A Starscream-Shaped Blind Spot

Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/1213.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warnings:	Ableism, Fantasy Oppression / Bigotry
Category:	General (non relationship-focused)
Fandom:	Transformers - All Media Types
Relationships:	Starscream & Megatron (Transformers), Starscream & Skywarp (Transformers), Starscream & Original Character(s)
Character:	Starscream (Transformers)
Additional Tags:	Abuse, Neurodivergent Starscream (Transformers), Canon Blending, Self-Harm
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Still Alive
Stats:	Published: 2024-12-31 Completed: 2025-07-12 Words: 90,294 Chapters: 23/23

A Starscream-Shaped Blind Spot

by rnn

Summary

Starscream is a liar. A traitor. Someone to be ignored and ridiculed. Those are the rules.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The world was full of rules. Those rules interacted, creating systems. Each system was intricate, held up by countless rules both said and unsaid. At the far end of the room sat the center point of many unsaid rules, lounging on his throne.

The plans laid before them were nonsensical.

"This arrangement is foolish," Starscream said. "Do you know nothing of flight formations, Megatron?"

Megatron shifted in his seat. "Enlighten me, Starscream."

"Well—"

Starscream launched into an explanation, dismantling the plan thoroughly. At least, he began to. He wasn't anywhere close to finished when something gave him pause.

A slight shift of weight. A small curve to his lips. A minuscule squint of his bright, burning optics.

Megatron pounced on the silence. "Thank you, Starscream."

Starscream preened internally despite the tone setting him on edge.

"We will continue as planned."

"What?" Starscream squawked.

"Do you need your auditory receptors repaired?"

"No, Lord Megatron, but—"

"Then be quiet."

☆☆☆

It wasn't just once, nor was it merely a couple of times. It took Starscream too long to realize it was a concerted effort. One of the new unspoken rules, it seemed, was not to listen to Starscream.

But he could make them listen.

"That attack may have succeeded," Starscream said. "If it weren't for your shoddy planning skills."

The hulking brute ahead of him turned, eyes burning brightly. "How so?"

Starscream explained, yet again. And again, Megatron stared.

And kept staring.

"What?" Starscream said. "Too stunned by—"

"You should talk less. Your voice is grating."

Megatron turned away. The other Decepticons—a crowd which Starscream had ignored up until now—watched silently.

This was fine. He'd just have to try harder.

☆☆☆

"Lord Megatron, this plan is ridiculous! What is the point of—"

☆☆☆

"Lord Megatron, you can't possibly—"

☆☆☆

"Lord Megatron, there's no—"

☆☆☆

"Lord Megatron—"

☆☆☆

"Megatron—"

☆☆☆

They wanted to play that game? Then, fine. Starscream could manage that, though the fists at his sides said otherwise. He paced his room, growling to himself. That oaf wouldn't know what was coming, and he surely wouldn't dare to do this again!

His comms pinged. A summon to the command room. He ignored it. If Megatron wanted to ignore his input, he would get no input at all. Then, that blind fool would see how valuable he was!

He paced the room again. Another ping. He paced more. Another ping. How many pings were they going to send? With a roll of his eyes, Starscream pulled out a datapad and began reading. If they were going to keep sending them, he needed something to ignore them with.

The datapad held a story—a romance oozing stupidity narrated with the worst purple prose imaginable. If it weren't for the sheer horridness of it, Starscream would've put it back. It was a crash in narrative form, and his morbid curiosity got the better of him.

How had it gotten into his room, anyway? Perhaps Thundercracker or some other soft-spark had accidentally mixed their belongings with his, and soon he'd find something crucial missing. Or maybe someone just wanted to play a prank on him. Though it wouldn't be ideal, tracking down his swapped datapad would certainly be something to do other than asserting himself to the rest of command.

A shadow fell over the datapad. Starscream paused in the middle of a passage detailing the variety of decals the story's love interest had. How hadn't he noticed the door open?

"Starscream."

Megatron's voice held a calm, simmering fury.

Starscream looked up. "Yes, Lord Megatron?"

"Why aren't you at the command center?"

Starscream hummed, glancing between the datapad and Megatron. "Oh, that's what that was about? I didn't realize I'd been pinged."

Megatron scowled.

"Can't you give me the notes? I'm quite busy."

Megatron stepped closer, lips curled into a snarl. "The notes?"

Perfect, perfect—a little irritation for all the annoyance the brute had caused, and all the plans gone to slag because he wouldn't take advice if it came from Starscream. But he could push it further!

"Well, yes," Starscream said. "You see, I've got plenty to do, and since you never take my brilliant advice, I figured attending meetings wasn't worth the time."

Megatron closed the gap between them, leaning over Starscream.

"And what are you so busy with?"

"Oh, just—"

The datapad was taken from Starscream's hands with a forceful swipe.

"Hey!"

It dangled, pinched between two of Megatron's fingers. Megatron glared at him. Starscream stood.

"Give that back!" He hissed, reaching for it.

Megatron pulled the datapad back and threw it behind him. It crashed into the other datapads on the shelf, sending them to the floor. No, no—he couldn't just—not like—

Something snapped in the back of Starscream's processor. With a roar, he leaped at Megatron. The terrible brute caught him with ease and threw him against the wall. Reeling from the impact, Starscream scrambled upward, the split second it took to rise all the time Megatron needed to reach him again.

Starscream leaped with another yell, but it caught as he was slammed into the wall again. He clawed at his neck, attempting to pry the giant hand pinning it off.

"Let me go!" He spat. "Let me go! I'll tear you apart!"

Megatron stared at him. Was in it in disbelief? Disappointment? Starscream couldn't tell. What did the fragger expect? That he'd just let him desecrate his property like that? Destroy his treasured possessions with his carelessness?

Megatron stared. Starscream squirmed and hissed and spat and clawed.

Megatron stared. Starscream squirmed and hissed and spat.

Megatron stared. Starscream squirmed and hissed.

Megatron stared. Starscream—

His hands fell at his sides. Megatron's grip loosened. The brute leaned closer.

"You will go to that meeting," Megatron said. "And every meeting after it. You will come when you are summoned or we will have this conversation again."

A new rule, or perhaps an amended one: Starscream's thoughts didn't matter as long as Megatron had any say.

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"You can't place them that close together!" Starscream said with a huff. "At that point, you might as well just consider them a single unit."

If Starscream didn't know any better, he would assume Megatron did this on purpose to antagonize him. But Megatron was just a fool.

Megatron glared at him. "And where would you place them?"

Starscream pointed at two spots on the map. "There and there. That way, if the first doesn't succeed, the other will be close enough to clean up the mess, but not so close that they're part

of it."

Megatron grunted. He looked between Starscream and the map, then leaned back in his seat.

"I prefer them closer. This plan is final."

Starscream let a frustrated groan escape him, stomping a pede on the floor. "If you won't listen to me, then why do you bother to summon me?"

Megatron raised his brows. "You are a valuable member of command, Starscream. If our air commander doesn't know what we're planning, how are we supposed to get anything done?"

"Well—" Starscream slammed his hands on the table. "Yes! I am valuable. That's why you should listen to me!"

"I do listen to you."

"Then why don't you—" Starscream slammed a hand against the table again. "You never take my advice!"

"Have you considered that it's not worth taking?"

Starscream froze, hands gripping the edge of the table.

"Not worth—what?"

He scowled.

"My advice is always worth taking!"

Megatron sighed. "When you stop acting like a petulant newly forged mech, maybe it will be."

"You—!" Starscream screeched, launching himself across the table.

Megatron caught him with a single hand and threw him back across the table. Tangled in the seats as he fell, Starscream bit back a pained yelp. Already, Megatron was upon him again, ripping him from the pile of seats by the wrist. Starscream kicked at him, activating his thrusters, but Megatron just stared.

"Let go of me!" Starscream yelled.

Megatron lifted Starscream's wrist in the air, forcing him closer to the other mech. Unbalanced by his thrusters, Starscream deactivated them.

"This is how the Air Commander of the Decepticons takes criticism?" Megatron said. "I'm disappointed, Starscream."

"Let go."

Megatron sighed and tossed him to the ground. Starscream wasted no time scrambling to his pedes. The world faded back into focus, embarrassment flooding through Starscream as the rest of command stared at him from the edges of the room. How did he forget they were there?

"This meeting is over," Megatron said to the group. He turned his head to Starscream, optics burning as the pedesteps of the rest of command grew softer. "Behave yourself next time. I don't want this happening again."

Megatron stepped past Starscream before he could even think of a response.

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Time passed. Mecha were recruited. Battles were won and lost. Megatron was Megatron.

After yet another embarrassing altercation, a shy hand was offered to Starscream. He squinted at the mech on the end of it, eventually recognizing the Seeker in front of him. Pointedly glaring at the hand, he rose to his pedes. Thundercracker followed him, pedes clinking against the floor. The other mech slowly moved to his side.

"You need to stop antagonizing him," Thundercracker said quietly, nearly under his breath—no doubt so the others in the hall couldn't hear.

"*He's* antagonizing *me*!" Starscream hissed.

"Then don't fall for it."

Of course *Thundercracker*, of all mecha, would say that. How he managed to function in battle when he was so unconfrontational outside of it was a mystery.

"But really," Thundercracker said. "All any of us hear is you losing it on him. Are you really sure you're not just blowing something out of proportion?"

Starscream paused, tapping a pede against the floor. Thundercracker took a step back.

"Yes, I'm sure!" Starscream spat, forcing his face close to Thundercracker's. "I deal with his slag all day. Don't try to make me put up with yours."

Thundercracker raised his hands in surrender. Starscream grumbled and turned away. They may be wingmates, but Starscream had limits—especially when that massive oaf was already throwing him around on a regular basis. Though…

Starscream was the first one to attack, wasn't he? Megatron's voice was sharp, but he never yelled until Starscream started to. Megatron, to Starscream's knowledge, never handled other mecha in the way he handled Starscream. Was it really just him?

The air around the two mecha grew charged. It was displaced as Skywarp appeared, sending a quiet noise through the area. She stared at Thundercracker and Starscream for a moment before gathering herself. She strode between them with a smile on her face.

"Hey, mecha," She said, leaning toward Thundercracker, then Starscream. "Heard some stuff when I got back from my flight. What'd you cause a disruption for this time, Screamer?"

"Another stupid plan of Megatron's, like always," Starscream said.

Skywarp's optics roamed over his frame. He pretended to ignore it. When she was satisfied with whatever assessment she was conducting, she slung an arm around Starscream's shoulders and patted him on the back. He grit his dentae at the contact.

"'Course!" Skywarp said. "Wish I could see you tell that old jerk off sometime. It's a shame they won't let us join you during meetings."

Thundercracker glared at Skywarp. She didn't even glance at him. Starscream laughed.

"Welp," Skywarp said, stretching her arms. One of her joints clicked, and Starscream made a mental note to force her to get that checked. "We should head back to our room. Gotta get ready for Megatron's terrible plans."

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As Starscream paced in front of his Seekers, explaining the battle plan, the echo of an opening door silenced him. The room grew heavy with Megatron's footsteps.

"Starscream!"

"Yes, Lord Megatron?"

Megatron's brows were furrowed, a scowl on his face. "There's been a change of plans. Soundwave's cassettes have learned of something much more valuable than the mine. I want you to retrieve it."

Of course, of course! Why wouldn't Megatron change the mission at the last possible moment? It wasn't as if they'd spent so much time and effort preparing for this!

"Just me?"

"Just you," Megatron said. "If we send a larger party, the Autobots will be drawn to it."

Starscream fought back a sigh and flexed his fingers. "And what is this oh-so-important item I'm searching for?"

Megatron's optics burned. "An asteroid. It has metals not typically found on this planet, which will be invaluable for Shockwave's projects."

Starscream turned back to his Seekers.

"Thundercracker."

The mentioned mech flinched.

"Lead the force while I search for this asteroid."

Thundercracker nodded.

The matter was settled. The Seekers took off in one direction while Starscream set off in the other. The coordinates, while a decent distance away, were much quicker to reach while flying. It wasn't odd for Megatron to send a Seeker to accomplish this task, but to send Starscream specifically was strange. Wouldn't the enemy notice he wasn't present during the attack?

Starscream landed in front of the asteroid and kicked at the dirt. The asteroid itself was visually unremarkable and barely fit in his palm. He didn't doubt its importance, but the irritation at the back of his processor still nagged at him. Was it really so necessary to retrieve this right now?

He paced around the crater, absentmindedly running his fingers across the uneven surface of the asteroid. If he returned to find his Seekers in shambles, it would be on Megatron's helm. Thundercracker could handle leading a mission, but Thundercracker wasn't him! He was supposed to be the one out there!

Pain exploded in the back of Starscream's helm, his optics fuzzing and glitching. When his vision cleared, he was cockpit-first on the ground, the asteroid just out of reach. As he crawled closer to it, it was snatched away.

Starscream threw himself to his pedes, aiming his weapons at his attacker. They rolled out of the way, so with a frustrated hiss, Starscream tackled them. In a struggle much less graceful than he'd ever admit that may have involved throwing leaf litter into his enemy's optics, Starscream managed to recapture the asteroid. To avoid losing it again, Starscream immediately launched himself into the air.

His attacker disappeared behind him, and Starscream dared to smirk. As a flier, he was much faster than any grounder. There was no possible way the Autobot could catch up!

A boom made his audials ring. The world blurred around him as he was sent spinning. His body grew cold, weighed down by a strange force. As his wings scraped painfully across the ground, the situation revealed itself to him: that slagging Autobot had planted a bomb on his wing!

He dragged himself out of the water, the world was still blurry. The heaviness slowly faded from his joints as the water drained from them, forming tiny streams on the rocks below. His hands were empty, and that seemed important, but he couldn't remember why.

He rubbed at his optics, attempting to clear them. They remained blurry, the world swimming around him. Bracing himself, he stood, then shot into the air and transformed. Immediately, he remembered one of his wings was damaged. He crashed to the ground a short distance away from where he started.

Why did he do that?

Starscream tapped his fingers against the ground and put the facts together. He was injured and his hands were empty. Whatever he was meant to be doing, he couldn't do it anymore. He also couldn't return to base without help. So, with a sigh, he pinged Skywarp. She responded immediately.

[Screamer! How's it going?]

The ping was easy, but replying made his helm hurt. He needed to… what did he need to say…

[Encountered an Autobot. Wing is damaged. Don't know what else. Can't travel. Tried. Need pickup.]

[Send me your coordinates. I'll be there.]

Starscream sent her the coordinates, fighting a whine as his helm throbbed. The air grew charged and soon, a servo was on his shoulder. Skywarp's form was fuzzy, but he recognized her colors immediately.

Her other hand drifted to the back of his helm. Starscream cringed away. She made a displeased click.

"That's not great," she muttered. "Are you being followed?"

"Don't know. They haven't gotten here yet."

Skywarp sighed and pulled him to her chest. "C'mere. This is gonna suck for you."

The world swirled around him, pain hammering into his helm. He attempted to curl into himself, but Skywarp's hands held him back. When he pushed harder, she wrenched him apart.

"Stop it," she whispered. "I know you'll throw a fit later if I don't let you walk yourself in there."

Why was everything so bright? And why wasn't Skywarp letting him hide? He just wanted to hide. He buried himself in her chest. She jolted at the contact, then placed a hand on his shoulder. The other drifted to his wing, stroking it.

"Come on," she muttered. "Come on…"

The stroking, though it didn't change in speed or strength, quickly became overwhelming. Starscream wanted to pull his wing away, but it wouldn't move.

The door slid open. A mech entered and settled beside them.

"Oh, Star," Thundercracker said quietly.

"He's having another one of… those episodes," Skywarp said quietly.

Right. That's what they called this. A shameful little secret that the three of them kept.

Thundercracker hummed, a note of concern in his voice. "Megatron will want a mission report. And…. he should really see a medic."

Skywarp's hand against his wings was unbearable. Starscream still couldn't pull away. He whined and Skywarp withdrew.

"Can't that wait until after we recharge?"

Thundercracker clicked nervously. "It'll have to."

Skywarp nudged Starscream. He still couldn't move, so he whined again. Embarrassment flooded the back of his processor, kept at bay by the pain and numbness. Skywarp pulled him up.

"C'mon, Screamer."

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Starscream's helm hurt. He cringed as the light hit his optics. Why was everything still so bright?

As Thundercracker and Skywarp stirred beside him, Starscream froze. The mission! He hadn't reported to Megatron, and he hadn't recovered the asteroid! And…

Starscream threw himself off of the berth and stomped across the room. Behind him, Thundercracker and Skywarp scrambled off the berth. He didn't wait for them as he entered the hall, but they managed to catch up.

"Woah," Skywarp said. "Where are you going?"

"Megatron," Starscream spat.

"Are you sure the report can't wait until after you visit the medbay?" Thundercracker asked.

"Yes."

The command center was closer than Starscream remembered. Or maybe he had just lost track of time. Megatron stared at him from atop his throne.

"Starscream," Megatron said. "I see you did not retrieve the asteroid."

"I was ambushed."

Megatron leaned forward. "I can tell."

Starscream fanned out his wings to make himself larger, hiding a wince when his damaged wing pulsed with pain.

"Go back out and find it."

Starscream stamped a pede against the ground. "What?"

Megatron stared.

"Are you not capable of such a simple task?"

"I'm perfectly capable!" Starscream said, stamping his pede again. "I just don't understand why you need this rock retrieved so urgently!"

Megatron stepped off his throne. "If you're perfectly capable, then I don't see why this is such an issue."

"Because *I* don't see the point! Are you even listening?"

"Retrieve the asteroid, Starscream."

Starscream tensed and untensed his fingers. "No. Get someone else."

Megatron stepped closer, his optics burning into Starscream's. "You should fix your own mistake."

"No," Starscream said.

Megatron leaned toward Starscream, nearly nose to nose. "You will—"

Before he could rethink it, Starscream sent a fist toward Megatron's face. Megatron caught it immediately, wrenching the Seeker's body forward, which only increased the ache in his helm. The brute's giant fingers sank into his injured wing, its metal creaking under the pressure.

"Stop!" Starscream hissed, pedes flailing. "Stop!"

Megatron glared at Starscream. "You will retrieve that asteroid immediately."

Starscream's protests were cut off as Megatron's grip tightened.

A new rule: Don't fail Megatron.

"Okay," Starscream said. "I will."

Megatron released him. Starscream scrambled out the door, forgetting that Thundercracker and Skywarp were there until they were already by his side. Embarrassment flooded his processor. They had seen everything!

"That fragger," Starscream growled.

"You *did* try to hit him first," Thundercracker said quietly.

Starscream glared at him, but found he couldn't hold it. He turned his gaze to the floor.

"Did you enjoy the show, Skywarp?" Starscream muttered.

"We're coming with you," Skywarp said.

Both Thundercracker and Starscream stared at her.

"I'm serious. If the old jerk wants that rock so badly, we should go get it together."

Starscream untensed plating he didn't know he had tensed. "Alright."

☆☆☆

The trip to the lake he lost the asteroid in was quicker than the one to its original site. The asteroid was easy to find once he looked, leading him to question how he'd even returned without it in the first place. Its presentation was also uneventful, since Starscream successfully resisted the urge to punch Megatron in the optic that time.

As he turned down the hall to head back to his room, Thundercracker put a hand on his shoulder. Starscream glared at him.

"You're overdue for a trip to the medbay," Thundercracker said.

Starscream sighed and rolled his eyes. They walked to the medbay. As they entered, Knock Out glanced at them.

"Oh, you," Knock Out said. "Sit down."

Starscream took his place on one of the examination berths. Knock Out put his buffer away and tutted.

"And to think I was almost done maintenance. What do we have here, other than the obvious?"

Starscream rolled his eyes. The medic had joined the Decepticons recently and was already getting on Starscream's nerves. But trained medics unlikely to turn treatment into a horrible experiment were few and far between. Most were with the Autobots, and a significant amount of the few who weren't had defected after watching their colleagues' ethical violations go unchecked.

At the very least, Starscream could trust that Knock Out's repairs would be aesthetically sound.

Knock Out examined Starscream from helm to pede, paying extra attention to his wings and helm. Normally, Starscream enjoyed being the center of attention, but this wasn't a normal circumstance. It took everything in him to stay on the berth.

"I can fix this," Knock Out said.

Starscream would certainly hope so.

As Knock Out worked on his wing, the medic asked him the typical questions one would receive after being examined for a helm injury.

"Any blurriness of vision? Light sensitivity?"

"Some."

"I can see you squinting. Don't lie."

Starscream huffed. His name, the date—he answered the rest just fine. Eventually, Knock Out finished with his wings. He did some work on his helm, but—

"Not much I can do about your processor. Just wait a few days and make sure you don't hit your head again."

Starscream sighed.

"If that's all–" Knock Out started.

"One of the joints in her arms is clicking," Starscream said, pointing to Skywarp.

Skywarp glared at him. He grinned. If he was forced to endure this, so was she.

Knock Out made his way to her. He tested her range of motion—flex, extend, flex, extend—and found the issue. After a quick fix, he waved the three Seekers off.

Skywarp was still glaring at Starscream.

"You didn't have to do that," she said.

Starscream shrugged. "We were already there."

Chapter End Notes

Another backdated fic taken from my fanworks site. I put way more fics on there than I thought I did. Wowzers. This one is... a lot. Personal, but not in a way I can share. I'm still proud of the Still Alive series and the only reason I hadn't tried to crosspost it until now is because of how long it is. Just putting it on my fanworks site was a slog.

▶ Original author's note

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This was the stupidest argument he'd had with Megatron so far.

"You haven't tested the ray?" Starscream asked.

Megatron crossed his arms. "I trust its construction."

"But it hasn't been tested," Starscream said.

"Are you volunteering?"

Starscream took a step back. "No, Lord Megatron, but we should definitely—"

A large hand came down on his shoulders. "Thank you for offering to test the ray, Starscream."

Megatron pushed Starscream in front of the ray. Starscream lost his balance, tumbling to the floor. As he scrambled to his pedes, the ray hummed. Leaping would be a better idea, he decided, just as the ray fired. It hit him dead-on.

Maybe that processor damage hadn't healed after all.

A buzzing spread throughout his body, locking his joints in place. Starscream attempted to move and the buzz quickly grew from a tingle to searing pain. He hissed, finding that his lips and vocalizer were also paralyzed.

"The immobilizer appears to be working well enough," Megatron said. "Though we did waste precious fuel on this test."

Starscream stared up at Megatron, his optics the only thing he could move. Despite knowing his brows and lips were paralyzed, Starscream summoned as much ire as he could onto his face. Perhaps if he stared long enough, Megatron would spontaneously combust.

The door slid open. Two sets of pedesteps sounded through the room.

"Skywarp, Thundercracker," Megatron said. "You arrived faster than I anticipated. Starscream volunteered to test the immobilizer. Take him to his quarters."

Skywarp and Thundercracker exchanged glances before bending down to pick Starscream up. Internally, Starscream seethed. Did they have no way to reverse this? Why would they construct an immobilization ray and not consider what would happen if it was used on their own soldiers? Either Megatron was intentionally letting him stay immobile, or he was truly that foolish. Both options were plausible.

The group arrived in their quarters. Thundercracker and Skywarp wasted no time placing Starscream on the berth.

"I'm gonna hope this wears off," Skywarp said, backing away.

Thundercracker nodded. He added in a whisper, "Star is gonna be mad when he can move again. I really don't think he volunteered for this."

Of course he didn't! But he couldn't say anything, on account of being *paralyzed*.

Skywarp settled on the side of the berth. "He probably told Megatron off again."

"He needs to stop making him angry," Thundercracker said. "He should know better by now. We're always stuck fixing it."

Then why stick around? Why hide behind the fact he was paralyzed to speak? Or did they really think he couldn't hear? It seemed like they did.

Skywarp hummed quietly, glancing at Starscream. "I… guess so."

Was it really his fault? Megatron was the one making the bad decisions!

"Not a single one of their confrontations has started without us hearing Starscream yell, Skywarp," Thundercracker said. "He's the one initiating."

Was he?

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The paralysis was—luckily—temporary. When he returned to his duties, Megatron barely spared him a glance. It was as if the entire incident never happened. Starscream was completely fine with that. Such an embarrassing thing was best left forgotten.

But Thundercracker's words could not be. If Starscream was the one initiating, then he should just be able to stop. He could keep quiet during meetings—avoid voicing his concerns—and then Megatron wouldn't keep… doing whatever this was. He could *behave*.

So, when the next meeting came and Megatron explained the plan, Starscream remained silent. Even as Megatron stated that the fliers—*His* fliers—would be entering a cave to retrieve some sort of supposedly powerful relic, and the very idea made Starscream want to yell, he stayed silent. Even when Megatron finished and…

"Any comments, Starscream?"

"No, Lord Megatron."

…Starscream stayed silent. Megatron stared at him for a moment, brow furrowing. Then, he called an end to the meeting. Starscream stood, mentally planning ways to give his mecha the news, when a hand landed on his shoulder.

"Stay," Megatron said. "I wish to speak with you."

Starscream jerked his shoulder away, fighting back a hiss at the contact. "Yes, Lord Megatron."

"Do you really have nothing to say?"

"I have no thoughts on the plan."

None that he wanted to share, anyway.

Megatron's optics narrowed. "Forgive me if I don't believe you."

"You are forgiven," Starscream said with a huff. "May I leave?"

When Megatron didn't respond, Starscream turned away. But a hand on his arm stopped him. With a quiet hiss, Starscream turned toward his assailant, baring his dentae. He would—

Oh. Right.

"Let go of me."

"I didn't dismiss you," Megatron said.

Starscream jerked backward. Megatron's grip tightened.

"Stop touching me!" Starscream yelled, pulling away.

"I didn't dismiss you," Megatron said again, pulling Starscream closer. He stared at Starscream, optics burning. "You're planning something. What is it?"

"I'm not! What would even—"

Megatron's face nearly touched his.

"You're quiet. Too quiet. Obviously, *something* is wrong."

"Maybe I'm just tired of you," Starscream said. "Ever think of that?"

Megatron's grip tightened further, on the verge of making Starscream's plating creak.

"Now, I need to go talk to my Seekers—"

"I didn't dismiss you. Tell me what you're planning."

"I'm not planning anything. Let me go—"

"Tell me."

"No—"

"Tell me."

Starscream struggled against Megatron's grip, pedes slipping on the floor.

"Tell me."

Megatron's optics seared holes into his body.

"Tell me."

"Fine!" Starscream screeched, throwing his helm backward. He rammed it into Megatron's face, stunning the mech. "You want me to be planning something so badly, then here it is!"

Starscream threw himself at Megatron, aiming a fist at his face. Megatron blocked it, but left himself open. Seizing the opportunity, Starscream swept his feet from beneath him. He readied a pede above Megatron, excitement pulsing through his spark to see that fool crushed beneath it—

His helm crashed to the floor. Megatron glared at him, a giant servo gripping his ankle. With a grunt, Megatron sent him flying across the room. Starscream's spark pulsed erratically, beating against his chest. His energeon lines burned.

Megatron stalked closer, upon him before he could rise. A large hand curled around Starscream's throat. His pedes dragged against the ground as he was lifted.

"I'm disappointed," Megatron said. "For all you complain about my plans, this was a pathetic assassination attempt."

That was because it wasn't one, Starscream tried to say, but all that escaped from his vocalizer was static. Megatron dropped him. Starscream landed on his knees, palms on the floor.

As the door slid closed behind Megatron, Starscream added a new rule to the list: No matter the truth, Starscream was a liar.

Though, did Megatron truly deserve to lead? If he was going to call Starscream a traitor, why shouldn't he earn that title?

Hands were on him. He tried to shake them off, but they persisted.

"It's us."

Thundercracker's quiet voice. Starscream let the hands guide him back to their room. They pushed him onto the berth, which he sat on the edge of.

"What happened?" Skywarp asked.

All three Seekers flinched at the static Starscream's vocalizer emitted when he attempted to speak.

"That'll need to be replaced," Thundercracker said.

Starscream rolled his eyes and sent a comm message.

[Megatron again. He thought I was planning something.]

"Were you?"

[No.]

The key being '*were*.' They didn't need to know that answer had changed.

Thundercracker sighed. "Let's go to the medbay."

☆☆☆

Setting a trap didn't work. Shooting close to him in battle and hoping it happened to hit without being obvious didn't work. Stabbing him didn't work. What was next?

Poison, obviously.

Starscream held two cubes of energeon in his hands. Only one was poisoned, but it would be impossible to tell which. The poison was flavorless, odorless, colorless, and undetectable unless it was already known. A perfect selection.

It was a stunning plan, save for one thing—Starscream tripped on the way there. Right before he reached Megatron, his pede caught on something. He fell to the ground, barely managing to catch the cubes. He was fairly certain they stayed in the same hands, but…

There was no time to doubt himself. He had the antidote in his room, anyway.

"Starscream," Megatron said. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Starscream offered Megatron the cube he was fairly certain was poisoned. Completely certain. Totally certain.

"I figured we could chat over our morning fuel," Starscream said.

Megatron took the offered cube. "Sounds fine to me."

The two sat in silence for a moment. Starscream fought not to fidget, fearing it would give him away. But would being eerily still not also give him away?

"Though," Megatron said, watching his cube as he swirled it in front of him. "Maybe I should worry about your schemes. This is one of them, isn't it?"

Starscream's denial did not come quickly enough. Megatron glanced at him with a raised brow and handed the cube back to him.

"Here," Megatron said. "Let's switch."

They switched cubes. It did not improve Starscream's confidence. He reminded himself that he had the antidote in his quarters. If he got the poisoned cube, all he would need to do was make it back there.

Megatron watched him with burning optics. Trying not to think of the poison, Starscream took a sip of his cube. After seeing him drink, Megatron took a sip of his.

The two shared a tense silence, optics glancing between their cubes. Which one was the poisoned one? Starscream would have to leave after they finished, since the poison acted quickly. He didn't want to be there when it hit, no matter how satisfying watching Megatron go down would be. Especially since the alternative was much worse.

"One of the mines uncovered a set of strangely colored crystals," Megatron said. "A kind not already cataloged. I'm having Shockwave run some tests."

Starscream took another sip of his cube. "What color?"

"Some sort of purple."

Starscream hummed. Unfamiliar indeed. The topic didn't have much to it beyond that, but they still managed to stretch it until both of their cubes were gone. Starscream seized the opportunity to flee.

"I can take your cube back if you'd like."

Megatron shook his head, rising from his throne. "We can walk and talk at the same time."

Slag.

"Hmm… yes, we can."

So, they walked and talked. Starscream set an alarm through his chronometer. He couldn't have drank the poisoned cube, but just in case…

They placed their empty cubes in the receptacle. Starscream's hand shook as he let go of his. Heat coursed through his lines. His fans clicked on. Megatron glanced at him. Starscream shut them off manually, but they automatically turned back on a moment later. The damage was already done, so he didn't bother trying again.

He checked the chronometer. His alarm hadn't gone off. That couldn't be right, could it?

"Starscream."

Starscream took a step. His spark pulsed in his chest, a testament to the panic he was failing to stifle. The antidote was in his quarters, but he'd failed to consider a very important issue.

Megatron was much larger than him. The dose was calculated for Megatron, not him.

"Starscream."

Starscream turned to Megatron slowly. "Yes?"

"Are you alright?"

Megatron's face was stern, but not angry. Starscream was nowhere near in the clear, but that was a good sign regardless.

"I— I'm fine," Starscream said, cringing at the stutter. "But I have something urgent to attend to. I nearly forgot until my alarm went off."

Starscream turned away, hoping for just this once that the brute would take him at his word. Why was walking so difficult? Right, the poison, it was overloading his systems—

"Do you?" Megatron asked. How did he get so close?

Starscream stepped away, fighting not to curl in on himself as his systems protested the movement. The poisoned fuel sat heavy in his tank. Megatron closed the gap and curled a hand around his arm.

"You seem unwell."

Starscream shuddered at the tone. It was mocking, surely, but he couldn't process how.

"It's probably just a virus," Starscream said. The words lagged, catching on the vowels. "I must've picked something up somewhere. Just… take me back to my quarters, please."

"It came on quickly," Megatron said, slinging an arm around Starscream's waist.

Starscream leaned into Megatron, fighting another shudder. Was the giant brute… supporting him? They walked through the halls, somehow only attracting disinterested glances on the way. There was no way Starscream would trust Megatron to actually listen to him and take him to his room, but…

Pain coursed through Starscream's core. On impulse, his arms curled around the source. Megatron pulled him forward. When they finally reached Starscream's quarters, the pain had spread across his body. With a gentle grip, Megatron steered Starscream toward his berth.

Starscream pushed back weakly. The antidote wasn't that way.

Megatron grunted, dentae bared. "If you're so determined not to go to the medbay, then you're going into recharge."

"No."

Starscream pushed. Megatron shoved. The impact of his back against the berth made Starscream's world spin.

"I need—" Starscream's vocalizer cut off.

Megatron's hand forced him down. "Need what? Lay down."

"I—"

He couldn't die today. Megatron already expected this from him. Sure, it'd anger him anyway, but he wouldn't kill him for it.

"It's poison. The antidote is on my shelf."

Megatron went to the other side of the room and searched the shelf, plucking a small vial from the edge of it. He offered the vial to Starscream, who took it with shaking hands.

"Was that so hard?" Megatron asked.

Starscream was too busy downing the antidote to respond. The vial fell from his fingers when he finished.

"You can leave now," Starscream said, curling in on himself.

Megatron sat beside him. "I want to make sure my Air Commander doesn't offline."

Starscream readied a retort, but it never left his vocalizer. A wave of pain washed over him, drawing an embarrassing whine out. Megatron sighed and placed a hand behind Starscream's back, stroking the edge of his wing. Starscream, humiliatingly, leaned into the touch. When another, even more intense wave washed over him, he threw himself into Megatron, who responded by pulling the Seeker flush with his chest.

"Hurts," Starscream hissed.

"I can tell," Megatron said.

The two stayed like that, Starscream occasionally whining in pain, until the door opened. Thundercracker and Skywarp spilled in. Starscream mewled as Megatron left the berth, leaving him in the arms of his wingmates.

"He poisoned himself," Megatron told Thundercracker and Skywarp, his voice stern. "Then took the antidote. Make sure he visits the medbay in the morning."

Thundercracker nodded. Skywarp pulled Starscream toward her. The door shut behind Megatron.

Added to the list was a new, perplexing rule: Megatron cared.

☆☆☆

A crushing grip. A soft caress.

"Can't have my second in command out of commission for too long."

A harsh, booming yell. A gentle whisper.

"I'm never surprised, but I'm always disappointed."

Another failed scheme. He swore someone in the crowd laughed.

"He's delusional!"

He kept trying. There had to be a way. Another failure. Another hand around his neck. A gentler one as he was dragged to the medbay.

"I don't think this is going to stop."

"He should know better."

Megatron was Megatron. Starscream was Starscream.

That would never change.

Chapter End Notes

These first two chapters are what I originally set out to write before the baseball bat of inspiration hit me a second time, so they serve as a prologue for the rest of this fic. The rest of this takes place after a significant time skip. It may be a while before I start posting again, because I want to get to the midpoint before I start editing any more chapters. I'm currently writing chapter 9 and am aiming to have around 20 chapters, hopefully less.

To be fair to Megatron, when the guy that repeatedly insults you, who has said, verbatim, "I'll tear you apart," and has physically attacked you multiple times suddenly goes quiet, it's pretty suspicious. Trying to build up the whole "Starscream is crazy and irrational" thing here, but... read between those lines. There's a very specific thing I'm going for here (which one of my tags is a big bright neon sign for) and I'm worried that I won't communicate it effectively, so any feedback is helpful. I promise I don't bite--at least not anymore.

I decided that Cybertronians can't vomit, which was pretty important for the poisoning scene. They're like horses and rats, in that way--and we all know what happens when a rat ingests rat poison. To be fully honest, I was thinking of this video where a guy replaces a car's oil with nutella when writing the scene. I'm not a car guy but even I can recognize carnage when I see it. XD

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The war ended not with a grand clash of enemies, but with a quiet surrender. So many deaths for such a long time, and yet it was over. Starscream didn't count this as a rule—there was no way they wouldn't be back at war soon, especially after what Megatron did. Bowing to the Autobots and their squishy human allies only ensured that any self-respecting Decepticon would find their own path.

And that was just what Starscream did. Emerging from the cave that served as his temporary home, Starscream prepared to fly. If he was lucky, he might find one of his wingmates. They disappeared shortly after the surrender, though somewhere within him, Starscream knew Skywarp and Thundercracker were still alive. His wingmates were too resilient to be felled in battle.

The world passed below him. He glided lazily on the air, letting the currents guide him. The paths of human-made flying vehicles were somewhat predictable, so he knew how to stay clear of them. The Autobots had few fliers, so Starscream rarely worried about them. He was much more likely to run into another rogue Decepticon.

A familiar signal reached Starscream's receptors. *Energeon*.

Starscream landed a short distance away, wanting to thoroughly investigate the area. For all he knew, he was walking into a trap. His joints, stiff from a lack of maintenance and raw from a dearth of resources, protested as he transformed back into robot mode. The ever-present low fuel notification glowed in the corner of his vision.

When nothing leaped out of the foliage to attack him, Starscream crept closer to the energeon. He reached it without issue and snatched it immediately. With a quick jump, he transformed and took to the sky. There was no way this wasn't a trap, so he couldn't stay to drink it.

But whoever laid this trap was prepared. Something pulled at Starscream's wings, and though he struggled, it was not enough. He crashed, back toward the ground, transforming into robot mode at the last possible moment to better catch himself. The cube of energeon bounced inside his cockpit.

He got halfway to his pedes before an electric current coursed through him, making him shake. Pedesteps approached, stopping just before his helm. Their heaviness indicated a single option.

"Megatron," Starscream hissed. Not lord, not liege. "I see you've decided to take your treachery to a new level."

Megatron's voice was eerily calm. "*You're* the traitor."

Starscream tilted his head and grinned. "I am? Only one of us is hunting down Decepticons."

"The Autobots offered asylum for all ex-Decepticons," Megatron said, grabbing Starscream. "You didn't take it."

"I'm not an *ex*-Decepticon."

Megatron's grip tightened. "Then what are you, Starscream? The Decepticons are no more. Professing allegiance to a dead faction will do you no good."

Starscream went slack in Megatron's grip. The mech grunted in surprise, his hold loosening. Starscream flung himself off of Megatron, seizing the tip of his wing and ripping the electrocution device off of it. He threw it at Megatron's face, then kicked him for good measure. If he weren't afraid of the brute grabbing him again, he would've done worse.

Starscream leaped into the sky and took off, pausing once he was high enough that another shot at his wing would be more likely to miss than hit. He opened a channel to Megatron and sent a message.

[As long as I live, so will the Decepticons. I will take my rightful place as leader, and I will eliminate you.]

He flew away before Megatron could react.

☆☆☆

The first step to victory was reuniting the Decepticons. Starscream's searches before had come up empty, but he still bothered to try. As his energeon supply dwindled, it became less logical to continue. Yet, Starscream launched himself into the sky for another time.

Either the other Decepticons were as skilled at hiding as he was (unlikely) or they had already been captured (very likely). What were the odds Starscream could escape from a human facility specifically made to imprison Cybertronians?

The answer was not zero, and that was enough.

During one of Starscream's patrols—his last one, since he was too low on energeon to continue—he finally spotted something worthwhile. A mech stood before a handful of others, which were flanked by humans. As Starscream flew closer, he recognized the mech's distinct accent.

"Just leave me alone!" Blitzwing yelled. "I want nothing to do with you!"

Starscream aimed his rays at the Autobots and their allies. As he swooped over them to land, he fired. The unexpected shot sent them into a flurry of chaos that, while brief, would be long

enough for Starscream to accomplish what he wanted.

"Run," Starscream told Blitzwing. "Or roll. Or fly. Whatever works right now."

Blitzwing nodded and sprinted. Starscream kept pace with him.

"Do you know where anyone else is?" Starscream asked.

Blitzwing shook his head. "No. I have not seen anyone except you since Megatron's surrender."

Starscream hissed in irritation. He was barely any better than he had started with.

Blitzwing's pace slowed for a moment. His optics dimmed before shifting slightly in hue. It was a familiar, though somewhat inconvenient, sight. The mech carried himself in different ways at different times, usually marked by brief shifts. Starscream braced himself for whatever he would say next.

"He really betrayed us?" Blitzwing asked. His voice was quiet, slightly shaky—completely different from the steady tone earlier.

"Yes. He has."

Blitzwing stared at him. "What're we supposed to do now?"

"Survive," Starscream said. "Our fellow Decepticons have been taken prisoner. I'm going to save them. Then, we can talk about something greater."

Leaves crunched behind them. The Autobots were catching up.

Blitzwing glanced behind them. "How're you gonna do that?"

Starscream stopped, turning back toward their pursuers. "Take a guess."

"No," Blitzwing whispered, optics wide.

"Like I said—" Starscream motioned toward the forest ahead of them. "Fly, roll, run, whichever. Survive until we meet again."

Blitzwing took off.

Starscream watched him leave until the Autobots got too close to ignore. They emerged from the foliage and he spread his arms wide, a grin slipping onto his face. He stepped toward them.

"Looking for me?"

☆☆☆

The cell was empty. The front of it was obscured by a tinted field. Starscream was certain that if he touched it, it would electrocute him. On the bright side, he was correct about the location of his fellow Decepticons. Though, neither Thundercracker nor Skywarp were present in the cells he was walked past.

"Starscream."

Soundwave's voice came from the cell across from him.

"Yes?"

"Query: Rumble and Frenzy?"

Starscream shook his helm. "Haven't seen them. The only mech I encountered before they brought me here was Blitzwing. He's free… for now."

Starscream paced the cell, glaring at the containment field. If he knew what frequency the field was, he could use his rays to short it out. It was something he'd picked up after Megatron had thrown him in the brig a few too many times, though he always made sure to only use the technique when Megatron was distracted enough not to detect his escape. Skywarp was happy enough to take the credit.

Starscream readied himself to touch the field. It was one of the best ways to get a good reading—

"Starscream—do not."

Starscream lowered his hand. "I have a plan."

"The field—"

Starscream placed his hand on the field. As the current hummed, he took note of the sensation. Then, the pain came. A yell escaped his vocalizer as his limbs twitched. He fell to the floor.

"Starscream—"

Starscream rose to his pedes, fighting the stiffness in his joints from the electrocution. With a triumphant smirk, he readied his rays. When they reached the correct frequency, he placed them against the field. The field flickered, then disappeared with a zap.

"Perfect," Starscream said to himself.

He stepped out of his cell. Now that he had the frequency, he could—

A loud crash echoed through the room as something fell from the ceiling. Starscream collapsed on the floor, the weight of whatever it was pushing down on him. A dark visor lit by tiny lines stared at him.

"Ravage," Starscream muttered.

The aforementioned cassette hopped off of his chest with a *mrrowl*. Ravage paced in front of Soundwave's cell, then pawed at the controls. Starscream approached.

"I see we had the same idea," Starscream said.

"Using null ray frequency to short out field—clever. Obtaining frequency by electrocuting self—not."

It was a fine plan! Starscream waved his hand dismissively. "Whatever. If we both have the same goal, we should work together."

The control panel beeped as Ravage entered the correct code. The field on Soundwave's cell disappeared. He stepped out and released Laserbeak.

"Laserbeak—free as many Decepticons as possible."

Laserbeak cawed in acknowledgment and flew off.

"They'll notice us soon. How are we going to handle that?"

Soundwave stared at him. "Camera feeds—modified. Detection will not occur quickly. Starscream—offering to provide distraction?"

"Not unless we need it, no," Starscream said with a shake of his helm. "I'd prefer not to risk being put right back where we started."

He had a faction to run, after all. Though, it *did* smart to realize that Soundwave had also planned an escape. His ideal fantasy was already shot and it barely had a chance to start. Such was the world.

It would've been beautiful, leading the Decepticons out himself. He would have to move quickly to ensure that command position now.

"Skywarp—next room over," Soundwave said.

Starscream took the cue to leave.

The next room over held significantly fewer Decepticons. He was able to find Skywarp's cell almost immediately. When he approached, she looked up from the corner of the cell. Some sort of collar was on her neck, which was clearly the reason why she hadn't just warped away.

"Screamer?" She whispered.

Starscream shorted out the field. "Yes. We need to get going. Do you know how to remove that collar?"

Skywarp shook her head. "Don't even know how they got it on."

They didn't have time to remove it. That would have to wait until after they escaped.

"Where's Thundercracker?" Starscream asked.

"She was free, last I saw her," Skywarp said. "But that was a while ago."

"Then let's hope *she* stayed that way."

The rest of the room was easy to free. But a few hundred chattering mecha was not something easily concealed no matter how much surveillance equipment was tampered with. They were halfway toward the exit when the halls exploded with noise.

Starscream ducked behind the nearest wall and fired his rays at their attackers. Aiming a second barrage, he sent a comm to every Decepticon he could reach.

[Keep going! Protect each other. No mech left behind. We're nearly free!]

The cacophony of panic gave way to a quiet—though still panicked—run. Starscream stayed in his position until he was certain most of his mechs were ahead of him. As he turned, a shot seared the edge of his wing. He hissed at the pain, but it wasn't severe enough to worry about.

Starscream's comm pinged just as he reached the edge of the group.

[It's a trap!]

The humans stood before them, equipment ready. The rest were behind them, quickly catching up. Starscream's gaze rose to the ceiling. It was thin, flimsy—*breakable*. He searched for Soundwave in the crowd and sent him a comm.

[I have an idea. You're not going to like it.]

Starscream fired at the ceiling. Debris rained down. Dust clouded the hallway. Satisfied with the size of their only means of escape, Starscream sent a wide-reaching message.

[Fliers, to the sky! Take any non-fliers with you. Remember, no mech left behind!]

Starscream leaped into the air, launching himself through the exit he created. When he reached the proper elevation, he transformed. A large, heavy-set plane soared beside him. A quick glance confirmed it the most unlikely of mecha: Lugnut.

"I'm surprised you didn't go with Megatron," Starscream said.

The mech had been a loyalist from the start. If Megatron asked Lugnut to lick the bottom of his pedes, he would have gratefully complied.

"I had a friend that didn't want to," Lugnut said. "I couldn't leave him alone."

Starscream scanned the ground. No humans. No Autobots. He increased his speed.

"Who was this friend?" Starscream asked.

"Blitzwing."

Blitzwing? Interesting. How could he have managed to break the unbreakable? Perhaps Starscream could…

"I saw him before I was captured. Helped him escape from the Autobots, actually. He's safe."

Lugnut's optic brightened. "Glorious! We will reunite and—"

Starscream jerked to the side. Smoke clogged his olfactory sensors and clouded his optics. The world spun. He fought desperately to right himself. When he finally corrected course, the sight before him demanded immediate action.

Lugnut plummeted from the sky, wings too damaged to hold him. Whatever had hit them must have reached Lugnut before it reached Starscream. Starscream dove beneath Lugnut and sent him a comm message.

[Transform into robot mode. I'll catch you.]

Lugnut complied. Starscream staggered under his weight, drifting lower in the sky, but managed to stay airborne. Starscream steadied himself and sent the coordinates of his cave to all of the Decepticons he could reach.

[We will meet at these coordinates! Remember, no mech left behind! If you can contact any of our free comrades, do so now!]

The rest of the route was smooth, if carrying a mech twice Starscream's weight could ever be considered such. When Starscream landed, many of the others had already arrived. He rolled to a stop. With a puff of displaced air, Skywarp appeared beside him. She took Lugnut off of him gently.

Starscream transformed back into robot mode. He wobbled on his pedes, the world swimming. Despite this, he forced his wings wide to project confidence. He searched the crowd for Soundwave, finding the other mech quickly.

[How is everything?] Starscream sent.

[Many injured. Medics—limited and busy.]

When weren't they? But now, at least they were free. It would take a long time to get back into fighting shape, but they could manage. Hopefully. Starscream shoved his doubts to the back of his processor.

[Query: Starscream—injured?]

Starscream tapped his fingers against his arms. They stuck together, almost as if…

He looked down at them. They were stained dark.

[Just the edge of my wing.]

Starscream assessed the situation more closely. Most of the mecha tending to others were not medics, though many of them were members of the science department. The largest proportion of the group by far were soldiers, who he knew from experience received basic training in repairs. It wouldn't be enough to resurrect a dying mech, but it would be enough to make the medics less overwhelmed.

Starscream's vision grew fuzzy at the edges. He tapped a pede to keep himself from slipping into numbness. Not now, *not now*.

A hand touched the edge of his wing. He didn't move. As it reached the graze on his wing, he let out a hiss. The pain gave him back control, which he used to turn toward the source of his discomfort. Skywarp stared back at him.

"It's just a graze," Starscream said. "How is Lugnut?"

The mech was stupid, but strong. And though it was intense, his loyalty, if to the right mech, would be an immense asset.

"Skywarp."

Skywarp looked away.

"How. Is. Lugnut?"

"Offline."

The fuzziness returned. "What?"

How hadn't he noticed? How long had he carried a corpse on his back? He was more observant than that! So, then how? If he couldn't notice that, what else had he missed?

Quiet voices grew loud. The wind against his sensors activated alarms that should not have been.

☆☆☆

Though many were lost in the escape, the messages reached those who managed to evade the humans, replenishing their numbers. Rumble and Frenzy were two of these mecha, much to Soundwave's obvious relief. To Starscream, they were merely assets—some of the Decepticons' best scouts were finally in his hands.

Despite the losses incurred during the escape, the event granted Starscream a kind of respect he hadn't seen during the war. Mecha looked to him and Soundwave for guidance, and with Soundwave's passivity holding him back, Starscream pounced. He was finally leader of the Decepticons. Everything he wanted, save for one thing: Megatron was still alive.

There were days that didn't matter. Days where he watched over his mecha with pride. Days where they did silly, foolish things and he found himself more amused than angry.

"No, no no!" Skywarp shouted.

Beside her, Bonecrusher snorted. The pile of bricks in front of them fell to the ground. Rumble and Frenzy snickered, making no moves to help as Skywarp and Bonecrusher began reconstructing the tower. Partway through, Skywarp's optics met Starscream's.

"Wanna join us?" She asked.

Starscream shook his head. "I'll watch."

They finished setting up the tower. Skywarp went first. She cautiously removed a brick from the top. Bonecrusher removed one from the middle with practiced ease. Rumble and Frenzy were relaxed whenever they removed bricks, though Starscream could've sworn he saw one of them stick a pede out during one of Skywarp's turns. Soon, the tower was wobbling. Skywarp's careful removals became quick and frantic.

It was during one of these removals that she froze, hands hovering in front of the tower.

"Thundercracker?"

Starscream followed her gaze. Silhouetted by the setting sun stood a mech he could never fail to recognize.

"Hi," she said softly.

With a whoosh of displaced air, Skywarp was at her side, arms around her. "You made it!"

Thundercracker hugged her back. "Yes. I got your message. I'm glad you got out."

Pedesteps crunched the dirt and gravel nearby. Another familiar silhouette emerged.

