

“That is *pungent*,” said Minimus Ambus, tapping the side of his nose and recalibrating his olfactory sensors. “Is that the spacebridge?”

“The greater the distance covered,” said Rodimus, “the stronger the smell. That’s what Wheeljack says, anyway.”

They were standing in Tyrest’s Control Room, watching Brainstorm, Grapple, and Inferno sift through the wreckage of the spacebridge.

“Do you think Tyrest did it?” said Minimus. “A doorway to Cyberutopia?” Rodimus tried to shrug, but his body—still tender after being pulverized by the Killswitch—was having none of it. “Dunno about Cyberutopia, but Skids says the portal took him somewhere. He’s not making much sense, admittedly; it’s all, ‘I saw a giant spark and it spoke to me in feelings...’” He snapped his shoulder hydraulics back into position. “Rung thinks he experienced a form of trans-lingual synesthesia, whatever that is. In time, perhaps he’ll— careful, Grapple! Set it down gently!”

“You’re busy,” said Minimus, stepping away. “We’ll talk later.”

Rodimus pressed his communicator to his ear. “Just let me make a few calls...”

Call 1: “Actually, Perceptor, I think finding Tyrest’s communications room is a priority. He had a computer that would have—no, hear me out. If he could reach his Enforcer wherever he was in the galaxy, surely we can reach Cybertron?”

Call 2: “No, still no sign of... Ratchet, if we find Pharma’s body I will tell you. I will call you. Yes. Yes, obviously. And what about Tailgate, any news? No, no, I understand. Keep me posted.”

Call 3: “Just land outside, Max. Anywhere! What sacred ground? Oh, the hot spot. Okay, see the big tower by the smelting pool? Park alongside that.”

Call 4: “I’m smiling. I am! I’m getting—Minimus is giving me a funny look because I’m standing here smiling. Nice one, Perceptor. Let me know as soon as you get it working.”

It occurred to Minimus that Rodimus had given more orders in the space of three minutes than he had in the last 12 months. “You look like you’re about to fall apart,” he said, as Rodimus finally turned off his communicator.

“I’m fine.”

Minimus tapped his leader’s bicep. A hunk of machinery and buckled plating slid to the ground. “Well I’m not about to bother Ratchet now, am I?” said Rodimus, stepping delicately out of the pool of his own body parts. “Not when he’s got Tailgate to worry about.”

In the 40 minutes since Tailgate’s collapse, the team of engineers, medics and mechanics in Pharma’s well-stocked medibay had discovered the cure to four infamous Cybertronian diseases. Under normal circumstances, an Autobot who solved the problem of form fatigue

or static spark syndrome would have punched the air and yelped with delight. Today, with Tailgate's death clock creeping towards zero, they merely smiled, put the latest miracle formula to one side, and got back to work.

"You are tired, though," insisted Minimus. "Mentally, you're exhausted."

"I'm tired; other people are dead. Have you seen outside? There are hundreds of corpses out there—we're talking half the Circle of Light. Now, if I can't help them I can at least try to fix the spacebridge." Rodimus rocked on his heels as Inferno barged past and fired foam into a section of the spacebridge that had caught fire. When the foam ran out Inferno stamped on the flames, and with a sad thud another chunk of Tyrest's precious patchwork portal hit the floor.

"Maybe it's better that the spacebridge isn't fixed," said Minimus slowly, seeing the look of horror on Rodimus's face. "If it was fixed, it might make people think that our losses were worthwhile: 'The ship was overrun and people died, but at least we found a way to get to Cyberutopia.' I don't want that. Do you?"

There was a sudden squeal of excitement, and Rodimus and Minimus turned to see Brainstorm skipping around the remains of the Killswitch, holding his briefcase above his head. Beaming behind his faceplate, the weapons engineer jogged out of the Control Room, pausing only to tug playfully at Minimus Ambus' moustache.

"Whatever happened to priorities?" muttered Rodimus, frowning with disapproval. "Now Minimus—sorry, Magnus—what was it you wanted?"

"I was, um, wondering if you'd found my outer shell?"

"The one without a head?" Rodimus pointed across the room. "Storage locker. I thought you'd come looking for it."

"Thank you," said Minimus, turning to leave.

