

## Victory Condition

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# Victory Condition

by [astolat](#)

## Summary

“Do you want me to tell you a story?” Megatron said mockingly. “You won’t like it, Prime. It’s not a very nice one.”

## Notes

It's hard to walk away from [Omelas](#) if it hasn't been built yet.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [Restricted Work] by [gattoindex](#)
- Translation into Русский available: [Условие победы](#) by [Hartwig\\_n](#), [Ladimira](#)

## Victory Condition

“Well, this is awkward,” Megatron said, when they finally gave up trying to push their way out.

Optimus stared at the ceiling, which was precisely 36.7 centimeters away from his optics, and for the first time in roughly eight million years had to admit that Megatron had a point. “I don’t suppose you’ve got radio contact?”

Megatron snorted. “If I had radio contact, I’d be delightedly telling you how much longer you had to live. You?”

“Not a peep.” Optimus set his long-distance distress beacon going anyway. One of the others might be able to pick it up before he could pick *them* up. “On the bright side, I’m reasonably sure the Autobots are going to keep looking for me longer than Starscream will let the Decepticons keep looking for *you*.”

“How is that the *bright* side?” Megatron said. “Soundwave has a weak-signal range at least five times longer than any of your people, our chances of being found will plummet.”

“You were just saying that would also involve my immediate death, so I’m not sure how that makes it less of a bright side for *me*.”

“Would you *actually* prefer to spend a million years trapped down here with me than die?” Megatron asked, in tones of curiosity. “It will be at least that long before our reactors run out when we can’t do anything except just *lie* here.”

“When you put it that way,” Optimus said, with a sinking sensation. He’d recently read an unfortunately apt human work of drama; Spike had been reading it for his schoolwork. Some of the interactions had been confusing, especially as at some point it seemed that all the characters had experienced total system shutdown but were nevertheless still functioning, but the overall conclusion had been that the true misery of a situation was generated by the people you were sharing it with. The argument felt highly convincing under the circumstances.

They didn’t talk for several hours, during which Optimus grew increasingly and unpleasantly aware of the fact that above that ceiling, so close to his optics, several million tons of concrete and steel waited. If they didn’t get found—and the already low odds were decreasing steadily with every minute of radio silence by now—their deaths would be a race between their reactors and the settling rate of this section of the underlayers. The ceiling would probably make contact with their frames in roughly five hundred thousand years and then start slowly crushing them flat, millimeter by millimeter.

“What are you doing?” Megatron said.

Optimus only then realized his intakes were starting to cycle at an accelerated pace. He attempted to slow them down manually, but the cooling system wouldn’t respond: conscious

control had been locked out. “Panicking,” he said in bleak resignation, as he felt more subsystems start to slide into involuntary mode. There wasn’t anything to do about it but let his mechanicals exhaust themselves uselessly.

“Yes, I can tell. Why?” Megatron said irritably.

“If I tell you, I might panic *you*,” Optimus said. “We could end up cycling back and forth down here for a thousand years.”

“The only thing that ever panics my system is *imminent* death; I’ll start to get worried in the last vorn.” Megatron paused. “Come to think of it, you *don’t* panic then; what a bizarre system you have.”

“I’ve seen Decepticons panic underground all the time.”

“*Seekers*, maybe,” Megatron said. “Is that it?” He shifted his weight and popped out a small electrojack from his shoulder, extended it downward and across to Optimus’s arm, and shocked him sharply in the elbow joint.

“Nng! Megatron, are you *really* going to start *that* kind of—” Optimus said, and then realized his system had just given him back conscious control: the panic had stopped. He put his intakes back into normal mode and turned his head slightly. “How did you know that would work?”

“*Seekers do* panic underground all the time. I’ve had to work out what to do about it in self-defense.” Megatron snorted. “One time we had to go sideways through a perfectly reasonable corridor on Helios level with two centimeters of clearance on front and back for *me*, and by the time we got out of it, Starscream, Skywarp, and Thundercracker had all set each other off. They were fighting each other to *climb* me.”

Optimus chuckled; he could actually see it. “What does it do?”

“The jolt? Waking your self-repair system in the area resets a handful of registers in the lower tarnic region; that seems to be where you all keep that particular bit of fear circuitry.”

“You just don’t have it?” Optimus said.

Megatron turned his head. “What do you think I was *built* for?”

Optimus stared at him. “You’re a gun.”

Megatron sighed out exasperated. “You’re *still* clinging to Functionalist garbage, aren’t you. Sometimes I feel like I’ve just been wasting the last eight million years.”

“You *have* been wasting the last eight million years.”

“Well, at least I haven’t allowed them to be *dictated* by what I happen to have been designed to turn into,” Megatron snapped. “I’m a gun now because I’ve *chosen* to be a gun. Being able to generate quadruple-power blasts is extraordinarily valuable tactically, and it gave me the contacts for the cannon.”



“You had your alt-mode overhauled completely?” Optimus said. “But that’s impossible unless you’re *conscious* for the entire...”

“That’s right, and yes, it hurt a great deal, and I’d do it again without hesitation. *I* decide my fate, not some random factory operator who built me to some random designer’s specifications for the benefit of the Senate.”

“I think you established that thoroughly after you *murdered* the entire Senate.”

“And yet here you are bleating at me at how I’m a *gun*, so clearly I’ve always been a gun, nevermind that I don’t match any military-mech design and no one in your much-lamented Senate would ever have allowed one of my size and power to be built,” Megatron said. “Do you think *Shockwave* was a gun to start too? They needed a military supervisor, but they built him to transform into a *targeter module*. Of all the stupid wastes. But yes, of course *Primus* wanted it that way.”

“So what *were* you?” Optimus said, ignoring Megatron’s rant; he didn’t actually believe in Functionalism himself at all and didn’t know a single Autobot who did anymore, but Megatron was clearly ready to keep having the argument all on his own anyway.

Megatron just glared at him, and Optimus looked back at him and suddenly thought about the shape of his helm and chest and said slowly, “You were a *miner*? But you’re five times Ironhide’s size.”

“Is he even rated for work below ten kilometers?” Megatron said. “I was a *deep* miner, Prime. Specifically, a selenium miner.”

“Selenium?” Optimus said, baffled. “Isn’t that mythical?”

“Of course it’s not mythical,” Megatron said. “It’s just extremely rare, and extremely difficult to get.”

“I’ve never seen a selenium mine marked anywhere on any map, even of Cybertron’s deepest levels.”

“You wouldn’t. They found one scattered vein of it after an exhaustive survey of the planet, and then they built five of us specifically for the job. What level are we on here, Eidolon? The access shaft started on Diurna, one layer down. From there it was roughly four days down, going straight in towards the core.”

“Four *days*?”

“Selenium only forms very deep in planetary crusts, and the exhaust from the refining process interacts very badly with virtually everything,” Megatron said. “They broke up the access shaft with sealed locks every kilometer. Even aside from the distance, that made the trip up and down slow. But they didn’t really want us coming up anyway. They only wanted the selenium.”

Optimus stared up at the ceiling in horror. “How—how long were you down there?”

“Do you want me to tell you a story?” Megatron said mockingly. “You won’t like it, Prime. It’s not a very *nice* one.”

“I *already* don’t like it,” Optimus said. Building mechs and shipping them four days straight underground to mine out of sight...it ranked among the worst excesses of the last decadence of the Golden Age, and he’d seen and heard of some pretty bad ones.

“Well, all right, in *that* case,” Megatron said. “Once upon a time, there were five happy little selenium miners working together down in the dark. They had some vague idea that there were other mechs and other places, but their curiosity circuits had been dampened, so they didn’t really think about it very much. They spent ten hours at a time hunting for tiny fragments of raw ore, and six hours resting in small rock chambers their tunneler dug out at the end of each shift. Roughly the height of this one. The best part of their existence was the little jolt of pleasure they got every time they put a sliver of freshly refined selenium into the collection unit their tunneler carried: it triggered a special device built onto their fuel systems that injected a bit of rilamin extract whenever that happened.”

“Primus,” Optimus said half under his breath.

Megatron laughed. “I haven’t even got started yet! So this idyllic existence went on for some unidentified amount of time, until one day, there was a bad tunnel collapse. There were *modest* tunnel collapses on a regular basis, of course—our miners were built to be caught in a collapse and dig themselves out. If you were worrying about being crushed to death, by the way, you probably needn’t. My frame will hold up the ceiling for at least three million years before the pressure gets strong enough to buckle my chest interior, and our reactors will be stone cold by then.”

“I’d like to say that’s not comforting, but I’d be lying.”

“If it helps to counterbalance the sentiment, if I *had* kept my old alt mode, I could crank the ceiling *up* and tunnel out of here in roughly half an hour.”

“Well, Megatron,” Optimus said dryly, “I guess that’s what you get for not respecting the will of Primus.”

Megatron snorted. “In any case, this particular collapse was worse than usual. It caught our tunneler badly. His cranial casing was cracked. His crewmates dug him out, but he couldn’t start digging again. They weren’t quite sure what to do. They couldn’t get any more wonderful selenium without him. So they took him back to the small shielded room where they got their energon dispensed once a month and pressed the dispenser over and over. They did that because once before the dispenser had stopped working, and after they pressed it roughly twenty times, someone had spoken to them out of the wall and asked what was going on, and they had explained, and shortly thereafter the energon started coming out again. They had been very pleased with this miraculous service.

“Well, soon a voice asked them again what was wrong, and they explained that their tunneler was not functioning, and they couldn’t get more selenium without him. There was a long silence. Finally, they were told to detach all his gear—the equipment sleds were mounted on

our bodies directly—and once they had got at his actual body, they were to put him inside the shaft where they loaded the selenium collector once a month.

“Our injured miner lost consciousness during this process and only woke up again in a makeshift repair bay somewhere on the Diurna level. A very irritated government medic who did not at all like having been forced to come down underground that far was patching his brain. It was extremely painful. He started howling in agony and began trying to break free from the restraints. The restraints were theoretically strong enough to hold him, but the repair table was not. It began to buckle. The medic finished the work very hastily and slapped his cranium shut and told the mine overseer everything was fine, and then fled.

“The medic had in fact finished the repair, but what he *hadn't* done was reactivated the curiosity-dampening technology. Our miner somewhat groggily trailed the overseer back towards the access shaft. It was a brief walk, half a kilometer, but it went through a low-level red light district. A dazzling array of sensory stimulation filled every corner of his vision. Even still half-blind with pain, the miner began to slow down to gawk, to sniff at the intoxicants in the air, to be caught by the sim advertisements—there was one offering scenic tours of cities on the *surface*. He had never quite understood that there *was* a surface, that there was an *end* to solid rock. There was a fighting ring with a shouting crowd of bettors, endless racks of cheap games...Honestly, even if the curiosity dampeners *had* been active, it probably wouldn't have been able to compensate for the sheer contrast with the rest of his experience.

“Then they reached the access shaft, and the overseer told the miner to head down and get back to work. The miner looked at the shaft, and for the first time in his existence, experienced having a significant opinion. He said, ‘I don't want to. I want to stay here.’

“As you might imagine, this didn't go over particularly well. The overseer started to rail at the miner for—yes, defying the will of Primus,” Megatron said, with a chuckle, “which was somewhat less effective than desired since thanks to their curiosity dampening, our miners had never bothered to actually pay attention to the catechism that was pumped into their audio receptors once every tenday, except as an interesting bit of noise; half the words didn't make sense to them anyway.

“When that didn't work, I am afraid the overseer did something a little inadvisable. He took out a disruptor and told the miner if he did not go down, he would suffer. The miner of course had never seen a disruptor and asked how. The overseer turned the disruptor to a low setting and fired a warning shot at the miner's arm.

“Our miner reacted by hitting the overseer. He didn't actually *deliberately* hit him very hard—but, well.” Megatron shrugged his massive shoulders, and Optimus could imagine; he remembered what most mechs had looked like in the Golden Age, any of them who *weren't* miners or hard laborers. What *he* had looked like.

“How badly did you hurt him?” Optimus said.

“I crushed his entire skull and half his torso,” Megatron said. “It was rather dramatic. Which as it happened, saved my life. Most of the people surrounding us fled screaming at once, but there was one mech in the area made of somewhat sterner stuff—his name was Brickbat. He

was one of the small-time promoters at the fight ring. But there was a fire of ambition deep in his breast. He longed...to manage a *gladiator*. A true gladiator, at the great arena in Tarn. His chances of achieving this ambition with any of the pathetic drugged-up mechs who washed up in his subterranean ring were nil. In the one blow of my fist, he saw—all his hope for the future realized.

“He waited to be sure I had not gone berserk. When he saw I was merely prodding the overseer’s body in confusion—I didn’t actually *realize* what I’d done—he came over to me. He told me with great sympathy that he’d seen everything, and of *course* I was justified, but the enforcers wouldn’t care about that. They’d disassemble me for sure. He urged me to let him take me somewhere safe.

“I informed him with some energy that I did *not* want to go back to the mine. He shook his head. Of course I shouldn’t go back to the mine! I didn’t belong in some dark terrible mine, slaving away for drips of energon. He would show me the world, et cetera, et cetera—I’m sure you can imagine. It was sufficiently appealing to persuade me to go with him, and he did, in fact, have enough contacts to hide me. A few months and a cosmetic overhaul later...I made my debut in the side ring at Tarn. The rest is rather public history.”

“And the others?” Optimus said, after a moment.

Megatron paused. “I did think of them, you know,” he said softly. “Not immediately. I was too overwhelmed. But after my third victory celebration, I woke up with a headache and complained, and Brickbat cleared everyone out of my room and darkened it, and lying there in the dark I suddenly thought of my brothers. I sat up and got Brickbat and told him there were four more like me. Stars and energon chits filled his eyes. He assured me he would look into it.

“And he did. He didn’t immediately tell me what he’d found, but I didn’t forget again. I started demanding updates every tenday, and then every day. He put me off and put me off, and finally I lost patience and told him I was going to go personally and *get* them if he didn’t. That was when he told me...he’d found out through back channels and bribery that they’d all been disassembled. They couldn’t mine more selenium without a tunneler, and apparently someone at the higher levels of the government had been extremely alarmed by my violent rebellion.”

“I’m sorry,” Optimus said quietly, staring up at the ceiling. He’d never really given much thought to where Megatron had come from, just assumed that he’d been built as a war mech, like most of the Decepticons. But this...it made a terrible wrenching logic, suddenly, of his casual willingness not just to kill but to *destroy*. What love could you feel for a world that had been brutally denied you?

“I haven’t thought of them in a long time,” Megatron said, a faintly wistful note in his voice. “But I’m finding this a nostalgic situation. Rather homey, in fact.”

Homey. In a completely confined crawl space, buried under twenty kilometers of overlayers, with no light but their optics and barely able to move. Optimus shuddered.

“No, I imagine you wouldn’t find it so,” Megatron said, amusedly. “I remember you before the Matrix got its claws into you—charming posh little Autobot, energon dockyard supervisor, even assigned a female counterpart because your neuroevals suggested your sparks might be worth collecting. Did you ever go below the surface at all? Maybe once or twice for slumming. You don’t really seem the type to have enjoyed yourself much, though.”

Optimus winced involuntarily; he had gone down to the red light districts on Kything level a couple of times—not as far as Diurna level, nowhere near that deep. He *hadn’t* enjoyed it much. Everyone around had seemed either hostile or *too* friendly. He’d gotten the persistent sense that all of them were angry. And...they probably had been. With justification. He heaved a deep breath. It had been a long time ago. “I didn’t,” he said, and on an impulse suddenly added, “But I saw you fight once, in the arena. In vorn 934.”

“Really? How did you afford tickets? I didn’t think they paid dockyard supervisors *that* well.”

“The dockyard corporation offered a prize for the best increase in energy efficiency over a tenmonth. A weekend in Tarn with seats in their box for the Saturday match. Elita—Ariel—and I worked our tailpipes off.”

“Well, well,” Megatron said. “So I had a fan. You *did* seem rather starstruck when we met, now that I think of it, but I got that a lot in those days. Did you enjoy *that*?”

“Your fight, yes,” Optimus said, honestly. “Not the...”

“The lead-up matches,” Megatron said.

“No.”

“I was getting bored by then; I’d started setting myself a challenge of getting a clean, one-stroke kill in each fight, no matter what they threw at me. The arena supervisors tried to hint me at more gore, but I didn’t particularly have to care what they wanted by then. They were charging something like a hundred thousand solars for the cheap seats when I was fighting. So they gave up and just counterbalanced my matches with a good helping of fluids and brutality in the lead-ups.”

Optimus grimaced. In retrospect, he could see how grotesque the whole enterprise had been, from start to finish. Even at the time, he and Ariel had ended up mostly hiding their optics, flinching and pretending to be enjoying themselves...but they *had* watched when Megatron had taken the field, as eagerly as any of the rest of the yelling mob. At least half of whom had probably been hoping on some level for this to be the day that he’d *lose*.

“What was the match?” Megatron asked, idly.

“Goremaw the Destroyer,” Optimus said.

“You’ll have to get more descriptive,” Megatron said. “I didn’t bother listening to whatever the random name was that they made up. I just sat in my alcove reading until they rang the bell.”

“A wormlike purple alien creature roughly the size of a Guardian robot,” Optimus said.  
“With durasteel spikes around its—”

“Oh, that one,” Megatron said. “Yes, I remember being annoyed; the way it moved, I was reasonably sure its brain was segmented, so I had to fight it for half an hour to figure out how to get a one-stroke kill.” He made a face. “*And* then I got completely covered in purple splatter. But you certainly lucked out with your prize day. I don’t think I had a match go on half that long that entire vorn.”

Optimus remembered the whole thing infused with far more drama, especially the killing blow: Megatron whirling in through a forest of terrible grasping spikes as the monster carried away his shield—Ariel had shrieked in horror—only to carve his massive sword right through the thing’s mouth as it plunged its head down towards him. He’d split it the full length of the body with its own momentum, cleaving it to either side of him until it finally collapsed completely in two spirals around him. Even slathered in purple gore, he’d looked like some kind of mythical figure. “It *was* impressive,” Optimus said, a little ruefully.

“I’m sure,” Megatron said, and then added slyly, “Did the *girl* think so?”

Optimus felt reasonably sure that if Megatron had his infrared scanner turned on, he’d just lit up incandescent on it. “Very funny,” he said, trying for austere instead of *completely mortified*.

Megatron laughed so hard Optimus thought he was going to knock himself unconscious against the ceiling. That would’ve been nice. “It’s not like I’m not amply familiar with the effect,” he said, still faintly strangled, when he finally managed to calm down again. “They charged a thousand times the price of the most expensive seats for a chance to visit my chambers afterwards.”

“They *charged*—” Optimus stared at him, outraged.

“Well, I got a considerable cut,” Megatron said. “At least, once I realized they were charging; before then, I thought of it as a perk for *me*. I used to go through six mechs in a row after a fight. Although by then I was mostly bored with *that*, too.”

“I think we should stop talking about this,” Optimus said firmly.

Megatron did pause for a moment, but only briefly. Abruptly he said, “Prime, not to panic you again, but what odds are *you* calculating on rescue at this point?”

Optimus stiffened. He’d been trying not to think about the plummeting number. It was almost onto the very thin tail of the asymptotic curve. “Not...high,” he said reluctantly.

“Well then,” Megatron said, as if he’d just explained something.

“Well what?” Optimus said, glancing over at him.

Megatron turned his head as much as he could and stared back. In what *he* obviously thought was a meaningful way, and left Optimus completely blank, until he said, “You can’t *actually*

be this much of a prude, can you?”

“What?” Optimus said, and then realized—“*What?*”

He jerked his head away to stare at the ceiling, because he couldn’t actually stand to look at Megatron—who was saying, completely casually, “I’m reasonably sure we can shave off a hundred thousand years or so off our reactor lifespans if we do it on a regular basis. It’s not like we can do anything *else* to expend significant amounts of power.”

“I am *not* going to interface with you,” Optimus said flatly. “I can’t even conceive of it.”

Megatron laughed. “I bet you can *now*, though.”

Optimus gave serious thought to wiping the entire exchange out of his own memory circuits, except if he did, Megatron would probably just tell him *all over again*, even more gleefully once he realized he’d successfully gotten under Optimus’s armor. In one of the *multiple* ways he apparently *wanted to*, for Primus’s sake. “Megatron,” he said forcing his voice steady, “I don’t interface just for some kind of—of—”

“*Fun?*” Megatron said. “No, that’s eminently clear. Do you actually do *anything* for fun? Even *Starscream* will go off on a pleasure flight once in a while, and he virtually has no other satisfaction in his existence except plotting my death.”

“What do *you* do for pleasure, besides plotting *my* death and that of all the Autobots and pillaging the entire Earth?”

“Poetry, mostly,” Megatron said.

“What?” Optimus said blankly.

“I write poetry. You’ve probably read some of it. I published a few books before the war as the Voice of Tarn—”

“*No*,” Optimus said. It was a flat, desperate denial.

“I’ll recite you some of the new work if you like.”

“No!”

“You really *are* a fan, aren’t you,” Megatron said. “If it weren’t for the extreme likelihood of suffering a grotesquely prolonged slow death down here, I’d almost be enjoying this.”

It was *worse* than having Megatron trying to get into his access ports. Optimus would have no difficulty—whatever imagery Megatron had managed to conjure up—saying no to interfacing with him. He wouldn’t be able to refuse hearing new poetry by the Voice of Tarn, who was *absolutely not Megatron*; in fact, if Megatron had any work by him that Optimus hadn’t read, he’d probably *stolen* it at some point and kept it hidden—

“I’m working on this one,” Megatron said, and recited, “*Soft cells still hold their shape until they burn; blind trees climb fractals towards sunlight; even the weakest, all life strives,*

*without accepting the limit of its reach—*”

It felt like being stabbed through the chest. Which Megatron had *also* done to him, on more than one occasion. “*Stop*,” Optimus said, his voice cracking with horror. “How—How can you—*even the weakest, all life strives—*”

“Yes, that’s the heart of it, isn’t it,” Megatron said thoughtfully.

“How can you *write that*,” Optimus snarled. He wanted to *hit* Megatron, and he didn’t have enough room to swing, he couldn’t do more than clang his leg sideways against him; it wouldn’t even scratch his armor. “How can you write that, and still—” He couldn’t keep speaking.

