The Iacon Prophecy

by ntldr

Summary

Barbarian AU.
Any other mech would have wilted when captured and dragged off by a wildland tribe, taken away from all that they had ever known. Any other mech would have been overcome by the constant language barriers, threats of mech sacrifice, visions of a prophecy...
Any other mech would not be Sideswipe.

Notes

Am I too late for the Barbarian AU Bandwagon? I hope not. Because I've got a wonderful idea that I'm cooking up...

We're going to be changing up the recipe of this AU. There are more mysteries to solve, more to be learned by both a certain city-mech and the tribe that indoctrinates him. This is told from Sideswipe's eyes, but it is not just his own story.

This is my first time writing any serious slash, and it will be sitting in the slow-cooker. Ratings will eventually change when we get to the meaty stuff.

Now then, shall we?
Neither he nor his brother had ever been a fan of minibots. The fragging things were hard to see, the city's public equipment had to be modified for their stature, they took great offense at being forcibly moved out of the way when they were being annoying...well, that last one might have been more their fault than the mini's. Mostly Sunstreaker's. But Sunstreaker wasn't here right now.

Anyway, Sideswipe wasn't a fan of minibots.

So as he found himself defending a caravan against an ambush of barbarians, in the middle of Slagging Nowhere, and the rest of his team were a bunch of minibots, he found the situation absolutely fragging ridiculous. He was the only standard-size mech among the group, tasked directly by Sentinel Prime to guard the latest donation of energon and supplies—a gesture of goodwill, but Sideswipe knew a bribe when he saw one—to the Decepticon tribe. Bumblebee, the yellow minibot leading the Teeny Bot Parade, was standing on top of the inert vehicle's control panel, firing at the mechs who were coming down the hillside, and the rest of his companions had followed his lead to take to its defense, thank Primus, because Sideswipe would never say that he was in command of a bunch of minibots, on the authorization of a Prime or not.

The vehicle had been passing through a small dip in the hills of the wildlands just before dawn when it's engine had suddenly sputtered and died, and as Huffer had opened the front panel to take a look at it, the barbarians chose that exact moment to leap from their hiding place and howl, scaring several vorns off of all of their lives, before charging down towards them, weapons and dentals bared. Bumblebee and Sideswipe had met them with gunfire, Bumblebee from a handgun, Sideswipe from his rifle, and the rest of the minibots were scrambling for their melee weapons. A lack of energon in Kaon had meant a lack of manufacturing, and a lack of manufacturing had lead to a lack of ammunition, and a lack of ammunition had lead to only Bumblebee and Sideswipe having enough to make bringing firearms worthwhile. And even that was quickly proving useless as the barbarians expertly dodged and weaved past the laser blasts.

"I'm out!" Bumblebee shouted, tossing the useless pistol away and snatched up his short sword. Sideswipe glanced towards him with a frustrated sneer before concentrating his dwindling ammunition on a black-and-white mech charging directly towards him. The barbarian all but danced out of the way, his feet scrambling from the lasers and debris torn up from the rocky ground, and the mech landed on his hands and flipped to the side with the grace of an acrobat. Sideswipe tried to trail his gun on him, but the fragger was just too quick to hit.

There were three more of them, another one black-and-white, one green, and one black. He didn't have time to assess their models in the pre-dawn light; he just wanted them scared off, or beaten off, or dead, so he could finish moving the caravan and get his credits. But the barbarians didn't seem to want to make his job easy.

"Would you hold still?!" he snarled at Black-And-White. Said mech grinned at him in response, before the red mercenary's next shot was deflected away by a twirling staff, the ricochet bouncing harmlessly into the ground between them.

The other three barbarians let their teammate distract Sideswipe and made right for the caravan. Bumblebee kept his stance on top of the control panel, ready to leap down on any hapless mech who came in range of his short sword, while Brawn, Cliffjumper, Windcharger and Huffer stood on its sides, unwilling to give up the one time they would have an advantage of height while on top
of a vehicle.

Technically, it was a six-against-four fight. But five of his team were minibots. So, that gave him, what, two-and-a-half worth of standard mechs fighting power? Probably not even that, because a standard-size mech's bottom half didn't loudly complain at how likely they were to die while the top half jeered at their attackers and tried to draw them forward.

Primus, he hated minibots. Especially Huffer and Cliffjumper.

His rifle chose that exact moment to tell him with a loud *click* that it was out of ammunition.

Getting the entire caravan to the Decepticons was hopeless now. It would be all they could do to defend themselves and survive, let alone get the vehicle repaired and moving again.

“Sideswipe!”

As the red mech chucked the useless rifle at Black-And-White, hoping that its butt would catch him in the helm while it was in flight, Sideswipe glanced back to Bumblebee, who slashed out at where Black was trying to reach for him. Black pulled back at the last second, the blade singing over his plating and barely missing him, though it tore through the layer of heavy cloth around his shoulders. Sideswipe didn't have time to consider why barbarians would dress themselves in such useless garments as Bumblebee shouted to him again.

“Sideswipe, get the map and get out of here!”

Sentinel Prime's orders rang in his mind.

Get the map to the Decepticons. If the caravan was attacked, grab it and run. Forget everything else.

Sideswipe turned back to the caravan and jumped to cling to its side, his feet braced on the top of a wheel as he shoved through the boxes in the cargo hold. “Out of my way!” he snarled at Windcharger, who stumbled past his groping arms and swung a baton at Other-Black-And-White, who was sneaking up behind the vehicle. Ignoring the sounds of the battle around him, Sideswipe frantically searched, overturning a container of energon before his fingers grasped the long, cylindrical tube housing the map.

A pained cry from Bumblebee whipped his attention back to the vehicle's front.

Green had pulled out a lasso, and hurled it around the yellow minibot's torso. Bumblebee had been yanked off his perch, despite Brawn's attempts to save him, and had gone face-first into the ground. Dazed, he didn't move for several seconds, and when he did, it was groggily.

Sideswipe's grip on the map's tube loosened as he saw Green pull on the lasso, dragging Bumblebee towards him, a triumphant gleam in his optics.

He hated minibots.

...That didn't mean that they deserved to die at the hands of some barbarian slagger.

Sentinel's plan for him to run with the map and abandon the caravan was quickly exchanged for his own 'Sideswipe' brand of a plan.

He dropped the tube, and instead snatched up the energon sword sitting next to it, the ground crashing underneath his peds as he leapt off of the vehicle and ran at Green.
He'd work out the details of the frantic counterattack later.

“Get away!”

The energon sword hissed online with a flash, bathing everything around it in a golden light. Green snapped his head towards him, blue optics huge, then yelped and backpedaled away as the sword barely missed him, the gears in Sideswipe’s arms squeaking as he tried to control the wild backswing. The attack had been desperate, but it had gotten Green away from Bumblebee, who was struggling to free his arms from the lasso.

While Green was still off-balance, Sideswipe jumped forward and struck out, attacking again, and again, missing Green by inches as the mech yowled something that sounded like a swear as he rolled away, not given a chance to scramble up and run. A need to destroy at least one of these fraggers before he was destroyed himself surged through Sideswipe, and he kept moving, sword raised to cleave the green mech in half.

As he swung down, the edge of a staff to his left parried his sword away.

He spun to face Other-Black-And-White, who stared at him with a tight-lipped expression, doorwings that had been pulled tight against his back now flaring, as if to frighten him off. Sideswipe faced down his new opponent, the sword's point forward, the hilt held in both of his hands. Other-Black-And-White stayed where he was, refusing to be baited forward into a duel, the staff held ready for any attack. The red mercenary could see the burn marks left in the staff by his own blade. The crystals powering his sword would last longer than his blaster’s ammunition, and should have broken the more primitive staff, yet it had held up, for now.

Shouts of warning from the vehicle told him to look left and right.

The two other barbarians, Black and Black-And-White, had ignored the vehicle and moved to his flanks. Behind him, Green was getting up, and had pulled out another, shorter lasso. Short words were barked by Other-Black-And-White at his teammates, and the circle around the sole caravan guard tightened.

Bumblebee was still freeing himself, but his blue optics were on the red mech, his fingers clawing at the rope as he stumbled and stood up. He didn't know about the other minibots, but their yellow leader would be on his way to back him up in less than a breem.

Like that did him any help.

“The map's still in the cargo hold!” he shouted back at the minibot. His feet roll-stepped backwards, trying to draw the barbarians away from the vehicle, and thankfully they followed him, intent on what they perceived to be the most dangerous threat. “Take it and go!”

“But...”

“Go!”

Sideswipe thrust out with one hand for emphasis. Immediately he regretted it. Green's lasso snapped out and caught his wrist, yanking his body to the side and twisting his arm around. Sideswipe gritted his dentals as he pulled back, the rope and his servos groaning under the strain, but Green held on firmly.

Black took advantage of his trapped position and swung something resembling a club at his legs. Sideswipe jumped, dodging it, then ducked forward as his audials heard Black-And-White rushing towards him, the dagger he held nicking his plating but not causing serious damage. Then Other-
Black-And-White charged.

His sword hissed and fizzled with energy as it blocked the staff, and again as the other mech tried to strike low, then again as he attacked at mid-level. Golden sparks showered the ground between them as Sideswipe was forced to retreat further backwards, his optics sweeping back and forth as he tried to keep watch on all four mechs, especially Other-Black-And-White. This mech, clearly the leader, looked like he wanted to finish him off quickly, before he could escape and have full use of his sword other than just desperate parries and feigned jabs. Green side-stepped, keeping Sideswipe's other arm outstretched and stopping him from trying to rush forward and surprise the leader.

He blocked the staff. He blocked again. He blocked a third time.

As he did, the end of the staff slid down the sword and struck his fingers. He yelped as he lost his grip, then again as Green pulled him off-balance with an assisted tug from Black.

The last thing he remembered was Other-Black-And-White's staff slamming into the side of his helm.
Chapter 2: Blind

"You sent for me?"

“I have another task for you.” Sentinel Prime cocked an eye ridge as the red mercenary coming through the door visibly bristled. “Or are you still recovering from the last one? It's been--”

“I'm fine. What's the job?"

“Eager, as always.”

“Just in need of credits. You know that, or you wouldn't have called me.”

Chuckling to himself and turning to the table beside him, the Prime picked up a long, hard-cover tube, and a datapad. He handed the datapad to Sideswipe first.

“I need you to assist in a delivery to the Decepticon tribe. This is the official manifest.”

Sideswipe scanned it, his black finger flicking through the document’s hologram. “...What some mechs would do if they knew how much energon was leaving the city,” he muttered with just a hint of a taunt. “You afraid of the caravan being followed by a rival city?”

“No. I can trust my other colleagues to keep this knowledge from leaving Kaon. What unnerves me is the aggressiveness of the other tribes, now that we've established diplomatic ties with the Decepticons.”

“I was really your first choice against a bunch of savages?” He snorted. “I asked for a break for a little while, not to be fragging coodled. You know that my brother and I have fought off worse.”

“Then this shouldn't be a problem for you.”

Still, Sideswipe hesitated. “Sunny's away on a different job. Can this wait until he comes back?”

“It most certainly cannot. I assumed that you were competent enough for a task this easy without your brother.” There was a teasing, but assessing, challenge to Sentinel Prime's voice.

“Of course I am. It's just that he and I usually work together on stuff like this.”

“Yet he's gone away without you.”

“Sometimes it happens, but not usually, and not for very long.”

“I expect that you’ll return before he does. It's not a long trip, Sideswipe, nor quite dangerous, except maybe a curious barbarian or two. But if it's too much for you, I can always hire the next adequate mech.”

“That won't be necessary,” he said quickly, his optics widening slightly when he saw how many credits the datapad was offering. “So...what's the catch? No way you'd hire me just to babysit an
energon delivery.”

Sentinel offered him the tube in his other hand.

“This. A map that the Decepticons consider sacred.”

A needle of dread stabbed briefly at Sideswipe's spark.

“...Is that...?”

“The same. Oh, my dear Sideswipe, you seem almost afraid of it.”

The red mercenary scowled at the Prime's grin. “My price just went up.”

“As I expected it would, but you won’t see one credit until you return and tell me that the map was safely delivered. Compute?”

“Yeah, I compute.”

Sideswipe held his palm out for the tube, but Sentinel snatched it back, his expression turning serious so quickly, it was as if someone had flipped a switch inside of his cortex.

“I do not jest. This map must get to the Decepticons. Even if that means abandoning the rest of the caravan.”

Sideswipe refreshed his optics. “Lose all that energon for one map? Really?”

“Really. If you are overwhelmed, grab it and run. Forget everything else.”

“...What on Cybertron is so important about a map?!?”

“It's not your place to ask, or to open it and look at it.”

“I am loving the premium you’ll be letting me charge you.”

“I pay for only the best.” The map was offered to him once more. “Can you do it or not?”

“I can. Who should I thank for telling you that I was ready to work again?” he asked as his fingers wrapped around the tube.

“Swindle mentioned that you ran right through the last job's credits.”

“Swindle?”

His spark clenched against another jolt of a stab. As he took the tube holding the map, he swore that he saw it grow a pair of red optics, staring up at him, and he heard a voice laugh, and there was that pain again...

Black. He only saw Black.

That pit-spawned barbarian, the one with the black armor. Why was he staring directly into his...

Oh. He only saw the color black.
Sideswipe turned his attention to his HUD, which was flooded with warnings about his processor encountering errors. By now his cortex probably though his processor was one giant error. That wasn't a far deviation from the norm, but the fact that he could only see the color black was concerning.

He made sure that his optics were actually turned on. They weren't. He fixed that.

Great. Now he only saw brown.

He swore that he could feel his cortex swatting his processor upside the back of its imaginary head. It finally rebooted, and tried to work the problem, reasoning out why his optics were particularly fond of blacks and browns today.

He rebooted his optics again, and though they were less than nominal, they were working and displaying exactly what was in front of him. Zooming in and out didn't help. He tried replacing 'brown' with several other colors, and his visual sensors were filled with those shades. His cortex heaved a weary sigh at this, and quietly worked together with his lagging processor to provide him with the answer.

He could only see brown because something brown was tied over his optics.

Oh. He was blindfolded.

Oh.

...Oh.

Uh-oh.

“...Slag.”

Sideswipe's battle programming screamed back online so fast that it made his plating tingle. Audial sensors, tactile sensors, olfactory sensors, all of these were kickbooted on as he frantically tried to make sense of where he was and determine if he was still in danger. He was resting on his side on the ground; the crumbling of rocks underneath his armor told him that he was still out in the wildlands. His hands were in front of him, but his wrists ached, along with a spot on his helm where the staff had struck him. Numerous scratches and other smaller dents were checking in, but none of them indicated that they would cause him to go into stasis lock anytime soon.

He tried to move his hands, and was horrified to discover that they were crossed over one another and tightly bound. Another cable wrapped around his torso squeezed his arms to the sides of his body. His hands closed into fists as he pulled at the cables, but he couldn't find any fault in them that would snap. At least he could wiggle his fingers, but they weren't long enough to reach the knots.

“Slag, slag, slag, slag...”

The ground under his head rumbled slightly. Footsteps were approaching him.

“Sideswipe?”

Bumblebee. But the minibot's tentative voice did not belong to the heavier mech walking towards him.

It was too late to pretend that he was still knocked offline, so instead he frantically struggled with
his bound wrists, praying that he wasn't in as much trouble as he realized and that he could break free, until strange hands grabbed at his shoulders, yanking him up and off the ground.

“Let go of me!”

He snarled and tried to twist away, but the hands only held him long enough to get him into a sitting position, his bound hands stuck in his lap. The other mech chuckled as the mercenary bared his dentals in his direction.

"Yoska. Sa.”


The feet moved a short distance away. Sideswipe turned his head towards where he was going, even though he could still only see the cloth tied over his optics. From how the light defused as it snuck through the threads, he guessed that he'd been offline for about half a joor, enough time that dawn had finally crept over the horizon. A glance at his sluggishly rebooting chronometer affirmed this. The rest of his systems were coming back online, slowly. That must have been one fragging good hit to his head to scramble his processor like that.

“Sideswipe?” Bumblebee tried again.

“Bumblebee?” The red mech turned his face towards the minibot's voice, which was over his shoulder and some distance behind him. “Are you hurt?”

“Just some dents and scratches. They tied us up too.”

“We lost.” It was less of a question than an affirmation. “Everybody still functioning?”

There was a chorus of mumbled answers from the rest of the minibots.

“Cliffjumper's here too, but he was knocked out shortly after you were,” Bumblebee added.

“Oh, good. The barbarians did one thing right.”

Brawn barked a short laugh, humorless laugh.

There were footsteps again. The barbarians were talking to one another in their own language, the vocalizations and clicks definitely Cybertronian, but not a dialect that Sideswipe had ever heard before. It was surprisingly more fluid than Cybertronian Standard; theirs consisted of less hisses and growls and more clicks and whrills, each word precise, yet not needing the harsh indication that a new sentence or idea was starting. The pitches went up and down, though he hesitated to call their voices musical, except for one of the mechs. Sideswipe paused as he listened, hoping to catch a word or two that he could recognize, then frowned when he didn't. He could tell from the inflection that one of them, the one with the cool and authoritative voice, was giving orders to the other three, who grunted the affirmative "Sa” before moving to whatever task that they'd been given.

“Any idea what they're doing?” he called out to the minibots.

Windcharger spoke up. “They've brought out some sort of a wagon pulled by two Minotorons, and are transferring things from our vehicle to that. Looks like they're concentrating on the energon, though they're going through our packs too.”

Minotorons? Sideswipe had seen those creatures before, at a circus held in one of the fighting
arenas in Kaon. Huge, ponderous beasts on four legs that looked spindly compared to their servo-packed torsos, their hides covered in fluffy mecha-fur. They rumbled and waddled as they moved, though he knew that if angered, they could charge, and the weight of their bulk slamming into a mech could cause serious damage. He knew because Sunstreaker had thrown his empty energon cube at one, and it had whirled around and slammed its horned head into the circus fence separating the creature and the golden mech, causing his twin to jump and shout in alarm while Sideswipe had roared in laughter. They'd been asked to leave a few breems later.

Wait...

“Windcharger, can you see?” Sideswipe asked. “Are you guys blindfolded too?”

“No, just you. They're keeping us grouped together by the caravan, but they blindfolded you and dragged you away from us.”

“Probably because they consider you more dangerous,” Bumblebee said in an appeasing way.

“Fragging right I am.” Sideswipe tried to smirk, though his pump had doubled its speed. He'd been singled out, and his imagination was throwing up hundreds of ideas as to why.

“And what a great guard you turned out to be!” Huffer sneered. “To the Pit with getting our fair share of credits; we'll be lucky if our heads are still attached to our torsos in a few breems!”

“If they wanted to kill us, they probably would have already.”

“Unless they're waiting for the right time! You know these tribes make sacrifices out of city mechs?!”

“We're not going to be sacrificed.” Sideswipe tried to sound confident. “They just want our stuff. And speaking of,” he spoke up a little over Huffer's retort, “Bumblebee, you're my optics right now. What exactly is happening? Have any more mechs arrived? What do these guys look like?”

“No, it's still just the four of them,” the yellow minibot replied. “Uh...a green model, medium-armor, carrying a lasso and a hunting knife. He's organizing the energon being put into their wagon. Black mech, heavier and reinforced armor, visored. Carrying equipment back and forth. A thin black and white mech, also visored, is going through the caravan and picking out what they want. Another black and white, medium-armor, with doorwings, is helping him. He looks to be the leader.”

That was the one who'd knocked him out, and he recognized the voice of the mech who'd given the orders to tightly surround the red mercenary. Sideswipe noted to himself that as soon as he was free, he'd kick that one's aft first.

“Have they found the map yet?”

“No, but they will soon. It's right next to your pack, and the first black-and-white is pawing through it.”

“Pawing through...hey! Slag-face!” Sideswipe shouted towards where the noise of the caravan was, and heard the sounds of movement die down, the barbarians halting to pay attention to him. “Get your rust-covered hands out of my pack!”

There was a pause. He was answered by a confused sound. A question.

“That's mine, you dumb son of a glitch! Put it down!”
He was met with a few noises, but no vocalizations, until Black-And-White sniffed hard at something, then made an “Aha!” sound. He chattered, either at Sideswipe or his companion, until Other-Black-And-White, who the red mech decided to rename Doorwings, muttered ”Sa.” Other-Black-And-White seemed far too thrilled at realizing that he had their opponent's belongings. He could hear the pack being shaken, and shouts calling towards him at the same time, clearly taunts.

“Well, uh...he's taking the pack and putting it in the wagon.”

“Aft,” Sideswipe spat. “Bet they've got my sword too.”

“Yeah.”

He groaned and slouched his shoulders as best he could against the restraining cables. Not only had they failed, but most of their supplies would be gone, and unless one of the minibots could get the vehicle working again, it was a long trip home back to Kaon. If the barbarians just wanted the energon and supplies, they would be abandoned and live, but be disgraced. Sideswipe's reputation with Sentinel Prime would be destroyed. How would he explain this to Sunstreaker when he got home?

There was a shocked yelp from the caravan. Sideswipe pressed his lips together, already knowing what was happening, as the other barbarians queried Doorwings. He heard the tube being opened.

“They, uh...they found the map.”

“I can tell.”

Three sets of feet went rushing back to the caravan. The hollow, empty tube rattled on the ground as it was dropped, and the map rustled as it was unfurled. The barbaric mechs muttered to themselves as they meandered around it.

They hesitated, and went quiet. They stayed quiet for an uncomfortably long time.

Then Black-And-White's tone completely changed, snarling, his engine revving. Two of the other barbarians apparently agreed, their voices loud and angry.

“Uh, Sideswipe?”

“Yeah?”

“They look fragged off.”

“I could tell that too.”

“They look fragged off and they're gesturing at you.”

Sideswipe's energon lines ran cold.

“...Well, frag me.”

“Did you do something with the map?!” Bumblebee asked quickly, trying to be heard over the stomping feet headed towards the red mech.

“I didn't! It's been in it's casing the whole trip!” He tried to scoot back from the voices. No way would Sunny ever forgive him for taking this job if a barbarian took one of his limbs as a trophy.

“Sideswipe, they are all focused on you right now. The green one has his knife out. What--”
A shadow fell in front of him. Sideswipe flinched, ready to be grabbed, or struck, but the shadow stayed where it was. The outraged shouts from the barbarians suddenly grew tremendously louder, then died as quickly as they'd come.

He heard Doorwing's voice, just as smooth and composed as before, directly in front of him, facing away from him and towards his companions. He sounded like he was trying to reason with them, or explain something. Sideswipe's processor whirled as he tried to figure out what he'd done to make them so upset so quickly. Maybe the scent of his pack had rubbed off on the map? Maybe they took great offense at the gift for the Decepticons, and blamed the delivery mech? Whatever it was, Doorwings was trying to convince them not to beat the ever-living slag out of Sideswipe for it.

Black hissed something that sounded like an accusation. Doorwings thought about it, then answered, his voice not as certain anymore, and then was quiet.

The others paused for a beat, then roared their answers. Green was clearly negatory, Black-And-White disbelieving, and Black was shocked, repeating "Na, na, na, na!" over several times before launching into a tirade. Their voices filled Sideswipe's audials, until it became hard to distinguish them from one another, only that they were all angry, all against whatever Doorwings was saying, all wanting to rush past him and snatch at the red mech. He bowed his head down, as if he could curl up into the ground and vanish, perhaps tunneling his way back to Kaon instead.

One more idea of what had fragged them off meekily made itself known in his cortex, and he banished it away. And yet it stayed, nibbling at a corner of his mind, even as he tried to shake it off.

He was so bent on blocking out this train of thought that he did not realize that his arm was grabbed until he was tugged off the ground. He yelped, his legs wobbling beneath him as he was forced to stand, his feet scrambling, and he took a breem to regain his balance, leaning slightly on the hand gripping his arm tightly. He struggled briefly, then winced and stopped when Doorwing's fingers dug hard enough into his plating to leave dents, warning him not to move.

Doorwings repeated what he'd said to the others, this time slower, and with more emphasis. His other hand patted Sideswipe's chestplate with a short clanging noise, then, with another word, splayed it on Sideswipe's chestplate, startling the mercenary.

“What?"

At that argument, the other barbarians ended the yelling, though not the grumbles. Black-And-White spoke up tentatively, as if asking “Are you sure?” This time, Doorwings replied sharply, “Sa,” and patted Sideswipe's chest once more for emphasis. Green's engine rumbled with disapproval, and Black muttered something dark.

Bumblebee's voice cut through. “Okay, so, uh...now they look really fragged.”

“I kinda got that,” Sideswipe snapped in his direction.

Black turned and walked away, still talking under his breath to himself. Black-And-White heaved a sigh, then stepped forward. Sideswipe felt him take his other arm, securing him between Doorwings, while Green tied a long piece of cloth around his waist, covering him from his hips to just above his knees.

Ooo-kay.

“What's happening?”
Green then grasped the cord pinning his arms to the side and worked on the knots. The cord slackened and fell away, freeing his arms, though they were still held by the two mechs, and then his hands were pulled up towards Green as the cord was re-wrapped between his wrists. This time he could feel slack in the rope still in the mech's hand. A tether. When he was through, and at an order from Doorwings, the three of them manhandled Sideswipe forward, forcing him to walk away from the caravan.

“What's happening?” he repeated, a little more frantic now, struggling under the grip of the two mechs, his hands pulled forward by the second cord. “Bee?!”

Bumblebee sounded just as alarmed. “They're taking you towards the wagon!”

Oh no.

Oh slag, no.

The red mercenary frantically dug in his heels, briefly stopping the procession, but with a collective grunt by the barbarians, he was forced to stumble forward again. Sideswipe twisted back and forth, elbowing their chestplates, desperately trying to escape their grip, yet they kept moving. They must have done this before, he thought grimly, but that did not dissuade him from trying to escape, instead reinforcing the need to run, to escape them now, before they could finish whatever they were going to do to him.

“Let me go, slaggit!”

He tugged at his bound hands, nearly pulling the tether away from Green, but the mech held on and kept his hands in front of him, pulled away from trying to club or claw at Doorwings or Black-And-White. Kicking didn't work either; they just side-stepped and kept walking him forward. He heard the minibots yelling, either calling for the mercenary or trying to distract his captors, but they were getting further away and couldn't help him. A panic bloomed through his systems as he threw himself at Doorwings in a desperate attempt to knock him aside. The barbarian only gasped briefly as he took the bigger mech's weight and shoved him back between him and Black-And-White.

The tether suddenly went taunt. He was held still just long enough for the other end to be wrapped around something sturdy, and then they all let go of him and stepped back, out of the way of his fury. Sideswipe tugged at the tether with a swear, testing it, then snarled when it did not give and tried to kick to his side, as if he could catch one of the barbarians and force them to untie him.

“Primus-fraggit, let me out of this!” he shouted. “The frell is wrong with you mechs?! Let me go right now!”

His cries were ignored, leaving him to struggle in vain. He heard feet walking away from him, one towards the front of the wagon, the other two to the sides. The minibots were still shouting, more desperately now, though they all stopped on one beat before hollering at the barbarians again.

“The black one left a knife for us,” Bumblebee shouted above his team. “Sideswipe, get away from them!”

“I'm trying!” He pulled on the tether again as hard as he could, the cable groaning as it strained, yet it did not give. “You fraggers, let me go--!”

In answer, the Minotorons bellowed, and the wagon suddenly lurched forward. The tether wasn't long enough to give Sideswipe much leeway, and he was yanked forward, his feet stumbling the
first few steps before he tried again, digging his feet into the ground and pulling with all of his might, not caring about the HUD warnings of possible structural damage to his shoulder joints.

It was a futile effort. The Minotorons grunted, and quickly won the tug-of-war. Sideswipe fell to his knees as he was overcome. Before he could be dragged across the rocks, a hand yanked at his back plating, and Doorwings muttered something at him as he set him to walk upright.

“Sideswipe!” Bumblebee's voice was getting further away. “I can cut myself free in a few breems, but...I can't...”

“Just get back to Kaon!” Sideswipe yelled over his shoulder, still struggling against the cords even as he was forced to walk. “I have a twin! Sunstreaker! Find him, tell him what's happened!”

“I will! I'll send rescue as soon as I can, Sideswipe! I promise!”

“I'm not holding my intake for that,” he muttered, then gritted his dentals as he kept trying to pull the tether off the wagon. “Stop! Let me go! Stop!!”

Doorwings was right behind him. He said something.

Sideswipe almost mistook it as an apology.

“Frag you!” he spat back at the other mech, wishing that the tether gave him a greater range to turn and attack the leader of the barbarians. But, as it was, there was nothing he could do but walk forward, straining at the tether the entire time, yelling curses at the mechs dragging him off the trail and further into the wildlands.
Chapter 3: March

For the first joor Sideswipe fought as hard as he could against the restraints on his wrists, yelling swears at the barbarians the entire time, cursing their creators, their creators' creators, all of their assumed gods (“Frag your sun god! Frag your dirt god! Frag your I-Need-To-Wear-Slagging-Cloth-Over-My-Perfectly-Good-Armor-Plating god!”), their paintjobs, their voices, and most of all, the Minotorons that kept pulling the wagon no matter how much he tugged at his tether. There was more light coming through the blindfold, promising a fine, warm day, but he didn't care. Good weather meant that they would travel faster, further away from the caravan where he'd been taken, and scraping away the already slim chance that he'd be found and rescued. He let the barbarians know this at the top of his vocalizer in the most colorful language that he had in his processor.

Several joors after that, he was still yelling bloody murder, though his vocalizer became strained. By now his wrists hurt too much to keep struggling, and although he did give them a frustrated tug every so often to emphasize how much he was NOT okay with being kidnapped, he walked along at the same pace as the wagon, stumbling blindly on the terrain every so often and working up a fresh storm of cursing. He must have made wonderful entertainment for his captors, because they were mostly silent, aside from the questioning comment whenever he directed his rage at one of them individually.

Several joors after that, around midday, he was too tired and miserable to keep the tantrum up any longer. He'd realized that he'd made a critical mistake. While struggling and raving for so long, he'd failed to keep track of what direction they'd been walking, if they'd made any turns around structures or landmarks, if the terrain under his feet had changed, or there were any identifying sounds and smells of the wildland around him.

All it had taken was a blindfold and him panicking and now he was completely disoriented.

“Fragging pieces of rust-covered scrap, too dumb to know their afts from their creator's faces...”

Sideswipe muttered darkly to himself at the barbarians, but they didn't seem to react to his swears anymore. Oh sure, they had to know that he was insulting them by now. But once he'd finally settled into a pathetic resignation that he was their prisoner, his blinded face turned downwards as he trudged behind the wagon, they whispered to each other in their own language, most definitely about him.

From the location of the voices, he reasoned that Green was standing towards the front, by the Minotorons, probably leading them on in the direction he wanted to go. Black and Black-And-White took the flanks next to the wagon. Doorwings had been right behind him the entire time, his footsteps alarmingly close, but the tether kept Sideswipe from turning and beating the daylights out of him.

Why were they making him walk anyway? They had a wagon. They could bind his legs and dump him in with the stolen energon and supplies, and not need to worry about him suddenly breaking the tether and running off. That's what he would done in their situation, had he been a smelly, pit-spawned barbarian. Instead, they were making him march on along with them, and his only consolation with this was that the servos in his legs were warmed up and ready to help him sprint, should he find a way to escape.

He doubted that he could get some answers from the mechs anytime soon. They were talking more
now, louder, in more friendly and casual tones, but aside from being able to discern the positive and negatory sounds, ‘sa’ and ‘na’, there wasn't much that he could translate into Cybertronian Standard. If Sideswipe had a cortex capable of recording and processing all the noises that they made, maybe he could have cobbled together some translation software, but that would be a long, arduous task, and he didn't feel like trying to learn the language of a bunch of mechs who thought that dragging him across the wildlands was a great way to spend the orn. Why did he need to learn their language? Why couldn't they catch up on Cybertronian Standard, like any other civilized mech?

A translation could warn him of any harm they were about to inflict on him, though. But what could he do? He'd fight to his end, yes, but that did not mean that he'd break free by sheer will alone. He wasn't sure that he wanted to know what they had in store for him. Was he to become some sort of a hostage against Kaon? They'd be in for a laughable surprise if they attempted that, especially if it gave his location to Sunstreaker, but Sentinel Prime wouldn't care if he died out here. Maybe they wanted to take him as a slave, or worse, bond him to one of the mechs that had captured him. Again, he'd fight to his death if that was the case; he would not become the toy of a bunch of dumb savages.

Maybe Huffer was right, and they intended to sacrifice him.

Sideswipe's tanks rolled as he considered its plausibility.

There had been an incident, vorns ago, when Kaon first began establishing connections with the Decepticon tribe. Some sort of relief needed to be found for the critical energon shortage, and Sentinel Prime had come up with the unconventional idea of turning to the wildlands for help, instead of the usual method of sending minibots deeper into the mines in search of the next energon vein. The team that he'd been sent to meet with the savages had been...less than diplomatic.

A basket had been left outside of Kaon's gates a decacycle later, containing the team's severed heads.

Despite the horror that had rattled the city, their Prime had not cut ties with the tribe responsible, and instead lavished them with gifts and tools and energon, fuel that the city itself sorely needed. Sideswipe had no idea how Sentinel intended on getting enough energon to feed a city of thousands from a bunch of wildland savages, but the Prime must have discovered something in his negotiations and trades. More stories and rumors had crept through the streets since then, told by mechs who dared venture into the wildlands to contact the tribe, or worse, attempted to spy on them. Attacks on camps that would slip in as quietly as smoke, the victims not knowing they were under attack until they were pinned down and held at knifepoint. Mechs swept away into the night, never to be seen again. A few were certain that they'd seen a sacrificial alter in the Decepticon camp.

At least these particular barbarians had howled just before they stormed the caravan. It had rattled Sideswipe and the minibots badly, but had given them a chance to flee, or to turn and fight. Sideswipe wasn't sure if they were Decepticons or some other tribe. He couldn't see them; he didn't know if he'd be able to distinguish one tribe's clothes or markings from another, but at least it would have been a start. It was far more terrifying to consider that these mechs were not Decepticons. Kaon would have no idea where he was being taken, not that Sentinel Prime would waste resources to rescue a sole mercenary.

The cloth around his waist slid over his thighs with each step, bounced out of the way by his knees, and although it was lightweight and did not impede him at all, it's constant presence over his armor
plating was irritating. It was barely anything compared to what the rest of the barbarians had been wearing. Maybe they had put it on him to symbolize which god they would sacrifice him to.

He was brought out of his musings by a laugh by Black-And-White. The mech's voice was slightly more pitched than his comrades', and he'd been the one that Sideswipe had identified as 'musical.' He chittered excitedly, and Green laughed back. Even Black chuckled, though Doorwings stayed silent from his position directly behind the mercenary.

“Have you never heard of Standard out here?” Sideswipe snapped at Black-And-White's location. “Does everything have to be clicks and whistles? You sound like a bunch of younglings.”

Strangely enough, Black-And-White answered him, but he doubted that he truly understood. His tone was light and mocking. Black snickered.

“Oh, you got jokes, do you?” The red mech snarled and walked as far over to Black-And-White as he could, which wasn't more than few side-steps. “Keep them coming, you oversized turbo-rat. I should have done a better job with my rifle and shot you in the face when I had the chance.”

More chittering. The other mech was enjoying himself.

“Do you even understand that I'm not being nice to you?! I'm a little fragged off right now. No, wait, a LOT fragged off. Why don't you take that staff-stick of yours and shove it up your tailpipe? What do you even want with me?! Is this some kind of purgatory for my last job? How do you mechs even know about that?!”

He was gleefully answered. Green even joined in, asking some question directly at Sideswipe.

“No, I don't know who your sire is. Oh wait. I ran into a homeless mech the other day who got part of his face blasted off during the war with Vos. Maybe that was him. You're just as slagging ugly.”

“Na, na, na.”

“Oh yes, sa, sa, sa,” Sideswipe retorted. “Funny how fast somebody can pick up a language that stupid. Guess what, I can speak the whole thing! Watch! Bar-bar-bar-bar-bar! That's what you sound like!”

Black-And-White and Green burst into hysterical laughter. Whatever they had asked him, Sideswipe's “Bar-bar-bar,” answer had been perfect. He heard Green stop walking, doubled over and wheezing as his engine rumbled merrily, and Black-And-White stumbled over to laugh along with him. Black stayed at his post, though he was chortling to himself. Doorwings continued to stay silent.

“Bar-bar-bar-bar-bar!” Green repeated, then broke into a fresh wave of giggles.

“Bar-bar-bar-bar?” Black-And-White questioned him. There was a clack of metal on metal, one mech slapping the other one on the back.

“Bar-bar-bar, sa, bar-bar-bar!”

Even Black joined in, murmuring “Bar-bar-bar-bar” under his breath.

“Yeah, laugh it up!” Sideswipe sneered. “I'll bet that actually means something in your backwards, slagged-up--”

“Bar-bar-bar-bar!”
“I'm talking!”

“Bar-bar-bar-bar-bar-bar!”

“Oh, *frag you!*” Sideswipe spat in their direction, then returned to where he'd been walking directly behind the wagon. His engine reved angrily, and he felt his systems heating up in an embarrassed rage. That didn't happen often; he was the type of mech to roll with the punches and love jokes, especially the ones that he started. But he wasn't up for being laughed at like some clown at the moment. Being kidnapped, tied up and dragged across an unmapped wildland would kill anyone's good humor.

“Bar-bar-bar!” Green called to him.

“Shut up!”

“Bar-bar-bar-bar!”

“I said shut up!” Sideswipe roared, his vocalizer screeching on the last word.

Then, behind him, Doorwings barked something at all of them.

Instantly the other three mechs silenced their vocalizers. A few breems later they were talking casually again, but no longer mocking their prisoner.

Shocked, Sideswipe turned his blinded face to look over his shoulder, aghast, then sneering. “I don't need your help.”

He was not answered.

Snorting, the red mercenary turned his face back to the front. One of the Minotorons moaned, long and low, and Sideswipe walked into a fresh waft of the creature's scent as it shook itself off. He winced, but could not escape it.

“...Gross.”

Doorwings vented as he walked through the same cloud, then stepped up to Sideswipe, closer than before, until he was right next to him. Sideswipe pressed his lips into a thin line and stared straight forward, intent on ignoring the barbaric mech as he marched after the wagon. They walked in silence for a while, the other mech's presence far too close to be comfortable for either of them, and yet he did not take the hint to leave by the red mercenary's refusal to acknowledge him.

Doorwings murmured something apologetic to him. It sounded similar to what he'd said back at the caravan.

“Don't say you're sorry for kidnapping me,” Sideswipe hissed. “When my twin finds me, I'm going to kick your aft all the way into the next Golden Age.”

Then, oddly, a hand was placed on Sideswipe's shoulder. He stiffened at first, expecting to be grabbed and jerked to the side, but Doorwings simply let it stay there. The apology was said again. The hand stayed, not hurting him, not groping him, not doing anything but simply being, until Sideswipe finally got tired of it and shrugged him off.

“No. *Na,*” he corrected himself, wanting to be sure that the other mech understood him. “You're not forgiven.”
“...Sa.”

The footsteps fell behind him once more, giving him space, though Doorwings still stayed close by as the rear-guard.

Surprised by the mech's actions, Sideswipe started to slow down too, until the tether yanked at his wrists, reminding him to keep up with the wagon. He fought the urge to look behind him again, especially when he could not see the mech anyway.

Maybe he should have paid closer attention to where he was going, even blindfolded. A Minotoron grunted, and a second later, Sideswipe's foot came down on something squishy.

“ECH! Yuck!”

Black-And-White and Green busted out laughing all over again. Sideswipe cried out in dismay, especially because he was still forced to keep walking as he hopped on one foot, trying to get the Whatever-It-Was off of him. Above the other barbarians hooting, Doorwings gave them instructions again, and hurried up to Sideswipe.

The red mercenary kicked some of the excrement at him when he came too close. “I told you, no!”

Black-And-White roared. Green was caught between a laugh and a gag, while Black changed his tune and made a disgusted noise from deep in his throat.

“Na yoska,” he managed out before huffing irritably.

Doorwings stopped walking completely. Confident that the barbarian leader was successfully horrified, Sideswipe threw a confident smirk over his shoulder. “And don't think there wouldn't be any on you too if you were closer!” he shouted at Black-And-White, who seemed to understand the threat, yet only responded in his own language with jubilation and a cackle.

Doorwings was silent and unmoving for a long while. When he finally did catch up, Black asked him a question, to which he replied “Na” with a few more words, sharp and annoyed.

Dragging his foot along to rid himself of the rest of the slag, and hoping they'd come to a river before too long, the dark cloud hanging over Sideswipe lifted just slightly, though, after a few more minutes of walking along, his dark thoughts came knocking again, reminding him that he still had no idea of what would become of him. This time, now keeping his sensors wide for any landmarks that Sunstreaker could use to follow him, he consented to follow after the wagon, and wonder how many more breems it would be before the barbarians stopped to refuel.
Chapter 4: Names

There was no light coming through his blindfold anymore when they finally stopped. Sideswipe's vents were wheezing, the servos in his legs aching as he gratefully slumped down next to the stopped wagon, trying to cool his systems as he listened to Black chocking the wheels for the night.

How did these barbarians walk this far voluntarily?!

Sideswipe was no weak mech. He and his twin had been built specifically to fight, and the size and structure of their frames showed it. Yet there he was, sitting on his aft and panting, his fans on their highest setting, while the rest of the mechs milled about and did...something. Probably preparing camp.

Maybe they would be playing Roast The Caravan Guard this evening. As soon as the thought had crossed his mind, he heard kindling being arranged, and smelled smoke. He swore at his imagination.

The tether didn't give him enough slack for him to rest comfortably; while he was sitting on the ground, his wrists were held above his head. Still, he couldn't make himself stand any longer, and he let his hands hang, his head drooping forward as he tried to circulate coolant to his poor legs. Perhaps that was why they had made him walk, so that he'd be too tired to run away. But the rest of the mechs had walked too, and they seemed perfectly fine. The only one running his fans was Black, and Bumblebee had said that he was more heavily armored that the others.

In his spark, Sideswipe honestly did hope that the minibots had made it safely back to Kaon. He was in this mess because he'd tried to rescue Bumblebee instead of running away with the map, after all, so they better have slagging lived. Plus, as soon as his twin was informed of what had happened, he'd comb through the entire wasteland to find him. He didn't know how he'd be found yet, though. There were no communication towers out here; he'd been able to pick up Bumblebee's frantic pings to follow his location for a few breems after his capture, but otherwise his comm was useless. And though he could still feel his twin through their spark-bond, it didn't tell him much other than that Sunstreaker was alive and on the same planet.

He should have left a trail of something. Maybe Sunstreaker would notice the streak of Minotoron excrement across the ground and follow it.

There was a flickering light on Sideswipe's blindfold as the fire grew larger. Three of the mechs were moving towards it and talking amongst themselves again, resting after a long, successful day of terrorizing a certain red city-mech. The fourth, though, was silent yet again.

His movements were so quiet that Sideswipe didn't realize how close Doorwings was until he cleared his vocalizer. He yelped, briefly struggling with the cord around his wrists and the tether, before glowering at where he supposed Doorwings was kneeling.

"The frell do you want? Go away. I'm tired." His tanks were also churning; he hadn't been offered a chance to refuel all orn, and walking for so long had depleted his energon reserves.

Doorwings spoke to him, his voice calm yet authoritative. Sideswipe made a face in return.

"Haven't picked up any more of your babble-talk other than that 'bar-bar-bar' is apparently some
He leaned closer to where he could hear Doorwing's helm vents, and spoke slowly, enunciating each word. “I. Don't. Like. You. Sa?”

Doorwings muttered, seemingly more to himself than to Sideswipe. A moment later his hands grabbed Sideswipe's arms. Instantly the panic from earlier that morning returned, along with his imagination running wild with all possibilities for why the barbarians had dragged him off, and Sideswipe's pump double-timed as the barbarian attempted to pull him to his feet.

“Stop! No!”

He sank back down, trying to go limp in Doorwing's hands and make himself difficult to grab. Doorwings growled and tried again, snatching one of his elbows and hauling him up. Sideswipe cried out, alerting the other mechs, who called out to Doorwings, one of them running over from the fireside.

“Get off! Stop!”

Another set of hands was on him. He heard Black-And-White, his voice confused at first, then trying to soothe him, then hissing in pain as Sideswipe managed to kick one of his legs. He struggled against Doorwings, his fists twisting back and forth in the cable restraints above him.

“Don't touch me!”

Then, suddenly, Doorwings snapped at him. He dropped Sideswipe onto the ground, startling him, then snatched either side of his helm with both of his hands. The red mercenary gasped and struggled anew, the cables around his wrists taunt and restraining him, his legs at too odd of an angle to kick anymore, but Doorwings was more focused on his helm.

A hand went behind his head. The blindfold was loosened, and fell away.

Sideswipe readjusted his visual sensors to the dark night and found himself staring into a pair of glowing blue optics. Doorwings should have been angry, enraged, ready to kill him or at least swear at him for trying to fight his captor. Yet he instead looked intensely worried. Worried, but scrutinizing, and focused. Solid. Confident.

Keeping Sideswipe's helm held tightly, he pressed their foreheads together, until Sideswipe could not see or focus on anything besides the barbarian's optics, his vents hissing over the other mech's armor. He spoke slowly, just as the red mech had, but even though his tone was just as harsh, there was something calming and cooling below it all. He shook Sideswipe once, just once, enough to make him wince and stare back at him.

A phrase was repeated, over and over. Sideswipe couldn't catch a Standardized word of it, but Doorwings kept saying it, using different inflections, speeding it up or slowing it down, but refusing to let the mech acknowledge anything besides his voice.

Sideswipe could only guess at what he was trying to say.

“...Like frell you're playing nice now,” he hissed up at the other mech. “You dragged me all the way out here, you kept me tied to the wagon like one of those pit-spawned Minotorons, and now suddenly you're my friend?”

Doorwings kept his grip on him and said the phrase again.

'Trust me.'
Sideswipe grimaced back at him. He wondered briefly if the barbarian's reflexes were quick enough to dodge him if he tried to headbut him right now. But he was already exhausted, and attacking him while bound would serve him no further than to frag off the other mechs, though he would certainly feel better after some petty revenge. He double-checked his HUD, which hadn't changed its warning that his tanks were low. If they weren't going to let him refuel, then he needed to save his strength, or he'd have no hope of escaping.

Doorwings studied his face, attempting to judge if he'd been understood.

"Sa?" he asked.

Sideswipe glared at him. But he relented.

"Sa," he muttered back.

The barbarian obligingly released his head, and took a step back, watching him carefully. The reflection of orange light from the campfire flickered across white and black armor, which was partially covered by cloths and hides. One long piece of white cloth was tied around his waist, similar to the one tied around Sideswipe's, and a thick piece of hide ran from his right shoulder, over a prominent front bumper, to his left hip and around his back again, crossing between his doorwings. He was shorter than Sideswipe, and it irritated the mercenary that this was the mech that he was...what, afraid of? He wasn't afraid. He had nothing to fear.

Doorwings opened his palms to him, asking for something, his optics still just as intense.

...He had nothing to fear.

Sideswipe slumped down, staring the other mech down in return with narrowed optics, then his shoulders heaved up and down as he vented a frustrated sigh, his decision made.

He leaned his hands forward as much as the tether would let him, surrendering and offering them to the mech.

Doorwings interpreted the gesture correctly, and bent forward, releasing the tether, though Sideswipe's wrists were still bound together. With the help of Black-And-White, who'd been watching them while he nursed his hurt leg, they pulled Sideswipe up, each of them gripping an arm, and lead him to the side of the built campfire. This time the mercenary didn't struggle or fight, allowing them to lead them on, and the short trip was easier for all of them.

The rest of the wildlands were eclipsed in darkness, but the light of the fire allowed him to finally get a good look at his captors. Green and Black were still sitting on the ground on the other side of the campfire, scrutinizing Sideswipe warily as Doorwings and Black-and-White had him sit on one of the boulders nearby. The red mercenary made no sign that he would jump up and run or attack, and instead slouched forward, his pump still working fast even as he tried to calm it through reason, his optics sweeping to each one of the mechs, committing their images to memory in case he was blindfolded again.

Bumblebee's hurried descriptions had been spot-on as far as their armor builds, but he'd forgotten their clothing, or whatever in the Pit they called the hides and cloths. Green's head was cocked to the side as considered their prisoner, then shrugged and went back to sharpening his knife on a whetstone, the scraping being the loudest noise in the small camp, which wasn't saying much. A poncho hung around his shoulders, hiding most of his arms and chestplate from view. The poncho's ends were tattered and worn, the material was greenish-brown, and Sideswipe concluded that it must be to help keep him camouflaged against the terrain of the wildlands. There was a lump on
it's back, which he belatedly realized was a hood.

Black wore something similar, though the material was heavier and dyed black, just like his armor. His hood was also pulled back, and he scowled at the mercenary, his optics hidden behind a blue visor. He murmured something gruff, and crossed his arms. When Sideswipe didn't answer, he jerked his head to the side, gesturing to the newest cut on the poncho, left by Bumblebee's short sword.

“Hey, I didn't do that to you,” Sideswipe grumbled back. “Ask Bee to patch that up, not me.”

Black-And-White chuckled and moved away to sit nearer to the fire. He was by far the smallest and leanest of the mechs, though not short, thankfully not a minibot. He had a prominent bumper, like Doorwings. Unlike the others, he wore a cloak that clasped over one shoulder, covering half of his body and one of his arms, though he could easily sweep this to his back and out of the way if he needed to. The cloak was intricately designed, with more colors than the majority black and white woven between the threads, forming geometric shapes that seemed to meld into one another. Sunstreaker would have been fascinated by his clothing, and Sideswipe found himself a little mesmerized as well.

His attention snapped to the present as he felt the tether go taunt. He turned his head, checking it, and frowned when he saw that Doorwings had sat down next to him on the boulder and wrapped the other end through his fingers. He gave him some slack again, but Sideswipe understood the motion perfectly. If he tried to run, he would make it only a few steps before Doorwings yanked him back.

Sideswipe dropped his optics down to his lap, scowling at nothing in particular. It was then that he finally looked at his own cloth, the one that the barbarians had tied around his waist. Just a dull, brown, torn up thing. Probably just scrap. A weary relief spread through him; that was one less sign that he was about to be a part of some ritual sacrifice if all they put on him was scrap, though the idea didn't completely leave him. He noted to himself that the rest of them also wore long strands that tied at their waists and covered everything between their hips and thighs, as if hiding their interface ports, dyed close to their main color scheme.

For the Pit of it, and because he had gotten tired of the thing bouncing around his knees during the walk, Sideswipe reached with his bound hands towards his hip to undo the waist-cloth. As he started to pick at the knot, the tether yanked, pulling his hands back.

Sideswipe glowered at Doorwings. “Listen, you rusted piece of scrap. I don't like it, and I want it off.” He turned away and tried again, but to a similar reaction, and Doorwings saying “Na.” Sideswipe's scowl turned even darker, but he plopped his hands back in his lap and didn't attempt to take off it off anymore.

Okay, the waist-cloth was important somehow. Even though he had perfectly good armor covering up his groin area.

He heard a clanging sound. “Prowl.”

“What?” He looked up at Doorwings. The black-and-white mech patted his chest again meaningfully.

“Prowl.”

“....Prowl?” Sideswipe's optics widened. “Prowl?”
“Sa.”

Prowl. His name was Prowl.

He was expecting something even more simple, like a grunt, or a hoot, or some weird clicking or buzzing noise. Or some name that didn't sound Cybertronian, like Valresha. Tooklla. Reneshtarula. Stanley. Okay, he liked Stanley, but that had been one weird mech.

Prowl.

Prowl sounded normal.

“Jazz.”

Sideswipe turned to the other black-and-white mech, who was leaning back on his hands, his visor bright with humor as he observed the red mercenary's stunned reaction.

Jazz was normal too. Granted, it wasn't so much a name of a mech, but the name of a type of music. But it could work for a mech.

Black raised a hand. “Trailbreaker.”

Green looked up too, briefly. “Hound.”


They had normal names.

Sideswipe's jaw slid open as he stared at them, completely flabbergasted. Black-And-White...no, Jazz chuckled at him for this, and chittered something at Prowl, who shrugged. The edge of Trailbreaker's mouth turned up into the tiniest of grins, while Hound continued to ignore him in favor of sharpening his knife.

Prowl gestured with an open palm towards Sideswipe. He said something, and though he didn't understand the words, the meaning was clear.

’What’s your name?’

“...Sideswipe,” he answered slowly, feeling like he was hearing someone else say it. “My name's Sideswipe.”

“Sideswipe,” Prowl repeated to himself, then said something that sounded like a greeting. “Sideswipe.”

Primus. He was out in the middle of the wildlands, captured, tied up, and he was introducing himself to his kidnappers.

...No way were they seeking to kill him if they were interested in knowing his name, and giving him theirs too.

Still, the itchy, worried feeling would not leave his sensor net. For all he knew, they would feel slightly bad for sacrificing him to one of their gods, and leave a little stone behind etched with 'Sideswipe' for Sunstreaker to find. He gulped hard.

“What do you want with me?” he asked Prowl.
Prowl cocked his head to the side, his optics refreshing.

...Duh, Sideswipe.

“What did you take me for?” He briefly struggled with the cords around his wrists, nodding to them with his head. “What am I tied up for?”

This time, Prowl did have an answer, a lengthy one, and Sideswipe was the one who couldn't understand. He growled in frustration, and Prowl frowned, seeming to also conclude that the language barrier was quickly becoming a problem. He said something to Jazz, who thought about it, then shrugged helplessly.

“Dumb-aft,” Sideswipe mumbled, slouching down again.

“Dumb-aft?”

“Yeah, that's exactly what you are.” He turned his head to Prowl's questioning stare. “Dumb-aft.”

Prowl took a moment to process this. Then he patted his chest again.

“Dumb-aft.”

“...”

A wicked idea flashed through Sideswipe's cortex, and his optics lit up as he latched onto it. A more sane part of his processor screamed at him, reminding him that he was with mechs that he considered enemies, and that taunting them, especially while bound and (somewhat) helpless, was a Very Bad Idea. His spark, however, practically danced, instantly vetoing all of his processor's calls for reason in favor of entertaining himself.

This was how Sideswipe's mind worked through hundreds of major decisions, and he didn't intend on changing it.


Prowl nodded slowly, though not without a raised brow-ridge, not understanding why Sideswipe insisted on a name change. On the ground, Jazz pushed himself around on his rear to face the red mercenary, and pointed to himself, also wondering if he needed to be reassigned a name for the convenience of the city-mech.

Thank Primus for all those card games with Sunstreaker and other mechs at the local bar, or there was no way that Sideswipe would have been able to keep a straight face.

“Daft.”

“Daft?” Jazz turned the word over in his mouth a few times, before grinning. “Daft!”

Sideswipe managed to give him a warm smile without it morphing into the slag-eating one he was hiding, then turned to Trailbreaker. “Slag-sucker.”

Trailbreaker repeated the word under his breath. He considered it, then said it again. “Slag-sucker?” He shrugged, then grinned. “Slag-sucker.”

Finally, Sideswipe turned his gaze to Hound, who had stopped working on his knife for the moment. “Aft-For-Brains.”
Hound made a sound like ‘Huh?’ and thought the new name over. Sideswipe repeated it, but Hound made a face, shook his head, and turned back to his knife.

Well, three out of four wasn't bad.

“Too long of a name for you?” he teased Hound, who snorted at him as a retort.

“Slag-sucker!” Jazz had raised his hands towards Trailbreaker, as if seeing him for the first time. “Oy, Slag-sucker!”

“Daft!” Trailbreaker repeated in a similar way, his poncho pushed back as he flung his hands up, his visor bright and happy.

Sideswipe was certain that the hysterical laughter building up inside him would explode and crack his frame at any second. He did allow himself a quick cackle, then cleared his vocalizer, trying to pretend that he'd laughed at Jazz and Trailbreaker playing with their names, not at the names themselves. Prowl, however, narrowed his optics at him, suspicious, especially when Sideswipe threw him an innocent look.

“This is me playing nice, Prowl,” he said sweetly. “If you don't like it, then you should take me back to my caravan right now.”

Prowl muttered something back at him, pointed and assertive. ‘I'm on to you.’

Oh, he would have fun with this mech, until the orn that he managed to escape the cables binding him and pound his face into the ground.

“So, uh...” He would have twiddled his thumbs, but his hands were crossed, so he settled for wiggling his fingers again. “So are you all...Decepticons?”

Instantly the mood changed. All four mechs glowered at him, their systems revving, and Sideswipe's optics grew wide as his own engine stalled out. He gulped, hard. Whoops.

“Okay, no. Na?”

“Na!” Trailbreaker exclaimed decisively. He looked around him for something, pursing his lips, then tugged at his own poncho and pointed at what Sideswipe had assumed to be a small pin or a spot. His optics focused in on the small image of a squarish red head. “Autobot.”

“Autobot? Huh.”

Now that he saw it, he noted that all of them had the little stitch of a red head somewhere on their clothing. The only one missing it was himself, and the cloth around his waist was probably unwanted scrap anyway.

Sentinel Prime had told Sideswipe nothing about an Autobot tribe. He did recall the name mentioned somewhere, maybe in some briefing about the wildlands as a whole. They had to be a minor tribe, one that had fallen under the radar of Kaon scouts because they weren't worth mentioning. For all he knew, the tribe consisted of all four mechs in front of him, and their base was anything that could be stored in their cart.

Thinking about the wagon drew his attention to it, even as Trailbreaker explained more about the Autobots, not that he could understand the barbarian mech's speech anyway. As Bumblebee had
said, his pack was sitting amongst the stolen containers of energon and boxes of supplies. Near to it sat his sword, offline, the golden blade darkened and quiet, and next to that was the tube holding the map.

His optics narrowed at it.

Fragging thing had brought him nothing but bad luck, and he didn't even believe in luck.

A rattling of aluminum brought his attention back to the campfire.

Each of the Autobots had pulled out a small, lumpy can, and were digging their fingers into them. Something that sounded like beads would rattle around inside, until their fingers caught one of the teeny items, and then the mech would pop it into his mouth. He caught sight of one of them as Jazz toyed with it between his thumb and fore-finger; it was dark purple, close to spherical but just as lumpy as the rations can, and each mech had to work to chew at it before swallowing and moving on to the next piece.

Despite the weird meal, especially when perfectly good liquid energon was in the cart nearby, Sideswipe's tanks reminded him that he had not refueled all day.

“Am I going to get some of that?” he asked Prowl.

Prowl nodded in an immediate understanding, and poured several of the pebble-like things into his hand. Moving closer to Sideswipe's side, he raised his palm and offered it towards the red mech's mouth. Sideswipe balked.

“I can feed myself!”

Prowl said something, quietly encouraging, as if giving directions to a youngling, and tried again, but Sideswipe turned his head away and raised his bound hands.

“Look, untie me and I'll feed myself!” He pulled at the cables. “Take these off!”

“Na.”

“What do you mean, 'na'?! Primus, Prowl...”

Prowl flicked his doorwings in an irritated shrug, then fed himself instead, turning his attention to his own meal. Jazz asked a question, Prowl answered it, and the two of them glanced at their captive before setting themselves to ignore him and eat.

Sideswipe's spark flustered, twisting around itself in humiliation within its casing as he realized what would happen if he refused to be fed. They would simply not offer him a chance to refuel, and let him wait until he was very low and willing to swallow his pride along with the fuel. He glowered at the doorwinged mech.

“Prowl...” he tried to plead, and offered his hands.

The Autobot glanced at his wrists, then at Sideswipe, and narrowed his optics. The little things inside the aluminum can rang against the sides as he shook it at the red mercenary, and repeated the phrase from a few breems ago.

'Trust me.' Or so Sideswipe assumed.

“...You seriously want me to eat out of your hand?” he groaned.
Prowl shook the can again, awaiting Sideswipe's answer.

To the Pit with this mech. But he needed to refuel, whether or not a chance to escape presented itself tomorrow, and if it did, he would need the energy to run.

“Fine.”

He dropped his hands to his lap again, and glared at the white mech, hoping to communicate that even though he would cooperate, he was *not* pleased with it. But Prowl just dumped several more of the pebble-things into his hand, and offered his palm. Sideswipe hesitated, staring at them, and glancing once at the other mechs to make sure that this wasn't some sort of a joke before leaning forward, his lips, glossa and dentals briefly sliding over the armor plates inside the mech's hands as he took the fuel into his mouth.

Oh thank Primus, it was just energon. Solid, dried and tough, but nothing alien.

His dentals did have to work at it, crunching uncomfortably at fuel that he'd known to usually come in a liquid, drinkable form, and he puzzled over why the barbarians kept their rations this way as he chewed. The answer came to him as soon as he swallowed, and his tanks registered a sudden jump in energy input. The energon was concentrated, formed and pressed down, and somehow molded into these tiny pebble-forms, which were easier to transport than the bulky containers of energon sitting in the wagon. They didn't taste bad either. They were just hard to eat.

Prowl offered some more in his hand. Sideswipe took it readily this time, bending towards him and putting his mouth against his hand, then drawing back to chew. The others ate quietly, occasionally glancing Sideswipe's way before concentrating on their own rations. Jazz toyed with his a bit more, even flinging one of the pieces into the air and catching it in his mouth, until Trailbreaker muttered a warning, something like *'Don't play with your food.'*

The next time he was given a handful, a few pieces fell out of Sideswipe's mouth before he could get them safely in. Prowl looked briefly at the wasted energon, then when Sideswipe leaned towards him for more, he let him nibble at the new pieces, then moved forward, keeping his palm over his mouth when the red mech leaned back.

“Hrrm?”

Sideswipe stared at him over his fingers, confused and a little alarmed. Prowl's optics stayed on him, and when Sideswipe tried to move his head, he moved his hand with him too. Sideswipe froze, puzzled, until he understood that the mech just didn't want him accidentally dropping his fuel. Outraged pride and logical reasoning did battle with one another inside of his cortex, and reasoning eventually won; he wouldn't get refueled by any other means than cooperation.

That didn't make the process of chewing with a hand over his mouth any less weird, his lips and jaw moving around against Prowl's palm and fingers, two sets of optics locked to each other as he considered when the process of refueling would get too intimate.

A strange look crossed the barbarian's face, but before Sideswipe could analyze it, he had already withdrawn his hand and was pouring out more pellets for the red mech to eat. This time he let Prowl's hand stay, eating out of it obligingly, his tanks more thankful than his cortex was. Now that they had a system worked out, Sideswipe could eat faster, his head staying near Prowl's and trying to ignore the sensation of his mouth running across the other mech's hand.

He was done before he knew it, his tanks quickly reaching capacity and satisfied, and he was almost saddened by it. Now he was left with nothing to do while Prowl finished feeding himself.
Sideswipe's frame, however, was fairly certain what the next step was. He'd been walking all day, had just refueled, and now would be a great time to recharge while his self-repair units fixed up his legs.

He didn't want to, not out here, in the middle of an unknown place, surrounded by hostile mechs. But his HUD insisted on it. Slowly, droned on by the lullaby of several voices talking around him as the rest of the Autobots finished refueling, his let his head bow forward, his arms resting on his knees.

“Sideswipe?”

“M'tired, Prowl...”

The dissolving energon pellets felt comfortably warm in his tanks, as did the hand on his back, and as his optics shut off and he fell into a light recharge, he barely had time to wonder why his spark did not insist that he shake the hand off of him.
Chapter 5: Warrior

_The teeny shot cube of concentrated high-grade burned all the way down his throat to his tanks, and when he was through Sideswipe slammed it down onto the bar with a gasp and a shudder. Sitting down next to him, Sunstreaker cackled at his brother._

“Feeling better?”

“Much,” Sideswipe croaked back. His blurred optics lifted from the shot cube to the bartender, who had her back turned to the two regulars while she chatted with a newcomer, then his gaze shifted further to the shelves holding a rainbow of different colored bottles of energon. He may have been overcharged, but he was still coherent enough to notice that half of the bottles were nearly empty. His spark sank, and not just because the shortage would mean that future-Sideswipe wouldn’t have as many drunken escapades.

“It's affecting everyone now,” Sunstreaker agreed, following his brother's line of sight. “I heard that they're cutting back on public transport soon too. Not enough energy to keep the shuttles going. Sentinel's going to try to keep as many reserves as close to him as possible until a new energon vein is dug up.”

“Think that means that he'll be holding back on jobs for us too?”

“Maybe. What if he asks us to join the regular military instead?”

His lagging processor mulled over the idea. “That would mean that he's about to declare war on another Prime, and if he does, he'll only have the energon to pay us if he wins. No thanks.”

Sunstreaker squeezed his fingers around his own cube. “...I've started taking commissions again.”

Sideswipe turned his head to gawk at his twin. “I thought you said you didn't have any more art in you.”

“It doesn't have to be anything decent, it just needs to be good enough that the client's happy and I get paid,” Sunstreaker snorted as he pushed his unfinished drink away and crossed his arms on the bar, then leaned over to speak more quietly into Sideswipe's audial, one optic on the bartender to make sure she wouldn't drift back their way anytime soon. “You should find a different line of work too. Sentinel's getting desperate. No telling what he'll have you do next.”

“Credits are credits,” Sideswipe mumbled.

Sunstreaker narrowed his optics. “Until they mess with your cortex and have you wake me up in the middle of the night from all the yelling.”

“Hey, that was just the one time!”
“Three times.”

“...Two times.”

“Three.” The golden mech held up three fingers. “You did it last night too.”

Sideswipe scowled at him, then returned his gaze to the empty shot cube in front of him. It wavered before his optics, mocking him, reminding him that the happy buzz coursing through his systems hadn’t solved anything. He would have ordered another, but the credits from the last job were drying up fast on high-grade.

A black hand patted his shoulder.

“Maybe we ought to leave Kaon,” Sunstreaker suggested quietly.

“I’m fine,” Sideswipe snapped back at him. “It was just one stupid mech at the docks. Nothing we haven’t done before. I’m fine.”

“Sides, we've both had nightmares from jobs that went bad. But yours? It's...different.”

“You're not the one who’s having them.”

“Yeah, slagger, but I see what it's doing to you. It's haunting you.”

Sideswipe was about argue that he didn’t believe in ghosts or visions, but at that moment a familiar pain stabbed at his spark, and suddenly Sunstreaker's optics were not blue anymore, but red, and his face was distorted, laughing at him...

“Sunny?!”

He reached for the warping image of his brother, but he was far away, and the bar was melting away, and Sideswipe was falling, down, down, down, so far away from Sunstreaker, and a mad, cackling laughter had surrounded him, and then he saw the flash of a knife--

He startled as he online, battle programing rearing up against the imagined foe and his engine roaring, but there was no one in front of him, and the world was sideways.

...Sideways?

Oh. He was lying on the ground.

His systems tensed, ready for an enemy to appear and scare the slag out of him, like on those stupid game chips that younglings at the arcade liked so much, and when nothing happened, the battle programming gradually dialed itself down, and his engine rumbled a disquieted purr, though his optics still warily took in the world around him.

Long shadows peeled away from the wagon nearby, and from the boulders, the crystal outcroppings, the hills, and Trailbreaker, who was standing guard at the edge of their camp. Dawn had come, and now that everything was bathed in a pale, pink light, Sideswipe could finally see the expanse of the wildlands of Cybertron around him.

His spark sank in its casing when he realized that he had no idea where he was.

The hills became sharper and higher in the distance. Mountains. But he had no idea how far away
they were, or what mountains they were, or in which direction they stood in relation to Kaon. The area that they were still consisted of rolling hills, similar to the trail that the caravan had been on when he'd been captured, but the terrain here was gently smoothing out into fields. Outcroppings of crystals dotted the plains everywhere, some no taller than his ankle, some rising as high as two Sideswipes standing on top of each other. They hummed as the air brushed over them, creating a soft, placid sound that naturally eased the tension in his servos. He could smell them too, the scents of so many different types of crystals wafting together to create a melody that no manufactured garden in Kaon could ever replicate. Sunstreaker would love this.

He also smelled the Minotorons, and that pulled him right out of his happy musings.

Sideswipe groaned as he rolled over, then paused as he realized that he was not actually lying on the hard ground. A woven mat was under him, thin and wide, but keeping the dusty metal granules off of his plating as he recharged. He remembered falling into a light recharge when he was sitting by the campfire, but his chronometer and HUD's energy status told him that he'd gotten a full night's rest.

The other half of the mat felt warm too, but when he looked over his shoulder, no one was there. Whoever his bedmate was had already gotten up and left.

...Someone had been sharing a mat with him.

He tried to get up to investigate this more thoroughly, but was halted by the tether on his wrists. He looked to the side, and glowered at where it's end had been staked into the ground.

“Slag,” he grunted as he rolled onto his belly with a huff, putting his weight on his elbows instead. His wrists still hurt from struggling with the cables all of the last orn, though his self-repair units had fixed some of the damage while he recharged. He gave them a rebellious tug, but the cables held him firm.

“Sideswipe.”

He snapped his head up. Prowl was approaching him, his feet moving across the ground far too quietly for a mech of his size. Once he was close, he crouched down in front of the red mercenary, and put a hand on the top of his black helm as he asked him a question, sounding partly like a greeting.

“Oh, I'm fine,” Sideswipe glared at him, and shook his hand off. “I've been kidnapped by a bunch of savages, but no, I'm great this morning. How are you?”

Prowl cocked his head to the side, trying to understand why the mech was growling at him. Reaching behind him, to where Sideswipe assumed his subspace pocket was hidden, he pulled out the can from last night, and offered him a few more energon pellets in his hand. Sideswipe drew back and shook his head again.

“I'm not fragging hungry, you cortex-disabled rust-bucket! I want to go home!”

Prowl narrowed his optics, and queried him.

“Home! Kaon! Back where I live! I need to tell Sunstreaker that I'm alright!”

Primus, did Sunstreaker even know that he was missing yet? If Bumblebee didn't safely return to Kaon, Sunstreaker would have no idea that something was wrong until Sentinel came looking for the caravan's overdue return, if he didn't automatically assume that the vehicle and mechs had been lost to the wildland tribe and called no attention to it. Sideswipe wished that he'd left his twin more
than just a scrawled note in their shared apartment. Sunstreaker would have no idea where to start looking. Pit, no one would.

The frustration built on top of itself, until Sideswipe had sat up, his hands straining at the end of the tether, as he turned his head up towards Prowl and shouted at him.

“You need to untie me and let me go home! This--” he shook the restraints, “this needs to come off right now! I need to get home!”

“Home?” Prowl repeated the emphasized word.

“Yes! Home!” There wasn't any slack left, but Sideswipe did his best to gesture behind him. “Go back home! Home! Kaon, the caravan, I’d even take you dropping me off with the minibots, but I need to leave!”

Prowl's furrowed the ridges above his optics. “Home...”

“C'mon, Prowl, you've got to understand.” Some of the anger left Sideswipe's voice, realizing that the mech was trying to appease whatever he was asking for. “Home. Where I belong.” He jabbed a thumb at himself. “Not here. Not with the Autobots. Kaon. Sunstreaker. Home.”

Two sets of blue optics stared at one another, one sincerely trying to interpret what the other was begging for. Prowl pressed his dentals tightly together, his own frustration at his inability to know what Sideswipe wanted clear on his faceplates. Sideswipe grimaced back at him, then tugged at his restraints hard, once. If he couldn't get him to translate the word, then maybe he would understand his intent.

'Let me go.'

Prowl glanced at the cables tying Sideswipe's wrists together. Then he shook his head.

“Na.”

Sideswipe's spark fell. “What, 'na'?! Prowl, you know I don't want to be here! Untie me, and let me go home!”

But the white barbarian was already rising up and turning away, ignoring the red mercenary's struggles and cursing as he walked off to oversee the rest of the camp.

*S~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Sideswipe swore that his legs were going to fall off at any second.

He was panting again, doing his best to keep up with the wagon, even at it's slow, lumbering pace. The Autobots walked on casually, some of them with their fans on to cool themselves down now that the sun was overhead, but none of them were showing as much trouble as Sideswipe.

At least they hadn't put the blindfold back on him. Maybe Prowl was confident that the city-mech was properly disoriented and couldn't find his way back home. He'd be right. All he knew was that they were moving north, but he'd missed an orn's worth of travel and had no idea where on Cybertron they'd started from. Every hill looked the same, and every crystal outcropping looked the same, despite the awing colors and shapes. As soon as they had started off, Sideswipe had tried to make a mental note of anything that looked like a landmark, but he'd given up when miles had been put behind them and the only thing unnatural that he had remembered was a giant crater in the ground, caused by a long-forgotten rocket shell. Add on that he was too exhausted for his cortex to
correctly log what would be helpful to note and what would be knocked over or brushed away by the time he returned.

And it was only midday.

Trailbreaker and Hound were talking to each other, the later seeming in a better mood since yesterday, his voice naturally light and friendly, compared to the dark looks and vocalizations he'd been giving Sideswipe since the blindfold came off. Trailbreaker had patched up his poncho sometime while the red mech had been recharging, and he and Hound laughed at some joke together, their chattering language as fluid with the wildlands around them as if the mechs had sprang up from the ground. Prowl kept silent from where he trailed behind Sideswipe, with the exception of one-word answers to a query from Jazz. The other mech was humming to himself as he walked, the beat of the tune matching each of his steps, his cloak swaying behind him.

The red mercenary had sworn at each one of them as soon as he was retied to the back of the wagon, and had been ignored. It seemed that they were getting used to him far quicker than he was getting used to being led on by a slagging Minotoron-pulled wagon. He muttered to himself, desperately wanting the walk to be over so that he could rest, and plot how on Cybertron he was going to escape.

As he put his foot down, something slipped under his ankle. He cried out as he went down, instinctively dropping to one knee instead of crashing on his face, then stumbled forward, panicked that he wouldn't be able to get up quick enough and would be dragged.

Immediately Prowl shouted a warning, and Hound grabbed the side of one of the Minotorons, the creatures bellowing but grinding to a halt, the wagon stopping right after them. Hands were on Sideswipe, grasping him, not pulling him up but instead turning him and letting him sit with his back to the wagon's wheels, his bound hands dangling above him. Prowl was in his face, worriedly assessing him, and Jazz was right behind him, rapidly asking questions, his cheerful mood evaporating as he crouched down and inspected Sideswipe's ankle.

His HUD showed no warnings of damage to his leg, other than being overheated and rattled from the fall. Jazz came to a similar conclusion at the same time, and murmured to Prowl, who looked relieved, but still watched Sideswipe's face for any indication that something else was wrong.

The red mech realized how badly his fans were working to keep him cool, his jaw hanging open as he attempted to vent through his mouth to supplement his cooling systems.

“I...need...to...rest...” he gasped.

That got across well enough. Prowl nodded once, then looked over his shoulder and called out instructions to the Autobots. They looked perplexed, but gathered nearby him and Sideswipe, then each took a knee on the ground to form a small circle, while Prowl sat down next to Sideswipe's hip. For a while the only sound was Sideswipe's wheezing intake, and he squeezed his hands into fists, embarrassed that everything had to be stopped for his sake. The Autobots hadn't stopped all during the last orn; taking a break like this must have been unusual. Then again, if rescue was coming, he was buying them some time to catch up to the wagon.

Hound's foul mood was back, pointedly directed at Sideswipe, and he growled as he gestured at him and then at the wildland beyond the wagon. Clearly he wanted to keep moving, but Prowl shook his head.

“Frag you,” Sideswipe managed out at Hound, his ventilations slowly coming back under control. “I don't know how you barbarians do it....but in the city? We've got something called...public
transport. Don't need to walk everywhere. Just get on a tram...and you're there in minutes. None of all this fragging walking.”

Hound's answer was fierce. He waved a hand at the hills in front of them, shouting back at Sideswipe, his vocalizer hissing angrily. A finger pointed back at the wagon, directly at the map, causing the other mechs to bristle, but Hound did not let up at a warning from Jazz, instead becoming even louder as he snarled at the red mercenary and kept pointing at the map. He was demanding an answer.

Sideswipe glared back at him, then snorted, and turned his head away, disinterested in anything having to do with the map.

He swung it right back with huge optics as he heard a knife being pulled out.

The rest of the Autobots had scrambled to their feet, shouting, but Prowl had reacted the quickest, standing right in front of the red mercenary, his doorwings flared out aggressively. Hound sneered at him, his fingers tight on his sharpened knife, but didn't dare to move against their leader. Prowl's voice boomed, controlled, but frighteningly loud. Sideswipe could do little to defend himself other than to curl up, his legs brought towards himself and ready to kick, his bound wrists useless from where they dangled above him.

“Bring it on!” he roared at Hound over Prowl's voice, disregarding the logic of how quickly he would be stabbed if the white mech wasn't guarding him. “You think you're so fragging tough, when it took all four of you to knock me out, and now you think you've got a fighting chance again when I'm tied up?! C'mon, mech! Why don't you tie up my legs too, if it makes things easier?! I'm not afraid of you! BRING IT!”

“Sideswipe!” Prowl snapped in warning.

He turned his head up to the barbarian, his dentals gritted. But Prowl kept his optics focused on Hound, whose shoulders were heaving under his poncho as his engine revved dangerously. Trailbreaker had taken a position near Prowl, helping him to guard their prisoner, while Jazz was trying to talk the green mech down, his hands splayed in a peaceful gesture as he spoke rapidly, his voice tight, but not matching his anger.

Hound's optics flashed between all four of them, lingering on Sideswipe, then on Prowl. The white mech glowered back at him intensely. The staff that had previously been hiding in subspace was in his hand now, and he let its end rest on the ground, the meaning clear. If he wanted to harm Sideswipe, he would have to attack their leader first.

After a consideration, Hound wisely put the knife away, but slowly. Prowl kept his own weapon out, staring him down, until the green mech huffed what sounded like a swear, turned and walked off.

The tension eased from the three remaining Autobots as their comrade stormed away and plopped himself down on the ground some distance from the wagon. Sideswipe sagged against his restraints, his pump still double-timing. “The Pit is wrong with him?”

Prowl's staff was flipped back into subspace, and he sat on the ground next to the city-mech, his engine still growling lowly as he kept an optic on Hound. Jazz and Trailbreaker took their cue to join him, tightening their small circle. They were silent, occasionally glancing at the green barbarian, then stared at the ground. Jazz attempted to talk with Prowl, but the white mech didn't answer. Jazz vented, then turned to Trailbreaker, muttering something, to which all he received back was a head shake.
“...So now, on top of everything else, one of you wants to kill me before we even get to wherever we’re going.” Sideswipe whined. “Great. I'm fragged.”

Hound had crossed his arms over his knees, and was staring out across the wildland fields. He slouched, resting his chin on his knees. He looked even more shaken than Sideswipe felt, as if he had been the one attacked. But Sideswipe couldn't feel bad for him, nor could he understand why the seemingly friendly mech had nearly turned violent. Even worse, none of the others had taken the knife away, as if his outburst had been justified, and he only needed time to cool off.

He suppressed a shudder as he heard the echo of insane laughter, and reminded himself that Hound's optics were blue, not red.

“Yoska, sa?” Jazz said suddenly, jabbing a thumb in Sideswipe's direction. Grinning, he leaned back, intimidating the mech's bound position and how he'd been ready to try to kick a knife-wielding enemy away. He chittered, and Sideswipe frowned, unsure if he was teasing him or not.

Hound heard him and called out without looking back. “Na yoska!” He was still angry, but his vocalizer was touched with weariness now.

“...What does that word even mean?” Sideswipe asked. “‘Yoska.’ I've heard you use it before. My name isn't ‘Yoska.’ My name is Sideswipe.” He looked at Prowl. “Yoska. Na. Na yoska.”

‘Not a yoska.’ Whatever the Pit ‘yoska’ meant.

Prowl sat up a little straighter, considering that. “...Na. Sideswipe, yoska.”

“Na!” Hound whipped his head around, offended, then grimaced and ducked his head down when Prowl's engine hissed angrily in his direction, warning him away.

“But what does it mean?” Sideswipe tried again. His cortex puzzled over how the word had been used. “...Whatever it is, Prowl thinks I am it, and Hound doesn't. Actually...”

He remembered when he'd kicked Minotoron excrement at Prowl the other orn. Trailbreaker had sounded disgusted.

“Na yoska,” he remembered the black mech saying.

And one of them had called him that word too when he'd first woken up after the battle, when he'd tried to fight whoever was touching him. He'd struggled against their hands, fighting blindly, and they'd called him 'yoska.'

It still didn't make any sense. He frowned, and when he looked up, the other Autobots were staring at him, considering how to answer him. “...Yoska?” he asked, spreading his fingers, the best he could do at a pleading gesture.

Prowl put a thoughtful hand to his chin as he thought about how best to explain. After a moment, he snapped his fingers, grabbing the attention of the rest of the mechs. Standing again, he pulled his staff out of subspace again, then hit its butt on the ground several times in front of himself, the weapon thumping dully.

“Yoska.”

“...Your staff?” Sideswipe pointed at the weapon, but Prowl shook his head.

Trailbreaker leaned forward, grunting as he pulled out his club, and smacked it against his empty
palm before putting it back into subspace. “Yoska.” He pointed at Jazz, who saluted him with one of his knives.

When Sideswipe still looked bemused even after that, Prowl got the idea to walk around the wagon, shift its contents around, and pat something inside it. Sideswipe had to turn his head up at an uncomfortable angle to see what the mech was doing, but he was able to spot the piece of metal that Prowl had pushed to be in his range of view.

The hilt of his sword.

...Well then.

“Yoska means warrior,” he realized, staring at the white mech with huge optics. “Am I right?”

Prowl shrugged, not knowing the Standard word, but assuming that Sideswipe had finally gotten the gist of it. “Prowl, Trailbreaker, Jazz, Hound, yoska. Sideswipe, yoska.”

His processor whirled as he interpreted this, and something clicked in his mind as understanding dawned on him.

That's why they wanted him to walk.

A weaker mech would be sitting inside the wagon, protected by the warriors.

The Autobots saw him as a warrior.

And a warrior walked.

That didn't explain why Hound was so set against him to the point of wanting to do him harm. But it didn't help that someone that Prowl was insisting to be a warrior was having trouble keeping up with the wagon, halting their progress and needing special attention. No wonder Hound had been so fragged off at them stopping.

“Hound!”

The green mech sent a tight glare over his shoulder at Sideswipe.

“You don't think I'm strong enough to be a warrior?”

Bracing himself on the wagon, and ignoring Prowl's surprised voice, Sideswipe pushed himself back up to a standing position, his legs wobbling dangerously but holding him up. The white mech came around to put a hand on his arm for balance, but he brushed him off.

“I can stand on my own,” he said to him, then turned back to where Hound was staring at him in confusion. “Hound! Yoska!” He struggled with his bound hands to point at himself, and ended up gesturing with his thumb. “I get it! Well...not completely, but I'm not some weakling slowing you down! You've seen me fight! You know that I'm just as strong as you!”

Hound said something to him in a questioning tone. But Prowl understood him first, nodded, and raised his hand, ordering the Autobots up. Though still angry, Hound was disciplined enough to return as soon as he was called, and took his position towards the front of the wagon once more. He narrowed his optics at Sideswipe as he passed, but for once, the red mercenary let him walk by without a taunt.

At a command from Prowl, the Minotorons were started forward again, bellowing and grunting as
they strained at the cart's weight before dragging it forward. The contents shifted, and Sideswipe caught sight of his sword moving next to the map before he gritted his dentals and forced himself to walk on, despite the servos in his legs still aching.

Frag him if anyone would find reason to call him less than a warrior.

That didn't stop his fans from kicking back on a few seconds later. He focused on putting one foot in front of the other, watching the ground this time, swearing to himself that he would not trip and fall again. He happened to see the curious glance sent his way by Hound, but when he looked up, the green mech had his attention on the Minotorons.

A hand sat on his shoulder again. Prowl said something.

He sounded proud.

“Yoska,” Sideswipe confirmed with a pained grin, and plodded on after the wagon.

Chapter End Notes

I try to stay two chapters ahead of what I post, and I had all day to work on Chapter 7, so here you go. I don't have a set posting schedule, so you guys will probably be seeing new chapters on my days off.

Also, AO3 is a pain in the butt when many lines need to be bolded during one of Sideswipe's dreams. It must be some coding to make sure writers don't try to bold their entire piece. Let me know if you guys spot any formatting errors.
Chapter 6: Allies

It took the combined efforts of Jazz and Prowl to get Sideswipe to the fireside that night. It wasn't that the mercenary had put up a fight; rather, he simply had no fight left in him at all. As he'd promised himself, he did not fall or cause the wagon to be slowed again, but this had done his legs no favors. The moment that a suitable campsite had been found and Prowl called for a halt, Sideswipe had crashed into the back of the wagon and hung onto it, as if he were at sea and clinging to a piece of flotsam. No amount of cajoling from Prowl could get him to stand upright as coolant rushed through his systems, so with the leader holding his feet, and Jazz grasping his upper body, the two Autobots carried the poor city-mech to the fire that Trailbreaker had built up.

Sideswipe grunted as he was laid down on his back, his mouth open and gasping, his fans running on their highest setting. A shadow passed between him and the fire to his left, and he heard Hound snicker down at him.

"Na yoska."

"Sa yoska!" Sideswipe croaked as he grinned at the barbarian. "And don't you forget it, Aft-For-Brains."

Hound snorted, and waved him off as he found his own seat on the stem of a felled crystal.

The heat of the fire felt good on his abused servos, and Sideswipe couldn't bring himself to sit up or find a more comfortable position. He groaned as he stretched his legs, letting the self-repair units rush through his gears, while he tested his joints and systemically read out and deleted all of the warnings and error messages on his HUD. He noted a rise in strength by some of his motors as they were repaired, and the buzz of satisfaction that washed through his cortex rivaled that of a round of high-grade at his favorite bar. He was getting stronger. In a few more orns, he wouldn't have as much of a problem keeping up with the Autobots.

Not that he still wanted to be with them in a few more orns. He hadn't lost hope that Sunstreaker would be told what had happened, and come to rescue him. In the meantime, he could make the best of the situation.

More feet approached him after the wagon was chocked and the Minotorons were fed. Trailbreaker grunted, his own servos whining as he sat down and stretched his hands towards the fire. Sideswipe took some vile glee in that the mech with heavy armor was also obviously tired, though he had a better reason with his plating weighing him down. Then Jazz and Prowl returned, taking a seat on either side of the mercenary, Jazz chortling as he prodded Sideswipe's foot, teasing him for his exhaustion.

"Ha, ha," Sideswipe grimaced, pushing his leg into the smaller mech's side. "I do better things all day than run around the wildlands and try to outrun anything that can eat me, which is everything. Lay off."

Jazz pushed back playfully, grinning at him, then pulled out his rations can and turned to speak with mechs who could understand his language as he ate. The red mech felt hands on his shoulders, then grunted and moved with Prowl as the Autobot helped him to sit up and lean his back against the white mech's side. An arm went around Sideswipe's waist, steadying him, a red shoulder pressed against a white doorwing, and he gratefully let the other mech take his weight with a sigh.
“Thanks.”

Prowl said something quietly in return. 'You're welcome.' His own aluminum can rattled as he pulled it out of subspace.

He was almost too tired to eat. Almost. His HUD was warning him again of how much fuel he'd burned through, and when Prowl lifted a hand to his mouth, he gratefully leaned his head forward and ate from his palm without a fuss, closing his optics as he did.

Why were these slagging things so hard to chew? He was already exhausted, all the way down to his frame.

Sideswipe barely noticed how he was drowsily running his lips over Prowl's palm long after the energon was gone, until the mech took his hand away to grab more of the pellets. His optics flickered back online as his processor pinged for his attention.

He should have been alarmed at his proximity to a mech he'd known only for a couple of orns, and who was one of his captors. He should be fighting against being hand-fed. He should be kicking, screaming, struggling with the cables binding his hands and demanding his release, trying to escape...

Prowl offered him another handful.

...It felt nice to have someone sincerely care for him. Swindle never did that.

Sideswipe's optics dimmed as he bowed his head forward, accidentally trailing his lips a little longer over Prowl's fingers before he nibbled at the energon. He felt the mech startle, but the hand stayed where it was until he was finished chewing.

The arm around his waist tightened slightly.

One of Sideswipe's eye ridges lifted as he waited for the next handful. Maybe that was the line for when feeding a captive mech would get too intimate. He hadn't meant to drag his lips on Prowl's fingers, and it was hardly his fault if he wasn't allowed to use his hands. But the barbarian kept letting him eat anyway, offering him more energon, until his tanks read that they were full.

Just for fun, he dragged his glossa on his fingers to get the last pellet, secretly delighting in how uncomfortable this made his captor. The doorwing against his shoulder twitched, and he grinned.

When he was finished, he rested against Prowl, his optics flickering back on once more to gaze up at the sky while the white mech ate his own meal and spoke with his comrades. The stars were out, and he realized in amazement that he could see far more of the universe high above them than he could from Kaon. The air was cleaner out here; there was no smoke from the mines and factories to blot out the light of millions of stars in the spiral galaxy that Cybertron was hurtling through.

There were rumors that mechs had traveled to the stars before, and this was reinforced by star maps found in the archives that could only be created by explorers that had escaped the planet. He'd read about constellations, but never was able to see them from his neighborhood's street. He dragged up the old memory files as he found groups and clusters, then let his HUD map out the constellations that he could remember. Solaris's Hammer there, and there was the Golden Disk. And there was the Gem of Mystery! And there! Primus's Big Foot! And there, on the horizon, the coincidental geometric shapes that formed a Matrix of Leadership.

Now that was a legendary item that hadn't been seen since before Sideswipe was created. None of the Primes carried Matrices anymore, not even Sentinel Prime. 'Prime' was just a title of a city's
leader these days, and nothing more.

Sideswipe knew that he didn't miss Sentinel Prime at all, or his work for the Prime. But he was surprised to find that he wasn't missing Kaon that much either. His spark ached for Sunstreaker. But Kaon? The dirty streets, the energon shortage, the looming crisis that everyone felt was coming? That didn't exist out here. A strange, warm sense of peace flowed through him as he stared up at the stars.

...Primus, his cortex must have been scrambled from the long walk. He was starting to like it out here.

His attention was brought back to the here and now as he realized that Jazz was singing, and the rest of the Autobots had stopped what they were doing to pay attention. Sideswipe turned his gaze away from the sky, and back to the crackling fire and the black-and-white mech leaning back on the heels of his hands as he sang to his friends.

It was a happy tune, quick and bouncy, its beat consistent and easy to follow, and one that the others had heard before. Jazz could easily control his voice to playfully move up and down the octaves as he wished without his vocalizer screeching, and he did every so often, pretending to be all the parts of a full chorus. Trailbreaker was tapping his foot to each beat as Jazz waved one hand around, conducting an imaginary orchestra. One verse finished, and the next one started, the words rhyming in a similar way to how they had before.

It reminded Sideswipe of drinking songs, where he and Sunstreaker would put their arms around each other and belt out with the entire bar about how much they missed some femme of a mountain city.

Then Hound joined in. His voice was nowhere as on pitch as Jazz's, but his spark was in it, the angry melancholy from before vanishing completely as he leaned forward and sang along, his smile stretching the sides of his face. Trailbreaker swayed his head back and forth to the song's timing now, a metronome at work, though he declined to add his voice. Prowl didn't sing either, but Sideswipe could feel an ease in the other mech's frame as he watched the other Autobots enjoy themselves after a long day, Jazz now conducting with both of his hands into a grand finish, ending with Hound and Trailbreaker breaking out into applause and cheering for their smaller friend.

The arm around him tightened a little more as Sideswipe smiled.

“Good job, Daft!”

Jazz showed his dentals as he grinned, pleased with himself.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The stake pounded into the ground with a dull *thud*, and the red mech winced at the sound.

“You don't trust me not to run away during the night yet, huh?”

Prowl didn't answer him, instead checking to make sure that the tether was secure, and that Sideswipe had enough slack roll over but could not raise his hands much higher than his chest. Sideswipe vented a sigh, but obligingly lay still on the mat, his HUD informing him that it would really like him to recharge soon. He didn't disagree with it. He just wanted to keep an optic on how the nighttime routine was prepared by the Autobots; he'd passed out the night before and hadn't awoken from recharge until dawn.

Once each of the mechs had eaten their fill and settled down from the long orn's walk, Trailbreaker
had kicked out the fire and scattered the remains. It would be difficult for anyone less than a seasoned tracker to notice what was left behind. Three mats had been pulled out from the wagon, two of them similar, the third a bit wider, and that was what Sideswipe currently lay on. Jazz and Trailbreaker had already laid down and were deep in recharge. Hound was taking the first watch and had found a perch for himself on the side of the wagon, his legs lazily kicking back and forth as he gazed out at the dark wildlands. The mercenary assumed that all four Autobots would cycle through their turns at sentry duty through the night, and switch mats as their shifts changed.

But there was one less mat than there would be for the number of mechs in recharge. The answer to that problem became apparent before Sideswipe had time to think about it.

He gasped and quickly rolled over to face Prowl as the white barbarian laid down next to him, an arm and a doorwing draping over the bound and startled mech. Prowl raised a tired eyeridge at Sideswipe's bewildered faceplates and muttered something, his hand sliding further along his back as he shuffled closer. Sideswipe froze up, then squeezed his optics shut and grit his dentals as he felt metallic arms encircling him, Prowl bringing him forward to rest on his bumper.

Suddenly he regretted teasing the mech by licking his hand.

Battle programming surged online.

He needed to fight. He needed to fight, he needed to escape, by Primus this mech had kidnapped him and would try to bond with him and he would be dragged off to live tied up in a tent somewhere and Sunstreaker would never find him again and his pump was about to leap out of his chest--

“Sideswipe.”

He snapped his optics on, and stared at Prowl's. The other mech looked...somber. Disturbed.

What was that?

Who was whining?

“...”

...He was NOT whining.

That sound was not coming from his own vocalizer.

And he was not shaking like a frightened youngling within Prowl's arms.

Nope, never.

Sideswipe bowed his head forward into Prowl's shoulder, and tried to force himself to stop trembling. Both twins had taken lovers before, separate and together, so it wasn't like interfacing was anything new. But it had always been on their terms, and in the few cases when things got too rough, he could always judo-throw a bad partner across the room. Now, tied to a stake and with no one to help him? The instinct to fight refused to die, no matter how much reasoned to himself that he was safe, that Prowl would not do anything to harm him.

He'd captured him, tied him up and refused to let him return home. But he hadn't hurt him. Right?

Primus, it would have been so much easier if he could identify him as an enemy. He'd snarl, raise his bound hands and try to gouge out his optics. But other than their initial battle, Prowl had done
nothing to him but watch over him, guard him, protect him, talk to him gently and hold him...

No, no, NO, he had to fight. He had to get away...

Prowl turned his head and murmured the phrase from the last orn into his audial.

'Trust me.'

Sideswipe stared at the white plating in front of him.

Prowl was doing nothing but holding him.

He wasn't being gropped. A light hand barely petted his back, and the gentle massage was soothing. He could hardly even call the gesture a cuddle, not with him being given enough space to turn away if he wanted. It was...

It was nice.

Sideswipe considered the request. 'Trust me.'

He nodded.

Slowly, he tried to unwind the tension in his servos, letting himself lay comfortably in the other mech's arms. He hadn't realized that his legs had been brought up to curl himself into a defensive ball, as if he were about to kick him, and now he let them stretch out, a rush of coolant through his lines reminding him that he was still repairing himself.

Prowl sighed through his vents, long and tired, the warm air wafting over Sideswipe's armor plating. The red mech stared at the barbarian laying his head down on the mat and shutting off his optics, his systems purring as they wound down. His fingertips kept running over Sideswipe's back, trying to keep him calm, even as the need recharge overtook the white mech.

It took some time before Sideswipe repeated him, letting his bound hands hang to his side, his optics flickering off as he let the side of his helm rest on the shared mat right next to Prowl's. He remembered his last thought being that he would never get to sleep that night.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Sunstreaker didn't know what to do with himself, and him scrambling around the apartment as he tried to get his art supplies together was inequitably entertaining for Sideswipe over the news program that he'd been watching. He cut off the report about the latest found energon vein being a dead end as he heard a crash from next room, followed by a curse, and then his golden twin was sticking his head out through the doorway.

"Why did you stack your datapads on my paint?!"

Sideswipe leaned far back in his chair to look at his twin with an upside-down grin. "Because there was nowhere else to put them?"

"We have an ENTIRE apartment, and there was fragging nowhere else you could have put them?!"

"You haven't touched your paints in forever. I assumed that they were, you know, in storage, and I can put them with other slag that's just going to collect dust."
“Well now the labels might have gotten switched around by the pads falling, and I'll have no time to check until I'm at the client's!”

The sight of him gathering up his paints in a huff and triple-checking the small box of painters' tools made Sideswipe's spark bounce around in delight. His brother was getting to do what he loved, even if he was as nervous as a turbo-fox in a hunt while he gathered everything that he would need. The red twin knew his brother's cortex was a whirlwind of activity while he was in this preparation stage. Sunstreaker had explained to him when they were younger that he could picture a hundred different methods to do the same painting in his mind before a brush ever touched a canvas, and while this was happening, he had no room or patience for anything else trying to get his attention, be they annoying brothers, transport schedules, or needing to take the datapads off of his paints before he yanked them off the shelves.

He would never have his brother's talent for art, and that suited him just fine. It was far too stressful, in his opinion.

“So how many different shades of blue do you need to paint somebody's wall?” he teased.

“It's a mural, Sideswipe. It's going to take up the main wall of his living quarters.”

Sideswipe whistled. “So if you mess up this giant painting, does that mean you'll have...a BRUSH with death?! Ha-ha...OW!” He was shoved out of the chair as Sunstreaker passed him.

“You're an idiot.”

“As you've told me,” Sideswipe snickered as he picked himself up. “When will you be back?”

“Four orns. Five at most. I'll have to do this in stages, and the mech's going to put me up at his place while I'm working.”

“Lucky you.”

Sunstreaker paused.

“...Are you going to be alright while I'm gone?”

“What?” The red mech refreshed his optics. “Of course I will. Why wouldn't I be?”

“You had that nightmare again last night.”

“So it's four times now.”

“Five times. And it's been eight orns since the job.”

“Whatever.” He rubbed a hand over the back of his helm. “I'm getting over it.”

“...You know, you make a great thief, and prankster, but a terrible liar.”

“That's not true,” Sideswipe retorted, his other hand over his chest as he pretended to be greatly offended. “I'm a great liar! You just know me too well.”

“Exactly.”
He turned back towards his chair, but a hand grabbed his shoulder and swung him around to face his twin. Sunstreaker looked him up and down, the excitement in his blue optics for the first commission he'd gotten in a long time vanishing.

“Do me a favor,” he said slowly, “and don’t do anything stupid while I’m gone.”

“Me? Sideswipe, do something impulsive or dangerous?! Primus forbid!”

“I mean it.” He narrowed his optics. “I’m worried about you.”

“I’m fine! Just get your stupid painting done, and come home. Okay?”

“You better still be here when I get back.”

“If I get a job, I’ll leave you a note.”

“...I’m serious about us finding something different. Sideswipe, Sentinel’s--”

“I know, I know.” He threw his hands up in a universal gesture of surrender. “But it’s not like anybody else wouldn’t use us as a couple of cortex-disabled servos.”

“We don’t need be doing somebody else’s dirty work all the time.”

“It's what we were created to do, bro. And we need the credits. And speaking of credits...”

He shoved his hands forward, pushing Sunstreaker towards the door and making him squawk in alarm.

“Go! And don’t forget to have fun.”

“...Swear you’ll leave a note if you leave,” his twin grumbled.

“I promise.”

Venting harshly, Sunstreaker muttered a swear, then turned around stepped forward to hug his brother.

Sideswipe stretched his arms out to him.

Sunstreaker went right through him, his smokey ends trailing over Sideswipe’s fingers.

“...What...”

His optics widened, and he scrambled around, reaching back towards where Sunstreaker was walking, but it was too late. His brother, the apartment, the world around him, everything was dissolving.

The floor lurched, and he cried out in horror.

“Sunstreaker!”

The swirling yellow mass dissipated, scattering away with everything else, leaving Sideswipe alone in the dark, and he was falling, falling, falling...
He was on his back. His limbs were pulled away from his body, a rope around each of his wrists and ankles, and his plating squealed against the stone slab as he wriggled around desperately.

No.

Not this dream again.

He tried to shout, but something tied cruelly across his mouth muffled his cries to frightened moans. He struggled harder, frantically pulling at the cables, knowing what was coming next.

Those red optics.

That insane, maniac laughter.

Where was Sunstreaker?!

Where was Prowl?!

Wide optics stared up at the huge mech crouched over him, pinning him down to the slab with one knee on his belly. He yelled through the gag and tried to buck him off, but to no avail. The mech stared down at him gleefully, and Sideswipe could hear more voices, his peripheral vision picking up more red optics, mechs watching the ritual in excited fascination.

Dreams weren't real. He didn't believe in visions.

This wasn't real, it couldn't be real.

At the last moment, he tried to plead for his life, shaking his head back and forth.

There was still more he had to do!

He couldn't die yet! Not like this...

His optics bulged in horror as a knife was brandished, and held high above him.

The tip was pointed down at his chestplate, straight at his spark.

The knife plunged.

“Sideswipe!!”

He ignored the voice shouting his name, screaming loud and long as he fought the hands gripping his upper arms.

“AAAAH!!”

“Sideswipe!!”

He was being shaken roughly, his shoulders crashing into the ground underneath his back. He kicked around in a panic, his foot catching something, someone, the mech going down with a
pained yelp. More hands snatched at him, forcing him to sit up, and he tried to lift his hands to punch and claw at them, but they were trapped together in his lap, the cables digging into his wrists as he tugged at them desperately.

Jazz was speaking frantically into his audial.

Jazz?

Another voice, even closer, a hand gripping the back of his helm and pulling him against a white bumper.

...Prowl.

He stopped fighting, his wide optics at last registering the world around him. He was pressed up against Prowl, who was half-holding, half-restraining him. Jazz was leaning over him, a hand on the cables around his wrists, stopping him from hurting himself. Trailbreaker was sprawled on his back nearby, rubbing a new dent on his hip, but his glowing blue visor was focused on Sideswipe. Beyond him was Hound, who'd stopped halfway from his post by the wagon, unsure of what to do now that the screaming had stopped.

Sideswipe was wheezing as if he'd been drowning, dying. He'd felt his own energon surging up his throat as he was stabbed, but it was gone now. He was shaking badly, far worse than before, his red armor plating rattling.

He looked at each of the Autobots, who were staring at him in mixtures of confusion and alarm. Even Hound, who'd he'd thought would be angry at him for breaking the peace of the night, tentatively took a few steps closer, distressed, whispering his name once, until he'd joined the small knot of mechs gathered around the mat.

The hand on his helm rubbed it soothingly.

...Frag that stupid, stupid map.

And frag Sunstreaker for not being there for him.

Sideswipe leaned his head into Prowl's neck, and sobbed.

He expected for the Autobots to be frustrated that their newest yoska was once again showing weakness. But no one vented, or growled. No one spoke. No one said a word.

No one, but Prowl. The white mech murmured directly into his audial, the words' definitions lost to him, but not their meaning. He was calming him, soothing him, holding the taller mech and letting him cry, not asking for an answer for why he needed to be comforted.

Sideswipe's tied hands balled tightly into fists. A shudder wracked through him.

...Maybe all this, the map, his capture, being separated from Sunstreaker for so long...maybe this was some sort of purgatory. He didn't believe in slag like that, but maybe...

If it was, he knew exactly what it was for.

“I'm sorry,” he rasped into Prowl's neck. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry--”

Prowl hushed him, and hugged him closer. Sideswipe bit his dentals, and shook his head. The white mech couldn't understand. Pit, Sunstreaker had been there, and been with him each time he'd
had the nightmare, and even he couldn't grasp why Sideswipe hated that fragging map so much. How could he explain this to a barbarian that didn't even speak Standard?

He felt a hand on his back.

Then another.

Then a third.

Sideswipe onlined his optics, gawking, then squeezed them shut again, but this time, his trembling had lessened.

He didn't deserve the comradeship of the Autobots, their hands pressed on him, helping a suffering friend in the only way that they knew how.
I'm amazed and delighted at how well this fic has been received so far. Thank you guys!

Again, I'm writing two chapters ahead of what I post. As of 6/11/16, this fic is at about 35,500 words long, and about 25,500 has been posted. And we've still got a long way to go.

Chapter 7: Near

Hound chattered at him. Sideswipe cocked his head to the side and considered the other mech walking along beside him before answering.

“So your sire was one of the Minotorons, was he?”

Chatter.

“Well, that explains your face.”

Chatter.

“Mine? Aw, he was Primus himself. Scooped up some sludge from one of the pits, formed him into the most handsome piece of work on Cybertron, had him run on high-grade and purge, then split him in two, making me and my twin.”

Chatter, but this time at Jazz, who was watching and grinning in amusement.

“So he's got a better creation story than me?” Sideswipe huffed, smiling to himself as he followed the wagon wheels around a boulder. “I already know his. A bunch of musical instruments got packed together into a smelter, and somebody forgot to put the slag into a waste dump. Jazz popped out on the other side of the machine.”

He knew that Hound couldn't understand a word he'd said, and likewise. It was a game that he and the Autobots had picked up over the last several orns. They'd be talking amongst themselves, and he'd jump in with a random topic. They'd talk back, as if he were part of the conversation, and Sideswipe would come up with the most random slag in return. They'd chatter back and forth, each side only knowing their own language, yet pretending that they understood each other perfectly. Not exactly stimulating, but it was better than trudging along in silence, unable to communicate with the mechs holding him prisoner.

Sideswipe was picking up a few more words of the barbarians' language, and making an honest effort at listening for common words to use, but it would take someone with a far stronger processor than his own to make a decent translation program. The barbarians, on the other hand, seemed to have no inclination to learn any Cybertronian Standard, even when he repeated common and helpful words over and over. During one of these times, Trailbreaker had stared at him for a bit before muttering “Bar-bar-bar” and chortled to himself as he ignored the mercenary, and that had been the end of that.
By now he could walk normally with the Autobots, even though he'd still be exhausted by the end of the day. He felt stronger, as if he could run faster than ever before, and if he was ever untied from the tether he would run. Maybe not even straight back to Kaon. Maybe up and down the wildlands a few times, just for the Pit of it.

They'd passed through the wide fields, and the hills were rolling serenely under their feet once more, interrupted every so often by jagged ditches that had to be maneuvered carefully. Each crest of a hill offered something new to see: terrain, crystals, and smaller creatures that the mercenary had excitedly pointed out but the Autobots had shrugged off. The other day he'd seen a turbo-fox, a real one, not just something mounted on a noblemech's wall. The other day he'd seen a turbo-fox, a real one, not just something mounted on a noblemech's wall. It had slunk up on the wagon, and when Jazz had tried to coax it nearer with a pellet of energon, it shied away and took off, faster than a small animal should have been able to move.

There was a primal urge in Sideswipe's spark, a want to see all that the wildlands had to offer, now that he knew how to traverse it and wasn't dedicated to a mission by Sentinel Prime. He and Sunstreaker might even go camping out here, under the stars, and he could show his brother all the constellations that they could finally see from outside of the city.

...Primus, he missed Sunstreaker badly. His spark squirmed around in its casing, longing for its other half.

“So what about your carrier?” he asked Hound, trying to keep his mind off of his twin. “I'll bet she's a big ol' femme, somebody who can knock these Minotorons in line just as well as you can, but using only a hip-check of her aft. Right?”

Hound shrugged, and babbled an answer. Since the night that the mercenary had woken up screaming, the green mech had been wary of him, but hadn't done anything violent like pulling a knife on him again. The morning after, he'd tried talking to him, cautious and in low tones, questioning, but seeming to have forgiven him for whatever infraction Sideswipe had committed. And now, orns afterwards, they could chat in a conversation that neither of them could understand, but enjoyed anyway.

“I didn't have a carrier. Told you, I was gift from Primus himself.”

Chatter.

“I think I know who Prowl's carrier was.” He jabbed a thumb at the white mech walking directly behind him, and the barbarian perked up when he heard his name. “There's a legend in Kaon about a giant walking piece of aft. No head, no body, no arms, just an aft on legs. Prowl was one of the sticks that got pulled out of the back of it.”

Prowl said nothing, though one of his eye-ridges raised. Sideswipe smirked at him.

“Bet you really want to know what I'm saying about you.”

Prowl muttered something, his doorwings snapping back and forth in annoyance as he turned his head away dismissively. Sideswipe cackled, as did Hound.

“You're a nice mech and all, but I'm still going to kick your aft as soon as I'm out of this.” He shook his bound hands. “How would you like it if I tied you up and dragged you around the streets of Kaon in return, huh?”

The white mech said something again, and the last word sounded like 'bluestreak.' Hound barked a laugh, and snickered all the way back to the front of the wagon as he retook his post.
“What was that? Is that some sort of barbaric derogatory?” Sideswipe sounded out the word in his mouth, but it still sounded like 'bluestreak' in Standard. “...Oooh. I'm talking up a bluestreak, huh?”

Prowl stared at him.

“Well aren't you just sunshine and rainbows today? Dumb-aft.”

His optics narrowed. Sideswipe's grin grew wider.

“Somebody's figured out that my nick-names aren't all that nice...”

The white mech's pace suddenly picked up. When he was walking side-by-side with the mercenary, he put a hand down on his shoulder, not gently this time, and spoke directly at him, sharp and irritated. Sideswipe opened his mouth to retort, but Prowl spoke over him, his vocalizer buzzing and chirping rapidly in the barbarian's language.

“Are you lecturing me?!?”

From the inflection in his voice, and the sly look being directed his way from Jazz, Sideswipe guessed he was right.

“Oh, great. All the way out here, in NowhereLand, Cybertron, and I still got the cops telling me what to do. Listen, Prowl,” he leaned on the mech's hand a little. “You kidnapped me. Now you've got to deal with me. Your own fault. Plain logic right there.”

Prowl's vocalizer hitched, and he turned his optics away. Sideswipe studied the ponderous look on his face, then exclaimed.

“Ha! 'Logic!' You like that word, don't you?”

But Prowl didn't answer him. He was staring towards the front of the wagon. Sideswipe followed his line of sight, and his energon lines ran cold as he realized that all of the Autobots were slowing down, Hound putting a hand on the Minotorons to stop their advance.

Something was wrong.

“...Prowl?” the mercenary started to ask, but was ignored. As the wagon halted, Prowl straightened up, his doorwings high and on alert, his optics moving slowly back and forth, gazing suspiciously at the horizon. The rest of the mechs had moved closer to the wagon, Trailbreaker putting a hand defensively. Jazz had pulled one of his knives out.

At the front, Hound crept forward, his head low as he advanced towards the next hill. He stopped, listening and sniffing at the air, taking in the world around him, before looking over his shoulder at Prowl and gesturing with his head towards the hill. Prowl nodded in understanding, and waved Trailbreaker and Jazz forward, the three mechs circling around the wagon to join Hound.

Sideswipe stepped forward to join them, but was caught by his wrists. He froze, and grimaced at the tether.

“Prowl!” he hissed quietly, and when the mech turned, he tugged at the cables.

If the mechs were leaving the wagon, Sideswipe would be nearly helpless against whatever had spooked them so badly.

Prowl came to the same conclusion right away, and doubled-back, immediately going for the tether
and untying it from the wagon. The cables stayed around Sideswipe's wrists with the white mech holding the tether's end. He gestured with his head for Sideswipe to follow him, and the red mech did so obediently, staying as quiet as possible as they rejoined the rest of the Autobots.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The air at the top of the hill reeked, and many of the crystals had been trampled, like a herd of Minotorons had come by. Sideswipe watched his step, not wanting a repeat of his first orn with the Autobots. Prowl kept him close as the five of them crawled up the hill, lying low against the terrain, then slowly peeked up over the crest at the field beyond.

At first, Sideswipe saw nothing wrong. Just another field, the same as all the other ones he'd seen over the past several orns. But as he stared out at the wildlands, he started picking up on things that weren't quite right.

The remains of campfires. A lot of campfires, some of them far bigger than what Trailbreaker had been building each night.

Crystals that had been damaged or trampled.

That stench of too many Minotorons in one place.

And then he started spotting signs of a hastily-packed encampment. Tie lines. Stakes left in the ground. Something fluttered behind a crystal outcropping, making them all jump, until they realized that it was just a piece of cloth floating in the breeze.

Trailbreaker's engine growled.

Sideswipe took a wild guess. “...Decepticons?” he asked quietly.

Prowl considered the field beyond them. Then he shrugged, and grunted as he stood up, in full view now. The rest of the Autobots and Sideswipe followed his lead, no longer having a reason to keep themselves hidden.

“Autobots,” Trailbreaker answered for the leader, and thrust a hand out at the field.

Sideswipe's optics bulged a little as he took in all of the leftovers of fires. Exactly how many Autobots were in this tribe?!

“AAA-WOOOO!!”

He cried out and fell on his aft as Jazz suddenly threw his head back and howled, his jaw falling open and his dentals bared. The rest of the mechs joined in, Hound, Trailbreaker, even Prowl. They lifted their faces to the sky and howled, their optics closed and their arms outstretched, Prowl fanning out his doorwings, as their voices carried all the way across the field and beyond. Sideswipe stared up at them in amazement.

It was different than just before they had attacked the caravan. That had been roaring, aggressive. This ...this sounded like a call.

The howl was long, and the ending almost mournful. When they stopped, the wildlands rang with their echo.

“...The frell was that!? You sound like a bunch of cyber-wolves!”
That's what Sideswipe wanted to say, but he got as far as "The frell--" before Prowl grunted and held a hand at him. 'Quiet.' He immediately shut his mouth and watched.

Jazz had stepped forward, and the rest of the mechs' attention was on him. He cocked his head to the side, listening, taking in their echo, and the hum of crystals as they resumed their song. Sideswipe heard what had become the normal to him, a melody of the wildlands. What was he listening for? A response?

The black-and-white mech waited several breems, then turned his face down and shook his head.

"Hound?" Prowl asked, turning to the green mech next.

Hound walked a couple of steps further into the field, and then took a knee to scoop up some of the metal shearnings of dirt nearby. He lifted his palm straight up to his olfactory sensors, sniffed it, then lifted his face up, his nose working at the air, as if he were not a mech, but some other wildland creature, his head turning back and forth as he considered where the wind was blowing too.

Sideswipe started to believe his own joke about his sire being a Minotoron. But before he could think about it further, Hound sprang up, and gestured with his hand towards the north.

Prowl asked him a question. 'There?'

The other barbarian nodded sharply. "Sa."

Sideswipe stared at them in disbelief as he climbed back to his feet. That was amazing. Hound could find his own tribe by their scent. His awe was suddenly overlaid by a terrifying thought. This was where the rest of the Autobot tribe had previously been camped, and if they hadn't moved, then Sideswipe would be within them, likely under the guard of a lot more than four mechs. In less than a few more orns, this would be a certainty, and he would be trapped within the camp of an entire tribe.

Time was running out for him to make his escape.

At Prowl's command, the Autobots about-faced and started back down the hill for the wagon, where the Minotorons had been calmly grazing at the nearest crystal outcropping. Their relief was more than apparent, knowing that their home was not much further away, though the mercenary wasn't sure that an entire tribe packing up and leaving was normal. Sideswipe kept his optics on his footing as he and Prowl descended the hill, his face grimaced and his thoughts far away from their little group.

There was still a chance that he could be rescued even after their group reunited with the rest of the Autobots, but then Sunstreaker would be facing a whole tribe, instead of four mechs and a wagon. What hope did he have in being rescued by his twin then? And even after that, they would need to get back to Kaon, somehow outpacing and outmaneuvering mechs who were used to the terrain. Sideswipe had only recently become strong enough to travel great distances on foot like they could. Sunstreaker couldn't.

He had to escape on his own, and soon.

But how, and where would he go? His only idea of his location was that he was somewhere north of Kaon; the Autobots had moved consistently north or north-east since they'd taken the blindfold off of him. But they could have walked far in any direction before changing their heading.
A part of his processor said 'Duh, you have a map.' And the other half whacked it upside its imaginary helm for the suggestion. He wanted nothing to do with the map, and besides, Hound would likely strangle him if he caught him messing with it. He'd only just gotten back into the mech's good graces.

They could keep the fragging map. It wasn't like he was going to get his credits now anyway. He didn't want it. He just wanted to go home.

His biggest problem was that he was persistently kept tied up. He could run with his hands bound with some difficulty, but it was more concerning that he was usually leashed to something else, like the wagon, or a stake in the ground, or Prowl.

Prowl...

A plan started to form in his mind. The mech favored him in some way, though he didn't understand what yet, or why. He'd been gentle with him whenever possible, despite him being a prisoner, but for all Sideswipe knew the barbarian would turn around and act, well, *barbaric* the moment they were back in the Autobot's main camp. He might shove him into a tent, tie him to a pole and frag his captive until he was sore.

...That should have sounded terrifying, slaggit, not a wickedly fun idea.

He knew that it wouldn't happen. Prowl wouldn't do that to him. He was careful with him, refusing to take advantage of Sideswipe being his prisoner. And for that, he felt guilty for the idea he'd come up with.

They were approaching the wagon, and Prowl was fingering the end of the tether, looking for where to leash Sideswipe.

“Prowl?”

The white mech stopped, and turned to him.

Sideswipe did his best to control his pump-rate, and mimic a shaken appearance as he approached the barbarian, his head down submissively and his bound wrists held close to his belly. He slowed his pace, briefly flicking his optics up to Prowl's and then back down, until he was pressed up to his front.

“Sideswipe?” White arms encircled him immediately, thinking he was in need of comfort again. The red mech forced a shudder to wrack through his frame, then stepped even closer, wrapping himself close to the other mech, his cheek on his shoulder. His fingertips reached out and traced Prowl's abdomen.

Sideswipe felt Prowl stiffen under his touch, and guessed that if he'd taken a lover before, it hadn't been a good one. He purposely blew a gust of air from his vents across Prowl's neck as he sighed in an exaggerated contentment.

“Cmon, Prowl,” he whispered, pretending that his voice was nervous, which wasn't that untruthful. “I know that you want me. Hand-feeding me, sleeping on the same mat? It's not just to keep a close watch on me.”

“Sideswipe?” Prowl asked again, his voice wavering.

“I don't want to be tied to the wagon. I want to be by your side.”
He dragged his fingertips to one of the mech's seams. Prowl flinched, hissing slightly, but did not move away from his touch. Glancing at his faceplates once to see his reaction, Sideswipe persisted, lightly grazing up and down the seam.

“Let me stay with you. Don't tie me to something else. Just hold the tether. I'll walk with you.”

Prowl's ventilations were picking up. The red mech purposely matched them with his own, his vents blowing warm air over the Autobot. The white mech's engine flared up briefly.

Primus, this had better work, or he really was going to get fragged hard in the barbarian's tent.

“Please? Don't tie me to anything. Sa?”

He didn't dare press too far. The other three Autobots were still milling around, waiting for Prowl's order to continue. If he touched him too much, or did anything that he'd learned that would get another mech's pistons instantly charged, one of them would likely step in and separate them. For now, it looked like nothing worse than Prowl cuddling a shaken mech.

Sideswipe lifted his bound hands away from Prowl's seams. The mech groaned a bit, not wanting the touches to end, and Sideswipe stared at his optics imploringly as he grasped the hand holding the tether, and pressed on his fingers, making sure that he was gripping it tighter.

He tried the phrase that Prowl had used with him.

“Trust me.”

At last, Prowl understood. He stared at Sideswipe, clearly suspicious...and muddled by the sudden affections of the normally aggressive and independent mech. He cleared his vocalizer, then held up the tether, showing Sideswipe that he had no intention of leashing him to the wagon.

“Sa.”

Perfect.

Sideswipe smiled, and as he pushed himself to stand up straight, he purposely dragged his fingers over Prowl's bumper, drawing a surprised purr from his engine.

“Thanks.”

“Prowl?”

They both looked up towards Jazz, who was giving their leader a questioning, vaguely suspicious stare. Prowl gripped the tether a little tighter, then called out an order. Jazz's blue visor stayed on them, watching them, but then he shrugged and turned back to the wagon as the Minotorons pulled it forward once more.

They started forward together, still at the rear of the wagon, but this time Sideswipe was free to walk around beside Prowl, and he kept up the act, staying at his shoulder, their arms brushing together every so often. The tether was passed between the white mech's hands, and his free one briefly stroked at Sideswipe's back. The red mech stretched to it, reveling in the touch more than was necessary, manufacturing a delighted smile for Prowl, who took that as permission to keep stroking him as they walked.

The truth was, he did like the mech's gentle touch. It was his own spark that felt slimy.
It was several more joors by the time it was too dark for them to continue. Hound pointed out a flat patch of ground on top of a hill, and the wagon was stopped there.

The nightly routine started at once. Trailbreaker bent down and chocked the wheels, then pulled out some kindle and found a good place to light a fire. Hound and Jazz gathered up some crystals and make sure that the Minotorons were feeding properly. Prowl walked the perimeter, doing a final check to make sure that the small group would have no surprises sneaking up on them. But this night, instead of bound at the rear of the wagon and waiting for someone to take him to the fire, Sideswipe walked along beside Prowl, pretending to take an interest in what the barbarian was doing.

The sky had clouded over just before the sun had set, blocking out the starlight. The wildlands would be cloaked in darkness, which worked perfectly for him. Sideswipe believed in making his own luck, but a little bit of help never hurt anyone. Primus knew he would need all the help he could get.

His spark twisted around in it's chamber, uncertain with his plan.

Their circle complete, Prowl started to head back to the campfire, as the rest of the mechs were doing. Sideswipe's bound hands gripped his fingers into his palms, and he stopped walking, the tether quickly losing it's slack.

“...Prowl?” he asked timidly.

The mech paused. “Sa?”

He was going to hear his pump slamming into his chestplate, and he was terrified that Prowl would hear it and it would give him away.

Still doing his best to play the cowed prisoner, Sideswipe meekly stepped forward to him, just as close as before. He let his mouth hang open slightly, his fingers running along Prowl's bumper, and lightly held the edge.

“Prowl,” he whispered, “I'm sorry.”

The white mech cocked his head to the side. Sideswipe had said this phrase in Standard before, and he knew Prowl had some inkling to it's meaning.

The mercenary took a sharp intake of air. Then slammed his forehead into Prowl's as hard as he could.

The mech hadn't been expecting an attack at all, and didn't even cry out as he stumbled back. Sideswipe immediately followed up with a kick, slamming his foot down just shy of the middle of the Autobot's belly. This time he did let out a yowl as he fell on his back and one of his doorwings was wrenched underneath him. The tether dropped from his hand.

“Sideswipe?!”

The mercenary snapped his head up. Jazz, Hound and Trailbreaker were staring at him, their blue optics wide.

Guilt at their horrified looks surged through him, making him feel like he would purge, and he
frantically shoved the sensation down.

He could run, he needed to run, he needed to run now--

He took a step back from them.

Then another.

Then he turned, and fled down the hill.

“Sideswipe!!”

All three mechs had abandoned their meal and were scrambling after him. Or rather, first they were running to Prowl, making sure he was alright, and then they were tearing down the hill, shouting swears and his name over and over.

Sideswipe did his best to block out their terrified voices as he ran for his life.
Chapter 8: Monster

With his hands still bound in front of him, all it would take would be one stumble or trip and he'd be done for. But Sideswipe didn't think about that. He focused everything within him on running, his optics trying and failing to make sense of things in the dark, hoping that his pursuers were having just as much trouble as he was.

From how they were gaining on him, he assumed that they weren't.

He dodged and weaved his way through the crystal outcroppings, some of them not appearing before him until he was almost on top of them, and he thanked his larger frame for being able to vault over some of the downed stems, while he knew that the Autobots would have to find a way around instead. He stayed towards the bottoms of the hills, not wanting to wear himself out by tearing up to a hilltop, exposing him to the barbarians and slowing him down.