"Magnus, wait. Listen. When it was all kicking off—when I was being wired into the Killswitch— you and I, we..." Rodimus paused to test the depth of a newly discovered dent in his forehead. "We came clean, didn't we? I told you about Overlord and... yeah." Minimus waited for him to continue. "I am going to do something about it, you know. I'm going to—"

"Make amends. So you said."

*

Rung looked up from the table at the sound of breaking glass and saw Fortress Maximus pulling his boot from the remains of a displaced engex canister. Max wasn't really to blame: it was impossible to walk across Swerve's ransacked bar without treading on something breakable.

“Thank you for seeing me,” said Fortress Maximus, sitting down opposite Rung. He tilted his head and realized that the shards of tinted glass in front of the ship’s psychiatrist bore a strong resemblance to Ark 5. “You know I’d have been happy to meet you in your office.”

“My office is full of dead Legislators,” said Rung, pushing a drink across the table. Fortress Maximus swirled the room temperature engex around the glass, watching the luminous pink liquid crest and collapse. “I’ve been made an offer. A new position. Rodimus was impressed by my handling of the Legislator invasion—which is ridiculous, frankly, because all I did was let them take over the ship...” He sipped his drink; it tasted bad. “Anyway. Yes. A new position.”

“Congratulations. I’m pleased for you.”

A second sip. “I don’t know whether to accept.”

Rung turned his friend’s empty glass on its side; it made a decent rear thruster. “You don’t think you’ve earned it?”

“Oh, I know I haven’t ‘earned’ it. This isn’t about ‘earning’ it. This is about whether I’m cured or not. The shooting spree—that’s in the past. I mean— hell—it’s easy for *me* to say that, but...” He slumped a little in his chair. “I feel like myself again. Like I did before Overlord attacked Garrus 9.”

Rung swept the mosaic aside and put his elbows on the table. “You’re not ‘cured’ because you were never diseased. But the fact you’re asking these questions—of me, of yourself—is good, Max. It’s really good.”

“But do you think I might come unstuck again?”

“I think you’re ready for whatever is around corner. As ready as the rest of us.” Rung reached across the table and unclenched his friend’s fist. “But promise me: if your thoughts run away with you, come find me. Ten floors down.”

“Ten floors down?”

“My office is ten floors below the Bridge. I assume that’s where you’ll be, if you’re going to be third in command?”

“Who said anything about being third in command? Rung, this new position—it means I have to leave the Lost Light.”

*

As Rodimus stepped into his office he shielded his eyes—literally put his hand to his face—to avoid catching sight of the flames he’d had painted around the doorframe. As soon as he’d sorted out the current mess he’d ask Atomizer to help him redecorate. No more fire-rimmed entrances, garish pink walls or self-aggrandizing plaques: just a desk, a chair,

some subdued lighting and a memorial to crewmembers killed by sparkeater, Legislator, or Overlord.

Overlord.

When his guard was down—when he wasn't showing off or doodling or spray-painting—the name made him think of the people who had died or lost loved ones because he'd been too scared to say no to Prowl. Overlord made him think of Pipes and Rewind and Chromedome and Lockstock and Lancet, but one face—Drift's face—kept crowding out all the others. It had been here, in his office, that they'd had their last proper conversation.

"An inquiry?" Drift stood in the doorway, looking incredulous. "An *inquiry*?"

Rodimus dragged him inside and locked the door. "I had to do *something*! People were asking questions! And what do you do if you want to stall things? You launch an inquiry." He slumped into his chair. "An inquiry into something *I'm* responsible for. Oh god. Oh god, I feel sick. I've messed up big time."

"I can sort this out, Rodimus. Honestly, I can fix this."

"This is my fault, not yours. We were standing in Prowl's office, and he was trying to convince me that bringing Overlord onboard was 'right and proper', and you called me an idiot for even considering it."

"Was I that blunt?"

"I don't know why he even let you in on those discussions in the first place. It's not like he trusts you."

"I'll tell you exactly why he wanted me there: it was in case something like this happened. Need a scapegoat? Get an ex-Decepticon."

"Well it's not gonna happen. I'm taking the fall for this one. Your name doesn't have to come into it. It's taken you years to win back people's trust, and you're not throwing it all away on my behalf."

"Rodimus, if you tell the crew what you've done, then that's it. The quest's over. We'll never find the Knights."

"No, it just means someone else will take over. You, maybe? Ratchet? I dunno. Someone."

"But someone doesn't take over!" Rodimus looked up sharply. "'Doesn't'?"

"Won't."