Megatron paused, and then he said, slightly bemused, “You came to see me fight in an arena where for nearly fifty thousand years I walked out once a week—once a day, in the earlier years—to my death. My odds of making it out of *this* are considerably bigger than my odds were of surviving Tarn. And I did it by killing my every opponent. Entropy comes for us all, Prime. Surely you understand that by now. It’s been a long time since *you* were sitting in the box seats.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to—*help* it!” Optimus said. “Yes, I came to the arena. I was young and stupid, and I didn’t understand what it was. I never wanted to go again afterwards, not even to see you. That fight—it was exciting, but the reason we—afterwards, wasn’t because of some—bloodlust. It was *relief*. Because in that blow you struck, at the last minute, we thought you were about to be *killed*. That we’d have to be there and see it happen—and *yes*,” he added, in tight anguish, “I know that half of that audience would have enjoyed it—”

“Half?” Megatron said, sounding amused.

“I don’t want to know how many,” Optimus said. “But not *me*. Not Ariel. And the reason *I* walk out onto the killing floor now is to save the lives of others. To *protect* others.”

“Yes, I know,” Megatron said. He sounded fairly dismissive. “I never quite understand it. You do realize—every single one of those humans you save, *all* of them—they’re all going to be dead in a century? I’ve got conscious thought processes older than them.”

“Some of *them* write poetry, Megatron.”

“Do they really?” Megatron said, with a snort.

“*When I do count the clock that tells the time*,” Optimus started to recite, grabbing with furious anger at an almost random piece: he’d loaded up that particular human’s collected works for the trip to Cybertron, on Carly’s recommendation.

Megatron actually listened to the whole thing, and when he finished, said, “That’s not half-bad. Is *that* one still alive?”

“No,” Optimus said. “But he wrote more than a hundred poems and thirty-eight plays. That’s not the best one.”



“How astonishing,” Megatron said. “I wouldn’t think you could write a decent poem in less than three hundred years. Congratulations, Prime, you’ve finally managed to offer me *one* rational reason for saving random fleshlings!”

Optimus froze and then turned his head to look at him. “Does that mean you’ll—”

“You mean on the unwarranted assumption we’ll ever get out of this hole?” Megatron said. “No, of course not. I’ve got a much larger number of reasons *not* to care about the flesh creatures, among them that *they* don’t care—you do realize that they’ve killed more of one another than we have, since we’ve gotten to Earth? They do it all the time.”

“It’s not the same as them dying because of *our war*,” Optimus said. “Or because you’re stealing the energy from their planet.”

“That’s the most idiotic thing I’ve ever heard,” Megatron said. “Of course it’s the same. Do you think it would have made a difference to me if I’d been killed by Goremaul the Berserk Worm or whatever it was, versus the Archon of Dendris? Dead is dead.”

“Wouldn’t it have made a difference if you’d died in that selenium mine under the weight of a planet without ever getting to see the surface?” Optimus said.

“It seems I’ve overshared,” Megatron said, sounding faintly irritated. “Anyway, *I* wouldn’t have known the difference.”

“You *do now*,” Optimus said. “So maybe *now* you shouldn’t be foreclosing on some other being’s potential future.”

“Spoken not at all like the mech who’s been doing his best to foreclose the potential future of all Decepticons for millions of years. You know, I’ve often been curious, do you actually have a *plan* for if you win? Any goals at all?”

“It hasn’t really seemed like something I was going to need to worry about,” Optimus said, without entirely meaning to; his emotional subsystem was in rapidly churning flux, and the bitterness of the answer slid out from somewhere too deep for control. He didn’t really mean it; he had faith that they would somehow find a way to defeat the Decepticons—only it was hard to keep believing after eight million years of watching Megatron’s insatiable war machine devour everything that seventeen million years of peace had built.

Megatron glared at him. “So you Autobots really are just suiciding in the most drawn-out and annoying-to-me way possible?”

“We’re not just going to lie down and let you roll over the entire universe without a fight.”

“Why *not*?” Megatron said.

Optimus started to engage his vocal unit, then paused and just said, resignedly, “Never mind.”

He and Megatron both sighed, at the same time.

#

They lay in silence for a while after that, and Optimus drifted into a rest cycle; he was almost always working on less than he wanted. He got a good seventeen hours in, actually, and he felt remarkably better even after Megatron said loudly and deliberately, “I’m *right here*,” and Optimus’s threat alert system instantly flailed over itself and shoved him to full awareness in three astroseconds. It also made him try to stand up, which only had the effect of clanking his head painfully against the ten-million-ton ceiling.

“Was that really necessary?” Optimus said, wincing as he let his head sink back.

“Yes. I’m bored,” Megatron said. “Tell me some more of the flesh-creatures’ poetry.”

“They’re called *humans*.”

“What a pointless...oh, it’s not worth arguing with you. Fine. Tell me some more of the *humans*’ poetry.”

Optimus considered, and then abruptly started with, “*Is this the Region, this the Soil, the Clime, Said then the lost Arch-Angel...*”

“Don’t stop there!” Megatron said, when Optimus reached the end of the section. “*A mind not to be changed by place or time*—yes. That’s truly magnificent. What is an archangel?”

“I can’t go on, I don’t have any more of it in my personal memory banks,” Optimus said.

“And they’re a kind of deity figure, I think. I’m not entirely sure. Some humans claim to have literally encountered them, but there doesn’t seem to be any empirical evidence of their existence, and their described qualities are inconsistent.” He was rambling mostly to postpone the inevitable; but after he struggled for several moments more, he finally, resignedly said, “Recite me something.”

“Oh, I don’t know, do you *really* want to hear my little old—”

“I’m the only audience you’ve got anymore,” Optimus said pointedly.

Megatron muttered under his breath and then began, “*We woke today together on the soft crust of a borrowed world*,” and went on from there, every line brutally painful to hear. He *was* the Voice of Tarn, unmistakably. Optimus had all of *his* poetry in his personal memory banks; he didn’t even have to run a literary analysis to recognize it. There were tears sliding from his eyes when Megatron finished, and he couldn’t even get his hand up to his face to wipe it away.

“I’ve often wanted to make you weep, but it didn’t occur to me I’d do it with poetry,” Megatron said.

“You were never going to do it any other way,” Optimus said.

They tried playing some Tanaxian War, but they both lost track of the game in memory after they added a seventh board, just as things got interesting. Optimus taught Megatron how to play Go, which was a satisfying game as long as you didn’t just brute-force it, except halfway

through the fourth round, Optimus realized that Megatron *was* brute-forcing it, and he stopped playing in exasperation. “What’s the point of cheating?”

“To *win*,” Megatron said, as if Optimus were the odd one.

“Win *what*?”

“To win!” Megatron said. “You’d have lasted fifteen seconds in the arena, you know.”

“I wouldn’t have lasted *that* long,” Optimus said. “I’d never have walked out in the first place.”

“Oh, of course you would, don’t you think they were expertly creative at that sort of thing?” Megatron said. “You wouldn’t even be a challenge. They’d get your little human pet and stick a gun next to its head and tell you to go out there or the thing gets it, and out you’d trot. That was their *job*.”

“Did they—do that to you?”

“Not at all,” Megatron said. “I didn’t actually comprehend death well enough to be afraid of it for some time—a solid understanding of mortal danger wasn’t very conducive to productive selenium mining—and by the time I did, I also understood the bargain I was being offered. I wasn’t going back underground, and the Functionalist Code wouldn’t have let me do anything else. Assuming the Senate didn’t just have me disassembled instantly when someone discovered I was their rogue selenium miner. Anyway, I rather enjoyed the energy of it at first. It was only after a few dozen vorn that I started to get bored.”

“You must have been rich enough to retire at some point,” Optimus said. “Or did Brickbat steal all your winnings?”

“No, oddly enough he was quite honest with me,” Megatron said. “He wasn’t greedy enough to risk his dream-come-true, I think. He invested my share for me very sensibly, for that matter.” He paused and went suddenly contemplative. “Do you know, I haven’t even thought about it in millions of years, but he opened me an account at the Malatine Confederacy’s Galactic Bank. An account with compound interest. They never cancel accounts: it must be up to the double-digit billions in galcreds by now. If I get out of here, I’ll go buy a nice Voxine space cruiser or something and bomb the Ark into smithereens from orbit.”

“If you get out of here, it’ll be because the other Autobots find us, so you’ll go sit in a nice comfortable cell,” Optimus said.

“I’ll *what*?”

“Did you think we were going to let you go?”

“I thought you were going to shoot me on the spot,” Megatron said, eyeing him. “You can’t possibly be stupid enough to try to keep me *prisoner*, can you? —never mind. I forgot who I’m talking to.”

“We’re not going to execute you summarily, no,” Optimus said. “We’re going to put you on trial.”

“*Trial?*” Megatron said, in a choked wheeze. “In that case, *carry right along*, Prime, don’t let me dissuade you from the path of justice and morality. Maybe I’ll even stay in custody long enough for it; the entertainment value seems enormous. I wonder if I could persuade an Autobot jury to acquit me. The more I talk to you, it doesn’t actually seem impossible.”

As soon as he said it, Optimus had the sudden terrible feeling that Megatron might not be *wrong*. In fact, he wasn’t entirely sure how *he* would be able to endure having to sentence the Voice of Tarn to death. But the Autobot Code wouldn’t let him just lock Megatron up forever to write poetry the rest of his life. Not that it wouldn’t have been a considerable improvement over how Megatron *planned* to use his time.

“Not that we *are* going to get found, so it’s all moot,” Megatron added. “Have you gotten over the prudery yet, or is it going to take a few more days?”

“It’s going to take a lot longer than that,” Optimus said.

Megatron groaned faintly. “We’re trapped in a crawlspace with a million years to go and you’re playing *hard to get*.”

“I thought you wanted to kill time,” Optimus started, before he realized that was an exceptionally bad idea.

“You want *seduction?*” Megatron said. “I’m not particularly skilled, I’m afraid: I’ve generally been on the other side of it.”

“Megatron, you’ve seduced half the population of Cybertron. And killed most of the *other* half.”

Megatron quivered with laughter next to him. “Well, if political rhetoric and appeals to individualism and glory do it for you, Prime, I can get your ports lubricated in thirty seconds.”

“I’m not continuing this conversation,” Optimus said.

“Have you ever considered...the depersonalizing implications of the Aldean Doctrine?” Megatron said. In a low, purring, *intimate* tone.

Optimus groaned faintly. “I *have*, and *no*, that is *not* going to do it for me. Nothing is going to *do it* for me. I don’t even understand why you would want to,” he added, between resigned and bewildered. “You hate me and want to kill me.”

“You’re the only opponent I’ve had in nine million years that I haven’t been able to defeat trivially, and that includes fifty thousand of them as a gladiator,” Megatron said. “I’m curious how your brain *functions*. You’re always behaving in so many completely counterintuitive ways, and yet you’re not simply a lunatic or I’d have defeated you by now. It seems a shame

to waste the opportunity. It's not as though you could possibly trust me for it under any other circumstances."

But under *these*, Optimus could. Because Megatron wouldn't use access to muck with his brain and risk being trapped for a million years—alone. There was something cool and fatalistic in his tone, even if the words were flippant. "I'm surprised you're—giving up," Optimus said slowly.

"Is that what you think it is?" Megatron said. "When I said that I walked out to my death on a regular basis for fifty thousand years, I didn't mean it figuratively. I assumed I was going to die, because that was the only reasonable conclusion. It didn't mean I was going to lie down and let someone crush me. It meant I wasn't going to bother thinking about the possibility of survival. There's no sense including an unlikely positive event in rational analysis. If we do get rescued and I've missed the opportunity to tie your processor in knots, that's sufficiently improved over the alternative that I'll have no regrets."

Optimus stared at the ceiling. He wondered what it took to do it that way, to walk out to your own execution, under your own power, over and over. He went out to face the chance of death himself often enough; any battle with Megatron held that possibility. But he didn't *expect* to die. He went out prepared for a fair risk; he didn't calculate out his odds over time and sentence himself to death preemptively. "Do you still feel that way?"

"These days? No," Megatron said. "I've got Starscream as a second-in-command. Now I assume I'm going to die from every single minute to the next."

They both chuckled faintly. "I have to admit, I've often wondered why you keep him around," Optimus said.

"I can't *spare* him. If I took him out—for one thing, it would crush the morale of the Seekers, but aside from that, our forces are almost perfectly balanced right now. Starscream is exceptionally dangerous in the field and losing him would mean having a gaping tactical hole in our air cover. I'd trade you him for Grimlock, though, if you wanted to exchange headache relief."

"Did you actually just suggest that I *execute Grimlock* just to make it convenient for you to execute Starscream?" Optimus said.

"Oh, you don't have to *kill* him, just send him away somewhere," Megatron said. "We could send them away *together*, in fact. A million years of being chased around in circles by Grimlock on an abandoned planetoid would do Starscream a world of good. And Grimlock would enjoy himself, I imagine. It's a win-win situation all around."

"No," Optimus said.

"Imagine the blessed silence in the command center," Megatron said. "Imagine a whole *day* gone by without someone violent and hostile questioning your leadership ability and every decision you make."

"*No.*"

#

Optimus took another long rest cycle, then put himself into defrag; he managed an entire hour before he woke, on the verge of another panic: he'd had a sensory dump of the ceiling moving down towards him. He put out a small electric jack and shocked his own elbow to knock the reaction out. The trick worked like before. He'd have to tell Ratchet about it, in case he didn't already know; he might not. Ratchet didn't exactly believe in using *pain* to treat his patients. If—if he ever saw Ratchet again. Which he probably wouldn't.

Megatron was deep in a defrag cycle of his own, unmoving, his face tranquil for once even while the green light flickered deep in his optics. Optimus had to resist the temptation to prod *him* awake. It was more than a little disturbing to realize that he too was *grateful* for Megatron's presence. Despite any attempts he might make at seduction by polemical. Or *other* methods—and Optimus *was* thinking about it now, oh hell. But he was still Orion Pax somewhere on the inside: *charming posh little Autobot*, Megatron had said, and Optimus couldn't even pretend to himself that if Megatron had looked down at him, all those years ago, and said *why don't I take you into the back of this warehouse of yours, and you'll open every access port you have for me*, that he *wouldn't* have. He'd have spread himself out *blissfully*; he'd have let Megatron feast on *him* before he moved on to the *energon*.

Right up until Megatron's brutal, ruthless processes came smashing through his hardware as effectively as his cannon actually had, destroying instantly all his paper-thin, naïve ideas of heroism and honor and how surely they went hand in hand with power and courage and strength and beauty: the idea that one implied the other. When instead...instead, all that power and strength had been built for a grotesque purpose, and twisted to an even worse one, to a lust for power and a selfishness so monstrous that it had devoured their entire world.

However, *until* that moment Orion would have been *very happy*. Optimus sighed faintly even as he firmly pushed down that inner whisper. He didn't actually believe that any sentient being was inherently and completely evil, and Megatron had just given him a terrible, ash-bitter understanding of where his rage came from. It was almost comforting that Megatron had *cause* for his savagery and selfishness. It wasn't a justification, but it...made sense of the incomprehensible. Optimus had never before been able to understand how someone so brilliant *could* be so monstrous. But it had also made clear that Megatron was never going to change, never going to take a different path. He'd deliberately walked out onto the arena floor to die more than half a million times. And the last thing Optimus wanted to do was actually feel that intensity of rage and bitterness in his own body. He shuddered at the thought of it.

Except—if *the Voice of Tarn* had messaged him yesterday and asked him to meet in some dark underground spot and interface without ever seeing his face, Optimus might almost have *agreed*, just for the chance of tasting that kind of poetry in his mind. For so long, their lives had been starved of beauty, of art, of hope. The shining dome of Iacon was fallen, the starscrapers had all come down. Cybertron was a wasteland of rubble. The weekly concerts he and his friends had loved; the shining radiant walls of the Teniros Library; the voices of *other* poets, reading aloud their work...all gone. And Earth's red mountains and green fields and blue skies were beautiful, of course; he loved the warm radiance of its cheerful little star,

but...it was such a strange and alien beauty, and even as he gazed on it with wonder, it reminded him how far he was from home.

He *didn't* do much for pleasure. He read, when he could snatch a few hours for himself without guilt weighing too heavy on his shoulders, but there was no poetry being written in his own heart. In fact, he couldn't remember any point in the last several million years when he'd had more relaxation than he'd so far had—in *here*. A few days of total rest, with no responsibilities, not even the option of doing any work at all, and *horribly best of all*, hearing the work of—a *great poet*, no matter that Optimus was involuntarily cringing all with every fragment of his being at even including Megatron in the same thought process as the Voice of Tarn. He still had no idea how to reconcile the apparent reality that they were the *same mech*.

The only possible takeaway from this was that he really *should* have taken that vacation Ratchet had been on at him about for the last three million years. If his high-water mark for pleasure was getting trapped in a hole with Megatron, he really *had* been working too hard.

Well, that clearly wasn't going to be a problem for the foreseeable future. Optimus drew a deep breath and tried to reach for calm again. But it was slipping beyond his grasp. He'd been doing his best to ignore the persistent surfacing alert from his logic engine trying to hand him an urgent status update, but it was getting boosted to priority levels of consciousness. The merciless calculations told him that his time had run out. Any hope of rescue was gone.

The Autobots would never have left him behind willingly, but it hadn't exactly been up to them. Omega Supreme was hard to take down, but even he couldn't just stand around in Decepticon territory forever. It would have taken Shockwave four days to reassemble one of the ancient Guardian-busting ion cannons the Decepticons had used in the first wave of the war, but by now he'd have gotten it done. And then Ultra Magnus would have had to order Omega to launch, or he would have been destroyed, and the others would all have been stranded and hunted down one by one. And Optimus knew that Ultra Magnus *would* have done it. That was why Optimus had put him in charge of getting the others to safety. Because Ultra Magnus would do what had to be done.

And that was still the choice Optimus would have made, even now with terror trying to climb out of his subconscious and seize control over his frontal processors, but it didn't help stifle his own inner horror. Another panic tried to whirr up; he shocked it away again, but he could feel it hovering just off the edge; this was going to be a constant presence with him for...for the rest of his life.

There was only one thin remaining hope he was willing to leave himself: Ironhide would have cut off his own legs before he left the planet with Optimus still on it, alive *or* dead. That old rustbucket would probably keep stubbornly digging holes in the underlayers for the next million years trying to find him. It still wasn't any *real* hope: Ironhide had all the grit in the world, but his armor was so thick that his comms systems were painfully limited. He could dig a tunnel three hundred meters away and never pick up their distress signals. But the affectionate thought warmed Optimus through anyway, loosening the bands of fear around his chest a little.

A little. He was still—*down here, down here for a million years—*

Megatron elbowed him roughly, jerking him out of the widening spiral. “Prime, next time wake me *before* you work yourself into a frenzy. What’s the matter *now*? It’s not like anything’s changed significantly in the last ten hours.”

“Omega Supreme brought us,” Optimus managed to get out.

“I know, what of it?” Megatron said in faint impatience. “It’s not like your people would have sat around waiting to leave until Shockwave literally trundled the ion cannon right up to him and started taking shots.”

“Yes,” Optimus said. “They would have.”

“Oh, you’re such *idiots*,” Megatron said. “Would they really? Their chances of actually finding us were virtually nil after the first thirty hours without picking up a distress beacon. Is this some sort of religious zealotry—they’re terrified to lose that Matrix thing? I suppose Ultra Magnus couldn’t claim the leadership without it.”

“What?” Optimus said. He was grateful for anything to talk about, think about; just hearing Megatron’s *voice* helped, because it shifted his systems towards combat mode and pushed down personal fear. “*No*, the Matrix isn’t a religious artifact! And it’s not a symbol of leadership, it’s the other way around. The Autobot leader holds the Matrix because he can make the best use of its guidance for us all. It’s a repository of wisdom.”

“Mm-hm,” Megatron said. “Yes, *wisdom*. What a conveniently vague thing to store. What’s the data structure look like? How do you access it?”

“It—holds consciousnesses, I suppose, is the best way to describe it. I can go within and speak with Autobots of the past—the Primes, others that the Primes encountered—they can give me their thoughts and advice—”

“So in other words, it induces delusions. How very useful. Why don’t you just think it out consciously yourself?”

“It’s not a *delusion*,” Optimus said, with a sigh.

“By all means explain to me how a device smaller than your own cranial unit is capable of storing accurate imagoes of some vast number of other Autobots,” Megatron said. “And then be prepared for me to laugh at you.”

“I can’t, actually,” Optimus said. “We have no real understanding of how the Matrix works. But I can be certain that it *does* work, because the minds inside the Matrix know things that I don’t.”

“Really,” Megatron said, in bored tones.

“Do you remember that Lomarian-built bomb you used to try to blow up the Kalis factories, about sixty thousand years into the war?” Optimus said.



“The one you fired onto our space station two days later?” Megatron said. “Yes, oddly that *has* stuck in my head: floating in orbit for a week with half my legs blown off was quite memorable. How *did* you manage to disable it?”

“There was an Autobot scientist named Illuminator in the Matrix who’d spent several thousand years at the technical university on Lomar studying their vapor electronics,” Optimus said. “He told me what to do. None of the rest of us had any idea, there was nothing in any of the databases to help us.” Megatron was still eyeing him skeptically. “You’ll just have to take my word for it, Megatron. I could list you a lot more cases than that. But the real truth is, I know it works, because when I go into the Matrix and speak to them, it’s not like talking something out with myself. I do that plenty, too. They’re not alive anymore, but they’re—present.”

“And you’ve never bothered to *investigate* this? The implications of the power differential you’re describing—”

“Wheeljack does run tests on it every once in a while, when I can spare him a few cycles,” Optimus said. “Believe me, he’d love to know. But the results don’t make sense: they often vary even when repeated instantly. He can’t even get an consistent *mass* reading on it. There’s a quantum barrier inside, around the core.”

“You’re carrying a *singularity* around,” Megatron said flatly. “And the only thing you use it for...is storing dead Autobots to *chat* with. Are you *serious*?”

“Says the mech who spent a week floating in orbit with his legs blown off,” Optimus said dryly.

“Who *did* succeed in blowing up Kalis Fabricators less than a thousand years later anyway,” Megatron said. Optimus grimaced. “Didn’t get very useful *advice* that time, did you? Maybe you’d be doing better if you didn’t waste your time listening to people who haven’t even managed to keep themselves alive.”