"I hate to interrupt this," Blitzwing said, his voice confident and stern. "But we are supposed to report to our new leader, yes?"

Skywarp released Thundercracker. She grinned, and Starscream fought a cringe as he recognized the expression.

"Right!" Skywarp said. She dropped into a dramatic bow. "Our glorious leader, Starscream!"

Thundercracker's lips twitched. Blitzwing raised a brow. Starscream sighed and stepped forward.

"It's good to see you," Starscream said.

Blitzwing stared at him. Not with malice or irritation or anything, really. Just stared. Starscream forced his wings to stay still.

"You kept your word," Blitzwing said.

"I did."

Blitzwing smiled. "Thank you."

Thank you? Well, Starscream supposed he should be thanked. Though, the confusion buzzing in the back of his processor said otherwise.

"We um," Thundercracker shuffled nervously. "You might not like this. We brought a friend. He can't contribute anything, but we couldn't leave him alone, so—"

Starscream waved his hand dismissively, though apprehension settled into his frame. "Get on with it."

Thundercracker opened her cockpit. A small, golden blur flew out of it, running in circles around the cavern. After a moment, it settled in front of the group, tail wagging as it barked.

"A dog," Starscream said.

"Yes—"

"That's fine. Just make sure it doesn't leave any messes around."

Thundercracker sagged, presumably in relief. She bent down to pet the dog. "Thank you!"

There were many things worse than a squishy little dog. Like Megatron.

Chapter End Notes

I sat on this one for a bit because I kept waffling on the background characters, of all the things to worry about (specifically Bonecrusher and the name of Thundercracker's dog, LMAO). I finished writing chapter 9, but only because it got long enough to split. What I was looking to tackle in one chapter seems to be a three chapter plotline. 20 chapters is looking less and less plausible. :'D

▶ This note was super long so I'm collapsing it. Mostly just more rambling about the characters.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thundercracker's dog—Buster was his name—quickly became a favorite among the Decepticons. Not a day went by without a playful bark as some poor Decepticon chased after him with an empty lead. Supplies weren't easy to acquire, but at least the dog didn't need energeon.

They were quite low on that, lately. Each morning, dim frames greeted him, nowhere near dead but certainly not living. Starscream downed his morning cube. It was so diluted that he could barely taste it, but at least it was *something*.

The injured had recovered now, but still Starscream stalled. The only parties sent out were to retrieve energeon and supplies. They couldn't risk being discovered—not with so many of them in one place. Nor could they split apart—the risk of being captured alone, of mecha starving and struggling by themselves, was too high.

"Buster!"

A golden blur smacked into Starscream's knee. He bent down to catch the dog. Buster stared up at him, tongue sticking out of his mouth.

"You are a nuisance," Starscream said, gently tapping Buster on the head.

The mech pursuing Buster—which happened to be Blitzwing—finally caught up. Blitzwing slipped the lead back around Buster's head and tightened it.

"Oh," Blitzwing said, looking up from Buster. "Starscream. I'm sorry."

Blitzwing's voice was soft this time.

"It's fine," Starscream said.

Blitzwing looked away. "I… need to ask you something."

"What is it?"

"Lugnut," Blitzwing said. "What happened? I heard he was offlined, and you were there."

The dread that coursed through Starscream's frame was foreign. His limbs tingled, his sensors glitching.

"He was shot," Starscream said. "I carried him. He died on the way here. Energeon loss."

Blitzwing's optics fell. The tingling in Starscream's limbs grew worse. How hadn't he noticed? If he had, and he should have, he could have done something.

"I'm sorry," Starscream said.

Blitzwing's optics met his.

"No," Blitzwing said. "Thank you for trying to save him."

Starscream took a step back. "Yes, well… I'll see you later, if that's all…"

Blitzwing didn't protest.

Starscream fled. He knew it wasn't fleeing, not truly—he wasn't even running—but it sure felt like it. The tingling grew worse, his sensors triggering alerts with no true reason.

He should have known. What had possessed him to convince himself that he could save Lugnut? Especially with those injuries? Why hadn't he just left him?

He couldn't have. No mech left behind. Not like Megatron. Not like Megatron at all. No mech left to suffer alone, no selfish betrayals. Megatron's rules didn't apply here because *there was no Megatron here*.

Starscream could be truthful. He could be loyal. His words and ideas mattered. He was the one making the rules!

So, why did it feel so wrong? Why, when he had everything he could have wanted, did he mourn? If he had just paid a little more attention, could he have saved Lugnut?

And if so, what else was he missing? What else was going on right beneath his sight?

What if Lugnut was only the first? If he was destined to see every one of his mecha die before him? Why did he care?

"Starscream."

Everything was fuzzy.

"Starscream?"

Starscream hissed. Too loud!

A hand touched his shoulders. He attempted to shrug it off, but his body didn't obey.

"Hey."

He was pulled close to someone's chest.

"Come on."

The mech led him into a corner of the cave. The walls blocked most of the incoming light. A sigh escaped the mech beside him.

"You're a wreck, Screamer," Skywarp muttered under her breath.

He couldn't disagree. Starscream struggled closer to Skywarp, the pressure of his body against hers the only reminder that he had a body at all. Light shifted around him. Another weight settled beside him.

"I got your comm," Thundercracker said. "I… really thought this would stop when Megatron left."

Megatron left, sure, but he was not *gone*. The rules may have changed, but the game was the same.

☆☆☆

Their dwindling energeon supply could not be ignored any longer. The raids were not sufficient. They had to reach for a larger, more dangerous target. Starscream would not let his mecha complete this mission alone.

Soundwave's cassettes had already scouted the facility. A large shipment of energeon was to arrive that night. It would not be stolen without detection, but there was no other option.

Ravage and Laserbeak opened the doors. Starscream led the small group of Seekers chosen for the mission—Skywarp, Thundercracker, Slipstream, and Nova Storm—into the building. Astrotrain waited outside in a gap between cameras, though Laserbeak had already modified the feeds to prevent his detection. The team moved boxes of cubes into Astrotrain's compartment as quickly as they could manage, knowing their time was limited.

[Autobots.]

Soundwave's comm arrived moments before disaster. Blaster fire sounded as a fight broke out. Starscream dodged an attack, rolling behind a set of crates.

[Skywarp!] Starscream sent. *[Secure Astrotrain and teleport him back with the cubes! We can't risk losing them!]*

[Yessir!]

The crates exploded in front of Starscream, sending him backward into the wall. He hissed in pain and pushed the splintered wood off of himself. Suddenly, he was yanked upward. Starscream pulled himself away, but his attacker tightened their grip.

"It's me!" They—or rather, she—whispered.

"Don't do that!" Starscream spat, finally yanking his hand away.

Nova Storm glared at him. "They got here too quickly. I don't like it."

"Me neither."

They jumped back into battle. Starscream shot at an Autobot that attempted to corner Thundercracker. The bot, distracted by his fire, was quickly taken out.

[Skywarp!] Starscream sent. *[Status?]*

[Astrotrain is secured! Warping back to base now!]

Good. There was nothing left to lose. In a mere handful of moments, they could flee. The original plan, assuming they were not caught, was to all be warped inside of Astrotrain, but that was no longer an option.

Starscream dodged a hit from a pink bot—What was her name?—and attempted to return the attack with a kick. Unfortunately, she was prepared, using the momentum of the kick to send him crashing to the ground. She placed a pede on his chest, preventing him from rising.

"Did you *really* think we'd let you take our energeon?" She asked.

"I just assumed you were incompetent," Starscream said.

He raised a ray to her face and fired it before she could back off. The force of it slammed his elbow into the ground, but watching her fly across the room was worth it. She took another bot with her, which was even more entertaining. Slipstream, who was fighting the aforementioned bot, grinned at Starscream before turning to a different part of the battle.

[Energeon successfully delivered, my glorious commander!]

Starscream could imagine the cheeky bow Skywarp would have made if they were together.

[Good. How many warps do you have left in you?]

[Not enough for what you're implying.]

Starscream sighed. Of course.

[How many?]

[If I refuel now, I can take four of us. Five if both of the cassettes come in one trip.]

That left one mech to fly home alone. Who would it be? Although Starscream didn't want to sacrifice himself, it was the only decent option. He was the quickest out of the group, and as the leader, he ensured he received a larger ration. He had the lowest chance of being caught and the lowest chance of running out of fuel. With so few Decepticons left, he couldn't risk losing anyone.

[Take the others. I'll fly back.]

The rest of the battle was uneventful. They stalled as Skywarp transported the team out until only Starscream was left. By that point, most of the Autobots had been taken out or

weakened. With one final dodge, Starscream took to the sky.

He would need to take a longer path to ensure he wasn't followed or tracked. His fuel reserves were just high enough to take the one he was contemplating. He would have to refuel soon after getting back to the base, but that didn't matter as much as getting there in the first place.

Starscream's proximity sensors sent a warning. He swerved to avoid the object coming from behind him, but as he moved, another object struck him in the side. The uneven force sent him into a spin. As he righted himself, he prepared for a controlled crash.

Trees and shrubbery scraped against his plating as he slid across the ground. When the skidding finally slowed, he transformed back into robot mode. His side screamed in pain at the movement.

This was going to be a long flight home, assuming he made it at all.

[Ambushed on the way out.] Starscream sent to Soundwave and his wingmates. *[Injured. Controlled crash landing. At least one attacker. Can still fly if I get away.]*

Maybe it was cruel to tell his wingmates when they couldn't do anything to help, but if this was his final moment, they deserved to know. As much as he would hate to lose control of the Decepticons, Soundwave was the next best leader. If anything happened to him, Soundwave would need to take action.

Starscream pushed himself to his knees, pausing as the pain in his side worsened. He glanced at it, gauging the flow of energeon. Sluggish, so nothing vital had been hit. That was good.

"Here we are again."

Starscream gritted his dentae at the sound of Megatron's voice. The brute stepped closer.

"You, writhing on the ground at my pedes," Megatron said. "Me, standing above you, uninjured."

"If you come any closer, I can change that," Starscream spat.

Megatron chuckled. "I'm sure you'd try. That wound looks quite painful."

Starscream struggled to his pedes, pushing past the pain. He stood tall, fighting not to hunch toward his injured side. If he did, the brute would surely notice. Then, Megatron stepped into range. Starscream readied an attack, but was cut short as agony gripped his side.

Megatron's face was less than an arm's length from his. Large, forceful fingers dug into Starscream's wound, the injured metal groaning under the pressure. Starscream threw a punch that Megatron blocked with ease.

"Surrender," Megatron said. "They'll treat you and give you energeon."

"Why—" Starscream's vocalizer glitched. "Why would I ever want—want to go with *you*?"

The fingers dug deeper. Starscream yelped.

"I see how dull your plating is," Megatron said. "You're running out of energeon, even for yourself. The crates you stole will only last so long. Your ego will lead your mecha to starvation, so surrender and save them."

Pulling away only hurt more, so Starscream stopped trying. He held himself as still as he could manage with his frame trembling from pain.

"We—we wouldn't have to starve if you left—left us alone," Starscream said. "Get Prime to call off those hu—humans and maybe we can make a deal. We can be accomo—accommodated *without surrender*."

Megatron scowled. "Stubborn and selfish as always. I gave you a choice."

It wasn't a choice. It was an unvoiced threat.

Darkness crept into the edge of Starscream's vision as numbness spread across his body. He floated away, a dim panic clawing at his mind.

Not now. Not here. Not in front of him.

The world faded to nothing as the hand released him.

"'Can still fly if I get away,' my aft!"

Skywarp's voice pulled Starscream from the darkness. The walls of the cave surrounded them. He was back. How?

"He's awake."

Hook's disinterested mutter. Not the best of medics, but the best had already gone.

A finger tapped on Starscream's shoulder and he remembered that he had a body. He turned to the source of the tapping.

"How?" He asked Skywarp.

"Had one more warp in me after all," Skywarp said.

It seemed like a lie, but Starscream didn't have the energy to question it. He pushed himself off the makeshift berth (a messily carved slab of rock) and turned toward Hook.

"You're lucky we got the energeon to replace what you lost," Hook said. "Be careful until your armor regrows. That patch isn't the strongest material."

Starscream glanced at the patch and fought a cringe. It was a completely different color and texture from the surrounding plates. He was going to have to walk around with *that* on him?

Hook snorted. "Yes, mister vain. That was all we had. Ruin my work and I'll slag you."

Starscream had definitely not been contemplating that. Not at all.

"You're discharged for now. I'd better not see you again."

☆☆☆

Starscream paced the section of the cave he called his personal space, ignoring the dull thump of pain each step sent through his wound. He was shielded from outside optics by a cobbled-together wall of various substances, from cardboard to brick to metal. Though he loathed it, there wasn't much opportunity for aesthetics.

With so many mecha to fuel, they were already running out of energeon again. Those who had been injured in the raid—Starscream himself included—required extra fuel to regenerate. The heavily diluted fuel they were passing out already caused healing to slow. Starscream wasn't eager to see what having no fuel might do.

If only there were some other option! They couldn't surrender, not if they wanted to keep their freedom. It was this or be locked away again. But what good was freedom if they weren't alive to enjoy it?

What if Megatron was right? Was Starscream holding his mecha back? If they kept going down this path, would they all starve?

Who would go first? Skywarp, undoubtedly. Her warps required a lot of fuel, and without them, she wasn't nearly as formidable a fighter as others. And wasn't that terrifying? Knowing that she would be the one to go? Starscream could prioritize her like he and Soundwave were prioritized, but that only went so far.

The would all starve, eventually. They would all starve and it would be Starscream's fault, because he was the one that led them. They would curse his name as they faded away.

But the other option was Megatron, which was not an option. The rules would slide back into place and he would become the lying, scheming traitor again. No one would spare him a glance except to laugh at his misfortunes or scold him for bringing it upon himself. Megatron would grin, satisfied that he finally had his favorite plaything back, because what else would Starscream be?

Starscream's spark buzzed ominously in his chest. He could not, *would not* go back to Megatron. They would figure this out somehow. They had to. His mecha would not die. The Decepticons would rise again!

To do what, exactly?

Live. Just live. Nothing else was more important. They would be themselves, unpleasant natures and all. Never to be crushed under Prime's thumb or manhandled by Megatron.

But how?

They needed energeon. They couldn't get it. It was too heavily guarded. And without energeon, they'd starve. His mecha would wither away and—

Starscream hissed in pain as his injury was pulled. Jolted from his spiral, his spark grew quiet. His body and all its sensations crashed into him with full force. He was standing in his personal room, inside the cave that was the Decepticon base.

He was Starscream. He could figure it out.

☆☆☆

Skywarp carefully pulled a brick from the tower, wings shaking with tension. The tower wobbled, but didn't fall. She turned toward Thundercracker.

Thundercracker smiled sheepishly and stared at the tower. After a moment, she reached for one of the bricks on the side. She gave the brick a small pull before yanking it out completely. The tower barely moved.

Bonecrusher pulled the next brick swiftly, a confident grin on their face. Next, Astrotrain stepped up, pulling one of the top bricks off. After him, Blitzwing swiped one from the bottom with an unnecessary amount of force. Then, Nova Storm stepped up and deftly pulled a brick from the middle. Frenzy poked one out from the side, and based on the laughter that followed, hitting Skywarp in the face with it was intentional.

Starscream didn't understand the appeal of the game, but it kept them from causing trouble, so he allowed it. If anyone *thought* they caught him sneaking glances at their small gathering from time to time, they were mistaken. He rolled his eyes as Skywarp nearly fell over while reaching for one of the top bricks.

"Buster!"

Slipstream's yell traveled into the cave at the same speed as the dog that came barreling through the entrance, lead flying off his neck with a shake of his head. The game paused as Buster danced around them, barking. Slipstream caught up and slipped the lead back onto him. She paused, staring at the tower.

"Wanna join?" Nova Storm asked.

Slipstream shrugged and weighed the end of Buster's lead down with a nearby rock. "Why not?"

The game continued. Though the tower wobbled, it never fell. Slowly, bricks were removed until it was barely supported. Starscream gave up the pretense of disinterest as the game grew more intense.

While Nova Storm was in the middle of picking a brick to remove, Buster whined. Thundercracker petted his head with a finger.

"What's wrong, boy?"

Buster whined louder. The tower shook. Starscream jolted upward, his plating snapping. They couldn't have—

The cave exploded with noise. Brightly colored bots flooded the area. Electricity crackled.

"No," Starscream muttered. "*No*."

An Autobot swung at him, electrocution device in hand. He dodged the blow and retaliated with his own, sending them to the ground.

[Soundwave,] Starscream sent.

No response.

[Soundwave!]

Starscream dodged another attack. He collided with another mech.

"Those fraggers!" Came Blitzwing's voice, harsh and low. "I'll kill them!"

Blitzwing aimed a blast of fire at one of the approaching Autobots, who jumped backward.

[Skywarp,] Starscream sent. *[Soundwave won't answer comms. Find him.]*

[Got it!]

One of Blitzwing's blasts came slightly too close.

"Watch it!" Starscream hissed. "You could've singed my wings."

"But I also could've singed that fragger!"

Starscream should've known this side of Blitzwing was the one they were getting for the day from how he pulled those bricks out earlier. He fought a sigh and decided to ignore Blitzwing for now.

[Nova Storm,] Starscream sent her a set of coordinates. *[Ensure this backup base isn't compromised. We'll need to move.]*

[On it!]

The sound of bricks scraping against one another interrupted Starscream's planning. The tower tilted sideways.

"Buster!" Thundercracker's yell came from the other side of the cave.

The dog sat below the falling tower, whining loudly. His lead was tightened around his neck far more than any of the Decepticons ever would have, pulled taut as Buster struggled against the rock it was weighed down by. Thundercracker launched herself across the cave, curling herself around him. The bricks crashed down onto her back.

Starscream reached her side as she rose from the pile. She opened her arms and Buster stared up at the two Seekers with wide eyes.

"He's okay," she whispered.

Starscream couldn't care less about Buster. He searched Thundercracker's wings for damage, relieved to only see dents. She smiled down at the dog, petting him with a finger and shushing him.

"You're gonna be okay," she said, reaching for the lead. "I just need to take this off—"

She let out a cry. A blade pierced through her arm. She turned to her attacker, striking at them with her claws.

"Help him," she hissed at Starscream as the Autobot prepared to strike again.

Starscream loosened the lead. Buster slipped out of it immediately and ran at the Autobot, barking at their heels. Thundercracker glanced at him for a moment, but a moment was all that the Autobot needed to land another hit.

"Buster, run!" She called.

The dog's ears shot up at the order and he sprinted out of the cave.

"A Decepti-dog?" The Autobot said. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," Thundercracker said, slashing at the Autobot's face.

The Autobot backed away with a noise of surprise, hand flying to their optic. Starscream took that time to step beside Thundercracker. The two fought back to back, making their way toward the cave's exit. Outside the cave, the battle raged just as fiercely. Starscream grimaced as he stepped in a puddle of energeon. Luckily, it wasn't from a mech he recognized.

[The new base is safe!] Nova Storm's comm came through. Perfect.

Starscream sent the coordinates to every one of his mechs he could reach, grimacing when many of the channels didn't connect. He couldn't consider the implications now.

[This set of coordinates is our new base! Once you can flee without pursuit, meet there!]

A set of affirmatives streamed through. That just left…

[Skywarp. Did you find Soundwave?]

[Yes. He was ambushed. They left him in stasis lock.]

That explained the lack of alert and the lack of response.

[Take him to the new base. Bring a medic there if you can.]

[Aye-aye!]

Starscream could imagine the mock salute. He rolled his optics and looked toward Thundercracker.

"Ready to fly?" He asked.

She nodded. They took to the sky together, providing support until they were out of range. Then, they took a few detours to ensure they weren't being followed.

"No 'no mech left behind' order this time?" Thundercracker asked as they flew past the shore.

"They know what to do," Starscream said. "I shouldn't have to say it now."

She smiled at him. "I like this new Decepticon philosophy."

"It's the only one that makes sense," Starscream said.

With so few soldiers, every single one was precious.

"Still," Thundercracker said. "You didn't have to let me keep Buster. You don't have to let us play games. We haven't been attacking left and right, just enough to get resources. I'm enjoying the free time."

Starscream scoffed. "Well, we need to get back into fighting shape before we can even think about crushing the Autobots! It's a waste of resources to send out soldiers just to get them killed!"

Thundercracker laughed. "You say that, but I don't think we're going back to war anytime soon."

How dare she?

"I—" Starscream paused. Hadn't he told Megatron they just wanted to be left alone? What would be so wrong about staying as they were? Aside from the lack of resources, they were happy. *Thundercracker* was happy. "Maybe I don't want to go back to war."

"I'm glad you're finally admitting it."

The waves flew by them. Well, it was more correct to say they flew by the waves.

Thundercracker's optics dimmed. She frowned. Starscream slowed his pace to stay beside her.

"Promise me you'll get Skywarp to teach Slipstream to tie Buster's lead properly," Thundercracker said quietly.

"*That's* what you're choosing to focus on?"

"He almost died. And I—" She wobbled in the air, optics dimming further. Dread curled in Starscream's spark. "I don't want him to get stuck like that again."

Starscream drifted closer to her, preparing to steady her. He examined her plating more closely. Energeon dripped below her at an alarming rate, and her colors were dull.

Not again. Not her.

"I'm going to carry you."

"What?"

"I'm going to carry you," Starscream repeated. "You're losing too much energeon. You can't afford to burn it, and I can't do emergency repairs while we're flying over the ocean."

Thundercracker sighed. "Fine."

Starscream pulled her into his arms. She latched onto him gently and deactivated her thrusters. With the extra weight, Starscream had to use more power, but that didn't matter. Starscream had plenty of energeon.

(He dismissed an alert. It surely wasn't relevant.)

As they flew past the sea and onto land, Thundercracker's colors dimmed further. Her grip grew weaker with each passing moment, and Starscream strengthened his to compensate. They were close! They could make it!

[Skywarp,] Starscream sent. *[Thundercracker and I are en route. Ensure a medic is ready for us. Thundercracker needs aid.]*

Starscream's only response was the 'message read' indicator. He increased his speed. Skywarp would be ready for them, and everything would be fine.

Thundercracker went slack. Starscream flew even faster, his cooling fans activating. They did nothing against the heat.

{Alert! Fuel level low.}

Starscream pushed harder.

{Alert! Fuel level low.}

They had to make it. If he could just move a little faster—

{Alert! Fuel level low.}

Starscream landed. His plating burned. Thundercracker was gray in his arms. He fell to his knees and set her frame on the ground.

"No," he whispered. "No. *No*!"

Not again. Not her. She couldn't—he couldn't—not—

Starscream swung his first, lashing out at the nearest object. Wood splintered under his fist. He swung again, then again. Pain blossomed on his knuckles and he paused. The world grew sharper in focus.

He couldn't do this. Not right now. He had mecha to lead. The Decepticons needed him. Starscream placed his hands under Thundercracker's frame, gently lifting her into his arms.

[Low on fuel,] He sent to Skywarp. *[Can you warp us the rest of the way?]*

The response was immediate. *[Coordinates?]*

Starscream sent the coordinates. With a whoosh of displaced air, Skywarp was beside him. She placed a hand on Starscream's shoulder. Her warp drive hummed as she activated it. It paused as her optics grew wide, fixed on Thundercracker's frame.

"Don't," Starscream said. "We can't right now."

Skywarp's face darkened. "*You* can't, you mean."

The world shifted around them. Suddenly, they were standing in the center of the new camp—a long-abandoned quarry that had yet to completely flood. Mecha were scattered throughout it, many injured. The first to approach them was Hook.

"Skywarp said you needed a medic," Hook said.

"Not anymore," Starscream said.

As he turned to leave, Skywarp's hand grasped his arm. The grip was gentle, but Starscream still felt the urge to wrench it away. Starscream turned to glare at her but found she was already giving him one of her own.

"You're going to sit down and let Hook examine you," Skywarp said, her optics searingly intense. "I'll take Thundercracker."

Starscream didn't have the energy to protest. He handed her Thundercracker's frame and sat. Hook assessed him, each poke and prod sending an agony through Starscream that had nothing to do with his injuries. After the medic patched him up, he handed him a cube of energeon. Starscream took it with numb fingers.

"How is Soundwave?" Starscream asked Skywarp.

"Medic says he'll recover," Skywarp said. "But Laserbeak was out, and hasn't come back yet…"

Starscream sighed, watching the energeon swirl in his cube. "Who else is missing?"

Skywarp gave a sizable list of names, which included Slipstream and Bonecrusher. Her second list, which was of the confirmed dead, was significantly shorter, a notable name within it being Astrotrain. Without him, obtaining energeon was going to be much more difficult. It was naive to hope the missing mecha were free and alive—they were either dead or captured. There weren't enough resources for another rescue mission, so the distinction didn't matter.

Static gathered at the edge of Starscream's vision. He downed the rest of his cube as quickly as possible.

Chapter End Notes

Haha. Hahahahaha. Ha.

There were three options. I picked the blue one.

There is a lot of 'other characters not understanding Starscream' in here, but not even Starscream understands himself. If he did, this fic wouldn't have a plot. XD

▶ A bit about terminology in this fic

And... more designs! I actually completed all three of the elite trine at the same time, but I queued them to post separately, so Starscream isn't out yet.

Soundwave: pillowfort | tumblr

Thundercracker: pillowfort | tumblr

Skywarp: pillowfort | tumblr

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Slipstream was confirmed dead, her body recovered along with many others in an effort to give proper funerals. At least Starscream wouldn't need to ask Skywarp to teach her how to tie Buster's lead. It was during one of these recovery efforts that the aforementioned dog was found. Skywarp had teleported right in front of Starscream with the mutt, shoving the dog in his face with glee.

Starscream didn't care about the dog. Most days, he could ignore the loud, smelly creature. But occasionally, it would pester him. Perhaps, with so many other mecha gone, it was running out of targets.

As Starscream sat in the woods near the quarry, staring off into the sky without a single thought about what he was looking at, a set of paws landed on his leg. Buster stared up at him with wide eyes.

"What do you want?" Starscream grumbled.

Buster laid its head on his leg.

"Get off."

The dog ignored him. Its stupid face pressed into his leg, getting its smelly dog residue all over him.

"Get off, you filthy creature!"

Buster whined at him. Starscream seized the dog in his hand, which only made it whine louder. He brought it to his face, staring it in the eyes.

"What do you want from me?" Starscream spat. "You could bother any other mech! I'm sure they'd *love* to pet your stupid little head!"

Starscream stood and dropped the dog. It landed on its side with a yelp, but was quickly at his pedes. He kicked it gently, sending it a short distance away. It rolled back onto its paws and trotted back over to him.

Starscream curled and uncurled his fingers, staring into the obnoxious little thing's face.

"Go away," he hissed. "You're the reason she's dead."

Starscream walked away—toward what, he didn't care—and groaned in irritation as the dog followed. If he had never let Thundercracker keep Buster, she wouldn't have gotten injured saving it. If that stupid creature had never come into their life, Thundercracker wouldn't have lost so much energeon that her spark fizzled out. With another angered growl, Starscream turned toward Buster, scooping it up in his hand.

He squeezed until the dog whined, then squeezed some more. Buster yipped pathetically at him, its legs scrambling helplessly against Starscream's massive hand.

"It's your fault," Starscream said. "You deserve it."

Starscream squeezed tighter. His spark hummed painfully in his chest.

"Your fault," Starscream repeated.

The only piece of Thundercracker he had left stared at him with wide, fearful eyes.

"Your—" Starscream's vocalizer glitched. His grip loosened.

If he hadn't let Thundercracker take in Buster—If he were faster—If he had more fuel that day—If the base were better hidden—If he had never agreed to join the Decepticons after Megatron had scooped him up, moments away from a death caused by his own folly—

Thundercracker had seen war before. She had never wanted to fight. He'd dragged her into it without any consideration, and now she was dead because of it.

"*My* fault," Starscream said quietly, sinking to the ground. "It's my fault."

He released Buster. The dog scrambled out of his hand, sprinting across the clearing. Then, it turned back to stare at him.

"Go," Starscream said.

Buster whined and trotted to his side. Then, Buster curled up beside him. Starscream hesitantly stroked the beast's head.

☆☆☆

Starscream and Buster reached some sort of understanding that day. The dog refused to leave him alone from that moment onward, making him Buster's new primary caretaker. Unlike before, Buster did not slip off his lead and run in circles around the camp. He stood tall and proud at Starscream's pedes, staring cautiously at any mech that came too close, with the obvious exceptions of Skywarp and Soundwave.

"Looks like he's your dog now," Skywarp had joked.

Whatever strange loyalty Starscream had gained from Buster that day, it was unshakeable. Not that he had any intention of repeating… whatever that moment was.

Supplies for Buster's care were easy to procure, as always. Plenty of squishies had pet dogs. Energeon and medical supplies were still as difficult as ever, especially for any flight frames and beastformers. Cars and trucks were everywhere, but the flying vehicles and metallic animals were not. Several Decepticons bore mismatched patch jobs that were slow to heal due to the lack of resources.

Starscream, due to being a priority receiver of energeon, was mostly healed. Same with Soundwave. His cassettes—what remained of them—were still covered in patches. He had requested extra supplies for them in the past, but if there wasn't enough for Starscream to give to Skywarp, there certainly wasn't enough for three other mecha.

The day Starscream and Soundwave would receive the same rations as all the other mecha was creeping closer. Megatron's words came to Starscream again. Was this all truly just for the sake of his ego? Were they all going to starve?

As much as Starscream liked being leader of the Decepticons, there was a pit in his spark that swallowed everything. It was a greedy little thing that given time, sucked the joy and satisfaction out of every good event. So Starscream fought harder, looked higher, and never allowed himself to be complacent, for fear that one day it would finally consume him.

Buster barked quietly, drawing Starscream away from his musings. Ahead of them was Nova Storm, her wings held low.

"Do you need something?" Starscream asked her.

Nova Storm took a hesitant step. "Can I… pet him?"

Starscream shrugged. Nova Storm sat beside Buster. The dog glanced at Starscream, then laid his head on his paws. Slowly, Nova Storm extended a hand and petted him.

"Is there any particular reason you're here?" Starscream asked.

"No," Nova Storm said, her wings held low.

☆☆☆

Despite all of the loss and change, the pointless brick game endured. Blitzwing, Nova Storm, and Skywarp were gathered in front of the tower. Starscream definitely wasn't watching them at all, because that would imply he didn't have anything better to do, or that—Primus forbid—he found the game entertaining.

Blitzwing took a brick carefully from the top. Nova Storm removed another with an exaggerated movement. Skywarp one-upped that by nearly knocking the tower over with hers. Then, she laughed and turned toward an empty space.

The players froze. A sluggish wind traveled through the quarry.

The game resumed. Blitzwing removed another brick. Skywarp attempted to nudge Nova Storm as she pulled out her brick. In retaliation, Nova Storm tripped Skywarp on her turn.

Skywarp managed to warp quickly enough not to land on the tower, teleporting on top of Nova Storm in what was undoubtedly an intentional move.

Beside Starscream, Buster barked quietly. Starscream turned toward the direction Buster barked in, quickly recognizing the approaching mech.

"Soundwave," Starscream said.

"Matters—must be discussed," Soundwave said.

"Yes," Starscream said, waving his hand dismissively. "What matters?"

"Our numbers—small. Our supplies—smaller."

Starscream sighed. "You're correct. Have our scouts found anything?"

Soundwave sent him a few sets of coordinates with notes.

"I'll take a look at that later and we'll decide how best to move forward," Starscream said.

Ahead of them, Blitzwing removed a brick from the tower as it wobbled precariously. Buster sat at Starscream's side, watching Soundwave with perked ears.

"Energeon supply low. No energeon—no Decepticons."

That fragging problem again.

"And what do you suppose we do about it, other than what we are *already doing*?"

Soundwave's visor stared into his optics. "Negotiate with Autobots. Take advantage of resources."

The Autobots. It made sense. It was their only option. But red optics burned, their glare searing into his processor. If they negotiated with the Autobots, they wouldn't be believed long enough to receive anything. The Autobots would take any excuse they could to lock them away.

The rules would change, no longer his but theirs. Starscream would be the liar, the pathetic joke of a lackey again. They would take everything away from him, turn everyone against him—

"No," Starscream said.

He held the power here. If he ceded to the Autobots, he never would again.

"Consider," Soundwave said. "Raids—will not sustain Decepticons forever."

Not now. Not yet. Not ever.

But Starscream nodded. He curled and uncurled his fingers, searching for words to end the silence.

"Is that all?"

Soundwave left.

Nova Storm pulled a brick out of the tower. The one next to it shifted, which shifted the one below it. Within moments, the entire thing toppled. Nova Storm groaned dramatically as Skywarp giggled. Blitzwing was already collecting the bricks to stack the tower again.

Skywarp glanced at Starscream, then grinned. "Hey, Screamer!"

Starscream put on his best disgruntled face, but it didn't deter her.

"Come join us!"

Starscream scoffed, but walked over anyway. What else was he going to do, aside from looking at reports that he didn't have the energy to review? When he sat, Buster placed himself between Starscream and Skywarp, a furry barrier between Starscream and the rest of the group. Skywarp whooped.

"This doesn't mean I'm joining," Starscream said.

Skywarp raised her brows. "You say that, but I don't believe you."

Starscream rolled his eyes.

Blitzwing and Nova Storm finally finished stacking the tower and the game began. Despite Starscream's token resistance, he played. The first round was typical—everyone took from the top and the tower did not wobble. With each turn, Starscream grew to understand the appeal.

The tower was missing about a quarter of its bricks.

"No, no," Nova Storm muttered as the tower wobbled. Her hands hovered in front of it as if she could prevent the possibility. Then, it stilled. She pumped her fist and returned to her seat.

The tower was down to half its bricks.

Skywarp grabbed a brick in the center, warping away with it. Nova Storm jumped up, pointing at her.

"That's cheating!"

Skywarp shrugged. "We never made a rule against it."

Nova Storm stammered. "Well—most of us can't teleport!"

"So?"

"So you shouldn't be allowed to!"

Starscream glanced at Blitzwing. The mech watched with an unamused expression, lips drawn in a line.

"We should make one starting now," Blitzwing said. "No outlier abilities for fairness. If we did not, then this would become a competition of outlier ability, not fun."

Skywarp groaned dramatically as Nova Storm grinned cheekily at her.

"I'm fine with that rule," Nova Storm said.

Skywarp looked at Starscream.

Starscream leaned his head on his hand. "It makes sense to me."

The tower was barely a frame. Every brick pulled made it wobble.

Skywarp removed a brick quickly, pulling it as flatly as possible. The tower shifted, but did not fall. Then, Nova Storm removed one of the few remaining bricks from the side. Blitzwing pulled another from the side.

Starscream tapped his fingers against his leg. It was his turn, and there was no other option. With a swift pull, he removed a center brick.

The tower leaned forward with a grinding noise. Then, with a powerful clatter, the bricks fell. Starscream hissed in surprise as one of them bounced off of his hand.

"Oooh mech!" Skywarp said. "Screamer made it fall!"

The playful, mocking tone pierced Starscream's audials. Unjustified embarrassment washed over him, quickly replaced by a wave of anger. He had no other choice! How could he be expected to do anything else when he had been set up for failure?

Blitzwing was already setting up the tower again. Starscream threw the brick in his hand, knocking down his work. Blitzwing glared at him but said nothing.

"Woah," Skywarp said. "It's just a game—"

Starscream rose from his seat and walked away, Buster at his heels. He curled and uncurled his fingers, tension seeping into his frame. His spark hummed painfully.

Of all the things to be upset about! But his spark refused to settle, anger squirming inside of him. A stupid game for stupid mecha! He shouldn't have let himself be distracted.

A hand landed on his shoulder.

"Hey—"

"Leave me alone, Skywarp!" Starscream said.

"Wait—"

"Leave me alone!" He yelled, yanking his shoulder away.

Skywarp stared at him with wide optics. Then, she grimaced and turned away. Starscream fled.

Into the sky, above the trees—where to didn't matter. He was gone with no one to pursue him. When the screeching in the back of his processor was satisfied with the distance, he landed, tucking himself beneath a tree.

The moment he settled, his body grew numb and heavy. He flexed his fingers, finding them one of the few things that would move. Wind brushed against this plating and he hissed, as if nature itself could somehow hear his displeasure and had it in itself to care. Birds chirped hesitantly, each whistle digging into his audials.

Starscream closed his optics and let his body go completely limp.

When he opened them again, it was to a quiet bark. Starscream willed his optics to focus, but they refused to work properly. Despite that, he knew exactly who had come for him.

Buster, he tried to say. His vocalizer didn't even activate.

"Oh," Came a voice from behind Buster. A mech emerged from the foliage. Between the voice and the silhouette, her identity was clear: Nova Storm.

Starscream begged his limbs to move, mortified. She couldn't see him like this! What kind of message would it send? That the leader of the Decepticons was a pathetic, whimpering fool who couldn't handle his duties?

Buster climbed onto Starscream's lap, looking up at him. His ears were held low, tail still. Air whooshed beside him, replaced with a familiar mech.

"I should've guessed," Skywarp said, the exasperation clear in her tone.

"What's happening?" Nova Storm asked quietly.

"I don't know."

Neither did Starscream.

"He just gets like this sometimes."

Skywarp pulled Starscream to her chest. Starscream curled into her as Buster leaped from his lap. A hand hovered at his back.

"Can I help?" Nova Storm asked.

Skywarp shrugged. "Not much *to* do. Just be here, I guess."

"I can do that," Nova Storm said, shuffling closer. "It's the least I *can* do, after everything."

The three Seekers sat beneath the tree, the sun sliding from the sky. As the stars began to emerge, the world finally quieted. Though Starscream's body was still numb, his spark no longer hurt. He pushed away from Skywarp slowly.

"You're alright," Skywarp muttered.

Starscream extracted himself and leaned his back against the tree. Buster hopped back onto his lap.

"You—" Starscream's vocalizer glitched as he addressed Nova Storm. "You will tell n—no one about this."

"I understand—"

"No. One."

Nova Storm stared into Starscream's optics. Starscream fought not to fan out his wings in discomfort.

"I get it," Nova Storm said. "Sometimes things hurt deep in your spark. It makes thinking hard. I know you lost Thundercracker. I lost Slipstream. We don't have to be alone."

She wasn't disgusted? Ashamed?

"It's inconvenient," Starscream muttered. For him and for them.

☆☆☆

Nova Storm kept her word. No other mecha were informed of the incident, and life went on. She spent noticeably more time with Skywarp and Starscream than before, but it wasn't anything worth getting bothered about.

The scouts had returned an energeon storage area and a potential abandoned mine. Of the two, the mine was the obvious first choice. With no one working there, it was unlikely they'd be discovered. It didn't make the process any easier.

The walls were narrow—*too* narrow. Only a single mech could fit through at a time, so they walked in single file. If Starscream flattened his wings, he could just barely turn in the tiny space. Ravage walked ahead of him, tail held high and head held higher. Behind him, Blitzwing's pedes made quiet thumps against the floor.

If the energeon crystals were of decent quality and quantity, they would take them back to be processed into energeon. They didn't have the devices to distill it yet, but those could easily be built from the scrap they had. Starscream, as one of the few remaing mecha who specialized in energeon distillation, was there to check the quality.

Ravage took a turn as the tunnel split in two. The walls ahead narrowed further, threatening to scrape Starscream's shoulders.

"You're *certain* we can fit?" Starscream asked.

Ravage yowled affirmatively. They took a couple more turns before—luckily, blessedly—the tunnel opened up into a cavern. Dull crystals glinted against their lights, covered in decades of dust. Starscream knelt in front of a particularly large cluster and brushed the dust off of one of them.

Freed from the dust that hindered it, the crystal glowed brightly. Its color was perfect—saturated and consistent. Starscream plucked the crystal and rolled it between his fingers.

"They're good enough," He said, turning back toward the other two mecha. "Take as many as you can for now."

The other two mecha obeyed. Starscream placed as many crystals as he could fit in his cockpit. There would be other collection trips, but there was no guarantee the mine would renain undiscovered. When the group had grabbed as much as they could manage, they headed back through the narrow tunnels, Ravage leading the way.

After they slipped out of the entrance, they took to the sky, Ravage clinging onto Blitzwing. The flight was short (though a walk wouldn't have been) but left enough time for thinking. Starscream was fairly certain they had the supplies to distill the energeon, but if not, they could run out before they procured them. And even if they did, it would take time to process —time they may not have.

They were halfway there when a ping from Ravage startled Starscream out of his thoughts. He read the message.

[Land.]

Starscream obeyed with minimal hesitation. Blitzwing landed beside him, Ravage leaping off his back as he transformed into robot mode.

"What is it?" Starscream asked.

The answer revealed itself before Ravage replied. Blitzwing's optics grew dim, his frame leaning forward. Starscream flexed his fingers as his spark buzzed uncomfortably in his chest. He knew, consciously, that Blitzwing was merely low on fuel, but the back of his processor screamed.

Soundwave's bleak reminder came back to him. The raids would not sustain them forever. But so soon? No, no…

He pinged Skywarp. She responded immediately, so she must've been back from her mission.

[Blitzwing is low on fuel,] Starscream sent. *[Can you warp us back?]*

[I'll be right there!]

With two whooshes of air, they were back at the quarry. Starscream turned to Skywarp.

"Give Blitzwing a cube of energeon," Starscream said.

Blitzwing stiffened beside him. "I have already had my ration."

Starscream glared at him. Dim optics stared back from a dull, dirty frame.

"Give him mine," Starscream said.

"What?" Skywarp said.

Starscream whipped toward her. "Don't make me repeat myself."

Skywarp backed away, brow furrowed. Then, she shook her head and warped. A moment later, she reappeared with a cube in hand. She hesitated before handing it to Blitzwing, glancing at Starscream. Starscream rolled his optics.

{Alert! Fuel level low.}

He would have to get used to that notification again.

☆☆☆

And get used to that notification he did. The ache of worn joints unable to be repaired greeted him as he exited recharge. He stretched, wings clinking against the wall he'd laid against, no concern for hitting another mech in his mind. Skywarp had stopped recharging with him when Thundercracker…

Buster whined beside him. Starscream sighed and petted the dog's head with a single finger. When Buster seemed satisfied, Starscream rose from his place and strutted aimlessly across the quarry. His mecha barely looked up, thoroughly used to his antics.

The camp was a shell of the previous one, which was a shell of what came before. Mecha milled about, chattering among themselves. The millions that began the war had dwindled to far below a hundred. Certainly, there were more mecha on other planets, but they were not the ones under Starscream's command.

And what good had it done them to remain here, beneath him? Dull plating glinted in the sunlight, smeared by eons of dirt and damage. Sand and dirt ground between joints until they got lucky enough for rain to fall. Every mech's optics were dim, their movements sluggish, an obvious sign of low fuel levels.

Buster barked quietly, bringing Starscream out of his thoughts. Heading toward him were Nova Storm and Skywarp, the latter hunched in an almost nervous manner. Starscream sighed and closed the gap.

"What do you need?" He asked.

"Just to talk," Skywarp said.

"Alright, then," Starscream said. "Speak."

Skywarp and Nova Storm exchanged glances. Then, Skywarp blurted something so quickly that Starscream couldn't process it.

"What was that?" Starscream asked.

"We think you should step down!"

Starscream stepped closer, wings fanning out. "You think *what*?"

"Or at least decrease your responsibilities!" Skywarp stammered. "Not because you're doing a bad job, or anything—actually, you're doing a great job, but—"

"We're concerned for your health," Nova Storm interjected.

Starscream laughed. "Concerned for my *health*? I'm in no worse shape than any of my mecha."

"Not that kind of health," Skywarp said.

"What other kind of health is there?"

Skywarp and Nova Storm exchanged glances again. Nova Storm's wings sagged.

"The *other kind*," Skywarp said, staring straight into Starscream's optics. "The kind that makes us keep secrets."

Starscream forced himself to meet Skywarp's stabbing optics, baring his dentae as he hissed, "I'm *fine*."

Skywarp leaned forward, face nearly touching his.

"You *aren't*. I can see it."

Starscream curled and uncurled his fingers. His wings itched.

"You can't make me step down," he hissed. "I can handle this. I've *been* handling this, and I will continue to handle it."

"Really?" Skywarp said. She motioned toward the mecha around them, many of whom had stopped whatever they were doing to gawk. "This looks very *handled* to me. It's not like we're *slowly starving to death* or anything."

"Shut up," Starscream hissed. He flicked his wings, not caring if the gesture was inappropriate—anything to stop the itch.

"How much recharge have you actually been getting? When was the last time you cleaned yourself?" Skywarp said. "You're overwhelmed."

"I'm *fine*."

"Stop lying!"

Lying? Starscream froze. His mecha stared at him, optics burning into his plating. He curled and uncurled his fingers, his wings twitching.

"I'm not lying," Starscream hissed. "I'm fine. I am your leader and you *will* respect my word."

Skywarp was challenging him in front of all his mecha. This couldn't—wouldn't—stand. Starscream shook himself, his spark humming painfully in his chest.

"I can't believe you," Skywarp said. "You stubborn aft—just admit it!"

Her voice rose into a yell, the tone stabbing at Starscream's audials. Starscream took a step back. His limbs tingled.

"Leave!" Starscream spat. "I don't have the patience to deal with this slag."

Skywarp took a step forward, closing the gap again. Her optics burned into him. Starscream's spark pulsed painfully in his chest, limbs growing numb.

"No," she said. "Not until you admit it."

'I have nothing to admit to,' is what Starscream tried to say, but all that emerged from his vocalizer was a quiet growl. He was coming untethered, the urge to hide rising up within him, but he couldn't back down. Moving and speaking were obstacles locked behind a hazy wall.

So, Starscream pushed against the wall with the fury of a trapped mechanimal, finally breaking through when his claws met Skywarp's cheek. Skywarp backed away from him, optics wide.

"Shut up!" Starscream screeched.

Skywarp grit her dentae and warped, appearing behind him. He turned to meet her, but she already had her hands on his arms. So, he kicked and clawed, uncaring for her safety. All that mattered was getting her away.

Nova Storm's voice called something behind him, hands reaching for him. He turned, blasting blindly with his rays. More hands reached for him. He flailed, barely able to perceive their location.

"Frag off!" He howled.

The hands didn't listen. They grasped him, pulling at his armor. His spark pulsed in his chest, the rest of his body numb, as if he weren't in it at all.

"I'm going to kill you," he roared. "Get your hands off of me!"

Another set of hands forced him to the ground. He was crushed beneath a pede, sensation briefly returning to his body. The world crept back into focus.

Soundwave stared down at him.

"Starscream—desist," Soundwave said.

"No," Starscream said weakly.

He should, logically. In the back of his processor, he begged himself to calm down, but his spark kept pulsing and the wall was still up.

"Let me go," Starscream said. When the pede didn't lift, he screamed. "Let me go!"

Something was wrong with him—deeply, utterly wrong—but he couldn't fix it. He needed to get away, to hide, but he couldn't. He rolled, grabbing the pede and forcing it off of him. Then, he leaped into the sky.

"Do—don't come after me!" He yelled. "I will be leader of this faction or I will be *nothing*, and this is what you've chosen!"

Skywarp stared up at him. "Screamer—"

Starscream took off before he could hear the rest. He flew until he lost track of where he was. When he landed, no one was pursuing him. He tucked himself behind a large rock.

His spark wouldn't stop pulsing. His body was still numb. He couldn't—something was wrong—he needed to fix it—

He sank his dentae into the plating on his arm. The pain jolted his body out of its numbness, calming his spark. He sat there, dentae in his plating, until it stopped completely.

There was no going back. He was on his own again, not even Buster to keep him company.

Chapter End Notes

Someone: *shows concern for Starscream's wellbeing*

Starscream: Is this a personal attack?

I jest, but... it really wasn't gonna go well from the start.

I finally got to sprinkle in some backstory! Yay! I was fighting myself from day one on how custom I was gonna make the continuity in this fic, but as I wrote, I realized things worked best if I just went ham, so ham I went! I have a small set of notes that I really want to share, but I must refrain because most of it will be revealed throughout the fic anyway. Maybe I'll stick it in a note once the majority of it is revealed.

Starscream's design, since I didn't link it last chapter: pillowfort | tumblr

I also made a Starscream-focused reclist that got way more attention than expected, if anyone is interested in that. :'D

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No one came for him, not that he wanted them to. He was better off alone if they couldn't respect him as a leader. They were simply holding him back! It was much easier to fuel one mech.

So, Starscream looked after himself. He stole energeon and supplies, did repairs on himself when needed, and never stayed in the same place for more than a day. All he needed was what he could carry!

Though, this did have the inconvenient side effect of him being unable to consume anything but pure energeon, since distillation equipment wasn't portable (not that he had any, anyway). Without it, he wasn't going to risk wrecking his systems. There would be no saving him if he ruined himself in that way, since the only hands to care for him were his own.

Birds chirped around him. It was almost pleasant. Dead leaves crunched beneath his pedes, and a weak wind swayed the trees. A minuscule bird flitted down from one of the trees, its beautiful red plumage highlighted by a small beam of sunlight.

Yellow eyes peered from a patch of ferns nearby. In a swift blur, the bird was caught between the claws of a fuzzy creature. The creature snapped the bird's neck and dug its teeth into its flesh. Starscream watched the scene for a moment, stunned, before he remembered what the creature was: *a cat*.

He was reminded, for a moment, why he had been fascinated by different worlds before the war began. Though he never had the opportunity to pursue this interest, unable to leave the planet, there was something intriguing about the cruelty of nature. He stepped closer.

The cat's ears turned toward the sound. It stared up at him, back rising, then fled with its meal. Why was that disappointing?

He shouldn't have wanted to associate with such a tiny, weak, and fearful creature. Organic creatures were filthy and stupid—he knew that! What had possessed him? Was he truly so lonely and pathetic?

(He tried not to think of Buster.)

"Whatever," he muttered to himself.

It was time to take off, anyway. He couldn't spend too long in one place or his enemies—ex-allies and Autobots alike—would find him. With a graceful leap, he took to the sky. Lazily, he soared on the currents until he was sufficiently lost. Then, he landed.

{Alert! Fuel levels low.}

Starscream ignored the notification, checking for the actual value. It was low enough, so he took a cube out of his cockpit and drank it. The moment the energeon entered his mouth, he craved more. The cube was gone before he could register it, and he had to stop himself from pulling another one out.

He couldn't drink them too quickly. With both factions as enemies, raiding for fuel was a major risk. The less he consumed, the less he had to worry. It meant he spent more time in recharge to conserve energy, but that didn't matter. As long as he wasn't found, it was fine.

☆☆☆

The facility was poorly guarded. It was definitely a trap, but what else was he going to do? So, Starscream broke in with as much stealth as he could manage, and had already filled his cockpit when the lights in the warehouse turned on.

One of the disgusting, squishy little humans stared at him from the entryway. Was this really not a trap after all? Were they so incompetent?

"What the fuck?" The human said. They blinked at him stupidly. Then, their brow furrowed. "Oh. Oh, right. You're one of those."

Starscream was so bewildered that he didn't realize he'd spoken until the confused, "What?" had already left his vocalizer.