"You said 'doesn't.' What d'you mean, 'doesn't'?"

“It’s hard to explain what I mean.” Drift unclipped his Great Sword and placed it on the desk. “You remember when I nearly died, back on Cybertron? I was within feet of Vector Sigma.”

“Yes...” said Rodimus slowly, unsure where this was going.

“When I put this sword through my spark, I saw something.”

“What, like a vision?”

“Kind of. More a sense of how things would play out. It was abstract and it was fleeting, and every time I call it to mind it becomes harder to interpret, but something is around the corner, Rodimus—and a year from now, or 50 years from now, that something will arrive, and we won’t be able to stop it unless we find the Knights. And I don’t care if you think, ‘Oh, that’s just Drift being Drift,’ because I’m convinced that you need to remain in charge. People can come and go—they can die—but you have to be here, otherwise we will fail. And so the simple solution—the only solution—is that I take the blame for this.”

“I won’t let you do this for me.”

“I’m not doing it for you. I’m doing it for everyone else.”

*

“Hey, what are you two doing in here? Are you... looting? I expected it of you, Fort Max, you light-fingered rogue, but *Rung*?!”

A grinning Swerve skipped across the room and went to vault over the bar. He caught his boot on an engex pump and fell face-first into the serving space on the other side. A second later, a solitary wheel rolled out from behind the bar, circled Rung’s leg three times, and toppled over.

“Save your innermost energon,” said Swerve, clambering to his feet. “I am unharmed!”

“You seem... reinvigorated,” said Fortress Maximus.

“Saved a life, Max, saved a life. Tailgate! Lives! On!” He threw an energon goodie into the air and almost caught it in his mouth. “Who says you can’t be a metallurgist and a bartender?”

Swerve’s grin left his face as he saw a silhouette in the doorway: head, legs, arms, briefcase.

“I’d like a word with Chatterbot in private,” said Brainstorm, fishing a barstool from the wreckage and sitting down. “You gonna do this place up, Swerve?”

“That’s the plan, yeah.”

“Good. Because people come here and they talk, and I need you to keep your ears open.”

“For what? What am I listening out for?”

“I think...” Brainstorm looked over his shoulder to check that Rung and Fortress Maximus had left. “I think someone’s tampered with the briefcase. It looks like someone’s opened it, and I want to know who.”

“Easy. Just look for the guy with no head.”

Brainstorm laughed and clapped Swerve on the shoulder, agitating an old injury and making the bartender flinch. Brainstorm continued to laugh until Swerve joined in, at which point he grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him close. “It’s not funny. Opening the briefcase when I’m not around is very far from being a sensible thing to do.” He climbed off the stool. “So... any idle chatter and you come to me. Are we clear?”

Swerve nodded—but not, Brainstorm realized, in agreement. The nod was directing his attention downwards, to the green light escaping from his chest plate. Before Swerve could say anything, Brainstorm smothered the leaking light with his briefcase and fled the room.

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Satisfied that the energon transfusion was having the intended effect and that the key points of articulation—waist, knees, elbows—were responding to his touch, Ratchet left Tailgate sleeping on the circuit slab. With the stab wounds in his chest and back patched up, the Waste Disposal Expert looked freshly forged. Sadly, that was just on the outside; before the anti-corrosives had forced it into remission, his rampaging cybercrosis had caused so much internal damage that when he’d collapsed in Tyrest’s Control Room, it had sounded like someone punching a bucket of nails.

Before administering the anti-corrosives, Ratchet had bled Tailgate’s body, opening the vents and traps designed to keep energon, oil and petrolex from escaping. Swerve had laid claim to the slops, saying he intended to run some tests. (It was nice that he was taking an interest, thought Ratchet, even if he wasn’t prepared to give up his day job.) Now, all that was left was to wait for Tailgate’s resurgent spark to build itself up until it could sustain him without the assistance of a life support machine.

Without the assistance of a life support machine. Ratchet walked into the morgue, went to open one of the body-lockers, and stiffened as he sensed someone behind him. Minimus Ambus was standing in the doorway wearing the bottom section of the Magnus Armor, his wrist-thin legs plugged into a pair of massive kneecaps.

“Hello, Ratchet,” said Minimus sheepishly, tottering into the room as if on stilts. “The armor’s easy to take off but hell to put on, especially by yourself. I wondered if you could help. I can talk you through the process, give you instructions.”

