

Rung stepped out of the elevator 20 floors earlier than intended, his nascent claustrophobia getting the better of him. It was quiet, and that didn't help either. It was never quiet aboard the Lost Light. Not this quiet. Not the kind of quiet that forced you to listen to your inner workings—to the sound your body made as it struggled, hour after hour, to keep you upright and alive.

Rung, who had been around for a long time, knew his somatic soundtrack better than most. He knew, for example, that if he was to direct his audio sensors fully inwards he'd hear a muffled cacophany of moving parts: a thousand keys turning in a thousand locks. He often wondered why more Cybertronians didn't collapse in awe at the miracle that was their body. Surely if you ever stopped and stood and studied yourself—the way you worked—the way all those little pieces inside you lunged and spun and spinnied—you'd fall to your knees, humbled by the sheer audacity of mechanical life

He'd always remained true to his original design, eyebrows and all. Mode fidelity, they called it. Not for him the redesign or the remould—he looked today as he had always looked. Perhaps that was why everyone seemed to look past him; why he so consistently failed to register: he was so unchanging he'd become part of the landscape.

While he had stayed the same, his friends had grown in size. In a post-Functionist society where your body was your primary weapon, size was everthing—at least until you become so energonhungry that you could barely make it from one mode to the next without seizing up. But until that critical threshold was crossed—and some people reached it sooner than others—every upgrade was an exercise in accretion and accession and the annexing of surrounding space.

Back on Kimia he'd written a monograph on the relationship between war and body size and then promptly filed it away with all the others, never to be circulated. His time as a psychiatrist of note was long gone; he knew that. Rival practitioners such as Froid may've been long dead, but the damage they'd inflicted on his reputation was irreparable.

The thought made him quicken his pace, as if he was afraid that the past would catch up with him. The gears in his legs screeched in protest, which only made him more anxious. Like all Cybertronians of a certain age, his visits to the medibay were triggered not by an uncomfortable sensation, but by an unfamiliar sound—cogs refusing to mesh, an intransigent axle, a screw too slow on the turn. He knew, however, that his anxiety was misplaced. After six weeks in the medibay—six weeks recovering from that short, sharp shot to the head—he was in better shape than ever.

He remembered very little about the moments leading up to his hospitalization, and the few details that he could recall were thin and brittle and prone to fragmentation: his arm around Fortress Maximus; Overlord's preternaturally expressive lips; a dash of light and a wink of shattered glass.

Six weeks later, when he'd woken up on the circuit slab and opened his new eyes for the first time, he'd not recognized the people standing around his circuit slab; or rather, he'd not recognized them as people. As far as he was concerned, Skids, Swerve, and Whirl were indistinguishable from the rest of the medibay (a common side-effect of brain injury). With

First Aid's patient tuition he was eventually able to separate people from their surroundings—that was the first breakthrough; the second was learning to move again, and for that he had Swerve to thank.

He'd been shown footage of the metallurgist perched on a barstool by his circuit slab, his legs at right angles to his body, and talking to him, nonstop, for 147 hours. He couldn't remember a single word of what was said (apparently it was mostly about Blurr), but Swerve's incessant talking had elicited a response. During the 147th hour, a twitch in his right hand had blossomed into a loose and languid gesture: slowly, tentatively, Rung had unfurled his forefinger and placed it delicately over his lips.

Not long after that, he'd been transferred to a sedentary circuit slab—Hound called them "wheelchairs"—and treated to a series of stories emceed by Rewind. Again, he knew this only in retrospect: at the time, he was buried too deep in the landslide of his own thoughts to make sense of what was going outside the rubble. In fact, aside from the smile on Skids' face when he'd corrected the persistent mispronunciation of his name, his one abiding memory of those lost days, strangely enough, was of the neat rows of bottled engex lined up behind Swerve's bar.

After the recent battle on Temptoria, which he'd been forced to sit out (something for which he was secretly grateful), he'd been invited to help Brainstorm make the holomatter avatars more energy-efficient. This had proved impossible, even for Brainstorm (an Autobot who insisted that Perceptor had once offered him a billion shanix for his brain), so they settled on creating "superintuitive avatars" instead. A literal projection of the Cybertronian psyche, SIAs could be deployed over longer distances than their precursors—and the hair looked more convincing.

They'd tested the new SIAs during the recent trip to Hedonia. And it had been in a badly lit Hedonian gift shop that Rung had realized that he'd done something bad. No, something awful. He'd done to someone what everyone else always did to him: he'd forgotten about them.

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Tap. Tap. Tap.

"Why are we wasting our time in a gift shop," said Tailgate, "when we could be wasting our time not in a gift shop?"