“Survival isn’t the best measure of a life,” Optimus said.

“It’s a fairly necessary precondition for all the others,” Megatron said. “And even if they were all geniuses, it’s still an idiotic use of that kind of technology. If you had that capacity, why wouldn’t you use it to construct *realities* instead? In the same resources it takes to represent an entire consciousness, you could simulate a reasonable approximation of a battlefield. Do that across the probability space, and you could just poke around until you found victory conditions and then get the backtrace.”

“I suppose it depends on what you value,” Optimus said. “The creators of the Matrix wanted to preserve history and gather wisdom, not ensure perpetual victory.”

“Which is again, a necessary precondition to anything else,” Megatron said. “But fine, I accept that it doesn’t really do you much good,” which was missing the point, but Optimus was going to give up arguing that. “If your people aren’t frantic over the Matrix, why the hell *wouldn’t* they leave sooner? They should have put this in the victory column and gone instantly. Sacrificing you to take out *me* is an excellent military outcome.”

“I think my feelings are hurt, Megatron,” Optimus said, half amused.

Megatron snorted. “It’s not *you* I’m insulting. Ultra Magnus isn’t what anyone would call inventive, but he’ll have Jazz, and Starscream will have his own ego, so that’s not much of an equal contest. If someone does stumble over us in a hundred thousand years or so, I’ll probably have to reconquer half the planet.”

Optimus frowned. “Ultra Magnus and—*Jazz*?” he said bemusedly. “They can’t stand each other.”

Megatron went still, and then he actually scraped sparks off his helmet just to turn his head and stare at Optimus more directly. “Are you telling me,” he said, that low threatening hum climbing into his voice that he got when he was really angry, “that the reason—the *actual reason*—that you’ve never assigned him as Magnus’s second, in all these years, in *millions of years of war*—is that they aren’t ‘*friends*’?” The word came out sounding like an expletive.

Optimus eyed him. “I *do* generally try to respect my officers’ preferences about—”

Megatron cut him off with a snarl. “How the hell haven’t I *killed you all yet*?”

“Because *we* are *friends*,” Optimus said firmly. “And all you Decepticons are is a bunch of selfish killers.”

“*We* are an *army*! *You* are a bizarre collection of mechanical clowns falling all over each other, somehow accidentally producing effective results a million times more often than you should!” Megatron scraped his head back over and lay there glaring at the ceiling, visibly seething.

Optimus turned his own gaze back upwards too, and out of curiosity, kicked off an analysis run: it was another excuse to occupy his frontal circuitry with something other than horror. The truth was, it wasn’t a conscious decision he’d made: he’d just literally never thought of putting Jazz and Magnus on a team together. Any time they spent more than five minutes in a room together, one of them invariably ended up coming to him with a complaint about the other. He’d done his best to even avoid having them in the same officer conferences. But now he almost immediately saw what Megatron was talking about: The two of them were absolutely perfect tactical-strategic counterparts. They’d be an even better match than Jazz and Prowl. And come to think of it, Jazz and Prowl had hated each other too, for the first million years or so. Of course, now he couldn’t assign Jazz *away* from Prowl, but if he shuffled things around...

“If you’re over there restructuring your officer hierarchy based on *my recommendation*, I swear I’m going to find a way to kill you,” Megatron said flatly.

“You’ve been trying to do that anyway.”

“I’ll find a way to kill you *agonizingly*.”

“It’s not like I’m actually going to get a chance to put it into effect, if that’s any comfort.”

“*Very little*,” Megatron snarled. “And before you start going into a spiral again just because you think your *friends* have deserted you, if they really *did* wait for Shockwave to drag an ion cannon all the way over, they’ve got another day.”

“What?” Optimus said. “It wouldn’t take him more than four days to—”

“He wouldn’t have bothered wasting the energon to *actually assemble one* until it became *inescapably clear* that Omega Supreme was in fact planning to just sit there like a target dummy! *Shockwave* has functional logic circuits! Unlike *you!*” Megatron’s optics were so bright with fury the whole crawlspace was tinted faintly red.

“I guess what *I’ve* got is a functional emotional subsystem,” Optimus said with an effort, an involuntary swell of relief rolling over him, hope sweeter than any intoxicant.

“That doesn’t have *military* value.”

“You’ve just finished saying you can’t explain our success against you,” Optimus pointed out, somewhat giddily.

Megatron actually ground his jaw audibly. “And now you’re lying there feeling *relieved*, aren’t you! For no sane reason! Just because your Autobots are still on the planet somewhere, undoubtedly being chased off their tailpipes by Starscream before they can so much as finish a three-meter scan! I swear, if I could get my hands around your throat—”

Optimus actually laughed out loud. “Where’d all the sweet talk go, Megatron?”

“I wouldn’t plug into your brain if my very existence depended on it,” Megatron said. “Your rationality center is *corrupt!*”

#

The brief sensation of effervescence faded quickly out of Optimus’s circuits. His rationality center *wasn’t* corrupt, although he increasingly didn’t have a lot of hope for its long-term stability. He could face a lot of terrible things with courage; he’d had to. But this...he was painfully aware that this was going to defeat him long before he actually died. The only hollow comfort was that there were no Autobots trapped here with him: he wouldn’t have the compounded agony of falling apart on them when they most needed him to be strong. Optimus could live with falling apart on *Megatron*.

He jerked suddenly as Megatron jolted him in the side again. “I wasn’t in a panic!” he said.

“Really?” Megatron said, so unconvincingly it wasn’t even a real attempt at innocence.

Optimus glared at him. “Now you *are* going to start some juvenile exchange down here?”

“If my alternative is sitting by here while you work yourself into personality breakdown, yes,” Megatron said. “I’d understand if it started getting to you in half a million years or so, Prime, but this is fairly pathetic even by Autobot standards.”

“I would’ve thought you’d enjoy the spectacle,” Optimus said.

“Not when I’m stuck *next to you*,” Megatron said. “I’m not going to have the luxury of retreating into insanity, so *you* don’t get to, either. Tell me something.”

“What?” Optimus said.

“I don’t know!” Megatron said. “The worst thing you’ve ever done, that should be mildly entertaining.”

“Brought the war to Earth,” Optimus said. It wasn’t much of a contest.

“I take it back,” Megatron said. “That’s only idiotic.”

“I realize you don’t want to admit the value of sentient organic life—”

“I’ve given up on questioning your bizarre fondness for fleshlings, I’m stuck on how this is anything *you’ve* done. I didn’t ask you what you think the worst thing *I’ve* done is.”

“*We* went to Earth,” Optimus said. “You *followed* us.”

Megatron instinctively tried to make an exasperated gesture and just banged his arms into the wall and Optimus’s side. “We were going anyway! It was the richest energon target with the lowest cost of operations in convenient distance, even *before* the humans started helpfully extracting and refining carbon fuels for us! And if you didn’t figure that out in pre-mission planning, you should have.”

Optimus froze involuntarily. All these terrible years since waking up in the Ark, seeing innocent humans dying under Decepticon fire because of his mistake, he hadn’t been able to bear looking at the decision-making in his memory files again—until Megatron had just *said* it, and suddenly the scene was surfacing out of deep storage: the conference he’d held with his scientists and officers, and Perceptor saying, *Optimus, after close analysis, I believe the Decepticons’ natural target will be the third planet of star G-1593—*

It was an almost destructively vast relief; Optimus could have burst into tears. And Megatron didn’t even *notice*, he was just going on, impatiently, “Besides, humans weren’t even *evolved* at the time!”

“There were still sentients!” Optimus managed, shakily. “Primates—whales—elephants—they just hadn’t developed *civilization* yet, so we didn’t *recognize—*”

“Yes, I can’t imagine how you overlooked their stunning intellectual capacity on a deep-space survey,” Megatron said. “And whales are not sentient, you idiot. Nice singing is not a sign of a functional intellect!”

“They love their young!” Optimus said. “They have *friends—*”

“What, *that’s* how you define—oh, of *course* it is,” Megatron softly clanked his helmet back against the floor a few times. “Never mind, you’re hopeless. Tell me the most *petty* thing you’ve ever done, instead.”

Optimus was still trying to get his emotional circuits back on an even keel, which wasn't much of an excuse for blurting, "I'm the one who put the Zilkian pilfer in your—"

Megatron literally smashed his shoulder into the ceiling trying to get his hands around Optimus's throat. "I'd say I'm going to kill you, but that would be *too kind!*" he snarled. "I'm going to kill *someone else* and make you *watch!*"

Optimus winced, but as long as he'd gotten himself into it— "I don't suppose you'd mind telling me how you got it out? We *were* curious how you managed it that fast. Ratchet was pretty sure it was going to stick around inside you for at least two months no matter what you could do."

"How did I get it out? I spent sixteen hours in a thermian isolator unit until it crawled out of my lower exhaust vent!"

"You—*what?*"

"What did you *think* I was going to do, just spend those two months with it occasionally causing me to go into hilarious contortions while it wandered around nibbling on my motor relays until it finally died?"

"As opposed to subjecting yourself to a thermian isolator for sixteen hours, *yes!*" Optimus said in horror. "People don't come out of thermian isolators *sane!*"

"They don't come out of selenium mining sane either, if there's even a remote possibility otherwise," Megatron said flatly. "Every component of my personality is thyline-shielded and has a quadruple backup layer. You'd have to soak my cranial unit in plasma for a week to cause any kind of real damage."

"That explains how you could *survive* the process, not why you'd voluntarily undergo it!"

"Because I *couldn't* survive two months of occasional fits with Starscream lurking around waiting to take advantage of them!" Megatron said.

"That's absurd, your system would have routed around that kind of minor damage if there were any real imminent danger!" Optimus said, bewildered, and then he realized—

"Megatron, did you put yourself in a thermian isolator because Starscream would have *made fun of you?*"

Megatron ground his teeth.

"Well," Optimus said after another moment's consideration, "I'd say I'm sorry. But I'm not."

"You *will be*," Megatron said.

"I'm sure all your warriors were very impressed," Optimus added, because he couldn't quite resist, then yelped, "Ow!" Megatron had just jolted him again. But to be fair, it was possible he'd deserved it this time. "I do also routinely have to resist the temptation to tell Tracks that he's got a scratch on his rear bumper," he offered.

“Don’t astonish me with your depths of depravity,” Megatron growled.

#

Optimus managed to sleep again until the last two hours of Megatron’s revised deadline, when he jerked awake again involuntarily. He lay in the dark a few minutes. The horror was slightly muted this time, dulled a little by repetition, but it was still creeping over him. After a moment he reached out, and Megatron came instantly alert, catching his hand before it even touched him, with a grip that would have allowed him to twist it wrenchingly away; as soon as he had the hold, he paused, then said, “I’m awake,” and let go. “Tell me your favorite poem.”

Optimus glared at the ceiling, and after a moment Megatron smirked and said, “Wait, let me guess—*Let the fallen rise again, in silver ranks?*”

“No,” Optimus said. “That’s Ratchet’s favorite, though.”

Megatron laughed. “Now you have to tell me. How *many* of you sit around and read my poetry together?”

“We don’t read just *your* poetry,” Optimus said repressively.

“Mm hm.”

Optimus sighed. “Me, Ratchet, Perceptor, Silverbolt, Bluestreak, and Ironhide.”

“If you do have a chance to lock me up for your trial, I’d be happy to host a meeting of your literary club in my cell,” Megatron said. “I imagine it would traumatize all of you very satisfyingly. So which one is it?”

“*We are always lying when we say here is all that I can give,*” Optimus said.

“Oh, you don’t understand it at all, do you,” Megatron said. “You probably think it’s talking about *the courage to go on* or something pathetically trite like that.”

Optimus glared at him. “Maybe *you* don’t understand it!”

“I wrote it!”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t be wrong,” Optimus said firmly, and then couldn’t help asking, “What do *you* think it means?”

“You’ve read the poem, so I’ve already told you,” Megatron said impatiently. “If I could explain it in something other than poetry, I wouldn’t have had to write a poem to say it.”

Optimus stared at the ceiling, overwhelmed all over again by the terrible, visceral understanding being forced into his unwilling mind that *Megatron was a poet*. It was traumatizing. “When did you start writing poetry?” he asked, in some desperation.

“Hm, after forty thousand years or so in the arena?” Megatron said. “I had to become literate, first.”

“You weren’t...” Optimus stopped, sickened again. Of course. If you were deliberately building incurious, dulled mechs—

Megatron just shrugged. “It took me some time to even know what I was missing. Brickbat didn’t leave me much leisure time—he didn’t have to. I was quite ready to be pleased with the idea of having *any* time awake where I wasn’t working. Besides, I liked training and fighting: the sheer physical satisfaction was a revelation. It took quite a while for that pleasure to start to pall—it never really has, honestly. Do *you* enjoy it? I know most Autobots don’t, but I’ve often wondered if you were different. You were rebuilt for it, after all.”

“I...enjoy the physical activity of sparring,” Optimus admitted.

“You sound *guilty* about it,” Megatron said amusedly.

“Most Autobots *do* find it difficult, or unpleasant. If I set an example of doing considerably more exercise than they can handle without stress—”

“They’ll fall apart into twitching heaps of scrap?” Megatron said. “Spontaneously explode? No, wait, *I* know—they’ll *feel bad!*”

“They’ll push past their own limits and end up *hurting* their performance instead of improving it,” Optimus said firmly.

“Yes, but what you really mean is, they’ll feel bad,” Megatron said. “So you deny yourself even the pleasure of a good fight, just to soothe the tender bruised spirits of your pathetic crew.”

“I get all the fighting I want,” Optimus said. “I just get it against *you*.”

“Once a month or so?” Megatron said. “That’s just sad, Prime. No sex, no violence, I’m sure you don’t overenergize or indulge in any recreational additives; holosims? No, I thought not. What a drab existence you lead. I’m surprised you’re noticing much of a *difference* down here. Except for getting more sleep and new poetry.”

It was a direct hit in an already-tender spot, and it cracked the protective shell Optimus had been trying to hold over the status update alert that had started going again. He tried to think of a clever response, of some way to turn the conversation and his mind away from the mounting horror of their reality. But he couldn’t. Faintly he was hearing in the distance the deep thrumming hum of an ion cannon charging up, and the shriek of its blast: *actually* hearing it, in his sensory processing system and not just his imagination, which he knew was an extremely bad sign.

Then Megatron said thoughtfully, “Do you know, you’re so pathetically understimulated that I could probably bring you to overload just talking. Shall we see?”

“What?” Optimus said distantly, underwater.

“It would certainly be trivial to get you if we were out of here, now that I know you’re so pathetically deprived,” Megatron went on. “I’d just send you some sort of private challenge. ‘Meet me somewhere alone and we’ll have it out,’ that sort of thing—it wouldn’t be hard to get you to show up, I’m sure; I could always just threaten I’d go blast the nearest human habitation into bits if you didn’t. Do you remember that power station on the island, that one we hit, hm, two months ago? There was a nice-sized human town some twelve kilometers away: I could probably kill twenty thousand of them in half an hour.”

Optimus surfaced abruptly. Megatron was *threatening harm*, to innocent humans and him personally: his entire system reoriented itself to figure out what he was going to *do* about it. The delusional sounds dropped out of his sensory subsystem instantly, and his tactical overlays came up as power rerouted to his combat systems—then the many details of the conversation he’d missed filled in, and he said, “Wait, *what?*”

“When you did show up, I’d insist on melee only, of course,” Megatron added, blithely going on. “Ranged weapons damage isn’t really conducive to what I’d have in mind for you. But it sounds like a bit of a tussle would probably put you in the *mood*. You’ve studied Morantian power dynamics, haven’t you?”

“I am *not responding to this*,” Optimus said, mostly to make himself feel better, staring pained at the ceiling. Megatron was actually going to describe this bizarrely grotesque idea of seduction in extreme detail. And while Optimus would have very much liked to immediately object in much stronger terms—he’d normally have started doing some jolting of his own without the slightest hesitation, even if that *did* end up in a thousand years of trading electric shocks down here—but it was *working*. Not as *seduction*, because every other word out of Megatron’s mouth was purely appalling, but as a *distraction* it was extraordinarily effective.

“Let’s say yes,” Megatron said. “That hip-pivot throw you like so much has a distinct flavor of it. I’d start with a fluid open, build to an exchange of thrusts—”

“Is this a *seduction* or a *tactical* discussion?” Optimus said. Cybertron, what he would give for it to become a tactical discussion. “Also, which fluid open? There are twenty-six different versions.”

“With only trivial distinctions,” Megatron said. “I don’t bother thinking out moves at that level, I let my low-level tactical handler manage that out of the conscious zone. If there’s anything of significant advantage, it’ll pick it out; if not, it will just randomize.”

Optimus had no idea how that worked. “You’d be launching your own body into unpredictable motion all the time,” he said, baffled; although it certainly explained why it was so damn hard to guess what Megatron was going to do in a fight.

Megatron shrugged. “It’s mildly disconcerting for the first few thousand years or so. Then you get used to it. But if you want more tactile specifics, fine: an undercut to the left hip followed by a slide-step, then a jab at the throat. How would you respond?”

The moves easily visualized in his tactical cortex. “You’ve already removed the cannon?” Optimus said. “An elbow to the optics, then pivot around to the right—”



“Mm, you always like to try and control my power side,” Megatron said, somehow making it sound *insinuating*. “Wide swing from the left, positioning high.”

“Grapple the extended arm,” Optimus said.

“Let you have the hold, right ankle hook,” Megatron said.

“You mean left ankle hook,” Optimus said. Megatron just looked at him. “A right ankle hook would—”

“Destabilize our joint balance,” Megatron said in a faintly encouraging tone.

“You really want to end up on the ground with me?” Optimus said. “Fine. Lower body pivot once we hit, keeping the arm hold, pinning your right leg.”

“Elevating your pelvic block and *beautifully* exposing your dorsal access port,” Megatron said. “Perfect.”

Optimus sighed in some exasperation. “I’m not sure what you’d be doing with my dorsal access port anyway, but I’m certainly not going to *open* it for you no matter what.”

Megatron paused for a long moment. “You *don’t know what I’d be doing* with it,” he repeated. “This is almost pathetically easy. As for opening it, I’d send a 3.265 decavolt current through the lock and it would pop before you could reroute power back from where it was being directed to the left leg to keep me pinned.”

Optimus paused, frowning, and realized somewhat disconcertingly that Megatron was right. “Have you—given *thought* to this?”

“In the last five days I have,” Megatron said.

“Well, I’m still not giving you *neural* access, and you can’t pop *that* open,” Optimus said, for which he was profoundly grateful. “If you want to poke a cable into my port while I’m ripping your right arm off, I guess you can.”

“I’m not going to put a *cable* into it,” Megatron said. “I’ve got a four-centimeter thick extensible electrojack in my left hip socket.”

Optimus felt his whole body screw up in dismay. “An *electrojack*?”

Megatron laughed. “You’ve never even *tried* it, have you.”

“Of course I’ve never tried it!” Optimus said. “Sticking an *electrojack* into an *access port*?”

“Prime, I dare you to send a pulse current loaded with white noise data to the entry socket around your dorsal port right now.”

“I’m absolutely not doing that.”

“Oh, go on,” Megatron said. “It’s not going to actually have nearly the same effect, but this is going to be virtually impossible if you don’t have *any* frame of reference for the sensation. Follow it up with an undirected power boost.”

“You think I’m going to *facilitate*—whatever this is that you’re doing?” Optimus said, incredulous.

Megatron blew out an exasperated sigh. “Would you rather have your reality matrix hyperattenuate?” he said with brutal bluntness. “Just talking through a *hypothetical* fight isn’t actually going to engage your tarnic system for any length of time.”

Optimus had been pushing his frontal cortex overtime to avoid thinking about why he’d needed a distraction in the first place—but he realized that Megatron was, horribly, *right*. His systems *had* been starting to roll out of high-alert mode again, just before Megatron had—taken the conversation obscene again. And if he stopped now... “You could—tell me some more poetry,” Optimus tried, despairingly.

“That’s *intellectual* pleasure,” Megatron said. “Do *you* think that’s going to work? Pulse current, followed by a power boost. Come on.”

Optimus groaned, and then he shoved the entire operation into an encapsulated routine and fired it off to his power-management subsystem before he could think too hard about what he was doing. One astrosecond later, a half-painful and somehow *glittering* jolt shocked through his whole pelvic region and traveled sparkling straight up the dorsal access channel for three meters before it fizzled out. He yelped out loud, involuntarily, just as the wave of heat from the power boost rolled right after it, and—and the entry socket *relaxed*—

“There,” Megatron purred. “Now I’ve got the jack *seated* in you. Are you still thinking about ripping off my arm? The next move’s a rotation of the jack, thirteen degrees—”

“This is your idea of *fun*?” Optimus said, strangled. He *wouldn’t* have been thinking about anything at this point except getting Megatron *out* of him, preferably but not necessarily without suffering internal damage.

“And another pulse current just like the first, delivered to the new position,” Megatron said. “Am I through to the next socket yet?”

“*No*,” Optimus said.

“Mm, are you *sure*?” Megatron said. “Very well, another rotation, twenty-nine degrees, and repeat.”

Optimus could now imagine the whole thing in detail, because he’d been an idiot and *listened to Megatron*: that unfamiliar sparkling sensation hitting him over and over, at unpredictable intervals, in highly sensitive and almost never active regions. His sensory-processing system would be getting wildly confused and trying to figure out how to *interpret* it, and it wasn’t clearly a threat—oh, *Primus*, Optimus realized in dawning horror: it wasn’t *remotely* a threat. The threat was *the fight*, which would still be dominating his entire frontal cortex, and there would be an extremely minor pain sensation in his own slightly over-extended leg, which

would be used to calibrate all other sensation categories, meaning that *this* was going to end up shunted right to his *pleasure centers*—

“I rather think I *am* through, now,” Megatron said, and Optimus couldn’t even argue with him. “Time to move on to the next socket.”

“Can you even *extend* that far?” he said a little desperately.

“I’ll tell you when I hit the limit,” Megatron said. “You wouldn’t have any idea how far I could go. I’d just be extending smoothly up through you—the jack is 3.2 centimeters thick in this section. A little bit of a tight fit, perhaps? Are your lubrication systems kicking in by now, do you think?”