"I don't get paid enough for this shit," the human said with an exasperated sigh. "Don't break anything."

It shut the door.

What in the pits did it mean by 'one of those?' Starscream didn't have time to wonder. He seized the opportunity and took off.

The next time he passed by that facility, security was much tighter.

☆☆☆

The new cubes only lasted so long. He was running out again. So, he set off, searching for another facility to raid. His search brought him a boon, though it wasn't his original objective.

Megatron's pale gray plating was unmistakable. A mech—presumably, a Decepticon—was subdued below him. Starscream seized the opportunity and fired on him, then dove in. Megatron caught Starscream in his hands, the force of the dive not enough to cause any worthwhile damage.

Starscream transformed and clawed him in the face, which did manage to pierce the plating. He clawed again, and again—as many times as he could before Megatron grabbed his wrists. The brute stared at him, a disappointed frown on his face.

"You look terrible," Megatron said.

"Like you care," Starscream hissed back.

Megatron sighed, shaking Starscream like an unruly cybercat when he began to struggle. "I suppose I don't. I hear you've left your faction, and now this is what you're doing?"

"I'm going to kill you," Starscream said. "You deserve it."

Megatron rolled his optics. "You've never succeeded before."

Starscream kicked at Megatron, finally freeing himself from the hold. He aimed his rays and fired. They singed Megatron's plating, eliciting a grunt from the fragger. He brushed himself off and closed the gap between them, seizing one of Starscream's wings.

"I tried to reason with you," Megatron growled. "You're a risk to yourself and everyone around you."

Starscream kicked off of Megatron, freezing when his wing bent painfully. A call to activate his rays was met with a low fuel warning. Allowing himself a brief moment of mourning for his dignity, he turned and sang his dentae into Megatron's hand. The fragger let go, optics wide in surprise.

Starscream took off before he could be grabbed again. His wing stung, and he landed as soon as he felt safe. Then, he leaned against a tree and braced himself. Using the trunk as leverage, he bent the wing back into its proper shape.

The world went blurry at the edges. Starscream curled up, his fans clicking on to combat the stress-induced heat burning his body. He gave in to temptation and sunk his dentae into his arm, the pain pulling him from what was surely about to become a spiral. This pain was the kind he could control—one of the few things only *he* could do to himself.

He allowed himself to drift into recharge.

☆☆☆

{Alert! Fuel levels low!}

The message brought him out of recharge. He grumbled irritably and pulled a cube of energeon out of his cockpit. Except… his hands came back empty. He didn't have any.

Fear seized his spark, but he pushed it away. He couldn't panic now. If he did, he'd be dead. Starscream forced himself to rise, fighting his system's demands that he lay down to conserve fuel. He took off, thrusters suppressed by his protocols to the point that they barely supported him.

Starscream shuddered. If he were caught now, he wouldn't be able to defend himself. He activated a long-inactive protocol, seeking anything that was even vaguely similar to energeon. His systems found something nearby.

He landed as quietly as possible in front of a long-buried cave entrance. He scratched at the rocks until an opening just large enough for him to crawl through was made. On the other side, energeon crystals greeted him.

They were covered in dust, which was not unexpected. They were also full of impurities, their color a dull, barely-glowing blue rather than a bright cyan. He had no means to process them, but he had dentae, so he bit.

The crystal gave under his dentae and was slowly ground between them. The taste was different from processed energeon, but anything would've tasted amazing with how low Starscream's fuel levels were. He would just have to hope his systems could process the energeon crystals for him.

He stuffed as many crystals as he could in his cockpit before succumbing to his system's calls for him to conserve energy and enter recharge. When he roused later, the low fuel alert was gone. He'd done it! His body could process the crystals!

His optics lit the cave dimly. It was spacious and full of crystals. There were no humans, Autobots, or Decepticons around. Maybe he could stay…

He drifted back into recharge.

☆☆☆

The crystals sustained him for a long time relative to his other finds, but they were not infinite. With an empty cavern behind him and the remaining crystals in his cockpit, he took to the sky and searched for a new fuel source.

His mission was brutally interrupted when an object triggered his proximity sensors. He swerved away from it, but it was too late. In a dizzying crash, he was sent spinning onto the ground. His side burned, and the hand pressed to it came back stained. As he pulled himself to his pedes, using the trunk of a tree as support, his wings twitched and sent a wave of agony down his back.

How had he been caught so off guard?

Voices came from nearby. Starscream didn't bother figuring out his pursuers' identities; they were Autobots or their human allies, any further details didn't matter. He attempted to transform and was met with an error.

"Frag," he muttered.

He was too damaged at a seam for the transformation to complete, so his systems denied attempts completely. There would be no flying out of this. He ran in the only direction he

couldn't hear voices. Still, they followed him, the crashing of wheels against foliage assaulting his audials.

They would catch up to him. He would be caught, imprisoned forever, laughed at—

He pulled himself out of that line of thought and searched for a place to hide. The only thing large enough to provide cover was a clump of rocks, so he threw himself behind them. The crashing passed by him as he sat perfectly still, running the command to shut off his fans on repeat to ensure they didn't automatically turn on.

The forest was silent when he finally deemed it safe to move. The Autobots had left long ago, but he still searched for any sign of them. When the search came up empty, he allowed his fans to click back on.

{Alert! Fuel levels low!}

Starscream froze. Of course! How did he forget that he was *actively losing energeon*? Frag! He had nothing to treat himself with!

He settled for shoving dirt and debris into his wounds until they stopped bleeding. It was disgusting and his systems chastised him for it with foreign contaminant errors, but what else could he do?

He still had some of the crystals from the cave, but those wouldn't replenish him quickly enough. Hissing in displeasure, he reactivated his energeon-seeking protocol. It found nothing nearby, much to his disappointment. So, he kept moving. Eventually, he reached a small human settlement.

All of the squishies were asleep, which left him free to do whatever he pleased as long as he was quiet. Starscream paused as he found a vehicle with a large tank on it. It was fuel for the humans' primitive transportation, a disgusting and smelly substance he'd had the displeasure of getting covered in during some fights in the past.

If it could fuel the humans' vehicles, could it fuel a cybertronian?

There was no better time to try. He ripped the tank open and drank, trying to pay as little attention to the taste and texture as possible. The fuel settled strangely in his tank, tempting him to clutch his abdomen. He resisted the urge, grimacing at the heavy and unpleasant feeling.

Lacking the energy to go far, Starscream dragged himself back into the woods. He laid against a fallen tree and slipped into recharge. With any luck, he would be fine when he woke.

☆☆☆

Starscream was not fine when he woke. He roused slowly, pain greeting him like an old friend before a betrayal. It intensified quickly, leaving him curled up in a whining ball within moments. He bit his arm to silence himself.

{Alert! Foreign contaminant! Location:—}

The list was long. Starscream could barely decipher it through the pain. His fans were already on, fighting pointlessly to cool him as his systems strained. His frame shook, plating rattling.

"Starscream?"

No, no! He'd been discovered—

A gentle hand landed on his side. Starscream recoiled, muffling a groan. Maybe they'd leave him to die instead of taking him prisoner. He could hope.

"It's me," the mech said quietly.

Starscream couldn't speak. All that came from him was static. He squirmed, trying to get a better view of the mech. It was difficult to make anything out through the haze of pain, but he had a guess.

"Blitz… Bli…"

"Yes," Blitzwing said quietly. "It's me. You'll be okay. Just… stay there."

He couldn't move even if he tried. Blitzwing withdrew, then, eons later, returned. Another set of pedesteps accompanied his.

"Eugh," the other mech said, cringing backward.

"Knock Out," Blitzwing said.

"Just… *wow*," Knock Out said. "This is… sweet Primus!"

"*Knock Out*."

"I can try, but there's really no fixing this," Knock Out said.

Embarrassment flooded Starscream's processor, kept from consuming him only by the pain. How must he look to these two mechs? Battered, covered in dirt and dust, the paint peeled off his arms?

Knock Out got to work, scrubbing the dirt off of his wounds. Starscream let out an embarrassing squeal when the medic finally reached the damaged metal. On the other side of him, Blitzwing gently worked his arm free from his jaws, handing Starscream yet another embarrassing revelation—he had somehow started biting himself again.

Blitzwing arranged Starscream's hands in front of him, arms extended, and traced patterns in his palms. He hummed some sort of tune, occasionally singing a word or two. Something about tiny spiders.

Eventually, the medic placed patches on the wounds and sighed. "There's something else going on, but I don't know what it is."

Blitzwing paused. "If you guessed?"

"Fuel poisoning, energeon line contamination," Knock Out said, waving a hand. "But we'd have to take him in for that."

"No…" Starscream muttered.

They couldn't take him! Then he'd be locked away, left to rot, laughed at—

Blitzwing traced patterns on Starscream's palms again, distracting him from his thoughts. The new clarity brought confusion with it. Knock Out had defected after Megatron surrendered. Why was Blitzwing…?

Starscream glanced at Blitzwing's chest, flinching backward when he saw the symbol. Blitzwing frowned at him.

"We can't bring him back to the Autobots," Blitzwing said. "We'd be turning him in."

Knock Out hummed. "A mech of his model should've offlined far before now, but this is *Starscream*. I can give him nanites and pain relief. It won't fix it, but it'll give him a better chance on his own."

As Knock Out prepared the nanites, Blitzwing sighed and said, "Anything is better than turning him in."

The nanites were injected with a pinch between his neck plating. Afterward, Knock Out placed the pain patches. They took effect immediately. Starscream relaxed as the pain faded to a dull ache.

Then, Starscream flung himself upward, initiating a transformation. This time, there were no errors to stop him from flying away.

☆☆☆

The pain didn't go away, but it did lessen. Starscream exited each recharge sore and tired, but he refused to surrender. The last of the energeon crystals were still tucked in his cockpit, nibbled on between whatever he could find that wouldn't kill him. Everything had impurities—it was just a matter of which would frag him up the least.

He could've eaten all of the crystals, sure, but something in the back of his processor rebelled at the idea. If he couldn't find any organic slag, then what would he have left? Nothing, and he would starve. It was better to save them.

So, he found himself sticking closer and closer to human settlements, unwilling to go without fuel for long. Human fuel—aside from its ache-inducing impurities—burned much faster than energeon. He was adept at avoiding the squishies by this point.

He ripped open the tank of a truck, listening carefully as he drank. The noise would attract the humans at any moment, so he had to move quickly. A shout from nearby made him jump, but just as he prepared to take off, the human spoke again.

"Wait! I have energeon!"

Starscream paused. This human had *energeon*? How? Why?

They disappeared as Starscream stared in disbelief, then returned with a glowing cube. They offered it to him slowly, like he were a frightened mechanimal. Starscream took the cube.

"Why do you have this?" He asked.

"I have some cybertronian friends," the human said. "I like to keep a little bit around for them."

Starscream backed away. Cybertronians? Friends with a human? That could only mean one thing: Autobots.

"No, no!" The human yelled. "Don't leave! I'm not going to report you. I just… They put all sorts of stuff out on the news, so I decided that if I ever saw you, I'd help."

"Why?"

The human fidgeted anxiously. "W-well, I know a lot about cybertronians, from my friends. I know that you're not supposed to be… drinking *that*."

Starscream's wings fanned out threateningly. "Are you implying I can't take care of myself?"

"No!" The human said, waving their hands. "You're doing a good job. I just wanna make it easier."

Starscream's optics narrowed as he glared at the human. They stood straight despite their nervousness. There was no fear within them in regards to their life, that much was clear. What did Starscream have to lose?

"A foolish endeavor," Starscream said. "I will leave here and run out again. One cube of energeon will not change my life. You're wasting your resources."

"But it'll make things easier for you tonight," the human said quietly. "And you *can* come back."

Starscream laughed. "And risk getting caught by the Autobots? I'd rather starve."

He took off, leaving the strangely brave human behind.

☆☆☆

Starscream was jolted from recharge by a wave of pain, a foreign contaminant alert following it. He rolled onto his other side and tried to reenter recharge, but it was futile. With an irritated sigh, he sat up, slouching from the pain. It intensified and he sank his dentae into his arm plating on instinct to keep from crying out.

He curled in on himself. Just as the pain began to lessen, muffled voices traveled through the forest. Starscream froze. Autobots, Decepticons, or humans—it didn't matter. He needed to flee.

Starscream leaped into the air, initiating a transformation sequence after he cleared the trees. He pushed as much power into his thrusters as his systems would afford, aiming to put as much distance between himself and the intruders as possible. Then, finally…

{Alert! Fuel levels low!}

Starscream landed on the border of a human settlement. He ripped open the nearest vehicle, finding its fuel tank easily. Like always, it settled uncomfortably in his tank, the taste repugnant. If he had any other option…

The annoyingly brave human came to mind. Hadn't they offered to give him more if he returned? Perhaps, he could—just this one time. Starscream took off again, destination set.

When he landed, the area was empty. The lights in the house were off. Then, one of them flicked on. A silhouette moved in the window, jumping when it turned toward him. It disappeared. A few moments later, the human came through the door.

"You came back," the human said. They offered him a cube of energeon. "Here."

Starscream took the cube. He prepared to take off, but was interrupted.

"Please!" The human said. "Stay. Just for a little bit. You can sit in the backyard."

He shouldn't, but what did he have to lose? The human hadn't reported him before. Maybe they had *more* energeon. He followed them to the backyard, moving carefully to avoid stepping on anything. The backyard was a small treeless patch with a pool on one side and a small, mesh-covered structure on the other.

A creature crawled through a tiny door on the already quite small door into the mesh structure, gazing at Starscream with wide eyes. Starscream stared back, slowly recognizing the creature: a cat. It seemed familiar.

"What is that?" Starscream asked, motioning toward the structure.

"The cat or the catio?" The human said.

"Catio?" Starscream repeated. "An odd name."

"Cat, patio—catio," the human said. "It lets Fergie go outside without getting hurt. He used to live in the woods. I didn't want to take that away from him."

Fergie stared out at the woods, giant mech and tiny human forgotten.

"But you did," Starscream said.

"He can still see the woods," the human said. "Hear the birds, feel the wind. But he can't hurt any animals and they can't hurt him."

Starscream hummed. Fergie's ears turned toward the noise. Then, the cat moved to the corner of the catio, staring at him again.

"What have you been doing?" The human asked. "Other than acting like a habituated bear, I mean."

Habituated bear? Starscream didn't know enough to tell whether or not that was an insult.

"Surviving," Starscream said.

What was there *to* do? He flew from place to place, seeking fuel and avoiding threats, then recharged when he was suitably safe. There was little time for anything else.

Movement in the corner of his vision drew Starscream's attention. He turned toward the source—his own reflection in the pool. The mech that stared back at him was a horrid, dirty mess. Its colors—what little were visible through the grime—were dull. He stared at it.

Who was he? What had he let himself become? Some sort of wild, filth-ridden creature?

"Hey."

The human.

"What is it?" Starscream asked.

The human had a small object in its hand. Water spewed from the tip of it.

"You can use my hose," the human said. "If that would help."

He *was* embarrassingly obvious, wasn't he? Starscream sighed and took the hose. It was a tiny thing, the spray surprisingly intense for its size. Despite that, cleaning himself took entirely too long. When he finished, the reflection that stared back at him was still unrecognizable, but it was slightly less revolting.

"Woah," the human said quietly.

"What?" Starscream asked.

"Your colors are really pretty."

Starscream huffed. "They'd be *prettier* if I had a shower and consistent access to energeon."

"Well, I can give you one of those, if you keep visiting," the human said, smiling sheepishly.

"Maybe I will."

☆☆☆

The visits became regular after that. His ever-present aches became bearable, then eventually only attacked him on occasion. The world was brighter, his frame lighter—knowing he no longer had to search for his own energeon made everything much easier.

It was on his way to visit the human again that he found *him*. After firing his rays, Starscream dove at Megatron, aiming to crush the other mech. Massive hands caught him and flung him away.

Using his thrusters to orient himself, Starscream landed on his feet. He aimed his rays at Megatron, threatening to fire them. The brute scrutinized him, optics narrowing.

"You look better," Megatron said.

"And you're as ugly as you always are," Starscream said.

Megatron rolled his eyes and stepped forward. Starscream charged his rays, but the brute closed the gap too quickly, wrenching his arms away so that the rays fired harmlessly into the air. With a hiss, Starscream pulled an arm loose and swung his claws at Megatron's face, aiming for his optics.

Megatron stumbled backward, releasing Starscream to clutch at his face. Starscream jumped away and charged his rays. Before Megatron could recover, he fired. With the power he had now, the shot would leave a mark!

The smoke cleared. Megatron stood before him, the plating on his chest dented and charred. Starscream grinned.

With some energeon in his system, the fight was much more evenly matched than before. They swirled, exchanging blows not quite meant to kill but certainly meant to come close. The fight halted when Starscream struck Megatron's face again, digging his claws into an optic and wrenching them deep.

Megatron threw Starscream off of him, face contorting with rage. His intact optic burned. The broken one sparked.

"*Starscream*!" Megatron spat.

Starscream readied a retort, but froze. A quiet hum traveled through his plating.

It couldn't be—

Megatron raised his arm. The cannon glowed.

Everything went white.

{Error—}

The ground was blurry, his hands in front of him.

{Error—}

Notifications flooded him. He forced himself to look past the noise. A hand closed around his arm and pulled him upward, ripping a scream out of his vocalizer as his body burned.

If he gave in now, he would die. Megatron was going to kill him.

He had to escape. Starscream kicked his pedes and activated a transformation sequence. He was met with an error. One of his seams—it didn't matter. He overrode the process, forcing the change.

The hands holding him were forced away by the transformation. Starscream flew as fast as he could. There was one place he could go.

Another error message. The world spun around him, pain and dizziness overcoming him. He crashed into the trees, leaving broken trunks in his path.

Where was he? He pushed himself onto his knees. Just ahead! He knew that structure!

Starscream dragged himself toward it. Then, finally…

He collapsed facedown.

"Oh, *shit*."

Energeon coated his hands.

"Oh, *fuck*."

They were here. He could rest now.

It would be alright.

Chapter End Notes

Thus ends the Starscream Alone arc, also known as Starscream's Horrible Time in the Woods, or Starscream Goes Feral! I thought it was longer, but it's really just the two chapters. I'm about 2.5k into chapter 15, so I figured I could post this one. I've divided this story loosely into arcs (of which there are approximately five--we're about to head into number four) and I hold back chapters from both the current arc and the previous one. It's a good compromise between posting immediately and waiting until I'm completely done, and has allowed me to stick hints for the current arc in when I edit the previous chapters. :3

Blitzwing's singing here is a (very obvious) reference to his introductory scene in TFA.

▶ I've got some song recs for ya if you want them, I suppose.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Voices reached his audials, muffled and indecipherable. His body was numb, unresponsive to his calls to move. For a brief moment, he was back beneath Megatron's pedes, the immobilizer aimed at him. But no, that wasn't it—it happened a long time ago.

That didn't quell the anxious humming of his spark. Starscream opened his optics, finding them one of the few things that would respond. Unfamiliar walls were ahead of him, medical equipment strewn in a semi-organized fashion around the room. He wasn't supposed to be here.

Where was he? The human—

They turned him in. They betrayed him! Now he was going to be imprisoned, thrown about, laughed at—the Autobots had him! He needed to get away, but he still couldn't move. What had they done?

His spark pounded in its casing. He needed to move, he couldn't, he needed to—

"He's awake."

No, no, no—he had to get away—they were going to—

Starscream's dentae ached. He needed to calm down, but there was no way for him to move, so he couldn't—

"You're fine," a gruff voice grumbled. "We blocked any commands to move your body while you're recovering. You weren't supposed to wake up right now."

"I told you," the voice that spoke earlier said.

The gruff-voiced mech sighed.

"Wh—" Starscream paused. He could speak? "When can I mo—move again?"

A flash of scarlet came into view. Starscream put that together with the other voice—*Knock Out*.

"We're nearly done patching you up," Knock Out said. "When we finish flushing your energeon, you'll be moved to a cell."

He expected that.

"How long?"

"Soon," the gruff voice said. "We had to do a complete replacement, but you were in stasis for most of it. What kind of slag were you drinking to get this many crystals in your lines?"

Starscream stared at the mech—or at least where he *thought* the mech was. What did *they* think?

"It wasn't li—like I had free access to—" Starscream's vocalizer cut off. He forced the words forth. "En—energeon with you keeping it all lo—locked up."

The gruff-voiced mech made a displeased noise. Something nearby shuffled and the world faded away.

☆☆☆

Starscream woke in a cell. It was much more spacious than the one he briefly inhabited as a prisoner of the humans, but just as empty. He pushed himself off of the floor, pausing as pedesteps echoed down the halls. As they reached the front of the cell, Starscream walked to the edge.

The mech was familiar. He knew who she was, instinctively, but he couldn't believe it. Why would she be here, of all places? Had Soundwave really…?

"Why?" Skywarp asked him.

"Why what?"

Her optics stared into his. "All of this. Any of this. Just… tell me."

That was vague. Immensely vague. What was he supposed to say?

"What do you want to hear?" Starscream asked.

"What was the point?" Skywarp hissed. "Attacking him, betraying us, abandoning me… why?"

Starscream's fingers curled. "*You* betrayed *me*!"

"I was worried!" Skywarp yelled. "You—you were… you're so fragging *stubborn*! You killed Thundercracker and you were killing yourself! It had to stop!"

"I didn't kill Thundercracker!" Starscream screeched.

How could she ever…?

Skywarp took a step back. "You're right."

"Of course I'm right!" Starscream said. "We both know who was truly responsible."

Skywarp stared at him for a moment. Then, she sighed. "This isn't worth it."

With a puff of air, she disappeared.

The halls were silent. Starscream's dentae ached. His spark hummed uncomfortably in his chest. The humming spread throughout his body, making it tingle.

He gave in to impulse, shoving himself into the corner of the cell and sinking his dentae into his arm. They were probably monitoring him, but it didn't matter. He needed something—*anything*—and he was the only thing in the cell.

☆☆☆

His next visitor was even less wanted. Starscream was still in the corner of the cell when he arrived, completely unaware until the mech said his name.

"Starscream."

Starscream jumped, his spark hammering. Then, he let out a quiet hiss and turned to face the mech. Megatron stared at him from across the containment field, optics glowing in the dim hallway.

"What do *you* want?" Starscream muttered.

"Watch your tone," Megatron said. "I just want to talk."

Starscream raised his brows. "*Just* talk? You've never been the talking type."

He was lucky the containment field was between them, but that could change at any moment. Who knew if Megatron had the code to deactivate it? It *would* be just like him to visit purely to get his hands on Starscream.

"You're a stubborn mech," Megatron said. "It was the only way to get you to listen."

Or, perhaps, Megatron could have just *listened to him*. Starscream decided to keep that thought to himself.

"So that justified it all, then?" Starscream said.

Megatron huffed. "And what is 'it all' to you, Starscream? You *chose* to act like a rabid turbofox and I reacted accordingly."

"So I deserved it," Starscream said.

Megatron rolled his optics. "When didn't you?"

Starscream hummed. He stared down at his hands as he curled and uncurled his fingers.

"What are you doing?"

Starscream kept staring. "I don't know."

"Look at me when I'm talking to you," Megatron said.

Starscream curled and uncurled his fingers again, the joints beginning to strain from the repetitive action. "No."

"Why not?"

That tone. Starscream knew that tone. He fought to keep his wings in place as they begged to fan out, to intimidate. His spark hummed uncomfortably in his chest. His fingers stung as he curled and uncurled them again.

"I don't want to," Starscream said.

"You don't want to?" Megatron repeated.

Starscream turned away from him.

"Don't ignore me—"

"Frag off!" Starscream screeched, whipping back toward Megatron. "Just leave me alone!"

"I'm your leader, Starscream!" Megatron yelled. "You don't get to tell me what to do!"

"Was!" Starscream howled. "You *were*! You're not even a Decepticon anymore! *I* led them when you abandoned us! *You* have no right to—"

"And how far did that get you?"

Megatron's voice was eerily calm, rage that was boiling over now just simmering beneath the surface. Starscream froze.

"How far did that get you, Starscream?"

Nowhere, but he wasn't going to say that.

"Frag off," he said instead.

"You—"

Pedesteps echoed down the hall. Both mecha paused. Knock Out emerged from the entryway, a cube of energeon in one hand and a case of… something… at his side.

"Megatron," Knock Out said. "I wasn't aware of any visitors today."

Megatron grunted and pushed past Knock Out. "I was just checking in."

Knock Out chuckled. "Well, isn't that my job? He *is* my patient."

Megatron sighed and left. Knock Out watched him walk down the hall before turning toward Starscream.

"I won't do the whole 'dangerous prisoner' treatment for this," Knock Out said with a dramatic scoff. "Unless you want it, that is. It's a lot easier for me to just come in there."

Starscream shrugged. Knock Out smiled and entered a sequence on the control pad, then stepped into the cell. He offered the cube to Starscream, who took it with gentle hands.

He stared down at it. The color was perfect—a bright, glowing cyan. Its flavor was phenomenal, but Starscream paused halfway out of habit. Knock Out nudged the cube.

Right. He… wasn't going to run out. Starscream drank the rest and set the empty cube aside.

Knock Out clapped his hands. "Great! Now, would you like a new paint job?"

"What do you think?"

Knock Out grinned. "I think *yes*."

He opened the case, showing off his paints. Starscream picked a set that mimicked his previous colors—there was no perfecting perfection. Knock Out set them up and painted. The soft stroke of the brush was relaxing, and Starscream found himself slowly drifting away.

He opened his optics when the sensation paused. Knock Out stared down at his arms, brush hovering over a patch where the paint was scraped away. Fear curled around Starscream's spark. The marks were unmistakably made by dentae—*his* dentae.

Knock Out had to know. Shame burned within Starscream, flames rising, threatening to consume him. Then, the brush landed.

"I used to be obsessed with maintaining my finish," Knock Out said.

What? A startled laugh escaped Starscream's vocalizer before he could stop it.

"It *is* a little bit amusing," Knock Out said. "I just needed my finish to be perfect, but every time I went to stop, I'd find some flaw. I would grind myself down until there was no paint left."

Starscream didn't know how to respond. Knock Out glanced at him, dipping the brush.

Knock Out continued. "I didn't know *why* I was doing it, just that I couldn't stop. During the war, a… friend… noticed it. He tried to get me to stop, and it did work for a while, but when he died… well, I picked it back up again."

One of Starscream's arms was fully repainted. Knock Out released it and gently took the other, laying it on his hand with the bitten patch exposed.

What did Knock Out have to gain from telling Starscream this?

Knock Out ran the brush down the bare patch and continued. "I kept it up throughout the war. I'm not certain how I managed. When Megatron surrendered, I was one of the first mecha to seek asylum. I thought I could keep it hidden the same way I had, but the Autobots were a tad more observant than I expected."

"When they caught you—" Starscream's voice wavered. "What happened?"

Knock Out's optics grew distant, as if reliving the memory. "It was Ratchet who caught me. I thought he'd be furious, but all he did was promise to help."

The final patch was filled in. Knock Out held the arm for a moment, smile fading.

"What I'm trying to say is… I know how it feels. You don't have to be ashamed."

Knock Out put the paints back in the case and closed it. Starscream felt the need to speak, but no words came to him. He watched helplessly as Knock Out left, his words echoing in Starscream's processor.

☆☆☆

There wasn't much to do in the empty cell but recharge. When Starscream woke again, it was to another visitor. Paws scrabbled over his frame, a quiet bark reaching his audials. Starscream opened his optics.

"Buster?"

Buster barked again, shoving his face in Starscream's. Starscream laughed and raised a hand to pet him. As the dog leaned into the touch, Starscream looked toward the containment wall. If Buster was here, someone must have brought him.

Blitzwing stood at the other side of the field, a small smile on his face. Starscream gently shoved Buster off and rolled onto his pedes. As he made his way to the front of the cell, Buster followed, running in circles around his pedes.

"Blitzwing," Starscream said.

"Hello, Starscream," Blitzwing said.

He stepped into the cell, hunching to pet Buster.

"I thought you would appreciate seeing each other again," Blitzwing said. "He missed you."

"I'm sure he did," Starscream said.

Buster settled at Starscream's side, tail wagging.

"Why are you here?" Starscream asked.

"For the exact reason I said," Blitzwing said. "But I did want to talk with you. How are you?"

How was he supposed to answer that? He was too tired to pull any angles.

"I'm fine."

Blitzwing hummed. His lips pulled into a thin line. "We are working to get you free. Being locked in a cell like this is not good for anyone."

Starscream reached down to stroke Buster's head, fighting a cringe as the dog licked his hand unexpectedly. "How is that going?"

"You will be free," Blitzwing said, voice hardening. "I promise."

What kind of freedom was being under the thumb of the Autobots?

Blitzwing sighed. "You missed a lot while you were away."

Buster looked up at Starscream with wide doggy eyes. Starscream stared back.

"What exactly did I miss?" He asked.

"I left when you did. I trust Soundwave, but I did not like how it all turned out. I liked you as our leader. You were not going to come back, so I went to the Autobots."

Blitzwing really liked him that much? Starscream mentally shook himself. Of course he did! He was Starscream!

"It was surprising to see Soundwave surrender. He and the Decepticons came here and laid down their weapons. They said they were tired of fighting. They were taken in with little hesitation."

Starscream scratched behind Buster's ear, rage beginning to simmer. Had he led the Decepticons to the Autobots, they would've been thrown in the brig. He would be exactly where he was right now. What did Soundwave have that he didn't?

Or, rather… what did he have that *Soundwave* didn't? The obvious answer was Megatron's ire.

"So, we're all here, then," Starscream said.

Blitzwing nodded. "All of us, now that they found you."

Starscream hummed.

"They searched for a long time," Blitzwing said. "The first thing Megatron asked Soundwave after everything started getting settled was where you were. There was a line the humans could call if they spotted you."

That explained the way the humans had reacted to him.

"They were really so desperate to find me?" Starscream said.

"Yes," Blitzwing said. "After the few who refused to follow Soundwave were captured, you were the only loose end left. The Autobots' human allies felt threatened by that."

"But they caught me, so there's nothing to feel threatened by now."

"They did," Blitzwing said. His face fell. "And yes, there should be nothing."

"So there *is* something."

Blitzwing looked away. "They are humans, and humans are full of fear, especially of us. Now they are worried about there being so many of us."

Starscream laughed. It was so very, *very* predictable. If Cybertronians actually cared about humans, then it would be a legitimate concern. But as it was, the Decepticons couldn't have cared less, and the Autobots only cared for the sake of peace. Even if either side gave a retrorat's tail, there were barely a thousand cybertronians on the planet overall, and well over seven billion humans. If those stupid organics could cooperate, they could eliminate the cybertronians through numbers and persistence like packs of ferrowolves overwhelmed cybermammoths.

"What are our *grand leaders* doing about this predicament?" Starscream said.

"They are trying talks, working with public relations humans, but… it is not an easy thing to fix."

Starscream hummed in amusement. Let other mecha juggle the impossible dilemmas for once. Primus knew they deserved it.

Blitzwing sighed. "It was simpler when we were all hiding."

So it was.

☆☆☆

The next time he was visited, it was Blitzwing again. Unlike before, where his voice was calm and cold, his words were soft as he called out.

"They're letting you out of the cell."

Blitzwing entered a sequence on the cell's control pad and the containment field disappeared completely. Immediately, Buster rushed through the field and jumped at Starscream. Careful not to injure the dog, Starscream rose.

"Out of the cell," Starscream said. "But not out of the base?"

Blitzwing shook his head, smiling. "Not free, just free-*er*."

Starscream laughed. Buster danced around his pedes as he walked out of the cell. When he went to take his first steps into the hall, he paused. The floor beneath was covered in sheets of metal. A thick seam divided it from the concrete floor of the cell.

"You're my guard, aren't you?" Starscream asked. "They wouldn't just let me wander."

Blitzwing's wings twitched. "Yeah. For now. If they get one of their fliers back from the other bases, I don't know how long they'll let me keep you."

"Then let's hope they don't."

Starscream didn't bother asking Blitzwing where they were going as he followed him through the halls. There was nowhere for Starscream to go, so what would've been the point? Scattered conversations traveled through the air as one of the hallways opened into the mess hall.

Mecha sat at tables and stood side by side. Starscream fought not to turn down the sensitivity on his audials, not wanting to miss anything important if Blitzwing spoke. Still, the voices were chaotic, floor and chairs clanging as mecha shifted in their seats. It was nothing like the predictable hum of machinery in a lab or even his cell.

Blitzwing led him to the energeon dispenser and got two cubes, handing one of them to Starscream. He took it and they both sat at an abandoned table in the corner of the room. Buster scrambled at the side of one of the seats, paws slipping. Starscream boosted him onto the seat with his palm.

Buster barked happily, tongue hanging out of his mouth as he panted from the ordeal that was climbing onto a cybertronian-sized seat as a creature barely the size of a mech's palm. Starscream tried not to laugh. Blitzwing, on the other hand, had no qualms with letting out a quiet chuckle.

Starscream drank his cube, reminding himself yet again that he wasn't going to run out. The small group sat in relative quiet for a few moments.

"No friends to sit with us?" Starscream asked. "Or did I scare them off?"

Blitzwing shook his head, placing his cube on the table. "Not many mecha want to be around me if they have the choice."

A few tables away, Skywarp popped in beside Nova Storm. The latter startled, then slipped an arm around Skywarp as she recognized her. She talked animatedly, nearly spilling her cube as she gestured.

Perhaps he and Blitzwing had more in common than Starscream thought.

"Why don't they?" Starscream asked.

Starscream knew the answer for his own loneliness, though he refused to acknowledge it out loud. In many respects, Megatron was correct about him. He was about as safe to be around as a rabid turbofox, and nearly as unpleasant.

"I'm unpredictable," Blitzwing said. "My… aspects startle them."

"Aspects?"

It was fairly obvious that Blitzwing was referring to his capricious nature, but to have a name for it…

Blitzwing leaned closer to him, speaking quietly. "If I explain this, do you promise not to tell anyone? They'll call me a freak."

Other mecha already called Blitzwing a freak, but for the sake of the conversation, that didn't matter. Starscream nodded.

"I'm not a single mech," Blitzwing said. "There is no Blitzwing, but it's easier to *just* be Blitzwing. We… work together as Blitzwing."

Multiple mecha in a single body? It was something he'd only heard in stories. Starscream put aside his disbelief. Even if Blitzwing were lying, what would he have to gain? Starscream couldn't risk alienating one of his few allies.

"Who are you, then?" Starscream asked.

Blitzwing—one of his aspects—stared down at the table. "I'm Popshot. The one you talked to after you saved Icebeam."

"And who is Icebeam?"

"The one that came to see you when you were in the cell."

Starscream was very familiar with Icebeam, then. Suddenly, all of it made sense. Blitzwing's strange moods and changes in speech pattern weren't because he was malfunctioning—they were different mecha. So, then…

"And the third one? The one I fought beside?" Starscream asked.

"Flamecrash," Popshot said. "She doesn't care much for everyday things, so she usually only takes over when we fight."

Starscream hummed. "So, how should I address you?"

Popshot paused for a moment, optics growing distant. Starscream drummed his fingers against the table. Was Popshot speaking with the others?

"In public? Just Blitzwing," Popshot said. "In private, you can use our names."

Starscream grinned. "Thank you for sharing this with me, Popshot."

There was no tactical advantage Starscream could glean from this for himself or for Blitzwing's aspects, yet his spark warmed in the same way it did after he learned a new secret he could use to overthrow Megatron. He basked in the feeling, soaking it up.

Then, a sudden pain shot through his arm. Energeon splashed on the floor as he dropped his cube. He gripped his arm with his other, dentae aching as his mind begged him to bite. He couldn't do that here—not now, not in front of Popshot and all of the mecha in the mess hall.

Beside him, Popshot froze. His optics dimmed for a moment, then his surprised face was replaced with one of determination.

"What is happening?" Icebeam asked.

"My arm," Starscream muttered.

Icebeam moved to place an arm around Starscream. He paused just before he could, optics scanning Starscream's face. Starscream pushed himself off of the table, hand immediately returning to the hurt arm after he steadied himself.

"Let us go to the medbay," Icebeam said. "Knock Out should be there, if that is what you prefer."

Starscream paid little attention to the journey. He clenched his jaw until it creaked, desperate not to give in. Then, *finally*, they arrived.

Knock Out looked up from the tools he was polishing. "What is it this time?"

"My arm," Starscream said as Knock Out approached.

Knock Out pried Starscream's hand away from his arm gently and tested the range of motion. The movement didn't change the pain, and Starscream told him as such. Knock Out just sighed and moved on to prodding specific areas of his arm, which also yielded little response.

"I have a guess," Knock Out said. "But I'll need a sample from your lines."

"Whatever it takes," Starscream muttered.

Knock Out took the sample, placing the needle of a syringe deftly between the seams of Starscream's elbow. Then, he placed the sample into a centrifuge.

"Sit," he said, motioning to the medical berths in the room. "We'll have our answers soon."

Moments passed by. The machine beeped and Knock Out removed the sample, then placed it on a slide. He viewed the slide under a microscope with a displeased hum. Then, he turned to face the other two mecha.

"Just what I thought," he said. "More crystals in your lines."

Before Starscream could ask anything, Knock Out continued.

"No, I won't need to flush them this time. Yes, this will likely happen again. I'll analyze the components of the crystals so we can figure out what you need to avoid, but for now—" Knock Out reached into a nearby cabinet and pulled out a small jar. "I'll get you something more general-purpose and we'll see if it can help."

As Knock Out prepared the medication, Starscream finally had time to speak.

"Why is this happening?" He asked.

Knock Out shrugged. "Could be the starvation. Could be lasting effects from something you had during your time alone. Could just be that you process things a little differently and it's only starting to have a noticeable effect now. Fifty percent of mecha that get crystals once get them again."

Lovely. Just. Lovely.

Knock Out finished preparing the medication and offered it to Starscream. "There. Take this once a day with energeon. The amount is written on the bottle."

Starscream took the bottle from him, irritation crawling through his plating. Of course, of *all* the things…

Didn't he have enough to worry about?

Suddenly, the idea of biting his own plating off seemed a lot more appealing. Starscream said his goodbyes and walked into the hall. Icebeam followed after him.

"Take me wherever I can be alone," Starscream said.

Icebeam nodded and led him to a room.

"This is yours," Icebeam said. "It locks automatically. If you want to go anywhere, ping us."

Starscream nodded and stepped into the room. The door slid shut behind him, the lock clicking. For the first time in a long time, Starscream had an actual berth. He flopped onto it as his plating crawled.

Just once, he told himself, sinking his dentae into his plating. *Just this time.*

Sunken teeth soon became gnawing teeth, powerful enough to scrape paint but not enough to draw energeon. He marred the beautiful paint job Knock Out had applied so recently, drawing shame forward that just fueled him further. There was so way for him to creep out of his own body, so this was the next best thing—the *only* thing—he could do.

When he finished, jaw and dentae aching in a new and typical way, he curled up, shoving his face into his arms. Every loss of control, however small, was yet another black mark on the disaster that was his existence. Knock Out's kind words from before shoved themselves to the front of his processor.

He wasn't alone. He could stop this horrid cycle of shame.

But who would ever see him like this and not be disgusted?

Chapter End Notes

Here is where a bunch of my headcanons come into play. I didn't fully intend to use them here, but with where things are going, they really fit. Knock Out and the Blitzwing collective are trying their best but they don't know exactly how to go about it.

▶ Collapsed for real-life pet illness/death mention

I didn't plan on posting a second chapter this week, but I'm sad, so!! Enjoy!

Current day author's note: I still miss that cat.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Starscream needed to get up. But as he laid on the berth, the idea seemed less and less appealing. What would he even do? He dismissed a low fuel alert and sighed.

Then, the door slid open. Blitzwing stood at the doorway, tilting his head at Starscream. Buster darted through the cracks between his pedes and the wall, leaping at the base of Starscream's berth and barking.

"You never pinged."

The quiet voice made clear which aspect was speaking. Starscream stretched and pushed himself into a sitting position, facing toward Popshot.

"What am I supposed to do?" Starscream said. "There's nothing I'm working on and nowhere to go."

Popshot stared down at him for a moment.

"We could get energeon together," Popshot said. "You have to be low by now."

Starscream pushed himself off of the berth. Anything was better than wallowing in his own misery. Just as they were about to leave the room, Popshot turned back toward him.

"The medicine?" Popshot said.

Starscream grumbled, then walked back across the room and grabbed the bottle. Stupid fragging crystals. Stupid fragging fuel lines. Stupid fragging body.

He followed Popshot to the too-loud mess hall. They settled in the same corner as before. Starscream opened his cube, read the instructions for the medication, and sprinkled the correct dose into his cube. He swirled the cube around lazily in his hand, hoping to Primus that the medication didn't have a flavor.

Luckily, it didn't. He sipped his energeon as Popshot glanced nervously at him, optics flitting from Starscream to the tables nearby. Just as he was about to ask Popshot what the issue was, Popshot finally spoke.

"Game night's tonight," he said. "I really hope you'll go."

"What else do I have to do?" Starscream said.

☆☆☆

He should have said no. He should've stayed in berth. He should've never woken up.

The room went silent when they entered. Mecha stared up at them, optics wide. Starscream had always wanted to be the center of attention, but not like *this*.

"Over here!"

Starscream suppressed a jump, though his wings still fanned out at the call. The mech responsible for the yell—Knock Out—waved at them from the side of the room. Popshot and Starscream made their way to him.

"What games do we have tonight?" Popshot asked.

Knock Out shrugged. "Nova Storm brought them. She said they'd be surprises."

Skywarp appeared in the center of the room, hand raised as she yelled, "Is everyone here?"

Knock Out stood and called back, "Not yet!"

Starscream gritted his dentae at the noise. He turned to Popshot and whispered, "Why don't they just use comms?"

"It's part of the fun," Popshot said. "Or something like that."

A mech entered through a door opposite of the one Starscream and Popshot entered through—which happened to be just beside where they settled. Starscream had seen him before. He was an Autobot scout during the war. His name was just out of reach—

"It's good to see you, Bumblebee," Popshot said.

That was nowhere near what Starscream was going to guess. Bumblebee smiled at Popshot.

"Likewise," he said, making some strange gesture with one of his hands. His face fell as his optics met with Starscream's.

"Hello," Starscream said.

Bumblebee stared at him. "Hi."

Bumblebee kept staring. Starscream refused to yield. He drummed his fingers against the table, maintaining optic contact.

Skywarp popped up behind him, nearly startling him out of his seat. "Is this *finally* everyone?"

Knock Out nodded. Skywarp scanned the table, optics lingering on Starscream. Then, she warped to the center of the room. Nova Storm joined her as the room hushed.

Then, Skywarp disappeared. She reappeared moments later with a large shape covered in a tarp. She glanced at Nova Storm, who grinned before calling out.

"Our first game of the night is—"

Skywarp ripped the tarp off dramatically, exposing a tower of bricks.

"Towerfall!"

Ugh. Not this again. Starscream sank in his seat. Beside him, Popshot smiled.

"I'm not participating in this one," Starscream hissed.

"That's fine," Popshot said. "Most of the mecha in here are just watching."

"All participants gather 'round!" Skywarp shouted.

Popshot and Bumblebee rose from their seats. Knock Out and Starscream shared glances, neither moving.

"You're not joining?" Knock Out asked.

Starscream grimaced. "Towerfall is not a game I enjoy."

"Then we have that in common," Knock Out said, leaning against the table. "It's just so… rudimentary."

Skywarp removed the first brick from the tower. Tapping his fingers on the table, Starscream was suddenly glad that they hadn't taken Buster with them. Popshot reached for a risky brick, pulling it out with enough force to make the tower sway. The rest of the players made noises of surprise as the tower stabilized.

The game was, to some degree, deterministic. While strategy would carry a mech toward the beginning, the less bricks there were left, the less it mattered. Eventually, one mech would pull the brick that stabilized the tower and it would all fall. There were no ways to pass on turns—if a mech had only essential blocks left, they were forced to topple the tower.

Where was the fun in knowing one was doomed?

A mech Starscream didn't recognize pulled a brick from the tower with practiced patience. Starscream graduated from tapping his fingers to curling and uncurling them, sighing as he leaned into the table. A flash of silver caught his eye.

He turned the sides of his arms toward himself. With a wave of embarrassment, he remembered the cause of the marks. Surely, Knock Out and Popshot had seen them. Had everyone seen them?

They needed to be fixed. He couldn't right now, but later…

Starscream crossed his arms on the table to hide the marks. Then, he turned to Knock Out.

"Where do you get your paints?" He asked.

Knock Out's optics fell to Starscream's arms. Starscream recoiled, again ensuring that the marks weren't exposed.

"Ruined my work already, haven't you?" Knock Out asked.

"No," Starscream hissed. "But—"

"It's fine," Knock Out said. "I can't give you paint, but if you come with me after this, I can reapply it in the medbay."

"Why can't you give me paint?"

Knock Out's optics fell to Starscream's arms again. Then, they locked with his. Starscream forced himself to remain still, the back of his processor screeching at the intense optic contact.

"We keep all of the paints in the medbay," Knock Out said. "It's difficult to synthesize them from earth pigments, so they're in short supply. Besides, I did a good job last time. Wouldn't you rather I do it again?"

Starscream let out an irritated noise and turned back toward the game. "Fine. I'll come with you."

The game continued for quite a while, owing to the increased size of the tower. Comparing the pitiful towers back in the Decepticon camps to the one before them now was not even worth it. Despite it just being a game, something about it made Starscream's plating crawl. He tapped his fingers on the table, watching as the tower dwindled to merely a frame.

It was Bumblebee who pulled the unlucky brick. The tower crashed to the floor, mecha leaping backward to avoid the bricks. Starscream fought a flinch, the noise attacking his audials. Still, he couldn't prevent himself from letting out a quiet hiss.

The players laughed, gathering up the bricks. Some patted Bumblebee on the back. When all of the bricks were gathered, Nova Storm placed the tarp back on top of them and Skywarp disappeared with it. She reappeared a moment later with a cart of datapads.

Nova Storm struck a dramatic pose, her wings swooping in a showy manner. Skywarp's stance was equally dramatic.

"And now!" Nova Storm yelled. "Our second and final game of the night—Wolfworld!"

Starscream had no idea what that was. He turned to Knock Out, who shrugged. As mecha began lining up to receive datapads, Popshot leaned around the line, spotting Starscream and Knock Out. He approached them.

"You should play," he said. "I think you'll like it."

"What is it?" Starscream asked.

"A collaborative survival game," Popshot said. "Nova Storm has been trying to get it to work on datapads for a while now. I didn't realize it'd be for this."

Starscream glanced at Knock Out, only to find the other mech also looking at him. He shrugged.

"What else do I have to do?"

The wait in line was boring, as lines typically were. But eventually, they reached the front.

"Where did you get this many data pads from?" Bumblebee asked as Skywarp handed him one.

"You don't need to know!" Nova Storm chirped.

Starscream snickered. In all likelihood, they were stolen from somewhere else in the base. It was so utterly Skywarp. His spark ached.

Bumblebee left the line and Starscream stepped forward. Skywarp went to hand him a datapad, optics elsewhere—until they landed on him. Neither mech moved.

"Starscream," Skywarp said. She leaned in close, shoving the datapad between them. "Don't ruin this for the rest of us."

Starscream took the datapad. He returned to his seat, spark cold. What had he expected? Numbly, he turned on the datapad and booted up the game. After entering a code that Nova Storm supplied, it brought him to a character customization screen, with a character that resembled a ferrowolf front and center.

He picked his stats first, prioritizing speed and stealth over strength. Then, he picked his wolf's appearance. After checking each option at least once, he settled on a dark rusty color. It was either that or white, and he didn't feel like choosing white.

He glanced at the mecha beside him. Knock Out chose a pale reddish wolf with nearly every point the game supplied allocated into speed. Blitzwing's face was stoic, so Starscream assumed Icebeam was currently in control. Icebeam had picked a white wolf with gray speckles. Its stats were spread evenly. Bumblebee's was a boring brown with stats leaning slightly toward stealth, but otherwise evenly spread.

Starscream saved his character. The game dropped him into the middle of a forest. Other wolves were around his, nametags making clear which mech was behind the screen. Knock Out's and Icebeam's wolves appeared near his. Nova Storm's wolf had a crown on its nametag, and the player list labeled her as 'pack leader.'

Knock Out's wolf grabbed Starscream's and threw it.

"Why did you do that?" Starscream squawked.

"I was just trying to see what that button did!"

Bumblebee laughed.

Starscream made his wolf run over to Knock Out's. He selected the button that looked most correct and grinned when his wolf got vengeance. Nova Storm's wolf ran between them, shoving them both to the side with a growl.

"This is a collaborative game!" Nova Storm shouted from across the room. "We're all in the same pack. Stop fighting."

"Then what are we supposed to do?" Starscream said.

The nametags on Starscream's, Knock Out's, Icebeam's, and Bumblebee's wolves changed to the same color.

"There," Nova Storm said. "You're a hunting team now. Go kill some elk."

That was… definitely a task. One that Starscream knew how to accomplish. Completely. Totally.

His wolf got thrown off the elk immediately. Bumblebee (Of all mecha!) had to show him how to hunt. It didn't help much, since the mech hadn't ever played the game, either.

Then, suddenly, Icebeam's wolf overtook the rest of the group and landed a killing blow on the elk. Icebeam leaned over Starscream's shoulder and tapped a cog on the side of the screen, then pointed to a button labeled "tutorials."

"Oh," Starscream said.

A brief review of the tutorials, and the team fell into a pattern. Starscream and Knock Out herded the elk while Bumblebee and Icebeam were typically the ones to land the final blow. Their pack quickly had a surplus, which led Nova Storm to introduce the next portion of the game.

In it, they were meant to raise offspring. Nova Storm suggested pairs, but didn't force any mecha together (unlike with the hunting groups). Somehow, Starscream and the rest of his hunting group ended up together anyway. It was for the best, considering they got as far as naming the pups before they all realized they had no idea what they were supposed to do.

The tutorials helped, but not to the extent they did before. As Starscream was watching over the pups, a strange wolf darted through the camp, followed by many others. Starscream immediately moved to attack the strange wolf, but he was quickly surrounded. One of the wolves grabbed one of the puppies.

(Somewhere in the back of his processor, Starscream doubted this was how wolves actually lived.)

"Knock Out," he hissed. The other mech should've been the closest to the camp. "Get back here!"

Knock Out's wolf ran into the camp. They fought together, but it still wasn't enough. Then, suddenly, Nova Storm burst through the edge of the screen, followed by a group of other mecha. The battle concluded with a victory, leaving Starscream satisfied despite its fictional status.

Soon afterward, the game night was declared over. The datapads were collected and warped back to wherever they came from. Mecha left the room in an inconsistent trickle, many staying just to chat. Starscream was contemplating recharging in his room when Knock Out's voice startled him out of his thoughts.

"Are you ready to go?"

"Y-Yes," Starscream said. "Let's go."

Icebeam followed them, as he had been assigned to do. The halls were empty aside from the few mecha heading back from game night that happened to be going in the same direction. Then, suddenly, they were not.

