Salvage

by dracoqueen22

Summary

It is peace, but not quite. As Optimus struggles to recover from the scars Megatron left behind, he faces an uphill battle against old grudges and frightening ambitions. He is not alone in this fight, however, as his Autobots remain loyal, and Optimus need look no further than the mech at his side to find support and comfort.

*sequel to Oubliette*

Notes

Just like Reign, I will update the tags, pairings, and characters as they become relevant for each chapter.

While Salvage is much more tame than Oubliette, there are three instances of vivid
flashbacks on Optimus' part involving triggery themes including rape and character death. I will mark those chapters at the beginning. Chapter one contains one of these scenes in the opening sequence, so skip past the italicized section if you need to.

Song for this chapter: "Dreaming My Way Home," Rogue Galaxy

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Cybertronians didn't dream, not in the human sense of the word. But like a human, the processor
did not shut down in recharge. It ran on a subconscious level, keeping basic systems functioning,
defragging harddrives, and compiling and collating data. Memories were archived. Experiences
measured.

Sometimes, they were even re-lived. Playing at the back of a mech's cortex like an old vidfile, the
clarity of the memory variable by experience. Happier memories, sure. On occasion. But the really
vibrant ones tended to be steeped in moments of sharp, harsh emotions. Fear and agony.
Confusion. Terror.

The heavy data files of emotion bogged down the system. Made it harder for the subconscious to
tag and store. Then the spark got involved. Because the spark carried memory, too. Nothing that
could be downloaded or weighed or measured. But the spark remembered. And when the spark
remembered, so did the frame.

His thighs trembled, aching from the effort. His knees were sore where they pushed at the berth,
again and again. His valve whispered warnings and pain, but Optimus kept moving, kept pumping
his hips, working the spike within him.

Megatron watched him with bright optics and a fanged smirk. He rested one hand on Optimus' hip,
thumb swept inward, placed right over Optimus' anterior node. He applied a steady pressure, just
enough to send jagged shards of pleasure-pain through Optimus' array.

He couldn't decide if he was aroused or not and that was part of the humiliation.

Optimus panted, dragging air in through his mouth. He'd been told to keep his face up. He'd been
told to keep his optics on his master, his owner. He'd been told not to look away. To do otherwise
meant pain.

He thought he could handle pain.

He bounced on Megatron's lap again, rolling his hips, clenching his valve, squeezing down. Doing
his best to milk the spike raking over his sensors and stabbing at his calipers. Sometimes,
Megatron would yank him down and grind on his ceiling node and Optimus would bite his lip to
contain his cries.

“Overload for me, Optimus,” Megatron purred, his thumb rubbing steady circles on Optimus' nub
now, making his hips jerk in an unstable rhythm. “I want you squeezing my spike before I fill you
with my transfluid.”

Optimus swallowed down a moan and an indignant retort. His vents stuttered. His fuel levels were
low. He was hot. His cables ached. He'd been riding Megatron for the better part of an hour. His
shoulders ached from keeping his hands behind his back, clasping his elbows.

He couldn't remember what it felt like to be alone.

“Overload,” Megatron growled, more warning this time, his optics flashing with displeasure.
“Don't make me say it again.”
Optimus snapped online, his vents whirring and his spark racing. His vision was blurry, gray around the edges, but worst of all was the telltale stickiness between his thighs. His valve panel was open, lubricant freely seeping out and staining the berth.

Primus.

Optimus sat up, staring down at the evidence of his overload. Again.

His tank churned. Optimus pulled a cloth from his subspace and hurriedly wiped his array clean, manually sliding his cover shut. It clicked as it locked into place. The soft sound seemed abnormally loud in the dim, narrow confines of the private berth.

The inhibitors were not helping.

Optimus rubbed his faceplate and slid off the berth. A quick search of a nearby drawer located a small bottle of solvent that he used to clean off the berth as well. He wasn't the only one using it, after all. There was nothing he could do for the scent of overload so thick in the air.

Clean to his best abilities, Optimus sat on the edge of the berth and cycled a ventilation. His chronometer informed him he still had two hours for his scheduled recharge, but Optimus had no interest in using them. Besides, he didn't want to online when they landed on Earth. He preferred to watch their approach.

He should probably refuel but the clench of his tanks made that unappealing.

Optimus rubbed his forehelm, sighed, and forced himself back upright. While he could theoretically hide in this room until his scheduled recharge was over, there was plenty of work to do to keep him distracted. Besides, company would better help him dump the short term memory of that purge from his cache.

Optimus eased out of the tiny berthroom, one of only two available within Blast Off's hold, and headed right for the cargo bay. A quick glance to his left found Onslaught on the bridge, the low drone of his vocals indicating a conversation, probably with Blast Off. Optimus didn't care to disturb them.

The rest of the small team, handpicked by Optimus, was Soundwave, Hound, Wheeljack, and Trailbreaker. Of them, only Hound, Trailbreaker, and Ravage would stay behind. More would arrive once the space bridge was fully functional.

Ultra Magnus had left a small team of Autobots behind when he first landed on Earth, long before he returned to Cybertron to help take down Megatron. It was there he'd assisted the Dinobots in defeating both Menasor and Barricade's team. Those who had survived, Magnus had brought back with him to Cybertron.

He'd left Kup behind, in charge of a handful of Autobot soldiers. Optimus hoped that Kup would not mind remaining a little while longer. Optimus needed someone he could trust to keep an optic on Earth and its resources. Kup was a figure who commanded respect from Autobots and Decepticons.

Optimus ducked down the hallway, the low ceiling more than a little discomfiting. He didn't like the tight confines, but there was little other choice. It was still impressive. How did Blast Off
subspace so much mass? Shuttles never ceased to amaze Optimus.

The rest of his team was in the cargo bay. Only Trailbreaker was missing. Optimus remembered, at the last minute, that Trailbreaker was on his scheduled recharge, too.

Soundwave had not brought all his cassettes with him. Rumble had opted to stay on Cybertron with Bumblebee, and Frenzy remained to keep an optic on both of them.

Hound and Ravage were off to the side. They sat with a table between them, some kind of strategy game set up on it. They were very close, and Hound was talking to Ravage, relating some kind of anecdotal story that had a smile on his face. It was a curious thing, but it was not Optimus' place to question it.

If Ravage's presence brought Hound comfort then all the better. Hound had been very quiet since they were all freed from the Decepticons. It was not unexpected, but it was disheartening. Like the rest of his soldiers, Optimus was at a loss for how to comfort Hound. He could barely comfort himself. Hound had spent as much time in Ratchet’s care as Optimus had, and Optimus had only suffered the full attention of Megatron. Hound had been divided among the Coneheads.

Soundwave and Wheeljack, however, were at another table, which was covered in datapads. Each of them were deeply involved in their own work with Wheeljack furiously scribbling and Soundwave playing perch to Laserbeak as he read from his datapad. Buzzsaw was nowhere in sight so Optimus presumed he was asleep within Soundwave's dock.

Laserbeak was the first to notice Optimus' arrival. She chirped a greeting and lit from Soundwave's shoulder, only to make a beeline for Optimus.

He froze, unsure what to expect. Surely she didn't mean to attack him? But no, she merely circled him once and then came in for a landing on his shoulder. She was surprisingly light, but her field nudged at his with friendly greeting. Her claws tapped arrhythmically as she shuffled back and forth on his shoulder.

Optimus blinked. “Good morning?” he hazarded.

Laserbeak dipped her helm and chirped at him. He imagined that she was smiling, though the beak did not give her so much expression.

Soundwave stared at the both of them, half-rising from his seat. “Laserbeak,” he said, his tone sharp and commanding. “Desist.”

Optimus held up a hand and shook his helm. “No, it's all right.” He pulled out one of the empty chairs at the table and sat. His spark was still palpitating, but he would get over it.

If Laserbeak intended to be friendly, Optimus wanted to encourage her.

“Laserbeak knows better,” Soundwave insisted, visor still focused on his errant cassette, who had inched closer to Optimus' helm, wings folded against her back. “Permission to be obtained first.”

She ducked her helm. Her optics dimmed. She gave Optimus what had to be the most apologetic look he had ever seen.

Optimus smiled behind his mask. “I understand,” he said as he turned his whole attention to the
winged cassette. “Laserbeak, you have my permission. But please, a little warning in advance next time?”

Laserbeak chirped. Her helm lifted, field tickling against his. It was too adorable for Optimus to be angry. When it came down to it, he would much rather her presence than anyone else's.

Optimus held up a hand toward her, and she butted her helm against his fingers, like an Earth feline might when seeking attention. He took it as a request to be petted and stroked two fingers over the crown of her helm and down the smooth armor of her back. Her wings were made of multiple tiny platelets like a bird's feathers, but much smoother.

Fascinating.

“There,” Optimus said, turning back toward Soundwave. “I believe we have made friends.”

Wheeljack set down his datapad and braced his elbow on the table. “Must be charisma or something, boss. I can't get the little pretty one to so much as talk to me.”

Laserbeak chirred something toward the engineer.

Soundwave shifted in his chair, giving off the air of one disgruntled, but choosing not to voice his displeasure. “Cassettes sensitive to odor.”

Wheeljack's vocal indicators flashed. “Are you telling me that I stink?”

Optimus chuckled despite himself.

“You do have a distinct scent, Wheeljack,” Hound piped up from nearby. He smiled as he laughed. “Part explosive material and part unstable material.”

“So you smell like a walking time bomb,” Optimus said and laughed again as Laserbeak chittered on his shoulder, obviously agreeing. “I do not know if I would call it a distasteful odor so much as they are wary of you.”

Thankfully, Wheeljack didn't take offense to this. He leaned back in his chair and shook his helm. “Well, that explains why I didn't have to chase Decepticon spies out of my lab all that often.”

“Cassettes have strong self-preservation instincts,” Soundwave said with a dip of his helm. “Only Ravage volunteer. Considered it a challenge.”

Ravage ignored all of them as she lifted a paw and moved one of her pieces, prompting Hound's optics to widen. He muttered a curse.

“I was hoping you wouldn't see that,” he said.

Ravage sat back on her chair, looking smug.

“Don't give me that look,” Hound said, shaking a finger at her. “That move's worked before.”

Red optics glittered with humor at him. “Precisely why it worked,” she said quietly, her vocals slightly hoarse as though she were unused to speaking.
This was probably the case, Optimus suspected. Because he had never heard Ravage speak before. He hadn't assumed she couldn't because he'd learned to never underestimate Soundwave's cassettes, but it still came as a surprise.

He looked at Laserbeak, wondering if she, too, would speak. But it was Soundwave who answered his unvoiced question.

“Laserbeak opted out of upgrade,” Soundwave explained as he gestured toward her. “Prefers current method of communication.”

Optimus' comm net pinged with an unfamiliar sender. When he accepted the hail, it turned out to be a text-only entry, punctuated by cheerful emoticons.

*It is an asset*, the message read. *When others think I am nothing more than what I appear. It is my secret weapon.*

Optimus blinked and turned his helm toward Laserbeak. “This is you?”

She dipped her helm in a nod and chirped at him. His comm net pinged again, another text-only message.

*Only give this address to mechs I trust.*

Her helm nudged against his, beak a light nip on his audial that he read as playful before he received another message.

*Never gave to Megatron. Even when Master trust, I never trust.*

“I see,” Optimus said aloud. “Then I shall treat this gift with the respect it deserves. Thank you, Laserbeak. I will endeavor to be worthy of it.”

She ruffled her feather plating and preened at him. Happiness was easy to read in her field.

“Though I do hope your master knows I am not trying to steal you,” Optimus added with a pointed look at Soundwave.

The former Decepticon touched his dock. “Cassette bond not so easily abandoned,” he said. “Soundwave unconcerned, but honored.”

“So you can break the bond?” Wheeljack asked. He'd completely set aside his datapads now, perking up with scientific curiosity.

Soundwave inclined his helm. “Yes.”

“It's not a permanent bond,” Hound offered as he continued to concentrate on his game with Ravage. Optimus was not sure who was actually winning. “The choice is always mutual and beneficial for all involved.”

*I will never leave Master*, Laserbeak sent with a heart-shaped emoticon attached to it. *I am fond of Optimus Prime.* This came with a smiling face.

“I did not know that,” Optimus said. He had asked Blaster a few times, but still felt as though he
walked away understanding very little of carrier culture. Especially since Blaster's cassettes were so much younger than Soundwave's.

“Neither did I,” Wheeljack said. He leaned against the edge of the table, tilting his helm. “How do you know so much, Hound?”

The tracker glanced briefly at Ravage before his faceplate colored a little. “I used to be friends with a carrier,” he said, hunching his shoulders as though trying to hide behind them. “Before, you know, the war.”

Ah. Which meant, in all likelihood, that mech was dead now. As so many of their family, friends, and colleagues were. The war had been hard on everyone. New ties had been forged, but it would never be enough to soothe the ache of what and who had been lost.

“Designation?” Soundwave asked.

Hound's optics flicked from Soundwave to Ravage and then back to his game board. There was something here, undercurrents, that Optimus figured he would have to question later.

“Twincast,” Hound answered even as Ravage made a sort of growling noise. Hound sighed and move done of his pieces on the board.

Soundwave inclined his helm, but didn't comment further. His visor briefly lit, as though he recognized the name, but he didn't say why. Optimus ran the designation through his own databanks, but it was unfamiliar to him.

“What about Rumble then?” Wheeljack asked, as though determined to change the subject. There was a sense of tragedy in the air that clung like a sticky tarp. “If cassettes can break the bond, is that what he's going to do?”

Ah, so Wheeljack had noticed Rumble and Bumblebee, too. They weren't being very discreet. Not that Optimus minded. The more bridges built between Autobots and Decepticons, the better.

“Rumble undecided,” Soundwave said. “The decision one not made quickly.”

Rumble and Frenzy had not always been attached to Soundwave, if Optimus recalled correctly. In fact, while they had always been mini-cons, they had reformatted into cassettes to dock with Soundwave. It was safer for mini-mechs to attach themselves to a carrier mech like Soundwave, but some still opted not to. No doubt there was precedent for abuse in some cases.

“Makes sense.” Wheeljack made a noncommittal noise, before he redirected his attention again. “Say Blast Off, how long until we get to Earth?”

“Another hour,” came the shuttle's reply which Optimus traced to one of the speakers up in the corner of the cargo bay. Blast Off sounded irritated.

Optimus tossed his interim Head Engineer a look. “Have you been bombarding our gracious host with questions, Wheeljack?”

Vocal indicators fluttered a pale blue. “I don't know what you mean, Prime,” Wheeljack replied with a half-shutter of his optics, completely innocent.
Hound laughed. “Don't believe him, Optimus. If he asks anything else, we're probably gonna find ourselves floating back to Earth.”

“Wheeljack curious,” Soundwave added with a pointed look the scientist's direction.

Wheeljack snagged one of his datapads and leaned back in his chair, propping his pedes up on the counter. “You don't understand. Do you even realize how much mass Blast Off must subspace in root-mode? The physics of it are astounding!”

“And that would be why our host sounds more than a little aggravated,” Hound said in a teasing tone. But he smiled at least, and that warmed Optimus' spark.

Wheeljack huffed a ventilation and buried his faceplate behind his datapad. “None of you have a quart of curiosity among you,” he muttered. There was a lack of offense, in his field however. Especially as he pulled out a stylus and started doodling, no doubt some new invention or schematic.

Optimus smiled behind his mask and left Wheeljack to his datapads. A slow scraping noise turned his attention to Soundwave, who pushed a small cube of energon toward him. The color hinted of medical grade which technically Optimus didn't need anymore, but found the flavor surprisingly preferable as of late.

Optimus accepted the cube with a tilt of his helm. “Thank you,” he said. “But you don't have to keep taking care of me. There are numerous other tasks that suit you better than playing nursemaid to me.”

“Task not objectionable,” Soundwave replied as he returned his attention to his own datapad.

_Master cares_, Laserbeak sent as she butted Optimus' helm with her own. _His coding demands it_.

Amused, Optimus reached up and stroked a finger down her backstrut, pleased when she arched into it. “Have I been adopted?” he asked softly.

Laserbeak chirred something like an affirmative at him. _Maybe_, she sent, as coy as her master. _Master cared for Megatron, too. But different. Not as enjoyable_.

Optimus considered what, precisely, Laserbeak meant. It was no secret that Soundwave had been among Megatron's most loyal soldiers. Prowl had long suspected that Soundwave was the glue which kept the Decepticons from imploding. He was often able to calm Megatron's rages when no one else could by simple manner of being there.

It wasn't romance, Prowl theorized. Soundwave seemed to have a calming influence. Perhaps because he didn't purposefully goad like Starscream and wasn't naturally inclined to provoke.

Or maybe Soundwave was giving his leader a mental nudge. Prowl seemed to think so. Jazz was less sure.

Having experienced Soundwave in his processor, Optimus was inclined to side with Jazz. There was no mistaking the feel of Soundwave poking around inside his thoughts, memories, and coding. If Soundwave had been subtly manipulating Megatron, he must have been doing it for so long that Megatron no longer noticed. Which meant he was the true shadow master behind the Decepticon throne, probably the cause of Megatron's madness, and Optimus should be on his guard.
Or Megatron was mad all along and Soundwave was only slapping a patch on an ever-worsening wound.

Something to think about.

Optimus wanted to trust Soundwave. He truly did. But he also knew well enough to be careful.

Trust, but verify.

Red Alert had once told him that.

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Optimus watched their approach to Earth from the bridge, occupying the only other available chair next to Onslaught. He opted for silence rather than casual conversation, an anxiety gripping his spark. He had expected he would feel something, but not a reaction as severe as this.

The last time he had seen Earth, he was packed into every available space-worthy Autobot like the rest of his soldiers, beginning a long, tedious journey back toward Cybertron with limited supplies and even more limited tempers. That journey had been tense, fraught with disappointment and worry. Optimus had been forced to leave some Autobots behind for lack of space. And they'd all had to abandon the Ark, a makeshift base turned home for several Earth years.

He remembered the human dignitary who told them to go, and the diplomatic team that had accompanied said dignitary, backing up his request. Representatives from multiple nations – not just the United States – had banded together to present the Autobots with an eviction notice. There had been no mercy in the human's eyes. No mercy and no regret. He'd only seen anger, disgust, and Optimus had thought both justified.

Cybertronians had brought their war to Earth and the humans paid the price. It was only fair Optimus do as asked.

How could he have known it was Decepticon treachery all along? Or that the humans were the reason Prowl collapsed mid-transit, suffering from an ailment Ratchet and Hoist were incapable of repairing?

A virus, Ratchet had said. A rather insidious one. Decepticon in origin, he was sure, only because all of them knew Jazz and Sideswipe hadn't put it together. But there was hope. They could still help Prowl. They just needed supplies. Once they landed on Cybertron, they could get to Wheeljack's old lab, and everything would be fine.

Except they never landed on Cybertron. The most they managed was a view of their precious homeworld from a distance before the Decepticons attacked en masse.

Now, here they approached Earth, another home Optimus left behind, and he had to concentrate to keep his ventilations even and his field from rattling Blast Off. He gripped the arm of his chair, hoping that he didn’t harm Blast Off, and stared out the viewscreen as the blue and white gem that was Earth came closer and closer.
“Do you still wish for me to land on the west coast near the Ark?” Blast Off asked.

Optimus offlineed his optics and leaned his helm back. They hit the first layer of Earth's atmosphere and things started getting a little rocky. “Yes,” he answered. “Kup and his team set up base there.”

“Very well.” Blast Off, at least, sounded neutral.

“You do know that the Ark was ransacked as soon as we claimed Earth,” Onslaught said.

Optimus onlineed his optics and glanced at the Combinicon commander. He was at ease in his chair, one elbow braced on the arm of it as he stared in Optimus' general direction.

“I suspected as much,” Optimus said. “We did our best to strip it of useful items, but there was only so much room to spare.”

“What do you hope to find?”

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “Nothing,” he answered honestly. “But there were some hidden panels. If there is any luck left in the universe, they were untouched.”

Onslaught huffed a noise of derision. “Foolish sentiment.”

“Perhaps,” Optimus allowed. He returned his gaze to the viewscreen, where streaks of molten fire have given way to the cloudy gray of Earth's atmosphere, no longer the clean and bright blue he remembered.

Megatron had been merciless, he'd been told. Megatron had razed Earth from end to end, choosing to exterminate rather than work with the humans. He didn't want opposition. He wanted energy, copious amounts of it and as quickly as possible. The humans had always underutilized their resources, but Megatron had no such compunctions.

Megatron had been in possession of Earth for nearly a year. And he'd managed to destroy every scrap of beauty within it.

Optimus' spark ached as they sank below the cloud cover, and he got his first glimpse of the western half of the United States. Bleak and brown were his first impressions, not a trace of familiar greenery to be found. Megatron had taken everything.

He'd razed cities to the ground with tactical nuclear weapons – because they were only as harmful to Cybertronians as the average blaster or lasergun – and striped the land in between with laserfire. It had been a calculated attack, one Optimus suspected Starscream was in part responsible for.

Starscream might have been the one to orchestrate Megatron's defeat, but he was no hero. Then, Optimus could not expect Starscream to have any attachment to the humans. The Decepticons had always considered them insects to be crushed. Starscream probably saw their absence as a disappointment that he couldn't use the humans as a resource or cheap labor. He was practical where Optimus was not.

Washington and Oregon had been lush, temperate climates. Optimus remembered the landscape around the Ark to be green and full. He remembered tall mountains and sparkling blue water and fields of flowers. Megatron had destroyed all of it.
Here and there, pockmarks of vegetation remained, pushing gamely through the desolated ground. Weeds, mostly, the hardiest of Earth vegetation. Earth vehicles were scattered along the roadside as though they'd taken part in the world's largest destruction derby. Of their former occupants, Optimus could see no sign. They'd either fled and hid, or been vaporized.

He wondered if there was any hope of finding living humans. He wondered how Spike and Sparkplug and Carly and Chip had fared. Had any of their human friends survived? Megatron had not bragged of killing them. Either he had not thought to do so, or he hadn't cared enough to take note of all the human lives he had taken.

Optimus' tank churned.

Blast Off landed on a clear patch, touching down with a soft lurch. Out the view screen, all Optimus could see was rusty dirt and the roofs of the temporary shelters Kup's team had set up. He was surprised they hadn't used the Ark.

“Please disembark quickly,” Blast Off said, a tightness in his tone. “I wish to transform as soon as possible.”

Optimus pushed to his pedes. “Understood.” Onslaught stood as well, but Optimus preceded him out of the bridge.

Blast Off must have told the others as well because the cargo bay was empty, of both their fellow soldiers and the gear they had brought along. The loading ramp was lowered, and Optimus' vents dragged in his first taste of Earth's air. Humid, he recognized, with a bitter tang, like that of old ordinance.

It wasn't unlike Cybertron right after the war began, when the sky was clouded over with debris and explosive particulate. So much ordinance had only worsened Cybertron's acid rain. He wondered if Earth now suffered the same.

Optimus stepped off the ramp and into a dull afternoon, overhanging clouds suggesting a storm but his sensors telling him there was no precipitation in the air. It was a shame.

The moment he and Onslaught cleared Blast Off's shadow, the shuttle transformed back to root-mode, shrinking down to a mech a little larger than Optimus himself. It was something that never ceased to amaze Optimus. Small wonder that Wheeljack had been so fascinated and eager to ask questions.

Speaking of... Optimus turned to locate his Autobots. Hound was crouched down nearby, examining something on the ground, with Trailbreaker standing next to him as though watching his back. Wheeljack was scribbling into a datapad, his vocal indicators flashing through an array of colors. Soundwave's back was to all of them as he looked into the sky, watching Buzzsaw and Laserbeak fly around each other.

Kup emerged from the nearest temporary shelter, cygar releasing a ring of smoke above his helm. He was accompanied by a mech with flashy red and orange armor.

“About time ya got here, Prime,” Kup drawled as he strode toward Optimus. He stuck out a hand. “Good ta see you're still alive.”
Optimus grinned behind his mask. “You're one to talk, Kup.” They clasped hands, and Optimus was reassured by Kup's strong grip. This old mech had many more millennia left in him. “Are you still teaching the younglings the right path?”

“Sure am.” Kup grinned around his cygar and clapped his hand on the shoulder of the young mech next to him. “This here's Hot Rod. He's a little brash and impulsive, but he's a good kid. Shows some real promise.”

Optimus inclined his helm. “Nice to meet you.” Just from a glance he suspected that Hot Rod was one of the youngest Autobots he'd ever met. He was probably sparked after the war began.

“Thank you, sir.” Hot Rod managed a faint smile, but he visibly shook. Not from fear, Optimus suspected however. “It's an honor to meet you.”

“I figure Hot Rod here can show your mechs to the space bridge,” Kup said as he squeezed Hot Rod's shoulder. “He's my second in command while we're here.”

Optimus chuckled. That was a familiar phrase. Kup had always been full of them, old adages and encouragements. “Indeed.”

Hot Rod's face registered heat, but he nodded eagerly. “I'll do whatever I can to help, Optimus Prime, sir.”

“Thank you, Hot Rod. I will appreciate the assistance.” Brash, Kup had said. Maybe so. But all Optimus could see right now was a youngling eager to please.

Optimus turned to seek out his crew. All loitered nearby, waiting for orders, though Onslaught and Blast Off were deep in conversation.

“Unless you need a day to adjust. This place is more ‘n a little disappointing,” Kup added with a disgruntled huff.

“We had more than enough rest on the trip,” Optimus assured him. “Wheeljack, Blast Off, are you ready to work on the space bridge?”

Wheeljack, without looking up from his datapad, gave a thumbs up. Blast Off said something to Onslaught and then looked back to Optimus, inclining his helm.

“One of my mechs is already there. Name's Roadbuster,” Kup said. “He's doing what he can, but many hands make for light work.”

Optimus chuckled. That was a familiar phrase. Kup had always been full of them, old adages and encouragements. “Indeed.”

More introductions were handed around. Kup didn't blink twice when introduced to Onslaught and Blast Off, both of whom would be working on the space bridge with Wheeljack. But Hot Rod seemed a little flummoxed and alarmed.

Luckily, Wheeljack was as friendly as he was charming, and he calmed the youngling long enough to send the foursome on their way. Onslaught might not be the friendliest former Decepticon, but Optimus trusted he didn't mean to harm them. After all, he had numerous opportunities to do so already.

“Here's hoping the lads get that fixed soon,” Kup commented as he watched them go. Another puff of grey smoke rose from his cygar. “I'm itchin' to get Cybertron re-energized.”
“We all are.” Optimus cycled a ventilation. “Any sign of the natives?”

“The humans? Not a one.” Kup rolled his shoulders and gestured for Optimus to follow him toward the largest of the temporary shelters they’d been using. “They are small, however, and resourceful. I don’t think Megatron could’ve exterminated them completely. Why?”

Optimus turned and motions for the others to follow him: Soundwave, Hound and Trailbreaker. He wanted them to see what Kup's team had found before he sent the scouting party out on their mission.

“I hope to find them.” Optimus ducked into the makeshift tent, sturdier than what the humans would have used, and waterproof to protect from precipitation.

A generator hummed in the back, providing power to the bank of computers nearby, all manned by a single soldier in blue armor. A divider separated another third from what looked to be a medcenter stocked to the brim with mobile equipment.

“Find them? Whatever for?”

“This is their planet,” Optimus said. There was no one else present. Kup's team was supposed to be small but he hadn't expected it to only consist of four mechs, including Kup. He didn't recognize the soldier at the monitors either, but he looked to be as young as Hot Rod. “I want to return it to them.”

“Energy needed,” Soundwave said from behind him. To Optimus, he almost sounded confused.

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “Yes, I'm aware of that. But whether or not we continue to have a presence on Earth after our needs are met is the question I seek to answer. We owe the humans that much.”

“It wasn't their fault they turned on us,” Hound added as he slipped in behind Soundwave, Trailbreaker next to him. The two scouts kept to the back, near the exit. “We have to be better than Megatron.”

“I am not so altruistic, however, to abandon Earth if the humans are no longer present,” Optimus clarified. He tipped his helm toward Hound and Trailbreaker. “That’s why they are here. If anyone can find the humans, it is those two.”

“And Ravage,” Hound chimed in.

“Hmm.” Kup thumbed his chin as he looked Hound and Trailbreaker from helm to pede. “You three gonna need some back up?”

Hound shook his helm. “No, thank you, sir. It's a long mission, and we're accustomed to working on our own.”

“If ya say so.” Kup shrugged and returned his attention to Optimus. “We've got the room if you want to bunk your team while we wait on the engineers.”

“Thank you for the offer.” Optimus moved to the monitor station, skimming the screens. They flickered through a series of feeds from various locations around the world.
Optimus suspected they were using a modified form of Sky Spy to get the feeds. What he saw made his spark ache. Demolished cities. Empty streets. Everything looked so still, so silent. It was nothing like the bustling life he remembered of Earth.

Death was too good an end for Megatron, Optimus thought. His hand curled into a fist at his side, anger cropping up again.

“Kup, Drift's back,” the blue mech said. He hit a few keys, and one of the screens fuzzed out, switching to the view of a white ground-frame mech speeding down the road, a cloud of dust rising in his wake.

“Tell him to come here before he hits the ‘racks, Blurr,” Kup ordered with only a brief glance to the screen. “I want to introduce him to the crew before someone around here gets trigger happy.”

“Yes sir,” Blurr replied.

Make that five mechs apparently. Though Optimus was not familiar with Blurr or Drift either. Considering that Ultra Magnus and his team had been wandering the galaxy, he wasn't surprised at the strays they had accumulated.

“Drift’s been hitting every place the Decepticons used to gather energy,” Kup explained as he pulled up a chair and lowered himself into it. One hand started working at his right knee, fingers digging into the cables beneath his aged plating. “Most of what they were working on is being run by drones. They had a system. They'd come in, rewire and reprogram, leave drones behind and move on to the next energy jackpot.”

Optimus turned around, folding his arms over his chest. “How many?”

“A dozen? They only had about ten months to work with.” Kup rolled his shoulders and rubbed a hand down his face. “This planet is a gold mine, Optimus. If we don't stay here, someone else will. Even if it's not the humans. There're minerals here that are worth trillions on the Galactic market. The humans are fragging lucky they haven't been found by the Exelons. Or worse.”

Optimus really had been out of touch with the universe at large if he hadn't recognized that.

Well, that certainly complicated matters. It meant no matter what happened, they could not leave Earth. Not unless the humans were fully capable of defending themselves, which they weren't. Even if Megatron hadn't come and razed their entire planet to the ground, they were never technologically advanced enough to protect themselves.

The sound of a high-performance engine and tires over rocky ground interrupted their conversation. Optimus turned toward the door as he heard someone transform and then near-silent pedesteps. The aforementioned Drift, he assumed as a mostly white mech came into the shelter, armed with two swords at the hip and one across his back. He was covered in dust as though he'd been on a long-range patrol.

Drift came to a startled halt, gaze whipping around the room and registering the newcomers. He raised his hands. “Am I interrupting?”

“No. Get in here, kid.” Kup pushed to his pedes and gestured Drift in closer. “What did you find?”
Drift cast a glance toward Soundwave and gave him a wide berth. “The nuclear plant in Richland is not yet functioning. I think they were in the process of reprogramming it.”

“Good, good. We can finish what they started.” Kup grinned around his cygar and clapped a hand on Drift's shoulder. “This here's Drift, Optimus. He's a stray I picked up and made useful. A bit of a loner but a good kid.”

Soundwave's visor flashed. “Designation inaccurate.”

Drift stiffened, his gaze dropping to the floor. Kup growled in his chassis, optics narrowing toward Soundwave.

“I know what the frag his name is,” Kup said in a cold tone. “I don't need a Decepticon telling me what I already know.”

Optimus cycled his optics. “What am I missing?”

“Designation: Deadlock,” Soundwave said, never taking his gaze off Drift. “Former Decepticon sub-commander under Turmoil.”

“The key word, fragger, is former,” Kup snapped. His hand dropped from Drift's shoulder, every inch of his old frame bristling with menace. “And considering that dock of yours is suspiciously empty of a badge, you don't have room to talk.”

Optimus crossed the floor, putting himself between Kup and Soundwave in the cycle of an optic. He didn't think either would attack, but he also didn't have any idea how long they'd be here on Earth waiting for the space bridge. He didn't need anyone harboring animosity to make their time uncomfortable.

“Soundwave, Drift's former associations are not relevant anymore,” Optimus stated.

Though if you have a legitimate reason to be concerned about Drift's presence, you may come to me in private, he added on a narrow-band channel.

He turned his helm toward Kup. “We are still in a state of transition. The war may have technically ended when Megatron tricked us into leaving Earth and attacked our arrival on Cybertron, but that does not mean the hostility itself is gone. Some of us still cling to old feelings. Patience is what is needed right now. From all sides.”

He hoped Soundwave heard that last message, too.

“Now Drift,” Optimus continued, and was dismayed to see the former-Decepticon flinch when Optimus addressed him. “You've been running searching patterns on Earth, yes? Would you be opposed to discussing your findings with my scout team?”

Drift worked his intake before inclining his helm in a nod. “No, sir. I haven't found any humans but maybe someone more familiar with them could make better sense of what evidence I have found.”

“Good.” Optimus turned toward Hound and Trailbreaker, both of whom had shifted into subtly defensive positions by the door and gestured for Drift to follow him. “This is Hound and Trailbreaker. Any clues you could give them would be helpful.”
Drift offered a hesitant smile. “Yes, sir. I'll do what I can.”

“If there are any humans left, we'll find them,” Hound said.

“I trust you will,” Optimus said.

Hound tilted his helm to the door. “Want to get out of here and talk? You look like you could use a break and a cube or two.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Wariness had yet to leave Drift's field, but he followed Hound and Trailbreaker out of the shelter anyway. Ravage slunked out after them, which came as a surprise to Optimus because he hadn't seen her lurking about in the shadows. No wonder the cassettes slipped into the Ark so easily.

Well, that was one crisis averted. Optimus rubbed his forehelm and returned to the other conversation at hand.

Kup had moved to stand by Blurr, the both of them talking quietly as they looked at the monitors. Soundwave hadn't moved, but he watched Optimus with an intensity that he didn't often bear.

“If there's nothing to discuss at the moment, I intend to head to the Ark,” Optimus said, feeling a sudden need for fresh air, distance, and perhaps some solitude. “You can reach me on my comms.”

Kup waved a hand of dismissal. “Can't think of anything dire, but I'll let you know. Hope you find what you're looking for, Optimus.”

“Accompaniment offered,” Soundwave said.

Optimus hesitated, but he didn't feel comfortable leaving Soundwave here either. Besides, Laserbeak and Buzzsaw were small enough to get into places neither Optimus nor Soundwave could. They might be needed.

“You're welcome to come with me,” Optimus said.

It wouldn't be awkward at all.

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Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Song for this chapter: "Utopia," Within Temptation

The bay doors had been wrenched open. Megatron hadn't bothered to override the circuits. He'd blasted the doors and peeled the metal aside, leaving it looking as though a bomb had gone off inside. Scorch marks on the exterior indicated that someone had taken potshots at the Ark, probably for the fun of it.

Perhaps this wasn't a good idea. But Optimus was here now, and he would not turn back. If there was anything to be saved from the Ark, Optimus would retrieve it. He owed his Autobots that much. He had failed them enough already.

Optimus transformed, ejecting Soundwave as he did so. Soundwave transformed mid-flight, making it look smooth and effortless. He freed Laserbeak and Buzzsaw to circle above them, darting around and teasing each other against the dull gray sky. Optimus continued to miss the bright blue. The wind was dry, carrying on it the scent of ashes and despair.

Optimus was grateful for company, in that moment. He was undecided as to whether he was comfortable with that company being Soundwave.

Nevertheless, Optimus gathered himself and went into the Ark, stepping gingerly through the jagged doorway and over a spattering of crumbled rock. It was dim inside. They had powered down the Ark before they left and taken Teletraan's memory core with them. Optimus made a mental note to ask Wheeljack if he still carried Teletraan. The Ark might be unsalvageable, but they could at least install the AI in their new headquarters. It would be nice to hear a familiar voice.

Optimus flicked on his highlights, illuminating the gloom. Scorch marks darkened the walls. Someone had dragged their claws down the corridor walls, leaving rough gouges in the blackened paint. More rubble dotted the floor.

His ventilations echoed in the silence. Soundwave's pedesteps were whisper soft behind him.

The silence unsettled him.

“Will you tell me about Twincast?” Optimus asked. Anything to break the quiet and hopefully, a topic that was not too touchy. “I assume you recognized the designation.”

He picked his way across the ground, headlights sweeping back and forth. Pedesteps were visible in the grime, but only just. It wasn’t as though he could tell who they belonged to, and perhaps it did not matter.

“Affirmative.” Soundwave kept close, his biolights a gleam behind Optimus. He clicked on lights
of his own, additional features not part of his alt-mode. “Twincast Ravage's former carrier.”

Optimus cycled his optics, glancing over his shoulder. “Before you?”

Soundwave inclined his helm. “Yes. Twincast murdered. Ravage only survivor.”

How terrible. Optimus frowned behind his battle mask. “Murdered why?”


And this was before the war.

They reached the double doors into the main cavern of the Ark. These were pushed open, evidence of handmarks in the crumpled edges of the doors. Large mechs, Overlord perhaps. Or Motormaster and Onslaught?

A few dim lights glowed in the far console, running on what power, Optimus didn't know. Wheeljack probably did, but that was less important right now.

“Do you know how Hound figures into this?”

“Hound knew Twincast. Ravage, also.”

So they were old friends before the war. Interesting. Optimus often wondered how many ties existed before the lines of war separated them. In the beginning, the war had been quite divisive. It often pitted family members against one other. Lovers and friends, even. The boundaries started to shift, allegiances flip-flopped, until eventually, numbers evened out. You found your niche and there you stayed.

Defections became less and less over the course of the war. Shooting at a former friend quickly killed any lingering attachment. Especially when said friend was more than willing to return fire.

“Then I hope they both can enjoy this opportunity to reconnect,” Optimus said. He cast a quick glance around the central command room, registering more rubble and blast marks.

Telettraan's main console looked to suffer the worst of it. Wires had been ripped out, panels tossed aside, and all of the monitors were shattered. Someone had taken great glee in dismantling all within reach.

“Did they have you do this?” Optimus asked as he dragged his fingers over the broken keys. He left a furrow in the dust. It had only been a year, but the whole Ark smelled of rot and disuse, perhaps because the main doors had been left open, allowing all manner of creature and weather to invade.

“Hack attempted. No new information found,” Soundwave answered. He came up to Optimus' other side, visor looking all around. “Others caused damage.”

“Out of a petty sense of vengeance, I imagine,” Optimus muttered. He turned away from the console, headlights sweeping a path until they found three of the corridors that led deeper into the Ark.

Which route to take? Toward the offices? Toward the refectory and recreation? Toward the
barracks? Each had their own sparkbreaks.

Optimus took the right-hand corridor, toward the offices. Command quarters should have been gathered together, he supposed, but Red Alert had always insisted that in the case of attack, they couldn't afford to have the command staff bunked too near. So they divided themselves into three sets of functioning command structure and occupied one of each of the sections of the Ark.

Optimus had been housed with Ironhide, and Ratchet and Wheeljack. His room had been at the back, the best protected by the volcano, and beyond the medbay. The reasoning had been that the Decepticons were least likely to attack the medbay. Whether or not it was sound reasoning, they never had opportunity to find out.

“Decepticons angry,” Soundwave said as he followed.

Optimus snorted, unable to hide the bitterness in his tone. “For winning? Or because it had taken trickery and deceit?” He couldn't blame them, he supposed. That was how wars were fought and won.

But if the Decepticons considered themselves great warriors, the way they had chosen to acquire their victory and how they had treated their defeated enemies, had given lie to that belief. There was no honor to be found in them, except perhaps in a select few.

“Reasons many,” Soundwave said. Or evaded rather. He was so very good at that.

Optimus dropped that particular conversation. More rubble dotted the floor, causing him to watch his step. The walls were dented and clawed. Doors had been wrenched open. Somewhere, he heard the *tink tink* of a steady drip. There was a leak apparently.

Personal effects were trampled and spread across the floor. He recognized game cartridges and movie disks, holo-frames and tiny trinkets. Over the years, the Autobots had acquired a tidy collection of gifts from the humans, most often from the children. Each and every one had been treasured, but there had been no room for the items in their haste to leave.

The first office was Silverbolt's and Hot Spot's – shared because space had been limited, and they were the last additions to the Command Staff. Luckily, the two gestalt leaders got along and learned to share their space amicably. It was an office filled with ghosts, Optimus thought. He didn't want to go inside.

“Opinion offered,” Soundwave said.

Optimus paused in the doorway, letting his headlights do the searching, not that there was much to see but *mess*. The Decepticons had turned the room upside down, upending desks and pulling out drawers. Broken datapads littered the floor, their screens cracked and broken.

“Speak,” Optimus said. He looked at Soundwave, who hovered nearby but not in Optimus' personal space. “I am not Megatron. I won't fault you for having an opinion.”

“Deadlock dangerous.”

Optimus cycled a ventilation. It wasn't what he expected to hear. He turned to acknowledge Soundwave, carefully choosing his words. “So are you.”
“Deadlock, known traitor,” Soundwave said, tone even. Laserbeak, on the shoulder opposite his sonic cannon, bobbed her head.

Optimus tilted his helm. “Again, so are you. I trust Kup's judgment, Soundwave. He says Drift – and yes, I will call him the name he prefers – has changed for the better, then I believe him.”

After all, he owed Drift the same courtesy of opportunity as he had given all the Decepticons who had chosen to either go neutral or petition to join the Autobots.

“It is fair,” Optimus added, more for Soundwave's sake. “Everyone deserves the chance. Do you not agree?”

Soundwave dipped his helm. “Optimus tolerant. Also, optimistic.”

It was almost a joke.

“A trait born of necessity,” Optimus said with a wan smile. “Orion Pax was not so forgiving.” He turned and peered back into the abandoned office. “Let's get this done.”

He felt surrounded by ghosts and the losses weighed heavily on his shoulders. He didn't know how much longer he could remain before he'd graciously quit and see if someone else would prefer to do so. Jazz perhaps. He knew all of the Ark's secrets.

“Affirmative,” Soundwave agreed.

Perhaps this place wasn't any more comfortable for him either.

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The medcenter was one of the first buildings Prime insisted be rebuilt and outfitted with all the equipment they could scrape together. Right now, it consisted of a single floor, a few rooms, and an operating theater. It was slightly larger than the Ark's medbay, which wasn't saying much.

It was, however, better than nothing. Ratchet certainly preferred it to working out of the medcenter in Iacon, or staying in the cramped medbay aboard the Xantium.

The fact of the matter was, there simply weren't enough hands to make the work go any faster. The Autobots had been decimated by the Decepticons after losing the war. Those who dared return to Cybertron as the Decepticon forces had were shot out of the sky, killed before Megatron identified them. The Autobot numbers were few, stripped of their skilled members, and some still recovered.

Ratchet didn't even consider himself fully healed.

Worse that Wheeljack had gone with Prime to Earth, in order to repair the space bridge from the other end. Jazz and his team had done an excellent job disabling the controls and while the majority of the structure remained intact, lengthy repairs were required to get the space bridge up and running again. Ratchet did not envy Wheeljack's return to Earth, but he did miss the fragger.

He'd only had a week to luxuriate in the fact Wheeljack was alive, they'd both survived, and they
were together again. Now Wheeljack was gone and Ratchet was left with the dull silence of the medbay. Except for the steady drone of the life support systems in the two back rooms, one for Sideswipe and Sunstreaker, the other for Red Alert.

Truthfully, Red Alert could be conscious. Nothing prevented Ratchet from allowing him to online. But Trepan had made Red Alert little more than a drone, and while online, all he did was stare and await commands. It was fragging creepy, and Ratchet didn't want to stash Red Alert in some corner to stare at the wall, so he put Red Alert in stasis instead.

Maybe death would be kinder, if Metalhawk's mech couldn't fix him.

The twins were no easier on the optics.

Ratchet lingered in the doorway. He didn't need to go in and check their readings; he had the equipment giving him updates anytime there was a measurable change in their systems.

They lay stiller than he'd ever seen them, sharing a berth and touching because Ratchet and the others had learned that if they weren't, both spark readings dropped. Ratchet did not know what Pit Shockwave had unleashed on them, but he vowed that the remorseless scientists would suffer for it.

No matter how often Ratchet had to petition the Decepticons for a harsher sentence.

"We have good news."

He almost startled. Were it not for the fact he'd gotten used to First Aid creeping around trying to go unnoticed, Ratchet would have leapt from surprise. As it was, he'd recognized the bare whisper of movement that indicated his future successor was nearby.

First Aid had learned that particular behavior while serving Shockwave.

“A cure?” Ratchet asked as he backed out of the doorway and let the door slide shut, sealing the twins back into their private room.

First Aid's field was flat, a clear indication he was trying to rein in his emotions. “A chance for one,” he corrected. “Starscream accepted my request. We'll be allowed to consult with Shockwave, for whatever good it will do us.”

Ratchet's tanks churned. “Great.” All that remained, then, was to ask Optimus for permission.

“I'm no more happy about it than you are,” First Aid said with a little sigh. He rubbed his forehelm, the droop to his shoulders screaming of fatigue. “But I want to help Sideswipe and Sunstreaker.”

_Like I couldn't before_ went unspoken. Ratchet knew that feeling all too well. How many Autobots had he repaired only to watch them return to their masters? And how many had come to him, so broken and used, there was nothing he could do?

Too many.

Worse were the times, bent over a berth or a desk or a bookshelf, that his own masters would tell him how lucky he was. That they let him use his skills to save his friends. That they didn't hurt
him, not really. That most of the time, they even made sure he overloaded, and he was allowed to use the washracks.

He was lucky, wasn't he? Because he was fed decent grade energon, and he could repair himself, and occasionally, see the rest of his friends. So what if Hook knocked him around sometimes, or Megatron requested his company.

He was lucky.

“Ratchet?”

He sighed and focused on First Aid. “I do, too. But they'll keep for now. Metalhawk's mech is supposed to come by at some point to examine Red Alert.” He aimed a scan at his assistant, perhaps replacement one day, and frowned at the results. “And you are going to recharge. When was the last time you ran a proper defrag?”

First Aid shook his helm. “I'd rather work, if it's all the same to you.”

“I wasn't asking.” Ratchet stepped closer, and when First Aid neither flinched nor moved away, he rested an arm on First Aid's shoulder. “I know it's been hard. Right now, the best thing you can do for me is take care of yourself. I need you healthy, Aid.”

First Aid cycled a ventilation, the light behind his visor shifting away. A visible tremor wracked his frame, tangible where Ratchet's hand rested. His arms wrapped around his chassis, shoulders hunching further.

“It's too quiet. And cold,” he said, and the misery in his vocals sent a sharp pang of grief through Ratchet's spark.

“Aw, kid,” he sighed and let First Aid slip into his arms, like he hadn't done or needed to do in years. “I miss them, too.” Not to the extent that First Aid did, however.

Ratchet couldn't imagine what it felt like to lose someone bonded to your spark, much less four someones. It wasn't a traditional sparkbond, but that didn't make it any less strong or powerful. What would it be like going from a constant noise at the back of your mind to an abrupt silence?

First Aid pressed against him, helm leaning against Ratchet's windshield. Minute tremors wracked his frame, but otherwise, he made very little sound.

“I don't know what I'm supposed to do,” First Aid murmured, his vocals filled with misery. “I'm just me. I don't know what to do with that.”

Ratchet stroked his helm and his back, light touches that seemed to comfort the younger medic. At least he was good for something.

He wished, oh how he wished, Rung had survived the war. Or even the databases of knowledge regarding processor health. Ratchet didn't know how to fix this. He didn't know how to help everyone heal. Instead, he fumbled through it and feared he only worsened matters in the process.

“You take each day one at a time, kid,” Ratchet said, trying to recall the advice Rung had given to him so long ago.
Ratchet had just lost his first patient. He was a fresh-faced newbie right out of medical school with the moniker “magic hands” attached to his designation, and he’d been voted the one most likely to fight Unicron for every spark. He’d lost his first patient to a perfectly treatable infection no one had recognized until it was too late.

He’d gone home, destroyed every trophy and award in his case, scared the Pit out of Wheeljack, and then hit the bars. He’d gotten himself so drunk that the Enforcers had to drag him home, and didn’t throw him in prison only because they recognized the marks on his shoulders. He’d been lucky.

He’d let Wheeljack drag him to see Rung and ended up forming a friendship that would last millennia, up until the war broke out.

Rung had said something to him then. Something about taking each day as it came. It stuck with him, even when the war came and he lost patient after patient, and sometimes, he wasn't sure how he was going to pick himself up and keep going.

“And if that doesn't work, you break it up into smaller intervals.” Ratchet tilted his helm against First Aid's, feeling the first open shiver of the younger medic's field. “You go by hours, and by minutes, and then by second. You put one pede in front of the other. Smile by smile. Spark cycle by spark cycle.”

First Aid's grip on his armor tightened, but Ratchet was not about to tell him to let go. It was better-easier-comforting to offer consolation to another.

“You keep doing it like that, even though you think you can't possibly keep on, that you're getting nowhere. And then one day you'll look behind you and see how far you've come and you'll be amazed at yourself.”

First Aid's field flexed against his, revealing for the first time, the deep well of grief he kept hidden. He shook again, face hidden to Ratchet's optics.

“I think... I think I can do that,” First Aid managed.

Ratchet's lips curved into a thin smile. “Me, too, kid. We'll try it together. All right?”


Primus, but he wished Wheeljack were here.

“Okay,” First Aid agreed.

“Good. Now why don't I comm Perceptor to take over for a little bit and both you and I get some recharge?”

First Aid edged out of the hug, the light in his visor dimming. “Actually, I'd rather just stay here...” His fingers twisted together, and he hunched into his armor again.

Frag Shockwave to the Pit and back. And while he was at it, Ratchet intended to yank Megatron out of the Pit to murder him again. Along with whoever else was responsible for destroying Defensor. Fragging Starscream wasn't giving any names.
Ratchet leaned down and tipped a finger under First Aid's chin, urging the younger medic to look up at him. “Why don't you come stay with me and Wheeljack for awhile? Truth be told, I'm finding our room a little quiet myself, and I think Jack's going stir crazy dealing with me all the time.”

Indecision ate into First Aid's field. Ratchet didn't want to push, but he also hoped that First Aid agreed. The company would do both of them good, and he didn't want to send First Aid away alone. It wasn't working or helping.

“All right,” First Aid finally said and a touch of relief entered his field. His visor brightened by a visible degree. “Call Perceptor. We can look out for each other.”

Ratchet smiled.

Thank you, Rung.

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Kup, unfortunately, was right. There was nothing and no one to be found in the Ark. Nothing to salvage. Even the personal mementos had been ruined by Decepticon hands.

It was petty destruction, petty revenge. So much internalized hate. Optimus gathered that it was a miracle a treaty had been signed at all.

He and Soundwave returned to what he had internally dubbed Base Camp to find that very little had changed. The Engineering team was still hard at work on fixing the space bridge, though Wheeljack had commed to say that he was confident it would take less time than originally anticipated. Hound, Trailbreaker, and Ravage vanished into the wilderness, following the data Drift had given them.

Kup and the rest of his team continued to do whatever it was they did while they waited for news from Cybertron. Training, by all accounts.

This left Optimus and Soundwave with nothing to do and no way to assist. Optimus busied himself by hovering over Kup and his team in the command center. Soundwave took over the communication console, evicting a rather mouthy blue racer in the process. One look from the stoic former Decepticon, however, and Blurr clamped his mouth shut.

Kup had not been offended. He'd tossed Soundwave a sideways look and puffed on his cygar. His attention was better focused on the many stories he had for Optimus, of all the battles with the Decepticons and the ruined colonies Ultra Magnus' Wreckers had found over the past four million years.

Kup's team was... odd, Optimus learned.

From Drift, the former Decepticon Lieutenant turned Autobot, who walked around with more bladed weapons than Optimus thought a single soldier needed. To Blurr, a racing legend who talked faster than the average processor could manage when he became agitated. And then there was Hot Rod, the brightly-colored mech who didn't seem to have any specific talent, just a range
Drift called Hot Rod 'runt' which often led to multiple tussles that ended with Drift sitting smug atop a fuming Hot Rod. After which Kup would kick both of their afts and send them in opposite directions, one to patrol and the other to monitor duty.

Even millions of years later, monitor duty was still universally loathed.

Despite the devastation, Optimus was glad to be on Earth. It was not Cybertron. It was not inhabited by three factions struggling to share space and squabbling over every little thing no matter what the treaty said. It was quiet and serene, and Optimus was actually allowed to be alone.

He had never taken himself for a mech who desired solitude, but it had become such a novel concept as of late that he reveled in it.

He snuck out of the temporary campground and comment center early in the morning, long before the sun rose over the horizon, and went for a drive. Too many times did he have to stop and nudge abandoned vehicles out of the road. He avoided the routes Drift and Hot Rod and Blurr used for their races and cleared his own.

Optimus never saw or heard any humans. Perhaps it was better that way. Though he did miss them. For such a small species, they were intriguing. They had so much promise, so much potential.

And Megatron had taken everything from them in his pursuit of power. Just as he had done to Optimus and the Autobots.

The early morning drives helped clear his thoughts. Optimus could let his wheels roll across the pavement and think of nothing. Every once in a while, Soundwave sent him a ping. It wasn't even a full communication, but a short check-in to ensure he was fine and not in need of assistance. Optimus pinged him back, and that was the extent of their interaction.

They left him alone, for which Optimus was grateful.

Optimus always returned within an hour of full sunrise. He received his updates from Cybertron – most of which came in the form of thrice daily reports from Ultra Magnus – and sent his own comments back in return. The three factions were, for now, keeping to their own chosen cities.

Optimus wondered if they would ever fully integrate and how much time would have to pass before that would become an acceptable proposition. Perhaps never. Especially so long as they clung to their badges, Decepticon, Autobot, or otherwise.

There was so much resentment. It would be difficult to overcome it.

But if there was one thing that Cybertronians excelled at, it was perseverance. Hatred and resentment were pushed down, buried deep, while they all worked together for the sake of a steady supply of energon. Medics and construction workers freely traveled among the three state-factions, though less so to Nova Cronum. Even if they all waited on bolts and brackets to see who would be the first to shatter the uneasy tension.

Work on the space bridge progressed at a steady pace.

The Cybertronian crew finished first, likely because they had more assistance, but the Earth crew
was not far behind as they had less to repair. Jazz's sabotage efforts had been concentrated on Cybertron's end. Any damage done to Earth's end had been unintentional and mainly consisted of blown fuses, scorched circuits, and part replacement.

A week later and the space bridge was repaired on both ends. Travel between Earth and Cybertron in an instant was restored. The celebration in the air was physically tangible and even Optimus smiled beneath his mask.

Because he stood in front of the swirling vortex and watched an Autobot and a former Decepticon exchange high-fives. When he passed through the space bridge on Earth and walked onto Cybertron on the other side, he saw Autobots, Decepticons, and Neutrals openly congratulating each other.

They would still need to plant Cybertron in a stable orbit somewhere so that they weren't constantly recalculating space bridge coordinates, but for now, they had a steady supply of energon. They did not have to worry about lacking energy to fuel everyone and their construction equipment. It was one less thing to cause rifts among the three factions.

“Welcome back, sir.” Ultra Magnus greeted him on the other side, looking painfully stiff compared to the celebrations around him. But then, that was simply Ultra Magnus' way. He took comfort in his own gravity.

They all had their coping mechanisms.

“Thank you, Magnus. Are there any urgent matters?” Optimus asked, but his second was already handing him a datapad before he completely finished the query.

It was, to no surprise, a matching request from both Metalhawk and Starscream to discuss the ramifications of what an open space bridge meant and how they intended to handle the guardianship and management of it. Politics, in other words. While they had all agreed that control of the space bridge would be shared, particulars had not been discussed.

For the moment, Optimus had left Kup in charge of Earth. He could trust Kup to be impartial – evidenced by his willingness to accept Drift into the Wreckers – and he knew that Kup could not be manipulated. Not to mention that Hound and Trailbreaker and Ravage would need a point of contact on Earth, someone to provide supplies if needed and to serve as a check in.

The humans, if any survived, were hidden, but they could still be a threat. Optimus had learned to never underestimate them.

Ravage remaining behind had been a bit of a surprise. Optimus had not known that a cassette could be separate from their carrier. But Soundwave assured him that Hound was in possession of the necessary mods required to support any need Ravage's casseticon reformat might require.

Optimus didn't understand and suspected it had a lot to do with carrier culture and frametype so he let it stand. As long as Ravage was in no danger, and Soundwave was not concerned, Optimus would let it be.

Besides, Hound and Ravage were obviously friends and gaining something out of it. How Trailbreaker fit in, if at all, Optimus didn't know. It wasn't his business. But all three had volunteered for the mission and Jazz had declared Hound in a fit mental condition that he could handle it.
It can only help him, Jazz said. He always did like Earth more.

Optimus didn't know how to help his soldiers. But if this eased Hound's pain, then he would not refuse.

Kup kept Drift and Roadbuster, but sent Hot Rod and Blurr back with Optimus. From the way the two gaped behind Optimus, he was beginning to think that neither of them had ever seen Cybertron. Which was possible given that they were both from one of Cybertron's many destroyed colonies.

“I see,” Optimus said and skimmed the datapad again. At least they had postponed the meeting for the next day, giving Optimus time to attend to anything the Autobots needed of him.

His pseudo-vacation on Earth was over.

There were other matters, too. Ratchet wanted permission to visit Shockwave to see if there was anything to be done for the twins. He had already obtained clearance from Starscream and Grimlock, but wanted to clear it with Optimus first. He declined an escort, stating he could take care of himself.

Optimus would agree and send Ratchet with one anyway. He did not think the Decepticons would cause any harm to Ratchet under Starscream's watch, but he didn't want to send Ratchet alone either. Wheeljack was back, so Optimus would send him, along with a more forceful backup. Someone like Springer with perhaps a bit more tact.

Speaking of...

Optimus looked up from his datapad to see Springer stride past him. He swept Hot Rod up in an embrace that had the former laughing and the latter looking embarrassed.

“I'm fine!” Hot Rod said as he patted the triple-changer on the back. “Honestly, I missed all the action, bro.”

Bro?

“Springer has, more or less, taken Hot Rod as a surrogate sibling,” Ultra Magnus said when he noticed Optimus’ gaze. His tone softened. “Like many of the survivors I've pulled from the colonies, Hot Rod is an orphan. Springer's younger brother was killed in the war.”

Springer put Hot Rod down, only to scrub his hand over the brightly-colored mech's helm. Hot Rod laughed and tried to fight him off, though Springer was twice his mass. Blurr stood back and watched them.

Well, that saved Optimus the trouble of calling someone to find Hot Rod and Blurr both rooms and future assignments. He would let Springer handle that, provided that Ultra Magnus approved.

“It is stories like theirs that make this difficult, Optimus,” Ultra Magnus added. He cast a glance toward Soundwave, who didn't appear to be paying them attention, but Optimus wasn't fooled. “I am glad for the peace, but it is hard to forget.”

“I know, old friend.” Optimus cycled a ventilation and headed toward the building they had re-
purposed into a command center. “And yet, truthfully, there is none of us – Autobot, Decepticon, and Neutral alike – who did not come out of his war without having lost something or someone.”

“That is the unfortunate truth.”

Soundwave joined them, Laserbeak on his shoulder, and Ultra Magnus handed him one of the datapads he had tucked under his arm.

“These are the issues I feel you are best equipped to handle,” Ultra Magnus explained as Soundwave accepted the pad and gave it a once-over.

“Gratitude extended.” Soundwave dipped his helm, Laserbeak copying the motion.

“Is there anything urgent that we missed?” Optimus asked. He finished perusing the report Ultra Magnus had gathered for him. It was fairly straightforward.

Work progressed steadily, if not slowly, on the facilities that were immediately necessary. Their medcenter was up and running, though it only consisted of the bare essentials. They were in the process of converting stable buildings into residential units and were currently able to house thirty percent of the resident Autobot population. There was no shortage of energon, even with the space bridge out of commission.

“Not missed, per se,” Ultra Magnus said, and he sighed, dragging his hand down his face. “There is the matter of Cliffjumper. I have received no less than three requests that we make a final decision regarding his fate, one of which was a rather blistering demand from your chief medical officer.” He ex-vented forcefully.

Optimus fought back a wince. Yes, Ratchet could be forceful when the situation called for it and especially when he felt there was a medical need being ignored. Combine that with a Ratchet who was perennially in need of a vacation, missing his conjunx endura, and suffering from all manner of inner turmoil, Ratchet could be blistering indeed.

“Suggestions?” Optimus asked.


An opinion Optimus struggled to share. He couldn't condone what was essentially murder, but he couldn't blame Cliffjumper either. Certainly Blitzwing deserved a worse fate than what was almost a merciful shot to the helm and sparkchamber. Optimus, also, could not be certain that he would not have done the same to Megatron, if given the chance.

However, Optimus couldn't allow his Autobots to think that it was all right to seek out personal justice. The last thing he needed was Autobots sneaking into Decepticon territory and meting out their own idea of punishment.

It would be the fastest way to return to war.

“And the Neutrals?” Ultra Magnus asked. Optimus was rather proud that he didn't even dispute Soundwave's statement.

While Soundwave still did not wear any sort of badge, he had clearly aligned himself with the
Autobots, though he enjoyed free passage to the Decepticons and Iacon whenever he pleased. If any Autobots gave him a hard time, Optimus had not noticed and Soundwave had not spoken up. Then again, he doubted there was a single Autobot willing to call out someone like Soundwave, who didn't need a weapon to kick a mech's aft.

“Metalhawk indifferent,” Soundwave said as they paused in front of the makeshift command center building, which loomed over them in its half-finished state. It had been suitably re-purposed from an old courthouse. “Cliffjumper's actions considered abhorrent, but Blitzwing’s conduct equally barbaric.”

Ultra Magnus snorted a ventilation. “Taking the high road then. How very like Metalhawk.” He frowned, his field prickling with distaste. “Those Neutrals and their insistence that they are better than both Autobots and Decepticons will be what reignites the war, Optimus. Except it'll be Them and Us.”

“I am determined it will not come to that,” Optimus said. He crossed his arms over his chestplate. Ultra Magnus did have a valid point. It had been a little over a week since the treaty had been signed by the three factions. While Optimus had expected some grumbling, he did not anticipate that it would be directed toward the Neutrals. Starscream and Grimlock did a good job of keeping the most objectionable Decepticons locked up. They had also proved that they intended to punish those who deserved it. But Metalhawk was open with his disdain, condescending in his cooperation, and overall contemptuous.

For Autobots and Decepticons alike, who had given everything the war, it was hard to swallow.

“What is Jazz saying?” Optimus asked. He wouldn't have a chance to touch base with his third in command until later this evening, if at all.

Right now Jazz was doing what he did best and Optimus left him to it. He trusted Jazz to do the right thing.

“Hawk's all bluster and bluff,” Magnus said, to the tune of someone parroting another's comment.

Yes, that certainly sounded like Jazz. Meaning right now Metalhawk was all talk and no action, but he would probably be a problem in the future. Perhaps it was time he and Optimus had a private chat, leader to leader, without the potentially antagonizing presence of Starscream.

“And what do Grimlock and Starscream say about Cliffjumper?” Optimus asked. It was perhaps their opinion which mattered most as the assaulted party had been a Decepticon, no matter his wrongdoings.

Optimus had already made up his mind to visit Cliffjumper immediately after catching up with Ultra Magnus. He wanted to get a better idea of Cliffjumper's mental state before he made any further decisions.

“Grimlock places blame on Blitzwing,” Soundwave answered, and Laserbeak bobbed her helm with a touch of pride. Perhaps she had been the one to witness that conversation. “Starscream more concerned with perception.”

In other words, Starscream didn't particularly care about what happened to Blitzwing and was more worried about potential Decepticon rebellion.
This would require a delicate balance.

“I see,” Optimus said. He cycled a ventilation and tucked the datapad into his subspace. “I'll go speak with Cliffjumper now. After which, I will either have him transferred to the medbay or leave him in the brig until I can sentence him.”

Ultra Magnus tipped his helm in a bow. “Sometimes, the illusion of progress is what is most important. If you have no further need of me, might I be dismissed?”

Optimus smiled and patted him on the shoulder, rather pleased that he could do so without flinching. “Yes, of course, old friend. I don't think there is anything of immediate importance. Take a shift or two for yourself. Inform Springer that I approved.”

“Thank you, Optimus.” Magnus patted Optimus' arm and dismissed himself, his field speaking of a quiet relief.

Only Soundwave remained and Optimus knew, without having to ask, that he planned to accompany Optimus as he visited Cliffjumper. Soundwave appeared content to be, more or less, Optimus' assistant. Optimus had asked him more than once if he wanted other duties, but Soundwave demurred.

Eventually, the lack of reason wouldn't be enough. Perhaps it was because Soundwave was accustomed to being the quiet left hand after serving Megatron for so long. Perhaps Soundwave was uncomfortable with his lack of a defined role. Maybe it was neither of the two and something else entirely.

For now, however, there were other issues at hand.

Optimus started toward the door, Soundwave falling into step beside him. “I'll ask you to wait in the outer office when I talk to Cliffjumper,” Optimus said quietly as he pushed the door open manually.

They reserved energy still, and Optimus hoped to continue doing so for the foreseeable future. The track rattled and bits of dust rained down on his helm and shoulders. Despite the foot traffic, the air still puffed out at him with the distinct, flat odor of disuse.

“Oh, understood,” Soundwave said. He reached up and patted Laserbeak. She butted against his hand in approval, and then seemed to understand, because she folded herself into cassette mode and returned to Soundwave's dock. “Autobots uncomfortable around Soundwave.”

For more reasons than one, not that Optimus was tactless enough to say so. “It was a long war,” he said.

The holding cells were a floor down, and Optimus headed for the slope—well, similar to what humans used but more appropriate for Cybertronians whose sizes ranged from Rewind to Skyfire.

“Optimus Prime not uneasy.”

He pushed the door open and held it for Soundwave, their gazes meeting. “No,” Optimus said. “I don't suppose I am.”
He ought to be, he realized. He had faced Soundwave across the battlefield on more than occasion. He had suffered a mind invasion on Megatron's orders from Soundwave.

Yet, he did not feel uncomfortable in Soundwave's presence. Not even now with them in this quiet, abandoned slope-well and no one around to hear them. Soundwave could easily attack him and given Optimus’ current condition, he might even win. They were of a height and mass. It was possible.

Yet, Optimus did not fear for that.

“Query?”

“I gather it's because I trust you,” Optimus said as they walked the slow circle down to the next floor and the next swinging door. “I trust you don't wish to see me harmed, and I trust you only want what's best for you and your cassettes.”

Soundwave paused in the doorway, helm tilted. “Optimus... trusts?”

“Is that really a surprise? I am a weak-sparked Autobot fool, after all.” Optimus tried for humor, but it fell a little flat. Perhaps quoting Megatron was not the best choice. He had enough of hearing Megatron in the back of his mind without giving voice to the tyrant.

“Weak, Optimus is not,” Soundwave said. He was near enough that Optimus could sense the barest hint of Soundwave's field and registered something genuine in it. Almost like... pride. “Soundwave honored by trust.”

“You've earned it.” More interesting was that Optimus honestly thought so. “Now let us go see what we can do for Cliffjumper.”

Chapter End Notes

Feedback is always welcome and appreciated. ^_^
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Song for this chapter is "Not Alone," Linkin Park

Of all mechs to find on guard duty, Optimus was not surprised to see Smokescreen here. He was their self-proclaimed psychologist, though he had no formal training. Jazz had, in all likelihood, assigned him shifts here as Hound was now on Earth (with Trailbreaker to serve as his nannybot) and Jazz only needed himself to look after Mirage.

Smokescreen looked up from his datapad as Optimus rounded the corner. He smiled, and even managed to hold on to his smile when Soundwave appeared behind Optimus. Smokescreen was nothing if not well-trained. He knew how to hide his dislike.

“Come to see Cliffjumper?” Smokescreen asked as he sat upright in his chair, the two legs hitting the ground with a dull thunk.

“Yes. Is he online?”

Smokescreen’s optics flicked to a viewing monitor that he turned in Optimus’ direction. “I don't think he recharges, to be honest, Prime. He does if First Aid comes down and gives him a sedative, but he won't initiate recharge on his own.”

Optimus frowned behind his mask. It didn't take a genius to figure out why. Optimus himself had trouble recharging.

“I see. Will he talk?”

Smokescreen sat back in his chair, picking up his datapad again. “He'll talk to you.” He sounded certain of it.

Optimus cycled a ventilation. He was honored by Cliffjumper's faith in him, even if he had so thoroughly failed his soldiers. He did not deserve their loyalty.

“I understand.” Optimus turned toward Soundwave. “You'll wait here, please. I don't know how he'll react to your presence. You can keep Smokescreen company.”

Oh, to be a turbofly on the wall for that conversation. Optimus did not know if the two of them ever faced each other directly during the war, but he trusted Soundwave not to incite anything. And he trusted that Smokescreen would play his mind games and get nowhere.

“Understood,” Soundwave said.

“And here I thought this shift was going to be boring.” Smokescreen's grin broadened, though it didn't reach his optics.
Optimus didn't feel a second warning was necessary, though he gave them both a look before edging past the desk and stepping down the hall. It was brightly light and almost cheerful, which contradicted the miasma of misery that lingered in the air. There were several cells here, but only one was occupied.

It was the first on the right and Optimus stood outside of it, staring in at the figure seated on the berth. Cliffjumper leaned forward on his knees, his hands clasped in front of him, his gaze focused on the floor. His armor was scuffed, paint missing in huge splotches, and there were multiple, visible small dents. The kind of damage that self-repair took care of once major issues were finished.

The kind of repairs that would have been completed as an outpatient or even in medbay, if Cliffjumper hadn't found some way to escape, steal a weapon, sneak into the Decepticon brig, and assassinate Blitzwing. It was still a marvel that he'd managed to do so.

Through the crackling of the energon bars, Cliffjumper seemed smaller. Optimus' spark ached at the sight of him. Cliffjumper had always been the type who came across larger than life, his shorter stature never holding him back from being a danger or a threat. Not to mention the inexplicable amounts of weaponry always stashed on his frame.

“Cliffjumper?”

The minibot raised his helm slowly. His optics were dim at first, but they brightened the moment he spotted Optimus. He went still before curling into himself and turning away from Optimus as though ashamed.

“Prime,” he said, his vocals riddled with static. “I'm sorry, Prime. I had to do it. I just couldn't... I had to do it.” His fingers tangled together, knotting until Optimus heard the knuckle joints creak from the pressure.

Optimus lowered himself to a crouch. It still left him taller than Cliffjumper, but he felt less like he loomed over the poor minibot.

“I know,” he said gently, careful to keep his tone neutral. “I understand, Cliffjumper.”

Silence. Cliffjumper's hands wrung together further. Optimus couldn't feel his field through the negation barrier set up by the cell, but he could only imagine how tortured it was.

Optimus didn't need further convincing.

Cliffjumper needed help, not punishment.

“I want to release you back to the medbay, Cliffjumper,” Optimus said. “But I need to know you won't try to escape again. Do you understand me?”

Red plating shuffled with discomfort. Cliffjumper was shaking, Optimus realized. His vents hitched as well, little snuffling sounds echoing in the cell.

“I had to do it,” Cliffjumper repeated, his vocals riddled with static. He looked up, and his optics were so bright, they were nearly bleached of color. “I couldn't function knowing that monster lived.”
Optimus worked his intake. He, too, had borne the brunt of Astrotrain and Blitzwing's attention. But Optimus was almost of a size with them. He'd survived the encounter, albeit with more than a few joints misaligned, his lining torn, and his valve aching. He couldn't imagine what Cliffjumper had suffered.

“And anyone else?”

Cliffjumper's fingers untangled. He looked down at them and squeezed them in and out of fists. “Do you know what they did to me, Prime?” he asked, his vocals perfectly clear all of the sudden, though there was no emotion in them.

They were so dead they sent a shiver of dread down Optimus' backstrut.

“Every day,” he said. “Every night. Every second they didn't leave me tied up in some corner, starving and broken.” His fingers trembled. His ventilations grew more rapid. “And if they weren't fragging me, then they were renting me out to Decepticons who didn't want to bother taking care of their own pet.”

Optimus' tank churned. “Do you--”

“Remember who they were?” Cliffjumper's engine growled. His hands balled into fists. “I remember every last fragging one, Prime. And you can bet your aft that if I see them again, and I'm armed, the last thing I'll be is in a forgiving mood. So maybe it's better you leave me here to rot. Because I'm not going to work with a Decepticon, no matter how nice they think they are now.”

Optimus' spark ached. The connectors where the Matrix had once been reminded him of their emptiness as though the old Primes called to him, telling him to fix what had been broken.

“Is that what you want?” Optimus asked. He still believed Cliffjumper needed help, not prison.

But he couldn't condone outright murder the likes of which Cliffjumper spoke. Because such a thing would catapult them right back into war. Decepticons still outnumbered Autobots, and were Grimlock and Starscream to be killed, Optimus did not know who would take their place. Nor did he know whether that new leader would care for the details of the truce. They could find themselves right back where they started, and he doubted Metalhawk would care enough to provide the Autobots aid.

Optimus couldn't take that risk.

Cliffjumper's intake bobbed. He stared at Optimus without really seeing him, his optics bright, but blank of emotion.

“I want to be free,” Cliffjumper hissed out, his vocals torn from his intake like a wounded animal. Optimus was glad, in that moment, that he could not sense Cliffjumper's field. “But whether it's these walls or the memories I can't forget, I won't be. Not ever again. I'm done, Prime. I'm done.”

He looked away, such a sharp turn of his neck that Optimus heard the grind of his gears. His jaw clenched.

“There are ten names on my list,” Cliffjumper gritted out, and his engine became a grinding pitch. “No one will tell me if they live or not. If you let me out, I guarantee you, I will hunt every last one of them down, Prime. And nothing will stop me.”
There was a finality in his tone that Optimus knew could not be reasoned with. Nor was he sure he wanted to. How could he convince Cliffjumper to lay aside his anger? He had every right to be this furious, this vengeful. He had every right to hate the mechs who had used and abused him.

It wasn't healthy, but Optimus couldn't blame him. If Grimlock had not killed Megatron, Optimus was not so sure he wouldn't have done so himself. The opportunity had been stolen from him, and perhaps it was better that way, but Optimus understood.

It was frightening how well he understood.

Optimus pushed himself to his full height. “I will discuss with Ratchet and Jazz and Ultra Magnus what we can do for you, Cliffjumper. In the meantime, is there anything that you need? I would like to send someone down here to take a look at your injuries, if you'd like.”

“It doesn't matter.” Cliffjumper's tone returned to that dull, dead pitch. The vibrancy present in his death threats had abandoned him. “I'm broken, Prime. There ain't no fixing me.”

Optimus' hands curled into fists. Apologies bubbled to his lips, but he swallowed them down. He couldn't ask for Cliffjumper to forgive him. He had failed his soldiers. He deserved every ounce of his guilt. He deserved Cliffjumper's hatred and blame.

“Even so,” Optimus murmured. “I will do what I can.”

Cliffjumper said nothing further. He only drew into himself, until he was a tiny, huddled frame on the berth, his red paint dulled. He did not at all resemble the brash soldier Optimus remembered. He was but a shadow of the mech he used to be.

Truthfully, they all were.

Optimus excused himself, his spark heavy and unable to hold his helm up high. If he ever needed a reminder about how much he did not deserve this title of Prime his soldiers had given back to him, Cliffjumper would serve as a poignant example. He had failed to protect Cybertron, he had failed to protect his soldiers, and he had failed to stop Megatron.

“Optimus?”

Smokescreen cut through his thoughts and Optimus paused as he stepped back into the main room. Smokescreen was still behind the desk, visibly relaxed though there was a tension beneath his armor that belied it. Soundwave remained near the corridor entrance. He hadn't moved since Optimus left them alone.

Optimus shook his helm to shake off the melancholy. For right now, he would have to be Prime. He could chastise himself later.

“How has any medic been to see him? Other than First Aid to offer sedatives, that is,” Optimus asked.

Smokescreen sighed and scrubbed his face. “He refused further treatment. Unless you want to legally declare him incompetent, we can't force it on him.”

Which would enter all kinds of ethical and moral discussions. Optimus did not want to force anything on Cliffjumper he didn't want. It would be assault of a different kind, no matter how well-
meaning.

“And his list?”

Here Smokescreen sighed again, fatigue suddenly etching itself into his faceplate. “Half of them are confirmed dead,” he said, his vocals soft enough not to carry to Cliffjumper's audials. “Two are in the Decepticon prison with no possibility for parole or release. Two more have petitioned for temporary release and are under consideration. One is already out on probation.”

“You have the names?” Optimus asked.

Smokescreen nodded, pulling one of the datapads out of the desk and sliding it across the top to Optimus. He reached for it, and raised an orbital ridge when Smokescreen didn't immediately let the datapad go.

Smokescreen looked at him, holding his gaze. “In my not accredited professional opinion, Prime, he's competent. He's hurting, and his anger is justified, but that doesn't make him, for lack of a better word, crazy. If you take that choice from him, you'll be doing more harm than good.”

“I know. I had already discerned that much.”

Smokescreen released the datapad, and Optimus tucked it into his subspace for later perusal. He would ask Soundwave about the relevant Decepticons and Starscream if necessary, especially if it prevented someone likely to repeat offend from being released.

“Do you think we can help him?” Optimus asked, casting another glance toward the hallway and the branching cells.

Smokescreen rubbed at his chevron. “There's only so much you can do for someone who doesn't want help, Optimus. If he is willing, if he accepts treatment, if he talks... yes. Theoretically, it's possible. But until he makes that choice for himself, no. There's nothing we can do.”

It was a sobering conclusion. He would, of course, seek a second opinion, but Smokescreen had always been skilled at reading mecha and their intentions. He was probably right.

“I see.” Optimus bit back a sigh. “Thank you, Smokescreen. Please let me know if there is anything Cliffjumper asks for. Within reason.”

Smokescreen nodded and made himself comfortable again. “Will do, Prime.” He tilted his helm toward Soundwave in acknowledgment and picked up his datapad again.

Optimus gestured for Soundwave to follow him and together, they left the makeshift brig. Fatigue made itself known, though Optimus had done very little since returning to Cybertron. He knew he should go directly to the medcenter and ask Ratchet about Cliffjumper, but considering that Wheeljack had returned, he doubted Ratchet was there.

“Destination?” Soundwave asked as Optimus drew to a halt in the command center lobby.

Optimus paused to consider. Perhaps it would be better to send a comm. Ratchet could redirect him or maybe First Aid was available.

“One moment,” Optimus said, and accessed his comm.
He dialed Ratchet first, but received the chief medic's busy message. He skipped over Wheeljack's comm on assumption and dialed First Aid instead. The junior medic answered, but his voice lacked the usual good-natured cheer Optimus had come to recognize in him. It was understandable, given his loss, but it still made Optimus ache to hear.

“I hope I am not interrupting anything,” Optimus said, careful to modulate his vocals to sound as soothing as possible. “Is Ratchet otherwise occupied?”

A hint of humor graced First Aid's words. “Yes, sir. He and Wheeljack are in their quarters. Should I interrupt…?”

“No, that's all right, First Aid. This is nothing that can't wait. I only wished to discuss Cliffjumper with him.”

“Ah.” There was a wealth of understanding in First Aid's voice. “Do you need me to come down and see him? Is he finally consenting to medical care?”

Optimus sighed and rubbed his faceplate. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately. “It is my dearest wish that he does eventually, but at this time, he is still refusing it.”

A light of an idea suddenly lit through Optimus.

“But perhaps there is someone else I can send to convince him,” Optimus said, shifting gears. “I will let you know. In the meantime, if you could give Ratchet a message when he's free. Let him know I want to discuss Cliffjumper's treatment.”

“Yes, sir. I'll do that. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “You can take care of yourself, First Aid.”

“I'll keep that in mind, sir.”

The comm ended and Optimus rolled his helm, his shoulders feeling an intangible weight. So many of his Autobots grieving and hurt. It was worse than the war had ever been. Frag Megatron to the Pit and back.

“Query?” Soundwave asked.

Optimus startled, forgetting that Soundwave had been beside him. He shook his helm and turned toward his makeshift office, which they'd put on the same hall as their makeshift command center and conference room. It was ridiculous to hope for speedy stability, but nevertheless, Optimus longed for a fully-functional base of operations, something they could all comfortably call home.

Currently, he didn’t require that all of his Autobots reside within arm’s reach of the command center, but no one seemed eager to branch out on their own. He suspected that would change with time, but for now, everyone appeared content to bunk nearby.

“Cliffjumper's not talking to Ratchet, First Aid, or Smokescreen. I know better to think he will seek counsel from me,” Optimus explained as Soundwave fell into step beside him. “The minibots have always been a close-knit group which is probably what's contributing to his grief. He and Bumblebee are the only two who survived.”
He pinged Bumblebee, but received another busy message. Either he was occupied with Rumble or he was busy with one of a thousand tasks that the mobile Autobots were struggling to accomplish. They had a third the soldiers of the Decepticons and had to start their rebuilding from scratch. They were all scrambling to catch up, even with Grimlock offering support.

Optimus didn't think he would ever be comfortable with looking out his window and seeing a guarded Constructicon at work.

Guarded for their safety, not an Autobot's, because while the Constructicons behaved themselves and meekly built as they were told, no formerly enslaved Autobot could forget what they had done. The Autobots were particularly angry because of Ratchet, and Optimus couldn't blame them. He didn't need another incident like Cliffjumper's.

It made him wonder if that was a good reason why Soundwave remained in his proximity. While Soundwave had owned no slave, and the worst he'd done was obey Megatron's commands, he was still Megatron's favored and a high-ranking Decepticon. Brand aside, his defection would not be easily received by the rank and file.

Truth be told, Optimus sometimes startled to look up or look behind him and see Soundwave standing there. Soundwave's very image was so synonymous with the Decepticon cause that even without the brand, Optimus' danger-alerts still triggered. He had to tell himself not to cycle up his weaponry or engage his self-defense protocols.

So it was understandable.

Optimus left Bumblebee a message. There was little more he could do for Cliffjumper at the moment, which meant he had nothing left to use as an excuse to not do his paperwork.

“Nothing left but to go to my office,” Optimus said, barely refraining from sighing. “Paperwork waits for no mech.” He gave Soundwave a sidelong glance. “Are you coming with me?”

“Affirmative.”

This was quickly becoming a habit, not that Optimus was at all opposed.

One floor down and a few hallways over deposited Optimus into his sparsely furnished office, but whoever constructed it had left a spare chair. One appropriately sized for a mech of Soundwave's size, interesting enough. Optimus wasn't going to complain, but he did find it curious.

He sat down, staring with dismay at the stack of datapads that waited for him. His only consolation was that they didn't contain reports concerning the direction of the war. They only contained information regarding rebuilding and recovery, which apparently was a lot more complicated.

Soundwave sat in his own chair, pulling out the datapad Ultra Magnus had given him. Laserbeak tilted her head against his, nuzzling him for a moment, before taking flight and choosing Optimus' shoulder instead.

He smiled and tickled under her chin, a gesture he had learned she found comforting. Laserbeak butted her helm against his, a show of affection.