They *would have been*, meaning that the electric stimulation would be getting carried *throughout the channel*; Optimus faintly heard himself whimper. His imagination center was generating the sensation right now—not nearly as vivid as actual physical contact would have been, but *more than enough*; he had no idea anymore why he’d gotten himself into this, but he had to get *out* of it—

“Once I was secured in the next socket, another round of stimulation,” Megatron said. “Only this time, I’ll be delivering pulse currents to both sockets at once, offset by half the pulse frequency.”

Optimus was—*panting*. His visual center was going offline. His pleasure centers were sucking power out of every part of his body, except—except the *dorsal access channel*—

“Well?” Megatron said softly. “Go on, Prime. Just like before, you know how. *Do it*,” and Optimus wasn’t, he wasn’t going to, he wasn’t listening to Megatron anymore, except his *body* was listening; his power-management subsystem actually *delivered* the stimulation, and he jerked helplessly.

Megatron groaned softly next to him, a pleasure-reverb running low in the audio output. “*Again*,” he said, and Optimus gasped. “Yes. And again, until you open up for me; are you there yet? You are, aren’t you. I’m extending further. How deep is the next socket?”

“Three meters,” Optimus said faintly.

“I’m almost there,” Megatron said. “Just a few more seconds...I’m taking my time; at this length the jack is two centimeters thick: flexrod, not durasteel anymore, but I imagine I’m still having to work at it a bit to get it in. You’d be helping me by now, you realize. Primary function would be dropping out of the combat system; your whole body would be relaxing, shifting to give me a better angle—”

Optimus heard a faint deep hum of low-level pleasure circuitry engaging, and it was *him* making that noise. He was starting to lose sensory input from his extremities; his whole sensory system was focusing on the access channel, waiting for input, waiting *hungrily*: for a completely novel sensation, taken to radical extremes, categorized as pure pleasure—

“There,” Megatron murmured softly. “I’m seated into the next socket. All three of the sockets this time. *Now*.”

Optimus knew he needed to interrupt, he had to cut off his power-management system or it was going to go ahead and fire the sensation again for him; it had started to accept Megatron’s command as a *trigger* for it, and he had to actively preempt it, except instead he just lay there and—and—let it *hit* him, washing through his whole body like a glowing wave. He gasped out, wordlessly, a stifled cry, and Megatron reached out and stroked his wrist with a finger, just that touch sending wild shivers through his entire body.

“I’m not done yet,” Megatron said. “How much further to the next one?”

“Five meters,” Optimus said blindly. He didn’t even *want* it to stop anymore. “Can—are you—going to—”

“What’s the radius I have to work with?”

“A centimeter,” Optimus said.

“Yes,” Megatron said. “I’m going to make it. I’d have you lying flat on your back by now; I’d make body contact at the hip ridges to align with the channel. Just a little bit of a push, now—a hint of pressure on all the sockets. Can you imagine it?”

“Nnh,” Optimus said, which was as close as he could manage to *yes, yes, please, yes, hurry*, he was imagining it *vividly*, the tremendous weight of Megatron’s body pressing down against him and a line of *molten fire* traveling all the way up his back, sparks glittering off it without a pause by now, his whole body waiting eagerly for Megatron to *get there*, to land the next connection and *give it to him*, deliver that magnificent dazzling sensation—

“*Now*,” Megatron said. His voice was distorted with pleasure, humming, and Optimus felt his whole body tighten up and—

He was staring blankly at the ceiling; his system still reeling and his whole body shivering; and Megatron groaned deeply and said, “Are you ready for more?” and Optimus said choking, “Yes,” and Megatron said, “Fire another round right now, just to keep you running hot,” and Optimus scraped himself against the ceiling and the walls involuntarily bucking.

“You’re *completely* open by now, aren’t you,” Megatron said.

“*Yes*,” Optimus said. “Yes. Megatron, *please*—”

Megatron actually emitted a *whining* noise; he’d just slammed shut his own sensory processing gates to keep from overloading right then. He snarled out, “I’m going the rest of the way. The jack can extend twenty-six meters. I’m all the way in you, seating the bare tip into the termination point. I’m going to lock every one of the sockets with a negative charge, and hit the whole channel with a triple-strength current—*now*,” and the world dissolved all over again, and when he surfaced, Megatron hit him with it *again*, and *again*—

Optimus floated back to consciousness half an hour later, surfacing in an extraordinarily dissonant combination of vividly glowing low-level physical satisfaction and coherent horrified disgust directed at both Megatron and himself. Except his metaprocessor was already determinedly kicking out the horrified disgust, having decided that the inconsistency had to go. And since *that* was dropping out of his intellectual evaluation of the situation, what his brain was coming up with instead was—

—that they could do this *again*, repeatedly; in fact at any time in the next *million years* he could on-demand experience this magnificently uncomplicated pleasure, with no guilt and no consequences, and maybe this situation *wasn't so bad*—

“Oh, Primus, no,” Optimus said in horror. In *metahorror*, because he wasn't feeling *first-order* horror anymore at all.

“Excellent,” Megatron said, yawning next to him. “I take it that worked.”

“I'm not sure I wouldn't have preferred personality disintegration,” Optimus said, staring dismayed at the ceiling.

“*I'm* sure,” Megatron said. “Tell me, did I actually get you lubricated?”

“No,” Optimus lied. His dorsal port was *dripping*.

Megatron laughed softly. “Liar. If we got rescued by the Decepticons right now, would you agree to let me do it to you for real, in exchange for safe passage off the planet?”

Optimus considered lying again, and then just gave up: there didn't seem to be much point. “I'd *beg* you to do it to me,” he said helplessly.

Megatron literally locked up and overloaded so fast and hot that faint wisps of white smoke came out of his shoulder vents and his cooling systems roared loudly for two solid minutes. He sank back out of it gasping wildly, staring at the ceiling open-mouthed, looking deeply disturbed himself.

That was mildly comforting, actually.

#

They slept for a while, but Optimus had actually paid off his entire sleep debt by then and was nearly through his defrag backlog on top of it, so after four hours he woke up. He didn't feel any less disturbed *or* any less sated. It was just as well there wasn't much hope of rescue anymore, because if he got out of here—he *would* let Megatron. He'd let Megatron do it anytime he *wanted*—at least until Megatron inevitably did something that reminded Optimus forcefully of what a monstrously twisted mech he was, and inspired enough fresh rage and sorrow in him to override this frantically intense *lust*.

“How can you actually justify any of what you've done?” Optimus said, half hoping Megatron would do that for him *now*. “The destruction of Cybertron, all the civilian deaths—

what you're doing on Earth *now*. How do you reconcile it with your *work*? Everything in *The Sacrifice of Violence* is a condemnation of abuse and tyranny."

Megatron sighed out. "You know what you are, Prime? You're one of the *nodding heads*."

"The what?" Optimus said.

"I bet you don't read *that* one very often, do you. Shall I refresh your memory?"

Optimus knew most of Megatron's poems, but he *wasn't* sure which one Megatron was talking about. "All right," he said slowly.

Megatron snorted softly and started reciting,

*This stuff's boring as scrap, one of the bodyguards said to the other, out on the balcony,  
while inside the room the others read my poetry.*

*Boring, but at least there's good energon  
and nobody's trying to kill you.*

*Inside the nodding heads agreed with him.*

*The nodding heads, polite, who understood very well*

*That they were paying with poetry and boredom*

*With all the forms and appearances of delight*

*For their delightful situation*

*The other bodyguard said nah, poetry's cool*

*You just can't listen to the scrap they try to sell you with it*

*I was out in Mantira Chasm before I got here*

*And we were sure we were all gonna die*

*We were just waiting for them to get around to it*

*They were dropping the trench bombs one an hour*

*And there were six more left before us*

*Then one of the guys said let's not just sit here*

*I'll tell you a poem*

*And he told us the one about killing the durasteel slagger*

*That one they read ten minutes ago and said it was about being your best self*

*Nah, it's about killing a durasteel slagger*

*And that's what we were doing*

*All of us together in Mantira Chasm trying to get ahead of it before it slagged us*

*And all you could do was keep throwing everything you had and hope you got out ahead*

*So we didn't just sit on our asses and wait, we started throwing everything we had*

*We weren't supposed to, the ammo was supposed to last another month*

*But we opened it up anyway*

*And the guys on either side of us started doing it too*

*And trench number six got slagged anyway*

*But we didn't, we got out ahead, so I got a medal and now I'm here*

*With people who don't get poetry.*

*I went out on the balcony with them*

*They were alarmed, of course; I was a guest and they understood they too had to pay  
With forms and appearances  
For good energon  
And no one trying to kill you  
And those things were dearer to those who knew their alternatives more clearly.*

*You're right, I said  
It's about killing a durasteel slagger  
They know it too  
Some of them saw it happen  
Sixteen hours in an oil-soaked ring  
But they can't tell you the truth  
They have built an empire of lies  
Where the dead beneath are buried twice  
To better feed the living above  
And you can keep the teeth of hunger off your own neck  
Only if you tell the ravening lies yourself  
And they too want to live*

*I'll tell you a poem  
I said to them*

*Let us build together  
The empire of unsheathed knives and hungers  
Where we will not lie in small rooms and say we want poetry  
When all we want is to live  
Let us pave the streets in corpses  
They are paved so already, and we cannot raise the dead  
But let us leave them out next time  
Let us bury lies instead of the living  
Whose mouths we stop up with stories  
Let us build it soon, if not today*

*They liked the poem  
We shook hands when we parted  
Soon, they said, if not today.*

Megatron finished, and Optimus stared blankly at the ceiling. "That—that *happened*," he said, still struggling through it.

"Of course it happened," Megatron said. "That was Dirge and Ramjet out on the balcony. It was only ten years or so before we launched the rebellion, I was actively recruiting by then. That's *why* I published the poetry. I certainly didn't do it so idiots like you could *give it awards*. Amazingly, no Decepticon who heard it ever had the slightest difficulty understanding what I was saying."

Inexorably, the other poems were beginning to reorient themselves one by one in Optimus's mind, being clamped together by new understanding into the shape of a towering, terrible

edifice. He realized—he'd been trying to integrate the information in the wrong direction. He'd been trying to reconcile in his own mind the idea that *Megatron*, the butcher of the arena, the brutal, selfish warlord who'd destroyed the Golden Age, could somehow be the brilliant, shining Voice of Tarn. On some emotional level, below intellectual understanding, he'd still half been clinging to the idea that it was—a counterfeit, a lie of some kind.

But that wasn't it at all.

"Megatron," he said, almost choked. "Megatron, your...your *name*, where did it—*come* from?"

"The arena, of course," Megatron said. "The administrator of the side ring came up with it before my first match. He thought it sounded impressive. Brickbat was calling me some terrible thing...I don't even remember. He wasn't very good at naming things. I didn't actually have a designation before then. I was the tunneler, I didn't need a name. There were only five of us, after all."

It wasn't a surprise by then. It was earthshaking enough to rock the foundations of Optimus's entire existence, but it wasn't a surprise. The understanding was already rolling over him, the terrible revelation: *Megatron* was the lie. The Champion of Tarn had only ever been—a fancy skimcoat put over the truth of the slagger poem, over the grotesque horror of pushing a sentient being into a ring and forcing him to murder others over and over again, just to survive. A lie told by the very people slaving over his agony and death. Optimus shuddered with fresh horror at the thought that he'd been *one of them*.

The mech lying next to him was the Voice of Tarn. Who had written down the vivid, brutal truths of his own experience, to speak not to *Optimus*, not to anyone privileged enough to be sitting in the Teniros library listening to a poetry reading, but to soldiers and underlayer dwellers living through that experience *with* him. And he'd published that poetry for a *purpose*; he'd taken the wealth and power he'd won with his own suffering and used it to build an army and rip apart the world that was doing it to all of them.

Megatron shook his head. "Were you really under the impression I've been doing all of this for my own entertainment? Unlike *you*, I do actually have a plan."

"But—but what *is it*?" Optimus burst out in frustration, still trying to understand. "Where *are* you going that's *not* the empire of unsheathed knives?"

"That *is* where I'm going!" Megatron said. "Of course that's where I'm going!"

"You're—*serious*? But—Megatron, that's insane! The empire of unsheathed knives—it's a grotesque dystopian vision! It's the *arena*! What sane being would ever choose to live there?"

"The ones who recognized that *we were all living there already*," Megatron said softly, murderously, "so that *the rest of you* didn't have to."

"I *have* been living there for the last eight million years!" Optimus said. "It hasn't made me want to *inflict* it on others!"



“You’re not living in my empire, Prime,” Megatron said. “You’re just clinging to the wreck of your own beloved Golden Age. You and your valiant band, still loudly braying your lies of *love* and *friendship* and *peace*, and all the while fighting just as savagely as any Decepticon warrior to bring back the world where you indulged in those luxurious illusions at *our expense*.”

“Because the Golden Age had been *corrupted*!” Optimus said. “Not a single Autobot in my army would defend a single thing that happened to you, Megatron; not a single one of us would ever condemn *any* sentient being to the arena, would ever start a war for conquest—”

“Nnngrh, I can’t *take* not being able to *hit* you!” Megatron said. “Are you actually going to try to claim to me that you and your warriors are somehow more virtuous and noble than the Autobot leadership of the Golden Age, the great and glorious heroes who saved us all from the Quintessons? Sentinel Prime was toting around your precious Matrix full of wisdom in *his* chest, too. He was brave, he was clever, he was determined; he ruled Cybertron for seventeen million years before I killed him. I’m sure it went splendidly at the beginning for *him*, too.

“And then four million years in,” Megatron went on, his voice dropping deadly-soft, “Cybertron *ran out of room*, so they built Aleph overlayer to make more of it, and the Functionists took the Senate shortly thereafter—to determine who was going to have to *stay underground*. So those four million years of peace were bought with thirteen million years of injustice and agonies in the dark. And eight million years of war since, while you’ve fought to start it all up again. If you win it, if you do get the chance to rebuild your Golden Age on the ashes, how long will you promise me *this* time around? How long before you’re presiding over a degeneracy as grotesque as the one I overthrew? Why should I believe you’re going to do better, when all you’re offering are the same old tired lies?”

Optimus found his whole body was trembling. He had answers for Megatron’s brutal, accusatory questions, a *list* of answers; he’d spent his whole life trying to come up with them, new ones added every time he’d learned of yet another grotesque poisonous failing of the Golden Age, another seed of war. He had plans for revising the system of government, for independent courts, special tribunals, a monitoring regime—but he couldn’t say any of them out loud. They felt suddenly insubstantial in his own mind, thin as cellophane. He had convinced himself the Golden Age had gone corrupt—in his *lifetime*, that it had just begun falling apart. But—but the underlayers—

No one had wanted to live below the surface. No one.

Megatron was *right*. Of course he was right. It had been corrupt the whole time. The brief flaring of peace and success had lasted only as long as critical resources had been unbounded. And when the first one had run out...

“But the answer can’t be to just—to put *everyone* in the dark!” he said, his voice distorting.

“The *dark*?” Megatron said. “No, Prime. The *light*. The answer is to bring us all into the light, where none of us tell slag-stinking stories about how we *deserve* the luxuries we take, or pretend that we have anything we want except by luck and strength, and we don’t hide the

things we do to get them from each other. No more *spectators* at the fight. You're all going to be on the killing floor with the rest of us, with your own knives out in the open."

"And how long do you think it'll be before someone murders *you* with one of those unsheathed knives?" Optimus said. "Do you think you'll escape it, after you've dragged us all down there?"

"How desperate you are to believe I'm some kind of gluttonous power-hungry fool," Megatron said. He sounded almost resigned. "Of course I won't escape it. Someone *will* murder me. I don't really think much of Starscream's chances, but if it's not him, it'll be somebody else. What of it? I was willing to die in the arena to keep from being buried alive again. Why wouldn't I take *that* death instead? At least it would be for a better reason than *your entertainment*."

"Oh, Primus," Optimus said, and his voice sounded faint and far away in his own ears.

#

He couldn't sleep. He couldn't bear to defrag. He couldn't speak, he couldn't even think clearly. Megatron's poetry kept coming into his head, lines stabbing like unsheathed knives themselves. He would have given anything for an open road and silence: to drive without thinking for hours in the dark, to let physical motion stand in for mental.

Megatron *was* in a defrag cycle next to him, silent and serene. Megatron, who wasn't a grotesquely selfish, brutal warlord at all, but the more-horrific opposite, a visionary who had chosen to willingly lay his own life down for a cause so vast and terrible that Optimus could barely endure to look at it. Not for peace, or love, or justice; not even for any hope of lasting happiness for himself or anyone else. Only for a cold, merciless truth laid bare, that would deny them even a chance to exist.

It was like lying next to the glowing helix at the core of a fusion reactor, feeling it stripping away at the shielding layers of his personality matrix. Optimus couldn't even convince himself it was a lie. Tears were sliding steadily from his optics.

Megatron sighed faintly. "This is why it's never a good idea to explain poetry. Do you need me to remind you that you're never going to have to do anything about it?"

Optimus shuddered. How grotesque, for that to be *comforting*. "That doesn't stop it breaking my heart," he whispered.

"*The universe doesn't care where your heart stops*, remember? Wasn't that your favorite?" and Optimus flinched in pain. Megatron snorted. "You know, you could have worked yourself into catatonic despair over my poetry sometime in the last eight million years when it would have been *useful*. I won't even be able to jack you out of this, will I."

Optimus couldn't answer him. It seemed laughable now that he'd been worried about what Megatron might do to his *body*. He didn't entirely understand how Megatron had kept going like this all these years—with nothing to hope for, nothing to *live* for, except his cold-as-the-void cause. When he didn't even believe love *existed*, outside of the lie. It was the same

courage, he supposed, that had enabled Megatron to survive the arena; the courage that had been forged into his brain so he could survive an endless dark. Optimus couldn't imagine it himself.

Abruptly Megatron said, "All right, listen to me," and Optimus turned his head and looked at him, half blankly, and Megatron recited,

*All this is true  
That death is not a door but an end  
And galaxies ten billion years away are fading into endless night  
Flying from us faster than their light can shine  
The stars one day will all go out  
And all empires will be dust long since*

*And this too is true  
It will not be long*

*And yet it will be longer than we have  
Aeons, ends of universes, are beyond our grasp  
All we can ever have is here  
A moment where you and I  
are stars not yet gone into the night  
and can draw a constellation  
by reaching out a hand.*

It was almost too cruel for kindness, insisting on the harsh truth of ephemerality even in a single moment of joy. But something in it—there was something in it, some tiny fragment of hope, and Optimus did reach out his hand blindly in the dark. Megatron paused and then reached out his own, and their fingers interlaced. Optimus slid open the access panel in his wrist, and let Megatron plug in to the small socket. The connection was still suspended: Megatron was opening a panel in his own arm, a little further up, and Optimus slid out a jack from his upper arm that could reach, and pressed into him, and they opened the connections simultaneously.

Megatron came into him swift and exploratory, a cold gleam of steel and ice and silver prodding through him, cruel in the way that his universe and his poetry were cruel: easily, but without malice. His mental fingers idly probed at nerve centers while he passed through them, sparking flashes of pain and pleasure: he didn't bother to avoid the first, the way any Autobot partner would have, and skittering fireworks ran through Optimus's whole brain and body. His event handler wanted to trigger combat status and deep relaxation at the same time, confused enough to rev up all his systems together, and he slid into Megatron's hardware already dizzying himself.

He flinched from the experience at first: Megatron's whole body was...in pain. And it wasn't from injury; in a fresh surge of sorrow, Optimus realized that it was by *design*. Megatron had been built without concern for whether his systems would ever feel well. Just whether they'd *work* well. And then he'd had himself deliberately overhauled, built on several massive

weapons systems to boot, and now there were ten thousand small grating edges everywhere throughout him, a constant cloud of disconnect.

There were ways to fix that: you could cushion it with software if you couldn't fix the hardware. Ratchet had done that for his own systems, which had some similar incongruities because of his rebuild. But Megatron didn't have any cushioning routines running at all. On impulse, Optimus linked his own; Ratchet's subtle programming had a bit of a hiccup figuring out what to do with completely unexpected hardware, but after a moment it fit itself to what it had to work with, and Megatron made a sudden stifled noise, out loud, as it kicked in everywhere at once.

Satisfied, Optimus reached for *his* nerve centers, and firmly did avoid the pain triggers; he didn't think Megatron needed any more of that, even though his own body was starting to slide towards overload *already* just from Megatron's casual rough handling. Megatron's grip was curling in harder, with a cool certainty that Optimus could *handle* it, waking pleasure circuitry that he'd *never* had activated—"Oh *Primus*," Optimus said out loud in desperation, and at the same time Megatron was *shivering* next to him, shock spreading out of him and into Optimus's circuitry like a cloud of ink; *he'd* activated every pleasure circuit in his body so many times that he'd just gotten bored with it, but he'd never treated his pain, and the pure sweetness felt almost impossible to him; he was—*suspicious* of it, a furious wrath building in him—this was meant to *control* him, this was—

Optimus wasn't coherent enough to formulate some kind of answer; he could only meet it with his own complete frazzling confusion: he was *falling apart*, he couldn't, he was, "Oh," he said, almost in tears, and his process chain abruptly came to pieces, a whirl of random thoughts and images flowing through his visual cortex and his databanks, his processor giving up on coherence and just letting sensation take complete control. Megatron's processes were working through him brutally, rummaging around wildly like he was *looking* for something, some scheme or conspiracy, and he wasn't going to miss *anything*, any corner where something might be hiding—he was pushing at the access locks to the deep personality components, and Optimus heard a low humming noise of cooling systems at maximum and only dimly realized that was *him* making that noise, involuntary. "*Megatron*," he said, and unlocked for him.

Megatron held back from one moment of complete blank suspension, almost uncomprehending, and then he was—it was a tidal wave, a roaring of a monstrous cataract, his full consciousness wanting *inside, inside*; Megatron grabbing almost frantically through Optimus's deep emotion memory banks at one long-buried doubt and fear and sorrow after another, examining them down to the core and discarding them with utter bafflement—did Optimus really not *know* that had been his best choice; that decision had been completely obvious; if only he *hadn't* chosen that particular lesser evil, Megatron would have been ruling the galaxy by now, pity—and they were *disintegrating* under the pressure of Megatron's absolute iron certainty, his perfect confidence that he was *right*—

Of course he was right; he didn't make mistakes. If you made a mistake, you died; death was the penalty for even a single error, and he was still alive, so he hadn't made one. It didn't matter that he hadn't *won* yet, that his plans had failed over and over: victory was never guaranteed and good outcomes didn't deserve being thought about, only enjoyed for a brief

half-astrosecond before it was time to move on, because you couldn't waste time like that; you had to keep going, and every single instant of pleasure had to be bought with hours of agony in the dark, that was how the universe was *meant to be*—

Megatron slammed hard into the wall of Optimus's mind where the total denial of that idea lived and stuck there in his own whirring confusion, unable to find anything he expected, nowhere further to go, and Optimus tried as best he could to say out of his piled-up fragmenting processes, *but they chose that for you, they were wrong; someone did choose—you choose, I choose something else. Nothing's meant to be, nothing's meant to be*—

And Megatron almost convulsively opened access in his own mind.