Starscream let out an irritated hiss as he nearly ran into Knock Out, who had paused in the middle of the hall. He silenced himself when the reason became clear. Megatron stood before them, optics glowing in the dim light.

"Knock Out," Megatron said, dipping his head. "My apologies. I didn't realize you would be heading this way."

He stepped past Knock Out, pausing when he locked optics with Starscream.

"You're here too."

The tone made Starscream's wings twitch.

"I am," Starscream said.

"It's… *good* to see you outside of that cell," Megatron said. "I hope you're taking advantage of the opportunity you've been presented."

"If that's the way you're talking about it, it certainly wasn't given by you."

Megatron frowned. "No, it wasn't."

"Right," Starscream hissed, tapping a pede. "After all, why would you want a *rabid turbofox* roaming around your base?"

"Don't be like that."

Starscream narrowed his optics. "Be like what?"

"This," Megatron growled. "I'm just trying to have a conversation."

Something drove Starscream to keep pushing.

"When has it ever *just* been a conversation?"

Megatron leaned close, nearly optic-to-optic with Starscream. "And who was to blame for that?"

Starscream's spark pulsed in his chest. A painful energy zinged through his lines. He knew that tone. They both knew how this would end. Starscream nearly took a step backward, then remembered that Icebeam was behind him.

There was nowhere to go but forward. Starscream braced himself, then shoved Megatron. The brute barely moved. His optics snapped toward Starscream's arms. He grabbed one of Starscream's wrists, dentae bared.

This was it. He was doomed—

Megatron's hand slipped lower. His grip slackened. With an ice cold wave of fear, Starscream realized why: his fingers had brushed against the mark.

"What is—"

"We have somewhere to be."

The voice was coarse, but unmistakably Blitzwing. *Flamecrash*.

"I imagine you do, too," she said, squeezing herself beside Starscream.

Megatron grunted. He glanced at them one more time before heading down the hall. Starscream watched him until he was out of sight, curling and uncurling his fingers. His teeth ached as his plating crawled, the uncomfortable energy that had built in his lines refusing to fizzle away.

"Fragger needs to realize not everyone wants him around," Flamecrash muttered. "No sense in reviving something so dead."

Knock Out glanced between Starscream and the empty hall. "Let's go."

The encounter wasn't too far from the medbay, so they arrived quickly. They paused at the entrance. Inside, the lights were off, and likely had been for some time.

Knock Out turned to Flamecrash. "Can you wait outside?"

Flamecrash nodded. Satisfied with the response, Knock Out led Starscream in, motioning for him to sit on one of the berths. When Starscream obeyed, Knock Out opened a cabinet and removed a jar of paint that matched Starscream's arms. He brought the jar over and gently took one of Starscream's arms in his hand, scraped side facing upward.

Starscream couldn't look away from it. Embarrassingly, the temptation beckoned. Not here, not now—but that didn't stop the feeling. He clenched his jaw. The solution was so close and yet completely out of reach.

Knock Out ran his fingers over the scraped patch, then looked up at Starscream.

"Do you want an energeon gummy?" He asked.

Starscream stared at him.

"To help you relax," Knock Out said. "Your plating is very tense right now, which makes it harder to paint near the seams."

Oh, right. Starscream nodded. Knock Out retrieved one from one of the cabinets and handed it to him, then began his work. Starscream rolled the gummy in his fingers for a moment. Sure, they had still managed to be around during the war, but it had been a long time since Starscream had one.

He popped it in his mouth. It gave way under his dentae, a sensation completely different from plating. But Knock Out was right—it did help.

Knock Out let his arm go, finished with painting, then tapped the other. Starscream offered the arm. Soon, that one was completed as well. Knock Out released it gently, optics landing on Starscream's.

"When I was… obsessed," Knock Out paused, optics drifting away from Starscream's. "I did it because I was anxious. I thought I'd never be good enough. What drove you to this?"

What *did* drive him to this? His processor was blank. In the moment, he always knew—but outside of it, it was as if another mech had acted for him. There was only one consistency.

"It hurts," Starscream said.

His spark, the marks—all of it.

Knock Out sighed. "I suppose so."

Starscream pushed himself off of the berth as Knock Out turned to put the paint away. Just as he moved toward the door, Knock Out came back toward him, a small container of energeon gummies in hand.

"Here," he said. "Take some for later."

Starscream hesitated, hand hovering over the container. Why was Knock Out…? He shoved the confusion to the back of his processor and took the container, giving Knock Out an awkward nod before leaving the medbay. Outside, Flamecrash waited for him, leaning casually against the wall.

"I'm going back to my room," Starscream said.

Flamecrash nodded, not detaching from the wall until Starscream passed her. Their pedesteps echoed down the empty halls. The closer they got to their destination, the less the sound mattered.

Why did he do this? Was there something wrong with him? Was Megatron truly right?

His body filled with a stinging energy. The pedesteps in the hall were suddenly louder. Around him, the walls shifted and groaned.

There was something about Megatron—his voice, the way he moved—that set Starscream on edge. One shift of the brute's tone, and Starscream became a snarling, cornered mechanimal. But he insisted—*Thundercracker* had insisted—that he was to blame. The massive, stalking creature that was Megatron did not start the fights. It only finished them.

That was the rule, had been the rule for so long that Starscream had to search his memory banks to find a time without it. Starscream was an insubordinate traitor, and those could never be dealt with using gentle hands. It was a protocol so deeply rooted that reversing it was impossible.

The door to Starscream's room shut behind him. When had he gotten there? The painful energy coursed through him again. He clenched his jaw, tapping a pede as the energy pinned him in place.

Even when he led the Decepticons, Megatron had all of the power. He struggled and starved while Megatron sat beside the Autobots with all of the energeon he could ever want. The brute strode around the base as if he owned it while Starscream was locked in a cell—and would've stayed there if it were Megatron's decision.

Familiar desperation crept into Starscream's processor. He couldn't leave the base. With no containment field between them, Megatron could handle Starscream however he wished. Nowhere was safe—not if Megatron was there.

His dentae ached. His fans had clicked on a while ago, the noise buzzing in his audials. A temperature warning appeared, which he didn't bother to dismiss. He couldn't do this.

Starscream knew what would help. Still, he resisted. He just had his arms repainted! If he did this now, he would have to see Knock Out again. His hands squeezed the container of energeon gummies.

A fraction of a moment later, he was prying the container open. He chewed on a gummy, pacing the room. The agony faded to a faint buzz.

He skipped recharge that night.

Chapter End Notes

KO, pointing at Starscream's arms: This needs to stop.

Starscream: Because you have to keep repainting me?

KO: NO--

Starscream will get to a better place eventually, I swear. Right now he has no idea what mental health is (or what he's feeling half the time--his aft is super alexithymic), let alone healthy coping mechanisms. Knock Out is doing his best. I hope how difficult this is for him comes across even through Starscream's self-focused POV.

There are a handful of things I'm setting up in the background, but it's really hard to drop hints about them. If somebody guessed them before they came up, I'd be shocked. I can give you this, though: Starscream has never had the full picture of anything throughout this fic. Being several chapters ahead makes it really awkward to edit because I'm past all of the reveals, but you guys aren't. :'D

▶ Collapsed for mentions of pet death (update on previous note)
▶ Song Rec

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The painful energy never went away. When the sun rose and the day began, Starscream knew he would have to do something. But what could he do?

Would it be so bad to live on his own again, if only to get away from Megatron? He paused in the center of the room. They wouldn't let him leave the base, but had that ever stopped him before?

Starscream strode toward the door. He raised his fingers above the entry pad, fully prepared to hack it—

UNLOCKED, the indicator read. *UNLOCKED*.

He opened the door. His pedes refused to move across the threshold. What if this was a trap? They were trying to see if he'd break the rules, and then they would punish him for it. It had happened before.

Starscream clenched his fists so hard that the metal creaked. That didn't matter. He'd just have to make sure he wasn't caught.

He moved down the halls, stepping lightly to minimize the noise he made. His fans clicked on, and with a frustrated grumble, he shut them off. Each hall was the same typical, boring gray. Where was the exit?

After the thousandth pointless turn, voices came from the end of the hall, echoing and muffled. Starscream froze, recognizing their sources. Megatron, Optimus, and Soundwave, here? Had he stumbled into a meeting?

If they caught him, he was doomed. Curiosity beckoned, and he crept closer. They were in a room, the door open. Now, he could catch a few words.

"Humans—reputation—Starscream—"

What about him? Starscream crept until he was beside the doorway and turned up the sensitivity of his audials.

"Starscream—unwise to leave unoccupied," Soundwave said.

"I know!" Megatron said. "But we can't give him access to anything he could use to plan against us."

"Starscream—unwise to leave unoccupied," Soundwave repeated. "Starscream—a scientist. Give access to a lab."

"That's the exact opposite of what we should do! It'll just give him the tools to betray us," Megatron said.

"Starscream—clever. Would have betrayed by now regardless of lab access."

Optimus hummed. "So you're saying that if he wanted to, he would find a way whether we gave him access to a lab or not."

Soundwave nodded. "Starscream—determined, irrepressible. Directionless Starscream—discontent Starscream."

"Yes, but—"

Optimus cut Megatron off. "We're arguing in circles. I'm sure we can spare a lab, or at least some supplies. He can be supervised."

"You don't know him like I do, Optimus," Megatron said, tone simultaneously biting and soft. "He's dangerous. He'll walk all over us if we let him."

"Then we won't let him," Optimus said.

"Megatron—forgets. Soundwave—also knows Starscream."

Megatron sighed. "Yes, yes. I know."

"Starscream—led the Decepticons. Starscream—wanted peace."

"That's what he *claimed*," Megatron said.

"Not a lie," Soundwave said.

"Then why would he attack me every chance he had?"

Starscream's hands curled into fists. How little did Megatron understand? Did the brute truly believe the aggression was undeserved? That he could push him around? Abandon his faction? Fight alongside the enemy? There was a difference between an act of war and an act of vengeance.

Megatron was the threat. He sat atop his throne like a predacon atop its deactivated prey. A hungry beast, he stalked the halls, waiting for an excuse to fight. With every small slight that Starscream managed, the scrutiny intensified.

Then, Starscream was reminded, it was just him. Other mecha failed Megatron on occasion, attracted his wrath, but none bore his unending ire. A dismissive '*yes, yes'* to Soundwave was a sharp *'Quiet your insubordinate vocalizer!'* to Starscream.

Why did *Megatron* hurt *him* every chance he had—even before Starscream had tried fighting back? What about *Starscream* demanded such a harsh hand? Why did Megatron never find him worth respecting or listening to?

"Starscream—wants what's best for the Decepticons and himself," Soundwave said. "Megatron—a threat."

Megatron sighed in irritation. "This won't get us anywhere. I've said my piece. If you want to take the risk, I can't stop you."

As pedesteps came close to the door, Starscream backed away, preparing to sprint down the hall, but it was already too late. Megatron emerged from the doorway, nearly running into Starscream. His optics, bright and burning, met Starscream's.

"I thought you weren't awake," Megatron said. "Where is Blitzwing?"

Starscream could throw Blitzwing under Megatron's burning gaze easily, but his spark rebelled at the idea. During the war, he wouldn't have hesitated, but now…

"The lock failed," Starscream said. "I'm here by myself."

Megatron's optics narrowed. "It did? And what are you doing out here on your own?"

Optimus emerged from behind Megatron, saving Starscream from having to explain.

"Starscream?" Optimus said.

Megatron turned back toward him. "He said the door was unlocked."

"Must have been an error," Optimus said. "But maybe we'll keep it that way. We have some good news for you."

Starscream dipped his head in acknowledgment, not quite sure what the proper response was (without irritating any of the mecha around him, anyway). It certainly wasn't *'Yes, I was just eavesdropping on you.'* He didn't have to worry, since Optimus spoke again.

"You will have access to a lab soon, should you want to work on any projects. Any proposals will have to go through our heads of science and security first."

"Thank you," Starscream said. "But… am I able to leave the base?"

The lab would give him something to do, but expanding the walls of his prison did not free him. Did they see him as a prisoner or an equal? Was this just a concession to keep a dangerous creature locked away?

"No—"

Optimus cut Megatron off with a gentle glare.

"Not yet," Optimus said. "There are a lot of complicating factors, but we are working to give you the same freedoms afforded to the rest of us."

So, this wasn't of their own doing. The humans, then? Regardless of the fault, the fact stood—Starscream was a prisoner.

"And this isn't just to make me work for you?" Starscream said.

Soundwave stepped out from behind Optimus.

"Your projects—yours. They will not be taken."

He stood with his chest at an angle that made the Decepticon brand on it flash. Starscream didn't doubt his words. Soundwave, above all, was an honest mech. Perhaps, he could have something to himself for once.

"I see," Starscream said. "I look forward to using that lab."

The conversation soon dissipated, and with it, the group. Optimus peeled away, Megatron following him after one last glance at Soundwave and Starscream. The two remaining mecha stood silent for a moment.

"So," Starscream said. "How are the cassettes?"

Soundwave turned away—slightly, nearly imperceptibly—but away nonetheless. "Ravage—restless. Like to wander. Rumble and Frenzy—gone."

"Gone?" Starscream said, leaning closer.

Ravage had always enjoyed exploring (and playing the occasional prank with even more occasional aid from Skywarp and the other cassettes) but Rumble and Frenzy were not the type of mecha to go off on their own without reason. Unless… had they been killed? Was that why Soundwave surrendered?

"They left," Soundwave said.

That was… strange. Starscream had rarely interacted with the two cassettes, but from what few moments he had, they were just as loyal to Soundwave as the others. Though, Starscream couldn't begrudge them for not wanting to stay with the Autobots. He had spent his entire leadership of the Decepticons attempting to avoid that fate, after all.

☆☆☆

Starscream was allowed a lab much more quickly than he expected. It was small, and only had the most essential equipment, but it was his. He stood in the center of the room, letting the fact settle in. All of this was his own space. If he was lucky, no one would be allowed to interrupt him—not even Megatron.

Of course, he was being watched. The cameras were obvious from the moment he walked in. But when hadn't he been watched since he was dragged to this accursed base? And, truly, when had anything been surveillance-free after the war began?

What could he possibly work on? Weapons were a no-go—he could tell that much without asking. With how basic the equipment was, there wasn't much he could build, anyway. What else could…?

The idea came to him suddenly, as if a foreign force had placed it in his processor. His hands brushed against his cockpit. *Energeon*. He could see if there was a way to manufacture it on Earth.

The caches around the planet could only go so far. Already, they were beginning to exhaust them. And if the humans wanted to use it for their own purposes? They would surely starve.

The substances already created on the planet were close enough that it could work. He was able to drink some of the humans' fuel—regardless of its adverse effects—so it would be a decent starting point.

He drafted a proposal and submitted it, pacing around the lab. A few moments later, he was pinged. The proposal was accepted. Starscream twirled in place, his spark humming happily.

If—*when* he succeeded, every mech on the planet would owe their lives to him. That embarrassing time alone was just what he needed to learn what no other mech was willing to.

☆☆☆

Getting out of berth was easier that morning, and the next, and the one after that. *Finally*, he had something to do. He hummed to himself as he set up a solution under a fume hood. The chemical compositions of energeon and earth fuels weren't particularly similar, but they shared some elements. Most mecha could consume modified energeon, such as gummies and candies, so if he could get it close enough to that, it might work.

The strange purple energeon—dark energeon, it had grown to be called—that was found during the war was also a different form of energeon. But unlike gummies and candies, it had disastrous side effects even when processed. After its discovery, any progress on converting different substances to energeon had been halted. No mech wanted another dark energeon incident on their hands—especially since no analysis was able to reveal why dark energeon did what it had.

(All of the substance had been destroyed at the end of the war, with orders for any future finds to be destroyed as well. One of Starscream's few restrictions on this project was that he couldn't use any dark energeon samples—not that he desired any.)

Finding the solution to this issue would be tricky, and would be more of a biology problem than a chemistry one. Though, was chemistry *not* biology? The point was, some level of processing could be done by a cybertronian's systems. There was an amount of unpredictability to some substances, but since Starscream had consumed earth fuels before, he had a general sense of how they'd impact a cybertronian body. They contained impurities that could not be filtered out properly by a cybertronian (*especially* one with his issues), but if he could create those filters…

Yes, yes! That would work! Starscream's wings wiggled. A use could be found for the portions that were filtered out. Perhaps the humans would want it. That part didn't matter as much.

And if they could filter the substances here, then couldn't they filter substances on other planets? As long as they avoided another dark energeon incident, it would be a perfect solution to their energy crisis! Starscream left the solution to sit under the hood for a moment, preparing for the next step of the process—

[May I come in?]

Starscream hissed at the intrusion that wasn't one, wings flicking. Tapping a pede, he glanced between the fume hood and the rest of his setup. It could wait—for now—but that didn't mean he had to be happy about it.

He sent an affirmative, and a moment later, the door slid open. Icebeam stared at him from the doorway.

"What is it?" Starscream asked, irritation seeping into his tone.

"We are watching a movie," Icebeam said, paying Starscream's irritation no mind. "I wanted to invite you."

Starscream curled and uncurled his fingers, the back of his processor still seething irrationally at the interruption. "Who else will be there?"

"Knock Out, Bumblebee," Icebeam said. He paused for a moment, posture stiff—likely answering a comm. "Ravage."

"Ravage?" Starscream said.

"Ravage overheard," Icebeam said.

Starscream laughed. What else should he have expected from one of the Decepticons' top spies? In peace, those skills had little use except for mischief.

"I'll come," Starscream said.

He had already been interrupted. The experiment could wait. Besides, he still had a lot of thinking to do. If it was a biology problem, he may need assistance. There certainly weren't any good ways to simulate a cybertronian's systems on Earth. It wasn't like he had access to any retrorats or glitchmice here. With Cybertron's death, there may never be any of them again.

Icebeam nodded. "Are you able to come now?"

"Yes," Starscream said, taking a step toward Icebeam.

The other mech headed to the entryway. As they both turned into the hall, Icebeam's optics met Starscream's.

"What were you working on?" Icebeam asked.

"Well—"

Starscream launched into an explanation, his wings rising. As the words tumbled out of his vocalizer, a momentum built, driving him to supply more and more details. Just as he was about to explain the difficulty he would encounter once he was ready to test the filtered substance, something gave him pause.

Icebeam's optics were following something. Starscream stopped speaking, and they stopped moving.

"What is it?" Starscream said.

"Nothing," Icebeam said. "Please continue."

"It's not nothing," Starscream insisted. "You're staring at something."

Icebeam hesitated before speaking. "You are very… passionate. I am appreciating that."

Starscream turned away. "You're lying."

"I am not lying," Icebeam said.

Starscream rolled his optics. The other mech could say that all he wanted, but it didn't prove anything. Icebeam was keeping *something* from him—it was just a matter of what. But whatever it was would have to wait. They had already reached the door.

Icebeam pressed to open it and a familiar golden blur flew out, heading straight for Starscream's pedes. Buster barked at him, paws scrambling against his legs. Starscream petted his head.

The mecha in the room watched them enter with no signs of hostility. Knock Out was splayed dramatically on one end of the couch while Bumblebee reclined on the other. Ravage laid across the back, paw dangling and tail behind Knock Out's head. There was just enough space for Icebeam and Starscream to fit.

Just as Bumblebee pressed play, the door opened. The movie was quickly paused again as the gathered mecha stared at the uninvited visitor. Soundwave stared back.

"Ravage," Soundwave said.

Ravage mrrowled in response.

"You did not tell me where you were," Soundwave said.

Head tilted and tail flicking, Ravage stared—no doubt sending a comm. A brief silence passed before Ravage sent another comm, this one available to the whole group.

[Mind if we add another mech?]

The group exchanged uncertain glances. Icebeam looked between Ravage and Soundwave.

"It is no issue," Icebeam said. "But we do not have a lot of room."

[Won't matter to him,] Ravage sent.

True to Ravage's word, Soundwave settled on the floor in front of the couch. Ravage leaped off the back of the couch, then crawled onto his lap with a purr. Bumblebee shrugged and hit play.

The movie was a human one—because *of course* it was—but the main characters were other squishy earth creatures. Though Bumblebee laughed at some of the more outlandish moments earlier on, Starscream found himself unamused. A quick glance around the room found him to be in the minority—even though the others were silent, they were fixated on the screen.

Starscream leaned back, nearly flinching as Buster hopped into his lap. He petted the dog, boredly waiting for the movie to end. At one point, the main character—a fluffy white dog—dangled a cat over the edge of a bridge. That moment finally got a snicker out of Starscream, which drew a quick glance from Bumblebee. Starscream quieted himself.

The movie went back to being dull. Ravage stretched in Soundwave's lap, motors purring. The dog and the cat he had threatened were forced to work together now, with the cat cleverly manipulating the dog to her will. Slowly, Starscream found himself rooting for the cat.

Then, through a series of events, the dog returned to his human only to find that he was replaced. Starscream's attention was drawn away from the movie as Ravage growled, then hissed and leaped off of Soundwave's lap. With an irritated rattle of plating, Ravage settled on the back of the couch again.

Soundwave stared up at Ravage, one hand curled into a fist and the other hovering above his lap. Ravage stared back, tail lashing. Shoulders falling, Soundwave turned back toward the screen. The dog in the movie dropped his toy and left his human with the impostor.

For a moment, Starscream felt small. To be so known, so loved—it was a thing he wasn't sure he experienced. But to be discarded, *yes*, he had experienced *that*. He glanced at Soundwave. The usually proud mech was hunched, fingers running along the seams of his arm plating.

Perhaps he felt the same way. Such a thing wouldn't have motivated Starscream in the past, but now he felt compelled to act. Part of it was practical—if they had something in common, they could ally—but the rest of it was much deeper and far more pointless. During the war, such an idea would never have occurred to him.

How could he go about it? Confronting him was out. What mech wanted their innermost conflicts made public? If Starscream were in his position, what would he want to hear?

[Megatron betrayed me too,] Starscream sent.

In front of him, Soundwave stiffened. Then, as a message came through to Starscream, he relaxed.

[Megatron—selfish. Only takes care of himself. Soundwave—should have known.]

[Do you think any of us expected it? I thought he would rather die than surrender. None of us—not even you—could have seen it coming.]

[Sold us out. Left us to rot. Pardons mean nothing.]

At times, speaking to Soundwave was like putting together a puzzle. He had a tendency to leave important details out, or omit entire words—something which did not carry over to his immensely detailed reports. In many cases, it protected him. The room for interpretation allowed others to take the most charitable one.

Though, Starscream had to wonder: did that irritate him? Did he know that what he said would never be what he meant? Did Megatron ever put words in his vocalizer the way that he put intentions in Starscream's processor?

[Yes, he did,] Starscream sent. *[What was that about pardons?]*

[Pardons—a cheap trick. Thoughtless at best. Megatron—still wants control. Autobots—uncharitable.]

On the screen, the dog watched as the set his human was inside of burned. He ran past the closing door to save her.

[I thought so, too. We are in this together, Soundwave.]

The dog on the screen led his human to an open vent, the fire burning around him. She was too weak to crawl. So, the dog barked, the sound echoing through the vent.

The next message Soundwave sent was an repeat of Starscream's own.

[We are in this together.]

The humans found the girl, and the movie ended.

Chapter End Notes

This and 10 were originally gonna be one chapter. Once I crept toward the 6k mark and I hadn't addressed everything yet, I knew I had to split it. Angst is my wheelhouse, so it's a little bit difficult to write fluff. But you've gotta give em a break sometime! This isn't quite fluff, but next chapter is gonna have some sillier moments.

The movie they were watching was Bolt (2008). It's my favorite movie. More Starscreams would be Mittens stans than would not, IMO. JayTheTaz did a super cool analysis of Mittens that covers a lot of the reasons I think Starscream would love her. I love referencing movies and TV shows to foreshadow events in the plot, and the inclusion of Bolt here is one of those moments, but a lot of the connections I'm drawing are very vague. :'D

Made a series and stuck this fic in it cause I'm contemplating a sequel and a couple of oneshots, but that all depends on me managing to hold interest and energy long enough to get em done.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The energeon conversion project was going well, despite many interruptions. Starscream couldn't help being irritated at each one, even when he knew it was bound to happen. Every hour not spent refueling, recharging, or with others was spent on the project.

This interruption came in the form of his own body. He rose that morning sluggish, his optics refusing to focus completely. But there were no error messages, so he pushed on.

He grabbed a cube from the dispenser and took it to his lab, determined to start working as soon as possible. But, as he gripped the lid of the cube to open it, his fingers slipped. As he adjusted his grip, the cube nearly tumbled out of his hands. Eventually, he managed to take his morning fuel, but not without struggle.

This strange lack of coordination carried over to the project. After the fifth time he nearly dropped a piece of equipment, Starscream placed the beaker on the table and stared. His plating crawled, and he sank to the floor. The overhead lights—which were loud and bright to begin with—were blinding, the buzz assaulting his audials.

Starscream hissed in irritation. What was wrong with him? Was this a virus?

The thought of leaving the room—of getting up—was unbearable. Despite knowing he needed to get up, to be productive, the back of his processor wanted nothing more than to stay on the floor forever. Pushing on the counter, he forced himself up, only to crumple when a stabbing pain attacked his leg.

On instinct, he sank his dentae into his arm, the other clutching his leg. The frag? What was happening?

He needed to… what did he need to do? The medbay! Knock Out—he needed to comm Knock Out!

But what did he…

Starscream stared at the floor. The lights turned off automatically. Was he truly sitting that still?

Eventually, the pain faded to a manageable amount, and Starscream's processor became clearer. He forced himself up, leaning against the counter, and made his way out of the room. If he could make it to the medbay, he was going to.

Loath as he was to admit, it was likely that another bout of crystals was responsible for this. After Knock Out had obtained the results from his sample, he'd been confident of the cause, but maybe he'd misjudged it. Or, maybe the dosage wasn't sufficient.

Starscream activated the touchpad in front of the medbay and leaned against the frame as the doors slid open. Three mecha stared at him from varying positions in the room. Starscream made optic contact with Knock Out, prompting the mech to react. Knock Out strode across the room as Ratchet and Hook went back to whatever it was they were doing.

"Let's sit," Knock Out said, leading Starscream toward a berth. He pulled the curtain around them, then turned back toward Starscream. "What seems to be the problem?"

"My leg," Starscream said. "I think it's crystals again."

"It probably is."

Despite that, Knock Out still did a range of motion test and felt the plating. It was a boring—but necessary—part of the process. Then, as expected, he took another energeon sample.

"I'll be back," he said, slipping through the curtain.

Starscream was left to sit alone. An object at the side of the berth caught his attention. It was made of stone, with a swirly black and white coloration. Were those eyes? Starscream leaned toward it. Was that a face?

It looked an awful lot like Knock Out. Starscream snickered.

Then, Knock Out pushed himself through the curtain, syringe in hand. He paused, looking from Starscream to the object.

"Ah!" Knock Out exclaimed. "You found my latest piece. What do you think?"

Starscream had no idea.

"Is it you?" Starscream asked.

Knock Out's posture straightened, standing proud. "Yes, it is. I carved it myself."

Starscream hummed. Knock Out stepped closer and prepared the syringe.

"This is just some nanites to promote healing," Knock Out said. He pulled the syringe out gently, then prepared a pain patch. "You know what this is."

Starscream relaxed as the pain faded. It wasn't completely gone, but it was ignoreable. Knock Out rose, optics briefly landing on Starscream's arms.

Slag. How had he forgotten?

"It's alright," Knock Out said quietly. "Can I see?"

Starscream offered his arm and turned his head away. Knock Out took the arm gently, turning it in his hands.

"Nothing a little paint can't fix," Knock Out said.

As Knock Out exited through the curtain again, determination rose within Starscream. He couldn't keep doing this. It was embarrassing and inconvenient. There had to be a solution, and he would find it.

Knock Out emerged from the other side of the curtain, paint and brush in hand. Starscream offered his arm and Knock Out began to paint.

"We analyzed the sample," Knock Out said. "It goes a lot faster with three mecha than one."

"What did you find?" Starscream asked.

"You're right. It's more crystals," Knock Out said. "The medicine we had you on can dissolve some of them, but it's not as effective as filtering your energeon in the first place. I can place an order for filtered energeon."

As if it hadn't sank in before, revulsion grew inside of Starscream—there was something wrong with his body, and it wasn't fixable. All of the other mecha would get their regular cubes—ones he'd drank all his function, ones that were *hurting him*.

Would the filtered energeon taste the same?

"You're not the only mech with fuel restrictions," Knock Out said, as if sensing Starscream's concerns.

"Okay," Starscream said.

The words were weak, barely able to exit his vocalizer. The rest of the visit passed in a numb blur, and suddenly, he was back in his room. He swung his arm, slamming it against the wall. The crack echoed through the room, and he froze.

No. He just told himself he couldn't do this.

He dug the container of energeon gummies out of his desk and popped one of the few remaining ones in his mouth, using the taste to distract himself. His dentae ached.

What could he do?

There was no concrete way to stop himself—he knew that. Redirection, like he was doing now, was only so effective. He needed something that was not himself. What could he use?

Then, he found the answer. He tore strips off the blanket on his berth and wrapped them around his arms. The sensation wasn't the same, but it was enough to protect his plating.

With the door locked from the inside and the lights off, Starscream curled up in the one place no other mech could intrude, and let himself fall apart for the thousandth time.

☆☆☆

He couldn't wear strips of torn blanket everywhere. It would be suspicious, and would hinder the transformation process. So, with stealth reserved only for war, he snuck his way into a storage room. It took some time, but he found the right materials.

Soon, he had two stylish arm guards. If asked, he would just say it was to protect his paint. He *was* known to be vain, after all. No one would ever ask what his paint needed protecting from.

☆☆☆

On the way to his lab, a bright yellow object caught his optics. Starscream stopped to examine it. It was tiny, squishy, soft, and most definitely *not alive*. The outer surface of the object reminded him of a blanket, though he didn't know any blankets that were oblong. It had tiny, circular appendages sticking out of its back that reflected light, and a dark stripe on its body.

There was some sort of earth creature it resembled, but Starscream couldn't recall its name. He took the object with him to his lab, placing it on a counter he barely used.

Starscream set out the supplies for the day's tests. Then, he stood there.

And stood there.

And stood there some more.

He was wasting time. With an irritated grunt, he prepared the first test. Or, he would have, if his processor would calculate the correct numbers. The calculations refused to run, catching on every possible snag, and eventually just becoming meaningless symbols.

First, that day when he could barely hold his beakers, and now this? Starscream hissed in irritation and tapped his pede. He could still work. He *had to* still work, because what else could he do? He *wanted* to do this! On any other day, he could do this with ease! What was the issue?

Starscream checked his fuel levels. They were low, despite the lack of alert. Perhaps that was the problem? He sighed and left the lab, heading for the mess hall. No mecha looked when he entered, but their chatter still pierced his audials. He lowered the sensitivity, but it didn't help.

When he entered his code on the dispenser, he was reminded of his new fuel. The color was slightly off, and it was thinner than regular energeon. But from a distance, no mech would be able to distinguish it.

He walked back across the mess hall, but something gave him pause—A flash of purple and bright yellow. He turned and his optics met with Skywarp's. Beside her, Nova Storm stood. Skywarp held an arm out, preventing Nova Storm from moving. Starscream looked away.

He stepped out of the mess hall, popped the seal on his cube, and drank. It was the least flavorful energeon he ever tasted. Not even the watered down sludge he and his mecha drank

while he led the Decepticons was this bland. But, knowing it was his only option, he forced it down.

It coated his mouth in a disgusting residue. He smacked his lips, trying to get it to go away. As it refused to disappear, he tapped a pede.

"I'm just saying, Warp—"

Starscream froze as the door to the mess hall slid open. *Skywarp and Nova Storm.* No. He couldn't stay here. He opened the door to the nearest room, not caring to read the label.

It was dark. If not for the glowing visors at the back of the room, it would've been pitch black. Starscream squinted at the sight, slowly recognizing the mecha on the floor.

"Soundwave?" He muttered.

Soundwave tilted his head toward him. Ravage, who was sitting atop his chest, did the same.

[You can stay,] Ravage sent. *[But be quiet.]*

Starscream nodded and sat on the floor. The room was small, so he was an uncomfortably short distance away from Soundwave. What was going on here?

They sat in silence. Starscream closed his optics. The lack of noise—machine or otherwise—was pleasant. Slightly unsettling, but pleasant.

Then, he was shoved sideways. He cut off his own startled yelp as he landed on top of Soundwave. A set of paws landed on him, a small glowing visor revealing the culprit: *Ravage*.

[Why?] Starscream sent.

Ravage stretched on top of him, then curled up, engine purring. The pressure and vibration was soothing. Soundwave's tape deck dug into his dorsal strut, but he found he didn't mind. Something about it oozed safety, and he found himself pleasantly drifting away.

Then, he remembered. Gentle hands, the brush of a wing against him—

Ravage shifted on his chest, nose shoved into his neck. The purring, now closer to his audials, drowned everything else out. He fell into a peaceful recharge.

When he woke, Soundwave was still beneath him. Ravage was halfway off his chest, legs dangling. The brightness of Soundwave's visor increased, and he stirred. Starscream prodded Ravage, who stretched, then slid off of him.

As they both sat up, Starscream turned to Soundwave.

"Why?" He asked quietly.

Soundwave looked away. Ravage, with a shake of plating, walked between the two mecha.

[Things get loud sometimes,] Ravage sent. *[Recharging in a quiet place with allies helps.]*

Allies… right. That was what they were.

Ravage glanced between Soundwave and Starscream before adding, *[Plus… without Rumble and Frenzy and… others… there's a lot less weight. You made up for it.]*

Starscream hummed in amusement.

"Well," Starscream said quietly. "I wouldn't be opposed to… doing this again."

Soundwave finally looked at him. After a quick rub of cheek plates against Starscream's arms, Ravage returned to Soundwave.

[How about tomorrow night?]

☆☆☆

Recharging with Soundwave became a regular occurrence. Neither of them spoke about it, but that wasn't a bad thing. There was an undercurrent of understanding beneath the silence. They typically spent the nights in Starscream's room, which was a surprise to realize. He assumed it was because Soundwave's was cold and empty.

The lapses in concentration faded away, though the occasional off day still plagued him. He was making decent progress. Though, an interruption came to him yet again.

[Let me in?]

The request was undeniably Soundwave. Starscream sighed and sent him an affirmative. A moment later, the door slid open. Soundwave walked through the doorway with two energeon cubes in hand. He offered one to Starscream.

Starscream tapped a pede. His fuel levels were low, so it wasn't unneeded, but…

Soundwave drew backward—slightly, nearly imperceptibly, but backward nonetheless.

"I can't drink that," Starscream said.

"Query: Why?" Soundwave said, bringing both cubes to his chest.

Starscream tapped his pede harder. It thunked against the floor loudly. The words refused to exit his vocalizer.

"Dietary restriction," He finally spat out.

Soundwave nodded, undeterred. "Query: Starscream and Soundwave—to the mess hall?"

"Sure."

The halls were empty as usual—at least until they were nearly there. They came to a stop as a familiar voice called out from around the corner.

"Soundwave! I've been looking for you."

Megatron stepped around the corner, something between a smile and a neutral expression on his face. It was soft in a strange way, but not completely friendly. His gaze hardened when his optics landed on Starscream.

"I wanted to discuss something," Megatron said.

"Soundwave—on break."

Megatron hummed. "That never stopped you before."

"Soundwave—now takes breaks."

"Really?" Megatron said.

"Really," Soundwave repeated. "Soundwave—on break."

"That doesn't mean—"

Something about the interaction irked Starscream, so he jumped into action.

"What about it don't you understand?" Starscream said. "He's occupied. Talk to him later, *afthelm*."

Megatron's optics turned toward him, burning.

"*Starscream*," He said in that special tone. "This doesn't concern you."

Starscream fanned out his wings. "Soundwave is spending his break with me, so *yes*, it concerns—"

"What is that on your arms?"

At some point, Starscream had waved them in front of himself. The arm guards were right in Megatron's line of sight.

"Arm guards," Starscream hissed.

"What for?"

Starscream stomped his pedes. "To guard my arms! What else would they be for?"

Megatron raised his brows. "They look strange."

Starscream flailed his arms, wings flicking. "Well… I think they look stylish! Maybe you just have no taste!"

Megatron rolled his optics.

"Whatever," Starscream hissed. "We're getting off topic. Go bother Soundwave some other time."

Megatron harrumphed and glared at Starscream.

"You'd better not be planning anything."

Then, he turned away and walked back down the hall. Starscream watched him leave, then looked at Soundwave.

"Mess hall," Soundwave said, pointing ahead.

"Yes," Starscream said. "Let's put this behind us."

The rest of the walk was brief. They entered, Starscream retrieved his filtered energeon, then they turned to leave. Motion caught Starscream's optics. From a nearby table, Blitzwing waved at them. Ravage sat on the table—not the seat, the table itself—beside him, tail held high. Next to Ravage was Bumblebee and Knock Out, who were both paying significantly less attention.

Starscream and Soundwave exchanged glances before taking a seat at the table. Starscream sat next to Blitzwing. The fuzziness of his optics made it clear that Popshot was in control at the moment. They exchanged a brief greeting before Starscream popped open his cube.

[How's the energeon?]

A comm from Knock Out. Starscream glanced at him and sent a reply.

[Bland.]

[We might be able to flavor it. I'd have to check, but I'm fairly certain it can be done.]

What a relief.

[Please do.]

Popshot and Bumblebee were speaking about something—some sort of human game about capturing monsters. Starscream didn't have it in him to pay attention. He could barely parse the conversation over the others happening in the area.

A flash of familiar purple caught his eye and he—unwisely, treacherously—followed it. Skywarp laughed with some other mecha, arm wrapped around Nova Storm. Starscream's spark hummed painfully.

Beside him, Soundwave shifted, as if uncomfortable in his seat.

[Soundwave—misses Rumble and Frenzy. Soundwave—knows how it feels.]

Starscream nearly jumped at the message. He sighed as he processed it.

[Thank you, Soundwave.]

Soundwave sat up straighter in his seat.

[I just… wish I could fix things, but I don't even know where to begin. I attacked them like a rabid turbofox. They're right to stay away from me.]

[Soundwave—with you. Soundwave—also attacked.]

[It's different.]

[Query: How?]

It just was. Starscream didn't know how to explain.

[Can we stop talking about this?]

Soundwave nodded.

☆☆☆

Starscream woke to a light tapping on his face. He swatted gently at Ravage, who leaped out of the way with ease. As he sat up, so did Soundwave.

"We're up," Starscream muttered. "What's the issue?"

[Bumblebee is in the hall,] Ravage sent. *[Causing a commotion.]*

"Over what?"

Tail flicking dismissively, Ravage trotted toward the door. *[No idea. But he's more likely to talk to one of you than me.]*

"Ravage—does not want to deal with it," Soundwave said, the words laced with tired static.

[So?]

Ravage opened the door and scampered into the hall. Starscream exited afterward, finding the subject of conversation almost immediately. Bumblebee was feeling along the walls, gaze downcast as he mumbled to himself.

"What's your issue?" Starscream asked.

Bumblebee jumped. "Oh! Starscream…"

Starscream tapped a pede. He'd been woken from recharge hours early, and his fuel levels were low. This was draining his very limited patience already.

"I'm looking for something," Bumblebee said. "I thought I might've dropped it around here."

Starscream put his hands on his hips and leaned forward. "What are you looking for?"

"It's, um," Bumblebee stammered. "Nothing important, really. Just a tiny, little… *thing*."

"A thing," Starscream repeated. "How *descriptive*."

Bumblebee waved his hand nervously. "Yeah, yeah… um. Just a thing. Very small. Can fit in one hand."

"What is it?" Starscream asked, flicking his wings.

"Um. A, uh. A thing."

"You're not going to find it if you won't tell anyone what it is!" Starscream hissed. "Just say it!"

"Well, uh—it's kind of embarrassing—"

Starscream swept his arms wide. "What can be more embarrassing than *this*?"

Soundwave came from behind Starscream. "Starscream—stressed. Calm down."

"Frag off," Starscream hissed.

Soundwave turned away and started walking down the hall. "Fragging off."

Then, he paused, turning back toward Starscream. "Query: Starscream—wants morning fuel?"

Starscream waved him away. "Yeah, sure. Whatever. Go away."

Soundwave threw his head backward (the closest the mech could come to an amused roll of his eyes) and continued his stroll down the hallway.

"I… yeah," Bumblebee said quietly. "You know, you're right."

Starscream sighed. "So, what is it?"

"A stuffie."

"And what's a stuffie?"

Bumblebee blinked. "Uh. A little soft thing that usually looks like a… um. A creature. The one I'm looking for is a bee."

Starscream stared at him.

"It's round, and yellow with black stripes," Bumblebee added.

"Like you," Starscream said.

"Like me."

Starscream hummed. He knew exactly where it was.

"Come with me," He said, waving Bumblebee toward him.

Bumblebee followed him to his lab. Starscream opened the door, stuck himself halfway through, and grabbed the 'stuffie' on the counter. He handed it to Bumblebee, whose optics were wide.

Bumblebee grabbed the stuffie with a speed unparalleled and squished it against his chest. He may have let out a squeal, but it was so quiet that Starscream's audials could barely pick it up.

"Thank you," He whispered.

Starscream shrugged.

"I mean it," Bumblebee said. "It's… it's really important to me. And you didn't make fun of me, or take it apart, or—"

"Why would I do that?"

There was nothing to gain from taking it apart. Sure, he could blackmail Bumblebee, but what for? It wouldn't help him with his project.

Bumblebee chuckled nervously. "Well, cute little things like stuffies don't really… fit with my image."

Starscream tilted his head. "Your image?"

"You know!" Bumblebee said. "Super cool war hero scout Bumblebee!"

Starscream fought not to laugh. Sure, the scout was respectable on the battlefield, but nothing about him had ever been cool. But whatever. Maybe other mecha had worse taste.

"Who cares?" Starscream said. "Things are cool because you do them. You don't do them because they're cool. If 'super cool war hero scout Bumblebee' likes stuffies, then liking stuffies is cool."

It was simple and obvious. To follow trends was to be, well, a *follower*. True leaders acted with confidence and let their followers mimic it. So, why bother caring what other mecha thought about such trivial things?

"I… hadn't thought about it that way before."

Starscream fluttered his wings. "Well, that's me. Always thinking in new ways."

After a moment of silence, he added, "What *is* the appeal of these little things, anyway?"

And that was how Starscream received a tour of Bumblebee's exclusively bee-themed collection. How did he get so many? Why were there so many bee stuffies? How did he come up with unique names for *all of them*?

At least he walked out of there with a promise from Bee that he'd find one for Starscream, too.

☆☆☆

He named it Ulchtar, because Bee insisted that it needed a name. It was a long, thin silver creature with a large, hooded head. Bee had called it a snake, and the name was familiar. Ulchtar spent the majority of its existence sitting on Starscream's berth, occasionally wrapped between him and Soundwave as they recharged.

Starscream woke, optic feed fuzzy, to Soundwave stirring. He grumbled, but Soundwave gently pushed him aside and climbed out of berth. Ravage was already gone, likely on the prowl for someone to pester.

"Query: Accompany Soundwave to the mess hall?"

Starscream's limbs were heavy. The back of his processor attempted to coax him back into recharge. He checked his fuel levels, since alerts didn't seem to be sending lately. They came back low, but he felt no urge to refuel.

"No," Starscream muttered. "'M recharging."

Soundwave stared at him for a moment. Then, he left. Starscream closed his optics and drifted back into recharge.

When he woke again, his fans were on. The room was covered in static—or was that his optic feed? His helm hurt. He grabbed Ulchtar and squeezed him against his chest. He rolled himself over, a pale blue gleam catching his optics.

Beside the berth was a cube of energeon—*his* energeon. Soundwave really didn't have to do that. Starscream squeezed Ulchtar harder. How long had he been in recharge?

His chronometer gave the answer. The day was nearly half gone. Starscream checked his fuel levels. His tank was nearly empty, so he forced himself to sit up.

With weak hands, he choked down his fuel. As soon as he finished, he slumped in the berth, optics drifting shut. He woke briefly when Ravage hopped into the berth and curled up next to him a few moments later.

A gentle hand landed on his shoulder. He faded out of recharge, muttering unintelligibly. His helm hurt even more now, and his fans were way too loud.

"Starscream."

"Soundwave," Starscream muttered.

"Starscream—afflicted by virus. Query: Visit medbay?"

Starscream attempted to get up, barely even lifting himself before he fell back into berth. "'M tired. Can't get up."

Soundwave tilted his helm. "Soundwave—can carry you."

Starscream hummed affirmatively. Soundwave placed his hands underneath Starscream and gently lifted the other mech to his chest. Starscream leaned into him, Soundwave's spark humming quietly against his audials, magnified by the material of his cassette slot.

When Starscream was finally aware of his surroundings again, they were in the medbay. He was still in Soundwave's arms, which might've registered as odd or even humiliating if he had the processing power to care. He barely had the ability to process the conversation around him.

"It's a virus, alright. It's been going around."

"Query: Best course of action?"

"I can update his firewalls, but it'll still be in his system until he clears it."

A hand skimmed across his arm, gently removed his arm guard, and popped open the panel that covered his medical port. As the connection was made, Starscream closed his optics, the light in the room suddenly becoming overwhelming. After a short time, the connection was cut.

"There. I should probably update yours, too."

Soundwave's arms shifted.

"Soundwave—is fine."

"You won't be when you catch it."

"Soundwave—is fine."

The second time was said with more force.

"Sure, sure. I'll remind you of that when someone drags you back here later."

☆☆☆

When the small group of mecha that actively sought out his presence heard of his illness, rather than doing the rational thing and avoiding him, they organized what Bumblebee called a "lazy day." They had run out of movies, so Soundwave suggested some sort of cooking channel. Knock Out had to leave just before they switched to it, since his shift in the medbay was about to start.

That left Blitzwing (of whom Popshot seemed to be in control at the moment), Bumblebee, Soundwave, Ravage, and Starscream to watch the program alone. As the human on screen described whatever dish they were about to make, Ravage's tail landed on Starscream's shoulder. He glanced at the cybercat cassette, who gave him a quiet purr in return. At his pedes, Buster's tail thumped against the floor.

Soundwave was leaning against him (or was he leaning against Soundwave?). The show of affection would've been embarrassing if Starscream had it in himself to care, but the helmache hadn't gone away yet, so he didn't. Instead, he pushed himself further into the other mech, who didn't seem to mind at all.

The human on the screen created some sort of thick substance and flattened it, then cut it into strips. They fed it into a small machine and turned a crank. The substance was squished completely flat between the rollers of the machine. Starscream's spark pulsed with a strange sense of longing.

"Wish that were me."

He didn't want to be *extruded*, specifically. But the crushing pressure held an appeal. His plating—especially around his chest—was often tight to the point it ached, held close to him by an ever-lingering restlessness.

"Query: Starscream—wants to be put through a pasta press?"

Had he truly let those words escape his vocalizer?

"I, um…"

They were staring at him. Oh, *Primus*. He sank in his seat, pulling away from Soundwave.

"On the floor," Soundwave said.

Too embarrassed to protest, Starscream obeyed. Once Soundwave was (seemingly) satisfied, he nodded his head, then flopped onto Starscream. Ravage jumped off of the couch and onto the both of them.

The pressure was… pleasant.

Popshot and Bumblebee stared at them from the couch. Then, Popshot stood up, tilting his head.

"Can't have a cuddle pile without me!" He exclaimed, launching himself at the piled mecha with a loud, cackling laugh.

Ravage leaped out of the way just in time to avoid being crushed. Then, with a graceful hop, the cassette landed back on the top of the pile. With a wide grin, Ravage sent a comm.

[Joining us, Bumblebee?]

"Um… sure."

Chapter End Notes

Why are you such a hypocrite, Starscream? I know exactly why, but chapters like this still make me want to ask. :'D

The pasta press joke is a reference to the autism steam roller, because that's all I can think about whenever I see that type of pasta press. Every time I try to write fluff, it swerves straight into crack territory. Hope you guys enjoy the motley crew being silly.

▼ Quick update on progress for this fic and related projects

Currently writing chapter 17, though I'm technically on 18 because I plan to keep going until I hit the end and then split things up. My ideal chapter length is 3k, and I have about 5k in the doc right now. Also started on a oneshot focused around the earlier days of Starscream and Megatron's relationship, but that relies on a lot of stuff introduced several chapters from now and is very AU-element heavy, so you guys probably won't see it for a while.

I usually like to reply to comments before I post the next chapter, but I wanna get this one out right now. I swear I'll reply to comments by the end of the day.

But, meh. You ever just have a day when your brain just doesn't work right and you can barely (physically) get things done? But it's not bad enough for it to be an actual issue? Just sorta happens sometimes.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Starscream recovered, and their usual routine returned—at least for a few blissful days.

Soundwave was… off that morning, for lack of a better word. He rose from recharge later than Starscream, his shoulders low and his visor just the slightest bit dimmer than usual. But before Starscream could ask, the mech was out the door.

Starscream tried to ignore it. He had work to do in his lab. So, he spent the day running a small set of filtration experiments. But as he worked on them, Soundwave wouldn't leave his mind.

The mech seemed unwell. Had he caught the virus from Starscream? If that was the case, then it was Starscream's fault. And even if it wasn't, he had cared for Starscream when he was ill. Soundwave was owed basic care.

So, Starscream left the lab slightly early, hoping to catch Soundwave on his way back to their room—and catch him he did. Soundwave, upon sighting him, peeled away from Megatron and Optimus. The latter gave him a warm goodbye, while the former glared as he realized the cause of the separation. Soundwave did not look back, and likely didn't notice.

"Soundwave!" Starscream said, leaning closer to him. "How are you?"

Soundwave stared.

"Optimal," he said.

Starscream didn't believe that at all. He glanced back down the hall. Prime had already distracted Megatron with something, and they were nearly out of sight. *Good*.

"Let's go back to my room," Starscream said, making sure he was quiet enough not to be overheard.

"Agreed."

The moment they crossed through the doorway, Soundwave slumped. Starscream rested a hand gently on him, and he nearly went slack. As Starscream moved to support him, the straining whirr of Soundwave's cooling fans became obvious.

"You caught the virus, didn't you?" Starscream asked.

Soundwave wouldn't look at him. Starscream rolled his optics.

"Of course you did," He muttered. "Mister 'I don't need a firewall upgrade.'"

Starscream deposited him on the berth gently. Despite the exasperation in his tone, Starscream wasn't annoyed—for once. This *was* his fault to some degree. He would show Soundwave the same care and consideration Soundwave had shown him.

(And if that was weak reasoning to hide his growing fondness for the mech, no one had to know. Fondness—and trust—were merely sources of pain. It was better to keep those feelings tucked away.)

Starscream pulled away. Soundwave attempted to push himself up, visor on Starscream's face.

"Stay there," Starscream said. "I'm going to get us some fuel."

When he returned, two cubes in hand, Soundwave was half-sitting. Starscream handed him the cube. He popped open his medical port, exposing the intake beneath it, and placed it inside the cube. Starscream, as a mech with a mouth, simply sipped in silence.