--Mind if I borrow your shoulder?-- she asked with a hint of mischief.
“Depends on what you need it for?” Optimus replied with a soft chuckle.

Soundwave made a noise that could have been chastisement, and Laserbeak ducked her helm. Her claws shuffled on Optimus' shoulder as though she intended to alight again.

“It's all right,” Optimus reassured with a glance toward Soundwave. “She's welcome to sit here if she likes.”

“Laserbeak: intends to recharge.”

Optimus' fingers stroked over the crown of her helm, her softer energy field butting against his own with pleasure. “If that would make her comfortable, I am not opposed.”

Laserbeak chirped and settled herself more firmly. Her feet clamped down with – Optimus noticed – a small magnetic burst that would keep her from slipping free. It was kind of nice to serve as a sleeping perch.

Optimus patted her helm indulgently and returned his attention to his paperwork. He felt the weight of Soundwave's gaze on him, but when he looked up, Soundwave was focused on his datapad.

He probably wasn't used to seeing others treat his cassettes with kindness. Something Optimus was sure was lacking in the Decepticons.

They settled into a comfortable silence. Optimus' first datapad was a summary of injuries and recovery rates, courtesy of Ratchet, and it was mostly good news. Though Red Alert's prognosis was despairing without Metalhawk's help, and Ratchet was unsure about Sunstreaker and Sideswipe's condition. Everyone else would be released soon, until all that remained were maintenance checks.

The next datapad was a summary of all the reconstruction completed in Optimus' absence, which included this shiny new office and the medbay Ratchet had made his own. They would be focusing on barracks next and had already picked out two apartment complexes that would be rebuilt.

There was a petition to allow the Constructicons a continued presence in Polyhex for faster construction. Optimus frowned, stared at it for several minutes, and then set it aside. He didn't know if it would be worth the discomfort their presence would cause multiple Autobots.

He would have to ask first.

At least one datapad didn't have bad news. Energon production was not only steady, it increased, even given their greater consumption. Earth was invaluable because of this. Optimus feared that if they did manage to find the humans, he wouldn't be able to convince his fellow Cybertronians to return the planet to its rightful owners.

Even his own Autobots would be reluctant, especially considering that it was human betrayal which was partly to blame for their loss to the Decepticons, and wholly to blame for Prowl's death. If they hadn't given him that infected datapad….

Optimus cycled a ventilation.

Losing Prowl was the first tragedy.
Optimus knew now that the humans responsible had been controlled by Bombshell under Megatron's orders and because of Starscream's plan, but that did not make the anger any less. Despite Starscream's aid in deposing Megatron, it was still difficult to look upon him with favor, no matter how helpful he had become.

A lot of Autobots had died. Too many Autobots. Too many humans. Megatron had effectively wiped the human race from existence, unless Hound's team was successful in locating them.

Another datapad was an updated roster and list of all the Autobots currently present and accounted for, their current status, and their current assignments. Optimus was rather pleased to note that there were approximately forty Autobot survivors so far. With any luck, there might be more in the cosmos, hearing the call to return home.

That they were still outnumbered by the Decepticons was disappointing, but at least for now, both Autobots and Decepticons outnumbered the Neutrals.

Soundwave stirred, his visor flickering. He tilted his helm in a way that suggested he was receiving a comm. Optimus waited for him to speak, welcoming the distraction.

"Received notice regarding call for action concerning space bridge," Soundwave said, a touch of testiness to his vocals, despite the modulation.

Optimus only needed one guess. "Metalhawk is being pushy again?" Because while Starscream could and would be pushy on occasion, Grimlock was doing a fair job of reining him in to what was socially acceptable.

Metalhawk had no such compunctions.

"Affirmative."

Optimus sighed and rubbed his hand down his faceplate. "When?"

"In two hours. Unless there is protest, in which case sarcastic suggestion to reschedule has been offered," Soundwave replied, audibly losing a touch of his calm. Frustration wrote itself into his frame language.

Metalhawk made all of them tense.

"Fine," Optimus said, and swallowed down any complaint he might have had about being exhausted or done with politics for the day. "Tell him we'll be there."

"Understood."

Optimus watched as Soundwave did as he asked. He waited for Soundwave to finish and composed his own quick note to send to Ultra Magnus. His second responded within seconds with an affirmative which made Optimus wonder if Ultra Magnus had even taken the rest he asked for.

And speaking of overworked subordinates…

Optimus leaned forward on the edge of the desk. "You don't have to be my secretary, Soundwave. Aren't there other tasks that are better suited to you?"
Soundwave audibly cycled a ventilation. “Prefer this,” he said, at length.

“How?”

“Duties similar,” Soundwave answered and shifted his weight, setting his datapad down across his folded leg. “Starscream refused. Shockwave on Cybertron. No one else patient enough. Often performed same duties for Megatron.”

Optimus tilted his helm. “You were not only his communications officer, but Megatron’s assistant as well,” he said. “Just how much of the Decepticons were truly under your command?”

It made sense. Megatron seemed to type to give orders, but then not pay attention to how they were carried out.

Meanwhile, there was Starscream who, recent events aside, always looked for a way to backstab Megatron or sabotage Megatron’s efforts. Shockwave on Cybertron was no help. Megatron had gone recruiting for the biggest and the baddest, but the fact remained, most of the civilians had gone Autobot, and when it came to organization and leadership, if you weren’t a military commander, you wanted a civilian manager.

How much of the Decepticon command structure was done from the shadows?

“More than acknowledged,” Soundwave answered.

“Why were you his third then? We never understood that.”

“Command position never sought.” Soundwave lifted a hand, touching the clear glass of his dock. “Leadership unappealing.” He paused, his visor flickering, a flash of his field indicating a level of discomfort. “Core coding incompatible.”

Optimus inclined his helm. “You mentioned it once,” he said quietly. “That you despised slavery.”

He rested a hand on the desk. “Were you a slave, Soundwave?”

Core coding was a tricky thing. Slave coding was even trickier. If Soundwave had been created with it, no amount of stripping and re-wiring could completely remove it. There would always be an unconscious urge to support and serve. Even if he could choose his master, the fact remained, it was written into his very being to serve.

Silence slipped into Optimus’ office, not that either he or Soundwave were loud mechs to begin with. Soundwave's helm dipped. His visor darkened.

“Soundwave was--” He paused, shook his helm, and leaned forward. Optimus heard a faint click as Soundwave's pedes flattened on the floor and he braced his elbows on his knees.

“I was one of many,” Soundwave continued, and Optimus realized that the click must have been him disengaging his vocal modulator. “Megatron was recruiting. He needed soldiers. He found us, the slaves, the oppressed, the broken, the beaten. He told us he wanted nothing in return, but when you have nothing, it’s easier to throw it all away for a chance to be free.”

Optimus nodded and shifted his weight, reaching to adjust Laserbeak, but the cassette hadn’t moved. She was firmly in place, and still recharging.
“So you joined him?”

Soundwave tapped his fingers on the arm of the chair. “The other options were unpalatable. Back then, he was someone to admire. His goals would have meant an end to what I had escaped.”

Admire. Optimus repeated the word to himself. Soundwave had always been touted as Megatron's most loyal supporter. While everyone else had been called into question at one point, Soundwave had never been one of them. There was a dedication there which had always spoken of something deeper than that of leader and supporter.

Optimus folded his hands on the table.

“There was a time when Megatron was charismatic. He was a mech worth following, I don't doubt that,” Optimus said, recalling the broadcasts, Megatron's speeches, the way he had so easily worked the crowds into a frenzy. “He would not have been able to keep leadership so long without it.”

Soundwave made a noncommittal noise. “Megatron's ideals were not wrong,” he said. “It was only when his goals changed from revolution to domination, that I began to get uncomfortable. Especially when he made pets of the Autobots, despite knowing how a good many of us despised slavery. After that, my faith in him whittled away.”

Optimus looked at Soundwave, trying not to squirm outwardly as much as he was squirming inwardly. He recognized this was none of his business, but he couldn't help his concern.

“Were you and Megatron ever...” He trailed off, trying and failing to find the proper term that didn't come across as juvenile.

“No,” Soundwave answered before Optimus could finish, and the finality in his tone left no room for confusion. “Megatron had favorites, those who bowed, and those he could force. I was, thankfully, not among them.”

Optimus burned to ask why not, but this was already a sensitive subject. He trod the lines of propriety as it was.

“And no one else?” Optimus asked before he could stop himself. “On the Nemesis, I mean. You left no one in the Decepticons behind?”

Soundwave shook his helm. “No. Solitude, I found, was best.”

Optimus frowned.

If Soundwave was a slave before Megatron found him, and he joined the Decepticons after, and had no lover amid the Decepticons, did that mean…?

“I can understand that,” Optimus said carefully. “Forgive me if I overstep but have you ever--”

“Yes,” Soundwave answered, again before Optimus could finish. He shifted his weight in the chair, his battlemask immediately snapping shut.

Conversation concluded.
Optimus leaned back and dipped his helm. “Thank you for soothing my concerns. You were under no obligation to answer those questions.”

“No apology necessary,” Soundwave replied, though the return to his monotone suggested an undercurrent of discomfort. “Optimus' concern for all is boundless.”

Optimus managed a thin smile. “It is one of my more annoying traits, I'm afraid.” He cycled a ventilation. “That being said, Soundwave, I do hope you understand that you're not required to work with me. You can do anything else for the Autobots that you wish.”

“Prefer this,” Soundwave said with a flash of his visor.

“You're certain?”

“Without doubt.” Soundwave inclined his helm. “If subordination required, then I would rather serve a mech worthy of my talents.”

There was compliment in there. Optimus smiled, his spark stuttering an unexpected warmth.

“I am honored to be worthy of your trust,” he said and cycled his vocalizer, forcing his attention to the datapads stacked on his desk. “I don't suppose that extends to finishing my paperwork for me, does it?”

An echoing rasp that could only be a chuckle rose from Soundwave's chassis. “Negative. Optimus' paperwork his own.”

“Can't blame me for trying,” Optimus said as he reluctantly dragged the first of the stack closer.

His only consolation was that in two hours he would have to meet with Metalhawk and the Decepticons regarding use of the space bridge.

Compared to that, he almost preferred the paperwork.

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Ratchet startled online with the unmistakable realization that he wasn't alone. He tensed, respiration quickening as a quick scan flashed through the room, demanding the identity of the intruder. His spark pulsed in the next second, offering reassurance, just as his scan pinged back a familiar, and welcome presence.

It was Wheeljack.

Ratchet sighed and sagged. He onlined his optics, still feeling groggy from his impromptu nap, one First Aid insisted he take.

“If you can insist that I get some rest then I can do the same for you,” First Aid said with that stubborn look of his, only to tack on a belated 'sir' as if that made up for him all but bullying Ratchet into some much needed rest.
He would make a fine CMO someday.

Ratchet hadn’t told anyone yet, but he was already considering replacements. He didn’t want to be Chief Medic until he offlined. At some point, he wanted to hand the reins over to a younger generation. Hopefully, First Aid wanted the task. If not, Ratchet would have to wait a while longer yet.

Possibly forever, if they couldn’t figure out how to repopulate Cybertron.

“Jack?” Ratchet called out as he turned onto his side, searching with his optics this time. Their shared quarters, just off the medbay, were still dim.

Wheeljack shuffled into view, rubbing the back of his helm. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. I only wanted to grab a datapad.”

Fatigue clawed at Ratchet, but he shook his helm anyway. “I don't mind that. Come here. You just get back?”

“Yeah. Space bridge is up and running.” Wheeljack's indicators lit up, perhaps in attempt to show his excitement, but his field didn't quite match it. Wheeljack was as exhausted as Ratchet, and the soot and dirt clinging to his armor only highlighted that.

Ratchet forced himself upright, every joint and hydraulic creaking noisily. Primus, he felt old. “That's good news, I guess.” He squinted at his conjunx, who stayed well out of reach.

Granted, that was partly Ratchet's fault. Most days, he didn't want to be touched. Most days, the feel of another mech's field was enough to send him spiraling downward. Most days, he was a poor excuse for a conjunx. He couldn't blame Wheeljack for keeping a safe distance.

“Are you expected anywhere?” Ratchet asked.

Wheeljack shook his helm. “No, but you should get some rest. If Aid sent you here, I'm sure it's for good reason, Ratch.”

He beckoned Wheeljack closer. “I'd get better rest if you were here. You were gone for two weeks, 'Jack. I missed you.” Romantic words, suddenly much easier to say now than they had been months and months before, when the Autobots were still on Earth and the war was still going strong, but so many of their friends were still alive.

Back then, Ratchet had taken so much for granted. He'd taken Wheeljack for granted. He didn't want to make that mistake again.

Wheeljack's indicators flashed a muted blue, an indication of his happiness. He came further into the room, finally letting the door shut behind him.

“Missed you, too, Ratch. Earth, it… it ain't the same. The 'Cons really did a number on it.” Wheeljack set an armful of stuff down on already overloaded table and came closer, daring to sit on the edge of the berth.

Ratchet did him one better; he pulled Wheeljack into his arms – dirt and all – as Wheeljack squawked in surprise. Their fields smacked together, jarring at first. It was taking them a while to
find their rhythm again, but soon enough, their fields knitted at the edges.

“I'm glad I didn't have to see it. And sorry you had to,” Ratchet said as he fell backward and dragged Wheeljack with him, his smaller conjunx falling over him in a sprawl.

“Ratch!” Wheeljack spluttered, flailing to find a more comfortable angle.

It was amusing enough that Ratchet cracked a smile. Relief struck him when Wheeljack didn't squirm free, but instead shifted to lay in Ratchet's arms, their plating notched together in the perfect configuration they'd discovered over the centuries.

“I was trying to give ya space,” Wheeljack said.

“I know. And I appreciate that.” Ratchet tilted his helm, resting it against Wheeljack's. “But right now, I don't want space. I just want you.”

Wheeljack audibly cycled a ventilation. “Whatever ya want, Ratch. I hate that I wasn't there for you.” A small shudder raced through his frame. “Every time I remember that we got separated, that I shoulda been there, it makes me so angry.”

Ratchet stroked a hand down Wheeljack's back, fingers briefly flirting with his winglets. “It's not your fault, Wheeljack.”

“I know that. I still wish it could have been different.” Wheeljack curled an arm around him, his hand resting against Ratchet's side as though with caution. “I should have killed every last one of them,” he added with a quiet fury.

Ratchet gnawed on his bottom lip. “I know.”

Silence fell between them, their fields mingling such that Ratchet couldn't tell where his own ended and Wheeljack's began. Wheeljack was warm against him, his frame softly thrumming, and the sense of his mass was a welcome one.

Ratchet had often recharged with a Constructicon on top of him or around him, but they were so massive he felt smothered and trapped. Wheeljack was smaller, lighter, and he was comfort, like a familiar blanket. His field pulsed nothing but love and calm, rather than lust and possession.

He never pushed; he always asked.

Ratchet stroked Wheeljack's back, tracing the path of his spinal strut. “Tell me about Earth?” he asked, careful to keep his vocals soft. He didn't want to spoil the moment.

“It's a ruin.” Wheeljack's reply was bleak and despairing. “Megatron destroyed every sign of civilization, save that which he could use. If there are any human survivors, Hound hadn't found them by the time I left. There's nothing green anymore. It's as dead as Cybertron is, Ratchet.” He buried his face against Ratchet's intake. “I hope I never have to go back.”

“You shouldn't have to,” Ratchet said. “But if you do, I'll go with you next time. I'll have to face it eventually. Better to do it together.”

Wheeljack made a noncommittal noise. His engine purred. “I hear we have a new roommate.” He lifted his helm, optics bright with humor. “Empty nest syndrome, Ratch?”
“Pah. Enough of that!” He idly swatted Wheeljack's aft, though it was nothing more than a light tap. “Kid needs someone to look after him. He'll work himself into stasis if not.”

“I know.” Wheeljack folded his arms under his chin so that he could better see Ratchet. “But meanwhile, our other children are all grown up and ruling the Decepticons.”

Ratchet snorted. “Our children,” he repeated. It wasn't exactly true, but the Dinobots had always treated the two of them as their parents.

“Yep. Ours.” Wheeljack beamed at him and where their chestplates notched, Ratchet could feel their sparks pulsing in sync. “We did good, Ratch. Aren't you proud of them?”

“I am.” He curled around his conjunx, stroking Wheeljack's back. He tried – and failed – to dredge up any arousal. He would have to settle for this closeness for now.

Wheeljack understood. But Ratchet hated that he'd allowed the Constructicons to damage him so much. He felt he should be stronger than this.

“When all this settles, we should go see them,” Wheeljack murmured. “Let ’em know how proud we are.”

“We will,” Ratchet said and dimmed his optics, soaking in the moment, taking comfort in Wheeljack's presence.

Wheeljack's engine purred. His systems started to settle. He shifted to make himself comfortable. Ratchet knew if they lingered much longer, the both of them would succumb to the pull of recharge. But Wheeljack was a mess, and Ratchet didn't feel like scrubbing the berth later.

“Come on.” Ratchet gently patted Wheeljack's aft again and nudged him with his other hand. “You need a wash, and I need to get up out of this berth. So how about I help you with one to encourage the other.”

Wheeljack laughed, his optics sparkling. “Fine by me, Ratch.” He leaned up, pressing their forehelms together. “You know I'd do anythin' for ya, right?”

“I know.” Ratchet pressed a kiss to Wheeljack's blast mask. “Come on. Up and at ’em.”

It didn't take much more convincing than that.

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Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Theme song for this chapter is "Finding Home," Zack Hemsey

Optimus considered himself to be a mech of patience and understanding. He was not prone to disliking other mecha, nor was he prone to a foul disposition.

Metalhawk, however, tried his patience like no other individual Optimus had ever met. Including Megatron. At least Megatron had been obvious in his intention to destroy everything he touched, and it was never difficult to guess what Megatron would do next.

Not only was Metalhawk the perfect example of a politician, but it was impossible to read his intentions. It was clear that he hated Autobots and Decepticons both. He considered himself superior because he hadn't engaged in the ugliness of war, and his hands weren't nearly as stained as those sharing a table with him.

A sentence from Metalhawk could send Starscream from calm to outrage in the blink of an optic. If not for Grimlock's steadying presence, Starscream would have had his hands around Metalhawk's intake more than a few times.

Optimus was hard pressed not to launch himself across the table.

He was having a difficult time being polite to Metalhawk, much less liking him. Metalhawk's subordinates, at least, were a tad more tolerable. By a few measurable degrees.

Every meeting had become an exercise in diplomacy. If Megatron were here, he would have already blown Metalhawk's helm away.

Neutral or not, Metalhawk was everything the Decepticons had initially banded together to destroy. He represented Cybertron of old. He was a noble, he was a politician, and he thought he knew what was better for everyone.

Optimus did not hate or loathe Metalhawk. That honor was reserved for a mech gone and melted down into slag.

But he was having a very, very difficult time remaining civil.

“Unacceptable,” Metalhawk said as he crossed his arms, the long spars on his elbows nearly smacking Skids seated next to him. “I will not have my people barred from using a commodity that should be available to everyone.”

Optimus sighed and rubbed his forehelm. “It is not only the Neutrals, Metalhawk. We are simply suggesting that use of the space bridge be restricted only to those who are assigned energon production and refinement.”
“Who I am certain will be Autobots and Decepticons alone.” Metalhawk's vents huffed disdainfully.

“If you have any citizens who are willing to work on an organic planet, they are more than welcome to join the workcrews,” Starscream hissed out through gritted denta. His optics darkened to fiery embers, and only Grimlock's hand on the back of his chair seemed to keep him calm.

Optimus wasn't sure why or what for and was afraid to ask and find out. At least for now. It seemed to be working for the Decepticon command so it was a matter for another day.

“I do not understand why any of the Neutrals would want to go to Earth to begin with,” Optimus added, glad for the mask to hide his frown. “There is nothing there of worth but our energon facilities. And it would be offensive to treat Earth as a tourist attraction.”

“It is not about Earth. It is the principle of the matter.” Metalhawk's yellow optics were harsh and cold. “The space bridge should be free for all to use.”

“When we have a stable economy, we can allow that,” Starscream said, vocals approaching a growl. “For now, it is reserved for energon production alone.”

“Scientists propose search for construction materials,” Soundwave offered, his monotone cutting through the rising tension. He and Ultra Magnus both were the most calm influences in the room. “Earth's resources many.”

Optimus cut Soundwave a look. “Not until we are certain that no humans remain. I won't plunder their planet any more than is necessary.”

“Oh, Primus. Not this again,” Starscream muttered, rubbing at his forehelm. “Yes, yes. We've already figured that out, Prime. I think what your emotionless partner is saying is that we can use the spacebridge to search, dare I say it, space for the materials we need.”

“That would require constant recalibration and a heavier energon use,” Ultra Magnus intoned. “We needed to stabilize all of our energon manufacturing facilities first.”

“Of course,” Starscream said with a roll of his optics. “I only meant in the future.”

Thin fingers rapped on the table. “You are all circling around the discussion at hand. I will not abide by having only Autobots and Decepticons in charge of the space bridge,” Metalhawk insisted, his voice ringing loudly through the room.

Oh, dear Primus.

Optimus' helm started to ache. It had nothing to do with his fatigue, he knew. But Metalhawk's vocals had a tone that grated on his audials. He didn't know his patience was so thin.

“The Neutrals are not known for having a trained fighting force,” Ultra Magnus said, carefully picking his words. “You are not familiar with Earth, and as far as I am aware, only one of your numbers is a skilled engineer. Why do you insist on this?”

“Because I know how it is going to go,” Metalhawk's optics narrowed. “You will form your little alliance, and before we realize what is happening, you will evict us from this planet, this home, that is rightfully ours.”
Optimus offlined his optics and hid behind his palm for a few ventilation cycles.

“Fine,” Starscream growled as he sat back in his chair, close enough that Grimlock's thumb could brush the back of his right wing. Which, oddly, Starscream did not object to. “What would make you happy? Since you're the only one who's being difficult.”

Metalhawk tilted his helm up. “I am only fighting for what we deserve,” he insisted. “But if you insist on having a guard around the space bridge, then I insist that we share the duty equally among the three factions.”

It would have been a reasonable request if the Neutrals weren't all, as a rule, as snobbish and self-important as Metalhawk. Optimus had heard more than one comment from Autobots and Decepticons that if anything started the war up again, it would be one more snide mumble from a Neutral claiming how much better they were for not fighting because they'd managed to be peaceful.

“And this would mollify you?” Ultra Magnus asked with a sideways look to Optimus, perhaps seeking his agreement.

Optimus' frown deepened. It seemed like a simple request, but he suspected that Metalhawk had a second motive. Sabotage, perhaps? Something he could blame on one faction or the other? Perhaps he intended to start the war again and hoped the Autobots and the Decepticons would wipe each other out?

It was kind of curious how quickly Metalhawk had arrived in the wake of Megatron's death and the rescue of the enslaved Autobots. Conveniently quickly, as a matter of fact. As if he had been lingering somewhere, watching and waiting for his opportunity.

Hmm. Something to bring up with Jazz perhaps.

“Yes,” Metalhawk said after a moment of silence. “It would. I even have an idea of which of my citizens would be best suited to the task.”

Optimus leaned back in his chair and rested his hands on the table. “Very well,” he said. “Then in the interest of cooperation, we shall all contribute guards to the protection and maintenance of the space bridges. Two per faction to be divided into two teams, one on each side of the bridge. Does that seem fair?”

“More like a recipe for disaster,” Starscream muttered subvocally, but he shrugged. “Sure. Whatever. So long as I don't have to listen to you whining anymore.”

Metalhawk's optics narrowed. His armor fluffed out as he bristled.

“Starscream,” Grimlock said, and it was apparently all he need say because Starscream huffed and sat back in his chair.

“We concur,” Starscream said.

“Then we do as well,” Ultra Magnus said, inclining his helm. He pulled a datapad from his subspace, his fingers flicking across the screen. “I will set up the schedule. Send me the designations of your mecha, and I will work them into the rotation.”
Metalhawk opened his mouth, perhaps to argue, but Optimus was quick to cut him off. There was only so much of Metalhawk's posturing that Optimus could take.

“Magnus is best suited for organizing,” Optimus said as he rapped his fingers on the tabletop. “He will work out the best rotation so that everyone is treated fairly. I trust that there is no one in this room who believes he would do otherwise?”

Ultra Magnus had a reputation for his impeccable sense of right and wrong. He lived by a strict moral code and there were many who believed he wrote the book on the Autobot Guidelines. The Galactic Council regarded him highly. Even the Decepticons respected him, which spoke a lot. Though that didn't stop them from trying to kill him or calling him weak-sparked.

No one argued.

Thank Primus.

“Good,” Optimus said. “Now if there aren't any further matters to discuss, we can consider this meeting adjourned.”

No one brought up anything further. Metalhawk and his subordinate did not look the least bit cowed or defeated, but they didn’t revel in victory either. Metalhawk grudgingly rose from his chair, his second beside him, and the two strode from the room, leaving Autobots and Decepticons behind.

In their absence, Starscream growled and jerked up from his stool, pacing back and forth. His wings hiked upward, also betraying his agitation.

“I do not like that mech,” he hissed.

Ultra Magnus set down his datapad with a defining click. “For once, Starscream, I am in agreement with you. And I never thought I’d ever hear myself say that.”

The ache in Optimus' helm continued to build. Lack of recharge, Ratchet would probably call it. The perils of leadership, Optimus would retort.

“He is determined to make every step of this process as difficult as possible,” Starscream continued with a broad gesture. His pedes clipped louder across the floor. “Are you sure we can't just boot him off and be done with him?”

“He would only return,” Optimus replied with a heavy sigh. “And he is right in that there are more Neutrals than any other faction. If we were to evict Metalhawk, I am quite certain he would return with an army.”

It didn’t matter that the Neutrals were not as skilled at war as the Autobots and Decepticons. They had the sheer advantage of numbers, outnumbering the Autobots and Decepticons combined nearly four to one. While the Neutrals had fled and hid, their numbers stabilized. Unlike the warring factions, whose numbers dwindled steadily with each passing decade.

“It was a rhetorical question anyway,” Starscream snipped.

How on Cybertron did Grimlock put up with that? Or maybe Optimus didn't want to know.
“Was there anything you two felt we needed to discuss without Metalhawk's presence?” Optimus asked, though he looked, also, to Ultra Magnus for guidance.

Starscream shook his helm. Grimlock sat up on his stool. He had a habit of barely speaking in these command meetings. Whether because he wanted Metalhawk to believe him a dumb brute or he trusted Starscream, Optimus didn't know. Another mystery. Sometimes, he wondered if he ever knew Grimlock at all.

“No.” Starscream glanced at Soundwave. “If we did, I'd just bring it up to Soundwave. He seems to be making it a habit of becoming a go-between.”

Oh? This was news to Optimus. He cycled his optics and looked at the mech who had become both his shadow and his assistant.

Soundwave inclined his helm. “Diplomacy a habit,” he said.

Starscream laughed. “Sure. Let's call it that. A habit.” He leaned forward on the table, hands flat against the top of it.

They stared at each other.

“Am I missing something?” Optimus asked.

“Nope,” Starscream chirped and winked an optic. “Not at all. Just a little joke between former friends.” He pushed himself off the table and whirled away, striding toward the door. “Now, I have work to do and I'm sure you do, too. So off I go.” He flicked his fingers over his shoulders in what Optimus assumed was a parting gesture.

“Call me if something important comes up,” Starscream said as the door slid shut behind him.

Optimus sighed and shifted his gaze to Grimlock. “Shouldn't you go after him?”

“Does he need a babysitter?” Grimlock asked, thankfully dropping the mask he had put on for Metalhawk.

“He's Starscream. He needs a leash,” Ultra Magnus muttered.

Optimus cycled his optics. He stared at his second in command, who seemed to realize that he'd spoken aloud and perhaps hadn't meant to because his faceplate colored. He hastily gathered up his datapads and rose to his pedes.

“I meant,” Ultra Magnus said with an askance look at Grimlock, “that he has a history of making poor choices.”

The light behind Grimlock's visor flattened. “Starscream is my second,” he said in a slow, measured tone. “If I didn't trust him, he wouldn't occupy that position.”

“My apologies.” Ultra Magnus dipped his helm, visibly and honestly contrite. “I didn't intend to imply otherwise.” His gaze shifted to Optimus. “Prime, if you'll excuse me.”

It was the closest thing to fleeing a room Optimus had ever seen Ultra Magnus do. Granted, it was
probably equal parts embarrassment and irritation. Magnus did not like being called out. But he hated even more losing control.

Grimlock chuckled and chose to leave as well. “Your second is interesting, Optimus,” he said with a glint to his visor that suggested he was more than a little amused. “Your other one suits you better.”

Optimus raised an orbital ridge. “I think Jazz would argue with you on that one.”

“I wasn't talking about your spy.” Grimlock laughed again, but he left before Optimus could form a response to that.

What was with everyone and being mysterious today?

Optimus sighed and rubbed his forehelm. Soundwave shifted beside him, pulling out a datapad and flicking through the information on it. Optimus, honestly, still wasn't sure what Soundwave did when he wasn't following Optimus around. Starscream's words struck a chord with him.

“Have you made yourself into a negotiator?” Optimus asked.

“Definition varies,” Soundwave answered without looking up, most of his attention focused on the work in front of him. “Soundwave, trusted by Starscream. Respected by Metalhawk.” He paused and lifted his gaze. “Friend of Optimus Prime?”

Optimus smiled behind his mask. “Yes, I think that is a fair assumption. But why was Starscream so bothered by it?”

Soundwave hesitated. His systems audibly reset, and he cycled a long ventilation. He shifted position on the chair, hydraulics creaking.

“Our interaction complicated,” he admitted. He drummed his fingers on the edge of the datapad. “Starscream, observant. Implications many. All personal.”

“I see.”

Decepticon politics had always been far more convoluted than Autobot politics. Optimus did not even pretend to understand them. So long as it did not affect the truce, he would not delve too deeply.

“Further work today?” Soundwave asked.

Optimus shook his helm. It was getting late and he'd hit the ground running from the moment he onlined this morning. He would have never guessed how much busier a time of relative peace would be compared to war. In many ways, the endless battle was simpler.

Ratchet had also told him, in no uncertain terms, that if he didn't get an appropriate amount of rest, Ratchet would relieve him of duty. So long as Ultra Magnus and Jazz supported him, Optimus would have to comply. He could think of little more loathsome at the moment. Long hours of rest and quiet would allow his mind to wander to places he did not want to venture.

Optimus would heed his medical officer's advice. Perhaps in doing so, he might set an example for the rest of his subordinates as well. There were many who needed to rest and recover.
“No. I believe I will retire for the evening.” Fatigue gnawed at his backstrut, his knees, his entire frame.

He was fully healed, but for some reason, Optimus couldn't shake this endless exhaustion. Not even the lack of recharge made sense. He had, at times, gotten much less during the war. Yet, a prevailing fog of weariness had eclipsed him.

“You are more than welcome to do so yourself,” Optimus added. He pushed to his pedes and stretched his arms over his helm to ease the kink in his backstrut. “You work as hard as anyone, Soundwave.”

The communications mech ducked his helm. Were he anyone else, Optimus would accuse him of being modest, almost embarrassed.

“Hard work familiar,” Soundwave replied as he shifted in his chair, his vents loosing a small cough. “Offer noted, however.”

“Good.” Optimus gathered up his own work, an uncomfortably large amount of datapads, and shoved them into his subspace. “Recharge well, Soundwave,” he said as he made his way to the door.

“Pleasant dreams, Optimus.”

It was an exchange that Optimus dared call normal. And with the former third in command of the Decepticon army no less.

Would wonders never cease?

0o0o0

Bumblebee ached. Exhaustion tugged at every cable and strut. How was it that peace-time drained him more than war? He felt he could recharge for a week, save that he knew he would have to get up tomorrow and do it all over again.

There was far too much work for far too few hands. Autobots were outnumbered by the Decepticons. As more Neutrals arrived, it wouldn't be long before they outnumbered both Bots and Cons, too. By the numbers, the Autobots had come out the worst by the end.

The reports were sobering. Bumblebee hadn't realized how many Autobots Megatron had killed before they ever reached the surface. Most, he'd chosen to destroy mid-air. He hadn't bothered to see if they were worth using. He'd had them targeted and killed without a second thought.

Most hadn't sent identifiers. They would probably never know all the designations of the Autobots Megatron had murdered. Then again, the missing list was staggering.

“Here.”

Bumblebee groaned as he forced himself to lift a hand and accept the cube Rumble offered. It was
a light mid-grade and judging by the scent, subtly flavored. Rumble had never forgotten, apparently, Bee's favorite accents.

“Thanks,” Bumblebee murmured as he curled his fingers around the cube. His energy levels weren't terrible. He didn't really need the cube.

Walking around with a full tank was a luxury. It was one of the few they had right now. He could top himself off without feeling guilty. Energon was the one thing they did not have in short supply, even if Megatron had to raze Earth to make that possible.

Bumblebee looked at the glittering pink energon, and all he could see was the blood of the humans in it. His tanks churned. He wondered if Spike and Sparkplug and Carly and Chip had made it out all right.

Megatron had probably aimed for them first.

Rumble sat down beside him with a wince and a slow ex-vent. He ached as much as Bumblebee did. For every task that Bumblebee attended this week, Rumble had been right beside him, offering to help without hesitation.

“Primus,” Rumble said as he stretched out his legs. “Who woulda guessed that Blaster'd be a worst taskmaster than the boss?”

Bumblebee's lips curled toward a smile. “He's passionate.”

Today, he and Rumble had volunteered to help Blaster and his cassettes repair and reboot their communication systems. The more Autobots who returned to Cybertron the better. But the only way to contact them was to get a better communications array because their current one was slag and didn't transmit any further than a dozen miles from Cybertron's surface. They needed to transmit across galaxies.

Rumble was the actual technician. Bumblebee had made himself the official retriever of needed tools and extra pair of hands. Sadly, the war had not given him much practical skills beyond sneaking, spying, and killing.

By comparison, the Decepticons seemed more civilized.

Rumble sipped at his cube. “Yeah, I mean, I get it. We need to get that array up. But mech, I am aching.” He rubbed at his opposite shoulder, fingers digging up under an armor panel.

Bee chuckled and rolled his neck. His own cables were kinking up.

He glanced at Rumble. They were sitting close, not enough that they touched, but enough to be in each other's space. He could feel the outer edges of Rumble's field, politely held close to his frame. Rumble hadn't pushed for anything. He was content to let Bumblebee set the pace.

He looked back at his cube before pulling a sealer from his thigh compartment and slapping it over the top. He would drink it later.

“Not hungry?”

Hungry. A human term. They'd spent so long there.
Bumblebee shook his helm and stowed the cube into his subspace. “I’m fueled enough,” he said and draped his arms over his pulled up knees. He looked over at Rumble. “On Earth... how much warning did the humans have?”

Rumble froze. What little Bee could sense of his field flattened. His fingers flexed around his cube and then he slumped.

“Not much,” he admitted, and scraped his free hand down his face. “We had their leaders locked, thanks to Bombshell. He kept ’em tractable while Megatron waited to blindside the Autobots on Cybertron.” Another sigh slipped free. “Once we had you contained, Megatron went back to Earth and just set the Seekers free.”

“On everything?”

Rumble shook his helm. “No. He had them avoid the power plants and energy farms and nuclear reactors. Places we could modify for our use. The less populated areas were ignored, too. But anyone in a big city or close to a military installation was gone in the first few hours.”

The queasiness returned. Bumblebee was glad he'd chosen not to drink the energon. His shoulders slumped as he stared out at the glimmer of starlight on Polyhex, and the flickering multitude of streetlights, interspersed with the occasional headlight. Finding a sun for a stable orbit was one of their priorities.

“You thinkin’ about your human friends?” Rumble asked.

Bumblebee didn't dare allow himself to hope. “Do you know anything about them?”

Rumble sighed. “No,” he said, and then added, “Sorry.”

“It wasn't your fault.” Bumblebee cycled a ventilation. They'd all done things to survive. Sometimes, that even meant following a vicious tyrant like Megatron.

After all, the Decepticons were the ones who had found their victory. Technically, they were the winning team.

“If I had never left, I might have joined the Autobots with you,” Rumble said.

Bumblebee looked at him, taking in the contours of Rumble's face and frame. He was a curious mix of familiarity and stranger. His paint scheme was the same, but he was smaller than Bee remembered, perhaps due to the fact he'd downsized to fit into Soundwave's dock. He'd also been modified extensively, with upgraded weapons and heavier armor, everything needed to survive a planet-wide civil war.

But his face was familiar. He'd changed nothing about it.

How many times had they lain together, recharging or chatting, and Bumblebee had looked into his visor and asked himself how lucky he was?

“If we'd never argued, I might have joined the Decepticons with you,” Bumblebee said. “Frag, I might have become one of Soundwave's cassettes.”
Rumble outright laughed and leaned toward him, bumping their shoulders together. “Sorry. But ya don't have the right spark for it, Bee. It's not about size, it's about culture, remember? Me'n Frenzy were always searching for a host spark.”

Yeah. Bumblebee remembered. That had been the catalyst of one of their frequent fights. Bumblebee had not liked Frenzy and Rumble's first or second choice for host.

He wished he'd been there when they met Soundwave. Bumblebee wasn't that familiar with Soundwave now, but from what he'd observed over the course of the war, Soundwave wasn't a bad mech. He treated his cassettes well, and Rumble and Frenzy obviously loved him.

“Are you going to stay with Soundwave?” Bee asked.

Rumble rolled his shoulders. “There aren't many choices left for us. I mean, I could upframe again, me and Frenzy both. But you know what that means if we do.”

Yes, he did.

“And I made you a promise,” he added.

Bumblebee reached for Rumble's free hand, relieved when his former lover allowed their fingers to tangle together. Primus, he'd missed Rumble so much for so long. He'd buried it deep and pushed it down and reminded himself only of the terrible times to make it easier. But he'd never forgotten all of the good times.

“You did,” Bumblebee replied. He leaned in and lay his helm on Rumble's shoulder. It was a bit of an awkward fit now that Rumble was smaller than him, but he enjoyed the way their field edges crackled and slid together.

“Does that mean ya forgive me?”

“Honestly, we're both to blame,” Bumblebee replied. “But right now, I need one less thing to worry about, and I want to stop pretending I haven't been dreaming about this, right here, for the entirety of the war.”

Rumble's field rippled with relief and happiness. “Ya want to try again?” he asked with a tight squeeze to Bumblebee's hand.

“Yeah. If you want to.”

“I do.” Rumble's helm tilted, resting against Bumblebee's.

“It's not going to be the same, you know,” Bumblebee murmured as he listened to the unfamiliar sounds of Rumble's frame. His ventilations, his hydraulics, all of it was different.

The only familiar song was the pulse of Rumble's spark.

“We're different. We've changed,” Bumblebee continued. His spark throbbed heavily. He knew he had changed from the sharp-tongued but cheerful mech he'd been when they met. “We may not even like each other anymore.”

“Maybe,” Rumble agreed. “But we'll never know if we don't try, right?”
Bumblebee's lips curved upward. “When did you become the optimistic one?”

“I'm trying something new.”

Bee laughed, unable to help himself. Trying something new, hm? Maybe Rumble had the right idea.

o0o0o

There weren't many mecha who could sneak up on Hound. In fact, he was pretty sure that no one alive could do so. He had the most finely tuned sensors of anyone he had ever met. It was why Mirage could never hide from him.

As such, Hound could always find Ravage, and always knew when she was nearby.

A smile curled his lips as listened. In the dark, with only the light of the stars and his biolights to brighten the landscape around him, Hound heard nothing. But he knew he wasn't alone. His sensors told him so.

Still, he pretended. He gazed up into the night sky, the one thing about Earth that hadn't changed, and waited until Ravage got within a few steps of him.

“Miss me?” he asked.

There was a playful nudge to his back before Ravage slinked around his right side, her sleek curves gliding against his arm. “Someday I will learn to get around those sensors of yours,” she said, her optics a barely noticeable glow.

“Let me have my one defense again you, sweetspark,” Hound replied with a warm grin.

Ravage scoffed and draped herself over his lap, her frame purring, her field a welcome push against his own. “I was trained to be the best. I won't rest until I am.”

Hound rested a hand on her back, feeling the pulse of her spark through the layers of her battle armor. “You never answered my question.”

Ravage arched her spine, head swiveling up to look at him, optics half-shuttered. “Miss is not an accurate term. I am unused to sleeping alone.”

“You could have cuddled with Trailbreaker.”

She made a face, and Hound laughed.

“While your friend is charming, he is not the mech I wish to share a berth with.” Ravage pushed to her feet again, whirling around in the blink of an optic and rising up, her forepaws landing on his chestplate. “Or haven't I made myself clear?”

One push and Hound tipped backward. His pose made it so he could have remained upright, but he
didn't want to. So he fell back and allowed Ravage to sprawl on his chestplate, warm and enticing.

“Mmm, now this is familiar. I approve,” Ravage purred. Her field slid against his, pulsing with affection and yes, lust.

Two days of freely sharing affection was not enough, apparently. Then again, Hound was reveling in the fact they no longer had to hide their relationship.

Her forepaws crossed, neatly concealing his Autobot badge.

“I'm sure you do,” Hound murmured. Both hands stroked down her spinal strut and caused her to arch into his touches. His engine purred, vibrating up into her frame. “But fair is fair, and we can't have Trailbreaker take watch every night so we can canoodle.”

Ravage blinked at him and burst into laughter. “Canoodle?” she repeated, her audials raised in amusement. “You've been spending too much time in Mirage's company. Where did you pick up such a word?”

“I read!” Hound retorted, but his hackles didn't last long. He knew Ravage was only teasing him. He stroked a hand down her back again, feeling the tangible shift of plating beneath his fingertips. He could feel the heat beneath her armor, the weight of a repressed need.

His hand drifted further down, toward her aft, but her claws kneaded against his chestplate. A warning growl rose in her chassis.

“Hound.”

His hand returned to her mid spinal strut, fingers sliding into seams and stroking the tense cables beneath.

“I don't know why you are so resistant,” he said. “I want to do this for you.”

Ravage rested her helm on her paws and started at him, her field stroking against his with affection and comfort. “I am not some beast who needs completion or I'll go feral. I can wait until I can return the favor.”

“That's not what I meant.”

“I know.” She sniffed as if offended. “But I want to make it clear to you. I can wait. And I will continue to wait. I don't need physical gratification to survive.”

Hound's lips twitched toward a smile. “Very well. As you insist.” He flexed his field against hers, letting her sense his apology, before he replaced it with affection. “Thank you for coming to alleviate my loneliness.”

“You know me. Self-sacrificing to the end.”

Hound laughed and let it drift into silence. Ravage nestled in closer, making herself quite comfortable. Her frame continued to purr, her spark pulsing strong enough that Hound could feel it through their armor.

Hound listened to Ravage's vents as they cycled steadily before he ventured his question into the
quiet night. “Have you decided?”

Ravage stirred, obviously already slipping back toward recharge. “Hm?”

“If you're going to stay with Soundwave,” Hound clarified, his spark pulsing in his chamber. He wanted to know the answer, and he dreaded it as well.

“Oh.” Ravage paused, her eyes slitting open as she arched her spinal strut and looked down at him. “Yes, I am. For now. Until you're ready.”

Hound cycled his optics. “Ready?”

Ravage nodded. “To consider bonding.”

He stared at her. He reset his audials, because he wasn't sure he heard her correctly. “You… you would have me?”

“Why wouldn't I?”

Hound pressed his lips together before he answered with words he couldn't take back. He didn't want to talk about all the ways he was damaged and broken and unrepairable, no matter that Ratchet had given him clearance.

He didn't want to talk about how he might never want to face again. Or how much the idea of anyone touching his equipment repulsed him. As much as he loved Ravage, he couldn't even handle her glossa on him. The idea of baring himself sent him into waves of panic.

Touch meant pain. His valve meant pain. His spike, now that it was replaced, meant pain. Interface meant pain.

In his short of time in custody of the Coneheads, Hound had learned that lesson.

He couldn't seem to shake it free. It was as if they'd managed to somehow rewrite his coding. He didn't know if he was repairable.

Hound couldn't condemn Ravage to a lifetime of celibacy. Not if she refused to accept his touches in return.

Oddly enough, he had no problems touching her. He had no problems giving her pleasure or cuddling with her and feeling the lust in her field. But the minute her attention turned toward his own equipment, he balked.

He didn't know if that would ever change.

“Hound.”

His gaze slid toward her, his frame stilling under her intent gaze.

“I love you,” Ravage said. “I loved you even when you became an Autobot. I have waited for you since before this foolish war began. I will continue to wait for however long it takes.”

His spark throbbed. His fingers pressed harder against her back, almost squeezing her against his
chassis. “I do not deserve you,” he said as he shuttered his optics and tilted on his side, curling around her.

Her glossa nipped at the bottom of his jaw. “Well, fortunately for you, that is not your decision to make. Unless, of course, you've decided you no longer hold any affection for me.”

“No!” His optics snapped online, though her field pulsed with affectionate amusement. “That's far from the case, Rav. I just don't want to burden you.”

She hummed and stretched her frame, sliding it along his. “What are partners for it not to ease the burdens of one another? Now you hush. It is my turn to recharge.”

“I am supposed to be on watch you know.”

Ravage shuttered her optics, putting her head up under his. “There's nothing around for miles. I'd know if there were. There's nothing to watch for.”

“I'm still not going to recharge.”

Her paw flexed against his chestplate. “Suit yourself.” Her power plant slowed into idle, her paw remaining hooked on an armor plate.

She was honestly going into recharge.

Hound chuckled to himself and wrapped his arm a little tighter around her. A quick sweep of his scanners found Trailbreaker nearby, still snoozing away. Their bodyguard, so to speak, or just another comforting presence for Hound who was recovering but hadn't wanted to do so on Cybertron.

He wanted to be on Earth instead, as ravaged and painful as it was. He still hoped to find the humans. He still hoped some had survived. They deserved to have their planet back.

For now, though, he would settle for cuddling with his partner, and staying online until the end of his shift, watching the stars to keep himself awake.

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Frenzy was not often left alone.

If not Soundwave, then he always had Rumble, or one of his other siblings. But now he found himself in the unusual position of being alone.

Ravage was off on Earth with her one true love, and Buzzsaw was with the boss, and Laserbeak was cozying up with Optimus Prime, and Rumble was with his one true love, and they had requested some alone time.

Frenzy, who had been tasked with keeping an optic on his twin in case things with Bee went sour, was left all by his lonesome.
Frag if he knew what to do with himself.

So he wandered around Polyhex, pretty fragging glad that he'd scrubbed off his Decepticon badge. No one gave him more than a second glance. They probably thought he was one of Blaster's cassettes. Stupid Autobots. Thinking all cassettes looked alike.

To be fair, Frenzy did look like his brother. But he didn't look anything like Blaster's cassettes.

For one, he was actually armed. And he had armor. And he was trained. Blaster's cassettes were practically sparklings. They were useless. All cheerful and full of stupid facts.

Che.

Bored, Frenzy wandered into Autobot headquarters and continued wandering. Should he call it Autobot headquarters or just headquarters? The boss hadn't started wearing the badge yet, but he hadn't said they were Neutral either. Neutral meant they'd have to go live with Metalhawk in Nova Cronum.

Like frag.

Frenzy might not be a Decepticon anymore, but he slag sure wasn't going to be a Neutral. He had too much pride for that.

He passed the conference room, but it was empty. The meeting about the space bridge must be over then. He checked the bond and found Soundwave had retreated to their new quarters down the hall from Optimus. He sent a querying ping, but Frenzy waved him off.

No need to worry, boss. All's well. Your kiddies are all off cuddling and it's just Frenzy, wandering around headquarters alone.

Soundwave returned with a pulse of affection and a warning to be careful. He was getting ready to recharge and had ‘Beak and ‘Saw with him. Good.

Rumble and Bee were still cuddling after a hard day's work with Blaster. Seriously, mech was more of a taskmaster than Soundwave ever was. Ravage was too far to get more of a faint sense of her across the bond. Frenzy could tell she was happy and content, but that was it.

Happy and content were good enough for him.

Frenzy wandered past the medbay, but all was quiet. He knew the Autobots' own twins were in there, left in a messed up state by Shockwave. Frenzy shuddered. He didn't know what Shockwave did, but he was glad Soundwave made sure he and Rumble stayed out of old one optic's greedy hand.

Jazz was on duty in the command center when Frenzy took a peek. While Jazz was fun to rile on a good day, the way he paced back and forth in there suggested today was not that day. Best to keep his distance.

Frenzy wasn't ready for recharge so he wandered back out of headquarters and paused on the main steps, pondering where to go next.

That was when something splattered against the side of his helm. What the frag?
“You look lost, Decepticon!”

Frenzy rubbed at his helm, coming away with a splatter of paint. The Pit? He looked up, searching the exterior of the building until he caught a small mech on top of the entrance overhang.

Not just a small mech. A cassette. One of Blaster's.

“Look again, Autobot!” he shouted, and shoved a thumb toward his empty chestplate. “Or maybe your optics ain't workin', cause I'm not a Decepticon.”

“Could have fooled me!” the cassette yelled and bounced something in his hand, something brightly colored.

A balloon?

Frenzy planted his hands on his hips. “Why don't ya come down here and talk, Autobrat? Or are ya scared?”

Laughter echoed through the air. The mech juggled the bright ball again, and then chucked it downward at Frenzy, who covered his helm and dodged. He wasn't taking any chances.

The ball splatted on the ground a few feet from his pedes, splashing purple goo in all directions. So. It was paint after all.

Frenzy scowled and glared back at the overhang, but the cassette was gone. Where…? He spun, searching all around him, but not fast enough to avoid another splash of color to his right shoulder panel.

“Hey!” he shouted as he stared at the green spot on his arm. “That crap doesn't come off easy, ya know.”

“I know.” There was another chuckle, closer this time, and the sound of pedesteps as the other cassette stepped into view, spinning three more colored balls in his fingers. “That's part of the fun.”

Frenzy glared in the mech's direction. He was blue and white, and Frenzy was sure he was Blaster's, but he couldn't remember the Autobrat's name.

“Fun?” Frenzy repeated.

The Autobrat grinned and tilted his helm. “You've been wandering around Polyhex like you're lost or something. Thought you could use a distraction since your brother is nomming all over Bee.”

“And this is how ya decided to introduce yourself?”

The Autobrat tossed a ball his direction and Frenzy caught it, giving the rubbery sphere a light squeeze. It had give to it and the contents sloshed around.

“I'm Eject,” he said with a wink. “You're Frenzy. There. Now you know. So do you wanna play a game or would you rather stay bored?”

Frenzy spun the ball off the tip of his finger. “You tryin' to be nice or somethin', kid?”
Eject snorted. “I’m older than you are, Decepti-dork.” He smirked and juggled his two paint balls. “Make up your mind. Clock’s ticking. We just hit the two minute warning.”

Well, Frenzy thought as he eyed Eject and the potential for causing mayhem to his paintjob, it was better than wandering around Polyhex.

Besides, the boss said they were supposed to be making nice with the Autobots.

This’d be a good place to start.

****
He couldn't move.

He was getting used to being on his knees. He hated that he'd acclimated. His wrists had been shackled behind his back. That, too, was so commonplace as to be almost comfortable. His shoulders no longer ached.

This, however, was new.

Megatron's spike in his mouth was almost familiar. But usually it had a purpose. One of many overloads the warlord demanded. One of many humiliations.

Megatron wasn't after an overload, however. He'd called Optimus over, he'd extended his spike, and he'd demanded Optimus service it. Optimus had bent to the task with a sigh, a sense of resigned fatigue.

He'd bent with no ceremony, sucking Megatron's spike into his mouth and working him quickly. He'd used several tricks he'd learned, including prodding at the transfluid slit with his glossa. Usually, Megatron left him to do it. He didn't bother Optimus so long as Optimus did what he was told.

This time, Megatron looked down at him with burning optics. Amusement glimmered in his field. Mischief, too, was present, and it was that which made Optimus uneasy.

Megatron's hand rested on his helm. This, too, wasn't unusual. Optimus offlined his optics, resigning himself to Megatron taking the lead, using him however he wanted. It was easier that way, sometimes, as Megatron often overloaded faster when he did that. Then Optimus would be pushed aside where he could cough in peace.

Both of Megatron's hands rested on his helm now, a heavy, noticeable weight.

“You look so good with a spike in your mouth,” he said. His grip became heavier. He pushed.

His spike sank deeper into Optimus' mouth.

“You almost look comfortable, Optimus. Like you're enjoying yourself.” Megatron ex-vented, a wave of heat rolling over Optimus.

He pushed again, and kept pushing, until Optimus' lips were flush with Megatron's panel, and Megatron's spike was down his intake. His intake fluttered with discomfort. He diverted his
ventilations so as not to overheat.

“But that's not the point of this,” Megatron said.

One hand lifted from Optimus' helm, and Optimus made a small noise. He tried to pull back, but Megatron's remaining hand pushed hard against him. Fingers dug into his helm, keeping him in place.

Optimus' intake squeezed. It convulsed. His tank roiled. His hands drew into fists.

Megatron didn't move, didn't thrust. His spike pulsed and swelled on Optimus' glossa and against his intake. His engine rumbled.

“Stay,” he said. His free hand groped the tabletop.

Optimus onlined his optics. Megatron dragged a datapad closer and flicked it on. His attention shifted to the datapad and its contents. He didn't seem to care about Optimus at all.

Heat built in Optimus' chassis. His intake spasmed again. His tank flipped. Warnings cropped up in his processor. There was something lodged in his intake.

Optimus squirmed. Megatron's fingers dug in harder. Optimus' helm creaked. Red optics flicked to him. Megatron shifted as though to make himself more comfortable, and kept Optimus pinned against his array. His lips and denta pressed against Megatron's panel. All he could smell was Megatron's scent, his arousal, the heat of his plating.

Humiliation burned. Sometimes, he forgot he was supposed to feel like this.

“That's better,” Megatron said, the amusement ripe in his field. “Can't let you get too comfortable, can I? Else you might think you've earned it.” His optics darkened. “And your comfort has never been a part of this.”

His words echoed in Optimus' audials. His intake rippled again. His tanks churned, torn between evicting the paltry energon Megatron had granted him, and keeping it.

Self-preservation won.

It was a long time before Megatron made an effort to overload.

His optics snapped online. His tank convulsed, and Optimus had a moment of blind panic. His entire frame shook, but more important was the rising surge of sickness. He flailed and tossed himself out of the berth, landing hard against the floor. His gyros reeled. His processor spun.

He shoved himself to hands and knees and managed a few unsteady, crawling steps away from the berth before his tank clenched again. A low moan escaped Optimus as the lingering memories of nausea overwhelmed him.

He had only a moment to brace himself before his tanks initiated a purge, and he expelled all of the energon he had yet to process. Drinking half a cube before recharge was apparently a bad idea as it splattered on the floor beneath him. He cycled his optics shut, fingers scraping against the floor, as his frame heaved, and his tank continued to clench.
Primus!

His temperature climbed upward. Warnings cascaded down his HUD. But his frame wouldn't settle until every last drop of unprocessed energon emptied itself. He swore he could still taste Megatron on his glossa, beneath the sourness of his own spill.

Optimus spat, trying to clear his mouth of the foul taste.

He backed away from the mess, and pushed himself back against the berth. He stayed there on the floor, legs and knees wobbly, unwilling to try standing. He swiped the back of his hand over his mouth, wiping away a few drips of sticky oral lubricant. He drew up his knees, resting his elbows upon them and buried his face in his hands.

His armor clattered. His field was a wild frenzy. He was hot all over. It wasn't sickness, he knew.

His energy levels hovered at thirty percent, relying only on the energon he'd managed to process overnight.

Ratchet would be appalled.

Optimus cycled a ventilation. He couldn't stop trembling. Heat cascaded through his system.

He realized, all too late, that it wasn't entirely because of the unexpected purge. Both of his panels were wide open. His valve leaked. His spike was half-pressurized. He shook because his lower half throbbed with arousal.

Primus.

Optimus groaned and pushed the heels of his palms against his shuttered optics. He tried to will the unwelcome arousal away. Megatron had trained his frame all too well apparently.

Megatron liked to use him and then make him overload afterward as a reward. His frame quickly learned to associate humiliation with pleasure. Every time Megatron debased him, his frame responded. He learned to be ready, to ease the pain. It left him in a constant state of mild arousal.

He hated no longer being in control of his own frame. He didn't know how to fix it.

The floor was chilly beneath his aft. The vents pumped cold air into his suite. Optimus tried to focus on the cold sensations. He refused to self-service. He forced his panels to close, ignoring the arousal still pinging him notices.

His chest ached. He ignored that, too.

Optimus was old enough and wise enough to know that recovery was a long process. He knew that nights like these were going to be common until he could figure out how to process what happened and move on from it.

Logic, however, did not help him when it came to moments like this. When recharge only made things worse and he woke up both purging and aroused and sick to his core. When he loathed himself and Megatron both, and knew, logically, that none of this was his fault, but still feeling as though he should have prevented it anyway.
Primus, but he wished Ironhide were here. Or Prowl, even. He desperately wished to have their counsel.

Optimus curled into himself, covering his helm with his arms and tucking it against his knees. He thought if he made himself small enough, he could block out the world. He could find his center.

He missed the counsel of the matrix. More often than not, it was a silent weight in his chest. Occasionally, he could tap into its wisdom if he was fully centered and seeking guidance. But all that remained was a raw ache where Megatron had yanked it from his chassis. Ratchet had repaired him, but he still hurt.

Ghost pains, Ratchet called it. He spent so long with the Matrix attached that his frame would need time to adjust to its absence.

Optimus focused on ventilating until the rippling in his tank ceased and the tremors in his armor eased. He watched his internal temperature cycle down, degree by degree; the slow count of it helped him center himself. He took the memory of the purge and shoved it down deep.

The arousal ebbed away, leaving him drained and exhausted. So much for a whole recharge cycle and the requisite defrag. Optimus felt worse now than he had when he laid down last night.

Time, Ratchet insisted. Time was all they needed.

Optimus sighed.

He did not return to recharge. He managed to unfurl himself when he felt marginally better. He sought out cleanser and rags to clean up the mess he made, missing cleaning drones in that moment. His tanks pinged him for more fuel.

The idea of consuming energon left him ill all over again.

He was at thirty percent. He could survive a little longer. Certainly, it was a luxury compared to what Megatron allowed him.

Optimus spent longer than he should have in the washracks, the temperature near-scalding. He should have been more conservative, but he wanted to scrub away all traces of the unwanted memories. He thought if he scrubbed a little harder, he might scrub away the memory of Megatron's hands on his plating, Megatron's spike in his valve, and Megatron's spark rasping against his.

Ugh.

Optimus shuddered.

He forced himself out of the washrack when he could no longer justify lingering. He checked his chronometer, but it ticked far too slowly toward first shift.

Optimus tried to busy himself with the stack of datapads that he’d brought back with him from the office. Ratchet didn’t have to know about these either.

The chime to his quarters rang ten minutes before first shift was due to begin. Optimus cycled his optics in surprise. No one visited him this early and Soundwave had an unusual talent of only
pinging Optimus precisely on time, not a minute too soon or too late.

Optimus tucked the more immediate datapads into his subspace and rose to his pedes. His legs were still wobbly, he noticed, but he hoped his visitor didn't. He opened the door and was once again surprised.

“Jazz?”

His third in command grinned at him, bouncing on the tips of his pedes. “Good morning, OP. Or…is it?” He tilted his helm to the side, as perceptive as always. “You look terrible.”

“Thank you for your honesty,” Optimus said with a sigh. He gestured for Jazz to go ahead and come in. “I didn't recharge well. Has something happened?”

Jazz all but danced in, carefully balancing a cube of energon in each hand. “Not bad news. Metalhawk finally sent his mech over, the one with the mneumosurgery skills, and Ratchet thought you might like to meet him.”

“That I do.” Optimus shook his helm as Jazz offered him a cube. “No, thank you. I am fueled enough.”

“Not according to my sensors.” The light behind Jazz’s visor dimmed. “You okay?”

“Nothing that won't heal with time.” Optimus returned to his chair and wasn't surprised to find Jazz hop up on the table, folding his legs to take up less space. “I am sorry if I seemed rude. I wasn't expecting you.”

Jazz popped open his own cube and sipped at it. “I know. Ya were expectin' Soundwave. But he's off in Iacon playin' nice with his old friends today.”

“Oh, I see.”

“You sound disappointed, OP.” Jazz drummed the fingers of his free hand over his knee. “I know he's been keeping pretty close to you, but I figured ya were bein' too nice to tell him to get lost.”

Optimus cycled his optics. “He's been inordinately helpful. True, I found it a bit odd at first, but now I find myself in a position where he has become irreplaceable.”

Jazz tilted his helm and finished his cube. “Huh. Now isn't that somethin'.”

“What?” Optimus asked. He leaned forward, peering at his third in command. “I know that tone. What is it, Jazz?”

He leaned forward, elbows braced on both his knees. “Somethin' goin' on I should know about, Optimus?” Jazz asked, his tone taking on an edge of seriousness. “Because Soundwave is awful close to ya all of the sudden, and now you're talkin' like you don't mind.”

“Because I don't.” Optimus leaned back in his chair, resting his elbows on the arms of it as he laced his fingers together. “He is no longer a Decepticon, and his behavior has been exceptional. I see no reason to believe he isn't honest in his intentions.”

Jazz waved a dismissive hand. “Never said he wasn't. Just said that it was interestin' how close he's
“stickin' to ya. Don't ya find that a little odd?”

“Why would I?” Optimus rolled his shoulders in a shrug. “Soundwave is simply pragmatic. He knows that he's safest close to me. I can't say I wouldn't do the same if I was in a similar situation.”

“Yeah. I get that. But I'm sayin' it's more than that, too.” Jazz's lips twitched toward a smile. “And you don't see the way he looks at ya.”

Optimus sighed and rubbed his forehelm. “Perhaps because there is nothing to see. Now, do we not have somewhere to be? Since it appears I need an escort without Soundwave present.”

Jazz chuckled and hopped off the table, stretching his arms over his helm. “I know a desperate bid to change the subject when I hear one. And, yes. If Metalhawk's mech isn't already there, he'll be there soon. Ratchet won't start without ya unless I tell him to.”

“Good. I want to be there.” Optimus rose to his pedes as well, briefly swaying as a spat of dizziness attacked him. He paused to regain his balance and pretended that Jazz wasn't giving him a concerned look. “And how is Ratchet?”

“Doc seems to be doing okay.” Jazz led them out of Optimus' quarters and started down the hall. There was less pep in his step than earlier. “He and 'Jack took in First Aid since Perceptor started bunking with Blue. They're making sure the kid takes care of himself. Ratch's cranky, and he don't like anyone touching him, but he's got a wealth of support. I think he'll be okay.”

Optimus managed a small smile of relief. It was good to know that he hadn't completely failed his Autobots. “And Mirage?”

“He's... not good.” Jazz glanced up at him. “You knew he and Tracks were partnered, right?”

“Given that Mirage is still alive, I assume not spark-bonded.”

“No. But they were close.” Jazz audibly cycled a ventilation. “I don't know that he's ever going to come back to the army, boss. He's angry. He's bitter. And if Cliffjumper hadn't gotten to Blitzwing and forced us all to tighten our defenses, he might have been the first to murder a Decepticon.”

Optimus' tank churned again. He was glad he had consumed this morning's ration, no matter how much he needed it. “The Stunticons?”

“Well, the three-fifths of them that survived.”

Optimus sighed and looked up into the sky as they stepped out of the Xantium. Bright stars shone against the dark. The haze was gone for now. It would return soon enough.

“I had the opportunity to save him,” Optimus said as his spark clenched with regret. “Tracks did not want to be saved. After being in Shockwave's custody and then being passed to the Stunticons, I can't say I blame him. But I now wonder if honoring his request had been the wrong choice.”

Jazz's field bumped against his, a bare brush that was an invitation Optimus had only to accept. “We had to decide a long time ago to stop wasting resources on mechs that didn't want to be saved, remember?”

“This is different.”
“Not really.” Jazz swept a hand over his helm, his visor darkening. “Honoring Tracks’ request was probably the only time he was able to choose anything for himself since the Decepticons took us down. I don't think Mirage can be angry about that.”

Optimus made a noncommittal noise. He wasn't sure he could believe Jazz. Perhaps it would be best to speak with Mirage himself.

“The honoring ceremony will help,” Jazz continued as they hooked a left toward the building Ratchet had claimed for a medbay, or medcenter as he planned on calling it. “The chance to honor the fallen and let ourselves grieve is something we all need, I think. Closure is important to the healing process, according to Smokescreen.”

Optimus nodded. “Just don't tell Ratchet it was Smokescreen's idea.”

Jazz managed a light chuckle. “I won't. Doc doesn't see optic to optic with Smokescreen on this. It doesn't matter that none of us know what we're doing.”

“We are all doing the best we can,” Optimus agreed. “And what of Hound, has he checked in yet?” He meant to check the communication logs first thing this morning, except that Jazz intercepted him. Perhaps it was better this way as Jazz would give him a more accurate presentation of his mech's mental state.

Jazz rubbed a hand down his faceplate. “He did and he's… better. They haven't found the humans yet, but Ravage thinks she's caught a fresh trail. Hound ain't recharging like he should, but he's letting Ravage cuddle with him, and 'Breaker ain't nothin' but a cuddle bear so I think he'll be all right.”

“You do whatever you think is best, Jazz. I trust your judgment. And be sure to tell Hound that I fully support him.” Optimus allowed a bit of fondness into his field. “He and Ravage have a history, as I understand it, and I don't wish to stand between him and any measure of happiness.”

Jazz tilted a grin toward him. “Boss, they had a history during the war, you just didn't know it. Don't think Sounders knew it either.”

Optimus cycled his optics and stared at his third in command. He paused in front of the medcenter, unable to believe his audials. “They were fraternizing?”

“If that's what ya want to call it.” Jazz shrugged, but it was far from casual. “Look, boss, things happen. What it was had nothing to do with faction. I knew about it. I was watchin' it. I never had anythin' to worry about. Otherwise I would've said somethin'. Trust me.”

“I do,” Optimus said automatically, because it was true. He trusted Jazz with his spark. “I am merely surprised. I never would have thought it of Hound.”

“He's loyal. He wouldn't have betrayed us. Just like Ravage is loyal to Soundwave.” Jazz offered another grin, this one softer than the other. “It's kind of lucky things ended this way. At least for them.”

Something good had come out of the horror. Optimus supposed he could be grateful for that. There was always hope. He wasn't sure he could pinpoint the exact moment he let himself forget that.
“I believe you,” Optimus murmured.

He stared up at the medbay. Ratchet would know, from the moment he scanned Optimus, how poor his health truly was.

Was it cowardly to hesitate? Ratchet had become even more of a mother hen since the defeat of the Decepticons. He'd taken their health as a personal crusade, convinced he couldn't rest until all of them were optimal, physically and mentally, perhaps even at the cost of his own.

“I know ya do. C'mon, OP. You know the doc don't like to be kept waitin'.” Jazz entered the medbay ahead of him.

Optimus gathered his courage and followed. If Ratchet wanted to fuss over him, Optimus wouldn't complain. Too much. He knew a coping mechanism when he saw one. They all had their ways.

When they entered the main service area, Ratchet was deep in conversation with a tall, gangly mech, wearing both visor and face mask. He was a grounder, judging by the tires on his shoulders and legs. He had long, thin fingers and Optimus wasn't sure why he noticed them except for the fact the mech had six rather than the standard five.

Ratchet noticed them first. “About time you got here!” he said, just short of a growl. The other mech turned to greet them. “This here's Chromedome. Metalhawk sent him.”

Optimus planted friendliness into his field and greeted the mech. “Thank you for coming,” he said. “Metalhawk said you may be able to help one of my Autobots?”

“Red Alert,” Chromedome acknowledged as he gripped Optimus' hand, two of his fingers oddly tapping at Optimus' wrist before he drew back. “I studied under Trepan. If there's any hope of undoing what he did, I'm probably the best chance you have.”

“And since you're here, we can finally get started,” Ratchet said as Chromedome backed off a pace. “I suppose you're staying, too?” He added with a glance toward Jazz.

He stepped back, holding up his hands. “I can always leave if you like.”

“Or you could go talk to the Twins. They could use some company,” Ratchet retorted with a roll of his optics.

Optimus blinked, startled. “The Twins are online?”

Ratchet sighed and scrubbed at his chevron. “There was no reason to keep them in stasis if I didn't have to. As long as I don't separate them, they can be online. Though if they persist in being irritating, I may have to put them under again for the sake of my sanity.”

“Shockwave's suggestion for repairin' them is nothin' any of us want to use. But we might not have a choice,” Jazz added.

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “Why haven't I heard about this?”

“I was going to tell you after we took care of Red Alert. I still am.” Ratchet spun on a heelstrut and waved over his shoulder. “Come on. Red first, Twins later. Jazz, you know what to do.”
"Sure thing, doc." Jazz tossed off a friendly salute. "We can do the rounds when you're done, OP," he said as he walked away, to the room that had been designated for Sideswipe and Sunstreaker.

The rounds? Apparently, Jazz really had appointed himself as Soundwave substitute. Did they think Optimus needed an escort?

Optimus rubbed at his forehelm and fell into step beside Chromedome and Ratchet. The former was actually taller than Ratchet, but the medic was more than twice his mass. Chromedome's field was unreadable, Optimus noticed. It was present, he could sense it, but Optimus couldn't read into it.

They stepped into the smaller room Ratchet had set aside for Red Alert, and Optimus couldn't quite hide his shiver of disquiet. Red Alert lay on a berth, painfully still, his optics offline, and his energy field as empty as it had been the first Optimus saw him again. If not for the brightness of his color nanites, Optimus would have thought him deactivated.

Ratchet stepped aside, giving Chromedome room to stand next to Red Alert's berth. He lifted his right hand, thin fingers twitching restlessly.

"You might not want to stay," Chromedome said as his left hand rested on Red Alert's helm. "The sight of pneumosurgery tends to make most mechs uncomfortable."

Ratchet folded his arms over his windshield. "I don't know you from Prima. I'm not going anywhere. I'm a medic, I think I can handle it."

Chromedome shifted to stand at the head of Red Alert's berth, both hands now on Red Alert's helm as he looked in Optimus' direction. "Prime, sir?"

Optimus shook his helm and took up a position next to Ratchet. "I will remain as well."

"Then don't say I didn't warn you." Chromedome bent over Red Alert, nimble fingers tracing the seams of Red Alert's helm before there was a tiny click and a protective panel lifted up and away.

Optimus' optics cycled wide as Red Alert's processor module came into view, the heavy protective plate being set aside. Chromedome tilted his helm to the side, one hand hovering over the exposed component, fingers twitching as though tracing some invisible lines.

"Trepan's so sloppy for someone who invented this," Chromedome commented, more to himself than to them.

One hand rested on Red Alert's forehelm as the fingers of his other hand twitched and long needles emerged from the tips of them. Optimus' tank churned at the sight. Next to him, Ratchet shifted, his field going still.

Chromedome glanced at both of them. "Last chance to leave."

"We're not going to," Ratchet growled. "Fix him."

"Please," Optimus amended.

"I'll do what I can." Chromedome cycled a ventilation, his needled fingers twitching in the air before he pressed the tips of them against Red Alert's processor.
Optimus cringed as Chromedome's needles sank into Red Alert's module. His tank wobbled with unease. No wonder Chromedome had suggested they leave. It was an unsettling image.

Next to him, Ratchet was as steady as a rock. He watched, his lips pinched into a thin line, his field thick with worry.

Optimus wasn't sure if speaking aloud would hurt Chromedome's concentration. So he picked Ratchet's comm instead.

*How long do you think this is going to take?* he asked.

*I don't know,* the medic replied as he shifted his weight. *I know of the procedure in theory, but it was a very small field before the war broke out. There were rumors, of course, that the council was forcefully reprogramming mecha.*

*You never believed it?*

Ratchet cast him an askance look. *Would you? It sounded like a sparkling tale. Something to convince mecha to behave. Luckily, Megatron started the war in earnest before it became common. He must have recruited Trepan along the way, probably convinced him with freedom to experiment, like he did Shockwave.*

Disgust rippled through Optimus' field. He frowned as he watched Chromedome work, the Neutral absolutely still, save for the flickering in his visor.

It made Optimus wonder. If Megatron's rebellion had never found its footing. If Megatron had never started the Decepticons, what kind of world would they inhabit? What would the council have done? Would this procedure have become commonplace? Would they have simply reprogrammed any mech too outspoken for their tastes?

Such thoughts sent another surge of nausea through Optimus' tanks. He was thankful for the berth behind him, as it provided something for him to brace against.

*How is Perceptor?* Optimus asked, desperate to change the subject.

Ratchet tossed him a knowing look. *He is well. He and Wheeljack are currently trying my patience right now. They've claimed the building next door and are attempting to turn it into a lab.*

*They're going to share one?*

Ratchet shifted his weight. *For now. Though I'm sure it won't last long. Perceptor is particular about where things go and Wheeljack's lack of concern for what he considers outdated and superfluous safety practices tend to irritate Perceptor.*

And yet, despite all of that, they were best friends. All three, in fact, were close. For the longest time, Optimus had thought they were all romantically involved, until Ratchet clarified matters.

*Then you're not worried about him?*

Ratchet snorted and then cast a guilty look Chromedome's direction, not that the Neutral noticed. He didn't so much as twitch, though his visor continued to flicker.
I'm worried about all of us, Ratchet said, correcting him. *But in terms of those who were rescued, no. Perceptor is one of the ones I worry the least about.*

*And the most?*

*We're looking at him.* Ratchet audibly sighed, drawing into himself. *Other than Sideswipe and Sunstreaker. Shockwave claimed that the only way to help them is to encourage them to bond.*

Optimus frowned behind his mask. *They are already bonded.*

*They need a third spark to balance them. I don't know what Shockwave did, but it set them perpetually off-balance. That's why they can't be far from each other. They are drawing on each other's spark to keep themselves from slipping out of oscillation.*

Optimus' optics narrowed. *And that's the best solution?*

*It's the only one.* Ratchet palmed his face, fingers pinching at his chevron. *I'm not a spark expert. I don't know that there's a medic alive who was one. Shockwave was messing with things we never fully understood.*

Shockwave was touching things he had no right to touch. Optimus' only consolation was that Shockwave currently sat in the Decepticon brig, and he highly doubted Grimlock was inclined to set him free anytime soon. The sight of Swoop was enough to convince Grimlock otherwise.

The Pit hath no fury like an angry Grimlock. He was and had always been protective of his subordinates.

A low click dragged Optimus' attention away from their internal conversation and back toward Chromedome. A small shiver worked its way across the Neutral's frame before he lifted his helm. The fingers buried in Red Alert's processor module gradually retracted until Chromedome was free and able to take a step back.

“Well?” Ratchet prompted, just short of a growl.

Chromedome's visor brightened and turned toward them. “I've identified the changes Trepan made. I believe I can undo them. Do you have access to Red Alert's back up memory cores?”

“Of course I don't!” Ratchet snapped. His plating clamped tight toward his frame. “They were left behind on the Ark with everything else we couldn't carry.”

And Megatron had quite thoroughly destroyed anything he perceived to be of value in the Ark.

“Can you not help him without them?”

Chromedome stepped away from the berth and rubbed his forehelm with one hand. He twitched the wrist of the other, prompting the needles to slide back into his fingertips and out of sight.

“I can remove the programming Trepan installed. The only problem is that in order to do so, Trepan wiped his operating system. So if I remove it, there won't be anything left. All he'll have are his spark memories and spark traits.” Chromedome's tone was apologetic, even as he grabbed a stool and slumped down into it. His knees visibly wobbled. “Trepan kept some of the core
programs, basic parameters like his security training, but everything that made him Red Alert is gone.”

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “Red Alert was very cautious. He always had a contingency plan. I can't imagine that he would keep his back ups in a single location.”

“You think he hid other copies somewhere?” Ratchet asked.

Optimus inclined his helm. “Why wouldn't he? I did. My main backups were kept in the medbay with everyone else's, but Jazz has a smaller copy of my core and so did Ironhide.”

The smaller copies were his core programming, his core memories. Such things took up less storage space, and relied heavily on his spark memories to supplement, but it meant if anything happened to him, he could be mostly restored. Optimus had done so on Prowl's suggestion that it never hurt to have a contingency plan.

“Who would he trust?” Ratchet asked, his expression solemn but his field speaking of a delicate hope. “Was there anyone he was close to?”

Optimus folded his arms. “Not that I am aware. But you know how Red was, he kept to himself.” Much like Prowl had. They were two of the more controversial Autobots. Sometimes, the crew did not understand why they made the choices they did, because the crew couldn't see the larger picture.

It was why Prowl had so few friends. Red Alert was the same way. Their social interaction was limited to the command staff. They couldn't mix into the crowd like Jazz and Ratchet and Wheeljack and Ironhide could. They couldn't shake what made them part of the command staff.

Worse, even if there was someone Red was close to that they weren't aware of, in all likelihood, that mech was dead. Megatron had been quite thorough in executing the Earth-based Autobots.

“It won't hurt to ask,” Ratchet said as he crossed the floor, a scan dancing over Red Alert's frame. “I'm not going to give up on him just yet.” He grabbed Red Alert's limp hand, giving it a squeeze.

“If you can find even a copy of his core code, I can return him to a semblance of who he was,” Chromedome said, fatigue thick in his vocals. “I'll do whatever I can to help.”

Ratchet gave him a sideways look. “You're a Neutral. Why would you even care what happens to one of us warmongers?”

“Metalhawk might be our leader, but he doesn't speak for all of us. Besides, I can't stand seeing this used for something so cruel. I learned pneumosurgery to help mecha, not break them.” Chromedome inclined his helm, the gleam of his visor coming across as earnest. “I want to live in peace on my home planet. I'm tired of running and hiding.”

“If only Metalhawk believed as you do,” Optimus murmured. He dipped his helm and pushed off the berth, offering Chromedome his hand. “Thank you for all your assistance, Chromedome. We very much appreciate it.”

A taste of Chromedome's field escaped, ripe with relief. “Whatever I can do to help. Would you like me to wait until you find a core copy?”
Ratchet shook his helm. “No. If we find it or not, I won't let Red Alert live like this. He deserves more than being a drone. Even if it means I let him offline at peace.” He squeezed Red Alert's hand again and spun away form the berth. “You stay seated. I'll bring you a cube before you start again. Optimus, come with me.”

“Yes, Ratchet.”

Optimus knew better than to argue. Apparently, so did Chromedome, as he planted his aft back down and nodded.

Optimus followed Ratchet into the main room and stood to the side as Ratchet filled a fresh cube from the dispensary.

“You trust him?” Optimus asked.

“I trust his intentions,” Ratchet replied with an askance look. “If I didn't, you can bet your aft I would have tossed him out already.” He spun toward Optimus, a cube in each hand. One he thrust toward Optimus. “You, however, I'm learning I can't trust. Drink.”

Optimus cycled a ventilation and reluctantly accepted the cube. “I had no appetite this morning,” he said. Truthfully, he had very little appetite now. His tanks remained unsettled, and hearing about Red Alert and the Twins had not helped.

“And if you let your energy levels dip too low and you collapse on your rounds, what then?” Ratchet asked. His field reached for Optimus, so thick with concern it was almost cloying. “You're already not recharging properly. If you stop refueling properly, too, I'll have no choice but to admit you here and confine you to the berth. And you and I both know that such inactivity isn't going to help.”

Optimus lowered his helm. Shame licked at the edges of his field. He stared at the energon Ratchet had given him – alas, back to medical grade. It wasn't so much that it tasted foul but that it had no taste at all. It was thick, slimy, and unpalatable for the texture, not the taste.

But his tanks reported a baleful twenty-six percent, and Ratchet had worked very hard to get him to an optimal level. Optimus couldn't function like this and he knew it. He'd been fighting off dizziness for a long time now.

Optimus forced a tentative sip and waited for it to settle in his tanks. When an immediate purge didn't follow the sip, he dared a second one and then a third.

“Have you considered talking to Smokescreen?” Ratchet asked, his vocals oddly soft.

Optimus arched an orbital ridge. “I thought you said he wasn't accredited.”

“He's not,” Ratchet retorted, but he audibly cycled a ventilation. “But he's the best we have right now and as much as I hate to admit it, I'm powerless here, Optimus. I can't help you.” His optics dimmed as his lips pinched together. His field was a wave of helplessness and misery.

Optimus' spark hurt to feel it.

“I am fine, Ratchet,” he tried to reassure. “All I need is time. Once the Autobots are better established, and I am convinced of Starscream's sincerity, and Metalhawk’s commitment to peace,
then we can all relax. Myself included.”

Ratchet scrubbed a hand down his face. “Sometimes, I really hate that part of you.”

Optimus cycled his optics. “Beg pardon?”

“The part that insists you put everyone else first. When are you going to learn to take care of yourself, Optimus?” Ratchet demanded.

Optimus tilted his helm, unable to hide the affection in his field. “I could ask the same thing of you, my friend.”

Ratchet peered back at him, planting one hand on his hip. “The difference between us, Optimus, is that when I wake up screaming in the middle of a recharge cycle, I have Wheeljack to reach for.”

Optimus hid behind his cube, taking another long sip. “I am accustomed to solitude, Ratchet. No matter what I may have endured.”

“That's not the point.” Ratchet rubbed harder at his chevron and then moved past him, still carrying Chromedome's energon. “I just wish you'd let us support you, even a little bit.” The last was muttered, to the point where Optimus wasn't sure if he was meant to hear it.

“He's right, ya know.”

Optimus turned at the unexpected comment, which distracted him long enough that Ratchet escaped into Red Alert's room. Jazz was behind him, leaning against the wall outside the room the Twins shared. He didn't look ruffled, but then, that was par for the course for Jazz. He was as steady as a rock, just like Ironhide.

Primus, but Optimus missed him. Every day reminded him of how many he had lost. Every empty seat at his command table was another knife to the spark.

“We all want to help ya,” Jazz continued as he pushed himself off the wall, unfolding his arms from under his bumper. “Ya just won't let any of us close enough to do it.”

Optimus shook his helm. “There are others who need your attention more.”

Jazz sighed and scrubbed over his helm. His field pushed at Optimus', heavy with affection and exasperation intermingled. “I know why yer sayin' that and for right now, Imma let it slide. We do have work to do.”

“What about Sideswipe and Sunstreaker?”

Jazz waved a dismissing hand. “They're in recharge. Interaction takes a lot outta them apparently. Sideswipe was droopin' like I've never seen before, and Sunstreaker flat out refused to talk.”

Sunstreaker wasn't very chatty even on the best of days, but Jazz could often get through to the Twins when no one else could. If he said they behaved out of character, Optimus believed him.

“Do they know of Shockwave's solution?”

“Yeah. Not that they're happy about it. Who would be?” Jazz headed for the medcenter door and
Optimus followed. “They haven't decided whether or not they're going ta try lookin' for a volunteer. Fortunately, they have time.”

Optimus cast a look over his shoulder, but Ratchet still hadn't emerged from Red Alert's room. Optimus would have to either return later or comm Ratchet for an update.

“Do you know if Red Alert had a friend or lover? Someone he might have trusted with a copy of his core coding?”

Jazz's visor flashed with surprise. “Not that I'm aware of.” He frowned, sadness tinting his field. “Prowl probably would have known. They were close.”