Optimus's frantic processes, trying to find someplace to keep running with Megatron taking up three quarters of his hardware, went pouring into him. He didn't have the control to look systematically, but he didn't need to. Megatron's deep emotion databanks were almost pristine, clean of doubt; his entire mind was organized with ruthless single-minded purpose towards a clear sharp-edged vision of terrible perfection: his empire of unsheathed knives and hungers. An empire where the cruelty of the universe was taken as a given, but lies were not; where no one was allowed to turn to another and say *this is your place*: your place was always whatever you could *make* it. And you would have to fight and rend and claw your way to get there, and keep fighting your entire existence alone to preserve it, but no one would tell the lie of *deserving* or pretend they had a *right* to anything better than anyone else; no one would deceive you with the false pretenses of love or fellowship, which were only another way to try and bind you to someone else's will.

And it was cruel but it was *true*, like Megatron's poetry. He *meant* it; he was ready to fight to keep his power and his empire as long as he lived, and he wouldn't pretend he deserved his throne or kept it *except* by relentless, ever-renewed battle, and when he was finally torn down by someone else, it would only set the truth in stone, and leave *them* to defend their place the same way.

It made Optimus want to weep; he *was* weeping, tears sliding down his face. He had no answer for it. He'd only ever wanted to go back, to that world that hung shining in his memory with warm golden light, a world where he hadn't had to make one agonizing choice after another, where he hadn't had to look down at his own hands and see oil and lubricant pooled in all the fine cracks, see the death he'd handed out and the deaths he'd cradled in their final moments. He'd longed to go back there with his friends, his friends whom he loved, each one of them a small flickering flame that warmed him even now when the greatest light was gone.

But he couldn't help but see that the golden light had been *full* of lies; lies he'd been told, lies he'd told himself, and it had been warm and comforting, but it hadn't reached a hundred kilometers beneath the surface of the planet. It hadn't even broken the skin. It couldn't stand up against the pure white blaze that Megatron had turned on it; it had vanished, and it—it—*deserved* to vanish, only this *couldn't* be the only other choice. He groped in desperation for some other answer he could offer, and came up with only—only his own truth; his certainty of *love*, of a deeper beauty that arose, inexplicable and yet true, out of the brutal randomness of the universe.

Megatron was trying to find the lie of it, beating away against it like some creature trapped in a cage of solid walls—like *them*, trapped in here together under the weight of all Cybertron and all the war, their war that they'd made. Optimus felt it when Megatron finally exhausted himself tearing through every possible corner of his mind, and fell back in a savage, desperate retreat to a *new* certainty, that it was *only him*; Megatron threw memories at him of Autobots cheering wild and bloodthirsty in the stands around him, of Autobot warriors ripping savagely at Decepticons with their own pleasure visible in their faces—

Optimus breathed out. Tears were still sliding from his eyes. He squeezed Megatron's hand gently, and felt his sudden wariness and alarm—but it was too late for him to run. Optimus kept hold of him, of his hand and of his mind, and drew him down into his heart: to the terrible ever-present weight that sat inside him pressing upon it, and he went into the Matrix.

Optimus had never tried to do this while interfacing with someone else before: it would have taken an intimacy this complete, this absolute to do it at all. But its impossible power unfurled, enveloping both their minds together, and as their visual processing routines moved into it, they were standing together on a wide silver road like a highway before the war, a million minds like stars and galaxies taking shape around them, with the bright pulsing supergiants of the Primes standing among them.

Megatron was standing next to him, holding back in a single shivering moment of refusal, of denial, but—he couldn't refuse. He couldn't turn away. If he did, it would be *him* hiding from the truth. And in a convulsive surge he suddenly flung himself forward down the road and seized right on Sentinel Prime in savage determination—*here, here* was the lie, in this coward, who'd overseen horror and called it a Golden Age—

Sentinel Prime looked frantically to Optimus for help, trying to pull free and retreat deeper into the Matrix, but Optimus shook his head silently, refusing; Megatron shook him, and Sentinel Prime trembled in shame and fear and sorrow. "I was tired," he whispered. "So tired," and his weariness rolled out over them like a terrible dragging weight: a familiar weariness that Optimus knew himself, that he fought off himself almost every morning, facing another day of war.

Sentinel Prime's war had ended. He'd defeated the Quintesson enslavers after a long brutal grinding struggle that had taken everything he had, and he'd thought... he'd thought he was *done*. But he hadn't wanted to give up the Matrix, even as the voices inside began to whisper *it's time to let go*. He had told himself the lie, that he *deserved* the power and the privileges, that he'd earned them with the work he'd already done and didn't have to *keep* earning them forever just to hold on to them...and around him mechs one after another began to indulge in that lie, because *he* did.

Optimus shuddered. He couldn't entirely understand; he himself longed to hand off the Matrix and be free of the burden. But the weariness...letting his vigilance fail...yes. If a successor *hadn't* appeared, or worse, if he'd made the opposite mistake and handed the Matrix on too quickly, to someone who hadn't deeply felt the wrongs of the Golden Age...

But Megatron only said to Sentinel Prime, in contempt, "Do you expect me to feel *sorry* for you?" He *didn't* understand, not even in the slightest. He'd been built unimaginably strong to endure the unimaginably horrible, and there was no weariness in him, no yielding at all.

Sentinel Prime cringed away before his shining condemnation. Megatron took a step towards him, and Optimus could almost see a faint outline of gleaming weaponry taking shape in Megatron's hands, the flail and sword he'd used to slaughter Sentinel Prime once before, as if he could kill him all over again inside the Matrix. But Sentinel Prime didn't try to raise up his own hands. Instead, in trembling defense he reached up and opened his chest: his empty chest, and then abruptly they were standing with him in a small dark room, as he took the shining gleam of the Matrix out of himself and held it out: not to any of his Senators, not to any of his sycophants, but to Alpha Trion—to the one mech of all the original rebels who had never stopped speaking out against the corruption he saw around him.

"Why now?" Alpha Trion said, almost despairingly. "If you'd only listened to me sooner—if you'd chosen a new Prime who would have fought the corruption—"

"Because I didn't," Sentinel Prime said, low and still desperately weary and now ashamed.

"But you'll never defeat Megatron without the Matrix!" Alpha Trion said.

"Do I *deserve* to defeat him?" Sentinel Prime said, and Alpha Trion was silent. "No. You know that I don't. And I'm not going to. I was a great warrior once. But I have seen the Champion of Tarn fight. I am not walking away from this, and if I take the Matrix with me, it will only be lost as well. No. All my buried sins have come up from the dark to claim me, old friend, and at this final moment before I face them, I will find my courage again. Keep the Matrix safe. Hold it until you find one who will not fail as I have failed. It is not much amends, but all I can make."

The moment faded: a final act of sacrifice that wasn't remotely enough to make up for what he'd done, but enough to leave a light on, a single flame, for someone else to use to start a fire. A light that still shone trembling, a faded flicker, down in the heart of him.

Megatron paused over him in silent trembling rage and then threw Sentinel Prime aside into a dimmed shivering huddle; he shot onward, deeper in, and tried again, with the smaller flicker of a random Autobot worker this time, someone who had spent his whole short and ordinary life working happily alongside three friends, and had given his life without hesitation to close a blast door and save them from irradiation instead of himself, knowing what he was doing, and who had died in drug-muted agony three days later without regret: Sentinel Prime had visited him in the hospital in his last moments, and the Matrix had caught the light of him and preserved it.

Megatron shoved him aside in impatience and blazed onward, digging into one mind after another and finding that small core of love vivid in every one, because the Matrix didn't preserve those without it; he found it in proud warriors and crisp-cold scientists as well as medics and workers and artists, over and over, even while he was dragging Optimus after him so deep into the Matrix that language began to vanish and even clear memories, and the lights shone steadily brighter because there was nothing in the way.

And then there was nothing left at all. They were standing together on the bare rock of the surface of Cybertron in a time so distant that they couldn't even see a city anywhere on the horizon. Optimus looked up at the shining of unfamiliar stars in wonder: he'd never been this deep before. He wasn't sure he even knew how to get back from here. They might both be

trapped in the Matrix forever, as much as they were trapped within Cybertron itself. But he couldn't be sorry, because they were still holding hands, and Megatron was shaking.

Optimus reached out and touched Megatron's shoulder with his other hand, brought him around, and Megatron turned to look at him, lost. Optimus said softly, "You aren't—*wrong*. You haven't made a mistake. But this is also true."

Megatron stood there silently, trying to—take it in, Optimus realized; to enlarge himself enough to fit this into his own cold and brutal understanding of the universe. Optimus stood beside him, his chest aching and full of sorrow, because he knew that the room for love was only made *by* love. If you'd never been *given* it, if you'd never felt its touch—he didn't know if Megatron *could* make that space inside himself, just by seeing that it existed somewhere else.

And then, overhead, the stars began to disappear. A wave of darkness was spreading over them, blotting them out, one by one at first but then in a terrible swath—and then the darkness was coming *down*, closing in all around with monstrous speed. Even within the Matrix, Optimus felt an instinctive panic trying to go off. He couldn't stand upright anymore, he was being pressed down crouching into a terrible unbroken night, a sense of impossible crushing weight and horror building all around him: rough walls so close they scraped his shoulders and his back and the top of his helm, the air stale and choked with a haze of toxins, heat and pressure so great that his circuits were breaking down as fast as his self-repair systems could work, an ongoing race against death just beneath his armor. He was alone in impenetrable dark.

And then there was a sudden strange glimmer breaking that dark: a light that was...not quite visible, and not quite otherwise. It *moved*, hovering through the very edges of the spectrum of solid matter, darting into infrared and ultraviolet, a phosphorescence and a glowing warmth together, breathtakingly beautiful. A light coming from a single small chip of metal, almost impossible to see except for the total surrounding dark. And then Megatron gave a sudden sharp breath of pain. Four deeply shadowed faces, barely more than *presence*, their features too indistinct to make out, turned and looked at him from around that tiny chip of light, and held it out.

Optimus shuddered back into his own body on the floor of the crawl space, gasping. The Matrix was *open*, its blazing light all around them. His own face was wet with tears, and next to him he heard Megatron weeping: mourning, in breathless agony, the nameless brothers he'd left behind down in the dark, whose faces he'd never even seen to store into memory; the brothers who had been with him, who had—terribly, been *happy* with him in the dark; who had dug rubble off his crushed body and sent him up into the light—and who had paid for that kindness, for that love, with death. Because, in his own instinctive flaring hunger for *life*, he had refused to go back down to them.

The Matrix shut completely with one final gleam that coruscated throughout the crawlspace and then vanished away through the metal above them. Megatron let out a few last gasps beside him, and their bodies disengaged automatically. Optimus was sinking rapidly away into a great enveloping quiet, a deep rest cycle, but he still felt Megatron's hand in his as the final sensation before it took him.



# # #

Optimus awoke again only after what his chronometer told him was twenty-three hours, and found Megatron awake beside him. The tears had dried on his face, smudged tracks of oil barely visible where a little metallic dust had collected on them. There was still something blank and a little shellshocked in his expression.

“Are you all right?” Optimus asked softly, breaking the silence.

“Not even remotely,” Megatron said flatly. But their hands were still entwined, and he didn’t make a move to take his away.

Optimus swallowed and said, “Well, if you want to talk—I’ll be here.”

Megatron was silent a moment, and then he said, “Not for much longer.”

“What?” Optimus said.

“They’ve been drilling towards us for the last hour,” Megatron said. “It should be another fifteen minutes or so before they break through the floor. Someone must have picked up our distress beacons after all.”

“The Matrix,” Optimus said softly, remembering that sudden last surge of light. “The Matrix must have boosted our distress beacons—gotten them to a receiver nearby.”

Megatron slowly turned a very hard narrow look at him. “And it didn’t occur to you to make use of this minor useful feature *before now*?”

“I didn’t *know* it could do that,” Optimus said.

Megatron ground his teeth. “I *hate* that thing.”

Optimus couldn’t help a chuckle, although it was halfhearted. It was objectively insane to feel *sorry* for even an instant, he *wasn’t* sorry, he was deeply grateful, and yet—Megatron’s hand was in his, and he didn’t want to let go. He didn’t want to ever let go. He had friends, so many dear friends that he loved, but—he didn’t have *this*. He’d been made into a sheltering fortress wall for the people he loved, and he wasn’t sorry, but that wall stood between him and them, too. He had nothing closer to this than a hazy, half-remembered memory of him and Ariel and Dion, the three of them coming down together in a sleepy golden-lit room, cables still interwoven, their minds drowsy and full of bright uncomplicated joy and affection.

And even that, with all its sweetness, was unimaginably far from this terrible, glorious sharing. Orion couldn’t even have conceived of anything like it. He *would* have been destroyed if Megatron had taken him; not by Megatron’s selfishness but by Megatron’s *truth*, a truth so brutal he would have collapsed beneath its weight.

But Optimus’s shoulders were strong enough to bear it now, just barely; to hold it up and offer his own truth back, of love forged strong in a crucible of eight million years of war and sorrow. He *wanted* to taste Megatron’s truth again, that shocking brilliance; he felt the urgent

need of it shining through all his own shadowed corners, and he wanted to pour himself into Megatron's heart at the same time, to feel himself giving and taking equal measures of strength. He wanted it infinitely more than he wanted the touch of Megatron's body, and he still wanted *that*, too. *All living things hunger*, Megatron had said, and Optimus couldn't deny it. He would gladly have taken a million years beside Megatron now. He wanted *more* than that. He wanted every year of sorrow paid back, eight million in a row, and he wouldn't stop being hungry after that.

But once the world broke back through to claim them...Megatron glanced towards him, and Optimus realized that his hand had tightened involuntarily. He swallowed and looked back, and their time was so short; fifteen minutes running away like water, and he said, softly, "I love you," because he wasn't sure he'd have another chance.

Megatron's optics widened in total outrage. "You *are* insane," he said savagely, and turned to glare at the ceiling. But he didn't take his hand away, which was enough to make Optimus's emotional circuitry glow with warmth. After a moment, Megatron said, "The Decepticons followed me because I promised them a path out of the dark. Do you think I'm ever going to leave them behind?"

"No," Optimus said, pain and joy mingled, because that wasn't cruelty speaking; that was love. The love Megatron had carried in him all this way for the ones he *had* left behind in the dark. "Do you think there might be...another path? One that we could walk forward on together?"

Megatron's shoulders moved a little, a shrug. "In this imperfect universe? Good luck finding it. And the path I'm on right now is still better than yours."

"I know," Optimus said quietly, aching. "I can't walk it with you, but...I know." He fell silent. He could never stop walking with love himself; he knew that. But he had seen the truth of the slow downward slope of his own road. He understood, terribly, that Megatron wasn't wrong. Megatron was the one on the higher, lonely road.

His sensors were picking up the drilling too by then, steady increasing vibrations from beneath, and abruptly Megatron's comm plate crackled. "*Megatron, respond*," Soundwave's voice came, fuzzed and blurred.

"Soundwave?" Megatron said. "Is that you coming?"

"Affirmative," Soundwave said. "Structural conditions highly unstable. Window of opportunity for extraction: limited. Prepare for rapid withdrawal."

"Why doesn't Mixmaster stabilize the walls with liquicrete?" Megatron demanded.

"Constructicons not available," Soundwave said. "Stand by."

"Well, that's inconvenient," Megatron said, frowning, after he switched off his comm.

"What?" Optimus stared at him.

Megatron glared at him. “*You* could make up any idiot story, and the Autobots would swallow it. What exactly am *I* supposed to say when my soldiers ask me why I’m letting you go?”

“There’s always the truth,” Optimus said.

“You’ve had a lot of bad ideas before, Prime, but that one’s particularly special,” Megatron said. “Hang on, they’re about to break through.” The floor beneath them was beginning to vibrate, and abruptly Megatron shoved him as far as possible to the side, pressing himself over in the opposite direction as well, and then the tip of a drill point came through. A moment later a red laser line emitted from the tip drew a wide circle around it, and then the circle glowed brilliantly and slagged, the molten metal being sucked down into a drill mounted on—

“Ironhide!” Optimus said.

“Let’s go, Optimus, no time!” Ironhide said.

“Go!” Megatron snapped, grabbing him and shoving him towards the hole as Ironhide backed up out of it: Optimus dived headfirst into it and started going, crawling as fast as he could. Ironhide was just backing straight out in reverse; the tunnel had been cut at roughly a 45-degree angle, and then it flattened out and Optimus caught a first gleam of light somewhere behind Ironhide’s taillights. Then Ironhide was out, and the way was clear, but the walls were creaking, starting to bend, and abruptly the ceiling right overhead—

From behind, Megatron shoved him forward hard and Optimus looked back to see it come down on his shoulders. “Megatron!”

“Go!” Megatron gritted out, braced and holding the whole thing up. “Get out of the tunnel!”

Optimus dragged himself forward the last stretch and out the tunnel mouth, and then turned around and reached back: Megatron was slowly grinding his way forward by inches, holding the tunnel up on his back even as it collapsed behind him, until he came into reach, and Optimus grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him the rest of the way out.

Megatron let himself just clank down flat on his back on the floor, breathing hard, and said aloud, “I can’t imagine what I didn’t like about it.” Then he pushed himself up standing and looked around—at Soundwave, standing in the small chamber with Rumble and Frenzy and Ravage. Ironhide was dusting off his hands, and Arcee was next to him. Megatron raised an eyebrow at Soundwave. “Interesting company you’re keeping. Where’s everyone else?”

Soundwave shrugged slightly. “Starscream ordered pursuit of the Autobots.”

“I’m shocked,” Megatron said. “Mostly that he didn’t make sure to drag you along, actually.”

“Subterranean passages difficult to navigate,” Soundwave said, in his monotone. “I fell behind and encountered the Autobots. Likelihood of search success separately: minimal. We agreed to combine efforts.”

“Not that any of the ’cons were on board,” Ironhide said, to Optimus. “So we might still have a little problem after we get topside.”

“On the other hand, if *you’d* like to get back to the surface before Starscream starts in on any serious reorganization efforts, maybe we can come to an arrangement after all,” Arcee said to Megatron, sweetly. “Unless you’d rather spend a couple of weeks trying to find a way back up on your own.”

Megatron looked down at her and snorted. “Yes, you can have safe passage on the spacebridge in return for guidance back up. I just spent six days locked up in a crawlspace with your beloved leader acquainting me with his most sincerely felt emotions. I can’t think of anything I’d like more at the moment than getting him off the planet.”

“Man, rough,” Rumble muttered, with a shudder. He and Frenzy both had their faces screwed up in horror.

Optimus had to work hard not to laugh aloud and blow Megatron’s cover. Arcee glanced over at him with an inquiring tilt of her head. He nodded back, and she said, “In that case, follow me.”

She led them out the narrow doorway and onto a pitch-dark avenue, illuminated only by the headlights she turned on; even the old emergency twitchlights had died, this far down. Long shadows across abandoned shops, bars, cramped narrow restcycle houses, all ghost-empty. A few skittering electrobeetles ran away from their feet, but that was it for signs of life. The deep underlayers had been drained early on by the war: Megatron had made it a priority of his rebellion to destroy big swaths of the checkpoint access network that controlled travel between the layers, and once he’d opened the way, desperate underlayer mechs had started coming up in torrents—some to try and snatch the chance to move up, some just to loot, some to throw themselves into his ranks. There were a few huddled bodies left in the doorways and alleys: some of the still-more desperate, who’d crept back down to the underlayers in the years of spreading energon famine to scrounge around for dregs until they died. But down this far there weren’t even many of them.

“We seem to not be getting any closer to the surface,” Megatron said to Arcee dryly, after about half an hour of walking.

“It’s going to be another twenty minutes or so before we can head back up,” Arcee said over her shoulder. “Virtually all of the access shafts back up to Eidolon have collapsed—like the one that fell in on the two of you. Unless you’d like a repeat of that experience, there’s only one area near here that’s seismically stable enough that there’s still a reliable passage going up—there’s a section of Diurna that was built on the last of the actual bedrock layer of the planet. That’s where I’m taking us.”

Megatron grunted. “By all means, then.”

“I sure hate having to take Megatron’s word,” Ironhide muttered softly to Optimus. “If he’s not takin’ potshots at our back five seconds after we hit Longinus level, I’ll eat my own drill bits. Sure we’re not better off ditchin’ the ’cons down here and trying to get the jump on ’em topside? Starscream won’t be expecting us.”

Optimus shook his head. “I wouldn’t leave anyone down here, Ironhide.” He huffed a wry breath and added, “Not even Megatron.”

Ironhide put a hand on his back, a comforting pat. “Sorry it took us so long to get to ya. Must’ve been pretty rough in there.”

“You could say that,” Optimus said, ruefully. He foresaw a lot of awkward conversations with friends in his future, but he didn’t feel like starting in on them at the moment. Particularly not with Soundwave up there next to Megatron and nevertheless undoubtedly listening to every word he said.

A short while later, Arcee led them around an avenue junction which had mostly collapsed and down a narrower street, with even dingier buildings crowded in on each other. Ancient, thickly grimed signs marked the area as condemned: these were the deepest slums where legal enforcement and the thin skimming of the energon dole had been withdrawn completely, and the buildings had been left to the last desperate dregs of Cybertronian society.

Optimus looked around with fresh sorrow as they walked; while he’d happily been living on the surface nine layers up, long-outdated or half-disabled mechs had been *living* here, buried deep, struggling to find some way to survive. And it occurred to him suddenly, with the cold clarity of Megatron’s vision lingering in his mind, that this would have been his *own* future, too, if not for Megatron’s rebellion.