“I’m impressed you were able to sneak up on me,” said Ratchet, kneeling down to examine the point where Minimus’ right leg disappeared into the Magnus Armor. He tapped 13 hidden pressure pads in quick succession and the armor rose up and wrapped itself more tightly around Minimus’s limb.

Minimus watched a confident Ratchet do the same—13 taps—with the other leg.

“How long have you known?” he said quietly.

“About you and the armor? Ooh, quite a while now.”

“But how? The armor is filled with these attention deflectors...”

“That work for all of five seconds.” Ratchet climbed to his feet and wiped his hands. “You might as well use smoke and mirrors. And quite frankly, I’m a little insulted that you’d think I’d be fooled.”

“You never said anything...”

“Why would I say anything? ‘Hey, Ultra Magnus, I know your secret.’ Why would I say that? What would that achieve? I didn’t say anything to the others, either.”

“You knew the other Magnuses?”

“Suture, Datum, Ramp, Blockus—all the way back to the original.”

“What was he like?”

“He wasn’t like you, that’s for sure.” Minimus looked hurt. “Well, thanks for the assistance. I think I can put the rest on by myself.”

“No two Magnuses are alike,” continued Ratchet, worried that he’d said the wrong thing. “But because people assume they’re the same person, they make allowances without realizing it. I’ve known you longer than any of your predecessors, and maybe that’s why, to me—and I know this sounds strange—you’re the true Ultra Magnus.”

Minimus gave a nod of—what? Understanding? Gratitude? He wasn’t sure, but he left the medibay feeling ten times taller, and it had nothing to do with the armor on his feet.

Ratchet turned back to the body-locker, slid a key in the lock, and braced himself. The body inside was different to all the other bodies in the morgue: it was alive.

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“Anything?”

Rodimus pressed his foot gently against the lunar landscape as if testing the temperature of bath water. “No. Nothing.” He pushed down harder— with his heel, this time. “Still nothing.”

“Are you sure this is the place?” asked Getaway, who was standing on a Mobile Autobot Repair Bay that was hovering a few feet off the ground.

“Mountain range to the left,” muttered Rodimus, flicking a thumb towards the horizon. He dropped to his hands and knees and pressed his cheek against the silver surface, hoping to detect weak heat or distant movement. “Last time, this whole place lit up the moment I stepped off the M.A.R.B. Millions of sparks, from here to the horizon. This—this sea of electric blue. VOMP!”

“I’m no expert,” said Getaway, “but hot spots don’t normally blink in and out of existence. They ignite, they stay ignited.”

“True, but they’re not normally ignited by someone treading on them.” Rodimus sat on the edge of Getaway’s M.A.R.B. and scanned the resolutely un-illuminated landscape; the hot spot’s stubborn dormancy registered as yet another personal failure. “Then again, you have to harvest surface sparks quickly, otherwise they... evaporate isn’t the right word, but you know what I mean. Maybe we just missed our chance.”

Getaway jumped to the ground, gave it a quick tap (why pass up an opportunity to find out if you were a Matrix-Bearer-in-waiting?) and sat down next to Rodimus. Sensing his despondency, he gave him a playful jab—“bomp”—on the upper arm. “What now, then?”

Rodimus reached into a compartment in his waist and pulled out the remains of the Matrix. “I don’t know if this is the right thing to do,” he said, scattering the cloudy fragments over the ground, “but I feel we should do something mark the passing of Luna 1’s lost generation.”

“I hope I don’t have to arrest you for littering,” came a new voice, and Rodimus and Getaway turned to see a second M.A.R.B. heading their way.

“Arrest me?” said Rodimus. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

Fortress Maximus skidded to a mid-air stop and smiled. “The newly-appointed Enforcer of the Tyrest Accord, reporting for service.”

“Good decision, Max, good decision. Just because Tyrest lost the plot it doesn’t mean there’s not work to be done.”

“Thank you for your faith in me.”

“Happy to accept the thanks, but it was Magnus who wanted this to happen. He said his successor should...” His voiced trailed off as someone stepped out from behind Fortress Maximus.

“Red Alert?”

“Captain, I want to apologize for—”

“Stop right there. No apologies. Not on my ship.”

“But I can’t imagine the inconvenience I caused by my decision to, um, remove myself from the field of play.”

“Nonsense. You were under tremendous pressure. Okay, so you didn’t feel able to confide in me, but that says more about my failings as a leader than anything else.” He pictured Ultra Magnus listening to him and nodding sagely at his words.

