouldn’t do to rip the other seeker’s wings off in the middle of a court room and beat him with them.

“You’ve got that look on your face.” Hound’s words broke Thundercracker’s imaginings and he returned his focus to the green mech.

“What look?”

“The one that says you’re thinking hard about something,” Hound replied.

“Just some mindless violence I want to inflict on him,” Thundercracker shrugged.

The green mech gave him a small smile, knowing whom the seeker was talking about and just why he couldn’t fall apart under questioning. Thundercracker thought he had hidden his desire to physically hurt the other seeker well but Hound had seen the rage beneath that calm exterior and knew Thundercracker would risk everything to see Starscream fall. That would only end badly, for both of them, and Hound didn’t want revenge, not like that. It wasn’t in his programming to lash out violently against wrongs done to him. That in itself felt immoral.

Hound approached Thundercracker, raising himself up on the tips of his pedes so he matched the seeker in height, resting a hand on the glass dome of the cockpit for balance and laid a soft kiss on the other’s mouth. A black hand cupped his cheek in return when he pulled back and Hound found himself opening his mouth. “Thundercracker, I…”

A knock at the door stopped him and Nightbeat stuck his head into the room. “Emirate is getting restless. It won’t do to make him wait too long.”

Hound pulled free of the flyer, heading for the door but Thundercracker’s hand curled around his arm. “What were you going to say?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Hound shook his head and Thundercracker let him go reluctantly. He couldn’t shake the feeling that it did matter and would have been very important, but Nightbeat was still hovering in the doorway. Hound was unlikely to express anything personal with others listening in, so Thundercracker followed him back out to the court room. Together they sat through Ratchet’s exact medical report. Spinister tried, again, to be intimidating, but discovered the white and red mech in the stand wasn’t going to put up with any nonsense, and certainly not implied slurs on his ability as a medic. Ratchet remained polite, but his tone was icy and his posture showed his anger.

There was a moment, when Skywarp was called to the stand, where Thundercracker felt guilty about what he was doing. He was, in effect, ripping apart the three of them and their very good friendship that had been in place since they were younglings, over another mech. He had been particularly close to Skywarp but had neglected him over caring for Hound and the black and purple mech had heard
Over the course of the mega-cycle no more slaves were called, which Thundercracker would have dearly loved to do, to highlight more of Starscream’s sadistic nature, but he could only pledge one slave’s word as his at this time. Both Thundercracker and Starscream had mechs give character references for them and then the Nightbeat shocked Hound by calling up Trailbreaker. When the green mech had been free Trailbreaker had been a very close friend and supported Hound’s decision to join the underground movement to free slaves. They hadn’t seen each other since Hound’s capture and the green mech found himself fighting with his emotions when he first saw the big black mech.

Trailbreaker smiled at Hound as he sat. He’d been shocked to hear what had happened to his friend and even more so when Nightbeat had contacted him, asking him to be a character reference for Hound, explaining what had happened. Nothing would have kept the black mech away, even though the Praxus Court made him uneasy with apprehension. It was too prim and proper for the rough, easy going mech to relax in but he gave a good, fair account of Hound’s personality and Hound whispered his thanks to Thundercracker when Trailbreaker had left.

Nightbeat and Spinister closed the proceedings with their finishing speeches. Spinister addressing mainly just Emirate Xaaron, hoping to appeal to his sense of importance whereas Nightbeat addressed the whole court, provoking reactions from the public gallery with some of his rhetorical questions, but he kept them from getting out of hand so as not to anger Emirate. The judge then left to make his decision and none of the mechs directly involved with the case were allowed to leave the court room during that time.

He was gone for nearly two cycles, in which time Hound got increasingly nervous and Starscream got increasingly loud about just what he’d do when he was found innocent. Some of his suggestions were designed to rile Thundercracker, and the blue flyer knew that if they did lose, then Starscream would drag this out to the ends of Cybertron. He tried to concentrate on Hound and in return the green mech kept Thundercracker in his seat to stop him giving in to the urge to inflict pain on the other seeker.

When Emirate Xaaron returned there was an immediate dead silence across the court room, making every move the yellow and silver mech made loud. He sat, regarding the datapad he held in one hand for a long moment, making everyone want to fidget, yet they daren’t for fear of missing something.

“Never before has a case like this been presented on Cybertron.” Emirate Xaaron finally looked up towards the court. “So any judgement I make will set the bar for any other cases that may follow afterwards and that is a heavy load to bear, but I do not wish to have that dictate the results of this case. With that in mind, along with the fact that Lord Thundercracker placed himself within the care of his slave, by pledging his word, I could not approach this case without treating Hound like I would any free mech.” Starscream let out a little hiss of disappointment, knowing that was one step further away from victory for him. Emirate ignored him. “The details within the medical report were shocking, showing that a deplorable level of violence had been levelled at a mech without the means nor the right to defend himself. Had this slave belonged to Lord Starscream then there would be no case, but as such a level of injury had been achieved then, in the very least, it qualifies as property damage. Fortunately, or unfortunately, Lord Thundercracker took such an attack as a personal affront and pledged his word before the Praxus Court which results in any attack on Hound becoming an attack on Lord Thundercracker. Not only does Lord Thundercracker have every right attributed to a free Cybertronian, he also carries the weight and responsibility of a Lord. I have no choice but to find the defendant, Lord Starscream, guilty of all charges.”

As soon as the judge found Starscream guilty Thundercracker grabbed Hound in an embrace, squeezing him tightly and the green mech found himself reciprocating in joy and relief. The court
room erupted, a mixture of cheering and booing but their surroundings didn’t matter for that moment, not until the Emirate Xaaron cleared his intakes noisily, banging his official hammer down hard, and Hound jumped in the seeker’s arms. Thundercracker moved back to him, though not because he wanted to, but because it was right and proper. The judge was looking at them, one optic ridge raised so high it was nearly at his helm.

“If you’re quite done…”

“My apologies your honour,” Thundercracker nodded.

“In reparation Lord Starscream is ordered to pay Lord Thundercracker damages of the cost…”

“Your honour,” Thundercracker held up a hand. “Forgive the interruption but I do not want credits in payment.”

“And just what do you want?” The presiding mech put down the datapad he’d been reading from.

“One slave of my choice from his employ,” the blue flyer returned. “He cost me my personal attendant for a time, I think it’s only fair that he returns the favour, permanently.”

Hound let out a little gasp and Thundercracker’s hand covered his under the table in reassurance.

“You want me to hand over Lord Starscream’s personal slave and that is all?”

“I also wanted him banned from coming within a hic of myself or any of my slaves.” Thundercracker shot a look at Starscream, who was now seething in visible anger.

Emirate Xaaron shrugged. “That is less than what I had in mind, but if that is what you want, and it is reasonable in the circumstances, then I shall grant your wishes. Lord Starscream’s personal slave is now the property of Lord Thundercracker and Lord Starscream is also banned from going with one hic of Lord Thundercracker or any of his property. Please make the arrangements to have the slave’s collar protocols turned over to Lord Thundercracker.”

Emirate handed out the official documents to both Spinister and Nightbeat before disappearing out of court. Many of those who had gathered to watch began filing out and Thundercracker, still smiling broadly, was in deep discussion with Nightbeat, until he heard a bang from behind him and he turned to find Starscream glaring at him. The blue seeker levelled a pointed look at him, measuring up the distance between them deliberately.

“This isn’t over!” Starscream hissed as he walked past.

“Go away Starscream,” Thundercracker said coldly. “I never want to see you again.”

Spinister hung back until his employer had gone before he held out a datapad. “Lord Starscream’s slave will be left at this location for your collection.”

Thundercracker took the datapad, took one look at where Prowl was being taken and scowled. Nightbeat peered at the pad and then shook his head. “I’ll have him transferred to Ratchet’s medical facility.”

“Thank you. We’ll see him there in a joor or so.” Thundercracker nodded before turning to Hound. “Ready to go?”

“More than anything,” the green mech smiled up at him. “I can’t thank you enough for…”
“Shush.” The flyer held up his hand. “No thanks needed.”

Together they left the court room, collecting Ironhide on the way who offered his congratulations to both Hound and Thundercracker, before they boarded the private shuttle. Thundercracker gave orders to fly in the direction of the medical facility Ratchet ran rather than heading home and Hound watched the cities pass by beneath, a little apprehension about meeting Prowl. He hadn’t seen him in quite some time and didn’t know how well he had fared in Starscream’s household, though he knew Jazz would have done anything in his power to help. The green mech also didn’t know how Prowl would react to find he’d traded one master for another, regardless of who that master was, or how he himself would react with a mech he knew before his enslavement living in the same house.

The journey took nearly a full joor, since the traffic around both the The Assembly and Ratchet’s medical facility was heavy, and by the time they landed Hound had put aside his anxiety about his feelings regarding Prowl, just looked forward to seeing the other mech. Thundercracker could see the new life in Hound, one that had appeared since Starscream’s sentence had been pronounced and could feel his own spark lifting alongside it. The green mech was truly beautiful when he was this happy and Thundercracker couldn’t wait for him to see Prowl, to see what lay in store.

They were directed through the clean, yet not sterile looking, corridors until they were shown a door, which their guide knocked on, calling Ratchet’s name. The red and white mech wasn’t long in answering, shutting the door behind him when he exited, smiling at Hound, who offered him one back.

“He’s a little worse for wear, but there is no permanent damage. Starscream seems to have taken a more mental route with Prowl, as opposed to physical, and I have had to place some sub-routines in his CPU to help him control his emotions. They may very well have to be permanent, but Prowl seems the type of mech to be able to adjust well,” Ratchet explained, before gesturing at the door. “He wants to see both of you.”

“Thank you Ratchet,” Thundercracker nodded and the medic smirked briefly, leaving them to it.

Hound opened the door and stepped inside, followed by the seeker. Standing by the window was Prowl, watching the traffic flow past outside. At the sound of the door shutting he turned to face his visitors, a slight smile in place, but the thing that had Hound’s utter attention was the missing band of metal that should have been in place around Prowl’s neck. It took a moment to sink in.

“You gave him his freedom?” Hound stared at Prowl’s bare throat before whirling back to Thundercracker, who nodded.

“I know that’s what you wanted.”

Hound threw himself at Thundercracker, hugging him hard, before sense came back to him and he pulled free, shooting an embarrassed look at Prowl, who was smiling softly at him.

“Thank you Hound.” Prowl inclined his head at him and the green mech smiled widely.

“I know the Enforcers won’t take you back now.” Thundercracker looked at the black and white. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. I have my freedom and from what I have heard, the Enforcers are no longer an institution I would wish to be a part of.” Prowl glanced down the road outside the window. “I know of somewhere I can go.”

“And work towards freeing Jazz,” Hound murmured softly.
Sharp blue optics darted between him and the seeker, who smiled placatingly. “I won’t tell. Good luck Prowl.”

Prowl dipped his head in thanks at Thundercracker before his optics met Hound. “No one has forgotten about you either Hound.”

The green mech shrugged one shoulder, aware of the blue mech’s gaze on him. “Jazz has more to offer towards what we were doing than I do.”

“In different areas perhaps.” Prowl turned his gaze to Thundercracker, still talking to Hound. “But you are no less important than anyone else is.”

The blue seeker’s optics narrowed at the accusation. He only managed to latch onto the urge to tell the black and white that Hound was the most important mech on Cybertron and how dare he imply otherwise, but there was no way, if he started on that tirade, that he’d be able to keep things quiet that he had to discuss, in private, with Hound first. Hound had every right to hear it from Thundercracker first, if the seeker wasn’t so scared about admitting how he felt without Hound running from him.
Hound had changed, there was no denying that. Thundercracker enjoyed the freer smiles and laughter. The green mech was seemingly content to spend every minute with him, including recharging and the occasional snuggle when Thundercracker gave into the urge. Hound no longer treated him like he was holding him at arm's length sometimes and every single mega-cycle it was getting harder for the seeker not to blurt out his feelings. He was now completely and utterly smitten with Hound and everyone else seemed aware of it, except the mech of his desire.

The mech in question was currently out running errands for Thundercracker and had been gone for nearly a full joor, dealing with a few traffic jams caused by careless drivers, but he was quite content to wait. His life had improved drastically since the court ruling, or so it felt to Hound, and he now looked on his relationship with Thundercracker in a better light. He could put aside their positions and just enjoy the other mech’s company, sort of. Hound knew that if they had ever gotten to this stage with both of them as free mechs, then he would have told the seeker how he felt for him, perhaps they would have progressed further with their relationship.

A little puff of air left Hound’s intakes as he sighed, finally pulling off the main highway to head for home. He pulled over automatically for the wail of sirens that raced up behind him and watched three fire rescue mechs rush past him, heading down towards the spread of mansions ahead of him. Hound wondered where the emergency was and put on a little bit of speed to follow the other vehicles to find out. The red light of fire and dark pall of smoke became more and more apparent as he descended towards the district that Thundercracker lived in. Real worry began to set in then and Hound ignored all the road safety he knew to get back home as fast as he could.

He nearly fell over his pedes as he transformed onto the driveway. Half of the mansion he admired and lived in was already engulfed in searing heat and flames, thick black smoke billowing skyward. Mechs were swarming the place; fighting the fire, clearing others back out of the danger zone. Hound spotted a yellow chassis and ran over.

“Bee! What’s going on?”

The minibot shook his head. “I don’t know. It was so sudden.”

“Did everyone get out? Where’s Thundercracker?” Hound had yet to see the blue seeker in the chaos.

“I don’t know,” Bumblebee frowned. “Ironhide was with him last I knew, but that was back inside before…” He didn’t get time to finish before Hound had taken off again, dodging mechs, looking for the big black frame of Ironhide, who he found with a red and white mech.

“Ironhide!”

“Hound, ya here,” the black mech smiled grimly. “Good, ya accounted for then.”

“What? Who isn’t?”

“No one’s seen Lord Thundercracker since the fire started…” Ironhide stopped, put off by the dawning horror on Hound’s face. The green mech lunged towards the house but was caught by the red and white mech.

“Stop! You can’t go in there!”
“But Thundercracker’s still in there!” He struggled. “It’s my duty to protect him!”

“We’ll find him.” The mech pushed him back. “That’s our job, not yours slave.”

Ironhide’s hand landed on his shoulder. “They know what they’re doing.”

Hound watched the red and white mech turn back to the fire, directing the other mechs before he looked up at Ironhide, his face set. “I’m going in there and you’re not going to try and stop me.”

Ironhide studied him. “Be careful.”

Hound gave him a sharp nod before concentrating. As he cloaked himself in a hologram to look like one of the fire fighters another hologram appeared next to him, a double of himself. Ironhide moved so he was standing next to the hologram to make it look like it was the real deal. Hound quickly crossed the garden, heading around the back of the house, trying to ignore the heat radiating from the building, until he found their quarters. He tilted his head backwards. The balconies he was aiming for were a storey up and he couldn’t fly. Well, enough of the building was already badly damaged, this wouldn’t make any difference.

Hound dug his fingers and very edges of his pedes into the cracks in the building, making them worse so he could climb up its surface. It didn’t take him long, determination and strength taking him past the worse parts of it. Once on the balcony he lost the hologram and broke the door down. The doors automatically sealed when there was a fire, seeking to trap the blaze within certain areas of the house.

“Thundercracker!” he yelled. There was no smoke in the berth room, but if Thundercracker had access to windows he wouldn’t be trapped. Hound barrelled through the next door into his private quarters. Smoke was starting to blacken the door into the office already but Hound didn’t hesitate, throwing one arm up to protect his face he kicked the door open. Thick toxic smoke billowed into his face and he ducked instinctively. It didn’t really help him see much, so he relied on his knowledge of the room and his sensors to guide him to the next door. His scan told him the seeker wasn’t in the office either.

The heat pouring from the door into the corridor told Hound the fire was just on the other side, but he didn’t have a choice. Bracing himself for the pain he knew he was about to experience Hound grabbed the door, digging his fingers into the now pliant metal, and pulling it back. He forced a scream down as it scorched his fingers and turned his face away from the intense heat that suddenly flooded over him.

“Thundercracker!” he shouted, desperate for an answer. Something shifted in the corridor and Hound somehow spotted a black shape on the floor. His scans told him it was a mech, though his systems were faint. Hound forced himself out into the hallway, pressing himself against one wall and trying to stay low, well away from the flames curling through the smoke on the ceiling, until he got to the lump that had moved. It was Thundercracker, though he was so black from soot and smoke he was nearly unrecognisable. His plating was scorching hot and it burned Hound to touch him but Thundercracker was unresponsive so he had no choice. The green mech grabbed the seeker, hauling him up and over his shoulder, grunting in effort and pain before he started back up the corridor the way he had come.

Smoke stung his optics and the soles of his pedes were smouldering with every step. Once he was back in office Hound found, because he’d forced the door open, it was much smokier than it had been before. He nearly collapsed when his intakes spluttered fitfully and he dropped to one knee as he coughed and hacked, trying to clear his intakes. Hound knew if he stopped they’d both die in this inferno.
It seemed like an agonisingly long time before Hound found himself back out on the balcony, where he did crumple, though he managed to stop Thundercracker tumbling off his shoulder. As gently as he could he set him down, before he weakly patted at the seeker’s face, hands in too much pain to touch him any harder.

“Thundercracker, please, please wake up.” Hound subsided when his intakes hitched and spat again and he was forced to wait until he could draw breath properly. “Help! We’re here! Please! Here!”

Hound’s voice was weak and dull, but he kept calling out. He knew he didn’t have the strength to get Thundercracker down to the floor without dropping him, but luck answered him when he heard footsteps heading towards them. The green mech staggered to his pedes to lean out over the balcony and wave.

“Here! Found them!” The big red mech shouted, just before he transformed, ladder extending upwards to the balcony.

“You!” The red and white mech from earlier recognised Hound. “I told you to stay outside!”

“Sorry, I had to find him,” Hound replied, not in the least bit apologetic.

A couple more fire fighters appeared to carry Thundercracker down the ladder. Hound managed to make his own way down, though it hurt like the pit on his hands and pedes, and he staggered after the mechs carrying Thundercracker. No one paid him much heed really. He may have pulled a mech from a burning building, but he was only a slave and took a far second precedence to a Lord.

Ironhide met up with them at the front of the house. “I have called his medic and he’ll meet you at the nearest hospital.”

Another ambulance was already on stand by, one that bore an uncanny resemblance to Ratchet, and whisked Thundercracker away swiftly. Hound watched him go.

“I hope he’s alright.”

“Lord Thundercracker’s a tough mech,” Ironhide replied. “Are ya alright? That was some stunt ya pulled off back there.”

“I’m fine,” Hound dismissed. “Can we go to the hospital?”

“Well,” Ironhide frowned. “They won’t want us hanging around but because of who we are then it should…” He never finished as Hound collapsed at his pedes. “Hound!” Ironhide was instantly at his side, listening to the mech’s intakes wheeze. “Primus, ya an idiot!” The black mech looked around. No one was taking any notice of them, they were only slaves after all and Ironhide didn’t have the right alt mode to transport Hound to the nearest help. “Slag.”

One of the only free mechs a slave was allowed to contact was a medic and the only comm. frequency Ironhide had was Ratchet’s. The same Ratchet who would be rushing to meet Thundercracker at the hospital.

‘Ratchet. It’s Ironhide.’

‘Is something wrong with Thundercracker?’

‘No, he’s on his way to the hospital. It’s Hound.’

‘What?’
‘He pulled Thundercracker from the fire and he’s just collapsed on meh. I can’t get him to hospital alone.’

‘Frag, alright Ironhide. I’ll send someone out for him. How bad is he?’

‘Sounds like he’s inhaled a ton of slag and he’s got burns all over him. His hands are real bad Ratchet.’

‘Pit slagging heroes always get into more trouble than the ones they were saving!’

Ironhide sat and waited with Hound. It felt like forever, listening to Hound splutter and cough. The old mech didn’t want to lose the younger mech. He had grown fond of the mech that had replaced him and knew just how much Thundercracker cared for Hound too. He’d never seen anyone, in all his meta-cycles of service, get to the seeker the way Hound had and even though Hound didn’t know it, Ironhide could see Thundercracker was letting himself fall in love. Ironhide also knew no one would accept Hound into the circle Thundercracker lived in. No Lord freed a slave and had an open relationship with them. Many interfaced with slaves, privately or not. Many interfaced with free mechs of lower status, though that was always thought of as almost a sport. No one built up a relationship with a slave and then freed them simply based on that.

A helicopter, marked in the red and white of an emergency vehicle, landed right beside them and transformed. He knelt on the floor next to them, optics glancing up at Ironhide before taking in the damage to Hound and the black mech could feel a scan pass through the air over the green mech.

“Name’s Blades,” the aerial mech told him as he worked. “I’m going to take Hound to Ratchet now.”

“Will ya tell Ratchet to tell Lord Thundercracker that I’ll stay here, try and find out what happened,” Ironhide rumbled, realising there was something he could be doing to help.

The white helm nodded before the helicopter reappeared before Ironhide, automatically loading Hound inside before taking off, rotor blade cutting the air. The black mech watched them leave before turning to find the red and white mechs he’d been talking to, knowing he’d been in charge. Ironhide was determined to assess the damage when the house was deemed safe because there was nothing in the house that would make it go up like that. He made slagging sure of that. Where the energon was stored in any great quantities it was safely locked away and all the guns and ammunition weren’t even stored in the main building itself, so weren’t touched by the fire. The whole thing stank of a deliberate attempt to raze the mansion to the ground, the big black mech would bet his favourite gun on it and he would also bet that they were after one mech in particular. Ironhide turned his blue optics in the direction that he knew the hospital lay and muttered a gruff prayer to Primus that both Hound and Thundercracker would be alright.

-“You know, Aid,” Ratchet finished wiping down his hands, dumping the rag into a bin, “I hate fires.” The trainee medic smiled at his tutor’s grumpy tone. “Thank your brother for me. He broke the record for getting a patient in, again.”

“He’ll be pleased to hear it,” First Aid replied before glancing at the two motionless mechs in their berths, side by side. “They’ll be alright?”

Ratchet grunted. “Should be. I’m keeping them both offline until they’re functioning without their backup machines. I’ve got to get hold of Wheeljack. Why does that mech never slagging answer his calls?”
“Because he’s too busy blowing himself up to hear it?” First Aid guessed.

The bigger white and red mech snorted. “Got that right.”

“Do you want me to go find him for you? I know you don’t want to leave them yet.” The young mech glanced between the patients and the CMO.

“You sure you want to risk your plating?” Ratchet quirked one optic ridge. “Go tell the slagger what I need.”

First Aid nodded before excusing himself. Ratchet stepped over to stand at the end of the blue seeker’s berth and folded his arms across his chest, shaking his head. Thundercracker was still black from the smoke, but washing him hadn’t been a priority, not when every major system had been failing from heat damage. There had been a frantic breem trying to bypass all his vital functions to hook him up to external machines so they could stabilise him and repair the damage. In the end most of the circuits had been replaced. Thundercracker was nearly a completely new mech internally now, but after that had been achieved and his systems had finished accepting the new parts, then his recovery should be swift.

Ratchet glanced over at Hound and frowned. His biggest concern, when the green mech had arrived at the hospital, had been his ruined ventilation system. He was barely cycling air, making his other systems overheat, and the main intake valves were shot, caked together as they were with soot. That had meant replacement straight off, and then came the tricky part. Ratchet had examined his pedes and hands to find them unrepairable. The extreme heat had melted the external plating down into the protoform underneath it and meant a long and exhaustive procedure to separate the two. How Hound had coped with what should have been excruciating pain Ratchet didn’t know, but once the plating had been cut away the CMO had wrapped the exposed extremities with temporary covers to protect the healing protoform. Wheeljack was supposed to be building him new hands and pedes, up to Hound’s specialised specifications, as they had been an intricate part of his sensors for his holo-ability, but his closest friend had this habit of not paying attention to his comms.

As it was it was six mega-cycles later by the time Ratchet felt both mechs had recovered enough to take them off their support machines. Thundercracker didn’t come back online then, but his systems happily adapted to the switch and Ratchet saw no point in disturbing him. Recharge was the best recovery he could recommend at the moment. Hound, on the other hand, came straight back to consciousness, even surging upright on his berth before Ratchet caught him, pushing him back down.

“Just what do you think you’re doing?”

Hound blinked at him rapidly as his CPU caught up with what his optics were telling him.

“Thundercracker?”

The medic nodded across to the next berth and Hound let out a little sigh as Ratchet said, “He’ll be fine.”

“Good.” With that his strength disappeared again and he fell into recharge. Every so often Hound would wake, almost like he needed the reassurance that Thundercracker really was ok, before he’d drift off again. It was another seven mega-cycles before the seeker stirred.

“I’m glad to see you’re awake.” Ratchet’s voice made Thundercracker power up his optics.

“What happened?” Thundercracker’s voice sounded rough and Ratchet made him drink a small amount of energon before he answered.
“Someone set your house on fire, you barely survived. You’ve been in my med bay for an orn and we’ve been waiting for your systems to recover enough to let you wake up. The heat of the fire very nearly fried everything in you.” Ratchet folded his arms across his chest.

“I feel like slag,” the seeker replied, when it had sunk in.

“I’m not surprised,” Ratchet snorted. “But you’re well on the way to recovery. You’ll be out first.”

“First?” Thundercracker frowned up at his medic, who glanced away, optics landing on the patient in the next berth. The seeker turned his head and found Hound laid out next to him. “What… He wasn’t in the house when the fire started.”

“He went back in for you. He saved your life.” Ratchet shook his head.

“What’s wrong with him?” The seeker could see the weird boxes over one of Hound’s hands and pedes.

“Apart from inhaling enough smoke to nearly destroy his intakes and ventilation system, he seriously damaged his hands and pedes. He’s not built to take the extreme heat fire fighters are and everything he touched burnt them more.” Ratchet’s optics met Thundercracker’s. “Wheeljack’s rebuilding everything for him, we were forced to otherwise he might never have got the sensation back in them.”

“Is he awake? I mean can you wake him?” The blue mech suddenly, desperately wanted to hear Hound’s voice.

“He has been awake, on and off,” Ratchet smiled gently. “Every time he’s awake he asks after you.” The medic crossed to Hound and laid a hand on his shoulder, shaking it slightly. “Hound.”

The green mech stirred after a moment. “Ratchet?”

“Hound,” Thundercracker spoke up, half afraid to say something, though he didn’t know why. The green mech’s head snapped around to the seeker and his optics widened. “You’re awake!”

“I am,” Thundercracker smiled. “I heard I owe you my life.”

Hound ignored that. “Primus, you don’t know how long I’ve been waiting to see you online.”

Ratchet rolled his optics before pushing Hound’s berth across the room until it was right beside Thundercracker’s. He then left them to it. Thundercracker weakly dragged a hand across to Hound’s arm and then up to his face, which he concentrated on gently stroking. Hound leant into it as best he could, optics shuttering.

“I’ve been so scared about you,” Hound whispered.

“You got to me in time,” Thundercracker reassured him. “But look at you, you should have been more careful.”

“Worth it.” Hound opened his optics. “Anything’s worth saving you.”

“I am going to kill him,” Thundercracker stated calmly. “He hurt you again.”

“What?” Hound blinked.

“I would bet I know who started that fire.” The seeker met Hound’s optics. “Starscream is seeking
“But your house… you’ve lost everything and it’s all because of me!” the green mech cried in horror.

“Worth it,” Thundercracker parroted Hound’s own words. “Anything’s worth having you.”

Hound shuttered his optics as his spark jolted in his chest. He’d truly been terrified of losing Thundercracker and in the face of that fire he would have sacrificed his life if it meant saving the seeker, but there was something scarier about Thundercracker reaching out to him emotionally like that. It meant that he cared, like Hound did, that there was something more to this relationship than just a master and slave that liked each other and physically expressed their attraction to each other.

Yes, he’d known the other mech cared for him before this, but Thundercracker’s first and only thought seemed to be of him, which spoke volumes of just how much he cared. Hound had gradually accepted his feelings for the other mech, since his attack, but knew two things stood in his way. Firstly were their titles and roles. No one would accept them as a couple as they remained, Master and slave. Secondly Hound never knew how to say how he felt because Thundercracker had never said either.

“You still smell of smoke,” Hound commented, unable to smell anything but that with Thundercracker’s hand on his face and he had to break this intenseness building up between them.

The seeker sniffed and wrinkled his face plate before grinning. “Do you think Ratchet will kill me if I try to go have a shower?”

“Yes he will,” came a voice from across the room as the CMO reappeared. “If you’re that desperate then wait until I can round up some help. I’m not having you wreck all my hard work just because you’re dirty.”

The medic did round up some help though and both patients felt much better when the muck and grime had been washed away. Ironhide was allowed in to see both of them as well, reporting to Thundercracker exactly what the fire specialists had discovered so far and the seeker sent him back with more questions and orders. Wheeljack also called back around with another hand for Hound and Ratchet let Thundercracker take a short walk whilst the other mech worked on the green mech. The blue flyer didn’t go far, just out of the room and into the corridor. He could still see Hound through a glass screen and just stood there, watching Wheeljack work as his CPU turned over, debating everything he knew and felt. When Ratchet joined him a klik later the seeker knew his decision was going to change everything.

“I’ve decided what I’m going to do,” Thundercracker stated, arms folded across his chest as he gazed through the window partition at Hound.

Ratchet glanced at him. “About the fire?”

“Starscream isn’t getting away with this. I will make him pay.” Thundercracker’s optics narrowed.

“Are you sure it’s him?”

“I have an evidence team searching for what I need, Ironhide is making sure of that,” the blue seeker replied. “But that was already decided. I have been standing here, watching him, and I’ve realised what I have to do.”

The medic turned his optics to Hound. “Are you going to tell him how you feel?”
The seeker shook his head. “I can’t influence his decision.”

“Decision?” Ratchet frowned.

“I’m giving him his freedom.” Thundercracker touched one finger to the glass. “It is well within my rights and he certainly deserves it after saving my life, but it goes beyond that.”

“No one would ever recognise you as a pair if Hound was a slave.”

“That and I will never be sure this is entirely his choice if I don’t.”

“How can you say that?” Ratchet turned to the bigger mech. “Surely you know him too well to know he wouldn’t do anything he truly hated!”

“I have to know.” Thundercracker’s head dropped sadly. “I’ve already started the process. I’m setting up an account in his name that only he can touch. It will have enough credits for him to start a new life wherever he chooses.”

“What will you do if he leaves?” Ratchet didn’t believe Hound would, but he had to hear it from Thundercracker.

“I’ve got a house to rebuild. I can lose myself in that.”

“And if he stays?”

“I’ll ask him to bond with me.”
Hound looked up at the only place they had found that had a room to spare for them. It was a plain, blocky building, with a few rust stains beginning to show under the eaves. The green mech had seen worse, he’d stayed in worse, but for Thundercracker it had to be an uncomfortable venture to say the least. The seeker was trying to avoid touching anything, but he was also trying not to look out of place, which just left him looking stiff and awkward. Around this place the free mech owner had no difficulty taking a room request off a slave, though he couldn’t have seen many personal slaves around. It was one way to vouch for Thundercracker’s credit flow without documentation.

Hound led them to their room and watched the blue mech survey the room with an unsure gaze and he had to smile. Being a privileged Lord and citizen all his life had brought with it difficulties Hound was sure Thundercracker hadn’t even realised it would, but normally, he was sure, the flyer wouldn’t have been this bad. Something was off since they’d been cleared to leave the hospital and Ratchet’s care. They had travelled to the destroyed mansion and Hound could see how hard it had been for Thundercracker to see his ancestral home in ruins, even though he didn’t say anything. He had exchanged a few words with the mechs who were searching the remains for any personal effects that had survived before they came away. The search for a place to recharge after such a spark destroying sight had left them both weary.

“Come on, it isn’t that bad,” Hound sat down on the edge of the berth. Thundercracker still didn’t move from his position in the middle of the room, arms held in tightly to his sides. Hound shook his head, hiding a smile. “It’s the best we could get on short notice. Now I don’t know about you, but I’m tired and I’m going to recharge. I…” Hound paused, summoning up the courage. “I would like some company.”

That had Thundercracker looking at him before the seeker relaxed. “I’m sorry.”

Hound waved that away as he laid back on the berth, optics watching Thundercracker come to him. The bigger mech curled up around him, holding him tightly as he buried his face into the back of Hound’s neck, and the green mech frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” came the murmured response.

“You’ve been tense since we left the hospital.”

There was a pause before Thundercracker sighed. “It’s looking more and more likely that the fire was caused by a deliberate attack. I’m trying to find the evidence to convict the culprit.”

“Thundercracker, I know that you think it’s Starscream.” Hound’s tone told him to stop beating about the bush and that he agreed. “Who else would do that?”

“He’ll know that too and by now he’s sure to know he failed to kill me,” the seeker replied.

“You’re worried he’ll try something else.”
“I can’t lose you.” Thundercracker’s voice was soft but desperate.

Hound bit back the instinctual reply of ‘you won’t’ to ask, “Do you really think he was just trying to kill you?”

“He waited until you were out the house. He had to know you weren’t there.”

“Why would he do that? Why not kill me as well?” the smaller mech frowned.

“I die, you go back into the slave market, anyone can buy you.” Thundercracker shook his head. “He could get his hands on you perfectly legally.”

“But the injunction, wouldn’t that…?”

“No,” the seeker interrupted. “It is against me and my property. If I was dead, then you wouldn’t be mine.”

“Oh.” Hound tightened his grip on Thundercracker’s hands briefly. “Then I’m really glad I came and got you.”

The blue mech made a small noise, almost like he was in pain, before he pressed a kiss to the back of Hound’s neck, hating more than ever that bar that blocked most his access. His arms squeezed the green mech even closer as Thundercracker fought down his jumble of emotions. He knew he was scaring Hound, but the scarily close reality of losing Hound was a little too much right now. It didn’t matter that he’d been the one that had nearly died in the fire. It was the fact that if he’d died, Hound would have been alone and vulnerable that scared him.

“Thundercracker…” Hound whispered.

“I’m sorry, just… Please let me hold you while we recharge.”

Hound had never heard the seeker so anxious and desperate and he nodded softly, unsure what he could say. It seemed to be enough because Thundercracker let out a long sigh of air from his intakes before silence fell. Still confused and worried, Hound initiated his own recharge cycle and was tired enough that it didn’t take him long to fall offline. Thundercracker stayed awake for some time afterwards, just listening to him recharge.

“Please don’t leave me.”

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When Hound pulled back out of recharge, he found his head resting on Thundercracker’s lap, with the seeker sitting up on the berth, reading a datapad. One black hand was gently laid over his helm, fingers stroking softly, almost absently, across the green metal and Hound caught a drifting thought that he’d love to stay like this forever, feeling safe and loved. That made him twitch in surprise and Thundercracker stirred, realising he was awake, so Hound drew himself up. The seeker smiled at him, but it didn’t seem to reach his optics and Hound wondered why.

“I’m expecting a few visitors later today.” The blue mech laid down his datapad. “What I could really do with is a better base of operations to start putting plans together to rebuild.”

“You want me to go look,” Hound guessed.

“Please, and bring us back some better energon.” Thundercracker shot a look at the half drunk cube on the table across the room. “The house energon isn’t exactly what I’m used to.”
Hound grinned. “I’m sure Bee will be able to manage that. Where are the others now?”

“Ratchet’s clinic has a section that deals with housing mechs when they have nowhere to stay after an incident like this,” Thundercracker replied. “You’ll find most of them there, though I suspect Bumblebee is out trying to find supplies for the new house.”

Hound nodded, sliding off the berth. Thundercracker followed him, stopping him so he could press a kiss to his lips. He had meant it to be a chaste thing, but he couldn’t stop himself pulling Hound in close and really kissing him. To the green mech it felt like he was being kissed with the desperation of someone giving their last kiss. When the seeker pulled back Hound prevented him from drawing further away and frowned up at him, noting the sadness in his optics.

“Thundercracker, what is going on? Something’s wrong.”

“It’s nothing,” the bigger mech dismissed. “It’ll be sorted soon.” When the green mech’s expression didn’t change, indicating he didn’t believe him, Thundercracker gave him the best smile he could. “Promise.”

“Alright,” Hound said warily and let Thundercracker go. The seeker went back to his work without another word and the green mech left, heading out to find them a better place to stay, trying to turn over why Thundercracker was acting so strange towards him. It wasn’t that he didn’t act tender towards him at other times; it was that almost fraught air about him, tingled with fear and distress. It was almost like he was living the moment of the fire again, but standing on the outside, like Hound had, instead of being inside. It was like he was trying find the courage to say goodbye but so desperate not too and Hound could not work out why.

It never left his thoughts as he searched, but even so, Hound found them a better place to stay that was willing to take them that mega-cycle. He stayed out about a cycle before heading back, still none the wiser as to the reason behind seeker’s mood. Hound came back into the room to find Thundercracker sitting at the table, playing with a datacard in his hands. The seeker didn’t look up when Hound shut the door but he spoke quietly.

“This is for you. It’s yours and no one else can touch it.”

Hound frowned. “Slaves can’t own anything.”

Thundercracker held it out, letting Hound take it and start reading it before he started talking again. “The appointment is set for later this mega-cycle. It won’t take long.”

“The appointment?” Hound glanced between the datacard, which was telling him he had a respectable amount of money in his own private account, and the seeker. “What are you talking about?”

“To take your collar off.” Thundercracker finally looked up. “I’m giving you your freedom.”

Hound stared at him blankly. One hand crept up to his neck to finger the imprisoning band. “Off?”

“Yes. We both know you’ve been free in all but the law, and you deserve it now, to them, by saving my life. I’ve been… wanting to do it for some time, but now I have the excuse the law needs.”

“Primus,” Hound whispered.

“I set the account up, no strings attached, so that you have no need to stay with me after it’s done.” Thundercracker fought to keep the misery out of his voice. “You have the ability to start a new life, wherever you want to, away from anyone that would know you as a slave.” Hound continued to
stare at him, as if his words weren’t real. “You could go back to doing what you did before.” The seeker studied him. “Just be careful not to get caught again.”

Hound twitched. “What do you know?”

“Nothing,” Thundercracker shook his head. “I know you never wanted me to know. I won’t deny I have always been curious, but I had hoped you would be willing to tell me in time.” The green mech abruptly looked away, shame washing over him and the seeker shook his head. “Don’t. It’s not… It’s your choice. I’m not getting at you.”

Hound turned back to him, subsparing the datacard as he did so. “I know. I’ve wanted to tell you too, but I… it’s not just me you know? There are others and it’s bigger than just this city.”

Thundercracker nodded. “You can’t make a decision for the others.”

“Right.” Hound blinked and then felt a wash of shock pass through him, abruptly leaving him with the need to sit down. He thudded down onto the edge of the berth as the reality of the seeker’s words set in and Hound felt like his CPU was filled with static as he couldn’t think.

“Are you ok?” Thundercracker’s voice was soft as he came to sit next to him.

“I didn’t think that this would ever happen…” Hound murmured.

“You had to know that good behaviour was rewarded with freedom, from many Masters, not just me?” the blue mech questioned.

“Yeah, it’s just… You never expect it to happen to you, you know?” Blue optics looked up to red then.

“You deserve it more than anyone else.” Thundercracker lifted his hand to touch Hound’s face but he stopped only half way there, realising the next words out of his mouth would have been an admission of love and he couldn’t, wouldn’t, prejudice Hound’s decision about what lay after the collar came off. Hound noticed the aborted movement, but was too caught up with his own feelings to try and understand why. “I’ll come with you to the clinic if you like.”

Hound nodded. For some reason he wanted Thundercracker’s comforting presence with him, even though this would be a step away, back from the closeness forced upon him by the connection of the collar to the seeker’s CPU. Thundercracker touched his hand briefly before he moved away, back to the table and its datapads. He tried to work for the next joor, but Hound could hear the noises of frustration coming from him when he couldn’t concentrate. In the end they both did very little and the journey to Ratchet’s facility was undertaken in silence. Thundercracker tried to start a conversation, but it failed before it started and neither of them could find anything to talk about, too caught up, as they were, with what lay ahead.

Ratchet met them in his office, ready to explain the procedure to Hound, expecting to find the green mech excited by the prospect of his freedom. Instead he found both of them quiet and unsure. The medic narrowed his optics at the seeker in question but Thundercracker refused to be drawn, turning away to gesture at a seat in the hallway.

“I’ll be here when you’re done,” he murmured before stepping out of the office, leaving the door to slide shut behind him.

“What’s going on?” Ratchet asked Hound. If one wouldn’t answer him, the other one sure as pit would.
“Nothing,” Hound replied tersely.

“Like slag there isn’t,” the CMO folded his arms across his chest. “What have you two said to each other?”

“Nothing.”

The white and red mech scowled, ready to snap at Hound to give him some real answers when he realised that ‘nothing’ could be the problem. Neither mech seemed to have the ball bearings to actually spit out how they felt and with something as monumental as this hanging over their relationship, one of them needed to say it. Ratchet opened his mouth to say just that, but Hound interrupted.

“Can we get on with this? Please? I just want this over with.” He raised his optics to Ratchet’s and the medic softened slightly.

“Fine, but you two have got to get this sorted afterwards, or I am locking you in some fragging room until you do.”

Hound looked away and didn’t give Ratchet a response, making the medic throw up his hands in despair, but he didn’t push it. He explained the physical process to remove the collar and then the software he would have to upload to counter the control programming, otherwise he would be left with a hole in his firewall which anyone, with the correct codes, could take advantage of. The green mech listened to it all, only taking in a fraction of it as he thought about the seeker sitting outside in the hallway and Ratchet’s words echoed in his head ‘you two have got to get this sorted’. If only he knew how.

The procedure itself barely took any length of time and Ratchet only kept him as long as he needed to make sure the new software took, then he released him. The medic followed him out into the hall, making sure to catch Thundercracker’s optics with his own. It didn’t take much for the blue mech to get he was to look after Hound on the pain of reformatting and looking at the green mech he could see Hound was in a little bit of shock.

“How are you feeling?” Thundercracker asked as he rose.

Hound touched the tips of his fingers to his throat. “Strange. I… I want to go outside.”

The seeker nodded, falling into step next to Hound, who walked like he was in a daze, seeing no one and responding to nothing. Once they were outside he seemed to come around a little, enough to tilt his face up to the sun and shutter his optics. Thundercracker waited patiently, though his CPU raced ahead of Hound.

“Would you mind,” Hound abruptly said. “If I just went for a walk… by myself?”

“Of course not,” Thundercracker shook his head. “I’ll be back at our new rooms.”

The green mech nodded before looking around, picking a direction and setting off, mood still subdued. Thundercracker watched him go until he was out of sight before he clenched his hands into fists and took to the air rapidly. He ached inside, even though he knew it would take Hound time to adjust. The seeker had hoped he would do that with him by his side, but apparently the first thing he wanted to do was get away from him.

Hound’s CPU was blank as he walked, the shock of being free wiping everything away. His hand kept drifting up to his neck and he kept snatching back when he felt his fingers touch his throat. He was free… Primus, it was like the ground had been stolen from beneath his pedes and he was blindly
looking for something to hold onto. Abruptly the strength went from his legs and Hound staggered to
a bench by the side of the pavement. He slumped onto it and buried his face in his hands as he tried
to control the shaking that had suddenly overtaken him.

“Dude, you don’t look so groovy,” a voice commented from next to him and Hound shot upright to
find a light blue mech reclined back on the same seat.

“Oh sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude…” Hound went to stand back up but the other mech waved a
lazy hand at him.

“Don’t worry so much. You look like you could do with something to kick back with and someone
to talk to.” A languid smile crossed his face. “I’m fresh outta the first but I can lend you an audio.”

Hound studied him careful for a moment before turning his optics back out to watch the traffic drive
by. They sat in silence for a moment, but it didn’t feel strained and Hound found his mouth opening.
“I don’t know what to do.”

“Mech, that ain’t anything new. Question is, do you know why?” the other bench occupant replied.

“I don’t think I’ve been so confused in all my life.” Hound rubbed the back of his neck, still in shock
over not finding that thin metal band there. “I… Was being free always like this?”

“Being free is a state of CPU. What you do with your life is what counts,” the mech gestured at the
traffic racing by. “They move so fast, but most of them aren’t going anywhere.”

“I know I’m not.”

“You know that, that’s more than most.”

“How do you know when something’s the truth or not?” Hound stared down at his hands.

“You ask. You trust your spark.” The blue mech tapped his own chest.

“I want to believe but it’s been so long since I’ve been free to make all my own decisions, I don’t
know if I’ve just got used to it being someone else’s truth,” Hound frowned

“Sounds like you’ve got to step back from it all. Take a drive, clear your CPU, find out what you
want most.”

“Him or freedom,” Hound murmured to himself.

The blue mech stood beside him, stretching languidly. “Don’t forget, sometimes it can be both.
Sometimes you don’t have to choose between things, you’ve got to choose to have both.”

With that he transformed and peeled out into the traffic, disappearing from sight. The green mech
stared blankly out into space. How could he have both when the seeker represented everything in his
head that meant slavery? Thundercracker meant so much to him, Hound knew that and he knew it
would hurt to walk away from that, but how much of that was because there had been no
alternatives? Hound had spent all his time, whether he had wanted to or not, with the blue flyer,
whereas in a normal life he would have been interacted with many more different mechs. He would
have had the opportunity to change partners, compare, but living as a slave Hound had no chance to
do that.

Thundercracker had also been so very different to what he’d expected and the seeker had stood by
him, cared for him, through some of the worst moments in his life and Hound couldn’t believe that
didn’t have some bearing on how he felt, that undercurrent beneath everything. How could he tell whether it was all real or just dependence on a mech that had stood by him through the worst times of his life?

Hound shifted slightly, remembering the datacard in his subspace pocket, and dug it out to study it more closely. Within the limited information it could show, it mentioned previous funds and the green mech frowned, trying to think back to how many credits he had had to his name before his enslavement. He hadn’t been rich, not like Thundercracker, but he’d led a comfortable life. The number on the datacard and what he could vaguely recall from before were strikingly similar and Hound felt a pang. The seeker had tried to give him exactly what he’d had before, not trying to buy him off with more credits, so that he couldn’t feel indebted to him. Granted the flyer hadn’t gained those credits when Hound entered the slave rings, they had been siphoned off to Primus knows where, but that information would have been attached to his name.

He buried his face into his hands. What was he supposed to do? He couldn’t admit to being in love with Thundercracker until he understood whether it was real or not and how could he do that without leaving? The idea of leaving tore up his spark and left him feeling desolate. He knew it would hurt Thundercracker… Primus, what was he supposed to decide?

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Hound could hear voices through the door, so knocked and waited until he was called to enter. Opening the door he found Thundercracker deep in discussion with a bright green mech as they poured over drawings and plans projected into the space above the desk. The seeker looked over at him and smiled broadly, before turning back to his companion.

“Thank you Hook. Do you have enough to work with for now?”

“Yes. I will draw up the plans and send them to you when I’m done,” the other mech nodded, shutting down the equipment and drawing it all together to take with him. The seeker nodded, Hound politely waited at the door so he could shut it after him. It also gave him the excuse to stay away from Thundercracker, because he needed to say what needed to be said and he wasn’t sure he could if he went to the flyer’s side.

“How are you feeling now?” Thundercracker asked.

“Better. I’m sorry about earlier…”

“No it’s ok,” Thundercracker interrupted. “I understand you needed your space. You came back, that’s all I wanted.”

Hound wanted the floor to swallow him whole as he watched the seeker smile happily at him. “I want to go visit old friends,” Hound couldn’t raise his optics from the floor, feeling like this was some sort of betrayal. “I need to thank Trailbreaker for what he did.”

Thundercracker nodded, understanding, yet in the same breath he was fighting off crushing hopelessness, as if letting Hound go now would be the last time he would ever see him. Seeing old friends, his life how it used to be, would be the biggest lure away from Thundercracker that Hound could experience and the seeker didn’t want to know which would win.

“Well… I hope you have a good time,” the blue mech said lamely, his smile gone. “If you choose to stay, you’ll let me know? I mean, you don’t have to, you don’t owe me anything, but it would be… nice… if you did.”
Hound nodded mutely back, hearing the stumbles and catches in Thundercracker’s voice and knowing why they were there, but he had made his decision and he had to stand by it, not crumble at the first hurdle. “I wanted to thank you… for all you’ve done for me. I…”

Thundercracker was on his pedes as soon as he realised just what it was that Hound was trying to say and crossed the room to grab his arms, startling Hound into looking up at last.

“You never, ever have to thank me for what I did. I would do it again in a spark pulse. I’d…” the blue mech faltered slightly, letting go of Hound, but decided that saying it wouldn’t make any difference if Hound was sure that he wanted to leave. “I’d do anything for you.”

Primus, did Hound know that. He wanted nothing more, right at this moment, to throw himself into Thundercracker’s arms. This was so hard, so much harder than he ever thought it would be. Hound swallowed.

“I’ll let you get back to your plans. There’s a lot of work there.” He stepped back to the door.