A million years on, the Senate would surely have authorized a new overlayer in Kalis. The house that he and Ariel and Dion had scrimped and saved for would have ended up buried in its turn. They would have all been old models by then. They wouldn’t have been rated high enough to get new topside jobs anymore. Unless one of them had gotten supremely lucky, made it to a corporation level—they’d have gotten buried along with their home and their dockyard.

They’d have gotten used to it after a while. They’d still have had good jobs. They’d still have had each other. One layer down wasn’t too bad, you could still go up to the surface on days off. But then, eventually, the second would come. The jobs would start to pay less, or vanish entirely. Not quite enough energon to operate at full capacity. Not quite enough to keep up their maintenance. Dion would’ve hated it so much. He couldn’t stand it if he had a single nut coming loose. Ariel...by then, she wouldn’t have had any hope of ever being given spark transfer approval. She’d already had to release two that she’d captured; they hadn’t passed the rating threshold. She wouldn’t even have been trying anymore. And Orion—Orion would’ve started having regular panics. Because getting to the surface would have become a once-a-year vacation. And they’d all have understood by then that it was only going to keep getting worse. For as long as they lived. They’d all have seen the lie then. Once it wasn’t a lie being told for their benefit.

Optimus found his breathing cycles tightening in sharp pain. How long, he wondered, before even love would have been eroded away under the grind of desperation and resentment. It would’ve been a different kind of suffering even than the war. At least they were all in the war together. And that was why Megatron’s terrible empire *would* be better. Because they’d all be in it together.

He bowed his head as he walked onward, in dread, wondering if he *would* end up having to walk Megatron's road with him after all. Trying to find a way to carve out room for his own heart along the way, bartering his strength and the Autobots' for protection for humanity, for other species; there was room in Megatron's empire for that kind of terrible bargain. It wasn't going to be some kind of endless piranha pit, the way Optimus had always vaguely imagined; he should have known better all along. The Decepticons *were* an army, they worked together effectively. Yes, they all fiercely defended their individual prerogatives and their places in the pecking order, but they *knew* what those places were; they respected each other's power and they didn't waste time constantly fighting. And now he understood that it *wasn't* just selfishness that drove their internal tensions. It was a conscious execution of Megatron's philosophy.

And under that philosophy, the citizens of his empire were allowed to *selfishly* desire humans to survive—to write good poetry, for instance—and to spend their own energy on achieving that goal if they wanted to. They were allowed to threaten and even kill anyone who hurt humans, to create incentives to leave their...*pets* alone.

But they weren't allowed to make the argument that humanity, that any sentient species, inherently *deserved* protection, and mercy. Because that invited the lie. If the weak had something that the powerful needed to survive, then the powerful would find some excuse to take it, no matter what. And *that* was what Megatron wouldn't tolerate. He'd allow theft and pillage. But not *lying* about it. You'd have to look your own crimes in the face as you committed them.

The strange and terrible thing was, Optimus could see that would probably *stop* the crimes, many of them. You wouldn't build an arena of death if you had good reason to think someone might put *you* into it. You'd be wary of revenge when it was always a legitimate possibility. And if you had to face the reality of what you were doing by shoving other mechs underground, and accept that *you* would end up down there one day yourself—you would think hard about a better way to do it.

Megatron *was* going to build a better world. A world of greater peace and justice, built upon a bedrock foundation of honesty. And the only thing he'd leave by the wayside, to get it done, was love. Love, and kindness, and mercy—you could experience them on a *personal* level, if you wanted to; if your circuitry ran more smoothly when you were kind, that was your business. But love would never be acceptable as the underlying principle of a single law, a single act of state. There would always be some cold, brutal reason. The knives would always be waiting, out in the open.

It was nightmarish, and Optimus didn't know if he could bear it. But he also couldn't look around down here and pretend he had a better answer. He didn't have a way out of here, and Megatron did—not for everyone, but for anyone strong enough to make the climb, and the people they chose to carry. And he *would* show a single profound mercy: anyone left behind wouldn't think it was for any reason but the simple mechanical truth of their weakness.

“There some reason we're stoppin'?” Ironhide asked, and Optimus looked up; to see that Megatron had halted in the street. Arcee paused and looked around, puzzled; Soundwave was looking at him too. But Megatron was staring across the street, his face gone still, and

Optimus followed his gaze. There was the half-collapsed ruin of a small ratty energon stipub across the way, and next to it was a large open sporting ring that had been fenced in with iron bars and cheap bleachers around it, an old betting screen hanging askew by one corner.

Optimus stared at it, and turned around. The building across the street was strangely incongruous. It wasn't fancy in any way, it was nothing more than a single blocky cube with no windows and only a single door, but it was newer by millions of years than anything else on the block, and there were frayed cables dangling where security cams and even autolasers had once been mounted.

Megatron turned and went straight to it. He put his hands on the door and with an effort tore it away—and it became even more clear the building didn't match; the door was four inches of solid durasteel set in a wall equally thick, with a heavy-duty lock. And on the other side there was only a single small room with the round cap of an access shaft set in the middle of the floor. "But that doesn't make any sense," Arcee said, peering around the corner in at it. "You can't get to Columna layer here. It's just bedrock underneath." She looked at Megatron. "How did you know it was here?"

Megatron didn't answer her. He was staring at the cap with a fixed, almost blank look. After a moment he went to it and ripped the cap open and stood there in silence, looking down. Optimus couldn't help it, whether it was going to blow their cover or not; he went to his side.

But the access shaft was filled in, solidly; looked like liquicrete. Ravage padded over and sniffed it, glancing up inquiringly. "Soundwave," Megatron said after a moment, "scan the shaft. See how far down this blockage goes."

Soundwave was silent for a while, then said, "Scanning has reached maximum depth of six kilometers. No break detected."

Whoever had arranged the selenium mine—they'd hauled an entire mixer drum of liquicrete down here and pumped the entire access shaft full. They'd buried their crime so completely that no one could dig it up again without drilling all the way back down to the dark all over again. And after eight million years of increasing instability...no one could even do that. If you tried to tunnel down here now, the whole layer would just come down on your head. Optimus looked at Megatron and said softly, "I'm sorry."

The others all eyed him sidelong. Megatron was still just staring down at the solid circle of liquicrete. But after a moment he shook his head. "There's nothing worth going down there for anyway," he said with finality.

"No," Optimus said. "Not anymore."

Megatron glanced at him and snorted. "Oh, don't try getting sentimental with *me*, Prime." He turned round and leveled a cold look at everyone else. "Well? Let's go."

Arcee looked at Ironhide and shrugged and turned around. Soundwave had his head tilted slightly in curiosity, looking at Optimus, but he didn't say anything, just fell in beside Megatron as he strode out again.

The image of the buried mineshaft and its silent sins kept tugging softly at the back of Optimus's mind even as they began the long slogging climb. When they finally got back up to Eidolon level, it was another hour's walk to get to a reasonably stable series of maintenance shafts that led to Ferrous. From there, Arcee started to take them back up quicker; these were layers she knew far more intimately, the middle-depth ones where Ultra Magnus's crew had long foraged for energon and supplies out of range of Decepticon scanners. But they still had the sheer physical length of the climb: the higher layers hadn't settled nearly as much, and they'd been built over taller buildings. The stretches went to a kilometer, then two, and finally the massive four-kilometer span from the base of Longinus all the way up to Maximal.

They had a clear shot from there to the access tunnel that led onto the Kalis-Polyhex elevated highway. They made it onto the surface in time for the second moonrise, Golin hanging beautiful and green-silver on the horizon with the distant jagged teeth of Darkmount standing dark against it and the endless stars spread all around, and Optimus just stood and breathed deep gulps of sweet-cold surface air and gratitude together. "Thank you," he said quietly, to all three of them: Arcee and Ironhide and Soundwave, who inclined his head very slightly.

Megatron was standing on the lip of the access shaft already frowning, though. "What the hell is going on over there?" he said, and Optimus followed his gaze: there was a brilliant white glow of light visible beyond the next highway ridge.

Megatron and Soundwave took off, and Optimus transformed and led the other Autobots after him; they caught up to the Decepticons standing atop the ridge, Megatron staring. Omega Supreme was parked on the horizon about a kilometer away. But it wasn't that he hadn't *left*. He'd gone and *come back*, because there were about twenty Autobots all around him, and roughly the same number of Decepticons. They weren't fighting.

Optimus couldn't tell what they *were* doing; the only visible arguing going on was apparently between Starscream and Scrapper. "What are they saying?" Megatron demanded. Soundwave popped up an antenna dish and pulled in the audio, Scrapper saying, "No, I *don't* care what your orders are! We're going to dig Megatron out, and if he's dead, *then* we'll have a discussion about leadership. And if you don't like it, you can take it up with *Devastator!*"

"Is that *so*?" Starscream snarled, levelling a null ray at Scrapper's head.

"No, actually," Ultra Magnus's voice came, as he and half the Autobots leveled *their* guns right at Starscream's head. "They're not going to have to *bother* forming Devastator."

"And the rest of you *traitors* are just going to stand there for this?" Starscream shrieked at the other Decepticons, who all conspicuously weren't doing anything.

"Hey, man, maybe if you weren't the biggest jerk in the entire universe, we'd have had a tougher time gettin' half your army on board for this rescue op in the first place," Jazz said. "Now, we've got twelve goddamn underlayers to get through, and we need to get started, so you wanna sit down and shut up or you wanna get shot?"

"We could just sit here and watch him seething for a while," Megatron said after a moment, sounding faintly bemused. "How long do you think they'll keep trying?"



“I think it’s more a question of how much of the planet we want them to collapse,” Optimus said. “Also, I’m not sure that your army is as sold on every aspect of your philosophy as you think they are.”

Everyone was busy inside the already-substantial hole by the time they got over there, so Starscream, sulking at the edge, was the one who actually noticed them first. “Megatron!” he yelled, and immediately stood up and assumed an important pose. “We’ve just begun the excavation to look for you! Naturally, I’ve been supervising.”

Megatron looked at Optimus. “Are you *really* that attached to Grimlock? How about a thousand years, just to start? I’d even take ten.”

“No,” Optimus said firmly, and then everyone was pouring out of the pit, the dividing ocean sweeping in between them, and Optimus took a deep breath and turned to face the wave, reaching out to grip Ultra Magnus’s hand, Jazz’s, to let his friends and his people come in close. Hot Rod and Springer were hugging Arcee, and Ratchet and Prowl were pounding Ironhide’s shoulders. Their happiness lifted him, and still more when he looked over at the Decepticons and saw them gathered around Megatron—because maybe they weren’t doing it the same way; they weren’t being effusive and telling him how glad they were, and they weren’t touching him, but they were all—showing off a little instead, Optimus realized; standing up straighter, in military order. Trying to impress not their tyrant but their *hero*; the one who had led them out of the dark.

Optimus wondered that he’d never seen it before. Dirge and Ramjet, who’d been with Megatron since a moment on a balcony eight million years ago when he’d gone to them and spoken to them in his true voice; Soundwave, who’d deliberately stayed down in the deepest bowels of the planet to try and track him down; Scrapper and the Constructicons, arms folded, telling Megatron coolly of how they’d planned to sink the access shaft down and carry out the systematic search; Thundercracker and Skywarp, defying Starscream’s scowls to join the others clustering around... They *loved* him. It felt like the poetry: like he’d been seeing what he’d wanted to see, what made his own world bearable, instead of what was really there.

And then Megatron turned and looked at him, across the sea of their two armies. “Yeah, here it comes,” Ironhide muttered, and he was right, if not the way he thought he was.

“Under the circumstances, Prime,” Megatron said, “I won’t break up the spirit of amity. I’d hate to discourage future cooperation along similar lines. You can have that safe passage I promised you.”

“Well, wonders never cease,” Prowl said under his breath.

Optimus knew he had to nod, and say something cool and wry, *I’m sure we’ll be seeing more of you soon*, and gather his people and take them aboard Omega Supreme and leave. And once he got home—he’d have to start telling them the painful truth, as gently as he could, and help them through it when he still didn’t know how to get through it himself.

Some of them wouldn’t believe it. Maybe a lot of them. They’d think Megatron had gotten to him, or the situation had; with all the love in the world, they’d doubt him. They’d think

Megatron had lied to him, tricked him. He'd fought hard against this too-painful understanding; he couldn't be surprised if they did too. He couldn't make it any harder for them by giving them any cause to doubt. There wouldn't be any slipping off for private assignations with Megatron; they wouldn't even be able to *talk*. And if—*when*—the Decepticons hit another human outpost—he'd have to go, and fight. He *would* fight with all his strength to protect them. But that was going to mean fighting *Megatron*. He'd have to put hands of violence on him, instead of love. Optimus wasn't sure how he was going to make himself do it.

But he was going to have to find a way. He drew a breath, and reached to the Matrix for strength, a gentle brush against the surface layers of it, and he opened his mouth and said, "We can't go yet. There's something we have to do. In Iacon."

Starscream folded his arms and snapped, "You Autobots really like to push your luck, don't you? You think we're going to let you start wandering all over the planet?"

"We *all* have to go," Optimus said, speaking to Megatron. "It's important."

The Decepticons were all visibly baffled; several of them shot looks between him and Megatron in confusion. Megatron was glaring daggers that Optimus had no trouble interpreting: *I hand you the perfect setup for a graceful exit, and you land me straight in the smelting pit*. "Let me guess," he said through his teeth. "This directive comes straight out of that piece of overdecorated scrap metal you're lugging around in your chest cavity."

"Yes," Optimus said, not apologetically. He felt suffused with urgency.

"This is some sort of joke, isn't it?" Starscream said. "We 'have to go' to Iacon with you because the Matrix says so? So that we can all walk into a trap, I presume?"

"Actually, Starscream, *you* can stay behind," Optimus said dryly. "The Matrix doesn't really care if you're there or not."

Megatron snorted. "At least it's got *that* much sense." He looked around at the Decepticons all staring at him and then made a tight gesture of exasperation. "*Where* in Iacon? Is it providing any helpful details?"

Optimus looked at Arcee. "Do you know a way to get inside the Primacy?" he asked her.

She darted a shocked look over at the Decepticons. "Uh—"

"Optimus, could—could I have a word?" Ultra Magnus said.

Optimus didn't need the word; he understood their objections. Megatron had bombed the Senate into rubble to start his war, but Sentinel Prime had sealed off the Primacy and locked it down before he'd gone to his final battle. Autobot warriors had protected it as best they could, all these years; some of the outer defenses had been damaged or lost power, but the building had retained its integrity. One of the last remnants standing of the Golden Age. Of course they didn't like the idea of handing the Decepticons a route straight into its heart—and

six days ago, Optimus would have agreed. Before he'd known that heart was rotten to the core.

"I'm sorry," Optimus said to Magnus quietly. "But this isn't up for discussion." He looked at Arcee. "Take us there."

She stared at him a little helplessly, then lifted her hands a moment and said, "I hope you're really sure about this," not quite under her breath.

Rumble looked up at Megatron and said in a slightly small voice, "Uh, *are* we gonna go with them?"

Megatron hadn't quit glaring at Optimus. "Apparently," he growled. "Let's get this over with."

#

Arcee brought them out of an old access tunnel right into the electrical room of the Primacy. "Well, *this* would have been useful—roughly eight million years ago," Megatron remarked, climbing up out of it and looking around. "Stop looking so distraught," he added to Arcee. "If I *did* want to waste energon bombing what's left of your capital, I certainly wouldn't bother slogging up through the underlayers to do it. And this gilded lump was never a military target of any value. So why the hell are we here?"

"I'm not sure," Optimus said. "This way." He ducked out into the corridor beyond.

"Of all the idiotic combinations of sentences," Megatron muttered, but he followed, and the others came out after him.

It was dark inside: all the towering windows of cut corundum were covered front and back with blast shields, and almost all the interior lighting had died, except for here and there a faint blue gleam of an emergency light still improbably clinging to a trickle of life. As they came into the Hall of Primes, only their own lights played over the great statues of the ancient Primes, gazing stern-faced down over heavy swords of dull titanium. The Decepticons looked uneasily around as they walked; their footsteps echoed loudly against the vaulted ceilings. "This place gives me the creeps," Thundercracker muttered.

"Man, are you kidding, this place gives *me* the creeps," Jazz said. "They sure had some weird ideas about interior decoratin' back then."

Megatron snorted. "You would have *loved* the arena at Tarn. How much further?" he demanded.

"It's upstairs," Optimus said.

The vast Excelsis Staircase rose sharply into the dark, climbing towards an enormous mosaic on the wall that depicted the final overthrow of the Quintessons, a crowd of Autobots armed not with weapons but with loader hooks and electrohammers and smelting rods, charging with Sentinel Prime in the lead, carrying a banner and pointing at the fleeing overseers and

the Quintesson ships taking flight. It was mammoth, the individual figures as large as Guardians, meant to overwhelm.

“How dramatic,” Starscream sneered at it, his chin raised in defiance. “Of course, if they really *had* been using random tools, they’d have gotten obliterated in the first wave, but why let that stand in the way of propaganda. Megatron, *how* much more of this are we going to endure? I’m a little unclear on why exactly we’re following Optimus Prime in the *first* place, but maybe you gained some special *insight* during your, hm, *intimate* time alone together.”

“It was six days, Starscream, not six centuries,” Megatron said, and then he paused, and slowly shot Optimus a narrow vengeful look and added, very blandly, “I only jacked him twice.”

Prowl tripped and slid down the steps, taking out eight other Autobots and Decepticons on the way; they all crashed noisily into a heap on the landing below. Optimus glared at Megatron speechlessly; Megatron smirked back. Starscream’s mouth was in a stricken gape.

“But Starscream *does* have a point, Optimus,” Megatron added. “My patience for wandering the hallowed halls,” he gestured a cold dismissive wave at the mosaic, “*isn’t* infinite.”

Optimus had to aggressively resist the temptation to make an extremely tasteless remark about Megatron’s lack of patience in other dimensions as well, which would have only made the situation worse, and not been accurate, either, so Megatron would have just smirked some more. “Then let’s *move quicker*,” he said instead, as coldly as he could, and turned and kept going up the stairs, trying vainly to override his mortification subroutine, which was flooding his circuitry so completely that every single mech in the place probably could see him glowing, possibly just with ordinary vision given how dark it was in here.

Past the mosaic, the stairs split to either side, and the Matrix nudged him along up to the right. “We’re here,” Optimus said, stopping in front of a gleaming golden door carved with the Autobot symbol. He pushed it open, and stepped into a massive chamber that was at once familiar and strange: a place he’d never been before, overlapping onto a memory rising out of the Matrix.

They all came inside: it was big enough. Optimus caught faint glimpses out of memory of the room full of Senators, planning meetings, arguments...he had a flash of Alpha Trion here shouting, a long time ago, gesturing out the window. The room was octagonal: one tall blast-shielded window in each wall, surrounded with metals of subtly different polishes and colors, carefully inlaid into patterns that evoked the great city-states of Cybertron that each window faced. Iacon, Kalis, Vox, Polyhex... Massive jewels dotted each design like punctuation, still illuminated with lights behind them that hadn’t run out of charge even after all this time, and heavy glassilk draperies framed each window, still as vividly red and gold as when they’d been woven.

“What is this place?” Ultra Magnus said, looking around.

“Sentinel Prime’s personal office,” Optimus said. The desk was a massive, pitted steel thing: made out of the remnants of the last Quintesson slaver ship, he knew suddenly, more information still surfacing out of the Matrix into his mind, and he went over to it and looked

down at the surface. There was a faint shape there on the side, a depression to rest a hand into, some kind of locking mechanism. He brushed away the dust and set his hand into it, and a circuit came running through him, seeking a pathway...a pathway that could only go through the *Matrix*, and as it found the way through, the lock clicked and the surface of the desk split open. There was a holojournal interface inside, next to a thick folder of physical documents.

Optimus looked down at it, filled with a strange distant echo of sorrow and guilt. There were a few dozen entries; one close to the end had been played back recently. He activated it, and with a crackle, a holo of Sentinel Prime's head and shoulders formed.

"It's almost done," Sentinel Prime said. There was a strained tone in his voice. "And none too soon. I tried to hide the expenditures in the military budget, but that busybody Alpha Trion found them, and he's planning to raise a formal inquiry in the Senate, blast him. I've canceled the next session on account of my health—I told them I needed a new power system upgrade. But I can't do that two months in a row. If it were just the money, I'd brazen it out. It's not like the Senate would do anything more than give me a slap on the wrist for ordinary corruption. But Alpha Trion will put Prowl and Bluestreak on it, and there's too much chance they'll dig up the schematics. Too many people have seen them—I knew it at the time, but there was no way around it, the blasted mechs just couldn't be *built* outside Kalis Fabricators. *Then* those lickspittle cowards will all have a fit—over the violation of the construction standard. They're all just so terrified of becoming obsolete—"

He broke off, his mouth twisting downwards hard, and he looked away. "They haven't the stomach to face what needs to be done, that's all," he said after a moment. "You won't catch *them* lining up for upgrades, not even ordinary mechanical ones. Too *painful*. Well, I'm not a slugging coward, and I don't mean to be left behind by the universe. We'll just have to finish before the month is out. I'm ordering Piledriver to have them increase the pace. We're close enough that I'll take the risk. And once it's done..."

He paused for a moment, but then he went on decisively, "I'll have the whole thing cleaned up right away. It's...it's not as though there's any alternative. There's certainly no place for them in civilized society—they don't even have full cyberneural capacity. The designers assured me they can't actually comprehend reality, or really feel pain or discomfort. If they did, they could never carry out their only function." He nodded once, sharply, and reached his hand forward. The holo ended.

Sorrow a sharp pang in his chest, Optimus looked across the room at Megatron, who was standing by the desk cold and silent, his optics burning with red light. *All my buried sins have come up from the dark to claim me*, Sentinel Prime had told Alpha Trion, in the Matrix. He'd meant it literally.

The others didn't know enough yet to understand, but the Autobots all looked bleak anyway. "I don't know what the hell he's talkin' about, but I sure don't like the sound of it," Ironhide said grimly.

Starscream was leaning against the wall by the door with an air of deliberate disinterest, but that got a sniff of disdain out of him. "Oh, of course you're all going to play innocent. As if it's not just another bit of typical Autobot hypocrisy. But none of *you* would ever, *you* don't

know *anything* about it, oh *no*.” There were a few sniggers of agreement among the Decepticons.