Then, Soundwave's hand closed around Starscream's arm.

"Soundwave?"

Soundwave's port was still open. His thumb rubbed where Starscream's would've been if it weren't covered by his arm guard.

"What do you need?" Starscream asked.

Soundwave's vocalizer popped and crackled.

Starscream sighed. "Can't talk, can you?"

Soundwave responded by running his finger over the spot again. It finally hit Starscream.

"You want a *connection*," Starscream said.

Soundwave dipped his helm.

"I suppose I can… allow that."

Connections—links, they were often called—were not uncommon, but they were for Starscream. Small amounts of data, such as reports and comm messages, could be sent without a direct, physical connection. Larger amounts of data—memories, entire processors—could only be transmitted through one.

They could be used intimately, but in recent times, this was rare. It was much more likely that information was picked off a dead soldier or a captive through force. Such a practice was referred to as hacking.

To do this, Starscream had to be completely confident that Soundwave held no harmful intent.

Starscream took the guard off his arm and opened his panel. In response, Soundwave released his cable and connected it to the port.

{Connection detected! Authorize?}

Starscream let down his firewalls.

◇◇◇

{Initializing…}

{Initializing…}

{Starting stream…}

Megatron was always large, and his optics always a bright, burning red. This persisted regardless of the mech viewing him. He leaned back in his chair. The room was full of energy, almost heavy with it. Starscream didn't know what to make of it, but Soundwave answered: *neutral, calm.*

Then, Megatron rose from his place and spoke. Starscream remembered the plan—yet another failure on top of a recent string of them. And, sure enough, the energy in one part of the room changed. Across from Soundwave sat Starscream, who slammed a hand on the table and stood up.

"Lord Megatron!"

The energy surrounding Starscream was buzzing, almost electric. *Irritation, exasperation.*

Megatron's energy changed from neutral to a sharp sting, nearly causing Soundwave to flinch. Still, Megatron stood with relative neutrality. Had Starscream not felt the energy as Soundwave did, he wouldn't have noticed a difference at all.

"This plan makes no sense! Why send so many mecha when our spies are perfectly capable on their own?"

Starscream was right. The extra mecha would increase the risk of discovery drastically. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw could work just fine by themselves, and Ravage could go where they couldn't.

The idea of the cassettes being discovered—*captured*—made his spark go cold.

The conversation escalated. Starscream gestured more dramatically, his wings twitching. His energy grew frantic, buzzing harder. Megatron's fists clenched as his energy grew even sharper, cutting into Soundwave's spark.

The room erupted into chaos as Starscream launched himself at Megatron, who flung him away with ease. The Seeker flew across the table, and Soundwave fell backward as he attempted to dodge.

Megatron stared down at Starscream. Soundwave stepped back. This was the end of it. Starscream's subordination had been punished. The room echoed as Megatron stepped forward.

Soundwave pressed himself into the wall, spark pounding and plating tight. Starscream and Megatron's energies clashed, frantic buzzing grating against a sharp blade. Starscream struggled against Megatron, who lifted him effortlessly by the neck with a single hand.

For a moment, it was Soundwave there instead. He had spoken—out of turn—to voice his concerns. The hand's grip tightened, crushing him.

When Megatron threw him again, it was Ravage that was then crushed beneath his pedes. As he was lifted once more, it was Rumble, then Frenzy. As a pede pushed him to the floor, it was Buzzsaw and Laserbeak.

The sharp energy of Megatron was merciless, cutting straight through Soundwave and his spark. He yearned to escape, but there was nowhere to go. If he moved, it would draw attention. So, he watched, silent.

Eventually, it was Starscream on the floor again. Megatron stomped out of the room. The rest of command slowly followed. Soundwave stopped before the doorway and looked back.

Starscream was still on the floor, crumpled and twisted.

Soundwave's plating itched. Was it wrong to leave him there? He had earned his fate, hadn't he? He was insubordinate.

But Soundwave had *agreed*. If he had voiced his thoughts, would he be in the same position?

No, because he would never put himself there.

Soundwave turned away.

◇◇◇

{Loading stream…}

Soundwave thought little of Starscream when they first met. He had been the communications officer for quite a while, and spent much of his time outside of that maintaining records. With few others aiding him, he was the one to process Starscream's information.

A Seeker—one of many. Starscream was not a completely unusual name, though was definitely self-chosen, especially based on the lack of prior information. A no-history mech was not uncommon in the Decepticon faction—many mecha wanted to start the revolution on

a clean slate, or had to keep themselves hidden. His age gave Soundwave pause, but only because it was so close to his.

Then, one day, Megatron entered the room, his energy warm and inviting. Soundwave disconnected from the console, prepared to greet him, then paused. A second energy inhabited the room, an anxious buzz that contrasted with Megatron's warmth. Soundwave swiveled, his visor meeting a bright pair of optics.

The mech stared back at him, wings fanned out. The buzzing energy intensified as the mech's nerves grew, his wings flicking. Soundwave reached out with his own energy, attempting to soothe the buzz to give himself some peace, but the mech didn't respond to it.

"Query: Why?"

Megatron smiled, placing a hand on the mech's shoulder. The mech flinched, energy flaring as he gritted his dentae. Then, he stood straight, wings fanned out again, and the energy fell back to the barely contained buzzing from before.

"This is Starscream," Megatron said. "Knowing how efficient you are, you've already processed his records. He'll be joining you."

Soundwave tilted his head. Megatron's energy was still warm, so there was no malice at play. He was quite happy at the moment.

"Query: Is Soundwave not sufficient?"

Megatron laughed, his energy growing even warmer. *Joyful, fond.*

"You're sufficient, Soundwave," Megatron said. "You always will be. But we can't run a revolution alone. Starscream is going to take over records for the air force after you train him."

"Perhaps more than records," Starscream said quietly.

Megatron smiled at him, and there it was again—*fondness, joy.* "Perhaps, but not today."

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{Loading stream…}

Soundwave was working at the console. Though his systems sent alert after alert begging him to refuel and recharge, he dismissed each of them. He would not be replaced, nor outcompeted. If Starscream was going to maintain records, he would have to ensure there was as little for the Seeker to do as possible.

[Recharge.]

A comm from Ravage. Moments later, the cybercat slipped through a gap in the ceiling, landing on top of the console.

"No," Soundwave said.

Ravage smacked him gently with a paw.

"No," Soundwave said again.

Ravage smacked him again. He went back to his work, determined to ignore the cybercat. The lack of recharge made him sluggish the next day, but it was worth the praise he received.

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Starscream had just been promoted to second in command. Soundwave didn't care about the title, but he did care about the warmth—*fondness, joy*—Megatron had as he proclaimed it. Starscream's ever-buzzing energy had calmed for once, but now it was even worse than before. Every time Soundwave entered a meeting, Starscream's crackling *anxiety, fear* greeted him.

Soundwave approached Megatron as the other mech leaned back in his throne. He looked up, optics meeting Soundwave's visor. His energy had a faint bite to it—*confusion, interest.*

"What is it, Soundwave?" He asked.

"Megatron—is absolutely certain in choosing Starscream?"

Megatron leaned toward him, the edge of his energy growing sharper, threatening to swallow Soundwave. "He is a talented mech. I'm confident that he can handle the position."

Soundwave… wasn't so certain. If he could, why did he radiate so much anxiety since taking the position?

"You should be proud, Soundwave," Megatron said. Despite the words, his energy grew painfully suffocating—*threat, irritation*. "You trained him, after all."

"I did."

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The first time Starscream protested, Megatron's energy was warm with only a slight edge—*surprise, amusement.*

But over time, something changed. The edge grew sharper. The warmth intensified until it burned. *Irritation, anger.*

Soundwave had resolved never to be the target of such a thing. Yet, fate loved its irony. The start of another battle, and Soundwave found himself directing his cassettes from behind the console. He could fight by himself, but was rarely sent out.

Rumble and Frenzy were already in the fray, fighting with glee. They had always enjoyed battling just a little too much. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw flew over the fight as Ravage slinked through it. All three had the same objective.

Frenzy dodged an attack. Rumble was at his side, immediately meeting the attacker with a swift blow. Laserbeak did a flip, and was chirped at by Buzzsaw—a reminder that this wasn't a leisure flight. After narrowly leaping past a grappling set of mecha, Ravage muffled a quiet *mrrow* of triumph.

[Did you see that?] Ravage sent. *[They didn't even notice me!]*

[Affirmative,] Soundwave replied.

They were close to the goal—a newly made human weapon that Shockwave could use for parts. Ravage leaped through another set of grappling mecha, completely unnoticed. Rumble got clipped by an enemy's rays, but Frenzy was there to defend.

Buzzsaw and Laserbeak—

An alarmed squawk came over the comm.

[Laserbeak, Buzzsaw—report!]

Silence. Soundwave couldn't find them in the monitor.

[Ravage—report! Laserbeak, Buzzsaw—location?]

Ravage ran for cover, then looked up at the sky.

[Can't see them!]

Soundwave's spark jumped in its casing. Not good. He searched the monitors again, still coming up empty.

[Rumble, Frenzy—]

[We don't see them either, bossbot!]

Soundwave slammed a hand against the console. They were alright—they *had to be*. But platitudes did not quell the nervous hum of his spark.

[Laserbeak, Buzzsaw—report!]

Still silence.

[Ravage—new objective: find Laserbeak, Buzzsaw.]

[On it!]

Ravage dove and ducked through the battle. Soundwave forced himself to keep track of the rest of it, despite his processor's preoccupation. They were doing well overall. But as

moments passed by without a check-in from Ravage—who had also disappeared from the monitor—the tide of the fight turned.

Rumble was shot in the leg, severely limiting his mobility. Frenzy was able to defend him, but not for long. Other mecha were in similar states.

Starscream was the one to call the retreat.

Soundwave felt the return more than anything else—the tingling, sour energy of many injured and dismayed mecha was impossible to escape. It was made significantly worse by the rapidly approaching field of searing energy that sliced through it all. But a much closer source drew Soundwave's attention.

A quiet *mrroo* accompanied a dull, sad aura as Ravage slipped into the room. A flash of gold froze Soundwave's spark.

"Query—"

[Laserbeak is alive.]

The rest went unsaid. Soundwave knelt and offered his hands. Gently, Ravage laid the golden remains in his palms. A tiny, lightless yellow optic stared up at him, separated from its body. Buzzsaw's wings, always a brilliant gold and red, were in pieces.

[This was all I could find,] Ravage sent.

Soundwave couldn't speak. His hands trembled as his spark cleaved in two. Never again would Buzzsaw dock in his chest. Never again would Buzzsaw chide Laserbeak for doing tricks.

"Soundwave."

So overtaken by grief, he hadn't picked up on the energy. It surrounded him, stabbing from all directions. Red optics stared from the doorway.

"Your cassettes didn't retrieve the weapon!" Megatron said.

Soundwave offered Megatron Buzzsaw's helm. Megatron stared down at it with a scowl.

"What is this?"

Soundwave's vocalizer started with a pop of static. "Buzzsaw."

Megatron's frown grew deeper—the energy, sharper. Not concern, not even pity. *Irritation.*

"Where is the other spybird?" Megatron asked.

[Medbay,] Ravage sent.

Megatron hummed. The energy grew sharper, and somehow even more all-encompassing. His gaze turned to Ravage.

"And this prevented you from retrieving the weapon *how*?"

Before Soundwave could speak, Ravage glanced at him.

[When I didn't see Laserbeak and Buzzsaw, I wanted to make sure they were alright,] Ravage sent. *[After I found them, the retreat was called.]*

That made it sound like it was Ravage's fault! Soundwave prepared himself to speak, not wanting any harm to befall the cassette—

"The retreat," Megatron said. His brow furrowed, lips drawn into a sneer as the energy in the room burned. *Hatred, rage.* "One that *I* didn't authorize."

"Starscream—authorized," Soundwave said. "Ravage—following orders."

He couldn't let Ravage take the fall for his mistake. Megatron had to know Ravage wasn't in the wrong.

"Of course. I'll need to have a word with Starscream about that," Megatron said, turning toward the door. "We can't have our soldiers confused on the battlefield."

Soundwave couldn't bring himself to vocalize his usual *affirmative,* but the silence was unnoticed. Megatron left, taking the burning energy with him. Soundwave knew what Megatron was going to do.

He felt nothing about it.

When Megatron questioned his drop in efficiency, he felt nothing about it. When Laserbeak chirped at him from a berth on the medbay, he felt nothing about it. As Laserbeak stayed docked in his chest after being discharged, tucked close to his spark, he felt nothing about it.

A large hand closed around a thin neck. A shrill voice shouted, questioning orders. Blue optics shined from across the room, just a small turn of the helm away from meeting his visor.

Soundwave did nothing. Soundwave felt nothing.

Better Starscream than him.

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{Loading stream…}

"Megatron—"

His quarters were empty. Soundwave hadn't seen him in the command center, nor in any of the meeting rooms. Where was he? Soundwave released Laserbeak.

"Laserbeak—find Megatron."

Laserbeak cawed an affirmative and flew off. Soundwave walked down the halls, sensitivity on his audials dialed high, searching for any sign of his leader.

Then, Laserbeak sent him an audio clip. He played it to himself, volume low to ensure no mecha nearby could hear. Megatron's voice.

[Laserbeak—location.]

Laserbeak sent him a set of coordinates—the communications room. What could Megatron possibly be doing there without him? He had never been in there without Soundwave to run the call. Soundwave made his way over, motioning Laserbeak to dock when he arrived at the doorway.

"I've grown tired of this war."

Megatron.

"Resources on both sides are growing scarce. We've destroyed our planet. But we can fix all of that."

"What does that mean, Megatron?"

Optimus Prime.

"It's time for rebirth. If you allow me an equal seat at the table, I'll disband the Decepticons."

Disband the Decepticons? Soundwave shook his helm. He couldn't just do that! What had they been fighting for this whole time if it could be thrown away on a whim?

Though his sensors still picked up on the conversation, his processor didn't parse it. After everything they had sacrificed, Megatron was bending the knee? *No*, that wasn't it.

He had sacrificed them for a single seat at the table of whatever was to rise from the war. He knew they were running out of energeon—that the medics scraped together supplies from whatever they could—that they were stuck stealing and plundering to supply the science department—

Had he ever cared, or was the cause just a means to an end? Did he truly want equality, or just power?

Only two demands were made—allow Megatron to rule in the new government, and pardon the Decepticons. What did pardons mean when mecha like Soundwave and his cassettes were considered devices? When he'd been thrown onto the streets for his enjoyment of music, viewed as nothing but a defective surveillance drone?

Ravage and Laserbeak were viewed as little more than mechanimals—extensions of Soundwave at worst, pets at best. Rumble and Frenzy, with their ability to verbally speak,

were still looked down upon, but not to the same degree. It was then that the realization struck him.

'Where is the other spybird?'

Megatron had viewed them the same.

Soundwave turned away, preparing a wide-reaching message. The doors slid open.

"Soundwave," Megatron said.

Soundwave glared at him. Megatron frowned, his energy growing sharp.

"You heard me."

It wasn't a question.

Soundwave moved to flee, but a hand seized his arm, pulling him backward. The metal of Megatron's cannon pressed against his face.

"You *will not* send that message."

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{Connection terminated.}

{Closing stream…}

☆☆☆

The room faded back into focus. Soundwave's plug disconnected and slid back into his panel, shutting with a quiet click. So did Starscream's. Starscream grabbed his arm guard from the side table and put it back on.

"Sorry."

The word was quiet and laced with static, but unmistakably Soundwave's voice.

"Sorry what?" Starscream asked. "It's hardly *your* fault that Megatron was… *Megatron*."

"Never stopped him. Never… cared."

What?

Starscream chuckled, nervousness making his spark hum. "When did *anyone*? You weren't special."

"Should have stopped him."

Starscream scoffed. "Should have this, should have *that*. What you *should* do is go into recharge while I comm a medic to set up an appointment for you."

Soundwave's visor dimmed and his body went slack, finally giving in to the virus. Starscream gently arranged him into a more comfortable position.

[Soundwave needs an appointment,] Starscream sent to Knock Out. *[Also, tell Ratchet he was right.]*

The horrid, buzzing energy had crept up on him. He hadn't noticed it, but now that there was nothing to distract him, it was unbearable. Anger replaced numbness for a moment.

How *dare* Soundwave presume he was so important? How dare he not help at all? If it was so wrong, so *terrible*, then why hadn't anyone stepped up?

Starscream grit his dentae, fingers twitching, as he paced the room.

Soundwave would have done nothing. He *did* do nothing. It didn't matter. Either way, nothing would have changed. But why did this realization come now, so long after it all occurred? Where was this support when it was truly needed?

Starscream hissed to himself. Why was he so worked up over the confessions of a sick mech? What was done, was done. There was no changing the past.

Soundwave was here *now*, and so was he.

Chapter End Notes

TFA Soundwave being built as a decoy toy was an interesting spin on him, so I wanted to play with a similar idea. "A custom security unit with amazing features, that's so intelligent you'd swear it was a real mech!"

I like the idea of the Autobots and Decepticons being split-offs from an original rebel faction after they had disagreements on leadership (sort of like TFOne but with bigger numbers and more history). Soon-to-be dictators often take advantage of the dissatisfaction of those beneath them to seize power. Megatron is... Megatron. I don't want to give all of the answers away. :3

- ▶ A small dump of art and misc for this fic
- ▶ Yet another song rec

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Soundwave recovered. Their routine truly and completely returned to normal, though Starscream wouldn't forget what had been shared. If he were gentler with Soundwave, more forgiving, then no mech needed to know. He sat on the edge of the berth, waiting for Soundwave to return from a meeting, when a ping startled him.

[Starscream! Open the door!]

Blitzwing. Starscream opened the door, coming face to face with what had to be Popshot, a grinning widely.

"We're gonna sneak out!" Popshot whispered in a voice that barely qualified as one.

"Not that I'm against it," Starscream said at a much more whisper-appropriate volume. "But where?"

Popshot walked down the hall and Starscream followed.

"A friend's home!" Popshot said. "They promised to make me something I can play MiniMon on if I got someone to help them test a project."

Starscream… didn't appreciate being an involuntary test subject.

"And what is this project?"

Popshot shrugged. "Some sort of field detector. They promised it wasn't invasive."

How much was the promise of a stranger worth?

"What do I get from it?" Starscream asked as they ducked behind a corner.

Distant voices rumbled through the hall. Both mecha froze until they passed.

"Well, you get to go out," Popshot said. "And I know you're into science, so maybe you'll think it's cool."

It was a fair point. This would be the first time Starscream had left the base since being captured. If it went poorly, he could just run. They were barely able to capture him before.

As they finally ducked out of the base undetected and took off, Starscream was reminded of something Popshot said earlier.

"So, what is MiniMon, anyway?"

The explanation lasted the entire flight and took multiple detours. Starscream retained absolutely none of it, but he didn't regret asking.

☆☆☆

He recognized the backyard as they landed in it. The pool reflected a mech much more graceful than the one it had before. Fergie stared at him from the catio. Moments later, the human emerged from the door, cubes in hand.

"Hey, Blitz! Thanks for bringing—" They paused, staring. "Starscream?"

"Human," Starscream said.

"You're okay!" They exclaimed, a smile spreading across their face. "When I found you in the backyard, I was so worried—"

Starscream waved his hands. "Yes, *yes*. I'm fine. Survived. Over that."

"But *I'm* not," the human said, glaring at him with their tiny eyes. "I haven't seen you since then."

Starscream rolled his optics. That wasn't his fault at all!

"It's not as if they'd let me leave."

The human's mouth fell open, their brow furrowing. "They wouldn't let you leave?"

Starscream knelt, leaning down toward the human until they were as close to face to face as possible with such a drastic size disparity. "How much do you really know about the war, *human*?"

They lived pitifully short lives compared to cybertronians. For all Starscream knew, this one had only lived after Megatron's surrender. From the human's falling gaze and fidgeting hands, he already had an answer.

"Not a lot," they said quietly. "My mom fought in it, but she never wanted to talk about it."

Starscream glanced at Popshot. The other mech stared at him, a small frown on his face.

"Well," Starscream said. "The war isn't over just because the fighting stopped."

The human looked up at him with watery optics. Starscream looked away, tapping his knee.

"Oh," the human said. "I see."

Popshot leaned in. "Enough about the war! We've got an electric thing to test!"

"It's an electromagnetic field reading device!" The human corrected.

"Yes, the field device!" Popshot said.

The human sighed, a smile slipping onto their face as they fiddled with something on their wrist.

"There!" They said. "It should be on."

Popshot stepped back. Starscream leaned closer, but the device was so tiny that he could barely see what must have been the interface.

"What is the exact function of this device?" Starscream asked.

"To detect electromagnetic fields," the human said.

"Why would you want to do that?"

The human looked up at him, nose scrunched. "To talk with you guys better?"

Oh. *Oh.* Starscream laughed.

"I don't know what you've been told," Starscream said. "But Cybertronians detecting others' emotions through electromagnetic fields is a myth."

The human raised their brows, gaze shifting between Starscream and Blitzwing. "Really?"

"Yes, *really*," Starscream said. "Just like the idea that ferrowolves have 'alphas,' or the legend of an immortal outlier spark."

"You're *certain*," the human said.

Starscream's wings flicked. "Why do you keep asking?"

The human looked toward Popshot again. Starscream followed their gaze.

"Starscream," Popshot said. "It's not funny."

"*What's* not funny? You're the one lying to the human!"

"I'm not lying to them!" Popshot said.

Starscream leaned toward Popshot, baring his dentae and flaring his wings wide. "Then what *else* do you call this?"

Popshot leaned back, frowning. "Starscream, can you not feel them?"

"I can't feel something that *doesn't exist*!"

Popshot's wings twitched. "How can you not…?"

Starscream's spark hummed painfully in his chest as he flexed his fingers. Then, the realization hit him.

"You're trying to humiliate me," Starscream hissed.

Popshot's optics met his. "I'm not."

"Then what *else* could you be trying to do?" Starscream yelled, stomping a pede.

Popshot and the rest of Blitzwing had gained his trust, only to turn it back on him! Just like Skywarp! Just like—

The machine on the human's wrist beeped.

"Woah," they said. "Maybe we should take a moment and—"

"You're in on this too!" Starscream screeched. "Why did I ever trust you?"

A hand closed around his arm. Starscream's spark froze. He flexed his fingers, claws at the ready, and swung. The mech that stared back at him was not Popshot.

Energeon leaking from a cut on her cheek, Flamecrash glared at him. She grabbed him by the wing and yanked him backward, pulling him to her chest.

"Enough!" She spat. "Calm down or I'll fragging make you!"

Starscream sank his dentae into her hand, forcing her to drop him. Spark pounding in his chest and cooling fans whirring, he glanced at the human one last time before taking off. As he reached the sky, they stared up at him, eyes wide.

Starscream flew. He didn't care where he ended up—he just needed to get away. Eventually, he landed, tucking himself behind a set of rocks.

How dare they? Whatever prank this was, he wouldn't—*couldn't*—be a part of it. They'd just have to find some *other* poor mech to lie to. He'd had enough of being dragged around, manipulated and laughed at—

Popshot's face came back to him, brow furrowed in a seemingly honest gesture. What if they weren't lying? The memory transfer with Soundwave… that energy… Starscream had just assumed the mech was an outlier. Was that what EM fields felt like?

He needed to know.

[Soundwave,] He sent. *[You can sense EM fields, correct?]*

Even if it was a stupid question, Soundwave wasn't the laughing type.

[Affirmative.]

Starscream gnawed at one of his arm guards, plating tingling. He had to choose his next words carefully.

[That's normal.]

[Sensing EM fields—typical. Query: Why ask?]

He should tell the truth, but the very idea made his spark hurt.

[Had a disagreement with someone.]

It left out the most important details, but hopefully Soundwave wouldn't question it. If Soundwave agreed, then the energy in those memories must have been EM fields. In Soundwave's processor, they were all-consuming. How hadn't Starscream ever sensed them? *Why* hadn't he ever sensed them?

Was it yet another thing he couldn't do?

How could he have hoped to amount to anything when he couldn't even be a functional mech? When his own body turned against him and his sensors refused to pick up vital information? When in every single interaction he had, there was an entire layer of communication he wasn't privy to?

Had he put intentions into others' processors the same way Megatron had in his, unable to tell truth from his own fiction?

Worse yet, was Megatron *right* about him?

There was one thing he knew for certain: he had treated Blitzwing—one of his few allies—unfairly. This had to be rectified, or he risked losing their relationship. He opened Blitzwing's communication frequency.

[I was wrong. I shouldn't have hurt you.]

The response was swift.

[Where are you?]

Starscream steeled himself and sent his coordinates. A few moments later, Blitzwing landed nearby. The mech had the scowl of Flamecrash on his face but the fuzziness of Popshot in his optics. It was impossible to tell which out of the two were in control—though with all Starscream knew, it could've been both.

"I'm sorry," Blitzwing said.

"For what?" Starscream asked. "I'm the one who hurt *you*."

Blitzwing shook his head. "I grabbed you when I knew you would react poorly."

"That doesn't mean I should hit you."

Blitzwing shrugged and sat next to him. "You were afraid."

"I was *angry*," Starscream corrected. "I thought you were lying to me."

Something in the back of his processor whispered that it wasn't the full story, but what else could it be? If he struck at the first sign of deceit, he would never be deceived. That he had misidentified the situation was a whole other—and much more relevant—issue.

"I didn't want to upset you," Blitzwing said quietly.

Starscream tapped his fingers against his knees. "I should have known."

Blitzwing—especially Popshot—had been nothing but kind to him. The mech was nowhere near a master of deception. If he were trying to trick Starscream, he would've figured it out at the start. Starscream was foolish to risk throwing away such a beneficial relationship, even if he did—erroneously—suspect deceit.

Blitzwing's face changed, but the fuzziness in his optics remained, as if Flamecrash were retreating back into his processor. She may have been, since the mech that faced Starscream now was certainly Popshot. Popshot blinked, staring blankly for a moment.

"You really can't read EM fields," Popshot said.

Starscream shook his head. "I guess not."

"It explains a lot," Popshot said.

"I'm sure it does," Starscream muttered.

How much had he missed in every conversation?

"Let's go back to the base," Starscream said. "Before they notice I'm gone. Tell the human I was wrong next time you see them."

Popshot nodded.

☆☆☆

Somehow, they weren't caught. No one questioned it as Starscream headed back to his room. He spent most of the day pacing, lost in thought.

When Soundwave came back to the room, Starscream expected their usual routine. Instead, Soundwave sat on the edge of the berth. Starscream sat beside him, tapping his fingers on his knees.

"Query: Starscream—left base. Where?"

Starscream's wings shot up. How did he know?

"Nowhere important," Starscream said. "Popshot wanted me to meet a friend."

"Starscream, this friend—had a disagreement."

Starscream flexed his fingers. "Not exactly."

"Query: Starscream—asked about EM fields. Why?"

Starscream turned away. Soundwave already knew about his dietary restrictions, but this was a completely different matter. He didn't know how the other mech would react, and that fact made his spark pulse.

But he couldn't run away from this. Within his own body, there was nowhere to go. And if he wanted to keep his allies, he couldn't leave them in the dark.

His vocalizer refused to start. He fought against it, eventually forcing out the words.

"I can't sense EM fields."

Soundwave's visor stared at him—a bright, gleaming red.

"Unexpected," Soundwave said.

Starscream laughed, nervousness pressing his plating tight. "I know, right? It sounds impossible—"

"Sensible," Soundwave said. "Explains your behavior."

"And what behavior is that?" Starscream asked.

"Starscream—always looking everywhere but optics. Starscream—always watching body language. Starscream—has no control of his EM field. Starscream—does not respond when others brush their fields against his."

Starscream forced himself to stare Soundwave in the visor. "I really do all of that?"

Soundwave nodded.

"I—"

Starscream didn't know what to say. What *was* he going to say? He brought his knees to his chest and hid his face.

"I'm stupid," he muttered. "So, *so* stupid. How did I never notice?"

"Starscream—far from unobservant. Starscream—did not know."

"I should have!" Starscream hissed, pulling his head up. "Everyone around me was so *confusing*, and I thought it was their fault, but I'm just *defective*!"

Soundwave lifted a hand. It hovered over Starscream's shoulder. Starscream sighed and nodded. Soundwave slung the arm around his shoulder, carefully avoiding his wings.

"Soundwave—also defective."

What? Starscream stared into Soundwave's visor.

"Soundwave—oversensitive to EM fields. Soundwave—cannot communicate. Soundwave—easily overwhelmed by other mecha."

"But—"

Soundwave pulled Starscream closer.

"Starscream—not alone."

Starscream returned the embrace.

"Thank you, Soundwave."

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Knock Out withdrew the needle. As he transferred the energeon sample into a container, he turned to Starscream.

"That should be it," he said. "I'll send you the results when we have them, but I'm quite confident that things are working as they should now."

As Knock Out moved to leave, curiosity struck Starscream. Knock Out was a medic, so if any other mech had suffered his strange affliction, he could know about it.

"Is it possible for a mech to not be able to sense EM fields?" Starscream asked.

Knock Out raised his brow. "In some cases. Why are you asking?"

Starscream fiddled with the edges of his arm guards. "I don't think I can."

Knock Out came back toward him with a hum.

"Well," he said. "Your electromagnetic sensors could be miscalibrated, or even disconnected. Were you able to sense EM fields before?"

Starscream shook his head. "I haven't felt one since I was constructed."

"I *can* run a scan…"

Starscream took off one of his guards and offered his arm. Knock Out took it, connecting his cable to Starscream's port. Medical scans were surface-level connections that could only be done through medic-specific overrides, so all that appeared for Starscream was a notification that a scan was ongoing. He could choose to reject the process, but it did not require his consent to start.

Knock Out hummed, his olfactory ridge crinkling.

"What is it?" Starscream asked.

"It says your sensors are connected," Knock Out said. "And they're properly calibrated, too."

"Then why can't I feel anything?"

Knock Out stared for a moment. "I don't know. Everything is coming back as *normal*."

"Well, obviously, something *isn't*!" Starscream hissed.

"Don't snap at me," Knock Out grumbled. "I'll see if Ratchet knows anything."

Knock Out disconnected from Starscream's panel and walked through the curtain. Moments later, he returned, Ratchet by his side. Starscream offered his arm as Ratchet proceeded to do his own scan, which returned the same results.

"You weren't exaggerating," Ratchet said to Knock Out.

"Of course I wasn't!" Knock Out said. "What do you take me for?"

Ratchet stared at him pointedly. Knock Out sighed.

Ratchet turned to Starscream. "This is a processor problem."

"*What*?"

"There is something not working correctly in your processor," Ratchet said slowly. "Your sensors are fine, and they're sending data, but your processor is discarding it."

"I didn't know you were a processor expert," Starscream snarked.

"I'm not," Ratchet said flatly. "But I have experience, and I've seen this before. Factory errors were a lot more common before they implemented testing."

"*Factory errors*," Starscream repeated.

"The spark-frame integration of constructed mecha is rarely perfect."

"What was done with these… errors?" Starscream asked.

He was tested after he onlined, and passed gracefully. Though he knew others had failed, he never saw them nor knew their fates.

Ratchet looked away, plating tightening just enough for Starscream to notice the tension. Beside him, Knock Out glared.

"They… were disposed of," Ratchet said. "Ethically."

"But that fell out of practice!" Knock Out exclaimed, volume slightly too high. He stepped sideways, putting his hip between Ratchet and Starscream. Quietly, he added, "Not that there's any way to construct new mecha right now…"

Starscream picked at his arm guards and stood up, numbness settling over his frame. Knock Out stared at him, brow furrowed and mouth agape. Ratchet's optics were more distant, his lips pressed thin.

"Thank you," Starscream said, the tone simultaneously flatter and more biting than he intended.

Knock Out flinched as he passed him.

When Starscream entered the halls, a friendly bark greeted him. Buster danced at his feet as pedesteps from across the hall grew closer.

"Starscream," Icebeam said calmly. "It is good to see you. Did your appointment go well?"

"As well as it could have," Starscream said.

Icebeam hummed. "Did you remember that it is movie night?"

He… actually didn't. Had the time passed so quickly?

Icebeam smiled. "It is fine if you did not. I came to get you, if you still want to go."

"Sure," Starscream said.

The world was slowly growing fuzzy, but that wouldn't keep him away from his allies.

☆☆☆

Starscream was jolted from recharge by the sound of shouting. He rolled his optics and went to the door, fully prepared to give the yelling mecha a piece of his processor. The door beeped at him, citing an error. He tried again. Same error.

He grumbled in frustration and sent a message to Soundwave.

[Door won't let me out.]

A few moments passed. No response—not even a 'read' indicator. He must've been busy, then. Starscream sighed and sat on the berth, fiddling with Ulchtar.

The yelling did not cease. It got louder, blaster fire and thumps joining it. Was someone *seriously* fighting outside of his room? Fights in the halls weren't uncommon during the war. After he was appointed second in command, he had his quarters moved to a less traveled area because of it.

But this wasn't the middle of the war, so what was the issue?

Something crashed against the door, sending an echoing clang throughout the room. Then, it crashed again, and again, until the door was more dent than door. Had they finally—

Starscream's dorsal strut slammed against the wall, sending a stab of pain through his body. Large hands pinned him down as burning scarlet optics stared into his. Megatron scowled at him, grip tightening as he spoke.

"*What* did you do?"

"Me?" Starscream said. "I didn't do anything! Some hooligans were fighting outside my room!"

Megatron slammed him against the wall. "Don't lie! I know you planned this!"

"Planned *what*?" Starscream yelled.

He squirmed, and Megatron's grip tightened as he leaned more of his weight into Starscream, forcing him still. Starscream stared, fans clicking on. There were scuff marks all over the brute, and a thin scratch on his cheek that had barely stopped leaking energeon.

This wasn't just a fight in the hall.

"I don't know what's going on," Starscream said.

"Don't give me that slag—"

"Listen to me for *once* in your fragging life!" Starscream screeched. "I couldn't open the door! Obviously, this isn't my fault!"

Megatron leaned close, dentae bared. His grip tightened further, metal creaking beneath his hands.

"Then whose fault is it, *Starscream*?"

A red visor shone from the door. That was all the warning Starscream received before the room was swathed in sound. Megatron was blown away from him. As the brute attempted to rise, a dark gray blur flew at him, claws sinking into his plating.

"Query: Starscream—alright?" Soundwave said.

Starscream pushed himself up using the wall and hissed, "What is going on?"

Soundwave tilted his head slightly, near imperceptibly. "Revolution."

"That barely tells me anything," Starscream muttered.

Soundwave stepped forward, a hand outstretched. Starscream paused, glaring at it. There was something inside…

His rays! Starscream swiped them and reattached them immediately. And not a moment too soon—Ravage flew across the room as Megatron dislodged the cassette.

Starscream shot before he could think. Soundwave joined him, the combined attack sending Megatron into the wall. When the brute didn't rise, Starscream turned back toward Soundwave.

"Why?" Starscream asked.

His comm pinged. It was his own message, sent back to him.

[We are in this together.]

"We are," Starscream said.

Soundwave offered him a hand. Starscream braced himself and took it, ready to plunge back into the pits. Whatever became of this, it would be better than rotting with the Autobots.

Chapter End Notes

Went back and forth on whether to include EM fields in this fic (because I could easily just have edited them into the first couple of chapters) when I was struck with the evilest idea. I had to go for it. I just had to. Especially after I sent a text to my sister asking if it was a good idea and received a very enthusiastic, all-caps response.

▶ Rambling about how difficult it was the foreshadow the EM field twist + EM fields as a concept in general

I'm a bit peeved that I forgot to edit a mention of Starscream's rays being removed into chapter 7. It was done while they were treating him. Slipped my mind as much as it did his, but that was part of his whole defeatist attitude. No rays, no self-defense, no escape. But I don't really feel like fixing that now.

The betrayal was exciting to write. Soundwave proposed it all the way back in chapter 5. He also directly called Megs a threat to the Decepticons in chapter 9, but Megatron was so distracted by the topic of conversation (Starscream) that he blew straight past it. XD

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Their new base was one of the replacements the scouts had found in the past—An abandoned junkyard, filled to the brim with jagged, broken items. The worst of it had been swept into piles, leaving thin walkways. It was beneath the junk that the true base lay.

Freshly patched together lights shone on the ceiling, which was supported by many mismatched metal panels welded together. No work was done on this location when Starscream had led the Decepticons, so all of it had to be new. Mecha parted as Soundwave led him to the back of the room, where a particularly bright light shone.

"Decepticons!" Soundwave exclaimed.

The crowd snapped to attention. Ravage wound between Starscream and Soundwave before taking the stage. After a quick glance at Soundwave, Ravage sent a comm, punctuating it with a roar.

[We have spent too long allowing ourselves to be controlled. First by the forged, and now by Megatron and the Autobots! With the blow we dealt tonight, we have supplies to last us longer than it will take for them to recover, but we are not free yet!]

Ravage glanced at Soundwave again. At a slight tilt of Soundwave's head, Ravage stepped back.

"Leadership—not an easy task," Soundwave said. "Decepticons—disorganized for too long."

Soundwave turned back toward Starscream, offering him a hand. Starscream took it and stood by his side. Then, Soundwave raised their hands, light bouncing off of them like the sun off of water.

"A single, authoritarian leader no longer," Soundwave said. "Together—we will lead."

Starscream's optics locked with Soundwave's visor. Slowly, Soundwave released his hand. Both mecha lowered their hands as the crowd cheered.

The optics that stared up at Starscream were familiar. With so few mecha left, they had to be. That didn't stop his wings from itching at the sight, or keep a pang of emptiness from seizing his spark.

He pushed the feelings away. Right now, he needed to speak.

"I will take this position with the zeal I have always had," Starscream said. "It is my sincere hope that we will find freedom, and peace with it. Let us all have a seat at the table—not just the most forceful and underhanded of us."

Ravage let out a yowl, sending a comm along with it.

[Decepticons, rise up!]

The crowd echoed the message. Despite their small numbers, the noise pierced Starscream's audials. His plating snapped close in an effort to avoid fidgeting.

Eventually, the crowd's cheers subsided, and the meeting with it. Starscream tapped a pede, plating starting to tingle. He nearly jumped as Ravage rubbed a cheek against his shin.

[Take a break,] Ravage sent. *[Get Soundwave to come with you. I can handle things for now.]*

Starscream nodded and turned to Soundwave.

"Soundwave?"

Soundwave tilted his head.

"Why don't you show me our quarters?" Starscream said. "We do have one, don't we?"

"Affirmative."

Soundwave led him through a tunnel. Curtains covered various holes on the side of the tunnel —presumably other rooms. Theirs was toward the end of it.

They moved through the curtain, and Starscream froze. His body burned as if someone had poured molten metal on him. His fans, already on, whirred loudly.

Starscream picked at his arm guards, fighting back a whine. He knew this feeling.

"S—Soundwave—"

Soundwave snapped to attention. He stepped carefully toward Starscream, hand landing gently on his shoulder, and steered him toward the berth. They both sat on the edge.

Starscream leaned into Soundwave. The other mech pulled him close, and he pushed himself into his tape deck. Soundwave's grip intensified. Despite the intensity, it was soothing.

They stayed locked like that until both of their sets of cooling fans went silent. Soundwave was the first to speak.

"Shouldn't have made you," Soundwave said.

"Ma—made me what?" Starscream asked.

"Speak so soon," Soundwave said. "Too close to confrontation."

"It had—had to be done," Starscream said.

Soundwave nodded.

Starscream poked his shoulder gently. "Besides, you spoke. It's only fair."

Soundwave looked away. His helm shifted downward slightly as his fingers traced the lining of his panels.

"Everything—will be better," Soundwave said. "We—will make it better."

Starscream rested his helm on Soundwave's shoulder.

"Yes, we will."

☆☆☆

Starscream watched from the corner of the main room as mecha milled about. On the side of the room, the inextinguishable game of tower fall stood, a small group clustered around it. Surprisingly, this group did not include Skywarp, though Nova Storm was at the edge of it.

The longer Starscream stared, the more he found himself searching for…

He flicked his wings. Why would he expect *them* to be here? Foolish, foolish, *foolish*…

Hands grabbed him from behind, which shouldn't have been possible. The world spun. Where was he? Who had—

Purple. Of course.

"Skywarp," Starscream said.

Skywarp glared at him, dentae bared. "You can't just do this."

"Do what?"

Skywarp threw her hands wide. "This! Coming back like nothing happened, taking command *again*—you just *can't*!"

Starscream tilted his head. "Why not? No one else protested."

"You don't—" Skywarp cut herself off either a growl of frustration, wings flaring. "You just don't—!"

Starscream's spark hummed painfully in his chest, but he pushed it aside. "Don't *what*, Skywarp?"

Skywarp burst forward. Starscream didn't have time to flinch before she was upon him, pinning him to a nearby rock.

"What is *wrong with you*?" Skywarp yelled. "You spent the majority of the war getting kicked around by Megatron, and I tried to support you then! I really did! But you just kept *throwing yourself into danger*!"

She closed her optics, grip tightening. Then, she snapped upward and started again.

"And *Thundercracker*! It was like you didn't care! But I kept looking after you, because it was what she would've wanted."

Skywarp's grip tightened even further, the joints between her fingers creaking.

"And then *you*… it was like you wanted to destroy yourself! You cut your rations, even though you'd always burned fuel faster than us—"

He'd always *what*—?

"—and you were barely recharging, barely keeping yourself clean, and you kept having your *episodes*, and I couldn't do anything to help because you wouldn't let me! It was like being in that ship again, picking you up after that fragger slagged you, and I just…"

Skywarp's optics met his, filled with fuzz.

"I thought if I stopped trying, I'd stop caring."

Her grip slackened. Starscream could've escaped easily, but he didn't.

"I just—" Skywarp's gaze fell. Then, she sprang forward, wrapping her arms around him and burying her face in his neck. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please don't do this again."

Starscream returned the embrace, spark calming. "I'm not. You can't stop me from taking command, but I won't be alone this time."

Skywarp hugged him tighter.

☆☆☆

Starscream roused from recharge early, systems lagging. The room was dark, and he was sandwiched between Soundwave and Skywarp. Soundwave was beneath him, so that wasn't much of an issue, but Skywarp was on top of him, and Nova Storm was on top of her. Ravage laid across all three of them, purring even in sleep.

Even if Starscream wanted to get up, he couldn't. He sighed quietly and attempted to reenter recharge, but his processor refused. He opened his optics and…

Two small lights stared at him from across the room.

[Rumble,] Starscream tried.

The tiny lights crept closer. Starscream received a 'message read' indicator. He rolled his optics.

"Rumble," he said quietly.

Rumble stared at him from the foot of the berth. Then, he hopped up, carefully avoiding the limbs of the sleeping mecha that surrounded him.

"Where were you?" Starscream asked. "Soundwave said you were gone."

"Scoutin' n' stuff," Rumble said. "Bossbot didn't want us on the big mission, so he gave us a li'l one."

So, they hadn't left him after all. They were just assigned an alternative mission, and Soundwave had to speak vaguely to avoid blowing their cover. That made much more sense. How long had Soundwave planned this? And why hadn't he been told?

The light of Rumble's optics caught on the arm guards, and Starscream was immediately reminded *why*. He hadn't exactly been stable for the majority of the plan. Admittedly, he spent much more time recovering from the impact of his time alone than actually being *present* while he was with the Autobots.

Rumble looked between Starscream and the sleeping mecha.

"You can join us," Starscream said.

Rumble crawled to his side, tucking himself between Starscream and Soundwave.

"We found somethin'," Rumble said, optics dimming. "Frenzy's still guardin' it."

"Recharge," Starscream said. "We can pick it up tomorrow."

☆☆☆

They met Frenzy deep inside a cave. Surrounded by water was a jagged stalagmite that bore a strange crystal at the top of it. It reflected what little light was in the cavern, almost glittering.

"What is it?" Starscream asked.

Frenzy shrugged. "Dunno. But it seemed powerful."

"Powerful *how*?"

Frenzy motioned toward the crystal. "Try 'n touch it."

Starscream approached the crystal, pausing when his pedes hit water. The water was cold, but as he carefully placed one pede after another, there was no risk of being swallowed by it. In the darkness, it appeared much deeper than it was.

As he touched crystal, a tingling energy coursed through his frame. He pulled his hand away. The energy was familiar—eerily familiar. He scanned the crystal.

"Spark energy," he muttered.

There was no way. Not on this planet. Starscream's frame was rooted in place. The Autobots—they could *never* know about this. Starscream pulled the crystal from the stalagmite and turned back toward the group.

"We need to hide this," Starscream said. "Right now."

As he walked back toward them, Skywarp waved a hand."Woah, woah, woah! You can't just say something like that and not explain!"

Starscream clutched the crystal.

"It's emitting *spark energy*. Nothing that's not a mech emits spark energy unless it can be used to *create sparks*."

The rest of the group stiffened, Soundwave especially.

"You're saying we could construct more mecha?" Skywarp asked quietly.

"If we have the materials," Starscream said. "But the Autobots could as well, if they got their hands on this."

Skywarp's wings were held wide and high, fiery determination in her optics. "We won't let that happen."

☆☆☆

Skywarp teleported them to the most secure room in the base—one of the few with an actual door. Starscream placed the crystal on a freshly repaired table. Just what kind of life could this create? Forged mecha came from cityformers and planetformers. Warframes came from captured sparks. Drones…

Starscream tapped a pede.

Drones were made from partial sparks—a split off from a living mech's spark, channeled into a focusing medium. It was why they'd not been considered mecha, despite having sparks. They were just half-sparked clones of another mech, placed into a useful body.

The duplication process didn't always succeed, and mecha created from it were prone to more problems than forged mecha, usually related to faulty integration or improper processing. But because of the focusing medium, it could also result in powerful abilities—known as outliers—like those of Skywarp's.

If this crystal could act as a focusing medium, they could turn the tide. An army of super-powered mecha at their fingertips, if only they had the resources. But—Starscream sighed to himself—they weren't here to wage war.

The crystal reflected what little light there was in the room.

How much did Starscream remember of his own creation? Very little came to him, except…

Starscream chuckled. "Shockwave would've loved this."

"Shockwave—would have," Soundwave said.

The scientist had always enjoyed ethically dubious puzzles. Whether it was how much energeon deprivation a mech could withstand before they died or how to force a connection without detection, Shockwave was the mech to tackle it. It was one of the reasons Starscream stayed away from the science department at first, but he grew used to it over time.

Was it twisted to miss the sound of screams?

Starscream turned back toward the group. "This will not leave this room. No one must ever know about it."

"Agreed," Soundwave said.

☆☆☆

Starscream was experimenting with chips from the Emberstone—as they had taken to calling the crystal—when he received a comm from Skywarp.

[You'll wanna see this.]

[See what?] He sent back.

[Just get over here! You'll see!]

Starscream rolled his optics and put his experiments on pause. He made sure to close and lock the door behind him, drawing the curtain in front of it. Then, he headed toward the main room.

His mecha spared him brief glances. The never-ending game of towerfall continued in the corner of the room. Skywarp wasn't there, so where was she?

Starscream ascended to the surface. He was met with a familiar silhouette in front of the setting sun. He reset his optical feed, but the sight remained the same.

"Blitzwing," he said.

Blitzwing stepped closer. "Yes. It is me."

Skywarp stopped scratching behind Buster's ear for a moment to glance at the two of them, a smile on her face.

"Told you that you'd wanna see this," she said smugly.

Starscream sighed fondly and turned his attention back toward Icebeam, who was pulling something out of his cockpit. He offered it to Starscream. Was that…?

"Bumblebee said to give this to you," Icebeam said.

Starscream took Ulchtar gently. "Thank you."

Icebeam dipped his head. He glanced at Skywarp, then turned back to Starscream. He hesitated, smacking his lips.

"I am glad to see you leading again," Icebeam said.

"And I'm proud to lead," Starscream said.

As they led Icebeam into the camp and Skywarp showed him around, a thought lingered in the back of Starscream's processor. *Bumblebee* had told Icebeam to give Ulchtar to him. In spite of the betrayal, he had remembered and cared. Did he and Knock Out still do movie nights despite having lost the majority of the attendees?

Knock Out. Starscream fiddled with the edges of his arm guards. Who would handle his appointments now? Who would fix his paint job?

Megatron wasn't the only thing he left behind.

☆☆☆

Starscream was sipping his morning fuel—filtered exactly to specifications, because Soundwave truly had been prepared—when his proximity sensors sent an alert. He sighed, not even bothering to turn as the mech behind him loomed.

"What is it, Dirge?" He asked.

"Snow swirls upon the land, bitter and cold," Dirge said. "But crystals gleam beneath the surface."

"So you *did* find something," Starscream said.

The old warframe had a habit of speaking poetically no matter the situation. It was rare that he dropped the tendency. As long as Starscream could tell what he was saying, he didn't mind. There were much more important things than how Dirge spoke—such as the confirmation of Rumble and Frenzy's findings.

Dirge dipped his head.

"That's good," Starscream said.

Neither the Autobots nor Decepticons had devoted much time to the poles of the planet, dissuaded by the extreme cold. It was a perfect place to search for energeon without risking a fight.

Starscream continued, "Put a team together. Take short shifts. If snow gets beneath your plating, go somewhere to defrost."

It would take extra work—and therefore extra energeon—to keep a mech warm in such a cold environment. Shorter shifts would limit the effects of the cold, even if that meant it

would take more time to extract energeon.

Perhaps, it would be worth it to see if one of their scientists could create something to aid his mecha in withstanding the cold. Maybe Tarantulas? Starscream would have taken the project himself if it weren't for the Emberstone. As Dirge left, he drafted a comm to Tarantulas.

When he finally felt it was decent enough to send, he was already being pestered by another mech. Though, as he turned to the source of the presence beside him, pestered wasn't quite the right word. Popshot's fuzzy optics stared into his, a grin on his face.

"Popshot," Starscream said quietly.

"Movie night?" Popshot asked. "You don't seem too busy."

Starscream sighed. "We don't have a working television."

Skywarp appeared beside him with a pop of air, nearly startling him off of his pedes.

"Yeah, we do," she said.

"Since when?" Starscream said, voice coming off sharper than intended.

Skywarp paid the irritated tone no mind, dramatically tipping her hand toward Popshot. "He brought it. We just set it up."

"I suppose I can indulge you."

☆☆☆

By the time the movie began, there were eight mecha in the room. Skywarp and Nova Storm rested on one side of Starscream, with Soundwave and his cassettes on the other. Popshot was the farthest away from him. They were all on the floor, various rags and torn pillows cushioning them. Unfortunately, constructing a cybertronian-sized couch with the resources they had proved difficult.

The movie was an odd one. It starred a young dog with strange dreams. Why did they choose to watch so many movies about dogs? As Buster yawned nearby, he was reminded of why.

Popshot had chosen the movie, claiming to have found it in one of the trash heaps. As it continued, the reason for that became clear—it was a confusing mess. The dog had been a human, somehow.

[Do you understand any of this?] Starscream sent to Soundwave.

[Negative,] Soundwave replied.

Starscream leaned on Soundwave's shoulder.