Prowl's voice added to his pursuit, and his intakes gulped down air as he forced himself to sprint even faster.

He'd been right before. He was stronger and faster. But he was only on par with the Autobots, and the wildlands were their home. He had no idea where he was going, especially in the dark, and he had no doubts that one of them would take advantage of a shortcut that he would never find.

He needed to hide.

Sideswipe zig-zagged through several more outcroppings, the crystals humming louder as he drew near, and once he was away, they hummed again as more mechs passed them. He knew that Jazz was in the lead, the smaller and nimble mech scrambling after their prisoner as fast as he could. Next was Hound, then Trailbreaker, his armor weighing him down. Bringing up the rear was Prowl, whose shouts were the loudest.

He truly felt bad for tricking him. But he had to get home. He had to get home NOW.

His foot came down and found nothing but air, and he held back a yelp as he tumbled into a ditch, his bound hands barely catching him in time. He knew immediately that it would take too long to climb back out. Instead, he ducked down and followed the ditch perpendicular to his original heading, his footsteps slowing and making as little noise as possible.

Sideswipe stopped completely when he heard the voices directly overhead.

“Sideswipe!”

He crouched down, pressing his shoulder to the nearest side of the ditch. He could hear Jazz's feet pounding on the ground, saw little bits of the ledge above breaking off and tumbling into his hiding place as the mech ran by.

“Sideswipe!!”

They didn't sound angry. No, scratch that. They were angry. But before that, they were panicked,
fearful for the city-mech trying to run through an unfamiliar place in the dark. Sideswipe's blue optics flickered up to the ledge, realizing that one of the mechs had stopped right above him, and he shut off his intake and cut his engine, his systems immediately heating up without his frame working properly, but he could not afford to make any sound. All the mech needed to do was look down, and that would be the end of the chase.

The mech paused, his head swinging back and forth as he tried to determine where the mercenary had gone. Another mech jogged up to him, and gasped out a question. The first mech snapped out instructions, gesturing with his hand towards the top of a hill nearby.

Prowl.

The second mech, Trailbreaker, leapt over the ditch, a feat for a mech of his armor class, and scrambled up the nearest hill, trying to get a visual of the surrounding area in the dark. Prowl stayed where he was, his blue optics nearly pale against the dark wildlands around them, his fans kicked on and his intakes panting.

“Sideswipe...”

Sideswipe bit down on his bottom lip, hard enough that he could taste energon in his mouth. His servos ached from the uncomfortable position, and he forced himself not to tremble. The rattling would give him away instantly.

He was certain now that he would be caught. Primus, what would they do to him? What would Prowl do to him? He'd betrayed what little trust the mech had in him...

But the Autobot leader moved on a breem later, following Jazz's path, calling out to the leaner mech, who replied with a negatory. They kept shouting for him, moving away, bearing south with the guess as to where he would go.

Sideswipe waited until he was sure that they had moved far away, and when his HUD sent red warning across his vision that his engine was too hot, he finally wheezed as he opened up his intakes, rasping cooler air through his vents. He was ventilating far too loud; they could come back at any second and hear him. But the short run on his already weary legs had worn him out, and he needed to catch his breath before he tried to move on.

Okay.

Now what?

He sunk down to his aft and rested his hands on his knees, his mouth open as he panted and tried to get his ventilations back under control.

He had to go south. It wasn't much of a plan, but that was the only certain direction he knew he should move towards. If he was lucky, maybe rescue was moving north to find him, and he'd run into them halfway.

...More than likely, something would gobble him up before he figured out where Kaon was. Or he'd run into more barbarians, who would be more than happy to pick up a lost and bound city-mech.

He also had to get the restraints off of his wrists. That was his first priority after putting distance between him and the Autobots searching for him. Some of the crystals outcroppings were sharp. If he could find a decent patch, he might be able to cut himself free, and run even faster when using his arms to pump his sprint.
Sideswipe was sure now that there was no one around; the sounds of the wildlands were no different than they had been on any other night, if a little quieter after the nocturnal creatures had been scared off by all the yelling. Taking a deep gulp of the cool air, he continued following the ditch, keeping his head down and roll-stepping to keep his noises to a minimum. Just because he thought all was quiet, that didn't mean that the barbarian's keen senses wouldn't pick him up. Jazz, a musical mech by spark, had shown to have supernatural-level audial sensors. And Hound--

He froze.

Oh.

SLAG.

Forgetting about being quiet, he scrambled forward, his feet crashing through the broken crystals that had fallen into the ditch over the vorns. He thought he heard raised voices, but he didn't care now. They were too far away to matter.

Stupid. He had sat still for too long, and let his scent permeate. Fraggit all...

The ground slopped up at a steep angle at the end of the ditch. Sideswipe threw himself at the edge, his bound hands digging at the ground, his legs working furiously to kick himself up and over. Eventually he did, and stood up, assessing the small clearing he'd found himself in, and started running again, intent on sprinting across it to the next hill.

Something whispered through the air.

When he heard it, Sideswipe tried to burst forward, but the lasso caught him around the chest. His momentum flung his legs out from under him, and he came down hard on his side with a pained grunt and a squeal from one of his damaged servos. Immediately he flung up his hands, trying to yank the rope off of him, but the other end was pulled and it tightened considerably around his chestplate and arms, trapping him and forcing his hands back down.

“Sideswipe.”

The mercenary let out a pained groan, and lifted his head to narrow his optics at the Autobot standing in what should have been plain sight, if he hadn't been in such a panic to escape. He straightened his back as he faced him. “Hello, Hound.”

Now that he'd caught him, the green mech looked relieved, if not more than a little agitated. He asked Sideswipe a question, his tone short, one of his hands lifting and waggling a finger at him, as if he were a sparkling caught with an energon goodie before refuel time.

“I was trying to get home,” Sideswipe answered in the same tone, grimacing and wriggling against the lasso, Hound wisely keeping a tight grip on his end as he approached the downed mech. “I'm sorry I hurt Prowl. But I need to go home! My twin is going to be out of his cortex looking for me!”

The lasso slackened, then the rope whispered through the air again, Hound throwing another loop around Sideswipe's arms to keep him from breaking free. Clearly he'd practiced this move, probably with Minotorons. Sideswipe struggled harder, his spark fluttering in panic and rage.

“How would you feel if someone dragged you away from the Autobots?! You'd fight to go home, right?! Hound, my brother is back in Kaon! I need to find him! I need to tell him that I'm safe, that you all haven't killed me! Or would you be fine in him believing that I'm dead?!”

Hound grunted as he pulled the lasso tight, making the mercenary wince and stop moving,
knowing that he would only achieve scraping up his paint. The green mech ignored his pleas, not understanding them anyway, and stepped forward to Sideswipe, bending over to grab him and haul him back to camp.

He stopped, and he snapped right back up, his blue optics wide. When Sideswipe tried to wriggle, alarmed by the sudden change in his stance, he gestured an open palm at him, as Prowl had done earlier that orn. 'Quiet.'

Sideswipe wisely shut off his vocalizer, alert for what could have spooked Hound so badly. As he sat on the ground, he turned up the grade of his audial sensors, listening hard for what the barbarian mech had noticed.

...Voices.

Jazz? Trailbreaker?

Prowl?

No.

Voices he didn't recognize.

He gasped, jerking his head up. “That's...!”

The voices were speaking a language he could understand.

Cybertronian Standard.

He didn't process who it was, or how they had found him. Before Hound could stop him, Sideswipe took in a sharp intake, and then screamed as loud as he could at the sky.

“HEEEELP!!”

The Autobot let out his own terrified yelp, then dove at the red mech. They both went down hard, grunting, Hound forcing his palm over Sideswipe's mouth, muffling his shouts. Sideswipe fought him with all his might, his legs pedaling frantically at the air, the cables straining against his arms as he squirmed underneath the green mech's weight. His head shook back and forth, trying hard to dislodge the hand from his mouth.

The voices' tones had changed. They must have heard him. But in the dark, they could wander in any direction trying to find him.

Hound was desperately trying to shush him, hissing and keeping his fingers clamped down over his mouth. Sideswipe bucked and kicked, bound hands scrabbling against Hound's armor, trying to tear off something vital that would make him roll off long enough for him to get the attention of his rescuers. He managed to get his dentals around a finger and bit down hard.

The barbarian swore, and then the hand left Sideswipe's mouth briefly as he tore off a piece of his poncho with a hissed riiip. The red mech immediately took advantage of this and screamed again.

“HEEE—grrph!!”

The piece of cloth tasted horrible, and he tried to push it out with his glossa, but Hound jammed it into his mouth anyway, then covered it with his hand again. It had more success in gagging Sideswipe and stopping him from biting, but though the sounds he could make were reduced to
whines and groans, he didn't stop fighting, his engine revving and his feet pounding on the ground, trying to make as much noise as possible. Rescue was nearby, and he refused to stop until they had found him.

That was, until an unworldly screech assaulted his audial sensors, the sound rattling him all the way down to his frame.

Both mechs froze, two sets of wide blue optics staring at each other. Sideswipe felt his tanks do a flip when all of the voices changed from talking in Standard to roaring drawn-out screams at one another. His pump skipped, and his spark huddled down at the bottom of its casing.

...No way in the Pit were those mechs from Kaon.

His processor quietly reminded him that something had made an entire tribe camp pack up and leave.

Hound hushed him again, his hand gripping his mouth painfully. This time Sideswipe obeyed with a slight nod of his head, his body frozen against the ground.

“Starscream,” Hound whispered, his vocalizer shaking.

Starscream? What in the Pit was a Starscream?

Whatever it was, Sideswipe's cries had drawn it to them and it was headed their way, smashing right through one of the crystal outcroppings, the sound of thousands of tiny pieces bouncing across the ground echoing through the night, the creature bounding across the hills.

The Autobot muttered something that Sideswipe assumed was a swear before grabbing the red mech and hauling him back to the ditch. The mercenary scrambled along, preferring his chances with the barbarian than with Whatever The Frell Was Coming, not even thinking to spit out the cloth in his rush to move. They tumbled into the ditch together, and Hound dragged him some distance away from the exit to the clearing before stopping and pressing him to lie down in the lowest part of the trench. As Sideswipe did, the green mech crawled on top of him, squishing him and holding him tightly to the ground, his hand clamping around his mouth again and ignoring his short noise of protest. His free hand yanked the hood of his poncho up, and then he lay on the mercenary's back and went still.

It dawned on Sideswipe that the poncho was covering up his red chestplate as well as Hound's upper body, hiding the most obvious colors to be spotted in the dark wildlands.

Something, several somethings, pounded into the clearing where they'd just been. Over his shoulder, he could see Hound gritting his dentals as he tried to lay perfectly still. More crystals were smashed, and a high-pitched voice shrieked in frustration. They both flinched at the sound of claws grinding over the rocks.

This had to be one of his nightmares again.

This couldn't be real.

Sideswipe squeezed his optics shut and bowed his head forward against the ground. Hound seemed to agree with him, his frame curling up over his back, willing them to be unseen.

“Where are you...?”

It was all he could do to not whimper.
Why was a wildland monster talking in *Standard*?!

Heavy feet moved towards the ditch. Hound twiched once, then stilled. His weight was painfully cutting off one of Sideswipe's sensor nodes in his leg, but the mercenary didn't dare try to move.

The feet were right at the ditch. A shadow had fallen over the duo.

Starscream was looking for them.

Starscream was looking right at them.

Primus, he never gave Sunstreaker a proper goodbye, he realized. Just a hug, and a promise to leave a note. He felt his vocalizer making a frightened noise behind the gag, and Hound's fingers dug into his cheeks, begging him to be silent.

Starscream stood there for far, far too long.

“...Wasting my precious time...”

The feet moved.

The shadow slipped away from them.

...All was quiet again.

Hound refused to budge, even after Starscream was long gone. Sideswipe didn't blame him.

They lay there, listening to the sounds of the wildlands that were oddly slow in returning. The nearest crystals had been smashed to pieces, their song ending, and any small creatures that took cover within the outcroppings had fled. The air was deathly quiet, save for both of their vents, which were suddenly too loud with monsters such as Starscream wandering around nearby.

Sideswipe turned his head slightly to look at Hound. The green mech was sorely frightened, but his nose kept twitching, sniffing at the air. He could only guess at what the Autobot was smelling, but since they hadn't moved, it couldn't be anything good.

It had to have been at least half a joor by the time the green mech reached for his poncho, and slowly tore off another piece, longer than the other. He lifted the hand from Sideswipe's mouth, but before the mercenary could spit out the wad, Hound had tied the second piece over his lips, keeping the cloth wad stuck behind his dentals, the long piece tied off behind his head.

Sideswipe shook his head once with a grunt, trying to dislodge it. It didn't budge. Not that he was going to try screaming again with that thing walking around anyway.

Hound suddenly bent forward, pressing Sideswipe's head into the ground, both of them ducking down again. Something else was coming. In a few breems, though, the Autobot lifted his face, and turned it towards other footsteps that were walking along the side of the ditch.

“Trailbreaker?”

The feet stopped, and so did Sideswipe's spark, thinking that Hound had made a grave error. But in seconds the footsteps quickly grew nearer, and the black mech lowered himself down into the trench.

“Hound?”
“Sa.” Keeping his voice down to a whisper, he sat up, and pulled Sideswipe to his knees, showing him to Trailbreaker. The other Autobot frowned at him, especially when Sideswipe glared back, but his main concern was at something beyond them, back at the clearing.

He whispered to Hound, the sentence ending with 'Starscream.' Hound nodded in agreement to whatever he’d said, and Sideswipe suddenly found himself pinned between the two mechs, his arms grasped as he was hauled up to his feet. The gag barely let him do more than mumble angrily at them, but this time he wisely kept his silence, allowing himself to be half-marched, half-dragged back to the Autobot camp, all three looking over their shoulders every so often.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Prowl was furious.

Sideswipe glanced up once at him, then returned his gaze to his bound wrists in his lap, ignoring the report that Hound was giving to his leader. As soon as he was marched up to the wagon, he was forced down onto his knees and kept still as Hound bound his ankles, hobbling him and stopping him from trying to run away again. Since then he’d knelt there, unable to move, waiting as first Jazz and then Prowl meandered back into camp, both of them exclaiming Sideswipe's name as soon as they saw him, but only Jazz had knelt down in front of him to make sure that he was unharmed.

Prowl had stormed past him, not bothering to look at the red mech as he spoke with each of the Autobots, making sure that they were alright and take report from them. Hound's was the longest, his hand staying on Sideswipe, and he heard 'Starscream' mentioned half a dozen times. The other Autobots mumbled in alarmed tones.

Sideswipe chanced looking up at Prowl again, and his shoulders wilted at the stare directed at him. Prowl's arms were crossed over his bumper, his fingers digging into his forearms, his doorwings held high and twitching every so often. Dark lines creased his faceplates, and his engine briefly snarled as he and Sideswipe locked optics.

The red mech hadn't done much physical harm to him. A dent to his helm, and the self-repair units could easily fix any damage to his abdomen by the next morning. Yet the Autobot's optics still looked pained, and he could see that he was fighting to not give into a building rage.

Sideswipe had asked for his trust, and then attacked him.

The mercenary squeezed his fingers into fists, and stared back at him with narrowed optics, raising his chin defiantly, growling at him through the cloth over his mouth.

He wasn't sorry for trying to get home. Prowl knew he didn't want to be here; there was no question that he'd been fighting all this time to escape the Autobots. If he didn't think that Sideswipe would try to escape as soon as he could, that was his own error in judgment. He was Sideswipe. When had he ever surrendered to anything, or anyone?

But his spark ached, and not just because he missed Sunstreaker.

The Autobots hadn't mistreated their prisoner. He hesitated to call them friends, but he could no longer call them enemies either.

Prowl....Prowl had done even more. He'd held him after his nightmares. He'd defended him against Hound's outburst. He'd saved him from whatever reason the Autobots had wanted to harm him when they'd found the map. He'd cradled him, touched him, laid with him at night, and he swore
that if they'd met in another life he'd have done so much more--

And then Sideswipe had betrayed him and placed the rest of them in danger.

Prowl deserved to hate him, and Sideswipe _should_ have hated his captor in return. He was shocked to find that he couldn't.

He startled and whipped his head around when Jazz put a hand on his other shoulder. The smaller mech asked Prowl a question, to which the barbarian shuttered his optics and bowed his head as he thought. Hound and Trailbreaker were silent, the later crossing his arms as well.

They were determining what to do with him.

There was nothing he could do but stare at Prowl, trying to judge what the other mech was thinking. He couldn't plead with him, and never would, even if he could speak his language, even if he hadn't been gagged. He would not ask to be forgiven for trying to get back home to his brother.

But if he could...he would have asked to be forgiven for betraying his trust. His guilt for that was twisting at his spark.

A far-off screech shook them all back to reality. Prowl's optics snapped back online and watched the horizon behind them, all of the Autobots turning, expecting Starscream to come over the nearest hill at any moment.

Sideswipe looked around, then grunted as he tested the cables around his wrists and ankles. Unless he was untied, he had no chance of defending himself against a creature like that.

Prowl must have thought the same.

He yelped through his gag as hands snatched his upper arms and dragged him up. Instructions were barked at Jazz, who hurriedly grabbed his legs as well. Together, they hauled the mercenary up, and shoved him into the wagon, his body twisting as he tried to find some way to sit in the cramped space between two of the energon containers. He tried to shout, protesting the rough treatment, and raised his bound wrists towards Prowl, shaking them when the Autobot only glanced briefly at him and turned away. His feet kicked at the wagon until the white mech looked again, and he repeated the gesture.

'Untie me!'

He would be completely helpless like this. If he had at least a weapon in his hands--

Prowl's fist smacked the side of the wagon, rattling it. Sideswipe instantly stopped, his optics bulging.

Jazz's voice was dismayed, and he grabbed their leader's shoulder and babbled something at him, pointing at Sideswipe, but Prowl snarled and brushed him off. Hound and Trailbreaker wisely kept out of his path as he made his way to the side closest to Sideswipe's head, climbed up, and leaned over to speak directly in his face.

"Na yoska."

...That felt worse on his spark than any lecture he could have been given for the danger he'd placed the Autobots in. Horrified optics stared at Prowl's, only receiving a glare in return before the doorwinged mech hopped to the ground.
Hound and Trailbreaker were thunderstruck. Jazz was angry. He grabbed Prowl's arm, snatching him and turning him around, and hissed fiercely at him, his normal good humor vanishing. Prowl snapped back at him, and the two of them bickered, Prowl's doorwings thrust out aggressively, but Jazz refused to be intimidated by his superior. It was a worried call by Hound that stopped them, the green mech's optics watching the horizon fearfully, still looking for Starscream.

Prowl was immediately giving the rest of the Autobots instructions and pulling away from Jazz. Hound ran to his place at the front. The Minotorons grunted, and the wagon pulled forward, the barbarians forming up around it, Trailbreaker breaking away long enough to kick out the campfire before returning to his post.

The Autobots had never moved at night before.

Sideswipe groaned and pulled at his restraints helplessly. Whatever happened next, he could do little but observe from the wagon. Words were snapped at him, and he looked to the side to see Prowl glowering at him from where he was taking the rear guard, his staff out and ready in one hand. Sideswipe glared back, but then dropped his optics, guilt churning the energon in his tanks.

Prowl didn't trust him anymore. They were being hunted by some monstrous creature of the wildlands.

...It was his fault.

He bowed his head forward, and willed for Sunstreaker to hurry up and find him.

Chapter End Notes

Need more? Have you checked out 'Sidequests' yet? The first chapter is up now.
Chapter Notes

My mom is coming to visit this weekend, and I likely won't be able to write or update until Monday.

So have a new chapter right now. :)

Chapter 9: Skirmish

He'd finally gotten his wish to sit in the wagon. He hated it.

The Autobots had pressed on for several joors through the night, moving as fast as they could and putting as much distance between them and Starscream as possible. They'd barely had time to make camp beforehand, and Sideswipe knew that they hadn't gotten a chance to refuel, and would already be tired from walking for an entire orn. The darkness made it difficult to maneuver the wagon, and the Minotorons were just as peeved about moving after dark as they were.

Sideswipe stared at his bound hands, knowing he could do nothing to help.

Maybe if he hadn't tried to run, Prowl would have untied him and given him his sword back, letting another warrior, another yoska help to protect the wagon. But he'd tricked him, made him believe that he was starting to form a bond with his captors. A bond with Prowl.

He affirmed to himself that he would never allow himself to be bonded to a barbarian, be it in friendship or spark. Frag them all.

It wasn't his fault that they'd decided to drag him away from the caravan. It wasn't his fault that they'd been dumb enough to sympathize with their prisoner.

...He didn't have an excuse for sympathizing with them too.

Sideswipe bowed his head miserably and whined into his gag.

"Shhh."

He snapped his head back up and glared acidly at Prowl, who gave him the same look in return. All of the Autobots had their weapons on hand, expecting an attack at any second, and the white mech's staff was clutched tightly in one hand. Prowl's other hand gestured a forceful open palm at Sideswipe. 'Quiet.'

Sideswipe growled as loud as his gag would allow, and kicked the side of wagon, startling Jazz, who was the closest.

Frag Prowl! Frag the rest of the Autobots! He did not want to be here, dragged off for Primus-Knows-Why! Frag the wildlands! And especially--

He looked around, then lifted his bound feet towards the tube holding the map.
A black hand snatched it up before he could kick it and crush it. Jazz snapped something at him, dismayed, and put it where it would be out of his kicking range. Sideswipe huffed at him, then sank back down, rebelliously tugging at the cables around his wrists and ankles one more time along the way and whining into his gag again.

Frag *everything*.

Hound suddenly called out, and stopped the Minotorons, the wagon rattling to a halt right after it. The rest of the Autobots halted as well, forming up close to the wagon. Sideswipe lifted his head towards where they were looking.

They were all staring at something directly in front of them. They were silent, and when he listened, he could hear the screeching again. His pump thudded against his chestplate.

Somehow, Starscream had gotten in front of them.

More voices. Sideswipe's battle programing came online, and his audials conducted their own sweep of the area as his head moved back and forth. Their conclusion appeared on his HUD.

They were surrounded.

Well, *scrap*.

Hound babbled something. A question. *What do we do?*

Heavy feet stalked to the front. Sideswipe turned his head, staring at Prowl's advance to Hound's position, as did the rest of the Autobots. The white mech stayed focused on the horizon, on Starscream's vocalizations, his doorwings held high and alert. White hands gripped the staff in his fingers, squeezing it as he pondered their quickly-dwindling choices. All the while, the voices were growing closer.

Sideswipe wiggled to take another look around. What choices did they have? Run, and abandon the wagon? Abandon their prisoner, who would only slow them down as much as the Minotorons? That was be just his luck. A fitting end to a miserable journey.

...It had been nice to get out of the city, though. At least he wouldn't be dying in some drainage sewer. He took some comfort in that Sunstreaker would never have to find his body.

Prowl turned suddenly, his optics narrowed tightly, and gritted his dentals as he pounded the staff on the ground three times and barked something at them. The rest of the mechs stiffened, then muttered 'Sa' in return, their hands gripping their weapons tighter. If he hadn't been bound and helpless, Sideswipe would have jumped straight up.

The Autobots were going to make a stand.

Prowl pointed at the red mercenary and spoke quickly. Jazz was at his side again, grasping him under his arms, and Sideswipe grunted as he pressed his feet into the bottom of the wagon, helping him to lift him out, Trailbreaker catching his legs as he slipped over the side rail. He held out his wrists, expecting to be cut free so that he could help them, but instead was pushed down.

The world became far darker as he was shoved underneath the wagon.

He groaned, appalled that he would not be allowed to fight, and tried to wiggle out, but hands pushed him back under again, enforcing that he needed to stay down and out of sight. He glared up at a blue visor, unsure if it had been Trailbreaker or Jazz, but the mech vanished, focused on other
preparations now that their captive was safe, such as chocking the wheels and making sure that the Minotorons wouldn't panic. He whined again, and slammed his fist on the ground in frustration.

Then Prowl was there, kneeling and looking right at him.

The two mechs stared at each other. The pained anger in Prowl's optics from before was completely gone, but it had taken with it the confidence of someone about to lead a defensive battle. He allowed himself to be exposed before the red mech, the fear and worry clear on his faceplates. Sideswipe wasn't sure if it was for the Autobots, for the bound mech hiding under the wagon, or for himself.

He spoke softly to him, the ire from early that night absent. Sideswipe's optics grew wider, at once understanding the meaning behind his sullen and apologetic tone.

'Goodbye.'

He heard insane, shrieking laughter, and couldn't tell if it was from Starscream or a ghost from his nightmares.

Sideswipe shook his head. No. If Prowl showed his fear, if he let it be known that he thought that they would lose, then the effect would ripple through the Autobots, and destroy any confidence they had in defeating the enemy.

He growled, hit his fist on the ground, then pointed out at the feet of the other Autobots.

'Lead!' he demanded with his optics.

He wasn't sure if the message had gotten through at first, and repeated it, but then Prowl's own optics grew harder again, confident, and solid. He nodded at Sideswipe once, then reached over and padded his arm with a single word.

'Stay.'

The mercenary glowered at him as the white mech disappeared. Like he had a choice.

A second later, something was pressed against his hip, and he rolled over to see it. His pack, and his sword, probably so that Starscream didn't see them and realize that the city-mech was hiding nearby. Then something else was rolled under the wagon, and Prowl purposely shoved it into his bound hands. Sideswipe fumbled it, then groaned when he realized what it was.

Why couldn't they let Starscream at the rest of those creatures have the map?! Why couldn't they just throw it out into the wildlands, and pretend that they had never seen it?!

But Prowl considered it important. As important, he realized, as Sideswipe's life.

The screeching was coming mostly from one direction now. The Autobots had formed a line in front of the wagon on that side. Prowl was hissing something that sounded like instructions. The red mercenary could hear weapons being shifted and held at the ready, the barbarian mechs' feet digging into the ground as they prepared to hold against the enemy.

Sideswipe was a fighter at spark, and longed to join them. But now, when he was needed the most, when his friends were facing off against Literal Pit-Spawn, there was nothing he could do but hide. It pained him, all the way down to the core of his spark, even moreso as it dawned on him that the Autobots, especially Prowl, valued his life over their own. Was he not a yoska now, and the same as them now?!! Should he not be fighting for them as well?!!
His own thoughts shocked him. He hadn't felt a camaraderie with anyone else like that since, well...since he had been sparked with his twin.

The screeching finally stopped echoing, and he could hear the enemy surging over the nearest hill.

“AAA-WOOO!!”

They were met by a howl from the Autobots, the same frame-rattling one that Sideswipe had heard back at the caravan that still made him shudder even now, one that called their opponents to either run or fight. Another scream from the creature made their intentions for the later clear.

Sideswipe whined and curled his body over the map.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

During a fight, time had a habit of no longer be a linear, flowing thing for Sideswipe. He could recall bullets flying at him in slow-motion, his processor whirling and giving him plenty of time to decide where to go, his body obeying sluggishly compared to the speed of his cortex. Another situation had him throwing punch after punch, enraged, not concerned with anything but getting in as many hits as possible, and before he knew it there would be half a dozen mechs passed out on the floor, and there were a lot less mechs in the bar than when he started, and the bartender was hurrying him to leave before law enforcement came. He recalled thinking that he'd knocked out an assassin for good, only for his legs to be snatched as he turned back to guard Sentinel Prime, a ghost from only a few breems ago now grabbing him and trying to stab him, and then Sunstreaker rushing in to finish what he started.

He could not think of another fight being as long as the one in front of the wagon, even though his chronometer would later tell him that it was no longer than a joor.

From his position, Sideswipe could only see feet and the bottom parts of legs, but without the explosion of laser fire from blasters and cannons, he could hear everything. The enemy had to also be mechs, thank Primus, because he had enough nightmares to worry about without adding in new bi-legged wildland creatures to the mix. They outnumbered the Autobots, and rushed at them, but the first wave was easily knocked back and scattered, the barbarians dueling their opponents until the enemy retreated to try again as a unit, knowing that no individual mech stood a chance against an Autobot warrior.

It had not been by luck that these four mechs had captured Sideswipe, and now that he was no longer swearing at them for his loss, the mercenary was awed at the practiced skill from what the city-mechs in Kaon had always assumed to be half-witted savages. He heard Prowl's staff whipping back and forth, the Autobot masterfully wielding it despite what should have been a limit by his prominent bumper and doorwings. His feet moved with an ease and a purpose, as if he were the one stalking their enemies, and not the other way around. Something cracked into metal, and Sideswipe heard a cry before a silver mech went down, followed by another as Prowl's feet smoothly changed direction.

Jazz's nimble frame was kept busy and moving around the wagon, his knives striking out here and there, a mech howling in frustration as he was unable to counterattack the black-and-white mech before he danced backwards, back-flipping on his hands and skirting away from danger before turning and backstabbing someone who hadn't been looking for him. Trailbreaker wasn't anywhere near as fast as him, but he and Hound were working in tangent; the mercenary could hear Hound's lasso whisper through the air and snatch up a mech, yanking him forward, and then Trailbreaker's club would smash through armor, crumpling their opponents. Anytime that someone got too close to Hound, one of his knives would flash out, before another Autobot would rush in and deal with
the problem so that the green mech could concentrate on his team-attack with Trailbreaker.

And all Sideswipe could do was press down to the ground and hope that he wouldn't be spotted. His tanks churned, the red mercenary wanting desperately to join in the fight.

The night wore on, and the Autobot's exhaustion began to tell against the overwhelming numbers. Attacks became sloppier and slower. Their opponents were predicting the counterattacks. Ever so often one of them would hiss or swear, energon briefly dripping onto the ground, before they came back in a fury, trying to knock away the monstrous creatures so that they could get a chance to ventilate.

Then, it happened.

Sideswipe could easily identify which feet belonged to Starscream by the high-pitched shrieking that would not let up. He wondered briefly if that was all that he could do, and it was just an intimidation game that he was playing with the Autobots. But suddenly blue-and-white feet rushed at Trailbreaker, timed perfectly for when all of the other Autobots were busy with their own duels. Something heavy impacted the wagon, metal shrieked and tore, and Trailbreaker roared in agony. The wagon's floor shook above Sideswipe's head. The gag muffled his frightened yelp, and wide blue optics stared up at a frame that shouldn't have been moving around like that, the Minotorons on the other side of the wagon bellowing in fear. A canister of energon tumbled out of the wagon, spilled, and for a breem Sideswipe thought that someone had been grievously injured as he saw the energon pooling on the ground, but it was followed by another canister, and then a box of tools and supplies.

Someone was at Trailbreaker's side. Prowl. He shouted, and Jazz and Hound formed up nearby him, the three of them frantically trying to protect the injured mech, not caring what Starscream was throwing out of their wagon.

“...It's not here! Neither it or the mech are here!”

A piece of Sideswipe's cortex tried again to figure out how Starscream knew Cybertronian Standard.

The wagon shook once more, and then Starscream's feet were scampering away. The last of the duels with the Autobots broke off, their enemies screeching and hissing demonically as they left, as if they had won the battle, instead of their victory taken away by no promise of the reward that they were searching for. Hound growled in return, and took a step forward, but a barked word from Prowl stopped him from chasing after the enemy. The held their ground around Trailbreaker, venting heavily, waiting for the last of the mechs to leave them behind.

Many, many feet raced away, some dragging along bodies of mechs that the Autobots had felled. Thankfully, Sideswipe saw the feet and legs of all four Autobots nearby. Or rather, he saw three, and Trailbreaker's back.

The heavily-armored mech's engine was wheezing and gurgling, the noise sickening.

They waited until the last of the feet had disappeared, and the screeching had vanished into the night. Then Prowl murmured something, and their defensive stances broke, Hound rasping “Trailbreaker!” as he turned towards his injured friend.

It was an even longer time before one of them remembered to retrieve Sideswipe. Jazz was suddenly leaning down, his broken optic band finding the mercenary, and his faceplates loosened
in relief when he saw that Sideswipe had been untouched. He grabbed his shoulders, and dragged him out, Sideswipe grimacing as his back and aft scrapped along the ground.

His paintjob must have looked awful by now. Sunstreaker was going to throw a fit when he saw him. But his mind snapped away from his twin and back to the present as soon as he saw Trailbreaker.

Part of the black mech's chestplate had been torn away, energon oozing out of the jagged clawmarks and invading systems that weren't supposed to be covered in free-flowing liquids. Something sparked and shorted out with a puff of smoke, and Trailbreaker winced as fresh pain coursed through his systems. His spark chamber had been missed, thank Primus, but Sideswipe felt his own energon run cold when he saw a tear in the other mech's fuel pump, which was splurting even more of the badly-needed energon out of his lines.

Hound and Prowl were frantically trying to stabilize him. Hound had pulled out a small, needle-like tool, and was trying to close some of the circuitry lines, while Prowl kept a hand over a pump that no mech should have been able to reach that easily, clamping his palm over the tear and attempting to keep any more energon from leaking out.

Sideswipe's spark sank.

He was no medic, and neither was his twin. But the two of them had taken apart enough mechs to know what was vital, and what injuries were grievous. Trailbreaker...

If he wasn't stabilized soon, then he wouldn't make it to the nearest medic, if the Autobot tribe even had one.

Prowl was saying something to Trailbreaker, his voice cold but shaking, trying to give him instructions, but the black mech could only nod back drunkenly. Something about a ratchet?

Primus, did the barbarians even know what to do for Trailbreaker?! They understood well enough that energon was supposed to stay in the frame. But they didn't have anything to patch the torn pump, nothing but cloths and hides, which the fluids would seep right through, and Sideswipe didn't have anything to contribute except--

His head snapped up, his optics wide and glowing.

His pack.

He still had his pack.

The pack was still under the wagon, and he was tied up and couldn't reach it.

Immediately he was squirming around, trying to shout at Jazz through his gag. The smaller mech stared at him, until Sideswipe pointed frantically at the gag, and he nodded in understanding as he reached behind his head and undid the first cloth. Sideswipe spat out the other one that had been stuffed into his mouth, then turned to the Autobots.

“Prowl! There's a first aid kit in my pack!”

Prowl glared in his direction, then held up his free hand. 'Quiet. Not now.'

“I can help him!” Sideswipe leaned forward. “I have Flexi-plex that can seal the wound! Untie me, and I can put it on him!”
Jazz was talking too, and pointing at the red mech, trying to keep Prowl's attention on him. But Prowl shook his head again, and focused on keeping his grip over Trailbreaker's pump.

“Listen to me!” he shouted even louder, his voice desperate. “Untie me, and I can help him!”

“Na, Sideswipe!”

“Prowl, trust me!!”

He'd used the same barbarian phrase again, then instantly realized his mistake. Prowl whipped his head around, his optics tight and narrowed at the red mercenary, the pained look of betrayal returning. Sideswipe ducked his head down and bit his lip.

Prowl had no reason to trust him. He had an overwhelming number of reasons to order Jazz to gag him again and toss him back into the wagon.

“...I'm sorry that I tricked you,” he murmured. “But now, I can help Trailbreaker. I swear it.” He lifted his face again and gathered his determination. “Please, trust me. Please.”

Prowl's optics studied his own, still suspicious, unwilling to be fooled by him again. Not now, not when one of the Autobots was in danger of offlining. Sideswipe tugged at the cables around his hands.

“I swear, I won't try to run. You all just saved my life. I want to help Trailbreaker. Prowl. Please.”

Jazz's voice had joined him. A little of the anger on Prowl's face washed away when the smaller mech put a hand on Sideswipe's shoulder, his voice affirming and strong. Sideswipe glanced up at him, thankful, then back towards the white mech.

“Please. Trust me.”

Hound's optics flickered up, but he was concentrating on shunting his friend's circuitry lines over whatever was happening around him. Prowl studied Jazz and Sideswipe, then glanced at Trailbreaker, then back to Sideswipe. The two of them locked optics, one imploring, the other unwilling to accept the apology and his pleads.

Primus, if Prowl didn't believe that Sideswipe would do anything but take advantage of the situation and run away again, then Trailbreaker would die.

“Please. If you understand me at all,” Sideswipe tried again, “I won't run away again. I swear it, on my spark, on my honor, whatever you want. I just want to help Trailbreaker. Prowl. Trust me.”

The white mech stared at him. More of the cold wall across his optics chipped away.

He glanced at the dying pump in his hand.

Then he grimaced, and snapped something at Jazz.

The black-and-white mech immediately snatched Sideswipe's wrists. A knife flashed out, startling him, but Jazz was sawing through the cables before he had time to panic and struggle away. They fell off his wrists and to the ground, and then the black-and-white mech turned and cut away the other cables around his ankles.

The red mercenary barely had time to comprehend that he was free, for the first time in orns, and ignored the sensation of liberty as he dove back under the wagon, shoving his sword and the map
aside as he grabbed his pack.

A horrifying thought occurred to him as he unlocked the top and peeled through it. Back at the caravan, orns ago, Bumblebee had said that Jazz had been going through his pack, probably curious for anything foreign and interesting. He'd been blindfolded at the time, and couldn't see if he'd discarded anything.

Oh please, let him have kept the first aid kit. If he hadn't, he'd look like a fool, and Trailbreaker would be offline within the joor--

*Yes!!*

Sideswipe let out a short crow as his hand came down on the handle of the kit. Immediately he snatched it out, letting the rest of the pack fall to the ground, and scrambled over to where Trailbreaker was sitting, Jazz running up behind him. Prowl eyed them, then shimmied over a little, giving Sideswipe room to work as he unpacked the kit.

Flexi-plex was a wonderful substance. It was thick, flexible, sticky, and could be manipulated for any shape or surface, and was often used as a waterproof patch for field injuries. Sideswipe couldn't count the number of times he'd had it applied to a malfunctioning frame, a leaking vein, or torn armor plating. Sunstreaker had once slapped a piece over his mouth when his twin wouldn't stop pestering him, and it had torn some of his paint away when he'd ripped it off, much to both their ire, Sideswipe's from pain, Sunstreaker's from knowing that his brother would demand that he touch up his paint for him.

The Autobots watched curiously as he unpackaged a small glob of it and molded it in his hands, softening the putty with his thumbs and smoothing it into a flat disk. When he was done, he held it up to the pump, and Prowl took his hand away long enough for Sideswipe to slap it over the tear, then press down the sides until the leak was contained. The Flexi-plex was still flexible enough to move with the pump as it worked but strong enough to hold the leak, the energon now properly flowing to lines that sorely needed it.

Jazz exclaimed in amazement. Prowl and Hound still looked grave, the later remaining focused on repairing the lines. Sideswipe let him stay on his task, guessing he knew more about fixing the other Autobot's circuitry than anyone else present, and instead reached back into the kit for an injection boost of repair nanites.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Oh, so now he gets to ride in the wagon?!!”

Hound chortled tiredly, guessing at what Sideswipe was complaining about, then grunted as the two of them pushed at Trailbreaker's legs. The black Autobot yowled once in pain before he managed to heave himself over the rail, grunting and immediately laying back against the energon containers, his vents still wheezing dangerously, though no longer gurgling as before. A larger wad of Flexi-plex held around his damaged armor plating, ensuring that nothing vital was going to tumble out of him during the bumpy ride.

He seemed just as unhappy to be inside the wagon as Sideswipe had been, and let it be known in a loud, grumbling voice. Hound reached over the rail and patted his friend's shoulder with a smile, only getting a snarled retort for his effort. Sideswipe crossed his arms as he watched the two of them with a quiet, tired satisfaction.

They still needed to get to a medic, and soon. But until then, as long as nothing else happened,
Trailbreaker would be fine.

Now that things had calmed down, he could get a look around at the battle scene and at the other Autobots. All of them had sustained injuries, and Trailbreaker's had been by far the most serious. They were covered in tears and dents and energon, though thankfully most of their wounds had stopped flowing by now. Jazz's optic band had been shattered in one corner, the jagged cracks webbing out to the front. Hound was limping badly on his right leg, and something had slashed at his arm. One of Prowl's doorwings had been wrenched to the side and out of its joint, and he was now loath to move it. And comparably...Sideswipe was just dirty.

He'd done what he could to help the rest of the Autobots with the first-aid kit, though he professed again to them, and to himself, that he was no medic, and his skills only went as far as to what had been packed in the kit. The barbarians had still been awed by the Flexi-plex regardless, and Hound kept picking at the wad that Sideswipe had smoothed over his arm, the green mech curious and wanting to play with it. The injection boosts of repair nanites had been mostly used up on Trailbreaker, though the rest of them had gotten a shot each, the look of relief clear on their faceplates as their self-repair units were supplemented.

The ground was covered with so much energon that some areas were slippery to walk on. As morbid as it seemed, a great deal of it had to do with one of the energon canisters that had cracked when Starscream had dumped it out of the wagon. The rest had been salvageable, as had most of the supplies, which were loaded back into the wagon. Sideswipe had no doubt that the mech had been looking for the map, which was safely tucked away again at the wagon's front, next to his sword and the remains of his pack.

The sky was graying as dawn approached. The Minotorons were roused from where they had been dozing, and the wagon's wheels were unchocked. The Autobots sorely needed to rest, but Prowl wanted to keep them moving, probably to not invite Starscream to easily attack them again while they were weakened.

As Hound leaned his weight on the side of one of the Minotorons and petted it while murmuring encouraging things in its audial, Sideswipe paused and looked down at his hands.

His freed hands.

His pump surged, as did his spark.

This was the first time since he'd been captured that he'd been completely untied.

He was free. He could run. The Autobots were too exhausted to be able to chase him this time...

His spark clenched at the thought, and so did his fists.

"Sideswipe?"

The mercenary turned to where Prowl was staring at him with a raised optic-ridge. In his hands were the restraining cables that Jazz had cut away.

His spark tightened further, even as he willed himself for what he knew he should do.

With a long, settling intake of air, he strode over to the white mech, who had narrowed his optics, realizing during his approach that Sideswipe could choose to run off before he could grab him. But instead, the red mech willingly stood before him.

He offered his wrists submissively.
“I don't intend on breaking your trust again. I swore to you that I wouldn't run.” He bit his lip. “I know you don't understand that I made that promise. But...”

His processor whirled as it dug up everything that he knew about the barbarians' language so far: how they used verbs and nouns, how they made up for a lack of conjugations, how they identified a word by clicks and whistles instead of growls. He paused, then offered his best guess at what he wanted to say.

“I trust you.”

Prowl's optics widened tremendously. Hoping that he'd gotten it right, Sideswipe stared at him beseechingly, and raised his wrists a little higher.

“Go ahead. I won't fight you again.”

He'd have a pit of a time getting home as soon as he was tied up once more. But he couldn't bring himself to put the Autobots in danger again, now that he'd seen what was lurking behind them. He vented again, and bowed his head forward slightly, further emphasizing his reluctance to fight.

The cables in Prowl's fist shook. Then, in a quick motion, he flipped them into his subspace pocket.

“Na.”

Now it was Sideswipe's turn to look surprised, then even further as a rare grin briefly appeared on Prowl's faceplates.

“Sideswipe, yoska.”

His optics lit up at the same time that his spark threatened to crow and fly out of his chestplate. He could only stand there, dumbfounded, his hands lowering slowly.

“Thank you...”

The smile disappeared as Prowl quickly assessed the other Autobots, then gave the order for them to move. Hound gave him a weary look, but tugged at the Minotorons, who lumbered forward, the wagon tugged pulled them with a short groan from Trailbreaker as he adjusted himself in his seat. Jazz kept a hand on the wagon's rail, using it to steady himself as he walked, though his ever-present grin had once again taken residence on his faceplates. It took Sideswipe a moment to realize that he'd been thoughtfully watching Prowl and the mercenary talking.

The white mech touched Sideswipe's arm, and spoke gently before heading to his place at the rear of the wagon. The red mech hesitated, then followed after him, ready to defend the wagon for the rest of it's journey home.
Dreams

Chapter Notes

Readers, beware! The rating of this fic will be changing to 'M' for upcoming sticky stuff. It won't be happening in this chapter, but it's coming.

Also, a fan made a wonderfully awesome 'Sidequest' fic. Check it out on Pastebin.

Chapter 10: Dreams

“Fraggit Prowl, I can't fix this if you don't stop moving!”

Prowl's optics flickered as he grimaced, but the tone behind Sideswipe's voice carried his meaning well enough, and he leaned forward and held still, his hands gripping his knees as the red mech adjusted his doorwing. It had been knocked out of its joint during the fight, and the white mech had been in clear pain each time he'd tried to move it. At last, when Prowl had finally decided that they'd put enough distance between them and Starscream that they couldn't be easily followed, they'd halted, and the Autobots had all but collapsed into their makeshift camp, this being the first time that they were preparing to stop for the entire day, badly needing to do so. The clouds from last night were breaking up, and the sun was reaching its zenith, but the mechs were exhausted enough to recharge regardless. The warm sunshine felt good on their hurt servos anyway.

Sideswipe's lips pressed into a thin line as he used his fingertips to find the broken joint, then pulled back as soon as Prowl flinched. “Sorry, sorry.” His fingers grazed over the surface of the doorwing while his other hand tried to maneuver the appendage back into place. He was learning quickly at how sensitive doorwings were, based on Prowl's assumed high tolerance for pain, and how he gasped and had to force himself not to move as the city-mech tried to fix it for him.

They knelt on their shared mat, Sideswipe keeping the tools of his first-aid kit close by, trying to do the repairs quietly for Hound's sake, who had passed out on his mat the moment that it was unrolled. Trailbreaker was still in the wagon, recharging peacefully, while Jazz was taking a short walk around their campsite, the first shift his own, despite the brief argument with Prowl when their leader had tried to take it instead.

As carefully as he could, Sideswipe moved the edge of the doorwing up, angling it so that it could fit back into the joint. Prowl hissed in pain, and the red mech murmured an apology again, before snugly fitting it back where it was supposed to go with a small click. Immediately relief washed over the white mech's face, and he gingerly tested the doorwing, still wincing as he fluttered it. There was no audible grinding, and it could move in time with his other one. Satisfied, he turned back around to face Sideswipe.

“Thank you.”

“No problem.” The task done, Sideswipe reached to his pack and slipped the kit back inside, making sure it was near the top and accessible. Nothing else in there would be needed right away; he'd packed lightly, assuming all those orns ago that he'd be going to the Decepticon tribe and back to Kaon within the same cycle. “You should recharge. You didn't get any rest last night. None of us did.”
At the reminder, weariness spread through his circuitry, making him yawn and squeeze his optics closed. And he hadn't done anything but hide under the wagon all during the battle.

He was cut off by Prowl gripping his chin. He startled, his optics snapping back open and then following along as his face was turned towards the white mech. A question was asked. Prowl's voice was even more tired than his own, but imploring. He needed to know something before he could attempt to recharge.

“...I told you. I'm not going to run away anymore.” A black hand was placed on his wrist, not to pull away, but to show the Autobot that grasping him was unnecessary. “I asked you to trust me, even after I'd hurt you, and you did. I owe it to you to keep my promise.”

The other mech narrowed his optics. Sideswipe vented a sigh.

“You still don't understand me. Right.”

He bowed his head forward, and cupped his cheek into Prowl's hand, briefly running his lips over the fingers that released his chin, then kept the side of his helm pillowed there. The white mech's engine rumbled in surprise and...something else.

“Does this help?” Sideswipe asked quietly.

It seemed that he did. His optics softening, he gently held the red mech's head, rubbing his thumb in a small circle around his jaw, his hand then raising slightly to pet his helm. Sideswipe sighed again, happier this time, his systems relaxing under the gentle, soothing touches, his head turning to the side and into the Autobot's palm.

“You play nice with me, and I'll play nice with you,” he murmured. “Trust me?”

“I trust you, yoska.”

He felt his spark flutter.

“...You still want me, don't you?” he belatedly realized.

Before he could think further on it, Prowl's other hand was holding his upper arm, drawing him closer. With a brief, surprised rev, the red mech willingly followed along, his lips parting.

Fraggit all, he was supposed to be fighting to escape this mech. This wasn't supposed to be so hot...

His mouth dropped open a little more, expecting to soon discover what the mech tasted like.

Prowl hugged him close to his chestplate and bumper, bowing his head against Sideswipe's shoulder, his arms encircling him and his hands splayed on his back. Sideswipe refreshed his optics in brief confusion, almost forgetting to return the gesture.

...This wasn't a kiss.

Well.

This was nice too.

Especially those fingertips on the seams of his back, rubbing at cluster nodes that he didn't realize were so tightly wound up until now, and his jaw slid open even further, his intake rasping as he let his servos relax. His optics closed, and he rested his head on Prowl's shoulder. His own arms wrapped around the shorter mech's hips, his fingertips skirting the edge of the white cloth around
his waist.

He felt so comfortable like this, held by someone who, for one of the few times in his life, gave a frag about him as more than a hired servo. The pressure of Prowl's fingertips over just the right nodes made his engine purr contentedly, and he did the same, palming his hips and massaging at servos that would be exhausted and taunt after the long fight, though he had to admit that Prowl was better with his hands than he was. He usually preferred to get right to the fun part of interfacing. But not right now.

Right now, he was just happily enjoying the intimacy.

But kissing would be a great addition.

Sideswipe raised his head from Prowl's shoulder, facing him, and after a moment's thought, ghosted his lips over the other mech's, then, when Prowl did nothing but vent over his mouth, pressed on into a kiss. The barbarian made a confused noise with his throat, his optics opening and widening, then further when Sideswipe's glossa slipped into his mouth.

His engine squealed in alarm as he shoved the mercenary back. Sideswipe fell on his aft with a short cry and nearly rolled backwards, catching himself on his hands. The spell between them broke as intensely as if someone had dropped a bellowing Minotoron between them.

“What?! What?!”

Prowl was babbling, shocked, his hands gesturing between them frantically as he spoke at a rapid pace. Sideswipe stared at him, his optic ridges raised high, at first thinking that he'd accidentally touched the sore doorwing and hurt him. But both appendages were held back, defensive, and Prowl sounded like he was demanding an explanation.

“...But I thought you wanted...?”

Sideswipe reached and held an uncertain hand towards the Autobot placatingly. Immediately Prowl took his fingers and squeezed them, though he was still talking, his voice lower and not as panicked anymore.

He wasn't angry. He was confused, lost. Bewildered.

He wanted to touch him, but the kiss baffled him?

Something clicked in Sideswipe's processor. It was affirmed further by Prowl making an eating gesture with his hands.

'Are you trying to eat me?!!'

Sideswipe clapped a hand over his mouth to unsuccessfully smother his burst of laughter.

Oh, Primus.

“You've never been kissed before?!”

His humor was completely lost to Prowl, who scowled at him, but he made no indication that he would get up and leave. Sideswipe tried harder to not giggle, and failed. The look on the Autobot's face was just too funny.

“Seriously?! You've never been kissed before. Wow. Is that...is that just something that doesn't
Sideswipe's cackling ended Prowl's shock, though he still looked irritated that their moment had been snatched away. At the other side of the camp, the mercenary happened to spot Jazz staring at them, one hand on his hip and the other scratching his helm, comically bemused by the duo. Hound and Trailbreaker thankfully remained asleep.

Prowl demanded something of him again. *What was that?!*

Sideswipe's devilish grin threatened to crack his faceplates.

“Slaggit, this is great. Teaching somebody to kiss, who's never even heard of a kiss.”

He crept forward on his knees, and Prowl didn't retreat, though he gave Sideswipe a suspicious look, which deepened when the red mech put a hand on the side of his helm.

“I swear, I'm not trying to eat you. Relax, please? *Trust me.*”

His optics narrowed, but he held still again, wary of what Sideswipe would do next. Even more slowly this time, nearly to the point of agonizing, Sideswipe bent his head forward, and held Prowl's helm steady as he ghosted his lips over the white mech's once more, venting warm air into his mouth, the Autobot unwittingly doing the same. When Prowl still did not pull away, he gradually moved even closer, and pressed their lips together.

This time, Prowl didn't move or make any noise, his blue optics contemplative and waiting, curious as to what on Cybertron the city-mech was doing. Remember how he'd dragged his lips over the mech's hand as he was being fed, Sideswipe moved his mouth similarly, his kisses as gentle and easy as he could manage, his other hand joining his first to cup Prowl's helm, keeping him still. He whined, his engine still purring, trying to show the Autobot that he was getting pleasure from doing this. The force of his vents increased as his systems heated up.

Then, after a moment, Prowl's optics slid closed, and his lips returned the motion.

It didn't take much longer for him to get the hang of it, their kisses tickling and nipping at each other, Prowl's white hands sliding up to grip Sideswipe's helm in return, his thumbs rubbing in circles and seeking out ridges and corners that held the most tactile sensors, sending tiny impulses riveting through his circuitry. Moaning into his mouth, Sideswipe tried again to press in his glossa. This time he didn't catch him by surprise, and was welcomed. He moaned again, louder, and pressed deeper into the kiss, their mouths locking together. Prowl's glossa tentatively prodded at his dentals as well, and was happily let inside to touch the walls of his mouth, letting his own dance around it.

*Primus,* he tasted *sweet.*

He heard Jazz make an exclaimed, confused noise at them, and knew that Prowl had heard him too. Just like Prowl, he was likely wondering why the two mechs were trying to eat each other's mouths. Both of them ignored the other Autobot.

Sideswipe's arms lowered to wrap around Prowl's neck and shoulders, careful to not push at his injured doorwing. His head turned to the side, taking in even more of him. It was the Autobot's turn to moan, thoroughly enjoying this new past-time of city-mechs. He pushed himself up on his knees slightly until he matched Sideswipe's height, his fingers moving from massaging to gripping his helm tight enough to be nearly uncomfortable.

Prowl tasted like the world outside of the city, fresh, warm, a million scents all perfected into a
sweet melody, raw. There was nothing the mech was hiding about his enjoyment of their passionate kisses, no motive, no distraction of wanting a different partner. He had him, he wanted him. Never before had he had a partner as dedicated to a single moment with him, and his spark was excitedly pulsing in time with his pump.

The white mech suddenly broke from him and gasped, his intakes wheezing, not realizing how long he'd gone without air.

Oh, right. Never been kissed before.

Sideswipe obligingly slowed down, his mouth dabbling kisses along Prowl's jaw while the Autobot caught his breath, his ventilations delightfully warm on the mercenary's helm. One arm stayed wrapped around his waist, still careful of the doorwings, the other black hand fingering the cloth hiding his groin's armor from view, petting it between his fingertips, realizing that it was quickly heating up while it sat over his interface port.

He smiled against Prowl's faceplates, then cautiously toyed at the knot of the white cloth.

Apparently barbarians didn't kiss, but there wouldn't be any left on Cybertron if they didn't frag...

Prowl's answer was to shove him onto his back on the mat. Sideswipe grunted, taken off-guard and confused, then doubly when white hands snatched his own and held them at his sides. He struggled briefly, then gazed up at hungry blue optics staring down at him, Prowl's mouth open as he cycled air, his engine growling in a way that sent the red mech's spark into gleeful fits.

Oh yes, he definitely wanted to interface.

Prowl's optics darted over to the other mat and the wagon.

But not right now. Not with two sleeping mechs nearby, and a guard who was far too entertained, his arms crossed as he looked their way.

“Not an exhibitionist?” Sideswipe asked weakly with a quick smile in Jazz's direction. “I guess spark-play isn't on the list of options either.”

Prowl pressed his mouth over his own again before he could say anything else, his glossa pushing inside demandingly, Sideswipe's happily answering.

Check one for life's bucket list. Got a barbarian to really like kissing and to take the lead in only a few breems.

He pulled at his hands, and this time Prowl let him go, more concerned with straddling him and holding his head. Sideswipe dragged his fingers along his bumper, delighting at the rev he got immediately. He didn't mind being on the bottom at all, even if he'd been the teacher in all this. He was having fun, and Prowl was definitely enjoying himself.

The Autobot came up for air again, gasping, and this time Sideswipe took advantage of his dazed look and grabbed his shoulders, pulling at him, sending him tumbling to sprawl on his red chestplate with a small yelp from Prowl and a clatter of metal, forcing the other mech to lie down on top of him as he caught his breath. The two of them vented hard, their fans running on high, two sets of blue optics staring at each other.

“You're a fast learner,” Sideswipe panted.

Prowl gasped something in return. Putting one hand on the mat underneath them, he started to push
back up, eager to start Round 3.

But then the red mech noticed him wince and freeze, the hurt doorwing held stiffly behind his back, not quite at the same angle as the other one.

...He couldn't have fun if he knew that Prowl was hurting himself to join in, and his systems revved down.

He frowned, then raised a black hand to cup Prowl's check, his other pointing at the doorwing.

“You need to rest,” he said remorsefully, realizing that he might have accidentally damaged him by pulling so hard, his cortex lost in his passions. “But I promise, we'll do this again.”

He'd be slagged if had to wait longer than a deca-orn.

“...Sa,” Prowl growled in return, getting at least his meaning, if not his words, though he flicked his doorwings one more time in frustration, then flinched when that did nothing to help him. His own systems cooling down, though not without a protesting whine from his engine, he crossed his arms over Sideswipe's chestplate, and rested his chin on them, his optics staring deeply into the mercenary's. He kept talking, his voice quiet now, suddenly aware of the other mechs trying to recharge, but his tone was affectionate, and gentle.

Sideswipe had no idea what he was saying. But he assumed that it was all very sweet. He grinned at him, and crossed his arms behind his head to pillow his helm.

“Still don't understand a fragging word of your babble-talk, Prowl. I'll thank you more when I can figure it out.”

Prowl cocked his head to the side, an optic ridge raised. Sideswipe's smile grew wider, and something popped into his mind.

“...Bar-bar-bar,” he growled, his voice deep, pretending to be some wicked, monstrous creature.

The Autobot immediately ducked his face into his arms to stifle himself. Sideswipe lifted his head up, alarmed when Prowl started shaking against his plating, his doorwings twitching. It took him a moment to realize what he was doing.

He'd never heard Prowl laugh before.

His own surprised cackle droned out the Autobot's, though they both cut off their vocalizers when Hound groaned and shifted, wincing as his recharge cycle was disturbed. Prowl laid his cheek on his arms again, still staring down at the mech that he was using as a sleeping berth. The red mech committed the amused smile to memory, knowing that it was rare thing.

“So I sound funny to you too,” Sideswipe whispered, considerate enough to not bother the mechs that had fought to defend his life half an orn ago. “You know, that's what everybody in Kaon thought you barbarians sounded like. You run around the wildlands all day, screaming 'Bar-bar-bar' at each other. That's even where we get the word, 'barbarian.' But you guys think that's what us city-mechs are doing, right?”

Prowl whispered something back.

“I know you're smarter than me, so you better have your processor working on a translation program right now.” He bent forward quickly to peck a kiss on his nose, startling the other mech. “Now, recharge. Your repair systems need time to work.”
The white mech grumbled something, the smile fading, but his optics were becoming heavier. He offlined them, then turned his head, fully resting his helm on his arms. Soon enough, his systems were quieting and purring.

The mercenary stretched out his back, and shut off his own optics against the sunlight high above them as he started his own recharge cycle, comfortable even with the weight of another mech on most of his body. Prowl was heavy, but warm, and his frame seemed to fit into Sideswipe's in just the right way.

Now why hadn't either of them thought of restraining Sideswipe by having the Autobot sleep on him before now? This was so much better than being tied up.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He woke up once, his face pinched and his frame tense.

He was supposed to have remembered something.

His HUD reminded him that his systems needed to recover, and he fell back into recharge, but not without a nagging feeling at the back of his cortex.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“I forgive you.”

*Sideswipe refreshed his optics at the other mech. “I'm not sure how you can. But thanks anyway.”*

“I forgive you,” he repeated, his voice wavering.

*A hand reached forward, and cupped Sideswipe's cheek, the touch affectionate, startling the mercenary.*

“...You have...a destiny...” He was weakening, fast.

*But the dying mech was no longer Sideswipe's focus. He saw red eyes, heard hysterical laughter, felt pain, pain, pain, and suddenly he heard screams, and they were his own screams, and he was curled up, trying to fight it and shove away the vision that had been cast into his mind, and somewhere far away, Sunstreaker was calling his name and shaking him...*

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He woke up again sometime around sunset, the sky's colors changing to vibrant oranges and reds. Next to him, Hound was saying something to Jazz, and Jazz was shushing him, pressing him to lay back down. He must have been offering to take the hurt mech's shift too.

Prowl was still on him, his frame having been warmed by laying in the sun for the later half of the day, his systems quiet as he slept.

The tendrils of the dream still clung to Sideswipe's cortex, and as hard as he tried to brush off the Primus-fragged memory and the visions that had been haunting him since then, a singular thought would not leave him.

He had to tell Prowl.
Prowl deserved to know.

All of the Autobots deserved to know.

Sideswipe didn't believe in things like visions, or purgatory, or destiny. But if there was...then he knew why it was happening. Pit, even if it wasn't, he had to say something about it.

He bit his lip, whining a bit, and felt Prowl move around on his chestplate, awoken by his mat-partner....Berthmate? Almost Lover? What were they?

No, before any of that, he had to tell Prowl.

But how? Neither of them could full grasp each other's languages. And there was so much he wanted to talk to him about before he brought up the topic of that. That stupid job, that stupid mech, these stupid visions.

That stupid map.

Prowl's optics onlined slowly, and he gave Sideswipe's face a bleary, drowsy look. The corner of the red mech's mouth turned up, and he lifted a hand from behind his helm to touch Prowl's arm.

“Primus, the things I’d say to you,” he whispered to the sleepy Autobot, turning his processor instead to the present, the candid moment he was sharing with the other mech.

What would he talk to him about? After telling him that he was a certified son of a glitch for kidnapping him.

First, he'd tell him all about his own world.

The city. Kaon.

All of his friends. The bar. The cute bartender that always knew which high-grade he liked best.

The streets, the public transports. None of all this fragging walking for entire orns.

The factories. The mines. Maybe not the minibots that were always running around in there.

His apartment. All the knick-knacks that he'd collected over the vorns.

The private berth that they could frag on.

He'd tell him all about his twin--

Sunstreaker.

His spark twisted and fell to the bottom of his casing.

Sunstreaker.

The happy light in his optics faded.

Prowl noticed, his systems coming back online, his doorwings stretching out, but then he winced and his optics flashed, likely as he read a damage report on his HUD. Sideswipe closed his own optics, hoping to keep the wave of pain coursing up from his spark to himself while Prowl was distracted, but he felt the Autobot's weight shifting on him as he tried to get a better look at the red mech.
Sunstreaker.

He was too far from Kaon. Starscream was between him and Kaon, and he was looking for the map. Looking for him.

...He'd never see Sunstreaker again.

“Sideswipe?” Prowl was worried. A hand cradled his cheek.

Sideswipe squeezed his closed optics even tighter. Prowl's touch was so nice, but his brother, his twin--

“I miss Sunstreaker.”

“...Sunstreaker?”

He onlined his optics. Prowl's other hand was pointing behind them, to the left of the sun, back south. Back to Kaon. Sideswipe's optic ridges raised slightly, until he realized that he'd said his brother's name several times since he'd been captured, mostly when he'd been screaming and demanding that he'd be released during the first orn.

“Sa. Sunstreaker.”

Prowl glanced at him, then at the other Autobots. Jazz had left them alone, walking the perimeter of the camp again, while Hound and Trailbreaker's systems buzzed as their repair units worked hard at their injuries. Sideswipe bit his lip, knowing what was going through the Autobot's cortex.

“I'm sorry,” the white mech murmured in his own language.

“You have to get them to a medic in your tribe. I get it. It's okay.” It wasn't. But as badly as he missed his twin, Sideswipe didn't have it within himself to demand that Prowl abandon them and return him home, braving Starscream and the long journey with few resources. “Just...when we get there? I need to get a message home to Sunstreaker. I need to let him know that I'm alright. He must have came back from his job several orns ago. I left him a note, but he'll be looking for me by now. Even if I can't see him, I have to tell him what's happened. He must be worried sick.”

Prowl nodded, as if he'd understood, but kept frowning. “Sunstreaker,” he repeated again, casting his gaze down, uncertain.

“He's a mech. My brother.” Sideswipe pointed to himself. “My twin.”

“'Brother?' 'Twin'?”

Neither of those words had been said often enough to give Prowl an idea of their definition. The mercenary lay still, pressing his lips together as he thought, looking past the Autobot and at the sky high above them, too beautiful to reflect the turmoil in his spark. It had been perfect a few joors ago, when he'd been teaching a mech how to kiss for the first time, but now, he would have preferred acid rain, if for no other reason than that Cybertron would be agreeing with his situation.

How does one explain a 'twin' to someone who doesn't speak Cybertronian Standard?

He thought about this for a long while. Prowl sat up, moving from straddling his hips to kneeling beside him on the mat, giving the mech space and waiting patiently.

“My twin is...”
Sideswipe put his hands together and flat over his chestplate, directly over his spark chamber. He made sure that Prowl was watching him, then lifted his hands, letting them hover above him, one balled into a fist and the other wrapped around it, forming a small circle. A spark.

Then, slowly, he separated his hands, closing his other fist too. Two balls. Two sparks. He let them drift apart to either side, separated, then brought them back and tapped his fists together, as if they had naturally been drawn to one another.

“Twins.”

He held up one fist, then the other.

“Sideswipe. And Sunstreaker.”

Prowl's jaw sagged open.

“I think you got it,” Sideswipe smiled weakly.

The Autobot refreshed his optics, then pointed to each one of his fists.

“Twins?!”

A little anxious at Prowl's tone, Sideswipe nodded, then tapped his fists together again. “Sa. It's not just my cortex that misses him. My spark needs him. We aren't meant to be separated like this.”

The Autobot looked floored. Several different emotions raced across his normally stoic face: confusion, revulsion, regret, anguish, melded together into a maelstrom of distress.

“Twins...”

His hand clasped one of Sideswipe's, and squeezed his hand hard, nearly painfully. He was clenching his dentals, and murmured an apology several times over, far longer and heartfelt than the one from a moment ago. Sideswipe rubbed a thumb over the top of his palm, and nodded slowly, accepting the meaning behind words that he could not understand.

Prowl finally knew that he was keeping him separated not just from a good friend, not even from a family, but from the other half of his spark. Some relief at that knowledge warmed his own spark, relieving some of the pain it was feeling, though it wasn't enough to stop it from pulsing at the twins' bond, trying to find his brother, then curling up into a miserable ball when it received no answer.

The white mech stared at him for a moment longer, then sat straight up and looked around.

“Jazz!”

The black-and-white mech turned to look towards where Prowl was waving frantically for him, then hurried over. Now definitely intrigued at their change in attitude, Sideswipe sat up too, and as Prowl gestured at him to repeat what he'd 'said', he turned to Jazz, and went through the motions again.

Jazz had a similar reaction to Prowl. His jaw dropped open in shock, and the two Autobots glanced at each other nervously.

“...Do twins not exist in the wildlands?” Sideswipe asked, unnerved by how anxious they looked. Prowl sincerely regretted separating them, but his faceplates had moved from anguished to outright
fearful. “I know we're rare, but it's not that strange...”

But the Autobots weren't looking at him anymore. They were speaking rapidly to each other, every so often pointing at Sideswipe, as if he'd given them some great revelation. Jazz's hands were all over the place as he gestured in all directions in a near-panic, flailing too much to make any comprehensible sense to someone who didn't speak his language. Sideswipe glanced between them, annoyed, then sighed loudly, resting an arm on a knee and propping up his head with his hand as he watched them converse.

“How about clueing me in too?” he grumbled as his optics narrowed. “You didn't know that I had a twin before you took me, so that's not why I'm here. What's so important about me and Sunstreaker?”

Prowl was finally trying to speak to him as well as Jazz. Few words were ones that Sideswipe understood, though his processor tried hard to follow along. Something about a 'wagon'. Probably the caravan, since it was unlikely that they had a word for the automated vehicle carrying the energon and supplies which had been stolen all those orns ago.

He checked his chronometer for exactly how long it had been. Primus Almighty. The caravan had been due back in Kaon deca-cycles ago. Sunstreaker had to know that something was wrong by now. He hoped his twin had slagged up Sentinel's office when he had come storming in to find him.

Prowl pointed at Sideswipe, then said the word that was like 'wagon' again. Caravan, and him. Yes, he was a caravan guard. He nodded, and Prowl continued.

*Iacon.*

An error popped up on his HUD, and he ignored it, focused on translating as much as he could.

The map. Got it. That was important.

Decepticons. Something about the Decepticons.

And Starscream?

He scratched the side of his jaw as he thought it over. Okay, maybe Starscream was a Decepticon. That made sense, given the terrifying rumors about the other tribe that he'd heard in Kaon before he'd left. And other mechs had attacked the wagon along with him. Maybe that was the Decepticon tribe, angry about the loss of the map.

But they were far from what should have been established Decepticon territory. That meant that the wagon had been followed, and--

Sideswipe's head snapped up, his optics huge as a thought sent his spark spinning into a panic.

“Sunstreaker will come looking for me,” he interrupted Prowl and Jazz by throwing his hands out towards them, “and he'll run right into the Decepticon tribe and Starscream, won't he?!”

Both Autobots were staring at him. Sideswipe gestured with a sweeping hand back south.

“Sunstreaker. Decepticons.” He punched a fist into his palm. “*Sa?*!”

Prowl and Jazz glanced back at each other, and didn't say a word.
Their grim expressions told Sideswipe everything.

His spark fluttered around, wanting to suddenly be free of its casing. Its other half would be in grave danger if Sunstreaker tried to find him.

He started to get up, but stopped himself. No. He'd promised Prowl that he wouldn't run away again. And besides, what hope did he have of finding Sunstreaker first? Or better yet, what hope did he have of sneaking or fighting his way past the Decepticons, who knew the wildlands far better than he did, and of finding his twin safely, and getting them both back to Kaon?!

If he hadn't made a promise, he would have taken this chances regardless and rushed off.

But he had made a promise. And as he considered if it was still worth obeying it, his cortex had time to logically explain that he would put the Autobots in danger again if he revealed his presence to the Decepticons.

All he could do was helplessly squeeze his hands into fists and bow his head.

A whimper escaped his throat.

He felt two pairs of optics staring at him. Jazz murmured something, then patted Prowl's shoulder as he stood up. His footsteps crunched along the ground as he returned to his patrol. The white mech, meanwhile, gazed at Sideswipe, then hesitantly shuffled forward until he could put his hands on the other mech's shoulders.

He spoke slowly and evenly, his voice attempting to be comforting. He was trying to reason with Sideswipe. He was trying to tell him something. He said Sunstreaker's name several times, and 'twin,' and then squeezed his arms, wanting desperately for him to understand something.

Sunstreaker...

Sideswipe didn't bother an attempt to translate anymore. His spark just couldn't be in it, not while he was desperately longing for his twin. He put his arms around Prowl in return, closed the gap between them, and rested on him heavily. A white hand immediately came around and petted his back, rubbing in circles, the Autobot's voice murmuring quietly into his audials.

Sunstreaker could be walking into danger, and there wasn't a Primus-fragged thing that he could do.

He didn't remember when they laid back down on the mat again, his helm pillowed on Prowl's arm this time. All he knew was that the world was suddenly sideways, and that he missed his brother, and that he was tired, and just wanted to be held and be told that everything wasn't going to the Pit in a handbasket.

His spark was so tired, exhausted by it's tries to reach his other half. The nightmares weren't helping.

It wasn't used to dealing with the nightmares alone. It needed support from the bond, anything, but Sunstreaker too far away.

A hand was on Sideswipe's helm, petting him, quietly encouraging him back into a recharge that he desperately needed, but didn't want.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
He and his brother stood shoulder-to-shoulder, blocking the only exit out of their section of the docks. In front of them, their target had pressed his back up against a wall of shipping containers, only realizing a breem ago that he'd run to a dead-end and was trapped, yet there was a surprising lack of fear in his optics.

“I wondered how long it would be before Sentinel Prime sent you after me,” the elderly, bearded, purple-and-red mech smiled, his tone as light as if the twins were his own creations.

Sideswipe and Sunstreaker closed in on him, still blocking him from escaping. “Dunno what you did to frag him off so bad,” Sideswipe said to him, rolling his shoulders and loosening up his servos. “You don't seem much of the 'Espionage' and 'Assassination of Primes' and 'Theft of State Secrets' type that we usually deal with.”

“Don't talk to him,” Sunstreaker muttered at his twin. “Just do what you need to, and let's get out of here.

“Ah, but I do have my secrets!”

The elderly mech reached into his purple cloak, which resembled the clothing that the mindless barbarians of the wildlands wore, and held up a hide-wrapped tube.

“This will be important for all of Cybertron! Not that Sentinel can appreciate that. A Prime indeed, hmph.” He stuck his nose in the air. “I don't recall naming him a Prime.”

“Neither do I, but...”

Unsubspacing his sword, Sideswipe powered it on, the golden light from the blade washing over the multi-colored shipping containers cutting off the bearded mech's escape.

“Credits are credits. Sorry.”

It wasn't terror that came to the mech's optics. More like...concern. Maybe worry. Maybe. Then acceptance.

“I forgive you, young one. Do what you must.”

“...Well, that's the first time I've ever heard that from a mark.”

“Sideswipe, I've got a bad feeling about all this. Hurry up so we can go home.”

The bearded mech looked like he would say more, but was cut off as Sideswipe burst forward. His optics grew tremendously wide as he was slammed into the wall. He tried to speak again, his vocalizer malfunctioning and cutting off, and he let the dribble of energon trickle from his mouth as he looked down at the sword impaling him into one of the containers.

Sideswipe yanked his weapon back out, the metallic container shrieking, and his mark tumbled forward. The tube fell out of his hand, rolled, and Sideswipe recalled seeing a tiny red face on it's exterior before Sunstreaker put a foot on it and picked it up.

“What is it?” the red twin asked, only half interested as he bent down to wipe off his sword on his target's cloak. He heard the tube being undone, and parchment being unfolded.
“...It's a map,” Sunstreaker murmured. “I think.”

“It is, or it isn't? Bro, maps aren't that hard to read--”

He gasped as he was yanked forward and down his knees. The mech was still alive and gripping his wrist.

“I forgive you,” he rasped again. Despite being nearly deactivated, his optics had taken on a wild, unusual shine, one that sent the mercenary's pump double-timing.

“I'm not sure how you can. But thanks anyway.” He grimaced and tried to pull his arm back, but the old mech's grip was unbelievably tight.

“I forgive you--”

“Sideswipe?” Sunstreaker was calling to him, but Sideswipe suddenly couldn't tear his focus away from the dying mech putting his other hand on his cheek.

He didn't believe in hypnotism. It had to be some programing briefly taking control of him, somehow through the mech's fingertips stroking his cheek.

“...You have...a destiny...”

Sideswipe stared at him. His optic sensors swam, blurring the image of his target laying on the ground, his energon pooling underneath his frame.

He saw himself.

He saw himself struggling under another mech, writhing, trying to fight the ropes tying him down.

A knife was raised over his chestplate.

Insane, horrible laughter.

He was screaming.

Screaming loud, long, and he hadn't realized that he had fallen back until his head impacted the ground. The pain didn't go away, and he clutched his helm as he curled up into a ball, still screaming, ignoring his brother shouting his name as he was pulled into his arms and shaken.

His other half was trying to reach for him and assure him. But his spark was twisting around itself, screaming just as loud as he was, because the vision was wrong, all wrong--

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He startled awake, his engine reving, battle programing fully online, though shushed by Prowl's voice in his audials.

Strong, white arms had encircled him, hugging him close and keeping him still.

He heard the word 'Sunstreaker' being said, and then an apology, and then the hands were massaging at servos that had locked up during his nightmare.
He heard Hound mumble a complaint, then huff and roll over on his own mat as he tried to go back to recharge.

Sideswipe's chronometer told him that not much time had passed. The sky above had dimmed to a navy blue. He groaned, his optics shutting back off as he turned his face into Prowl's neck, his own arms squeezing around the Autobot.

He remembered the little red face on the map's exterior tube.

...He had to tell him.

It hurt, but he had to tell him.

Maybe the nightmares would stop once his conscience was cleared.

Prowl may never trust him again if he did.

*He had to tell him.*
Chapter 11: Genius

Sideswipe had been staring upwards at the sky as they walked along, bored and finding shapes in the clouds high above them when Jazz had suddenly moved over and swatted his arm, startling the mercenary's thoughts back to the present. He looked around anxiously, then scowled, seeing no immediate danger.

“What? What's wrong?”

Even though he was freed of his restraints, he was still as nervous as a turbo-fox. Despite calling him yoska and allowing him to take Trailbreaker's place on guard beside the wagon, Prowl had refused to allow him to carry his sword, though it was in easy reach at the front of the wagon. They'd not seen nor heard any sign of Starscream and the rest of the Decepticons since they'd packed up camp that morning, but that didn't mean that they weren't still being followed.

The Autobot was speaking lightly and excitedly, and gesturing over the next hill. Prowl's doorwings were fanning back and forth, relief etched across his face, while Hound was fighting to not run ahead of the wagon.

Sideswipe frowned as something heavy wafted through the air.

“...You all are getting excited over a bad case of Minotoron purge?”

The wagon trudged up the hill, and as it reached its crest, Hound put a hand on the side of the Minotorons, pulling them to a stop. The rest of the Autobots climbed up shortly after that. Balancing himself on a large crystal outcropping as he stepped up over a boulder, Sideswipe froze, and refreshed his optics at the sight he beheld.

“...Whoa...”

That explained the smell.

The entire hillside was occupied by an enormous herd of Minotorons. The lumbering creatures milled about, settling in no place in particular, enjoying being warmed by the sun. One or two of the biggest ones were roaming back and forth, every so often nudging their horns at any that looked tired or ill. Others stood facing each other and bleating, as if they were gossiping. The smallest ones were nursing at the undersides of their carriers. Grouped together and casually munching at the crystals dotting the ground, the grunting and bellowing Minotorons seemed almost majestic.

Well, 'majestic' was not quite the word that Sideswipe would use for the smell still assaulting his olfactory sensors.

Footsteps crunched across the ground behind him, and a moment later Prowl joined him at his side. Noting how Sideswipe was staring across the massive herd, he put a white hand on his back, briefly stroking him reassuringly before holding onto his shoulder, as if he expected the mercenary to fall over at the grandness of a bunch of smelly creatures wandering around a field. More likely, the stench would knock him out, and send him tumbling backwards down the slope.
He did have to admit that there was a certain beauty to them, though. So many creatures, roaming, *alive*, not just cooped up in pens and being shoved around to a circus ring, or to slaughter.

He didn't miss that part of Kaon. This was much more...more *real*.

By the other edge of the herd were two other mechs looking after a Minotoron with a hurt leg. One was gray with a doorwinged frame similar to Prowl's, while the other was orange and red, small enough to be a minibot, but as he watched the skinny little mech work, Sideswipe realized that he wasn't a minibot or skinny, but a youngling. Both mechs wore clothing similar to most of the Autobots: hooded ponchos that covered their arms and chests when they weren't moving, and strips of cloth and hide wrapped around their hips down to their knees, purposely matching their armor's main color scheme. Two holes had been cut in the back of the gray one's poncho for his doorwings.

Sideswipe watched the youngling curiously as he bandaged the creature's injured leg, the other mech holding its horns so that there was no chance that it would turn aggressive on his smaller friend. The mercenary quickly realized that no mech that young would be far from a carrier, even if he was strong enough to help with the chores.

“...We're almost there, aren't we?” he murmured, and it was only after he spoke that he realized that his voice was wavering.

*They were almost there.*

“AAA-WOOOO!!”

He shouted in alarm and flinched. “Would you stop doing that?!” he bellowed at Jazz.

Jazz ignored him, and lifted his head to the sky as he howled, the tone still long and carrying, but more joyous than a few orns before. Seconds later Prowl and Hound added their voices, and from the wagon, Trailbreaker tried to join, though his ended with his engine sputtering, and the black mech muttered darkly as he slumped back down.

Only a few Minotorons lifted their heads at what should have been a frightening sound. The mechs, however, popped up instantly, turning their faces towards the Autobots, and as soon as they spotted them, answered in their own howls as well, their voices lighter and more youthful. The noise echoed through the hills, and Sideswipe felt something deep within his frame quiver, as if some primal urge in his cortex had been activated.

Either that, or the soundwaves had rattled a nut loose.

The gray mech raced towards them, the youngling following after as soon as he was done subsparing the leftover bindings. The Autobots waited for them, their stances and their tones friendly as they called out to the two younger mechs, waving their arms in greeting and matching their smiles. The gray one reached them first, and immediately started jabbering, his blue optics lit up brightly as he swung his head back and forth between each one of them.

“Bluestreak,” Prowl said as he pointed out the gray mech to Sideswipe, while the orange youngling ran up to Hound and was pulled into a hug, the Autobot talking excitedly to his young friend and rubbing the top of his head. “Hot Rod.”

“Bluestreak...?”

At his name, Bluestreak turned to Sideswipe, uncertain optics taking him in, before confidently launching into what could only be a long greeting, or an explanation, or questions, or...maybe all of the above. Sideswipe's optic ridges raised high as the young mech went on and on, unafraid of the
stranger, and he wasn't sure if it was because he was next to Prowl or if he was always this outgoing.

Prowl had called him 'Bluestreak' several orns ago when he'd been pretending to join in a conversation.

“...Bluestreak,” Sideswipe said again to Prowl, this time more pointed and accusing. The edge of Prowl's mouth twitched in the faintest of grins, while Jazz laughed outright and took his turn to bear-hug Hot Rod.

Bluestreak cocked his head to the side at Sideswipe, and pointed to him, his vocalizer clicking and whirling rapidly. The mercenary could only catch a few words, let alone string them together. He swore that his processor was cooking itself as it tried to keep up.

“Sideswipe,” he eventually said, and pointed to himself.

The gray mech made an awed “ooo” sound as he stepped closer, then tried to start a conversation with him. Or rather, tried to speak at him. Sideswipe got the idea that he would have had difficulty getting a word in even if he understood the language, and he glanced at Prowl helplessly.

The white mech had the gall to smirk at him as he crossed his arms and let his friend keep talking.

“Dumb-aft,” he muttered, to which Prowl snorted before taking a knee and gently rubbing Hot Rod's head affectionately. His young age must have held great importance to the Autobots.

Sideswipe now saw that each of the young mechs were carrying some sort of weapon; a long, slightly curved stick with a string running from end to end, and a tubed basket of feathered sticks hanging over their shoulders. Some sort of slingshot projectile?

“What is that?” he pointed at the one that Bluestreak was clutching in his hand.

The gray mech answered in a surprised tone, then looked to Prowl, who clarified what Sideswipe wanted to know. With a sharp nod, he took one of the feathered sticks, said something to the red mech along the lines of 'Watch!', notched it, pulled it back, and fired towards the far hillside, right over the Minotorons. The stick flew straight into the center of one of the crystals, cracking it and sticking, and quivered there.

“So this is what you guys use instead of a gun,” Sideswipe breathed, shocked by the weapon's accuracy and penetration. It was no blaster, but the projectile could puncture through heavy armor and cause serious damage while it lingered in a mech's systems.

Hot Rod bounced up and down on his heels, his squeaking voice calling for attention, then notched his own weapon and repeated the exercise. His own stick landed a bit off-center, but held as well. Jazz whistled in admiration, and the youngling beamed at him.

“Bow.” Prowl pointed at the weapon he'd used, then at the sticks. “Arrows.”

“Bow and arrows,” Sideswipe repeated. “Got it.”

For a few breems the younger mechs showed off their proficiency to their older comrades, firing over and over at the crystal outcropping, then at one even further when there were too many arrows sticking out of it for it to be a viable target. Bluestreak's somehow always landed dead-center, no matter how far he aimed, or if the wind shifted. Hot Rod's was not as good, but Sideswipe assumed that the youngling was still learning, and besides, he was still better than if the mercenary tried to pick it up and give it a shot. He preferred his high-powered rifle to the primitive tech, though he
had to admit that using a bow took a certain amount of skill and talent, as opposed to him aiming a gun at a target and pulling the trigger.

Another howl from an adjacent hill grabbed all of their attentions. Bluestreak turned, considered the sound, then howled back, his dentals baring, Hot Rod following his lead shortly after him, as did the rest of the Autobots.

Figures appeared over the hill. Three more mechs, two walking, one being carried over the first one's shoulder. All three of them waved at the other group, then kept moving towards the north.

Sideswipe pointed at the red and blue mech hanging off the first one's shoulder. “Is he hurt?” he asked Prowl. “I still have some more Flexi-Plex in my kit.” When the white mech could only give him a confused stare, he mimicked picking something out of a bag, then molding a piece of Flexi-Plex and placing it on an injury. Prowl considered him, and the other group, before calling out an order and gesturing towards them with his hand.

Hound gave Hot Rod one more hug, and said a happy word to Bluestreak, then scampered back to the wagon, and guided the Minotorons forward. The two younger mechs said their goodbyes, then made their way back down the hill to finish their chores.

The wagon had to work around the perimeter of the herd, lest they go right through and get stuck by a stubborn creature not moving out of their way. Jazz called out to the other group, and they slowed their pace, waiting for the wagon to catch up to them. As they got closer, Sideswipe squinted at them, making out more details of what he assumed were other Autobots.

The one walking along unburdened was red and grey, a heavy build like Trailbreaker, but instead of a poncho, he wore a strip of cloth and hide running from his shoulder to his hip, like Prowl. His voice was deep and gruff, and Prowl immediately spoke to him first, his own tone cordial, while the red mech smirked and patted a heavy hand on his shoulder when he got close. The second one was white, a medium-build, his armor pointed and spiked, especially around his head. A cloak was wrapped around his shoulders, the ends whipping behind him as he walked. What intrigued Sideswipe the most, though, were the pair of short swords attached to each of his hips, and the long, beautifully designed broad sword strapped to his back. The mercenary was immediately interested in him far above the rest, and would have tried to speak to the other sword-bearer, but before he could, the light red-and-blue mech that he was carrying lifted his head.

“Ah! New friends, I see! Good day! A pleasure to meet all of you.”

Sideswipe nearly fell over.

It was a different dialect, but--

“You speak Cybertronian Standard?!” he demanded, his voice ending on a higher octave that was nearly a squeak.

The mech turned his face towards him, his own optics delighted. “As do you! Hello! I assume you are also a prisoner, like myself?”

“Sort of...”

The white mech carrying him adjusted his 'prisoner' to rest over his shoulder more comfortably, his optics taking in Sideswipe suspiciously, wary that he was speaking the same language as his captive, before softening as Prowl extended his hands and said what had to be an explanation. “Drift,” he introduced himself, waving his free hand.
“Ironhide,” said the other red mech, his voice thick and drawling.

“Oh, where are my manners?” The ‘prisoner’ cleared his vocalizer. “My name is Perceptor, astrophysicist, ecologist, chemist, and naturalist of the great metropolis of Tarn.”

“I'm Sideswipe. A nobody from Kaon.”

The rest of the Autobots in Prowl's troop said their names to Perceptor as well, but the scientist's focus was on his fellow city-mech. The groups combined as they marched forward, the Autobots chattering amongst themselves in friendly and familiar tones, while Perceptor eyed Sideswipe from the odd angle of hanging over Drift's shoulder, the red mercenary needing to walk directly behind Drift to speak with him. The Autobot showed no inclination to put him down so that he could talk more comfortably, and neither did Perceptor ask him to do so. As he got closer, Sideswipe noted a piece of cloth tied around Perceptor's waist as well, though it was in better shape than his own piece of scrap bouncing along at his thighs.

“Quite a long way from home, aren't you? Not that I can say that it hasn't been an expedition for myself, but you've traversed a tremendous distance, if you've wandered all the way from Kaon. Must have been a grand odyssey!”

“Y-Yeah, it was.”

Primus, he hoped that was Cybertronian Standard.

Hound snickered, then lifted his hand and pretended it was talking, mumbling 'Bar-bar-bar' to himself, earning a snorted guffaw from Jazz.

Perceptor continued. “So how did you end up with these fellows? They're a motley bunch.”

“I was guarding a caravan sent by Sentinel Prime to the Decepticons.” At the last word, Drift and Ironhide stiffened, but Jazz spoke to them in their own language, and their tension eased. “The barbarians attacked and overpowered my vehicle.”

“I prefer to call them 'nomads.' Calling them 'barbarians' makes them sound mindless and soulless.”

Sideswipe waved his hand dismissively. “Whatever. Anyway, they knocked me out cold, tied me up and blindfolded me. They took most of our energon and supplies, then Prowl over there decided to take me too.”

“Oh my. Was anyone injured?”

“Just some bumps on the helm. Hopefully my team's gotten back to Kaon by now.” His spark twisted a little, and he was surprised to realize that he missed the minibots. And he hated minibots. Perceptor was the first friendly voice he'd heard in Cybertronian Standard in far too long.

“Well, ah...I'm glad that you're able to peruse the wildlands freely now,” Perceptor offered in a weak condolence.

Sideswipe smirked. “They think of me as a warrior, just like them.”

“Oh, you're a yoska?”

His optics widened, as did Drift's and Ironhide's. Jazz was hurriedly giving them an explanation again, and Sideswipe tuned it out as he leaned towards Perceptor. “Yeah! Have you got a translation program running yet? Because I'll be slagged if I can understand more than twenty
words of their babble.”

Perceptor tapped the side of his helm. “Nearly there. I was working on a vocabulary translation long before I met Drift and Ironhide. Their grammar is hard to pin down, though.”

*Oh, thank Primus.*

The red mech vented a sigh of sweet relief. When Perceptor was done, he could transfer the program, and Sideswipe would finally understand anything that the smaller mech had translated from the barbaric language. Or, nomadic. Whatever.

“My team was in the wildlands on a meteorological project, but I do enjoy studying the nomadic cultures as well. Unfortunately both of these gentlemechs are few of words, though Drift has been kind enough to attempt to answer most of my questions when I first met him. He and Ironhide rescued my science team from an attack by another tribe, then stayed with us for the orn.” He lowered his voice, though he spoke excitedly. “They're as curious about us city-mechs as we are of them!”

Sideswipe frowned. “I'm not curious. I want to go home.”

“Oh.” Perceptor's face fell. “I do hope that Prowl allows you.”

“He'd better,” he growled over his shoulder, but the white mech was deep into a conversation with Ironhide. He changed the subject back to the scientist. “So you're on good terms with Ironhide and Drift, right?”

“Indubitably!” the smaller mech grinned, still ignoring his ridiculous position.

“But, ah--” An optic ridge raised, Sideswipe pointed at him. “He's...not letting you walk.”

“He insists on ferrying me, and who am I to tell him no?”

“That's not exactly 'ferrying.' And I thought you said that you were a prisoner?”

“That is right, I am.”

“But you're not fighting to get away? It's not like he tied you up.”

“Ironhide did want to at first.” Perceptor looked cross. “Do I look like I could outrun either of them? Terribly preposterous idea. It would have only stressed me and made transporting me more of a chore. Anyway, Drift picked me up, and I didn't struggle. I'm perfectly capable of walking, but he insists on this.”

For emphasis, he stretched one of his feet out, and Drift responded by wrapping his arm more tightly around his legs, holding him still.

What he was not expecting was Drift's other hand to briefly massage his aft cheek with a low, sultry word. Perceptor squeaked, and Sideswipe's optics grew huge, before he burst into a cackle.

“H-He's not usually this forward!” the scientist stammered over Sideswipe's laughter. “Oooh—Drift, what did you do that for?! I know perfectly well what you want me to do when we get to your camp, but that was uncalled for!” He smacked a fist against his back. “Now see here, you brute! That is enough!”

Drift was chuckling too, and murmured something that sounded like an apology. Perceptor pouted
at him, crossing his arms against his back, and glared as he swayed back and forth with each of the
bigger mech's footsteps.

“Honestly! You've already claimed me as your mate, so you could at least wait until we have the
decency of privacy!”

Sideswipe's laugh abruptly cut off, as did his footsteps.

Wait, what.

WHAT.

“He's taking you as his mate?!” Concerned for the lightly-armored mech, Sideswipe hurried back
to him, his mind whirling as he tried to figure out how he was going to rescue Perceptor from
Drift's hands with six Autobot warriors around them, and two younglings that would see them
escaping and run for help. “Has he hurt you?!”

“Oh no, no, no, nothing like that!” The scientist raised his hands placatingly. “It seems to be a
ritual for these wildland mechs.”

“Ritual?! Like a sacrifice--?!?”

“Goodness, no! They can either take a mate or partner from their own tribe, or, if they want more
respect, kidnap someone they fancy from another tribe. The act of courting a previously unknown
mech is on par with a great, heroic deed. One must hunt down their prospective mate, capture and
drag them back, and then--”

The concept of kidnapping for the purpose of mating was making Sideswipe's head spin. What did
that even mean?! 'Mate' as in 'interface,' or 'mate' as in...as in bonding?! He refreshed his optics
several times, his audials no longer hearing the rest of Perceptor's explanation, and he turned to
Prowl, who had been chatting with Ironhide all this time.

He thought of the first orn, right after the attack on the caravan, when Prowl had held him up to the
rest of the Autobots, patted his own chestplate, then Sideswipe's.

Fraggit all. He'd later assumed that he was calling for his protection over Sideswipe, or explaining
that he wasn't some monster, but a mech like them. He'd been completely wrong.

Prowl had been claiming him.

His tanks flipped, threatening to purge.

The white mech happened to look in his direction. Sideswipe didn't know what expression he wore,
but Prowl suddenly looked like he was facing a charging Minotoron.

And then he was charging at Prowl, shouting at him, cut off from getting too close as Jazz
suddenly realized the danger and snatched his arm, hauling him to a stop as he twisted it behind his
back.

“You kidnapped me to make me your 'mate'?!?” Sideswipe screeched, fighting Jazz's restraining
grip. “That's why I'm here?! You dragged me all the way up here to make me...what, some sort of
slave to you?! I've known you for a handful of orns, and now I'll be dedicated to you and only
you?!”

Jazz was jabbering something in his audial. Hound had stopped guiding the Minotorons to run
back and grip his other arm too, and Sideswipe was pinned between them, but that didn't stop him from fighting, the other two mechs digging their feet into the ground as they tried to restrain the red mercenary. Prowl could only stare at him, baffled as to why his new 'mate' had suddenly turned on him, while Perceptor threw up his hands and shouted.

“It's not like that, Sideswipe! He does not want to make you a slave! Drift, please, he's panicking--”

Guessing what he wanted, Drift obligingly stopped and walked back, shifting Perceptor forward so that he was carried at his chestplate, where he could talk more appropriately, the scientist's arms slipping around the swordsmech's neck for balance. Perceptor spoke fast, moving into what little nomadic language he knew, apparently telling the rest of the group why the red mech was so worked up. Ignoring him, Sideswipe gritted his dentals, and struggled harder against Hound and Jazz's hands, twisting his body around as much as he could. Ironhide started forward with a growl, ready to help hold down the rebellious city-mech if needed.

“Let me go!” Sideswipe yelled. “I'm not going to be some toy to a bunch of barbarians--”

“Sideswipe.”

He looked up, and Prowl was right there, directly in front of him, his faceplates tight and looming. The sight would have scared anyone else slag-less, but Sideswipe only sneered in return and wriggled his arms back and forth.

“You took me away from Sunstreaker, Prowl.”

The Autobot flinched as if he'd been slapped.

“Sunstreaker?” Hound murmured.

“My twin,” the mercenary hissed at him, “You were in recharge during that little conversation.” The green mech still didn't understand him, but he didn't care.

Prowl mumbled and shook his head. His gaze returned to Sideswipe, and white hand reached for his helm.

Sideswipe automatically pulled back his head back, as if expecting to be hit. But when Prowl's fingertips appeared on his jaw and helm, the touch was gentle, soothing. And by now, familiar.

Prowl spoke slowly, authority dripping from each word. But underneath all that was some sort of a deeper, sincere promise. He stroked Sideswipe's head, the other mech biting his lips into a thin line as his tactile sensors lit up happily, despite his rageful mood.

“Trust me.”

There it was, that Primus-fragged phrase again. He grimaced, and squeezed his optics shut.

Did he trust Prowl, after knowing that he'd brought him here to be his 'mate'? Did he trust someone who might force him to bond?!

...He had never hurt him. He had never mistreated him.

Sideswipe opened one optic to glance at Drift and Perceptor. Despite teasing him before, the white swordsmech was holding the scientist with as much reverence as if he were made of a fragile crystal. That may well be because Perceptor had the lightest armor of all the mechs present, and if that were his reason...then he was still a good mech.
Prowl had always been good to him. Even when he'd acted like such an aft to him.

Pit, even when he'd done something terrible to all of the Autobots.

He needed to tell Prowl.

Slowly, he let his fists relax, then his arms, then the rest of his body, going submissively limp in the other mechs' grip, his head bowed forward. Jazz watched him, then hesitantly let go, as did Hound. As the tension around them burned away, Prowl risked a step closer to Sideswipe, and put a hand on his other cheek, turning his face towards him, still with no threat to do him harm, even though Sideswipe had no way to fight back. Especially because Sideswipe had no way to fight back.

The red mech vented, still angry, but his rage was lost. Mostly.

“When we get to your tribe,” he muttered, “we're sending a message to Sunstreaker, and telling him all that's happened. Whatever you have planned for me, he has to know. Sa?”

Prowl still didn't understand. “Trust me?” he repeated, questioning this time.

“...Yeah. Sa. I trust you.” He glared at his 'mate.' "You son of a glitch."

A shout from Trailbreaker caught all of their attentions.

There was a beat when all of them stared at the rolling wagon, the Minotorons plodding on, Trailbreaker yowling and flailing, his injuries preventing him from easily getting over the side rail by himself.

No one was guiding the wagon.

They stared, Trailbreaker's voice escalating as the wagon veered off-course and crested over the next hill.

Sideswipe's outburst was suddenly very trivial.

They all rushed after the wagon as one, Hound yanking out his lasso and Jazz steps behind him, Prowl and Ironhide sprinting along and shouting, Sideswipe right after them, and Perceptor whooping with glee as he was bounced around in Drift's arms.

“What an adventure!” he shouted to Sideswipe. “Isn't it grand?!”

Drift said something to his mate, then grunted a swear and nearly tripped over the red mercenary. Sideswipe had stopped short, frozen, not looking at the runaway wagon anymore or the Autobots chasing it, but at the valley below them.

His pump felt like it had skipped a beat.

Primus Almighty.

“...That's a lot of tents,” he breathed, his optics trying to take in the tribe's entire camp spread out before him.
For people who have read my SARMA fics, yes, SARMA is leaking into here. They are two very different universes, but I may play with some more leakage later on.
Chapter 12: Tribe

There had to be more than a hundred mechs and femmes in the valley, and just as many tents. Sideswipe's jaw felt like it would be stuck open forever. Never before had he seen an encampment like this.

"By the Matrix..."

He turned to see Drift stepping up, still carrying an awestruck Perceptor. The size of the scientist's optics rivaled his own. The two city-mechs could only stare, drinking in the sight of so many tents, the Autobot tribe the size of a minor village.

Behind them, he could hear the Minotorons bellowing as Hound lassoed one of them and brought the wagon back under control, Trailbreaker roaring obscenities at his friends for abandoning him, while Jazz cheerfully retorted. Sideswipe and Perceptor ignored them, unable to break away from the sight of the tribe.

"This is fantastic!" The scientist bounced up and down in Drift's arms, the Autobot grimacing as he adjusted his hold on his mate. "I've never seen so many nomads in one location! Do you suppose more of them speak Standard? I would love to see any sort of writing system. Surely with that many mechs in one area, there is a need for at least tallies. Oh, or literature!"

Drift rumbled something in amusement at him.

"Alright, well, perhaps a more visual form of storytelling instead? Or any storytelling, really. Oral? Yes, that sounds more reasonable for the nomads."

Prowl had come up behind Sideswipe, and placed a tentative hand on his shoulder. Sideswipe scowled, still angry at the white Autobot, and his servos tensed underneath the white fingers.

His mate. He was this mech's fragging mate.

He wanted to turn around and shout at him some more. Primus knew he deserved it. But that was all that Sideswipe could do, and how would that help? Prowl knew he was angry, and didn't want to be there. And yet, here he was.

Instead, Sideswipe gave Prowl a weary look as Perceptor kept chattering about all that he wanted to see, the scientist's pace rapid-fire.

"Bluestreak?" he muttered.

Prowl made a sound that was suspiciously like a laughed snort being held in, though he was disciplined enough not to let it show on his face.

"Sa." he murmured back.

With the wagon back under control, Hound started to lead the Minotorons down into the valley, Jazz and Ironhide holding onto the sides, keeping the wheels from sliding on the hill. Drift followed after them, the Tarnish scientist still jabbering away in his arms.

The white hand reached down, and held Sideswipe's fingers.
He paused, then returned the light squeeze.

He had nothing to fear.

The red mech had little time to comprehend that he was being led along until he realized that the camp was suddenly closer than it was a breem ago. His pump's speed increased, and he gulped. Despite the warm, friendly aura that the camp seemed to naturally extend to him, he couldn't fight the feeling that invisible gates had been shut behind him, snatching away his last chance to flee back to Kaon.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

"By Solus Prime's Hammer, look at this!"

Perceptor sprinted to the other side of the through-way, Sideswipe jogging right behind him, his curiosity blooming. Once they were inside the camp, Drift had finally set Perceptor down, likely assured that his mate had no chance of running away and escaping when surrounded by the rest of the tribe. Likewise, Prowl didn't seem to mind Sideswipe tagging along after the scientist that was running here and there, the white mech more concerned with getting Trailbreaker off of the wagon and over to one of the largest tents towards the center, which Sideswipe guessed was some sort of infirmary.

If he had to describe the Autobot encampment in one word, it would be colorful. Their clothing, the decorations around the seams of the tents, the designs woven into animals hides, the crystals that were allowed to keep growing naturally alongside the structures...

He had to admit that it really was beautiful.

The group had been welcomed as soon as they'd drawn near the outer ring of tents, and though Perceptor and Sideswipe had received odd and dubious glances at first, the rest of the tribe quickly seemed to understand that the visitors had been brought in by friends and would do them no harm. There was one exception: a mech with the same frame as Sideswipe, his color scheme also red and white but in different patches, had pulled them aside and searched them for hidden weapons. The mercenary had been shocked by the mech that could have been his clone, and stared at him as much as he in return kept a wary optic on the mercenary and scientist. Eventually the supposed-guard became more interested in the boxes of foreign supplies that had been stolen from Sideswipe's caravan, and he left the two city-mechs alone.

There was a certain organization to the tents, though Sideswipe could not yet define it. He did note that the largest, most important-looking public tents were in the middle of the camp, and the rest of them were facing through-ways branching off from the center, but he couldn't figure out whose private tents went where and why. There had to be some sort of system. Maybe by job, or caste? But many of the Autobots were not close to their own tents as they worked or simply milled around, and he couldn't identify if someone had a higher status than another, besides the strapped cloths that both Ironhide and Prowl wore, and that seemed to be a mark of seniority or leadership, not value.

Perceptor was infatuated with it all, talking to both Sideswipe and himself as they explored. He knelt down in front of a small tabletop in front of one of the tents, and inspected the pottery set on display, the plates, bowls and cups mostly earthware, but Sideswipe immediately identified some as being stolen from one of the cities. The light-green femme sitting cross-legged nearby, presumably the merchant, kept an optic on Perceptor as he picked up one of the bowls and turned it over in his hands. She chittered and pulled her hood back to get a better look at him, her voice curious, and not seeming to mind that he was handling everything on the table.
Another mech, dark-blue with white appendages poking out of his back, walked up and picked up two of the cups. He and the femme chatted for a little while, their tones cordial, and then he walked off, the cups tucked to the front of his poncho.

“Hey, uh--” Sideswipe watched the retreating mech, then shook Perceptor's shoulder. “Did you see that? He didn't pay for those.”

“Hmm? What?” Perceptor looked up. “Oh. Some of the nomad tribes don't use a currency system.”

Sideswipe stared. “But he didn't give her anything in return! Don't they at least barter?!”

“For things that they want, yes. But if it's something they need, they may work on some sort of an economic honor system. He'll repay her at a later time, either in another item, or labor.”

“How on Cybertron would they keep track of something like that if they all do it?”

“They don't.” He picked up a plate and held it up, fascinated by the looping design spinning around it's edges. “Sometimes bartering is not feasible. Not everyone creates an item to trade, or has the strength to repay a favor through labor. Let's say that this femme needs nothing that the mech could offer her. She has bowls and cups, but he has an entire Minotoron. He could not pay her in quarters of a Minotoron.”

Sideswipe briefly imagined how such an exchange would work, and he shook his head to get that visual out of his cortex.

“So,” Perceptor continued, “he owes her a debt, but has no currency, which is just a physical form of debt. He could fulfill that debt by repaying someone who she owes a debt.”

He touched a metal plate with an insignia of a manufacturer in Tarn.

“Let's say that this was found by one of the nomads on patrol and given to her. She owes a debt to the patrol. So our friend over there will take the shift of a patrol the next time that one of them is injured. He has cups, the patrol has an extra mech, and she has a new plate. All of their debts will be fulfilled, and they're all satisfied.”

“Wait. But how does he know that the patrol gave her the plate?”

Perceptor grinned at him. “That's what I find intriguing. He doesn't. He sees where his help is needed, assumes that he's fulfilling a debt somewhere, and just does it. The Autobots are all obligated to each other, and their needs and debts are balanced out in the end.”

Sideswipe crossed his arms as he let his processor roll over that. “...That's some of the most primitive slag that I've ever heard. They'll never know who owes who.”

“It works for them!” the scientist laughed. “Granted, they still barter for things that they want, which would not help the rest of the tribe, and for large things. But there's nothing comparable to the extravagance of the cities out here, no way for their collective debt to suddenly become out of control. They help each other because they need to, and want to. They don't think about needing to work together any more than you or I think about needing to ventilate. They just do.”

“And if that mech over there was a lazy-frame and did nothing to help anyone after he took the cups?”

“Then the rest of the tribe would note that, and shun him. Of course, I'd imagine that a few angry tribe members would shout at him to do some work before it came to that.”
“So...she's not really a merchant, then.”

“Nope. She's who the tribe goes to when they need pottery, and these are likely pieces that weren't immediately needed.”


“Perhaps. Oh, look!”

At the far end of the tent line, someone had asked Dark Blue a question, and he'd ducked into his tent, returning a moment later with a thick, woven cloth, the kind that made their ponchos.

“I wonder if he made that himself? Oh, if he did, perhaps everything that he makes is inside of his tent, to keep them out of the elements?” Perceptor bounced up. “Let's go see!”

Sideswipe grasped his arm. “Let's not.” He pointed over to the wagon, which was quickly being cleared out, mechs and femmes coming by and picking at the stolen tools and supplies, some frowning before putting back what they didn't want, or turning to another Autobot and handing it over. The energon containers were gone, rolled to another big tent that must have been a granary. With the unloading nearly finished, Prowl and Drift were heading back towards their mates, the white mech briefly giving directions to someone who was carrying Sideswipe's sword and pack away. He stared after them, knowing that Prowl wouldn't allow them to be given away or destroyed, but still unhappy that his belongings were being taken from his sight.

“Another time, then,” Perceptor nodded in agreement. “Though I must say, I look forward to exploring the rest of their camp!”

“I don't,” Sideswipe growled.

“You're not enjoying the charm of this place?” the scientist questioned.

The mercenary paused.

...Was he?

“...”

...Fraggit.

He was.

Sideswipe scowled, the look darkening further when Prowl came to his side and took his arm.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The center was occupied by a large bonfire, with plenty of space around it to give the tribe a decent common area, the largest tents encircling and pointing towards the fire. Dozens of Autobots were standing, sitting and talking, chatting with one another either briefly as they walked through the common area, or lying on mats and sunning themselves, having been there all day. Younglings were running around too, shrieking and laughing as they chased each other around legs and through groups. Every so often an adult would give in to the urge to play and snatch a hand at them, hugging and tickling any youngling that they caught, despite their squeals and kicks. A few of the oldest femmes, their paint dulled and the lines of their faceplates thick, scowled at all the racket that the younger ones were making.
Prowl and Drift led their mates through the crowd and towards the front of the largest tents. Jazz, Hound and Ironhide were following along, likely to report to whoever they were taking the city-mechs to see. Prowl had the map gripped tightly in one hand, the other on his mate, and Sideswipe glanced nervously at him every so often as they weaved through the tribe.

“Oh, hello little one!”

One of the younglings had run up to walk alongside Perceptor, and he bent down to rub the femme's helm as she babbled something up at him. He answered, his own speech much slower and deliberate, and Sideswipe could all but hear the incomplete translation program chugging away. The youngling said something back, then hurried off, quickly losing interest in the slow-speaking mech over whatever the rest of her friends were doing.

“There's a lot of them,” the red mercenary noted. The ratio of younglings to adults was the same as the one of minibot to standard-sized mechs in Kaon, but he had yet to see a single minibot in the Autobot camp.

He hated minibots. Younglings were fine in small doses. Usually.

“There are.” The scientist's face fell. “There has to be. The wildlands are far more dangerous for these little ones than the cities.”

“...Primus.” He gave the youngling mechs and femmes a second glance. “How many will--”

“I don't know. And I don't want to think about it.”

Sideswipe agreed with a grim nod.

The group's pace slowed, and both city-mechs looked forward. The crowd around them had grown thicker, then suddenly stopped at an invisible line. Prowl came forward, shouldering his way past the next mech, the rest parting when they saw who he was. The group followed after him.

“Prowl!”

The voice belonged to a nomad at least a full head taller than everyone else, including Sideswipe. The only reason that mercenary hadn't spotted him before was because everyone else was crowded around him, but now they thinned out directly in front of him. He was red and blue, heavily armored, and a mask covered the face below his nasal ridge. Like Prowl and Ironhide, he wore a long strip of cloth and hide around one shoulder, but this one was made of finer material than anything that anyone else was wearing, silky and completely red.

At the cloth's front, right over his chestplate, was a large picture of the stern red face on all of the Autobots' clothing, stitched in gold thread.

He was waving at Prowl and stepping towards him, but as soon as he came close enough, Prowl stopped and bowed respectfully and formally. All the other Autobots in his group took their cue to do the same, as did Perceptor when he saw Drift doing it.

All of them, but Sideswipe.

Ironhide noticed him out of the corner of his optic, and huffed, but the red mech refused to move, once again defying any wildland norm that he thought was unnecessary. His optics narrowed at who he assumed to be the leader of the Autobots.

The big mech glanced his way. Sideswipe was expecting him to sneer and growl at the newcomer,
demanding that an outsider pay him due respect. That's what Sentinel would have done in his place. It would be the quickest way out of here, to be tossed out into the wildlands by their leader. But the Autobot stared at him, then raised his head slightly and lifted an optic ridge, as if asking a question. It wasn't a challenge that he bow, though his optics were sharply assessing him, and something in the mercenary's spark told him that this mech was far wiser than he appeared.

Sideswipe nodded his head in the barest of respects, never taking his blue optics off of him. And yet that seemed more than enough to the mech, who spoke to Prowl again, cueing all of them to straighten up.

The other mechs and femmes in the common area were turned their way, curious to the discussion between two senior-ranking Autobots. As they talked, Drift said something quietly to Perceptor. The scientist startled, then turned and asked for clarification. When Drift said it again, he paused, then shuffled over to Sideswipe, and lifted a hand to whisper into his audial.

“Drift says his name is Optimus Prime.”

Sideswipe froze up. “...What in the Nine Pits is a Prime doing all the way out here?!” he hissed back.

“I have no idea!”

“Did he defect from one of the cities, or was he captured, like us?!”

“I strongly doubt it. It would make international news if a Prime was kidnapped.”

“Then if he's a nomad, how do they know to refer to him as a Prime?!”

Prowl was giving some sort of report. Every so often Optimus would nod, showing that he was paying attention, or interrupt and ask a question. Sideswipe heard Trailbreaker's name mentioned, and the lines of Optimus's faceplates crinkled, as if he was frowning behind the mask. He asked about a...ratchet?

Why did the Autobots think that everything could be solved with a ratchet?

Whatever it was, Prowl answered with an affirmative “Sa,” and their leader looked relieved. The white mech continued, then, eventually, gestured to the two city-mechs. Optimus's optics fell on them again.

Perceptor gulped. “I suppose introductions are in order,” he affirmed, mostly to himself.

He drew an intake, then stepped forward, Sideswipe right behind him, until they were standing before the Autobot leader.

“Greetings!” The red scientist spread his hands in a peaceful gesture. “My name is Perceptor, and it is a pleasure to meet you, Optimus Prime. I hail from Tarn, which is a metropolis very unlike your camp! I look forward to learning more about your tribe, and if it may assist you into an embrace of technology, my specializations are as an astrophysicist, ecologist, chemist, and—Oh!”

He was interrupted by Drift affectionately wrapping an arm around him. The swordsmech grinned at the smaller mech, and most of the Autobots chuckled, including Optimus.

Perceptor's engine squeaked as he realized something. “I...was not translating a word of that, was I?”
“Nope,” Sideswipe smirked. “That was 100% Cybertronian Standard.”

“Oh dear.”

“I'm pretty sure they don't have a word for 'astrophysicist' anyway.”

After Drift said something to their leader, Optimus reached forward, and patted Perceptor's shoulder in a friendly, comfortable way as he spoke to him. Sideswipe furrowed his optic ridges. Most Primes demanded respect from their underlings. Optimus's mannerisms didn't seem that much different than any other mech, other than that he was the biggest and naturally pulled at their attention.

He then turned to the mercenary. Sideswipe pointed to himself.

“Sideswipe,” he said simply.

“Sideswipe,” Optimus repeated, then said something else, a greeting that included Prowl's name.

“Yeah. Dumb-Aft dragged me here to be his mate.”

Perceptor gawked at him. “Sideswipe! Language!” he hissed, appalled.

“Oh, c'mon!” He shrugged, and smirked at Optimus. “It's not like he can understand me.”

Prowl cleared his vocalizer, then stepped forward again to Sideswipe's side. He put a hand on his back, as if steadying his mate, then said something to Optimus. When the Autobot leader turned towards him, he held out the map, and said a word, identifying it.

*Iacon.*

Optimus's engine revved, his back straightening in surprise. Immediately all the other mechs in the common area stopped what they were doing, went quiet and looked his way.

“What is that?” Perceptor whispered, but Drift only tightened his grip on him, his mouth pressed into a tight, thin line.

Optimus asked something, slow and deliberate, directly at Prowl as he took the map, holding it with a mix of reverence and revulsion, as if it were a magical object that could suddenly grow fangs and bite him.

Prowl hesitated for a long moment. Then, after gathering himself, he patted Sideswipe's shoulder, his answer.

There was a collective gasp from the Autobots closest to them, who stepped back. Worried murmurs buzzed through the air, and Sideswipe's armor prickled as he felt dozens of optics suddenly on him.

None were as intense as Optimus Prime's.

The mech's attitude had taken a complete turn. The map was gripped tighter into a fist, and his optics narrowed, glaring acutely at the red mercenary before him, his presence changing from warm and open to looming and dangerous.

Sideswipe felt his battle program surging online, and he struggled to quiet it, the task made harder as the murmurs from the tribe changed to angry sneers. The grip on his shoulder increased, Prowl pulling him closer, his doorwings flaring up defensively as he looked around them, as if
shielding his mate from the rest of the Autobots.

“Sideswipe?!” Perceptor had no answer for what was happening, and then suddenly he was not
there anymore, pulled back as Drift hurried to remove him from a situation that was quickly
becoming unstable.

There were more footsteps nearby. Hound, and Jazz, taking up positions on his other side and
behind him, their faces scowling at the crowd, daring someone to come forward and do their friend
harm.

Sideswipe recalled orns ago, Pit, only his second orn with the Autobots, when Hound had
demanded an answer about the map, and when Sideswipe had dismissively ignored him, the green
mech had pulled out a knife and been ready to attack him. Now the same thing was happening,
except his opponent was a lot bigger, and there were dozens of mechs surrounding him, looking
like they wanted to rip his head from his shoulders. His only consolation was that three mechs were
guarding him once again, one of them who had nearly stabbed him before, his mind changed to
instead protect a mech he'd previously regarded as an enemy.

Optimus spoke, his tone cold, asking a question directly to the red mercenary, who narrowed his
optics at him in return.

“I don't know why you're so fragged off at me,” Sideswipe said slowly to the Prime, his vocalizer
hissing, “but I haven't touched your slagging map. I don't want anything to do with that Primus-
fragged thing.”

Whatever Optimus had thought he'd said, it had been the wrong answer. His engine reving
dangerously, he reached for him, only to be blocked by Prowl, who positioned himself between his
leader and Sideswipe. The white mech spoke rapidly, arguing, then placed a hand on his
chestplate, then the same hand over Sideswipe's.

The message was my clear. “He's my mate. Don't touch him.”

The Prime's rage only moved to Prowl instead. His deep vocalizer rumbled something dangerous at
him. Prowl answered quickly, the sentence ending with 'yoska'.

“Na,” Optimus growled immediately. “Na yoska.”

Sideswipe stiffened.

Not a yoska?

After coming all this way, after being dragged all over Primus's creation, after all that he'd been
through, their leader was going to declare him as anything less than a warrior?!

Something within him snapped.

There were alarmed shouts from Jazz and Hound, and a gasp from Prowl as Sideswipe shoved past
him to stand toe-to-toe with the leader of the Autobots, his face turned up to the taller mech.

“Sa yoska,” he growled. “You have no fragging right to take that from me.”

Prowl grabbed his upper arm to pull him back, but instead of trying to yank his arm away from
him, Sideswipe turned and shoved himself close to the white mech, catching him off balance, their
vents rasping over each other as their foreheads touched, the Autobot startled by his mate's actions
just long enough for Sideswipe to pick-pocket his subspace and yank out his staff. It was whipped
back around, pointed right at Optimus's head, Sideswipe's voice roaring a challenge at the Autobot leader.

“You want me to prove myself too?! You and me, right now, so I can wipe the ground with your--”

The air was knocked out of his intake as three Autobots tackled him, Jazz and Hound crashing into him from the side and pinning him to the ground, Prowl grabbing his wrist to disarm and restrain him as he took back his weapon.

The voices around them became shrill, mixing with his friends' shouts and pleads for him to stop moving, the noise pounding in his audials as he ignored them and fought to rise back to his feet, the ground crunching underneath his plating, and his own cries of frustration seemed too far away, overlaid by insane laughter high above where he was struggling to free himself--

Optimus's voice boomed above it all.

It went so quiet, so fast, his audials were left ringing in the silence. He froze, realizing that everyone else had too, though he could hear and feel his friends' rapid vents on his armor as their fingers gripped him hard enough to dent his plating.

Optimus spoke again, the same sentence, though quieter, now that he had everyone's attention.

Jazz pushed himself off of the mercenary, as did Hound. Prowl grabbed his mate's arm to pull him to his feet, a hand brushing him off before turning back to his leader, once again standing protectively in front of the red mercenary. Sideswipe shook his head once to clear it, a hand on his helm, before he looked up towards the Prime.

Optimus had an axe in his hand. He stared Sideswipe down, and the city-mech didn't need Perceptor's translation to know that the Autobot had accepted his challenge.
Chapter Notes

Want a soundtrack for this chapter?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 13: Honor

As if moved by the hands of Primus, the crowd backed away from them rapidly, yet mechs and femmes were elbowing each other towards the front of the loose circle, wanting to see the proceedings with their own optics. Perceptor's voice called above them, the scientist amongst the crowd but out of view as Drift held him back.

“Sideswipe?! What's going on?! Sideswipe!!”

Sideswipe didn't answer, his focus on the tall mech standing before him, an axe in his hand as he judged the relatively-smaller mercenary. The red mech's only protection from him was Prowl, who refused to back away with the rest of the crowd, intent on guarding his mate against his leader. Even Jazz and Hound had stepped away, acquiescing to the command to clear a space for their leader and his challenger. The white mech tried one more time to reason with Optimus, his voice becoming more frantic, one hand on Sideswipe's arm, ready to thrust him out of harm's way if the Autobot leader suddenly attacked.

The crowd had retreated far enough that the bonfire now became part of the inner circle. Despite the sun still being above the horizon, the fire's light drew dancing shadows across all three of them, the heat warming their plating, and for a moment Sideswipe could imagine that they had descended into the Pit, and that the mech before them no longer a Prime, but some giant Pit-spawn monster that he would need to face in order to reclaim his status as a yoska.

That idea excited him on a deeper, primal level, tucked somewhere in the battle programming that was surging online.

“Prowl.” He put a firm hand on the white mech's wrist. “I've got this.”

Prowl gave him a horrified look and shook his head. “Na!”

“Sa, Yoska, remember?” A wicked, confident grin came easily to his faceplates. “I've taken down mechs worse than him. The bigger they are, the harder their nose crashes into your fist on their way down.”

There was a clap of metal as Optimus tested the weight of his axe in his palm.

The distraction startled Prowl, and Sideswipe's other hand cupped the white mech's cheek to turn his optics back to him. “Sa, yoska.” He tried the other phrase. “Trust me.”

Prowl was torn, his head turning in the mercenary's hand back towards his leader, then his mate. He was nearly panicking, especially when jeers of the crowd started to again, the Autobot tribe realizing that Sideswipe may be forced to back out of his own challenge by his mate.
“You're insane if you think that I won't fight Optimus.” Sideswipe glanced at the Autobots, then locked his optics with the white mech's again. “*Trust me,*” he repeated, lowly and slowly. “They won't respect me as a warrior if I don't do this. And besides, this mech that thinks he can call himself a *Prime* needs to be knocked down a peg or two.”

Prowl's resignation was forced, but he must have eventually come to the same conclusion. His jaw set tightly, he nodded once at the red mercenary with a muttered 'Sa.' Reaching behind him, he pulled something out of his subspace pocket, then pushed it into Sideswipe's hands. Sideswipe gripped the staff, then grunted as his mate pulled him into a tight, brief embrace.

“...I'll be fine,” he murmured, returning the gesture, his head leaning forward, their helms touching. “You'll see.”

Prowl said something that might have been a quick prayer, or a wish for luck. And then he was gone, moving to a place beside Jazz, and Sideswipe was left alone, his mate's weapon in his hand as he faced down the leader of the Autobots, whose optics had moved from challenging to calculating.

Sideswipe smirked back at him, refusing to show any fear or respect, then carefully side-stepped to the right.

The shouts from the Autobots grew as the two mechs began to circle and stalk each other, both of their weapons held at the ready. Though his primary weapons were his rifle and sword, Sideswipe had trained for a variety of fighting skills, one of them being long weapons like a staff or spear. It wasn't his weapon of choice, but the weight felt good in his hands, and he was confident that he could wield it and use its speed and reach to his advantage. Optimus, meanwhile, had the size and power to match his axe. One good hit could cause severe damage, probably ending the match and the mercenary's life, but he wouldn't be able to recover from a failed attack as quickly as Sideswipe. If the mercenary could just stay one step away from him, he should be fine.

He feinted forward, jabbing the staff, checking the so-called Prime's reactions. Optimus took a step away, then came back, already knowledgeable to the staff's reach. Sideswipe pressed his lips into a thin line. It was likely that Prowl had already sparred with Optimus with this same weapon, and knew how it was wielded. Meanwhile, Sideswipe had never faced this axe-bearing opponent.

Said axe was suddenly hissing through the air. Sideswipe ducked and swore, pulling the staff down alongside him, wanting the backswing to go wild as the mercenary leapt back up.

The Prime was agile for a mech of his size. While the axe was still completing its backswing, Optimus stepped forward, a giant hand reaching out to snatch the staff's head and tear it away, and Sideswipe was forced to roll backwards to avoid him, swatting his weapon against the bigger mech's wrist, just like how older models would punish naughty younglings. There were a few laughs from the crowd at this, but far more jeers at Sideswipe, and shouts of encouragement at his opponent. Both of them recovered, then began to stalk and circle each other once more, the bonfire hot on their armor as they stepped past it.

The red mercenary caught sight of Prowl gritting his dentals, his arms crossed over his bumper, and his fingers digging into his arms, likely as he forced himself to stand to the side and not interfere. Jazz had a hand on his friend's shoulder, both holding him back and comforting him, while he roared and thrust a fist in the air, shouting encouragement at the city-mech.

