Summary

A shocking betrayal leaves Optimus Prime incapacitated, Ultra Magnus in command of the Autobots, and Megatron devastated and searching for revenge. The only hope for escape, and Optimus’s recovery, lies in the keys to the Omega Lock, keys spread across the landscape of an increasingly hostile world.

And slave coding is far from the only nasty trick the humans have learned.
In the depths of space, a call went out.

And they came.

Their numbers were reduced to a fraction of what they had been, but they came, tiny points of light in the endless blackness. They met each other in the vast expanses of the universe, the places where naught but rock might observe or the edges of civilized space. Some fought, deciding that there had been too many false hopes to trust such a strange message. Some met, wary and uncertain, and consulted. Some decided to simply wait where they were.

And some, a handful, heeded the order. They consulted long-defunct star maps, rendered obsolete by the shift of worlds and the slow rotation of galaxies and the death of stars, and they came. With hope in their sparks, they began the long journey across the stars, to a small blue-green organic planet with a strange organic name, where they might be a single people, where they might again be Cybertronian.

But some were already on their way, already in stasis for the long journey, oblivious to the news of peace.
A mere two days after the ceasefire announcement was broadcasted, a strange object streaked across the night sky and landed somewhere in Wyoming, prompting a number of UFO fanatics to fits of delight, and the US government to issue a statement saying it was a decommissioned satellite.

The Cybertronian presence on Earth swiftly identified it as a Decepticon escape pod, and so when the occupant poked his helm out, he was greeted by Megatron and a large group of Vehicons.

An Earth hour later, Optimus Prime found himself apologizing to Megatron for the new arrival’s behavior, reprimanding said new arrival, and trying very, very hard to keep the amusement out of his field at Megatron’s absolutely disgruntled expression.

Their sparkbond, however, meant that Megatron knew that Optimus found the current situation deeply amusing, and his expression shifted from disgruntled to outright irritated. The new arrival, Smokescreen, took a step back so that Optimus was between him and the full force of Megatron’s glare.

“If you find this so amusing, Prime,” said Megatron, and made a face as Knockout started work on the weld along his arm, where Smokescreen had gotten in a very lucky shot indeed, “you may have the honor of greeting the next ship.”

“Very well,” said Optimus.

About a week later, the next ship arrived. Its crew were no more aware of the treaty than Smokescreen had been. They were, however, delighted to find Optimus Prime alone and not interested in putting up a struggle, and it was only Megatron’s standing order that Prime, if captured, was to be brought directly to him unharmed that saved Optimus from a very unpleasant assassination attempt.

It did not, however, preserve him from the indignity of being brought aboard the Nemesis in stasis cuffs, slung upside-down over Tarn’s shoulder with the Decepticon Justice Division speculating about what exactly Megatron had planned for him. Optimus ex-vented heavily, and said nothing, let Megatron feel his annoyance through the sparkbond, and tried to ignore them. He was already quite certain of what Megatron had planned for him, and did not appreciate the intrusion. He had been rather looking forward to that evening, and he was very suspicious that the stasis cuffs were going to give Megatron ideas.

Megatron took one look at his predicament, at Tarn’s field of satisfied triumph, and laughed. Tarn dumped Optimus on the floor. Optimus glared up at Megatron and said nothing.

“Optimus Prime,” said Megatron, and grinned. The mischief that echoed over the bond did not bode well. “At my mercy at last.”

Optimus’s optics narrowed. Megatron, he sent, this is not amusing in the least. Release me immediately.

After all of Tarn’s hard work? was the response. Really, Optimus. play along for once.

No, sent Optimus.

You found it amusing enough when Smokescreen attacked me.
I had the courtesy not to show it.


Tarn shuttered his optics, but did as told. Optimus staggered back to his pedes, and said, “Megatron, I believe we have now been equally inconvenienced by each other’s subordinates. May I propose that the next ship be greeted with a joint party?”

“I suppose that might be arranged,” said Megatron, still grinning.

“Lord Megatron?” said Tarn, both deferent and utterly shocked. Megatron looked at him; he ducked his helm again. “I do not understand, my liege.”

Megatron offered Optimus a hand. Optimus looked at it for a moment, then at Megatron, who cocked his helm and gave him a little smile that all but said *I have a plan; do not be stubborn.*

Optimus supposed that solidarity was a desirable quality to exhibit. He set dignity aside and took the hand, allowing Megatron to pull him to his pedes.

“I must compliment you on your prompt recovery of my consort,” said Megatron, and Optimus tilted a glare at him, though Tarn’s expression of perfect confusion was somewhat satisfying.

“You must have been dealt with, my liege?” said Tarn, both deferent and utterly shocked. Megatron looked at him; he ducked his helm again. “I do not understand, my liege.”

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Optimus kept the strong dismay out of his own—that Tarn found such an order familiar meant he had carried out its like many times before.

“Every sentient being deserves a opportunity for redemption,” he reminded himself, but even he had to admit that there were sentient beings that the sentiment was difficult to apply to.

“No,” said Megatron. “They have been dealt with, but that was a mere symptom. The problem itself remains; we are weakened and the universe knows it. We cannot afford to allow this to continue; if such a foolish young species knew well enough to take advantage of it, others will as well. You will enforce this ceasefire. You will direct the combatants back to Cybertron, whether they be Autobot or Decepticon. Any who defies the ceasefire is a traitor to Cybertron as a whole as well as the Decepticon cause.”

Tarn bowed his helm. “We shall depart immediately, Lord Megatron.”
“Report to Knockout first,” said Megatron. “How are you to serve me if you are in bad repair?”

Tarn bowed again, rose. “As you command, my lord.”

“I shall accompany you,” said Megatron. “We have other matters to discuss. Optimus?”

Optimus hid his ruffled dignity behind a polite facade, and said, “My presence is required at my own base; Project Iacon is yielding promising results. We will reconvene to continue our negotiations later this evening.”

“That is acceptable,” said Megatron, and with that, Optimus took his leave.

Tarn had to be dealt with carefully, and Megatron was pleased that Optimus heeded his unspoken request and left the *Nemesis*. He was even more pleased that Starscream was nowhere in evidence; aside from the Seeker’s complete lack of anything resembling tact, especially around mechs eager to kill him, his repeated attempts at treason meant he occupied a rather nebulous position, and even Megatron wasn’t entirely sure whether Starscream was on the List or not. It all depended on how current Tarn’s information was—and given the nature of their war, he wasn’t about to risk an unexpected encounter between the two of them. He needed Starscream online and relatively intact. If the Justice Division had him currently listed as a traitor, it was highly unlikely that the Seeker would remain either in the event of an unexpected encounter.

Optimus had been a close enough call for the day.

Megatron let Knockout (rather discomfited—no, *alarmed*—at the sudden appearance of the Justice Division in his sickbay) take over the care of the rest and motioned Tarn to follow him.

Tarn reset his vocalizer. “My lord,” he said, obviously uncomfortable, “I do not mean to question your judgement, but might I ask the reason behind sparing this world?”

“You may,” said Megatron. “It is too valuable to be destroyed; it is one of the few places where dark energon may be mined, and is rich in other resources. Additionally, it imprisons Unicron the Destroyer.” He smirked at the flash of shock in Tarn’s field. “Dangerous though its dominant species is, the planet’s preservation is far more necessary than their destruction.”

“My lord, I must profess myself startled at their apparent ferocity,” said Tarn. His field had been confused before; now it intensified, deep, honest confusion mixed with some distress. Tarn certainly did not like questioning him, and did not want his desire to better understand the situation to be mistaken for defiance.

It was easy to dismiss the humans as no threat. Megatron looked at Tarn a long, long moment. Yes, the humans were tiny, soft, easily destroyed.

But there were mechs that knew otherwise. Optimus, who now recharged curled on his side, and flinched at certain phrases. Starscream, who, when he thought no one was watching, would lapse into the haunted-opticked expression Megatron had seen on the faces of his master’s pleasure-bots, long ago when he himself bore slave coding. Knockout, whom Megatron had found pacing the corridors well into the night-cycle, uncharacteristically silent, EM field pulled in tight and private. The mixture of Vehicons and Eradicons who refused to recharge apart from each other and hesitated before they said ‘sir’.
“True, they are particularly unprepossessing,” said Megatron after a time. “But so were Cybertron’s elite—and like them, the humans are persistent, and multiply like space barnacles.”

“I see, my lord,” said Tarn.

“However, the very fact that such a primitive species was able to cause such damage—that it dared to even attempt such a feat—demonstrates that Cybertron has fallen far. It cannot be allowed to fall further. We have destroyed the old order. Even if he so wished, Optimus Prime would not be able to restore it, and given his recent encounter with a remnant of that order, I have reason to believe that his sympathies will never return to his former masters.”

Tarn bowed his helm again. “Do you wish us to maintain the List, my lord?”

“Strike all those who defected to the Autobots or merely deserted,” said Megatron, “or were convicted of cowardice, but maintain those who would defy my authority with the intention of usurping me. And add any who defy the treaty. Their selfish vendettas would bring Cybertron itself down.”

He paused. Knockout was pinging him, increasingly desperate packets; apparently Tesarus was raising considerable objection to being vaccinated.

“What are we to do with the Autobots we encounter?”

“The same as you would if you encountered a loyal Decepticon. Send them back, Autobot and Decepticon alike, not here but to Cybertron. Aid them if it is necessary.”

Unease spiked in Tarn’s field again, but he bowed his helm. “Yes, my lord.”

Optimus was not in the best of moods when the next signal came in. Starscream had firmly ensconced himself in a corner with Rafael, peering down at something on Raf’s laptop screen, and his wings were flicking and clattering in a singularly distracting manner.

“Starscream,” he said after some time, “you are present sometime earlier than is your usual.”

“I’m helping Raf with his homework,” said Starscream, and Optimus reflected privately that the comment had to be one of the most blatant lies in recorded history.

He settled for saying “I see,” in a deeply doubtful tone, before he was interrupted by the strident beep of the base’s comm system. “This is Commander Ultra Magnus calling Autobot Outpost Omega-1.”

“This is Autobot Outpost Omega-1,” said Optimus, spark lifting. He had hoped that Ultra Magnus still lived, though he had not heard from his second-in-command for a considerable span of time. Wheeljack might raise objection, but Ultra Magnus’s bureaucratic acuity was not to be underestimated. “Welcome to Earth, Ultra Magnus. We will direct you to an appropriate landing site; you are aware of the ceasefire?”

“Affirmative.”
“Then you will not be surprised when you are greeted with a joint party; negotiations are currently ongoing.” Optimus allowed warmth to creep into his voice. “Your assistance and advice will be deeply appreciated, old friend.”

There was a pause, indication that Ultra Magnus was just as uncomfortable with such informality as he’d been last time Optimus had addressed him in such terms, and then, “Thank you for your confidence in my abilities, sir,” and the channel was closed.

“Ratchet, transmit landing coordinates to Ultra Magnus and prepare a groundbridge. I will contact Megatron.”

Megatron was waiting for him at the provided coordinates.

“Is the Justice Division still present on the planet?” asked Optimus.

“No,” said Megatron. “They departed as soon as medical and maintenance protocols had been fulfilled. You may tell Starscream that he can return.”

“I suspected that he was not indeed assisting Rafael with his homework,” said Optimus, and Megatron snorted.

“Was that his excuse? Typical.”

“Given recent events, I cannot say I find his behavior unreasonable.”

“Why, Optimus, was your dignity really so deeply offended? The cuffs were most becoming.” Megatron favored him with a grin. Optimus glared steadily back.

“If our treaty is to succeed, we both must refrain from making shows of power over one another,” he said.

Megatron’s expression went abruptly sober. “It was necessary,” he said.

“Explain,” said Optimus, in no mood to be easily mollified.

“Tarn is that rarest of creatures, a true patriot,” said Megatron, “His loyalty to the Decepticon cause is unquestionable; his respect and admiration for me remarkable to the point of being mildly unsettling. That I have made peace with you is difficult enough. That I have sparkbonded with you and allowed you an equal place is still more so, bordering on the unacceptable.

“Handled incorrectly, Tarn will believe me to have betrayed the cause. The anger that such a disillusionment would produce would be dangerous indeed. I do not think him popular enough within the ranks to create a substantial faction of his own, but the abilities of the Justice Division are such that I would much rather they remain loyal.”

“You do not trust him either.”

“I trust him. I trust him to be exactly the mech he is. He will remain loyal to the Decepticons above all else. Even above me—and so if I had to sacrifice your dignity for the sake of ensuring that he did not believe me to have compromised our interests, so be it.” Megatron gave him a very assessing look. “I am sure that I can compensate you in some manner.”
“If you are so taken with the stasis cuffs, I suggest that you wear them. I have had my fill of such things for the day.”

“An intriguing proposition.” Megatron glanced at the sky. “I suggest we conclude this conversation at a later time; I doubt Ultra Magnus would wish to overhear it.”

“On that we are agreed.”
Chapter 3

Ratchet at least had a project to bury himself in so that he could ignore the absurdities of life as it presently was—Starscream, Ultra Magnus, and all. At least in the forty-eight human hours Ultra Magnus had been present on base, Starscream hadn’t appeared for any significant length of time.

Still, Ultra Magnus was having a worse time of it than even Ratchet was. He was, after all, spending the morning with Optimus and Megatron and a draft of the treaty.

“Ratchet?”

“What is it, Knockout?” said Ratchet, looking up at the base comm. “I am in the middle of a very important—”

“Well, this is important too. How much do you know about obstetrics?”

Ratchet raised an optic ridge. “Only the usual for a general practitioner,” he said. “Why?”

“Oh, good,” said Knockout, sounding worryingly relieved. “That’s one better than me. I know you’re probably dreadfully busy doing some sort of top-secret Autobot-ish thing, making sure that your patients have the maximum amount of sunshine and fluffy Earth biota, but I have a case here that you’re,” and here the voice shaded annoyed, “rather more trained for than I.”

“Go on,” said Ratchet, his professional pride overruling his common sense.

“I’m a surgeon,” said Knockout. “Not a general practitioner. I slept through the megacycle they spent on obstetrics, and they only discussed the terrible ways that something can go wrong, so I need you to come over here and tell me what exactly I should do when I’ve got a brand-new, rather agitated, carrier on my examining berth because I don’t. The sire is threatening to reformat me into a taxi if I frag things up.”

It took a moment for that to sink in. It took another before Ratchet collected the various clamoring bits of his processor enough to quite understand what Knockout wanted. And it was a very long interval indeed before he managed to construct a cogent sentence.

“You mean to tell me that someone’s gotten sparked?” he said at last. “There’s a newspark onboard the Nemesis?”

“Not a newspark,” said Knockout. “A trine of newsparks. That much I can tell.”

Excitement leapt in Ratchet’s spark. He put down the equipment he’d been working with. “Who is it?”

“You remember the Decepticons that MECH took last month?”

“Yes?”

“Well, it’s two of them. The bot who wound up in command—Tailspin—and one of the two flyers. Lightwing. They’re just about cross-opticked with delight, let me tell you. I want to give them a full standard examination before I inform Lord Megatron, make sure that none of the bitlets have anything nasty and congenital before we start celebrating.”

“Good,” said Ratchet. He reached for his kit, realized that he didn’t have the correct equipment
immediately to hand. “I’ll be there as soon as possible. Is the flyer the carrier?”

“Yes.”

“Slag. Means a lot more trouble for you and the carrier. Flyers are Pit when it comes to deliveries.” He collected the tools he needed and then went to the groundbridge. “It’s unusual for one to spark in this situation—”

“Not in this one. Tailspin doesn’t have a gestational tank.”

Ratchet paused in what he was doing. “Oh,” he said quietly, sudden understanding. He forced cheer into his voice again. “But don’t worry too much, Knockout. You have another year before any of the serious carrier maladies will show up—you have time to read up on it.”

“How comforting,” said Knockout.

Knockout’s medical bay was a mess, but Ratchet ignored it. “Well? Where are they?”

“Over here.” Knockout led him over to one of the berths in an adjoining room, one that allowed a certain amount of privacy.

An Eradicon lay on the berth, propped up on an elbow, holding the hand of an Vehicon, who stood over him protectively. “Tailspin and Lightwing, isn’t it?” Ratchet said.

Lightwing nodded. “Yes,” he said, and then with an effort, the disinclination to use the word evident, as it was in all of MECH’s victims, “sir.”

“No need for that,” said Ratchet. “You have new paint jobs.”

“And upgrades,” said Lightwing, sitting fully upright and flicking a silver wing with every evidence of satisfaction. “Tailspin’s aren’t too evident but he commands his own squadron of Vehicons now.”

Ratchet scanned him. “For another year or so, yes,” he said. “Congratulations, you’re carrying. A trine, it looks like—too soon to tell if they’re grounders or flyers, though my bet’s a mix of both. But you knew that.”

“Are they healthy?” said Lightwing, anxiety mixed with happiness washing through his field. Tailspin’s hand tightened over his.

“Just a moment,” said Ratchet, switching to a finer scan. He examined the resulting data closely. “Hm. Seems like it, at least in sparks and coding. We’ll have to check again when your gestational system begins assembling their first instar frames. But,” he closed the panel on his arm, “it is perfectly possible to construct artificial first instars if necessary. Now, as for your health, I just checked you last month, and you were in decent condition then, given your previous injuries. However, I will want to keep a close eye on you and the bitlets; your recent experiences are far from typical.” He paused, looked at the pair of them. “If, that is, you wish to carry to term.”

“I do,” said Lightwing, pressing a protective hand over his ventral plating, and flaring nervous excitement at him. “I really do—I never dreamed…”

Ratchet patted his shoulder. “Glad to hear it.”

“Shall I inform Lord Megatron, then?” said Knockout. Ratchet favored him with a glare.
“Only if Lightwing consents.”

Tailspin looked from one to the other. “You mean Lord Megatron would… take an interest?”

“You are carrying the first sparklings our species has seen for two thousand years,” Ratchet pointed out. “Or rather longer, depending on your source. Both Optimus and Megatron will want to know.”

“Primus,” said Lightwing, very quietly, then nodded. “If it will be of help to the Decepticon cause —” he hesitated, glanced at Ratchet, added, “— or the Autobot cause, I suppose, I give my full consent.”

“Thank you,” said Ratchet, and opened a comm to Optimus. Are you onboard the Nemesis?

Yes, Optimus responded, sounding, if anything, somewhat annoyed. I am with Megatron and Ultra Magnus debating minutiae of the treaty. Do you require my presence?

I do, said Ratchet. Fortunately, this time, it is good news.

Good.

Bring Megatron. Leave Ultra Magnus with the paperwork. It’ll make him happy.

I will.

“They’re on their way,” said Ratchet. He cocked an optic ridge at Knockout, and decided that it was worth asking the question because if anyone was monitoring the gossip aboard the Nemesis and was willing to talk about it, it was Knockout. “Optimus was not his usual self when he arrived back at base the other day.”

“Oh, that,” said Knockout with a wave of his hand. “I suppose you did miss the excitement earlier. Optimus went to greet that new ship. Turned out it was the DJD.”

“What?” In a bot with a higher vocal range, it would have been a shriek. In Ratchet, it rasped off into static, and he had to reset his vocalizer twice before he could enunciate clearly again. He’d had a huge number of nightmares about Optimus’s safety; the DJD was chief among them. He’d encountered a number of their victims; there hadn’t been enough to even begin to repair, even though most of them had still been alive. And Optimus Prime, Orion Pax, was considered in no uncertain way the traitor of the Decepticon cause, the one that all others paled before.

The Decepticon Justice Division specialized in destroying—no, butchering—traitors, in the most hideous ways imaginable.

Knockout snickered. “See, Lord Megatron had left orders with them; he would deal with Optimus Prime personally, and they were to bring the traitor to him without damaging him. It was perhaps somewhat unfortunate that their arrival coincided with when everyone went onshift this morning.”

“What happened?” said Ratchet, passing a hand over his face.

“Most of the Nemesis got treated to the sight of Optimus Prime being carried through the halls in stasis cuffs, upside-down over Tarn’s shoulder and seething the whole time. Nastiest field I’ve encountered since last time I had to perform a fuel systems overhaul on Lord Megatron.”

“Are those…those monsters still here?”

“No, thank Primus, they’re gone. Megatron sent them off to spread word of the treaty, apparently. I
had the lot of them in here for standard medical evaluations. It was *horrible*. Tesarus doesn’t like syringes. Need I say more?” His gesture took in the state of the bay, broken tools and shelving.

“No,” said Ratchet, remembering a similarly unpleasant encounter with Grimlock. Grimlock had been very contrite about it afterward, but it didn’t do anything to compensate for the two hours Ratchet had spent reattaching his arm. “What inoculations?”

“Stygian Pox, Cosmic Rust and Rigellian Fever. The pox is always so unpopular.”

“Hm. Yes, Optimus is particularly bad about dodging his SP boosters. He does have an unusually strong reaction to it, but it’s no excuse.”

“Had the same problem with Skyquake. He’d lose a patch of paint around the injection site every time. Anti-inflammatory drugs only do so much.”

“I’ve been able to avoid paint loss by using a mild nanite suppressant in the area,” said Ratchet. “Mild and localized, mind you—just enough to keep the inflammation from bubbling the paint or damaging the first dermal layer, while allowing the nanites to recognize the parasite.”

“I’ll have to try that. Half the crew’s due for it, and the other half should get the booster anyway, given the influx of new patients. Except for Lightwing here.”

Lightwing looked up, rather hopefully.

“Yes, of course,” said Ratchet. “We’ll be relying on herd immunity in his case.”

“Herd immunity?” said Tailspin, making no attempt to mask his suspicion.

“Lightwing is immunocompromised because of the newsparks. We can’t give him an attenuated virus because of that. So we’ll just have to make sure that everyone around him is inoculated and can’t get it. If they can’t get it, he can’t catch it from them.”

The infirmary doors opened to admit Optimus and Megatron.

“Well?” demanded Megatron, and Knockout strutted forward as if he were the one sparked and said, “I am pleased to announce, Lord Megatron, that we…” he paused for emphasis, “will be receiving no less than three new additions to our crew in the near future. Lightwing here,” gesturing to the mech in question, who looked embarrassed and pleased at the same time, “has sparked. A trine.”

The two leaders looked at each other. Then Optimus said, “Are you sure of this?”

“Yes,” said Ratchet, before Knockout could respond. “I checked his readings myself. The first sparklings in two thousand years.”

“Congratulations, Lightwing, Tailspin,” said Optimus gravely. “You carry the hope of our people.”

The two Decepticons looked suitably humbled, but it was when Megatron added, somewhat grudgingly, “Indeed,” that they really seemed pleased.

“You are the carrier, Lightwing?”

“Yes, my lord,” said Lightwing, all but quivering with excitement. “I am, my lord.”

“You will carry shipboard duties until emergence.” Lightwing slumped. Megatron raised a hand. “You are too important to risk. At least until someone else is sparked, we must ensure that no harm comes to you.”
“Yes my lord,” said Lightwing, much subdued.

Megatron gave him a long look and added, “You’ll retain command of your squadron. Do not think you will be idle.”

Ratchet looked past Megatron. Optimus looked as if he wanted to say something and was waiting for a good opportunity.

“Additionally, my lord,” said Knockout, “I believe it would be prudent to inoculate the crew at the earliest possible time, given the influx of new arrivals.”

“I concur,” said Ratchet. “The same will apply to the Autobots.”

“A marvelous idea—” started Megatron, and then paused, looking at Optimus. There was a brief silence as they communicated over comms. Then he said, “Inform me once you have the necessary supplies,” and swept from the room, Optimus next to him.

Knockout, who had been in the very act of reaching for a syringe, ex-vented heavily. “Well, at least someone’s here,” he grumbled. “Tailspin!”

Tailspin’s field flickered resigned and he held out an arm.

“Right,” said Ratchet. “Good luck with Megatron. I’m going back to base and trying to get the rest of the overgrown sparklings to sit down and get their shots like good little bitlets.”

“Good luck with that,” said Knockout. “It was Optimus who initiated that little retreat.”

“Oh, I know,” said Ratchet, comming Bumblebee to bridge him back. “And Primus is he going to regret it.”
Chapter Notes

Optimus intended to return directly to base after he finished working on the treaty draft, but a call from Agent Fowler derailed that, and meant that he had to delay his appointment with Ratchet. But Ratchet, he was sure, would understand the importance of maintaining good relations with the humans at such a point.

With that in mind, it was perhaps unfortunate that Optimus announced the news of his sparkbond to Megatron, the arrival of Smokescreen, the DJD and Ultra Magnus and Lightwing’s sparking at the same time to Agent Fowler.

The human sat very still in the seat for several minutes as the road flashed past. A twinge of nervousness went through Optimus’s circuits.

“Agent Fowler—” he started, and Agent Fowler interrupted him.

“You mean to tell me that I’ve missed your wedding, two welcoming parties and a baby shower?”

‘Baby shower’ took a moment to look up. “Not precisely. Our gestational period lasts roughly seven to ten of your years,” said Optimus. “The equivalent ceremony to a baby shower won’t be for some time yet.”

Agent Fowler sighed. “I suppose. By the way, congratulations?”

“On what, Agent Fowler?”

“Your sparkbonding, wedding, whatever you guys call it.”

“Oh. Thank you, Agent Fowler. It is indeed a very promising development in terms of Cybertron’s future.”

“Yeah, it’s great in political terms but I meant congratulations to you.” Worry crept into Fowler’s voice. “It’s not all political, is it?”

“No,” said Optimus, and allowed some of his own pleasure to creep into his voice. “It is not. I do not think I can adequately express my delight, Agent Fowler. Our war is over. Our people will survive; Cybertron will live. And where Megatron is concerned, at last I may act selfishly without guilt. It is far more than I ever dared hope for.”

A small human hand patted his dashboard. “Glad to hear it,” said Agent Fowler. “So you think that the war really is over?”

“I still hesitate to say such a thing,” said Optimus. “We have come close to peace before. If this, too, ends badly, I have at least the comfort that it will not be of my will or of Megatron’s.”

Agent Fowler was silent.

After a while, he said, “So. What’s this about sparklings?”

“They are the juveniles of our species,” said Optimus. “Their gestation period is lengthy, and the care that they require considerable, requiring the involvement of many other individuals other than their
‘parents’. This is in part due to the fact that we tend to produce multiple young at a time, each of which is as demanding as one of your species’ juveniles—and for a considerably longer time.”

“So how many babies are these two Decepticons having?”

“Three: a modest litter, but hardly unsurprising considering the ordeal that both progenitors endured. It is a wonder that Lightwing sparked at all.”

“And it’ll be seven years before they’re born?”

“Depending on frame type, even longer. This litter should have a comparatively short gestation; both progenitors are quite small.”

A pause. Then, Agent Fowler sounding very tentative, “So if you and Megatron decided to have kids…”

“It would be a considerable length of time before emergence,” said Optimus, and was somewhat surprised at how his spark rose at the idea. “Needless to say, it is not under serious consideration just now. Once things are stable, it will be a definite possibility.”

“I see,” said Fowler, and ex-vented. “So everyone’s coming home right now, and getting married and having kids, huh?”

“We’ll see,” said Optimus. “It remains to be seen just how many of us there are left. Our war has been savage; this planet is but one theatre of operations, and neither Megatron nor I have been able to maintain stable communications between the others. Our war became many different wars, spread across the galaxies, and its resolution may be as lengthy a process as its inception. I hope not.”

Agent Fowler was silent another long moment. Then his phone rang. “Agent Fowler?” said Ratchet’s voice.

“Yes?”

“Are you with Optimus?”

Optimus, who had a suspicion of what this was about, ex-vented heavily and started looking for somewhere to turn around.

“Uh, yeah? Why didn’t you just call him?”

“He turned his comm off,” said Ratchet, and there was an edge of annoyance in his voice.

“Oh.”

“Yes. He’s supposed to be back here getting his Stygian Pox inoculation. Tell him he’s not getting out of it this time.”

“Um.” There was absolute, genuine puzzlement in Agent Fowler’s voice. “Okay then. Heading back now.”

He snapped his phone closed. “Care to explain?”

“In the confusion of the last month, I have not had the time to attend to such matters,” said Optimus. “The inoculation in question does have a number of rather unpleasant side effects, including particularly pernicious itching—very difficult to ignore.”
“Better than getting the real thing, though. You know June would have your hide for trying to weasel out of a vaccination.”

“I fear Ratchet already will,” said Optimus. “Perhaps I should encourage Ratchet and Shockwave to see if it is possible to create a vaccine that does not need to be renewed centennially.”

“Centennially? You have to get it renewed centennially?!”

“Yes. The frequency is yet another unpleasant factor.”

“Mister, you don’t know how good you’ve got it! We have one you have to get yearly. And another you’ve got to get three times in a year for it to take—and that one hurts like hell.”

“I will keep that in mind,” said Optimus, rather taken aback.

“Good. Now get back there and take your shots like a bot.”

The itching was at its zenith when Ultra Magnus returned, Megatron following close behind. Optimus greeted him with as much composure as he could manage, and kept himself from scratching with an effort of will far above anything he could recall exerting in battle. He was the Prime. He was entrusted with the Matrix of Leadership and the wellbeing of his species. He had to set an example to his people, and he could not go find somewhere private and scratch half his paint off, even if it seemed impossible to ignore the low-grade itch that had settled in what seemed like the majority of his dorsal plating, or the vicious, almost burning irritation at the injection site. The nanite suppressants Ratchet had given him ahead of time only did so much.

The lecture Ratchet had given him did still less, but, he reminded himself, better the itching than going offline from a perfectly preventable infection.

He listened with a facade of grave attention to Ultra Magnus’s overview of the changes to the treaty—mostly the clarification of terminology and the addition of key punctuation—feeling faintly guilty the whole time, as his attention kept getting tugged away by the physical discomfort. Which was absurd, given that he had withstood outright pain without such difficulty, but he recalled having much the same trouble with his last inoculation. A glance at Megatron showed that he was smirking, well aware of Optimus’s inattention. Optimus sent a pulse of irritation at him, then closed down his end of the bond as much as he could, so that Megatron would have to concentrate to eavesdrop on his feelings. There was no sense in sharing his current discomfort, after all.

Megatron’s response was a singularly impudent roll of his optics.

Optimus pretended not to notice. Ultra Magnus finished expounding on the virtues of a particular variety of settlement of mining rights, and looked expectantly at Optimus for approval. Optimus inclined his helm.

“Thank you, Ultra Magnus. It is indeed an elegant solution, and the lack of exploitable legal loopholes important in the extreme. I look forward to your assistance in settling the matter of human energy-production by-products.” He glanced at Megatron. “We have encountered some significant difficulties with that matter.”

“As it is an unprecedented one, I am not surprised,” said Ultra Magnus. “I will conduct the pertinent
examinations of the available records for precedent.”

“He likes this slag,” growled Megatron as soon as Ultra Magnus was out of audial range. “Precedent and ancient rulings and clauses. Remind me why he’s your second in command?”

“He did defeat your forces at Uarya,” said Optimus.

Megatron shuddered. “Don’t remind me.” He shook his helm. “Enough of this. There are things I wish to consult you on.”

“Such as?” Optimus started toward his quarters, Megatron’s presence now more natural than his absence. He allowed their bond to open somewhat more.

“A number of things. What, exactly, is wrong with you?”

“A normal reaction to the Stygtian Pox inoculation I received this afternoon.”

“Ah. I have heard it is unpleasant.”

Optimus ex-vented, irritated, as the doors to his quarters slid open. “You ought to behave yourself about your inoculations, Megatron—”

“Oh, I do. But Stygtian Pox is unnecessary. I have, after all, had it.”

Optimus sat heavily on the berth. Megatron settled next to him, placing the flats of his hands against his back, stroking in slow circles. Optimus pressed into the touch, finding some relief from the itching. Megatron chuckled, warm air puffing over Optimus’s dorsal plating.

“This is nothing,” he said. “I lost all my paint and the first layer of armor besides. Splitting processor ache and vicious purging too.” His fingers found a particularly affected spot and dug in slightly. “Better?”

“Please don’t stop,” said Optimus, offlineing his optics and enjoying the simple feel of Megatron so close to him, a vast protective and trusted presence.

“Have you considered the effect of us producing a sparkling on the treaty?” asked Megatron after some time had passed. Optimus gave him an assessing look over his shoulder.

“I had assumed that neither of us would wish to spark until the final government of Cybertron was firmly established and the process of rebuilding well underway. Even an average litter would require significant resources and time. Would we have either to spare until then?”

Megatron huffed quietly, looking away. “I suppose you are correct. Though from a political standpoint…”

Optimus watched him closely. “You were influenced by Tailspin and Lightwing’s success?”

“Heirs would be desirable,” said Megatron.

“And sparking is a lengthy and uncertain process,” said Optimus after a moment.

“Indeed,” said Megatron. “And the period of incubation…”

They looked at each other.

“You think we should begin trying now?”
“There are two of us,” said Megatron. “You seem proficient enough at managing this group of sparklings without aid; I doubt any offspring of ours would pose such significant difficulty as to stymie both of us.”

There was a patent absurdity in that statement. Megatron, by his grin, knew it too.

“In all sincerity, Optimus,” he said after a time, the grin fading, and then hesitated. Optimus glanced at him, rather taken aback by the pause—most unlike Megatron.

Megatron looked directly at him, anger flashing, dentae bared. “I still have my gestational tank,” he said. “Do you know how rare a thing this is for a gladiator, Optimus? For the most part, my compatriots lost theirs. Too expensive, to lose time to gestation. Too expensive to terminate unwanted offspring. Especially if you had to make shareware of yourself to survive. Frame and spark together make a far better profit than simply a frame.”

Optimus found it hard to meet Megatron’s optics. “I did not know,” he said, very quietly.

“I did not tell you,” said Megatron, and shifted his weight on the berth. “There were many parts of Kaon I did not show you. I didn’t want to distress you; a mistake.”

Optimus bowed his helm and said nothing.

“Very few in the Pits had the luxury of carrying,” said Megatron after a time. “Many underwent the procedure voluntarily. It was encouraged by the authorities. Fewer intakes to supply. Fewer corpses to clear from the streets.”