[Should've let you pick the movie,] Starscream sent.

The dog attempted to kill his past human life's business partner only to realize he had been the one responsible for his own death. Starscream fought not to laugh. What a fool!

Though, the more he thought about it, the more interesting the idea of living multiple lives became. It was something unexplored in the few faiths he had learned of. Starscream was not a religious mech, and even if he had been interested, there was little opportunity for it.

Soundwave slumped against him, visor darkening as he slipped into recharge. On the screen, the dog dug at his own grave. It was horribly corny, which was only outweighed by the strangeness of its premise. Somehow, the dog's family understood this—realizing that he was their absentee family member—and they left him.

The message of the film was clear: value your friends and family.

"He asleep?" Skywarp asked quietly, leaning over to glance at Soundwave.

Starscream nodded.

Skywarp smirked. "He looks kinda cute when he's not staring ominously."

"That's just how he is."

Skywarp raised a brow. "Cute or ominous?"

Starscream rolled his optics and sighed. Despite the show of exasperation he was putting on, she *had* caught him, and he had to admit she was clever. The group fell silent as the movie came to an end. Popshot loaded the next movie in.

As the title appeared, Starscream's spark hummed uneasily. He berated himself. Why, when he was surrounded by allies, doing something fun, did he feel *dread*? Red flashed on the screen.

At any moment, the Autobots could find them. Like so many times before, Starscream's joy existed in a careful balance. Safety was a fragile thing, easily torn apart by large, brutish hands.

Chapter End Notes

Starscream likes to be crushed, and Soundwave has a death grip. Perfect match.

I was originally going to use The Art of Racing in the Rain (2019), but it didn't fit the tone I wanted. To be fully honest, I don't remember much about the movie, but I remember how the book made me feel. Such a soul-crushing story.

It's fun to write the movie nights because I put so much effort into picking the movies just for Starscream to completely not get them at all. XD

Skywarp wasn't supposed to make up with Starscream in this chapter. They were originally intended to fight (and either take a few more chapters to make up or not make up at all), but Warp decided she missed him too much. She probably shouldn't be the one apologizing, but she seriously needed to vent. And we all know Starscream doesn't really do verbal apologies, anyway.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite the tension the Emberstone brought, Starscream could not devote all of his scientific effort to it. After a great deal of scrounging, he finally had the supplies to restart the energeon project. He spent all of his free time—of which there wasn't much—in his lab, alternating between fuel experiments and the Emberstone.

He sighed as another set of tests came back unsuccessful. How had he managed to survive on this slag when it refused to be made safely drinkable?

His comm pinged. He ignored the message. Whenever he finished with this, he would look at it—along with the thirty others. It pinged again. And again.

He set up another set of tests. As they came back with undesirable results, his comm pinged again. He hissed in irritation. What could possibly be so important? He opened the message.

[Hey, Screamer! Just wanted to check in—] Dismissed.

[You missed movie night. We will be having another tonight. If you want to come—] Dismissed.

[Skywarp said that—] Dismissed.

[I was wondering if—] Dismissed.

Dismissed, dismissed, dismissed! Nothing important! Why did they insist on contacting him for the most inane things?

Starscream jumped as a knock echoed through the room. He sighed, forcing his wings down, and called out, "Who is it?"

Soundwave opened the door a crack.

"Energeon," he said.

Starscream sighed and checked his fuel levels. They came back low. Why hadn't his systems sent him a notification?

"Leave it on the table," Starscream said.

Soundwave shook his head. "Starscream—must drink."

"I'm busy," Starscream said, turning back toward his tests.

Soundwave stepped closer.

"Starscream—must drink," he repeated.

"Frag off," Starscream muttered.

A moment of silence.

Starscream had a lot to do. He couldn't waste his time on trivial things.

"Fragging off," Soundwave said.

The door clicked shut behind him.

Starscream returned to his experiments, cube left alone until he finished for the day, or until he could no longer hold his instruments properly due to fuel depletion—whichever came first. The room was quieter than he would have liked, its vast emptiness highlighted by the silence.

☆☆☆

He had run out of the human vehicle fuel, of all things! It was easier to procure than energeon, but not without risk. He narrowed down the fuels the humans used to the handful of types that were most likely to work, which made things more difficult, since he couldn't just rip a fuel tank out of any vehicle and call his supplies replenished. The true issue was doing it without detection.

Starscream flew over a human settlement, searching for a sufficiently isolated area. Although fueling stations held more resources, it was easier to steal from individual vehicles. There was only so much he could carry on his own, especially without being noticed.

Soon, he found an isolated vehicle and gently tore its tank out. After a brief check of his surroundings, he prepared to take off. He froze as his audials picked up a noise.

Red shone through the trees.

"Doing this again, are we?"

Megatron's voice echoed through the area. If not for his optics, it would've been difficult to pinpoint him in the dim light.

"Leave me alone," Starscream hissed. "How did you even find me?"

Megatron stepped out of the shadows, his silhouette slowly fading into a fully featured mech as he came closer.

"Call it intuition," Megatron said. "I've known you for a very long time. There is little you can do to surprise me."

Starscream backed away, flaring his wings in warning. "That doesn't tell me anything!"

Megatron moved forward despite the warnings. His pedes thudded against the ground, plating clinking as it shifted. Something hit the back of Starscream's wings and he fought back a squawk of alarm. The moment of distraction was all Megatron needed to pin him, pushing a hand against Starscream's neck.

"What are you planning?" Megatron growled.

"I'm continuing my research," Starscream said, fingers jammed beneath Megatron's as he attempted to pry the hand away. "That's it."

Megatron sneered. "There's always something more with you. Don't lie to me."

Starscream kicked pointlessly at Megatron, unable to free himself. He would've sunk his claws into the brute's plating if he didn't already know it was futile.

"Have you ever considered that I'm *tired*?" Starscream said. "I accomplished *nothing* in the time I spent attempting to overthrow you! You overthrew *yourself*! I don't want to fight anymore. Let me and my mecha live in peace."

"*Your* mecha," Megatron said. "As if you didn't steal them from *me*!"

His grip tightened around Starscream's neck, pushing against his vocalizer. It glitched as Starscream spoke, filling his words with static.

"You *abandoned* them. They came will—willingly."

Megatron's grip tightened further. He bared his dentae with a growl. Then, he sighed, his grip loosening only slightly.

"They used to be so loyal," Megatron said. "*You* used to be so loyal."

Starscream closed his optics.

"I had noth—nothing when you found me. You gave me hope."

Megatron chuckled bitterly. "Yes. I remember finding you. I could barely tell you apart from a pile of scrap. My fallen star."

Starscream jolted at the nickname, prompting Megatron to tighten his grip again. He hadn't heard it in so long. Now, he could see the mocking cruelty in it. He had never left the atmosphere—his frame wasn't equipped for it. His attempt to reach space had been the desperate final resort of a grieving mech who didn't care whether he lived or died.

"I—I had nothing," Starscream repeated.

"And I gave you *everything*," Megatron said. "You threw it all right back in my face like the ungrateful creature you are."

He said it as if Starscream were a pet, or a servant. Anger bubbled up inside Starscream, burning his fuel lines.

"You hurt me!" Starscream yelled. "You ignored me, belittled me, and refused to treat me as an equal! What was I supposed to do?"

Megatron leaned close, optics burning. "Listen, like a good mech."

"Why should I listen to someone who never listened to me?" Starscream spat.

"You were never *owed* respect, Starscream. I was your leader. You were obligated to listen, and every time I gave an order, you *refused*."

Starscream shoved at the hands holding him down, struggle renewed as fury burned hotter within his body.

"That's it, isn't it!" Starscream yelled. "You wanted a good little *drone*, didn't you? A perfect servant? Your own *eye in the sky* to rival the council's?"

Megatron drew backward. "I *never*—"

"You could've fooled me! Barking orders at me like you *owned me*, talking about how I'm not owed respect, or freedom, or… or dignity! That I'm just some wild animal you need to tame!"

Megatron's grip tightened, metal denting beneath it. He growled leaning impossibly close, and then—

Starscream's body hit the ground, elbows slamming into the earth.

"Go," Megatron said.

Starscream scrambled to his feet. Megatron turned around, picking up the fuel tank Starscream had dropped and flinging it toward him.

What?

"Go," Megatron repeated.

Starscream took off, stopping midway to check the damage. The flexible plating of his neck was misaligned, and he was dented in various places. His spark pounded in his chest as entire frame shook.

He sank his dentae into one of the arm guards.

He planned to return without being noticed, but he couldn't come back like this. That wasn't even accounting for the injuries, which wouldn't be ignored, however minor they were. He hadn't told anyone where he went.

And…

Why had Megatron let him go? Surely, the brute hadn't suddenly grown a conscience after all this time? Starscream checked his plating for trackers, but found nothing. *Why*?

Was Megatron sick of it, too?

After straightening himself out the best he could, Starscream headed back to the base. He snuck in through a rarely-used side tunnel, placed the tank in his lab, and braced himself as he exited it. There was little he could say to avert suspicion. Starscream, stubborn as he was, knew doom when he saw it.

"Screamer!"

Starscream did not jump, nor did he squeal. He *did not*.

Skywarp leaned toward him, brow furrowed. "I swear I already checked over here, but whatever. You're coming with me. Right now."

She grabbed his arm. Starscream jerked away.

"Where?" Starscream asked.

"Movie night! You're not missing this one, not after you missed the last… few…" Her fingers ran over one of the dents on Starscream's arm. Her optics traced them, landing on the bent plating of his neck. She glared at him. "*What* did you do?"

"I was getting supplies for an experiment—"

"*Alone*," Skywarp said.

"Yes," Starscream said. "Alone. I thought I had avoided detection, but I misjudged how close the Autobots were to my location. One of them found me."

"We're going to the medbay. Right now."

The medbay was a tiny room barely isolated from the others, and his injuries weren't serious, but any protests died in Starscream's vocalizer as Skywarp silenced him with another glare.

☆☆☆

Starscream shaved another shard off the Emberstone. Another set of tests, another type of energy to run through it—likely another failure. He knew the way it functioned. Shockwave had told him when he helped in the lab. The scientist—faceless and with a processor so thoroughly lobotomized that he barely felt any emotion—offered an explanation drier than in any textbook.

It boiled down to this: a fraction of a spark could not exist on its own. It would fizzle out without a body to support it. Newly forged sparks were supported by the cityformers and planetformers that spawned them, which was why they didn't disappear before they had bodies. When captured to create warframes, sparks were kept in specially designed containers that bounced their energy back into them, preventing them from fading out.

Typically sized mecha did not have the energy within their sparks to create an entire new one. Any that attempted on their own died. But, with a medium that replaced the missing

components, a sliver of spark energy could be magnified. No one had managed to invent a fully artificial spark. From the way Shockwave explained it, they never would.

Starscream hissed as the blade slipped, cutting his finger. Energeon dripped lazily onto the table as he sighed.

The process of splitting a spark was not without risk. Many feared that the sparks would lose their energy after so much use. Attempts were made to use other drones to create more, but not a single newspark survived. Several of the drones themselves died in the process. It was yet another reason drones were not considered mecha.

Shockwave was not a drone, despite his lack of a face. He spent his life before joining the Decepticons constructing drone frames and forming drone sparks. Lobotomized criminals like him were expendable, so there was no worry about his spark becoming 'used up.'

Starscream ran the Emberstone shard through the conductor. Sparks flew off of it, but not the correct kind. Another dud.

Starscream barely knew Shockwave. In return, Shockwave barely knew him. Shockwave's liberation was an afterthought—just a byproduct of freeing the drones. He was a cold guiding hand with a familiar optic. Starscream knew where he had seen it before, because that was the precise reason that plant was freed first.

Starscream's real mentor in the realm of science was long dead. To think his name was to recall his own near death, crashing down to Cybertron's surface after failing to ascend. The planet's atmosphere proved too strong a contender. Thundercracker had scolded him, after he'd explained everything—first for disappearing without warning, second for nearly killing himself.

His model wasn't meant to leave the planet, and he'd known this since he first onlined. It didn't stop him from dreaming.

Starscream chuckled bitterly to himself. He had always wanted to see another planet, and now here he was, stranded on one. Cybertron was a distant memory.

Sometimes, he wished he was back there again. Flying over the city, sneaking past his limits to watch wild mechanimals, finding excuses for extra free time so he could secretly work in the labs—he missed it all. Everything was so much simpler, even if he'd had to steal and deceive for every scrap of individuality.

Starscream sighed, staring at his arms. The dents had already been fixed. The metal was tender, but not painful.

When he'd fallen from the sky, Megatron had found him. He offered Starscream freedom—the ability to make his own choices, and to be equal with others. He was kind, though inconsiderate at times (Starscream could never quite get him to stop manhandling him). He was a strong mech that commanded respect despite his status in society, and refused to stay in his place.

Starscream admired that, until he saw how little the mech knew about flight. Why did he recruit so many flight frames when he didn't know anything about them? Starscream attempted to fill the dearth with his own study and determination, but Megatron had never wanted to listen.

Starscream noted the set of results with a sigh. Since those were—as expected—a bust, it was time for the fuel tests. As he brought out the new set of filters, he received a message. He was fully prepared to ignore it like the others until he saw the sender—*Dirge.*

[A mech sleeps within the ice. He has no symbol on him. What do you wish us to do?]

A factionless mech? Here, of all places? Why?

[He isn't online, is he?] Starscream sent.

[No spark to speak of.]

A factionless frame, then. Still…

[Bring it back,] Starscream sent. *[I'll investigate.]*

There was only one reason a factionless mech would be here—a pre-war expedition. But what kind? And why hadn't they been found before? There should have been an investigation for any mech that failed to return at their allotted time. Something was missing.

Starscream waited patiently for Dirge and his group to return. Any mecha claiming otherwise were greatly exaggerating. They brought the frame covered in drapes, as was customary. Starscream nearly startled at the sight. It had been so long since they'd given a proper funeral —or even bothered to dispose of their dead—that he had forgotten about the tradition.

It took four mecha to carry the frame. Whoever they had been, they were large. Based on the timing, they were either a very old forged mech or a larger class of warframe.

Starscream made his way to Dirge, who was supporting one of the shoulders.

"Put him in my lab," Starscream said.

Dirge nodded.

The trek to the lab was short, and any mecha along the way scurried away after noticing the drapes. It was rude—to some, sacrilege—to interrupt funerary proceedings. But this was not yet a funeral, Starscream reminded himself as they passed through the doorway.

Starscream motioned to a spot on the floor. "Place him here. I don't have any tables large enough."

Dirge and his group followed the command. As they placed the frame down, Starscream caught a flash of red and blue. The red, if accounting for the dulling caused by death, was pale and desaturated—one not very common in recent times. The blue, on the other hand, would have resembled Starscream's own.

Starscream fought a shudder. It wasn't a rare color, though it was very specific. He watched Dirge and the others leave, then shut the door. After a moment, Starscream swiped the drape off the frame.

His spark froze. The frame that stared back at him was a flight warframe. It was heavily reformatted, as most were. Minimal weapons, a large amount of plating—there was no mistaking it. Tapping his pede, Starscream came closer to the frame. He ran a hand down its faceplate.

Unlit optics sat behind a protective visor. Starscream tapped his pede harder, the sound consuming the room. He searched for the mech's medical port, and after prying it open, made a connection.

The first thing he tried was the override to open the spark chamber. The energeon in the mech's lines had melted by now, giving the frame energy, but not enough. The plating unlocked, but it did not move. Starscream forced the chamber open.

As expected, the chamber was empty. Sparks required constant energy to be sustained. If a mech's lines froze, the spark wouldn't have received the energy it required.

There was one thing left to do. Starscream's processor rebelled at the idea, so he ran a scan instead. It came back incomplete, but of the systems it was able to assess, all were intact. This mech had not been damaged before succumbing to the cold. Death would have been painless and sudden.

Still, Starscream's spark ached. He flexed his fingers, preparing for the final task.

{Connecting…}

{Connection—authorized—}

{Downloading…}

{Download complete!}

{Loading files…}

The first file opened, and Starscream terminated the connection immediately. He pulled away from the frame, spark pounding.

"No," he whispered.

He hadn't wanted to believe it.

"No, no, no!" He hissed. "Not *you*."

The exact lab down to the arrangement of the drawers, Starscream holding a squirming retrorat for the first time, the day when the dehumidifier in the lab broke and everything was covered in condensation from the exotic vivariums—all of the memory files were there.

No search party was sent for Skyfire, as if council hadn't wanted him back—

It explained *everything*. The Council *hadn't wanted him back.* They *knew* he was sympathetic to the drones! It was a freak accident, but one they had taken full advantage of. A brilliant scientist, thrown away by the Council for getting too close to the truth!

He deserved a *real* funeral—one put together with care. But, as Starscream stared down at the frame, he was reluctant to let go. In the corner of the room, the Emberstone caught his optics.

"Spark energy," he muttered to himself.

It was unlikely, but not impossible.

☆☆☆

A mech's memories were stored in the processor, which was coded by the spark—but only during integration. Mecha whose processors were modified, such as those who underwent empurata (the formal term for Shockwave's lobotomy), did not suddenly recover, because the spark did not continue to code the processor. The processors placed within drones and warframes were blanks. They were immediately overwritten on integration.

If a processor already had data, would the spark still overwrite it?

The question remained in the back of Starscream's processor as Skyfire's frame sat in the lab. It occupied his thoughts as he organized raids. During movie nights, the screen was a blur as he thought of only one thing.

The Emberstone sat in his lab. The frame laid beside it. If he could—

"Hey, Screamer!"

Starscream hissed as he was poked in the side of the helm.

"Anybody in there?" Skywarp said.

Starscream slapped her hand away. She snickered as he turned toward her.

"Finally!" She said.

"What do you want?" Starscream muttered.

"We're gonna have a game night tonight," Skywarp said. "Keep up the morale, y'know? You're coming with me—*right now*—because you missed the last two."

Starscream sighed dramatically, rolled his optics, and followed Skywarp into the hall. She, as usual, grinned at his dramatics. But as they moved down the hall, her smile slipped. She paused in the middle of the hallway and sighed.

"You promised me you wouldn't do this again," Skywarp said.

"I'm not doing anything."

Skywarp's wings flicked. "You think that's not part of the issue?"

Starscream flexed his fingers. "What am I *supposed* to do, then? I have projects to work on! I can't spend every hour hanging out with you—"

"Are you avoiding us?" Skywarp said, optics staring into his. "Because it seems like you are."

"I—" Starscream wrung his fingers, his wings flattening against him. "No, I'm not… I just—I'm busy!"

Skywarp drew backward slightly. Then, she stepped in close, gently taking Starscream's hands in hers. She squeezed. Starscream squeezed back.

"What are you afraid of?" Skywarp said.

A reply meant to come out as an insistent hiss instead emerged as a quiet protest.

"I'm not afraid of anything…"

"I can *feel* it," Skywarp said. "I know you're scared. I just don't know *what* you're scared of."

Starscream squeezed Skywarp's hand again and let out a weak laugh. "You have me at a disadvantage there."

"Disadvantage?" She blinked at him, then shook her head. "You'll tell me what that means later. Stop trying to distract me. Why are you so scared?"

Starscream turned away, staring at the wall.

"This is temporary," he said. "It always is. It's all going to fall apart, and I'll be alone again, and it's going to *hurt*."

"What… makes you say that?"

Maybe it was when he'd led the Decepticons, only to be confronted by mutiny. Or, *oh*—maybe it was when he joined Megatron, joined the Decepticons, to watch his enemies burn only to be burned himself. Perhaps, it was before then, when he found joy and belonging only for the Council to snap it away! Maybe it was when he, for a brief time, was able to live his dreams, only for a wrench in the shape of Megatron to come along and tear the entire thing apart with meticulosity typically reserved for surgeons.

Nothing, and *no one*, was permanent—whether that was through mortality or through betrayal. Starscream would forever be forced to cling to the edge as it slipped beneath him, hurling everything he knew and cared for into the void. There was no such thing as safety, yet he found himself fooled each time.

But no more! He would never believe in the possibility again.

"What *doesn't*?" Starscream said, a sardonic grin spreading across his face. "Nothing has ever gone my way."

Skywarp pulled him closer, drawing a hiss out of Starscream as his arms were yanked. She glared at him, wings fanned out.

"It will now."

The words were delivered with a determined fury. Starscream chuckled, spark humming uncomfortably.

"Will it?" He said quietly.

"I'll make sure of it," Skywarp said. "I'm not letting you leave me again."

Starscream leaned away. "That sounds like a threat."

"Maybe it is, if that's what it takes to get the idea that I care about you into your processor."

Despite Starscream's protests, *that* was what he feared. The very idea of being cared for, emotionally, sent dread through his frame. It came in rippling waves, creeping in just when he thought it resolved.

It would've been better for his wingmates if they had never cared about him.

"Don't we have somewhere to be?" Starscream said, turning away.

Skywarp pulled him back. "Not yet. We aren't done."

"What more is there to talk about—?"

"How about that comment earlier?" Skywarp said. "Something about disadvantages?"

Starscream cursed himself for using such a subpar diversion. He attempted to pull his hands loose, but Skywarp's grip tightened. She wouldn't hurt him, he told himself. She would never hurt him. He had to believe it.

"Can you let go of me?" Starscream asked.

Skywarp tilted her head. "I will when you answer the question."

Starscream flicked his wings. She wouldn't hurt him, he told himself again.

"I can't sense EM fields," Starscream said. "I've never been able to. You can tell what I'm feeling, but I can't tell what you're feeling. *That's* the disadvantage."

Skywarp's olfactory ridge crinkled. "That's… interesting."

Starscream failed to pull his hands away again and tapped a pede. Skywarp finally let him go.

"Yes," he hissed, rubbing his wrists. "*Interesting*."

"I didn't think that was a thing," Skywarp said.

"Well, it is!" Starscream snapped. "So I'd appreciate it if you weren't so… *whatever this is* about it."

"'Whatever this is'," Skywarp repeated mockingly. She laughed. "That explains why using my field never worked to calm you down."

Starscream rolled his optics. "Yes, *yes*. A beautiful moment of realization. Can we move on now?"

Skywarp took a step down the hall.

"Sure, drama queen."

Chapter End Notes

kywarp: If I hold his hands, he can't run away.

Starscream is about to make a monumentally bad decision. I'm very excited for it.

Skywarp is trying, but she has no idea what she's doing. There was a major (and Megatron-shaped) wedge between them before they even had their fight. A lot of the things she used to do with and for him are now things he doesn't want. She's desperate to fill the hole Thundercracker's death has left in their dynamic, but she's a very different mech from Thundercracker. They'll work things out eventually, but it's a bumpy ride to get there.

Finally did a Megatron design!

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Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Starscream stopped ignoring messages. He didn't attend every social event, but he went to most of them. Skyfire's frame sat in his lab, the Emberstone shining beside it. A terrible energy invaded Starscream's body, seeping into it deeper and deeper as time passed.

Most nights, he fell into recharge last out of his small group. Some nights, with plating so tight that his spark ached and his hands shook, he sat up in the berth, staring at the ceiling. Megatron and the Autobots would find them. It was only a matter of when.

Fuel splashed on the floor as a canister slipped from Starscream's hands. He hissed in irritation, righting the canister. It nearly slipped out of his hands again when he moved it away from the spill.

"Fragging stupid," he muttered to himself.

He paused as his pede struck something. He stared down at Jetfire's frame, spark frozen.

"At least it's not on you," he said.

Another unsuccessful set of tests. Starscream slammed a fist against the table. As another fuel canister tipped over, he let out a frustrated shout.

"Why can't anything just *work*?" He yelled.

What was the point of this? He'd been running these fragging tests for so long, and none of them returned any useful results! He knew more about what was unsafe for a cybertronian to consume than any other mech at this point!

He was no closer to solving this than when he started. The energeon cached on Earth was not infinite, and they were already fighting for it. How long would it be until they were running out again?

Skyfire's lightless optics stared at him from the floor. He looked away, but the idea lingered. Skyfire was strong. He was as large as Megatron. If they had to fight…

Starscream tapped a pede. Even without considering Skyfire's strength, he would be a useful addition to the Decepticons. Assuming a new spark didn't overwrite his processor, his scientific knowledge would be invaluable.

Starscream reached for the Emberstone. He held it close to his chest as he knelt down and made a connection with the frame. After sending the command to unlock the spark chamber, he wrenched it open. He ran his fingers along the sides of it, hesitating.

Not a single mech of his origin survived this. But he was Starscream, and he had survived many things.

Starscream opened his spark chamber. He forced the Emberstone close to his spark, hands on the frame's chest as he braced himself. Having never witnessed this, he could only guess based on Shockwave's accounts. He willed his spark to release energy.

The pain was sudden and intense. Starscream silenced a cry as it coursed through him, starting at his spark chamber and traveling through his frame. Before him, energy crackled around the Emberstone. A small ball of light gathered on the other side of it.

Starscream pushed more energy. He crashed to the floor, knees slamming down. Still, it wasn't enough! He pushed more and slid down to his elbows. Even that wasn't enough.

He hunched over the frame, legs splayed beneath him. More. He still needed more.

With a flash, he was knocked onto his back. The Emberstone clicked as it landed beside him. A dull hum filled the room, light emitting from the center of it. Starscream crawled toward the frame. Every joint in his body ached, and his fuel lines burned, but he had know.

As a spark spun before him, he laughed.

"I… I did it," He whispered. "It… worked."

The spark chamber snapped shut. Starscream connected himself to the frame and ran a diagnostic. The numbers swam in his processor, but he managed to find the most important one.

{Fuel level: 16%.}

Starscream pulled his medical intake out and connected it to the frame's. Then, he pushed the override.

{Fuel level: 20%.}

He watched the levels climb, growing lightheaded, until they reached fifty percent. Then, he withdrew. He attempted to sit up, but the world spun before him, sending him back onto the floor. His fans hummed, straining to cool his frame.

Light flooded the room as the frame's optics came online. Starscream pulled himself onto the frame's chest. The frame—no, the *mech*—stared up at him.

There was no recognition in its optics.

"H—hello," Starscream said, vocalizer glitching from the strain on his frame.

"Hi," the mech said.

"Access your data—databanks," Starscream said. "What do you know?"

After a moment, the mech's olfactory ridge crinkled. They blinked, then stared at Starscream again.

"It's all numbers," They said.

"That's good," Starscream muttered.

The mech could access their diagnostics. Integration must have wiped the memory bank completely.

"You're a cybertronian," Starscream said. "You'll—you'll learn what that means soon enough. Your name is Sk—*Jetfire*. Your name is Jetfire."

"Jetfire," the mech repeated. "What's yours?"

"Starscream. I made you."

The world grew dark at the edges as something snapped beneath Starscream's plating. He bit back a hiss. Not now!

"You *made* me?" Jetfire said, optics growing wide.

{Alert! Fuel levels low!}

"Yes," Starscream said.

He attempted to push himself up again. The world blurred, and he fell. Beneath him, Jetfire shifted.

"Help me up," Starscream demanded.

Jetfire pushed himself up, then grabbed Starscream by the shoulder. Metal warped beneath the newspark's fingers, and Starscream yelped.

"N—not that hard!" Starscream hissed. "Let go!"

Jetfire flinched away. A twinge of regret seized Starscream's spark, but he ignored it in favor of rising, leaning on Jetfire to keep himself from falling. He swayed on his pedes, joints protesting.

"I'm… going to comm someone," Starscream said. "Don't be scared when they come in."

[Skywarp—]

{EMERGENCY STASIS INITIATED.}

Everything went dark.

☆☆☆

Muffled voices spoke around him. Starscream willed himself to move, but his limbs were too heavy. He opened his optics, hissing at the brightness of the room. At his side, a large mech sat. *Jetfire*.

"He's awake."

Hook?

A hand brushed against his. He turned toward the source, blinking away static.

"Skywarp?" He said.

"What the *frag* were you thinking?" She hissed.

"I don't—" he pushed himself up and immediately slid back down. "What's going…"

Skywarp sighed. "You went into emergency stasis."

Right. The Emberstone. Jetfire.

"I know how the Emberstone works now," Starscream said.

Skywarp glared at him. "I figured."

Shuffling at the entrance to the room gave both mecha pause. Soundwave came through the doorway. He paused, glancing at Jetfire, before making his way to the edge of the berth.

"Soundwave—arrived as soon as possible."

"I'm not done chewing this idiot out yet," Skywarp said.

"Unproductive," Soundwave said. He turned toward Starscream. "Starscream—should be dead. Starscream's survival—miraculous."

Starscream pushed himself up again, his body finally having the strength to support him, despite the shaking of his arms.

"I have a talent for surviving what others cannot," Starscream said.

"Starscream—survives the impossible," Soundwave said. "Starscream's body—bears the consequences."

Starscream waved a hand dismissively and nearly fell as his other arm's elbow collapsed beneath him. "So? Bodies heal."

Skywarp leaned in. "Not *perfectly*, you dumbaft!"

"I'll be fine," Starscream said.

"Remains to be seen," Soundwave said. "Your spark—sustained damage. Your body—even more damaged."

"I'll be *fine*," Starscream repeated.

☆☆☆

He had gotten past the enforced berthrest, at least. Starscream disguised a pained hiss as he walked down the halls, joints moving more than they had in a while. He obtained his ration and picked a corner of the main room to curl up in.

"Starscream!"

Starscream looked up as Jetfire approached. Jetfire sat beside him, a smile on his face.

"You're up!" Jetfire said.

"Yes," Starscream said between sips of energeon. "I am."

The newspark had already made plenty of allies. It seemed that he retained Skyfire's kindness, which combined charmingly with his naivety. Despite all of these allies, Jetfire visited him daily while he was confined to the berth, chattering excitedly about this or that little thing.

"I'm so happy to see you up!" Jetfire said. "Does this mean you're getting better?"

"As better as I can be getting," Starscream said, tilting his cube to ensure the last drop was gone.

He stood, hissing as his frame protested. It would get less painful with time, but did it have to hurt so much? His plating hadn't even been damaged! He'd just overloaded his sensornet!

And maybe fried several essential neurocircuits that were still reintegrating, but that wasn't as important. His body was so busy repairing the essential circuits that it left his motors to languish, causing weakness and shakiness. It was embarrassing to barely be able to cross a room, but this was temporary.

At least, that was what he told himself. He had to believe it was. Skywarp and Soundwave's warnings sat at the back of his processor, popping up whenever he had doubts. But would recover from this one, as he had all the others! He was Starscream!

Starscream crossed the room, Jetfire following closely behind him. When they entered the hallway, Starscream allowed himself to lean against the wall until they reached their destination. Hook looked up at them from the other side of the medbay.

"Took you long enough," Hook said.

"Try getting anywhere quickly with fried neurocircuits and weak motors," Starscream snarked.

Hook rolled his optics. "I offered you assistance *multiple times*. Not my fault you're so fragging stubborn."

Starscream glared at the poorly constructed assistive devices stored haphazardly in the corner of the room. "Those wouldn't have helped."

Hook stared at him, brows raised as if to say *'Really?'* Then, he sighed and patted one of the berths.

"Sit here."

Starscream obeyed. Jetfire stood behind him, casting glances between him and Hook.

"Pop your medical panel," Hook said. With a quick look toward Jetfire, he added, "Internal injuries need diagnostics, since we can't just open our patients back up—as much as he makes me *want* to eviscerate him."

Starscream rolled his optics and opened his panel. Hook made a connection. His lack of medical overrides prompted Starscream to accept it. Briefly, Starscream contemplated rejecting the connection just to irritate the other mech, but decided to be mature.

Starscream's systems alerted him as files and programs were accessed. Luckily, Hook was a practical mech, and didn't care enough to dig through anything he didn't immediately need to. A moment later, Hook disconnected, lips twitching upward.

"You're recovering well, considering how badly you slagged yourself," Hook said. "Some of my best work."

Starscream rolled his optics. What was it with medics and giant egos? Hook hadn't even completed medical school before the war started.

Hook motioned to Jetfire. "You want to try?"

Jetfire moved around the berth slowly, wings held low.

"Um, sure," he said quietly.

Jetfire missed the port on his first attempt. On his second, he didn't insert it all the way. On the third, Starscream finally received the prompt. He authorized the connection and waited.

As his systems alerted him to access of his diagnostics, Jetfire whispered, "That's a lot of numbers."

"It's about knowing which ones are important," Hook said. "Find the air change rate."

Jetfire read the number aloud.

Hook nodded. "That's a good value. If he were overheating, his fans would be running faster, which increases the rate. I replaced one of his fans after it snapped, so making sure the rate is good is important."

Jetfire nodded, a small smile on his face. Starscream didn't appreciate being used as a teaching tool, but…

"Now, fuel line pressure."

Jetfire read that one out.

"Good," Hook said. "It's higher than yesterday, which is what we're looking for."

They continued like that—Jetfire reading or guessing while Hook instructed—for quite a while. Starscream tapped his fingers on his knee. He was recovering, but how quickly? When would he be fit to continue his experiments?

Starscream had taken quite a few beatings in his life from both allies and enemies. He survived on nothing but human-made slag. He crashed from the sky, plating burning from the atmosphere. What was one more near-death?

Perhaps *he* was the confounding factor in his experiments. Something perilous to him was instant death for other mecha. The idea was appealing, but its implications for the future were bleak. If Starscream was an outlier, then there was no way to create energeon outside of Cybertron.

There was no energeon remaining on the planet when they left it. If they couldn't find a new source of fuel, they were all going to starve. Caches could only last for so long, and many mecha weren't equipped to leave the planet on their own.

Starscream was pulled out of his thoughts by a lull in conversation. The visit was over. As Starscream pushed himself off the berth, Jetfire moved to his side, catching him as his legs crumpled beneath him.

"Are you sure you don't want something to help?" Jetfire asked, voice quiet and gentle.

Starscream glared at the pile in the corner of the room again. Those devices would turn to scrap more quickly than he was.

"I don't want to touch those things," Starscream muttered.

"Why?"

"Because they're garbage!" Starscream hissed quietly enough for Hook not to hear. "They have no structural integrity!"

"Okay," Jetfire said, offering an arm.

That was it? He wasn't going to force it on him, or insist he knew better, or…? Who was he kidding? This was Jetfire! He had all the soft passivity of Skyfire and then some.

Starscream took the arm, allowing Jetfire to lead him out of the medbay. When they were in the hall, Starscream looked up at Jetfire, waiting until the newspark stared back.

"So, you have an interest in medicine," Starscream said.

"Well…" Jetfire looked away. "I want to make sure you're okay, and it helps everyone, so…"

Starscream leaned more of his weight on Jetfire. "There's no need to be so sheepish about it! Medicine is a fine profession. We can always use more medics."

"Really?" Jetfire said, staring down at him.

Starscream chuckled. "Really!"

"Is that what you made me for?"

Starscream paused. Jetfire aborted his next step after nearly dragging Starscream.

Starscream was struck by the realization that the mech before him was a thinking, feeling thing. He knew this, but it was something he hadn't considered when he stared down at the empty frame, ready to split a spark into it. At that time, he hadn't been Jetfire.

Starscream had plans for Skyfire's frame, but not *Jetfire*.

"No," Starscream said. "That's not why I made you."

Jetfire tilted his head. "Then why did you make me?"

How was he supposed to explain the pit that consumed his spark? Was there a way to explain such a horrid thing to a mech so new to the world? The violence, the abuse, the war—it would taint Jetfire's naive view. Starscream stared into Jetfire's bright optics and knew he could never force such a softspark to fight. Regardless of his size and strength, Megatron would tear him to pieces.

"I wanted to," Starscream said. "Simple as that."

He needed some light in the darkness of life. And if it *had* killed him, so what?

Sk—*Jetfire* stared at him, wings held high. The pattern, the colors—it was all so familiar. Starscream's plating crawled.

"Do you like your colors?" Starscream said.

Jetfire looked away. "I haven't really thought about them. They're nice enough, I guess."

"I think we can do something more *you*," Starscream said.

"I onlined with these colors," Jetfire said. "Aren't they *me*?"

Oh, if only it worked like that…

"I changed my colors," Starscream said. "I used to be red and gold."

[Do we have paint?] He sent to Soundwave.

[Storage room 5,] Soundwave replied.

Jetfire hummed. "It's hard to imagine you like that."

"I was quite striking," Starscream said with a grin. "But I wanted to paint my gauntlets blue, and the red didn't match with those, so I changed it."

Jetfire glanced at Starscream's arms. "It's kinda like my blue stripes."

It was the exact same color, but Starscream couldn't say that.

"The point is, we have some paint. Why don't we take a look and see if there are any you like?"

"Um, sure…"

The walk to the storage room was short. When they reached the room, Starscream sat on one of the shelves, limbs aching, as Jetfire hovered over him. After a few moments, he rose, determined to find the paints. It took some searching. They were buried in the back of the shelf, shoved haphazardly into a box.

It made sense. Appearance wasn't a priority when so many threats were present. For all Starscream knew, they were grabbed inadvertently when the Autobots' supplies were raided.

Starscream arranged them on an empty shelf by color and shade. The variety was larger than he expected. Jetfire would have a decent range to pick from.

"See any you like?" Starscream said.

Jetfire looked down at the paints. "Umm…"

He picked out a handful. Starscream scrutinized them. Orange? Seriously? And such a bright one, too! A bright yellow, and an equally bright red… had Jetfire chosen randomly? Starscream fought not to sigh and looked at the final two.

Black and purple. Not quite Skywarp's shades, but close. With that yellow… Starscream fought not to laugh.

"Taking a little inspiration from Skywarp, aren't you?" Starscream said.

"I—I like her colors!" Jetfire said. "And I'm not really sure what I want…"

"Well," Starscream said. "I don't think dark colors suit you."

Starscream hummed, sliding the purple to the side. He kept the black. What else? He pulled the red to the front, side by side with the red, and took a white from the back.

"Let's keep the white base, if you're willing."

Jetfire nodded. "Okay…"

"What do you think about red and black for the stripes?" Starscream asked.

"Sure!" Jetfire said, wringing his hands.

Starscream tilted his head. That didn't sound very confident.

"You're certain?" He asked.

Jetfire's wings flicked upward. "Yes! I'm certain!"

They got to work. The white base coat was easy, since Jetfire was already white. Starscream only needed to patch up some areas where the paint had been scraped off from his frame's time under the ice. The red and black were what brought difficulty.

As Starscream attempted to paint the lines, his hands refused to work properly. He hissed in irritation as the brush veered, the resulting line thin, shaky, and crooked. Stupid neurocircuits. Stupid motors. This wouldn't stand!

[Skywarp, are you free?]

The response was immediate.

[Coordinates?]

Starscream rolled his optics.

[Storage room five.]

[Cool! Be there in a moment!]

With a whoosh of displaced air, Skywarp popped into the room. "Sup?"

Starscream motioned to Jetfire, who was half-painted. Skywarp's optics widened. She leaned forward with a grin.

"Oh! Paint jobs!" She said. "I haven't done one in so long!"

"Just—" Starscream motioned to Jetfire. "Please."

Skywarp took the paint brush from him and got to work. Her lines were perfect, despite her claims. Starscream looked away, jealousy burning within him. If his neurocircuits weren't taking so long to recover…

Truthfully, he wouldn't have done the best job even if he was fully recovered. His hands were only as steady as they needed to be for lab work. There was one mech he would've trusted with this task above all others (even Skywarp), but that mech wasn't here, and never would be again.

Skywarp was quick—much quicker than he was. When she finished, she stepped back, admiring her work. Then, she turned to Starscream with a grin.

"Whaddaya think?"

Jetfire's stripes were a similar pattern to before, but the blue was replaced with red and black. It was sleek, and more importantly, did not immediately call Skyfire to mind.

"It looks good," Starscream said, allowing himself to deliver full praise.

"Awesome!" Skywarp chirped. She leaned back, likely snapping an image of Jetfire. She looked up at him. "What do you think?"

Jetfire smiled. "I look nice…"

Skywarp's wings rose proudly. "Well, you'll have plenty of opportunities to show it off! Blitzwing is about to walk Buster, if you want to come along for that."

Jetfire's wings fluttered. He looked between Skywarp and Starscream. "I, um—"

Starscream waved a hand. "You can go."

Jetfire nodded and left the room. Before Starscream could make his exit, Skywarp turned to him. Her optics stared into his.

"Was that his idea?" She asked.

Starscream shook his head.

Skywarp looked to the doorway again. Starscream attempted to step past her, but his unsteady pedes betrayed him. Before he could crash to the ground, Skywarp caught him with a sigh.

"You're thinking about Skyfire," She said.

Starscream hadn't thought of Skyfire in so long. The mech was dead long before the war began. Though he had left a hole in Starscream's spark, there hadn't been a reason to think of him.

Something squirmed in the back of Starscream's processor. Had he forgotten about Skyfire? It was so wrong to think, but…

"I hadn't been," Starscream said. "For a long time. But then we found his frame."

"You missed him," Skywarp said.

"I…"

Had he? Starscream's fingers weakly pressed into the plating that enclosed his Spark chamber.

"Yes. I did."

The words kept coming.

"I saw him and he was all I could think about. He and—and Thundercracker, they kept me safe when I was a newspark. I can't bring Thundercracker back, but having Skyfire's frame in front of me, I couldn't… I had to know if it was possible."

Skywarp hadn't known Skyfire well. To her, Skyfire was probably just some mech that a young Starscream was inordinately attached to. But just as Thundercracker guided both of them as Seekers, Skyfire taught Starscream as a scientist.

Starscream hadn't been allowed to take classes or get a license. Skyfire himself had barely been allowed to. He had put it all at risk to teach Starscream everything he knew.

"It didn't bring Skyfire back," Skywarp said quietly.

"It didn't," Starscream whispered. "But I don't regret it."

Skywarp frowned, her wings lowering. "Don't say that."

"What? That I don't regret making Jetfire?"

Skywarp's grip tightened. "That you don't regret almost killing yourself."

"Those are two separate things," Starscream muttered, failing to push her hands away. "Quit manhandling me."

Skywarp's grip loosened. "Sorry."

"It's fine."

Starscream leaned against her to force himself upright. Skywarp moved to speak, but hesitated. Then, finally, the words came.

"I want you to speak with Nova Storm."

"Nova Storm?"

Skywarp sighed. "When Thundercracker died, she… she helped me. She knows things. She can do a better job than I would."

"She isn't a medic," Starscream said.

Skywarp's wings flicked. "Not with that. The other stuff. The… other kind of health."

Starscream kept his questions to himself, not wanting to repeat the past.

"Fine."

Chapter End Notes

Happy mother's day! I'm posting this a little early because I realized I had a golden opportunity at the last possible moment. Hope you guys like Jetfire. :3

- Rambling about the inspirations behind Jetfire
- Song rec

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Skywarp told me to talk to you."

Nova Storm's wings twitched as she turned toward Starscream. She blinked slowly at him.

"Oh," she said. "About what?"

Starscream glanced between the rabble in the main room and the hallway. "Can we go somewhere more private?"

"Of course."

Nova Storm followed as Starscream hobbled into the hallway, leaning against the wall once he reached it. At this time of day, their quarters would be empty, so to their quarters they went. He sat on the berth. Nova Storm sat beside him.

How was he supposed to begin? He barely understood *what* Skywarp wanted him to talk about. Maybe…

"When my initial leadership of the Decepticons ended," Starscream said. "A… 'different type of health' was mentioned. What does that mean?"

"Your processor—" Nova Storm said.

Starscream laughed bitterly. That was already shot, and had been since he onlined.

"I'm serious," Nova Storm said. "The way we think, feel, process the world—it can be maintained, just like a frame."

Could it *really*?

"I don't see how that could work," Starscream said.

Processors were processors. They were part of the body. Why would their maintenance be separate?

"It's an idea I learned from human literature," Nova Storm said. "After I lost my wingmates…"

The Rainmakers. Starscream remembered them. To him, they were merely soldiers, but to Nova Storm, they were everything. Seekers were kept in groups of three from creation. Starscream's group had been an exception, owed to Thundercracker's status as a warframe. Ion Storm and Acid Storm were lost in one of the earlier battles on Earth, before Starscream had grown displeased enough with Megatron's foolishness to call retreats himself.

Nova Storm continued.

"I couldn't recharge, I didn't want to refuel… it was difficult to keep trying. It still is, sometimes. But I wanted to keep going, so I looked for anything I could. The humans studied their own processors and I wondered if any of that could apply to us, so I tried it."

As much as Starscream loathed to admit it, humans were clever at times.

"I assume it worked," Starscream said.

"It did."

"So," Starscream said, gesturing dramatically. "What is your human-inspired advice, then?"

"That depends on the issue," Nova Storm said.

Did Starscream even know?

Megatron and the Autobots were going to find them and ruin everything. That was a realistic and reasonable fear. They would run out of energeon—an inevitability. Those were all issues rooted in the physical.

"If I knew, would I be here?" Starscream said.

"Then let's find out what it is."

Starscream rolled his optics. "How are we going to do that?"

After a long line of questions, they still hadn't reached a conclusion. Starscream tapped a pede, irritation growing within him. What was the point of this?

"Are you sure—"

"I'm sure," Starscream hissed. "This is a waste of time."

All of his problems—Megatron, the Autobots, their lack of fuel—were real! They weren't only in his processor, so why would tackling them like that help? It would be putting a patch on a dying mech. There was no pretending everything was alright.

Before Nova Storm could protest, Starscream staggered across the room. He checked his fuel levels, no longer trusting that his systems would alert him properly, and headed for the main room when they came back low. Only a few mecha watched as he fetched his energeon. He headed for the corner of the room.

His unreliable pedes slipped out from under him partway through. He clutched his cube as he fell, his descent stopped by large hands. After a moment, he pushed himself away from the other mech.

"Thank you, Dirge," he said.

"You are welcome," Dirge said.

Starscream walked past Dirge and settled in the corner of the room. Moments later, Dirge settled beside him. Fighting a sigh, Starscream sipped his cube. Just because he was weak right now, everyone wanted to crowd him.

"The Quintessons are in my processor."

Starscream nearly dropped his energeon.

"They are long dead," Dirge said. "But they linger."

"What?" Starscream said.

"War doesn't end. It just changes locations."

How was he supposed to respond to that…?

"I guess it doesn't," Starscream said.

It was true. Despite claims of peace, this war was far from over.

"The war stopped being on Earth," Dirge said. "It's in our processors now."

Again with the processor talk.

"Megatron and the Autobots are *alive*, unlike your Quintessons," Starscream hissed.

"Yes, but neither are here."

It didn't matter if Megatron was *here*, it mattered that he was alive at all!

"He won't stop tormenting me until he's *dead*," Starscream said.

"The Quintessons are dead," Dirge said slowly. "And they torment me."

Would Megatron remain within him, even after death? Starscream's plating itched. He couldn't let that happen.

"Ask any warframe, they'll say the same." Dirge stirred beside him as he spoke. "Some lose the battle, but it cannot be won."

Starscream flexed his fingers. Would he be fighting Megatron and the Autobots forever?

Dirge's optics met his. "Our enemies may be different, but you fight your own war. You are a strong commander. I do not want you to lose."

"I—" The words struggled to leave Starscream's vocalizer. "I won't. I don't want to, e—either."

Dirge laid a gentle hand on Starscream's shoulder. His gaze drifted toward the rest of the room. Starscream followed.

Mecha milled about, some clustered together while conversing. A small group was gathered at the towerfall table—the game was an irksome constant.

"All of us hold faith in you," Dirge said. "Enough to risk our lives and freedom. We want you here."

Starscream didn't know how to respond to that. Truthfully, he didn't know why Dirge was telling him this. He flexed his fingers, the bending of his joints distracting him from the confusion.

"You didn't used to," he muttered.

"Circumstances changed," Dirge said. "As have you."

Had he really changed, or had they not bothered to look any further? It didn't matter. The outcome was the same.

"But that is a different path to travel," Dirge said. "We support you, and we await your recovery."

'That sounds like a threat.'

'Maybe it is, if that's what it takes to get the idea that I care about you into your processor.'

Starscream hummed.

A brick fell on Frenzy's head as the tower at the side of the room fell. Rumble pointed and laughed, prompting Frenzy to leap at him. The two wrestled as the rest of the players watched with amused grins.

Why had he always jumped to malice, even when it came from those closest to him? Why did he associate affection with fear? Why were love and kindness a threat to him?

'I want to make sure my Air Commander doesn't offline.'

Megatron was in his processor—had been for too long. It was time to be rid of him.

Starscream smiled, pushing against the wall as he rose.

"Thank you, Dirge."

☆☆☆

Starscream woke lazily from recharge to a gentle jostle, Ulchtar curled around his arms. The others had already vacated the loose nest they had created (eight mecha couldn't fit on a berth, especially not when one was *Jetfire*), but Starscream had no obligations except to heal, so he allowed himself to rest. As he was jostled again, he clutched Ulchtar tighter.

"Starscream."

Jetfire's quiet voice.

Starscream rolled over.

"Starscream," Jetfire repeated. "I've got something to show you."

Starscream deposited Ulchtar in the nest and pushed himself up. Though his strength was beginning to return, his arms still shook. The tremors would take some time to go away; Neurocircuits were slow to repair.

These slow-to-repair circuits were the reason Starscream hobbled down the hall as Jetfire led him. As one of his pedes slipped, he let out an irritated hiss, catching himself on the wall. The return of his strength didn't improve his balance or control—it just meant he was faster at falling.

Jetfire offered him a hand. Starscream took it, cursing his frame. A few more moments of walking, then Jetfire stopped at the entrance to a storage room. They entered, and at first, Starscream didn't notice anything.

Jetfire wheeled something to the center of the room. Recognition sent a zing of wariness through Starscream's spark.

"A walker," Starscream said quietly.

"A rollator!" Jetfire corrected, swiveling it on its wheels. "You didn't like the ones in the medbay, so I made it just for you!"

Dread washed over Starscream, making his plating itch. He fought not to twitch his wings, knowing Jetfire would pick up on it. It was a beautiful gift—an amazingly thoughtful gift—and *Jetfire* had made it—but Starscream couldn't…

A mech that couldn't fight was as good as dead. In many cases, they *were* dead, whether through loss in battle or a medic's mercy. Displays of weakness were a beacon to the enemy.

Starscream could cling onto another mech or lean against the wall. It drew no attention to him. If he used the rollator, it would make noise. The sliding of the wheels would be noticed. Though one could tell he struggled with walking if they watched, the rollator would be a neon sign.

Every mech would know. If the Autobots, or Primus forbid, *Megatron*—

"What do you think?"

He had to respond.

"I—" Starscream stammered. "Thank you, Jetfire. I appreciate it."

"Great! Let me show you how to use it!" Jetfire said, wings fluttering.

Starscream listened numbly as Jetfire gave him every detail with an enthusiasm unparalleled. When Jetfire urged him to take a step forward, he obeyed. The rollator supported him perfectly, only driving the dread in further.

"Starscream?"

What was he thinking? There were no enemies here. He repeated that to himself. *No enemies here.* Jetfire just wanted to help—and he *was*.

Starscream let go of the rollator and flexed his fingers. "I—"

Jetfire stepped closer.

"Th-thank you," Starscream said. "I really do mean it."