“In all likelihood, it probably was Prowl who he trusted,” Optimus said with a sigh. He rubbed at his aching forehelm.

Prowl was one of the frames Megatron had pulled from the wreckage of Omega Supreme and smelted down. Perhaps he feared a miraculous recovery, Optimus didn't know. It didn't matter because anything Prowl might have carried, was melted down with him.

“I'll ask Smokescreen, though,” Jazz said with a soft ventilation. “He tends to know all the little secrets. I take it we need one to help him?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Optimus' shoulders sagged. Today was full of bad news, it seemed. “Shall we see to Bluestreak then?” Perhaps the sight of Bluestreak thriving would restore some of the hope he seemed to be lacking as of late.

“Whatever you want, boss bot.” Jazz patted him on the elbow, the nearest part he could reach, and Optimus was rather proud of himself for not flinching. The bare brush was actually rather nice.

See, Ratchet? Optimus was healing fine on his own.

****
Of all mechs to be waiting outside of his office when Optimus turned the corner, he did not expect Grimlock to be one of them. Grimlock did not seem the type to wait, and while things between them had not been sour, they had not been friendly. Optimus couldn't blame Grimlock. He had mistreated the Dinobots.

“Grimlock,” Optimus greeted as he juggled an armload of datapads. “Were you waiting for me?”

Grimlock moved away from the panel so Optimus could key in his code. “Wasn't waiting for Soundwave,” he said gruffly. His field was neutral, for all Optimus could sense from it.

“Of course you weren't.” Optimus sighed inwardly. “Come on in. Nothing's urgently the matter, I hope.”

“I can't show up to speak with my former commander without it being an emergency?” Grimlock asked, but thank Primus, there was humor in his vocals rather than challenge.

Grimlock was baiting him, perhaps on purpose. They were on equal ground now.

Optimus dumped his datapads on his overflowing desk and sank into the chair behind it. Grimlock sprawled into the largest chair Optimus had available for guests, the scavenged piece of furniture creaking and groaning beneath him.

“Then it's a social call?” Optimus guessed. Though speaking of, where was Soundwave? Optimus hadn't seen or heard from the former Decepticon all day.

“Something like that.” Grimlock folded his hands across his ventrum, the very picture of ease. “Where's your shadow?”

“I am not his keeper. Soundwave is allowed to do as he wishes.” Optimus busied himself with arranging his datapads into separate piles based on priority. “I trust that his business is his own, or it is for the benefit of the Autobots and Cybertron.”

Grimlock made a contemplative noise. “That's a lot of trust you're putting in a Decepticon and a mech who used to be Megatron's left hand.”

Optimus lifted his helm and raised an orbital ridge. “One could say the same about you. Remind me again your current position and who serves as your second?”

Grimlock chuckled. “You grew fangs, Prime. I'm impressed.”
“You'd be surprised what can make you change,” Optimus replied, though it was a lot less sharp than he would have liked. He flattened his palms on the desktop and caught Grimlock's gaze. “What did you want to talk about, Grimlock?”

“My Air Commander.” He lifted his chin, all trace of amusement abruptly wiped from his field. “I'm going to court him.”

Optimus cycled his optics. He rebooted his audials for good measure. “I beg your pardon,” he said carefully, giving himself time to form the proper words. “But I don't think I heard you correctly. You are telling me you mean to court Starscream?”

“Yes.”

Blunt and to the point. He wouldn't be Grimlock if he wasn't.

Optimus sat back in his chair and pinched his nasal ridge. “And you, what, came here to seek permission?”

“No. To keep you informed. As a courtesy.” Grimlock sat up and leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. “We are on equal footing now, Optimus. I want to keep it that way. I told you as a show of respect. Something that was sorely lacking in our relationship in the past.”

Optimus dropped his hand to the arm of his chair. “I am to blame for that, Grimlock. I can only say that I allowed my ignorance to blind me, and I do apologize for that.”

“I know. I'm moving on. I don't have time to dwell on the past, but you asked for an explanation, and I gave you one.”

“Then I take it congratulations are in order?”

Grimlock outright laughed and sat back, ease returning to his frame language. “Congratulations are premature. I haven't informed Starscream yet. He may refuse me.”

“I don't see why he would.” Optimus rolled his shoulders in a shrug. “But then, I can't say that I've ever fully understood what motivates Starscream. I am glad to see that you two are getting along, however. It can only mean good things for the Decepticons.”

“If by getting along you mean christening every available surface, then yes, I suppose we are.” Grimlock's visor lit up. If Optimus didn't know better, he'd think Grimlock was smirking. His field certainly buzzed with self-satisfaction. “Though perhaps you'd know all about that.”

Optimus blinked. “I don't know what you mean.”

“Of course you don't.” Grimlock snickered and pushed to his pedes. “You always were blind, Optimus. I wonder how long it will take for you to notice that you have an admirer or if someone's going to have to point him out to you.”

Optimus frowned behind his battlemask. “It wouldn't matter if there was. I don't have the time or the inclination right now.” Nor the interest. He wasn't keen on physical contact, and while Optimus recognized it for a perfectly valid reaction, he didn't have the time to address it.
Optimus was fine on his own. He didn't need interfacing to survive. He'd done fine before.

Grimlock looked at him for a long moment before he leaned forward, bracing his hands on the desk. He stopped just shy of Optimus’ personal space limits.

“If there's one thing I've learned from watching, Optimus, it's that no mech is an island,” he said in an even tone. “You can't beat this enemy on your own.”

Grimlock pushed back upright. “You look busy. Comm me when you have enough free time to spare for socializing.”

Optimus worked his jaw for a long moment. “You came here… to give me advice?”

“No. I came to tell you about Starscream. The advice was a bonus.” Grimlock turned and flicked a wave over his shoulder. “Remember what I said, Optimus.”

Grimlock left Optimus alone in his office, behind his mounds of datapads, unable to settle the confusion taking over his processor. That was not only the politest conversation he'd ever had with Grimlock, it was also the most enigmatic one.

Optimus shook his helm and cycled a ventilation. He had work to do. He couldn't dwell on this.

He reached for the next datapad in the stack.

~

A life of living in darkness and surviving a war in the shadows left Jazz a naturally suspicious person. So when the Decepticon's most famous loyalist and spy defected and immediately attached himself to Optimus Prime, well, Jazz got a little curious.

Granted, he'd let it slide for a little while. Only because it didn't seem like Soundwave intended to cause Optimus harm, and surely Sounders wasn't so stupid as to try and do something like that after a truce was signed. Especially since he'd helped the Autobots take down Megatron in the first place.

Plus, Jazz was a little distracted. He had his crew to think about first. But Trailbreaker and Ravage were taking care of Hound and had him well on the road to recovery. Bumblebee was mending things with Rumble, with Jazz’s full set of double thumbs up approval. And Mirage, well, he was better. He wasn't going to be the same, but Jazz didn't think any of them were.

The war had been too long. They'd lost too much. They'd suffered too much.

Right now, however, Jazz left Mirage with Bluestreak because he had something he needed to do. Namely, finding Soundwave and sussing out whatever his intentions were for Optimus.

It didn't take him long to track old Sounders down. Soundwave made no secret of where he was. If anything, he was being so blatantly open that Jazz felt more than a little leery.

Especially since Soundwave was walking around Polyhex in plain sight.
“Hiya there, Sounders,” Jazz chirped as he intercepted Soundwave with a grin, pedes skidding to a halt in front of the former Decepticon. “Spare a minute for an old pal?”

Soundwave gave him an even stare, Buzzsaw fixed upon his shoulder opposite of his sonic cannon. Jazz wondered if the other cassettes were scampering about. Laserbeak, maybe. Or Frenzy. Ravage and Rumble, he knew, were otherwise occupied.

“State purpose,” Soundwave replied.

“Just a friendly chat.” Jazz tilted his helm and widened his grin, showing off his denta. “You know, me 'n you, we got lots in common. We should talk about that, you think?”

Soundwave audibly cycled a ventilation. “Public location requested.”

Despite himself, Jazz laughed. “I'm not going to hurt ya. That would upset Optimus, and I'm not about upsetting OP. I suspect you aren't either.” He lowered his helm, looking up at Soundwave from the top of his visor. “I'm on my leash for now.”

“Understood. Discussion accepted. Where?” Soundwave didn't relax, but he seemed to trust Jazz's word.

Which was good. There'd always been a sort of professional understanding between them, and Jazz hoped it would be maintained now that there was a truce, and they were more or less on the same side.

“Well, I'd hate to take up too much of your time. I know you were busy doing… what is it you're doing again?” Jazz asked as Soundwave started walking. Jazz fell into step beside him.

He wasn't lying. He didn't need to take Soundwave somewhere private to get to the nitty-gritty. He only needed five minutes of the dock's time, and he'd learn all he wanted to know.

“Whatever must be done,” Soundwave said as Buzzsaw alit from his shoulders and took the sky, circling above them. Jazz did not believe for a second that he would go far. “Wherever Soundwave is needed.”

“Including at Optimus' right hand?”

Soundwave drew to a halt and turned toward Jazz, staring at him with that blank stare that tended to intimidate lesser mechs. Jazz had faced off against it before. He remained unperturbed.

“Jazz opposes?” Soundwave asked with a tilt of his helm.

“I didn't say all that now,” Jazz said as he folded his arms under his bumper. He looked up at Soundwave, glad that there was no one around to eavesdrop. “I'm just curious. And ya know how dangerous that can be.” He grinned.

“If not opposed then… jealous?”

Jazz's visor flashed. “There's nothin' to be jealous about. OP and I have an understanding. I'm where I'm supposed to be. But if ya want to give it a name, you can call me protective. That's my Prime you're lurkin' around, Soundwave. And I've no problem killing for him. Just ask Megatron.”
He paused and rolled his shoulders before continuing, “Well, actually, you can't because he's a pool of dreg at the bottom of a smelter right now. Maybe Overlord instead… except he's an empty shell, lucky that his spark is pretty much a bomb. Ya see where I'm going with this?”

“Soundwave agrees that Jazz is dangerous,” he replied, and Jazz politely pretended that he didn't hear the hitch in Soundwave's ventilations, however slight it was. “Respect given, but threat unnecessary. Soundwave intends no harm.”

Jazz leaned forward, bobbing on the tips of his pedes before sinking back. “Yeah, the thing is, I actually believe ya about that. Which brings me to wonder why? And before you even try to pull that card, yeah, it is my business.”

Soundwave shifted his weight. “Optimus Prime belongs to Optimus Prime.”

Jazz's stared at him. “You know very well what I meant, Sounders. He's a free mech, but he's ours. And your madmech of a leader might have taken Ironhide and Prowl from him, but I'm still here, and I'll do what Optimus can't. Tell me I won't.”

Soundwave went silent.

Jazz stood his ground.

Just give me a reason, he vowed. He'd held himself back before. He wasn't going to do so now. He had all the respect for Soundwave; they had a sort of professional respect over the centuries of war. But Jazz wouldn't hesitate to take him down and hide the empty frame if he had to.

Finally, Soundwave's shoulders drifted down by minute increments. His head tilted, gaze looking over Jazz's helm. “Threat unnecessary,” he repeated. “Soundwave wishes no harm on Optimus Prime. Soundwave wishes only...” He trailed off, pausing, and of all things, Jazz did not expect to see Soundwave fidget.

Holy Primus on a pogo stick.

“...Friendship,” Soundwave finally said though with a huff of frustration, as though he had sought a better term and settled only for what emerged.

Friendship. Jazz had a feeling there was a lot more to it than that, but now he suspected not even Soundwave was sure what he wanted and was trying to figure it out in a kind of clumsy, suspicious manner. The logical reason to stick close to Optimus aside, there was something personal there, too.

Just how long had Soundwave admired Optimus?

“Friendship,” Jazz repeated and let his lips slide into a more friendly grin. “Well, that's all right then. We could all use a bit more of that right now. Fostering good relations and such.”

“Interrogation over?”

Jazz laughed and unfolded his arms. “That was me being nice, Sounders. I don't know what you're talking about.”
“Prefer Soundwave.”

“I'm sure you do.” Jazz dimmed half his visor in a version of a wink. “I'm really glad we had this talk, Sounders. Contrary to what you might think, I really do respect you.”

Soundwave's helm tilted back down, his visor focusing on Jazz again. “Jazz's behavior contrary.”

“Yes. I know. It's part of my charm.” Jazz's lips curved. “Just don't hurt my Prime, and we won't have to have this conversation again, yeah?”

Soundwave's visor rippled with light, his field touching Jazz's briefly, as though in acknowledgment. “Intentions were never to harm.”

“Then we understand each other.” Jazz grinned and patted Soundwave on the shoulder, noticing that he flinched. “Good talk, Sounders. Glad we had it.”

“Soundwave doesn't share Jazz's opinion,” Soundwave replied, wariness thick in his tone.

Jazz didn't blame him one bit. That had been his intention all along.

He chuckled. “I know. You've got time though. Hopefully, we won't have to repeat this conversation.” He flashed half his visor in a wink. “Catch ya later, Sounders.”

He made himself scarce, whistling as he strolled off without a backward glance. He didn't know where Buzzsaw was, but that didn't mean the winged cassette wasn't around.

Jazz wasn't bothered. He'd learned what he wanted to learn. The rest was up to Optimus.

So long as Soundwave behaved himself. Besides, Jazz had a certain combiner team to find. He had a job offer, and it was about time they contributed.

Finding the Combinicons was no harder than finding Soundwave. They'd taken to residing in a bunk near the Space Bridge Command Control. As a purely Neutral party, they often took shifts guarding it from “potential threats.”

As far as Jazz was concerned, the biggest threats were a) sitting in the Decepticon brig and b) squatting in Nova Cronum, plotting a way to take Cybertron from the united Autobots and Decepticons.

That was the topic du jour Jazz wanted to address with Onslaught. Jazz's own team couldn't do this task. Mirage had been making noise about retiring. Bumblebee had sparks in his optics over Rumble, and Jazz couldn't fault him for that. Smokescreen had his hands full trying to be a fully-fledged psychiatrist without the credentials to back him up.

Jazz was going to have to outsource, and he couldn't rely on Soundwave loaning him his cassettes. Besides, Metalhawk would be suspicious of anyone with a brand on their chest right now, and everyone knew Onslaught and his team had scrubbed theirs off the moment the truce was signed.

Jazz strolled up to the bunk and hit the chime, shifting from pede to pede as he waited for someone to answer. As far as he knew, they were none of them on-shift right now, but Jazz was also not privy to the Combaticon schedule. They were obligated to report to no one, not even each other.
They were, in fact, the only group of Cybertronians right now who were truly Neutral. Metalhawk's group counted as a faction in its own right. But the Combaticons had identified themselves as entirely separate.

It's a smart move, one worthy of a brilliant tactician, the same Megatron had never properly utilized. Well, Jazz wasn't going to make the same mistakes as Buckethead. As much as he called Optimus his Prime, Jazz wasn't letting him call all the shots either.

He'd tell Optimus about recruiting Onslaught when it became relevant, but not before.

The door opened with Onslaught standing in the frame, his expression hidden behind mask and visor.

“Now,” he drawled. “What could Prime's pet spy want with us?”

Jazz grinned. “Got a job offer for ya, if you're interested.”

“All of us?”

“All of you who can be spared.” Jazz bobbed on his heelstruts, at ease despite the baleful nature of Onslaught's stare.

The Combaticon Commander did not intimidate him. It didn't matter that Onslaught was twice his size and mass. So was Ironhide and Jazz still beat him four spars out of five. Ironhide never held back either.

It was all about leverage.

Onslaught made a noncommittal noise and stepped aside, gesturing for Jazz to enter. “I'll listen,” he said.

“Great!” Jazz chirped and strode inside, taking in the barren nature of the place, though the Combaticons had made some effort to turn it into a home.

Not much of a one. No doubt Onslaught ran his gestalt like the military commander he was sparked to be. At least each member had a room of their own, Jazz noticed as he passed closed doors before finding himself in an open room, probably a gathering area for the team given the large screen.

Brawl was nowhere in sight, but Jazz heard a rumor he was hanging around Dinobot headquarters so that came as no surprise. Unfortunately, however, Vortex wasn't around either which put a wrench in Jazz's gears. Vortex was the one the most trained. Then again, Vortex was also unappealing to many, many Cybertronians so maybe it would be better if he didn't participate.

Rumor had it he had his visor set on a certain talkative sniper, which situation Jazz intended to monitor very, very closely.

Blast Off and Swindle, however, were present. The former of which stared intently at some datapad, and the latter of whom aimlessly cycled through the limited programming on the vidscreen. Some enterprising Autobot had made an effort to upload human programming to the planet-wide servers. Selection was still limited, though.
“So,” Onslaught said as he leaned against the massive couch where Blast Off sat, clearly subspacing some serious mass to fit on it. “Talk.”

Jazz planted his hands on his hips. “Got a job for you, if you're interested and up to the challenge. How do you feel about infiltrating the Neutrals?”

The screen paused. Swindle looked up from his datapads. Blast Off half-turned to stare at Jazz as Onslaught tilted his helm.

“And this will work how?” Blast Off asked with a visible frown. Or a glower, rather. “Metalhawk has a distinct distaste for Decepticons.”

“Ahh.” Jazz lifted his hand and wagged a forefinger. “But none of you are Decepticons anymore. You are brand-less. You loathed Megatron. You are his kind of mechs.”

Swindle snorted and leaned his chin against his fist. “You actually think that'll work?”

Jazz lifted his shoulders. “It’s no secret that Megatron was controlling you. And you've not shown any inclination to work with the Cons. Besides, you gonna tell me you can't be convincin' when ya need to be, Swindle?” He gave the conmech a pointed stare.


“And that depends on what ya want,” Jazz replied. “We're short on credits and resources right now, but if it's in my power to get it, I will.”

Blast Off tilted his helm. “You don't have to ask the Prime?”

“Oh, I probably should. But I'll save that for when I really need it.” Jazz smirked and shifted his visor toward Onslaught. “Metalhawk's up to something, and all of my team is down for the count. I don't have anyone else to send.”

Onslaught crossed his arms. “Did you intend to betray that weakness to me?”

“Just layin' all my cards on the table.” Jazz spread his hands. “We're all thin and understaffed, and the Neutrals outnumber us. I gotta know what he's up to before he succeeds in kicking us off Cybertron.”

Jazz doubted they'd all survive the exodus. Because Autobots and Decepticons would fight to stay on their home planet, and despite claiming to be non-combatants, Jazz had no doubt the Neutrals would shoot to kill. Not to mention the lack of resources they'd face stuck out in the universe on whatever crowded shuttles they found.

“Hmm. All of us?” Onslaught asked.

“As many of ya as ya think ya need,” Jazz replied. He spread his hands. “I'll consult if ya want. Help build a profile.” He knocked a fist against his helm. “I'm good at it.”

“Yes, I know,” Onslaught said.

Swindle laughed and sat back in his chair. “Well, I'm in. Though it's going to cost you. I'll ponder a
sufficient payment.”

“There is a shuttle among the Neutrals,” Blast Off said, though he turned his attention to the screen. “Perhaps therein lies my welcome. I am quite certain, also, that Vortex might object. He is busy courting.”

“So I’ve heard,” Jazz drawled. He slapped his palms together and rubbed them. “All right, my mechs. Then let’s create a plan of attack, shall we?”

“I can hardly wait,” Onslaught drawled.


Optimus tugged harder at the restraints, despite the pain lancing up and down each arm. He’d broken something in his shoulders, could feel the harsh grind of components together and the sticky slick of seeping fluid, but the urge to resist compelled him.

His entire frame shuddered and shook. Half his cooling vents were blocked. He couldn't pull in air. Heat rippled through his entire infrastructure. His vocalizer spat static.

Still the glossa lapped at his valve. Denta scraped over his throbbing anterior node, a sensation that was so far removed from pleasure, it was agony. Yet, it still left him cycling higher and higher toward another overload.

This was as much torture as Barricade's acid.

“Come now, Optimus,” Megatron purred as he gripped Optimus' thighs harder, thumbs pressing between a seam and bruising the cables beneath. “You should be thanking me for serving you.”

His vocalizer spat another blat of static. He'd smelled smoke earlier, and suspected he'd burnt out the components. Another tremble wracked his frame.

Megatron latched onto his anterior node between his denta and gradually applied pressure. Optimus threw his helm back, trying to twist away, but Megatron's grip was made of steel and there was nowhere to escape the agony of it. His node throbbed. His array sparked charge into the air.

Another overload stripped him raw, sent his thoughts into the red.

Optimus screamed and writhed, his engine weakly revving a tune of distress. Megatron's pressure on his node didn't ease. He flicked his glossa on the nub trapped between his denta, and Optimus' hips jerked beyond his control. His spark shrank with fear and pain. He gasped, couldn't breathe, couldn't think, had no vocalizer to beg for freedom.

Optimus startled online, his optics flashing online and his spark strobing shock. There was a warmth on his helm and his right hand, and he jerked away from it.

“Whoa, whoa, Prime. Calm the frag down!”
“Frenzy, desist.”

Optimus rebooted his optics and audials. The smear of colors and shapes in front of him coalesced. He was in his office, his new office in Polyhex. He was at his desk, or slumped over it to be precise. There was mess everywhere, his desk clear of all items. He suspected he'd find them on the floor.

Soundwave knelt next to him. He had Optimus' hand in one of his. The other was gently pressed to Optimus' forehelm, but he removed it the moment he realized Optimus was more aware.

“That musta been some nightmare.” Frenzy's vocals again.

“Frenzy!” Soundwave's chastisement was sharp. Optimus heard a scoff and a subvocal mutter, but nothing further.


Optimus shook his helm and straightened, feeling exhausted to his core. “No, I understand. Thank you, Soundwave.” He looked down. Soundwave still held his hand.

Soundwave startled as though he'd realized it as well and let go of Optimus hand. “Apologies,” he said, again.

He missed the warmth almost immediately which was an odd feeling Optimus tucked away to carefully examine later. Or perhaps it was that he was so unused to comforting, friendly touches that he was desperate for them. Cybertronians were not meant to be so isolated.

“No need,” Optimus reassured as he pushed back from his desk, rubbing a hand down his face and over his battle mask. Sure enough, his desk accessories were on the floor. “Rather I appreciate the assistance.”

“Gratitude unnecessary.” Soundwave straightened, but he also took a step back, as though making sure not to loom. “Apologies, also, for prior processor invasion.”

Optimus frowned behind his mask, looking up at the former Decepticon. “You act as though you had a choice, Soundwave. To refuse would have earned you or your cassettes punishment. I recognize that.”

There was a difference, Optimus knew, between those who hurt him because they could, and those who hurt because they had no other option. Besides, of all the violations Optimus experienced while in Megatron's possessions, Soundwave's almost gentle exploration of his processor was the least of them.

“Apology still given,” Soundwave insisted.

“You'll have ta accept it. He ain't gonna stop until you recognize he feels bad,” Frenzy said with a cocky smirk as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Soundwave turned toward him, and though his expression was hidden, Optimus imagined there was chastisement in it. Though all Frenzy did was smile brighter, the picture of innocence.
Optimus knew very well Frenzy wasn't innocent. Was it not he and Eject who painted the face of Autobot Headquarters in brilliant splashes of color? While Optimus was glad to see the two getting along, the mess was unacceptable. Though neither had complained too much when Ultra Magnus punished both of them by requiring they clean up after themselves.

“Apology accepted,” Optimus replied. “But I reiterate that there is no need.” He looked down at the mess under his desk and sighed, slipping out of his chair to attend to it.

Soundwave knelt beside him, reaching for a scattered pile of datapads, two of which Optimus could see were broken.

Helping without being asked. As he'd been doing from the beginning, since requesting to defect.

Optimus frowned behind his mask and stared at Soundwave. “Is that what this is about?”

Soundwave looked up at him. “Query: clarify?”

“This.” Optimus gestured between himself and Soundwave. “Your assistance. The way you help me and serve as... as an aide. Is that your way of apologizing? Of trying to make up for what happened?”

Frenzy groaned and slapped his face. “Of all the-- are all Autobots as dumb as you, Prime?”

“Frenzy, desist,” Soundwave snapped, his visor flashing.

“But--”

“Desist.”

Frenzy's visor darkened. “Fine.” He spun on a heelstrut and stomped toward the door. “I'll go find Rumble then, since you're being mean to me.”

How could a little mech make so much noise, Optimus wondered, as Frenzy slammed his palm on the panel – which he should not have been able to open – and stormed into the hallway.

Silence rose behind him. Optimus blinked and directed his attention back to Soundwave. After all, Soundwave had not answered the question.

Soundwave cycled a ventilation and continued to pick up the datapads, though with greater care. “Soundwave has much to answer for,” he replied, a touch of tightness to his vocals, despite the monotone. “However, actions not entirely due to guilt.”

“You can't tell me you enjoy taking on a duty best suited to interns,” Optimus replied as he gathered the last of his items and pushed to stand. “Your talents lie beyond personal assistance.”

Soundwave rose as well, carefully stacking Optimus' datapads on the end of the desk where he always kept them, though Soundwave left out the two that were damaged. He fiddled with them instead of looking at Optimus' face.

“Soundwave... serves,” he said, a noticeable pause between the two words as though he searched
for the right answer. “Position optimal.”

It wasn't the first time Soundwave reassured Optimus. He doubted it would be the last. Knowing the position Soundwave had carried with Megatron, Optimus struggled to believe that Soundwave didn't feel marginalized or set aside.

Optimus dumped his belongings on his desk, telling himself he would reorganize them later. Or sweep them into a drawer.

“You'll let me know if you wish to do otherwise?” Optimus asked.

“Affirmative.” Soundwave stared hard at the broken datapads as though they would provide all the distraction he needed. “Soundwave would present offer.”

Optimus tilted his helm. “Offer?”

The communications mech lifted his helm and reached with his free hand, tapping his forehelm. “Memory removal within Soundwave's capabilities,” he explained. “If Optimus trusts.”

Optimus cycled his optics, the full implications of Soundwave's offer striking home. He leaned against his desk, bracing his hands on the edge. Soundwave could potentially remove the memories of his time spent in Megatron's possession. Did that mean he would instantly be recovered?

Of course not.

What the processor forgot, the spark remembered. Only, he'd be left without the context. He'd be afraid without knowing why. He'd be disgusted without a reason. He'd avoid those around him and then be struck with paranoia because he couldn't pinpoint a reason, save for the blank spaces in his memory.

Was that a better alternative?

Optimus shook his helm. “I appreciate the offer, Soundwave. But I must deal with this, not wipe it away.”

“Offer remains,” Soundwave said, and then, as if to hurry and change the subject, he held up the two damaged datapads. “Soundwave will repair and retrieve data.”

Optimus nodded and lowered himself back to his chair. “Thank you. There's nothing classified on there. Not that I believe there is anything left to be classified.” He leaned back, bracing his weight against one chair arm. “No Special Ops divisions. No factional lines. We shouldn't be concealing anything from Grimlock or Metalhawk.”

“Optimus still has faith,” Soundwave said as he circled around the desk and took the other chair available.

It occurred to Optimus that Soundwave still did not have an office of his own. He knew that Soundwave had quarters somewhere, but he did not know where. He never thought to ask.

How could he know so little about the mech who had become his right hand?

Optimus shook himself out of his musings as Soundwave's comment filtered through. “Of course I
do,” he said, though he could understand why it wouldn't seem so obvious. “Otherwise I would have chosen to gather up the Autobots and leave Cybertron entirely.”

“Soundwave grateful Optimus did not.”

“You would have stayed on Cybertron?” Optimus asked, confused. If Soundwave did not wish to stay with the Decepticons and had no interest in Metalhawk's Neutrals, what would he have done?

Soundwave rested his hand over the datapads. “Cybertron home,” he admitted. “But leaving an unfortunate necessity.”

“Mm. Fortunately Grimlock stepped in, making peace with the Decepticons less of a burden,” Optimus said with a tilt of his helm. “I do appreciate all of your assistance, Soundwave. It surprised me how much I noticed your absence.”

Soundwave's visor flickered. “Apologies,” he said, his field flickering out, but then drawing back before Optimus could sense the emotion in it. “Soundwave interviewing potential candidates for defection to Autobots.”

Optimus leaned back in his chair, resting his hands on the arms. “How many?”

“Three, two denied. Petitioners sought to circumvent Grimlock's authority.” Soundwave's visor darkened in determination. “Soundwave refused to allow. Two unwelcome.”

Optimus considered those he knew still in the Decepticon's brig without parole. Necessity had allowed the Constructicons a small measure of freedom, but there were others gathering dust in the jails. Motormaster and Barricade, for example. Dirge was another.

This sort of underhanded move sounded like something Barricade would do. He supposed he owed Soundwave for taking care of that issue before Optimus was required to address it.

“And the third?”

“Potential exists. Will forward request. Identity: Breakdown.”

Optimus tilted his helm. Not the designation he would have expected. He didn't think combiner teams could or would separate. Certainly the Protectobots and Aerialbots had never indicated a desire to do so. Though First Aid no longer had a choice. Gestalt members could survive without their teammates, though it was an uncomfortable and painful existence.

Then again, such was the same for Breakdown. Of his brothers, only two still lived.

“I'll take a look at it,” Optimus said, making a mental note to contact Mirage. He'd been in Stunticon custody and if he was willing to discuss it, Optimus would get his opinion on Breakdown's potential rehabilitation. He would not force Mirage to suffer seeing Breakdown if it was at all possible it would harm Mirage.

All apologies to Breakdown, but Optimus' own Autobots came first. He was no longer going to consider the greater good. At least, not immediately. He had learned his lesson. If Breakdown truly wanted to leave his team and the Decepticons, he had the option to go the route of the Neutrals, though Optimus doubted Metalhawk would be any more welcoming.
Then again, Metalhawk did have Chromedome, Trepan's former associate. It wouldn't be a stretch to think Metalhawk might use him.

Times like these, Optimus wished he had some insight into Metalhawk. He didn't trust Metalhawk's motivations.

“Thank you,” Optimus said, “For taking on that task for me.”

Soundwave inclined his helm. “You're welcome.”

Optimus smiled behind his mask.

~

Chromedome slumped as he disengaged from Red Alert and sat back in his chair. The tenth session had gone well, but it left him drained.

He was getting a little tired of cleaning up after Trepan's messes. He didn't know whether to thank the Autobots for putting an end to Trepan's madness, or curse them out for not keeping him alive to fix his own mistakes.

Chromedome was of mixed feelings about the situation. Metalhawk hadn't given him much choice in the matter. While Chromedome was willing to help another victim of Trepan's, he was loath to do so with skills he had sworn to abandon. He also didn't like that his aid was being used as a means to spy on the Autobots.

For all that the Autobots and Decepticons had set aside their differences to end the war, Metalhawk was the one who seemed determined to cling to it. He didn't see it that way, of course. But there was a bitterness inside Metalhawk. One that no amount of goodwill could dissipate.

“Here.”

Chromedome startled, hand whipping upright and to his chagrin, nearly impaling the poor minimech who was trying to hand him a cube of energon. In his exhaustion, he'd neglected to retract his needles. Primus. Trepan would have ripped him out for his negligence.

He retracted them with a quiet snickt, expecting the other mech to flinch, except that he didn't even flare his visor at the sight of them.

The black and white mech – who on closer inspection was probably small enough to be a cassette – stared back at him. “Sorry,” he said. “I didn't mean to startle you.”

“No. It's okay. I was just thinking.” Chromedome winced. It was a bit of a lame reply. He directed his attention to the energon instead. “You brought that for me?”

“You look like you could use it. You've been sitting still for six hours.”

“That long?” Chromedome rubbed the back of his neck as he accepted the cube. “I didn't even notice.” He should have checked his chronometer.
Chromedome pulled out his autoinjector and plunked it down in the cube. He peered at the mech who, in turn, peered back at him.

“You're not the mech who was here earlier,” he said with a tilt of his helm.

Unsurprisingly, the Autobots made certain he had a guard every time he plugged into Red Alert, not that they could do anything to stop him once he engaged. Nor would they be able to recognize a problem if there was one.

“No. That was one of my brothers.” The cassette clasped his hands behind his back and rocked on his heelstruts. “I'm Rewind. And you're Chromedome, the Neutral who is going to fix Red Alert.”

“I'm going to try,” Chromedome corrected. He glanced at his patient. “I never could match up to my mentor, but I will do the best I can.”

Rewind tilted his helm, and that was when Chromedome noticed the light shining from the side of it. He cycled his optics behind his visor.

“Are you recording me?” he asked.

Rewind chuckled and tapped the side of his helm. “I'm always recording. It's kind of what I do. I'm a data archivist.”

“But you're a cassette.”

“I'm not just a cassette though. My dock's Blaster.” Rewind rocked up and down on his heels again. “If it bothers you, I'll stop.”

Chromedome leaned back in his chair. “But it's your function.”

“I don't want to make you uncomfortable. I'm interested in the Neutrals and Blaster says I can't go over there, and Metalhawk probably wouldn't allow it so all that's left is you.” He paused and something like distaste entered his field. “Or Ambulon but, he's cranky all the time. You looked like you're more interested in talking.”

Chromedome laughed a little himself. “What on Cybertron gave you that impression?”

“Instinct.” Rewind turned and grabbed the only other chair in the room, dragging it closer. He plopped himself down and folded his hands in his lap. “So,” he continued. “Will you talk to me? If you're too tired, you don't have to, but I thought it couldn't hurt to ask. Blaster says I should always ask.”

“ Asking is important,” Chromedome agreed. He dragged a hand down his faceplate, feeling the fatigue as it crawled into every strut and cable. “But maybe another day? My datastream's sluggish, and I can barely process.”

Rewind smacked his own forehelm. “Duh. What am I thinking? Of course you're exhausted. You've been in Red Alert's head. Even on a good day, that's a minefield.” He slid down from the chair and held out his hand. “Come on. I'll take you somewhere you can rest.”

Chromedome stared at him and the offered hand. Most mechs didn't blindly offer such to
mneumosurgeons. They thought he could access their thoughts with a flick of the wrist, no matter how many times Chromedome explained that he didn't use wrist dataports.

“I expected to go back to Nova Cronum.”

“Don't be ridiculous. You're helping Red Alert. You don't have to go all the way back there to rest.” Rewind wriggled his fingers and then paused, tilting his helm. “Unless you want to, I mean. I'd understand if you weren't comfortable here.”

Metalhawk would tell him to go for it, to take every chance he could to learn more about the Autobots and their potential weaknesses. Chromedome was supposed to find something to exploit. He simply didn't want to. But he also didn't want to go back to Nova Cronum. The terrain was rough, he was exhausted, and he was more likely to crash than he was to make it back safely.

Plus, Metalhawk's suspicions made it an unpleasant place to be.

Did it count as defecting if he left the Neutrals to be an Autobot?

“Thank you for the offer,” Chromedome said as he rose to his pedes, towering over the cassette by twice Rewind's height. He took the small hand, still marveling over the fact it had been offered to him. “It would be nice to recharge here.”

Rewind's visor lit with happiness. “And when you wake up, maybe we can talk?” His camera light glowed up at Chromedome, still recording.

“Sure,” Chromedome said. “I don't see why not. There's a lot we don't know about each other.”

*Metalhawk, I don't want to do this.*

Rewind beamed at him and started to tug him from the room, not that Chromedome was at all resistant. Another few sessions, maybe Red Alert would online, and they'd all trust him. Then he could spill the truth about Metalhawk and maybe, they'd let him stay here.

His fingers flexed in Rewind's grip.

Maybe.

****
It pained him to stand here, an ache that was as internal as it was external. To stand in front of his Autobots, next to a plaque with a list of all those they had lost to the Decepticons, and know that he was partly to blame.

If he had not been so eager to bend to the whims of the humans, perhaps this would not have happened. If he had been a little more demanding, if he'd let Jazz go on that mission, perhaps this could have been avoided.

If he'd been a little more willing to do what was necessary, perhaps these mechs would still be alive today.

He could look out now, at something that could only generously be called a crowd, and count the Autobots he had remaining. Even Cliffjumper was present, firmly emplaced between Smokescreen and Mirage.

Grimlock had come, but for the most part, the Decepticons kept their distance. It was, Optimus believed, better that way.

Starscream had sent his condolences, but refused to attend. Again, given that many blamed Starscream as equally as they blamed Megatron, it was a wise choice.

But to many, Grimlock was the hero, despite the Decepticon badge he now wore.

Grimlock was the hero, and Optimus was only a Prime without a Matrix, who had become the enemy's fragtoy, who could only watch helplessly as Megatron murdered, tortured, and mutilated his soldiers.

Optimus was not a hero. He barely counted as a leader. But they somehow still looked up at him, looked at him to lead them.

He did not deserve their loyalty.

Optimus' intake worked. He gripped the edge of the podium. He needed to speak. He needed to get himself together.

“

“My fellow Autobots,” Optimus began, feeling his spark shrink tighter and tighter, his field matching it. “Welcome guests… I stand before you now without a speech. Truly, there are no words I can offer except my deepest apologies and my heaviest condolences.”

He paused and cycled a ventilation, forced himself to look into the faces of those who had survived. “We have lost more than fellow soldiers,” Optimus continued, gripping the edge of the
podium. “We lost friends, family, loved ones. We lost brothers-in-arms. We lost pieces of ourselves.”

He tried, in that moment, not to think of himself and let his own grief overwhelm him. He tried not to think of Ironhide's craggy voice, and Prowl's determined clip, or the look of anger in Grimlock's visor when he told Optimus about Sludge. He desperately tried not to recall Tracks’ look of surrender, the smoking remains of Omega Supreme, or the way Inferno had stood defiant even with Megatron’s fusion cannon pointed at his helm.

Optimus worked his intake over an unavoidable lump. He knew his voice wavered, but it wasn’t in him to fight for control.

“I am certain I am not the only one who thinks of the Allspark in times like these. Or the Well. It brings me little comfort to know we will see them again, not when there are empty places beside us, in our recreational centers, in our staff.”

“We stand here today to remember, to remind ourselves of who we have lost, to promise to never make the same mistakes again.” Optimus lowered his gaze. “I make that vow to you. I will not fail you as I have our fallen. I have much to answer for, and this is not the least of it. But know that I grieve as strongly. Know that I will do whatever it takes to ensure that their losses are not in vain.”

His spark ached. Optimus tried not to think of it, to the echoes of those who were gone, who he'd never speak with again.

“We will make Cybertron whole again, for their sake if not ours. We will be as one people united. We will be strong. And we will not forget. Thank you.”

He stepped back and aside. Optimus had promised himself he would not let his voice be the only one heard. He wanted as many who wished to speak do so. Very few took him up on the offer. Their grief was too fresh. He did not blame them.

This monument, this obelisk standing in the courtyard of Autobot headquarters, was a paltry offering. It was not surrounded by beauty, but construction. The view around it was bleak, lifeless. It didn't offer celebration.

Optimus could not look at the designations branded into the steel surface without hurting. He knew it would only be a harsh reminder to everyone else.

But he also felt such a reminder was necessary. To remember the mistakes he had made and how much he owed his Autobots. He needed to be reminded to put them first.

Optimus joined the crowd, mixing with his fellow Autobots, united as they were in their shared grief. No one here had escaped the war unscathed. Everyone had lost someone, and Optimus felt the weight of that loss keenly.

One by one, they went to the podium. Some had only a few words to say, a name or a promise. Others had more, echoing Optimus' statements and building upon them. Some chose not to speak at all, their silence all the proof of their grief.

He made it a point to speak to everyone, to let them know they weren't alone, to promise that he would do whatever it took to make sure war would not happen again. Ultra Magnus' Wreckers hung back, more or less providing a protective circle for the Autobots grieving in the middle.
Optimus was grateful for that.

Optimus scanned the crowd again and frowned behind his mask when he did not see a familiar face. Of all mechs he expected to not be in attendance, Ratchet was not one of them. Anytime the Autobots had taken a moment to honor the dead, Ratchet had been there. Perhaps silent and in the background, but he'd been present.

Optimus looked again and had to concede that Ratchet was not, in fact, attending. Wheeljack was, however, so Optimus made his way to the engineer's side, where he was in quiet conversation with First Aid and Perceptor. Both of them looked well.

Perceptor had always been a quiet mech, but there was a greater sense of silence around him now. But of those taken by the Decepticons, the only one in greater repair than Perceptor, was Bluestreak. He was also in reasonably good spirits, his sorrow more related to the fate of his friends rather than his own experiences.

First Aid, at least, had improved. His field was no longer a sickly mix of anger and fear and longing. There was fatigue, yes, and a heavy pall of grief. But he held together, and if he gripped Wheeljack's hand tightly, Optimus was polite enough to pretend not to notice.

"You look like a mech on a mission," Wheeljack commented as Optimus arrived, though given the light pulse of his indicators, it was meant in jest. "Need an answer, Prime?"

"I do have a question, yes," Optimus replied, careful to keep his tone warm. "Perceptor, First Aid, you both look well."

"Thank you, Prime. I find it comforting to be back in a lab, doing that which I know best," Perceptor replied with a thin smile. "Though if you'll excuse me, I'll go offer my condolences now." He dipped his helm and excused himself.

First Aid cycled a ventilation. "Every day is new," he said, his vocals clear and strong, though his field wavered. "I'm told it gets easier. I suppose I'll just have to keep going to find out."

Wise words. Optimus would do well to heed them himself.

"A brave endeavor. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to help," Optimus replied.

First Aid nodded. "Yes, sir."

Optimus shifted his attention to Wheeljack. "I noticed that Ratchet is not present. Is everything all right?"

Wheeljack rubbed his free hand over his helm. "He didn't want to leave the permanent residents, you know, the twins and Red. He said someone needed to look after them, and he wasn't gonna make First Aid miss this either."

"I told him we could swap off, but he just waved me away," First Aid said with a little sigh. "He insisted that he'd rather keep an optic on the others himself."

Insisted, Optimus guessed, rather forcefully. Something in Wheeljack's field shifted toward an exasperated sort of agitation, mixed with resignation. Surely, he'd learned when to pick his battles.
“I see.” Optimus shifted his weight, his frown deepening, though thankfully neither could see it.

He had not had the chance to speak with Ratchet privately since they were freed from Decepticon custody. It had all been such a flurry of activity, that it was one necessity Optimus had pushed to the backburner. Physical demands had taken precedence, as had solidifying political ties and treaties.

“I admire his dedication,” Optimus continued, trying to offer reassurance in his field and knowing that it fell flat of his former strength. “I only wish he could have been here.”

“Maybe you can convince him otherwise,” Wheeljack suggested and ex-vented audibly. “Primus knows he's not listening to me.”

“If you do, comm me. I'll take over monitoring them,” First Aid added with a hopeful gleam to his visor.

Optimus nodded. “Of course. In fact, I'll go speak with him now.” There was nothing more he needed to do here.

Everyone lingered for reasons of community, not because there was more ceremony.

Wheeljack ex-vented relief. “Thank you, Prime.”

“You are welcome.” Optimus paused, awkward, but then dipped his helm and excused himself.

Once upon a time, he would have rested a hand on Wheeljack's shoulder, perhaps offered the closeness and heat of his own frame. He almost did so now, on instinct alone, but put himself in check a mere nanosec after the impulse struck him.

He did not want to think that Megatron had broken him, tainted him inside and out, but it was the little things that reminded him of how much he had changed. Optimus sighed and eased his way out of the crowd of Autobots.

The only one who noticed his departure was Jazz, but all he did was tilt his helm and make a little shooing motion before he turned back to his conversation with Bumblebee.

Optimus made his way to the medbay with ease. The hallways were deserted as all of the Autobots were at the honoring, save apparently for Ratchet and those incapable of attending. The group currently stationed on Earth would be spelled by a team from Cybertron so that they could view the monolith as well.

Optimus entered the medbay and heard a low dong as he stepped through the sliding doors. He cycled his optics in surprise. That was new.

The door to Ratchet's office opened and he appeared in the entryway. “Optimus? Shouldn't you be at the honoring?”

“I've finished my speech,” Optimus answered as he crossed the floor in a few swift strides. “All that's left is socializing. I couldn't help but notice my CMO's absence.”

Ratchet snorted and turned back into his office with a tacit invitation for Optimus to follow.
“Sideswipe and Sunstreaker are stable, but I don't trust it. They could crash at any time.”

“And Red Alert?”

“Still in stasis. Chromedome claim he's stripped all of Trepan's programming out, now we just need something to replace it.”

The door closed behind Optimus. He watched Ratchet ease his way back behind a desk that was already overflowing with datapads and various accouterments. His office was also crowded with boxes of what looked to be scavenged parts.

“Any luck on locating a memory copy?”

Ratchet lowered himself down to his chair with a heaviness that was greater than his actual mass. Optimus knew that heaviness. It was more emotion than physical weight. It was the weight of a millennia spent at war.

“No. If Smokescreen is right, then the only one who had a copy of Red Alert's core was Prowl.” He waved Optimus to an empty chair in front of the desk, one that didn't look stable enough for Optimus' frame. He risked it anyway, wincing as it creaked, and sighing when it held his weight.

“Though it's not like Red to only have one contingency plan,” Ratchet continued with a tired cant to his voice. “I don't know. Maybe there's something we missed in the Ark. Maybe I can convince Starscream to let me rifle through Trepan's quarters. Maybe he kept trophies.”

Trophies. Optimus’ tank churned at the very idea.

Optimus rubbed a hand down his faceplate. “Maybe it's kinder to let him start over.”

Ratchet cycled his optics. “You mean a total reset? Wipe his memory core completely?”

“And let him decide for himself what he wants to be?” Optimus proposed with a nod of his helm. “That is exactly what I am suggesting, Ratchet. Primus knows there are things I'd prefer to forget. There are things maybe we are all better not remembering.”

Soundwave had made the offer, and Optimus refused him, because he'd known removing those few memories wouldn't have been enough. They were in his spark now, in his core. Even if he'd had a core wipe, erasing all his experiences, everything that made him both Orion Pax and Optimus Prime, his spark would have remembered. He still would have been an echo of the mech he had been.

In a sense, that would hold true for Red Alert. He'd still have an echo of memory. He'd recognize his friends without knowing why. He'd be anxious without the context. But he could grow. He could repair. He could live in a world where the war wasn't a threat.

Sometimes, Optimus wondered if that might not be better.

“That is an extreme option, Optimus, but it may be our only one,” Ratchet said at length. He sighed and leaned back in his chair, pressing his palm to his chevron. “I'll keep trying, but I'll keep that in mind, too.”

“We do what must be done,” Optimus agreed. He reached out with his field, gently testing
Ratchet's own, and worried when he found it completely withdrawn.

Ratchet cycled a ventilation, though it was shaky. “Primus, what a mess. There are times, too, I wonder if maybe that's not the easier road, too.” He lowered his hand, the light of his optics bleak and dim as his gaze fell to the desk. “All the wrong choices I've made. My mistakes. I could wipe them away.”

Optimus leaned forward, closer to one of his oldest friends. “If anyone is to blame, Ratchet, it is me. For not ending the war sooner.” He reached out with his field again and was relieved to find that Ratchet opened to him, just a little. “You have nothing to apologize for. I want you to know that.”

Ratchet shook his helm, sinking in his chair, burying his face behind one hand. “It was easier, Prime, to think that when it was war. When I recognized the reality of needing to repair soldiers. When I couldn't bear to see my friends hurt, despite knowing they would only be sent to battle again.”

He paused, cycled a heavy ventilation, a wealth of grief and self-loathing in his field. “It was not so easy afterward. I couldn't save Beachcomber. I repaired Hound only to watch as he was sent back into the hands of more monsters. I repaired you so many times I lost count. I stood there, helpless as Megatron-- as he--” He stuttered, trailed off, vocalizer glitching.

“Ratchet--”

His oldest friend shook his helm almost violently and dropped his hand, staring back at Optimus, bleak and tormented. “I was the one who removed your t-cog. I installed the system that Megatron used against you. I welded on the cuffs and the collar. I might as well have raped you myself!” His vocals edged toward a hiss, his plating clamped down, as though keeping in violence in check. “Except I did, didn't I? Knowing all that monster had done to you, I took your valve anyway. So don't you dare sit there and tell me I'm not to blame for anything, Optimus. Don't you dare.”

Optimus' spark squeezed.

It had never once occurred to him to blame Ratchet for anything. Not once. Not a single time had he woken to Ratchet beside him and thought, “How dare Ratchet repair me? How dare he do whatever it took to live? How dare?”

Optimus worked his intake as Ratchet's helm bowed, his gaze falling to the floor. He was shaking, Optimus noticed. His field, whatever block had been on it before, had fallen. It filled the room, so thick with self-reproach that it was nauseating.

Optimus had left him like this for weeks. No wonder Wheeljack had looked lost.

No.

Megatron would not win. Optimus refused to let even the ghost of Megatron count anything as a victory.

Optimus rose to his pedes, spark aching further when he saw that Ratchet flinched. He cursed Megatron internally with every force of his being. He circled around the desk, but Ratchet would not look at him, had turned his helm away, his misery like a cloak about his frame.
A frame, Optimus noticed, that was in dire need of maintenance.

He reached for Ratchet's hand, taking carefully the scuffed red fingers that, yes, had once touched him upon Megatron's orders and had been forced into causing harm. But, also, Optimus remembered much more than that, how often these hands had been gentle and kind and comforting. Those times far outstripped whatever Megatron had made Ratchet do.

“Optimus, please don't,” Ratchet murmured.

“Don't what?” Optimus asked, careful to keep his tone gentle as he let his field slide against Ratchet's own. “Forgive you for something that doesn't need forgiveness?” He gently squeezed Ratchet's hand and lowered himself to one knee beside Ratchet's chair. “Ratchet, my friend, what makes you think I would ever blame you for doing what you had to do?”

A shudder wracked Ratchet's frame. He buried his face in his free hand, his vents hiccuping.

“I don't deserve your forgiveness.”

“The only thing you don't deserve is the guilt you are carrying,” Optimus retorted, though he kept it gentle. He pushed more affection into his field, doing fierce battle against the loathing that had gripped Ratchet's spark. “I have lost so much already, Ratchet. No matter what I endured, I am grateful that I can still have you in my life.”

Ratchet shook his helm, his hand curling around the one Optimus had rested over his, threading their fingers together. “I should have let Megatron kill me.”

“No, you should not have,” Optimus said firmly. “Wheeljack lived. So did First Aid. For that alone, you had reason to endure. We do what we must. At the point Megatron won the war, survival was all we had. And you had reasons to survive.”

Ratchet dragged in a shaky ventilation. His helm turned back toward Optimus, though his gaze remained lowered. “I am sorry, Optimus,” he said with a squeeze to Optimus' hand. “More than you will ever know.”

Optimus reached up, gently cupping Ratchet's helm. “And I reiterate that you have no reason to do so. But I accept your apology nevertheless. You are forgiven, Ratchet.”

The last of the shields around Ratchet's composure crumpled, his field wide open and embracing the comfort Optimus offered in his own. It was only natural to rise and take Ratchet into his arms, embracing one of his oldest friends as he had done so often, long, long ago.

This, too, he would not let Megatron take from him. He had made the conscious choice. He had offered. Ratchet was tentative, careful, but still open to it. He returned Optimus' embrace with a low ex-vent, the tension in his frame softening out.

Something within Optimus eased as well. One of the many tensions he carried.

“Thank you,” Ratchet murmured, barely audible.

Optimus made a low noise of assent in his vocalizer. His free hand stroked the back of Ratchet's helm.
He did not know how long they stood there. It did not matter in the end. He would stand hours more if it meant he could mend the rift Megatron had crafted.

He heard Ratchet's door slide open and was unsurprised to find Wheeljack all but tiptoeing inside, something of relief etched in the gleam of his optics.

Ratchet's shaking had calmed and he drew back from Optimus, his vents occasionally clicking. “Jack?”

“Is this a two-mech love fest or can I join in?” Wheeljack asked, just enough humor to suit the occasion as Ratchet chuckled, though it was soft and raspy.

“Get over here, you idiot,” Ratchet said. “I know you're the one who sent him here.”

“Good that he did,” Optimus said as Wheeljack crossed the room and circled behind the desk, wedging himself into what little space there was remaining to notch in at Ratchet's other side. “This conversation was a long time coming.”

Ratchet grumbled, “Yeah, well, some of us are slower to realize things than others.”

Wheeljack pressed their forehelms together. “It's okay, Ratch. I still love ya.”

“And I do as well.” Optimus squeezed Ratchet's hand before letting him go, leaving room for Wheeljack to take his place.

The two conjunx embraced each other, their enduring love something that had always been a balm to Optimus' aching spark, even before they lost the war. He didn't think he could have that connection for himself, but it was comforting to know that others could.

Optimus excused himself, politely turning down their offers for him to remain.

Jazz waited for him outside the medbay, casually leaning against the wall with his arms folded. He pushed himself off when he noticed Optimus, giving a short whistle.

“You look like you've just gone through a battle.”

Optimus nodded, rubbing a hand over his faceplate. “I've spoken with Ratchet. We had some unresolved issues to address.”

“Good, good. About time. Maybe now Doc will finally start to heal,” Jazz said as he nodded. He fell into step beside Optimus. “Where ya heading?”

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “I am honestly not sure.” He did not want to return to the Honoring. He was far too shaken. While speaking with Ratchet had been cathartic, it had reminded him of things he didn't want to remember. “Perhaps my office. There is work to be done.”

“Pah. You and your work. Want some company?”

Optimus offered Jazz a gentle smile. “I would not say no if you feel you must look after me.” He actually wasn't surprised. Whenever Soundwave wasn't around, Jazz seemed to attach himself to Optimus' side.
He started down the hall, and Jazz fell into step beside him.

“It's not lookin' after. Maybe I just miss hangin' with my Prime.” Jazz's grin widened as he reached out with his field, tangling affection and good humor. “A certain quiet comms officer seems to have usurped my position.”

Optimus lifted his orbital ridge. “I don't know what you mean. As I recall, you never made yourself into a glorified secretary.”

“That you know of,” Jazz chirped. Half his visor flashed in a wink. He lifted his hands and wiggled his fingers. “I am a sneaky-sneak after all.”

Optimus chuckled, some of the weight on his spark lifting. “That you are.” They arrived at his office, and he keyed in his code, gesturing Jazz in ahead of him. “And while we're on the subject--”

Jazz wagged a finger at him, cutting him off. “Nope. Ain't nothin' goin on yet that I'm free to tell ya. Though I got some strings out, so to speak.”

“Please reassure me that you are not antagonizing Starscream,” Optimus said as he sat down behind his desk, noticing warmly that his inbox was much emptier than it had been when he left. Soundwave must have come by.

“Not this time.” Jazz flopped down into the other chair and propped his pedes up on the edge of the desk, crossing his ankles. “Got bigger fish to fry.”

Optimus tilted his helm. “You mean Metalhawk.”

Jazz's grin never wavered. “Someone's got to keep an optic on the slippery fragger. You know he asked for a secret meeting with Grimlock?”

Optimus frowned. “I did not. When was this?”

“Recently.” Jazz waved a dismissing hand. “They haven't met yet, but we don't have anythin' to worry about. Grimlock don't like 'im anymore than we do. But it's still something to note.”

Optimus leaned back in his chair and drummed his fingers on the desk. “To what end?”

“If ya ask me, Metalhawk ain't stupid. He knows the easiest way to get us all out of his way is if we go back to killin' each other.” Jazz lifted a hand and pinched his forefinger and thumb together. “It only takes an ounce of suspicion before we start looking for reasons to fire again.”

“Then it's a good thing we are not so easily manipulated,” Optimus replied. He grabbed the first datapad from the stack and flicked it on. “I trust you to manage the situation, Jazz. And I trust you'll involve me when it becomes relevant.”

There was a stomp as Jazz dropped his pedes and leaned forward, folding his arms on the edge of the desk. “It warms the spark that ya trust me so much, OP. Glad to know I haven't fragged everythin' up.”

What a curious thing to say.

Optimus tilted his helm and lifted his gaze. “What do you mean?”
Jazz shrugged; it was anything but nonchalant. “Ratchet has his guilt, and I got mine. I shoulda seen this comin’. I shouldn't 've let you listen to the humans. I shoulda done a lot of things sooner.”

“That is the benefit of hindsight, Jazz,” Optimus said gently. He pushed the datapad to the side. “Everyone is so eager to blame themselves for things they could not have prevented. By that argument, I am the guiltiest one of all. I made many mistakes, many wrong choices. And I feel the weight of those deaths every day.”

He paused and cycled a ventilation. “That you all continue to look toward me for guidance is humbling. I do not deserve that honor, and yet here I am, still daring to call myself Prime.”

“You are Prime because you are the only mech I've ever willingly followed, Optimus,” Jazz said, nothing disingenuous in his tone. “That's not gonna change. I still believe in yer spark and that's what matters.”

Optimus gave him a fond look. “Your faith in me is enduring, Jazz. I must admit that I cling to it in my darker hours.”

Jazz offered him a soft smile. “Yer worthy of it, Optimus. That's all I care about.” He cycled a ventilation. “And I know, logically, that the only one to blame for all this mess is Megatron.” He paused and chuckled darkly. “Yeah, okay, and a bit Screamer, too. But he's making up for it. Anyway, my helm knows logic but my spark...”

He rested his chin on his arms and looked up at Optimus, “My spark still remembers seeing you on my display in the hands of those monsters. My spark can't forget Hound or Ratchet or all the other shows Megatron put on. Those are the things that haunt me.”

“And yet, if not for you, we would have all remained in Megatron's thrall, until the end of our sparks.” Optimus reached across the desk, touching Jazz on the arm. “Something for which I am exceedingly grateful.”

Jazz's visor brightened. “No way was I gonna let Buckethead win, even if it killed me, OP. Now look at us. We got Cybertron. We got somethin' like peace. We gotta chance to try again. Make things right this time.”

“That we do.” Optimus smiled warmly and returned his attention to his datapad. “Granted we have a lot of work ahead of us, but it is one challenge I am too happy to accept.”

Jazz grinned. “Me, too, Boss.”

Optimus' door chimed. He cycled his optics and looked up. That was unexpected. Weren't most of the Autobots still at the Honoring? Before Optimus could send the codes for the door to open, however, it slid aside, allowing entrance to Soundwave. The former Decepticon was as surprised as Optimus and Jazz, coming to a halt just inside the office.

“Apologies,” he said, the light behind his visor traveling from Optimus to Jazz. “No one expected.”

“No apologies needed, Soundwave. This was an unplanned stop.” Optimus smiled at the mech who had become a staple in his life as of late. “Did you need something?”
Soundwave looked at Jazz again but then gestured with a handful of datapads. “Reports processed and ready for approval. Datapads also repaired.” He approached the desk, giving Jazz an oddly wide berth, handing the datapads over.

“You didn't have to do that, but I appreciate it,” Optimus said as he accepted them. He chanced a glance at Jazz who was giving them an inscrutable look. “Why don't you grab a chair? Join us?”

Soundwave shook his helm and retreated a few steps. “Apologies. Much work to be completed.” The light behind his visor shifted to Jazz again before he backed toward the door, though it didn't look so much like a retreat. “Next time, maybe,” he added, and then he was gone and out the door.

It slid shut behind him.

Optimus cycled his optics. Well, that was strange.

Someone was laughing. Optimus turned his gaze upon Jazz, who had buried his face in his crossed arms and was laughing himself silly.

“What on Cybertron is so funny?”

Jazz snickered into his arms. “I'll tell ya when yer older, Optimus.”

He tossed his third an unamused look. “You and your inside jokes.”

“That's not serious.” Jazz leapt to his pedes and stretched his arms over his helm, pulling off a full-frame stretch. “Well, I think that's my cue to leave, too. Gotta check on the crew, make sure no one's getting drunk and maudlin and thinkin' about causing trouble.”

“Thank you for looking after them.” Optimus looked down at the stack of datapads Soundwave had brought him, most of which only needed a signature of approval. “Though to be fair, Ultra Magnus is there, too.”

“Pfft. Magnus.” Jazz twisted his torso, stretching out his abdominal cables as well. “He's a good mech, Optimus, but he doesn't have an ounce of personality.”

Optimus chuckled and looked back up at his third. “Give him a chance. You may find that there is more to him than meets the eye.”

Jazz snorted. “Good one, boss.” He spun on a heel and waved a hand over his shoulder. “Imma check on ya later, make sure yer not sleeping at your desk.”

“I wouldn't do that.”

“Well, just ta be sure.” Jazz palmed the panel and opened the door, only to pause in the frame, keeping it from closing. “Or maybe I'll send Sounders to check instead.” He winked and stepped out the door before Optimus could provide a response.

He narrowed his optics and glared in his third's general direction. Sometimes, Jazz could be as inscrutable as Soundwave. Harrumph.

Shaking his helm, Optimus directed his attention back to his work. Might as well get something done today. There was always more work waiting in the wings.
His chronometer chimed him several hours later, reminding him both that he hadn't refueled lately, and that it was getting late. Any longer, and Jazz would follow through on his threat to drag Optimus out of his office.

He rose to his pedes and stretched, feeling an ache seep into his cables and struts. He knew it was a compounded ache, built from lack of proper recharge and overworking himself. If Ratchet had his way, Optimus would soon find himself on medical leave.

*The difference is that when I wake up screaming, I have Wheeljack to reach for.*

Optimus sighed and scrubbed a hand down his face. He was not about to seek out a lover for the sole purpose of comfort. That felt disingenuous at the least. Besides, physical contact was still touch and go at this point.

What he needed was time. Until then, a distraction would do.

Optimus arranged the datapads on his desk in order of importance, tossed the completed ones into his outgoing box – which Soundwave would pick up in the morning and distribute as needed. He grabbed the only one he'd need for tomorrow's meeting and turned to go, but as he did, he glanced out the window by habit.

Optimus blinked and paused, getting closer. He peered down into the courtyard, his window offering him a view of the remembrance obelisk, something which had been done a-purpose. Optimus wanted to be able to look out and remind himself what he was fighting for and why he couldn't be as merciful as he'd been before.

He needed to remember to take care of those who mattered first.

It took a moment to recognize who it was. Starscream, of all mechs, was down in the courtyard, staring up at the obelisk. Until he crouched to lay something at the base, something Optimus couldn't identify from this distance.

A fellow mourner was acceptable. Optimus was just glad to see it wasn't a vandal.

He tagged the button to close the window shutters and headed downstairs. He'd have to pass through the courtyard to get to his hab-suite. Perhaps Starscream would still be there, if not, Optimus would move along.

He had a suspicion as to why Starscream was there in the first place.

Optimus took the lift two floors down, passing by other empty offices and rooms, some yet to be occupied, and others who belonged to members of staff who took Ratchet's orders to rest seriously. The Autobots were still small in number. Optimus despaired that they might ever meet living Autobots again.

He emerged from their 'command center' and descended the front steps. Starscream was still
present, and his wings twitched as Optimus approached. He turned to acknowledge Optimus’ arrival.

“Working late, I see,” he commented, his tone free of emotion, but his field wreathed in it. Grief hung heavy around him.

“Always,” Optimus replied as he came to a halt beside Starscream and looked up at the large, dark obelisk. “That is the perils of leadership.”

“Mm. You don't have to tell me.” Starscream shifted until he faced the memorial once again, everything in his frame language speaking of taut discomfort. “Am I not welcome here?”

Optimus shook his helm. “All those who wish to honor the fallen are welcome.” He paused and amended, “but I do appreciate that you waited until after the ceremony itself.”

“I do know something of tact,” Starscream remarked in a dry tone. His wings twitched again and he sighed. “Even if I had just as much reason to grieve.”

Optimus made a noncommittal noise. He assumed that Starscream was talking about Skyfire. He couldn't imagine any other Autobot that Starscream would grieve for.

“Sometimes,” Starscream continued, his melancholic vocals a surprise because Optimus found it hard to believe Starscream was willing to be that honest with him. “Sometimes, I wonder if it might have been better if we never found him in the ice.”

“What do you mean?”

Starscream's gaze fell. “When I think about the world he woke to, I cringe. It was no better than the world we left.” His field flared, flickering with grief. “He woke to war, to strangers, and we pushed him into the middle of it. And I was just as much of a stranger to him as everyone else.”

Optimus tilted his helm. “Killing him wasn't part of your plan?” That had always confused him. It had been enough for Optimus to consider that perhaps Starscream was not of his right processor.

Starscream tossed him a sharp look. “Of course it wasn't. You think all of this was my plan?” His engine revved with frustration, field sharp and incisive. “Megatron took what I had and pushed it to the extreme. I never would have advised slaughtering the flyers, and especially not Skyfire.” His mouth twisted into a grimace. “The slagger did that just to spite me.”

“And yet you continued to play obedience.”

“Lucky that I did!” His optics flashed. “If he'd killed me, do you think Soundwave alone could or even would have arranged a mutiny?”

Optimus inclined his helm. “You honestly think Megatron would have ever killed you?”

“I think that he'd lost enough of what little sanity he had left to try.” Starscream sneered and stalked toward him, wings rigid. “He beat Soundwave, there at the end. And if that doesn't tell you how insane he was, I don't know what will. If you're looking for an apology from me, Optimus, you won't find one.”

Optimus stared at him. He didn't blame Starscream for his own fate. Megatron would have found a
way to ruin Optimus with or without Starscream's help. Starscream's death would not have saved
Optimus. He would have always been Megatron's obsession.

“I do not want an apology. I recognize that you made a decision.” He cycled a ventilation, trying to
contain his anger. “I recognize that the war made it so that your only option was an act of
desperation. I recognize that some, if not all, of the blame rests on my shoulders. But if you are
expecting gratitude, that I cannot offer.”

Starscream snorted. His wings flicked, and he stepped back, shoulders tight with pride. “A thank
you from an Autobot? I won't hold my vents. I did what I had to do, and thanks to me, we still have
a Cybertron left to repair, and some semblance of a species left to rebuild with.”

It was this willpower, Optimus reasoned, that kept Starscream reasonably sane no matter how
many failed coups he had attempted before, and how often Megatron had beat him into scrap. It
was ironic, however, that only in working with Megatron, had Starscream succeeded in defeating
him.

Optimus cycled a vent and shifted his gaze back to the obelisk, to the carefully inscribed names
already present, and the vast swathes of smooth metal. Plenty of room remained for the rest, for the
thousands upon thousands of Autobots who had died over the course of the war.

All of their energon rested on his shoulders alone. He couldn't blame Starscream for any of them.

And Starscream did have a point.

How long, he wondered, would they have gone on fighting each other, neither gaining ground nor
losing it. Autobots and Decepticons, chipping away at each other, until there was nothing and no
one left. Oh, there would have been the Neutrals, and maybe eventually they would have returned
to Cybertron.

But there would have been nothing and no one of the Autobots or Decepticons.

Would it have been Optimus and Megatron alone in those final days? Would they have fought to
spark-death, to the end of each other. Would they have each landed a mortal blow with nothing to
show for it? Would one have survived the other?

Optimus did not know. He suspected, however, that there was merit in his dark thoughts. Without
Starscream's push, there was no other way for the war to end. Megatron would never have bowed;
Optimus would never have surrendered.

“Regardless of your methods and the unexpected outcome, you are right,” Optimus conceded at
length. He looked directly at Starscream. “We are all better off now than we could have been.”

Starscream tilted his helm. “That was almost a thank you. I suppose it's the best I'll get.” His lip
curled up, toward a smirk. “You're welcome, Prime.”

Perhaps it was that arrogance which had caused such strife between he and Megatron.

Irritation dared make itself known, but Optimus was careful to withhold it. “And since you and
Grimlock hold court over the Decepticons, then perhaps this peace will continue. For that, and that
alone, I am grateful.”
Was it worth it?

Optimus did not know.

There were times, during the war, he couldn't even say he'd made the right decision to stand against Megatron as he had done. In his captivity, in the long nights he spent chained to Megatron's berth or Megatron's spike, Optimus dipped toward self-chastisement even further.

His humiliation. His pain. Was it worth what they had now? This tentative peace with so few survivors.

He did not know. Only time would tell.

Optimus cycled a ventilation and turned away from Starscream. “Stay as long as you like. All are welcome to mourn here. Grief sees no faction lines.”

“Some might argue differently.”

Optimus inclined his helm. “It's not their call to make. Good night, Starscream.”

“Good night, Prime.”

He left Starscream there and wasn't surprised Starscream lingered. He continued to stand there, staring up at the monument, his expression as unreadable as before.

For the first time, however, Optimus felt he finally understood the querulous Seeker. Whether it was because Starscream was changing or Optimus already had, he didn't know.

He was simply glad for it.

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Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Song for this chapter: "Human," Christina Perri

The notice was the first thing Optimus saw when he onlined the next day. It was not something pleasant to wake to, and he sat on the edge of his berth, dully reviewing the contents.

More Decepticons had come to Cybertron.

As far as Optimus could tell, it was only a single spacecraft and not a warship, but still, he could hear Metalhawk's rant already. The last thing the Decepticons needed, in Metalhawk's opinion, were reinforcements. Optimus, meanwhile, could only hope that they weren't dangerous. Or Megatron loyalists.

Optimus pushed off the berth and paused when dizziness struck. He swayed on his pedes and waited for the vertigo to pass. It came more frequently as of late, and he was reluctant to pay a visit to Ratchet. Only because he knew what Ratchet would say, and those solutions weren't doable at the moment.

The dizziness passed.

Optimus cycled a ventilation and inched toward his desk. He gathered what datapads he thought would be relevant for the day, and there were far too many of them for his comfort.

In the middle of debating between an accounting report and a list of proposed rebuilding sites, Optimus' door chimed. Would it be Soundwave or Jazz this time, he wondered.

Well, to be fair, Jazz would probably walk right in.

Optimus sent the command to open the door and looked up to find Soundwave entering, carrying a fresh cube of what looked to be mid-grade. Optimus' tanks clenched at the sight. He was rather surprised because for the first time, he felt a stir of interest in the energon.

“Good morning,” Optimus greeted with a tilt of his helm. “Thank you for the fuel.”

“Optimus welcome.” Soundwave set the cube on the counter by his hand. “Recharge optimal?”

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “As well as can be expected.” He tucked his datapads under one arm and scooped up the energon with the other. “You?”

Soundwave shifted his weight. “Recharge optimal,” he replied, but he sounded unsure.

He was also, Optimus noticed, without a single cassette this time. Usually Buzzsaw or Laserbeak could be found on his unarmed shoulder. More often than not, Laserbeak would abandon him for Optimus.
“Is everything all right?” Optimus asked as he triggered his blast mask to open. He took a long sip of the energon.

“Soundwave functioning within optimal parameters.”

Optimus squinted at him. “Which is not the same as everything being all right. Is something wrong? Are you being harassed?”

Soundwave shook his helm. “Appreciation for Optimus' concern, but no issues exist.”

Yet, there was something in the way he held himself, a distance he hadn't invoked before, that seemed to prove otherwise. Optimus frowned. Soundwave kept his field close, however, and with the mask and visor, it was impossible to read his expression. Optimus had no way of telling how he truly felt.

He lowered his tone, careful to keep his vocals soothing. “You were acting a little strange yesterday. Is Jazz doing something I should know about?”

He was aware Jazz and Soundwave held something of a rivalry over the course of the war. Optimus hadn't observed them having any altercations, but he wasn't so foolish as to assume they didn’t happen. Jazz was sneaky, and Soundwave as well.

“Jazz protective of Optimus,” Soundwave said with zero inflection, more a statement of fact. “Optimus and Jazz *endurae*?”

Optimus blinked. That was not quite the question or direction he expected.

“No.” He took another sip of his energon. “Jazz is a very dear friend and yes, he can be quite protective. I have come to value that trait of his greatly. If not for Jazz, I...” he paused, trailing off. “Well, you were present. I owe my freedom to Jazz as much as I owe it to you and Starscream.”

Soundwave shook his helm. “Actions intended to right a wrong whereas Starscream's motivations uncertain. Gratitude toward Jazz accurate.”

“For that and other reasons,” Optimus agreed. He tilted his helm, giving Soundwave a curious look. “You never answered my question, however. Has Jazz done something?”

“Negative. Merely an observation.”

Optimus wasn't so convinced. He made a mental note to speak with Jazz later. Because even if Jazz wasn't involved in subtly making threats toward Soundwave – something Optimus knew him fully capable of doing – there could be other Autobots who were making life difficult for Soundwave. While it was understandable, fomenting resentment would not help anyone right now.

“Optimus has *endurae*?” Soundwave asked.

Optimus blinked out of his thoughts. “No,” he admitted with a shake of his helm. He finished off his energon and dispersed the cube, sliding his battlemask closed. “The role of Prime doesn't often leave room for such indulgences. Or niceties. You?”

This was perhaps the oddest conversation he'd had first thing in the morning in quite some time.
And with Soundwave of all mechs.

“Negative,” Soundwave replied. His visor flashed, there and gone again before Optimus could interpret it. “Cassettes to consider.”

“In a parental capacity?”


Much like Optimus then. There was never time during the war, and given what he knew of Soundwave's past before the war, it did not surprise he had no one prior.

“Desired, however,” Soundwave said, his vocals softening. “Wondered, always.” His field opened, by a small degree, and a sense of longing rose in it, one that resonated with Optimus' own.

Optimus' comm buzzed before he could respond, and given that the request had come from Ultra Magnus he could not ignore it. After all, new Decepticons had just landed on Cybertron.

“Excuse me a moment,” Optimus said as he half-turned away, accepting the comm. “Good morning, Ultra Magnus. Aren't you off-duty this morning?”

“Yes, but I cannot ignore the situation,” his second in command replied. Unlike Optimus, he didn't sound the least bit tired. He'd probably been awake since dawn. “I believe a staff meeting is in order, however brief.”

Optimus rubbed a hand down his faceplate. “I don't think we have anything to worry about. The Decepticons are not plotting to use these new arrivals against us.”

“I know that, but you can be certain Metalhawk does not. If he has not already contacted you out of concern, I am sure he will shortly.”

He had a point.

“Very well,” Optimus replied with a cycled ventilation. “I can be in the conference room in a few minutes.”

“Jazz is already on his way. I'll be there in moments. Magnus, out.”

Sometimes, Ultra Magnus could be so much like Prowl it was painful. That necessary practicality was so very similar. Optimus rubbed his faceplate again, fighting down a rise of grief. Things had changed. He needed to come to terms with that.

“Prime's work is never done,” Soundwave commented after a moment.

Optimus lowered his hand, offering a wan smile. “Indeed. Now you know one of the many reasons I do not have an endura.” He waved his free hand toward the door. “And now we are off to a staff meeting.”

“Ultra Magnus' concerns justified.”

“Yes, I know. I only wish they weren't.” Optimus sighed as they left his quarters, and Soundwave
fell into step beside him. “Peace is terribly complicated.”

“But preferred.”

He looked over at Soundwave. “Yes,” Optimus agreed. “I will take the political wrangling and headaches over the stress of war without second thought.”

They stepped out of the residential building and passed the memorial obelisk. It was all the reminder Optimus needed that peace was a much better prospect, no matter how much of a headache it gave him. Besides, if they were still at war, he would have never made a friend of Soundwave and that was a disappointing prospect.

“Optimus suited for politics,” Soundwave commented.

Optimus chuckled. “Funny you should say that. When I first became Optimus, the high council bickered over my ascension because they were convinced I was as ill-suited as they come. Maybe they were right. I am built for war, Soundwave. I am not a Prime meant for peace.”

“Current circumstances would indicate otherwise. Support given from all Autobots,” Soundwave pointed out.

“And for that I am grateful.” Little did they know he made it up as he went, relying on instinct above all else. “Besides, right now, we are technically a military unit. We haven't gone full civilian yet. When that day comes, I hope to appoint someone better suited.”

It was more than a hope, it was a longing. Optimus was proud to lead his Autobots. He was proud to be the one they turned to. But he didn't want to do it forever. He was tired. And perhaps that was what Cybertron needed, to turn leadership over to a new generation.

If only they could figure out how to make new sparks.

“Opportunity exists now. May come sooner than hoped,” Soundwave said.

Optimus nodded. “That is my wish,” he said as they arrived at the conference room, the door already open for them. No doubt Ultra Magnus had been the first one here.

“Optimus.”

He paused just before he entered the door, realizing how close Soundwave suddenly was, though his field nudged gently against Optimus' own.

“Request private conversation?” Soundwave asked.

Optimus blinked. “Yes, of course. When?” Perhaps Soundwave had finally decided to tell him whatever caused him distress.

“After shift? Before recharge?”

“Barring no complications, yes. I'll be available.” Optimus offered him a warm smile. “We can share evening energon.”

Soundwave shifted his weight. “Appreciation offered.”
“None needed. But you're welcome all the same.”

Soundwave inclined his helm and edged past Optimus, entering the conference room ahead of him. He didn't seem any more relaxed, however, and for the first time, he did not take a seat next to Optimus. Instead, he sat on the other side of Ultra Magnus who gave him a long, confused look but said nothing.

Springer was not present today, but Kup was, and Optimus grinned at the sight of his old mentor. They clasped hands, and the weight of Kup's scarred hand on his shoulder was surprisingly welcome.

“Ya look like slag warmed over, Optimus,” Kup said with that unfailing honesty of his.

Optimus blinked and then chuckled. “Yes, I know.” He squeezed Kup's hand in return. “But don't tell Ratchet or he'll have me aberth before the hour is done.”

“Maybe that's where ya need to be.” Kup tilted his helm, giving Optimus a knowing look. “Ya got a capable staff here. Maybe ya should think about handing over the reins fer a day or two.”

“Later, perhaps,” Optimus said as they drifted apart and found their chairs, moments before Jazz strode into the room.

“Morning!” he chirped, the only mech with a bounce in his pedes and the widest of grins on his face. He tossed himself into the chair at Optimus' right and made himself comfortable. “So what's the emergency?”

Ultra Magnus' optics narrowed, and the click of a systems check echoed in the room. “It is not an emergency by definition of the term, but this is a matter that needs to be discussed.”

Jazz waved a dismissing hand. “Did it not occur to people that mechs from all three factions would eventually start returning to Cybertron? Especially since Megatron broadcasted to the entire universe that the Decepticons won the war?”

“Of course it did,” Kup replied, slumping into his chair to get comfortable in much the way Jazz had. “But we all know that the only one gonna throw a hissy fit, is Metalhawk.”

Jazz laughed. “And I used to think Starscream was annoying.”

Optimus powered on his main datapad and blinked when he found two messages waiting for him in the queue. They'd been sent across the official channel, which meant they were official communications. Curious.

He tapped the icon and brought up the details. One was from Grimlock, sent not long after Optimus retired yesterday. The other was from Metalhawk, sent first thing this morning.

Well, at least the items dictated by the treaty were being put to good use.

Optimus opened Grimlock's message first and skimmed the contents. It read like a press release or a statement of intent.

Six Decepticons had arrived, all of whom were willing and eager for peace, one of which who
debated defection to the Autobots. They were considered low risk for trouble and unless Optimus had any objections, their ship would be repaired and refurbished for the sake of supply runs and space exploration.

However, there was a second matter that Grimlock would like to discuss with him, in private, at a time of his convenience.

“We are not to worry about the Decepticons,” Optimus said, cutting into something between Jazz and Kup that seemed to consist of poorly worded jokes about former Decepticons. “Grimlock says they are nothing to worry about.”

“I'm not worried about the individual Decepticon,” Ultra Magnus said, pulling out his own datapad. “But that the Decepticons continue to have an advantage over us in numbers.”

Kup leaned forward, bracing his arms on the edge of the table. “But they aren't the concern. The Neutrals are.”

Speaking of… Optimus tapped the icon for Metalhawk's message and sure enough, it was a thinly veiled accusation about the threat of new Decepticons and whether or not they should be concerned that the Deceptions were rebuilding their army. It was almost laughable, considering that once the Neutrals started rolling in, it would be Metalhawk with the advantage.

Clearly Metalhawk did not understand the ties that had already been sown between the Autobots and Decepticons. Though, to be fair, Grimlock was a new addition to the command ranks. Metalhawk had never known or heard of him prior to Grimlock taking control of the Decepticons.

“None of this is a problem,” Jazz insisted. He tilted his helm, tossing Kup a cocksure grin. “Trust me. Grimlock'll keep his Cons in line and don't you worry yer pretty helm about Metalhawk. I got 'im covered.”

Optimus wasn't sure he liked the sound of that.

Neither did Ultra Magnus, whose frown deepened to the point of a scowl. “I do not recall approving any missions for Special Operations. I wasn't aware you had a fully functioning unit.”

The light in Jazz's visor went flat as his chair hit the floor. He sat up properly. “One, I don't remember needing to ask for your permission. Two, I have all the team I need, and I don't need your reminder about their functioning, and three--”

“Jazz,” Optimus interjected before the coiled violence in his third could be unleashed. “Perhaps you might be willing to share with us exactly how you mean to counteract Metalhawk.”

It was times like these that Optimus was reminded how very little Ultra Magnus and Prowl were alike. Jazz and Prowl had respected each other. Right now, Ultra Magnus and Jazz had very little reason to do so.

Ultra Magnus thought Jazz too reckless and ill-behaved. He didn't conduct himself as a member of high command ought to do.

Jazz thought Magnus followed the rules to the point of his detriment. That he couldn’t see the larger picture and because of that, he missed what was important.
They would get along eventually. They had that luxury. And unlike Prowl and Jazz, Jazz and Ultra Magnus did not have the millennia of working together to draw from. They would have to start from scratch.

Jazz tossed him a razor-sharp smile. “Of course I would, Prime,” he chirped. “And the answer to that question is Onslaught.”

“The Combinatics?” Now Optimus was the one who was confused. “How do they fit into this?”

“Well, since I am understaffed at the moment, and Soundwave's bits are off the market, I had to outsource,” Jazz said and this time, it was accompanied by a glare in Magnus' direction. “Couldn't get Vortex, which is probably for the best, but Onslaught and Blast Off have agreed, and all I had to do was wave a few creds at Swindle before he leapt at the offer.”

Kup snorted. “And you think a buncha former Cons are gonna get closer to Metalhawk than anyone else?”

“Onslaught badgeless,” Soundwave pointed out, the first he'd spoken since the meeting began. “History of despising Megatron. Vocally outspoken against Autobots, also.”

“Exactly!” Jazz grinned and half-lit his visor in a wink. “Couple that with the fact I know Blast off has been doing some freelance engineering work in Nova Cronum, and Swindle's already agreed to do some trading on their behalf, and we have our in.”

It was better than nothing.

“Very well. But I want to speak with Onslaught first.” Optimus said, careful to hide his frown. He didn't like treating the Neutrals as enemies, but he suspected that they were already doing the same toward he and his Autobots.

It was why he had insisted Ratchet keep an optic on Chromedome. And why there was someone from Ultra Magnus' unit always around whenever a Neutral came to visit for whatever reason.

“Of course, Boss. I'll set up a meetin' for this afternoon.” Jazz's visor glinted with humor. “Unless you're busy, of course.”

Optimus shook his helm. “I will make time. This matter takes precedence.” He made a mental note, also, to key a reply to Grimlock. If it was important enough for Grimlock to publicly request a private meeting, then Optimus wanted to ensure he did not miss it.

“In the meantime, are there any other matters that need to be addressed?” Optimus asked.

The moment of panic, such as it was, passed. No one had any other concerns and Optimus called the meeting to an end. Soundwave was the first mech out the door, as if the fires of Unicron nipped at his aft.

Ultra Magnus departed next, after Optimus gave him a stern reminder to enjoy his off-duty time and not return to work. There was nothing that needed to be done today that couldn't keep until tomorrow.