“Hound,” the seeker said suddenly and the green mech met his optics. “Be safe.”

Hound’s hands were shaking as he pressed the button to open the door. “I… Bye.”

With that he was gone, out of the door and out of Thundercracker’s life. The flyer watched the door slid shut before he unconsciously blurted, “I love you,” but by then it was too late.
“And then he actually asked her out, right then and there!”

“Primus, and she said yes?” Hound laughed.

“Right before he fell over his own pedes and knocked himself offline,” Trailbreaker guffawed. “They’re still together. You’ve been away too long.”

“Tell me about it,” the green mech smiled widely at his friend.

The big black mech took a swing of his energon before he put his drink down to study Hound. “What about you?”

“Hmm?” Hound replied absently as he watched the sun dip lower across the sky, turning the Tagan Heights and Rust Sea a brilliant red.

“You still with your seeker?”

The green mech froze for a brief moment before sighing. “’Breaker, it’s not like that.”

“No?” Trailbreaker frowned. “Oh, sorry, I just thought you guys were together. I mean, at the trial, you said you were interfacing with him and you’re not a mech that just ‘faces with someone for the sake of it.” Hound kicked at the floor, knowing what his friend said was true. “And it sure looked like you meant a lot to him.” Hound glanced at him, trying to gauge how true that was and Trailbreaker returned the look levelly. “You look like you’re not sure of that.”

“It’s complicated.” Hound gestured at himself and then out at the general area, like he was indicating to another mech.

“Do you care about him?”

“‘Breaker…” the green mech tried to stop his friend pushing.

“C’mon Hound,” the black mech nudged him gently. “I’m your best friend. I know when you need to talk. Spill.”

Hound stared at his hands as he thought about that and suddenly the flood gates opened. “I do care about him, a lot. When the fire... You heard about that?” He glanced at Trailbreaker, who nodded. “When he was trapped in the house, I couldn’t think for a moment. If he died, I don’t know what I would have done. He saved me from Starscream. He gave me back my freedom, gave me the choice to walk away, gave me the means to. He…”

“Does he love you?” Trailbreak asked softly.

“I don’t know,” the smaller mech whispered. “I think he does, but he never said anything.”
“Maybe he didn’t because he didn’t want you to stay just because you’d never be able to hurt anyone that told you that they loved you.” Trailbreaker laid a hand over his friend’s arm. “You’ve got a big spark Hound, and you’re one of the most caring mechs I’ve ever met. Could you have walked away if he had said that?”

Hound shook his head and then abruptly turned to his friend, grabbing his hand. “‘Breaker, have I made the wrong decision? Did I walk away from someone I…” He stopped rapidly, blinking.

“From someone you love?” Trailbreaker finished for him.

“I love him?” Hound searched his friend’s face, surprised.

A broad smile crossed the big mech’s face. “Listening to you talk about him, I wouldn’t know anyone that would say you didn’t.”

“But, how do I know that it’s him I love and not… not the idea?” The black mech frowned at Hound’s words, forcing him to try and explain. “He’s always been there for me, he wasn’t what I thought he’d be, he’s attractive, he’s clever, he’s funny, he stands up for what he believes.”

Trailbreaker understood then. “You think you’ve fallen for all the good things and that he can’t be that good?” Hound nodded and his friend thought for a second. “List his bad points then.”

“He’s grumpy, uncommunicative, supports the slave system, goes turbo-fox hunting. He can be bossy, though I don’t think he knows he does that,” Hound shook his head.

Trailbreaker laughed then, trying to hold his mirth in against the hurt, confused look on his friend’s face. “Hound, will you do one last thing for me?”

“Alright.”

“Shut your optics, picture your seeker.” Trailbreaker smiled at his friend’s dubious expression before Hound did as he was told. His appearance changed to a soft smile and he unconsciously relaxed. “How do you feel?”

Hound jerked, optics flying open and he stared in shock at Trailbreaker. “What have I done ‘Breaker?”

“It’s not the end of the world,” the big mech reassured him. “I’ll bet my forcefield ability he still loves you. Just talk to him.”

“I…” Hound bit his lip for a moment. “I haven’t even called him to tell him I’m alright. How can I just walk in and tell him how I feel?”

“Is there anyone who’d help you both get this sorted?”

Hound couldn’t stop the smile then. “Yeah, Ratchet said he’d lock us in a room together if we didn’t sort it.”

Trailbreaker chuckled. “Not quite what I was thinking, but that could work. Talk to this Ratchet, Hound. You deserve to be happy.”

Ironhide wasn’t known for his patience. In the right circumstances, he could wait, but standing here, watching a blue seeker moodily push datapads around his table was not one of them. Most of the
other slaves were outright trying to avoid their Master now and Thundercracker didn’t seem to care, which spoke volumes about the level of the funk he’d sunk into since Hound had left. The black mech scowled. If he saw that retarded piece of junk any time soon he was going to beat him into a pulp for screwing up. The temptation to do the same with the flyer was almost as great.

“You’re sure he’s gone?” Thundercracker abruptly asked and Ironhide smothered the sigh.

“Yes my Lord. Starscream hasn’t been seen in nearly an orn now. His house is empty, his funds are gone and his slaves have been sold onto the market.”

“Then where the frag has he gone?” the blue mech snarled, flicking his fingers at a datapad and sending it spinning from the table. Ironhide remained quiet, having already answered that question at least five times. “He’s never been without his life of luxury, he should be the easiest target to find on Cybertron, little egotistical bastard. Someone has to be helping him.”

“Perhaps if ya asked Skywarp…”

“Skywarp doesn’t want to talk to me, remember?” Thundercracker snapped, red optics shooting up to glare at the black mech, who somehow looked at his face without meeting his gaze. It was just something else that fragged the seeker off and the remaining datapads on his desk took the brunt of his anger as he slammed his fist down on the table. “So much for slagging friendship!”

“Ya ignored him over Hound…” Ironhide was pretty sure he shouldn’t be saying that and stopped himself when Thundercracker’s look turned cold. The green mech was a touchy subject nowadays and no one knew how the flyer would react. One cycle he would look openly distraught at the mention of Hound’s name, others he would smile softly and sigh and then there were times like this. Thundercracker rose from behind his desk to stalk across the floor towards Ironhide, who, for his part, did not back down.

“Are you insinuating that Hound is more important than my oldest friend?” Thundercracker leant right into the shorter black mech, who realised that was one pit of a tricky question to answer.

“It’s not my place to say, sir, who ya consider more important.”

“No, it isn’t and you slagging well better remember that,” the seeker hissed menacingly. Ironhide suddenly found himself doing something he really knew he shouldn’t and blamed it on all the time spent in Hound’s company before. He raised his optics to meet Thundercracker’s and told him, voice low, “I’ve stood by ya, through thick and thin, and never before have ya threatened me. Take a look around. Ya slaves are scared of ya now, worried they’ll say something that makes ya think of Hound and that you’ll explode at ‘em. Ya’re turning into Starscream.”

The anger in Thundercracker had been visibly building, one hand clenching and unclenching at his side but that last statement deflated him utterly. His head dropped and he said weakly, “I had plans. If Hound left, I’d rebuild, get Starscream for what he’d done and I thought I could lose myself in that until it didn’t hurt so much. It’s not working.” Thundercracker looked back up at Ironhide. “I’m sorry.”

The black mech nodded, accepting the apology. “Hound’s the bigger glitch.”

Thundercracker opened his mouth to snap at Ironhide for daring to speak ill of Hound but caught himself. He shook his head, turning away. “He had his reasons.” Ironhide made a noise of doubt and disagreement from behind him. “I know you think I’m an aft for letting him walk away…” There was a noise of agreement at that time. “…but I couldn’t have stopped him, he never would have forgiven me.”
“I think ya thinking of the wrong mech.” Ironhide studied the blue mech as he sat himself back down. “Excuse me if I’m speaking out of turn sir, but if ya had once, just once, told him how you felt, he’d still be here.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Neither can ya,” and with that Ironhide excused himself. Thundercracker sat in silence, staring at the walls so new they still sparkled and hated Ironhide’s words, hearing how they rang true. All this time he’d tried to convince himself that he had never spoken of his feelings in fear that they would drive Hound away but in reality it was because he was scared that they wouldn’t be reciprocated. Now he was alone and he had no one to blame but himself.

Once he’d tried to blame Hound, right back just after he’d left, but he found he’d had to work just to make himself angry and it became too hard to hold him responsible. The seeker had buried himself in rebuilding, hoping to make the aching loneliness go away, but, if anything, it had made it worse. There were so many times he found himself wanting to ask Hound for his opinion, to even get him to create a hologram of how it would look before it was built.

That was when he’d driven himself to find Starscream, to confront him, but now the other flyer was gone, without a trace. He’d even tried to track Prowl down with a foolish thought that the ex-Enforcer might be able to help, but the black and white mech had disappeared as well. Thundercracker knew he couldn’t be far away, Jazz was still in Skywarp’s household. He was the one that had fielded all of Thundercracker’s calls when he had attempted to make amends, but at least he had expressed his gratefulness at Prowl’s freedom, though it had been whispered and rushed as not to be overheard by Skywarp.

Now mega-cycles drifted by without much for Thundercracker to do. He listened to the news feeds about the unrest spreading on Cybertron and the growing talk of some group called ‘Decepticons’. The blue mech worried for Hound, wondering what he was doing and hoping he was happy, whilst at the same time, a small part of him hoped he wasn’t. It felt so very wrong to wish him ill but Thundercracker knew it was just part of the desire to have him come back and be happy with him. Primus, he just wanted to see his face, listen to his voice, once more. He’d give everything to touch Hound again.

Thundercracker hung his head, burying his face in his hands, knowing he couldn’t continue like this, but not being able to see a way out of it.

- Hound fiddled with the controls on the communicator sat in one corner of Trailbreaker’s apartment. The black mech was conspicuously absent, having not come back with the green mech, only handing him an access card and wishing him luck. He knew the idea was to contact Thundercracker, really, but Hound was just too unsure of how he felt to manage such a call, so that left Ratchet. At least talking to the seeker’s medic would achieve one thing; he’d find out if Thundercracker was ok and that was something he desperately needed to know.

Quickly, before he could change his mind, Hound inputted Ratchet’s calling frequency and waited for it to be accepted. The white mech came into view, clearly right in the middle of something and not pleased about the interruption. Hound smiled, actually surprised at how much he had missed the grumpy medic. “Hello Ratchet.”

“Hound!” The white mech glared at him. “You haven’t even called Thundercracker have you?”

Hound couldn’t look at Ratchet after that. So much for pleasantries. “No I… I don’t know what to
say to him. Is he alright?”

“Even just to say you’re alive? You’re happy?” Ratchet said incredulously. “And he’s become the epitome of moodiness, was that what you wanted to hear?”

“No… I don’t know if I am happy though,” Hound stared at his hands.

“Then what are you doing still out there then?”

“Being free,” Hound replied, looking up. “I’ve missed doing what I want whenever I want to.”

“And seeing Thundercracker will change that?” The white mech folded his arms across his chest.

“No. It’s just…” Hound paused, trying to find the right words. “I miss him, but I don’t know if how I feel is because I spent so long living like that, I don’t know how else to feel. Going back there… I might just fall into it again and how do I know it’s real?”

“The fact that we’re having this conversation is proof enough,” Ratchet returned, a level of annoyance in his tone. “You’re slagging worried because you feel for him. If it had just been a by-product of your time in slavery then that would have faded a little by now. Has it?” Hound shook his head as Ratchet continued. “You’d feel relief for getting away from him, especially when you were doing all those things you missed. Do you?”

“No. I… find myself thinking how much Thundercracker would like it,” Hound admitted. “I don’t know how to talk to him.”

“I’d be hitting you right about now, if you were here,” the medic pointed at him. “You never had trouble before, what difference does it make now? Has being free robbed you of your spinal struts?”

“No!” Hound narrowed his optics, a little spark of anger flaring.

“Then get off your slagging aft and go see him. Talk to him, face to face and tell him how you feel, all of it. Don’t let the fragger get away without telling you the same either.” Ratchet actually poked the screen, making it sway slightly. “Next time I talk to you I expect this to be dealt with.” Then the screen went blank and Hound was left staring at his reflection in the glass.

That little bit of anger Ratchet had stirred galvanised Hound into action. The medic was right in one respect, Hound had never struggled to tell Thundercracker how he felt, before he started falling for the seeker. As a free mech, there was no one to make his decisions for him and there was strength of character within Hound that had let him stand up to everything the slavers had tried to break him with. The green mech knew, without a doubt, his time as a slave had changed him but if anything it had reinforced his belief in what he’d been doing had been right. Before his slavery, if he had feelings for another he would have told them, without worrying about so much about the consequences, about rejection. The world wouldn’t end if that were the case.

Hound stared at his reflection, watching himself blink as that thought settled. Was that it? Was he scared of rejection? He frowned, thinking back to what Trailbreaker had said. There had been little doubt in the big black mech’s voice when he had said that Hound loved Thundercracker and Hound took a deep breath in through his intakes as he let himself consider that properly for the first time. It was one pit of a scary notion, but yet, it wasn’t. It would explain so much, but he wouldn’t be able to face the seeker and tell him that if he thought the other mech would push him away.

Hound turned away from his reflection, hating the insecurity he could see in it. He hadn’t been looking for this, far from it, and his freedom, the chance to do exactly what he liked, had really highlighted that. If, if, Thundercracker couldn’t offer him his pure, unconditional love and accept him
as he stood then he couldn’t stay, even though it would hurt to walk away. His freedom and the
courage to go back to the fight meant more to him than fighting for this feeling, when he wasn’t even
sure what it was.

Those thoughts turned over and over in his CPU as he left Trailbreaker’s and headed towards The
Towers. It was a reasonable distance between the two places and it gave Hound plenty of time to
think, but despite the occasional desire to turn around, he kept heading towards Thundercracker.
Whatever the outcome was, by the end of the mega-cycle Hound was determined that his decision
would be made.

Almost on automatic, he’d driven the road so many times before, the green ground vehicle pulled
into the sweeping driveway. Once he’d transformed Hound stared up at the mansion and couldn’t
actually tell that Thundercracker had rebuilt from nothing, apart from the sheen of new metal. It was
like Starscream had never been here, like the house had never burnt down and he’d never left. A
pang echoed in his spark, but he pushed it to one side as he strode forwards to the doors. Hound
wondered if his access code would still work, but didn’t want to try because of fear it wouldn’t, so he
rang the door chime. It wasn’t long before it swept open to reveal Bumblebee.

“Hound!” the mech exclaimed. “I mean sir.”

“Bee, you can always call me Hound,” the green mech smiled softly.

“I’m glad you’re back,” he replied, an answering smile on his face. “You know where his office is,
he didn’t change much rebuilding.”

“But don’t you have to tell him I’m here?” Hound frowned.

“Standing orders regarding you. You are to be shown straight to him regardless of time or anything
else.” Bumblebee gestured for Hound to come in before shutting the door behind him. “Thank you
for coming to see him.”

With that he left and Hound was forced to go to Thundercracker’s office alone. The doors looked
identical to what they had before and Hound lifted his hand to knock at least three times before he
actually cursed at himself. His knuckles made a loud, sharp noise as they stuck the metal plates of the
doors.

“What?”

Hound frowned at the sheer animosity in the voice that he knew so well and that alone made him
open the door and go in. The seeker was standing by one of the windows, his back to the door but
Hound could see his arms were folded across his chest and his shoulders were stooped as he
slouched. Never before had the green mech seen Thundercracker in such a bad mood and Ratchet’s
words suddenly made sense. He hadn’t been able to believe them before.

“What?” Thundercracker snapped again.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you,” Hound said softly.

The blue mech whirled around so quickly he nearly fell over and had to steady himself with one
hand on the wall. His red optics were wide with disbelief. “You…”

Hound shut the door behind him to give the seeker a moment to compose himself. “We need to talk.”

Thundercracker blinked at the smaller mech, not wanting to trust his optics that this wasn’t a lie, but
as Hound moved to sit on one of the seats Thundercracker began to realise he was real and here. His
pedes took him halfway across the floor before he realised it and Thundercracker veered away, afraid that if he got close enough nothing in the universe would stop him touching Hound and there was only one thing Thundercracker was going to do if he touched the green mech. Instead he sat down unsteadily in his chair behind his desk, clinging to it, and found his voice.

“How are you?”

“I’m well, thank you,” Hound nodded. “You’ve been busy here. It looks good.”

“Thank you,” Thundercracker nodded, feeling better at the pleasantries.

Hound studied him before quietly asking, “How are you?”

“I’m fine.”

“Thundercracker,” Hound shifted on his seat, but said it anyway. “Can we agree not to lie, here and now?”

“I…” the seeker shuttered his optics briefly before he nodded.

“How are you?” the green mech repeated.

“I’ve been better,” Thundercracker gave Hound a weak smile and then realised Hound was waiting for more. “I missed you. I’m glad you came back. I…I was worried about you.”

Hound couldn’t help but smile then. “I’ve been safe. I haven’t gone back to before; I just wanted to enjoy life for the moment.” Hound remembered what the blue mech on the bench had said. “I was taking someone’s advice.”

The seeker nodded, trying not to feel his spark crumbling as he interpreted Hound’s words to mean he enjoyed life more without him. How could he say how much Hound meant to him if the green mech was happier far away? He knew that if Hound left this time and didn’t come back that he would be utterly lost. Thundercracker could only see his future with the green mech. “Then I guess you’ll want to be getting back to that.”

“I…” Hound glanced down at his hands and chuckled.

“What?”

“I knew what I was going to say but now I’m here, I find I’ve changed my mind.” Hound stood up as he spoke, optics meeting Thundercracker’s.

“Oh?” Hope warred with desperation in those red optics.

Hound slowly stepped around the desk to the seeker. “I was going to say how I wasn’t sure what I wanted any longer, that I had missed my freedom more than I knew, but seeing you, I realised what I have missed more.” Thundercracker had turned his chair as Hound had come to his side and the green mech leant into the seeker, one hand going out to his face. He gently touched the grey metal, running two fingers under his chin in a gesture Thundercracker had often used on Hound, to tilt the mech’s face upwards. “I was stupid to think I could try and live my life away from you. You’re what makes me happy. I want to give this a try. I love you.”

With that he bent the last few inches and pressed his lips to Thundercracker’s. The seeker moaned in bliss, his own hands wrapping around Hound’s shoulders so he could tug the mech downwards, until Hound ended up sitting sideways on his lap, though they never broke the kiss. Thundercracker could
feel the overwhelming feeling of joy infuse through him. Hound was here and he wanted to stay.
The seeker broke the kiss after a long breem and he stared up at Hound. “I’ve missed you and you
don’t know how happy you’ve just made me.”

“Then show me,” Hound murmured, stroking Thundercracker’s helm softly.
The seeker smiled before standing, dumping Hound backwards onto the desk. “Here? Now?”
“I’ve always liked this desk,” Hound smirked, hands tugging the seeker down to him.
“It’s not the same desk, you know.”

“Then we better christen it.”

Thundercracker kissed him again then, taking his time to get himself reacquainted with the feeling
before he leant back slightly and smiled broadly. “It’s been awhile but I can still remember just the
way you taste.”

Hound felt his face plates heat with embarrassment and pleasure, but he didn’t want Thundercracker
talking. There were other things he wanted that mouth to be doing right about now and he knew just
how to get it. Thundercracker cried out as both wings were attacked simultaneously. The green mech
roughly toyed with the edges before soothing them with long gentle caresses, sending a mixture of
pain and pleasure through the seeker until it was all he could do to support his own weight over
Hound.

He whined when one hand left his wing but then hissed when it found an intake to fondle.
Thundercracker was barely aware of Hound shifting beneath him until a hot glossa left a wet stripe
down the middle of his cockpit and then he was too busy moaning to think about it. Hound kept his
touches coming, switching them between every pleasure centre he could reach, waiting for the seeker
to lose control a little more.

He knew that moment had come when he could feel a hard enlarged spike pressing against his port
covering and Hound was pretty sure Thundercracker didn’t even realise he’d extended it. The seeker
ground his hips down onto the black set beneath them, whimpering in need and Hound couldn’t help
the jerk of his own hips in reply. Thundercracker hadn’t touched him yet but the lubricant was
beginning to leak past his port covering in anticipation. Hound hadn’t been with anyone else since
his last time with Thundercracker and he shivered in anticipation as he slid back the cover.

Two black hands slid over the white aft of the seeker as Hound pressed him down and forward,
guiding his jack into his own ready port. Thundercracker cried out in pleasure, his own body taking
over the movement so he drove into Hound quicker, making the green mech gasp out his name in
sudden, fierce delight. His fingers dug into the plates of the seeker’s aft as Hound held
Thundercracker to him and he brought his legs up, digging his pedes into the edge of the desk so he
could bow towards the pleasure. The flyer urged him on with hot, deep strokes as if he thought to
climb inside Hound forever.

Hound threw his head back, body arching beneath Thundercracker and every thrust wrung a little
cry of desire from him. Thundercracker had his arms braced either side of Hound as he watched the
smaller mech revel in everything he could give, those sounds coming from his throat driving him
crazy. His beautiful, bare neck; free, unmarked, uncollared. Impulsively he leaned forward to press
his lips to the faintly lighter band of white metal and whispered his love.

The movement shifted his spike inside Hound, scraping sensors, and brushed his cockpit against the
grill on Hound’s chest. Hound groaned with unrestrained, exuberant pleasure as he overloaded with a fierce burst of pulsing energy. The sight of him, coupled with the wave of energy, unleashed Thundercracker’s own overload and he followed Hound with a cry of his name falling from his lips. Thundercracker rested his helm against Hound’s as they panted, coming down from their high together and the seeker had to say what he’d wanted to say for more than a meta-cycle. “I love you.” He lifted his head to find Hound smiling at him, looking utterly content and sated and Thundercracker found the words slipping from him. “Will you bond with me?”

The look changed into one of shock. “You want me to… I…”

“If you don’t want to, that’s ok,” the seeker said quickly, hiding his hurt.

“No, no it’s not that,” Hound reached up with one hand towards the mech above him before drawing it back to touch his own chest, almost like he didn’t dare touch Thundercracker. “You really want me that much?”

Thundercracker wrapped his own hand around Hound’s. “For a long time.”

“But I’m just a ground mech. The others…”

“Don’t you get it?” the blue mech shook his head. “Forget the world. I don’t care what they think. I love you, not them.”

Hound smiled widely. “I don’t deserve you.”

“I think you’ll find it’s the other way around,” Thundercracker responded. “Now are you going to answer the question or do I have to interface it out of you?”

The green mech chuckled. “I do like the idea of the second one.” Thundercracker’s optics glinted with promise at that. “But I don’t need it to say yes.”

“Hmm,” the seeker murmured. “I think you might. You don’t sound enthusiastic enough to me.”

Hound opened his mouth in retort but all that came out was a strangled gasp as Thundercracker moved his hips, dragging the tip of his jack over one sensitive port wall, before pushing it back again. The green mech arched up against him, optics tightly shuttered and a high pitch noise wormed its way out of his vocaliser. This close to an overload ports were much more responsive as they were still absorbing the transfluid from the other partner. Some couldn’t take the almost painful feeling of a jack moving in them again so soon after overload, but Thundercracker knew just how much Hound could take and just what he liked.

“Will you bond with me?” Thundercracker asked softly.

Hound whimpered and it took him several attempts to find one word. “…Yes… please…”

“Please what?”

“…need…” Black hands tugged uncoordinatedly at the seeker’s hips, trying to get him to move faster, harder, anything but this slow torture. With the way Thundercracker had him pinned the smaller mech had no power to change their position or rhythm and was at his mercy. “Please!”

Thundercracker gently placed a kiss on Hound’s lips, never changing his pace, before he cradled his head between his hands. Hound looked up at him then, trying to focus on his optics through the haze of pleasure.
“Forever could never be long enough for me to feel like I’ve had long enough with you. Together could never be close enough for me to feel like I am close enough to you. I love you Hound.”

There was nothing Hound could think of that even came close to Thundercracker’s words or how he felt at this very moment, so he reached up and took the seeker’s hands in his own. Clinging onto them tightly he split his chest plates and revealed his spark to the seeker for the first time. The blue mech stared at the pulsing blue orb with wonder, movements stilling, before opening his own chest. The light from both sparks lit up their faces and neither of them moved for some time, not until Hound whispered, “Thundercracker, I’m scared.”

“I’m not,” the seeker replied. “You’re all I’ve ever wanted in a sparkmate.”

“You are too.” Hound’s grip tightened on his hands. “It’s just so big, this step. We’ll never be alone again.”

“Exactly,” Thundercracker nodded, smiling widely. “You’re always going to know how much I love and want you.”

An answering smile extended across Hound’s face. “I can live with that. I want that.”

Hound loosened one hand from Thundercracker’s and reached towards the seeker’s spark. His optics ticked upwards before he made contact and he got a nod of consent in return. Gently Hound ran his fingers down the edge of the spark case, watching the way the spark pulsed in response, hearing the way Thundercracker hissed in pleasure and feeling the heat burning through everything. His own spark leapt in his chest, responding to the spark above it, desiring to merge and Hound let out a little gasp. He touched the very edge of Thundercracker’s spark and a tendril of energy curled around his finger, flickering and dancing. The seeker let out a groan so low and erotic that it sent a surge of pleasure racing through the green mech. He gently pulled his hand free and used it to cup the back of the flyer helm, to pull him down to kiss him. It put their sparks close enough that they could feel the heat radiating from the other and Hound whispered, just before their lips met, “I love you.”

Thundercracker kissed him like the world depended on it and as he did so their chests came close enough together for their sparks to finally be able to reach each other. There was a flash of light as the curl of energy that each spark sent out met, twining around each other and the two sparks drew towards each other. The flares of light grew more intense until the sparks finally merged into one orb that hung suspended between the chests that were pressed together. The two mechs held onto one another tightly, faces pressed into each other’s shoulders as they felt the heat and pleasure burn through them, but past that they could feel their sparks linking fully. First Thundercracker, then Hound, lowered their firewall to allow the other mech complete access to their systems and could feel them being reconfigured, their permissions keyed to the other mech.

Suddenly, then, they were one thought and one spark, with nothing separating them. Not one thing was held back from the other, not that they could have anyway. Thundercracker saw the horrors that Hound had seen and lived through and understood his determination to bring the slave system down as well as his acceptance of his own unmitigated love for the seeker. Hound felt Thundercracker’s loneliness at the life he lead, his sadness at having lost his friendship with Skywarp most of all, but he couldn’t have believed, until now, how brightly Thundercracker’s love for him burned.

After a length of time neither of them could remember they could feel their sparks parting, but their thoughts and feelings still brushed against each other. Thundercracker pulled back slightly to give them room to close their chests and he smiled down at Hound, sensing the echo of it within their bond. He watched the way the green mech touched his chest in return and let out a content little sigh. Love, trust and happiness travelled between the two until they couldn’t remember who was feeling what, but that didn’t matter anymore.
Thundercracker shifted his hips slightly, moving his spike within Hound and their optics snapped to one another when they felt the simultaneous flares of pleasure from each other across their new bond. The seeker moved again, shuddering as he understood just what it meant for Hound to have Thundercracker buried deep within his body. Hound let out a little mewl, decidedly turned on by the possessiveness emanating from the blue mech moving above him. The sensations built as they fed off the other through the bond and when their overloads took them their worlds exploded into bright colour before the excess energy burnt out.

They came back to themselves to find their helms resting together and the flyer lifted his head back enough to focus on Hound, who smiled almost shyly at him. Thundercracker pressed a soft kiss to his lips and the silence didn’t hurt anymore. The bonded pair let their connection settle, building their firewalls back up to entwine around the bond and neither one of them could remember a peace like it. Their sparks were now a part of each other forever and nothing could change that. Thundercracker chuckled and Hound smiled at the sense of wry amusement that drifted across the bond.

“What’s so funny?”

“There is supposed to be a public engagement period before we bond.” Thundercracker rubbed his nose against the other mech’s cheek in affection. “To let everyone see us as a couple and raise any objections they might have. I think we blew that.” The seeker could feel the worry and delight echoing across the bond from his mate and answered it with reassurance. “It’s boring and I’m glad we didn’t have to go through it.”

“I think there would have been a lot of objections,” Hound murmured, letting Thundercracker ease his doubts.

“Probably.” The blue mech manoeuvred himself to his pedes and helped Hound up. Their hands lingered in each other’s grip and Thundercracker stroked the metal above the other spark that was part of him as well now.

Hound grinned at him. “And I don’t think a desk was what you had in mind either.”

“No.” The seeker smiled broadly before admitting, “I meant to wait longer before asking too. I didn’t want to push you.”

“And you know you didn’t.” Hound covered Thundercracker’s hand on his chest, flattening it to the grill. Their bond resonated with love, confidence and happiness from Hound. “I’m sorry for being such an aft about all this.”

The seeker chuckled. “You’ll just have to make it up to me then won’t you?”

“Do you have any more plans for the rest of the mega-cycle?”

Thundercracker reached for a datapad on the desk and then chucked it over his shoulder. “Not any more.”
The mega-cycles past the newly bonded couple without them noticing as they settled into life together. They already knew how to live with each other, those details had long been dealt with, but the bond took some getting used to. At first it was discriminating who was feeling which emotion and then it was learning to filter the thoughts and feelings from the other so they weren’t constantly having to deal with both. They barely left each other’s company to begin with and Ironhide, having been firmly told not to treat Hound any differently, vehemently kept telling them to ‘stop being so slagging soppy all the fragging time’.

It didn’t take Thundercracker long to realise that his bonded would never accept being served by slaves, despite his new position in life as sparkmate to a Lord, and was being constantly reminded of what he’d given up to be with Thundercracker. The seeker broke some more rules to keep his beloved happy by setting all his slaves free. He gave them the option to stay in their roles as paid employees, which some, like Ironhide and Bumblebee, did. Hound was floored by the kindess and thoughtfulness Thundercracker showed and began to understand how much he had changed the seeker, or rather, how much his presence had encouraged the blue mech to flaunt society’s rules.

Their peers weren’t exactly having much to do with them anyway. Thundercracker had lost a lot of contacts when he had taken Starscream to court and many more were utterly disgusted by the fact he had bonded to an ordinary, ex-slave mech. All the flyers abandoned him, for he had gone against every tradition in taking a ground bound mech as his sparkmate, and Thundercracker couldn’t have been happier.

A few didn’t turn away, accepting what the pair had done, and Hound won over a few more mechs with his calm, cheerful disposition. Mirage had wanted nothing to do with the rough commoner, though he wanted to keep his business and social contact with Thundercracker, but had been converted when Hound proved he could out track and out-maneouver a mech that had thought his gift of invisibility made him untouchable. The green mech could still sense the other mech when he cloaked but found the slender white and blue Lord a determined and persistant hunter. It gave them a starting point to a tentative friendship they both found they needed.

It was that friendship that led Mirage to organise a celebration for Hound and Thundercracker when they reached their second orn of being bonded. Normally this period would have marked the end of their engagement and the time that they should have been formally bonded. Since that was a little late, but still thinking the couple deserved to celebrate, the white and blue mech told Thundercracker what was going to happen. He tried to protest, it was his house after all, but he didn’t fight it much as he appreciated the gesture. Hound was a little wary of the idea, but was a social mech at spark, so the idea was soon readily accepted.

The party turned out to be a relaxed, almost informal affair, and everyone seemed at ease with one another. Mirage’s only disappointment was that Skywarp had refused to come, but he hadn’t told Thundercracker he’d asked, at Hound’s request. The green mech had thanked him for trying but the white and blue mech could see the hurt lingering in his friend’s blue optics. Hound put it to one side.
though, as he accompanied his mate around the party, casually chatting to their guests, thanking them for their well wishes and presents.

Eventually Mirage stole Hound away to get him involved in a discussion with a small gathering of mechs and Thundercracker let him go, content to get himself a cube of high grade from the table, catching Bumblebee’s optic as he did. The yellow minibot came straight over.

“Is everything alright?”

“It’s excellent, thank you Bee,” the blue seeker nodded. “I know you’ve put in a lot of extra time to make this work.”

The little mech smiled. “You both deserve it. Hound is a mech that would never ask for something like this.”

Thundercracker’s red optics lifted to find his sparkmate across the room. The green mech was smiling at something and the seeker couldn’t help but smile in response, even though it wasn’t directed at him. Primus, he was a lucky mech. The way that his blue optics lit his face, the way that the ends of those highly kissable lips curved upwards… Heat curled through his systems as he watched Hound and he didn’t hide his feelings when they drifted through the bond. Hound looked up across the room to meet Thundercracker’s optics. Both of them stilled, holding the look between them before they both turned to the mechs they were talking to and excused themselves. The seeker made it to his office first, but it wasn’t long before Hound was locking the door behind him.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” Hound murmured as the blue mech crowded into his space, pressing him to the door. Thundercracker kissed him briefly as he ran his hands across his bumper and lights. “We have guests.”

“Mmm,” Thundercracker ran his glossa up the side of Hound’s helm. “They can wait.”

“They’re big mechs,” Hound slid his hands over intakes and wings. “They can take care of themselves.”

The seeker pressed his lips to Hound’s and gripped the black hips, hoisting them up so Hound was off the ground. The green mech wrapped his legs around Thundercracker’s waist, taking his weight as his sparkmate ground their pelvic plates together, mimicking the act of interfacing.

“Want you so much,” Hound whispered harshly.

Thundercracker didn’t know what to think, he couldn’t anymore. It was like an outside force had come in and taken over. All he could think about was teasing those little noises out of Hound he liked so much, driving his mate over the edge as he took possession of his body. The need to be touching him, loving him, was all consuming and the seeker was barely aware of just what he was doing, where his fingers stroked. Anywhere that Hound touched him seemed to burn with passion, leaving streaks of fire over his chassis, and when he finally drew the seeker into him, there was nothing else in the world but that feeling of heat surrounding him.

Hound clung to him, arms wrapped tightly around his shoulders, legs around his waist and his face buried in his neck. Every movement of the flyer’s body forced noises from his vocaliser and the green mech was lost to the love making. Everything he was inside was turned to this very moment. Their bond was wide open and nothing was hidden. When Hound was tipped over the edge into overload, he pulled Thundercracker after him and they both cried aloud, the seeker crushing his mate to the door as his legs shook, fighting to hold them up. As they came down from their high, Hound climbed off his mate, pressing kisses to his helm and face.
“Primus, I love you,” he whispered.

“I need you again,” Thundercracker returned, voice rough. “Always need you.”

They made it as far as the office desk before Thundercracker was pressing Hound down again. The green mech pulled the flyer into him, having never closed his interface port, and he was certainly more than ready. Their overlord was fast and burning but when their optics met afterwards both could see neither was ready for it to be over yet.

Thundercracker pulled his mate off the table and they stumbled to the berth room, tangled together as they shared kisses. As they tumbled onto the berth, their need burning everything out of existence, all they could think about was each other. Maybe, if they’d stopped to think, they might have recognised the signs; multiple interfacing and overloads in a short time, the amount of data Thundercracker had passed to Hound. All this was readying Hound’s chassis to receive a sparkling and only required one more act to complete the cycle.

Hound could feel another overload building in his system, but yet it didn’t feel enough, so he split open his chest plates, baring his spark to Thundercracker. The seeker hissed out a yes, his own chest plates opening and just as their overload peaked Thundercracker merged their sparks. Everything went black as systems crashed from the excess energy and exhaustion and it took both of them some time to come back to themselves. When they did they found their sparks still merged and it took a lot for Thundercracker to lift himself off Hound, to break that connection. He slumped sideways onto the berth next to his mate and groaned quietly.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so fragging tired.”

“That might be a record, even for us,” Hound murmured, stroking the wing that lay across his body, making the seeker twitch.

“Please don’t,” Thundercracker whimpered. “I ache all over. I haven’t got anything left.”

Hound snorted, caught the seeker’s hand and guided it down to between his legs. Both thighs and most of his crotch plating were smeared in transfluid and lubricant. “No it’s all in and on me.” Thundercracker gave him a tired smile and then shuttered his optics. Hound nudged him until he opened them again. “We’ve got guests remember?”

“Slag…”

Hound hauled himself upright and then eased himself off the berth, wincing a little. Walking awkwardly he made it to the wash rack and turned on the shower, waiting for it to heat up. He glanced back at Thundercracker when worry came across the bond to find the seeker watching him with concern. Hound sent back love and reassurance before saying, “I’m ok, just trying to remember how to walk again.”

That made Thundercracker smile and he slid off the berth to join Hound. His jack was still out and he was just as covered in transfluid and lubricant as Hound was. They glanced down at each other before the green mech snorted again.

“We’re a right pair.”

“If I didn’t feel like I was about to drop into recharge on my pedes, you’d be turning me on right about now,” Thundercracker told him, gently pushing him back into the spray of the shower. The seeker cleaned the green mech down with sure strokes and Hound had to agree with him. If he wasn’t so tired as well, he was pretty sure they’d be interfacing against the wall in here, since they
never seemed to manage to get past seeing each other wet without consequences. Hound slid his port cover shut when Thundercracker got down to his hips, not wanting it touched because it was too sensitive for him to stand it and the seeker didn’t ask.

Once Hound was clean he switched positions with Thundercracker and returned the favour. Even when he dropped to his knees and lovingly cleaned every inch of the exposed jack, the blue mech only had the energy to murmur softly and slide it away. Hound leant his head against the white hip plate of his mate and shuttered his optics briefly as Thundercracker stroked his helm. Both of them may have been exhausted but there was nothing except love in their bond.

They went back to their guests, hand in hand, offering apologies about their absence but not the reason why, though they suspected that they could guess. Bumblebee was quick to appear at Thundercracker’s elbow with two glasses of energon, which did a little to help their low energy levels. Hound stayed closed to his bonded from there on in, almost always touching him in some way and gradually the party wound down. The guests could see the way their hosts were fighting to stay online and politely declined to stay any longer, despite the invitation too.

When they were finally alone Thundercracker curled himself around his mate and insistently propelled them to their berth. Hound didn’t resist and they fell into recharge together, utterly content and at that moment, with no worries in their lives.

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Hound massaged his chest absently as he worked and the seeker frowned at him. For the last mega-cycle he’d been doing that, though Thundercracker was sure he didn’t realise it.

“What’s wrong?”

“Huh?” Hound looked up from his datapad.

“You keep rubbing your chest.” Thundercracker downed his own datapad to study his mate properly.

Hound glanced down at himself, guiltily taking his hand away. “I just can’t seem to get comfortable, that’s all. Just an ache.”

“I think Ratchet should see you,” the blue mech replied. “Maybe we overdid it the other mega-cycle.”

“Thndercracker,” the green mech smiled fondly at him. “I’m fine.”

“Humour me then.”

“I thought I did that every day.”

“Cheeky glitch,” the seeker attempted a scowl, but it was ruined by the twitching of his lips. “So can I call Ratchet then?”

“If you insist,” Hound sighed, not really that bothered.

Thundercracker put out the call immediately, making the green mech roll his optics dramatically. The medic was busy, but agreed to pay them a visit as soon as he could. If Hound wasn’t in pain, which he assured he wasn’t, and he didn’t have any upset in his systems, then it wasn’t serious, so the seeker wasn’t to worry. That didn’t placate Thundercracker much, but he knew his medic wasn’t one of the best on Cybertron for nothing, so refrained from arguing, much.
Half an orn later the white mech turned up and Thundercracker wasted no time in cornering Hound and getting him to lie down for Ratchet to examine. The green mech complained, saying the ache was gone now, but Ratchet hadn’t driven all the way out to him for him to get away without even a checkup, so Hound agreed. The medic ran a scan over all his systems, frowned at the results and did it again. One optic ridge rose as he realised just what the data from Hound was telling him, before Ratchet stepped back from Hound and placed his fists on his hip plates as he scowled at Thundercracker. The seeker blinked at him, knowing the look but not understanding why it was directed at him.

“What did I do wrong? Did we overdo it?”

The medic snorted. “That depends on your opinion of ‘overdo’. What you did was interface the slag out of Hound, enough to prep him for conception of a sparkling. Congratulations.”

“What?” the pair chorused, Hound sitting up sharply.

“Hound is now carrying your sparkling within his chest.” Ratchet raised one optic ridge. “Did you not realise what you were doing? It’s a fragging specific set of steps to conceive a sparkling.”

The bonded pair exchanged a look before they both looked down at Hound’s chest and then at Ratchet. Hound managed to find his voice first.

“A sparkling? I’m carrying…”

The medic folded his arms over his chest and waited patiently. Thundercracker abruptly let out a whoop of joy and grabbed his mate, twirling him around. The green mech clung onto him, a smile blossoming on his own face and he happily welcomed the kiss Thundercracker pressed to his lips when he stopped spinning them round. The seeker laughed softly, optics bright.

“Our own sparkling. I never even thought about it.”

“Clearly,” Ratchet said dryly, shaking his head.

“Oh shut up,” Thundercracker responded good-naturedly, not taking his optics off Hound. “You don’t mind do you? I mean we never talked about it.”

“Of course I don’t mind.” Hound pressed a finger to the seeker’s lips to hush him. “I always knew there might be a chance I’d carry a sparkling, I’m the one with the port after all, and it’s your sparkling. Why wouldn’t I want this?”

“It’s our sparkling,” Thundercracker returned fiercely and Hound’s smile broadened. The blue flyer took a step back then, so he could lay a hand over the green chest plate and a look of wonder crossed his face. “We really made a sparkling.”

“So it would appear,” the medic interrupted. “And you’re both going to be model creators. I expect to see you in my medical clinic every orn for a check up from now on. Are we clear?”

Both the other two mechs in the room pulled a face but agreed nevertheless, still too caught up in the news to have any mind to protest. The news seemed to settle more on Hound as he turned his optics down to the hand on his chest plate and covered it with his. Inside his chassis, nestled next to his spark was another life now, wholly dependent on him to keep it safe. The sparkling would rely on the energy from his spark for the next meta-cycle until it was large enough to survive and power a body of its own. It would still be a little while before it was big enough for Hound to recognise but then he would be able to truly being to build a bond. Thundercracker would have to wait a little longer to connect with their sparkling, but it wouldn’t be long until they’d both be able to feel the
growing life reaching out to them across the bond.

Thundercracker squeezed his mate’s fingers in his hand, the smile on his face never faltering. He hadn’t ever thought about becoming a creator before and didn’t think he would react this way, but there was nothing but that feeling of intense joy in his spark. The seeker knew a sparkling would be hard work, and their lives would be changed forever because of it, but he wouldn’t swap this news for anything. This little life was created by the love he and Hound shared and it would want for nothing, ever. The blue mech glanced at Ratchet.

“Are we having a mech or femme?”
Hound looked up at the sound of a chirp indicating an incoming call from Thundercracker’s personal terminal and then glanced at the windows. He could just see the blue seeker flinging himself around the sky and decided not to bother his mate when he was enjoying himself. The green mech slipped into the seat and accepted the call. The screen lit up to reveal Jazz’s face and Hound’s mouth dropped open.

“Jazz!”

The other mech grinned. “One ‘n the same. How’s it hangin’?”

“Your collar, it’s gone!” Hound’s finger touched the screen where it showed the bare black metal around the other mech’s neck.

Jazz nodded. “It’s why I’m callin’. I got some news ‘n ya ain’t gonna like it much. Thundercracker there?”

“He’s outside,” the green mech frowned. “This is about Skywarp isn’t it?”

“He’s gone.” The black and white touched his neck. “It’s why I ain’t wearing that thing no more. I wasn’t gonna sit around ‘n wait for ‘im t’ get back.”

“You got someone to take it off without a release order?” Hound raised both optic ridges.

“Got a recommendation,” Jazz smirked, visor flashing. “Prowl says howdy by the way.”

“I bet he didn’t.”

The recently freed mech laughed. “Not in so many words.” Then he sobered. “Look Hound, Skywarp was actin’ suspicious ‘fore he up ‘n left. Takin’ calls ‘n hidin’ who they were comin’ from. He ain’t the best at it though. I couldn’t get who he was talkin’ to, but the calls all came from Kaon.”

Hound’s CPU whirled into action. “He doesn’t have any contacts in Kaon… not unless it’s the gladiatorial rings.”

“Something’s goin’ down in Kaon, big time.” Jazz shook his head. “I only called t’ give Thundercracker a heads up on Skywarp. I owe him for Prowl. If he wants t’ get Skywarp outta Kaon ‘fore whatever this is kicks off, he better do it sharpish.”

“I’ll tell him,” Hound nodded, glancing at the window again. “I don’t know what he’ll do though.”

“Thought he wanted t’ talk t’ Skywarp?”

“Yeah, but if Kaon is as bad as you say I’m not letting him go there alone and he won’t like that, not at the moment.” Hound touched his chest unconsciously as he spoke.
Jazz didn’t miss the gesture and was quick enough to guess. “Ya sparked?”

Hound blinked at him before nodding. “It’s been over twelve deca-cycles now.”

“Congrats mech,” Jazz grinned. “Ya expectin’ a little mechlet or femme?”

“Mech,” Hound smiled softly, letting his mind brush the bond with his sparkling, who squirmed happily under the attention. “Thundercracker’s hoping he’s a flyer.”

Jazz tilted his head to one side. “I shouldn’t have called.”

“No, you were right to,” Hound sighed. “He needs to know. He still feels bad about all of this and so do I. If he can talk to Skywarp, even if he doesn’t listen, it will heal a lot of wounds.” Hound narrowed his optics at the screen. “What’s really going on Jazz?”

The black and white shook his head. “I can’t say Hound, I don’t know how secure this line is ‘n ya out remember? I can’t risk what we know gettin’ out.”

Hound shook his head. “I didn’t want to abandon you…”

“Ya had a shot at happiness. No one here blames ya Hound, don’t beat yaself up over this.” Jazz gestured around himself and then at the green mech. “Ya’ve got yaself a bondmate, a sparklin’ on the way. Most mechs dream ‘bout things like that.” The other mech smiled then. “Keep ya family safe Hound ‘n I’ll see ya around.”

With that he cut the transmission. Hound sat deep in thought, though he was aware of when Thundercracker’s jets cut out and he landed on the balcony outside. The seeker was wearing a satisfied expression on his face as he came into the room but that changed as he spotted Hound.

“What’s the matter?”

The green mech didn’t answer straight away, not until Thundercracker was at his side, crouching down to see his face. Hound met his optics, still debating what to say, but wanting to reassure him.

“Jazz called.”

“About Skywarp?”

“Yes,” Hound nodded. “He’s gone. Jazz has freed himself.” Thundercracker’s head dropped slightly as he processed that but the ground mech continued. “He said Skywarp had been acting strange before he disappeared, taking calls from someone in Kaon.”

“Kaon?” Thundercracker’s CPU replayed the conversation he’d had Skywarp and how enamoured he’d seem of the underground movement that violent place.

Hound sighed. “There’s something going on in Kaon. Jazz said he owed you one for Prowl and that if you wanted to get Skywarp out of Kaon before it started, then you had to be quick.”

The blue flyer stood back up again, pacing next to the desk as his mate watched him with concerned optics. Not once had he considered that Skywarp would give up his life as a Lord, but that was what he had appeared to do, because otherwise there was no way Jazz would have had the freedom to escape like he did. Taking secret calls from Kaon could only spell trouble and Skywarp never seemed to know when he was in too deep. His cocky, gung-ho attitude was all part of his belief his teleportation ability made him untouchable and Thundercracker had always been the steady, doubting one out of the three of them. Starscream was just too greedy and ambitious to stay
Skywarp’s need for a thrill.

That stilled the seeker. Starscream. Since his disappearance, once Thundercracker realised he couldn’t find him, he hadn’t given him much thought to him, determined to put the past behind them, but now things were falling into place. Starscream had to have gone underground to hide from Thundercracker but before he’d gone he’d twisted Skywarp against the blue flyer. He didn’t know why Skywarp would leave, but if he had somewhere to go, someone to go to… The black and purple seeker could very probably been talking to Starscream, but why would have he been hiding that from everyone?

Hound watched the frown creasing Thundercracker’s face deepen and rose from his seat to stop his bonded pacing. The taller mech stopped, regarding Hound almost speculatively, and the green mech answered his own question.

“You’re going to Kaon.”

“I need to,” Thundercracker shook his head. “If he’s in trouble, if he really has contacted Starscream and been lured somewhere dangerous…”

“I’m going with you.”

Thundercracker violently shook his head. “No way in pit.”

“Thundercracker,” Hound warned, raising a finger to poke his mate’s cockpit chest, “You cannot stop me, I’m a grown mech, and you could very well need my help tracking Skywarp down.”

“It could be very dangerous,” the seeker batted the finger away. “I don’t want to put our sparkling in any situation he could get hurt in.”

“If it’s going to be that dangerous, I don’t want you going at all. You are just as important to this sparkling as I am.” Hound folded his arms under his bumper, daring the other mech to argue.

“That’s not…” Thundercracker shut his mouth and glared at Hound. “Don’t make me choose.”

“I’m not,” Hound returned, voice and posture softening. “You’re just going to have to accept that anywhere you go, I’m going as well.”