Optimus reached forward and placed a tentative hand on his shoulder.

“But that world is dead now,” said Megatron. The corners of his mouth tilted up, scarcely a gentler expression. “Our war is over. And both of us are capable of sparking, of carrying. Think, Optimus, how thoroughly we would have scandalized them, archivist and gladiator, Prime and warlord—”


“Not yet,” he said, and stood, pulled Optimus to his pedes.

Optimus moved in close to him. “Given that we are particularly large-framed,” he said, “we would have roughly ten years before emergence.”

“Indeed,” said Megatron. “If we cannot get Cybertron functional within that time, we deserve the difficulties of sparklings on top of those of administration.”

Optimus smiled. “Then I have no objection to beginning our attempts immediately. Though I do have a meeting remarkably early in the morning tomorrow. Agent Fowler’s superior.”

“Human meeting,” said Megatron disdainfully. “I don’t want you going.” He leaned forward to lick at a stay. Optimus gasped and clutched at him, offline his optics and nestled his helm against Megatron’s neck, a gesture of confident intimacy he would have been hesitant to make such a short time ago.

“I must,” he said, and felt the massive body under his shudder as his mouth moved against plating. “I have no choice. We are guests on this planet and must respect the locals’ requests.”

“If you were aboard the Nemesis, this wouldn’t be of concern,” said Megatron.
“The base is sufficient to our needs,” said Optimus.

“But the humans…”

“Would grow nervous if we were to abruptly vacate the planet. They are nervous enough as it is about our alliance.”

“Fools.”

“Cautious. You have hardly endeared yourself to them in the past.”

Megatron snorted. Claws worked their way in between the plating on Optimus’s back. He let out a very un-Prime-like noise and stiffened.

Megatron kissed him, hard and biting. “I want you here with me,” he growled. “You frightened me badly enough with the Justice Division. I don’t want to risk losing you ever again—”

“You cannot keep me safe forever,” said Optimus gently. “I would find it deeply unpleasant.” He raised his helm to meet Megatron’s optics. “I did, of course, survive the last few million years.”

Another snort. Arms tightened around him. Optimus pressed himself against the broad expanse of Megatron’s chest and simply enjoyed being held, the proximity, the intimate play of Megatron’s field over his own.

Megatron scraped gentle claws over his plating again. “Have I taken your mind off of the itching, at least?” he said, and Optimus let out a vent of irritation.

“You had,” he said.

“I see,” said Megatron. “Perhaps I ought to redouble my efforts, then.” One hand continued the perfectly delightful gentle scratching, and Optimus leaned into it, optics half-shuttered—

—and then started with a mixture of surprise and delighted indignation when Megatron’s other hand slid over his aft and between his legs, playing with the mechanisms of articulation there.

Megatron chuckled, and lifted him off his pedes entirely.

“Continue doing that with such frequency, and I shall accuse you of wanting to show off,” said Optimus.

“You enjoy it,” said Megatron.

“True,” said Optimus. He moved a hand down to play with Megatron’s interface array, stroking around the edges of the panel. Megatron made a small noise of surprise. Optimus gave him a look of patent innocence and leaned forward, replacing fingers with glossa.

Megatron all but dropped him on the berth. Optimus caught him by the arms while he was still off balance and twisted, sending Megatron onto the berth with enough force to make things creak.

Megatron laughed, long and low, and started to push himself up but Optimus was on top of him, pushing him back down and pressing their helms together.

“One day,” he said, very quietly, “you will remember that I am supposed to protect you as much as you protect me.”

“Oh?” said Megatron, still grinning, “Do demonstrate.”
“Gladly,” said Optimus, settling his weight over Megatron, feeling the frame under him shift to better accommodate him, the simple small movements of Megatron’s ventilations, the weight of his attention. He stroked over Megatron’s panel again, felt it snap aside, the cable nose at the flat of his palm, searching. He kept his own panel shut with an effort, ran gentle wondering fingers over the edge of the port, felt that massive body hitch under him. The cable extended further, nudged gently at his armor, and he opened his own panel, caught his own cable as it moved forward, venting sharply at the feel of his own fingers. He caught the flare in Megatron’s optics, stroked down the length of his cable again before releasing it.

Megatron caught at his arms, pulled him close, and he vented hard as Megatron’s cable socketed home, charge arcing between them, and his own plunged into Megatron, heat, light, pleasure. He moaned, catching at the armor under him, Megatron’s cable pushing into him, twisting and bringing charge and heat with every change.

“Your spark?” Almost reverent, gentle, tones he had not heard from Megatron for eons before their bond, and it warmed him greatly.

Optimus slid the panels over his spark aside even as Megatron opened to him, the shifting azures casting strange light over the little room. Their sparks reached for each other, flickering caresses, intimate beyond comprehension, and came together, a clash of electric joy. They were one and it was as it should be, one sparkbeat, one processor, one frame, filled with silent wonder and ecstasy.

It seemed to last forever, Megatron’s optics flaring bright into his, the ghost-feel of his own hands where they rested on armor not his own.

And then they unraveled, came apart in a white-hot flood of pleasure edged in longing, and Optimus looked down at Megatron, who raised a hand to caress the side of his helm with a contented rumble, pulled him in close with their helms resting together. Optimus pulsed serene and exhausted joy along their bond, and curled into the embrace, offlining his optics.

The last he felt before he succumbed to recharge was the gentle weight of Megatron’s hand on his dorsal plating.

While the ‘base’ was anything but ordinary—all disposable, completely manned by classified personnel, with the newest in extraterrestrial-control technology—the scene before General Bryce was one repeated the world over, wherever military operations were planned. A lot of very tired people, a lot of coffee, and a lot of computers.

And right now, everyone was clustered around one monitor.

“How many new arrivals?” Bryce peered at the screen, wishing he’d brought his reading glasses out of his office.

“We’ve detected three ships so far,” said the technician. “Impossible to tell how many individuals, however.”

“Each one of those individuals is more than capable of leveling a small town on its own,” said the program director. Bryce had his doubts about the kid—after all, working for a domestic terrorist organization was hardly a sterling letter of recommendation, but Johnson had proven himself to be both diligent and competent. “Sir, if there was ever a time to do this, it’s now.”

Bryce stared at the screen a long time “It does indeed seem like they’re planning something,” he said.
“Seem?” said Johnson. “What else could it be than an invasion force?”

Bryce nodded. “I suspect that you’re correct, Johnson. Alert Agent Fowler. Inform him that I want to meet with Optimus Prime at our designated location. And alert Agent Mearing. Inform her that she’s received a promotion and to report to the Autobot base on my order. Fowler’s replacement should be accepted, once we have Optimus Prime under our control.”

“Yes sir,” said Johnson, with vicious satisfaction.

Chapter End Notes

By the way, should add this little warning; I will be rather irregular in updating this fic, as I'm in school and can't really keep up the same writing speed that I usually do. However, I will be trying to get one chapter per week up at the very minimum, and hopefully post every other day if the next midterm goes well. (I know, this is where my usual ambitious posting speed comes back to bite me in the butt!)

Thanks for understanding!

I have been reading rather a lot by this delightful writer of recent, and so may not be entirely innocent of being influenced by her work regarding pre-war Cybertron:

http://www.fanfiction.net/u/3224725/Morrigayn-DeWyvern

I have tried not to pilfer outright, but I'm too used to citing sources to not give credit where it is due!
“Hey Ratch,” said Agent Fowler. “Optimus around? We’ve got a meeting with General Bryce in twenty minutes.”

“He should be,” said Ratchet, not glancing up from what he was working on. Fowler sighed and looked around the base. It was as messy as he’d ever seen it. “Starscream?”

“However did you guess?” grumbled Ratchet. “I’m not going to complain about the kids again for a very, very long time.”

The thump of approaching footsteps made Fowler glance at the door, just in time to see Megatron stop and pull Optimus into what was probably intended to be an out-of-sight kiss. But when they came out into the main room, the smirk Megatron directed at him made him rethink that.

Fowler didn’t say anything. Optimus looked too happy, and there was no use embarrassing him now. He’d just have to hope that Megatron wouldn’t decide to pull something similar next time Bryce came by—though Bryce’s face would be priceless. As far as Fowler knew, the general had yet to remove the ‘Protect Marriage’ bumper sticker from the family car.

“I apologize for my tardiness,” said Optimus.

“Don’t,” said Fowler. “You’re on your honeymoon, after all.”

He saw the change in expression as Optimus looked that one up, and kept the grin strictly off his face.

“Technically the official ceremony is yet to happen,” said Optimus, sounding almost sheepish, as Megatron snorted, amused. Optimus shot him a severe look, and without another word transformed and shrugged his driver’s side door open.

“You sure?” said Fowler, pausing before getting in.

“We will not wish to unsettle General Bryce or his command any more than is necessary,” said Optimus. “He has, after all, been disturbed by aspects of Cybertronian behavior.”

You have no idea, thought Fowler, but said, very quietly, “Bryce’s a big boy. You don’t have to do this.”

The door stayed open. “No,” said Optimus, “I do not. Please get in, Agent Fowler.”

Fowler obeyed, making a point of obviously fastening his seatbelt because that seemed to make Optimus more comfortable even on his bad days, and made sure the driver’s seat was scooted well back so he couldn’t reach the pedals.

There was a large thump above him. “Optimus,” said Megatron’s voice, “Please attempt to ensure that you return before our meeting with Ultra Magnus this afternoon. I am not sure how long I will be able to tolerate his pontificating.”

“I will bear that in mind,” said Optimus, and Fowler could have sworn he sounded amused.

He had to admit, it was a little weird, the big guy in love. And anyone unfamiliar with Optimus (General Bryce, for instance) probably wouldn’t pick up on any of it—hell, Fowler’d missed most of
it, probably was still missing a good chunk on account of being human. But if you spent enough time around the bots, paid enough attention? Definitely something there, even without Megatron around to show off. It really was rather endearing, if you could apply such a word to a forty-foot-tall-machine with laser guns in his arms (again, something General Bryce would have trouble with).

Optimus waited until they were through the groundbridge before speaking. “How specific was General Bryce about the purpose of this meeting?”

“No at all,” said Fowler, glaring out the window. Ratchet had made sure to set them down well away from the base, as he always did. No sense in tempting the humans with tech they couldn’t have.

Usually, Fowler would have protested at that, but after their run-in with MECH, he was a lot more sympathetic.

“That does not sound particularly promising,” said Optimus.

“No,” said Fowler, “it doesn’t. Last I heard from him, he was nervous as a long-tailed cat in a roomful of rocking chairs about these negotiations of yours.”

“The recent arrivals are unlikely to have gone unnoticed,” noted Optimus. “Did you include Tailspin’s sparking in your last report?”

Fowler snorted. “And how am I to explain that to Bryce? He’s already got enough issues about how humans reproduce. I’ll inform him once the fact we’re about to have bouncing robot babies is immediately relevant. Until then, internal Cybertronian affairs, none of his beeswax.”

Pause. “You disagree with Bryce’s political views?”

“We don’t talk politics much, if that’s what you mean,” said Fowler, and frowned at the structures that had appeared ahead of them. “He’s my superior officer, after all.”

Optimus made a little gear-grinding sort of noise that was probably sympathetic approval—another thing that had changed over the last few months, the bots allowing themselves to lapse into Cybertronian behaviors again rather than their painstakingly crafted human ones. Optimus did it least of anyone; Fowler had walked in on Arcee and Wheeljack having a conversation that sounded like an airplane gone terribly wrong, and walked out just as quickly.

And then there was that buddy of Starscream’s hitting on his helicopter the other day, but that didn’t bear thinking about.

There were some days you just had to sit back and hope like hell your superiors didn’t freak about exactly how much weird was actually going on. Especially the robots-in-love weird. Cripes, he hoped Bryce would keep his hair on about that one, because Optimus and Megatron’s politically motivated sparkbonding (read ‘marriage’, sir) was not something that could be omitted from his reports. Bryce had enough sense to keep his personal beliefs out of this set of decisions, right?

Fowler wished there wasn’t a question mark at the end of that sentence. But there wasn’t a whole lot Bryce could do; the people actually holding the strings to the funding for this project were way higher up and way more flexible about these things than Bryce. Bryce could be obstructive, sure…but not much more.

Definitely reassuring.

They got up to the gate. Optimus rolled down the window and Fowler leaned out to talk to the kid
on gate duty. They parked, outside one of the larger hangars, and General Bryce and a few security
guys came out to meet them. Optimus flicked a door open; Fowler climbed out and saluted. Gone
were the times when he could get away with any informality. While he and Bryce had had a rather
friendly relationship before the MECH incident, the same could not be said now.

“Security will want to check both of you before we proceed,” said Bryce. “My apologies for the
inconvenience,” and he did sound sincere, to Fowler’s surprise, “but given some recent incidents, our
protocols have gotten stricter.”

“I understand entirely, General Bryce,” rumbled Optimus, making the security guys jump and look at
Bryce for help.

Something didn’t quite match up. Optimus was a living, rolling weapon of mass destruction. There
was no way he’d ever clear any security procedure—any human security procedure, at least. His
definition of security procedure was probably entirely different, hence his quick agreement.

The hell was Bryce playing at?

“This way, Agent Fowler,” said Bryce, gesturing, “Optimus Prime,” and there was a subtle stress on
the title, always had been since Megatron had called him on the use of ‘soldier’, “they’re ready for
you in the hangar.”

Optimus closed his door and waited for the humans to get clear of him before proceeding toward said
hangar at a sedate and cautious pace.

This didn’t smell right. This didn’t smell right at all.

Fowler followed Bryce, overly aware of the presence of the security guys around him, trying to
come up with some way out of this. He should have mentioned some codeword to Optimus, should
have set something up so they could get a call from base and have to go haring off, because this was
wrong.

Then he realized he was thinking this way about his superior officer, about fellow soldiers. Cripes,
how paranoid had the bots made him?

“General Bryce?” he said.

“Yes, Agent Fowler?”

“What exactly is going on? You’ve never asked to meet with both of us here before, and you
certainly haven’t had extensive security checks…”

Bryce looked at him. Fowler stopped in mid-step, because that was not a good look.

A flash lit up the narrow corridor. A strangled cry, Optimus, an impact that shook the ground from
under his feet and before he could stabilize himself he was on the ground with a knee in his back and
cuffs around his wrists, someone shouting, and somehow distinct a staticky voice saying, “Robot’s
down, sir!”

They hauled him to his feet, staggering, bloody-nosed, and he wasn’t listening to them when they
arrested him, when they told him what he was under arrest for, just stared at General Bryce, betrayed
and angry and far, far less shocked than he should have been.

“And exactly what do you think you’re doing, sir?” he said, shocked by the levelness of his own
voice. “The other Cybertronians are going to interpret this as an act of war.”
“The other robots will never know about this,” said Bryce, gesturing for the security team to follow him. “It’s a necessary measure of national security.”

“And what exactly is this necessary measure?”

General Bryce said nothing. They started up a flight of stairs, turned through double doors and into the adjacent hanger.

Fowler had only seen MECH’s facilities after the bots had been at them, and so had only a brief sketchy impression of what they had looked like. But it was more than enough for him to recognize the purpose of the facility, the bot-sized cables suspended from the ceiling, the restraints around Optimus’s arms and chest.

Optimus himself was unconscious, his face strangely peaceful, and Fowler’s gut twisted at what was going to happen. “Bryce, you can’t do this,” he said, and this time his voice did shake. “Do you have any idea—”

“Oh don’t worry,” said one of the techs from the computer. “We’re not using that big chest port again; there is a far higher rate of moping, failure to thrive and so on associated with it. We get far better results going for the smaller one in the back of the neck.”

“It’s still breaking the biggest taboo on the books!” snapped Fowler. “General Bryce, exchanging code is a deeply intimate act in their society, and doing so without consent—”

“In their society, not ours,” said Bryce. “In case you’ve forgotten, Bill, we’re on Earth. They’re machines. Their feelings on the matter are irrelevant.”

“They’re not going to be so irrelevant when Megatron blows up the planet!”

“He won’t,” said Bryce, “Because he won’t find out, and if your reports about the nature of his relationship with Prime here are accurate, we should have a good way of controlling him.”

Fowler’s eyes went to Optimus again, seeing the twitch of a massive hand, a faint grimace cross the metal face. No no no, stay asleep a little longer, big guy, let me talk them out of this—

Optimus opened his eyes, blinked blearily, looking as though he had a massive headache, and tried to move, found he couldn’t.

Fowler hoped that he was the only one to see the fleeting moment of terror, absolute, horrible terror, before Optimus hid his feelings behind his usual calm expression, tilted his head back so he could look at the humans above him. “Agent Fowler,” he said. “Are you unharmed?”

“I’m fine,” said Fowler.

“I am glad to hear it,” said Optimus, then added, “General Bryce. I would appreciate an explanation of why you have found it necessary to restrain me, and would like to reiterate that no Cybertronian on this planet intends any ill to humans as a species.”

“I’m reluctant to believe it,” said Bryce.

“Whatever you believe, General Bryce, does not justify this action,” said Optimus. One of the techs moved forward; Optimus’s eyes fixed on him and went wide again, mouth setting.

“I believe you’ve already met our program director,” said Bryce.
“I have,” said Optimus, very carefully indeed, and his hands clenched. “Johnson, I believe. I am surprised to find you working with this government; I thought the stated purpose of MECH was to overthrow it.”

“That was before your friends murdered Silas,” said Johnson.

Optimus said nothing to that.

“You’ve forced our hand,” said Bryce. “Regardless of your assurances to Agent Fowler—or his assurances on your behalf—I can recognize an invasion force when I see one. You’ve had no less than ten new arrivals in as many days; we had reports of shots being fired at one landing site—”

“A misunderstanding,” said Optimus. “Not all of the new arrivals have had news of the treaty.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Bryce. “Your people’s presence on this planet has greatly increased in the last month, while your ‘negotiations’ with Megatron have been by all indications anything but professional.”

Optimus gave Bryce a long, level look. “I beg your pardon?”

“So you deny you’re having an affair with him?”

“General Bryce, I must admit to some confusion. All our records indicate that your species, too, practices politically-motivated bonding ceremonies, often with the stated intention of the production of offspring to cement alliances between factions. My relationship with Megatron is just that, and has significant precedent in Cybertronian legal tradition. Indeed, it would be difficult to end our current war without something of the kind.”

“So you’re saying it’s purely political?”

There was a pause, Optimus’s honest nature getting the better of him.

“I assure you that I will never allow my personal feelings to intervene where the safety of either of our species is involved,” he said after a while. “General Bryce, you should also be aware that, if you do truly intend to attempt to activate the slave coding I carry, it will be a futile endeavor. All Cybertronians on this world have been outfitted with countermeasures.”

“I got a good look at those countermeasures when we caught that medic of yours,” said Johnson. “Working around them woulda been easier if the rest of the fu—” He glanced at Bryce, amended what he was trying to say, “the rest of the robots hadn’t barged in, but I’m confident that I’ve broken through your little honeytrap now.” Another glance at Bryce, very ugly satisfaction twisting his mouth. “We’ve got everything ready, sir. We’ll start when you give the word.”
Chapter 6

Optimus’s tanks lurched with sick horror. “General Bryce,” he said, “this is a foolhardy course of action. No Cybertronian on this world intends your species harm, but Megatron will interpret this as an act of war and will act accordingly.”

“You’ve said that many times,” said General Bryce. “But your actions have demonstrated anything but goodwill. The attack on MECH’s base of operations was undertaken without informing or negotiating with the United States government, whose citizens your people killed—”

“It was an act of self-defense on the part of the Cybertronians being held against their will,” said Optimus.

“You still did not consult us,” snapped Bryce. “You demonstrated complete contempt for the sovereign power of the United States—and by extension, every human government. And now you’re building an invasion force in cooperation with Megatron, who has never demonstrated anything but hostile intention to humans as a species. You’ve left us no choice, Optimus Prime.”

“You cannot do this!” Optimus struggled, found it to be useless. “You must listen to me!”

“In point of fact,” said General Bryce, with a nasty satisfaction, “this is a necessary measure of national security.”

“The Autobots pose no threat to your country, General Bryce.”

“But what about the Decepticons?”

“Megatron’s treaty with us states that he will not take any aggressive action against any human party, unless in self defense.”

“I don’t trust him to keep it,” said General Bryce.

“He will interpret this as an act of war!” cried Optimus. “This will only place your country in greater danger, not protect it. General Bryce, we shall leave this world if you so desire; this is folly.”

General Bryce looked at him, and even with his lack of experience interpreting human facial expression, Optimus could see the disgust plain. Bryce thought that he was pleading for his own sake, not to protect the humans. Optimus offlined his optics and turned his helm away, grief rising in his spark. Megatron would exact hideous revenge when he learned of this, and there was nothing Optimus could do to prevent it, save stay silent about this danger to every Cybertronian—every one of his people—on this world.

Underneath that horror roared a selfish distress, his processor and spark alike filled with fierce, terrified denial—no no not again, never again!

Johnson’s voice by his audial. “You gonna scream this time too?”

He did not dignify that with a response as hands fumbled at his medical port, the cap of a medical cable shoved roughly into place. The terror and loss of control were hardly lessened. He struggled again, crying out as it invaded him, warped him, the tearing through everything that he was. He reached across their bond to Megatron, desperate for some relief, for help, and felt Megatron’s spark light with rage for him, fear—
Do not destroy them for this, I beg! he cried over their bond and Megatron did not understand what was happening, only knew that Optimus was hurt.

General Bryce’s voice jerked him back to himself. “You will tell no one of this,” he said, and Optimus drew a shuddering ventilation. “Not Megatron, nor any of your officers.”

“Megatron already knows. He and Prime are sparkbonded,” said Fowler’s voice. “You idiot, Bryce. You’ve killed us all.”

“Take him away,” said Bryce, and Optimus onlined his optics, rigors rattling his frame against his restraints. He looked up at the ceiling, seeing the myriad pipes in absurd detail, absolute despair clouding processor and spark.

“What does he mean by sparkbonding?” said Bryce’s voice, his master’s voice, and Optimus responded mechanically.

“We are mated,” he said, using the crude human term, and not caring. “He feels what I feel. He knows that you have attacked me.”

Bryce swore. Optimus offlined his optics, not caring enough to try to say anything else. His battlemask slid over his face, some measure of privacy.

He did not move even when they released the restraints. He did not online his optics, lost in the terrible grief and misery, the loss of control. Bryce had to order him to his pedes.

“Does he know exactly what happened?” demanded Bryce.

“No,” said Optimus. “He does not. He only knows that I have been harmed.”

“You will tell him our attempt failed,” said Bryce, and Optimus bowed his helm. “And you will ensure that he does not attack us.”

“I would have done that regardless,” said Optimus very quietly. “Your world does not deserve to die for your crimes, General Bryce.”

“You will address me as ‘sir’, soldier,” said General Bryce. Optimus shuddered, not bothering to hide it. It did not matter. General Bryce controlled him now. He stood as he’d been ordered to stand, optics forced online, looking down at Bryce.

“What are the specifics of your treaty with Megatron?”

“That I am to appoint him as my Lord Protector upon the ratification of the treaty. That we are to join in a cooperative effort to revitalize Cybertron. That officials for the interim government shall be appointed in equal parts from among Autobot and Decepticon ranks.” He fell silent, then asked, forced by the coding, “There are further details. Would you like them, sir?”

“After you tell me what a Lord Protector entails,” said Bryce.

“Megatron will be the official head of Cybertron’s military,” said Optimus. “It is an equal position to that of Prime. He protects Cybertron, as do I, and he protects me, as I do him.”

Bryce looked alarmed. If he could have brought himself to care, he might have found that satisfying.

“Then,” said Bryce, “If the opportunity presents itself, you will upload the slave coding onto Megatron.”
Optimus’s spark stilled in horror. “Please,” he said softly. “Please do not ask that of me, sir.”

“It was an order, not a request,” said Bryce.

“Please,” said Optimus again, all he could do, and even that was difficult, the code raging against his questioning an order. “You do not understand what you demand. What it would do to him—sir, do not ask this, I beg.” Something in him flinched from the humiliation, but he had to do it, had to do anything to spare Megatron this. “I’m not a medic, sir—”

“Our consultant informs me that a medic is not necessary for the procedure. Is that not correct?”

“It is correct,” Optimus said, wishing the words would garble in his vocalizer. “But you are asking me to engage in a highly intimate act with the intention of—”

Bryce slammed his hands down on the railing and glared at him. “Enough. You will install the coding. You will never question an order again, do you understand me, soldier?”

“Yes sir,” said Optimus.

There was a tap at the door, and one of the humans opened it.

“This is Agent Mearing,” said General Bryce, and Optimus peered down at the small pale female human standing there. She looked as displeased to see him as Bryce had. “She is Agent Fowler’s replacement. You will tell your compatriots that Fowler is on enforced furlough for the moment. Not the truth. You will follow all of Agent Mearing’s orders as if they were my own.”

“Yes sir,” said Optimus, and looked up at the distinctive sound of an approaching flight engine, Megatron. He looked down again just as quickly. Too late. His very rescue would doom Megatron to the same fate. Better that he remain here.

“Damn, they’re ahead of schedule,” Johnson said.

“Just pack it up, son,” said Bryce. “You, go out and delay him. Stall long enough to allow all humans to evacuate the base. Then you may accompany him back and await further orders.”

Optimus managed something like a nod, supplemented it with a quiet, “Yes sir,” and went. There was nothing else to do.
Chapter 7

The flash of emotion over their bond caught Megatron between one step and the next and he froze.


Optimus.

“No!” he snarled, not realizing it, and turned, Ultra Magnus looking after him with distress, saying something, but he was already transforming, throwing himself along the corridors of the ship, calling Soundwave, Shockwave, the Eradicons, all the Eradicons, the Vehicons too, prepare for a massive attack on these coordinates.

Instinct, all of it instinct. No reasoning, desperate reaction, fear for his mate, fear from his mate, pain, despair.

Knockout and the Autobot medic in front of him, confused. “With me, now!” he roared, and the Autobot hesitated. “Your Prime is in danger!”

That got them. They followed him, caught up in the flow of Vehicons heading to the groundbridge, and behind them came the sound of an engine like Optimus’s, Ultra Magnus.

Megatron could have raged at them all. They were too slow, far too slow. His bond echoed with despair, abruptly closed off.

No. No. They couldn’t have offline him. This world would be shreds if they had. He would end them, end all of them, burn the surface of the world and poison the very stone of it. Optimus was his —

—no, not offline, he could sense a faint vaporous ghost of him behind the wall, pain, despair.

Increasingly alarmed pings. Ratchet. What happened? Megatron, what happened? His own fear was echoed in the source-glyphs each message trailed.

I don’t slagging KNOW, he wanted to send, but he couldn’t show such weakness to the Autobot medic. Instead, he sent, He is acutely distressed, and left it at that.

Ratchet was a smart mech. He stopped pinging.

Flight deck ahead. Groundbridge. Waiting Eradicons. No time to make a speech. He didn’t even bother flipping out of alt, barreled through and out into hot bright alien sun and dust in his vents and there, down below, human installation. Human installation with human vehicles rising from it and fleeing the armada behind him, and there, in the center of it, a bright splash of color.

Optimus.

Alive. Upright. No injuries. Looking up at the sky with battlemask raised and optics wide behind it, and for a moment he saw Orion instead, hurt innocence and confusion mixed.

A second bridge flared to life, the grounders arriving, a few incongruous splashes of bright paint among the uniform purple-black of the Vehicons.

“Search the area!” he roared, and did not wait to see his orders carried out, transformed and landed before Optimus.
“The search is unnecessary, Megatron,” said Optimus, before Megatron straightened up. “The humans have already left.”

“We shall see about that,” said Megatron. “Are you unharmed?”

“Perfectly,” said Optimus, and looked away. Megatron did not need the shiver of his field, tightly drawn in and controlled, to tell that he was lying. Anger stirred in his spark. He had a good idea of what the humans might have done to Optimus while he was in their custody.

“Optimus,” he said, and placed a hand on his shoulder, feeling a fine tremor not attributable to Optimus’s systems. “Whatever has happened, we shall repair it.” He glanced around. “Did you not have the human with you when you left the base?”

“Agent Fowler is on an enforced leave from his duties,” said Optimus, and seemed no happier about that than his previous statement.

So the humans had slave-coded him. Megatron bared his dentae briefly, allowed his anger to brush the wall Optimus had erected over their bond, and called for Ratchet.

Who was already there, looking grim indeed. “We’ll need to get you back to the medical bay,” he said, trying to sound unthreatening.

“While I appreciate your concern,” said Optimus, “the precaution is unnecessary.”

“It’s procedure, Optimus—” Ratchet started, but Megatron shook his helm.

_I think the circumstance is clear enough_, he sent, and Ratchet ducked his helm in a nod.

_It will be necessary, regardless_, he responded, _We will need to get some idea of the code to begin work on removing it._

Another voice broke in, one of the Vehicons, broad announcement to all mechs in the area. _“Lord Megatron, we have found a slave-coding facility. Computers have already been wiped. Should we destroy it?”_

Was that relief that flickered through Optimus’s field?

“Yes,” said Megatron.

“The human attempt was unsuccesful,” said Optimus quickly, far less deliberately than his norm. Megatron opted to ignore it, the statement patently false.

“Let us return you to your base,” he said.

Optimus bowed his helm and said nothing.

Megatron knew.

A relief. A shocking, utter relief. Megatron knew he was coded, and was acting accordingly. He would not have the chance to betray him. Ratchet too, and if the price of that was the shock and anger and horror he felt flickering through his old friend’s field, so be it. If he could be contained, if he could be stopped, Bryce would not succeed. That, above all things, was what mattered.
He followed them meekly into the groundbridge, out into the middle of the base, and somehow did not flinch from Miko’s query about Agent Fowler’s current location.


Startlement and worry in their fields, quickly repressed. Optimus tried to meet their optics, somehow project that nothing had happened, and found it impossible.

Megatron’s field expanded around him, as comforting as Megatron could make it, and the sheer repressed rage humming just below the surface of the calm and assurance Megatron was trying to project made his battle protocols begin to activate. He stopped them, did not dare to allow his field to reach to meet Megatron’s. It would betray far too much distress to be easily explained away, and the slave coding forbade that.

It forbade allowing his coding to be scanned, too. The scan would reveal its presence, and that was unacceptable. He’d been ordered not to speak of it, to tell them that the coding had been a failed attempt. But his very refusal would reveal its presence.

They led him into the med-bay, and Ratchet directed him to sit—no need to lie down, Optimus—on the berth and wait. Ratchet went and busied himself at one of the benches, and Optimus fought the impulse to flee, the coding hooking into desire for privacy.

After a few moments, Ratchet came over with a medical grade cable on one hand and paused. “Optimus,” he said, looking at the cable, “You’ve probably been ordered not to let us find out what happened, which precludes you allowing us to scan your coding. But your refusal will simply indicate that much more certainly that you are carrying slave coding—it will be as good as telling us that it is present.”

Optimus looked at him a long moment as understanding dawned. Ratchet’s wording was chosen to trick the coding into viewing refusal as more dangerous than acceptance. And it worked. He found himself able to nod, to incline his helm to allow Ratchet access, and there was a sort of victory in that even as his spark contracted in irrational fear at the feel of a cap against bruised sensors.

He kept his helm bowed and his optics offline as Ratchet scanned his coding.

And scanned it again.

And exclaimed and ran yet a third scan.

“What is it?”

“There’s nothing there! He’s acting like he’s carrying slave coding, but I see nothing out of the ordinary. It looks like we did get there in time.”

“That makes no sense,” growled Megatron. “Do you mean to tell me that they just let him go, believing that they’d succeeded?”

“It’s the only thing that could have happened,” said Ratchet, and for all the consternation in his voice, his hand was gentle as he removed the cable. Optimus ex-vented heavily and stayed where he was.

“Impossible,” snarled Megatron, and took two strides forward, leaning over Ratchet. “He is not acting right. His very spark is distressed; do not question me, doctor, for I feel it through what remains open of our bond. He is not well, and he is under the influence of coding. Check again!”
“No,” said Ratchet, and looked at Megatron. There was a brief pause as they communicated over comms and Optimus sat there he was, not quite believing his own audials.

He was coded. He knew it. He’d felt its bite and the unthinking compulsion. He’d given Bryce information against his will. He could feel the code pressing on him, pressuring him to follow his orders. Get Megatron alone.

Enslave him.

And Ratchet could find no trace of it. Ratchet thought he was safe. For a horrible moment, Optimus wondered if Bryce would force him to similarly enslave the Autobots after he had provided him with Megatron. The thought did not bear long consideration. It was far too likely.

“I will keep him here,” said Ratchet, “under observation, for some time.”


Another brief silence.

Optimus kept his gaze on the floor and tried not to remember Silas and Johnson speaking as if he weren’t there. After a time, Megatron came over to him and offered him a hand. He took it.

Megatron pulled him upright.

“Starscream tells me that the human facility is destroyed,” Megatron said. “Thoroughly. They will pose no more danger to us.”

If only that were true.

“Ultra Magnus has found a vast quantity of technical difficulties in the treaty draft,” Ratchet said. “If you need time to recover, take it. The peace process needs Ultra Magnus more than it needs you just now; there’s no reason to overexert yourself.”

They were expecting him to say something in response to that. He managed something like a smile and said, “That is appreciated, old friend, but I would prefer to have something to occupy myself with.”

“Continue your work on the Iacon database,” Megatron suggested. “Retrieval of artifacts ought to keep both you and your Autobots busy. Especially that new recruit of yours.”

“That would indeed be a worthwhile pursuit,” said Optimus.

“Good,” said Megatron, and leaned forward to touch his helm to Optimus’s, but Optimus flinched away at the last moment, with the memory of Bryce’s orders. Megatron retreated, pulsed acceptance and understanding through bond and field alike, and with a courteous inclination of his helm, left.

Optimus let out a heavy ventilation of relief as the coding quieted again, then glanced at Ratchet.

Who looked as lost as he felt.