They were no longer at war, after all. They should all indulge in a bit of peace and quiet.
Kup promised to make sure he did so, and went off after Ultra Magnus, leaving only Optimus and Jazz behind. Unsurprisingly, Jazz didn't seem in a hurry to go.

“Speaking of mechs who need to rest, sit yer aft down,” Jazz said as he nudged Optimus' chair back toward him. “Don't think I can't see ya swaying on your pedes.”

Optimus obeyed, but only because he meant to do so. The dizziness had returned, but like before, the spell was brief. “Have you become Ratchet then?”

“One of us has to get through to ya. When are ya gonna take yer own advice and get some rest?”

“The moment I feel it is safe enough to do so.” Which given the current situation, might be months from now. There was a tension in the air, one Optimus could not explain, but felt he could not ignore.

Jazz made a noncommittal noise. “But Sounders is acting a little odd, ain't he?” he asked as he leaned against the table and looked up at Optimus.

“You noticed, too?”

“I've made a habit of watching him over the decades. Old habits're hard to break.” Jazz gave him a lazy grin. “Want I should have a look see?”

Given the way Soundwave reacted whenever Jazz's name was brought up? Primus, no. “He's an ally, not an enemy,” Optimus said. “I'll speak with him.”

“Sure, sure.” Jazz straightened, stretching his arms over his helm, a languid roll of his frame to ease kinked cables. “Hound is supposed ta check in today, so I’mma head to the space bridge control, see what he has to say. I'll comm ya when I hear from Onslaught?”

“Please do.”

One less problem to worry about was one thing Optimus greatly appreciated.

~

It was a novel concept to be alone, Bluestreak thought. Though he wasn't entirely alone. Mirage was here, too, though he was in the washracks, undergoing his second wash of the day.

It was technically improvement. He used to spend half a day in there. It was a compulsion at this point. His cables would start to itch, he claimed. Or his paint wasn't perfect. Or there was dust.

Bluestreak understood. He didn't intervene, unless he felt Mirage had been in there too long, or he scrubbed too hard. For now, it was one of the many ways Mirage coped. So Bluestreak let him have it.

Besides, it was kind of nice, for once, to be needed.

Bluestreak was aware that he was one of the lucky ones. While he'd been a prisoner, he'd been
treated well. He'd never once been harmed. He'd been fueled. He'd been repaired. He'd been left alone, for the most part, except for the training.

Then again, they never worked him any harder than they worked themselves. It felt so natural, once the battle began, to take up arms again. It felt like a return to normal, and Bluestreak had never felt so justified than when he stood beside the Comboticons and fought to free his friends from Decepticon control.

Bluestreak knew that compared to Mirage, he'd been lucky.

Mirage… had not been.

First, he'd been caught by the Stunticons, which had been a miscalculation on his part, he admitted. Usually in halting sobs while he and Bluestreak sat back to back, their fields embracing.

But he'd been injured, Mirage whispered. He'd been injured and low on energon, and his invisibility cloak had been damaged, and there were five of them. He'd tried to hide, but they found him anyway.

They found him and celebrated their victory by enjoying his frame.

Four mechs, he admitted with staticky vocals. They weren't great at sharing or patience either.

There are five Decepticons, Bluestreak remembered saying, confused.

But only four rapists, Mirage corrected.

When they were done, they brought Mirage back to Iacon and Megatron. They thought for sure they'd get to keep him. On the journey back, they told him in detail all the filthy and humiliating things they intended to do to him. How he could earn his energon. How it would be the only thing that gave him worth.

It wasn't relief when Megatron gave him to Shockwave instead, Mirage admitted. It was trading one horror for another.

Shockwave didn't violate him sexually, but there was nothing sacred to the mech. His coding, his frame, his spark – all of it was laid open for Shockwave's cold-opticked perusal.

His only consolation was that when he wasn't on the examination table, he was left alone, in the silence and darkness of a tiny cell. Sometimes, he could hear others. Sounds of pain, sounds of horror.

Mirage had known that after Shockwave was done with him, he'd be passed to someone else. He didn't know who it would be, but he dreaded it.

Several times, he contemplated one last free choice. He could take his own spark. He had the protocols. He could do it. There was nothing left to protect but himself.

It was thoughts of his endura, Tracks, that kept him living. As far as Mirage knew, Tracks was still alive. He clung to that hope.

A hope that would be for naught as it turned out.
There was so much pain in Mirage's voice when he spoke of Tracks that Bluestreak felt his own spark ache. He offered as much comfort as he was capable. He didn't know what it was to lose an endura, but he had experienced loss.

He missed Prowl more than words could tell. He missed Ironhide, his mentor. He missed his friends, Sideswipe and Sunstreaker who were stuck in the medbay, and Smokescreen who was always busy, and Beachcomber, who the Coneheads had killed, and Hound who was on Earth now.

So many gone. So many hurting. Bluestreak did the best he could with what he had.

He no longer had nightmares of Praxus. They had been replaced with a new horror.

The door chimed.

Bluestreak cycled his optics. A visitor? While that wasn't highly unusual, he knew that Smokescreen was on-shift, and Jazz was at a meeting, which narrowed the pool of candidates.

Bluestreak turned away from the balcony and answered the door, surprised when it slid open and revealed Vortex.

“Afternoon!” the rotary said with a tone that Bluestreak dared call cheerful.

Bluestreak worked his jaw. “Afternoon,” he replied automatically. “Um, not to be rude or anything, but why are you here?”

Vortex shifted his weight from pede to pede. “Came to see you,” he said, his visor gleaming a little brighter. “Hadn't, you know, since the end of all things. Was kind of hoping we could talk?”

“Talk,” Bluestreak repeated. “About what?”

“You,” Vortex said, and he cycled a ventilation. “And me.”

This was only getting weirder.

Bluestreak tilted his helm. “But there's not a 'you and me.'”

“I know.” Vortex rifled about in his subspace and produced a box wrapped in ribbons, which he presented to Bluestreak. “I was kinda hoping there could be.”

Bluestreak took the box, because he couldn’t think of a good reason not to. It had a weight to it, which suggested either energon goodies or waxing supplies.

“I don't understand,” Bluestreak said, not with a frown, just with confusion. “Why me? And no offense, but you're… you.”

Vortex looked to the left and right, up and down the hallway. “I'm me,” he confirmed. “But I'm not only me. It's kind of hard to explain, but I could, if you wanted me to. Only not out here? I feel like I have a target on my rotors.”

Of course he did. He was Vortex, well known crazed interrogator, standing in the hallway of a residential area for the Autobots. How many other mechs had he passed who watched him warily,
wondering why the frag he was here?

That took guts.

Bluestreak shoved the box into his subspace and stepped forward, urging Vortex to back up a step. “Actually, that's not a good idea,” he said as he let his door slide shut behind him, just as he heard the click of the washracks cutting off. “Coming in my suite right now, I mean.”

“Oh. I see.” Try as he might, there was no disguising the disappointment in Vortex's tone. “I understand.” He turned as if to go, and Bluestreak found himself moving forward before he could ask himself why.

“No, I only meant – Mirage is in there,” Bluestreak explained and offered Vortex a tentative smile. “And I don't think he'd be comfortable with you there, even if you aren't a Decepticon anymore.”

He gave a pointed look to Vortex's badgeless chest.

Vortex's visor darkened. “Mirage, hm? Yeah, you're probably right. Think he's been on my table a coupla times.” He chuckled, like it was a fond memory.

A chill crept down Bluestreak's spinal strut. “Right. So…”

Vortex shifted, and then his field flashed as though panicked. “I only meant that was the other me, the one that is me, but not the me in front of you right now. Oh, frag. I'm screwing this up.” He exhaled loudly and swept a hand over his helm.

In that moment, Vortex reminded Bluestreak a lot of Smokescreen. Or maybe Red Alert. A cross between the two? And honestly, Vortex had been nothing but polite and respectful to him while the Combaticons had 'owned' him for lack of a better word.

That Vortex could be awkward, well, Bluestreak had never known that. But he knew it now, and it was strange but also… kind of cute?

What could one little talk hurt?

“You're not,” Bluestreak said, offering him a smile. His door wings flicked. “We could meet later? Somewhere else?”

Somewhere public, the rational side of his processor offered. He was willing to give Vortex a chance, but he wasn't going to be stupid about it. Seeking Jazz's advice would be a good idea, too. Bluestreak wanted to hope that Vortex was genuine, but also, he wasn't an idiot or a fool.

Vortex lit up and his field did as well. So either he was a very good actor, or that was genuine relief and excitement he showed.

“Wherever you want,” Vortex said and his rotors wiggled, which was too adorable for words. “I'll comm you?”

“Sure. I'll be looking forward to it.” Bluestreak grinned and watched as Vortex backed down the hallway with a little wave.

And then he was gone, capping one of the strangest things to happen to Bluestreak in quite some time. He shook his helm and went back into his shared suite with Mirage, already dialing up Jazz.
Time to build some bridges, he supposed.

~

Onslaught was nothing if not prompt, though Optimus realized once the necessities were taken care of, he would need to see about obtaining a larger office. It didn't seem so small when only he was in it, or just himself and Jazz or himself and Soundwave.

But the addition of Onslaught made it appear smaller, cramped, and Optimus couldn't help feeling trapped between the cabinet behind him and his desk in front of him. Perhaps Onslaught's presence was partly to blame, though Optimus had no reason to be uneasy with the mech.

Onslaught had done nothing to him. He didn't bear a Decepticon badge, and neither did Optimus associate him, at a glance, with the Decepticons.

The size of his office had to be to blame.

“Thank you for coming,” Optimus said as Onslaught lowered himself into a chair that noisily protested his mass.

“It's in my best interest to cultivate a good relationship with potential employers,” the Combaticon Commander said. His gaze shifted to Jazz, who had taken to perching on the edge of Optimus' desk, though there was a chair available for his use. “Though if this assignment is to work, this should probably be our last direct meeting.”

Optimus inclined his helm. “Yes, of course. I only wanted to be sure you understood the risks, and that you were accepting this of your own accord, without outside influence.” He gave Jazz a pointed look.

His third grinned back at him.

“The benefits are worth the risks,” Onslaught replied as he folded his arms in his lap, effecting a posture of ease. “As are the rewards. I don't think there is a single non-Neutral mech who does not consider Metalhawk and his ilk a threat.”

“Ilk.” Jazz snickered. “Mech, since when did you start talking like that.?”

Onslaught's field flickered with humor. “Metalhawk is a mech of nobility, one from a particularly high caste. If I am to gain his confidence, I must appear to be the same.”

“Am I correct in assuming you have a plan already?” Optimus asked.

“Yes, of course. Blast Off has a former associate who is among the Neutrals. He intends to reestablish contact,” Onslaught explained as he made a vague gesture with one hand. “Swindle, of course, has contacts all over the galaxy and unsurprisingly, has worked with the Neutrals before. I will formally ask Metalhawk for a meeting, explaining to him our Neutral status and ask how we can be of assistance to him.”
Optimus nodded. “And you think this will work?”

Onslaught rolled his shoulders. “The worst Metalhawk can do is decline our request and the ops comes to an end. Which means we'll have to find another means of keeping an optic on him. The point is to try.”

“And I have the utmost faith that it will work,” Jazz said as he swung his legs playfully. “Metalhawk is suspicious, yeah, but he's also proud. If Onslaught plays his cards right, he'll find himself in Metalhawk's cabinet. Plus, I got an ace up my sleeve that could work in his favor.”

Sometimes, Optimus swore Jazz held more secrets than a puzzle box.

“What kind of ace?” he asked.

Jazz grinned. “A certain former associate of mine who happens to be among Metalhawk's crew. He doesn't want to come back to the Autobots officially, but he's also not too fond of the murmurs he's been hearing from Metalhawk.”

“Precisely.” Onslaught tilted his helm toward Jazz. “So we have this well in hand. Metalhawk knows that the treaty prevents him from doing anything untoward to us. At worst, he can bar us entrance into Nova Cronum. Really, there is little risk.”

“Very well.” Optimus cycled a ventilation. “Jazz, I will approve this mission. I leave the delineation of it in your hands. If Ultra Magnus gives you any trouble, let me know.”

“Sure thing, boss.” Jazz grinned.

Onslaught rose to his pedes and offered Optimus a hand, which he took. “Pleasure working with you, Prime. Jazz has my comm if you need me. As it is, from now on, there will be a visible distance between us.”

“Which is to be expected. Good luck, Onslaught.”

“Luck is for those who need it.” Onslaught's visor glinted, and then he depared, leaving the office that much larger.

“Told ya there was nothin' to worry about,” Jazz said cheekily.

Optimus rubbed a hand down his face and gave his third a long look. “Prowl would have given you a long lecture for that, you know.”

Jazz's smile lightened. “Yeah, I know.” He hopped off the desk and stretched his arms over his helm. “Kinda wish he were here to give me one now.”

“As do I.”

“Go get some rest, boss,” Jazz said with a warm pulse of his energy field. “I worry about ya.”

Optimus' spark hummed. “I have one more meeting and then I will. I promise.” He would lay down at the very least, though whether his recharge would be beneficial remained to be seen.

Jazz tilted his helm. “Another meeting? You should be off-shift, OP.”
“This is a private matter. For Soundwave,” Optimus clarified. “Perhaps it will explain his strange behavior.”

Jazz paused and looked up at him. “Soundwave?” he repeated, and thumbed his chin, sounding thoughtful. “Wow. Look at 'im bein' all impatient. I guess I rattled him more'n I thought I did.”

Optimus sighed and palmed his forehelm. “Jazz, what did you do?”

“Nothin’.” Jazz rolled his shoulders. “Nothin' like what you're thinkin' anyway. If he got rattled, it's cause he's assumin' things without fact-checkin'. Terrible behavior for a former spy, if ya ask me.”

Optimus dropped his hand and stared at his third. “That is not an answer.”

“I know it ain't.” Jazz beamed up at him and planted his hands on his hips. “But that's only cause ya can be so dense sometimes, Optimus. Soundwave is attracted to you.”

He blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

Jazz sighed and shook his helm. His field was a mix of exasperation and humor. “It ain't recent either. I'd guess he's been interested for a while, but ya know, there was a war and everythin'.”

Optimus shook his helm. “No, it's not like that. I cannot go into the details without betraying his trust, but Soundwave is only responding to me as the new leader he has accepted. Whatever else you might think is happening, is not.”

“This has nothing to do with coding, Optimus.” Jazz waved a dismissing hand, sounding frustrated. “He likes you. The mech you are. And have been. And always were. And you just don't notice, which I can't tell who it frustrates more, him or me.”

Optimus was at a loss for words. He stared at Jazz, groping for something to say, but he couldn't think of anything beyond another denial. Surely Jazz was wrong.

Jazz cycled a ventilation. “So I guess now the only question is: what do you think about him?”

Optimus honestly had no clue how to answer that. He'd not given any thoughts to romance or love or intimacy. He'd long ago given up on allowing himself a relationship in that respect. He'd been content to share his berth with those closest to him, taking the burden of being Prime as the only permanent berthmate he'd ever have.

“Cause my guess is, that's what he wants to talk about,” Jazz continued with another shrug. “Maybe so he can tell himself to move on. Maybe cause he's tired of waitin', I don't know.”

Optimus shook his helm slowly. “That is unexpected,” he admitted, and he scraped a palm down his faceplate. “I… thank you for telling me, Jazz.”

“Ya needed to know.” Jazz peered up at him. “Ya gonna be okay, boss? Want me to make up an excuse for ya?”

“No. This isn't a problem.” Optimus cycled a steadying ventilation. He was too stunned to examine his own feelings. He still felt Jazz was wrong somehow.
“Ya sure?”

Optimus nodded. “Yes.” He offered Jazz an unsteady smile. “I'm quite capable of managing my romantic entanglements, but thank you for your concern.”

“I'll never stop worryin' about ya, Optimus. It's in my nature.” Jazz grinned and rolled his helm, another one of his stretches. “Good luck with Soundwave. I'm off to see if Mirage needs some company tonight.”

Optimus blinked. “You and he…?”

“It's not like that.” Jazz shook his helm. “Mirage don't like recharging alone, but he'd never admit it, so we all swap off. But Smokey's got shift tonight, and I'm pretty sure Blue has a date, so it's up to me. Great tragedy that is.”

“Bluestreak? A date? With whom?”

Jazz smirked. “Vortex.”

Optimus rebooted his audials, quite sure he hadn't heard correctly. Wait. No, he did remember Vortex asking if he was allowed to court an Autobot some time back. He'd meant Bluestreak?

“I see,” he said faintly.

“Hey. You were the one that said we needed to build bridges.” Jazz patted him on the shoulder, a mere wisp of contact that was miles away from the full-fledged hugs he used to give. “I'm just offering out the tools.” He winked and turned away. “Catch ya later, Optimus.”

“Good night, Jazz.”

He watched his third go with lingering confusion, but affection as well. Bluestreak and Vortex? Who would have guessed?

All that remained to be seen was whether or not it worked out.

Optimus shook his helm and left his office. It was time he headed back to his quarters. He was expected to meet Soundwave shortly and now, it was doubly-important he did not miss this meeting.

His internal comm chimed. Optimus slowed his pace as he recognized the ident code attached to the instant message which read Permission to land? He smiled softly and looked up, even as he sent an affirmative.

Laserbeak was above him, but the moment she received his permission, she came down for a landing. Optimus paused, giving her a stationary target, and smiled as she landed on his shoulder gracefully, without a single scratch to his paint. Her field buzzed with pleasure, and her helm tilted against his. He had come to recognize that as a show of affection.

“Good evening, Laserbeak.”

Evening, Prime, Laserbeak replied as she shifted and settled, making herself comfortable. Jazz is not wrong. Master does hold feelings for you.
Optimus' spark stuttered. “Oh, I see,” he said, vocals faint as he forced himself to keep moving, heading toward home.

*If he is not welcome, he will understand,* Laserbeak said with a gentle, audible chirr. *It is the not-knowing that haunts him.*

“Yes, I can understand why.” Optimus cycled a ventilation, feeling as if his worldview had shifted quite alarmingly. “And what of you and your siblings? How do you feel?”

*I like Optimus.* Laserbeak's field flushed with amusement and humor. *Buzzsaw grumpy, but he always grumpy. Others approve, too. Even Ravage. She said something about the Autobots corrupting us.* She added a laughing emoticon, and then chuckled aloud, a rolling chirp right in Optimus' audial.

Optimus smiled despite himself. “Yes, it would certainly seem so.”

He passed the memorial, the shadow of the obelisk falling over him. He paused, as he always did, to take a moment to remember, to grieve. Abrupt motion, however, didn't suit him.

Dizziness attacked again. Optimus swayed on his pedes, his vision glitching.

*Optimus?*

“I am fine,” he said, though all evidence seemed to prove to the contrary.

His ventilations stuttered. His knees wobbled. The dizziness did not pass. Instead, it only worsened. But he was fully fueled. He was fully repaired. He had been feeling fine.

Laserbeak shifted on his shoulder, the motion of her limbs grating in Optimus' audials, ringing louder and louder. He winced, gripped at his helm, and it took two tries to even touch his helm. He kept missing.

The world spun.

*Optimus?*

Laserbeak alit from his shoulder and took to the sky. No, she wasn't flying. Optimus was falling. His helm spun, his thoughts scattering in all directions. He couldn't ventilate.

He never felt himself hit the ground.****
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

"We All Need Saving," Jon McLaughlin

Soundwave had heard rumors that the Autobot Chief Medical Officer could curse with the best of them. That he had a full arsenal of foul words to choose from, some of which held origins in various foreign languages, and he used them liberally. The more he cursed, the angrier he was, but also, the more likely his patient would survive.

So Soundwave took comfort in the amount of vitriol spewing from Ratchet's lips even as he worked on Optimus, attaching drip lines and sensors and monitors. He moved fast, his hands a blur, practiced and calm. He'd put Optimus together more times than any of them could count. For Ratchet, this had to be common. Rote. Nothing worrisome.

Soundwave certainly hoped so.

He was wise enough to stay out of the way, though he refused to leave the room. His spark still hadn't slowed, and still pulsed a frantic beat.

Laserbeak's frantic pinging and calls across his comm and their bond still rang through him. She didn't often sound frightened, but this time, she did. It was enough that Soundwave had dropped the energon he'd carefully selected for his meeting with Optimus and ran.

The sight of Optimus collapsed in the courtyard had nearly stopped his spark. He thanked Primus and anyone else listening he was strong enough to scoop the Prime up, rushing him to the medical center, even as he pinged Ratchet relentlessly. The CMO had been in recharge, but he'd been out of the berth the moment he heard who Soundwave was bringing in.

Soundwave feared it was poison. That this was Metalhawk finally making his move.

He feared worse things.

Laserbeak remained on his shoulder, refusing to return to his dock. She huddled near his helm, her optics locked on Optimus' unconscious frame. Occasionally, Soundwave would stroke her head.

She might very well have saved Optimus' life. Soundwave was even more glad that he'd had the foresight to have Laserbeak keep an optic on Optimus. The Prime did not know how to look after himself.

Why was Jazz not with him?

Soundwave determined that he would have words with the Special Ops Commander later. But for now, he would stand here and listen to Ratchet curse as the machines beeped a steady cadence, proving Optimus was alive.
Soundwave could not remember the last time he'd been so frightened.

“He's going to be fine, the stupid fragging Pit-slagged excuse for a Prime that he is,” Ratchet snarled, and it took Soundwave several moments to realize that buried in all the cursing, Ratchet reassured him. “Just so you know.”

Soundwave dipped his helm. “Thank you.”

“I'm only telling you so you can stop watching me like I'm going to make a mistake or something,” Ratchet retorted with a halfway glance over his shoulder. “And so you can stop looking like someone kicked one of your symbiotes. This fragger's going to live. I've brought him back from worse than this.”

“Every confidence in Ratchet's skills held,” Soundwave replied with an inclination of his helm. “Comfort in waiting.”

“Yeah, yeah. At least you're out of the way.” Ratchet shrugged a shoulder dismissively and then bent himself back to the task of repairing Optimus. “Fragging stupid mechs not listening to their slagging Unicron-slogged medics who obviously don't know--”

Soundwave tuned him out once he realized Ratchet was simply cursing again, and not saying anything relevant.

Optimus was going to be fine, Ratchet said. Soundwave believed him. Though it was not enough to ease the tremor of worry in his spark. He'd left a mess outside Optimus' quarters. He made a mental note to clean that up. He should probably contact Jazz and Ultra Magnus, but didn't know if Ratchet had done so already.

There were many more things he should be doing than standing here, watching Ratchet work, worrying himself into illness. Laserbeak continued to shiver on his shoulder, no matter how much comfort he offered her. She had grown attached to Optimus.

_He greets me like an equal!_ She'd chirred to Soundwave, her enthusiasm so great it had been infectious. Her delight affected Soundwave's spark.

“That's because you are one,” Soundwave had replied, but her excitement could not be deterred.

She'd turned circles in the sky that day, and constantly badgered Buzzsaw with her glee. He grumped at her, but her mood eventually infected him, too.

That was the moment Soundwave knew he'd made the right choice.

Seeing Rumble with Bumblebee had been the start. Sending Ravage off with Hound, her delight in finally being able to have something she'd thought she'd lost, had been the second point.

And now, Laserbeak's unadulterated delight, they were all proof. They were relief. Soundwave had finally done something right for his cassettes. Even if Ravage and Rumble and Frenzy ended up leaving him, Soundwave had done right.

He turned his attention back to Optimus, trying to ignore the way his spark squeezed into a tiny ball. He hated feeling this helpless.
A querying ping rang across the bond – Rumble, wanting to know if Soundwave needed company.

He sent back a negative. He had Laserbeak. He would be fine, so long as Ratchet did not force him to leave.

Ratchet worked; Soundwave watched. He did not move. He had fine-tuned the art of standing still, watching and waiting. It served him well now.

He did, in fact, contact both Jazz and Ultra Magnus. The latter stated he would take over Optimus' duties for the time being. Jazz accepted that he would help pick up the slack. Neither placed the blame on Soundwave.

'Just look out for him for me, okay?' Jazz said. Almost as if he knew.

But of course he knew.

Soundwave had tried to be subtle, but there were some things a mech could not hide. Especially not from someone as intuitive as Jazz. Soundwave had always admired Optimus Prime from afar, and the recent proximity to Optimus only made those feelings come pouring back.

Even if nothing ever came of it. Even if all Soundwave was allowed was a chance to remain at Optimus Prime’s side, however platonic, it would be worth it. Optimus Prime was a mech worth following. This Soundwave knew to be true.

Soundwave watched for several hours until Ratchet finally stepped back, wiping his hands with a cloth pulled from his subspace. Optimus' vitals had stabilized, including his ventilations and his spark rate. He no longer lay on the berth tensely, as though fighting an inner battle. There was relaxation to his frame.

“He's recharging,” Ratchet said, an exhausted cant to his voice as he dragged himself around the berth. He tilted his helm toward the door, indicating Soundwave should follow. “And if I'm half the medic I think I am, he'll be recharging for the next several hours.”

“Understood.” Soundwave moved to follow, but Laserbeak alit from his shoulder.

Soundwave sent her a questioning ping, only to find her perched at the head of Optimus' berth. Her gaze dropped to the sleeping Prime, her wings fluttering as she made herself comfortable.

I want to keep an optic on him, she said, and in her field was a sense of guilt. I should have been paying closer attention.

Plenty of blame to go around, Soundwave replied. He did not demand she return, and luckily, Ratchet didn't demand she leave.

Soundwave followed Ratchet out of the private room and down the hall, to the medic's office. It was a small space, crammed with cabinets and boxes of supplies, but Soundwave supposed it was the privacy that mattered. Ratchet signaled for the door to close and lock, but Soundwave had no doubt that Ratchet still monitored Optimus remotely.

Ratchet dropped down into his chair with the heaviness of a mech exhausted and carrying a weighty burden. “Ahhh,” Ratchet sighed with a palm shielding his expression from Soundwave's view. “It was never the war that was going to kill me, but foolish Primes thinking they are
indestructible.”

Soundwave found a sturdy chair and carefully lowered himself into it. “It was poison?”

“Poison?” Ratchet dropped his hand and snorted. “Of course not. It was idiocy.”

Soundwave stared at the medic.

Ratchet cycled a ventilation and straightened a little on the chair. “Optimus wasn't fully recovered to start with, but he insisted on not being berthbound. I released him with caveats. He was to fuel properly. He was to recharge properly. And he was supposed to come to me if he sensed anything was wrong.” Ratchet threw one hand into the air, field flaring with aggravation. “He failed on all three counts.”

Soundwave inclined his helm. “Optimus refuels,” he said, the accusation stinging a bit as he'd made it a duty to ensure that Optimus received the proper amount of fuel every day. As far as he knew, Optimus had been consuming it.

“Yeah, he refuels,” Ratchet admitted, but it was a scowl. He tapped one finger on his desk. “But what he's been neglecting to mention is that he's been purging it just as much as he's been consuming it. More than half of his daily intake has ended up in recycling.”

Soundwave lowered his helm, guilt striking him anew. “It was not sabotage then.”

“No.” Ratchet sighed and sank a little lower in his chair. “It was Optimus not getting the rest he needs. He has suffered as much, if not more, than the rest of us. But he continues to insist on putting our needs before his.”

“Optimus great leader.”

“You don't have to tell me that.” Ratchet tossed him a hard look. “But he can't lead if he's not healthy.” He whipped a hand in the general direction of Optimus' recovery room. “He hasn't had a single night of uninterrupted recharge in weeks. The inhibitors aren't working because he's not slagging taking them! He passed out because his own frame turned against him. It forced a manual shutdown!”

Soundwave flinched. He had a passing knowledge of medical engineering. He was a field medic at best. But even he knew that when the frame forced a manual shutdown, it was not good.

Ratchet rubbed at his chevron, looking old and tired. “I shouldn’t even be telling you this,” he admitted in a gravelly voice. “But frag it, Optimus needs looking after and both me and Jazz have our hands full. You seem like you want the job so here I am, offering it to you.”

Soundwave tilted his helm, confused. “I don't understand.”

“I'm not blind, Soundwave. And neither is Jazz. We know why you're sticking close to Optimus, and it's not just for political reasons. Though at least it shows you have better taste than we all thought you did.” He lowered his hand, looking Soundwave straight in the visor. “My advice? He's never going to realize it unless you say something.”

“An unwise action,” Soundwave said quietly.
Ratchet snorted. “Why? Because you used to be a Decepticon? The rules aren't that simple anymore.”

“Reasons more complicated,” Soundwave said with a shake of his helm.

“Reasons like fear, I'd imagine.” Ratchet squinted at him but then waved a dismissing hand. “Whatever. I'm not here to tell you what you should do. If you don't want to, fine. I'll find someone else to make sure Optimus stays in that berth where he belongs.”

Soundwave cycled a ventilation. “Medical leave?”

“If I have to,” Ratchet said darkly. “We're settled enough that the Autobots will survive without Optimus looking over their shoulders. I'm not losing him because he won't take care of himself. Frag that.”

This was no idle threat, Soundwave realized. Ratchet was serious. Every inch of his energy field was firm and unarguable.


“You have no idea.” Ratchet ex-vented a heavy sigh and leaned into his chair, the fatigue pulling down on his frame. “When he wakes up, he's not going to be happy. But he doesn't have a choice. I'm putting him on berth rest for several days. I trust you'll help me keep him there.”

“Affirmative.”

“Good.” Ratchet hid his optics behind his palm again. “Primus, my spark can't take this.”

“Apologies for startling you.”

Ratchet's free hand waved dismissively. “Of all the things that happened today, none of it is your fault. Instead, I'm grateful Laserbeak – and by default, you – were there.”

Some of the tension eased out of Soundwave's frame. If Ratchet could be so relaxed, then so could Soundwave. It was a relief to know that Optimus was in no real danger, though he still chastised himself for not paying better attention. He'd known Optimus was still exhausted, but assumed that Ratchet was monitoring it.

At the time, Soundwave had not thought it his place to question Optimus' health. But Ratchet had given him permission to do so and so Soundwave would.

Optimus was needed. And not just because he was their Prime. Sometimes, Soundwave wondered if maybe Optimus lost himself in the title, that he forgot he was also dear friend to his subordinates. That they would miss him as Optimus and not just Prime if he was gone.

“Rest, also, suggested for Ratchet,” Soundwave proposed. The medic looked in better repair than Optimus, but exhaustion still sat heavy on his frame. “Until Optimus onlines?”

Ratchet's lips quirk toward a smile. “Medic, heal thyself? How true.” He gave Soundwave an amused look. “Don't worry. I intend to get some rest. I'm monitoring Optimus' vitals as it is. Might I suggest you do the same? You can't do anything more for him now.”
Soundwave nodded. “Suggestion understood. Will return later.” He rose to his pedes, the tightness in his frame almost fully gone. “Laserbeak to remain, if allowed.”

“Yeah. She can stay.” Ratchet waved another dismissing hand. “I owe her one anyway. Lemme know what she likes.”

“Laserbeak partial to rust sticks.”

“Junk food, hm? I’ll get Jack to whip up some.” Ratchet shifted in his chair as though getting comfortable, his expression turning sober. “I’m serious, Soundwave. Thank you.”

Soundwave tilted his helm in acknowledgment. “Appreciation unnecessary. Welcome all the same.”

He took his leave of the office, though he stopped by Optimus' private room first. He paused at the viewing window, looking in at the sleeping Prime. Laserbeak remained at the head of the berth, ever vigilant.

Optimus would be safe. He would recover.

Ratchet was right. There was nothing Soundwave could do here at the moment. But he could see to cleaning the mess he’d made and ensure there was nothing of immediate importance in Optimus’ paperwork. He would also need to contact Grimlock and Metalhawk, informing them to direct their queries to Ultra Magnus for the time being.

There was work to be done, and Soundwave would see to it. Optimus could not recover if he was concerned about the Autobots and the daily running of Polyhex. The least Soundwave could do was support him. Besides, it would be an excellent distraction if nothing else.

He found her on a ridge, staring out over the ravaged landscape the Decepticons had left behind. She was seated, running on silent mode, even her field completely withdrawn. Below her, the land went on for miles, bleak and brown and empty.

“What's wrong?” Hound asked.

Ravage's tail twitched before she turned her head up to look at him. “Soundwave. Felt a spike of fear and worry from him before it was gone.”

“Do you think something happened?” Hound asked as he lowered himself down beside her. He gently rested a hand along her back.

“I don't know. At this distance, only the sharper emotions come through.” Ravage sighed and leaned against him, the warmth of her frame a wonderful counterpoint to the cutting chill of the wind this high up. “It was not a fear for himself. I know this much. And it was not one of the others. I would have felt their pain.”
Her field finally opened to him, letting him inside. There was worry there, but it was nice to know she was comforted by his presence.

“We check in soon,” Hound replied as he let their fields tangle. “We can ask for news then. And if you want, we can go back.”

“Are you ready to return?”

He opted for silence rather than answering that question. It was a loaded one, and to be fair, Hound wasn't sure he knew how to answer the question. Cybertron was full of memories, more painful than not. While being on Earth hurt, it was still a lesser agony than the dead husk of Cybertron.

“Hound?”

He shook his helm. “I will return if you need to,” he said. “And I will go where you go. Here, at the end of the war, where I want to be is wherever you are.”

Affection rose in Ravage's field. Her engine purred, vibrating against his armor. “How romantic of you.” Her vocals were thick with humor. “But don't think I didn't notice you sidestepping the question.”

He made a noncommittal noise.

Cybertron was still home. It made him no more uneasy to be on Cybertron than it did to be on Earth. But the idea of casually going about his business, only to look into the sky and see a Conehead flying freely? He did not like that idea at all.

Jazz told him that the remaining Conehead was still imprisoned and right now, unlikely to see freedom anytime soon. It wasn't as much of a comfort as Hound hoped it would be. Not when he still couldn't be intimate with his partner without breaking into a cold shiver and rolling with nausea.

He needed time.

Luckily, Ravage did not mind spending his self-imposed exile with him on Earth. Luckily, Trailbreaker did not mind guard duty. Hound was lucky for many things.

So no. If he had the choice, he would not return to Cybertron yet. But he would go for Ravage, because he would not let fear hold him back for her sake. For his own, yes. But not for hers.

“We will see what is necessary after we check in,” Ravage said, once it became obvious Hound was not going to answer her question. “For now, I will try not to worry about it.”

“Soundwave can take care of himself, and your siblings are nothing if not resourceful,” Hound replied. “I am quite sure there is nothing to worry about.”

Ravage's head rubbed against his chest again. “Your optimism is one of many reasons I love you.”

“And I cherish you as well.” Warmth filled Hound's spark, chasing away the lingering chill of the crisp winter air.

“Hound! Ravage!”
Trailbreaker's shout carried to them easily in the thinner air. Ravage didn't stir, but Hound half-turned to see their escort-slash-guardian huffing his way up the narrow trail. He had more grace than many gave him credit for, not so much as disturbing the gravel-like bed of the trail.

“I found something!” Trailbreaker said with an excited wave of his arms.

“Primus, not another mushroom circle I hope,” Ravage murmured without cracking open an optic.

Hound chuckled. “You have to admit, that was a fun detour.”


Hound's grin widened, and he shifted to see Trailbreaker better as the other mech came to a halt behind them, somehow managing not to loom despite being the largest of the three.

“What is it?” Hound asked.

“I think,” Trailbreaker said with the widest grin Hound had ever seen. “I think I've found the humans. Or at least some humans. I've picked up some chatter buried in the AM bands.”

Hound tried not to get too excited. The last clue had led to a dead end. “Are you sure it's not just a repeat transmission? Or a cycling playlist from an abandoned radio station?”

“I'm sure.” Trailbreaker was all but wiggling with glee. “So come on, you two. Stop snuggling. Get off your afts, and let's go. This is the break we've been waiting for!”

Ravage looked up at Hound, her amusement ripe in her field. “Is he always this painfully enthusiastic?”

Hound chuckled. “Sometimes he's worse.” He patted Ravage on the back. “He's right, though. No use in sitting around admiring the view. We are, technically, supposed to be working.”

Ravage huffed but rose to her feet with a stretching arc of her backstrut. Hound took a moment to admire her, the gleam of her plating in the rising sun, the little puffs as her ex-vents hit the cooler air, the curve of her spinal strut. She was beautiful, and he wanted to touch her, to listen to her quiet sighs as he offered her pleasure.

An idea occurred to him. There was one thing they hadn't tried. Perhaps he would bring it up at the next opportunity. But for now, Trailbreaker was right. There was work to do.

Hound pushed himself to his pedes, brushing off the dirt that stuck to his aft. “All right, Trailbreaker, show me what you have,” he said.

Trailbreaker grinned and offered a data-chip. “You'll believe me when you hear it.”

Ravage harrumphed. “We'll see about that.”
A week's worth of enforced berth rest. Maybe less if he consumed his energon properly, reported his symptoms as they occurred, and managed at least two cycles of proper recharge – and all of this to Ratchet's standards, not his own.

Optimus tried not to pout, but the desire to do so was strong. He did not want to be berth bound. There was work to do. He did not want time to think. He wanted to be active. He did not want to be confined to berth.

It rankled. But the look on Ratchet's face shamed him before he could argue otherwise.

“Do you have any idea how it felt to be startled online by a frantic call from Soundwave because you'd collapsed?” Ratchet demanded, pacing back and forth by Optimus' bedside, his plating clamped tight, his energy field a maelstrom. “I trusted you to tell me when something was wrong. I trusted you to take care of yourself. And all you've done is proven how much you don't trust me!”

Optimus flinched. “Trust was not the issue,” he replied quietly.

“Yes, it was, and don't tell me it wasn't!” Ratchet near-hissed. “You don't trust me to help you. You don't trust anyone to do it. And believe me, I understand why.” He whirled toward Optimus, his field turning bleak. “I understand, I honestly do, Optimus. But working yourself into stasis? That's not a solution either!”

His spark ached. And right now, he couldn't even be sure if it was an emotional reaction, or a symptom of what Ratchet called a survivor's stasis.

Optimus' shoulders sagged. Even now, despite succumbing to it and spending the last half-day in stasis, Optimus was exhausted. It was as if all the fatigue he had pushed aside for the last month was now crashing down on him.

He wanted to get out of this berth. Right now, he didn't know if he was capable of doing so. His limbs were heavy; his frame felt twice as massive. He had to ventilate shallowly.

Ratchet had him on an energon drip. He couldn't trust Optimus' system to accept energon orally. Optimus could see his energon levels rising, slowly but steadily, and for once, the thought did not fill him with nausea. But he knew, logically, he couldn't survive on an energon drip for the rest of his function.

“It wasn't a solution,” Optimus said at length. He sighed softly. “It was a stop-gap measure. I could not take the time. I did not want to take the time. I did not want to think.” He pressed the heel of his palm to his optics, guilt building a sludge inside of him.

Ratchet scraped a hand down his face and ex-vented. He ceased his frantic pacing and sat down on the edge of Optimus' berth. “And you didn't want to be a burden. I get it. I understand. But that doesn't mean I'm going to sit here and watch you hurt yourself.”

Optimus sighed. “I can't sit on my aft right now, Ratchet. The political balance is still too unstable. There's work to be done.”

“And you may not have your original command staff, but you have a very capable crew who is willing to step up and help you.” Ratchet dropped his hand and looked at Optimus, something pleading in his optics. “Won't you just let us support you?”
Optimus bowed his helm.

It was not an enticing prospect, but he knew that Ratchet was right. The lack of recharge, the inability to keep down his energon, the constant anxiety – none of it was healthy. He was not improving.

He could not serve his Autobots properly if he could not keep himself together. And it was worse to see Ratchet hurting, to see him blaming himself.

“I remain humbled by your faith in me,” Optimus murmured as he lifted his helm and reached for Ratchet's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I promise to do my best to recover, so long as you promise to release me when I improve, and don't prevent me from at least doing my paperwork.”

Ratchet's lips quirked toward a grin. “Deal.” He squeezed back before releasing Optimus' hand and pushing to his pedes. “Now, there is someone else who's here to visit before I let in the rest of the mob.”

Optimus chuckled. He had no doubt there were many well-wishers out there, and he was glad that Ratchet's rather draconian temper protected Optimus from being overwhelmed.

“Thank you, Ratchet.”

“You can thank me by resting, Optimus,” Ratchet said as he left, the words a tease, but his tone serious.

Optimus smiled despite himself and shifted a bit, making himself comfortable on the berth. Or as comfortable as he could be given the monitors that were attached to his frame, and the energon drip shunted into his left wrist port.

The door opened again, admitting Soundwave, who held an armful of datapads tucked under his left arm, and Laserbeak balanced on his unarmed shoulder. She chirped a greeting and lifted from his frame, choosing instead to land on the head of the berth behind Optimus' right shoulder.

*Optimus is well?* She sent along the private channel, offering a hugging emoticon and one that indicated concern.

“Yes, thank you,” Optimus replied as he gave her a smile. “I hear you were my guardian angel whilst I was in stasis. I could not have asked for a better guardian.”

Laserbeak ducked her head, her field flushing with a mix of pleasure and embarrassment. *I was worried,* she sent. *Please don't be so careless again.*

“I shall do my best to try,” Optimus replied as Soundwave handed him the datapads. He accepted them and tucked them next to his side.

“Optimus looking well,” Soundwave commented.

“I'm told I have you to thank for such a rapid response,” Optimus said as Soundwave lowered himself into the chair, sitting upon it stiffly. “If not for you and Laserbeak, I do not know how long I would have lain there.”
Soundwave inclined his helm. “Optimus neglects self.”

The tip of Optimus’ audials burned. “Yes. I’ve been told that as well.” He ex-vented softly and gathered what little poise could be had when he was berthbound. “I also had my optics opened to something I had not seen before. And I wanted to ask if it was true.”

Soundwave shifted on the chair. “Have I offended?”

Optimus shook his helm. “No. Nothing of the sort.” He performed a systems check, steadying himself. Why was this so awkward? “Jazz is under the impression that you desire to remain in my proximity is about more than political protection.” He met Soundwave's visor with his own. “Is he right?”

“Jazz not wrong,” Soundwave admitted. His hands sat flat on his thighs, his plating drawing tight to his frame. “Optimus is good mech. Kind. Intelligent… Attractive.” He cycled a ventilation. “I have always admired Optimus.”

His spark throbbed with warmth. “Admiration,” Optimus repeated as Soundwave's visor focused on him. “Is that all it is?”

“Negative.” Soundwave tilted forward as though he meant to rise, before he second-guessed himself and sat back in his chair. “Interest carried for Optimus. No reciprocation expected, however.”

That was terribly sad. Optimus honestly didn't know how he felt about Soundwave. He saw the former Decepticon as a friend, a welcome one, and here lately, as a great source of support. Did he view Soundwave in a romantic light?

Optimus didn't know. He was so used to pushing those types of interests aside, he wasn't sure he could recognize genuine attraction if he felt it.

Though attraction wasn't the problem. If Optimus had a type, Soundwave was it. They were of a similar size and mass. Soundwave was caring, at least to his subordinates. He had a code of ethics. He was quiet, compassionate and intelligent.

He was the exact kind of mech Optimus could see himself falling for.

Optimus worked his intake. “I do not know that as I am, I would make a good partner, Soundwave. I am…” he trailed off.

He did not want to say broken. He did not want to say damaged. He was both, but admitting it aloud was not something he wanted to do. But it was true that he couldn't take care of himself right now. Optimus did not want to enter into a relationship where he had nothing to offer.

You are you, Laserbeak transmitted with a soothing warble. And what you are, Soundwave likes.

“You mean the mech I was,” Optimus said.

I meant what I said. Present-tense.

“Optimus strong,” Soundwave said, perhaps heedless to Laserbeak's comments or because of them. “But strength not always physical. Also, Soundwave patient. Wish nothing but friendship.”
Optimus inclined his helm. “I understand. But I regret I do not have an answer for you right now. This is a lot to have happen all at once.”

“Understood.” Soundwave's palms scrubbed down his thighs. “Soundwave will wait. Optimus take time.” He rose to his pedes and gestured to the datapads he’d brought. “Ratchet approved work. Soundwave to return later?”

Optimus offered him a smile. “Please do. I would welcome your company.” Perhaps by then he would have sorted out his own thoughts and could give Soundwave a proper response.

Soundwave's field leaked free for the first time, and Optimus sensed the relief in it. “Laserbeak to remain if no objections?”

“None at all.” Optimus looked at the avian cassette, who tilted her helm against his in something he recognized as a show of affection. “I am honored that she would spend her time with me.”

“Laserbeak fond of Optimus.”

“I'm quite fond of her, too.”

Soundwave's field hummed with appreciation. He gave Optimus another long look, and then he excused himself, departing from the room much as he had a few days prior, when he'd walked into the office while Optimus and Jazz were talking. He understood better now Soundwave's reaction.

To the outside observer, it probably did look like there was something intimate between Jazz and Optimus. He relied on Jazz for many things and counted his third among his closest friends.

And speaking of sneaky spies…

“Knock, knock.” Jazz helm popped into view as he grinned and rapped his knuckles on the door frame. “Hey, boss bot. Got some time fer an old pal?”

Optimus gestured his third inside. “Come into my cell, Jazz. I'll not be leaving anytime soon.”

Jazz chuckled and threw himself into the chair Soundwave had abandoned. He kicked back, crossing his pedes on the end of Optimus’ berth. “Did I just see Sounders stroll out of here?”

“You did.”

“And did he say what I think he was gonna say?” Jazz's grin couldn't have been cheekier.

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “He did,” he confirmed. “And yes, before you prod me, I concede that you were right.”

“I'm rarely wrong.” Jazz lit half his visor in a wink. “Go on then. What's the gossip? Me 'n Ratch have something of a bet going on.”

Optimus pulled one of the datapads into his lap. “I should not be so surprised.” He cut it on, finding that it was a financial report, not that anyone had much of a credit-based economy anymore. “There is nothing to say. I need to do some thinking.”
“So you don't want to talk about the dashing former Decepticon who has a crush on you?”

Optimus gave his third an exasperated look. “No, I do not. I need to figure it out for myself, Jazz. So why don't you tell me how you and Ultra Magnus have decided to divide my duties for the foreseeable future?”

Jazz sighed loudly, his field spiking with visible irritation. “Are you sure we can't replace Magnus with someone with more personality?”

“Quite sure,” Optimus replied without looking up from the report. “If you would simply speak with Ultra Magnus without antagonizing him, I'm sure you'd see that he is more interesting than you give him credit.”

Jazz made a noncommittal noise and wiggled his aft, getting more comfortable on the chair. “If you say so.”

Optimus smiled to himself.

They would learn to get along eventually.

~

Rewind met him at the perimeter, excitement in his field and in his frame language as he shifted his weight from pede to pede. His optical band lit upon sight of Chromedome, and he waved wildly to get Chromedome's attention.

He was also alone, which concerned Chromedome. Did his carrier not know how dangerous that could be? That Metalhawk just waited for an opportunity?

“Welcome back!” Rewind greeted as Chromedome transformed, looming over the smaller mech without even trying.

Because Rewind was tiny. So tiny that Chromedome feared harming him, even though Rewind was three times his age. Rewind was one of the oldest Cybertronians Chromedome had ever met, which was odd, considering his twin was Eject. Eject, by contrast, still acted like a youngling.

“Thank you,” Chromedome said. “I’m surprised you are greeting me. I would have expected one of the medical staff.”

Rewind shook his helm. “No. They're all busy with Optimus. I volunteered.”

“Why?”

“Because I still have questions,” Rewind chirped as he reached up and tapped his camera. “I mean, that is, if you still have answers.”

Chromedome chuckled. “I do. And I don't mind your questions.”

They headed toward the medical center. Rewind, however, skipped ahead of him, turning to walk
backward so that he faced Chromedome.

“You’d be the first,” he said. “Why is that though? Most people get aggravated after the first couple minutes with me?”

“Maybe because I find you charming?”

Rewind stumbled and fell. Chromedome cycled his optics behind his visor, stopping by the downed mech and offering a hand to pull Rewind back to his pedes. The little mech let himself be lifted up and rubbed at his now scuffed aft.

“Walking backward is not the best choice, I guess,” Rewind said, trickles of his field suggesting embarrassment.

“No. I wouldn't think so.”

Their hands were still touching, Chromedome realized. It was such a novel thing that he delayed letting go. Mechs tended to be afraid to take his hands, or let them touch him, as though all he needed was physical contact.

He’d tried to explain, but there was a stigma attached to mneumosurgery. Given Trepan's reputation, Chromedome couldn't blame them.

Rewind cycled a ventilation. “Did you mean it?”

“Mean what? That walking backward isn't a good idea? Because recent events should be proof of that,” Chromedome said with a little laugh.

Something in Rewind's posture sagged, and he took his hand back. “No. Never mind.” He turned around, clasping his hands behind his back. “So. What are you going to do today? I thought your work on Red Alert was done?”

Chromedome tilted his helm, but decided not to push the issue. “There's a little bit of clean up left to do. After that, yes, my work is done until they find his back up memory core.”

“And if they don't?”

“They'll have to start anew.”

Rewind made a non-committal noise. “You mean, he'll be like a sparkling.”

“But with the instincts of a spark that has survived a millennia long war.” Chrome cycled a ventilation. He couldn't imagine a worse fate. “If it were me, I do not know that I would want that.”

“You'd rather die?”

Chromedome scrubbed a hand down his face. “It was a long war.” There was a reason he had chosen to become Neutral. “I would not want to be burdened with painful shadows of a past I couldn't remember. Or have to carry the burden of those around me knowing who I was and having difficulty reconciling that.”

“Oh. You have a point.” Rewind touched his chin, looking thoughtful. “Well, I know Optimus
planned on sending someone back to Earth to see if we could find a memory core for him. That's our last hope.”

“I will pray they are successful then,” Chromedome replied. He wasn't particularly religious, but it couldn't hurt to put good thoughts out into the universe.

They arrived at the medcenter with Rewind still cheerfully in the lead. It was Chromedome's fourth time strolling into the Autobot medbay, and it still surprised him how quickly they accepted his presence. After the first day of suspicious looks, they welcomed him.

He could easily sneak around and explore, like he'd been told to do. But Chromedome didn't. He returned the Autobot's trust. He kept to his assigned areas.

He lied to Metalhawk. He told his leader that the Autobots always kept him under guard, and he didn't have the opportunity to snoop into their affairs.

And he wondered – he hoped – that if he could speak with Ratchet, he could convince the medic to expedite his petition to defect to the Autobots.

It was sad that while the Autobots and Decepticons worked together to ensure their peace was successful, Metalhawk was convinced the war needed little urging to return to the status quo. Chromedome didn't want to go back to war. He wanted to live without looking over his shoulders. He wanted to settle down and not worry about where his next cube of energon was coming from.

He followed Rewind to the private room reserved for Red Alert, noticing that another one of the private rooms was occupied. The door was open as he passed, and Chromedome peeked in, exventing in surprise when he realized that it was none other than Optimus Prime in the berth.

What did Metalhawk do?

“Something wrong?” Rewind asked as he palmed the lock, giving Chromedome entrance to Red Alert's room.

Chromedome cycled a ventilation. “Did something happen? To Optimus Prime?”

The door closed behind them, and locked with a beep. “Nothing untoward, if that's what you're asking,” Rewind replied. “He just needs some R&R.”

Chromedome looked down at the smaller mech. “You're sure?” Because that sounded like Metalhawk's tactics – sneaky and underhanded and untraceable.

Metalhawk claimed to be a peace-loving Neutral, but he wasn't above getting his hands dirty if he thought that was what he needed to obtain said peace. He might not be the one out there starting battles and fomenting war, but he wasn't any less guilty.

Chromedome didn't want to think about the number of times he'd used his skills to *adjust* some prisoner Metalhawk had caught, in an attempt to alter their wicked ways. Or even, he thought with a churn in his tanks, mechs who were members of their own faction.

In Metalhawk’s hands, Chromedome had become a monster. One he feared no amount of goodwill could cure.
Fixing Red Alert was about far more than earning good regard with the Autobots.

“Very sure,” Rewind said though he tilted his helm and stared at Chromedome. “Why?”

“No reason.” Chromedome shrugged it off and shifted his attention back to Red Alert. “Time to get to work, right?”

He still had time. He could prove he was a good mech.

All he needed was a little more luck.
Soundwave was not a mech prone to indecision or uncertainty. Yet, he found himself lingering outside of Optimus' private room, wondering if he dared go inside.

He'd been gone for most of the day, attending to the duties that Ultra Magnus and Jazz could not cover. He'd made it a point to be as productive as possible, so as not to spend too much time worrying about things he could not change.

Now he'd returned, with Ratchet's permission of course, and logically, he knew a day was not long enough for Optimus to think about what Soundwave had said. Just as he knew, logically, that if it took any longer, it was because Optimus was trying to think of a way to let him down gently.

He was not going to get any answers if he lingered in the hallway. He found himself continuing to do so anyway. Long enough that he caught some strange looks from First Aid, the young medic Ratchet had left in charge since the medic had finally left to get some rest of his own.

Soundwave cycled a ventilation, double-checked to ensure that he still carried the datapads that would serve as shield and excuse if all this visit merited was business, and rapped his fingers on the door. He ignored Frenzy and Rumble snickering at him from afar, and welcomed Laserbeak's soothing encouragement. Buzzsaw, asleep in Soundwave’s dock, had no opinion to offer.

“Come in!”

Now or never.

Soundwave braced himself and opened the door, stepping into the private room Ratchet had arranged for Optimus' use. Ratchet was being a most vigilant medic as well, monitoring how many datapads Optimus was allowed at any given moment, and ensuring that his Prime was not overworking himself.

Optimus was hooked up to several machines, and the sight of him as such gave Soundwave pause. It reminded him of that night, that spike of panic from Laserbeak, and the moment where he'd stepped out into the courtyard and found Optimus collapsed like a house of cards.

Laserbeak chirped a greeting at Soundwave. She remained perched at the head of the berth, unwilling to leave Optimus’ side for even a moment. Soundwave could not express how grateful he was for her persistence. Her gaze was one of knowing, though she did not leave Optimus to return to Soundwave.

Optimus looked up and though he wore his face mask – an ever present thing as of late – his optics brightened in greeting. “Welcome back, Soundwave,” he said and gestured to the chair at his berthside. “Is this a brief stopover or were you planning to linger?”
Momentarily taken aback, Soundwave was at a loss for words. Given the discomfort present in
their previous conversation, he'd expected Optimus to be awkward as well. But perhaps that was
only because Optimus had been taken by surprise. He'd since had time to gather his wits.

“I would stay, if I am welcome,” Soundwave said, hoping that his nervousness did not show in his
vocals. Times like these, his modulator was more than useful.

Optimus' helm tilted. “You are welcome,” he said and tapped at the datapad in his lap, sending it
into standby. “There is, after all, a small matter that we need to address.”

This was it. The moment of his dismissal.

“Understood.” Soundwave stepped fully into the room so that the door could shut behind him. At
least there would be privacy for his sparkbreak. “Though if more time is needed, I am patient.”

“It would feel cruel to do so,” Optimus replied.

Soundwave retracted his field as much as he was capable. He did not want to accidentally guilt the
Prime into kindness. He wanted honesty.

He took the chair offered to him, seating himself without any ease. He clutched at his datapads like
a lifeline. If he had made Optimus uncomfortable, what would happen then? Would they send him
back to the Decepticons? Would he be sent to serve under another? Would Optimus give him a
task far away from Optimus' side?

His code thrashed at the very idea of it. His spark flickered, on the edge of panic, and Soundwave
wrestled with himself, forcing his inner dialogue into submission.

“Besides, I do not need more time,” Optimus continued as he shifted his weight and looked
directly at Soundwave. “I already know what I want to do.”

Soundwave nodded. “I am listening.”

There was a quiet click as Optimus' facemask retracted, a gesture of trust that Soundwave did not
take lightly. A small smile graced Optimus’ lips, though he still looked wan and tired. He'd spent
barely a day in Ratchet's custody. It would take much longer than that until he was at full health.

“I have spent the better part of the afternoon thinking how I can put this into words,” Optimus
began with a cycled ventilation. “It is odd how I find a speech so much easier than speaking from
the spark, but here I am. And here you are.”

Soundwave tried not to squirm. “A difference of vulnerability perhaps?”

Optimus inclined his helm. “Perhaps,” he agreed with another soft smile. “The truth is,
Soundwave, that I never thought of romance. It never seemed an option. I have those I am close to,
who I dearly adore, and I was content in it and considered myself lucky to have it. As Optimus, as
Prime, I assumed that was the best I could hope for.”

It sounded terribly lonely. And it explained the shadows behind Optimus' optics, at least in part.
The life of a leader was often one of solitude, and Soundwave's coding and spark called to soothe
that feeling of isolation. All the better that it was for a mech he found attractive in mind, frame, and
“Prime is meant to stand alone,” Soundwave commented quietly.

“That is what I believed,” Optimus confirmed with a quiet cycle of his ventilations. “But a lot is different now. Those old structures are gone. The Matrix is gone. And perhaps clinging to the old ways is only going to set us down another dark path.”

Soundwave's spark dared quicken. Was Optimus circling around to the sort of answer he wanted to hear?

“Support is offered,” Soundwave replied as he found himself leaning a bit closer, though he still kept a polite distance. “No matter what Optimus decides.”

Optimus' smile gentled. “Yes, I know. That is why I find this so strangely easy.” His hands tangled together before he rested them in his lap. “I do not know whether or not I am suited to a relationship or if I can even sustain one right now, but I would be willing to explore it. With you, to clarify.”

Soundwave's visor brightened and as much as he wanted to wallow in his excitement, the practical side of him was suspicious. “Because of convenience?”

Optimus' optics widened. “No, of course not!” he said without so much as a hesitation. “I already considered you a friend. That you are attractive to me was the deciding factor.” His faceplate visibly heated, and he sagged a little, coughing into his palm. “I only ask that we take it slowly.”

“Speed determined by Optimus,” Soundwave reassured. He debated quickly, and then offered his hand to Optimus. “Slow, also, preferred.”

Optimus' gaze dropped from his face to Soundwave's hand. He steadied himself, cycled a ventilation, and then reached back. The warmth of his palm against Soundwave's was worth more than a bucket of high grade. That he could accept the touch, welcome it even, was a massive improvement.

“I would know you first, before anything,” Optimus murmured, his thumb sweeping over Soundwave's palm as he focused on Soundwave's hand. “I suspect there is much we could learn of each other.”

Soundwave disengaged his modulator with an audible click. “Optimus may ask me anything,” he said without hesitation. “I have nowhere else to be.” And nowhere he'd rather be.

The faint heat that touched Optimus' faceplate was charming. “I would appreciate the company,” he said, though it was with a sideways look in the direction Ratchet was known to haunt. “That is, if my physician allows it,” he said with a wry chuckle.

Soundwave's lip curved. “I have snuck out of worse places than Ratchet's domain, should the need arise.”

Optimus' laugh was genuine and rich. “Then I will trust in your skills.” His thumb swept another path over Soundwave's palm, igniting a wave of heat. “Just as I have learned to trust in you.”

Soundwave's spark throbbed. He almost wondered if he had dreamt this moment, because it didn't
feel real. But the weight of Optimus' fingers against his was undeniable, as was the first tentative push of Optimus' field.

Trust.

Few mechs trusted Soundwave. Even fewer did he trust in return.

There was a time, he had offered such to Megatron. There was a time he might have believed Megatron returned that trust.

But the way Optimus looked at him, spoke with him, treated his symbiotes, Soundwave believed in it again.

~

Jazz, for the record, hated paperwork.

He'd do it, if necessary, but this was what he'd always foisted off on Mirage. His second had taken great pleasure in writing mission reports, often using the most poised language possible, and as a result, he'd been Prowl's favorite. Jazz hadn't minded at all.

So he let Mirage do his paperwork. He let Bumblebee manage stock. And he let Smokescreen make sure their entire team was as sane as they could be, given their occupations. Smokescreen, after all, knew that Spec Ops was measured against different parameters than the average soldier despite Ratchet's insistence that he wasn't a real therapist.

Pfft. Real enough for Jazz's purposes.

Still that was the set up. And it worked. Now… now Jazz did it all.

Mirage was never coming back. Even if he said he wanted to, Jazz wasn't going to allow it. His head was no longer in the game. He'd lost too much, and Jazz couldn't blame him. Besides, Spec Ops in peace-time had a different flavor than Spec Ops in war-time. All of his mechs deserved the chance to enjoy this peace.

As for Jazz, well, he couldn't enjoy his peace until he was certain it was going to stick around. Sure Grimlock had Starscream well in hand, and Shockwave was in a Decepticon dungeon. But there were other terrible Decepticons still roaming the universe. Metalhawk was a pain in everyone's aft, and Cybertron remained unstable.

Jazz couldn't relax until the shadows were gone from Optimus' optics. And if that meant he was on his own, well, he'd been in worse straits.

He still had Bumblebee sometimes. He borrowed Smokescreen when he could. He told Trailbreaker to stay with Hound, now and forever, so both of them were out. But maybe if he was lucky, Jazz could borrow a cassette or two. He caught Buzzsaw grumbling about how boring things were, and Frenzy was the third wheel on the Brumble bike, so maybe he wanted a job, too.

None of these mechs, however, wanted anything to do with Jazz's paperwork. Now he had part of
Optimus' on top of his own. Which, okay, he was fine taking on some of Optimus' load. He'd taken a peek at Ratchet's report when Ratchet wasn't looking and honestly, Jazz was surprised Optimus hadn't dropped before now. He was in bad shape.

Forced rest and recovery could only do him some good. Jazz fully supported Ratchet's decision and so did Ultra Magnus. With all three of them in agreement, Optimus couldn't protest. He had no choice but to get better. Which was what Jazz wanted.

It still left him with a lot of paperwork, even after dumping half of it on Ultra Magnus.

Jazz sighed and put down his stylus, slumping in his chair. He removed his visor temporarily and rubbed his faceplate, feeling an ache building at the back of his optics. What he ought to do was send half of his half to Soundwave. Let him do it. He was always up Optimus' aft anyway. Surely he knew more about this than Jazz, and he had more help than Jazz did.

Except that he probably shouldn't disturb Soundwave right now.

Jazz leaned on his desk, propping his helm up with his fist as he snapped his visor back on. The last thing he wanted to do was interrupt whatever cute little interlude was going on between Optimus and Soundwave.

Jazz never thought he'd see the day when he was encouraging Megatron's most loyal lieutenant to pursue Optimus. But here he was. Encouraging it. So long as Soundwave was sincere which of course he was. Soundwave didn't do anything by halves, and he would have never betrayed Megatron if Megatron hadn't betrayed him first.

A mech like that, he'd be good for Optimus. He'd keep an optic on him and treat him the way he deserved to be treated, and well, Optimus would be good for Soundwave, too. Poor Sounders needed a mech who wasn't going to take advantage of him.

They needed each other.

As for Jazz?

He needed to get this damn datawork done so he could call it a night.

Jazz groaned and shifted his attention back to his paperwork. He shuffled the half-dozen or so datapads on his desk, searching for one that might capture his interest, at least for a little while. One of them was labeled “Search for Natives.” Jazz squinted at it before dragging it closer.

He powered it on and skimmed the introduction before wriggling in his chair. This was Hound and Ravage's report! Why wasn't it at the top of the stack? Why wasn't it in Jazz's stack to begin with?

Maybe he'd need to have a word with Ultra Magnus about the proper distribution of mission reports. Hound was clearly in Spec Ops, even if his mission was determined by Optimus. This was obviously Jazz's jurisdiction. Hmph.

He went back to the report, which was classic Hound, heavy on the details and observations, almost to the point of detriment. But observation was kind of Hound's thing. Smokescreen was the one who picked apart the observations to find the truth behind them. Mirage was the one who could get into places no one else could, but Hound? He was about details. He sniffed them out.
And, apparently, he sniffed out the humans, too. Or at least, he thought he had.

Jazz’s grin widened.

Trailbreaker had found a signal. They’d tracked it down to what appeared to be an underground bunker somewhere deep in the Rockies. Not government issued, thank Primus. Jazz really didn’t want to deal with a surviving human government. He wanted to deal with real people, not bureaucracy.

Ravage got close enough to tell there was some kind of human presence, but short of breaking in, they weren’t able to establish contact. Unless they wanted to announce themselves through the radio signals they picked up.

They waited for further orders.

Optimus was going to be ecstatic. The death of the native species on Earth had been one of the things that weighed heaviest on his spark. Boss bot took on too much as it was, and while yeah, their crash-landing on Earth had brought the Cybertronian war to the planet, they’d done the best they could.

Anyway. Hound needed orders.

Jazz rapped his fingers on the top of the desk. He needed a liaison. Someone to make contact with the humans who wouldn’t frighten them. Someone they saw as a friend, perhaps someone who didn’t look dangerous, at least to a human.

Hound and Trailbreaker were nice enough, but they were big, Trailbreaker especially. Ravage was an overlarge black cat and had become something of a celebrity amongst the humans as a Decepticon.

And just like before, Jazz knew who would be perfect for the job.

He leaned back in the chair and pinged his favorite organic liaison. “Bumblebee? Got a new mission for ya, and it’s non-negotiable.” He paused, his visor catching the headline for another datapad – something regarding Red Alert. “Two missions actually. All in the same place. Ya can even bring Rumble if ya want.”

This would work, Jazz decided as he started putting together the mission parameters. Plus, Bee had been missing Earth, and while there wasn’t much to see over there now, maybe it would help him out.

Jazz wouldn’t recall Hound and ’Breaker though. Hound wasn’t ready to come back to Cybertron, and maybe he never would be. Jazz didn’t know. He would leave that up to Hound and not push.

They weren’t at war. Not anymore. Jazz didn’t need all the soldiers he could get. And he definitely didn’t need soldiers whose heads weren’t in the game. Those kinds of spies got themselves killed.

So what if he only had Smokescreen anymore? He’d worked with less before. He’d make do. He’d figure it out.

He was Jazz.
He was nervous.

It was an emotion Vortex was unaccustomed to enduring. At least, not for millennia. Before he was a Combinaticon, before he was an Interrogator, before he'd been given an assignment... he used to be anxious. He used to be uncertain.

All of the above had rather quickly and ruthlessly stripped his anxieties from him. He couldn't survive if he indulged in that flavor of weakness so he'd buried it deep. He built another Vortex on top of the fragile one, and locked the gentle Vortex away.

Gentle Vortex would get him killed.

But now, he dared dip past the mask. He peeled back the layers, slowly, slowly. Gentle Vortex had taken one look at Bluestreak and tried to claw his way to the surface. There was a longing there, a desperation to be something more than survival had made him.

If Brawl could do it, why couldn't he? If Soundwave could court Optimus Prime and succeed, if Starscream could be happy in a non-fragged up relationship, then there was hope for Vortex. Not Interrogator Vortex, but the Weak Vortex.

He could do this. He believed he could. He just needed the weak half of himself to be strong. He needed to keep the learned instincts buried. He needed to not look at Bluestreak and imagine how pretty he would be if he screamed.

Vortex cycled a deep ventilation. He could do this. He would do this. He recited a calming technique he learned ages ago.

* I am who I want to be. I am not what I was made but who I want to become. *

And then he stepped out into the main square of Polyhex, in the shadow of the obelisk that served as a memorial for the fallen Autobots. He didn't question why Bluestreak wanted to meet here. Everything they had chosen was for Bluestreak's comfort. Vortex didn't want to fail before he even started.

He wanted whatever it was his spark longed for in Bluestreak, and if there was even the slightest chance that Bluestreak might return the interest, Vortex wanted to try. That was the hardest part, wasn't it? The trying.

It was a mission he couldn't fail.

Bluestreak was already waiting, his posture reading tense and distracted, a touch unsure. A dark side of Vortex could easily read his frame language, from the minute twitches of sensory panels to the exact tautness of his plating. But he pushed that side down and focused on the positives.

Bluestreak had come. He hadn't required an armed guard. He'd said yes. It was a start. It was a good start.

Bluestreak turned as Vortex approached, perhaps sensing his field, perhaps hearing the deliberate
scuffs of pedesteps Vortex had made. His plating shone in the street lighting. He'd gotten himself polished, probably Mirage's doing. He had a smile on his face, taut though it was.

“You're early,” he said.

“So are you,” Vortex replied. “Not that, uh, it's a bad thing. Just an observation. I hope you weren't waiting long, I mean.” Great. He was babbling.

Weak Vortex in action. The babbler. The one who gave away too much.

Bluestreak calmed a little. His armor relaxed. His smile deepened. “No. I was early on purpose. You can probably guess why.”

Probably. Was he going to try? Nope. That was the dark Vortex. Dark Vortex wanted to read everything, know everything. Dark Vortex didn't understand the joy of finding out naturally.

“I can. But I won't,” Vortex said, and then almost smacked himself because that was creepy, and he knew it. “I mean, are you sure you want to do this? You didn't just say yes because you were afraid to say no?”

Bluestreak tilted his helm. His sensory panels drifted down by a fraction, a motion of subtle relaxation. “I was a prisoner in your compound for the better part of six months. You never once touched me. Was that on threat of Onslaught or did you restrain yourself?”

Vortex snorted on instinct. “Pfft. I obey Onslaught because I want to. He can't make me do anything,” he scoffed. He didn't even have to think about the answer 'cause it was true.

He obeyed Onslaught because he respected Onslaught. But even if Onslaught hadn't, Vortex wouldn't have done anything. What fun would that have been? What would've been the purpose?

“That's what I thought,” Bluestreak said and he lifted his chin, a light entering his optics that gave hint to a quiet strength, something deeply inward, that he let few see. Maybe, a little bit like the weak Vortex that he couldn't let others see. “And that's why I wasn't afraid to say yes. Curious. But not afraid.”

“Curious?” There was still the space of five mech strides between them. Vortex didn't dare cross it. He hadn't been invited.

He was a threat. He knew he was a threat. He didn't want to come across as a threat. He wanted whatever his spark sensed in Bluestreak's.

Bluestreak grinned, genuine this time, and scratched at the side of his nose. “Cause if there's anyone I'd guess you'd go after, it'd be Smokescreen, not me. He seems, um, more your type?”

Vortex tilted his helm. “My type?” He didn't know why he asked. He already knew the answer. Mechs looked at him and they just saw the Vortex who survived. They never wondered if there was another Vortex underneath.

“Oh.” Bluestreak's face heated. “That's rude, isn't it? To assume you have a type. I should know better.” His orbital ridges drew down, his gaze sliding to the side. “Assumptions are annoying, aren't they? People make their judgments of you at first glance and that colors the rest of their observations. After that, it doesn't matter what you do or say. You're forever painted that color.”
His tone flattened, but beneath it, a lingering sense of annoyance.

Ah. There it was. The reason Vortex's spark had throbbed an extra beat. Bluestreak understood.

“It happens,” Vortex demurred, his spark spinning with joy. “But that you're here proves that people don't always keep that first impression, right?”

Bluestreak's optics slid back toward him, brightening. “Right.” He nodded and planted his pedes. “So let's get this date started. You. Me. And whatever it is you have planned.”

Vortex stared at him. “You trust me to decide?”

Bluestreak stepped closer, until their fields were close enough to touch. “Sure,” he said, looking up at Vortex with a genuine smile this time. “Why not?”

~

“Yes!”

Bumblebee watched as Rumble did a little dance and pumped both fists into the air. He looked far too excited to be on Earth.

“Why?” he had to ask, because Bumblebee himself was having trouble working up any kind of enthusiasm.

What he saw before him resembled a barren wasteland. The forest was gone, the mountains barren as though laid to waste. It was too quiet, except for the occasional chirp of the rare insect. It was nothing like what Bumblebee remembered.

“Because Frenzy didn't come with us,” Rumble replied with a large grin. He bumped shoulders with Bee. “And now we can finally get some alone time. I love my twin, but Primus-on-a-pogostick he's a nuisance.”

Bumblebee managed to dredge up a chuckle. “Then lucky for you he and Eject seem to be striking up a friendship.”

“Lucky for both of us,” Rumble corrected, and he reached for Bumblebee's hand, tangling their fingers together. “You gonna be okay. Ya kinda look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Bumblebee sighed. “I didn't think it would be this hard. Coming back here.” They started toward the temporary-now-permanent station that Kup and his team had built. “I don't think I ever realized how attached I was to this planet.”

“Sorry. I forgot, too.” Rumble squeezed his hand. “Earth wasn't much fun for us so I was glad ta leave. But you had friends here.”

Friends.

Bumblebee's spark squeezed.
He remembered their human friends asking them not to leave. Sparkplug had insisted the American government had no right to force them out. He'd actually asked that they go to a different country if they had to. Carly was certain that the Decepticons couldn't be gone; she begged them to reconsider. Spike had said nothing, only looked at Bumblebee as though they'd all broken his heart. Chip made them promise to try and return.

He didn't know if any of them had survived.

“They are probably dead,” Bumblebee said as he drew to a halt, not ready to face Kup's crew at the moment. “I tried not to think about that before, but now that I'm here...” He shook his helm and cycled a ventilation. “I wouldn't even know where to begin looking.”

Rumble shifted in front of Bumblebee and took his other hand. “Then let's do it.”

Bumblebee cycled his optics. “Do what?”

“Look for your friends. We can ask for a transfer here, work under Kup, and look for 'em.”

Bumblebee worked his jaw. “But you hate Earth.”

Rumble stepped closer, until he looked up into Bumblebee's optics, his lips curving in an oh-so-familiar smirk. “Don't hate it. Not really. Just hate being underwater and cramped quarters. Besides. I'd be with you. Isn't that what it's about?”

Sometimes, he looked at Rumble and saw the mech he knew from before the war, the one who pulled him out of the gutters and helped turn his life around. Sometimes, he saw the Rumble who'd hurled insults and grenades at him during the course of the war. And then there were times he saw Rumble presently, a mech who was determined to make things right, and who loved Bumblebee fully and honestly.

“We should see what information Kup has to offer before we make any plans to stay,” Bumblebee said as he squeezed Rumble's hands. “Plus, we do have another job to do first.”

“Yeah. Finding the memory cores. I remember.” Rumble leaned in and stole a kiss before Bumblebee could react, and never mind the heat in his faceplates at the thought someone could have seen them. “So let's get that over with so we can look for your friends, all right?”

Bumblebee nodded. “Sounds like a plan.” He paused, squeezing Rumble's hands before his partner could wander away. “Thank you.”

Rumble leaned in for another kiss, this one softer and sweeter and who cared if anyone saw them? They had a lifetime of being at war with each other to make up for.

~

“Thank you for coming,” First Aid said as he met Ambulon outside the Autobot medical center and escorted the Neutral medic inside. “I am actually surprised Metalhawk approved your visit.”
Ambulon's smile was thin around the edges, his shoulders hunched, his paint an oddly mottled swath of pale colors and bright spots. “He said, and I quote, that he intended to foster good relations and offering medical aid to those in need was something of a given.”

“I see.” First Aid wasn't sure he trusted that, but he would go along with it for now. “Still, I appreciate the assistance. Spark specialists are rare.”

Ambulon's smile thinned even further if that was at all possible. “The specialization evolved as something of a necessity.”

“How so?”

Ambulon's hands tightened around the datapad he carried. “Decepticons,” he said tightly. “And their fascination with combiner technology. It's a product of spark mechanics as much as it is frame compatibility.”

The door to the medbay proper swung open ahead of them, and First Aid dimly registered the low dong that announced their arrival. Being as he was the on-duty medic, he would have been the one to respond.

Ratchet, finally, was getting the rest he needed since he'd been hovering over Optimus nonstop, not that First Aid could blame him.

“You were a Decepticon?” First Aid asked, unable to hide his surprise. Most of the Neutrals had been Neutral from the start. The rest tended to be former Autobots. Rarer still was the mech who left the Decepticons for a non-combatant role in the Neutrals.

Ambulon would be the first that First Aid had ever met who lived through the war. The Decepticons tended to take defectors personally. Or at least Megatron did. First Aid had heard the horror stories of the DJD.

“Yes.”

The terse answer spoke volumes.

First Aid didn't press for more. He understood not wanting to talk about things. After all, he had three patients in his medbay who might never get to leave. Though that also explained what brand had been on the scrupulously clean section of Ambulon's paint, opposite of his medic's marks.

He gestured for Ambulon to follow him to the small room they used for patient records. Ambulon wanted to sift through all the data on Sideswipe and Sunstreaker before he could make a judgment call, and First Aid wasn't comfortable data-bursting it to him. He didn't want the Neutrals to have a copy of Sideswipe and Sunstreaker's medical records for any reason.

“I'm sorry the room's so small,” First Aid said as they squeezed into the narrow space, which had enough room for two chairs, a slender table, and two bookshelves piled with datapads. “Data storage is low on the list of priorities.”

“I've endured smaller. It's fine.” Ambulon pulled out a chair and sat himself at the table. First Aid retrieved Sideswipe and Sunstreaker's files. “Is there any equipment that you are lacking? Perhaps we have spares.”
First Aid set the two datapads down in front of the Neutral. “How much time do you have? Our list is endless,” he said with a sigh. “Most of what we have is taken from the Xantium or has been scavenged from Polyhex or in some cases, built by hand out of scrap parts.” Though he'd heard Ratchet scrounging together some items worth enough to trade with Swindle in hopes to acquire their more dire equipment.

“Then I'll see what all we can spare and have it sent here,” Ambulon said, but his tone was absent as he clicked on the datapads and started to skim the available data. “This is up to date?”

First Aid leaned against the wall near the open doorway, unwilling to try and squeeze down at that table. The room was tiny and reminded him too much of the cell where he'd spent a good portion of the last several months.

“Yes. The most recent scan was taken this morning after recharge and before energon consumption.”

Ambulon nodded, though again it was with a distracted air. “They have very unique sparks. No wonder Shockwave was intrigued. Twins are something of a rarity. I have only studied two pairs in all my functioning.”

“What happened to them?”

Ambulon sighed and scrubbed a free hand down his face. “One pair died not long after splitting. Spark instability. But that's what happens when you force the fissure.”

“And the other?”

Ambulon lapsed into silence. His field drew inward, tight to his frame, and his fingers tightened around the datapads. “They died as well. With the rest of their unit.” There was grief in the way he carried himself. A personal grief that felt somehow familiar.

Despite himself, First Aid gravitated toward the available chair and lowered himself to it. “Together?”

“No. That much is myth.” Ambulon shook his helm and glanced at First Aid. “Mechs often confused the two. The difference between a branched spark and a split spark.” He lifted Sideswipe's records pointedly. “They are split. They are separate mechs. Branched sparks are connected. When one falls, so does the other.”

First Aid hadn't known that. He assumed all twins were alike. After all, the only ones he'd ever met were Sideswipe and Sunstreaker. Ultra Magnus' Wreckers had once had a set, a pair named Rack 'n Ruin, but they died. Together. First Aid assumed that the same would happen to Sunstreaker and Sideswipe.

Ratchet hadn't even known this. Granted, he was more of a general physician than a specialist, and he'd admitted that the particulars of spark mechanics were not his strong suit but still…

First Aid peered at the Neutral medic. “How do you know so much?”

Ambulon sighed. “I used to be part of a gestalt.”

First Aid's visor reset. He stared at Ambulon, not expecting that answer. “You did?”
The Neutral nodded. His gaze wasn't directed at First Aid. Instead, he seemed very focused on the datapad in front of him, but something in the way his plating clamped tight to his frame was familiar.

There was pain in his posture, an old pain, an old grief.

“Eons ago,” Ambulon said, his fingers fiddling with one of the buttons. “My team was part of an experiment. An attempt to make a combiner team that hadn't been sparked together.” He paused and gave First Aid a long look. “That research would later help craft the Combaticons, you know.”

“I didn't know.” First Aid put down his scanner and dragged himself onto a stool. “What happened to your team?”

Ambulon's gaze drifted away. “They died,” he said, and his armor shivered. His shoulder, where a brand had once been, seemed all the brighter. “One by one. To this day, I'm still not sure how or why I didn't.”

“I know what you mean.” First Aid rubbed at his chestplate. “You don't ever forget, do you? That moment when you felt them offline.”

Ambulon set down the instrument and looked at him, his optics dim. “No, you don't. The pain doesn't go away. It feels like they're still inside you.”

“Talking to you,” First Aid added, his shoulders slumping. “Offering commentary even though you didn't ask for it. Fooling you into thinking they're still alive somewhere.”

“Yes. That.”

“Is that why you joined the Neutrals?”

Ambulon audibly cycled a ventilation and set down the datapads. “I left the Decepticons without a plan. My escape shuttle broke down. I was floating in empty space waiting to die. Metalhawk’s crew saved my life.”

“You went by a different name then, didn't you?”

“The mech I was before, he died with the rest of my team. Ambulon wasn't a better choice but...” He shrugged, giving First Aid a wry look. “All the best names are taken.”

First Aid chuckled despite himself. “Left arm,” he said, tapping his shoulder. “You?”

“Right leg.”

First Aid cycled his visor, and then laughed louder, more genuine this time. “And you picked Ambulon on purpose?”

The Neutral medic shrugged again. “Made it a little bit easier to laugh at myself.” His lips curled toward a gentle smile. “I wasn't Scalpel anymore. I knew I couldn't forget who I was, but I hoped changing my name would at least help me move on.”

“Did it?”
Ambulon's optics – a Neutral gold shade – dimmed even further. “Some days are better than others,” he admitted.

“And some days are worse,” First Aid agreed. He folded his arms over his spark, concentrating on the familiar pulses of it. “I don't think I could give up my designation. It's all I have left that connects me to them.”

Ambulon tilted his helm. “We all grieve differently. There's no right or wrong way. And that's after I've had centuries to get used to feeling this lonely...” He trailed off as though admitting his inner pain had been a mistake before offering First Aid a wan smile. “It is nice, however, to know I am no longer the only one.”

First Aid's visor brightened in agreement. “It is.” It would be nice, too, to have a friend. Wheeljack and Ratchet were invaluable to him, but he'd been so close to his team that First Aid struggled to form a connection with anyone else. “Would you... be interested in exchanging personal comms?” he asked, but was quick to add. “Please don't feel obligated to say yes. I only thought—”

“Yes,” Ambulon said, and his expression softened. “I would enjoy being able to have a conversation with you that isn't being monitored.” His field opened to First Aid, just enough that he could sense the offer was genuine. “Especially since we should probably get to work. I have permission to be here, but too long gone and I'm sure Metalhawk will become anxious.”

“Good point. Back to work then.” First Aid made shooing motions. “We'll have plenty of time to talk later.”

Ambulon's optics glinted at him. “Yes, we will.”

~

Soundwave pressed a kiss to Optimus' fingers before he left. It was an action so chaste that it should not have caused a wave of warmth to spread through Optimus' frame, and yet it did.

Optimus swore that his fingers tingled, though only the truly romantic believed such a thing happened. He stared out the door as Soundwave left, his spark lighter than it had been in weeks.

It was not what he could have expected.

He was glad, at least, that Laserbeak had stayed. That she perched even now on the head of the berth beside him and nudged her helm against his.

He would return, if you asked, she sent to him, a smiling emoji attached to the purely text communication. Her field pushed at his, warm with affection and amusement.

To his dismay, Optimus' face heated with the beginnings of a blush. “That is not necessary,” he replied. “I should be recharging anyway. Ratchet would insist.”

And you always obey Ratchet, Laserbeak commented with another trickle of amusement. She shuffled over on the head of the berth as though making herself more comfortable. Are you sure?
All it would take is a little nudge.