The blue flyer stared at his mate for a moment before sighing. “I’m not going to talk you out of this.”

“You know me well enough by now. When I agreed to bond with you I did so, so I could be with you through everything; good, bad or dangerous.” Hound pulled one of Thundercracker’s hands up to his mouth to lay a kiss on the back of his fingers.

The seeker wrapped his arms around his mate, holding him close as he shuttered his optics. “I’m sure I don’t deserve you.”

“None of that,” Hound’s muffled voice told him firmly before he pulled back slightly. “Now would you feel better if Ironhide came along and glared at everyone?”

Thundercracker smirked. “He does that so well.”

Hound grinned, glad that Thundercracker had let it go without further argument. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“I’ll let him know,” the blue mech agreed. “I want to go as soon as possible.”
As it was it took them another mega-cycle before Ironhide would let them fly, claiming the shuttle needed some added ‘extras’ if they were flying into Kaon. Neither Hound nor Thundercracker asked what they were, they trusted the black mech to do his job, but they also realised they might be better off not knowing. The seeker compiled a list of places and mechs to see in that time, none of them pretty, many of them with their connections deep in the underground. Hound recognised a few of them from his time before he was a slave but wondered how a Lord would know of them. When he asked Thundercracker had half smiled, saying that Skywarp had an ability to get himself into business with all the wrong mechs and he’d always watched out for him, which occasionally led to a little illegal dealing. The green mech could see the memories hidden behind his mate’s optics at those words.

The flight to Kaon itself was undertaken in mostly silence, Thundercracker too caught up in his thoughts to offer much conversation and Ironhide was never much one for talking to relieve tension. Hound had never been to Kaon and wasn’t looking forward to it. The city had been built up around heavy industry, was heavily polluted, with frequent, localised acid rain showers. He knew his specialised sensors would suffer in the smog.

When Kaon finally appeared into view all three mechs leant forward to take a good look. Thick clouds of mucky vapour hung around the smelting pit towers, plunging the rest of the city into dim murk, which gave the whole place a dreary, uninviting atmosphere. Its capital, the fortress city of Kolkular, was just visible in the distance. Thundercracker scanned his instruments as he slowed the shuttle, looking for a place to set down. One appeared when a large transport lifted up right in front of them, lumbering as it turned in the air, and Ironhide frowned at it.

“There’s more traffic in the air than normal.”

“I noticed,” Thundercracker replied as the shuttle landed and he powered it down. They disembarked to find mechs already appearing from the shadows to approach them, optics staring at the sleek shuttle in greed. Ironhide stepped between them and the ship, folding his arms over his chest, gun obvious at his side.

“What do ya want?”

“Transport out of Kaon,” one answered. “You can take anything you want.”

Thundercracker narrowed his optics. “Why?”

Quite a few of the gathered mechs laughed. “You don’t know! You are so slagged, coming here, not knowing!”

“We’re here looking for someone,” Thundercracker returned, annoyance rising. “So move out of the way.”

“We want passage.”

“Ya’ll get no such thing here,” Ironhide rumbled before he looked towards the other two. “Ya go ahead. I’ll make sure we don’t pick up any hitchhikers.”

Thundercracker nodded and stepped towards the gathered mechs. Once he got within reach of them they moved away, unwilling to risk a physical confrontation and Hound followed along behind, only glancing back once to make sure Ironhide would be able to cope. The black mech hadn’t moved, except to watch the gathered mechs, and Hound reassured himself with the knowledge that Ironhide knew what he was doing.
The green mech caught up with Thundercracker to walk at his side and they made their way silently through the grim streets. Hound did his best not to inhale too much of the thickest smog, knowing it would do him, or the sparkling, any good. He needed his sensors to be at their highest working order so that they could penetrate the atmosphere here. The streets were packed with Cybertronians of all shapes and sizes. The one thing they did have in common was the way they scurried, heads down, from shadow to shadow. The blue seeker looked particularly out of place as he strode confidently right down the middle of the road.

Thundercracker led them deeper in Kaon, but he unnervingly headed through the maze of alleys and streets. Hound trained his sensors in a large circle around them, searching each mech they past for weapons and any violent movement on their part, but apart from watchful optics, their passage was ignored, at least until the flyer got to where he wanted to be. A huge mech stood next to one door, innocuous next to its neighbours and Thundercracker strode straight up to it, clearly intending to ignore its guard.

A hand swung out in front of him, landing on his cockpit and pushing him back. “No one’s allowed in.”

“I was last time I was here,” Thundercracker returned, unsubtly wiping at his chest. “Would you stop a Lord?”

Two red optics narrowed at him. “No one’s allowed in.”

“Did you let a black and purple seeker in recently?” Thundercracker asked, refusing to be a good mech and go away.

“That’s none of your business. Frag off.”

“I say it’s my business,” the blue mech snapped before glancing at Hound. “Can you tell if he’s here?”

“I’ll try, but it won’t be easy. There are a lot of bodies in there.” The green mech frowned, raising his hand towards the door. A hologram of the interior, beyond the door, began to appear next to him, hazy in its details as Hound struggled to piece together an accurate reading. The guard mech took offense and stomped over to scuff dirt up at Hound’s face, making his intakes splutter and destroying his concentration. Thundercracker snarled angrily, as Hound stepped back into cleaner air.

“You’re lucky I don’t rip your head from your body and beat the door down with it. It’d work, it’s so thick!”

“Your threats are pitiful. What do I care who you are?” the mech sneered. “So what if you’re some Lord? Down here you’re just scum and scum don’t have any rights.”

One hand shoved at Thundercracker’s shoulder, not hard enough to pose any real threat, but enough to make the seeker sway in place. Thundercracker narrowed his optics. He was perfectly capable of taking the mech, but fighting wasn’t his style, not like this. There was no honour in a dirty street fight.

“Don’t touch him!” an angry voice snapped and Hound was suddenly pushing the aggressive mech away, getting between him and Thundercracker. The seeker’s worry suddenly skyrocketed. His mate was much smaller than the mech he was squaring up against and he was well into his carrying period for their sparkling.

“Hey, look at this, he’s even got his own little pet guard!” the mech cackled. “What you gonna do?
“Kick my knees?”

“No, but he will,” Hound nodded over the bigger mech’s shoulder.

“Like I’m going to fall for that one.” A finger tapped him on the shoulder and he whirled to find a towering block of a bot standing over him. “Where the pit did you spring from?”

“Me,” Hound replied and as the trapped mech turned back to him Hound landed a solid punch in his face, enough to knock him back into the hologram he had created. He bounced off the hologram and to his knees in front of the green mech. Hound crouched down to face him as he raised his head.

“You ever touch my sparkmate again and you’ll regret it.”

“Hound,” Thundercracker’s hand landed on his shoulder. “Don’t.” Hound let the seeker guide him away from the other mech, hologram fading, but Thundercracker couldn’t stop himself from placing a pede on the kneeling mech’s chest plates and shoving him backwards. “And if you ever insult my sparkmate again, I’ll make his threat look like a walk in Praxus Gardens in comparison.”

The pair walked away together, not looking back and they didn’t speak again until they were some distance away. Thundercracker let out a sigh, shaking his head. “We should head back.”

“We don’t have to yet,” Hound touched his arm gently. “I know you don’t want to give up on Skywarp yet.”

“Look at this place Hound,” the blue flyer gestured around them. “It’s a mess. We aren’t going to find Warp and I suspect he doesn’t want to be found.”

“And Starscream will have a lot to do with that.”

Thundercracker ran his hand over his face. “I screwed up with him, over Starscream. I should have talked to him first.”

“I’m sorry,” the green mech said softly, knowing it was his fault.

Thundercracker gave him a small smile back, reaching out to touch Hound’s cheek with his fingertips. “Thank you for coming with me.”

Hound snorted. “Like I would have let you come here alone.”

The seeker’s black hand dropped to the green chest, stroking the metal and Hound felt one corner of his mouth curl up in an amused, but loving smile. Their peace was shattered by the sound of gunfire and screams from another section of the city. They both looked in that direction, even though they couldn’t see anything and when Thundercracker spoke his voice was grim.

“We shouldn’t have brought our sparkling here.”

Hound felt the urge to remind Thundercracker that he was built to be extremely tough, but didn’t want to fight when the flyer was just being protective of him and their child.

“We’ll go home, if you’re sure you want to.”

The taller mech bowed his head slightly, a look of indecision on his face. Skywarp was his oldest, closest friend and he truly regretted letting them drift apart, but he could not have let Starscream get away with what he’d done. His choice was made for him when the skyline suddenly turned red and an explosion made the ground buck enough to knock the pair of them down to their knees. His
bonded and their sparkling was far more important and he should have never brought them into Kaon to start with.

Thundercracker helped Hound to his pedes, sharing a worried look with him and their black hands entwined before they hurried towards they had left their shuttle. Ironhide was standing outside, impatiently waiting for them.

“’Bout time! This place is going to the pit,” the black mech gestured them inside.

“Have you heard anything?” Hound asked as he made his way to his seat to buckle in.

“The underground movement ain’t staying so underground,” Ironhide growled as he slapped his palm down onto the panel to close the door. Thundercracker was already at the controls, making the shuttle lift off and the other mech joined them at the front of the ship. “Word’s gone out, just before the bombing started. ‘Join up or die.’”

“Join who?” the blue flyer asked, optics not leaving the viewing screen as he sought to navigate them out of the chaos.

“Callin’ themselves the Decepticons,” Ironhide replied as he paced the floor behind them. “Slagging war mongers.”

Hound frowned before he shifted forward in his seat to play with the comm controls. The other two mechs stayed quiet as he fiddled with frequencies plagued with static until he found the one he wanted.

“I know you’re listening Jazz,” Hound said into the silence.

There was a pause before a voice replied, “Hound, ya know better than this.”

“Yeah, well, you aren’t trying to get out of Kaon right now,” the green mech told him. “Did you know it had got this bad?”

“We’ve been tryin’ t’ stop it, but we can’t get close t’ ‘im,” Jazz voice sounded low.

“Him?”

“Lord Megatron is the self proclaimed leader o’ the Decepticons.”

“Primus,” Hound whispered and was echoed by the other two. Their Lord Protector, the mech who was supposed to safe guard their future was ripping Kaon apart, and all in the name of building a better Cybertron.

“Get somewhere safe Hound ‘n look after ya family,” Jazz told him before the connection went dead.

An explosion, too close for comfort, rocked the shuttle, making Thundercracker snarl angrily. His choices for manoeuvrability were limited as the skies were filled ships and mechs of all shapes and sizes, trying to flee the chaos. He’d have been out of Kaon airspace within a klik if it had just been him here, but the shuttle was far bigger, slower and less manoeuvrable. Ironhide was twitching behind them, optics glancing at the weapons console he’d only just installed. It wasn’t exactly legal, but the black mech had got suspicious enough to give the shuttle weapons, especially with Hound carrying. In the face of Thundercracker deciding to come to Kaon after Skywarp, it had become a sound decision, but there was nothing to shoot at. Everyone else was just as desperate to get out of Kaon as they were.
Smoke billowed from destroyed buildings, the smelting towers had been toppled and huge craters had been opened up in the land. Hound watched it all in silence, listening to his mate swear as he navigated them away, one hand resting on his chest. He trusted Thundercracker to get them clear as his thoughts were in turmoil. Everything told him this could very well be the first stage of war, even though he prayed it wasn’t. The Enforcers were good at their job, but their leaders were corrupt and had been amongst the mechs Hound had been trying to bring down. It had been why Prowl, a straight laced Enforcer, had ever considered joining their illegal operation to gain enough evidence to change their laws. The corruption at all levels of their ruling government would mean an uncoordinated response to Megatron’s demonstration and the fact that it was their Lord Protector leading the rebellion would just add to the chaos.

“Primus help us,” Hound murmured, feeling Thundercracker echo his sentiments through the bond. The green mech hoped that Optimus could force the senates’ hand into a quick and decisive move, but he doubted it. It left him wondering what the Prime would do because he would not stand back and let his home planet fall into war if he could prevent it.

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As it was it took some time for anyone to officially, publicly, acknowledge that Cybertron was at war and it wasn’t until Helex declared itself independent from the ruling Cybertron body that everyone seemed to realise just how severe it had all become. Megatron had never been some upstart pretender, so some had taken him more seriously to begin with, but because he was the Lord Protector he had more idea of their offensive capabilities than most of the rest of them. Optimus Prime was becoming the main public figure that mechs were flocking to in agreement that action had to be taken and, though Optimus was still trying to avoid all out war, he was not afraid of standing his ground.

Many city states, even now, were trying to live normally, pretending their world wasn’t falling down around them and it exasperated both Hound and Thundercracker to find all their neighbours blithely continuing with their pampered lives. Ironhide had expressed a wish to put his knowledge to more use and had said goodbye to the both of them not long after. Hound also suspected he was becoming more uneasy around them as the deadline for the sparkling loomed nearer. The black mech did not want to intrude into their family life anymore and whilst both of them would miss Ironhide, he was a mech free to make his own decisions.

Thundercracker glanced sideways at his mate in the co-pilot’s chair and smiled. Hound was deep in recharge. The trip to the hospital hadn’t taken all that long nor had it been anything bar a thorough examination and check-up, it was just Hound was tired most of the time now. The sparkling was nearing the time to be transferred out of Hound’s spark chamber and was a large drain on the mech’s system. Hound had gone through a pretty uneventful carrying period so Thundercracker was more than willing to forgive his mate for being tired now.

The seeker was forced to pilot the shuttle as well, since Hound had been warned not to try transforming this late into his carrying and Thundercracker wasn’t going to risk carrying Hound to the hospital as he flew. The route between the Towers and the clinic was still safe, the war hadn’t gotten to the bigger cities yet, the exception being Helex, where Megatron ruled from and Kaon, which Megatron had used as an example of his power and a recruiting ground.

The blue flyer secretly hoped that the war would take a long time to spread, that maybe it would never even get any further, all because there was nothing he feared more than trying to raise their sparkling with a war raging around them. There was only an orn left to go until Hound had carried to term, though every sparkling was a little different in the speed of their development. Thundercracker suspect Hound was torn between wanting to hold their sparkling (and to be free of the tiring drain on
his body) and wanting to keep the sparkling safe within his chassis forever.

The seeker spent most of his time at his mate’s side, getting him anything he asked for, holding him close so their sparkling could feel both of his creator’s sparks at the same time, but as Hound spent a great deal of time in recharge now Thundercracker used that time to see what information he could find out about the internal workings of the war. He didn’t have Hound’s contacts, and wasn’t going to stress him by asking about them, but he had plenty of his own.

He was deep in conversation with one of the shadier characters he knew when Hound appeared from their berth room, rubbing his chest with one hand and carrying an empty energon cube in the other. Thundercracker stopped the conversation he was having and rose to meet his bonded, taking the cube from his hand.

“Do you want another one?”

Hound blinked a few times, shaking off the effects of recharge before he smiled. “Mmm, please.”

Thundercracker nodded, heading over to the temporary energon dispenser that they’d installed in the corner of their living area so that Hound didn’t constantly disturb Bumblebee at all joors of the mega-cycle, asking for more energon.

“Is he moving again?”

“Yeah, he woke me up again. He’s been really restless these past few cycles.” The green mech glanced down at his chest, internally trying to quieten the sparkling across the bond. When he’d first started shifting around Hound’s spark chamber, he’d been thrilled at the feeling, at how their sparkling was growing. Now it was more of an uncomfortable irritation. “Well, ow,” Hound said suddenly, frowning.

“Ow?”

“It would appear,” the green mech winced, “That our sparkling has decided to make his appearance this mega-cycle.”

“Oh,” Thundercracker blinked at him. “Now?”

Hound smiled at his faint voice. “Yes love, now.”

The seeker stared at him for a moment before something seemed to click in his CPU and he moved to Hound’s side to pick him up. Hound waved his hands away and said, “I can still walk,” a moment before he doubled over, clutching at his chest. Thundercracker instantly steadied him, drawing him into his side, as he asked, “You want to try that again?” Hound shot him a peeved look when the spasm subsided but the blue mech wasn’t put off in the slightest. “Let me help you Hound. I’m going to feel very redundant and useless very soon.”

Hound relaxed, beginning to understand that his mate knew he could do very little to help him, and straightened up. The seeker wrapped an arm around his waist, gave him a hand to cling onto and shifted a lot of his weight onto his hip, so that the next time the sparkling let out a pulse of energy Hound didn’t trip over his own pedes as they hurried to the shuttle. The tiny spark nestled next to Hound’s had gradually, as it had grown, begun to change its spark harmonics from ones that were near identical to Hound’s to those he would use for the rest of his life. Now the frequency had reached a state that it couldn’t sit so close to Hound’s without causing a clash of energies and that sent spasms through Hound’s spark, letting him know in no uncertain terms that it was time to transfer the sparkling to his own protoform body.
Once Thundercracker had gotten Hound settled in his seat on the shuttle he took off and flew the route to the clinic like a pit-spawned demon. No one got in his way, not that Thundercracker really noticed. He knew the quicker he could get Hound to Ratchet the faster the sparkling would be removed, reducing the time he spent in pain and lessening his panic as the only safe place he’d known was suddenly hurting him. Thundercracker could feel, to a lesser extent, their sparkling’s confusion at the new problems he was suddenly facing and he did his best to offer what comfort he could. His bonded was relatively quiet as his attention was turned inwards as he sought to reassure their sparkling that all the pain would be over soon. Occasionally he’d let out a little hiss of pain, clutching at the grill portion of his chest and every time he did that Thundercracker pushed the shuttle harder.

By the time they landed, rather badly and right in the front of the clinic’s entrance forcing mechs to flee for safety, the shuttle’s engines were smoking in protest from the abuse. Thundercracker literally bundled Hound outside and straight inside, bellowing for Ratchet.

“Calm down,” a sharp voice told him and the white medic appeared at his side. “You panicking your aft off isn’t helping anyone. If you keep it up I’m not letting you in with Hound.”

Thundercracker bit off the angry retort threatening to spill from his lips when his mate squeezed his hand, and he glanced down to find Hound looking up at him with a pleading expression on his face plates. He attempted to rein his emotions in check and followed Ratchet, still holding onto his bonded, into a suite designed for this very purpose. It already held the protoform shell in its crib and whilst Thundercracker had seen it before, it suddenly had more meaning now. Whilst Ratchet settled Hound on the berth, hooking him up to monitors and talking to him about what he was feeling, Thundercracker found himself standing over the cot and staring at the body. Very soon it would be alive with the sparkling that Hound and he had created.

Carefully the blue flyer gently scooped the protoform up, marveling at how light it felt and wondered whether blue or red optics would stare back at him. There was equal chance of that, just as there would be for the mechling being a flyer or ground based transformer. With a gentle finger Thundercracker traced the outline of the sparkling’s face. At the moment it was just the generic shape all protoforms came in. It wouldn’t change to hint at the adult frame for some time, since the sparkling would need to adjust to running a chassis first, but once he started processing information around him, he would begin to mould the protoform on an unconscious level.

“You can bring that over here now.” Ratchet’s voice interrupted his musings and Thundercracker looked up. Hound was watching him, one hand rubbing at his chest, a nervous smile on his face.

“We’re ready.”

The seeker looked down at the protoform in his hands. “Oh.”

The next few joors were a blur of intense emotions for Thundercracker. Hound had mostly closed down their bond so he wouldn’t feel the sharp stabs of pain, but he could still feel when their sparkling was finally free of his mate’s chassis. There was worry for those moments when the tiny spark was being transferred to his protoform and Ratchet was persuading him to integrate with his new systems. Hound clung to Thundercracker’s hand, grasp so tight he dented the metal, but the flyer barely noticed because he was hanging on just as strongly. The white mech worked swiftly and smoothly, talking quietly to the sparkling as he worked, encouraging each system to start, but Ratchet kept his voice low enough that both creators could hear it the moment their sparkling’s pump kicked into life.

It was barely another nano-klik later when a tiny cry rent the air and the sparkling let everyone know just how displeased he was to be out in the world so unexpectedly. Hound let out a gasp of relief and
Thundercracker sagged against his side as they realised the most crucial time had past. Ratchet finished running his checks, a smile creasing his face as the sparkling carried on wailing, his little arms and legs kicking out in protest, before he wrapped him up in a thermal blanket and carried him over to Hound and Thundercracker.

“Congratulations. You have one healthy little mech.”

The green mech tentatively took the tiny bundle, tucking him into the crook of his arm so they could both see his face, even if his optics were screwed shut as he cried. Hound whispered, “Hey there little one.”

Thundercracker reached down and softly stroked the grey head. “Shush, what’s all this fuss about?”

Both grown mechs were reaching out through their bond to their sparkling, trying to calm his cries, offering every bit of love they had, and it didn’t take long for the tiny mech to quieten down. As he did so he opened his optics for the first time and a faint blue glow shone up at his creators, making Hound lift his head to smile up at Thundercracker. The seeker placed a kiss on Hound’s lips and then bent down to carefully put one on the sparkling’s forehead. The mechling gurgled and squirmed, one little fist working its way free from the wrap and Hound offered up a finger to it, which was rapidly taken in a surprisingly strong grip.

“Do you have a name for him?” Ratchet asked, gently breaking into the family moment.

Thundercracker nodded. “We’re going to call him Silverbolt.”

“Silverbolt,” Hound whispered, and the sparkling blinked at him before smiling, gurgling happily again. “Welcome to Cybertron, little one.”
It didn’t take long for Silverbolt to start on the process of moulding his protoform. The stubs of wings were the first to appear, sprouting downwards on his back from shoulders to hips and Thundercracker was overjoyed to discover his sparkling would be a flyer. Two tiny wing flaps also appeared on the front of his shoulders, which was unexpected, but both Hound and Thundercracker were thoroughly enjoying watching their sparkling grow.

His colours took longer than expected to appear and in the end he kept much of his pale grey protoform colour. Silverbolt picked out a red stripe from his seeker creator’s wings to colour the upper portion of his chest and back and then the flash of yellow across the front Hound’s hip plate for his thighs, waist and the middle section on his arms, lightening it as he did so. It was unusual for a sparkling not to go with his creator’s major colours, but neither Hound nor Thundercracker minded.

As Silverbolt’s personality developed he proved to be a well behaved sparkling, though at times he demonstrated to be very determined to get his way. Although they tried to discourage him from chewing on his own fingers when he was concentrating on something. He also learnt that if he made enough noise and flapped his arms wildly then Thundercracker would take him flying. Hound understood the fact that both his bonded and sparkling thoroughly enjoyed the activity, but he still didn’t entirely like to watch Thundercracker fly with Silverbolt in tow. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust the seeker not to drop Silverbolt, but his grounder instinct felt safer when they were both firmly on the floor. Silverbolt particularly loved being dangled below Thundercracker as he flew where he could spread his little arms and legs, giggling like crazy.

Every time they came back down and Silverbolt was reunited with Hound, he would babble his nonsense words excitedly, but would also pat the green mech with his tiny hands, like he knew Hound didn’t like him doing it. Silverbolt also adored the holographic shows Hound would make for him, showing him other places he hadn’t been, or the stars he couldn’t see, or a turbo-fox to pet. All in all, Silverbolt was a very loved and spoilt sparkling and both creators kept him very sheltered from anything about the war, not that he was old enough to understand the concept.

They succeeded for nearly six deca-cycles, until Megatron brought his army, and the war, to The Towers without warning. There was no one to fight back and it was an easy target that caused huge ripples across the elite of Cybertron, which is exactly what Megatron wanted. Silverbolt was asleep in his crib. Hound and Thundercracker were taking advantage of the quiet time to enjoy a little intimate moment, so when the first detonation ripped through their neighbourhood it took them completely by surprise.

The seeker was the first up, heading straight to the balcony doors to see what was going on. Hound was just about up on his pedes when another concussive blast shattered the glass, showering Thundercracker with pieces. Luckily Silverbolt was at the other side of the room, so was safe from the flying debris. The green mech joined Thundercracker at the shattered doors, after checking him for injuries.

“It’s Megatron isn’t it?” Hound stared out across the land, spotting the fires caused by the bombing.
“I didn’t think he’d come here, not so soon. It’s so far from his other strongholds.”

“He’s making a statement that he can do what he likes and no one can stop him,” Thundercracker snarled, anger burning at the sight of the devastation in the place that had always been his home. Hound pulled him away from the window, knowing the view wasn’t a good thing if he wanted the flyer to keep his temper. The next explosion was much closer, making the house shake and Silverbolt started crying, hands screwing up into little fists as he wailed. Hound immediately scooped the sparkling up, cuddling him to his chest, rubbing his back in a soothing circular motion, careful of the sensitive wing stubs.

“Thundercracker, we can’t stay here.”

“This is our home!” the blue seeker glared up at the ceiling. “I’m not just giving it up!”

“It’s not safe,” Hound flinched as another blast rocked the building.

“I’m going out there.” Thundercracker turned to Hound, gripping his upper arms. “Get Silverbolt somewhere safe.”

“I’m not leaving without you!” Hound exclaimed, freeing one hand to grab Thundercracker’s.

“I’m going to see if I can get them to stop,” the seeker told him, prising himself free.

Hound shook his head. “Don’t. You can’t.”

“Find somewhere safe to go Hound, please.” Thundercracker touched Silverbolt’s head briefly and then Hound’s face before he hurried off to one of the balcony doors.

Hound watched him take off, fear racing through him. The seeker sent back reassurance through their bond and towards Silverbolt who hiccupped, cries subsiding a little in his creator’s arms. The green mech cuddled his sparkling higher up on his chest, tucking his head under his chin, as he watched his mate take off and disappear from sight. He couldn’t let him put himself so in danger. They all needed a way out and Hound would slagging well find it. If he had a safe way to get out of this attack, then Thundercracker would be forced to come with them.

With that thought in his processors Hound was at the computer terminal in an instant, attempting to get a call out, but the area was flooded with static, making it difficult. Hound was no hacker, but he managed to get a short distance link to Mirage’s home, less than a hic away. The screen flickered and sometimes the picture disappeared all at once, but he could just make out the blue and white mech’s voice.

“Mirage, can you hear me?”

“Hound? What is going on?” There was a trace of panic in the other mech’s voice, but not as much as the green mech thought there might be from someone who had led such a sheltered life.

“Megatron’s forces are attacking The Towers. We’ve got to evacuate the area,” Hound replied, still trying to find another frequency.

“And go where?”

“I’m working on that. Can you meet me here?”

“I… yes, I can,” the Lord’s voice strengthened slightly.
“Then get here as fast as you can, I’ll be waiting for you,” Hound instructed before he cut the connection. He spent another klik securing the link he really wanted but he didn’t even get a word out before Jazz’s voice was telling him what to do, where to go. The black and white mech’s voice told him good luck before the connection very abruptly severed. Hound pressed a kiss to the top of Silverbolt’s head, glad he had stopped crying, though he hadn’t given up his tight grip of the green mech’s grill, and got up from his seat to hurry to the nearest window.

His footsteps crunched as the floor was littered with glass, but Hound paid no attention as he searched the skies for the blue seeker. The air was filled with smoke from burning buildings and was backlit an eerie red. When he couldn’t find him, he used his bond to call out to him, hoping he wouldn’t distract him at a critical moment.

‘We’ve got transport of out here. Please come home.’

There was a large pause, filled with a sense of determination and concentration from the flyer before he responded.

‘Send me the co-ordinates. I’ll meet you there.’

‘Thundercracker, please.’

‘Hound if you could see what I could, you would want to be out here, doing what you could.’

‘No I wouldn’t, not if I was leaving you and Silverbolt. I gave that life up for you remember. Please come down.’

‘Go to the pick up point. I promise I’ll see you there.’

Hound knew when it was pointless to argue with Thundercracker. The seeker was twice as stubborn as he was when it came down to it, so he pulled back from the window and went in search of Bumblebee. He nearly, literally, bumped into him when he opened the main door into the corridor.

“Bee, where are the others?”

“They fled as soon as the bombing started.” The yellow minibot shook his head.

Hound frowned. “I hope they’ll be alright. As soon as Mirage is here we can leave. I know where there is safe transport.”

“Where is Lord Thundercracker?” It was Bumblebee’s turn to frown when he realised the blue seeker wasn’t with them.

Hound’s face twitched through worry, annoyance and pain before he answered, “He’s out trying to make them stop.”

“That’s suicide!” Bumblebee exclaimed before biting his lip. “Sorry, I didn’t mean…”

“No, you’re right,” Hound sighed. “He said he’d meet us there.”

“Well, I guess he knows what he’s doing right?”

Hound didn’t have the spark to explain to Bumblebee that any self defence training Thundercracker may have was nothing in comparison to a soldier or gladiator’s training. The only thing that might keep him safe was his brilliance in the air when he was flying. No one could match him. “Let’s go to the main doors to wait for Mirage.”
They ended up in the actual doorway, watching their world outside being randomly and savagely destroyed. Hound was concerned that his friend wouldn’t make it here unhurt. Even with his ability to bend photons around him and disappear from normal optic range, he could still be hurt by a stray blast, but he kept his fears to himself. Bumblebee was a solid, sensible mech, but he was still young in comparison and Hound saw no sense in adding to his already troubled thoughts.

As it was Mirage got there faster than Hound was expecting, startling Bumblebee by appearing right in front of them. The green mech had been aware of him racing up the driveway, since his sensors could see him cloaked, but the yellow minibot wasn't expecting such abrupt behaviour from the Lord. The blue and white mech cast his optics upwards and a look of pain crossed his face.

“The devastation has increased in this direction. Most of the buildings are on fire now. The Towers, my home, is gone.”

“We’re still alive,” Hound reminded him, realising he was the one that was going to have to stay strong and firm. The green mech concentrated for a moment, casting out a hologram around them that looked like thick smoke. They would have to hope the Decepticons wouldn’t look twice at a waft of smoke, even if it was drifting close to the ground, across the wind. “We’ll have to stay close together. If you two want to leave me, then go ahead. I’ll only slow you down, carrying Silverbolt.”

“We’re not leaving you behind,” Bumblebee said firmly, glancing at Mirage, breaking the rules of an ex-slave basically ordering the Lord what to do. Mirage didn’t meet his gaze but nodded in agreement. “We’re right behind you Hound.”

The green mech stepped down from the step, past Mirage and led the other two mechs out into the chaos. He curled one hand around Silverbolt’s head to help protect his more delicate audios from the noise and to help him feel less frightened. The sparkling was holding onto him tight, with both fingers and through their bond, constantly seeking reassurance, but he since he had stopped crying he hadn’t made a sound. Hound’s sensors were pushed out wide around them to check for any enemy activity so they could stay away from them. One part of his CPU he turned over to constantly manipulating the smoke, making it flow and shift and another guided him flawlessly through the mess to the directions Jazz had given him. Once he had settled into processing all the information coming and going Hound picked up the pace. They had over a hic to go, heading for the western edge of the Towers and Hound didn’t want to make anyone wait for them, not in this.

There were a few close calls, a few moments of fear as Decepticon jets flew overhead or ground troopers blasted down the street, but the three mechs kept hold of themselves and stayed together. They knew they were getting close when they began to see other mechs, clearly fleeing, in either mode, and they were all heading in one direction like they were being drawn by some invisible force. When a shuttle took off from not far in front of them everyone sped up, afraid they were being left behind.

Silverbolt screamed an instant before Hound collapsed down onto his knees, clutching at his chest with his free hand. Mirage was grabbing at him, stopping him going further and steadying his hold on Silverbolt, who was ridged in pain and wailing at audio blowing level. The green mech gasped, trying to remember to function over the intense agony flaring in his spark, but it was his sparkling’s cries that forced him pull himself together. He threw up a block as best he could around Silverbolt’s bond, knowing he could only dull the pain coming in from Thundercracker, but was better than nothing. Then he became aware of Mirage calling his name repeatedly.

“How, Hound! What’s going on?”

“Thundercracker… Something’s wrong with Thundercracker,” Hound bit out because, despite the
pain, he didn’t want to close their bond down in case his mate needed him. He let go of his chest to
stroke Silverbolt’s wings, trying to calm to still upset sparkling, who was clinging to him desperately.

“We can’t stay here.” Mirage tugged on his arm, flinching as another explosion went off close
enough for them to feel the heat on their chassis.

“I can’t leave him. He’s hurt!” Hound staggered to his pedes.

“You can’t take Silverbolt back in there,” Bumblebee pointed out, trying to help Mirage drag the
green mech in the direction they’d been heading. “And no, we’re not taking him. He needs you.”

Hound saw the truth in his friends’ words and was trapped. Everything in his bond was screaming to
turn around and find Thundercracker, but his instincts as a creator drove him to protect whimpering
sparkling in his arms. He couldn’t force himself to run away from Thundercracker, but he let Mirage
hurry him and guide him. Eventually, as they joined others fleeing from the carnage, they came
across a huddle of transport shuttles, rapidly being filled with refugees. Around them were mechs
armed with guns, cannons and rocket launchers, keeping the Decepticons at bay for the moment.

Hound reached down into the bond, trying to tell Thundercracker that they had a way out, that they
were safe and to please, please, get here. The white and blue mech propelled Hound forward to the
nearest ship, past the bulky yellow mech calmly directing the frightened survivors up the ramp and
found them a wall to sit down against. Hound brought his legs up to protect Silverbolt from the crush
and whispered to him that it would be alright as the shuttle filled to capacity around them.

Bumblebee was aboard the same transport, though his small size meant he got pushed away from
them. It wasn’t long in lifting up from the ground, but the shuttle shook as the Decepticons opened
fire at it and many of its passengers were crying in fear. The green mech shut it out, pushing his
world down to the bonds he shared with Silverbolt and Thundercracker.

The sparkling was still scared but the emotions and pain were draining on him and the tiredness was
being to take away their raw edge. The pain from Thundercracker came and went in flashes, almost
like he was regaining consciousness, just to fall offline again when he moved, but underneath it was
a growing sense of panic. At first Hound thought it was worry over Silverbolt and himself, so he
tried to reassure Thundercracker, though he wasn’t sure anything would be making it through, but
the panic was growing. Real fear was being to shine through the panic and Hound was getting even
more scared for his sparkmate. The seeker was no coward and had little fear for his own safety.
Whatever it was had to be very bad.

Vaguely Hound was aware of the shuttle touching down again and the refugees beginning to leave,
but he didn’t care about being the first out. His bond was everything, filling his head, and he felt it
when that fear and pain was momentarily wiped out with utter hatred and anger. It was so deep it
made Hound gasp in surprise and that noise went to one of shock as the bond went completely silent.

“No! Thundercracker!” The green mech shot upright, Silverbolt clutched to his chest. Mechs shot
him confused looks and Mirage stopped him from trying to run blindly somewhere.

“Hound, what is it?”

“He’s gone! Thundercracker’s gone. There’s nothing there. I… It’s…” Hound faltered, voice dying
as something in the back of his head whispered that silent might mean dead.

Mirage could literally see his friend fall into shock and suddenly he was determined not to lose him.
They had got so far and Silverbolt needed Hound to stay alive, even if Thundercracker truly had
been lost. The white and blue Lord didn’t know what it felt like to bond, or to lose your bonded, but
he had heard it was agonisingly painful, like your spark getting ripped out of your chest. Hound
didn’t seem to be suffering like that, so Mirage doubted the flyer was permanently offline.

Using his elbows and hands in a rude manner that shocked him to the core, Mirage pushed his way off the shuttle, Hound in tow, and looked around for anyone that might help him. The survivors were being directed in two separate directions and after a moment Mirage noticed that one group contained all the injured mechs, so that’s where he went. As soon as he stepped through the doors into the open space beyond Mirage regretted his actions. It was utter chaos. There were wounded mechs lying everywhere, with medics darting around between them as fast as they could, sometimes calling for big mechs to carry them away to be treated immediately.

“Who’s the medic in charge?” Hound could hear Mirage yelling above the din, something he’d never thought he’d hear the polite, well spoken mech do, but he was so closed off from what was going on that he didn’t hear any reply. It was just a steady constant noise, occasionally interspersed with sharp cries and screams. All the green mech could feel was a dull throb of pain, the warm body of Silverbolt on his chest and the tight grip of Mirage’s hand on his elbow. He was aware, vaguely, when the noise level dropped, and sat down when the white and blue mech prompted him to before looking up at him blankly when he gripped his shoulders.

“Hound, I’m going to find someone for you, ok? You just wait here.”

The green mech nodded dully and watched Mirage leave, staring at the closed door for sometime, before Silverbolt squirmed. He looked down to find the sparkling staring up at him with wide, but tired optics and he gave Silverbolt a tiny smile, trying to find energy from somewhere because Silverbolt deserved it.

“Hey little one. It’ll be alright. I promise. It’ll be alright. We’ll get Thundercracker back. He’ll be ok. We’ll be ok.” Hound laid a kiss on the little bump developing on the front of Silverbolt’s helm, feeling a tear slip down his cheek.

The silver sparkling let out a tiny gurgle and reached up with his hands as Hound pulled back and the mech let him pat his face. Hound felt the tears well more, blurring his vision momentarily, as his sparkling tried to comfort him, understanding he was in pain, though he couldn’t voice his own. He enfolded his small chassis in his arms and held Silverbolt tight. The sparkling let out a little warble as he clung onto his creator and Hound could feel how tired he was through the bond, but also how his confusion and pain at the sudden loss of Thundercracker was keeping him online.

“Hound.” The green mech looked up to see Ratchet in the doorway, regarding them with understanding and pity. The CMO came into the room and crossed the floor to the two emotionally exhausted mechs, reaching out to stroke the top of Silverbolt’s head. “Mirage told me that something happened to Thundercracker.”

Hound nodded. “There was so much pain in our bond, but since it stopped there’s been nothing, not even a whisper. I’m scared he’s… dead.”

Ratchet shook his head. “You would know.”

“Are you sure?” Hound looked up, seeking reassurance and so he saw the pain that flash in Ratchet’s optics before he looked away.

“In the past joor I’ve lost six mechs because their bonded have died. We tried to tell them there was hope that they might be alive and hiding in the ruins, but they knew they were gone. They just gave up, giving in to the pain of having the other half their spark destroyed.”

Hound looked down at Silverbolt. “I can’t give up on Thundercracker. He has to be alive.”
“How is Silverbolt doing?” The medic was impressed that the sparkling wasn’t crying.

“He’s scared, but he’s being so brave.” The green mech gave his sparkling a smile when he’d looked up at the sound of his name. “I tried to block the pain out, but it must have hurt him so much.”

“He’s a remarkable little mech,” the CMO agreed, remembering some of the sparklings he’d seen slip into shock at the loss of a creator.

Something dawned on Hound then and he glanced up at Ratchet with a frown. “What are you doing here?”

“I answered the call for medics from the Autobots when news of the attack came through.” Ratchet folded his arms across his chest. “Optimus Prime has asked me to CMO of the forces here and I’ve agreed.”

“Autobots?”

“It’s the name that spread amongst the ranks of those fighting back against the Decepticons,” the red and white mech explained.

“Has the Council agreed to retaliate then?” Hound asked, hope lighting up in his optics.

“The Council has crumbled and fled,” Ratchet scowled. “Optimus is now the non-official leader and everyone who wants to fight is flooding to him.”

“He’s a good mech.”

“He has no tactical experience, not like Megatron has,” Ratchet sighed. “Prowl’s going to have his work cut out.”

“Prowl?” Hound was shocked to hear the black and white’s name.

“After his release he joined Jazz at Optimus’ side. They’re basically his right and left hand now.”

Hound blinked. “I’ve really missed out on a lot.”

“Once things have calmed down a bit I’m sure someone will fill you in…”

Hound interrupted, “I want to join.”

The medic frowned. “Are you sure that’s wise? You’re not in the best of conditions to make such a monumental decision and you have Silverbolt to look after.”

The green mech glanced downwards again. “I don’t plan on leaving him, but I want to offer what I can.”

Ratchet didn’t look convinced, but had too much on his own CPU to argue. “I’ll see if I can find some sparkling energon in this place and get it sent over for you.”

“Thank you.”

“I’d say get some rest, but you’re not going to recharge until you fall into it from sheer exhaustion,” the red and white mech scowled and Hound gave him a lopsided, pathetic smile of agreement. Ratchet shook his head, but squeezed the green mech on the shoulder in consolation and encouragement before leaving. He was right. Hound was soon on his pedes pacing, half trying to get Silverbolt to recharge and half waiting for the slightest stirring in the bond. He felt useless and
pathetic just waiting around for something to happen. Hound was very much a mech that took action, rather than hanging around for someone else to supply the answers.

Mechs came and went, barely sparing Hound a glance as they took the supplies they needed from the shelves, though one came back with a sparkling berth with raised sides for him, offering him a tired smile as he pushed it alongside the berth. Hound murmured his thanks, trying not to miss the one from his home. It was just another little thing they had lost. Ratchet returned quite some time later with the sparkling energon himself, along with regular stuff for Hound. He gruffly apologised for being late, but said that chaos didn’t even being to cover what it had been like.

Hound didn’t really respond to that, only taking the sparkling’s ration. Ratchet set the other down on the berth when the green mech sat down on its edge, cradling Silverbolt in one arm as he offered him his energon. The silver sparkling screwed up his face and refused to take it, tired and upset.

“Come on little one,” Hound encouraged. “You’ve got to have your energon.”

“I could say the same thing to you,” Ratchet appeared at his elbow. “You’re not setting a good example.”

Hound sighed, pressing a kiss to the sparkling’s helm. “I know.”

“It would help if you could be happier around him too. He’s missing Thundercracker too and needs you to offer him more, not slip further away.”

“I know Ratchet.” Hound turned tired, barely angry optics to the medic before they went back to Silverbolt. “I used to think I knew what it felt like to be alone when I was a slave, but now I really know.”

“You’re not alone.” Ratchet laid a hand on one green shoulder and tickled Silverbolt’s abdomen with the other. The sparkling gurgled and kicked with his little legs happily. Ratchet watched Hound smile before he drew back to stand close by, studying the green mech as he cared for his sparkling. He was gentle and attentive, his joy and love for Silverbolt clear, even through his grief. Silverbolt settled, taking his energon quietly and when he was finished he rubbed his optics sleepily as Hound rocked him into recharge.

“Thundercracker used to do this,” Hound murmured as not to disturb the sparkling in his arms. “He used to walk around with Silverbolt, talking to him until he fell into recharge. His voice used to do the same to me when I’d had a hard day…”

The green helm bowed in sorrow, resting it lightly against Silverbolt’s. Ratchet sighed quietly before he came and retrieved the recharging sparkling from Hound, laying him in his crib without a sound from Silverbolt. When he was done the medic turned back to Hound and decided to just say what needed to be said. There was no way to do this gently.

“You must shut down your bond to Thundercracker.”

“What?” Hound shot upright, shock and anger on his face. “I’m not blocking him out!”

“We know he’s not dead,” Ratchet pointed out. “But you can’t sustain an unanswered bond like this. It would kill you eventually, draining all your energy away and that would kill Thundercracker.”

“But what if he reaches out to me and he can’t get to me because I’ve shut him out?” Hound demanded.

“You should be able to feel him through any block you make, if he really tries that hard.” The medic
folded his arms across his chest. “Do you really think you could live with that pain in your life, constantly?”

Hound looked away, hands clenching into fists. Ratchet was right. The pain in his spark was never ending, it was always looking for its other half and it would continue to do so as long as Hound let it. A block wouldn’t take away the loneliness or sorrow at Thundercracker no longer being there but it would stop the pain. It would let Hound relax, not having to work so hard to cope around it all and to stop that feeling filter down to Silverbolt. The sparkling was already suffering from the loss of one creator, feeling the other in constant pain would do him no good.

It felt like he was dying without Thundercracker, his world was falling apart but he couldn’t let it because Silverbolt was now dependent on him alone. No one else could build a block between sparkmates but the two directly involved, so if Hound didn’t do this, no would else could. It was solely his decision and that cut deep. He would have to make a choice to cut Thundercracker out of his spark to protect their sparkling.

“What about Silverbolt? He’s too young to know how to block Thundercracker out and I can’t keep the block in place permanently.”

“He will automatically start blocking out anything that causes him pain, but a bond between creator and offspring is different. You don’t share a spark, so eventually that bond diminishes over time anyway. Silverbolt will just lose his quicker and it won’t be dangerous to him either,” Ratchet explained.

Hound covered his chest with one black hand and bowed his head. It hadn’t been a conscious thought when he bonded, but he realised now just how much he had come to rely on the seeker to help balance him out. He hadn’t needed another half to make him whole, not in that sense, but Thundercracker made him a better mech just by constantly being here. Hound felt like he was going to have to start over again and he was scared by the thought.

He raised his blue optics to the recharging Silverbolt. No, he wasn’t alone and he couldn’t let Silverbolt be either. One mega-cycle he would get Thundercracker back, and every mega-cycle he would work towards that, but right now he had to take it one step at a time and the first step was now.
“Ratchet said ya were here.” A rough voice spoke up from the doorway and Hound looked up, startled.

“Ironhide! What are you doing here?”

“I joined.” The big black mech came into the room and Hound optics darted to the huge cannons on either forearm. Ironhide glanced down at them too and shrugged. “Ratchet wasn’t happy when I asked for him to install ‘em.”

“I never thought you’d fight,” Hound replied. “You’re retired.”

“Cons don’t care if ya’re retired or not.” Ironhide came across the room to Hound’s side and glanced down at the crib next to the desk. His face softened as he watched Silverbolt recharge for a moment. “He’s getting big now.”

Hound glanced at his sparkling before shaking his head. “What do you want?”

“Who’s to say I didn’t just come to catch up?” the big mech raised an optic ridge.

“You never came back to visit after Silverbolt was born,” Hound reminded him. “Even though we both asked you to.”

“Ya were a family,” Ironhide grunted. “Ya didn’t need me, ya needed each other.”

The green mech’s head dropped briefly. “We still do. What do you want Ironhide?”

The bulky mech shifted around on his pedes for a second before drawing a datapad out of subspace and regarding it for a moment.

“Optimus said I shouldn’t show ya this, but he’s a slagging idiot if he thinks he can hide this from ya.”

Hound’s optics watched the datapad as it was stretched out to him and he took it, somehow knowing it couldn’t be good news. He didn’t want to know if it was bad news, because the only bad news Optimus would try and hide from him would be about Thundercracker and he never wanted to hear bad news about him.

The datapad was already on, glowing faintly, and Hound saw it was a field report from a battle and it came with images. Pain seized his spark and he struggled to keep calm, knowing if he didn’t he’d scare Silverbolt. He instantly recognised Starscream and Skywarp in the first images, he’d know them anywhere, but he was over that trauma now. The pain came from seeing the third seeker in the picture with them; a blue one that swore he’d never fly with them again and promised he’d never wear the purple emblems on his wings.
“A trine… Megatron has his trine.” Hound’s voice sounded remarkably calm to his audios.

Ironhide nodded. “At least we know Thundercracker is online and healthy… Hound, ya seem to be taking this well.”

Hound had to admit he was. “We knew they had to have him, where else would he be? They must have done something to him, threatened him, to get him to join, something…” The rest of the report sank in. “Primus Altihex…”

Ironhide looked grim. “Megatron tested out his trine as the leading force on Altihex. It was a walkover.”

“But Iacon’s right on its border, why didn’t we hear about this?” Hound frowned at the report, reading it as rapidly as he could.

“It happened too quickly. They came out of Tagan Heights, in and out in barely half a cycle,” the black mech scowled. “The trine works too slagging well.” There was a sharp crack in the silence that followed as Hound crushed the datapad in his hand in anger. Ironhide looked away, scowl still in place, but didn’t take it back. “Optimus said if I was going to tell ya, then I had to also tell ya that ya should leave Ankmor. He wants ya in Iacon.”

“I told Optimus I wasn’t fighting until Silverbolt was into his adult upgrade.” Hound put the damaged datapad down and folded his arms over his chest.

“It’s not going to be safe here much longer,” Ironhide returned. “The Autobots don’t have the resources to defend somewhere as significantly unimportant as Ankmor.”

The green mech sighed, the fight leaving him. “Alright.”

Ironhide nodded, glanced once more at Silverbolt and then left without another word. Hound buried his head in his hands and listened to the silence fall as the black mech’s footsteps faded. There was nothing he could do, all he could think of was Thundercracker and those pictures and how much it meant he’d lost his sparkmate.

It had been two deca-cycles since their bond had fallen silent and Hound had struggled his way through life, gradually piecing himself back together, joining the Autobots almost straight away. Every mega-cycle he had searched for information about Thundercracker, but there had only been little snatches of news and rumours. Someone had claimed to see a blue, offline seeker being taken away from the Towers area by Decepticons. A badly distorted rumour had filtered through to Hound about a blue flyer in the care of a purple mech, though no one could fit a name to any mech. Hound kept trying, but had begun to realise that the Decepticons had been hiding Thundercracker away.

Now this report… Hound knew, without a shadow of a doubt, Thundercracker would never have flown alongside Starscream again and he would never have become a Decepticon either. His hatred of both was too great, so something had had to have happened. The green mech worried that they lied to his bonded, saying they had him or Silverbolt, threatening his life unless he did what they wanted, but then why was their bond silent? How was the bond silent unless Thundercracker was blocking it? Why would he do such a thing?