“I am sorry to have unduly alarmed you,” he said at last.

Ratchet shook his helm. “Don’t apologize, Optimus. You had every reason. I only wish we had more resources available for you—I can do very little in...in cases like this.”

This he could do. This was so much easier. He stepped forward and placed a hand on Ratchet’s shoulder, and said, “Do not blame yourself, Ratchet. You have already done far more than I could
ever ask. Be assured that, should I require your assistance, I will not hesitate to ask.”

Ratchet managed a weak smile. “Thank you, Optimus.”

He smiled back, glad that Ratchet’s sense of him was confined only to his field, and it appeared to reassure Ratchet.

It was only late that night, when he was alone and the quiet of their bond indicated that Megatron was deep in recharge that he allowed himself to sit on the edge of his empty berth and let the despair flood his field.
Chapter 8

Time passed.

Months passed.

Agent Mearing made her first appearance at the base. There were no new orders for him. A relief. And, like Silas, she demanded that their conversations take place during long drives with her in the driver’s seat. Fortunately, while she rested her hands on his wheel, a gesture that he found unnerving in the extreme, she did not try to drive.

She was, however, horribly good at asking questions. While Optimus found it simple enough to misinterpret her orders just enough to make them ineffective, she was very good at phrasing questions without such an escape.

She knew he was defying her. It frustrated her, especially as she was well aware of how utterly helpless he should have been.

He ignored her anger, as he ignored much about his current situation. That was necessity; he was not sure whether he would have been able to tolerate it otherwise.

Months passed. He settled into a routine, a way of interacting with Mearing, a way of keeping up a façade when around the others, a way of thinking in such ways that even with their bond open, Megatron would not sense his distress. It was hiding, lying, but he had no choice.

He feared for Fowler, of course. He knew that humans were capable of great and inventive cruelty to their own species. He also knew that the effects of long imprisonment could be terrible. But there was nothing to be done about it. He found it difficult enough to keep those around him safe; rescuing Agent Fowler was out of the question.

At least, Optimus had managed to continue to delay the issue of Megatron's coding; the protest that such a rash action would assuredly blow his cover was one that Mearing—and by extension, General Bryce—found sufficient. Beside that victory, all the other petty indignities of his current existence paled, became tolerable.

Even with the loneliness.

Though being Silas's prisoner had been bad enough, separated from the constant presence of fields and the sounds of engines, this existence had its own horror, a feeling of being alone even among friends. He'd experienced the like long ago, when he first received the Matrix, but that had been different. There had been honor to that, and it was a burden that he accepted gladly, grown accustomed to.

There was no honor to this. This was mere stubborn existence, a struggle difficult by dint of its wearing length and little more. This was lying to those who trusted him, telling the truth to their enemies, betraying them with every ventilation, and the only victory in not betraying them as thoroughly as he could. As his masters demanded.

At least that struggle was some distraction from the terrors that brought him gasping out of recharge, kept him awake with tank churning, a phantom ache in his port. Now there was no one to turn to, no one to ground himself with, no way to banish the ghost of another voice, vicious and satisfied. Some nights, he didn't even bother to attempt recharge, only stayed up and worked, reread and suggested alterations to the treaty draft as it grew steadily more voluminous under Ultra Magnus's avid care.
Sometimes even that was not distraction enough, and those nights he dug up old datapads, datapads that only still existed because the archivist in him had refused to let Cybertron's histories and literature die with Cybertron itself. Those nights, he tried to lose himself again in tales of heroism and a Golden Age that he had many times been assured never truly existed.

If only mere reading were still enough to entirely occupy his processor.

But Megatron was still free, he reminded himself, and that in itself was victory enough. Megatron was free. Mearing didn't know about the children, not yet, and Megatron was free.

He didn't expend much thought on what would come next. It was absurd to think that the current state of affairs would last forever, but he was far too occupied in keeping his misfortune from destroying them all to wonder about it more than infrequently.

Now, it had been eight months since his coding and Agent Fowler's imprisonment. The morning started as it usually did; Mearing turning up at an early hour that Agent Fowler would have flatly refused to appear at, and he waited for her order to transform, opened a door for her because he didn't want her pulling it open. His distaste for transformation was returning; he only hoped he would be able to overcome it again.

This early in the morning, the desert air was still cool, the dryness reminding him faintly of Cybertron, but the particulates tasted strange and musty in his vents, and so the resemblance was confined to a passing fancy, set aside as he turned his attentions to giving Mearing a report that conveyed the minimum information possible without being obvious about it. This week was particularly fortuitous; one of the secondary generators at the base had failed and was requiring extensive and significant repairs. In light of that, the fact that two other Vehicons had sparked, and that the Decepticon Justice Division was reporting far higher numbers of survivors than either he or Megatron had anticipated, could be omitted without difficulty from the coding or Mearing.

That dispensed with, he fell silent, and tried to concentrate on something other than the hands on his wheel.

“And you have yet to transfer the coding to Megatron?” said Mearing after a time.

“As I have previously noted, there has been no possibility of transferring it without exposing my current situation, sir,” said Optimus, using the same respectful tone as he did every time the question was asked. At least she could not demand to be called ‘sir’ back at the base—too much risk of being overheard.

And suddenly he was in neutral, engine forcibly disconnected from road, and small human hands wrenched his wheel, bouncing him onto the shoulder, brakes slamming him to a painful halt in a cloud of dust. A wrench of the gearshift and when he tried to engage his engine again, bewildered and distressed, a human voice told him, “Don’t,” and he found himself frozen.

He sat there, venting hard with his plating clamped down around him so it wouldn’t rattle as he shook—the human likely thought it was simply engine vibrations, and he was glad of that, she wouldn’t know how sickened and terrified he was.

“Johnson told me I might have to do that,” Mearing said, and there was a note in her voice he found very alarming. “Said it was some sort of dominance display and would keep you from feeding me that line of absolute bullshit you’ve been trying for the last six months. I do not appreciate being bullshitted, Prime.”

He said nothing.
“Now, would you care to tell me the other reasons Megatron isn’t under control yet?”

She hadn’t phrased the question right. “I would not,” he said, even with the prickling of the coding telling him that he knew that wasn’t what the question really meant. But he’d answered it truthfully.

Irritated ex-vent. “Tell me the other reasons Megatron isn’t controlled yet.”

No way around it now. “The trust that we have built is hard-won indeed, Agent Mearing. My betrayal of him could quite possibly reignite our war, and that our species cannot afford.”

She ex-vented, irritated, but only said, “And for other personal reasons, no doubt.”

“Indeed,” he said quietly. “No sentient being should be so violated.”

Her weight shifted, and she hesitated before speaking, things that Agent Fowler had said were indicative of discomfort. He said nothing further, only sat there and waited.

“You will transfer the code tonight,” she said abruptly, sounding angry again. “I don’t care if it blows your cover. Do you understand?”

Cold washed through him, and his tank lurched. He pulled his plating in more tightly, pricks of pain from strained servos flashing through his frame. He could not protest. He was never to question an order again. “I understand.”

She said nothing.

“I understand, sir,” he said.

“Good.” The foot lifted from his brake. “Take us back to base. Inform me immediately once your objective is secured.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Okay, last chapter was one heck of a cliffhanger and I had the next one ready so...early update!

Megatron greeted him with a pulse of profound delight through bond and field alike, and it was only by the utmost effort that Optimus throttled back his distress and hid it from him, accepted the offered hand.

“I am glad to see you here again,” said Megatron, guiding him along the corridors of the Nemesis, and looking around him, Optimus recalled being carried along them, a hazy memory of disorientation and pain. Megatron had brought him here to free him; he had come to enslave Megatron.

He kept the better part of that emotion from the bond. To think that he had in part justified their sparkbonding with the rationalization that Megatron would be unable to hide evil intentions from him.

“I am glad to be here again,” he said, because it kept his processor from that line of thought, from anticipating what would happen. There was a strange unreality to all of it, an inability to think of what he was to do in anything but the most abstract terms. Megatron slid his hand a little further up Optimus’s wrist, tip of a claw teasing gently at the stays and lines hidden by armor.

“I worried,” he said quietly, and paused outside a door; his quarters. Optimus kept his ventilations even. “And if you were to change your mind about this—”

“No.” Optimus shook his helm. “No, I will not.”

Megatron looked at him a long time and then opened the door and led him inside. They settled on the berth together, looking at each other, as they always did, and Megatron reached out cautiously to cup the side of his face, leaned toward him. Optimus reciprocated, trying to take comfort in his proximity, but his spark whirled with dread and realization. He was not going to be able to escape this. He was not going to be able to do anything, refuse at the last moment, flee, because the pressure of the slave code was in his very struts, forcing hands forward to touch and caress, forcing him closer.

He had been ordered to transfer it and there was no other way and to do so, he had to keep Megatron from knowing how he felt, lie to him over the bond.

Megatron kissed him. Optimus leaned up into it, wrapped an arm around his neck and kissed back, though the very spark of him wanted to shove Megatron away, cry Do not touch me, I’ll hurt you, do not let me hurt you!

He stroked Megatron’s interface panel, his hand trembling as he did, already seeing Megatron arching under him, crying out under the assault of the code, the hideous betrayal in his optics. The humiliation and anger, a twin to his own, the blame—

Megatron pulled him into his lap, touching him in all the places that made his frame light with pleasure, nibbling on his neck cables, licking and kissing, and whispering fierce possessive
endearments. Optimus trembled in his arms, horror and terror washing through him and returned the caresses like a sparkless thing, wishing he could say something, wishing he could at least keen or do something to warn Megatron. There was nothing coming over the bond from Megatron now, only waves of desire, and he doubted that Megatron could perceive his carefully-hidden distress in time to save himself.

Megatron leaned in again, catching his wrists in one clawed hand and pressed his helm to Optimus’s. “Optimus,” he rumbled, and Optimus felt the heat of him and wished he could take comfort from it. “Optimus, look at me.”

Optimus did, slowly, tried to keep the gaze interested and amorous.

And stasis cuffs clicked around his wrists.

“They did something to you,” said Megatron. “Don’t think I can’t tell. We are of one spark.”

“You could tell?” said Optimus, shocked, relieved, forced himself to still his trembling.

Megatron vented something like a laugh and cupped Optimus’s face in a clawed hand. “Of course I could. If there is one thing our long war taught me, it was that you do not lie easily, or willingly. And I knew you were lying; your spark showed me as much, though you tried to hide it.”

Optimus pressed his bound hands against Megatron’s chestplates and rested his helm on Megatron’s shoulder, and said nothing.

“Come, Optimus,” said Megatron quietly, and gathered him in his arms. “We will see Ratchet.”

“Thank you,” said Optimus softly. He offlined his optics and allowed himself to simply cling to Megatron, shudders wracking his frame.

“Ratchet,” said Megatron’s voice on his personal comm, startling him out of a sound recharge, “I require your presence aboard the Nemesis. It is Optimus. He is unwell.”

“What did you do?” Ratchet rolled to his pedes and felt for his medical kit, spark hammering with sudden panic.

“It is what the humans did. Come quickly; be prepared to scan for slave coding. Again.”

“Oh no,” said Ratchet, very quietly, and made for the groundbridge. It should have been impossible, but… “This is important, Megatron: what is his emotional state?”

“Relieved,” was the answer, and rage crept into Megatron’s until-now carefully level voice. “I gather that they ordered him to transmit it to me, though he cannot say as much.”

“Good. It was unlikely, but if he were to panic…”

Megatron snorted. “We are speaking of the same mech, are we not?”

“I said unlikely,” said Ratchet, though such a re-visitation of severe trauma had unpredictable effects, and compounded with the stress from an incomplete mandated task, and the long period of dormancy, the results could be quite severe. Primus, I should never have believed those readings!
But Optimus had seemed recovered, in good health and spirits, remarkably quickly after his kidnapping. And there had been no coding in his processor. But the long absence from Megatron, his sudden change of spark that night, general behavior after they’d rescued him... It pointed to slave coding. Slave coding he’d been unable to find. If it was truly present, he’d failed Optimus in ways more profound than could be imagined.

Ratchet set the coordinates for the groundbridge with shaking hands and activated it.

He stepped into not the medical bay, but personal quarters—Megatron’s. The lights were on, and Megatron himself sat on the sizable berth with Optimus gathered in his arms. Ratchet’s optics went immediately to the stasis cuffs on Optimus’s wrists; Megatron, noting his regard, said, “The coding might have forced him to resist.”

Optimus uncurled somewhat, trying to straighten up. His optics were dim, and a fine tremor ran through his frame, but with an effort he met Ratchet’s optics. “Thank you for coming, old friend,” he said, and his voice was far quieter than usual, though it did not tremble.

For a moment, despite the words, Ratchet saw Orion Pax again, standing helplessly on the Council floor, looking after Megatron with shocked, distressed optics, heard him afterwards: *I do not understand, Ratchet. I only wanted to put it so that the Council understood him. I had no wish to undermine him!*

He moved closer, their fields playing over him. Megatron, enraged and distressed. Optimus, relieved but miserable and guilty. Ratchet projected calm as best he could. “How did you find this out?”

Megatron’s field shaded protective. “He tried to interface with me, and it was clear from our bond that he did not wish to.”

Optimus bowed his helm and said nothing.

A chill crept up Ratchet’s spinal strut. “Optimus, I’d like to scan you again, just to see if I can find anything now that it’s more active. Can you do this for me?”

A full-frame shudder ran through Optimus’s chassis, but he bent his helm forward as requested. One of Megatron’s hands described long circles over his back, calming the flinch as Ratchet gently inserted a medical cable.

It took time. At last, Ratchet ceased searching the somatic coding and moved to the autonomic, which managed fuel processing and other involuntary processes. It wasn’t part of the usual scan; no useful slave code should affect the autonomic system. Even in the golden age of Cybertronian science, no one had known much about it or how it functioned.

It was there he found it, identifiable by that nasty little tail, a tag of code that would initiate a wipe of the processor if tampered with.

*Oh slag,* thought Ratchet. *Scraplet fragging Primus. Raf was right.*

It was new. Totally new. Affecting a completely different part of the processor, one relatively unknown to Cybertronian science. It extended to every part of that processor, controlling movement, speech, everything, new codes that allowed these things to become involuntary rather than voluntary, as they should have been with the somatic system. It was utterly alien. It was some time before he even found the designated master.

“It was a human,” he said when he withdrew, and Optimus offlined his optics and drew his field in tight. “Agent Fowler’s superior.”
Optimus hunched himself small and said, “I must relinquish command to Ultra Magnus. I cannot be allowed near the base or the children.”

Megatron growled, quietly. “Oh, I doubt we’ll be retaining an official presence on Earth much longer,” he said, very quietly.

“Megatron, no!” Optimus’s optics flared bright and his field expanded with distress as his grip tightened on Megatron’s plating. “No, don’t. Do not destroy them for this, I beg! The majority of them are innocent, this is the action of a few, Megatron—”

Megatron stroked his back again, pulled him close. “I do not plan to destroy this world,” he said. “Do not concern yourself with that. But it will no longer be prudent to have a Cybertronian presence on Earth.”

Optimus gave him a long look, then seemed to accept the explanation.

“Ratchet, transmit a copy of your findings to Ultra Magnus,” said Megatron.

“Medical privacy regulations state that—”

“They don’t apply in circumstances in which the chain of command is involved,” said Megatron. “Ultra Magnus will insist on a report in any case; it will make the transfer more efficient.”

“Optimus—” started Ratchet. Optimus looked away, mouth setting. Ratchet’s spark hurt at that.

“It is most likely that the slave coding will have rendered him unable to consent,” said Megatron over comms, some measure of consideration for Optimus’s comfort.

“In which case authorization should devolve to close cadre—a trinamate, sibling or conjunx endura,” said Ratchet, and then stopped. And stared at Megatron, who cocked his helm and grinned at him.

“No conflict with privacy regulations at all,” he said.

Ratchet’s tank rolled. Prettily legal it might be, but something in him rebelled at the idea of Megatron making such decisions without even consulting Optimus, like he was a sparkless thing, blithely announcing that Optimus was incapable of consenting and taking the opportunity to seize still closer control of his old enemy. Optimus might trust him with his very spark, but Ratchet had seen far too many of Megatron’s victims. He did not have any illusions of some honorable tendency in Megatron’s spark that might keep him from viciously abusing any measure of power given him, and the idea of Optimus helpless and utterly at Megatron’s mercy was intolerable.

It did not help that in this case, Megatron’s decision was entirely appropriate and could not be argued with on any basis.

Ratchet let out a heavy ex-vent and sent the pertinent information to Ultra Magnus.

“Optimus,” Megatron was saying, “are you able to contact that new human representative?”

“I am,” said Optimus, “but I cannot condone any injury to her—”

A flicker of grim satisfaction played through Megatron’s field. “No, she will not be harmed,” he said. “I only desire to speak with her; you need not give her further information than that.”

Optimus gave him a long doubtful look. Megatron touched his shoulder gently, leaned his helm
forward and pressed it to Optimus’s. “You are safe now,” he said, “but there are other things to be considered—Agent Fowler’s safety is one of them.”

Optimus’s optics widened, and he looked at Megatron with both hope and joy, and Ratchet’s spark twisted. Did he really believe that? Ratchet had little belief in Megatron’s concern for Fowler’s safety, and Optimus must have been ill indeed to put such easy trust in him.

“I cannot condone human injury,” he said after a while.

Megatron shuttered his optics slowly, stroked over the back of Optimus’s helm. “Very well,” he said.

Optimus’s hands clenched hard over his shoulders. “Megatron—” he started, a warning.

“I know,” he said. “Ratchet, you will need to induce stasis.”

Ratchet looked at Optimus, who was trembling now, very slightly.

“Do it!” snapped Megatron. “Or do you want to sit here and watch him try to resist the coding? It’s highly uncomfortable, medic.”

“It will pass,” said Optimus, sounding pained. “It is of no matter.”

That decided Ratchet, the strain in every line of Optimus’s frame and the desperate edge to his field. He reached for his medical kit, deciding that it would be far better to induce stasis using chemical means rather than the port again; Optimus had had enough of that particular trauma for one night. Optimus stiffened, but Megatron caught his hands and kept him distracted while Ratchet administered the injection. After a moment, he slumped, gratitude flickering through his field. Megatron lowered him to the berth and stood.

Ratchet pulled a thermal insulator over Optimus, watched him shift and murmur in recharge, and looked up at Megatron. “What are you doing?”

Megatron paused in the doorway. “Responding appropriately,” he said.

Ratchet rose. “You know the damage you will do to Optimus’s mind if you do destroy the Earth because of this?”

“Oh, I do,” said Megatron. “No, I merely wish to free Agent Fowler. I will require Ultra Magnus’s assistance.”

Ratchet’s plating bristled. “And what exactly will you be doing?”

“Discovering the correct way in which to legally make Agent Fowler a citizen of Cybertron in absentia,” said Megatron. “At that point, I will be well within my rights—even in the view of the Galactic Council—to demand his return or threaten repercussions.”

“Oh,” said Ratchet.

“Yes,” said Megatron. “Oh. Are you so surprised, medic, that I should be considerate of Optimus’s wellbeing?”

“I am still surprised that you are capable of being considerate of anyone’s wellbeing,” snapped Ratchet.

“And I suppose you think that I sparkbonded with Optimus in order to manipulate him more
effectively.” Megatron stepped closer to Ratchet and glared, field whipping with genuine anger. Ratchet didn’t budge.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” he said.

“And that I am only using him to sate my own base desires?” Megatron’s optics narrowed.

Ratchet said nothing and met his gaze, not flinching.

“The last mech to accuse me of such was Dreadwing,” said Megatron, lowering his voice. He took another step forward, fist clenching. “I snuffed him for it.”

“I am not Dreadwing,” said Ratchet, equally quietly, and moved forward. “And if you hurt him, in any way, even your precious ‘Justice’ Division will not save you.”

“You think that I would hurt him?”

“You certainly have in the past,” snarled Ratchet. “That little incident with Orion Pax ring a bell?”

Megatron seized him by the arm and pulled him out into the corridor, out of audial range of Optimus, slammed him into a bulkhead. A few passing Vehicons looked at them in surprise; a glare from Megatron sent them into alt mode and skidding around the corner.

Ratchet struggled, silent, optics blazing. Megatron shook him, baring his dentae in vicious satisfaction as Ratchet’s ventilations hitched and his pedes thumped against the wall, the knowledge of his helplessness repulsive.

Megatron leaned forward. “Do not suggest that I raped Optimus while he was in my custody,” he said, and Ratchet glared at him, flinching back against the wall. “Morality aside—you would not believe me even if I were to admit to being restrained by conscience—my proximity to Orion constituted a severe security risk, an increase in the probability that he would recover his memories.”

“And why would I believe you?”

“Optimus does,” said Megatron, and dropped him. He turned away as Ratchet regained his pedes, adding, “And he is the one I cannot lie to.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Updates are going to be slowing down again--two midterms, a cosplay gathering, a poster and a trip to grad schools are getting in the way. But rest assured, the story is far from over...

“Chief Medical Officer Ratchet informed me of what happened,” said Ultra Magnus as Megatron came out of the groundbridge. “I have assumed command of the Autobots—”

“So I expected,” said Megatron. “Optimus Prime is currently in stasis and under Ratchet’s care. Given the circumstances, I advise immediate evacuation of Outpost Omega-1, and offer the Autobots present on Earth asylum aboard the Nemesis.”

“How charming,” said Arcee, and Ultra Magnus looked down at her with an expression that promised nothing good. Arcee bristled. “What? Something bad happened to Optimus and we’re just going to trust Megatron?”

“Would you prefer to negotiate with the humans?” said Megatron.

Glares all around.

“They have attacked our Prime,” said Megatron, striding forward. “They have attacked our Prime in the basest of ways, and attacked the only human sympathetic to us, though he was of their species. They cannot be trusted, and I will not leave any Cybertronian undefended on this world.”

Wheeljack looked up at Ultra Magnus. “Whaddya know, Buckethead has a point.”

“And we should trust him why?” said Arcee.

“Perhaps because we have little other choice,” said Ultra Magnus, forestalling any further objection. “Our treaty is yet to be finalized, but Optimus put great effort into making it possible; we must have faith in his judgement.”

Megatron smiled. “Indeed. Ultra Magnus, once the evacuation is arranged, I will need to consult you on the legal protocol pertinent to making a Cybertronian citizen in absentia; in the meantime, do you have any way by which to contact the new human agent assigned to this base? There is strong reason to suspect that she was heavily involved in the attack on Optimus Prime.”

Ultra Magnus’s optic ridges drew down. “Optimus would not condone an attack on—”

“He condoned the attack on MECH,” said Megatron, “and I would not propose any action other than the perfectly legal detention of a suspect in the attack on our Prime.”

That made Ultra Magnus pause. “That would be possible,” he said, deeply suspicious. “Would I have your assurance that the suspect would be treated in accordance with all galactic treaties?”

“You would,” said Megatron. “Indeed, as this would be a matter of Cybertronian affairs, I would be pleased to offer you full supervision of all of the investigation into this incident.”
“I will consider it,” said Ultra Magnus and turned to the Autobots. “Begin evacuation procedures.”

There was surprisingly less resistance than he’d expected, only some grumbling and the Autobots filtered out of the room. Ultra Magnus turned to Megatron.

“I am inclined to doubt that it is purely a desire to see full and legal justice enacted for the outrage of our Prime that motivates you,” he said, “as your definition of justice has never before been anything but far too severe to be condoned. Why, then, this insistence on the capture and legal treatment of the human representative?”

“Because her government may be willing to exchange her for Agent Fowler,” said Megatron.

“And why would that human’s freedom matter so much to you?”

“Because he knows—and is far more likely to tell us—exactly what they have done to Optimus Prime, and by learning that, we may repair the damage that has been done to Optimus,” said Megatron, and bared his dentae in what was certainly not a grin. “As for the lack of true retaliation, the only thing that prevents me from recalling the Justice Division and allowing them to wreak devastation on this world is that doing so would wreak similar devastation on Optimus Prime’s mind, and such injury to my bonded I will not tolerate.”

The expression of surprise on Ultra Magnus’s face was deeply amusing, but Megatron was not in the mood for a repeat of the lecture he’d had from Ratchet. “Is that reason enough, Ultra Magnus?”

“It seems logical enough.” Ultra Magnus looked away, then added, “We may be able to detain Agent Mearing without a warrant for one of this planet’s rotations, no more. Have you any evidence—”

“We will only need one rotation,” said Megatron. “Though, if the prisoner exchange takes longer than that, we should have the necessary evidence long before the grace period is over.”

“While it is acceptable in all technicality, in terms of the usual ethics associated with the justice system, this is dubious in the extreme—”

Megatron turned on him, snarling, “And where does the human use of slave coding fall? Are we simply to forgive them the rape and enslavement and torture of our Prime, of Decepticon and Autobot alike? This is no time for your bureaucracy, your tedious paperwork, Ultra Magnus; were it not for the tenuous state of our treaty I would indeed attack the humans and take what information I require.” He stopped, venting hard; Ultra Magnus was looking at him with a flat, unimpressed regard.

“I did not say that I refused to participate,” said Ultra Magnus. “I merely wish to keep a close watch on the proceedings to ensure that no abuses of power occur.”

To Megatron’s disdainful surprise, the human fell for it. But Soundwave was nothing if not competent, and the composite soundfile telling the human in Optimus’s voice that the task had been accomplished brought her to the Autobot base with satisfying speed.

It was Ultra Magnus who made the actual arrest, and the look of utter shock on the human’s face went a long way toward mollifying Megatron that he could not rip it to shreds for its role in Optimus’s imprisonment and humiliation.
Besides, it was useful. And he had a plan that would not even upset Optimus. That, at least, was a pleasing thought. Instructing Ultra Magnus to keep a close watch on the interaction, he stepped into the repurposed interrogation chamber they’d let the human loose in.

The human in question was sitting on an empty energon cube, trying to project calm assurance and succeeding remarkably well given the circumstances. She rose when Megatron stepped in, an icy human courtesy that was rather amusing.

“I demand an explanation for what’s going on!”

“This is an investigation into the attack on Optimus Prime,” said Megatron, “though we will drop all charges and abort the investigation if the damage done to Optimus is reversed. I believe you are capable of assisting us in lifting the order he is operating under to enslave me.”

“Even if I could, I wouldn’t.”

“Agreement would be far more profitable for you.”

“The United States does not negotiate with terrorists,” said Mearing, folding her arms and glaring up at Megatron. He had to give the human credit for courage—or stupidity—but sheer audacity hardly ever saved anyone.

“Oh, but we’re not terrorists, Agent Mearing.” He grinned down at her. “Last I checked, I was listed as the head of state of a hostile power, and we have yet to attack any civilian installation. You are, after all, a member of your nation’s military.”

“Get on with it.”

“I want a favor from you,” said Megatron. “Lift the order on Optimus Prime commanding him to transmit the slave coding to me. Once that has been done, you will be free to go.”

“What makes you think I can do that?”

“General Bryce sent you here, did he not? No master likes his slave going unsupervised.”

“I suppose you’d know that from experience.”

Megatron stilled the impulse to crush the creature in front of him, simply said, “I do.”

The human flinched.

“Lift the order on Optimus Prime,” he said again.

“No.” She smirked. “Why should I? You said yourself, you can’t do anything to Earth because Optimus would be devastated if you harmed any human on his behalf.”

“That is certainly true,” said Megatron. “And would be relevant if I had any intention of harming humans. I do not. All I propose is a select...relocation of certain primitive explosives. Your nation appears quite fond of crude nuclear weaponry, after all. I wonder, what would happen if it were to mysteriously disappear?” His grin widened as Mearing’s vanished. “All of it. I believe Optimus is quite fond of disarmament on general principles.” He paused for effect, then added, “And if you try my patience too sorely, I will consider risking my Prime’s wrath and relocate some of it into the hands of those charming people who believe that they are also in the middle of a religious war with you. After all, I’m only a simple gladiator. How was I to know how delicate your political situation was?”
“You wouldn’t.”

“You may certainly tell yourself that, Agent Mearing.” The grin widened. “But do you really want to take the risk that you are wrong?”

Mearing looked away.

“You have two of your hours to decide,” said Megatron. “It will take at least that long to modify our groundbridge so that we can be sure not to set off any of said primitive explosives. I eagerly anticipate our next conversation.”
He met Ultra Magnus in the corridor.

“While your inventiveness is to be praised, I do not think that the confiscation of weapons from a pre-spaceflight society is acceptable under the terms of—”

“I am fully within my rights to take non-violent countermeasures against a species holding a Cybertronian citizen prisoner,” said Megatron. “Besides, we must make our next move.”

“I still do not understand how you intend to persuade the human government to participate in a prisoner exchange,” said Ultra Magnus. “This particular government is well known for being unwilling to negotiate.”

“While I fully intend to complete a prisoner exchange,” said Megatron, “it will not necessarily be with the humans’ approval. Soundwave is remarkably adept at tracing their transmissions; all I will require is certain knowledge of where Agent Fowler is being held.”

Ultra Magnus reset his vocalizer uncomfortably. “Speaking of Agent Fowler, the papers pertaining to his citizenship are...as complete as they will be, given that he is lacking in several categories—alt mode, spark frequency and so on.”

“There is no need to so inform the humans,” said Megatron. “At this point, they will doubtless have noticed Agent Mearing’s disappearance. All that remains is to inform them of her location, and of our terms.” He glanced at Ultra Magnus who had, as always, looked as interested as a statue. “But do not mistake this for anything but a rescue, Ultra Magnus—I do not intend to allow the humans to delay this any more than it already has been.”

“Understood.”

Had Megatron been in a more reflective mood, he would have found it deeply amusing that Ultra Magnus was the easiest of the Autobots to persuade. However, under the circumstances, it was anything but.

“You’re joking,” said Arcee flatly, favoring Megatron with a suspicious gaze.

“I am not,” said Megatron. “Do you want to save your human friend, Arcee? I can assure you that his compatriots are unlikely to be treating him well. I require your assistance for this.”

Arcee made a dismissive noise. “And why exactly would you be so fixated on rescuing Agent Fowler?”

Megatron ex-vented heavily and wished with all of his spark that he could simply beat the slag out of the lot of them, as he would have with similarly recalcitrant Decepticons. How in the name of Unicron did Optimus manage this lot without going utterly mad? But no, Autobots required
explanations and more explanations and assurances…!

He gritted his dentae. “Do you wish Optimus Prime to recover or not?”

Arcee folded her arms and glared. “I don’t follow.”

Megatron made no attempt to conceal his irritation. “Agent Fowler is far more likely to tell us exactly what happened to Optimus than the other human agent,” he pointed out. “Besides, given Optimus’s nature, it is quite likely that the rescue of Agent Fowler will do a great deal to improve his emotional state.”

Arcee gave him a deeply skeptical look. “You expect me to believe that you’re doing all this purely out of concern for Optimus?”

“We are sparkbonded,” Megatron pointed out, almost a growl.

His response was a deeply suspicious look. “Yeah, that’s a whole smelting pit I’m not gonna touch,” said Arcee. “Look, just because you’ve somehow managed to charm Optimus—”

Megatron somehow did not slag her. Instead, he let out a huff of air, gathered his field in as much as he could, and walked past her. He would find an alternative.

Small fingers touched his arm. He spun, hand clenching into a fist—

—and Arcee looked up at him, her field gone abruptly small and apologetic though still angry. “Fine,” she said, and her tone was forced. With a start of rage he realized she must have brushed his field, felt his distress, and yes, there was pity there in hers, too.

“Fine,” she said again. “I’ll do it. For Optimus, not you.”

“Good,” he spat, the pity too galling for anything else, and with the tersest of instructions, left her.

At least he could expend some of his vitriol during his next chore. Soundwave already waited for him; he had managed to track down General Bryce’s contact information. Though human communications were still primitive, they appeared to have some rudimentary ability with visual communications, and Megatron required a visual feed for this particular project. Only if Agent Fowler were present would it be worthwhile to trace the origin point of the call and send a groundbridge there.

But first, General Bryce needed to be apprised of the situation. And just how dire it was for him and his masters. Megatron bared his dentae, vicious angry satisfaction rippling through his field. No matter how the humans had harmed Optimus, at least, in this way, he might wreak revenge on them. General Bryce would regret this for the rest of his pitifully short lifespan. If Megatron could not destroy him, he would at least make a laughingstock of him among his species.

Soundwave politely made no acknowledgement of Megatron's field when he entered the bridge, merely inclining his helm, data cables splayed over the ports on the workstation—something that would have been considered borderline-indecent on Cybertron, even if the bot and cables in question were engaged in strictly practical matters. There was a reason that the upper-class archival models interacted with the data they'd processed through less direct methods than a hardline connection; only the lowest data-processing bots used modified cables.

"How soon will the human weapon be aboard?" Megatron asked, and Soundwave flicked a diagram of its progress onto his visor. Megatron nodded, pleased. "Good," he said. "We will contact the human general when it arrives. No sooner."
Soundwave inclined his helm.

A commotion at the bridge doors made both mechs turn. A party of Vehicons gingerly maneuvered a large explosive through the doors—it was a wonder that the humans could manage such sizable objects. One of the Vehicons turned a questioning field at Megatron. "Where should this be placed, my lord?"

Megatron directed them to put it well within the camera's pickup, and ordered them about their duties. He wasn't overly concerned about the explosive; it was human-made, and what humans termed a big explosion tended to be less than impressive—even without the consideration that varieties of radiation they enjoyed dropping on each other were far less harmful to Cybertronians. After all, what they termed seriously hazardous waste amounted to little more than mildly inebriating sweets to the average bot.

That said, he did not particularly relish the idea of leaving a primitive explosive near the bridge of the Nemesis for any longer than was strictly necessary.

"Open the channel," he said.

The main screen flickered, the view of Earth replaced by General Bryce's face, hardly an improvement. "Your mom and I are very proud of you, honey," he was saying, all smitten cheer. "Take care, okay? Don't do anything I wouldn't do--"

He broke off. And stared.