Optimus chuckled despite himself and turned his helm so that he could look at Laserbeak, her optics glinting back at him. “You are a menace,” he said teasingly. “I can tell I am going to have to watch you closely.”

*You and Master are a good match,* she replied with a touch of smug superiority that was Soundwave through and through. *I am only encouraging what is obvious to everyone else.*

She had a point. Optimus remembered the knowing looks Ratchet kept giving him, and the ones Jazz echoed, though his with a touch of amusement. He wondered if Jazz harassing Soundwave had a secondary intent other than sussing out Soundwave’s intentions. Optimus supposed he would have to have a chat with his third tomorrow.

*But you are also right,* Laserbeak continued with that same mischievous edge to her text she had earlier. *You need rest and if I keep you awake, Ratchet will come in here and yell at me.*

“He wouldn't. Not at you. I would bear the brunt of his displeasure,” Optimus said with a gentle smile.

He thought he wouldn't be able to recharge. Given the nightmares that usually haunted him when he was most vulnerable, Optimus expected to spend half the night cycle staring at the lights on the equipment around him.

Laserbeak's presence was a surprising soother.

Optimus settled himself into the berth, surprised also by how much of a comfort the thin metalmesh blanket Ratchet had provided gave him as well. There was something about the barely-present weight and warmth of it that calmed him.

He sent a ping to the lights so they would dim, and the room draped itself in pockets of shadow intermingled with bright orange and red and blue lights. As far as he could tell, all the machines monitoring him were reporting back positive results.

*Recharge well, Optimus,* Laserbeak sent, a smiling emoticon and a hugging one transmitting to him. *Recharge in peace. I will guard your rest.*

And not a better guardian could he ask for. “Goodnight, Laserbeak,” Optimus replied aloud and he offlined his optics, cycling long, slow ventilations as he attempted to initiate recharge.

It came to him swiftly and for the first time since the Autobots had been liberated from Megatron's tyranny, Optimus did not dream.

****
Soundwave was there when he woke. He was there until it was time for Optimus to sleep. He was there as often as Optimus asked for him, and never failed to make certain his presence was welcome. He didn't presume. He waited for an invitation.

Laserbeak, also, never left Optimus side. Since Ratchet never minded her presence, she never felt the need to leave. Optimus was grateful for it. He couldn't bear to be alone, but he also couldn't tolerate too much company. For some reason, Laserbeak's quiet presence was enough to satisfy both.

During the day, his conscious hours, Optimus welcomed Soundwave's company, the quiet conversation, his soft humor, his gentle presence. It was easy to forget that Soundwave once bore the Decepticon badge, especially when he disengaged his battle mask and looked even less like the symbol.

They talked. A lot. More so than anyone would have believed Soundwave were capable. There were moments of silence, too. But being as they were virtual strangers to each other, despite this almost inexplicable attraction, a lot of talking was involved.

Optimus found he didn't mind too much. He used to think he wanted silence, to wallow in his own pain, but Soundwave's quiet conversation was better than the void. It was better than letting the nightmares drag him down.

There were some topics they avoided or skirted around, such as their occupations before the war. Optimus had no problems admitting who he was – Orion Pax, discovered by Alpha Trion, and who had a Matrix thrust upon him when he wasn't looking. But Soundwave grew silent and uncomfortable, and Optimus learned to drop the line of conversation quickly.

He suspected, based on previous hints, that Soundwave's past was murky and terrible, like many Decepticons, and Optimus was willing to wait until Soundwave was ready to share. And if his suspicions proved true – that Soundwave had been a slave until Megatron freed him – then Optimus resolved even more to wait. He had somehow earned Soundwave's trust. He did not want to throw that away as Megatron had.

Which left them with the silly questions, but important nonetheless.

“You don't like sweets?” Optimus stared at the communications mech, unable to hide his astonishment. “Surely there's some type of goodie you find palatable.”

Soundwave shook his helm, lifting his datapad a bit higher as though attempting to hide behind it. The pad itself was ostensibly there because Soundwave was still working, but he hadn't spared it a glance since coming into Optimus' prison.
“None,” Soundwave answered, his vocals lacking the monotone, though he still preferred to be concise in his word choice. “Preference of functionality rather than taste.”

Optimus grimaced. “That does not sound appealing. What on Cybertron do you do to spoil yourself then, if not unhealthy treats?”

Soundwave's visor glinted. “Peace and quiet,” he answered, a note of humor entering his tone.

Optimus' lips curved into a smile. On the headboard behind him, Laserbeak chortled, shifting across the back.

“One wonders why,” Optimus replied with no small amount of humor of his own. “But you must also have other interests. Music? Reading? Games?”

“Yes.” Soundwave inclined his helm. “All of the above, more so the last.”

Optimus shifted on the berth, trying to ease the cramp in his right thigh. He wanted to get up and move and if Ratchet didn't let him up to walk around soon, Optimus intended to sneak out. He had wheels for a reason. Movement was necessary.

“What sort of games?” Optimus asked, but before Soundwave could answer, the sound of knocking interrupted the moment.

He looked up and past Soundwave's left shoulder to see Jazz standing in the doorway, his fingers rapping over the frame.

“Hate ta interrupt,” the Spec Ops commander said with a grin. “But needs must 'nd all.”

Optimus never knew that one day he would welcome the idea of work. Soundwave's visits were the highlight of his day, but the hours between were dull and tiresome. Ratchet had taken to confiscating his work datapads because he'd reached his “maximum daily quota of work,” and Optimus was bored out of his processor.

Soundwave stood, perhaps faster than seemed necessary. “Duty comes first,” he said, though his tone carried reluctance. He looked at Optimus. “I will return tomorrow?”


Soundwave's field rippled, his armor echoing the motion. “I will be here,” he said, and made a beeline for the door where he nearly collided with Jazz, though Jazz's little pirouette at the last moment saved him from getting a faceful of carrier dock.

Jazz laughed it off, and Optimus didn't miss the almost abashed cant to Soundwave's field as he dipped his helm in apology and then scurried away.

Embarrassment. He never thought he'd see the day when he caught Soundwave in a moment of imbalance.

“Why is it that every time I run into 'im, he runs away?” Jazz asked with a grin as he strutted into the room and snagged the stool Soundwave had abandoned. “Hey, Beak. How's it going?”
Laserbeak warbled a greeting in return, lifting one wing. Optimus found it amusing that all of his Autobots had gotten so used to the sight of her that no one so much as batted an optic.

“But yeah,” Jazz continued as he spun the chair around in a circle before slinging himself into it with all the grace he'd shown earlier. “Is it somethin' I said?”

Optimus, despite himself, chuckled. “I'm quite sure it was. You do have a habit of intimidating other mechs.”

“Who? Me? Well, I never.” Jazz effected an air of offense, though the grin belied it. “I'll have ya know, Optimus, that I've been the epitome of politeness and welcome to old Sounders. Mebbe he still thinks I'm crouchin' on his territory.”

Optimus arched an orbital ridge. “His territory,” he repeated, amusement rich in his vocals. “And by that you mean…?”

“His presence at your side 'o course.” Jazz tilted forward, planting his elbows on the edge of Optimus' berth and his chin on his palms. He looked up at Optimus, all coquettish charm and flashing visor. “Poor old Sounders don't even realize he doesn't have anythin' to worry about. You 'n me, it ain't like that.”

Optimus' lips curved further. “No, it isn't,” he agreed, warmth suffusing his spark. “What we have defies explanation, yes, but it is nothing Soundwave need compete against.” That he didn't quail at Jazz's proximity was testament enough.

Jazz grinned. “Exactly. Though I have to tell ya, OP, I haven't seen anythin' cuter than the two of you since I caught Bumblebee and Rumble canoodlin' in a storage closet last week.” His shoulder tires wiggled suggestively.

“Yes, well, they have a history,” Optimus demurred, though he was happy to know Bumblebee and Rumble seemed to be determined to rekindle their old flames. “I don't think you came to visit simply to tease me about my romantic endeavors.”

Jazz made a face of playful disgust. “Ya know, it's that constant need to be workin' that landed ya in this berth in the first place.”

“There is much work to be done,” Optimus said by form of protest. “How can I tumble it into the hands of others and wash my own of it?”

“Because we told ya to,” Jazz said, pointing a finger at him, toward his spark. “Yer so busy takin' care of everyone else that ya didn't pay a bit of attention to yourself.”

Optimus worked his intake, cycling a slow ventilation. It wasn't the first time he'd heard something similar, and he knew it wouldn't be the last. He knew very well that he'd been letting his personal health slide. He knew why he'd done so.

He didn't much enjoy confronting his own behavior, but he also knew it was necessary.

“Then consider this easing my peace of mind,” Optimus replied, and before Jazz could protest, he held up a hand and continued, “I promise not to fill out any paperwork or make any command decisions. I simply want to know what's going on.”
Jazz tilted his helm, giving him a scrutinizing look. "Okay," he said. "Fair enough. What do ya wanna know first?"

"Anything that's relevant."

Jazz laughed and stretched his arms over his helm with a creak of taut cables. "All right. Well. Hound thinks he might have found the humans. I sent Bee and Rumble to help make contact."

Optimus cycled his optics. "Wait. You found the humans? That's great!"

Jazz waggled a finger at him. "We only think we do," he corrected. "We haven't made visual contact yet. When they do, they're gonna let me know."

"Still… it gives us hope." Optimus sank back against the head of the berth. It was a relief to know they hadn't led to the utter annihilation of the natives of Earth. "What else?"

"Onslaught meets with Metalhawk today. Hopefully, we'll get some answers soon about what he's planning."

"Ah." Optimus inclined his helm. His gaze drifted to the table set up in the corner of the room, where well-meaning Autobots had sent him get-well gifts, mostly small things like cards, hand-made objects, even a small crystal or two. Someone, Optimus suspected Springer, had sent him a fragmentation grenade.

Why?

Optimus had no idea. Perhaps it was a joke? Perhaps it was meant to comfort him by offering a means to protect himself? Either way, Optimus suspected the next time he fell into recharge, Ratchet would make the grenade vanish. It was almost a pity. The grenade would come in handy, should the worst happen.

Metalhawk, however, had seen fit to send what looked to be a vintage bottle of Praxian engex, complete with ribboned bow. Optimus didn't dare try it and not even Ratchet – self-proclaimed fan of Praxian high grade – had any interest in popping the cork. He assumed it would continue to be a very fancy room decoration, one Optimus didn't dare throw out on the off-chance Metalhawk asked about it.

Praxian high grade bottles were supposed to be collectables, empty or full, though that was the sort of useless way of thinking that only the elite and high class indulged in.

"Metalhawk sends his wishes for a speedy recovery," Optimus said, unable to hide the disbelief in his tone. "Are you interested in giving it a taste?"

Jazz spun in his chair to stare at the bottle. A shudder raced across his armor before he spun back around. "There's not enough credits on the planet, Boss Bot. And what kinda mech sends engex to a patient on strict medical grade anyway?"

"The oblivious kind." Optimus grimaced and scrubbed his hands down his thighs. "Is Onslaught going alone?"

Jazz shook his helm. "Nah. He's taking Blast Off. Says there's another shuttle in the Neutrals, and you know, Blast Off used to be a noble. That oughta win him some points. He's takin' Swindle, too,
which is a gamble if ya ask me.”

“Not necessarily. Swindle's motivations are largely monetary.” Optimus cycled a ventilation. “All we can do from here is hope that they are capable of pulling this off.”

Jazz leaned back, folding his arms behind his helm. “I've the utmost faith in my temporary team, O.P.”

“I'm relieved that you do.” Though that did bring up another point, encouraging Optimus to shift to another topic. “And what of your actual team?”

Jazz sighed, some of the joie de vivre vanishing from his frame language. “Mirage ain't asked to come back, and even if he did, I'd say no. He's in no condition, boss. I'm tryin' to find somethin' else for him to do, maybe help Magnus in accounting.”

Optimus glanced past Jazz, but could see no sign of Ratchet through the window. He dared swing his legs toward the edge of the bed.


“Bee's fine. He's lettin' Rumble court 'im the right way. Breaker's happy to play bodyguard for Hound and Rav, you know how he is.” Jazz gave him a curious look as Optimus' pedes hit the floor. “Uh, Optimus. Don't think yer supposed to be standin’.”

Optimus gingerly rose to his pedes, feeling at once exhausted and relieved. It was a mercy to be off that berth, but he had to admit, his legs felt wobbly and uncertain beneath him. Was he that tired? Had he truly drained himself that much?

“I'm not going anywhere, Jazz. I only needed off that berth for a moment.” He held onto the backboard with one hand and rubbed at the base of his backstrut with the other. “Unless you plan on telling Ratchet on me.”

Jazz coughed into his hand. “I won't if you won't. But if he catches ya, I'm goin' to swear on your spark that I tried to stop ya.”

Optimus chuckled. “I'll hold you to it.”

Please be careful, Laserbeak said, her words laced with concern. She scuttled closer across the back of the headboard, her optics focused on him. Optimus had nearly forgotten about her, so involved in Jazz’s information had he been.

“I will,” Optimus promised and returned his attention to Jazz. “What of Smokescreen?”

Jazz rebooted his vocalizer, relaxing back into his chair. “He's the only able-bodied mech I got. He has his hands full. And no, before ya ask, I'm not goin' to go recruitin'. Not yet. Not until I know what I need.”

“I trust your judgment.” Optimus dared take his hand off the backboard, finding that he could at least stand, and tried a couple careful steps. It felt immeasurably good to be moving again. He waved toward Jazz. “Continue, please. I want to know everything.”

“Everything, huh? That could take awhile.”
Optimus cast him a fond look. “If Ratchet has anything to say about it, time is something I have plenty of right now.”

Jazz chuckled and leaned back in his chair, though his posture remained tense and his visor tracked Optimus' movements, as if he expected Optimus to topple over at any moment.

“All right,” he said. “But don't say I didn't warn ya.”

~

“Are you certain we are choosing the right side?”

Onslaught stared out through Blast Off's windshield as the landing site for shuttles in Nova Cronum came into view. A small group of mechs already waited, their gazes locked in Blast Off's direction.

“We are Neutral,” Onslaught said as he kept a hand on the back of the pilot's chair to hold his balance. “We have no sides.”

“Pfft.” Swindle smirked as he leaned his helm against his fist, his arm balanced on the chair he occupied. “You're a terrible liar, Ons. Maybe I ought to do the talking before Metalhawk chases us out of here with guns ablaze.”

“That won't happen.” Onslaught cast him a long look, but as always, it did not faze Swindle. There was little that did. “And yes, Blast Off, I am certain. While I care little for Starscream and only vaguely trust Optimus Prime, a Cybertron under the control of one such as Metalhawk is not a Cybertron I wish to call home. He is old guard.”

Blast Off's voice echoed around them. “He claims otherwise.”

“He also claims to only want peace, but given the way he's sneaking around more than that pet spy of Prime's, he's a worse liar than Onslaught.” Swindle's visor flashed. “He wants Cybertron for himself, and he thinks he can scare the rest of us off it.”

“He is wrong.” Onslaught's hand tightened on the back of the chair as Blast Off gracefully landed without so much as jostling his passengers. “Come. We have work to do.”

Swindle leveraged himself out of the chair, stretching his arms over his helm. “Work,” he repeated, effecting a yawn. “Did they happen to mention how much we're getting paid for this work?”

“It will be worth it. That's all you need to know,” Onslaught said as he headed toward the loading ramp which Blast Off had already begun to lower.

“See, when you put it that way, it kind of sounds like you're saying we're not getting paid at all,” Swindle muttered, but it was quiet enough that only Onslaught caught it. The words did not carry to the trio of mechs awaiting them just outside of Blast Off’s landing zone.

“Combaticon Commander Onslaught.” Metalhawk stepped forward, his hands clasped behind his
back, his gait as graceful and regal as a mech born and raised in the Towers. “Welcome to Nova Cronum.”

Onslaught dipped his helm in a respectful nod as behind him, Blast Off shifted to root mode, subspacing much of his mass in the process. “Thank you, Metalhawk… or do you have a title you prefer?”

“Metalhawk is acceptable.” The Neutral leader's upper lip curled. “I am not so proud that I need to be a Lord or a Prime, unlike others.”

“I see. You need not use my title either as I carry no rank here.” Onslaught gestured to his left, where Swindle had taken a lazy, non-military stance. “This is Swindle and behind me is Blast Off.”

Metalhawk cycled his gold optics. “You appear understaffed, Commander. I was under the impression there were five of you.”

“Vortex remained in Polyhex.” Onslaught projected disapproval into his tone. “Brawl had another duty.”

Swindle coughed into his hand. “Tex is infatuated with an Autobot. Thinks he found a new toy.” He rolled a shoulder, setting one of his tires into spinning. “It'll never last. He'll be back with us soon enough.”

“I see.” Metalhawk's tone remained perfectly neutral. He gestured to the blue mech at his left, Praxian if Onslaught had to guess. “This is Skids, my second, a former Autobot if you must know.” He then lifted a hand to the mech on his right. “This is Sky-Byte, a former Decepticon.”

Onslaught nodded at each in turn. “Then it is true, what they say, that you welcome all with open arms, so long as they are willing to look toward peace.”

Metalhawk's lips curved. “Is that why you are here? Are you interested in peace?”

“Among other things.” There was something in Metalhawk’s tone that Onslaught despised. Perhaps because he came across as smarmy. “I would like to thank you for accepting this meeting.”

Metalhawk inclined his helm. “I'll admit, curiosity compelled me. You are infamous, you and your team, especially your interrogator. Pacifism does not seem to suit you.”

“People change. Priorities change.” Onslaught shifted his weight, clasping his hands behind his back in mimicry of Metalhawk. “There is a difference between deeds done by choice, and those done because of the bonds of slavery.”

Metalhawk made a noncommittal noise. “You wish to petition to join us? All… five of you?”

“Perhaps. You are Neutral, yes? We'd still like the ability to move freely.” Onslaught replied, glancing at Sky-Byte behind his visor. The former Decepticon frowned, his optics narrowed in disapproval. Skids, however, looked bored.

Swindle crossed his arms over his hood. “Some of us have business opportunities that require it,” he added and ignored Onslaught’s engine growl of disapproval.
The Neutral's didn't have to know it was planned. Let them think some of the Combaticons could be swayed. Let them think there was a rift.

Metalhawk nodded. “That can certainly be arranged. Come. Let us talk more inside. One never knows when the shadows are listening.”

Onslaught was grateful he did not have a mouth so Metalhawk could not see him smirk. If Metalhawk was suspicious of the Combaticons, it did not show. He was too concerned with Optimus' band of spies to think that perhaps they stood on his doorstep.

“Metalhawk, if I may, I was told that Octane and Sandstorm were among your crew?” Blast Off said, speaking up for the first time.

Sky-Byte looked up at him, optics narrowed. “Yes, they are,” he said. “Why?”

“They are old friends.” Blast Off did haughty dismissal very well. “Unless they are somehow prohibited from such, I would like to contact them.”

Metalhawk unclasped his arms, one of them raising to gesture at Sky-Byte, who immediately clamped down on a protest. “I don't see why not.” He smiled up at Blast Off. “I'll have Skids take you to them.”

Skids grinned at that and planted his hands on his hips. “If you save me a walk, I won't even complain about it. You've got thrusters, right?”

“I do.” Blast Off could not have sounded less thrilled.

Onslaught left them to it while he and Swindle joined Metalhawk and Sky-Byte.

“I have the feeling this is going to be beneficial for both of us,” Metalhawk said as he took the lead, guiding them into the command center of Nova Cronum.

“As do I,” Onslaught said, and before they entered the privacy shield – a curious thing for a group of pacifist Neutrals to have – he sent a ping on a private, guarded channel.

_We're in._

~

A couple months since they officially split from the Decepticons and joined in with the Autobots, and Polyhex still didn't feel like home. Not that Iacon did either, what with the way Soundwave got all twitchy and wouldn't let 'em wander around as much.

It still felt weird to look in the mirror and see an Auto-brand. But then, it had felt weird all those millennia ago to see a Decepti-brand, too. Frenzy wasn't used to being claimed like that. Back on the streets, it hadn't been wise to announce your affiliations unless your friends were big and bad.

Back then, Frenzy's friends had been neither big nor bad. They'd consisted of Rumble and Bumblebee and while they were sly, they weren't intimidating. Finally hooking up with
Soundwave was one of the best decisions they ever made.

Well. Rumble might not see it that way. Between that and leaning toward the Cons, he’d lost Bumblebee. But Frenzy supposed it all worked out in the end. Cause there they were, together at last, off canoodling on Earth under the guise of doing some work, and here Frenzy was, stuck on Cybertron.

Alone.

He wasn't used to that. Being alone. He didn't know how to be alone. He's always had his brother, his twin, his best friend.

Frenzy knew Rumble didn't mean to leave him behind. He knew, like he knew his own spark, that they'd always be brothers, and Rumble loved him and all that slag. But he also knew Rumble had missed Bee with every wire of his being, and Frenzy wasn't about to complain now that they were tentatively working toward something special.

He didn't want to get in the way of that.

He just... he just didn't want to be alone. He wasn't used to it. If there wasn't Rumble, then there was the boss and their new siblings. There was Ravage and the bird twins and now, there wasn't even them.

Ravage was off with her own Autobot toy, and Laserbeak watched over Optimus for the boss and Buzzsaw, little carrier's mech that he was, was never far from Soundwave's shoulder.

Which left Frenzy here. All alone.

Alone except for the door he was standing in front of. Passing Autobots were giving him strange looks, but no one was yelling at him or trying to toss him out. He supposed they'd gotten used to seeing former Decepticons wandering the hallways of their pseudo-base.

Anyway. The door. He was standing here, debating whether or not he ought to press the call button. Maybe the Autobrat was messing with him. Maybe that day of fun had been just that, a single day.

Maybe he was standing here for no reason.

And maybe, just maybe, he'd found a friend, one that the boss grudgingly approved of. Not even changing factions could make that old rivalry die quickly. Blaster and Soundwave worked together civilly, but friendly was out of the question.

Frenzy sighed. Nothing to do but try, he guessed. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

He pressed the call button and waited. He knew someone had to be inside. No one was on shift today, and there wasn't that much in the way of entertainment around Protihex.

The door opened, Blaster standing in the frame. He looked down at Frenzy, the ghost of a frown on his lips. “Can I help you?”

Frenzy put on his biggest, friendliest grin. “I was lookin' for Eject. He around?”

Blaster's optics narrowed. He stared at Frenzy for the longest moment before he sighed and stepped
back. “Yeah, he's here. Come on in.”

Frenzy rebooted his visor. “Ya don't sound so sure about that invitation.”

Blaster pinched the bridge of his olfactory sensor. “It's going to take me awhile to get used to this, Frenzy. It's taking all I have not to point my gun at you.”

“Oh.” Frenzy edged through the doorway, trying to look as nontthreatening as possible. “If it makes ya feel better, I had to disable my threat protocols just to walk down here.”

“It doesn't. But nice try.” The door slid shut behind Frenzy, trapping him in an apartment that looked pretty cozy.

It was filled with warm and inviting tones, and compared to the one Frenzy shared with the boss and his siblings, it was a mess. Organized chaos maybe. Stuff was piled everywhere. There was a huge vidscreen on the wall, currently playing some noisy movie, and Steeljaw and Ramhorn were gathered in front of it.

“He's in that room,” Blaster said, gesturing to one of the three doorways connected to the main room. “And please remember that there are other audials in the building.”

Frenzy grimaced. “It ain't like that.”

“If you say so.” Blaster's upper lip curled toward a smirk. “Just remember that there's a disapproving carrier sitting right outside the door.”

Frenzy sighed. “I'll remember.” He headed toward the door Blaster had indicated, probably one Eject shared with his twin.

He hoped Rewind wasn't here. He was probably in the medbay, come to think of it. Frenzy heard rumors he was getting awfully cozy with one of the visiting Neutrals. He wondered if Blaster disapproved of that, too. Or was his disapproval saved for bots attached to Soundwave?

Engex for thought.

The door was open. Frenzy hung around the edge and peered inside. No Rewind. Just Eject, sitting cross-legged on the floor with a controller in his lap and a small vidscreen blinking in front of him. He was playing one of Earth's consoles and some kind of sports game.

Hah. Frenzy should have known.

“No down for family bonding time?” Frenzy asked as he stepped fully into the doorway and leaned against the frame.

The game paused as Eject swiveled toward the door, his visor brightening. “Hey, Deceptidork!” he greeted with a bright grin. “What brings you to our neck of the city?”

“Boredom. Whatcha playin’?”

“Madden NFL 12.”

Frenzy cycled his visor. “What? Really? Ya don't have anythin' better?” He pushed off the frame
and invited himself inside, since Eject didn't seem keen on marching him out at gunpoint.

“I did,” Eject replied as he swung his attention back to the game. “It's back at the Ark, rusting with everything else.”

Oh.

Frenzy tried not to squirm. “Um, my bro's on Earth now. Want me to have him find ya somethin' else to play?”

“Ohhh, so that's why you're here.” Eject laughed and unpaused his game, his thumbs flying across the controls. “You were lonely.”

“Was not!”

Eject flicked a gaze over his shoulder. “Wanna bet?”

Frenzy squinted at him. “I don't think ya know how that phrase works.” He laughed and plopped down on the ground next to the other cassette. “Do ya have another controller?”

“I thought you said this game was stupid.”

“Not in so many words.” Frenzy nudged him with a shoulder. “Well. Do ya?”

Eject stared at him for a long moment and then leaned over, pulling a box out from under the berth and rummaging inside it. He produced a wireless controller, which he handed over.

Frenzy reached for it, only for Eject to pull it away at the last second.

“Only,” he said in a playful tone, “if ya get Rumble to bring back some games.”

Frenzy winked his visor and snatched the controller away. “Deal,” he said. “Now come on, unpauser so we can play this stupid thing.”

“Ooo. Ya make it sound like so much fun when ya say it that way.” Eject snickered. “All right. Get ready to have your aft whipped.”

“You're on!”

~

Soundwave returned, technically after visiting hours, but Optimus figured he either was allowed inside, or put his skills to the test and managed to sneak around Ratchet. He came into the room as quietly as his eldest cassette, with not so much as a whisper of sound to indicate movement.

Optimus, fortunately, had not even begun to head toward recharge. Had he been staying awake in hopes that Soundwave would return? He refused to answer that question.

“Welcome back,” he said.
“Apologies for delay,” Soundwave said as he lowered himself to the stool he had claimed for himself. “A matter needed my attention.”

Laserbeak chirped a greeting as well, prompting Soundwave to reply with his field, the warm touch of it briefly brushing Optimus’ own.

Soundwave reached for the nearest of Optimus' hands, fingers gently curling around Optimus’ own. Optimus' ventilations hitched as Soundwave brought Optimus' hand to his mouth. The guard slid aside in enough time for Soundwave to press his lips to Optimus' knuckles, a surprising warmth spreading through Optimus' hand in the aftermath.

It was an action as chaste as they come, but something about the simple touch, the gentle sweep of Soundwave's thumb over his palm as he lowered Optimus' hand back down, sent an echoing warmth through Optimus' frame.

“A matter?” Optimus repeated, once his processor rebooted into something a little more workable than mush. He tried to focus. “What's wrong? What happened?”

Soundwave shook his helm, lowering Optimus' hand into his lap. Optimus found he had no inclination to request it back. Two points of contact and suddenly, it was a world of intimacy he craved.

“Verbal altercation between two mechs, one Autobot, one Decepticon,” Soundwave answered though nothing in his field suggested Optimus should be concerned. “Disagreement was small, petty, and appropriately, handled.”

“But as with all things that cause a cross-factional disturbance, had to be overseen by a member of high command,” Optimus murmured. He cycled a sigh. “Well, it was too much to hope for no issues whatsoever. At least it was minor. What was the topic?”

“So petty as to be irrelevant.” Soundwave rolled one shoulder in a shrug. “Peace makes everyone uneasy. We are too used to conflict.”

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “That is very true,” he admitted. It would take time and patience to fix what millennia at war had broken. He was under no illusions it would happen quickly and without issues.

“Only need time.” Soundwave rubbed his thumb over Optimus' palm. “There is nothing that can't be solved through time.”

His field reached out, entreating, and Optimus allowed it. There was something in the soft patience of Soundwave's actions that helped him relax, made him feel unpressured.

“Of course.” Optimus worked his intake. “Thank you, Soundwave, for handling the duties I am unable to take. I regret that I am unable to assist you, but I am very grateful that the Autobots have such capable leaders in my absence.”

An absence he began to worry might last longer than Ratchet's restrictions. There were times, especially now, he wondered if he was still suited for this role. True his Autobots had voted for him, but Ultra Magnus had confided in him that the vote had not been unanimous. He suspected that it was because some of his Autobots worried for Optimus' health, but Optimus wasn't sure.
He would not be surprised if any of his soldiers had lost their faith in him. There were days he struggled to find it in himself.

The days where the empty Matrix connectors ached were the worst. So much for being the chosen one.

“Gratitude unnecessary,” Soundwave insisted. He leaned forward, still cradling Optimus' hand, rubbing soothing patterns in the dermal metal. “Concern is only for your health.”

Optimus gave him a wan smile. “I wish I could say that was a reassurance. It only makes me more determined to get out of this berth as fast as possible.”

“Then luckily Ratchet will say otherwise,” Soundwave said, with something that Optimus dared call a twinkle in his visor. “He will ensure you are fully healed.”

“He can be something of a tyrant, I agree,” Optimus replied.

Soundwave chuckled, though it carried a raspy edge. He bowed his head, brushing another kiss to Optimus' knuckles, the gentle press of his lips sending a shock through Optimus' systems.

Optimus' spark throbbed in his chassis. He gnawed on his bottom lip, suddenly feeling as if there was a great chasm opening in front of him, and he was going to fall into it if he wasn't careful.

He didn't want to hurt Soundwave. And he didn't want to hurt himself. He needed to speak up before it became too late.

“Soundwave, I…..” He worked his intake, feeling as though there was a glitch in his emotional circuit. “I apologize, but I am still… I do not know that I will ever...” This was frustratingly difficult to put into words.

Soundwave shook his helm, pressing another kiss to Optimus' fingers, the warmth of his ex-vents making Optimus' hand tingle. “I am patient. I will wait. If never, I am content in this.”

Optimus gnawed on his bottom lip. “I cannot ask that of you. Surely you'd rather someone else? Someone less...”

Broken.

He didn't want to say the word aloud again, but it had been circulating inside his processor for hours, days even. Long before he collapsed in the courtyard, prompting his current state of enforced berth rest.

He felt broken, and he didn't know if there was a way to repair what Megatron had shattered within him.

“You are who I chose,” Soundwave murmured, his field gently nudging Optimus' like the warmth of a hug that felt even stronger when Laserbeak reached out as well. “Just as you are. Damaged, yes. But not broken.”

Of course Soundwave wouldn't have to ask. Optimus had been all but screaming it mentally. Surely his emotional state had to be grating to the touch-telepath. But Soundwave never once complained.
How this quiet, dignified mech had lasted so long in the Decepticons, Optimus felt he would never understand. How Megatron had first proven himself worthy of Soundwave's loyalty was also a mystery.

_He means it_, Laserbeak offered. _If that reassures you at all, Optimus._

It did, to a certain extent.

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “Then if you'll have me, partners we are,” he said with a wan smile.

Soundwave's field rippled with delight. He squeezed Optimus' hand. “I--”

Commotion beyond Optimus' room captured his attention. It jerked him from the moment, and he startled on his berth. Soundwave, too, tensed, and they both swung their gazes toward the window.

Lights sprang to life in the hallway. Optimus heard rushed conversation, a sense of tension rising in the air.

By unspoken request, Soundwave released Optimus' hand and rose, going to the doorway. He keyed it open, peering into the corridor, just as Wheeljack came into view.

“Oh, Soundwave. You're here,” the engineer said, indicators flashing in quick flickers of color.

“Danger?” Soundwave asked.

Wheeljack shook his helm. “No. I mean, yes. I mean, well, we don't know. Something's happened is all we know.”

Optimus frowned and threw back the berth cover. “What do you mean, Wheeljack?” he demanded as he made to swing his legs over the side of the berth.

“No, no, no. Stay put!” Wheeljack said as he rushed into the room, waving his hands. Only to pause, his indicators flushing pink. “I mean, please, sir. Stay on the berth. It's nothing you need to handle.”

Optimus' frown deepened. “Are we under attack?”

“No,” Soundwave answered before Wheeljack could, one hand lifted to his comm system. “Polyhex is secure. There is no attack within our boundaries.”

“It's not us,” Wheeljack said with another shake to his head, and gestured at Optimus again. “It's the Cons. Something happened to Starscream. Grimlock called Ratch, private channel, not faction-related, asking for help. He's gone to Iacon now.”

Optimus' spark lurched. “What?” he made another effort to get off the berth, but it was Laserbeak this time who stopped him.

She launched off the head of the berth and flew in front of him. You need rest, she insisted, something of fear in her optics.

“I don't know the details. Ratchet's gonna let me know when he actually knows something.”
Wheeljack sighed and rubbed at his helm. “But if Grimlock's asking for help, I'm guessing Starscream's hurt badly.”

“They were not attacked,” Soundwave said as he stepped from the door. “I have received no alerts.”

“Which means whatever happened was internal or...”

“Sabotage,” Soundwave finished, and his visor dimmed. He pressed the manual release for his dock, and one of his cassettes emerged, transforming into Buzzsaw. “Iacon. Investigate Starscream's condition.”

Buzzsaw dipped his helm in midair and took off before anyone could protest, flying out the door above Wheeljack's helm.

Buzzsaw will get information, Laserbeak said as she flew toward Optimus, as if nudging him back toward the berth. Please, Prime, rest?

Optimus sighed and pinched his olfactory sensor. “Politically, I should at least make an effort to contact Grimlock.”

“Decepticon Lord made private request of creator,” Soundwave said, finally moving away from the door to approach Optimus' side. “Politically, no response on Prime's part required.”

Wheeljack nodded in agreement. “Soundwave's right, Optimus. For now, Mum's the word until Grimlock makes a public statement.”

It still didn't sit right with Optimus, but he understood their position. No doubt Ultra Magnus would advise the same.

“Very well.” He lowered himself back to the berth, not failing to notice that Laserbeak's field went flush with relief, and some of the tension eased out of Soundwave's posture as well. “But I expect to be kept informed. Political tensions are high as is, I cannot have them worsened by rude behavior.”

“Of course.” Wheeljack nodded vigorously and slid a pace toward the door. “Now I gotta go inform First Aid he just got a temporary promotion. Soundwave, stay as long as you want.” He paused in the doorway and winked an optic. “Especially if it keeps Optimus in that berth.”

Wheeljack vanished out the door, hitting the panel so it would close behind him, before Optimus could muster up any kind of protest. Heat gathered in his faceplate and to his amazement, Soundwave looked a little discomfited himself.

“Autobots nosy,” he said.

“It is one of their more endearing traits.” Optimus quirked a grin and patted the berth beside him. “Sit,” he offered, only to amend. “I mean, please. If you want. I don't think I'll be able to recharge anytime soon.”

“Worried?” Soundwave visibly hesitated before taking the offered seat, the heat of his hip pressed to the side of Optimus' knee.
“Yes.” Optimus rubbed at his forehelm, hoping to stave off the inevitable ache behind his optics, a clear sign of tension. “Our peace is so tenuous. The slightest mistake could catapult us back into war, and I fear the consequences of such would be dire.”

Soundwave's weight shifted. Peripheral sensors pinged a warning before Optimus felt the careful touch to his fingers where his hand rested on the berth. He turned his wrist, offering his hand to Soundwave who accepted the invitation. He curled their fingers together, his field reaching out for Optimus'.

“It will not happen,” Soundwave said quietly. “We are stronger than any machinations Metalhawk or whoever else has in store.”

“I certainly hope that is true,” Optimus murmured as he lowered his hand, and happened to catch Soundwave's gaze.

The crimson visor gleamed at him, the intent in Soundwave's expression making Optimus' spark skip a beat. He worked his intake, intensely aware of the points of contact between them, and what the clamor in the hallway had interrupted.

Optimus opened his mouth to speak and had to reboot his vocalizer when nothing came out but static. He coughed into his free hand, feeling heat steal into his faceplate once more.

“Thank you,” he said. “For the reassurance.”

Soundwave rubbed his thumb over Optimus' knuckles. “It is what partners do,” he said.

Optimus' spark throbbed with warmth.

Partners.

He liked the sound of that.

****
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

"We Are Broken," Paramore

There was no official statement from the Decepticons. All was quiet from Iacon, as a matter of fact.

Given that less than twelve hours had passed since Ratchet first ran out of the medical center, Soundwave was not surprised. Decepticons, as a whole, were not inclined to admit weaknesses, no matter what former Autobot had taken leadership of them.

Soundwave trusted Buzzsaw would bring him information once he discovered the whole story. Ultra Magnus, however, was a little more impatient than his grave personality might suggest.

Soundwave would not call the repeated pings to his communication suite as relentless, but it was a near thing. Any moment now and Ultra Magnus would come out of his office, strut firmly down the hall, and press his finger most obnoxiously to Soundwave's call button.

Bzzzzzzt.

And there it was.

Soundwave remotely unlocked the door and waited for the tide of disapproval to come sweeping over him. For all that Ultra Magnus was reserved in expression, his field slipped from his control more often than not, betraying his true emotional state. It was more than a little disconcerting. In contrast, Optimus freely displayed his emotions, but his field was calm and ordered.

For the most part. There were still times of fear and anxiety that Optimus could not hide.

As Ultra Magnus came striding into Soundwave's office, his neutral cast was belied by the concern and outrage rippling in his field.

Soundwave cycled a ventilation. “Assistance needed?” he asked. He did not want to be here wading through paperwork with an irritated Ultra Magnus.

He wanted to be in the medbay, at Optimus' side, bathing in the quiet calm of Optimus' field, and patiently waiting for each soft, guarded smile. He preferred to hold Optimus’ hand, stroke his thumb over Optimus’ palm, and listen carefully for each quiet hitch of ventilation.

Optimus might call himself broken, but every tell, every subconscious reaction, spoke of a mech yearning for intimacy. Soundwave was willing to wait for the time when Optimus’ conscious recognized that need.

“I have received a leave of absence request from Ratchet. Care to explain why?” The demand cut into Soundwave’s wandering thoughts, dragging his attention back to Ultra Magnus.
The second-in-command stood in front of Soundwave’s desk, and to anyone else, it might have come across as a loom.

Soundwave leaned back in his chair. “Why not direct query to Ratchet?”

“Because he isn't answering any comms at the moment. I contacted Wheeljack, and he informed me that Ratchet was in surgery, which is interesting because Ratchet is nowhere to be found in the medbay.” Ultra Magnus' optics narrowed. “If I am to be in command of the Autobots while Optimus is indisposed, I need to be kept in the loop, and I know if anyone is aware of what is occurring, it is you.”

Soundwave inclined his helm. That was almost a compliment. “Medical Officer Ratchet in Iacon,” he said.

“What?” Ultra Magnus cycled his optics. “Why?” He leaned back, only to shake his helm. “No. Start at the beginning.”

Soundwave cycled a ventilation. “Details unknown. Ratchet's assistance requested by Grimlock, as creation not Decepticon commander. First Aid temporarily promoted in absence of chief medical officer.”

“For what purpose?”

“Starscream.”

Ultra Magnus stared at him for a moment before drawing back and pinching his nasal ridge. His field bled exhaustion and disbelief. “I see. Do you have any idea how long Ratchet's leave of absence might take?” That he didn't appear to be fighting the request spoke volumes about Ultra Magnus' respect for Ratchet.

Or perhaps it was fear. There were few willing to cross the indomitable chief medic.

“Unknown at this time,” Soundwave answered just as a ping hit his internal systems. Buzzsaw was returning. “Though information to be obtained shortly.”

Ultra Magnus nodded. “You'll inform me when you know something?” He seemed only marginally comforted.

“Affirmative.”

The tension bled from Ultra Magnus' field. Reserve remained, but he did not seem so startled anymore. “I appreciate it, Soundwave.” He turned to leave, only to pause halfway. “And for what it's worth, I am glad that you have joined our team.”

“Compliment appreciated,” Soundwave said.

Ultra Magnus nodded and left, the door sliding shut behind him, but not before Buzzsaw swooped in at the last second. Soundwave sent the code for it to lock as Buzzsaw circled his helm before landing on the desk, shuffling back and forth atop Soundwave's work datapads.

“Information obtained?” Soundwave asked.
Buzzsaw dipped his helm up and down, wings ruffling. *Download preference?* he asked.

Soundwave popped open his dock. Buzzsaw shifted to cassette mode and slotted himself within, allowing Soundwave direct access to the data he'd obtained. It downloaded straight to his processor, letting him sift through every little detail.

The first image that truly stood out to him was the sight of Starscream in a private medical room. The amount of equipment connected to his frame was daunting. Some of it Soundwave couldn't recognize, it was so rarely used, but he could identify spark support and manual fluid circulation pumps.

There were so many lines and wires criss-crossing the Seeker's frame that one could barely see the paint beneath. He didn't look damaged, save for all the equipment. His faceplate was a little pale, and his optics were shuttered.

The first still had Ratchet and Knock Out to either side of him, Ratchet peering at a datapad while Knock Out's attention was on one of the machine's readouts.

Buzzsaw, unnoticed in the corner, found it easy to hack into the unsecured datapad, downloading Starscream's medical file. Soundwave glanced through it, the results unsettling.

Starscream was dying. It was a drawn out process, but nonetheless, he was slowly succumbing to some kind of debilitating virus. One no doubt he had been infected with, rather than innocently contracted. There was nothing innocent about this monstrosity.

Did Grimlock blame the Autobots? Doubtful. He would have known that such actions were something Optimus would not approve of. Was it beyond Jazz, however?

Soundwave pondered.

There was no reason for Jazz to play such games, not with a tentative peace and truce. Surely he would have at least come to Soundwave if he had suspicions that Starscream could not be trusted, even if he wouldn't go to his Prime.

No. This stank of Metalhawk, though how the Neutral leader had managed to do something so underhanded, Soundwave did not know. The Decepticons did not have a functional investigative team. They hadn't the mind of a law enforcer, or the dark tactics of a Special Operations team.

They were woefully ill-equipped to investigate this matter.

Soundwave contemplated offering his assistance. Starscream would have distrusted him, but would Grimlock believe differently? And what were the political ramifications of him offering to aid in their investigation? Would he have to do so quietly, perhaps by sending Laserbeak or Buzzsaw?

If only Ravage were here. She would have been perfect for a mission like this. Alas, her current mission was of equal importance. Perhaps not to Cybertron itself, but it was important to her which meant Soundwave had no wish to interrupt her.

The upload finished, and Soundwave popped his dock, allowing Buzzsaw his freedom. The avian cassette refused, however, and nestled firmly into his slot. To recharge it was.

Soundwave closed his dock again, and picked up a datapad, connecting to it. He uploaded a
summary of what Buzzsaw had learned. He would update Ultra Magnus, and inform Optimus of what had happened himself.

The attack on Starscream would have repercussions across the entirety of Cybertron, not just in Iacon. Plans would have to be made.

~

Waking to dew on his armor was a familiar irritation. Bumblebee flexed his transformation cog and revved his engine, trying to nudge Rumble awake, as the sound of birds singing filtered to his audios. It joined the noise of wind whispering through trees and other ambient sounds of Earth.

Life persisted, Bumblebee supposed. A scraggly forest rose in the wake of the burnt remains of what Megatron had torched.

“It's too early,” Rumble complained as he performed a full frame stretch, hands knocking against Bumblebee's back window and pedes tapping the door.

Bumblebee chuckled and bounced on his shocks. “We have work to do, you know.”

“Yeah, but so early?” Rumble flopped over onto his front, burying his face in Bumblebee's back-cushion. His knees drew up, aft waving into the air, and Bumblebee lamented that he was in vehicle-mode. An aft presented in such a way demanded a slap.

“I'm too comfortable to get up.”

“How about next time you transform into a car and I sleep in you then?” Bumblebee teased. He popped his doors and bounced on his shocks again. “Come on. I wanna transform. Out, out.”

Rumble's engine purred. He wriggled his hips, his aft waving enticingly again. “But I like being inside ya.”

Bumblebee outright laughed. “You're ridiculous. Now get out and maybe I'll let you grope me a little.”

Rumble snorted a ventilation and pushed himself upright, sliding out of Bumblebee's backseat with a little hop. “You're no fun.”

“I can be a lot of fun,” Bumblebee retorted as he shifted to root-mode with a sigh of satisfaction. He stretched out, twisting his torso left and right to ease the kinks. He'd gotten too used to lingering in root mode that alt-mode now felt cramped.

“Oh yeah?” Rumble planted his hands on his hips and tilted his helm. “Prove it.”


“Should I not have?” Rumble moved closer, their fields coming into sizzling contact just as he reached out, his hands finding Bee's hips. “It's just you and me and the birds here. The birds and
the Bee.” He snickered.

Bumblebee rolled his optics. “Oh, wow. That's the first time I've heard that joke.” He slid his arms over Rumble's shoulders, letting the cassette pull him closer, into range for a kiss.

Which, of course, Rumble took full advantage. He pressed their mouths together in a quick kiss, and a flick of his glossa over Bumblebee's lips. His engine purred, the vibrations humming against Bumblebee’s frame.

“Now that's what I call a good morning,” Rumble murmured as his fingers flexed on Bumblebee's hips. His field stroked along the edges of Bumblebee’s like a physical caress. “Want to make it even better?”

Bumblebee pressed his forehelm to Rumble's. “In the middle of a forest?”

“Ain't no one around but the trees. Why not?” Rumble pressed a kiss to the corner of Bumblebee’s mouth and nibbled along the curve of his jaw. “'Sides, I seem to remember how adventurous you were in the past.”

Bumblebee worked his intake. “Yeah, well, we were pretty stupid in the past.” He shivered as Rumble found his audial and ex-vented hotly into it. “Though you're kind of convincing me to be stupid now.”

“Mmm. My dastardly plan all along.” Rumble pulled them together, their hips coming into contact, his field coaxing along the edges of Bumblebee's own. “We have the time, don't we?”

“Sure.” Bumblebee grinned in an attempt to stave off the rising arousal. “But you're the one who gets to have grass in his gears.”

“Deal.” Rumble stole his lips for another kiss, making a happy noise in his intake. His hands wandered from Bee's hips to his aft, giving it a pat.

A thrill ran through Bee's spark. They'd been dancing around intimacy for awhile. Sure there was the occasional grope and kiss and snuggle. But they never got as far as open panels.

To be honest, they probably wouldn’t now. Not in the middle of a forest with the ground soft from rain beneath the grass. But to push the limits of third base?

Bee was all for it.

“Now that's not something you see every day.”

It was an embarrassingly long second before Bumblebee realized the voice that had spoken had not come from Rumble, and even longer for him to recognize they should probably be concerned. Fortunately, Rumble was just as slow on the uptake.

They parted in a flash, whirling toward the intruder, only to find Ravage sitting on her haunches, examining her right forepaw. “Couldn't even wait for a roof over your heads, could you?” she asked, optics glinting with mischief.

“Pah, you're one to talk,” Rumble retorted, grabbing a mantle of outrage and draping it around him. “What kind of mudholes have you and Hound been rolling in?”
“You say that as if it's no fun, brother.” Ravage's tail flicked dismissively, the curve of her mouth around her fangs wicked. “Don't insult it until you've tried it.”

“Ew. I did not want to know about your 'face life,” Rumble grumped, folding his arms over his chestplate.

Ravage inclined her helm. “And I did not want to witness yours.” Her gaze shifted to Bumblebee. “Good morning, Autobot. Are you sure you have no better options than my sibling here?”

“I'm sure I do.” Bumblebee draped an arm around Rumble's waist, dragging him in close as Rumble squawked in surprise. “But I like him anyway.” He pressed a kiss to Rumble's cheek, delighted to find his lover's face had heated.

So there were some things that embarrassed him. Good to know.

“Now, now, Ravage. Don't tease the young'uns.” The bushes rustled, or more like broke in several places when they were pushed aside, as Trailbreaker stepped into view, Hound at his side. “They can't help themselves.”

Trailbreaker grinned. Hound came to a rest beside Ravage, one hand gently tracing the curve of Ravage's ear. Bumblebee felt as though he needed to look away, such an intimate gesture it was.

Rumble, however, scowled. He also seemed to drop maturity points whenever he got around his siblings. “Don't we have work to do?” he huffed, one foot tapping against the grass. “Or ya just gonna stand here and tease us some more?”

Bumblebee rested a hand on Rumble's shoulder, projecting ease into his field. “Simmer down, Rum,” he murmured into his partner's audial. “I'm just glad that Hound's smiling.”

Some of the tension eased out of Rumble's frame. “Yeah, okay,” he muttered. “But I don't hafta be polite to Rav if I don't want to. The boss isn't here.”

Bumblebee chuckled. “If you insist.” He shifted his gaze to the other three. “So I hear that you found some humans.”

“Actually.” Hound straightened, standing firmly between his two companions, “Trailbreaker did, and Ravage helped track them down. We've attempted to make contact, but they're not responding to our hails.”

“Maybe we're just not using the right words.” Bumblebee clapped his hands together and rubbed his palms. He had to admit; he was a little excited.

He tried not to hope that Spike and Chip and the others had survived because he didn't want to be disappointed, but just the idea some humans had made it sent joy streaking through his spark. If they truly wanted to remain isolated then so be it. But Bumblebee had to try.

“Let's get to work!” he said brightly.

Ravage twitched her tail. “Are you always this cheerful?”

“Yes,” Trailbreaker and Hound answered in concert.
“Only when I need to be.” Bumblebee winked at the feline cassette and grabbed Rumble's hand, giving it a squeeze. “So let's go.”

~

Ratchet had trained First Aid a little too well.

“I'm sorry, sir, but no,” the younger medic said as he backed toward the door, clutching a datapad to his chestplate. “Ratchet's instructions for you were very clear.”

Behind Optimus, Laserbeak chuckled quietly.

“First Aid, I have been on this berth for the better part of a week,” Optimus said, hoping he didn't come across as a petulant toddler. “My energy levels are holding steady. I am no longer in pain. I am not asking to participate in a marathon. I only wish to take a walk.”

“And you can direct that question to your primary physician when he returns,” First Aid replied, with more firmness than he used to have. “That is not a decision I am authorized to make.”

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “You are trained to evaluate, correct?”

“Yes, sir. Of course.”

“Then in your professional opinion, can I safely take a short walk around the medical complex?”

First Aid's visor dimmed. He took another step toward the door. “That question is a trap, sir, and as much as I would love to answer it, I can't.” He hugged his datapad a little tighter. “I'm sorry, Prime, but when it comes down to it, Ratchet's scarier than you are.”

With that, First Aid spun on a heelstrut and vanished out the door, leaving a defeated Optimus to his increasingly uncomfortable and boring berth. His shoulders slumped, and he rubbed a hand down his faceplate. He didn't want to whine, but he was coming close to such a reaction.

“It's not the lack of recharge that's going to offline me, but the sheer boredom,” he muttered behind the safety of his hand.

Laserbeak chirped a laugh. *Then it's a good thing Soundwave is on his way here.*

“He is the only bright spot to be found here in my captivity,” Optimus replied, but he allowed himself a small smile.

He understood Ratchet's caution. Honestly, he did. He'd collapsed in the middle of the courtyard a week ago. He'd been so undernourished and under-energized that his primary internal security system had taken matters unto itself. He had stressed his spark, something already suffering from the strain his captivity under Megatron had given him.

So yes. Ratchet's concern was understandable. He only wished it didn't feel halfway like a punishment.
Optimus settled back in his berth, smile brightening when Laserbeak nudged her helm against his. Her company made this tolerable as well. For her sake, Optimus didn't push his recovery speed.

Soundwave appeared in the doorway just as Optimus considered pulling out one of the datapads he had yet to read.

“First Aid distressed,” he said by way of greeting as he came into the room. He made to sit on the stool, but Optimus reached for him instead.

He’d made this decision already. He didn't want to deny himself the comfort of another, or the intimacy. It might never turn sexual, but he couldn't deny he felt better when Soundwave was near. The mingling of their fields, the simple heat of another being, the absolute presence – all of this Optimus craved.

Soundwave paused, confused, and then offered a hand. Optimus took hold of his fingers and with a tug, guided Soundwave to sit on the berth beside him. Their fields knitted upon contact, and Optimus could read the indecision buried deep within Soundwave's field. He was uneasy about something, but given the way he leaned in to Optimus, it had to have been something more than their relationship.

“My repeated requests to be free of my confinement have gone unheeded,” Optimus said. “Aid is no longer the weak link, I'm afraid.”

Soundwave rumbled a laugh. He tangled their fingers together, the uncomplicated intimacy speaking a wealth of words.

“Recovery is important,” he said.

“Yes, I know.” Optimus sighed and lowered his hand, giving Soundwave his full attention. “Did you discover anything?”

“Work is not resting,” Soundwave informed him with a squeeze of Optimus' hand.

“I am still Prime, and I must admit, I am worried. All I know is what Wheeljack told me, that Ratchet was going to remain in Iacon for the foreseeable future.” Optimus’ spark fluttered within his chassis.

He had to admit a tad bit of anxiety had kept him awake longer than was healthy. Enough that his frame fought the sedatives which were still part of his daily healing routine. Ratchet's regime took no chances.

It was Soundwave's turn to cycle a ventilation. “Starscream infected with a virus,” he said, and his tone was concerned. “Suspected assassination attempt.”

Optimus’ optics widened. “What?” He pushed back against the headboard, out of his comfortable slump. “Who did it?”

“Currently under investigation.” Soundwave cycled a ventilation, something in the pinch at the corner of his mouth suggesting fatigue. “No suspects yet.”

“Is anyone pointing toward us?” Optimus twisted to the right and groped under the berth, He’d
secretly magnetized a datapad to the underside, and now seemed a good time to bring it out.

Ratchet didn't need to know he was doing work during his recovery. It wasn't anything stress-inducing, just paperwork.

“Not yet.”

Optimus powered on the datapad, immediately pulling up his official communication account. “The Decepticons do not have anyone capable of investigations. They will need assistance.”

Soundwave shifted his weight, jostling the berth. “Intend for me to offer aid?”

Optimus cycled his optics and looked up from the datapad. “Is that a problem?”

“Politically inadvisable.” Soundwave rested a hand on Optimus’ knee, the warm weight of it soothing. “Medical aid already given. Offer of investigative assistance possibly perceived as suspicious.”

Optimus rubbed at his forehead. “I am sick of politics,” he said, his processor starting to ache. “I am tired of these games, of the maneuvers in the shadows. There are times, Soundwave, that I miss the war. It, at least, was simpler.”

He hadn't liked the political machinations when he first became Prime, and he certainly didn't like them now. He wanted peace, for himself, for his Autobots. He wanted his greatest concern to be whether or not to raise taxes or… or the best mix for paving the roads. He didn't want to continue worrying about assassins and appearances.

The berth shook as Soundwave shifted closer, his hip pressing to Optimus’. His fingers gently tugged Optimus' hand away from his forehelm, bringing them instead to Soundwave’s lips. He pressed a kiss to the tips of them, the tiny action sending a frisson of heat down Optimus’ spinal strut.

“Peace is a process,” Soundwave said, his thumb rubbing over Optimus' palm as his field wrapped around Optimus, as soothing as an embrace. “Every step is one closer to the end goal. We need only handle Metalhawk until then.”

Optimus' managed a small smile. “Since when did we switch places? I thought I was meant to be optimistic and you were meant to remind me of reality?”

Soundwave chuckled. The sound of it was enough to warm Optimus’ spark. He couldn't have imagined that one day he'd be sitting near enough to Soundwave to feel the thrum of his spark, or that he'd see the taciturn communications officer laugh of all things.

But here they were.

“Things change. People change.” Soundwave kissed Optimus' knuckles again, a delicate brush of his lips over each one. “Do not offer aid, but reassurance. Inform Grimlock of intent to cooperate. Send best wishes for speedy recovery.”

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “It sounds artificial.” Then again, he supposed that was the price one paid for playing politics. “If I can get off this berth, perhaps I can convince him for a private meeting, something without any eavesdroppers.”
“Agreed.” Soundwave squeezed his hand and lowered it. “Rest first.” His free hand patted his chestplate and the dock behind it. “Buzzsaw will investigate further tomorrow. Ratchet, too, will bring news.”

“Rest, huh?” Optimus gave Soundwave a pointed look, noting that his field was frazzled around the edges, his vents sounded as though they were sputtering, and his armor had a dull sheen. “And when was the last time you had a full night of recharge?”

“Irrelevant.”

Optimus squeezed Soundwave's fingers, tightening his grip before Soundwave could draw away, as Soundwave's posture gave every indication he intended to do so.

“I know that answer,” Optimus replied firmly. “It's the one I often gave Ratchet during the war, and was common right before I found myself attached to this berth for the foreseeable future.”

*Soundwave has not been recharging properly,* Laserbeak offered.

Optimus raised his orbital ridges. “And Laserbeak informs me you're not recharging.”

Soundwave's gaze shifted to the avian cassette, something accusing behind his expression. She shuffled nearer to Optimus. If she felt any guilt for ratting out her master, it didn't show.

“Energy levels adequate,” Soundwave said, a hint of testiness in his tone. “Capable of functioning on worse.”

“I am not talking about being functional, Soundwave,” Optimus said quietly. He projected worry into his field. “You needn't push yourself anymore. We have supplies, we have others who can handle the load.” He gave a small, self-deprecating laugh. “Besides, the Autobots can't have both of us collapsing. What a sorry state we'd be in if so, right?”

Soundwave frowned, cycling a huffed ventilation.

*He worries,* Laserbeak said as she ruffled her feathers. *About us, but about you right now. He works so he doesn't worry. But still, not proper recharge.*

Ah.

“Thank you, Laserbeak,” Optimus said aloud and redirected his attention back to Soundwave.

He had a thought, perhaps a ridiculous one, but it couldn't hurt to try. For what was a little platonic guarding between friends? Especially those who had made the tentative overtures toward a romantic partnership?

“If you would prefer,” Optimus began, choosing his words carefully. “I would not be opposed to you recharging here.”

Soundwave straightened, his helm tilted. “Medberths should be open for potential patients.”

“Yes, that is true,” Optimus admitted, and to his horror, he felt his faceplate heat. “But I am a large mech and as such, have been given a large medberth. One might even say one that is too large. For
just one mech.”

Laserbeak sent laughter across the private comm. The emoticons accompanying the laugh were equally amused.

Soundwave cycled his visor. His field rippled with surprise. “You would be comfortable with this?”

“It is only sharing a berth.” Optimus tucked the datapad back under the berth – he would compose an official response to Grimlock in the morning. “Surely you’ve done something similar during the course of the war?”

Judging by the expression on Soundwave's face and in his field, he had not. Clearly, the idea of sharing what comfortable space you had managed to scrape together in the midst of battle, was unfamiliar to Soundwave.

Optimus, meanwhile, could recall dozens of occasions where he'd recharged either back to back with Ironhide, or curled in a corner with Jazz on top of him, or snuggled between Wheeljack and Ratchet, or with his arms wrapped around Prowl – the only way sometimes to convince the hard-working tactician to power down for a few hours.

Bittersweet memories those. Optimus' spark ached at them. How he'd had to coax Prowl away from his paperwork, the tactician so certain the key to winning the war was in some minute detail of a scout's report. He would resist it until the last moment, only to surrender to recharge and sleep as though offline, safe in Optimus' arms.

Ironhide was usually the one to convince Optimus to recharge, planting his aft on the desk in front of Optimus and refusing to move until Optimus agreed to find a berth. Ironhide would then follow him until he actually did so, often urging cube after cube of energon at Optimus until he finally took one.

Wheeljack had to work just as hard to coax Ratchet into berth, and sometimes, Ratchet felt the need to make another suffer. If he had to recharge, then so did Optimus. With Wheeljack at his heelstruts, he would barge into Optimus' office and demand that he get some rest. They offered room on their berth, and back then, Optimus was weak to the offer of warmth and comfort.

Jazz’s methods had always been simpler. If an outright seduction did not work, he had a hurt puppy expression that rivaled Bluestreak’s for potency.

Optimus worked his intake, his spark spinning into a tiny ball. “Yes, Soundwave, I would be comfortable,” he said instead. “And if I become otherwise, I will let you know. For now, however, I would be more comfortable knowing you are getting the rest you need.”

Soundwave stared at him for a long moment, one that stretched into incredulity before he slowly nodded. “I would like to try,” he said at last. “Thank you for the invitation.”

“We're partners,” Optimus said, already shifting over on the berth. He sent a remote signal for the lights to dim – Ratchet would have a conniption if he knew First Aid had given him access to his room controls. “Thanks are not needed.”

Soundwave's field wavered before firming. “I am… unfamiliar with the rules.” He rose to his pedes and stared at the berth as though working out the geometrics of fitting his frame in beside
“Rules?” Optimus blinked. “Soundwave, there are no rules when it comes to something like this.” He paused, a thought occurring to him. “Have you ever had a lover?” As old as Soundwave was, as long as the war had been, it hadn't occurred to Optimus to ask.

Soundwave froze, one knee on the berth. “Clarify,” he said, his voice pained.

“I don't mean interfacing. I mean, a lover. A partner. A long-term relationship.” Optimus’ spark throbbed, fearing he already knew the answer.

The sound of Soundwave's ventilations were oddly loud in the quiet of the room. “Negative,” he answered finally. His shoulders slumped. “Circumstances did not allow for… attachments.”

Well, that explained a lot actually. Optimus had been admiring Soundwave's caution, the way he consistently sought permission for a great many things. He assumed it was because Soundwave knew to be cautious given Optimus’ treatment at Megatron's hand. While he was certain that was also true, he wondered now if it was also uncertainty. If Soundwave's caution was also due to the fact he didn't know what he was supposed to do.

Optimus was at a loss for words. He worked his intake and finally patted the berth beside him. “There's room for you here.”

“Optimus has had a lover before?”

“Not as Optimus, no.” Optimus offered him a sad smile. “Orion Pax had a lover. Once upon a time.”

That mech was long gone, another one of the casualties of Optimus Prime. There were many things left behind when he was given the Matrix – Orion Pax and whatever life he'd led before then was the first to be sacrificed.

Optimus held out a hand, hoping to encourage Soundwave to take it and join him on the berth. “So, in a way, I am going about this as blindly as you. I do know, however, there aren't any rules. Just communication and trust.”

“Trust,” Soundwave echoed and seemed to brace himself before he accepted Optimus' hand. “Something else unfamiliar.”

“Maybe we can change that then.” Optimus tugged on Soundwave's hand and finally, the former Decepticon climbed onto the berth.

Each motion was made gingerly, carefully. He stretched out next to Optimus, as stiff as a pole, until Optimus finally turned and pressed his back to Soundwave's front. He felt the rumble of the other mech's engine and the soft thrum of his spark. Soundwave's field had become comfortably familiar to him.

Optimus ex-vented softly. “Make yourself comfortable,” he said.

The berth shifted as Soundwave did until finally he carefully draped an arm over Optimus' side, his hand resting on Optimus' upper arm. Optimus lifted his helm, allowing Soundwave to slide an arm under it, giving him somewhere to rest his helm.
The lights dimmed further.

“Optimus comfortable?”

With the warmth of Soundwave's frame behind him, Optimus couldn't imagine being otherwise. It was easy to shutter his optics, to focus on Soundwave's ventilations, and the now familiar sense of Laserbeak in the room.

“I am.” He wriggled further back, until he was firmly pressed to Soundwave, to every available point of contact between them. “Thank you for indulging my request.”

Soundwave's thumb gently stroked his arm plating. “Seems more like I should be thanking you.”

Optimus chuckled. “Thank me by getting an appropriate amount of recharge.”

Soundwave made a noncommittal sound of agreement. The berth rattled for a second before Optimus felt the lightest of pressures to the crown of his helm.

“Recharge well,” Soundwave murmured.

Optimus slid his left hand up, tangling his fingers with Soundwave's. “You as well.”

Perhaps tonight, he wouldn't have any memory purges.

It was worth a try.

~

Jazz never thought he'd see the day when he'd be nodding off at his desk. Pit, he never thought he'd see the day where he spent the majority of it behind a desk. He was a spy! A saboteur! He was meant to be out causing terror in the sparks of all Decepticons.

He really needed to get Mirage out of that habsuite and into an office. All of these reports and numbers would be a good distraction and would get Jazz out of this Primus-bedamned chair.

He swore it was designed to be a torture device. Any longer and his aft would be glued to it.

Ha. Wouldn't Ultra Magnus like that? He could force Jazz to fill out paperwork all day. He'd be positively delighted to know Jazz had little choice but to get it finished on time.

Jazz's jaw cracked in a yawn, his Earth-disguise coding still active. He kinda liked it, after so many years having it installed. And now, it was kind of a way to honor the humans Megatron had killed.

So he let himself yawn. His optics dimmed behind his visor. His engine started that low-key knocking it did when he worked himself to exhaustion.

He didn't need Ratchet to start looking at him with narrowed optics. Ratchet already had one member of high command confined to berth. He was itching to grab another and tie them down.

Blind medic couldn't see he needed to do the same to himself.
They all had their ways of coping.

Jazz yawned again and shoved himself away from the desk. That was it. The rest could wait for tomorrow. He was going to go right down to Bluestreak's hab and drag Mirage out if he had to. Sitting there cooped up in the dim and silence wasn't going to help. He could grieve just as well in front of a datapad as he could staring at a wall.

Besides, Jazz knew very well that Mirage would continue to sit there until someone propelled him into forward motion.

Tracks had always been so very good at that.

Jazz cycled a sigh and rubbed his forehelm. No. He didn't need to get morose tonight either. There was too much going on. With Metalhawk acting skeevy, and the Combi-ticons intake deep in Neutral territory, and Starscream dying and all the scientists scrambling to save him – when Jazz knew very well Metalhawk was to blame, he just needed some Prime-damned proof!

Frustration ate at him.

No. He needed to refuel and recharge. He'd feel better tomorrow. He'd be able to think straight without numbers and data running endlessly through his processor. Maybe he'd start the day with a nice long drive.

Jazz powered down his console and left his office, locking it behind him. It still felt odd to have an office. He'd had one on the Ark, but he'd never used it, and ended up turning it over to Silverbolt and Hotspot to share. The two of them got on like Thelma and Louise.

No. Don't think about them either. He had enough grief in his spark right now. He had to get through this crisis with Metalhawk and the Decepticons first.

He couldn't think about all the Autobots Megatron had massacred or he'd just get angry all over again. And right now, Jazz couldn't do a damn thing about that anger. He filed it away, buried it deep.

Autobot Command was still and quiet. That was a novelty, too. During war-time, there was always something happening no matter what time of the day or night it was. Now, they powered down most of the facility during the quote-unquote third shift, and there was only a skeleton crew on duty.

By that, Jazz meant a single member of Optimus' command – it was Springer tonight, he believed – and two supporting members of Autobot infantry. Springer had a couple Wreckers with him, if Jazz remembered correctly. Some bright young thing named Hot Rod and a fast-talking racer.

Cute kids. Honestly.

Jazz strode out of the command center. Unlike Optimus and Ultra Magnus, he preferred not to berth in their citadel. He'd found a relatively stable single-person apartment a short walk from the command center and made it his home. It was small, but it was hard to find and arguably more secure than the command quarters.

It gave him the privacy he sometimes needed. Tonight, Jazz figured, was a night for privacy. He
had the option of snuggling with Mirage and Blue, but he didn't want comfort tonight. He wanted to collapse on a berth and let himself snore without bothering his berthmates.

It was dark. Sometime yesterday, Cybertron had passed out of the most distant reach of the sun in this galaxy. Now they hurtled somewhere, Primus only knew. Getting Cybertron into a stable orbit was on the science staff's ever growing to do list because the constant recalibration of the space bridge was tiresome.

For now, the courtyard and surrounding areas were lit with street lamps. They cast a pale glow in the gloom, barely aided by starlight. Times like these, Jazz missed Luna 1 and 2. He even missed Earth's Moon. The stars in this system were unfamiliar. It made Cybertron feel a lot less like home.

Jazz sighed and scrubbed a hand down his face. My but he was maudlin tonight. Was it because he passed through the shadow of the memorial obelisk? Maybe so.

His backstrut tingled.

Jazz froze as instinct reared its ugly head. He hadn't survived the war without listening to it. He buried his face in his hand as though buried in the burdens of his existence, and pumped his sensors to max. He heard nothing. He couldn't detect any movement. But his hackles were raised.

Someone was watching him. Someone was out there.

Jazz lifted his helm a little, sliding his hand from his visor to cover his mouth. He placed his hand on his hip, and turned forty-five degrees as though he intended to start pacing. He had the obelisk in his peripheral vision. He let his shoulders slump.

He looked as though he were grieving, Ruminating perhaps on all the sparks lost. His visor was dim, but working overtime, scanning the area.

No signs of heat. No signs of movement. No biolights in the dark. Whoever was out there was good. Trained. Trained like Mirage or Bumblebee or Barricade, but the last was firmly buried in Decepticon prison, the second was on Earth, and the first would not be stalking Jazz.

His backplate itched. There was no skylight, but he happened to be standing directly under a street light, with the echoes of the obelisk display on his plating. He was a very visible, very obvious target. If he bolted, whoever was out there would know Jazz had made him. He might lose his opportunity to catch the stalker.

He couldn't stand here forever.

Jazz shifted his weight. The obelisk would provide some cover. He shifted back toward it like someone who felt the need to mourn.

He never heard the shot, only felt the impact as it slammed into his chestplate and knocked him several meters back. He hit the ground, skidding, leaving paint streaks in his wake, as pain flooded his chassis. Error reports streaked across his HUD, the smell of charred metal and energon nauseating.

Wha…?

He couldn't move. He coughed energon from his vents. His vision went static. Jazz's right hand
flopped weakly, landing on his chestplate, where he felt the ragged edge of a powerful blow. Through and through. Right next to his spark.

Frag. Frag it all.

Peace had made him soft, hadn't it?

Gray crept in around the edges of his vision. Numbness set in. It was a good shot, he thought with a energon-soaked chuckle. Off by a few micrometers, but that wouldn't matter.

Ratchet was in Iacon. No one knew Jazz was out here. It didn't matter that the assassin had missed his spark chamber.

He was going to bleed out long before someone found him.

More critical errors bled across his HUD. Jazz sent out a distress signal, pinging his team, Ultra Magnus, Springer, anyone who would respond. He wondered if his attacker had a signal dampener with him and if so, Jazz had no hope of surviving this.

His spark fluttered with anxiety. His visual feed fritzed from static to black. His awareness drew inward. He counted the pulses of his spark.

Darkness seeped in.

And then there was nothing.
First Aid was in the middle of scrubbing down one of the berths in the Emergency Ward when chaos tumbled into the medbay. He startled so hard that he dropped his spray bottle and meshcloth both, his spark pounding.

“First Aid!”

“Medic!”

Two distinct voices, one more panicked than the other, though perhaps panic was a strong word. First Aid circled around the berth, hurrying into the reception area.

He skidded to a halt, vents gasping, his visor wide with shock. Smokescreen and Mirage had Jazz braced between them, a haphazard dressing over a very large wound in Jazz's chest, dangerously close to his spark chamber. Jazz's faceplate was pale. Energon dribbled from his lips. He was limp.

Was he even alive?

“What happened?” First Aid demanded as he rushed forward, scans rapid-fire pinging across Jazz's frame and returning bad news after bad news.

“I do not know,” Mirage said, his voice cold and hard, the voice of a spy. “I received an emergency data burst from him, and when I arrived, I found him like this. The data burst did not indicate the cause.”

First Aid worked his intake, immediately wishing Ratchet were here, and sent a quick ping to Wheeljack. He was going to need all the hands he could get.

“He's bleeding out,” First Aid said, hoping he didn't sound as scared as he felt. “We have to get him into surgery stat.” He spun on a heelstrut and jogged to the nearest emergency berth, mentally compiling a list of all of the equipment he would need. He sounded more calm than he felt.

The trick, Ratchet always said, was to never let anyone know how rattled you truly were. Pretend long enough, and it'll eventually seep in.

“It nicked his spark chamber, near as I can tell,” Smokescreen said, his vocalizer etched with static as they carried Jazz between them. “Not through and through.”

Which meant the pressure echoes would have bounced around in Jazz's chassis, producing further damage. First Aid upped the danger level past severe into critical. He weighed pinging Ratchet for all of two point three seconds before he buzzed his mentor's comm.
Starscream could wait. He had machines keeping him alive. First Aid needed help to stabilize Jazz. This wasn't a surgery he could do by himself.

By the time they managed Jazz onto the emergency berth, Wheeljack arrived, his field a swirl of fatigue and agitation. He must have been in recharge. His optics flared with alarm the moment he saw Jazz, however, and his indicators went dark.

“What happened?” he demanded.

“I don't know,” First Aid replied, distracted, as he started peeling back the mesh Mirage had used as a static bandage. Energon no longer seeped steadily from the wound, suggesting that Jazz had nothing left within him but reserves. “Will you set up the energon drip for me?”

Wheeljack nodded and rushed to do so. Smokescreen hovered near the doorway; Mirage lingered within reach.

“Do you need help?” the noble offered, though his faceplate had bleached of color and his field was a distorted mess.

First Aid hated that he didn't know if it was genuine or calculated. Sometimes, one could never tell with Spec Ops if they were running a mission, or an injury was actually unintentional.

“I've contacted Ratchet,” First Aid began and Wheeljack echoed him. “That should be all the help we need. But thank you for the offer.”

He knew he sounded distant, but all of his focus had turned to keeping Jazz alive. This was, at least, different than the kind of damage Shockwave made him repair. This was battle wounds, war wounds, and as horrible as it was, comfortably familiar.

He could do this.

He would just prefer if Ratchet were here, too.

“Contact whoever's on duty in the command center,” Wheeljack said, his vocals coming through from a distance as First Aid peeled the last of the emergency static bandage away and the wound came into view. “Let them know what happened.”

“Good idea.” Smokescreen patted Mirage on the shoulder. “Stay and keep an optic on the boss. I know you want to.”

Mirage's armor ruffled under Smokescreen's hand. “You know what I want you to know,” he said, a touch frostily.

Smokescreen, however, took it in stride. He smiled at Mirage and excused himself from the room, leaving Mirage to redirect that steely glare in First Aid's direction. He tried not to let it bother him. If he could operate on Sideswipe with Sunstreaker glaring him down, he could certainly work on Jazz with Mirage as a witness.

“He's gonna make it, Aid,” Wheeljack said as he flipped the switch, setting up the energon drip. “I know ya can do it.”

First Aid's field reached out with affection. “Thanks for the vote of confidence. But let me know
when Ratchet is coming all the same.”

“Will do.”

Wheeljack's confidence was comforting, but First Aid couldn't indulge in it. Not just yet. Jazz's spark flickered, his fuel levels were inconsistent, and this injury had nicked several important components within his frame. This was no quick fix.

First Aid needed all the concentration he could manage.


Soundwave stirred from recharge sluggishly, for the first time unwilling to respond to the urgent pings cutting through his silent settings to force him online. He was comfortable for once. He was deep in recharge. He was curled with Optimus on the medberth, and he didn’t want to move.

The intensity of the pings worsened. They dragged him up out of recharge, forced him awake. He onlined his visor, his face inches away from Optimus'. Affection pulsed through his spark and his engine purred.

Why did he have to get up?

--Soundwave.--

That was Ultra Magnus, not the sort to engage in hyperbole or disturb Soundwave without reason.

--Apologies for delay. I was in recharge,-- Soundwave sent in reply. He was reluctant to wake Optimus, who looked to be peacefully resting for once. --Assistance needed?--

--You could say that.-- Ultra Magnus sounded grim, as though he were on the very edge of his control. --Someone attempted to assassinate Jazz.--

Soundwave was instantly alert. He bolted upright, in that moment forgetting he held Optimus, and startling the Prime from recharge as well.

“Explain,” Soundwave said, accidentally aloud. He looked down at Optimus, who was cycling his optics blearily. He'd been deep in recharge.

“What's going on?” Optimus asked.

Soundwave shook his helm as Ultra Magnus answered, --He is in the medbay. Ratchet is on his way back as we speak. Please inform Optimus.--

“Soundwave?”

--Understood.--

Soundwave ended the call and sat up fully, regretting that now Optimus looked strained, where he had once been restful. Was there no peace for the Prime?
“Jazz attacked,” Soundwave answered, and took Optimus' hand, squeezing it when the Prime stiffened. “Perpetrator assumed to be unknown. I will investigate immediately.”

Optimus returned the squeeze and then drew his fingers free, scooting toward the edge of the berth. “How badly?”

“Ratchet recalled.”

Optimus winced. “Bad,” he murmured and shoved himself off the berth, though he had to quickly catch the headboard as he swayed. “That is it. I cannot remain on this berth any longer.”

“Rest needed,” Soundwave said, though he was loath to tell Optimus what to do.

“I have rested enough,” Optimus replied, only to wince and cycle a ventilation. “I apologize. My irritation is not directed at you.” He offered a small smile. “I will make sure to rest adequately in the future and maintain my energon intake, but for now, I cannot be confined to the berth.”

Soundwave inclined his helm. “Understood.” He rose off the berth and circled around it. “Assistance offered.”

“To investigate what happened to Jazz?”

“Affirmative.”

Some of the tension eased out of Optimus' posture, but not enough to make a difference. “Thank you, Soundwave. We're so understaffed right now I did not know who I could give the task.”

Soundwave approached the Prime, wanting to offer an embrace but not knowing if it would be accepted or not. He settled for resting a hand on Optimus’ shoulder, a chaste, comforting touch he'd witnessed Optimus performing before. He touched his chestplate with his other hand, where the Decepticon brand used to be, and where an Auto-brand gleamed proudly.

“Assistance gladly offered,” he said, Optimus' armor warm beneath his fingertips.

Optimus' field rose up, gently brushing Soundwave's own. “And I am grateful.” He rested a hand over Soundwave's. “For that and for your company earlier. I had forgotten the simple comfort of sharing a berth with another, even if only for recharge.” He paused, a touch of heat entering his faceplate. “And perhaps further come the future.”

Soundwave's spark fluttered.

Optimus, however, coughed a ventilation and slipped from Soundwave's hand. “However, right now there is a crisis at hand and such is the perils of leadership that I must handle it.”

“Responsibility beckons,” Soundwave agreed, tucking his hand back at his side. He glanced at Laserbeak, whose optics shone with delight as she glanced between the two of them. “Laserbeak to accompany you.”

She squeaked a sound of joy and took to the air, circling Optimus twice before finding a perch on his shoulder.
“Surely you wouldn't prefer Soundwave's company?” Optimus asked as he turned his helm to address her directly.

It was one of many reasons she adored him.

Laserbeak chirped and ruffled her feather plating, bumping him with her helm. Soundwave could only imagine that she'd sent him a negative across the comm.

Optimus chuckled. “Very well. Then I welcome the company.” He paused, giving Soundwave a sidelong look. “And, I suspect, the monitoring of my health that comes with it.”

Laserbeak had perfected the art of looking innocent. Soundwave, thankfully, had mask and visor to hide behind.

“Concern not unexpected,” Soundwave said.

Optimus chuckled. “Yes, I know. At least this is much more subtle.” He lifted his shoulder where Laserbeak rested, prompting her to shift her weight, and headed toward the door, only to pause and look back at Soundwave. “Join me tonight?”

Soundwave's spark did that lurching motion again. His visor brightened. “Yes,” he replied, all he could manage.

Optimus' lips curved in a smile and then he was gone, off to tend to important matters, though his gait was slow and measured.

Soundwave supposed he ought to be doing the same. He wanted to be able to give Optimus answers tonight. He wanted to help.

He wanted a lot of things.

And it seemed some of them were finally within reach.

~

The pinging had been just an oscillation short of relentless. It did not help that the buzzing noise came from two different mechs, trying to capture his attention at the same time. Ratchet tried to ignore them, to focus on his conversation with Grimlock, trying to reassure the eldest Dinobot that his partner, his Intended, would live.

It was odd enough that First Aid had contacted him. Odder still that Wheeljack had now joined the fray, and Ratchet could ignore them no longer.

He'd selected the messages – for messages they were, not active lines – and cringed as the data poured through. It took him a moment to pick through the words before his lines went cold.

Jazz.

All else suddenly became secondary.
Ratchet didn't run out of the medbay, but it was a near thing. He sent a quick message to the Decepticon medical staff, apologizing for his hasty departure but reassuring them that their antivirus would succeed.

Starscream would live. Ratchet was sure of it.

But right now, his faction, his Prime, his mate, and his protege were calling him and Ratchet had to respond. Jazz being injured was odd enough that Ratchet couldn't ignore it. This smacked of something political. It reeked of it.

There would be no more death. Not if Ratchet had anything to say about it.

He had the decency to wait until he was out of the Decepticon med center before he transformed. He sped down the streets, avoiding pedestrians with ease he'd never lost over the war, and was grateful that Grimlock had commed ahead. The gate was open so Ratchet never lost momentum as he peeled out of Iacon and set a course for Polyhex.

He pinged Wheeljack a warning to let him know he was coming and was actually surprised when his mate picked up the comm.

“Ya on your way?”

“Of course,” Ratchet said, unable to hide the growl in his voice. “What has that fool done to himself this time?” By which he meant, what was the official story.

“He's gettin' sloppy,” Wheeljack replied, sounding tired and strained. “Either that, or there's something else going. Single blaster shot to the chassis. Nicked his chamber. Aid's got him on the machines now but we're waiting on you to start surgery.”

“Aid's hands should be steady enough.”

“He wants to wait for you.”

Ratchet cycled a ventilation and pushed pedal to the metal, his engine growling at him as he shot faster across the bumpy road. Thank Primus he'd been in the midst of refueling when he got the comms, otherwise this would have been a different story.

“He's ready,” Ratchet said, though he knew First Aid would argue otherwise. His time in Shockwave's possession had rocked his confidence. He might never get it back, or he might return stronger than before.

Only time would tell.

“I know that. You know that. He doesn't yet. When will you get here?”

“Soon.” Ratchet eyed the shambling towers of Polyhex in the distance. Close enough for casual travel, but still too far in an emergency.

Times like these, they could use a shuttle. Damn Decepticons slaughtering every last Autobot with wings did not help. How much of that, he wondered, was Starscream's idea? He tried not to think too hard about all the Autobots Starscream had killed when he was working to save Starscream's
spark.

That he did for Grimlock.

“Ya sound tired,” Wheeljack said. “When was the last time ya recharged?”

“I'll recharge when the war is over.”

“I thought it was.”

Ratchet cycled a ventilation and bounced over another pothole. “Sometimes, I'm not so sure. Tell First Aid I'll be there as soon as I can, 'Jack.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Wheeljack replied, a note of humor to his vocals, something he never managed to lose. Thank Primus.

Ratchet loved him for it.

The comm went silent. Ratchet didn't bother to ping First Aid. He didn't want to interrupt his apprentice's concentration. Besides, he knew all he needed to know for now.

He would worry about the rest when he got there.

~

Optimus would not admit to pacing back and forth outside the emergency room where a trio of medics and engineers were hard at work on his third in command. But pacing was better than standing at the window and staring in, flinching at every energon-slick instrument and the sight of Jazz's chassis wrenched open.