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Skids reached for another hat and frowned. "How can someone who spent six million years in a cave complain of being bored? Hm?" He found his face in the mirror and adjusted the hat. "Anyway, no-one's forcing you to browse. Forced browsing is not the Autobot way. Wait outside." "I'm not going outside by myself—Nutjob's out there."

"So?"

“So he knows I’m easily led. He’ll talk me into assassinating Rodimus or swapping my Transformation Cog for a hand grenade or something. And to be honest, I’m starting to think—and don’t you dare tell him this—but I’m starting to think he’s not stable.”

They looked down the aisle, between the shelves filled with souvenirs for the indiscriminate pleasure-seeker (everything from hypersensitive bodysuits to mouth food to elixirs laced with dopamine) and saw Whirl gently banging his head against the glass.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“We should count ourselves lucky,” said Rewind, as he and Rung leaned in to see what the others were looking at. “When he’s bored he tends to shoot someone. He’s not allowed in museums because people end up dead.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Rung shook his head sadly. “Poor thing. He’s trying to relieve the pressure on the part of his brain that he blames for his unpredictable behavior.” “I’m pretty sure Chromedome would tell you it doesn’t work like that,” said Rewind. “I’m sure he would. But if Whirl wants to think it works like that, we should let him.” Skids jabbed Rung playfully on the shoulder. “You alright, Eyebrows?” “Not really, no. I feel guilty about leaving Swerve to handle Ultra Magnus. Do you think he’ll be able to calm him down?” “Calm him down?” Rewind muttered, fiddling with his head-mounted videocamera. “You think we’re really in trouble?” “Well, let’s see,” said Skids, folding his arms. “We allowed Whirl to intoxicate to the point of temporary shutdown the galaxy’s least forgiving law enforcer...Of course we’re in trouble! We’re in a rich tapestry of trouble! We’re in shades of trouble so subtle and multifaceted that you probably have to take several steps back to fully appreciate the breadth and scale of the trouble we’re in.”

Tailgate snapped his fingers. “Let’s run away. Let’s join the Cosmic Carnival and get into scrapes.”

“If Magnus is going to arrest us and put all our sparks in the naughty jar, then maybe we should get out and about,” said Rewind, tapping the chronometer on his wrist. “We’ve only got half an hour before the shuttle leaves. Half an hour to uncover the dark secret at the heart of Hedonia...”

“Dark secret?” said Skids approvingly. “Tell me more.”

“I’m just guessing,” admitted Rewind, “but— look outside. The smiling tourists, the friendly locals, the overwhelming sense of contentment and bonhomie. There’s always a dark and horrific secret in places like this.”

Rung raised a perfectly rectangular eyebrow. “You’re saying the more outwardly peaceable and well-adjusted a society, the greater the likelihood—”

“Of it having a sinister underbelly. Yup.”

Skids shook his head. “Even Lovetopia, off Regel VII?”

“Lovetopia? Please. The Lovetopian elite were selling the lower classes to the Macerators. The ‘magic ingredient’ in every pint of Yum Yum juice? An impoverished family of six.”

“Cuddlex, in the Benevolon Sector?”

“A wonderful place for a vacation—if you ignore the fact that they breed haemoslaves to fight in service to the Antigod. And don’t even get me started on the living hell that is Giggleepolis.”

“Hold on everyone,” said Tailgate, balancing a shelf to get a better view of the street outside. “Where’s Whirl gone?”

“Beats me,” said Skids. “But look who’s just turned up.”

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Cyclonus entered the shop and acknowledged Tailgate with a nod so subtle it could have been a trick of the light. He proceeded to stalk the aisles, picking things up, turning them over, frowning at them, and putting them down again.

“He can’t afford anything,” concluded Skids.

“No, no, he’s loaded,” said Tailgate. “He’s, like, a multi-billionaire or something. Tetrahexian real estate. No, he just thinks possessions are a weakness. Actually, he thinks everything’s a weakness. I like him, but he’s phenomenally stern.”

“He’s humming,” whispered Rung, picking up a model spaceship rather than glance in Cyclonus’ direction.

“It must be the browsing,” said Skids. “It pacifies him. Maybe that’s where we’ve been going wrong all these years: rather than trying to defeat the Decepticons using force, we should’ve taken them shopping.”

“Firstly, he’s not a Decepticon,” said Tailgate. “And secondly, why are you obsessed with browsing?”

Rung smiled and left them to it, walking to the pay-port with the spaceship in his hand. He was stopped in his tracks by a display rack full of memory sticks, each one stamped with a legend that invited customers to *Relive the Hedonian Experience*.