There were so many unanswered questions, and sitting here, behind a desk, trying to help without being on the frontline where he was needed, meant he got the news second or third hand. Hound glanced at Silverbolt and an unconscious smile curled his lips upwards as the sparkling, very nearly a youngling now, wriggled in recharge. However much he missed Thundercracker, he couldn’t endanger his own life by fighting because Silverbolt still needed him badly at this stage. Optimus had
understood his decision, but had asked Hound to join their frontline forces as soon as he would, because there was no one else with his abilities. It was one of the reasons he was posted out at Ankmor. It was significantly unimportant to keep them safer, unlike Praxus or Iacon, but it seemed that the Decepticons wanted all of Cybertron now.

Iacon would be more dangerous in some ways, since it was a main, future, target of the Decepticons, but it was also the Autobots main headquarters and most heavily guarded. Because of that, it was also where most of the family units were. Out in Ankmor there were very few other sparklings Silverbolt’s age for him to play with and Hound knew that wasn’t good for him. Iacon would give him a chance to experience more of life and perhaps change him out of the quiet, overly serious sparkling he’d become. Hound didn’t berate Silverbolt for being who he was, but he doubted he would have been this way if the war had never struck.

With a sigh Hound packed away his datapads before he stood, gently gathering Silverbolt up without waking him, even though he was getting heavy now. It would soon be time to see about getting a shuttle to their new ‘home’, but right now, Hound could use a break. He headed back to their cramped quarters and got himself settled into the only chair, Silverbolt nestled on his chest, still in recharge, and a cube of energon in the other hand.

The green mech sat quietly, enjoying the close contact with his sparkling and slowly finished his cube, feeling his systems wind down after being so tense. Silverbolt squirmed and let out a little squeak and Hound gently stroked his wings, lulling the sparkling back into full recharge. Being a creator, having Silverbolt by his side, made Hound feel good, even at the worst of times and before he realised it the green mech had slipped into a light recharge himself.

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Hound stared out the window of the shuttle as it flew over the bombed land below. Silverbolt lay in his arms, cuddled up to one of Hound’s hands that he was gently stroking the youngling with. He would soon be too big to hold like this, but Hound selfishly wanted the contact. The devastation was gradually spreading from city to city, enough that Optimus had ordered every sparkling and youngling to be sent to Iacon, along with any creators and carers who wished to go. A lot of femmes had decided to take on the role of carers when many of the mechs had decided to fight. Hound was very outnumbered on the shuttle and would be at the care centres in Iacon. He pulled his optics away from the window, finding the sight too hard to bear.

“Is he yours?” a soft voice asked and Hound found a femme smiling gently at him from across the aisle.

“Yes,” Hound glanced down at Silverbolt.

“He’s gorgeous. I can see flyer in him.” She looked up from her observation of the sparkling and asked tentatively. “His other creator?” Hound nodded, voice deserting him at the raw reminder that Thundercracker wasn’t here. “Are they still online?”

Hound nodded again, realising he was going to have to talk. “Yes… There hasn’t been any pain in our bond… not the way the medics say there should be if he…”

The femme frowned. “Is he fighting?”

It had been recommended that bonded pairs didn’t fight, because the loss of two mechs from the death of one in battle was more than the Autobots wanted to consider at this point.

“So I’m told,” Hound shuttered his optics briefly. He remembered when he’d seen the first report of
a blue seeker with purple Decepticon emblems on his wings and the pain it had caused him.

“I don’t understand,” the femme shook her head, confused by Hound’s non-answers.

The green mech shot her a sad smile, understanding why. “He’s a Decepticon.”

The femme gasped, one hand covering her mouth in shock as her optics darted to the red Autobot symbol on Hound’s shoulder, before she shrunk back in her seat. “Oh, I’m sorry… I didn’t mean to intrude.”

Hound watched her turn away in her seat and sighed. A lot of bots didn’t like the idea of him being bonded to a Decepticon so Hound didn’t tell many of them, not unless the conversation led to it, like this one had, because despite the looks, he wasn’t going to deny who he was bonded to. He loved Thundercracker and wasn’t going to turn his back on his mate, ever. Hound would always wait for him to come back into his life again.

It had been hard to admit it to himself that Thundercracker was a Decepticon now, regardless of whether he was willing or not, he still carried the symbols and he still fought for them. That’s how everyone else would see the blue seeker now and Hound couldn’t argue the fact, not without giving them their entire history and there were some things that were better left in private. Even then, he couldn’t explain why Thundercracker was doing what he was. Hound had seen it in Ironhide’s optics as he’d handed over the datapad; he thought Thundercracker was lost now. He hadn’t said it, but the green mech knew he thought Thundercracker must be fighting voluntarily now, otherwise why wasn’t he communicating via the bond?

Hound stayed lost in thought until they arrived at Iacon. The noise of the docking woke Silverbolt and he scrambled upright to peer out the little window on Hound’s right, optics wide as he took in all the bots moving around outside. The green mech stayed until everyone else had departed, letting Silverbolt watch, before he picked his youngling up, cradling Silverbolt in one arm. The mechlet wrapped his arms around Hound’s neck to hold on as Hound disembarked from the shuttle and made his way across the metal deck towards the exit.

“Home?” the youngling tapped his fingers on Hound’s shoulder and the green mech smiled slightly.

“This is Iacon. It’s our new home now.”

“Daddy?” Silverbolt looked hopeful and Hound felt the smile waver.

“No, I’m sorry Silverbolt. He’s not here.”

The youngster looked a little crestfallen at that but was soon distracted by all the noise and bustle. Hound made his way carefully through the crowds created by many ships docking at once, looking for someone to ask for directions or just some directions, and eventually that led him out of the docking area and into a main thoughfare though Iacon. As the press of chassis’ thinned Silverbolt wriggled and asked, “Down?”

“Alright, but you’ve got to hold my hand,” Hound instructed before he set the silver mechlet down on his pedes. Silverbolt obediently took hold of his creator’s hand and the pair started walking again, albeit more slowly now, with Silverbolt still trying to look at everything as he walked. He was confident on his pedes now, even with the weight of his wings on his back, and as they walked he was full of questions, but patient enough to wait for answers. Hound explained everything as best he could, eventually finding their new quarters, then the crèche where Silverbolt would be taken care of when Hound needed the space to work.
Amongst some of the other younglings already there was a dark grey and red mechlet of Silverbolt’s age, tucked away in a back corner, deeply engrossed in a datapad. As Hound talked to the femme in charge Silverbolt made his way over to the other youngling, noticing with excitement that he was a flyer, and sat down beside him. When he looked up the silver youngling, Silverbolt asked, “What you reading?”

Blue optics blinked at him and then the datapad was turned around so Silverbolt could see the screen. “It’s about flyers.”

The glowing pad was filled with pictures of lots of different types of transformers that could take to the skies and Silverbolt smiled widely.

“It looks good.”

The other youngling nodded rapidly. “It is. I’m Skydive.”

“Silverbolt. Favourite one?”

And with that Skydive truly opened up and started talking. By the time Hound was ready to go the two younglings were curled up together, datapad held between them as they nattered animatedly. The femme who Hound had been talking to smiled.

“That’s good. I was worried Skydive wouldn’t talk to anyone. He loves reading more than he does socialising with others.”

“Silverbolt would talk to anyone,” Hound replied, feeling infinitely pleased that his son had found a kindred spirit so soon and that he had apparently found one in a youngling that needed a friend…

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Looking back now, Hound realised that those days had been easier for Silverbolt. There had been no pressure on him, no difficult questions about his other creator because the younglings at that stage weren’t old enough to grasp the mechanics of missing parental units. They just weren’t there, that was the norm, but as they grew so did their curiosity and Silverbolt found himself struggling against prejudice. Not only was Hound, one of his creators, a ground mech, making him less than pure flyer, but his other creator was a known Decepticon.

Hound had kept that quiet, but Silverbolt had wanted to understand where Thundercracker was, so the green mech had told him. Perhaps too early, because the youngling didn’t understand that having a creator who was part of a faction that had destroyed a lot of family units would be a sore point. He had been quite open as to who Thundercracker was and been on the receiving end of vindictive taunts, though Skydive and a few others hadn’t joined in. Thundercracker’s reputation for being a highly skilled flyer vastly appealed to the youngling flyers, regardless of his side in the war. Silverbolt was proud of his seeker creator, yet at the same time scared of his reputation as he wanted to live up to everything his missing parental unit seemed to be.

The other younglings, the other flyers in particular, were much more open and braver about trying new things. Silverbolt rarely did anything he was dared to do; it was just part of his sensible nature, but that made him boring in the other younglings’ optics, though Skydive didn’t seem to care either way. What they didn’t know, or understand, was most of their dares involved flying and Silverbolt was afraid of doing just that. Hound had done his best to encourage Silverbolt to fly, but he knew it was his fault his sparkling hated it. The green mech always felt a pang deep in his spark when he saw Silverbolt take to the air, for he reminded him intensely of Thundercracker and his loss. Silverbolt picked up on his sadness, however unconsciously and knew it caused his creator pain.
“You mustn’t let them push you into doing things you don’t want to do.” Hound looked up from inspecting the long but superficial scratch down Silverbolt’s arm.

“I know, but they said Dad was a coward again,” Silverbolt admitted. “And that I was and that I wasn’t a proper flyer because you’re a ground mech.”

“Neither of you is a coward and it doesn’t matter about who I am, it doesn’t make you less of a flyer.” Hound stroked his youngling’s head. “Thundercracker would be so very proud of you. You’re clever and loyal.”

“He would have taught me to fly wouldn’t he?” Silverbolt whispered.

“Yes darling and he would have loved every breem of it.”

“I miss him.”

In truth Silverbolt didn’t remember his seeker creator but missed the idea of having both creators, especially when Hound talked to him of Thundercracker. Hound gathered the youngling up in his arms, still not quite able to believe how much he’d grown and that one mega-cycle soon he’s be taller than him. His wings were nearly fully developed, making them oversized on his chassis, which was completely normal for any flyer of his age, but that leant him an air of innocence.

“I do too.” Hound released his youngling, holding him at arm’s length to get a good look at him. “Now get going you and have some fun, alright?”

Silverbolt smiled and nodded vigorously. “There’s a new ship docking today. I heard it’s got flyers on it! One’s my age!”

“Really? Well then you better go meet him and show him around then hadn’t you?” Hound already knew who was on the transport and hoped Silverbolt would get on well with the other youngling flyer. “Take Skydive with you. He always likes going to the transport docks.”

The silver youngling beamed widely at him, always willing to show anyone new around. The docking crews were fond of the youngster who greeted nearly every new ship to Iacon with enthusiasm and seemingly endless patience. One mech had remarked to Hound that he always seemed to be looking for someone, but never seemed worried when they didn’t appear. It was like he knew he’d see him later. He hadn’t seen the way Hound had momentarily crumpled emotionally as pain flared from his spark.

Hound had found it so hard to keep the family together, so far apart. He had raised Silverbolt how he hoped Thundercracker would have done, trying to be both creators for Silverbolt, so that he would know his seeker creator when he met him. The green mech didn’t dare think what would happen if Thundercracker didn’t recognise Silverbolt for who he was because he knew it would break the youngling’s spark.

It would still be some time before Silverbolt would even be allowed to attempt his first transformation sequence that would be after his final adult upgrade, but once he did he would be considered an adult. Hound had brief flash back to a conversation he had had recently with Silverbolt that had truly scared him. The grey youngling had told him that he was going to join the Autobots, only he didn’t want Hound to be angry with him, but he wanted him to understand he thought it was the right thing to do. The green mech’s first instinct was to tell the young flyer that he wasn’t ever allowed to fight, but he had realised that would be hypocritical, considering his own stance on the war. Hound had only laid down a few restrictions that Silverbolt had agreed to. He had to be an adult and confident with his transformation, even when flying, knowing that implied he had to be secure on the wing. If
he was really his sire’s offspring, then Silverbolt would be just as graceful in the air as Thundercracker, even with his fear.

Hound watched Silverbolt dash out the door before he seated himself down at the desk, glancing at the stack of datapads next to the terminal and had a fleeting wish to be out in the wilds of Cybertron, far, far away from this. He quickly pushed it away. He had been committed to the Autobot cause long before they had even borne that name and the green mech wouldn’t change that decision now. It was just sitting behind a desk endlessly that was being to wear at him now. The terminal beeped at him and Hound answered it with a sigh, which he smothered as soon as he saw Optimus.

“Yes sir?”

“Hound,” the big mech greeted. “Have you considered when you’ll be back?”

The green mech knew this was coming. “Silverbolt is due to be upgraded for the final time. After that, I’ll rejoin the front line forces.”

“How is Silverbolt?”

“He’s growing into a good mech,” Hound smiled.

“I’ve heard some of his teachers call him sensible, beyond his years,” Optimus commented.

Hound nodded. “He is. He always has been. I think because Thundercracker hasn’t been here, he’s grown up too fast.”

Optimus gave the green mech a sad smile. “Hound I received a request from Silverbolt to join the Autobots when he comes of age.”

“I know. We talked about it. I said he’d have to wait until he was old enough and as much as I don’t want to see him join this war, it’s his choice.”

“I see.” Optimus paused for a moment. “Hound I’m considering making Silverbolt an offer. We need a team of flyers to counter the seeker trines and I want Silverbolt to lead it.”

Hound stared at his leader, who knew just how precious Silverbolt was to him. What he was offering would put him on the front lines, right at the heart of the danger. The seeker trines were deadly, competent and most of all, very experienced. All of this flashed through Hound’s CPU but it didn’t stand a chance against his most vivid thought.

“You want to put him up against Thundercracker. Optimus, how could you even think to ask either of us that!”

“There is a good chance their bond would stop Thundercracker firing on Silverbolt, however unconsciously, which gives us an advantage. Hound I know you don’t like it. I don’t either, but we need every chance we’ve got.”

Hound’s hands clenched into fists, out of sight of Optimus, betraying his anger. “And what about Silverbolt’s fear of heights?”

Optimus tone was calm. “He’ll learn to adapt. I’ve been told he’s improving.”

“He’s still terrified by it, but he’s forcing himself not to show it so the others don’t mock him anymore than they already do.” Hound narrowed his optics.
“One new scientist in our ranks has been looking at his problem and has proposed an interesting solution to help both him and the war,” the big mech told him. “If Silverbolt and the other four flyers we have chosen agree to it, we would like them to become a gestalt. It would be a great advantage.”

Hound’s optics widen in surprise. “A gestalt? I didn’t think it was possible with unrelated mechs.”

“Information has come from the Decepticons which suggests they have cracked it and it has led us to believe we could do the same thing,” Optimus explained. “Jazz ran a great risk to steal the information, from Shockwave no less.”

“With or without permission this time?” Hound asked, one optic ridge raised.

The big mech smiled slightly. “With, for once. Jazz is also pretty sure the intrusion went undetected, so with any luck the Decepticons won’t know about this until it is too late.”

Hound nodded. From what he understood about gestalts, the connection the group would share was somewhere between a sibling bond and a sparkmate bond. They could share everything between them, communicate faster than words or actions, but they would survive if one of their number died. That wordless support and understanding would seriously help bolster Silverbolt’s personal fears and let him concentrate on leading others. It was an incredibly brave, trusting offer from Optimus considering Silverbolt had no experience and no one knew what he’d really do under pressure in a battle.

“I know you’re not happy with my decision Hound,” Optimus continued. “It’s not one I took lightly, but the casualty figures are too high and Silverbolt has shown the most promise on becoming a steady, careful but determined mech, which is just who we need to lead a group of flyers.”

Hound knew what he was getting at. Flyers had a reputation for being spontaneous, reckless and over-confident. They needed someone to hold them in check slightly. Thundercracker was that mech for his trine and it was looking like Silverbolt was taking after his seeker creator in yet another way.

“Who else are you asking to be part of this gestalt?”

Optimus paused, clearly thinking how much information he could divulge. “Skydive is one mech you already know.”

Hound frowned. “I didn’t think he would want to fight.”

“Someone persuaded him his knowledge of aerial military tactics would save lives.” Optimus shook his head. “I didn’t want to put pressure on any of our younglings to join, but it is hard for others not do that, not with how the war is going. Fireflight, Slingshot and Air Raid are the other three mechs.”

Hound knew all three of those younglings, since flyers weren’t all that common in Iacon, and knew they each had their problems. Slingshot had been one of the other flyers that had often taunted Silverbolt, but had stood up for him against anyone else, almost like he was the only one who was allowed to be cruel. Fireflight was a pleasant youngling, though highly distractable and often involved in accidents, generally with Air Raid nearby. Somehow, thought, despite their differences, or perhaps it was because of them, the five younglings were nearly always in each other company. Hound could see Optimus’ reasoning behind his choices and even if it still stung, he also knew their Prime was forced to make hard decisions he didn’t want to in this war.
The scout put down his report when his personal terminal relayed he had a private message coming in and opened the link to reveal Silverbolt, who smiled at him tiredly.

“I know, I’m over a cycle late.”

Hound smiled back in reassurance. “That’s alright, I was a little late in getting back anyway and there’s always reports to do.”

“Tell me about it,” Silverbolt rubbed his head.

“How was training?”

“We tried out some combiner manoeuvres today. Fireflight crashed several times, but all in all, it wasn’t bad.” The Aerialbot rotated a shoulder like he was stiff. “I just wish we could be better, faster. We’re safe in Iacon, practicing and everyone else is out risking their lives.”

“You need to be good to stand a chance,” Hound reminded his youngling, even though Silverbolt was firmly an adult now. “Don’t knock the practice.”

Silverbolt smiled. “I know, I know, but everyone still feels bad.”

“It’s Air Raid and Slingshot isn’t it?” The flyer paused for a moment before nodding and Hound asked, “Are they listening to you more now?”

“Yeah. The bond has settled now and I think we’re all starting to understand each other better.” The grey mech touched his chest absently. “Speaking of which, I’m being nagged at again.”

Hound felt one side of his mouth curl upwards as he watched his offspring tilt his head slightly, clearly listening to something over the bond. However new the gestalt’s link was, all five Aerialbots had taken to it well and now they were finally learning to accept each other’s flaws. “I’ll let you get back to them.”

“I’m sorry. You don’t have to go, I can…”

Hound shook his head. “No, that’s alright. I’ll speak to you soon.”


And then the picture went blank, leaving Hound with his work, alone again. That had been something else that he’d learnt to adapt to. When they had lost Thundercracker, the pair of them had each other to rely on, but now Silverbolt was part of the Superion gestalt, then Hound was left much more on his own.

The green mech shook his head, ridding himself of his melancholy thoughts, as he heard the sound
of pedefalls heading down the corridor towards his room. There was no one else down this way at
the moment; most were out on assignments, so Hound could guess the mech was coming to see him.
He opened the door from his terminal and put away his report.

“Hound.” The green mech looked up to see Jazz was leaning in the doorway, arms folded. “I
shouldn’t be tellin’ ya this. I ain’t told anyone else, though Prowler thinks ‘m holdin’ back on ‘im.”
The black and white used his hip to push up from the frame, letting the door close behind him as he
came into the room. “When I was diggin’ round Shockers’ data stores I came ‘cross reference t’ the
‘Trine Project’.” Hound froze, intakes stopping dead. “I didn’t have ‘nough time t’ look properly, but
from what I got, Shockwave did summat t’ Thundercracker t’ make ‘im forget his life ‘fore the war. I
don’t know how he did it, but he ain’t holdin’ out on ya deliberately.”

“Then there’s a chance, if I can talk to him, to try and break the hold…” Hound whispered.

“I ain’t sayin’ that,” Jazz warned. “I can’t encourage ya t’ put yaself in danger, ya know that.”

“But you told me this, it’s pretty much the same thing,” the green mech frowned.

“I happened t’ mention, in passin’, t’ some mech, that I saw other things in Shockwave’s computer,”
Jazz shook his head. “I’m supposed t’ help run this army, not help individuals with their own personal
troubles.”

Hound nodded slowly. “Alright, thank you Jazz.”

“Ya welcome!” the black and white said cheerily, serious attitude disappearing in a pump beat. “See
ya round Hound.” With that he let himself out of the room, leaving Hound consider what he’d do if
he was ever given the opportunity which might never come. It went without saying that he had to try
to talk to Thundercracker, but just what he’d say, and what Thundercracker would do was an
unknown entity. If their luck changed then just seeing each other might break the hold Shockwave
had placed in his mate’s CPU, but Shockwave was very good at what he did and Hound knew, if he
wanted to be honest with himself, that wasn’t really going to happen. Hound didn’t want to, refused
to, contemplate the idea of Thundercracker never recovering who he was and coming back home.
They had scientists just as good as Shockwave and the green mech wouldn’t let them give up on his
bonded.

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Whether it was Primus’ will or just the way the war was turning it was but only a joor later Hound
found himself on a frontline battle again, one dominated by the jets screaming by overhead, both
Decepticon and Autobot. There was one enemy seeker that kept drawing the green mech’s attention
though and he was caught between admiring his skill in the air and wincing at every accurate shot he
laid out. Hound watched him circle around the line, clearly looking for someone and Hound’s optics
flickered up and down the line, searching for someone who’d be important enough to be a target.

Prowl was standing back from the lines, directing the troops from his higher position and his black
and white paint job made him easily visible, but he wasn’t alone. At his side stood a grey and red
mech of similar Praxian design, a sniper rifle held steadily in his hands. Bluestreak was a relatively
new member of the Autobot forces and this was one of the first times he had been on the frontline.
His traumatic past meant he really was unsuitable for fighting, that and his young age, but he had
been discovered to be one pit of a shot as a sniper and had been assigned to protect Prowl when he
was such a target.

Hound could see it coming even before Bluestreak raised his rifle, tracked Thundercracker across the
sky and fired off a perfect shot that tore up one stabilising thruster and badly damaged a main jet. The
scout flinched when the blue seeker spiralled out of control and crashed into the ruins, but it gave him an opportunity that he didn’t think he’d get again. He shifted behind his shelter and Ironhide glanced over at him, a scowl marring his face, and Hound realised he knew exactly what he was thinking. The black mech obviously realised he couldn’t stop Hound when he said shortly, “I’m comin’ after ya if ya take too long.”

Hound nodded and then darted from his cover, heading along the Autobot frontline to its far edge where he could slip into the ruins undetected. He pulled a well used hologram over him, hiding himself under a cover of smoke and ran from ruined wall to damaged column, heading towards Decepticon line through the no-mech’s land between the two lines. The green mech slowed when he reached the area he was sure Thundercracker had gone down in and lost the hologram so he could concentrate more on his sensors. Movement drew him onwards but a moment of carelessness, caused by apprehension about seeing Thundercracker, meant he kicked a piece of debris and it clattered across the floor. Hound swore silently before swinging around the partition he was behind to come face to face with an armed, pissed looking Thundercracker, who was slowly backing up across the floor. He could see the look in his optics and knew he was a nano-second away from dying.

“Thundercracker, wait.” Hound held out his hands towards the seeker, empty and pleading. The blue mech continued to keep the gun levelled at him but stopped moving and didn’t shoot him either.

“Who the frag are you?”

The pain that burned through Hound at that was as bad as if Thundercracker had actually shot him and his voice wavered slightly. “I know you won’t believe me, but I’m your sparkmate…”

“Frag off.”

“Please, just… All I want to do is tell you a story.” Hound lowered his hands. “All you have to do is hear me out. That’s it.” The red optics narrowed suspiciously but Thundercracker remained silent. “If you don’t remember me, then I’ve got to ask you, when you were a Lord, who was your bodyguard?” Thundercracker frowned but Hound answered for him. “Ironhide. The same Ironhide who fights in the Autobots.”

The black helm shook from side to side. “He betrayed me, burned my home down.”

“No, that was Starscream.” Hound tilted his head to one side. “Do you remember when you first met Megatron? At a party. Optimus was there as well. Megatron spent all evening staring at you and the other seekers.”

“I…” Thundercracker lowered his arm. “Yes, I remember that…”

“Who was at your side all evening?”

“I… Ironhide…”

“No, I was. I was your body guard after Ironhide. I was your slave.” Hound touched his neck in emphasis. “You bought me from Swindle, untrained, to be your guard.”

“You’re lying.”

“You taught me how to shoot better. You let me be myself when I was alone with you.” Hound felt memories spring up in his CPU, tearing at his spark. “We grew attracted to each other.”

“I never…” The seeker turned away slightly. “Stop lying. I would never touch a ground pounder.”
“You like flying alone because you can talk to yourself without worrying that mechs will overhear,” Hound told him, ignoring the insult. “You like to be the dominating force when you interface with someone, not because you want to be in charge, but because you want to make your partner feel as good as they can. You drink your energon before you go in the washracks after training. You hate it when Starscream thinks he can take without asking, especially because you don’t.”

“You’ve been spying on me…”

“What did they tell you happened with your home?”

“Someone in my household betrayed me. The Autobots were afraid of me joining the Decepticons, giving them my wealth, so they struck first,” Thundercracker glared at him.

“Doesn’t sound much like them to me,” Hound returned levelly. “You left to go talk to the attackers, remember that?” Thundercracker nodded. “Who did you leave in the house?”

“I…”

“You were going to meet someone in the midst of the attack weren’t you? What happened? Why did you never get there?” Hound pushed.

“Stop it!” Thundercracker snapped. “You’re just confusing things. I had bad CPU damage in the attack. I can’t remember it properly.”

“Is that what they told you?” Hound inched forward towards the seeker. “What did they tell you about why your spark feels empty? That dull ache that’s always there.”

Thundercracker’s hand landed on his chest. “How did you….? No. You…the Autobots, planted a virus in it, in the attack, when I was offline. I’ve got to keep a block on it, to stop it spreading.”

“That’s the lie.” Hound touched his own chest. “Mine feels like that because it’s being blocked from its other half and it’s always calling out to it.” With that Hound opened his bond wide, letting the pain in more, pushing the call out to the spark not five mechanometers away.

Thundercracker backed away. “You… you’re doing that… Stop it!”

“Please,” Hound held out his hands. “Just drop the block and you’ll see I’m not lying.”

“No!” Thundercracker shouted, turning and running off into the ruins. Hound didn’t go after him, just sank to his knees as sadness overwhelmed him and he buried his face in his hands. That’s how Ironhide found him a breem later.

“Hound?” he knelt down beside him. “How did it go?”

“He didn’t shoot ya.” Ironhide heaved the mech to his pedes. “That’s something.”

“He ran away,” Hound shook his head. “He’ll never let me get that close again. I’ve really lost him.”

Ironhide hadn’t believed Thundercracker would listen in the first place, but hadn’t said that because it would have been cruel to Hound. Now, though, it would be cruel, surely, to keep Hound’s hope burning. “C’mon, we can’t stay here. Move out.”

Hound obeyed automatically, trudging back to the line as Ironhide watched their backs. The black mech said nothing as they walked, unable to think of anything to say that wouldn’t hurt and deciding
silence was better than that. He glanced back over his shoulder again and wondered just what the blue seeker was thinking.

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Thundercracker stopped, pedes aching. Flyers weren’t meant to run long distances. The blue seeker snarled angrily, slamming one fist into a wall. He was confused, in pain and fragged off. His thoughts were in turmoil from all the green Autobot had said. It couldn’t be true, it was just lies. Thundercracker shook his head violently, trying to stop his traitorous thoughts, but something nagged at him.

There were things that didn’t make sense, things that the green mech had said that illuminated holes in his memories. Holes from long before that attack on his home, ones that shouldn’t have been affected and then when he’d done… that thing to his spark. Thundercracker shuddered. He knew the virus, lying in a dormant state deep within his spark just needed him to relax his guard for a moment for it to take over and corrupt him. That green mech had made his grip on it waver and how could he have done such a thing? No one could touch that block… Not even Shockwave could build anything like it, even though he’d tried when Thundercracker had been in his care, recovering.

A frown creased the seeker face. Shockwave… That mech’s name always sparked up buried memories, laced with pain from his time fighting to live through his injuries. There had been things he hadn’t understood, but that he’d put down to delirium due to his pain: mentions of a project, a sparkling, someone called Hound…

The flyer’s spark pulsed at that thought and Thundercracker angrily thumped his chest, hating it for a brief moment. Starscream always took great pleasure in telling him he was defective, how lucky he was to be able to fly under his leadership, that he let him live when Megatron wanted to offline him. A surge of familiar hatred flared up then and the blue mech’s frown turned to a snarl and he forced himself to transform, taking to the air despite the pain emanating from his damaged thrusters. He wavered in the air, but Thundercracker wasn’t one third of Megatron’s lead trine by being a second rate flyer.

The blue seeker set himself back on course for the nearest base, still deep in thought. Starscream was always throwing his weight around, more than he ever did before and Thundercracker knew he hated him, but sensed it emanated from a deeper reasoning than the Air Commander being a slagging glitch. That reason eluded him though, and it was just another thing that annoyed the mech, with there being nothing in his memories to give him a basis for it, not unless that Autobot had been right…

There was so much that was beginning not to add up and Thundercracker knew he would never get any straight answers from anyone in the Decepticon camp. Lying was second nature, but that meant the only option was the Autobots and why would they tell any enemy an honest truth? An image of the green scout flickered through his CPU and Thundercracker seethed quietly all the way back to his own lines. He was going to get some answers and if that Autobot was the only one who would give them to him, so be it.
Hound was just about to initiate his recharge cycle when the klaxon sounded, summoning everyone to their battle stations. Despite the fatigue settling over him like a cloud, the scout obeyed the call, running through the corridors until he reached the command post where he received his orders. A supply convoy, heading for Iacon had been intercepted by Decepticon bombers and they were heavily outnumbered. Every able bodied mech that could be spared was being sent straight out to help.

A joor later the convoy was safe behind Iacon’s shield, the bombers had fled and Hound had been sketchily debriefed. He had drunk his emergency energon ration during the fighting in an attempt to stave off the approaching exhaustion and was now running on fumes. The scout desperately needed to refuel, but more than that, recharge and that’s exactly where he was heading. He grabbed a cube from a station in passing, drank it as he walked and collapsed onto his berth as soon as he was within range.

Only two cycles later the klaxon was ringing again and Hound jerked online before he muttered a tired oath. He scrambled to his feet and went straight to the command post again, where he found Optimus organising troops with Prowl. The green mech looked around until he spotted a tall, red frontline warrior he knew and collared him. “You know what’s going on?”

“Rumour is Kalis has been hit,” Sideswipe replied. “We’re going to look for survivors.”

Hound frowned at him. “I didn’t think you did rescue work.”

The red mech lifted up his hand and transformed it into a pile driver. “Mech of many talents.”

Prowl ordered for everyone to be quiet before he gave out orders and the assigned mechs filed out to the transports. There was a steady hum of voices as the transports ships flew across Autobot territory into Kalis. The city was already heavily damaged, but there was still a population living there, either too stubborn to move or part of the Autobot forces. The transports landed on the far side of Kalis, away from the Decepticon line, and the rescuers and back-up troops poured out. Some already had their orders and immediately began splitting up. Hound was one of those left standing around Optimus, knowing his orders were going to be more specific and he was right.

“Blaster, do you have control of the airwaves?”

A tall red mech appeared next to Prime, frowning down at the open section of his chest that was laid out like a screen, displaying complex information.

“Soundwave ain’t here right now, so I’m good. If he does, things might get interestin’.”

“Hound, I want you scouting ahead,” Optimus ordered, finger raised to point in the direction he was to go. “If this is a trap I want to know about it. If there are survivors in there I want you to mark their position.”
“Yes sir,” Hound nodded before turning, transforming as he did so and powering off towards the bombed area and the threat of the enemy. It took him a while to get to the area that had recently been decimated, with the whole city being in such a mess, but he was built to take on the rough terrain and was aware this is why he was chosen to come. With his sensors sweeping the destroyed buildings Hound soon registered spark signatures and left small range beacons for the rescue teams that would be coming behind him. It hurt not to be able to dig the survivors out himself, but that wasn’t his job and he was making the task easier for the mechs equipped to do such a job.

The green mech, after about half a cycle, came across an utterly demolished section of the highway and was forced to transform to take the next section on pede. Whilst he was negotiating the ruins he picked up movement ahead of him and paused, searching for whatever had triggered his sensors. Right on the edge of his awareness the scout could just detect a spark signature, but it was heavily shielded, like someone was trying to hide. It was also moving.

Hound’s suspicion rose. A survivor may well be trying to hide, but to find one capable of moving at the speed this one was made Hound wonder why he hadn’t made his way across the city to safety. The Decepticons were still in the area, but apparently content after their reign of destruction to remain on ‘their’ side of the city. This mystery mech could well be a scout, or worse, a Decepticon disguised as a survivor to get into Iacon and at their information. It wouldn’t be the first time the Decepticons had tried that particular little ruse.

There was a good chance Hound hadn’t been detected yet. His sensors had a better range than most others, but a signal back to the Autobots could well be traced and if this was a spy Hound didn’t want to tip him off that he’d been spotted. The green mech wasn’t built for stealth, he was no Mirage, but he wasn’t a lead scout for nothing and decided to risk sneaking closer to ascertain this mech’s identity.

Hound was roughly twenty mechnanometers from the other mech, with no indication that he’d been spotted when his comms flared into life, Blaster on the other end. ‘All Autobots…’

Harsh static cut him off and Hound paused, knowing that the message would have included him, but unsure of what do now. His own comline was just filled with the same white noise, which meant someone was blocking all communications. Clearly it hadn’t been Blaster which left only Soundwave with the capability, and complete communication blackout generally heralded an attack.

That thought had only just formed when the skyline lit up a fiery red as the Decepticons open up with heavy artillery and bombing runs right into the middle of the rescue mission. Hound swung back around to face his own line and was torn with indecision. Blaster’s broadcast had been cut and Hound suspected it had contained his new orders, but he had no way of knowing what they were. He could go back to the main Autobot forces and join the fight there, or continue out here looking for the survivors that would now need him more than anything.

Being distracted meant the green scout was no longer paying close attention to the spark signal he had detected and didn’t notice it grow dangerously close, nor did he register that he recognised it. Had Hound done so he wouldn’t have been caught by surprise when the wall not two mechanometers from his head exploded in a shower of shrapnel, making the green mech flinch away and shutter his optics. When he opened them again he found a blue seeker standing in front of him, gun pointing straight at his spark.

“Thundercracker…” Hound said softly, hope marring his voice.

The other mech grunted harshly, “I should kill you, but if you’re right, then I’d kill myself and I don’t want to put that theory to the test.”

“All you have to do to prove that theory is open up the block on your spark.” Hound touched his
own chest. “If it doesn’t call to mine, then kill me.”

Thundercracker stared at him for a long moment before lowering his arm. “That could just be a way to get me to release the virus in my own system.”

“Your own side isn’t that far away.” Hound shook his head. “But does that really sound like an Autobot thing to do?”

Thundercracker snorted, clearly agreeing, but unwilling to say it. “What’s your name?”

“Hound.” He met the red optics, seeing the confusion in them and opened the bond wide again. The pain of it going unanswered crawled through him and Hound knew if Thundercracker didn’t answer him this time he might not be able to take the shattering loneliness of doing it again.

The seeker twitched, being able to feel something beat against his block. The name Hound haunted him, ringing true with memories from that time of pain, and he dropped the block, hoping for answers when that name made his spark pulse. Both of them gasped as they felt each other’s presence to the depth of their core: Thundercracker doubled over as emotions that were not his own shot through him and Hound slumped against the wall, overwhelmed to feel his mate again. He couldn’t help the swell of love and gratefulness towards the seeker and that made Thundercracker look up.

“That’s…” the blue mech stepped towards Hound unsteadily. “Familiar… Primus I didn’t know…”

“It’s ok.” Hound reached out, taking one hand between his. “It’s ok now. It’s ok.” He repeated it, not quite believing it himself.

Thundercracker stared at their hands and then up to Hound’s face. The green mech watched that shock morph into something recognisable, yet it was something he hadn’t seen for nearly a vorn. Raging desire flared up in the seeker and it flooded straight into Hound who moaned, dragging the blue mech towards him. Their kiss was rough, almost as rough as Thundercracker was with Hound as he shoved him hard up against the wall, fingers digging into seams. The green mech groaned, his own hands scraping over all those spots on the seeker he had never forgotten, and giving as good as he received.

Thundercracker hoisted him up and Hound wrapped his legs around the white hips, sliding his port covering back in time for the seeker to fill him with his jack. Their mating was intense and desperate. Somewhere in the back of his processor Hound realised they were out in the open where anyone could see them, but he couldn’t summon up the energy to care about how dangerous that was.

“More,” Hound demanded and then split open his chest plates to bare his spark. The seeker growled, the blue of Hound’s spark reflecting in his red optics as he stared down at it before Hound’s own blue optics were reflecting the light from Thundercracker’s spark. The seeker pushed his chest forward, merging the two sparks without warning and both of them cried out as their overloads slammed through them.

Thundercracker’s legs gave way then and they both hit the dirt roughly, the action jolting their joined sparks and bodies. That hurt enough draw a wince from Hound and then a cry of pain when something slammed through their bond like an energon sword. Thundercracker choked on a scream, hands tightening on Hound as the programme and coding placed in his CPU by Shockwave splintered. Flashes of images, both real and fake, overwhelmed the seeker and he collapsed backwards away from Hound, breaking their merged sparks, but the damage was already done. Thundercracker grabbed his head as the pain intensified. The programme was an active one and it was trying to regain control of his CPU but the open bond and newly rediscovered sparkmate were
making it impossible.

“Thundercracker!” Hound scrambled to his side, his own chest closing. He could feel the shots of agony over their bond and could guess what was going on but felt so helpless. Had he known this would have happened he would have waited until they were both safe before trying. Right now, out in battle and a fair distance from the Autobot line was about as far as they could get from safe. “Hold on. Help’s coming.” The seeker could barely hear him but took some comfort from his presence when Hound wrapped his arms around him.

‘Hound to Ironhide!’

‘Hound! Where the frag did ya get to?’

‘Bring Ratchet now! I found Thundercracker!’

‘Slag, Hound, this is the worse timing ever. We’re getting our afts handed to us out here.’

‘Well unless you want to lose me to the Cons, someone better come meet us because I am not leaving him now he remembers!’

‘Remembers? Cut the slag and get your aft back here!’

Hound tersely agreed, realising they would be safer there than here and cut the comms. He looked around, trying to locate somewhere nearby that gave them more shelter than the half a wall they had just interfaced against, but there was nothing. That’s why he’d been out here in the first place; he and Mirage were the only ones really capable of getting so close to enemy lines with so little cover.

He could carry Thundercracker and cover them with a hologram but he was well within the no go zone in the city and had been for some time, so Hound really didn’t know if he had the energy left to do both for as long as it needed him to do it. His emergency ration hadn’t been replaced since the last battle when he’d been forced to use it, so that option was out, unless…

“Thundercracker.” Hound tried to get the seeker to register his presence, but got no response beyond an incoherent moan of pain. “Don’t panic, I’m just going to look through your subspace pockets.” The scout gently manoeuvred Thundercracker around in his arms so he could reach and grimaced as he overrode the seeker’s safety catches, making the panel whine in protest as he forced the subspace pocket open. The blue mech never flinched so Hound supposed he couldn’t even feel the new pain above what was screaming in his CPU.

Their luck gave them one emergency ration of energon, of which Hound drank two-thirds before trying to force the rest down Thundercracker. He choked and lost a great deal of it but swallowed some, which was better than nothing. Hound could feel the effects of the highly concentrated energon starting in his systems so he slung the seeker over his free shoulder, got his pedes under him and hauled himself upright, grunting in effort. Once he was standing Hound then covered them with a hologram to make them look like drifting smoke and set off back towards the Autobot line, or where he hoped it still was. If the battle really was going badly Optimus would have called a retreat to protect his troops over holding this particular line.

Thundercracker let out occasional moans of agony, but he seemed to have mostly passed out, for which Hound was grateful. He wasn’t entirely sure what was going on in his CPU but the pain across the bond was enough that Hound was truly worried for his mate.

The journey back seemed to take three life times and there were a number of times that there were some truly close calls from not only Decepticon fire, but friendly fire from his own forces. Being
cloaked like they were had its disadvantages too. Eventually, though, Hound made it within sight of faces he recognised, mostly hidden behind a temporary, hastily scraped together blockade. The green mech dropped the hologram, made sure his Autobot insignia was obvious to the soldiers he was approaching and headed straight for the wall. He heard some voices as they took note of him, recognised him as one of their own, and didn’t blast him down.

“Medic!” Hound yelled. “Ratchet!”

He could hear others calling for the CMO, unsure of where he was in the chaos, as he climbed over the barricade, scratching his legs up on the sharp metal as his balance wavered with the weight of Thundercracker on his shoulder. A hand appeared in his vision and he grasped it, letting the other mech pull him over, until he was safe on the Autobot side of the line. He crouched down to let Thundercracker down off his shoulder, gently setting him against a wall, touching his slack face.

“That’s a Decepticon!” Brawn exclaimed and Hound glanced up at the minibot.

“He needs Ratchet’s help.”

“He needs putting out of his fragging misery and ours!” A gun was levelled at the unconscious seeker’s helm but Hound was between the two in a nano-second, his own gun in his hand, though he didn’t point it at Brawn.

“Put that down. No one’s touching him, not while I’m online. If you don’t want to look at him then go away and find Ratchet.”

The other mech stared at Hound liked he’d suggested Megatron was coming round for a pleasant chat, but he didn’t argue. Not when Hound looked more determined and threatening than he’d ever done before. Brawn left them alone, going back to the fight without a word. Hound turned back to Thundercracker, hunkering down beside him so he could be close to him if the seeker regained consciousness. From the pain in their bond he highly doubted he would, but he wasn’t going anywhere.

Another thing that irked him was the fact that he knew it would be tantamount to suicide to show his real connection to Thundercracker here and now. Hound wanted nothing more than to take his mate’s hand and pull him into a tight embrace, but in the middle of a battle, effectively curling up with the enemy in plain sight would not go down well with a great deal of the others. He was already considered a soft spark to the hardcore warriors because of his particularly caring nature and he couldn’t endanger Thundercracker anymore than he already was.

The sounds of heavy pedefalls made Hound look up to see Ratchet running up to them. The red and white mech stopped dead about five paces away and stared at the unconscious seeker like he’d never seen him before in his life.

“Hound, what were you thinking? No, scrap that.” Ratchet cut the air with his hand before he crossed to the blue mech’s side. “What happened?”

The scout lowered his voice. “I got him to drop the block he’s been holding in his spark. He remembered me, us.” Hound stopped then, embarrassment suddenly swelling up in him.

“Out with it,” Ratchet growled as he continued to scan Thundercracker.

“We merged sparks…”

“You what?” the CMO’s mouth dropped open. “In the middle of that?”
“It did something to his head,” the green mech snapped back. “He screamed in pain and blacked out. I keep getting flashes of images of a dark place and a single yellow light.”

Ratchet scowled at him. “We’ll talk about what you did later. Right now…” The medic transformed his hand, and opened up a panel on the side of Thundercracker’s helm and plugged a lead in. There was a pause as he made a connection before Ratchet physically flinched and had to stop himself pulling away. “What, in Primus’ name, have they done?”

“Ratchet?”

The CMO shook his head as he disconnected himself from the seeker. “I can’t do a thing here, Hound. Get him back to the transport ships. One’s due to leave with the injured and civilians. Get him on that and I will see you back at Iacon.”

Hound nodded sharply once and the medic was gone. The scout hauled Thundercracker back up onto his shoulder and started the walk back to the shuttles which were much further back from the line. He saw the looks he got, word of mouth got around quickly, and ignored them. The ones that whispered words wouldn’t have dared if he’d been Ratchet or someone else in command, but Hound didn’t care what they thought. The only pain that flashed across his mind was when he was boarding the shuttle, knowing that he was perfectly healthy and could help them fight, but one look at the unconscious seeker next to him and Hound knew there was never another choice.

It was quiet now. Ratchet and the other medical staff had dealt with the emergencies from the battle and now the CMO was ready to deal with the mess that was the enemy flyer laid out in a private, isolated room. The one glimpse he had got when he had connected to Thundercracker in the battle had been troubling him deeply. He had never seen a CPU in such a chaotic state before. How it was running so many programmes and still functioning Ratchet didn’t know.

The green mech was sat quietly at Thundercracker’s side, optics dim, and the CMO could see the pain he was suffering in his hunched over posture. He didn’t say a word when Ratchet started work and he only looked up when the red and white mech pulled back from the seeker with a sigh.

“I’m good,” Ratchet said shortly. “But there are some things I can’t fix.”

“What?” The look in Hound’s optics told Ratchet he didn’t want to hear that. The medic didn’t either.

“My expertise lies with physical injuries. Give me plasma burns, a shot pump, and I can make it right again.” Ratchet looked down at Thundercracker. “He has none of those. Everything is programming; complex, highly encoded programming that is not designed to be broken. Jazz would have more luck breaking it than I could, but this isn’t programming we can break. That would destroy Thundercracker.”

“Is there nothing you can do?” Hound whispered, still fighting the denial at the words.

“I will put out the word that we need someone trained to the level of programming, but other than that…” Ratchet shook his head.

Hound opened his mouth to respond when Ratchet’s comm. beeped and the medic pulled away slightly to answer.

‘Ratchet. How is everyone?’
‘Everyone will pull through.’

‘Good. I heard a rumour about one of your patients.’

‘Saying what?’

‘That we have a seeker in our midst and that we’re helping him.’

‘Thundercracker is here, but I can’t help him, Optimus.’

‘Hound?’

‘He’s the one who brought Thundercracker in.’

‘You’re being evasive Ratchet.’

‘Comms aren’t the place for this Optimus.’

‘Alright, but as soon as I can get down there, I’ll want real answers.’

Ratchet cut the connection and as soon as he made optic contact with Hound, the green mech asked, “Can you get him back online?”

“Yes, but I don’t know what that will do to him.”

“Wake him,” Hound said, voice soft but firm.

“Alright.” Ratchet did what he was asked. “But I can’t be in his direct line of sight when he comes back online. He needs to see you first and I hope that will keep the old Thundercracker with us.”

Hound nodded, feeling the fear and worry form a lump in his throat. No one wanted the Decepticon Thundercracker loose on the base. He’d be shot before he got anywhere, if he didn’t kill someone else first. The scout was vaguely aware of Ratchet backing away towards the door as he stood, leaning over Thundercracker, hands clasped around one of the seeker’s.

The blue flyer came back online in a rush, a scream of pain choking him, and he jerked upright. Hound had to jerk back otherwise they would have clocked helms. Thundercracker reacted like he was still in the heat of battle and his arm raised to point his weapon, but Ratchet had taken the precaution to disconnect the guns on the seeker’s arms. That seemed to panic Thundercracker more and he flailed, only to discover his other hand trapped. He swung his red optics around to meet the blue of his bonded and froze before he whispered, “Hound?”

The green mech relaxed. “Yes love, it’s me.”

“What happened? Where am I?”

“You collapsed. You’re in Iacon, in the med bay,” Hound replied gently.

“…Iacon…” Thundercracker repeated before flinching. He pulled his hand out of Hound’s grasp to cradle his head between his palms and the scout could feel the confusion emanating from him.

“We’re working to find a way to help you.” Hound reached out to tentatively touch Thundercracker’s head. “Do you remember? I keep getting images from you that don’t make sense.”

The blue mech let out a whine of distress as those memories he hated flared up; that dark, cold room, a single yellow optic staring at him and the agony… Hound got a moment’s warning as that constant
pain was suddenly overwhelming and then Thundercracker was off the berth, face contorted with anger and hurt. The smaller mech tried to embrace his sparkmate but Thundercracker just saw constraints coming to hold him down and reacted violently.

Hound grunted harshly as he hit the wall, collapsing down onto his knees as he bounced off it. The was a loud clatter and the green mech looked up to see Thundercracker had flung a tray of equipment at Ratchet, who raised an arm to stop it colliding with his face, but didn’t move from his position guarding the door. It was Thundercracker’s only means of escape and the need for it was written across every line of his chassis.

“Thundercracker, please,” Hound climbed to his pedes, wincing at the pain in his back. “Just listen to us….”

The seeker screamed at him again, inarticulate in his rage and confusion. Everything was so jumbled in his head he couldn’t even think straight enough to complete a sentence before he was disagreeing with himself. All he knew was his head hurt and something was telling him these mechs were bad, even though his spark was demanding he let the green one come closer.

Hound warily approached his mate again, hands held out empty in front of him. The seeker, even like this, was bigger and more powerful than the green mech and was instinctively using the knowledge of Hound’s weaknesses that only a bond mate would know, against him. Hound talked softly, calmly, restating everything he had already said, everything that was real and not the lie corrupting Thundercracker’s reality.

‘Optimus is outside.’ Ratchet informed him.

‘I can do this.’ Hound sent back over his comm. as he continued to talk to his mate.

‘Whose med bay is he trashing exactly?’