Ratchet rushing past him without so much as a word had been all the answer Optimus needed. Jazz was in dire straights. Ratchet wasn't even cursing. There was nothing in his expression but focus.

Optimus wanted answers. There were none to be had.

Jazz was supposed to be infallible. But then, so was Ironhide. Optimus did not want to lose anyone else. He had lost too much already.

He paused, his spinal strut tingling. Optimus drew to a halt in front of the window, watching the medics at work, while he addressed the ghost behind him. He hadn't even known Mirage was back on the job, but then, Jazz had always operated on a “need to know” basis and Optimus had allowed it because he trusted Jazz.

“What do you know?”

“Not much,” Mirage admitted. Whether or not that was the truth, Optimus did not know. “Jazz databurst a cry for help while Smokescreen and I were having a talk. We responded.”

Optimus have turned. “You and Smokescreen?” He wasn't aware the two of them were close.
Mirage stepped up beside him, his gaze focused past Optimus and into the room. If he was bothered by the sight of his commander in disarray, it did not show on his face. Then again, Mirage was a master of controlling his expressions even before he joined the Autobots and was recruited into Jazz's division.

“Yes.” Mirage folded his arms across his chestplate. His paint was a far cry from the polished sheen he used to bear. He was clean, but he no longer shone with pride. “We often meet for energon. He is concerned for Bluestreak, though without merit.”

Optimus inclined his helm. “I see.” He cycled a ventilation. “What did you see when you found Jazz?”

“Nothing.” Mirage dipped his helm, rubbing at his brow. “Whoever did this is good. Trained. We did not have time to investigate while worried about repairing Jazz, but I went back after. I found no trace of the assassin.”

Optimus turned away from the window. The very sight made his spark heavy. “Do you have your suspicions?”

Mirage lifted his helm, his gaze a piercing blue. “I wish that I did, sir. But of those that I know capable of such a thing, they could not or would not have done it.”

“I have Soundwave looking into it. Would you be willing to work with him?”

Mirage's armor flicked, but the motion was so minute Optimus almost did not catch it. “I am no longer a part of the Special Operations unit, sir,” he said quietly, but the glint of his optics turned steely. “For now, this final mission, however, I will work with whomever I must to see that the perpetrator is suitably punished.”

“Fair enough. Would you like me to recall Bumblebee?”

Mirage shook his helm. “No. His mission is of equal importance. I can do this, especially with Soundwave's help.” He half-turned, looking through the window at his once-commander, his expression flickering into agitation for the briefest of moments. “It's what he trained me for, after all.”

Optimus gently nudged Mirage with his field, the closest to an embrace the noble had ever allowed anyone. “I trust your judgment, Mirage. Do what you will. Shall I have Soundwave contact you?”

“No, sir. I'll go to him once I've done some investigations of my own.” Mirage unfolded his arms, every inch the spy he had been. “Will you let me know if his status changes?”

Optimus nodded. “The very moment I find out as well,” he replied.

Mirage dipped his helm in a bow. “Thank you, sir. Now if you'll excuse me.” He spun on a heelstrut and strode down the corridor, his steps as silent now as they had been when he'd first appeared behind Optimus.

Without Mirage as a distraction, Optimus returned to pacing. There was little else to do now but wait.
Everyone was working diligently to not only make Cybertron habitable again, but to also return the planet to its former glory. Certain items were given greater priority, such as living quarters, medical facilities, and refueling stations. Recreation and non-essentials, sadly, were at the bottom of the list.

There was nowhere Vortex could take Bluestreak for anything resembling a date. He doubted Bluestreak wanted to fly over the ruins of the Crystal Gardens or romp through the blackened husk of the Temple of Primus. The Sea of Rust lived up to its name now, dry and empty for kliks in all directions. He especially doubted that Bluestreak wanted to visit any museum, as all of them would require an excavation to see if their contents had survived beneath the rubble.

Last time, they'd taken a table in the corner of the Autobot Refectory and had a rather stilted conversation. Vortex couldn't stop fidgeting under the stares of the Autobots who wandered in for one reason or another – no doubt to check up on their precious sniper. His jitteriness made following the conversation difficult as his processor splintered between picking apart Bluestreak's mannerisms to read the mech, and listening intently for the sake of knowing Bluestreak.

It was very nearly a disaster and no one could have been more surprised than Vortex himself when Bluestreak smiled at him and said he was looking forward to the next time they met.

Which brought them to here. The best Vortex could offer, without recreational pursuits and a public corner of the refectory, was a walk around Polyhex perimeter. He had a box of energon candies he'd convinced Swin to give him for cheap, and this he gifted to Bluestreak, pulling another one of those genuine, soft smiles to the Praxian's lips.

This wasn't romantic. Nor was it private. It was noisy and noxious, and all they had for a view was a choice between reconstruction and devastation. The road crunched beneath them, a collection of cracks, gaps, and debris. There was no middle ground.

Bluestreak's smile, tentative though it was, made it worthwhile. His doorwings wriggled with delight with every nibble at the candy. His engine gave a purr of pleasure. Vortex didn't even mind that he was stuck with the Cybertronian version of a Slurpee.

“So,” Bluestreak said as he nibbled on a bright blue gel. “Where are you from?”

Vortex stared at him. “What?”

“Isn't that the kind of question I should be asking? This is a date, right? And since I don't know anything about you beyond what was fed to me as an Autobot, where else should I start?”

Vortex scratched at his battle mask, interest in his energon pouch forgotten. “That's a good point. It's just not what I thought you'd ask.”

“Would you rather I made you name all the Autobots you've maimed, tortured, and killed during the course of the war while in service to the Decepticons?”

“...No.”
Bluestreak shrugged, his doorwings moving with the motion. “Then where are you from?” he asked, and popped another candy into his mouth.

Such a mundane question. He would have sneered at it once upon a time, if a mechanism without a mouth could sneer. Onslaught had mastered the art of looking contemptuous without a face. Vortex had only ever managed to look crazed.

“Helex,” he answered, a part of him unsure why the truth came so easily. He could have lied. He probably should have.

No. It was not about lies. It was about truth. It was about peace, starting over.

“I was sparked in a batch of two-dozen other mechs. Same frames. Same mechs. Same expectations,” he said, his rotors twitching at the unwelcome memories.

One of many. He hadn't even had a designation at first, just a batch number.

Bluestreak made a noise of contemplation. “Helex was a military city, wasn't it?” he asked, the question rhetorical as he continued right along with, “Nothing but soldiers there. It's all they did.” He tilted his helm, optics scrutinizing. “You ever known anything but war?”

Vortex shrugged. He didn't know if it came across as casual as not. Because that's what normal mechs did, right?

“Peace ain't a concept I'm familiar with,” he said, but then, what Decepticon was. They were most of them pulled from military units, laborers, the hard workers. They didn't know what rest or recreation or quiet felt like.

“You the last?” Bluestreak asked, again oddly insightful.

Bluestreak's file said he was young, possibly naive. He was one of the few Praxian survivors. They said he'd been found in the rubble, surrounded by the dead and dying. He'd lain there for days waiting for rescuers to dig him out, which was probably enough to make anyone go a little mad. And before that…?

His file was oddly blank. Vortex was starting to suspect that the blankness mattered more than they gave it credit.

Bluestreak was easy to dismiss. He was charming, friendly, engaging. He had an innocent look to him, the kind a soft-sparked mech wanted to protect.

But then, Jazz could do that, too. If you didn't know him. If all you ever saw was his smile, his friendliness, his flirtations… you wouldn't know he was the bump in the night that sent many a Decepticon into paroxysms of fear.

Curiouser and curiouser.

“As far as I know,” Vortex finally answered.

Bluestreak made a noncommittal noise. “I know what that's like,” he said quietly, a touch morose, and now Vortex wondered. Was that calculated? “Is that why you joined the Cons?”
Vortex shook his helm, watching Bluestreak more intently now. “No. I joined because my Commander did and I trusted him. I don't know anythin' but followin'.”

Another energon candy vanished into Bluestreak's mouth. “You mean that literally, don't you?” he asked around the sticky treat. It had the effect of making him seem younger, innocent. But he wasn't. No mech could shoot like that if he was.

Vortex's spark did a weird little flutter. “Somethin' like that,” he replied cautiously. “It ain't in me to lead. Make decisions. It's not in my coding, or my programming. I have to follow, have a handler.”

“You mean Onslaught.”

“I mean.” Vortex cycled a ventilation, tucking the pouch into his subspace. He wasn't drinking it anyway. “That's classified, you know. A little tweak and I could be anyone's.”

It was a gross oversimplification, to be fair. But Bluestreak was an Autobot and Vortex was something in between and no matter how much he liked the Praxian, he didn't quite trust Bluestreak. Something wasn't adding up. It intrigued him, enticed him, but it left him far to the right of trusting Bluestreak.

Bluestreak gave him a wry grin that made Vortex's spark flicker again. “I can keep a secret,” he said, until his look turned distant. “My head is full of them. Secrets. White noise.” His door wings twitched. “Also classified. Not that you could get them anyway.”

“Oh?”

Bluestreak rooted around in the box, producing a pale yellow goodie, the color that seemed to be his favorite. “I'm tougher than I look.”

Despite himself, Vortex chuckled. “Already knew that.”

His comm chimed. Vortex chose to ignore it. He was off-shift. He was busy. He'd already informed all involved he was busy. They would just have to deal.

“All right.” Bluestreak spun around until he was walking backward, as confidently as some do forward, without so much as checking behind him. “Then answer me this question. Why me?”

Vortex rebooted his visor. “Eh?”

Bluestreak's free hand wiped a sprinkling of dust from the corner of his mouth. “Why me?” he repeated, his lips curved but his optics serious. “I'm nothing special. I'm pretty boring if you get down to it. All I can do is shoot a gun and well, anyone can do that. Plenty of us did, if you remember.”

“I do.” Vortex watched him, his effortless footsteps, how he found each obstacle with ease. “And I told ya why.”

“Mmm. So why don't I believe it?”

--Vortex!--
He winced as his comm exploded to life, bypassing all of his redirects and his busy signal. There was only one mech in all of Cybertron who could do that, now that the obedience coding no longer spoke to Megatron.

--What?-- he demanded, a close snarl.

--Do not take that tone with me.-- Onslaught snapped, his voice a warning, one Vortex had learned to obey.

He paused and cycled a ventilation.

“Vortex?” Bluestreak stopped moving and Vortex nearly bumped into him as a result.

He shook his head. “Sorry, I have a… hold on.” He held up a finger and turned away from the Praxian, devoting his full attention to the comm. --Yes, sir. What's going on?--

--You have an assignment. You are to provide investigative assistance to the Autobots.--

Vortex's rotors snapped into a thin line down the center of his back. --What? Why? Don't they have Soundwave for that?--

--Jazz has been attacked.--

--Impossible.-- Vortex hissed. That was akin to admitting Vortex himself had fallen victim to an assassination attempt.

--Tell that to the hole in his chassis.-- Onslaught's tone was stiff and cold. --Assignment effective immediately.--

--But I--

--Go. Now.--

The comm ended with a single defining click. It was an order, one he could not ignore. Vortex cycled a ventilation and turned back toward Bluestreak.

“Duty calls,” he said, and could not hide the regret in his tone.

“Shame.” Bluestreak nibbled another candy, licking the rust dust from his fingertips. “I was having fun.”

Vortex's spark did that flutter again. His gaze tracked the motion of Bluestreak's glossa as his engine gave a small rev. Now that was unfair. Who knew Bluestreak was such a tease?

“It's not that I want to go. I have to,” Vortex said.

“I know.” Bluestreak offered him another one of those genuine smiles. “We can try again next week. Or the week after that. Or in a month. Or whatever.” He shrugged. “This is peace, but not quite. We'll manage.”

Peace but not quite. What an apt way of putting it.
Vortex's visor brightened, the closest thing he had to a smile. “Yeah. We will,” he said, and stepped back so that the backwash wouldn't batter Bluestreak. “I'll comm ya?”

“You had better.”

Oh, sweet Primus. If his rotors wriggled any harder, they'd jitter right off the hub. Vortex transformed before he made a complete fool of himself and took the sky, aiming his nose toward the Autobot Command Center. And if he looked in his rearview down at Bluestreak, well no one had to know but him.

~

There were no cameras in the private office save for those requested by the occupants of said offices. Given that the mech in question was Jazz, Soundwave didn't bother to search for a vidfeed. Even if there was one, he would only see what Jazz wanted him to see, and there was virtually no guarantee that it would even be legitimate feed.

The camera in the corridor recorded nothing out of the ordinary. There was no guarantee Jazz hadn't fiddled with it either, but Soundwave hoped that he wouldn't go that far in a time of not quite war. The only odd activity of note was the fact that Jazz left his office late. For a mech who abhorred paperwork, he had a lot of it now.

The feed showed Jazz leaving, a tired slump to his shoulders. He appeared to drag his pedes, but Soundwave doubted he made so much as a scrape. Jazz meandered down the hall and out of the command center like a mech in desperate search of a berth to collapse into.

There were multiple cameras and angles in the courtyard. Most of them focused on the obelisk, but a few were aimed toward alley openings and doorways. Jazz wandered close to the obelisk and paused, helm bowed. A moment of silence for the departed perhaps, but there was something in his posture that suggested tension.

None of the cameras showed another living being. It was dark, consequence of passing beyond the reach of a sun, and the streetlamps cast ominous shadows.

Jazz's hand covered his mouth. He shifted back toward the obelisk, but not entirely. There was caution in his stance, and yet, he'd also left himself wide open. He was standing in plain view. Soundwave counted at least a dozen angles a sniper could get on him in that position.

Why would a mech as fully trained as Jazz do such a thing? Surely he wasn't that tired...

Light glinted behind his visor, barely caught in the footage. So Jazz's optics weren't dim. He was looking around him. Perhaps he'd sensed something?

Jazz's armor fluttered. He spun to the right, toward the obelisk, and that was when the shot fired. It slammed into him at an angle from the front, tearing through his chassis as though it were paper. Whatever type of projectile had been used, it was not strong enough to punch entirely through. Or perhaps that had been intentional.

The force of it sent Jazz tumbling to the ground, landing on his back in a limp sprawl. The video
feed fizzled in that moment. It could not have been accidental. Had Jazz sent a databurst for help? Something on a private channel that only his team could have heard?

Soundwave paused, rewound the feed, and scrutinized it, ignoring Jazz for now to take in the surrounding area. There was nothing and no one in the shadows. The shot had come from high and to the left, the roof of one of the taller buildings. Currently, that one was not habitable as it was not stable.

Soundwave zoomed in on Jazz and rewound the footage again. He peered closer at the spy's left hand. His fingers were pulled into a fist, as if he held something.

Interesting.

Soundwave reached for the preliminary report given by Smokescreen and Mirage and First Aid. There was no record of Jazz holding something. That might change with the finalized version, but Soundwave doubted it. Either Jazz had dropped the item, or someone had taken it.

It couldn't hurt to look.

He ejected Buzzsaw, who stirred from recharge with an annoyed squawk. He emerged from Soundwave's dock, ruffling his feather plating and giving Soundwave a baleful optic.

"Investigate attack site," Soundwave said, gesturing to the image on screen. "Search for item."

Buzzsaw huffed a ventilation at him but alit, casting aspersions behind him. He was not one to approve of truncated recharge. He didn't want to swap with Laserbeak, but he did envy how she was allowed to avoid all of the 'hard work' as he so eloquently put it.

Soundwave returned his attention to the footage, letting it play at normal speed. Jazz lay there for several moments, energon pooling beneath him, before Mirage and Smokescreen rushed into view. Perhaps summoned by a cry for help on Jazz's part? Or did they so happen to be walking by?

Soundwave favored the latter. Their arrival was faster than possible if they responded to an emergency ping alone.

Mirage slapped static bandages on his leader as Smokescreen looked him over, and together, they picked up Jazz and headed offscreen. Soundwave was sure he could track their progress straight to the medbay. They didn't linger long enough to investigate, but then, he'd have to dive into the coding to see if the footage had been edited.

Soundwave rewound and started from the beginning, slower this time. He kept the preliminary report at the back of his processor. The shot had been clean, sniper-level, the likes of which few mecha were capable of. Bluestreak, Jazz himself, Mirage, Cliffjumper… those were the Autobots who could have done it.

Decepticon-wise… there were fewer. Barricade, yes, but Soundwave knew he was safely in the brig and wasn't likely to be released anytime soon. There was Cyclonus' crew, but Soundwave was not familiar with their stats. He doubted however that Cyclonus was behind this.

No. It had to be Metalhawk and his ilk. Of the Neutrals, Soundwave knew very little. He knew of Sky-Byte in theory. He knew Skids used to be an Autobot. Ambulon, their medic, had once been a Decepticon. Needlenose had always been Neutral. There were others, most of them either former
Autobots or mechs who had been Neutral from the start.

If there were any snipers among them, Soundwave did not know. Intelligence had never bothered much with the Neutrals once they were out of the way and out of range.

There was also the curious note that while the shot had come close to killing Jazz, it had been off by such a degree that he survived long enough to make it to medical aid, but it would have killed him eventually. Soundwave reasoned that if someone had meant to kill Jazz, the shot would not have been off.

It missed just enough to look like someone tried to kill him. It looked staged.

Soundwave also knew he was one of the few mecha still living who could tell the difference. To the masses, he knew this appeared as an assassination attempt, perhaps perpetrated by the Decepticons as a means of revenge. He was sure that would be the implication Metalhawk would lean upon.

Buzzsaw returned, something clutched in his talons. Soundwave held out a hand, the small item falling with a gentle *tink* into his palm.

It was a datachip.

Soundwave produced a handful of energon pellets and laid them out for Buzzsaw as a reward and then pulled out a datapad. While Buzzsaw ate, Soundwave popped the datachip into the read port and was not at all surprised to find that it was encrypted.

He paused the vidfeed – which he planned on reviewing frame by frame – and focused on the datachip. It wasn't encrypted with Autobot military grade security. This was private. Personal. Jazz's handiwork no doubt, though not Jazz's usual level of protection. It was haphazard, perhaps because it was applied in a hurry.

It took him longer to decrypt then he would have liked, especially given that the size of the file was miniscule, at least according to the chip reader. Whatever was on here could not have amounted to much, and by the time the last layer of encryption fizzled away, Soundwave confirmed it.

It was a single line of text, one that was obviously directed at Soundwave, despite not being addressed to him.

*All part of the plan.*

It even had a smiling emoticon attached to it, of the sort that Laserbeak was inclined to attach to her databursts.

Plan? What plan?

It would have been nice to be included in such a plan.

Soundwave tapped several buttons on the console, wiping out the footage 'accidentally.' He leaned back in the chair and hid his face behind his palm.

Jazz was the single most irritating mech Soundwave had ever battled against, and that was saying much considering he spent most of the war squabbling behind the scenes with Starscream.
Soundwave cycled a ventilation and internally cursed out Jazz. All part of a plan Soundwave knew nothing of, but had the potential to foil if he so much as acted out of turn. He couldn't tell Optimus, because he knew Optimus, not quite as well as Jazz, but he could guess.

Optimus was many things, but good at subterfuge was not one of them.

Complications. Soundwave did not like them, and Jazz had just dropped a large one into his lap, no doubt to draw out Metalhawk.

Soundwave lowered his hand and stared blankly at the staticky image in front of him, the result of erased data. Nothing to do now but wait, he supposed, and come up with a suitable story for Optimus.

There were so many ways this could wrong.

Jazz owed him one.

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“Have I mentioned how much I hate tunnels?” Bumblebee asked.

Rumble chuckled, though it sounded strained. “Only ten times in the past hour alone.”

“Well, let me repeat it again.” Bumblebee ducked to avoid another dip in the rock ceiling and inched further into the cave.

It was a honeycomb maze down here. He didn't know how the humans navigated it without inbuilt orientation calculations and the background program Bumblebee had running that measured and kept track of their progress, slowly but surely building a map.

Then again, he supposed if one was looking for somewhere to hide, a labyrinth of tunnels underground was a good place to start.

“Blame the humans, not me.” Rumble peered down at his tracker, which pointed them unerringly toward what they hoped were human refugees.

Bumblebee bit back a sigh and continued onward. It felt like the weight of the Earth pressed down on them. It smelled damp and musty. Something skittered in the darkness, and while Bumblebee wasn't afraid of insects, he didn't much like them scrambling against his substructure.

“Quiet, both of you,” Ravage called back, her voice a hushed hiss that seemed to carry further than the sound of their conversation. She was far ahead of them, biolights cut to nil, so she was only a darker shape against the black enclosing them.

Rumble sighed and cast Bumblebee a grin, one that was barely visible in the dim glow offered by their biolights. Bumblebee had cut off his headlights some twenty minutes ago, using them sparingly to conserve energon. He moved closer, dropping his voice so it wouldn't carry.

“That's the tone of someone who's frustrated,” Rumble said with the air of mischief. “Hound's not ready, and she's refusing on principle.”

Bumblebee startled. “Rum,” he hissed, both scandalized and chastising. “One, I don't know how you know that or why. Two, I fail to see where it's a bad thing.”

Rumble shrugged. “Didn't say it was. Just said that if Rav's a bit testy, that's why.” His gaze wandered back to the scanner, focusing on the blip that grew stronger and stronger, especially when they took a tunnel on the sharp right. “TB isn't even interested in it at all. That's the weirdest part.”

Sometimes, Rumble was the worst sort of gossip. Then again, considering that his carrier was
“It’s not weird at all. That’s just how he is,” Bumblebee retorted.

“You knew?”

It was Bumblebee's turn to shrug. “Jazz knows all. Kind of like your boss.” He stared down at his shorter lover? Partner? Mate? Eh, he'd worry about titles later. “Please tell me you haven't been insulting him.”

“Of course not.” Now it was Rumble's turn to look offended. His armor fluffed out, as though trying to make himself larger. “I know who ta tease and who not to. I'm not stupid.” He huffed a ventilation.

“Neither of you are being quiet,” Ravage called back to them mere seconds before the glint of her optics was caught by an echo of Bumblebee's biolights. “You are making for poor spies.”

Rumble planted a hand on his hip. “Aren't ya supposed to be scoutin' ahead? Ya ain't that great yourself.”

Ravage flicked an ear at him. “I found a door.”

“Really?” Bumblebee stared past her, toward the dark tunnels. “Is it locked?”

Ravage's gaze shifted toward him, something flickering in her optics. “No. I opted to wait for the both of you before entering.” She rose to her pedes and turned her back on them, tail flicking. “I suspect this is not the good news we had all hoped for.”

Bumblebee's spark dropped into his tank. He exchanged a glance with Rumble before he wordlessly followed Ravage. The feline's tone spoke all.

Silence fell, save for the insects skittering in the dark and the bats chittering to each other several tunnels over. Sound carried all too well down here.

Bumblebee clicked his headlights on. If Ravage's tone was any indication, he had little concern for alerting anyone to their presence.

What they found at the end of the tunnel barely qualified as a door. It was door-shaped and wedged into the rock, but it had no hinge and seemed lodged into place. A few cracks around the frame exuded a very dim, flickering glow, like that of candlelight. If there were humans behind it, Bumblebee could not hear them.

“Let's get this over with,” Rumble said, but his tone carried none of his usual flippancy.

He walked up to the door, worked his fingers into the gap, and yanked it free. The resulting screech echoed around them, sending feedback into Bumblebee's audials. Grit rained down on them.

The silence afterward was most telling.

Rumble leaned the door against the tunnel wall and together, the three of them ventured forth. They found themselves in a decently sized space, living quarters of a sort. There were areas
sectioned off by thin sheets and supplies scattered about. The flickering had indeed come from a candle, but one of those electronic ones. It was hooked up to some kind of battery system. Bumblebee was impressed the batteries had lasted this long.

There were piles of foodstuff trash behind one curtain. Others held stacks of clothing and bedding, broken equipment and the like. It had all been rummaged through, once folded garments tossed aside.

There were no humans, no sign of any kind of struggle. It looked like they had packed up and left in a hurry. Though why they would leave important supplies behind, Bumblebee didn't know.

There was a radio, however. It, Bumblebee reasoned, was the source of the transmission they were picking up. It was connected to a cord that was attached to the rock wall. He followed it with his optics. It ran the length of the wall, the ceiling, and ran toward the opposite end of the space, vanishing behind another curtain.

“Where did they go?” Rumble asked. “I mean, it's obvious they left, but why?”

“Maybe they ran out of food. Or water,” Ravage answered as she nosed at a stack of empty plastic jugs. “It's not like the Decepticons made much effort to locate survivors.”

Bumblebee pulled down the curtain concealing the wire and found another tunnel, this one narrower than the first. A back entrance? The wire above him continued onward, down the tunnel. Perhaps it connected to some kind of larger transreceiver outside. That would explain how they were able to send and receive signals down here.

“So this is a dead end?” Rumble said.

“Maybe not.” Bumblebee gestured toward the new tunnel, less a back entrance and more an emergency escape he suspected.

Ravage sat on her haunches. “You think we can still find them?”

“I think that I'm not willing to give up yet,” Bumblebee replied. “Humans are more resourceful than any of us know. Something tells me that this route is a lot more direct. Besides, what could it hurt to look?”

The two cassettes exchanged glances.

“What indeed,” Ravage replied and rose back to her pedes. She was the first to move past Bumblebee, delicately sniffing the air. “There is a fresher scent coming from this direction, perhaps an outside access even. It is worth a look.”

Rumble shrugged and spread his hands. “Why not?” he grinned. “Beats going back to Cybertron.”

“Then let's go. Ravage, you're up.”

Ravage twitched her tail at him. “Someday, I will make you the first to leap into danger while I trail behind,” she said before loping off into the darkness, leaving them to follow.

Bumblebee chuckled to himself as Rumble moved to follow her. Bumblebee lingered long enough to get another look behind him. It felt a lot like chasing ghosts, but if there was the slightest chance
to find survivors, Bumblebee didn't want to miss it.

He owed it to them all.

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There was chaos in the outer medical rooms. Chromedome had peered into the hallway once. No one noticed him, but he'd gotten the sense that it was none of his business. The sight of a bleeding mech in black and white – Jazz, according to Metalhawk's datafiles – had been all the information he'd needed.

So. Metalhawk had moved into stage three already.

In the madness, they'd forgotten about him. Chromedome hoped they would continue to do so. As long as he was here, under the guise of repairing Red Alert, Metalhawk would not press him for information. Which meant, for a time, he was safe.

Chromedome sank back into his chair, perched close to Red Alert for obvious reasons, and braced his elbows on his knees. He leaned forward, stared down at his hands, extended and retracted his mneumosurgery needles, over and over again.


It was the kind of rhythmic noise that would have irritated Red Alert, were he anything more than an empty slate waiting to be repaired. Something Chromedome could do, had he the right data. Not that Red Alert would ever be the same.

There would always be a shadow, shifting on his spark. Chromedome could do nothing to fix that. It was not in his jurisdiction. He hadn't told the Autobots, of course. Not and risk what little regard they had for him.

He'd thought joining the Neutrals was a better course of action. But in the end, they were just another faction, just another set of rules to follow or break. Just another way for someone to make use of his skills for their own ends.

He'd lost count of the number of mechs he'd altered. A few had given their consent. A few had asked to forget, but most had no choice.

Forget or die. That wasn't much of an option.

Chromedome was tired.

The door to Red Alert's room slid open with a chirrup of override codes, and he didn't have to look to know it was Rewind, his self-appointed escort and guide. With the medics busy trying to save Jazz's spark, it could be no one else.

“Domey?”

His spark squeezed at the affectionate nickname. When was the last time someone treated him with
such decency? Such warmth?

He looked up at Rewind and wondered if his visor showed the bleakness that had leached into his field. “Your third-in-command is fighting for his spark,” Chromedome said with a vocalizer gone staticky. “Your Prime deserves to know why.”

It might end in his death. Or incarceration. Sometimes, Chromedome didn't know which was preferable. He only knew he couldn't continue on like this.

_Snikt-shunk. Snikt-shunk._

Rewind hovered in the doorway, staring at him. “You know who did this?”

“Yes and no.” Chromedome stayed seated, aware of their height difference, unwilling to loom or threaten. “I can guess who shot him. I know who ordered it.”

The minibot stepped inside, letting the door slide shut behind him. “I can call Optimus if you want,” he offered, and he dared come closer, despite the traitor in his midst. “He'll want to hear this but… why?”

Chromedome cycled a ventilation and dipped his helm. It was hard to put into words the reasons behind his choices, at least, not without damning himself in Rewind's view.

“Do you know how long we were in orbit around Cybertron before Metalhawk decided it was safe to land?”

Rewind's field was like a flash-fire filled with shock as it bounced around the room. “I suspect I'm not going to like the answer.”

“Months.” Chromedome tangled his fingers together, pressing his palms, fighting back the urge to extend his needles. “We watched. Waited. Surely, Metalhawk rationalized, we would have an opportunity.”

Because that was what Neutrals did. They watched while the Autobots and the Decepticons squabbled. They swooped in to pick up the pieces and congratulated themselves on being too righteous for war. After all, whatever the two factions were fighting for, it had nothing to do with them.

All they wanted was Cybertron back the way it was.

And so they waited for the Autobots and the Decepticons to kill each other. To wipe one another out. Because Megatron would never lay down arms, and Optimus Prime never seemed willing to do what was necessary. There would be no peace, no truce, in this war. There would only be the dead and those who escaped it.

Metalhawk preached a bright, hopeful future. But there were more Neutrals than a single mech could hope to control. There would be compromises, far too many compromises, and Chromedome knew that the single unifying factor – _we are unwilling to risk our lives for this war_ – would not be enough to sustain peace amid the Neutrals for too long.

What Metalhawk wanted… it couldn't be done. Or it could, but it would be no better than the Cybertron they'd left behind.
A Cybertron where mechs like Rewind were lesser beings, lesser creatures, because they could and did depend on the kindness and strength of another.

The Autobots and the Decepticons would destroy each other, and all that would be left were the cowards unwilling to fight for their own freedoms. They'd willingly bow to Metalhawk's rule because it had to be better, didn't it, then whatever they'd left behind.

Chromedome's tank churned.

“We received every broadcast Megatron issued,” he continued, his armor drawing in tight, Rewind's stare feeling so much like judgment. “He wasn't taking care to hide them after all. He wanted the whole galaxy to know his strength. Metalhawk told us to wait. That we'd only be getting ourselves killed if we interfered. We were Neutrals. And so we did. We waited.”

Rewind moved closer. “How long?” he asked. There was nothing in his tone that suggested anger or disappointment.

Chromedome's plating creaked. “Since he captured your medic.”

Rewind's swift intake of ventilation was like a blaster shot in the silence of the room.

“Well,” he said, after a long moment, ripe with his struggle to comprehend the magnitude of what Chromedome had revealed. “Metalhawk certainly takes the definition of Neutrality to its outright end, doesn't he?”

Chromedome shook his helm. “In the end, we're just another faction. Don't let anything he says fool you.”

Rewind crouched down in front of him, his hands resting over Chromedome's with a gentle warmth. “It was war,” he said, as though that should be all the reason, all the excuse Chromedome needed.

He cycled a ventilation and dimmed his visor. “Call Optimus Prime. I have a lot to tell him.” He gave a sidelong glance to Red Alert. “I may never be able to fix Red, but maybe I can at least make a difference in this.”

Rewind's fingers squeezed over his. It felt like a comfort he didn't deserve, but Chromedome leaned into it nevertheless.

~

The 'Round Table' as Jazz had once jokingly called it, had looked empty as of late, and it felt even emptier still without Jazz's personality to fill his spot. Mirage was there, acting on behalf of his former commander this one last time, but he did not have the energy Jazz seemed to carry despite the circumstances.

Optimus ached, and worried that he was not effective at concealing it.
Prowl and Ironhide were not here. In their places were Ultra Magnus and Springer, both good, decent, and honorable mechs. Optimus trusted them with his spark. He trusted they would do well to fill their seats.

Yet, he could not look at them without seeing the ghosts of the mechs Optimus had relied upon for so long.

Red Alert, also, was absent, though still alive in a manner of speaking. In his place sat Soundwave, not their director of security but the closest thing to it. Looking at the former Decepticon filled Optimus with warmth, but he was ever aware of the lack of Red Alert's presence.

They had all balanced one another. Learned to tolerate or tease one another's quirks. They'd had centuries to get used to one another, to trust one another.

It felt like all of that had changed in the shutter of an optic.

Optimus cycled a ventilation and focused on finishing the cube of medical grade Soundwave had brought him, more than aware of the affixed stare a very tired Ratchet was pointing his direction. Ratchet had officially, and with much reluctance, released Optimus from his confinement in the medical center. But it was with the caveat he take care of himself according to Ratchet's standards. He'd then turned around and appointed Soundwave to make certain Optimus did just that.

Once upon a time, their concern would have felt like a burden, another way for Optimus to disappoint. Now it was comforting.

The conference room door opened again, Blaster slipping inside before it shut behind him. He took the last seat between Mirage and Springer, a bright red buffer between the cold noble and the irascible Wrecker. Optimus inwardly thanked him for recognizing a potential issue in the making.

“Are we waiting for anyone else?” Ultra Magnus asked, ever brisk and professional, and the echoes of Prowl swirling about him like a punch to the senses.

“No,” Ratchet said and slumped further in his chair, rubbing at the base of his chevron. “And if we could make this as quick as possible, that would be great. I haven't recharged in days.”

Once upon a time, Ratchet wouldn't have admitted how tired he was. He would have worked himself right into glitching with poor Wheeljack having to drag him to berth. They had all of them changed.

Optimus gave Ratchet an apologetic glance. “Please update us on Jazz's condition, Ratchet.”

The Chief Medic rubbed harder at his chevron. “He's going to live,” Ratchet said, his optics dimming. “It'll be a day or two before I can risk bringing him online, but he's going to live.”

“You really are as good as they say,” Springer commented.

Ratchet's optics slid toward him balefully. “I had a lot of help,” he corrected. “If not for the quick response in getting him to the medbay, and First Aid knowing exactly what to do, he wouldn't have made it. That shot breached spark containment which wouldn't have been so bad, save it clipped an old weld I'd done centuries ago. One that'd gone brittle.”

Optimus cycled a startled vent, and he wasn't the only one. Mirage went as still as stone. Blaster
squirmed in his chair. He and Jazz were close.

“Lucky shot?” Ultra Magnus asked.

“For Jazz, yes. I'd say the sniper missed but...” Ratchet rolled his shoulders in a shrug and spread his hands. “I'm not a ballistics expert. Either whoever did this just isn't very good, or they are too good.”

Blaster cleared his vocalizer. “So good that they missed?”

“They did not miss,” Optimus corrected, his short-term chip bringing up images of Jazz, limp and lifeless under Ratchet's hands.

“Oh, they missed,” Ratchet said, stirring himself into a proper wroth. “A few micrometers to the left and they'd have punched through his spark core.”

Ultra Magnus leaned forward, his stylus flying across the datapad. “An assassin who is a very good sniper. How many do we know who fit the criteria?”

“At least two dozen,” Springer said with a languid sprawl into his chair. “Some of ours. Some of theirs. I don't know enough about Metalhawk's crew. He's, unsurprisingly, not forthcoming with the details.”

Optimus' gaze slid to Jazz's stand-in. “Mirage?”

The former noble stirred, though the ice in his gaze did not ease. “No trace. The vid feeds have been scrubbed. If I didn't know any better, I'd say Jazz did it himself. Or one of Soundwave's minions.” He paused and tilted his helm. “That was not an accusation, Soundwave, but a compliment.”

“Understood,” Soundwave replied. Nothing in his posture suggested offense, but Optimus was aware that something of a rivalry had developed between his Special Ops Unit and Soundwave over the course of the war.

Blaster twitched and held up a hand. “Hold on a sec, all. I'm thinkin' our answers are about to walk through the door.”

Optimus straightened. “What do you mean?”

Blaster gave him a lop-sided grin. “Looks like one of Metalhawk’s cronies wants to come in from the cold. Should I give Rewind the okay to bring him in?”

“Please do.”

They all, as one, turned their attention to the door, which had to be disconcerting to whomever stood on the other side of it. The door slid open, Rewind entering first, but in his wake came Chromedome, the very same mech they had entrusted with Red Alert's recovery.

Chromedome hovered in the doorframe, but inside enough that the door slid shut and nearly clipped his back tires. He stared at them, visor and battle mask making it difficult to discern his emotion, save for the nervous way he tangled his fingers together.
Optimus leaned forward against the table, bracing his elbows against it. “Chromedome, I understand there is something you wish to share with us?”

The mneumosurgeon nodded. “Yes, sir.” He paused and audibly cycled a ventilation. “Your commander was shot on Metalhawk’s order.”

Silence fell. Optimus doubted there was anyone in this room who had believed otherwise, but were only laboring under the burden of proof. Optimus didn’t for one moment think Grimlock and the Decepticons were involved, but to an outside spectator, he could see where that conclusion could be drawn. Especially considering Starscream’s current condition.

It took all Optimus had to maintain his composure. “Go on.”

Chromedome untangled his fingers and tucked them behind his back. “I volunteered to come here because I wanted to help Red Alert. Metalhawk only approved it because he wanted an inside look at your operations.” He inched away from the door, but he kept his back to the wall, a defensive posture. “He’s angling to get both Autobots and Decepticons off Cybertron. He doesn’t want you here.”

Ultra Magnus leaned back, his expression devoid of opinion. “What of the rest of the Neutrals? How do they feel in the matter?”

“Some of us just want to be home. Some of us are tired of running. Some of us are desperate to believe in the truce.” Chromedome’s visor briefly dimmed. “Some of us don’t know what to think, and all we know is how to follow.”

The last was a problem Optimus knew far too well. The inability to do anything unless there was leadership behind the prompting. He had to wonder if much of it stemmed from something in all of their base coding, so base that every Cybertronian carried it. Perhaps it was some sort of holdover from their creators back at the dawn of Cybertronian life.

But that was a wondering for another time.

“Why come to us now?” Springer asked. He wasn’t the first to think of it, but he was the first to speak it.

Chromedome sighed and his plating clamped down tightly to his protoform. “I can't do it anymore. I want to believe in peace. I want to remember what it means to help others. I just...” He unfolded his arms, spreading his hands as though in surrender. “Even if it means I end up in a brig somewhere, I'd rather be there knowing I told the truth.”

“You seek to defect?” Ultra Magnus asked.

Chromedome nodded. “I know the truce states that any mech can petition to join another faction, but it is up to the leadership to approve it.”

“But it's not just that Metalhawk tried to have Jazz killed,” Rewind said, speaking up for the first time. His gaze shifted to Optimus. “The Neutrals had been here for a while. They watched while Megatron tortured the Autobots, and they did nothing.”

No words could have sucked the air out of the room more effectively.
“To… to be fair,” Optimus said, struggling to speak. He didn't want to see tension boil over, resulting in the assault of potentially innocent mechs. “They were under no obligation to render aid to an outside faction, or get involved in what appeared to be an intra-faction squabble.”

“Not by Cybertron's laws, no, but by the Galactic Standard?” Ultra Magnus' grip on his datapad tightened, the casing creaking under the strength of it. “The laws set by the Galactic Council are clear in this matter. The moment Megatron declared victory, the imprisoned Autobots were considered prisoners of war. There are certain standards of behavior.”

Springer shook his helm, his face blanched of color. “The Galactic Council ousted us eons ago. After the second planet Megatron destroyed in his hunt for an energy source. All Cybertronians are blacklisted.”

“That does not matter,” Mirage said, an unholy glint brightening his optics. “It's about perception. Metalhawk claims he is better than we who chose to fight. Yet, he ignores the laws of common decency?” He turned toward Ultra Magnus. “When you came to our assistance, how did you know it was needed?”

“I picked up Megatron's broadcast.” Ultra Magnus shifted into his seat, as though coming to a slow realization. “It gave distressingly little information in terms of origin. We had to hunt for it. Soundwave's communication later assisted us in mounting an offensive and told me where to look.”

“Exactly. Even if Metalhawk hadn't wanted to risk himself or his crew, he could have arranged for assistance using other means. He after all, did not have his communications blocked,” Mirage said. The fire in his optics brought new life to his frame, made his field for once tangible and energetic.

Optimus inclined his helm. He had to admit that Mirage had made a very good point. There was not getting involved, and then there was watching from the shadows, like a scavenger to pick up the pieces so as not to dirty one's own hands.

He rapped his fingers on the table top and looked at Ultra Magnus. “Is that enough cause to confront Metalhawk?”

“Perhaps.” Ultra Magnus set down one datapad and picked up another. “I'll need to review the laws. Something tells me that while I consider myself an expert, Metalhawk has memorized everything applicable, down to the last semi-colon.”

“For now, we should concentrate on gathering evidence against Metalhawk.” Optimus laced his fingers together and bracing his elbows on the edge of the table. “There is some truth to his threat. We are outnumbered by the Neutrals. If we can't prove he was actively working against peace, we will find ourselves ousted from Cybertron.”

Springer's engine rumbled. “I will be damned if I get tossed off a planet I risked my spark for a thousand times over.”

“Then we will do this correctly,” Ultra Magnus said.

Ratchet shoved his chair back and stood. “Seeing as this is all political nonsense and things that don't concern me, mind if I excuse myself to the berth?”

Optimus waved him along, glad that his mask hid his smile. “Enjoy your rest, Ratchet. Do let me know when Jazz can receive visitors.”
“Will do.” Ratchet nodded at each of them before spinning on a heel strut, wobbling toward the door. He must have been exhausted to not even bother with a pretense of alertness.

He did pause, however, to speak to Chromedome. Whatever he said was for the mneumosurgeon as it was spoken only loud enough that an eavesdropper would have to strain to overhear. It did, however, seem to relax Chromedome to a degree. He nodded, some of the tension leaving his armor.

Ratchet left, Chromedome gingerly slid into the seat Ratchet vacated, and back to business it was.

“We will need to speak with Grimlock,” Optimus said, once the door had closed behind Ratchet. “Undoubtedly the rumor mill has already begun, and I wish to show a solid front.”

“Speaking of the Decepticons, you should know Metalhawk was responsible for Starscream's accident as well,” Chromedome said. “Though again, the how and the why, I don't know. I just know it was the first stage, an attempt to sow discord between the Autobots and the Decepticons.”

Optimus sighed and rubbed at his forehelm. “We are fortunate that Metalhawk knew nothing of Grimlock, otherwise he would have realized such tactics would have never succeeded.”

“Onslaught still active in Nova Cronum,” Soundwave pointed out, the first time he had spoken since the meeting began. “Possibility of retrieving proof?”

“Good point. I will contact him as well. Anyone else?” Optimus asked. Primus knew there were dozens of other topics to discuss: the reconstruction, finding a stable orbit for Cybertron, the Autobots still in need of recovery, the humans on Earth, et cetera.

But one crisis at a time.

“What about Chromedome?” Rewind asked. He'd moved to Chromedome's side, standing next to the Neutral as though protecting him. “Can he stay?”

“If he fills out the proper paperwork,” Ultra Magnus said.

Optimus, despite everything, smiled internally. Say what they did about Ultra Magnus, but he was not one for the nuances of things. While his second might grumble a little about it, Ultra Magnus was one to see the world for what it was – complicated.

“Yes,” Optimus answered. “From what I've seen, you've made a genuine attempt to restore Red Alert. Though my concern is Metalhawk. You realize you need his approval to leave? At least, if you wish to do so without causing an incident.”

“I am certain Metalhawk would use such a thing to his advantage. Especially given how much time Chromedome has spent here,” Mirage said, with Blaster nodding in agreement. Mirage’s interlaced fingers and slow nod were purely noble politics. He knew how to play the game.

Soundwave inclined his helm. “Metalhawk initially refused Tailgate's defection to Decepticons,” he said, though how he knew that, Optimus had to wonder. “Metalhawk underestimated Starscream, however.”

“Don't we all,” Blaster commented with a shake of his helm. “I say petition anyway. If Metalhawk
is sincere like he claims, he won't raise a stink. If he tries to contest, he might stumble and give us more ammunition. Especially since Domey here has a sponsor.”

Optimus straightened in his chair. “A sponsor?” While one wasn’t necessary, the treaty did dictate that an individual could acquire a sponsor from the faction they wished to join. Said sponsor would expedite their transfer and defection request, as well as take responsibility for the actions of said mech during his probationary transfer.

Rewind lifted a hand. “I kind of… volunteered?”

Optimus cycled his optics. He knew he wasn't the only one. He knew that Rewind had been tasked with keeping an optic on Chromedome, but he hadn't realized that a friendship had been born from it.

“All the better,” Ultra Magnus said after rebooting his vocalizer with a loud crackle. “That brings further legitimacy to the petition and puts Metalhawk in the awkward position of questioning your intentions.”

Springer leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms above his helm. “Given the rate of mechs flocking from his side, you'd think Metalhawk would realize the problem isn't us.”

“We are blind to our own faults,” Optimus said, thinking of his own, of course. He had made many wrong choices over the course of the war and the unrest leading up to it. “I suspect he either does not have a diverse cabinet to advise him, or chooses to ignore their advice.”

“It's a bit of both actually,” Chromedome offered. “Sky-Byte is like Metalhawk, he hates Autobots and Decepticons equally and is fully on board with the plan to get rid of both factions. Skids has been petitioning for patience, but Sky-Byte is a lot louder when he gets riled up. They feed each other.”

“Good to know,” Ultra Magnus said, and jotted down something on his datapad. “Would you be inclined to speaking with me in private? I feel that even the smallest detail could help us build a case against him, or chooses to ignore their advice.”

Chromedome nodded. “Sure. It'll be nice to do some good for a change.”

There was something ominous in that statement. Optimus made a mental note to investigate it further, though he suspected Ultra Magnus would do the work for him, giving the notation he just made.

“Then if there is nothing further, I will call this meeting to an end. We can return at a later date to compare notes and form a firm plan for Metalhawk,” Optimus said. “Is that acceptable?”

No one disagreed. Dismissed, they rose and left the room, though Chromedome and Ultra Magnus gravitated together, with Rewind lingering nearby. Blaster, however, didn't seem bothered by the attachment, so Optimus would defer to his judgment in this instance.

The only one who persisted was Soundwave, rising from his seat further down the table to switch for one nearer to Optimus. “Tired?” he asked.

Optimus shook his helm. “I have had enough of resting.” He lifted the now empty cube of energon.
“Thank you, by the way. I am sure Ratchet is relieved someone is monitoring my intake.”

“Anything for Ratchet,” Soundwave replied, a reward of his rare humor.

Optimus huffed a laugh. “Indeed.” He let Soundwave's field wash over and through him. He leaned into the comfort it offered.

“Jazz will recover,” Soundwave said.

“Yes, I know.” Optimus cycled a ventilation. “But I had dared think such things were behind us. It frustrates me that we are still fighting the same old fights.”

“Same, but different,” Soundwave corrected. He reached for Optimus' hand, and Optimus did not hesitate to offer it. The warmth of Soundwave's hold was welcome. “Grimlock intelligent, not quick to judge. This is not war.”

“Mm.” Optimus leaned back into his chair, cycling a ventilation. “Which reminds me, I do need to contact him, to both inquire into Starscream's condition and to set up a meeting. Off the books.”

Soundwave squeezed his hand. “Company desired?”

Optimus shook his helm. “No. As much as it would be welcome, I hope to draw as little attention to this meeting as possible.” Which meant the fewer involved, the more likely it was to stay under the radar.

“Understood. Soundwave to continue investigation into Jazz's attack then.”

“We already know Metalhawk is behind it,” Optimus said, confused. “What else is there to learn?”

“Who and how. Security breach worrisome.” Soundwave rose to his pedes after another squeeze to Optimus' fingers. “Safety a priority.”

Optimus gave him a gentle smile. “You would make for a good Director of Security.”

“Negative. That position Red Alert's.” Soundwave's field pulsed with affection at the offer however. “Compliment appreciated, however.”

“You're welcome.”

Soundwave’s helm bobbed, a dip of respect. “Company offered presently.”

Optimus chuckled softly. “Yes, I would welcome Laserbeak’s company if she wishes to offer it.” He’d grown quite fond of Laserbeak’s presence. There was something soothing about her charm and her quiet humor.

Soundwave’s dock popped, freeing said cassette. Laserbeak spun into the air above both of their helms, chirping with delight, before she moved to land on Optimus’ shoulder. Her helm butted Optimus, her beak nuzzling against his audial.

“Pleasure to see you, too,” Optimus murmured as he scratched under her chin.

She chirred at him.
“Soundwave will return tonight?” Soundwave asked, drawing Optimus’ attention back toward him.

“Tonight,” Optimus confirmed. He was glad that his battle mask hid the ridiculous smile on his face. “I will see you then.”

~

“I see ya got my message.”

Soundwave did not startle visibly, but inwardly, his spark did lurch. Jazz still managed to surprise him, even after all these centuries.

He stepped further into the recovery room, letting the door slide shut behind him. Soundwave input a code into the panel to lock it and set up a privacy screen. He suspected that discretion would be the better part of valor here.

“Knew I could trust ya,” Jazz added with a lop-sided grin that was degrees off from his usual saunter.

Soundwave approached the berth. “Chromedome confessed this the result of Metalhawk's plan,” he said with a gesture to Jazz's current berth-locked condition. “Inaccurate?”

“That depends.” Jazz chuckled, a sound wreathed in static. “Metalhawk certainly gave th' order, but the plan was mine.” He tilted his helm, the plating around his now-visible optics scarred and scorched. “Say, mind helpin' an old friend out and grabbin' my visor for me? Doc-bot thinks I don't need it if I'm rechargin'.”

“Ratchet assumes you to be in stasis.” Soundwave turned, hunting around for the aforementioned object and finding it on a nearby table, along with a plethora of equipment that he was not surprised Jazz had been carrying.

“Pah. I learned how to override that ages ago. It's only pain.” That lop-sided grin lingered, even as Jazz lifted his helm a fraction to aid Soundwave in slotting the visor back into place. “Mmm. That hits the spot. Thanks, Sounders.”

He cycled a ventilation and lowered himself to the chair at the base of Jazz's berth. “Designation: Soundwave.”

“Is it?” Jazz's visor bloomed to life after a reboot, adding light to his mischievous expression. “Yer lookin' after Optimus good, I hope.”

Soundwave narrowed the light behind his own visor. “Jazz avoiding more important topic.”

“Just gearin' up, mech. Calm your dock.”

Sometimes, parsing Jazz's mannerisms was more helmache than he was worth. Soundwave resisted the urge to rub at his forehelm.
“Yes,” he said, if only to speed this along. “Optimus in good health, recharge, and fueling state.”

“Good, good. That's what I want to hear.” Jazz wriggled a bit on the berth, though not without disturbing any of the sensors attached to his frame. They all still displayed a mech at rest, rather than one online and alert. “Now, ya got my message and yer here so that tells me you got an inklin' of what's goin' on. Care to share?”

Soundwave folded his hands into his lap. “Jazz simulated attack. Why?”

“Cause I couldn't risk Metalhawk gettin' it in his fool helm to aim for someone else,” Jazz replied still with that damnable grin. “Soon as Starscream went down, I had Metalhawk's angle all figured out.” He hummed in his vocalizer. “It’s classic misdirection, mech. Coulda worked if someone less smart were in charge, too. But he underestimated alla us.”

Soundwave made a non-committal noise. “Why?”

“In case ya haven't noticed, I am lackin' in recruits.” Jazz's smile melted away. “Mirage is doin’ a good job of pretendin', but he ain't fit fer duty. Neither is Hound. Right now, yer all I got. And like it or not, yer good at what ya do.”

There was a compliment buried somewhere in there. Soundwave acknowledged it, tucked it away, but refused to let it influence him for now.

“Jazz has plans?”

“Of course.” A steely glint entered Jazz's visor. “And since he thinks I'm outta commission, I can move around freely.”

Soundwave leaned back in his chair. He gave a pointed look to the mesh wrapped around Jazz's mid-section and the fact that he couldn't get out of the berth. Like it or not, plan or not, Jazz was not mobile.

The saboteur chuckled. “I meant he thinks he doesn't hafta worry about me right now. I've got ya to walk around fer me.” Jazz lifted a hand, wriggling his fingers. “I mean, unless yer not into workin' with me. I understand if I scared ya.”

Soundwave huffed a ventilation. “There is no fear.”

“Sure, sure. So I take it that's a yes, then?”

Soundwave was not keen on the idea of lying to Optimus. Obviously, Jazz could quite effectively pretend to be in a recuperative stasis when it suited him. Which meant the only ones who knew the truth would be Soundwave, perhaps Mirage, and definitely whomever Jazz had convinced to shoot him – if not Mirage himself.

But… if somehow the truth were revealed too soon, Metalhawk might decide a better impact would be felt if Optimus were attacked instead. That was something Soundwave could not allow.

“Affirmative,” he said, though it was with some disappointment. “However, burden of blame to fall on Jazz after.”

“Ya mean with Optimus?” Jazz's smile returned, though it felt genuine this time, soft and almost
indulgent. “Yeah, mech. I got ya. If he’s mad, I’ll take the heat. It's too cute to watch ya'll snuggle. I'd hate to ruin that.”

Snuggle.

Soundwave wrestled with the idea Jazz had been spying on him, realized it was inevitable, and then buried the discomfort down deep. Optimus was more than a friend to Jazz. This he had known from the beginning. Optimus was precious to his Autobots, to his followers, his friends. It was understandable that they be worried about his close proximity to all the horror that Soundwave was.

Still, he didn't have to like it.

Soundwave leaned forward. “Task to give?” he asked.

“In a tic, mech. We’re just waitin’ on one more player for th’ game,” Jazz said with a little laugh. Half his visor dimmed in a wink. “And he should be here right about…. Now.”

No sooner had the word passed Jazz’s lips then Soundwave heard the distinct noise of someone hacking the doorlock. He whirled toward it, annoyed that someone had bypassed his lock so easily, only for the irritation to melt into exasperation. Vortex. Of course it was Vortex.

“Uhhh, am I at the right party?” Vortex asked as he eased inside, the door sliding shut behind him and locking itself. With Soundwave’s own security code no less.

Frag it all. He’d have to reset everything.

From a distance, Laserbeak laughed at him. From within his dock, even Buzzsaw was amused. Soundwave firmly told both of them to be silent.

“Depends. Didja bring me a welcome gift?” Jazz asked with something near a wiggle.

Vortex gave Soundwave a long look and a wide berth. He eased around the other side of Jazz’s medberth and dug something out of subspace. The small box was passed to Jazz who opened it with glee.

Inside were candies. Just what the healing patient did not need. Ratchet was going to have a conniption if he found out. Soundwave took an image capture. For reasons.

He might need the blackmail down the line.

“Yep. Yer definitely at the right place,” Jazz said as he popped one candy into his mouth. He grinned and tipped his helm from left to right. “Tex, you know Sounders. And vice-versa.”

Vortex dipped his helm in the barest of nods. “Commander.” His rotors jittered, an action Soundwave had never quite learned to read.

“No longer serving same faction,” Soundwave replied stiffly. “Respectful addresses not required.”

Jazz groaned. “Aw, you two. Don’t start. We got work ta do, remember? We’re all gonna have to get along and cooperate. Tex, have a seat.”
“You aren’t my commander either,” Vortex bit out, but he did take the empty stool, perching upon it stiffly.

“I am fer this mission,” Jazz shot back, a dark edge to his tone. “Don’t make me tattle and contact yer boss. Right now, yer mine.”

Soundwave loudly cycled his vocalizer, hoping to forestall any further debate between the two. He had plans with Optimus later which he did not want to miss. “Task to give?” he prompted again.

“Yeah. For both of ya,” Jazz said. He shot a warning look Vortex’s direction before his grin turned sly, and his visor brightened to an Earth-sky blue. “First things first, we gotta get that rumor mill startin' so Metalhawk can bathe in his misplaced glee.”

The worst part, Soundwave reasoned as Jazz began to detail his plan, would be interpreting every one of Jazz's mannerisms. Subterfuge and political manipulations would be easy.

He only hoped he didn't pay for it by losing Optimus' trust in the process.

****
Bumblebee had trained under Ironhide, but he'd passed under Kup more than a few times when he'd first joined the Autobots. He'd gravitated toward Jazz and Spec Ops after that, and one would think that meant Kup could barely remember the scrappy yellow mech who had ended up on his aft more often than not.

One would be wrong.

Kup greeted him like they were old friends, his age-worn hands clapping down on Bumblebee's shoulders as he looked Bumblebee up and down with a gimlet optic.

“Look atcha,” he said, pride in his voice for reasons unknown. “Not quite grown, but kicking Decepticon tail I hear anyway.”

Bumblebee, despite himself, managed a crooked grin. “Something like that.” He pointed a thumb at Rumble. “This is Rumble. A former Decepticon.”

“Reformed, eh? Those are the best kind in my opinion.” The cygar wobbled from one corner of Kup's mouth to another, loosing a curl of smoke. “Welcome.” He shoved a hand toward Rumble, who blinked at the offer.

“Just like that?” Rumble asked, no few ounces of suspicion in his tone.

Kup rolled his shoulder. “I've pulled more'n a few of your kind out of the fire. Even got me one over there. When ya get as old as I am, kid, you learn to look past the little things.”

“If ya say so.” Rumble accepted the hand, which Kup shook vigorously, nearly rattling Rumble out of his armor. “And I'm not a kid.”

“Everyone's a kid to me, kid,” Kup said with a smirk around his cygar. He loosed his hold on Rumble's hand and removed the cygar. “So what brings ya back to my corner of the galaxy?”

“Same old mission,” Bumblebee answered, since Rumble looked like he was working himself into a fine snit. “We need to go through the Ark, and after that, meet back with Hound. Did he tell you?”

“That he might have found the locals?” Kup shrugged and replaced the cygar. “Yeah, I heard. All communication goes through this here hub.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “I don't hold much hope though. Cons can be thorough when they want ta be.”

He had a point.
They'd opted to let Hound, Trailbreaker and Ravage continue the search for the humans. The trail had gone cold when they'd found their way out of the tunnels, but Ravage thought she might have picked up the echo of a scent. Hound was eager to go chasing after it; Rumble not so much.

A compromise was made.

Bumblebee and Rumble would get to looking for the memory core, and afterward, reunite with the others. First and foremost, they needed to get their transfer approved. If a transfer was even necessary.

Kup continued, “What ya thinkin' you'll find in the Ark? We've been through it twice already, and Optimus was here a few months or so ago, too.”

Bumblebee rubbed a hand over his helm. “We're looking for a miracle.”

“Seems like we could use a lot of those.” Kup inclined his helm. “Well, ya don't need my permission for that. Unless ya need some of my mechs…?”

“Nope. This is just courtesy.” Bumblebee curled his lips in a grin. “Wouldn't want you guys getting antsy about some movement inside and come in, guns blazing.”

“Antsy.” Kup repeated the word like he was tasting it. “Ya know, I downloaded the local vernacular, but it still sounds odd ta me.”

Bumblebee chuckled. “You get used to it. Thanks, Kup.”

The old mech waved them off, already turning back toward the command center, which was looking a lot more permanent than the heavy tent that had been here a week ago when Bumblebee and Rumble first arrived. They probably should have introduced themselves to Kup then, but they’d arrived late.

“Holler if ya need me. Ya've got my comm.”

Bumblebee tilted his helm toward the Ark. “Come on, Rumble. We have work to do.”

His partner fell into step beside him as they made for the Ark, or what was left of it to be more precise. Curiously, Kup's crew could have moved into the abandoned ship rather than rebuild outside of it, but they had chosen not to do so. Out of respect? Perhaps.

“I'm not sure if I like him,” Rumble grumbled with a steely optic over his shoulder. His plating was fluffed, his hackles raised.

Bumblebee laughed despite himself. “Kup rubs everyone the wrong way to start. I'm sure you'll be friends in no time.”

“Doubt it,” Rumble muttered and pushed ahead of Bumblebee. “Don't we have work to do?”

“Yes. Though I don't think you know where to start.”

Rumble twisted around and walked backward, somehow avoiding the debris that littered the ground as they headed deeper into the dim. Once again, Bumblebee was forced to switch on his headlights.
“And you do?” Rumble asked.

“We'll start with Red Alert's berth, than his office. Between the two of us and the fact the Ark is running on emergency power, we should be able to get in,” Bumblebee replied. Though 'should' was the operative word here.

There was no one better at security than Red Alert. His contingency plans had contingency plans for his contingency plans. Some called him paranoid, but it was only because they couldn't draw a line between two unrelated events to see the chaos on the horizon. Red Alert could.

His processor bounced around in a thousand different directions, constantly providing him potential outcomes. Not unlike Prowl's tactical battle computer, but a lot more random and disorganized. It wasn't that Red Alert was paranoid, but that he could see every option imaginable, even those so implausible as to be impossible. When faced with that much data, was it any wonder he went a little nutty?

Red Alert knows all, sees all, hears all. That was the rumor. It was a joke. It was a whispered taunt to keep new recruits in line.

They never knew it was truth. Red Alert didn't truly recharge. He ran four different processing systems, and only one was ever down at a time. Teletraan fed him terrabytes of data on a daily basis, from the tiniest of insignificant details, to the largest of them.

Red Alert was brilliant. Red Alert was a little off. Red Alert was both things and more, and he allowed few to see that.

Was it any wonder that he and Prowl had been close?

“Pfft. How hard can it be?”

“You'll see,” Bumblebee said.

They started with Red Alert's room. Not the last on the officer's secondary hall, but close to it. The honor of the last room belonged to Perceptor. Red Alert’s door was closed and locked, the light glowing a baleful orange at them. It was receiving power, it was coded, and no, they couldn't bash through it.

Rumble, however, swaggered forward like it should have been as easy as oilcake. So Bumblebee let him at it and walked away, examining the other doors. Some were accessible, some were locked, and ah, here was Prowl's. Perhaps it was worth a look?

While Rumble fussed with Red Alert's lock, Bumblebee broke into Prowl's room, conveniently across from Red Alert's. Grit pinged on his armor as the door screeched back into the slot, and the unlighted dim came into view. It was a mess. Some Decepticon had come in here and thoroughly tossed it.

They'd done so to all of the accessible rooms, according to Optimus and Soundwave. Red Alert's must not have been worth the trouble.

Bumblebee cycled a ventilation and pulled on his Spec Ops mask. He couldn't be Bumblebee right now. He had to be someone else. Otherwise the memories would make his spark stutter. Because
Prowl was gone and nothing could change that.

He waded through broken datapads and datatrax. All of Prowl's carefully ordered belongings had been scattered in a haphazard fashion. They'd ripped the padding off his berth, tore into the wall behind it. The harddrive was gone from his in-room link-up to Teletraan, not that they would have found anything on it.

Prowl had a thorough self-executing wipe program. Everything they couldn't take with them was cleared of sensitive data.

Bumblebee searched, not entirely sure what he was looking for, but convinced he'd recognize it when he found it.

"Got it!"

Bumblebee inched out from under the berth and pushed back to his pedes, brushing in vain at the dirt on his armor. "Really?" he asked as he stepped back into the hall.

Rumble beamed at him. "Really, really." He jerked a thumb toward the door. "I, uh, may have broken it in the process though. You weren't intending to lock it back were you?"

"No." Bumblebee laughed and shook his helm. The door looked outright mangled and was that an impact mark? Had Rumble broke out the pile-drivers and somehow Bumblebee missed the noise? "Come on. Let's have a look. But try not to break anything."

"I make no promises."

They forced the door open – emergency power did not extend to sliding doors – and stepped into Red Alert's immaculate hab. While the door had power to the lock, the room itself did not. Bumblebee's headlights provided a meager glow.

"You take the computer, I'll look through the room," Bumblebee said as he headed toward the storage locker. He doubted anything would be hidden in such an obvious location, but he had to try.

"Got it."

They worked together in silence. A comfortable silence. They'd always had a rhythm, and understanding. It was one of the things Bumblebee missed when they went their separate ways. Rumble had always seemed to know what Bee was thinking.

Except when he didn't. Except that last, final argument that catapulted them to opposite sides of the war for millennia.

Bumblebee sighed.

Nothing in the locker. Nothing in the trunk under the berth. Nothing in the hidden paneling beside the berth. Nothing in the ceiling behind a loose panel. Nothing in a vent so small not even Laserbeak could fit.

Nothing, nothing, nothing.
“Any luck?” Bumblebee asked as he resisted the urge to punch a hole in the wall.

Rumble's fingers made a steady staccato across the keyboard. He hunched over the computer, his systems attached to the unit to keep it powered. The screen flickered, reflecting on his visor.

“Red Alert,” he said, through gritted denta, “was a fragging genius.”

Bumblebee’s lips curled. “Tell me something I don't know.”

“He and Prowl were fragging.”

“What?” Bumblebee joined Rumble at the computer, but all he could see were lines of code. “How do you know that?”

Rumble smirked at him, though his fingers never ceased. “Intuition.”

Bumblebee leaned hard against him, making his armor creak. Rumble's typing slowed as he struggled to keep the proper angle.

“Bee!”

“Don't give me some scrap answer like intuition,” he said, a note of irritation flickering through his spark.

Rumble fluffed his armor. “Well, that and a few seemingly innocuous internal messages that are the closest thing to flirting those studious types got.”

Bumblebee cycled his optics. “Oh.” He straightened and folded his arms over his chestplate. “I knew they were close, but they were also pretty private. Never would have guessed they were together though.”

“Frag, we didn't even know, and there's not much that happens on the Ark that the boss didn't know,” Rumble said with a quick tap-tap of his thumb. “Soundwave had a ton of secrets that he never told Megatron.”

Why?”

“Leverage. You never know when you might need it.” Rumble sighed and pushed back from the computer, his fists hitting the edge of the desk. “I can't get in.”

Bumblebee patted him on the shoulder. “It's all right. We'll think of something.”

“Beeeeeeeeeep!”

Bumblebee straightened, whirling toward the door as the sound of someone shouting his designation echoed through the corridor. He didn't recognize the voice.

“What in Unicron's Rusted Undergarments was that?” Rumble demanded, shooting to his pedes.

“Good question.” Bumblebee made his way to the door and peered out into the hallway.

He jerked back inside just as quickly as a blue blur went racing past him, nearly taking off one of
his sensory horns. Bumblebee cycled his optics and looked again, with caution this time, as said blue blur skidded to a halt, nearly impacting the wall at the end of the corridor.

He whipped around, the Autobot symbol on his chestplate as visible as the bright white and blue biolights that accented his frame. He had a crest on his helm. He looked vaguely familiar. One of Kup's mechs perhaps?

“Bumblebee!” His optics lit up, and he jogged back toward Bumblebee, his plating flared and his cooling fans running at max. “I've been looking everywhere for you. Comms don't work in here or something, I don't know. Point is, you've been recalled to Cybertron.”

“What? Why?” Rumble popped out from under Bumblebee's arm, looking the blue mech up and down. “And who're you?”

The fast mech popped off a sloppy salute. “Blurr,” he answered, and then dropped his hand. “Though I don't think that's really important right now. Commander Jazz is.”

Bumblebee's spark fluttered. “What do you mean? What about Jazz?”

“I don't know the details,” Blurr said. “That's above my pay grade. They just sent me to find you and deliver a message. We're prepping the space bridge for you right now.”

Rumble and Bumblebee exchanged glances. The work they were doing here was important but… Red Alert could keep. If Jazz felt the need to call them back, or even Soundwave, it had to be for a good reason.

They would have to return to Cybertron.

“All right. Let's go.”

~

Ratchet ached.

He'd felt like this before. He'd felt like this often. It was a welcome pain compared to what he endured under Constructicon possession.

That didn't mean he wanted to languish in it. For once, Ratchet didn't want to push himself. He wanted the rest he was owed.

He keyed open the door to the hab he shared with Wheeljack and lurched inside. He didn't drag his heels intentionally. He could barely move.

“Ratch?”

He blinked at the sight of his mate sitting at the main table, a disassembled something spread out in front of him. Wheeljack was always tinkering. It was how he relaxed, how he let his mind wander.

“Weren't you monitoring Jazz?” Ratchet asked.
“Percy's got him in hand.” Wheeljack stood, throwing a sheet over the pieces, no doubt to protect delicate internal components from settling dust. “You're back early. Meeting short?”

“More like I said my piece and escaped as soon as possible.” Ratchet stepped fully inside, and almost stumbled.

“Good. You need to rest. When was the last time ya recharged?”

Ratchet rubbed beneath his chevron. “I don't remember.” It wasn't even an exaggeration. He might have caught a few snatches of a stasis nap, but he couldn't fully relax in Decepticon territory, especially Constructicon territory, and couldn't power down.

Wheeljack's indicators flashed a worried blue at him. “Ratch...”

“Don't worry. I intend to recharge now.” Ratchet's smile was lopsided, but genuine. He headed for their berthroom.

“Let me grab you some energon first. I can tell you're low.”

“Thanks.”

“What're mates for?”

Ratchet's spark hummed with affection. Their bond pulsed warmly. He inched his way to the berth and collapsed on it with little grace. He groaned from sheer relief as the tightness in his backstrut loosened. He knew he needed a wash but honestly, that could wait.

He forcefully did not think about Grimlock worrying over Starscream or Jazz lying comatose on a medberth. He did not let himself dwell on Optimus' tenuous good health, or Red Alert locked forever in stasis, or the Twins who flipped when they were more than five feet apart.

He could not let himself fret over Cliffjumper, alone in the cell, trapped by his anger. Or First Aid who stared into space, rubbing his chestplate. Or Mirage who was nowhere near fit for duty, but pressed into it all the same.

Because if he did, if he stopped to think about all of the patients he felt he was failing, he knew he could not grant himself the rest he needed to repair them.

Wheeljack appeared in the doorway, a cube of mid-grade in one hand. “I can hear you frettin' all the way out there,” he commented as he approached the berth, offering the cube to Ratchet.

Sitting up to drink it felt like too much effort. In fact, he didn't even want to savor. So Ratchet propped himself on an elbow just enough so that he could down the cube in one quick swallow. He dispersed it with a flick of his fingers and sagged back onto the berth.

“It comes with the territory,” he sighed, and sank into the berth, which was neither plush nor soft, but suddenly the most comfortable piece of furniture he had ever discovered. “Thank you.”

Wheeljack's indicators glowed back at him. He reached for Ratchet's hand, gently taking his fingers and squeezing them. “Anytime. Rest well, Ratch. Holler if you need me.”
He turned to go, loosening his hold, but Ratchet had come to many conclusions in the past twenty-four hours. He tightened his own grip, halting Wheeljack in place.

“You don't have anywhere to be,” Ratchet said as Wheeljack faced him once more and their optics met. “And I could use the company.”

They’d shared a berth multiple times since reuniting. But it never lasted. Ratchet often excused himself, or shoved Wheeljack away, usually without conscious thought. He couldn't bear the weight or warmth of another frame too close to his.

Loneliness, however, was a worse pain, a worse ache. One Ratchet was tired of forcing onto himself.

His mate's field flashed with surprise, and then, hope. “Are ya sure?” Wheeljack asked as he moved closer, his thighs touching the berth. “I mean, I don't want ya to feel like ya hafta or--”

“Jack.” Ratchet squeezed Wheeljack's hand and gave it a light tug toward the berth. “I'm sure. I missed you. I missed recharging next to you. I missed the strength of your arms.” It was poetic, sure, but Ratchet was tired enough that it didn't embarrass him.

Besides, he knew how much Wheeljack loved the romantic slag.

“I missed it, too,” Wheeljack said as he moved with Ratchet's pull and slid onto the berth into the space Ratchet left for him, shifting to his back so that the foam could accommodate his winglets. “I just didn't want to push something you weren't ready for.”

“And I love you for it.” Ratchet snuggled into Wheeljack's side, throwing an arm and a leg over his mate, knowing how much Wheeljack enjoyed being pinned. “For other things, too, but this especially.”

Wheeljack cupped his face with a free hand, thumb gently sweeping the curve of Ratchet's jaw. “I promise not ta be offended if ya kick me off in the middle of the cycle again.”

Ratchet chuckled. “Good. Cause I can't promise not to flail, or online suddenly and not remember where I am.” He dipped his helm, pressing a kiss to Wheeljack's thumb. He was a long road from wanting to try anything involving his interface array, but a little harmless snuggling should do fine.

“It's all right if ya do.” Wheeljack's indicators pulsed a slow flicker of pale pink. “Recharge well, Ratchet. I'll guard ya.”

He smiled against Wheeljack's thumb and rested his helm on Wheeljack's shoulder. “I know you will.”

Ratchet ex-vented and shuttered his optics. He turned his focus to the familiar sounds of his mate's frame. To the measured ventilations, the idle tick-tick of his components, the thrum of his spark. Wheeljack's field surrounded him like a second warm embrace.

Recharge came easier than he could have hoped.

~
No one objected to him walking into Iacon.

No one noticed him sneak into the medical center, find Jazz's room, and invite himself inside. They hadn’t noticed the first time either. Back then, he hadn’t questioned why he was supposed to meet his contact in an unconscious mech’s recovery room. Spec Ops were mysterious for a reason.

Perhaps he should have questioned. Because walking into a room where he expected a Jazz in stasis, only to find a very much awake Jazz and Soundwave too, had been more than a little startling. Jazz was supposed to be in a critical-state recuperative stasis. Instead, he’d been online, alert, and a little snappish.

Then again, Vortex had started out rude, so maybe he was to blame.

“Good. You're here.”

There was a dim glow behind Jazz’s visor. He still played the part of an unconscious patient, despite evidence to the contrary.

“Sorry I had to interrupt your date with Blue,” Jazz continued, his tone surprisingly chipper for a mech who was attached to several machines that didn't seem to notice he was conscious. “Don't worry. You'll get another.”

“Ya know, you’ll heal faster if ya stay in stasis,” Vortex pointed out as he dared approach the medberth. Jazz could kill him just as easily near the door as he could with Vortex a few steps away.

“I know. I just don’t wanna be.” Jazz grinned at him and gestured toward the empty stool. “Have a seat. We should get down ta business before Percy comes by on a round.”

Vortex looked over his shoulder to the viewing window. The Autobots were hilariously short-staffed in the medical department. He'd only seen the sniper-cum-scientist in the main room, and he was typing away at a workdesk.

“Don't worry. We got about ten minutes or so,” Jazz continued airily.

Vortex turned back toward Jazz. “What th' frag am I doin' here? I'm supposed ta be investigatin' your attempted assassination. Like ya told me. Last time.”


Vortex's processor spun. He sat. “Yer not makin' any sense.”

“I will. Soon. Promise.” Jazz half-lit his visor, a parody of a wink. “All ya gotta know right now is what I tell ya. Remember that yer on loan to me.”

“Fine.” Vortex sat back, though mindful of his rotors. “What do ya want and when do ya want it.”

Jazz's smile was razor-sharp and dangerous. “Now that's the kind of cooperation I like to hear.” His glossa swept over his lips, visor taking on a dark gleam. “So let me tell ya how ta play the game. Ya might wanna take notes.”
In that moment, Vortex understood just what kind of monster Optimus Prime had kept leashed.

~

His sitter for the afternoon was Laserbeak, per the usual. As much affection as she might have carried for him, she had no qualms about tattling if he didn't consume energon as he was supposed to, and take regularly scheduled breaks. Not only that, she had perfected her guilt trip.

Optimus refueled properly. He rested when needed. He took walks around his office rather than stay chained behind his desk. There was a stack of paperwork that needed his attention, but under Laserbeak's watchful optic, he didn't allow himself to get buried in it.

That it also served as a fantastic distraction from the worry that hovered on the edge of his processor was a plus.

The knock on his door was expected. Laserbeak chirped at him, her comm telling him who was on the other side, not that Optimus didn't already know.

“Thank you, Laserbeak,” Optimus said as he remotely unlocked the door and let his visitor inside.

Grimlock stepped through the door, as imposing as ever, his helm dipping in a respectful nod. “Optimus.”

“Grimlock, thank you for coming.” Optimus gestured him inside and to a large chair he'd had Soundwave move here earlier this morning. “I apologize for asking you to meet here rather than on neutral ground.”

“I am aware of your ill-health, Optimus,” Grimlock said as he accepted the seat, carefully lowering himself down to it. “Let's consider it a polite courtesy if anyone asks. Decepticons do have manners.”

Optimus' lips curved despite himself. “That they do. This may get you in some trouble with Metalhawk.”

Grimlock barked a laugh. “The day I fear that overgrown crow is the day I join Megatron in the Pits.”

“Glad to see you are so confident.” Optimus folded his hands on the desk. “I hope you don't mind my assistant.” He gestured to Laserbeak, who raised her wings and ruffled her feather-plating.

Grimlock slumped comfortably into his chair. “Is Soundwave possessive or concerned?” He tilted his helm, the light behind his visor shifting to Laserbeak. “Methinks both.”

“Or just the latter, given the rumor I've been hearing about you and a certain Seeker,” Optimus replied with a raised orbital ridge.

“Mm. You have a point.” Grimlock rested his hands on the armrests. “Very well, Optimus. Enough chatter. On to business. How is your third?”
Optimus rubbed his forehelm. “Recovering. He will live, thanks to Ratchet. Speaking of, I'm told your second is on the road to recovery.”

Grimlock's engine growled. “So it would seem. If Shockwave wants to live, then he had better.”

“I didn't know Shockwave was responsible.” Optimus frowned. This was news to him. The going theory was to blame Metalhawk.

“He wasn't. But he did code the quote-unquote cure. If it turns out to be anything less, he will learn what Megatron didn't until it was too late.” Grimlock's visor flashed, his field briefly filling the room with restrained anger. “As for who is responsible, it was Acid Storm.”

Optimus cycled his optics. “But... he is a Seeker?”

“And one apparently dissatisfied with Starscream's return to Cybertron. He was last seen speeding toward Nova Cronum. I suspect Metalhawk got in his helm.” Grimlock sighed with the resigned air of a leader sharing his grievances with another. “If there is one thing Metalhawk does better than both of us, it is whisper lies as sweet as truth.”

“Unfortunately, you are right. I believe he is responsible for Jazz's condition as well, especially considering I am certain you and yours are not.”

Grimlock spat a blat of static at Optimus. “Of course not. I may act dumb, but I'm not as stupid as I pretend to be.”

The guilt returned, clawing at Optimus’ spark. As did the shame. It was the worst. There were many things Optimus regretted. He felt he could never make up for the way he had treated the Dinobots.

“I only wish I'd had the decency to notice sooner.”

Grimlock shook his helm and waved a dismissive hand. “I didn't come here to assuage your guilt, Prime. What did you want to discuss?”

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “Fair enough.” He sat back in his chair as Laserbeak made an untranslatable sound behind him. He pulled a nearby datapad closer. “Metalhawk is making an effort to turn us against one another. Perhaps he'll think this meeting is an intended confrontation, perhaps not. But it is my belief we will need to handle him sooner or later.”

“And by handle you mean?”

“Arrest, preferably. I do not believe any other response would be treated kindly by the surviving Neutrals or the Galactic Council.”

“Pfft.” Grimlock straightened a leg, looking more than a little uncomfortable in the chair. “You're still soft, Optimus.”

He cycled another vent, slower this time. “Only because I need to be in this instance.” If Jazz had not survived, Optimus did not know how much softer he could allowed himself to be. “I do not wish for another war even if it becomes that of us versus them.”
“I suppose you have a plan.”

“Something like one.” Optimus slid the datapad toward Grimlock. “We are gathering evidence: anecdotal, copies of transmissions, that sort of thing. Anything that will stand up in the Galactic Court or to examination by whatever secondary leadership there is for the Neutrals.”

Grimlock accepted the datapad, but he didn't power it on. Instead, it was stowed in his subspace.

“From what I hear, the Galactic Council doesn't give a slag what Cybertronians do. We're black-marked.”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Optimus rubbed at his forehelm, feeling an ache building. Laserbeak chirped concern; he offered a quiet reassurance. “But needs must.”

“Then we need another--” Grimlock cut off, sitting up straight. “Hold on a moment, Optimus.”

He rose to his pedes and turned his back to Optimus, one hand rising to his comm. He spoke internally, probably a private Decepticon matter. Optimus did him the courtesy of not trying to speculate, turning instead to offer Laserbeak an energon treat. She remained miffed about Grimlock's presence.

Grimlock's field abruptly spiked with alarm, prompting Optimus to whirl back around. The Dinobot's armor clamped tightly to his frame. Optimus heard a low whine, like that of defensive protocols automatically activating. Grimlock's engine revved, and his hand dropped.

“I apologize,” he said, the light behind his visor a fierce gleam. “Something's come up. I have to go.”

“Is everything all right?” Optimus asked, pushing to stand, a sense of alarm drizzling through his spark.

“No. But it's a Decepticon matter, not yours.” Grimlock started toward the door, his pace hurried and a touch frantic. “We'll talk about Metalhawk later.”

He left before Optimus could form a response or offer his assistance. He had never seen Grimlock look so rattled. Not afraid, but certainly alarmed.

Optimus turned back toward Laserbeak. “Do you know what is going on?”

--A ship landed in Iacon,-- Laserbeak replied, her optics dimming as they often did when she communicated internally with Soundwave. -It's… oh, no.--

“What? What is it?”

She shook her head, her feathers ruffling before drawing tight to her frame.

“Laserbeak?”

Optimus' door opened, and if it was possible for a sliding door to slam, his certainly did. Soundwave appeared in the frame, harried for all that he wore his mask and visor both. Laserbeak immediately rose from the back of Optimus' chair, landing on Soundwave's shoulder opposite his shoulder cannon.
A soothing sound echoed in Soundwave's chassis as he petted her helm. She still shifted closer to his intake, as though begging to take shelter in his dock.

A chill raced up Optimus' backstrut. “What is going on?” he demanded. “Laserbeak is frightened, and Grimlock ran out of here as though Megatron's ghost wreaks havoc in Iacon.”

“Optimus’ observation not far from truth,” Soundwave said. He stepped entirely inside, letting the door shut behind him. “It is the DJD.”

Optimus frowned. A cold chill danced down his strut. “I thought they were myth.”

“No myth.” Soundwave hurried toward him, only to draw short of actually touching him, ever conscious of Optimus' boundaries. “They are dangerous, and they are here.”

Laserbeak nuzzled at Soundwave's helm again, until finally he took a step back and opened his dock, allowing her to slot inside. Optimus watched her, this brave cassette who had never feared anything, and the chill in his back worked deeper.

“What do they want?”

Soundwave folded his arms over his dock, as though a secondary guard for the cassette – possibly cassettes as Optimus did not see Buzzsaw – within.

“Tarn and crew loyal to Megatron, not the Cause,” Soundwave said, his monotone edged with static. “Grimlock undoubtedly on List. Along with Starscream and any Decepticon defectors.”

“Including yourself I gather,” Optimus said.

Soundwave nodded.

“But there are only five of them. Surely between the two of us, Autobots and Decepticons, we have nothing to worry about it.”

“Five,” Soundwave repeated, and his gaze bore into Optimus'. “Five murdering outliers without a kill code.”

In other words, five mechs with extraordinary abilities that could possibly not be countered. Only without the convenient code which would wipe them, as Soundwave and Jazz had done to the Phase Sixers currently in Decepticon cold storage. Even so, they were outnumbered by the combined forces of Autobot and Decepticon.

Provided that no Deceptions currently willing to serve under Grimlock wouldn't change their minds if presented with a potentially better offer.

Optimus rubbed his forehelm. “I must contact Grimlock and offer assistance. Political lines matter very little in such a matter as this.”

“Assistance rejected.”