This time Optimus feinted first, jumping forward and bracing himself on his heel, ready suddenly twist in a different direction. Sideswipe whipped the head of the staff down, its length held protectively in front of him and could similarly be moved to counter any attack. He noted that the
burn marks from his sword from when he and Prowl had first met had been wiped away, though he’d left a dent that was now under one of his fingers. Optimus had far more weight that he could throw behind his axe than he ever could with his sword, even when it was energized; he could not trust that the staff would not be split in two this time.

“C’mon, you son of a glitch,” he hissed. “Let's get this aft-whooping under way.”

There was a growled retort. Optimus was suddenly on the move again, closing the distance between them, ducking underneath the swing of the spear's butt that was meant to bash him in the side of the head. Sideswipe scrambled backwards as his opponent came too close, wary of the Autobot inside the reach of the staff, and then he jumped, the axe skimming the ground where his ankles had just been. As soon as his feet had hit the ground again, he spun, one end of the staff coming up to block the axe's second attack coming on his left, then again to smack away the hand on his right.

He retreated, spinning the staff back and forth, cracking the weapon on any part of the Autobot leader that came too close, the waist-cloth twirling around his hips at each twist. He scored hit after hit, none of them hard enough to damage him, but neither allowing the axe to come in range of his torso. Optimus kept pressing him backwards, the two of them moving around the perimeter of the circle, turning away from the spectators at an unspoken agreement that the fight would only involve each other. Sideswipe was forced to put his back to the fire, and when his HUD warned him of its proximity, he rolled to one side, coming up to face Optimus again, both of them pausing to catch their breath against the firelight.

The noises from the crowd were even louder, and someone was pounding on a drum. Sideswipe's pump briefly matched it's quick, steady beat. One leg stretched out in front of him, ready to take his weight if he decided to pounce forward, the staff's length running parallel to it as it was held towards Optimus. The Autobot was heaving his shoulders as he ventilated, the axe twirling once in his fingers before coming back into a confident grasp in his palm. One side of his face was bathed in orange light, the other in flickering shadows, and Sideswipe could only surmise that he in turn looked just as demonic to his opponent.

In the crowd next to the bonfire, Drift had somehow managed to shove his way forward, Perceptor held tightly to his chestplate, the scientist wriggling at the strong arm wrapped around his waist as he watched the fight with huge, horrified optics.

Sideswipe bore his weight on his front foot, and used his own height along with the staff's reach to jab forward at Optimus's chestplate. The end stabbed at his armor, but he only let out a surprised grunt before smacking the weapon away. While Sideswipe recovered and pulled the staff in close again, Optimus advanced, and the red mercenary was sent retreating backwards once more, desperately parrying blows from the axe and the Autobot's fist.

He'd thought that he could use his speed to his advantage, but Optimus wasn't giving him any openings, fraggit. Granted, he wasn't letting the so-called Prime get too close either, but at this rate he'd be pushed back forever, until the bigger mech's greater size and energy reserves won out.

He had to take to the offense.

But how?

Dirt was kicked up under his heels as he stepped backwards, the metal granules forming a brown cloud around his calves and staining his armor plating as the fight progressed. Optimus wasn't giving him a chance to catch his breath again, the speed of their clashes picking up, matching the pace of the drum. Sideswipe wondered what would happen if the drummer suddenly changed the
beat. They would both be thrown off from their focus on their battle programing.

Thrown off...

He rolled sideways again, a risky move as the axe that had been coming up on the same side whizzed over the tips of his audial horns, the air singing inches above him. His free hand came down on the ground, scooped up a handful of dirt, and as he came back up on his feet, he stepped forward within the axe's reach, and thrust the dirt into Optimus's optics.

The big mech roared in shock and agony, a hand reaching up to brush his visual sensors clear. Ignoring the outraged cries of the Autobot tribe around them, Sideswipe pressed his advantage, spinning and crashing the staff against one side, then the other, the big mech now on the defense and retrying as he tried to buy himself enough to get the dirt out of his optics. But Sideswipe knew how to finish the fight before that could happen.

He herded the Autobot leader backwards, towards the fire. Optimus stopped, feeling the heat on his back, then fought blindly, realizing Sideswipe's intentions. But he was at a disadvantage, and took one more step backwards, then another, trying to ward off his attacks.

Realizing the danger, the crowd roared in horrified anger. Sideswipe focused on blocking them out, his spark surging as he realized that he would soon win, and this nightmare would be over, and the Autobots would see him as a--

“Sideswipe!” Perceptor's voice screamed above them all. “This is not what a yoska would do!!”

He let up on his last attack, but not before Optimus started to slip backwards, his footing caught on a piece of kindling.

Time seemed to slow before Sideswipe's optics, allowing him time to think.

This was not what a yoska would do. This is not what a warrior would do.

This would have made perfect sense as a mercenary, fighting another mech for a Prime's credits, knocking his opponent out by any means necessary and eliminating him. That's what he'd been doing with Sentinel for so many vorns, wasn't it? He'd been programmed to fight like this, to use any tactic, even if they were dirty, doing whatever it took to win. That's how he and his twin had stayed alive for so long.

That was how a mercenary would fight.

...This was not how a yoska would fight.

Maybe he'd been using the word 'yoska' wrong all along.

Dropping the staff, he darted forward and caught Optimus's hand, stopping him from falling into the fire. If Sideswipe's frame had been any smaller, he would have been pulled right in with him, and he gritted his dentals as he dug in his feet to keep his balance. The orange flames licked at both of their armor platings, the city-mech's HUD flashing warnings of imminent damage, and the two mechs grunted as one pulled the other clear, back out and into the open area.

The angry shouts crescendoed into a thunderous eruption. Sideswipe and Optimus ignored them, panting, both checking their HUDs for heat damage on their plating. Sideswipe's was minor. He saw that the Autobot leader's back was singed, the paint peeling away in strips, but as Optimus rolled his shoulders, testing his frame, he didn't show any serious or obvious pain. Sideswipe wasn't sure if it was because he was used to taking a hard blow, or if the tactile nodes had been
burned away.

The city-mech realized that the shouting had moved to cheering. He paused, and looked around in confusion. All optics were still on him and Optimus, but...

“Sideswipe.”

His head snapped back to the taller mech. Optimus stared at him, then nodded to the staff that had been abandoned on the ground. Sideswipe glanced back and forth between the two of them, then slowly, expecting the Prime to take advantage of him being disarmed, reached down and retrieved his weapon. Optimus waited, then took a fighting stance again, letting Sideswipe refocus so that their fight could continue.

The cheering turned into applause, then gradually descended back down into shouts and jeers, though not as threatening this time. The mercenary chanced a glance to the left and right. Perceptor looked beyond relieved, his hands gripping Drift's arm so hard that the swordmech was wincing. Prowl still looked grim, but the panicked worry in his optics was gone.

Sideswipe didn't have time to contemplate their reactions before his battle programing screamed at him to take the initiative, and he followed through, snarling as the Prime managed the deflect the first hit away with his axe, then ducked under Sideswipe's follow-up.

The fight began in earnest again, now a match of skill and speed, both mechs holding their ground as they attacked and defended furiously. Sideswipe's feet stayed on the move, his weight shifting back and forth as he swung left with one end of the staff, then right with the other, left, right, left, right, each hit higher or lower than the last. Optimus somehow managed to keep up with him, the axe thrust from hand to hand, correctly anticipating most hits, and when he could not, his heavy armor took most of the damage, though Sideswipe's barrage of attacks were starting to show from multiple dents and scratches that dribbled energon. Every so often he'd manage to get the axe inside the staff's reach and slice towards the red mech's torso, the glancing blows causing significantly more damage than the staff every could.

The drum pounded even louder and faster, matching their pace, the two mechs refusing to slow. The first one to forget his rhythm would be the loser. The both vented hard, gasping and growling when they could, their fans buzzing hard enough to make it seem that they were surrounded by a cloud of angry insects instead of a crowd of shouting Autobots.

Sideswipe's focus broke long enough that his cortex was able to acknowledge that, somewhere beneath his desperation to win, he was having fun.

It had been a long time since he'd been able to find someone who could spar and equal and fair match with him, besides Sunstreaker. And were they just sparring? He'd made it clear that even though he wanted to win, he did not wish for Optimus to die. He just wanted to prove himself, to beat whatever reason the tribe hated him so much. He--

He should have been concentrating.

The back end of the axe came up and cracked Sideswipe in the jaw. He tasted energon in his mouth as he saw the sky, the tops of helms somewhere above him, and then suddenly he was on his back, his HUD filled with warnings and errors as his body was dragged along the ground by its own momentum. The attack stunned him long enough that, for a macro-second, he could only process the screaming pain on his back and his aft, and a groan bubbled up from his vocalizer.

Before he could reorient himself, the air sang, and something crashed into the ground next to his
Sideswipe froze, his pump stopping, his optics glancing to the side at polished metal that hadn't been there a second ago. The axe could have easily cleaved his head off of his neck if Optimus's aim had been off by a nano-meter.

He could only hear the dying ring of metal next to him, and then the air was eerily still. The tribe was holding a collective breath.

The Prime was standing over him, his shoulders heaving with each ventilation, both hands on the axe embedded into the dirt next to his opponent. Blue optics stared down at the red mech.

Sideswipe expected his gaze to have a deadly intent. There wasn't any. Instead, he lifted his head slightly and raised an optic ridge, in the same manner from when the newcomer to the tribe had refused to bow to their leader, not so much in a challenge, but questioning what he would do next.

The red mech gritted his dentals up at him and hissed a swear, his chestplate raising up and down as he panted. Then, clenching his jaw, he opened his palm, and let the staff roll out of his hand.

"You win."

The cheered roar of the Autobots was drowned out in his audials by Optimus's rumbled "HA!" as he reached down to grasp his bared hand, and easily pulled the relatively smaller mech to his feet with a grunt. The grip on his hand changed, and he felt it being squeezed between them, the Prime's other hand grasping his shoulder with a quick shake, the gesture one of friendly camaraderie. The mask covered the expression on his lower face, but his blue optics were smiling.

"Sa, yoska," he affirmed, his voice strong enough to be heard by everyone. While the red mech was recollecting himself from that statement, the Prime repeated the greeting he'd given Perceptor before, one that welcomed him into the Autobot tribe.

"...I'd feel even better about that if I'd won," Sideswipe complained, but smirked at the bigger mech, gripping his hand back in kind.

More hands were on him. Optimus let go so that Sideswipe could turn around towards Jazz and Hound, who were whooping and bouncing up and down, patting and grasping and hugging him, as if he'd beaten his opponent instead of getting his aft handed to him. Others, still strangers to him, were coming up to him too, chattering in their own language as they greeted him and touched him. More circled around Optimus, their tones congratulatory or joking, likely talking about the fight. A few were still wary of Sideswipe, as Hound once had been, and gave him nasty looks before retreating out of the common area.

The crowd around him was tightening, and it was getting hard to see more than a few arm-lengths away. Sideswipe looked around, then called out over the cacophony of voices. "Perceptor! Where are you?!"

"Here!" He could hear him, but not see him.

"Perceptor, what does yoska mean?!" Sideswipe grunted as some new mech bear-hugged him, and he pushed the Autobot away. "I thought it meant 'warrior!'"

"You were nearly correct! The Autobots have a different word for a generic 'fighter,' but a 'yoska' refers to someone following a code of ethics, who does not kill or harm unnecessarily, and always has the tribe's best interests in--"

"Sometime this deca-cycle, Perceptor!"
“It's best translation is 'honorable warrior!'”

...An honorable warrior.

The Autobots didn't see him as some servo-for-hire mercenary.

They saw him as something greater.

His spark all but danced in its casing.

At least, it would have, if the tight knot of strangers that kept touching him wasn't making him so nervous.

“Would you get off?!” he snapped at a femme that had turned his head her way so that she could see him. Someone else grabbed his arm, and yanked him away from Jazz and Hound, who were still trying to talk to him, as if he'd understand. “Hey! Get off!” He stumbled back. “I said, get off!”

And then someone else shouted something above them all.

The Autobots backed off, and then Prowl was there, an arm around his mate and his doorwings swept out to either side, warning the rest of his tribe away. They grumbled and complained, but did as they were told, giving Sideswipe room to breathe more easily.

Jazz chuckled at this, and leaned over to prod one of Sideswipe's audial horns with his finger, drawing a glare from the red mech and a deeper one from the white one, which only made him laugh harder and waggle his finger at them.

“Yeah, I get it,” Sideswipe grimaced. “But can you blame him for being protective after all that?”

Prowl snapped something at Jazz that must have been a similar argument, because the black-and-white mech raised his palms in a gesture of surrender and backed away with a grin. Hound cackled, and chattered something at Sideswipe before ducking away too, shouting at a group of other Autobots and waving one of his hands, clearly wanting to tell a tale about their adventures during their long walk back to the tribe camp.

More Autobots blocked Prowl's path, wanting to talk with him, but he ignored them and gently pushed them aside, leading his mate away from the common area and the hundreds of excited voices.

Sideswipe smiled to himself, and reached up to grip Prowl's fingers.

“Yoska.”

“Sa,” the white mech confirmed immediately, the tension in his voice releasing as they left the other Autobots behind.

Chapter End Notes

And there's a new Sidequest too!
Alright folks, it only took us 54,000 words to get here. Enjoy your 'M' rating!

Chapter 14: Mate

Someone else must have erected Prowl’s tent. The camp had moved at least once since his group had left for Decepticon territory, and there was no way he could have built it in the brief time he'd left Sideswipe alone with Perceptor when they'd first arrived. This was confirmed by Prowl grumbling in frustration the moment that they entered the tent and beelining for what should have been a perfectly acceptable shelf of scrolls and books. Sideswipe stopped just inside of the flap, a hand on the tent's liner as he took a look around.

The floorspace was octagonal, and if he could warp the dimensions it would have covered the same amount of space as the living area of his apartment in Kaon. The roof flared out from a center support beam, flattened, then dropped down and around a light, eight-sided frame that held up the 'walls'. A collection of scattered rugs around a little table indicated a sitting space, and to the left side was thick mat layered with furs and pillows, obviously Prowl's sleeping berth.

A long, low bookshelf held an assortment of scrolls, books, and scattered papers and parchments, which Prowl was hastily rearranging, entirely dissatisfied with whoever had put his belongings out.

“You are the most bookish nomad ever,” Sideswipe said. “You sure you don't want Perceptor as your mate? I could go with Drift.”

He was ignored.

Several more chests sat to his right, closed and locked. Leaning against one of them was Sideswipe's sword and pack; the map was nowhere to be seen. Curiously, an oiled hide had been wrapped around his sword and held with twine. Sideswipe immediately went to it, worried that it had been damaged somehow, but quickly realized that the hide was meant to cover the blade and keep it from rusting, or accidentally cutting someone when not in use. The same mech who'd wrapped it had polished the handle, and Sideswipe looked it over appreciatively, intent on thanking whoever had done this later.

His attention was caught by Prowl clearing his vocalizer.

His task done, the white mech now appeared to be at a loss with what to do with himself. He stood by the bookshelf, his hands at his sides, staring down the other mech in his tent. After a moment’s hesitation, where Sideswipe stared back at him, waiting for directions, Prowl headed back to the tent's entrance, but then stopped, and gestured with his palm at his mate.

“Stay.”

Sideswipe nodded, too tired from the fight to object and follow him, and watched as Prowl disappeared through the flap and into the twilight.
The red mech paced back and forth across the tent, his arms crossed over his chestplate, his finger tapping nervously at his forearm. It had been nearly a joor since Prowl had left, and dusk had fallen on the Autobot camp. Someone had come in a little while ago and lit a couple of lanterns that were hanging from hooks on the center support beam, but they had ignored Sideswipe as he tried to talk to them, and when he attempted to follow them out, they'd given him a look of shock before giving him the same 'stay' gesture. And stay he had, despite wanting to go out and explore the camp further, now that the danger of Unreasonably Angry Primes was past.

He heard the voices and activity of the tribe camp lessening as night fell, and most of everyone had retreated into their own tents, though he could still hear footsteps every so often, likely guards. But then where had Prowl gone? Had he taken a night shift immediately after returning home to camp? And if he did, why hadn't he made that clear, and gestured for Sideswipe to go to recharge on their shared mat?

...They didn't have just a shared mat anymore. Sideswipe paused as he glanced at the berth of furs and pillows, and gulped before he resumed his pacing.

He had wanted to interface with him the orn before. But that had been a simple, friendly thing. In Kaon, it was common to take a mech or femme home, frag them, and then never see them again after they left the next morning. Primus knew that he and Sunstreaker had done that enough times, going through several new 'friends' in a deca-cycle, the twins picking up a habit of pounding on the wall between their rooms when one of them was being too amorous with a partner.

But he'd completely misunderstood Prowl's intentions the last orn. The city-mech had wanted a quickie. But the Autobot didn't want to just interface. He wanted Sideswipe as a mate. The red mech still had no idea what that would entail, other than that he'd be dedicated to only interfacing with Prowl from now on. The Autobot had never shown any sign that he'd accept mistreating Sideswipe, or making him into a servant or slave. But then what did he mean by taking him as a 'mate'? Would the city-mech have to interface with him whenever he wanted? Would he need to consummate being whatever-they-were? Would there be some kind of a ritual? Would he have to bond?

Would that even work when he already had an established twin-bond?

He could ask Perceptor, but he was stuck in Prowl's tent at the moment, and Perceptor likely in Drift's. And besides, if being Prowl's mate meant doing something special while interfacing, he doubted that the scientist would want to be there to walk him through it.

Sideswipe couldn't help a startled gasp as the tent's flaps suddenly parted, and he spun around towards the entrance, automatically dropping into a defensive crouch.

Prowl was there, looking just as alarmed as his mate, as if he hadn't been expecting him to still be there. Right behind him was Jazz, who had shoved his friend inside. The visored mech smiled at Sideswipe and greeted him as the city-mech stood back up, but his expression changed as he turned back to Prowl. His tone became scolding, and the white mech flared his doorwings irritably, turning to argue with him, their voices low and hissing. Sideswipe heard his name mentioned several times.

Whatever they were saying, Prowl finally relented to it, bowing his head and dropping his doorwings back down. Jazz grimaced, then spoke softly, patting the other Autobot on the shoulder with a few more words. Then, with a quick wave at Sideswipe, he was gone.

Prowl stared at the entrance, as if wondering if it would be worth running back out again. Then, with a vent of resigned frustration, he stepped up to the flap, and tied the laces, shutting his tent to
visitors for the rest of the night.

Sideswipe's pump started pounding.

This was it.

Primus Almighty, why was he so nervous?! Some part of him was aware that Prowl had turned back to him, and taken his hand as he led him over to his berth, *their* berth, his processor too busy at sorting his own thoughts to realize this before they were kneeling by its side. He'd fragged with dozens of mechs before. He knew what he was doing, probably better than Prowl did. He'd run circles around him, and if the doorwinged mech got too rough, he could toss him across the tent, like that one time with Swindle. It wasn't like he was still tied up and helpless and thrown onto the furs so that Prowl could hold him down and--

Slaggit all, that was NOT supposed to sound hot.

Prowl didn't throw him. The white mech gestured for him to lay down alongside the furs, finding him a comfortable, cozy space between the pillows. Once the bigger mech was laying on his back and had stretched out, the Autobot crawled over him, straddling him, both his hands splayed across a red chestplate, lightly pinning him. Sideswipe stiffened at the feel of the now-familiar hands on him, and his jaw clenched.

It was then, with Prowl towering over him, looking just as nervous and awkward as Sideswipe felt, that the city-mech realized why he was afraid.

He'd always had it in his mind that he'd eventually return to Kaon. Not only would he be with Sunstreaker again, but he'd go back to his old life. He may or may not return to Sentinel's employment, depending on how forgiving the Prime was for his failure to deliver the map to the Decepticons, but even if he wasn't, he'd go on to be hired by the next rich mech in need of a bodyguard, or assassin, or whatever they needed some cheap servo-for-hire to do. He'd go back to his apartment, back to the bar, back to drinking after each successful job until he couldn't remember when he'd killed a mech or why.

He was afraid because once he consummated with Prowl into whatever-this-was, whatever it meant for him to be his mate, he'd never go back to that life. His old self, Sideswipe the Kaonite Mercenary, would die.

He'd have to dedicate himself to his mate, to the Autobot nomads—Since when had he stopped calling them barbarians? Since, his cortex realized, Perceptor had named them as such, and he valued that they were *mechs* just like he was, not a bunch of cortex-disabled creatures that happened to look like city-mechs. They wanted him to at least dress like them and follow their rules.

Maybe they'd let him go as soon as he'd satisfied Prowl. Or maybe they intended to keep him forever.

He had no idea what to expect as Prowl's mate. And *that* was what scared him.

Sideswipe realized that both he and Prowl had been staring at each other for quite some time, both too afraid to make the first move. He knew what he was scared of. But why was Prowl afraid?

"*I trust you,*" Sideswipe blurted out, startling both of them out of their spell. "*I know you'll never hurt me. You've never said it, but you've proved it.*" He paused. "...And I promise that I'll never hurt you either, if you don't hurt me. I owe you that. *Trust me?*"
"I trust you."

Still, Prowl didn't move. Sideswipe frowned, and squirmed a bit, waggling his hips in the process, yet the white mech was still hesitating, though his engine revved a bit at the movement between his thighs.

What more did he want? This was his own tent, and his own mate. Sideswipe had just said that he promised--

Wait.

Duh, Sideswipe. His cortex mentally smacked his processor.

Prowl still didn't speak Cybertronian Standard. He didn't know what the red mech had promised, other than that he'd finished by asking for his trust.

It was just like with him swearing not to run away. He couldn't tell him what he'd said. He'd have to _show_ it, just as Prowl had shown him since the day that he'd captured him that he wanted to guard his mate from all harm, including what he could accidentally cause himself if he'd forced him to interface when he'd first claimed him as a mate. Primus only knew that Sideswipe would have tried to kill him.

He was still angry that he'd been kidnapped. But the mech was no stranger anymore. He was a friend.

More than a friend.

And he couldn't just tell Prowl this. He had to _show_ it.

Reaching up, Sideswipe took both sides of Prowl's helm to hold him still, then leaned up, pressing their lips together with a short moan, his thumbs rubbing either side of his chevron. The Autobot jolted and made a surprised sound into his mouth, nearly pulling away, but Sideswipe continued, kissing at him hungrily, running his lips over the other mech's, until Prowl began to answer him. White hands gripped a black helm in return, squeezing to being nearly painful, then moved to instead cradle his head, his mouth moving just as urgently.

He could say for certain that Prowl definitely liked kissing, and Sideswipe held a weird sense of pride that he was the one who had taught him. Rather, _was_ teaching him. They were in the middle of a lesson, and he couldn't wait to show him that they could kiss more than each other's mouths.

For now, though, he let Prowl lower him back down to the berth, the back of his helm finding a pillow, the white mech's fingers trailing down his jaw to massage gentle little circles around the edges of his faceplates, appreciating his new mate with his hands as much as his mouth.

Sideswipe's arms slid down to wrap around his shoulders, pulling the Autobot's body close to his own, both of their fans kicking on as their frames radiated heat.

One long leg wrapped around Prowl's waist, and he _definitely_ heard the excited rev from that. Sideswipe briefly grinned against his mouth, then turned his head to deepen the kiss, his glossa prodding into the other mech's mouth, and feeling something slipping between his dentals in return. He opened his jaw up further, happily surrendering to letting the other mech take the lead. He thrust his hips up once, balancing himself on his leg, and the rev was much stronger that time.

The Autobot was suddenly venting on him, still not used to how he should breathe and circulate air through his systems while his mouth was occupied for so long. Sideswipe took the opportunity to lean down and suckle at his neck, earning a surprised cry from Prowl that ended in a groan. White
hands petted quickly down his face, his neck, his shoulders, stopping at his arms and gripping him tightly, squeezing, pulling him off and pinning him before Prowl turned his head and recaptured his lips, cutting off his mate's surprised whine. Sideswipe moaned into his mouth, struggling as his arms were forced down at his sides, his heels kicking at the berth in frustration, though he matched his kisses in earnest, stretching up his head to do so.

He wanted to touch him, fraggit, he wanted to touch him...

White fingers continued to slid down from his upper arms to his forearms, his wrists, and then to his hands. Their fingers entwined, gripping each other, and then Sideswipe's hands were pulled up to either side of his head, white hands gripping black, massaging each other as their kisses veered back towards gentler, slower and sweeter.

Prowl's fingertips slipped down his palm. He muttered something against his mouth on the next breath.

"Stay."

Sideswipe whined, but did as he was told, letting his hands stay palms-up on either side of his head. Prowl kept kissing him softly, but his focus was now on his hands, his fingertips massaging back down at white forearms leading to red shoulders, and then a red chestplate, where he quickly found an armor seam and traced it. Sideswipe gasped, pleasure spiking through is frame.

So this is what nomads did instead of kissing.

He arched his back a little, silently begging Prowl to do it again. His engine growled as he was answered with the same touch, and then he squirmed as Prowl moved lower, down his chestplate, to his hips. Shifting down the berth little to reach him comfortably, the Autobot grasped either of his mate's hips, his palms over the waist-cloth, and pressed his fingers in firmly, massaging him deeply. Servos that he didn't realize needed tactile stimulation so badly lit up, electrical impulses being redirected their way pleasurably. Many of them took a long route up his legs and through his groin, and Sideswipe cried out into the white mech's mouth as his interface port suddenly came online.

"Prowl..." he whined as the Autobot gave him one last kiss, lifted away from him and scooted back. His chestplate rose and fell as he ventilated heavily at the mech straddling him. "Prowl, what are you---AH!!"

A hand had slipped around his waist to squeeze at his aft through the cloth. He automatically bucked, the leg wrapped around Prowl spasming and falling down to one of the pillows, but the white mech didn't seem to mind. His mouth hanging open as he ventilated nearly just as hard as Sideswipe, he massaged all around the taller mech's hips and aft, the red mech's sensors lighting up with pleasure, energizing his interface port, which had suddenly become the warmest part of him. Within it, he could feel both his valve and his spike prickling, both stimulated and ready to play.

The port's cover slid back with a quick shiiick, though it was hidden by the waist-cloth, and his spike was still sheathed. Sideswipe was a mech who preferred to spike, but Primus, if Prowl kept touching him like that, he'd gladly let him take his valve as long as he wanted, especially if he could get one of those fingers inside of him first.

Prowl kept massaging him, and he must have heard and smelled the port opening, but he ignored it.

Sideswipe opened one optic. "Oh c'mon, Prowl," he gasped, his optics suddenly squeezing shut again as his jaw clenched and his fingers squeezed, another wave of energy rippling through his
circuitry at the tactile stimulation. “Enough with the pre-frag stuff! I'm ready!”

He wiggled his hips again in the other mech's hands for emphasis. But Prowl seemed to disagree. He took advantage of Sideswipe's movements to get his other hand under him too, both palms squeezing at his aft, making the bigger mech cry out and arch his back.

“Frag! Aw scrap, that feels good...”

The white hands grabbed more of him. Bracing his feet on either side of Prowl, Sideswipe pushed himself harder into his fingers, demanding more from him. If the Autobot was bent on drawing this out, then by Primus, it had better not be teasingly light. The message got across, and the red mech rolled his head from side-to-side as he moaned and gyrated his hips to each press into his aft.

He couldn't help but spasm again as another impulse jolted through his interface port demandingly.

“C'mon,” he tried to plead. “I usually just—HRFF!!--get right to it! Please? Prowl, I'm wet.”

He wasn't lying. His valve had started to lubricate without anything inside of it, expecting that another mech's spike was imminent with all the pleasure that was coursing through Sideswipe's frame. The lubricant was its own stimulant, tickling the sensors inside his valve at the same time that it prepared for him to take a spike, and the idea that he'd soon be entered produced more fluid, and it would turn into a terrible infinite loop if Prowl didn't hurry up and fragging touch him.

Plus, the waist-cloth would get damp.

One of Sideswipe's hands reached down to undo it and get it out of their way, but Prowl growled and snatched his wrist, pushing it back to beside his head. Sideswipe grimaced and struggled, even as he wiggled his aft inside the mech's other palm.

“Fraggit, if you don't want me to touch you, then you had better touch me--”

He yelped at a particularly strong squeeze at his aft plates.

“I mean inside me!” He gaped at a chuckle from Prowl. “...And you know that, don't you?! You son of a glitch, hurry up!”

At last, the Autobot took some mercy on his poor mate. Lowering his aft back down to the berth again, one of his hands petted the lower part of Sideswipe's belly, as if admiring it, sending a tingle radiating up through his circuitry, while the other hand expertly undid the knot of the waist-cloth. For the first time in deca-cycles, the piece of scrap cloth fell away from his thighs.

He felt free. He felt...naked? He had been wearing it for quite a while, after all, to where it no longer bothered him unless something specifically his called attention to it. It was almost strange to see his own groin and interface port again, as if some part of his cortex believed it had vanished without his optics being able to take note of it. Maybe that was part of the reason why the Autobots insisted on clothing, even though their frames and armor did a good job at keeping the elements out of their circuitry lines. Uncovering it now felt like he was revealing something sacred and personal, a part of him that he only wanted Prowl to see.

If that was true, it would also explain why his spark bounced around in insane excitement when Prowl undid his own waist-cloth, and shrugged off the cloth and hides wrapped around his torso, the extra clothing being laid to the side. He crouched over him, 'naked' as well, and Sideswipe could finally get a good look at his mate's entire frame.

By Primus, he was a handsome mech. And Sideswipe wasn't just saying that because he wanted
nothing more than to frag with him at that moment.

He nearly took it back when, instead of opening his own interface port, Prowl circled a finger around Sideswipe's valve. The red mech shuddered pleasurably, but narrowed his optics.

“I said enough with the pre-slag! I want—OH FRAG!!”

How on Cybertron had he found his inner node so fast?!

Whatever sorcery it had been, it had reduced Sideswipe to putty underneath his mate after he'd jolted in surprise. He moaned loud and long, his optics squeezing tight as he rocked at the single finger pressed gently inside of him, hooked around the rim of his valve and playing with his node. Prowl grinned again, pleased with himself, then put his other hand on Sideswipe' chestplate, warning him not to try to get up, as the single finger unhooked and worked in and out of his valve, carrying back a little more lubricant on it with each thrust.

The red mech scratched out any lingering ideas that Prowl was a virgin. There was no way he'd have found his node that fast and figured out to pleasure his mate with a single finger if this was his first interface. He decided that he would find the mech who taught him that and shake his hand.

Sideswipe shuddered as a second finger joined the first, the folds of his valve tightening around them and trying to draw them further inside. His hands clenching and unclenching at either side of his helm, Sideswipe undulated his belly, pressing the folds of his valve further down on the other mech's hand until he'd taken him down to the knuckle, and hoping that he could rev Prowl up to where he'd replace his hand with something far more satisfying.

“AAH!!”

Prowl's fingertips had found an area that was not responding as quickly as the rest of his valve, much deeper inside of him. Sideswipe wheezed air, then managed a quick, weak laugh.

“I swear, I'm not a virgin either. I'm just...I'm not on the bottom that much. Not usually my thing.”

Prowl must have concluded that as well a breem later, because he murmured curiously to himself, then kept a firm grasp on Sideswipe's hip as he pressed in his fingertip a little more, and wiggled it back and forth. It had been vorns since anyone had widened the city-mech, and he almost didn't recognize what Prowl was doing, though when he did, he braced himself and arched his back, giving his mate further access within him. The tight walls were nudged apart, bit by bit, Sideswipe gasping and whining the entire time.

“Oh frag, oh frag, oh frag, oh frag...”

Primus, it felt so GOOD.

More lubricant joined the batch from the first round, coating Prowl's fingers, making his task easier, while telling him without words how much his mate was enjoying the attention. Sideswipe's head rolled to the side, his mouth open and panting, his legs spreading further apart for the mech he wanted inside of him with more than just fingers. But Prowl seemed to be having just as much fun teasing his valve as he did with massaging his frame, until Sideswipe thought that he might overload without ever being properly spiked.

“Prowl,” he moaned, gyrating his hips again. “Prowl, please...”

The fingers were pressing in and out, in and out, simulating the spike that he wanted badly to be opened with instead. Sideswipe shook his head.
“I want you.” His voice suddenly grew louder. “I want you!! Oh please, please, frag me, please! Prowl!!”

He squeezed his aftplates together and rolled his hips at his mate.

“Prowl, please!”

And, at last, Prowl relented, a smirk on his mouth for how he’d teased the city-mech into begging for him. Sideswipe noted to himself to add that to the list of reasons that he was going to kick his aft later.

The fingers withdrew with a wet *SMACK*, leaving the red mech suddenly feeling very empty. He shuddered, groaning, his hips wriggling as if he could summon the hand back to him.

“Oooh...” he moaned, praying that they wouldn't be taking a break for very long. There was no way that he had the patience for being stimulated like that again.

A gooey hand lay flat on his belly. Prowl was busy with something else. Sideswipe took the moment to catch his breath, panting, wide blue optics swimming and staring at the tent's roof, his systems warmed and reving, more than ready for--

He heard a panel being lifted back. Prowl gasped a whine, then crawled back over Sideswipe, filling his vision as he braced himself with his hands on either side of his mate, their two sets of blue optics staring hungrily at each other.

Something bigger and thicker than a finger touched the rim of his valve. Sideswipe gasped, one foot braced on a pillow and the other on the berth as he lifted his interface port up, giving Prowl better access, *demanding* the other mech to get inside of him. This time, Prowl didn't tease, but slowly, carefully, slipped himself in.

The spike was inflated, and growing, and the red mech felt his walls ripple as they were finally touched by something satisfactory, the spike's progress eased by the nearly over-lubrication of his valve.

Both of them groaned. Prowl clenched his jaw and flared his doorwings as he pushed inside, and Sideswipe knew, from spiking many different partners, how good it felt to come across someone with a valve that fit his spike just *perfectly*. He trembled, but managed to keep from grinding up at Prowl, letting the nomad feel him with his spike, until his tip found the tender area that he'd just widened. Immediately Sideswipe cried out, sensation from the rarely-used valve area flooding his cortex. That single touch alone threatened to send him into overload.

“Primus fraggit! Oh frag, oh frag...AAH!!”

He arched his back and threw his head back with another cry as Prowl's thrust probed further in this time. The nomad raised an optic ridge at his mate, then pulled back a little, likely worried that he was hurting him somehow.

“No no *NO!*”

Black hands clamped down on Prowl's upper arms and squeezed him.

“Don't you dare stop!” He wriggled, bouncing the spike against his walls. “It feels good, I promise. Keep going, keep going, please...”

Prowl asked a question. Sideswipe replied by gyrating almost violently with a pleading whimper.

...The question had been answered.
Reversing his early insistence that Sideswipe not touch him, Prowl let him cling to his arms and pushed back in, thrusting, a wave of electricity rushing up from Sideswipe's groin and straight into his cortex. He yelped, then yelped again, then groaned, then moaned, each sound matching Prowl's thrusts into his valve. His optics flickered on and off, and his fingers clenched hard enough to leave dents in the other mech's plating, yet Prowl kept going, his mouth open and gasping as well to the beat of each thrust.

“Don't stop, don't stop, don't stop--” Sideswipe rasped out in barely-alert mantra.

Both of his long legs wrapped around Prowl's waist this time, giving him better leverage and allowing him to hit the back of his valve. The Autobot was enjoying himself just as much as Sideswipe, grunting and moaning, his optics flickering every so often as wave after wave of pleasure coursed through his frame too. Sideswipe rocked back and forth, matching the spike penetrating him, helping it to go further and further, until the last of his rarely-used walls were being pressed in by Prowl's spike, and the tip was striking a batch of nodes at the rear of the valve. Eventually one of his hands drifted up and grabbed Prowl's shoulder, holding onto him as he tipped his body just slightly to the left, until the center of the nodes was hit with each thrust. He swore venomously, grimacing, then renewed his counter-thrusts with a vigor.

Red warnings lit up his HUD, signaling that his body would overload at any moment. The two of them kept going, their vents becoming raspier, their moans higher and longer, Sideswipe tightening his legs around his mate while Prowl's thrusts became even faster, pushing in as hard as he could without risking harm to a rarely-used valve.

“I'm gonna...I'm gonna...”

Sideswipe suddenly tightened up and bowed his head down to Prowl's bumper with a drawn-out scream. His overload struck him hard, his processor unused to receiving so much input from his valve instead of his spike. He convulsed briefly, completely overwhelmed, then gritted his dentals as his valve jerked and clamped down on Prowl's spike.

A moment later, the nomad followed him with a roar of Sideswipe's name into his audial. Trans-fluid rushed through him, making him shudder, but he held on tightly to Prowl, the other's thrusts suddenly turning longer and slower, his spike pumping fluid all over his inner walls. It was deliciously warm and thick, massaging over his sore walls, and Sideswipe's overload was extended as even more input raced through his processor, all of it delighted and energized and happy.

He curled up into the other mech, gasping and wheezing, weakly bouncing at the spike inside of him. The air between and around them was as hot as a furnace, and their fans tried in vain to keep up. Prowl's doorwings fluttered back and forth, as if that could help cool them off. His hands came off the berth and reached around to instead hug and cradle his mate, mumbling nonsensical things at him.

“...That...” Sideswipe gasped, then gulped, trying to get his ventilations back under control.

“That...that was amazing.”

Prowl rumbled an agreement.

Their thrusts into each other slowed, calming, the last of the fluid squirting up and filling his valve. When the nomad was done, his spike began to deflate, no longer touching all of his walls at once, and the sensations that each of them had to deal with became manageable.

Sideswipe felt his frame being lowered back down onto the berth, a fur-trimmed pillow behind his helm. He sighed contentedly, his systems dialing down as it processed the overload, his cortex
moving on to the happy afterglow that always came after a good frag. He detangled his legs from around Prowl's waist, and let himself stretch out, the other mech still inside of him and not quite ready to pull out and rest alongside his mate.

“That was amazing,” he repeated, a smile climbing up on his faceplates as he stared up at Prowl's optics, which looked to be gazing far away as the white mech moved from overload and into his own afterglow.

“Sa,” he drawled, his vocalizer sounding drunk.

“Wanna take five breems, and do that again?”

Prowl gave him a contemplative but weary look.

“Okay, no,” Sideswipe chortled. “But...wow. I was...okay. I had it in my cortex that you were a mech that did not know how to frag. I assumed wrong. I'm sorry.”

The white mech stared at him.

“Still can't understand me. Gotcha.”

He wiggled slightly, until Prowl got the idea to slip out of him, a little bit of trans-fluid dribbling at the end of his spike, to which the white mech grimaced and pulled a rag out of subspace to clean it with before it could mess up their berth. The rest was clamped down into Sideswipe's valve, where his frame would process it later. The feeling of “full” was not something a mech who liked to spike felt often, and he squirmed back and forth, uncertain if he liked it or not.

“So, uh...”

He reached up, and touched Prowl's arm, though he waited until the mech was done wiping off his spike before speaking.

“Are we mates now?”

Prowl gave him the same contemplative look again, this time uncertain. He almost looked worried.

“Hey. Hey.” Sideswipe's other hand reached up to take the white mech's other arm. “It was a good frag, whether it meant anything or not.” He grinned. “I do like you. You're a complete aft sometimes, and you kidnapped me...Well, that should be a deal-breaker, shouldn't it? But listen. I don't hate you. I know that you're a good mech. And if I have to stay with you...it's not that bad.”

The Autobot was staring at him again. Disregarding that his words couldn't be understood, Sideswipe continued, his voice soft and easy, at least getting the message across that he'd enjoyed himself, if nothing else.

“I still want to know why the frag you took me. I know I was the best-looking mech there, but...Yeah, the rest you had to pick from were mini-bots. Not really a fair choice, huh?”

“Sideswipe...”

“Okay, I'll shut up.” He leaned back on the pillow again, his body relaxed and ready to recharge. “I'm kind of glad that you don't speak Standard, because I don't really know how to put into words yet that...with you being my 'mate' and all...

He bit his lip as he tried to process his thoughts.
“I know you're my mate, and I'm more than okay with that. I think...I may even be starting to--”

He was interrupted by the sound of plating moving apart.

A blue light radiated out between the two mechs.

His vocalizer hitched to an abrupt halt as his optics widened tremendously, and he sat straight up, his cortex struggling back into an alert state. Prowl was still staring at him, uncertain, and yet he had parted his chestplates and--

“Prowl, your spark...”

Sideswipe's vents picked up again as he stared at the perfect, round ball of light spinning around in the exposed spark chamber in the middle of the nomad's chest.

...Holy slag.

“...You want to spark-play?” he asked dumbly.

Prowl answered by pulling a bit closer to Sideswipe, naturally afraid of exposing his spark to the elements for too long.

The city-mech's processor whirled. He'd spark-played before, but only a handful of times. It was an intense experience, and meant for mechs who had a firm trust in one another. It was never something that he would do in a quickie, or even an overnight with a new partner. There were very few others that he would trust with an exposed spark; the risk of injury from incompatible sparks was high, and not being careful could lead to a spark-bond. Trying to get rid of that would be a painful, messy affair, one that would take a very long recovery, if it was possible to break at all.

And yet Prowl had exposed himself to his mate after just one interface.

Were the rules different in the wildlands? Did he naturally trust his mate that much, when they'd known each other for only a few deca-cycles?

...Pit, it was acceptable to *kidnap* their mates. Why not add in spark-play to new partners?

Prowl had pulled even closer, and whined his name. “Sideswipe...”

The red mech shook his head to clear it, his optics immediately drawn back to the pale blue light. Inside his chest, his own spark was twirling around its chamber, excited by the idea, consequences of a bad spark-play be slagged.

He took a long intake through his nose to steady himself.

“...Okay. We can spark-play.”

Sitting up a little straighter, and bracing himself with one hand on the berth, Sideswipe leaned close to Prowl, until their foreheads touched, their optics flickering from each other to their chestplates, one open and exposed, the other still closed. With one last shush to a line of code in his processor that was roaring that this was a Bad Idea, he opened up his chestplates as well, and then, after a moment of consideration, let the plates at the front of his spark chamber slide apart.

A twin's spark looked no different than a normal spark. It spun and danced in the same way that Prowl's did, staying close to the perfectly polished walls of the inner chamber, naturally drawn to the container that was meant to harbor it from ignition to extinguishment. Concentrating less on the
world around them, including both his frame and Prowl's, Sideswipe focused on his spark, allowing his cortex and frame to drift into a passive state while his concentrated on the very essence of his being.

A spark was naturally wary of being exposed, and it huddled slightly towards the back of his chamber, away from anything that could do it harm. But Sideswipe was also a curious being, and it began to peak out, the light glowing just as brightly as Prowl's, and then it was suddenly more aware of the other spark nearby. Prowl's was also staying in its chamber, noting the warm light from the nearby mech and basking in it, but refusing to leave the safety of its spark chamber to explore further.

Their frames shifted, moving closer together, until their chestplates were touching. There was still a little distance between their chambers, but the gap was no longer dangerous. Sideswipe felt one of his arms lay across Prowl's shoulder and lightly stroke at a doorwing, while Prowl's hand rested on his black hip.

The two sparks moved nearer to one another, drawn to each other's perfect light. Despite Prowl being the one to suggest spark-play, Sideswipe's was the first to venture to the edge of its spark chamber, the light pulsing gently, 'greeting' the other spark and calling for it. Prowl's hesitated, then moved forward too, until the electricity fields surrounding both sparks tickled at one another.

Sideswipe moaned, the feel of another's field rattling through his circuitry, and so did Prowl. He knew that he was looking at the other mech, but he couldn't see him. His entire focus was on his spark, the core of who he was, and his cortex and processor were catching up with the fact that it was very pleased with itself.

They came even closer, the fields generating more of a discharge that jumped to each other's chambers, causing both of them to startle. The two sparks pulled back, waiting to make sure that the other was okay, before gliding together at the same time. Sideswipe's began to dance, teasing, swaying back and forth, and Prowl's chased after it, slipping up and down as it tried to catch their fields together, wanting more of that sensation of having two essences tapping into one another. It was far more satisfying to work to catch Sideswipe's, to bring it back to the middle, where it wiggled and bounced in a youthful glee, encouraging Prowl's to do the same, until it was, and the two of them were happy, just happy, dancing and twirling around each other.

“Primus,” Sideswipe heard himself say, his voice far off and booming, as if heard by a tiny creature. Prowl's voice was similar and rattling through him, and yet he didn't mind it at all.

As the sparks danced and slipped over one another, he started to hear voices, see flashes of visions, things that he did not recall seeing himself. A turbo-fox at the same optic-level as him on the ground, sniffing at his small hand curiously, and he held his youngling frame tightly still as he tried not to scare it off. His staff crashing against Springer's--Springer, who was Springer?--as the two warriors sparred and circled each other. Optimus was talking to him, using words that Sideswipe somehow understood perfectly, and he was pointing to a map he'd scrawled in the dirt, directing him to where the Minotoron herd should go. Jazz's voice, laughing, a hand grasping his to pick him up, while he growled at his friend for the joke that had sent him careening peds-over-helm into a ditch.

Sideswipe wondered what Prowl seeing of his own spark. He hoped they were good memories.

Then he saw something else, stronger, the vision less 'found' and more of being thrust at him. He saw...himself. A tall, red mech, blindfolded with his wrists bound in front of him. He was sitting on the ground, helpless, trying to squirm away from footfalls that were coming closer. He glanced, no, Prowl glanced at the angry mechs approaching him, and his optics immediately laid on the
weapons in their hands.

They would injure or kill the mech before they returned to the tribe. Despite what Alpha Trion had said, they were angry, and wanted vengeance.

Prowl would be lying if he said that he wasn't angry too. He knew what the red mech was now. He was a monster, a murderer. The most that he deserved was a quick death.

But Alpha Trion had said...

Something clicked in his processor, no, Prowl's processor. Some program that Sideswipe didn't remember his own systems having.

There was an 87% chance that the red mech would sustain permanent damage before he could be taken to Optimus Prime, and a 68% chance that he would be offline, either by the Autobots acting in a fit of rage or by the wildlands claiming someone unfamiliar with its dangers.

A long list of options to remedy the situation scrolled through his processor. He dashed out everything but the top five, then rejected two more. He studied the last three.

He could let the chances of the mech's death stand, and keep a close watch on him as he was assaulted by rageful, armed mechs. He'd interfere if death seemed immediate.

He could free him, allow him to return to the city he'd come from, and pray that the mech played no further role in the prophecy. There was a 92% chance that he would.

Or, he could ensure his safety by taking the mech as his mate.

His cortex balked.

_That was insane! He couldn't take this monster as a mate!_

It was the only way to ensure his safety. The odds of permanent damage dropped to 43%, while offline remained around 60%.

_He didn't know the mech! He hadn't tracked him! He didn't even speak his language!_

He'd learn. Worse mates had been taken and wooed by others.

_He couldn't do it!_

He could.

_He didn't want this mech!_

That was a lie, he was desirable. And if he did nothing, the mech would be in danger, and so would the prophecy.

_No!_

Did the prophecy not come first, before his own happiness?

_What was the point if he couldn't be happy too?!_

He would be happy. There was a 98% chance that they would eventually love each other.
The statistic shocked him, and he tried to figure out how his battle computer had come up with that number. It stood firmly before his HUD, recalculating several times and refusing to change.

98%...

His processor, fast as it was, wouldn't be able to figure out how it had come up with that before the other Autobots came closer, and they were storming towards the red mech, their dentals bared, their weapons out...

...I can't...

I can.

He gathered himself, trusting in his battle computer's decision, as he always did. Then, affixing the strongest look of authority that he could muster on his faceplates, he stepped forward to the red mech's defense.

The vision ended, and Sideswipe's realized that his spark had stopped dancing, holding still and floating next to Prowl's as it considered the other ball of light.

He'd...

Sensation jolted through him, and he yelped.

Another wave of electricity shook between the two sparks, but this time it was different. Sideswipe's spark was being cradled, held, and it only tried to squirm away once before warily poking towards the wave again, drawn towards the curious prickling.

“Prowl, what...?!”

He felt hands on his shoulders, gripping him tightly, keeping him from pulling back.

The sparks came together again, too close, way too close, their fields were swirling and mixing, and that's what was causing the new sensation. Sideswipe's spark pulsed brightly, awed, then dove in again, ignoring that his frame was arching as his head leaned back with a long gasp.

“What're you...?!”

The other spark pulled him in tight again.

More visions. More voices.

Oh Primus, were they...?!

“PROWL!!”

He remembered the light between them growing exponentially brighter. He remembered shouting at the tent roof, his body quivering as if in overload, but it was far greater.

He remembered a look of shock on Sunstreaker's face.

He remembered something appearing briefly on his HUD, something, a new line of code, simple but important, and he didn't have the energy to read it before he slumped against Prowl.
Chapter Notes

I have a very bad infection and I'm home sick from work. Boo.

It's very painful and makes writing difficult. Boo.

I can't play Pokemon Go. BOOOOOOOO.

My readers will hopefully forgive my lack of concentration and any proofreading errors? Yay?

((This is why writing several chapters ahead is exceedingly helpful. I definitely can't write anything new right now, but I can maybe proofread.))

Chapter 15: Bath

Sideswipe couldn't remember what he had dreamed about. Something was tugging at his spark when he became aware of himself again, but he couldn't remember why the very core of his entire being was riled up.

He hoped he hadn't dreamed the reoccurring one. He was too warm and happy to have that lurking around his processor right now.

...Achy. He felt achy.

Why on Cybertron did his spark feel tired?

His processor rebooted with a rebellious sputter of errors.

Hazy memories of the previous night came back to his cortex. Sideswipe and Prowl touching each other, grasping each other, the red mech throwing his head back and screaming his mate's name as a blue light engulfed them...

Well, that explained why his valve was pleasantly throbbing.

And he thought he'd convinced himself vorns ago that he preferred being the one spiking someone else. Not that he wasn't looking forward to being the one on top next time. They hadn't gotten the chance to flip over and give the red mech a turn.

And speaking of...

He onlined his optics as his systems wearily tried to catch up with his processor, which was chugging along groggily. The blurred colors of black and white nearby sharpened into a doorwing, and the orange backdrop turned into the fabric walls of a tent.

Sideswipe was lying on his back, cradled in a mess of pillows and furs, and something warm was pressed up to his side. He instinctively leaned closer to that warmth, and felt a body move next to him in return. An arm that was wrapped around his chestplate tightened, and the light ventilations
on his neck picked up briefly before the other mech sank back down into a deep recharge.

...He could get used to this.

Prowl was partially sprawled next to and on top of him, the side of his head resting on Sideswipe's shoulder. The red mech lay comfortably still, letting his new mate rest, knowing he'd be just as exhausted. The afterglow of interfacing had passed, but it had left behind a sleepy peace between the two mechs, and Sideswipe wasn't ready to break it.

The filtered orange haze on the tent walls increased, becoming brighter than the flickering, dying light of the lanterns. It must have been dawn outside.

He could hear noises from around the camp. Nomads were getting up, sleepily chatting, and ration cans were rattling as the mechs and femmes grabbed some fuel to keep them going throughout the day. Somewhere far off, a Minotoron bellowed. A piece of fabric was shaken out as someone walked by their tent, and he could hear the wisp-wisp of clothing being folded as the Autobot nomad continued on.

The Autobot group that had captured him had always been up and moving from dawn until dusk, and it seemed that the same rules applied for the tribe in general. Except, right now, for a certain white mech cozily snuggled into his side.

It was behavior unlike the Prowl that Sideswipe had come to know. He'd led his troop by example, always being the first one up in the morning, and the last one to sit down at the fire at night. Perhaps it had just been a necessity to keep one step ahead of the Decepticons while they were out in the open wildlands, and he was allowed to sleep in when at home. Or maybe, right now, Prowl was just too tired and didn't care about whatever chores he had to attend to in camp.

Allowing him sleep on, Sideswipe instead turned his thoughts on himself, his gaze staring off at one of the walls.

So...interfacing with Prowl had been fantastic. That was a definite perk to being his mate.

It wouldn't be so if Prowl could demand it of him at any time. However, he doubted that he would; the Autobot had plenty of opportunities to interface with him by force, and never did. But then what was Sideswipe expected to do? Become some sort of a house-mech, or rather, tent-mech? No, that would drive him insane. He'd be tearing holes through the tent walls before the orn was over, and the Autobots who knew him would be fools to think otherwise. Perceptor had already assured him that he wouldn't become some sort of a slave for the other mech, though that worry still reared its head, even after he shushed it. Was he supposed to learn a trade? He'd painted small models before, and those monstrosities still stood proudly on a shelf in his apartment, but he had no artistic talents like Sunstreaker, and he doubted he'd ever have the patience to sit down and weave a basket or something.

Sunstreaker...

Primus, wait until he told Sunstreaker about all this.

Though still aching from the spark-play, he automatically pulsed out for his twin, knowing that he wouldn't receive a reply from this distance to Kaon, but he was never unwilling to try. The twins normally 'pulsed' to each other all the time, to where they weren't aware that they were doing it unless they did so with a purpose.

Sideswipe's spark pulsed out into the darkness that was everywhere besides its immediate spark
chamber.

And then he felt happy.

“...”

...Huh.

Sideswipe furrowed his optic ridges in puzzlement.

He pulsed out through the bond again.

His spark lit up happily, spun around in its casing, and then settled back down.

That was...strange.

He tried once more. And once again, his spark briefly danced, excited, then settled down and rested.

The shadow of loneliness that had been plaguing him since he'd been dragged away from the caravan and the life he'd always known was abating. It was as if someone was pulling off a dark cloak that had been draped over him when the other half of his split-spark had been too far away to 'feel' anymore.

He focused on his spark, and tentatively felt his way through the darkness of an unreal, ethereal world. He still felt lost, but there was a confident light guiding him, leading him towards something that quietly tugged at his spark.

...There was only one mech on Cybertron who could do that to him.

Sideswipe's optics snapped open wide.

“Sunstreaker!”

His spark pulsed, harder, his processor catching up on what was happening and frantically giving instructions to his basic essence, his systems picking up with as much vigor as if he were about to run circles around the tent.

Prowl stirred, probably disturbed by his gasp and the noises his systems were making, but Sideswipe was much too excited by this new revelation to pay any attention to the other mech.

A spark was pulsing back at him through the bond.

Sunstreaker could 'hear' him!

Granted, it was extremely limited, and he could barely make out the return pulses at all, but he was there. The only way that their bond could have gotten stronger overnight was if his twin was getting physically closer to him.

Sunstreaker was looking for him, and getting nearer.

His own spark aflutter, Sideswipe gathered up the longing and hope and joy he'd felt in the past few nano-seconds at 'hearing' his brother again, packed it into a ball, and flung it as hard as he could through the bond. He didn't know how long the bond would stay open, and if the 'message' would get to his twin. It felt like he was trying to stuff something bulky through a very small pipe; Primus only knew how much would get through, if at all. He pushed it along as far as he could
'touch' it, then waited, stiffened on the sleeping berth and staring up at the roof of the tent, trembling a bit in anticipation.

Please let him hear me, please let him hear me, please let him hear me, please let him hear me--

Prowl was moving again next to him, groaning as he came back online. The hand on Sideswipe's chestplate reached up and briefly stroked along his neck and shoulder, as if the Autobot was assuring himself that his mate was still there.

The return message 'sounded' muffled, a light coming from an end of a long, dark tunnel. That was fine; he would cling to whatever he received from his brother, and he did, snatching it and cradling to his spark what had been broadcast back to it, to him.

Concern. Relief.

Comfort.

Love.

Prowl's hand had lifted up to Sideswipe's cheek, and his systems made a soft, confused buzzing sound as his fingertips touched the grin widening on his mate's faceplates. Sideswipe turned his head towards optics that were dully glowing blue, the white mech much too tired to come back into full alertness anytime soon.

“Prowl,” he whispered, smiling even more as his cheek was cupped again. “I feel him. My brother's looking for me.”

Prowl stared at him incomprehensibly, and Sideswipe heard a hum of circuitry coming back online as he tried to process what he was being told. He refreshed his optics several times, the lights behind them becoming brighter at each instance, until he was awake enough to at least prop himself up on his elbow and stare down at the red mech. He looked puzzled.

He asked Sideswipe a question.

“I feel him,” Sideswipe repeated, and patted his chestplate, right over his spark. “Sunstreaker.”

In the meantime, he was sending another message through the bond, nothing with words, but simply a brotherly love, love, love, and whether the whole thing got to Sunstreaker or just a little, all of it was spark-felt.

Prowl suddenly looked startled, and troubled. His other hand reached around to take the back of Sideswipe's helm. He cradled his mate's head, and stared into his optics.

The question was asked again, more insistently.

Sideswipe gaped up at him, but did not truly see him. His attention was caught between Prowl, laying right next to him, and Sunstreaker, far away but calling through the bond once more. His brother was more concerned this time, questioning, worried. The distance between them must have been filtering what he was truly feeling; Sideswipe knew that Sunstreaker would have been in a panic by now. The best that he could interpret the message was 'Where are you?'

What answer could he give him? A tent? He had no idea where the camp was. He hesitated, then squeezed his optics shut, ignoring Prowl as he concentrated instead onballing up the feeling of safe and broadcasting it across the bond.
“Sideswipe...”

He was being pulled against Prowl's body, the other's bumper sliding across his chestplate. Sideswipe instinctively wrapped his arms around him in kind, hugging him, but as white fingers traced down the his spinal struts, part of his attention was snapped back to the present, and away from the spark-bond. He stiffened, then squirmed a little in Prowl's hands, whining as he tried to pull back.

“Wait! I need to concentrate!”

Another message had returned, though it was far weaker. Comfort, love, reassurance, not only to Sideswipe, but of the bond. He felt like the other spark was 'patting' it, remind both of them of it's existence, and that it would not break, no matter what.

Sideswipe shook his head and pushed through the bond as hard as he could. He couldn't help that his return message dripped with worry; Sunstreaker had to be within Decepticon territory, after all. Yet he focused on the bond, agreeing with him; the bond was there, the bond would not die, they would not die. He tried to reach out and touch the other spark.

He had the sensation of something 'pawing' at him, trying desperately to find something to hold on to, but it was being yanked away. Sideswipe gasped, and forgot where reality was as his hands snapped forward and grabbed Prowl's shoulders.

“Don't leave me!”

He heard Prowl's voice, urgent, consoling. But his focus was on the spark that was slipping away.

Love, love, love, love...

The feeling was gone.

Yet, strangely, the loneliness of an isolated split-spark did not return.

Sideswipe grunted as he suddenly bore most of Prowl's weight. His cortex snapped its focus back to his frame, to the tent, reality, where he was right now. Prowl was leaning heavily on him and gasping, the bear-hug around the red mech weakening.

“Whoa, whoa, easy...” A heavy guilt pulled at Sideswipe, and readjusted his grip on his mate to help him to lay back down at his side on the berth, his processor whirling as it tried to comprehend what had just happened while he was focused on the spark-bond. Prowl had never seen him try to reach out to his twin that way. He must have thought that he was somehow hurt.

...Had he hurt Prowl instead? His own systems told him that he was fine, other than a little achy. But Prowl's fans were only just notching down from where they'd kicked onto their highest setting while Sideswipe had not been paying attention. The red mech cuddled his mate apologetically, waiting as the other mech's systems cooled down, until Prowl looked cohesive once more, and returned the hug.

“Sorry about that.” Sideswipe rested his cheek on the top of Prowl's helm. “I hadn't truly felt my brother's spark in so long...I had to take advantage of the bond being open.”

Prowl mumbled something. His apology was accepted, though with a grumble.

Sideswipe smirked, then lowered his face, closing his optics again as he briefly kissed the other's forehead. “That's kind of what it means to be a twin. Didn't mean to worry you, though.”
A white hand lifted away, then slipped between them. Sideswipe felt it crawling across his headlights, over the seams and curves of his chestplate, until the palm rested right over his spark. Prowl spoke again, this time not as a question, but an affirmation. The sentence ended with “Sunstreaker.”


The hand stayed there a while. Then, it closed, balling into a fist. Prowl grimaced, and his vents hissed.

He was frustrated.

“...The frell's wrong?” Sideswipe pulled back a little to look at him. But Prowl had turned his gaze away from him. “The Pit...Are you mad that I was reaching out to Sunstreaker?”

Prowl didn't answer him.

Sideswipe's engine rattled and growled, his arms around the other mech loosening as he slipped further back. “Sunstreaker's coming for me. Whether you like it or not, he will find me.” His voice softened, but only a little. “I'll explain what I can to him. But we can't stay separated forever. Okay? Sa?”

Prowl's face darkened. The grip on Sideswipe tightened a little, almost painfully. The red mech winced, then bared his dentals in irritation when all that Prowl said in return was a short “Na.”

“Na?! No?! What the frag?! Prowl, I--”

Prowl suddenly straightened his back, his optics wide, sucking in air in a quick gasp.

Sideswipe immediately cut off his vocalizer, wise enough after the incident with Starscream to know that when something alarmed one of the nomads, he needed to stop and listen, even as he still simmered over the idea of Prowl purposely keeping him separated from his twin. But Prowl wasn't paying attention to him anymore. His optics glanced once at Sideswipe, then stared at the far wall, not really seeing it. He must have been reading something on his HUD.

Sideswipe had yet to see a comm tower, even a broken one, during the long walk from Kaon to the Autobot camp. Did the Autobots have some other form of internal communication system?

The white mech turned his optics back on the red mercenary. He pointed at the other mech's lips, and said something short, an instruction. When Sideswipe started to protest, Prowl hissed, then wiggled the finger up and down, imitating his jaw working as he talked.

...He was asking him to repeat himself.

“I said that you can't keep Sunstreaker and me separated,” Sideswipe growled. “He'll find me, Prowl. And he's going to kick your aft when he does.”

Prowl refreshed his optics at him, once.

Twice.

Thrice.

Then his shoulders, his doorwings, and his entire body, slumped in relief.

“Sa.” he murmured weakly.
“Sa?” Sideswipe looked startled. “What, you're happy about getting your aft kicked by my twin? You think I can get violent when fragged off? You haven't met Sunstreaker. When he's done, he might turn whatever pieces are left of you into a nice modern art sculpture.”

Yet that still didn't shake the look of relief on Prowl's faceplates. The edge of his mouth turned up in a small smile.

“Sa, sa, Sideswipe, sa...”

“What? What? What?” Both of the mercenary's optic ridges lifted up high at his mate. “What's with you?”

But Prowl only smiled happily, and leaned forward to hug him, gently this time. Sideswipe's engine revved in bafflement, but he returned the gesture, even though it was nowhere near as affectionate.

“Primus, you're weird.”

Prowl was much more awake all of a sudden. He started to climb to his feet, stumbled, and when Sideswipe moved to follow him, he gestured to him with his palm. 'Stay.'

He glared at him. “Stay for what? I can't lay on a berth all day.” Still, he did as he asked.

Prowl moved towards the front of his tent, waddling a bit as he went. A wicked pride bloomed in the red mech for a short time, knowing he'd been the cause of that. The Autobot untied the tent's flaps, then poked his head outside, hiding his 'naked' frame behind the flap as he called for someone, then spoke quietly at whoever had come by. The other mech answered, his voice just as low and whispering, then hurried away.

Sideswipe rolled over and climbed to kneel on the top of one of the furs. “...So are we supposed to pretend that didn't just happen?” he grumbled. “You didn't just get mad because I was trying to reach out to Sunstreaker through our bond?”

Then again, was he? He barely understood how or why the bond had reopened long enough for them to 'speak', and Prowl certainly wouldn't get it. At the very least, Prowl understood that Sunstreaker was close to him. Why would he get mad about him reaching out for his twin?

“Were you jealous?” he blurted out.

Prowl snapped his head back to him.

“Were you jealous because my twin has a stronger connection to me than you ever will?” As soon as he'd said it, Sideswipe shook his head. “No, that's not it. You don't understand me, or my twin. You don't get it.”

The white mech's only answer was to refresh his optics at him. Sideswipe pressed his lips together, then sat down on his aft and curled up, wrapping his arms around his legs and resting his chin on his knees.

“How can you be jealous of something that you don't understand? Pit, most Kaonites don't get it. I'll bet you're mad because, after a good night of fragging, the first thing I do when we wake up is talk about my brother. You didn't know even that I was 'talking' to him, did you?” He waited, as if expecting Prowl to be able to process his words and answer, before snorting and turning his head away. “Frag it all.”
An uneasy tension hung in the air between the two mechs. Prowl stared at his mate, baffled, at a complete loss for what to do. Sideswipe, meanwhile, refused to look at him, embarrassed first by his assumption that Prowl had been jealous of his twin, then frustrated that the two mates still could not talk to one another.

Perceptor was probably resting with Drift the same way he and Prowl had been a few breems ago, but as soon as he could, Sideswipe was going to go find their tent and demand a copy of the translation program, unfinished or not. He couldn't stand this anymore.

_He had to tell Prowl._

He startled a bit at a call for Prowl from outside the tent. The Autobot turned around, spoke through the flap, then reached out and took something that was offered to him.

Sideswipe raised his head up to see, then lifted an optic ridge.

A bucket of warm water, the steam rising from its surface, and several clean cloths, thick and clearly meant to be used as towels.

Sideswipe was suddenly aware of the dried, leftover fluids that were sticking to his thighs and interface panel.

“So is it common to have something ready for after new mates interface or what?!?”

Prowl must have guessed to what he said, because he vented something that might have been a snorted chuckle. He carried the bucket over to the side of the berth, then plopped down on a pillow, grimacing as he did. Sideswipe's optics opened wide.

“Are you hurt?” He patted Prowl's leg and pointed at it. They hadn't been _that_ rough, and Sideswipe had been on the bottom. If he'd been on top and a lover had been having that much trouble moving around in the morning, well, that would have been a different story. He doubted that his own walk would be very graceful for at least two or three more joors.

The white mech shook his head. “_Na, na._” He pointed at his chestplate, and said a few words.

“...Your spark?”

Prowl nodded.

“...Guess you've never spark-played before. Wears you out, huh?” Uncurling, Sideswipe crawled over to his side, and pulled over a pillow to sit on too. “That's why you're not supposed to spark-play with every other partner. You really are putting your very essence into it, and your spark at risk. It's no joke.”

“_Sa._”

A cloth was dipped into the water and then wrung out. As soon as it was, the red mech sniffed at something new hanging in the air. Something had been mixed in with the water, fragrant and calming. He leaned over past Prowl, looking into the bucket, and noted tiny, shining bits floating around on the surface, sparkling in the filtered light coming through the tent's walls.

“Huh. Shavings of crystals.”

Somebody _did_ have this prepared.
A white hand was on his shoulder. He looked up and locked optics with Prowl, who made sure that he had his attention before pressing on him, gesturing for him to lie back on the furs. Perplexed as to why, Sideswipe did so anyway, stretching and making himself comfortable, then immediately understood as the pleasantly warm cloth swiped over one of his thighs.

“I can clean myself, you know,” Sideswipe grumbled, nevertheless spreading his legs to accompany him, ignoring the heightened arousal swiftly returning to his systems. “Can feed myself too. I'm a big mech.”

Even after the mercenary's wrists had been untied for good, Prowl had still insisted on hand-feeding him. Both times when this had happened, Sideswipe had just been too tired to fight their routine and quietly ate from his palm, but now that they were safely in camp, maybe it was time to remind his mate that he wasn't a helpless sparkling. Hadn't fighting a Prime been enough to prove that?!

“I can do it.” He started to sit up and offered his hand. “Give it to—AAH!”

He fell back down with a shudder as the warm cloth slid over his interface port. It had surprised him. Prowl chuckled, then murmured something that sounded like an apology.

“You aft,” Sideswipe panted, engine revving. His spark responded pleasantly, eager to pick up from where they'd left off last night, but he still offered his hand for the cloth. “C'mon. Give it.”

“Na.” Wrapping the cloth around his fingers, Prowl pointed at Sideswipe, then mimicked cleaning off his own interface port, stroking along where his spike had been protruding joors ago. The message got across fairly well.

'I'll clean you, and then you can clean me.'

“...Alright,” Sideswipe tentatively agreed with a nod. Prowl wasn't really babying him. If he could at least reciprocate, it wouldn't be so bad. “Sa.”

Knowing what the touch would feel like in a breem, it was a little difficult for him to make himself comfortable again. Prowl waited patiently, and when his mate had stopped wiggling around to find a good position, he crouched down next to him, and kept one hand on his belly while the other lightly scrubbed at his interface port again. Sideswipe shuddered, sensation wracking up his relays, nowhere near as powerful as from last night but still enough to make his vents pick up in excitement.

The plating around his groin was the same armor-grade as the rest of his frame, resistant to things far worse than stains, and the dried fluids flaked off easily and quickly. The inside of the port was a different story. As soon as Sideswipe slid the lid back when Prowl was done cleaning the outer plating, the cloth dove in, and Sideswipe hissed and arched his back as a warm cloth pressed right up to the closed folds of his valve.

“NNGH!!” he groaned between clenched dentals, and squinted one optic at Prowl as his mate immediately stopped, thinking that he was causing him pain. “E-easy, will you?” he tried to laugh, though it came out as a hoarse choke. “It's still sore.”

Prowl mumbled an apology.

His next touch was far more gentle, first touching the outer ring of the valve, wiping it clean, then slowly working his way towards the center in little circles. This inner part of the mech was far more sensitive than his plating, and as soft and clinical as Prowl was being, Sideswipe still let out a
quiet moan and shuttered his optics again. His legs spread a little wider, and his heels pressed into the berth as he raised his hips up slightly.

The cloth reached his folds again, and, as lightly as possible, the nomad stroked at them, both to clean them and to summon them to open. The red mech shivered as they receded back, opening to a small chamber that was still holding whatever of Prowl's fluids that Sideswipe hadn't yet absorbed. The cloth wavered a second, then slowly crept in.

“Oooh--”

He understood that Prowl was trying to clean him, but that didn't mean that he wasn't enjoying the covered finger that prodded inside, tickling at his walls as it scooped up the excess trans-fluid. Despite the sensuality of it all, he was actually very comfortable with this; otherwise he'd have to find time to flush the excess fluids by himself, which was always a clumsy task when one didn't have a partner to help. The trans-fluid was easily picked up the cloth, and Prowl's hand was aided by the extra lubricant...

Lubricant?

The white mech noticed too, and cocked his head to the side, then gasped as the mercenary undulated once at him. Sideswipe snickered as Prowl's concentration was broken.

“I happen to like your finger in me.” He raised his head up slightly to grin at the Autobot. “My frame agrees.”

Prowl's response sounded reprimanding, though not angry. How could he be, when his mate's valve was responding naturally to his touch? But he wasn't trying to frag at the moment, and was probably explaining this to Sideswipe and grumbling about him getting too excited.

Sideswipe pulled an arm behind the pillow that his helm was resting on. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. You're trying to clean me. Can't help it, though. It feels good.”

The white mech made a dismissive clicking noise, then got back to work. Sideswipe stiffened again as the cloth dragged along his walls and his folds, Prowl's touch as gentle as he could possibly be, but still energizing tiny synapses that were built specifically for a pleasurable feeling whenever his valve was stimulated.

Then all too quickly, it was over. He whined a little as the cloth was withdrawn, and sat up with a groan, the sensors around and inside of his valve buzzing and demanding more. He heard a splash of the water in the bucket. Prowl had washed off the cloth, then put it aside to instead soak up the other clean one for Sideswipe to use on him.

An idea popped into the city-mech's mind.

“Hey, wait a breem.” Sideswipe put a hand on Prowl's arm, stopping him. “I've got a different way to clean you.”

Prowl stared at him, but Sideswipe gestured for him to lay down as he'd been doing before. With a raised optic ridge, Prowl crawled back onto the berth, and stuffed several pillows underneath his spinal strut before laying down on his back. Sideswipe immediately understood why: laying with his shoulders directly on his doorwings would be uncomfortable.

Still keeping the wet cloth nearby, the red mech shimmied to the foot of the berth, and knelt down between Prowl's legs. The sides of his mouth turned up at a questioning sound from the Autobot staring down at him.
“Don't worry, you're going to like this. I can do a lot more with my mouth than just kiss.”

A black finger wiggled at the top of Prowl's interface port. The lid receded back for him, revealing a valve that they'd yet to play with, and Sideswipe was determined to get his spike into that later. But for now, he focused instead on the other's sheathed, deflated spike.

Picking up the dampened cloth, he rubbed the top of the sheath, cleaning off the thin layer left behind from the previous night. Prowl's systems revved up, and the sheath slid back too, his spike revealing itself and warming up slightly as trans-fluid began to prime it. Sideswipe let its end rest in his palm, and as it grew, he slipped his fingertips up and down its length, encouraging it to fill, until he could hold it in his hand, and Prowl was gasping and fidgeting back and forth on the berth.

“Sideswipe...”

The red mech ignored the whimpered moan, and once he was satisfied with how full it had become, he lowered himself to exhale a vent on its tip. Prowl's response was instantaneous; a yelp, a shiver, and his spike wiggled as a bulb of pre-fluid surged from its tip.

Sideswipe dipped his head even further, and with a quick jab of his tongue, licked the pre-fluid off.

This was as foreign to Prowl as kissing had been. He yelped what sounded like a cut-off protest, whined, then looked down, his optics wide. He was alarmed, but...intrigued. He whined at him beseechingly.

He wanted Sideswipe to do it again.

The city-mech did, this time dragging his tongue along the spike's length first. That earned a frame-wracking shiver from his mate, who settled back down on the furs, one arm draped over his chevron as he took in several deep vents, his chestplate and bumper heaving up and down with each breath.

The spike quivered in Sideswipe's palm. His own systems warmed, and he couldn't resist it for more than half a breem, especially when he'd been given a preview of how good the pre-fluid tasted.

The tip came to his lips again in a brief kiss, then slipped further past his lips, and past his dentals, which he cautiously remembered to not use too much. Prowl had been afraid that he was going to eat him at the first kiss, after all. Letting him put his spike into his mouth took some measure of bravery for a mech that didn't know what his mate was doing, but Prowl held still and let him do this very new and strange thing, throwing his head back and gasping hard as the red mech's mouth drew further down his length.

At last, the tip touched the back of his throat, and Sideswipe held it there. He purposely swallowed, the walls of his throat tightening on the spike briefly, and the white mech all but squeaked before writhing around, unsure of what Sideswipe was doing but not minding it one bit. His tongue got to work, slipping up and down the length, scooping up the dried fluids, cleaning him, and in his opinion, it was far more effective than silly wet cloth clenched in his palm.

His black hands slipped down to Prowl's hips, holding him down and massaging his servos, before he lifted his head back slightly, and brought it back down, making sure it went a little further down his throat this time. Prowl yowled. Sideswipe's mouth smiled around his spike.

Oooh, he was going to have fun.

Keeping his hands tight on Prowl's hips so that he couldn't buck and accidentally hurt him before
he understood how to enjoy being given oral, Sideswipe bobbed his head up and down slowly, licking at the spike, washing it and pleasuring it at the same time, venting through his nose in a way that he knew would tickle the plating around the other mech's belly. Prowl grunted with each bob, and the red mech could feel him struggling under his fingers, wanting badly to give into a desire to grind up at whatever was doing such wonderful things to his spike. His aft wiggled on the berth underneath him, and Sideswipe felt his own frame responding to sight and sounds and *taste* of his mate.

“Mmm...”

He closed his optics as he picked up his pace. One of Prowl's hands was digging into a pillow at his side and squeezing, his other hand clenching and unclenching above his head. Bliss was written across his faceplates, and his mouth dropped open to pant in time with each bob.

Sideswipe abruptly slowed down. Then, with one last kiss at the tip, he picked himself up, making sure that Prowl was looking at his face as he licked his lips sensuously.

“There. You're all clean now.”

His optics opening wide, Prowl revved directly at him, and made a face as Sideswipe climbed up to rest at his side once more. He hissed and clicked rapidly. *Now* he was angry, and the red mech didn't need the translation program to know what he was saying.

“*Get back down there and finish me!*”

“*Na.*” Tapping a finger at Prowl's nose, Sideswipe smiled devilishly at him, then curled up into the other mech's frame. “That's payback for teasing me for so long last night.”

Granted, all of the pre-slag *had* made that night one of the best frags he'd ever had. And now Prowl was grasping at him and whining, asking for something, no, *pleading,* and he nearly gave in. The Autobot was worked up now, and his spike was primed; it wasn't fair for Sideswipe to leave him to lose the charge in his interface port after several breems of no stimulation.

“*Na,*” he repeated. “And besides, you don't want to overload yourself just yet.”

He put a palm direction on Prowl's chestplate.

“Spark-play is draining. Let yourself rest first. And then we can do it again later.”

Prowl groaned, knowing that Sideswipe would have been firm about stopping for a good reason. After all, he'd wanted to frag last night just as much as Prowl did. Pit, he'd been the one who'd started kissing him first. But the Autobot was disciplined enough to stop if his mate insisted, even if it was with a grumble and narrowed optics. Sideswipe returned the glare with a bright grin.

“If it helps, I need to rest too. It's been a while since--”

“Prowl?”

The tent flaps were being moved aside. Both mechs froze for a nano-second before Prowl threw himself over Sideswipe, covering him, the red mech grunting at the sudden weight on top of him. His cortex took a moment to catch up with his processor, which had recognized the voice as friendly, despite Prowl's reaction.

Tracer? Tracker? Tracks? Yeah, that was it. *Tracks.* Someone had named Tracks for him after the fight with Optimus.
The dark blue mech had poked his head in through the flaps that Prowl had forgotten to re-lace. Immediately the white mech was hissing and growling at him, his engine revving dangerously, and Tracks made a surprised noise that sounded like a quack before slapping a hand over his optics.

Understanding dawned on him, and Sideswipe burst into laughter underneath Prowl, whose doorwings were quivering in irritation at both the other Autobot and his mate.

The mech was definitely not an exhibitionist, at all, especially to intruders in his own tent.

There was a furious exchange between the two Autobots before Tracks put something down on the tents floor and left, the flaps hurriedly being re-laced behind him. Prowl huffed, then flopped down next to his giggling mate, his doorwings still twitching.

“Aw, c’mon.” A black hand lifted to stroke one of the extended panels. “Two mechs fragging is natural. Even though we weren’t doing anything at the breem but laying ‘naked’ together. Is that what you nomads think? If you're not wearing clothing, then you must be getting ready to frag?”

Prowl grunted. Sideswipe laughed again, then took his helm and kissed his cheek before wrapping his arms around him.

“Go back to recharge. If you've got the day off or something because of me, then we can do more when you wake up.”

The mech muttered something at that. But eventually he gave into the warm embrace of his mate, and laid his head down on his shoulder. Sideswipe grinned, his chin ducked down over Prowl’s helm, and let his processes slow, even though he knew that it would take a while for his interfacing system to realize that he wanted to recharge a bit longer, not frag something.

Scratch that. He did want to frag, and his spike pressed against its sheath as it announced itself and reminded him that he'd still not stuck it into Prowl. But he also wanted to frag effectively, and he needed rest before he could do that.

The spark-play must have worn him out too, more than he'd originally thought.

He couldn't help a curious glance at what Tracks had left behind though, and he lifted his head towards the mound of cloth. He refreshed his optics at it, staring at the bundle of cloth, then enjoyed the warm pride blooming in his chestplate before snuggling into Prowl again.

Right next to the flap was a folded red poncho, and matching waist-cloth.

His spark lit up happily, and broadcasted out, even if there was no one to hear it at the moment.

*Love, love, love...*
Chapter 16: Voice

Sunstreaker looked over the back of the couch as he heard someone make several attempts to close the front door properly. Sideswipe was waddling in, and Sunstreaker narrowed his optics at him, judging if he was just overcharged all to the Pit, or if somebody had surgically removed his processor and juggled with it. Both looked plausible. His twin's face was especially dopey, his smile all crooked, and Sunstreaker frowned as he put down the article about the city's energon shortage that he'd been reading.

“Hey, before you read, Go check out the thing that Regenerating_Degenerate made! It's from the 'Rain' chapter back in Sidequests!

“You look like fresh slag.”

“Your creator looks like fresh slag,” Sideswipe immediately retorted drunkenly. “All aft and no... and no... anything else.”

The golden twin scoffed as he got up and pulled his brother's arm over his shoulder, taking his weight and letting him use him as a crutch as he walked him towards his room. He doubted Sideswipe's ability to traverse the short distance on his own right now without breaking something at the moment.

“So, does this mech have a name?” he asked.

“Swindle,” the red mech drawled.

“Sounds like a real winner.”

“He ain't got much of a valve. But, frag, one frell of a mouth. Knew where to get the best drinks too.”

Shouldering open the door, Sunstreaker led Sideswipe across the room and over to his berth. Unlike Sunstreaker's room, Sideswipe didn't mind his own clutter, and his brother huffed as he forced himself to ignore mess and get his twin onto the berth. The red mech flopped down without a second thought, cackling as he bounced a little.

“Wheeee--!”

“Must have been some drink.”

“Drinks-es-es. Plural.” He scrunched his face in a brief, deep concentration as Sunstreaker threw a thermal blanket over him, and then his optics lit up with a fantastic idea. “I want to see him again.”
“No, Sideswipe.”

“Yes, Sideswipe!”

His shoulder was shoved, and he rolled over, the blanket moving with him and entangling his arms and legs. “The mech wanted you drunk for a quick frag,” his twin scolded. “Don’t get too attached.”

“Nnngh...” Sideswipe raised his head to refresh his optics at his brother. “But I like him!” he protested. “And he likes me!”

“He likes your spike.”

“He likes my frame.”

“Oh, well excuse me,” the golden mech snorted. “Point still stands.”

“He likes you too!”

Sunstreaker's optic ridges shot up. “He likes me?!”

“Yeah! You know how some mechs get freaked out when we say that we’re twins? I told Swindle, and he got all excited and bought me another drink.”

“Probably wants me to join in with you two.”

“...Would you...?”

Sideswipe's head was shoved into the berth. “No! You dumb glitch,” Sunstreaker growled.

“I am drunk,” Sideswipe argued, his faceplates mushed into the liner. “I can be as dumb as I want.”

“You mean as dumb as usual.”

“Yes, exactly. Wait. What?”

Sunstreaker snorted. After a hesitation, though, the thermal blanket was adjusted so that Sideswipe could stretch out more comfortably. “Do me a favor,” the yellow mech said, his voice softening. “Don’t fall too hard for a mech who just wants your spike. Okay?”

“Mmm. Fine,” he grumbled, and shut off his optics.

Footsteps walked across the floor towards the door. “Dumb-aft.”

“Slag-sucker.” He suddenly jolted in realization. “Sunstreaker?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t leave me.”

“I’m just going into the next room--”
“Please?”
“...”

The footsteps returned. The berth sank a little as the golden twin sat down on the edge, and rubbed his palm on Sideswipe's back. The growing tension in his spinal struts eased in a few strokes, and the red twin shuttered his optics, though his face had puckered into a grimace.

“You can recharge, Sides. I'll be here if the nightmares start again.”

“Mmmph.”
“I'm here.”
“...Don't leave me.”
“Never.”

Sideswipe's pleads were cut off by the gag in his mouth as he struggled against the ropes around his wrists and ankles. He screamed, he cried, but no one stepped forward to help him.

The laughing red optics were only further amused by this, and the knife was raised high, dangling a moment in the air, before plunging down towards his quivering spark.

And then, suddenly, the red mech wasn't afraid anymore.

Light engulfed him, and he felt warm...

Sideswipe's frame was curled up against another's at his front. A whimper that had been bubbling up in his vocalizer died, and if it hadn't been for the same dream plaguing him for Primus-knew-how-long, he would have forgotten why he'd nearly cried out. But this time, he'd stopped himself, though his berth-mate must have detected his distress anyway.

Something had changed. Or maybe his cortex had finally figured out how to deal with a reoccurring nightmare.

Still, he clung to the mech laying down beside him, who was hushing him gently. A palm cupped his cheek, and a sloppy but spark-felt and tender kiss was pressed on his lips.

...That had to be Prowl. The two of them seriously needed to practice their kissing. As much as the nomad liked doing it, he was embarrassingly poor at it. Yet his touch and taste made the red mech feel wonderful anyway.

Sideswipe's mouth followed his mate's as he drifted back into wakefulness and onlined his optics. He mumbled gratefully, the words jumbled as he found himself caught between talking and kissing, too drowsy to dedicate himself to one or the other. Prowl kept at it, leading the taller mech on, but only until Sideswipe rolled his head back with a sigh and squinted up at the roof above them. As the rest of his systems came online, the Autobot leaned his face down into his neck and sighed.
peacefully.

The orange haze on the tent's fabric was dimmer now. Someone had re-lit the lamps while Sideswipe been recharging.

He wondered if Prowl had woken up and yelled again at whichever mech had walked in on the two sleeping, 'naked' lovers? He nearly smiled at the imagery that came to his mind, but the grin died as his cortex jumped to a different train of thought.

...No amount of fragging had ever made him need to recharge for *that* long.

Alarm buzzed through his circuitry, and he checked his status on his HUD. Was he hurt? Was he sick? If he was, then Prowl must have been suffering from the same ailment. Despite them resting all day, he looked exhausted as well, maybe even more than Sideswipe. But his HUD came up with nothing, other than that his should be thinking about replenishing his tanks in the next few joors.

“I think we might need to go see Ratchet,” he mumbled.

Prowl immediately pushed himself up on his elbows when the medic's name was said. His huge optics went to scanning his mate, hurriedly looking for injuries that Sideswipe may not have mentioned before. Sideswipe snorted at his over-reaction and raised one of his hands placatingly.

“I'm not damaged. I think. But we've been resting all day, and I still feel like I haven't gotten enough recharge. I know that spark-play is hard on a frame, but it's not *that* bad.”

Prowl still looked worried, though not as frantic anymore. He heaved a sigh as he laid back down, and a hand quietly stroked along Sideswipe's chestplate, just above his spark chamber. He murmured something in the nomadic language, and pointed at the plating, then at himself.

“You too, huh?” Sideswipe allowed himself a small smile. “It's just the spark-play then. We're fine. In fact...”

One of his hands stretched down to tickle along Prowl's belly mischievously.

“I can think of a few things we can do to pass the time that doesn't require an overload,” he smirked. “I could show you what else I can do with my mouth.”

Despite the warming purr of his engine, the white mech's faceplates crinkled. He was contemplating something, or reading his HUD. Or both. Did this mech ever stop over-processing?

Before Sideswipe could tease him for how funny he looked while he was thinking too hard, Prowl's concentration was replaced by a look of resignation, and then he spoke quietly.

“...You...!!” Sideswipe gasped out.

He'd understood him.
Prowl had spoken in Cybertronian Standard.

Prowl had spoken in *fragging* Cybertronian Standard.

...Sideswipe's processor nearly crashed, and it was in the middle of a reboot when the white mech reached for him, concerned.

“Are you alright?”

Sideswipe's answer was his engine revving up so fast that it *shrieked*. He scrambled up, his optics still locked on Prowl's, but then he broke contact as a pillow slipped under his foot and sent him crashing back down on the edge of the berth with a squeal of protesting servos. He tried again to get up, but his legs disobeyed, his cortex ignoring any requests for motor functions while it was preoccupied with comprehending a new reality.

*Prowl had spoken in Cybertronian Standard.*

“Sideswipe!”

Hands were on him. He was rolled over onto his back, then pulled back into the berth, partially resting along one of the furs. White hands were gripping his shoulders, halting his frantic movements. Prowl's own optics stared down at him, huge and anxious.

“I didn't mean to startle you. Please, calm down--”

“Since when do you speak Standard?!” Sideswipe yelped. Some rogue line of code in his cortex recalculated the limits of the pitch of his voice; he had no idea that he could screech that high.

“I had been working on this translation software between our languages since shortly after you were rescued.”

His processor threatened to overclock itself.

“Since I was rescued...?!”

Prowl nodded, and continued.

“I understood some of your more simple words through reasoning and deduction, but my processor was writing a translation program in the background whenever you spoke. It finished coding itself a few joors ago.”

Prowl spoke Cybertronian Standard more formally than some *Kaonites*. That had to be one Pit of a translation program.

Wait...

A few joors ago--?!

*They'd been* cleaning each other a few joors ago.

“Why didn't...why didn't you tell me then?!”

“You were already agitated. I didn't want to stress you further.”

“Well I'm pretty fragging stressed *now*!” Sideswipe roared. “You knew what I was saying and *chose* not to tell me?!!"
Prowl matched his growing hysterics with a cool authority. “You were upset because you thought that I was willingly keeping you and Sunstreaker separated. On top of that, you were still adjusting to being my mate. You were facing two crises at once. I didn't want to harm you by adding a third. I chose not to tell you for your own good.”

“So instead, you waited until—”

“Until you were calmer and stronger, sa. I decided that now was the time to tell you, before you did something, ah, 'exhausting' again.”

Either the word ‘sa’ meant something stronger than 'Yes', or the Autobot had decided that Sideswipe already knew its definition and did not need a translation.

The city-mech wriggled under the nomad's hands. “Do I look CALM to you?!” he snarled.

“Not at the moment. But there was an 83% certainty that you would be incapable of listening to me if I told you that the program was running as soon as it had installed earlier today.”

“I'm about to be incapable of listening to your percentages right now if you don't let me up!!”

Prowl scrambled back, giving Sideswipe room to roll over and climb up by himself. “Sorry.”

“Uh-huh.” Kneeling on the berth, the red mech vigorously scrubbed his faceplates with his palms, willing himself to wake up, if he was still dreaming. He'd wake up on the berth, cuddled next to Prowl, and laugh at himself for thinking that the mech had suddenly finished his translation software. Or, better yet, he'd wake up at home, and promise himself to never drink like that again. Yet no matter how much he rubbed his faceplates, the feel of his hands and the smells of the tent and the ring of Prowl's voice did not change.

“...Primus Almighty,” he mumbled into his hands. “You really do understand me.”

“Sa. But weren't you working on your own translation? You know a few of my words.”

Sideswipe's blue optics looked at him from between his fingers. “I figured out only what I needed.”

“You're an Autobot now. You should be learning our language, not the other way around.”

The weak light in Sideswipe's palms blinked on and off as his optics refreshed.

...What?!

Oh Primus, he knew he'd been accepted into the tribe, but...

“...I'm not an Autobot!” He slapped his hands down over his knees. “You dragged me here, but that doesn't automatically make me one of you! I'm not a fragging savage, I'm--”

“You're my mate. Thus, you are now an Autobot.”

He growled. “Then I'll just not be your mate! Simple!”

Prowl looked stunned. “It's too late for that. You're mine, and I'm yours. We're mates now, forever.”

“Until Sunstreaker finds me, and I leave with him,” Sideswipe grimaced. “And I dare you to try to stop him when he gets to this camp. I dare you to try to stop me from reaching him.”
“I'm not sure what will happen if Sunstreaker finds us, but--”

“He'll find me.” The red mech raised his chin up confidently. “Did you understand what I meant when I explained that I have a split-spark?”

Prowl nodded slowly, cautiously. “You have a ‘twin.’” He stumbled over the word. There must have been no equivalent translation for the nomad. “Two halves of the same spark. But Sideswipe, this is why--”

“This is why Sunstreaker will never stop looking for me! And he's getting closer! I felt him earlier today!” He crossed his arms over his red chestplate and sneered at the nomad. “Wait until you see what happens when you keep apart two mechs who are bonded together. You think I can be scary? Wait until you see my twin.”

Now it was the white mech's turn to refresh his optics at him. After a moment of consideration he looked...sad.

“...Sideswipe. This morning...That wasn't Sunstreaker.”

Sideswipe scowled. “Of course it was! I know my brother's spark from--”

“That wasn't your brother.”

“...”

Icy-cold dread worked through his circuitry as a horrifying thought came to him.

They'd spark-played. He couldn't remember what had happened towards the end of it. Their sparks had merged, and...

No.

No.

No, no, no, no, NO.

“That was Sunstreaker!” He pounded a fist into the ground. “That was my twin!”

Prowl's voice was far too calm. “No, it wasn't.”

The white mech put a palm over his chestplate, just above his protruding bumper. His optics flickered, and he vented slowly, his shoulders and doorwings lifting up and down as he concentrated on something internally. He paused.

Sideswipe felt a tug at his own spark.

...It felt weak.

It felt very far away, at the end of a long tunnel.

It felt like it could be as far away as Kaon, or further.

His spark responded to it happily. Briefly. Then his processor caught up with him, and it shuddered to a stop.

“...You...”
Prowl online his optics again. “You're my mate,” he said slowly, staring intensely at the other mech, daring him to deny him again. “You're mine, and I'm yours.”

“...”

Sideswipe didn't remember when he had moved. He didn't remember it any better than what had happened at the end of their spark-play the previous night. A ghost of a vision, Prowl, and he was howling at the other mech...

But this time, now, he was howling in rage.

He got in one good hit on Prowl's cheek, snapping the mech's head back and stunning him briefly as the nomad tumbled backwards and off of the furs and pillows. But Prowl had earned the title of yoska just as well as Sideswipe. In a split-second he had turned his tumble into a controlled roll, coming up on his toes and fingertips, and he sprang to one side as Sideswipe's next punch slammed into the ground where he'd just been.

“You son of a GLITCH!!” the city-mech screamed.

He saw blurs of movement through the tent, mostly orange, the walls, browns, the frame and floors, and white, right there, and he was screaming and throwing himself at white, thrusting his fists at him and following him, unable to think while his cortex was consumed by a blinding rage.

It had to have been Sunstreaker this morning. It had to, it had to, it HAD TO--

Sunstreaker wouldn't leave him alone here. Sunstreaker was coming. Sunstreaker would find him.

But he couldn't feel him any better than when he'd been kidnapped, but he could feel this mech, weak and uncertain while Sideswipe's spark all but exploded rage through their bond.

Their bond, by Primus...

Prowl was grabbing for something. Sideswipe dove at the white blur, missed, but managed to snatch the edge of a doorwing. He heard a cry of pain, and he yanked at the panel hard, tugging him inside the range of another punch.

The nomad ducked, spun, and tackled him instead, driving them both across the tent, their feet slipping over the rugs and furs. Something unyielding slammed into Sideswipe's back, and the whole tent rattled.

“Sideswipe, stop it!”

“You fragger! You piece of slag!!”

Something tightened around his left wrist. Ignoring it for now, he swung out his other hand at Prowl's face, and was rewarded with a crash of metal along his knuckles and a pained grunt from the white mech. But then Prowl was on the move again, scrambling on top of him, pinning him to the center pole, grabbing Sideswipe's right hand and shoving it behind his back, into the loop of cloth wrapped around his left hand.

“NO!”

The other end of the loop closed around his right wrist, and when he tried to pull it forward, he ended up tightening and closing the loop himself. Prowl tugged the slack out of the cloth before wrapping it around Sideswipe's wrists several more times. The material was soft, but would not
give or tear; it was the long piece that Prowl had been wearing over his shoulder before. His body pinned the red mech's down as he hurried to knot it. Sideswipe roared and struggled underneath him, trying to buck the other mech out of his lap and desperately pulling at his bound wrists as Prowl finished tying him down.

“NO! No, let me go!”

“You need to calm--!”

He snarled and headbutted Prowl as hard as he could. The nomad gasped and fell backwards, freeing the mercenary's legs as the mech's weight tumbled off. But Sideswipe still couldn't get up and follow him. He grimaced and sneered as he yanked at the wrists tied behind his back, on the other side of the center pole.

He was trapped.

He was trapped, again, by the same mech, and things were worse, so much worse. Panic spiderwebbed through his circuitry as he struggled against the knotted cloth with all of his might, the tent's structure shaking as he dug his feet into the ground and pulled desperately.

He was trapped.

Sunstreaker didn't know that he was here.

Sunstreaker wasn't nearby.

Sunstreaker wasn't looking for him.

No, he had to be looking for him! His twin wouldn't abandon him!

Sideswipe felt Prowl's optics on him, the nomad watching him warily from where he had crouched out of the way of black feet kicking wildly. The red mech twisted his arms back and forth and gritted his dentals.

“Where's Sunstreaker?!" he shrieked. “Why can't I feel our bond?! What did you do?!"

“I don't know where Sunstreaker is,” Prowl said, far too quietly. His hand was a wound on his temple that was oozing energon. “I haven't broken your bond with your twin. He's just...He's further away than I am. You're feeling me before him.”

“I know that I felt him before! I know I did! I know I did!!”

“That was me, Sideswipe. Not your twin.”

“It was not you! You're not Sunstreaker!” He thrashed one more time, then slumped against the pole. The volume of his vocalizer, however, didn't lower by a macro-meter, and he panted before shouting again. “Do you have any idea what you've done?! You know how hard it's going to be to break a slagging bond with you?!”

“...I don't intend to break it.”

“...You wanted to bond with me,” Sideswipe realized. “You kidnapped me, you took me as your mate...You wanted to force me to bond...”

Prowl grimaced. “Not to force you. I took you because—”
“You piece of slag, you don’t think I can break this?!”

The nomad's optics widened tremendously. “Sideswipe, don't!”

But the red mech had already squeezed his own optics shut and doubled over. His body was bound, but his spark was not. No...it was bound. Bound to another mech, and he'd been fooled, thinking that the bond leading to another spark had been his brother's. Stupid, stupid, STUPID!!

His spark quivered with anger, rage, hate. It writhed and screamed at the ethereal darkness around it. Then there was another light. The other spark was standing between him and Sunstreaker, eclipsing his brother from his sight. It was the only explanation for why he could not feel his twin. It wasn't as strong as his twin, but it was close, and it was bright, and it was in the way of a bond that he'd always known.

He felt a weak cry from somewhere else, but ignored it. He searched, feeling out for found the bond leading to that spark, barely discernible from his brother's. He gripped it, and braced himself for incredible pain...

Perceptor's words rang in his head, but it was not in the scientist's voice. It was his own.

“That's not what a yoska would do!!”

He paused.

He was...

He was a mercenary. He could take the pain. He'd hurt himself, but he'd hurt the other mech far worse.

...He wasn't a mercenary. Not anymore.

Other mechs saw him as something more.

Prowl saw him as something more.

Prowl had bonded with him.

Prowl was keeping him from Sunstreaker.

Confusion and fear whirled in with all of his anger, creating a maelstrom that sucked him up, and he was lost, so lost, and he just wanted Sunstreaker. Sunstreaker would make everything all right again. Sunstreaker would put everything back and make sense of it all.

But he couldn't feel his twin.

He was alone.

He was alone, with an enemy, and he could fight him and he might even offline him, and--

“That's not what a yoska would do!!” the voice in his head repeated.

With a tendril of his spark still wrapped around the bond, ready to snap it and deal with the horrible consequences that would follow, Sideswipe onlined one optic and peered at Prowl. The other mech had braced himself, a hand over his own chestplate, his dentals clenched, prepared for the terrible pain of a bond being torn asunder.
If breaking the bond would *hurt* Sideswipe, it would probably do far worse to Prowl, who didn't know what a spark was capable of.

...That's not what a *yoska* would do.

That's not what *he* would do.

But he knew what he *would* do.

Sideswipe's spark squeezed the bond once, a dangerous reminder to Prowl, before releasing it, and it snapped back into place.

Prowl gasped, relieved, then winced as thick walls slammed down between the two sparks, cutting him off from feeling the supernova of rage coming from Sideswipe, and Sideswipe could no longer feel the weak pulses of pain and worry and *fear* from the nomad. The force of the walls crashing into him hit Prowl as if he'd been physically shoved, and he fell on his back.

Sideswipe's entire frame quivered as he stared him down. His shoulders heaved, and he didn't realize how badly his fans were trying to cool his systems as the tent was filled with the sounds of two mechs panting. Prowl looked utterly terrified, and had propped himself up on his elbows as he watched the red mech with wild optics. But Sideswipe only glared at him as willed himself to cool down.

...He was okay.

He was bonded, but he knew and *felt* what that meant, and so his spark was stronger than Prowl's. He could block him out.

He was okay.

He was okay.

...He still couldn't feel Sunstreaker.

Sideswipe whined, and leaned back against the pole, shaking as some of the wrathful energy left him.

He didn't know how to put a block up for two *different* bonds. He and Sunstreaker had learned over the vorns how to put a block up, either when they were upset with one another, or wanted to be alone, or they simply didn't want to distract their other half with whatever was bothering them. But he'd never put up one block and left a *different* bond open.

Could that even be done?!

“*Oh, Primus...*”

As long as he was blocking Prowl out, *he had no chance of feeling Sunstreaker's spark.* His own spark could barely tell the difference between them. His twin could be right outside the tent, and he wouldn't know.

“Sideswipe?”

He snapped his head up and sneered at the nomad.

Neither would he lift the block. Not if it meant giving this mech access to his spark.
“Frag you,” he mumbled, shocked at the exhaustion in his own voice. Frag it all, *that* was why both he and Prowl had been so tired today. Their sparks were in the midst of establishing a new bond.

Had the other Autobots known what was happening?!

Prowl looked just as weary, but gathered himself anyway. He started to approach Sideswipe, carefully, as if the red mech had turned into a skittish turbo-fox that was cornered and was threatening to bite him.

“...If you listen to what I have to say, I'll untie you,” he said gently, though his voice wavered a little. “But I can't risk you trying to hurt me or running away until I'm done.”

Sideswipe narrowed his optics. “You'll let me go?”

“If you try to run out of the camp, I'll stop you, as will the others.” He paused. “...But if you listen, and don't try to hurt me again when I'm done, then I'll untie you.”

“Then *talk*. Fast.”

Prowl's doorwings quivered a little; his patience was beyond it's end, but when he spoke again, his voice was controlled. “...Did you understand that your people had betrayed you?”

“My people?” He raised an optic ridge. “Kaon? I was sent out by one mech. Sentinel Prime.”

“Then this 'Prime', your Prime, has tricked you.”

“How?”

“You were told to bring the prophecy to Megatron, correct?”

“The prophecy? You mean the map?”

“It's not just a...nevermind. You were sent to bring the prophecy to the leader of the Decepticons, *sa?* Sideswipe...are you aware that the Decepticons practice mech sacrifice?”

Sideswipe took a sharp intake.

His dream...

“I...suspected,” he muttered coolly. “They've killed Kaonites, mechs from my city.”

“Were you aware that *you* were meant to be the one to give them both the prophecy and a sacrifice from your city?”

“...That's ridiculous,” he spat. “Sentinel Prime wouldn't do that to me. He and I may not see optic to optic, but he wouldn't...”

“There's something special about you,” Prowl continued. “It didn't escape me that the rest of the mechs on your team were...undersized?”

“Minibots. We call them minibots.”

“None of them would have made a good sacrifice. But Megatron, the leader of the Decepticons, thinks that if he sacrifices you, he'll open the way to Iacon.”

The red mech's head felt like it was spinning. Iacon? Megatron? Was that who he'd been seeing in
his dreams? Was that why he saw himself dying? But dreams weren't real...

“Sentinel Prime wouldn't do that!” he repeated, but his voice was shaking. “He wouldn't...”

“Sideswipe. We rescued you,” Prowl implored, his voice more gentle now that he knew that the city-mech was starting to conceive what had really happened. “We were sent to steal the Iacon prophecy before it could be delivered to Megatron. As soon as we saw how you fought compared to the 'minbots', my team realized that you were intended to be a sacrifice. Megatron would not take a small, weak mech; it would not be worth his time or effort, and, according to his sick mind, they would not be worthy to his gods. He would immediately choose you. We originally intended to escort you to one of the other cities and release you, where you would be safe not only from Megatron, but from whoever sent you to be sacrificed in the first place. This 'Sentinel Prime,' as you said.”

Sideswipe remembered that when he'd first woken up after the battle, he'd been separated from the minibots before any of the Autobots had touched the caravan. They had been ready to take him before they knew that the map was with him. So far, the Autobot's story made sense.

“But you didn't escort me to another city,” he said sharply. “You kidnapped me, and took me here.”

“That's because we found the prophecy. It talks about you, Sideswipe.”

“...That's impossible. I don't even know what this 'Iacon' is. How can I be related to it?”

“I don't know. But you are.” Prowl stood up. “Whether you believe me or not, understand that Megatron believes his interpretation fully. If he gets his hands on you—”

“He'll carve out my spark for his gods.”

The Autobot refreshed his optics. “One of his gods. Unicron. You know how it's done?”

“I...”

He'd seen it.

His dreams. That's what he'd been seeing. He was seeing his own sacrifice.

“It's not real,” he blurted. “None of it is. It can't be, it can't...”

“And not only does Megatron believe it, so does your Sentinel Prime. I do not know why he chose you, but you were who he chose to give to the Decepticons.”

Sideswipe's spark sank.

“...So even if I got away from you...Even if I outran the Decepticons and returned home...”

“You'd be running right back into the arms of the mech who sent you to die.”

Sideswipe bit his bottom lip, and bowed his head forward slightly.

“Primus...”

He wanted to purge.

He'd never been under the inclination that Sentinel valued his life, but...
Sentinel had tricked him. He hadn't intended for Sideswipe to ever return home.

The red mech squeezed his optics shut and gritted his dentals with a soft whine.

His feet light and impossibly quiet, Prowl worked his way around Sideswipe, and to the back of the pole, where his wrists were tied. The city-mech had gone limp, and didn't bother to lift his head to check the other mech's progress.

“I'm going to untie you. Sa?”

“...Sa.”

With a few swift jerks, the knots in the cloth came free, and Sideswipe lifted his wrists to rub them. But he stayed seated, his back against the pole.

He wanted to run. But where to?

“...I can't go home.”

Prowl was kneeling down beside him. “I'm sorry.” He sounded like he meant it. “If you do--”

“Kaon will send me back to the Decepticons, probably in chains this time. I get it.”

“But you're not there anymore. You're here, and safe.” A hand was laid on his shoulder. “We've escaped the Decepticons. We're back in camp, and no one can touch--”

“Don't touch me.”

Prowl's hand whipped back. “...Sideswipe. I'm not your enemy. I claimed you as my mate because--”

“No.” Sideswipe put his hands over his audials. “I don't want to hear it.”

The Autobot vented, exasperated. “Sideswipe--”

“No. No more. Not right now. Please?” He winced at how weak and pleading his voice sounded, as if he'd downgraded his frame back into a quivering younling. He couldn't help himself though. The rules of the world had suddenly been re-written, and nobody had bothered to tell him.

“...All right.”

The red mech closed his optics as he heard his 'mate' getting up and shuffling back over to the berth, rearranging the pillows and furs that had been thrown about during the fight. Sideswipe made no attempt to help him. Instead, he bent his head forward, resting his forehead on his knees, and covered his helm up with is arms as he whimpered.

It made too much sense.

A sacrifice.

Sentinel Prime saw him as nothing more than a sacrifice. No doubt that he'd already planned to tell Kaon how poor, brave Sideswipe had been taken prisoner and killed in the wildlands, far from any help that the Prime could have offered.

He couldn't go home. He could never go home, even if he could escape. Sentinel would send him right back to his death, this time without the trickery of assigning him as a caravan guard. Pit, he
might name him a traitor as soon as he entered the city, and have him dragged back to the Decepticons as punishment for treason. No one in Kaon would ever question the Prime.

*He could never go home.*

...Was Sunstreaker looking for him? Had he believed whatever report Sentinel had made about his death?

“Prowl?”

“Sa?”

“What happens to me now?”

The white mech paused, considering him for a long while, before answering.

“The Decepticons are still looking for you, and the Iacon prophecy. But you are an Autobot now, and my mate.” His voice strengthened, confident and determined. “I will not let them find you.”
Chapter Notes

I'm all better! Thanks guys!

Chapter 17: Middle

It had rained overnight. Clouds were still clustered in the sky at the beginning of the next orn and narrowed what sunlight could break through them into radiant beams that shined down onto particular fields in the wildlands, as if Primus himself were spotlighting certain crystals and animals. The air was cooler than it had been in severalorns, and drops of water clung to the crystals and tents long after dawn.

The bonfire had died down a little during the rainfall, and some mechs had come by in the morning and built it back up. A group of femmes were crowded to one side of it now, embedding curved posts into the ground and leaning their ends towards the flames, which held small cans of to-be-created rations. Sideswipe watched them with some curiosity, wondering how the application of heat turned the liquid energon into tough pellets, but for now he stayed on the mat that he was sitting on, unwilling to move closer to learn more about the tribe's fuel.

A few other Autobots were sitting on mats in the Commons too, but most of them had something to do in their lap: the weaving, the patching, the folding, etc. An older femme was rocking a sparkling swaddled in blankets and humming softly to it, and nomads passing by her would briefly lean down to coo at the tiny mech. But Sideswipe had purposely chosen a spot away from the rest of the mechs and femmes, and was doing nothing but brooding, his legs pulled up to the red poncho covering his chest and his arms wrapped around his knees. He felt somewhere between a youngling being babysat by the tribe around him, and a tamed cyber-wolf waiting for its master to return.

He had figured out that pulling up his hood over his helm when it was not raining was a universal sign for “Leave Me Alone.” And that's exactly what the nomads did, though they sent odd glances his way.

The ex-mercenary was waiting for Prowl to come back from Optimus's tent. As soon as the sun had risen, someone had asked for Prowl at the mech's tent--their tent, Sideswipe reminded himself with a scowl--and Prowl had immediately gotten up and dressed himself, though he still looked exhausted.

“...Are you going to destroy my things if I leave you alone?” he'd asked his mate.

“Maybe,” Sideswipe had grunted from his own 'berth'. He'd grabbed some pillows and recharged on the other side of the tent that night, still upset and unwilling sleep on the same mat as the white mech.

“Then am I supposed to keep you tied up while I'm gone?”

His pump had double-timed when there wasn't a drop of humor in Prowl's voice. “...You want to see what'll happen if you try?” he'd grunted, unsure if his complaint would even matter.
But after some thought, Prowl had brought him to the Commons area instead, where there would be more optics on his mate, and then he'd left him there. The mechs on watch over the camp would be keeping a special optic on their newest Autobot and notice if he looked to be causing trouble. Sideswipe had wandered the camp for a short time, looking at the stands and tables that had been set up early in the morning, and tried to explain to nomads that friendlily approached him that he couldn't yet understand them, and when they persisted he stormed back to the Commons, plopped down on a mat and yanked his hood up, which got them to go away. And now here he was, alone, with nothing to do but to feel sorry for himself.

The new poncho took some getting used to. The material was light and breezy, and moved aside easily enough, but the fact that it was there was distracting, just like the waist-cloth had been for the first few orns after he'd been captured. And thank Primus that his new one was made of something nicer than scrap. The old one had been starting to itch. The new one was longer, down to just past his knees, made of a softer yet sturdy fabric, and was easier to tie around his waist.

Sideswipe stared into the flames of the bonfire, and tried to ignore the sounds of the camp around him.

He wanted to try to find Sunstreaker. He wanted to stretch out and follow their bond, and try to feel out him. Even if he couldn't contact him, if he could at least know that his brother was alright, he'd feel happier. But as soon as he tried, his spark found itself facing the self-inflicted block.

If he tried to keep going by lifting it, Prowl would have access to their own bond. And if Sideswipe couldn't break it, at least he could keep his spark isolated from the white mech. The fragging glitch. But now the red mech was trapped behind his own walls. His spark was safe, for now, but it couldn't reach out to his twin without exposing itself to the new bond, and for now it stewed in it's spark casing, twisting and hissing and feeling just a tense as the rest of his frame.

Every so often he'd feel something on the other side of the barrier. The twins were well-versed enough in each other's blocks that they could 'knock' to get the other's attention, or, when enraged or in a panic, forcibly shove the whole block out of the way. But the presence that he felt from Prowl was like a pebble being thrown at a fortified city wall. He heard it, sure enough, and it was annoying, but the Autobot had no chance of breaking through.

Eventually Sideswipe had flared at the bond, his anger seeping through his own barrier, like fire licking past the fringes of a gate, and the noises had stopped. But the presence was still there, waiting, staring at the wall, as if calculating how to get through. All that Sideswipe could do for now was to sit on his own side, seething and waiting to fight to hold the block in place for whenever Prowl's assault began. Yet the nomad did nothing but patiently wait, and every so often, 'tap' and remind him that he was still there, waiting for the block to be lifted away.

Sideswipe gripped his arms around his knees a little tighter. He'd much rather have the other mech try to forcibly break through. Then at least he had an excuse to immediately hunt Prowl down and punch him in the face.

“Good morning. Mind if I join you?”

He startled, and his blue optics swept up from under the hood to the smaller mech coming up to him. Perceptor didn't wait for an answer, instead lowering himself to a nearby mat, grimacing a little and shuffling down awkwardly at the effort.

He was having as much trouble moving as Prowl did after they'd--

“You and Drift have a good frag?” the ex-mercenary smirked.
Perceptor's vocalizer choked something that sounded somewhere between a cackle and a suppressed, indignant cry. His head swiveled back and forth, as if making sure that no one else was around, before he matched Sideswipe's quiet grin and raised one finger.

“In Tarn, we call it ‘well-slagged,’” he whispered.

Despite his foul mood, Sideswipe couldn't help sniggering.

Perceptor's new ‘clothing' looked closer to Ratchet's than anyone else's. Red and blue, the robes covered his arms, torso and legs, all the way down past his knees, with two long slits along the sides so that it's length did not impede him. Though it fit him comfortably, it was clear that he wasn't going to be expected to fight with it on, unlike Sideswipe's poncho, which allowed him to move easily and swiftly. If the scientist had made his talents clear, or somehow came up with the nomadic word for “astrophysicist,” then the tribe probably wanted his assistance in the healers' tent.

He still wanted to hear the mech explain the field of astrophysics to a bunch of savages, though. That would be one frell of a conversation.

“You're bonded to Drift now, aren't you?”

Perceptor nodded and smiled. “That was...quite something, really. I've, a few times...well, I hadn't had much experience in matters like this, but Drift was very patient, a perfect gentlemech.”

“Lucky you.”

The scientist frowned. “Oh dear. Prowl was not? I'm sorry, I'd come to believe from their culture that they respected--”

“I didn't know that he was trying to bond with me until it was too late.”

Sideswipe hugged his knees again, and stared at the bonfire as he let Perceptor process that. It took the other city-mech a moment, then even longer for him to try to stammer out a response.

“...Oh, Primus. Oh Primus, Sideswipe, I'm so sorry.” His own happy mood vanishing, he shuffled closer to him and put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing him through the poncho. “Are you hurt? Did you--”

“We merged just fine,” Sideswipe said icily. “For some reason, our sparks didn't reject. It was fragging perfect, to where I didn't realize that something had changed until that evening. Lucky, lucky me.”

“...Sideswipe, I should have told you. I'd assumed that somewhere in your journey here, someone would have warned you that the Prowl would try to bond with you as he'd brought you to his tent.”

“How?!” he growled. “I've been barely able to understand them, much less hold a conversation!”

“I...I didn't...”

Sideswipe turned back to him, and his spark dropped at how stricken Perceptor looked.

“It's not your fault,” the ex-mercenary said quickly, soothingly and placatingly. “You only knew me for a few joors. You didn't know my situation.”

The scientist still took his hand back from Sideswipe's shoulder, and bowed his head shamefully. “I
still should have said something, back when you'd just realized that Prowl was taking you as his mate. I knew that you understood very little about what was happening, but I thought...something as important as that would have been...Primus, Sideswipe. I hope you can forgive me.”

“I forgive you,” he said immediately. “This is not your fault, Perceptor. I had my suspicions, but I didn't figure it out until it was too late. And even if you had told me, would that have really helped? I don't think we would have come all the way from Kaon just for Prowl to accept a 'no' from me.”

“If he professes to be a yoska, he would have.” He lifted his head a little as a thought occurred to him. “...Did you not interface with him at all during your journey from Kaon to the Autobot camp?”

Sideswipe thought about the second night, when he'd been frightened, whining and shivering as Prowl had pulled him to his side, and the Autobot had sighed and done nothing else but cradle him until he'd calmed down. Since then, he'd always laid with him at night, sometimes dispassionately, sometimes drapping an arm over him, though he had always pulled him into his arms whenever he'd had a nightmare. “No. Well...just before we arrived, we did kiss and touch each other during a stop, but it didn't get further than that. He's just been lying next to me most nights. Is that unusual?”

“It is. As far as I know, when a nomad takes a mate from another tribe, they make it clear that they are not a prisoner of war, per say, but their chosen partner. Much of the journey back is spent teasing and wooing their potential mate, not only to ensure that their sparks will be compatible, but to excite their mate until they won't want to leave them until they've bonded.”

“He was making up for that by teasing me the other night, the fragger,” Sideswipe muttered under his breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly. “So Prowl never interfaced with me until the other night. Yet he still expected me to know that I was supposed to bond with him?!”

“It's...plausible. Perhaps this is the only way he's ever known how and when to bond. The same may go for the rest of the Autobots. He may not think that he's done anything wrong by bonding with you after one interface, because by then he had 'claimed' you not just in words, but by successfully capturing you and taking you to his camp. In his optics, you can no longer be bonded to anyone else.”

Sideswipe hissed. “That sounds less like choosing a partner and more like ownership.”

“To us, it does. We've always been taught not to bond with someone unless we absolutely trust them, which would take vorns. These nomads...They live dangerous lives. They give themselves and their potential mates only a short time to decide if they want to spend the rest of their lives together, and, given that one had won the 'right' to bond by capturing the other, the answer is usually overwhelmingly positive.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Their 'right'?!?” He sat up. “You said that we weren't going to be made into slaves!”

“We're not!” Perceptor said appeasingly. “I mean that capturing a mate is a show of strength and skill, and is important to mechs whose lives depend on this. Their potential mate is supposed to be impressed that they couldn't overpower their captors and escape.” Frustrated, he raised his palms. “I know that it sounds terrifying, but that is their culture, and they accept it not only as traditional,
but as a necessity. Maybe Drift can explain it better than I can.”

“Or Prowl will. He finished his own translation program yesterday.”

“Oh?” The scientist's blue optics lit up. “Has he now? He was able to speak Standard to you?”

“Yeah. That's how I finally knew what was going on.”

“I'm nearly done with my own, and I was going to offer a copy of it to you, but it sounds like Prowl's will follow his language's depth and~”

“I'm not going to ask him for it,” Sideswipe scowled. “I'm blocking the bond. I don't want anything to do with him, other than to get some fragging answers.”

Perceptor lifted his optic ridges high. “How are you blocking...?!”

“I'm a twin. We'd drive each other crazy if we couldn't block each other out every once in a while.”

“I...see. I did not know that.” The scientist looked at him strangely, as if seeing him in a new light, then frowned and shook his head. “Questions about that can wait for another orn.”

“How about one for you instead?”

“Me??”

“How can you be so accepting with all of this?! I know you're on way better terms with Drift than me and Prowl, but he still kidnapped you! You may never see Tarn again, and yet you seemed thrilled that some strange mech just bonded with you! You let it happen!”

Perceptor paused a moment, staring at him, as if the other city-mech should easily know the answer to such a simple question, then grimaced tightly. He tried to lean forward and to rest arms on his knees, but the stance made him look even more uncomfortable as he took a moment to gather his thoughts.

“Kaon must be in better shape than Tarn,” he said quietly, almost conspiratorially. “We're in the middle of an energon crisis. Our mines have been drying up.”

“...So have ours.” The red mech sat up a little straighter. It was the first time that Sideswipe had realized that other cities were having the same troubles. All of the headlines had been concerned with Kaon's energon stores, not the other's. Or were the other cities hiding their own shortages from each other? “I thought it was just our vein that was weakening.”

“It's not. The cities of Cybertron may have finally outpaced the need for energon against what they can realistically draw from the mines. Polyhex is in a similar predicament. So is Kalis, and Vos, and Tyger Pax. I'd imagine that the smaller cities and towns aren't faring much better.”

Sideswipe refreshed his optics.

All of the major cities were having energon shortages?

Primus Almighty.

“We're starting to drain the planet,” he murmured in a dark understanding. “It can't keep up with us.”

“Now granted, it's not to late to attempt to slow our consumption until Cybertron renews itself!”
Perceptor said as he sat back up. “We'd have to live without many conveniences, but I've run calculations several times, and if the cities work together, we can stop the crisis in a few vorns, and then reverse it. It would take a massive cooperation effort, but--”

“The different Primes would never go for that.” Sideswipe said. “They're too proud to work with each other.”

Perceptor cut himself off as he bit his lip. “...Exactly.”

“But would they really--”

“They'd rather take each other's dwindling energon stores than admit that they've been mining too much on their own veins.”

The two city-mechs stared at each other, one's face that of a sorrowful wisdom, the other's a dawning understanding. Sideswipe's blue optics opened wide.

“...There's going to be a war for the energon,” he hissed. “Holy slag.”

“Yes. It's coming. I don't know when, but it'll be soon. Tarn has already turned some of its factories to weapons manufacturing.”

“Who are they stockpiling against? Kaon?!?”

“Kaon, Polyhex, who knows? Whoever arms themselves first will be the ones to destroy whoever arms themselves last.”

Deca-cycles ago, Sideswipe and Sunstreaker had talked what they would do if Sentinel had pressed them into joining Kaon's military. Now the red mech was certain that's what would have happened to them in less than a vorn, if the Prime hadn't changed his mind and sent the red mech to be sacrificed to some nomadic god instead.

Sideswipe had enough pride in his skills that he could call himself one of Sentinel Prime's best mercenaries. Yet in the middle of a crisis and oncoming war, the Prime sent one of his strongest mechs to be sacrificed, along with a shipment of badly-needed energon? Why?

“There were already talks about stalling my company's research projects in favor of, ah, interests more immediately suitable for the government.” Perceptor scowled. “Several of my friends resigned and moved to other cities, only to send word that they were facing the same prospects no matter where they relocated. I've already received inquiries about how I may benefit the army in the coming war. But all of my work has always been for the expansion of knowledge, to work towards a value for all Cybertronians, to help mechs! Not to destroy our civilizations!”

He crossed his arms, the sleeves of his robes draping over one another.

“I was in the wildlands for a meteorological study, and it would have been one of the last ones I could freely join before I was reassigned. So when I met Drift and Ironhide...I...well...”

“You didn't want to go back to Tarn.”

“When a kind spark like Drift's came along and offered to take me away from all of that nonsense, I most happily agreed. Of course he did, ah, 'capture' me. We had a mock-fight, I lost quickly, and he put me over his shoulder and carried me away. I had no choice to return once he'd started off. But aside from seeing my friends again, I have no desire to return and become a cog in a war machine. I will gladly spend the rest of my orns in a simpler life, out here with mechs who truly
care about one another. And one that, now I know in my spark, cares about me.”

Sideswipe sat back as he considered the smaller mech with new optics. “...And here I thought that you were just so into the adventure of getting carried off by savages that you forgot about everything else, even your city.”

Perceptor huffed at him, but some of the tension had left his frame, and the side of his mouth popped up into a smirk. “Nomads, Sideswipe. Not 'savages.' If I were to assign that name to anyone, it would instead be the Seekers that attacked my team until Drift and Ironhide fought them off. We've been found and taken in by good mechs.” The smile died. “But I knew what was coming long before I arrived, and accepted that I would need to bond with Drift. I was able to explain my uncertainties to him, and he's responded admirably. You and Prowl did not have the same privilege.”

The ex-mercenary vented through his nose at that. He pressed his lips together, then, after a thought, pulled his hood back, exposing his black helm.

“He did save me from worse things that would have happened.”

“I'm sure that your Prime would have sent you to fight on the front lines. Your duel with Optimus Prime was terrifying, I must tell you.”

Sideswipe stared at him. “That's not what I meant. He rescued...”

Wait.

It was all possible that Prowl had been lying about his reason for kidnapping Sideswipe, and that he'd simply desired him and dragged him off to be his mate, but if he hadn't...

“Perceptor, have you heard anything about something called the Iacon prophecy?”

The scientist refreshed his optics, and then his systems hummed as he searched his personal databases. “I've heard of an 'Iacon', but not a prophecy that goes with it.”

“Who's Iacon?”