‘I said I can do this!’

‘This is my med bay, my decision.’

‘Fine. Just make it quick or this is going to turn really bad.’

Ratchet stepped clear of the doors as they slid open. Optimus powered into the room, fixing his sights on Thundercracker as he did so. He was nearly on top of the seeker before the flyer realised, but even so he nearly missed catching him as Thundercracker threw himself to one side. Even in his confused state it seemed Thundercracker knew better than to try and take on Optimus head on.

The bigger mech managed to grab both legs and tackled him to the floor, pinning him down with his weight. The seeker thrashed, hitting what he could of Prime, who ducked his head down to avoid the worst of the flailing fists. Ratchet had followed Optimus across the room, ready to knock the seeker offline when he could get in close enough. He struggled to get a good enough grip on the blue mech.

“Hound, help hold him,” Ratchet snapped at the green mech who was watching all this with pain on his face.

Thundercracker turned his face up to his mate and said desperately, “Hound, please… make them stop.”

The green mech bit back a sob but he couldn’t stop himself turning on his pedes and fleeing the med bay.
“Primus frag it! Hound!” Ratchet swore.

“Leave him Ratchet,” Optimus grunted. “Just get on with it.”

The CMO eventually pinned down an arm and administered a fast acting sedative. The seeker went limp almost immediately and Optimus levered himself upright, glancing at the doors before back at Ratchet. Without a word the big mech hauled Thundercracker upwards and laid him down on a berth before stepping back to let his medic check for any damaged caused in his panic.

“Ratchet. Can you repair him?”

The white and red mech stilled and when he finally answered his voice was low. “The damage done by Shockwave, the programming still in there, is extensive and I’ve never seen anything like it. I can’t just wipe it out, there are safe guards hardwired into Thundercracker’s life support functions to stop us doing just that. I can’t leave it because, like this, it’s fighting to regain control and if that goes on too long the damage will be irreversible. Until I know what, exactly, I’m dealing with, Thundercracker is better kept offline.”

“Isn’t there a chance the programming could regain control with him not actively fighting it?” Optimus frowned.

“A chance, yes, but his spark,” Ratchet tapped the blue flyer’s chest, “his bond with Hound is no longer being suppressed. That is something only Thundercracker can do fully, how they ever got him to do it in the first place I don’t know. The alternative must have been such pain that it was the only way to save himself.” The CMO shook his head. “Hound is constantly reaching out to him now, both for Thundercracker and his own need for reassurance. There’s little likelihood that the programming will push him far enough for him to ignore Hound.”

“I’ve never seen him run before,” Optimus remarked quietly.

Ratchet looked across at the med bay doors. “Neither have I.”

“He is one of the strongest mechs I have ever encountered,” Optimus stated. “But he’s been through so much already, I worry that this prove his undoing.”

Both sets of blue optics landed on the offline seeker and wondered if, by saving Thundercracker, Hound had sentenced them both to more misery.
Hound wasn’t quite sure how Mirage found him or how he even knew, but his friend said nothing as he sat down beside him. He looked out over Iacon from their position high up on a watchtower and waited silently.

“How much have you heard?"

“Brawn,” Mirage said the name with clear distaste. “Was saying you’d brought a Decepticon in and wouldn’t let anyone touch him.” Hound made a non-committal noise. “There is a lot of talk about you.”

“And none of it’s good.”

“Not all of it,” the blue and white mech inclined his head in agreement.

“I don’t know what to do, Mirage,” Hound replied, voice strained. “Ratchet can’t help him and he doesn’t know who I am, not really.”

“Would you rather he was still a Decepticon?”

“No!” Hound hesitated after his automatic denial. “No, but… sometimes… yes… Primus that sounds so selfish.”

Mirage laid a black hand on Hound’s shoulder. “Speaking as your friend, you are one of the least selfish mechs I have the privilege of knowing, but I hate seeing you like this. Thundercracker has always caused you pain.”

The green mech turned his head sharply, optics narrowed, so he could level a truly angry stare at his companion and Mirage pulled his hand back. “No he hasn’t.”

Mirage knew he was treading on dangerous ground right now, but getting Hound angry was better than the scout beating himself up over something he couldn’t control.

“He’s causing you pain right now and he doesn’t even know it.”

Hound’s mouth tightened down into a thin line. “And I’ve done the same to him. He’s carried my problems. It’s time I returned my share.”

“You’ve done more than your fair share,” the spy returned levely. “Ask anyone who knows you are Silverbolt’s creator.”

“That’s not fair Mirage,” Hound argued. “Thundercracker didn’t choose to miss out on that.”

“He chose to fly away from both of you that night. He could have stayed at your side and seen you both safe.” The other mech looked away abruptly, feeling the pain in the truth of Mirage’s words and
all those lost meta-cycles. Mirage touched Hound’s shoulder again fleetingly before he stood up. “I didn’t come out here with the intention of hurting you more or making you dwell on the past, but you must realise you can’t change that or what has happened. If you truly wish to stand by your seeker’s side through the worst he has to offer, then do it. If you keep breaking down and feeling sorry for yourself, then how long do you think it will be before someone confronts you on those rumours? What would you say then?”

With that Mirage turned and vanished back into the tower. Hound was left alone with those questions and he knew Mirage was right. A long time ago he had sworn an oath, alongside his Autobot pledge, not to directly admit to being bonded to Thundercracker whilst they served in opposing factions. Hound had refused to include Silverbolt in that promise, but the flyer had learnt quickly who he told about Thundercracker anyway, so very few knew about their relationship and even fewer knew about the depth of Hound’s connection to the seeker. Optimus had known, even back then, that many would not understand the scout’s love for a mech that had killed so many of their fellow soldiers, but there had been another reason behind the big mech’s decision. Hound had asked what it had been, but all Optimus would say was that ‘It is for the future and if that time comes, then I will tell you’.

No, no-one could know, but Hound was not a mech who gave up on those he loved. That much was obvious for everyone to see and right now the mech that he loved more than anyone else on the planet needed him badly. Hound could sit here, feeling sorry for himself, but that gained him nothing, except a mild rebuke from Mirage as it turned out. The green scout climbed to his pedes and set a course back to the med bay. As he walked he was aware of some of the looks he received; the curious glances, the narrowed optics, but he ignored it. Gossip was rife in Iacon, it filled the time between battles, but it was mostly harmless.

Hound spent his cycles at Thundercracker’s side, devoting so much time and effort to his mate that he forgot about his own duties, until Optimus paid him a personal visit. The Prime meant to reprimand the scout, to explain to him that his private life couldn’t impact on his role within the Autobots but the instant guilt that was apparent on Hound’s face was enough to stop Optimus. He felt for the smaller mech, knowing that he was being offered a second chance that so few got during the war and suddenly Optimus could not punish Hound for his dereliction of duty. Instead he had Hound’s role reduced, giving him datawork instead of fieldwork and Hound promised not to forget again.

For the most part he didn’t. The seeker struggled through each joor and Thundercracker had bad mega-cycles, not so bad mega-cycles and then he had times where he returned to the Decepticon he had been. His violence and ill temper Hound could cope with, though Ratchet didn’t like the repairs he was forced to make on the scout when Thundercracker hurt him. It was the coldness in his attitude towards Hound that pained the green mech the most. It felt like he was right back where he had been all those meta-cycles before and there was a limit to his internal strength.

Ratchet had agreed to let Thundercracker spend a portion of each mega-cycle online so that Hound could attempt to talk to him, to help root him in reality, even though the medic doubted it would do much good. It was, in some ways, to help Hound feel he was doing something to help his mate. Ratchet suspected simply staring at his stasis locked chassis would slowly drive Hound insane and one mech that could do without that was Thundercracker.

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Hound frowned at the vacant berth, looking around the empty isolation room for his mate, who should have still been offline. He found him tucked down in one corner, file in one hand as he twisted round to attack his wings, or rather the purple Decepticon emblems on them. The floor was
littered with shavings of blue and purple metal.

“Ratchet!” Hound shouted, already running across the room to Thundercracker. He crashed down next to him and wrestled the file out of his hand, but the seeker just set to with his bare fingers, scratching madly, ignoring the energon trickling down his wing. “Thundercracker, stop it! Look at what you’re doing!”

“Badbadbad,” Thundercracker muttered, optics narrowed in determination.

The green mech pulled his hands away from his wing and held onto them tightly. Ratchet abruptly appeared next to him, staring at the mess the blue mech had made of his own chassis.

“Primus,” he murmured. “At least it’s only one wing.”

“I thought he was supposed to still be out of it,” Hound glanced up at the medic.

“He was.” Ratchet knelt down next to the pair of them to peer at the seeker. “He still is.”

“He’s dreaming?” Hound exclaimed.

“More like hallucinating.” The CMO shook his head. “I was worried repeatedly drugging him with all the CPU problems he has might cause side effects.”

They both looked at Thundercracker, who wasn’t fighting to attack his own wings anymore, but was just sitting quietly, mumbling away to himself.

“What are we going to do?”

“Help me get him up on the berth again.” Ratchet took one arm as Hound took the other and they led a stumbling Thundercracker back to his berth, where he laid down without protest. The medic set to work patching up the damage on the wing when it became apparent the seeker wasn’t registering pain from the normally super sensitive appendages. Hound sat on the other side of the berth, holding one of his mate’s black hands in his own, vaguely glad Ratchet hadn’t answered his question as he meant it.

“I’m glad Silverbolt hasn’t seen him like this,” the green mech sighed. “He doesn’t remember much of him anyway, but I wouldn’t want his first adult memories to be of this.”

Ratchet glanced at him briefly before returning his gaze to his work. “He’s going to have to meet him some time and Thundercracker is only progressing slowly.”

“I know, I know.” Hound shook his head. “But seeing Silverbolt won’t help Thundercracker, he’s never seen him in his adult chassis and it will only serve to bring up memories of who he left behind.”

“Which are the ones we want,” the CMO reminded him dryly.

“Except he’ll be miserable.”

Ratchet raised an optic ridge at that. “Thundercracker never gets miserable. Grumpy, angry maybe, but he’s not self-pitying.”

“He does. You just never see it.”

“Hound, even if we get….,”
“When,” Hound interrupted mulishly.

Ratchet sighed. “If, when, we get this right, there will be no way to permanently remove all traces of the programming. It will have made an impact on his personality, like it or not.”

Hound nodded. “I know. It’s been so strange. He’s always been so capable, so strong, and he’s always looked after me.” The green mech looked up at Ratchet. “You remember what he was like after the fire.”

“Stubborn slagger,” the medic agreed. “You are perfectly capable and strong. You raised Silverbolt in the worst of times and everyone says he’s a good mech.”

Hound shrugged one shoulder. “That’s Silverbolt. Thundercracker is different. I never meant to let him be the one to look after me, it was supposed to be equal, but that’s the way I always felt it was. For all my independence I liked not having to be the capable one sometimes.”

“You’re saying you don’t want to take on that role for Thundercracker?”

“No,” the green mech shook his head vehemently. “No, it’s just not us. It’s something else that’s changed, that we’ve lost.”

Ratchet stopped working then and turned on Hound sharply. “Everyone has lost something. You still have close friends, your family is still alive. Would you rather be Bluestreak? Is your pain worse than his?”

“No, I…” Hound looked up helplessly, but the CMO known as The Hatchet was in full rant mode and wasn’t going to be stopped.

“The one slagging thing I can’t stand is mechs that whine and wallow in their own Primus-damned misery. You’ve got back struts in there! Use them!”

Hound knew the medic was right, but he also knew it wasn’t as easy as that. “How, Ratchet? What can I do?”

The red and white mech grimaced momentarily before snapping, “Stop being so pathetic and get out.”

Hound sighed, sliding off the berth. “I know why you shout Ratchet. Maybe if you let someone in you wouldn’t feel the need to shout as us, not when we know it’s because you care.” With that the scout vanished out the door, leaving Ratchet behind growling. The medic hated it when other mechs pointed out his flaws. He knew perfectly well he had them, and didn’t need a scout to tell him that.

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The green mech frowned when he noticed another mech with Ratchet in Thundercracker’s isolation room. Very few mechs had access; Ratchet, Hound, Optimus, and Hound had never seen this particular red mech before. Not only was he in the room but the green mech could well overhear what they were talking about.

“…create a Trojan that will isolate the affected area and disguise it as a divergent piece of code so Thundercracker’s wonderfully complex system will not reject it. I would say our best bet is to shut down the neuro-synapses in direct contact with Shockwave’s handiwork entirely and prevent them from reconnecting until we deem it safe to do so. Once that phase is complete it will be much easier for me analyse its codonic make, construction and neuronic interactivity, and then hopefully I can formulate an antiviral programme that will attack and neutralize only the offending material. It will
have to be very carefully constructed so none of the outlying hardware or software components are
damaged, influenced or altered though, which will be enrapturing in itself to puzzle out.”

“It’s well ingrained into his core programmes, can it be isolated without affecting those?”

“Ratchet,” Hound interrupted. “Who’s this?”

Both of the talking mechs turned to face him and the red one peered at him. “You must be Hound.
The intricacies of your mate’s reprogramming is fascinating work. Your spark bond is an interesting
condrum that, it would appear, Shockwave couldn’t fully counteract. Now, of course, he didn’t have
you, as I do, so…”

“Shut up,” Ratchet interrupted gruffly. “Hound this is Perceptor. He’s recently arrived to Iacon, but I
believe he can help Thundercracker.”

Hope spiked abruptly in Hound’s spark. “You can?”

“It will not be as easy as erasing a virus from someone’s systems,” Perceptor explained. “But I have
never had such a fascinating case to work with. I am aware of Shockwave’s work, though I always
greatly disagreed with his ethics. This should prove an interesting challenge…” His voice trailed off
as his optics dimmed slightly, clearly lost in a new thought process. It was just as well because he
missed Hound’s expression. Anger at the way the scientist had referred to his mate had stiffened his
whole chassis and narrowed his optics. Ratchet turned Perceptor back around to face the terminal
without a word of complaint from the other before shaking his head.

“Don’t take it personally Hound. I don’t think he’s aware of how he comes across.”

The green mech shook his head before crossing the floor to Thundercracker’s side once more and
seating himself at his side. He dug out a datapad and started reading a field report that had come in
from one of the other mechs that had taken over some of his work now Optimus had let him do desk
work. Hound lost himself in the work, partially because it distracted him from his thoughts and
partially because he didn’t want to listen to Perceptor and Ratchet argue about Thundercracker.
Perceptor, in particular, came across like he didn’t have any real concern for the mech behind the
corrupt processor and that this was all just a fascinating study for him to immerse himself in. Cycles
past this way, as they did most orns.

Hound jumped when Thundercracker abruptly shifted on the berth, red optics flickering fitfully. He
twisted around, hands clenching, legs moving aimlessly before he focused briefly on Hound and
frowned. “It’s all so confused…” He touched his helm, before covering his face. “There’s something
wrong. I remember… I remember… A sparkling? There was a sparkling… our…”

“Yes,” Hound risked speaking, scared in case he set his mate off again. The fact that he was
conscious was worrying in itself, but Hound wasn’t leaving him to get Ratchet, who had briefly
stepped out the room to attend to another patient in the main med bay. “We had a sparkling called
Silverbolt. He’s all grown up now. A flyer like you.”

“Silverbolt…” Thundercracker frowned, fingers digging into his head as he struggled with memories
that didn’t make sense. “Flyer… Aerialbot… Autobot… enemy.”

The green mech reacted as soon as he realised but it was too late. Thundercracker was upright,
falling off the berth the other way to Hound, looking for a weapon as battle training and
Shockwave’s protocols kicked into the fore. Hound stilled as the seeker scrambled backwards over
the floor.
“Thundercracker, look at me.”

The blue flyer did, obeying the voice he knew, but couldn’t identify and let out a noise of confusion. Hound smiled at him softly and ever so slowly inched around the berth towards him. Thundercracker just stared at him, face almost blank in incomprehension, and the green mech held his hands out at his sides, empty and open, encouraging Thundercracker to his pedes. The green scout was almost at the seeker’s side when Perceptor chose to speak up.

“This is incredible! Does he wake from the enforced stasis frequently?”

Thundercracker reacted swiftly, far faster than Hound could, and violently. He turned on Perceptor, whose expression turned from excited to horrified as the seeker lunged at him, forcefully grabbing his arms. His face was twisted by a snarl of anger, marred with faint traces of confusion that still lingered.

“Thundercracker! No!” Hound dived after his mate, grabbing at one arm and twisting his hold off the scientist. He wasn’t strong enough to break both grips and there was only so far he was willing to go before he hurt Thundercracker.

“Autobot scum,” the big blue mech growled, red optics still fixed on the now scared Perceptor.

“I assure you I didn’t…”

“Shut up!” Hound interrupted harshly. “Don’t make it worse!”

Thundercracker tugged at the arm the green mech had pinned to his chest, almost in annoyance that he couldn’t use it, but gave up after a moment, making do with the grip he still had Perceptor. He turned his chassis away from Hound, clouting him with the edge of his wing and flung the slender red mech hard across the room. Perceptor yelped as he hit the floor, but was quick to climb to his pedes. Hound dug the back of his pedes into the floor and clung on grimly as the seeker tried to pursue his quarry to inflict more damage.

“Thundercracker, please, listen to my voice,” Hound begged, not wanting to think about how much worse the situation could get. “Remember who I am.”

Unfortunately for Hound the circumstances did get worse when Optimus picked that moment to walk into the room. Perceptor, with wide optics, beat a hasty retreat to the Prime’s side when Thundercracker’s engine rumbled threateningly and his hands tightened into fists. The big mech stopped dead when he saw the way Hound was hanging onto his mate, well used to these kinds of situations. It wasn’t that he feared Thundercracker, but he knew Hound had the best chance of calming his bonded when the seeker wasn’t reacting to an Autobot threat like a cornered Decepticon.

“Perceptor, go get Ratchet,” Optimus ordered quietly.

“Of course!” The scientist backed out of the room quickly.

“Hound, do you have control or do you need my help?” Optimus asked, optics steadily watching the seeker watching him.

The green mech hated that question. He wouldn’t lie to Optimus; he didn’t have control and he wasn’t big enough or strong enough to stop Thundercracker if he chose to make a move, but he knew the flyer would lash out if Optimus came anywhere near them.

“I don’t think he’ll let Ratchet touch him like this.”
“Alright, but this can’t happen again. I will assign mechs to defend against this… state of mind.” The red and blue mech nodded before adding softly, “I am sorry Hound.”

The scout looked away momentarily as he braced himself, ready for his mate’s reaction when Optimus moved. He could feel it in their bond when that hatred and anger towards the other Autobot in the room flared in a burst of emotion, exactly timed to Optimus stepping across their small room in their direction. When the bigger mech got closer Thundercracker really started struggling against the hold Hound had on his arm, but he never turned on his mate in anger, almost like the smaller green mech was a blind spot in his confusion.

When Thundercracker realised he couldn’t get away from Optimus he tensed, his free hand balling into a fist and the Prime deflected the following punch with a raised forearm. He grabbed the seeker’s arm before he could swing at him again, trapping it under his arm and braced his body for the expected struggle that came next. The blue flyer swore at him, grunting and snarling in his effort to free himself but Optimus’ optics were really watching Hound. The green mech stood there, being tugged backwards and forwards without seeming to notice, with his optics shuttered and clear pain written on his face plates.

Ratchet reappeared, Perceptor in hesitant tow, and Thundercracker reacted accordingly. The medic sighed, hating this side of the seeker the most. Their shared past history was older than Hound’s and Ratchet knew this violence and anger was something Thundercracker may have had inside, but normally knew how to control. His hatred towards Shockwave grew every time he saw Thundercracker’s personality being warped like this.

Swiftly the CMO knocked the struggling seeker offline and the tension level in the room dropped like a stone when the mech sagged in the arms of the two bots holding him. Ratchet ordered him to be put back on the berth and rounded on Perceptor to get back to work and ‘solve the fragging problem already’. Hound laid a kiss on Thundercracker’s helm before swiftly departing the isolation room, with plans to leave the med bay all together to give himself a little time to get his emotions back in check.

“Hound.” The tone of Optimus’ voice stopped the green mech dead and he scowled at the floor, not wanting to show his leader his expression. “This needs to be done. He’s not stable and I will not risk the lives of the others to protect your sensibilities.”

“He doesn’t need guards,” Hound insisted, hands clenching. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t do anything.”

“You have your own duties to attend to,” Optimus reminded him. “However I’ve limited them, I cannot take you completely off duty and you know that. What would you do if he got confused again, when you weren’t here, and he hurt someone?”

Hound stiffened, hating the way Optimus knew just what to say to get him to comply. “Then I don’t want just any guards. Most of the mechs here would just shoot first, before trying to stop him any other way.”

“Agreed,” the big mech nodded. “Ironhide has volunteered as well as Mirage and Trailbreaker. Between the four of you, you should be able to cover the necessary time when Ratchet isn’t around or he’s too busy to keep an optic on Thundercracker. If you let Silverbolt know he was here…”

“No,” Hound interrupted, shaking his head as he turned to face Optimus. “Thank you for agreeing to send him away from Iacon… but he can’t see Thundercracker like this.”

“I agreed to that because it gave the Aerialbots a chance to take on the seekers whilst they were a mech down and confused,” Optimus rumbled quietly.
“I know,” the scout admitted before a thought struck him. “You had already asked Mirage, Trailbreaker and Ironhide before you came here.”

“Yes, I had come here to tell you of my decision. The incident today just compounded my belief that it is the right thing to do, for Thundercracker and others.” Optimus laid a hand briefly on Hound’s shoulder. “I am also about to call a meeting of my unit to discuss Thundercracker’s presence. Prowl has told me there has been a lot of disquiet since you brought him in. Certain members of the forces are not so good at remaining patient and waiting for answers.”

Hound’s optics widened. “How much will you tell them?”

“As much as I need to,” the bigger mech warned. “But I do not plan on divulging your own personal history. That is your choice, not mine.”

The green helm bowed in acceptance. Optimus had the right to tell mechs whatever he chose, if he believed it had some impact on their war. He was holding back because he judged it right for each mech to have his own private life, even in the midst of fighting. So much of that was lost, that each little bit you could save was precious.

Optimus said nothing more, except to ask Hound to accompany him to a conference room, one of the only rooms big enough to hold all the mechs needed for the meeting. Hound remained quiet, even when he joined Mirage and Trailbreaker at a table where they had saved him a seat. Both mechs looked worried, unsure of the reason behind the meeting, though the scout’s face gave them some indication.

“Allright,” Optimus quietened the mechs down. “I know all of you are asking questions as to why we have a Decepticon in our med bay and why we’re helping him. This is better told to all of you and it is better if Ratchet explain just what we’re trying to do for Thundercracker.”

The medic took over, fixing the gathered crowd with stern optics. “I am sure you’re all aware of who Shockwave is and have heard the stories of the experiments he conducts. The seeker in my med bay has been through Shockwave’s care. He had systematically had nearly a vorn of memory replaced with lies so he can’t remember who he was, or more importantly, who he knew. This was all done so Megatron could have a trine and Starscream could have a little payback. Some of you are aware, like myself, of what Thundercracker knew before and, the rest of you, try to slagging understand, he’s so far off limits for anyone looking for a little Con payback time that if I find anyone in my med bay I’ll let Ironhide use you for target practice after I’ve removed your legs and beaten you with them.”

Optimus cleared his intakes quietly, grateful Ironhide had volunteered to remain on guard duty with Thundercracker. Ratchet glared at him and Optimus raised one optic ridge, making the medic grumbled quietly. Prime continued.

“As Autobots we stand by the ideals that we fight for, though sometimes we may get a little lost as the war clouds our path. When Hound brought in Thundercracker he did so because it was the right thing to do. The mech was in pain and needed help, something he would not get from his own side. Who are we to deny him that? We are here to offer help to anyone that needs it and the seeker in Ratchet’s med bay requires our help.”

“What happens if he doesn’t want it?” Sunstreaker asked, voice loud. “Are we going to waste resources on repairing him just so he can rot in our holding cells?”

“Are you saying we don’t try?” Optimus responded calmly.

The yellow twin didn’t reply, just sat back moodily in his seat, folding his arms over his chest.
Everyone else shifted, muttering quietly before one mech decided to speak up. Wheeljack looked distinctly uneasy to be taking up where frontliner had left off. “Sunstreaker has a point. What if he does end up in the brig? He would be a very tempting target for the Cons to attempt to rescue. I mean, I know they don’t ‘rescue’ as such, but if Megatron went to all that trouble to start with, and the trines have proved highly effective, then surely he’s more of a risk?”

Optimus sighed and nodded. “Yes, he is, but if it comes down to that, he may also be a useful in an exchange for some of our captured soldiers.”

Hound tried not to react to that statement, but something must have shown on his face because Mirage laid a warning hand on his arm. The scout looked up to find Blaster watching him with intent, curious optics from across the room and he made himself keep the optic contact, pretending nothing was wrong. The red mech smiled slightly, like he knew something he wasn’t letting on and then went back to listening to Optimus. Hound kept studying the communications officer, wondering just what he’d figured out. He knew the loud, apparently careless mech was actually very good at intelligence gathering and had a very serious streak in him. Blaster could put two and two together without a problem. It was what he chose to do with that information that Hound couldn’t predict.

The big red mech was known to be a gossiper, though how much of that was information he gave away, or just collected, no one seemed to know for sure, but he did seem to have some morals on what data he let slip. The scout just didn’t known whether whatever he had heard about Thundercracker fell into a secure category.

“There is one thing I will insist on and the reprimands will be harsh if I discover anyone has broken this rule.” Optimus’ gaze swept the room. “No one is to mention what we are trying to do for Thundercracker outside a secure location. For all the Decepticons know, he is our prisoner. If he can be helped, then he may be willing to join our side and work as an undercover agent.”

The bottom fell out of Hound’s world then. Optimus had never even breathed a word of such a plan to him. He had thought Thundercracker would merely join their forces once he was recovered, giving them much needed air support. To send him back into the heart of danger when he knew what that could mean for the seeker, for Hound, was a terrible decision Hound knew he couldn’t have undertaken lightly.

Mirage and Trailbreaker exchanged an understanding look over the top of the green mech’s head and silently vowed to offer more to their friend, even when he didn’t ask for it.
Thundercracker screamed, doubling over, hands clutching at his head. Hound was at his side instantly, trying to hold him, to offer him some comfort and something to hold onto too. The seeker lashed out at him, knocking his mate away and Hound fought down the instinctive response of hurt at the gesture, knowing Thundercracker couldn’t help it.

“Stop it! Stop it!” the blue mech cried, begging, voice high with pain. “Make it stop!”

Ratchet had moved to get the sedation kit the moment Thundercracker had shrieked in pain and closed in on the seeker from the other side to Hound, syringe held ready. Perceptor stood at the other side of the bed, fretting. “This is most unexpected. All indications were that the recoded data stream should have gone completely undetected by the implanted code lines from the antivirus program…”

“Shut up Perceptor and reverse it!” Ratchet snapped, not wanting to knock the flyer out when he wasn’t sure what that would do to the programming.

Perceptor nodded rapidly, fingers landing on his terminal. “I will just have to reconnect the synaptic core nodes my program switched off and re-route them through a different part of his processors altogether…”

Thundercracker let out another howl of pain before he abruptly froze, optics wide. Everyone else stopped too, wondering what was happening, and willing it to work. The silence grew, still Thundercracker didn’t move. Ratchet frowned and reached up to click his fingers right in the seeker’s face. Nothing.

“You stalled his CPU. Congratulations.” The medic shot a look at the scientist who was tapping his fingers on his chin in thought.

“That was a possible side affect,” Perceptor reminded them. “There is simply not enough space in the core access memory within his processors to handle the processing power of both my antiviral program and Shockwave’s still-active programming.”

“Did you just call Thundercracker slow?” Hound frowned.

“That is a matter of perspective,” the red mech responded, somewhat sniffily. “The fact that he has coped thus far indicts a reasonable level of processing power.”

“Back on topic Perceptor,” Ratchet warned.

Hound found most of what Perceptor said went straight over his head and yet again he felt redundant, but there was one thing he could do that Perceptor couldn’t. The scientist had often remarked that it was the strongest weapon they had at their disposal for helping Thundercracker. The green mech opened the bond to his sparkmate as wide as it would go and reached down it to find his bonded. Thundercracker reacted with warmth and affection towards Hound, indicating that the code hadn’t made the Decepticon seeker reappear. The frozen mech let out a burst of mild confusion and
then resignation over his current state which Hound gently rebuked him for.

The scout was let deeper into his mate’s spark and could almost see the state of Thundercracker’s fractured CPU. The flyer was still himself at spark, though more guarded and quicker to act in violence than before, but his CPU was the hardware that control his actions. Hound could see he didn’t want to be this way, now he knew he’d been changed, not that he’d ever doubted that, but he could also understand Thundercracker’s growing frustration at their seeming lack of progress. The seeker didn’t trust the red mech he was letting, in effect, experiment on him, but was desperate enough to be himself that he was willing to try anything.

The rest of the mega-cycle past slowly, with Perceptor undoing his work, making a few changes and trying again. Each time some new problem cropped up, though the scientist assured them that was all part of the process and they were making progress. Thundercracker suffered in silence, though everyone could see the discontentment on his face and in his body posture. After some time Perceptor had a programme installed which seemed to limit the power the Decepticon programme had over Thundercracker’s immediate actions, but he could still feel it pulling at him, trying to regain control.

Hound, eventually, put an end to it, having had enough for the moment and, despite orders, despite the vehement opposition from both Ratchet and Perceptor, Hound walked Thundercracker out of the med bay doors. The flyer was more than happy to leave the place that was, in effect, his prison and the fact that Trailbreaker stood guard outside the Medical Centre that joo didn’t make a difference. The black mech took one look at the set expression on his friend’s face and the weariness that hung over Thundercracker and ‘escorted’ them to Hound’s quarters.

None of them talked on the way there, though Trailbreaker was acutely aware of the looks they were getting. Decepticon prisoners had no business being in the ground troops’ bunk facility, under guard or not, and certainly not propped on the shoulder of a well respected scout who looked ready to offer you a fist to the faceplates if you dared to ask what was going on. No one was actually in the corridor when Hound got to his door, so apart from whomever was watching them on the security feeds, no one else knew that Hound was letting a Con stay in his rooms. Thundercracker disappeared inside, but Trailbreaker caught Hound’s arm before he left.

“Do you want me to stay?”

“No ‘Breaker, that’s alright. We just need some time to ourselves.” Hound patted his friend’s hand in reassurance.

The bigger mech nodded. “I’ll go find out who noticed us on the cameras and make sure someone higher up has a private word before they knock down your door.”

“Thank you.” With that Hound stepped into his room and locked the world outside, even if it was just for a little while. His bonded had already made it to the berth and was sitting on the edge of it, face pressed into his palms and Hound was struck by realisation that he had never seen Thundercracker look so low, not even when Hound had walked out on him after being granted his freedom all those meta-cycles ago.

“My head hurts. It never stops.” The flyer’s voice was flat, tired.

Hound crossed the room, climbed up onto the berth, stretching his legs out behind Thundercracker as he sat against the wall at the head of berth. “You need some rest. We both do.”

Thundercracker looked at him before sighing and nodding. He slid back on the berth, easing between the white and green legs before turning to Hound to curl around his body, laying his helm
down on the scout’s chest. Hound wrapped his arms around him and silently waited for Thundercracker to fall offline, knowing sometimes it took breems. This time his sparkmate’s exhaustion was obvious because it was barely a klik before his systems powered down and he relaxed. It was the only real peace he got, and more often than not, it was disturbed by warring coding in his CPU. The best thing they had found was for Hound to be in physical contact with Thundercracker and for him to transmit calm feelings and old memories across the bond as the seeker recharged. That often meant Hound didn’t recharge at all when Thundercracker did and he didn’t like being out of it when his mate was online in case he was needed.

For a joor Hound held the offline seeker close, stroking his helm and gently talking to him about anything he could think of that they had shared, anything to root him in reality. It didn’t matter that he felt tired enough to recharge, that wasn’t important. He kept talking, even when he felt Thundercracker start to waken. The seeker’s optics flickered into life and when Hound paused, he murmured softly, “There’s no reason to it. I hear your voice and all the darkness disappears.” Thundercracker shifted slightly, tilting his head back so he could see Hound’s face from his position on his shoulder and gave him a small smile.

His mate answered him, just as quiet, “Every time I look into your optics you make me love you. You’re the piece that makes me whole and I’ll never let you go, whatever happens.”

“I don’t deserve you.” Thundercracker raised a hand to touch the bottom of Hound’s chin.

“You know what I think about that,” Hound admonished gently.

“I will get better,” the seeker promised. “I know it’s been hard for you. I can’t imagine how hard, but I will get better.”

“I know.”

“When… when I am,” Thundercracker dropped his gaze, running his fingers along Hound’s arm. “Will you have another sparkling with me? I know it’s not the right time, with this war, but I missed out with Silverbolt and as much as I try and make it up now, it’ll never be the same.”

“Oh Thundercracker,” Hound smiled. “Of course I will. I don’t think Ratchet will be pleased, or Optimus, but I always thought we’d have more than one anyway.”

That made the seeker raise his head. “You did?”

The green mech chuckled. “Maybe by accident.”

“We never were very careful were we?” Thundercracker smiled.

“Carried away, I think would be accurate,” Hound grinned, optics sparkling. “But I always loved it when you couldn’t wait and you just take me wherever we were, hard and fast.”

The seeker growled playfully at him. “Stop teasing.”

“Did I ever say no?”

“I think you would have done if I’d tried it on just before Silverbolt was born,” Thundercracker reminded him.

“No, more likely I would have recharged through it,” Hound teased.

The seeker narrowed his optics. “Are you saying it would be so boring you’d just drop offline?”
Hound raised an optic ridge and the tip of his glossa protruded just a little from between his lips. Thundercracker growled and surged upwards to kiss him. Hound was careful only to return what the seeker offered because they hadn’t interfaced since that day out on the battlefield and the scout was scared to hurt his mate again, but Thundercracker seemed determined to push them further than just a kiss. His hands wandered over the green frame beneath him, fingers digging in between plates to tease wires and servos. Hound hissed in enjoyment, feeling the heat rise in systems and it wasn’t long before he couldn’t help but touch his mate in return.

Softly Hound stroked his fingers down the edges of those sweeping wings, taking his time to relearn everything he’d missed about his seeker. Even being gentle the green mech soon had Thundercracker purring in pleasure against him, optics shuttered as he enjoyed the touches to every part of his chassis. The heat between them built slowly, carefully, almost like both were afraid that they had lost that part of their relationship after so long apart.

Hound overloaded his mate, his fear almost a tangible thing after what had happened last time, but Thundercracker just rolled in the sensation, feeling nothing but the pleasure and overjoyed that was all he was experiencing. There was no pain, no confusion and Primus it had been too long since an overload had felt so good. The blue seeker felt ashamed that, in their time apart where he had not known Hound, he had sought release with others, but it had never felt right, there had always been something lacking and now he knew what it was.

Thundercracker attacked his bonded as soon as his limbs obeyed his commands again and the smaller mech was soon arching up under him, plating hot, hands grasping and begging him for more. The flyer joined their bodies, nearly overloading from the sensation of being deep within his mate alone and had to fight for control long enough to split apart his chest plates and bare his spark. The green mech was quick to follow his lead and merge the two orbs. It didn’t take either mech long to reach that climax and Thundercracker cried out Hound’s name, before he collapsed bodily over him, completely wiped from the intense feelings.

Hound was caught between tears and joy. It felt so good to be so connected to Thundercracker again and it had been too long, far too long, since he’d interfaced. He’d almost forgotten how it could feel, but the tears caught him unawares, reminding him of how much he’d missed his bonded. He tightened his grip on the seeker and rocked them slightly without realising it. The blue flyer just let Hound do what he wanted, comfortable and secure where he was, knowing his mate could happily bear his weight. As his systems settled and reordered themselves after his two overloads a startling realisation came over the seeker and it took him a moment to grasp it. When he had he lifted his head, optics wide.

“Hound my head… it’s clear!”

“What?” the green mech blinked up at him.

“The confusion, all that fuzziness, it’s gone!” Thundercracker sat further up, the look of astonishment growing on his face, until his was straddling Hound’s thighs. The green mech propped himself up on his elbows to regard his mate with a puzzled expression before saying in a dubious tone, “Interfacing made you better.”

The seeker pulled a face at that. “Ok, that sounds very corny when you put it like that.”

“But you really are… yourself again?” Hound sat up a bit more as it began to dawn on him what Thundercracker actually meant.

“I think so.” The blue flyer put fingers to his helm, pushing at his CPU internally, trying to find the flaws just kliks ago he’d been trying to ignore. They were still there, he discovered, but it was like
they were filed separately, safely put away. He could still access the memories, the coding that made him the Decepticon soldier, but they didn’t control him, they didn’t seek to regain a hold anymore. That information must have passed down their bond because the next nano-second Hound’s arms were around him, squeezing him so hard it actually hurt a little, not that Thundercracker minded.

Their world was nothing but each other and sheer joy for the next few moments as the information really settled in. The relief that both were finally free of the damage that had been done by Shockwave, that they had a chance at a vaguely normal life, that they could be together.

“I told you I’d get better,” Thundercracker said, a grin evident in his voice even though Hound couldn’t see his face.

“I agreed, didn’t I?” Hound leant back a little. “It’s just so sudden…”

“I know.” The seeker was all agreement, though still a little lost in the sudden peace he had. He realised all of that disquiet he had felt whilst he’d been a Decepticon had partially been due to Shockwave’s coding in his CPU, always working away, and not just a blocked bond trying to make itself heard.

“I hate to spoil the moment but we should go see Ratchet.” The green mech touched his mate’s face gently. “To see if this is really happening and it’s not some wonderful after effect.”

Thundercracker closed the gap between them again and softly kissed his mate before whispering against his lips, “I know it’s not, but for you, I’ll go.”

Hound gave him a brilliant smile and Thundercracker knew he’d missed those kinds of words most of all. Nothing came close to words from the spark from the one you love and the blue flyer was not known for being the most vocal when it came to such speeches, so every little bit was special.

Thundercracker gave Hound another gentle, barely there, kiss before sliding back off the berth and drawing the green mech after him. They walked to the door together but when it opened the seeker was suddenly aware of another fact. He was still, technically, a prisoner. When Hound had brought him here before, they’d been in the company of Trailbreaker; a pair of guards to one prisoner, as it should be. Now they’d be returning without that and Thundercracker didn’t have to be around Iacon to know that there had to be a lot of rumours going around about Hound and him, some of which would be hurting the scout. He would love to put those to rest, to show the Autobots the truth, and when did he ever let talk stop him doing whatever he wanted? But the flyer needed to be sure, to have his recovery confirmed before he stepped into that particular fire.

“When you brought me here,” he started, gesturing outside. “I had to lean on you, I needed your help to walk. I’d like to go back under my own power.”

Hound nodded, understanding the need to exert a little bit of independence after so long. “I’ll be right beside you though. No way in pit you’d get me to go away.”

The blue mech grinned broadly. “Like I’d want it any other way.”

The walk back to med bay took them past several other Autobots and their openly hostile looks but Hound was almost blissfully unaware as he just basked in the after glow of having his mate back again. Thundercracker was floating, a little bit, too but was also aware of how much damage he had done to his reputation, how many Autobots he’d killed. Hound may put his devotion to his bonded over his name in the ranks of the Autobots but the seeker was aware of how Hound liked being friends with everyone and hated bad feelings between himself and others.
He put those feelings behind him for the moment when the med bay doors slid open. Ratchet and Perceptor were both present and both mechs looked pleased that they were back, though the CMO quickly hid it with a scowl.

“And just where the slag have you been? I get a call from Optimus asking me why I’d let you out of the med bay when you’re not supposed to leave without his permission and just what was I supposed to tell him?”

“We both needed a break Ratchet,” Hound said, placatingly. “And it did us good.”

The medic let out a disbelieving snort, which he cut short when Thundercracker interrupted, “It did.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, thank you very much. Now sit.” He pointed at the nearest medical berth. The seeker did as he was told and sat quietly through a whole host of scans Ratchet and Perceptor put him through, watching them slowly get more confused by the results, until Perceptor finally burst out with, “That isn’t possible!”

“Told you it did me good.”

“Tell me exactly what you did after you left here.” Ratchet fixed the pair of mechs with a stern look. Hound dutifully explained, though he didn’t go into details. Ratchet on the other hand, had no trouble in being blunt.

“So you interfaced his CPU into chaos and thought doing it again would fix it.”

Thundercracker let loose an evil, flirtatious smirk that Hound both loved and dreaded, knowing that whatever the seeker was about to say would be embarrassing for him. “What can I say? Hound’s a fantastic frag.”

Hound wondered if he looked as mortified as Perceptor did and then decided he probably didn’t as he’d had an instant to brace himself for that.

“I was about to say I was glad to have you back,” Ratchet commented dryly, “But now I remember what you were like.”

“Is it permanent?” Hound finally blurted, wanting it confirmed, to erase that doubt hanging over his head.

“By all intents and purpose, it appears to be,” Perceptor nodded. The explanation he then launched into was long winded, used mainly polysyllabic words and left everyone else feeling a little glazed by the time he was finished.

“So the answer to Hound’s question was yes then?” Thundercracker raised an optic ridge when the scientist finally shut up.

“Yes and the bond appears to be holding it in check now, though how is still a mystery,” Ratchet got there before Perceptor. “But there is one more thing Thundercracker has to do before he’s free to go.”

“What?” the blue flyer asked, a little surly. Hadn’t he been patient enough with all these tests?

“Optimus wants to see you, alone,” the medic told him. “He’s the one that makes the decision about your future.”
There were numerous protests about Optimus being alone with Thundercracker, no matter how ‘cured’ he appeared to be but Optimus put his concerned officers in their places by asking them if they thought he was incapable of dealing with one unarmed seeker in a room where the Prime would have the advantage. Ironhide still took up a guard post outside his office door. Those that knew could pretend it was for the pretence of the others, but the big black mech had given all of his loyalty and faith to the red and blue mech that led them. Thundercracker may have, once, been someone he respected but that didn’t mean he trusted the seeker anymore, even if he appeared to be back to pretty much his normal self.

Neither Optimus nor Thundercracker was particularly looking forward to this conversation. The flyer knew the Prime had the power to basically put his life on hold indefinitely as he was still a possible safety breach and that would drive him insane, not being able to do anything. He wasn’t a mech that sat back and let others take action without him, and certainly not with his mate in the line of fire.

Once the door had slid shut behind the seeker’s wings, Optimus gestured to the chair placed opposite him and invited Thundercracker to sit down, which he didn’t and the big mech hid a sigh, already feeling the tension settle between them. He didn’t want to ask the already clearly troubled mech what he had to ask, but there was no choice and little sense in taking his time. That would only agitate Thundercracker more.

“Jazz has reported back to me that the Decepticons still think you are our unwilling prisoner and that offers me the chance to put before you a proposition that may well end this war.”

The blue flyer lifted one optic ridge, all he showed of his interest but at least Optimus knew he was listening. “I want you to go back to the Decepticons undercover and report back to us with information that we can use to bring them down. You’re closer to Megatron and the highest level of security than any of our undercover agents could hope to get. I understand that it’ll be extremely dangerous and that…”

“You’d ask me to walk away from my mate after we’ve been apart all this time?” Thundercracker asked, a snarl curling his lip upwards as he folded his arms across his cockpit.

Optimus regarded the hostile seeker standing the other side of the table but wasn’t perturbed by his attitude. He would have been surprised not to have seen this side of the seeker. “Yes I am, but I am also asking you to help us end this war quicker so that you may spend time with Hound without worrying whether either of you live through the next battle.”

Thundercracker froze as those words hit hard and deep and then his anger came bubbling back to the surface. “How can you throw that in my face? What you’re asking me to do is far more dangerous than fighting any battle.”

“And you’re not willing to risk your life on the chance of things returning to normal with Hound sooner,” Optimus returned levelly.

“Don’t you dare!” Thundercracker hissed.

“You cannot tell me how to act Thundercracker.” Optimus’ voice was still calm, but he wasn’t going to back down in the slightest. “I’ve been leading this army against Megatron since this war began and all that time I have been looking for any opportunity to end it. I do not like asking mechs to do something that they do not want to do, but I have to make the hard decisions. That rests on my shoulders and no one else’s.”

“You’ve not given up your bonded to fight!” the blue flyer snapped, throwing his hand out to point at the bigger mech.
“Haven’t I?” Optimus raised an optic ridge. “You know nothing of my personal life.”

That made Thundercracker pause, reining back his emotions and actually thought about what Optimus had asked him. He considered it enough to draw back the chair he had ignored before and sit down in it. “What exactly do you want me to do?”

“I want you to discuss it with us. We have a plan which we want you to look over. You know them better than we could ever hope to,” Optimus sent a comm. ping to those who were to be involved in the top secret meeting and none of them were long in stepping through the door and taking a seat, making Thundercracker realise that they had been waiting for him to say yes for some time. Prowl was the one who started the meeting properly, outlining the proposal, the pros and cons of what they were asking of Thundercracker and then a detailed list of contingency plans. He finished by fixing the seeker with a piercing look.

“The most important thing is to stay away from Soundwave.”

That surprised Thundercracker who was expecting to be told Shockwave’s name. “What about Shockwave? Won’t he be able to tell you’ve done something?”

“No. My programming is flawless,” Perceptor answered, tone indicating no self doubt. “The fact that your bond seems to be playing a large, yet indistinguishable role just helps to blend my programme into the background.”

“Over confident.” Thundercracker raised an optic ridge in disbelief.

“If Perceptor says it will work, it will,” Ratchet shook his head. “There is no one better.”

Thundercracker dismissed the thought of arguing that point to one that concerned him more. “Soundwave will do a scan. It’s standard.”

“Then make it not standard.” Jazz leant forward on the table. “Make ‘em forget.”

The flyer narrowed his optics. “To do that I would have to give them something and it would have to be good. It would have to hurt you.”

There was silence for a moment before Jazz leant back in his chair. “I can do that.”

“What did you have in mind?” Optimus asked quietly.

“I can give him enough low down on one o’ ma sabotage plans. Enough t’ stop it but not enough t’ get us caught in the act,” Jazz replied easily.

“Jazz, that is putting yourself in needless danger.” Prowl shook his head before fixing his black and white counterpart with a concerned stare. “I don’t like it.”

To anyone else they may have only seen the emotion of a close friend and colleague with a long history but Thundercracker had not had much of a chance to see Jazz and Prowl interact and therefore saw deeper. The SIC was renowned for showing a blank mask to the world; he was the calm logic in the face of any crisis, so to see any emotion was rare and spoke volumes about his relationship with Jazz. The fact that the Head of Special Operations was returning that look with a small smile only confirmed Thundercracker’s belief their relationship ran along a very personal line.

“Mirage ‘n I ain’t gonna even get close t’ bein’ caught Prowler. We’ll just make ‘em think we are.” That smile changed to a smirk.
Thundercracker listened to Jazz outline his plan and wondered how this would ever work, but more so, why he was paying attention to it. He hadn’t agreed, yet sitting here, listening to them try to find hope in the slimmest of chances reminded Thundercracker of Hound, sitting back in their room, waiting for him. Any chance of ending this war and keeping his bonded safe was tantalisingly tempting. He had done it before, that fateful night he had taken to the skies to stop the bombers destroying his home and family and realised he would again, but how could he tell Hound he was leaving again? There was nothing more painful and nothing more likely to stop him going, but that part of him that was more Decepticon than the rest, that hardness carved from reliance on no one but himself, told him he couldn’t and shouldn’t back down in the face of such pain. It was because of pain that he was making this decision in the first place. Pain and love.
"He asked you didn't he?" Hound asked when Thundercracker had entered their room and he nodded.

"Hound, I know you don't…"

"Don't," the green mech interrupted, rising from his seat to go to his mate. "Not now. Just hold me. Please?"

Thundercracker nodded again, folding the smaller frame into his arms and kissing Hound's upturned lips. The other mech let out a little cry and suddenly the kiss turned desperate and needy before Hound pushed Thundercracker back against the wall behind him. He pressed his chassis to the bigger seeker trapped before him, dragging his head down for another kiss. The blue flyer tried to stop Hound, to slow him down, scared by the speed the green mech was frantically pawing at him, but Hound knew what he was doing and Thundercracker lost out to the arousal flooding his systems, from the bond and those touches. The seeker never claimed to be perfect and this was one of his biggest weaknesses.

Thundercracker slid his hands down his mate's back to cup his aft so he could haul Hound's pedes off the floor, never breaking the kiss, and took them across the floor to their berth. His bonded pulled him straight down on top of him, taking his weight, and arched his hips up towards Thundercracker. The flyer hissed as their groin plating scrapped against each other and he could feel the slick heat of lubricant being transferred from Hound to him.

"Please Thundercracker. I need you," Hound whined.

"It's alright Hound," the seeker whispered, hands capturing those squirming hips. "I'm right here. You'll always have me."