“I knew,” Prowl said, flat. He looked at the other Autobots. “This was...maybe fifty thousand years before the war. Alpha Trion found a discrepancy in the military budget for the Ferthian War. Almost a trillion enercreds had been siphoned off for something. He asked me and Bluestreak to look into it...we managed to figure out the money had gone into some kind of illegal deep mining operation going off Diurna level. But by the time we got there, the whole thing had been shut down—even the access shaft was filled with solid liquicrete. Whatever he was trying to do, he must have finished it.”

“Wait,” Arcee said suddenly. “Off *Diurna*?” She looked at Megatron. “That was the shaft we passed today. You knew about this operation?”

Megatron raised his head to stare at her, then snorted. “What, you haven’t figured it out yet?” he said mockingly. “Go on, Prime, let’s have another of these illuminating entries.”

Optimus looked down at the list. He almost touched the final entry, but some impulse abruptly turned his hand to the next-to-last instead. Another holo opened up. The date wasn’t an entire month off, but Sentinel Prime looked...notably different. He looked like he hadn’t taken a rest cycle in a few straight days, his eyes staring and hollow and rimmed with white where light was leaking around the edges of his optics lenses. “It...it’s all gone wrong. That idiot Piledriver—*lost the tunneler! Lost him!* The only critical one! We’re *slivers* away and he *lost him!* And that old fool Alpha Trion is already starting to nose around.” Sentinel Prime stopped, trembling. “I have to shut it down,” he said abruptly. “Piledriver’s *dead*, in front of a crowd of witnesses...I’ll have to track them all down, and...well, they’re only underlayer dregs. It’s time that section of Diurna was condemned anyway. It’s another week to the next Senate session. I’ll...I’ll get it cleaned up. I’ll get it all cleaned up. We’ll have to fill the shaft...”

He pounded his fists on the table suddenly. “*Where is he!* I’ve got to have him! I can scrap the rest of them, but I have to find him!” His breath was coming in ragged panting. “He can’t just hide forever. He’s too big. His energon demands will force him out. He’ll turn up. I’ll find him. I’ll find him. I’ll make him go back down! I’ll make him drill the whole slagging shaft back open and finish it alone! I’ll make him get it for me, I’ll *make him*, I’ll—I’ll promise him anything he wants, I can just scrap him after—” It was—a *howling*, an open cry of naked hunger. All the Autobots were shrinking back from it in disgust and horror. But Megatron was only smiling a little, contemptuous, and the other Decepticons mostly looked bored or cynical. It wasn’t anything that surprised them. It was only the knife coming out of its sheath, and they already knew it was there.

Sentinel Prime was visibly shaking. He dragged in several breaths. “I’ll find him,” he whispered. “I’ll find him. I’ll finish it. I *have* to. I *need* it. I need it and they won’t *shut up!* They’re all *jealous* of what I’ve done, what I’ve built! Peace for seventeen million years... Who else could have done it? None of them! It’s *mine!*” He thumped his own chest with a fist. “It’s *mine*, do you all hear me? It’s mine! I won’t give it up! I won’t! I won’t let you throw me on the scrap heap!”

He abruptly burst into tears and covered his face. “I’m so *close...*” he said muffled. “So close.”

He stopped speaking and just sat there with his face in his hands. Optimus manually cut off the holo: the recording itself went on for another hour without any more audio. When he shut it off, there was a heavy silence in the room. It wasn’t just the naked hunger. It was the naked *fear*. Sentinel Prime knew the universe devoured the weak and small and obsolete, chewed them up to feed the strong. He knew it, and he had built a world that hid it away so he could pretend it wasn’t happening, until it was happening to *him*.

After a moment, Optimus touched the final entry. It was...fifty thousand years on. Sentinel Prime had undergone extensive modifications: there were new intakes on his shoulders, his armor was different around the neck and his helm had been refashioned. But he looked older anyway, heavy and drawn. His mouth was deeply turned down. He sat staring straight ahead for several moments, and then he burst out in a harsh laugh. “He’s in Tarn. That slagging runaway mech’s *in Tarn*. All this time I’ve been searching underlayer holes and he’s been right there in the slagging *arena*, with a hundred thousand *idiots* howling his name every week. If I hadn’t let Straxus talk me into going for the anniversary games...” He ground his jaw, while in the room everyone turned to look at Megatron; the Autobots almost unwillingly. Arcee had her hands over her mouth looking sick, and Prowl had reached out blindly behind him to take Jazz’s hand. Megatron didn’t look bothered in the slightest; he was leaning against the desk with his arms crossed, relaxed and watching the holo with a satisfied smirk if anything.

“I sent a military squad to get him,” Sentinel Prime said. “Not only didn’t they manage it—he *ripped them to pieces!*—but not ten minutes later I’m getting urgent inquiries from a dozen different Senators with slagging *investments* in the place. That’s not even counting the thirty notes from the ones who have box seats at ringside. If I push the matter, they’ll realize there’s more to it than just a mech who’s clearly in violation of the construction standard. Funny how none of them care about that *now*. I’m going to have to *wait*. Until he *loses*.” He pounded his fist again. “I’ve already told the arena administration they’re to get him on life support instead of junking him the way they usually do, and I’ve told them to cut his career short. We caught a slagger last month on Morthauk, that should do it.”

Megatron laughed aloud, a shocking noise in the hushed room. All the Autobots flinched; Optimus bowed his head and reached out to turn it off.

“Poor Sentinel Prime,” Megatron said, jeeringly. “The supreme leader of Cybertron scrabbling around like a mecharat, so desperate to keep the whole mess of lies propped up. How grotesquely pathetic. What the hell was it even for? I confess I’m curious now.”

Optimus looked down at the sheaf of documents, blueprint sheets poking out around the edges. He took it out and slowly opened it up onto the table. They weren’t just hard copies, he realized immediately: they’d actually been drafted by *hand*. To keep them from being stored in data form. The first few pages were low-level components, building blocks; he couldn’t recognize them. But as he turned the sixth sheet over...

Wheeljack had come to look over his arm. “Hey, wait a second, that’s...”

“The Matrix,” Optimus said softly. “It’s blueprints for the Matrix.” He lifted the sheets one after another, looking through them in detail—and there were some minor differences; there were a few different power conduits on the exterior... “It’s blueprints for—*another* Matrix,” he corrected himself.

“Running out of room for dead Autobots, Prime?” Megatron said dryly.

Optimus shook his head. “No. That’s not what this was about,” he said. “The Matrix... was urging Sentinel Prime to pass it on to a new leader. That’s what he meant—the voices within the Matrix were telling him to let go. But he didn’t want to give up the power. So he decided to make another one.”

“He oughta have known better,” Ironhide said heavily, laden with disapproval. “Nothin’ worse than when a good mech goes bad.”

“Yes,” Optimus said, low, as he uncovered the final blueprint, the diagram of the core, a set of metallic rings centered around a tiny solid cylinder in the middle, suspended between them. A cylinder labeled *362 grams selenium*. He looked up at Megatron again. “I’m sorry.”

Megatron shrugged. “I destroyed everything he built and ripped his fuel pump out with my bare hands and he died a broken wreck at my feet,” he said, cheerfully more than anything. “I don’t think anyone could say I hadn’t revenged myself adequately.”

Optimus looked down at the blueprint again, the cylinder of selenium that Sentinel Prime had bought with so much pain. “I don’t know where he put it.”

Megatron paused, looking down at the desk, and then he said, “It’s right here, Prime.” He looked around. “Soundwave, get into the network and shut off those lights. And all of you shut down all your illumination routines.”

The blast shutters were already down over the windows. When Soundwave shut off the lights, he plunged them into a darkness broken only by the light of their optics. And then even that went out, as they shut the systems down, and when Optimus closed the holojournal interface, he finally saw the faint gleam of it, a flicker of strange, impossible light, down in the desk compartment.

He reached in slowly and took it out: a small cylinder, not quite as large around as his thumb. When he lifted it up, the gleaming traveled around it, making the shape visible. Only the barest tiny notch was missing from the completed shape. It *was* just a few slivers short. And if Sentinel Prime had succeeded, if he’d *gotten* enough selenium... Optimus looked at Megatron. It was almost impossible to see him. Only a faint suggestion of the lines of his helm and face, a glint in his optics. The way his brothers would have seen him. A little longer working down there in the dark... and all five of them would have been disassembled, not just four.

He held out the cylinder, the almost-formed shape. “This is yours,” he said quietly.

Megatron reached out and took it. “Soundwave,” he said, and Soundwave stepped to his side. “Hold it steady.” He handed him the cylinder, then grunted faintly; Optimus heard the sharp,



sliding noise of a subspace access going, and Megatron's breath came slightly faster, pained, as though he'd pulled in a part of his alt mode without fully transforming.

But while it was hard to make out much in the strange light, Megatron was reaching his hand into what seemed to be a compartment in his side, one that couldn't have been part of his gun mode; it was too large. And then...he brought out three small slivers, shining with the same strange, coruscating light. One after another, he carefully set them into the small gap at the top of the cylinder. They merged seamlessly in, as if the selenium was liquid as much as solid, and they completed the shape of it.

The shivering light gleamed brighter in the room suddenly, moving in more visible waves, as if it had reached some critical mass. Megatron took it out of Soundwave's hand and held it up between his fingers. They all stared at it together in the dark room: the jewels and metal of the walls shone faintly with it, and its light reflected in their optics and on their faces in colors not normally visible. It was beautiful, and impossible, and real. And it had been paid for with millions of years of pain.

Megatron looked at it a moment longer, and then he put the whole cylinder back into his compartment and shunted it back away into subspace, his breath easing. The total dark returned for a moment, but Soundwave was already turning the lights back up. Megatron looked at Optimus across the desk, and abruptly Optimus knew why they'd come. He held out the blueprints, too.

Wheeljack made a stifled noise of protest; virtually every Autobot in the room took a flinching step or reached out a hand as if to stop him. But Megatron just snorted and made no move to take it. "Do you really think I'd inflict one of those things on myself? If I want advice, I'll ask my *officers*, not some gaggle of corpses."

Several of the Autobots glared at him indignantly. Optimus just said gently, "What was it you said you'd use it for? Looking for victory conditions?"

Megatron scowled at him, but after a moment he grudgingly reached out a hand and took the blueprints after all. "I suppose there's some chance it can be modified into something actually useful," he growled, holding the sheaf out to the Constructicons; Hook and Scrapper both leaped for it at the same time and held it together, jostling each other back and forth as they started paging through it greedily. Wheeljack made another stifled noise of agony, staring at them.

"Wait a minute, these rings are made out of *uru metal*!" Hook burst out in indignation. "That would cost sixteen billion credits on the galactic market!"

Optimus paused, then slowly grinned. "Well, Megatron," he said, beatific, "I guess you'll have to choose between that and a Voxine cruiser." Megatron glared at him, indignant, and snatched the blueprint container from his hand.

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When the alert came in, Optimus was out on site at the new defense station they were building with the United Nations, on the Northwest coast. The Decepticons had gone

completely silent on Earth for almost seventeen months—no major operations, no raids. Even the space bridge had been shut down—Optimus had yielded to temptation and sent a small raiding party of his own just to see if they could get it open long enough to send through a drone. He'd told himself they needed to know what the Decepticons were planning, but he wasn't sure if it qualified as lying to himself if he hadn't been convinced. At least he hadn't sent Omega Supreme or Cosmos to take a look on Cybertron yet.

Instead he'd used the time and quietly reached out to the leaders of humanity. His own guilt and sorrow had stood in the way of asking them for help before; he'd felt the Autobots owed it to them to put their own bodies in the way. But that wasn't going to actually save them. So now they were building a collaborative network of defense stations and even a fusion reactor, so when the Decepticons *did* show up again, they'd have to take humanity *seriously*. Not out of kindness or mercy, but as a simple pragmatic decision.

But the silence had stretched, and he'd started to think maybe...not that they were *never* coming back, but that it wouldn't be for...for years. Or that Megatron had decided to turn elsewhere after all; that he'd turned to some other worlds to plunder. But he'd had Perceptor do the analysis of likely Decepticon targets all over again, and he *had* sent Cosmos to look at the top ten, and there'd been no sign of them anywhere.

He tried not to be *glad* as he drove at top speed through the Bering Tunnelway; the Decepticons were headed straight for the reactor project in Siberia, and even though it was as isolated and uninhabited a location as possible, there were still thousands of human workers there on site. Not to mention that they *needed* the reactor to power the satellite defense network. There were twenty Autobots converging on the location with him, and they *were* going to make it a knock-down drag-out fight; *he* was going to, no matter how little he really wanted to fight.

It hadn't been easy to bring everyone around—even though seeing the truth come straight out of Sentinel Prime's mouth had helped, there were still a handful of Autobots who were refusing to buy in. Ironhide was still steadfastly determined that there was a mistake somewhere; he didn't know what it was or what difference it would make, but it was out there somewhere. Ultra Magnus had just shrugged and told Optimus he didn't really care: the Decepticons were still the enemy, so what difference did it make? Meanwhile Grimlock had said it sounded like they were *all* Decepticons now, which okay, but then why were they bothering to fight them anymore? He and the Dinobots were mostly helping with projects now only because they were bored just sitting around, and Optimus had the bad feeling if the space bridge *had* been open, they'd have ditched them all and gone back to Cybertron already. And Ratchet hadn't disbelieved a single part of it, but he'd decided after about a month of struggle that they were *all* wrong, and he maybe didn't know what was right, but it sure wasn't anything any of them were doing, so he'd quit and gone to live in a quiet back corner of Earth repairing broken machinery for individual humans. Beachcomber had gone with him.

But the rest of them had slowly and painfully come along with him; they'd accepted Megatron's savage truth, and that their only choice for preserving each other, preserving humanity, without succumbing to the lie again, was the brutal and pragmatic. The Protectobots were having the roughest time of it. Humans *were* getting hurt; they were dying

working on the reactor and the defense stations, because Cybertronian technology wasn't designed with the tolerances of organic beings in mind, and with all the efforts they could make to adjust, they still made mistakes on both sides. But after Optimus had wept over those deaths, he'd steeled himself to go on, and he'd go on *now*, too, no matter what it cost him personally.

He and Ultra Magnus and half a dozen other Autobots beat the Decepticon strike force to the site. They were outnumbered, though, and the Decepticons split into two groups on approach, so Optimus sent Magnus with most of the others to hold the group heading for the far side, and went with Prowl and Bluestreak for Megatron's group, which was him and Soundwave and Ramjet and Thrust: but about a quarter of a mile before they landed, Soundwave ejected Rumble in passing, and he immediately started pounding open a fault line headed straight for the reactor building. "Bluestreak!" Optimus said.

"I see him!" Bluestreak yelled, already peeling off.

That left two on four, which was bad odds even *without* Megatron in the mix. Megatron, who outright *smirked* at him as he landed. "You seem to have gotten yourself into a corner, Prime. Are you sure you wouldn't like to consider surrender?" he said mockingly, and promptly nearly blasted Prowl's leg off.

"Not even for a minute," Optimus said, glaring at him, and took a shot right at his head. It was a lot less emotionally painful than he'd expected.

Fortunately, they had the barricade of two perimeter walls to fall back behind, and a wave of human soldiers rushed in and manned the guns mounted on the walls; together they managed to hold until the rest of the reinforcements came in. The Decepticons had done a reasonable amount of damage by then, but they hadn't breached the main reactor walls before Megatron abruptly called the retreat. The humans cheered wildly as the Decepticons took off, and Optimus ordered a pursuit; the reinforcements were all in perfect condition, while most of the Decepticons had taken some damage, and there was another human military base down the road to the north where they'd retreated. Megatron might not *think* that was going to be a problem, but he was going to be wrong.

Optimus felt—a sense of *relief*, almost, roaring down the road with the Decepticons just in sight ahead. He'd known the first time would be the hardest, and he'd done it, and it was even *working*; after a bunch of humans had just helped a skeleton crew of Autobots send them packing, the Decepticons weren't going to be able to write them off as pointless flesh creatures anymore. That fierce satisfaction only redoubled when they crested the next hill and found the Decepticons falling apart in disarray under a pounding from the newly upgraded anti-aircraft guns at the base, being scattered in all directions. "Don't let them regroup!" he ordered, and they all split off into groups themselves, each chasing one or two other routed Decepticons into the distance.

Megatron himself was trailing some smoke from a bad hit to the leg, which he'd damned well been asking for, and Optimus and Bluestreak stayed on him and Soundwave as they retreated to the southwest. They lost visual confirmation after half an hour, but the hit must have taken out a servo: a human-originated report went out over the joint channel that Megatron had actually gone in for a landing at a small gas station a couple of kilometers further on.

Optimus was glad to see the humans already well away in the distance evacuating when he and Bluestreak got in sight of the gas station. He didn't see any sign of Megatron or Soundwave yet, so he and Bluestreak slowed down and transformed, creeping in more cautiously with their weapons ready. "Fuel pumps look drained. Maybe they already moved on?" Bluestreak said, peering through a sharpening filter.

"They might be on the other side of the building," Optimus said. "Take the left side, I'll go around the right. Keep a channel open."

He'd just turned the corner around the back of the building when Bluestreak's side of the channel abruptly cut out with a squawk. "Bluestreak!" Optimus said, and he turned to charge after him, when Megatron suddenly exploded out of gun mode from off the roof of the building, where he'd been hiding. He body-slammed Optimus into the wall, arms pinned overhead, and jammed clamping bolts around his wrists, locking him to the concrete.

"Don't worry about Bluestreak, Optimus," Megatron said in his ear. "Just a jolt from the stun disk Rumble put on him earlier. He'll be perfectly fine once he's rebooted. I just wanted to arrange a little alone time."

"What?" Optimus said, and then Megatron shocked open his dorsal access panel and—

"Oh, *Primus*," Optimus said, or he thought he said; he wasn't sure if it had actually made it out of his vocal unit, or if that was locked up in sensation like the rest of him. Doing it to himself hadn't been *remotely* comparable. He'd...he'd possibly tried doing it again on his own once or twice, playing back his recording of Megatron's voice, but—"Oh. *Oh*," he choked out as Megatron sent the pulsing current into him again.

"Open for me," Megatron was murmuring, low and demanding. "Come on, Optimus, I want you to open the whole way—"

Optimus made an incoherent noise that wasn't anything like *no* and tried desperately to persuade himself he had to stop this, he absolutely had to—except everyone else was literally gone in all directions, nowhere in range; Bluestreak was unconscious; there weren't any humans in danger; even the *reactor* was safe—Megatron abruptly varied the pulse cycle and sent it through him again, and Optimus groaned helplessly and spread his hands wide on the wall and braced himself and opened up, opened completely. Megatron actually gave a soft moan of satisfaction and happiness that fired every single one of Optimus's *emotional* pleasure circuits at once, and then he extended the electrojack *all the way in*, pushing it steadily to the termination point, and then he just held there and pulled Optimus's head back against him and kissed his throat and said hoarsely, "Beg me for it."

"Please," Optimus said, shivering. "Please. Megatron, *please, please*—" and Megatron actually choked out a strangled gasp and put his arms over Optimus's, and opened access ports in both of his wrists, and Optimus *reached* for him frantically, opening his own, and they fell together into an almost obliterating wave of joy and pleasure.

Megatron didn't withdraw the electrojack immediately, even after they were both leaning heavily on the wall panting, the restraints almost the only thing keeping them standing. Instead after catching his breath a little, he leisurely began to contract and extend different

parts of it, sending small unpredictable surges of stimulation at various points in the access channel. Optimus overloaded twice more before he could even focus his brain well enough to think, much less speak; that took another three rounds, and then he managed to strangle out, “It’s—it’s *working*. Your Matrix. You got it *working*.”

“Mm,” Megatron said, a low purr of triumph. “I like to call it the Oracle, actually.”

“And *this* is what you used it—for!” Optimus said through his teeth, with a yelp as Megatron sent another wave of current flowing all along his channel.

“As though you could possibly have thought of any better use for it any time in the last two hours,” Megatron said mockingly. He nuzzled at Optimus’s throat again.

“I don’t—*believe*—you!” Optimus said, trying with all his heart to be angry. It wasn’t working all that well. Megatron had taken hold of his hips and was nudging insistently at the access panels there, and Optimus half involuntarily opened them. Megatron didn’t plug in; he reached his hands up to his mouth one after another and lubricated his thumbs and lightly rubbed the sockets, just running them around in a wild tease of a circle around the rim. Optimus moaned helplessly.

“Oh, don’t fret so, Optimus,” Megatron said. “This is just the recreational stage. I was reasonably sure you wouldn’t have done anything about your pathetic lack of stimulation all this time, so I thought I’d better get you warmed up first, so you wouldn’t be too distracted. I’m *afraid*,” and it was very definitely a sly taunt, “that we’re going to have to do quite a lot of this sort of thing.”

“Yes?” Optimus said vaguely, floating. Megatron was pressing his thumbs harder into the sockets.

“Maybe we’re not done with the recreational stage just yet,” Megatron said.

Optimus surfaced again groggily some time later. They were lying on the ground at that point: they’d accidentally smashed the wall somewhere along the way. He still had chunks of concrete attached to his wrists. He broke them off with a quick effort and tossed them away. “*What* were you saying? And where have you *been*? It’s been months; what have you been doing all this time?”

“Selling the idea of the Oracle to the Decepticons, obviously,” Megatron said. “To really use it to its full extent, I had to get them willing to accept short-term failures for long-term success. But the plans for the thing came straight out of the Autobot leader we all hated more than anything. They took a great deal of convincing. The easiest way to do it was to demonstrate conclusively that it actually works. We’ve won, by the way,” he added dryly.

“Won what?” Optimus said warily.

“The war,” Megatron said. “Polyhex and Darkmount are at full fuel capacity, I’ve got ten thousand Decepticon warriors awakened from stasis—”

“*What*?” Optimus said in horror.

Megatron smirked at him. “And just think, it was all thanks to you.”

Optimus stared at him. “Are you—*joking*?”

“No, not at all,” Megatron said. “You do realize you handed me a way to *look into the future*? I found a set of valuable energon targets where we didn’t get interrupted by Autobot attacks. Even Starscream stopped being skeptical after I took us straight to the tenth one in a row. Now he’s just trying to come up with a way to steal the Oracle from me. You wouldn’t *believe* how wildly frustrated he is every time he starts in on an attempt and I tell him all about it before he can really get going.”