"I'm just trying to help," Jetfire said quietly.

"I know."

☆☆☆

As he walked down the halls, holding the handles of the rollator, Skywarp glanced at him. Immediately, she appeared beside him, a large grin on her face.

"Looks like it's working well," she said.

Had she helped Jetfire build it?

"It is," Starscream said.

As fearful as he was about what the rollator would represent to his enemies, it gave him one great advantage: mobility. He no longer had to rely on walls or other mecha to traverse the base.

"He worked really hard on it," Skywarp said. "Kept talking with Hook on how to build it and begged me for supplies, because we didn't have the alloy he needed."

Starscream hummed. That sounded exactly like Jetfire.

"Don't take this as an endorsement of what you did, but…" Skywarp sighed. "You split a good spark."

Too good of a spark. Starscream couldn't believe how kind the newspark was. That kindness, that politeness—it had to be the remains of Skyfire. Even if Jetfire's spark had rewritten his processor, there was no way it could have come from Starscream.

Starscream was violent. He was ill-tempered. He was a liar, a traitor, and—

No. He wouldn't go down that path.

"A spark from a splitspark," Starscream said, attempting to distract himself.

"I don't even want to *know* how you managed that," Skywarp said, shaking her head. "Wasn't it considered impossible?"

The conversation paused as Starscream reached the fuel dispenser. He grabbed his serving, and Skywarp grabbed hers. A small seat at the center of the rollator—a very smart choice on Jetfire's part—allowed Starscream to carry his cube without having to sacrifice his grip on the rollator. Skywarp placed hers next to his on the seat and he rolled his optics. She stuck her tongue out at him.

"I've always managed the impossible," Starscream said, fanning his wings out and pushing his chest forward in a show of mock haughtiness. "But, truly… I have no idea. I just tried it the way Shockwave described it to me and it worked."

It shouldn't have. The process killed the drones it was tried on. Again, Starscream had to wonder: what was it about him?

Perhaps he was so determined not to die that his spark refused to go out.

They reached the corner of the room. Starscream took the cubes from the seat, offering Skywarp hers as he sat. She took it and leaned against the wall.

Even if Starscream couldn't die—which *wasn't proven*—he could suffer. Those around him did not share his abilities, whatever they were. If the Autobots found them…

"Fight me," Starscream said.

Skywarp nearly dropped her cube. "*What*?"

"I need to learn how to fight again," Starscream said. "If I'm going to be like this. So, fight me."

"Are you sure—"

"*Fight. Me*," Starscream hissed.

He would be no use on the battlefield if he couldn't work around his… *limitations*. If the Autobots found him, he would be a liability. That was unacceptable.

(That he had accepted his condition's permanence did not cross his mind.)

Skywarp flinched. "Okay, okay! *After* we finish our fuel."

Good.

☆☆☆

The rollator sat beneath a tree, neatly folded. Skywarp's optics flicked between it and Starscream, her wings twitching. Stance wide to compensate for his altered coordination, Starscream glared as he waited for her to speak.

"Um," she said. "Are you sure you don't want the rollator?"

"When am I going to be able to use my rollator during a *fight*?" Starscream said.

He wouldn't use it as a weapon unless absolutely necessary—it was too valuable to risk damaging. Besides, if he was taken prisoner, would they even bother to take it? He would need to find a way to fight without it even if he did train with it.

"Okay…" Skywarp sighed. "Just, uh… come at me, I guess?"

Starscream launched himself at her, aiming a blow toward her face. She caught his fist, and as he stumbled, she held him up by it.

"Stop *helping*," he muttered, yanking himself out of her grip and stumbling backwards. He swept a leg underneath her, sending her to the floor—along with himself.

That move would've worked just fine before...

"Sorry!" Skywarp yelped.

"Don't apologize!" Starscream yelled, throwing himself upward.

He *needed* this. The fall only proved it. When Skywarp rose, Starscream leaped at her again. She countered his blows with ease, aided by the unsteadiness of his pedes. After a brief struggle, she flung him backwards into a tree. Starscream activated his thrusters, determined not to crash.

He flew back toward Skywarp, this time finally managing to hit her. The battle took a turn in his favor, and as it continued, Starscream's spark sung. Eventually, he backed Skywarp into a tree, the other mech letting out a surprised chirp as her wings hit it.

Starscream let her go, a grin spreading across his face. She stared at him with wide optics.

"You never touched the ground," she said, a laugh escaping her vocalizer. "That's—wow!"

Starscream cut power to his thrusters, which he hadn't realized were still on. He kept losing his balance because his pedes couldn't make proper contact with the ground. If he stayed in the air, that nullified the issue completely!

He wiggled his wings. He *could* still fight—as if that had ever been in doubt! Despite everything, he could still defend himself.

"Let's head back," Starscream said. "We've done enough today."

☆☆☆

They continued to practice, with Starscream growing more used to fighting entirely off the ground each time. It was an easy adjustment to make, since he was already a skilled flier in his alt mode. Though, there was one mech who wasn't…

"Come on," Starscream said. "It's simple. You just leap and turn on your thrusters."

"But what if I fall?" Jetfire whispered.

"You won't."

"It'll hurt," Jetfire said, staring down the at edge of the cliff.

Starscream gently pulled his head away from the cliff. "You're not going to fall. Your flight protocols will engage before you hit the ground. It's a failsafe for situations like this."

"But what if—"

Starscream sighed and stepped backward off the cliff. As Jetfire let out a shocked yell, Starscream engaged his thrusters. He flew back over the cliff, glaring at Jetfire as he hovered in front of the edge.

When he'd onlined, he and all the other Seekers of his batch were lined up and forced off the tallest tower in the city, built specifically for this purpose. Any mech whose flight protocols failed to engage quickly enough was offlined, and there was no way to refuse the trial. Starscream hadn't known enough about the world or his own mortality to be terrified.

For a moment, Starscream considered doing the same to Jetfire. Really, this had been his fault in the first place—Jetfire had gone too long before taking his first flight, which allowed fear to set in. Jetfire stared up at him, optics wide and wings held low, and Starscream knew the same approach wouldn't work for him.

Starscream landed.

"Here," he said, transforming into his alt mode.

Jetfire crouched to look at him. "You're so tiny."

Starscream refrained from telling him to *shut up*, knowing the newspark was unaware he'd been hearing that his entire life.

"Yes, yes," Starscream muttered. "I'm a small model. That's not important."

Starscream had no landing gears, since he was built to land in robot mode. Any flightframe that wasn't constructed for far travel was intended to land in robot form. Starscream's model was meant to change between the two forms rapidly, flying from structure to structure like cybird.

This lack of landing gears did not stop him from taking off in his alt mode, which he did with ease, blasting himself off the cliff. He transformed back into robot mode in midair and turned back toward Jetfire.

"Would that be less intimidating?" Starscream asked.

Jetfire's wings lifted slightly. "I… I think so."

"Great!" Starscream said, clapping his hands. "Let's try it, then. Transform into your alt mode."

Jetfire transformed. His alt mode, built to mimic Quintesson war shuttles, was much larger. Although Quintessons were a small species—even smaller than humans—a war shuttle had to fit many of them. Most shuttleframes were repurposed as cargo carriers due to their large interiors.

Unlike Starscream, he had landing gears—both because he was modeled off of a non-transforming plane and because he had the capacity to travel long distances in his alt mode.

"Good," Starscream said. "Turn on your thrusters and try rolling forward. You'll need to build up a lot of speed to take off this way."

Jetfire obeyed, pushing power to his thrusters. As they could propel him off the planet and through the atmosphere, he had a lot more power than Starscream, and was quickly at the edge of the cliff. Starscream made up for his lack of power through maneuverability and flexibility, but that didn't matter much when he was trying to ensure that a shuttle twice his size stayed in the air.

"You'll need to angle yourself upward!" Starscream called out, changing into his alt mode.

Jetfire angled himself upward just in time to leave the cliff, ascending to the sky. It wasn't the most traditional takeoff, and was likely more difficult than a midair change would've been, but it had gotten the newspark in the air. Starscream settled beside him as they flew.

[What do you think?] Starscream sent.

They flew over a lake, the waves reflecting specks of sun. Jetfire shifted slightly.

[It's amazing. Really, really amazing,] Jetfire replied.

[You haven't seen amazing yet.]

Starscream flew ahead, building up enough speed to do a loop. As he came out of it, he spun. There was nothing like flying. No one to disturb him, no unreliable pedes forcing him to the

ground—it was just him and the sky. When was the last time he had flown just for the sake of it?

Starscream's next trick fizzled out at the thought. It was before the war. Since then, every flight was for a reason. There were no pleasure flights when your enemies could blast you out of the sky at any moment.

[That's so cool!]

Jetfire's message drew Starscream from his reverie.

[Could I do something like that…?]

Amusement warmed Starscream's spark.

[With practice,] he sent.

Jetfire was much larger than him, so complex movements would be more difficult. Still, he could learn at least *some* sort of trick. As Jetfire grew closer, Starscream realized his pace had slowed. Jetfire continued to pick up speed, and Starscream allowed himself to drift behind.

Jetfire tilted from side to side, testing his limits. It wouldn't be long before his flight sensors were fully calibrated. Basic maneuvers would be instinct at that point. But for now, the newspark had to learn consciously.

[This is amazing!] Jetfire sent.

A humming whoosh drew Starscream's attention. He nearly stalled to a stop as he spotted a human plane in the distance. They weren't supposed to be this close. Had they changed their route?

[You can fly straight,] Starscream sent. *[But can you turn?]*

Starscream swerved in the opposite direction of the plane, splitting the focus of his sensors between Jetfire and the plane. Now playing catch-up, Jetfire turned behind him, starting off too sharp and then overcompensating by going too wide.

They should go back immediately, but…

Jetfire tilted again, a little further than last time. First flights were important. He needed those sensors calibrated. If Starscream were honest with himself, he enjoyed seeing the newspark fly. Every little tilt, every exclamation of awe—it was a reminder of what he fought for.

Jetfire, though new to the world, was a warframe. On Cybertron, Warframes hadn't been allowed to obtain medical licenses. Clinics outright refused to hire warframes, and most educational institutions were picky about what fields warframe applicants could choose to pursue.

Drones hadn't been allowed education at all.

But here, far from Cybertron and with the war on its final pede, there were no such laws. In the most twisted way possible, the Decepticons had won. There was still a point to it all, even with a victory so bitter.

Once Jetfire began swerving and tipping, Starscream knew his flight sensors were properly calibrated. It was just in time—they would need to head back soon or they would be missed. Skywarp had threatened to search the globe if they didn't come back before sunset.

[Let's land,] Starscream sent when they reached a particularly empty area. *[You can land in your alt mode if you want. Just make sure you have enough room to slow down.]*

Starscream descended from the sky, changing into his robot mode just before he hit the ground. He stumbled, but managed not to fall. It was a far cry from his graceful landings in the past, but his standards had changed. Landing without tripping over his own pedes was enough.

Jetfire rolled to a stop, then transformed. A wide grin was on his face. His wings practically vibrated with excitement.

"That was awesome!" Jetfire said. "I can't believe we can do that! Just take off into the sky and *soar*!"

Starscream chuckled. He settled on the ground, motioning for Jetfire to join him. The newspark, still buzzing with excitement, sat beside him. As Jetfire continued to rant, Starscream closed his optics.

A small wind blew, rustling foliage and whistling beneath his plating. His wings ached, not having seen use since he created Jetfire. He checked his fuel levels—low, but not *that* low—and fought against the tiredness that settled throughout his frame.

He had gone much longer without refueling. He had nearly crossed the entire planet, despite not being built for it. What was different now?

Starscream's claws scraped against his leg, deeply enough to feel but not enough to cause damage, as the answer came to him. The pain, the tiredness—it had never been different. He just hadn't been able to rest.

Starscream froze as his audials picked up a sound. Pedesteps, or something like them. Nothing should have been here—nothing *was* here. Starscream opened his optics.

Red stared back at him, framed by gray.

Starscream pushed himself to his pedes. As Jetfire did the same, Starscream stuck his wing out, blocking the newspark.

"Stay behind me," Starscream said. "If he attacks, fly away."

Megatron grew closer. Starscream's spark hummed in his chest. Behind him, Jetfire's joints creaked as he fiddled anxiously with his hands.

"Starscream," Megatron said.

"Why are you here?" Starscream hissed.

"We received reports of Decepticons in the sky," Megatron said. "I took it upon myself to investigate."

Megatron stared past Starscream. "Who is this?"

"No one you should be concerned about," Starscream said, sidestepping to block Jetfire from Megatron's view.

His pede slipped slightly, and he stumbled. Jetfire's hand brushed against his back, offering to steady him, but Starscream shrugged it off.

Megatron's optics narrowed. "You seem different."

"So *what*?" Starscream said.

Megatron stepped closer, optics burning. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing *happened*," Starscream said. He couldn't step backward—he would just run into Jetfire.

"Am I to believe that you're stumbling around like an invalid just because you *like it*?"

"I'm not an *invalid*!" Starscream spat. "Why can't you just mind your own business?"

Megatron took another step closer. Starscream allowed himself to move backward, Jetfire's hands against his back. It took everything in him to keep his plating from rattling.

"I'm concerned for you," Megatron said. "You've always been fragile—"

"Fragile!" Starscream howled. "*Fragile*? Was I *fragile* when you gripped my neck and threw me into tables? Was I *fragile* when you assigned me mission after mission despite my protests? Was I *fragile* when you *tested your weapons on me*?"

Megatron reached out. Starscream grabbed his arm, sinking his claws into the plating. The brute didn't move.

"You don't care," Starscream hissed. "And you never have. Stop it with this act and just *hurt me* already."

"No."

Megatron's arm slipped from Starscream's grasp as his spark pounded. What was this? What did Megatron want?

"What?" Starscream said. "Am I *not good enough* for you anymore? Did you get *tired* of taming your pet turbofox?"

The game was simple. Megatron did something stupid, and Starscream pushed back. The brute put him in his place, and Starscream was forever the rabid turbofox, forever the lying traitor.

Megatron stared.

Where was the scolding? The crushing grip?

"Are you just going to stand there?" Starscream said quietly.

Why wasn't Starscream getting what he deserved?

Megatron kept staring, a frown on his face. Not a scowl, not a grimace—*a frown.*

"You can't do this!" Starscream screeched. "Not after everything! You stand beside Prime and everyone loves you, forgives you—despite it all! While I rotted in a cell and starved alone, they loved you! While you left dents in my plating and stained your hands with my energeon, they accepted you! My nightmare, free to run while I suffered!"

Silence swallowed the field.

"Are you done?" Megatron said.

Starscream glared at him, fans clicking on as his spark burned. "Why are you doing this?"

"I've grown tired of this cycle," Megatron said. "I miss my fallen star."

"Your fallen star is dead!" Starscream hissed. "*You* killed him."

"He's right here. I just want him to talk to me."

When was it ever just a conversation? Even when there was no violence, there were always rules. It was a power play, even when it appeared not to be.

"You're mistaken," Starscream said. "Go back to Prime and your cronies."

"I'm not leaving," Megatron said.

The burning spread through Starscream's lines. If that fragger wouldn't leave, he'd *make him*!

Starscream swung at Megatron. The brute dodged the blow with ease, and grabbed his arm when he attempted another. His grip tightened, plating creaking beneath it.

Sick, twisted relief flooded Starscream, warring with the panic within him. This was it. He would attack, and it would be over. After this, Megatron would be gone.

The panic won for a moment.

"Let me go!" Starscream hissed, stumbling as he attempted to pull away.

Megatron pulled Starscream closer and crushed him against his chest. Starscream's spark pulsed, the sensation beating through his entire body. He scratched at the brute's plating, but it was futile.

"Let me go!" Starscream said weakly. "Let me go…"

His struggles slowed as Megatron squeezed tighter.

"I… I don't—don't understand," Starscream said.

Megatron shoved his face beside Starscream's audial.

"Violence was all I'd ever known," Megatron said. "I was constructed for war, forced to work in the mines when it ended. But you're different. You're soft. I should've known not to use violence with you."

A laugh escaped Starscream's vocalizer before he could stop it. He was untethered from his frame, sensations just out of reach.

"Is that supposed to be an apology?" Starscream said.

"You're impossible to please," Megatron said.

"I could say the same about you."

Megatron's grip loosened, helm shifting. Was there something ahead of him?

"Then we're at an impasse." Megatron released Starscream with a shove. Starscream stumbled backward into Jetfire's waiting hands.

"Go," Megatron growled.

The world twisted around him, and Starscream was suddenly back at the base. The main room was still. There was nothing but the pounding of Starscream's spark.

A hand landed on his shoulder and he fought the urge to shrug it off, turning toward the source. Skywarp stared at him, brow furrowed with concern.

"Are you alright?" She asked quietly.

Starscream's vocalizer refused to activate. He shook his head. He would be. As he attempted to activate his vocalizer again, a flash of color caught his optics.

"B—Bumblebee…?" The name, stuttering and laced with static, escaped without warning.

"Yeah," Skywarp said. "He's here. Said he had to tell us something important. Blitzwing found him."

Starscream fought back a whine. He had to talk to him *right now*? He took a step forward, nearly falling. Jetfire's arms steadied him. Beside him, Skywarp disappeared with a whoosh

of air before reappearing near Bumblebee. She stood side by side with Soundwave and Ravage, who were already speaking with him.

Soundwave turned to her. After she warped again, Soundwave turned toward Starscream, leaving Bumblebee with Ravage.

"Starscream, Jetfire—returned from flight," Soundwave said. "Encountered Megatron."

"That's his name?" Jetfire said quietly.

"Affirmative," Soundwave said. "Query: Starscream—alright?"

"N—not injured," Starscream squeaked.

"Not injured," Soundwave repeated. "Clarification: Starscream—desires rest?"

"I—I have to—"

Soundwave gently placed a hand on Starscream's shoulder.

"Starscream—may rest," Soundwave said. "Bumblebee—will wait."

When Skywarp reappeared, Starscream allowed her to warp him to their quarters. After settling into the nest with Jetfire and Skywarp, he was quickly joined by Nova Storm, Soundwave, and the cassettes. With the lights off and the entrance shuttered, the room was peaceful.

The Autobots may have found him—*Megatron* may have found him—but that could wait as long as he was tucked between his allies.

Chapter End Notes

Optimus, in lieu of greeting Megatron as he returns to the Autobot base: You look like you tried to hold an angry cybercat.

Megs: One might describe it that way.

▶ Fic rec

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Starscream roused from recharge to fingers softly stroking his wing. On the other side of him, large arms held him steady. He blinked as his optics focused, the world slowly growing less fuzzy with each moment.

Nova Storm groaned from the other side of Skywarp. "He's up. Now we all have to get up."

Slowly, the group rose from the nest. Starscream made his way to the side of the room. He took his rollator and uncollapsed it, sitting in the seat as the others continued to stretch and complain.

"Bumblebee—alerted," Soundwave said. "Command, Bumblebee—will speak over morning fuel."

Nova Storm, popping up from a stretch, patted Jetfire on the elbow. "Alright. Let's go for a flight, buddy."

Soundwave tilted his head. "Nova Storm—member of command."

Nova Storm's wings fluttered. "I am?"

Skywarp smacked the back of Nova Storm's helm playfully, a smirk on her face. "Yeah! You're the wingmate of the air commander!"

"I never saw *you* in meetings," Nova Storm said.

Skywarp scoffed. "That's the *old* Decepticons! The new Decepticons are all about making the command table huge!"

[Not how I'd say it, but yeah,] Ravage sent. *[We want as many mecha to have voices as possible.]*

"Affirmative."

Skywarp slung an arm around Nova Storm's shoulders. "You don't have to go—"

"I want to!" She said. She turned back to Jetfire. "How about you go find Blitzwing? If he isn't in the mood for flying, I'm sure he'll want help walking Buster."

Jetfire nodded and left the room. Starscream waited until he was gone before standing.

"We have a mech to meet," Starscream said. "Let's go."

☆☆☆

The meeting started well. A corner of the main room was cleared out, and a table was shifted to fill it. Apparently, all of their previously empty rooms were now used for storage, and having the meeting in their quarters was improper. Starscream and the rest of command—Skywarp, Nova Storm, Soundwave, and Ravage—settled at the table.

Rumble and Frenzy, as usual, split off to join the never-ending game of towerfall. Soundwave had offered them a place at the table, but they were completely uninterested.

Starscream sipped his fuel as they waited for Bumblebee to arrive. He was lent a 'spare' room for the night (Dirge and Blitzwing had graciously agreed to share), so it wouldn't be long. Sure enough, Bumblebee emerged from the hallway. It took a moment for him to figure out how to work the fuel dispenser, but he eventually made his way to the table.

Before sitting, his optics landed on Starscream—more specifically, his rollator. But the mech was wise enough not to comment, and quietly took his seat.

"What is this *utterly important* message that you must deliver to us?" Starscream asked.

Bumblebee stared at him. Then, his gaze fell to the table.

"The humans want us gone."

"They've wanted that since we arrived," Starscream said.

"All of us," Bumblebee said. "As soon as possible."

Skywarp slammed her cube onto the table, splashing droplets of energeon onto its surface. "Where are we going to go? Cybertron is dead!"

"Do they have anything to back this up?" Nova Storm asked.

"They know how to deactivate us," Bumblebee said. "They were researching us—"

"Great!" Starscream hissed. "While you Autobots were getting all buddy-buddy with the humans, they were *using you* to figure out how to kill us all, weren't they?"

Sheer numbers was enough. It would have been enough for the Quintessons, even when the Cybertronian population was much larger. The only thing that had saved them was the creation of warframes. Now, with fewer than a thousand mecha between both sides and no resources to create more frames, they would surely be destroyed.

And the Autobots, the fools that they were, had unintentionally aided the enemy!

"We didn't know," Bumblebee said.

"You *should have*—"

"Starscream," Soundwave said. "Unproductive."

Starscream let out a frustrated hiss and sank back in his seat. "You're right. What's done is done. We need to focus on solutions."

And what solutions would there be? The Decepticons' ship was destroyed when the war came to Earth, and any chance of the Decepticons leaving the planet with it.

"We have no way of leaving the planet," Starscream said. "The flight warframes and some of the forged can leave the atmosphere on their own, but many of us cannot. Unless you have a stash of energeon we don't know about, the Ark won't leave the ground, either."

"No," Bumblebee said. "We were hoping you might."

Starscream sighed. "Then we're fresh out of luck."

An uneasy silence settled over the table. Starscream took a long sip of his cube.

"If the humans want us gone so bad," Skywarp said. "Then they should help us leave."

"Yes!" Starscream exclaimed. "Tell your *humans* that if they need us gone, *they* can provide us the energeon!"

Ravage mrrowled affirmatively.

Bumblebee's grip tightened on his cube. "Sure. I'll let them know."

"Even if they help," Nova Storm said. "Where are we going to go?"

Starscream tapped his fingers against his leg. The question, though asked, was evaded thus far. The answer was obvious: they had nowhere to go.

"We're… still discussing that," Bumblebee said, doorwings shifting downward.

The meeting dissolved fairly quickly after that. After assurance that their concerns would be heard and another meeting would be had—this time with the Prime himself—Skywarp returned Bumblebee to the Autobots.

Inexorable dread crept back into Starscream's spark. No matter how much they fought, or how hard they worked, something out of their control would come in and wreck everything. As he mulled the meeting over, a flash of white caught his optics.

Jetfire.

Earth was all Jetfire had known. How were they going to tell him?

☆☆☆

A meeting date was set. There was plenty of time to kill before it was reached, which left Starscream with the dilemma of breaking the news to Jetfire. The other Decepticons wouldn't like it, but they would expect it. Jetfire…

They decided to have a movie night. Starscream would spring the news after the movie ended, and if he was upset, they could offer to watch another. Jetfire had already been tasked with finding a small selection of movies, which he excitedly presented to the group.

"Which one do you think we should watch?" He asked, staring directly at Starscream.

Starscream put his hand on a random one. "This one."

Jetfire held it up to the rest of the group. On the front of it was some sort of dog-like creature on two legs. Then, he loaded the disc into the DVD player and pressed play.

It was a silly movie. That much was clear from the start. Starscream resigned himself to watching nonsense and contemplated how he would break the news to Jetfire.

'Sorry, Jetfire. You've spent your entire life here, and know nothing of Cybertron. You watch birds and tell me all about the tiny bugs you saw while walking Buster, and you love the world so much, but—'

The dog and man on the screen exploded. They were sewn back together as a single entity. In any other movie, the very concept would be horrific. In this one, it was completely brushed over.

'The humans want us gone, Jetfire. We're going to fly away in a ship with a bunch of mecha you don't know to somewhere we haven't decided yet. We might not have enough energeon to make the journey—'

As the movie continued, Starscream repeated himself. No, no—he couldn't say that! No, this was exactly the same as that—

The villain of the movie, a cat, cloned himself. He expected a fully formed adult, but received a child instead. Something about it was familiar. Starscream shoved that thought to the back of his processor and continued planning what to say to Jetfire.

'We're leaving, Jetfire. We're going onto the Autobots' ship and flying until we find somewhere to stay, because the humans don't want us here—'

Jetfire pulled Starscream closer, interrupting his thoughts. On the screen, the cat lectured his clone inside a closet. Something about his father leaving? The music indicated it was a sad moment, but Starscream had no context.

'We have to leave, Jetfire. We're going aboard the Ark and we're never coming back. I don't know where we're going or if we'll make it—'

The dog and the cat teamed up, fueled by a need to protect the clone from a third character. A wacky battle ensued involving living buildings that Starscream barely paid attention to. Skywarp and Nova Storm cackled loudly during it, so it must have been entertaining.

Then, the fight was won. Starscream assumed the movie would end at that point. It didn't.

The cat and his clone came home to an empty house. The cat's father—which the clone had found earlier in the movie—had taken everything. Starscream sighed.

'Jetfire, we are going to leave—'

The clone complained about the world. It was a dark, terrible place full of horrid things. Starscream could agree with that. Jetfire pulled Starscream even closer, squeezing him gently. For a moment, Starscream allowed himself to indulge in comfort and nestled into Jetfire's chest.

Did he have to deliver such bleak news? Couldn't they stay here, in this moment, forever?

The movie ended. Starscream stayed tucked at Jetfire's side until the screen was turned off. Then, he pushed himself away slowly, spark buzzing in his chest.

"Jetfire," Starscream said quietly.

Jetfire pulled him into a hug. Again, Starscream wished the moment would never end.

"You're awesome," Jetfire whispered. "I love you."

Starscream wanted to ask him what prompted this, but words could scarcely exit his vocalizer.

"Jetfire," Starscream said again, voice breaking. "We—we need to tell you something important—"

"This is about the Autobot, right?" Jetfire asked, releasing Starscream.

"Y—yes," Starscream said. "It's about the Autobot…"

Jetfire stared down at him, lips pulled into a frown and brow furrowed in concern.

"The locals of this planet want us to leave," Starscream said carefully. "And they won't take no for an answer. Bumblebee was informing us of this."

Jetfire's optics widened. "Where are we going to go?"

Starscream cast glances at the rest of the group. None of them stepped forward.

"We're still figuring that out," Starscream said.

"Oh," Jetfire said quietly.

Starscream braced himself for the worst. Jetfire had only known Earth. He was as native to the planet as the humans that were chasing them away.

"Are we taking Buster with us?"

Starscream… hadn't even thought about Buster. If they took him, how would they feed him? Would they just have to hope wherever they went had organic species the dog could consume? They could only take so much dog food, and it could only last so long…

But could they really abandon the only thing Thundercracker left them?

"We're taking him."

Popshot's voice was quiet, but his optics held a fierce determination.

"Everyone is coming, then," Jetfire said, a small smile forming on his face. "That's good."

Starscream didn't know what he expected, but it wasn't this. Jetfire was so… quiet. Resigned.

"We're not leaving anyone behind," Starscream said.

Not again. Not *ever* again.

The room fell quiet. Starscream flexed his fingers. Despite the silence, the conversation was incomplete—

"Wherever we go, we'll build a new home," Nova Storm said. "One even better than this."

"Affirmative," Soundwave said.

Skywarp shifted her wings high. "The Decepticons have always adapted. We aren't gonna give up now!"

[Yes!] Ravage sent, punctuating the statement with a confident growl. *[We will persist!]*

The world had tried to kill them many times, and abused them when it failed. Still, they carried on, bearing the marks of their rebellion for all to see. To lose hope was to give up the battle, and Decepticons never stopped fighting.

Starscream remembered his own words from before the Decepticons were freed from the humans, sent over commline with a determined fury as he fled from Megatron.

"As long as *we* live," he muttered to himself.

☆☆☆

As the moment of the meeting grew closer, a tingling, painful energy rose within Starscream. It started at his spark and traveled to the tips of his fingers. He paced the edges of the room, unable to rid himself of the restlessness. This meeting held the key to the future of all Cybertronians on Earth.

That wasn't what he was worried about.

Starscream nearly jumped as Skywarp materialized beside him with a whoosh of air. She stared at him, expression falling. Then, she reached for the rollator in the corner and unfolded

it.

"Hey," she said. "You ready to go yet? Everybody else is waiting."

Starscream hadn't fueled, but how could he? The idea made his plating crawl. And the rollator…

"I don't need to take this," Starscream said weakly.

Skywarp tilted her head, her wings flicking. "You don't? Because I think we're gonna be walking quite a bit—"

"I'll be fine!" Starscream said. "Just…"

His wings drooped. He *would* need it. Even though his neurocircuits were nearly repaired and his strength had returned, it wasn't the same as before. Some days, he could move relatively well without it, but he would still stumble and stagger. Others…

Today was one of the *other* days.

"I don't want to take it."

"But do you need it?" Skywarp said.

Starscream turned his gaze to the wall. He flexed his fingers.

"Yes," he hissed. "I need it."

"Then we'll take it," Skywarp said, pushing the rollator closer to Starscream.

Starscream's hands refused to close around the handles. He needed to take it, but he *couldn't*. If he did, the Autobots would see it, and they'd all know he was an *invalid*—

"What's your issue?"

Starscream fought a flinch and bared his teeth.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it like that," Skywarp said, wings shifting low. "You haven't been so reluctant to take it before. What's different?"

"The Autobots," Starscream said. "We're heading straight into enemy territory."

Skywarp shrugged. "Bumblebee didn't seem to care."

Starscream had known Bumblebee, though only briefly. Of *course* he wouldn't say anything. The other Autobots were not guaranteed to react the same. And…

Starscream leaned more weight on the rollator as he tapped a pede.

"It's not just Bumblebee," Starscream muttered.

Skywarp hummed. "Well, if anyone tries—or *says*—anything, all of us will be there to make them regret it."

It should've been reassuring, but the energy refused to leave.

☆☆☆

Megatron would be there. The thought invaded his mind as they arrived at the Ark. Megatron would *be there*, and Megatron would *see him* with the rollator. The brute already thought so little of him. What would he think now?

They were greeted by Bumblebee. Soundwave and Skywarp took control of the conversation. Starscream stared down at his pedes. Any moment now, Megatron would be here. His spark hummed painfully.

The conversation continued. Something about someone being late? Starscream took the opportunity to sneak away. He was far from stealthy, but a sufficiently distracted mech could ignore many things. After a couple of turns, he found a small storage room and slid inside.

He sat on the seat of the rollator, fiddling with his arm guards. His fans clicked on, invading the space with noise. Plating aching with how closely it snapped to his body, Starscream knew one thing: he couldn't go to the meeting like this.

What could he do? He needed to calm down—*immediately*.

He knew what would do it. But he hadn't done it, not since Jetfire—

No, no. He wouldn't. He—

He pulled the arm guard off and gave in. Paint scraped beneath his dentae, exposed plating stinging. But the effect was immediate—his plating relaxed, and the overwhelming buzz faded to the background.

Pedesteps echoed down the hall. Starscream pulled his arm guard on as the door slid open.

Yellow optics peered through the doorway. *Skywarp*.

"What'cha doing in here?" Skywarp asked.

Starscream flexed his fingers. "I… needed a moment."

"Well, they're all here now," Skywarp said. "So we should probably get back there. If you're ready."

Starscream nodded, pushing himself up from his seat. The buzzing had receded, but a crushing guilt rose to replace it. Why had he done that? Why couldn't he have just… he didn't know! But why *that*?

And now he was *lying* to Skywarp. Well, it wasn't a lie—but it felt like one! If she knew what he had just done, she would be *furious*.

"I'm ready," Starscream said.

Another lie. There was no such thing as being ready to face Megatron.

When they entered the meeting room, the brute stared—first, straight into his optics, secondly, at the rollator. His lips twitched, but he didn't speak. Beside him, Optimus raised a brow. Megatron huffed and looked away.

"Are we ready to begin?" Optimus asked.

"Affirmative," Soundwave said.

The meeting was mostly unproductive. It was spent going back and forth on possible destinations. No, not that one, it has no energeon caches. Not that one either, it has deadly acid storms. And that other one? Metal-eating bacteria. Didn't they read the notes before they picked them?

Starscream spent the entire meeting ensuring that his vocalizer remained functional, and every other moment thinking about… the thing he had done. And when he got too distracted with *that*, Megatron was eager to draw attention to his silence. After the fifth time Megatron loudly commented on it, Starscream slammed his fists on the table and howled.

"Well, if we can't find a suitable planet, why not just go back to Cybertron? If we're all going to die a slow, painful death, we might as well do it at home!"

The table went silent.

"You *know* I'm right," Starscream said. "This is pointless because we have *nowhere* to go. Why drag it on?"

The other occupants of the table exchanged glances. Skywarp grimaced. Soundwave tilted his head away. Optimus glanced at Megatron, who sighed before staring right into Starscream's optics.

"You're correct."

He was *what*? What kind of trickery was this? Megatron had *never*—

"There is nowhere for us to go," Megatron said. "Except home."

Starscream's spark stopped spinning. Megatron *agreed* with him.

The rest of the meeting faded away, muffled voices barely reaching his audials. Megatron's burning optics stared from beneath a furrowed brow. Spark humming, Starscream fiddled with his arm guards, trying not to think of the many things he was avoiding.

His name broke the surface of the conversation.

"Have any suggestions, *Starscream*?"

Megatron again. What were they speaking about? Starscream scoured the memory files his processor had just created, but they were junk. He glanced at Skywarp, silently begging for aid.

[Getting the Ark off the ground,] Skywarp sent. *[It died of energeon depletion at some point after we landed here. They've been running it without a spark.]*

Like all mecha, Cybertronian titan shuttles could run many commands without a living spark, if supplied with the correct amount of fuel. But self-repair would never engage, and nothing could be automated, which ensured that the upkeep of any dead titan shuttle was a monumental task. With so few resources on Earth, there was no way the Ark could become flight-ready without self-repair.

When the Nemesis was torn in three upon landing, she was abandoned. There was no point in repairing a titan shuttle so damaged. Her plating was scavenged for medical repairs, and the energeon was drained from her lines after her spark dissipated.

Starscream assumed the Autobots were lucky on landing and had kept the Ark alive. How long had they been maintaining a lifeless frame?

The quickest way to solve the situation would be to bring life back to the dead ship. This would cut the time it took to complete repairs significantly. Besides, living titan shuttles were much easier to pilot than dead ones.

How could they manage that? The answer came to him immediately.

"The Emberstone," he muttered.

Skywarp leaned closer. "Are you *sure*? Didn't you make a big deal about how we *couldn't* tell anyone about it? It nearly killed you."

"Forged mecha—withstand spark splitting," Soundwave said. "Minimal complications."

Nova Storm leaned around Skywarp. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but… There aren't a lot of forged mecha left. And a titan spark is *very large*."

It was true. Not a single mech at the table was forged. Megatron was a warframe. The drones outnumbered him six to one. Only Starscream had a chance of surviving spark splitting, and that was only because he was an anomaly.

The Decepticons had been short on forged mecha from the beginning. That was the nature of rebellion.

Seekers? All drones. Soundwave? Security drone. Dirge and his few surviving cone-headed ilk? Warframes. The only forged Decepticon he could recall off the top of his processor was Shockwave, who was long dead. Except…

Was Blitzwing forged or a warframe? He would have to come back to that.

The Autobots fared slightly better, but not by much. Even if the majority of them weren't still making their way over from the other bases, most of the forged mecha on the Autobots' side were medics. Though complications were *supposedly* minimal, they couldn't risk anything happening to them.

"Can you explain?" Optimus asked gently. "I believe we're missing some context."

[We found a spark splitting focus medium,] Ravage sent with a quiet meow. *[Starscream named it the Emberstone. It has already been tested.]*

Megatron scowled. "*How*?"

"Irrelevant," Soundwave said. "Private information."

"It's not irrelevant!" Megatron said. "I demand to know how this testing was done."

After a glare from Optimus, he added, "Please."

Optimus sighed.

Starscream wrapped his fingers around his injured arm, sinking his claws into the guard. "I tested it. You've already met the results."

Megatron's optics widened. "*Y-you*? It made that mech?"

"Yes, so if we can get back on track—"

"That still doesn't answer my question," Megatron said.

Ravage hissed, silencing the table. Skywarp flicked her wings. With a quiet pop of air, she appeared behind Megatron, leaning close to his audials.

"You're gonna drop this, or we'll *make you*. Leave Screamer alone. It's *not relevant*."

She warped back to her seat. Megatron gritted his dentae, but remained silent.

"However concerned we may be," Optimus said quietly. "We'll respect your wishes for privacy. The Emberstone sounds like our best solution so far. I believe we should search our factions for volunteers and meet again."

"Satisfactory," Soundwave said.

Chapter End Notes

Heyyy creatures! I survived the past few weeks. Got through a scary test and now I have to figure out what comes after it. Put my video projects on hold for the longest time I've

ever intentionally put em on hold to survive that test and what preceded it, so I need to regroup.

Finished writing chapter 1 of this fic's sequel (current working name is Sacrificial Turbofox), so you guys have that to look forward to! From this point on, I'll be editing and posting chapters of this fic as I write chapters for the sequel. I think I've said that several times at this point, but meh. I'll try to keep myself from supplying teasers until we get closer to the end.

▶ A brief ramble on why I chose biting as the form of self-harm for this fic

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The meeting dissolved after that. Starscream was able to get away from Megatron, leaving him with his *other* issue. He fiddled with his arm guards again, fighting not to flutter his wings from the tingling anxiety that coursed through him. When they returned to the base, Starscream took the first available opportunity to peel away from the group, tucking himself inside his lab.

He removed his arm guard and stared at the scraped paint. All he had to do was keep the guard on. Then, no one would ever notice! But guilt and revulsion swirled within him at the idea. He would be using it to conceal the very thing it was meant to prevent.

And hadn't he vowed to stop doing this? Didn't he acknowledge it was impractical? What would hiding it do, other than tempt him to start the cycle again?

A knock startled him. Starscream nearly let out a squawk before catching himself.

[Is it okay if I come in?]

Starscream's plating relaxed. It was just Jetfire. He pulled the arm guard back on.

[You may,] he sent back.

The door opened slowly. Jetfire poked his head in before stepping through the doorway.

"Hi," he said quietly. "I saw everyone else when they got back from the meeting, but I wanted to see you too, so…"

Jetfire wrung his hands, optics falling to the floor. "Can I hug you?"

Starscream nodded. Jetfire pulled him close, wrapping his large arms around him.

"I'm scared," Jetfire whispered.

How cruel was it to bring a mech into the world just to suffer and starve?

"Me too," Starscream admitted. He squeezed Jetfire's arm gently, making sure to keep his claws away from the plating. "But we'll figure this out."

He couldn't say everything would be okay. He didn't know that. But he *did* know that they would keep trying, even when the universe was determined to kill them. How different was it from the entire rest of life, anyway?

Starscream renewed the embrace, waiting until Jetfire's plating relaxed before letting go.

"Feel better?" Starscream asked.

Jetfire nodded.

Starscream fiddled with his arm guards, suddenly remembering the mark. He sighed and looked at Jetfire.

"Can you go ask Skywarp to meet me here?" Starscream said. "I have something private I need to tell her."

"Okay," Jetfire said.

He drew away from Starscream, and after a moment of hesitation, left the lab. Starscream pulled at the edges of his arm guards as he waited. Skywarp would be here at any moment, and he…

He tried not to think about it. He *had to* do this. She would be angry, but it was necessary. She would want to know.

With a quiet whoosh of air, Skywarp appeared before him.

"What'cha need?" She asked, a false smile on her face. The mock nonchalance extended to the rest of her frame as she leaned against the wall.

Starscream steeled himself. "Promise you won't yell at me."

"Okay," Skywarp said, smile dropping. "I won't."

"I—"

Frag. He couldn't do this. His spark pounded in its casing. Why did he think this was a good idea?

"I… fragged up," he finished weakly, claws against his arm guard. "When I was alone, I—I picked up a bad habit. I've been try—trying to get rid of it, but just before the meeting…"

Starscream closed his optics. She was going to be so *angry* with him.

A gentle hand landed on his shoulder. Starscream flinched before he could remind himself that it was *Skywarp*.

He slipped the arm guard off.

"Oh," Skywarp said quietly. Her claws traced the mark. "*Slag*."

Starscream turned away. This was it.

"You're mad at me," he muttered.

"*No*!" Skywarp yelled. As Starscream flinched again, the rest of her words came quieter. "No. I'm not mad. I just don't know what to do."

"That makes two of us," Starscream said.

"Hah, yeah…" Skywarp said, wings drooping. "Two of us. Do we still have any of that blue?"

"I think so."

With two quick pops of air, Skywarp retrieved the paint. "Looks like we do!"

Starscream offered his arm to her as she prepared the paint. She took it gently, but hesitated before placing the brush down.

"It's been so long," she said. "Remember when you used to get all scuffed up after arguing with the Enforcers?"

The brush came down.

"They were better at keeping me in a cell than keeping me in line," Starscream said with a roll of his optics.

"Yeah," Skywarp said between brushstrokes. "They were. Thundercracker and I had to repaint you so many times. That yellow never wanted to stay on."

"It's a good thing I changed it, then."

Skywarp paused. "Yeah, a good thing."

Paint was one of the few things they had control over before the war. Every Seeker valued their paint jobs highly. Not a single Seeker would be silent if asked about the colors they chose. They onlined with a pre-chosen set of colors, but most changed them at some point.

This small freedom was a product of inattention. The Council—and by extension, the Enforcers—didn't care about what color their Seekers were. It began with Seekers requesting new paint jobs from their medics, and evolved into entire sets of smuggled paints applied when they were off shift.

(It turned out, mecha were willing to bribe if it meant a few extra days of freedom. Many Seekers—Starscream especially—were happy to look the other way in exchange for a jar of paint or a handful of energeon goodies. Who was going to report them? The other Seekers?)

Starscream had onlined with bright golden yellow and vibrant red plating. He didn't have much reason to alter it until Skyfire's disappearance.

"The red was nice," Skywarp said quietly. "But I always liked you in pink."

Starscream smiled. "I like me in pink, too."

Pink was the color of some types of energeon—particularly the kinds that would leave a mech woozy. The phrase *'pretty poison'* had slipped out of the vocalizers of more than a few mecha after he adopted the color. Such attention gave a powerful rush, even when the mecha uttering it were beyond sleazy.

It was also the color of the insides of many organic creatures. At the time Starscream chose the color, this fascinated him. His shade wasn't quite the same, since it needed to match with the blue, but the influence was there.

Skywarp released Starscream's arm. "Done."

She put away the paint, but didn't warp away with it. Instead, she held it in both hands and sighed.

"How can I help?" Skywarp asked, optics on Starscream's. "I have no idea, so… thought I would ask."

Starscream stared down at his freshly repainted arm. The paint was still wet and pale.

"I don't know," he muttered. "I'm still trying to figure out how to stop this. Until the meeting, I thought I'd solved it."

Dirge's comparisons came back to him. This was his own private, lifelong war. Could Skywarp even help?

Gentle fingertips along his wings, hands holding him close—she *could*.

"Can I come to you?" Starscream asked, finally meeting her optics. "When I feel like slag and get tempted, or—or even if I end up doing it, can I come to you? Will you be there?"

"You can," Skywarp said, wings twitching upward in a show of sincerity. "I'll be there. And I won't be mad. I just want to help."

"I know," Starscream whispered.

☆☆☆

Popshot dragged Starscream out with a claim of important business. When Starscream asked for clarification, all he received was that it was important, but not urgent. So, still shaking off lag from recharge, Starscream followed Popshot along a familiar route.

[At the announcement, you were looking for forged mecha.]

Although Blitzwing was three mecha, the message was only tagged with one name.

[Yes,] Starscream replied. *[We are.]*

[We're forged.]

Starscream glided lazily on the wind as they flew over a lake.

[Are you volunteering?] Starscream asked.

[We talked. We're not against it, if it means we go home.]

Starscream drifted closer to Blitzwing. In his jet mode, he dwarfed Starscream. That wasn't unusual.

[Are you sure?] Starscream sent. *[Reviving a titan shuttle won't be easy.]*

Popshot swayed in the wind.

[Ha! If three mecha aren't enough to revive a titan shuttle, then I don't know what is!]

If Starscream were in robot mode, he would've rolled his optics. Blitzwing may have been three mecha, but they shared a single spark. Although…

[If the Autobots follow through, it won't be just you,] Starscream sent.

A brief silence. Then—

[I hope they do. It will make the process easier.]

They passed by a familiar forest, trees still regrowing. They sprouted from beneath the fallen ones, tiny green shoots reaching toward the sky. Starscream fought a shudder when memory file played and a fusion cannon hummed behind his audials, knowing it wasn't real.

[Did we ever tell you why we are this way?] Asked Icebeam.

[No,] Starscream sent. *[You haven't.]*

[It was before the Quintessons were eliminated. We had not yet learned how to make warframes, so the Council was looking for ways to increase the power of their soldiers. Our frame was one freshly forged volunteer among a handful.]

[Your frame,] Starscream sent. *[But not you?]*

[None of us remember before. We know what happened from the accounts of others, but we were not there. I am the oldest of us. I only onlined after it all happened. But we know we were experimented on, and it was painful.]

Starscream didn't know what he was meant to say, so he remained silent.

[I believe the experimentation created us, but we did not know about one another until long into the civil war. It is quite easy to notice something amiss when mecha complain to you about things you did not do, and you cannot access the majority of your memory files.]

Starscream huffed out a laugh, taking the cheeky tone for what it was.

[Why are you telling me this?] Starscream asked.

They were nearly to their destination. As Icebeam sent his reply, Starscream prepared to land.

[If this all goes wrong, we do not want to be the only one who knows our story.]

Starscream stumbled on landing, but managed to catch himself. Icebeam landed in alt, then transformed. Before sending a reply, Starscream made sure to catch his optics.

[I'll carry it with me, then.]

Icebeam nodded. *[Thank you.]*

Blitzwing would be fine. They had to be fine. But if they weren't…

A quiet click drew Starscream's attention as the human exited their home. Gleaming eyes stared from the catio.

"Hey, guys!" The human said, looking between Icebeam and Starscream. "I uh, didn't expect two of you to be here. But I'm glad you came!"

"You saved my life," Starscream said with an irritated flick of his wings. "Why would I *not* say goodbye?"

The human glanced back at Fergie. The cat mowed at them from behind the screen walls.

"You just didn't seem like the type," the human said.

Starscream hummed in amusement. "Maybe I wasn't, but I am now."

A bird chirped. Fergie's ears swiveled toward the noise, and with a quiet chatter, the cat followed it.

The human looked up at Blitzwing. "I got that dog food for you. And that nutrition book."

Icebeam crouched down. "Thank you."

After a short while of talking, the human brought out the dog food in their truck. Icebeam and Starscream loaded as much of it into their cockpits as they could. As they finished, the human looked up at them.

"Do you think you'll ever visit?" They asked.

"That depends on whether your rulers allow us back," Starscream said.

"If we can," Icebeam said. "We will."

The human smiled. "If we ever make a rocket that goes far enough to reach Cybertron, I'll visit you, too."

Starscream refrained from mentioning that there wouldn't *be* a suitable Cybertron for the human to visit. Instead, he opted to return the smile.

"Take care of yourself, human."

☆☆☆

Getting a bunch of boisterous mecha ready to travel was no easy task, especially if those mecha were Decepticons. They were already late, and the chronometer kept counting. Starscream sighed as yet another mech suddenly realized they forgot something and had to backtrack. But the exasperation came with a bitter realization: they all finally had things worth bringing.

At least they were ahead, compared to the other group. The Decepticons were split in two—fliers and non-fliers—with Starscream and his wingmates leading the former while Soundwave and his cassettes led the latter. Blitzwing opted to go with the non-fliers so that Buster wouldn't be confined to his cockpit.

Starscream had few belongings, despite his status. His rollator and Ulchtar were tucked safely in his cockpit. Skywarp, on the other hand, had to beg Nova Storm to carry some of the blankets from the nest. Apparently, they were all hers. Between that and the stacks of movies, there wasn't much space left in either Seeker's cockpit.

[Prepare to land,] Starscream sent to the group. *[We've reached rest stop E.]*

The rest stops were intended to give the ground-bound group time to catch up. No mech complained about the arrangement. After all, who was eager to meet with their mortal enemies just to head back to a wasteland?

Starscream transformed and landed, staggering to a stop. He swayed for a moment, fans quietly clicking on, and shook his helm. Today was a terrible day, but they needed to travel. As the rest of the group began to land, Starscream settled on the ground with a sigh.

A few moments later, Skywarp popped in beside him.

"You alright?" She asked quietly.

"Tired," Starscream said. "But I'll be fine."

"Someone could carry you, if you wanted," Skywarp said, idly picking at the grass. "Jetfire. Maybe Dirge."

Starscream looked away. "I'd rather not."

He had flown farther distances.

"I can hear your fans," Skywarp said. "You're straining."

Starscream laid his chin on his knees. Around him, mecha were in varying states of rest. Some were already in recharge, while others sat like him and Skywarp. Dirge, in particular, was stretched out beneath one of the few trees in the meadow. Nova Storm was on the ground facefirst a short distance away, wings swaying lazily as she recharged.

"*Everyone* is tired," Starscream said. "I can manage."

"But you don't have to."

Starscream startled at Jetfire's voice, falling forward in an attempt to evade the mech's sudden presence. As Starscream pushed himself back into a sitting position, Jetfire mumbled a quiet apology. He had three small cubes of energeon in his hands—one alone, and the other two perilously stacked. He offered the lone one to Starscream before offering one of the stacked ones to Skywarp.

"I just finished handing out the energeon when Skywarp sent me a message," Skyfire said. "I'd be happy to carry you."

The twinge of irritation that ran through Starscream's plating was smothered by guilt as he stared up at Jetfire. His gaze fell to his cube.

"I'll be fine," Starscream said.

No other mecha were being carried.

Skywarp's wings flared as she bared her teeth. "You *fragging*—"

Starscream flared his wings in response, flashing his claws at her. She paused, wings falling.

"I'm sorry," Skywarp said. "*That's* not going to help. I really want you to take a break. No one will think any less of you for it."

Starscream tapped his fingers against his cube. It wasn't worth pointing out that he was *already* taking a break.

"Fine."