"Good evening, General Bryce," said Megatron, with a vicious smile. "I have something to discuss with you."

"How the hell did you get this info?" Bryce's voice reached a pitch that Megatron was under the impression that it was very rare for a male human voice to attain. Even with the differences between their species, he could tell that the human was exceedingly distressed by his sudden appearance.

"I have my methods," he said, allowing dark amusement to color his voice. "As you, apparently, have yours. We have discovered what you did to Optimus Prime. Rest assured, we are working on a remedy."

Bryce made a visible effort to collect himself. "It was necessary," he said.

"And why would that be, General Bryce?" Megatron tilted his helm to one side, regarding Bryce intently. "Optimus Prime's fondness for organics, while deeply vexing to me, is a quality that your species might at least appreciate."

"His alliance with you indicates otherwise," said Bryce.

"Does it?" Megatron bared his dentae. "Let me explain the situation more clearly for you, General Bryce. We have found the slave coding present in Optimus Prime's systems. Agent Mearing is under arrest and awaiting trial for complicity in assault on the person of a Prime, the traditional punishment for which is empurata—the removal and replacement of the head and hands, a process that I am assured that organics find lethal. The punishment for those more...directly...involved is of course far more extreme."

"Barbaric," said Bryce.

"You speak to me of barbarism, General Bryce? Recall what you have done to my mate. That is a barbarism I will not readily forgive. Or forget. My terms are as such: I will speak with you again in
two hours time to negotiate the exchange of Agent Mearing for Agent Fowler, whom I have cause to believe is not, in fact, on extended leave. I will want to see Agent Fowler to ascertain whether he is, in fact, alive; you will use this same method to contact me."

"The United States does not negotiate with terrorists," said General Bryce.

"Your grasp of your own language leaves something to be desired, General Bryce. I am the head of state of a hostile power, and Agent Fowler is, as of this morning, a Cybertronian citizen--in other words, I have the full legal right to demand his return."

"What 'full legal right'?!" demanded Bryce. "You're robots. Machines. There's nothing in any legislation passed in this country about you having rights. You can't violate human rights if you're not human. It's just reprogramming."

The human's words froze Megatron where he was, a flash of memory, Optimus trusting and loving around him, arcs of charge between their sparks, pleasure secondary to his presence--

--sudden echo of pain, terror, humiliation, a horrible blankness as Optimus closed the bond, the horrible dread, was he offline, no, no it couldn't be--

He narrowed his optics at the screen, the foolish little human with his foolish little presumptions. "You speak as if you would indeed like to have your planet destroyed, General Bryce," he purred, leaning in toward the screen. "While Optimus forbids me to oblige you, I can of course make some concessions." He stepped to the side, allowing the video pickup to see the crude human weapon currently occupying the bridge.

Bryce in-vented harshly.

"I see you recognize this," said Megatron. "Good. I give you a choice--as Optimus is so fond of doing--between cooperation and complete nuclear disarmament. You will contact me in two of your hours. Agent Fowler will be present, and I will speak with him."

"What about Agent Mearing?"

"Your human agent will be returned, as long as Agent Fowler is present at the required time. If she is not, I will relieve you of her as well as your crude weapons." Megatron cut the channel.

Now that was settled, he could attend to other matters--such as Agent Mearing herself.

She was still sitting on top of the empty cube, and Megatron noted with some amusement that it was probably because she was too short to climb off. Given what she'd been complicit in, his conscience was not much exercised.

"Agent Mearing," he said. "Have you reached a decision?"

"It wasn't as if I had much of a choice," she said, and turned what was probably supposed to be a threatening glare up at him.

"That was my intention," said Megatron, and smirked. "So you will cooperate?"

She nodded, and he bent and offered her a hand to climb onto. "He will be in the medical bay. Do not attempt to double cross me, Agent Mearing. It will be unsuccessful; unlike Optimus, I am no stranger to treachery."

"So I've gathered," said Mearing, and climbed onto his palm, wobbling as she stood.
Which was when Arcee commed him. "Hate to bother you," she said, anything but regretful, "but what are we supposed to do with the kids?"

"The kids?" said Megatron, caught off guard.

"Yeah, the kids. The 'human pets', as you so charmingly term them. They need to be picked up from school."

Megatron ex-vented heavily. "Bring them aboard if you must. Only ensure that they behave themselves. And stay out from underfoot."

"Kids?" said Mearing.

"Concern yourself with Optimus Prime's well being," said Megatron, "not internal Cybertronian affairs."

"I fail to see how human children here is a matter of 'internal Cybertronian affairs'," said Mearing, but he didn't respond, turning the corner and pinging Ratchet to make sure Optimus was conscious when they arrived.

Optimus was in fact conscious when they arrived, though still groggy. He smiled a little when he saw Megatron, a small sweet smile that did not belong on a bot with that much mass. He tried to rise, found he couldn't, as Ratchet had seen fit to restrain him. An intelligent precaution.

"Lift the orders," said Megatron.

Mearing hesitated, then reset her vocalizer. "You do not need to transfer the coding to Megatron," she said, sounding as if she regretted each and every word. She glanced up at Megatron, who gestured for her to continue. "And I rescind every order I have given you."

Megatron pointedly raised his optic ridges. Mearing sighed heavily and said, "And every order you've been given."

"Your cooperation is appreciated," said Megatron and deposited the human on an instrument tray, where she sat down abruptly and tried to look as if it was intentional. Megatron ignored her, releasing Optimus's restraints and taking his hand. "I will be back shortly," he said. "I am negotiating Agent Fowler's release."

Optimus shuttered his optics a few times. "Agent Mearing is unharmed?" he asked, concern flooding his field.

"I did nothing that you would object to," Megatron assured him. He patted Optimus's hand, not wanting to show more affection than that in front of the human, and rose. "Rest, Optimus. I will return shortly."

Optimus smiled again, his optics offlining as he did. Megatron gathered up a subdued Mearing and started toward the bridge again.

"You know that there will be repercussions from this," she said at last.

"There are always repercussions," said Megatron.

For Optimus's sake, he would risk any and all of them.
Chapter End Notes

Sorry for slow updates, everyone. A combination of midterms and a trip to visit grad schools entirely ate my life. Thanks for being patient!

Also I apologize for any typos that I didn't catch; I wrote most of this on the plane on a tablet keyboard, which I'm really not as good on!
Chapter 12

Bryce had been sufficiently cowed by the threat, and he made contact at exactly the time Megatron had ordered, and Agent Fowler, thinner and much the worse for wear, was with him.

“Good afternoon, Agent Fowler,” said Megatron, deliberately ignoring Bryce for the time being. “I trust you have been treated well.” Now he did look at Bryce, the threat apparent.

“Won’t be recommending the service any time soon, but I’m alright,” said Fowler.

“Good,” said Megatron, and lifted Mearing into the video pickup. “Agent Mearing, too, is unharmed.”

“And how do we know that you will return Agent Mearing if we fulfill your demands?” General Bryce glanced over his shoulder at Fowler, who stared steadily back.

Megatron bared his dentae, something he knew unsettled the human badly. “You might have thought of that before you decided to provoke me, human,” he said. “You will cooperate with my demands; I do, after all, have the upper hand.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” said Bryce. “You seem pretty desperate to obtain Agent Fowler. He must be of considerable value to you.”

Megatron snorted. “Hardly more than sentimental. My mate requests his return.”

The human was trying to look shrewd. He did a far worse job of it than Starscream ever did. “I doubt that’s all to it.”

“Very well,” said Megatron. “He is my consort’s ally, and therefore mine, and therefore under my protection, and I will have him back.” Behind him, well out of the visual pickup, he heard a groundbridge activate. Time to keep the human distracted. “All of Optimus Prime’s allies are now under my protection, and his enemies are my enemies. He is my sparkbonded, my closest ally, and will be the sire of my sparklings,” he had the satisfaction of watching the human’s expression go horrified and disgusted, “and we are joined until the Allspark takes us or the universe itself ends, no less. Think of the destruction we have wrought upon our own world, and imagine what we might do to yours should we find the occasion. You were a fool to provoke us, General Bryce, and one way or another, you shall suffer the consequences.”

General Bryce tried to compose himself, completely oblivious to the sudden increase of green light in the little room; Megatron’s speech had drowned out the sound of the groundbridge opening. “Was that a declaration of hostile intent?”

Megatron watched Arcee come into view, moving surprisingly silently. “You moved past mere declarations long ago. Take this as a...demonstration.”

“What?”

And pandemonium erupted behind Bryce. Arcee scooped up Fowler, and sheltering him with her frame dove back through the groundbridge, bullets pinging off her armor. Soundwave picked Mearing out of Megatron’s palm with a cable and sent her through the groundbridge as Arcee and Fowler emerged; Megatron didn’t particularly mind if the human was shot by her own allies, but she seemed well enough from what the human camera displayed just before he closed the channel.
Arcee set Agent Fowler down very carefully and looked pointedly at Ultra Magnus, not Megatron. “Now what?”

Agent Fowler wobbled, looked up at the bots, and, also addressing Ultra Magnus, “What in the name of Uncle Sam’s trousers just happened?”

“A rescue,” said Megatron and bent to better look at the human. “Welcome aboard the Nemesis. I will have questions for you later.” He straightened up. “Determine if he is unharmed,” he said, and left the bridge.

June Darby had been home for less than an hour when there was the sound of an engine and a honk that managed to be at once polite and inquisitive. She looked up from the weeding.

There was a Vehicon parked outside her house, and as she watched, it shrugged open a door. “Nurse Darby? Lord Megatron and Optimus Prime request your presence and medical services.”

“Where’s Arcee?” Then, as the request sank in, “Is one of the kids hurt?”

“The children are perfectly well,” said the Vehicon. “Lord Megatron simply wishes you to determine if Agent Fowler sustained any injuries during his absence.”

“Bill’s back?” She put the trowel down and stood, brushing off her jeans. The door stayed open.

“There are also matters he wishes you to be advised of,” said the Vehicon. “I’ll explain on the way.”

June hesitated. Getting into a strange car—much less a strange car she knew was a member of the army of a brutal alien warlord—went against every bit of common sense she possessed.

“You’ll want your medical kit,” the Vehicon suggested, sounding as if it was trying to be helpful, and shifted its weight on its wheels. “Please hurry, Nurse Darby. I’d like to get back to the warship. I’m almost off duty.”

“Uh. Okay,” June said and headed inside, calling Jack as she went. “Jack?”

“Hi Mom,” said Jack. “Uh, I can explain.”

That sounded suspicious as hell. “Why is there a Decepticon outside my house saying Megatron wants to see me?”

“It’s really complicated, Mom,” said Jack, “but weird as it sounds, you should probably go with him. Arcee’s kinda busy right now.” In the background, Arcee’s voice rose, quickly drowned out by Ratchet’s, Ratchet’s distinctively raised in the universal if you didn’t wiggle this wouldn’t hurt so much! tone known to medics and parents everywhere. “I’ll see you there, okay?” He hung up.

Well, that was less than helpful. June debated calling him again—the fact that Ratchet was arguing with Arcee was a pretty sure indication that whatever injury she had sustained was fairly minor, and Jack had little excuse to be so abrupt—but decided not to. Both Jack and the Decepticon currently edging nervously up her driveway seemed to agree that the current situation was ‘complicated’, and it seemed like she was going to get no explanation whatsoever until she went in person.

She picked up the family first-aid kit, rather better stocked than the average first-aid kit but still not quite what she might have wished for, and tucked a can of pepper spray into her purse. She thought
for a few seconds, then took a knife from the kitchen for good measure. Then she stepped out into the garage.

The Decepticon seemed to relax and flicked a door open again. The passenger side door, June noted, and hesitated.

“Please hurry,” it said.

This was the dumbest thing she’d done in a long, long time and that included releasing all those *Drosophila* in the RA’s room freshman year. June climbed in, felt the seat move under her, a nervous shift, and the door thumped shut. The Decepticon shuddered slightly as she fastened her seatbelt.

It probably disliked this as much as she did. “I do have a car if you’d prefer me to follow you,” she said after a moment, not sure what constituted polite in giant robot circles.

The Decepticon began edging down the driveway. “It’s okay,” it said. She supposed the voice sounded kind of male, but she didn’t want to make assumptions. “It’s just weird. Really, really weird. I don’t understand how the Autobots do this all the time.”

June sat very still. “Just tell me if I do anything that makes you uncomfortable, alright?”

“Thanks,” it said. It started down the street at a sedate pace totally at odds with its general appearance.

“So, uh,” June started, unsure of how to start a conversation with something that, she was pretty certain, had probably shot at her son at some point. “What’s your name?” She winced at her own tone—it was obvious that she’d said it just for the sake of having something to say.

“Tailspin,” said the Decepticon and slowed slightly so a little old lady driving a Prius could merge into their lane and then into the appropriate exit.

“So, what’s going on, Tailspin?”

“Er.” Tailspin sped past the exit to the base. “Well, it started two rotations ago—”

“What’s a rotation?”

Pause. Then, “Nights?” in a very tentative tone.

“Ah. Okay.”

“Lord Megatron found slave coding on Prime,” said Tailspin. “We think it came from the humans. At the same time Agent Fowler went on that ‘extended leave’. We knew they’d tried to slave code Prime but all the scans came up negative, apparently, and Lord Megatron—no, I really don’t want to ask how—figured out that he was carrying it and was ordered to code him. So the Autobot base has been evacuated and all units have been recalled to the *Nemesis*, and Megatron seems to think that Agent Fowler is the key to removing the slave coding. So he’s aboard the ship too, and Lord Megatron wants another human medic to check him over and make sure that the other humans didn’t injure him while he was a prisoner.”

“I thought you said he was on leave!” said June, alarmed.

“We thought he was on leave,” said Tailspin, “but Lord Megatron was suspicious that the humans’ treachery would have affected Optimus’s human friend as well. He was correct.”
June realized she’d pressed a hand to her mouth. She lowered it. “So the kids are on the warship?”

“Yes,” said Tailspin. A pause. “That is the human word for sparklings, am I correct?”

“Sparklings?”

“Juveniles?”

“Oh. Yes. Yes I guess they are.”

“Oh. Is one of the ones involved with the Autobots your progeny?”

“Yes,” said June, feeling that the conversation had suddenly gotten away from her, but Tailspin’s tone had shifted very interested indeed. “Jack.”

Tailspin turned down a dirt road off the highway. There was a long pause. Then, “Do...do you have any advice on raising sparklings?”

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Optimus drifted back to consciousness with a mixture of faint worry and satisfaction, and a small voice in his audial that was somehow both alien and comforting. He onlined his optics, the dim purple lights of the Nemesis’s medical bay creating a confusion of light and shadow that his optics found difficult to process.

“Optimus?” said the little voice. “Ratchet said you should be awake.”

He turned his helm to look at the instrument tray by the berth, recognizing its occupant with a start of delight. “Agent Fowler, it is good to see you unharmed.”

“Good to see you too, big guy,” said Fowler, and shifted his weight. “You holding up okay?”

“As well as is to be expected,” said Optimus.

Agent Fowler ex-vented heavily. “Good.”

They were silent for a while.

“I’m sorry,” said Fowler. “I should have realized that it was a trap sooner.”

“Do not apologize, Agent Fowler,” said Optimus. “I failed to protect you.”

Fowler snorted. “And how exactly were you supposed to do that?” he asked. “They were human; we both know how much of a disconnect there is between the body language of our species. I was the one who should have been watching out for it.”

“But they were your comrades,” Optimus pointed out quietly. “Do not blame yourself for their treachery.”

Fowler looked down at his hands. “Never pegged Bryce for an extremist.”

Another long pause.

“In every sentient species,” said Optimus at last, “there are those like Silas and Johnson; supremely
selfish creatures who care not for the damage they do. Sometimes, they take active pleasure in it, in
the torment of others, and do not believe themselves accountable for the pain they cause. They
hunger for power and comfort and little else. And in every sentient species, there are those who
devote themselves to a cause far higher than themselves, higher than frame or processor or very
spark.”

He was silent for a long time, “Of the two, it is the latter that become the true monsters. So it is that
General Bryce saw fit to betray you. So it is that Megatron and I became the greatest butchers our
species had ever seen. For when forced to deeds that threaten their very selves, the selfish beings turn
back, and walk a path of lesser evil. The others plunge onward, believing themselves so utterly in the
right that their sparks are a small price to pay.”

Fowler was still looking down at his lap. After a while, he said, “Where are you guys going to go,
then? You can’t really go back to Cybertron, right?”

“Not in the foreseeable future, no,” said Optimus. “The relics listed in the Iacon database have given
me some hope—the Forge of Solus Prime among them, but it will take time, and the risks entailed in
recovering them are high indeed. I do not wish any other Cybertronian to fall victim to this new
human weapon.”

“We have Soundwave, don’t we?” said Fowler. “And my knowledge may be out of date but I can
probably advise you about places to avoid.”


“All I can do,” said Fowler. “The kids have been asking after you, by the way. Thought I should
warn you before they actually show up. We both know how Miko can be.”

Optimus found himself smiling slightly. “Indeed we do,” he said. “I will look forward to it.”

They talked quietly, until one of the Vehicons, Tailspin, if Optimus was correct, entered, talking
with a human cupped carefully in his hands. “...and Crankshaft is mad as a scraplet, because he’s
almost as picky about his paint as Knockout is and he and his team were covered all over in organic
chemicals.”

“Pesticides,” supplied the human, and Optimus recognized Nurse Darby’s voice. So did Agent
Fowler, by the way he started up and stared. “They’re supposed to keep certain types of organic life
off of the organisms humans use for fuel. Crankshaft got buzzed by a crop duster.”

Tailspin snickered, then paused, inclined his helm to Optimus. “Optimus Prime, it’s good to see you
awake.”

“It is good to see you again as well, Tailspin,” said Optimus. “How is Lightwing?”

“Gripping about being unable to fly more than local patrols but otherwise quite well,” said Tailspin.
“Agent Fowler, Lord Megatron would like to speak to you soon, after Nurse Darby determines
whether you require medical treatment. She informs me that privacy is culturally required for this
procedure?”

Agent Fowler nodded, and Tailspin lowered his hands to the instrument tray to allow him to step into
them. “Ratchet will be along shortly to see you,” he said to Optimus and hesitated, clearly wondering
if he ought to ‘sir’ him or not.

“There is no need to use any form of address you find unpleasant,” Optimus said.
“Thank you, my Prime,” said Tailspin, obviously relieved, though Optimus wished he wouldn’t find the higher formality necessary.

After they left, he stared up at the darkened ceiling until the sound of hesitant pedes pulled him from his near-doze.

“I’m sorry, Optimus,” said Ratchet’s voice, very quiet.

“There is no need to apologize, old friend,” said Optimus. “I did all I could to hide it from you.”

A huff of vents. “I should have kept looking. I shouldn’t have been so quick to blame it on trauma. Optimus, I have failed you in ways—” His voice broke, and he had to reset his vocalizer several times before he continued, “in ways that should have been unimaginable. Can you ever forgive me?”

“On the contrary, old friend, I do not see what there is to be forgiven,” said Optimus, Ratchet’s misery making his spark hurt. It was bad enough he had been injured; that Ratchet should blame himself was horrifying. “How could you have cured me of something you did not know was possible? Do not treat yourself so harshly.”

And while Ratchet managed a wan smile, Optimus knew that his guilt would not be assuaged by anything he could say, and found it difficult to meet his optics. He was the cause of this, and it hurt to know that.

It was much later when Megatron came for him, uncharacteristically subdued. “Agent Fowler knew little more than what we have managed to piece together,” he said. “This is no more than a minor setback; we shall redouble our efforts to free you.”

“Megatron,” said Optimus, raising a hand to his helm, “you have already done far more than I had hoped was possible.”

Megatron turned his helm away with a snort of derision. “Then your expectations were low indeed, Optimus. This should not have been permitted to happen in the first place. We have said again and again and yet again that we shall not allow this to happen to any Cybertronian, and then the universe makes mockery of our vow. Earth remains intact only because you will it, Optimus, and I think it a great error.” His hand clenched on the side of the berth, claws gouging curls of metal from the rough surface. “Give me the word, and I shall ensure that these creatures never again threaten us. The humans you care for are all aboard; they will not be harmed. Give me the word, and I shall send Unicron’s spawn back to the Pit.”

“Megatron,” said Optimus, “you know as well as I that the majority of the population of Earth is innocent of this crime. I will not murder a species for the crime of a few of its members, members only associated with a single one of its factions.”

“You have said that before.” Megatron’s voice went rough. “And yet here we are, and you tell me I cannot even seek revenge for your sake?”

“I do not wish revenge,” said Optimus, and looked down at his hands, the unspoken accusation painful. If he had somehow acted more decisively, been more willing to eliminate MECH, none of this would have happened. Tailspin would not hesitate before saying ‘sir’. Knockout would not pace in the night and flinch when Breakdown’s name was mentioned. Agent Fowler would not have been
betrayed by those he served. Ratchet would not be tormented by his own guilt. Megatron…

He looked up at Megatron, felt his field thick with helpless anger, and found it impossible to meet his optics.

“Optimus.” Megatron’s hand on his shoulder. “Stop this.” An irritated huff of vents. “You always find a way to blame yourself. Look at me, Optimus.”

Optimus forced himself to turn his helm, and Megatron’s hand cupped around his face and brought it up to his.

“The humans have done this,” he said. “Not you. Do not blame yourself for this, Optimus Prime. It is foolish. Do you understand me?”

Optimus leaned into the touch, optics half-shuttered. Part of him desperately wanted to believe Megatron. The rest knew it wasn’t true.

“Optimus.” The press of a helm against his own. “Optimus, slagging listen. It is bad enough the humans have brought you to this. Do not help them!”

Optimus drew a shaking ventilation, clinging to Megatron’s words.

Megatron stayed where he was for some time, his voice a quiet rumble. “There is the matter of accommodations. If you wish it, I can provide you with separate quarters. Mine are, of course, always open to you.”

“I—” It was hard to say. He had been keeping secrets too long. “I do not want to be alone,” he said, and the simple blessing of being able to tell the truth, being able to hold Megatron without the insidious press of the coding, made the world bearable again.

Megatron was pulled out of recharge in the depths of ship’s night by Optimus making some small noise and pushing against him. Megatron obligingly moved away, onlined his optics and pushed his field out, projecting comfort and assurance.

And frowned when it came up against Optimus’s field, dim with recharge, and filled with sickening fear and humiliation. Optimus’s face was turned toward him, mouth moving soundlessly; he struggled weakly.

Megatron reached out and shook him, hard. Optimus’s optics snapped online, blank frightened incomprehension fading to relief.

Megatron pulsed comfort and understanding. “You were dreaming.”

Optimus let out a long, shuddering ventilation. “I am sorry.” He reached for Megatron, as if he needed assurance that he was really there, and Megatron leaned into the touch, didn’t move otherwise.

“Don’t apologize,” he said. “Do you wish me to remain?”

“Please.”
Recharge was long in returning, and long after Optimus had drifted back into rest, pressed tightly against Megatron, helm tucked in the crook of Megatron’s neck, Megatron lay staring awake into the darkness.

Whatever victories he might win over the humans were useless. No revenge, nothing in his power, would save Optimus from his nightmares.

The next day brought a perfectly delightful afternoon in the laboratory—though it was a new, strange laboratory—which was completely ruined when Knockout came in and pointedly reset his vocalizer. “Ratchet, a moment?”

Ratchet turned to look at him. He seemed uncharacteristically nervous. “What is it?”

“About sparklings…”

“Yes?” Ratchet’s optics narrowed. He resigned himself to a considerable waste of time. Knockout was never concise.

“How much time off duty would carrying require?”

“Very little until the last tenth of gestation,” said Ratchet. “Why?”

Knockout shifted from pede to pede and looked nervous. “Starscream and I were...discussing…”

“Oh,” said Ratchet and stared at his junior colleague. “You want to spark? With Starscream?”

“What can I say, he has wonderful paint,” said Knockout.

“A simple ‘yes, Ratchet’ would have sufficed,” said Ratchet, and turned away. “Isn’t it somewhat early to be thinking of such things?”

Knockout snorted. “Well, it’s the question of the hour, isn’t it? Suddenly two Eradicons spark, everyone wants to try it for themselves. Don’t tell me you’ve not had anyone come through to have their gestational systems checked! It wasn’t even a full day after we reported to Megatron that he turned back up in here for a thorough exam. Even took his inoculation with the minimum of complaint.”

Ratchet thought about that a moment, and made a mental note to drag Optimus in to get his systems examined as soon as possible as well.

“Besides,” Knockout was saying, “sparklings would be very far indeed in the future for us. Very, very far. Neither of us is ready to even...nevermind.”

Ratchet carefully didn’t look at him. Anxiety had flickered through the other medic’s field, powerful and edged with grief.

“How does Starscream fare?”

“A lot more stable than before,” said Knockout. “Having someone around seems to help, and he’s happy with transforming again. Other things are coming more slowly, but they are coming. I think. It’s hard to tell.”
Ratchet ex-vented heavily. “It always is.”

And his comm came to life. “Optimus has collapsed,” said Megatron. “I require immediate medical assistance.”
Chapter 13

“What happened?”

“Optimus collapsed,” said Ratchet, already reaching for the portable medical kit.


“May adversely affect his autonomic neural net,” said Ratchet, closing the kit and lifting. “It’s impossible to tell the extent to which it will have stimulated it, and there are no data on the effects of long-term stimulation of the autonomic systems.” He paused.

“I’ll come with you,” said Knockout. Ratchet gave him a long, suspicious look, and he shrugged. “What? You may require a second pair of hands, and I know how to deal with Lord Megatron when he’s upset. Besides, two processors are better than one.”

Ratchet huffed. “I have no time to argue with you,” he said and made for the door. Knockout grabbed his own kit and followed.

They found them at Optimus’s workstation, Megatron cradling Optimus’s frame closely, having apparently caught him as he fell. He pulled his field in tightly as they entered the room, but Ratchet caught a ghost of entirely sincere fear in it.

“Did he display any abnormal symptoms before the attack?” Ratchet demanded, scanning Optimus. Just as he’d feared. Degradation of the the neural net, damage that rightly should have been on a much older bot.

“He simply collapsed,” said Megatron, and met Ratchet’s optics, the tiniest flash of uncertainty in his expression. “What happened?”

“It’s the slave code, and no, I don’t know how to fix it,” said Ratchet. “We might be able to buy ourselves some time if I forcibly re-categorize some of his coding from his autonomic subprocessor to the somatic processor, but it won’t take the burden off his autonomic net as much as it should. He should reboot in a few minutes.”

“I asked a question, medic,” snapped Megatron, hands tightening over Optimus’s shoulders and this time it was definite, desperation and uncertainty under the anger. “What happened to him?”

“The coding is affecting his autonomic neural net,” said Ratchet. “Usually, this neural net and the subprocessor associated with it only controls involuntary functions. By introducing a slave code into his autonomic coding, the humans have transferred the bulk of his voluntary actions to it, and the stress of prolonged firing is causing damage.”

“My scan agrees with Ratchet’s,” said Knockout. “And he’s right. There’s not much we can do until remove the code—difficult, as it’s proving a real puzzle even for Bumblebee’s favorite human, and Shockwave—save reroute what functions we can and, if all else fails, put him into stasis. Neither will halt the degradation, but will slow it significantly.”
Megatron looked at Optimus, optic ridges drawing down. “And the end result?”

“If we don’t find a treatment?” Ratchet and Knockout looked at each other.

It was Ratchet who said at last, “It is likely to be fatal.”

His own spark twisted at that. After all these eons, this is how I lose you, Optimus? To the foolishness of humans?

Megatron’s field flared out, rage and devastation. “If he dies, Earth will pay,” he snarled. “There are many, many ways to end a world while leaving its structure intact. The spawn of Unicron shall pay for their crimes.”

Optimus took an abrupt in-vent and his optics flickered open, wise and confused. His battlemask slid into place, and as Megatron leaned over him he wrenched free and scrambled to his pedes, battle protocols onlining with a whine. Megatron came upright as well, took a step back.

“One shall stand—”

“Optimus, no!” Ratchet caught him by the arm as he brought out his ion cannon, wrenched it down. Optimus turned to look at him, shock roiling in his field. “Optimus, it’s me, you’re safe. You are not fighting Megatron!”

Incredibly blue optics shuttered, once, twice, and then Optimus’s battle systems powered down, the mask retracted. “Ratchet?”

“Yes!” said Ratchet, who hadn’t a slaging clue what had gone wrong now and was really, really disturbed. “Optimus, look at me—no, not over there they’re not important right now. What can you remember?”

Optimus frowned. “My last memory?”

“Yes,” said Ratchet.

“Discussing the retrieval strategy for several of the Iacon relics with Megatron,” said Optimus. “I believe my gyros mis-equilibrated; I remember nothing more.”

Ratchet let out a heavy ex-vent of relief. Whatever it had been, it had been temporary, maybe only a glitch in restart.

Given their recent luck, however, he knew better than to hope that.

Megatron was looking at them with mixed confusion and angry concern. Optimus was only confused.

Knockout raised his hands as Megatron’s gaze swept over him. “No, Lord Megatron,” he said, sounding as if he were used to doing this, “we don’t know what caused this. We’ll need to take him to the medical bay to do a more through scan of his neural net.”

Do you know what this is? Ratchet asked Knockout, over private comms. I doubt that it is merely a reboot error.

Knockout’s face didn’t move from its expression of professional concern.

No, he sent. We’ll just have to see what we can do. And hope that Shockwave and your little human figure something out.
The barracks were crowded; gamma shift was just coming out of recharge and heading to duty, and alpha shift was filtering back from the mess and to their berths. Tailspin, on beta, was off early, a reward for a successful recovery mission of one of the artifacts.

“For the spark of me, I can’t tell what it is,” he was saying to Contrail. “It looks like a lump of strangely shaped metal. I’m glad I’m not the one who’ll have Lord Megatron venting down the back of my neck over that.”

Contrail snorted. “Yeah, well, Shockwave’s not gonna be objecting to that.”

“I bet Starscream gets it instead,” said Tailspin, heading for the washracks. “Shockwave’s got his couplings in a twist over Prime’s condition—Hey, Crankshaft, what’s wrong?”

Crankshaft looked up at them. “I itch,” he said.

“That organic slag you ran into?”

“I guess?” Crankshaft shifted uncomfortable. “I don’t get it, I washed up really well…”

“Go see Doc Knock,” said Tailspin.

“It’s just an itch,” said Crankshaft, scratching.

“Seriously. Go see Doc Knock.”

“You’re not my progenitor.”

“But I can make your life Pit,” Tailspin pointed out. “Now, go.”

“Fine,” said Crankshaft, and rose. “Fine. Though you’re not actually my superior officer, Tailspin—”

“I need someone to practice being a good progenitor at,” said Tailspin. “Besides, if you don’t want Doc Knock poking you, go bother that Autobot medic. He hardly even throws things.”

Crankshaft snorted and brushed past him.

“Don’t get too full of yourself,” muttered Contrail into Tailspin’s audial. “Real sparklings are far less biddable.”

Tailspin shrugged. “So I expected. And how would you know?”

“Wingmate got clearance to have a litter,” said Contrail. “The unit got put on nurturing duty for a while. One of the perks of the military castes; they liked having sparklings from their ranks.”

“Lucky slagger. They yanked my gestation tank as soon as I had my last upgrades.” Movement caught his optic, silver wings held high, helm turning, scanning the crowd. “Lightwing’s here. See you later.”

Contrail made a rude comment, lost in the abrupt hubbub as the rest of beta shift poured in. Tailspin pretended not to hear, elbowed his way through the crowd until he came up against Lightwing.
“How was shift, sweetspark?”

Lightwing laughed and put an arm around him. “Boring. How about you, sweetspark?”

Tailspin reached around and tweaked the base of a wing. “Got a new relic. Otherwise, boring.”

“Oh, frag you. I was stuck going in circles around the warship all morning. ‘Important asset to be protected’, my aft. I hope Himself sparks, then we’ll see whether he ‘carries shipboard duties’.”

This was a common refrain of recent. Tailspin leaned against his bonded and allowed his engine to purr suggestively. “Frag you?” he said, and tilted his helm up. “Well, there should be an unoccupied storage closet somewhere on the warship…”

“Heh, from what I heard, you have to be careful about that. Wasn’t it Dipstick who found our esteemed leader and Prime in one once?”

“Dipstick would,” said Tailspin. “And the way I heard it, it was those two Wreckers, and they invited him to join.”

“Which two? There are three.”

“Not Ultra Magnus. I mean, really. The only thing he’s about to frag is the Autobot Code.”

That made Lightwing laugh again and pull him closer, a laugh that was abruptly cut short when a hubbub arose from the washracks. Contrail’s voice rose above the others, a snapped command, and an aisle cleared through the assembled mechs. Tailspin craned his helm to see around Lightwing’s wings and saw Contrail and Droptank carrying a Vehicon between them, blue energon spattered over his plating.

“Stay away from there until the medics have examined him,” Contrail was saying. “Tailspin, you and Lightwing, out now.”

And he was gone.

Tailspin and Lightwing traded alarmed looks, their fields reaching for each other. “What was that?” said Lightwing.

“I have no idea,” said Tailspin, deeply unsettled. “Uh. Let’s go find that closet, okay?”

He didn’t want to admit that most of his reasoning behind that was that he wanted to get out of the barracks as soon as possible. Maybe then his neural net would stop prickling with anxiety.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I blame my housemate entirely for how throughly this chapter went off-subject. She was the one to bring up Airachnid, after all.

It was halfway through the examination when Optimus lurched up off the berth and went for Megatron’s spark, calling out an enraged challenge, that Megatron had attacked one of the humans.

This time, Ratchet could not bring him out of it. It took both medics and Megatron to restrain the raging Prime long enough for the berth’s built-in systems to confine him. Remarkably robust systems, Ratchet noted, and his tanks turned over with horrified disgust as he realized that they were probably built to contain prisoners. Prisoners as powerful as Optimus.

Megatron was venting hard by the time Optimus subsided. He turned his attention to Ratchet. “What is wrong with him, medic?”