He sounded delighted. Optimus didn’t have the slightest inclination to share his pleasure. Horror was spider-climbing through his circuitry. “Oh, don’t look so *stricken*,” Megatron added. “Do you think I just came back here to wipe out humanity for no reason? You know I’ve never been *gratuitously* cruel, even before you infected me with this tiresome empathy of yours. I came because *you*’ve done enough.”

“Enough for what?” Optimus managed.

“For me to justify offering you a treaty,” Megatron said. “The humans had to look like *something* of a plausible threat to the other Decepticons, otherwise they’d balk.”

It was a little like being spun around in a centrifugal device in multiple dimensions. Optimus took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down and stop letting Megatron jerk him around. “But if you’ve already got Cybertron, and you *don’t* care about conquering Earth anymore, then why are you here at all?”

Megatron paused and turned his head to stare at him, clearly attempting to convey some obvious-to-him meaning. Optimus stared back blankly, and then Megatron ground his teeth and said, “Are you just trying to make me *say it*?”

“*Oh*,” Optimus said, his voice cracking, and reached for him; Megatron muttered under his breath after Optimus pulled him in and pressed their foreheads together, and then he reached up and unlatched Optimus’s faceplate. Optimus twitched instinctively. The ruin of his lower jaw had been too complex to repair fully; you couldn’t replace core emotion reactive face modules. He had to take off the faceplate to drink, of course, and he saw it in the mirror when he did his weekly cleaning and maintenance; he was used to it himself by now. But objectively speaking, it was fairly gruesome. He had a little of Orion’s vanity lingering, and he’d never had any inclination to show it to a lover.

But Megatron didn’t so much as pause; he kissed his mouth hungrily, and stroked a fingertip over the exposed and dazzlingly sensitive jaw servo that made Optimus shiver again. “You didn’t *really* think I was going to let you nobly give me up, did you?” Megatron said. “I could just have offered you humanity’s safety in exchange for sexual servitude, you know. It’s not like you would have *refused*.”

“I *would* have,” Optimus said. He hoped.

“Hmm, I’d have to consult my Oracle,” Megatron said mockingly. “But it’s moot. You’re going to have to spend the rest of your existence helping me find it anyway.”

“Find what?” Optimus said.

“Your victory condition,” Megatron said.

Optimus sat up abruptly, staring down at him. “You’ve identified— What is it?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea. I’ve only caught the barest glimpse,” Megatron said. “Only hints that it *may* exist, somewhere in the realm of possibility. It may not. But if it does, it’s somewhere out on the very far edges.”

Optimus stared down at him. Megatron was just lying there stretched out next to him, an arm tucked behind his head, relaxed. The Decepticon Matrix—the Oracle—hadn’t changed his body at all. But he sounded...a little far away and remote, and there was a faint silver shimmering on the surface of his optics, as if he was seeing something else. Seeing in a different way entirely. *You’ve given me a way to look into the future*, Megatron had said. As if he could walk through a thousand universes and find...possibility.

“How do we get there?” Optimus asked softly.

“That’s the problem. It’s unimaginable, and I can’t really find a way towards it if I can’t *conceive* it,” Megatron said. “But conveniently, *you’re* toting around a repository filled with a vast number of minds, all of whom, however incompetently, have been trying to do just that.”

“You want to use the Matrix and the Oracle *together*,” Optimus whispered.

Megatron stretched and gave him a smug, heavy-lidded smile. “Like I said, Prime,” he purred. “We’re going to be doing a lot of this. And for a long time. The chances we’ll ever actually reach it are fairly small.”

Optimus reached out and cupped his cheek, joy trembling through him. “More unlikely things have happened,” he said softly.

## Epilogue

I caught a glimpse of it again tonight  
The nameless city that I'll never see  
It won't be a city at all, of course  
Walled and victorious  
Nothing like the empire that I've had to leave behind  
But I haven't seen enough to tell you what it will be, so call it a city.  
I saw only the shining on the other side of the mountains  
That I only ever see in the dark  
And that I already know I'll never reach.

But I think I'll find you the road. He built me to make a way in deep places  
To find the smallest trickling gleam of impossible light  
I've had to wonder now if he wasn't trying to find it also  
If he walked among his golden towers and saw the rot himself  
And in his frantic selfish clawing at the foundations  
Uncovered a paving stone or two

I hate the very thought of it, hate  
How even that purest hate's been stolen from me.  
But I've seen my turn will come to take hope in my hands and hand it on  
To someone I don't yet know  
Who'll turn to me and hold out a half-seen hand demanding  
And I'll have to make his choice.

I'll find the road.  
I'll put your feet upon it.  
But tonight I knew—  
a bitter taste of the road's ash—  
that even you won't reach the journey's end.  
That I'll have to give the gift whole, untarnished  
To wipe off a few more of my fingerprints glistening with oil  
Knowing that even you  
Your heart wide enough to host the multitudes  
Of flesh and bone and flickering life  
Won't find your way through the city gates.

You've opened your own gates, your heart, one time too many.  
For now you don't yet feel the mortal wound  
Only occasional flashes of pain, sharp edges grating on the machinery  
As you keep on pumping fuel  
Only when it's withdrawn  
Will you finally pay  
For taking in an unsheathed knife.



But when at last you read this poem, if you ever do  
—oracles aren't omnipotent, can only see  
through windows into windows beyond, and not through solid walls when they misalign—  
Walk on, without your heart  
To where at least you can see the destination

I won't say that I'll be with you  
Lies won't travel any better on that road than on mine  
Even ones told with love  
And my absence will be the necessary precondition.

I will not even be  
One of those voices you can reach inside to wake  
The universe stands between our singularities  
When you look you will not find me  
And when you yourself one day are woken, by some new wide-open heart  
If they ask you of me  
You will have nothing to say.  
You will only be able to tell them of a few hours in the dark  
When you did not yet love me  
And I still walked a road to walled victory  
To a place that I could see from where I stood  
And had nearly reached: my fingers straining, scrabbling at my empire's gate  
A colder light leaking around its edges  
When you caught me in your heart and drew me down  
Back through the underlayers  
To the gift of an unpaid debt.

I won't be with you.  
You'll look at a stranger standing in my place  
With cleaner hands and a clearer view to guide you to the final turnings  
And all you'll want is to stop in the ash-choked dark where last you saw me.  
But leave behind the severed fragments of your heart, go on a little further  
Take that one clear sight which is the most that I can win you  
With this my accident of poetry  
Let me write you a way out of the dark  
By telling you that I knew this time as well  
The bargain I was making  
As when I bought my life with death.

You already don't like to think of it, I know.  
In your sight I shine silver with the light you needed  
To see in the dark  
And you would sooner blame others—by which you always mean yourself—for the choices I  
was given  
But still I chose to live  
To take the light out of others' eyes

And here's the truth I'll use to break you this once to my will:  
I'm not sorry.

You could take me back down to the uttermost dark inside  
And wake in me unwilling love  
But there's only one way you could ever build into me the softness of regret  
For all that oil wet on my hands, the weekly sacrificial rite  
Where I offered up a heart that wasn't mine.  
I lived in that arena fifty thousand years  
Each one a hundred tendays  
Count them, now, as you've carefully avoided doing  
Do you see them mounting up behind me now: five million lives  
—for simplicity's sake, leave out the times they fed me more than one—  
Not slain at a distance, or in my righteous war, but one by one  
With my own bare butchering hands  
For nothing but the lust to live.

I owe them a debt too  
The toll that stands between me and that shining place  
And I could scrape the payment together  
It wouldn't even be hard  
I could simply give you this poem tomorrow when you wake  
And when the time came, you'd wash away all that oil with yours  
Which you'd spill yourself, a offering made freely  
To get me to the light.

It wouldn't be today, not for a million years or more  
It couldn't be; that wouldn't pay the price.  
First I'd have your hand lingering in mine a long time  
Seeing my own hunger in every moment of joy  
Paying down the debt  
Until the last payment came due.

And if you read this, when you reach this point, you'll cry out  
*but I won't get there either way*  
*and you could have made it*  
It's true. But I don't make small bargains.  
I won't pay them back. Not with one single cycle of your breath.  
Not even if I see in every road that's left before me that you'll lie down and die in grief  
beside my corpse  
And never even read this poem.

So I'm not sorry, and I won't learn to be  
But I'll do my best to see that you read this and learn before the end  
That I loved you  
More than the worth of five million lives  
And the four left down below  
And mine the one I bought with all of them together

And then you'll go  
And see whatever damned thing it is  
Throwing up all that light out of the dark  
Before you let your breath stop.

And who knows, maybe I'm wrong about all this.  
Maybe there's someone over there already  
And if we just get close enough  
They'll come out to show us the rest of the way.  
If so, I'll give this to you when we get there  
And watch you weep  
And I'll pay my last debt with whatever I'll feel then  
Equally impossible to imagine.

# Excerpts from *The Sacrifice of Violence and Other Poems* (translated from the Tarn dialect of Cybertronian)

## *Foreword to The Sacrifice of Violence And Other Works*

The endeavor of translating poetry from one language to another is fraught with difficulty, and all the more so when attempting to convey the intentions and meanings of an alien species, much less an inorganic one. The translator in this case does not remotely claim to have done so with any real accuracy. Aside from the many untranslatable words and concepts, and the undoubtedly common instances in which subtleties have been misunderstood or confused, the original author deliberately avoids all established conventions of Cybertronian poetry except when he engages them for a brief moment only to jarringly break away again, which renders his work challenging even for the native Cybertronian readers who have formed her primary sources of assistance.

Complicating matters further, long sections of these poems cannot be experienced by humans at all because they require multiple sections—in one case as many as twenty—to be preloaded into memory and then processed simultaneously in parallel, an action trivial for the cybernetic mind and virtually impossible for our own. Several of these sections are actively contradictory and some are literally nonsensical; others are nontextual forms of input. Based on conversations with Autobots, the parallel processing of these sections induces sensations in Cybertronian brains completely unlike sequential processing of the same material, which they have not been able to articulate in human terms.

The translator offers this work, therefore, not as an accurate representation of the original, but rather as fragments of lost artworks gleaned from a shipwreck: difficult to retrieve, occasionally valuable in their own right, and perhaps conveying some faint suggestion of what the original might have been. But she is well aware the entire effort may be a failure both as poetry and translation, and apologizes to the reader in advance. The original poet could not be consulted for his opinion, for obvious reasons.

We woke today together on the soft crust of a borrowed world  
Not for the first time, most of you,  
so often shipped as soldiers to unchosen destinations  
to die under a distant star.  
You looked with easy disinterest on red-brown soil and an atmosphere so thick it scattered  
half the wavelengths of solid light into a haze  
and wreathed us all in clouds of clinging gas,  
and when you asked where we were, you didn't really care about the answer,  
some contrived name or set of coordinates.  
What mattered was how far we were from home

And what we had to do before we could go back.

But here at least we've come by choice  
Mine and yours, to do this work  
And we'll decide when it's done ourselves  
For ourselves, not for the lies they used to tell us  
We've left them in the ashes of their own works  
And though our world's still dark, now it's only for the lack of fuel.  
Nothing left needs burning.

Soft cells still hold their shape until they burn,  
blind trees climb fractals towards the sunlight.  
Even the weakest, all life strives, without accepting the limit of its reach...

We are always lying when we say *here is all that I can give*  
When it feels the most true, still what we mean is  
*Here is where my heart stops*

But the universe doesn't care where your heart stops.  
That's not the question it asks  
It's only the question we want to answer  
But the universe asks us only  
*Where do your limbs stop?*  
*Where does your breath stop?*  
*Where do your eyes go dark?*

The universe is patient  
Again and again it listens to the lie  
Again and again it lets us draw the line.  
But the universe and its patience are not infinite  
One day sooner or later it grows tired of waiting  
It puts a hand on our back and pushes  
And we find that we can go on past our hearts  
We can leave them behind entirely, in fact  
We can go on so much further that we can no longer look back and see them.

Let the fallen rise again, in silver ranks

Armored with truth, shining  
Let them stand up in the dark and say  
*I didn't deserve to die.*  
That their deaths were only the consequence of hunger  
and the hidden knife called glory carved them  
for another's feasting.

Let them march ahead of us, a forward guard  
Carrying no banners to block our sight...

Will you ask to live?  
You will. You know you will.  
When the hand closes on your throat, when the ash thickens your breath, you will ask, and ask again—

What promises will you make, when your shining dome comes down, that you withheld to see it rise?  
Will you still value its bright curve, steel and stone, higher than a breath in freedom?  
What will you then want more than the unbound hand and the open mouth?  
Make ready your offers and your bargains. Breathe. Breathe now.

I didn't know I was going to make it until I had  
Until I crossed the threshold back to a single pair of waiting hands  
With the cheering, disappointed crowd behind me.  
They were glad for any blood, but they'd hoped for mine  
A pleasure too long denied, become more sweet  
And they'd come so close this time.

I didn't know I was going to make it when I put the remnant of my last sword through its skull  
And pinned it to the oil-dark sand to finish smothering.  
It might have broken loose  
It might have spat one last gout of slagging poison in my face  
It might have already killed me,  
Some toxin that hadn't yet wound its way through my systems  
I didn't know I'd make it to the doors,  
Even after it stopped twitching and I caught my breath.

And I didn't know I was going to make it when I came out on the sand and saw it waiting.  
But I knew that I wouldn't unless I spent myself  
Down to the last credit

Buying victory with pawned scraps of my armor and my strength and pain  
A bargain worth the making, only I wouldn't know until the end  
Whether the offer was acceptable  
And either way I'd have to suffer just the same.

Or I could give up, instead; go down easy.  
After fifty thousand years of fighting for their pleasure  
I was bored, and sick of it and them  
And I didn't have anywhere better to be.  
I could have gone at it head-on, and let it take me quick  
and taken that pleasure from them, at least.

But still I didn't want to die.  
So I spent everything I had and got paid back in kind  
And when I made it out, this time I kept going,  
Out of the arena walls into the streets of Tarn  
Where the cheering crowd put me on their shoulders like an idol and carried me  
And from that godlike height I first saw better in the distance  
The empire that I could build upon their bodies  
And I decided that they all deserved to die  
At least as much as I did  
Or the poor stupid beast I'd slaughtered for their pleasure  
And all the ones before it.

So I'll make the bargain for us all  
And if there's a way to that empire shining like an unsheathed blade with truth  
Buy it with all we have  
Though we won't know if we'll make it until we have.

This stuff's boring as scrap, one of the bodyguards said to the other, out on the balcony,  
while inside the room the others read my poetry.  
Boring, but at least there's good energon  
and nobody's trying to kill you.  
Inside the nodding heads agreed with him.  
The nodding heads, polite, who understood very well  
That they were paying with poetry and boredom  
With all the forms and appearances of delight  
For their delightful situation

The other bodyguard said nah, poetry's cool  
You just can't listen to the scrap they try to sell you with it  
I was out in Mantira Chasm before I got here  
And we were sure we were all gonna die

We were just waiting for them to get around to it  
They were dropping the trench bombs one an hour  
And there were six more left before us  
Then one of the guys said *let's not just sit here*  
*I'll tell you a poem*  
And he told us the one about killing the durasteel slagger  
That one they read ten minutes ago and said it was about being your best self  
Nah, it's about killing a durasteel slagger  
And that's what we were doing  
All of us together in Mantira Chasm trying to get ahead of it before it slagged us  
And all you could do was keep throwing everything you had and hope you got out ahead  
So we didn't just sit on our asses and wait, we started throwing everything we had  
We weren't supposed to, the ammo was supposed to last another month  
But we opened it up anyway  
And the guys on either side of us started doing it too  
And trench number six got slagged anyway  
But we didn't, we got out ahead, so I got a medal and now I'm here  
With people who don't get poetry.

I went out on the balcony with them  
They were alarmed, of course; I was a guest and they understood they too had to pay  
With forms and appearances  
For good energon  
And no one trying to kill you  
And those things were dearer to those who knew their alternatives more clearly.

You're right, I said  
It's about killing a durasteel slagger  
They know it too  
Some of them saw it happen  
Sixteen hours in an oil-soaked ring  
But they can't tell you the truth  
They have built an empire of lies  
Where the dead beneath are buried twice  
To better feed the living above  
And you can keep the teeth of hunger off your own neck  
Only if you tell the ravening lies yourself  
And they too want to live

I'll tell you a poem  
I said to them

Let us build together  
The empire of unsheathed knives and hungers  
Where we will not lie in small rooms and say we want poetry  
When all we want is to live  
Let us pave the streets in corpses  
They are paved so already, and we cannot raise the dead



But let us leave them out next time  
Let us bury lies instead of the living  
Whose mouths we stop up with stories  
Let us build it soon, if not today

They liked the poem  
We shook hands when we parted  
Soon, they said, if not today.

All this is true  
That death is not a door but an end  
And galaxies ten billion years away are fading into endless night  
Flying from us faster than their light can shine  
The stars one day will all go out  
And all empires will be dust long since

And this too is true  
It will not be long

And yet it will be longer than we have  
Aeons, ends of universes, are beyond our grasp  
All we can ever have is here  
A moment where you and I  
are stars not yet gone into the night  
and can draw a constellation  
by reaching out a hand.

I caught a glimpse of it again tonight  
The nameless city that I'll never see  
It won't be a city at all, of course  
Walled and victorious  
Nothing like the empire that I've had to leave behind  
But I haven't seen enough to tell you what it will be, so call it a city.  
I saw only the shining on the other side of the mountains  
That I only ever see in the dark  
And that I already know I'll never reach.

But I think I'll find you the road. He built me to make a way in deep places  
To find the smallest trickling gleam of impossible light  
I've had to wonder now if he wasn't trying to find it also  
If he walked among his golden towers and saw the rot himself

And in his frantic selfish clawing at the foundations  
Uncovered a paving stone or two

I hate the very thought of it, hate  
How even that purest hate's been stolen from me.  
But I've seen my turn will come to take hope in my hands and hand it on  
To someone I don't yet know  
Who'll turn to me and hold out a half-seen hand demanding  
And I'll have to make his choice.

I'll find the road.  
I'll put your feet upon it.  
But tonight I knew—  
a bitter taste of the road's ash—  
that even you won't reach the journey's end.  
That I'll have to give the gift whole, untarnished  
To wipe off a few more of my fingerprints glistening with oil  
Knowing that even you  
Your heart wide enough to host the multitudes  
Of flesh and bone and flickering life  
Won't find your way through the city gates.

You've opened your own gates, your heart, one time too many.  
For now you don't yet feel the mortal wound  
Only occasional flashes of pain, sharp edges grating on the machinery  
As you keep on pumping fuel  
Only when it's withdrawn  
Will you finally pay  
For taking in an unsheathed knife.

But when at last you read this poem, if you ever do  
—oracles aren't omnipotent, can only see  
through windows into windows beyond, and not through solid walls when they misalign—  
Walk on, without your heart  
To where at least you can see the destination

I won't say that I'll be with you  
Lies won't travel any better on that road than on mine  
Even ones told with love  
And my absence will be the necessary precondition.

I will not even be  
One of those voices you can reach inside to wake  
The universe stands between our singularities  
When you look you will not find me  
And when you yourself one day are woken, by some new wide-open heart  
If they ask you of me  
You will have nothing to say.

You will only be able to tell them of a few hours in the dark  
When you did not yet love me  
And I still walked a road to walled victory  
To a place that I could see from where I stood  
And had nearly reached: my fingers straining, scrabbling at my empire's gate  
A colder light leaking around its edges  
When you caught me in your heart and drew me down  
Back through the underlayers  
To the gift of an unpaid debt.

I won't be with you.  
You'll look at a stranger standing in my place  
With cleaner hands and a clearer view to guide you to the final turnings  
And all you'll want is to stop in the ash-choked dark where last you saw me.  
But leave behind the severed fragments of your heart, go on a little further  
Take that one clear sight which is the most that I can win you  
With this my accident of poetry  
Let me write you a way out of the dark  
By telling you that I knew this time as well  
The bargain I was making  
As when I bought my life with death.

You already don't like to think of it, I know.  
In your sight I shine silver with the light you needed  
To see in the dark  
And you would sooner blame others—by which you always mean yourself—for the choices I  
was given  
But still I chose to live  
To take the light out of others' eyes  
And here's the truth I'll use to break you this once to my will:  
I'm not sorry.

You could take me back down to the uttermost dark inside  
And wake in me unwilling love  
But there's only one way you could ever build into me the softness of regret  
For all that oil wet on my hands, the weekly sacrificial rite  
Where I offered up a heart that wasn't mine.  
I lived in that arena fifty thousand years  
Each one a hundred tendays  
Count them, now, as you've carefully avoided doing  
Do you see them mounting up behind me now: five million lives  
—for simplicity's sake, leave out the times they fed me more than one—  
Not slain at a distance, or in my righteous war, but one by one  
With my own bare butchering hands  
For nothing but the lust to live.

I owe them a debt too  
The toll that stands between me and that shining place

And I could scrape the payment together  
It wouldn't even be hard  
I could simply give you this poem tomorrow when you wake  
And when the time came, you'd wash away all that oil with yours  
Which you'd spill yourself, a offering made freely  
To get me to the light.

It wouldn't be today, not for a million years or more  
It couldn't be; that wouldn't pay the price.  
First I'd have your hand lingering in mine a long time  
Seeing my own hunger in every moment of joy  
Paying down the debt  
Until the last payment came due.

And if you read this, when you reach this point, you'll cry out  
*but I won't get there either way*  
*and you could have made it*  
It's true. But I don't make small bargains.  
I won't pay them back. Not with one single cycle of your breath.  
Not even if I see in every road that's left before me that you'll lie down and die in grief  
beside my corpse  
And never even read this poem.

So I'm not sorry, and I won't learn to be  
But I'll do my best to see that you read this and learn before the end  
That I loved you  
More than the worth of five million lives  
And the four left down below  
And mine the one I bought with all of them together  
And then you'll go  
And see whatever damned thing it is  
Throwing up all that light out of the dark  
Before you let your breath stop.

And who knows, maybe I'm wrong about all this.  
Maybe there's someone over there already  
And if we just get close enough  
They'll come out to show us the rest of the way.  
If so, I'll give this to you when we get there  
And watch you weep  
And I'll pay my last debt with whatever I'll feel then  
Equally impossible to imagine.

## End Notes

With many thanks to monicawoe for beta! All feedback loved. If you like, [reblog](#)!

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