“Not a 'who,' it's a 'what.'” He pressed a fist against his mouth, deep in thought as he analyzed the file he'd come up with. “It's a location. Supposedly. There haven't been any recent records of it in millions of vorns.” He paused again, his optics flashing as he read something on his HUD. “There's not even an assumed position on Cybertron. No one, aside from several history fanatics, have attempted to look for it, and those mechs were bordering on ridiculous.”

“But what is it?”

“I'd presume that it's some sort of an ancient city. Perhaps it was destroyed, or relocated, or evacuated. If it did exist at all, it could have been abandoned for any number of reasons.” He turned back to the ex-mercenary. “I didn't take you as having much interest in archeological studies.”

Sideswipe's engine grumbled. “Oh, frag. Mech, make yourself comfortable. This is going to be a long one.” He rolled his shoulders. “So, deca-cycles ago, Sentinel Prime assigned me and my twin to track down this old mech...”
When he'd finished telling his story, Perceptor's optics were wide and bright. Sideswipe gave him a chance to digest it all, and the scientist needed several breems before he spoke.

"...I wonder if they'll let me take a look at this 'map'--"

"I wouldn't touch it if I were you," Sideswipe said immediately. "That thing's brought me nothing but bad luck since it came into my life."

"This could be the historic find of our lifetime, Sideswipe! Oh Primus, imagine, we could soon be on our way to uncovering an ancient civilization--"

The ex-mercenary held up his hands. "Whoa, oh no. I'm still getting over the fact that, you know, I got kidnapped and bonded to a nomad. I'm not going looking for some ruins that probably don't exist anymore, if they ever did at all."

Perceptor frowned. "The Autobots seem to think that they do. Keep in mind, they refer to themselves as 'Autobots', but they call their language 'Iaconian.'"

"But what's this 'Iacon' got to do with me? And how do I undo it having anything to do with me?!!"

"I...don't know."

Sideswipe growled, and flopped to lie back on his mat with a dull thud of impact. His blue optics stared up at where the sun was still trying to break through the clouds, and he glared at them, wishing that they would hurry up and let the sunlight through, or turn back into stormclouds and rain on his head. Anything would be better than being stuck in the middle and waiting for whatever would happen next.

"I was just trying to earn some credits back then," he murmured. "This isn't fair."

"But regardless of how you got here, you are here." Sideswipe heard Perceptor shift his weight. "You should talk with Prowl."

The red mech scoffed, and pillowed his arms behind his head. "Why? So he can reason to me why it was okay for him to bond with me after our first interface?"

"He may very well do that. And it would help both of you if you were to listen, even if you don't agree with his logic. You two are bonded now. Unless you plan on trying to break the bond--"

"I've got to live with the slagger."

"...I'm afraid so."

Sideswipe grunted, and the two of them went silent. The red mech stared up at the re-gathering clouds a while longer.

...Deca-cycles ago, he and all the Kaonites would have been sent scurrying back inside on days like this, where storm clouds could open up at any moment. Now, even if it began to rain again, it wouldn't matter too much. He would forever treasure the memory of his first rainfall outside the city, even including the Autobots staring at him like he was a glitched drone as he sat out in the rain and stared at the sky, enjoying what should have always been natural.

"...I really do like it out here," he murmured at Perceptor. "I just wish I'd come here by my choice."

"I wish you had too. Under different circumstances, I think you'd be enjoying yourself as much as I
Footsteps approached them. Perceptor stopped talking, and Sideswipe's view of the clouds was obscured by a white, spiky head. Blue optics glinted down at him, and a black hand waved at his face.

The red mech smirked at the visage. “Hello, Drift.”

Drift grinned down at him, and squatted to lean closer to Sidewipe's face as he chattered directly at him, his tone light and playful.

“Yes, it's difficult to sun myself without a sun. Also, you make a better door than a window. You mind?”

Perceptor laughed, then spoke up in the Autobot's language, his own words slow and deliberate, though not as much as the last time Sideswipe had heard him attempt to translate. Drift chuckled, then left Sideswipe to instead plop down next to his mate, and the red yoska turned his head to watch them. The Autobot had wrapped his arms around Perceptor, and was whispering something straight into his audial. The rhythm was precise, and the clicks and buzzes of each word matched up in the timing, though a few were enunciated and drawn out.

Sideswipe raised an optic ridge. Was Drift reciting poetry at his mate?

“Oooh, I'm not certain of what you just said,” Perceptor purred as he leaned on him, “but by golly, do it again.” He grinned at the Autobot, then snuggled into him, showing his clear approval.

Something Perceptor had said popped into the Sideswipe's cortex. The more devious part of his mind immediately went to work.

“So, Perceptor,” he drawled as Drift cuddled the scientist and nuzzled his neck, making the smaller mech beam happily, “how many orns did it take for you to arrive at this camp?”

“Ah...” His optics flickered as he checked his chronometer. “Seven orns. We're much closer to Tarn than to Kaon right now.”

“So in seven orns, how many times have you and Drift interfaced?”

“At least a dozen—wait, what?!”

Perceptor whipped his head back to Sideswipe with such alarm that Drift immediately let go and climbed to a knee, looking for what could have distressed him so badly. Sideswipe hooted a laugh at the look on Perceptor's face, and pounded a fist on the ground as he broke into a fit of giggling.

“Teasing and wooing' all the way here, right?!” he laughed.

Perceptor clung to Drift, pulling him back down so that he could return to cuddling him while he glared at his fellow city-mech. “W-well, it did work! I'm very happy!”

“As I can tell.” Sideswipe gave him a sly look. “Have you tried kissing him yet?”

“What? Oh...ah, yes...yes I did.”

This time he returned the same expression, if a little lighter. Drift glanced between them, baffled, then murmured something as he stroked his fingertips along Perceptor's back, but the scientist ignored him for now.
“He all but catapulted himself off of the mat. Scared vorns off of my life, and off of Ironhide's. The poor mech thought that I was trying to purge into his mouth, or something. It's the first and only time that I've ever seen him trip over his own broadsword in his haste.”

Sideswipe laughed even harder. The imagery of Drift fearfully scrambling away from the smaller, lovesick mech was too much for his poor cortex.

“If it helps...Prowl thought I was trying to eat him!”

“It *does* make sense in their minds. These mechs do bite and nip at each other when in passion, but 'kissing' is unique to the cities. To them, it seems foreign, and alien, nearly to the point of exotic.”

As if to prove his point, he leaned over, and planted his lips over Drift's. By now the Autobot knew what he was doing and how to respond, and hummed a bit as he returned the kiss, but a second later his optics opened wide at the exclaimed noises coming from the rest of the tribe in the Commons. Immediately realizing that the duo had become the center of attention towards every mech and femme in sight, he pulled back, then spoke to Perceptor frantically, the words stammered in the low tones he'd used for poetry, this time the words tripping over one another. The scientist cackled, and hugged him as he leaned forward to rest on his chestplate, even as the white mech tried and failed to maintain his composure in front of his shocked tribe.

“You see?!”

Sideswipe grinned and snickered. “Yep. I see.”

The flaps to one of the tents rippled, and then was pulled aside.

Sideswipe looked towards Optimus Prime's tent, and jolted upright. The good feeling that had been building up within him died, and he narrowed his optics at Prowl's approach. The other mech's doorwings were held high as he marched right for him.

Perceptor noticed immediately as well, and went still in Drift's arms. “Sideswipe--” he murmured in warning, watching the other city-mech anxiously.

“I know.”

Still, he felt out for the bond, and once he'd grasped it, all but *hissed* at his mate through it, straight through the block. Prowl's steps faltered, but then he shook his head once before continuing forward at the same pace, until he stood before the red mech glaring up at him. He ignored the acidic look, and leaned down towards him.

“I need you to come with me,” he said in Cybertronian Standard, and offered his hand to help him up.

Sideswipe stared at the white palm. He considered it, and squeezed his own hands into fists.

He wanted to tell him where to shove it, or impetuously ask him why he didn't just drag him across the camp to where he wanted his mate to go, or outright refuse and ignore him, or reach up and snap off a doorwing--

“Where are we going?” he muttered at last, his optics suspicious.

“To Optimus.” Prowl bent down a little further, and his voice softened. “You deserve some answers.”
Sideswipe grimaced at him.

“...It's about slagging time.”

Then, after hesitating a bit longer, he grasped the offered hand.
Chapter 18: Map

Optimus Prime's tent was far more spacious than Prowl's, and held up by four corner poles instead of the other's single one, but most of the floor space was not dedicated for his personal use. Half a dozen low tables lined the frame of the tent, holding a collection of scrolls, artifacts, and trophies. A collection of wide rugs, varying in design and quality, covered the entire floor until none of the wildland's grounds could be seen, and one might be able to trick themselves into thinking that they were inside a building, not a temporary structure. Along the far wall was a high partition, and Sideswipe assumed that behind this was where Optimus's berth and personal belongings were held, and if it was, then his self-allocated living space was teeny. The rest of the tent looked more like a giant meeting room.

He'd come all this way from Kaon just to find that a wildland Prime still had his own equivalent of a board room. Sideswipe would laugh at that later.

He was surprised to find that Optimus was not the only one waiting for them. Ironhide, Red Alert, Ratchet and Jazz sat cross-legged on pillows in a semi-circle facing the entrance, with the Prime at its top point, the furthest away, on his own plush cushion. At the other end of the semi-circle were a collection of smaller pillows, meant for visitors.

One of the seats at Optimus's side was empty. Sideswipe glanced at Prowl, knowing who it was meant for, but the white mech instead strode to one of the smaller pillows facing the senior-ranking Autobots, and sat down to face his comrades. When his red mate only stood at the entrance, dumbfounded, a black hand still gripping the flap, Prowl turned and patted the pillow next to him.

"I'll be translating for you."

Sideswipe nodded, then stepped forward and gingerly took a seat next to his mate, crossing his legs neatly as the rest of the mechs had done. The seats were positioned so that he and Prowl were under the scrutiny of the rest of the Autobots, and Sideswipe drooped his shoulders a little and grimaced as he glanced suspiciously at each one of them. All of the nomads were giving him stern, assessing looks, except for Jazz, who grinned and briefly waved his hand. Sideswipe didn't smile back.

"Why do the rest of them have to be here?" he muttered to Prowl.

"Because they help to lead the tribe too. Optimus respects and appreciates their advice, so whatever you have to say, they should hear." He gestured to each one of them. "Ratchet is our Master Healer. Ironhide is one of the strongest and most knowledgeable yoska of the tribe. Jazz trades with other tribes and keeps an optic on territorial disputes. Red Alert is Master of...Guards?"

The white nomad furrowed his optic ridges as he tried to mull together the correct wording, while Red Alert raised his own when he heard his name.

"...In the city, we'd call him a 'guard captain,'" Sideswipe whispered.

"Yes, that sounds right. 'Guard captain.'"
Optimus cleared his vocalizer for attention. Prowl immediately straightened up, and as the Prime spoke, the white mech translated what he said into Cybertronian Standard for Sideswipe, with Optimus patiently waiting until he was done repeating each sentence before continuing.

“I apologize that we could not speak adequately with you until now. It was not my intention to keep you unaware of why you needed to be brought to our camp. Prowl has told me that you only recently learned that you were intended to be a sacrifice to the Decepticons.”

Sideswipe put his hands on his knees and raised his head up as he spoke, trying to sound more confident than he felt. This time, Prowl translated his words into Iaconian a moment later for the rest of the assembled mechs.

“Prowl promised that you would give me some answers.”

“I swear that we will attempt to explain as much as we can,” the Prime nodded, his voice deep and cool, but in no way dismissive of the smaller red mech. “And perhaps you can answer some of our own questions as well.”

“Fine.”

“We should start with the Iacon prophecy itself.”

“I need to see it.”

Optimus paused. “You haven’t yet?”

“I’ve seen the tube that it’s in, but not the map.” Sideswipe squeezed his hands into fists on his knees. “I’m tired of being the one left in the dark through all of this. Sentinel Prime seemed to know what it was. You all know what’s on it. And I didn't care to know. But now? I might care a little after all. It’s the whole reason that my city’s Prime wanted to sacrifice me, and why you all thought it was better to drag me here instead of dropping me off at another city. And I still don’t know what’s on it.”

“I had assumed that if you were carrying it, you would have laid optics on it, even if you couldn't read it. Ironhide?”

With a grunt, Ironhide turned, and reached towards one of the tables behind him. His palm fell on the tube, and it was then that Sideswipe realized in surprise that the prophecy had been quietly sitting there on the top shelf. He’d half-expected it to be on a pedestal, or some place of reverence, but besides being held in Optimus’s tent, it was no different than any of the other scrolls. Was it really all that important than? Or were the nomads too utilitarian to worry about things like worshiping something like that?

Ironhide said something gruffly to Prowl, then handed the tube over to the white mech.

“The prophecy is written in an old form of Iaconian,” Prowl explained to his mate as he pulled the paper out of the tube, “and it’s difficult to translate, even for us Autobots. But I’ll do my best to put it into words that you know.”

Scooting a little closer to Sideswipe, the nomad put the tube aside and unrolled the paper on the rugs in front of both of them. The edges were frayed and yellowed, dangerously thin, and it looked like that if it was gripped too hard, it would crumble into dust in his fingers. The other Autobots were silent, watching intently, while Prowl and Sideswipe pressed closer to one another and leaned over the paper to read it together.
The red mech immediately understood why Sunstreaker had identified it as a ‘map.’

The caricatures of the mountains and landscapes of Cybertron were simple ink drawings, but still quite beautiful. There were no colors other than the black inkbrush; they were not needed here. Pointed peaks of mountains were obvious, though they were mostly on the northern side of the picture, while the ex-mercenary knew that actual mountain lines were to their east and west right now. Crystal outcroppings were nearly as tall as the hills that they stood upon, but then again, if it had been scaled correctly, they’d have been barely more than specks. It really was a primitive yet gorgeous thing to look at, and if the circumstances hadn't been so tense at the time they'd found it, Sunstreaker might have appreciated it more. Pit, he'd probably be able to understand any hidden messages that had been spun into the art better than his brother could. Sideswipe braced himself on one hand on the ground as he looked over the ‘map,’ his optics narrowing slightly as he tried to discern what it all meant.

The drawings seemed to be centered and woven together on a strong, bold line, which chained through each caricature, as if the person who had drawn it had attempted to create the entire thing with one long stroke of a brush, and then came back to draw the more identifying details here and there. There was a small distance between the landmarks, the line continuing on between them, like a winding black road darting through the hillsides.

He quickly realized that the broad line was not only part of the art, but a path.

They needed to start here, in the fields, the line curving around over the hills, ignoring the little turbofoxes scattering about with other wildland creatures, and continue on to...some sort of water? The line curved around the ‘beach’, and smaller lines indicated waves. Then to tall mountains, and…

Sideswipe frowned.

He couldn’t claim to be an expert on the topography of Cybertron. But there was no way that fields and oceans and mountains all existed so close to one another. And because the drawings were exaggerated to make the landmarks clear, he had no idea where they stood in relation to one another. For all he knew, the artist had run out of space, and moved to draw the mountains at the top of the page, when in reality the ‘map’ could be indicating that they needed to move east.

It was a beautiful piece of artwork. But as a map, it was ultimately useless.

And then his optics fell on a column of text to one side of the paper.

Prowl waited until he’d noticed it, then put his finger underneath each line as he slowly read it out, the rhythm like the poetry that Drift had been reciting to Perceptor. Every so often the nomad paused as he tried to come up with the equivalent word in Cybertronian Standard.

“Great Plains
Red Sea
Touches the Clouds
Mountain of the Moon
Onward, Brave One
To the Gates
A Spark, Halved

Lights the Darkness

Iacon, Opens”

Sideswipe's intake hitched. “A spark, halved.” He pointed at the line of text, the old characters nearly just as simple yet beautiful as the 'map'. “This...this is what you think refers to me?”

Prowl nodded. “The world 'halved' is more along the lines of something being 'cut,' but, sa.”

He turned to him, and made the same gesture that Sideswipe had used to explain to him that he was a twin orns ago. He 'lifted' his fist from his chest, further out than his bumper, then made a gesture of two fists separating apart, spreading to either side of his body and away from the center.

“Halved sparks. Twins.”

“But you didn't know that I was a twin when you found me. When you attacked my caravan,” he corrected himself.

“Sa. But I...” He paused, then held up a finger towards Sideswipe. The other Autobots were giving them odd looks, and Prowl hurriedly translated what the two of them had said before continuing. “I knew that if Megatron wanted further evidence to sacrifice you, this would be it. A spark, cut.” He looked up at Optimus to repeat himself in Iaconian before continuing. “I had thought that the line referred to you being used as a sacrifice until you told me that you had a split-spark.”

“You and Jazz weren't too happy when that was cleared up.”

“We'd realized the harm we'd done by separating you from your twin for so long. But it also confirmed to us why Megatron wanted you as a sacrifice. Your spark has a twin-bond, which is far more powerful than any other type of bond, forged or otherwise. Thus, when Megatron 'gains' it, he also gains that power. Or so he believes.”

Sideswipe put a hand over his chestplate, feeling his spark thrumming warmly against its casing as he briefly focused on it.

Megatron wanted to literally cut out his spark.

“...It's slag.”

“What?”

“Doesn't that translate?” Sideswipe glared at him. “It's slag. It's garbage, it's junk, it's whatever the frell comes out the back of those Minotorons. It's not right. There's no way that this refers to me.” He gestured at the paper. “This thing is probably older than I am! How can it be about me?!?”

“It is a prophecy. It may be vague, but--”

“But it's nothing but slag!” He jabbed a finger at Optimus. “Tell him that! Tell him this has nothing to do with me!”

Prowl's doorwings fell a little, but he did as his mate asked, and translated his mate's words for the other Autobots. Immediately they stiffened, except Jazz, who must have been expecting this reaction from Sideswipe and shrugged a little to himself as he resettled on his pillow.

“Sideswipe,” Optimus said, his voice deep and grave, “there is no doubt in my cortex that the
Iacon prophecy refers to you. Do you think that it was a coincidence that someone with a split-spark would be carrying the Iacon prophecy?”

“Sa!” At least he could translate that much himself.

The Prime leaned forward. “You were chosen specifically to be Megatron’s sacrifice. This ‘Sentinel Prime’ must have somehow translated the prophecy, determined that you were the one that it speaks of, and had you deliver it, and yourself, to the Decepticon camp. Or, he would have, if Prowl’s group hadn’t found you.”

“Twins are rare, but I know that we aren't the only ones on Cybertron. Why not another pair of twins? Why not my brother Sunstreaker, or both of us?” He pointed to himself. “Why would he only target me?! It makes no sense!”

Ratchet raised a hand. “Maybe there was a different reason that he chose you than the prophecy’s words. After all, we had difficulty translating it. How would a dumb city-mech know what it said?”

Sideswipe briefly swept his optics at Prowl. He doubted that ‘dumb’ had really been the word that had been said in Iaconian.

“They did have the prophecy held in their city,” Ironhide pointed out. “They may not speak Iaconian, but given enough time and resources, they may have figured it out.”

Red Alert shook his head. “It would have shown signs of damage if it had been under scrutiny for vorns. This has only been recently removed from wherever it was being kept safe, until Alpha Trion found it.”

Alpha Trion?

Prowl finished translating Red Alert's words, then glanced at his mate once before interjecting in Iaconian with his own thoughts on the situation. Whatever he had said, it briefly silenced the other Autobots. He paused, then looked to Sideswipe again.

“...I told them that you've been having nightmares,” he said quietly.

Sideswipe’s optics grew wide, and his mouth dropped open. The icy feeling of betrayal stabbed at his spark again.

He hadn’t told him or the other Autobots that had kidnapped him to not mention that to anyone, but still...

“That's none of their fragging business!” he hissed.

“It is, if it's how your Prime determined that you were linked with the prophecy.” He turned away from him as he translated himself.

The ex-mercenary sneered, baring his dentals at the white mech. “You slagger...”

From behind the barrier that he’d erected around his spark, he grabbed at their bond again and gave it a quick, venomous tug. Immediately his own spark cried out, and warnings blinked on around his HUD. He saw Prowl's doorwings twitch once in pain, but the mech otherwise kept a straight face in front of his comrades, though he did mutter to him out of the side of his mouth.

“Stop it.”
“Make me,” he growled back.

Jazz rolled his shoulders. “Alright, let's assume for now that the prophecy hasn't been translated by Sentinel Prime, and Sideswipe was targeted because he was having some bad nightmares. I can second what Prowl said. I saw him throwing fits during some of the nights on our way back home.”

Sideswipe grunted a swear. Prowl didn't answer him.

“Lots of mechs have nightmares,” Ironhide said as he crossed his arms, and looked right at the mech in question. “What's been bothering you that got Sentinel Prime's attention?”

“I told him that I needed time off to deal with some stuff from the last job, but I didn't tell him about the dreams!”

“Maybe he found out some other way,” Red Alert said.

Ratchet leaned forward. “Sideswipe, what exactly were the nightmares about?”

“It's about...It's...”

He cycled air, trying to shove down a rising wave of fear. All of the optics in the tent were looking right at him, and he suddenly felt bared and very alone.

...He wished that it was Sunstreaker beside him, and not Prowl.

He cycled air again.

He could do this.

“...I've been dreaming about being tied down to a flat rock, and that a silver mech was stabbing me.” He patted his chestplate. “Right into my spark.”

Ratchet's optic ridges raised high, as did everyone else's. “You were dreaming about your own sacrificial ritual?”

“If that's what it's supposed to be.” He raised his hands. “But that doesn't mean that I'm part of some slag about a prophecy! I had a bad job before this all started, and I got spooked. I...”

He had to tell Prowl.

His vocalizer hitched.

...It was too late.

Sideswipe glanced at the white mech. Prowl was looking back at him. His expression had softened drastically.

The red mech stammered. “I...I had to do something that I was paid to do...and I...”

Primus.

What the frell was wrong with him?!

He wasn't scared of anything.

Well, death was always a scary thing. So was the thought of losing Sunstreaker. Or getting dragged
away from Kaon by barbarians. Yeah, those were definitely frightening.

But he'd never been scared of *saying* something. He usually said whatever came to mind, and sometimes he ended up being a worse mech than Sunstreaker. Somehow everyone considered him to be the more social twin, even when he was the one more likely to pull slag like that.

Yet here he was now, freezing up, like a youngling that had been thrust onto a stage and asked to recite Kaon's Pledge of Obedience to a crowd of his elders.

Why?! Why was he so scared?!

“...I...”

...He hadn't realized that the barrier had pulled away slightly, by his own overwhelming need to find some support.

He hadn't realized that his spark was seeking out comfort through the bond.

But he still couldn't feel his brother.

...*Prowl.*

Sideswipe straightened up.

His spark was asking for comfort, and Prowl's spark was all but ebbing it at him.

The ex-mercenary snapped the barrier back down, and the white mech winced. Sideswipe grimaced, and crossed his arms, trying to hide that his plating was rattling.

He could have told Prowl, but didn't.

*Prowl would never trust him again.*

“Sideswipe?”

He lifted his head towards Optimus Prime. “Yeah?”

“Do you know who Alpha Trion is?”

After a moment of searching his databanks, Sideswipe's HUD pulled up a negatory search. “No. Red Alert mentioned it a moment ago, but otherwise, no.”

“Alpha Trion is a *him,*” Optimus corrected. “He's an old mech, who joined our tribe deca-vorns ago. He was wise. He taught us things we didn't know about Cybertron, some about the cities, but much about the planet itself. He taught us about how it was formed around Primus, and how energon froms and flows from the core, and of how we are descendents of planet itself.”

First the Iacon prophecy, and now Primus theology? Despite often yelling his name as an expilcative, Sideswipe wasn't much for religious slag. He resisted the urge to scrub his face in frustration as Optimus continued.

“Nearly a vorn ago, Alpha Trion told us that he'd decided that we were worthy of returning to Iacon. He made me a Prime, and then shortly afterwards, left us for good. He told us that he would be looking for a prophecy that would tell us how to find Iacon.”

An alarm rang in Sideswipe's cortex. He straightened up.
The mech from his last job--

Optimus vented air through his intake. “He told us that he would not come back. He said that in order for the prophecy to be returned to us, his spark would have to be extinguished.”

The bearded, old mech. He’d touched him, and told him he’d had a destiny, and then as soon as he’d died was when the nightmares started...

*He had to tell them.*

“...I killed him.”

Sideswipe blurted it out, then bowed his head forward, unable to meet any of their optics.

Primus, this was a mercenary's worst nightmare: to be confronted by the friends of a mark. Those were always the worst. They’d be looking for vengeance, and they’d been inescapable. And now, in a tent with the highest-ranking mechs of the Autobot tribe, who must have known Alpha Trion the best, he had no chance of running away, and little of fighting them off if they decided that he should be offline for murdering their friend.

But what more did he have to lose? His guilty conscience? Finally?

Maybe the nightmares would finally stop. They would never trust him again, but he'd finally be able to recharge peacefully.

“I killed him,” he repeated. “Sentinel Prime had me track him down and kill him. I was being paid. I did what he asked without questioning it. It's...it's not the first time I've had to do a job like that.”

He squeezed his optics shut.

“He was dressed like one of you, and he had the Iacon prophecy in his hand. That's why I've been having nightmares. Because all this time, I've been scared that I would be tracked down by mechs from the wildlands that knew him, and torn apart. Right after I killed him is when the nightmares started.”

It was all making sense now. It had nothing to do with a prophecy, or a destiny. He was scared. He was guilty.

“He didn't fight back against me,” he mumbled. “He said that he forgave me, at the end. Nobody...nobody's ever done that before. So I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry that I attacked him. I'm sorry that he's not coming back to you.”

Sideswipe doubled over.

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry! And now that you know, I just need these nightmares to please stop, please-”

He didn't realize that his vents were having such a rough time moving air back and forth until he could barely do it anymore. He stayed as he was, leaning far forward, his head bowed towards Optimus and the other Autobots as he sobbed. He was met with silence.

...Were they in shock?

Were they deciding the best way to punish him? The best way to kill him?

Good. Let them.
Anything to make the nightmares stop.

A hand laid on his back.

“Sideswipe.”

The red mech turned his head slightly towards Prowl. The nomad's doorwings were fluttering slightly, as if trying to fan him.

“Sideswipe, we already knew. We forgive you.”

...What?

“...Y-You already...”

They already knew?

Sideswipe's optics snapped back open wide, and he stared down at the tent's floor.

He thought of how the Autobots had roared and sneered and been ready to attack him when they'd found the Iacon prophecy. They'd been ready to rip him to shreds, and would have done so if Prowl hadn't intervened.

Hound had nearly killed him.

So had Optimus.

...They knew...

Sideswipe looked up. The rest of the Autobots were all giving him the same solemn, pitying look.

“We knew, because Alpha Trion told us that the mech who would bring us the prophecy had a destiny, and that we should forgive him.” Prowl rubbed his fingers on Sideswipe's spinal struts.

“That was you.”

Sideswipe stared at him.

“...You should have killed me.” His own voice sounded far away. “That's what I would have done. You knew that I murdered your friend.”

“But that wouldn't have brought back Alpha Trion. And after I saw that you were having nightmares...you're already punishing yourself for it. Granted, I was angry at first. So was my team. So was Optimus.”

He nodded towards the Autobot leader.

“But you proved to us that you weren't evil. You really are a yoska. And we forgive you.”

More clouds had broken away and the sun was rising higher in the sky when Prowl and Sideswipe emerged from the tent. There was much more activity in the Commons now that mechs and femmes were finishing up their morning chores and tasks. Sideswipe ignored them, his arms still wrapped around himself, while Prowl stayed close, his doorwings up and warning off anyone who tried to approach them.
They hadn't been able to converse much further with the senior-ranking Autobots. The red mech was still in shock that he'd survived telling them that he'd murdered a wise old mech from their tribe. He'd been expecting to be screamed at, at the very least. Worst, to be punished, or banished, or killed. Not for them to tell him that they'd already known and forgiven him. When Optimus had realized that he wasn't going to get much more out of Sideswipe while he was in his current state, he'd ended their meeting, and sent them off.

The world needed to stop changing the rules on him. If things kept being swept out from under his feet like this, he was going to purge all over the place.

“Sideswipe.”

Prowl grasped his shoulder to bring him to a halt. When the red mech turned to him, something small was pressed into his palm. Sideswipe frowned, and stared at the data chip.

“What's this?”

“A copy of the translation program. It's going to take a while for your processor to install it completely, maybe more than an orn. But I doubt that you want me needing to stand by every time that you want to talk to someone.”

*Finally.*

Without thanking him, Sideswipe opened a port on his arm and stuck in the chip. His systems immediately went to work on installing the file, and his HUD displayed a loading bar.

1%...

Well. Eventually. But at least he had something.

“What now?”

“I have things I need to oversee. Stay out of trouble.”

And with that, Prowl turned away, and left him, striding off down one of the throughways towards the smaller tents.

Sideswipe stood there a while, suddenly feeling cold as he was truly left alone. He bit down tightly on his bottom lip.

Then he swore at himself, his mouth curling back into a sneer.

He still needed to talk to Prowl. Maybe not about Alpha Trion, but Perceptor was right. When this was done, he still had to live with the slagger.

And besides...

“What kind of a mate leaves me alone after all that?!”

His peds trotted after Prowl's.

Chapter End Notes
Not quite as many answers as I wanted to give, but I think you guys will be able to piece together more than Sideswipe did. ;) Readers beware, I do love hearing theories in the comments, and some may be correct and possible spoilers!
Spat

Chapter Notes

So who else here saw the new Bayformers design for Hot Rod, and reacted like I did? Jesus Christ, what's with his mouth?!

Chapter 19: Spat

“That's something you should have asked Optimus Prime in his tent.”

“I was under a little bit of pressure at the time!”

Prowl kept his head turned away and tried to keep focused on inspecting the knives that one of the Autobots was sharpening, but Sideswipe was determined not to make his mate's disregard of him easy. He pressed up to his shoulder, ignoring the doorwings that were twitching at him irritably, as well as the green-and-blue mech who had looked up from his knife-work to stare at the senior-ranking Autobot and his new mate bickering.

“This is not the time, Sideswipe,” Prowl muttered. “Maybe later.”

“I'm not going to have let you drag me all the way here just to pretend that I don't exist when you don't want to talk!” Sideswipe snarled at him. “I'm here, I've got questions, and you understand me now. Let's talk.”

“I have things to do.” He laid down the knife he was looking over, and didn't bother to check the rest, instead turning away to try to move through the camp to his next task, but Sideswipe stayed right next to him.

“They let you spend an orn doing nothing after we bonded, so take another one to, you know, explain things to me a little better than I'm you're mate and you're an Autobot and you're supposed to like it!”

Prowl pinched his face into a frown. They continued speaking in Cybertronian Standard as they walked, the rest of the Autobot tribe giving them odd glances at the strange growls and hisses that they were hearing from both their newest yoska and the well-regarded mech. This did not elude Prowl's attention, and he glanced at two femmes whispering each other and staring at them before he turned to Sideswipe and lowered his voice.

“Alpha Trion trained Orion Pax to think not only as a tribe leader, but as a Prime. When he decided that he was worthy, he presented to him the Matrix of Leadership. That's why we refer to him as 'Optimus Prime,' and not 'Orion Pax' anymore.”

“See, was that so difficult to tell me?” Sideswipe grinned. “Although it's complete slag. None of the Matrixes have been seen in deca-vorns. Even I know that.”

“Would you like to go find Optimus again so he can open his chest plates and show you where it rests?” the white mech deadpanned.

“Oh yeah, that'd go over well. But whatever Alpha Trion gave him, it's not a Matrix. Can't be.”
Prowl huffed in frustration. “You doubt the Iacon prophecy, and now you doubt that we have a Matrix. Do you have no faith in anything?”

“Only in myself. And since when did The Master of All Things Percentages take faith in anything either?”

“I know that Optimus has the Matrix of Leadership, I'm not blindly believing it. Alpha Trion gave it to him, and he also sent you to us with the Iacon prophecy.”

“He didn't send me anywhere! Sentinel Prime did!”

They were moving to the edge of the camp, towards where the Minotoron herd was grazing over the hill, but Bluestreak met them halfway through their trek first. The gray doorwinged mech ran up to Prowl, chattering in a friendly tone at the mech as he approached, and held up a piece of thick hide to him. As Prowl took it and looked it over, Sideswipe realized that there was writing on it, mostly of columns and tallymarks. It was primitive, but it worked, especially when the Minotoron herders only needed to convey easy numbers to count. He guessed that the largest column was the Minotron head-count.

That was a lot of tallies.

The translation program was already working at what Bluestreak was saying as well, but until it completely installed, the red mech was only picking up few more words than those that he already knew. The half-completed mess only served to tease him for now, reminded him of his communication limits, and this frustrated him even more.

“‘Scuse me, Blue,” he muttered at the smaller mech, and shouldered him aside as he put a hand down on the leather, blocking Prowl from reading it. “We're not done,” he growled. “I need to reconnect with Sunstreaker. He needs to know what's happened. Not only with the prophecy,” he pointed between the two of them, “but with us.”

Prowl snapped the leather piece away and turned around so that he could continue looking over it. “Springer will attempt to--”

“Springer's never met my brother before! He might get the description right, but Sunstreaker will have no idea who he is--!” Sideswipe cut himself off as he did a double-take at the writing on the hide, and realized something.

...Oh.

Well, frag.

“I can write something real fast!” He reached for the leather hide again. “Give me that. If I write on the back of it, I can catch up to him before he--”

“Na!” Prowl held the hide out of reach, then with a groan, handed it back to a confused Bluestreak. “You must stay in the camp. And neither can Springer carry anything from you with him. The Decepticons followed us here; they may still be in the area. If Springer is attacked and they find the note on him, they will be at our camp within orns. But as long as they are uncertain as to where you and the prophecy are, and you are hidden away, you'll be safe.”

Bluestreak chittered at Prowl. Most of what he said was untranslatable for the program's current installation, but Sideswipe caught enough of it to know he was asking something like 'Is everything alright?', and Prowl grunted something back at him, ending with 'Jazz.'
"I don't want to be safe!" Sideswipe snapped as Bluestreak ran off with the hide towards the largest tent, and the two of them turned around and retraced their steps back into the camp as well. "I want my brother to know that I'm okay! Prowl, he might think that I'm offline! Or worse, that I'm with the Decepticons, and that's where he'd go to rescue me! He'd be running right into Megatron's hands!"

"And?"

"And?!!" He shoved the white mech, sending him stumbling to the side. "What's to stop Megatron from sacrificing him instead, if he couldn't get his hands on me?!"

The nearby Autobots had stopped what they were doing to watch the brewing fight with alarm. Prowl came right back into Sideswipe's space and glowered at him, his doorwings raised up menacingly high on his back, though he still had to raise his head up slightly to meet his mate's optics.

"You were the one that the prophecy foretold, not your twin. I can't let you put yourself at risk to try to find him."

"Why?! This tribe will be fine without one more yoska!"

"Na. You may not go because you are my mate, Sideswipe. I will not allow you to be harmed."

"...If that was supposed to sound like you're some heroic 'bot or something, I hate to break it to you, but it's not working," the ex-mercenary hissed. "You took me because of the prophecy. Not because you desired me or anything like that."

He clamped a mental grip down on the bond, ignoring the squeak of pain from his own spark.

"I saw it when we merged. You taking me was a calculated move. Nothing more."

Sideswipe grunted as Prowl suddenly stepped even closer and gripped his forearms, his fingers digging into the armor plating. A waft of air hot air blew from his vents into his face.

"Will you stop that?!" the smaller mech hissed, real pain in his voice. "You're hurting me."

"You fragger, you deserve it," Sideswipe growled back, his optics narrowing dangerous as he stared down at Prowl. "I should rip your fragging doorwings off, but if I did, I'd probably ended up tied up like some mecha-animal again. What I'm doing is only a taste of what I'd like to do to you."

"For what?!" Prowl snarled, optics wide. "For saving your life?!"

Sideswipe shoved him off and away, and the nomad stumbled. "For kidnapping me, for dragging me away from my home and my brother, and for bonding with me before I was ready!" he shouted.

Prowl's voice raised as well as the two of them slowly circled each other. "And if I had left you there, your spark would have been extinguished in Megatron's hand by now! Would you have preferred that?!"

"Low blow, Prowl, low blow." He put a hand on the poncho fabric over his chestplate. "I would have preferred if this wasn't making it impossible for me to 'hear' my twin!"

Prowl jabbed a finger at him. "And I would prefer a mate who doesn't block me out whenever he-..."
Something rushed between them. Sideswipe was startled by black-and-white armor that did not belong to Prowl. A cloak breezed in the air behind the new mech, and Jazz said something appeasing to Sideswipe as he held a palm out in his direction, and another at Prowl’s, keeping the two warring mates away from each other as he spoke rapidly.

Prowl's engine revved, and he barked something at Jazz, who answered him coolly, almost in a joking tone. The Autobots nearby who had been watching the exchange with a growing wariness eased a bit, a few snorting their own chuckles.

Sideswipe tried to lean around the smaller mech as he glared at his mate. “Whenever I do what, Prowl?! Whenever I get mad because I can't feel Sunstreaker anymore?! Am I supposed to not be upset about that?!”

“I’ve sent Springer to try to find your twin!” Prowl snapped back at him, and pushed forward against Jazz's staying hand, despite his protests getting louder. “What else would you have me do?! I can't break the bond with you now, it's too late!”

“You should have never done it in the first place! I wasn't ready!”

“Your spark was ready! If we were incompatible, then this wouldn't have worked!”

“You piece of slag, I WASN'T READY!”

“Yes you WERE!”

“FRAGGING--!!”

Before he could skirt around Jazz and charge at Prowl, a black hand snatched at his helm. Fingers wrapped around his audial horn, and pain shrieked down his head and neck. Instantly he doubled over, his hands grabbing blindly at the mech's forearm, but Jazz refused to release his grip.

At the same time, Prowl cried out. The ex-mercenary heard a squeal of servos, and quickly realized that Jazz must have snatched one of his friend's doorwings with his other hand.

The visored Autobot mumbled angrily to them both. Then, with a short tug, he marched both of them along the through-way between the tents, much to the amusement or disappointment of the other nomads who had gathered to watch the fight.

“Ow! Jazz! OW! Let go!” Sideswipe batted frantically at the hand gripping him and holding him prisoner as he stumbled along, his poor audial horn sending all sorts of errors into his HUD. “That hurts!” On the mech's other side, Prowl was yelping in pain and shouting something similar in Iaconian, but Jazz only snapped at both of them, and continued dragging them away.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Sideswipe huffed as he faced the orange walls of the tent not far from his nose, and crossed his arms as he lay more comfortably on his side. The accumulation of pillows that he'd stolen from Prowl's berth was nothing like lying on the berth itself, but it was better than the hard ground.

Primus knew that he would probably be sleeping here a while.

His abused audial sensor picked up the sounds of Prowl peeling through one of his scrolls from where he was sitting on their—HIS—berth. Sideswipe affirmed to himself that the only reason he would go back over there was if the mech got an energon pellet stuck in his intake tube and had to have someone else knock it out. That would show him. He'd save the white mech's life, thus
repaying any debt he owed him, and get to kick his aft at the same time. That would be wonderful.

It was only a magnificent daydream, however. He vented again, then grunted as he kicked at one of the pillows on his own 'berth,' sending it flopping over with a very unsatisfying thud.

The filtered light of the sun had moved across the tent over the last joor or so. He checked his chronometer. Actually, going on two joores now since they'd separated to opposite sides of their tent to aggressively pretend that the other mech didn't exist.

Jazz had tossed them into the tent with a few sharp words at both of them, and then laced up the flaps on his way out, preventing them from rushing back into the camp and making fools of themselves in front of the tribe again. His message was clear: the two new mates were not to come out again until they could make up and behave themselves. Sideswipe had immediately stormed over to his pillows and flopped down, and Prowl did not follow him, instead choosing to quietly read on his berth.

He knew that the white mech was still angry, though. He knew because the 'knocking' on the block on their bond had stopped, the Autobot no longer holding any interest in trying to reconnect with his mate. Instead, he'd gone right back to pretending that Sideswipe would simply calm down and accept things if he left him alone for long enough.

Just for the frell of it, he 'flared' at Prowl through their bond to let him know that he was still just as fragged off.

He heard the nomad gasp, and drop the scroll. “Would you please stop?!”

“Why?” Sideswipe asked the tent wall. “Now you know how I've felt all this time.”

“I've never purposely harmed you!”

“Purposely.” He crossed his arms a little tighter, and frowned. “I'd think that bonding with somebody before they were ready is definitely doing them harm!”

“Your spark was compatible!”


“When exactly were you supposed to be ready?!”

“Where I come from, we don't bond unless we thoroughly trust each other first. I've known you for deca-orns! And now I have to spend my whole life with you!”

“You are not in the city anymore! You are HERE! And HERE, I took you as my mate, and by the time we arrived at my tent, you were compatible, and we bonded. We are mates now. What's done is done, and there's nothing to be done about it but to accept it.”

Sideswipe's vents hissed. “...You know, I liked you better when I couldn't figure out what you were saying, because that is some foul slag coming out of your mouth right now.”

“Then uninstall the translation program, and give the chip back. You have been entirely ungrateful for it anyway.”

“Sure, and uninstall yours. A fragging savage doesn't deserve to know Cybertronian Standard anyway.”
He heard Prowl's engine rev dangerously, and through the bond, he felt something crash into the barrier, though it was still not much more powerful than someone pounding their fists on a reinforced wall. The scroll was slapped down onto the ground.

“Says the uncivilized mech who normally runs around without any clothes on!”

“And so says the barbarian who hangs around fragging Minotorons all day!”

“Thinks that a decent language is hissing and growling!”

“Eats dried-up scrap instead of decent energon!”

“Goes running right towards the mechs who are trying to kill him!”

“Dragged me away from my twin!”

“Murdered a mech who wasn't fighting back!!”

“Frag you, that is IT--!!”

Sideswipe rolled over, baring his dentals aggressively at Prowl, and clamped down hard on their bond. Pain immediately surged through his sensor net in response, and he felt his own spark twist and 'yelp,' warning him that he was hurting his own essence. Several warnings popped up on his HUD, none of them minor, but he ignored them. He could deal with the pain for now.

Prowl's reaction was far worse. He'd been sitting upright on his berth, facing Sideswipe as he read, but as the bond was squeezed, he cried out and fell to the side, the pillows and furs softening his fall as his hands slapped over his bumper and chestplate. His limbs seized for a second, and then he curled up, his optics squeezed tight and his dentals gritted, his doorwings pulled down and tightly against his back, as if his frame was in the middle of being electrocuted.

“I was doing what I was created to do,” Sideswipe growled, static threatening the edges of his vocalizer. He ignored the spots around his vision that had nothing to do with his HUD, which was springing up more red-line warnings. His optics glowed fiercely, nearly turning white. “I was getting paid nicely for it. If I had to kill a mech or two to keep me and my brother from ending up on the streets, then frag it, I would do whatever it took to make sure that we survived! It sucks, and it sucks for all the other mechs I've ever had to kill, but I did what I needed to do! Got it?!"

Prowl didn't answer. His fingers were scrabbling at his chestplate, and when he was unable to find the seam and get some relief, he curled into an even tighter ball.

“Frag your prophecy,” Sideswipe continued, “and frag your old mech. Frag Alpha Trion. Frag all of this!”

He shoved the bond out of his grasp.

Prowl immediately cycled air, as if he'd been incapable of it before. The pained tension keeping his body tight broke away, but only somewhat. His mouth opened wide as he gasped, and he rolled over onto his belly, his chevron pressed into one of the pillows while he panted hard down at the mat.

Sideswipe scoffed at him and rolled back over towards the wall.

“Dumb-aft.”
He closed his optics, and crossed his arms irritably over his chestplate again. One by one the warnings on his HUD disabled themselves as his systems returned to normal, though his spark still felt 'sore,' and probably would be for at least a few joors. The tent was filled with the sounds of Prowl wheezing and his systems buzzing as he brought himself back to a functioning status. Sideswipe ignored the pained sounds from his mate, his own frame quivering slightly at what he'd put himself and his spark through, but he didn't care.

Prowl had deserved every second of it.

After a few breems, the white mech got his ventilations back under control, but only barely, his panting still aggravated and pained. The tent was otherwise silent, save for what noises outside could pass through its material. Sideswipe huffed as he adjusted himself, settling himself in to rest and repair some of the damage he'd just inflicted on himself.

A little while longer after that, he heard the nomad's voice.

“Just break the bond and be done with it.”

Prowl's voice was far weaker than before, and hoarse. Sideswipe's optics slid open by a small margin, and he stared at the orange tent wall.

“Just get it over with, Sideswipe. If you want to kill me so badly, then just do it.”

His optics opened even wider. He rolled back over to face the nomad's berth.

Prowl was still curled up. His own optics were squeezed tight, and his mouth stayed open as he continued to gasp down air. White hands were clapped around one spot on the chestplate above his bumper, right above his spark.

...Primus above, had he really hurt him that badly?

“I don't want to you to offline,” the red mech mumbled, a lame apology. “I want you to know that I'm hurting, but--”

His own spark twisted around in its casing at a horrid realization.

He'd really hurt Prowl.

He'd hurt his spark.

By Primus.

Sideswipe and Sunstreaker had to do many things that they weren't proud of in order to survive in Kaon. But there were a few things that they considered too heinous to touch, not without one of the brothers being in mortal danger.

First of all, besides their line of work, they actually disliked offlineing other mechs. Extinguishing sparks wasn't a thing to be taken lightly. It was something they'd never do outside a job if their lives weren't at stake. Primus knew that both twins had their own ways with dealing with the guilt of what they were sometimes asked to do. There were enough empty cubes at the bar for Sideswipe to attest to his own.

Second, they didn't touch younglings or sparklings. That was a level of vile that most Kaonites didn't consider possible. Thankfully there hadn't been much opportunity to break that rule; even Sentinel Prime had lines that he wouldn't cross.
Thirdly, something even worse than offlining a spark would be to isolate and torture it. It was one thing to break a frame for information; it was another to extract a spark and manipulate it, especially when this would do nothing but prolong a mech's death. Neither twin had the capabilities and equipment to do that themselves anyway.

Until now.

Sideswipe was suddenly aware and alarmed by how quiet the spark on the other side of the barrier was. He sat up abruptly.

“Prowl...”

The white mech's answer was a soft, frightened whimper.

Sideswipe's own spark twisted again as his energon ran cold and guilt flushed through him. The barrier wavered for a moment. Then, hesitantly, as if fighting himself for the control, he brought it back down. He still had to keep himself safe, first and foremost.

But in the next breem, he'd crawled up, and made his way to the side of Prowl's berth. The nomad had begun trembling a bit at his approach, but when he came close, the mech's voice was stronger, and more confident.

“Just break it and go. But please, stop doing that to me. Please. Please stop.”

Heavy blue optics assessed the white frame below him. Prowl's vents were still going hard, but not just from a reaction to pain or damage anymore. His fingers had squeezed down against his palm into fists, and his arms had crossed slightly, defensively.

Sideswipe had built a barrier to protect himself against the other spark, but Prowl had done no such thing. How could he? He'd never had a bond before. He didn't know how it worked. He didn't know how to defend himself in that realm.

Suddenly the self-satisfaction of being able to hurt Prowl for all the distress he'd put him through felt as prideful as if he'd knocked around a helpless youngling. A helpless mate. Or worse, a helpless old mech, who'd done nothing but stand there as he'd impaled him with his sword.

The ex-mercenary mumbled to himself. “...I really am a monster.”

Prowl winced when he heard the furs being shifted. But Sideswipe didn't touch him. Instead, he eased himself down to lay down on his belly at his mate's side, where he would be no higher than the other mech, no longer as physically intimidating. It was a long while before Prowl managed to convince himself to open one optic and glance warily at the red mech that had attacked the bond.

Sideswipe rolled slightly on his side so that he could face him, one forearm pillowing his black helm. “I honestly didn't think I was going that far,” he murmured quietly.

The single optic on him narrowed. “How can you not know?! Do you not feel that?!”

“Not as well as you do,” he sighed. “I guess I'm...better at it?” He gave him a half-formed smile, but it fooled neither of them. Prowl's plating was closed tightly against his frame, and refused to budge.

“I've never had a bond before,” Prowl said flatly. “This is as unfair for me as it is for you. So instead of twisting at it, just break it and--”
“I won't. If manipulating it is hurting you this much now, then breaking it will kill you.”

“...Then do it fast.”

His own mouth falling open in a horrified dismay, Sideswipe started to reach for him. Prowl immediately shied away, his doorwings pulled back again, as if preparing for another shock through the bond. Sideswipe let his hand hover, then took it back.

“Why didn't you tell Prime and the others?” the red mech suddenly realized.

“What?”

“You didn't tell them that I was doing this to you. Otherwise...otherwise, they'd be here, and--”

“You'd be knocked offline. Or worse.” Prowl grimaced. “Mates don't attack each other, ever. I've seen fights, but...never with the intent to...”

“Never with the intent to do some real damage?”

Prowl nodded.

“So why didn't you tell them?”

“Because you're still my mate, despite this.”

“...That's stupid,” Sideswipe growled. “You shouldn't need to put up with me doing that to you just because I'm your mate.”

“By taking you as my mate, I also swore that I'd protect you,” Prowl reasoned. “Even...even from my own tribe.”

The red mech stared at him.

Hadn't he been doing that since the beginning? Since the first day, when the others who had attacked the caravan had wanted revenge for Alpha Trion's murder?

And he was still doing it now, even while Sideswipe had been tearing up the essence at the core of his being?

Slowly, Sideswipe offered his hand again, but this time let it rest palm-up on the pillow between their heads. When he spoke, it was barely more than a whisper.

“The first night we made love, I swore that I wouldn't hurt you, if you didn't hurt me. You didn't understand me then, but I intended to keep my promise, just the same as not running away after the whole thing with Trailbreaker.”

“I had guessed that you were saying something like that,” Prowl mumbled.

“Point is...I went too far.” He vented slowly, trying to keep himself calm. “...Don't lie to me. Are you intentionally blocking me from Sunstreaker?”

Prowl immediately shook his head, his chevron dragging on the pillow underneath him. “You're under enough stress from being separated from him. And I'm starting to see how painful it is to have a bond blocked,” he added dryly.

“I believe it.”
He wiggled his fingers.

“I can't forgive you for bonding with me like that. Not yet. But...I'm stuck with you. And you're stuck with me. So if we can't break this...we need to figure out how to make this work,” he admitted. “We can't keep fighting each other.”

Prowl gazed at the black hand resting between them imploringly, then lifted his optics to Sideswipe's as he grimaced at him.

Slowly, his own white hand unclenched from it's fist above his chestplate, and shakily started to work towards the black palm.

“Prowl.”

The hand stopped.

“Don't make me do something that I'm not ready to do.” Sideswipe clenched his jaw, then rattled the barrier on their bond, reminding his mate that it was still firmly in place. “I interfaced with you because I wanted to. And I know that we were compatible, and ready to bond. But that doesn't mean that I was ready. Don't ever push me into something like that again. Okay?”

“...Okay.”

White fingers found black ones, and squeezed them gently.

Sideswipe raised their interlocked hands a little.

“It'll be easier on both of us if we try to make this work. I promise, I will try. But don't push me before I'm ready.”

“I won't,” Prowl affirmed, more confident this time. “I swear this to you.”

And somehow, though the barrier was still up, the sincerity of those words rang true in Sideswipe's spark.
Their voices carried high above the singing, clapping, and fists pounding on the bar to the song’s beat.

“And she’ll be waiting up for me!”

“On the highest mountain peak!”

“And when we go to make love—”

“She’ll say I sprung a leak! HEY!”

The mechs and femmes erupted into cheers, and many of them used it as an excuse to take a long swing of their high-grade, Sideswipe included. He chugged it down in a couple of gulps, then slammed the empty cube down, grinning at the dazed feeling washing through his processor.

“I LOVE THIS PLACE!” he bellowed out to no one in particular, and was answered by a couple of agreeing crows, a belch, and one grumble from a big green construction mech whose forehead was becoming closely acquainted with a tabletop.

A black hand latched onto the red mech’s shoulder.

“Maybe, but this place sure ain’t gonna love you back if you purge!”

“S’okay. Bartender knows me,” Sideswipe slurred with a dopey grin at the new arrival. “Might be here too often. I dunno.”

“Maybe,” the other mech smirked back at him. “So, where’s your brother? You promised that you’d introduce me.

“I tried to get him to come. He, uh, doesn’t want to meet you.”

“Oh.” The smile fell a little, but then came right back. “No worries. Since we ain’t waitin’ for him...bartender?” He raised a hand. “One more drink for the road for my friend here!”

“For the road?” Despite his confusion, Sideswipe didn’t decline the cube that slid in front of him, and took a swing of it, a few of the drops dribbling and splattering on his chestplate armor. “I can’t pay you back right now,” he mumbled.

“Not a problem. You ain’t the only one to know the bartender.” He gave the femme in charge a thumbs-up and a grin, and she returned the smile before turning back to her other customers. “You don’t owe me a credit for just the one drink, my mech.”

Sideswipe didn’t believe him, but he finished his cube quickly anyway. “Where are we going?”

“My place. I think if we...got to know each other a little better,” black fingers dragged more
lightly on Sideswipe's arm, “your twin will be more acceptin' of me.”

The red mech's engine purred in response immediately, his cortex too overcharged to think much further ahead than what he wanted to do at Swindle's place. “Fragging right he will. Aughta knock some sense into him when I get home.”

He felt himself being guided away from the barstool, and towards the door. He didn't mind one bit, instead giggling to himself as he leaned on the smaller mech.

“C'mon, you lush.” Swindle's hand reached back to pat Sideswipe's interface cover, and the red mech gasped and waddled in response. “I wanna to see what else you can do with this.”

“I'd show you right now, if you'd let me,” he growled back.

“On the bar floor?” Swindle's optics opened wide, then narrowed them again as he paired it with a wide, toothy smirk. “As hot as that sounds, my berth is WAY more comfortable.”

“Suit yourself,” Sideswipe mumbled as he leaned down and pressed a sloppy kiss into his cheek, too drunk to make contact with his lips properly. The beginnings of another bar song followed them into the street as they headed out the door.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Sideswipe's chronometer told him that several joors had passed. He confirmed this as he slid open his optics, and the tent was barely lit by the dimming sunlight sneaking through the fabric walls.

He remembered falling into recharge as he lay next to Prowl. That made sense; he'd barely gotten any rest the night before, and while they'd been laying down comfortably on the berth, his frame must have initialized a recharge cycle on its own.

What he did not remember was the two of them curling up together, or when he'd wrapped an arm to blanket around Prowl's shoulders, cuddling the white mech's head into his chestplate. His other arm was pillow under his own helm, and he felt a slightly painful tingle as the tactile sensors under his armor plating were allowed to come back online after holding his weight for so long. Prowl's own arms were hugging his sides, his palms resting on the red mech's back struts, and the servos under them felt eased, like they'd been well massaged.

...What a way they'd come from before they'd fallen asleep.

He resisted the selfish urge to push the other mech off of him and roll over, which he would have surely done a few joors ago. But he promised that he'd try to make this work. No doubt that Prowl needed the quick recharge just as much as he did, if not more, considering the damage he may have done to his spark. And besides...

This felt nice. This felt right. His own spark was at ease again, and thus was his processor, his cortex, his frame, all of him. His essence felt right.

Still, something had woken him up. He lifted his head up slightly, trying to figure out what it was, and this made Prowl stir and online as well. His systems humming, the nomad's blue optics refreshed several times, and he bleary looked around, remembering where he was and how he'd gotten there, and when he found his mate next to him, he leaned his face into Sideswipe's chest plate again.
“I'm sorry,” the white mech mumbled.

Sideswipe turned his head down a little to see him. “For what?” he asked, his vocalizer just as quiet.

“For everything. Everything that made you fear me, and hate me.”

“...I don't hate you,” he murmured, and felt Prowl's arms squeeze a little tighter around his sides. “I'm not that afraid of you anymore either. But...you're scared of me. Right?”

He didn't get an answer to that.

The ex-mercenary sighed through his vents.

“...I was just as scared too,” he admitted. “And that was the only way I could fight back against you and get something, I dunno, satisfying out of it. I didn't realize how much damage I was really doing. I really am sorry.”

“And I'm sorry that I've been such a poor mate to you.”

Sideswipe shifted. “You have?” he asked dryly, though honestly surprised to hear it from Prowl.

“I didn't take you to be a prisoner. I took you to be my mate. But you didn't understand that until we'd nearly arrived at camp, nor that I wanted you to bond with me. I assumed that you would eventually understand and accept our ways. I was wrong. You've been frightened this whole time, and I did little to appease you. I don't blame you for using the first way that you could to finally strike back at me. I'm a poor mate, and I'm sorry.”

Sideswipe was quiet as he took that in, letting Prowl move a shaky cycle of air as he processed it over. He didn't realize that his fingertips were comfortingly petting the back of his mate's helm until he stopped as he adjusted himself again.

“I'm not sorry that I don't play by the same “mating” rules as the rest of your tribe,” he whispered. “That's not going to change, Prowl. But, uh....slaggit...”

The hand behind Prowl's head moved to cradle his helm more gently, and turn his face up towards Sideswipe's, two sets of blue optics locked together.

“What I think of it happened isn't going to change the fact that we're bonded now. We have to live with each other, because ignoring the bond is just going to drive us nuts. So let's make this work. I'll forgive you, if you forgive me. We'll start over. Sa?”

“...Sa,” Prowl murmured, but a second later his gaze flicked away. “Sideswipe...you don't have to trust me yet.”

Something thrummed against the other side of barrier around his spark, but this time, not aggressively. Prowl knocked on it simply to acknowledge that it was still there, yet made no move to force his way through.

“I understand why you did this now. So I'll be a good mate to you this time, and earn your trust. Sa?”

And at that, behind the walls where it had hidden itself, Sideswipe's spark warmed and spun, an intense light briefly leaking out through the bond to his mate, though the barrier still held firm around it.
“Fragging SA, yes,” he murmured a bit louder. “I think you get it. That is,” he raised an optic ridge, “if you still want me?”

Prowl looked shocked that he'd even ask that question. “Of course I do!”

Sideswipe grinned at him, before he leaned forward, and his mouth descended on his mate's. Prowl's response was immediate, his mouth kissing back, the arms around him gripping him even tighter. Sideswipe cupped the back of his helm, turning him just enough to deepen their kisses, which were growing faster, quickly.

He tasted just as sweet and true and raw as before. As bad as a kisser as Prowl was, it also meant that he held nothing back, hid nothing. He did want him. And, Sideswipe admitted to himself, so did he.

He wouldn't let him into his spark again yet. But he could happily accept him working his way up to it.

Then, abruptly, Prowl stopped.

“Was that you?”

“Hmm?” Sideswipe pressed their cheeks together as his frame blew off the hot air from his engine. “What was?”

“That noise. What's...?”

He felt Prowl push off his frame and move his head to look towards the front of the tent. Sideswipe lifted himself up on his elbow slightly to follow his mate's line of sight. And when he did...

He found what had woken him up.

Well.

Primus.

The last thing he'd been expecting was Jazz's disembodied head grinning down at two mechs from the tent's entrance.

“...”

Both of them froze, staring, before screaming.

“AAAAAH!!”

“AAA-ooof!!”

Prowl's body slammed into him, covering him protectively and pressing him into the pillows and furs. He heard Jazz cackle madly, and pull his head and shoulders back through the unlaced flaps, where he could continue laughing himself sick outside.

The white mech was all but quivering over Sideswipe, who was caught between sharing Jazz's humor at their dismay and shock, and an indignatious wrath that the other nomad had been spying on their private moment. Prowl was sticking firmly with the later, and he buzzed and clicked angrily at Jazz in Iaconian through the tent fabric, Sideswipe's incomplete translation picking up things like “Why would you do that?!”, “Son of a glitch!”, and “It's not funny!”.
Oh thank Primus Almighty, there were equivalent swears from Cybertronian Standard to Iaconian, and Prowl's translation software had figured them out.

“Why do you keep doing that?” he asked as he shoved a hand at Prowl's bumper to try to push him off. “I can defend myself!”

“It's not about defense, it's about decency!” Prowl hissed, even as he climbed off of his mate and allowed him to sit up. “We're both naked, and Jazz hasn't been invited in!”

“...Oh.”

He looked down at himself. He was naked. Both his and Prowl's clothing was sitting in a half-folded pile nearby.

“When did that happen?”

“You looked uncomfortable, so I undressed you.” Prowl sat back on his aft as he rubbed his fingers on either side of his helm, ignoring Jazz's chortling outside, his doorwings fanning back and forth behind him as he tried to calm himself down. “You needed to recharge, so I didn't wake you up.”

“You were able to do that?”

“Sa. It's not hard to unwrap clothing without disturbing a mech.”

Sideswipe must have then cuddled to Prowl in his sleep when the white mech returned to the berth.

Huh.

Suddenly he felt guilty that it was Swindle that he'd been dreaming about. Had he been thinking about him, or Prowl?

Pushing away that line of thought, he climbed to his feet, stretching his limbs a bit to stimulate the energon flow. “So what's the problem with other mechs seeing us without clothing?” He gestured to his frame, which was the same as it always had been whenever he'd walked around Kaon.

Prowl stared up at him. “It's indecent! The only one who should have to see you naked is a mate, or a healer!”

“Why?” Sideswipe asked as he cocked his head to the side.

“It's offensive!”

“Offensive how?”

“You're....you're showing off what you're about to use!”

“...You wouldn't be naked unless you were about to interface with someone?”

“Not quite,” Prowl groaned. “Just...please don't run around naked.”

“Nobody in the city wears clothes, except to show status. Like a noble-mech wearing a cape, or something like that.”

The nomad lifted an eye ridge. “Perhaps we're better than the city-dwellers, then,” he muttered.

Sideswipe started to think that over, but before he did, his processor zoomed instead to a far more
wicked idea. His cortex balked and tried to stop him, but his processor overrode it.

It was just far too devious, and he needed to blow off some steam anyway.

“Hey, Jazz!”

The laughing had died away a breem ago, but black-and-white mech was still smiling as he shifted the flaps aside and stuck his head back in the tent. In the time it had taken him to do that, Sideswipe had spread his legs, pulled back his interface cover, and let his limp spike rest in his hands. He threw him a wide grin as he held it up to him.

“Look!”

Jazz screeched.

The tent rippled momentarily as he accidentally pulled at its frame in his attempt to back away as fast as possible. The flaps fluttered open long enough for the Sideswipe to see the mech throw himself to the ground and roll around with his palms over his optic band, howling and laughing at the same time, the translation program picking up his bawled “My optics! My optics!”

Sideswipe closed his interface port as he fell back on his aft on the berth, overwhelmed by his own evil cackling as well. This was only made worse when he turned and saw the look of absolute horror on Prowl's face, his optics insanely wide and nearly white, his doorwings pulled back and twitching.

“Why would you?” he squeaked, a sound that didn't seem possible for his frame. “...Why would you?!...”

The red mech was simply unable to answer him, his vents working too hard to keep up with him as he laughed hysterically, feeling better than he had in deca-cycles. His spark twittered and danced in its casing, pleased with itself, and so was his processor, even though his cortex was 'scolding' both of them. Soon enough the scolding took on Prowl's voice, who was leaning over him, a hand shaking his shoulder as his doorwings moved to instead flare angrily.

“--he was not invited in, and he is NOT supposed to see that, and for Primus's sake, don't do that!!-_-”

“Couldn't help it!” he giggled. “After all, I'm just a dumb city-mech that runs around naked all day, aren't I?!”

“Yes you are, yes you certainly are!”

Sideswipe rolled over, and kept laughing for several more breems. In that time Jazz yelled something into tent, and Prowl sat beside his mate, irritably waiting for him to calm down so that he could translate for him.

“When you are done,” he snapped, “Jazz is inviting us over to the bonfire for the evening.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The sun was nearly set when they emerged, an orange and red glow on the horizon, a dark-blue cloak of a starry sky being pulled along behind it. The light of the bonfire was plenty to illuminate the Commons, though, and torches had been lit in the main throughways so that mechs and femmes didn't trip over each other as they walked around. Many of the tribe had retired into their tents for the night, but there were a great deal still in the Commons too, sitting on mats and talking and
drinking, at ease now that the day was over.

Drinking?

That got Sideswipe's attention immediately.

“What's this?!” he asked Prowl at the same time that he grabbed a thick earth-ware mug from one of the tables that had been set up near the main tents. Bright pink fluid within it glowed up at him, and the mug was big enough that he had difficulty grasping it with one hand.

“You don't drink high-grade in the city?” Prowl asked as he retrieved his own cup.

“This is high-grade?!”

He bounced on his peds, then took an eager swing of it.

And immediately his intake nearly blew it right back out before it could hit his tank. He coughed, choking, and nearly fell on his face, stopped by Prowl grasping his arm and guiding him to sit down on a mat instead before he could hurt himself. He crossed his legs and braced himself on his knees as he hacked up the rest of the fluid, his optics bulging.

“HRRF!! What--ACK!--the frag?!—”

“High-grade,”’ his mate answered with a grin as he sat down next to him. “It's strong.”

“No slag!” Sideswipe coughed, a few drops splattering the ground in front of him. “I've--BLEH!--I've had high-grade, but nothing like this! The frag...?!”

“You're not supposed to drink it so fast, unless you're used to it, or want an overcharge that badly.”

The smell alone was nearly overwhelming to his olfactory sensors, now that he'd given himself a chance to pay attention to their input. He choked up the last of it, then grimaced at what remained in his mug. The pink fluid glowed innocently back at him, just as inconspicuous as before.

Prowl smiled wider, and took a sip of his own drink, taking in only about half a mouthful.

“Like this.”

Cautiously this time, Sideswipe mimicked him, allowing himself a small drink instead of guzzling it. The taste still threatened to overwhelm his glossa, and after he'd gulped it down and let it hit his tanks, his processor was already beginning to swim. “Primus frag it all. What's in this stuff?!”

“No slag!” Prowl answered happily as he took another drink in his cup. “High-grade, I told you.”

“It's not like any high-grade I've ever tasted,” he grumbled as he looked around at the other nomads varying between taking small sips, like Prowl, or pouring it down their intake in one go and then roaring victoriously at their feat, startling anyone else sitting nearby. “And I know my drinks. How do you make it?”

“They're leftovers from the process of making energon pellets. Did you see some of the Autobots cooking by the fire earlier today?”

“Yeah. But energon doesn't 'cook,' as far as I know. It explodes when exposed to too much heat.”

“Not after it's been mixed with the right ingredients.” Prowl put down his mug and gestured at it with his hands as he explained. “When the batch is cooked, the energon seizes into a hardened,
solid form, and this is rolled into pellets that we can carry with us more easily than a liquid. Whatever does not seize, however, is collected, contained, and left alone in barrels. After a few deca-cycles, its turned completely back into a liquid form, but now energized, and flavored with the ingredients that should have cooked it. The longer it's left alone, the better it tastes.”

Sideswipe nearly dropped the high-grade. “This is fermented energon?!”

“You have a word for it?”

“Yeah, but I’d never tried it. Nobody in the city is willing to let energon sit out that long. It would have gone bad.”

“Without being mixed with other ingredients, sa. But this mixture is safe.”

Sideswipe sniffed at the mug again. He could definitely make out the individual flavorings and crystal shavings now. He took another drink, this one a little longer, then swore and nearly choked it back up as he saw spots on his optics.

“Frag a carrier. That is something,” he wheezed.

“Sideswipe!”

The red mech looked up when he heard his name. The crowd around them was getting thicker, and louder, mechs and femmes chatting with each other animatedly as some of them quickly worked themselves into an overcharge. After a group of older mechs had ambled on by, he spotted Perceptor waving at him from a few mats away, Drift sitting next to his smaller mate, an arm wrapped around his shoulders. Sideswipe grinned, and waved back.

“Evening! Have you tried the high-grade?” He lifted his mug.

“I have,” the scientist answered, “and I have decided that I will be kind to their limited stores and not drain them too much.”

“...Couldn't handle it, could you?”

Perceptor made a face. “It seems to be something of an acquired taste.”

Sideswipe chuckled. “Yeah, right. It ain't bad, it just took me by surprise.”

“Good evening, Perceptor.”

“Good evening!” The scientist started to say something else, but instead did a double-take at Prowl. “You...You speak Standard! Oh, well, Sideswipe did say that you'd finished your translation program. Well then! I'm honored to speak with you with a complete vocabulary at last!”

Prowl bowed his head once. “As am I.” He greeted Drift in Iaconian too, who grinned and waved his fingers at the other couple, before he continuing in Standard for the two city-mechs. “We don't normally have this many of the tribe by the bonfire at night. But tonight's something of a celebration for you two.”

Both of them sat up a little straighter. “It is?” Perceptor asked, then turned and asked something of Drift, who nodded and spoke quietly to him, likely with his own explanation. Sideswipe turned his head to Prowl and gave him a questioning look.

Prowl picked up his mug and held it up. “We officially have two new Autobots, now that you two
have both successfully bonded.”

“...Oh.”

The white mech's face fell shortly after Sideswipe's did. The mug was placed back on the ground, and his free hand went to the red mech's shoulder. “I know this isn't ideal for you,” he said quietly, “but you are being welcomed here. The rest of the mechs see you as one of them now.”

Still, Sideswipe felt his plating tighten defensively against his struts. “This isn't my home, Prowl. Not yet.”

“Not yet?”

“...Maybe. Eventually.”

“...When you are ready.” He squeezed his shoulder. “I swore that to you. Everyone has already accepted you, when you are ready to accept them too.”

Sideswipe glanced around at the mechs and femmes celebrating. Among them were faces that were becoming familiar. Hound laughed as he slapped the back of his hand against one of his friends' shoulders and babbled at them, the translation chip picking up enough for Sideswipe to guess that he was telling them about some sort of creature he'd caught on a hunt. The dark-blue mech that he'd seen several times, Tracks, was attempting to smooth-talk his way in to a circle of femmes, who were enjoying seeing how long he'd keep trying until he got frustrated and left. Ironhide happened to walk by with a mug, down his high-grade in a few gulps, belch, then slammed the empty cup onto one of the tables before retrieving another. Somewhere, someone was beating a drum, and a few nomads had taken to dancing in front of the bonfire, Jazz included. His movements were slow and graceful at first, that of a practiced dancer, but then quickly became wild and silly when a couple of younglings tried to copy him, until all three of them were leaping and bouncing around in time with the rhythm. He enjoyed himself, leaning down and clapping for them, and grabbed one of their hands and twirled the youngling around.

Sideswipe cycled a round of air to steady himself.

He really was starting to feel like one of the Autobots.

One of his hands reached up, and squeezed Prowl's fingers on his shoulder.

“Thanks.”

“You're welcome.”

More mechs and femmes joined them in the Commons, some coming by to say a quick word to the two couples, or touch them briefly. Sideswipe was quickly learning that nomads touched each other often; it was a far stronger acknowledgment of camaraderie than small talk. He was getting to know how and when to touch back: if someone touched his arm, than he should touch them back in the same place to show that he recognized and appreciated them. Someone touching his helm was a quick notice of something more personal, like when a still-healing Trailbreaker came up to make sure that he and Prowl were doing alright, laying a palm on the ex-mercenary's black helm as he said something about his injuries from the fight with Optimus, and Sideswipe didn't need to touch him back once the hand was lifted away. Someone laying a hand on him for a long time, though, was deeply personal, and he should definitely touch them too if possible.

He thought of how the Autobots that had kidnapped him had all laid their hands on him when he'd been traumatized by a nightmare on the second orn into their trek. They couldn't understand why
he'd been so scared of a dream, only that he was, and was suffering. They'd responded by showing support in a way that surpassed comforting words, a deeply personal way that would have made more sense to a fellow nomad. Still, it did calm him, and he'd trusted them more since then. Maybe some primal part of his cortex understood the gesture better than he did.

And now here Prowl was, a hand laid comfortably on his shoulder, and staying there as Sideswipe slowly grew used to the Autobot tribe around him, ready to support him if he was overwhelmed. The red mech squeezed his fingers a bit tighter in gratitude, and felt the gesture returned.

“Ahah!”

Both of them looked across the fire. On the other side, Optimus was play-wrestling with pink youngling, who shrieked a high-pitched howl, barely more than yelp, before launching herself at the big mech. He caught her, then rolled onto his back, grunting and pretending that he was in great pain and pinned by her diminutive frame. The Autobots around him cackled at their leader as the femme sat on his massive chestplate and crossed her arms, pleased with her victory, until the Prime rolled over, knocking her off, and she squeaked and escaped the hands grabbing at her. As she scurried away, Optimus rumbled to himself, his optics smiling, then retook his seat between Bluestreak and Firestar, neither of whom held any rank in the Autobots, but were laughing and talking with him amicably anyway.

...What an odd mech to carry a title of a Prime. At least compared to Sentinel, or how the news talked about the Primes in all of the other major cities.

The drum beat had slowed, and someone was singing. Gradually, others added and raised their voices too, until the song drifted throughout the Commons, and even those who weren't joining stopped what they were doing to sit and listen.

Sideswipe checked the installation progress of the translation program.

43%...

It was getting there, but not enough for him to yet pick up all of the words. However, the tone and meaning conveyed just fine.

The Autobots were singing about a home they'd return to someday.

As the song continued, Sideswipe leaned a little on Prowl's side. His mate happily took his weight, his doorwings drifting back and forth slowly behind them, fanning them. The red mech allowed his frame to relax.

The song, the drinking, the singing...

He missed Kaon.

He missed the bar.

He missed Sunstreaker.

He missed home.

Yet, strangely, was that not what the song was about? The Autobots were singing about returning to their home too. But they were nomads. They didn't have a home, besides their camp.

“...Iacon's your home,” Sideswipe quietly realized, and looked to Prowl for confirmation.
Prowl nodded his head. Then, after a hesitation, he leaned the side of it against Sideswipe's helm. The motion was awkward, as if he wasn't sure if he should ask first, or wait until he was pushed away or not.

Sideswipe allowed him, shifting his own helm just a little to better accommodate him, and Prowl sighed a little as he stayed there.

The red mech was starting to remember why he missed Kaon so much. And yet...nearly everything that he missed and loved was here. A home, good friends, high-grade...

The only thing missing was his golden twin. And he was coming. Sideswipe still couldn't feel him, but he was certain that he was on his way. And even if he was lost, Springer would soon find him, and bring him to the camp. They'd be together again.

Everything would be alright again, soon enough.

A warm sense of peace wrapped around him, like a blanket, and he felt himself drifting off into recharge, his frame partially leaning against Prowl's, and Prowl's leaning on his.

That was, until the song was interrupted by a far-off howl.

Sideswipe snapped open his optics that he hadn't realized had closed. “What...?”

The singing abruptly ended, as did any other chatter. Nomads were all turning their heads in one direction, towards the howl.

Red Alert's voice. From wherever he was posted, he howled again, louder and more urgently.

More shouts and howls were taken up around the camp.

...An alarm.

Prowl's weight on Sideswipe changed suddenly, and the red mech found himself on his feet, partially dragged up by his mate, Prowl's fingers digging into his armor plating. The white mech was barking orders in Iaconian at the mechs around him.

Many of the nomads were on the move before they'd heard him. Younglings were running back to their carriers to be swept up into their arms. Those who had brought weapons on their frames or in their subspace had pulled them out and were either running towards the outskirts of camp or hurrying to gather around Prowl or Ironhide, who was also bellowing instructions to the yoska. Optimus's voice rang above them all, though he was speaking towards those without weapons, telling them what to do and where to go. Only when he was certain that all of them were hurrying to safety did he leave, sprinting towards Red Alert's position, leaving the two senior-ranking mechs to oversee the warriors.

“Drift?!”

Perceptor was reaching for his mate, but the white swordsmech was coaxing him over to Ratchet, who had appeared out from the crowd and taken the scientist's shoulder to lead him towards the healers' tent. The two robed mechs were quickly obscured by dozens of frames hurrying for their own tents, those with younglings or sparklings, or those too weak to help in a battle. Drift watched his mate being ushered away for a breem, then ran to where the warriors who had responded to Prowl and Ironhide were gathering to await their instructions.

Sideswipe's battle programming had already shifted into high-gear, and his head twisted left and
right, looking for threats. But although everyone in camp was reacting to the alarm, and yoska who must have been back-up patrols were running to the outskirts to strengthen the camp's defenses, no one was fighting. At least, no one that he could hear or see yet.

Then he saw the shadows on the nearest hill overlooking the camp.

Shadows with tall, thin frames, framed by wings.

Shadows with piercing red optics.

Sideswipe froze, gawking at them, and didn't comprehend what Prowl was saying into his audial, his sensors deafened to everything but his quickening pump. His sight of the enemy barbarians creeping towards the nomad camp was blinded as his mate threw the hood of his poncho over his head, preventing the enemy from easily picking the red mech out of the crowd, but he already knew that it was too late.

The Decepticons had found him.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 21: Negotiate

Sideswipe was held tightly at Prowl's side, the white mech's grip never leaving his mate's upper arm as he spoke rapidly to the knot of yoska huddled around him. The group became even more densely packed as Ironhide and his yoska joined them, the two senior-ranking mechs standing shoulder-to-shoulder and quickly updating each other on the situation and how many warriors they had at their disposal. Sideswipe grimaced, and kept his head bowed slightly forward, trying to keep his face hidden underneath his hood.

Did it matter if he did, though? The Decepticons were here. The rival tribe was far from their territory now. The only reason they'd have come was if they knew that he was within the Autobot camp. Hiding would do him no good.

He glanced up, and noted that many of the other yoska standing close to him had also pulled up their hoods, eclipsing their grim expressions in the flickering shadows of the bonfire. It dawned on him that they might be attempting to make the red mech harder for an outsider to find amongst them, and his spark warmed at that idea a little. The method of concealment wouldn't work for long during a fight, but it was appreciated all the same.

A breem later, several of the mechs and femmes parted as Optimus stepped up to the group, returning from getting Red Alert's debriefing at the edge of the camp. His blue optics were tight; the humor from before the alarm had been raised had vanished. He spoke deeply in Iaconian, slowly, and deliberately.

Sideswipe checked his translation software on his HUD and swore under his breath. It was still nowhere near done, but it pulled together enough of the common words for him to get the gist of what the Prime was saying.

“The word I have in my language for that is 'parley,'” he hissed at Prowl. “They want me, and then they'll leave, right?”

“You, and the Iacon prophecy.” Prowl murmured as Optimus continued speaking to his assembled warriors. The white mech's optics flickered in a strange way that caught Sideswipe's bemused attention. He stared forward a moment, reading something on his HUD. He then spoke up in Iaconian, the rest of the Autobots turning towards him to listen, and as he let them mull over what he'd said, he translated for Sideswipe. “There's an 85% probability that they're still uncertain to your presence, but have inferred that my team must have smuggled you by them if they cannot find you anywhere else. It's not worth the risk of us attempting to bluff and say that you aren't here, or that you offlined during the journey. They'd storm the camp.”

Sideswipe thought of the night that he'd been hidden underneath the Autobots' wagon, bound and helpless, while the Decepticons had ruthlessly attacked the much smaller group of barbarians. They'd only pulled back after Starscream had gotten into the wagon and concluded that they didn't have their sacrificial mech or the prophecy. If Sideswipe had helped with the fight, as he'd wanted to, Starscream wouldn't have stopped attacking until the team had been killed and the city-mech was in his custody.
One of the *yoska* grumbled and pointed at Sideswipe. Immediately Prowl hissed, and clutched his mate even closer to him, making Sideswipe wince in pain as his fingers left dents in his plating.

“Okay, I get it! You're not giving me up,” he grimaced. “Prowl, that hurts.”

The grip lessened, though he didn't let go of him. “Sorry.”

Optimus was snarling a retort at the offending mech instead, who bowed his head and took a step backwards, to a few chuckles and jeers from his commrades. The rest of the *yoska* made no similar suggestions, but were also quiet, unsure of what to do. Ironhide growled as he spoke to Optimus and kneaded his fist into his palm, but the Prime shook his head.

They wouldn't give him up. But neither could they risk a fight.

Sideswipe recalled all of the younglings he'd seen running around the camp in the past few orns, who were now hiding with their carriers and protectors. There were many *yoska* in the Autobot tribe, but there were also many non-combatants, not unless things were truly desperate.

The setting of a battlefield would have been one thing, or even a street fight, but this was the tribe's *home*. If they fought and lost, they'd have no place to fall back to, and those who could not defend themselves or run away from a victorious enemy would be offline.

“What do we do?” he asked Prowl. He jolted a little when his mate's optics flickered rapidly again.

“I'm thinking.”

The flickering continued for a breem, while Optimus kept glancing warily at the mechs waiting for them on the hill. They weren't attacking right away, instead giving the weaker tribe a chance to meet their demands without a fight, but certainly there would be a limit before they lost their patience and attacked.

Sideswipe clenched his jaw. He wanted to fight. His spark was raging at the injustice of a bigger tribe preying on the mechs that had rescued him. That had *kidnapped* him, he reminded himself. But he was one of them now, right?

Right?

His spark seemed to think so. It all but *growled* as he glared at the shadows from underneath his hood. He was shocked by the depth of the primal urge within him to repel the enemy away from the tribe.

Prowl's flickering optics stopped and went solid again. He immediately straightened, his doorwings raising high on his back. He announced something, and it was simple enough for Sideswipe to translate on his own.

“I've got an idea.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The party ascending the hill was lit by mechs carrying torches on either side of them. Optimus Prime took the lead, flanked by Jazz and Drift on his left, Ironhide and Hound on his right. Behind him came a dozen of the *yoska*, spreading out and ready to defend their leader if the Decepticons dared to attack him. The rest were spread out around the perimeter of the camp, on-guard to repel any sneak-attacks.
Within the group headed towards the other tribe, Sideswipe kept his head bowed, still wary of revealing himself, especially now that they were moving closer to the enemy. Prowl had finally let go of him, not wanting to prompt the Decepticons as to who in the group needed extra protection, but he still stayed by his mate's side, unwilling to leave him while he was in imminent danger. Those wearing ponchos around him still kept their hoods up, and though Sideswipe did appreciate how it hid him in the crowd, he realized that they hadn't unanimously done it for his benefit.

With their hoods drawn and their faces unseen, an advancing group of Autobot yoska looked like terrifying creatures that had melted out of the dark wildlands. If he'd been their enemy, or hadn't known who they were, he admitted that the sight of them would have made him think twice about challenging them. He doubted that intimidation would work on the Decepticons, but if nothing else it would show the rival tribe that the Autobots were unwilling to back down quietly.

Then, as the torch-bearers raised their lights towards the enemy, he finally got a good look at the Decepticons.

The first thing he noticed was that they were all 'naked.' It shocked him at first, especially after what Prowl had said earlier that evening. Was the clothes-wearing phenomenon exclusive to the Autobot tribe?

Then what he'd assumed to be flickering shadows on their armor plating took form, and stayed, the dark shapes twisting around limbs and torsos, some ending intricately, especially around their faces, others abruptly, as if the winding tattoos had been painted on as an afterthought. Many of the Decepticons with long, high wings--'Seekers', Prowl had called them--held the most beautiful designs on their wing panels, which must have made fantastic canvases. But many more of them swirled with dark, sharp edges, as if their bodies had been covered in black knives and thorns, which extended all the way down to their clawed hands. When they twitched and moved, the red mech could swear that the tattoos snaked around their limbs, as if they were living creatures.

Suddenly the Autobot's hoods and ponchos didn't seem that intimidating anymore, not against these mechs.

The Autobots stopped about ten strides from the nearest Seeker, and held their ground. Dozens of red optics assessed and sneered at them. Sideswipe quickly realized that if the Seekers chose to betray the parley and attack, the Autobot warriors would be outnumbered by at least two-to-one, and that wasn't counting any Decepticons that could be hiding in the somewhere else. Still, the Autobots stayed as they were, refusing to show their enemies any fear, a few hissing their own swears in Iaconian.

He recognized the light-blue feet before he took in the mech that was Starscream. The Seeker was flanked by two more of his kind, one black and purple, the other a different shade of blue. All three assessed the weaker tribe's show of force, but then Starscream was more concerned with talking to a tall, silver, non-winged mech standing nearby to him.

"See! I told you, they don't have him!,” he said in Standard, his vocalizer so high-pitched that it constantly shrieked. “We've wasted mechs and valuable energon to come here!"

Sideswipe's optics shifted to the silver mech, who rivaled Optimus for height, and whose frame all but bulged with servos.

His spark stopped.

_Holy frag._
“Have you considered that they wouldn't drag a bargaining token out for us to see? He must be here.”

“And if he's not?”

Red optics assessed the band of Autobots standing before him. The silver mech curled his lips, revealing sharp, pointed dentals around a deeply scarred face. In the dark, it was hard to tell if the lines crawling around his helm were more scars, or tattoos. Or both.

“He is. I can smell him.”

Sideswipe ventilations picked up, and he had to fight to not back away.

His nightmares. The mech plunging a knife into his chestplate and down to his spark stood in front of him.

*Megatron.*

Prowl's hand suddenly grasped his fingers.

It was then that he realized how badly that he was shaking. He paused as he fought to control himself, and gave his hand a return squeeze, then dropped it, before anyone could see.

Drift stepped closer to Megatron, and as soon as the Decepticons noticed him, they hissed and growled, many of them baring their claws and dentals. The white Autobot tried to ignore them as he spoke to Optimus, then to the Decepticons, using a language that Sideswipe had not yet heard.

Prowl had already told him what would happen. Drift knew the Decepticon language from before they had switched to Standard; the reason for the switch was something they had yet to figure out. Neither tribes were interested in learning each other's language at all, so in the few times that they interacted, Drift acted as a translator for them.

But whatever he'd said for Optimus, the Decepticons scoffed at it. Megatron barked a short laugh, then pointed directly at Drift.

“I will not speak to a traitor who uses primitive words from so long ago!” he snarled. “I am not here to negotiate! I am here for what you have stolen from me: the prophecy, and my sacrifice. Where is he?!?” he shouted, optics sweeping over the nomads. “Where have you hidden him?!”

Only Sideswipe and Prowl spoke Standard, but his demands were clear to the rest of the Autobots. Those with their weapons bared held them tighter, and those at the flanks turned their bodies slightly, ready to defend the group from any attacks on the sides. Prowl's doorwing subtly pushed his mate towards the center. The red mech sent a quick glare at him, but obligingly took a few steps to the more protected spot, if nothing but to humor him.

His spark sent a quick pulse to Prowl's over the barrier on their bond, and held close to the wall as it listened for the answer. It came back shortly as a negatory.

*Not yet.* He had to wait for the right time.

Optimus spoke in Iaconian, his voice booming and authoritative. Sideswipe's incomplete translation program tried to puzzle his words into something he could understand.

“He is not property. He is not a Minotoron beast. He is a mech. I will not give him up to be slaughtered by you.”
Drift's voice could not hope to match the power behind Optimus's, but he tried. Megatron narrowed his red optics into slits.

“Spread the word,” he said to Starscream, even as he kept his gaze locked with the Prime's. “Encircle the camp. As soon as we are through here--”

Sideswipe started to move, but Prowl grabbed his arm.

_Not yet._

“And the prophecy?” Starscream asked. “It could be destroyed if we overrun them!”

“No. They'll have put it somewhere safe.” He glanced towards Optimus's tent. “With wherever the sacrifice is hiding, and that likely will be wherever they keep their younglings--”

Prowl shoved Sideswipe's shoulder.

_Now!_

“Oh no you don't!”

Dozens of red optics snapped to him as he burst forward, shoving his way past the other _yoska_ as he attempted to get to Megatron. Just as he reached the front of the group, Hound, Ironhide and several other Autobots grabbed him, halting his progress and snapping him back. His arms were snatched and held away from his sides, where he could not hurt anyone, nor himself. Sideswipe winced and made a show of struggling against them, and though they'd been instructed not to hurt him, the fingers digging into his plating didn't exactly tickle either. Hound grunted something in Iaconian as he held him tight.

“Aha...”

He twisted his head up towards Megatron, and it was no act to freeze as his energon run cold. The Decepticon's sneering grin had curled up on his face as soon as he'd spotted the red mech.

He remembered that same triumphant look from his nightmares, right before he 'died' each time. He suppressed the terror that reared and clamped down on his spark, and hoped that he'd managed it before the look had reached his faceplates.

“Look at this, Starscream. It's sacrifice that you told me could not have possibly escaped you.”

The Seeker stuttered for a moment, optics wide and baffled as he took in the new red mech, before he shook his head.

“Impossible! It's just another Autobot, too stupid to keep his intake shut!”

“An Autobot who speaks Standard?” Megatron purred as he stepped closer. Immediately the Autobot _yoska_ holding Sideswipe pulled him to them, not allowing the Decepticon leader any chance of snatching him away. “Well, well. Look at you. They've dressed you up, and made you look like one of them. Clever.”

Sideswipe bared his dentals at him. He felt his pump pounding against his chestplate, and his fists were shaking. He had no idea if it was from fear, or the overwhelming need to insert one of those fists into Megatron's face.

“Not really Kaon's fashion, but it works for me,” he said coolly, his body tense against the
Autobots’ hands, ready to spring forward and attack the mech threatening them.

Megatron chuckled, then put his hands on his hips as he leaned towards him. “It must have been quite a journey for you, city-mech,” he said as he lowered his voice. “How did they get a fighter like you past my hunter teams?”

“Kept me tied up and gagged inside of their wagon,” he lied. “I couldn't move or make a sound. Starscream over there nearly found me and stepped on me one night.”

“What?!” The Seeker's wings fluttered as his red optics bulged. “I dumped anything that could have hidden you out of any wagon that we found! You were not--”

“You managed to get a claw into a big, black one. Then you got into the wagon and started throwing out energon canisters. I saw it all. But you didn't see me.” The side of his mouth twisted up into a smirk. “Remember that?”

That made Starscream pause. And his hesitation was all the affirmation that Megatron needed.

A claw swept out and struck Starscream's face, sending him reeling with a cry.

“You fool! You had him right under your nose!”

As he turned towards the Seeker, who was babbling and pleading, Sideswipe allowed himself to wince a little and subtly gesture with his fingers to Ironhide. The nomad let up from the grip that had increased as soon as Megatron turned violent, though he still held him restrained, as if keeping him from running up and attacking the Decepticons.

Megatron turned back to him.

“My...apologies that we were not able to recover you that night,” he growled, not an ounce of sincerity in his voice at all. “But now, your nightmare is over. We'll be taking you back to your home.”

“Slag!” Sideswipe barked. “You don't think I heard you a minute ago?! I'm not going back to be sacrificed by you!” He spread his fingers, unable to gesture with his arms held. “I'm safer with these sons of glitches than I ever will be with you!”

“...How interesting,” Megatron sneered down at him, immediately tossing out any intent on pretending that the other tribe was his 'rescue.' “My sacrificial mech thinks that he has a choice in this.”

“I am not your fragging sacrifice!” He twisted at the nomads' hands again, and this time it wasn't for show.

“You were promised to me. You were stolen from me. And now I will take you to where you belong.”

“Onto an alter?! Fat chance!”

“Then let me make my terms a bit more clear to you, since they obviously were not explained well enough.”

The Decepticon leader crossed his arms over the tattoos wrapped around his chestplates, and stalked back and forth, up and down the Autobot line, his optics never leaving Sideswipe's.
“The Autobots will turn you over to me, along with the Iacon prophecy. Or, each of these mechs protecting you, each one of them,” a clawed finger swept from one end of the group to the other, “will die. All of the mechs and femmes hiding in their camp down there will die. All of your younglings, all of your sparklings, will die.”

Sideswipe froze. “You’d…”

“The wildlands have no need for weak-sparked mechlings. I’d be doing them mercy by killing them before they have a chance to upgrade and become thorns in my side.”

He stopped in front of the red mech, and the Autobots holding him.

“Those are my terms, city-mech. Now, will you come quietly, or do I have to burn the camp first?”

The ex-mercenary clenched and unclenched his fists, longing to be able to lash out and strike him. He was close enough, fraggit! If he could convince Hound or Ironhide to loosen their grip long enough to let him get in one hit--

“Oh, and another thing.”

Megatron had taken one step closer. Too close. The nearest Autobots were brandishing their weapons, ready to stab at him if he dared one more step. But the silver Decepticon ignored them, his red optics locking onto Sideswipe's blue ones.

“Your brother misses you.”

Sideswipe's intake hitched as his pump stopped and his struggles froze.

His spark immediately pulsed, instinctively looking for its missing twin.

Sunny...

How did he know?

How did he know?!

“…You don't know that,” he hissed.

“Do I?” The Decepticon turned his head to the side slightly, his grin triumphant.

“You've never met him.”

“Golden mech, about your size, head vents on either side of his helm? And, oh--”

He leaned his head in, until the ex-mercenary could swear that he could feel his ventilations.

“He was so worried about those nightmares of yours. He wondered if you were still having them, and who was there to comfort you.”

Sideswipe stared up at him, his optics huge. Glowering red optics stared back.

He considered himself fairly good at keeping a straight face whenever his friends at the bar got together to play cards. Frell, this was why Prowl was certain that the plan would work. He could act, when he needed to, to a point. But he’d never been good at reading the faces of the other players.
He gulped.

His spark tried again to pulse, but found itself repelled by its own barrier. On the other side, he heard *something*, and he resisted the urge to look at Prowl.

He had to stick with the plan.

But *Sunny*...

Megatron might take him to Sunstreaker.

If he went with him, there was a chance that he might see his twin, one more time, before he was sacrificed and offline. It wasn't much, but his spark would do anything, *anything* to see Sunstreaker again.

Megatron knew this. He knew that the twins were desperate to find each other. He knew his brother, he knew about the dreams.

...Did he?

“...What were they about?”

Megatron's optic ridges narrowed slightly. “What?”

“My dreams. What were they about?”

Megatron studied him carefully.

But he didn't answer in time for Sideswipe's faceplates to morph from wide-opticed fear to dawning realization, and then twist into a sneer.

“...Oh, *frag you*...!”

Angry that the mech had tried to deceive him by using his brother's description, something that *any* mech could have told him, Sideswipe reacted without thinking. He worked a ball of fluid in his mouth into a bolus, then, while the Decepticon was still leaning towards him, spat directly into his face. It landed on his cheek plates with a satisfying *splat*.

It took a beat for it to drip away, and for everyone else to realize how stupid the red mech had been.

Several of the Autobots gasped.

The Decepticons shouted in outrage.

And above all of them, Megatron roared, optics blazing, as a claw reaching out for the red mech's throat.

Hound and Ironhide pulled hard on their friend, getting him out of harm's way, but not before the edge of the claw sliced along Sideswipe's chin. It wasn't a deep wound, not even enough to register more than a small damage report on his HUD, though he definitely felt it. He twisted his head sharply to keep the claw from digging too far down into an energon line, and his hood flipped off of his helm, exposing his face completely to the Decepticons. He was more worried about the follow-up once the backswing had ended, but a staff whipped out from the crowd, smashing into Megatron's wrist and making him stumble back before he could strike again.
Prowl was there, directly between the Decepticon leader and his mate, his doorwings flared high and his dentals bared.

"You will not touch him."

The growl was unlike anything that Sideswipe had ever heard from him. He gawked, too stunned to fight the hands that were gripping him and keeping him pulled back. Prowl refused to move away from his defense.

His processor whirled, panicked, before it affirmed that Prowl had shouted in Iaconian, not Standard. Thank Primus the mech was level-headed enough to remember their plan. Or, maybe, he had reacted on pure instinct at a threat to his mate, all the way down to which language packet he used to respond.

Megatron glared down at the smaller, doorwinged mech standing between him and his sacrifice. Then, with a smile, and keeping his stare directly at Prowl, he lifted his claw with the Sideswipe's energon dribbling on the tip to his scarred mouth.

Sideswipe watched in a horror as the Decepticon licked the energon away, slowly, making sure that Prowl was watching grimly. Megatron took his time, as if tasting something delicious and sweet. When he was through, he looked at the now-clean fingertip.

“He's bonded with you. Interesting.”

The city-mech didn't try to deny it. He was already disgusted enough that Megatron had somehow figured that out by tasting his energon.

“So then, is your decision made?” Megatron asked in a louder voice, and spread his hands towards the Autobots as he spoke to Sideswipe. “You fight me, and these mechs will die. And I will make sure that this one,” he pointed at Prowl, who was still crouched defensively in front of his mate, “will be saved for last. After all,” he grinned, “a sacrifice like yours needs a proper audience.”

Sideswipe started to struggle again. But as soon as he did, Prowl pounded on his side the barrier. *Stick to the plan.*

He took an intake of air to gather himself, froze, then made an effort to slump in the hands restraining him.

“...The prophecy isn't here.”

Megatron started. “It isn't?”

“A lie!” Starscream yelped.

“It's not,” Sideswipe mumbled, his head bowing. He squeezed his fists, pretending to be at war with a decision, before he lifted his optics wearily towards the Decepticon leader. “I'll tell you where it is. But only if you leave this camp, and me, alone.”

The Decepticons that overheard him mumbled to themselves. The Autobots, not understanding Standard, glanced his way nervously, but otherwise didn't react. Prowl showed no indication that he would ever leave Sideswipe's defense, his weapon and optics staying pointed at Megatron.

“Now why would I ever leave my dear sacrifice that I've worked so hard to find here, when I will need you as soon as I find the prophecy?” Megatron asked far too sweetly.
Here's hoping that Prowl's guess had been right.

“Because you're having the same dreams as me,” Sideswipe growled, his voice regaining some of its fire. “You know how your sacrifice's death should be carried out, and it will be *at Iacon*. You will *never* open Iacon if you kill me now. And besides, you think that you can keep me alive while you figure out how to use me with the prophecy, when I know that you'll only kill me in the end anyway?”

It took the Decepticon leader a moment to gather his answer. Some weight lifted from Sideswipe's spark, but only a little.

“...You are linked to the Iacon prophecy,” Megatron hissed. “I will take no one but you for a sacrifice this important.”

“How do you know that you need me, if you've never seen the prophecy?” He lifted his head. “I'm just a mech with nightmares. And one that won't keep himself online if you raze this camp,” he added sharply.

“You would terminate yourself, and your twin, for these savages?”

His spark pulsed unhappily at that thought.

If he managed to kill himself, Sunstreaker would never know what had happened to him. He'd simply be *gone*, and his twin would be alone forever. That is, if he survived their bond being torn apart.

Would either twin have a chance of surviving without the other? Neither Sideswipe nor Sunstreaker liked to dwell on that. It wasn't that they were frightened of suddenly dying by a mistake by one of them. They were scared of what would happen if one outlived the other.

“...You don't know my brother. He'd understand,” he lied, then raised the volume of his vocalizer. “Do you want the prophecy, or not? I don't care about it. You can take it and sacrifice some other mech for all I care. But I *won't* let my spark keep spinning long enough for you to find the Iacon prophecy if you harm this tribe. Those are *my* terms.”

“And when I find it gone because you've already told these mechs where to retrieve it?” Megatron asked suspiciously.

“They don't know. How could I tell them? They don't speak Standard.”

He was telling the truth. Mostly. And Megatron couldn't tell him otherwise, as he glared at each one of the Autobots, and only received an angry but ignorant stares in return, none of them having been able to understand the conversation. Prowl's faceplate was the worst of all, cold and severe, and Sideswipe wondered if Ironhide would be wise enough to restrain him too if he tried to attack the Decepticon leader on his own.

“I'll tell you,” Sideswipe continued, “but only if you leave them, and me, alone. You get your prophecy, don't have to lose any more energon or mechs, and you can go find some other sacrifice that's easier to capture. Sounds more than fair in my book.”

“Lord Megatron,” Starscream pleaded as Megatron considered the red mech, “it's an obvious lie! He has the Iacon prophecy in the camp. On your word, I'll--”

“Raze the camp, and not find it, just like you didn't find my sacrifice in a simple wagon?!” Megatron snarled. “And then the sacrifice offlines himself, and I'm left with nothing?!”
“We'll bind him tightly. He won't have the chance to slice his energon lines. He won't be able to move a strut after we--”

“ENOUGH!”

The power of his voice rattled all of them, even the Autobot yoska. Optimus started to move his hand towards his subspace pocket, where his axe was hiding, but stopped himself as Megatron spoke to Sideswipe again.

“You should know better than to ask a wildland mech for any sort of promise,” he glowered. “Any wildland mech, be they Decepticon, or Autobot. But...I will leave you in peace, for the prophecy. For now.”

Sideswipe bit his bottom lip, as if battling his decision. Then, seeing that he had little choice, he bowed his head again, and mumbled.

“It's back by the caravan, where I was captured by the Autobots, back in your territory.”

“Caravan?”

“Automated wagon. The vehicle holding the energon we were going to deliver to you. When I saw that we would lose the fight with the Autobots, I threw the prophecy into the limbs of the closest crystal outcropping. I thought that I could retrieve it later, or tell the next unit going to your camp where to find it.”

“...Clever. And these mechs didn't see it?”

“No. They've been trying to get me to tell them where it was since I was captured. I didn't. I thought that they'd kill me once they knew.”

Megatron stared at him, assessing him, but Sideswipe kept his head and his optics down, pretending to be ashamed for giving up the information. He stayed there, his stance defeated, until Megatron snapped his fingers to get his attention, and his black helm popped back up.

“You find a way to tell them that if I ever find an Autobot stealing from me again, I will deliver them to your camp in pieces. And if I find you have lied to me--”

He pointed towards the camp, where the non-combatants were hiding.

“I will return, and you will watch as each of their spark chambers are ripped out. Understand?”

Sideswipe nodded once.

“Good.” He turned to Starscream. “We go.”

“But—but Lord Megatron...” the Seeker gestured to the Autobots. “They...”

“I said,” he shoved his shoulder, “We go.”

Starscream squawked as he stumbled, but did as he was bid, and shouted instructions to the rest of the Seekers. With long glares and growled swears at the other tribe, and especially at Drift, they turned towards their leader, and followed him back over the hill. Their shadows trailed after them, whipping along the ground like an extension of the tattoos, until they vanished.

The Autobots waited until long after they could not see the silhouettes in the darkened wildland anymore before they eased. Immediately Optimus sent a squad of yoska to fan out on either side,
making sure that no Decepticons were trying to sneak up on the camp from a different direction. As they ran off, he turned to Prowl, who had finally stood up straight again, and asked him a question. The white mech nodded his head sharply.

At that, the other yoska released Sideswipe. Hound said something light-hearted to him, and rubbed a palm over the dents he’d left in his armor plating. The red mech made a face at him, then forced himself to grin and touch his arm similarly.

“I'm alright. But thanks.”

The smile dropped as he turned to Prowl. Around them, the rest of the yoska were making their way back to the camp, though likely to stand guard a little closer to their tents for the rest of the night.

“That's a delay that'll only work for so long, Prowl. He'll be back for me, and he'll be beyond fragged. You know that.”

Prowl sighed, and let his doorwings droop.

“It was necessary. I could not calculate any plausible scenarios in which we convinced them that you were not here and they did not attack. However,” he crossed his arms, “convincing them that we never retrieved the Iacon prophecy was easier.”

“They’ll come back when they don't find it.”

“Then we need to get to Iacon before they do. Megatron will need to gather his resources to be able to feed an army to get all the way here to us, and then to track us once we move.”

“...That wasn't his army? We were heavily outnumbered.”

Prowl stared at him. “That was a scouting team.”

“...Fragging Primus on his back,” Sideswipe mumbled to himself as he looked back at the darkened hills.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

When they returned to the tent, Sideswipe took a long moment to glance back-and-forth between Prowl's berth, and his temporary one on the other side of the tent. He made his decision, and moved to the pillows he’d stolen and arranged. Prowl watched him go, then vented a sigh as he turned away and walked over to his own berth, his doorwings drooping low.

Then he made a surprised noise when Sideswipe plopped the stolen pillows down next to him.

“Thought you might want these back.”

The red mech knelt down as he scattered them around the mat, then fluffed them with the furs until the berth was comfortable for two mechs to lay on it again. Prowl watched his mate in bemusement, optic ridges raised high, and continued to do so as Sideswipe grunted as he crawled onto the berth and lay down on his back, his head cushioned by one of the larger pillows.

“...Well?” he asked as he stared up at him.

“Sideswipe, I thought that you--”

“I promised to try to make this work. And that's going to be hard if we can't even share the same
berth.”

Prowl hesitated a bit longer, his optics refreshing, then obliging crawled down to his knees and lay down next to his mate. The moment that Sideswipe's arms went around him, the gesture was returned, and he sighed as he rested his head on a red shoulder. Sideswipe cradled his mate comfortably, as easily has he had for several nights besides the last. His systems didn't power down, though.

He wasn't ready to recharge yet. He couldn't, not when his spark was twisting itself in knots.

“...Prowl?”

“Mmm?”

“What are the chances that Sunstreaker will get here safely?”

The city-mech watched Prowl process this, the nomad's optics flickering for a breem. As he opened his mouth to answer, Sideswipe spoke over him.

“Honestly, what are the chances? Don't glossy-paint it for me.”

“Sideswipe...” he groaned.

“Don't.” He hugged him a little tighter. “I can trust you better if you can tell me bad news.”

He huffed through his nose, but relented.

“...38%.”

The ex-mercenary's frame stiffened. His fingers tightened on the other mech's frame, then stopped and apologetically massaged the plating until he could gather himself to speak again.

“And what was it before tonight?”

Prowl grimaced. “You'll only worry yourself over something you can't change now.”

“Please?”

He sighed. His optics flickered again.

“62%.”

Sideswipe lay still a long while as he took that in. Then, with a small whine, he turned his face down into Prowl's white helm.

“Thank you,” he mumbled

“You're not welcome,” Prowl grunted. “Why would you do that to yourself?”

“Because he's my twin.” His voice wavered. “And I just pointed the enemy right to where he'd go first when he looks for me. If he doesn't make it...it's...it's my fault.”

“It's been deca-cycles since we took you,” Prowl reasoned. “He'd have checked the caravan's site and have been long gone by now. There's an extremely low chance that they'll go back and encounter him.”
“Then why isn't he here?” Sideswipe whined. “Why hasn't he found me yet?! Megatron was lying about having spoken to him. But...what if the Decepticons really do have him? What if they're holding him as, like, a back-up sacrifice or something?! What are the chances of *that*!”

Prowl was silent.

After a moment, the white mech embraced him tightly, his fingertips kneading at his back struts, and gently pressed at the barrier, willing for it to come down so that he could embrace his spark as well.

Sideswipe felt it, but squeezed his optics shut, willing for it to stay in place, even as his spark begged him for his mate's comfort. Or his twin. Preferably his twin.

“Sunny...” he moaned despairingly.

Prowl hugged him tighter to him, and leaned up to murmur into his audial as he petted him. The gesture was small, and quiet, and it would never be enough to totally pacify his misery.

...Yet...he did relax.

A quivering sigh escaped through his vents, and he turned face partly into the pillow, letting Prowl whisper something in Iaconian into his audial, something soft, something he didn't understand, yet seemed to ease him until he could feel his systems powering down.

Or maybe he didn't have to understand.

As his frame curled against Prowl's, he focused on his spark, which was cooling and easing, and he wondered how impregnable the barrier on their bond was after all.

Chapter End Notes

I need to share some behind-the-scenes hilarity. I like and prefer to write action scenes over dialogue between characters. I was warring with myself to not turn this chapter into a straight-up fight; the Autobots would definitely lose or at least suffer massive losses until Sideswipe was captured, and that would be a swift end to this story. At the same time I was really struggling with Megatron's 'voice', to the point where I strongly reconsidered how the scene would go just so I wouldn't have to give him that much dialogue. I finished it just before I posted the chapter before this one, and felt more confident about it...

*My face when* many of the commenters expressed that they were excited for a battle scene.

No hard feelings at all, you guys rock. XD My roommates could tell you about how I was nervous and running in circles the day after I posted. That was hilarious. I love you guys.

**Edit:** 100,000 words, whew!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 22: Normal

Sideswipe’s sword raised up to deflect the incoming blow. He gritted his dentals as the two weapons crashed together, the sound echoing through the wildland hills, the force of the impact driving through his arm and nearly overwhelming his servos before he parried the club away. Immediately he took to the offense, roaring as he drove forward, and slammed his shoulder into the other red mech’s chestplate.

Ironhide grunted as he wobbled back a step, but though he was a little shorter than Sideswipe, he was far more massive, and when his back foot came down he was once again an impenetrable wall of servos. Sideswipe’s arm was left too close to him. It was gripped, and then the ex-mercenary’s shoulder was holding all of his weight, and then his feet left the ground. The sky and the hills tumbled over one another until he bounced and landed on his aft several lengths away from the nomad. He groaned, and rolled over and up to his feet, noting the damage warnings on his HUD before dismissing them as minor. Nothing had been more damaged than his pride.

Ironhide shook his head, and pointed at the ex-mercenary before shouting at him in Iaconian. “Missed the point. Attack together.”

The translation software was nearly completely installed, to where he could almost always get the gist of what the Autobots were saying, even if it sounded weird. Sideswipe didn’t try answering back in Iaconian yet for fear of him coming off as stupid instead of just having an incomplete language packet. Instead he glowered at Ironhide, and walked back over to where Hound and Trailbreaker were snickering at him.

With the Decepticons so close, half of the yoska had been detailed to keep watch over the camp that night, and when the sun rose and it was clear that the rival tribe had moved away, the rest were summoned by Ironhide to practice. Sideswipe guessed that the exercises were meant not only to keep them sharp and for the yoska leader to gauge where they needed to focus their training, but to also cool their nerves from nearly being attacked by a far more powerful tribe.

Prowl had his own summons from Optimus Prime: the two Autobot leaders needed to discuss where to move the camp once the Minotoron herd was done grazing. So while he had gone to the largest tent, Sideswipe had jogged over to the cleared space between tentline and the herd where the yoska could practice without fear of tripping over a table or rope line or a youngling, or whatever else may be in the way. Ironhide had immediately taken charge and partitioned up the yoska. Some of them, the younger and inexperienced, were running in circles around the camp to build up their servos. Others were hacking away at posts of deadened crystal stems, their weapons rhythmically scratching away at their imagined opponents. More were paired off into duels, or teams, as Sideswipe, Hound and Trailbreaker had been.

As he did his rounds with training each of the warriors, Ironhide had taken a particular interest in Prowl’s new mate, and had come up and told his team to attack him. Sideswipe had obliged.

Obviously he’d misunderstood.
“Together,” Hound repeated in Iaconian. As he said that, he pulled his lasso out of subspace, and held it up for his teammate to see.

Sideswipe stared at it a moment as he remembered when he'd first met the Autobots, when the caravan had been attacked, and how they had ganged up and worked together to defeat him. If he'd taken them on each as individuals, he might have had a chance at fend ing them off. But Prowl's team had surrounded him and then jumped between distracting and attacking him, overwhelming his battle programming until the white mech could knock him out. Something similar had happened during the fight with the Seekers: Hound lassoed their opponent in, and while they were busy trying to escape, Trailbreaker would deliver a heavy blow.

That hadn't been luck. They had trained to do that.

Sideswipe glanced down at his own sword, the golden blade powered-down while in sparring practice, but still sharp and dangerous. He and Sunstreaker always worked well together, but that was obvious because of their split-spark. They trusted each other fully, and could all but read each other's thoughts and movements during a fight. Working with other mechs on a team was always problematic. The twins didn't always mean to drive their fellow mercenaries insane. Mostly. They just preferred to work only with each other.

He turned his attention to Trailbreaker and made a slow, sweeping motion with the blade. “I'll get him with an upper-cut, and you club him down from the top. Sa?”

The black mech got the message from the weapon's movement at least. “Sa.”

The three mechs stood together again, letting Ironhide brace himself and stand ready for them, and this time Sideswipe waited until Hound had begun to stalk Ironhide in a clockwise motion before he matched his pace as he side-stepped the other way. Ironhide crouched, anticipating them, his head swiveling back and forth, but made no attempt to escape the closing trap as the two yoska circled around him, leaving Trailbreaker at their opponent's front.

Ironhide said something, and made a show of wiggling his own club around in front of him, and Trailbreaker grinned as he did the same. Sideswipe understood it: he was showing that in a real fight, he'd be sparring with Trailbreaker and hopefully not noticing what the two other Autobots were doing, but for now the team was to concentrate on the maneuver. The two mechs jeered lightly at each other, but their attention was on the other two circling their prey.

Then, in a quick motion, the lasso snapped out, and latched around Ironhide's wrist. The big red mech yowled, and automatically brought his hand back to try to tug it away as he turned to face Hound. Immediately Sideswipe took advantage of this and leapt forward, ducking down as soon as he was in range so that he'd have a stronger push off of the ground as his sword swept up. Ironhide saw him coming, and danced away, using what little slack he had with the lasso to his advantage. But he couldn't go far, and Trailbreaker followed up on the team-attack, rushing forward and bringing his club down towards Ironhide. Halfway through the swing, he controlled it and stopped, and instead let it bounce slightly on the yoska's shoulder, demonstrating where it would have hit.

Ironhide grinned at them. “Better.”

Hound undid the lasso from his fellow Autobot's wrist, and the four of them reset to practice the maneuver again. This time, as Sideswipe and Hound stalked Ironhide, the mech stepped back and out of the trap, forcing them to keep following him. The trap could not close if they didn't get ahead of him, and so they kept going, but Ironhide kept pace with his attackers as he roll-stepped backwards, silently asking how they would adjust to this.
Trailbreaker had the idea to suddenly rush forward, pouncing and engaging Ironhide in a short duel, before jumping backwards. The other mech had to come forward to re-engage him, and that's when Sideswipe and Hound stormed in. Once again, they successfully overwhelmed him, and he had them reset.

After several more rounds of stalking, attacking and usually succeeding, Ironhide switched up his own tactics, throwing out ideas of what an opponent would do when confronted by them. As Sideswipe and Hound started to move, Ironhide suddenly leaped to the side, straight at Hound, ignoring his 'duel' with Trailbreaker. The green mech yowled as he dropped the lasso and scrambled backwards, and suddenly he was the one on the defense and trapped, with Trailbreaker and Sideswipe hurrying to his rescue.

“Na!” Ironhide shouted to him. “Cannot run and leave team! Defend, switch roles, keep going!”

Sheepishly, Hound came back and retook his spot as the trio reset. Ironhide gestured for them, and the green and red mechs began stalking him once more. Trailbreaker was enjoying his role as the 'antagonist' keeping their prey from leaving the trap, and called out what must have been a ridiculous insult at the yoska leader, because Hound sputtered and grinned, while Ironhide roared and wiggled his club in a way that looked anything but menacing. Then, with speed that didn't seem possible for his quick frame, his feet whipped around in the dirt shavings as he faced and pounced at Sideswipe.

The ex-mercenary could do a far better job of holding his ground than Hound. He immediately crouched to one knee, solidly taking the first blow of the club against his blade and allowing the force of the attack to ripple right through his struts and into the ground. As Trailbreaker and Hound hurried to close the trap, Sideswipe kept the other red mech engaged, the two now truly dueling. Blade met club over and over again, with Sideswipe making sure that he didn't come too close to be grabbed or accidentally hit by his teammates, but neither too far that he would accidentally disengage Ironhide or draw him too far away from the other mechs. He managed to slip in a jab, the sword's flat end crashing into Ironhide's hip, making him grunt--

100%. Software Installed.

Sideswipe froze.

He'd forgotten all about checking the little loading bar at the corner of its HUD. But now it had expanded itself, telling him that it was finished and--

“Sideswipe, duck!”

His optics flitted to Hound.

...Had the green mech called to him in Cybertronic Standard?!

Any attempt to process that baffling turn of events was immediately put in a queue as something slammed into his jaw. The completed loading bar vanished, replaced by damage reports, and beyond his HUD the world was spinning, then coming up to meet him, and then he was lying on his belly, dirt shaving and the nubs of smaller crystals scratching up his clothing and plating and working their way into his joints. Alarmed voices were all around him, but he focused instead on his processor, which was too scrambled at the moment to piece together anything other than a short “…Ow.”

It rebooted itself a second later. Or at least his chronometer assumed that it did.
Okay, what happened?

His cortex grumbled, then fed him the data that he'd been piecing over. Something distracted him. Ironhide hit him in the jaw. The damage reports said he wasn't badly hurt, but OW. Definitely OW.

What had distracted him? Was he in danger? Were the Decepticons back?

“Sideswipe, are you okay?!”

He was distracted because Hound had spoken in fragging Cybertronian Standard.

...Wait, that wasn't right.

His optics refreshed, then again as something shoved into his shoulder, rolling him onto his back, and then he was staring up at Ironhide, who was snapping his fingers right over the downed mech's nose.

“I ain't hit him that hard! Sideswipe, hey! Ya'll still with us?”

Ironhide spoke it too?!

...That wasn't right either.

His cortex mentally 'whapped' his processor, resetting it, and his optics opened a little wider as it clicked everything together.

They weren't speaking Standard. They were speaking Iaconian, and he understood.

It was far better than a word-by-word translation on his HUD. The entire database that Prowl had put together now sat in Sideswipe's cortex, and not only could he understand what the mechs were saying, he heard how they were saying it. He knew that Iaconian was simplistic when compared to Standard, the clicking and beeping more vague than the universal language used between cities, but his cortex helpfully inserted in other words or re-worked the sentence to clarify what was said into something that he was used to hearing, and by the time Trailbreaker and Hound came into his field of view, he could process what they were saying as fast as if he'd heard them speak all of his life.

No wonder the program had taken so long to install. It also spoke volumes of Prowl's processing speed if he had been able to write a program this intensive in deca-cycles instead of vorns.

“His optics are tracking us,” Trailbreaker muttered, “so you didn't break him completely.”

“I didn't break him!” Ironhide snapped. “He's dazed!”

“Maybe I should call Ratchet?”

“We ain't need Ratchet, ya'll just need to give 'em a breem!”

“Sideswipe?” Hound was kneeling by his arm, blue optics wide as he gazed down at him. “Sideswipe, are you functioning?”

The red mech groaned, and tried to sit up. Hands went behind his shoulders, supporting him and keeping him from falling backwards as vertigo swam through his cortex from the brief journey from laying to sitting. His breakfast of energon pellets threatened to make a reappearance. He put a palm on the ground, assuring himself that the planet was not moving, then cleared his vocalizer.
“Bar-bar-bar?” he asked Hound innocently.

All three nomads stared at him.

“...You broke him.”

“I did NOT break him!”

“He's just babbling at us now!”

“Hound, he's done that before. He's teasing you--”

The beginnings of a smirk popped up at the side of Sideswipe's mouth. “Bar-bar-bar?” he asked again, using a conversational tone.

Hound started to retort, but then stopped, stared, and glared at him. “...Yep. He's back. Same old doofus of a Sideswipe, giving me that babble-slag again,” he growled. “Mech, are you okay? Or at least as okay as you can be?”

Trailbreaker chuckled. “Just admit that you like him, Hound. He has as much fun being silly as you do sometimes.”

Hound shrugged. “Don't make him any less of a dumb-aft.”

Sideswipe prickled. “Who're you calling a dumb-aft, you slag-sucker?!”

“You, of course! You're--”

All of them stopped, including Sideswipe. The red mech stared back at the nomads' bulging optics, then whined and pouted.

“Aww. I'd wanted to see how long I could make you think that I still didn't understand you...”

Trailbreaker's optic band refreshed. “...Ironhide?”

“Yeah?”

“You hit him so hard, you knocked some Iaconian into him.”

Sideswipe snorted. “No, no, no!” he tried to explain between the black mech's short cackles, and Ironhide's blustering. “I was installing a translation program that Prowl gave me! It just finished less than a breem ago.”

“Is that so?! Well then...”

Trailbreaker clapped a hand down on his shoulder as he grinned at the ex-mercenary.

“Nice to finally speak with you, Sideswipe. Welcome to the Autobots.”

Another hand touched his shoulder. Then another.

Sideswipe raised his head to smile at all three of the nomads, their expressions different mixtures of surprised relief and friendly warmth.

“Thanks. Nice to finally speak to you too.”

“You're still a dumb-aft, though.”
“...Bar-bar-bar?”

Hound pointed into his face. “Bar-FRAGGING-bar.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The sun had already reached its zenith and was on its way back down by the time Ironhide released them from another training session several orns later. Those that had been building up their servos were beyond exhausted, and wearily dragged themselves back to their tents for a quick recharge. But most of the yoska appreciated the work-out and practice, especially when they were still nervous that the enemy could be nearby.

The group splintered off to other tasks as soon as they'd reached the tentline. Ironhide had explained to Sideswipe during the past several orns that the mechs and femmes who were yoska did other tasks for the tribe besides fight. They were the servos, the physical backbone of the Autobot tribe, and from everything from raising a tent to herding the Minotorons, the yoska were expected to help. Sideswipe suspected that Ironhide encountered at least one other city-mech before who was used to the corrupt 'peacekeepers', and he had nodded in understanding. The yoska weren't guards. Well, they could be when asked to be. But they had no special privileges for being the ones to fight, and the ones more likely to be offline. They were different than the soldiers and peacekeepers who were meant to protect Kaon, but really worked directly for Sentinel Prime and his interests. The yoska served the tribe first. Optimus and the other leaders only directed them.

It was a change of pace that he'd appreciated after working with Sentinel Prime, and not for the first time he wondered how different Kaon would have been if Optimus was their Prime instead. Then again, Optimus could keep an optic on and befriend each warrior in the tribe, while that would be impossible in a city of thousands.

Thus, after practice, Sideswipe fell into the habits of the other yoska and found himself wandering around the camp, looking for something to do or someone to help. His boredom never worked out well for anyone. For himself and his own entertainment, sometimes. But no one else.

He was thinking about swinging by the healers' tent and seeing what Ratchet was up to, when something caused him to halt.

...He felt anxious.

Sideswipe did a quick systems check, and when everything came back as nominal, he put a palm over the front of his poncho, right over his spark, as if he could reach in and pet it until it calmed. Yet it kept twisting as it spun, discontented by something.

He felt strange.

...Something was wrong.

His battle programing whirled online as he glanced left and right, searching for plausible threats to himself or the camp, until a tiny cry reached his audials.

“Shh, little one...”

Looking around past the groups of other nomads walking around, he spotted an older femme sitting on the ground outside of the granary tent. A bundle of blankets was nestled in her arms, and she was talking to it, but something within it fusssed, and a corner of the blankets was pushed aside by a tiny, flailing hand.
Back in Kaon, Sideswipe had rarely been around sparklings and younglings. There was no opportunity to interact with them; he'd never kindled a new spark, nor knew anyone who did and would still come to the local bar with a sparkling in tow. Younglings were whisked away from their carriers and to the Academy when they became old enough, so he hadn't seen them in his work that much either, which was perfectly fine with him. The Autobots took an entirely different approach: the younglings were a beloved and important part of tribe's everyday life, and could be found nearly everywhere. They were expected to work nearly as hard as the adults on their chores, but once they were done, they were always playing underfoot, and nearly all of the nomads were happy to give attention to a bored youngling, though sometimes this was to set them right back into another list of chores.

Perceptor had once guessed to Sideswipe how many of them would survive the dangers of the wildlands and actually make it to their adult frames. Neither city-mech dwelled on that grim thought long afterwards, though they did understand why the nomads were far more protective over their young than Kaon or Tarn had been.

It could be that his systems were automatically and nervously responding to the sparkling's cries, though the more conscious part of his spark didn't know what it meant or what to do about it yet. His battle programming dialing down, he stared at the femme and sparkling, pondering how such a small mech could create such a noise.

Curiosity beat out his annoyance at his wailing, though, and he headed over to the femme's seat.

“Hey, uh...do you need some help?”

The femme, her gray armor dusky and the lines around her faceplates thick, turned her head up and gave him a grateful look. “Yes, please.” When Sideswipe only stood and stared down at her, she gestured next to herself. “Sit.”

He did so, folding his legs in front of him as he'd seen many of the nomads do. As soon as he was comfortable, the blanket was pressed into his arms.

“Wha--?!”