“I don’t fragging know!” snapped Ratchet.

“You had better!” snarled Megatron. “You have no excuse not to, doctor! You had the finest education Iacon had to offer—how can you not know what is wrong with him?”

“Because medicine is messy,” Ratchet retorted. “He’s my Prime too, Megatron, so either mute it or get out, because of the two of us, I’m the one who’s actually capable of saving his spark!”

Megatron stared at him, his field roiling in shocked anger and took a threatening step forward, but the sound of Optimus’s voice stopped him before he reached Ratchet.

“What happened?”

Calm, reasonable. Optimus once again.

Ratchet looked at Megatron. Megatron looked at Ratchet, and lowered his arm.

Optimus pulsed his field at them in silent reproof, but only said, “Why am I restrained?”

There was a distinct pause. Megatron, of course, knew nothing; Knockout was obviously taking refuge in the fact he was the junior doctor here and could defer to Ratchet and leave him with the awkward questions.

“Whatever damage the slave coding is doing to your neural net, it appears it involves some degree of memory loss.”

Optimus gave him a long, level, very patient look, the equivalent of get to the point were he anyone else.

“You attacked Megatron,” said Ratchet.

Something in his spark flinched when Optimus looked to Megatron for confirmation of this—just
another little sign of his growing reliance on Megatron, a reliance that Megatron was assuredly going to use to control him.

But it wasn’t unreasonable. Ratchet turned and pretended interest in the readouts by the berth, keeping his field tucked in close. It wasn’t as if he were worthy of Optimus’s trust, not after he had failed him so completely.

“Ratchet?”

Both Optimus and Megatron were looking at him expectantly. “No,” said Ratchet, “I don’t know what’s causing it.”

“I understand, old friend,” said Optimus. “What precautionary measures would you advise to prevent me from causing serious damage?”

“The restraints are unacceptable as a long-term solution,” growled Megatron.

There was a small staticky noise as Knockout reset his vocalizer, one hand on his hip and a confident expression that belied the fact he’d pulled his field in so tightly it was utterly unreadable. “Might I, as the only previously bonded mech in the room, make a suggestion?”

“And what would that be?”

“Well, it depends on the mechanism responsible for this glitch,” Knockout strolled around the edge of the berth to look at the scan of Optimus’s processor, “but the sparkbond should be enough to override Optimus’s instinctive responses. If, that is, you can manage to produce a calming influence.”

There was a brief silence. Everyone looked at Megatron. Ratchet just barely kept himself from producing a derisive snort, confined himself to saying, “And what data do you have to back that claim up?”


“The idea appeals,” said Megatron. “And if it is not sufficient, I am more than capable of containing Optimus until he comes to his senses. We will simply need to keep him away from the Vehicon population.”

“Speaking of which,” said Knockout, cocking his helm, as he received a comm message, “I believe my skills are needed. Sounds like one of the Vehicons did something stupid. Again.” He turned and strutted from the room, the confidence obviously false.

“While Knockout’s proposal has its merits, I do not want to leave Megatron in the position of restraining me should I have another episode. Perhaps you could supply him with the appropriate sedatives?”

Ratchet glared at Megatron. Megatron, to his surprise, looked as displeased by the possibility as he felt.

“Surely I will not need such assistance,” he said.

“It would be prudent,” Optimus said. His hand opened, turned over under the hard light restraint, seeking Megatron’s. “I have no wish to harm you.”

Megatron took the offered hand, and Ratchet suppressed a shudder at the calculated affection of the gesture. He did not want to hand such power over Optimus to Megatron.
Optimus was looking expectantly at him.

*Are you sure this is wise?* Ratchet sent, unable to contain himself. *It’s Megatron, Optimus—do you think you can trust him with this?*

*I have trusted him with my spark, old friend,* was the reply, edged with startlement and hurt. *He will not deceive me.*

There was nothing he could say to that, save, *I am sorry. Old habits are...difficult to set aside.*

But he didn’t mean it, and from the way Optimus looked at him, he knew it too.

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Tailspin was back on duty, chasing after yet another relic, and idly chatting with Lightwing as he drove.

*Any word from Contrail?* he asked, turning off the freeway and heading into a stand of tall organic biota.

*Not a chirp,* said Lightwing. *Not a word from the doc either.*

*Huh.*

*Yeah. Guess he was overcharged?* Lightwing sounded doubtful.

*And Crankshaft?*

*Says he’s fine.*

*Figures.*

Tailspin signaled the rest of his team to split up. While they hadn’t detected any activity, human or otherwise, in the area for quite some time, one could never be cautious enough. *Gotta go silent for a bit, sweetspark.*

*Got it. Hear from you soon.*

The channel closed, and Tailspin turned his attention to the terrain around him. There was a sheer cliff to his left and heavy forest to his right—hardly a strategic location. His plating prickling, he came to a halt and transformed, reaching for his scanner from his subspace. *Gearshift, report.*


Still nothing. Tailspin’s processor whirled with all the horrible possibilities. He readied an emergency channel to the warship and peered around the corner.

*It wasn’t the Star Saber that caught his attention.*

It was the two bodies in front of it, energon puddled around them. Gearshift’s helm was at least two hundred meters away from the rest of his frame, visor dark and offline. From here, Tailspin could see the raw bright edges of Bolts’ shredded sparkchamber, glinting in the dull Earth light and nothing else.
They were definitely dead.

He tried the emergency channel, and found only static. Pressing himself back against the rock, he reached across the sparkbond to Lightwing, mentally apologizing as he flooded the link with his distress. Shock and a query, but now Lightwing knew. He’d alert the appropriate authorities.

Too late for Bolts and Gearshift, though. Tailspin transformed an arm and glanced around the corner again.

And something struck him in the middle of the torso, something strangely warm and clinging, and he looked down, spark hammering in panic. Not again not again—

Webbing.

Scrap!

He wrenched at it, wished Pit upon whatever glitch-headed slagger had decided that enforcement frames didn’t need blades, and a second wad of webbing pinned his free arm to the rock. He tried to transform, found webbing in the way and subsided, gasping.

He wasn’t dead. He would have been dead by now if she wanted him dead, so she wasn’t intending to kill him immediately. He reset his optics, tried to exercise some sort of control over his ventilations, and held very, very still.

“I thought Megatron had learned not to come after me anymore,” said a voice just by his audial. He flinched, antennae scraping rock. “He’s been so very quiet recently.” A pause. “So have the Autobots.”

Tailspin repressed the retort that rose in his vocalizer and said instead, “We’ve been busy.”

“‘We’ve been busy’.” Her face came into view, purple optics narrowed. Legs clicked on rock. “Well. You’re an articulate one. So why has Megatron been too busy to get out much?”

Tailspin hesitated. A leg shot past his visor and into the rock.

“Not a time to get shy,” Airaichnid said.

Tailspin reset his vocalizer. “There’s a treaty. They’re negotiating it now.”

“So why is there a treaty?”

“Humans,” said Tailspin, and shuddered involuntarily. “You’re aware of MECH?”

“Oh? Did the scary fleshlings make Megatron nervous? How amusing. Really, I was hoping that our long war would end more remarkably.”

“The humans discovered slave coding,” said Tailspin. She was just looking at him, faintly interested. The longer he could keep her like that… “They used it on Optimus Prime.”

“Slave coding?” Her face rotated as she adjusted her position. “Remarkably innovative of them. I’ve used it myself a few times—so helpful. Didn’t think it could be put to such good use. Tell me, is the Prime still MECH’s toy, or has Megatron taken advantage of the situation?”

Anger boiled up Tailspin’s intake. “Neither,” he spat. “Lord Megatron would never tolerate the use of slave coding, unlike scum like you. He and Prime are working together to stop this once and for all.”
“Hit a nerve, did I?” She smirked. “So Megatron was too soft to enslave Prime when he had the chance? How the mighty have fallen. Sounds like I won’t have to worry about the Decepticons for a good, long time.”

Tailspin stayed quiet, watching her. Her optics flickered, and she looked down at her claws as she thought. He tensed when she looked up, her field flashing mocking amusement.

“You’ve been very useful,” she said. “Unfortunately, you can tell Megatron where I am.”

Oh scrap. One of her legs poised itself over his spark.

Tailspin blurted the first thing to come to processor, possibly one of the stupidest things he’d ever said. “Please don’t offline me! I have a bonded and sparklings!”

There was a distinct pause.

“What?”

Tailspin brought his optics back online, not even aware of having offlined them. “I have a bonded. And sparklings.”

Her lip curled. “You’re lying.”

“No. I’m not.” Tailspin felt a little confidence trickle back. “So don’t offline me unless you want to end up quite high on the List. Lord Megatron takes our survival very seriously, and the Justice Division is due back any cycle now.” The last bit was...something of a lie, but she wouldn’t know any better. And he might have a much better chance if she thought he was the one carrying.

Outrage replaced shock. “You mean to tell me that you, a drone, have sparked?”

Tailspin bobbed his helm.

Airachnid bared sharp dentae. Something grazed the top of his abdomen, pricked through webbing; he tensed, not daring to look down.

“I should tear out your tank now, you presumptive little piece of scrap,” she snarled. “To think that a drone is carrying the first sparklings in two thousand—” She cut herself off. “It would be better if that little Autobot two-wheeler sparked—she at least has coding of quality.” The sharp point pressed in hard. Tailspin made a little binary sound and winced back against the rock, offlining his optics. If she followed through on her threat, if she found out he wasn’t the one carrying—

And there was the sound of an engine and weapons fire and Airachnid yelped, was abruptly gone. Tailspin onlined his visor again and there was Lightwing, straightening up with one arm outstretched and his optics blazing.

“Get the frag away from him.” Flat, calm, a tone of assured menace that was almost as good as Lord Megatron’s, and Tailspin just stared, because his bonded looked glorious.

And alone.

Frag.

Airachnind was nowhere to be seen. Lightwing headed for him at a dead run, a cutting torch clutched in one hand, and Tailspin looked around desperately. “Where’d she go?”

“Don’t know. Let’s get you free.” Lightwing went to work on the webbing with the torch.
“Lightwing, she might—”

“She will,” said Lightwing. “And we stand something of a chance if there are two of us. Mute it and keep watch.”

The first section of webbing came away, and Tailspin shook his arm free, transformed it and covered the area as Lightwing went to work on the rest of it. He turned his audials up to their highest sensitivity, and threw himself forward as the dirt under their pedes crumbled and Airachnid came up at them, reaching for Lightwing. Tailspin fired twice in her direction, scrambled back, putting himself between her and Lightwing as she came at them, dentae bared.

A bolt hit the ground next to them, spraying dirt everywhere. “We should run,” Tailspin yelled.

“No. Not leaving you.” Lightwing hauled him to his feet.

And was promptly bowled over by Airachnid as she lunged at him. Tailspin managed to get a shot off that damaged one of her legs—she snarled and leaped away, slashing at them again.

Tailspin and Lightwing backed up, leveling their blasters at her. This close, even without the fear pulsing through their bond, Tailspin could hear his plating rattling. Airachnid was watching them with cruel amusement now, just standing there on her eight legs, claws flexing and curling.

Tailspin kept the pulse of fear from his field. This was the bot who’d snuffed Breakdown, who’d eluded the DJD for millennia now. She’d almost snuffed Megatron too, if the rumors were to be believed. Two Vehicons, even if one was a flyer? They stood no chance.

“So your partner showed up, did he?” Airachnid said, smiling. “How endearing. You know, if you’re working so closely with the Autobots, you should know…” She paused, the grin growing nastier, “I really like killing partners.”

The next shot of webbing caught Lightwing full in the faceplate and slammed him into the rock wall. Tailspin threw himself in front of him, firing wildly, and found his blaster arm stuck to Lightwing’s chest. He raised the other one, but Airachnid had vanished.

Webbing slammed into his free arm, pinned him spreadeagled to the wall and he thrashed, panicking, as Airachnid stalked forward, barely hurt.

And stopped, looking up. Tailspin followed her gaze, heard the distant sound of a powerful engine and a flicker of silver in the gray sky.

No, flickers of silver.

One very distinctive.

Airachnid turned an enraged, disbelieving snarl on Tailspin, flipped into alt and fled. A wing of the Seekers broke off to pursue her, but the other one, the one led by the huge Cybertronian jet, remained on course.

Lightwing was still attempting to claw the webbing off his visor as Lord Megatron transformed and landed, and the sheer rage in his field flattened both bots against the substrate.

“Lightwing,” he said, worryingly reasonable, “what are you doing off of the Nemesis?”

Lightwing had stiffened as soon as he heard Lord Megatron’s voice. When he responded, it was both somewhat nervous and somewhat muffled.
“My apologies, my liege,” he said, as Tailspin froze and fought against the urge to offline his visor. “My bonded was in danger.”

Megatron reached for them. Tailspin tried to move away, somehow didn’t yelp as sharp claws scratched over his plating. Webbing peeled away, and he had to catch himself against the rock to keep from wobbling. Megatron’s field washed over him, overpoweringly angry and edged strangely with distress. Lightwing chirped in protest when Megatron ripped the webbing from his helm, none too gently.

Megatron shook the clinging stuff from his claws. “Do not,” he said, all cold menace, “ever,” he leaned forward, and the two of them shrank back, expecting blows or worse, “disobey again. You are both confined to the warship until further notice.”

“Yes, my lord!” they chorused, and Megatron, making no sign of having heard them, turned and stalked away.
What was heartbreaking wasn’t Optimus’s decline.

It was Megatron’s reaction to it.

Fowler had little else to do; most of the time he found himself assisting the medics with delicate tasks, or hanging out with the off-duty Vehicons, who weren’t a bad crowd once you got to know them. The kids were also welcome company, a good distraction from the fact that he was in effect exiled from his own fucking planet.

Not that he could use those exact words. Miko’s language was already bad enough. At least he could talk frankly with June, whom he didn’t see nearly as often as he wished he could.

It was clearly, horribly apparent that Optimus’s condition, the slow destruction of his mind, was also destroying something in Megatron. Gone were the pomp and showboating, gone was the confident, vicious smirk; Megatron spoke little, unless it was to bawl someone out, snarl threats, or talk to Optimus. It had obviously scared the everloving shit out of every other bot on the ship—Starscream in particular, who had been assiduously avoiding Megatron.

Worse yet was one time Fowler had stumbled upon Megatron and Optimus as Optimus faded out of one of his brief periods of lucidity, Megatron holding onto Optimus’s hand as if by main force he could drag Optimus back into the present, his face open, desperate and pleading, an expression Fowler had never expected to see from the ‘Con warlord. He was talking to Optimus, unintelligible words but quiet and gentle and Fowler had retreated immediately feeling he’d intruded on something unspeakably private.

He’d hated Megatron’s metal guts for years—but he never wanted to see him like that again.

Scientists took too slagging long about everything. It was clear Optimus was getting worse, but over the next intolerable days, Ratchet and Knockout and Shockwave had no answers for Megatron, nothing more than half-sparked guesses and excuses. Ratchet he had expected better from; the mech was utterly devoted to Optimus, after all, and Shockwave was nothing if not efficient. But none of them seemed to understand what was going on under their very optics, and it was a rare conversation that did not end with Megatron snarling in irritation and stalking back the section of the medbay that held Optimus.

Sometimes, Optimus recognized him. Sometimes, he called Megatron Megatronus, and whispered endearments, the same young archivist he had met so long ago.

Sometimes, he called challenges. Demands to be released. Once, he even attacked Megatron, and it took both Shockwave and Ratchet’s assistance to restrain him again.

And still worse, Megatron watched him relive the first slave coding, again and again, and the times when he retained enough control of himself to hide his reaction were somehow worse than the times he didn’t. Once, he came out of it enough to ask, “Megatronus? What are you doing here?” and that one time, Megatron had pulled him fully out of it and for a short time he was Optimus again, and they clung together until the glitch parted them and Optimus writhed away with an expression of
disgust.

A glitch in the slave code, Ratchet called it, as if it were an enormous breakthrough. Humans tampering with a delicate mechanism that even Cybertronians were hesitant to alter. They’d destroyed the boundaries between the stored sensory data contained in Optimus’s memory banks and the input from his sensors in the present, making it impossible for him to tell the difference between them. Ratchet hoped to fix it, said it should be simple enough, but Megatron saw the hesitance in his frame and knew better, and the rage bubbled up more fiercely for the lie.

No one knew how to save Optimus. No one could.

And all the time, Optimus lay in the dark and spoke to his memories as they played across his optics and Megatron sat with him when he could, offered what little comfort he could. If he were truly merciful, he would offline Optimus then and there, not watch him suffer through this Pit of indignity and fear. But that would destroy what Optimus had worked so hard toward, destroy their peace, and some small foolish part of him still hoped that Optimus might yet be restored, that there would be something they could do to save him. He was a fool for it.

He was a fool for it and still he hoped, even when their bond grew weaker every day, Optimus’s spark dimming slowly, withdrawing from him.

He occupied himself with other things when he wasn’t around Optimus, an attempt to clear his processor and soothe the gnawing ache in his spark, the slow sundering of their bond, the attendant grief. For now, it seemed the most pressing problem was the recovery of the Star Saber.

“Can we not move the mountain?” he snarled at Starscream, who lowered his wings and made a little backwards hop that he would have found amusing under any other circumstances.

“With the difficulties of obtaining energon, my lord, it’s not particularly feasible.” Starscream’s wings lowered still more. “Not with the human activities around the mines. We’ve lost three this week.”

Megatron growled, hands clenching. “I am not leaving such a relic in the hands of the fleshlings,” he said. “It is ours by birthright.”

“Perhaps…” Starscream inched forward, his wings rising again. “Perhaps we might consider leaving this planet and returning for it once we have the requisite resources? The longer we remain—”

“We will not flee from organics,” said Megatron. “If humans can do this to our Prime and escape reprisals, what message does this send to the rest of the galaxies? What will happen when the Quintessons hear of our defeat? No, Starscream, we will do no such thing, not until we neutralize this threat.”

“And until then, how do we fuel?” asked Starscream. “Our resources are not infinite, and the humans reduce them with every one of their hours we spend here.”

“Use your imagination,” snarled Megatron. “We will find a way to fuel, because we must. We are hardly in the Galactic Council’s good graces; we can hardly call upon them should some species decide to take advantage. They would likely support our conquest and enslavement. No, Starscream, we shall remain here, and we shall have our revenge.” He turned and stalked toward the door.

“Don’t deceive yourself, Lord Megatron,” Starscream called after him. “This isn’t about the survival of our species. It’s about Optimus Prime.”

Megatron whirled on him and he yelped and cringed back. “So what if it is?” Starscream stared up at
him with frightened optics. “So what if it is, Starscream? Know this; the moment Optimus Prime’s spark flickers out, Earth shall be rendered to atoms. That, at least, should demonstrate that Cybertron is still powerful.”

“I...I would expect no less,” said Starscream. Megatron turned to the door again, and he straightened up. “My lord.”

There was something impudent about that, but Megatron opted to ignore it. Optimus was, he hoped, expecting him.

The comm signal came in as the bridge doors slid shut behind him.

Megatron, your services are urgently required in the medical bay. Ratchet’s voice had an even rage that rivaled even Optimus at his worst.

“And why would that be?”

You’ll see, said Ratchet. When you arrive, obey all instructions from medical personnel; we are at level four containment.

“There is a pathogen aboard the warship?”

Just get down here.

Suspicion formed. Megatron wheeled and started toward the medical bay. “You never did tell me how Optimus managed to contract Cybonic plague, medic.”

Ask questions when you’re here. Ratchet disconnected.

He reached the medical bay and stepped inside, then shuttered his optics with surprise. The infectious ward, usually inactive, had an energon-blue light blinking over the door, indicating that it was currently occupied. Knockout came around the corner with an armful of supplies, field flaring anxiety. “Lord Megatron?” he said, surprised.

“Ratchet implied that I was needed,” said Megatron, glancing at the door.

“Ah. Right. He’s in there right now. I’ll see if he can—” Knockout raised a hand to his comm, paused, and then winced. “Sounds like he wants you to go in to him,” he said. “I think we have a few vent filters in your size.”

“Vent filters?”

“Autobot invention. Designed to isolate health personnel from Cybonic Plague. Autoclave the ambient atmosphere as your vents pull it in. Ah. Here we are.”

Despite his fear, Knockout was briskly efficient, something that Megatron had rarely seen and had wondered if the medic was capable of. He deftly slotted the vent filters into place, checked them against Megatron’s schematics to make sure he hadn’t missed anything, hooked them to a supplementary atmosphere tank, and directed him to the infectious ward—(“Pause in the airlock until a green light by the far door indicates that the robing process is complete”), and followed him, applying his own filters as he went.

The robing process was highly unpleasant, a full-frame application of thick polymers to protect from outside contact, and the installation of a temporary visor to protect the optics and intake. Megatron felt abruptly numbed to the world and deeply clumsy, and he grumbled, resentful.
“We don’t know if it’s capable of aerosolizing, Lord Megatron,” said Knockout behind him, withstanding the process with remarkable fortitude, given its probable effects on his finish. “The isolation equipment is easily removed. There’s the green light.”

Megatron stepped forward, and into a living Pit.

Knockout exclaimed, put the tray down, and went to Ratchet’s side as the other medic worked over an Eradicon, who abruptly arched up between them and purged his tanks, semi-processed energon mixed with rust and incongruous bright metal. Two other Eradicons lay on the decking, visors dim and offline, spark chambers shredded open and empty. Another three curled on berths, and even Megatron’s rudimentary medical knowledge was enough to tell him that they were heavily sedated.

“Get the slagging line in!” roared Ratchet. “He’ll tear his own tank apart if he keeps this up—”

A yelp, a grunt of effort, the Eradicon purged again, slumped.

Ratchet and Knockout, spattered with fluids, stepped back.

“The sedative may overstress his systems,” said Knockout.

“Then he won’t be in pain when he offlines,” said Ratchet, and looked at Megatron, concentrated fury in his optics. He stalked around the limp figure. “Take a good look, Lord Megatron.” His gesture took in the room, the seven limp Eradicons, the energon spattered floor. “It’s tiny by comparison, but this is what you did. This is what we lived, for a year and a half. Millions of Autobots and civilians, millions, died like this.”

“So it is indeed Cybonic Plague,” said Megatron. “Why have you not administered the antidote?”

“Because it isn’t Cybonic Plague anymore, Lord Megatron—” started Knockout, but Ratchet pushed him aside.

“Someone based this on Cybonic Plague,” he said. “Someone took what you made and made it worse. Purging was never a symptom. Tanks shredding themselves was never a symptom. The rust wasn’t a symptom. Your victims just rotted away prettily in their own plating—these slagging explode. It’s not responding to your antidote. It’s not responding to anything we do. We have no idea how infectious it is, or how virulent, but we do know that the organism responsible is very closely related to your little invention.”

Megatron looked around the room. “How did this happen?”

“Crankshaft there,” said Knockout, nodding to one of the corpses, “said that he and his patrol were buzzed by a human plane while reclaiming one of the relics.”

“Have you contacted Shockwave?”

“He’s in there,” said Ratchet, gesturing at the next door. “Thanks to him, we know what this was based on. We’ll see if there’s similar mortality related to spark frequencies with this disease. I hope so, or we’re about to lose all Cybertronian life on this ship.”

“I should hope your containment protocols are better than that,” said Megatron, pacing over to examine one of the Eradicons. The distinctive necrotic tissues were visible on his visor, and his ventilations were wildly irregular.

“At this point? No containment protocols are going to halt this thing until a lot more people are dead.” Ratchet gestured at the room in general. “They were attacked ten days ago. That’s ten days of
them in contact with other members of the crew, sharing space with them, refueling, using the
washracks, interfacing—ten days in which they’ve been transmitting the disease to every mech
they’ve encountered. And that’s been a lot; the Nemesis is severely overcrowded.”

It was a sobering thought. Megatron frowned down at the Eradicon in front of him. “How long until
you have this under control?”

“It could be three hours, it could be two weeks, it could be two years,” said Ratchet. “We’re doing
all we can.” He met Megatron’s optics, blazingly angry and not bothering to hide it. “And it’s
unlikely to be enough.”
Two days later, the entire medbay had been converted into an infectious ward, and Lightwing and Optimus were in full isolation: Optimus in Lord Megatron’s quarters, and Lightwing in a spare set of officers’ quarters that had been specially cleared. Tailspin couldn’t say that he objected to the sparse comfort of their new quarters, but he far preferred the barracks.

Tailspin himself was kept running between Optimus and Lightwing, on the logic that, if he had to remain uncontaminated to interact with his mate, he might as well be used to attend to the other isolated patient, in order to keep as many bots as possible focused on containment efforts.

Tailspin wished he had a good argument against that, because even deeply sedated, the Prime scared the scrap out of him. He was almost as big as Lord Megatron, for one thing; for another, Tailspin had seen far too many of his fellows offline almost casually by the mech, and the fact that there was nothing to protect him from a similar fate should Optimus wake outright terrified him.

Agent Fowler, whom he’d been assigned to assist as well (and Tailspin had never been so glad that the form Silas had chosen had not been human at all—at least he wasn’t being reminded of Silas every time he turned around!) tried to assure him about Optimus Prime’s supposed conscience, and Tailspin very politely didn’t point out that he was probably well on the wrong side of the Prime’s conscience. Let the human put his faith in the Prime. Tailspin certainly did not.

There was something comforting to the fact that he could pick Fowler up in one hand, that the human was so tiny and delicate. It made him seem far less dangerous, and Fowler himself was certainly aware of Tailspin’s skittishness and was working actively to seem nonthreatening.

The Autobots’ human pets, too, were spending the bulk of their time with them—the Autobots themselves had been assigned duties just as the Decepticon troops were, at Lord Megatron’s insistence and Ultra Magnus’s ready compliance; both factions were well aware of just how dire the situation was, and arguments were few. While the Autobots certainly visited, their duties were far too hazardous for the humans to accompany them. There was too great a risk of someone getting squashed.

There was some debate of whether to cut human contact for the requisite period. That ended abruptly when Fowler pointed out exactly how nasty humans were capable of being to their own species. And so Lightwing sparkling-sat the younger humans and Tailspin dealt with Agent Fowler and Optimus Prime, and wished for the companionship of the barracks again.

At least Lightwing was entertained. The smallest of the humans, Raf, had worked out some sort of arrangement with Soundwave (“Don’t tell Optimus,” he’d said, strange liquid optics wide) that allowed them to get human entertainment on the warship. The entertainment itself was strange and alien, but Lightwing found it interesting enough and that was all Tailspin cared about.

A few weeks, Agent Fowler said. Just a few weeks before this was contained. They hoped. But Tailspin had heard too many false promises not to recognize one, even from an alien.

There was nothing quite like getting crawled over by humans to take one’s processor off current difficulties, and Tailspin supposed that Nurse Darby was right in saying that it was good practice for dealing with their own sparklings. Perhaps he would have found that comment still more comforting
if he wasn't deeply suspicious that it was more likely than not that they wouldn't survive to have their own sparklings.

As expected, morbidity climbed and kept climbing.

Unexpectedly, the mortality rate stayed put.

Two human weeks in and they were holding steady at 100% mortality, an absolutely incredible figure. Few pathogens displayed such a rate--variations in immunological coding in Cybertronians were such that there was usually at least one mech who had some small immunity to everything. Even Cybonic Plague, the original Cybonic Plague, had only displayed a mortality rate of about 75%--combined with an Ro(or, average number of individuals infected by a single contagious individual) of 12, it had been enough to kill millions. They didn't have enough data yet to calculate this disease's R₀, but by all indications it was similar.

Ratchet was all but dropping into recharge on his pedes—they all were. He'd found Knockout leaning against a wall, completely powered down, mouth open and vents rattling, still in full protective gear. A corner of the medbay had turned into a makeshift barracks, no berths, only the medical staff curled on the decking, fully suited and recharging. Decking was pretty attractive at this point, Ratchet had to admit.

Even Megatron was making himself useful, and wasn't that just shocking. Ratchet'd expected the warlord to vanish off to tending Optimus and leave them to fare for themselves. But no, he was organizing shifts and looking at the schematics and the infection maps and going in person to defend their remaining energon mines from human attack. As far as Ratchet could tell, he hadn't recharged in about four days, and the only sign of it was the way his optics would slide slightly out of focus if he was talked at for too long. Ratchet was debating hitting him with a sedative just to get him into a berth for a decent amount of time, but given how well he was holding up under the accumulated exhaustion, he wasn't sure if it would work.

So he went for the other option, the time-honored medic tradition of bullying your inferiors into taking care of themselves—and never mind that Megatron was going to object to that terminology, Ratchet was slagging well the commanding officer here.

Unfortunately, some traitorous slagger must have told Megatron Ratchet was looking for him, and Megatron accordingly made himself scarce.

A soft gasp and the flare of a field at his back took Ratchet's mind off the problem.

“Knockout?” Ratchet turned. Knockout had frozen, staring at his hand with wide optics.

“Knockout!”

Knockout looked up and turned his hand to show Ratchet a hole in the isolation suit. “I’m almost certainly infected,” he said, his voice faint. "I was tired--my hand slipped--"

He was swaying. Tired was likely an understatement. Something in Ratchet's spark twisted; he shoved the emotion back and walled it away before it could distract him. "We'll get you to an isolation chamber," he said. "What was the nature of the injury?"

"I was doing a biopsy," said Knockout. "My hand slipped; I nicked myself."
It didn't sound good; Ratchet checked the injury. While it didn't seem to have drawn energon, there was a scratch there—and mere dermal contact with infectious substances was enough to transmit the infection.

“Isolation, now,” said Ratchet. Knockout’s optics were flickering with fear, and he reached out and put a hand on the younger mech’s shoulder, met his optics. “We’ll do what we can. There’s still a chance that you didn’t make contact—” Knockout let out a faint snort of disdain, “—or that this thing will interact differently with medic coding. Either way, you won’t have to wait long.”

“I know,” said Knockout, and allowed Ratchet to guide him toward the isolation chambers. Ratchet handed him a datapad. “I need an evaluation of what parts of the warship we can turn into supplementary wards and the necessary supplies and labor to do so.”

“You’re just trying to keep me distracted.”

“Yes,” said Ratchet, and keyed in the combination to one of the two chambers, a small space with a makeshift berth, hermetically sealed from the outside atmosphere. “Go distract yourself or recharge. Orders from your superior officer.”

Knockout made no objection and settled himself wearily on the berth, glancing past the datapad at Ratchet. He said nothing, which was indicative enough to Ratchet of how thoroughly terrified he was.

“Would you like me to contact Starscream?”

Knockout ventilated deeply, then shook his helm. “No,” he said, his voice made tinny by the isolation chamber comm. “Not unless I test positive.”

“Understood,” said Ratchet, and started away, spark too numb to register fear or horror. He commed Dipstick, informing the Eradicon that he would assume Knockout’s duties for the duration, and to appoint someone to take his place. If only he had something other to work with than Eradicons—but none of the Autobots had proper scientific training, and slagged if he had time to conduct said training.

He wondered dully who would take over when he next recharged, but set it aside as a problem for a later time.

Starscream was handing out mine guard assignments when the message came through. He wondered briefly why Ratchet would bother contacting him, then turned to the Vehicons in front of him. “Additionally, any illness—whether or not you think they’re shamming—must be reported immediately. Failure to do so will have severe consequences. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes sir,” they chorused. One raised a hand.

“Commander Starscream, sir? What do we do if there’s a human attack?”

“Inform us immediately. And do not allow yourselves to be captured. Believe me,” his mouth curled in a sneer, “offlining will be far better.”

Another ping, also from Ratchet.

“Dismissed,” he said, and turned his back on them as he sent automatic acknowledgements to the
messages and then looked at them.

And pounded out the door at a dead run, heading toward the medical bay.

Ultra Magnus collapsed later that day, along with an Eradicon who was later found to be carrying, his immune systems too compromised to provide any significant obstacle to the infection. When his sparkchamber blew, it was to reveal his internal mechanisms reduced to a slurry of rust and energon.

Ultra Magnus regained consciousness briefly before they put him in stasis, just long enough to express concern for those he had been in contact with. Ratchet told him not to worry, that he had not exuded any infectious fluids on his inferiors, and slipped him into stasis in the same gesture, not regretting the lie at all. The last thing he needed was guilt.

They instituted daily temperature readings after that. There simply wasn’t enough time to use more reliable methods. Shockwave was overworked enough trying to find some kind of serum, let alone process laboratory samples from the entire ship’s complement. Ideally, they would have screened the rest of the crew to determine if there were any more carriers present, but that measure, too, was impossible.

Starscream turned up shortly after Ratchet conveyed the news that Knockout was infected. Ratchet put him to work just like anyone else, on the principle that it would keep him from fretting. It seemed to work.

Soon after, they found out it was capable of aerosolizing. Vent filters became standard issue, and they fueled and recharged with them in, and, for the most part, prayed that they wouldn’t fail without warning. They weren’t designed for long term use, and the resources needed to make more were in short supply indeed.

Ratchet felt far more tired than he thought possible. Shockwave had provided him with a supplemental debugging program that did away with many coding errors that arose after long periods of time without recharge—not all of them, of course, but with Knockout ill, he couldn’t afford to recharge. Or, rather, his patients couldn’t.

Though it didn’t mean that he felt particularly prepared to speak with Megatron; with Ultra Magnus in stasis, he was now the most senior Autobot officer present, and hardly in the mood to participate in political wrangling. Even when protocol required him to keep their Decepticon allies apprised of the situation.

So it came as a surprise when Megatron’s first words to him were, “How long has it been since you last recharged?”

Ratchet snorted. “You expect me to remember?”

Megatron snorted. “Very well. Deliver your report, then go recharge.”

“No,” said Ratchet, and put the datapad down. “I’m needed. Without another trained physician on duty—”

“You will recharge,” said Megatron. “You are useless if you are too exhausted to function.”

“You’re one to talk,” said Ratchet, nettled. “You’ve recharged less than I have.”
Megatron gave him a very broad grin. “Revolution is a sleepless business, medic. Do not worry; I am in a far better state than you.”