“What?”
Soundwave cycled a ventilation. “Pride,” he said. “Decepticons value strength. Grimlock must defeat Tarn on his own, or he loses that support. It is Decepticon law.”

“That's ridiculous,” Optimus said, staring at Soundwave. “There is no shame in seeking assistance for a matter beyond your capability.”

“It is law,” Soundwave repeated.

“Would the Decepticons follow Tarn?”

“Negative. Only because Tarn would not lead. He would locate suitable candidate.”

Optimus' engine growled. It might be Decepticon law, but surely Grimlock would have dismissed such ridiculous notions.

Optimus raised his hand to his personal comm only to hesitate. Yes, Grimlock might have ignored said laws, but the Decepticons he led had not. While they respected his strength and his ability, it would not take much for his soldiers to turn on him. Optimus could not afford for the Decepticons to find new leadership. He suspected whomever rose to the top – once Grimlock and Starscream were ousted – might not be so amenable to the truce.

Especially if it were Tarn.

Optimus lowered his hand. “I have every faith in Grimlock's abilities,” he said, though it pained him to do so. He gave Soundwave a sidelong look. “Hypothetically speaking, were Grimlock to be overcome, what would happen next?”

Soundwave's weight shifted. His field buzzed into the room, distressed. “Traitors on List to be handled first,” he said. “List compiled by Kaon.”

“Traitors?”


Optimus folded his arms over his chestplate. His spark was a mad flutter within his chassis. “Do the DJD come after Autobots?”

“No.” Soundwave's field dipped, flattening Optimus' hopes. “However, Optimus betrayed his master. Autobots defied Megatron. That alone is worth punishment.”

Optimus stared at him. “Tarn will attack simply because I used to be Megatron's slave.”

Soundwave inclined his helm. “Slavery suitable punishment of those responsible for Autobot oppression.”

“That… that is ridiculous.” Optimus' tank churned. He turned away from Soundwave, sweeping a hand over his helm. “He sees us as Megatron's property? As belonging to the Decepticons? That's not a loyalist, that's an extremist!”

“Yes.”
One word, one confirmation.

Fanatics were the worst. They could not be reasoned with. They would not bargain. They saw only one truth and could not be dissuaded.

If Grimlock fell, though Optimus did not want to even consider a universe where Grimlock could not defeat one such as Tarn, then the Autobots had to be prepared.

Optimus was the commander on call. Springer was off-shift. Ultra Magnus was in recharge. Blaster was in the command center. Ratchet was supposed to be resting. Jazz was still in stasis lock.

“Send out an alert,” Optimus said as his hands drew into fists. He had thought they were done with war.

He had not known Megatron had one more hand to play.

“Call everyone to standby,” Optimus continued, his processor already working to plot a best course of action. “ Summon leadership to an emergency meeting. I do not know how long we have, but I refuse to be caught unawares.”

“Understood.” Soundwave turned away from him, one hand rising to his comm.

The urge to act made Optimus jittery. He despised waiting around for something to happen. He would prefer to meet the DJD head on, standing alongside Grimlock in a show of solidarity. It felt as though he were throwing Grimlock to the wolves, so to speak.

Optimus' comm pinged. He expected it to be Ultra Magnus, either confirming he would be at the meeting, or confused as to why it had been called.

Irritation overcame Optimus before he could tamp it down. Metalhawk. Of course. The timing of this could not be a coincidence.

Optimus cycled a ventilation and answered the ping. “Metalhawk, I am in the middle of something important, so I pray that this is as well.” Did he sound terse? A part of him didn't care anymore.

Metalhawk was working very hard to undermine everything Optimus struggled to rebuild. It left him testy. It left him unwilling to play along.

It left him a lot less polite than he used to be.

“I apologize for interrupting,” the Neutral claimed, though he didn't sound sorry at all. “I have heard of your recent ill health. I called to inquire about your current condition and whether you were available for a meeting.”

Optimus ground his denta. “Thank you for your concern. I am fine. As far as meetings go, however, there is a matter of greater importance at the moment. Surely you are aware of what is happening in Iacon?”

“The Decepticons have a new arrival. That is hardly anything that should concern me,” Metalhawk replied blandly. “The terms of our agreement state that we are all under no obligation to report any Cybertronians who wish to return home.”
Optimus twitched. “They are not mere arrivals, Metalhawk. There are the Decepticon Justice
Division. I am sure you have heard of them.”

“Only tales meant to frighten.” Metalhawk could not have sounded more dismissive if he tried.
“We are Neutrals, therefore we have nothing to fear. Though I can see where you might be
concerned, given the Decepticon defectors who have joined your ranks.”

“I understand you have a defector as well,” Optimus reminded him. “Horri-bull, correct?”

“It is curious how you know that.” Metalhawks' tone took on a sharper cant. “Regardless, yes, I do
have a Decepticon defector. But compared to what waits for the DJD in Iacon, and also Polyhex, I
am not concerned.”

“Would that we could all be so confident,” Optimus replied before he could stop himself. He
paused to regain his control. “So you can see, I do not have the time for a private meeting
regarding…. I apologize, what was it you wanted to discuss?”

“I never said.” Metalhawk went back to sounding gleefully sly. “But it does seem like you have far
more important matters at hand. I'll ping you again later.”

The comm ended before Optimus could so much as retort or argue otherwise. He could, of course,
dial Metalhawk back and seek more information, but he was loath to do so.

“Optimus?”

He shook his helm and turned back toward Soundwave. “That was Metalhawk. He wanted a
meeting. He mentioned my ill health but said nothing of Jazz's. Perhaps his operative has not
reported back to him yet.”

Soundwave made a non-committal sound. “DJD greater concern.”

“Yes, of course. Have you contacted the others?” Optimus moved to his desk, hurriedly gathering
up what datapads he thought might be important.

“Affirmative. Blaster relayed orders to all involved. Proposed contacting Earth.”

“Hmm.” Optimus shifted a stack into his arms and headed for the door, Soundwave falling into
step beside him. “No. Earth may be our only escape, should the need arise.”

He did not want to abandon Cybertron again. But he liked the idea of dying even less. Better to
survive and fight another day.

“Understood.” Soundwave slid in front of him before Optimus could key the door open. He raised
his hands, which hovered out in request, his field echoing it as well.

There was room aplenty for Optimus to ignore the request and slide beyond Soundwave. He was
not trapped. An offer had been made. That courtesy made it so easy for him to accept.

Optimus' own field relented as he shuffled his plating. Silent acceptance. The warmth of
Soundwave's hands fell on his shoulders before sliding down to cup his elbows. Soundwave
stepped into his inner field space, his forehelm tilting to press against Optimus'.
Optimus could read his concern as easily as he could feel his own worry. “It will take a lot more than Megatron's pet enforcers to kill me,” he murmured.

“Soundwave aware,” the former Decepticon replied. “Caution still requested.”

“I could say the same for you. No unnecessary risks, do you understand?” Optimus replied as Soundwave drew back, though he kept his hands on Optimus' arms.

“Affirmative.” Soundwave's visor glowed a dim crimson. “Preference to remaining near Optimus.”

He managed a smile. “That would be mine as well. I cannot promise anything, Soundwave. But I will do my best to try.”

“My thanks.”

“None needed.” Optimus lifted a hand, resting his fingers over Soundwave's gentle hold. “Now let us form a course of action that protects all of us, shall we?”

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Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

"Land of All," Woodkid

Chapter Fifteen of Reign covers the battle between the DJD and the Decepticons in a bit more detail if you're curious. :)

Gathering all of the command staff to an emergency meeting would take longer than expected. Soundwave told Optimus to go ahead of him while he made a detour to a nearby office, one that was unused and as such, dusty and unfurnished. But it was private, which was what he intended.

Before he so much as keyed the override into the door, Laserbeak was jittering to be deployed. She knew why they were here and excitement was enough to override the agitation she felt at mere thought of the DJD.

“Be calm,” Soundwave said as the last key was inputted.

His actions belied his words; however, as the moment the door opened, Soundwave released her from his dock. She took the air with a happy chirp, and then dove toward her fellow cassette, nearly hitting Rumble in the face.

He squawked with surprise and hurried to catch her, a light-hearted laugh escaping him. “Yeah, yeah. I missed ya, too feather-brain,” he said as they bopped helms, and she chirped at him.

Buzzsaw was already present, roosting on a dusty, but empty shelf in a high corner. Ravage was here, too, though Soundwave had not sent for her. She sat in the middle of the room, her gaze focused on Soundwave. Frenzy had taken the sole chair and was, at the moment, spinning aimlessly around in it.

“And the gang's all here,” Frenzy sang with a happy giggle. “It's about time we got the band back together.”

“What band?” Ravage asked dryly, but the bond still thrummed with affection. “It is a temporary reunion at that, brat.”

Frenzy's pedes hit the ground, skidding him to a stop. “What? No, no. You're here. No way you're going back to that dirtball.”

“Frenzy,” Soundwave said, a warning.

Frenzy's lower lip jutted out in a pout. “It ain't fair, boss. Everyone's off doin' their thing. Where's that leave me?”

Ravage arched a brow. “Spending a lot of time in Blaster's company, as I understand it.”

Soundwave cycled a ventilation. He had not been monitoring his cassettes and their off-cycle
activities because he trusted them. This, however, was news.

Had he neglected Frenzy so much that he would court another carrier?

Frenzy's faceplate heated. “It's not like that, boss!” he said, his tone earnest and truthful. “Ain't no way I'm hookin' up with a stiff like Blaster. It's just, you know, Eject is kind of fun to be around.” He scratched at his chin, gaze shifting away. “Especially since my stupid twin is too busy making goo-goo optics at Bee now.”

“I am not!” Rumble retorted, folding his arms over his chestplate. “Ya coulda came with us, ya know.”

“Yeah. That's exactly where I want to be. The Frenzy-shaped spike-block in the middle.” Frenzy huffed a ventilation. “No, thank you.”

Laserbeak chirped loudly. Buzzsaw rustled his feathers.

--Off-track we are getting,-- Laserbeak sent to all of them, her tone as stern as the one Soundwave was preparing to use. --Important matters right now, yes?--

“Yes,” Soundwave confirmed. He looked at each one of his cassettes and tried not to imagine the many ways in which the DJD could slaughter them. “There is danger here.”

“The DJD,” Ravage confirmed quietly. “Yes, I know. It is one of the reasons I chose to return. Though I cannot stay.” She gave Frenzy an apologetic glance.

“I guess there is one downside to joining the Autobots,” Rumble said with a sigh. “So what's the plan, boss? We ain't runnin', are we?”

Soundwave shook his helm. “Negative. We stand and fight.”

“Suicide mission,” Buzzsaw squawked, as verbose as always.

“Not so,” Soundwave said. “We will provide support to the Autobots.” He shifted his gaze to Ravage. “Comfortable monitoring Iacon?”

She dipped her helm. “You wish me to be the advance warning.”

“Affirmative.”

“If it means protecting Hound and my family, then yes, I am comfortable.” Her optics glittered with menace.

All of Soundwave's cassettes were capable in their own right. But Ravage was his best spy for a reason. He trusted that she would not be spotted or risk herself.

Soundwave inclined his helm. “Buzzsaw to provide support.”

Buzzsaw squawked his outrage, wings lifting and feather-plating ruffling to double his size.

Ravage cast him an amused look. “Don't worry. I'll protect you.”
Buzzsaw huffed a ventilation. “Boss?”

“Would you rather she go alone?”

“Laserbeak…?”

“Will be watching Optimus Prime, per her request,” Soundwave said, perhaps a touch sharper than he meant.

He knew Buzzsaw wasn't a coward. While he feared the DJD – anyone in their right processor held a healthy respect for Megatron's killing team – Buzzsaw was not trying to weasel out of a task. He simply preferred to stay close to Soundwave.

Buzzsaw huffed again and settled down harder onto the shelf. “Fine.”

“What about us, boss?” Rumble asked, bouncing up and down on his heels. “We can't sneak like Rav can.”


--Soundwave really is becoming Director of Security,-- Laserbeak transmitted with a note of humor and affection. It was a narrow-band send, he noticed. He sent her a long look, but she preened at him.

“Check for places the DJD might sneak by, huh? Will do!” Rumble snapped off a salute. “Just so I'm clear, though, are we workin' with Jazz's team on this?”

Soundwave shook his helm. “Jazz unavailable. Mirage unreceptive to our assistance.”

“Some mechs can really hold a grudge,” Frenzy commented.

He was referring, of course, to the fact Mirage could not sneak around half as well as he claimed without the invisibility cloak he relied upon far too much. Which meant, more often than not, Ravage could sniff him out, or Buzzsaw could see right through the cloak.

Mirage never quite got over the indignity of being captured and released from the Nemesis by Soundwave and his team. They had not reported the incursion to Megatron, as it was pointless, Mirage had learned nothing.

Well, nothing except not to underestimate Soundwave and the cassettes despite their origins.

“How long do you think we have?” Ravage asked.

“Peaceful Tyranny landed ten minutes ago,” Soundwave replied, his backplating shuffling without his consent. “Tarn likely biding his time for full effect.”

“He always did love to put on a show,” Frenzy muttered and hopped to his pedes, stretching his arms over his helm. “Let's get this over with then. I don't wanna wait around for my death.”

“No one is dyin’!” Rumble snapped, punching his brother in the shoulder.
Frenzy growled at him, rubbing the scuffed plating. “I'm just sayin'. We oughta be realistic.”

“Enough you two,” Ravage hissed, bearing her fangs, something that tended to be enough to end their bickering. “Soundwave, is there anything else we need to know?”

“Negative.” Soundwave's gaze landed on each of them in turn, conveying his affection across their shared bond. That and his hope that they keep themselves safe. “Mission given. Cassette dismissed.”

Ravage, however, flicked her audials. “Soundwave, a word?”

He inclined his helm. “Of course. Buzzsaw, wait in the hall. The rest--”

“Yeah, yeah. We know our duties.” Rumble grinned and bopped his brother on the shoulder. “Come on, Frenzy. Tell me about Eject before we have to go our separate ways.”

Frenzy coughed a ventilation.

They all filed out, leaving Soundwave and Ravage alone. She was serene as she sat there, and Soundwave lowered himself to a knee so that he could be on an even ground with her. He suspected he knew what this was about. He had feared this for many months now, as much as he expected it.

“What is it?”

“You already know.” Ravage rose up and moved closer, into his personal space, so that their energy fields meshed. “This is my final mission, Soundwave. After this, I plan to return to Earth. To Hound.”

Yes. It was exactly as he'd feared.

Soundwave dipped his helm. “Understood.” He gathered himself, forced out the words. “Ravage wishes to break to the bond.”

Her optics fluttered. Her gaze dropped. “Yes.” Her claws kneaded an anxious pattern on the floor. “I made him that promise centuries ago, Soundwave. He has the mods for this very reason, and I let the war be an excuse to delay it. I don't want to wait anymore.”

“Ravage will be missed.”

“I know.” She stepped even closer, allowing him to embrace her, as he hadn't done in years. “If you have need of me, I will be there. You and the others will always be my family. Even Frenzy.”

A short laugh escaped Soundwave before he could stop it. Frenzy had made it a personal mission to antagonize Ravage at every opportunity. It had become something of a game between them over the years.

“A short laugh escaped Soundwave before he could stop it. Frenzy had made it a personal mission to antagonize Ravage at every opportunity. It had become something of a game between them over the years.


Something not unlike a feline purr rippled through Ravage's frame. “Of course.” She bopped him with the top of her helm and then sat back on her haunches. “I will spare you the pain and tell the others.”
Soundwave nodded. “Thank you.”

He could not say that he was glad she was leaving. But he was glad she had found happiness. It was all he could have hoped for.

Ravage pushed to her pedes with all the grace her frame provided. “And don't worry. I'm pretty sure Rumble's going to be sticking around for a longer while yet. He's not ready to leave the nest.”

Whereas Ravage, his oldest and most faithful cassette, had been ready to fly for ages. Not because she despised him, but because her spark called for another. Soundwave had known, even millennia ago when he'd asked the feline cassette to be his first, that someday, he would be wishing her farewell.

“Ravage is loved.”

Her tail flicked, her optics bright with affection. “Soundwave is loved, too,” she said, and headed for the door. “Now let's show these DJD not everyone is afraid of them.”

~

“All non-essential personnel and anyone who doesn't wish to fight is to depart for Earth via the space bridge,” Optimus said as he met the optics of every one of his commanders and leadership team. “No one has to justify their desire to leave. It is not cowardice.”

“I doubt there are many who would,” Ultra Magnus said, his usual grave tone decidedly more dark in this moment.

“Unless we have a transport capable of life support, I can't move my patients,” Ratchet said as he rubbed at his chevron. “Well, theoretically I could, but I don't know how that travel will affect them. Especially Red Alert.”

Optimus inclined his helm. “The Xantium is fully-equipped, Ratchet. Make what arrangements you need.”

“Are we really going to run from a bunch of Cons?” Springer asked as he folded his arms over his chest. Every inch of him bristled with outrage. “I don't see what there is to be afraid of.”

“Springer blind,” Soundwave said, his tone so frosty Optimus felt as though he should brush ice from his armor.

Springer's optics narrowed. He straightened in his chair, armor quivering. “Or maybe you are a coward,” he hissed.

Optimus raised a hand as Laserbeak squawked her outrage. “Enough,” he said, tone sharp, cutting through the tension. “We accomplish nothing by arguing amongst ourselves, save creating division at a time when unity is needed most. Am I clear?”

“Affirmative,” Soundwave said, though his gaze did not leave Springer's. “Apologies offered.”
“And accepted.” Optimus turned his attention to Springer, who cut his optics toward Optimus before slouching a bit in his chair.

“Sorry,” he bit out, though it sounded insincere. “But I still say we should stand and fight.”

“Which is our intention,” Ultra Magnus pointed out, shooting his former second a chastising look which did more to guilt Springer than Optimus' own. “We will be the last line of defense for those on Earth. Even destroying the space bridge if we must.”

Optimus shook his helm. “Let us hope it does not come to that. Right now, we are merely formulating contingency plans. We don't want to be caught ill-prepared.”

“Besides all of that, we are grossly understaffed.” Mirage pointed out, present against Optimus' better judgment, but having no one else to stand in for Jazz. “Ultra Magnus' unit is the only fully-functional team we have, and even so, half of it is staffed by mechs lacking in experience.”

“They are fully trained,” Springer said with a narrowing of his optics.

“Against the might of someone such as the DJD, I would hesitate to put them on the front lines however,” Ultra Magnus said as he rested a calming hand on Springer's shoulder. “Mirage is correct. Less than half of my unit are suitable, and I have been informed putting Drift against the DJD is tantamount to murder.”

Yes. Rumor had it that there was little Tarn and his unit despised more than traitors, especially those who had been highly-ranked once upon a time. Drift certainly fit that bill. And now, so would Soundwave.

“Then lucky he is safe on Earth,” Ratchet said. “Which means Mirage is right. While it may seem cowardly to flee, I am of the mind that we save as many sparks as possible.”

“I don't think there is anyone here would disagree with that,” Optimus said gently.

This meeting had already drawn on longer than anyone was comfortable with, and tensions and tempers were high. Knowing a threat was so close made them all antsy.

But Optimus dared not risk any misunderstandings. In this, communication was critical. It could be the difference between survival and a torturous end.

Soundwave stirred and rose to his pedes, attracting everyone's attention. His visor turned in the direction of Iacon as Laserbeak startled on Optimus' shoulder. Both of their fields pulsed in sync, though Optimus was unable to immediately identify it.

He put down his datapad. “What is it?”

“It would appear we took precautions for nothing,” Ultra Magnus said with a sigh. “Am I correct, Soundwave?”

“Affirmative.” Some of the tension eased out of Soundwave's frame. “Ravage confirms Tarn's deactivation.”

Optimus cycled his optics. “Grimlock defeated him?”
Soundwave’s visor flashed, a glint of brighter red through the crimson transsteel. “Grimlock and Starscream. Other surviving members surrendered. Prisoners taken.”

Air rushed out of the room, taking the anxiety and tension with it. Optimus audibly heard several defensive protocols stall and disable.

“Thank Primus.” Ratchet sank low into his chair. “Not that I ever doubted Grimlock's ability.”

“If anything, this at least gave us practice for potential future disasters,” Ultra Magnus commented as he made a notation on his datapad. The relief in his field, however, was proof of his prior concern.

Springer swept a hand over his helm. “We worried for nothing,” he said, with a crooked grin. “Kinda sad I missed the chance to try my blade against theirs, though.”

“Be grateful that you did,” Ultra Magnus said.

“Perhaps if you're nice, Starscream will let you spar against the survivors,” Ratchet said with a roll of his optics. He rose to his pedes. “Permission to go to Iacon and offer medical aid if needed?”

Optimus inclined his helm. “So long as Jazz is stable, yes. Starscream should have been berthbound.”

“Well, if Shockwave was worth half of what he claimed, then his anti-virus would have worked like he said it would.” Ratchet shrugged, but it was far from dismissive. “And yeah, Jazz is stable. Aid and Percy can keep an optic with him. Was hopin' to take Jack with me. He misses the kids.”

“Not to put a damper on your familial ties, Ratchet, but are we certain allowing this is politically sound?” Ultra Magnus asked, shooting a gaze to Optimus. “It is not that I think we should be concerned about Grimlock, but there is the matter of Metalhawk.”

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “You do have a point.” He looked at Ratchet. “Put in a request for a leave of absence for yourself and Wheeljack as before.”

“Politically set aside Autobot ties for a vacation to Iacon to hang out with the sparklings. Got it.” Ratchet smirked. “And don't worry, Magnus. I wasn't offended. Good thing is, medical ethics means I can render aid to anyone in need of it regardless of faction ties.”

That, at least, had been written into the treaty. Any medical officer could offer aid to any mech needing it, and said mech was allowed to accept it without fearing political repercussions. That was, only if said medical officer had accidentally stumbled upon the injured mech. Requests for medical aid had to come through political lines.

It was a somewhat hazy distinction, but very important.

“Exactly. Feel free to leave whenever you are ready, Ratchet. I'll have your request set to auto-approve,” Optimus said.

“Thanks, Optimus.” Ratchet tipped his helm in a nod to the other members of command and took his leave.
“I guess that means I should go, too,” Springer said as he stood, armor clanking as it shuffled and resettled around him, no doubt shifting from standby defensive to a more normal configuration. “I'll inform everyone we are no longer in a state of emergency and rearrange the shift schedules.”

“We should all probably disperse in order to restore order to what had become a moment of fear for many of our residents,” Ultra Magnus stated. “Unless there is another more pressing matter we should handle first.”

Optimus shook his helm. “No. Everything else can wait.” He set down his datapad. “I'll contact Grimlock once the dust settles and see if there is anything he needs. In the meantime, everyone rest, relax, and continue working to improve our living situation on Cybertron.”

No one disagreed thankfully. Optimus could see the strain in everyone, even Soundwave, and was relieved all they'd had to deal with was a brief scare.

Ultra Magnus scooted closer to Optimus as Springer and a noticeably-silent Mirage filed out. Soundwave lingered in the doorway, but a single nod from Optimus apparently spoke a wealth of words as he, too, departed.

“Something on your processor, Magnus?” Optimus asked.

His second's expression was earnest, and beneath it all, almost gleeful. “I believe I have found the solution for our Metalhawk problem.”

Optimus cycled his optics. “Please, share.”

Ultra Magnus held out a datapad to him and Optimus powered it on. A single document lit the screen, which he recognized as a formal copy of the treaty they had all signed. Every last page of it, which was extensive.

Cooperation and concession meant the treaty had gone through several revisions. Not even Optimus was sure he knew every last detail. Ultra Magnus, of course, had made it his business to memorize every line and mark of punctuation.

“I don't follow,” Optimus said.

Ultra Magnus reached over the edge of the datapad, tapping several icons before he brought up another screen, this one with sections of the treaty copy and pasted. Portions of those sections had been highlighted.

“We have the proof, with Chromedome's testimony, that Metalhawk has violated terms of the treaty,” Ultra Magnus said. “It should be enough to remove him from office at the very least.”

“You are certain?”

Ultra Magnus inclined his helm. “When we discussed how to punish offenders of local law, we also discussed jurisdiction regarding other factions. If wrongdoing is suspected in terms of violating the treaty, we are within our rights to demand Metalhawk answer our grievances.”

Optimus skimmed over the text. “Who would preside?”

“We would have to reach out to the Galactic Counsel. Or, barring that, a jury of peers selected from
each of the three factions at random,” Ultra Magnus answered. “It is an attempt to avoid partiality.”

“Is Chromedome's testimony enough?”

Ultra Magnus cycled a ventilation and rubbed at his forehelm. “That part is unclear. The treaty only refers to ‘sufficient proof to support accusations’ but doesn't clarify what qualifies.” His engine rumbled a dissatisfied note. “I apologize Optimus. This is something I should have noticed in the negotiations.”

Optimus shook his helm. “It is all right, Ultra Magnus. We are none of us perfect, and we could not have anticipated this. We spent many an hour on the treaty. I am not surprised it is still imperfect.”

Sadly, his words did little to reassure the stoic commander.

“I appreciate your saying so.” Ultra Magnus straightened. “If we can get Lord Grimlock to register with us, our complaint will have more bearing. Especially if he has proof Metalhawk was responsible for Starscream's injury.”

“And other things,” Optimus murmured. He was sure Metalhawk was guilty of a lot more than a few conspiracies. Given the guilt he'd seen in Chromedome's visor, Optimus wasn't sure he wanted to know. He feared the list of transgressions was more than he could bear.

“I will speak with Grimlock,” Optimus said, adding it to the list of items he would need to address with the Decepticon leader. “Do you suggest we spend time building a case or would it be more prudent to confront him as soon as possible.”

Ultra Magnus cycled a long ventilation. “I hesitate to face him with so little physical evidence, but I fear what else he might have planned. We already have one casualty in the medbay. I daren't risk more.”

Optimus handed him back the datapad and frowned. “What are the repercussions if the accusations prove unsubstantiated?”

“We'll owe reparations to be decided by the offended party.” Ultra Magnus folded his arms across his chestplate. “No legal concessions thankfully. For instance, he cannot demand you step down. But he can ask for energon, credits, supplies, the return of prisoners, et cetera.”

Optimus gnawed on the inside of his cheek, processor spinning. “Is there anything he can ask which we cannot afford to lose?”

“We are sharing resources among the three factions as it is. I cannot imagine a concession Metalhawk would want that we would be happy to part with,” Ultra Magnus admitted. “But he is crafty and sly, not unlike Starscream actually. I wager that there is much we can't afford to lose, but we won't know what it is until he asks for it.”

A conundrum of the highest degree then.

Optimus, however, trusted Ultra Magnus. The only mech who possibly understood more about Cybertronian law and contract law in general was Prowl, and that worthy was no longer here to offer advice. Ultra Magnus had studied under the great Tyrest prior to offering his conscription to Optimus.
“Then we move forward,” Optimus said with a decisive nod, praying he was not making another ill-fated decision. “The threat of the unknown means I would rather be forced to concede some special item, rather than risk harm to any of my Autobots while playing political games.”

Ultra Magnus' engine rumbled. “Understood.” He unfolded his arms. “For what it is worth, I am in agreement with you. I can guarantee that Springer would be as well. Though I wager he will be disappointed to know we won't defeat Metalhawk in some grand battle.”

The corner of Optimus' lips curved. Springer was so very much like a young Ironhide that it often pained Optimus to see him.

“With any luck, it will not come to that,” Optimus said. “I will seek the counsel of others, but I suspect everyone else will agree that this is the best course of action.”

Optimus rubbed at his forehelm. “Also, Metalhawk made an attempt to contact me only hours ago. Of course, I was too busy with the potential DJD attack, and I put him off. Perhaps I should contact him and agree to that meeting now.”

“Are you suggesting an ambush of sorts?”

“Not by such a term, but yes.”

Ultra Magnus' field glimmered with approval. “You have changed, Optimus.”

He startled, looking up at one of his oldest and dearest friends. “When mechs say such, it is generally an insult.”

“In this case, it is not.” Ultra Magnus' field reached out, a gentle wave of comfort. “I have always admired your willingness to cling to a moral center, and I now admire that you are willing to do what is necessary to protect your people. It means that we were all right.”

Optimus tilted his helm. “Right about what?”

“ELECTING you to the position of Prime, of course.” Ultra Magnus smiled, and that in itself was reward enough, for he so rarely did so. “Did you know there were other candidates?”

“No. I didn't.” To be fair, he had spent many days after Jazz's successful coup in the medbay, in and out of stasis. He still wasn't fully capable by the time he barged in on the meeting with Grimlock and Metalhawk.

“There were three,” Ultra Magnus replied, his field lingering against Optimus’ in subtle comfort. “Metalhawk insisted upon it. He stated that an election wasn't much of one without other candidates. Three others were nominated, myself included.”

“And Jazz, I suspect,” Optimus said. He tapped his chin, trying to consider who they could have put forth for a third. Kup perhaps? He was popular.

But no, Kup had been on Earth during the entirety of that decision. Certainly not Ratchet, he would have cursed them all for suggesting such a thing.

Did it matter? Perhaps not. Optimus had won the vote, despite having equally qualified candidates
in the race against him.

“Yes,” Ultra Magnus said. “Never doubt that we believe in you, Optimus. The Matrix made you Prime, but it is not why we followed you.”

Warmth flickered through Optimus’ spark. “Thank you, Magnus. Your support is greatly appreciated.”

“Anytime, sir.” Ultra Magnus dipped his helm in a nod. “Now, might I suggest we confront Metalhawk as soon as possible?”

“Better sooner rather than later.”

“I agree. I will gather all evidence and inform Chromedome we will require him shortly.” Ultra Magnus dipped his helm again. “Rest well, Optimus.”

“And you as well.”

They left the conference room. Optimus didn’t expect anyone to be out there, but he should have known Soundwave would linger, with Laserbeak on his shoulder. Optimus gave them both a smile, nodding his goodbye to Ultra Magnus.

“You didn't have to wait for me,” Optimus said, though he couldn't help the flutter of warmth that throbbed through his spark.

--We wanted to-- Laserbeak transmitted as she rose from Soundwave's shoulder to land on Optimus'. Her helm butted against his, a gesture of affection Optimus had come to learn.

“Then I appreciate it.” Optimus lifted a hand and dragged a finger down her spinal strut. She purred beneath his touch.

“Purpose of discussion?” Soundwave asked with a helm tilt toward the retreating back of Ultra Magnus.

“We've come to a decision on how to deal with Metalhawk,” Optimus replied. He fell into step beside Soundwave, leading him toward Optimus' private hab. “But we don't have to talk business tonight. We do enough of that already.”

“Fair enough,” Soundwave said. His field reached out, gently stroking against Optimus'.

It was a light, barely tangible touch, one Optimus had found was more and more welcome as of late. He didn't flinch in Soundwave's presence, which was a victory in itself.

“How is Optimus feeling?”

“Absolutely fine.” Optimus offered Soundwave a gentle smile. “You can cease worrying over me, I promise. I'm sure even Ratchet would attest I'm on the way to a full recovery.”

“Soundwave happy to hear that.”

Optimus hummed his approval. They walked the rest of the way in a comfortable silence, until Optimus found himself outside the door to his hab-suite. While he didn't feel the exhausting pull of
fatigue, it felt almost a luxury to know he would be recharging on time and hopefully, without night purges.

Optimus keyed in his passcode and stepped inside as the door opened. He paused, however, when he noticed Soundwave didn’t immediately follow him.

“Are you coming?”

Soundwave stirred. “If I am welcome?”

“Of course you are.” Optimus fully entered, expecting Soundwave to take the invitation. “Why wouldn’t you be?”

“Soundwave would never assume.”

“Mm. And I appreciate that.”

The door slid closed behind Soundwave, locking with a cheerful chime. Laserbeak bumped her helm against Optimus' before flitting off his shoulder, choosing to fly directly into the berthroom.

“Someone’s tired,” Optimus remarked. “Want a cube? I suspect I will be faced with an angry medic, a sulky cassette, and a quiet guardian if I miss my nightly serving.”

Humor rumbled in Soundwave's chassis. “Energon welcome. Thank you.”

“Have a seat.”

While Soundwave picked one of the chairs in the modest sized living area, Optimus fetched them both some energon. Mid-medical grade for himself, much to his disappointment, and a tastier mid-grade for Soundwave. He took the seat across from Soundwave, a small table separating them, and downed his own energon as fast as possible.

Flavorings could only mask the taste so far. He wondered if it was a universal constant for medical things to be foul.

Soundwave, he noticed, didn't drink his, but fiddled with it. One hand toyed with the cube as he stared at it, not upset Optimus realized, but merely pensive.

“Are your cassettes relieved?” Optimus asked.

Soundwave inclined his helm. “Affirmative. Buzzsaw, especially, concerned.”

“Any particular reason why?”

“Buzzsaw worries. Frenzy disappointed like Springer.”

Optimus grinned. “Why am I not surprised?” There was a reason, he gathered, the cassette had been named Frenzy.

Relief was universal, Optimus thought. They had avoided something terrible, and while they had Grimlock and the Deceptions to thank for being the first line of defense in this instance, Optimus could not help but think they had dodged a bullet. They had been far too close to something
Optimus had hoped to never face again – battle.

He knew there were dangers out in the universe, and he should not be afraid to face them. He wasn't, for the most part. It wasn't his own safety he feared. He'd endured everything a mech could never wish to endure under Megatron. Death did not frighten Optimus, even though he no longer had the comfort and wisdom of the Matrix to rely upon.

Losing his friends, his loved ones, the mecha he cherished – that did frighten Optimus.

While one could argue that the close call barely counted as one, it did to Optimus. It made him realize how much the ghost of Megatron haunted him still, and how said ghost held him back.

Soundwave was very patient, and Optimus adored him for it, but it still felt as though Optimus could be moving faster.

He was struck with a sudden impatience for himself. If recent events had shown him anything, it was that the future wasn't promised. Only the now.

Time to take a risk. Time to test himself. Time, Optimus realized, for a change.

“Soundwave?”

“Yes?”

Optimus gathered his courage and ignored the squirming in his tanks. “I would like to try something, if you'll allow me.”

“For Optimus, anything.”

Such a brief answer, but it meant a wealth of things.

Optimus set aside his mostly empty cube and stood. “Yes, well, I'd hope that if I ever made you uncomfortable, you'd tell me so.”

He stepped around the small table between them and approached Soundwave, who had selected the most uncomfortable chair Optimus owned.

“Offense impossible,” Soundwave said, though his visor tracked Optimus' every move. “Trust given.”

“And what a valuable thing it is,” Optimus murmured.

He cycled a ventilation. He felt the buzz of something, potential perhaps, and decided he would no longer let his own insecurities dictate his future.

Optimus rested his hands on Soundwave's shoulders and lowered himself onto Soundwave's lap, his thighs bracketing Soundwave's hips. They'd only been this close in recharge, and while that had felt intimate, this seemed ten times so.

He was simultaneously nervous and excited and knew his energy field had to be betraying the conflicted emotions.
“Would you retract your battle mask?” Optimus asked.

Soundwave's vents audibly hitched, but he did as Optimus requested. The battle mask slid aside slowly as Soundwave's hands found their way to Optimus' hips and ever so cautiously rested there, his hold barely carrying any weight behind it.

He treated Optimus as though something fragile, and while once upon a time, that would have angered Optimus, he was grateful for it now. He felt fragile. Soundwave's lack of presumption, however, was reassuring.

Optimus leaned closer, aware of Soundwave's intent stare. “Stop me if I'm presuming,” he murmured.

Soundwave's fingers flexed on his hips. “Optimus welcome,” he said.

Optimus closed the distance between them. He pressed his lips to Soundwave's, his hands shaking where they rested on Soundwave's shoulders.

The kiss was brief. A hint of warmth. A brush of soft, dermal metal. A shiver through Optimus' spark.

Optimus drew back, but he didn't go far. There was a heat there, it was in his spark, flooding out, suffusing his entire frame.

Soundwave didn't immediately press for more. He waited, and the trust was in the waiting. But he did cycle a ventilation, his glossa sweeping briefly over his lips.

“Why?” Soundwave asked.

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “Because I want to. Because we are courting. Because I do not wish to be hampered by the shadows over my spark.”

Soundwave's fingers stroked a soothing pattern on the armor at Optimus' hip. “Then I am not opposed.”

“Good,” Optimus murmured and closed the distance between them again, sealing his mouth over Soundwave's for a longer, firmer kiss.

He pressed closer to Soundwave, windshield to dock, until he could feel the thrum of the other mech's frame against his own. He shared in Soundwave's warmth as their lips moved together, a series of small, dry kisses that sent little shocks straight to Optimus' spark.

He worked his intake and dared part his lips, introduce his glossa to the occasion. He teased at the seam of Soundwave's lips and made a delighted noise as Soundwave's mouth opened to his. He moved closer, vents quickening, as their glossae touched, warm and damp.

Optimus' engine purred. His fingers kneaded patterns on Soundwave's shoulders, and Soundwave's hold tightened, though his hands did not stray. His entire frame vibrated beneath Optimus as heat wafted out from beneath his plating, mingling with the warmth Optimus surrendered.

Optimus had missed this, such a simple intimacy, the joining of mouth and glossa, the unhurried press of lips. He deepened the kiss and met Soundwave's mouth with more force. He pressed
closer, until he swore he could feel the hum of Soundwave's spark through their armor.

He shuttered his optics, surrendering himself to sensation. Heat and intimacy, warmth and pleasure. He relaxed in Soundwave's embrace, enjoying the kisses for what they were, an expression of affection.

Heat built between them; Optimus' cooling fans switched on. Each touch of Soundwave's glossa to his own sent the tiniest of jolts through his frame. Soundwave kissed like he did everything: slowly, methodically, as though tasting and savoring each motion. Optimus imagined he gave that same dedication to everything else… including interfacing perhaps?

A light moan bubbled up from Optimus' vocalizer. He pressed harder to Soundwave, an unexpected heat gathering in his groin. His hips seemed to move of their own accord, rocking against Soundwave's groin and abdomen. He shifted on Soundwave's lap restlessly, the slide of metal on metal sending a tingle through his dermal plating.

Soundwave's grip tightened. He moved beneath Optimus, the tiniest of motions, only to abruptly still. His vents whooshed loudly.

Soundwave drew back, pressing his forehelm to Optimus. It was then Optimus noticed Soundwave’s fans spun and little tremors wrecked his plating.

“What's wrong?”

“Unless Optimus wishes to continue, we must stop,” Soundwave said with a tiny rumble of his engine.

The heat beneath his aft had a new meaning.

“Oh.” The tips of Optimus' finials heated. His glossa flicked over his lips. “Then I should stop.” He leaned back, putting distance between their frames, for his comfort and Soundwave's.

Some soft touches and kisses shared were miles from interfacing, and Optimus wasn't sure if he was ready to take that step. His frame had other ideas, given the way it hummed and heat gathered behind his panels. Optimus didn't want to push himself.

The last thing he wanted was to frighten himself or Soundwave by taking on something he could not handle.

“Let me just...” Optimus, rather awkwardly he had to admit, eased himself from Soundwave's lap.

He preened a little on the inside as Soundwave bowed his helm and cycled a ventilation as though gathering his restraint. Some of his plating had flared, allowing extra heat to disperse.

“I don't mean to tease,” Optimus said.

Soundwave looked up, his visor burning brightly. “It was not interpreted as such,” he said, and finally rose to his pedes, one hand gently cupping Optimus' helm. “Haste not needed, only Optimus' comfort.”

It was that regard for Optimus' comfort which made it so easy to lean into Soundwave's touch and pull him down for another kiss. A gentle slide of their lips, and the taste of Soundwave on his
Optimus hummed approvingly in the back of his intake. He heard Soundwave echo him, heard the rumble of Soundwave's engine, before the former Decepticon pulled back again. His vents were whirring, his visor bright.

"Recharge now?" Optimus proposed.

A low laugh rattled in Soundwave's chassis. "Moment needed," he replied, a hint of static on the edge of his vocals. "Request use of private washracks?"

Optimus' lips curved in a genuine smile. "Of course. Help yourself." That he'd driven the Decepticons' most reserved mech into the washracks with a few minutes of kissing had to be worth some kind of award.

"Much appreciated." Soundwave's thumb stroked Optimus' cheek one last time before he turned away, reluctance writ into the lingering caress of his energy field.

Optimus watched him enter the washracks with affection and amusement both tugging at his lips. He had to admit, a heat had stirred within his own frame. He thrummed for want of it, though unlike Soundwave, he was certain his would go away on its own. He remained uncomfortable with self-service as it was.

He tried not to think about Soundwave doing just that in the heat and steam of the washracks. Or to imagine the dark blue plating streaked with solvent, venting heat in bursts of billowing steam. Or strong fingers wrapping around what had to be a beautiful spike, or perhaps pushing into the clenching heat of a welcoming valve.

Optimus' engine revved. His face heated.

He wasn't doing a good job not thinking about it at all.

He shook his helm and busied himself with tidying up his suite. He gathered their half-finished energon and put it back into temporary storage. He dragged out some covers and pillows for the berth – indulging in a little comfort seemed appropriate. Laserbeak, he noticed, was dozing on the head of the berth, her beak tucked under one wing and her optics shuttered. She made little snuffling sounds as she recharged, noises Optimus found adorable and not distracting.

In that moment, he realized how genuinely domestic this entire moment felt. And how it didn't bother him. How instead, it filled him with a quiet warmth he dared call happiness.

Given the stress and strain of the day, from the moment he'd heard about the DJD's arrival and the threat of imminent death and torture, it felt odd to suddenly shift gears to comfort and relaxation. Yet, it also felt nice. Felt... wanted.

Optimus paused, clutching a pillow in one hand, as something inside him quietly clicked, like a transmission shifting to a different gear. He wasn't poetic enough to say his entire world changed in that moment. He decided he himself had been changing little by little the entire time, and was only now looking back to see how far he'd come.

Living for war and living for peace were two entirely separate things. He used to wonder he wouldn't know how to survive once the war was won, that he'd been functioning under the stress of
life or death for so long, he'd forgotten what it meant to live.

It seemed, without him knowing, he’d already begun to remember.

The door to the washracks clicked open, freeing a soft burst of cleanser-scented steam. “Optimus?”

Soundwave had probably detected the conflicting emotions in Optimus' field.

Optimus tossed the pillow onto the berth and offered Soundwave a smile. “It is nothing. Ready for recharge?” he asked, and then, with a deviousness he hadn't felt since Orion Pax died ages upon ages ago, he continued with, “Or are you still too tense?”

Soundwave stared at him before amusement burst out of him in a rolling, deep chuckle. “Tension relieved,” he said, with a note of humor. He approached Optimus, smelling strongly of the cleanser that Optimus favored. “Recharge welcome.”

Optimus stepped into Soundwave's space, wrapping his arms around the mech in an embrace, reading the surprise but then delight in Soundwave's field. “It is indeed,” Optimus murmured.

Recharge very welcome, especially if it included the quiet warmth of Soundwave beside him.

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Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

“You’ll Be Okay,” A Great Big World

The sound of a key code being inputted into a lock preceded the noisy rattle of a pressurized door opening. Jazz didn't look up as it did so, pretending instead to concentrate fully on the datapad in his possession. It contained some rather incriminating data, and he wouldn’t want to miss a single databyte of it.

“What in the-- What do you think you're doing here?”

Metalhawk's outraged voice could not have sounded sweeter to Jazz's audials.

He let his lips pull into a gradual smirk and slowly looked up, swiveling a little in the chair behind Metalhawk's desk. He lounged in it, pedes propped up on the desk, flakes of grit leaving a mess on Metalhawk's collection of very important datapads.

“Makin' myself at home,” Jazz said cheerfully. “Bein' as I'm goin' to be in charge of the Neutrals from now on, I thought I'd try out my new chair.”

The door closed behind Metalhawk. He glared at Jazz, optics glittering, and one hand drifted to his right panel.

Jazz shook his helm. “Nah, mech. I wouldn't do that. Cause ya shoot me, then ya gotta explain how a mech who was lying in critical condition in the Autobot medbay somehow found himself in Nova Cronum with another gunshot wound.”

“What do you want?” Metalhawk hissed, anger making his optics bright, his plating bristle.

He was kinda hot when he was angry. Too bad the rest of him was as slimy as a Quintesson, and as free with his affections as Jazz was, he wasn't about to touch that with a twenty foot pole. Gross.

“Ta talk.” Jazz tossed the datapad onto the desk and crossed his arms behind his neck, leaning back fully in the chair. “Mostly about why this desk is now mine and what yer goin' to do for me.”

Metalhawk folded his arms, cocking a hip. “And why would I do that?”

“Chromedome.” Jazz's smirk turned razor-sharp. “Among many other reasons. Tell me, Metalhawk, do your subordinates know how many of them have scars on the back of their necks? Course you need some ultraviolet light to spot them, and who has one of those handy?”

The Neutral leader froze, but his expression betrayed nothing. “I do not know what you mean.”

“Ya can try and lie yer way out of this, if ya want. Deny and pretend and when the truth outs, we'll all know what happened, won't we?”
Jazz wiggled one of his pedes, nudging a datapad beneath it. “Now this here, this datapad is very interesting. Just how many have ya sold out over the millennia, hm? Cause I'm seein' a lot here. Includin' somethin' about a mech named Zetca. Now who was he?”

If it was possible for a mech to shoot lasers from his optical sockets, Metalhawk was certainly attempting to do so now. “How did you even get in here?”

Ah, misdirection. Jazz knew that ploy very well.

He shrugged. “I'm Jazz.”

“You're supposed to be dead,” Metalhawk said, taking a measured step closer to the desk. “Barring that, you should be in the Autobot medical center.”

“Got bored. Felt like talkin' a walk instead.” He scratched at the side of his nasal ridge, loving how Metalhawk squirmed. “Don't wanna talk about Zetca? All right then. Let's talk about Acid Storm and Starscream? Or Skids and me? Or, or. I got a better idea. Let's talk about what happened on Abraux Seven.”

Jazz tilted forward, his pedes hitting the ground with a firm snap. “It was a terrible accident that left Zetca behind, wasn't it? You had no choice but to leave in a hurry, with the Decepticons tryin' to roast yer thrusters. Ain't that right?”

“I am the leader of my crew. It is my duty to protect them. Sometimes, sacrifices have to be made,” Metalhawk gritted out. But his plating drew tight, his field even more so.

“Sure, sure. I know a thing or two about that. Been there myself.” Jazz tilted his helm. “But ya know... interfering with the treaty, tryin' to create dissension, that kind of thing, it's a breach of trust. A blight on the signature ya gave.”

Metalhawk sniffed. “That treaty is a farce in itself.”

“Even so, it's a farce ya signed and a farce everyone is takin' seriously. Including, I'll bet, the Galactic Council.”

Gold optics narrowed at him. “They care nothing for what the Cybertronians do.”

“Ya really want ta test that theory?”

Silence. Metalhawk had to be considering it, but even he wasn't that stupid. Sure the Galactic Council hated the Cybertronians. Sure they didn't care so long as the Cybertronians were killing each other. It was the massacre of unrelated species that had earned the Cybertronians their black mark.

But if a truce had been made? A genuine one? Well, in the best interest of the universe, the GC might just flock on over to make sure it stuck. Or might just decide that the blight called Cybertron was no longer worth the effort and blast them all out of the universe. Given their low population, Jazz wasn’t even sure any of the factions, even if they worked together, could stop them either.

Jazz leaned back again, looking up at Metalhawk as he folded his hands over his abdominal armor, and purposefully, over the static mesh that helped protect his wound. Like it or not, Skids had
honestly shot him. He had been deeply wounded, and yes, he'd needed Ratchet to keep him alive.

He'd knew he'd survive it, however. He always did.

“Now you and I both know that breaching the treaty is only gonna go so far,” he continued as Metalhawk twitched and fumed. “It's not enough to oust ya or arrest ya. At most, it's an inconvenience that will probably result in reigniting tensions among the three factions.”

“Your point?”

Jazz cycled a ventilation and resisted the urge to roll his optics behind his visor. Honestly, some mechs just didn't understand the importance of a good dramatic reveal.

“Let's pretend that it is enough, shall we?” he proposed with an even stare. “When they come for you, keep your dignity. Step down and claim that ya feared the war and only did what ya thought was best. Be willin' to pay fer your crimes, of which there are oh so many.”

Metalhawk arched an orbital ridge. “Or?”

Jazz gave him a wicked smile. “Or I can show these mechs who ya really are.” He propped one pede on the edge of the desk, pushing himself back and forth in the swivel chair. “Barring that, ya can have an accident.”

“You'll kill me,” Metalhawk stated.

“No, no, no. Ya misunderstand. Killing ya would make ya a martyr,” Jazz said, shaking his helm. “I'm not causin' another war in yer name.”

Metalhawk blinked at him, confusion poking holes in his outrage. “And yet you did just threaten my life.”

“I said you'd have an accident.” Swivel went the chair before he sat up, both pedes planting on the ground again. “No one said you hafta be dead. Why don't you ask Tappet or Steelfist? Or don't they remember anymore?”

Metalhawk stared at him. A light of comprehension began to form behind his optics.

Jazz rose to his pedes, braced his hands on the edge of his desk, and stared up at Metalhawk. “Yer gonna be my puppet either way, Metalhawk. Yer only choice now is how hard I tug the strings.”

Metalhawk's denta ground so hard Jazz could hear the metal shrieking. “I could kill you,” he hissed.

Jazz laughed, and it was not at all faked. “Been there. Done that. Got the scar.” One hand tapped the static mesh around his midsection. His pedes were starting to tremble a little. Thank Primus Metalhawk couldn't see them.

But he needed to hurry up and give in to Jazz's demands soon. That way 'Tex could stroll in and give Jazz a hand cause he was on the last of his energy reserves.

Metalhawk stared at him. His plating rattled, rage incandescent in his energy field. His mouth opened and closed, but he couldn't seem to offer up any kind retort.
Jazz grinned at him. “So tell me, Hawk. What's it gonna be? You got, I'd say, ten minutes before Optimus and Ultra Magnus storm in here in a righteous fury.”

Jazz flicked one of the datapads on the desk, one of many copies of all the damning evidence he'd gathered against Metalhawk. With Onslaught and his team’s help of course. Broadside and Octane both had been very helpful.

Jazz couldn't have smiled broader if he tried.

“What's it gonna be, Metalhawk?” he asked again. “Tick-tock.”

~

Optimus hadn't realized, until he did so, how long it had been since he'd used his alt-mode. There were the few times he'd shifted after Ratchet repaired him, in order to make sure the surgery had taken the refurbished cog, but after… never. Optimus had seen no need. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if he'd forgotten he could.

How quickly he'd gotten used to the lack of it while under Megatron's control.

He hadn't realized, until he put tires to bumpy road and headed toward Nova Cronum, how much he missed the freedom to drive. Or the rush of atmosphere against his windshield and the crackle of the road beneath him. His engine purred happily.

The crumbled spires of Nova Cronum were fast approaching. He tried not to let their impending political nightmare disturb his enthusiasm. He fought a losing battle.

“Are you all right, Optimus?” Ultra Magnus asked over the wideband frequency they were using to communicate. He drove next to Optimus, his alt-mode much larger, nearly over-shadowing Optimus.

“I am fine,” Optimus transmitted back. He leaned on the accelerator a little harder, his aft axle rattling as his aft tires hit a particularly mountainous bump in the road. “Only ready to get this completed.”

Laserbeak chirped a protest at the rough ride from within Optimus' cab, and he forced himself to slow so she wouldn't get tossed about. Soundwave had not been allowed to come, for obvious reasons, but he insisted Laserbeak accompany them. Optimus was hard-pressed to argue otherwise.

“It will be a relief to have Metalhawk handled,” Ultra Magnus admitted. “I am glad Grimlock added his confirmation to the accusation. It will help our case carry more weight.”

“Indeed.”

They arrived at the gate to Nova Cronum, recently rebuilt as it had been crushed during the war. Now it functioned less as a defense and more as an active warning.

Two mechs stood guard at the gate. Optimus and his entourage – which really consisted of Ultra
Magnus and Smokescreen, any more would have seemed like an invading force – transformed once they arrived. Optimus moved forward to address the guards, both of whom were rather large mechs.

Optimus did not recognize either of them. Metalhawk had neither introduced his entire crew, nor provided a crew manifest. The terms of the treaty stated that he wasn't required to do so, but it should have been a common courtesy. In order to ease potential tensions, both Optimus and Grimlock had offered a crew list.

Granted, they'd left out important tidbits like duties, skills, et cetera. But still, they'd offered a list.

Which mean that not only was Metalhawk's crew something of a mystery, they had no idea the true size of Metalhawk's forces.

“I have a meeting with Metalhawk,” Optimus informed them. “Please let us pass.”

The two soldiers exchanged glances, and Optimus detected the buzz of narrow-band comms between them. He was too polite to decode their conversation though he was sure Smokescreen had no such qualms. If they said anything worrisome, Smokescreen would let him know.

“Very well,” the largest of the two said as they both stepped aside. The gate started to rise. “Metalhawk is in the main center in his office. He said you agreed to meet there.”

“That we did. Thank you for your prompt response,” Optimus replied with a tilt of his helm. “Ultra Magnus, Smokescreen, let's go.”

It was a short walk from the gate to the central building the Neutrals claimed for a command center. Even so, it was enough for Optimus to see that while they were attempting to rebuild, they weren't making much progress. Most of the efforts were concentrated on fortifying the central building. Perhaps they were still living in the shuttle they'd used to get to Cybertron?

“Is it just me or do they look like they are gearing up for war?” Smokescreen transmitted across the private comm. Opposite Ultra Magnus at Optimus' side, his optics skittered from one Neutral mech to another, who regarded the three Autobots with nothing short of suspicion, and no few mechs radiated hostility.

Optimus chose not to respond.

Metalhawk had arranged for this meeting. He'd asked for Optimus to come to Nova Cronum rather than meet on more neutral grounds. He'd made no attempts to disguise his building efforts either.

What game was he playing?

It was a question Optimus asked himself again as they arrived at the central building and Metalhawk stood just outside the front doors. He was not waiting inside his office as his guards claimed. He stood there, face devoid of expression, arms folded behind his back, waiting with a patience he had never displayed before.

“Optimus.” He tilted his helm in greeting. “Ultra Magnus, and I do apologize, but I do not recognize you.”

“Smokescreen,” Optimus supplied while he immediately put himself on guard. He hoped Ultra
Magnus and Smokescreen did the same. “He is serving as the recorder for this meeting. I hope you understand.”

Metalhawk's smile was every inch that of a politician’s. “Of course. It is only expected. I do regret that we will not be able to meet in my office as I had planned. There is something wrong with the vent system. The odor is ghastly.”

Optimus hoped his skepticism didn't show in his tone. “Perhaps it is better we conclude our business in the open then,” he said. He didn't intend to play too long with pleasantries. “So as not to seem as though we are hiding something.”

“I wish to be as transparent as possible.” Metalhawk fully descended from the ramp, taking him further from the front doors. “I had something important to discuss with you, Optimus, but it seems as though you have come to me with an important matter as well. Shall I be polite and first offer you the floor?”

“If it is talk of a means to defend ourselves from the Decepticons, I am afraid I must decline,” Optimus said, and he carefully cycled a ventilation. “I have come to confront you on a matter of most importance. I have come across some disturbing information indicating you have been behaving in a matter that is to the detriment of the entirety of Cybertron.”

Metalhawk arched an orbital ridge. “That is a bold statement, Optimus Prime. I do not know what you speak of.”

“We have it on good authority you are the one who gave Acid Storm the virus to infect Starscream,” Ultra Magnus said before Optimus could get a word out. “We also have a signed confession from Chromedome detailing several other misdeeds, including the assassination attempt on Jazz.”

Metalhawk stared at them, still as stone. “As I said, those are bold statements. Perhaps Chromedome is confused.”

Optimus shook his helm. “Do not play these games, Metalhawk. I am not here to have you twist words, but to get the truth. Did you or did you not supply Acid Storm with a virus?”

“Whatever a mech does with a gift is no concern of mine,” Metalhawk said smoothly. “And whatever I have done, it was for the good of Cybertron, to keep it free of those who have already destroyed it countless times before.”

It was close to a confession. But would they be able to get anything else out of him?

Optimus exchanged a glance with Ultra Magnus who shook his helm. He was no surer of Optimus as to what to do next.

“The Autobots and the Decepticons and their war have ravaged Cybertron, destroyed our two moons, pillaged the colonies, and made us outcasts in our own universe,” Metalhawk continued, something burning behind his optics. “Even now, our planet hurtles endlessly through space because the most brilliant minds we had to offer Cybertron are either dead or too busy thinking of the next, greatest weapon.”

Optimus inclined his helm. “I understand your motives, Metalhawk. But just like Megatron, your methods leave much to be desired.”
“I did what I thought was necessary,” Metalhawk said frostily. “There have been countless cease-fires and truces. All have been broken at one time or another. I cannot be blamed for disbelieving in this one.”

“Perhaps not. But you can be blamed for attempting to reignite the war to suit your own ends,” Ultra Magnus said, his tone firm and commanding. “You signed the very same treaty we did, Metalhawk. You agreed to the laws we all put in place. Threatening the security of the truce merits punishment.”

Metalhawk tilted his chin. “So be it. I do not regret my actions. I am certain that there are others who agree.”

“That may be true,” Optimus said quietly. “And if it is, we will let their voices be heard. However, we cannot condone your actions. This peace is precious to every last one of us.”

Metalhawk stepped closer, unfolding his arms and offering his wrists to Optimus. “If you are seeking an apology, you will have to wait for far longer. For when your flimsy truce falls apart, and the war begins anew, you will look to me, and you will wish I had been wrong.”

Optimus sighed inwardly. There was something in Metalhawk's tone that felt a farce, a performance for the benefit of the crowd they'd gathered. But beneath it all was an echo of truth.

Metalhawk hadn't trusted in the truce, and Optimus could not fault him for that. He was right. Countless ceasefires. Countless truces. Countless attempts to help Megatron see reason and every last one of them for naught.

That did not excuse Metalhawk's actions.

“Very well.” Ultra Magnus stepped forward, slipping a light pair of cuffs around his wrists, more for appearance than restriction. “Metalhawk, by approval of Optimus Prime, Lord Grimlock, and Lieutenant Skids, you are being placed under arrest under suspicion of violating the terms of the treaty. You are being remanded to Autobot custody until such time as an expedient trial can be arranged.”

“What in Primus' name do you think you are doing?”

Optimus turned to see Sky-Byte storming toward them, his pointed denta bared. The outrage in his field far preceded his arrival.

“Release him at once!”

“I cannot do that,” Optimus said, placing himself between Metalhawk and his second in command. Smokescreen stood alongside him, creating a secondary barrier. “He has violated the terms of the treaty and must face judgment for it.”

Sky-Byte snarled. “You need approval from a member of his own cabinet to press charges!”

“I have it from Lieutenant Skids.” An unexpected addition to their litany of proof against Metalhawk, to be honest.

They'd been prepared to argue, that majority ruled in this case, until at Chromedome's insistence,
they spoke with Skids. He admitted to arranging Jazz's attack upon Metalhawk's insistence and agreed to co-sign the arrest warrant.

Sky-Byte startled, his optics widened. “What?”

“Sky-Byte, stand down,” Metalhawk said, his tone sharp, but dismissive. “They are perfectly within their right to do so. For my sake, I simply ask that you obtain the necessary items to defend me when the time comes.”

The former Decepticon straightened, though the suspicion did not leave his field. “Very well,” he said, and his gaze shifted to Optimus. “But know this. If any harm should come to him, you will learn how mighty a force the Neutrals carry.”

“That is fair,” Optimus said. “But I assure you, we wish this to be performed properly.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Sky-Byte’s engine growled.

“I take no offense that you do,” Optimus turned back toward Ultra Magnus and Smokescreen who had Metalhawk between them. Ultra Magnus would transport Metalhawk back to Polyhex. “Very well, gentlemechs. Let us return home. We have judicial proceedings to prepare.”

~

When Ambulon walked into the medical center, First Aid could not help his surprise. Given Metalhawk's recent arrest and imprisonment, he hadn't expected Ambulon would show today. Or ever again.

He said as much.

Ambulon shook his helm. “I knew it was coming, arguably long before Metalhawk did. He could never come to terms with the truce. He was so certain it would break.”

“And you?” First Aid asked as he gestured Ambulon to come with him, back to the small room that served as First Aid's office. “What did you think?”

“I didn't care so long as we weren't fighting anymore,” Ambulon replied with one of his enigmatic smiles. “And I believed Lord Grimlock would be a far more trustworthy leader than Megatron.”

“He is that. Though I don't think anyone ever expected it. Not even me.” First Aid offered a small smile. “I am glad you came.”

“As am I.”

They took a seat on the low futon First Aid preferred rather than the single chairs. Ambulon produced a datapad from his subspace and handed it over.

“I have run the numbers on Sunstreaker and Sideswipe's spark damage,” Ambulon said by way of explanation. “I think I have a solution, or at least a temporary one.”
“Really? That's great news!” First Aid's field spiked with excitement before he could remind himself to have some poise. Shockwave's advice, so far, was all they had to work with.

“It's not much. But it's a start. It'll at least get them out of the medbay in short intervals,” Ambulon said.

“Still. It's better than no news.” First Aid clutched the datapad, his visor lighting up with his enthusiasm. “Thank you for this. And for helping. I know that you didn't have to.”

Ambulon tilted his helm. “Well, according to the vow I took when I accepted my medical credentials, I did. But I understand your point. Besides, I wanted to. I know how hard it can be when you have a patient you want to help, but you can't. Besides, I earned a valuable friendship out of it. Didn't I?” There was something hopeful in Ambulon's gaze, something the stoic Neutral rarely showed.

First Aid leaned closer, letting their shoulder touch. “You did,” he murmured. “Which means you won't mind explaining this to me, right? I never finished the spark mechanics module.”

Ambulon plucked the datapad out of his hand and powered it on. “I would be happy to do so.” His field shimmered against First Aid's, strong with affection, and just a taste of the broken bond First Aid knew so well.

First Aid didn’t fight his smile this time.

Friend or more, it didn’t matter which. It was simply nice to feel less alone.

~

Smokescreen helped him get down here without incident, but Jazz waved off further aid. If he was going to do this, he had to be in total control, or at least look like he did. Metalhawk would capitalize on the slightest ripple of weakness.

Cliffjumper had been moved elsewhere, a private room in the medcenter as they tried to find a solution that would help him.

Metalhawk was the only resident of the Autobot brig currently, kept here because it wouldn't have been good for his safety to join the brigged soldiers in Iacon. Unanimous vote said imprisonment in Polyhex was in Metalhawk's best interest.

That it put him within easy reach of Jazz made it all the better.

Jazz strode into the dim hall with confidence, ignoring the ache in his abdomen. He'd done too much too soon, but he was almost finished. Just one last order to issue.

Metalhawk sat stiffly on the bare berth in his new accommodations. He stared straight ahead, through the energon bars which kept him caged. He noticed Jazz immediately, his gold optics widening briefly before going as cold as the Arctic.

“I have done as you asked,” he said in a dull tone, his gaze sliding away. “What more could you
possibly want?”

Jazz flashed him a grin. “Nothing,” he chirped. “I just wanted to say thank you and let ya know that ya made the right choice all around.”

Metalhawk snorted a ventilation. “I am sitting in an Autobot cell. Nowhere does that constitute a good choice.”

“Coulda been a lot worse.”

Metalhawk said nothing. He pressed his lips into a thin line, and Jazz was lucky he could not sense the Neutral's field. He was quite sure it would be vile.

“Look on the bright side,” Jazz continued as he bounced on the heels of his pedes. “Ya spend some time in jail. Ya admit yer wrongdoing. And sooner or later, Optimus will let ya out. He's kind-sparked like that.”

“He's a fool,” Metalhawk bit out.

Jazz's heelstruts hit the ground with a firm snap. “Ya see, it's that kinda talk that got ya in here in the first place.”

Gold optics slanted at him. “If I recall correctly, I was arrested for attempting to cause a division that would free Cybertron of both Autobot and Decepticon alike, pests and parasites who will only lead to further destruction.”

“Pretty words those're,” Jazz said and approached the bars. “But we both know ya did it because a peace ya didn't control was a peace ya didn't want.”

A ripple rolled over Metalhawk's plating.

“Ya know, it's pretty sad that all ya had to do was wait. Ya'd have seen that we meant peace, that Grimlock is not the stupid beast ya think he is. But then, I guess that wouldn't have mattered either. Ya wouldn't have been happy unless it was you on top. Am I right?”

“I am not going to dignify that with an answer,” Metalhawk said frostily. “If you came here to taunt and berate me, then know I will not rise to such bait.”

Jazz chuckled. “Nah, mech. That's not why I'm here. Just wanted to point out a few things is all.”

Metalhawk tilted his helm, only a hint of gold optic visible now. “You berth within a few hour’s travel from Decepticons, mechs who have killed Neutral and Autobot alike during the course of the war. How can you stand it?”

“Because I'm fragging tired of fighting.”

“Hah. One wouldn't know it given your threats upon my person.”

Jazz moved closer, until the electrical energy of the bars hungered for his plating, but couldn't cross those last few millimeters.

“Ya threatened Optimus,” he said, and he dropped all cheer from his voice, all sense of ease. “Or
did ya think I didn't know?"

Metalhawk went stiff.

“What was yer plan?” Jazz asked, or hissed rather. “Was it to lure him to your office and let Chromedome do yer dirty work? Just as you've done countless times before? And then Optimus would be under your wing hinge and the Autobots in the palm of yer hand. I'll bet Grimlock was next. He's simple, ain't he? Shouldn't be too hard to trick him.”

Metalhawk's arms twitched. His plating flexed and clamped as though in response to the venom in Jazz's tone.

“Strong accusations from a hypocrite.”

Jazz laughed. There was no joy behind it. “Ya threatened Optimus,” he repeated. “And mech, that's a line ya don't cross. There ain't nothin' I won't do ta protect him. Just ask Megatron.”

He stared at Metalhawk, the light behind his visor, dim and malevolent. It was a stare that had unnerved many a Decepticon, and apparently, it worked on Neutrals, too.

Metalhawk sat back on the berth, huffing indignantly, but it lacked the force needed to make it believable. “He's gotten himself a Decepticon lover, or didn't you know?”

So, He still had some fight, did he?

Jazz inclined his helm. “Mech, you really wanna go there right now? Ya still got somethin' left to lose after all.”

Metalhawk twitched a winglet. “Just leave me in peace.” It was concession.

Good. Even injured, Jazz could still cast a shadow.

“I thought as much.” Jazz smirked and spun on a heelstrut, waving a dismissive hand. “Enjoy your stay.”


Jazz paused long enough to cast a sidelong look over his shoulder. “When I give them a pull, ya'll know,” he promised, and left Metalhawk to his simmering.

He'd have to keep a close optic on Metalhawk. Mechs like that, they could be slippery, think they could worm their way out of their corners. If need be, Jazz would find a more permanent solution, but for right now, Metalhawk was more useful alive.

He was Neutral through and through. Too much nobility and poise. He didn't even hurl insults at Jazz's back, or promises of retribution. Tch. So boring.

Jazz emerged from the brig and waited until he was fully out of sight of Metalhawk's cell before he collapsed against the wall. His knees were like jelly, his ventilations had quickened, and his internal temperature had skyrocketed. Humans would call it a fever, and damn, but he had one.

“Jazz?”
Smokescreen was there in an instant, hands patting over Jazz's frame until he swatted them away.

“M'fine,” Jazz said with a roll of his optics behind the visor. “Just pushed myself too hard is all. Give me a moment to catch my vents, and I can go.”

Smokescreen backed off and folded his arms under his bumper. “You know, any one of us could have played this part,” he said with a frown.

Jazz shook his helm. “Not this time,” he said, and braced himself against the wall, processor spinning a bit. “This's personal.”

He hated the knowing look in Smokescreen's optics. Always trying to get into someone's processor, Smokey was. But nope. Not Jazz.

“And don't look at me like that,” Jazz insisted as his cooling fans clicked on, the right one betraying a rather audible rattle. “I ain't here for ya to pick apart my motives.”

“And don't look at me like that,” Jazz insisted as his cooling fans clicked on, the right one betraying a rather audible rattle. “I ain't here for ya to pick apart my motives.”

“Uh huh.” Smokescreen gave him a knowing look. “Far be it for me to question anything you do. I'm just the last full member of your unit. No one special.”

Jazz sighed and pressed a hand to his forehelm. He ached. “I'm hurtin'. I'm annoyed. And I'm tired of playin' the game. Can I just go back to my medical berth now?”

“You sure that's what you want?”

Jazz held out a hand, wiggling his fingers. “Yeah,” he said with a genuine smile this time. “I think I oughta go ahead and wake up now, don't you?”

Smokescreen shook his helm and tucked Jazz against his side. “Yes, I do.”

~

Today was a day of good news it seemed.

Optimus could not hide the leap of joy in his spark when First Aid commed to let him know Jazz was online and eager to take visitors. Jazz had even asked for Optimus personally, though oddly, he'd asked that Optimus bring Soundwave.

Then again, Jazz was an unrepentant matchmaker.

Optimus threw all need to rest out the door and hurried to the medical center, Soundwave in his wake and Laserbeak fast asleep in Soundwave's dock next to her brother. The release of tension regarding Metalhawk had left them all exhausted, but Optimus felt a new wave of energy overcoming him.

“He's pretty tired,” First Aid admitted as Optimus arrived, but there was a light behind his visor. He was as relieved as Optimus. “It'll be at least a few days of berth restriction before I can release him to light duty.”
Optimus smiled and nodded to First Aid. “Then I shall do my best to make sure he is adequately occupied. I know how bothersome a bored Special Ops Mech can become.”

First Aid chuckled. “Yes. The only ones worse had been the Twins.” He gestured Optimus and Soundwave toward the room with a gentle flick of his hands. “Now you better go see him so he stops pinging my comm. I have never seen a mech whine so piteously before.”

Yes, that sounded like Jazz all right. It meant he was in high spirits rather than in pain, which was a very good sign.

Optimus rapped his knuckles on the door to announce a visitor and then let himself inside, Soundwave on his heels.

Jazz was still aberth, surrounded by numerous monitoring equipment, but the static mesh around his chassis looked fresh and clean. There was a sense of animation to his frame, despite him being berthbound, and his bright smile was the first thing to greet them.

“Optimus! Sounders! Finally, two visitors who can entertain rather than warn me to take it easy.” Half of Jazz's visor lit in a wink. “If ya ask me, Aid learned a little too much from his mentor.”

Optimus chuckled and took the stool at Jazz's right. “We all have our sights set on a successor, Jazz. First Aid is learning from the best.”

“Still kinda miss that sweet kid who blushed if I pinched his tire though,” Jazz said and his gaze shifted to Soundwave. “Ya just gonna stand there or take a seat, too?”

“Preference to stand,” Soundwave said stiffly.

Optimus sighed and gave them both a warning look. “Is there ever a time you two won't be this awkward around each other?”

“Sounders just needs ta warm up ta me is all.” Jazz chuckled, but Optimus didn't miss the look – whatever it meant – that passed between them. “Once ya get past my good looks and charming personality, ya can't help but fall in love with me.”

Optimus gave him an askance look. “When did you start channeling Sideswipe?”

“Defense mechanism.” Jazz patted his chassis, and the underside of his bumper which still looked scorched. No washracks for him yet. “Sorry, boss.”

Optimus reached for his hand and was relieved when Jazz offered it, allowing Optimus to squeeze their fingers together. “I am glad you are recovering, Jazz.”

“So'm I, OP. I didn't mean ta scare ya.”

He shook his helm. “It wasn't your fault. We should have known Metalhawk would soon make his move. It was only a matter of guessing the target. I assumed, perhaps out a grand sense of my importance, he would choose me.”

“He better be glad he didn't,” Jazz retorted, with a sharpness that belied the honest fatigue in his field. “Else he'd be suffering a lot worse than a little alone time in the brig.”
For once, Optimus could not bring himself to chastise Jazz or remind him of the benefits of mercy and diplomacy. It seemed shallow and selfish in the wake of Jazz's injuries and all that had befallen the Autobots after the Decepticons defeated them.

Optimus squeezed Jazz's hand again. “Hopefully, it is a moot point. Metalhawk will learn from his mistakes, come to recognize the peace we are working toward, and with any luck, become a support rather than a hindrance in the future.”

“Nice ta see yer still so optimistic, OP.”

“Trait appreciated,” Soundwave commented. He currently stood just behind Optimus' left shoulder, placing Optimus between himself and Jazz. It was as if he believed Jazz would leap right up off that berth and knife him in the intake.

Well, to be fair, they had been rivals and enemies for the better part of several millennia. With time, perhaps they would become good friends.

“I'll bet it is. Ya'll two make a cute couple,” Jazz said with a lazy grin, the light in his visor a bit hazy, as though they'd given him the good pain blockers. “I'll bet ya snuggle all the time.”

Optimus cycled a ventilation of amusement.

Soundwave's field fluttered with something Optimus dared call embarrassment. He shifted behind Optimus, but didn't comment.

“Jazz,” Optimus said warningly. “Please don't tease Soundwave. He isn't used to your charming personality.”

“He will. With time.” Jazz winked again and gently retracted his fingers from Optimus' grip. “But ya know OP, Ratchet-in-training might be meaner than he ought, but he's right about one thing. I guess I need my rest.”

To be fair, Jazz did look a bit peaked. The light in his visor kept flickering and his vents snuffled, all clear signs of fatigue. And given that he'd been near-death, Optimus didn't want to push it.

“I understand. I'm just glad you're all right.” Optimus managed a smile, as fragile as it was. “I don't want to lose anyone else.”

“I promise, Optimus. I'm not goin' anywhere,” Jazz said, unexpectedly solemn, only to break it up with one of his usual crooked grins. “Yer stuck with me, like it or not.”

Optimus pushed to his pedes. “I just so happen to like it. Rest well, Jazz. Take care.”

“You, too, OP. But hey, mind if I borrow old Sounders for a second there?”

Optimus peered at his third in command, not for a single moment falling for the wide, innocent smile. “You don't intend to threaten him, do you?”

“Of course not--”

“Or interrogate him, or taunt him, or--”
Jazz’s laugh cut through Optimus’ list. “Nope. Just wanna talk. Promise. Cross my spark and hope ta die.” One hand flittered over his bumper, but the motion was not as graceful as it ought to be.

“I am going to hold you to it then,” Optimus said. He turned toward Soundwave, who inclined his helm in a nod.

“Discussion intended only,” Soundwave said, his field brushing against Optimus’ own, approving of his concern, and touched by it.

“It had better be,” Optimus murmured.

He excused himself from the room, but he did linger in front of the window once he was through the door. Not that he expected Jazz to leap off the berth and attack Soundwave or anything, it was simply a peculiar request. Or perhaps it was the first steps toward a mutual understanding.

Optimus certainly hoped so.

He offered the two mechs some privacy and went in search of First Aid. He couldn't very well pace outside of Jazz's room like a worried genitor, could he?

He found Ratchet's apprentice in the main room, perched behind a desk and nearly hidden by a massive stack of datapads. He was hard at work, stylus scribbling fiercely.

Optimus coughed a ventilation to get his attention, and smiled when First Aid fumbled his stylus, startling in his chair. His visor flushed pink as he scrambled to catch everything, nearly tumbling over the stack of pads in the process.

“I did not mean to startle you,” Optimus said.

Vents working madly, First Aid shook his helm. “You didn't. Well, I mean, you did. But I know you didn't mean to. I was just concentrating. A bit too hard I guess.” He chuckled self-deprecatingly, righted the stack of datapads and then pushed to stand. “Is there something you need, sir?”

“Oh, only a moment of your time, if you can spare it.” Optimus folded his hands behind his back.

“Of course I can. Paperwork can always wait.” First Aid gave the datapads an askance look, one Optimus knew all too well. “Is it about Jazz? I promise he's on the road to recovery. He'll be back to his old self in no time.”

Optimus smiled gently. “I'm sure he will be. I'm told it is thanks to your quick thinking that his spark was saved.”

First Aid's visor pinked again. “I don't know about that…” he trailed off and then gathered himself, drawing a ventilation. “I appreciate your faith in me, sir.”

“You are worthy of it, First Aid.” Optimus stepped closer. “But actually, I was curious about our other patients, and to be honest, you.”

First Aid's visor blinked. “Me?”
“Yes.” Now it was Optimus’ turn to shift uncomfortably. “You are doing well? Recovering well?”

“I… Oh.” First Aid ducked his helm and scratched at his battle mask. “Yes, sir. I am recovering. Ratchet and Wheeljack look after me. It's hard, but I know they would have wanted me to be happy.”

Optimus unfolded his arms, resting one gently on First Aid's shoulder. “You are absolutely right. Your brothers would have wanted you to be content above all else. Never forget that.”

First Aid's field shimmered with nothing short of delight. “Thank you for saying so. I've actually, um, made a friend,” he said, and then loudly coughed a ventilation. “Speaking of which, Ambulon has been working with me to help Sunstreaker and Sideswipe.”

Optimus lifted his hand away. “Do we have good news?”

“That depends on your definition.” Some of the glee faded from First Aid's field. “Spark merging with another mech could temporarily stabilize their sparks, but a permanent solution would be a spark bond. Finding someone they trust and like is a bit of a challenge.”

Just as Shockwave suggested then. It was good to have confirmation from elsewhere, even if the solution was less than ideal.

Optimus hummed in his intake. “I imagine so. Have we asked for volunteers?”

First Aid gestured to one of the datapads behind him. “I figured we'd have a smaller pool if we let the Twins pick who they wanted to ask first. I've got their list there. I'll start contacting mechs tomorrow.”

“Good. What about Red Alert?”

First Aid's fidgeting increased in earnest. He sighed, this time a lonesome and disappointed sound. “Without a copy of his memory core, we've few options. Complete reformatting or…”

“Or letting him offline in peace,” Optimus murmured. “The question one wonders is which would be kinder.”

“We don't have to decide right away. He could be in stasis for a long while yet. And who knows… maybe the solution will come to us, given time.” First Aid released another soft sigh. “He did not deserve this.”

“None of us did.”

Megatron was dead. Somehow, that still failed to come across as a relief. Megatron was dead, but the echoes of his actions remained, and all Optimus could do was salvage what was left.

Optimus rubbed at his forehelm. “Thank you, First Aid. You and Ratchet are doing great work here. I know the both of you have gone above and beyond your best.”

First Aid's optical band brightened, the closest he had to a smile. “With every flicker of our spark,” he said.

“I'll leave you to your work now,” Optimus said with a long and unjealous look at the stack of
Datapads. “Primus knows I have enough of my own.”

First Aid chuckled. “Don’t we all? Have a good afternoon, sir.”

Optimus excused himself and headed back to Jazz’s private room. As he arrived, Soundwave stepped out, gently closing the door behind him. At first glance, he did not appear rattled, but then, Soundwave generally could appear composed even in the most dire of circumstances.

“Everything all right?”

Soundwave inclined his helm. “Affirmative. Jazz wished to offer appreciation.”

“For what?”

“Assistance in arresting Metalhawk.”

“Ah.” Optimus nodded and held out a hand to Soundwave. “Well then. Would you be interested in joining me for midday energon?”

Soundwave took the offer, tangling their fingers together with a light squeeze. “Yes,” he said. “Invitation welcome.”

Optimus squeezed his fingers back, a warmth flooding his spark.

Moving forward, inch by inch. It was about time.

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Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

"Toward the Sun," Rihanna

Optimus was true to his word.

There was a trial within days of Metalhawk's arrest. Gathered evidence was presented. Testimonies were given, the most damaging being those from Chromedome, Skids, and Acid Storm – on loan from his own residence in the Decepticon brig. He'd been extradited, apparently, the moment Metalhawk was arrested.

They had no presiding judge, but everything was recorded for the Galactic Council should anyone feel the need of a neutral party. Instead, they drew upon their experiences on Earth.

Metalhawk was judged by a jury of his peers, an even mix of Autobot, Decepticon, and Neutral. Perhaps he believed this would deadlock them. That because Neutrals were on the jury, there would be no unanimous consensus as required.

Metalhawk only offered the same defense: that his actions were for the good of Cybertron, a claim that fell false in the wake of Starscream’s and Jazz's injuries, and the thread of unease their attacks had left on their fellow factions.

Metalhawk miscalculated. He assumed his own crew would understand the need for desperate measures.

He underestimated how many of them were tired of running, of worrying, of wondering. How many of them were ready to start hoping. They were appalled to learn that the attacks weren't Autobot and Decepticons returning to the status quo, but orchestrated entirely by the mech they trusted.

The unanimous decision of 'guilty' was inevitable. There was no doubt Metalhawk had orchestrated an attempt to reignite the war in order to reserve Cybertron for the Neutrals alone. His motives were not on trial, only his actions. No one could argue he hadn't violated the terms of the treaty.

He was caught.

At least, Optimus observed, he took the decision and sentencing with dignity. He did not rant or rage. He accepted it with a cold glare and a jerk of his helm.

Sky-Byte attempted to speak on Metalhawk's behalf. He told of his time in the Decepticons, the atrocities he witnessed, the perversion of the cause. He spoke of how Metalhawk had offered him a position despite his former faction. How only in the Neutrals had he found peace.

But when asked whether he condoned Metalhawk's actions which could have led to another war, Sky-Bye refused to comment. His silence spoke for itself.
Imprisonment was not a solution, Optimus knew.

He’d lobbied for installing new leadership in the Neutrals, chosen by democratic vote by the members of Metalhawk’s crew the same as Optimus had been chosen by the Autobots. He also insisted on a public apology and acknowledgment that the treaty was valid, it was working, and Cybertron was safe for any who wished to come home.

It was a good deal.

Nevertheless, Metalhawk ground his denta as he agreed to it. For freedom was preferable to a decade or more in prison. If he wished to prove that he had the best interests of his people and Cybertron at spark, Metalhawk would do this.

This being a speech in front of Autobot and Decepticon and Neutral alike. A crowd had gathered at the space bridge, the only territory fully shared by the three factions. Those that couldn’t be present would be able to watch it as Rewind was recording and broadcasting simultaneously, a rather proud Chromedome sitting next to him.

Metalhawk was the picture of sullen nobility. He stared at the waiting microphone as though it were a sparkeater waiting to bite him. His plating clamped down against his frame. Loathing wrote into every line of his energy field.

He had no other choice, however, and he knew it.

It had to be done.

“My fellow Cybertronians,” Metalhawk began, his vocals easily carrying through the gathering area. “I have come here today to apologize for my actions. In my fear, in my distrust, I committed an egregious offense that threatened the sanctity of the truce, and the peace we have all so carefully built.”

He paused to fold his arms behind his back, his optics staring straight ahead, over the helms of the spectators.

The speech was not his own. Optimus had read what Metalhawk intended to say and while it did meet the parameters of the judgment, it lacked refinement. It lacked a personal touch, an admission of guilt, and a promise to adhere to the truce in the future. It also held a few subtle insults Optimus would not tolerate.

He revised it.

Metalhawk sneered at the new speech, but he would give it. Such was the terms of the agreement.

“In my fear, I orchestrated an attempt on Commander Starscream’s life in hopes the blame would shift to the Autobots. I then arranged for an attack on Commander Jazz for the same effect.” Metalhawk shifted his weight. “It was my belief the Decepticons and Autobots would then leave Cybertron to the Neutrals. I believed only we were capable of true peace. I feared war would return, and we would be unprepared.”