“No need to buy one of those,” said Rewind, steering Rung away from the rack. “I’m making my own recording.” He bent back his right hand, ejected a memory stick from his wrist, and caught it. “See?”

“It’s not that. I’ve just remembered something. Someone. I’ve just remembered someone.”

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Rung turned another corner and moved closer to the heart of the ship. He thought he'd be able to hear the dry whine of the quantum engines by now, but no, the silence persisted: epic, devastating, all-encompassing. Until:

"You may have noticed that I'm not much of a conversationist," said Ultra Magnus, turning to look at him for the first time since they'd set off from Rung's office 20 minutes earlier.

"No, no, don't apologize," said Rung quickly, straining to keep up with his companion. "But to be honest, I'm not sure you need to accompany me to Rodimus' quarters."

"Under normal circumstances, I'd agree. But Rodimus may not be in the best of moods."

"Oh. Really? Why's that?"

"Blaster's plan to use the subspace network as a means of communicating with Cybertron has come to nought, we've lost our only lead in terms of locating the Circle of Light, and our quest to find the Knights of Cybertron has all but ground to a halt. In addition, Rodimus is struggling to come to terms with the fact that the aspects of his personality that give him an edge in the field— principally his capacity for quick, decisive action— work against him in a postwar environment in that they encourage him to take unnecessary risks whenever the opportunity arises."

"That was remarkably... succinct. You really are very deliberate with your choice of language, aren't you?"

"I'm not one for padding, if that's what you mean. As far as I'm concerned, each deviation from the point amounts to a minor failure of nerve."

"Fascinating. To you, speech is like a vehicle for conveying information, and you like to get from A to B using as direct a route as possible."

"I beg your pardon? 'Vehicle'...?"

"I didn't literally mean a vehicle... It was a simile."

Ultra Magnus narrowed his optics. "I've spent years weaning myself off figurative language. It clouds the facts. I occasionally resort to a simile if the situation absolutely demands it, but I remain intensely distrustful of extended metaphors."

Rung stared at him, searching for traces of irony. "That follow-up appointment," he said at length. "I'd really encourage you to make it. Or just turn up—my door is always open."

"Always? I'm sorry, but your office contains highly sensitive information about members of the crew. As Director of Security I must insist that you lock your door at all times."

"No, again, I don't mean that I literally left the— ah. You're joking." Rung paused, considered his options, and decided he should laugh, but the moment was lost.

“People keep telling me to ‘lighten up,’” continued Ultra Magnus, “but whenever I try to make a joke it falls flat.” He scaled a flight of stairs in a single stride and waited for Rung to catch up. “Rodimus says it’s my delivery. He says—what does he say? He says I sound like someone phoning in a bomb threat.”

“I think you just need to find the kind of humor that works for you. And I think that deep down you actually *like* talking to people.”

Magnus stopped, raised himself to his full height, and held up his forefinger to signal the impending arrival of another gag.

“If Primus had intended his children to make light conversation he’d have equipped us all with vocal synthesizers.” Pause. “Sorry—with more energy-efficient vocal synthesizers. That’s right: he’d have equipped us all with more *energy-efficient* vocal synthesizers.”

A silence deeper and truer than any Rung had ever known descended upon them both. Minutes stretched into hours. Empires rose and fell. Molecular clouds formed stars that collapsed and went supernova. The universe succumbed to its inevitable heatdeath.

“I should have said energy-efficient vocal synthesizers,” said Ultra Magnus quietly, in a manner reminiscent of a pathologist estimating the time of death.

Rung was so embarrassed for his crewmate, and so desperate to change the subject, that he fleetingly considered confessing to a Category A crime. In the end, however, a more natural distraction presented itself.

“What’s this?” he said, examining a gold rectangle on the wall outside Rodimus’ quarters. “The captain of the Lost Light, Rodimus of Nyon, resided here for the duration of his awesome quest to find the Knights of Cybertron.” He straightened up and scratched an eyebrow. “A plaque? Isn’t that a tad... premature? Not to mention—well, one doesn’t have to be a psychiatrist to detect a certain degree of...” He trailed off as he remembered that he was standing next to Rodimus’ second-in-command. “I suppose ‘arrogance’ is too strong a word to use.”

“No comment,” said Ultra Magnus, directing Rung through a doorway surrounded by stencilled flames that recalled the pattern on Rodimus’s chest.

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Rodimus sat cross-legged on his desk holding a laser scalpel that he was using to make patterns on its surface. “Rung!” he cried, looking up and flashing the smile that allowed him to get away with pretty much anything. “Take a seat!” He shuffled to the edge of the desk. “You’re a psychotherapist, right? What’s *wrong* with people? Why am I the only normal one around here?”