“I doubt it,” grumbled Ratchet. “Here’s the report. Shockwave’s managed to raise it in culture.”

Megatron examined the datapad. “Scant progress.”

“Look on the positive,” grumbled Ratchet. “At least we can start seeing if we can find a cure now.”

“How long?”

“We don’t know.” Ratchet let out a heavy ventilation. “Between the two of us, it will take a miracle to halt the spread of this thing, and more of one to save those already infected. Though, it should be noted, even in the worst case scenario, the miners and soldiers on Earth should survive. Provided we keep the populations separate from now on.”

“Don’t count on that.” Both mechs turned to look at Starscream as he stalked in. “Remember that mine you chased the humans off of two days ago, Lord Megatron?”

Megatron nodded, brows drawing down as suspicion dawned. “Yes.”

“They’ve reported their first case. One of the Vehicon guards.”

The slant of Megatron’s shoulders shifted, and there was something abruptly tired and old about him, and very, very angry. “Doctor,” he said to Ratchet, and Ratchet looked suspiciously at him, “Go recharge. Now.”

Ratchet’s plating flared. “I will not,” he snapped. “There are patients who need me—”

“Alive and functional,” said Megatron. “How many will die if we lose you to a similar accident as we did Knockout? Do it of your own accord or be drugged, medic, but you will power down after you leave this room.”

Ratchet glared defiance at him. “I don’t follow your orders.”

“I am not particularly concerned with procedure.”

“I am not abandoning my patients—” A sharp pain caught him in the back of the neck, and he turned to see Starscream tucking something back into his subspace with an innocent expression. “What was that?”

“You’ll thank me for it later,” said Starscream, rather smugly. “You won’t be out of it for too long, just enough to make sure you recharge decently.”

He was blazingly angry, but that seemed unimportant next to trying to keep his optics onlined and stay standing. Things started sliding out of focus. A distant fear—what was Megatron planning? Was this some kind of treachery—

His optics offlined, and heavily armored arms caught him as he collapsed unwillingly into recharge.

“The Autobots are not going to take this well,” said Starscream, as Megatron maneuvered Ratchet’s
unconscious frame onto a berth. Megatron all but snarled at him, the strain of lifting the medic—Unicron slag him, why were medical frames so fragging heavy?—aggravating the low-grade ache that had settled along his backstrut. There was a patch up one leg that had been itching since he’d last onlined, a slow, sickening itch that simply didn’t stop.

“They will recover, I am sure,” he said. He straightened up, repressed a growl as it did nothing for the ache, and started toward the door. “We cannot afford to lose our remaining medic to a laboratory accident.” He noted Starscream’s flinch at that and filed it away for future reference; so he did have some emotional connection to Knockout. Interesting. Surprising that they’d been keeping it so quiet.

“About the infected mine…”

“Bring the cases back aboard. We must keep the mine functional as long as possible. But now that Shockwave is capable of growing the pathogen in culture—”

Starscream snorted. “What, you think our problems are over? Science isn’t magic, oh Mighty Megatron. Certainly, Shockwave can do experiments, but it hardly means he’ll find anything. Work will probably be slower because of your little trick with Ratchet—Lord Megatron?”

Megatron had stopped, his helm cocked to one side, thinking. “Science isn’t magic, you say?”

Starscream snorted. “Of course not,” he said. “It’s tiresome and boring and difficult and takes forever, and half the time it doesn’t work for stupid reasons. I know. I dabbled.”

More than dabbled, Megatron knew. He shook his helm to clear it. Regardless of what he’d told Ratchet, he needed to recharge soon. “Perhaps,” he said. “But we do possess something that combines the two.”

“What?”

“Resume your duties,” snapped Megatron, and broke into a lumbering run. “I have something I must attend to.”

“My lord?” Starscream’s voice rose in consternation; Megatron ignored it.

His frame seemed reluctant to respond, heavy and stiff and itchy; he ignored it. The Forge of Solus Prime was useless without a Prime to wield it. Well enough. If the Forge was truly as virtuous as the legends claimed, it should be able to repair Optimus.

It wasn’t as if they had a better option just now.

He reached the door to the vaults, keyed in the code and stumbled in the door. There was the Forge, isolated in a pillar of blue light, still and gleaming. Megatron reached for it, staggered under the sudden weight.

A twinge in his spark made him fumble and almost drop it, and alarm surged through him. That could only be Optimus, he knew that feeling, and he cursed himself for a fool in not realizing the solution right under his optics. He hefted the Forge, hoping in a foolish helpless way that he was not too late, and set off again.

The lack of recharge grew more acute with every step he took, making his processor swim and a low-level buzz grow in his audials. He shook his helm and kept on, the growing ache in his spark feeding his desperation. A few more steps, through the decontamination spray, place hand on the touchpad.
The door opened. He took a step forward and stopped because Optimus’s optics were online, casting a faint blue glow on the ceiling.

He hesitated. The door closed behind him.

This was folly. He was trusting in foolish legend, not in fact.

He had no choice, he reminded himself, and took another step. Froze, because Optimus’s mouth moved, words.

“Who stands before me?”

Optimus’s voice. Not Optimus. The world seemed hot and buzzing, words garbled. Megatron stumbled forward, claws trembling on the Forge. When had it become so heavy?

Optimus’s chest plates were opening. It seemed an eternity before his mazed processor understood.

Optimus was dying.

The Matrix had chosen him.

Megatron set the Forge down and clutched at the haft, stable point in the spinning room, and stared.

It would be easy.

So, so easy.

The very thing he had cast Orion aside for, the very thing he had begun this war for, now offered itself to him. So easy to take it. So easy to tell the Autobots that Optimus had died, the Matrix had chosen him, because it would be true. Perhaps they would believe him. Perhaps it was indeed the right, the only, thing to do.

He shook his helm, swallowed back the wave of energon that rose in his intake, bitter and hot. He could not think, it seemed, only felt a deep confused rage at the universe, at Primus, the Matrix. Some kind of sick jest, the Matrix offering itself.

After they’d resolved matters without it.

This was not right.

He should have torn the Matrix from around Optimus’s beating spark, if he did take it. He should have become Prime on his own terms, not meekly stepped into Optimus’s place. He should have been his conqueror, not his successor.

Rage rose, sharpened his thoughts, directed at the only entity that could be responsible for this. Somewhere, that scraplet-fragging Pit-forged excuse for a god was laughing, he was sure of it, laughing as he handed Megatron everything he’d wanted with one hand and took the one thing he needed with the other.

“No!” he snarled. Whispered. Vocalizer wasn’t running at full capacity, would see Ratchet later.

Step forward. Another step. Base of Forge in Optimus’s hand.

Heat, light, noise. He fell back, world yanked away in confusion. Confusion, then darkness and he turned over and purged viciously, painful, tasting of rust, didn’t seem to matter, looked up and saw the light of blue optics.
“Optimus,” he said, no sound, a mute movement of dentae and faceplate, and his optics flicked offline. He fell, the world spinning away, Optimus’s voice anxious and distant and somehow not important now.

Chapter End Notes

Quick explanation about the medical terminology in this: morbidity is the number of people sick, R0 is the average number of people infected by a single infectious subject, and the importance of being able to culture the pathogen cannot be underestimated—it means you can study the pathogen, the first step in being able to vaccinate or treat it.

If you want to know more, this article on the movie Contagion is pretty excellent. (http://www.cnn.com/2011/09/13/health/contagion-big-screen/) The movie Contagion is also extremely accurate and very very excellent.

Yes, the author's focus is in disease biology...
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

The Dipstick here is not to be confused with the IDW Dipstick, who is, after all, an Autobot. Honestly, I didn't realize there was a Dipstick in canon until it was too late and I was far, far too attached with the name... (and had already mentioned him in A Pound of Flesh).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He came online in darkness to the sound of retching, a huff of vents very like a phrase. Then a muffled impact, something falling.

Only exhaustion over the bond, exhaustion and pain, fading.

Optimus pushed himself up, feeling strange and clumsy, looked down at his own frame.

Found it unrecognizable. Confusion again, but not the sick growing confusion that had clouded his processor for so long. He looked around, and with a shock of recognition saw the Forge of Solus Prime lying on the decking, as if it had been carelessly dropped.

And Megatron, sprawled in a puddle of energon and rust, frame heaving with strained ventilations.

That he could focus on. He rose from the berth, dropped to his knees next to Megatron’s still form, and lifted him, ignoring the oily warmth of semi-processed energon on his plating. Megatron was shockingly light, and Optimus gathered him in close to better carry him, rose clumsily, the weight of new plating throwing him off. His processor provided him with the location of the medical bay without difficulty, and he started in that direction.

Megatron had revived him with the Forge, that much was clear. What wasn’t clear was why he’d collapsed, and a dreading part of Optimus’s spark asked if it might not be because of a sparking gone wrong. He pushed the guilt back, kept going through the eerily quiet corridors.

There was the medical bay, but something was wrong. Guards in full containment equipment waited outside, visors dull and flickering with exhaustion, fear in their fields. They straightened up when they saw him, shock flicking through their fields. “Optimus Prime?”

“Megatron has collapsed of unknown causes,” he said. “He needs a medic. Where is Ratchet?”

“No,” said the first Vehicon, and the flat resignation in his voice startled Optimus; it was the voice of a bot who’d lost all hope. “No, it’s not unknown causes. Get him inside, sir. The medics will see to both of you.”

Optimus nodded and stepped between them and into the medical bay.

Another Vehicon, as fully garbed in protective gear as the guards, saw him, stared, and dropped the empty tray he’d been carrying. “Oh slag,” he said. “Dipstick, get out here now! We need another berth—and an isolation chamber!”

“Not again,” said someone, presumably Dipstick. “Did some stupid fragger decide to carry his friend
in? I thought we’d made it clear that—” He appeared around the corner, saw Optimus, and froze.

Optimus shifted his weight, still holding Megatron close, knowing he was all over energon and rust.

There was a frozen moment. Then, “Someone wake Ratchet. This way, sir.”

He was escorted to a side room, barely bigger than a cupboard with a berth taking up most of it.

“We’ll check him for infection,” said Dipstick, “though it’s pretty definite—” He cut himself off.

“We won’t be able to check you for infection for another four hours. We’ll keep you in isolation until then.”

“Infection by what?” asked Optimus, settling Megatron on the berth. He still felt tired, strangely clumsy.

“Cybonic Plague,” said Dipstick, checking Megatron over, intent. “Rather, a variety thereof. Our current guess is that the humans modified the original pathogen before deploying it.”

“The original treatment is ineffective?”

“Entirely. I’m afraid Ratchet is in recharge right now, but he will be alerted immediately.” Another Vehicon bustled in, and Optimus frowned.

“Where is Knockout?”

“Infected,” said the new Vehicon.

“We’ll get you a casualty list,” said Dipstick. “Is Ratchet—”

“Groggy as Pit but awake,” said the new Vehicon. “He’s uploading that little defrag program of Shockwave’s, should be here soon. Starscream says to get him back to berth as soon as this situation is stable. Says we might have to knock him over the helm, though.”

Dipstick made an amused noise. “Of course we will.” He took an energon sample from the crook of Megatron’s arm and hooked it into an analyzer attached to the side of the berth. “Reads nanite levels and programming,” he explained to Optimus as he did, then whacked the side of the monitor with a hand. “That is, when it’s working.” Addressed to the monitor, “I’d better not have to calibrate you again—There we go.”

He peered in silence at the monitor a while, as numbers flicked over the readout. They slowed, settled and Dipstick’s field went horrified. “Get Ratchet here now. I don’t care if you have to carry him.”

The other Vehicon turned and vanished. Optimus leaned forward, trying to get a look at the monitor screen. “What is it?”

“His nanite levels are severely depressed,” said Dipstick, and reached for a handheld scanner, ran it over Megatron’s chestplates, read it. “Slag!”

Ratchet appeared in the doorway, field shedding exhaustion, and walked over to the monitor, said, “Scrapiet fragging Primus,” without half his usual venom, and plucked the scanner out of Dipstick’s hand. He considered it briefly then said, “Bring me three packages of inactive nanites. Dipstick, we need to get a hardline in and reboot his immunity protocols.”

“Won’t that—”
“It will. We don’t have a choice. He’s got maybe an hour otherwise.”

The hardline was inserted, Ratchet did something rapid at the monitor, and the other Vehicon returned with medical packages of nanites, dumped them into the supplemental energon reservoir Dipstick had set up.

“Output levels?”


Ratchet looked grim. “Haven’t been for a while—look at the coding. We’ll need to do surgery as soon as he’s stable enough. Any secondary infection—even if it’s just an overpopulation of his own micromechanica—would be lethal at this stage.”

“Output levels just stabilized.”

“Good.” Ratchet stepped back from the berth. “Supplemental nanites every two hours. He won’t be generating any on his own for a while.”

Optimus shifted his weight uncomfortably, not sure whether he should ask for a prognosis, and Ratchet, without looking at him, said, “He’s got as much of a chance as anyone else does. Not good, but we’ve bought him some time.”

Optimus ex-vented heavily, his spark sinking. “Thank you, old friend.”

Ratchet jerked at the sound of his voice and turned to stare at him, optics wide behind the isolation mask, and widening further as he saw the rust and energon smears on Optimus’s frame.

“No,” he whispered. “Primus, please, no.”

Chapter End Notes

Alas, it is finals week, and I probably won't have time to post until after this coming Wednesday. See you then!
“We’ll get you to an isolation chamber,” said Ratchet, after a long moment. “Pathogen levels won’t be high enough to be sure if you have it for several hours yet.”

“If I too, am infected with Cybonic Plague,” said Optimus quietly, “I would prefer to remain here. I cannot see that I would do much good elsewhere.” Ratchet looked ready to object, and Optimus reached out and took Megatron’s hand in his own. It was hot, far more than it should have been, and his tank twisted at the idea of Megatron left alone now. “Please, old friend.”

Ratchet glanced at his hands over Megatron’s and nodded. “I understand,” he said, and left.

Optimus bowed his helm and waited.

He remembered well the slow creep of discomfort, the building heat in his systems, the sick itching pain spreading from his optic. The disorientation, the way time seemed to stretch unbearably, waking up from what felt like a year’s painful recharge to find that mere seconds had passed, the children still sitting in the same place, still conversing about the same subject. He waited for the pain, watchful. It did not come.

It was four human hours by his internal chronometer when Ratchet in full protective gear came to take a sample; four hours and fifteen minutes when Ratchet returned with shocked wonder in his optics and caught him by the arm.

“The test was negative.” Ratchet pulled him upright, or tried to, and held him by both arms, staring up at him. “The test was negative. Optimus, do you know what this means?” And Ratchet laughed, actually laughed. “Optimus, come quickly. You’ll be more use to us in the lab.”

“Ratchet, please elaborate,” said Optimus, quietly.

“You, alone, out of every Cybertronian on this ship, you are immune to this thing! We’ll need your repair nanites to reprogram everyone else’s—Optimus, no one else is going to die, we can save all of them!” His gesture took in the little room, the room beyond filled with the dead and the dying. “It must be because you had Cybonic Plague before, this thing is similar enough that your nanites recognize it early enough to destroy it—it’s a simple enough business—”

“Surely others have contracted the original disease,” said Optimus, getting to his pedes.

“Not as recently as you have. Not for the last few million years, at least. Immunity sometimes does wear off over time—the nanites erase the programming related to the disease in order to replace it with new data.”

“I see,” said Optimus, and looked at Megatron again, strangely silent and still on the berth. “What do you need me to do?”

They sedated him for the examination; while it was perfectly possible to do such a comprehensive systems check with the patient conscious, it was unpleasant and less efficient.
He onlined some time later, with an ache playing through his torso just under the armor, and sat up cautiously, wincing somewhat. No one seemed to notice, and with a flash of startlement he realized he was in the same room as Megatron had been, and that Megatron was gone.

Deciding to risk Ratchet’s wrath, he made his way into the main section of the infirmary, and shuttered his optics rapidly as they adjusted to the higher light levels. And went very still as he registered exactly what was there.

They’d run out of berths a long time ago, apparently. The sick were laid out in rows on the decking, all heavily sedated. He tried to accurately count them and could not; the confusion of limbs stymied any attempt. He saw Ultra Magnus there, and Knockout, and a glimmer of white near the back that might have been Wheeljack.

He reached for the doorframe to brace himself and simply stared, the horror closing his vocalizer and offlineing protocols. The floors had evidently been scrubbed, but the stench of semi-processed energon and rust and ozone scorched his olfactory receptors, mixed heavily with astringents. His tanks rolled.

Pedesteps. He reset his vocalizer, and managed, “How many?”

“Too many,” said Ratchet, quietly. “The infirmary records and Soundwave know the exact figure—or as close to the exact figure as we can know. There are likely some cases whom we never saw.”

“How?” asked Optimus.

“A biological weapon,” said Ratchet. “From the humans.”

Optimus bowed his helm, speechless with guilt and horror. I brought my people here, he thought. I brought them to this.

“You should be in berth,” said Ratchet. “I need to speak with you, and you need to fuel.”

Optimus nodded. “Understood, old friend. Where is Megatron?”

“Resting and stable,” said Ratchet. “Let’s get you to the clean area.”

The clean area was a number of rooms with a handful of makeshift berths set up and an energon dispenser. There were a few rooms intended to allow private conversation; Ratchet handed him a cube and led him to one of these, and he settled on the berth therein with a heavy ventilation of relief. Ratchet closed the door and hesitated.

“Firstly,” he said, “I am sorry that I was unable to consult either you or Megatron about this, but both cases were far too severe to delay.”

“I trust your judgement, old friend,” said Optimus, and forced himself to take a swallow of the energon. He was suspicious he would have no desire for it after hearing Ratchet’s report. “And military regulations give you considerable power of decision in these situations, particularly when the patient’s life is in danger.”

“I know,” said Ratchet, nodding jerkily. “Fuel, Optimus, please.”
Optimus took a deep ventilation and drained the cube, hoping that it wouldn’t make an abrupt reappearance. The lingering horror of the infirmary with all its bodies lent it an unpleasant flavor.

“The Forge saved you,” said Ratchet, quietly, not looking at him. “But…”

Fear twisted his tanks. “Is Megatron—”

“Megatron is as well as can be expected,” said Ratchet quickly, glancing back at him. “He is out of immediate danger. Optimus…” He looked away and Optimus waited, dreading. Finally Ratchet drew a harsh intake and met his eyes, professional and medic-direct. “Were you aware that you were carrying?”

It felt as if the room were suddenly vacuum, the very atmosphere stolen from his vents. “No,” he said, did not bother to hide the shock, the sudden realization of distress. “No, I did not.”

Ratchet bowed his helm. “While the Forge restored you, it did not save the sparkling; it is likely that the slave coding somehow interfered with your carrying protocols. I am sorry, Optimus. It was already dead when I scanned you.”

Optimus looked down and drew a long, shuddering ventilation.

“I had to remove the frame. The rust infection was extensive, and threatening to reach your sparkchamber,” said Ratchet. “Fortunately, the damage to your tank was repairable.”

“May I see…” started Optimus, and couldn’t bear to say ‘it’, vocalizer closing with sudden acute longing for a life with a sparkling, his sparkling, Megatron’s sparkling.

“Her,” said Ratchet, reluctantly, as if he feared he could make Optimus’s grief worse. “And Optimus, there is something else as well.”

Optimus looked at him. “It is better that you tell me now, old friend.”

“Megatron was also carrying,” said Ratchet. His voice was professional again, as if he were reading a report, and Optimus found that easier to bear. “Three sparklings, roughly the same stage. The Cybionic Plague killed them long before he succumbed, and the resulting damage to his gestational chamber was beyond repair. After seeing the state of your systems, I opted for immediate surgery as soon as he was stabilized.”

Optimus looked down and tucked his field in, so as not to inflict his own grief on Ratchet. “He will take it hard,” he said quietly.

Ratchet wasn’t done speaking. “The damage and subsequent secondary rust infection were such that we had to remove the tank itself. It is unlikely that we will be able to do a transplant, even if we were to find a willing donor; Megatron’s systems are old enough that it is nearly certain that they will reject most current models of the organ.”

“Primus,” whispered Optimus, very quietly.

“I’m sorry,” said Ratchet, “It would have been fatal otherwise.”

“I have faith in your judgement, old friend,” said Optimus, still not able to meet his optics. “It will only take time before—before it is possible to—”

His vocalizer failed him and he went silent, staring down at his pedes. The grief was too deep for keening, even if he still could do such a thing.
Four sparklings. Four sparklings he had never dared dream could be possible. He offlined his optics, heard Megatron’s voice again. “I still have my gestational tank. Do you know how rare a thing this is for a gladiator, Optimus?”

He wrenched himself out of the grief, pushed it away. Now was not the time; there was still an epidemic raging, and it had to be addressed before he could indulge in his own losses. He forced himself to stand and met Ratchet’s optics. “What do you need me to do, old friend?”
Chapter 19

There was little Ratchet had for him to do, but at least he could take over Ratchet’s administrative duties; meeting with Starscream and other members of the Decepticon command, monitoring the energon mines for signs of trouble, and so on. He soon found that Megatron had taken to defending the mines in person, and resolved to do likewise in case of another attack. Hopefully, the size of his new frame would be a sufficient deterrent.

The new frame was difficult to adjust to. He felt absurdly clumsy, avoided moving slowly, and still had knocked things to the floor more times than he cared to count. It had only been because Starscream had pointed it out that he realized the new mass on his dorsal plating would, in fact, allow him to fly. He wished he’d had more time to conduct simple tests on it, but time was something in short supply.

As became increasingly clear when Starscream showed him the infection rates.

The Nemesis was a dying ship. Half her crew were stricken. Another eighth were dead, with many of the sick likely to join them. One mine was also ill; the other two were working at the highest output they could manage, and still that was barely enough to supply the warship’s fuel, let alone those aboard.

Optimus looked at the figures, and tried not to let the helplessness show in his field. “Ratchet and Shockwave are confident that—”

“They’ve been confident before,” said Starscream, despairing and angry.

It was a scant hour later that Shockwave’s voice came across the room’s comms. “Optimus Prime, Commander Starscream. I have sequenced the pathogen. The results will be of interest to you.”

“That,” said Shockwave, gesturing to the long dark portion of an even longer sequence of highlighted letters on the monitor, “is the original virus’s genetic material. The highlighted portion is alien; the organism it is from is phylogenetically very different from the original virus. A bacteria.”

“You see,” said Nurse Darby, from a rather precarious position on the console, “bacteria are remarkable among organic organisms for their abilities to pick up any stray DNA that’s lying around and incorporating it into their genomes.” She glanced around, saw that the only look of comprehension she was getting was from Raf, and said, “They pretty much go around putting whatever they find into their mouths, and using it later if they’re stressed. It’s what drives things like antibiotic resistance and the creation of hormones necessary for treatment of genetic conditions, as well as other transgenic organisms. Genetically modified foods and so on.” She cleared her throat. “Anyway, what it looks like they did was put the virus’s genome into a bacterium and managed to make the bacteria behave in a very similar way to the virus. The thing is, they’re also expressing their own effects, which seem to be detrimental as well.”

“Namely, they corrode metal,” said Shockwave. “If we are to address the disease, we will need to find a way to attack the bacterium rather than the virus. The original anti-viral treatment attacks entirely different pathways than the bacterium possesses. That is why our efforts so far have been
ineffective.”

“Then why were Optimus’s nanites able to destroy it?” demanded Starscream.

“Nanites contain small genetic scanners,” said Shockwave, and brought up a picture of one on the screen, a nasty looking bug-like structure. “They contain a rudimentary processor and memory core that store a library of malicious sequences to be recognized and destroyed. In short, they recognized and attacked the pathogen in much the same way we have been diagnosing it.”

“Identifying the pathogen visually in culture proved extremely difficult,” said June, “which is why sequencing was necessary to fully identify it.”

“Previously, the one way we could identify it was searching for the Cybonic Plague sequence—hence the need for a certain quantity of pathogen for a diagnosis and the four hour wait between infection and identification.” Shockwave gestured to the dark portion again where it burned purple against blue. “This sequence also reveals where the humans obtained the virus in the first place. It exactly matches the sequence that Ratchet obtained from Optimus Prime when he was infected, and that of the Autobot plague ship that crashed here one hundred and seven point five years ago, a discovery not properly logged or reported. These data indicate that MECH must have obtained the information on the location of the crashed ship and the virus from one of their prisoners.”

“No,” said Starscream, horrified, behind them and they turned to look at him. His wings were down, the knuckles of one hand pressed to his intake, optics wide.

“Starscream, do not be quick to blame yourself,” said Optimus. “MECH could have as easily gleaned this information from me.”

Starscream laughed, a short sharp sound with no humor to it. “From you? What do you know about cyberbiology? It had to have been me.”

“And you had no choice but to divulge your own knowledge. Starscream, you are not to blame for this. Only General Bryce and Johnson are responsible.” Optimus looked up at the screen. “Shockwave. How long do you estimate it will take for you to create a serum?”

“Some time,” said Shockwave. “The programming of your own repair nanites will accelerate the process, but it will be by no means certain or instantaneous. The involvement of the genetic material from the Earth organism makes it especially difficult to predict.”

“Wait,” said a tiny human voice and Raf stood up, wobbling a bit, on Soundwave’s shoulder. “Have you identified the organism?”

“A variety of rust-creating bacteria,” said Soundwave.

“Anything more specific?”

Shockwave cocked his helm, then went to the computer. “I will have to convert my data to something compatible with human databases,” he explained as he worked. “However, the organic compounds involved are closely equivalent.” A pause. “Searching.”

Long pause. And then Shockwave announced, “Leptospirillum ferrooxidans.”

“Spell it!” said Raf, laptop open. Soundwave complied.

“It can be treated with chlorine,” said Raf. “A concentration of over 200ppm. Can you guys take that much?”
“It shouldn’t cause significant damage in early cases,” said Ratchet. “Allergic reactions would be most common, possibly some crystallization if systems aren’t properly rinsed afterward.”

“If there is nothing to be lost by trying it…” started Optimus, but Ratchet raised a hand.

“We’ll see if it actually works first,” he said. “In the laboratory.”

“Many of our number do not have the necessary time,” said Optimus.

“A concentrated chlorine rinse will stress their systems in any case,” said Ratchet. “If it is ineffective against the bacteria, the stress will only hasten the spread of infection, due to decreased nanite activity. We must be sure that it at least inhibits bacterial growth before we test it on any Cybertronian.”

Ratchet and Optimus were jerked out of recharge later that night by a ping from Shockwave, five words.

*It works. No negative effects.*

They met Starscream in the hallway, or rather, watched him barrel past in alt-mode, heading for the laboratory. They followed suit, and found Shockwave putting the figures up on the screen with his usual meticulous attention.

“How does it interact with the nanites?” Ratchet asked.

“As far as it is possible to tell,” said Shockwave, “not at all. The combined effect on the pathogen, however, is notable. While we are still likely to lose patients even with the treatment—it is, after all, useless if the subject’s systems are already irreparably compromised—for those symptomatic within the last five days or so, it should be remarkably efficacious.”

They pretended to not notice the relief in Starscream’s field. “Shall we begin treatment immediately?”

“Yes,” said Ratchet. “We have no more time to lose.”

The children almost didn’t get picked up from school the next day; the warship was in a flurry of activity. Even though nanites and chlorine treatment killed the pathogen, the systemic damage was often enough to keep the patients in stasis long after the pathogen itself was eliminated.

But at least people stopped dying at the same rate.

At least infection was no longer a death sentence.

Ultra Magnus and Knockout almost didn’t make it, the longest-infected patients to survive. Systems redundancy, said Ratchet. Thank Primus for military caste frames. Thank Primus for medic protocols.

Optimus, watching the Eradicons around him die, amended that to ‘upper military caste frames’ and
mourned those who died from no more than an accident of sparking.

Megatron, too, was a touchy case. The Cybonic Plague was gone, but his immune systems refused to stay online, causing more than a few close calls with infections. Ratchet seemed confident that they would reboot fully in time—interference from carrier protocols, he called it—and Optimus nodded as if he shared that confidence and repurposed the computer terminal in the room so he could work nearby, when he had the time. There was usually someone there, and that relieved him greatly. He did not want Megatron to wake alone.

The rest of his time he spent assisting with the cleanup.

Ratchet was right. The patients who made it to the medbay were only a small portion of those who had been stricken. They found corpses throughout the warship, in dark corners where the ailing had hidden, driven by the photophobia of the late stages of the illness, rust and energon dried on the walls around them. Optimus recognized few of them, and regretted it deeply. They deserved better.

One he did recognize, faintly. “What was his designation?” he asked, lifting the broken, stained frame so that the area could be cleaned. This mech had died particularly horribly. There were clawmarks on the walls of the little cupboard he’d locked himself into, where he must have struck the walls with claws and fists to distract himself from the pain. By all indications, he had closeted himself there long before the photophobia had set in, perhaps in some hopeless attempt not to infect others. Noble and useless, and Optimus looked down at the frame in his arms with regret that he had not known the mech better in life.

“Contrail,” said one of the Vehicons. “He was one of the ones taken by MECH. Tailspin’s command. Don’t tell Tailspin how we found him. They were friends.”

Optimus bowed his helm and took Contrail to the deck they were laying the corpses out in. It grieved him deeply that such a brave spark had extinguished in such a manner, and that he would be designated as ‘one of the ones taken by MECH’ afterwards. He deserved far better.

Never again. The words taunted him, his own words, Megatron’s words. He had promised again and again and yet again that he would never allow another to be slave coded and he had never succeeded in that. He had only succeeded in bringing still greater destruction than he had imagined possible. He had failed Contrail, who had been coded and then destroyed hideously by his tormentors. He had failed every last one of the dead, every last one of MECH’s victims.

Every last one of the sparklings they would never have.

Optimus placed Contrail’s body at the end of the line of corpses, and stood, looking at the rows and rows of the dead, at the enormity of his failure.

They’d scanned his coding, all of it. The slave coding was gone as if it had never existed, proof that Primus had never intended His children to be tormented by such a thing. This thing, his conscience alone dictated he do. For if he was to accept the enormity of his failure, it was only right that those who had orchestrated this accepted the enormity of their success.

“I wish to speak with General Bryce,” he said to Soundwave, who glanced up from his task of cataloguing the casualties, going very still in surprise. “In person.”
Chapter 20

Soundwave collected and brought Bryce to him personally, the human sputtering with rage and terror. Optimus put out a hand for him to step into.

“Return me immediately, soldier!” snapped Bryce. “This was not in your orders—”

“The slave coding has been removed,” said Optimus. “You have no power here, General Bryce.” Bryce’s face, already ashen, became more so. He tried to take a step back. Optimus steadied him.

“If you kill me, you’ll start a war,” he said.

“You already have,” said Optimus. “It is fortunate for your species that we are wearied of war.”

“What do you mean?”

“We intend you no harm, General Bryce,” said Optimus. “We only wish to give you an understanding of what it is, exactly, you have done.” He strode into the next room where the dead lay in rows.

“You expect me to be impressed?” said Bryce. “I’m not some paper-pusher. I know what a battlefield looks like.”

Optimus looked at him, a long, level regard, and gestured to the first corpse. “That was Contrail,” he said. “He was one of the survivors of MECH’s experiments, and his courage saved the lives of all imprisoned with him. He died of Cybonic Plague, alone, in darkness and in agony. The vials next to him are a tribute to the dead. They are from Lightwing and Tailspin, who mourn that he will not be present to mentor their coming sparklings.”

He moved onward, speaking of each bot: Crankshaft. Trencher. Named those who’d left vials by each, spoke of the deaths each had suffered—for the most part hideous and protracted and lonely. Bryce tried to remain dismissive, became angry when that wasn’t shield enough. Optimus ignored him, kept up his long litany. Tiltwing. Gearbox. Autoclave. Spoke of what had brought them to this alien world, what they had hoped for afterward.

“He fought because of his spark twin, reformatted and disappeared.”

“He hoped to open a bar, after the war ended.”

They came to the end of the bodies, to a patch of matte black decking on which tiny filigrees of metal were laid. Optimus paused and for the first time bowed his helm and shuttered his optics before speaking.

“Agent Fowler tells me you are a member of a political faction that believes all unborn life should be preserved, even if it violates the will and bodily autonomy of the carrier. I do not share that belief: the tragedy in these deaths lies in the fact that they were wanted, desperately, urgently wanted. These were the hope of our species, and had they survived until emergence, we would have cherished them as closely as anything sacred.”

General Bryce abruptly went very quiet. There were only seven corpses there, tiny scraps of curled metal, most blackened and twisted, one simply incomplete. Optimus named the progenitors of the first three and then stopped, looking down at the others, at the little silver incomplete corpse.
“I did not know that I carried her,” said Optimus after a time. “Not until Ratchet removed her from my frame so that her remains would not kill me as well. She died as your slave coding destroyed my circuits. The ones next to her, they would have been her brothers. They died of the Cybonic Plague that ravaged their carrier’s frame and rendered him unable to ever carry another.” Optimus ex-vented deeply. “Megatron will be devastated when he learns of it; he is still deep in stasis, the damage he did his systems while saving me still too great to allow him to wake. But he shall wake, and he shall be free.” Optimus looked down at Bryce. “So this is what you have done, General Bryce. If you wished to demonstrate that your species is indeed capable of cruelties as great as any ours has committed, you have done so. If you wished to heap miseries upon our recovering people, if you wished to demonstrate that we must indeed unite or die, you have done so. If you wished to destroy our families, you have done so. But if you desired to end our hopes of a future, you have failed.”

Bryce looked down at the little bodies a long moment. Then, “Isn’t this the part where you kill me?”

“No,” said Optimus. “Even if I knew for a certain fact that you would attempt to continue your work with the slave coding, I would not kill you. I have seen enough life lost,” his gaze flickered to the incomplete frames in front of them, “as it is. No, General Bryce, understand this; humanity is far from the worst threat Cybertron has faced. It is hardly the first species to use slave coding on us. For millennia, we were slaves of the Quintessons, and there is one thing that you must bear in mind should you continue your attempts to enslave us, General Bryce, and that is that there is a reason the Quintessons are no longer a great power in the universe. We won our freedom before; we will win it again.”