“He's just been fed, so all he needs is to be re-swaddled and given some attention. Thank you, yoska.”

“You want me to...what?!” Sideswipe held the crying sparkling awkwardly, his optics growing wide as he realized what he'd been given. “Wait! Wait, I--”

But when he turned his head up, she was gone, already ambling away. Sideswipe started to raise the volume of his vocalizer to call for her, but as he was gathering a breath, the bundle wiggled around, and instead he let out an un-mechly squeak as his optics instead turned down towards the sparkling.

The little mech had struggled an arm out of the blankets to press his thumb into his mouth, and had calmed himself down as he began to suck on the digit with short whines at each intake. He wasn't much bigger than a protoform, perhaps only deca-cycles old, and was no longer than Sideswipe's forearm. He was incredibly light, but the dimensions of his limbs and head were strange, and although the red mech had been told that it was normal for a sparkling's frame to have a bigger head and torso than adult frames, it still took him by surprise to see it for himself. For a breem he worried that the poor mech had a swollen helm or something.

“Oooh frag,” he whispered to himself. “Oh frag, oh frag, oh frag.”
He had never touched a sparkling, let alone held one. The little mech felt way too light. The ex-mercenary's hands had destroyed items much tougher than a sparkling's frame, and he held him awkwardly, fearing what he might accidentally do to him.

“Umm--”

He looked left and right, panic creeping up through his systems. But no one was coming over to assist him, not when the sparkling had calmed down in his arms. A tiny face was pressed up to his chestplate, smooshing his nose, and, as carefully as he could, Sideswipe pulled himself away a little, afraid that the sparkling was going to block his own intakes.

The little mech didn't like that at all. His optics squeezed again, and he stopped sucking on his fingers as his whimpers turned back into crying.

“Oh frag. Primus. UH!?”

Sideswipe had seen carriers rocking their sparkling to calm them down, but he was too afraid to try this himself. He had bigger servos; he might damage it by swinging it around too hard. Instead he froze, the bundle of blankets held slightly out from him, and winced as the sparkling protested and wailed, his arms and legs wiggling out of the cloth.

At last, someone came down the throughway. As soon as they saw Sideswipe, and heard the crying sparkling and saw that the yoska was trying to hold it away from his chest, they hurried into a jog.

“Drift!” Sideswipe called out frantically, leaning up slightly as the white swordsmech trotted to a stop next to him and knelt down. “Some femme made me hold this, and...I don't know what I did wrong, but...!!”

“Easy, easy. He's not hurt.”

Drift beckoned with his hands, and Sideswipe all too happily gave the sparkling up to him. But instead of cradling it, Drift placed the bundle down on the ground in front of him, and unwrapped the blanket.

The sparkling considered this to be several times worse. He yowled, his optics squeezed tight as he bawled out a scream, tiny fists squeezed tight and shaking as he dedicated each ventilation into a wail, over and over and over. But Drift only shushed him quietly as he got to work.

The left corner of the blanket went over and around the sparkling's arm, tucking it in tight to his side. The bottom edge was picked up, laying across his chestplate, and then the right end wrapped over his entire frame. Sideswipe watched anxiously, worried that the wrapping was too tight, but it was as if the white mech had hit an 'off' switch to the crying. Instantly the sparkling quieted, still hiccuping and whining every so often but no longer loudly, until Drift picked him back up, and cuddled him with both of his arms. The last of his whimpering faded out after a few breems.

“There we go,” he mumbled down to him. “Better?”

The sparkling agreed. His breathing slowed and evened out, and he quit trying to wiggle against the tight wrapping of a blanket. If anything, he looked comforted by this, and happily allowed Drift to re-adjust him until his face was turned toward his chestplate. Once again, his nose was smooshed, and the swordsmech chuckled before lifting him slightly so that his head was tucked into the crook of his arm instead.

“...How did you do that?!”
“Do what?” Drift turned back to an awe-struck Sideswipe as he lightly bounced the tiny mech.
“You've never swaddled a sparkling?”

Sideswipe shook his black helm. “I've never even touched one before! What was swaddling, the thing with the blanket?”

Drift's optic ridges lifted. “Really? You've never seen this? Your city doesn't help your carriers?”

“No really. Not unless they pay somebody to help them out.” He pointed back down the row of tents. “That femme barely knew me, and handed me her sparkling. How is that normal?! I thought carriers were insanely protective over their new-sparks!”

“They are. But the entire tribe helps to raise sparklings and younglings once they're not brand-new sparks anymore. Besides--”

He bowed his head slightly to nuzzle the sparkling's face, who cooed gently before giving the bigger mech a drowsy stare.

“This isn't her sparkling. This little guy's name is Backburn. His carrier is out hunting for the next deca-cycle.”

“...So the babysitter got tired, and when I asked to help, it was my turn to baby-sit?”

“Exactly.”

“That's crazy,” he blurted out. “How can you pass a sparkling around?! They'll get lost, or get passed to somebody incompetent!”

“Everyone here knows how to take care of a sparkling, to some degree.” He frowned. “…Except you, it seems.”

He suddenly leaned forward, and pressed the blanket into Sideswipe's hands.

“Here, take him back.”

“What? No!” But ex-mercenary knew better than to drop the sparkling, although that didn't make his hold on Backburn any better, caught somewhere between holding the most delicate crystal and trying to keep him off of his frame. “Drift, I don't know what I'm doing!” he protested. “I'll hurt him!”

“You won't, I promise. Look--”

Putting one hand on Backburn, and the other on Sideswipe's forearm, the swordsmech gently pressed the sparkling to lie correctly in his arms.

“He's not strong enough to hold his head up by himself yet, so it needs to be lying like this. He's small enough to rest right on your strut, like...this...”

As he shifted him, Backburn automatically sought out the bigger mech's warm chestplate, turning his face towards him. Towards his spark, Sideswipe realized belatedly. He froze, letting Drift move his hands and arms until he was correctly holding the little mech, and he stayed that way even as the nomad sat back on his heels to observe them.

“...You can rock him, Sideswipe,” Drift grinned. “It'll keep him calm.”

“I'll hurt him,” the red mech repeated.
“No you won't, as long as you make sure that it's controlled and gentle. You've got plenty of servos in your arms. Sparklings love that. It gives them a nest to lie in, and they know that there's no chance in the Pit that you'll ever drop them.”

“Then they're idiots,” Sideswipe whined, but took his advice anyway, and very gently tried rocking the sparkling back and forth. Backburn lay still, staring up at the two bigger Autobots, then slowly closed his optics, his tiny mouth dropping open as he relaxed further. Sideswipe kept rocking him, each movement exceedingly cautious and awkward, until the sparkling yawned and drifted into a light recharge.

“Primus,” Sideswipe whispered, proud of himself by no small amount, but still nervous that he'd slip up at any moment. “He's asleep.”

Drift nodded. “Sparklings do that a lot.”

“...Now what?”

“Now you keep cradling him, and let him rest by your spark. Or at least, keep him nearby.”

“I-I can't,” he stammered. “I've got big hands, and...what if I pull him up too hard, or--”

He chuckled again. “If you're not confident yet, I can take him.”

Sideswipe all too happily gave him up, the blanket passed carefully between the mechs, until Backburn was resting in the crook of Drift's arm again.

“I'm sorry,” Sideswipe murmured. “That's...wow.” He threw up his hands. “That's too much for me right now. Primus. I thought I was going to end up snapping him in half or something.”

“It's fine,” Drift said as he tucked in a corner of the blanket that was coming undone. “I really am surprised that you had no opportunity to take care of one before now. Does the city give you no opportunity to practice? What will happen when you carry or sire your own?”

...What?!

The city-mech's jaw dropped. “Carry my...Wait, wait! When am I having a sparkling?!”

“I'm sure you'd know if you were by now,” Drift smirked. “I meant eventually.”

“I'm supposed to carry or sire?!”

“You have a mate, don't you?”

“Yeah, but--we never discussed--!!”

Drift shrugged, making sure not to jostle Backburn as he did so. “It's not something expected of you right away, or ever, if you and Prowl decide not to. You haven't talked about this?”

“We've been busy with other issues,” the red mech growled.

Fragging Pits, the moment he found Prowl, he was going to wrangle him and they were going to have a very long talk.

“As I said, it's not something you need to do right away.” He paused, and then his voice softened. “Maybe it's for the best, until the Iacon prophecy is fulfilled.”
Sideswipe refreshed his optics. “What do you mean?”

“You've delayed the Decepticons from trying to attack, for now. But eventually, they'll return. And if we're not at Iacon by then--”

The swordsmech let the rest of the sentence hang, but Sideswipe understood him well enough, and his spark sank in its casing as both of them gazed down at the blankets in Drift's arms.

Megatron had claimed that he wouldn't spare anyone.

Backburn chose that moment to squirm a little, and whimper. Drift immediately stood up.

“Somebody wants some attention,” he grinned down at the little mech before nuzzling him again. “I'll bet Perceptor would be all too happy to help me watch him.”

“Thanks again,” Sideswipe said as he climbed to his feet. “I'll try to get a little better, but--” he showed the other mech his hands, “--I'm not used to these handling anything more fragile than a weapon.”

“I understand completely. But please, try to practice.”

“I will.”

The two mechs separated, Drift heading back to his own tent, and Sideswipe meandering into the Commons once more. But instead of looking for work, he let his feet guide him around randomly, his head down, his mind somewhere far away.

Somehow, before the Decepticons returned, they had to figure out how to get to Iacon. But the map still made no sense. Surely Optimus and Prowl and the rest of the senior nomads were working on that problem right now. Prowl had mentioned several times that the camp would be moved north in the next few orns. The ex-mercenary wasn't sure if that was their best guess towards Iacon's direction, or if it was an attempt to put a little more distance between them and the rival tribe.

None of that would matter if Megatron returned with an army. As much as the Autobots' yoska had been practicing, none of that would matter if they were heavily outnumbered. The smaller nomad tribe would be wiped out, and Sideswipe would be taken as a sacrifice.

He had to make sense of the prophecy, soon.

He felt no less anxious than before. His spark kept twisting around painfully.

...Maybe he needed a recharge after all, if nothing but to get his thoughts in order.

Still rattled, he decided to head back to his tent. As he walked, he wasn't sure if he'd only imagined Perceptor's happy squeal from the direction of his and Drift's tent.

Chapter End Notes

A wild OC appears! He probably won't be mentioned again though. Backburn's too young to do anything important besides cry and poop right now.

Next one will be much longer and get the plot moving, I promise.
Chapter 23: Quick

*Insane laughter. Red optics.*

He was struggling hard against the ropes around his wrists and ankles, and yelling against a gag shoved crudely into his mouth. His spark fluttered around in a panic.

Another frame was straddling him, keeping him from squirming away.

A knife glinted, raised, then plunged down towards his chestplate.

Pain.

Light.

And then suddenly he was no longer afraid...

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Sideswipe? Sideswipe?”

Someone was grasping his upper arms, and battle programming swept online before he could comprehend who his opponent was as he grasped the other mech in return, ready to throw him off or struggle his way free. His grip on the other one's plating stopped the shaking, and gave himself a breem to comprehend the world around him, and the red optics staring down at him.

Red?

No, blue.

Blue.

*Prowl.*

Both of their grips relaxed, but didn't fall away. Sideswipe let his helm roll back onto one of the fur-lined blankets as he gasped and got his ventilations back under control from whatever rapid pace they'd been going at before.

“That same dream again?” Prowl asked gently as his mate's breathing soothed back into normality.

“It's...it's changing,” Sideswipe groaned. The brownish-orange interior of the tent was melding into reality around him.

The white mech's optic ridges raised high. “How so?”

“Megatron still kills me in the end. But then...I see a light. And then I'm not panicking as badly as I was. Not at all, really. I'm just—I'm just at peace. Calm.”

He swallowed hard, gulping his fear down and letting it eat away at the inside of his tanks instead.

“Prowl, am I dreaming about dying? Is that it?”
The furs and pillows shuffled as his mate climbed down to rest his frame alongside him. A white arm wrapped around him, and Sideswipe bowed his head to rest his helm on Prowl's bumper as the other mech cradled him.

“If your dreams are changing, then maybe your destiny is in flux,” Prowl whispered into his audial as his fingertips petted his mate's back struts. “Maybe you're seeing another possibility, where you are saved before the sacrifice is complete.”

“That 'destiny' stuff is slag, I told you,” Sideswipe mumbled. “I have bad dreams because I felt guilty about--”

“But you already told the tribe about Alpha Trion. Optimus forgave you.”

“Then it's because...I'm just...I'm scared, Prowl,” he quietly admitted. “We don't know where Iacon is, or how to get to it. Megatron will come back for me eventually. And I'm scared.”

Prowl didn't respond to that, and instead held the other mech, his hand rubbing at his plating soothingly. Sideswipe lay still, letting his systems wind down from the fright of the nightmare, and allowed himself to enjoy being hugged and cradled by Prowl. By his mate.

When had this become normal? When had he become used to being comforted so easily by someone other than Sunstreaker?

Thoughts of his brother made his spark tense up, and he shuddered. Prowl mistook it as him still being rattled by the nightmare, and he rocked him gently as he nuzzled his black helm.

“It's alright, it's alright. It's all going to be alright.”

And somewhere in the core of his spark, despite all reason and logic that doom was coming, Sideswipe believed him. He sighed through his nose as he buried his head further into his chestplate and bumper.

Prowl was getting pretty good at this comforting thing. It probably helped that he'd had plenty of practice with--

Sideswipe's optics popped back open. Oh yeah.

“So when were you planning on telling me that we're supposed to have a sparkling?” he grumbled.

Prowl started, and his grip around his mate changed. “We don't need to have one. But...it is encouraged.”

“Do you really want a tiny mech or femme running around in here, crying at all hours of the night, and messing up all of your slag?”

Prowl's response was silence. Sideswipe considered this, then grunted as he pulled away from him slightly to prop himself up on his elbow so that he could face the other mech.

“Holy slag, you do!” he gasped.

“I'm not going to make you carry a new spark with me,” Prowl said immediately, shifting instead to lay comfortably on his back, his doorwings flattened on either side of him as he looked up to Sideswipe's face. The nomad's body language spoke of anything but a want to argue with him. “The tribe is in a precarious situation right now. This is no time for one of us to carry a new spark on top of everything else. And I swore to you--”
He raised a hand and put his palm on Sideswipe's red chestplate, right over his spark chamber.

“I swore to you that I would not press you to do anything that you weren't ready to do. And clearly you're not ready for a sparkling. So I did not and will not ask right now.”

Sideswipe felt his spark warm at that and spin around. A more logical part of his cortex told him that he should have been able to take for granted that he would not be coerced to do something that he wasn't ready to do, but the reminder that Prowl was now purposely choosing to make sure that his mate felt safe and free in his decisions felt good all the same. He refused to harm the city-mech again.

“I appreciate that,” he said, a black hand reaching under him to grasp the white fingers on his chest and squeeze them gratefully.

“What brought this on anyway?”

“This femme in the Commons gave me a sparkling to take care of today. I had never held one until that moment. What was his name? Backdraft? Backflow?”

Prowl's systems hummed. “Backburn?”

“Yeah, that kid. You've babysat him before, I guess?”

“His carrier has been away for several orns now. We all take turns caring for him until he returns.”

Sideswipe sat back on his aft, intrigued by this, and a moment later Prowl sat up again too with a grunt, wanting to join him now that the argument had been defused.

The duo shifted until they were side-by-side on the mat, the platting on their arms rubbing against one another, their frames sharing the warmth radiating from their systems. Sideswipe noted that the air had been markedly colder the last several orns. Was the season about to change? He did enjoy the reason to be close to his mate, though.

“Prowl...I'm not kidding when I say that I have no experience with sparklings,” Sideswipe murmured. “I really did think I was going to do something that would hurt Backburn, and not even know it. It scared me.”

“As you've said, you've never held one. That's completely understandable.”

Sideswipe bent forward to hug his knees. “I would be Cybertron's Worst Sire. Or Carrier. Whatever. I wouldn't know what the frag to do. I'd probably end up sleeping on it or leaving it somewhere out in the wildlands, or something like that.”

“No, you wouldn't.” A white hand patted his shoulder. “But you don't have to explain yourself to me.”

“I feel like I do,” he mumbled, his voice wavering into accusing. “You want one.”

“I can wait.”

A cheek lay next to the hand on his shoulder, and the top of Prowl's helm touched Sideswipe's chin.

“I want you first. And if you tell me that you don't want a sparkling right now, then I will respect that. I promised you that I would. And if you never want one, then I can be happy just looking after
the other younglings in the tribe. Primus knows we have enough.”

Slowly, a red arm snaked around behind them, sliding its way around Prowl's lower back, just under his doorwings.

“Prowl?”
“Yes?”

“You're...you're a good mate,” he managed out. “Better than before, anyway.”

“...Thank you.”

They sat there in a mutual awkwardness, cuddling one another, and let it slowly burn away as they both shifted again after several breems, making themselves comfortable on their berth. When that was done, they simply sat, enjoying the peace in each other's presence. It took a little while longer before Sideswipe's hand traveled down to Prowl's hip and stayed there.

“You want me, huh?”

“You're my mate. I'd do anything for you.”

“Prowl, you barely even know me. You kidnapped me a--”

“A third of a vorn ago.”

...Had it really been that long? He checked his chronometer to be certain. When it affirmed it, he blew air through his vents in a grunted sigh. The season was about to change.

“You still barely know me.”

“I'm learning more about you every day. And you, me.”

“I'm learning all the reasons we shouldn't have been compatible.”

“We were, though. It was strong enough for our sparks to bond.”

“...Can we not bring that up?”

“Right.” His doorwings fell. “Sorry.”

“No, I'm sorry,” he huffed. “I'm trying, Prowl. I swear that I am. This is all still really foreign to me, you know?”

“Sideswipe?”

“Yeah?”

“You're a good mate too.”

That struck him, and he sat up a little straighter. But Prowl said nothing further, and only leaned on his shoulder. Against his back plating, Sideswipe could feel the nomad's doorwings picking back up again happily.

The anxiety from earlier that orn slipped away a little. But not completely. His spark still fluttered slightly, worried about something that his cortex and processor had not yet comprehended. The
uncertainty of what was making him feel this way was unnerving him further, and he tried to ignore it.

“So I was here taking a nap after practice with the other yoska. But what’re you doing back here so early?”

“Taking a break from brainstorming with Optimus and Red Alert. We still haven't made horn or hoof of the Iacon prophecy yet.”

“...Horn or...?”

“It’s just a phrase. I mean that we still don’t know where Iacon is, despite having the prophecy. Jazz is away to try to ask some of the other tribes around us for help translating it, but I doubt that he’ll find anything. He can't go too far, or rumors of what he's doing will spread back to the Decepticons before they return to their territory, and they'll come storming right back.”

“I was wondering why I hadn't seen him lately. Prowl, if we don't figure it out--”

“I know,” he said, his voice a little sharp and frustrated. “I'm trying.”

They were quiet again.

An idea popped into Sideswipe's processor. And for once, his cortex didn't disapprove of it. Mostly.

“...You need a break?”

“Sa.”

“Want a quickie?”

Prowl popped his head up and turned it towards Sideswipe. “A...what?”

The red mech grinned back at him. “A quick interface. Since you want me so much, and I'm such a good mate.”

Prowl's optic ridges raised high. But Sideswipe also heard his engine running a little faster. “...You are incorrigible, you know that?”

“And you haven't answered me. Do you want a quickie?”

“...Yes, I would like that,” he said slowly. “But exactly how fast is a—MMMMPH...!?”

He was cut off by Sideswipe's fast descension on his mouth, his glossa diving between his lips. Prowl was taken completely by surprise, and instinctively pulled back, panting, his optics wide and staring at Sideswipe's devilish ones.

“About that fast,” came the city-mech's hoarse answer, low and inviting.

Prowl stared at him a bit longer. Then came forward just as quickly as his mate had, grasping either side of his black helm as he shoved their mouths together. But Sideswipe took control right back, grasping the nomad's hips towards him and kneading him, enjoying the feel of him wriggling around underneath his fingertips as he pressed himself into the kiss more urgently. Prowl thought that he was trying to pull him into his lap and started to climb forward, but Sideswipe gave the white mech's hips a
sharp pull instead, and Prowl yelped as he fell backwards, the pillows and furs cushioning his fall, though he was still dazed for a second.

Sideswipe wasted no time in crawling over him and straddling him, and bent down to recapture his lips. Prowl growled into his mouth as white hands grasped his mate's helm again, this time finding some grip on an audial horns and staying there. Sideswipe squinted as he whined painfully and struggled a little at the fingers, then relented and gave himself up to be consumed by Prowl's lips, while his hands patted blindly at their clothing, searching for the knots.

A few breems later, Prowl's shoulder-wrap, Sideswipe's poncho, and both of their waist-cloths lay in a haphazard pile just to the side of the berth, not that either of them took note on where they'd gone.

Sideswipe growled into Prowl's mouth as he shimmied back along his naked frame a little, the hands on his audials going with him, until he could rest on his knees and elbows, trapping the other mech underneath him. Or did Prowl have him trapped instead by grasping his audial horns so hard? Did it matter? He happily surrendered control of his helm to his mate while one hand groped down to their interface ports. His own sprang open immediately, his spike already inflating in eager anticipation, and the panel over Prowl's valve slid open a second later.

He took the invitation to plunge a finger straight into the valve, unconcerned with the preliminaries at the moment. That had been completely unlike how they'd fragged just before they'd bonded, when the nomad had been leading. Prowl's shocked yowl at this was muffled by their lips, and Sideswipe winced as the grip on his horns tightened in response.

“Ow!” they both shouted at once, lifting their mouths away and heaving their ventilations at one another, their air from both of their engines hot.

“H-How fast again?!” Prowl managed out, his optics swimming as the finger stayed inside of him. Sideswipe could feel his walls already undulating, surprised by the intrusion but recognized that the invading digit belonged his mate and welcomed it in.

“Fast. I just need enough to coat my spike.”

Prowl nodded, then changed his grip to drape one arm over Sideswipe's shoulder, the fingers gripping his back plating instead, the other cupping the back of his helm and dragging his face down to meet his mouth again. They moaned together, their kisses slow and sloppy and passionate, though they both were more focused on what the red mech was doing with his fingers. A second digit had followed the first into Prowl's valve, and the nomad jumped with a small whine.

Prowl definitely had at least one lover before Sideswipe. He knew exactly how to lift his hips and aft up by digging his heels into the mat, some of the blankets slipping away before he found purchase, and he angled himself perfectly for his mate to press further inside. When he did so, a wave spasmed through Prowl's back struts, making him moan and shudder, his doorwings quivering on either side of him against the blankets and pillows.

Lubricant dripped all over Sideswipe's fingers as he dug in. He greedily swiped it up as he plunged in deeper, allowing it to coat his digits and the beginnings of his palm, and then he made a scissoring motion with his two fingers as he begged the valve for more. Prowl obliged him, the folds rippling around his fingertips, and Sideswipe massaged them in return, which produced even more fluid. The nomad's hips wiggled from side-to-side, wanting to take him in deeper still, but in moments Sideswipe was satisfied that he had all that he needed.

He pulled his hand out to a mournful whine from his mate, then another as the red mech pushed
away from him and sat back on his knees.

“Watch,” he growled, not meaning to have sounded so aggressive, but not apologizing for it either. Prowl panted and caught his breath as he bowed his head forward to watch Sideswipe stroking the fluid up and down his quickly erecting spike, both lubricating it and giving himself a little pleasure at the same time. The ex-mercenary's jaw fell open, forming a small 'O', his shoulders rising and falling with each gasp as he stroked Prowl's fluid all along the shaft of his spike. It continued to inflate, until it was long and hard, it's tip pointed directly at his mate.

Prowl looked on, infatuated, his engine revving and purring at the sight of his mate stroking himself. He licked his lips, and for a second Sideswipe imagined changing his plan and instead asking Prowl to suck him instead. A small bulb of pre-fluid appeared on his tip. At that, Prowl refreshed his optics as he realized something while staring at the spike.

“Sideswipe. You're bigger than—AH!”

“Be with you in a second,” he growled again, his free hand digging back into Prowl's valve, this time not to steal lubricant, but to trace his rim, giving his mate something to refocus his attention on while he prepared himself. He let his fingertip search around the inside of the rim, hoping that he might happen to find a particular cluster of sensory nodes, but although he found several spots that made Prowl yelp and squirm more than usual, that particular one eluded him for now.

He frowned a little, before reminding himself that this was just a quickie, and he could search for it at his leisure in due time. Warmed by that thought, and more than a little turned on by it, he gave his spike a few more swipes with his palm to ensure that it was fully stimulated, then groaned as he let it go.

The blankets shifted as he crawled back down once more onto his hands and elbows, his frame hovering just above his mate's. Prowl quivered beneath him, ready, his hips still raised in a way that was less of an invitation at this point and more of a demand.

“We're going to go hard and fast,” he warned the nomad. “Hold onto me, and if I hurt you, you tell me to stop right away. Sa?”

“Sa,” Prowl groaned.

“I'm serious.” One hand gripped Prowl's shoulder, and the other one stroked down his bumper, his waist, then rested on his hip, quietly shifting him until the edge of his valve met the tip of his spike, making them both shudder a little. “This'll be rough.”

White hands grasped either of his shoulders. “I can take it.”

“Alright...”

He gritted his dentals. Then, with no further warning, plunged himself inside.

*Primus.*

Prowl was lubricating sufficiently by now, but that did not prepare him for the reminder that the nomad was smaller than his mate. Prowl yowled and threw his head back, the noise ending with a swear that Sideswipe didn't think that he'd know. Both sets of their fingers clamped down on either of the two mechs' shoulders, digging into their plating. The folds of the valve rippled around Sideswipe's spike on all sides, as tight as if he were Prowl's first lover, yet squeezing and milking him with the experience of a mech who knew how to please his partner.
Sideswipe took a deep, shuddering ventilation, relishing the feeling of how perfectly he fit.

Then he began to move, hard and fast, just as he'd promised.

It took him a breem to get into a rhythm, his spike not completely sinking into his mate's valve down to the hilt, but plenty deep enough for it to squeeze around his shaft pleasurably with each thrust. His pushes shook through both of their frames, and poor Prowl would have slid all over the berth if he didn't brace himself. Still, his body was jolted upwards with each hard thrust, and he had to keep a good grip on his mate and press back down onto the spike in order to stay in place, which, happily for both of them, meant that it went deeper into him each time.

“AH! AH! Ah! Oh!”

Prowl's optics squeezed tightly closed, his jaw dropping open as he tried to comprehend the wonderful new sensation of a spike shoving in and out of him rapidly. Sideswipe's hand on his hip steadied him to ensure that each shove went straight into his valve, and the other hand on his shoulder kept him from slipping away, while Prowl gripped him as if he were the only presence keeping him anchored to this world. The red mech kept up his intense pace, comfortable now with his speed. He was created to be a fighter; he had the endurance to keep going like this for as long as it took to make the mech under him overload.

“Ever been fragged this hard before?” he rasped, his vocalizer shaking in time with his frame.

Prowl's answer was a babbled shout. Clearly not, then.

Chuckling a little, Sideswipe pressed his lips together as he concentrated on keeping up his speed and depth. He was thankful that he'd remembered to pre-lube his spike. Their frantic pace was wearing away at it, and doing this dry would have been painful and no fun at all, but luckily Prowl's valve seemed to get that it needed as much fluid as possible, and his spike remained soaked and easily slipped in and out, in and out, in and out.

A few breems later, he already had warnings of an imminent overload appearing on his HUD, yet he kept at it. Prowl's valve felt wonderful around him. The walls squeezed and massaged at his pike, milking him, pre-fluid mixing in with the lubricant inside of his mate. And that was nothing compared to the noises that Prowl was making as he was fragged hard. He gasped, he cooed, he babbled at Sideswipe in Iaconian, and Sideswipe felt a little proud at how he was blowing his mate's cortex.

“You know that I can go even deeper?”

“...H-H-how?!”

“Wrap your legs around my hips.”

Prowl did so eagerly, if not clumsily. At the same time Sideswipe released his shoulder, and instead braced his palm on the ground a little bit above his mate's helm. He slowed for a moment as he adjusted himself, then came back just as fast, and now twice as strong, his frame now angled perfectly to drive his entire spike into Prowl.

At the first thrust, Prowl screeched, and Sideswipe briefly worried that someone outside would think that he was in trouble and run in on them. Prowl must have thought so too, because he clenched his jaw against his next cry, only allowing it out as grunted moans in time with each shove. Sideswipe answered him with a whine, shivering as pleasure rocketed up from his spike and into the rest of his frame.
“Primus, Prowl, you feel so _good_! So wet and tight and _uuugh_...”

He bounced his hips up and down, their bellies and their thighs scrapping against one another. He knew that it wouldn't be much longer. Mechs getting fragged hard like this by him could never hold back their overload for long.

Prowl surprised him, and managed to stave off his overload for a few more breems. Then, suddenly, he stiffened up with a cry, and the legs around Sideswipe's hips squeezed him, forcing him to slow down a little as his mate's walls rippled around him, milking him hard, until he gave himself over to the sensation and overloaded as well with a roar.

Transfluid gushed out of his tip, thick and gooey, flooding Prowl's valve and filling him. Sideswipe kept pumping his hips, though much more slowly now, letting rest of his fluids spill out and coat Prowl's walls. Spots danced in front of his optics that had nothing to do with his HUD. He concentrated on slowing his rhythm down, giving his spike a chance to finish squirting into the valve. Prowl's rim dribbled with the overflow, and belatedly Sideswipe remembered to lift his hips up a little higher, keeping their mixed fluids inside of him until it could be cleaned or processed.

The air around them buzzed with noise as their fans worked frantically to cool them. Prowl's mouth was wide open, his intake gasping down our to supplement his rapid ventilations. Slowly, both of his hands slid away from Sideswipe's shoulders, and flopped limply to either side of his head on the pillows, his fingers curled to his palms in loose fists.

“Primus fraggit, Sideswipe,” he croaked.

Sideswipe grinned devilishly. “So he _does_ swear.”

Prowl didn't answer that, instead whining as he closed his optics and bent his head back, enjoying what had to be one frell of an afterglow washing through his systems. Sideswipe stopped the last of his weaker thrusts to instead stare down at him, drinking in the sight of his mate thoroughly fragged and sated and _happy_ by his doing. He committed that image to his memory banks.

“You're beautiful,” he whispered, then stiffened a little, surprised at himself at how easily that thought had tumbled out of his mouth.

It was the truth, too.

One blue optic onlined at him drowsily, and a white hand gropped up to cup one of Sideswipe's cheeks. His thumb rubbed small circles around the other mech's faceplates and just under his optic.

Prowl opened his mouth to respond to his mate, but then he grimaced and winced.

“Ow!”

The _squelch_ of Sideswipe's spike pulling out of him felt loud enough to echo throughout their tent, breaking the peace between them. Fluid spilled out behind them, and Prowl groaned, feeling the overflow tumbling past his rim. Sideswipe chuckled nervously. “Sorry, sorry.”

His own hand lifted, taking Prowl's, then turned it over to kiss at his fingers sweetly and apologetically. Both of them lay still, allowing their systems time to cool, and Prowl's a moment to absorb some of the fluid.

“I need to get back to Optimus,” Prowl whined, though he made no attempt to move.

Sideswipe didn't stop. “Mmm. Aren't you taking a break?”
“Sa, but--”

“How about you recharge, and I'll wake you up in a joor?” He smirked at him over the top of their hands. “Unless you want to try waddling across the Commons.”

The white mech frowned, then shifted his hips, testing his frame, and took in a swift intake of air when his servos informed him that they didn't like that too much. “That...may be wise,” he admitted.

“Thought so.” He kissed his fingers one more time, then set the hand down to lay along his bumper. “Have a good nap.”

Prowl nodded, then let his optic slide closed again, his frame relaxing and sinking into the pillows shortly afterward. Sideswipe gazed down at him a while longer, watching his mate's progress from relaxing to resting to deeply recharging, before he crawled over to lay at his side, their helms resting close to one another. One arm curled around Prowl's back, just under his doorwings, the other slipping under his helm to pillow it.

After setting an alarm on his chronometer in case he fell asleep too, Sideswipe relaxed, admiring his mate's sleeping form, and pondering how a nomad who had kidnapped him a third of a vorn ago had crept into becoming one of the most important mechs in his life.

He would ask what Prowl had wanted to say to him at another time.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Sideswipe?”

“Mmm?” The red mech looked up from where he was nibbling energon pellets out of his mate's palm while he leaned on him. The two of them had finished cleaning each other and re-dressing, but Prowl still looked woozy, so Sideswipe had suggested that they take a quick refuel before going back out. He'd learned that hand-feeding had been a necessity for Prowl to do when Sideswipe had been captured and tied up, but anytime after that was meant as an affectionate gesture since his mate could now easily feed himself. This was further reinforced by Prowl's free hand petting his back struts or his helm whenever he licked or nipped his fingers.

“Why is it that you don't know how to take care of a sparkling? Did your carrier not show you? Is that normal in the city?”

Sideswipe licked a crumb off of his lips before answering. “In Kaon, it is. Carriers watch over their sparklings up until they're old enough to attend the Academy. They're supposed to do a better job at educating a youngling for their job than a carrier or sire ever could.”

“What's the Academy?”

“A city-run school. An education center. Uh,” he stared at Prowl's befuddled faceplates, “you don't have schools? There's plenty of younglings around here that could use one.”

“What's a 'school'?”

“A place where all the sparkling and younglings are gathered to learn. Kind of how everyone who gets damaged gathers in the healers' tent to get seen by one mech? Think of a tent just for teaching.”

“Sometimes we do that. But usually the younglings learn everything they need from individuals in
the tribe, depending on what that mech or femme knows, and what the youngling needs to know, instead of one mech trying to teach a group one subject.”

“We have way more younglings than you do, and carriers aren't always that great at teaching their sparklings what they need to know for their job if it's going to be different than what they do. Like, a carrier who is a scientist can't teach their sparkling how to work at a refuse dump.”

Prowl balked, probably as he guessed at what a 'refuse dump' was. “Why would anyone want to teach their sparkling how to work at a dump?”

“Because that's the job that they may be recommended by the school.”

“Why?”

“Because of how smart they are, or what their skills are. Somebody needs to do it, so why not the ones that aren't going do well anywhere else?”

The white mech looked disturbed. “Do they want to work there?”

“Probably not.”

“But they have to?”

“Somebody does.”

“Did this 'school' not teach you how to take care of a sparkling because they decided that you would not be good at it?”

“Pretty much.” Sideswipe shook his head when Prowl offered him another handful of fuel; his tanks were full. “Both me and Sunstreaker have powerful frames, so Kaon decided that we were going to be trained how to fight. We were modified with battle programming, and we spent most of our time doing physical training once we were done with Basics. I had an instructor that wanted to give me more tactical instruction and a battle computer...but Sunny couldn't come with me to that class. He's no good at slag like that. So we stayed together, got all the upgrades we could...Anyway, there was no reason to teach us how to take care of a sparkling.”

“But didn't your carrier teach you once you were done?”

Sideswipe frowned. “Slag, no. I haven't seen my carrier or sire since the city picked up me and Sunny and took us to the Academy.”

Prowl's optic ridges raised high, and he sat up a little straighter. “You haven't tried to find them?”

He cocked his head to the side. “Why would I?”

“Because...they're you're carrier, Sideswipe! They're important!”

“Not unless I got some virus or malfunction that the city needs to call my creator about.” Sideswipe stared at Prowl's appalled face. “Prowl, most younglings in Kaon never see their creators again once they get sent to the Academy. Not unless they're loaded with credits and can afford to be home-schooled, and those mechs are pompous as frag. My creator did their job by caring for me and Sunny until the city could take over, and that job's done. That's it. That's all they really mean to me.”

“That's...that's horrifying.” Prowl looked spark-broken. “I'm so sorry, Sideswipe.”
“Why?” The ex-mercenary stretched and rolled his shoulders nonchalantly. “I'm unlike any other Kaonite sparked in the last thousand vorns. Look, the two of us are very different mechs, Prowl. I don't regret learning more about fighting than how to take care of sparklings. That would have never helped me until now. You guys are the weird ones. Making everybody take care of everybody else's creation--”

“How is that weird?!”

“To me, it is.” He returned the tight expression that Prowl was giving him with a grin. “Oh, c'mon! Younglings running around everywhere, doing almost all the same chores the adults do, mechs and femmes giving their sparklings to their neighbors, none of that strikes you as strange?”

“No,” Prowl responded flatly. “It's the way its always been done.”

“Eh, to each his own. Perceptor will tell you that Tarn does something different. Something about younglings staying with their carriers while they attend school. It's weird.”

“Hmph.” Prowl climbed to his feet, then offered Sideswipe a hand. “I think I have a better understanding of why you are like you are.”

“Oh?” Sideswipe took the hand and easily pulled himself up. “And what am I?”

“An oddball.”

“...Well.” His grin grew wider, and he pulled his mate a little closer to him, and purred down at him. “I like the term 'individual,' or 'unique.' But I can do 'oddball.' It works.”

Prowl's mouth twitched up into smile. But, as quickly as it had come, it faded, and he bowed his head slightly.

“Sideswipe?”

His vocalizer's tone dropped Sideswipe's face into something more serious as well. “Yeah?”

“I told you that I wouldn't press you into anything you weren't ready for. But--”

He took in a deep vent intake of air, then splayed hand on his red chestplate.

“...I miss you.”

Sideswipe quietly considered him, and the feel of the warm palm on his frame, pushing slightly at him, as if it were trying to slowly and gently move his plating aside, to find something underneath. He pressed his lips together, frowning, then leaned his head forward, until he could rest his forehead just above Prowl's as he embraced him.

“I'm right here,” he whispered. “You can see me and touch me. I'm here.”

“That's not what I mean.”

“...I know.”

He sighed, and shut his optics.

The barrier was still in place, as it always had been since the day after they had bonded. Sideswipe had thrown it up in a rage and a panicked need to defend himself from a mech who had gone too far. He could admit to himself that he had been scared of Prowl that orn. The mech had kidnapped
him, dragged him across the wildlands, and bonded with him. Any other mech would have wilted at that, but Sideswipe fought back with whatever tool that he could find. The barrier had not only allowed him some payback for the suffering he'd caused him, but also ensure that he couldn't harm the city-mech's essence further.

He'd been satisfied with it at the time. He had been justified in blocking him out. He should still be fighting him. He had every right to hate Prowl.

But he didn't now. Not anymore.

...Quite the opposite, actually.

He swallowed thickly as he considered what he wanted to do. Prowl caught it, and immediately spoke up.

“You don't have to do anything. I'm just telling you how I feel. That's all.”

Sideswipe grimaced. “I'm still hurting you, aren't I?” he asked at the same time that he realized it.

“It doesn't matter.”

“...Fraggit, I am,” he growled, angry at himself that he hadn't seen it until now.

He was used to having a bond, and having a barrier on it when necessary, but Prowl had never experienced what it was like to have someone bonded to his spark, or what it was like to have that same mech ignore the bond. The twins had their arguments that resulted in them throwing up a wall between them, but the loneliness of an isolated spark would become unbearable over time, even when they were still mad at each other, and eventually one of them would drop it.

Sideswipe wasn't the one locked behind the barrier walls. Prowl was. He had barely an orn to comprehend his new bond to another spark, and then Sideswipe had shut him out.

“Sideswipe, it doesn't matter.”

White arms wrapped around his torso tightly.

“This is better than it was before. You're not trying to hurt me. I can take this for as long as you need to trust me again.”

“You shouldn't have to.”

“I choose to. You're my mate.”

That didn't make him feel any better at all.

...Did he trust him now?

The barrier hadn't been as impenetrable as he thought it was. The two of them had still managed to exchange feelings, even with Sideswipe firmly keeping the wall in place against a mech with no experience with a bond. Prowl could have attempted a way to tear it down and force himself over. But he didn't. He saw the holes, and other than letting them bleed through, ignored them. He'd simply waited outside, alone, and could only hope that his patience was rewarded. And all the while, he was baring the pain of a new bond that had been strained and blocked, leaving him cut off from the mech that was supposed to be connected to him for the rest of his life.

That anxiety that had been following him around since midday twisted at Sideswipe's spark again.
Was it Prowl that he had been feeling? Was that unexplainable sensation just leakage through their bond?

Primus help him, he did care about the other mech.

And he couldn't let him wallow in misery. Not like this, not anymore.

Sideswipe gathered Prowl up, hugging him close, and gently pressed his lips over his mate's, far more slowly and easily than a joor ago, but just as passionately. Prowl startled, but returned the kiss, his own optics closing, and his systems revving up again once he realized what Sideswipe was going to do.

The red mech predicted that the new bond would immediately be flooded with feelings that the nomad couldn't yet keep to himself, and so he braced himself as he grasped the barrier, then gingerly and slowly pulled it back.

Their chestplates remained closed. They weren't going to merge yet. But his mind's eye, in his spark, he saw Prowl's anyway, and for a second basked in the warm, familiar light, allowing himself to feel the relief and love washing down the bond.

Suddenly, everything was right again.

Everything was how it should be.

And then he screeched into Prowl's mouth, his faceplates twisting in pain, and fell to his knees.

He heard a gasped cry, and white hands clumsily grasped at him, but were ignored.

FEAR.

MISERY.

EXHAUSTION.

And, beyond all that, beyond the sound of Prowl's panicked shouts of his name into his audials, he heard another's voice. Another's spark.

“WHERE ARE YOU?!”

“Sideswipe!!”

Prowl was shaking him. He onlined optics that had been squeezed shut in pain, and stared back into Prowl's, who was kneeling in front of him and gripping his shoulders.

“Sideswipe, what happened?! Are you alright?!”

...That hadn't come from Prowl.

No way that had come from Prowl.

...Oh Primus.

Primus Almighty.

He'd been so STUPID.
He raggedly gasped several times as he tried to force his awareness back into reality, his entire frame shaking as he tried to regain control of his frame.

Then, to another worried cry from Prowl, he sprinted out of the tent, the flaps snapping aside on either side of him.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Prowl was running after him. Maybe he had figured it out too. Or maybe he was trying to stop him. Sideswipe didn't know. And he didn't care.

He heard the familiar, friendly howl of one Autobot greeting another returning to the camp. Then, another, more frightened. Not an alarm, but definitely calling for assistance.

Nomads in the camp were looking up, and they were all a blur on either side of Sideswipe as he raced past the edge of the tents. He remembered glimpsing Ratchet hurrying behind both him and Prowl, also headed towards something. Did he know too?

Hot Rod was there. He was coming down the hill, towards Ratchet, his hand gripped over one arm, the plating ripped open and sparking in a way that would have made the red mech's tanks churn if he'd bothered to give him any attention, which he didn't. Ratchet would take care of him.

Sideswipe ran on towards Springer, who stood at the top of the hill.

The green mech's mouth was pressed into a grimace, and gripped his prisoner a little tighter.

The golden mech held over his shoulder, a green cloth wrapped around his waist, his wrists and ankles bound tightly, began to stir as Sideswipe screamed his name.
Arrival

Chapter Notes

You guys may or may not like Sunstreaker, I dunno, it's hard to tell...XD

Just for fun, I'm opening up the Ask box on my tumblr. Keep in mind that I'm only just getting back into the website; I'm not impressed by it's "community" and I'm just around to be silly and have fun. (I can tell you guys a sad story about my old roommate's girlfriend accusing me on tumblr of being homophobic when I banned her from the apartment because she was a thief and a fucking nutcase, and my roommate and friends didn't stand up for me because we must support victims, but that's a story for another day.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 24: Arrival

At the same time that he was scrambling up the hill, Sideswipe's focus suddenly turned completely in on his spark, his essence feeling something that frantically needed his attention. He felt his frame rushing towards Springer, and he knew he was charging at his top speed and that his arms were pumping on either side of him, encouraging him to go even faster, but his mind was instead directed towards his spark.

And, just in front of it on that weird, dark plane of existence, he saw his other half.

It shocked and frightened him at how long it took for Sunstreaker's spark to respond his own spark's 'shouted' pulses when his twin was only a few lengths away from him. They'd had an enormous distance between them until now, but unless Springer had developed teleportation, the communication between their two sparks should have gotten better as Sunstreaker got closer. Unless Sunstreaker had given up on ever getting a response from him again. Had he really given up?!

Primus Almighty, Prowl hadn't been the only one that he'd been blocking out.

But he could fix this now.

The last of the barrier cracked and burst away, so unlike how he'd been cautiously pulling it back less than a breem ago for Prowl, and he ignored the shock of the bond being opened wide as he ran on. Both his spark and his voice screamed for his twin.

“SUNNY!!”

The golden frame jolted.

He heard him.

By Primus, he heard him.

“Sideswipe?!” he croaked.
When the ex-mercenary was steps away, Springer finally lowered Sunstreaker to the ground, turning him to face his twin, and Sideswipe barely noted the totality of exhaustion lifting from his brother's optics before he crashed into him. Both of them went sprawling on the ground, and then Sideswipe grabbed him and pulled both of them up to their knees, his arms tightly around his twin, squeezing him, the their faces pressed down into each other's shoulders as the red mech pulled their frames close.

But all that was on the physical plane. Sideswipe instead saw their two sparks barreling towards each other, crashing, then grasping and swirling around their duel tendrils of light, a pair of binary stars caught in each other's gravity and spinning around one another faster and faster, crying out in joy and relief that the other had not blinked out of existence. They looped, they swam, they sang, shouting that at last, at last, everything was as it should be.

Sideswipe felt his brother's frame shaking in his arms, and realized that he was doing the same.

“I thought that you were offline,” Sunstreaker whined. “I felt an...an 'explosion', and then you were hard to find, and then I couldn't find you at all...”

Whatever he'd said after that devolved into sobbed babbling. Sideswipe couldn't bring himself to give him a coherent answer either, too caught up in the pulses of relief and love that were flooding the bond between them. Instead he held him, and rocked him, trying to calm his brother down, trying to calm both of them down, barely succeeding, and not minding that at all.

The two stars continued to swirl around each other.

“It's okay,” he murmured in a mantra, his vocalizer cracking, both of their frames shaking from each other's heaving gasps. “It's okay, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay...”

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He had no idea how long they stayed like that. Joors, maybe orns. Maybe deca-cycles. It didn't matter. He'd stay there for the next thousand vorns if he could, embracing his twin, crying and praising deities that he didn't believe in that his brother had managed to find him, all the way out here.

There was movement around them. Mechs talking. Mech talking at them. But Sideswipe didn't care. Nothing was more important to him than the mech held in his arms, not the tribe, not his mate, nothing. He ignored them all in favor of the warm plating pressed up against him, physical evidence that Sunstreaker was real, he was here, he was safe, he was alive, he was alive!

It was a long while before both of them managed to get their ventilations back into some semblance of control, and Sideswipe pulled back just far enough to get a good look at his brother's frame.

He groaned. “Primus, Sunny...”

Vain, beautiful Sunstreaker was speckled in dents, tears and mud. His head hung weakly, the mech not having the strength to lift it for very long, and his optics were dim. Springer had attempted to dress some of his wounds with strips of cloth, but it was clear that he'd been running on reserve stores of energy for some time. One of his servos was making a grinding noise, a symptom that would have sent them storming off to the nearest medical clinic back in Kaon, but out here it had been left alone to steadily become worse.

At the same time, Sunstreaker was staring at his red twin too. “...The frell are you wearing?” he
rasped.

Sideswipe looked down at his poncho. “This? Latest fad. All the rage out here. Was thinking of matching it with a necklace of cyber-wolf teeth. What do you think?”

“You look like a cortex-disabled savage.”

“And you look like slag.”

“And yet still better than you.”

A true smile grew on Sideswipe’s faceplates, but then it warped as he bit his lip, then gritted his dentals, then leaned forward again to embrace his brother with an uncontrollable sob.

“I’ve missed you so much, Sunny,” he gasped out. “I’ve missed you every single orn.”

Sunstreaker pressed his forehead into his twin's shoulder, his own vocalizer hitching and hiccuping.

“D-ditto.”

Sideswipe snorted a choked laugh. “You have way with words, bro, you know that?”

The golden mech didn't answer him, and Sideswipe let out a happy sigh through his vents, trying to cool his frame and calm himself down, and assure himself that this was real, that Sunstreaker had finally made it to the Autobot camp safely.

They were together. Everything was right again.

Everything would be okay.

Soon enough, though, he became aware of Sunstreaker stiffening and cautiously raising his head. The red mech turned around to see what he was looking at.

More Autobots had come out of the camp to see what was going on. The ground rumbled slightly with Optimus's footsteps as he hurried towards them. Springer was still standing guard nearby the twins, his frame similarly damaged as Sunstreaker’s, his arms crossed over his chestplate, his expression unreadable. Hot Rod was sitting on the ground, whining and holding his arm while Ratchet hurriedly repaired it. The Autobots closest to the youngling looked mixed between revulsion and rage. The damage to his plating could have only been caused by a sharp, heavy weapon, not by a fall or a creature.

Beyond them, Ironhide was helping Prowl to his feet. The white mech was holding his helm and shaking it, as if something had clocked him in the head a few breems ago.

Sideswipe tried to remember if he'd accidentally shoved his mate aside while he was running towards his twin. He didn't recall that he did, and he didn't see any physical damage on Prowl's frame, yet the nomad was still squinting his optics painfully and rubbing his temple.

...Their bond.

Poor Prowl had gone from not feeling anything from his mate to feeling everything when Sideswipe's spark had 'shouted' to his twin.

Oops.
Sunstreaker's biggest concern, however, was with the big red-and-blue mech stomping towards them, and he shrunk back a little. Keeping his arms around his golden twin, Sideswipe turned slightly to address the Prime.

“This is Sunstreaker,” he explained in Iaconian, gripping his brother. “This is my twin.”

To emphasize further, he put a hand on his poncho, right over his spark, then lifted it and pressed the same hand over Sunstreaker's chestplate. Optimus stepped closer and took a knee by them, blue optics sweeping over and assessing the new arrival.

“He's taken a journey and a half to find you,” he observed from the dirtied state of golden mech's frame.

“That's my brother,” Sideswipe grinned, although it fell off of his face as Sunstreaker's optics widened in alarm.

“Is your vocalizer glitching?!”

Sideswipe hesitated before the problem dawned on him. “It's Iaconian,” he answered in Cybertronian Standard. “They don't speak Standard out here. One of the mechs cobbled together a translation program that I'm running.”

Now Optimus looked confused, and a little miffed as he realized what was wrong as well. They now had another city-mech who couldn't understand them. Not until he got his copy of the translation program installed anyway.

Sunstreaker wiggled his arms. “Sides?”

Sideswipe mentally smacked himself. Sunstreaker's wrists and ankles were still bound.

But as he reached over to untie the knots, Optimus snatched his arm, stopping him.

“Na.”

Sideswipe snapped his head towards the Prime, his face thunderous. “Na, yourself! I'm untying him! He's not going to be a prisoner here!”

“Sideswipe. He harmed Hot Rod.”

“...What?”

His pump ran cold.

Slowly, he turned back to see the orange youngling, and his injury.

Hot Rod's lip was trembling as he tried not to cry out in pain as Ratchet hurriedly worked on any broken plating and struts that were in danger of piercing one of his vital lines. Cloth previously wrapped around it to keep the limb in place, likely Springer's doing, was soaked in energon and torn aside by the healer. The slash was an offensive wound; it must have happened while Hot Rod was attacking or parrying with a knife.

Sideswipe had used his sword in combat often enough to identify the cause of the wound. His engine squealed in alarm as he turned his gaze back to his twin.

“You attacked a youngling?!”
Sunstreaker grimaced. “They came at me in the dark. I thought that they were attacking, and that he was a mini.”

He sounded truly sorry. Instantly Sideswipe believed him. It was against both of their natures to do harm to a youngling or sparkling. But there Hot Rod sat, slashed by Sunstreaker's sword. He'd been lucky that he hadn't done more damage, or offline him. Primus knew what the Autobots would do to him if that had happened.

What would they do when they realized who had done this?!

“...Oh fraggit all, Sunny...”

Ratchet seemed satisfied that he'd done enough to keep Hot Rod out of immediate danger, and he grunted as he picked up the youngling and carried him back to the camp. Hot Rod was shockingly quiet and compliant to being cradled like a sparkling, his free hand still gripping his ruined arm.

As soon as Ratchet had disappeared behind one of the tents, the yelling started. Mechs who had seen the youngling, Springer and Sunstreaker coming into camp immediately pieced together what had happened, and were snarling and pointing at the golden mech. Sideswipe's spark clenched when he saw a flash of rage cross Optimus's optics too.

“No!” He let go of Sunstreaker to stand in front of him defensively and address the Prime, his hands splayed to either side of his body, ready to counter any of his brother's would-be attackers. “Optimus, he said that he thought Hot Rod was a minibot! I know my brother, and he would never purposely harm a youngling!”

Optimus narrowed his optics. “A...'minibot?'” he asked, slowly trying the new word.

Sideswipe swore. Duh. Perceptor had told him when they'd first arrived that minbots didn't exist in the wildlands. The Autobots would have never seen one before.

They would not excuse Sunstreaker's mistake.

Oh Primus, this would be worse than them being angry about Alpha Trion. He'd at least foretold what would happen in Kaon. Apparently there was no prophecy about Sunstreaker blindly striking out and accidentally hitting a youngling.

He could sense fearful, yet tired pulses from his twin's spark. He knew that he was in trouble, and he didn't have the strength or ability the fight back.

Sideswipe raised his head to answer the Prime, rallied by the knowledge that if he didn't do something quickly, Sunstreaker would be unjustly punished by mechs who wouldn't even try to understand why he'd identified Hot Rod as a threat. “They're mechs that are designed to be squat and not much bigger than a youngling's frame. They work the mines in the cities. Sunstreaker said he mistook Hot Rod for one in the dark. He would never have hurt him if he knew that he was a youngling!”

Some of the anger left the little bit of what could be seen of Optimus's faceplates behind his mask. He seriously considered Sideswipe, and his brother shivering behind him, but his attention was caught by the growing noise of the crowd moving towards their hill. Before they could get any closer, though, his booming voice called out over all of them as he looked over his shoulder.

“Prowl! Didn't you tell me that the mechs helping Sideswipe transport the prophecy were undersized?”
Prowl's helm-ache had gotten several times worse at the shouting, and he was grimacing and rubbing his helm, but when he looked up and locked optics with Sideswipe, and saw how distressed his mate was, he instantly pulled himself together and straightened up, lifting his hand away from the side of his head. “I did. There were five of them. They behaved like normal mechs, but were oddly proportioned and small.”

“And--” Optimus turned back to Sideswipe, but kept his voice just as loud, and the red mech realized that he was partly addressing the riotous crowd, “--are these mechs normal in your city?”

Sideswipe nodded vigorously. “They were created specifically to work the energon mines,” he answered, making sure his voice carried too. “We'd see them all the time. Hot Rod would have looked like one of them in the dark.”

Outraged voices answered him. Several of the nomads outright didn't believe him, or refused to accept any explanation for attacking a youngling. But above them, yet another voice called out.

“I've seen them too!” Hound called out, cupping his hands on either side of his mouth. “They were at the caravan that we took Sideswipe from! They fought just as hard as any normal mech. If Sideswipe says that his twin thought that Hot Rod was one of them, then I believe him! Trailbreaker can back me up, and so can Jazz!”

He heard Ironhide's voice. “I believe 'em too. An' I ain't ever seen any mech like that. But Sideswipe ain't no liar. A pain in the aft is what he is, but not a lyin' mech.”

Sideswipe felt his spark rise a bit higher in its chamber, especially as he heard further rumbles of agreement from the other yoska that he'd trained with against those who sneered at Sunstreaker. The mechs and femmes were positioning themselves to make sure that none of the antagonizers could rush out and attack the newcomer easily. “You guys…” he breathed.

Optimus's vocalizer carried above them all. “This will be investigated more thoroughly at a later time. But for now, this appears to simply be a horrifying, unfortunate accident.” He narrowed his optics when dismayed cries rose up from the Autobot ranks again. “Enough! This will be investigated, but I will not interrogate the family of one of our mechs, especially not when he's just arrived after a desperate journey, and especially not when he is in a weakened state!”

Sunstreaker's spark was writhing on the other side of the bond, and Sideswipe knelt down by him again as he put his arm around his shoulders. “That's Optimus,” he explained in Standard, leaning towards his audial. “He's their leader.”

“They're angry that I hurt that kid,” Sunstreaker mumbled.

“He's defending you,” Sideswipe insisted. “He'll make sure that they don't try to retaliate.”

“Sideswipe.”

The red mech snapped his head up towards the Prime, who had stood and placed himself between the twins and what remained of the crowd that still wanted immediate justice for an injured youngling.

“Untie your brother. I want you to stay close to him until this anger dies down.”

Sideswipe didn't need to be told twice. Immediate he reached behind Sunstreaker, and tugged at the ropes binding him until the knots were loosened, and tossed them away. As soon as his arms were free, Sunstreaker threw them around his twin and squeezed him tightly.
“It's okay,” Sideswipe murmured as he hugged him in return and pulled them both to their feet, the golden twin's legs wobbling a bit as he nearly failed to hold his own weight. “I won't let anything happen to you. You know that.”

“You dumb- aft, I came here to make sure that nothing bad happened to you.”

Sideswipe smirked. “I'm okay. Really. I was scared for a long time, and I missed you badly, but the worst they did to me was push me into their horrible fashion sense.” He gestured with a nod down to his poncho and waist-cloth.

“...You're lying.”

His smile vanished.

Frag their bond.

“...I'll explain everything later. But for now, let's get you somewhere that you can rest.”

Sunstreaker didn't have any arguments against that. However, as soon as he took a step forward, he nearly slipped, and had to cling to his twin for balance. Sideswipe squawked as he braced himself and held them both up.

“When's the last time you refueled properly?!?” he realized.

“Ran out of rations several orns ago.”

“Oh Primus, Sunny...”

Another mech jogged up to them.

“Here--”

Sunstreaker stiffened as hands unfamiliar to him grasped the arm that was further from Sideswipe, and laid it over white shoulders, just in front of a pair of doorwings. Taking his mate's cue, Sideswipe took Sunstreaker's other arm in the same way, allowing the golden twin to rest his weight between both of them.

“My name's Prowl,” the nomad introduced himself in Cybertronian Standard, and continued when all that Sunstreaker did was give him a long, hard stare. “I learned your language from Sideswipe on the way back to our camp.”

The golden mech hissed. “Are you one of the ones who kidnapped him?”

“Sunny...” Sideswipe tried to whine appeasingly, but Prowl spoke over him.

“I am. I'm also the one who decided to take your brother back with us instead of releasing him with the rest of his team, or to another city.”

His honesty startled Sunstreaker long enough for Sideswipe to get a word in, before his twin could realize that he was in the perfect position to reach around and rip a doorwing off.

“I forgave him, Sunny. He's a friend now. All of these mechs are.”

“...How can you call a bunch of savages that kidnapped you as your 'friends'?!”

Prowl frowned. Sideswipe reached up to grip Sunstreaker's fingers.
“Let's talk about this after we get you inside a tent, and get some fuel in your tanks.”

“Fine.”

Together, the two mates bore Sunstreaker's weight, and half-led, half-carried him down the hill, and back into the Autobot camp, taking a wide path away from those still trying to argue with Optimus.

Sunstreaker winced as he bit into a pellet, expecting it to be crusty and taste like slag, but after a few chews, his optics brightened slightly. “It's got a kick.”

Sideswipe grinned at him. “It's what all of them refuel on. Apparently liquid energon is too difficult for them to carry around all day without spilling it. It's condensed, so your tanks will be full in no time.”

The two of them were sitting on the berth's pillows and facing one another while Sunstreaker dug his fingers into Sideswipe's aluminum ration can and dug out more of the pellets. Prowl had left as soon as Sunstreaker was safely inside their tent, likely to go back to the crowd, act as an advocate for the twins and attempt to cool tensions in the camp while the two city-mechs rested. Sunstreaker kept glancing around them, still wary of the alien environment and, as far as he knew, hostile mechs walking around outside of the tent, and Sideswipe's spark pulsed soothingly at him, attempting to keep his twin calm.

He would have really liked Sunstreaker's first encounter with the Autobot tribe to be better than this. But then again, how 'good' could it have possibly gone? As far as his brother knew, as far as anyone in Kaon knew, Sideswipe had been dragged away from his caravan kicking and screaming. Which...actually wasn't entirely untruthful. His last contact with anyone who wasn't a nomad, besides Perceptor, had been a distraught Bumblebee swearing that his teammate would be rescued.

And speaking of...

“Do you know if the minibots from my caravan's team made it home safely? Were they the ones who told you what happened to me?”

Sunstreaker nodded, and waited until his jaw had worked at a pellet a few more times before swallowing and answering. “Bumblebee came to our apartment a few orns after I came home from the client's. He told me everything. We left to find you that night.”

Sideswipe refreshed his optics. “The other minibots came with you? Where are they?”

“Dunno. We got separated.”

“...How do you lose a whole bunch of fragging minibots?!”

“Because they're minibots, and you have to turn your head down to see them?”

Sideswipe smirked briefly. “Fair enough.”

“We knew you had been taken north, and we walked towards the Autobots' territory for deca-cycles. We couldn't find a trail from the mechs holding you, but we figured that if we headed towards their main camp, we'd either rendezvous with them, or catch up to them there. But sometime around when we were passing Tarn, I felt an 'explosion' through our bond, and I...I panicked. I ran off. I thought that you were dying.”
“...What exactly did you feel?” the red twin asked carefully, his smile fading, already knowing what it had been.

“You, and everything about you. I saw flashes from when we were younglings, at Academy, on our first jobs, and a whole bunch of memories like that. Then I saw you on your back, and shouting, and someone else was grasping your arms, and I could see the light from your spark on your face. I thought...with the dreams you were having before you left, that...you were...”

“That I was being sacrificed at that moment,” Sideswipe realized.

Primus, how could he tell him...?!

“The only thing I could think of was stopping whatever was about to extinguish your spark. I felt where you were for a split-second, exactly where you were. And I ran.” Golden fingers gripped the aluminum can tightly, and it creaked as its sides were pushed inward. “I ran, and I ran, and...when I stopped when the ‘explosion’ was over...I was alone. I could still feel you, but it was weak again. I couldn't pinpoint where you were anymore, only the direction I was facing when I stopped running. And when I looked around, I couldn't see any of the minibots around me.”

“If you truly thought that I was dying and that you had less than a breem to save me, there's no way they could have kept up with you.”

“Exactly. I waited a little while to see if they had tried to follow me. But when the sun came up, and nobody came, I kept going towards where I'd last felt you. But after an orn...even that went away. Suddenly, I went from feeling you dully to not feeling you at all.”

The can rattled as it shook. Sunstreaker set it back down, and tucked his hands inside of his lap, forcing them to lay still.

“Sides, I really thought that you were gone,” he murmured, his voice shaking. “I thought I'd felt your spark extinguish, and that was it. I was too late, and I was going to be alone.”

Sideswipe grimaced, then spread his arms out to either side. “But I didn't die. I'm right here, aren't I?”

Sunstreaker nodded slowly. “I'm waiting for you to turn out to be another delusion.”

“Another?”

*Oh boy.*

“Sunny, were you having hallucinations about me?”

“A lack of energon will do that,” the golden mech reasoned. “Brawn was holding most of the rations in his pack, from what the minis brought with us and what they were getting from hunting. I didn't really care how they were doing it, just that we had enough to keep going. I only had what was in my pack when I panicked and ran. It didn't last long.”

“Didn't Springer offer you any of his energon pellets?”

“Who?”

“The green mech that brought you here.”

“He tried,” Sunstreaker grimaced. “Fragger tried to hand-feed me. But I didn't want any. I thought
that not only had I been unable to find you, but I'd gotten myself captured too, and he was going to
drag me even further away from you, or kill me. I had failed. I didn't want to stay online, let alone
refuel.”

Sideswipe's spark fell to the bottom of its casing and twisted around itself.

“Sunny...”

Crawling up to his knees, he leaned forward, and embraced his brother again. This time
Sunstreaker could easily return the hug, and his systems whined as he gladly welcomed the ability
to do this, to hold onto his twin again, and feel their split-sparks close together. He bowed his head
forward into Sideswipe's shoulder, one of his headfins pushing slightly at his brother's cheekguard,
and a vent of a sigh rattled through him.

“I didn't want to keep going without you.”

Sideswipe hardly knew what to say to that. If he'd been in Sunstreaker's peds, he would have felt
the same way. What was the point of one twin going on if the other had died, and they'd somehow
survived?

“Sunny, I'm so, so sorry.” He gulped down the lump in his throat. “I tried to escape them at first. I
tried to go home, to you. I tried.”

Sunstreaker squeezed him a little tighter.

“I know. It's not your fault that these fragging savages took you.”

This time, Sideswipe still felt a little offended, even when Prowl wasn't there to hear him. He bit
his lip, then held his twin for a bit longer, before patting his back, and they mutually let go and sat
back, both calmed somewhat.

“Sunny, I did eventually find out why they took me, and not one of the minibots.” He held up a
finger against Sunstreaker's retort. “And it's not just because they're minis and weren't worth their
time. They were after the prophecy I was carrying to the Decepticon tribe.”

Sunstreaker raised his optic ridges high. “Bumblebee mentioned a map. The map, I guess? The one
from the old mech that we gave Sentinel Prime?”

“Yeah. Found out that his name is Alpha Trion.”

“How'd you learn that?”

“Because he used to belong to this tribe.”

Sunstreaker stared at him for a breem. “...Oh. Frag,” he hissed, and Sideswipe felt a quick burst of
fear that wasn't his own.

“Yeah.”

“Do they know?”

“Before they even knew who I was. Apparently he predicted his death to them, and when they saw
the map, they knew that I did it. They were going to kill me right there, back at the caravan. Prowl
stopped them. What Bumblebee saw, and what I thought was happening too, was that they were
taking me prisoner because I'd been holding their map. I didn't speak their language at first, and
even Prowl didn't speak Standard until a couple of deca-cycles ago, so we couldn't talk to each other and clarify what was going on.”

Sunstreaker's expression hardened. “Did they hurt you?”

Sideswipe immediately shook his head. “No, no. Opposite, bro. They forgave me for killing Alpha Trion. Apparently that was part of the old mech's prediction too. They had to forgive me. All of them were still harboring a whole lot of hatred towards me at first. But it got better. Now--”

He picked at the edge of the poncho, and held it up.

“They'd be attacking one of their own.”

Sunstreaker crossed his arms as he looked him up and down. Sideswipe could feel the disapproval ebbing down through their bond.

“How can you be one of them now?! They kidnapped you!”

“Can't exactly go home,” Sideswipe muttered as turned his gaze to the rugs littering the ground.

“...I know.”

His optics lifted. “You do?”

“The minibots took another look at the caravan vehicle after you were captured. They said that it had been purposely set up to fail. It should have disabled itself when you were closer to the Decepticon camp, but apparently you guys had been moving faster than whoever rigged it thought you would be.”

Now it was Sideswipe turn to stare at him, and refresh his optics.

“...It was Sentinel Prime,” he growled suddenly. “He had me set up to be a sacrifice to the Decepticons. Sunny, that's why my team was a bunch of minibots! If Megatron was going to sacrifice anybody, it was going to be me, not some fragging mini! And I had the prophecy too--”


“That's what the Autobots think it is. They call it the Iacon prophecy. It's supposed to show them how to get to some ruins somewhere.”

“And you think Sentinel knew about this?”

“More than that. He purposely sent me instead of some other mercenary because of our split-spark.” He tapped the fabric of his poncho above his chestplate. “Apparently being a twin makes me a really good sacrifice for Megatron, the Decepticon leader. They were expecting me, Sunny. Somebody told them that their prophecy and a sacrifice were coming. Sentinel had me leave the city in an unassuming way, as a delivery-bot. If they'd dragged me out in chains and made it clear that he was going to let me die in some ritual, Kaon would never trust him again!”

Sunstreaker gnashed his dentals. “The carrier fragging son of a glitch. He was never going to attempt a rescue for you! Frag, he was sending me as a replacement when you disappeared!”

“Exactly.”

“Fraggit all!” A yellow fist smashed into the ground, although it's impact and sound were softened
by the rug. "We should have never trusted him, ever. He nearly got you killed. Nearly killed me too. I was going to confront the Decepticons, until Bumblebee told me about the disabled caravan, and that they were leaving the city. The minis figured out that the Autobots had you because of that red symbol on all of their clothing." He pointed to the little red face that was stitched by the shoulder of Sideswipe's poncho. "Otherwise we would have been wandering in circles, looking for some random tribe."

"...Do you think that the minis are still alive?"

"Honestly? Yeah," he scoffed. "Probably are. They're...strangely hardy in the wildlands. They seemed to instinctually know what to do and how to maneuver around. We saw a bunch of nomads hunting one orn, and they picked it up how it was done right away. They used that to supplement our energon, and keep away any hostile creatures or mechs."

"I've never seen native minis out here. I thought they were created specifically for mining."

"So did I."

They were interrupted by the laces of the tent flap being undone. Sunstreaker startled, and nearly scrambled to his feet, but Sideswipe raised both his hands towards him in a settling motion.

"It's okay! I think that's Prowl."

He was right. A moment later, the doorwinged mech pushed the flap aside, and his blue optics flitted between the two brothers sitting across from one another, assessing both of them, but especially Sunstreaker.

"Feeling better yet?" he asked in Standard.

Sunstreaker nodded is head slowly, his own optics still narrowed suspiciously. "It'll take me some orns to get my strength back completely. Also, I need something to clean myself with. And some wax."

Sideswipe chuckled, and grinned at Prowl's befundled look. "That means he's definitely feeling better."

"Hmm." Prowl crossed his arms as he addressed his mate, switching to Iaconian. "You and I need to figure out something, and quickly."

The red mech's face dropped. "Tell Optimus that any punishment that the tribe's coming up with for Sunny is undeserved," he answered in the same tribal language. "Injuring Hot Rod was a complete accident."

"That's not the problem."

Sunstreaker scowled. "The frag are you saying?" he asked Sideswipe in Standard, but his twin held up a palm towards him so that Prowl could continue, even though Sunstreaker was being left out of the conversation at the moment.

"Optimus has managed to appease the mechs that want Sunstreaker punished, but there are conditions."

Sideswipe grimaced. "Such as?"

"They want his weapons taken away unless he'll be trained as a yoska."
“Fine. Then I’ll help him train. Sunny’s as good of a fighter as me.”

“They’re also demanding that if he stays with the tribe, that he be kept in check by a mate.”

“...What?!”

Sideswipe leapt to his feet. Sunstreaker started to get up too, seeing his brother’s distress and feeling it through the bond.

“With who?!” Sideswipe demanded. “With you?!"

Prowl shook his head. “I am already bonded to you. You may be twins, but you are both still individual mechs. It would be extremely unfair of me to take two mates.” He rubbed his helm. “And I don’t think my spark could handle it.”

“Then what’s going to happen to Sunstreaker?” Sideswipe asked slowly.

Prowl took a long, bracing intake, already knowing how his mate would react.

“Springer has already fulfilled his right to take Sunstreaker as his mate by capturing him and bringing him to camp. He’s asking for him in his tent, right now.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, now that you're done, you should go read this now. It's by a good friend of mine. Go go go!
Chapter 25: Brother

This time Sunstreaker climbed all the way to his feet as Sideswipe roared a swear in Cybertronian Standard, and grabbed Prowl's wrist to haul him out of the tent. “Sides! What--?!?”

“Give us a breem!” Sideswipe shouted at him over his shoulder, ignoring Prowl's gasp and stumble as he tried to keep up with his mate. “Just stay there, okay?! I need to talk to Prowl in private!”

“But I couldn't understand you at all just now!” Sunstreaker tried to protest, but was still left behind inside the tent as the red mech pulled the nomad outside. He winced and squinted for a moment as his blue optics adjusted from the darkened tent to the powerful red beams of a setting sun, but kept walking, dragging Prowl along with him along the throughway and away from any other Autobots milling around, until they were a fair distance away from the tent and would not be easily overheard by his twin, though he could feel him pulsing worriedly at their bond.

“The frell like Sunny's going to bond with Springer!” he growled at Prowl in Standard once they'd stopped between two other tents, and Prowl had yanked his hand free. “He's known him for even less time than I knew you!”

Prowl rubbed his wrist, soothing the wiring that had been squeezed too hard. “This is the best way to keep the tribe from seeking vengeance on him. No one would dare attack him for fear of facing retaliation from Springer.”

“That's the same dumb-aft logic that you used with me!”

“It is, and I recall that it saved you, didn't it?”

“You are NOT doing the same thing to Sunstreaker!” Sideswipe barked. “My spark felt like it was going through the Pit and back again when I found out that we were bonded! Yes, things are better now,” he growled at Prowl's hurt look, “but it scared the frell out of me! You KNOW this, better than anyone!”

“I do,” he admitted. “But this time, we can explain to him what will happen, and why it's so important, especially to keep him safe.”

“I'm not going to help you convince my twin to bond with somebody he barely knows! Pit, he doesn't even know that I'm bonded yet!”

“You didn't tell him?”

“How can I?! 'Oh hey, Sunny, while you thought I was captured and being sacrificed, I was really bonding my spark to one of my kidnappers and enjoying a good frag!' I know I've got to tell him, but--”

“Sideswipe, he cannot stay here unless someone takes him as their mate. The tribe will never accept him otherwise.”

Sideswipe threw his hands up in disgust. “Do you guys just never have friends that stay the night or something?!”

“I am assuming that he will not be staying temporarily as a guest, if he would be in greater danger
by returning to Kaon, or leaving and being abducted or killed by the Decepticons. Sideswipe, this is what is best for him.”

“What is best is not taking away his freedom to choose who he bares his spark to!”

“Springer has already claimed him. No one else will take him now.”

“And what if he doesn't want Springer?!” he yelled, gesturing frantically at the other tents. “What if he doesn't want anybody?! He came here to rescue me, not to get bonded!”

Prowl grabbed Sideswipe's hands to stop him from flailing around. He held them in front of him, and squeezed his fingers as he looked directly into his optics and kept his voice low. “I know that this isn't ideal, and not how you do things in the city. If there were another way, then I would not ask to do this to him. But he must be bonded to Springer, if you want to keep him here in camp.”

Sideswipe grimaced, but didn't struggle to free his hands. “What happens if he rejects Springer?”

“In our tribe, if a yoska entirely fails to woo his new mate, he cannot force the bond. The tribe would step in and make him release the potential mate back to their own camp. But if that happens here, Sunstreaker will have nowhere to go. He'll be made to wander wildlands again, alone. Unless you would rather us risk him staying without a mate and being attacked in camp by someone trying to take revenge. He attacked Hot Rod. Most of us understand that it was an accident, but those that don't will think that they have a fair reason for injuring or killing him.”

The red mech's pump thudded anxiously at that thought. The image of Hound's knife flashing out before Prowl had stopped the angry yoska from attacking their prisoner darted through his mind. On the other side of their bond, Sunstreaker pulsed to him, even more worried and questioning, and Sideswipe tried to send back a soothing, calming feeling, but knew that his brother would see right through it to the growing panic that lay underneath.

At the same time, he saw Prowl’s shoulders relax a little and a grateful look came to his optics, if not also puzzled. Sideswipe stared at him, before realizing that those same calming pulses were being sent to his mate as well.

Primus, this bond would take some getting used to.

“That can't happen,” he muttered.

“Then he needs to accept Springer as his mate.”

“That can't happen either!”

“Sideswipe,” Prowl grunted, and squeezed his hands a little tighter, “it's one or the other. Either Sunstreaker accepts him, or the tribe will gladly force him to leave.”

“Not all of the Autobots will want him gone.”

“Enough that Optimus would have to seriously consider them.”

“...It's not fair.” Sideswipe bowed his head and gritted his dentals. “Prowl...I can't make Sunstreaker go through the same slag I went through. He'll have it even worse than me, because he doesn't really know Springer. I can't do that to him. I can't.”

“Sideswipe, if you have any other ideas, I'm listening. I don't want the same fear and hurt that I caused for you to happen again with your twin. But it's unlikely that Sunstreaker will be allowed to
stay if he doesn't at least try to accept Springer.”

The ex-mercenary snapped his head up suddenly as a thought sprang up in his processor. “Is there a time limit for how long Springer has to woo him and make him compatible for bonding?”

Prowl stared at him. “...No. It's usually assumed that by the time a yoska brings his captured mate back to camp, his mate has accepted him, and just needs a few more orns to be made compatible, if at all.”

“But what if there was no time to court them?”

“Court?”

“Woo. Interface. Well, not interface, not if they were at that point yet, but whatever. What it is you do to make your mate compatible before bonding. What if something happened and there was no time for that?”

The nomad paused as he thought that over. “If there was an emergency, such as an attack by another tribe, a yoska would hurry their mate back to camp first, and protect them. Wooing would take a low priority compared to their safety, and could continue later.”

“And there's no time limit for however long that takes?”

“...Within reason.”

The gears in Sideswipe's cortex were turning. “Your team took a fragload of deca-cycles to move all the way from Kaon to the camp. I'd gotten to know you by then, even though I didn't understand what was happening. But Sunstreaker knows as much as I did then about being taken as a mate, and he's known Springer for only a few orns. And in that time--”

“He was too exhausted for Springer to do anything to woo him,” Prowl realized at the same time, his optics lighting up, then suddenly flashing as he processed something on his HUD. “I've got an idea.”

Sideswipe smirked. “I think I got it before you.”

When they returned to the tent, Sunstreaker looked up at them from where he was sitting on a pillow and hugging his knees. “Sideswipe?” he asked weakly, his optics large and worried.

“It's okay,” his twin immediately assured him, plopping himself down next to the golden mech and draping an arm around his shoulder. “We just had to talk about something important.”

“Something that you didn't want me to hear,” Sunstreaker growled.

Sideswipe shrugged. “Pretty much. Won’t lie.”

“Fragger.”

Pulling over another pillow from the berth, Prowl took a seat in front of them, crossing his legs neatly and putting his hands in his lap as he addressed Sunstreaker. “You don't need to convince me that you didn't mean to hurt Hot Rod,” he began. “Sideswipe believes you, and thus, I do too. But the incident has still alarmed the tribe, and many of them will want you to leave.”

Sunstreaker stiffened up, and one of his hands reached up to grip Sideswipe's fingers. “I didn't
“Come all this way just to leave Sideswipe here!,” he snapped. “I'm not going anywhere without him!”

“Easy, bro,” Sideswipe hushed gently, returning his squeeze. “I won't let them separate us. I promise.”

Prowl continued. “It would be best, for both you and Sideswipe, to remain with the Autobots. I know that Sideswipe will stay. So can I assume that you will too?”

“Not exactly like I can go home,” Sunstreaker grunted with a glance at his brother. “Sideswipe, how much does this mech know about what Sentinel Prime was doing?”

“As much as I do. He's the one who figured out that I was intended as a sacrifice to the Decepticons.”

“Then you know that I have no choice, Prowl. If you mechs had been hostiles, I would have found a way to rescue Sideswipe and we would have run for one of the other cities. But since you're not...”

“You would be welcome here,” the white mech said. “Under two conditions.”

“...I'm listening,” he grimaced.

“First, the tribe wants you disarmed until they are confident that you will not harm anyone else.”

“That green mech's got my sword and my pack.” Sunstreaker showed his bare hands to Prowl. “He pickpocketed my subspace to make sure that I didn't have a knife either.”

“Then there's something else that needs to be explained before I tell you the other. It's about why your twin must stay.”

He purposely directed his gaze at his mate. Sideswipe felt his pump surge. Immediately Sunstreaker snapped his head in his direction, feeling his twin's surge of anxiety.

“What is it?” he demanded. “Are you sick? Are you hurt?”

Sideswipe shook his head. “Sunny... You're not going to like this. But I need you to stay cool about it, alright?”

That did not calm him at all. “Oh slag, how bad is it?”

“Not that bad, honest.”

“Liar.”

Sideswipe pressed his lips together into a thin line, trying to think how he would do this. Then, slowly, he moved his arm off of his brother's shoulder, and instead reached behind him to grip his upper arms, squeezing them gently. His twin's back struts went taunt, though he didn't try to pull away.

“...Sides?”

But Sideswipe didn't answer him. Not verbally. Instead, he concentrated, focusing on their bond, and tried to separate it from the weaker one that he had with his mate sitting across from them.
It was incredibly difficult to do. The bond with Sunstreaker had existed for the entirety of both of their lives. It was always there, and it always would be. Controversially, the bond with Prowl was new, and uncertain, and on the other end was a mech who didn't understand what it was to have another spark bonded to his own, and never would as well as the twins did. Yet, briefly, he saw not only his brother's spark, but Prowl's, weaker and nearby. *That* was the one at the end of a very long tunnel, not Sunstreaker's. And it wasn't because Prowl was physically further away. The white mech didn't understand how to get 'closer', not without merging.

Sunstreaker's servos were tense under his brother's palms, knowing that something was wrong.

Sideswipe sent a strong, singular pulse to him, soothing the other half of the split-spark. But, at the same time, he sent a similar message to Prowl's spark, and then waited.

Both Prowl and Sunstreaker's shoulders rose as they took a deep intake, their vents hissing, letting their frames ease as their bonds to Sideswipe pressed in to calm them. Prowl sent a message back, and though it was more vague than any communication that the twins could do, Sideswipe knew that his mate's anxiety over what they were showing Sunstreaker was cooling. Some relief washed over him with the knowledge that at least he could figure out which bond was talking back to him now, even if he had difficulty projecting to one individual. The confusion from the morning after they bonded would not happen again.

Sunstreaker, however, stared at Prowl. Within the breem he figured out what had happened, and it took him only a few seconds to process why it had happened. As his optics grew huge, his engine choked to a stop, and squealed in horror.

And then *roared.*

Sideswipe was very glad that he'd subtly gripped his brother's arms even tighter.

Sunstreaker's reaction was, in a word, *explosive.*

“You're bonded to him?!”

Sideswipe pinned his brother's arms behind his back and held him, then grimaced and braced himself as his twin tried to launch himself forward at Prowl anyway. The golden mech yelled a string of swears as he struggled to move, his dentals bared, engine snarling, and Sideswipe was nearly overwhelmed by the uncontainable rage that swept over their bond, but he held on to protect his mate, who had wisely jumped up and backed away a couple of steps.

“I claimed him as my mate,” Prowl started, his hands up placatingly. “He would have been attacked if I hadn't--”

“What did you do to him?!”

White-hot anger blasted out from Sunstreaker's spark, and for a breem Sideswipe was almost swept up into it, his first reaction to eagerly find whatever was opposing his twin and help him to beat it into the ground. Prowl's alarm nearly didn't register to him, but somehow it shined through the dark rage and hatred tendrilling out from Sunstreaker, and when it did the red mech shoved away the instinct to join his brother in the fight as he threw his weight onto Sunstreaker's back, pinning him to the rugs and furs on the floor.

“Sunny!” he gasped as the golden mech squirmed underneath him. “It's okay! I'm fine!”

“You said that they didn't hurt you!” Sunstreaker howled as he tried to buck him off.
“They didn't! I didn't know that it was what Prowl was trying to do, and back then I was as mad as you were, but it's okay now! Sunstreaker, stop!”

But his brother didn't listen, and hissed as he fought to throw Sideswipe's weight off, sounding less like a mech and more like a possessed creature. Thankfully, though, he was already exhausted, and even with the fuel from the energon pellets, he still ran out of energy after a few minutes of struggling. That, and he had no desire to hurt his brother. Otherwise Sideswipe would have found himself chucked right through the tent wall. Instead, Sunstreaker suddenly dropped, panting, and Sideswipe changed his weight on him to keep him safely restrained while both of their systems labored to cool down.

“I was angry,” he managed over Sunstreaker's rasping gasps. “I was horrified that Prowl had done that to me. I was scared. I trusted Prowl, but not enough to let him into my spark. So I threw up a barrier, and it's been up until just before you arrived.”

“...That's why...I couldn't feel you?”

“That's why you couldn't feel me.” Guilt snatched a fist around Sideswipe's tanks and twisted them. “I couldn't tell the difference between the bond with you and me, and me and Prowl. I still can't very well. But at that moment, I was willing to risk blocking you out too to make sure that Prowl couldn't get to me.”

“...How is that somehow OKAY now?!”

“It isn't. It wasn't. But I trust him now. I eventually let him in.”

Prowl hadn't left them. Sideswipe could feel the guilt and pain and sadness drifting down their bond, and he tried again to pulse soothingly at both bonds, but to little response from either of them this time.

“It's still not okay that he did that to me. But I also know that Prowl hadn't intended to hurt me, and he's been trying to make it up to me since then. Sunny, I know that you can't trust him yet. And I won't make you. But I'm not going to let you touch him either. Sa?”

“What?”

“Don't touch him. Okay?”


Satisfied enough, Sideswipe cautiously got off of him, and grabbed his hand to help him sit up again too. Sunstreaker groaned, and rolled his shoulders, wincing at the one servo that was still whining noisily.

Slowly, Prowl moved to sit back down on his pillow as well, one palm towards Sunstreaker, as if he were a wild animal in the middle of being tamed. “I would never hurt Sideswipe,” his optics locking on Sunstreaker's. “He is not only a friend, he is now my mate.”

“Your mate?!” he hissed, narrowing his blue optics. “That's what you think of a mech that you kidnap?!”

“He became my equal when I bonded with him. I know that I caused him misery by taking him here, but I did so to save his life, and now that he is safe, I will make sure that he continues to live a good life with the tribe.”
“Sunny, it's true,” Sideswipe murmured softly, lacing an arm over his brother's shoulders again, though now tentatively and awkwardly. “Prowl's done everything he could to make sure that I felt welcomed here. I didn't accept it at first, or him. But I can recognize at least that he's sincerely trying.”

“He's trying to make it seem like dragging you here to have someone to frag whenever he feels like is somehow acceptable,” Sunstreaker growled.

Prowl's doorwings stiffened and rose at that. “That was not my intention at all,” he said sharply. “I claimed him in order to keep him from being harmed by my team, once we realized that he was Alpha Trion's murderer.”

Sideswipe winced, but Prowl kept going.

“My team was ready for vengeance for a mech that we had always admired. When I claimed Sideswipe, he was taken out of that danger; they could not harm him without me retaliating for him. I could not explain this to your brother at the time, and he was panicked by us tying him to our wagon and forcing him away from his caravan. I regret the harm that it caused, but I do not regret doing it. There was no other plausible way to ensure that he would survive, and I could not let him go, not with your city casually giving him up to die at the Decepticons' hands.”

He spoke louder and over Sunstreaker when the golden mech tried to get a word in.

“I had a right to attempt to interface with him every night during our march, but I refused, because I respected that your brother was frightened of me and his situation! I worked on a translation program the entire time, and though it did not finish before we bonded, I did come to understand him and want him, and he came to prefer me, and we became compatible. When we bonded, I did nothing to hurt him! I will never be able to apologize enough for not understanding that our bonding was unwanted until it was too late, but I have never attempted to do him harm to make him accept it!”

Sunstreaker pounded a fist on the ground. “You kidnapped him and forced him to come here, so don't try to pretend that Sideswipe had a choice to accept anything! Normal mechs don't bond with each other unless they've trusted their partner for vorns, and you've known Sideswipe for decacycles!”

“That is plenty of time for us to become compatible! NORMAL mechs don't need that much time to pick a potential mate! My circumstances for claiming Sideswipe were poor, but he is desired, and he is being given a safe home, and he is loved!”

Something in Sideswipe's spark leapt up.

...Prowl loved him?

“Don't presume that you know anything about him!” Sunstreaker roared back. “He's my twin, my split-spark! I know him better than anyone! And you--”

“Stop it!!”

Sideswipe let go of his brother as he shoved himself between the two mechs, a palm out towards either of them, but his face directed towards Sunstreaker.

“Sunny, I don't like how it happened, but that doesn't change the fact that I am here, and bonded. I could be a rusting frame on a Decepticon sacrificial alter right now, or worse, on my way back there under guard by Sentinel Prime's orders! The Autobots rescued me. Prowl rescued me. That
doesn't mean that he deserved to bond with me, but would you rather this, me being bonded, or me being offline?"

Sunstreaker stared at him. "...I would rather that you were not forced to bond with some savage!" he bellowed, gesturing a hand at where Prowl was shaking and squeezing his fists as he kept himself from retorting.

"What's done is done. Prowl and I are bonded now. Sunny, if I tried to break it, not only would it hurt me, but it would probably kill Prowl. I don't want that." He took a swift intake of air. "He is my mate now. And I respect him, because he respects me."

"Since when is kidnapping a mech and calling them their mate a show of respect?!"

"It is for the nomads," Sideswipe said quietly. "I'm not going to pretend to understand it, or agree with it. But it is what happened, and it can't be changed. Prowl and I have been trying to make this work between us."

He turned to face Sunstreaker completely, and put a hand on his shoulder.

"And it's not helping that my twin hates my mate. Sunny. You're hurting me too. Stop it."

Sunstreaker couldn't find an answer to that. He stared back at him, his jaw hanging open. Slowly, the rage curled around his spark lessened, and Sideswipe felt it ebbing down to him. It was soon replaced by worry, fear, and...something that Sideswipe couldn't place.

Jealousy? Resentment?

Something brushed up against their bond, right next to Sideswipe's spark. It was familiar, and warm. He let the tendril of light briefly wrap around him, drawing him closer, the other half of his spark peering into his essence, before letting him go after it had found something.

Sunstreaker gulped hard. When he spoke again, his vocalizer was shaking.

"...You stupid, stupid dumb-aft."

Kneeling higher, he pulled Sideswipe down and into a hug. Sideswipe instantly returned it, the two of them automatically bowing their heads and resting their forehelms on each other's shoulders, used to doing this gesture a thousand times over. The golden mech's frame trembled in his arms, and it took a breem for Sideswipe to realize that he was doing the same.

The bond between them lit up. Sideswipe heard Sunstreaker's voice, but not with his audials, or his comms.

/What have I told you about falling too hard for somebody/?

Sideswipe smirked painfully. /Don't ever, or something like that../

/You love him./

It wasn't an accusation. It was a statement.

Sideswipe wanted to argue with him, but suddenly found that he couldn't. One half of a split-spark could easily read the other, especially at this proximity. Sunstreaker was only telling him what he had seen when he looked into his essence.

/You love him,/ he repeated. /There's nothing I'll ever do or say to convince you not to./
He sounded sad. Still resentful.

And just as fast, Sideswipe read his brother's spark as well.

/I'll always love you,/ he soothed, and poured that feeling through their bond. /You're my twin. No bond that I'll have with anybody else will ever trump this. I promise./

This eased Sunstreaker a little. Behind them, he could hear Prowl gasp quietly, feeling the residual of the brotherly devotion the twins had for one another ebbing over the mates' bond. For now, though, Sideswipe focused completely on Sunstreaker.

/You don't have to love him too. You've got every right to hate him, and so do I. But I choose not to. I do want to make this work./

/I could help shield you if you want to break it,/ Sunstreaker offered. /I could anchor you and take half of the rebound./

/NO. I'd survive, but that would kill him./

/You really do love him./

Sideswipe's fingers gripped his brother's dirty and dented plating a little harder. Primus help him, it was odd to see Sunstreaker's frame in such a state. The golden mech would have dragged himself through the Pit itself if it had meant a chance of rescuing his twin. And here Sideswipe was, trying to convince him to forgive his new mate, which was a frell of a lot harder.

His thoughts were interrupted by Sunstreaker's arms suddenly tightening around him, tugging his brother to his chestplate protectively. One hand went behind his helm as he spoke over Sideswipe's shoulder.

“You ever hurt him again,” Sunstreaker growled, “and I'll make sure they'll never figure out how many pieces were left of you. You understand?”

“...I understand,” the nomad replied.

Sideswipe refreshed his optics, then sighed weakly through his vents.

/He's my mate, but he will never replace you. I swear it./

/I know that. I'm your twin. He'll always be some savage barbarian, no matter what./

Sideswipe snorted a chuckle. /He might be a little more than that by now./

/So you admit it?/

/...One step at a time, okay? I just got you back./

/And you'll always have me. I'm never leaving your side again./

The red mech's spark crowed with delight at that, and spun around in its casing. Nearby, he could feel Sunstreaker's doing the same, a joy spreading between them and replacing the dark tendrils that had been leaking out over the bond before.

That was, until Sideswipe remembered what else they needed to talk about.

Patting his hand once on his brother's back, he pulled away slightly so that he could look at him in
“There's still another condition to you staying in the camp.”

Sunstreaker huffed. “Like what? They want me to go hunt a turbo-fox or something? Show of strength? What?”

Sideswipe bit his lip. He felt a quick surge of anxiety from the bond, and knew that it wasn't coming from Sunstreaker.

Then, a second later, it was.

“Sides?” he asked weakly. “What do they want me to do?”

Sideswipe started, but couldn't find the words to explain it to his brother. As he stammered, Prowl saved him and spoke up.

“The mech who brought you here is named Springer. He's claimed you as his mate, and you are required to bond with him.”

The sharp explanation rang in the red twin's audials.

“...They want me to what?” Sunstreaker's voice was dull, and far away, as were his optics.

Sideswipe gritted his dentals together.

“Sunny, I wouldn't ask you to do this, if it didn't mean otherwise losing you.”

The golden mech snapped to alertness. “I'm not leaving you.”

Prowl leaned forward. “Then you must bond with Springer.” His expression softened. “But...Sideswipe and I have a plan. You don't have to bond with him immediately. Your situation is more than exceptional.”

“You guys need to have compatible sparks before you bond, or it won't work,” Sideswipe continued for his mate, hating how shell-shocked his twin looked as he stared at him. “And right now, you barely know him. That's the way it normally is for when this tribe takes their mates from other tribes, but they know what they're getting into, and accept them. So what we do is explain to Optimus that you'll eventually bond, but you need way more time than usual to become compatible. Springer's done nothing right now to...to court you.”

Pit, he couldn't believe that those words were sliding out of his mouth. He felt like he was going to purge.

“You're already here, but Springer needs to continue to try to win you over. You guys go at the pace that you set.”

“...But I'll need to eventually bond with him anyway. You want me to bond with one of them.”

The twins locked optics. That was, up until the guilt and disgust with himself ate at Sideswipe's insides and he turned his gaze down.

“Sa. I mean, yeah. Yeah, eventually.”

“...If I do this, and try to make it work, do I get to stay here?”
“Yeah. I mean, you'll have to sleep in Springer's tent--”

“But you wouldn't be far.”

“Yeah.”

The three mechs were silent for a long time. They sat there, letting Sunstreaker process it all over, but all that Sideswipe could think of was how he was going to make himself sick for asking his twin to do this for him. Allow himself to be courted and eventually bond with someone he'd only known for orns? Was he insane?!

Then, a gentle hand touched Sideswipe's arm.

“You know that this is fragging nuts, right? I don't know anything about the mech.”

Sideswipe snorted. “I didn't know much about Prowl either.”

He was met with more silence.

And then a deep, bracing vent from the golden mech.

Springer's optics snapped back and forth between the twins as he sat on the mat of his tent and listened to Sideswipe go on and on, but Prowl standing near the entry with folded arms was enough to make sure that he paid rapt attention to the red mech.

“--and you follow the exact same rules as a yoska,” Sideswipe was saying in Iaconian. “If he doesn't want something, if he backs off, then you back off too. You don't touch him anytime that he doesn't want to be touched. In fact, try not to touch him at all. He doesn't like his finish to be messed up.”

Springer looked his new 'mate' up and down, taking in the multiple dents and scratches marring his entire frame. “You sure about that?”

The golden mech misinterpreted the look, and narrowed his blue optics as his engine growled. Sideswipe held up his hands towards him and switched to Standard.

“We were saying that you don't like your finish messed up.”

“Then tell him I need to get washed and waxed, ASAP.”

“It's probably going to have to wait until tomorrow, when he can get some water heated up.”

“Whatever.”

“He wants a bath,” Sideswipe translated. “He wants a fresh coat of wax too.”

The green mech's jaw fell open. “I've only got so much of it, and I use it for special occasions!”

“Then give whatever you've got to him.”

“Fine. Anything else?”

Sideswipe leaned forward towards the other yoska. “I can't emphasize this enough. This all goes at Sunstreaker's pace. This is how we do things in the city. If we were back there, you can't just drag
him to your home and declare him as your mate. This has to be mutually wanted. Sunstreaker doesn't have the choice of being here, so everything else is going to be nice and slow. You don't do anything more until he's comfortable and ready, and only when he tells you that. Sa?"

"Sa, sa," the green mech grunted. "Nothing that he doesn't want. I'll tell the same to Hot Rod, but tell your brother to go easy on him. He's been through a lot too."

Sideswipe glanced at the other berth in the tent, smaller and meant for a youngling's frame. Ratchet was keeping Hot Rod in the healers' tent for the night, insisting that he wanted to ensure that no infection was building on the torn energon lines. But Sideswipe knew, as bad as his injuries were, the youngling should have been fine to rest in Springer's tent.

...They'd tackle one problem at a time.

"This is an awful lot to do for a new mate, you know," the green mech murmured.

Prowl stiffened up his doorwings. "You claimed him, and now you must attend to your mate's needs. That is no different than what you would have done for anyone else. This just happens to be a longer and more complicated list for him than normal."

"Just slightly." But Springer nodded his head in agreement. "Fine. As slow as Sunstreaker wants to go, even if I can't touch my own mate." The last part was sneered.

"I'd highly suggest that you work hard to make him happy. I knew that the twins had a bond that was unlike any of our bonds between mates, but I had no idea how strong Sideswipe's control over it would be. A bit of wisdom for you, Springer: you do not want to make such a mech angry."

Sideswipe grimaced. That was the closest that Prowl had come to telling any of the tribe how intense their fight after their bonding had really been.

Springer glanced between them the two other mates. "You city-mechs are strange."

"If you want to win Sunny over, that's how it's going to be." Sideswipe raised his chin. "And if you ignore any part of that, then you don't just have to deal with Sunny, you have to deal with me."

"And me," Prowl added. "This is my mate's twin. He's my family now too."

Sideswipe's optic ridges rose high, and he twisted to look over his shoulder. But Prowl's expression didn't change or show the slightest amount of humor.

"You're serious?"

"I am." He huffed. "As...insulting as your brother may be to me."

The red mech grinned. "Worse than me?"

"Hush."

Springer groaned, and lay back to stretch out on his berth. "You better make sure that this is alright with Optimus."

"He's our next stop. I highly doubt that he'll object to this, especially if this keeps things peaceful not only between you two, but with Sunstreaker and the rest of the camp."

"Good. Now, if there's anything else...?"
He let the question hang, and Sideswipe and Prowl took that as their cue to leave. But as the doorwinged mech turned and vanished through the flaps, and the red mech went to follow him, he halted as he felt a stab of anxiety race through his spark. It hadn't come from his own.

Immediately he turned back to Sunstreaker, who was looking at him with huge optics.

“...I promise, I won't be far,” Sideswipe murmured. “Tomorrow I'll show you around the camp. I really have made friends here, and you'll get to meet them. And in a few orns that translation program will be fully installed, and you'll get to speak with them. Most of them are nice. Really.”

“No more barriers for a while. Okay?”

“No more,” he said immediately. “I swear it.”

He paused.

“...Not unless Prowl and I are interfacing or something. And I'll warn you first.”

Sunstreaker shuddered, likely thinking about getting a residual of love-making through their bond, which had happened accidentally to both twins several times. That was never a happy morning-after. “Yes, please.”

Sideswipe snickered, then took a knee to hug his brother one more time for the night. Their arms squeezed each other, once more reveling in the ability that they could after deca-cycles of separation.

“Night, Sunny.”

“Night, Sides.”

As he got up and pushed the flap aside, Sideswipe dragged his feet on the ground outside and stopped, and lingered just outside the tent for a breem, looking back in through the space between the unlaced flaps. Sunstreaker would know that he was still there, but the golden twin's optics were on Springer's berth instead.

The green mech stared back at new mate. Then, with a grunt, he rolled over, leaving a wide space for Sunstreaker, but turning his back to him and crossing his arms. Sunstreaker waited, and when Springer kept the space open, giving him plenty of room to rest without being touched, he worked his way over to the berth, then gingerly laid down on his belly, pulling one of the pillows closer to him and laid his helm down on it.

Sunstreaker was truly was exhausted, and eventually the need to recharge override the fears of his situation that his twin knew were dancing around his cortex. Sideswipe hung around until he could feel his brother's spark easing as he drifted off to sleep, and only then did he leave him and trot over to Prowl, who was waiting patiently with Optimus a few tent rows away.
Chapter 26: Doubt

Prowl groaned and kept his optics shut as he nuzzled his face into Sideswipe's neck. “Sideswipe. Go to sleep,” he grumbled.

His arms hugged his mate a little tighter. “I am sleeping,” he mumured at the fabric ceiling.

“Hmm.”

A breem passed.

“...Please go to sleep?”

“Trying.”

The red city-mech wondered if it was the blue light emanating from his optics that was keeping his mate awake along with him, and he shut them off, cutting off everything in his visual space but his HUD. For a while he swiped through different screens, checking off task lists that were updating themselves, troubleshooting minor errors, and generally trying to bore himself into recharge by micromanaging his own systems.

Some time later, his processor informed him that it was as fit as it could possibly be without a full-cortex defrag. Primus knew that Ratchet would be over the moon if he did that.

Prowl let out a short huff through his vents. A hand slipped up and stroked the red mech's jawline.

“Sunstreaker is fine. Please, go to sleep.”

Sideswipe vented heavily, and stared blindly up at where he assumed the roof of the tent was. “You go to sleep. I'm going to do my job and worry myself sick over my twin for the entire night cycle. If I don't do that, I risk losing my title in the tribe as The Best Twin Ever and I might even get fired.”

He heard the light squeak of Prowl's doowings twitching. “What? What's on fire?”

“Nothing's on fire,” he smirked. “Just because I'm up and stressing over Sunstreaker doesn't mean you have to too. Just recharge. I'll be fine.”

“...I'm trying, but you're making me anxious.”

“How am I making you--?”

His optics snapped back online, and he turned his head down to look at Prowl's own sleepy, half-dimmed optics.

Oh.

Their bond was now open.

Duh, Sideswipe.

“Sorry, sorry,” he chuckled, lifting his hand to take Prowl's fingers away from his face. He
squeezed them gently in his palm. “You can't block me out so that you can sleep?”

“I don't know how.”

Sideswipe would have thrown up his own block, a small one, if he hadn't promised Sunstreaker that he wouldn't do that again for a while. From further down the twin-bond, he could 'hear' the quiet mumbling of a spark occupied with recharge, but Primus help him if his twin suddenly woke up and was cut off from him again. Not only was his proximity close enough for him to force down a barrier, they would suddenly have a Very Unhappy Sunstreaker occupying their tent within breems.

“Prowl,” he whispered, his free hand moving down to cup his mate's cheek in return, “how much of me can you feel now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Can you feel what I'm feeling? Wait, duh, of course you can,” he scolded himself. “I'm worried, so you are now too. Okay. Um...”

He bit is lip as he tried to figure out how to explain it. He and Sunstreaker never had to talk about the technicalities of their bond to each other. They both understood it as well as the other, and it was always there. Trying to explain it to someone else felt like he was trying to teach Prowl an entirely new language. It had taken them long enough to learn that, fraggit.

“Can you feel what I'm feeling without me broadcasting it to you?”

Prowl squinted at him. “...Without you 'broadcasting’?”

“What I'm doing right now, apparently. It's like...hmm...”

He took his hand back to clasp Prowl's other hand, and held them both together just between their chestplates.

“It's like the difference between me shouting how I'm feeling and me mumbling it to myself. If I shout ‘I feel sad!’ to you, then you know exactly how I'm feeling, to where you also feel sad too, because you're connected to my spark. But if I'm just mumbling to myself “I'm sad,” then you have to come closer and purposely listen to hear me saying it. Does that make sense?”


“You could do that. But it's not very nice to grab somebody and spark-merge when you just want to check up on them,” he smirked.

“Then how?”

“I honestly don't know. Sunny and I just do it naturally. I don't have to think about it that much.”

Perhaps showing him would be better than trying to talk him through it.

Sideswipe leaned his head forward, his forehelms pressed against Prowl's chevrons, their optics locked, and their hands still held between them. He cycled air a few times as he let his consciousness drift down to his spark.

He could 'see' himself, his own spark. And there was Prowl's, not that far away. Somewhere a little further was Sunstreaker, but his twin wasn't paying attention to him while in recharge. Hopefully
he'd stay that way awhile so that Sideswipe didn't accidentally startle him with this experiment.

“This is me broadcasting.”

He filled his mind with the dumbest, most hilarious jokes that he'd heard at the bar back in Kaon. One of the construction mechs had a thing for puns that would make his teammates at the table groan, probably because they'd hear him retell it all over, while the rest of the patrons roared in laughter. Sideswipe bundled up the feeling of whenever he'd snicker at the latest joke, the joy at being able to forget himself for a while and enjoy the bar with dozen of other happily drunk mechs, and folded that all into a little ball before pulsing it all out, hard.

Prowl's doorwings twitched, his optics opening wider and gazing at his mate. “You're laughing about something.”

“You got it. I had to force that a little, but let's say I was really excited about something and couldn't keep it bottled up. You'd know right away. Now...this is me getting closer to you, so to say.”

He focused on his spark again, and then on Prowl's. He concentrated, reaching out across the bond to it gingerly, then brushed against him, one tendril of light sparking against another's, not enough to alarm his mate, but make him aware of his presence.

Prowl would be unable to hide from him or block him out, so Sideswipe respectfully kept his distance, only reading what he could sense on the surface of his mate's mind.

“You're a little awed by all this,” he whispered with a grin.

“...Clearly, but you can feel that?” Prowl asked.

/Sure./

The nomad's yelp startled both of them. Sideswipe kept their hands clasped so that he couldn't go far, but shuffled back to give the shocked mech some room.

“What's wrong? Did that hurt you?”

“I...you...I could hear you in my spark!” Prowl cried.

“...Yeah?” Sideswipe lifted one optic ridge. “We're bonded. Of course you can hear me.”

He gaped at him. “This is normal?!”

“Between me and Sunny, it is.”

“I've never heard of other mates talking about anything like this!”

His other optic ridge shot up. “We've always done this. We have to be physically close in order for it to work properly and for us to comprehend a 'sentence', and it's hard to understand more than basic words when there's a distance between us, but otherwise its not that difficult.”

“That's amazing,” Prowl gasped, fully awake now and pushing himself to sit up slightly. “You can talk to each other without ever saying anything?!?”

Sideswipe stared up at him. “Well yeah, sure. It's not that different from comms.”

“Comms?”
“Communication Systems. Wait, nevermind.” He shook his head. “I forgot, you guys don't have comm towers out here. Comm systems are another way for mechs in the cities to talk using data bursts. But,” he stared at his mate's bemused face, “it has nothing to do with bonding. Bad example, forget it.”

“So this is normal to you?”

“Always has been.”

Prowl's optics flickered, the same way it did whenever he was thinking hard about something. It took a breem. “You and Sunstreaker are used to how your bond works. I don't know if I could ‘talk’ like that too. There's a low chance of it.”

“Well, let's try.” Sideswipe was honestly curious. “I don't want to spark-play right now; Sunny would feel it and he's trying to rest. But let's see if you can talk back to me without us doing that.”

He shifted so that Prowl could roll over and lay comfortably on top of him. It was as close as the two mech's sparks could physically be, their chestplates rubbing against each other, without opening their chambers and exposing their essences to one another. Even without it Sideswipe could still feel his spark pressing up to the chamber's anterior space, 'hearing' its mate nearby and trying to reach out to it, and he was certain that Prowl's was doing the same.

//Concentrate on saying something to me./ His hands lifted and clasped Prowl's shoulders when the other mech jolted in surprise again. //It's okay. I'm not really in your mind; I'm talking and you're hearing me. That's all.//

“It's so strange,” Prowl murmured, adjusting to make himself comfortable, his arms crossed over the top of Sideswipe's chestplate and pillowing his chin as he gazed down at his mate.

Sideswipe answered aloud this time. “I guess for you, it is. I've never thought it was a big deal because it was so similar to comms.” He pressed his lips together, showing Prowl that he was no longer using his vocalizer. //Now try to say something in your mind, but at me. I'll tell you if I hear you.//

Prowl's frame relaxed, and his optics dimmed slightly as he concentrated no longer on his physical presence, but on his spark. Sideswipe did the same, but instead of concentrating on himself, he let his senses spread, nearly switching on his battle programming as he asked for his systems to start looking for anything unusual. His audials heard the rustling of the tent flaps in the night wind more clearly, his optics detected each flicker of the lamps hanging on the center pole, and his hands gripping Prowl's shoulders noted the smoothed, warmed metal, and he swore that he could feel the each pump of the mech's energon lines underneath his plating. But none of this was what he was actually looking for, and he quieted his mind as he let his spark look further.

There was Prowl, as close as he could ever be without merging. He felt through the bond that his mate was doing something. The spark was wiggling around, as if just now realizing how immobile it was on the dark, eternal plane that wasn't the physical world, compared to Sideswipe's, which could zip back and forth whenever he pleased. There was a pulse, and Sideswipe perked up, listening, but was unable to judge what had passed by.

He waited, and Prowl tried again. This time the pulse was harder, more insistent, but only that, just a pulse. Sideswipe frowned.

/I feel you, but you're not actually saying anything./
“I'm trying,” Prowl mumbled aloud.

/I know. It's okay. Keep trying, I'm still listening./

Another pulse. Sideswipe stared at him, not breaking his expression, and Prowl furrowed his optic ridges as his spark 'wiggled' more forcefully before pulsing again. This time Sideswipe could sense the frustration behind it.

“Okay, I do feel you, but maybe 'talking' is only something Sunstreaker and I can do,” he murmured gently. “I can sense that you're getting frustrated, but I don't hear any actual words.”

“Hmph.”


The spark wiggled again, preparing itself, then pulsed. Sideswipe felt a new hope behind it, a longing for something to work. But that was all he felt.

“...Still nothing, besides how you're feeling. Sorry.”

“I could practice,” Prowl offered.

“Maybe. But Sunny and I are literally splits of the same spark. 'Talking' as if we're on a comm may just only be for the two of us. It's an entirely different bond than what you and I have.”

“But you can talk to me.”

“Because I'm stronger.”

The light behind Prowl's optics wasn't coming back. Sideswipe reached his arms around and cradled his mate's head, and nuzzled the top of his helm. Prowl's engine lightly revved in a grumbling tone.

“Are you jealous?” Sideswipe realized with a small smirk.

“Why would I be?”

“You are.”

“I'll get better with practice.”

“Prowl, Sunstreaker and I have been bonded since we were ignited as one spark. You didn't even know that I could do this until a few breems ago. It's going to take you vorns to catch up, if you ever do at all.”

“It would be useful if I could do it too.”

Sideswipe's grin grew even wider. “You want to do it because the idea of talking without using your vocalizer at all is blowing your Primus-fragged cortex right now. I should ask Perceptor about getting short-range comms set up.”

Prowl made a face. “I admit that I find it incredibly intriguing.”

“Uh-huh.”
“I thought that I had felt something while you and Sunstreaker were hugging a few joors ago. Were you two talking like this?”

“We were.” Maybe he was getting better at separating the bonds now that Sunstreaker was nearby, if he could ‘broadcast’ to them as individuals. Or maybe Prowl wasn't as good as 'listening' as Sunstreaker was.

“After we bonded, you said that you couldn't feel Sunstreaker anymore.”

Sideswipe paused. “...You were blocking him from my 'sight,'” he said slowly. “I could barely feel him at all once I was in the wildlands. The distance between us was too great. Then we outpaced him on the way back to camp, and it got even worse. The morning after we bonded, I thought I felt him, and then--”

“I thought it was me.”

“You're not sure?”

“Not now.” One of Prowl's fists clenched. “I know that I felt you. I assumed that you were feeling me too. You were hopeful, and excited. I thought that you were reaching out to me, that you liked the bond.”

The smile on the red mech's face instantly vanished. Some of the anger that still clung to his spark boiled back up and resurfaced.

“Everything you felt from that was meant for my brother,” he said lowly. “Not you.”

“...I know.” Instead of arguing, Prowl bowed his head, and rested his forehelm on a red arm. “I know.”

Sideswipe stared at him. Then, after a huff from his vents, he adjusted his hold on his mate to let him pillow his head more comfortably on his chestplate instead, his arms draped loosely over his shoulders, just above his doorwings.

“Prowl. You're never going to have as strong of a bond with me as Sunstreaker and I do. Okay? It's just never going to happen. I'm not being an aft to you, I'm just stating that as a fact.”

The nomad didn't answer that. He kept his head laid down, and stayed quiet, unwilling to continue that conversation.

Sideswipe's spark twisted a little.

He felt sad.

His mate felt sad.

But, for now, he was unwilling to continue on that topic either. It would likely be a minefield forever.

Prowl had kidnapped him. Prowl had claimed him as his mate. Prowl had assumed that he would be fine with bonding. He was trapped here, with a tribe that could be wiped out by the Decepticons before the vorn was over, because of Prowl.

He should hate him with all of his spark.

But as he laid his helm back on the pillow, and tried again to clear his mind of its troubles so that
he could recharge, Sunstreaker's words circled around through his processor.

'You love him.'

...Sunstreaker had been in camp for less than a day. He didn't know what he was talking about.

Sideswipe liked Prowl. He held a sincere affection for him. They'd interfaced several times, and he'd trusted him once (once!) to spark-play. They'd been through too much together for him to ever want to see the mech hurt. They respected one another.

But he didn't love him.

Even the twins, a pair of split-sparks, could make mistakes in interpreting what the other was thinking. This wouldn't be the first time that had happened, though it would be the first that one of them had falsely accused the other of falling in love.

That didn't comfort him at all, and he had no idea how long it was until he finally fell into recharge, or if his disheartened mate ever followed him.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He woke up to 'yelling' from his brother.

Sleepy optics flickered until they stayed online, and Sideswipe quickly realized that he was lying alone amongst the furs on the berth. A rustling movement nearby told him that Prowl hadn't gone far, though. One of the scrolls was put away on the shelf, and then the nomad came back into his visual range, a white and black blob while the red mech tried to adjust his optic sensors.

“Sideswipe? What's wrong?”

“Nng...” He held up one finger to tell his mate to wait, and instead focused on his spark.

/You alright, bro?/ he asked sleepily.

/I thought you told the son of a glitch not to touch me!/

Instantly Sideswipe went from partially-online to fully alert. He was up fast enough to startle Prowl as he leaned over to grab where his waist-cloth was folded and tugged it on.

/I did! Are you alright? What did he do?!/

/He tried to wash me!/

Sideswipe froze in the middle of tying the cloth's knot.

/...Well, I did tell him that you needed a bath.

He felt the equivalent of 'sputtering' through the bond. /I can scrub myself down just fine! But my 'mate' insisted on helping me with my back!/

“Sideswipe?” Prowl asked again, cautiously. Sideswipe vented in frustration, and continued to dress himself at a more sedate pace.

“Springer tried to bathe Sunny. He didn't like it.”

The white mech refreshed his optics at him. “Your brother was filthy when he was brought in.”
“Oh, he likes to stay clean, believe me. He's going to split energon lines when he realizes how accepting you guys are of a little dirt. But Springer tried to help clean him up. He really doesn't like being touched.”

“...Ah.” At that, Prowl grabbed his clothes and began dressing as well, while Sideswipe finished tugging on his poncho.

/He's trying to be nice, Sunny./

/He won't be trying anymore./

/Oh Primus, what did you do?/

/Dunked the bucket of water on his head./

Sideswipe snorted a laugh, and he knew that his humor was cascading down both bonds, because he felt his twin 'scowling' back at him, while Prowl popped his head up and looked even more confused.

“...And now...?”

“Sunny's taking care of himself just fine,” Sideswipe smirked as he reached for his sword and strapped it to his back. “But I better go rescue him.”

“No one will mind if you spend the orn with him, especially when he doesn't yet understand anyone,” Prowl said as they both finished gathering what they needed for the orn and stepped out of their tent.

The rest of the Autobots were rising with the dawn, and the tribe's camp was coming alive all around them. Springer must have gotten a bucket of warmed water early, long before there would be anyone else at the bonfire in the center of the camp to pester him about his new mate.

“I'll see you tonight,” Prowl said. “Don't forget, we're moving out tomorrow.”

Sideswipe halted. “Moving out where?”

“North. We don't yet know where Iacon is, but it's time for the Minotoron herd to move on anyway, before they graze down the crystals here too much.”

“Too much?”

Prowl nodded, then pointed to one of the small outcroppings between the tents, no higher than his knee.

“We don't want the crystals entirely worn down, or they won't have a chance to grow back by the time we come through here again.”

“But we could end up moving away from Iacon.”

“We are under that same risk no matter what direction we move in, and if we go anywhere, I'd rather it be away from Decepticon territory, in case they move faster than we anticipate and return.”

“Prowl, we need to figure out its location soon,” Sideswipe reminded him. “It won't take them long to realize that we were delaying them.”
“I'm waiting for Jazz to come back. With any luck, one of the neighboring tribes will have some ideas about interpreting the prophecy.”

“And if they don't?”

The nomad's doorwing's raised stiffly. “Then I'll figure something else out.”

“...Prowl, they'll--”

“I know.”

A white hand reached up, cupping his cheek, and the nomad's thumb stroked Sideswipe's jaw.

“I won't let them touch you.”

Sideswipe huffed. “I'm more worried about the tribe, not me. At least the Decepticons would keep me alive long enough to sacrifice me.” He grimaced. “And even if we find Iacon, we still need to protect the tribe once we get there. Wouldn't the Decepticons just follow us to it?”

“Not if we put enough ground between us before they return, and they have nothing to track. We'll find a way. The tribe always does.”

“...You know, for a such a logical mech, you are putting way too much faith in a Primus-fragged prophecy,” Sideswipe scowled as he pushed his hand away from his face.

“It brought you to me, didn't it?”

“No, it didn't.”

“Alpha Trion said that you had a destiny. After all that's happened, you don't think that you're fulfilling something?”

“Nope. This is just some rotten luck. Nothing more.”

Prowl just shrugged, and the gesture made Sideswipe even more irritated. His mate must have felt it, because he leaned up and quickly kissed his lips before the red mech could do anything about it, and ignored the surprised squeak of Sideswipe's engine.

“I disagree. See you tonight.”

And before Sideswipe could get another word in, he was gone, heading off towards the edge of the tentline. The ex-mercenary watched him go, then muttered darkly to himself as he turned and walked in the other direction.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He came to Springer's tent just in time to see Tracks leaving, the dark blue mech chuckling to himself as he came upon the other yoska.

“Springer's got his work cut out for him.”

“You have no idea,” Sideswipe replied with a short grin of his own, and the two yoska touched each other's shoulders as they passed, which the ex-mercenary had learned was a brotherly gesture to the nomads. Tracks headed on down the throughway, while Sideswipe patted the tent flap.

“Knock-knock!” he called out.
“About fragging time. Get in here.”

“Nice to know you're still a wonderful bowl of sunshine.”

Stepping into the darkened tent, the red mech took a moment to let his optics adjust to the dim light, then focused on his twin sitting on the berth, picking at several layers of folded yellow cloth sitting nearby. He saw the wet spot on the rugs where the bucket had been overturned, and if he stared long enough, he could make out the footprints of a drenched mech angrily storming out.

“Feeling better?”

“Much.”

Sunstreaker certainly looked better. There were dents in his plating that were still self-repairing, but he was reasonably clean now, and he'd clearly worked on buffing out the scratches. The aura of a mech who was proud of his appearance was coming back to his stance, and Sideswipe's spark lightened with the knowledge that his twin would eventually be back to his grumpy, narcissistic, normal self.

“I guess this is mine?” Sunstreaker asked as he pawed apart the waist-cloth. Somehow Tracks had gotten a shade that was very close to the golden mech's coloring, and Sideswipe quietly thanked Primus for the yoska's keen optic.

“Yep. It takes some getting used to, but it's not that bad.”

“What if I don't wear it?”

“Then everybody in camp gets upset because you're exposing your interface port to everyone.”

Sunstreaker glanced down at himself, and the piece of Springer's green clothing that was still tied around his waist. “It's not even open!”

“Yeah, but they're weird like that. They don't like mechs being 'naked.'”

“Why?!”

“Dunno. Just go with it, bro.”

He growled a swear, but undid the green cloth and tried on the new clothes anyway. Sideswipe knelt down to help him, showing him how to wrap the waist-cloth around himself so that it wouldn't slide off his hips, where to tie the knot, then how to get the poncho over his head and past his plating without it catching on anything. Only a few deca-cycles ago Prowl had been helping him with the same thing, and it felt strange to now be showing it to his brother.

Pit, Sunstreaker was right. He really was one of them now.

Once he was dressed, the two of them left the tent, Sideswipe leading the way to the Commons. Almost immediately Sunstreaker was the center of attention. Several mechs and femmes stopped what they were doing to look his way, some suspiciously, still not trusting him for hurting one of their younglings, but more were just gawking, their optics wide, before whispering at one another and pointing.

“...They're staring at me,” Sunstreaker hissed.

Sideswipe cocked his head to the side and grinned. “And that's different from the streets of Kaon,
how? I thought you liked being the hottest mech in sight.”

“At least at home they had the decency to pretend that they weren’t staring.”

“What can I say? You’re new, you came in pretty dramatically yesterday, you’re fragging handsome, and you’re more polished than any of them. They’re probably wishing they claimed you as their mate instead.”

Immediately Sideswipe wanted to take it back, but Sunstreaker’s engine was already growling darkly.

“They can all go suck on slag.”

“I hear you.”

“No, you don’t.”

He tried changing the topic. “Has Hot Rod come back to the tent yet?”

“Who, Springer’s youngling? I haven’t seen him yet. He’s probably avoiding me for as long as he can.”

“...Go easy on him, okay? He’s just a kid.”

“I know. Or I do now, anyway.”

It took them a few breems longer to reach the clearing, and find a couple of mats close to the center bonfire to plop down upon. Mechs walking around still stared at them, but Sideswipe shifted so that he was facing the flames, turning his back to them, and Sunstreaker did the same.

The twins sat in a communal silence for a while, staring into the fire licking around the felled logs of crystal stems, before Sunstreaker spoke up again.

“I’m still trying to take this all in. Sentinel turning on us for some prophecy, almost selling you out to the Decepticons, and then you just happened to get snatched up by a different tribe and bonded to one of them--”

“Prowl thinks that Alpha Trion was right, that I have a ‘destiny’ or something.”

“Please don’t tell me that you believe him.”

He scoffed. “Of course not. It’s all fragging superstition. I can hardly believe that Sentinel allowed himself to get caught up in it. All for what, energon? An army? Even the Autobots don’t know what’s in Iacon, if it even still exists.”

“Then why are we still here? We should run away. Tarn isn’t that far. They might take us in.”

“...Sunny, there’s another city-mech here, from Tarn. Goes by the name Perceptor. He was brought here about the same time that I was. He came here willingly.”

“Must have a screw loose.”

“I thought so too. But the things he told me about the energon crisis that Tarn has, the exact same one that Kaon’s having...Sunny, it’s happening all over the planet. It makes sense now why Sentinel was so desperate for whatever’s supposedly in Iacon. He’s running out of mineable energon, and so is every other city.”
Sunstreaker straightened up. “I knew Kaon was in bad shape, but I thought it was just a temporary thing. Demand goes up, there's a crisis, there's a fight, we lose mechs, demand goes back down. It's a cycle.”

“Yeah, but this cycle's going to be one frell of a kicker this time. The only ones who aren't going to be scrambling for energon and weapons are the wildland tribes.”

“Because life is so much easier out here, right?”

Sideswipe vented. “Honestly? It kind of is. At least there's no chance that we're going to get signed up for a planet-wide war while we're here.”

“...You really think that's what's going to happen?”

“Perceptor does. And the more I think about it? If Sentinel was ready to sacrifice me for whatever Iacon's rumored to have, then things are really getting desperate.”