“Ratchet’s brought me up to speed,” said Red Alert. “I know that some of the Circle of Light are staying behind, and that you intend for Tyrest’s body to remain here too, and I—”

“We’ve built a secure room in the medibay,” interrupted Rodimus, pointing vaguely in the direction of what had been Tyrest’s base of operations. “We’ve stabilized Tyrest but he won’t be resuscitated until I’ve spoken to High Command—if I ever get to speak to High Command—and they’ve decided what to do with him.”

“My point, Rodimus, is that I’d like to stay here.” He held up a hand to forestall Rodimus’s protests. “We all know there are pockets of rogue Decepticons out there. I can help the Circle of Light prepare for the possibility of attack. I’m already thinking that we could reprogram the... what are they called, Legislators? We could reprogram the Legislators to act as the moon’s protectors.”

“I think with you and Fort Max, Luna 1 is going to be in safe hands. Just promise to stay in touch!”

“Actually, Rodimus, that’s why we’re here. Perceptor’s been trying to reach you.”

Rodimus turned his communicator back on and nodded towards the hot spot. “Sorry, I was expecting to be busy with the...” He looked up. “What did Perceptor want?”

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“You said you wanted to contact Cybertron as soon as I got this working,” said Perceptor, gesturing to a monitor screen that took up an entire wall of the Communications Room.

Rodimus craned his neck. “That. Is. Massive.” He beckoned Getaway, Red Alert and Fortress Maximus over. “Who else wants one of these on the Lost Light?”

“I intend to replicate the comms system without the oversized monitor,” said Perceptor, taking his seat at the operating console. “But first... dialing Kimia now, captain.”

Rodimus clapped his hands. “Right! Good! Let’s surprise Bumblebee!”

“I hope he’s alright,” said Red Alert, as the screen filled with static. “Course he’s alright! I bet within 48 hours of us leaving Cybertron he’d talked the NAILs ’round, taught the ’Cons the error of their ways, and become Cybertron’s first democratically-elected postwar leader. You’ll see—any second now he’ll be waving his little cane at us, telling us about the New Golden Age...”

Getaway was the first to detect a picture amongst the static. “What’s that? Some kind of emblem? It’s not an Autobot symbol, that’s for sure.” He read the words underneath the emblem as soon as they appeared. “Welcome to the Republic of Cybertron.”

“You see?” Rodimus turned to the others. “You see? He’s brought the whole planet together. Good old Bee. Good old brilliant Bee.”

“That’s not Bumblebee,” said Fortress Maximus.

“Don’t tell me Prowl is screening his calls...” Rodimus muttered, turning back to the screen.

Starscream looked down at him and grinned. “Well, well, well. What a lovely surprise.”

POSTSCRIPT

Being entirely mechanical, Outrigger had never experienced breathlessness before, but running down half a mile of corridor and cutting across the hot spot put such a strain on his aging servos that when he crashed into Red Alert’s office it took him a moment—bent in half and clamoring at the doorframe—before he was able to speak.

“He just moved!”

Red Alert helped Outrigger to his feet. Weren’t members of the Circle of Light were supposed to be prime physical specimens? Weren’t they supposed to be high-shine, chrome-coated überbots, their bodies and minds sharper and more deadly than the Great Sword they carried on their backs?

“Sorry, Red. I’d have called you, but I know you don’t like using your communicator because you think it interferes with your—”

“Brainwaves, yes, yes. Forget that. Who just moved?”

“Tyrest!”

“I’m not saying I don’t believe you,” said Red Alert as they approached Luna 1’s medibay a few minutes later. “But unless someone repairs him properly, Tyrest’s going to be paralyzed forever. Maybe you saw the shadows move?”

“There are no shadows in the medibay,” said Outrigger, pointing at the locked room in the corner. “Take a look. Tell me I’m seeing things.”

Red Alert took a step closer, suddenly wary. “How did he move, exactly? Did he twitch? Was it a spasm?”

“No, nothing like that. It was very... considered.”

Red Alert checked the door—still locked—and then put his eye against the peephole.

“It was his fingers,” continued Outrigger. “The fingers on his right hand. It looked he was going to clench his fist.”

“Get Fortress Maximus,” said Red Alert, face still pressed against the door.

“Why? What should I tell him?”

“Tell him Tyrest has gone.”