Rung realized that Rodimus wasn’t joking, but the smile stayed on his face, too embarrassed to move.

“Everyone’s miserable,” Rodimus continued, “and I can’t be doing with it. Yes, we’ve had some ‘setbacks,’ but come on! It’s got to be better than Cybertron, right?” He looked over at Ultra Magnus, who was in the corner of the room, tidying the furniture. “I said it’s got to be better than Cybertron, right?”

“Speaking as someone whose been strangled, attacked by a technoparasite, and taken hostage— and shot in the head—I’m *still* glad I signed up to this quest,” said Rung, sincerely. “And I’m certain everyone else feels the same. Everyone who’s, um, still alive.”

“Thank you, Rung. That’s good to hear. Thank you for coming.” Rodimus clicked the laser scalpel back on and resumed his doodling.

“Er...” Rung looked helplessly at Ultra Magnus, who put down a table and synthesized a cough.

In the right hands, a cough could be a weapon: properly deployed, it could silence an argument or empty a room. But Ultra Magnus liked to take things to extremes, and in his supersized hands a cough carried the force of a full-scale nuclear assault. An Ultra Magnus cough was loud enough—intimidating enough—to make an army of Decepticons turn and run. Only the Duly Appointed Enforcer of the Tyrest Accord could clear a battlefield by clearing his throat.

Rodimus jumped, snapping his scalpel in two.

“Rung asked to see you,” said Magnus patiently. “Not the other way round.”

“Oh. Sorry. Sorry, Rung. What did you want to see me about? It’s not about visiting Fortress Maximus in the brig, is it? Because I think that’s a comically bad idea.”

“It’s about Red Alert, sir.”

The atmosphere in the room changed. Rodimus climbed off his desk and sat down behind it. “Magnus?” he said, without taking his eyes off Rung. “Make sure we’re not disturbed.”

Ultra Magnus left the room, stopping only to straighten a chair. The door closed behind him.

“You heard about the accident,” Rodimus said.

“While I was on shore leave, yes. I heard there was an explosion—something to do with the engine rooms. I’ve heard various accounts.”

“Right,” said Rodimus slowly, pretending to be more interested in the broken scalpel.

“Before my own accident, Red Alert paid me a visit. Sir, what I’m about to tell you—you know I’d never divulge confidential patient information unless lives depended on it. You understand that, don’t you?”

“What makes you think lives are at stake?”

“Red told me he’d heard a voice—a voice from below decks. From underneath the ship itself. He thought something was going on. And not long after that... he had his accident.”

Rodimus leaned forward conspiratorially. “The thing you have to remember about Red Alert,” he whispered, “and I’m choosing my words carefully because mental illness is a sensitive subject, and because I respect what you do... but the thing you have to remember about Red Alert is that he’s as mad as a bag of scraplets.”

“He’s *what*?”

“I mean I like him—I like him a lot. And I feel bad that he’s out of commission. But...”

Rung snatched the two halves of the scalpel and fixed them back together with an impatient twist of his wrist. “I heard it as well,” he said firmly. “The voice.” He fixed Rodimus with a stare. “What do you think of *my* mental health?”

“You heard it too?”

“Red recorded it. Put it on a data slug. He played it to me.”

Rodimus held up his hands in surrender. “Okay. I’ll look into it. First I’ve got to see Brainstorm about the proton missile launchers, and then—”

“I didn’t know we had any proton missile launchers.”

“Yeah, we bought from the Hedonians—turns out they’re the most well-connected arms dealers in the galaxy. Can you believe it?” Rodimus smiled and shook his head at the thought. “And then I promised Perceptor I’d let him tell me about some scientific discovery or something. There are only so many times you can do a Prime before someone calls you out.”

“Do a Prime...?”

“When Optimus wanted to get out of doing something he’d say he’d had a Matrix-induced vision and he had to work out what it meant.”

Rung looked at him skeptically. “And after Perceptor?”

“After that, as I say, I’ll look into it. If there’s something going on—and it sounds like there might be—I’ll get to the bottom of it.”

Rodimus ushered Rung into the corridor and raced off, leaving a scribble of tyre marks in his wake.

“How did it go?” asked Magnus, adjusting the plaque so that it was at right angles to the door.



“Did you hear any of that?”

“No. If Primus had intended for his children to eavesdrop, he’d have—”

Rung laughed. “Actually, I could do with a chat.”

“A chat?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll do all the talking. I just need someone to listen to me.”

INTERLUDE ENDS