Both twins went quiet again as Sideswipe let Sunstreaker process that. The golden mech was pressing his lips together into a tight line, the orange light of the fire flickering on pondering optics. Eventually he drew his knees up, and hugged them.

“Primus Almighty.”

“Still want to go to Tarn? We'll probably get recruited for their army, if not sent right back to Kaon. Or taken as war prisoners before the war actually starts.”

“I'll bet that things have gotten even worse since we left.”

“And it'll get even more insane when Sentinel tells Megatron that he lost not only his sacrifice--”

“But his back-up. Nice to know where we stood with him. I knew he was a piece of slag, but Primus fraggit, this is insane.”

Sideswipe drew his knees up too, matching his twin's pose. “It’s not that bad out here, really. Once you get past the whole kidnapping thing.”

“You don't 'get past' being kidnapped, Sideswipe,” his brother grunted. “Whether it saved your life or not, Prowl dragged you away from your caravan, kept you isolated from anyone from the cities, and now that you think that you've got no choice but to stay, he's got your spark wrapped around his finger.”

“No he doesn’t,” Sideswipe growled, and shocked himself at his own aggressiveness. He got a snort in response.

“Yes, he does. If there was no war coming, would you walk away? Would you be able to leave?”

...He wouldn't.

Primus, he couldn't.

“I'd stay, but not just because of Prowl!” he argued. “First of all, Sentinel tried to have me fragging sacrificed. It'll be a cold day in the Pit before I ever go back to Kaon. Second, I've made other friends here, good friends. In the tribe, I'm a yoska. It's something like a warrior, but better. I work not only to protect the tribe, but care for it. Mechs rely on me now, and I can't just turn my back on them. And third, and most importantly, the Decepticons know where I am, and they still think that
sacrificing my spark will get them to Iacon.”

Sunstreaker’s head snapped to his brother so quickly that the servos in his neck shrieked. “Wait, what?!”

“...I guess I haven't told you that part yet,” Sideswipe said, his optic ridges raising a little. “They know that I'm here.”

“What's stopping them from coming for you and wrecking this place?!”

“They already did come.”

“What?!”

“It's okay! We managed to fool them into thinking that I left the Iacon prophecy back with the caravan in their territory, and that's decacycles away. They probably don't know how or when to sacrifice me without it, and I threatened to self-terminate during the long trip if they tried to take me with them.”

“And they probably thought that I was already at their camp, happily waiting to get sacrificed instead,” Sunstreaker growled.

“They're going to be fragged to the Pit when they get home and realize that they've been tricked, twice.”

“So they'll come back?”

“Eventually. That's why we need to find Iacon before they return.”

“...What else haven't you told me yet?!”

“Bro, I haven't seen you in a third of a vorn. We've got some catching up to do.”

Sunstreaker glared at them, then skirted around on his mat until he was facing his brother.

“Then let's start right now. Talk.”

...Well, Prowl did say that he was allowed to spend the entire day with his brother. Preemptively feeling exhausted at the tale he was about to tell, Sideswipe pulled his rations can out of his subspace pocket, and offered it to his twin.

“Might as well refuel as you listen. So, right after the caravan vehicle broke down...”
Chapter 27: Herd

Packing up their belongings was a shockingly quick task, and a sad reminder for Sideswipe of how much he did not have anymore. Moving across the city to a new apartment had always been an odyssey, even though the twins were servo-packed and only needed one orn to move all of their possessions across Kaon, but Prowl and Sideswipe had all of their things packed into a communal wagon in less than a joor, and most of these were Prowl's things, not Sideswipe's.

“All I have left is my sword, and what was in my pack and subspace pockets,” he lamented to Prowl as the two of them undid the frame holding together the octogon-shape of the tent's walls. “The rest of my slag is gone. With nobody paying rent, somebody will eventually repossess the apartment, and everything in it.”

“No one will watch your things for you?” Prowl asked. He put the frame piece he was holding down outside the tent, then took Sideswipe's and began to stack them into a neat pile. “The tribe moved at least once while we were gone, as you saw, though the last time was in a rush to get away from the Decepticons. Someone will pack and unpack my tent for me, and I do the same for someone who is not at camp during a move.”

Sideswipe snorted. “The city will watch my things long enough to resell them.”

“I'm sorry.” He was sincere. “Have you lost anything important?”

“Just...sentimental stuff, you know? I can think of a few things that would help us out here, but most of it was important because it was mine.”

“Is it anything that could be replaced?”

“Not really.” He glanced at the wagon, loaded with things from at least four of the neighboring tents. “Nothing that wouldn't just take up space.”

“Sideswipe, you know that anything in the tent is now ours, sa? It's not my berth anymore, it's our berth.”

“I know, but I'm still wrapping my cortex around that,” he said as he stacked another frame piece onto the pile. “So does this mean all those scrolls are ours too?” he asked with a sudden smirk.

Prowl made a face. “...Sa,” he replied cautiously. “They are.”

“So I could--”

“Please don't deface them.”

“You're no fun.”

Without the frame, the tent was loosing its shape and its ends were flapping in the breeze. Prowl and Sideswipe stepped inside one more time to undo the roof's ties from the center pole, then let it flutter down behind them on their exit. Next came undoing the tie lines, which Prowl explained
was saved for last, so that the tent wouldn't fly away if they were suddenly distracted.

And as soon as he was done telling his mate that, that's exactly what happened. There were howls from the edge of the camp, not friendly, but not in warning either. Anyone who was a *yoska* suddenly stopped working, and laid down what they were doing before jogging off in the direction of the howls.

“What's happening?” Sideswipe asked as Prowl set down the stake that he'd just pulled out of the ground.

“The herders need help with the Minotorons.”

Sideswipe gestured his hands at the remains of their tent. “What about this?!”

“Others will get it.” He beckoned his mate. “Let's go.”

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“So how far has the translation program installed?”

“59%.” Sunstreaker's optics were shut off as he rubbed his thumb and forefinger along the bridge of his nose. “I'm getting some of the basic words in, but the rest that I'm hearing is just babble. All this clicking and whistling. They sound like a bunch of younglings with a virus in their vocalizers.”

Sideswipe cackled as he walked alongside his twin within the group of *yoska*. “You know, to them, we sound like we're growling and snarling at each other.”

“It's Primus-fragging Standard, Sideswipe!”

“Yeah, but they don't use it. We're the ones babbling right now.”

The group was passing the end of the tentline, or what was left of it, and climbing the hill towards the valley where the Minotoron herd was still grazing. The twins had headed towards each other as soon as they'd spotted one another, and their mates let them be, Prowl jogging ahead to speak with the other *yoska* leaders, while Springer hung back to chat with his own group of friends as they ambled along.

A hand clapped Sideswipe's shoulder, startling him briefly, and when he turned, Trailbreaker was grinning at him. “So this is your long-lost brother!” he said in Iaconian. “You haven't introduced him to everyone yet.”

Sideswipe smirked “We can do that better once he actually speaks the same language.” His optics glanced back at his brother, who was frowning, once again left out of the conversation.

Trailbreaker wiggled his fingers at the golden twin, who only darkened his scowl in response. “Real pleasant, like you, *na*?”

“You say that like I may have made some friends with you all.”

“Primus forbid.” Trailbreaker tried again with Sunstreaker. “Hey, you! Maybe you can understand this! Bar-bar-bar!”

Surprise and humor flashed down through the twins' bond, though Sunstreaker didn't let it show any more than a snorted guffaw. “Where'd he learn that?!” he exclaimed at his brother as Trailbreaker's smile grew wider, and a few of the *yoska* around them chortled. “That's supposed to
be a joke of what these barbarians sound like! Frag, it's where we get the word 'barbarian!'"

“I yelled it at them after they captured me, and they thought it was the funniest slag that they ever
heard!” And indeed, now that he could understand Iaconian, ‘bar-bar-bar’ was absolutely nonsense
and silly. It did sound like barked growling to mechs who spoke mostly in chirrs and clicks, which,
oddly enough, was closer to what Standard sounded like to them than what Iaconian had been like
to Sideswipe's audials. No wonder Prowl's group had burst out laughing when his new mate had
snarled it at them. The fragging joke had been twisted on its head.

“You know,” he said to Trailbreaker in Iaconian, “that's what I thought you sounded like when I
first met you mechs.”

“Ha! Couldn't tell the difference between that and the rest of the slag that came out of your mouth.”

As they crested the hill, and came upon the field of grazing Minotorons, Sunstreaker stumbled a
step as his optics bulged, shocked by the size of the herd, and Sideswipe had to pat his back to keep
him moving. But a moment later both of them were slowing, baffled as the yoska spread out
without an issued order, the nomads knowing what to do.

“Hey, uh--”

Sideswipe spotted a flash of green that was already standing by the herd, and ran over to it,
Sunstreaker following closely behind him. Hound turned at their approach, grinned, and held up
the rope lasso coiled in his fist.

“You better get ready. We'll need as many mechs as we can to get them through the first push.”

“Hound, nobody told me what we're doing. We're going to walk up to the Minotorons and start
pushing them?”

“Not literally.” The nomad spread his hand to the other yoska. “See how everyone's forming a
line?”

“Sa?”

“We're going to be a moving fence. The Minotorons in a herd this size can't be enticed to follow
bait, but they will move away from a group of us coming at them from behind. The others in the
herd will move along without thinking why they need to go, and we can get all of them moving in
one direction. Hopefully.” He grimaced. “One of the bulls is giving us a hard time. He's been
fragging up any attempts to get the herd to go anywhere.”

He pointed out one of the largest Minotorons at the far end. The horned, servo-packed creature was
shoving the rest of it's peers out of the way as it gobbled up the best of the crystals, and the rest of
the Minotorons were wisely giving him space.

“He's become suddenly more aggressive in the past few orns. I don't have time to figure out what's
wrong with him. Bluestreak and I will keep an optic on him, but if you see him getting ready to
charge, get the frell out of the way, sa?”

“Sa.” Sideswipe relayed this to Sunstreaker before turning back to Hound. “So where do we go?”

“Anywhere in the line. Just do as we do.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
The line of *yoska* was nearly as long as the herd itself. Some of the Minotorons were already shambling away from them, nervous and skittish at the presence of so many mechs, but most of them ignored the Autobot tribe. The mechs at the flanks had curved around to make a 'C' shape, preventing the herd from getting the idea of going around them. For now, the group stood still, letting the creatures get used to their presence, and giving the stragglers from camp a few more breems to catch up. Even some of the younglings had run over to watch and help, a few of them darting into the herd itself, running back and forth and petting the Minotorons who turned their heads to nuzzle the smaller beings. They seemed to know instinctively not to hurt them.

Sideswipe noted that there were still quite a few *yoska* missing. They must have been assigned to stay in camp and help finish disassembling the tents. Optimus was absent as well.

The twins stood together, of course, with Prowl on Sideswipe's right, and Springer on Sunstreaker's left. After a long while of Springer actively ignoring Sunstreaker, keeping his back turned to his new mate as he chatted with the nomad next to him instead, Sideswipe stepped closer to his brother.

“Did something happen?”

Sunstreaker grunted. “He didn't come back all of last night,” he said quietly. “Neither did Hot Rod.”

“Maybe they both slept somewhere else. Maybe the kid's too nervous to want to share a tent with you yet.”

“...Sides, I really didn't mean to hurt him.”

“I know,” Sideswipe said immediately, sensing his brother's weary remorse. “But he's a youngling. He doesn't know that.”

One of the younglings called out to another. The ground nearby crunched as small footsteps ran up from the herd to the line of nomads, then slowed to a walk. Sideswipe turned his helm towards the newcomer, and his pump picked up when he saw who it was.

“...And speak of the mech...” At the same time he pulsed quickly at the bond to get his twin's attention.

Sunstreaker turned too, and his optics widened a little at the orange youngling. Hot Rod's shoulders were back, his head held high, and once he'd stepped up close to the golden twin, he crossed his arms and glared up at him.

Prowl and Springer stopped what they were doing and watched curiously, as well as some of the other *yoska* in the line. Sunstreaker stared back at the youngling, then cocked his head to the side when he did nothing but grimace and rev his engine, the sound far too light for either city-mech to take as an actual threat.

“What?”

Hot Rod spoke in Iaconian. “You should know that I'm not afraid of you.”

Sunstreaker stared at him blankly, and after a moment of silence Sideswipe mentally whacked himself upside the head and translated for his brother. Sunstreaker glanced between the two of them.

“You don't need to be. I'm sorry that I hurt you.” He tried to sound sincere, but it came out
awkwardly, then was worsened by the need for Sideswipe to translate again for the youngling.

“I want to fight you, on fair ground this time. I'm going to win.”

“Is that so?” Sunstreaker lifted his optic ridges. “I'm not going to fight you, kid.”

Hot Rod raised himself to his full height, which wasn't much further than the middle of the golden mech's chestplate. “Why not? You're scared of me?”

“No, because your carrier would have my aft if I tried.” He jabbed a thumb towards Springer.

“I bet he would. But he's not here.”

Sideswipe interrupted to gesture with his head towards the green mech watching them with an apprehensive look. “But Springer's right over--”

“Springer's not my carrier.” Hot Rod's hands gripped his arm plating a little tighter. “My carrier and sire are gone. Springer just takes care of me.” He raised his voice a little, trying to sound as threatening as a youngling could be. “So you're going to fight me, and I'm going to beat you this time!”

The twins glanced at each other, baffled.

Springer wasn't Hot Rod's carrier?

Well, that was one assumption thrown straight out the window.

But Sunstreaker was saved from having to talk his way out of not dueling a youngling by a howl from the end of the line, calling for attention. Immediately the rest of the yoska stiffened up and braced themselves.

“We're getting ready to move.” Prowl at last stepped in. “Hot Rod, help the others keep the Minotorons calm.”

“But--”

“Go.”

Despite his scowl, even Hot Rod knew better than to disobey an order from one of the yoska leaders. With one last glare at Sunstreaker, he huffed what sounded like a held-back swear, and stormed off, stomping over to where the other younglings were petting different Minotorons soothingly.

“...The frell was that about?!”

Prowl looked at his mate. “He's trying to be older than he actually is.”

“He challenged Sunstreaker to a fight!” Sideswipe exclaimed. “Is this kid trying to get offline?!”

“He's trying to deal with his fear of your brother. Hot Rod thinks highly of himself. He finds that the best way to conquer his fear is to deal with it head-on.”

“A youngling after my own spark.” Sideswipe snorted, then turned to say something to Sunstreaker, but froze when he saw the haunted look on his face. “Bro, you alright?” he asked in Standard, and at the same time pulsed lightly at their bond.
Sunstreaker stiffened. “I’m fine.”

Sideswipe didn't believe him for a second. He wanted to question him further, but motion from up and down the line stopped him. All of the mechs were raising their arms, spreading them, reaching out towards one another's fingertips.

The twins glanced around at first, then hesitantly did the same. They stood upright with their shoulders slightly hunched, their fingertips barely touching each other's, and those of their mates. In less than a breem the line had formed into an unbroken chain of nomads surrounding the rear of the herd. Sideswipe noted that all the mechs had adopted a somewhat aggressive stance, and those with doorwings had flared them, including Prowl.

“Advance!” the white nomad barked.

Then, as one, all of the yoska took a step forward. Sideswipe and Sunstreaker quickly followed, staying in line with the rest of the nomads as they walked forward towards the Minotorons. They kept pace, but it wasn't a military march; their feet did not mark time or pound on the ground, and the line wiggled into a blob as some mechs moved faster or slower than others, but they generally stayed together, and pushed forward, the formation crawling towards the herd.

The nearest of the Minotorons immediately moved away, not wanting to get entangled with the nomads. They groaned and bellowed at their neighbors, and these ones moved away too, and the same was repeated throughout the herd. Before long the cacophony of bellowing echoed through the wildlands, and the creatures allowed themselves to be moved out of the small valley and up the hill, alongside the camp that was nearly done being disassembled.

“Watch the ground,” Sideswipe warned his twin.

“Why?”

“You should see the slag these things leave behind.”

“Guh.” Sunstreaker made a face, and carefully stepped down a suspicious brown pile lying beside a crystal. “Thanks for telling me that before I got volunteered for this.”

Some of the mechs, including Bluestreak and Hound, broke off from the line and ran forward along the flanks, guiding back Minotorons that were wandering too far from the herd. The front was a sloppy mess, but putting someone in front of the Minotorons might cause them to stop or split, and the nomads instead concentrated on keeping the herd together and moving. After a while the Minotorons got the idea, and stuck together, grumbling at each other more quietly and ignoring any other crystals growing on the ground. The formation kept them from falling behind, and the herd ambled on.

As they passed where the last of the wagons were being loaded up, a tangle of creatures got confused and crowded around each other, bellowing angrily and shoving one another. Some of the yoska noticed them and closed in, hissing and whistling and making all sorts of noise until the creatures were startled enough to try to gallop away, running right back into their own herd. Several of the younglings ran up to them, petting and cooing at them until they calmed. The braver younglings, including Hot Rod, scrambled up onto their backs and hitched a ride, their small frames bouncing around ridiculously as they both petted the Minotorons' back fur and guided them through the herd.

“I want to try that,” Sideswipe said to his brother, pointing to the orange youngling, who had forgotten all about Sunstreaker while he focused on the task of leading his ride on.
“Oh Primus, please don't.”

“What? It could hold my weight.”

Sunstreaker scowled at him. “It'll probably take off, and then I'll have to cross the wildlands to find you, again.”

A roar snapped their attention back to the front.

The bull that Hound had warned them about was shoving other creatures out of it's way as it attempted to turn around and go back, disinterested with moving with the herd. Worse, some of the other Minotorons were taking to following after it instead, and before the nomads could stop them, the bull had accidentally gathered half a dozen 'followers', and was plodding back the way it had come, snarling and knashing its dentals, its head bent low to display its horns at the nomads in its way.

The yoska focused on it, similarly making aggressive noises directly at it, trying to scare it into rejoining the herd. A few of its 'followers' did just that, bleating in alarm and scrambling back to join the other creatures. Without thinking, Sunstreaker and Sideswipe joined those closing in on the bull.

The bull's optics moved to them. In response, the twins began to match each other's pace exactly, each of their footfalls impacting the ground at the same time, their nearest arms outstretched to each other on the same plane, as if they were not two mechs, but one creature.

Intimidation by synchronizing their movements through their bond was not a new trick for them. Other mechs tended to think twice before trying to mess with two mechs whose cortexes' could share information on their foe so quickly.

The bull, however, was no mech.

And it only got angrier.

“Back off!” Prowl shouted as it clawed its forepaw on the ground. “Back off!”

Immediately the other yoska backed away, though they still kept their hands towards each other, not wanting to show the rest of the herd how easily the fence could be broken. The twins scrambled back as well, losing their synchronization, and in less then a breem a wide space had opened around the bull. The rest of its follows brayed, fearful of being left behind and open to danger, then turned and galloped back to the herd.

The lone bull snorted, pawed the ground again, then walked in a circle, its optics twitching from mech to mech, looking for one of them to give it reason to attack. But they all stood still, knowing not to provoke it further and give it reason to charge.

Beyond it, the herd slowed, no longer under the pressure to keep moving. Trailbreaker noticed them first.

“Prowl--”

“I see them,” the white mech answered sharply. “Open up a hole! Let it out and keep going!”

Sideswipe gawked at his mate. “We'll lose it if it gets away!” he replied in Standard, so that his twin could understand.
Prowl grimaced. “Maybe. But this one's worked up, and we're not going to get it back under control until it wears itself out.”

He separated from the mech to his right, creating a space as he moved towards Sideswipe. The Minotoron took advantage of the break in the fence and raced out, bellowing and snorting, and Prowl warily looked over his shoulder as he closed the hole again. The space between them and the rest of the herd was narrowed, and the herd shambled forward again as the pressure on their rear was restored.

Hound was running back towards the bull, lasso in hand, as were several other mechs who were armed, forming a small task force that would concentrate on one creature. Curious, Sideswipe turned around and walked backwards, intrigued by what was happening behind them. So he didn't notice the orange blur passing under his arms before it was too late.

“Hot Rod!”

Springer's head snapped up at his youngling's name being called, and his optics widened as he saw the young mech running out to help those who were distracting the bull. “Hot Rod! Get back here!”

“I can help them!” Hot Rod shouted over his shoulder, not slowing and making straight for where Hound was growling his engine at the Minotoron, keeping its focus on him and not the walking fence.

“No! Fraggit all--”

As the green mech fell out of line and ran after him, Prowl gestured with his arms as he spoke in Standard and stopped walking.

“Sideswipe, Sunstreaker, close the hole! I'm going back too!”

“Then so am I!” Sideswipe retorted.

“Same,” Sunstreaker added. “Can't let my mate get himself killed, can I?”

Prowl hissed something, likely a swear, but the other yoska had seen what was happening and were already closing the hole in the walking fence for them. Satisfied that at least the herd would be kept moving, he took off towards the Minotoron bull, the twins right behind him.

By the time they got close, the bull was even more agitated, ill at ease at being separated from the rest of its herd, but unwilling to cooperate with the nomads in order to get back to them. Hound's lasso was whipping in a circle at his hip, ready to hook the Minotoron if it tried to charge anyone, and the other yoska that had joined him were holding their hands out in an effort to barricade it from darting towards the disassembled camp. Several more of them, Hot Rod included, were circling around behind it, shouting and smacking their plating and making a ruckus, trying to get its attention and let it charge around in an open space instead of at anyone.

“Hot Rod!” Springer yelled as he approached.

His shout was the instigator that finally set the creature off. With a deep bellow, it charged at the nomads making the most noise, its head down and horns bared at them. The Autobots yowled and wisely dove out of the way, letting it rush by them and through the field, a cloud of brown dirt shavings following in its wake.

“Spread out, and keep it busy!” Prowl called out, and the nomads hurried to follow his orders. “Let
“it wear itself out!”

“Spread out!” Sideswipe relayed to his brother, and the twins separated, hurrying to either side to flank the creature.

The bull circled back around, growled at the group of Autobots that must have seemed even bigger than before, then charged again, attempting to spear one of them with its horns. The nomads fell back in waves at two sides, easily stepping back from the agitated Minotoron, then came back closer together as they jeered, clapped and hissed, daring it to try to attack and expend its energy.

The bull attempted to run them down one more time. But this time, it waited a moment, then picked out what it thought was the weakest target.

“Hot Rod!” Springer cried, realizing the Minotoron's intentions as it stampeded towards the youngling, who was standing off on his own.

Hot Rod realized the danger and scurried to the right, away from the rest of the group, but the Minotoron's bearing followed him. He ran, trying to get to its flanks, but before he could--

The other nomads, too far away to help, gasped as the youngling tripped and fell. Thankfully the Minotoron missed and whizzed past him, its hooves pounding on the ground only a few lengths from the youngling's frame, but it had spun around and charged again before Hot Rod could pick himself off the ground, its head and horns bent low, intent clear.

Sideswipe started running towards orange mech, ready to shield him and let his heavier armor take the blow. But a flash of yellow was closer to the youngling, and got to him first.

Sunstreaker grabbed Hot Rod, somersaulted, then curled around his smaller frame, knowing that he wouldn't be able to outrun the creature in time.

“SUNNY!!”

The Minotoron roared, and horn struck Sunstreaker's back paneling. The city-mech was sent sprawling, rolling over and over again, but with Hot Rod tucked in safely against his chestplate. The Minotoron slowed its charge, panted, then pawed the ground again, reving itself back up to attack, encouraged by scoring at least one hit.

But that was when the Autobots had lost their patience.

They unanimously changed tactics, and roared and howled as they came at the Minotoron all at once. As tough as the bull was, it was startled by this, and bellowed at them as it scrambled away a few steps, then further as its rear was slapped by one of the yoskas' weapon.

“Get out! Get out of here!”

A line was formed in front of Sunstreaker, who had braced himself on the ground with Hot Rod underneath him, ready to take another blow if the Minotoron charged. Sideswipe joined the line, frantically sending pulses to his twin, then instead braced himself for the fight when Sunstreaker pulsed back, assuring him that he was in no danger offlining. The red mech glowered at the bull threatening them as the line stomped forward, forcing the creature away from the injured city-mech and youngling.

Hound managed to scamper behind it, and whipped his lasso around one of its horns. It brayed angrily as it spun around towards him, then charged one last time, its movements far slower with its energy spent, and Hound easily dodged it. The rest of the yoska continued to force it away, until
it was galloping off in the other direction, fully disinterested in fighting any longer, and wanting nothing more than to escape the nomads for the while so that it could rest. It ran straight for the valley that the herd had originally been grazing in, and continued on.

The Autobots didn't care to chase it and try to get it to return to the herd, and instead watched it to make sure that it wouldn't get any ideas about coming back. As it disappeared over the hills and the danger passed, Sideswipe broke from the line and sprinted back to his brother.

“Sunstreaker!”

Sunstreaker groaned, and knelt up, Hot Rod coming with him while the youngling still clung to his chestplate. Hot Rod was thankfully uninjured, with the exception of some dents and scrapes when the two of them had rolled. Sunstreaker, however, had a jagged laceration oozing energon across his back plating from where the horn had struck him, having cut right through the poncho, and he stayed hunched over, unwilling to straighten completely and aggravate the injury even more.

As the other yoska headed back over to check up on them, Sideswipe squatted down next to his brother and inspected the wound with a sympathetic hiss from his vents.

“...You've had worse,” he concluded as he felt around for anything that could be stuck inside the plating. “How do you feel?”

Sunstreaker growled. “Like I got ran over by a fragging Minotoron. How do you think I feel?!”

Hot Rod was babbling at the golden mech, his voice squeaking and frightened. Springer took him from Sunstreaker's arms, and hugged him, while Hound knelt down by Sideswipe and pulled out a long piece of cloth from his subspace to cover the wound. Understanding what he wanted to do, Sunstreaker lifted his arms obliging, letting it be wrapped around his torso, though not without a few hissed swears.

“Sides,” he grunted.

“Yeah?”

“Tell that kid that I just saved his life, and we're even.” The golden twin winced as Hound tightened the dressing. “If he wants to fight me after all that, I've got full rights to kick his aft.”

Sideswipe snorted a laugh, but relayed this in Iaconian to Hot Rod. The youngling nodded dumbly in response, still shaking in the other yoska's arms. A second pulse at his spark prompted the red mech to look towards Prowl, who was jogging over towards the twins, his optics immediately going for Sunstreaker's injury in worry, but also with an odd flash of pride. Hound, meanwhile, cackled at a sudden realization.

“So we have a new yoska now?” he grinned, and pointed at the wound. “He's officially one of us?”

Sideswipe thought on that, and shrugged with his own smile. “Could you imagine him doing anything else?”

Chapter End Notes

I'm heading to TFCon in Chicago in October! Who else will I be seeing there?
Looking at my notes (which have been revised many, many times since I started this fic), I want to guesstimate that there's 11 or so more chapters left. Originally I'd wanted to have this done before TFCon. That's obviously not going to happen now, but if I continue my schedule of updating every 3-4 days, with the longest deadline being 7 days, I wonder where in this story I'll leave you guys when I go on vacation? Mwhahaha.

But on that happy thought, we're more than halfway done!

Chapter 28: Later

When the wagon train at last rolled to a stop that evening, Sideswipe climbed into one of the carts and started to pull out the tent poles, expecting the camp to be set up before the nomads could recharge. All he received for hopping out of a cart with an armful of poles were odd looks from the rest of the tribe, and he sheepishly put them back.

The wagons were parked much in the same way that they had been while traveling: those who could not fight were positioned at the center, and the rest formed loose circles at the perimeter. The younglings were allowed to run around frantically, free to enjoy not having to stay close to their carriers during a move, before they wore themselves out and were guided right back into the wagons that were covered in hide, shielding them from the view of any nocturnal predators. The adult mechs and femmes dragged out blankets and pillows, and arranged them around campfires as they settled down to rest, the Autobot tribe unanimously agreeing to take advantage of the clear night sky and recharge under the stars.

As last of the sun's rays disappeared over the western horizon, Sideswipe spent a long time doing nothing but leaning against the side of one of the wagons and looking straight up. Without the smog and pollution of the city, there were so many more stars twinkling in the sky, to where he now had trouble finding constellations not because they were blocked from sight, but because they were mixed with thousands more galaxies and clusters than he could have ever imagined existing, until he swore that if he could just reach his hand out far enough and swipe it across the sky, he'd scoop up a thick handful of stars and carry them around in his palm. Maybe he could even put them in his subspace pocket for later.

As he gazed at them, he began to pick up familiar shapes and structures at last. Solaris's Hammer. The Gem of Mystery. The Matrix of Leadership peeked out over the northern horizon, beyond the hills that they'd been moving towards all orn. He couldn't see Primus's Big Foot, but it was getting late in the year for that. Or were they in the wrong hemisphere now? Pit, they were a long way from Kaon. A long way from home.

When his neck started to ache from staring upwards for so long, he groaned and stretched the servos in his arms, then worked his way through the temporary camp towards the campfire that he, Prowl, and several other mechs were sharing. Sunstreaker had been released from Ratchet's wagon just before they had stopped (more like booted out, really), and he quietly sent a pulse over to his golden twin, checking on him, and received one back: Sunny had found Springer, and both of them
were settling down for the night. There was little exchange after that, not with Sunstreaker worn out from supplementing his self-repair units and sorely needing to recharge. They briefly wished each other good night, and a few breems after that, he heard the 'mumbling' of the other half of the split-spark when its frame was offline.

The other mechs at the fire were already in recharge by the time Sideswipe found his mate, except for Prowl. The white nomad had laid out a mat and pillows for the two of them, and he sat cross-legged on the side closest to the fire, taking advantage of the flickering light to ponder over a piece of thinned leather in his hand. Sideswipe recognized it as the kind that the tribe used to scrawl out quick notes. Prowl was frowning, deep in concentration, his lowered doorwings giving away his frustration with whatever he was reading.

Sideswipe roll-stepped his peds as he approached him, a stealth skill that some of the other yoska were teaching him, and would come in handy later if he was ever allowed to go hunting. It worked up until he was about two lengths away from Prowl, who then abruptly raised his head.

Sideswipe froze. “Fraggit.”

The corner of Prowl's mouth twitched up, and his doorwings raised a little in amusement. “Trying to scare me?”

“Wanted to see if you could use those doorwings to take flight.”

The red mech sank down to the mat, but when Prowl turned his attention back to the leather instead of him, Sideswipe huffed before crawling over and plopping his head down in his mate's lap, startling the nomad and nearly causing him to drop the note.

“What're you reading?”

“You resemble an oversized cyber-wolf, you know that?” he grumbled, even as he shifted to make sure his mate would be comfortable on his leg.

“Maybe. What's that?” he repeated, pointing to the leather.

Prowl lowered it, and Sideswipe rolled over slightly so that he could see it clearly. His optic ridges furrowed as he took in the Iaconian text and scribbles. He knew verbal Iaconian, but its written form was still lost to him. He did, however, recognize the symbols after a few breems.

“You copied down the Iacon prophecy?”

“I'm trying to make sense of it. Maybe there's a code hidden in the text.” Prowl's fingers tapped the scribbles next to the more carefully written lines. “It was written in an older form of Iaconian, one that we barely use. I'm hoping that some clue was mistranslated.”

“So you wrote down all the different ways that it could be said?”

“And included a few that don't make much sense in context.”

Sideswipe folded his hands over his chestplate as he rolled back and settled. “I remember that you said that “a spark, halved” could have been something more like “a spark, cut.” But either way, it still refers to a split-spark. Me, or Sunny, or both of us?”

“Right.” Prowl made the same motion with his hands that Sideswipe had showed him to explain that he was a twin when they did not use the same language: he held his clenched fist over his chestplate, then spread two of his fists away from each other. “But even the word “spark” isn't that
clear.”

“Really?”

“The word translates to something like “orb-light.” Sometimes it's used to replace the word “sun.” I can't imagine how we're supposed to split the sun, so it must mean “spark.”

“...Maybe it's really asking for a spark to be offline.”

“No,” Prowl said, immediately and firmly. “Have you ever seen our tribe try to sacrifice a mech? Other tribes may do that,” he interrupted Sideswipe's reply, “but that is not what we do. We work together, and we trust one another. How could we do that if we feared being offline by our own tribe at any time?”

“You ask the yoska to be self-sacrificing,” Sideswipe pointed out, recalling how the tribe seemed to be a little more at ease with Sunstreaker for the rest of the orn after he'd shielded Hot Rod from a Minotoron bull.

“That's entirely different. It's one thing to give your life to protect your tribe. It's another for the tribe to tear your life from you. The difference is that the first is an act of love.”

That quieted Sideswipe for a while. His uneasy processor mulled over that, and once again changed the definition of the word he'd come to easily refer to himself and the friends that he sparred with every orn.

Yoska.

One who loved the tribe over himself.

Prowl returned his attention to his notes on the prophecy, then vented as his optics scanned the scribbles on the leather without coming up with any new ideas.

Sideswipe's own optics gazed up at his mate's face.

...Primus. If only he could have met this mech in another place, another way. Not here, not when their priority was keeping their tribe safe from the Decepticons' imminent return.

He would have probably let himself fall in love with him.

...But was this so bad either? Out under the stars, a warm fire nearby, surrounded by mechs who gave at least two frags about him, his brother close by and safe, and his helm pillowed in his mate's lap?

This...wasn't so bad. But it would eventually end.

“Prowl,” he tried to reason again, “Iacon can't be anything more than ruins by the time we get there, if it exists at all.”

“It exists,” Prowl replied, not lifting his optics from the leather.

“How are we going to protect the tribe from the Decepticons? If what we saw before was just a small show of force, then they'll easily overrun us. I'd fight to the end, but all of the yoska together couldn't hold them off forever.”

“We'll find a way when we come to that.”
“I thought you were the one good at planning,” he grumbled, shifting his legs.

“I am. Maybe there will be more resources for us in Iacon than you think.”

“You know what's out there?”

“I don’t.”

“Then how can you be so confident that something there will save us? That's...illogical.” The word felt strange slipping from his mouth at Prowl. “It's a plan I'd come up with. It's not like you.”

“That's not the first time you've questioned my faith in this prophecy.” The corners of his mouth turned up for a split-second, then slipped back down. “Whatever it is, the Decepticons want it. Your city wants it. And its in our home. Whatever it is, it is ours. And it will protect us.”

Sideswipe huffed through his nose. “Can't we ask for some help to keep the tribe safe until you figure this out? You told me that Jazz was going to see the other tribes.”

The leather crinkled as Prowl's fingers tightened around it.

“...Jazz returned to us safely, but he found several camps that had been burned.”

Sideswipe stared up at him.

“...They never left,” he whispered. His pump pounded, and his spark twitched nervously.

Across the bond, he felt Sunstreaker pulled from his recharge by his twin's alarm.

/You okay?/

/Yeah, yeah./ Sideswipe sent back to him. There was some distance between them now, and although they could still speak using 'words', it was no longer as effective. /Hard stuff./ he tried to explain, and sent along his feelings of disquiet, worry, but that he was safe, with Prowl.

“...likely an advance team, and not the main bulk of the tribe,” Prowl was saying. “They stayed to keep watch over us, and prevent us from calling for help while Megatron investigates where you said that the prophecy was hidden.”

“They'll tell Megatron that we moved.”

He acknowledged the sense of comfort and love from Sunstreaker with one of his own, telling him that it was fine for him to go back to sleep. Then, seconds later, he felt the same pulse again. But it wasn't from Sunstreaker.

It would take him a long while before he was no longer surprised by feeling another spark that wasn't his twin's.

An idea occurred to him. “Sunstreaker got across the wildlands with the help of the minibots on my team. When we bonded, Sunstreaker panicked, and ran right at the camp, and they weren't able to keep up with him. Is it at all possible that the attacks weren't from the Decepticons, but from the minibots?”

Prowl’s optics flashed. Sideswipe had grown used to that meaning that he was processing and calculating something, his cortex somehow working in a different fashion than the rest of the mechs. “...Unlikely,” he said when he was done. “They could have been using that as a tactic to draw us out if they couldn't find our camp, but there's many more of us than there are of them. That
would be a suicidal method to try to grab our attention.”

“Somebody needs to tell them that Sunny and I don't need to be rescued.”

“That's not high on our list of priorities right now. If they find us, then we can gladly explain that you are safe, and bonded, and Sunstreaker soon will be too, but if we may be attacked by Decepticons soon, then we need to keep the yoska close to the camp.”

Sideswipe made a face. “If you flat-out tell the minibots that I'm bonded now, then they're even more likely to try to sneak into the camp and 'rescue' us. You saw how Sunny reacted.”

“Yes, but your brother is...volatile.”

“No less than Cliffjumper,” he muttered.

“What?”

“Never mind.”

That thought humored his mind enough that Sunstreaker must have concluded that his brother was fine, because when he automatically checked the bond at the mention of his twin, Sunstreaker's spark was 'mumbling' sleepily again.

“Anyway, we should tell the sentries to look out for them,” Sideswipe continued. “And to NOT drag them back here as their bonded.”

“I doubt any of the yoska would go for a minibot. But I'll spread the word in the morning.”

“Thanks.” He paused. “I'm not sure how I'll tell them that I'm okay with all this. Being kidnapped, being bonded...that'll sound terrifying to anybody who doesn't know you guys.”

Prowl put the piece of leather to the side, done with trying to figure it out for a while, and instead concentrated on his mate. One hand touched the underside of his jaw, the other on the top of his helm, tilting the city-mech's head back to see him a little better. “You sound ashamed.”

“Well...Yeah, kinda.” He smirked up at him, allowing his head to be manipulated. “If I'd really been a nomad, there's no way you'd have been able to overpower me. I would have been watching for mechs like you. Your team took me by surprise, and I didn't have anybody to help me but a bunch of fragging minibots.”

Fingers stroked along his jawline and down his neck cables. “I'm sure that my team still could have managed you.”

“Nuh-uh. Other way around. You'd be my prisoner, and we'd be going back to my camp.”

“Is that so?”

Sideswipe noted the shiver that briefly wiggled through Prowl's doorwings, and his smile grew wider.

“Frag yeah. None of this confusion over whose rules are right and what we're doing.”

“I would still put up a fight. It's appropriate to show your potential mate your strength and will, and to test their own.”

“Last time I checked, I was bigger and stronger than you were.”
Prowl leaned further downwards, until his face was just above Sideswipe's. One of his hands scooped behind his black helm, raising him even closer. “And yet whose camp are we in right now?”

“Frag you and shut up.”

They came together in a deep kiss, Prowl's other arm wrapping around Sideswipe's body to support him, Sideswipe reaching up and gripping his shoulder. Their mouths moved slowly, savoring and appreciating one another. Prowl tasted just as good, as he always did, and Sideswipe noted that he was getting better at kissing, now knowing when and where to thrust in his tongue, and how to move his lips over his mate's in the most sensual way. Practice had clearly been helping.

Sideswipe gripped him even tighter as they kept going. One of them moaned too loudly, and a mech on the other side of the fire snorted, disturbed. The two of them immediately stopped and glanced up. Prowl considered their neighbors, and then his engine grumbled as he lowered Sideswipe back down to the mat, to a complaining whine from his mate.

“But--!”

“The others are recharging,” he whispered. “Now is not the time.”

Sideswipe growled as Prowl lay down on top of him. “Get a blanket, throw that over us, and they won't have to see.”

“No. Not right now, Sideswipe.”

“Ugh. Later?”

“When we get our own tent set up.”

“Killjoy.” He shifted so that Prowl could more comfortably use his chestplate as a pillow, his own arms wrapping around his shoulders, just in front of his doorwings. “You're kind of a prude, aren't you?” he muttered.

“What?”

“You don't like being affectionate to me in front of other mechs.”

“I've kissed you outside of our tent before. Much to everyone's confusion.”

“Yeah, but you won't do anything else.”

“Anything else would be inappropriate.”

“Whatever.” He tugged Prowl higher up, until their optics could meet. “I've seen mechs grope each other on their way back to their tents.”

Prowl narrowed his optics. “And it does not get further than that in public.”

“But you've never done that to me.”

“It's not appropriate, Sideswipe!”

His doorwings were twitching, flustered, and Sideswipe was far too entertained by this to drop the topic. “So how much touching is allowed before it's too much for the common mech? I bet it's more than what you'd like.”
“For Primus's sake--”

“How 'bout it, Prowl?” He leaned his head up, and purred at him. “Would it be okay if I petted your doorwings while we were walking along? Or reach down even lower, and take a handful of your aft--”

As he said that, a hand snaked down and his fingers walked around Prowl's hip, only to be smacked away.

“Ow!”

One of their neighbors grunted again, and Prowl shushed his mate as he grabbed his wrist to stop him from trying to grope him again. “You're going to get both of us in trouble,” he hissed.

“I'm in trouble all the time.” Sideswipe briefly tugged at his hand. “Hasn't stopped me from having fun when I can.”

“What on Cybertron did I bond to?”

“Me!”

“Stop it.” Prowl released him. “Recharge. We'll continue this when we have some privacy.”

But Sideswipe still wasn't done. “So who taught you all that you know about how to frag a mech?”

He groaned, and turned his head to rest a weary helm on his mate's chestplate. “Sideswipe...”

“Because you're good at it! Well, when you actually want to frag,” he grumbled, and wiggled his hips a little, electing a short squeak from the nomad as he was bounced around. “But I had thought that you were the type of mech to have never touched anyone before, you know?”

“This is neither the time nor place--”

“You didn't get that good without practice. So who was it? Or is it some sort of common nomad training, to learn the best ways to spike a mate—MMPH!”

Prowl's hand slapped over his mouth before he could continue. The white mech leaned up, pressing his weight down on him far more aggressively, pinning him and staring down at him with narrowed optics.

“Enough. Stop it, or I'm going to recharge somewhere else. Do you understand?”

Sideswipe froze. The flash of true anger that had lit down their bond shocked him.

He slowly nodded his head. Prowl lifted his hand away, then stared down at him, daring him to continue, but when Sideswipe held his silence, he sighed before settling down on top of his mate again, his doorwings drooping heavily.

...Sideswipe hadn't been expecting Prowl's response to his teasing to be that vicious.

Much to the ire of his self-preservation protocols, his curiosity refused to be stifled. A breem later, he tentatively poked the bond, drawing himself closer to his mate, and 'felt' what was trying to be kept hidden from him. And as soon as it became clear, the energon in his tanks flopped.
He kept his voice as quiet as possible. “You loved someone before me.”

Prowl didn't answer, and he tried again.

“Were you bonded before I came along? You survived losing a mate?”

“We weren't bonded.” Prowl's voice was just as low. “It’s fine for two members of the same tribe to interface with each other casually. It’s encouraged, really. We need to practice for our potential mates somehow.”

“...But as soon as you bonded with me--”

“As soon as I claimed you, it was over. I took you and dedicated you to me, so in turn, I am dedicated to you too.”

Sideswipe refreshed his optics. He'd guessed that already, even before they had bonded. Referring to someone else as their 'mate' pretty well explained that nights of bringing home some strange mech to his apartment, or stumbling out of someone else's in the morning, were over. He was not supposed to interface with anyone else, and neither could Prowl. But he had still been working on the incorrect mindset that Prowl hadn't been with anybody else before and didn't know how to interface. Yet he did.

Oh Primus, and he already knew who it was. It was obvious.

“Prowl.”

“Mmm?” His systems were powering down, likely in an attempt to ignore him by recharging, but Sideswipe had caught him before he could.

“Did you want to bond with him instead? Is there a way to do that now?”

Prowl sighed. “Mechs of the same tribe usually don't bond with each other. We can love each other, we can interface, and we can spark-play sometimes. But our tribe would die out quickly if we didn't take in new members.”

“Why? Wait.” He thought of the implications of all the mechs of a tribe being related to one another. “Oh. Eww. I gotcha.”

That explained the need to take mechs from other tribes, though not the kidnapping ritual.

“Did you know that he offered to take you as his mate if I didn't want you?”

And that snapped his mind right back to the present. Sideswipe wriggled as he startled.

“No slag?!”

“Anyone from that team could have claimed you. We all worked together to capture you. If I had wanted someone else to take you, we would have just pretended that I had never claimed you first. No one else would ever know.”

“Jazz wanted me?!”

His spark fluttered a bit. That...might have actually worked out nicely. Jazz was more open than Prowl was, and just as attentive. And if he had been the one to teach Prowl all that he knew about interfacing...
Prowl suddenly lifted his head to scowl at him. He must have felt the mixed feelings through the bond.

“You are bonded to me.”

“Whoa, whoa.” Sideswipe lifted one of his hands up in a signal of surrender. “Just letting my cortex play. No harm done.”

“Hmph.”

“...Prowl?”

“What?” The white mech's patience was exhausted.

“Were you happy with him?”

“...What?”

Sideswipe grunted as he pressed his elbows under him, and sat up, letting Prowl slide off and kneel beside him. “Were you happy with him?” he repeated, his tone serious.

“What kind of a question is that?!”

“An important one.” He stared at him, his weight resting behind him on his palms. “I'm not kidding around anymore. Were you happy?”

It took too long for Prowl to answer him. Far too long.

“...I was,” he said at last, though slowly, as if he knew that he was walking into a trap. “We also knew that it was not meant to last. We...enjoyed each other's company. We both learned different techniques for wooing a potential mate.”

“But you were happy.”

“Sa.”

Sideswipe considered him. Then sat up straight.

“I shouldn't be here.”

Prowl raised his head from where it had been drooping. “Why?!?”

“I don't belong here. Here, with you. You should be with Jazz, not me.” He grimaced. “You didn't want to claim me. You certainly didn't want to bond with me.”

“That's not--”

“Tell me that's not a lie.”

A hand gripped his shoulder. “Sideswipe...”

The red mech growled and shoved him off. “You never wanted me. You saved my life, and I thank you for that, but fraggit Prowl, you didn't come after the caravan with the intention of taking me as your mate, right?! You were after the Iacon prophecy! You were happy with Jazz, and then I came along, and I forced you to end that! It's not fair to either of us!”
Their neighbors were grumbling again, but neither mech seemed to care now. Prowl tried again, this time grabbing both of Sideswipe's shoulders and forcing him to face him.

"Jazz and I knew that we'd have to separate at some point; he bares no ill-will towards you for bonding to me. If it were not you, then one of us would have tracked and captured some other mate, and we would have still separated."

"Then you should have found somebody who actually understood this whole 'kidnapping' thing and didn't fight you!" he countered. "Somebody who would have made you happy!" He pushed off his hands again, and stood up. "This whole time, you've been trying over and over to make sure that I was okay, and Prowl, I'm not going to do the same for you!"

"You don't have to!" Prowl scrambled up as well. "I swore to you that I would not press you into what you do not want. And if you never care for me as much as I do for you, that is fine. That will not diminish how much I love you."

...Oh, Primus...

Primus, no.

"Don't fragging say that you love me!" he cried, completely ignoring the optics that blinked online and raised to them from across the campfire. "I don't love you! I like you, sure, and we have fun interfacing, but that doesn't mean that I love you! How can I?! You kidnapped me, Prowl! That's not something I can ever pretend that I'll be okay with!"

"And I say again, you don't have to."

His mate stepped closer to him, and reached up to cup his cheek.

"I love you, with all that I am, with all of my spark--"

"Shut up!!"

The hand was smacked away, and Sideswipe took a step backwards.

"How the frell can you say that you love me when you barely know me?! That makes no fragging sense! I barely know you, and I sure as slag don't love you! I promised to try to make this work for us because we're already bonded, but that doesn't mean that I'm automatically going to love you! There is never going to be any of the 'normal' relationship that you want so badly, Prowl! It's not going to happen! It is not!"

Prowl dared a step closer to him, and Sideswipe took another one away.

"No, Prowl. I don't love you. So just stop trying to love me. Just stop."

The white nomad's optics assessed him, and, shockingly, the city-mech only saw a little of the pain he'd assumed that he caused by denying him over and over. Instead, Prowl seemed far more worried about his mate than himself. He did as he asked, and did not come closer.

He did, however, take a vent of air before speaking again, his voice calm and soothing.

"I cannot. I do love you, Sideswipe. And if I need to wait for the rest of my life for you to love me too, even if you never do, then I will. Sideswipe, I loved you from the moment that I claimed you. Our bond only reinforced that."
Sideswipe gawked at him.

From when he *claimed* him?!

“...How could you love me then when you didn't even know my name?! All that you knew was that I was a fragging *murderer!*”

“Your brother risked his life for a youngling without knowing anything about him,” he reasoned. “I can bond with and love you without knowing much about you either.”

“You would have been happier with someone else!”

“Maybe.”

He offered his hands to him.

“But I am happy with you.”

All that the red mech could do was stare at his white hands. He wasn't forcing him to come to him. He was offering, guiding, giving him someplace safe to return to, someplace he *knew* that he'd be loved--

“Then maybe you need your cortex looked at.”

Leaning forward, he revved his engine and sneered as he pointed directly in Prowl's face.

“I. Don't. Love. You.”

And without waiting for his mate's answer, he turned and fled, unwilling to bear the look on Prowl's face for much longer, nor those of the mechs lying around the campfire.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He was smart enough to know not to leave the camp, and instead slowed to a stop at a hill running along the eastern perimeter. Another *yoska* was already there, keeping watch, and he stared at Sideswipe for a while as the red mech sank down on the ground nearby and hugged his knees. Eventually the *yoska* returned his gaze to the dark wildlands, and Sideswipe's optics did the same, though his were unseeing.

He couldn't love him. That was ludicrous, to fall in love with a mech that had kidnapped him. And then Prowl had told him that he loved him ever since he *claimed* him?!

Ridiculous. Absolute lunacy.

He would never understand him. He would never understand this tribe.

He didn't belong here.

...He'd made friends. He'd made the tribe his *home*.

And he honestly did care for Prowl. He'd preferred to see him happy with Jazz, hadn't he?

Primus, what was *wrong* with him?!

Sideswipe clutched his knees tighter with a short whine.
He didn't love him.

He did not, he did not, he did not.

The dark expanse of the wildlands gave him no answers or comfort.

Several breems later, he heard footsteps behind him that were not of the yoska on patrol. The other mech sat down beside him. A heavy arm went around his shoulders, and with a shuddering sigh, Sideswipe repeated the gesture for his twin.

The two halves of their spark pulsed together, easing and soothing the one tormented and confused.

Sunstreaker didn't ask what was wrong. He simply sat there, embracing his twin, giving him something sturdy to lean on, something that Sideswipe could always fall back to when things became overbearing, as Sideswipe always did for Sunstreaker as well. Together, they gazed out at the horizon, and slowly Sideswipe's spark calmed and was at peace.

...At least, through all this madness, this would never change.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 29: Love

They arrived at the new grazing field in the morning two orns later. The yoska herding the Minotorons guided them to a crater that would act as a natural corral for them, and as the creatures shambled in and settled down for a meal of crystals, the mechs and femmes left them under the care of the herders and headed back to where the wagon train was making camp.

Building the tents took longer than disassembling them, yet was still a surprisingly quick task. Mechs swarmed to first build the most essential tents for the healers' and the granary stores, then worked on their own, and when they were done, they helped their neighbors. Before midday most of the structures were set up, and all that was left to do was to offload personal items and disassemble the wagons, and then the Autobot camp would go right back into their routines, as if they had never moved.

Sideswipe only spoke to Prowl when necessary as the two of them carried chests and other items into their tent. He'd been cold to his mate for the entire two orns, making sure that he found reason to walk along somewhere else near the wagon train, usually close to his brother. He could feel pulsations of pain and loneliness and defeat from the other side of their bond, and he considered putting up another block, but for Sunstreaker's sake he instead actively ignored Prowl, pretending that he didn't exist until they laid down for recharge in the night. And even then, he kept his back turned towards him, making sure he was just far enough away that Prowl would have to reach for him if he wanted to touch him.

It was infuriating that Prowl mostly respected his implied wish to be left alone. Sideswipe was agitated, and itched to fight. But Prowl refused to give him a good reason to turn around and shout at him, let alone throw a punch.

The nomad understood him by now.

He loved him.

...Fraggit.

Sideswipe threw down the pillows over the berth with far more force than necessary, and was entirely dissatisfied with their soft plop as they hit the mat. Behind him, Prowl was ignoring his mate's tantrum, instead focusing on rearranging the scrolls on the low shelf at the rear of the tent.

An equal amount of irritation flashed through the bond between the twins. Then, a breem later, it thundered into pure anger, and Sideswipe groaned before he slumped down on his aft on the mat.

/What?/ he snapped, feeling just as cranky as his brother was normally.

/Translation finished./ Sunstreaker was too far away for complete sentences to traverse the bond easily.

Good. /And?/

/Springer./
He shoved himself up. “I'm going to find Sunny.”

Prowl looked over his shoulder. “I'll see you tonight?”

Sideswipe’s answer was only a snort as he shoved the flap of the tent aside.

He could hear yelling long before he reached Springer's tent, thankfully in Iaconian. No longer would he have to act as a translator for his brother. Unfortunately for everyone, now Sunstreaker was doing just fine with making his opinions known, loudly.

“...never came back, and you think that this is normal?!”

“He's a youngling, not a sparkling! He's smart, and he's strong, and he knows how to take care of himself. He'll be just fine.”

“Just fine getting trampled by a Minotoron again?! Or running out of camp?! Or encountering someone like me?!”

“You know, I was doing just fine with him before you came along.”

“Everything seems fine to you because you don't give a slag!”

Sideswipe whapped the tent flaps with the back of his hand, the only warning to his presence before he shoved them away and ducked inside. “What the frag is wrong now?!”

Both Sunstreaker and Springer snapped their heads up towards him from where they were seated on opposing sides of their mat, and if he hadn't been in a foul mood Sideswipe might have been humored by how similar their expressions matched one another's. “He's trying to tell me that it's somehow okay that Hot Rod hasn't come back all orn!” Sunstreaker snarled as he pointed at his mate.

“He slept in the wagon with the other younglings, and now he's probably off playing somewhere,” Springer growled back. “It's what younglings do.”

“You haven't bothered to go check!”

“Then why don't you go find him yourself, if you want to coodle him so badly?!”

Sunstreaker’s engine revved up from a hiss to an infuriated roar, which would have intimidated anyone but the two mechs in the tent. “I am trying to do my part to help you out with him!”

“You've done nothing to help except nag me about how poor of a guardian I am--!”

“Enough!”

Sideswipe’s shout cut off Sunstreaker's retort. Scowling darkly at both of them, the red mech took several more steps forward, then plopped himself down on the tent's floor, his legs crossed under him.

If he and Prowl were on such poor terms and they had known each other for deca-cycles, how was he supposed to make things work between Sunstreaker and Springer?!
“Sunny, younglings are more independent in the wildlands than they are in the city. Sometimes they don’t even sleep in the same tents as their carriers if they wanted to go visit their friends instead.”

“You see?” Springer huffed, but Sideswipe held up his palm to stop him from continuing.

“And Springer, Sunny's doing his part to build some sort of relationship between you two by looking out for your youngling!”

“He's not mine!”

“His sleeping mat and his things are here!” Sideswipe gestured towards the smaller mat on the other side of the tent. “Clearly you adopted him, so you should at least have some inkling to where he is all the time, sa?!”

Sunstreaker lifted his head up pridefully, while Springer scowled at the twins.

“I didn't adopt him by choice. Hot Rod preferred to stay with me after I brought him to this tribe. Fragging Drift tried to adopt him, but he kept coming back to my tent, so eventually we moved his things in here—” He spread his hands helplessly. “Now everyone keeps insisting that he's mine, even you two! He is not!”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Sunstreaker leaned forward. “You brought him here?”

The green mech's face was tight. “...After our tribe was wiped out.”

Surprise ricocheted through the twins' bond.

That was news for both of them.

“So...you're not an Autobot?”

“I am now,” Springer growled as he drew his shoulders up. “I pledged loyalty to Optimus vorns ago.”

“But you weren't an Autobot before then.”

“That was another lifetime ago.”

“But--”

Springer abruptly stood up with a grunt, interrupting him. “If it's that important to you to keep tabs on Hot Rod, fine, I'll go find him. But I'm telling you, he's fine.”

“Springer.”

Sideswipe jumped up and grabbed the green nomad's arm before he could leave. With Sunstreaker still sitting and watching them curiously, he leaned into the other yoska's audial and murmured to him.

“If you want more than just my twin as a mate, if you want him to help you with a family, then put some fragging effort into it. Sa?”

“Sa, sa.” Springer brushed him off.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
The granary didn't need any help organizing the energon supplies. Nor did any mech need assistance in raising their tents; most were done and those that weren't yet had other *yoska* helping them. Nor did the sentries need an extra pair of optics. Nor was anyone up for sparring. Sideswipe even tried ducking his head into the healers' tent, and was shooed out by Ratchet before he could cause any trouble.

So Sideswipe found himself wandering around the camp, looking for something to do, unwilling to return to his tent just yet, even as clouds began gathering on the horizon. Some of the Autobots had noted the rain that was coming and scurried back into the tents, thankful that they'd been erected in time, but most were taking advantage of the daylight while they still could. There were few in the Commons, though, and Sideswipe nearly walked right back out.

That was, until he saw a big red mech sitting close to the bonfire in the center.

The silk sash with the Autobot's symbol stitched into it was still wrapped around Optimus's shoulder, but there was a second cloth around his other shoulder, not as fine, and the Prime was preoccupied with something at its front. Curious, Sideswipe walked closer to him, and raised an optic ridge when he saw that there was a small lump hidden within it, pressed up against Optimus's chestplate.

“What is that?”

“Hrmph?” Optimus turned to him. “Sideswipe? Is something wrong?”

“Nah, just bored.” Sideswipe took the invitation to sit down next to him as the Prime scooted around to face him instead of the fire. “Don't have much to do, and I can't dedicated myself to any big tasks with rain on the way. What is that?” he asked again, pointing to the lump.

“Backburn.”

“What?”

Optimus shifted the cloth so that he could see the inside the sash. It was then that Sideswipe realized that the cloth was actually a sling, meant to hold a small sparkling to a mech's body and give them the ability to let go and work with their hands. Within it, Backburn was swaddled in a thin blanket, fast asleep.

Sideswipe couldn't help a small guffaw at the sparkling's light snoring, his little nose once again purposely smooshed into the bigger mech's chestplate.

“I don't get why he does that. It looks like he's going to break his face.”

The corners of Optimus's optics squinted; he was likely grinning underneath his mask. “New sparklings can sense the sparks of others more easily than any adult ever can. They've spent their life up until now nestled against another spark, and automatically seek out to return to that state.” This time he rumbled a laugh aloud at the bemused look on Sideswipe's face.

“That's...weird.”

“Sparklings in your city don't do it too?”

“I wouldn't know. I'd never worked with sparklings and younglings until I was brought here.” He leaned forward a bit and gently stroked a finger along the top of Backburn's helm. “Sentinel Prime would definitely have never babysat.”
Optimus hesitated. “…I'm not sure if I'm supposed to be above watching over sparklings with a title of “Prime.” I am still a chief of this tribe, first and foremost, and it's my duty to ensure the safety of everyone, especially the littlest ones.”

“Well I gotta tell you, you're leagues better than Sentinel ever was, so if you're breaking some taboo by taking up babysitting, you're still cool with me.”

He rumbled louder this time. “Thank you.”

Backburn had turned his head a little towards Sideswipe's finger, his optics fluttering open briefly to see what was touching him, and when the *yoska* stopped petting his helm, he shifted and pressed his faceplates back into Optimus with a short grunt. One of Optimus's massive hands held him through the sling and gave extra support to the improvised craddle, assuring the sparkling that he would not accidentally fall.

The tone of this vocalizer changed. “I'm not just babysitting him. I'm guarding him.”

Sideswipe stiffened. “Why?”

“It is my responsibility to watch over him until a new surrogate carrier for him can be found.”

“...Why does he need a new--”

He sat up.

Prowl had said that Jazz had come across burned camps a few orns ago.

Oh. Oh, scrap.

“...Primus. I'm so sorry.”

“This is, unfortunately, nothing new. And again, I am the chief before I am a Prime. I am responsible for all of the tribe, from the *yoska* to the sparklings. Backburn is without his carrier now, so I will care for him as if he had always been my own, and I will ensure that whoever becomes his new carrier is up to the task.”

“Have you found anyone yet?”

“I have a few candidates in mind.”

“I wish I could say that I'll take him, but I'm still no good at stuff like this.”

“I understand.” Backburn started to whine, and Optimus reached back into the sling to stroke his helm until he calmed. “He will have a good surrogate in the next few orns. I will make sure of that.”

An idea about that popped up in Sideswipe's mind, but he shushed it down for now when the Prime raised his optics to the *yoska.*

“Sideswipe?”

“Yeah?”

“How's your brother settling in? The entire tribe is talking about how he saved Hot Rod from a Minotoron. I doubt there will be any more objections to him carrying a weapon. Even those who swore that he would never become one of us are having second thoughts.”
A cocky smirk lit up Sideswipe's face, and a swelling feeling of pride was sent down the twins' bond. It surprised Sunstreaker and he juggled with it for a moment, unsure of what to do with the compliment, or why his brother felt that way suddenly, but he took the praise anyway, and that cheered the red mech.

“He's still got a long way to go before he and Springer are even in the ballpark of liking each other, but they're working on it,” he said truthfully. “The problem is that we've stuck two of the most stubborn mechs together in the same tent, and they've both got their own ideas about what they should be doing to make a decent bond between them.”

“I see. And what about you and Prowl?”

The happy feeling building in his chestplate was stabbed and burst.

“What do you mean?”

“I've heard about your argument.”

Frag the other mechs. And frag him for not having the sense to switch back to Standard while they fought.

“...Prowl said that he loved me.”

“Is that a problem?” he asked, surprised.

“It is if I don't love him back.” Sideswipe vented through his nose and crossed his arms. “Your tribe, your culture...It's still very different than what I'd always learned about in Kaon. I wasn't ready for any of this. I'm not ready to love him.”

“Sideswipe. Some of the yoska have suggested that if Prowl has failed you as a mate, then you should leave.”

That rattled him.

“Who said that?!”

“I won't name the mechs. But they came to me, legitimately concerned about your happiness after they heard what you had said to your mate. Sunstreaker is not yet bonded to Springer, but you are bonded to Prowl. And that you two do not love each other yet, long after the bond was formed, is worrying.”

“He loves me. It's just not mutual.”

“So then he has failed.”

“Not yet,” Sideswipe said immediately and honestly. “He's really been trying all this time. And I do appreciate and respect that he's gone far out of his way to understand me and play by the rules that I set. But that doesn't mean that I should love him!”

Optimus raised an optic ridge. “If you don't mind me asking...when should you?”

“...I...”

His vocalizer clamped up.

He had no idea.
He wasn't sure if he ever would.

...Maybe he never would.

And as soon as he thought that, Sunstreaker's voice rang in his audials, not from the bond, but from how he knew his brother would taunt him if he'd been sitting next to him. *You love him, you love him, you love him!*

“I...I don’t know. I thought I would just instinctively know.”

Or maybe he already did. And Sunstreaker had sensed it.

...No, his twin had made a mistake. He didn't love Prowl.

...Didn't he?

Optimus had gone quiet while Sideswipe's cortex raced and warred with itself, and when he suddenly remembered where he was, he stammered a moment uncomfortably under the Prime's scrutiny.

“S-Sorry, I just...I don't know yet, Prime. But Prowl is trying.”

Optimus kept a comforting hand on the sparkling cradled in the sling. “Your safety and your happiness are both important to this tribe. I can ensure the first for you. But the second? That is up to you, Sideswipe. I haven't known you long enough to know what would make you happy, or who. The one who would know that the best would be your twin.”

Fraggit, and he already had his answer from Sunstreaker about *that*.

“I want Prowl to be happy too. He'd be better off with someone else.”

“Is he happy right now?”

“...He says that he is,” the red mech admitted. “But he also said something that confused me.”

“What was it?”

“He said that he's loved me since he claimed me.” Sideswipe patted the front of his poncho, over his spark. “But when Prowl met me, all he knew was that I was some city-mech who was carrying the Iacon prophecy and had probably killed Alpha Trion. He should have hated me. Not loved me.”

“Is that what worries you? Why he came to love you so quickly, when you think he should have learned more about you first?”

Sideswipe nodded. Optimus had put the problem into better words than he could.

“Because by claiming you, Prowl was dedicating his spark to you,” Optimus explained. “I highly doubt that he fell in love with you at that moment. But he committed himself to being your mate, and he knew that the end of that path was for him to love you. Many of the *yoska* do this. It would be nearly impossible to for them to be completely in love with their potential mate if speaking to them would alert them that they were about to be taken.”

“So...wait. He made himself love me?”

“Because that's what you deserved when he captured you, whether you had been from the city or
another tribe. You were taken from your home, and whisked away to a tribe and mechs that you did not know. Anyone could be overwhelmed by this. A good mate would make sure that you had someone who loved you and watched over you every step of the way to your new home.”

He refreshed his optics. “So that’s...normal?”

“It is.”

It was normal. Primus, this was all normal.

“I was scared of Prowl, and his team. And this was normal.”

Optimus nodded.

Sideswipe sat back on his aft as his processor whirled over this new affirmation that everything that he'd felt, every fear and doubt, all of that had been expected. Of course, having no knowledge of what they were doing and what would happen to him had terrified him further than any common nomad. Yet through it all, he'd never broken. He'd had his moments of panic, to the point of being crippled and sobbing when he was too overwhelmed, but he never broke. He'd always remained as Sideswipe.

With a snazy poncho and waist-cloth added to his person, of course.

And in some ways--

He was happier here than he'd ever been in Kaon. It was dangerous in the wildlands, and he still didn't know how they were going to survive the next few decacycles, but his brother was here, his friends were here, his home was here--

Prowl was here.

His mate had done all that he could to make sure that Sideswipe was comfortable, or as much as he could be when kidnapped by tribal mechs. Prowl had kept him safe. He'd respected him. He'd trusted him. He'd loved him.

And Sideswipe was happy with him.

...More than that.

Far, far more than that.

Well, scrap.

He had to set things right.

Optimus turned his face towards the darkening sky and the clouds that were bloating out the sun, then groaned as he climbed to his feet, one hand still supporting Backburn so that the sparkling didn't roll around too much. “You might want to head inside, if you don't want to get wet in the next few breems.”

“I actually like the rain,” Sideswipe admitted as he stood up too. “Even that's different than what's in the city.”

The Prime stared at him, and cocked his head to the side in bemusement. Sideswipe nearly burst out laughing at that. Optimus was just as much of a barbarian as the rest of the tribe.
“The pollution's made the rain over Kaon acidic. You'd be seriously damaged by standing outside during a storm.”

“That sounds awful.”

“It is. Prime?”

“Sa?”

The red mech spread his hands out to either side, gesturing to the entire camp. “If you're responsible for everyone's safety, why are you intent on leading your people to a bunch of ruins?! There can't be anything left in Iacon.”

“It will be our home,” Optimus answered him without any hesitation.

“How can you know that?”

“Because the Matrix tells me so.”

Sideswipe gapped at him. Prowl did tell him decacycles ago that Optimus carried the Matrix of Leadership, but he hadn't believed him. And he still didn't.

“What you think of as a Matrix and what I think of as a Matrix must be two different things. There aren't any Matrixes left anymore. None of the Primes in any city have one.”

“Hmph. I would show you, but…” Optimus adjusted his hold on Backburn. “Maybe some other time.”

“Maybe. Whatever.” He held up a finger. “One last thing. I know that I wouldn't be a good a surrogate carrier for Backburn, and neither would Sunny. Neither of us are used to handling sparklings, so we couldn't do it without our mates doing all the hard work for us. But if I can make a recommendation for someone else instead?”

“Go on.” He looked intrigued.

“Well, I heard that Drift didn't get a chance to properly adopt Hot Rod, and Perceptor's good with kids—”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The rain started just as he was leaving the Commons, and Sideswipe pulled his hood over his helm as he jogged between the tents and back to the one that he shared with Prowl. Around him, other Autobots were scurrying inside, not because the rain had any chance of damaging their armor, but simply because they didn't like to be wet.

He passed by a group of younglings gleefully splashing through puddles that had already formed, jumping the distance between them and trying to make as big of a splash as possible. Their happy shrieks were interrupted by one of them being scooped up by a femme, who wrestled with the struggling young mech as she carried him into one of the tents, scolding him the whole way for letting his clothing get soaked.

The Autobots loved each other.

Well, they were not all in love with each other. Ick. But each of them cared for the other nomads as much as they were all a close family. He was certain that the femme carrying the youngling was
Not his actual carrier, just someone who wanted to make sure that the cold moisture didn't over-
cool his weaker systems. She took care of someone else's creation without a second thought.

Loving each other came naturally.

They never questioned how they processed that. They just *did*.

Granted, some were better at it than others. Springer had barely more knowledge for how to care
for Hot Rod than Sunstreaker did, and he tended to leave him to the care of the rest of the tribe. Yet
there was no doubt in his processor that he loved the youngling. Sideswipe had seen how the green
mech had panicked when Hot Rod had been in danger, and how he'd hugged and comforted him
once the Minotoron had been dealt with. He'd give his spark to protect the youngling.

Sunstreaker had taken a hit from a charging Minotoron for him, and he didn't even know Hot Rod.

Prowl's words spiraled around his cortex. *"Your brother risked his life for a youngling without
knowing anything about him. I can bond with and love you without knowing much about you
either."*

Prowl...

He had to make things right.

With a new determination in his spark, and the beginnings of a plan, he hurried through the rain
and back to their tent.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not yet done with the chapter after this one, but it's going to be fairly long, so I
think I can excuse failing my own policy of writing two chapters ahead for now. That
being said, I need a little time to catch up, so the chapters after the next may be a little
shorter, or take longer than usual to be posted.
Sideswipe wasn't sure if Prowl would have returned to their tent yet or gone to someone else's when the rain had started, so he didn't bother announcing himself as he ducked inside. Consequentially, both of them jumped and startled as he stepped between the flaps.

Prowl was sitting on the far end of the mat, closest to his shelf, with a half-dozen scrolls lying around him. Alarm registered across their bond, and at first Sideswipe wondered if he'd caught his mate in the act of doing something terrible, but when he realized what the problem was his mood lightened a little.

This was the messiest that he'd ever seen their tent, and Prowl was ashamed of it.

“...Still trying to figure out the prophecy?”

Prowl nodded as he hurriedly scooped up the scrolls nearest to him and wrapped them up, as if he'd been in the middle of cleaning when his mate had arrived. His movements slowed when Sideswipe allowed some of his humor to filter through their bond at the white mech's embarrassment of his mess.

“Didn't interrupt any break-throughs, did I?”

“Unfortunately, no. I thought that I had a lead about “Mountain of the Moon” referring to the “base” of a mountain, but it's not quite right.”

“Maybe the “base” of one of the moons?”

“Cybetron only has one moon.”

“It used to have two.”

“What?” Prowl looked interested, but the city mech waved his hand.

“Nevermind. You've got a breem?”

“Of course.”

Before he could step any closer, Sideswipe reached down and lifted the poncho up and over his head, then laid it over the top of one of the chests closest to the entrance so that it could dry. The outer part of the poncho was coated in a hydrophobic Minotoron grease, and thankfully it wasn't soaked through, though eventually the underside would catch some water and get soggy. Now that he wouldn't drip all over their belongings, he came up to the mat, and knelt down in front of Prowl,
who had put his materials aside and was giving him his undivided attention.

...He had no idea how to start.

After what had to be a breem of awkward silence, Prowl cocked his head to the side. “Yes? What is it?”

“I need to apologize to you. I'm just trying to figure out how.”

The white mech frowned, then reached over and gently took his shoulder. “Sideswipe, there's nothing you need be sorry for--”

“I'm sorry that I didn't understand you. I promised you that I would try to make this bond between us work, and then I didn't. You've been doing most of the hard stuff in trying to understand me instead.”

“That's not true. You're adjusting to a whole new way of life. Understanding our bond is just one aspect of that.”

“Not just the bond, Prowl. The culture about it, the way it works, and especially how it started. Everything about it has been different than how I've always thought that it should be. And I still think that it's wrong that you guys kidnap your mates.” He took a bracing intake of air, then put his hand on the white one resting on his shoulder.

Primus, this was going to sound nuts.

/Hey, Sunny?/

/Yeah?/ came his twin's answer a moment later.

/Blocking you./

Surprise flitted down the bond, but thankfully Sunstreaker was confident by now that his brother wouldn't vanish overnight, and even if something did try to spirt him away again, the golden mech could sprint over and stop it from happening. He felt a quick pulse of brotherly love, the equivalent of saying /see you later/, before a block snapped up between them, and Sideswipe reinforced it with his own, making sure that poor Sunstreaker wouldn't feel any residuals from what he was about to propose.

Prowl must have felt something on the bond changing. He looked stunned. “Are you alright?” he asked, and Sideswipe felt a tentative push on their own bond, far weaker than anything that would ever come from Sunstreaker.

Good. This wouldn't work if he accidentally blocked his twin and his mate. He was getting better at separating them.

“I'm fine,” Sideswipe assured him as he squeezed Prowl's fingers on his shoulder. “Prowl...I may not agree with what you do, but I want to understand you better. You said that you'd loved me since you claimed me. If we were in Kaon, it would be insane to tell someone that you'd loved them since you saw them. Or at least it'd be really, really sappy. I didn't believe you.”

“But it's true,” Prowl insisted. “I've loved you since I claimed you.”

“And I didn't understand that. Pit, I barely still do. Every memory that I have of you kidnapping me and bringing me here is coupled with some spectrum of fear of you.”
“That's never what I intended. I'm sorry.”

“I know that you are. There's not much either of us can do to see all that in a better light, not when so much was associated with fear. So—”

He vented again, his shoulders heaving up and down.

“I don't know if I can love you in the same way that you love me. But I know that I can learn to trust you again. We'll go from there.”

Prowl shifted on his pillow. “I take it that you have an idea?”

“Sa.”

Sideswipe leaned forward, and stared intensely at Prowl's optics, ensuring his mate that what he was about to say was no joke.

“If you had taken me from any other tribe, you would make sure that I grew to trust and love you during the journey back home. But I'm from Kaon. You did your best, but I still had no idea what was going on and you had no way to convey to me that you would never harm me. But I get it now. And I'm going to ask you to try again.”

“...You want me to try again?”

“Sa.”

Recalling the last time he'd done this, Sideswipe crossed his wrists and offered them to him, then dug up a phrase that he now knew how to correctly say in Iaconian.

“I trust you.”

They sat there, staring at each other.

And then Prowl understood.

His optics bulged at him, and his engine screeched to a halt. Alarm blared across their bond, and the white nomad sat up straight, his doorwings raised high and flaring and registering his shock just as well as his faceplates did.

“What?! Are you out of your cortex?!”

Sideswipe refused to break his gaze or his expression. “I'm not,” he replied coolly.

“I terrified you with this before! You've told me so many times about how you hated being dragged away from the city! And now you want me to simulate--?!”

“You're not actually taking me anywhere this time. And now that I understand what you're doing, I can listen when you try to convince me not to be frightened of you.”

Prowl shook his head once. “I will not harm you further by making you relive that!”

Sideswipe lowered his voice as he tried to reassure him. “I'll tell you if I get too scared and that you should stop. But I'm certain that you won't harm me now. I know you. I trust you.”

White hands grabbed his, but pulled them apart from where they were crossed, then held them to gently squeeze his fingers. “There's still so much about it that you don't know, and wouldn't be
expecting. I'll just terrify you all over again, and then you'll trust me even less.”

“Then talk me through it the whole time. Tell me what you're doing, and why you're doing it. The whole point is for me to understand how your tribe convinces a kidnapped mate to love them.”

“It took us decacycles to return to camp, and I was supposed to be wooing you the entire trip. There's no way that I can make you love me in one night,” Prowl scoffed.

“You don't have to. Just do enough so that I can understand you and trust you.”

“...Are you certain about this?”

“One-hundred percent certain.” Taking advantage of their close proximity, Sideswipe leaned in even closer, and briefly kissed his lips. “Pretend that everything with the Iacon prophecy never happened. Pretend that I'm just some other mech that you decided to take from another tribe. There's no hurry to get me away from the Decepticons, and I'm not panicking and trying to get back to my city and twin. I understand enough that you've taken me as your mate, though I don't know anything about you. What would you do?”

“...I'd do things that you, Sideswipe of Kaon, would disagree with,” Prowl whispered, even as he nuzzled his mate's cheek in return. “I can't make you understand and agree with our ways through play.”

“No, you can make me understand. I'll probably never agree with how the tribe takes and bonds with mates. But maybe I'll get why.”

“...You're sure?”

“I trust you to stop if I get overwhelmed.”

The Autobot kissed lightly at a black audial. “I swear to you, I will.”

“I know.”

Air vented over his frame as Prowl sighed, his doorwings lowering and relaxing as he relented. “I've...never had to teach someone about this in such a fashion. Older yoska teach the younger ones the best way to track and care for a mate. It's easily talked about amongst us during that time until it becomes common knowledge.”

“But didn't you say that Jazz gave you some techniques?” Sideswipe lightly teased, turning his head slightly to meet his lips again.

“Hmm.”

The feathery touches and kisses continued a little longer before Sideswipe realized that the other mech had stopped. Prowl simply held his hands, and studied his mate, pondering if he should deny him or not, and for a while the city-mech thought that's exactly what he would do. Then, after a breem, he sighed again, this time resolving himself to what Sideswipe was asking of him.

“Swear to me that you'll tell me to stop if this is too much.”

“I swear it,” Sideswipe said immediately. He tried not to let it show on his faceplates that his pump was pounding, though he was sure that his anxiety could easily be felt by his mate if Prowl searched their bond. “This is to help me to trust you. I won't let it work the other way around.”
Prowl paused. Then, with one last brush of a kiss on his lips, he stood up, and let Sideswipe's hands slip out of his fingers as he moved away.

Sideswipe did not turn to look for where Prowl was going as the nomad circled around behind him. He heard the patter of the rain on the roof, and quiet movement; more footsteps, and rustling. The tent liner flapping. Prowl was tying the flaps of the tent's entrance closed, making sure that they wouldn't accidentally have any visitors.

Oh Primus, that would be just *prime* if someone walked in on them.

He stayed where he was, kneeling on the mat in only his waist-cloth, his hands slipping down to rest on the plating that covered his knee-joints. Prowl was still fussing with something, and if Sideswipe knew him well enough, the white mech was making sure that he was entirely prepared before he agreed to do anything else.

A few breems later, he felt and heard Prowl taking a knee directly behind him.

“Put your hands behind your back.”

He did so, and immediately felt a roll of soft cloth being wound around each of his wrists, not enough to impede him much. It was more as if his mate was covering up an injury. Prowl took his time with this task, then when he was done, something much tighter was wrapped over the cloth, and this *did* keep his wrists crossed and pinned, squeezing at his plating, but the cloth acted as a buffer before it could do any harm.

“Last time you tore up your wiring when you were trying to fight and run away,” Prowl explained.

Sideswipe nodded.

“You'll tell me if you're truly afraid, *sa*?”

“For the last time, *sa*.” He wiggled his arms. “I know that you'll never let me get hurt at your hands.”

“...I'm going to blindfold you too.”

“Why? So I'm disoriented?”

“Exactly.”

Sideswipe waited patiently as Prowl checked the ties around his mate's wrists, making sure that he was both comfortable and could not easily break them, and then he saw another cloth right over his optics, and then they were on his optics, the other end being tied behind his helm. His vision changed to a dull shade of brown. Immediately his back stiffened and he straightened up.

“How you alright?”

“I'm fine,” Sideswipe said quickly, automatically running menial troubleshooting processes on his HUD to remind himself that his visual sensors were working fine, and that he would regain his sight as soon as the blindfold was removed. “Just, uh--”

“You *are* afraid.”

He started to deny it, then stopped himself, realizing that he was probably broadcasting clearly to Prowl's spark across their bond.
“It's normal for a new mate to be frightened when they're taken. Right?”

“Sa.”

“So then this is normal. I'm fine.”

Sideswipe felt him prod suspiciously at their bond. Prowl didn't believe him. But the red mech held firm as his mate searched what little he could see through the bond, looking for signs of a growing panic, and when Prowl found nothing, Sideswipe smirked over his shoulder at where he guessed the nomad was kneeling.

“Ready? Because I fragging well am.”

Prowl hesitated a breem longer.

Then gave him a slight push, and Sideswipe grunted as he fell forward onto their mat.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He gave into the first instinct to struggle and try to get his wrists unbound. Part of this ritual was a show of strength, after all, and if Sideswipe could break free then Prowl wasn't worthy to try to take him as a mate anyway. He guessed that if this had been real Prowl would have done more than just tie his wrists behind his back and blindfold him, but his mate refused to let him come to harm, accidentally or not. So Sideswipe played along, and didn't try to pick himself up and run blindly out of the tent, instead grunting as he rolled back and forth, squirming and yanking at his wrists.

He knew that Prowl was still kneeling nearby. His mate had gone silent, watching over Sideswipe, but letting him try to free himself without intervention, for now.

The cloth kept the cables from sawing between his plating and into his wiring, thank Primus. At the same time he was tied tightly enough that he couldn't slip a hand out through them. The knots were just above where his fingertips were grasping for them.

Still, Sideswipe put up a fight for a while, if nothing but to show his mate his own strength and will. He wasn't going to cow that easily. He wasn't going to fold and accept that he was being taken to be the mate of some strange mech. Not the Sideswipe then, not the Sideswipe now.

Memories of his first orns after being captured by the Autobots resurfaced, and with it the recollection of panicked fear and desperation to return home. He blocked it out as best as he could, gritting his dentals and hissing as his wiggling turned into feverish tugs at his arms.

A hand touching his shoulder made him gasp and shrink back.

“Sideswipe?”

Prowl's voice was quiet and uncertain. Sideswipe groaned again as he stopped squirming around so violently, and wiggled his fingers at his mate to show that he was not hurt.

“I'm alright,” he panted. “I don't think that I could get out of this unless I really wanted to.”

“That's the point.”

“But let's say that I did. What would happen?”

“I would try to chase you and recapture you. But if I lost you, then I was not strong enough for you, and thus not good enough for you. However--”
Hands grasped each of his arms, and lightly tugged at them. Sideswipe followed through the motion and climbed to his knees, although he continued to struggle as Prowl's arms wrapped around him from behind, his bumper pressed into his back.

“If I'm strong enough to keep you from running away, then I've given you a small proof that I will be a good mate.”

Sideswipe braced himself on the mat and tried to yank his frame out of Prowl's arms, but the mech held him firmly. “What does that have to do with being a good mate?!”

“We are in the wildlands, Sideswipe. We face all sorts of dangers. Wouldn't you prefer a mate who can hunt and fight, who can defend your tribe and family, who will not die shortly after bonding?!”

“That--hnrg!--makes sense, I guess,” he muttered as Prowl pulled him even closer, making him shimmy backwards on his knees a little.

“And meanwhile you've shown me that you're capable of doing the same. I doubt that I would have ever taken you without the help of a team. The chances of us capturing you at all were less than 50%.”

His cortex buzzed with that new information. That...gave the kidnappings some weird validation. He still didn't like it, obviously. Mechs and femmes were snatched away from their homes, and dragged away to live with new tribes. But their captors were ‘assessing’ them at the same time, while a potential mate judged if their kidnapper was worthy of even attempting to woo them.

“So if I just flopped over and didn't move--”

“Then I've sorely misjudged who I was taking as a mate, and I'd let you go. Or if you'd been truly panicking, as you really had been, then it would have been made clear that you must return home. But most yoska who track their mates don't make this mistake.”

While he'd been thinking about that, Sideswipe's struggles had lessened. Prowl still held him firmly, not giving him a chance to 'escape' from his arms, but after his mate had quieted down, his fingers began to move. Sideswipe shivered at the first touch and jerked.

“Easy,” Prowl whispered directly into his audial, his voice much lower now. “I'm trying to keep you calm.”

“By touching me?!”

“Sa. I'm showing you that I'm not an enemy who is trying to harm you.”

His fingertips stroked up and down Sideswipe's chestplate, right along the seams, the touch so light that it could be that it was only the air being moved as his hand passed by. Sideswipe's tactile sensors lit up, trying to determine what was causing the sensation, and he belated realized that his systems were automatically tuning to feel more of Prowl's hands, uncertain of what was causing the feathery sensations and wanting to provide an answer for his cortex.

“...That...actually feels...”

“Good, doesn't it?!”

Sideswipe nodded once, then twice.

“This is what you do instead of kissing?”
“It's not quite the same.” Prowl's ventilations wafted down his shoulder, and with Sideswipe's sensors running more sensitively than normal, the warm air felt like it was drawn right into his plating. “I'm touching you to keep you calm, and again to show that I am a good mate. I understand how to make you feel good. I know how to attend to your needs.”

The hands raised to rub twin circles around his belly, then figure-eights. Sideswipe reflexively took in an intake of air, tightening his servos underneath his abdominal plating.

“And,” Prowl murmured as he dragged his lips against the back of Sideswipe's helm briefly, “I'm also getting to know that frame of the mech that I've claimed as my mate. I already knew that he had the spark of a warrior. But now I'm understanding how he practices every day to keep his servos in shape like this...”

The purr of his voice made Sideswipe shiver. He kept sawing his wrists back and forth, continuing to fight to free himself, but the movements had become less frantic and desperate. If anything, his attention was drawn to the white palms splayed across his belly, lightly massaging at the plating before working their way around either of his flanks. He stiffened again, allowing Prowl to work around to the small of his back, then massage his way up his back struts, walking his fingers around his mate's bound hands.

“I'm also starting to understand where you prefer to be touched. I need to be paying attention to you in order to do this right.”

“Shouldn't I be scared right now?” Sideswipe asked, rolling his head back as those hands reached his shoulders and massaged at the servos he'd been yanking back and forth as he tried to free himself.

“You may or may not. Are you afraid?”

“Not of you,” he mumbled honestly. “But,” he wiggled his pinned arms again, “I think I should be.”

“No one would blame you if you are.”

“And what if I am?”

“Then I would tell you that you, Sideswipe, are brave to the point of fault, and you have no need to be afraid of me.”

The fingers strayed up along his neck cables, no longer massaging, but returning to the light touches again. The palm of a hand stroked one of Sideswipe's cheeks, the other traced its way up his helm, over the blindfold, and toyed with his audial horn briefly, before sliding back down and around his jaw, as if memorizing his face by touch.

“H-How would you know that if you had never met me?”

“I can guess that you would have fought just as hard as you did back at the caravan. I saw how you defended your friends. You could have run away. You chose not to. You tried to get my team to follow you away and you gave the minibots a chance to escape. You were truly a yoska in our optics before any of us knew a thing about you.”

That warmed his spark. His struggles ceased completely, and he allowed himself to relax and tentatively appreciate the fingertips sliding over his faceplates and neck, giving him the gentlest of massages. “I thought we were pretending that I was from another tribe.”
“We are. I know that you would do the same thing in similar circumstances to protect others in a tribe. You had earned my respect without saying a word.”

“...You don't mean that,” Sideswipe murmured. “You're just trying to flatter me.”

“I do mean it. And of course I'm trying to flatter you. I wouldn't woo you by saying other things, like that your sense of humor borders on evil.”

That made the corners of his mouth turn up. “Of course you wouldn't.”

“Nor that you stubbornly made the strangest noises in your language. Or that you have a willpower that surprised all of us. Or...that I wouldn't admit to anyone that you really are a handsome mech, and that I was pleased that I'd claimed you before Jazz did...”

The hands had traced lower, running lines down his backstruts. One hand grasped his bound wrists, lifting them up slightly, restraining him further while the other one dove even lower, and grasped a handful of his aft through his waist-cloth. Sideswipe let out a short cry of surprise and wriggled upright.

“AAH!” He bounced upwards, kept from going too far by Prowl's grip on the cables. “And what's grabbing my aft supposed to show?!”

“That I like your aft?"

“...Fair enough.”

He groaned and shifted as Prowl's palm massaged his rear plating. His engine was growling by now, enjoying the attention, even if it was coupled with him being restrained. But this is how it was normally done by new mates, and he surprised himself when he found that he wasn't as worried as he thought he should be when bound and helpless. He tugged at his wrists once, and Prowl immediately changed his grip to further up his arm, not allowing the cables to have a chance to bite into him, yet still keeping his mate close as he stroked down the back of his thigh.

“So you like my aft.” He tensed as Prowl squeezed him again in answer. “You didn't even try to touch me until we were almost at camp.”

“As I said, in normal circumstances I would have released you. The last thing I wanted to do was to panic you further.”

“And now?”

“And now?” Prowl repeated. “Now, you know what is happening. You know that as much as I desire you, I will not harm you. Sa?”

“...Sa.” Sideswipe breathed, realizing it at the same time that the nomad was saying it.

Prowl pushed at his rear slightly, almost as if to give him something to sit on, and once Sideswipe got the idea and was kneeling up, his fingertips traced around to the knot of the waist-cloth and undid it. The last piece of clothing slipped down his legs, and Sideswipe shifted to move it out of their way as Prowl's hand traced back around his hip to his now-exposed interface port. It took only a few strokes to convince him to slide back the cover over his valve.

Just like the first time that they interfaced, Prowl's touches were slow, almost to the point of exceedingly cautious, but at the same time teasing and calculated. Sideswipe's jaw fell open as two fingers formed a 'V' and slid back and forth over the folds at the top of his valve, not penetrating
him, but convincing the folds to slide further and further open with each stroke. His inner folds started to curl automatically, expecting something, but when nothing came, a little bit of lubricant leaked out of him, both in preparation for a spike and a small attempt to entice whatever was stimulating his port to continue.

“And all the teasing?” he whined. “What's with that?”

“I'm only staying at a pace that we're both comfortable with. If you had already accepted me as my mate by now, I would be proceeding much faster.”

“I might have accepted you after a few breems?!”

Prowl rumbled lightly, his laugh trembling through Sideswipe's frame. “No, no. I'm condensing down what would happen over a journey back to camp. This would be once you were calmed and curious about your potential mate.”

“How long does that take?”

“Usually less than a few orns.”

Sideswipe shook his head. He could wrap his cortex around wildland mechs not falling in love right away and still agreeing to bond, but accepting their kidnapper as their new mate that quickly?! Primus, the nomads were strange. That took an outrageous amount of trust in a stranger.

...Which was what he was giving to Prowl right now.

But Prowl wasn't a stranger. Not really. Not anymore.

He almost missed when the tip of a finger slid down the center of the opening of his valve. He yelped with a small jump that didn't go far with Prowl's other hand gripping his elbow joint.

The nomad's voice turned serious. “Do you want to stop?”

Sideswipe's engine wheezed. “No, no, frag no! You just surprised me!”

Tentatively, the finger returned again, stroking his outer folds once more to a small gasp and whine from the red mech. Then, on its third pass, it started to dip inside, but popped right back out. Sideswipe shivered and groaned.

“C'mon, Prowl...”

A helm nuzzled the side of his own. “This would take much longer if it were real. And weren't you just complaining a moment ago that we were going too fast?”

“Yeah, but my valve just remembered that you're good at this. I can convince myself that we're playing and getting to know each other, but my valve's not fooled.”

On cue, another long drip of lubricant escaped through his folds.

“Then I'll move on,” the nomad relented. “Once I'm certain that you are comfortable with me touching you, I'd explore more of you...”

Prowl's entire palm brushed over Sideswipe's valve, as if he were covering it from someone else's view. His thumb and three of his fingers continued to massage just outside of his mate's folds, but the middle finger, longer than the rest, suddenly dove inside of him. Sideswipe yowled again and squirmed around when the finger hooked in and immediately found his node.
“Primus FRAGGIT! AH!!”

The fingertip stayed there, simple pressing at the node, the initial burst of sensation that had rocketed through Sideswipe's frame now lost, but an insistent, buzzing feeling was left behind, wanting it to either leave or continue, not loiter around. The node craved stimulation now that it was being touched.

“I'll bet...mmph...that Jazz taught you that,” Sideswipe growled, fighting the urge to bounce up and down to get the hand moving.

“He did.” Prowl paused, and Sideswipe thought that he might have crossed a line by mentioning his previous lover, but a breem later the nomad had looped his free arm around his red chestplate, pinning him to his mate's front. His voice lowered. “He also showed me how to test a potential mate's stamina.”

“You know I've got plenty of that,” Sideswipe replied, not intending for it to come out so warily.

“I do. But we're still playing, right? I wouldn't know until I'd tested you.”

“Yes. So how would—AAH!!”

A forefinger joined the middle finger, and pinned the node between them. At first they massaged it together, keeping it trapped between them, and sensation from Sideswipe's valve lit up happily. Then, just as he was getting used to it, the fingers began to slide in and out, in and out, in and out, always striking the node between them, now that Prowl knew exactly where it was located. Each hit sent a jolt of electricity rocketing through his circuitry, pulsing through him over and over, until the input felt like it was constant, and Sideswipe rolled his head back again with a long moan.

“Nggh...Primus fraggit all, Prowl...”

“I can guess that you've got stamina just by your servos,” his mate purred, holding him too tightly for Sideswipe to bounce on the hand, “but I want to see for myself how long can you hold out before I make you overload.”

“Longer than it'll take for you to get tired,” he shot back, even as his vocalizer warbled.

“Hmm. We'll see.”

Sideswipe would have retorted, but was instead distracted by another wave of sensation zooming up through his circuitry, disrupting his thoughts and making him cry out again. The node was pinched, not painfully, but hard enough that his valve suddenly became concerned that it was about to accept something huge, and his inner walls cycled at nothing but fingertips, yet still rapidly produced lubricant in anticipation. This spilled out of him, coating Prowl's fingers, taking away some of the friction from rubbing Sideswipe's node, but at the same time encouraged him to keep going just as hard. Sideswipe spread his legs further to balance himself, sinking a little down Prowl's front as he did, but the arm stopped him from going too far.

“Aw frag...aw frag...that feels...HRNG!...”

He clenched his fists behind his back as he tried not to thrash, his systems loving the touches to one of the most sensitive parts of his frame and wanting to demand that the other mech give him an overload right away. His head rolled back and forth, slowly shaking a negatory to himself, refusing to allow himself to end this so quickly.

“You're stubborn,” Prowl was mumbling quietly into his audial, even as his hand set a hard and fast
pace. “Just about as stubborn as me. We'll push each other, demand only the best from one another. You'll be as good of a mate for me as I am for you.”

“You learned all that from fragging me with your hand?!”

“Sa.”

Sideswipe couldn't see him, but he got the feeling that the Autobot was smirking at him.

A warning flashed on his HUD. He dismissed it with a grimace, knowing that he could last for far longer. Or could he? Sideswipe knew that he could last longer than Prowl in a quickie, but he was the only one being pleasured right now, not Prowl. And he knew that Prowl could be ridiculously patient when he wanted to be.

He would overload eventually, he realized, yet he still whined and wiggled as he tried to hold it back. It didn't help when Prowl suddenly slowed the pace, giving Sideswipe a chance to ventilate properly and recover, and lose part of the growing charge for overload, before picking up again, startling him away from his concentration.

“T-That's cheating!”

“What is? My knowledge of how to make a stubborn mech like you overload?”

Sideswipe's ventilations were matching up with Prowl's strokes and squeezes at his node, and he had to swallow before attempting to answer. “F-frag you,” he moaned. “You piece of slag.”

“Your piece of slag.”

The mouth and ghostly whispers of air returned to the side of his helm as Sideswipe cried out at a particularly strong throb that rippled through him, this one sending a second alert to his HUD. Once again he dismissed it, but it was quickly followed by a third. His inner folds were cycling and rippling even faster, badly wanting a part of the stimulation that his node was greedily enjoying.

“I'm yours, as much as you are mine,” Prowl was murmuring into his audial. “The two of us are going to build a wonderful life in my tribe. Your tribe now. You'll have a mate who loves you, who will do anything for you, and who can do this to you--”

Another roll against his node, and Sideswipe howled as he arched his back.

“And this is only a taste of the beginning. I haven't gotten my spike into yet--”

The thought of truly interfacing with a nomad who could do such wonderful things to his frame, coupled with the same mech stimulating him so hard, finally pushed him over the edge. Sideswipe shuddered, his back pressed firmly against Prowl, and he let out one last cry before a thick wave of lubricant splurted out of him. He felt much of it dripping down his thighs, but some was dribbling onto Prowl's fingers, who had suddenly changed his tactic to instead stroke him smoothly and gently, enticing the overload to continue as long as possible.

Strong arms held him, and Prowl was cooing something at the side of his helm. His cortex didn't have enough available processes running to interpret it, and Sideswipe instead slumped against him, his mouth open, optics staring at the cloth blindfolding him, lubricant still pouring out from between his legs for half a breem longer.

Primus.
That felt good.

He wanted more of that. And then he immediately understood why Prowl had teased him. He wanted to unlock a desire for the mech that had taken him, and by the Pit, he'd gotten it.

By the time his senses returned, his orientation in space had changed. He was lying on his front. Had he been turned around? Prowl was suddenly softer, much softer, too soft. He had turned into a giant pillow.

Or was it the mat?

“Prowl?”

“I'm right here.”

The nomad had moved, and Sideswipe automatically turned his head towards the sound of his voice, though he couldn't see him. Fingers slipped stroked over his cheek gently, and the worry that he'd been left alone while he was coming down from overload was resolved and sated.

“How do you feel?”


“I mean, do you still fear me?”

He had to think about that. “...A little,” he admitted, wiggling his hands that were still bound behind him. “But nowhere near as a bad as before.”

“Why?”

“Because—I dunno. I just don't?”

It was hard to think when his cortex was a happy pile of warm goo. He tried anyway.

...He just didn't.

Prowl had been explaining it to him the whole time. He wasn't his enemy. He wouldn't hurt him. He made sure that his mate was safe and comfortable, even as he touched and teased the bound mech.

The kidnapping ritual moved things along way too fast for Sideswipe's liking, but it made perfect sense to the nomads. They needed mates right away. And in a short time, they had to make sure that their new mates understood that they would be loved.

That's why he wasn't afraid.

He understood that Prowl would love him.

...Prowl loved him.

And now Prowl was in love with him.

He couldn't have been from the beginning. Who knew when they'd progressed from Prowl's definition of love to Sideswipe's? Sideswipe barely knew when he had...

...Primus.
"Prowl? Can you untie me now?"

There was absolutely no hesitation in his answer. A hand gripped Sideswipe's arm to keep him still while the other quickly picked at the knot, and in a few seconds he was free. The cables and protective cloths were tossed aside, and then the blindfold fell away. Sideswipe refreshed his optics several times to adjust them to the dim light inside the tent, then grunted as he rolled over so that he could face his mate.

Prowl was kneeling next to him, optics wide and worried, a hand immediately going behind Sideswipe's head.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," he assured him, his own hand reaching out and grasping Prowl's shoulder. "I was just done with playing. That's all."

"Have I hurt you at all?"

He snorted. "I'm fine. Prowl, if you trusted yourself as much as I trust you right now, you'd be the most overbearingly confident mech on Cybertron."

"...So I would be your brother."

"Yes, exactly." He cleared his vocalizer. "So that...wow. I think I get how things work in the kidnapping ritual a little better. You were trying to show off that you'll be a good mate, but at the same time, you're learning more about me too."

"And you're also learning about me."

"That's how you'd get a new mech to love you in a hurry?"

"Sa. Though I still don't understand why you think that this is hurried."

He frowned. "It wasn't?"

"Well, that was. I wouldn't expect you to love me in less than a joor."

"But you can love me regardless."

"I wouldn't take you if I didn't."

His grimace deepened. But in reality, Prowl *had* taken him anyway. He didn't know a fragging thing about him when he met him.

...But...

"Prowl. Do you love me?"

He answered immediately. "Of course I do."

"No, I mean, are you *in love* with me?"

"Sa."

"I mean...aw, FRAGGITY. You're the one who wrote this stupid translation program." Sideswipe groaned and bowed his head.
Once again, language barred them.

This was too confusing. It was too much for his poor cortex to wrap around.

How did Prowl really feel about him? Not just in play, not just then, but now? The translation program had been made by the mech himself. If 'love' wasn't the right word to describe it, then--

His optics bulged a moment.

...Duh, Sideswipe. Duh.

“Hey, Prowl?”

“Sa?”

“Listen up for a second.”

The white nomad refreshed his optics. “I have been.”

“No, I mean, just...”

/Just listen./

The nomad startled, hearing his mate's voice in his spark, and stared at him as Sideswipe reached up for Prowl's other shoulder and steadied his weight as he concentrated. He felt Prowl adjusting his grip to hold him more comfortably, but didn't focus on that, instead dropping into what he 'saw' in that dark, eternal place, the void of consciousness, one that he saw only with his spark.

He saw Prowl's spark before him, twitching and worried, but open and waiting.

Sideswipe gathered up everything that he felt about their bond, and about his bond-mate, and molded that into a little ball. It almost felt like he was writing out a checklist of everything that he felt, and he made sure that it was all there, and he almost started to categorize it too into what he wanted Prowl to see first, before abandoning the idea and leaving it as a malformed, ugly, honest little ball. Let his mate unweave it and see for himself.

He didn't love him in the same way that Prowl claimed he did from when they'd met.

No.

It was so much more than that.

He pushed it through the bond, straight at Prowl's spark, knowing that he'd be able to see the entire thing with their sparks' proximity so close to one another. Prowl stiffened. Sideswipe returned his focus to reality, his glowing blue optics on his mate's, and patiently waited.

...It didn't take long at all for him to get an answer back through the bond.


Then trust, then relief, RELIEF, excitement, still pinches of doubt and worry, but above all that--

Sideswipe returned the feeling just as fast with his own, and he was on the move before he realized where his frame was taking him.

They crashed into one another again, Sideswipe wrapping his arms tightly around Prowl's
shoulders as he moaned into their kiss, and Prowl was moving his mouth against his faster than he ever had before, far too energized and happy for his usual decorum.

They clung to each other, and then their hands were on the move, and Sideswipe had no idea if he'd rather keep his attention on what their frames were doing to each other, or the mutual pulses flashing back and forth between their sparks, affirming in a language that was no language at all that they both felt the same way.

They fell back on the mat together, side-by-side, groaning and groping and loving and strengthening a bond that refused to ever be doubted again.
Chapter 31: Vain

Sideswipe woke up sore.

He did not mind that at all.

“Ughn...”

Okay, so maybe his frame did mind a little when he tried to roll over and his servos spouted curses at him through his circuitry and more formally across his HUD. Even his processor was gogglier than usual this morning.

But his spark was happy. Pit, it was beyond happy.

It pulsed, and touched another spark very close by that felt the same way.

A groan from the mech using his chestplate as a pillow affirmed that Prowl's frame was giving him a similar lecture about exactly how many times one could reasonably overload before it was too much of a strain on his systems. One of the city-mech's black hands stroked the back of a white helm.

“And I thought that I had stamina,” Sideswipe groaned with a short chuckle. “Or have you been learning to keep up with me?”

Prowl grumbled, but turned his head slightly so that black fingertips brushed along his chevron. Sideswipe took the hint and rubbed his thumb along its side, stroking it from the bottom of the crest to its point, and his mate relaxed once again.

Neither of them had noticed when the sounds of the rain had stopped. In fact, the light of the morning sun was illuminating one section of the tent fabric. Beyond it, he could hear the usual sounds of a nomad camp going through the early chores and routines. Before too long he and Prowl would be expected to emerge and find someone to help.

He doubted that he could do much more than waddle right now.

And so they rested, not going back into recharge, but not coming completely online either. Sideswipe felt himself drifting in and out of his focus on reality, and more on the bond between him and his mate. They'd been bonded for a while, but he felt as if he had now allowed himself to explore it for the first time, and he gradually poked around, cautious, noticing how when he pulsed, Prowl pulsed back without thinking, and visa versa.

It was strange. And yet, familiar. It wasn't as strong as his bond with Sunstreaker, and that made it a little easier to manage when it wasn't confusing him. It amazed him how far he'd allowed this strange mech into his spark, and yet it felt comfortable, it felt right. A weird sense of anxiety that had held onto him since they'd bonded had finally been washed away.

Everything was as it should be.
A deeper sense of *peace* pulsed at him, and Sideswipe realized belated that Prowl was only responding to that sense from his own spark first.

And to think that he'd been afraid of this for so long.

Sideswipe's other hand gripped Prowl's shoulder as the white mech tried to push himself up.

“Few more breems,” he groaned. “Please?”

“Sideswipe, it's time to get up.”

“Hrmph.” Not if he didn't let go of him. “No. You're warm and snugly and I'm tired and sore. Stay with me.”

“...Five more breems.”

“Five more breems,” he agreed.

Prowl's smaller frame lowered to rest on him again, and Sideswipe wrapped both of his arms around his mate, refusing to give him a chance to sneak away. Not that thought that Prowl would. If he was tired from the previous night, then Prowl must have been exhausted.

Five breems passed. Then another five. Neither of them moved, far too engaged with doing absolutely nothing at all.

“...Can we just stay like this forever?” Sideswipe whined. “It's nice.”

Prowl's chuckle rumbled through both of them. “We do have a tribe to look after.”

“True. Fraggit. Few more breems?”

Prowl started to sit up again. “Sideswipe, honestly--”

He was cut off as Sideswipe sat up with him, and pressed his lips over his own. Not that Prowl complained about that at all. Their kisses were far lighter and slower now, the previous desperation and excitement replaced by a serene harmony. Sideswipe was learning to put his more rambunctious energy in check and keep it at something warm and tender, and in return Prowl allowed himself to be more open and intimate than he ever would be to other mechs. Sideswipe turned his head slightly, letting more of Prowl's tongue in, allowing him to savor him while he enjoyed the now-familiar taste of the nomad.

Prowl's palms slipped up to both of his cheeks. Sideswipe moaned, his pace picking up slightly in anticipation, but those hands gently but firmly gripped him, and held him in place as his mate gradually pulled back, then stared him in the optics.

“We *must* start the orn.”

“It already did start,” he mumbled, keeping the weight of his head resting in Prowl's hands so that the other mech would have to consider dropping him in order to leave. “It's off to a very good start. And I vote that we continue what we were doing.”

“I veto that.”

“Frag you.”

Prowl smirked, then leaned in for one more kiss, a peck this time, before climbing to his feet with a
groan from both his vocalizer and his servos, his fingertips slipping across Sideswipe's face. “Get your chores done, and perhaps I'll consider some more tonight,” he said as he stumbled over to where they'd tossed their clothing.

“Let me get you done, and perhaps I'll consider doing my chores.”

The red waist-cloth flew across the tent and whapped him in the face.

As he detangled it and wrapped it around his hips, Sideswipe pulled down the barrier on his side of the bond with Sunstreaker, and 'knocked' on the adjacent wall that his twin had thrown up too. Immediately it came down, and the two of them automatically pulsed at each other, first in a sort of a acknowledgment/greeting, and then in a drawn-out question from Sunstreaker, the equivalent of asking “Well?!”

Instead of trying to answer back in a word, Sideswipe pulsed to him all the serene feelings that had been spiraling in lazy circles around his processor that morning. Sunstreaker took a moment to interpret and process them, then pulsed something that was slightly painful, the mental equivalent of smacking his brother upside the head.

/I told you./

Sideswipe grinned to himself as he stood up and tied his waist-cloth's knot. /Shouldn't have doubted you./

/Who knows you better than me?/

/No one./ he admitted, his spark dancing around at the warmth that he was feeling from not one but two bonds, two sparks that loved him, one his brother, the other his mate. /Was it that obvious?/

/Written all over your spark./

His smile fell a little. /Sorry that I dragged you through all this./

Sunstreaker's answer was instantaneous. /I'd do it all again in a spark-beat./

/You know that you're my favorite brother?/

/Ditto./ Suddenly, excitement. /Come see!/ /Come see what?/

/Come see!/ Sideswipe poked at his twin's spark, curious, but Sunstreaker refused to answer further, even though their proximity was close enough that he could have sent a clear image of whatever he'd noticed. Now even more interested, he started to look around for his poncho, and found it still resting on a chest by Prowl, even though his now-dressed mate hadn't bothered to give it back to him.

He came over, intending to pick it up, but Prowl stopped him by grabbing his forearm.

“I have something for you.”

“Oh?” Sideswipe lifted an optic ridge. “Didn't think that you were one for gifts. What's the occasion?”
“That I have it.” At Sideswipe's bemused look, Prowl shrugged, his doorwings dipping up and down. “Someone owed me a favor recently and has repaid it. And now I have something for you.”

“Okay. What is it?”

The Autobot lifted a finger, signaling him to wait, then headed over to one of the chests on the other side of the tent. He rummaged through it, and didn't take long to find what he was looking for. Sideswipe caught sight of the trailing end of red cloth, the same shade of his waist-cloth and poncho. A rare, infectious grin was working its way up Prowl's face as he came back to him with the bundle in his arms.

“Let me help you put it on.”

He unraveled it, and Sideswipe held still as the nomad wrapped the cloth around his shoulders. A small metal clasp hooked the top ends to his right shoulder, giving him plenty of freedom with the one arm, and although it covered most of his body when he was standing still, the cloak could be easily pushed out of his way to instead trail behind him. It was slightly thicker than the poncho and much longer, wrapping down to just below his knees. He noted the stitched insignia of the Autobots over his left shoulder, along with fainter, simpler geometric shapes woven through the rest of it.

As Prowl took a step back to admire him, Sideswipe lifted one edge to take a better look at what he was wearing. “This is nice!” he exclaimed.

“Does it fit?”

“It's kind of loose around the neck, but I can fix that easily! Wow!” He walked in a circle, the cloak's end following his movements. “This is beautiful! Did Tracks make this?!”

“No; there's a femme in another tribe who has become famous for these.”

“Then how--?!”

“Jazz owed me a favor, and repaid it.” He crossed his arms as his smile grew. “It was worth calling it in.”

Sideswipe paused. “Jazz?”

Something that Perceptor had told him a long time ago rang in his audials. “They help each other because they need to, and want to. They don't think about needing to work together any more than you or I think about needing to ventilate. They just do.”

He doubted if he would ever understand the Autobot's concept of 'love', ever. But it was no longer as alien anymore.

He grinned as he rushed up and drew Prowl into a tight hug. “I love it. Thank you!”

“You're very welcome.” The smaller mech leaned up a little to kiss his cheek.

“When did Jazz give this to you?! Did he come by this morning?”

“No, he came through before the rain started last night, just before you came back. He's probably still sleeping right now; he didn't want to be gone from the tribe for too long, not with all that's happening, so he probably ran to and from the other tribe's camp.”
An idea popped into Sideswipe's cortex.

“...So did he get one for Sunstreaker too?”

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“It looks just like the one that smaller black-and-white mech was wearing! You know, the one with the visor?”

“Jazz. His name is Jazz.” Springer had crossed his arms and cocked his head to the side, for all intents appearing to be annoyed with his mate, but the glow of his optics and the grin on his faceplates spoke otherwise. “You should thank him the next time that you see him.”

“He's the one that got it?” Sunstreaker sounded less than interested with their conversation about Jazz, instead smoothing the palm of his hand over the shapes woven into his golden cloak. It was cut in the exact same way as Sideswipe's, even down to the extra slack around the neck, likely because the femme who had made it was only going by Jazz's description of the twins.

Sideswipe silently thanked Primus for whatever manner the nomads used to get the colors right. Maybe Jazz had stolen a chip of their paint or something. If anybody could notice a shade that was slightly off, Sunstreaker could, but his brother was more than pleased with his gift, so it must have been right. It warmed his spark to see his twin so genuinely happy, even if it was making his vanity clear as he experimentally pushed it to rest in different ways around his frame.

Then again, Sideswipe had let himself indulge on the double-takes of other nomads when they saw his new cloak too, so he couldn't say too much about his brother's pride. He was used to other mechs taking notice of his brother. It was rare to have others stare at him in the same way as well.

Prowl was standing at his mate's shoulder, watching as Sunstreaker toyed with the clasp keeping the cloak hooked to his frame. “It won't impede you if you need to fight, sa?”

He had correctly guessed that both twins found that important, and at the same time they both lifted their left arms to sweep their cloaks back behind them, the movement easy and smooth. “Works just fine,” Sideswipe said, leaving it behind him while Sunstreaker re-wrapped his own and checked it over to make sure that nothing had splattered on it. The golden twin then growled when Hot Rod ran up and pawed at the back of the cloak.

“Hands off!”

“When do I get one?!” the youngling asked, even as Sunstreaker yanked it away and double-checked it.

“When you get a mate and they give you a gift,” Springer answered for him.

“He's just going to get paint on it!”

“No I won't!” Sunstreaker snapped. “I'm not letting anything get on this!” His engine revved on a lower key when Sideswipe chuckled and prodded his shoulder playfully. “I won't!” he repeated, taking a step away from him.

“Bro, this is meant to keep slag off of your frame. Of course scrap's going to get on it.”

“No if I can help it.”

“You see how many rust shavings are out here?! You think you can avoid them all? Nevermind,”
he cut off Sunstreaker's retort. “You'll probably try.”

“Hmph.”

While Springer snickered at the twins, Prowl spoke up. “How would Sunstreaker get paint on himself?”

Hot Rod’s optics lit up as he switched gears and ran forward to grasp the white mech's hand. “You've got to see this! He can paint!”

“Paint? Paint what?”

“Yeah, paint what?” Sideswipe echoed, even as both his optic ridges raised high as he and his twin exchanged grins. They followed as Hot Rod dragged Prowl into the tent, with Springer taking up the rear behind the city-mechs.

Immediately Sideswipe's olfactory sensors were assaulted by the thick scent of paint permeating the air and trapped in a small space. The tents were good for holding in heat, but poor on ventilation, at least for this amount of paint.

He'd been expecting a large canvas, maybe a huge piece of cloth that he'd been helping Hot Rod to finger-paint on--

“Whoa...”

He stopped, then turned in a circle, Prowl doing the same beside him.

Every inch of space on the inner part of the tent liner had been used as a canvas. The unbroken walls had become an encircling work of art, a painting of the landscapes of the wildlands, here and far beyond the Autobots’ territory. On the east wall were the plains, guided by rolling hills until they flattened out into the long, sandy deserts on the south wall. Charcoal loops representing the wind blew aside the stubs of crystals that somehow survived such an inhospitable environment until they grew taller, and taller, then into a forest that took up the west wall. From there, the crystals grew along hills that climbed higher and higher, until they became peaks of mountains on the north wall, and tumbled back down to the hills in the east.

Sideswipe turned his head up towards the ceiling. Above it all was a melding night and day sky, either dusk or dawn, and where it was night, the stars were out. He even picked up a few constellations, and his spark pulsed joyfully. Star-gazing had always been more of Sideswipe's habit than Sunstreaker's, but the red twin had taught him a few things over the vorns of joining him out on a balcony or a roof, and Sunstreaker had remembered them.

“This is...this is amazing, Sunny!” he exclaimed, fighting the urge to bounce up and down on his peds.

“Incredible,” Prowl murmured, optics wide as his head swiveled back and forth. “How on Cybertron did you do this?”

“With paint and charcoal.”

The smug glee that was all but flooding the twins' bond didn't bother Sideswipe in the slightest. He kept turning around, finding new details everywhere he looked. A pack of cyber-wolves were roaming the desert, one with his nose down as he searched for scraps. The forest was a magnificent rainbow of colors, but behind it all was a soft, blue glow, which all crystal forests had when the energy between structures was constantly exchanged. Here and there were different nomads
scattered around, some poking their heads out from behind rocks, others climbing up hills or the mountains, all of them teeny as compared to the landscapes around them, which made the painting seem all the larger.

“Not the biggest canvas I've ever used,” Sunstreaker said, as if reading his brother's thoughts, “and there's a whole list of mistakes that I need to fix.”

Springer's jaw dropped. “What mistakes?!”

“Well, like this one.” Sunstreaker pointed a finger at one of the crystals on the forest portion of the mural. “The wind was blowing on the tent when I was drawing the line, so it's not straight. I need to do that over with a straight edge. It looks weird compared to the rest.”

“It's fine!”

“No it's not,” he grumbled. “And look, over here, no mountain would ever look like this, not even from a distance.” He grimaced. “Frag. I think I can still paint over that, but only if it's the same color—”

“Sunstreaker. It is beautiful.”

Through the bond, Sideswipe felt his brother stiffen. Immediately he snapped his head to him, and noted how Springer was grasping Sunstreaker's shoulder.

“I've never seen anything so gorgeous before. And in my own tent! There's not a thing that needs to be changed on it.”

“...I'd be happier if I could,” Sunstreaker muttered, his optics flashing to the hand on his shoulder.

“I'm not stopping you, but I'm going to keep telling you that it's beautiful anyway.” Gray hands lightly kneaded the golden armor. “Thank you for doing this.”

“I didn't do this for you.”

“But it's in my—it's in our tent. And I get to see it every night.”

He paused. The hand fell away.

“...So what should I go get so that you can paint more?”

Sunstreaker turned to him. “Cans of paint, obviously.”


“Why would you care?”

“Because this,” Springer spread his hands, gesturing to the tent around him, “this is what made you happy. The happiest that I've ever seen you. I'm not sure what else I could find or trade for, but if you give me a list, I'll keep my optics open.”

“...I can just draw with charcoal, so the tent doesn't reek.”

“Fair enough. Sunstreaker?”

“Yeah?”
The green nomad leaned towards him, and when he spoke, his voice was softer.

“I'm sorry that I didn't do more to appreciate your smile. It's more beautiful than anything that you've just painted.”

The golden mech froze up. Confusion/conflict ebbed across the tent at Sideswipe's spark.

Then he scowled.

Then he shoved Springer hard in the face, sending him tumbling backwards.

“That was some slag, and you know it!” he barked.

The green mech was howling with laughter, and kept cackling even when Sunstreaker stormed up to him and kicked him in the side, making his engine wheeze.

“The look on your face just now was worth it!”

“Aft!”

Smaller hands grasped Sideswipe's, dragging his attention away from the wrath about to be dropped on his brother's cackling green mate. “I drew stuff too! Look!” He pointed excitedly at a simpler sketch of a Minotoron, one that Sideswipe could only identify because of it's prominent horns that were nearly as long as the creature was. The drawing was on the east wall, right above where the youngling's mat was. “See? See?”

“I see it, and he looks great,” the red mech praised him, taking a knee to put himself at the same level as the drawing. “Looks like he wants to eat all the crystals in the forest over there.”

“I don't think he can. He's got a looong—” Hot Rod spun around, tracing the path the Minotoron would have to go with his finger, “way to go to get there!”

“And then a long way to come back home. Think that's where the bull from our last move went?”

“Maybe. Minotorons usually don't go far from their herd. Maybe he'll come back someday.”

Sideswipe grinned at him. “Wouldn't you be scared of him if he came back?”

“Na!” Hot Rod boasted, drawing himself up as high as he could. “I'd ride him, and show him who's the boss!”

“I like the way you think,” he cackled as he reached over and rubbed the youngling's helm, thinking back to how he and his brother used to be. Pit, not much had changed over the vorns. “I want to try to ride one of those things someday.”

“You haven't?!”

“Na. The only one I've seen in the city was at a circus, and we couldn't ride him. But I'll bet it's fun.”

“It is!”

“Hey, Prowl!” Sideswipe called over his shoulder. “When am I going to get a chance to ride a...Prowl? Hey, Prowl?”

The white nomad didn't answer him. He hadn't even turn around to acknowledge him.
He was staring at the north wall. Right at the drawings of the mountains.

Sideswipe tried again to call his mate's name, and he was still ignored. Prowl's optics instead glanced once at his golden twin, before returning to the painting.

“Sunstreaker?”

He raised a hand, and trailed his fingertips along four tall, skinny peaks on the 'horizon', lined up one after another. Their tips were nearly touching the fluffy clouds on the edge between the wall and the roof of the tent.

“What are these?”

Sunstreaker had stopped mauling his giggling mate long enough to look at what had Prowl so intrigued. “Those are the Pillars. Sometimes they're called Primus's Fingers. They're four towers north of here, part of some building project that was abandoned vorns ago, but--”

“Are they real?”

“They are. I've seen pictures of them in the Archives back in Kaon.”

Prowl considered the Pillars a moment longer. Sideswipe saw a flashing of light on the wall, then realized that it was being reflected from his mate's optics.

“Prowl?” he asked again cautiously, lightly prodding their bond. “Prowl, what's on your processor?”

Prowl turned suddenly, and grasped Sunstreaker's wrist.

“Come with me.”

“Wha--?!”

The golden mech was yanked forward and forced to follow after the nomad as he was dragged out of the tent. Immediately Springer was up too, his mood doing an about-face as he roared in outrage and jogged behind them, not happy at all with how his mate was being treated. Hot Rod scrambled after them, baffled, and so did Sideswipe, although he tripped over something on the way out.

“...Are those my gestalts?!” he cried out in surprise, before forgetting them as he ran after his brother.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Prowl's hands flattened out the prophecy's scroll, careful to not damage it, but still moving quickly. Beside him, Sunstreaker frowned, his optics squinting at the simple imagery drawn on the paper.

“...I've seen this before.” He turned to Sideswipe, who was sitting cross-legged on a pillow next to him. “This is the map that the old mech had.”

“Alpha Trion. Sa.” Sideswipe shuffled a little closer to him. “I didn't get a chance to see it until a few decacycles ago. You said it was some kind of a map, and I thought that's literally what it was.”

“I still think it is.” Sunstreaker pointed to the Iaconian words on one side of the scroll. “I have no idea what that says, though.”

In front of them, on his own massive pillow, Optimus readjusted himself as he leaned forward.
“We do have a translation. Prowl?”

The white mech read out the words line-by-line to the mechs who had assembled in the Prime's tent: all of the senior mechs who sat on Optimus's side (including a sleepy and yawning Jazz), and the twins, Springer, and Hot Rod, who was seated in Springer's lap.

“Great Plains
Red Sea
Touches the Clouds
Mountain of the Moon
Onward, Brave One
To the Gates
A Spark, Halved
Lights the Darkness
Iacon, Opens”

Sunstreaker stared at Prowl, then shook his head. “Sounds like poetry, but I have no idea what it means.”

“We've also been trying to determine what the prophecy talks about since we found it with Sideswipe's caravan. It's some sort of a direction, a way to read the map. I hadn't had much luck with it beyond the first line, 'Great Plains', which must be talking about the portion of the wildlands where we are now. However...”

Prowl tapped one of the lines.

“Touches the Clouds.”

Then he reached back to the map, and tapped the caricatures of the mountains.

“They're touching the clouds.”

“...Like Primus's Fingers,” Sideswipe realized at the same time as his brother, the twins snapping their optics towards one another.

“The Pillars!”

“Sunny, when's the last time you went to the Archives if you drew those from memory?!”

“Just before the last job. The client wanted a mural taking up one of his walls, remember?” Sunstreaker smirked at his brother. “As much as I love to draw out what comes from imagination, I know better than to not do research when it comes to landscapes.”

Sideswipe straightened up. “And you and the minibots knew where to find the Autobots' territory-”

“From looking at a map of the area. It wasn't a very complex one, but--”
“Does any of this make sense to you?” Sideswipe pointed at the prophecy's words. “If these are referring to landmarks, do you know where they'd be on a map?”

Sunstreaker refreshed his optics at him, then turned back to the prophecy and stared at it. He held the attention of all the mechs in the tent, including little Hot Rod, who was at a loss to what exactly was going on but trying to sit still in Springer's lap anyway. As Sunstreaker continued to stare at the scroll, pondering it, Sideswipe put a hand on his shoulder, and pulsed soothing waves at his twin's spark, trying to keep his twin focused. A sense of appreciation ebbed back at him.

“...I can give you a good guess as to what each of those refers to, and where they are,” the golden mech said slowly. “And a very general idea of where they'd be on a map.”

“General is better than nothing, bro.”

Prowl's doorwings were twitching. “Would all of these locations be close together?”

“They're all in a line going north-ish.”

“Can you show us?”

“Give me something to write on.”