He paused and cycled a ventilation, helm dipping in a calculated show of guilt. “I was wrong to do so. I violated not only the terms of the treaty, but the trust placed in me. I do not know how I can
offer reparations for my actions, but I intend to try.”

Silence fell over the crowd. While most residents of Cybertron knew the circumstances of this speech today, there were some who did not. Some didn't know all the details.

“I would like to take this moment to put my full support behind the treaty,” Metalhawk continued, his vocals gaining strength. “I want every Cybertronian spread across the universe to know that it was signed in good faith, that the war is over, and that peace has been made. Come home to a planet that needs you as we work together to rebuild and unite. You have my word that we should not fear. This treaty is genuine. We have peace at last.”

Metalhawk's plating fluttered as though with unease. He lifted his helm, gaze meeting the crowd's once more.

“I ask for your forgiveness knowing I am not owed it. I ask that you continue to work hard together. I beg that you trust the treaty. And I thank you for your time.” He nodded to the crowd. “That is all.”

He stepped away from the microphone, leaving no room for anyone to ask questions, not Optimus expected they would do so.

“Was that done to your satisfaction, Prime?” Metalhawk asked, his tone so venomous he had to have been building it during the course of the speech.

“You should be asking that of the mechs you tried to offline,” Optimus said, his own voice equally cold. He felt he should be more merciful, more understanding.

But if not for Grimlock, if not for open lines of communication, they would have been inches from war. Optimus could have lost one of his oldest and dearest friends. Grimlock would have probably razed Nova Cronum if Starscream had perished, and Optimus would have been unable to stop him.

Metalhawk played a game with sparks on the line. He deserved to lose.

“They are the ones whose forgiveness you need seek,” Optimus finished.

Metalhawk scoffed a ventilation. “It will be a request made in vain and you know it. Besides, I would have to be genuinely apologetic, wouldn't I?”

“It is my hope that you will be, with time,” Optimus said with his own soft cycle of ventilation. He folded his arms behind his back. “Per the terms of the agreement, you are free to return to Nova Cronum.”

“And what a joy that will be.” Metalhawk's gaze skipped from Optimus to Ultra Magnus and Jazz before returning to Optimus. “Pray that the next time we speak is under better circumstances.”

Optimus had no time to offer a retort before Metalhawk stepped back, transformed, and headed for Nova Cronum in a flare of his thrusters.

It wasn't perfect. But Optimus hoped it was enough. At least with this, Metalhawk would be dampened. Or even, perhaps, tamed.

It was the best Optimus could wish for.
Of all the things Soundwave had to do in his entire functioning, this was one of the most difficult. He had known, way back when Ravage first accepted his courtship request, this day would come.

That did not make him any more prepared for it.

While everyone else was occupied with Metalhawk's speech, Soundwave and his cassettes had gone for the space bridge. With permission, of course. Ravage wished to return to Earth, and Soundwave was lucky Rumble had not decided to go with her.

Soundwave would be able to hold onto him for a little while longer.

Breaking the bond was a painless process. It was not the same as that which was borne of love between two conjunx, but it was a bit deeper than that of amica. Their telepathic connection was gone. The space where she had been within his spark was a yawning emptiness.

He missed her already, and it grew harder to hide that fact. Ravage was the eldest, the first cassette bond Soundwave had ever forged. She understood him best. Ravage was his rock when he had no other shore.

“You do realize this is not goodbye forever, yes?” Ravage asked, her tone entirely deadpan as Frenzy threw his arms around her in an exaggerated embrace that for once, she allowed without growling at him.

“But ya won't be here ta be bothered anymore,” Rumble said with a smirk. He was standing next to Bumblebee, an unexpected addition to this goodbye much as Eject was, and their hands were linked.

Soundwave knew it was only a matter of time before he said farewell to his chaotic twins as well. For wherever Rumble went, Frenzy followed.

“And thank Primus for that,” Ravage replied with a light chuckle. “You two stay out of trouble and make sure that he does, too.” Her gaze shifted to Soundwave as she spoke.

“Pffft. He's the last one we need ta worry about,” Rumble said with a roll of his optics.

“Then clearly, you haven't been paying attention.” Ravage's attention turned toward Laserbeak and Buzzsaw next.

The latter hopped up to her, pecked at the nearest audial, and then took to the sky, taking refuge on Soundwave's shoulder, next to his sonic cannon mount. He buried his face in Soundwave's neck without a word.

“Yes, I suppose I deserved that,” Ravage said softly.

Laserbeak, thankfully, was much more gentle in her grief. She reached up, pressing her beak to Ravage's jaw. Her feathers rustled. Soundwave detected the presence of a narrow-band comm, but
whatever Laserbeak said was not his to know. He did not pry.

One by one, they said their goodbyes, and one by one, they left to offer Soundwave privacy, until it was only he and Ravage who remained. Until he had to look at her and tell himself, one more time, she would not change her mind. The bond had already broken.

His spark ached. He tried not to let it show.

Ravage stood and approached him, only to wind around and through his legs, their armor sliding together. It was something she'd picked up from the humans, an amusing behavior meant to confound the Autobots who thought her a pet. It had since become something of an inside joke between them.

His vents stuttered at the realization it would become little more than a memory eventually.

“I will be fine,” Ravage said and her tail flicked at his right calf plating. “As will you. As poetic as it sounds, we are both following our sparks.”

“Ravage will be missed.”

“Soundwave will be missed.” She hummed with amusement and completed one last circuit before coming to a rest in front of him.

Ravage sat on her haunches, and Soundwave dropped to one knee in front of her. He rested his arm across it, bracing himself.

“Thank you,” Ravage said. “You already know what for.”

“Answer indeed known.” Soundwave's field reached out, warmly entangling with hers. “Gratitude extended, also.”

“I know.” She tilted her head, expression softening. “Soundwave, be happy. You deserve it.”

His ventilations stuttered again, perhaps a matter that needed Ratchet's oversight. He dipped his helm and performed a systems check.

“Ravage will be missed,” Soundwave murmured again.

Because it was the honest truth, and he couldn't find the words otherwise. There was a catch in his intake, a wobble in his spark. He had gained much after Megatron’s fall, but this felt like his first true loss.

“I know.” Ravage bumped her head against his fingertips.

The ground shuddered as the space bridge roared to life, glowing Energon-blue behind her. They had run out of time.

Soundwave stood and watched her go, watched her walk into the space bridge, away from him and toward her happiness.

He wouldn't say it didn't hurt.
“Are you sure you want to do this? It is not required of you,” Ultra Magnus asked in as gentle a tone as he was capable, no doubt.

Chromedome nodded. “Yes, sir.” He looked past Ultra Magnus' massive shoulders to Rewind who sat on the counter behind him. Rewind offered two thumbs up, his visor flashing brightly. “I am.”

“Very well.” Ultra Magnus cycled his vocalizer and straightened, clasping his hands behind his back. “I, Commander Ultra Magnus, having witnessed your gentle spark and dedication, hereby welcome you to the Autobots.”

Ultra Magnus held out his right hand, a single Autobot badge nestled in the palm of it, looking bright and shiny new. It was still wrapped in plastic, the Nano-glue backing protected by a seal.

“May you bear this badge with honor and strive to represent all we fight to defend,” Ultra Magnus finished in a solemn tone.

Chromedome accepted the badge, surprised to find his fingers trembling. For the entire course of the war, he'd been a Neutral. He'd vowed he could not take a side in the slaughter. Lives saved were better than lives wasted. And in the end, he'd still been party to terrible deeds that his neutrality had not saved him from.

But peace?

Peace was a side he'd gladly claim. Especially with Rewind's friendly support.

“Thank you, sir,” Chromedome murmured as he closed his fingers around the badge, drawing it close. His thumb toyed with the backing. “For your acceptance and your trust.”

Ultra Magnus clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Your actions have aided us in so many ways. It is we who should thank you.”

Chromedome's visor brightened, his field flickering with delight. The warm weight of Ultra Magnus' hand felt like approval. It felt genuine.

He peeled the backing off the badge, and under Ultra Magnus and Rewind's gaze, Chromedome placed it in the middle of his chestplate. The subtle addition felt good, as though signaling he now belonged.

“It's a good look for you, Domey,” Rewind chirped as he all but wriggled on the tabletop.

“Indeed it is.” Ultra Magnus' lips curved in a reserved smile. “I look forward to working with you.”

Chromedome dipped his helm, feeling a heat building around the edges of his optical band. “Thank you, sir.”
Ultra Magnus' hand slipped away. He nodded to Rewind, and then excused himself from the room, the private suite that was now to be Chromedome's. They had opted to put him under the purview of the medics, which meant Ratchet was his direct superior, but Chromedome didn't mind. Ratchet was stern, but fair. As a result, his suite was one of many in the medical building. First Aid was a few doors down.

“So,” Rewind said as he hopped off the desk and approached Chromedome. One hand reached up and tapped the newly installed badge. “You're one of us now.”

“That I am.” Chromedome captured his hand, gently giving it a squeeze. “And it is thanks to your encouragement that I even considered doing so.”

Rewind's ventilations audible stuttered. “Oh, well. I didn't do much.” He rolled his shoulders in a shrug, but his fingers further tangled with Chromedome's. “You did all the hard work.”

“Nevertheless, it was your support that led to my agreement.” Chromedome knelt so that they were on even ground. “Thank you, Rewind.”

The mini's field blushed with emotion. “You're, um, you're welcome.” He fidgeted in place. “I'm glad you're sticking around, Domey.”

Chromedome, had he a mouth, would have been smiling from audial to audial right now. “As am I.” He couldn't have imagined he would be this happy.

He was glad the opportunity had come for him.

~

Optimus had been so absorbed in his datapad – a collection of ancient fairy tales – that he had lost track of the time. It wasn't until his fuel reminder pinged that he checked his chronometer and realized not only was it time for his nightly allotment of medical grade, but it was near his usual recharge time.

And he was alone.

That was the oddest detail.

While he and Soundwave had not shared a berth every evening since the first time – command duties and occasionally, cassette duties had made such implausible – it was never without informing the other beforehand. By now, they were usually sharing energon in a companionable silence, their fields intermingling to the point Optimus registered Soundwave as – friend, companion, partner – automatically.

Even more odd, Optimus was alone. There was no avian cassette perched over his shoulder, commentating on the florid prose of his novel. Or giving him limpid optics in exchange for the treats Optimus had taken to carrying with him at all times.

Optimus put away his datapad and rose to his pedes. He fetched his energon, consumed it quickly, and pinged Soundwave. Nothing.
That was a touch concerning.

He checked the schedule, but Ultra Magnus was on shift this evening. There was only one other place Soundwave would be, if something nefarious was not afoot. Given what happened to Starscream and Jazz, given Metalhawk's distaste for the outcome… one couldn't be too careful.

Optimus wouldn't allow himself to panic. It absolutely was not alarm that had him hurrying from his suite, scarcely remembering to lock it behind him. It did not take him several moments, in his haste, to remember which room was Soundwave's – so often did they simply share Optimus' or Soundwave sought Optimus out first.

He did not run or jog down the hall, but his pace might have been called hurried if someone were desperate for an adverb. He pinged Soundwave again, and received the equivalent of being sent straight to voicemail.

Optimus arrived at Soundwave's suite and only buzzed the panel once. He had restraint after all. He waited, his spark a little strained, for someone to answer.

He lifted his hand to buzz again, but the door opened before he could press. Soundwave stood in the frame, silhouetted by the lights behind him.

“Optimus,” he greeted and he sounded… odd. Not disappointed, a touch surprised, and definitely not himself.

“I hope I am not disturbing you,” Optimus said with a gentle smile. “I hadn't heard from you since this morning, and I was a bit concerned.”

Soundwave was uncharacteristically tense, his field noticeably withdrawn from Optimus. “Apologies,” he replied. “Full attention required to personal matter.” He paused and shifted his weight. “Cassette Ravage returned to Earth.”

“Oh, I see. Did Rumble remain?”

“Affirmative.” Soundwave's helm dipped a little, a tremor rippling across his armor. “Bond dissolved. I...” He trailed off into a blat of static, swaying a bit on his pedes.

Oh.

Now it all made sense.

Laserbeak had mentioned there was a possibility of Ravage leaving to be with Hound. Hound was apparently physically capable of sustaining the functional needs of a cassette, that he'd been modded long ago to support one, all for this very reason. Laserbeak had cautioned that, with the war over, it would be soon.

She had been vague as to how it would affect Soundwave. Now, Optimus could see why. He was quite clearly grieving, but to anyone who did not know him, Soundwave would only come across as blunt and unmoved.

“I apologize if solitude is what you prefer,” Optimus murmured, reaching out with his field to show his sincerity. “But if you would like company, I would offer you comfort.”
Soundwave bowed his helm. “Optimus welcome,” he said, and stepped aside, allowing Optimus to enter the suite. “Only, inability to entertain--”

Optimus held up a hand, cutting Soundwave off. “I’m not here so you can entertain me or be the wonderful support you’ve been. I’m offering to do the same for you.” He came into the room and turned to face Soundwave, spreading his hands. “Even if all you wish to do is talk.”

The door closed as Soundwave faced him. He looked, of all things, confused. “Company desired,” he said, again. “But I do not wish to burden you.”

Optimus shook his helm. “That's not what this is about.” He paused to cycle a ventilation and stepped closer, into Soundwave's space, into his field. “Soundwave, hasn't anyone ever offered to take care of you before?”

Judging by Soundwave's field, by his posture, Optimus would guess that it was something anathema to him. Perhaps because he had spent so long being a slave, and then he had his cassettes to look after, and his time in the Decepticons meant there was no one he could trust. Soundwave had only ever relied on himself and his cassettes.

“Carriers provide,” Soundwave said with a shake of his helm. “Strength. Calm. Confidence.”

Optimus rested a hand on Soundwave's dock. “I am not a cassette,” he said warmly and cupped Soundwave's helm with his other hand, pulling their forehelms together. “We are courting, which means I am to be your partner, your equal. I, Soundwave, am to care for you.”

Soundwave's field rippled. He leaned into Optimus' hold, his vents audibly cycling. He spoke nothing but static, but his field said it all: a grief, a need, and on the edge of it, relief.

Optimus dropped his hand from Soundwave's chest and grabbed one of Soundwave's. “Come. Sit with me. Have you energized today?”

“Affirmative.” Soundwave allowed Optimus to pull him toward one of the couches in the main room.

Soundwave had several, but only one of which was appropriately sized for a mech of Soundwave and Optimus' stature. The others were cassette sized and noticeably empty.

“Laserbeak made sure of it, I'll bet,” Optimus said as he sat down on the couch and pulled Soundwave beside him. “Where are they?”

Soundwave's free hand rested on his dock. “Recharge needed.”

“All of them? Even Rumble?”

Soundwave nodded rather than speak. His field reached for Optimus, though he sat stiffly on the couch, almost as though he didn't know what to do next.

“Then I am glad they are close.” Optimus shifted about on the couch until he found a comfortable position, and then pulled Soundwave nearer.

Soundwave went willingly, malleable to every manipulation of his frame. He tucked himself
against Optimus, helm resting on Optimus' windshield, their legs tangled together, a show of need for once. His field tangled with Optimus', willingly reaching for the comfort Optimus offered.

He seemed to be holding himself together through sheer force of will, and it wasn't until they lay still, Optimus' arms around him, one hand gently stroking Soundwave's battle mask, that the poise flickered away. Soundwave's plating shivered. His arms tightened around Optimus' torso.

“Ravage… will be missed,” Soundwave said, static lacing every glyph.

“Yes.” Optimus' fingers traced gentle patterns over Soundwave's mask. “And though I cannot begin to understand how hard it must be for you, I know you are glad she will be happy. Still, it is not so easy to let go.”

Soundwave said nothing. The tremors in his armor grew more intense, his ventilations quickening. His face turned, burying into Optimus' windshield, leaving him to cup the back of Soundwave's helm instead.

Optimus understood.

Sometimes, words weren't needed, just quiet comfort. It was nice, he reflected, as he held Soundwave, nice to be someone's support. Nice to be a source of strength and comfort. Nice to feel strong again.

It was nice to be needed. Nicer still to be able to offer it and have that offer accepted.

Nice to be with Soundwave.

It was nice.

~

Vortex asked again.

Bluestreak could think of a thousand reasons to decline, and only one to accept, but that one was enough to agree before Vortex could fully get the words out of his mouth. Maybe it was the way his fingers twisted together where he thought Bluestreak couldn't see. Or the way his rotors juttered. Or the way his visor flickered.

It was entirely possible it was all an act.

But Bluestreak had always been a good judge of character. He knew things Vortex didn't. He knew that Bluestreak didn't need Jazz to protect himself. He would do just fine on his own.

He knew there was something Vortex wanted from him, and not even Vortex knew what it was. But Bluestreak knew. Because he could read a mech, in much the same way Interrogator Vortex could. Just like the times Jazz had come to him – moments of weakness, of confession – so, too, would Vortex.

It was only a matter of time.
“I swear, that is the last time we get interrupted,” Vortex said, his rotors drooping as though he feared Bluestreak would rant and rage about the previous two aborted attempts.

Bluestreak almost giggled, but managed to keep it to a small smile. “If we were at war, you wouldn't even need to apologize, so why now? It happens.”

Vortex's engine made a dull clanking sound. “I just don't want ya to think ya ain't a priority.”

“Why would I? We're just talking.” Bluestreak shrugged, his doorwings flicking back and forth. “You don't owe me anything.”

“Yeah, but….” Vortex trailed off and finally cycled a long ventilation. “I don't have any clue what I'm doin', and I know it.”

Bluestreak's smile widened. He patted Vortex on the arm. “I don't think any of us do, really. All we ever know anymore is war. It's kind of our default. Figuring out how to put that away, compartmentalize it… that's not easy.”

Vortex stared at him as if he'd grown a secondary helm. “Ya sound like a therapist or somethin’.”

“I'm not one,” Bluestreak assured him. Therapy was not what he'd call it. Therapy was good for mechs. Bluestreak's skills had only ever been a stopgap. “But I do know a little something about starting over.”

“Ya mean Praxus?”

After so many centuries, he didn't flinch anymore. But sometimes, it was a near thing. It was a good thing that Vortex's lack of tact could be considered charming in light of the fact he had probably never been in a real relationship before.

“Yes, I mean,” Bluestreak said, and figured, now was as good a time as any to clue Vortex in.

He stopped and turned toward Vortex, who suddenly drew up short, helm tilted in confusion. He was taller than Bluestreak by almost a full helm, yet he tended to slump his shoulders when they talked as though to make himself smaller. He was trying, and that in itself was charming.

Bluestreak lifted a hand and didn't fail to notice Vortex watched him with nothing short of wariness in the gleam of his visor. He also tracked the path of Bluestreak's hand with single-minded intensity.

Soldier, through and through.

The tremor that rippled through Vortex's frame would have been invisible to the naked optic, but Bluestreak felt it as he cupped Vortex's helm with one hand. His thumb lay gently across Vortex's jawguard. Had he a mouth, Bluestreak's thumb would be poised over his lips as though shushing him.

Their fields sizzled together, physical contact translating into field contact. He could read Vortex easily, in such a way that few were taught to do – intuition warring with training warring with instinct. A desperate desire to please fighting with the urge to do harm. A need to understand clashing with the desperation to dig in deep.
There was hope there, struggling against a raw sort of despair, and an awkwardness that was
genuine.

Vortex had only ever been a soldier. He didn't know what it meant to be civilian. He would always
be a soldier.

Bluestreak could live with that.

“I think,” he began with a stroke of his thumb, “that between you and me, we can figure it out. That
is, if you want to.”

Vortex held himself as still as stone, as though afraid if he moved, he would break Bluestreak or
shatter the moment. “I want ta,” he admitted, his rotors giving a little wiggle. “I don't even know
why sometimes, but I want ta.”

“That's all right. We can figure that part out, too.” Bluestreak's lips curved in a genuine smile as
Vortex's field flushed dizzying warm and confused. “And step one, I think, is to have an
uninterrupted date. You can talk about you, and I can talk about me, and we can learn about each
other. Sound good?”

Vortex's ventilations stuttered. He tilted forward, ever so fractionally, into Bluestreak's touch.
“Yeah,” he said. “Sounds real good.”

“I think so, too.” Bluestreak rose to the tips of his pedes and pressed a kiss to Vortex's mouthguard,
right over the central ridge.

Vortex's cooling fans rattled to life. “What, uh, what was that for?”

“Because I wanted to.” Bluestreak shrugged and dropped his hand from Vortex's helm, but only so
he could grab the rotary's hand and tangle their fingers together. “And because you earned it. And
because it's the kind of thing mechs who're dating do. Ready to go?”

Vortex worked his intake and nodded. “Yeah.” His fingers squeezed Bluestreak's. “Let's go on a
date. An uninterrupted one. Like ya said.”

Bluestreak beamed at him.

He'd already figured out what Vortex wanted from him, and now, finally, Bluestreak was starting
to figure out what he wanted in return.

Time to go see what they were made of.

~

“Chromedome's getting his badge today,” First Aid commented conversationally. He kept his
focus on his datapad, however.

“I am glad that he decided to join the Autobots. He was not happy working with Metalhawk,
though he would never admit why,” Ambulon replied. His stylus scritched across the board noisily.

First Aid peered over the top of his datapad, watching Ambulon as he worked on a complicated equation, something to do with sparks. First Aid would learn eventually, he claimed.

First Aid cycled a ventilation. “Were… you considering it, too?” he asked. Or, he hoped rather.

Ambulon stilled, hand lowering from the longboard. “Oh.”

That was not a good ‘oh.’

First Aid's spark thumped in his chassis and he jerked his gaze back to the datapad. “I was just curious,” he said, with what he hoped was nonchalant enough to sound dismissive. “I mean, Chromedome defected. Tailgate defected, though he went to the Decepticons. Skids might come here depending on the way the vote goes…”

Ambulon put down the stylus and turned to face First Aid, his expression unreadable. He crossed the floor in two quick strides and rested his hands on First Aid's shoulder, encouraging First Aid to look up at him.

“I adore our friendship, First Aid,” he said, his tone the softest First Aid had ever heard. “It is one of the greatest treasures I have found since losing my gestalt.”

Aid tightened his grip on his datapad. “I am sensing a 'but'.”

“But I am not going to be an Autobot,” Ambulon said with a small smile. An apologetic one.

First Aid's shoulders slumped beneath Ambulon's hands “Oh.”

Ambulon's field reached for his, as warm as an embrace. “I will come to Polyhex anytime you have need of me, and I will visit often, but I must remain in Nova Cronum.”

“Because you want to or because you have to?”

“The Neutrals will still need a local medic,” Ambulon said, and he had a point. “However much I am in disappointed in Metalhawk's leadership, I cannot abandon those mecha to begging for medical attention and preventative care. You understand?”

First Aid nodded. “Yes, of course I do.” He cycled a ventilation. “You're right. The Neutrals need you, and they are lucky to have you.”

It still hurt. He'd begun to hope Ambulon would choose to stay because Ambulon, at least, understood. Ratchet and Wheeljack were amazing supports. First Aid would have lingered forever in his grief without them. But only Ambulon understood the pain of a shattered bond, the ache of longing that never faded.

“And at least with Metalhawk out of power, some of the restrictions regarding travel between the two factions should be eased,” First Aid added with what he hoped was a brightness in his field and visor. He didn’t want Ambulon to feel guilty. “I could even come visit you, given that you are understaffed.”

“That would certainly help.” Ambulon squeezed his shoulders again and then let him go. “Now
let's see if I can solve this impossible batch of spark mechanics to help your friends.”

First Aid nodded. “Yes, let's.” He watched Ambulon get back to work, peering at the board as though it were written in another language.

He supposed this was good, too. And at the very least, it was good for now.

First Aid’s spark fluttered as he bent back over his datapad. Time to get back to work.

~

In a history of bad ideas, choosing to recharge on the couch ranked up there. Optimus should have been used to recharging under any kind of situation given the war and falling wherever one could sometimes. But he'd let himself get addicted to comfort these past few months and that weakness had slayed him.

He onlined the following cycle with a crick in his neck, an ache in his back, but most delightfully, the weight of Soundwave warm against his front. It was almost enough to make up for the other aches, pains, and kinked cables.

Optimus onlined his optics and looked down at his couch-mate. Soundwave had fallen into an exhausted recharge late last night and Optimus hadn't wanted to disturb him. He'd thought one evening on the couch couldn't hurt.

He'd been wrong.

A soft smile tugged at Optimus' lips as he stroked the back of one finger against Soundwave's mouthguard. He heard Soundwave begin to stir, ventilations growing louder, the background hum of a living mech growing more pronounced.

“Good morning,” Optimus murmured.

Soundwave's visor flickered on, a dim glow at first before it brightened. He tilted his helm upward, finding Optimus' optics. A blat of static emerged before he audibly rebooted his vocalizer and tried again.

“Apologies,” Soundwave said as he shifted his legs and attempted to push himself upright. They were so thoroughly tangled that it took some finagling. “Optimus in discomfort?”

“Nothing a stretch or two won't solve,” Optimus assured him. He stroked Soundwave's mask again. “Are you feeling better settled?”


“None needed.”

“Offered still.” Soundwave looked around, as though confused to find them on the couch. “Apologies again. Couch unsuited to recharge.” Something in his frame creaked as though giving truth to his words.
“How very true. You could always make it up to me with a kiss?” Optimus suggested with what he hoped was an air of innocence, and not an unexpected playfulness.

Soundwave stared at him, visor slowly brightening, before he leaned closer. “If Optimus wishes,” he murmured as his mouthguard slid aside. “Apology given.”

His ex-vents whispered warm against Optimus' frame. His lips brushed against Optimus', barely counting as a kiss, but the warm weight of him was surprisingly welcome.

“Apology accepted,” Optimus replied, and slid his arms around Soundwave's chassis, tugging him down and closer, so that their lips could meet in a deeper kiss.

Soundwave's engine purred. He shifted his weight, bracing his upper half deep in the couch cushions, their legs once again tangling. His lips moved against Optimus', slow at first, but then deeper. His glossa swept over Optimus' lips, and Optimus opened his mouth to Soundwave.

His spark stuttered in his chamber. Optimus felt he should be alarmed, but all he could feel was content, curiosity, delight. He shifted beneath Soundwave, and shivered as their armor rubbed together. Soundwave was slightly heavier, and his frame bore Optimus into the cradle of the couch cushions. One arm wedged beneath Optimus' frame, and fingers traced a curious pattern up and down Optimus' backstrut.

Pleasure filtered through in the wake of it. Optimus' optics shuttered as he gave himself over to it. He melted into the embrace, into the slow but steady progression of Soundwave's mouth against his. Glossa tangling and retreating, sliding together, wet and smooth.

Soundwave's engine purred, vibrating their frames, until Optimus' joined in, a slightly stronger rumble. The air between them grew hot as Optimus shifted again, his leg rubbing against Soundwave's, tingles spreading southward, toward his panel. He nipped at Soundwave's lips and deepened the kiss, a low noise rising in his intake. His hands clenched on Soundwave's back, kneading the firm armor, keeping them pressed together.

Heat filtered through his lines. Optimus' ventilations stuttered. Soundwave's denta gently scraped his lips, his glossa smoothing over the rough edges. His lips pressed against Optimus' again and again, shared vents passing between them, his field drizzling over Optimus' with a shimmer of want.

Optimus purred into the kiss, and found himself rocking up, his panel growing heated. He loved the slide of their armor together, and the soft sounds it made. He greatly enjoyed the subtle vibrations, especially when they pooled in his groin and teased at his array.

He thought of all the times he'd asked Soundwave to stop, or Soundwave ceased on his own, and wondered if perhaps this time, Optimus wanted to continue.

Suddenly, Soundwave stopped and drew back, pressing his forehelm to Optimus'. “Apologies,” he said.

“Wasn't that what the kiss was for?” Optimus asked, amused.

A low chuckle echoed in Soundwave's chassis. “That and activities must cease.”
“Do you need to visit the washracks?” He was privately tickled and relieved by how willing Soundwave was to see to his comfort.

Soundwave drew back a little further, until they no longer shared the same ventilating space. “Affirmative, but also...” One hand rose and patted his dock. “Cassettes objected.”

Optimus stared, his hands going absolutely still where they had slid to Soundwave's hips. Heat gathered in his faceplate.

He had forgotten all of Soundwave's cassettes were docked last night.

Optimus opened his mouth to speak, but honestly, no words came to mind. Was this what mortification felt like? A heat in his faceplate, static rising in his antennae, and a squirming in his tanks?

“I...” Optimus rebooted his vocalizer. “I suppose they wish to be deployed.”

“Wish also to cease witnessing,” Soundwave said, and he distinctly sounded amused. “Laserbeak, however, willing to continue.”

Optimus, despite himself, chuckled. “She would.” He dug his elbows into the couch and pulled himself back, nearly dislodging a cushion in the process. “That was my fault. I had forgotten, and in the heat of the moment--”

Soundwave's finger rested over his lips. Optimus cycled his optics in surprise, looking up at the carrier mech. Soundwave leaned forward, his finger falling as he stole Optimus' lips for another heated kiss that made Optimus' lines thrum with desire.

“Cassettes will recover,” Soundwave murmured, and then drew back. He pulled himself off the couch, mouth guard sliding back into place.

“They might, but I am not certain I will,” Optimus retorted, but it was spoken subvocally, not meant for Soundwave to hear.

But of course, communications specialist and special operations manager, Soundwave did anyway. He chuckled and offered a hand, helping Optimus off the couch. Optimus looked around for a mantle of dignity, but there was none to be found.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Dissolved bond difficult,” Soundwave admitted as he pulled Optimus into an embrace that was more than welcome. “Better with time. Optimus' comfort appreciated.”

Optimus curled his arms around Soundwave and pressed their forehelms together. “Anytime.” He pressed a kiss to Soundwave's mouthguard before drawing back. “Now why don't you free those minions of yours before you abscond to the washracks while I go find us some energon?”

Soundwave laughed, but turned to obey, his field flush with amusement and affection.

Optimus smiled, too, and excused himself to find energon as Soundwave deployed his cassettes, who emerged in a raucous handful of noise. Buzzsaw chittered. Frenzy chattered. Rumble laughed. Laserbeak chirped. If Soundwave said anything to them, Optimus couldn't hear it over the noise
they made.

It was adorable.

Optimus' smile deepened. A flutter ran through his spark, and he realized, all at once, that he was happy. He was content.

He had a partner who offered unwavering support. The treaty held strong, despite machinations otherwise, and there was no sign Cybertron intended to return to war. His own friends were on the mend, and if this morning was any indication, Optimus' own ills were gradually fixing themselves. He never could have guessed that in the wake of the Autobot defeat and all he suffered at Megatron's hands, he could feel this way again. Optimus thought he'd forgotten what it meant to be happy.

He was glad to see he was mistaken. That he could salvage not only Cybertron and his Autobots, but himself as well.

Joy bubbled in his spark at the revelation. Optimus hid himself in the energon storage alcove because the smile on his face had to be ridiculous.

He was going to be all right, he realized.

He was going to be just fine.

****
Recovery was not an immediate process, no matter how much Optimus wished it would be so.

He recharged with Soundwave more often than not, but even the comfort of Soundwave's familiar field and warmth was not enough to chase away the echoes of Megatron's touch.

Sometimes, Optimus startled awake and all he wanted was distance and space. He wanted to be alone. He didn't want to be touched, no matter how welcome.

Soundwave offered, again, to remove the memories. Optimus refused. He didn't want the easy way out. He wanted to face his fears and move on, not worry about dealing with them later.

Soundwave did not ask again, he only offered a promise. If Optimus changed his mind, Soundwave would help him in an instant.

He offered space when Optimus desired it. He hovered in the periphery, with energon or casual conversation if it was wanted, and he returned when Optimus reached for him. If he was bothered by the constant push-pull, Soundwave didn't show it.

It was months before they moved beyond kissing. Before Optimus could trust himself further than heated mouths, clumsy touches, and deep, lingering kisses which left him hot and wanting.

Soundwave spent a lot of time in the washracks. If he complained, Optimus did not hear it. Instead, he was patient. He waited. He never pushed, never presumed.

If anything, he excused himself sometimes before Optimus was ready to call things to an end. Once, his panel had popped without his permission and never had Optimus seen Soundwave so embarrassed and apologetic.

To see him standing there, spike erect, and backing away as though the very sight of it would harm Optimus, had been so amusing he could do nothing but laugh. Laugh so genuinely it broke through the tension of the moment.

Well, the worried tension.

The rest Soundwave had to handle in the washracks. He never complained, not even once. He would simply leave with a nod to Optimus if requested. Or he would climb into the berth beside Optimus, hold out his arms, and wait for Optimus to climb into them. Which Optimus would do with gratitude and affection.

It was easy to fall into Soundwave's arms. Easy to grow more and more attached to him. Soundwave’s quiet dignity, his dedication, his gentle spark, all of it called to Optimus’ own. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t seen it sooner.

He trusted Soundwave more than he ever thought he could. Which often brought them back around the bend to here and now, to this rapidly familiar course of events.
Gentle kisses turned to heat and passion. Hands that never roamed any further than they were allowed. Tangled legs and hot ex-vents. Lips brushing over his, the soft rumble of desire. Feeling aroused and hesitant all at once. Believing Soundwave wouldn’t hurt him, but still questioning his own trust. Unable to decide if he wanted to stop, or if he couldn’t bear to do so.

And always, always, the soft statement popped up.

“Activities should cease,” Soundwave murmured, drawing back from the kiss only so far as to lean his forehelm against Optimus’ own.

Optimus rumbled appreciation of his own. He drew in a deep intake, and ventured down a different route. Nothing would ever change if he kept rolling down the same road.

“Actually,” he said. “If you’re not opposed, they could continue…?” Optimus suggested, his spark thumping and his frame flush with heat.

Soundwave’s visor brightened, his grip briefly tightening on Optimus before it loosened once more. “If Optimus wishes,” he said, but the yearning in his voice was painfully clear.

Optimus licked his lips. “I do,” he murmured, and slanted his mouth over Soundwave’s again, their glossas instantly meeting in a sizzle of need.

He ex-vented into the kiss, their frames sliding together. His thighs tightened around Soundwave’s waist as he pressed their chestplates against one another. Soundwave’s grip on his hips tightened, keeping him in place, his armor vibrating. Need yawed in Soundwave’s field, yet he kept himself held back.

He would always wait for Optimus.

Affection throbbed through Optimus’ spark. He gentled the kisses, turning them into brief presses of lips together, and reached for Soundwave’s right hand. He tugged it away from his hip, guided it to his groin, and deliberately placed it over his array panel. There, invitation extended, one Soundwave accepted as his fingers carefully traced Optimus’ seams.

Optimus shivered, little bursts of need peppering through his array with each brush of Soundwave’s fingers. Arousal tightened in his abdomen in a slow curl of heat. He moaned against Soundwave’s lips, his hips rocking urgently toward his lover’s touch. His cover spiraled open without waiting for Optimus’ command, freeing his spike to jut upward.

Soundwave, however, made no move toward it. He seemed content to gently tease Optimus, stroking around his array, his hips, his pelvis. Dipping into seams and caressing cables, his fingers drawing lines of charge in their wake.

It was as frustrating as it was reassuring.

Optimus fumbled for Soundwave’s hand again and boldly placed it directly upon his spike, shivering as warm fingers encircled his throbbing length. Optimus worked his intake, his cooling fans rattling to life, as Soundwave rubbed his palm over the sensitive head before stroking down the shaft.

Tingles spread outward in a dizzying wave of pleasure. Optimus’ hips bucked as he surrendered to
the sensation, as he let the ecstasy build in his array. He focused only on the press of Soundwave’s hand, the flick of his fingers, the gentle squeeze. His spike throbbed to the beat of his spark. Pleasure lit through his frame like lightning.

Optimus broke away from the kiss to pant against Soundwave’s intake. His hands tightened on Soundwave’s shoulders, his hips rolling into Soundwave’s slick grip. A rattle started in his pedes and raced up his frame, zipping charge in its wake, until it reached his groin and rushed out through his spike, dragging his overload with it.

Optimus’ shoulders hunched as his spike spurted, pleasure zapping up and down his spinal strut, and his spike dribbling transfuid over Soundwave’s fingers. His entire frame trembled as his vents roared, his sensory inputs rolling with static.

The shaking increased in earnest. Optimus loosed a sound, he wasn’t sure he could call it a moan, and pressed himself into Soundwave’s ventrum. His tanks clenched, a tide of nausea seeping up from his core.

This… this was both unwelcome and unexpected.

Soundwave’s hand slid from his hip to his backstrut, stroking up and down the length of it gently. His hold on Optimus’ spike eased until it vanished, his hand resting on Optimus’ thigh instead.

“Optimus well?” Soundwave asked, their proximity and physical contact no doubt keying him into the unease that wiggled into the edge of Optimus’ spark.

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “Yes,” he said. It was only partially a lie. “I apologize. I just...” Need a moment. Need to get his processor on straight. Need to stand firm against the onslaught of unwelcome memories and banish them back to the darkness.

“Space desired?”

Optimus shook his helm and offlined his optics, in-venting Soundwave’s increasingly familiar scent. “No. This, as we are, is fine.”

Soundwave’s hand stroked down his back again and again, soft and repeated strokes Optimus could time down to the second. The rhythm was calming. He started matching his vents to it, his spark gradually calming as he did so.

The nausea went away, chased by the warmth Soundwave’s frame offered. No, not just warmth. Heat. Over-heating.

Optimus’ unshuttered his optics and eased out of the close embrace. Charge danced just under the surface of Soundwave’s armor. His fans were lowkey humming. Arousal leaked from his field in tiny reveals.

Oh.

Optimus nearly smacked himself in the face. He’d kept Soundwave from departing to the washrack earlier. No wonder he shook from repressing his own arousal. Yet, he didn’t so much as twitch or push Optimus away.

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “Thank you,” he murmured, leaning up to press a kiss to
Soundwave’s chin.

The other mech tilted his helm down, catching Optimus’ mouth. Their lips brushed, Soundwave’s ex-vents a warm caress over Optimus’ frame.

“You are welcome,” Soundwave said, his damp fingers stroking over Optimus’ thigh, closer to his knee than his array however.

Optimus hummed in his intake and kissed Soundwave again, feeling the other mech’s lips tremble against his. More charge crackled out from beneath Soundwave’s plating. He was clearly beyond the point where he could will his arousal away.

Optimus stroked the back of his knuckles over Soundwave’s cheek. “Shall I return the favor?” he asked as he dropped his free hand, fingers ghosting over Soundwave’s dock before they ventured lower.

“Exchange of pleasure is not required unless Optimus ready,” Soundwave replied, his hand capturing Optimus’ before he managed to find Soundwave’s panel. “Want Optimus’ true desire. Not repayment.”

Optimus’ engine purred. He curled his hand around Soundwave’s helm and pulled him into another kiss, their lips sealing together and their glossas tangling. It wasn’t obligation he felt, but a desire to return the pleasure Soundwave offered. Nevertheless, he was grateful Soundwave had denied him.

He wasn’t sure he was as ready as he wanted to be.

Soundwave rumbled at him and drew back from the kiss, briefly brushing their nasal ridges together. “Reciprocation not required,” he said, a note of humor in his voice. “But release of charge still necessary.”

Optimus chuckled and slid back, putting some space between their frames. “I will take my leave then.” Rather than force Soundwave into the washrack for the umpteenth time, Optimus would excuse himself to it.

“If Optimus wants.”

Optimus paused where he’d slid to the edge of the berth, curling his knees beneath him. “You would let me watch?” He had to admit, the idea appealed to him.

“Affirmative.” Soundwave shifted, leaning his back against the wall, his legs stretched across the berth in front of him. One hand had already dropped to his panel, his fingers stroking the domed metal.

Optimus’ lips curved into a smile. “Then I’d like to stay,” he said, and shifted so that he sat more or less perpendicular to Soundwave, close enough their frames touched, and he felt a part of it, but not so close he felt obligated to participate.

Not that Soundwave seemed to mind either way.

Soundwave rubbed the heel of his palm against his array, eliciting a firm pressure Optimus would not have expected. His ventilations quickened; his panel popped almost immediately. His spike pressurized into view, dark blue and banded in spirals of pale white and soft red. Transfluid already
beaded at the tip as sky blue biolights blinked in fitful succession.

Soundwave’s fingers flirted briefly over his valve, offering Optimus only tantalizing peeks, before they wrapped around his spike, now coated in his own lubricants. Optimus’ vents quickened as Soundwave firmly gripped his spike, giving it a long, thick pull that had Soundwave’s engine racing and his hips pumping upward.

Soundwave’s field spilled heat and desire into the room. His optical band darkened, his lips parting as some of his ventilations diverted orally. He stroked himself in long pulls, fisting his spike and squeezing out pearls of pre-fluid with each upward pull.

Optimus couldn’t tear his gaze away. His mouth went dry. “Do you… do you think of me?” he asked, briefly lifting his gaze to Soundwave’s.

“Always,” Soundwave replied. His vents huffed another low whoosh of air. His hips rolled into his fist, his engine rumbling into a higher pitch. His glossa swept over his lips, more pre-fluid dribbling from the tip of his spike.

Heat dared return to Optimus’ own frame. He found himself creeping closer without conscious thought, drawn to the sight of Soundwave working his spike, dark blue armor glistening beneath lubricant. His motions became faster, his helmet dipping as he panted.

Soundwave’s field blasted, filling the room with his need. His free hand gripped the berthcovers, tangling in the fabric. He pumped himself harder and harder, the slick sounds of lubricant overshadowed by the roar of his engine.

Optimus’ breaths caught in his intake. He pressed against Soundwave’s side, felt the other mech vibrating against him.

“Are you thinking of me now?” Optimus asked, barely above a whisper, enraptured by Soundwave caught in his own pleasure.

A low groan rattled in Soundwave’s chassis. “Yes,” he bit out, and gnawed on his bottom lip, the dermal plating growing swollen and plump.

Optimus groaned and closed the distance between them, sealing his lips over Soundwave’s. The other mech panted into his mouth, denta and lips claiming Optimus’ with bright hunger. Soundwave shook beneath him, but no more so when Optimus dared reach between their frames and flirt his fingers over the head of Soundwave’s spike.

It might as well have been a lightning strike. Soundwave’s backstrut bowed, his hips jerked, and his spike spurted. He overloaded with a low, sexy sound, stripes of transfluid erupting from his spike. Soundwave’s entire frame shook as his hips lazily pumped into his fist, milking his spike of every drop of transfluid.

Optimus drew in a shaky ventilation and rested his helm on Soundwave’s shoulder. His hand rested on Soundwave’s thigh, leaving a sticky imprint behind. His own system hummed with a soft heat, not quite full arousal, but not revulsion either. That had been unexpectedly arousing.

Soundwave shifted a little. “Apologies,” he murmured, as though embarrassed he had overloaded so quickly.
“What for? I’m unbelievably flattered.” Optimus grinned and pressed a kiss to the corner of Soundwave’s mouth. “Better than the washrack?”

A laugh rattled out of Soundwave’s chassis. “Yes.” He leaned down, pressing his forehelm to Optimus’. “Thank you.”

“Mmm.” Optimus’ engine purred. “My pleasure.”

He could do this, he realized. He didn’t have to hold himself back. Two steps forward, one step back.

He managed to be somewhat intimate with Soundwave without needing to run away and hide. But the night purges returned. Vivid imaginings and lies, telling him he’d never escaped, Megatron wasn’t dead, and it was all a dream fabricated by a spark clinging to hope.

Soundwave and Starscream had failed; Megatron had tortured and killed them both, ripped out their sparks in front of their agonized cassettes and trinemates. He’d caught Jazz, and hadn’t been merciful. He’d raped and tortured him, all in front of Optimus, and then ripped open his chassis and tore out his spark, all while Optimus thrashed in chains he could not break.

‘M sorry, boss bot…

Jazz’s voice echoed in his helm.

He onlined shaking, spark hammering, field wild. He shoved Soundwave away from him, the other mech too large, too hot, too present.

“Optimus--”

“I’m fine,” he lied, but couldn’t speak the truth, couldn’t voice it. He couldn’t even be certain what the truth was, save that he certainly wasn’t fine, and it wasn’t Soundwave’s fault.

Optimus pushed himself off the berth, away from Soundwave, his legs wobbly, his knees even more so. He felt the urge to move, to go. It didn’t matter where. He just wanted to know that he could.

He touched his wrists, his intake, his chestplate. Felt the locks, the lack of chains and collar. There was nothing inhibiting him. His code worked on the door. It slid open and then shut again when he didn’t leave.

He paced a circle around the room. It wasn’t Megatron’s. It was very much his. This was his console. This was his window. It looked out on Polyhex, not Iacon.

In the reflection of the window, Optimus saw it. His panels were open. His spikehead barely peeped into view, but the biolights around his valve lightly flickered. The barest sheen of lubricant decorated his thighs. His engine revved weakly.

Optimus’ hands formed fists. One of them rapped against the window, barely enough to make a sound. There was no arousal in his system, but he was ready anyway.

Such was the power of a nightmare. One that grew in strength, trying to convince him he’d been telling himself a lie.
It was early. Perhaps not too early. He pinged Jazz anyway. His third would understand.

“Optimus?” Jazz’s reply sounded sleepy, a bit dazed. “Is somethin’ wrong? Somethin’ happen?”

Optimus bowed his helm. “No. I apologize for waking you. I only...” Wanted to know you were all right. Wanted to know that I could. Wanted to know I wasn’t dreaming.

“It’s okay, boss.” Jazz sounded more alert now, and somehow even managed chipper. “I’m fine. We’re fine. All’s fine. Old Buckethead’s dead, and you should be snugglin’ with Soundwave right now. That sound right?”

Optimus didn’t know how Jazz always knew. But he was grateful for it in that moment.

“Yes, it does. Thank you, Jazz.”

“Anytime, OP.”

The comm went silent, but not before Jazz transmitted a digital hug and an emoticon the likes of which Laserbeak favored. Not even Optimus’ subconscious could have produced that.

Calmer, Optimus focused on ventilating, one intake after another. He counted his sparkpulses as they slowed from panic to calm. He listened to the sounds of his own frame, no longer labored or struggling. His repaired windshield glinted in the window.

This was reality. Not that nightmare.

And slowly, slowly, the panic eased.

Optimus cycled his optics, performed a systems check, and unclenched. He half-turned, aware that Soundwave was still here, though the other mech had been wise enough not to move.

He stood near the berth, his attention on Optimus, but making no sudden movements. He tilted his helm in question, but did not speak.

“I apologize,” Optimus said, and winced when it came out striped in static.

Soundwave shook his helm. “Apologies unnecessary.” One hand rose slowly, and tapped his forehelm. “I saw.”

Two words.

Chill raced down Optimus’ backstrut. His gaze fell, shoulders hunching. “I see.”

“It was unintentional,” Soundwave rushed to say. “Physical contact and unconscious trust left both open. I apologize.”

Optimus worked his intake, feeling as though a lump had taken up residence. “We’re both sorry,” he said, and offered Soundwave a smile, only to realize that his battlemask had activated in the midst of his fear.

He couldn’t bring himself to retract it. The mask, too, was evidence that he was safe, and no longer
in Megatron’s clutches.

“Preference for solitude?” Soundwave asked. He still hadn’t moved, as though he feared it would set Optimus off in some manner.

Perhaps he was right.

“No,” he answered, and then shook his helm. “I mean…” He trailed off. He didn’t know what he wanted.

He yearned for the comfort Soundwave offered. He didn’t want to be touched, however. He wanted to be alone, but knew he would be lost in his thoughts if he did so.

“I am sorry,” Optimus said again, his tone bleak, his gaze dropping.

“Apology unnecessary,” Soundwave said quietly. He took a step, an unexpectedly silent one, toward the door. “Moment needed? I will retrieve coolant. Then re-evaluate.”

Coolant?

Oh. Optimus’ temperature had skyrocketed. He hadn’t noticed in all the other pains. Yet, Soundwave had.

His spark squeezed.

“Yes, thank you. That sounds nice,” Optimus said, managing to lift his helm. He couldn’t smile, not behind the protection of his mask, but he hoped that his gratitude was in his field.

Soundwave dipped his helm, and excused himself from the room. In the silence of his absence, Optimus cycled a ventilation. He stood there several seconds more before he moved toward the berth on shaky legs. He sat down on the edge and scraped a hand down his face.

He hated this. He hated the weakness, the uncertainty, the crawling fear. There was no reason to be afraid, to panic. Megatron was dead. He was safe. All he wanted was to feel safe, to allow himself to be comforted by the mech who would be his lover.

Yet, he could not even have that. Megatron and his tortures lingered at the back of Optimus’ subconscious like a rust infection that had settled in all the way through his frame.

The door opened as Soundwave returned, still moving slow and careful. He carried with him a decanter of coolant, which Optimus gratefully accepted.

“Thank you,” he said, and was ashamed when he had to turn away from Soundwave so he could open his mask to sip at it. He should not feel so unsafe.

“You are welcome.” Soundwave lingered, not too close, not too far. “Optimus wishes for solitude?”

Optimus shook his helm. “No. I don’t want to be alone, but I don’t… I don’t want to share a berth either.” He cycled a ventilation. “I apologize. I know very well that I sound contrary and irrational.”
“Only to some. Suggestion offered?”

“Of course.”

Soundwave moved closer, slowly, as though waiting for Optimus to protest. He gestured to the berth. “I will sit. You can recline. Sound fair?”

“That doesn’t sound like you will get a restful recharge,” Optimus said, frowning behind his mask. He tucked the container of coolant into his subspace. “Neither does it sound fair.”

Soundwave’s field reached out, tentatively, for Optimus’ own. “Positions have been worse. More worried for Optimus’ comfort.”

His spark thrummed with warmth. “All right,” Optimus said. “Let us try.”

You would have thought he’d offered Soundwave the world, the way his lover lit up with delight. Soundwave’s field became soft and warm, like the caress of a blanket. Yet, he still moved cautiously, telegraphing his motions as he pulled himself onto the berth, and braced his back against the wall, his legs stretched out in front of him. There was still plenty of room left for Optimus.

He privately thanked Jazz for his foresight in acquiring Optimus a larger berth.

Soundwave patted the thigh nearest to Optimus. “Invitation extended,” he said, holding out a hand to Optimus.

There was no urgency in his motions. He looked as though he were willing to wait for Optimus until morning came, if he needed. That, in itself, was enough to convince Optimus.

He pulled himself fully onto the berth and got into position. He lay there, stiff as a board, his head pillowed on Soundwave’s thigh, his frame stretched across the berth. Soundwave was warm beneath him, a gentle thrum coursing through his frame. Nevertheless, he sent the command for the lights to dim.

“May I touch you?” Soundwave asked, his vocals softer, as though trying not to startle.

Optimus cycled a ventilation. “Yes,” he said, aloud, though there was a part of him that immediately tensed at the idea. Surely Soundwave didn’t mean intimately.

But no. Soundwave’s hand rested on the crown of his helm, a barely tangible touch that was none the less warm and soothing.

“Optimus must recharge,” he murmured, his fingers stroking a gentle pattern over the curve of Optimus’ helm. “Rest necessary for recovery.”

“So I’ve been told,” Optimus said. He cycled several ventilations, tried to focus on them and the pulses of his spark. He didn’t want to admit he feared what he would see when he shuttered his optics.

“Optimus must rest,” Soundwave repeated, a murmur again, but instead of falling into silence, what rose after was a sound.
It wasn’t quite a song. Optimus couldn’t call it that as it didn’t seem to come from Soundwave’s vocalizer. But neither did it come from his speakers. It seemed to emerge from his frame, as though he were manipulating some of his internal systems to produce the sound. It wasn’t a noise, but had a lyrical quality, one without words.

It was beautiful. It seemed to match the pulse of Optimus’ spark, and as it slowed, so did his spark rate. Until the tension that left his cables taut and his plating clamped, eased out of him with each passing ventilation.

“Often soothed cassettes like this,” Soundwave said as his fingers stroked gentle patterns around Optimus’ helm and audials, though careful to avoid his sensitive antennae. “The humans would call it a lullaby.”

“It is very nice,” Optimus murmured, his optics seeming to shutter of their own accord. He felt his ventilations even out.

Soundwave hummed deep in his chassis. “Rest now,” he said.

Optimus made a noise of agreement. He focused on the sound, the lullaby as it were, and let it lull him right back to recharge.

He had no more nightmares that night.

~

They tried again.

Or to say, Optimus tried again. He set forth with a determination he hadn’t felt in months. He refused to let Megatron be a noose around his intake.

Post-shift, he invited Soundwave back to his hab-suite. Soundwave always waited for an invitation. Once inside, he walked right up to the former Decepticon and gently tapped his cassette dock.

“Out,” Optimus said, with perhaps more force than he intended. “We are going to need some privacy.”


His dock popped, the two avian cassettes emerging immediately with playful chirps at each other. Buzzsaw booped Soundwave on the helm affectionately, but Laserbeak came and booped Optimus, her field buzzing with affection.

“There’s energon crush in the dispensary,” Optimus offered, lifting a hand to tickle a finger under her chin. “Help yourselves.”

Laserbeak sent him an emoticon and nipped at his fingertips. Her and Buzzsaw squawked at each other before taking off for the dispensary.
“Optimus spoils Laserbeak,” Soundwave said, amused.

“Sometimes, people deserve to be spoiled,” Optimus said, and stepped closer to Soundwave, well into his personal space. He cupped Soundwave’s jaw with one hand, gently rubbing his thumb over Soundwave’s mask. “Open for me?”

“Of course.” Soundwave’s mask split down the middle and slid back into his helm.

Optimus smiled and closed the distance between them, pressing their mouths together for a soft kiss that quickly became less than chaste. He flicked his glossa against Soundwave’s lips, requesting entrance, and hummed when Soundwave relented.

His thumb swept over Soundwave’s cheek as he deepened the kiss, tangling his glossa with Soundwave’s own. Soundwave had recently consumed energon, a perpetually sweet blend that he favored. The flavor of it lingered on his glossa.

Optimus’ frame hummed.

This… this was all right.

He eased out of the kiss, brushing only their lips together. “Thank you,” Optimus murmured, his optics half-shuttering.

“I am the one who should be grateful,” Soundwave replied gently. He cupped Optimus’ face as well, and Optimus turned his helm into the gentle touch.

He wanted to focus on this, and only this.

“What would Optimus like?” Soundwave then asked, his lips all but mesmerizing as they moved.

Optimus flushed. “I did not get that far,” he admitted, and worked his intake. “I do not know. I only know that I do not want to be ruled by my fears.”

Soundwave leaned down, pressing their forehelms together. His warm ex-vents gently ghosted over Optimus’ faceplate. “Optimus trusts Soundwave?”

“Yes.” Optimus surprised himself with how much he actually meant it. There were a thousand reasons he should not trust Soundwave, and yet he did. He trusted that Soundwave would not hurt him or intentionally bring him harm.

A ripple passed over Soundwave’s armor, one of utter delight. “Then will Optimus allow Soundwave to try and bring him pleasure?”

Optimus shivered. A surge of heat rippled down his spinal strut as his spark throbbed and his processor conjured several helpful images – most of which starred his past Autobot lovers, but a good many now starring Soundwave though they had actually done very little yet. Optimus did, however, have an active imagination.

“Yes,” he said, and embarrassed himself with how needy he sounded. “You may.”

Soundwave’s engine rumbled. His thumb stroked over Optimus’ cheek. “Prefer to sit or stand?”
“Stand.” He didn’t even have to think about it. He didn’t think too hard about why that was.

“Very well.” Soundwave pressed a kiss to Optimus’ forehelm and then dragged his lips slowly down, over the just of Optimus’ nasal ridge, before capturing Optimus’ mouth with his own.

The kiss was soft, so soft. His lips brushed over Optimus’ in a slow and steady sweep. His ex-vents were warm flutters over Optimus’ dermal plating. His glossa traced the seam of Optimus’ lips but never ventured within, because then his mouth moved on.

Over the curve of Optimus’ jaw, to the sensitive curve of his audial, and further still, to the delicate cables of his intake. Optimus shivered as Soundwave kissed him there, ex-vents tickling at the protoform beneath the web of thick cables. Optimus worked his intake, felt Soundwave’s mouth bob over his cables, and shivered again.

His hand slid from Soundwave’s helm to his shoulder. His fingers twitched and flexed in their loose grip.

Soundwave flirted with his intake for several more seconds before he moved on again, and only then did Optimus realize he was slowly kneeling. His hands ghosted over Optimus’ shoulders, down his arms, then to his sides, fingers dragging a light burr of charge over Optimus’ ventral armor.

Optimus licked his lips, feeling almost breathless as he watched Soundwave descend, his lips caressing seams as he knelt. He ex-vented more damp heat into Optimus’ grill until finally he was on his knees, pressing a small kiss to Optimus’ ventrum.

Optimus sucked in a sharp intake. He watched, enraptured, as Soundwave’s mouth descended further. He placed a kiss to Optimus’ interface array, his hands gently cradling Optimus’ hips. His thumbs swept soft patterns over Optimus’ plating as his lips explored the seam of Optimus’ panel. His glossa emerged then, licking a line around and around Optimus’ array.

Optimus shivered, heat pooling southward, dragging all of his attention to that point of pleasure where Soundwave seemed content to caress him for no other reason than to bring him pleasure.

Soundwave tilted his helm and looked up at Optimus. “You will open for me?” he asked.

Optimus’ hands trembled. He couldn’t bring himself to speak, so he sent the command to manually trigger his panel open. It slid aside, both inner covers spiraling open to reveal his interface components.

The head of his spike peeped into view, even as he felt a rush of cool air caress the rim of his valve. The tiniest trickle of lubricant had gathered, barely a minimum, but then Soundwave ex-vented damp heat, and Optimus’ valve clenched. He shivered, knees wobbling.

“Thank you,” Soundwave murmured, his lips barely an inch from the head of Optimus’ spike.

“I think I should be thanking you,” Optimus forced out, static in his vocals, his ventilations increasing.

Soundwave huffed a laugh. His lips moved closer, until he pressed a kiss to the tip of Optimus’ spike. Optimus swallowed down a moan. Such a simple act should not feel so electrifying, yet it sent a surge of need up his spinal strut. Even more so when Soundwave drew the head of Optimus’
spike into his mouth and licked it.

Optimus’ hips jerked forward, his spike thickening quickly. Soundwave hummed in his intake, lips and glossa working patterns of pleasure over Optimus’ spike. He kissed and licked it as though it were an energon candy of his favorite flavor. He pressed another kiss to the tip, sending another hot wave of want through Optimus frame.

Though it was nothing compared to the shock of need that attacked him when Soundwave moved further still. When his lips pressed to Optimus’ outer node, and his glossa flicked across it. Optimus’ hips danced, a low groan escaping him before he could stop it.

Optimus shifted, legs pushing further apart, hips canting toward the wet heat of Soundwave’s mouth. A glossa swept over his rim, tracing the entirety of it, flirting with the swelling fold. His anterior node pulsed, his valve cycling faster, until the first bead of lubricant welled at the rim.

Optimus cycled a ventilation, his knees wobbling. He worked his intake, his array aching from want. It was the sweetest torture.

And then Soundwave had the audacity to stop. He pulled away and looked up at Optimus, his lips glossy from lubricant.

“Optimus wishes me to stop?” he asked as his thumbs swept caressing patterns over Optimus’ hip and groin.

“I am the furthest from wanting you to stop,” Optimus replied.

Soundwave hummed an approving note. “Then I will continue,” he said, and slid his hands around Optimus’ thighs, tugging him closer and burying his face in Optimus’ array.

A sharp cry escaped Optimus’ lips. He pressed his hand over his mouth to cover the embarrassing noises, even as his helm tilted back. Soundwave latched onto his exterior node and sucked on it, his heated ex-vents caressing the twitching rim of Optimus’ valve.

His glossa swept deep and consuming into Optimus’ valve. He slurped up trickles of lubricant, kissed Optimus’ rim, and lovingly laved every node within reach of his glossa.

Optimus lost control of a whimper and it eked free. His optics shuttered as he shivered. His spike fully pressurized, proud and eager, pre-fluid beading at the tip. His knees wobbled.

“S-Soundwave,” Optimus tried, but it fell away in a garble of static as denta gently scraped over his anterior node again.

His engine roared, cooling fans whirring.

His hand groped for and found Soundwave’s helm. He patted the crest of it, even as he managed to call for Soundwave through another wave of static.

The warmth of Soundwave’s mouth instantly vanished. “You want me to stop?” he asked, his visor bright and warm.

Optimus shook his helm. “I need to sit. Or I’m going to fall.”
“Understood,” Soundwave said, and there was almost a wicked gleam in his visor as he stood and leaned in close, pressing their forehelms together once more. “Berth or chair?”

It was hard to think with the pleasure simmering in his lines, with his spike bumping against Soundwave’s frame and leaving streaks behind. With the scent of his own arousal emanating from Soundwave’s lips.

“Berth,” Optimus managed to get out, his processor swimming in pleasure and warmth. “Berth is fine.”

Soundwave’s chassis rumbled. His lips moved down, descending over Optimus, and he groaned into the kiss. He tasted himself in Soundwave’s mouth, and it tasted like trust, like freely given pleasure.

Optimus moaned and clutched at Soundwave, his knees wobbling again. He felt Soundwave’s hands on his waist, his hips, and then his thighs. Soundwave’s fingers flexed before Optimus felt himself lifted, hoisted upward.

He startled, scrambling for a hold, but it wasn’t needed. For Soundwave took three steps before they were at the berth, and then he lowered Optimus to it, his back cradled in the plush surface. Soundwave leaned over him, firmly nestled between Optimus’ thighs, yet he hadn’t so much as popped his panel.

He kissed Optimus, still as slow and leisurely as before, their mouths exchanging heat and damp. Optimus moaned, his arms winding around Soundwave’s neck and shoulders, holding him close. Soundwave’s frame hummed with suppressed charge, yet nothing in his actions suggested urgency.

Not even when he ended the kiss to mouth his way back down Optimus’ frame. He lowered himself to his knees, cradled Optimus’ hips with his hands, and set upon Optimus’ array as though Optimus’ pleasure was the only thing that mattered.

Optimus bucked toward his mouth, heat rolling outward in steady waves from the focal point of his array. Soundwave took Optimus’ spike into his mouth, and swallowed him to the base, glossa stroking paths of pleasure. He slid his hands to Optimus’ thighs, urged them over his shoulders, and sucked Optimus deep.

Coherency vanished.

Optimus had no attention for anything but the hot pleasure Soundwave evoked in him. The sweep of a talented glossa. The gentle scrape of denta. The flirting caress of lips. His spike pulsed, hot and full, throbbing in the embrace of Soundwave’s mouth. His valve clenched and clenched, lubricant soaking his aft, dribbling down the side of his berth.

He might have babbled Soundwave’s name. He couldn’t be sure. Not through the rush of noise in his audials, or the rapid beat of his spark. Not when Soundwave’s mouth abandoned his spike, and he buried his face in Optimus’ valve. His glossa plunged inside, his nasal ridge rubbing on Optimus’ anterior node.

He whimpered, hips bucking against Soundwave’s mouth. His thighs tensing and trembling. His hands clutched restlessly at the berth, twisting in the covers, his hips rolling against Soundwave’s mouth over and over.
Pleasure twisted within him, folding in and over itself. His engine raced. His vents roared. Everything narrowed down to a single point, to the press of Soundwave’s mouth, the flick of his glossa, the brush of his lips. Optimus’ anterior node throbbed, his valve squeezed down, and then Soundwave hummed. He hummed, and the vibrations coursed over Optimus’ array.

Optimus shattered.

His helm tossed back as he bucked up hard. He heard something rip, vaguely, as he came undone, overload tossing him back in waves of pleasure. His backstrut arched. His spike spurted, his valve spasmed, and charge lit along his lines like a flash fire.

He twitched and tossed within Soundwave’s grip and ever gentling oral caresses, until he fell back planet-side, vents whirring and frame rattling. He panted for ventilations, his hands gripping the covers unbearably tight – the torn covers. He had to force his sensory suites into a reset, his optics powering back on with a flicker.

Soundwave still cradled his lower half, though he’d moved on to pressing gentle kisses up and down the inside of Optimus’ thighs.

Optimus cycled a ventilation and forced his optics back online. His entire frame thrummed with satisfaction, his processor oddly quiet, his spark softly twirling. He waited for the panic to set in, but there was nothing. Yet.

Only time would tell.

He had to reset his vocalizer twice before he could make it function. He unwound his fingers from the torn berth covers and forced his elbows beneath him, propping up his chassis so he could look down his frame at Soundwave.

He’d had both a spike and valve overload somehow, he noticed. Transfluid striped his belly, and Soundwave’s face was damp from Optimus’ lubricant. Yet, he didn’t seem bothered by it.

“Optimus well?” Soundwave asked.


Soundwave’s glossa flicked over his lips. He pressed one last kiss to Optimus’ inner thigh and then pushed himself to his pedes. He leaned over the berth and Optimus, hands braced to either side of Optimus’ shoulders.

“You are welcome,” he said, his field stroking over Optimus’ in a delicate caress. “Optimus is gorgeous in pleasure.”

Heat stole into Optimus’ face. He did not know why the compliment left him so embarrassed.

“Thank you,” he said as their faces came close together, nasal ridges brushing. He shifted his weight, cupped the back of Soundwave’s helm, and pulled him in for another soft kiss.

He tasted himself once more, and a shudder rippled down his spinal strut. It helped ground him in reality somehow, reminding him where he was and who he was with.

Soundwave purred against his mouth, shifting his weight so that he could curve one hand around
Optimus’ chassis, his fingers pressing against the line of Optimus’ back strut.

“It was my pleasure,” Soundwave murmured against his lips. “I adore you.”

“I’m beginning to understand that,” Optimus replied. He rubbed their nasal ridges together. “I do not know how well I can return the favor, but I could try, if you’d like.”

Soundwave rumbled a laugh. “That is not necessary.” He drew back and gestured to himself, splatters of transfluid on his own groin paneling. “Optimus is very inspiring.”

Heat flushed Optimus’ face to the tip of his antennae. “Oh. I see.”

Soundwave chuckled and brushed their nasal ridges together again. “Patience is Soundwave’s strong suit,” he murmured. “More concerned with Optimus’ comfort.”

Optimus’ lips curved. His fingers stroked the back of Soundwave’s helm. “What did I do to deserve you?” he wondered aloud.

Soundwave brushed their lips together and murmured, “Feeling mutual.”

~

“You’re pushing yourself too fast.”

That was how Ratchet chose to greet him when Optimus showed up for his weekly appointment. There was no getting out of it. His recharge and refuel issues were clearly documented and until Ratchet was absolutely certain Optimus was in no danger of collapsing again, these weekly appointments were unavoidable.

“Have you been nosing about in my personal life again?” Optimus asked as he hoisted himself onto the berth.

Ratchet came at him with a double-handed approach of a scanner clutched in each hand. “I don’t have to. These scanners tell me everything I need to know.” He peered at Optimus, his expression half one of accusation. “This is not a race, Optimus.”

“No, it is not,” Optimus agreed. “But that does not negate the fact I am not pushing myself fast enough. One does not grow from remaining stagnant and safe.”

Ratchet’s frown deepened, worsening the lines in his faceplate. “There is such a thing as over-exertion.”

“No. I refuse to let Megatron continue to rule my thoughts and actions,” Optimus insisted as the wash of the scans made his armor itch. “I am the master of my thoughts and my spark, not the horrors he inflicted upon me.”

Ratchet sighed and set the scanners aside. “Optimus, it is not a failure to take time. Recovery is not an instant process. And it’s not just Megatron’s actions you are dealing with, but also the effect of thousands and thousands of years of civil war.”
Optimus pressed his lips together. His spark quivered. Ratchet, he knew, had a point. But Optimus did not want to agree. He hated cowering in the shadow Megatron had left over him.

Ratchet sighed again and scrubbed at his chevron. “You know, I haven’t even been intimate with Wheeljack yet, and I’ve known and trusted him a lot longer than you have Soundwave. You need to give both of yourselves time.”

“It is unfair to demand such a thing.” Optimus shifted his weight on the berth, recalling the great care Soundwave showed him, care Optimus seemed incapable of returning. “Soundwave deserves better than me.”

“Soundwave deserves to choose for himself,” Ratchet said. “Besides, he’s getting the support he needs. It’s time you do that, too.”

Optimus tilted his helm. “What do you mean?”

Ratchet dropped his hands and picked up a nearby datapad as it beeped at him. His gaze dropped to the screen, no doubt data on Optimus’ systems.

“It was Wheeljack’s idea,” Ratchet explained. “He started a support group, sort of a question and answer thing, for mechs supporting partners who’ve gone through trauma. Soundwave’s attended a few times, I know.”

Some of the tension eased out of Optimus’ frame. “I did not know such a thing existed. Or that Soundwave would even attend.”

“We all need support in different ways,” Ratchet said, his stylus flicking across the screen before he stowed the datapad once more. “If you need someone to talk to, someone who was there with you, I’m always here for you.”

Optimus’ helm dipped, a smile curving his lips. “I know you are, old friend.” He held out a hand, a part of him thrilled when Ratchet accepted it.

Sometimes, he could not move past the horrors Megatron forced him to inflict on Ratchet. Nor the knowledge of what Ratchet had suffered. But a part of him healed a bit more every time Ratchet reached back for him without hesitation.

“Please take your time, Optimus,” Ratchet said, giving his hand a squeeze. “It’ll be worth the wait.”

“I know.” Optimus offered his medic a reassuring smile. “I will do my best to try.”

~

Ratchet wasn’t wrong, in any case. Optimus was well aware he needed to apply some brakes. Only it was difficult to do so when Soundwave was intoxicatingly easy to kiss and hold.

When he wanted, so much, to see Soundwave come undone beneath him.
When he had Soundwave to himself, with no cassettes about, no matters of state to handle, no emergencies. Nothing but the quiet of Optimus’ habsuite, a soft song playing through his console, a shared tray of energon gummies, and Soundwave looking at Optimus as though he were the most precious thing in the world.

Times like these, the last thing on Optimus’ mind was patience.

Soundwave was all too willing to guide Optimus toward another processor-blowing, strut-shattering overload. His hands were ever cautious, ever waiting for permission. His focus was on Optimus alone.

Not this time.

Optimus was the one who guided Soundwave down to the berth, who held his weight over Soundwave’s frame and covered him in sweet, savory kisses. He tasted and nibbled Soundwave’s intake. He pressed a kiss over Soundwave’s dock and his newly emplaced Autobot badge. His fingers stroked patterns over transformation seams and armor gaps, wriggling into them so that he could caress the heated cables beneath.

“Optimus…?”

“It is my turn,” he said, lifting his gaze toward Soundwave, who had lifted his hands as though he wanted to touch, but wasn’t sure he was welcome. “I do not know if I will be capable of as much pleasure as you have given me, but I will try.”

Soundwave’s visor dimmed at him. “Effort appreciated but not required.”

“It is not a requirement,” Optimus retorted, and nudged his way between Soundwave’s legs. He sat back on his heelstruts, his hands stroking down the length of Soundwave’s thigh. “I wish to offer you pleasure. Do you not want it?”

Soundwave’s engine revved. Charge leapt out from beneath his plating, betraying the need that surely yawed in his spark.

“Desire present,” Soundwave said, his armor visibly juttering. “Only never wish to cause Optimus discomfort.”

“Good.” Optimus rested his palm over Soundwave’s array and rubbed a slow circle over the heated metal. “Then you will allow me to show you how I feel about you now?”

A moan rose in Soundwave’s intake, rattling through his chassis. His glossa flicked over his lips, vents rattling to life. “Affirmative.”

Optimus’ spark thrummed with affection. “Feel free to let me know if you wish for me to stop,” he said as Soundwave’s panel slid aside beneath his fingertips, an eager spike jutting into his hand.

Soundwave groaned, his helm falling back against the berth. Optimus took that as confirmation and gripped Soundwave’s spike, forming a fist around the length of it. Soundwave was already fully pressurized, his spike throbbing and leaking profusely. Had he been holding back from the moment they fell into berth together?
No, Optimus realized. Soundwave had been holding back from the moment he realized he had a chance to court Optimus.

It was so charming as to be adorable. Optimus wished he could bring himself to offer Soundwave oral pleasure, but the very thought of doing so at the moment made something within him go cold.

Perhaps another time then. There was such a thing, after all, as moving too fast.

He did, however, have two very capable hands. One of which was stroking Soundwave slowly and surely. The other sought to explore Soundwave’s valve, which Optimus had only gotten a glimpse of before. This time, he paid it more attention.

His fingers rubbed over the damp opening, tracing the swollen rim. Soundwave’s biolights were a very pale blue, and they pulsed fitfully as Optimus familiarized himself with Soundwave’s equipment. He had not one anterior node, but a cluster of smaller ones arranged at the apex of his valve, and another one at the base of it.

“You favor being on top of your partner, do you not?” Optimus asked as he flirted with each of the nodes in turn, his own breathing quickening at the sight of Soundwave rolling his hips, his valve pulsing needfully.

Soundwave cycled his vocalizer loudly. He nodded before reaching up and gripping the head of the berth as though preventing himself from grabbing at Optimus. Any other time, Optimus would have invited him to grab whatever he wanted.

“How fortunate,” Optimus murmured as he finally let his fingers slide into Soundwave’s valve, his intakes catching as rippling calipers clutched at his fingertips. “I would enjoy seeing you move atop me.”

Soundwave groaned, his valve clamping down tight. His visor flickered as he rocked his hips toward Optimus’ hands, his spike pulsing another dribble of pre-fluid.

“How Optimus teasing.”

He chuckled. “Yes, that may be true. I promise, Soundwave. There will be a time when every moment I spend in the berth is not wasted fighting my internal demons.” He curled his fingers, rubbing them along the top of Soundwave’s valve, and dragging along a line of sensors in the process. “You will see then what I can do for you.”

Soundwave’s engine roared. His knees bent, pedes shoving down against the berth as he lifted his hips, pushing them harder toward Optimus’ hands.

“How though it seems what I am capable of now is good enough,” Optimus observed, unable to tear his gaze away from Soundwave, wracked with pleasure.

His faceplate darkened in hue. He sucked on his bottom lip, worrying it between his denta. His armor flared, heat rising up, and little flickers of charge dancing out. The berth creaked where he gripped it. Biolights flashed in intermittent bursts. His valve all but soaked Optimus’ hand, and his spike was solid steel. Given the way he trembled, Optimus was surprised that he hadn’t overloaded yet.

That was when it occurred to him.
Optimus worked his intake and tilted his helm. “Are you holding back, Soundwave?”

A thin whine rose from Soundwave’s chassis. He ex-vented loudly, a burst of nearly boiling heated air.

“Affirmative,” he said, the words laced with static.

Optimus cycled his optics. “Why on Earth would you-- No. Never mind.” He shook his helm and gave Soundwave a firm look. “I want you to overload for me,” he said instead, putting a firmness in his tone, perhaps even a command. “I want to see your pleasure, and feel it in my field. I want to see you undone.”

Each word seemed to unlock something. As he spoke, Soundwave shifted on the berth. His backstrut arched, his thighs trembling as they tilted inward. His engine roared loud enough to rattle some of the items in Optimus’ quarters.

“Soundwave,” Optimus said, capturing his attention and his gaze. He held his lover’s visor, enraptured by the pleasure bleeding in Soundwave’s field. “Overload.”

And he did.

Optimus’ internals clenched, his low-grade arousal shooting into the atmosphere as Soundwave’s back bowed, and he overloaded. His spike spurted in Optimus’ fist, and his valve spiraled down so tight that Optimus wondered if he’d get his fingers back. Heat poured off Soundwave in waves as he loosed a sound that punched straight to Optimus’ array.

Soundwave collapsed against the berth, panting for ventilations, his fans whirring, his frame limp. He still gripped the head of the berth as though it were a lifeline, his visor dim.

The desperate clamp of his valve eased, and Optimus was able to withdraw his fingers, though not without a few twitches on Soundwave’s part.

Primus, he was hot. Optimus’ spark throbbed, and all he wanted to do was climb up Soundwave’s frame and press their mouths together. And so he did. He reacted on personal desire, stretched across Soundwave’s frame, and sloppily slanted his lips over Soundwave’s.

Soundwave responded immediately, his arms coming down to wrap around Optimus’ torso, his glossa joining the fun. His thighs cradled Optimus’ lower half, Optimus’ array panel rubbing on the mess left on Soundwave’s groin.

Soundwave groaned, deepening the kiss, need so thick in his field. His hands stroked patterns on Optimus’ backstrut, drawing lines in the charge dancing over his armor. His engine rumbled, vibrating through Optimus’ frame.

Optimus broke off the kiss, pressing his forehelm to Soundwave’s, his own body aching with need. He offlined his optics, trying to cycle his ventilations, beat down the arousal. This was about Soundwave, not himself.

And then Soundwave dared roll his hips, grinding his equipment against Optimus’ closed array, leaving streaks of transfluid and lubricant over the heated panel.
“Optimus is welcome,” he invited, arousal still thick in his vocals and heavy in his field. His spike began to pressurize again; Optimus could feel the jut of it against his abdominal armor.

The temptation was intoxicating.

Optimus’ entire frame trembled. Heat peppered his lines like blasterfire, need clawing within him. He couldn’t think about anything but the desperate clasp of Soundwave’s valve, the way Soundwave moved beneath him, eager and willing and hungry.

Primus, he was already worked up, and he’d done nothing but offer Soundwave pleasure. Watch his lover writhe beneath him, surrender to ecstasy.

A broken sound of need escaped Optimus before he could whisk it away. His hips rolled of their own accord, frotting against Soundwave’s equipment, the heat rising between them. The air was thick with the scent of overload, heated metal, and all the while, Soundwave thrummed beneath him, patient but ready.

Soundwave’s knees pressed in at his hips. “Invitation extended,” he said, his vocals striping toward static.

Optimus worked his intake, and gasped as his control faltered, as his panels snicked aside, freeing his spike. It pressurized immediately, greeting Soundwave’s spike with a delightful rub of dermal metal on dermal metal. Optimus groaned, his shoulders hunching, pleasure lancing through him like a lightning strike to the cortex.

“Are you certain?” he asked, because Optimus could not be the only one who demanded outright consent and free desire.

Soundwave moaned and bucked up against him. His visor flashed a deeper hue of need. “Yes,” he said. “Please.”

Optimus shuddered. Heat flooded his frame in a flash-fire. His spike throbbed, dripping pre-fluid. He had no more excuses to offer, because there was only this now, this moment.

He thanked Primus that the height difference between them was negligible. It took no effort to capture Soundwave’s lips with his own, even as he thrust against Soundwave. He never expected their first coupling would be like this, frantic and hungry, the desperate motion of two frames moving together.

He couldn’t find Soundwave’s valve, not without breaking away from the desperate merge of their mouths together. It didn’t matter. The thrust and rub of their spikes together was enough. Soundwave was slick and sticky from his earlier overloads, and Optimus was aroused enough that his spike dribbled pre-fluid.

Each push and pull, rock and thrust, sent a barrage of charge up and down Optimus’ spinal strut. He panted against Soundwave’s mouth, and Soundwave bucked up against him, metal screeching on metal. He swore he could feel the pulse of Soundwave’s spark where their chestplates pressed together. Charge leapt from Soundwave’s frame into his, sending his arousal rocketing skyward.

Optimus broke away from the kiss and buried his face in Soundwave’s intake. He cried out an unintelligible sound, the overload taking him over before he could begin to hold back. His spike spurted even as his hips continued to rock and grind against Soundwave’s. Pleasure streaked
through his lines faster than he could track, and he shook in Soundwave’s arms, vents running full bore.

Soundwave moaned, clamped his thighs around Optimus’ waist. His own hips continued to pump, as though he hovered on the edge of overload. Optimus nosed into his intake, kissing and licking at his cables, before taking the largest between his lips and giving it a gentle bite with his denta.

Soundwave bucked beneath him and he, too, overloaded, his spike spurting between their frames. Their groins were a sticky mess, but Optimus couldn’t care, not with Soundwave humming and rocking beneath him, his frame trembling with release. Optimus’ fans roared, vibrating them both.

He sagged on top of Soundwave, panting for a ventilation, surrendering himself to Soundwave’s embrace and the warm press of Soundwave’s field. He waited for the panic to set in, but felt only content, even as he burrowed his face against Soundwave’s chestplate. He listened to Soundwave’s sparkbeat, rapid in the wake of his overload. Soundwave’s hands pet down his back, long and gentle strokes.

Optimus lay there, listening to their systems cycle down, registering as the overheat slowly seeped from their frames, though it lingered between them. He focused on the slowing of Soundwave’s sparkrate and his own. He had forgotten what it felt like, the comforting aftermath of intimacy with another, to press together, frame to frame, after sharing pleasure.

He’d forgotten that it could be a good thing.

“Optimus online?”

Soundwave’s gentle question didn’t even startle him.

Optimus chuckled. “Yes. I am still awake.” He dragged his hand from the berth to rest it on Soundwave’s shoulder. “I am savoring.”

Soundwave shifted a little beneath him, knees falling away from their desperate clamp on Optimus’ hips. “I enjoy this, too.”

“I’m glad.” Optimus lifted his helm, shifting enough that he could press a kiss to Soundwave’s chin. “Thank you.”

Soundwave stroked a hand down his backstrut. “Gratitude extended also.” His frame hummed, a soothing sound. “Only before recharge, visit to washrack necessary.”

Optimus laughed despite himself and folded his arms beneath him, balancing his chin on his hands and over Soundwave’s dock. “Are you saying we made a mess?”

Soundwave’s lips curves. “Affirmative.”

“Then we should get cleaned up.” Optimus pushed himself upright, and slid off Soundwave to the left, toward the berth edge. “Together.”

Soundwave pulled upright, looking down at the mess coating his lower half. “Help will be needed,” he said.

Optimus laughed and eased off the berth, holding out a hand in invitation to Soundwave. “Allow
me to assist you then.”

Soundwave accepted his hand with a soft smile and together, they stumbled into Optimus’ private washrack. His legs still wobbled a little, satisfaction making him feel warm and sated. Even more so when the solvent sputtered to life, spattering down on their frames. Optimus felt he could recharge right now, as content as he felt in this moment.

Soundwave grabbed the scrubber before Optimus could, which meant Optimus got to stand still and relax as Soundwave gently wiped him clean. The soft strokes of both scrubber and cloth worked out the last of the tension that managed to cling to Optimus’ cables and struts.

He purred, optics shuttering in relaxation.

“Optimus is all right?” Soundwave asked.

Optimus waited to answer. His spark was calm. Fear didn’t loiter in the wings, waiting to swallow him whole. He didn’t know what the night would bring, but for now, he felt fine. He didn’t even have a lingering sense of unease.

He was, well, he was content.

“Yes,” Optimus replied with a small smile. “I think I will be. With time.”

He realized, too, that it wasn’t even a lie.

~End Epilogue~

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end, folks. Thank you to everyone who's been leaving such nice and wonderful comments. You are all greatly appreciated.

I do have a Post-Script type follow up fic planned, a five-year time jump thing. I need to get started on that. I do have a sequel that I'm currently plotting, but I don't know when I'll manage to get to it. There's still a lot of story left to tell.

Anywho, thank you for reading! And I hope you enjoyed.

End Notes

Feedback is always welcome and appreciated, along with constructive critique. I always self-edit, so if you notice a typo, I'm not offended if you point it out to me. Thank you for reading!
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