Fluid welled up in Hound's blue optics as he heard that. He knew it was true but he also knew he was going to lose Thundercracker again the next mega-cycle. Hound didn't need to ask him what he had chosen to do, he knew his mate too well. How long they'd spend apart was anyone's guess and there was a very high risk of Thundercracker being discovered. No one knew whether he'd be put back in Shockwave's care again, or whether Megatron would just consider him too great a risk and have him killed. Hound doubted he could survive that and, in truth, didn't want to. The time he had spent alone had been more than enough to convince him he couldn't live his life without Thundercracker, not indefinitely.

"I'm surprised you haven't made me promise not to do anything stupid," Thundercracker continued, mouth twisting into a half smile.

"Like dying, you mean," Hound choked out before he covered his mouth, shuttering his optics in pain.
Fingers entwined with his, lifting them away from his face so Thundercracker could lay his lips against Hound's in a gentle kiss. The green mech chased his mate upwards when the seeker tried to draw away and that desperate passion that had dimmed a little flared back up into life. Thundercracker let out a groan when he felt Hound pushing his fingers against the cover for his jack and extended it into the waiting hand. The green mech encircled the spike, stroking it eagerly, making the seeker thrust into his grip and start panting in pleasure.

Hound stilled his hand, using it instead to guide Thundercracker into his port and as soon as the blue mech felt the heat and slickness around the head of his jack he thrust forward hard. Hound cried out, arching towards the intrusion and Thundercracker bowed his head down, clenching his jaw as he drove himself into Hound over and over. His hands gripped his mate's white thighs, spreading him wide and holding him exactly where he wanted him. The smaller mech clung to his bonded as he welcomed the rough pleasure, letting it chase away his fears for the moment, so there was nothing but the movement of their bodies together, but even that wasn't enough to truly help Hound set aside his pain. He needed a moment without it hanging over him before Thundercracker left again.

The seeker's movements faltered slightly when he heard the click of chest panels opening and was suddenly bathed in the blue light from Hound's spark. He could feel the tug on his own spark, the calling across the bond and divide between them as Hound sought his reassurance. Thundercracker let go of Hound's legs so he could pull him upwards until they were both sitting, Hound in the seeker's lap, with Thundercracker's spike still deep within him. It wasn't often the blue mech let Hound dictate the pace, but in that moment he knew what Hound truly wanted.

"Bring us to the edge," Thundercracker whispered, bracing one hand on Hound's back to hold him close.

The green mech groaned, fingers finding his mate's shoulders to hold on as he rose and fell, speeding up as he gained his rhythm. The flyer was entranced by the beauty of having such love before him and urged Hound on until their overload was hovering above them like a threatening rainstorm, beautiful, powerful and cleansing. When Thundercracker couldn't hold it for another moment he stopped Hound and bared his spark to his bonded's, pressing their chests together.

The instant their sparks met, the instant they synchronised and merged, the instant they became each other perfectly, both of them forgot every little thing that had made them despair. They remembered and reaffirmed the love that bound them together and found reassurance in the other to calm their fears. Both wished they could remain like this forever but sparks were not meant to be permanently joined, though perhaps they held still for a little longer than normal. Their overload was blissful and sweet but that perfect moment couldn't last forever.

Once both of their chest plates had sealed shut, Thundercracker laid down backwards on the berth, pulling Hound with him so his mate was mostly sprawled over the top of him, as close as they could get. The green mech's grip on him was tight, but the seeker's was just as strong and they said nothing more as they let recharge take them. There was little they could say. Merging sparks had shown the other their fears, their doubts, their arguments for and against the future that lay ahead of them. Why discuss something they had already realised was inevitable and decided?

xxx

Thundercracker woke first, not really in need of recharge, not with his CPU filled with information about what he had to do now. In a few cycles he'd be gone, using the plans and route Jazz had given him through the security. They had decided the quicker the better, leaving less chance of their plans being discovered. Red Alert hadn't been told about the plan, he wasn't a good enough actor to fool anyone, so having Thundercracker escape his renowned security measures, and the resultant panic
from their Security Director that would occur, gave everything a very real feel to it.

It would also be quite safe because Red Alert would also immediately fix the holes in their security grid. The seeker remembered the grin the saboteur had given him at that, saying, "I'm givin' a lot o' ma good stuff up for ya." The implied 'you better be worth it' went unsaid but Thundercracker didn't miss it either. He hoped it was as true as everyone believed it was. A lot was being rested on his shoulders and whilst failure on his part wouldn't mean failure for the Autobots, it would mean a longer war, more deaths, more chance of losing Hound. In reality it was that last fact that was all that was motivating Thundercracker, though he knew it hurt his bonded more than he let on when more friends didn't come back each megacycle.

Thundercracker glanced down at his sparkmate, peaceful in recharge, and realised, with a wrench, that he wouldn't be able to say goodbye. He'd never be able to leave if he had to do that. The seeker knew he wasn't strong enough to watch Hound struggle to be brave, to show it wasn't affecting him seeing Thundercracker walk out on them again.

Anger flared through him. Was it too much to ask that they had happiness in their lives? It seemed if they got that, the next moment they were being torn apart again and it made that violent portion of the seeker want to beat someone, anyone, into a messy pulp across the floor. It made him remember all those other Lords that had walked away from him when he had announced that he had taken an ex-slave as his bonded. It made him remember all those seekers that had called him an abomination for spark mating to a ground mech. There was a sudden thought, damning Swindle for ever daring to bring Hound into his slave market, for letting him see Hound, but then Thundercracker felt sick, banishing the thought. No matter what, any time he had spent with Hound in happiness was worth all that pain and misery. He hated himself for even thinking otherwise.

There was too much of that in their lives and Thundercracker couldn't leave with that in his mind. He reached out and stroked Hound's face, keeping his touches light, but enough to bring his bonded out of recharge. Hound blinked up at him and smiled softly, feeling Thundercracker's intentions through their bond and reached up to bring his face down within reach.

They filled those last few cycles with what Thundercracker wanted; love, reassurance, peace, happiness, and never once thought about what was to come afterwards. They bonded and interfaced several times, but more than that they just shared thoughts and feelings, good memories and dreams. Eventually Hound drifted back into recharge, lulled there by his mate's voice and his presence after so long without and Thundercracker just watched him, until the time came. He couldn't prolong it any longer, it all hinged on perfect timing, and the blue seeker inched his way out from the green mech's side. The flyer thought he had managed to escape without waking Hound, but he should have realised he wouldn't be able to sneak out on a mech with such attuned sensors.

"You're leaving without saying goodbye." Thundercracker stopped, hand on the door.

"I couldn't face it."

"I shouldn't ask but…"

"Don't ask me to say goodbye, Hound. I won't." Thundercracker remained with his back to the room, wings stiff and high.

"No," Hound slid off the berth and crossed the room to lay a hand on his mate's back. "I want you to promise me you'll come back."

The seeker relaxed, though he didn't turn around. "That's easy. I promise."
The scout swallowed a lump in his throat, but said nothing more and when the silence had lingered for more than a nano-second Thundercracker abruptly keyed the door open and strode away, fighting the urge to look back over his shoulder every step of the way until he was out of sight down the corridor. Hound watched the door slide shut. "That was a lie, but thank you anyway."

The scout knew he had his own orders to follow now, to make Thundercracker's escape more realistic, to help fool the others. He waited a few breems before paging the security hub and broadcasting an escaped prisoner alert. The alarms went instantly, throwing Iacon into organised chaos as mechs rushed to their posts, but Hound didn't move, opening a comm. to Ratchet and asking for medical assistance. The CMO, following his own orders, made like it was a priority, dashing to Hound's side, like he was injured, and letting himself into Hound's quarters.

The green mech was seated on his berth, optics watching his monitor as alerts and alarms cycled across the screen, and he barely gave Ratchet any indication he'd noticed his arrival. The medic glanced at the screen before setting his med kit down next to Hound and setting to work. He wasn't generally asked to create fake wounds on soldiers but he knew how to do it. Hound didn't react to the burn of Ratchet using a welder to score lines on his plating, too much of his concentration locked on the screen. There were still so many things that could go wrong; so much of this was down to an element of chance, down to Jazz's knowledge of who would be where because he knew their habits.

Ratchet didn't ask once how things were going. He fixed his own CPU on his work so that he wouldn't be distracted by his own worries about such a flimsy plan succeeding. That was something he had lots of experience with, all successful medics did. Without it they would never be able to put aside their personal feelings and concentrate at the task at hand, no matter if the mech beneath their hands was a friend or not. He also knew Hound would react instantly, however the outcome and he was right.

The scout stiffened momentarily before nodding his head briefly and then letting out a spark wrenching sigh. His optics tracked down to the arm Ratchet was working on and he watched him for a moment before saying, "He's out."

"I'd say good," the medic replied. "But I know that's not what you want to hear."

"It is, for everyone here," Hound touched his chest with his free hand. "And you too, eventually."

"I know. That's why I didn't fight this," the scout nodded. "But I'd somehow forgotten being alone was this hard."

"It's not like before," Ratchet straightened up from his position. "You can contact him."

"It's not worth the risk, not to comfort either of us," Hound shook his head before studying the medically faked welds on his plating. "Think this will work?"

"Course it will," the white and red mech snorted. "I'd better go see Red Alert now. I'm sure he's freaking out right about now and Inferno will only be able to calm him so much. You get some 'rest' and then…"

"I know what I'm supposed to do Ratchet," the smaller mech shot him a look as he interrupted. Ratchet took the rebuke without a word, knowing his friend didn't mean to be abrupt, but he would need some time to adjust and the time and space to do it. Luckily enough he had a close friend in Mirage who knew the details and other friends, like Trailbreaker, who would stand by him.
regardless. There was going to be backlash from this echoing around Iacon, and the whole Autobot army, for orns to come and Hound had been the one to bring Thundercracker in. He was going to be centre of the storm when it came home. The small group behind the plan knew it and also accepted there was nothing they could do to protect Hound from it, because letting him take the blame would be only following the correct procedural rules.

Prowl reprimanded Hound, according to those same rules, for allowing himself to be alone with a Decepticon prisoner in an unsecured room. Thundercracker's recovery was not public knowledge, so he was still labelled as a prisoner, rather than defector and the Autobots had very strict rules on the movement and guarding of Decepticons within their home base. That did a little to placate some of the less worked up Autobots but there were still those who watched Hound with suspicious, angry optics.

xxx

Thundercracker had been in Decepticon airspace for a cycle and with every hic he flew deeper his apprehension grew. He was well aware he would have been spotted and identified by now, so why he hadn't been shot down, apprehended, joined or at least hailed nagged at him. The blue seeker's sensors were trained on Helex in the distance and knew, in theory, that he should never even get within strike range without being challenged. An open path in was virtually unheard of, even for Megatron's unit and commanders.

"Frag this," he muttered and opened a comm. line to Skywarp to see if he was in range.
'Thundercracker to Skywarp.'

'…TC! What the frag? Last I heard you were playing prisoner in Iacon!'

'Well I'm not now. I'm within sight of Helex and I've not heard a Primus damned whisper from our side. What the frag is going on down there?'

'Like I'd know!'

'Then go find out moron!'

'You find out yourself slag-for-processors!'

'Warp…'

'Yeah, yeah…'

There was silence for a long moment before Skywarp started talking again. Thundercracker was now getting close enough to Helex and Megatron's seat of power to count the towers of the city.

'Soundwave was so talkative, as usual, but it looks like they're watching you come in and you're gonna get a welcoming committee on landing.'

'A deadly welcome or just guns?'

'Hard to say. Enjoy talking your way outta this one. Megs has been royally fragged off since you got taken.'

'Not surprising.'

'Good to have you back TC.'
Then the purple seeker cut the comm. line, leaving Thundercracker with only the sound of his own jets for company. That and his apprehension, but he pushed that back as he went over his well planned story again, making sure he knew it flawlessly, that there were no holes. He weaved between the towers, noting the gun emplacements mechanically, hating how he fell back into the soldier's role so easily. The route to the main landing deck to Helex hadn't changed and it wasn't long before the blue flyer could see it, and the gathering crowd on it. Wonderful, a public spectacle.

Thundercracker transformed five mechanometers above the platform and touched down gracefully with a quick burst of his jets to counter gravity. He dipped his helm at Megatron in a show of respect before lifting his optics to check who else was here and where his options might lie. Starscream was here, of course, with Skywarp standing just behind him. Soundwave was in his usual position at Megatron's left handside, statue still and emotionless as always. Blitzwing and Astrotrain were standing by the bay doors that led off the deck, clearly not invited, but too nosey to stay away. The main thing that worried Thundercracker was that all five Predacons were arrayed in a loose arc behind Megatron. They were the Decepticon's elite squad, deadly in their individual right, and the best, or the worst depending on your view, of their Combiners. They never stood around and looked intimidating for Megatron unless there was a chance of violence.

"Well Thundercracker," Megatron started, voice almost lazy, relaxed, making the seeker feel significantly tenser. "What a remarkable thing. It would appear you've returned to us, unharmed, alone."

"And bearing information about a future sabotage plan," Thundercracker added.

"Have you now?" Megatron raised on optic ridge. "How fortuitous. We'll have to get that confirmed, obviously." Thundercracker's optics ticked towards Soundwave involuntarily and Megatron smiled in such a way it made the flyer's plating crawl. "And I will be most interested in hearing how you managed to escape Iacon when no other mech has ever managed it."

"Of course," Thundercracker nodded. "But the sabotage plan has to come first as it will happen within the next mega-cycle." Megatron folded his arms across his chest, the image of patience, but the blue seeker knew better than that. Luckily enough he also knew just the way to deal with it. "Jazz is leading it."

The instantaneous bloom of anger that followed was predictable as was the smirk that came after that, "Optimus' Head of Special Ops is coming to pay us a visit is he? We'll have to make sure we give him a warm reception then."

With that Megatron turned and headed back inside. Astrotrain and Blitzwing bolted, knowing they shouldn't have been listening in, and the Predacons looked annoyed that they had been merely decorative. Skywarp on the other hand, grinned as he came forward and punched Thundercracker hard on the arm.

"Nice moves TC. Is Jazz really coming here?"

"Not here, but I'm not going to lie to Megatron about something like this am I?" the blue flyer snorted.

"It's good to have you back mech," Skywarp's expression changed a little there, revealing the deeper emotions behind the cheerful façade and Thundercracker wanted to take his friend away from this because he knew his betrayal would hurt Skywarp in the end, even if it was for his own good.

"Good to be back."
Soundwave intruded into their conversation then. "Sabotage information required. Thundercracker report inside."

"You are such a joykill, Soundwave," Skywarp scowled.

"Irrelevant," Soundwave intoned. "Information collection pertinent." Something in the way he said that, even though it was as boring and monotone as ever, made Thundercracker frown.

"You doubt my escape."

"Percentages indicate Iacon escape unlikely. Laserbeak dispatched to ascertain truth."

With that the navy mech turned his back on the pair of seekers and walked away. Thundercracker watched him go for a nano-klik before sighing and following. His optics finally met Starscream's, who he'd been avoiding, knowing that around the Air Commander his resolve would be the most tested. As it was Starscream merely sneered at him before flying away. Whether that expression was the best greeting Starscream could give, or whether he resentful that Thundercracker was back (after breaking out of a prison no other Decepticon had), the blue flyer couldn't tell, but if that was it, then he could be grateful for it. Now all he had to do was avoid Soundwave's telepathic scan. Easy.

xxx

"He's a slagging Con," Windcharger snapped. "We tried to fix him, gave him a chance to be an Autobot and look how he stabbed us right in the front. You're all fools to believe he could ever change."

"He deserved a chance," Trailbreaker replied. "That's what we do and you didn't know him before the war."

"Neither did you," the minibot shot back.

"Hound did," Sideswipe butted in, shooting a look at the green scout who had been very quiet as the argument had raged around the rec room. Everyone, regardless of whether they'd been pretending to listen in or not, turned their optics to him and he shifted uneasily.

"So, come on then," Windcharger prodded. "Tell us how wonderful this Con was. Tell us how you can still believe that after he left you for slag."

"He was a good mech," Hound said quietly. "He still is. The programming has changed him."

"I heard Ratchet say the programming only exaggerated personality traits he already had," Cliffjumper returned hotly. "His aggression, his violence."

"His loyalty to others," Hound levelled a look at the red minibot. "There are mechs here that would be a lot worse if they went through Shockwave's care."

"How can you stand by a Con?" Cliffjumper glared at him. "And the rumours I heard, he was in your quarters! No wonder he escaped with sympathisers like you on guard duty."

A loud boom echoed through the room, making everyone flinch and duck, before turning to find Ironhide standing in the doorway, cannon raised at the ceiling, which was now sporting a smoking, blackened hole.

"Hound is no sympathiser and I'll have words with anyone that even hints at that again. If ya recall Cliffjumper, I was on duty as well. Ya wanna say something to meh?"
The minibot shifted uneasily in his chair and muttered, "Still don't get why everyone seems to like the fragger so much."

The big black mech shot Hound a look and the green scout turned his optics down to his energon. Ironhide let out a snort. "Ya do nothing but gossip, the lot of ya, like a bunch of slaggin' femmes. Get over him already. We're at war."

With that he stomped back out of the room. After the doors slid shut after him quiet mutterings started up around the rec room and Hound was aware of the optics that kept looking his way. He fingered the fake weld like running across his forearm and wished they didn't have lie, but he also knew there were mechs here that wouldn't be able to keep the secret of Thundercracker's double life. The scout let out a little sigh, which he cut off when Blaster slid into the seat opposite him, giving him a cheerful smile which didn't reach his optics.

"Y'know, before the war, I did a lot of travelling round Cybertron," the red mech started without preamble. "Once I found myself in The Assembly when there was this big case going on in the Praxus Court. I'm not normally one for sitting still long enough to listen to all that slag, but 'pparently the public gallery seats were going like energon goodies and I couldn't miss out on that."

As Blaster had talked Hound had felt a growing sense of dread and wanted to think of some excuse to get up out of seat and not to hear the end of this tale, but his CPU was blank. The communications officer was lounged casually in his seat, so that anyone that watched them would think they were just having a pleasant chat, but he kept his voice low enough not to be easily overheard.

"That was some ruling, that mega-cycle," Blaster tilted his head as the green mech continued to say nothing. He glanced across at Trailbreaker who was sitting next to Hound, but got a facial expression to say the black mech wasn't going to fill in any blanks Hound wasn't willing to. "Y'not gonna ask me 'bout it?"

"Why are you telling me this?" Hound asked, lifting his optics to search Blaster's face.

The red mech shrugged one shoulder. "You seemed to have gotten lucky. A lot of bots remember that case, but they ain't got a clue on names and faces."

"And you're here to tell me what? That you know? That you'll tell the others?"

"I ain't gonna spill, not when you seem to think it needs keeping a secret," Blaster replied calmly before leaning forward. "You got some courage mech, to let him go again after all that. I wouldn't have done it."

Hound looked away. "It was his choice." There was a pause before the scout spoke up again. "Why are you telling me this?"

"No reason," Blaster rose to his pedes. "Just I got your back, and that mate of yours if y'need me. You two gave the rest of us looking for hope summat to believe in back then. It's kinda cool to be able to offer you summat back."

"He's right you know," Trailbreaker said and Hound jerked his head around, feeling bad that he had forgotten his friend was sitting with him at the table. The big black mech knew about Hound and Thundercracker, but not all the details of his undercover work. He was smart enough to know something was going on but he also knew not to pry. If he needed to know, Hound would tell him. "There are a lot of mechs here that support you." Trailbreaker gave him a wry smile. "Unfortunately the rest of them just have bigger mouths on them."

That made the scout smile properly for the first time since Thundercracker had left. "Thanks
"Breaker."

"He'll come back." The bigger mech knew what lay in his friends spark, but Hound didn't acknowledge that comment and Trailbreaker realised that the scout couldn't, wouldn't think about the future, not when it was so uncertain.

xxx

"Lazerbeak reports, Megatron," Soundwave intoned, stepping into the room. "Iacon security has risen. Autobots angry at escape of Thundercracker. No detection of Thundercracker being aided with escape. Suspect escape genuine."

Thundercracker felt a relived smile cross his face and turned it into one of cocky assurance, like he always knew that Lazerbeak would come back with the proof of loyalty. Megatron was silent for a moment longer, optics locked on his Communications Officer, before he nodded.

"So it would seem I really do have my lead trine back at full strength. Soundwave, reinstate Thundercracker's security clearance and get him back in the roster. I want him training again. He will be rusty having spent so long in a cell."

Starscream made a noise of protest, realising that meant him and Skywarp as well. "I will not go back to training. That's sparkling territory! I am the Air Commander, I don't need training!"

"Your protests make me think otherwise Starscream," Megatron replied dryly. "If you don't need it, then you'll all pass the tests straight away."

The white seeker hissed, wings flexing in agitation and he fixed Thundercracker with angry glare. "You better slagging well get this right first time or you'll regret it."

"I can still out fly you any day," Thundercracker returned, a level of amusement in his voice, knowing it would rile Starscream more and please Megatron. Megatron's trust, for what it was, was more important than appeasing Starscream's ego. Plus his own level of hatred for the other seeker meant that any chance to piss him off made Thundercracker feel so much better. The Air Commander was still sporting healing wounds from the confrontation with Jazz during the ambush the Decepticons had set for the sabotage team. It had not gone to plan. The Special Ops mech hadn't wrecked the base, or stolen any information, and any other mech would have been grateful for that, but Megatron had wanted Jazz dead or captured. As it was Jazz, and Mirage, had escaped after injuring at least ten Decepticons and permanently offlining several more. Thundercracker's information and 'escape' had been verified, and whilst Megatron had been livid beyond belief at their lack of success, Thundercracker had not been blamed.

Megatron dismissed them, Starscream already stalking out the door before his leader had finished speaking. Skywarp waited for Thundercracker and fell in beside him. Once the door slid shut behind them the purple seeker began talking animatedly about their training. Trust Skywarp not to be put down by 'training' if it meant flying with Thundercracker and Starscream. Regardless of the war, the animosity that lingered between his trine, or the fact that it was supposed to be work, Skywarp could not think of anything better than that. It made Thundercracker genuinely smile and be grateful, that despite what he was facing being back here, that the other flyer was truly his friend and by his side.

The training itself was monotonous and boring as slag. Thundercracker proved he hadn't lost his touch and that he didn't need any special ability, like Skywarp's teleport or Starscream audio shattering engine note. Mechs had always presumed he was the weak link, but when they worked together they had no weak link, nothing to exploit. The Autobots had feared when their trine took to the sky because they were the best at what they did, at least until very recently. They were still
willing to take on the five Aerialbots in the air but the youngsters were becoming a cohesive unit of their own and Thundercracker couldn't deny he was proud that it was his youngling leading them.

xxx

Thundercracker lay on his berth, curled on his side, wing hanging off the back and took a little comfort that he was finally alone again. It had been mega-cycles of constant watching before they'd decided to trust him even just a little, and even now he doubted Soundwave did. What had been hardest, over those cycles, was not keeping up the pretence of being a Decepticon. He already knew how to do that, he remembered being that aggressive, arrogant mech and falling back into it was easier than he would have liked. The most difficult bit was coping around that gaping, yawning hole in his spark where the bond with Hound should have been. Before it been there but as he hadn't understood it, it had been easier to push to one side and ignore. Now it made his tanks churn because no matter how full they were, he still felt hollow inside.

Neither mech wanted to take the risk that the open bond could be traced, so had agreed to close it down again, sacrificing the personal for the sake of this war effort succeeding. There was only one time that they had been allowed to open it and that was to confirm when Thundercracker had been accepted back into the Decepticon fold. Even when he had given the Decepticons the information about Jazz's sabotage plan he had been forced to be silent, having to trust the Third In Command's word when he said he was that good. Jazz was a force to be reckoned with and the fact that it was his name Thundercracker uttered made Megatron more likely to trust him, just because the Decepticon leader wanted to see the black and white mech dead.

It had been a close call for Jazz and Mirage. The Head of Special Ops looked cornered at one point, but he had beaten Starscream down with little effort and, rumour had it, with almost an air of retribution about him. Very few mechs knew about the past history Starscream shared with Optimus' two highest ranking officers but they knew Jazz often gunned for the Air Commander more than anyone else, bar Megatron. That close call, and the fact that it had been Starscream who had resembled a plane wreck at the end of it, just confirmed Megatron's trust, as much as he ever did, in Thundercracker, leaving him to finally walk alone again.

Had Shockwave been Helex instead of Tarn, the blue seeker knew his reintegration would have been near impossible but luck had dealt him a free hand there. The one mech that would have distrusted his story the most and had the ability to test it was busy elsewhere and Megatron was disinclined to drag him back to Helex for just him.

One black hand pressed down over the metal and glass on his chest over his spark before he dug his fingers a little into the seams and dropped the blocks around the bond. The empty echo washed over him for a moment, making him hate his life a little more, before he pushed it to one side and called out to his sparkmate. Hound wasn't long in responding, he had been waiting for this connection since Thundercracker infiltration the Decepticons. At first, it was just a rush of love, filling every fibre of their being and both of them would have been more than content to just bask in the feeling, but there wasn't the time, nor could Hound push aside his worry. The blue seeker felt that question and answered it with calm reassurance before using words to convey more.

'Megatron has reinstated my clearance. I am still in 'training', but I'm not being constantly watched.'

There was relief then, almost overwhelmingly so. 'Please stay safe Thundercracker.'

The flyer's fingers dug a little deeper into the seams, a miniscule stab of pain, and suddenly he couldn't remember why he'd lied to Hound when he'd left him back in Iacon. 'I am coming back Hound. I would never break a promise to you.'
He knew his bondmate was fighting back tears then but his mate didn't let them fall, didn't let his fears and worries resonate in the peace of their bond. 'I love you.'

'I know. Why else would I come back? I can't stay Hound… We can't risk this.'

'I know.'

Thundercracker wondered if this was the hardest thing to do, willingly shutting down a bond so filled with love and understanding. It felt like he was starving and turning down life saving energon. An answering, identical emotion from Hound reminded the flyer he wasn't alone and somehow that made it easier to finally pull away. The room was empty and cold and so terribly alone.

Thundercracker laid his fist into his berth before he could stop himself, denting the metal and scoring his knuckles. Why was he doing this to them?

xxx

Life continued without change within Iacon. Hound relayed that Thundercracker was back in the fold, but now it was a waiting game. Jazz and Prowl worked hard to position other operatives in places they could be of help, to gain information that they needed to aid Thundercracker if he brought them something suddenly, that they had to act on there and now. Optimus read their reports, sanctioned their actions but those three were the only ones that knew the full scale of the force they were putting behind one seeker. Thundercracker's escape, Hound's involvement faded like the scouts fake scars, until it was just another loss in the chaos of the war.

Battles came and went. Both sides lost and gained troops, ground, energy, resources. It was relentless, tiring and pointless. Neither side was willing to give even a little, knowing it could mean to turn in the tide of the war. Everyone's skills were demanded more, trying to force the other side to break before them.

Hound spent even more time out beyond the frontline, alone, scouting for weaknesses in the Decepticon lines as well as casualties and resource reports. Energon was becoming the main driving force behind every deadlock as Cybertron's output dropped drastically. The green mech's highly attuned sensors became so valuable he often only returned to Iacon to hand in his information, refuel, recharge and then he was gone again. His latest report meant he was needed for a frontline battle to highlight what he had found and as always he spent every nano-second with one optic on the sky looking for his bondmate.

This time though, once back in Iacon, he actually got time to visit the washracks and take orns of dirt and dust that had accumulated on his chassis off. Hound relaxed gradually under the heat of the water. It had been a long battle, with casualties on both sides and Thundercracker hadn't been visible amongst the enemy. The blue mech clearly hadn't been cleared from suspicion yet and Hound worried for him, knowing that if he was discovered, he would suffer terrible torture and death.

The green mech massaged his stiff joints and aching chassis, glad he hadn't been injured today. As the aches subsided a little he noticed a smaller one in his chest and rubbed at it with his fingers. It wasn't like the others; it felt deeper, like it was inside. It felt oddly familiar, but he couldn't quite place it, so he stepped forward until the water was only running down his back and split his chest plates open. It wasn't easy to see inside your own chest cavity but Hound could just make out the edge of his spark chamber and a small ball of pulsing energy next to it.

"Oh… well where did you come from?" Hound asked softly, before he grinned, realising there was only one place a sparkling would come from. His fingers hovered just over the tiny spark of life, wanting to touch to make sure it was real, but knowing he shouldn't. "I missed you arriving little
one." He didn't remember interfacing with Thundercracker like they'd done when he'd conceived Silverbolt, but apparently this spark was so eager to come into the world that it hadn't needed that much encouragement.

Wonder filled Hound as he stood, chin pressed to chest plates, watching the little spark in his own chest. Now he was aware of its presence he could feel the beginnings of their bond forming, right at the edge of his senses and a huge surge of pride, love and joy burst from him, straight down the bond to Thundercracker. An empty echo of nothing came back and just as suddenly that wondrous feeling was replaced by crushing sorrow.

A choked off sob echoed around the empty washracks as Hound closed his chest and sunk to his haunches, burying his face in his hands. How could this be happening? Hadn't they both been through enough in their lives? He wasn't angry at the new life growing within him, more that he knew Thundercracker would be devastated to miss out on his sparkling's upbringing, again.

He was so wrapped up in his anguish he missed Mirage entering the wash racks, but the white and blue mech couldn't fail to spot Hound. The green mech was rocking backwards and forwards on the tips of his pedes and was radiating abject misery. Mirage froze when he saw him, not used to his normally upbeat friend in such a condition. Granted he had been hard hit by Thundercracker's departure but he had never broken down in public; that would have been too hard to explain. The spy kicked himself into action and was soon at his friend's side, turning off the water before crouching down next to him.

"Hound?" he laid a hand tentatively on his arm. The green mech jerked, optics going straight to Mirage. When he realised who it was that had joined him, Hound dropped his head again. "What's the matter? Has there been news? Is it Thundercracker?"

At Thundercracker's name Hound choked and Mirage drew his friend into his side, holding him as he struggled to pull himself together enough to say, "I'm carrying."

Mirage froze for a split nano-second before bowing his head and murmuring, "Oh Hound, I'm so sorry."

"It's not that I don't want him... her... It's just... now," Hound raised his head, staring blankly at the floor ahead of him. "I can't do this alone Mirage. I can't go through this alone again."

"Then tell Optimus. He'll understand, he'd bring Thundercracker back," Mirage spoke softly, almost like he was afraid Hound would stop talking if he raised his voice.

The green mech shook his head violently. "No! No, I can't do that. I'm not as important as this war. With Thundercracker where he is, there's a good chance of ending this war. If he came back, we'd lose that chance and then everyone that died after that, it would be my fault..."

"Hound, you can't think that," the blue and white shook his head. "This sparkling is just as important to you, to all of us. It's a sign of why we're fighting."

"But can you imagine anything worse? Silverbolt had no sparklinghood, he was raised in the war, and it really wasn't as bad as it is now. How can I bring a sparkling into this? If Thundercracker can end this, then I don't have to worry about that." Hound let out a sigh that wobbled unsteadily as he fought his emotions. He pressed his hands into his chest. "Primus, I want Thundercracker back."
Just as Hound, Mirage and Trailbreaker pulled up to Optimus’ office door, Jazz appeared from the other direction, Blaster in tow.

“Hound!” the communications mech exclaimed, clearly surprised.

“Something’s going on with Thundercracker,” the green mech said without preamble. “We need to mobilise everyone, now!”

“That’s what we were just gonna do,” Jazz replied, rapping his knuckles on the door. He barely waited a nano-second before he was opening it and striding inside. Hound followed without hesitation, but the others paused briefly on the threshold. This was the Prime’s office, ingrained protocol said you didn’t walk in without an invitation to do so. Blaster was the first out of the remaining three to step inside.

“Jazz,” Optimus frowned up at his TIC, a question in that one word.

“Prime, we got a situation,” Jazz told him, moving straight to the large console on one wall of Optimus office. His digits moved quickly, calling up various stacks of information. “Blaster tell ‘im what ya heard.”

“Soundwave tried to block me out, like he normally does, but I heard a few mentions of troop movements, big ones. The Cons were excited.” The tall red mech shook his head in disgust. He hated listening in sometimes.

“One of ma mechs just came in ‘n confirmed the Cons are shippin’ out in big numbers,” Jazz added.

“Alright,” Optimus had already come to his pedes and rounded his desk to look at the information. He glanced over at the other three in his office. “Hound?”

“Thundercracker opened our bond,” the scout replied, not caring that not all the mechs in the room were briefed on his mate’s undercover assignment. He watched his leader contain his surprise down to a few optic blinks and knew he understood how early this was. “He sent me an image,” Hound reported, moving to the computer. “I recognised it. Here.” He opened several images, blowing them up bigger onto the screen. “It’s a front line outside Iacon City in the Border Regions. I scouted past the line last deca-cycle.”

“It’s been quiet there for meta-cycles,” Optimus spoke quietly, optics fixed on the screen. “There’s nothing of value in the Border Regions.”

“‘N our forces are thinnest there.” Jazz called up another image, this time scattered with tiny moving dots of colour marking each Autobot’s position. “Makes perfect sense t’ attack here.”

“The Cons’ comm noise went through the roof a couple of breems ago, then nothing,” Blaster frowned. “Soundwave’s not even put a blanket of static down.”
“They’ve had their orders. They’ll be mobilising,” Optimus stated before turning to Jazz. “Get reinforcements out to that line now. Send up some flyers to check the rest of the borders to make sure this isn’t a double bluff, but not the Aerialbots. I need Superion on the frontline.” Hound shuttered his optics briefly. He always hated hearing that. “Hound I’ll make sure everyone knows that we need Thundercracker - all the Decepticon command structure - online, but you are going to stay well off the front lines.”

“What? No! You can’t…”

“Hound,” Optimus warned carefully and he watched the green mech clamp his mouth shut, anger still clear, but not far enough gone to trespass into insubordination. “Your judgement is clouded in this matter. You will make decisions that will not be for the benefit of everyone and I can’t have that if this is to the deciding battle in the war.”

“Yessir,” Hound replied in a tight voice and Optimus hid the sigh. He knew Hound was furious, that more than anything he wanted to be on the frontline to find his bondmate, but he was a liability like this. The Prime dismissed them to get on with their jobs as he did his. Optimus watched Trailbreaker laid his hand on Hound’s shoulder, clearly trying to offer support, but the green mech shrugged him off and strode away. The other mechs in his office exchanged looks but they had jobs to do and couldn’t spare the time, however much they wanted to. In war personal relationships had to take a back seat.

Hound knew that as well, but he couldn’t believe in that right now. For the first time in his life he truly disagreed with Optimus. Before there may have been times where he disagreed with his orders, decisions, but he had trusted him to lead them to their goals. Now there was nothing but muted rage. Optimus knew how much his world revolved around his bonded and how much he’d given up when he’d let Thundercracker go without argument. To say, now, that Hound couldn’t go to him, that wasn’t acceptable.

The scout’s optics narrowed, his mouth set into a thin firm line; a look that was rarely seen on the easy going mech. It was not going to happen either, even if it resulted in his court martial and dismissal. Nothing on Cybertron was going to keep him off the frontline in this coming battle. The green mech smiled thinly. Let someone try and stop him. It wasn’t in Hound to brag but there was no one better at getting through enemy lines when it came down to it. Mirage may be able to become invisible, but his sensors didn’t match Hound’s. Jazz may be head of Special Ops for numerous reasons, but he often relied on patience, misdirection and stealth. Hound could stride through the middle of it all if he wanted.

He kept walking, letting nothing distract him as Iacon leapt into action around him as the orders filtered down to the ordinary troops. Mechs and femmes ran past him, heading to their posts, heading out. Here he was just one mech amongst thousands and no one would pay him any attention, or so he hoped. Hound had left most of his friends behind in that office, and whilst he was well known others wouldn’t be so inclined to stop him. He slipped through security check points without stopping, knowing they were more concerned about those incoming than those heading out. Soon he was beyond the main city and dropped down to his wheels, pointing himself towards the Borders, but kept his speed down as not to attract attention. Hound made sure he was alone before he cloaked himself in hologram to make himself look like a drone, pre-programmed to head to a specific destination without anyone being needed to control them. Once he was beyond the city limits he shed the hologram and pushed his speed to its maximum, knowing he had to be in place before the Decepticons attacked. He knew the Borders extremely well and planned to use that information to get in behind the enemies lines before they were truly in place.
“Sunny, heads up!” Sideswipe called and tossed a gun his brother’s way. His twin caught it without looking up. He swung it round his hand in a casual gesture, checking the ammo pack almost offhandedly, before he slotted it upside down to its holster on his back, another already in subspace.

Sideswipe joined him, a gun on his own thigh and a cocky smile on his face. Sunstreaker knew it was partly true. They did enjoy the thrill and rush of a fight but part of it was to hide the tendril of fear. Not for the others, but for each other. It was their greatest fear, that they’d lose each other, but they’d be slagged if that was going to stop them either. They fought to protect each other, and as a consequence there were few better in close combat therefore they were always committed to the heart of the frontline.

“Yo, Sides, Sunny!”

“Don’t call me Sunny,” the yellow mech snapped automatically at the smaller saboteur who had appeared next to them.

Jazz ignored him. “Ya on the next transport. Ya good t’ go?”

“Yeah we’re packed and ready for some action,” Sides nodded amiably, before making a show of looking around. “Where’s Hound? I thought he’d be on this transport.”

“Prime ordered ‘im off the lines,” Jazz returned, face emotionless. “Cuttin’ too close t’ home for ‘im.”

“Slag, that burns,” the red twin shook his head in sympathy.

“Ya know the orders. Ya ain’t t’ kill any of the command mechs ‘n this time ya will listen. This has got t’ be a clean take,” Jazz made clear and deliberate optic contact with both of the frontliners. Sunstreaker gave him a disgusted look whilst Sides grinned at him, but neither disagreed out right and Jazz had to accept that was the best he was going to get.

He watched both mechs’ attention come off him at exactly the same time and his internal scanner told him that Ratchet had just appeared behind him.

“He’s on the next transport too.” Both frontliners’ optics snapped back at him and it was Jazz’s turn to grin, “Ya mechs are ‘bout as subtle as Hide’s canons.”

“Tell that to him then,” Sideswipe grumbled, optics drifting back to their CMO.

“Ain’t in ma job description. See ya two out there,” Jazz saluted them with two fingers before disappearing off into the rapidly growing number of mechs in the hanger.

The twins glanced at each other, rapidly turning over emotions and thoughts between them, before they silently headed across the hanger themselves. Everyone else, consciously or not, parted before them and the path to Ratchet was easy. By the time they reached the medic’s side, Sideswipe was grinning easily again and Sunstreaker was pretending to be disinterested in his surroundings. Ratchet glanced up at them, optics narrowing slightly. “What was with the look?”

“Look? What look’?” the red brother asked, the pair falling in either side of Ratchet.

“The one from the other side of the hanger when I walked in. Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

“You always notice us Ratch,” Sideswipe’s face lit up with a smirk, though he could feel the echo of warmth from Sunstreaker at that. “Cause we’re just so gorgeous.”
The red and white mech snorted inelegantly, hand briefly patting Sideswipe on the shoulder. “Right, you just keep telling yourselves that.”

The CMO was unaware of the sharp flash of pain that travelled between his two companions, but they hid it well, very used to the unintentional put down and rebuttals. Ratchet was too busy organising the other medical staff and the limited supplies they had to take with them onto the front line to be concentrating on the Twins, but he was also aware they never left his side, nor did they get in anyone’s way. They stayed with him as he boarded, sat either side of him in the transport belly of the ship, quiet and watchful as they always were before a battle. The loud jokes and broad smiles disappeared from Sideswipe as the time drew nearer but the silence between the three of them wasn’t uncomfortable. Ratchet didn’t want to talk either. He knew he’d lose too many good mechs in the next few joors to have any appetite for conversation.

The flight was a short one, everyone was quick to unload and disperse to their positions, their transport rising again almost the instant the last mech stepped off the ramp. More ships were constantly arriving, filling every available space. Ratchet was barking orders now, voice clear and rising above the din of moving mechs and weapons. Sunstreaker was watching everyone without appearing to, taking note of who was going where, where the gun emplacements were, whilst his brother’s optics were clearly on the sky, but he wasn’t the only one.

“Incoming!” A voice screamed and everyone reacted immediately, ducking for cover and raising their weapons all at once. Missiles came raining down on their position from the sky, some making it through the instant barrage of fire from the Autobots, hitting their targets; the transport shuttles.

‘Prowl to all shuttles. Clear the area immediately.’

Their SIC’s comm was brusque, a subtle indicator his battle computer was fully up and running, and all the air transports began to move away from the incoming fire. The Autobots weren’t ready for the attack yet, and everyone was moving with as much haste as they could to get into position, but they were here and that was better than the Decepticons sweeping through their defences here and hurting them much closer to home in Iacon.

Ratchet was already moving towards the impact areas, ready to help the casualties. The twins moved after him but he pushed them away. “No, you’re needed on the frontline. Don’t argue with me.”

“We’re not letting you out of beacon range Ratch,” Sideswipe told him, utterly serious. “And if you need us for anything, just say.”

“I know,” the medic gave them a grim smile. “Has it ever been any different?”

The frontliners let the CMO go then, sharing their own look of worry before they turned back to the battle and began searching for the first Decepticon intrusion into their ranks.

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Hound could hear the fight as soon as it started, but he was already well into the Border land, roughly heading parallel to the front line. He was slipping between Decepticons as they came and went, listening for information that would lead him to Thundercracker. There was nothing so far, no indication that the seeker had made his move, not until he came across a trine of conehead jets. The white one, Ramjet was the designation Hound’s CPU supplied him from somewhere, landed next to the other two, transforming as he did so, laughing.

“He’s so fragging screwed!”
“What are you on about now?” Thrust sneered, not moving from lounging against a wall.

“Thundercracker…” the next part of the sentence was lost in a white haze of static as Hound froze before he got himself back into focus. “…shot at Megatron.”

“Did he hit him?” Dirge asked curiously.

“Slag yeah, but he didn’t put him down,” Ramjet grinned widely.

“He’s fragged then,” Thrust snorted, seemingly uncaring that the seeker was a traitor.

“He’s not offline yet,” the white conehead returned.

And he was staying that way Hound thought as he dug something out of subspace he may have ‘borrowed’ from Mirage’s Special Ops weaponry that he wasn’t supposed to know about. The electronic incapacitator was painful, long lasting and supposedly banned by the Autobots, but the scout knew all the Special Ops mechs carried on when they went on highly dangerous missions. The green mech carefully held it in one hand, gun in the other and waited until a rain of missiles hammered their position.

Under the cover of smoke and raining debris he struck. The incapacitator was slammed into Dirge’s unprotected back, sending him down with a scream and crackle of electricity. Hound then took down Thrust with dead centre hit to his chest plates. Normally, he wouldn’t have been sure enough to get the perfect hit, but this close, it was hard to miss, and the conehead hit the ground hard.

By this point Ramjet was levelling a gun in Hound’s direction, already firing off shots. One caught Hound’s upper arm, making him grimace in pain, but he continued to line the flyer up in his sights and two shots later the conehead went down, both wing flaps on his legs smoking. It was a backhanded way of downing any flyer, but Hound needed him online. He moved swiftly, stamping down on Ramjet’s weapons, breaking them from his arms before dropping to one knee and planting a hard fist into one wounded wing. Ramjet screeched in pain before swearing profusely, striking at Hound. The scout took the blow before levelling his gun at the conehead, who subsided quickly, glaring.

“All you have to do to live is tell me everything that happened with Thundercracker, right now.”

“Frag you!” Ramjet snarled. “I’m no traitor.”

The green mech narrowed his optics. He knew he wasn’t feared, he was no Special Ops mech with a reputation for getting information from Cons, but right now he was willing to destroy that image. “No, but I was hoping you weren’t an idiot.” He leant on his fist a little more and waited for the Decepticon to finish twitching in pain. “I’ll keep this up for as long as it takes.”

“Fine, you want to know about the traitor? He shot Megatron in the back. Megatron is slagging invincible. Megatron shot back and now it’s just a matter of time before he catches the coward and rips his spark out,” the white conehead spat.

“Where are they?”

Ramjet’s red optics blazed with hatred, but he gave directions to where he had last seen the blue seeker and as soon as he was done speaking Hound knocked him offline hard. Once Ramjet couldn’t see him he let out an explosive breath, feeling his tanks churn, both from what he’d done and from the worry over his bonded.

“Stay alive Thundercracker. I’m coming for you.”
The scout was back on his pedes and running, a fleeting hologram covering him, because nothing, bar another mech, would travel at this speed, and then there are all sorts of issues with identity beacons and other Cons recognising his holographic self if he tried. Better to be something that blended in, someone nondescript and unmemorable, something that didn’t drain his systems to maintain, only kicking in when he grew close enough to someone that they might spot him.

The co-ordinates to Thundercracker’s last known location were a fair distance over the rough terrain and his luck flailed before he was much closer. Hound never heard the jets coming. One instant it was just explosions, shouting and general battle mayhem, the next there was a crackle and muted boom right above his head. He didn’t get his hologram up in time, though the fact that he never stopped running saved his life as the air around him was filled with lasers. One caught his shoulder, another one leg and Hound hit the floor, his momentum making him roll over several times and into shelter.

The green mech swore, hands flying to the leaking wounds, but his CPU was already rerouting energon supplies and telling him the injuries were not serious enough to need attention immediately. The one thing that did, however, was the fact that when the blast had hit his shoulder, he had dropped his gun and there was no way to retrieve it now. He had the grenade launcher on his uninjured shoulder, as always, but he couldn’t use it, not when his tracking programme was telling it was Skywarp who had fired on him.

“Skywarp!” Hound shouted. “Let me go.”

“Like pit I will,” the seeker howled back, still circling the area. “I knew you’d be here, as soon as he became a slagging traitor! It’s always you.”

“He’s fighting for what’s right,” the scout snapped. “Like he’s always done!” There was the sound of a transformation, though Hound could still hear the jets, so Skywarp was maintaining aerial position over him.

“It’s your fault!” Skywarp yelled. “If you hadn’t come along, we’d still be a perfect trine and everything would be fine!”

“Stop deluding yourself!” Hound threw back. “You know that’s not true. Thundercracker and Starscream already had their differences, even before I came along.”

The seeker retaliated against that by blasting at the scout’s cover again, raining him with debris. “You made me lose my best friend! It’s all your fault!”

“He tried to talk to you, you wouldn’t listen,” Hound answered, remembering the pain his mate had suffered when Skywarp had began blocking him from his life. “If you want to blame someone, blame Starscream! He’s the one that twisted you against Thundercracker!”

“All because of you!” the hovering mech screamed, meta-cycles of anger and hatred making him deaf to reason. “I’m going to kill you. I should have done it when I first laid optics on you!”

“If you kill me, you’ll kill Thundercracker, you know that?” the green mech cried, suddenly wondering if the purple seeker would do as he said.

“He’s dead anyway. He was dead the moment he opened fire on Megatron! Do you really think he’d let something like that pass?” Skywarp scoffed.

“Then shouldn’t you be helping him? Where’s your loyalty to your best friend?” Hound returned, trying to keep his voice level through the fearful imaginings of his bonded trying to survive
Megatron’s wrath alone.

There was a moment of silence from above him before Skywarp replied, “he’s a traitor. All traitors should die.” His voice wasn’t as convincing as before and Hound risked peeking out of shelter. He could see the look of doubt on Skywarp’s face.

“You know what? I think you still care about Thundercracker, regardless of how mind-wiped the Decepticons think you are.”

“Shut up!” the seeker snarled.

“If you can’t bring yourself to help him, then let me do it.”

“Megatron will kill you both,” Skywarp replied, almost mechanically.

“Then he kills us and you’ll be rid of me.” Hound risked standing up in full sight of his enemy. “But I have to try to save Thundercracker. Please.”

“Look at you,” Skywarp gestured at the wounds and rents in Hound’s chassis. “You’re in no condition to offer any challenge to Megatron. What are you going to do?”

“Stand by my sparkmate and creator of our sparklings,” Hound said calmly, speaking the truth and was not afraid of it.

“You only had one brat before…” Skywarp’s red optics narrowed before he dropped to the ground right in front of Hound. The scout made himself stand his ground as the purple and black seeker loomed over him. Skywarp poked one finger into his chest and Hound batted the finger away, instinctively angry he’d gotten so close to the sparkling. “You’re really risking everything for him aren’t you?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Primus, I don’t understand you Autobots,” the flyer snorted. He threw up his hands in annoyance and then blasted off from the ground again, shouting back over his shoulder as he left. “If you save him, tell him he should straighten his priorities out.”

Hound frowned at the departing seeker, unable to reason out why Skywarp had suddenly changed his mind, but that didn’t matter now. There were more important things to deal with.