Ironhide immediately searched the shelves, and a large roll of paper and charcoal were provided for him. Sunstreaker promptly got to work, first drawing out a large topographical view of their hemisphere of Cybertron, and quickly noted the nearest cities, which would have been the most vital for any map for a city-dweller and gave him solid reference points. From there, he had to stop and think before drawing out where each of the landmarks hinted at by the prophecy would be, what they would look like, and his best guess as to what the terrain around them would be. More details began to emerge as he went. Nothing cute like the little turbo-foxes or nomads, but terrain features, reminders of natural dangers that they would be facing, and what he could remember about different paths that they could take.

Nearly everyone in the tent was leaning over to watch him work, the noises of their systems hushed. The quiet was broken by Optimus Prime suddenly standing up, which startled a few of the mechs.

“Someone go outside and spread the word.”

He drew an intake of air, as if needing to affirm his declaration to himself before he continued.

“We are going to Iacon.”

Chapter End Notes

The game for the next couple of weeks is "Can NTLDR re-read the entirety of MTMTE before TFCon?"

Or, rather, "Will NTLDR still be up for TFCon after her brain has melted?"
Migrate

Chapter Notes

I'm a little frustrated because I posted the latest Sidequest just before midnight, and it showed up behind other fics that had been posted all day. Hopefully the same thing doesn't happen here too. *grumble*

Also, here's some music for reading this fic. I'm still playing with what songs these get seeded from, but most of them fit in some way.

Chapter 32: Migrate

From Sideswipe's perspective, packing up and moving the tribe for a long journey was no different than preparing for the short trek to new grazing fields for the Minotorons: everything was disassembled and piled up into wagons, the yoska gave the Minotoron herd the initial push to get them going in the right direction before the regular herders took over, and then off they went. But there was a new air around the tribe now. Everyone knew that they would be moving through lands that they'd never seen before, and there was a chance that the place that they were going to wouldn't be able to sustain them. And yet there was a joy and excitement in every mech and femme, and especially in the younglings, who were running around all over the place when they weren't cooped up in the center wagons.

They were going to some fabled place. But more importantly, especially to the oldest members of the tribe, they were going home.

Sideswipe tried not to think about the implications of that as he flanked the wagons while he walked, taking his job to guard the Autobot tribe seriously as they moved across the wildland fields and into unknown territory. Stories about Iacon were as much of legends to the eldest femmes as they were to everyone else. None of them had laid optics on the place. Sideswipe strongly doubted that there would be anything there besides rubble. And yet here the Autobots were, uprooting everything and throwing their fate to the legitimacy of some prophecy.

Then again, if they had stayed, they would have all been offline when the Decepticons returned.

But then again, if they were going somewhere that couldn't sustain the energon that a tribe needed, then they would be offline anyway. It would just take longer.

/Hey, Grim-Bot. Knock it off. You're making me depressed./

Sideswipe was startled out of his thoughts by his twin. He turned his head, looking for him, and spotted a golden cloak near the rear of the wagon train. /You're not worried?/ he asked. The distance between the twins was close enough that they could 'speak' with as if they were on comms instead of with just thoughts, feelings, and basic words.

/Of course I'm worried. There can't be anything out there./

/Yet here we are./ Sideswipe vented through his nose. He could hear singing from the middle of the wagons, but couldn't bring himself to share in the rest of the tribe's excitement.
Having second thoughts about leaving?

Maybe. I did my part by bringing them the Iacon prophecy. There's not a lot left for me to do. Except to be sacrificed to some Decepticon god, but he hadn't had that dream in a while now. He must have been right about it all along, despite what Prowl said. It wasn't a vision. He had felt worried and guilty, and now that he was at peace with himself, the nightmare was going away, and with it the irrational, nagging feeling that Megatron would fulfill how he interpreted the prophecy.

You wouldn't go. Sideswipe heard the equivalent of a snort through their bond. You'd have to leave him behind.

...I could do it. If I had to.

And leave me to deal with a spark-broken, miserable twin for the rest of my life?

You shouldn't have to stay for me.

I'm your brother. I love you. There's absolutely no way in the Pit I'm leaving you here with a bunch of crazy nomads.

Sideswipe smirked. You're not calling them 'barbarians' anymore.

Shut up.

He poked Sunstreaker through the bond, and got a more painful smack in return. Grumpy-Bot.

Aft.

Slag-sucker.

Pit-spawn.

Cortex-disabled.

Son of a glitch.

Don't you say bad things about our carrier!

Hmph.

His mood swiftly rising back up, Sideswipe picked up his pace, even scouting to the side a little to check the underbrush of crystals for anything that could be tailing them before jogging back when one of the other yoska called a warning to him, worried that a cyber-wolf pack might take advantage of a mech scouting alone.

After a few breems, though, he noted the waves of irritation that kept bombarding him through the twin-bond.

What's wrong?

When do we take a break from walking?!

At dusk, when it's too dangerous to make the wagons keep going.

...Springer just told me that, and I thought that he was joking! My legs will fall off before then!
/That's right, you and the minis probably took breaks like normal 'bots when you were coming here. These fraggers can walk all orn. It was a lot of fun to learn that when you're tied to the back of their wagon and made to walk along with them./

/What?! Sideswipe, you told me that they didn't hurt you!/ 

/They didn't! They knew I was strong, so they thought it was weird that I could barely keep up at first. Apparently it's all part of being a yoska. You're capable of walking, so why take up valuable space in a wagon? Anyway, this is a slower pace than when I was with a team of four 'bots./

The other spark 'groaned.' /My servos are going to wear out./

/I'm fine!/ 

/That's because you're one of them./ 

/I guess so./ Sideswipe's toothy grin was only for himself.

/What else have you conveniently forgotten to tell me?/

He quickly stuffed down the gleeful mischief that swelled in his spark before his twin could feel it. 
/Have you tried to kiss Springer yet? 

/Huh?/

/Kiss him. He's walking nearby you, right?/ Prowl had joined an advance group that was scouting ahead of the bulk of the tribe; otherwise he would have stuck close to his mate. /Give him a kiss./

/Why? What will happen?/

/Just kiss him./

/Sides, we're not even close to that point yet./

/But you do like him, right?/

/No, I don't./

/Yeah, you do./

/No, I DON'T!/

/You do. It's written all over your spark./

/Oh, frag you!/ Sunstreaker snarled at him. Sideswipe wisely didn't answer him, and instead waited, giving his twin only two choices: ignore his suggestion or proceed.

At first, Sunstreaker did the former. Sideswipe heard nothing from the bond other than a restless irritation. But then, slowly, curiosity started to creep in, then was beaten down, then came back, then was affirmed. Sideswipe held back from prodding his brother further, not wanting him to retreat when under his twin's scrutiny.

Sunstreaker was building himself up to do something. Then, he was concentrating on something. Probably talking to someone.

There was a pause.
He heard yelling from the rear of the wagon train. Several of the Autobots were looking back over their shoulders to see what all the fuss was about.

Sideswipe cackled, then sprinted forward, as if he could outrun the burst of rage that flooded their bond, and the golden mech that he knew would be hot on his trail.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“...Thank Primus we don't need to cross that.”

The setting sun highlighted the sea in front of them, making it turn an even brighter shade of red, but Sideswipe knew that it's hue would not change even as darkness fell. Surprisingly, a good portion of the Autobots had already seen the Sea of Rust, having come this way when scouting, yet only a handful of times at most, and Ironhide had to keep walking up and down through the makeshift camp to ensure that everyone was paying attention to their jobs instead of staring out at the waves crashing into the shore. Even the twins had been briefly hypnotized by it, before the servoed red mech had shoved them back towards where the wagons were being chocked for the night.

Once everything was secured, Sunstreaker left, needing to join the first watch of the night. Sideswipe pulled out his and Prowl's mat before his mate was due to return, then dragged it to share the warmth of a fire with several of other mechs. Many of them were still chittering excitedly, talking about what they might find on the way to Iacon, or better yet, in Iacon, and Sideswipe talked to them for a little while before losing interest and settling down to rest as he waited for Prowl. He pillowed his arms under his helm, and let the drone of conversation become background noise.

It was the first time in a long time that he was falling into recharge without Prowl next to him. Even when things had been bad while they were fighting, they'd always shared the same tent, and when things had been good, especially in the past few orns...

He was starting to enjoy cuddling up to his mate's warm frame before falling asleep. He surprised himself when he found some difficulty initializing a recharge cycle without him.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Shh, shh, it's me.”

“Nnngh...”

Sideswipe's faceplate's crinkled, and he squeezed his optics even tighter before allowing them to open and online. The dim light of the crackling fire didn't give him much illumination to work with, but it was enough to recognize his mate's face hovering over him.

Sideswipe yawned. “You're back late.”

“We found evidence of recent movement around us. Had to make sure that it was a bunch of cyber-wolves going by and not another tribe.”
He kissed him on his way down to rest at the red mech's side. Sideswipe sighed, briefly noting how much more at ease he was now that Prowl had returned safely, then rolled over so that he could drape an arm around the white nomad's shoulders.

Or, he would have, if Prowl hadn't been tightly holding his wrists.

He refreshed his optics at his hands as he came fully online. “...What?”

“You tried to punch me.”

“...I did?”

“Sa, just a breem ago.” Prowl released him, confident to do so now that Sideswipe was awake and alert. “It's fine. You didn't get me.”

“Prowl, I'm sorry,” he gasped, his spark dropping in shame.

He didn't recall having the nightmare, or the outburst at the end.

...Primus.

“Have I ever done that to you before?!?”

“Several times in the past five orns or so. I thought it had something to do with your visions getting worse.”

“Prowl, my dreams were getting better,” Sideswipe argued. “I'm calm at the end of it, when I see a light, and then I wake up. And the past few orns I haven't been having that nightmare at all. I thought that I was over it!”

A white hand stroked his cheek. “Not entirely, it seems.”

Sideswipe groaned, and it was only Prowl's soothing hand that kept him from flopping over and throwing a tantrum like a sparkling. “I don't understand. I'll always feel bad about Alpha Trion, but I don't feel like the guilt about him dying is eating me all the time, and neither am I afraid of you anymore! So why haven't the nightmares stopped?!”

“Your visions are changing again. You don't even recall having them now?”

“They're not visions. They're just plain old nightmares. That's all.”

Recognizing them as anything else would also give validation to what could happen to him in the end.

Prowl vented a sigh, and his hand moved to instead pet the side of Sideswipe's helm. “Even with us on our way to Iacon, you still don't believe in the prophecy, or your destiny?”

Sideswipe hissed, although the noise sputtered out as Prowl's fingers massaged him, and his optics wearily faded to partial-brightness. “I'd hate to be there the orn that you figure out that I don't have some great, foretold destiny or some slag like that. I'm just an ordinary mech who's done some fragged-up scrap and feels bad about it.”

He felt lips slipping over his own. “I am fairly certain that you are anything but ordinary.”

“Mmm.” Sideswipe grunted, but gave him a brief kiss back. “Besides being a twin, nope. Just got some bad luck.”
“Is this bad luck?” Prowl mumbled.

“...Now why’d you have to do that, when I’m all set to bemoan my existence? You slagger.” He smiled anyway as one of his hands walked its way around Prowl’s shoulders, pulling his mate in close. “No, this is not bad luck. I’m fragging grateful that, of anybody I could have ended up with, I’ve found myself bonded to you. You’re devoted, you're brilliant, you're loving, you're almost as beautiful as your spark is--”

He was cut off by Prowl’s mouth settling over his. Sideswipe happily let him in, their glossas exploring one another, both of them quietly moaning as they held each other's helms.

Primus, he was never going to get over the way he tasted. So sweet, so raw, so unlike anyone he'd ever met in Kaon.

All too soon Prowl stopped, though with a few apologetic pecks at his lips when Sideswipe whined.

“We're not alone,” he whispered, nodding his head up towards the other mechs recharging around the crackling fire.

Sideswipe snorted. “Frag them. We're just kissing. Which you started, by the way.”

“We need to recharge too.”

“Later.”

“Now.”

“Aw, c'mon...”

Prowl pressed his face into his mate's neck. “I remember a time when you would be exhausted from walking all day and pass out barely before getting to the mat.”

“I got stronger.”

“A shame.”

“Clearly. Hey.” He shook his shoulder. “Prowl?”

“Hmm?”

Sideswipe brought his other hand down to cup his mate's chin and turn his face towards him, making sure that he was paying attention. The growing humor disappeared from his faceplates. “I'm serious about me not having a destiny. And I'm scared that the tribe is blindly dedicating themselves to rumor about Iacon's existence because of me.”

Prowl refreshed his optics at him. “It's no rumor. We have a prophecy that Alpha Trion told us would be brought to us by you. That is exactly what has happened. How much more proof do you need of its legitimacy?”

“Maybe if it was brought by a more 'legitimate' mech than me. I'm just some slagger with nightmares.”

“With visions.”

Sideswipe grimaced. “And they end with me dying. You really think that this all is true? Then you
can't cherry-pick that out of the equation, Prowl. I'm supposed to die.”

The two of them lay in silence for a long while, their arms still around each other, but the magic was lost.

Slowly, cautiously, Sideswipe felt something press at him through the bond. He let himself remain open and accepting, knowing that Prowl still struggled with that quiet plane that their sparks resided in, and when the feeling that he was conjuring finally pushed through, Sideswipe embraced it before returning his own to his mate. This made Prowl ease, but only a little, and his free arm wrapped tightly around Sideswipe's torso.

“Megatron won't get the chance to lay a hand on you ever again.”

One of Prowl's thumbs stroked the spot on Sideswipe's chin where the Decepticon leader's claws had raked into his plating after Sideswipe had spat in his face. The injury had been minor and long since repaired, but Prowl remembered exactly where his mate had been harmed.

“But this prophecy that you believe in says that I'll die,” Sideswipe muttered.

“No, it doesn't.”

“Then what does it say? ‘Iacon, Opens,’” right? That means there'll be one more obstacle in our way. Are you really going to wait until we're in Iacon to figure it out how to solve it?”

“Sa.”

“And then what if Megatron's interpretation was right all along? What if I have to extinguish my spark so that this prophecy becomes real? What then?”

Prowl clenched his jaw, and he clung to Sideswipe.

“I won't let that happen.”

Sideswipe sighed.

“Prowl, you can't have it both ways. Either I'm right, and the prophecy a lot of slag, or I'm wrong...and I'm a dead mech walking.”

“You're wrong on both counts. The prophecy is real, and you will live.”

“...Prowl?”

“Sa?”

He bent his head forward, and kissed his mate's chevron, then let their forehelms rest together, their optics staring into one another's.

“If anyone can save me from whatever's supposed to happen to me, it's you.”

Prowl clenched his jaw as his own blue optics gazed into Sideswipe's.

“Nothing is going to happen to you,” the nomad growled, his tone nearing possessive. “You would not have been brought this far just to die before we can make it home.”

“...You really are just as stubborn as I am.”
“You say it like it's a bad thing. I will not allow you to die. I won't.”

“I'll make a deal with you,” Sideswipe said, his voice softening. “If we survive this...If it turns out that you were right, and Iacon really is our new home, for both of us...”

He shifted to rest his chin on the top of Prowl's helm as he hugged him close.

“Then I swear, I'll make sure that we have that life that you were talking about. We'll have a good life, you and me, a normal life. I'll be as good of a mate to you as you've been to me all this time.”

His fingers massaged Prowl's back struts. “We'll look after the tribe. We'll raise a sparkling. We'll be safe, we'll be loved, we'll love each other. I promise. As long as you prove me wrong, and I live to see Iacon become our home. Sa?”

Prowl considered him, then clung even tighter to him.

He didn't have a single word to offer to that.

But his spark had plenty more to say across their bond.

And Sideswipe heard him. And his own spark danced.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Hot Rod gazed over to tops of the hills in front of them. “They really do look like fingers trying to touch the sky.”

Sideswipe nodded, then adjusted the youngling on his back. After a couple of decacycles of walking, the tribe had left the Sea of Rust behind them, and had returned to the hills, which were becoming steeper and more treacherous every new orn. Their progress was slowed as the Minotorons struggled to get the wagons up the slopes. As energetic as Hot Rod was, his small frame was getting tired by all the climbing, so Sideswipe had offered him a piggy-back ride, much to the youngling's delight.

Not far from them, Sunstreaker was carrying both his and Sideswipe's swords on his back; the golden mech had the foresight to pick off his brother's when he'd bent down for Hot Rod, unwilling to take a chance that the youngling would slip and slice himself on the blade. It wasn't much of an extra weight, but Sunstreaker was still getting used to walking such a distance, and the slope wasn't helping, so he kept a hand on Springer's shoulder as they climbed. Even Prowl was using his staff as a walking stick, as were other yoska with similar weapons.

In front of them, about half an orn's walk away and behind a smaller peak, four skinny towers snaked up towards the sky. They had stood for so long without maintenance that Cybertron had eventually reclaimed the structures; most of their outer plating was thickly rusted, where it was still present, and thick crystals were snaking up their bases, possibly the only thing that was keeping the derelict towers from falling down. One of them had been halved, likely from a fault that had finally been overcome over vorns of disuse, and that almost looked like a pinky finger compared to the other three, with its rubble laying like a thumb across a palm.

Sideswipe, Sunstreaker, and Perceptor could reason to themselves that the towers was another example of the cities of Cybertron overreaching their influence during times of peace and plenty of energon, and that it looked like a hand reaching up was a haunting coincidence. But the rest of the Autobots were unnerved. They did look frighteningly like the fingers of a giant hand trying to grasp the clouds.

Springer swore under his breath as he stared at them with huge optics. Sunstreaker grumbled and
gripped his mate's shoulder tighter.

“They're just abandoned towers. Nothing more.”

“Nothing like that could ever be built by hand.”

Sideswipe readjusted Hot Rod to sit a little higher on his back. “Kaon has bigger ones. Nicer, too. Shinier. Oh yeah, and mechs actually live in them.”

“What kind of mechs would build such things as a home?” Prowl asked.

“Ones with way too many credits.”

The two couples and the youngling had moved closer to the wagons, not wanting to be caught on the perimeter while Hot Rod was with them in case they were attacked. The jubilant mood that had been an aura around the tribe when they had started towards Iacon had faded now that they were far from territory that they knew. Sunstreaker's map had proved invaluable, and several copies had been made and given to the different leaders in case the tribe somehow became separated as they moved further into the mountains. Still, a nervous fear was making its rounds through the mechs and femmes, now that they were dedicated to finding Iacon and could not admit a mistake and turn around. Yet no one else besides the twins had vocalized any worry that it didn't exist.

Even Perceptor was becoming more and more confident that they would find it, despite his early misgivings. But for now the scientist was sitting on the edge of one of the wagons, his attention completely on a bundle in his arms. Drift was walking along close to his mate, a gleeful energy in his step, and every so often he'd hurry up and say something to Perceptor or peer down at the sparkling that he was cuddling.

Sideswipe grinned to himself as he watched them. He was sure that he wasn't only one that had recommended the new couple as good surrogates for Backburn. He reached behind him to keep Hot Rod from slipping as he jogged up to their wagon.

“How's the sparkling?”

Drift beamed at him. “Comfortable with both of us. He's becoming more alert while the sun's up too. Look.”

Perceptor shifted the blankets and the sleeves of his robe so that Sideswipe could see. The sparkling still grunted and protested at being moved away from being cuddled, but he was much more awake than the last time that the red mech had seen him. Backburn's blue optics stared at him, recognizing him, and he made a cooing sound before quickly losing interest and turning his head back towards Perceptor.

The scientist smiled warmly at him and pulled him in closer. “I'm here, little one. I haven't gone anywhere.”

Backburn's response was to grunt and press his face into his chestplate.

Something in Sideswipe's own spark lit up at that, and he grinned broadly.

Hot Rod, however, wrinkled his nose as he looked over the ex-mercenary's shoulder at the much smaller mech. “What's so great about him? He can't talk yet. Can't even walk. Bet he can't even howl.”

Drift was nonplussed, but Perceptor frowned. “He'll learn all those things eventually. He's only just
learning to recognize different faces and spark signatures.”

“Wait, did you say ‘howl?’” Sideswipe perked up. “Sparklings can howl?”

“You've heard enough sparklings crying by now to know the answer to that,” Drift winked at him.

“No, I mean...that noise that you guys like to make. He can do it?”

“Noise?”

Figuring it would be better to demonstrate than to try to verbally explain, Sideswipe threw his head back, and gave his best imitation of a tribal howl. “AAA-WOOO!!”

Nearly all the mechs in his vicinity snapped their heads his way. The conversations around them died.

“...What was that?!” Hot Rod exclaimed, breaking the awkward silence after a few seconds.

“A howl?”

“It didn't mean anything! That was just yelling!”

Sideswipe bristled. “That's what howling is!”

“No, it's not!” Bracing himself on the bigger mech's shoulders, Hot Rod let out a cry of his own, higher-pitched, but more drawn out than Sideswipe's had been. “Aaa-WOOO!” There seemed to be more passive reaction amongst the Autobots to the youngling's howl, though they still looked his way to see what was going on before returning to what they were doing.

“That's...the same?” But even as he said it, Sideswipe knew that he was wrong. It sounded different.

Hot Rod had actually been communicating something.

...Slag.

“Hey, Prowl?”

His mate walked over to him. “Sa?”

Sideswipe glared. “Your translation program forgot something.”

“...Oh.” Prowl's optics lit up, and though he didn't smile, humor washed through their bond. “It never occurred to me that you don't call to other city-mechs in that way.”

“Fraggit all, Prowl!”

“Sideswipe, language!” Perceptor admonished as he hugged his sparkling.

“Whatever. Prowl, you never cued me in on how you all do that howling...thing!”

The white nomad shrugged, while the mechs and femmes outside their small group mumbled to each other and pointed, spreading the word that someone was making a whole lot of noise and was not really calling for attention. “It's much simpler than verbal processing. I doubt that you'll need to update the program for it. Listen.”
He threw his head back and bared his dentals with his own cry, his doorwings fanning out at the same time. It was drawn-out too, the tone almost mournful at the end, though Prowl showed no sign of distress. When he was done, he looked just as calm as he had been before.

“That's how we call to each other over a long distance.”

Sideswipe recalled hearing a similar call when Prowl's team had been trying to find where the Autobot camp had moved, and when they had located Bluestreak and Hot Rod amongst the Minotoron herd.

“And if you need to get someone's attention at a shorter distance--”

“It sounds more like this!”

Sideswipe winced as Hot Rod howled again, this time shorter, the sound more like a bark.

“Not in the audial, sa?”

“Sa, sorry.”

“If I may?”

The mechs turned to Perceptor.

“Go ahead.”

The scientist cleared his vocalizer. Then, in a much softer voice, he tried a similar call to Hot Rod's.

“AAA-WOO-oo-OO!!”

Backburn snapped his optics up at that, understanding the sound well enough to know that he should look towards whoever was making it.

Hot Rod cackled. “That's way better than what Sideswipe did.”

“Oh yeah?” Sideswipe smirked over his shoulder, then stopped walking to gather himself, spreading his feet and taking a deep intake of air, then howled at the sky, his dentals bared and snarling.

“AAAA-WWOOO000!!”

Amongst the laughter and chattering, Sunstreaker made a face at his twin and rubbed the side of his helm, just in front of his head fin. “You sound like a cyber-wolf.”

“I think that's the point, Sunny!”

Prowl shook his head. “You wouldn't make it sound that loud and aggressive unless you were preparing to attack.”

Before he could retort, a cry that was even higher-pitched than Hot Rod's echoed around them.

“Eee-WOOO!”

The group was shocked into silence.
And then Drift's engine made a squeaking noise that shouldn't have been capable of a mech of his size as he scrambled up into the wagon with Perceptor, and put an arm around their sparkling too while the scientist babbled excitedly and cuddled Backburn to his frame.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Sideswipe didn't mind returning Hot Rod to Sunstreaker and Springer at the end of the orn. He honestly did like the kid; he reminded him of himself at his age. But the red mech's patience only went so far, which wasn't to say that he thought that Sunstreaker would do much better when the whole tribe was tired and Hot Rod was still bouncing around. But the youngling was Springer's, and Sunstreaker seemed to be adapting to the need to assist him.

Either that, or he liked the youngling too.

He and Prowl rested on their mat for a while, and a few joors into the night he was awoken by another yoska to take the second shift of the watch. Disentangling himself from Prowl, he crawled up, yawning as he pulled on his thick cloak, and carefully worked his way around the recharging mechs towards the edge of the camp.

He did linger a moment when he came across his twin's mat. While in recharge, Sunstreaker's spark had little to say to him other than mumbles. But he did relax a little more at a wave of humor and peace that was coming from the red twin. After all, it made Sideswipe's spark spin around happily in its casing to see how Sunstreaker and Springer kept Hot Rod safely nestled between their frames as they slept, shielded from any danger by the two yoska on either side. Hot Rod burrowed his head into his pillow in his sleep with a short whine, and the bigger mechs unconsciously shifted even closer to him, until the youngling had calmed and settled back down again. Sideswipe didn't feel his twin awaken at any point during that, and he wondered if they'd always had the programming to know how to guard a recharging youngling as he walked on.

After a few breems he came to where Hound was sitting at the top of a small rise, and Sideswipe made a clicking noise from his vocalizer as he approached him. He was aware that he wasn't actually saying anything; the clicking noise didn't have a direct translation to Standard, but his cortex provided the meaning well enough. “My turn, good night.”

Hound didn't move. Sideswipe switched to speaking in Iaconian.

“Go get some sleep, mech. Hey...Hound?”

Hound still didn't move. Instead, he raised a hand, silently ordering Sideswipe to be quiet.

Instantly Sideswipe's battle programming surged online. The wildlands were suddenly alive around him, now that he was paying close attention to every hiss of wind and reflection of light. Hound's focus was on a different sense, however. He kept sniffing at the air, resembling a turbo-fox, and Sideswipe resisted acknowledging the comparison aloud when his friend was on alert for danger.

After a few breems, though, his shoulders fell.

“Sideswipe. Something doesn't smell right.”

“What do you mean?” he whispered, cautiously stepping forward so that he could take a knee next to the green mech.

Hound grimaced. “There's been a pack of cyber-wolves following us for deca-cycles now. It's not uncommon for a pack to tail a tribe on the move as they look for stragglers to prey on. But these...”
He gestured a hand towards the hills, which Sideswipe could barely see in the dark.

“They smell like cyber-wolves. But something is wrong. It's...not quite right. And you know how you and some of the others were practicing howling today?”

Sideswipe narrowed his optics at the wildlands beyond the camp's perimeter. “Sa?”

“None of those wolves answered you, or ran away.”

“...Slag.”

He reached over his shoulder to touch the hilt of his sword, nearly bringing it to bear, but froze, and took his hand back.

“Go wake Optimus and tell him about this. I'll keep watch. Let's make it seem like we're not on to them yet.”

Hound nodded, and Sideswipe knew that the nomad was fighting to lightly jog and not full-out sprint to where their Prime was recharging. In the meantime, he sat down, and let his battle programming help him to sense and build the world around him, his optics glowing to a shade closer to white than blue.

And yet, even as more yoska were quietly awakened and waited with their weapons on hand, the 'wolves' never came any closer, and by dawn they had vanished once again.
Mountain

Chapter Notes

The fandom really loves Jet Judo, but in this chapter Sideswipe's going to quote himself in one of my personal favorite scenes with the twins from the original show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 33: Mountain

Prowl crossed his arms. “Whoever they are, we have the element of surprise on them as much as they do on us. There's a low probability that we've given any indication that we know that we're being followed.”

Red Alert grimaced at the other mech. “Unless you're planning to preemptively attack them, that won't help us. They're looking at our defenses right now, how many mechs we have, how well we're armed. We need to double the watch each night.”

The leaders of the Autobot tribe were sitting in a circle together underneath a large piece of hide strung out between poles. It was raining that day, and as the ground turned to mud, Optimus had decided that it was too dangerous to keep climbing through the unfamiliar mountains and around cliffs with heavy wagons. The rest of the tribe, besides those on guard duty, had ducked into the covered wagons or built their own lean-tos against their sides.

Sunstreaker was joining the leaders as he poured over the map he'd drawn, looking for safe passage, while his twin hung back near the edge of the hide roof's extension. The rain pelted the back of his cloak, and Sideswipe kept his hood up to keep the water off of his neck, but he didn't try to crawl in closer to the small meeting, not even to sit by his mate, not while he was trying to focus on how to keep them all alive. Sunstreaker could offer ideas on where to go, but Sideswipe couldn't. A flash of jealousy that his twin was more helpful to the Autobots died before he could dedicate any processing power to it, and he stayed to instead give his brother some support by his presence.

A soft pulse at their bond told him that Sunstreaker appreciated it, and some of the tension was relieved from his shoulders.

“The ground will be more level over here,” the golden mech said as he pointed to the next landmark identified by the prophecy, raising his vocalizer's volume to be heard over the rain. “It'll take us longer to detour through it, but it won't be as dangerous as trying to get up the slopes.”

Ironhide leaned over to see the map. “How do ya'll know what the ground will look like if ya'll ain't seen it?”

“Because of this.” He tapped the rounded dome that he'd drawn.

“What?”

“We need to consider the safety of the non-combatants of the tribe,” Optimus interrupted before Sunstreaker could clarify. “The paths going up the mountains here are narrow and steep. We could
easily become separated from each other and picked off if whoever is following us gets ahead of
us. Sunstreaker's path will take us *around* the peaks."

“But this'll take longer!” Ironhide protested. “An' we'll be exposed on open ground!”

Prowl's optics flickered briefly before he spoke, “The chances that whoever is following us means
to do us harm are great. If they know this terrain better than we do, they'll know how to hide on the
cliffs around us. We'd be better off out in the open, where we can see who approaches us, and not
offer the enemy any cover.” He glanced around at the other mechs. “We have no chance of hiding,
not with our Minotoron herd. We must press on and be ready for an attack.”

Jazz shrugged. “An open plain won't last forever 'round here. Eventually we gotta get through the
mountains again.”

“We'll figure out what to do next once we've crossed the field. For now, though, I agree with Red
Alert,” Optimus said. “The watch will be doubled each night. For all we know, these 'wolves' are
another tribe that will lose interest in us once we leave their territory, but we won't unnecessarily
risk the tribe's safety.”

He was answered by a chorus of mumbled “Sa.”

/*Won't unnecessarily risk the tribe's safety?*/ Sideswipe grumbled at his twin over their bond. /*Then
what does he call moving everyone into unknown territory?*/

Sunstreaker vented as he rolled up his copy of the map. /*Faith. Something that we accidentally
gave them, you with the prophecy, and me with the map.*/

Sideswipe had nothing to say to that.

...

“...It can't be.”

“But it is,” Sideswipe smirked.

Prowl turned to his mate, his optics bulging in shock. “But we already have a moon!”

“And I already told you, we used to have two.”

“A moon is up in the sky! This is--”

“Prowl, how is that you can believe that my dreams are visions, that a poem is some kind of a
prophecy, but you can't believe--”

Sideswipe spread his hands out as he gestured to the too-round mountain before them, and the land
that had been cleared around it upon its crash thousands of vorns ago.

“--That a fragging moon can fall and slam into a planet?!”

The rest of the tribe was having similar reactions to Prowl. Everyone had stopped in their tracks,
awed by the sight of a too-round mountain before them, covered in a variety of metals that were
rare anywhere else. A field of low-lying crystals had plenty of time over the centuries to form
around it, and as alien as it was, it had long since become part of the landscape. Sideswipe even
noticed a pair of turbo-foxes leaping into holes that they'd burrowed into its side, the creatures
seeing little difference between the remains of Luna-1 and the rest of Cybertron.
Perceptor tightened his grasp on Backburn's blanket as his optics swept over the 'mountain.' “The fallout from its crash must have been incredible,” he breathed. “Perhaps this is what caused the Golden Age to end?”

“You mean when the cities started to decline?” Sideswipe asked, turning his head towards the wagon where the other city-mech was perched.

“Exactly that. Something caused a cataclysmic change of Cybertron, and the destruction of many cities in its northern hemisphere.”

“A moon slamming down nearby might do that.”

“You'd think there'd be more in the Archives about this,” Sunstreaker grumbled. “All I knew was that there was a 'hill' that looked like a moon.”

“Its destruction must have cut off communications around the planet. The southern hemisphere may have only known that there was a giant explosion from the north, which could be assumed to be a horrifying weapon of a warring city.” Perceptor swallowed hard. “Or, the other way around. It may have been their war, and some super-weapon, that brought Luna-1 down to Cybertron.”

Ahead of them, the Minotorons were bellowing and working their way down the small slope to the open field of delicious crystals, completely ignoring the derelict moon that had carved out said field. Sideswipe shrugged as he followed after the creatures, and called back to his friends, and the rest of the tribe beyond that.

“Whatever happened, it was a long time ago, and it made a nice hole in the mountain range for us to pass through. Haven't you guys ever heard of a shortcut?! C'mon!”

Some of the yoska followed, wanting to make sure that the path down the hill and onto the field was safe for the wagons. Immediately all of them discovered that the footing was treacherous, the rocks refusing to remain still under feet that were not as sturdy as a Minotoron's, and they scrambled to the side, looking for a different way down, but Sunstreaker continued to trail his brother.

“Since when do you know anything about this countryside?!” he exclaimed.

“Listen, I've got search instincts like a proton-powered pathfinder!” As he said that, something slipped under his foot. “Watch it!”

The warning came too late. The ground gave way under them, and both city-mechs cried out as they slipped on the still-wet ground. The small avalanche was barely higher than their ankles, but it was not something they could stand on, and they tumbled down several lengths before rolling to a stop halfway down the hill, just behind one of the Minotorons' afts.

Someone above them burst out laughing. Hound, or Trailbreaker. Maybe both.

Sideswipe's HUD helpfully informed him that nothing was more damaged than his pride. Sunstreaker scowled at him, and shook off the dirt that had gathered on his beloved cloak as he climbed to his feet.

“Proton-powered pathfinder, huh?”

“Shut the frag up,” Sideswipe grumbled.
It had taken them nearly a deca-cycle to work their way past Luna-1, all the while hugging the edge of fallen moon, but never straying too far back onto the mountainous highroads. The Minotorons had enjoyed the fresh crystals, which had been rarer on the mountain passes, and herding them became surprisingly easier when their tanks were full, yet making their way down to the long, flat stretch of land had taken far more time than scrambling over a peak would have.

The Iacon prophecy gave no landmark clues about where to go next. It was clear that they would have to continue on the northern bearing that they'd been following all this time, but if they went off-course now, they'd become hopelessly lost in mountains that no one was familiar with.

'Onward, Brave One', indeed.

They had heard nothing from their 'cyber-wolf' followers the entire deca-cycle. Still, Red Alert was unwilling to lessen the strength of the watch, and the yoska were showing signs of weariness from having to walk all day and then spend half of their nights looking out on a dark, unfamiliar wildland. Sideswipe was cranky.

But not because he was tired.

"With all that me and Prowl have had to do, you know when the last time we interfaced was?!" he complained to Sunstreaker as the two of them walked from wagon to wagon and chocked the wheels while the rest of the tribe prepared the night's camp.

"No, when?" Sunstreaker replied absently, not even looking up as he knocked another weight behind a wheel.

"Just before we started this Primus-fragged journey, that's when! I can't even get the slugger to kiss me properly when other mechs are sleeping nearby, much less interface!"

"He's being polite."

"He's being a prude!" Sideswipe shook one of the wagon frames to make sure that it had no chance of rolling away. "I don't ask for much out of this relationship. Love, affection, and for one of us to stick our spike into the other one's valve every once in a while. I'm not getting much of the third!"

"Amazing. We could get attacked at any moment, and you're upset that Prowl hasn't given you a good frag lately."

"Sa!"

Sunstreaker groaned and stretched his back as he stood up. "Sides, Prowl's not an exhibitionist in any sense. He's got too much pride in himself. You're going to have to wait until you two get some privacy before he'll be comfortable doing anything. Until then, self-service or something. I don't know."

"Tried that. Got a good overload, but it's not the same. Not quite as good as getting spiked for real, you know?"

Sunstreaker made a gagging noise with his vocalizer as he stalked away.

Sideswipe rolled his shoulders to keep the energon flowing through his lines and to give himself a boost of alertness as his optics gazed back and forth across the dark wildlands, his HUD highlighting any movements that lasted more than a few seconds. Now that they were nearing the
end of the field, and approaching the steep incline that would take them back into the mountains, Red Alert had been as paranoid as ever about a possible surprise attack. The yoska were exhausted, and even Optimus had been wondering if they should take one more day in the field to rest and repair their worn servos before attempting the final push. That decision would be made tomorrow, once the Prime had a good recharge. Until then, Sideswipe was waiting for his relief to arrive, and then he could attempt a few joors of sleep before the sun rose.

It was definitely becoming colder as they went further into the mountain range. Or maybe that was the season changing. Could be either, could be both. A shiver wracked through his body, making the sword strapped to his back rattle and his plating tighten around his frame, and he pulled his cloak a little tighter around him to keep his joints from freezing up.

He couldn't wait for this to be over. He and Prowl could erect their tent again, their nice, warm tent, and sleep amongst furs that were currently packed up on the wagons. Sideswipe knew that his mate had more blankets that hadn't been used while the weather was still decent. They'd unpack and throw those over the two of them, and curl up next to each other, the smaller mech pressed up against his red chestplate. If the two of them had the energy for it, he'd grasp Prowl even tighter, and savor his taste as he stroked his fingers along his doorwings--

Sideswipe shook his head to wake himself out of that fantasy.

Primus Almighty, it really had been a while.

Frag Prowl for being so shy around the rest of the tribe. And frag the tribe for keeping Prowl distracted from his mate's needs.

Frag Iacon, and its prophecy. Frag him for not being to do more to help the tribe. His tribe.

...They really were his tribe now, weren't they?

Frag everything.

He sat there for a long while, feeling sorry for himself, before the sound of footsteps made him snap his head up. His plating tingled as battle programming surged through his circuitry, suddenly on high alert for the approaching enemy.

No, those footsteps were from behind him, approaching from the camp. Two pairs. Two mechs.

He looked over his shoulder, and he picked out Prowl and Jazz's forms in the dim starlight. Jazz made a clicking noise as he smiled at him. He must have been his relief for the shift.

Prowl, though, didn't slow his pace as he came upon his mate. Instead he grasped Sideswipe's hand, hauled him up, and continued walking away from the camp.

"Whoa, hey!"

Sideswipe stumbled after him, his cloak fluttering behind him, and he looked at Jazz once for affirmation that his mate hadn't knocked his cortex offline or something like that. But Jazz only took a seat where the red mech had just been, and wiggled his fingers at the two of them with a sly grin as the couple left the camp's perimeter.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

“Alright, what's this about?” Sideswipe hissed at his mate once they had climbed over the nearest hill to rest against the lee of a short cliff, but not so far away from the camp that they couldn't hear
Jazz singing a lyric-less tune to himself. Red Alert's paranoia of an imminent attack wasn't without merit, after all.

Prowl smirked, and rested a hand on Sideswipe's chestplate. “I'm getting better at listening,” he said under his breath.

“...Listening?” He raised an optic ridge. “Listening to what? We've barely been around each other long enough to--”

...Oh.

*His spark.*

“You were broadcasting,” Prowl clarified at the same time that Sideswipe realized it.

“...Reading me like an open book.” He wasn't a mech that embarrassed easily though, and his hand rested over Prowl's and squeezed his fingers as he grinned down at him. “So what did you see?”

“That I'm not seeing to your needs as my mate well enough.”

...There were, of course, exceptions to the rule.

It lasted for only a second before his spark felt like it was bouncing around inside of its chamber.

“Well I...I wasn't going to say anything directly to you.” He settled an arm over Prowl's shoulders. One of his fingers slid up and down the edge of a doorwing, making it flutter briefly. “You've had more important things on your processor, and I get it. Keeping us all alive takes precedence over keeping my array stimulated.”

“It will get better once we get to Iacon.” Prowl's own hands let go of Sideswipe's and palmed each of his mate's cheeks, and brought his face down to his own. “We have a promise to keep, don't we?”

This time his smile was sincere. “A normal life. Or at least as normal as it can get for mechs like you and me. I haven't forgotten.”

“Don't ever.”

Their mouths came together sweetly, Prowl turning his head slightly to the side to accommodate Sideswipe, their glossa sweeping over each other's. Sideswipe's free hand moved to Prowl's other shoulder, bracing himself and kneading the plating as their pace slowly picked up.

He absently realized that Jazz had been asked to take the shift after him because Prowl felt less shy about what he did with his mate if his former lover happened to see or hear them, as opposed to any other member of the tribe. It was strange. In Kaon, it would have been the opposite. Sideswipe knew better than to ever look for someone to bring home from the same bar that he'd been in the night before. The Autobots thought differently. Jazz was more concerned with his friend's happiness than asserting himself as a previous lover and making things miserable for any of Prowl's partners after him.

Still, Sideswipe knew better than to be too obvious in what they were doing. Other than making Prowl nervous or Jazz jealous, it was just plain rude to remind the black-and-white mech exactly what he was missing. Maybe that's why Jazz was singing; it was an attempt to drone them out.

Prowl's mouth over his own muffled his pleasured groan as he sank down to his knees, pulling his
mate down with him so that they were partially obscured by the crystals around them. Prowl's hands moved to grip the back of Sideswipe's helm, unwilling to let him move as he kissed him faster. The red mech wondered briefly if his mate enjoyed his taste as much as he did Prowl's, or if it was the strangely exotic city-culture of kissing that intrigued him so much. Either way, he wasn't about to complain, and instead sighed happily, relieved to finally be able to do this with his mate again.

He wiggled further to sit on his aft, his back against the cliff, and tugged Prowl into his lap. “I want you,” he whined into his mouth.

The white mech shifted up on his knees. “And I want you,” he purred, blue optics gazing into Sideswipe's. “I could see you shivering a few breems ago. I'd be happy to warm you up.”

Sideswipe cackled quietly. “Now you've gone from listening to my spark to mind-reading.”

“To be honest, I could use someone to, ah, warm me up too.”

“...Well then.” His smile grew even wider. “I think I can be of some assistance.”

One of his hands snaked down to Prowl's hip, and pressed him even closer to his frame, his fingers ghosting appreciatively over his aft. He dipped his head, freeing Prowl's lips from his own, while his mouth went to work on his mate's neck instead, nibbling and suckling at the exposed energon lines. The mech in his lap squirmed with a gasp, his fingers petting all along a black helm, then releasing him to instead slide down his back as he leaned on him.

They both slouched down lower, until they were half-laying on the ground. If Sideswipe had been his brother, he would have complained about getting dirt shavings all over his cloak and the hide that his sword was wrapped in, but the red mech didn't mind having those between him and the rocks and pebbles. And besides, he was far too distracted with his mate to think about things like that right now.

“Unngh...”

His frame spasmed a bit as Prowl's fingertips began to explore his seams, looking for sensitive spots, and touching and stroking them whenever Sideswipe moaned. He soon realized that his mate was following along the places that he'd learned that Sideswipe was the most responsive from their last session, when they'd pretended that he'd captured his mate like any other tribal mech. The red mech wiggled a little so that his hood could flop back behind his head, giving him a pillow as he laid himself flat on the ground, Prowl now completely straddling him and pinning him and sinking to lay down on top of him and accommodate the mouth suckling greedily at his neck.

Their bond lit up with a want and need that their frames were already aware of. At about the same time, something else poked at Sideswipe's spark uncomfortably. He groaned and raised his lips away from Prowl as he focused on his spark instead.

/Sorry/

He 'felt' a grumble from Sunstreaker before a barrier snapped up on their bond.

Prowl's hands had stopped touching him. “What was--?”

“I forgot about Sunny,” Sideswipe whispered with a throaty, quiet laugh. “He was trying to recharge.”

“...How he puts up with you, I'll never know.”
Sideswipe grinned devilishly up at him. “He's had vorns of practice. Now, cm'ere.” He put a palm on the back of Prowl's helm and pulled him down. “I am nowhere near through with you.”

“Insatiable,” Prowl mumbled, and the complaint was completely forgotten as their lips came together again, moving now twice as fast.

The glowing and humming crystals around them was framing their love-making perfectly, and Sideswipe would have been happy for everything from cuddling to a hard frag if only to lay here longer with Prowl, in a peaceful night under the stars. One of his long legs wrapped around his mate's waist, pulling their groins close. He hoped that the white mech could feel how hot his plating was becoming with the extra energon diving down to support his spike and valve, even with both of their waist-cloths in the way. Primus, he didn't even care if he took it or gave it tonight. Hopefully they could take turns and do both.

Prowl suddenly snapped his head up and clapped his palm over Sideswipe's mouth, cutting off his whine.

...Well. If that's how his mate wanted to play it.

Sideswipe moaned into his hand, his glossa flicking out at his fingers, and he squirmed a little harder. Pit be fragged if he wasn't going to make Prowl work for that.

But Prowl didn't respond to him other than to squeeze down on his mouth harder, to the point of being painful as he gripped his jaw.

Sideswipe winced, and stopped moving.

That wasn't supposed to be playful.

The swelling, happy feeling that his spark had been swimming in melted away.

/...Prowl?/

“Shh.” The nomad didn't bother to look at him, his optics opened wide and focused to their side, over the edge of the crystals surrounding them.

Sideswipe glanced in the same direction.

The energon in his lines suddenly froze to ice. His battle programming came screaming online so fast that it gave him a brief helm-ache.

...Oh slag.

Oh, slag.

He managed to withhold a grunt as Prowl's weight completely fell on top of him. He was instantly reminded of all the times when someone had walked into their tent while they'd been lying together naked, and Prowl had covered his mate's dignity with his own body. This time, however, he was Sideswipe's shield, whether Sideswipe wanted him to be or not. His doorwings flattened tight against his back, out of sight.

A mech roll-stepped through the crystals nearby, not noticing them.

A tall mech.

A tall, winged mech, with fearsome tattoos curling around his plating, ending in points as sharp as
a blade.

Sideswipe heard words being whispered in Standard. More of them.

At least half a dozen voices on both their left and right.

They didn't see him or Prowl. They were on the move, staying in a ragged formation that had been temporarily broken by the cliff next to Sideswipe's head, which had saved him and Prowl from being tripped over.

They moved on, past the couple hidden in the crystals, then stopped, and crouched down.

“Now?” one hissed at another.

“No. Wait for the others to get into their places.”

Panic bounced from Sideswipe's spark to Prowl's, then back again. Prowl risked lifting his head up slightly to affirm what they both feared, and the horror that was ebbing on their bond was plenty to tell him what the nomad had seen.

More Decepticons were surrounding the camp's entire perimeter.

And beyond the hidden line of winged mechs, inside of their trap, Jazz continued to hum to himself, oblivious to the danger crawling towards him.

Chapter End Notes

And NOW you guys get a battle. ;3

I won't be bringing my laptop with me to TFCon, so I'll have the next chapter saved as a draft on A03 and post that from my phone at the con.
Chapter Notes

Hello from TFCon!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 34: Ambush

This is when comms would have been perfect. Frag him, why hadn't he insisted that Perceptor make some sort of rudimentary comms for the Autobots?!

Sideswipe tried to mumble something to Prowl, but the mech kept his hand firmly pressed over his mate's mouth, silencing him. The red mech grabbed his wrist to try to pull him off, but Prowl still didn't budge.

/We need to warn the camp!/ Sideswipe cried across their bond, his fingers digging even tighter into his mate's plating as panic gripped his spark.

Prowl kept his flickering optics on the Decepticons lying in wait as he mouthed his response to Sideswipe, not even daring to whisper with the other mechs so close to their hiding spot. It was then that he realized that 'talking' over their bond was exactly what Prowl had wanted Sideswipe to do instead of risking them both being overheard.

“Have Sunstreaker wake the yoska. Quietly.”

An idea popped up within his cortex at that, and immediately afterward he realized that Prowl had already come up with the same plan.

...Duh.

Sideswipe nodded once against his hand, then refocused on the bond between the twins. Just grasping the barrier that Sunstreaker had erected was enough to startle his brother out of recharge, the 'mumbling' vanishing and the bond ebbing of a feeling of confusion. Yanking the wall down grabbed his brother's full attention even before the bond was completely open. The other half of his spark went on alert, knowing that Sideswipe would not do such a thing unless something terrible was happening.

/We're being surrounded./ Sideswipe hissed at him. /Get everyone up and armed, but don't make any noise./ He pressed across the feeling of his panic from seeing a Decepticon Seeker only a few strides from where he had just been cradling and kissing his mate.

Sunstreaker's shock and fear matched his brother's. Something happened on the other side. He must have been frantically shaking Springer awake.

/Are you safe?!/

/No,/ Sideswipe replied grimly.

/Fraggit, where are you?!!/
/Just outside the eastern perimeter. The Decepticons didn't see me or Prowl, but we're trapped outside. They could notice us at any second./

/The slag are you two...Nevermind. I'm coming./

/No! They don't know that we're on to them yet. Remember what Red Alert suggested before?/

He heard and felt Sunstreaker pause. /...A preemptive attack?/

/Right. Have the yoska ready to rush them as soon as Prowl gives the signal./

His twin must have gotten up and found one of the yoska leaders; he was now focused on something else, though his spark kept pulsing at his brother, making sure that they would not lose contact. Satisfied that the camp would be ready for action in a few breems, Sideswipe redirected his attention back to his bond with Prowl.

/Sunny's raising the alarm. Now what?/

Prowl let go of Sideswipe's mouth, confident that he wouldn't try to cry out now, but still held his mate's head tightly as he leaned down as far as he could and whispered directly into his audial.

“We're outnumbered. We may be able to frighten some of them off if we make them think that we've been counter-tracking them and have gotten a team behind them. The Decepticons rely on intimidation and fear; they avoid truly contested fights whenever they can.”

/So how do we make it seem like there's more of us out here?/

“You and I will need to come up behind them and make as much noise as possible. Tell Sunstreaker that when he hears us, the yoska in camp should do the same, as if they've been waiting for joors. The Decepticons will think that they've been caught inside of a pincer trap and try to flee.”

Sideswipe narrowed his optics up at him. /That's insane! What happens when they turn around to fight their way out, and realize that it's only two of us against all of them?!

“We need to hold them off just long enough for the yoska to crash into their other side and scare them away. If they want to run, we'll let them run. But the Decepticons have too many mechs at their disposal for us to win otherwise. On top of what we see, there's a high probability that reserve teams are waiting in the hills. If the initial teams run away, the reserves won't advance.”

Primus, even more could be lying in wait?!

The plan was nowhere near satisfactory, but there was little else they could do, besides continuing to hide and watch as their tribe was wiped out. They just needed to survive the night, and then...

Sideswipe's cortex didn't like plotting that far ahead, not when the focus was on the battle here and now. All of his systems were dedicating themselves to taking apart the enemy now. He'd leave the later part up to Prowl when they came to it.

After relaying Prowl's idea to Sunstreaker, and feeling an affirmative pulse on his twin's side as it was relayed in turn to the yoska, he grasped his mate's hand and gently squeezed it.

/Don't let them kill you. For Pit's sake, don't let them kill you./ he pleaded across their bond, optics wide and staring into Prowl's. /Not now, not when we're almost there./
“I won't. We're keeping that promise.”

The weight over his frame vanished, but Sideswipe kept holding Prowl's hand long enough to silently kiss his fingers, then let him go. The two of them rolled up into a crouch, then, with Prowl pointing out directions with his finger, they separated, Sideswipe crawling through the glowing and humming crystals to the left, and Prowl to the right.

The Decepticons before them continued to keep their attention on Jazz, who would surely be their first kill as soon as the order to attack was given.

_

There was definitely more activity in the camp, at least that Sideswipe could see when he knew what to look for. Too many mechs were suddenly up and about, though walking casually, as if they'd all been called over for a drink by someone's fire. But he also saw those with sparkling and younglings hurrying towards the center, where they'd be most protected, and ducking into the heavy wagons. So far he saw nothing to indicate that the Decepticons had caught on to this.

As quietly but as quickly as he could, Sideswipe made his way behind the Decepticon line, moving further and further from Prowl. While he crawled along, he counted the number of Seekers who could potentially turn around and attack him if the yoska in camp didn't engage them fast enough. Three, four, five, slag, slag, slag...

He would have to rely on the shock of having an enemy sneak up behind them in the dark to startle the Decepticons into retreating; if they realized that there was only two mechs out here, and that there was a fair distance between them, they'd quickly be overwhelmed. As much as he wanted to rip the wings off of every Seeker leering at the tribe in front of them, Prowl was right. If the enemy wanted to run away, he had to let them escape. He would be fighting hard to survive the next joor as it was without forcing his opponents to stay.

Somewhere behind him, Jazz finally and abruptly stopped singing. Then, quietly, he began humming a different tune as he moved to the side, as if choosing a new spot to post himself, but a second Autobot had joined him and was strolling in a different direction. The two of them were making sure that there were no holes for the Decepticons to sneak through as they pretended to still be unaware of their presence.

It wasn't much, but at least his friend stood a fighting chance against the Seekers now.

_/There's way more on the western edge,/ he warned Sunstreaker, his pump pounding as he noted how the circle was being tightened around the camp's perimeter, closing the trap. If he and Prowl hadn't spotted the ambush, the Autobots would have been surprised by an attack at all sides, and wiped out in breems.

_/We see them./

_/Ready?/

_/Ready./

Doubling over, Sideswipe slowly pulled his sword off of his back, and carefully unwound the oiled hide from the blade, leaving it on the ground to be found later. His other hand grasped at his hood, and pulled it over his helm. In the dim light of the night, hopefully all that the Decepticons would see of him would be his cloak and the blue glow of his optics, and he would look like a demon that had materialized out of the shadows.
He'd forgotten until that moment that if one of the enemy Seekers recognized him as their sacrificial mech, and captured him, then Megatron would have no reason to hold back on the utter destruction of the Autobot tribe. Not only could he not allow the Decepticons to complete their ambush, not only could he not allow himself to die, he could not allow himself to be captured.

A tall order.

He gritted his dentals, and squeezed the hilt of his sword as he briefly cast his optics down at the golden blade.

//Love you, bro,// he murmured as his thumb lay over the switch that would power the crystal.

//Love you too,// came the immediate reply, along with a warmth in his spark.

The Decepticons were whispering to each other, passing a message down their line. In breems, they would be ready to attack. Sideswipe could see a couple of the Seekers stretching their long, clawed fingers, itching to dig them into something.

He sent a short, staccato pulse to Prowl. Prowl returned it.

The two of them timed a beat, and Sideswipe let it echo to Sunstreaker.

Three...

Two...

One...

He burst straight up from his hiding place, threw his face to the sky, and howled as loud as he could.

“AAAA-WWOOOOO!!”

He ended in a hissing snarl, just like he'd heard the Autobots do so long ago just before they'd attacked the caravan. The sound back then had made his spark stop, terrifying the Kaonite mercenary and the other caravan guards for several key seconds, and he prayed that he was doing the same to the Decepticons now.

His audials rang with Prowl and Sunstreaker's echoing howls.

All of the Decepticons froze. Many pairs of red optics flashed his way, searching for what sounded like an army sneaking up behind them.

Then, a beat later, the entire Autobot camp roared.

The Seekers didn't know where to look. Some of them panicked.

Sideswipe didn't give the Decepticons any more time to react. Screaming a war cry, he charged forward, his sword flashing out a golden light as he flicked the crystal powering the blade online, and slashed it at the nearest mech.

He felt resistance meet his weapon, heard energon being spilled, smelled it. And yet the Seekers were still too shocked to move.

Then, as Sideswipe stabbed his sword into a second Decepticon, a familiar screech rang out further down the line.
Starscream.

“KILL THEM!!”

The enemy mechs hissed and let out their own war cries before scrambling up as well.

Instantly Sideswipe found himself outnumbered, and he crouched defensively as he started to back away, knowing that he stood no chance of taking them all on by himself. As he slithered through the crystals, his optics on the mechs charging at him, he hissed his engine, mimicking the sound of a mecha-animal about to attack. Along with the Decepticons’ presumption that he was not alone in the underbrush, the trick worked, and some of the more timorous Seekers slowed down, breaking up their wave, and only two arrived in front of Sideswipe at first.

That, he could handle.

His peds dug into the ground as he reversed direction, sprinting forward and taking the first Seeker by surprise as his blade thrust into his belly. Red optics widened in shock, and Sideswipe braced himself before shoving the Decepticon's shoulder to get him off of his sword, then swung out at the second mech. Clawed hands raised to try to catch it, and maybe if the blade wasn't energized, he would have succeeded. Instead Sideswipe felt resistance for all of a macro-second before his swing continued, and he heard the Seeker scream as he smelled more energon being spilled.

He had no time to finish him off. More of the enemy had arrived, and these ones were properly armed. Sideswipe growled as he tried to throw all his weight into the next swipe, only to grunt as his weapon crashed into an unyielding club. Gritting his dentals, he pressed in harder, and he did feel some give as the crystallized energy started to melt into the more primitive weapon, but the Seeker realized this too, pulled back, and swung down at his head. The red mech dove to the side, rolled to one knee, then parried the next attack from a fourth Seeker.

The fifth and six ones were closing in fast.

Slag.

He howled again, though this time it came out as more of a short bark. One of the Decepticons stumbled to a halt and looked around, thinking that Sideswipe was summoning help from the underbrush, but the other three surrounded him, and suddenly the red mech found himself hunched with his sword held in front of him, optics snapping left and right, dentals bared, daring one of the Decepticons to be the first to attack him.

That was until his bark was answered.

Ironhide didn't even bother with a club. His entire body smashed into the nearest Seeker, knocking him down, and the yoska followed through with a fist driving into his face. A claw that had been swiping towards Sideswipe's exposed back was snapped back as a lasso looped around Decepticon's wrist. All of the training with the other yoska had made Sideswipe's reaction instinctual as he turned and attacked that Seeker, stabbing his sword into his leg and disabling him, before turning on his heels, preparing for the last two to rush him.

But they were no longer there. Seeing that their prey was not as easy to kill as they'd thought, the other two Decepticons had taken off, racing along the perimeter and looking for a different opponent.

“Get after them!” Ironhide roared at Hound, and the green mech snatched his lasso back from the Seeker groaning in agony on the ground before sprinting after the Decepticons.
“Ironhide!” Sideswipe gasped as the other red mech started to follow them too. “Prowl--!”

“Slaggit.” The older yoska understood immediately. “’C’mon!”

The two of them turned on their heels and raced back along the line, storming through the crystals, smashing their way through where the two mates had previously been cuddling, stealth be slagged now. It didn't take them long to find where the white mech was desperately holding out against his own wave of Seekers.

Prowl's staff had saved him; he was doing a better job at keeping his attackers at bay with a longer weapon. But the Decepticons had figured out that he was alone. Their attacks were relentless and unbreaking, and Prowl was parrying left and right and left and right, and suddenly he missed a slash to his left heel and he went down on his back--

“RYYAAA!!”

Sideswipe wasn't sure what sort of primal screech roared out from his vocalizer. All he knew was that his mate was in danger, and then suddenly one of the Seekers was turning and staring at him with horrified optics, and then the ‘Con was under him, and then he wasn't moving anymore. The red mech took no time to comprehend that, and instead slashed his sword diagonally along another Seeker's wing who was clawing at Prowl. A roar of pain filled his audials as the Seeker arched his back, and Sideswipe ignored it as he stabbed at him, driving him back until the injured mech scrambled away and ran for the safety of the hills.

Ironhide was taking care of another one, and that gave Prowl enough space to roll backwards, his doorwings tight against his back before flaring as he completed the maneuver, and snarled as his staff took out a Decepticon's legs out from under him. Sideswipe leapt forward and finished the mech off, feeling his blade driving through plating and into interior workings, before he withdrew it and kicked the motionless frame away.

“Are you alright?!?” he gasped, his fans roaring as he ventilated rapidly.

“Fine.” Prowl swiped the back of his hands against a jagged, oozing cut that was running along his faceplates.

“You're--!”

“One of their claws. It's shallow. I'm fine.”

The sounds of battle were erupting from all over of the place. The two yoska leaders and Sideswipe took the moment to ventilate and assess how the counter-attack was going. The Seekers had been successfully repelled on their side, with a grim-looking Jazz and several other Autobots standing guard, looking for another wave that might come over the hills at any moment. But elsewhere in the camp--

“They're breakin' through!” Ironhide cried out, thrusting his hand towards where several mechs with wings were running at the center-most wagons.

“Getting to those won't stop more from forcing their way in.”

“But--”

“Ironhide, you and I will take the flanks,” Prowl instructed, his optics flashing as he assessed the camp and where the bulk of the fighting was. “We need to strengthen the perimeter so that no more get inside. Sideswipe, go up the center. Once you've taken care of the threat to the wagons, join the
western edge.”

“You got it.”

With no time to disagree, Ironhide sprinted to the left with a curse, to the south, where Hound had gone. Prowl twirled his staff in his fingers once, reassuring himself of its grip, and then ran north, towards where another wave was coming, and Sideswipe pumped his arms as he sprinted to the center of the camp.

Not a single mech or femme was left sleeping at the fireside, and the camp felt haunted by the number of sparks that had been suddenly roused from sleep and evacuated. Everyone was at the perimeter, fighting for their lives, or hiding in the most protected wagons at the center. Sideswipe stormed through empty mats and blankets that had been tossed aside, and zig-zagged between untended campfires as he threw himself towards where the Decepticons were trying to converge in the middle.

His spark dropped when he heard several frightened, young cries split through the roar of the battle.

Oh Primus Almighty.

The Decepticons thought that their sacrifice was hiding with the non-combatants.

_They were going after the wagon where the younglings were cowering._

Praying that he was wrong, he leapt straight over one of the campfires, not allowing himself the delay to go around it, his HUD briefly flashing a heat warning. And there, just past the next wagon, he saw a group of Seekers working their way past several downed and graying Autobot frames and stalking towards a covered wagon. Inside, he saw several pairs of frightened blue optics widen before the terrified younglings pressed themselves as far from the enemy warriors as possible.

“No!”

Spark pounding, he threw himself into a mad sprint, but a Seeker claw was already diving into the wagon to grab at the nearest young mech.

Then he immediately fell back, screaming as he clutched his arm.

An arrow was quivering from where it was stuck on his tattooed plating.

Another arrow flew out, then another, striking the other Decepticons around him. The Seeker hissed a swear as he yanked the arrow out of his arm, and dove for the wagon again, but enough time had been brought by the archer hiding inside for Sideswipe to close the distance between him and the enemy.

The Seeker only took one more step before his body realized that its head was rolling away several lengths from him, and then the frame trembled and tumbled to the side. Sideswipe wasted no time in slicing the follow-through at another Decepticon. The edge of the blade struck the Seeker's face, and he yowled as he stumbled back, clutching at a ruined optic, and retreated before the red mech could do further damage.

Sideswipe turned to face his last opponent, but something whistled through the air, and the
Decepticon was knocked to the side with a shocked cry, an arrow quivering on his shoulder. Grimacing, the former mercenary stabbed down at the Seeker, finishing him off, and once he'd flicked off the energon from his sword, he called out into the wagon.

“Great shooting, Hot Rod! Anybody hurt?!”

The orange youngling shook his head at him from where he stood guard in front of his friends, who were curled up and whimpering at the rear of the wagon. “Didn't touch us.”

“You're going to have to teach me how you--”

“Sideswipe!” Hot Rod's optics bulged as he notched another arrow, and aimed it. “Behind you!”

Sideswipe spun, and got the fright of his life from a Seeker sailing through the air at him. And in superb moment of battle instincts...

He side-stepped.

The Seeker fell flat on his face. It was then that Sideswipe noticed an arrow sticking out of the back of the Decepticon's helm, slowly oozing the energon that had been supplying his processor.

He snapped his optics up at another one of the wagons, where more of the 'non-combatants' were fighting back, throwing everything and anything they could find at Decepticons who had broken into the camp, though there were few of the enemy left. One of the Autobots had found his own bow and arrows, and carefully aimed before firing again, hitting a chestplate dead-on over the spark chamber. The Decepticon snapped back, his feet flying out from under him as his momentum kept his frame going even as he off-lined in mid-air.

“...Since when could you use a bow?!” Sideswipe yelled at the mech climbing out of the wagon to get a better shooting field.

Perceptor hastily notched another arrow, his hands shaking a little. “Well, the mechanics aren't that difficult to understand! Much of what keeps the arrow flying in the correct direction has to do with the atmosphere and wind speed, and I was studying wildland meteorology when--”

“Never mind! Just—Hey, Hot Rod!”

“Sa?!?” The youngling poked his head out of his own wagon.

“You and Percy, fire at anyone that comes your way before they get too close!” Sideswipe thrust his hand down the throughway between the wagons. “Protect the others from any more Decepticons that break through so that the yoska can concentrate on the perimeter! Can you do that for me?!”

“I-I believe so!”

“Of course I can!” Hot Rod grinned. “Rodimus Prime will take down anybody who tries to hurt his tribe!”

With a quick, playful swat at the young mech's head, Sideswipe ran off, heading towards the western edge, as he'd been directed previously. Somewhere far in front of him, he heard Optimus roar, and the sound shook him down to his protoform. The big mech was challenging a mob of Seekers, drawing their attention towards him instead of the camp, and his axe swung through the air, crashing through any Decepticon dumb enough to try to block him.
Some sort of primal instinct lit up in Sideswipe's spark at that. Their Prime, their *chief* was fighting just as hard as the rest of the *yoska*. He wouldn't let anyone harm the mechs and femmes under his protection.

An epiphany struck him as Optimus howled again, and was answered by the other *yoska* around him before all of them stormed at the incoming Decepticons, shocking them and making them turn heel and run. They gave chase all the way to the western edge, where they stopped and formed a line at the Prime's orders, daring the enemy mechs to try to attack again.

The howl *was* an instinct. It was as if someone had given him a dose of high-grade, coupled with the planet's heaviest energy-booster. The urge to fight and *win* was insane.

...And they were winning.

They were winning!

/A little help, please?!/

...Oh no.

/Where?!/

/Southern edge. Ironhide—GAH!/ Pain registered through their bond. /Ironhide and Hound are down!/

The western front, where Prime fought, was completely forgotten. Sideswipe raced away to the left, his cloak flapping behind him, his limbs pumping as he ran towards his brother.

Frag, if Ironhide and Hound were down...

/Coming!/

He didn't remember the journey there. All he recalled was that he was running as fast as he could around campfires and abandoned mats again, shoving past other mechs who were trying to get to the western portion of the camp, dedicating only a few bites of processor storage to understand that the strongest push was happening around Optimus Prime. Starscream was trying to kill the Prime, but there was another wave coming from the south, and Sunny was alone, Sunny was alone, *Sunny was alone*—

He ran past offline frames, both Decepticon and Autobot, the majority of them graying. He didn't bother looking down. He didn't even try to find Ironhide or Hound, but hoped that they were still alive.

He saw a golden blur as he crested a hill, and he heard his twin snarl.

There were only a few enemy mechs left here. But up against a single, exhausted *yoska*, they were proving to be too much for Sunstreaker. The golden mech was backing away, his own glowing crimson sword held in front of him as the five Decepticons continued to advance, trying to surround him.

/Here!/

Sunstreaker didn't have to look at his brother to know what to do next. He stopped moving, giving Sideswipe a moment to meet him at his shoulder. Then, together, they began to walk forward as one.
Their split-spark pulsed in time between twin mechs so close to one another, like a guiding drum, marking time for them, keeping them exactly in pace with each other's movements. Right foot first. Then left. Then right.

Both of them raised their swords at the same angle, the glowing blades complimenting the other twin's paintjob.

Both of them narrowed their optics.

Both of them wore the same sneer.

And it would be an idiotic mech who did not falter for at least a second when confronted by such opponents. All five of the Decepticons froze.

Then, hearing a far-off war-screech from Starscream, they attacked.

The two sides crashed together, and the roar of sound became white noise in Sideswipe's audials as he became entirely focused on fighting and surviving and keeping the same timing as his brother. Two Decepticons found their chestplates slashed open, and as they fell back, two swords breached each of their plating, digging around at the internal systems and tearing apart as much as they could. Then, two swords withdrew as each of the twins took a step back, giving themselves time to go on the defense as the remaining three Decepticons encircled them.

More noises.

Sideswipe almost ignored them, but his battle programming noticed it too and went into a frenzy.

One more wave of Decepticons, at least one more, coming up from the south. Starscream's reserves, hoping to sneak in a push in a different spot than the main battle.

“We need to get help!” he yelled at Sunstreaker as they blocked incoming attacks on their flanks simultaneously, their dorsal plating scraping against one another through their cloaks as they pushed their backs against one another.

“No slag!” Sunstreaker retorted. The twins crouched and separated, giving them a macro-second to ventilate as they ducked a wide-sweeping club. “We're going to wear out before these mechs do! We'll--”

The Decepticon holding the club braced himself, and reversed the backswing.

The twins were masters at an intimidation tactic by mimicking each other's movements.

But not every opponent needed to be attacked in exactly the same way. The twins were too exhausted to remember that.

The return swing presented no danger to Sideswipe.

But it did to Sunstreaker.

And the golden mech hesitated, his spark caught between repeating Sideswipe's defensive stance, and the need to get the frag out of the way of the oncoming club.

Sideswipe felt pain shrieking through the twins’ bond, and then Sunstreaker was suddenly no longer beside him. He was flying backwards, then rolling on the ground, his cloaked tangled around his frame, and then he vanished into the darkness as he fell into a small gully behind the
hill.

“SUNNY!!”

His brother didn't answer him. Sideswipe frantically grasped at the bond, only to get a 'mumble' in response. The blow had knocked Sunstreaker offline.

The red mech scrambled up and repositioned himself to block the Decepticon advance towards where his brother had fallen, even though he couldn't see exactly where he was in the gully. His spark fluttered in a panic inside his chestplate. He knew that Sunstreaker hadn't been killed; he wouldn't be feeling even the 'mumble' if that had happened. But now Sunstreaker was helpless, and Sideswipe was all alone against the last of the Seeker reserves.

He gritted his dentals as he stared down the jeering Decepticons, who were stalking towards him, now having plenty of time to surround and tear apart their prey. Even if he shouted for help, no one was in range to save him before he was cut down.

Primus, if he fell...If he lost...

Sunstreaker couldn't defend himself.

Thus, Sideswipe couldn't die. *He couldn't die,* not now, not when he was the only mech between them and Sunny!

...The Decepticons wouldn't kill him.

*Of course.*

They wouldn't advance further into the camp, and towards the gully, if they knew--

Sideswipe ignored the negatory screams from his processor, telling him all at once that this was a Bad Idea as he reached up and threw back his hood, exposing his helm and face in the dim starlight for his enemies.

“Recognize me, you sons of glitches?!” he roared at them, optics blazing. “Are you going to try to kill me too?!”

His opponents froze.

“...Is that...?!” one of them hissed, a clawed finger pointing at the Autobot's sneering face.

“Holy frag.”

The corners of Sideswipe's mouth shifted up into a wicked grin. “Can't kill me, huh?” he growled. “You've got direct orders from Megatron. He can't sacrifice a dead mech, right?”

The Decepticons stared at him, their processors mulling over that tidbit of logic.

But it didn't last long.

Sideswipe didn't remember an order being given. He had been ready for one, and to retort, to yell, to scream, to get some sort of attention from the rest of the tribe to him as the Decepticons tried to figure out how to proceed if they couldn't kill an armed opponent. But though he had battle programing, he had no battle computer. Tactics were not his fore.

And thus, in his plan to guard Sunstreaker until help arrived, he didn't calculate fast enough how
desperate the Seekers would be to capture the red twin instead.

They all threw themselves at him at once. Instantly one was impaled on his sword, and yet the 'Con kept reaching for him. Sideswipe swore as he wriggled the sword left and right, trying both to tear the mech apart from the inside and to free his weapon, but the Decepticon grimaced and kept grasping until his circuitry gave out. By then two more had tackled Sideswipe from the side, bringing him down heavily onto his back, the impact driving the air out of his ventilators with a squeal.

Sideswipe roared, and flailed his now-free sword at them. The tip of the blade struck someone, and he heard a very satisfying yowl of pain, but it wasn't enough.

They kept dog-piling on him, their weight too much for one mech to shove off.

They pinned him.

His wrists were seized, and the sword's handle was ripped out of his fingers.

“Slag! Get off of me!”

His optics widened as one Seeker lifted a helm and called out to his comrades.

“We have the sacrifice! Withdraw!”

/...Prowl!!/

He felt pulses of fear and horror and panic crashing through their bond, and he had no idea if they were from his mate or the echos of his own terror.

“No!” he screamed at the Seekers. “NO!!”

He saw a fist coming at his face.

He remembered an impact.

He remembered feeling dizzy and nauseous as his head bounced on the ground.

He remembered being only coherent enough for one last wiggle and a frightened, static-filled cry as many hands grabbed him, before everything became garbled white noise.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: With no hesitation, Micheal Bell said that his favorite, between Sideswipe and Prowl, is Prowl!
Chapter Notes

A bit more of weirdness from AO3. The last chapter was saved as a draft so that I could post it from TFCon, and it did upload correctly when I finally submitted it from my phone. However, the fic did not reappear on the queue for Transformer fics, and the last upload date still said "October 20th."

Uploading this chapter normally, hopefully this fixes it.

Chapter 35: Captive

At some point he'd forgiven Prowl and the other Autobots on his team for snatching him from the caravan intended for the Decepticons so long ago. He now understood that they'd had the best of intentions in mind: they had been trying to save his life from a rival tribe that wanted to sacrifice him to their god. It had been terrifying, yes, but nothing like the stories that Kaonites liked to tell of mechs being spirited away to be enslaved to barbarian tribes, and forced to be a worker, an exotic pet, or worse. In the scope of their own culture, the Autobots had treated Sideswipe with respect. They'd affirmed him as a voska, an honorable warrior, within orns of meeting him. They'd made sure that he was not mistreated. Most of all, his mate had done his best to make Sideswipe feel safe and loved all through their journey, even if it hadn't been in a conventional sense for either of them, and wasn't understood until much later.

Thinking back on it, Sideswipe no longer felt that he'd been “carried off by barbarians” that orn. That would imply too much against mechs that he now called friends. He'd forever bemoan being snatched away from his old life, sure, and he still despised the kidnapping ritual that had become normal for the wildland mechs, but he'd be a deactivated pile of scrap by now if they hadn't intervened. They'd become his tribe. He loved them.

But this? Now?

Now Sideswipe could say that he'd been properly carried off by barbarians.

His beautiful red cloak had been torn to into strips to bind his wrists and ankles, and another piece had been tied around his mouth when he'd gained enough of his senses back to try to howl and give his location to the Autobots that would surely be looking for him. The cloak's destruction had enraged Sideswipe far more than he’d thought it would. The waist-cloth was gone too, leaving his frame naked and exposed, but that piece had been a simple thing in relation to the cloak, a gift from his mate. And now it was gone. Sideswipe had screamed curses at the Seekers through his gag as they shredded the last of it and tossed it behind an outcropping, and he'd kicked his powerful legs at anyone who tried to silence him.

And that’s when he learned what it truly meant to be carried off by barbarians. Unlike the Autobots, the Decepticons weren't above beating an uncooperative and helpless captive to keep him quiet.

They had stopped at least three times to pummel him until he was in too much pain to do more than whine and squirm around pitifully. Of course, they wouldn't kill him, just as he'd predicted. They
weren't stupid enough to do that. But there was nothing that they did that couldn't have been inflicted during the battle, nothing that would be questioned by their superiors later. It was amazing what a Cybertronian could survive. After the third beating, Sideswipe allowed himself to go limp over the shoulder of the mech carrying him, moaning in pain, and trying to keep himself from panicking.

The last time that he'd been dragged away by barbarians (and his spark twisted at the acknowledgment that this was something that had happened twice in his lifetime) he'd made the mistake of being so engaged with fighting his captors that he'd forgotten to keep track of the route home. He grunted as he continuously sawed his wrists back and forth, quietly trying to tear through the cloth to free himself, but he kept an optic on the dark wildlands around him, trying to remember the landmarks and how he'd make his way back to the Autobot camp once he eventually escaped.

He was being carried over someone's boxy shoulder, someone almost as big as he was and dark-blue. Someone who was not a Seeker. Sideswipe wasn't being prodded by a wing at least, but unlike how the rest of the Decepticons were taunting and jeering at their captive, this mech was frustratingly and eerily silent. He hadn't responded to Sideswipe's squirms or grunts, except when the red mech had managed to jack-knife and throw off his balance, and then all he'd done was lower him to the ground and let Seekers beat him again until he could barely move.

At the end of the last time that had happened, when he'd finally decided to save his strength for when he could more effectively fight back, Sideswipe had squinted up and managed a glimpse of a masked face and a glowing red visor staring down at him, judging him with no hint of an expression. And then he'd been yanked over the silent mech's shoulder again, who proceeded onward as if nothing had happened.

He panted through his vents and the gag as he tried to take his mind off the pain from his damaged frame. He had to keep himself calm. But his spark felt as if it would leap out of his chestplate at any moment--

No, no, he couldn't panic! If he panicked, he was dead! He'd never find his way home, he'd never see the tribe again. Stay calm. Stay calm.

...Frag that.

/Prowl!!/

His spark had been desperately calling for both his mate and his twin since he'd regained his senses, even if he was too far to broadcast anything but short words and how frightened he was. Sunstreaker's response was little more than 'mumbling'; he must have still been offline. Sideswipe had been too concerned with the fight and staying alive back then to note his brother's injuries. He didn't doubt that he'd already been hurt before his red twin had arrived to back him up. For all he knew Sunstreaker was still getting over being decked by a club, and would awaken in a breem, or he could be bleeding out his energon as he waited to be found by a healer. Sideswipe didn't know, he couldn't know. And there was nothing he could do, nor anything that Sunstreaker could do for him either.

Prowl, though, was lighting up their bond as he tried to return each one of Sideswipe's cries for help. But all that he was capable of doing were short pulses, small bursts that told the red mech that his mate could 'hear' him, but didn't tell him where he was. Not that Sideswipe could do that for him either, not in the dark and in unfamiliar territory. Nor could he get an answer about the tribe's condition after the attack. Had his capture ended the battle? Were the Decepticons walking around him the same as the ones who had assaulted the camp? Were there more left behind?! Were they still fighting, right now, mopping up the Autobot survivors?!
For all he knew, Prowl might be captured too, and was being dragged along by another group somewhere behind them.

He didn't know. And that frightened him more than whatever the Decepticons had in store for him.

Not to say that his current position, bound and gagged and being carried over a Decepticon's shoulder, wasn't also terrifying.

They wouldn't kill him. Not yet.

But they'd kill Prowl without hesitation.

He had to hold on, and not give in to panic. He'd find a way to escape. He'd find a way back to Sunstreaker, back to Prowl, back to his tribe.

Whatever remained of it.

_Primus._

The sounds of other mechs around them were escalating. Sideswipe lifted his head, and realized that they'd passed by a small redoubt of felled crystal stems, their jagged edges pointed outwards. Not only did this block trespassers, but a group trying to charge forward in the dark might find themselves impaled on one of these.

They must have entered a camp. The Decepticon camp. The continued growing cacophony of voices affirmed this.

It had been mostly Seekers that had attacked the Autobots. The mechs here were a mix of Seekers and Standard builds, and all of them were pausing to take a look at the sacrifice that they'd fought so hard to capture.

So _this_ was the main bulk of Megatron's army. They weren't as strong as the Seekers, but they still out numbered them by at least--

Sideswipe's spark sank as he guessed the number of mechs around him. He quit trying to do the numbers.

The Autobots didn't stand a chance in the Pit.

More hands were touching him and grabbing at him, the voices hissing and cackling. It wasn't the gentle pats and drags that the Autobots used to greet one another. Someone snatched his audial horn, painfully yanking his face to be clearly seen by many pairs of red optics, and Sideswipe snarled through the gag at them.

The mech carrying him pressed on through the crowd, ignoring the jeers called to his prisoner in Cybertronian Standard, which Sideswipe fully understood. The former mercenary's energon boiled, and he growled at the Decepticons gathering around as he was carried on further into the camp, only to let out an un-mechly squeak as his captor suddenly released him and let him fall forward to the ground. He came down on his back with a heavy grunt, unable to throw up his hands and catch himself, and pain rocketed through his frame as previously minimized damage reports flew back up on his HUD.

“Mission Objective: Completed.”

By Primus. Even the dark-blue mech's vocalizer sounded _dead._
Sideswipe grunted as he rolled over onto his belly, which wasn't much better, but at least he wasn't prone and could curl up against the next beating that was surely about to come. He could hear many pairs of feet storming up and closing around him, and chatter filled the air, becoming a deafening roar as the Decepticons examined their captive.

Blue optics squeezed tightly closed as he braced himself. This was intimidation, he kept repeating to himself. They had stripped him, bound him, and tossed him into the middle of a crowd of mechs who could tear him apart. They were trying to scare him into submission. Frankly, it was working. He was scared witless, but underneath it all was a roaring anger, a need to fight, and need to destroy all in his way to get back home to his mate and his twin...

“Well, well, well. It's been a long time, Sideswipe.”

His optics shot back open.

That voice...!

He squirmed again. Someone, two someones grabbed his arms, yanking him up to a kneeling position while also keeping him restrained, and then he was staring into another pair of optics just in front of his own, these ones purple, and built to be wider than average, as if the mech was purposely designed to be a creature of the night.

And as he realized who the newcomer was, Sideswipe decided that he was exactly the kind of monster that would only exist in the dark.

He snapped himself out of his horrified shock as he snarled and glowered at the other mech, but the Decepticons holding his arms kept him from bursting forward. One of them snickered, then pulled the gag out of his mouth, ready to be entertained by their captive's fury.

“YOU!!” Sideswipe roared in Cybertronian Standard at the mech taking a knee in front of him.

Swindle grinned toothily back at him.

“Me.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“It was you!” Unable to move, he directed his rage into sawing at the cloak shreds binding his wrists behind his back, wanting nothing more than to reach forward and wrap his fingers around Swindle's neck. “You! You're one of them?!”

“Always have been.”

“You've been an informant for Megatron all this time?!”

“More like a negotiator with your Prime.”

It took Sideswipe a moment to realize that he was referring to Sentinel, and not Optimus.

The purple-and-yellow mech had squatted down so that he was on the same optic-level as the yoska. “It's amazin' how similar the wildlander mechs and the city mechs are, really. I had my tattoos painted over, and with your Prime's blessin', I strolled right into Kaon. The first few orns were a little tough. Using the city's public transport is a lesson in patience, gotta say. But after that, I became Megatron's optics and audials within the city walls. Nothin' passed in your city that he didn't know about as well. So when Sentinel informed me that another wildland mech had snuck
into Kaon...well...”

He rubbed his palms together.

“You've made a number of mechs 'disappear' for your employer before, an' you accepted the contract quickly enough. You an' your twin fulfilled all of our expectations, an' then some. You even found the Iacon prophecy for us!”

“You're the one who had me kill Alpha Trion?!”

“Oh, no, no, that was your Prime. I just told him who to look out for, an' he sent his best couple of servo-headed lackies to take care of the old mech for him.” Swindle patted Sideswipe's shoulder. “An' you did a great job. Bravo.”

Sideswipe sneered and tried to shake him off. “You were tracking him. And then you moved on to tracking me?! Why?!”

“Well, I didn't give a frag about you at first. You did your part in killin' the old mech, an' you got paid. You were just a cog in the machine. An' the poor little mech you are, you needed some time off afterward. I didn't think much on it.” Swindle's grin grew even wider, and his fingers clutched Sideswipe's plating so that he couldn't wiggle away. “Until I saw you again at a bar, gettin' yourself as drunk as possible and groanin' about not being able to recharge.”

Sideswipe froze. He could barely recall which of those nights was the one where he had dragged himself to his favorite bar and been complaining to anyone who would listen that his job sucked. Everybody came to a bar with similar grievances. He had been no different than anyone else with bad nightmares.

Except Swindle had seen him, heard him complaining, and knew why.

The red mech hissed. “I always knew there was something wrong with you. You were too friendly. Too slimy.”

“And the only one to lend you an audial.” Swindle's other hand patted the yoska's cheek in a mockery of affection. “Aww, c'mon, Sideswipe! Don't pretend that we didn't have fun!”

“I think I need to go wash off my spike!” Sideswipe announced loudly for the rest of the Decepticons. “This slagger didn't tell me about his rust infection, and he wasn't even satisfying in the end!”

Bellows of laughter rumbled from all around them. Swindle's smirk faltered for only a second before coming right back.

“Rude, much? Those nights we had together were grand. Pit, if you hadn't turned out to be the sacrifice that the Iacon prophecy calls for, I probably would have taken you back to camp myself.”

“Too bad for you. I've met a mech who can actually do my spike justice.”

More laughter. Sideswipe felt the corner of his mouth turn up as Swindle's optic twitched. The yoska knew that he was playing with fire, but what else did he have to lose at this point? His life?

He winced and gritted his dentals as one of his audial horns was seized.

That reminder, which was quickly becoming less of an opinion and more of a fact, made his spark pulse desperately to his mate. The answer came almost immediately, although Prowl wasn't strong enough or close enough to do much more than assure him of his presence.

“You were like a lost turbo-fox, Sideswipe. You were willin' to cling to anythin' that could offer you a heavy drink an' a good frag, an' get your mind off of the nightmares. Pit, I did a better job keepin' you sane than your own brother did! Everyone knew that if you went missin', it would be because you'd drunk yourself blind and fell down a construction shaft or somethin'. I could have easily smuggled you out of the city. I should have.”

Sideswipe hissed as the grip on his horn tightened possessively. “But Sunny would have known better,” he growled. “He would've hunted you down, and blown your cover.”

“Exactly. I tried to solve that by getting him in on the action too. Imagine! Two twins in one berth.” He snickered, as well as some of the other Decepticons. “But your brother is a stubborn one. If he threw me out, that would be the end of us, an' he really didn't like me. Not as much of a drunk as you. I got frustrated.”

“And so you tried to spark-play with me to see--”

“To see your dreams, yes. Your visions. I figured that if slag did go down, at least I would have somethin' to report to Megatron.” He rolled his shoulders. “Obviously, that didn't work. But then I got a lucky break!”

“Sunny got called away for a different job.”

“An' I told Sentinel that I would be takin' you while he was gone. But by then you'd lost your trust in me. So the Prime arranged for a delivery.”

“A delivery of me, and the Iacon prophecy.”

“Now you're gettin' it. Of course, then the Autobots interfered, but it's all worked out in the end, hasn't it?”

“You know what, Swindle?” Sideswipe squinted one optic at him, trying to ignore the pain screeching down from his audial horn. “You really should have tried to smuggle me out earlier. Little mech like you, up against me? I could have ripped you apart back then. I should have. Making you acquainted with my berth-room wall was entirely unsatisfying. But trying to kidnap me would have given me a great excuse to rip your fragging head off.”

Swindle brought his face even closer, not frightened of him in the slightest. “I would have liked to see you try,” he growled under his breath, even though he was still smiling. “You're not the first Kaonite I've brought home with me. No, not to my apartment, to my camp. It keeps things peaceful in Kaon when the Decepticons don't need to attack to take the mechs that they want.”

Sideswipe's pump skipped a beat, and his energon ran cold.

“...You're sick.”

“I'm resourceful,” Swindle shrugged. “I regret that you had to end up being a sacrifice, though. I would have really liked you.”

Grasping the other side of his helm, the purple-and-yellow mech kept Sideswipe's head still as he mashed their lips together. Disregarding the other mech's outraged cry and struggles, he forcibly pushed his glossa into his mouth with a low, sensuous moan.
Sideswipe lunged and bit down as hard as he could.

Now *that* was satisfying.

Swindle screamed, but Sideswipe didn't let go until he was dragged backwards by the two Decepticons holding his arms. Swindle fell back on his aft as well, his hands pawing at his damaged glossa.

The Autobot *yoska* spat out the energon that had gotten into his mouth, and grinned wickedly at him. “You don't learn, do you?”

“Meh! Bleh!”

Some of the Decepticons were roaring in laughter as Swindle hastily made his getaway through the crowd, likely to seek out a healer. For a moment Sideswipe could enjoy the humor, and even pretend that he was safe. Or, safer. The worst had passed.

...The worst was yet to come.

He recognized one laugh in particular.

The silver mech seemed to melt out of the crowd around him. Pointed teeth grinned down at his captive, and red optics assessed him, pleased that he was still alive and was not in danger of off-lining anytime soon.

.../*Prowl, please. Please, find me, find me, please*/...

“Welcome, Sideswipe, welcome! I hope you're enjoying my tribe's hospitality.”

The red mech couldn't help but to shrink back a little against the Decepticons restraining him, then when he realized what he was doing, he mentally scolded himself, and brought his chin up so that he could look at Megatron's optics. “Somehow, I still prefer the Autobots. You still want to pretend that this is some sort of a rescue or something?”

“But of course it is! You're right where you always should have been. We've put you back on the path of your destiny.”

Sideswipe tried to hide how hard he swallowed.

.../*Prowl, please, where are you?!*/

His mate's pulses back to him were just as hurried, yet there was still no message behind them. Sideswipe had no idea if Prowl was trying to tell him that he was nearby, or if he was badly wounded and doing his best to keep his lost mate comforted. Either way, he continued, refusing to let Sideswipe suffer alone, even when he truly was *alone*, bound and surrounded by enemies, and facing down the mech who wanted his spark sacrificed to some barbarian god.

“Did you have trouble finding the Iacon prophecy?” the *yoska* hissed up with a smirk at the silver mech. “Couldn't find which crystal branch it got tangled up in?”

He immediately regretted taunting him.

Megatron's clawed hand snapped out and seized his throat. The other Decepticons let go of their captive as Sideswipe suddenly found himself lifted into the air, dangling by Megatron's grip on his neck cabling.
“Do you think me stupid, city-mech? I left you in peace long enough for you to make sense of the prophecy for me, and your tribe led me straight to Iacon. The Autobots had plenty of neighbors to keep my army fed and armed until Optimus finally moved and showed me the way.”

The burned camps that Jazz had found...The other tribes...

But Sideswipe had bigger problems at the moment then other mechs that were long dead.

He considered himself tall for a Standard-sized mech. But Megatron was taller. Sideswipe's bound feet couldn't find purchase on the ground no matter where he kicked, and all his weight rested on the Decepticon's fingers that were choking him, sealing off the air to his ventilators. On top of that, his claws were dangerously close to the main energon lines supplying his cortex, and severing those was a quick way to permanently offline a mech.

He gagged and coughed, then squeezed his optics shut when the fingers only tightened their grip. Warnings cascaded across his HUD as his systems began to overheat from the lack of fresh air.

“My threats ensured that you would not dwaddle,” Megatron continued. “However, I do intend to carry out my promise to you. Once Iacon is mine, and once my army is resupplied, I will come for the Autobots that have escaped the Seekers. I will destroy them, every last one of them. And if your mate is still alive, I will save him for last. In his last moments, he will regret stealing you from me.”

He was choking, he was dying, Megatron wasn't going to wait to sacrifice him at Iacon and he was going to kill him right here and now in a fit of rage...

Sideswipe was suddenly dropped, and landed on his side, his arm and shoulder taking most of the impact. His vocalizer wheezed, and he winced as he dismissed the latest damage warnings on his HUD, then shakily pushed himself up to kneel so that he could cough properly and get air circulating through his vents again.

Something tore.

Sideswipe's optics widened slightly, and then he stopped wriggling his hands behind his back.

Hitting the ground had made a tear in the remains of his cloak bound around his wrists. He could already feel the slack. It would take only a few more pulls for him to break free, though his ankles were still bound too.

He just had to wait for the right moment--

“'He's dead, so you've already missed that opportunity,' he rasped, at the same time pulsing across the bond to Prowl, assuring himself that he was still alive out there, somewhere. ‘I felt him die while I was being taken here, you slagger! It's your fault that he's gone!’”

“A pity.” Megatron crossed his arms. “I was going to have fun with him. I suppose there's nothing to stop me from slaughtering the rest of the Autobots all at once, is there?”

“You fragging son of a glitch!!”

He faked an agonized cry and bowed his head forward as he pretended to mourn for his dead mate. As long as Megatron thought that Prowl was deactivated, he wouldn't look for him. And as he'd told his mate several nights ago, if anyone could save him--

But what if he really was dying?!
What if he never saw Prowl again?!

No. He had to keep faith in his mate. Prowl was coming. *Prowl was coming.*

“Iacon's not even real!” he shouted, his vocalizer's strength returning. Maybe he could delay Megatron's next move for only a few breems, but the Autobots would need every bit of time that he could give them to find him. “It's a stupid legend that all of you idiots think is a fact! Maybe there was an Iacon sometime, somewhere, but it's gone now!”

“Is it?”

The rumbled chuckling of the Decepticons gathered around them made Sideswipe's platting quiver.

“It is!” he argued. “And you're even stupider than I thought if you put all your tribe's energy and resources into finding a place that doesn’t exist! Pit, I've been trying to tell the Autobots that since we started this Primus-forsaken journey! There is NOTHING out here!”

A heavy silver foot took a step towards him. He heard the creak of servos of a mech leaning down, and then a single claw touched the underside of Sideswipe's chin up, forcing him to meet Megatron's optics.

“And this is where the benefit of never being slowed down by things as tumultuous as a herd of Minotorons shines.” The silver mech's smile grew wide. “I've had mechs scouting the area far ahead of your camp. They've seen it with their own optics. The Gates of Iacon.”

Sideswipe stared back at him.

“...So they found some ruins? So what? Doesn't mean that some destroyed city is viable for anything besides rusted parts.”

“I will decide that for myself once the gates are open. Or rather, once you open them for me, Sideswipe.”

His pump pounded. Flashes of his nightmare leapt about through his cortex, and Sideswipe grimaced to try to keep his panic from showing on his faceplates.

“Ready for your next big disappointment? I'm not a mech with visions. I'm a mech with *nightmares*. I felt bad for killing Alpha Trion, and I dreamed about a bunch of barbarians taking their revenge on me. That's all.”

“Ah, but you and I are having the same visions, as we agreed the last time that we met. And mine have been growing stronger by the orn.”

Sideswipe would have shaken his head if it hadn't meant that the claw would dig into his jaw. “*My nightmares went away because I'm at peace with myself.*”

“Did they?”

Megatron's other hand went behind his back, reaching into his subspace pocket, and metal rasped as he pulled out a dagger.

Sideswipe instantly recognized the blade. He'd seen it often enough.

“...That's....!”

“Who would want to acknowledge visions of their own demise? You can ignore it all you like, city-
But you and I both know that your spark will be the one to open Iacon.”

The edge of the horrifyingly familiar dagger tapped the top of Sideswipe's chestplate with a too-loud ring.

Megatron's voice dropped even lower. “I could kill you here, right now. Nothing is stopping me, except for the method of your sacrifice. There is a time and place, as we both have seen. But do not be a fool and continue to lie about the power that you carry, Sideswipe. You will open Iacon for me. You will not run from that destiny any longer.”

There was no place for Sideswipe to go, except to fall backwards on his aft, and he would not do that in front of this mech. He gritted his dentals as he sneered up at the Decepticon leader, trying to ignore how his spark was fluttering around its chamber in terror by having the dagger he'd seen so many times in his dreams resting casually on his chestplate. “What power?! I'm a twin, Primus fraggit! Me and my brother aren't the only split-sparks to ignite on Cybertron! When you kill me, you won't gain a slagging thing except a fragged-off Sunstreaker!”

Megatron's dark, knowing chuckle nearly stopped his spark right there.

“Your spark won't be the first to grant Unicron its power as its bonds are torn wide open. As you die, I will see what you see, and use the same paths that you use to dive into the All-Spark.”

...What?

“The frag are you talking about?!”

The silver mech lifted the dagger up to inspect the sharpened edge, then put it away.

“The bond with your twin. Or do you conveniently ignore that too? The strength of your bond, the way two mechs, two twins can read each other's sparks, the way you communicate right through the All-Spark. It’s a feat that mated Cybertronians only dream of achieving, but you--”

He flicked his claw, and Sideswipe hissed as a small tear in his plating was opened up on his chin. It wasn't deep, but it oozed energon, and Megatron showed him a drop that stained the tip of his finger.

“You can dip into the All-Spark without a Matrix guiding you. But without a Matrix, you will never hold as much power as a Prime. You are merely a tiny drop in a deep well. Yet your split-spark will give Unicron access to the All-Spark, briefly, yet long enough to grant me immense power. And then Iacon will open for me.”

Sideswipe stared at the claw tip dripping with his own energon.

...It couldn't be right.

...Could it?

That dark, eternal plane that his spark always dove into whenever his spark 'spoke' to his brother's. There was nothing else there. It was always dark, and cold.

Except if he was 'looking' at Sunstreaker or Prowl.

But when he was...

Sideswipe's ventilators hitched, his cortex scrambling with the plausibility of such an insane idea.
...Primus.

Primus Almighty.

It...it could be real.

Prowl had been shocked by Sideswipe's ability to 'talk' to him through their bond, even though the tribe must have had so many mechs bonded to each other for vorns. Such a concept was alien to a mech who already understood the process of bonding and what being a mate would entail. The Autobots would have known if their way of 'talking' was normal between mates.

Even Perceptor, another city-mech, had been confused when Sideswipe mentioned voluntarily blocking Sunstreaker from the bond whenever the twins were arguing. He'd never heard of such a thing before.

It was something that no one else was capable of doing.

The dark plane was something that no one else could see. The twins didn't talk about it because they'd always assumed that the weird realm was normal.

It was always dark to Sideswipe's spark because he had no Matrix to guide him through it. He couldn't see anything else besides what his spark was already bonded to, unlike the stories about the Primes who could bear a Matrix and dive right into the All-Spark and speak to ancient mechs who had passed on vorns ago.

The plane was on another layer of existence to which all Cybertronians were connected. He and Sunstreaker only saw a tiny piece of it, but it was more than anyone else.

The dark plane, which neither he nor Sunstreaker could explain or explore, and had always felt safe and normal, had always been the All-Spark.

“...Can't be,” he whispered, his optics wide and his jaw hanging open. “It's...it's only what my bond to Sunstreaker looks like...”

“It's only what a mech like you is capable of seeing.” Megatron smirked at the epiphany dawning across Sideswipe's faceplates. “It's how all bonded mechs 'see' each other. But yours is stronger than anyone else's. Even your brother's, who is still wandering around the wildlands somewhere, but I don't care about him anymore. He is not the one to which the All-Spark granted visions of the future. Now do you understand, city-mech?”

Around them, the other Decepticons were either whispering to one another or had gone silent. Many of them wore the same grin as their leader, enjoying the sight of a mech realizing his importance as their sacrifice.

“That...is...slagging ridiculous!” Sideswipe shouted up at Megatron. “You know scrap about the bond between me and my brother!”

“I know enough that destroying the bond will unleash the power contained within it. It has with other sacrifices. But those were all bonds between mates. Yours? A bond with a twin?”

He lifted the claw to his mouth, and licked off the energon.

“It will be delicious. Hmm.” He suddenly furrowed his optic ridges, then raised them higher. “And it appears...hmm...it appears your mate is still alive. Lying to me still even now, Sideswipe? Pitiful.”
...Primus, if this was all true...

Huge optics stared up at Megatron's faceplates, who was grinning at his now-clean claw. But Sideswipe was terrified for more than his mate's life right now. If this was all true, then...

His processor immediately came to a decision.

He couldn't wait for Prowl.

He had to stop Megatron.

He had to stop Megatron now.

And there was only one way to ensure that he could not sacrifice him.

Sideswipe narrowed his blue optics at Megatron's red ones defiantly, holding his attention for as long as possible, as he gave his arms one last, massive tug. The cloth binding his wrists tore, and instantly he was free. He couldn't run, but he was free.

Free to reach up and grab one of the vital energon lines on his neck.

/I'm sorry, Prowl/ 

He grimaced and ignored the screamed warning from his self-preservation protocols as he started to pull.

But he was tired, and the Decepticons around him were faster.

With a horrified, outraged roar, several frames body-slammed him into the ground. Chaos rippled through the air, and Sideswipe was trapped underneath it all, squirming, shouting, his fingers scrambling for the energon line and trying to tear it out, but hands had wrapped around his wrists, and were yanking them behind his back once more.

“NO!!”

He struggled, kicked, bit, and screamed, but the Decepticons didn't let up. He was pinned by so many mechs, too many, all following Megatron's barked orders to bind him tighter, to not let him make an attempt at his life again.

“If he offlines himself before we get to Iacon, all of you will pay! Do you understand?!”

Mumbled, frightened answers rumbled through the air, but Sideswipe wasn't paying attention. He kept fighting, desperate to stop them. If there was the slimmest chance that all of this had been true all along, and that sacrificing his spark would actually do something...He couldn't let them win! No! No!

But new ropes were digging into his wrists and arms, and more were wrapped tightly around his body. The Decepticons were taking no chances with their captive.

They outnumbered him.

They overpowered him.

...Just like they had with the Autobots.

And Prowl was coming.
Sideswipe groaned out a sob as he was yanked up from the ground and dragged away.

It had been one thing to decide in a split-second that he needed to destroy himself in order to stop Megatron from succeeding. But if he couldn't do that...

A *yoska* loved his tribe more than himself.

Right?

His struggles lessened, and he gritted his dentals against a cry of pain as his frame was dragged across the ground, damaging it further, but his focus was on his spark.

*/Prowl/*

His mate's pulses were faster than ever, as frantic as Sideswipe's pump beating under his chestplate. Prowl knew that something terrible was happening to the red mech.

*/Prowl. Get the others. Run south. Get far away. Go now./*

The pulses froze. And then came right back, just as fierce as ever. There was still no message, but Sideswipe could all but hear his mate shouting 'No, no, no, no' with each beat.

Each beat that was coming through to him via the *All-Spark*.

Primus frag it all.

If only he and Sunny had figured it out sooner. He wouldn't have walked around in denial of the Iacon prophecy for so long. He wouldn't have ignored it.

He'd been so stupid.

*/The Decepticons are too strong. Won't let me go. Get everyone else to safety. Run south. Please, go/*!

The next pulses were even more determined. Prowl must have been trying to reach him with all the strength of his spark.

But Sideswipe's spark was stronger. It had always had been. He'd always known that it had something to do with his twin-bond with Sunstreaker. He'd just never comprehended the realm that they were speaking through.

*/Prowl/ He tried to be firm, even though his own spark felt like it would break. /Have to break promise. Find Sunny. Keep him safe. Find new territory. Protect the tribe. Don't need Iacon. Run. Live. LIVE/*!

He wanted to tell him more, so much more, but his mate was too far away, narrowing what he could say across their bond. If he was stronger, Pit, if he were a *Prime*, he could have reached across the *All-Spark* and grasped him and told him everything that needed to be said. But he was just a mech with a particularly strong bond with his twin. This was more than anyone else could do, and he was barely able to say anything at all.

Prowl refused to back down. The pulsing did not let up.

Sideswipe was still stronger.

*/Can't let you find me, Prowl. They'd kill you too/*.
His bound hands clenched behind his back, and he ignored the jeering of the Decepticons packed tightly around him as his frame shivered. He strengthened his resolve for what he knew he had to do to protect his mate and his tribe.

/...I love you./

He squeezed his optics closed, and dropped a barrier onto the bond with his mate.

And just as he did, he 'heard' him.

/--SIDESWIPE--!!/

His spark quivered and twisted as the scream was cut off, but he could no longer 'hear' anything but someone pounding on the other side of the wall.

He ignored it, and instead howled swears at the Decepticons holding him as he was dragged further away from where Megatron was barking out orders for the camp to disassemble.
Sideswipe had expected to be dumped into a wagon, or carried over Soundwave's shoulder again, or have a tether put on him and be forced to walk along. But the Decepticons had one more surprise in store for him.

He found himself slung over the back of something huge and warm and alive. The creature, obviously under-nourished despite its size, grunted as the mech's weight was thrown over it, and it adjusted itself with a few grunts and shuffles as Sideswipe was secured to it, the cables too thick for him to rip apart like he had with the remains of his cloak. That didn't stop him from trying though, and he swore venomously at the Decepticons and winced when his bonds were tightened to the point that his HUD warned him that trying to move would damage the wiring between his plating. After a few breems of struggling and nearly breaking free, his wrists were instead re-tied in front of him, pointed down towards the ground, and one end of the cable from them was run under the creature, and the other end wrapped around his ankles, hog-tying him and preventing him from rolling off.

As the creature grunted and bellowed again, Sideswipe's optic ridges shot up as he recognized what it was. A Minotoron. The Decepticons had tied him to a fragging Minotoron.

The Autobots were the tribe of herders, not the Decepticons. Where on Cybertron had they gotten a Minotoron from?! Had it been stolen from the Autobots without one of them noticing it? But none of their Minotorons were this sickly, not that he remembered anyway. Had it been held with them a long time?

Once they were satisfied that their prisoner wouldn't be able to squirm out of his bindings, one of them patted the yoska's bare backside, and Sideswipe was suddenly reminded of his nakedness. Not that the lack of the waist-cloth and his beloved cloak would have mattered to him a vorn ago. Prowl's sense of 'decency' must have rubbed off on him. And also, he didn't like a strange mech rubbing their palm on his aft.

“Let's see you try to break out of that, city-mech.”

Sideswipe had to lift his helm so that his face wasn't squished into the Minotoron's flank. “Frag you,” he croaked hoarsely, and bared his dentals, despite his helpless position.

“If only. Swindle was right. It's really too bad that you're going to be a sacrifice.” The hand patted him again. “A real shame.”

“Why don't you untie me and try saying that again to my face?!”

“Ha. You aren't worth Megatron getting slagged off at me.”

Sideswipe hissed and tugged at the cables around his wrists one more time, but all he succeeded in doing was making the Minotoron grumble at him. Most of the Decepticons walked off, now occupying themselves with gathering up the camp with the rest of the tribe, though at least one stayed at the Minotoron's front to make sure that it didn't wander away with their sacrifice strapped to its back.
Grimacing, he slumped over, and instead focused on strengthening his efforts to keep the barrier on
his bond with his mate shut tight, despite the frantic pounding on the other side, and the pained
twisting of his spark as he tried to keep Prowl from finding him.

Dawn spilled more light over the top of the mountains, and Sideswipe finally got a good look at the
tribe marching all around him. He could confirm again that the Autobots would be ridiculously
outnumbered if they tried to attack the Decepticons, but all he could do now was pray that Prowl
had listened to him and fled, or if he hadn't, at least his mate would be smart enough to take a look
at the size of the army and conclude that Sideswipe's rescue would be impossible.

By now the pounding on the barrier standing on their bond had weakened, though it was still there.
Prowl must have been getting tired, or focusing his attention somewhere else, or he was getting
further away. Either the Decepticons were outpacing him, or he was moving in the other direction.

Primus, let him be moving away. If he was running, if he was making sure that the tribe would be
safe from Megatron's wrath after they'd taken Iacon...Sideswipe would be happy with that. Pit,
maybe he would be right after all, and the ruins of Iacon would have nothing to sustain the
Decepticons. There were no more tribes nearby for them to leech on. They would have to retreat
back to their own territory if they didn't want to starve, and the Autobots would be safe.
Terrorizing the smaller tribe would be a low priority for even Megatron if he risked starving out
the Decepticons for petty revenge, and it would be vorns before he could gather the resources for a
journey this long again. It would still mean that Sideswipe would die, but the Autobots' lives, or at
least those survivors of last night's ambush, would be spared.

Optimus's side of the fight had been going well when Sideswipe had abandoned the western edge
of camp to assist his brother. If the Decepticons had pulled back shortly after he was captured, then
at least the non-combatants would be fine. He knew that some Autobots had died; he'd seen their
graying frames. But plenty of Decepticons had died too, several by his own hands and sword.
There should hopefully be enough yoska left to guard those who could not fight, like Hot Rod and
Perceptor, as they ran south.

Scratch that. Hot Rod and Perceptor had proved themselves that night. They were no yoska, at least
not yet in Hot Rod's case, but Sideswipe had been impressed by how they'd stepped up as a last line
of defense for their comrades. Still, he hoped that their part was done, and that Drift was guarding
his mate and adopted sparkling as they ran back to their home territory, and Springer was keeping a
sharp optic on Hot Rod. Maybe even Sunstreaker was helping, once he woke up. If he woke up.
Maybe Prowl would step in if the golden mech was seriously injured.

...Would Prowl survive his mate's death, and their bond being ripped apart? Would Sunstreaker?
His twin had mentioned being hit with a surge of energy and a vision of Sideswipe mid-merge
when he'd bonded with Prowl, so what would Sideswipe's death do to him? Would he deactivate
instantly? Would it take time for his spark to flicker out and join him forever in the All-Spark? Or
worse, what would happen if he survived?

Sideswipe shuddered, and bowed his fore-helm into the Minotoron's side with a short whine as he
considered such a horrible fate for his brother.

He'd also figured out how the Decepticons had acquired the creature that was carrying their
sacrificial mech.

As the 'Con leading the Minotoron had tugged it around a boulder, one of the Seekers had smacked
a claw on its rear, annoyed and trying to get it to move faster. The Minotoron had bellowed
dangerously, reared on its front legs and kicked the Seeker's chest, damaging his plating and sending him flying into those walking behind him to a round of cursing from all of them, and there was a moment of panic as they tried to keep the beast from getting out of control and running away with their sacrifice, and that was the one and only time that Sideswipe was grateful that he was strapped down so tightly.

Its roaring and bellowing had sounded awfully familiar, and the reason why struck Sideswipe's processor at the same time he'd realized that it was purposely being starved to keep it from getting too strong and rebelling more than it already was. It was the bull. The same Minotoron that had nearly run down Sunstreaker and Hot Rod the first time they had moved. It had been released into the wildlands with the Autobots assuming that it would be back once it had cooled down. It never had, and no one had time to spare to go find it.

That also told of how close the Decepticons' encampment had been if they had captured the bull and kept it around to assist in hauling equipment. That task was now left to gangs of mechs, also under-nourished, who pushed and pulled the few wagons of supplies that the Decepticon tribe brought with them.

...Another idea popped into his cortex. He opened his optics and turned his head towards the Decepticons walking behind them.

Optimus had always made sure that the tents for the weakest and youngest Autobots were kept towards the center of camp, and they were in the most protected position of a formation when the tribe was on the move, with the armed yoska fanning out at the perimeter to scout for enemies long before they could approach the non-combatants. But Megatron kept his troops in an intimidating horseshoe formation, with himself, Starscream, the mechs who seemed to be lieutenants or some other sort of tribe-leader, and the Minotoron carrying his sacrificial mech at the middle of the front. The rest of the forward line was made up of Seekers, the backbone of the Decepticon army. They looked formidable and terrifying to anyone that they were approaching. But the rest of the army, the ones walking along behind them, with the exception of a small line of Seekers making up the rear guard? Some of them could be solid warriors in a fight, just as good as the Seekers, if not better. But not all. Definitely not the majority.

Pit, if he didn't know better, he'd say that the rest seemed unwilling to be part of the march. Especially the malnourished ones hauling the wagons.

His processor caught up with his cortex as he watched them struggling along.

...Primus.

“They're slaves,” he muttered to himself, his optics widening.

Swindle had said that Sideswipe wouldn't have been the first one that he'd smuggled out of the city, and the Decepticon who had only been masquerading as a city-mech had already known how to kiss him while the concept baffled most Autobots. There were a staggering number of mechs here that were clearly not ready to fight. Why would they be? If they'd been dragged here unwillingly and been mistreated, arming them would have enticed a rebellion. It wasn't like the kidnapping ritual with the Autobots, which emphasized on the two mates being able to trust and love each other by the time that they bonded. He strongly doubted that the Decepticons had an equivalent ritual. How could a kidnapped mech ever trust in a mate that might turn around and allow him to be used as a sacrifice if Megatron demanded it?

What had Prowl said last night? “The Decepticons rely on intimidation and fear; they avoid truly contested fights whenever they can.”
So then this wasn't as huge of an army as he'd originally thought. These mechs doing the non-combative labor didn't have the ability or reason to fight the enemies of the Decepticons, but their presence behind the Seekers and other warriors could easily fool another tribe into thinking that the effective army was huge.

...Actually, it still was, even if he subtracted every single mech and femme that wasn't carrying a weapon. Pit, probably weren't allowed to carry a weapon. But that still left too many Standard mechs and Seekers who were combat-ready, far too many for the Autobots to ever take on in a fair fight.

The bubbling hope that there was a chance of a rescue succeeding died in Sideswipe's spark before it could grow too large.

Primus Almighty, if only he had listened to Prowl. If only he had taken the prophecy seriously, and been more careful with his own safety if he was to fulfill it. He...

“...Slaggit all.”

He would still be in this same mess, wouldn't he?

There was no way he would have remained safely hidden away with the younglings while his tribe was under attack. Prophecy or not, he would not of been anyplace else but the front lines during a fight, where he belonged. Maybe he'd bought them a little more time by holding the southern part of the camp as long as he had. Maybe he'd saved some lives that night.

And now he was going to save even more by making sure that no one tried to throw themselves away on a hopeless rescue attempt. Because he was an Autobot. Because he was a yoska.

Because he loved his tribe.

He squeezed his bound hands into fists as he continued to block out the relentless but weakening pounding on the other side of the barrier.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The sun was at its zenith, and the Decepticons were ascending the steepest hills. Sideswipe noted that the path cut through the mountain was becoming sleeker, as if purposely carved. Of course, Cybertron was in the process of reclaiming what must have been an old road, just as it had with the Pillars and with Luna-1. Patches of crystals hid the edges of where the road turned into randomized metal shavings, and the barriers that must have separated lanes of traffic were nearly indistinguishable from other boulders. But the road itself had been reinforced to take the weight of heavy vehicles, and even after thousands of vorns its outlines were clear to a mech who had spent most of his life in the city. He had no choice anyway but to see it with the angle that he was lying over the Minotoron's back.

Perceptor would have been fascinated by all this. Frankly, Sideswipe would be lying if he said that he wasn't intrigued too. The stories about Iacon, or whatever city ruins they were headed towards, weren't one-hundred percent fantasy after all. They were moving towards something.

The Minotoron swayed him back-and-forth as it ambled along, and if he wasn't surrounded by the enemy, Sideswipe might have let it lull him into a recharge. He certainly could have used it. The battle had worn down his systems, not to mention the extra damage caused by the beatings, and his self-repair units couldn't work effectively with his frame tensed with fear and his energon reserves low. No one had offered him a cube or rations since he'd been captured, and he doubted that he
would ever get one. Megatron wasn't going to waste resources on a mech who'd be dead soon. Even keeping the barrier up on his bond while his mate scratched at the wall was exhausting him all the way down to his spark.

He tried to let himself go as limp as he possibly could. What was the point in struggling anymore? Even if he did squirm free, he was surrounded by Decepticons. He'd be re-captured immediately, beaten, rebound and they'd be off again after the small delay. There wasn't a point.

He was going to die, no matter what he did.

After all this, after all that he'd been through, that was his destiny.

He was going to die.

All he could do now was to make sure that he'd be the only one of the Autobot tribe to die now, the rest making their way back south and to their old territory. They'd be fine.

But he would die...

His self-pitying thoughts were interrupted as something powerful rocketed up his bond with his mate and crashed into the wall, startling him.

...No.

It wasn't his bond with Prowl that was under attack.

Even now, it was still hard for him to tell the two bonds apart.

Prowl's attempts to get the barrier down had felt like a mech pounding their fists on a reinforced city wall. Sunstreaker's felt more like a construction crew was swinging the planet's largest wrecking ball at it with a vengeance.

Sideswipe twitched and winced as something smashed into the barrier and made it waver. He tried to restrengthen it, only to scramble and grab it as Sunstreaker tugged hard at his side.

/No!/ 

The twins briefly struggled with the wall, one trying to yank it down, the other fighting to hold it up. In the end Sunstreaker's desperation overwhelmed Sideswipe's, and their bond flooded with worry and panic as the wall tumbled down.

/WHERE ARE YOU?!!/ 

He was too far away for anything more than simple words and feelings to be interpreted into something understandable by the other half of his spark, but the strength of his panic and desperation echoed as loudly as if a megaphone was blasting in his twin's audial sensor. Sideswipe grimaced and dug his fingers into his palms.

/Don't find me! Run!/ 

/WHERE ARE YOU?! 

/Get Prowl, run! 

/WHERE ARE YOU?!
He pulsed a wave of frustration at Sunstreaker and shook his head, ignoring his helm and face scratching at the Minotoron's flank.

/Decepticons have me. Don't find me. Run./

/No./ The tone of Sunstreaker's growled answer told him that he had plenty more to say, mostly curses at his brother. The bond had been narrowed too much for them all to get through.

/Too many! Don't fight, run!/  
/No!/  
/Please, go. Love you./  
/Love you too. NO./

“Sunny, please,” Sideswipe murmured aloud as he squeezed his optics shut. “Please, don't try to find me, please. Take the tribe and run away, please...”

He painted an image in his mind of little Hot Rod, and then Springer, and then Jazz, Ironhide, Trailbreaker, Hound, Ratchet, Optimus, Backburn, Perceptor, Drift, and all of the mechs and femmes in the tribe that the twins had come to know and care for and protect. He shoved that image across the bond to his brother, hoping that the whole thing was able to reach him, though he would have been happy if even a couple of the familiar faces got through.

/Save them! Get them away!/  

Sunstreaker paused. He must have been seriously considering him, and how abandoning the tribe to rescue his brother would put them in jeopardy with not one but two of their strongest yoska gone.

Then--

/No. Saving YOU./

Sideswipe growled and tugged at the cables around his wrists. ‘Fraggit!’ He forced himself to go limp again and pretend to be only mourning for himself as some of the Decepticons looked his way.

Did that mean that there was no one left in the Autobot tribe to save? Was his brother now on a suicide mission to rescue his twin because there was nothing left worth protecting?! Or was he really that stupid?!

...He hoped it was the last option.

Something warm wrapped around his spark. Yet Sunstreaker was still 'yelling' at him, swearing a negatory each time that Sideswipe told him to leave, with Sideswipe 'yelling' right back and begging him to run south.

Then who--

...Oh.

...It really was hard for him to tell the difference.

And impossible for him to lower a barrier for one bond and not the other.
Prowl kept pulsing feelings of relief and comfort and love at him, and unable to resist and block him out any longer, Sideswipe allowed his spark to indulge in it and wrap the feelings around himself like the warmest and softest of blankets. His mate was somewhere out there, alive, alive, and he still had no idea if he was harmed or not, if he was also captured, or dying, but he was still online, and reaching out to him.

The powerful, candid, undeniable pulses of pure love washed over him, and Sideswipe went silent. Soon enough, perhaps as he heard the ‘echo’ of what Prowl was doing for his mate, Sunstreaker did the same thing, loving him, assuring him and reminding him over and over that he was not alone, that both his mate and his twin held him dearly, no matter how far he was taken from them.

Even when he had no hope left for himself, they would not abandon him.

Even as he screamed at them, demanded that they leave, his spark quivering and shaking and even going so far as to hiss and roar and try to scare them away, neither of them backed off.

They loved him too much to do that.

He loved them too much to deny their comforts.

And eventually, he gave up the facade that was okay with facing his death alone.

In the dark plane that their bonds existed in, no, in the All-Spark, his spark rushed towards the only two lights that he could see.

/I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!/  

He was hushed, cradled, cuddled, and despite how he was tightly bound in reality, he swore that he could feel two sets of arms wrapping around his frame, hugging him and assuring him that he was not alone. He could all but see them, and he pressed himself into their frames, his wrists struggling briefly with the cables binding them in reality, while off on another plane he was free to grasp his twin and mate as tightly as they held him too.

/Dumb-aft./ Sunstreaker whispered to him. /Not leaving you. Ever./  

Sideswipe's spark 'hiccuped' quietly at his brother, and his fists unclenched and slowly went limp, until they dangled over the side of the Minotoron again.

/...Love you./  

/Love you too./

And though he wasn't anywhere as strong as the twins, and couldn't verbalize it, the pulses that he was getting from Prowl all but told him that he was saying the same.

Frag them. If they kept this up...

...He might get the will back to keep fighting for his life.

But what good would that do him now?

/The tribe?/ Sideswipe asked suddenly, more concerned with the Autobot tribe's uncertain future than his own very certain one.

/Hurt./ Sunstreaker answered cryptically, even though his twin knew that he was trying to get the message across as well as he could while being limited by their distance. /Repairing, Worried
about you. Coming.

/No! Make them go away!/ 

/Rescue!/ 

/No!!!/ 

/Love you./ 

/Love you too,/ Sideswipe replied immediately, before he suddenly grasped what Sunstreaker truly had meant.

Prowl and Sunstreaker loved him, in their own way, one as his mate and the other as his twin, but they weren't the only one that held the red mech dearly.

And they would not abandon him either.

...Stupid!!

/Tell them to go!!!/ 

/No./ 

/Sunny!/ 

/You tell them./ 

If all the lives in the Autobot tribe weren't at stake, Sideswipe would have found that funny. Sunstreaker had never been a sociable mech. He often got his way by storming around and throwing a tantrum, or objects, or minibots.

But if he couldn't convince them to leave, then maybe--

/Tell Prowl!/ 

/...Where's Prowl?/ 

His energon suddenly turned to ice. 

/Where's Prowl?!/ he repeated back to his twin. He hadn't seen any other Autobots since he was captured, let alone Prowl. If Prowl had been captured too, surely Megatron would have dragged his captive's mate out to entice Sideswipe into cooperating to keep the white mech alive a little longer, if not to taunt and torture him.

/Not here. With you?/ 

/No./ 

But he was still alive. Sideswipe could feel him.

/Prowl. Where are you?!/ 

But despite being able to scream for him when at his most desperate, Prowl now could only pulse at him, telling him something, but not enough that Sideswipe could interpret into anything useful. Assurance, yes, he was getting that. But what else? Confidence, maybe?
That didn't tell him where he was.

Unless...

Oh, Primus Almighty.

/He's following us!/  
/He's following you,/ Sunstreaker clarified. /Rescue?/  
/Maybe. Stupid!!/  
/Yep./

Sideswipe redirected his gaze past the Decepticon non-combatants, and the hills and mountains lying beyond the road.

“...Don't do anything stupid,” he pleaded quietly at the hills. “Please, Primus, please don't do anything stupid. All it'll do is change up the order of which one of us dies first.”

But there was no answer from wherever Prowl was hiding.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

For the rest of the orn Sideswipe tried desperately to explain to Sunstreaker what he'd learned about their bond, about all bonds, the truth of how they 'spoke' to one another, and that despite both of them agreeing that the Iacon prophecy was superstitious nonsense deca-cycles ago, now Sideswipe believed that it was true, it was all true.

...Mostly true.

He wasn't quite ready to wrap his cortex around the idea that all of this had been predestined somehow.

But with their limited communication because of their distance, it was difficult for him to express this to Sunstreaker in simple words, and that was coupled with Sideswipe's weariness. He tried 'gesturing' to the plane around them, his spark flashing and twirling and trying to 'show' his twin what he meant. /The All-Spark!/ he cried. /The All-Spark!/  

The message wasn't getting through. /Not dead yet./  
/Not dead! Here! Now! THIS!/  
/You, me? In the All-Spark?/  
/Yes!!/  

Sunstreaker paused, and Sideswipe could feel him 'looking' around.  
/...Nothing here. Not All-Spark./  
/Can't see!/  
/Right. Nothing./

“Augh!” Sideswipe gritted his dentals in frustration as he muttered aloud. “Sunny, listen to me!
You and me, we've been *talking* through the All-Spark all this time! That's what makes us so important to Megatron!"

He made little progress. If it hadn't been for Megatron using the mechanics of their bond as his reasoning for sacrificing Sideswipe, the twins would have been, at the most, *vaguely* intrigued by someone explaining to them how their bond worked. Now, though, Sideswipe found it vital that his twin understand what was happening and why it was happening, but it was difficult enough to process by himself, let alone explain it to someone else who was not in front of him. The concept still sounded insane to him. Bonded mechs dipping into the All-Spark to 'see' each other, and the twins being the best at it? That was crazy. Crazy...and made an eerie amount of sense.