“What are you going to do, then?” said Bryce.

Optimus was silent.

“Was that a threat?” Bryce’s fists balled at his sides. “We, too, have to defend ourselves. I’ve got kids too—”

Optimus looked down at him and he fell silent.

“I cannot allow this to happen to my people again, General Bryce,” he said at last. “This is proof of my failure. I shall not fail them again.”

He started out of the room. “We have discussed all we need to, General Bryce,” he said. “Go back to your family. I must attend to what is left of mine.”

“You should have killed the fleshling,” said Starscream, after Soundwave had returned. “He’s just going to be encouraged by your little talk. Not only does he now know that we are drastically weakened, but also that we have hostile intentions.”

Soundwave bobbed his helm in assent.

“Killing General Bryce would only have reenforced his superiors’ perception of us,” said Optimus. “No, we must handle this more delicately. We must cripple their ability to do this again, rather than the people who did this.”

“And how would propose we do this?” said Starscream. “Destroy the installation?”

“That has not been effective in the past,” said Optimus. “No, I mean a more subtle attack. I will require your assistance, Soundwave. I hesitate to ask Rafael—”
Starscream let out a shuddering, disgusted snarl. “You tell me how that goes, Prime. In the meantime, I will make sure that we are capable of launching a more physical attack when your plan inevitably fails. This planet and everything on it is a threat.” He stalked away.

“All the more reason we cannot afford to fail,” said Optimus quietly. “I cannot condone the destruction of an entire species, whether it is human or Cybertronian.”

Soundwave bobbed his helm and gestured to his computer console. Optimus inclined his helm in assent.

In the next few weeks, Optimus and Soundwave began working to ensure that no human agency would again be able to use slave programming. It was long, tiring work, involving painstaking replacement of every copy of the code present on human datanets with an innocuous version, and that only after gaining access to the sensitive areas in which it was stored. Rafael helped, but pointed out that it was entirely possible that someone had yet another copy on a ‘thumb drive’ or other inaccessible device.

Soundwave looked as if he were considering the possibility.

“And they might just restart the project,” Rafael added. “Johnson’s probably really familiar with the structure of the code. He might even be able to recreate it all on his own. And Bryce is really not likely to stop now. They had the disease and everything; the vanishing of their codes isn’t going to be a major setback.”

“What do you suggest we do, Rafael?” asked Optimus, though he already had a terrible suspicion—Starscream’s plan—and a still more terrible one that it was, indeed, necessary.

Rafael looked unhappy and shrugged. Soundwave looked considering, ducked his helm and went back to work at an even greater pace.

The next day, General Bryce’s face was splashed across websites and front pages nationwide. It was an unpleasant surprise for Optimus, but as he read the headlines, it became clear what, exactly, had happened.

*Sex Scandal Hits Pentagon!*

*Top General Had Affair With Prostitute!*

“Are you sure that this will be sufficient?” asked Optimus, doubtfully. “It seems both petty and personal; would not an accusation of incompetence be better?”

Soundwave made a little gesture like a shrug and went back to work.

Within the next few days, public interest in the scandal climbed. An inquiry was launched.

What it found was utterly damning.

The supposed prostitute had vanished after getting on a flight to another human nation-state, one bordering yet another nation that the United States had hostile relations with. And a large sum of money was found to have been transferred to Bryce’s personal account. Said sum, once it had been
traced back through a number of confusing maneuvers, was found to have originated with the prostitute. Phone records were found.

The slave code was found on Bryce’s laptop, sent from the email address connected with that bank account and that large sum of money.

The conclusion the media leapt to, and that the inquiry agreed on, was this: General Bryce had an affair with an undercover agent from a hostile power, who had given him a computer virus to infect the United States’s most sensitive networks with, and been paid royally for his work.

It was neat. It was elegant.

It was utterly morally unacceptable.

But it was already done. Soundwave, after all, did not answer to Optimus, and Optimus had no power to condemn his actions.

And it was far, far better than the alternative.

Within days, the humans were rooting the slave code out themselves. General Bryce’s command was shut down and its members interrogated. All were acquitted.

Except Johnson, who was soon found to have received a similar sum of money from a similar source. He never made it to trial, though; some malfunction in a computer-operated crane dropped a shipping crate on him the same day the damning sum of money was found.

Optimus had little time to ponder the dubious morality of this. Megatron went into another crisis that evening, and it was the very early hours of the morning when Ratchet managed to stabilize him.

“Minor this time,” said Ratchet, a Pit of a comment from a mech covered in energon. “His carrying protocols are finally beginning to offline—though it should be noted that I had to permanently offline a number of them myself this time. It will set him back somewhat, but the prognosis is good. Improved from the last time, if anything.”

Optimus nodded, already half in recharge as he came down from the anxiety and terror of the last few hours. “I will stay with him,” he said. “Thank you, old friend.”

As if to mock him, the comm at the workstation went off. “Optimus Prime, sir,” said a Vehicon, “The Justice Division have just arrived and are demanding to see Lord Megatron. Commander Starscream has refused to deal with them, due to the uncertainty of his position. They are being rather insistent, sir.”

“Inform them that I will meet them aboard the Peaceful Tyranny shortly,” said Optimus, and forced himself to his pedes. “Inform them of the infection risk and Lord Megatron’s condition.”

“Optimus—” Ratchet’s optics were wide, anxious. Optimus looked down at his old friend and managed something like a small smile.

“The Justice Division, too, are Cybertronian. At a time such as this, even they deserve a warning and assistance if they require it.”
“What have you done to Lord Megatron?”

The entire Justice Division was arrayed in front of the airlock door. Optimus met Tarn’s optics steadily.

“What is the purpose of your return, Tarn?” he asked.

“A suspicion,” said Tarn. “It is unfortunate that we did not act on it sooner.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“You know perfectly well.” It was quiet, but pain crackled through Optimus’s spark all the same.

“You have not changed much, Orion Pax.”

“Elaborate.”

Tarn’s voice remained deceptively level. “Even for you, a pathogen is remarkably underhanded. But it has achieved the weakening of the Decepticon cause, and the incapacitation of Lord Megatron. Desperate times call for desperate measures. Tell me, Pax, did you wait until Lord Megatron was in stasis before stealing the relic that upgraded you so remarkably?”

“You believe this was my doing.” Anger rose in Optimus’s spark, overwhelming the discomfort from Tarn’s voice. “You believe that I turned this weapon on my own people, when we were at the brink of peace?”

“A traitor’s spark does not change.”

“You did not fully read the report, I gather,” said Optimus. “This was an outside attack, not an act of Autobot aggression. We too, have suffered from the effects of this illness. We too, have lost sparks to its advance.” His hand rested briefly over his ventral plating. “Believe me when I say I desire peace above all things. There is little hope for our species otherwise.”

“An easy sentiment from you,” said Tarn. “Lord Megatron was a fool to accept you back into the fold. It falls to us to remedy that mistake.”

There was a shift and murmur from the Justice Division, and they drew forward, ugly anticipation in their fields. Optimus stayed where he was, an unfamiliar rage building hot and vicious within his chassis. It ended the thought that their assumption was reasonable, that they too were Cybertronic and therefore his people. The memory of the little silver frame flickered before his optics, the blackened and twisted remains of their other sparklings, rows and rows of the dead laid out on the decking. Contrail sparkless in filth and rust, his fingers worn and splintered from scrabbling at the walls. Megatron still as Ratchet worked desperately within his frame.

Ultra Magnus all but offline, hardly ventilating, Ratchet explaining that they’d had to remove one hand entirely because the rust had cut off energon flow to the appendage entirely, and the ensuing protoform death was irreversible. Starscream standing by Knockout’s unconscious form, an arm folded tight over his chest.
Mearing and Johnson and Bryce, a mocking chorus of voices. Strange sick confusion. **Were you aware that you were carrying?**

He took two steps down and forward, and the Justice Division fell back under the onslaught of his field. He met Tarn’s optics, felt the brush of the other mech’s field over his, weak and falsely challenging, filled with the impotent anger of a bully thwarted. He pressed back with his own, all but unaware of what he was doing, only knowing the hurt and rage and grief of his own spark.

Tarn’s nearsighted foolishness would destroy this peace that they had worked so hard for. Tarn’s eagerness for a useless revenge would doom their species again.

He was Prime. He had failed once. He would not fail again. He had a duty to his people, those alive and those destroyed.

“You know not of what you speak,” he said. “I will **not** allow you to jeopardize the peace that we have sacrificed so much for, Autobot and Decepticon alike.” He shoved Tarn’s fusion cannon down as the mech attempted to raise it. “I will not allow you to force us down this path again.” Tarn made a faint noise as Optimus’s fingers dented the armor of the cannon housing, and Optimus ignored the flicker of discomfort it provoked. “Your orders were clear; to assist in the recovery of Cybertron. You have violated these orders, violated the trust that Megatron and I placed in you. By doing this you betray our species. Tell me, Tarn, how does this serve the Decepticon Cause? Or were you merely serving your own ambition?"

“You are hardly one to speak of the *Decepticon Cause,*” spat Tarn, the words like daggers in his spark, and Optimus somehow didn’t flinch. “You betrayed it at its inception. You became its greatest enemy—”

“That is another matter entirely,” said Optimus, and shrugged off the reaching hand that pressed his shoulder. “What matters now is the survival of the Cybertronian people, not the Autobot or Decepticon causes. I will not allow you to jeopardize that.” He cycled on his weapons, letting the sound speak for what would happen if they did not cooperate. He could only imagine too clearly what would happen if he were killed here; the Autobots aboard the *Nemesis* would follow shortly, the war would begin again.

Megatron would likely not wake, not without a med’c’s care.

Megatron, who could be negotiated with, would no longer lead the Decepticons. His successor was unlikely to be Starscream, not with Tarn waiting in the wings, and Soundwave was too wise to step blithely into his place. No, the new leader of the Decepticons would be Tarn, if for no reason other than being the right person in the right place at the right time, and Tarn could not be negotiated with.

He’d thought himself numbed to grief and dread, but that future was one he could no more allow than one in which Bryce had succeeded.

Tarn wrenched his arm from Optimus’s grasp and struck at him. Optimus ducked aside from the blow, from Helex’s aborted lunge at him.

And the airlock door slid open to reveal Soundwave.

There was a frozen moment. Soundwave’s helm turned, and then, as if seeing the Justice Division locked in combat with Optimus Prime was an everyday sight, stalked purposefully over to the nearest computer terminal and put a data cable into the port. He turned his helm back to them, as if to make sure that they were paying attention.
Helex’s arms lowered. Tarn took a step toward the terminal.

“Medical reports.” Ratchet’s voice. “All pertinent information.” Megatron. A pause. Then, to drive the point home, Megatron’s voice again. “It is long past time for all Cybertronians to unite as one people...our next oppressors will come from outside Cybertron otherwise. During our long war, we have forgotten that there are other threats among the worlds...There are species possessed of the means to bring us again to our knees, as the Quintessons did before, and they need only the tool with which to do it.” Pause. Different clip, still Megatron. “You will listen.”

Optimus looked at the Justice Division, who were glancing between him and Soundwave with great confusion.

“Thank you, Soundwave,” said Optimus, because it was only prudent, because his battle protocols were refusing to cycle down here. “I will return to the cleanup.”

Tarn shot a glare at him, then looked back to Soundwave, who bobbed his helm in assent.

The utterly disbelieving air to Tarn’s field was far more satisfying than Optimus wished to admit. He made sure to take his leave with the requisite formality, feeling Tarn’s optics on his dorsal plating the entire time.

“So what’s the big deal about this ‘Justice Division’ anyway?” said Agent Fowler. “Half the ‘bots on the boat seem scared out of their metal pants by them, and Ratchet has been muttering about what an idiot you are for the last hour.”

Optimus looked down, and found Nurse Darby had paused in her work as well, similarly interested. The two humans had taken over a small table next to the workstation near Megatron’s berth, coerced the medical bay attendants to bring in some human-sized furniture, and set up shop. Nurse Darby was taking stock of the remaining medical supplies, and working through the enormous database of Cybertronian medical texts that Ratchet had assigned her. Agent Fowler’s knowledge of Earth politics was being put to use in monitoring human communications concerning the fallout of General Bryce’s supposed treachery. So far it appeared that Soundwave’s interference had escalated tensions, but a war was not imminent.

“They have good reason to be anxious,” said Optimus. “The Decepticon Justice Division’s stated purpose is to terminate traitors in such a way as to discourage others from similar actions. Megatron originally granted them broad powers of discretion when the Division was formed.”

“Somehow I don’t think you’re a fan,” said Fowler. “So how are they going to react when they find out that humans were responsible for all of this?”

“I hope that Soundwave can adequately explain the situation to them,” said Optimus, “and that I will not be obliged to take further action to prevent them attacking Earth.” He looked over at Megatron’s unconscious form. “The timing is unfortunate.”

“Are they going to listen to anyone but Megatron?”

“That remains to be seen,” said Optimus. He turned his attention back to the work at hand, the destruction or removal of all Cybertronian material on Earth. The Autobot wreck that the humans had obtained the virus from had been destroyed without hesitation, though there was no telling what
technology the humans had scavenged beforehand; the Harbinger remained to be attended to, and the Star Saber had yet to be reclaimed, as it required Optimus to personally remove it.

He was interrupted again as the door opened and Fowler made a surprised noise and stood abruptly.

Tarn stood in the doorway, the rest of the Justice Division peering around him. Most were staring at Megatron, the worry in their fields seeping through the doorway, almost a physical force. Tarn, however, was looking at Optimus, and his field had been pulled in tight and unreadable.

“We wish…” Tarn’s optics flicked sideways to Megatron, then back to Optimus, “…to offer condolences for the loss of your creations.”

Optimus turned to fully face them, placing himself between Tarn and the humans. “Your sentiments are appreciated,” he said, taking refuge in formality. There was something about Tarn’s behavior that made him deeply uneasy.

Tarn took several steps into the room, and looked at the medical monitors. How much of it he understood was very much in question, but the demonstration of concern was likely genuine. “We were informed that the details of Lord Megatron’s recovery were yours alone to disclose.”

“Megatron will make a full recovery,” said Optimus.

That was not the answer that Tarn was looking for, it was clear, but he merely nodded. “The situation was made clear to us. Soundwave said that we were to ask your permission before executing standard protocol concerning this planet.”

There was a little rattling noise as June stood up, knocking over her chair. Optimus glanced down at her and raised a hand—she visibly restrained herself from speaking and glared up at him.

“You will not execute standard protocol,” said Optimus. “Those responsible have been dealt with.”

“Forgive me if I don’t immediately understand,” said Tarn, and there was no mistaking the edge to his voice. “This species has committed an act of war, attacked Lord Megatron’s person and that of,” a distinct pause, “a Prime, and you simply forgive them?”

“It was only a fraction of the species, unaligned with the majority of the planet’s inhabitants,” said Optimus. “To execute an entire people for the crimes of a few is unjust.”

“But…” Tarn looked utterly shocked. “But after what they have done…”

“What a few humans have done.” Optimus stepped aside to reveal Nurse Darby and Agent Fowler. “And we owe our survival to the actions of a few humans as well.”

“Prime, what are you doing?” hissed Fowler.

“Nurse Darby’s knowledge of Earth biology was instrumental in finding a cure for the modified Cybonic Plague,” said Optimus. “She has also offered considerable assistance in its containment. Agent Fowler has been a longstanding and valuable ally, risking both his life and freedom to preserve ours. Our other human allies are not present, but have been indispensable in the removal of slave coding.”

Tarn peered at the humans, uncertainty in his field.

“Their species is still more factionalized than ours,” Optimus went on. “This was the action of a handful from a single faction; that handful no longer exists. There is no more to take revenge on. No,
“Tarn, your services are required elsewhere.”

“And where would that be?”

“Resume your previous mission,” said Optimus. “Bring Cybertron’s people home.”

“Even the traitors?” That was Tesarus from the back for the crowd; Tarn shot him a very annoyed look.

“Even the traitors,” said Optimus. “They will stand trial for their actions.”

Anger flickered through Tarn’s field, quickly repressed. “We will, of course, confirm these orders with Soundwave,” he said.

“Of course,” said Optimus. It was a gamble but he suspected Soundwave would concur. They had lost too many sparks already to lose still more to the Justice Division’s erroneous disciplinary activities.

June and Fowler visibly relaxed when the Justice Division left.

“I don’t trust him,” said Fowler.

“If Soundwave gives the order, they will obey it,” said Optimus. “Earth is safe until they are ordered otherwise.” He looked at Megatron, and added, “The sooner we can depart, the better.”

“I am pleased to announce that our work on Earth is completed.” Optimus stood on the bridge of the Nemesis, flanked by Starscream and Ratchet. “All evidence of Cybertronian activity has been eliminated; with our current energon stores and the repaired and relocated spacebridge, we can return to Cybertron and begin the process of rebuilding our home.

“We have no time for revenge. Though our losses have been great, we cannot afford another war. The threat has been eliminated; we must now look to recovery. We have been entrusted with the means to restore Cybertron, and we must not squander it.” Alpha Trion’s words still rang in his processor, words meant for a time of war, but still filled with hope.

“To our human allies, we owe a debt we may never truly repay.” He looked across to the Autobots, at the children standing with them. “We will do all we can to ensure their continued protection, though the political situation has become far more stable.” Agent Fowler smiled wryly at that; given Bryce’s fall from grace, it hadn’t even taken prompting from Soundwave to have Fowler’s arrest and imprisonment questioned. The official story now was that Bryce had taken action against Fowler to conceal his own traitorous activities. Fowler was in the clear.

Optimus went on, thanking the medics who had worked so hard (which made Knockout, leaning against Starscream for support, smirk), everyone who had put themselves in the way of the disease to aid others, the scientists who had found the cure. He honored the dead again, though the funeral rites had been held a scant two days before.

“Ratchet informs me that Lord Megatron will come out of stasis within the next few megacycles.” After so long using Earth time measurements, it was comforting and familiar to slip back into Cybertronian time units. “It is my hope that he will wake to a healing Cybertron.” This statement
provoked a pleased murmur from the Decepticons in the audience.

“We have a long journey to true recovery, but together, as kindred, as Cybertronians, we will be more than equal to it.”

Chapter End Notes

No, this is not the last chapter. Things are far from being resolved...
“Nice speech,” said Fowler later, the bridge cleared and a groundbridge back to Nurse Darby’s house open. “How long did that take you to write?”

“I only regret that I could not give you and the other humans more credit,” said Optimus, carefully pretending not to notice that Miko was crying quietly as she clung to one of Bulkhead’s fingers. It would have offended her pride.

“Don’t sweat it,” said Fowler. “Different audiences, different speeches—and you’re still the substitute teacher. I know you have to step carefully.”

Looking that figure of speech up proved difficult; Optimus gave up after a few moments and surmised that Fowler had made it up on the spot. “Thank you, Agent Fowler. Please do not hesitate to inform us if you require assistance again, though it is my hope that our visits will not have to be confined to that. The paperwork you requested has gone through; you are no longer considered a Cybertronian citizen and will be able to again serve in your former position according to the laws of your country.”

“Thanks, Prime. Sorry about that.”

“I understand entirely. However, should you ever change your mind, I would be happy to reinstate you.” He looked at the other humans. “Any of you.”

“I wanna—” started Miko.

“College first,” said Bulkhead, firmly.

“Awww.”

“Hey, I’ll still be able to visit.”

Ratchet and Nurse Darby were still talking, Ratchet saying, “And continue your readings, Nurse Darby; we may need your assistance again.”

Agent Fowler was looking at her with an expression that was difficult for Optimus to read. “I believe Nurse Darby thinks very highly of you,” he ventured.

Fowler looked back at him with a raised eyebrow. “Are you trying to give me romantic advice, Prime?”

So he had guessed correctly. “Only if it is welcome.”

“Romantic advice,” said Fowler again, and shook his head. Then, more quietly, “Thanks. I know you’re going to be busy with rebuilding your planet and everything but see if you can keep in touch? I’d appreciate it.”

“I will try to do so,” said Optimus. “Your friendship means a great deal to me, Agent Fowler; I would be sorry indeed if we were to fall out of contact.”

Fowler’s mouth quirked up slightly, then went grim again. “I know Earth’s hardly been friendly in the last few months, but I’ll try and make sure that it’s pretty friendly around here if you want to come back again.” He looked down. “I’m sorry for your loss.”
“Thank you, Agent Fowler.” Optimus repressed the unhappiness before it showed in his field.

Fowler looked around. “We should get going, I think.”

It was not as simple as that, of course. Both Autobots and humans were deeply unhappy about the separation, and it was with a twinge in his own spark that Optimus watched Agent Fowler start into the groundbridge.

The human hesitated, then turned and drew himself up into a human salute. Optimus, unexpectedly touched by the gesture, placed his own hand flat over his spark, an old gesture of respect between equals.

The closing of the groundbridge left the room quiet and dim.

A personal comm from Ratchet broke the silence. Optimus, Dipstick has just informed me that Megatron is beginning to online.

Ratchet did an examination of Megatron before he declared him indeed ready to come out of stasis, and initiated the protocols that would bring him back online. Optimus stood by the berth, relieved and worried at the same time. He did not wish to greet Megatron with bad news, but he had no desire to conceal the truth.

“I’ll give you two some privacy,” said Ratchet. He met Optimus’s optics. “Comm me if you require assistance.”

Optimus nodded, and looked down at Megatron. “I will. Thank you, old friend.”

The doors slid shut, and there was a low chuckle from the berth. Megatron’s optics onlined. “Your medic is overly concerned,” he said. “I have survived far, far worse. You, for example.”

He reached for Optimus’s hand. “I take it that a cure has been found?”

“Yes,” said Optimus quietly, and took the questing servo in his own. “The advance of the disease has been halted.”

“Good.” Megatron tried to sit up and thought better of it.

“Stay still,” said Optimus. “The infection caused severe damage in a number of your systems. You are still recovering.”

“Hah,” said Megatron, and looked sidelong at Optimus. “Out with it, Prime. What damage have I suffered that has you so dismayed?”

Optimus shuttered his optics, and found himself abruptly unable to meet Megatron’s. So much for not being abrupt.

“Tell me what happened,” said Megatron, a note of steel in his voice. “I do not wish to be protected.”

“We were carrying,” said Optimus at last.

Megatron’s optics widened in understanding, and his field flared grief and growing anger. “How?”
he said, voice abruptly rough, and Optimus knew that he was not asking how they had come to be carrying.

“The slave coding shut down my gestational systems,” said Optimus. “The sparkling I was carrying did not survive. You—” His vocalizer fizzed static, and he had to reset it, the grief and loss shading his field. He offlined his optics briefly, stepping back, fighting for the emotional distance he used when giving such news to someone under his command. He did not know if he could form the words otherwise. “The Cybonic Plague destroyed your gestational systems. The sparklings you were carrying did not survive.” He drew in a deep ventilation, the weight of Megatron’s shocked realization heavy on him, making it hard to continue speaking. “The extent of the damage is such that it was necessary to remove your gestational tank; the rust infection that had set in would have killed you otherwise.”

The bond clamped shut. Something closed down in Megatron’s face, and he looked away, field pulling in so fast Optimus got only the barest sense of a shocked confused agony. He didn’t move otherwise.

“Megatron—” Optimus started.

“Leave me.”

“I am here if you wish to—”


Optimus went to the door, moving slowly. “Megatron—” he started, but thought better of it and with a backward glance at the still figure on the berth left the room.

He leaned against the doorframe, suddenly deeply weary, watching a pair of Eradicons talk, the joy in their fields pressing against his. A snatch of conversation reached his audials—*a sparkling, cannot believe*—and he offlined his optics and folded his arms across his chest.

From the closed doors there came a long low sound that may have been a keen, and Optimus pressed himself back into the door, sick and helpless and horribly alone.
“It’s a liability,” said the proprietarius, glaring at the datapad in his hand. “You will have it removed, immediately.”

“A liability?” Megatronus tilted his helm, allowing no more than an expression of inquiry to cross his face. He remained still and deferent, the very picture of an obedient fool.

“Yes. A financial liability. If you’re sparked, we lose shanix. If you terminate it, we lose shanix to the procedure and recovery. Insist on retaining the tank, and we have no bargain.”

“Ah. I understand.” Megatronus shifted his weight, allowing his plating to fan out, ever-so-slightly. Not quite a threat, but a reminder, of his abilities and his value. Under any other circumstances, he would have gone elsewhere—but just now he had little choice. Selling himself to this fool for a full six vorns was hardly ideal either, but desperation was an ugly master.

The smaller mech looked up at him, an appraising light in his optics. “I know you haven’t any other choices, Megatronus,” he said. “Not after what you did to that last lanista of yours.”

Megatronus snorted. “Do you want my skills or not?”

The proprietarius inclined his helm in a nod.

“Good,” said Megatronus. “Then do not require me to sell my frame and spark and no issue shall come of it.”

“I’ll consider it,” said the proprietarius, after a long pause.

“Optimus Prime? You should fuel.”

Optimus looked up. A Vehicon, Tailspin, if he remembered correctly. He straightened up, realizing that he was sitting with his back pressed hard against the door. “Thank you,” he said, but made no move to take it.

“Please fuel,” said Tailspin. “The medics will have my helm if you don’t. Ratchet’s in a foul mood.”

Optimus glanced back at the door. “And Megatron?”

“Fuel first,” said Tailspin.

Optimus accepted the cube, and Tailspin turned to go. “Tailspin,” he said on impulse, and the Vehicon turned to look down at him. “How is Lightwing?”

“Probably flying circles around the warship again,” said Tailspin. “He’s delighted to be out of quarantine.” The tone was wry, but his field flickered in affection.
Optimus managed a smile. “I am glad to hear it. Thank you, Tailspin.”

Tailspin hesitated a moment, then settled himself against the wall a respectful distance away. “If you would like company…” he started, then looked away.

“By all means,” said Optimus before the Vehicon was overcome by his own embarrassment. “It would be appreciated.”

“According to the physician, you still have your gestational tank,” said Puchellus, peering at the datapad in his hands. “How pretentious. Tell me, do you actually intend to use it?”

Megatronus looked away, heard himself answer. “I had hoped to, yes.”

Puchellus laughed quietly. “You do seem to have quite a habit of imitating your betters. So how would you intend to support a sparkling, my foolish gladiator?”

“At present it would be impossible,” he was forced to admit.

Puchellus laughed. Small blunt fingers touched him under the chin, forcing him to look up and meet his master’s optics. ‘At present’, the smaller mech mocked. “You still harbor dreams of greater things, Megatronus?”

He hoped that was rhetorical. Puchellus looked down at him a long while, then released him.

“I’ll have it removed,” he said. “When the finances will stand it. The newest toy was so very expensive.” He smiled down, tilting his helm. “Oh, don’t look so low about it, pet. If I decide I want sparklings out of you, I can always find you something pretty to mount.”

Tailspin left sometime after that in Lightwing’s company. Optimus stayed where he was, not wanting to disturb Megatron, but not wanting to leave in case he was needed, and not knowing what else he could do. His mind raced in circles, trying to find some sort of solution, something he could do to make it right, to comfort his mate.

Instead of the background stupor of Megatron’s sleeping mind, the bond flickered with pain and grief, dim but present.

He watched Starscream come in to find Knockout, Knockout still unsteady on his pedes but grinning broadly all the same. The passing touch of their fields, flushed with happiness and anticipation, was torment in itself, and he forced himself not to watch them, pushed the longing envy back.

There was a disapproving noise above him. “You’ve barely touched your fuel,” said Ratchet, and bent to lift the cube. “Finish it; I have one for Megatron when you’re done.”

He obeyed; there was little else he could do, and stood, holding out a hand for the second cube. “Is it wise to disturb him?”
“He needs to fuel,” said Ratchet. “Especially in his condition. We’ll do a direct line in if he doesn’t cooperate; somehow I think he’d prefer this.”

Optimus imagined the result of that and said, “I believe you are correct, old friend.”

He turned to the door, hesitated a moment and then touched the pad by the side of the door. It opened.

Megatron sat on the berth, knees drawn up to his chest, arms folded over them, staring at the wall. He glanced up at the sound of the door. Optimus held the cube out like a peace offering. “You should fuel.”

Megatron looked away, optic ridges drawing down, and said nothing. Optimus took a few more steps forward, and placed the cube on the edge of the berth. Megatron’s field drew back from his, and Megatron turned his helm away pointedly.

“Megatron…” he said softly.

“I don’t want your sympathy, Prime,” snarled Megatron. “I asked to be let alone.”

“But you do not have to bear this alone,” said Optimus, and put a hand on the berth. “I am here for you in whatever capacity you require.”

“I require solitude, Prime, is that really so difficult to comprehend?” Megatron hauled himself to his pedes and steadied himself on the berth. “I need no pity, no condescension—”

“I offer neither,” said Optimus. “Only what support you might require.”

“Then leave.”

Optimus hesitated, but Ratchet had been vehement. “Fuel, and I will.”

With a snarl, Megatron took the cube and drained it. “Satisfied?”

Optimus inclined his helm. “No,” he said, “but I will honor your request.” He turned to go.

“Your old frame was far better,” said Megatron to his back, and Optimus kept the hurt out of his own field and merely said, “I know.”

And then the message came in, a panicked Eradicon. “Optimus Prime, sir, the Justice Division is back. They’re demanding to speak with you.”

“I will see to it,” said Megatron, shoving past Optimus.

“My lord, I wasn’t aware that you were—” The Eradicon cut himself off, then added, “They say they have prisoners. For trial.” His voice rose a little in disbelief on the part of that phrase.

“I will address that matter,” said Optimus, because he misliked the idea of Megatron charging into such a situation alone. And he had the suspicion that, whatever Tarn meant by his sudden reappearance, it was directed at him.

Somehow, he doubted it was a show of loyalty.

Chapter End Notes
Yup, I admit it, I mucked around a bit with Roman terminology when it came to my gladiators. The inaccuracy is completely intentional, because I imagine Cybertronian gladiators' lives were totally different from their Terran counterparts...
Chapter 24

Fulcrum had given up on enumerating the worst experiences of his life. There were too many. If he was to be entirely honest, his life was just one long really bad experience. He needed to make better life choices, but even when he tried they all came back to bite him in the aft. But if he was keeping count, this one had to be one of the very, very worst.

The rest of the little group of scavengers were jammed into one corner of the brig, staring at the door beyond the forcefield with wide optics. Fulcrum, on account of being the slagger who had gotten them into this to start with, was at the front and determinedly trying to wriggle his way back into the middle. Being picked up by the Justice Division was bad enough. Being picked up and kept alive by the Justice Division after attacking them was even worse. For attacking them by mistake, but to be honest, who expected the Justice Division to go flying around spreading the news of peace? No one, that’s who. Absolutely no one.

It hadn’t helped that they’d opened their transmission with the announcement that one of the Scavengers was on the List. And that all of them were to surrender immediately. That wasn’t the sort of thing you said before announcing peace. That was the sort of thing you said before messily executing the traitor and then everyone else for sheltering the traitor.

So they’d been scared. So they’d attacked the DJD.

Who hadn’t proceeded to murder them in messy and creative and above all painful ways, not even Fulcrum, the traitor in question.

No, they’d been bunged in a cell and left. With the occasional snicker from a passing member of the Justice Division which was even more terrifying. Because if the Justice Division captured you and then didn’t kill you and laughed whenever they saw you, it was a pretty good bet that whatever was in store for you was even worse than the usual treatment traitors could expect, and if that wasn’t tank-churningly terrifying, Fulcrum didn’t know what was.

He hadn’t been able to imagine a worse fate than being caught by the DJD. Now, however, he could imagine plenty.

The sound of raised voices in the corridor froze them all in place. Someone made a small, high-frequency noise. One voice rose in unmistakable, absolute rage.

The voice in itself was unmistakable.

Fulcrum felt every optic in the brig settle on him.

“What did you do to torque Megatron off?” someone hissed.

“I don’t know!” Fulcrum tried to push himself further away from the forcefield, found it impossible. “Really, I don’t! It’s not possible! I’ve never met him!”

Pedesteps, and the door opened. A sparkling-noise of terror escaped Fulcrum’s vocalizer. He wasn’t the only one.

Kaon stepped through the door. He did not look happy. But Fulcrum’s attention fixated on the mech behind him, big, distinctively red and blue, with what looked like the fragging Star Saber on his back, and Autobot decals winking silver from his upper arms.
“Deactivate the forcefield,” said Optimus Prime, the fragging *Prime*, and the entire group flinched back into the corner as he stepped forward and offered a hand to them. “There has been an error. I apologize. You are free to go.”

Terrified optics stared back at him, and the group huddled in the corner of the brig didn’t move. Optimus tried to take another step forward, and stopped when the movement provoked another chorus of high-frequency panic. He glanced over his shoulder.

Kaon was smirking.

“You may go,” he said, and watched the smaller mech leave, then commed Ratchet. *We have a group of Decepticon refugees*, he sent, for want of a better description. *They need inoculation before coming aboard, or mingling with any previously infected—*

*I know my job, Optimus, thank you*, retorted Ratchet. *On my way.*

The huddled mass in the corner began to disentangle itself. “This isn’t a joke, right?” ventured the little mech who had been at the front of the crowd, K-class with an impressive chin. “Er. And is that actually Megatron out there?”

The words, “...utter and complete disregard of my EXPLICIT orders...” filtered through the door.

“Yes,” said Optimus. “It is.”

“And you’re actually Optimus Prime?”

“I am. Do any of you require medical assistance? My chief medical officer is on his way; due to a recent crisis aboard the *Nemesis*, we will need to inoculate you for a strain of Cybonic Plague before you come aboard.”

“What are you doing here? Why aren’t they trying to kill you?”

“The war is over. We are at peace, and ask your assistance in restoring Cybertron.”

“YOU SEE FIT TO WASTE MY TIME WITH THE TRIALS OF THESE MINOR OFFENDERS? DO YOU KNOW WHAT WE HAVE LOST, TARN?”