Superion disliked the situation. He preferred to be fighting out in the open, not stuck within a city. His sheer mass and power meant he destroyed what precious little standing buildings there were and they restricted his movements. The Aerialbot combiner was already a big target for the Decepticons and now he could be sniped at from nearly every angle, but Optimus had ordered him to remain on the ground and supply support for their frontline. He was to be the main battering force to break the line and that was a goal that had to be achieved.

Normally Superion had two simple goals that dominated his every action; to destroy the Decepticons and protect others, but today Silverbolt’s emotional attachments were heavily influencing Superion’s movements. The other Aerialbots accepted their leader’s need to see his seeker creator safe when they had discovered just how badly things were going, but they still knew to follow orders, much to their own chagrin. His single-minded attitude often made him distant and unfeeling, but today everyone could see the way the gestalt was letting himself be a target and shielding others with his bigger chassis, even if a lot of hits were going to his primary weakest points; the gestalts merge
seams.

Superion roared in pain and anger as a missile impacted in his midriff, even though he was resistant to most Cybertronian artillery, and swung to the left, wiping out the building the missile had originated from. His stripped-down thought process made it difficult for him to think creatively or adaptively during combat. Using brute strength wasn’t hard to do.

‘Optimus to Superion.’

‘Superion.’

‘There are two heavy artillery guns two hundred mechanometers due east of your position.’

‘Located and understood.’

The gestalt strode forward, stepping over the wrecked building he’d just destroyed and crushing several Decepticons when his pede hit the ground again, which he ignored as he swung his optics around, tracing the rounds as they lit the skies back to the guns themselves. He didn’t have a clean shot yet, so he moved closer, his heavy pedefalls shaking the ground. Decepticon jets screamed past the combiner’s head, strafing at his more vulnerable face, making Superion swipe at them in annoyance though it didn’t slow him down.

As he got closer the mechs operating the artillery guns seemed to realise this, swinging the barrels around to face him, but Superion now had a clean line of sight. He levelled his electrostatic discharger rifle and pulled the trigger, watching the blast of 150,000 volts of electricity hit its mark, starting a chain reaction which blew the first gun to smithereens. The Aerialbot combiner knew he had little time left before that final gun started firing at him and the sheer power it contained could cause him some problems.

Everyone could see the electrostatic discharge and resulting explosion light up the skyline for at least a hic in either direction when Superion pulled the trigger a second time, even Ratchet from where he stood inside one of the few remaining intact buildings. He’d spotted it after treating one patient and in a moment’s lull in the action had ducked inside to scope it out to see whether he could use it as a medical base, rather than leave patients out in the open whilst they waited for pick up. Its only problem was its proximity to the fluctuating frontline. Ratchet really didn’t want to be this close, but if wishes were guns, the Autobots would have won this Primus forsaken war vorns ago.

“This is an opportunity too rare to pass up on,” an emotionless voice said and Ratchet nearly leapt out of his plating, though vorns of practice had him keeping his reaction under wraps as he turned around, optics narrowing as he peered into the darkest of shadows. As a medic he was not equipped with trackers, beyond the normal, so it was, in a way, easy to sneak up on him, but no one had successfully managed that in so long that the time frame was hazy. The twin pests that were a constant in his life did not count.

A single yellow optic appeared, followed by the bulky outline of a mech as the owner of the voice stepped forward. Furious, blazing anger sparked in Ratchet and his hand was on his gun without thought, but his voice was restrained, for now. “I didn’t expect to see you so far from Megatron’s side.”

“There were events that required my attention elsewhere,” Shockwave finally came out of the deepest shadows. “And I came to seeking answers. I am impressed that, however temporarily, you managed to return Thundercracker to his original state.”

“It is not temporary,” Ratchet snapped. “And you’ll get no answers from me. He is one mech that is
“He will never be free of the programming,” the big purple mech returned, voice calm.

“You fragger,” Ratchet growled. “You cold sparked fragger. This war has ruined so many bots’ lives, but you had to take it one step further. I’ve seen what’s in your lab. The remains of the mechs you’ve experimented on and Primus knows that only scratching the surface. I’m going to take you down now.”

Shockwave’s single golden optic glowed slightly brighter for an instant before his whole head tilted slightly to one side. “You stand little chance in defeating me in combat. Whilst you have a reputation for being a strong combatant, you are first and foremost a medic. I am not so restrained.” Shockwave surged forwards. He was not a particularly fast or elegant mover, but neither was Ratchet. The red and white mech knew the odds were stacked against him in a one on one battle, but he felt angry enough to take Unicron down right now.

Ratchet ducked under the first fist, and neatly snagged the vulnerable power line that supplied Shockwave’s gunhand, tearing it from his chassis. That saved him from immediate danger but the Deception still used that gunhand as a weapon, punching it into Ratchet’s side like a blunt blade, puncturing and buckling the metal. The pain and shock of the impact made the medic lose focus for a moment and that was all it took for Shockwave to disarm the red and white mech, sending his gun skittering away across the floor.

The medic pulled back, hand touching his side and finding it wet with energon, before he snarled, slamming forward again to meet the Military Operations Commander with plate buckling force. Ratchet didn’t consider this a fight for his own life anymore. This was for everyone that had ever fallen into Shockwave’s clutches and never come back again. The medic wasn’t one for revenge and retribution most of the time, but some mega-cycles, it was all that you could do to try and right what was wrong.

“Where’s Ratchet?” Sunstreaker growled at his twin. Sideswipe spun around on his pedes, a look of growing unease on his faceplates.

“Slag, I don’t know.”

“I’ll find him.”

The red frontliner forcefully halted his brother when he took off and ignored the way Sunstreaker tried to loom over him intimidatingly. “You can’t just go running off, we’ve got orders.”

“You’d put Prime’s fragging general orders over his safety?”

“No, just…” Sideswipe frowned. “Be careful alright. I’m not gonna be watching your back.”

It was the yellow mech’s turn to frown. “Where are you going?”

Sideswipe dragged his brother to a split section of wall where they could see down into the blasted and open courtyard between a selection of buildings. Down below was utter chaos and carnage. Mechs on both sides were dying. The red twin pointed down to one side of the space and it took Sunstreaker a moment to spot what he was gesturing to. Hound was leaning against one building, clearly watching the fight going on with the intent of running the gauntlet. He looked battered and exhausted.
“He’s not supposed to be here,” Sideswipe muttered. “And what did we, like idiots, promise a young Aerialbot?”

“Slag,” Sunstreaker swore. He felt half tempted to tell his brother to just blow off the promise they’d made to Silverbolt, but Hound had always been one mech throughout their lives that had be fair to them. He was a good mech and Sunstreaker knew it would be one more thing on his conscience if he died here and now. His twin brother was also far more likely to be bothered over not keeping a promise and the one who would be more troubled about it later.

“I’ll see you later bro,” Sideswipe punched his shoulder with a grin on his faceplates. “Go save Ratchet’s aft.” With that he took off, running down the wrecked alley between even more wrecked buildings. His paintjob wasn’t meant for blending in on this job, but he was quick on his feet, a good aim with his gun on the move and his reputation often gave him a slight advantage as mechs hesitated before him.

The frontliner ran parallel to the chaos in the courtyard to his left, counting on being able to move faster than Hound beneath him. Sideswipe didn’t pass up on confrontations though. He was still part of an army, he still accepted he had a role to do in all of this, even with a promise to a young mech who was trusting him to keep his creator safe. Sideswipe both hated that and felt awed that anyone would do such a thing when neither Sunny or he were known for their ability to listen particularly well, unless it suited them.

The floor in front of him was missing, but he didn’t slow down, taking the two storey drop without flinching, deckign a Con on the way down and snapping his neck with one move. Down here the gunfire was intense and Sideswipe couldn’t move as fast anymore. He’d lost track of Hound, but his intuition was good. It was also helped by two facts. From where he was he could hear the roar of a fusion cannon and only one mech had one that powerful. The other was the blue seeker turning and twisting through the air, avoiding missiles from all directions and that deadly purple beam coming from the ground beneath him. Every Autobot within optic range could see what was going on and the rumour was spreading down the line fast: Megatron firing on one of his own and everyone was remembering Thundercracker in Iacon and nothing was so clear cut anymore.

“He’s a slagging suicidal smelting reject dumbaft,” Sideswipe commented to himself as he dodged behind a pillar to avoided being ripped open by shrapnel from an explosion. “A really brave idiot.”

Ratchet screamed in pain before rolling away and Shockwave let him go, clearly intent on slowly wearing him down. He almost seemed to be enjoying it, if you could read that much emotion in him. The CMO felt the damaged system seal itself off and a secondary system kick into action. He may not have been fast, he may not have been a fighter, but he was built to be extremely tough and with inbuilt redundant systems he could reroute his life support though, major injuries for others became minor to him. It meant taking him down like this took longer, but Shockwave had the advantage over him and was slowly pressing him back.

“This is a futile endeavour. I will crush you.”

Ratchet spat energon onto the floor as he rose to his pedes, hands clenching into fists. He’d lost his gun already and Shockwave had destroyed the mechanism in his arm which allowed the double cutters to emerge. He was ready to go down fighting and the red and white mech had a few tricks left. The medic narrowed his blue optics, ready to shoot out another caustic retort when a blur of yellow slammed into Shockwave’s back, sending him staggering forward. One yellow hand ripped a fin from the side of his head whilst the other formed a fist that ploughed into a weaker armour seam on his side. As the purple Decepticon turned, trying to get back at his new attacker the yellow mech
got a powerful kick into the side of his head, knocking him down properly.

“You won’t touch him again, you walking scrap heap.”

“Sunstreaker! What are you doing here?” Ratchet exclaimed, even as he cast around for his gun he’d been stripped of.

“Looking for you,” the warrior returned shortly, optics fixed on Shockwave who was trying to regain his pedes. “I don’t like you disappearing in battle.”

“You got your gun?”

“That’s too easy an ending for him,” Sunstreaker growled. “I’m going to make him pay for what he’s done.”

“You’re not killing him,” Ratchet snapped back, spotting his own gun. “He’s got to stand trial with the others.”

“You may defeat Megatron, but I will simply take his place. I have systems set up for just such an event as this,” the Decepticon stated, finally rising to his pedes. Energon ran down the side of his head from the damage Sunstreaker had inflicted. The frontliner snarled at him, closing the distance between them again. Shockwave may have been larger, heavier and ready for him this time, but Sunstreaker was one of the Autobot’s best hand to hand combatants and had a moral compass that often failed him in the optics of his comrades. He was also enraged at seeing the wounds on Ratchet’s chassis. Between him and his twin they had vowed to watch over their CMO in battle, and upon discovering him missing there had been nothing else on Sunstreaker’s processor except finding him.

Shockwave landed a few powerful, brutal blows on Sunstreaker, but they barely seemed to register as a blinding rage settled over the yellow warrior and he hammered blows into the Decepticon. If Shockwave had been uninjured then Sunstreaker wouldn’t have succeeded as well as he did, but Ratchet’s well placed blows beforehand were the key to the purple’s mech undoing.

When the purple Military Operations Commander went down, the frontliner hammered his chassis with kicks, face dark even as his optics blazed with intense anger. Sunstreaker straddled the bulky mech, digging his fingers into the rents in the metal plating over his shoulders and leaned right down to growl into what amounted to Shockwave’s face. “You never touch him again. Never. He’s mine. Do you hear me you fragger? Mine!” With every word Sunstreaker slammed Shockwave’s head back down into the ground. Even once he had run out of words, he kept at him despite Shockwave being limp beneath him.

“Sunstreaker! Stop!” Ratchet pulled the yellow twin off the unconscious Decepticon, having to put his full weight behind the movement to prise the two apart. “What the pit is wrong with you?”

The frontliner’s face was still screwed up in an angry snarl, “He hurt you!”

“He’s hurt others worse,” Ratchet snapped, hiding his fear over the twin’s actions. “And that’s no reason to beat him to death.”

“It’s every reason!” Sunstreaker bullied close to the medic, vibrating with emotion. “You’re mine. No one else touches you. I should tear him to pieces for daring to hurt you.”

“Sunstreaker… I don’t belong to anyone,” the red and white mech shook his head.

Sunstreaker growled in annoyance, unable to articulate how he felt, but he had to do something.
Everything he’d bundled up inside was bubbling over now. He literally lunged at Ratchet, smashing his lips against the medics in a furious, one sided kiss. Ratchet froze under him before shoving him away, a look of confusion on his faceplates.

The yellow mech snarled in anger, at himself and the world in general, spun around to deliver a thudding kick to Shockwave’s chassis and then storming out, leaving Ratchet in stunned silence. The CMO touched his fingers to his aching lips and wondered, blankly, what had just happened.

‘Superion to Ratchet.’

The medic startled at the unexpected comm but recovered quickly, letting it get his CPU back on track. ‘Go ahead.’

‘Request your presence at my location.’

‘Are you injured?’

‘I do not require your help. Thundercracker does.’

‘What the frag…? You know?’

‘Yes. Seeker is failing rapidly. He will lose speed and manoeuvrability. Megatron will not miss.’

“Frag, frag, frag,” Ratchet swore. ‘On my way Superion.’ The CMO switched comm connection. ‘Ratchet to Prowl.’

‘Prowl.’

‘Shockwave is out for the count. You better send someone to get him before he regains consciousness.’ Ratchet sent the locations and cut the comm, storming out the building muttering, “Why the frag has everyone gone insane?”

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Hound had always been sensible. Even in the face of some of the things he had faced in his lifetime, his balanced, thoughtful nature had won through, but at that very instant in time it was pushed to the very limit.

“Thundercracker!”

The scream of the seeker’s name echoed between the buildings. Hound felt he should be running, moving towards where he’d seen his mate fall from the sky, but he was frozen in place, clinging to the edge of the building he’d collapsed against. There was nothing in their bond and the green mech begged for there to be something, even if it was pain, because that would mean he was alive.

There was a moment of silence before a spluttering cough filled the sky. It quickly changed into a roar that Hound recognised as the full burn of seeker jets and his spark soared as a blue shape rocketed skywards. Hope was immediately cut again as that brilliant flare of purple energy shot after him. Megatron was still firing. Optimus hadn’t made it through the line yet. Normally Megatron wouldn’t hesitate to engage the Autobot leader in battle if he saw him, but his desire for revenge on Thundercracker was winning out.

Something shifted inside Hound. Whether it was something the sparkling unconsciously provoked or whether it was just seeing his bonded in danger, Hound’s anger won out. Ignoring his own exhaustion and wounds he pushed himself up from the building and started running again. His pedes
pounded down the torn up road, optics fixed on the point where the firing was coming from as his CPU rapidly put together a hologram. He wouldn’t be able to hold it long, not in his current condition, but he hoped it would be enough.

As he got closer to where Megatron was he began to spot other Decepticons and Autobots engaged in close fighting, sometimes even hand to hand, but he ignored it, barrelling straight through the middle. Occasionally he heard his name being called, or a shot coming his way, but he kept going almost blindly, sparing no thought or hologram for his own safety. He wouldn’t be able to keep the pace up if he did. Eventually the green mech was forced to stop when a round tore up the ground right in front of him and he threw himself to one side to dodge, rolling into cover.

A roar of engines overhead announced it was a seeker that had fired on him and Hound looked upwards to see Starscream banking to come back for him. The roar of Megatron’s cannon was audible now, he was that close. Slag it! Hound wasn’t enraged enough to forget that he was unlikely to be able to take Starscream on and win, not in his present condition. He hunkered back down when another set of shots rained down on his shelter, destroying a good part of it, meaning he’d be exposed very soon. The green mech took a good look around whilst Starscream was manoeuvring, searching for somewhere else to go, preferably that would take him closer to Megatron.

There was a scream right behind him before two chassis came right through the wall to his left. Sideswipe looked up and grinned at Hound as he climbed off the motionless body of a fallen Decepticon.

“Didn’t think you were supposed to be here.”

“I’m not,” Hound returned shortly. “But Thundercracker needs my help.”

The red warrior glanced across at where he could just make out the blue flyer twisting through the air, narrowly avoiding Megatron’s cannon blast. “What’s going on between you two?”

Hound avoided answering as Starscream opened fire on them again and Sideswipe swore as shrapnel pelted his chassis. The green mech interrupted his tirade. “Look I need to get away from Starscream. I’ve got a way of helping Thundercracker, but I can’t do it with someone shooting at me.”

Sideswipe regarded Hound for a split second before grinning again. “One distracted Air Commander coming up.”

With that he threw himself upwards, firing his jetpack to launch himself at Starscream quicker so the seeker didn’t have time to change course before they collided. Hound set off running again as soon as Sideswipe had engaged Starscream, hoping he hadn’t just signed the red twin’s death warrant. He ducked inside another ruined building, hurrying across the interior until he came to a huge rent in its structure where he could see through to the square beyond. Standing in the middle of it was the grey Decepticon leader, ignoring the shots being taken at him by Thundercracker who was still holding his attention above him. Now Hound was closer he could see the damage on the underside of the blue flyers chassis and he was amazed he was still airborne.

The scout frowned in deep concentration as he worked out how to get the hologram he wanted to project up there and have it be successful. He watched his mate twist and turn and abruptly recognised it. Hound had often watched Thundercracker enjoy his early morning flights, marvelling in the way he threw himself effortlessly around the sky out of sheer enjoyment. Now he was doing it to save his life, but they were the same moves and the scout knew what was coming. He overlaid the seeker with his hologram and waited until he barrel rolled and split the image.

Suddenly there were six blue seekers soaring across the sky in all different directions and Hound let
himself have a small smile when Megatron paused in firing, swearing angrily, but he couldn’t waste anything more on that. He could already feel his chassis shuddering under the strain of the effort and energy it was costing him to do this. Hound sank down to his knees as he made the holographic projections open fire on Megatron, though he didn’t have enough in him to make the shots real, so he had to deliberately miss. Megatron didn’t even flinch.

The green mech pushed on the bond, begging Thundercracker to open up, let him in, tell him what the plan was, anything. His sparkmate had to know he was there now, no one else could do this. The sparkling in his chest squirmed as he felt Hound open that bond and the scout blinked rapidly as the first real emotions from it filtered through. Before it had been too young, too small to do anything on a scale that registered.

Hound clutched at his chest, trying to concentrate around the distraction. It was amazing to feel, but it was quite possibly the worse timing ever and he begged the sparkling to shush, even thought all it was trying to do was call out to Thundercracker with him. Perhaps it was that little extra difference but something made the seeker react. The bond opened marginally, Thundercracker brushed past them both, surprise evident when the sparkling reached for him too and it showed. He faltered in the air and that imperfection marked him out from the perfect holograms around him. Megatron reacted in a nano-second. One instant Thundercracker was airborne. The next the bond was filled with screaming pain and the seeker was hitting the floor hard, transforming on impact, bouncing over several times before he came to a stop, deathly still.

“Thundercracker!” Hound cried out, without volition and Megatron turned to his hiding place. The green mech realised how stupid he’d just been and threw himself clear when the Decepticon leader blew up the wall he was crouched behind.

“You! You’re the Autobot scum who’s caused all this,” Megatron pointed a finger at the smaller mech where he crouched.

“I caused nothing!” Hound snapped back, rising as he did so. “You’re the one who fragged up a whole lot of lives just to have your trine.”

An evil smile curled Megatron’s lips upward before he raised his fusion cannon to point at Thundercracker. “I think I’m going to enjoy this. I kill him and I get to watch you die in agony as your useless bond kills you.”

“No!” Hound didn’t know he could move so fast, but however fast he moved it wasn’t enough to stop Megatron. He did the only thing he could and got himself bodily between the fallen seeker and Megatron. Agony tore through his side, the force of the shot spinning him around and sending him crashing to the floor, where he lay gasping. The scout looked up, trying to focus, at the sound of heavy pedefalls coming towards him and couldn’t do a thing to stop the dominating grey mech levelling his cannon at his head.

“At doesn’t matter to me, who dies first. I wonder if, when I end your pathetic life, that traitor will ever wake up again.”

Hound looked away. He didn’t want to see his death coming, so he searched for Thundercracker. If this was going to be the last thing he saw, then he wanted it to be Thundercracker. That was why he missed Optimus powering into the clearing and tackling Megatron into the nearest building, but the commotion whipped his head back around and as soon as he realised he was safe, Hound’s thoughts turned to his bonded.

With cries of pain he couldn’t suppress, the green mech levered himself to his hands and knees, but couldn’t get up any further. He forced himself to crawl those few mechanometers to the still seeker
and once at his side Hound collapsed, reaching out with one hand to try and gauge Thundercracker’s health. Their bond was swarming with pain from both sides, so Hound couldn’t tell just how damaged his sparkmate was, but the thud of the pump in the flyer’s chest was steady.

Hound curled himself around Thundercracker, cradling his head in his lap with one hand whilst he pressed his other into his side to try and stem the flow of energon. Megatron’s shot had damaged a lot of systems and Hound guessed it had severed a major energon line somewhere because of the way his HUD was flashing at him with sharply dropping levels. He held his bonded as tight as he could. They were back together now and he wasn’t ever going to let him go anywhere again. Gradually, to the sounds of Optimus and Megatron still fighting, Hound’s vision faded, until it blacked out. His head fell forwards, landing with a sharp crack against Thundercracker’s chest and he knew no more.
Thundercracker came back to consciousness to the sound of voices. They were fuzzy as his CPU struggled to sort itself out. He was still in a lot of pain since Megatron cannon had done just what it said on the label and fused his plating to his internal wiring, but luckily every shot had only glanced across his chassis, bar that last one. Any part of him that formed his undercarriage flared with pain every time he moved and his wings ached but he guessed for him to come back online he had to be stable, which meant someone had to have helped him.

Red optics flickered on and Thundercracker found himself staring at an orange ceiling, remembering how much he hated the colour, but that colour meant only one thing. He was back with the Autobots, so those voices were likely to belong to Ratchet and the other medics, but if they weren’t working on him, then someone else was in a worse condition. The blue, battered seeker rolled his head around to the left until he spotted where the voices coming from. Ratchet was standing with his back to him, bent over a mech on the medical berth, with another red and white medic standing the other side, working furiously as well. Standing next to Ratchet was a grey and white mech who Thundercracker vaguely remembered, but couldn’t recall his name, and he was blocking the flyer’s view of the rest of the mech. All he could make out was a pair of green pedes at the end of the berth.

Realisation hit Thundercracker then, like another blast from Megatron’s fusion cannon and he struggled upright on his berth, “Hound!”

The other red and white medic glanced up from his work, “Ratchet, Thundercracker’s getting up.”

“Jack, go over there and make the slagger lie down!” the CMO snapped and the grey and white mech turned around to see the seeker nearly fully sitting up.

“Hey, hey!” he hurried over to try and push Thundercracker back down. The seeker was bigger than him but injured he couldn’t put up as much as a fight. “You’re still badly damaged and any movement could make you worse off.”

“I’ve got to see Hound,” Thundercracker tried to get Wheeljack’s hands off him. “Move!”

Wheeljack frowned at him, glancing back at Ratchet. He still didn’t have the full story about the flyer and scout, but guessed there was something going on between them, more than anyone was letting on, especially when he’d seen the sparkling orb nestled next to Hound’s spark. “Is the sparkling yours?”

“Yes! Now get out of my way!” Thundercracker’s voice rose as his desperation increased. He had to get to Hound’s side. Wheeljack didn’t leave him, instead helping him up off the berth, letting him lean on him heavily as the pain threatened to black him out again, before he staggered across the floor. The other mech left him at the foot of the berth, clinging to its edge to remain upright, as he went back to helping the two medics. Ratchet had both hands buried in Hound’s side, his arms were streaked with energon and had a look of intense concentration on his face.
“Aid is the pressure coming back up yet?”

The other medic shook his head, “Not anywhere near enough. His spark is pulsing again.”

“Frag,” Ratchet muttered. “C’mon on you slagger, show yourself.”

Thundercracker covered the end of Hound’s pede with his hand, willing his mate to fight for his life and the life of their sparkling. Their bond felt dull, sluggish, like slag in an energon line. His red optics, muted with pain, watched every movement that Ratchet’s hands made and he let out a little explosive breath from his intakes when the CMO finally caught the leaking energon line he was feeling for and sealed it. First Aid sprang into life then, hurrying to attach a series of leads to Hound’s spark casing and hooking them up to another machine.

The seeker couldn’t hold himself back any longer, “Is he going to be alright?”

Without looking up from his work at Hound’s side Ratchet replied, “He should be dead. How the frag he’s still alive I don’t know but he’s made it this far, I’m not just going to let him slip now.”

“The sparkling?” Thundercracker whispered, knowing that tiny light of life was the reason why Hound was lying on the table fighting for his life.

“If Hound’s spark stops pulsing, then it should pull through.”

Wheeljack glanced up to see the frown on the blue mech’s face and elaborated, “Hound’s spark is pulsing because it’s attempting to power back up systems that have failed due to energon lose, but that are needed for him to maintain systems at a level where he can provide for the sparkling. Unfortunately pulsing, and in the worse case flaring, seriously endangers the sparkling as Hound’s own spark could overwhelm it as it is not very old.”

Thundercracker dropped his head downwards to rest his forehead on Hound’s pede and for the first time in his life he prayed to Primus. Hound had never been the one he’d considered to be in danger, not like he was. He was the one running the risk of being caught and yet here Hound lay, fighting for not only his life, but the life of their sparkling and Thundercracker carried all the blame.

The seeker was still there when Optimus appeared a cycle later. The CMO was just about finished on Hound, though he hadn’t replaced the damaged plating yet, in case an emergency dictated he needed quick access to Hound’s systems. The big mech, still carrying damage from the battle, stood inside the doorway, optics trained on the blue mech until Wheeljack noticed him.

“Optimus, why haven’t you been seen to yet?”

“It is minor damage, and all the other medics are run off their pedes. How is Hound?” Optimus replied.

“It’s still touch and go,” the inventor shook his head. “He’s sustained a lot of damage from that blast and the sparkling had put a lot of strain on his weakened systems.”

“Sparkling?” Optimus turned his head to stare at Wheeljack.

“You didn’t know?”

“I would never have let Hound out of Iacon if I had known he was carrying!” Optimus sounded shocked.

“That was my fault,” a weak voice told him just before Thundercracker stood up, wincing and swaying. “I pushed him into a decision he should never have had to make. Your consolation, should
you lose Hound, lose a good solider, is that the mech responsible won’t be far behind him.”

“Oh will you shut up,” Ratchet snarled, batting the seeker around the back of the head, though not hard enough to stagger him, as he came to stand next to him. “I’ve had enough of this bonded woe you two keep spouting. Hound’s a grown mech, he made his decision and he’s slagging well going to live, both of him and sparkling, got it?” When Thundercracker gave him a tentative nod, almost scared to believe him, Ratchet scowled and turned on Wheeljack. “And what did I tell you? He’s supposed to be lying down.”

Wheeljack held out his hands, “C’mon Ratch’, it’s not like I could force him to stay on the berth.”

“Yes you can. You know how sedatives work and in case you need a refresh…” the white mech produced a needle and syringe from subspace. Wheeljack chuckled uneasily, coming back over to Thundercracker’s side to try and guide him back to his berth. The seeker was reluctant to go and had only take a few steps when one of the machines attached to Hound screamed into life. Ratchet was back at his side in a flash, swearing as he removed the temporary cover over Hound’s chest and side. First Aid was there as well, checking his spark.

“His spark is flaring,” the younger medic reported.

“There must be a blockage somewhere,” Ratchet returned shortly, fingers rapidly checking every new weld and repair, searching for anything he might have missed.

“Hound!” Thundercracker lunged at the berth, only to be caught by Optimus, who held him back so he didn’t get in the way. He was no match for the Prime and hung limply in his grasp as he watched the two medics fight to save Hound’s life. A litany of words fell from his lips. “Please Primus, please let them live, please.”

Every mech in the room heard him and silently echoed his words.

Silverbolt limped up the corridor as fast as he could, pushing through the crowds of mechs; injured, jubilant, exhausted, numb, everything they could be, and he wanted to take off and blast down the corridor faster than this. The other Aerialbots had lost track of him as soon as he’d heard and set off across Iacon as quickly as his battered chassis would allow. He had one destination in mind but that was blow out the water as soon as he saw a single pair of mechs, arguing in low, angry tones, trying not to draw attention to themselves. He turned their way immediately.

“…talked about this!”

“Frag off Sides. It wasn’t like you were there. You didn’t see what he’d done to him!” Sunstreaker slammed his fist into his twin’s chestplate, not hard enough to damage, or even knock him back, but more effective than just jamming a finger into him. Sideswipe opened his mouth to respond but they both remained silent when Silverbolt appeared at their side and matched him with a pair of equally pissed stares. Silverbolt was not scared of them.

“You promised,” he hissed, full of the pain and anger of a betrayed, lonely and frightened youngling. “You promised! And now they are both in the med bay, dying and you promised you’d look after him! You promised!” The Aerialbot’s voice broke in the last word and he crumpled. The twins caught him without thought and manoeuvred him so he was sitting with his back to the wall, knees drawn up to give him a little privacy against all the mechs staring at them.

Sunstreaker glared at them all until they stopped and turned away again. Sideswipe was carefully
keeping contact with the younger mech, knowing that touch would help him calm down. He was also well aware that the other Aerialbots would be coming straight for him now, though he was going to give them a piece of his CPU for being stupid enough to let Silverbolt get away from them at a time like this.

Silverbolt covered his face with trembling hands, but it was easy to tell from the way his shoulders shook that his emotions were getting the better of him. Sideswipe said nothing. Yes they had promised, but the red frontliner had done his best and he wasn’t Primus. Somehow Sideswipe doubted even he could have stopped Hound from doing what he'd done: The rumour was he’d taken on Megatron before Optimus had got there to intercede. By now everyone was talking about the pair that was the blue seeker and green scout; how it had been all undercover work, how they were together, how they’d both taken on the Decepticon leader single-handed, but very few knew how bad a state both of them had been in when they were rushed back to Iacon. The red twin had.

After downing Starscream, painfully into the side of a building, knocking the seeker offline and smashing up Sideswipe jetpack, the frontliner had taken off after Hound, fearing the worst when the Megatron’s fusion cannon stopped. He would have loved to give Hound the benefit of the doubt, but even on his best day he was no match for Megatron. By the time he’d gotten there Optimus had already, mostly, subdued Megatron and Ratchet was kneeling on the floor, already streaked in energon, fighting to save Hound’s life. Sideswipe ran to the medic, crashing to down to his knees and sliding the last few mechanometers to keep his momentum.

“What can I do?” he asked.

Ratchet’s optics snapped up to him for a nano-second before he started speaking, “Come round here.” Sideswipe obeyed, stepping over Hound’s outstretched legs and kneeling down next to the medic, who never stopped working. “In my lower back plate there is a catch. Open it and locate the thing that looks like a squashed pulse rifle.”

Sideswipe blanched for a moment, instinct screaming at him that he couldn’t do this, but he’d offered to help and the fact that Ratchet looked more beaten up than he did couldn’t stop him when Hound was clearly dying before them. He did as he was asked and touched the part he thought was right.

“This?”

“Pull it out.”

“Ratch…”

“It’s a redundant system. Pull it out now!” the CMO barked.

The red twin braced his hand on the medic’s white back to counter the force he’d use to free the system and yanked. The medic never made a sound, even when a spurt of energon followed the part in Sideswipe’s hand out of his system.

“Here, now,” Ratchet ordered and Sideswipe shuffled back round to see where he was being pointed to. He slid one hand down into the gaping wound on Hound’s side, glad he wasn’t in the least bit squeamish and held still as Ratchet hooked it up, diverting major energon lines through it to stop more loss. Sideswipe was surprised Hound had anymore to lose, looking at the size of the pool he was knelt in. “Go check Thundercracker.”

The frontliner blinked rapidly, wanting to argue he was no medic, but he didn’t. He was all Ratchet had right now. He got back to his pedes, crossed the distance to the still seeker and knew enough to check that his pump was still working and he didn’t appear to be leaking much energon. The worst of it was the sparking rent across one side of his chest and shoulder and the smell of burnt, melted
plating made Sideswipe turn his olfactory sensor off it was so intense. "He looks alright… I think, though this power sparking hasn’t stopped yet."

“I’ve got it,” a voice told him and the frontliner looked up to see Wheeljack above him, already pulling something out of subspace. The red warrior pulled away, optics darting between the two patients and their medics and wondered, not for the first time, if this war had really been worth it and where the frag was his brother?

“Silverbolt!”

The twins looked up in tandem to see the rest of the Aerialbots rushing down the corridor. Sideswipe got a very dirty look from Slingshot as he knelt down on the other side of their gestalt team leader and the frontliner moved back out of the way of the to let the rest of the young mechs crowd round. Skydive remained standing for a while optics on Sideswipe and the red twin muttered, "Look after him, yeah? He might really need you lot soon."

Skydive blinked and then asked, voice pitched low so Silverbolt couldn't hear him, "Is it really that bad?"

Sideswipe just nodded, drawing away and pulling Sunstreaker after him. When they were far enough away not to be overheard he took back up the conversation they'd been having before Silverbolt interrupted. "Look, I'm sorry I wasn't there but we talked about this Sunny…"

"I know we did," his brother interrupted. "But that means nothing now does it? It's all out in the open."

"Except it really isn't," Sideswipe pointed out. "All you did was kiss him in a fit of anger and worry. What is he gonna get from that exactly?" Sunstreaker grimaced, folding his arms over his chest plates. "Yeah, exactly, this is Ratchet we're talking about here."

"So what do we do then?" the yellow warrior's optics contained more emotion in them than he normally let out in public and Sideswipe reached out through their bond to instinctively soothe. "I'll go talk to him and…"

"We both need to," Sunstreaker said stubbornly.

"Sunshine," the red frontliner said in exasperation. "How do you think he'll react if you turn up now? The last thing you did was inexplicably kiss him. Just let me talk to him, get him out of Med Bay as soon as I can and somewhere private so we can actually sort this."

Sunstreaker had to admit that was a better idea than just storming into the Medical Centre and trying to get Ratchet to listen and give them a straight answer in public. The yellow warrior looked at the chaos in the corridor, knowing the rest of Iacon would be like this, and that the Med Bay would be even worse. They had even let another medic tend the worst of their damage because they understood that Ratchet was too busy right now to deal with them as they weren’t dying, missing limbs or anything else that could get them classed as serious casualties.

“I won’t wait for long."

“I know, but give him a chance to do what he’s best at and then we’ll do what we’re best at,” Sideswipe nudged his brother. “Sorting the idiot medic out.”

“"You should be lying down. Your own injuries are still extensive,” Ratchet laid a hand on
Thundercracker’s shoulder where he was sat next to Hound. “There’s nothing you can do now.”

“Let him be Ratch’,” Wheeljack responded before the seeker had a chance to. “He’s not hurting anyone.”

The medic sighed and left the blue mech alone. Thundercracker held one of Hound’s hands between his, stroking it softly, over and over again. He’d been doing it since the medics had pulled away from Hound and Optimus had let him go. The flyer guessed he should be feeling pain from his own injuries, but he couldn’t sense his own chassis, not when everything ounce of concentration was focused on his bond, willing it to show him something. The silence was frightening. It was worse than all that time they had spent apart, though Thundercracker wondered if this is what it had felt like for Hound just after he’d been taken by the Decepticons. It was worse because Hound was right here, he was touching him, and there was nothing.

“I love you Hound,” Thundercracker bowed his head as he spoke. “I should have told you more often. I know I’m not a mech to voice his feelings for everyone to hear and I’m sorry for that. I wish you could hear me, making an aft of myself here. You could laugh at me, I’d love to hear you laugh again.”

“Never… laugh… at… you.”

The seeker’s head shot up so fast he cracked something in his neck. Hound’s optics were glowing ever so faintly and his hand tightened slightly on Thundercracker’s fingers. Thundercracker opened his mouth to speak, let out a choked off sort of noise and rose up in his seat enough to press his forehead to Hound’s.

“Love you.”

“I know…’” Hound’s voice was rough and tight. “How are,, you?”

“I’m alright,” Thundercracker lifted his head to see his mate’s face. “I didn’t scare everyone.”

Hound frowned slightly, “Sparkling?”

“You can’t feel it?” one of the flyer’s hands hovered over Hound’s chest, unable to touch it because of the leads still attached to it.

“Can’t… feel… I…” the green mech faltered, optics shuttering.

“Ratchet!” Thundercracker called and the medic was at their side moment later. “He was talking. He can’t feel the sparkling.”

Ratchet frowned, scanning Hound’s chest, “The sparkling is fine.” He gently shook Hound’s shoulder until the green mech’s optics powered back up. “Hound, tell me what you can feel.”

“Can’t… I…” the fingers in Thundercracker’s hand flexed.

“I know it’s hard,” the CMO replied. “As best you can. Are you in pain?”

“My side…” Hound frowned, shifting slightly. Ratchet tightened his grip on the mech’s shoulder.

“Easy Hound.”

“My chest… feels… numb,” the scout blinked, struggling to stay with them.

“That’s from your spark flaring,” Ratchet reassured him. “And the pain meds. Your sparkling is
doing well. Rest, you’re safe.”
Hound shook his head faintly, “Want to… know. Megatron… what…”

“Optimus beat Megatron. We got all the major Decepticon players and the rest are scattered. We won,” Ratchet squeezed Hound’s shoulder. “Rest.”

Hound smiled faintly, optics turning to Thundercracker as he lost consciousness again. The medic checked the green mech’s readings again, pleased to find them stable, and turned back to Optimus. He had been reporting, verbally, back to his commander about the current status of all the mechs in his Med Bay, and those that had been through it, as he didn’t have the time to write one as he patched him up. The Prime asked occasional questions, but didn’t interrupt the medic too often. Once Ratchet rejoined him, he voiced his concerns about the bonded pair and Ratchet quietly agreed. No matter what he’d told Thundercracker, or even Hound himself, the medic was still deeply worried about the scout and by extension the seeker. He was stable, but he’d been through the pit to survive and even now his spark could just decide to give up. There were two things that gave him a higher chance of survival: His bond with Thundercracker and his own Primus damned stubbornness to stay online for the sparkling.

“What can I tell the others?” Optimus said as he rolled his newly fixed shoulder, testing its mobility. “That he’s alive and there’s a good chance he’ll pull through,” Ratchet answered. “Give them a little hope.” The medic stopped cleaning his hands for a moment to make full optic contact with the Prime. “And go find Silverbolt and talk to him yourself. He won’t answer my comms and the rest of the Aerialbots are refusing to say why.” “He’s probably scared you’re going to tell him Hound’s gone,” Optimus murmured and Ratchet nodded. The big mech laid a hand on the CMO’s shoulder. “You need a break some time soon old friend.”

Ratchet’s mouth drew into a displeased line, “When there aren’t mechs in need of my help.”

Optimus had learnt long ago that there was no way he’d ever persuade his medic otherwise. No one could, no one except a pair of twins that everyone else generally thought were only out for their own gains. The Prime had separated himself from his troops because it was necessary for the war, but he was more than aware of what went on between most of them. Certain mechs, like Jazz, happily provided him with gossip, understanding he needed to be touched by their lives, even if he couldn’t do it himself and he had other sources of knowledge. The fact that the red and yellow mechs weren’t here was highly unusual and as Optimus left the Med Bay he noted he may have to send someone to run a little interference in their lives, even if it was just to get his medic to recharge before he ran himself into the ground, again.

The next time Hound came around he felt significantly less fuzzy, though he was still exhausted. Slowly he blinked his optics, focusing on the ceiling, as he took in what he could feel of his chassis. His chest ached, but he could feel it now, along with the faint awareness of the sparkling, which made him smile weakly. His side no longer hurt, but from his hip to just under his bumper to the midline on his abdomen there was no sensation at all. The green mech shakily raised his left hand to his chest where his fingers inelegantly poked at the trailing leads, before he dropped it to his side to discover a fresh weld line running along the edge of where he was numb.

Hound dropped his hand back to the berth and turned his head, following the sounds he could hear until he spotted Thundercracker, who was sitting on another berth across the room. Ratchet was standing in front of one of his wings, working on it, and the seeker was trying not to flinch too much,
but Hound felt unbelievably grateful that Thundercracker was not only alive, but clearly well enough to be up and about. The scout knew that Ratchet would be the one mainly responsible for saving both of their lives and they both owed the medic more than they could repay.

The white and red mech was still sporting marks of his own injuries, but that didn’t seem to be slowing him down, but Hound knew his friend well enough that he probably should have stopped cycles ago. He apparently wasn’t the only one who thought that. Sideswipe was pacing around the med bay, clearly irritated, but every time he made moves to approach Ratchet the CMO pointedly glared at him and he went back to stalking the room. There were fresh welds, patches and missing paintwork littering his chassis, but he paid them no heed.

“C’mon Ratch’, you need a break,” the red twin protested. “And I need to talk to you.”

“No you don’t,” the medic replied shortly.

“I do. Sunny told me what you did,” Sideswipe was gravitating back to Ratchet’s side. “What he did. We need to talk and you need to take a fragging break already! No one’s dying right now.”

“Thundercracker needs these sensors repaired before I can do anything else for him and Hound still needs constant monitoring,” the CMO did something to the seeker’s wing that made him hiss in pain and narrow his optics at Ratchet.

“I’m awake Ratchet,” Hound said, voice rough and quiet, but it carried well enough. Thundercracker reacted instantly, nearly knocking Ratchet over with his wing as he leapt off the berth. He was at Hound’s side a moment later, gathering one hand in both of his, trying to smile but clearly still shaken by nearly losing his bonded that it was a little off. Hound squeezed his fingers back, giving him a reassuring smile as best he could.

Ratchet appeared at his other side, optics checking monitors and then the attachments to his chest, before using his fingers to check the weld lines.

“How is he?” Sideswipe abruptly asked from over the CMO’s shoulder.

“Recovering slowly,” the red and white mech didn’t look up from his work.

“But recovering, as in not in any immediate danger,” the frontliner put one hand over Ratchet’s forearm and the other on his shoulder and tugged. “We need to talk.”

“You look like you could use a break,” Thundercracker’s red optics took in the medic in a quick once over. “And I’m here with Hound. You’re not going to get a better watch mech. First Aid and Wheeljack are also around.”

Ratchet’s mouth opened and then shut again before he grimaced in annoyance. Whatever was hanging between him and the Twins was clearly something he didn’t want to deal with, but the persistence Sideswipe was showing meant there was no avoiding it either. Hound and Thundercracker watched him give in and, almost sulkily, follow the red frontliner out of the Med Bay.

“You’re…” the blue seeker started, drawing Hound’s optics back to him. “You’re really alright?” The lingering pain and hesitation in his voice highlighted how scared Thundercracker really still was. Hound wriggled his fingers until his mate let go of them and reached up for his face, missing and nearly poking him in the optic. Thundercracker covered his hand with his, moulding it to his cheekplate and shuttering his optics as he leant into it.

“We’re alright,” the scout whispered. “All three of us.” The grip on his hand tightened. “Nothing’s going to keep us apart again.”
“Nothing,” Thundercracker agreed, turning his face to press a kiss into the palm of Hound’s hand and they stayed like that for some time: Thundercracker unwilling to let go and Hound lacking the energy to want to fight it. Hound even drifted off for a brief time, still weak and relaxed with his bonded touching him. He was drawn back awake when the seeker eventually moved, too injured himself to stand still for long and had to smile at how much more at ease he looked.

“I kept my promise, you know,” Thundercracker grinned. “I seem to recall you promising to stay alive. Just what were you trying to pull?”

“Cheeky glitch,” Hound smiled widely, feeling good doing it, feeling his spark lighten at the gentle humour.

First Aid chose that moment to interrupt. He checked Hound’s vitals first, then his welds before looking up at Thundercracker and quite firmly saying, “You need to lie down.” The seeker tried to protest and whilst the young medic was nowhere as intimidating as Ratchet, he didn’t need to be. “Before you fall down. Hound’s recovery will take a long time and he will need you to be able to take care of him much more than he did before, throughout his carrying period.”

Thundercracker was suddenly serious again, optics going from First Aid to every injury littered over Hound’s chassis and the scout could see he understood what the medic was asking him, but he could feel the indecision through their bond and made his mate’s choice for him. “Go lie down Thundercracker. I’ll be right here. Let First Aid finish fixing you.”

His gaze went to the broad expanse of scarred blue wings either side of the seeker and knew how much pain he was blocking from his sensors.

“Alright,” Thundercracker bent down and kissed him, for once being firm about something, instead of so gentle, like he was afraid Hound would break under his fingertips. “I’ll be right over there.”

“I know,” Hound murmured, feeling the tiredness creeping back over him even as he said it. He was far from better.

“Recharge. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“Ratchet, will you just stop for a nano-second!” Sideswipe didn’t quite yell, but he looked closed to it. In fact he looked downright scared and that made Ratchet stop more than the words did. The medic looked away from Sideswipe, who was still trying to hover far too close, and glanced straight at Sunstreaker. The yellow twin had been nearly silent throughout the whole exchange, leaving it to his twin to explain what he couldn’t, but he’d barely looked at Ratchet either.

“What did I do?” Ratchet asked without thinking.

Sunstreaker’s head jerked upwards to meet his gaze. "For someone who can spot the smallest nick in the tiniest of fuel lines, you can be so fragging blind to everything else,” Sunstreaker replied, voice heated, but low, like he was trying to hold everything back.

Ratchet wanted to snap a sarcastic answer off to that, but he couldn’t. Sideswipe, for all his annoyance, was right. This had to be sorted, dealt with… but Ratchet still didn’t know how. “Then tell me what I’m so fragging blind to. I can’t be a miracle worker all the time.”

Sunstreaker threw his hands up in frustration. "Like the fact that we won't let anyone else fix us, like where we hang around most is the medbay, like me beating that fragger Shockwave's head in weren't clues enough!"
“Clues to what?” Ratchet demanded, exasperated. “That you’re trying to annoy me to an early offline?”

“Frag no!” Sideswipe swore. “Ratch’, don’t you get it? That’s the last thing we want. We’d die first…”

“Never say that,” the CMO growled, optics narrowing on the red twin.

“But it’s true,” Sideswipe glanced at his twin, then back at the medic. Sunstreaker took the hint, sliding off the berth he’d been sat on, to cross the floor to stand on the opposite side of Ratchet to his brother. “How long have we known you Ratchet?”

"Far too long, in my opinion," the mech replied grounchily, folding his arms across his windshield. "Why?"

“And what have we ever done, in all that time? Consistently, without fail?” Sideswipe persisted.

“Annoyed me?”

“Been there for you,” Sunstreaker bit out. “More than any other mech.”

The red and white mech opened his mouth to argue, complain, anything, but he couldn’t speak as memories of the twins flooded his processor, from loud, only just adults, mechs to the mechs they were right now: That time after he’d got landed doing their highly successful surgery, that they would let no other bot fix them from then on because no one had his magic hands; a claim, he realised, they had made good on, Sideswipe's uncanny ability to time his visits right when he needed a break from his work, Sunstreaker's unusual skill of picking up little medical tricks that more often than helped rather than hindered Ratchet, their regular calls and check-ups on him, even if it was for nothing more than a 'how had his day been' and letting him rant it all out to them.

And even now in the middle of war, if it wasn't both it was one or the other who was always nearby protecting him, and the first on scene if he was hit. They would pester him in the medbay to the point he had to forcefully drive them out, and for some reason he always felt better afterwards.

“I… Why? Why me?” the medic glanced between them rapidly, trying to find his pedes again, to secure himself in this conversation which was swiftly beginning to lose him.

“Why not?” Sideswipe couldn’t help the grin then. Sunstreaker reached across older mech to swat him and he sobered up again instantly, which was decidedly wrong, Ratchet realised. “Seriously though, Ratchet, why not? You seem to have this retarded mental block on your own worth. You lay into others when they do it, yet seem to think it’s perfectly acceptable to doubt yourself.”

“That’s natural,” Ratchet stressed back.

“It’s moronic,” the yellow twin growled.

“We don’t doubt you,” Sideswipe said, like he was stating a fundamental law of physics, one that could never be broken. “In fact, we do more than that. Sunstreaker kissed you for a reason.”

“Never get slagging hurt again, do you hear me?” Sunstreaker glared at Ratchet. Sideswipe hit him this time, levelling a look that clearly said ‘Back up, bro. No repeats.’.

“Look, just hold it,” Ratchet held up his hands. “Sunstreaker kissing me made no sense. I’ve never given you any signals like that, and you…”
“We have given you plenty,” the red warrior’s voice had dropped. “But I think you ignore anything that might make you personally happy outside of your work.” Ratchet opened his mouth to protest but Sideswipe wasn’t done yet. “We have always wanted more from you and you getting yourself into a fight with Shockwave, of all mechs, pushed Sunny too close to the edge. To think that we might ever lose you…”

“It doesn’t process,” the yellow warrior took over when Sideswipe shook his head. “And we won’t let it happen.”

“You can’t control everything!” Ratchet protested.

“Watch us,” Sunstreaker rumbled, closing that last bit of distance between himself and Ratchet, until he was near enough that the medic could feel the heat radiating from the other mech. Another warm chassis joined them on the CMO’s other side, until Ratchet was trapped between to two mechs.