And now that there was some weird science backing up the Decepticons sacrificing other mechs, Sideswipe's fear of his impending death was compounded by the dread that something really *would* happen as his bond with Sunstreaker was torn apart. Megatron talked about Unicron briefly taking control of the 'power' that he held, and that Megatron could use it. Was that really how Iacon would be opened?

Would something far worse happen?

The reinforced path was getting harder to see as the sun dove behind the western cliffs. Sideswipe had still not been offered any energon, and his tanks were rumbling. He did his best to ignore it as he 'talked' with his brother for as long as he could, but by now he was mentally exhausted as well as physically. Sunstreaker kept pressing at him, trying to keep him going, and was probably tracking him by whatever direction he moved in when the bond strengthened, but Sideswipe's systems were starting to demand that he recharge, and if he didn't do it soon, then his frame might rebel and do it for him.

As the last hill was ascended though, he lifted his head up, his blue optics glowing as he snapped back into alertness.

They'd emerged into an open area, surrounded by steep cliffs, and Sideswipe was quickly realizing that these weren't cliffs, but *walls*. Outer walls? The remains of outer city walls?

They had to be walls. They were far too high, too smooth. Not even the hardiest crystals could find a handhold along the sheer metal, except those that had somehow swept themselves to the very top and were blooming in uncontrolled sprouts like a collection of wild, thorny crowns.

The further on they walked, the higher the walls raised, until the Decepticons found themselves in a wide, cleared spot, walls flanking their left and right side. They were in some sort of a bailey. Here too the ground was reinforced, sheet metal layered over one another, though some had been ripped up over the vorns and were now being reclaimed by crystal patches. The Minotoron started towards these, bellowing hungrily, but then was led away.

The highest walls were before them. They were *ridiculously* high. Ludicrously high, and completely sheer, yet they seemed to melt into the mountains at their ends, giving intruders no option to go around.

Sideswipe knew now, without a shadow of a doubt, that they'd finally arrived at the ruins of some ancient city.

But there was something else that told him that what they'd found was *Iacon*.

His optics kept moving along the wall, and to the long, wide gates at the center, at least ten times taller than he was when standing upright, similar to Kaon's most crowded main entryway into the
city, except Kaon's gates were riddled with holes and scars from countless invasion attempts over thousands of vorns. These weren't in perfect condition either, but Kaon's could never have held the beautifully carved relief that these doors did.

The best description that he could have for the image on the gates was that of an *spark erupting from its casing*.

Sunstreaker would have been out of his cortex if he'd been here with his twin. He loved slag like this.

The Minotoron grunted as it stuttered to a halt, its tether held tightly to keep it from straying towards the crystals, but Sideswipe ignored the excited whispering in the air from the Decepticons around him as his optics grew wider and wider, his jaw sliding open and his ventilations picking up.

He saw no locking mechanism for the gates, and yet they were sealed shut with only the barest of seams to show where they would open, the edge cutting down right through the center of the relief. Intricate designs, pictures, characters, words of ancient Iaconian that Sideswipe didn't understand whirled out from the carving, and he swore to himself that when he saw Prowl again, *if* he ever saw his mate again, he was going to demand that the mech teach him how to read the old language.

But despite him not knowing the words...

*He understood.*

By Primus, the relief carving was plenty for him to finally understand what the prophecy had *really* meant.

Maybe Megatron didn't know it because he'd never seen it before. But Sideswipe had.

“By the Nine Pits...” he breathed.

...He had to tell the Autobots. He understood it all now.

He'd been wrong, Prowl had been wrong, Megatron had been wrong, *all* of them had been wrong about the Iacon prophecy! Even the dreams, the 'visions,' they were wrong!

*He understood!!*

Sideswipe squirmed at the cables binding him to the Minotoron, a new determination filling him to escape and warn the Autobots. But as he did, his optics feel on something else, much lower and on the walkable ground.

He found the same flat, metallic rock from his nightmares, the one that he'd always been strapped to as Megatron killed him, at the same time that Megatron noticed it too.

The Decepticon leader grinned at the rock, and when his gaze shifted knowingly to where his prisoner was held, helpless and ready to be sacrificed at the snap of his fingers, Sideswipe felt like he would purge.

It didn't matter now if he somehow warned the Autobots that the Iacon prophecy had never been about him.

*He was still going to die.*
Did I not say right at the beginning of this fic that this is not just Sideswipe's story?!

;)

...If you guys still need a hint...Before they could effectively communicate with each other, what did Sideswipe and Prowl _do_ whenever "twin" or "split-spark" came up? You might have to repeat their gestures in a mirror to get it.

I am gleefully bouncing around because as close as we are to the end, only one or two commenters have outright and successfully named what the prophecy was really about.

On that note, beware possible spoilers in the comments as people figure it out!
Feral

Chapter Notes

My readers are so silly. XD No, sex is NOT going to get the gate open. Not unless that helps them concentrate or something.

Lasagna.

Chapter 37: Feral

“Why do you insist on delaying further?! We're finally here, and we have your sacrifice! Hurry up and kill him already!”

Megatron snorted through his vents at his Seeker commander. “We are in the correct place, and we have the correct mech. But the time is not yet right.”

Starscream let out an aggravated rev of his engine as he thrust out his hands. “Then when will it be?! In a few more orns we'll have to put my Seekers on half-rations in order to have enough left over to survive the return trip home! And you would have us wait even longer before you finally kill him?!”

“I can hear you, you know,” Sideswipe muttered, then winced as Starscream's clawed hand slapped his cheek, leaving three shallow cuts along the plating.

“Quiet, city-mech!”

Several lit torches illuminated the Decepticon leader, his lieutenants, and the sacrificial mech still strapped to the Minotoron. A temporary camp was being erected not far away, where the ground was clearer. Megatron hadn't let Sideswipe out of his sight the entire march, and though they were finally at Iacon, he wasn't yet ready to abandon his caution and untie him from the Minotoron, not when his victorious ending was so close at hand.

Thus, Sideswipe got front-row seats to the mechs deliberating how and when he would die.

Wonderful.

Soundwave had been standing quiet and still for so long, he'd nearly been forgotten by the rest of the group. “Starscream's energon tally: Correct. Supplies critically low. Recommended Action: Find energon vein in Iacon quickly.”

“If there even is one,” Starscream snapped. “I really do hope that our wise and glorious leader hasn't lead us to a dead city. Architecture is nice, but what we need is energon, and as you can clearly see,” he gestured to the high walls, “there is none.”

“It awaits us in Iacon,” Megatron growled, his arms crossed over his broad and servo-packed chestplate. “Along with whatever secrets that the old mech was trying to hide.”

Sideswipe perked up. The old mech? Alpha Trion?
“And if it is blocked?”

“Then you will put your claws to good use and dig.”

One of the other Decepticons sputtered a chuckle, then quickly shut up as Starscream glared at him.

“As much as I look forward to doing mindless physical labor for you, my Lord Megatron, I still do not understand the delay. If your sacrificial mech can dip into the All-Spark as you claim that he can, then he must have been crying for help from his fellow Autobots all through the orn. They could find us at any time.”

“I will not damn my chance at Iacon by sacrificing this mech incorrectly!” Megatron sneered back at him. “The vision showed me how and when my sacrifice will die. Or, rather, it has shown me the when more recently.” He turned his head towards Sideswipe. “Isn't that right, city-mech?”

Sideswipe narrowed his optics back at him.

The most recent change to his dreams, from when he could still remember them...

“A flash of light,” he realized aloud. “You're...you're waiting for the dawn.”

Starscream scoffed. “Foolishness. If I were you, Megatron, I would have already dragged a claw across his throat in front of the gates, and we'd be strolling through Iacon right now.”

“You have not seen what he and I have seen.”

Megatron pointed to the flat rock to one side of the gates.

“Just before dawn, we will tie him to that. We shall proceed with the ritual as we have for hundreds of other mechs, but this time, I will wait to tear out his spark until the sun has just risen over the horizon. When that happens, I will carve into his spark chamber with this dagger.” He unsubspaced the weapon and showed it to Starscream. “And as he dies, Unicron will grant me the power necessary to open the gates of Iacon.”

Sideswipe tried to not make it obvious that he was ventilating faster. Megatron had easily named and re-interpreted everything that Sideswipe had seen in his dreams for almost half a vorn.

But the dreams were wrong!

“It won't work,” he blurted out. “Killing me won't open Iacon.”

Megatron raised an optic ridge at him. “Surely you can make better pleads for your life than a lie, Sideswipe,” he scoffed.

“It's not a lie! It's not going to work!” he repeated, raising his voice and his head.

“Then tell us, in your wise and knowledgeable opinion, how do we open the gates?”

Sideswipe bit his lip to keep from snarling out the answer.

He knew how.

But he was a yoska. He loved his tribe more than he loved himself. And perhaps in the confusion of the aftermath of his failed sacrifice, he would buy the Autobots more time to turn around and escape.
He tried again to tell Sunstreaker to turn around and run, as he’d been pleading with him all orn, but he was mentally exhausted as well as physically, and he could barely manage more than a 'mutter.' He’d only just started a new pulse at his brother before a warm, nearly overbearing feeling of love was broadcast back to him. Sunstreaker would not run. Sideswipe tried the same thing with Prowl, to a similar answer, although his mate’s return pulse was much weaker than his twin’s.

/Look up!/ he 'croaked' at Sunstreaker, and that's all that he could say with his focus so poor. He didn't even have the strength to push the image on the gates across their bond, but if his brother had paid attention to his twin's star-gazing hobby, and he knew that he did, maybe he'd understand what Sideswipe was trying to warn him about anyway.

Megatron thankfully missed why Sideswipe had reflexively glanced up at the night sky high above them, and he instead smirked at his captive. “We both know that you’ll soon be pleading for your life in earnest.” He leaned towards him. “I wonder who it is that you kept crying out for in those visions? Your twin, or your mate? Or both of them?”

The red mech's engine hissed dangerously. “Frag you!”

“And wouldn't it be funny if we caught them sneaking into camp, and had them watch as your spark was ripped out? That's what you've been telling them, haven't you? Help me! Save me!” His smile grew wider. ‘They're coming for you. And my Seekers are waiting for them at the bottleneck. But you tell me, shall I keep them alive long enough to watch your sacrifice, or be merciful and kill them right away?’

“Frag you!” Sideswipe roared at him, his bound hands squeezed tightly and wriggling against the cables. “Frag you with a sharpened crystal shaft right up your aft!!”

“Gag him. I don't feel like listening to this drivel all night.”

“I hope Prowl takes his time ripping off each of your limbs!” Sideswipe howled, even as one of the Decepticons approached him with a cloth in his hand. “I hope impales you on that Pit-fragged staff of his! And then Primus help you when Sunstreaker finds you! He's going to—MMMPH!”

The cloth was shoved cruelly into his mouth and the ends tied behind his helm. Sideswipe tried to shake it off, but the Decepticon finished quickly, then shoved his head down into the Minotoron's side, even as the Autobot continued to scream muffled curses at Megatron.

“Under no circumstances is he to be untied until I am ready to sacrifice him,” he heard Megatron saying to the three mechs guarding the Minotoron as his lieutenants began to file away. “Let the Minotoron feed to keep it sated for now. But the city-mech will not be moved. Understand?”

Sideswipe ignored the chorus of “Yes sir”s as he kept fighting with his bindings, though the only one who acknowledged him was the Minotoron as it grumbled a bellow at the squirming weight strapped to its back.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The sounds of crackling fires and mechs shouting and laughing echoed on the enormous walls around the bailey, and though Sideswipe couldn't see the main camp from how he was laid across the Minotoron, he could hear them well enough. They were partying. They were celebrating their certain victory over Iacon.

They were celebrating that their sacrificial mech would soon be dead.

Even Megatron must have been relaxing after the long journey to get here. Primus only knew what
his method of entertaining himself was. Sideswipe didn't want to think about it too much.

Energon was oozing from underneath the tightened cables binding his wrists and ankles, and the red yoska had only just stopped his frantic struggles a few breems ago, his chest and shoulders heaving as he panted through the gag. No matter how he fought, he couldn't find any weak spots in the ropes or knots. But he also wasn't ignorant to the fact that even if he had gotten loose he'd be recaptured immediately by the three mechs sitting nearby. They had gotten bored with watching their captive struggling and were now talking quietly amongst themselves, but were still keeping an optic on him.

Small crystals crunched underneath the Minotoron's hooves as it lowered its head and munched on the larger outcroppings sprouting from the nearby patch. The creature was tethered to a stake in the ground, but with food finally available to it, it wasn't going to make any attempt to escape.

Sideswipe was briefly reminded about how he been just as compliant with Prowl when the mech had hand-fed him the night after he'd been abducted by the wildland mechs. Then he immediately scolded himself for the comparison. Prowl had been trying to be compassionate to his new, frightened mate, and prove to him that he was among friends and would not be harmed. The Decepticons were only now allowing the malnourished bull to feed so that it didn't run off with their sacrifice still strapped to its back. Once he was dead, they'd probably have it towing a wagon and keep it at the edge of starvation again so that it didn't rebel.

What he wouldn't give to see Prowl one last time before he died.

He couldn't say goodbye to him via their bond, even with as exhausted as he was. But it wasn't the same as being able to take him into his arms, to hold him, to press their helms together and whisper down to the smaller mech cradled to his chestplate.

He missed the touch of his warm plating, the smooth paneling of his doorwings under his palms, the scent of a mech who'd spent his entire life as a wildland barbarian.

He gave the cables around his wrists once last tug before slumping against the Minotoron's flank with a weary, defeated groan. His guards didn't bother looking up. Why would they? Their captive had no chance of breaking free. They were more cautious about him attempting to offline himself than him escaping, and as long as he was bound, their job was easy.

A fire deep within his spark commanded him to keep fighting anyway. He was Sideswipe. He didn't give up for anything, or anyone.

But he was so tired.

It would be so easy to accept that he'd failed himself, his tribe, his twin, his mate, everyone. That had been his luck since this whole crazy adventure had started, hadn't it?

He wasn't there when his tribe needed him the most, when their enemy was less than an orn's march from their camp, and instead was the bait drawing them closer to their deaths.

He hadn't been able to fight off the Decepticons and stop them from capturing him.

He'd previously lost the duel with Optimus Prime, despite him being able to steal the victory if he'd just let the Prime fall into the fire.

He hadn't escaped from Hound during his only partially-successful attempt to run away from Prowl's group.
He hadn't kept the Autobots away from the caravan he'd been employed to protect, and if they'd been anything less than honorable, he and all the minibots would be deactivated by now.

Even Sentinel hadn't seen him as a real 'guard' in the end. He was just a naive mercenary that had been happily walking right into a trap for his employer.

What kind of warrior was he? What kind of **yoska** was he?!

Sideswipe bowed his forehelm into the Minotoron's side, and shut off his optics.

He wasn't any kind of honorable warrior. He'd been kidding himself to think that he'd become anything more than a cortex-disabled mercenary working for a corrupt Prime. His greatest accomplishment towards Cybertron's history would be killing an unarmed old mech that had been trying to save a wildland tribe.

He was *trash*.

And now he was going to die.

What was the point of fighting anymore?

...The warmth somewhere across his bonds to his twin and his mate gave him the answer. But instead of comforting him, he felt as if his spark would extinguish itself while still in its casing as it grieved. **He was never going to see them again.** So then what was the point?

/Don't give up!!/

Sunstreaker's voice rang within his spark, and he heard it as if his twin had become omnipresent and surrounded him. And yet he still wasn't close enough.

/I'm sorry...*/ Sideswipe 'mumbled' back, too exhausted to say much more across their bond.

He wanted to go into recharge. Just a quick nap, while he was still strapped to a Minotoron and it was impossible for him to move. He would dream, and maybe he'd finally have *good* dreams, and he wouldn't be awoken and have to face this terrible reality until Megatron dragged him over to the flat rock to tie him down again and plunge the dagger into his spark chamber--

He wouldn't be able to sleep if that Primus-fragged *scratching* didn't go away.

Slowly, Sideswipe onlined one blue optic.

From his angle slung over the Minotoron's back, he had only a couple of options to look around without lifting his head up, which would strain his neck after a while. He could either look straight down at the ground, which showed him nothing right now except the broken crystals that the bull had stepped on while it was munching away, or nod his head forward and get the *wonderful* scent of a Minotoron flooding up his olfactory sensors as he looked under the bull, upside-down.

Too tired and spark-broken to fight anymore, it was all Sideswipe could do to blearily focus his vision on the movement within the crystal patch on the Minotoron's other side. His processor briefly entertained the idea that the planet had flipped, and he was looking at everything dangling off the edge and risking falling *down* into the sky.

...He was no Hound, but he swore that he *smelled*--

Sideswipe's optics shot open wide.
A pair of smaller blue optics were staring right back at him from within the crystals.

Oh, FRAG!

This one and only time, he was thankful that he'd been gagged. It muffled his surprised yowl and kept the guards' attention off of him.

“Shh, shhh.” The much-smaller mech lifted a hand when Sideswipe garbled a curse and started to wriggle frantically against his bonds again. “Sideswipe, lay still. We'll get you out, don't worry.”

...Oh Primus Almighty, was that...?!

The red yoska nearly cried in relief as he began to discern more shapes in the crystal patch, their armor hidden by the furry hides of cyber-wolves draped over their shoulders, which had also disguised their scent from the native wildland mechs. That trick had nearly fooled Hound. And if the Decepticons didn't have an equivalent tracker with as good of a nose like the green mech...

Sideswipe loved minibots. Had there ever been a time when he didn't?!

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Lie still,” Bumblebee whispered under his breath, and Sideswipe nodded as the minibot crept closer, until he was almost underneath the Minotoron. The rope connecting the Autobot's wrists and ankles ran under the bull, keeping Sideswipe from using his limbs or wiggling off, and the yellow mech pulled out his short-sword and got to work on sawing at it. The breem that he started, the Minotoron grunted, unhappy with having a strange creature working so close to its unprotected belly.

“Shh. Easy, big fella.” One of the other shapes, the voice deeper and brassier, crawled forward close enough to pet its head. Sideswipe couldn't see him, but he recognized the sound of his vocalizer.

Brawn.

More movement, the mechs working to crawl around the Minotoron and get to the other side. Sideswipe turned his head left and right to spot them all.

Windcharger, Huffer, and Cliffjumper.

They moved slowly and cautiously through the crystals, towards the Decepticons guarding the sacrificial mech, slithering along unseen on their elbows and knees. Their intent was clear; they would knock out the guards at the same time that Bumblebee freed Sideswipe, before an alarm could be raised.

All of the minibots had survived the dangers of the wildlands, and had stayed together, and this amazed the Autobot yoska. All of them were...wearing cyber-wolf hides over their shoulders?

Since when had the minibots gone feral?!

Sideswipe would have loved to question why a bunch of mechs who had been created with the intent of being able to traverse energon mines were now doing so well for themselves in their own little tribe in the wildlands, but at the moment a fluttering hope that he may actually survive the orn was swelling up inside his spark instead, and if he weren't tied down he swore that he'd be hugging each one of the minibots right now. Instead he forced himself to hold still as Bumblebee's short sword kept working at the cables restraining him.
Windcharger suddenly hissed. “Someone's coming.”

The minibots all but melted back into the patch. Alarmed, Sideswipe whined through his gag as his wide optics tried to find them again, before he realized that he'd become used to not only using his visual sensors in the wildlands, but his audial and olfactory, which was necessary to survive if he didn't want to be eaten by some creature during the night, and the smaller mechs had fooled all three. The minibots were too small to be seen easily, and they had gotten good at masking the other two senses.

Perceptor was going to lose his mind when he brought them back to camp with him. The growing certainty that he would return to tell this story was bubbling across his bonds to his twin and mate, but before he could 'listen' to their answers, his head snapped up as feet marched towards his guards.

Oh no.

“Evening, gentlemechs! Anybody want me to take over for them?”

The guards scowled at the newcomer. “Frag off, Swindle,” one of them growled. “We've been posted for the whole night. Got strict orders; nobody touches the sacrifice.”

“Ah, but I heard that the orders were that nobody unties the sacrifice.”

He was met with a contemplative silence.

“...And what's with the bottle?”

“Kaonite high-grade, to celebrate our discovery of the lost city of Iacon! Yours to share the rest amongst yourselves! Or for me to sadly finish alone if I can't touch my old partner one last time.”

‘Partner?’ Hmph.” The mech made a noise somewhere between a snort and a chuckle. “Is that what the city-mechs call it?”

“It's the nicest way to put it.” There was a clinking of glass as the bottle was handed over. “The word 'mate' sounds primitive to them.”

“Swindle,” another one called out. “Not a cable gets loosened, alright? If he even makes an attempt to escape, Megatron will have our heads.”

“Not a single cable loosened, I swear,” he called out, his voice getting closer, and his peds crunching through the broken crystals. “But he's not that sly to escape if I only undo his gag, eh?”

“Fair enough.”

Swindle was now close enough that Sideswipe could see him in the dim starlight. The red mech's pump pounded in his chestplate, not only in rage at his former lover, but in a panic when the Decepticon stepped close to where Cliffjumper was hiding amongst the crystals. Sideswipe narrowed his blue optics and let out a growl from deep within his engine, one that made him sound less like a mech and more like a wild animal, both in ire and to try to keep the other mech's attention on him.

Swindle clicked his glossa. “You've changed.” He lowered himself down to one knee to put his head on the same level as Sideswipe's, and stroked a hand along the side of his black helm. “Definitely more sober now. And wilder. Barbaric.” He flashed his dentals at him. “I like it.”
The red mech could smell the Kaonite high-grade on his ventilations. Sideswipe was well familiar with how being overcharged could give someone a substantial boost in reckless courage. No wonder Swindle had decided that it was a good idea to meet with Megatron's sacrificial mech one more time before he was killed.

“Mmph.” Sideswipe grunted at him through the gag, and briefly strained at the cables around his wrists. He felt the rope running under the Minotoron slacken a little; Bumblebee had made progress with cutting it through, but hadn't finished. If he could just pull it loose, he could grab Swindle's throat even with his hands still bound...

He jiggled that rope even more, hoping to get Bumblebee's attention and make that point clear. In the meantime, he kept his optics locked on Swindle's, hoping that would stop him from taking a look around and spotting one of the minibots.

“I meant what I said before,” the other mech was saying as he kept stroking and petting Sideswipe's helm. “I really would like to have kept you. You would have eventually gotten used to livin' in the Decepticon camp, just like you did with the Autobots. Would have kept you locked in my tent for longer, of course, and chained until you calmed down. With the way you fight, I could've gotten Megatron to make you a warrior once you'd pledged allegiance to him. And if you refused to do that...well, we would still have our fun.”

The minibots couldn't move, not with Swindle so close to them. He'd detect them immediately and alert the guards. Sideswipe hissed again, this time in frustration. His rescue was so close, so close, and Swindle was fragging everything up!...He had to do more to distract him.

He groaned into the gag again, but now he made sure that his vocalizer took a pleading tone. Swindle paused, one optic ridge raised.

“Not gonna to bite me again, are you?”

A voice called out from the far end of the patch. “Don't untie him!”

“I'm not that stupid!” Swindle shouted over his shoulder, before turning back to the bound mech. “Keep in mind that if you try to bite me again, this time I'll dislocate your jaw. Megatron doesn't need you to be able to talk in order to sacrifice you.”

He slowly nodded once in understanding.

The knot on the cloth was tugged back, and the gag fell away and to the ground. Sideswipe took a moment to appreciate being able to ventilate normally through his mouth before speaking in a harsh whisper.

“Was that all I ever was to you? Just a nice frag for you to toy with while you kept track of what was happening with my visions?”

He didn't care about that now, of course. Swindle was the lowest piece of garbage that he could imagine, and he didn't care about the how or why of his actions anymore. But talking to him was keeping him occupied, and, at an extremely cautious pace, the minibots were moving again.

“Yeah, pretty much,” the purple-and-yellow mech drawled with a growing smirk, and without a hint of an apology. He went back to stroking the red mech's helm. “You and I both know that
you're not the brightest of mechs, Sideswipe. Especially when you were overcharged every single
orn. You needed me bad. I'd probably have had you in my tent a long time ago, if it wasn't for your
brother.”

It was all Sideswipe could do to ignore the coil of hate and disgust that was tightening around his
tanks, and keep his vocalizer to sound weakened and helpless.

“You should have been honest with me. I might have come with you willingly.”

“Ha! You never would have trusted me that much. Do you even believe in the Iacon prophecy,
even now, when we stand before the city gates?”

“I believe that I'm going to die in the next few joors, no matter what I think about whether all this
superstitious scrap is true or not.” He swallowed hard. “You saw the jobs I had to do. I don't keep
track of how many times I've brushed against deactivation anymore. But I got out of all of those
with my own two hands. I fought back. Or my brother pulled my aft out of the fire. Now? I can't.
And Sunny's not here. I'm done with fighting because there's no point. And I'm scared.”

That last part was no lie.

“Aww, poor, poor Sideswipe,” the Decepticon cooed mockingly, his other hand cupping his cheek.
“And is this the part where you tell me to untie you so that I can drag you onto the ground and give
you one more good, hard frag? I ain't that stupid, mech.”

“Then don't untie me. But I'm...I'm still scared.” He made his vocalizer warble. “Swindle, I need
you. Please?”

Now he was lying. He kept his optics on Swindle's, fighting to not glance left or right to check on
the minibots' progress.

Swindle moved his head even closer, until Sideswipe could feel his ventilations wafting across his
faceplates. “Need me how, Sideswipe?” he asked slyly, even as his voice purred in a familiar way.

“Whatever it was that you did to keep me from losing my cortex,” he breathed. “You kept me sane.
You made sure that I kept enjoying life, even when the nightmares were eating away at my spark.
You were the only one who gave a flying frag about me when I was at my worst. I need that again.
You're my only friend here, Swindle. Just one more time? Please?”

The Decepticon paused as he considered the helpless mech.

His grin widened, spreading to nearly across his entire face. His gleeful look made Sideswipe's
plating crawl.

The smaller mech thought that Sideswipe was back in the same miserable, desperate ball that he'd
found him in at the bar so long ago. Everything within the yoska screamed at him to fight, to yell,
even spit in his face, but for now, just long enough to buy the minibots some time...

“Please?” he whined one more time.

“Aww, Sideswipe. How can I say 'no' to a face like that?”

Holding both of his cheeks to keep his former lover still, Swindle pressed their lips together
greedily. Sideswipe immediately faked a relieved moan, loud enough to cover the movements of
the minibots around them. As Swindle closed his optics and groaned happily in response,
Sideswipe chanced a quick glance to the side, and saw several of them moving towards the guards.
The timing had to be perfect for this. If they acted too soon, Swindle would turn around and shout, alerting the main camp. But if they waited too long, and the mech got bored and started to pay attention to his surroundings again, they'd miss their only window to escape without needing to fight the entire army of Decepticons.

Swindle pushed his glossa into Sideswipe's mouth, exploring him, and Sideswipe let him, suppressing the urge to gag. His fingers dug hard enough into his palms to dent the plating as he faked another moan, and was met with a pleasurable answer from the Decepticon. In the meantime, he wriggled his hands, trying to jiggle the rope keeping him tied to the Minotoron.

If Bumblebee didn't untie him soon, he swore that he was going to purge in Swindle's mouth--

The cable suddenly went taunt. He could feel the sawing motion of the minibot's short sword cutting through it.

Just a few more seconds...

He turned his head slightly, deepening the kiss, and opened his mouth further. The invitation was too enticing for his former lover to resist, not when he was back to where he was when they'd first met, with Sideswipe easily mailable and thinking that the other mech was helping him somehow. He felt Swindle put an arm around the back of his head, drawing him as close as his bindings would let him, and his fingers started to walk up his back, then slid across his aft. He didn't doubt that the mech was brewing plenty of ideas for what to do with Sideswipe until the morning, even while tied down.

“No untying him,” a voice from the edge of the patch reminded purple-and-yellow mech, as if guessing his thoughts. Then, abruptly, there was a scuffling noise. “Hey, what the--”

The rope broke. And immediately after, so did the facade.

His battle programming eagerly sprang online.

“RYAAAA!!”

Sideswipe's snarl was all but roared directly into Swindle's mouth as he propelled himself off of the Minotoron and onto the smaller mech. His hands, still entangled in cables, shot out and snatched his throat, cutting off his own surprised yowl as the Autobot landed heavily on him. The Minotoron yowled in surprise and side-stepped, threatening to crush them both under its hooves before it moved away as far from the ruckus as its tether would allow it.

Further on, he could hear the sounds of a fight, short-lived and violent. But his entire focus was on the mech struggling underneath him, unable to take an intake and cry out for help, or do much of anything, not with Sideswipe pressing his entire weight down on his neck.

They locked optics again, except now one's was filled with rage, and the other fear and panic.

The Autobot squeezed his fingers as tightly as he could and gritted his dentals as he glared down at him. Swindle's purple optics bulged, his vocalizer gagging, and he grappled frantically at the other mech's arms and hands, but couldn't yank him off.

He could easily crush his vital energon lines, just as Megatron had nearly done to him. He could make sure that he would never hurt him or anyone else ever again...

And at the last moment...
He changed his mind.

Sideswipe released Swindle's throat. The Decepticon choked and gasped, too stunned to move, and had no time to defend himself as the Autobot smashed his fists into the side of his helm, knocking him out cold.

...He felt oddly proud of himself.

*That* was what a *yoska* would do.

And besides, Megatron could find a far worse punishment for Swindle than simply choking him out. Sideswipe didn't have time to spare for revenge. Swindle wasn't worth his attention for anything.

“Sideswipe!”

Kneeling upright, he turned towards Bumblebee's voice, and offered his wrists. The minibot hurriedly cut through the rest of the cables, no longer needing to worry about stealth, and as he got to work on freeing his ankles too, Sideswipe glanced over to see how the other the minibots had done. He noted a few bodies being dragged into the crystal patch, where they'd be hidden from any other guards who happened to walk by, at least temporarily. A few seconds later Brawn, Cliffjumper, Huffer and Windcharger crawled over and rejoined them.

“Cyber-wolves,” Sideswipe muttered as he rubbed his wrists, flinching when injuries around his wrists were reopened, though the oozing energon flow wasn't steady enough for him to worry about it for long. “You've been haunting behind the Autobots as *cyber-wolves.*”

Bumblebee nodded. “We had a run-in with a pack of them shortly after Sunstreaker ran off.” He touched the hide draped around his shoulders, which covered most of his frame. Anyone looking at him while he was laying down would have thought that he was a cyber-wolf hunting a smaller creature. “Used them as disguises and to hide our scent while we kept looking for the Autobots.”

“You had us fooled up until a few orns ago. Why didn't you approach the camp when you found us?!”

“We did!” Cliffjumper grumbled. “We were going to sneak in, find where you and Sunstreaker were being held by the barbarians, and get you the frell out. But when we came up...We saw you sitting by one of the mechs on watch. You could have run off by yourself. But you didn't. You were *fine.* And then we saw Sunstreaker come up and sit next to you too.”

“We realized that you were staying with them willingly,” Windcharger added. “Neither of you were in danger. You didn't *need* a rescue. Well, up until now.”

They must have been talking about the night that he and Prowl had argued when Prowl had said that he loved him, and Sideswipe had stormed to the edge of the camp as he tried to deal with his feelings on the situation.

“And so you didn't return to Kaon--?”

Huffer scoffed. “We're never going back. Did Sunstreaker tell you what we discovered about caravan?”

He nodded. “I don't blame you. Sentinel Prime can go rot in the Pit.” He gestured a hand towards the Decepticon camp. “*These* mechs are the ones that he was going to let sacrifice me, not the Autobots! The caravan was a plot to get me to the Decepticons, and Sentinel set it up! You all saw
the Autobots dragging me away, but they were stopping *this* from happening that orn. I need to get back to them. Will you come with me?"

The minibots glanced at one another.

"...I don't know what it is about this place, but the wildlands are more appealing than going back to work in a mine for *any* city right now," Bumblebee smirked. "And it'd be nice to be around more mechs than the just the five of us."

Sideswipe grinned back at him, but it was short lived. "How do we get out without being spotted? The walls at the front of the bailey make a natural bottleneck, and there's Seekers posted over there to find any Autobots trying to rescue me. And a patrol will eventually swing by here to check on my guards."

"We snuck by the bottleneck through the crystal patches. But, uh--" Brawn patted Sideswipe's arm. "You're too big to pull off that trick too."

"So I'm going to have to fight my way out."

"*We're* fighting our way out," Bumblebee corrected. "I'm keeping my promise to you. You're getting out of here safely." The other minibots nodded in agreement.

The red mech blew air out through his vents in a quiet frustration. "Unless you've got an army hidden in your subspace pocket, we're not going to hold them off for even a few breems, much less escape. Not without--"

His head snapped up.

His processor came up with an idea. A brilliant one, or at least it told itself that.

His cortex balked.

...And then curiously prodded the queued idea.

And then, knowing that whatever input it gave would be overridden by Sideswipe's impulsive nature anyway, it relented with a heavy sigh.

If he survived long enough to tell Prowl about this plan, his mate's own cortex was probably going to short out.

Sideswipe turned around. "Heeey, big guy."

The Minotoron, which had been startled when the mech had leapt off of its back, had gone back to passively munching at the crystals, but its pace was slowed now that its tanks were nearing full capacity. Keeping an optic on the camp to make sure that he wasn't seen, Sideswipe reached up and petted its neck.

"Wanna get back to your herd?" he whispered. "I do too. So how about we call a truce from all the slag you pulled before with nearly impaling my twin, and go home? What'dya say, huh? Wanna go home?"

Big, brown optics refreshed at him.

Bumblebee's engine squeaked. "Wait. WAIT. You're not seriously considering--"

"Home. We've got to go home." It clicked in his processor for how to communicate this to the
Minotoron. Leaning towards its head, he cupped a hand over its audial processor, and quietly mimicked the sound of a *yoska*'s howl. “Aa-wooo!”

The creature snorted gruffly, first in alarm, then again in acknowledgment, and turned away, its tail flicking back and forth. At first Sideswipe thought that he’d only agitated it, but then he realized that it was looking for the exit of the walled area that the camp was inside.

“Get on!” Sideswipe hissed at the other mechs.

“What?!”

“Just get on! C'mon!”

Baffled, the minibots did as he'd ordered and scrambled up onto the Minotoron's back, crowding into one another and squeezing in tightly. Sideswipe followed them a second later, vaulting up towards the creature's front, his long legs dangling over either side. Leaning forward, he gripped its horns, and scratched behind its enormous head, as he'd seen Hot Rod and the other younglings do whenever the herd was moved.

“Good boy! Now...CHARGE!”

He kicked in his heels.

The Minotoron bellowed, the sound echoing through the bailey, and lopped forward, shooting right across the open field and along the far side of the camp towards the exit.

The minibots couldn't help their yelps of surprise.

At first, there was no indication that they'd been noticed. Or maybe the Decepticons had no idea how to handle the sight of something as big as a Minotoron charging through the night not far from where they were relaxing. Some must have been overcharged enough to think that they were hallucinating.

But then shouts began to fill the air. Alarms. Warnings. But Sideswipe didn't bother to look back.

“Go, go, go, go!”

Behind him, the minibots were yelling encouragement too, and Cliffjumper was slapping his hand on the Minotoron's rear, trying to get it to go even faster. It grunted, then bowed its head forward, its hooves thundering along the ground as it galloped onwards, towards the road leading away from Iacon.

There was no time for the Decepticons from camp to deploy and stop them. Somewhere in the cacophony Sideswipe heard Megatron barking orders, and he tried to block the sound out of his mind and the urge in his spark to turn around and square off against the Decepticon leader now that he was free and able to fight. He *itched* to give him at least one good punch in the face, but he knew that he would never survive the encounter, not with hundreds of other Decepticons between the two mechs.

The Seekers who had been previously watching for intruders at the bottleneck turned towards them, shocked, but they quickly broke themselves into a battle line. Sideswipe grimaced, then, in a moment of clarity, raised his head up.

“AAA-WOOOO!!”
The Minotoron answered him.

Bellowing a roar of its own, it stampeded right at the Seekers. The winged mechs realized too late that they had no chance of substantially injuring the creature, let alone stopping it, and they panicked and dove to either side. One didn't move fast enough, and there was a cut-off scream as the horns smashed into him before he was trampled, the Minotoron's pace never slowing as it ran right through the bottle neck and out the other side.

Sideswipe punched his fist into the air as he cackled in glee. “WHOO-HOO!!”

“That was awesome!” Bumblebee was shouting, bouncing up and down directly behind Sideswipe, and the red mech had no idea if it was from excitement or if he could just not get a good seat on the Minotoron's back.

Huffer looked over his shoulder. “They're chasing us!”

“Let them!” Sideswipe grinned. “They'll never catch up to this thing! C'mon, Bob! Keep going!”

“Bob?!”

“This thing has earned a name, hasn't it? C'mon, Bob! Run home! Go back to your herd! AAA-WOOO!”

'Bob' grunted again in what sounded like agreement with that idea, and raced on to the south, ignoring the curses being hurled at him from the winged mechs desperately trying to sprint after the stampeding Minotoron.
Chapter 38: Charge

The bonds between Sideswipe and his twin and mate were nearly overflowing with joy and excitement, and maybe a little smugness as well. He could feel pulses back from both of them, just as relieved and loving, but he was beyond exhausted and couldn't 'talk' for long. He ached to be able to see both of them face-to-face again, to hug both of them, and apologize on and on for nearly giving up his life while they'd been desperately searching for him.

Bob had lost the Seekers chasing them some time ago, and although he'd slowed a little to huff at the ground and try to find the familiar scent of the Autobot tribe, Sideswipe had been wise enough this time to have watched his surroundings while he was being dragged off by the enemy, and could guide the Minotoron in the right direction by gripping his horns and turning him the way that he wanted him to go. Now that the immediate danger was gone the minibots had been chattering away, asking Sideswipe all sorts of questions about the Autobots, how they had treated him, and why he'd decided to willingly stay with them. Bumblebee had nearly fallen off of Bob when Sideswipe told them that he'd bonded to one of his original kidnappers.

“Did he--??!”

“No!” Sideswipe looked over his shoulder at the yellow mech sitting directly behind him. “They're nothing like the Decepticons. He respects me, he loves me. And I love him too.”

Bumblebee still grimaced, not thoroughly convinced. “A lot's changed since we last saw each other.”

“Yes. Last time I saw you, you all weren't running around as your own wildland tribe!”

“We weren't expecting to be one! We all just wanted to rescue you, and then move onto another city, like Tarn or something. But living out here, under the open sky, able to go wherever we please and make our own destiny is way better than being ordered in and out of energon mines by corrupt Primes. Right guys?”

There was a chorus of agreement from the rest of the minibots.

“Hate to tell you,” Sideswipe cackled, “but the leader of the Autobots calls himself a 'Prime' too.”

Huffer groaned and smacked his forehead. “Well that's just great. We can't escape from them, even in the wildlands!”

“But he's nothing like the Primes of the cities! He's even got a...wait! Wait!”
Sideswipe abruptly leaned up and narrowed his optics as they ascended a hill. The sky was taking a pink glow as the dawn approached, and he mentally snickered as he imagined the enraged tantrum that Megatron must have been throwing right about now, but his focus was instead on the small figures that he could see descending the next hill to his right, just off of the path.

They were spread out.

They were searching for something.

The closer that they came, the better he could see them, and he also could see the small haze of dust that was kicked up by a Minotoron herd somewhere behind them--

“We found them!”

Bob noticed the tribe at the same time, and changed his bearing to head right for them. Sideswipe crowed, then, as he saw some Autobots turning their heads his way, he threw back his head and let out a jubilant, drawn-out howl at the sky, announcing his return.

“AA-WOOOOO!!”

There was a pause, but only a short one, and then he was joyfully answered by more howls echoing down the path and bouncing off of the cliffs.

“AAAA-WOOO!!”

The howling continued in a wave, and Sideswipe's spark soared as he realized that the entire tribe present was answering his cry. Bob heard the familiar calls as well and ran onwards at them.

Mechs at the front of the group were abandoning the searching formation and instead running towards him as fast as they could, shouting, crowing, smiling, and yelling at him in an overwhelming mix of greetings and questions. Just as suddenly the mechs at the front stuttered to a halt, their optics bulging as they bumped into one another as they stopped themselves, and then they dove out of the way as Bob rushed right past them.

“Hey, HEY, whoa-whoa-whoa-WHOA!”

Sideswipe yanked hard at Bob's horns, but the Minotoron only grunted at him and shook his head, nearly knocking the yoska off as he continued running past the mechs and towards the herd over the next hill. Unable to change course, the red mech yelled over his shoulder at his comrades.

“This thing's got no brakes!! Help!”

And despite the madness of it all, Sideswipe would forever treasure the hysterical moment of him helplessly clinging to a runaway Minotoron, a bouncing gaggle of minibots hanging onto its rear half, while a dozen Autobot yoska chased after them, Hound sprinting along at the front as he tried to whirl a lasso around Bob's neck.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Sideswipe!!”

The red mech had barely taken two steps away from Bob before Jazz crashed into him, nearly bowling him over as he wrapped his arms around him in a great big hug. Then just as fast something else collided into his back: Hound, who had just finished releasing his lasso from around Bob and had let the Minotoron trot off to rejoin the herd. And then something even heavier
than Hound smashed into all of them, and Sideswipe coughed out a laugh as Trailbreaker's arms flopped over his friends and squeezed them all.

And they were just the first wave.

The press of mechs around him grew heavier and thicker as more *yoska* ran up to greet their lost commrade. Sideswipe felt himself being passed around from one hug to another, but instead of trying to fight his way out, as he had when the tribe had done something similar after his duel with Optimus, he simply grinned and let his spark happily dance around its casing as he was embraced over and over again, some mechs also scrubbing their palms on the top of his helm playfully, others squeezing him into tight hugs that made his plating creak until he thought that he would be snapped in half. He reached out and tried to hug back as many as he could, or at least touch them, which he'd learned was just as good as an acknowledgment of friendship among the nomads, though he did manage to find Hot Rod and pick him up briefly, the youngling babbling to him about the rest of the ambush and how he'd briefly joined with the other *yoska* fighting off the enemy until Springer plucked the smaller mech out of his hands.

“How did you escape?!”

“We thought you were gone!”

“We were all so fragging worried about you!”

“So what's coming back and forth from the Pits like, huh?!”

“You mad mech, riding a Minotoron all the way back here--”

“Who's this?!”

Some of the Autobots were finally realizing that Sideswipe had not arrived alone. The *yoska* on the outer edge of the group turned, automatically forming up to protect their tribe from a new threat, only to stare in confusion as they were approached by strange, undersized mechs wearing the hides of cyber-wolves. The minibots looked just as alarmed and cautious, and halted as they came under scrutiny, wary of getting too close to the armed barbarians.

“It's okay!” Sideswipe called out, then grunted as Ironhide came up behind him and squeezed the *yoska* into a bear-hug. “They're--GAH!--They're the minibots that I told you guys about!”

“Minibots?”

The unfamiliar word was passed around from mouth to mouth.

Bumblebee raised his optic ridge when he heard the nomads saying 'minibots' over and over, though he couldn't have understood the rest of the Iaconian language. After quickly clearing his vocalizer, he tried a wary smile as he stepped forward while offering his palms, a universal gesture for peace.

“Nice to meet you,” he said calmly in Cybertronian Standard. “I'm Bumblebee.”

The Autobots still looked at him suspiciously. One mech, though, stepped forward out of the crowd, and took a knee so that he was on the same optic level as the yellow mech.

“Bumblebee?” Jazz returned the minibot's smile with a broader one of his own, then patted his own black-and-white chestplate. “Jazz.”
“I remember you!” Windcharger called out from behind his friend as he pointed accusingly at the Autobot yoska. “You’re one of the barbarians who attacked our caravan!”

“Yeah, and he saved Sideswipe’s aft too, if you haven't forgotten,” Bumblebee reminded him as he thrust out his hand, wanting a handshake. “Pleased to meet you, Jazz.”

Jazz cocked his head to the side at the offered hand, the light behind his visor refreshing.

“...I suppose this is how ya'll greet each other in the city?” he asked Sideswipe in Iaconian as he mirrored the gesture, and let Bumblebee take his hand and shake it.

“Sa!” At the moment Sideswipe was far too occupied with trying to wriggle his way out of Ratchet’s grip, who was trying to hold him still as he gave him a rapid assessment. It didn't escape his notice that one of the healer's white arms was partially wrapped around his head in what was certainly not a subtle hug to his least-favorite mech. “You know, I think we can count this as the first official diplomatic meeting between groups from both the city and the wildlands! Sentinel's contact with Megatron doesn't count.”

Jazz cackled at that, his visor flashing happily, and though they didn't yet speak the same language, the expressive mech kept trying to communicate with the minbots anyway, as if they were simply yet another tribe from somewhere further off in the wildlands. As they understood what he was doing and gathered around him, and more yoska wandered over to curiously inspect the new arrivals, something snapped Sideswipe's attention in the other direction.

From within the dark realm that he now knew was the All-Spark, something raced directly at him. He barely had time to comprehend it before a golden fist smashed into the side of his helm, knocking him right out of Ratchet's hands.

“OW!” He stumbled and fell to his knees as errors whipped across his HUD. “Sunny!”

Sunstreaker's answer was to grab his brother by his chestplate panels and haul him back up to his level so that he could hiss right into his face, his optics blazing with rage.

“Don't you ever do that to me again!”

Both halves of their split-spark danced around one another as Sunstreaker yanked Sideswipe into a tight hug, which was gladly and immediately returned. The two of them bowed their faces into each other's shoulders, gripping each other as hard as they possibly could, and though Sideswipe could feel other Autobots' hands patting his head and shoulders to make themselves known, no one dared to try to separate the twins' reunion.

Sideswipe had no idea how long they stood there, squeezing each other, oblivious to the rest of the world.

He would have been happy to stay that way forever. Here, right here, everything was perfect and right.

Sideswipe started to try to explain himself, stopped, then tried again, mumbling directly into his brother's neck. “I...I thought there was no hope left for me.”

“You stupid slag-head.” Sunstreaker's fingers dug into Sideswipe's plating hard enough to leave dents. “There's always hope. I didn't come halfway across the fragging planet to find you just so you could give up and die.”
“I promise that I'll never do that again.”

“Good.”

The golden mech's shoulders heaved up and down in a weary, happy sigh, one that his twin could feel all the way down to his core.

Sideswipe smiled to himself and pressed himself tighter to his brother.

Within the All-Spark, their duel sparks continued to twirl and dance, a couple of binary stars forever swirl ing around one another.

A hand much bigger than Sunstreaker's patted the red mech's back and startled him back into reality.

“Welcome home, Sideswipe.”

He poked his head up, and smirked at the Prime, whose optics were grinning right back at him. “It's good to be home, Optimus. Sorry I didn't say goodbye before leaving, but the Decepticons were kind of insistent that I go with them.”

“Sideswipe, I don't know if anyone has informed you yet, but, ah...” The big mech leaned in a little closer, and lowered his vocalizer, but the deep rumble of his voice carried across the group anyway. “...You are naked.”

Both twins opened their optics wide.

...Snickering broke out all around them.

Instantly Sideswipe found himself an arm's length away from his brother as Sunstreaker held him back and took a good look across his twin's frame. “What the frell happened to your clothes?!" he gawked, though his optics stayed on the multiple, untended injuries littering his body.

The red mech's self-repair units had been working vigorously on the wounds he'd sustained during the battle two orns ago, but the worst of the injuries had actually come from the beatings when the Decepticons had been dragging him to their camp, and the ligature wounds around his wrists and ankles were not doing him any favors either. On top of that he hadn't rested properly in at least a deca-cyle, and had not refueled or recharged at all in the past orn and a half. Summed up, he knew that he was a mess, and at the same time there was still no time to rest. Not yet.

“They tore them off to try to scare me into not retaliating.” He spread his arms. “Then they tied me up with strips of my cloak. They would have gotten an audial-full about it if I wasn't gagged too.”

Sunstreaker's engine snarled. But before he could say anything else, Optimus stepped up, and there was a whoosh of cloth fluttering in the air.

“Then let's fix this, before you give any of the old femmes in the tribe a spark-attack.”

Something was tugged around Sideswipe's waist. He automatically lifted his arms obligingly, though bemused, and as the Prime wrapped the long piece of cloth several more times around him and knotted it, he looked down to see what it was that was now covering him up. He doubted that Optimus carried spare waist-cloths in his subspace pocket, after all.

The Prime's silken shoulder-wrap didn't match the same red color of his paintjob, but it would do just fine.
More then fine.

Pit, he was honored.

His jaw hung open.

“...Thank you?”

“You're most welcome.”

The wrap was clearly too big for him, hanging all the way down to his calves, and was not meant to be worn in such a way. But Optimus had looped it around tightened it enough to make it viable, and it was in no danger of falling off. In fact, given its silky material, it was comfortable. The golden symbol of the Autobot tribe stitched into it was stretched a little, pulled up by the knot on one of Sideswipe's hips, the rest of it displayed over his thigh.

“Better,” Sunstreaker agreed tentatively.

There were more than a few murmurs of approval at the Prime's gift to one of his yoska, and Sideswipe couldn't but to put his hands on his waist as he inspected himself proudly. It wasn't as if Optimus had made him a Prime on the spot; it was just enough to keep his decency covered. And yet what it was, and who it had come from, made Sideswipe feel as if he'd earned it anyway.

Before he could make any sort of a quip about it, something pulsed at his spark. At the same time that he returned with a tired answer, Sideswipe's head snapped up in alarm.

Oh frag. Here he was, preening over new clothing, when he had yet to find his mate.

His spark dropped.

“Where's Prowl?!”

Sunstreaker's optics widened. “You didn't run into him on the way back?!”

“No! I thought that he was just a little further out than the tribe, like an advance scout or something!”

Optimus straightened up. “He ran after you when we realized that you'd been captured,” he said, his voice returning to the severe timber of a leader who knew that one of his mechs was in danger. “I assumed that he panicked and thought that he could rescue you before you were taken to the main camp.”

“I didn't see him, but...I've been feeling him, in my spark.” He patted his chestplate. “He wasn't far behind us. The Decepticons didn't know that he was following them. Prime, they're already at Iacon! Megatron's entire army! They can't open the gates, but they're right outside of it!”

A horrified silence fell over the group. Metal groaned and creaked as Optimus tried to hide how he was squeezing his fingers into his palms, his facemask hiding his expression, except that which creeped into his optics.

“...We can't let them enter the city.”

“I know. The good news is that Megatron can't get the gates open by himself. He still thought that sacrificing me would give him the power to get them open.”

The red mech smirked deviously.
“But I've figured it out. I know how we'll fulfill the prophecy.”

“...Do tell.”

“First, before that, we need to cut through the Decepticons and get ourselves to those gates. Megatron will have his Seekers out looking for me, but there'll still be plenty more guarding the path to Iacon.” He gritted his dentals. “...And when they go looking for me, they'll flush out Prowl. Slag.”

“If we can't contact him, then we have to trust that he'll be wise enough to have gone into hiding upon your escape, or better yet, is on his way back here. Sideswipe, you've seen the terrain that we'll be fighting on. Do you have any ideas about how we can defeat Megatron's army?”

“...Uh...”

Sideswipe's cortex whirled as he scrapped together all that he knew about the resources that the Autobots had at hand, the enemy they were facing, and how they could attack them. Even with the mechs within the Decepticon tribe that seemed unwilling to fight subtracted, the Autobots would still be outnumbered, and with Seekers on Megatron's side, outclassed. They had to find a different tactic than a straight-on fight. But the Decepticon camp had been inside of a bailey by the gates, with walls surrounding it, and the only entrance was through a bottleneck. The Autobots could still conceivably charge through it, but the Decepticons would have plenty of time to see them coming and deploy.

It would be as if the Decepticons already held the entire city of Iacon. They were at an easily defendable position from a forward attack, and it wouldn't be possible to sneak around and surprise them from the rear, or even out-flank them.

“...I...uh...” He wiggled his fingers in the air helplessly as he let his processor try to add in anything it could cook up on the fly.

Optimus's optics tightened. He turned around to hear a suggestion from Ironhide instead. Sideswipe felt his spark seething and writhing at that, angry that he was too exhausted to come up with a plan that would give his tribe an advantage in their next fight.

If only Prowl were here. He'd think of something.

He reflexively pulsed as his mate as he thought of him again, and received an answer. This one was without any sort of broadcasted feeling attached to it, just a simple, cold pulse.

Prowl must have been getting tired too. Scrap.

The communication between their bonds was quickly about to become useless. Prowl couldn't hint as to his location, and Sideswipe wouldn't be able to warn Prowl to get the frell out of the way of their charge.

...An idea snapped up in his processor.

*That's it!!*

His cortex heard it, then threw up its non-existent hands and walked away, cursing at him up and down as it decided that it would be happier to take a vacation for the next orn or so than to help with this madness.

“I've got it!” Sideswipe's blue optics glowed as he bounced up and down lightly on his heels. “I've
got it! I know how we can break through the Decepticons and get to the gate!”

Optimus turned back to him. “You do?”

“Sa!”

Even Sunstreaker was getting alarmed by his brother's behavior, and went to touch his shoulder, but Sideswipe shoved him off.

“No, really, I know how we'll do it! Hey, Hot Rod! Come here!”

The Autobots nearby went deathly quiet.

A small voice squeaked in answer from somewhere at the front of the crowd.

“Me?!” Hot Rod's optics were huge. “You want me to break through the Decepticons?!”

He was lifted off the ground as Springer tugged the youngling to his chestplate protectively and gave Sideswipe a horrified stare. As more voices began to shout in outrage, the red mech held his hands up.

“Na, na! I mean that Hot Rod has got me inspired for how we'll do this! Listen!”

He gestured for everyone to come forward to hear him, and he couldn't help a little grin when all of the yoska immediately did so, sincerely trusting the same mech that they could easily joke as cortex-disabled during practice. At the same time, a quick flash of doubt almost made him change his mind. If this plan didn't work, then he would be dooming his friends' lives.

Was this how Prowl felt when giving orders?

He took a quick ventilation to steady himself, and squared his shoulders.

“Okay, so here's what we're gonna do…”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

As the sun continued to rise in the east and climb up the mountain peaks, the shadows that the white mech had used to conceal himself faded, and he changed his position to further up a hill overlooking the road to Iacon. He stayed on his belly, his wings pulled tight to his back to not give him away, his staff resting on the ground beside him within easy reach as he watched the activity below him.

Seekers were still pouring out from behind the walls, almost two joors after he'd guessed that Sideswipe had escaped. Prowl had been unable to see exactly how his mate had gotten himself free, only that Sideswipe's miserable, hopeless pulses had suddenly changed to excitement, then fear, and then to an overwhelming joy as a Minotoron had suddenly burst out of the Decepticon camp and right through the line at a bottleneck between the walls. Prowl had been lurking behind an oddly-square boulder on the path, taking note of the positions of the Seekers and formulating a plan to get past the bottleneck, when his mate had suddenly turned everything on its head and raced past him and away, at least two dozen Seekers on his heels and not looking for the second Autobot crouched down and out of sight.

Prowl did not blame Sideswipe for leaving him behind. He hadn't known that he was so close to his position. The poor mech must have been exhausted beyond all reason, and he wouldn't have been looking for his wayward mate while fleeing for his life.
He could only assume now that the red mech was on his way back to the tribe and safe. Relief swelled in his own spark, loosening it from how it had been twisting itself in knots these past two orns, and now he could concentrate on his secondary task.

The Decepticons had found Iacon. But they had not yet opened it. Prowl wanted to know why, and how the Autobots would do it once they had arrived.

...Had Megatron truly needed to sacrifice Sideswipe in order to access Iacon? Would Optimus need to do it? Prowl had refused to even consider the idea orns ago. But now, when that had come so close to becoming a reality, he'd re-run the probability of it working and been spark-broken to find the numbers drawing higher.

...No. He would not allow it to happen. If fulfilling the Iacon prophecy meant taking Sideswipe's life, then the price for returning to their home was far too high.

Sideswipe had been right about one thing. They didn't need Iacon. They'd been living just fine for orns without it. Prowl would have been perfectly happy to life the rest of his life as a nomad if it meant keeping his mate safe and by his side.

But Sideswipe had also been frantically trying to tell him something shortly after the Decepticons had arrived at Iacon, and Prowl suspected that it had something to do with how the prophecy was truly supposed to be fulfilled. There should have been one more obstacle to face before the gates could be opened, one more riddle to solve. Whatever it was, Sideswipe had spotted it. Maybe he had even figured it out. But whatever he was trying to 'say' had turned into something Prowl could only describe as far-off 'mumbling,' and all that he could understand was the urgency behind his 'tone.' He could only pray that the disruption between their sparks was because his mate was tired, and not that Megatron had done something to damage their bond.

Whatever he'd found, Prowl wouldn't know what it was until he was face-to-face with Sideswipe and asked him. And if he left now, who would watch the Decepticons' movements? Megatron must have sent out the majority of his Seekers out across the mountains to find his sacrificial mech and haul him back, with most of them staying on the reinforced path. Optimus had a unique window to storm the opposing tribe while they were spread out. Who could tell the Autobots about it if Prowl wasn't here to watch their movements?

...Primus. Maybe he was the one who was tired. Who would tell the Autobots if Prowl wasn't with them to say what he'd found?

It was time to rendezvous with the tribe and plan their attack, and hope that nothing changed drastically in the meantime.

Noting one more time the checkpoints that the Decepticons liked to gather near so that he could draw out a map of these locations for Optimus upon his return, Prowl started to crawl backwards away from his hiding spot, granule metal 'pebbles' kicked up by his shuffling.

Something nearby growled.

Prowl engine squealed in alarm as he snapped his optics over his shoulder.

What in the name of--?!

That same something slammed into his side and tore at his plating, shocking him. It wasn't as big of a mech. Barely even half the size of one. But it was still attacking, forcing him to roll away or be torn to shreds by its claws. As he scrambled away, Prowl reached for his staff, missed, tried again,
and barely got his fingers around the shaft before he swung it out and crashed it over the creature's head. It yowled and backed away, buying the yoska just enough time to somersault backwards and climb to his feet.

The feline shook itself off, then snarled another yowl at him before charging. This time it got under Prowl's staff as he swung at it again, and latched onto his chestplate as it tried to clamp its teeth around his neck and rip out the vital energon lines. Panicked, Prowl stumbled backwards, letting go of his weapon to instead punch and claw at the creature, trying to yank it off.

He didn't realize that his feet had left the ground until he was falling.

Their first roll slammed his weight into his attacker, and it screeched as it let go and leapt aside. Prowl kept rolling, his arms and doorwings flailing to try to control his fall, bits of the hill falling along with him and pelting his armor. He came to a stop more than three-quarters of the way down, and groaned as he shook his head to get his bearings.

He heard voices.

Something crashed into his back, slamming his chestplate and face into the ground.

Pain laced through his frame, his HUD popping up with damage reports as something far bigger than him pinned him. Rocks were still tumbling down the hill, and he spotted his staff among them, but when he tried to wiggle forward to try go grab it, hands snatched at his wrists and slammed them down on either side of his head.

“Oh no you don't, Autobot!”

Another weight fell on him. The Seeker's knee jammed down on his doorwing, making him cry out as the panel was twisted the wrong way, but despite him thrashing, the two other mechs had a good grip on him.

“We've got one! We've got one!”

They were answered by more shouts. Prowl's pump double-timed, his spark automatically crying out for his mate, just as Sideswipe had done for him during the ambush, but the bond felt narrowed. He had no idea if Sideswipe 'heard' him at all, much less understood that he was in trouble.

A deeper, dead voice rumbled above them all.


The white yoska snarled and kicked as he was hauled up, fighting even more of the hands that grabbed and restrained him, tying his hands behind his back, and he bit his dentals against the urge to swear at them the same language that the enemy mechs used as he was hauled away.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Megatron stroked his clawed fingers along his chin as his red optics looked down at his kneeling prisoner's frame. “I knew that you weren't far. But you're a little late, aren't you? If I had chosen to sacrifice your mate as soon as we had arrived, his frame would be cold by now.”

Prowl glared up at him, but wisely said nothing. Despite his pump pounding hard against his chestplate, he had to keep a cool demeanor and control what little he could of the situation. Megatron did not know that he knew that Sideswipe had escaped. He did not know that Prowl
could understand Cybertronian Standard. He cortex was throwing back high probability statistics that keeping that knowledge to himself could benefit him later.

His chances of escaping alive, however, were dwindling.

His squeezed fists began to shake, and the Seekers holding him took it as a sign that he'd try to break free and gripped him tighter, making him wince.

To the side, Starscream snickered at their prisoner as he crossed his arms. “A sad irony, oh Mighty Megatron? You've lost your sacrifice, and now his Autobot mate arrives to find him! He'll make a poor substitute.”

Megatron hissed. “Thank you, Starscream, for telling him that Sideswipe is no longer here!”

“Oh please. It's not like any of the Autobots can understand us. None of the lesser tribes are smart enough to understand the importance of dealing with the cities. They'll be wiped out by the oncoming war soon enough.”

Prowl kept his face schooled.

The silver Decepticon leader turned back to Prowl. “Without Sideswipe, I have little use for him other than as a hostage. And if he came all the way here to rescue his mate, then Optimus Prime's tribe won't be far behind.”

“We'll be ready for them. We've been ready.”

“Just as you were to catch my sacrifice as he galloped out of camp on a Minotoron?! Recall the Seekers.” His claws snapped out, and grasped Prowl's chin, turning his face up towards him. “The city-mech will be with the Autobots when they come for this one. All we need to do now is strengthen our defenses and wait for them to offer themselves for slaughter.” His voice lowered as he locked optics with Prowl, and the corners of his mouth turned up. “I wonder, though, how much I could gain from sacrificing you if you have a bond with such a powerful link to the All-Spark--”

Without thinking, the yoska worked up a bolus of fluid and spat in Megatron's face, surprising himself at the instinct to retaliate so indecently. All that he got for his effort was a fist crashing into the side of his helm, shattering one of his optics and sending searing pain down through his jaw.

What had he been thinking?! That was something Sideswipe would have done to goad the enemy, not him. He must have been spending too much time with his mate.

...That was perfectly fine with him.

He glowered at Megatron, who was wiping away the spit with the back of his hand and staring down at his captive, likely pondering how he'd torture the white mech until the Autobots arrived to rescue him. Prowl's cortex reminded him that he should not try such a venomous taunt again, not if he wanted to increase his probability of staying alive for the next few joors.

Alarmed cries distracted him from that line of thought, and all their heads turned to the entrance of the walled area. Seekers were running back towards the Decepticon camp from the road and shouting for attention.

“They're here already?” Starscream's optics went wide. “How did they--?!”

“Get your Seekers formed up, Starscream!” Megatron roared at him. “Do not let them get near the gate!” He rumbled a swear, one that had no translation, but Prowl had heard Sideswipe mutter it
whenever his thoughts turned dark. “Something is not right. Optimus Prime is not foolish enough to try a frontal assault, not with such weak mechs fighting for him. He's up to something...”

As much as he wanted to defend his tribe's prowess, Prowl's spark twisted uneasily. He'd seen the state of the *yoska* after the ambush two orns ago. Most had survived, but many were injured, and they'd be heavily outnumbered by the Decepticons, even with the majority of Seekers scattered around outside of the walls while they searched for Sideswipe. A frontal assault would be suicide. What could Optimus be thinking?!

He gasped as he was tugged backwards, the Seekers holding him following Megatron's gesture to walk with him towards the gate while the rest of his lieutenants raced in the opposite direction towards the bottleneck.

The Decepticon leader growled at the Autobot. “Call for your mate, and you will live long enough to reunite with him and see him open the gates of Iacon for me. Or do not...and I'm sure Unicron will find some use for you.” When Prowl did not answer him, a claw flashed out, nicking his faceplates, and the drop of energon on one finger was shown to him. “Your mate! *Sideswipe!* Summon him to me!”

Hissing, Prowl struggled harder, dragging his heels along the ground and twisting and pulling his frame around as hard as he could. No. No! He refused to call Sideswipe for a rescue! But if he didn't, and Megatron killed him out of spite instead, or in some weird hope that he could somehow open the gates too...

What would happen to Sideswipe?!

Their bond being ripped apart would disable the red mech at the very least, and mid-battle, he'd easily be recaptured, or destroyed. That was if he survived. Prowl very nearly gave up his decision to not tell Megatron that he could understand Cybertronian Standard so that he could attempt to plead with him. The probability of him convincing the Decepticon to let him live were hilariously low, but he couldn't die here! Not now! Not with his mate so close and able to completely feel the repercussions of his death!

Up ahead, he saw the gates, and before them, a low, flat rock. His tanks churned when he saw a frame already lying on it, the purple and yellow paintjob quickly fading to gray. One of the mechs standing nearby quickly untied the body and shoved it unceremoniously to the ground, clearing the space.

Prowl stumbled as he fought his captors desperately, realizing Megatron's intent, but all he managed to do was to tumble to his knees, and the Decepticons continued to drag his legs across the ground, ignoring his squirms. As he struggled, he heard war cries from the entrance to the walled area, and managed to get a glance over his shoulder.

...Oh. Oh, *Primus.*

He now understood why the Seekers looked so alarmed.

No Autobot *yoska* with any experience with the Minotoron herd ever wanted to see such a haze of dust approaching so quickly from the horizon.
Only a little more to go!

(My roommates have gotten me hooked on 'Hamilton,' and I found that this reminds me so much of Prowl. Not the entire song, but a good portion. Prowl can be a patient mech when he needs to be. Sometimes.)
Chapter Notes

This chapter's a long one, readers! Get your battle music playlists queued up! I was using this one while doing the final edits.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 39: Prophecy

The dust granules kicked up by the Minotorons' hooves were making a thick, brown cloud in their wake, but the Autobots were moving so fast that there was little concern about how they were giving away their position to the enemy. The rumble of so many creatures hurrying along together thunderrated across the ground, and nearly droned out their bellowing and grunting.

The sight of the Autobots' chosen transport was either terrifying or ridiculous, depending on how you looked at it. Sideswipe chose both.

He'd managed to scarf down some rations into his tanks before they had set off, and even though he was still terribly weary, he mentally braced himself for one last push, one last battle. All they needed to do was to take Iacon. All they needed to do was to fulfill a prophecy, and go home. And then he could rest. And when he did, he was going to recharge for orns.

Sideswipe's proximity to Sunstreaker was close enough now that they could easily feel each other through their bond, the golden mech understanding the other spark's exhaustion and supporting him as best that he could. But Prowl's side had gone cold. He knew that he was still out there somewhere, alive, but where? They hadn't met him on the path, and the Decepticon scouts that they'd encountered were either running back towards Iacon, escaping into the hills, or had been trampled by the Minotoron herd as they galloped right at them. For all he knew, Prowl was hiding in one of the caves hidden along the mountain paths, just like the non-combatant Autobots who would not be joining this battle.

Sideswipe didn't want to toy for too long with the idea that his mate had been captured. If he had, and there was no one for Prowl to be held hostage to, Megatron wouldn't have many reasons to keep him alive. He may even try to sacrifice him for the frell of it. Each sacrifice supposedly made both him and Unicron stronger, right?

He gritted his dentals, and tried to relax as he felt Sunstreaker's spark 'nudging' his own.

/You're sure that you don't want to hang back?/
/Positive./
/You look like slag./
/So do you, but I'm not asking if you want to go take a nap instead of fighting one of the most important battles of our lives, am I?/

His brother mentally 'thwapped' him. Sideswipe made a face at the where Sunstreaker was riding next to him.
As the road escalated upwards towards walls too steep to be natural cliffs, the herd began to slow and form up more tightly. Optimus allowed this and took the chance to turn around and address the yoska all riding on Minotorons behind him, plus a few normally non-combatants that had refused to miss out on the fight. Sideswipe had immediately noted how close Perceptor was staying to Drift and that the smaller mech kept his bow notched, ready to shoot as soon as the word was given. Hot Rod had nearly convinced them all that he could have helped too, and it was only Springer staying behind to protect those who couldn't fight that had finally stopped the youngling from trying to sneak off with the rest of the yoska.

Optimus raised his voice, even though every set of optics was already focused on him. “Iacon is just up that hill. Our home is before us, Autobots. I've come too far to walk away now, but I won't pretend that I'll live long enough to see Iacon with my own optics today, and it would be impossible for me to promise that for anyone else. If anyone wants to leave, and stand ready to escort the rest of our tribe back to our old territory if this attack fails, now is the time to leave.”

None of the yoska showed any signs of wanting to turn their Minotorons around. A few looked appalled and offended by the insinuation that they would do such a thing. Ironhide was among them.

“With all due respect, Prime, frag you,” he growled.

A wave of cackling and laughter worked its way through the crowd. Optimus's optics squinted in the way that was obvious that he was grinning behind his facemask.

“I'm only taking the mechs who choose to fight this battle with me, old friend. With that in mind--”

He unsubspaced his axe, and held it before him as his tone changed to severe.

“You've all seen how many of our friends and family we lost during the ambush on our camp. We are guaranteed to lose even more today. But the reward for our sacrifice is our tribe taking back its home. We have a prophecy that tells us that we can, no, that we are meant to do this, but,” he looked directly at Sideswipe before addressing the rest of the Autobots again, “it falls on us to make our own destiny. No matter what our visions or prophecies tells us, we are free to walk the path that we choose! This tribe has proven its strength and willpower by journeying all the way here, and today, we will be tested one more time, and Primus willing, we will take back Iacon for us, for our families, and for those who come long after us! Our past and our future are here, and we are about to reclaim them!”

He punched his axe into the air.

“Are you with me?!”

The answering roar rattled Sideswipe all the way down to his core, especially when his voice added to it. It echoed through the mountains, reverberating up the path, and if there was any doubt in Megatron's mind that the Autobots were coming, it was now gone.

“You all know the plan! We need to carry our charge as far as possible, then head straight for the gates!” Optimus kept yelling as their own shouts rang in their audials. “Don't stop pushing forward until they're open, and we are home! AUTOBOTS!”

Turning back towards the walls, he leveled the top of his axe straight with the road, towards the
guarded path that would take them right into the bailey.

“ROLL OUT! HEE-YA!!”

Optimus dug his heels into his Minotoron's flanks, and the creature lurched forward with a deep bellow. Immediately the rest of the *yoska* followed suit, stampeding after him, some still whooping and cheering. The Minotoron herd became caught up in the energy too, and snarled and growled as they lowered their heads, horns ready to impale any mech stupid enough to try to make a stand against their stampede.

Bouncing around on the top of their mounts, the Autobots still looked utterly ridiculous. But in that moment, not a mech or femme would say that they didn't feel part of a legend that was going to be retold for thousands of vorns.

Some Decepticon lieutenant apparently hadn't gotten the memo about how the last Seekers to try to stop Bob's frantic charge away from Iacon had ended up. As soon as the Autobots were spotted, the Decepticons ran to the bottleneck of the walled bailey to block them, their weapons out, ready to defend the strongest point of their defense and keep out the invaders.

They didn't realize that the Minotorons had no intent to slow down until it was too late for them to scramble away.

“Break through!!”

Optimus couldn't claim that he was the first one to slam his Minotoron into a Decepticon and send them flying. That honor went to Bluestreak, who got his mount to suddenly sprint the last few paces. As the unlucky Seeker was sent sailing head over heels to bowl into his comrades, the gray mech crowed and rubbed his palm on the top of the Minotoron's head, praising it for a job well done. The rest of the herd hit the remaining Seekers shortly after him. In seconds the entire line was crumpled, the enemy mechs either diving for the sides, trampled, or running in the opposite direction and delaying being mowed down for a few more seconds.

The other herders like Bluestreak and Hound, who had more control over their mounts than anyone else, fanned out as the Autobots broke through and began to target individual mechs, driving away anyone brave enough to counter-attack their flanks. That earned the rest of the *yoska* enough time to pour in through the gap, quickly launching themselves across the bailey and right at the gates.

Anyone who had doubted Sideswipe's description of *how* the gates would be opened were now eating their words when they saw the relief carving etched into the giant doors and recognized it. The red mech glanced up at them one more time, affirming to himself that he'd been right, then pulled out his sword with one hand and energized it, the other keeping a good grip on the Minotoron's horn to keep himself from tumbling off as it raced onwards. On his other side, Sunstreaker did the same thing with his own red sword atop Bob, the only Minotoron that Sideswipe could convince his brother to ride, as it had been reliable enough to bring his twin back to him.

The Decepticons waiting for them took a beat to be shocked by how quickly the bottleneck had been overridden. And then they surged forward with their own screams that sent chills down the bravest of mech's spinal struts. And yet the Autobots ran on for as long as they could, as if they were plowing through a river of mechs, but yet that river was surging forward to crash over any fool who swam in too deeply.
Up ahead, Prime was swinging his axe at any Decepticon who dared to get too close to the edges of the herd. The twins ran their Minotorons just behind his and spread out, presenting an even more formidable line for the Decepticons trying to break up the stampede, the brothers' glowing swords slashing at anyone who got in their way.

The Minotorons' hides were tough, and could take the impact of weaponry, but with so much presented at once as the Decepticons regrouped around them, their charge slowed down to a steady gallop, then even further to not more than a trot when they came closer to the walls. Behind them, some of creatures brayed as their rears were struck by enemy mechs climbing back up from the bottleneck and chasing them, making the neighboring Minotorons buck and panic, and the Autobots riding them were forced to jump off or be thrown.

“Dismount!” Optimus shouted as he did the same. “Let the Minotorons keep running and spread out! But keep going!”

Somewhere behind them came a chorus of war-cries as the minibots, who had all scrambled onto the same Minotoron before the charge started, followed the reaction of everyone else to the Prime's order and leapt off their mount. The closest Decepticons to them got a nasty surprise as they were suddenly hit by a wave of minibots and knocked to the ground.

A wiry and bug-eyed mech was sprinting at Sideswipe's Minotoron with a spear, intent on impaling it, and the red yoska jumped off to purposely land on him, knocking them both down and crushing something vital in the Decepticon's chestplate. Sideswipe let his momentum carry him through a roll and back to his feet, and slashed out at the next Decepticon that tried to attack him, one of the Seekers. The enemy mech dodged backwards, fell back on his wings, and scrambled away as Sideswipe feinted towards him, then instead re-targeted another Seeker on his left. A clawed hand zoomed just inches from his helm, then continued, then flew on as the yoska swung upwards into his wrist, disconnecting the hand from the rest of the arm with a brief splatter of energon. The Decepticon stumbled backwards with a swear, and Sideswipe paused briefly as he looked for his next opponent.

Nearly everyone had dismounted by now. Without their riders, the Minotorons made one more charge forward, then began to spread out, bringing chaos wherever they went, and broke up what should have been an overwhelming counter-attack into patches of skirmishes and duels. Some of the bulls lowered their horns again and stampeded into individual Decepticons that smelled nothing like the familiar tribe that took care of the herd, but many more were in a panic, and as they zoomed around the walls of the bailey, they were just as likely to mow down an Autobot as a Decepticon.

/Look out!/ Sideswipe automatically doubled over at his brother's warning, and felt the movement of air of some weapon swinging right over his audial horns. Sunstreaker waited for the failed strike to finish before getting inside of the swinging range and stabbing his sword into the Decepticon's chestplate. Instantly the red mech was back up again and instinctively moving to cover his twin's back as they dueled the next wave of Decepticons running towards them.

Together, they cut down through more and more mechs, their attacks and motions beginning to match one another, the pair of twins working as fluidly as if they were in one body. Two voices screeched war-cries at their opponents, causing the more timorous enemies to stumble back. Two pairs of feet charged forward, knocking back the first line in the densely-packed mass of Decepticons. Two glowing swords, red and gold, swung out and sliced through the second line. Two frames leapt back before the retaliating attack could touch them.
Someone shouted behind them. “Down!”

They both hit the dirt and lay flat on their bellies. The Decepticons were so shocked by this change that they missed the arrows flying right at their faces until it was too late. The twins stayed down, waiting for the whistling sounds to pass over them, and once a space had opened as the Seekers retreated away, they popped back up to defend Perceptor from anyone trying to rush him.

“Great job, Percy!” Sideswipe grinned over his shoulder. “We'll make a yoska out of you yet!”

Perceptor huffed as he tried to cool down his overclocking systems. “I think I'll stay to assist Ratchet next time, thank you very much!” he gasped as he notched another arrow.

“Ratchet?! C'mon, mech, that fragger won't--”

Horror suddenly dawned in Perceptor's optics, and he did an about-face. Further away, Drift was locked in a duel with another swordsmech, but a second Decepticon was coming up on his left and raising a club over his head, intent on crushing the Autobot's helm.

Perceptor aimed and fired.

While the arrow was in mid-flight, Drift cocked his head slightly but purposely. The arrow zoomed by his cheek without touching him and struck the Decepticon in the face, buying Drift enough time to dodge the second one's attack and turn to engage him instead.

Sunstreaker was briefly struck dumb. “...Whoa.”

“Somebody's getting used to their bond,” Sideswipe added under his breath.

“On second thought!” the former scientist cried, “I should spend more time providing covering fire and assisting you, if all of you insist on hand-to-hand combat!”

The other Decepticon now dispatched, Drift ran back to Perceptor's side, guarding his smaller and weaker mate from melee attacks, while Perceptor took out the Decepticons at a distance before they could close in. With the twins flanking them as their vanguard, the four of them gradually pressed forward, following the crowd of Autobots grimly pushing their way towards the gates, doing all that they could to not be stalled and drawn into a fight that they could not win.

But their momentum was badly slowing. At his next chance to ventilate as he shoved another Decepticon mech backwards, Sideswipe lifted his head to see how the battle was going. His spark sank when he realized they were only just crossing the midway point of the bailey, and their pace was at a crawl. The Decepticons still outnumbered them, and were surrounding the smaller tribe. Worse yet, Seekers were returning through the bottleneck from the road, not only cutting off their escape but attacking their rear too, forcing the yoska at the back of the group to turn around to face them.

If this kept up, the Autobots would be boxed in and cut to pieces in less than a joor. They would be pushed into a tighter and tighter knot, until it would be impossible for the Decepticons to strike into the group and not hit someone. Already this had worked against Jazz, whose dexterity was useless when he had nowhere to go, and the bleeding and grimacing mech was helped into the more protected center of the formation of yoska.

The Minotorons were still milling around, some no longer interested in anything more than keeping the Decepticons off of them long enough for them to heave ventilations, their heavily-servoed torsos warbling up and down with each breath. Sideswipe wished he could do the same as his his low energy reserves were starting to make themselves known on his HUD again. He shook...
his head once to clear his optics as his visual sensors swam briefly. If he didn't focus, he'd die. He couldn't recharge now!

...Was it just him, or did many of the Decepticons looked just as tired?

And those who looked exhausted were not the warriors or Seekers currently attacking them. They were the skinny, under-fueled mechs and femmes that he'd seen forced to walk with the Decepticon tribe, who were supporting the warriors by falsely inflating their numbers and making them seem that more overwhelming, but where the enslaved mechs stepped back, the warriors followed, not wanting to show off this weakness. They were nothing at all like the extended family that the Autobot tribe had become.

An epiphany lit up in Sideswipe's cortex.

“Do what I do!” he cried out to his friends, then threw his head back to the sky. “AAA-WOOOO!!” Sunstreaker answered him without a hesitation. “AAA-WOOO!!”

Then Drift and Perceptor joined in the howl. Then Bluestreak, who was fighting nearby. Then Tracks. Then Jazz, somewhere inside the group, louder than the rest. Then Trailbreaker. Then Hound.

Then Optimus.

And then, as soon as their leader had done it, all of the yoska lifted their heads and howled at the sky.

With the giant walls so close, the sound had nowhere to go. It rattled and rumbled through the bailey, shaking through all of them, and for a moment it sounded like not a few hundred mechs and femmes howling a challenge at their enemies, but thousands, maybe millions. An entire city was shouting, roaring.

Iacon was roaring.

Just as it had during the ambush, something primal in Sideswipe's spark lit up at that. Suddenly energy was coursing through him, a need to attack, a purpose driving him to win. He was fighting for the tribe that needed him now, all of whom were letting their voices be known, as if they were manifesting their connections in the All-Spark. The sentiment was shared by all of the Autobots, all at once, and in a split-second the Decepticons were fighting a whole new opponent.

The yoska threw themselves at the opposing tribe with a renewed drive and will. Just as Prowl had warned Sideswipe orns ago, the Decepticons did not like contested fights. They were forced back, right into those that they’d abused and forced to come with them.

Those 'Decepticons,' with no more loyalty than that of a slave, began to falter.

They took a few steps back.

Then more.

And then, as if a whistle had been blown somewhere, the rear line of the skinniest mechs began to run, fearing the enemy more than retribution for leaving their oppressors.

“Let them go!” Optimus shouted, needing to grab a few of his own yoska to ensure that they would not break out of the formation in a blood-lust to attack. “Push them away, but when you're done,
The Autobots nearly didn't listen to him. They snarled, they pounded their weapons in their palms or on the ground, they made such a noise that it would be a suicidal mech who thought that he could fight them and live. But they weren't feral; they were wise enough to head the Prime, and when the Decepticons ran, they let them go.

Then some of the Seekers began to join in the retreat, caught up in the crowd's stampede.

“Yeah!” Trailbreaker punched his club at the air as more of the armed warriors panicked. “Run, you stupid fraggers! Run while you can!”

The jeering from the Autobots brought a few more infuriated Decepticons forward, but nowhere near as many as before. They were easily beaten back, and the yoska began to spread, pushing them away, and as the Decepticons abandoned the positions in front of the gates to not become trapped between the other tribe and the walls, the Autobots regained their momentum and pressed forward, despite a frantic last stand by Starscream and the most elite of his Seekers.

Their desperation to keep the enemy slowed as long as possible was grasped by Sideswipe's processor. Starscream was not a model of bravery in any way, shape or form. Why was he trying to so hard to keep the Autobots away from Iacon when a defeat was imminent?

“Go! Go!” Ironhide shouted, shoving some the yoska who were trying to stop to ventilate, worn out by the last push. “We're almost there! Go!”

Something stabbed at Sideswipe's spark, like a shot of pure lightning, and he stumbled to a halt. His optics bulged.

“...Sunny!” He grasped his brother's arm, stopping him. “I can feel Prowl! He's...He's scared. Something's wrong!”

“You think?! One of the Seekers outside the bailey must have finally found where he was hiding!” Despite his snarled answer, Sunstreaker swiveled his head back and forth, trying to see if there was another fight somewhere else inside of the bailey, and Sideswipe did the same.

“He's not outside! We were both tired, so if I can feel him, that means he's close--”

Another stab of unfiltered panic launched across their bond.

Sideswipe's own spark felt like it had turned to ice.

“...Sunny. Sunny, I know where he is! Oh frag, Sunny, Megatron's going to sacrifice him instead! Starscream is keeping us distracted so that Megatron has time to sacrifice Prowl!”

“What?!”

But Sideswipe was already pulling away from the group, searching past the thinning line of Decepticons for the flat rock that he'd always seen in his dreams. He'd just been here, fraggit, but it had been dark, and he'd been in shock! Where was it?!

As soon as he figured it out, he burst forward, away from the other Autobots, ignoring the frantic shouts for him to come back. Another pair of feet pounded the ground right behind him. Sunstreaker. No one else dared to follow.
The Decepticons were more concerned with staying alive and getting out of the other tribe's way than to attempt to intercept a couple of rogues, and the twins raced off, Optimus's borrowed shoulder-cloth snapping around Sideswipe's legs, and Sunstreaker's cloak flapping behind the golden mech's shoulders as they ran across the battleground.

“The tribe's not at the gate yet!” Sunstreaker shouted. “They still need our help!”

“They'll make it!” Sideswipe yelled. “Optimus doesn't need me to get the gate open, remember?! And if we don't—THERE!”

The field in front of them cleared, and the sight before the red *yoska*’s optics horrified him.

It was as if he were re-living his dream from the perspective of someone else.

...How reliable would that perspective have been after his spark had bonded with another's? He'd seen Prowl's memories, after all. Who was to say that his visions had been his own?!

Prowl was tied on his back to the flat rock, his wrists and ankles stretched out away from him. He flailed at the ropes, desperately tugging at them, knowing that he was doomed if he did not escape in the next few seconds. A gag in his mouth had prevented him from crying out to the Autobots for help when they'd arrived, but now Sideswipe could hear him groaning fearfully as the Decepticon leader finished meticulously cleaning the dagger at the foot of the rock. Meticulously, *ritualistically*. A pair of glowing red optics stayed on his sacrifice, completely ignoring the battle all around them.

Sideswipe and Sunstreaker burst into a sprint, even though they both knew that they would not arrive in time.

Megatron easily climbed on top of the rock, and settled to kneel right over Prowl, a knee on either side of him, preventing his sacrifice from rolling away at the last minute. *Just as Sideswipe had dreamed.*

The white *yoska*'s fingers squeezed into fists as he gave the ropes one more pull as hard as he could, his legs kicking and squirming as much as possible as he tried to find some way to fight his way out. Megatron grinned down at him, then raised the knife.

Sideswipe saw a flash of light as the blade glinted in the sunlight.

*A flash of light!*

**“MEGATRON!!”**

The dagger swung down. But at Sideswipe's scream, its fall was controlled, and the edge stopped right over Prowl's heaving chestplate, dangling inches from where the mech was shivering.

The Decepticon leader snapped his head up to the red and golden mechs running at him. Prowl's optics had squeezed shut at the second that he thought he would die, but he re-opened them now, and when he turned his head and saw his mate approaching, Sideswipe again felt the lightening bolt of undiluted *fear* surging through their bond.

“Ah, so you *did* come back!” Megatron's smirk grew even wider. “And here I thought that city-mechs were wise enough to run away when confronted with their deactivation. And what's this?!” His optics flicked to the golden mech right behind the red one. “You've brought your twin to me too!”
Sideswipe's sword was out again, and he slid to a halt several lengths away from the rock, his sword pointed at the Decepticon leader as he challenged him. “Prowl's death won't open the gate for you, Megatron! We both know that! Your sacrifice is right here!” He spread is arms. “Or is your cortex so fragged up that you can't even tell the difference between Autobots now?!”

Sunstreaker had stopped at his twin's shoulder, his optics snapping around as he guarded his brother against any other Decepticons who might get the bright idea to stop them. So far, though, none did, though quite a few were watching. “Sides! You aren't trading yourself—”

“I'm not trading anything.” Sideswipe never took his optics off Megatron. “You're pretty slagging tough when you've got a mech bound and disarmed! Well, how about now?! You want to sacrifice me?! Come get me!”

Underneath the silver mech, Prowl garbled something and shook his head back and forth, but froze when a clawed hand gripped his shoulder possessively.

“And if I choose to kill both of you instead?”

“You can kill him after I'm dead. Or are you just as cowardly as your tribe?!” Sideswipe gestured behind him to the Decepticons that were trying to escape out of the bailey, even though the Autobots weren't attempting to chase them. “Is this what Unicron stands for?! Is this what you stand for?!”

He got the answer that he was looking for. A lifetime's experience with toying how far that he could tease and push mechs until they snapped had now come in handy.

“You dare to call me as weak as those traitors?!!”

The silver mech climbed off of Prowl and leapt to the ground, and though he kept the knife grasped in one hand, the other went into his subspace pocket. Metal jangled. A spiked ball and chain appeared in his grasp, and Megatron let it sway back and forth at his hip, like a pendulum, before flicking a switch on the handle.

The weapon hissed, then glowed violet, the color reflecting on the ground and off of Megatron's finish.

“...That could have only been manufactured in a city,” Sunstreaker growled at the same time that Sideswipe realized it too. “I haven't seen any of the barbarians carrying anything powered by crystals.”

“Doesn't matter.” Sideswipe held his own energized sword at the ready before him, his optics narrowed and his voice lowered as he tried to focus his strength for one last battle. “I've got this, Sunny. Go get Prowl, before somebody gets the fantastic idea to attack him while he's tied up.”

The golden mech snatched his brother's elbow. “I'm not leaving you to fight him alone!” He pointed at Megatron, who was striding closer each passing second. “You can't--”

“I can't win. I know.”

He took a long, slow inhale, and tried to ignore how his systems were rattling, demanding that he rest.

“But I don't need to. I just need to hold him off long enough for the Autobots to get to the gate, right?” He smirked. “I promise that I'm not going to let him deactivate me.”
“Sideswipe--”

“Sunny, if you let my mate die over there, then I'm officially taking away your title as Best Twin Ever. Go!”

Deep in his spark, he told his twin the same thing, though in different ‘words.’

The dual sparks swirled around each other one more time, not wanting to separate after just finding each other again joors ago.

“...If he kills you, I'm going into the All-Spark right after you just to bring you back and kill you again myself.”

“Good plan.”

/Love you./

/Love you too, bro./

Sunstreaker paused, wanting to say more. But whatever it was, he couldn't think of it. Or it had already been said.

And then he was gone, taking a long route around Megatron so that the silver mech didn't decide to change his mind about which twin he wanted to kill. With a quick snort in Sunstreaker's direction, Megatron let him go, then refocused his optics on where Sideswipe still stood ready for him, both of them ignoring the muffled cries from Prowl as he continued to try to break free of the ropes and help his mate.

The Decepticon began to close the distance between him and his intended sacrificial mech.

“I can only consider one reason for why Alpha Trion decided to intervene in your destiny, and it is the same reason for why he touched Orion Pax's.” The ball and chain began swing in a circle, falling up, down, up, and down again, higher and higher with each flick of his wrist. “Because, for the good of this planet, mechs like you need to die.”

Sideswipe barred his dentals. “...Ditto.”

Megatron howled a roar as he abruptly sprinted the last few steps, swinging the spiked ball above his head and sending it careening at Sideswipe. The red mech saw it coming and dove to the side, knowing better than to try to parry it. It slammed into the ground where he'd just been, scattering metal shards everywhere, and carving a small crater into the ground. It took a second for Megatron to yank it back up, but when he did, he immediately turned himself back to Sideswipe and spun it in circles around his head again, ready to strike the moment that he closed in.

Sideswipe's battle programming surged and tried to calculate his options. Both of them only held melee weapons; he could have taken the more cowardly route and shot arrows at him from a distance to keep himself from getting pummeled, but he didn't carry a bow. Just like with Optimus's axe, it would only take one solid hit from the spiked ball to severely damage or offline him; he couldn't afford even one blow. Just like the fight with Optimus, he would lose.

...No! He couldn't think like that!

The spiked ball zoomed through the air. Sideswipe back-flipped out of its way, his feet skidding on the ground briefly before he got his bearings, and side-stepped, trying to goad Megatron into circling his opponent, which would buy him some time. It didn't work. The Decepticon swung out
again, straight forward, and the margin Sideswipe had before it would have hit him narrowed as he
dove out of the way.

He couldn't win. He knew that. He was too tired; his energon reserves were nearly depleted. And
even if he had been fighting at his full strength, as he had with Optimus, he was outmatched. He
was never one to back away from a fight, but Primus, this was insane!

He didn't have to win, he reminded himself. He just needed to keep buying time. The Autobots
were almost at the gate. Once they were there, Optimus could--

_Frag!!_

This time Megatron had aimed low, and although Sideswipe had jumped, part of the spiked ball
had caught his ankle. He flew out of control, coming down hard on his chestplate, his HUD
fizzling into static briefly, and when it came back there were proximity warnings screaming in
front of the smaller damage reports, and Sideswipe rolled, barely missing the second strike aimed
at his head.

“Sideswipe!!”

Prowl was shouting for him, partially freed and un-gagged, and Sunstreaker was hurrying to saw
his sword through the rest of the ropes binding the Autobot to the rock.

But Megatron wasn't giving the red _yoska_ any time to climb to his feet. Or maybe it was that
Sideswipe was too exhausted to find an opportunity to get away. He kept rolling, then abruptly
thrust his hand out to stop himself as Megatron anticipated his next movement and smashed the
spiked ball right in front of him. This time it became lodged in the ground, stuck, and as the
Decepticon grunted and heaved it back out, Sideswipe somersaulted and scrambled up to his feet.

He didn't have time to check on the Autobot tribe's progress. Were the gates open yet?!

The ball and chain slashed out at mid-level. Changing tactics and hoping to catch his opponent by
surprise, Sideswipe raised up his sword, letting the chain wrap around the blade and catch him. Or
rather, he'd caught Megatron. Bracing his feet on the ground and gritting his dentals, he attempted
to yank the weapon out of the Decepticon's hands. Disarming Megatron would give Optimus _plenty
of time._

It might have worked, if Sideswipe's servos didn't begin to fail him. He tugged, hard. The handle
nearly slipped out of Megatron's grasp, but didn't.

_Megatron pulled back._

And suddenly Sideswipe found that not only was _he_ the one disarmed, his entire frame was
dragged forward too, sending him stumbling and off-balance. His optics widened, and he grasped
vainly at the air as he saw the golden sword flying away from him.

The ball and chain were going with it.

_Megatron had choosen the best time to change tactics, and weapons._

The bigger, silver mech crashed into the _yoska_ as Sideswipe fell too close to him. He was smashed
down onto his back, and a clawed hand seized his throat, keeping him pinned, even as Sideswipe
grasped his forearm and wrenched at it, trying to yank him off. His ankles dug into the ground as
he fought to push himself away. The grip on his throat increased, cut off any circulating air, but he
knew that Megatron was not going to wait for him to choke and offline.
The unscathed dagger was flipped into a stronger grip in his free hand.

Twin stabs of panic shot through his bonds with his mate and his twin.

He heard them crying out his name. They were coming.

...There was no way that they could stop this.

Sideswipe could do nothing but stare up helplessly as time began to slow before his optics. He now had a breem to appreciate how closely certain aspects had been correctly predicted by his visions. The pure fear deep within his spark, knowing that it was about to be extinguished. The red optics gleaming triumphantly down at him. The smell of ozone, energon all around him, which he'd previously misunderstood to be the result of the sacrifices before his own. The sound of his own pump beating in his audials.

The dagger was lifted high into the air.

He remembered making one last desperate, nonsensical scream across his bonds to both Sunstreaker and Prowl as he braced himself.

The dagger struck down at him, right over his spark chamber.

And then...

Light.

“AAAAH!!”

He expected great pain. And yes, the sudden input on his optics did hurt. That's probably why Megatron was howling in pain as well.

Was that from his spark?!

...No.

The blade hadn't touched him.

Megatron was shielding his optics. He was reeling back, the dagger still grasped in his hand, but he was under assault. But not from Sideswipe's spark. Not from Sideswipe at all.

That's because...

The Iacon Prophecy had never been about him. Though he had been linked to its true meaning for a short time, since the moment that Alpha Trion had touched him.

Turning his head back and narrowing his optics into slits, the red mech got a good look at where the burst of light was coming from.

...The Autobots had made it to the gate.

And, just as he'd instructed him to do, Optimus Prime had brought out the Matrix of Leadership hidden in his chest and held it up to gates, towards the carved relief that was a near-exact representation of the Matrix constellation that Sideswipe liked to pick out in the night sky. What he'd not expected was for the Prime to grasp both ends of the Matrix in two fists, and slowly pull them apart.
A blue light in the center, more beautiful than any spark, wavered, then burst out like a supernova, flooding the entire bailey with light, and it was answered as the lines of the constellation lit up in response.

The slit between the gates widened.

“They're opening! The gates are opening!”

The cries and cheers from the Autobots caused both Sideswipe and Megatron to freeze for a long, fateful moment. Long enough for the Decepticon to realize that he'd failed.

Long enough for him to snap his enraged optics back to Sideswipe, intent on taking his revenge instead.

Long enough for something, two somethings to race across the dark realm of the All-Spark.

War cries from both Sunstreaker and Prowl filled Sideswipe's audials as they tackled Megatron, driving him off of the red yoska. Snapped back into reality once more, Sideswipe backpedaled, then scrambled to where his sword had fallen. It only took a few shakes to untangle it from the spiked ball and chain.

Sunstreaker and Prowl were keeping the Decepticon leader at bay. A clawed hand swiped at the golden mech, which he dodged, and the opening bought enough time for Prowl to smack one end of his staff into Megatron's helm, then follow through and crack the other end into his thigh. Then he was on the defense, parrying the next attack, and Megatron cursed as a glowing red blade struck the armor over his chestplate.

Then Sideswipe added himself to the mix.

He could barely recall what happened next. He and Sunstreaker were so used to their sparks complimenting one another as they fought, syncing up, communicating, until they moved as if in one body. But now another spark also called out to him. Prowl couldn't have known how to do the same thing that the twins had spent vorns perfecting, but maybe he could peer into his mate's spark just enough to know each action that was coming, and accompany them.

Megatron was pressed further and further back. Holding off two mechs was feasible; he had two arms. Three? When all of them were fighting in a rage?

He didn't stand a chance.

Sideswipe remembered all three of them punching their weight forward. Someone's weapon finally stabbed through Megatron's armor. He didn't recall whose it was.

Megatron fell backwards, and something right behind him propped him up as the Decepticon leader's clawed hand grasped the wound bleeding profusely over his belly. A shaking breath rattled through his engine. He made to get up again, but Starscream reinforced his tight grasp on his leader, stopping him until he could be passed over to two more Seekers.

“We can't win this!” Starscream shrieked to all who would listen. “Retreat, Decepticons! Retreat!”

“NO!” Megatron's optics blazed. “No!! I order you to attack, Starscream! Kill them!!”

But the Seekers were already dragging their injured leader away. With one last snarl at the three Autobots, his claws spread in brief warning for them not to attack him too, Starscream backed away, and followed the mass exodus fleeing the bailey.
And just like that--

Things began to quiet.

“...We won...”

Sideswipe found himself ventilating harshly, his engine rumbling and sputtering with each breath. And yet he couldn't recall his spark every crowing this loudly across the All-Spark ever before. He wasn't even sure if he was vocalizing it, or shouting across the dual bonds. Or maybe he was doing both.

“We won! Guys...WE WON!!”

And then his legs finally gave out.

As the Autobots behind them cheered and roared and punched their weapons in the air, two mechs on either side of him caught the red yoska before he could hit the ground. A new surge flooded both of the bonds, and Sideswipe allowed himself to briefly drown in it, before they dragged him back up, refusing to let him sink offline.

“Sa. We won,” one voice murmured into his audial.

“I've got you, slagger,” said the other. “Don't you pass out on me just yet. You're going to stay awake and celebrate, you hear me?”

Letting out a choked but sincere laugh, he threw his arms over both of their shoulders. He felt himself squeezed between the two mechs that he loved more than anyone else in the entire universe, and both aloud and through the All-Spark, he told them so.

And they told him the same.

Chapter End Notes

If you don't see a "Next Chapter" button, refresh in a couple of minutes. It's uploading right now.
There was a short incline through the gates and the thick walls that surrounded Iacon, hiding the city from view when within the bailey, and from there, there was another short decline back down into the city itself. The twins stayed on either side of the front line marching forward, guarding their tribe for the last leg of their journey, though it was more of a formality with how slowly they were limping along, Sideswipe especially.

Between them came Optimus Prime and the rest of the leaders of the Autobot tribe, with Prowl the closest to his mate. The rest of the yoska continued to flank the sides of the formation and guard the non-combatants, even with the Decepticon threat gone. It would be hard for them to break that habit. A group of them had gone back to find those of the tribe that had been hiding instead of participating in the battle while the rest saw to their wounds. Optimus had insisted that even those who could not fight were just as important to their victory as the yoska, and they would all enter the city together.

The group stopped at the peak of the incline, and looked down.

Sideswipe and Sunstreaker drew in sharp, tight inhalations, their engines revving, and somewhere further inside the tribe, they heard Perceptor doing the same.

This...

This had been a city at some point.

Some point hundreds of vorns ago. If not thousands.

Buildings, those that were still standing, were falling apart, some with giant holes scored along their sides either from rust taking over their structure and crumbling, or another building slamming into it on the way down. The roads and highways were shattered, barely discernible from the rest of the ground other than that they had been reinforced. Super-structures that appeared to have once been stadiums or government buildings were crumbling. An unregulated flow of energon from a collapsed mine at the other end of the walled city was cutting right through the downtown area.

Sideswipe swallowed hard, and felt like he was trying to break down rocks in his tanks.

This?

This is what they had fought so hard for?

A city, ruined after an apocalypse?

This is what other Autobots had died for?!

Sideswipe nearly became so lost in his dark thoughts zapping back and forth between him and Sunstreaker, and those that must have been swirling in Perceptor's cortex too, that he nearly missed a blossom of joy that was coming from Prowl.

He lifted his head towards his mate, and the rest of the line of Autobot leaders.

The state of Iacon made Sideswipe miserable. But they...?
They were smiling. Some were making chirruping noises with their vocalizers, which his translation program failed to comprehend as anything other than excitement. Some of the non-combatants behind them were standing on their ends of their peds to see over the shoulders of the front line and were bouncing up and down.

“Primus be praised!!”

The twins glanced each other in confusion. And then they took a second look, trying to discern what nomads who had never laid optics on a healthy, vibrant city would be seeing.

...Wild, untamed crystals climbing up the buildings that were still standing, sometimes even fortifying them by how thick they grew.

The unregulated energon flow that had become a flowing river in the streets.

The sounds of wildland creatures that had managed to find their way into the closed city and were scrambling from hole to hole.

Long fields of smaller crystals, with plenty of space for the Minotoron herd to roam.

The walls, both built and naturally caused by the mountains, protecting the perfect sanctuary.

Sideswipe felt his spark warming in his casing again, responding first to Prowl, then further as both he and Sunstreaker understood what they had missed.

What city-mechs had seen was destruction.

What the nomads had seen was paradise.

Without another word, Optimus turned around to address his tribe, and punched his fist into the air.

“Autobots! We are home!!”

Joyful roars and howls answered him, along with cries of relief that their long journey had finally come to an end. And then the Prime vanished, swept up in the crowd that burst over the incline and raced down to the city.

Sideswipe just barely managed to side-step out of everyone’s way and take cover by a ruined pillar. He heard Perceptor running by, bouncing Backburn in his arms as he hurried alongside Drift, who was both crowing back and forth to his friends and trying to keep his mate and adopted sparkling from getting run over by the stampede. Somewhere within them he heard Hot Rod squealing in laughter, and then barked shouts from Springer as he tried to catch the youngling before he could run off into unknown territory. Alarm surged across the bond with his twin, and Sideswipe’s spark ‘cackled’ at his brother before nudging him.

/Go on. I’ll catch up in a breem./

/Love you./

/Love you too./

And then Sunstreaker was gone, a speck of gold sprinting down alongside the crowd, trying to keep his optics on the orange dot heading for the nearest climbable building.

Sideswipe leaned back on the pillar, letting more mechs and femmes rush by him. If he weren’t so tired, he’d be joining them. Primus, he’d be the first one running down the hill. But his frame was
weary. Yet happy, and proud.

He wanted to savor that.

He looked up as another mech took the spot next to him and slipped an arm behind his back. Sideswipe's grin grew even wider as his own arm hugged Prowl's shoulders.

“Prowl. We're home,” he murmured, his vocalizer hoarse.

His mate said nothing. He instead leaned his head on Sideswipe's shoulder. He didn't need to say a word.

His spark was 'saying' plenty.

Sideswipe closed his optics, and as the last Autobot flew by into the city, he hugged mate to his side, and allowed himself to embrace love and peace flowing between them as they watched their tribe's progress into Iacon.

~~* The End *--~
Afterword, FAQ and Bloopers

I will forever be awed and humbled by how amazingly well this story was received. Back in May of 2016, I scribbled out the first few chapters of this fic after reading some awesome Barbarian AU fics already hosted on this site, not even having a title for what I was writing yet. Fast-forward to now, seven months and more than 200,000 words later. This is the longest piece of work that I've ever written, let alone finished, and certainly the greatest number of dedicated readers that I've ever seen. And I've only been on AO3 for less than a year! This community is incredible, and I'm grateful that you all have been so welcoming to me.

Special Thanks to:

Kit_SummerIsle, Quiet_Shadow, and CerysKitty, who all wrote amazing Barbarian AU fics long before I came to this site and inspired me to write this one. (Go check them out!)

Abyssopelagic, who kept me sane and let me geek with her all sorts of things about this fic, especially what shall happen after.

Greenapplefreak, who constantly inspires me with her SARMA comics. Some elements of SARMA wiggled their way into Iacon Prophecy too!

My roommates, who at the beginning of this year literally saved my life.

Ready for my story of IRL woes?

For a very short time in 2016, I was homeless. The year before I had moved from Florida to Georgia for a friend who then allowed her girlfriend to say all sorts of crap about me, including that I was homophobic, rather than confront my objections that said-girlfriend was manipulative and a thief. Many of my online friends, especially gay or gay-allies, ate that lie up and stopped talking to me; I started wondering if there was something wrong with the LGBTQ community to have believed her so easily. At the end of the lease, the plans for my next apartment fell apart, and I put most of my things into storage. My home was my car. And thanks to my old friend not standing up for me, I had few friends left.

I nearly gave up.

Then I met my new roommates on Craigslist (a process I don't recommend, it was scary!), who needed a third person to help them pay rent to get out of their own bad situation, and to this day we still joke about them picking me out of the listings as a legitimate person instead of a Craigslist 'bot because I had noted that I was a Transformers fan. In days, I had a safe place to sleep again, and a couple of months later the three of us moved into our own beautiful apartment. They've been incredibly supportive of me, both as a fellow geek and someone who was running out of reasons to keep living a year ago, and they restored my faith in the LGBTQ community. They've set the standard for a healthy gay relationship, and helped me work through that what my old friend had done to me was pretty fucked up and not the norm.

I choose to talk about this now because I want you guys to know that you helped pull me out of the dark place that I was falling into. I've made so many new friends in the process of writing The Iacon Prophecy, both online and offline. I've healed from how I was at the beginning of the year as I found myself able to let my imagination run wild again. I've met a whole new community of Transformer fans both here and on Tumblr. The support that I've gotten while writing this has been nothing less than phenomenal. I'll never be able to overstate how everyone's kindness helped me in
Although I wouldn't classify this story as in the mystery genre, I had fun playing with this new method of storytelling. There was WAY more planning into what was really happening with the Autobot culture and the Iacon prophecy than anything I've ever written, and how Sideswipe would (sometimes incorrectly) perceive them. At the same time number of twists appeared on their own (the Minotoron bull was going to reappear and 'remember' Sideswipe, but I didn't think of naming him as 'Bob' until just a few weeks beforehand), and some commenters came up with fresh ideas that were entirely plausible and could have made it into the fic if my plans hadn't already been outlined! You AO3 commenters are such fun people to talk to. Lasagna.

I got a case of the warm fuzzies every time I got a good comment from someone enjoying the story, but at the same time I really do value people who stepped up and pointed out inaccuracies, inconsistencies, or implausibilities. That takes some bravery, and it helps me to grow as a writer. Eventually I need to go back and mop of a number of inconsistencies that cropped up as my ideas for how the story should go evolved over time. A good example of this is Jazz using a staff to fight in the first chapter. Originally each of the nomads would have their own staff, but a few chapters later I changed my mind, and each of the mechs on Prowl's team had a signature weapon. I forgot about it and need to fix this, especially since it will make it clearer who Sideswipe was fighting at the time when he is only able to refer to Jazz and Prowl as 'Black-and-White' And 'Other-Black-And-White.' But an even better example of how far this story has come from my original notes? My first plan was that Sideswipe and Prowl would never bond. Prowl would keep insinuating and pressing for it, but because Sideswipe didn't understand what he wanted or the situation he was in, Prowl never went through with it. The conversation that they have en route to Iacon about living a 'normal' life would also included Sideswipe promising to bond with Prowl if they could get there safely. It's quite different than the plot that was driving everything at the middle of the finished story! Somewhere around Chapter 9 I changed my mind about how their relationship would grow and rewrote my notes. Then I did it again when commenters pointed out that Sideswipe would be more in character if he reacted aggressively and violently to being bonded, as opposed to depressive and gradually accepting, which had been more in line with the original notes where no bonding occurred at all.

This has been an incredible journey, and thank you all for sharing it with me, especially you commenters. And this isn't the end of Sideswipe and Prowl's story! Sideswipe still has a promise to keep, after all. But first, I need to write some notes and make a new outline. And take a nap. Let no one say that 200,000 words in seven months can't be done, but man, am I tired.

Thanks again!

--NTLDR

FAQ:

Q: If Iacon prophecy was talking about the Matrix of Leadership, why was Sideswipe having visions?
A: Just because he wasn't the one to open the way to Iacon didn't mean that Sideswipe was lacking an important destiny. Alpha Trion recognized this, especially his and Sunstreaker's unique bond in the All-Spark, and just before he died he temporarily linked Sideswipe to the Matrix so that he could better understand the prophecy's fulfillment and act upon it. Unfortunately, what Sideswipe originally saw was the 'Bad Ending.' He was going down the wrong path; his destiny at that point was to be killed by Megatron, and he saw no indication that Iacon would be opened. And Sideswipe is no Prime; he can't see any more of the Matrix or All-Spark than what is directly linked to him. It didn't help that he interpreted the visions to be some manifestation of his guilt at...
killing an old, unarmed mech and that he tried to ignore it.

Destiny's a funny thing, though. It's never set in stone.

Instead of being taken to the Decepticon camp, as should have happened, Sideswipe was picked up by the Autobots. He gained new allies. The greatest change in the path that he was taking occurred as soon as he bonded. When and Prowl did that, Sideswipe's visions began to change too. But now Prowl would be the one to die, and Sideswipe saw that through his mate's optics. Thankfully things continued to change, until eventually the original interpretation never came to pass. Both Prowl and Sideswipe were nearly killed, but Iacon was opened first.

Q: Why was Sideswipe having trouble remembering his dreams as the Autobots approached Iacon?
A: Sideswipe's connection to the Matrix was always meant to be weak and temporary, just enough to help him fulfill the prophecy. By the time the Autobots set out for Iacon, it had nearly fizzled out. Sideswipe interpreted that this meant that the guilt about killing Alpha Trion was no longer eating at him. However, his destiny was still in flux, which is why Prowl observed Sideswipe trying to fight him in his sleep, even though Sideswipe didn't remember the dream about fighting off Megatron when he woke up.

Q: Did Sunstreaker receive visions too?
A: No. Because Alpha Trion was a frail old mech and not a mark that presented any feasible threat, Sunstreaker was keeping a lookout while Sideswipe killed his target. Thus, Alpha Trion only reached out to Sideswipe's spark. Sunstreaker did feel this happen, but only Sideswipe was now 'listening' to the Matrix, though he did his best to ignore it.

Q: How did Optimus become a Prime?
A: None of the current 'Primes' exhibited the qualities necessary to carry the Matrix of Leadership. Alpha Trion kept it with him as he searched for someone worthy of it. Finally, he meet Optimus, and after tutoring him and understanding the kind of mech he was, handed it over. He is then summoned to Kaon, in order to meet (and be killed by) Sideswipe. Such was his own destiny, and he knew it, and warned the Autobots not to take revenge on his killer when they found him.

Q: Where is Mirage?
A: He was there. You just didn't see him.

Q: Why are the cities falling into disrepair and turmoil?
A: The energon wells that the cities are based upon have started to dry up. There's less to go around, and yet no one wants to be the first to use less. Unless the problem is corrected, the energon will continue to be depleted, and the crisis will get worse.

Iacon, however, is fine. No one has lived there hundreds of vorns, and its vein is in great shape.

Q: Why did Sentinel agree to have Sideswipe sacrificed?
A: Kaon was as much in trouble as the rest of the cities. The legends about Iacon promise that it's the Cybertronian equivalent of The Land of Milk and Honey. Sentinel could have attempted to find it himself, but that would be a drain on already failing resources, and noticeable by the other cities. Megatron promised that he could find it with the map the Sideswipe takes from Alpha Trion, and then Swindle asks for Sideswipe himself when Megatron determines that he needs him as a sacrifice. Sentinel had no problem with letting a mech-for-hire be killed for the good of his city.

Q: Why did Sideswipe kill Alpha Trion?
A: Both he and Sunstreaker had received orders to kill him because Megatron had told Sentinel Prime to do this for him if he wanted to continue negotiations to hunt down Iacon. It's Megatron
pulling the strings in Kaon now, with Sentinel desperate, thinking that the Decepticons will somehow save them. Megatron knew that Alpha Trion had stayed with the Autobots for a long time, and, aware that the old mech could be a dangerous knowledgebase, he told Sentinel to have him killed. Sideswipe and Sunstreaker needed the energon credits that badly, and didn't question yet another assassination staining their hands.

**Q:** What will happen now?
**A:** A planet-wide war. Good thing our heroes have found a safe home to bunker down in until it all passes over. Right?

In their more immediate concerns, Sideswipe did promise normality to Prowl. And a sparkling.

**Q:** What's with the “Bar Bar Bar” jokes?
**A:** This is an ongoing joke in Crash Course: World History. To Sideswipe, the Autobot “barbarians” speaking Iaconian could say nothing but “Bar Bar Bar Bar” all day. Ironically, the more growling, hissing tones of Cybertronian Standard sound more like “Bar Bar Bar” to the Autobots than their own language, and they tease him for it when he starts making that noise at them.

**Q:** Why is the nomads' kidnapping ritual so awful?
**A:** To them, its not! They think of their 'mating' rituals in a more utilitarian sense than the city-mechs do. They're much more likely to die in the wildlands, so there is a limited time to find and woo a good mate. Kidnapping a potential mate is a show of prowess and strength, which are very desirable qualities for wildland mechs, especially Autobot yoska. From there, its up to the individuals for how much wooing they still need to do before their new mate will let them bond to them, if at all. Forcing a bond is considered heinous, however. The Autobots understand that they're choosing a partner for life, and emphasize a great deal of respect towards their mates, even as they're trussed up and dragged back to their camp. This can still be terrifying, though it's also considered a normal part of life in the wildlands.

Keep in mind that there are more tribes out their than the Autobots, and not all of them follow the same rules about respecting their mates. Sideswipe observed the equivalent of slavery in the Decepticon tribe. Other tribes might take multiple mates, or only have their 'warriors' do the kidnapping, or abolish the ritual all together, etc. Sideswipe never got the chance to see this, and even by the end of the fic he's still not comfortable with it, though he's accepted that its not something he can change.

**Q:** Why doesn't anyone transform?
**A:** No one knows that they have the ability to do that. That function was lost ages ago...

**Q:** I spy an inconsistency!
**A:** Point them out to me, please! I mean it! I'm going to have to sweep through this fic at some point and clean them up.

**Q:** But what about [insert question here]?
**A:** Feel free to ask about anything I've missed! There is some of this fic that is meant to be left open to reader interpretation, or set-up for me to explore later, but if there's anything I can clear up, please let me know!

Also I love talking to you guys. You all rock.

And now, for something completely different:
Bloopers:

Then, abruptly, Prowl stopped.

“Was that you?”

“Hmm?” Sideswipe pressed their cheeks together as his frame blew off the hot air from his engine. “What was?”

“That noise. What's...?”

He felt Prowl push off his frame and move his head to look towards the front of the tent. Sideswipe lifted himself up on his elbow slightly to follow his mate's line of sight. And when he did...

He found what had woken him up.

Well.

Primus.

The last thing he'd been expecting was Bob's head peering in on them from the tent's entrance.

“AAAAAAAHH!!”

“AAAAAAAHH!!”

“MOOOO!!”

_:*_:*_:*_:*_:*_:*_:*_:*:

“...What were they about?”

Megatron's optic ridges narrowed slightly. “What?”

“My dreams. What were they about?”

Megatron studied him carefully.

But he didn't answer in time for Sideswipe's faceplates to morph from wide-opticed fear to dawning realization, and then twist into a sneer.

“...Oh, frag you...!”

Angry that the mech had tried to deceive him by using his brother's description, something that any mech could have told him, Sideswipe reacted without thinking. He leaned forward as far as he could go, and dragged his glossa across Megatron's face.

Megatron's optics bulged to the size of dinner plates as he scrambled away.

“PLEH! BLEH!”

The Autobots fell back, laughing their afts off as Megatron frantically scrubbed his clawed hands at his faceplates.

“Is he allowed to do that?! Writer! Is he allowed to do that?!”

_:*_:*_:*_:*_:*_:*_:*_:*:
He feinted forward, jabbing the staff, checking the so-called Prime's reactions. Optimus took a step away, then came back, already knowledgeable to the staff's reach. Sideswipe pressed his lips into a thin line. It was likely that Prowl had already sparred with Optimus with this same weapon, and knew how it was wielded. Meanwhile, Sideswipe had never faced this axe-bearing opponent.

Said axe was suddenly hissing through the air.

Sideswipe missed his written cue.

Good thing these fight scenes use soft, practice weapons.

Though that didn't stop Prowl from squawking in alarm and rushing over to his fallen mate while everyone else reset.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Prowl groaned and kept his optics shut as he nuzzled his face into Sideswipe's neck. “Sideswipe. Go to sleep,” he grumbled.

His arms hugged his mate a little tighter. “I *am* sleeping,” he murmured at the fabric ceiling.

“No, you're not.”

“Yes, I am.”

“No, you're *not.*”

“Yes, I *am.*”

“No, you're—”

“Yes I am, times infinity. So there.”

Prowl opened one optic. “I think we're frustrating the writer.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Sideswipe felt Prowl stiffen under his touch, and guessed that if he'd taken a lover before, it hadn't been a good one. He purposely blew a gust of air from his vents across Prowl's neck as he sighed in an exaggerated contentment.

“C'mon, Prowl,” he whispered, pretending that his voice was nervous, which wasn't that untruthful. “I know that you want me. Hand-feeding me, sleeping on the same mat? It's not just to keep a close watch on me.”

“Sideswipe?” Prowl asked again, his voice wavering.

“I don't want to be tied to the wagon. I want to be by your side.”

He dragged his fingertips to one of the mech's seams. Prowl flinched, hissing slightly, but did not move away from his touch. Glancing at his faceplates once to see his reaction, Sideswipe persisted, lightly grazing up and down the seam.

“Let me stay with you. Don't tie me to something else. Just hold the tether. I'll walk with you.”

Prowl's ventilations suddenly hitched. His doorwings fluttered in an odd pattern.
“No really, stop,” he said in Iaconian Standard. “I'm ticklish.”

Sideswipe snorted. “Great, now you broke character. However--”

Before the writer could stop him, he'd narrowed the space between them, and a second later Prowl was shrieking and trying to leap away from the tickling fingertips.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Something, several somethings, pounded into the clearing where they'd just been. Over his shoulder, he could see Hound gritting his dentals as he tried to lay perfectly still. More crystals were smashed, and a high-pitched voice shrieked in frustration. They both flinched at the sound of claws grinding over the rocks.

This had to be one of his nightmares again.

This couldn't be real.

Sideswipe squeezed his optics shut and bowed his head forward against the ground. Hound seemed to agree with him, his frame curling up over his back, willing them to be unseen.

“Where are you...?”

It was all he could do to not whimper.

Why was a wildland monster talking in Standard?!

Heavy feet moved towards the ditch. Hound twitched once, then stilled. His weight was painfully cutting off one of Sideswipe's sensor nodes in his leg, but the mercenary didn't dare try to move.

The feet were right at the ditch. A shadow had fallen over the duo.

Starscream was looking for them.

Starscream was looking right at them.

“Peeek-a-boooo!!”

Both Sideswipe and Hound snorted, breaking their cover.

“Hi, Skywarp. Starscream's on break?”

'Starscream' wiggled his clawed fingers at them. “He's calling his agent right now. Said that he thought he was going to get a bigger role in this story.”

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lifted himself up on his elbow slightly to follow his mate's line of sight. And when he did...

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“AAAAAAAH!!”

“AAAAAAAH!!”

Optimus winced. “Jazz is a liar,” he grumbled.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The Autobot was suddenly venting on him, still not used to how he should breathe and circulate air through his systems while his mouth was occupied for so long. Sideswipe took the opportunity to lean down and suckle at his neck, earning a surprised cry from Prowl that ended in a groan. White hands petted quickly down his face, his neck, his shoulders, stopping at his arms and gripping him tightly, squeezing, pulling him off and pinning him before Prowl turned his head and recaptured his lips, cutting off his mate's surprised whine. Sideswipe moaned into his mouth, struggling as his arms were forced down at his sides, his heels kicking at the berth in frustration, though he matched his kisses in earnest, stretching up his head to do so.

He wanted to touch him, fraggit, he wanted to touch him...

He jolted.

“AAAAH!”

There was the sound of something wet splattering on metal. Both mechs froze, one with a look of horror, the other sheepish.

“...Sorry,” Sideswipe said meekly with a tiny grin. “I got too excited.”

“Now that's what I call a preemptive strike!” Jazz added from where he was quietly watching from behind the wagon.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

After a few breems, though, he noted the waves of irritation that kept bombarding him through the twin-bond.

/What's wrong?/

/When do we take a break?/!

/At dusk, when it's too dangerous to make the wagons--/

/No, I mean from this scene! She's been re-writing it all day! I know she can be cortex-disabled at times, but this is fragging ridiculous!/ 

Sideswipe mentally groaned. /You know that she can hear us even this way too, right?/
And then Sunstreaker was struck by a random bolt of lightening.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

“Didn't interrupt any break-throughs, did I?”

“Unfortunately, no. I thought that I had a lead about “Mountain of the Moon” referring to the “base” of a mountain, but it's not quite right.”

“Maybe the “base” of one of the moons?”

“Cybetron only has one moon.”

“It used to have two.”

“What?” Prowl looked interested, but the city mech waved his hand.

“Nevermind. You've got a breem?”

“Of course.”

Before he could step any closer, Sideswipe reached down and lifted the poncho up and over his head, then laid it over the top of one of the chests closest to the entrance so that it could dry.

...He tried to, anyway.

A breem later found Prowl trying to stifle his giggles as Sideswipe waddled around their tent, struggling with the wet poncho caught on his audial horns.

“Little help, please?! Costuming department?! Help!!”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

“Put your hands behind your back.”

He did so, and immediately felt a roll of soft cloth being wound around each of his wrists, not enough to impede him much. It was more as if his mate was covering up an injury. Prowl took his time with this task, then when he was done, something much tighter was wrapped over the cloth, and this did keep his wrists crossed and pinned, squeezing at his plating, but the cloth acted as a buffer before it could do any harm.

“Hey, Prowl?”

“Sa?”

“You ever wonder if this is getting a little too close to Fifty Shades for the audience?” Sideswipe winked over his shoulder to no one in particular.

Prowl scowled at him.

“Don't compare us to THAT fanfiction. And stick to the script, please.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

“Lie still,” Bumblebee whispered under his breath, and Sideswipe nodded as the minibot crept
closer, until he was almost underneath the Minotoron. The rope connecting the Autobot's wrists and ankles ran under the bull, keeping Sideswipe from using his limbs or wiggling off, and the yellow mech pulled out his short-sword and got to work on sawing at it.

Before he got far, though, the Minotoron brayed, then lifted its tail. Bumblebee froze. Then dodged the sound of something wet falling to the ground, to muffled cackling from Sideswipe.

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Primus.

The last thing he'd been expecting was...there to be no one there?

Both mechs lifted their heads.

“...Jazz!”

There was a curse from the other side of the tent flap. “Sorry, sorry!”

“What are you doing?!”

“Definitely not texting!”

“Barbarians don't have comm units, Jazz!!”

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The center was occupied by a large bonfire, with plenty of space around it to give the tribe a decent common area, the largest tents encircling and pointing towards the fire. Dozens of Autobots were standing, sitting and talking, chatting with one another either briefly as they walked through the common area, or lying on mats and sunning themselves, having been there all day. Younglings were running around too, shrieking and laughing as they chased each other around legs and through groups.

One of them crashed into Perceptor before he could advance any further into the scene.

Drift groaned as he helped the stunned city-mech back up. “Reset!”
“No, we're done!”

No, we're not done.

“Yes, we are!” Sideswipe said to the sky from his and Prowl's shared mat, and gave the roof the middle finger.

We need to write up one more scene before bed!

“Why don't you let us do the work and put it as some porn in Sidequests or something?”

...You tempt me.

Sideswipe grinned, and crawled over Prowl, much to their mutual delight.

~*~ Actually The End ~*~

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!