Optimus glanced at the door. “Some alacrity would be appreciated. I hope to distract Megatron before he says something to further aggravate the situation. He has only just been released from the medical bay.”

“Uh.” The little K-class mech looked uncertain. “Right. Just so I have it absolutely clear—you’re not planning on killing us in inventive ways, right?”

“No,” said Optimus, resolving to have firm words with someone about the fact these bots seemed terrified of their own leaders. “You will not be harmed.”

The opening of the groundbridge provoked another withdrawal.

“This is Ratchet,” said Optimus. “He is my Chief Medical Officer. Please cooperate with him.” The little group shrank back into the corner, and he added, “I would prefer not to have to enlist the assistance of the the Decepticon Justice Division, but I will if Ratchet informs me that it is necessary.” There was an instant movement away from the wall, and Optimus felt slightly guilty at
having resorted to the threat. If it weren’t for the question of Tarn’s reaction to Megatron’s anger, he would have stayed and assisted Ratchet; they were still obviously distressed, and deserved protection rather than intimidation. “Thank you. I will return shortly.”

He hardly needed to enter the room before he knew that he was too late. Tarn’s field was tucked in too tightly to be read, but the set of his frame was that of sullen anger and indignation. The question remained of how to derail Megatron without further enraging him, a difficult proposition indeed.

“Megatron,” he said, stopping Megatron in mid-snarl, “the prisoners have been released, and Ratchet is currently performing a systems check on them and inoculating them for the new strain of Cybonic Plague. As my credibility is, for obvious reasons, somewhat questionable in their minds, I believe it would be best if you were to apprise them of the situation in person.”

Megatron turned a gaze on him that made his spark flinch. It was an expression he had seen turned on him many times during their war, one that he had hoped never to see again in peace.

“Very well, Prime,” he said after far too long, and pushed past Optimus. Optimus stilled him with a hand on his shoulder, and Megatron paused, the anger still whipping through his field.

*Be kind to them, Optimus sent. They did not ask for this.*

Megatron shrugged away from his hand. “I am well aware of that,” he snapped, and stormed away through the door. Optimus did not like the idea of leaving the little group of Decepticons at his mercy, but Ratchet would ensure there was no harm done, and there were far more pressing matters to attend to.

The Decepticon Justice Division were staring at him, fields filled with impotent hatred. He was the reason for their humiliation.

“Megatron came out of stasis earlier today,” he said. “He has only just learned of the death of our sparklings and the extent of his own damage.” Tarn and the others appeared unmoved, and Optimus judged it necessary to sacrifice Megatron’s privacy, a small measure in order to prevent rebellion. “Including the removal of his gestational chamber.”

A collective ventilation of shock, and the Justice Division drew back, looking at each other.

“How?” demanded Tarn, after a moment. “Who would dare—”

“It was due to the modified Cybonic Plague,” said Optimus. “You have, I presume, seen the casualty lists; it speaks greatly to Megatron’s strength that he alone of the affected carriers survived the illness. However, the epidemic has severely eroded the resources available to us. Now, more than ever, Megatron needs your support.”

There was another pause. The Justice Division were trading thoughtful looks again. Lord Megatron’s loyal supporters in his hour of need. They *liked* that idea.

“Those who did this to him—”

“Soundwave has dealt with them,” said Optimus. “Cybertron’s restoration is our priority now. Our people must recover from our long war. Otherwise, what will we do when other species learn of the slave coding? We are a weak and easy target now, and can expect no aid from the Galactic Council.” He had only heard of the blacklisting of Cybertronians far too late to appeal it; if the Quintessons tried again to enslave them, or if some new species attempted it, they would be on their own.

Tarn made a derisive noise. “Certainly not,” he said. “They’d *like* to see us controlled.”
That was certainly an unpleasant thought, and Optimus suspected it to be entirely true. “Fortunately, it is unlikely that they will be able to obtain the coding in the first place. Soundwave has made sure of that.”

They looked doubtful, but their fields were expanding, and there was significantly less anger in them now.

“We have not previously had the required time to allow you to make a full report of the current situation in other parts of the universe,” said Optimus. “I would appreciate such a report in five megacycles, if your orders allow you to remain in company with the Nemesis for that period of time.”

“Our current orders,” said Tarn, sounding very displeased indeed, “confine us to Cybertron’s orbit for the foreseeable future, where we will be no use at all to the Decepticon Cause.”

“It is not my place to rescind Megatron’s orders,” said Optimus. “I will certainly consult with him, however. In the meantime, I require that report.”

He wasn’t sure if Tarn would do it, but the closed side of the bond that was Megatron warned him not to attempt another conversation, and so at the appointed time, he went across to the Peaceful Tyranny.

To his surprise, the Justice Division had indeed prepared a report, and delivered it with a sort of grudging meticulousness that warmed significantly as Optimus showed himself willing to listen and indicated that he valued their opinions.

Some of those opinions were deeply unsettling—Optimus quickly determined that it was vital to keep Tarn away from the Wreckers, Wheeljack in particular—but they were useful nevertheless in determining the sentiments of the hardline members of the faction. He found, to his relief, few points of contention in the current treaty. By the time he left, he was at least reasonably sure that the Justice Division was not about to cause a split among the Decepticons.

Upon his return to the warship, he found Megatron stubbornly unwilling to even speak to him, and retreated to their empty quarters by himself, where he fell into recharge out of sheer exhaustion.
Chapter 25

Ratchet had to shoo Megatron away from the little group of Decepticons, before he scared the sparks out of them any further. They were, of course, in absolute shock, still obviously trying not to think about how they were being treated by an Autobot medic, or how they’d just spent Primus knew how much time in the brig of the Peaceful Tyranny, or that they’d just encountered both Optimus and Megatron within the same megacycle. Mostly, their thoughts seemed to focus around thank Primus we’re not dead (as one of them frequently reiterated until Ratchet was ready to whack him upside the helm). Ratchet made sure to inform them of the current situation anyway; he had no desire to patch up injuries from any fights that might be caused by someone saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Then Knockout came in, obviously gloating, and demanded a full-frame scan. Knockout had been accurate in his guess—he was indeed sparked. Ratchet noted his surprise that they had embarked on this course of action so rapidly; Knockout simply said, “Cybonic Plague. It rearranges your priorities. How’s Himself, by the way?”

“Recovering. Mute it while I do the fine scan.”

Starscream was obviously, obnoxiously, exuberantly happy when he learned of the sparkling. Every spare moment he had, he fluttered and preened over Knockout, presented him with gelled energon—its a remarkable treat—escorted him to and from the medical bay, and looked insufferably pleased with himself even with Knockout well out of sight. Knockout gleamed more than he had since Breakdown’s offlineing.

“What can I say, he’s wonderful with a buffer,” he said when questioned, and then—Ratchet was sure it was only to vex him—added with a significant look, “And I mean wonderful.”

It was one sparkling; Ratchet would have been shocked if they had managed a standard litter. Both progenitors, after all, were quite small.

Starscream was already preening about the fact the sparkling appeared to be a flyer, and making comments about succession and how brilliant a flyer his creation would certainly be.

At least he’d learned early on not to talk about such things in front of Megatron, who was released from the medical bay within the next few rotations.

It wasn’t much later that the rest of Starscream’s trine arrived. Ratchet at first counted himself lucky that he was sequestered in the medical bay, but it didn’t last long. Seekers got everywhere.

Skywarp and Thundercracker were as delighted to see Starscream as Starscream was to see them, and the air vibrated with shrieking, chirring and spates of Vosian, a high-frequency dialect almost impossible for any other Cybertronian to understand. Within the first twenty minutes, something Starscream said grievously offended Skywarp, and there was a very brief tussle ending with the two of them crashing into the decking hard enough to make things shake and bring Ultra Magnus out of sickbay at a brisk hobble.

Soon after that groundbridge opened and shut and the exploration crews around the Sea of Rust were treated to the sight of the command trine beating the slag out of each other with the greatest of glee.
“It is good to see Starscream enjoying himself again,” said Optimus, later that evening.

Megatron snorted, a derisive sound. “How delightful for him, I am sure,” he said. “As long as he can keep his trinimates in line during the treaty signing tomorrow, I will refrain from scrapping the lot of them.”

Optimus said nothing, though he profoundly disliked hearing Megatron speak of his officers in such terms. Megatron, however, sensed the disapproval through the bond and snorted again.

“Is there anything I may do for you?” Optimus asked, because anything more directly addressing the problem would only earn him snarled anger. Close proximity to Megatron these days was a constant exercise in patience and discretion.

“I’m not an invalid, Prime.”

“I never meant to imply any such thing.”

“You pity me,” spat Megatron, turning on him. “Don’t lie, Prime, I can feel it in your field, over the bond. The great Optimus Prime, savior of the cosmos, with his unending well of pity. Am I just another pet to you now, another thing to be protected and taken care of, like those fools the Justice Division picked up? I will not tolerate it, Prime. I will not.”

Optimus bowed his helm and said nothing.

“Oh, show some anger, Prime!” Megatron rounded on him, dentae bared. “Anything but that tolerant understanding, as if I were one of your Autobots!”

“I do not understand what you want of me,” said Optimus, not bothering to hide his distress. “Megatron, please, I do not understand what I am doing wrong.”

“They were your sparklings too. Show it, Unicron take you!”

Optimus looked away, the pain rising in him again. “I have not had the luxury of expressing my distress openly for a long time,” he said at last. “It does not come easily. Believe me when I say that I too mourn the sparklings we have lost.”

“And yet you allowed the humans to live.”

“Yes,” said Optimus.

“Why? Did all those lives matter so little to you, Prime? They were supposed to be your people—or do you still believe the Eradicons and Vehicons to be drones? Even so, what of your sparklings?”

There was an unspoken demand there. What of me?

“I am sick to my spark of death,” said Optimus. “What Soundwave did to General Bryce was sufficient to end his activities, and it labeled the slave code a malicious virus, which the humans will destroy themselves. Johnson is dead. And yes, the humans live. They deserve an opportunity for redemption, as do we. I did not destroy Earth because I believe that now is the time for peace. All those lives will mean nothing if we simply turn and destroy ourselves in another war.”

“I despise this,” snarled Megatron, glaring up at him. “I am weak. I am small. I am again second to you. I have lost my sparklings and my tank just as I would have had our war never happened, and
you tell me, Optimus, that now is the time for peace? It is easy enough for you. You at least have grown stronger."

“Megatron...” Optimus bowed his helm and offlined his optics, and did not know what to say.

“Megatron, please!” His own voice echoing in an open, silent commline. “Megatron, wait, it’s not like that, wait—don’t you understand? This is the only way we’ll be able to get them to listen to us. I don’t want this.”

Long, long pause, and the words wouldn’t stop coming. “You would make the better Prime, but the Council won’t accept it, you know that. I can do this. Let me help. Megatron?”

The comm clicked dead.

“Tell me what I may do,” he said at long last. “Please. I do not wish to repeat our past.”

Megatron turned away with a snarl. “Is our war again your only concern, Prime?” The title was a curse.

“No,” said Optimus. “No. I fear for you. I do not wish to lose you again, not as the price of my own survival. You are far more than I could ever have asked. Megatron, I beg you not to bear this alone.”

He opened the sparkbond as widely as he could. “I am here.”

Megatron hesitated, still with his back turned.

He eased himself to his knees, the unfamiliar frame threatening to overbalance him, and waited.

Megatron did not turn back to him for a long while, then sat abruptly on the decking. He allowed Optimus to reach out to him, pressed back against his hand, and bowed his helm.

After a long time, he allowed himself to be gathered up and simply held. The sparkbond eased open again, filled with clear and devastating grief.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The treaty was signed the next day, and recordings of it were broadcast across the galaxies, Optimus Prime and Lord Megatron agreeing to peace. The War was over. And, in accordance to the stipulations of the treaty, Optimus Prime appointed Lord Megatron as his Lord High Protector, a ceremony made unusually austere by their circumstances. And then, together, they announced their sparkbond for all to hear, using the traditional language, the traditional vows, so stilted and passionless compared to what they had said the night the bond had been made.

Megatron’s side of the bond was very slightly open now, not much but enough to fill Optimus with hope. Megatron, however, did not act any more warmly to Optimus than tradition and ceremony demanded. Any newcomers likely thought the bond purely political, a distressing thought.

The Justice Division was present, but refrained from causing any calamities, which was as much of an endorsement of the treaty as they were likely to give. However, there was a tense moment when Wheeljack—by accident or intention, and Optimus rather suspected the latter—blundered into their midst carrying a lob ball.

People tensed. The Justice Division looked down at the Wrecker. Optimus readied himself to intervene to prevent a re-ignition of the war they’d just ended. Next to him, Megatron did the same.

Wheeljack looked over his shoulder at Optimus, grinned a grin that promised trouble, and handed the ball to Tarn.

The ensuing, viciously competitive game of lob proved beyond a doubt that the Autobots and Decepticons had a long, long way to go before tensions were truly dissipated. Ratchet and Knockout would have their hands full later, even though Optimus and Megatron remained to make sure that the competition did not become something worse.

They returned to their quarters exhausted. Megatron sat heavily on the berth and caught Optimus’s arm, pulling Optimus down next to him. Optimus placed a hand on Megatron’s shoulder, greatly relieved when Megatron did not move away.

“I doubt that Ratchet or Knockout will thank us for the results of today’s activities,” said Optimus.

“Ratchet will not,” said Megatron. “Knockout is with Starscream. It is hardly problematic; none of the injuries were significant. It is the threatened rematch that we should be concerned about.”

“Indeed,” said Optimus, and tentatively moved closer to Megatron. Megatron’s hand tightened around his arm.

There was a brief silence. Then, very quietly, Megatron said, “Tradition would suggest that the announcement of our bond be consummated with a sparkmerge.”

“Only if you wish it,” said Optimus.

Megatron made an irritated noise. “Would I have mentioned it otherwise?”

Optimus smiled and reached to cup the side of Megatron’s helm in his hand. “Then I am glad indeed,” he said. He leaned forward to rest the front of his helm against Megatron’s.
Megatron huffed. “There is no need to be maudlin,” he growled, but clutched at Optimus’s shoulder guards and pulled their frames together with a crash. Optimus leaned to nibble along Megatron’s neck guard and Megatron made an impatient noise.

“A moment,” said Optimus, running his hands over Megatron’s back with broad gentle strokes. He tucked both legs up onto the berth, and reached to place both hands on Megatron’s waist. “May I?”

Megatron looked away and nodded curtly, and Optimus lifted him into his lap with shocking ease. Megatron hooked his legs around Optimus’s waist and the hands on Optimus’s shoulder guards tightened.

“Are you comfortable?” asked Optimus, carefully not moving. The tension in Megatron’s frame worried him. “I can lean back if you would prefer that.”

Megatron hesitated, then nodded again. Optimus eased himself back against the wall—not entirely prone, as that was uncomfortable—and let his hands drop from Megatron’s waist.

Megatron caught them and replaced them. “I’m not made of glass, Prime,” he growled. His claws slid under the outer guards of Optimus’s pelvic plating, and Optimus made a little noise between a gasp and a whine.

Megatron worked his way up Optimus’s abdomen, and Optimus clutched at his waist, trying not to hurt him, and moaned as his interface panel slid back. A hot glossa traced the edge of his port. He shivered as it was withdrawn, and then gasped again as his cable was given similar treatment.

“Megatron—”

Megatron chuckled, deep and full of promise. “Your spark, Optimus.”

Optimus managed something like a nod, and opened his chest plating, baring the Matrix. It took him another moment before he had the wit to unlock the spark chamber itself, lighting Megatron’s faceplates in blue.

Megatron offlined his optics, and opened his own spark. He hesitated a long time like that, and Optimus looked down.

New welds crisscrossed the bottom of Megatron’s sparkchamber, a testament to the wonder of his survival, the ravages of the disease he had so nearly succumbed to. He did not reach to touch it, fearing that he might cause damage, the new frame still too big and clumsy to trust with such precision. Instead, he leaned to rest his helm on Megatron’s.

Megatron huffed impatiently and leaned up, bringing their sparks together.

The world fell away. The rightness of it stole the atmosphere from Optimus’s vents, and he clung tightly to Megatron, reveling in the closeness, in the feel of Megatron all around him.

But there was something odd, something not quite right, and Optimus expressed gentle query at the other spark.

Which withdrew. He sent a feeling of apology—hadn’t meant to pry—but did not conceal his concern.

Something about that was too much. Everything Megatron had hoped to conceal, everything he had meant to hide, to forget about, came flooding forward, an overwhelming wave of grief and anger and burning shame, growing as Megatron realized he’d failed to hide it. He’d hoped to lose himself in the
sparkmerge, to escape from his own emotions and the prison they had made of his own frame.

He had failed. He was weak. He had lost everything, and been helpless to prevent it. He had failed to protect his sparklings, his mate, himself, and his survival was a joke, a jest of the universe. And what had brought him to this?

Humans.

Organics.

Primitive organics had done this to him, and he wasn’t capable of revenging himself!

He was weak. He had failed. He was a weak fool and there was nothing more he could do.

The shame rolled through them, biting and bitter. The war be damned. He’d still lost his tank, and was helpless to stop it. He’d been mutilated by the organics, the tiny, weak organics. His very sparkchamber was scarred.

Distantly, Optimus heard his own voice, repeating a denial over and over again. Megatron no, please no. This was not your fault.

His spark reached for Megatron’s, gentling and loving. This was not your fault. You are not diminished by it. He projected calm, felt Megatron’s frantic misery subside. You are strong.

Dull denial.

You are strong. You are still here. You survived when no one else did.

So did the ones who did this to me!

Deny them that importance. He drew Megatron into him, sharing with him his own pain, his own anger.

Something about that made Megatron relax.

Do not be ashamed. There is nothing for you to be ashamed of.

Optimus reached into the memories of the reports he’d gotten. Megatron defending the energon mines, singlehanded. Megatron directing the containment efforts.

The security footage of Megatron reviving him, staggering under the weight of the Forge, collapsing.


Cybertron and the Council. The arena.

This does not diminish you. This does not take from you what you have achieved.

The gladiator a young and foolish archivist had fallen in love with, so many millennia ago, and the moment he had seen that gladiator again before him, in a desert on an alien planet.

And slowly, Megatron seemed to accept this. Anger and grief still ran strong through him, and Optimus embraced him, asking nothing, only being present.
Slowly the misery dissipated. It would return, they both knew that, but for now there was a relief, a comfort and a shelter in the other’s presence, and that was all either of them could ask.

Two rotations later, they activated the Omega Lock. Two Autobots and two Decepticons stepped forward and inserted the keys into their places. Looking across the mechanism to Megatron, Optimus saw his own somber hope reflected in his Protector’s optics, a hope for peace and regeneration.

And as the ground beneath their pedes jolted and hummed to life, he felt Megatron’s own wonder and joy through the sparkbond, even as Megatron hid his emotion with a flippant comment.

Optimus simply smiled, and pretended he hadn’t heard.

They rebuilt. Even with the Lock, there was much to be done. Shockwave worked to restore Cybertron’s fauna, cloning what organisms he could find genetic material from. The Omega Lock contributed to that as well, but not at a noticeable level.

Megatron had to firmly dissuade him from attempting to clone anything prehistoric, and Optimus was impressed that he had managed to do that much; Shockwave’s antennae drooping as he was informed he could not, in fact, attempt to clone a Predacon from the bone he held was painful to watch.

Time passed. Cybertron healed.

Cybertron’s people returned.

Optimus’s time filled with negotiations, with the establishment of a permanent government. To his shock, they insisted on retaining the positions of Prime and Protector; it did a great deal to diffuse Autobot/Decepticon tensions, he was informed, and that was the final word on the subject.

Of course, the positions themselves were rapidly made mostly symbolic, ‘unless in the case that the Council should see fit to reinstate the traditional powers of the Prime and Protector’. Megatron complained bitterly, but was mollified somewhat when both of them were appointed to the Council.

Returning neutrals complained about that, but they already enjoyed more than adequate representation on the Council and had no legal basis for their complaints.

Not long after that, sometime between the dismissal of the Iacon Reconstruction Planning Committee and the formation of the Iacon Reconstruction Executive Committee, Optimus found himself unable to ingest standard energon rations without significant discomfort in his fuel systems. He took himself in to see Ratchet, feeling somewhat guilty for troubling him over something so trivial.

Ratchet was hardly halfway through the frame scan when he smirked and said, “Thought so. It’s carrier sensitivity. We’ll need to get you on medical-grade rations immediately—the impurities in standard rations are what’s causing your discomfort.”

Optimus shuttered his optics at his old friend, a wild hope forming in him. He didn’t dare voice it.

Ratchet turned to look at him. “You’re sparked.”

Now he did smile, a hand going instinctively to his ventral plating. “That is good news indeed, old
friend,” he said. “What else can you tell me? How many—”

“It’s difficult to tell,” said Ratchet. “They’re all extremely active—a good sign—and there’s interference from the Matrix. Cautiously, I’d estimate about eight. You’ll need help raising them.”

“Indeed,” said Optimus, realizing he was still smiling. “Thank you, old friend.”

Megatron’s response was uncharacteristically subdued, the good news undoubtedly overshadowed by the memories of the sparklings they had lost, and they sat for a time in silence. But after that, Megatron turned to the attendant tasks with as much interest and pleasure as Optimus did; determining which bots to ask assistance from for raising the coming brood (Ratchet and Soundwave both made the top of that list, and both accepted; Soundwave with an evident glee that surprised Optimus—no gestational chamber, explained Megatron, and creations killed early during his time in the arena), determining new living arrangements and rearranging their usual schedules to accommodate the sparklings.

Carrying, Optimus soon discovered, was not an enviable experience, and by the time Lightwing underwent emergence, Optimus heartily wished he could be doing the same. Even if Knockout had appeared distinctly unsettled that evening, and kept sneaking glances down at his own expanded chest plating, his field nervous.

The new progenitors were utterly delighted, and their sparklings were, to the stated shock of the doctors, all female, and all displayed features that neither of their parents possessed—different coloration, differently shaped optic visors, more digits on each hand. Genetic recombination, Ratchet explained; as both Tailspin and Lightwing had been modified into uniformity early in their development, it was certainly to be expected. The large number of femmes, however…

The Matrix whispered reasons for that into Optimus’s spark, and he remained silent. It was not a topic he wished to broach without further, tangible evidence; the gradual reformatting and elimination of those who were unusual—of whom Solus Prime’s descendants were only the most recent in a long line of alteration—was a terrible suspicion indeed, and not one that belonged here in this bright little room filled with cheerful banter and chirping sparklings. He would do all he could to bring it to light—he owed those affected no less—but it was not possible now.

Instead, he held the sparklings when they were handed to him and marveled at the sheer personality present in the little scraps of life, and rejoiced that perhaps the sins of the past might be put aside, just for a handful of megacycles.

Never again, he told himself, thinking of all the things that had led to this moment, and this time, this time, watching the new progenitors with their sparklings, Megatron’s field pressing around him with benevolent amusement, it was almost believable.

END

Chapter End Notes

Don’t worry, there will be an epilogue.
Rafael’s dissertation defense almost prevented him from making it back to the meeting, but he managed to catch a red-eye out of Boston and arrived in Jasper exhausted, with a heinous case of jet lag and a grin out of all proportion to the hellish last twenty-four hours. Fowler went to pick him up from the airport—there was no way in hell he was letting him drive while he was that tired, and it had been damn well ages since he’d last seen the kid. Raf had gone to college, burrowed into research and, as far as Fowler could tell, not left the lab save for food and class. His admission to graduate school had only meant he was buried in the lab halfway across the country instead of in some little specialized computer science program out in California.

“It’s a few hours before they arrive,” Fowler said to him, once he was settled in the car. “You’ll have time to get some sleep on the couch before they show up.”

Raf hid a huge yawn behind a hand. He’d just been looking at the seatbelt like he’d never encountered one before, let alone remembered that he’d just put it on. “Thanks,” he said.

Raf was asleep before they reached the base. He roused long enough to make a beeline for the couch and was asleep within seconds of lying down, his feet hanging over one end.

“Do we tell him it’s the same couch?” said Jack, wandering in. “I mean, there’s a reason no one sits on it these days. I don’t know where Bee got it—”

“Junkyard,” said Miko. She took a sip of her coffee. The sight (Miko with coffee?!) would have been enough to send Fowler running for help even just last year, but they had her involved in enough projects that she actually needed the caffeine. Still scared the slag out of Mearing, though, and seeing his second-in-command discomfited was one of the few pleasures left in Fowler’s mostly deskbound career.

Well, that was a lie. They were doing important things here, preparing Earth for its entry into the great big universe, even if Fowler saw the bulk of it from behind a pile of paperwork. His biggest problem was keeping the military’s mitts out of it. They were preparing to join the interstellar community, not blow it up.

Thank god and all the little fishies that Mearing’s encounter with Megatron had pounded home the ‘do not provoke the giant alien robots’ lesson, and for now, she was working with him instead of for Bryce’s old cronies. Better to have her in pissing out than out pissing in—and that was a turn of phrase he needed to remember not to use around Optimus, if only to avoid having to give him an explanation.

He just made sure that these visits fell on her days off. No sense to tempting the military with what they couldn’t have.

Two hours before the arranged time, the hangar was locked down. This visit would be somewhat
more complicated than the usual, and this time, it had been Optimus who had thrown a wrench into the works.

Optimus had asked if it was all right for his sparklings to accompany him.

Fowler had, of course, immediately agreed, and privately reflected that it was about damn time. Last year, the poor guy had so gravid he’d spent most of his time sitting, needing Megatron’s assistance to rise to avoid going flat on his face.

“How many babies?” Fowler had asked Ratchet, once Megatron and Optimus had left.

“We’re not sure,” Ratchet said. “It’s been difficult to get an accurate count. Our best guess is at least eight, probably more, but the presence of the Matrix has complicated matters.”

Eight babies. “Jesus,” said Fowler. “Human reproduction doesn’t seem so bad now.”

Ratchet looked as if he were considering it. “That point, I will concede to you,” he said.

Fowler knew better than to ask further.

It was the opening of the spacebridge that woke Raf, who sat bolt upright with his hair sticking up and glasses askew. The other humans moved forward.

Bumblebee, Arcee and Bulkhead were out first, calling greetings to their human friends. Then came Ratchet, looking around for Nurse Darby.

And last of all, Optimus stepped out of the bridge, Megatron close behind him—Fowler still didn’t like Megatron hanging around, but he and Optimus were inseparable, especially when humans were concerned. You couldn’t really blame either of them, but Megatron had changed very little. Fowler still kept well away from his feet in case the big metal bastard decided to step on him.

But today, there were other things to stare at.

Namely the flat, almost insectile things clinging to both Optimus and Megatron. A quick count determined there were at least a dozen of them.

“Uh,” he said, and then refrained from saying anything, because Optimus looked pleased as punch, and a horrible suspicion was forming in Fowler’s mind.

“Agent Fowler, it is a pleasure to see you again,” said Optimus. “Is the area sufficiently secured to allow the sparklings to roam freely with the least amount of difficulty to your operation?”

“Yup. It’s childproofed,” said Fowler, still staring. Optimus nodded, and said something in Cybertronian.

There was a huge clatter of plating, and Fowler found himself being stared back at by a lot of red and blue optics. The sparklings were silver all over, but he could see some resemblance to their parents—antennae like Optimus’s on one, Megatron’s build on another.

“Cheep?” said one of them, and swarmed down Optimus’s front to the ground. It was about the same size as a moderate dog, and there was something about the way it moved that was entirely alien to the way its parents did, far more feline.

The ones on Megatron’s chest followed suit, though a few remained on Optimus’s shoulder, looking down at the humans with round, glowing eyes.
Fowler did another head count.

“You had thirteen kids,” he said, not quite believing it himself.

Optimus steadfastly ignored the sparkling pulling on one of his antennae. “Yes. An unusually large litter, even for our species, but by no means unheard of.” He winced at a particularly hard tug. “Tritogeneia, desist immediately. That is uncomfortable.”

The sparkling paid him no attention. With a long-suffering sigh, he reached up and gently disengaged her, cradling her in the crook of his arm. Her winglets went down and she let out a distressed chirp. “I requested that you stop,” Optimus said sternly. More distressed chirping. Optimus looked rather put-upon.

“You,” he informed the sparkling, who widened her optics at him, all innocence, “take after your Sire.”

“Hardly,” deadpanned Megatron, gently herding the sparklings away from the groundbridge. “You are the one with the vexing curiosity, Optimus.”

One of them wandered up to Fowler, plopped down and sat staring at him for several seconds, then extended a careful hand to touch him. He offered it an arm, which it touched with gentle fingers—evidently warned by its parent to be cautious around organics.

“Are you taking care of these guys all on your own?’ asked Fowler. It boggled the mind. One kid was bad enough. Thirteen…

“Soundwave and Ratchet have been our primary associate caretakers,” said Optimus. “We have also received considerable assistance from the other unbonded Cybertronians in our immediate living group; otherwise, the rearing process would be extremely difficult.”

“I’ll say,” said Fowler.

There was a derisive snort. “It’ll get even more interesting once the new litter arrives,” said Ratchet. “We’re expecting another seven from one bonded pair, and five from a second. At least a lot of people have been coming home, and we can spare the labor to raise them.”

“And they haven’t got alt-modes yet?”

“They are in their third instar,” said Optimus. “The final alt-form won’t be available to them until two molts from now. Their current alts allow them protection when being carried.”

Aliens, thought Fowler, and felt silly for thinking it. They really were alien; it was just easy to forget sometimes, especially with Bulkhead and Miko off in the corner yammering about shriek metal, and Bumblebee chirping happily at Raf about something.

Or Megatron playing peek-a-boo (or, at least, a close equivalent) with a gaggle of chirring robot babies to keep them out of Optimus’ way. Two were climbing his back, and he didn’t seem to mind. Quite the opposite, he had an utterly smitten expression, like a cat with kittens, as he covered his face with his claws and peered around them at his brood.

A little robot hand folded around Fowler’s own, and the sparkling lifted it to examine it. It lost interest after a moment, and went off to explore other areas of the hangar.

“You and Nurse Darby are doing well, I trust?’ asked Optimus. He had good reason to inquire; he’d officiated their wedding. Hooray for online temporary minster’s ordinations. It had been difficult to
pull off, but neither of them had wanted anyone else to do it.

“Very well, thanks,” said Fowler, and glanced over at June where she was looking over a sparkling and asking questions of Ratchet.

“I am glad to hear it,” said Optimus, bending to catch one of the babies with consummate skill before it cannoned into the midst of the humans.

They went on to talk shop for a while, political situation on Cybertron, political situation on Earth, progress made in the last year, policy changes, the usual discussion on how to deal with the Galactic Council if they came by (a much-discussed but never realized concern), oblivious to the racket the others kicked up playing with the sparklings.

“I thank you,” said Optimus, raising his voice as a group of the sparklings crashed into Megatron, who pretended to be bowled over, “for allowing us to visit with our creations. While they are—”

“crash thump CHEEP CHEEP CHEEP”—particularly rambunctious today, it is my hope that we will be able to raise a generation untainted by the xenophobia of those past. Accustoming them to other species will be key indeed.”

“I understand entirely,” said Fowler. Miko was doubled over laughing at something, probably Megatron’s attempts to rise, Raf was sitting on Bumblebee’s shoulder and grinning broadly in an exhausted sort of way, and Jack and Arcee had the sense to be well out of the chaos. “Wish we could do the same with more of ours.”

“You have done extraordinary things with the resources available to you, Director Fowler,” said Optimus. “You have done all you could to prevent the past from repeating itself. For that, and for your continued assistance, I cannot thank you enough.”

“Glad to do whatever I can,” said Fowler. Megatron still hadn’t managed to sit up, and as Fowler watched, another sparkling hurled itself onto the pile on his chest. “Megatron seems happy with being a dad.”

That brought a genuine smile to Optimus’s face. “It is a role he long suspected he would never play,” he said. “I too, feared I would never be able to have creations of my own. To see that assumption proven wrong is only one of many joys our peace has brought.”

“One big happy family,” said Fowler, and glanced up at Optimus.

Optimus was watching the scene in front of them. “Yes,” he said, gravely. “A very ‘happy family’ indeed, Director Fowler. I am gladdened by my family, but still more by the knowledge that my sparklings will mature in a world where they will be treated as equals, where they will not know hunger or die of preventable illnesses or know what it is to be slaves at the hands of their own people. They will not be reformatted to suit a society’s desires. They will suffer none of the evils that we have lived through—and neither shall anyone else’s progeny. Certainly, they will face their own challenges—for what parent can protect a child forever?—but they will be strong, and their challenges will not be the evils that we once believed acceptable.”

Megatron had managed to sit up, the sparklings still clinging to him and cheeping loudly. He looked at Optimus, grinning, and there was the distinctive silence as they communicated over comms. After a moment, Megatron nodded and began to talk to the sparklings in Cybertronian—the sparklings seemed to settle down, some flipping back into their alt modes.

Optimus watched, a slight smile on his face. “And truly,” he said, very quietly, “I could ask for no more.”
When I started writing Do We Not Bleed back in April, I never envisioned it ballooning into this monster. The characters, however, had their own plans, and eight months later, I find myself at the other end of a project that is certainly one of the most ambitious I have ever undertaken. It was my delight to borrow these characters for these eight months, (yes even Silas and Bryce), and it is an entirely different and somewhat sadder delight to bring this to an end.
I am stunned and delighted at the response that the end product has received. As always, there are people to thank:
Zuzeca, who introduced me to the fandom to start with, and, along with DexitroDNA, leaned over my shoulder on that long, long train ride and encouraged me to get the first draft of Do We Not Bleed down on a yellow legal pad.
My beta readers, the two mentioned above and LeggyStarscream, for screening for embarrassing typos and ensuring I didn’t get too far off subject, or venture too deeply into the realm of the absurd.
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And all of my readers. All of your encouragement has been deeply appreciated, and kept me going through the times when I felt like putting the project aside because it was too ambitious.
Thank you all very much.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!