“Tell us to leave, Ratchet,” Sideswipe ordered. “Tell us we don’t love you, tell us we’re not worth the risk to be happy. Tell us that and we’ll walk away.”

Sunstreaker’s optics snapped up to his brother, vehement denial on his face, but he kept quiet when Sideswipe reached out through their bond to reassure him it was just a ploy to help Ratchet feel he had some control left. Their Chief Medical Officer never did well when he didn’t feel in control of a situation, but he might know them well enough to understand they didn’t relinquish something if they wanted it this badly.

“I… have always understood you two came as a package deal,” Ratchet began, not looking at either of them as he tried to find words to explain what he didn’t fully know or understand himself. “And that you’ve never had… partners, or long term ones, because finding someone that wants both of you for more than just one mega-cycle… You’re both too different and I…”

“Exactly our point,” Sideswipe interrupted. “You treat us equally with no favouritism for one of us above the other, but as individuals.”

“Not like everyone else,” Sunstreaker continued. “I know how they look at me.”

“Sunstreaker…” Ratchet said, pained. “Don’t say that.”

“I don’t care. They are not you,” the yellow mech reached out, cautious and wary, which was something you never saw on the frontliner, and gently touched the medic’s chest. “They aren’t you, Ratchet.”

“Don’t you want someone to care for you?” the red twin asked softly, an almost sad tone in his voice.

The medic opened his mouth before shutting it without uttering a word. A memory flashed back across his CPU, one from long ago, when he had been arguing with Thundercracker, of all mechs, that he should tell Hound he harboured feelings towards him. ‘I’d feel a lot more reassured if I knew someone cared deeply for me.’ He’d said those words and he had meant them. They still rang true now, but a lot had changed since then as well. Ratchet was older, bitterer and closed off now. The Twins he had watched change in his war as well, grow into the mechs they were today. He knew them inside and out better than anyone else alive and realised they were such a constant in his life he would be lost without their presence. Barely a joor went past when he didn’t see one or both of them. They were in and out his Med Bay, often with such a see-through excuse he didn’t see why they bothered, and in and out of trouble with all the senior officers. They saw more time in the cells than an Autobot should, but Ratchet realised, with something akin to shock, that he had never sent them
there himself. Every time they’d been in trouble and he’d been the first to find out, he’d verbal reprimanded them to an inch of their lives and they’d been better behaved for longer after that than any time they’d come out of the cell block.

“Ratch’?” Sideswipe asked, voice incredibly gentle for the power in him. Sunstreaker’s hand was still on his chest, why hadn’t he pushed it away, and it was moving, softly tracing the edges of his windshield.

“I… I don’t understand,” the medic uttered bleakly.

“We want to make you happy Ratchet. Give us a chance to prove that,” the red frontliner touched him then, hand sliding around his forearm.

“Please,” Sunstreaker murmured and the CMO could hear the pain then. He looked at the yellow mech and saw the fear of rejection in his optics, the fear that he had utterly destroyed the one thing he held most sacred in his whole life, beyond the life of his Twin.

“Sunstreaker, don’t… I would never push you away,” and without volition his own hand came up to touch the side of Sunstreaker’s face, the first time he’d initiation contact between himself and either Twin since Sunstreaker had kissed him. The yellow mech smiled then, strange and bright on his face and Ratchet realised they had been right.

“Yes.”

“Yes?” Sideswipe repeated dubiously. “Yes what?”

Ratchet swung back to meet his optics then, “Yes, I do want someone to care for me. Yes, I do want to give you a chance to prove it. That yes you idiot.”

The red warrior’s own smile was as startling as his brothers and abruptly Ratchet was embraced from both sides in a tight, warm hug. His initial reaction, after the surprise, was to bristle a little at the close contact, but neither Twin let go, nor reacted to his tension and eventually he relaxed. The medic began to understand that this closeness was not easy for either of the brothers and that they knew it wasn’t something simple for him either. He let himself forget the battle, the patients waiting for him back in his Med Bay and just enjoy the warmth from the bodies pressing into his.

It was Sunstreaker who released him first, dropping his arms and stepping back, making Ratchet turn his head to look at him, but Sideswipe moved then. He stepped around in front of Ratchet, not loosening his arms and Ratchet fought not to lean back from the face looming in his. It wasn’t that he was intimidated, but he was wary what Sideswipe would do with this new information he had, especially with that smile on his face.

“Sunny’s already had a kiss,” Sideswipe explained. “It’s my turn.”

Ratchet opened his mouth to protest, again (he seemed to be doing that a lot recently) but the red twin had moved in and it gave him the perfect opportunity to kiss the medic thoroughly. He was powerful, overwhelming and teased Ratchet’s senses until the white and red mech forgot he was meant to be pushing the younger mech away. Luckily for him Sideswipe broke the kiss before too long and Ratchet watched him send a grin towards his brother.

“He’ll definitely come around.”
Over the next few days Hound passed back and forth in and out of consciousness, getting stronger and staying awake for longer each time. Gradually Ratchet was satisfied enough with his progress to start unhooking him from various machines, including the one supplying his system with energon, which meant Hound now had to feed himself. He had never realised that just sitting up and ingesting energon could be so tiring, which was proof as to how lucky he’d been in this war, to never have gotten badly injured before now. Thundercracker was true to his word and always there when Hound needed him, even if he was driving Ratchet to utter distraction by constantly being under his pedes. Most of the other patients had been discharged from Med Bay, even if they weren’t allowed back on duty yet.

During this time Thundercracker was ordered out of the Med Bay for a proper debrief with Optimus and the senior officers and Silverbolt carefully chose this time to visit Hound. The brush with death that his creator, creators, had made him almost scared of seeing Thundercracker for the first time, and despite wanting to see Hound sooner the Aerialbot had held back, even with the rest of his team urging him to do otherwise. Luckily for Silverbolt Hound was online when he did show up. The reunion was emotional, even though Ratchet shouted at both of them not to get the scout worked up, but they didn’t need many words. Silverbolt merely clung to Hound, discarding the adult behaviour to revert to the way younglings sought comfort from their creators and Hound did nothing to stop him. He just held the flyer until he got himself under control and then gently answered all of his questions until Silverbolt felt secure enough to leave, knowing Hound wasn’t going to abruptly drop dead on him. The scout felt for Thundercracker that Silverbolt wasn’t ready to see him, but he didn’t push the Aerialbot either. It would come in time.

The next step for Hound came several mega-cycles later when Ratchet decided he had recovered enough to restore the sensors that were currently held offline throughout the section that had been wrecked by Megatron’s fusion cannon. He warned Hound that it could be painful to turn them back on, and the green mech was to do it slowly, gradually and if it was too much he had to stop immediately. It was a strange feeling, after being numb for so long, Hound had forgotten what it felt like to have a complete body. A dull ache resided, but no real pain, which seemed to satisfy the CMO. It lulled the green mech into a sense of security. He really was better, he had survived injuries that should have ended three lives and he pushed for the next step in his recovery. The scout was by nature an active mech and he was awake for long enough now that lying around was beginning to drive him a little insane with boredom. Thundercracker knew it, but was he was also determined, it seemed, to treat Hound like a fragile Praxian crystal that he barely let him try anything, so Hound waited.

At the first opportunity, when Thundercracker was away from the Med Bay and Ratchet was in his office, Hound pushed himself upwards until he was sitting properly and then swung his legs off the berth, brushing the tips of his pedes across the floor. His side twinged, making his next intake of air shorter, but after a moment it passed and Hound slipped from the bed until he was standing. It felt good to have the ground under his pedes again and a smile crossed his face, one hand reaching up to stroke across the grill at his chest.
“You’ll have to get used to this little one. I never was very good at doing nothing.”

Steadily Hound stepped away from the support of the berth and headed across the Med Bay. He hadn’t planned on going too far, but as he got closer to the doors the scout realised how much he craved not to be stuck in this room and before he’d thought about it he had palmed the doors open and was outside the Med Bay. The corridor was quiet and a check on his chronometer told him it was early in the mega-cycle, when most sensible mechs were offline and comfortable in their berths. Hound turned in one direction and started walking, carefully taking it slowly. He might be breaking Ratchet’s rules, but he wasn’t that stupid as to overdo it too badly.

His strides took him up through the levels until he was in one of the observation towers overlooking most of Iacon and there he stopped, more tired than he’d like to admit and sat himself down next to one of the floor to ceiling windows so he could stare out across the city and recover. Hound could admit that maybe he wasn’t ready for this, but he felt good, despite being weary and it had been too long since he’d had a chance to sit in silence and take in a view like this.

It had been perhaps a bream or two when a panic burst across his bond, making Hound jump slightly. There was a sense of frantic worry emanating from Thundercracker, so he opened the bond further, trying to send calm back but it was drowned out when all that concern came flooding through.

‘Where are you? Are you alright? Primus, don’t leave without telling me! You shouldn’t be out of the Med Bay…’

Hound interrupted firmly, ‘Thundercracker. I’m fine. I just had to take a walk. I’m up in the north observation tower.’

He got a sense of movement from his sparkmate and knew without a doubt he was speeding his way towards him. The worry hadn’t subsided much and Hound knew perfectly well it wouldn’t until Thundercracker could touch him again. The seeker could appear uninterested, laid back, sometimes even cold, to other mechs, but Hound had seen a depth to him in all their time together that occasionally scared him a little. Thundercracker felt everything so intensely. By the time the flyer came running into the room Hound was smiling at him and words fell from his lips.

“I love you.”

Thundercracker stuttered to a halt before snorting, “Nice try, but that’s not going to distract me from telling you that you are an idiot.”

The green mech reached up from where he was sitting and Thundercracker immediately took his hand, easing down next to him. He ran his free hand over Hound’s chest and then down the still visible, healing weld line down his abdominal plates.

“Really, I’m alright,” Hound told him again. “Just tired.” His own hand touched the bare patches in the paint on the flyer’s own frame. They had both been so caught up with Hound’s recovery that Thundercracker’s had passed by with barely a murmur. The seeker had never complained nor sought pain relief, having learnt to cope with it during his time amongst the Decepticon ranks where seeking medical attention could sometimes be worse than healing by yourself. Ratchet had always said the seeker made a good, quiet patient.

“You scared me,” the blue mech admitted quietly. “You could have waited for me to be around to help you.”

“You’ve been treating me like I’ll break with every movement.”
“I… Sorry, it’s just…” Thundercracker tilted his head to press his face to the side of Hound’s helm.

“I know.” Black fingers crept up around the seeker’s cheek and drew him in for a gentle kiss. “Life’s been a pile of slag recently, hasn’t it? But it’s over now and we’re here and we’re alright.”

Thundercracker sighed softly. “I don’t deserve you but I’m so glad I’ve got you. You don’t know how much.”

Hound smiled at him then. “I think I do.” Their bond glowed with love and the seeker smiled, letting himself admit that Hound did know. They sat in silence for awhile before Thundercracker shifted, fingers drawing absent glyphs on the back of his bonded’s hand. Hound waited.

“Skywarp’s here. I checked, when I wasn’t with you,” the seeker paused, almost like he didn’t want to talk about it. “He gave himself up without a fight apparently, saying something about knowing when to cut his losses.”

“I saw him in the battle. He could have killed me…” Thundercracker’s grip on him tightened but Hound continued. “…he could have stopped me getting to you in time, but I think he still cares about you. He was so angry about what you’d done but I think he was more worried that Megatron would kill you.”

“When I was a Decepticon, it was like our fights were forgotten. We were friends again and that was one of the major things that kept me doubting for so long.” Thundercracker leant his head back against the window behind him. “Even in all that slagging death and hatred, I was happy when Skywarp was there.”

“He is your closest friend,” the green mech replied softly, optics drifting shut. “You should talk to him.”

“I want to, but… I don’t feel I have the right.”

“Ask Optimus to let you go into the cell block,” Hound murmured.

“That’s not what I meant Hound. I…” the seeker looked down at his bonded and silenced himself when he realised the other mech was soundly offline. Ratchet would have a fit once he noticed them missing, but right now, however uncomfortable this would later turn out to be, Thundercracker wasn’t willing to move from this peace and quiet for anyone.

- Hound was still weak from his brush with death, but determined to join Thundercracker when the seeker went to talk to Skywarp, after the green mech had passed his message along. Ratchet had threatened to dismember the still healing flyer if he let Hound push himself too far, especially since his recovery would take much longer than normal with the sparkling making demands on his systems. The journey down to the very full holding cells took longer than normal as Thundercracker took Ratchet’s warnings to spark and made Hound pause frequently.

They also had to pass through numerous check points and security details, verifying their permissions that allowed them to be here. No one was taking any risks with any of the prisoners, not now that they were so close to overall victory and control of Cybertron. Eventually they made it to the security doors outside the cells to find Ironhide on duty. He had his own injuries that were still healing, but the big mech wasn’t going to let that stop him doing what he thought no one else would do as well as he could. His bright blue optics, one partially damaged still, watched the pair come down the corridor towards him before he grunted out a greeting.
“Surprised to see ya up and about.”

“Thundercracker wants to see Skywarp,” Hound replied, by way of an explanation.

Ironhide made a noise of disapproval. “Don’t know about that. The rest of the cons aren’t gonna want to see ya in there and I like a quiet block.”

“Who else is here?” the seeker asked quietly.

“Amongst others I got those twin punks Rumble and Frenzy, who have been mouthing off at every chance they get; Reflector, who’s been pretty quiet and…” Ironhide hesitated. “Screamer.”

Hound and Thundercracker exchanged a look for a moment, but the green mech could see that Thundercracker’s need to talk to Skywarp overrode his desire to be as far away from Starscream as possible. For himself, his very personal history with Starscream was so long in the past it no longer affected him, not in a way that would stop him accompanying Thundercracker. Ironhide didn’t need telling to see the mutual decision they had reached, he knew them both far too well for that.

“Alright, but as soon as they get too bad ya coming back out again. We clear?” Both mechs nodded and Ironhide linked up to the console to grant them access.

As the doors slid open the black mech deliberately looked at Hound and then met Thundercracker’s optics. “Ya owe me a cube of high grade and an explanation.”

The blue seeker dipped his head once, curtly, accepting that he had a lot to make up to Ironhide in regards to his decisions over Hound. The weapons expert was fiercely loyal to those that he believed fell under his protection and the green mech had been there since the day Thundercracker had brought him home. The old mech was a soft spark under his hard exterior and once Hound had been stationed at Iacon with him, he had let himself be a part of his life again, and in turn grown attached to Silverbolt and the rest of the Aerialbots. Thundercracker suspected the black mech would have beaten his aft if he’d been in the house that night the Decepticons had attacked the Towers.

The cell block was a typical Autobot standard: Two rows of cells running down either side of the long room. Every cell was occupied so the force fields cast a pale glow into the central corridor. Some of the prisoners only glanced up as Hound and Thundercracker walked by, uninterested by Autobot visitors. Some sneered and hurled abuse, mostly aimed at the seeker, but they didn’t seem to have the energy to keep it up once they had passed out of sight and the pair of mechs weren’t interested in them either.

There was one mech, though, who they couldn’t ignore. They watched Starscream’s face turn murderous as he registered it was them before he unthinkingly launched himself at the energy barrier. He snarled in pain as he was thrown back from it. His pain and anger meant he lost the ability to articulate his feelings, long enough for Thundercracker’s own to get the better of his mouth.

“You look good in there Starscream. The force field energy colouring suits you.”

“Frag you Thundercracker!” The white seeker snapped. “This isn’t over between us.”

“It never is,” the blue flyer returned, voice restrained. “You can’t let go of the past, and you might even be a good mech if you could.”

“He’ll never be a good mech,” Hound shook his head. “He can’t do anything now. He’s a prisoner. He’s trapped where he is and he can never hurt anyone ever again.”

“Oh you say that, but do you know what I’m going to do?” Starscream taunted, his faceplates full of glee, his schadenfreude obvious for all to see. “Everyone’s going know I’ve fragged you, that you
give it up to any seeker that told you to.”

Hound caught Thundercracker’s arm before he could attack Starscream and said, in a tight, controlled voice, “And what do you think would happen when they found out you’d raped me? No level of security would keep you safe from retaliation and I think you’re too much of a coward to risk your plating.”

The green mech stabbed the control that cut all sound to and from Starscream’s cell with more than a little sense of satisfaction, leaving the Decepticon flyer inside to rant and scream at nothing. They could read the threats falling from his lips, but they turned away from him to find the mech that they really came here for. Skywarp’s cell was opposite his trine mate’s, but he was standing with his back to the corridor, clearly a deliberate move, though when he’d done he decided to do it, Thundercracker couldn’t tell. Both Hound and Thundercracker stopped just short of the forcefield.

“Warp, I need to talk to you,” Thundercracker said, optics locked on the purple seeker’s back.

“You got your priorities straight yet?”

The blue flyer glanced across at Hound, then nodded. “Yes.”

Skywarp turned around then. “Is it true then? That Shockwave experimented on you?”

Hound blinked. He had thought Skywarp had known, had been part of the scheme. Thundercracker gave no outward sign he had known any different.

“Yes. He blocked out any memories containing Hound or anything that gave me sympathy for the Autobot cause.”

“They just told me you had CPU damage.”

“You weren’t there that night they bombed the Towers?” Hound asked, suddenly curious.

Skywarp narrowed his optics slightly at the scout, almost like he didn’t want reminding he was there, but answered anyway. “Screamer wouldn’t let me go. No one would tell me where they were going. I would have tried to tell you, TC, if I’d known.”

“Why? You’d been refusing to speak to me for deca-cycles.”

“As much as I hated you back then, the Towers was still our home,” the imprisoned seeker reminded them, a flicker of emotion passing over his face.

“And now?” Thundercracker enquired. “Do you still hate me?”

“Not for a long time. When we were fighting together, it was like having my friend back,” Skywarp shrugged.

“You never lost him…”

“That was my fault,” Hound interrupted, casting his spark mate a rebuking look.

“Yes it was,” Skywarp agreed, more than happy to assign the blame to the mech that he had always felt had taken his best friend away from him. “But you’re good for him.”

“You’re jealous!” Thundercracker suddenly exclaimed.

“Am not,” the purple mech folded his arms over his cockpit, a sullen expression on his face.
“I should have seen it before. All this because you were jealous you didn’t have my attention like before and you were bored. You were never that interested in fighting.” Skywarp scowled, unwilling to admit Thundercracker was right, but all three of them could see it for the truth it was. “I’ll put in a good word for you, with Optimus.”

“He owes you one doesn’t he?”

“Several and I know being in here is driving you stir crazy.”

“They took my teleport ability offline, fraggers,” Skywarp muttered.

“You wouldn’t have stayed here otherwise,” the blue flyer smiled slightly.

“I gave myself up without a fight,” Skywarp retorted.

“You’re not stupid, despite appearances to suggest otherwise.”

“Hey!” Skywarp pretended to be insulted but the answering smiles on both seeker’s faces told Hound that this was friendly banter that came naturally to them. They both seemed to relax then, tension fading and the scout could feel the relief emanating from Thundercracker. He hadn’t thought it would be so easy to mend the damage done over the vorns, but it would seem the vorns hadn’t done anything permanently detrimental to their friendship.

Hound drew in a short breath, hand going to his side for a moment, when pain abruptly lanced through him. Thundercracker’s hand was on his shoulder in an instant, a worried question coming through the bond. The green mech made himself relax, sending the seeker reassurance back, but he knew he’d need to get off his pedes soon. The blue flyer wasn’t fooled though.

“I’ll tell Optimus what I can to lessen your sentence,” Thundercracker repeated and Skywarp’s bright optics hadn’t missed the way Thundercracker’s attention had veered off him so suddenly, nor the way Hound had touched his welds. However much Hound was grateful Thundercracker had a friend in Skywarp, he still wasn’t all that sure around the purple seeker; a side affect of him being an enemy for so long, perhaps.

Skywarp said nothing more and the pair of visitors filed out, ignoring everyone else. Thundercracker didn’t touch Hound again until the cell block doors were firmly shut behind him and then his fingers were ghosting down his arm, a physical, outward sign of the unvoiced question being asked over their bond. The green mech made himself relax, sending the seeker reassurance back, but he knew he’d need to get off his pedes soon. The blue flyer wasn’t fooled though.

“I’ll tell Optimus what I can to lessen your sentence,” Thundercracker repeated and Skywarp’s bright optics hadn’t missed the way Thundercracker’s attention had veered off him so suddenly, nor the way Hound had touched his welds. However much Hound was grateful Thundercracker had a friend in Skywarp, he still wasn’t all that sure around the purple seeker; a side affect of him being an enemy for so long, perhaps.

“Thank you for doing this with me,” the seeker murmured, hand sliding across the scout’s windshield as he urged him forward to start walking again, taking them back to where Hound could rest and refuel.

“As if I could do anything else,” the green mech returned lightly, nodding to Ironhide as they passed. Thundercracker smiled down at Hound before he shivered: A sensation that someone was staring at him crawling down his backstruts and he looked up to find Megatron at the far end of the corridor, being led back to his cell under heavily armed guard. Their optics met and the seeker’s mouth twisted up into a snarl of anger whilst the beaten Decepticon leader sneered. Hound reacted to the boiling hatred in his bondmate by pushing his chassis closer in to him, increasing their contact to remind Thundercracker that he was right here and that leaving him to vent his anger would be worse than the momentarily satisfaction he would gain from doing what he really wished to do. The scout
wanted to badly hurt Megatron as well, but his anger had rarely overwhelmed him in such a way and he knew that a trial was the only way to get justice for everyone that deserved it.

The blue seeker brushed his fingers over Hound’s back, curling his arm around him, showing a clear defiant message that despite everything, both were still alive and still very much together. There wasn’t time for anything more because the guards weren’t aware of the exchange and they wanted to get Megatron back behind his forcefield as soon as they possibly could, so in the next nano-klik he was gone behind a different set of cell block doors.

“It’ll get easier, one mega-cycle,” Hound curled his hand around the seeker’s forearm, tugging at him, urging him to walk again.

The flyer’s red optics turned down to him and gradually that seriousness, that blistering anger calmed until Thundercracker settle back into his normal self once more. There was still fleeting, harsher emotions brushing past the edge of their bond, but that would pass over time and neither of them planned to see Megatron any time again soon. They had too much to do just between themselves.

Sunstreaker stopped dead in the exact middle of the hallway, folding his arms across his chest and Thundercracker stopped as well, frowning back. There was no love lost between the frontliner and the seeker, both had inflicted enough damage on each other over the war, but there was a begrudging respect for the other mech.

“I heard you’re the one that made this possible,” Sunstreaker said without preamble. “That we’re supposed to be thanking you.”

Thundercracker shook his head. “I did what I did for Hound.”

Sunstreaker didn’t seem to react to that. He gave the blue flyer a once over and then nodded. “You look better without those Con blemishes on your wings.” With that he strode past Thundercracker and disappeared without another word. Hound glanced back at him and shrugged.

“I think that was a thank you.”

The seeker mimicked the shrug, not sure and not particularly caring as to why the normally antisocial mech would even both to thank him. Hound could see, in part, that the flyer didn’t like the unsolicited praise, whilst the rest of him distrusted why he would even get it. He did what he did for selfish reasons; even going back to the Decepticons had been done to end the war quicker for themselves, no one else. It was the only way Thundercracker had seen a way to gain peace and a life together with Hound. He had been altruistic before the war, and still was, in a way, but he was also now a lot more selfishly motivated. Just because that covered Hound’s welfare didn’t make it less true.

“Come on then, let’s get some energon. Ratchet says I need to get the exercise now.”

Thundercracker let his bonded brush the disquiet from him with the distraction and walked at his side through the corridors to the one of the main energon dispenser areas, one that had been turned into a communal area for mechs off duty. It was often loud, filled with bots talking and exchanging gossip and normally not somewhere Thundercracker was that inclined to go, but Hound was a social mech. He’d missed out on these interactions when he’d been confined to the med bay and Thundercracker couldn’t deny him.

Occasionally on their walk between their quarters, which Ratchet had allowed them to move back to,
and the rec room a few other mechs had stopped them to chat with Hound, mainly, but it was generally just a few questions about how he was, so it didn’t take them long to get there. The doors slid open to reveal an only half filled room and a steady hum of voices.

“Hound!”

The green mech looked around at the sound of his name and saw Trailbreaker waving at him from across the room, so he guided Thundercracker across to the big black mech and found two seats empty at the table, with Mirage already seated.

“How are you doing?” Trailbreaker asked, smiling as he pushed two cubes towards the newest comers. “That’s a big weld scar.”

Hound touched the line running down the centre of his chassis. “Still a bit stiff, but much better than I was.”

“And the sparkling?” Trailbreaker asked, trying not to sound hesitant.

Hound smiled, glancing at Thundercracker who sent him one back, covering his hand on the table with one of his own. “Alive and healthy.”

“Congratulations,” Mirage nodded at the pair of them.

Thundercracker relaxed gradually as the other two seemed to have no trouble accepting him. Their close friendship with Hound was obvious and they apparently had extended it to him. The seeker remembered what Mirage had been like before the war; aloof and snobby, and whilst he was quieter than either Hound or Trailbreaker, he treated them as equals and was happy. Thundercracker was also aware of the other mechs around them giving them a wide berth, still clearly not happy that the former Decepticon was so welcome amongst them.

“That’ll change,” Hound said softly when Mirage and Trailbreak were talking to each other.

Thundercracker smiled, leaning his head against Hound’s, “I’ve got you. That’s all I care about.” He placed his hand on the green mech’s chest, “You and this little one.” Hound felt his lips twitch before he let out a laugh. “What’s so funny?”

“You,” Hound pressed a kiss to Thundercracker’s forehead. “Everyone thinks you’re this big, bad, tough Decepticon and in fact, you’re the softest, kindest mech around.”

The blue flyer mock scowled. “Don’t say that. I have a reputation to protect.”

“Sorry love, but that’s all gone now. What do you think it’s going to be like when our sparkling is born?”

“That I’m the big, bad Con that knocked you up?” Thundercracker smirked. “Fragged you something good in the process, made you beg for more.”

“You are a tease,” Hound stated, poking his mate’s cockpit.

“It doesn’t have to be teasing,” the bigger mech’s grin got bigger.

“I don’t think Ratchet cleared me for what I had in mind,” Hound gave his bonded an appropriately mischievous look.

Thundercracker let out a small growl. “It’s been a long time. If you keep that up I am going to tie you
down and Ratchet’s orders be fragged.”

“It’s been even longer since you did that,” Hound replied cheekily.

The deep rumble that echoed from the seeker as his arousal got the better of him, made the other two mechs at the table stop their conversation. Hound attempted to look innocent, but that was rather ruined when Thundercracker refused to take his optics off him, or lean away.

“If Ratchet catches you two, he’s going to blow a gasket,” Trailbreaker grinned.

“You two need to get a room,” Mirage shook his head, a little put out by the obvious intentions of Thundercracker and Hound.

The scout opened his mouth to reply, but the blue mech curled fingers around his chin and firmly pulled Hound’s face round to his. The kiss was deep, thorough but brief. Thundercracker knew better than to push Hound too far and embarrass him in front of his friends, but he was also, sometimes, a bit of a fragger. He’d kissed his bonded deliberately far more passionately than he normally would in company, just to rile Mirage up a little and so that everyone could see that no matter what they said, he wasn’t going anywhere. When he let the green mech go, there was a glazed look in his optics before he hastily blinked a few times and then tried to scowl at his mate, but there was nothing behind it at all. The attempt to pretend he wasn’t happy faded quickly and Hound leant into the flyer instead, entwining their other fingers.

“Hound, I want to apologise. This is my fault,” Mirage abruptly spoke up. “I thought I did the right thing telling Thundercracker you were carrying, but you both nearly died because I rushed things. Other mechs did offline because we weren’t ready.”

“Mirage,” the blue seeker answered first. “I am as much to blame for any of that as you. I did things too fast. I could have waited, planned things out better. You telling me that was just an excuse for me to do what I really wanted to do, to get back to Hound quicker.”

The slender mech across the table was silent and still for a moment before he nodded slightly, but it was Trailbreaker who spoke up.

“Perhaps both of you should stop seeking to blame yourselves and just accept that everyone is here, alive and well and that the war is pretty much finished.” The black mech gestured at the bonded pair. “And that is mostly thanks to both of you. Mechs don’t know how much you gave up to this war and how much they owe you.”

“Breaker,” Hound smiled, shaking his head, not upset with his friend, but he couldn’t take the words, not when he didn’t see them as true. “Don’t say it like that. Everyone lost something and we did what we did for selfish reasons.”

“I was here Hound,” the big ground mech returned. “Call it what you want. I know what I saw.”

There was no arguing with Trailbreaker, not when he gestured round the room lazily and challenged them to ask anyone here how grateful they were that the war was over. It didn’t matter who, how or why, just that it was.
Iacon never slowed down. Most of the Decepticon troops lost the spark to fight without their leaders and handed in their weapons without a fuss. There were still some pockets of resistance, but they were outnumbered and without long term resources. It was just a matter of time before the Autobots had total control of Cybertron. Optimus was now putting the after plans into action, something no mech had really believed they would see happen and it was beginning to help reality settle back in. Neutrals and refugees were starting to come forward to ask when they could go home and start rebuilding. Resources were tight but Optimus could now afford to let mechs leave Cybertron to search for more. The ships were small, with limited range, but they were already beginning to make a difference. Scientists were out searching their planet for signs of its recovery. If Cybertron could regenerate on its own then they could stay here.

Hound was fully recovered from his injuries, but was still restricted from doing much as the sparkling was growing rapidly and was being much more demanding than Hound remembered Silverbolt being. Ratchet explained this was from the shock of Hound nearly dying: The sparkling’s own growth had been several restricted for a good length of time and was now trying to make up for lost time.

By now everyone knew about the scout and seeker, having heard the story of his undercover work and having seen them together around the city. That led to any mechs who knew more of their past being pressed for their history, though the more forward of the bots just straight up questioned the bonded pair. Femmes were calling it an epic love story, which embarrassed both Hound and Thundercracker no end. The news about Hound carrying took longer to emerge but eventually they put the information together and congratulations were flooding in from all quarters. Apparently the idea of new life starting again was enough for many who held old grudges against Thundercracker to put them aside. Old memories resurfaced and Silverbolt and, in turn, the other Aerialbots, were suddenly being quizzed about Hound and Thundercracker. That was hard for Silverbolt in particular as he still hadn’t spoke to his seeker creator and as the time dragged by, it just got harder. He hadn’t voiced his concerns to Hound but his lack of social calls made that abundantly clear anyway. The green mech couldn’t interfere though. Both Silverbolt and Thundercracker were grown mechs and wouldn’t take kindly to being prodded into meeting. That and Hound, however selfish it sounded, was just too tired to really try.

Thundercracker’s own mega-cycles were curtailed by Hound’s increasing berth ridden lifestyle but he never complained. In fact he secretly enjoyed the time where it was just the two them with no interruptions. It felt like before, before the war, when they were still in that first flush of bonded love and waiting for the arrival of Silverbolt. They relearted everything they had lost and what had changed in each other them; their more guarded nature, Thundercracker’s higher tendency towards aggression and violence, Hound’s quieter reactions.
Their interfacing was curtailed to gentle interactions, but for the sparkling’s sake, as well as their own needs, they had to spark merge occasionally. That was often dictated by when Hound was feeling
strong enough and Thundercracker happily did all of the work, teasing his sparkmate to an overload and merging their sparks in that moment of bliss. As much as he would have liked to stay basking in such closeness, the blue flyer was careful not to over expose his mate. If any mech who still doubted Thundercracker’s loyalties to the Autobots had seen the care he took with Hound in moments like this, then they would have had all lingering reservations banished.

Thundercracker loved the moments after that as much as the interfacing itself. He got to just hold Hound as he recharged, allowed to touch him however he liked without being caught. It wasn’t that he minded Hound knowing that he just wanted to stroke his chassis with barely there touches, but there was something the seeker couldn’t explain about being able to do this in absolute trust. The flyer had hadn’t realised, until the first time he found himself cradling Hound as he recharged during his recovery, that he had missed this as much the interfacing, as the conversations, as the sense of completion. He knew it wouldn’t be long before this would change again, until their lives were centred around a sparkling again and Thundercracker was taking every opportunity to enjoy just them.

Right now though, there was something annoying him and Thundercracker couldn’t suppress the urge any longer. He should have seen Silverbolt before when he was in Iacon but Hound had persuaded him otherwise. The blue flyer eased upright on the berth and Hound shifted restlessly. Thundercracker reached out through their bond and soothed him until the green mech calmed. For a moment he just sat, watching his mate recharge, enjoying the peace and knowledge that he, and their sparkling, were safe, but he didn’t delay long.

The walk through the corridors of the Iacon base was disconcerting. A lot of bots were giving him suspicious looks, knowing who he was on sight, but his wings were emblem free now and the war was pretty much over. He had walked around Iacon before, but never alone and he refused to slink like he felt he should. The seeker strode down the middle of the corridors confidently and was left alone. He had a lot of practice doing that, looking like he belonged when he was never sure he did.

Thundercracker hadn’t had the chance before now to seek Silverbolt out: A combination of his and Hound’s injuries and the fact that Silverbolt was in charge of overseeing all aerial transfers of Decepticon prisoners, which were increasing by the mega-cycle. For once the head of the Superion gestalt was actually in Iacon for some time.

Thundercracker rang the door chime and waited for a moment before it slid open to reveal Skydive, who appeared momentarily surprised to see him. His expression soon turned to one of annoyance, “He’s only just got into recharge. He’s been on the go for mega-cycles.”

Thundercracker knew that was a risk he ran by calling unannounced, “I’ll leave…”

“No,” Skydive interrupted, shaking his head. “He’d never forgive me if I made you go.” With that the grey and red jet stepped back and gestured for Thundercracker to enter. The blue flyer noted, absently, that he was a fair bit taller than the other mech, a fact he had not really noticed when they had fought in aerial combat. He found himself within in a communal area which the individual berthrooms linked to. Fireflight was the only other Aerialbot present and he looked up, startled and anxious, from where he sat on a large couch. Skydive motioned for Thundercracker to stay where he was. “I’ll go get Silverbolt.”

“But he only just got…” Fireflight began in protest, but his gestalt brother interrupted, though not unkindly.

“I know ‘Flight, but you know what he’ll be like if he doesn’t see… him.”

The red and grey jet disappeared into one of the rooms. Thundercracker didn’t try and make conversation with Fireflight and the younger jet seemed too on edge to start one by himself. When
Skydive reappeared he swiftly moved over to red and white jet and urged him to his pedes and into another room, but honestly, Thundercracker barely noticed. His optics were fixed on the other flyer entering the room. From Silverbolt’s expression Thundercracker could tell Skydive had told him who was waiting for him. The seeker could also see just how tired the young mech was and he realised, with something akin to shock, that his youngling was now taller than him.

“You’ve grown,” he blurted without thinking.

Silverbolt glanced downwards at himself before giving Thundercracker a small smile, “Not in awhile.”

“I’m sorry…” the blue flyer took the gentle rebuke with all the guilt from the past that it brought up. “I should have seen you before. I…”

“No, it’s okay,” Silverbolt held up a hand. “Dad explained why. I’m not sure I understood entirely, but he got away with it.”

Thundercracker frowned at him, “Got away with what?”

“It’s hard to argue with someone when they tell you you’re gonna have a little brother or sister soon,” the Aerialbot leader shrugged.

“Oh, you knew…” Thundercracker blinked for a moment before searching Silverbolt’s face. “And that’s alright with you?”

“Dad said exactly the same thing,” it was Silverbolt’s turn to frown. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because you didn’t have both of us when you should have done and you might feel…left out,” Thundercracker shifted uncomfortably.

Silverbolt moved to sit on the couch to hide his expression. It wasn’t that the fact Thundercracker hadn’t been there when he was a youngling didn’t hurt, it did, it was more the fact that Silverbolt didn’t know what to do now Thundercracker was back in his life. He’d spent more of his life without two creators that having another was hard to adjust to and his gestalt family had filled up a large hole in his spark. Silverbolt didn’t want to hurt Thundercracker by saying that. “Another sparkling would be good for you two right? I mean, you’ve lost out on so much, this is a chance to start over.”

The blue seeker cautiously sat down beside his adult youngling and said warily, “Yes, but I want you to be a part of that too. Hound and I having a new sparkling doesn’t mean I want to spend any less time getting to know you.”

Silverbolt couldn’t help the genuinely pleased smile that crossed his face, “I’d like that. I want you to get to know the other Aerialbots as well. They’re my family too now and…” Silverbolt shot the blue seeker an embarrassed smile. “They’ve always been in awe of your flying skills.”

“Well, when you’ve got a free moment, maybe we can all go flying together,” Thundercracker offered.

“I would really like that,” Silverbolt nodded. “I’m sure the others will too. I…” he paused, glancing at his hands before he swore. “Frag this.” Thundercracker abruptly found himself being hugged as Silverbolt lunged at him across the sofa and he stiffened momentarily, unused to physical affection after so long without from anyone but Hound. The Aerialbot felt it and hurriedly tried to back away, but the seeker didn’t let him go as he gripped him back.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, unsure why he was apologising. “I’m not doing any of this right.”
“Don’t,” Silverbolt returned. “You’re here now.”

Thundercracker leant back to regard Silverbolt, who gave him a tentative smile and he sat back a little, pulling out of the embrace. “When I was a Decepticon, when I saw you in the air, being fired on, I always had the strange, misplaced worry about you. I had always thought you were all too young to be fighting and being a Con never changed that, but it was just when you were being fired at by others, I wanted you safe out of the air.”

Silverbolt’s hand curled around his and he held on far too tight, the metal of both their hands creaking under the pressure. “I’m scared of heights.” The blue seeker blinked at him and the Aerialbot shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I know you’re probably disappointed but I wanted you to know and…”

“Don’t Silverbolt. I’m not disappointed. You’ve achieved so much and we’re all afraid of something,” Thundercracker shook his head and gave him a wry smile. The bigger flyer stared at him for a moment, clearly doubting, before a pleased expression broke out over his faceplates. “I did want to ask you something. When the sparkling is due we, I’d like you to be there.”

“Really?” the Aerialbot asked before his wings twitched, a sign of barely suppressed joy at the invitation. “I would love that. You really don’t think I’d get in the way?”

“It’s not that complicated. You and I will basically just stand there until it’s over. Hound and Ratchet do all the work between them,” Thundercracker shrugged one shoulder. “I felt awkward and, well, overwhelmed when it was you.”

Silverbolt gave him grin, clearly wanting to tease him, but unsure how Thundercracker would take it. The blue seeker smiled back, appreciating that this would take time and it grew deeper when Silverbolt optics flickered as the need to offline crept up on him. He squeezed the fingers still held loosely in his. “I know I’ve stopped you getting the recharge you need.”

“No, it’s alright. I…”

Thundercracker interrupted, “You’re important now and busy. You need the recharge and I need to get back to Hound.”

“Well, alright,” the Aerialbot agreed reluctantly. He didn’t want to let Thundercracker go now they were talking. He was half afraid he wouldn’t come back again.

“Come and see us some time,” the blue seeker instructed. “Hound would love to see you more, when you’re not so burned out.”

Silverbolt promised and he kept it. At first he just visited them by himself, but gradually Thundercracker met all the other gestalt members properly. The young jets were loud, vaguely obnoxious sometimes, but beyond close and Thundercracker found himself enjoying their company. On a day when Hound was feeling up to it, the blue flyer took to the skies above Iacon with the Aerialbots and they just flew; racing each other around the towers and from one end of the city to the other. The green mech watched them, Trailbreaker keeping him company and offering up amusing commentary when the flyers did something reckless or silly. Hound could feel his bonded joy at the freedom. He hadn’t flown free like this since before the war and even longer before that with any other jets. Some of younger flyers were faster, some more manoeuvrable but Thundercracker had vorns of experience over them and utter faith in his abilities. He didn’t feel a pull to them as he did other seekers, but that didn’t matter when he was cutting up vapour trails with his wingtips, thrust vectoring and stalling deliberately.
When they eventually landed, they were tired but full of smiles and chatter. They collected Hound and Trailbreaker, sweeping them up with them and making sure they had seen all the Aerialbots had done, just like the young mechs they still were, before the war had made them grow up too fast. Thundercracker’s hand slipped into Hound’s as he talked with Fireflight and there was nothing but contentment between them.

Hound shifted, a slight frown coming and going across his faceplates, before he settled again. Thundercracker watched for a moment, reassuring himself the scout was fully in recharge once more, prior to taking up the datapad he’d been reading. His sparkmate’s recharge patterns were highly disturbed as he neared the end of his carrying period. This time it had not been the smooth ride as it had with Silverbolt. Hound had struggled with upset systems, lethargy and some cycles, sharp pain in his chest. He had, at later stages, not been able to do much and for the past two mega-cycles had been confined to their quarters. The seeker hated seeing him so listless, but the green mech had never once complained about carrying and Ratchet had merely reiterated that this was all down to how serious Hound’s injuries had been and that he had never regained his reserves to cope with the disruption of a sparkling. The scout was strong enough to see the period through without worry, but he had to take it carefully.

Thundercracker had taken those words to spark and watched his bonded closely, without trying to seem like he was hovering or suffocating him. At this point, Hound was often in restless recharge, but he enjoyed the company in the moments he was online. Silverbolt came and went as regularly as he could, but ended up basically just spending the joors chatting to Thundercracker, often with some plea from Fireflight to check that the seeker would go flying with them again.

Hound muttered in his recharge and Thundercracker hauled himself to his pedes. He crossed the floor and crouched down next to the berth, reaching out with a hand to trail fingers gently over Hound’s forehead. For a klik he just stroked his bonded’s face, but when that didn’t have its usual affect of quietening him, Thundercracker spoke softly,

“Hound, come on. You want to wake up for me?” Gradually the green mech came online, optics barely half their normal brightness. The blue flyer smiled warmly. “You weren’t recharging properly. How you feeling?”

“Tired,” the scout murmured, nudging his face into those fingers still stroking his face. “And my chest aches.”

“I’m sorry love, but you’re nearly there. Ratchet thinks you’ve got another half an orn left.”

Hound pressed his own hand to his chest, pushing at the grill and Thundercracker hooked his fingers away, knowing that Hound would keep it up until he ached more, just trying to find some relief. “No, it really hurts this time,” the green mech tugged at the seeker’s grip.

“How badly? Do you want me to call Ratchet?” Thundercracker asked, concerned, but keeping his voice level.

“No, I think I…” Hound frowned, pushing at the berth until he was sat up a little before he winced sharply. “I need to go to Med Bay.”

Thundercracker blinked at him, real worry flooding through him. Anything could be going wrong. Was it Hound’s systems? Were they failing? Was it the sparkling? Was it in distress? Was it…

“Oh,” Thundercracker pushed down their bond a little more, towards Hound and their offspring.
“Oh, now.”

Hound laughed softly, a broad smile crossing his face, “When I have heard that before?”

Thundercracker managed to summon up a half grin, “Now you find the energy to tease me. Come on, we’ve got to get to Med Bay. Do you think you can walk?”

“Won’t know until I try,” the green mech let the seeker draw him off the berth to his pedes. He wavered a little before Thundercracker got him secured against his side, arm tight around him, much like they had been before when the blue mech had rushed Hound to the shuttle when Silverbolt had been due. This time Hound didn’t argue and he clung a little more. Thundercracker sent a comm. to Ratchet on their way there, so by the time they made it to the Med Bay, the medic was ready for them. The tiny protoform was laid out next to a berth, just like it had been before and Thundercracker helped get Hound settled as Ratchet chased the Twins out of the door. No one could have failed to notice their increased presence in and around the Medical Area of Iacon, nor Ratchet’s increased time actually spent away from the centre.

Silverbolt arrived at nearly the same time that the bonded pair did, having rushed over at Thundercracker’s urgent call. He left his gestalt members at the door to the Med Bay, despite their protests, promising they could come in as soon as it was allowed. The Aerialbot reminded them what Ratchet would do to their wings if they dared to try and sneak in. Silverbolt hovered at Hound’s side, nervous and excited, much like Thundercracker, but he didn’t get in anyone’s way because he could see the way his seeker creator was wearing a glazed, stunned look that was so out of place. He knew it was Hound and Thundercracker’s place more than his, to see what was happening, but he felt like a real family like this. It was a moment closer than most of the others they had experienced up to now.

As it turned out Thundercracker could remember as much, or as little really, as Silverbolt’s transfer to his protoform and realised he would never get used to it. There was that intense, overwhelming emotional outpouring from the moment Hound cracked open his chest to the instant the sparkling powered up his blue optics for the first time. Ratchet made Thundercracker take the sparkling this time, too concerned for the exhausted Hound to let him hold him yet. The CMO ran a series of tests whilst Thundercracker cradled the newest member of his family, staring down at the squirming bundle; another little mech that carried Hound’s blue optics.

Unlike Silverbolt, he hadn’t wailed or cried. He just seemed determined never to lie still. He kicked his legs up, pulling at the thermal cover until it was barely covering him and chewed messily on his own fingers, making Thundercracker smile. They were both testing out their bond, watching for reactions in one another. A wave of affection from Thundercracker had the sparkling squeaking up at him in delight, fingers still jammed in his mouth.

“How I hold him?” Hound’s voice was soft and the seeker looked up to see Ratchet had stepped back from his sparkmate. The green mech looked like he was barely online, but he was smiling. Thundercracker sat down on the edge of the bed and carefully passed the fidgeting sparkling over.

“He’s a healthy little mech,” Ratchet interrupted. “He’s suffered no ill effects from the carrying period as far as I can tell. Hound, you need to take it easy for the next couple of orns or so.”

“Thank you Ratchet,” the green mech nodded.

“I’ll leave you alone now,” the CMO replied. “I will tell your ‘guests’ outside that all is well.”
With that the red and white headed out the door, leaving the four mechs alone. The little mech wriggled around within his blanket, optics bright, clearly in not in any hurry to recharge. It didn’t matter if Hound or Thundercracker held him, everything was too interesting for him to stop trying to look at it. The room was filled with little warbles and chirps of nonsense sparkling words and Hound noticed Silverbolt had a soft smile on his face. He almost looked like he wanted to touch the newest member of their family, but daren’t, so Hound turned the sparkling around and held him out to the Aerialbot.

“Here, you can hold him.”

Silverbolt’s optics widened dramatically, “I don’t know how. I mean, he’s the first sparkling I’ve really seen or been this close to.”

“Now the war is over, you’ll be seeing a lot more, so you better get some practice in now,” the green mech smiled. “It’s easy, just put your arms together.” Silverbolt did as he was told, though he looked as scared as he’d ever been and Hound gently slid the mechlet into the cradle of his elder brother’s arms. “That’s it.” Silverbolt slid his hand to where Hound’s had been behind the sparkling’s head and stared down at his sibling. Big blue optics watched him back and little arms waved up at him, fingers grasping at the air between them.

“Primus, he’s so tiny,” Silverbolt whispered, unintentionally lowering his voice.

“You were that size once,” Thundercracker smiled warmly, still pressed up to Hound on the berth. The tall mech could feel his sibling’s tiny presence on the edge of his spark, nothing like his gestalt or creator connections, but unmistakably there nevertheless. The sparkling let out another loud string of clicks and chirps before wriggling again, hands closing into tight fists as he snuggled down into the thermal blanket, optics dimming. The three grown mechs watched, identical smiles of love on their faces as the little mechlet gradually fell into recharge. They were still when there was chime on the door and Optimus entered slowly, unsure about interrupting the family moment.

“Ratchet just passed on the good news. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Hound said and Thundercracker nodded. The big mech came further into the room to get a better look at the sparkling and Silverbolt finally took his optics off his brother to glance upwards at the Prime. The Aerialbot realised that their leader, the mech that everyone looked up to, had an expression on his face that he had never seen before: One of disbelieving hope, leaving him looking a little vulnerable.

“Would you like to hold him?” Silverbolt asked without stopping to think. Optimus blinked at him rapidly, “This is your family moment, I don’t want to intrude.”

“He’s in recharge now,” Thundercracker spoke up. “He won’t know the difference.” Silverbolt carefully held out the sparkling and Optimus hesitantly took him, though he knew how to hold a sparkling without being told. If Silverbolt had thought the mechlet looked small before he seemed miniscule now in Optimus’ broad hands. The big mech was motionless as he gazed down at the tiny life that he held and felt utterly lost. This was a symbol of what he had been fighting for all these vorns but now it was here…

“You are our future, little one,” he said softly. “The first sparkling born in far too long, born to loving creators who have fought through the worst this war had to offer and come out the other side stronger. Everyone will look to you, our symbol of peace, and know that finally we can build a better
Cybertron and we will, so that you can grow up without knowing war, pain, suffering, inequality or anything else that led to me standing here today saying this. Don’t let it be a weight on your shoulders though, let it be the road beneath your pedes or the wind beneath your wings.” Optimus stopped, looking up with a half embarrassed smile. “What is his name?”

“Lightspeed.”

“Welcome to the New Golden Age Lightspeed. Welcome to Cybertron.”

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