☆☆☆

Jetfire carried him until the next rest stop. Starscream didn't want to admit it, but it was helpful—his fans were finally silenced. By the time they arrived at the final stop, they were already back on, though not as loud as earlier.

Fatigue settled over him as he sat next to his wingmates, awaiting the arrival of Soundwave's group. The fuzziness of his mind beckoned him to recharge. If he mentioned it, he knew Skywarp would want him to, but he couldn't. Any moment now, Soundwave would arrive and they would enter the Ark.

He would see Bumblebee and Knock Out again.

He would also see *Megatron*. He would be trapped on a ship, heading toward a dead planet, with *Megatron*. Why couldn't one of his assassination attempts have succeeded?

On the horizon, turned to silhouettes by the setting sun, was a crowd of mecha. Starscream stared as they marched forward. Eventually, the mecha flooded the final rest stop, grounders

mingling with flightframes.

[You look tired.]

A message from Ravage. Starscream huffed and turned toward the cybercat, who had approached while he was staring ahead. Ravage watched him with a tilted helm, tail twitching.

"Aren't we all?" Starscream said.

Ravage glanced at Skywarp and Nova Storm, who were already in recharge beside him. Jetfire laid beneath them, also deep in recharge.

[You should be with them.]

Starscream rolled his optics, wings twitching. "Then who would be here to greet you?"

Ravage let out a quiet growl and paced. A few moments later, Soundwave approached, and Starscream knew the argument was lost.

"Command: recharge," Soundwave said.

"I don't want to," Starscream muttered, slamming a palm on the ground like a petulant newspark.

Soundwave tilted his head. "Query: Why?"

"I just… *don't*."

Soundwave sat beside Starscream. Starscream looked away, flexing his fingers.

"Starscream—stressed," Soundwave said. "Reason?"

Starscream sighed. "Why do you *think*? Any mech with *half* a processor would stress themselves out of it in this situation."

"Worries—reasonable. Recharge—necessary."

"I don't want to," Starscream repeated.

Soundwave stared.

"I don't want to," Starscream said again, shrinking in on himself. He buried his face in his hands, words coming out as a hiss. "I don't want to."

If he recharged, the night would pass, and they would have to leave. Then, he would be on the Ark with *Megatron*! They would make the long, *long* journey back to Cybertron just to *starve* on the empty planet.

He couldn't delay the inevitable, but if he didn't recharge, he would have more time. With more time, maybe it would hurt less.

[Enough of this!]

Starscream's wings thudded against the ground as Ravage leaped onto him, tail lashing. Before he could push himself back up, Ravage stretched across his chest. The cybercat purred, nuzzling Starscream's neck.

[This is my recharge spot, now,] Ravage sent. *[You'd better stay nice and still for me.]*

It was difficult to resist the call of recharge with a purring cybercat on his chest.

Chapter End Notes

It's so wild to edit chapters and realize how much happens in a single one. Counting this fic and the sequel, I'm only 7 chapters ahead of you guys, but everything is so different. It's also weird to edit chapters that are 3k because all of the sequel chapters have insisted on being 4k words minimum so far, LMAO. I'm sure it'll thin out once I get to the middle and start having to improvise.

- Some tag updates
- Talking about the human and the way I use/choose characters in general
- A brief ramble about Blitzwing

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Knowing that the Ark was dead made everything about it emptier and duller. Nova Storm stayed behind with the rest of the Decepticons, prepared to keep them in line while the rest of command was away. In her place was Blitzwing, with Icebeam currently at the helm. Starscream squeezed the handles of his rollator as they entered the meeting room.

Optimus greeted them cordially from his seat as Megatron stared.

"Can we get this over with?" Starscream said.

Megatron glared at him. "Yes. Let us."

"We were short on volunteers, as I'm certain you can tell," Starscream said, leaning a cheek on his hand. His wings itched, and he fought not to twitch them in front of the brute. "Not many forged mecha in the Decepticons. But Blitzwing has *generously* volunteered."

Megatron's mouth twitched. Optimus spoke before he could.

"We encountered similar issues," Optimus said. "Ratchet has volunteered his spark. Knock Out came forward soon after."

Both mecha were medics. Were the Autobots truly comfortable taking that risk, however small?

"Satisfactory," Soundwave said.

If they were so intent on gambling their access to medical care, why not let them? Still, Starscream's spark churned at the idea. What was making him so uneasy? He tapped his fingers on the table—*quietly*, so the brute wouldn't stare.

Ah, well. Maybe it would pass.

☆☆☆

It did not pass. As they stood (well, *sat*, in Starscream's case) in front of the Ark's empty spark chamber, Starscream tapped a pede. It thunked quietly against the floor, joining the humming of his spark. He sank his claws into one of his arm guards, attempting to dissipate some of the energy, but it refused to abate.

Starscream silenced a hiss before it could escape his vocalizer. Why was he feeling this way? He wasn't even the one risking their spark!

Pedesteps echoed down the hall. Two familiar mecha entered the room. Starscream stared up at Knock Out. The mech stared back, optics widening for a moment before a more neutral expression settled on his face.

"Oh," he said. "Starscream. I should've expected to see you."

"Knock Out," Starscream said quietly.

He craved *something*. He didn't know what it was. But staring at one of the few allies he had during his time among the Autobots that hadn't come with him broke something. His spark chamber was hollow.

Starscream flexed his fingers.

"I hope you've been in good health," Knock Out said. He hesitated, mouth hanging open for a moment as if he wanted to speak more.

Starscream stared down at his claws. In. Out.

"As much as I can be," Starscream said.

[I told Skywarp,] he sent through a private channel.

"That's good," Knock Out said with a smile. "I'm glad to hear it."

The conversation died a quiet death. With that, the perverse ceremony of lifegiving began. The Emberstone—completely dwarfed by the Ark's spark chamber—was placed on a podium. The three volunteers stepped forward, baring their sparks.

[Why did you come forward?] Starscream sent.

He didn't expect a response. He got three.

[I used to build drone frames,] Knock Out sent. *[Before I became a cosmetic surgeon. I want to see the other end of it.]*

Ratchet glanced Starscream's way as his response came in. *[I put factory errors to rest before I got my license for general practice. It's only fitting.]*

[We want to matter,] Blitzwing replied.

[This is going to hurt,] Starscream warned them. *[Are you ready?]*

All three: ready.

The room exploded with light. Starscream closed his optics as a powerful wave coursed through the room, knocking over the mecha beside him. Just as the light reached its greatest intensity, everything went dark.

☆☆☆

Shapes. Muffled noise. Starscream willed his optics to focus. A brief moment of clarity brought vague outlines of frames and a bright, pulsing ball. Starscream pushed himself upward, hissing as his wings caught on something behind him.

Argh. Right. The rollator.

Starscream detached himself from the rollator and sent the command to his optics again. This time, they decided to function properly. Aside from the roaring hum of a fresh titan spark, the room was silent.

[Is everyone alright?] Starscream sent.

Not a single response. Was he truly the first one awake? Slag.

He searched for nearby signals. The Ark—or whatever the new mech would want to be called—would have one soon. There!

[Have you received this message?] Starscream sent to the brand new channel.

[I have. Who are you?]

Knock Out's fingers twitched. At least *someone* was regaining consciousness.

[I'm Starscream,] he sent. *[You're a Cybertronian titan shuttle. We need you to fly us to Cybertron, where you're ready.]*

[Fly…?]

Starscream sighed. *[You'll understand soon.]*

☆☆☆

The Ark kept its name, despite Starscream's hapless efforts to the contrary. The big, bumbling Prime just *had* to immediately greet it with its previous life's name! But whatever. Reusing the name was its choice.

With the Ark alive, repairs went quickly. The humans provided them with permission to mine as much energeon as they could possibly find—still with the condition that they used it to leave the planet. With the last of the mines picked dry, it was time for takeoff.

Well, *almost*. Prime was speaking with those wretched creatures, as if they deserved a goodbye for sending them all to their deaths. If Starscream had to choose between the safety of the Cybertronian species or the safety of the humans, the answer was obvious.

But weren't *they* making the same choice? Could he fault them for that?

A golden blur streaked through the hall, barking and howling all the way, and flew into the room. The clunk of a heavyset frame followed it, and Jetfire entered the room, fans barely audible, but audible nonetheless. He held the end of an empty lead as he stared down at the dog.

"Buster!" He shouted. "Come back!"

Buster ran in circles around him. Starscream snickered.

"Back to your old ways, are you?" Starscream said.

Buster paused in his circling, ears angled toward Starscream. Then, he ran at him, leaping onto his lap. Starscream held a hand under the dog as he pulled himself up, not wanting the small creature to fall. But Buster crawled into his lap unassisted, staring up at him with his tongue hanging out.

"What a mischievous creature you are," Starscream muttered, petting Buster with a single finger. "Nothing like the mech that adopted you…"

The words left a sour taste in his mouth. So many of his comrades' frames were left on this planet—Thundercracker's included. There would be no retrieving them. Such a weight would make it impossible to leave the atmosphere. With so many mecha on a single ship, they were already troublingly heavy. But what other option did they have?

Buster yelped in betrayal as a lead was slipped around his neck, pulling Starscream from his thoughts.

"Gotcha!" Jetfire said.

Buster looked up at him, whining dramatically. Jetfire ignored the dog's pleas, likely used to it.

"Thanks for the assist," Jetfire said. "He slipped off his lead and just went running."

Starscream smiled. "He's known to do that. I'm surprised it took this long to happen."

Jetfire wrung his hands. "Right…"

Starscream may not have been able to read EM fields, but he had working optics. From the low set of Jetfire's wings and the hand-wringing, the newspark was nervous. Starscream leaned forward, shifting his weight as the rollator moved beneath him. Buster woofed quietly in alarm, but quickly settled down.

"What is it?" Starscream asked.

Jetfire's wings moved upward, trembling with tension. "What's what?"

"You're nervous," Starscream said. "I can see it. What's going on?"

Jetfire wrung his hands harder, joints creaking. His wings fell.

"It's just, um…" He looked away. "There are so many mecha here. I don't know them, and we're all leaving, and…"

Jetfire's gaze fell to the floor.

"Yes?" Starscream said.

"What if we don't get along?" Jetfire asked, meeting Starscream's optics. "What if… what if they're like *Megatron*? He hurt you, and he was following us, and now he's here and—I'm scared."

Starscream's spark hummed painfully, claws itching to dig into his guards. His fingers twitched as he pondered what to do. Jetfire liked hugs, didn't he?

Starscream shooed Buster off his lap and stood. Then, he wrapped his arms around Jetfire. The newspark hugged back, squeezing him tightly—but *gently*, always gently. How had he been blessed with a spark so kind?

"That's what allies are for," Starscream said. "They keep the Megatrons of the universe away."

Jetfire shoved his face into Starscream's shoulder. "But what if I'm alone? What if *you're* alone?"

Starscream pulled away from the hug. He locked optics with Jetfire.

"I lived alone on Earth for a while," Starscream said. "The humans, the Autobots, the Decepticons, *Megatron*—they were all hunting me. I had to drink human fuel when I ran out of energeon. But I survived. I'm a difficult mech to take down."

"You really did that?" Jetfire said quietly.

"Mhm," Starscream said. "Took Megatron's optic out once. He didn't like that."

Jetfire didn't need to know that he was shot by Megatron's fusion cannon shortly after. Starscream suppressed a shudder at the memory, nociceptors threatening to relive it and sending a tingle through his plating.

"You're right," Jetfire said quietly. "You *are* tough."

Starscream nodded, squeezing Jetfire's arms. "Yes. So don't worry about me."

Jetfire stared, optics wide. Buster barked and leaped. Jetfire sprinted after him as he ran across the room, shouting to the dog not to slip out of the lead again. Starscream chuckled as they sprinted back into the hall.

The room fell quiet, save for the buzz of machinery. Starscream sat back on the rollator, tapping a pede. It would be full of mecha later, but that didn't stop the emptiness from seizing his spark. They would take off soon.

He buried his face in his hands.

They were all going to die. It wasn't a matter of *if*, it was a matter of *when*. How long would their reserves last? Would they even reach Cybertron?

Starscream picked at his arm guards.

[Skywarp?]

She was at his side immediately.

☆☆☆

A vast route stretched before them, nowhere near complete. But the Ark had left the atmosphere. They were on their way.

Energeon was conservatively rationed. Every mech was to receive the absolute minimum they could comfortably subsist on. Skywarp was, to Starscream's relief, allotted extra fuel on account of her warp drive. The large cube in Starscream's grasp was currently a mystery, though he had guesses.

He took a seat at the edge of the room, not quite feeling social but not wanting to be alone in Decepticon command's quarters. Mecha chattered, filling his audials with noise, so he turned the sensitivity down. It did little to aid the overwhelm, but at least it was *something*.

Starscream rolled his optics as he looked down at the cube again. He *really* didn't need this much fuel, despite whatever Skywarp claimed about his consumption. He did fine on much less. She was responsible for this, no doubt. He'd need to clear that up before too much fuel was wasted. But for now…

He took a sip. Still the same pre-filtered slag. Maybe Knock Out could finally try adding some flavor to it? Or would that *also* be a waste of resources?

The unmistakable creak of armor beside Starscream made him go still, clenching his cube. He turned toward the source of the noise. Pale blue optics stared back at him, framed by two large audial fins.

"Optimus," Starscream said. "Don't do that."

Optimus backed away. "My apologies. I didn't mean to cause discomfort."

The mech talked like a warframe or a forged mech, despite being created as a drone. It was undeniably a product of the matrix in his chest. Starscream had doubts that the artifact was from Primus itself, but its power was undeniable.

"Get on with whatever inane thing you want to bother me with," Starscream said.

Optimus sighed, optics falling to the other side of the room. His plating tensed slightly—not enough to indicate true distress, but enough to notice. What could possibly make the *Prime* nervous?

"You made that mech," Optimus said. "How did you do it?"

Seriously? Starscream glared at him. Optimus looked away again.

"Why do you want to know?" Starscream growled.

Optimus fidgeted, finials flicking. "If you were able to make that mech yourself, then…"

He rested a hand on his windshield.

"Then what?" Starscream asked.

Optimus's hand tensed, leaving streaks on his windshield. "I've… always wondered about the process of creation, but it was out of reach. But if you could, then maybe *I* could."

He *couldn't*.

"I fried my neurocircuits," Starscream said.

Optimus's optics widened. "But you *did it*."

This fragging *idiot*.

"I was *berthridden*," Starscream hissed.

"It would be worth the cost—"

Starscream leaned close, baring his dentae. "You're too *important*!"

"But you *aren't*?"

Starscream backed off. That stupid *afthelm*, how could he…? He'd forced Starscream into a corner!

"I was testing a hypothesis," Starscream said. "It won't work for any drone but me."

Optimus's face fell. "You're certain?"

"Absolutely certain," Starscream said, resisting the urge to glare again.

Optimus stared for a moment, optics searching Starscream's face. Then, he sighed and rose from his place.

"Thank you," he said.

What an odd mech.

☆☆☆

The rations stretched surprisingly far. They were nearly three-quarters of the way before they had to reduce them. Unfortunately, this just confirmed Starscream's suspicions. Once they reached Cybertron, they would starve.

The door slid open. Starscream sighed, preparing to greet one of the many possible mecha it could be. As he looked up from the datapad he was checking statistics on, his spark froze.

Familiar, burning red optics stared down at him.

"I figured I'd find you here," Megatron said.

Starscream's grip tightened on the datapad. He forced himself to relax, not wanting to damage the screen.

"What do *you* want?" Starscream said.

"Don't be like that," Megatron said, taking a step into the room. "I need to talk to you."

Giving up on relaxing, Starscream placed the datapad beside him on the berth. "Is it truly so *urgent* that you couldn't send a message?"

The brute came closer. Starscream's wings twitched as he stopped himself from fanning them out. A threat display would only encourage the brute. He had to stay calm, stay still—maybe *then* the fragger would get bored and leave him alone.

"It's personal," Megatron said.

Starscream dug his claws into the edge of the berth. Not *this* slag again.

"No," Starscream said. "Frag off."

Megatron's strides grew longer, footfalls heavier. His burning gaze lit aflame, turning to a glare as his brow furrowed.

"*You* don't get to tell me that," Megatron said, practically spitting the words.

He leaned close, olfactory to olfactory with Starscream. Starscream finally allowed himself to bare his teeth, leaning backward as he flared his wings.

"Get it over with," Starscream hissed.

Megatron's lips curled. He clenched his fists, and Starscream readied himself to evade an attack. It never came.

"I made… *errors* in disciplining you," Megatron said. "But if I hadn't, you wouldn't have learned."

What the *frag*? How could the brute manage to apologize without even understanding he'd done anything wrong?

"What sort of *lesson* were you trying to teach me? That I should be beaten and mocked for being myself?" Starscream said.

Megatron's optics narrowed. "That you can't yell and scream and expect to walk all over me. This sort of attitude is *exactly* why."

"You can't be *serious*!" Starscream spat, rising from the berth. "*You* held the power! You always have! I had to make myself heard! What did you expect me to do?"

Starscream knew the answer before the brute spoke.

"Sit and listen."

How could he say that? Didn't he see how *hypocritical* it was? Had Megatron viewed him as a mech, or merely as a drone? It seemed the answer was clear.

Starscream forced himself to meet the brute's optics. "If you expected me to do that, you never knew me."

"I knew you," Megatron said, optics blazing. "Never say I didn't. *I* picked you up off the ground, plating barely held together, and watched you as you recovered. *I* saved your life. *I* helped you liberate your Seekers. *I* helped you get revenge against the Council. There isn't a *single thing* in your life that you can't thank *me* for."

Starscream flicked his wings. "Skywarp."

Megatron's optics widened. "What?"

"Skywarp," Starscream repeated. "You had nothing to do with her. Or Thundercracker."

And Jetfire, precious Jetfire, was all his own doing—but he didn't dare bring that up. The farther away the brute was from his newspark, the better.

"And you may have created them," Starscream said. "But the Decepticons are under *my* command now. They follow us because they *chose* to, not because they'll get *slagged* if they don't."

"I never coerced anyone into following me," Megatron said.

Starscream laughed. "Sure! You just recruited a bunch of mecha that were considered property, that were forced out on the streets, and that could barely afford to live! Then, you started threatening them with violence if they stepped out of line! *Where* were we going to go if we changed our minds?"

Megatron stared.

"That's right!" Starscream exclaimed. "Nowhere! We had *nowhere* to go! At least with you, we weren't going to starve! At first, anyway. That's a moot point now."

The brute continued to stare. Were any of his words sinking in? Starscream leaned close, deciding to risk retaliation.

"We're heading toward a slow, painful death," he hissed. "All because you couldn't tolerate the idea that *sometimes*, someone knows things better than you!"

The brute didn't react. He continued staring blankly into Starscream's optics. Starscream looked away for a moment, twitching his wings. Why was he just *standing there*? Was he going to grab him again?

Starscream sidestepped, passing the brute. Megatron didn't turn.

"You know," Starscream said quietly, wings drooping. "I believed in you. Not in that stupid artifact—just *you*. I didn't even think it was *real* until Prime stole it from you."

"He didn't steal it."

Starscream's wings shot up. "What?"

"He didn't steal it," Megatron repeated. "It chose *him*. Not *me*."

"That's… that's ludicrous!" Starscream said, taking a step closer. "You can't expect me to believe—!"

Megatron clenched his fists. "After everything, it didn't choose me."

Starscream shoved the realization that the matrix could *choose* things aside. The brute wasn't getting away *that* easily.

"Whoop de *fragging* do!" Starscream hissed. "The ancient religious artifact liked Optimus more than you. So what? Is not being *special* the reason why you decided to become a tyrant? How *pathetic*—"

Megatron turned toward him, lips curled. "*No one* chose me! Not even you!"

Starscream took a step back, stomping a pede. "*I* didn't choose you? I killed the council for you! When the Seekers had doubts, I commanded them to follow! I dragged my wingmates into your fragging war!"

He still remembered staring up from the medical berth as Megatron hovered over him. Closing his optics and expecting never to wake up, only to be rescued. The brute seemed impossibly huge back then.

He treated Starscream like a mech. Or at least, he put on a convincing show of it. Helped him repaint his frame and honored his request to join the Decepticons.

Megatron's lips fell, slackening into a frown. "Where did that go, Starscream? I miss it."

Starscream searched the brute's face. His optics smoldered, not burned.

"Do you really not know what you've done?" Starscream whispered.

Megatron looked away. Starscream's plating rattled, limbs shaking. His spark pulsed in his chest.

"You're—you're never going to understand, are you?"

"Starscream—"

Starscream stomped a pede and swept a hand toward the door. "Go! Leave! I never want to speak to you again!"

Surprisingly, the tyrant listened. The door shut with a click.

How could he have never realized? Megatron was *never* going to understand. It just wasn't possible!

Starscream crossed the room and sprawled into the berth. Ulchtar laid above his head. He grabbed the stuffed animal, squeezing it to his chest. When that didn't calm his spark, he curled in on himself.

He and Megatron were fundamentally different. It hurt, but it was the truth. They would never see optic to optic. Some small, forever young part of Starscream died at the idea.

He was a turbofox, and Megatron was a ferrowolf.

☆☆☆

"I met you before the war."

Starscream jumped, nearly falling as he flung himself in the direction of the voice.

"Bumblebee!" He hissed. "Don't… don't do that."

Bumblebee shrugged and settled beside him. The game room was almost always empty when it wasn't game night, making it the perfect place to sit and contemplate if one wanted to leave their quarters. Bumblebee had one of his copious bee-themed plushies in his lap. He ran his fingers through the tiny fibers that stick out on it as he spoke.

"You didn't recognize me, though. I didn't expect you to."

Starscream looked away, picking at the edges of his arm guards. "I never knew a *Bumblebee*, that's for certain."

"I wasn't Bumblebee until we got to Earth," Bumblebee said with a slight laugh. "Before then, I was B-127."

The serial number was familiar, but Starscream couldn't place it. He squinted at the other mech.

"You'll need to remind me," he said. "I feel like I should've recognized a bright yellow mech. There aren't many of them around."

Bumblebee smiled. "I was a lot redder back then. Quite a bit of silver, too."

Finally, things shifted into place.

He met a waste disposal drone during his recovery from his attempt to leave the atmosphere. He was left alone, so he seized the opportunity and crawled through a vent that he had slowly screwed open in the moments that he wasn't being watched. But rather than finding an exit, he ran into an ever-narrowing tunnel. In an attempt to turn, he accidentally dislodged a panel and fell straight into an empty waste cart.

The drone organizing the carts discovered him immediately. When Megatron and the others arrived, they seemed to know him. If that was him, Bumblebee wasn't just a high-ranking Autobot—he was one of the earliest Decepticons.

"That was *you*?" Starscream asked.

"Yeah," Bumblebee said. "Major glow up, huh?"

"*Major*," Starscream said.

The way Bumblebee looked before wasn't *bad*, but it was clear that the mech was a lot more comfortable with his current coloration. Starscream could relate. When he wore the red and gold, his plating crawled whenever he caught his reflection. Something was just *wrong* about it.

A brief silence fell. Starscream fiddled with his arm guards, curiosity striking him.

"Why did you leave?" He asked.

Bumblebee's hands gripped his plushie, practically kneading it. He stared down at it.

"Well…" He said. "Optimus asked me to. I didn't like where the Decepticons were heading."

So, he was one of the mecha who followed Prime during the schism. Starscream should've guessed.

"What about it didn't you like?" Starscream asked.

"Megatron."

Starscream froze. He should've expected an answer like that, but he didn't. He assumed Bumblebee would merely cite a preference for Optimus, or spout some religious slag about the matrix.

"Megatron," Starscream repeated.

"He changed," Bumblebee said. "He used to refuel with us—*all* of us. If we had concerns, he'd sit with us and talk it out. But then the matrix came up, and it was like he just expected to have *everything*. I barely saw him. And then he ordered you and the rest of the Seekers to kill the Council without telling any of us…"

Starscream's wings thunked against the wall as they shot up. "You didn't *know*? I thought that was the plan all along!"

"No," Bumblebee said with a shake of his helm. "Not even Optimus knew."

The brute was a liar all along. But something about that didn't add up. The back of Starscream's processor nagged him, begging him to search for the understanding he was missing.

But he told the fragger that he didn't want to speak to him again. He wouldn't go back on that so soon. Still…

"Did any of us truly know him?" Starscream asked. "Was he just… *always* like this, and we never realized?"

Bumblebee pulled the stuffed animal to his chest and squeezed it.

"I think he had good intentions," Bumblebee said. "I could never doubt that. But maybe they got lost along the way."

Starscream hummed. "Maybe…"

Megatron had treated him like a mech, at first. He had emphasized Starscream's ability to make his own choices. But as his power grew, Megatron became less and less interested in anything but crushing the opposition—including the autonomy of the mecha he commanded. For a long time, Starscream buried the early days in the back of his processor, choosing only to focus on the harsh and bitter present.

It hurt less to pretend Megatron had been a monster all along.

Chapter End Notes

Woop woop! 'Nother chapter for ya guys. Still chugging away at chapters for the sequel, and I've climbed a bit further than expected. If I keep that pace up, it guarantees weekly updates for a while! But we'll see how things go.

Bumblebee's mentioned paint job as B-127 is a reference to Armada Hotshot, since he was named Bumblebee in a very early concept bible, according to TFwiki. :P

Got a Rattrap figure as a graduation gift, so I'm gonna have to work Rattrap into the sequel somehow, haha. I love writing for fandoms like this because we really are just playing with toys. It reminds me of how my sister and I used to have several-year-spanning multigenerational stories with our LPS, MLP figurines, and Webkinz. Continuity soup, my beloved.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Starscream was preparing to enter recharge when a ping startled him. He muffled an irritated growl and checked his comms. A message from Optimus.

[Please report to the communications center immediately.]

Starscream glanced at the berth. Skywarp and Nova Storm were already deep in recharge, piled on top of Jetfire. Ravage was stretched out at their feet, tail swaying lazily. Rumble and Frenzy slept on either side of Ravage, leaning against the cybercat. Starscream *could* just ignore the message. What could possibly be urgent when they were so close to Cybertron?

Starscream flexed his fingers. He hissed quietly in frustration and turned away from the berth. Only he and Soundwave were awake. The others could hear about whatever this was in the morning, but at least *someone* had to be present.

As Starscream reached the doorway, he paused, staring at the rollator in the corner of the room. He'd *just* put it away. Was it *truly* worthwhile to pull it out again? His pedes ached and his legs trembled, but *frag it all*, he didn't want to take the damn thing out after he just put it away.

Leaning against the walls as he made his way to the communications center, Starscream lamented the poor timing of whatever emergency the Autobots decided to have. He was always worse at the end of the day, tiredness combining with the usual frame strain to make what had become a barely noticeable issue feel exactly like it had when he'd first clambered out of the medbay.

When he crossed the entrance to the communications center, he nearly tripped. He caught himself just in time, an irritated hiss escaping his vocalizer and drawing the attention of the gathered mecha.

"Can't you Autobots have *whatever this is* at a more convenient time—" He paused as his gaze fell on the main screen. An unfamiliar mech stared down at him through it. "Who is that?"

The mech herself answered him.

"I'm Windblade of the Cybertronian Revival Initiative," she said. "Who are *you*?"

Starscream took a step forward, moving slowly in the vain hope that he wouldn't stumble. "Starscream, member of Decepticon command."

Soundwave tilted his head. "Nova Storm, Skywarp, Ravage—location?"

"In our quarters, in recharge," Starscream said, adding quietly, "Like *I* should be."

Soundwave nodded.

Windblade hummed. "I *apologize* that this isn't at a convenient time, but we can't allow you to land without confirming your intentions."

Confirming their *intentions*? What was so worth protecting down there? Cybertron was drained of its energeon long ago! It was why the war had ended up on planets like Earth in the first place—both sides were *scrambling* to harvest their caches after the planet ran out!

"To die at *home*," Starscream growled. "Instead of some stupid faraway planet."

Windblade's optics narrowed, lips pinching, but she said nothing. She looked toward Optimus.

"Is this true?" She asked.

"I wouldn't have said it in those exact words," Optimus said, bowing his head. "But yes. We have returned because we have nowhere else to go. We expected a barren planet."

Soundwave stepped closer to the screen. "Autobots, Decepticons—no longer fighting. This flight—presumed final resting place."

Windblade's expression was unreadable. Starscream flexed his fingers, wings itching. Was she going to deny them?

"I have good news for you, then," Windblade said. "You won't be dying any time soon."

A notification popped up on the screen—a file download. Soundwave scanned and opened it on a smaller monitor, text and diagrams filling the screen. It outlined exactly where and how to land.

"I'll see you on the surface," Windblade said.

The screen flickered, and she was gone. Starscream dared to glance at the other mecha in the room. Optimus stood completely still, plating tensed. Soundwave stared up at the screen, fists clenched. Then, both of them relaxed.

"We're going *home*," Optimus said quietly.

☆☆☆

The Ark landed without a hitch, piloted by Soundwave and Optimus while the rest of the ship —including Starscream—recharged. In the future, the ship would be able to land

independently, but because it was the Ark's first landing since being brought to life, it couldn't be left unsupervised. Starscream rose first out of the rest of command, having set an alarm to go off right before they landed.

He extracted himself from the cuddle pile, pausing as Jetfire stirred. When the newspark didn't wake, Starscream crossed the room. He stared down at the rollator.

Today was a good day, he decided. He didn't *need* it. Some part of his processor enjoyed pushing the thing around, and the seat was convenient, but…

He tapped a pede. Windblade didn't know. None of the mecha on Cybertron knew. He could already *feel* the stares he would get. His plating tensed at the mere idea of them making assumptions, *pitying* him, underestimating him.

Today was a good day. He could walk just fine.

"Starscream?"

Starscream turned to Jetfire. The newspark was carefully extracting himself from the cuddle pile, eyes on his creator.

"I thought you were still in recharge," Starscream said.

Jetfire exited the berth. "We're not moving anymore. Did we land?"

"Yes," Starscream said. "We landed."

Jetfire wrung his hands. Starscream sighed. Then, a realization hit him. He stepped closer to Jetfire, taking the newspark's hands in his.

"There are other mecha on the planet's surface," Starscream said. "We're going to live with them."

Jetfire's hands tensed. "O-okay."

The newspark's wings trembled, and Starscream silently cursed his own negligence. Jetfire had only known the Decepticons, and his first experience with a stranger had been *Megatron*. Not only was the newspark severely undersocialized—he was *terrified* of strangers.

"Come here," Starscream said, pulling him in for a hug. Jetfire leaned down to reciprocate. "You'll be okay. We'll all be okay."

Jetfire squeezed Starscream—gently, always so *gently*. His plating creaked as his wings continued to tremble. Starscream reached around Jetfire's shoulder, fingers barely reaching the surface of his wing. Jetfire stiffened.

"You'll be *fine*," Starscream said, motioning for Jetfire to sit. "Stay still."

Had no one touched his wings before? *Slag*. Starscream had been even more neglectful than he thought. With Jetfire sitting, Starscream was able to reach more of his wings. He took the

edge of one in his hand and rubbed it.

Jetfire let out a chirp, then flinched at the noise. Starscream laughed, nearly as startled as the newspark. He continued rubbing Jetfire's wings, and after the shock wore off, the newspark leaned into the touch. As Starscream put more force into his motions, the newspark leaned harder, until Starscream had to back away as Jetfire flopped on his side like an overgrown cyberpup.

Starscream laughed again as Jetfire blinked, staring straight ahead as if he couldn't comprehend what had just happened. It wasn't unusual to elicit such a strong reaction, especially in a newspark. The first time Starscream's wings were touched, he fell straight off the berth. Skywarp had *definitely* done it on purpose, no matter how much she denied it.

A new frame needed input to calibrate its sensors. Because of this, newsparks were particularly sensitive to touch, among other sensations. While other parts of the body were often touched, the wings were typically left alone, making the calibration of those sensors a difficult task. It was an unspoken tradition among flightframes (and other mecha who possessed similarly difficult to reach structures) for guardians to aid newsparks in calibrating those sensors.

Eventually, Starscream was satisfied with the session. He nudged Jetfire. The newspark was splayed out on the floor, completely limp.

"Wha' wuzzat?" Jetfire muttered, half of his face still pressed against the floor.

"Just calibrating the touch sensors on your wings," Starscream said. "I thought it would help you relax."

Jetfire hummed, making no move to rise. Starscream grabbed an arm and pulled.

"Come on up, you giant cyberpup. We have a big day ahead of us."

☆☆☆

When they finally exited the Ark, the CRI wasted no time greeting them. Jetfire was reluctant, sticking close to Starscream, Skywarp, and Nova Storm as they were escorted to the meeting. Keeping track of the newspark's mood and his surroundings at once proved difficult, and for a moment, Starscream wished he could just *sense* Jetfire's feelings like any other mech.

The area they landed in was far from any major cities. Sparse buildings decorated the landscape, vastly outnumbered by rocky outcroppings. Small bits of vegetation rose from the ground, shriveled but alive. From a distance, the bright antlers of a lightdeer shone. Already, the world was more alive than they left it.

Since their arrival was unexpected, no living arrangements were made yet, so they were expected to stay in the Ark until they were formalized. Despite that, most mecha spent their time outside the ship. Dirge, in particular, spent most of his time staring into the woods. Jetfire joined him occasionally, the two muttering back and forth about the flora and fauna.

Starscream took a seat beside them, catching the end of a conversation about petrorabbits.

"They really eat their own slag?" Jetfire asked.

"Nutrients hide themselves within the plant walls," Dirge said. "So they have learned to unlock them."

Jetfire hummed. Then, he stiffened, wings shooting upward. He leaned forward, focused. Starscream followed his gaze.

"A cybird," Starscream muttered.

Jetfire glanced at him. "Looks kinda like you in your alt mode."

"I was designed to mimic them," Starscream said.

"Seek and Capture Drone Model ULCHTAR. Less than a thousand produced."

Starscream's wings shot up as he whipped toward the source of the voice. Windblade stood in front of him, arms crossed. The CRI mecha lingered in the area, but he hadn't seen her since the call. Just what was her role in the organization?

"Less than four hundred, actually," Starscream said.

Windblade's optics narrowed. "Discontinued due to low capture rates and a proportionally high rate of deactivations."

Plating creaked as Jetfire wrung his hands. Starscream flexed his own at the newspark's nervous tell, claws digging into the ground. He twitched his wings, and received a twitch from Windblade in return.

"Most of us died during the war," Starscream said."But *I* was strong enough to survive."

Windblade was a flightframe, but not any model Starscream recognized. There were many possible explanations for this. Firstly, she could be a forged mech. Forged mecha took unique forms, and their frames reflected that. But any forged mech alive would be far older than she seemed based on the lack of wear on her plating.

The second option was that she was a warframe. This was unlikely. Starscream had never seen a flight warframe with fans on their wings. So, that left one other: she was a drone created after the war left Cybertron. Or, possibly even by the CRI itself.

"I want to speak with you," Windblade said. "Privately, if you're willing."

Starscream leaned to the side, attempting to project a relaxed and comfortable image. His elbow shook, and he knew it was a losing battle, but he stubbornly kept the position.

"About what?" He asked.

Windblade smiled. "I heard you studied in a handful of scientific fields. I'd like to talk science with you."

Starscream pushed himself to his pedes, a grin slipping onto his face. "Very well."

They walked past the camp and into the nearby forest, making their way through a well-worn but empty trail. Throughout, they traded various facts. The CRI mecha had done extensive ecological research, it seemed. The area wasn't of Starscream's expertise, so when Windblade sought opinions, he steered the conversation toward more familiar areas. His education was spotty, so there were quite a few moments where he was outshone. The only thing keeping the ordeal from being pure humiliation was the fact that they were alone.

Despite his best attempts, Starscream was a lab assistant at his most qualified. Even then, he could never hope to obtain a certification of any sort. He'd spent most of his (very sparse) hours at Jetfire's lab caring for the retrorats and glitchmice or carefully observing whatever strange alien species Skyfire had imported that week while Skyfire lent him textbooks and allowed him to observe studies. It was the most he could do without getting caught.

The majority of his practical skills were obtained during the war through trial and error. Shockwave was willing to prattle, but his words were drier than most textbooks, and most of his experiments were the kind that made Starscream's plating crawl. So, while Starscream understood which solutions he needed to mix underneath a fume hood to keep himself from passing out, he never quite got around to figuring out *why*.

Although, he did learn one particularly interesting tidbit.

"That was after we discovered Unicron's Blood—"

"Unicron's blood?" Starscream asked.

What the frag could they possibly be calling *that*?

"Our supply of crystallized energeon," Windblade said, flicking a wing. "We found that unpurified energeon degrades over time. The most obvious signal was a change in color from cyan to purple."

Starscream hummed, flexing his fingers. Purple energeon. Could this 'Unicron's blood' be dark energeon? If so, why did this degradation begin in the first place? When energeon flowed freely and crystals were abundant, they didn't deteriorate, no matter how long they went unpurified.

But the conversation drifted toward other things, and Starscream didn't feel the need to ask these questions to Windblade specifically. He kept them in the back of his processor, fully intending to investigate them later. Maybe there were records of dark energeon even further back, if it were a natural process.

When they were far from the camp, Windblade finally made the move he was waiting for.

"You were attempting to synthesize energeon from organic compounds," Windblade said. "I saw the records, but in your own words, how did that go?"

Starscream stared straight into her face. "Terribly."

Windblade hummed, turning away from him. "We tried something similar when your factions left the planet, but with compounds available on Cybertron. We didn't succeed, either."

She increased her pace, and Starscream stumbled while trying to keep up.

"How aren't you starving, then?" Starscream asked.

"We changed our focus."

A particularly large branch thwacked Starscream in the face. When he wrestled it out of the way, Windblade was crouched in front of a cage. Quiet scraping made it clear the trap was occupied. A large ferroet struggled inside the cage, tail banging against the edges as it hissed and howled.

Windblade drew a set of swords that were sheathed inside her wing. With one, she forced the ferroet to the edge of the cage until it could no longer struggle. With the other, she decapitated in a swift motion.

"Why?" Starscream asked.

Ferroets were trapped for extra materials in the past, but their usefulness was quickly outpaced as mining technology improved. Since she killed it, there was little chance it was caught for a study.

Windblade flicked a lever on the side of the cage and it sprang open. Carefully, she removed the helm and frame.

"It's simple," Windblade said as she laid the ferroet's frame on its dorsal strut. She stood back, using one of her swords to slice the creature down the middle. "There were sources of fuel all around us—we just couldn't access them."

"You're not implying—"

Starscream cut himself off as Windblade bent the ferroet's plating open. She dug her claws into its internals, pulling out its fuel filters. She held it up to him. The organ was nearly identical to a Cybertronian's from the outside.

"We have fuel filters," Windblade said, placing the organ on the ground. "And they're a close match. But that isn't enough to allow us to process fuel aside from purified energeon."

She pulled out a tubelike organ. Attached to the side of it was a portion of a different organ. Starscream called up the diagrams from his time with Skyfire. The answer came quickly—the enteric tubes and the dissolution tank. In mechanimals, the enteric tubes took liquid from the sublimation system, allowing mechanimals to process less refined fuels and eventually

secrete waste. The dissolution tank stored the substances needed to turn raw materials into fuel.

Cybertronians lacked both of these organs, so they could only eliminate waste through the sublimation system. Anything that couldn't be exhaled through the plating remained in the fuel lines. Only energeon and derivatives of it were safe to consume.

"What are you saying, exactly?" Starscream said, leaning closer.

Windblade pulled out the ferroet's spark chamber and *bit it*. Starscream flinched backward as the sound of grinding metal assaulted his audials. The action was his answer.

"That's insane," he muttered. "You modified your internals?"

"Yes," Windblade mumbled around her meal. She paused, holding the bitten spark chamber in front of her. "If your mecha want to live, they'll need the surgery, too. It's the only way forward."

Starscream flexed his fingers. If the rest of command—Autobot and Decepticon—were informed of this, he wouldn't be hearing it now. Windblade was telling him *before* the others.

"Why are you telling me this now?" Starscream asked. "Why not just call a meeting?"

Windblade took another bite of the spark chamber before replying. "You're a mech of science. You'd understand the importance of this the most."

She stared down at the spark chamber. In the distance, a cybird chirped.

"Besides," Windblade said, sighing. "This isn't exactly sanctioned. There are… other things I wanted to ask you, but this has to do with it."

Starscream flicked his wings to rid himself of a nervous itch. "What did you want to ask?"

Windblade closed her optics. She took another bite of the spark chamber. It was particularly drawn out.

"Your gait is uneven," she said. "I noticed it when we first spoke, but I wasn't certain until I asked you to walk with me. It got easier to see the longer we walked."

Great. Starscream flexed his fingers. There was no doubt the other CRI mecha had noticed, if she picked it up from a single video call. He would be lucky to receive any sort of respect—

"We've been working on full frame transfers. There have been a couple of successes. If you wanted, we could build you a new frame."

What?

"A new frame," Starscream muttered.

"Yes," Windblade said. "A new frame. It might fix things."

"Might," Starscream said, shifting from flexing his fingers to picking at his arm guards. "Why just '*might*?' What aren't you telling me?"

Windblade turned away. "Not all transfers are successful. The process requires complete reintegration of the spark with the new frame. Memories are uploaded afterward. Not every trial mech reintegrated, and the rate of integration errors is similar to spark splitting. If your issues are from spark coding, they'll just be brought with it."

"So, I could die during the process," Starscream said. "Or end up no better than I am right now."

Windblade nodded.

Starscream considered it for a moment, but only a moment. No more struggling to walk. No more rollator. No more staring. No more *invalid*. No more of Skywarp hounding him over his limits. He could drink regular energeon again.

But what if this wasn't just his frame? How much of this was coded at the spark level? His inability to sense EM fields would remain.

What if he never woke up? Or *worse*—what if he was stuck as a disembodied spark, forever alive but unable to reintegrate?

Starscream dug his claws into the arm guard.

"Thank you for the offer," he said quietly. "But I would rather be disabled than dead."

Windblade turned back toward him, a smile gracing her face. "I understand. I just wanted you to know it was an option."

Starscream sighed. She was honest with him about the procedure. If she truly wanted him to accept, she wouldn't have mentioned the negatives at all, or at least downplayed them. But there must have been plenty of desperate mecha willing to throw their lives away if it meant they had the slimmest chance of solving their problems. *'A couple of successes'* implied many failures.

[Hey, Screamer?]

Starscream stood straight. The message was labeled as urgent, despite its lack of meaningful content.

[What is it, Skywarp?]

[Can you get back here? Fast? It's Jetfire.]

Starscream turned away from Windblade. She rose from the crouch she had adopted to dismantle the ferroet, wings lifting.

"What's going on?" She said.

"I need to go back," Starscream said. "It's important."

Windblade nodded. "Don't let me keep you."

Starscream glanced at the sky. As luck would have it, the canopy was open where they stood. He leaped, activating his thrusters, and transformed as soon as he cleared the treeline.

[What happened? How is he?]

[I don't know. He just started screaming and hit anyone that came near him. He's on the roof of the Ark right now and won't come down or let any of us close. There's smoke. Definitely from him.]

Starscream increased his speed. Smoke was never a good sign. It typically implied severe overheating or the failure of multiple systems. He forced that thought out of his processor before it could take root. Jetfire's frame was old, but it was *healthy*.

There was another, significantly more plausible reason: Jetfire was an outlier, and had just developed his ability. Forged outliers—the few that existed—formed the mechanisms required for their abilities with their frames. Constructed mecha, since they were placed into pre-built frames, formed theirs over time after integration.

The spark coded the processor, and the processor operated the frame. When it sensed an imbalance between coded traits and the frame, it moved to fix it. That was why not just any mech could perform a proper reformatting procedure, or build frames. Coding for specific outliers in mediums was unreliable, but the blanks that spark splitting mediums filled in ensured that at the very least, the internal schematics of processors would match the frames they were placed in.

Starscream had known, objectively, that it was possible for Jetfire to be an outlier, but hadn't seriously considered the possibility. It was yet another reason he was negligent.

As he landed, Starscream stumbled, nearly falling. The high speed paired with his reduced coordination made for a difficult combination, but that didn't matter. He sprinted across the camp until he found Skywarp.

She stared up at the roof of the Ark. A small trail of smoke rose from it. Starscream traced the trail. Then, powering on his thrusters, he leaped onto the roof. It was far from graceful—he pinwheeled to keep himself from falling backward when he landed—but he made it. Crouching low to keep his balance, he made his way to the source of the smoke.

Jetfire was curled, helm in his knees and arms wrapped around his legs. His wings were high, quivering from tension. The sides of his arms were reddened with heat around where his hands gripped them.

"Jetfire," Starscream said.

The newspark jolted. "G—go away!"

"You're…" Starscream searched for a neutral word. "Stuck. You need to calm down. I want to help you do that."

Jetfire closed his optics, his olfactory ridge scrunched as he hid his face again. Weakly, he mumbled, "No…"

Starscream moved closer. The newspark's cooling fans whirred, standing out against the sparse chirps and chitters of wildlife. Before reaching out, Starscream hesitated. If this was anything like *his* episodes, touch was a fickle thing. Jetfire was strong enough to crush his plating by *accident*. If he were too distressed to communicate properly, injury was a serious risk.

But—Starscream glanced at the red-hot plating of Jetfire's arms—the newspark was already injuring *himself*. That couldn't continue. Decision made, Starscream closed the gap.

He started small, making sure to avoid the wings—those sensors still weren't calibrated, so a touch in this state was just as likely to further Jetfire's distress as it was to relax him. Starscream rubbed the newspark's shoulder, slowly moving as close to where Jetfire's hands rested as he could. He needed Jetfire to let go. But first…

"Do you want to go to our quarters?" Starscream asked.

Jetfire buried himself further.

"We could also go into the woods," Starscream said. "The cybirds are out. Maybe we'll see some."

Jetfire didn't respond. Starscream needed a different approach. He searched his processor something, *anything* else to do—

"Sss… ss… cy—"

Starscream shot upward, then winced.

Wait.

"Do you want to go in the woods?" Starscream asked.

"Mm—mm…hm."

Knowing how difficult it was to speak in this state, Starscream *despised* asking questions, but he didn't want to do anything to upset the newspark. So, trying to keep his tone light, he spoke again.

"Okay, let's go into the woods. Can you fly there with me?"

Jetfire curled back up. That was a no, then.

"Can I ask Skywarp to take us?" Starscream said.

Jetfire raised his head just enough for his optics to peek through. "Hh—hmn."

"Okay. I'm going to comm her."

[Can you warp us into the woods? Somewhere far enough that we can't hear or see anyone but close enough for us to walk back.]

Rather than receiving a message, his response came in the form of Skywarp appearing on the roof beside him. Jetfire brought his head up completely, staring at her with wide optics.

"Hi," she said quietly.

Jetfire hid his face again. Skywarp grimaced.

[Don't take it personally,] Starscream sent.

Skywarp sighed. *[I just wish I could help.]*

[You are.]

With a dizzying rush, they were transported to the base of a large tree. After one last glance, Skywarp warped away, leaving Starscream and Jetfire alone. A nearby cybird let out a long chirp.

Starscream sat beside Jetfire, listening to the cybirds chirp, until eventually the newspark unfurled. It happened in pieces. First, his grip loosened, hands falling away. Burned, warped imprints were left behind. Then, he sat upright. When Jetfire was comfortable enough to stretch his legs, Starscream spoke.

"How are you feeling?"

Jetfire closed his optics, face scrunching, and let out a sigh. "Li—nhn. *Slag*."

Starscream laughed. "Makes sense. These things are terrifying. They take a lot of energy."

"You kn—know what…?"

Good. Full words. They were coming out the other end of it.

"Yes," Starscream said. "I get stuck sometimes, too."

Jetfire stared at him with wide optics. "*You*?"

"I do," Starscream said. He leaned closer. "Let me look at that arm."

Jetfire offered his arm. Starscream took it, gently running his claws over the warped plating. As they ran over a particularly singed edge, Jetfire flinched.

They would need to visit the medbay after this. Perhaps, while they were there, Knock Out and Ratchet could check Jetfire for Starscream's processing glitch. Or, if the episodes weren't associated, whatever one caused *this*.

"What happened before you got stuck?" Starscream asked.

Jetfire looked away, wringing his hands. "W—well… my plating was burning and itching and it *really* hurt, so I kept trying to stay away from everyone. Then I felt something on my wing, an—and there was a hand on my shoulder and it was so *big*, and I wanted it off and I just… I don't know."

So, he was *already* overwhelmed. Whoever touched his wing had just sent him over the edge. Was the discomfort beforehand from his outlier ability manifesting? Or was it the same kind that Starscream always felt?

"Does it still hurt?" Starscream asked.

Jetfire shook his head. "Only where… um…"

Starscream hummed. Jetfire stared at the ground.

"We need to go to the medbay, when you're ready," Starscream said. After realizing the newspark had never met Ratchet and Knock Out before, he added, "But we're not going to Hook."

"Okay," Jetfire said quietly, joints creaking as he wrung his hands tightly. "Okay…"

Chapter End Notes

Felt real clever making that acronym. Cybertron Revival Initiative, Constant Rate Infusion—the planet probably needs both, haha. The alternate title for this chapter was "Spark Coded" for obvious reasons.

Theoretically, if a constructed outlier mech's abilities came from a particular organ (say, a *warp drive*), they would regrow it if it were removed. I'll let you think about the implications. ;3

Windblade is written a bit weirdly here because she isn't *just* Windblade. She's someone else, too. Another victim of my propensity to shift around, split, and fuse characters.

▶ Short ramble about growth, self-repair, and spark-coded traits

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Starscream didn't want to expose Jetfire to something he knew was stressful so soon after an episode, but his wounds couldn't be ignored. Small bits of energeon welled up where Jetfire's palms sat, surrounded by melted metal. The damage was mostly to his plating, but from how Jetfire had cringed at a light touch before, it was clear that the warped plating was putting pressure on his internals.

Knock Out, already aware they were coming, barely glanced up as they entered, focused on cleaning a particularly complex tool. As they waited for him to finish, Starscream took the opportunity to examine Jetfire's response to the mech. The newspark's wings were high, but not quivering—he was tense, but not terrified.

Finally, Knock Out placed the tool back on the rack and approached. Jetfire's wings twitched. Knock Out hesitated before speaking.

"Hello, Jetfire," he said, offering a hand. "I'm Knock Out, your… creator's *preferred* physician."

Starscream rolled his optics, which drew a wry smile from Knock Out. The medic was just stroking his own ego, but the statement *was* true.

"Hi," Jetfire said, voice so strained that the word bordered on a squeak.

Knock out motioned toward the closest medical berth. "You should sit. Let's take a look at those arms."

Jetfire wordlessly obeyed, staring at the floor after he sat. Knock Out set himself to the task, examining the wound. He retrieved a syringe and aimed it between the newspark's plating.

"What is that?" Jetfire asked shakily.

"Local block," Knock Out said. "So I can remove the plating digging into your internals without causing pain."

The appointment continued like that—Jetfire asking questions while Knock Out worked—until Knock Out was finished with both arms. Jetfire's voice grew more confident with each question, the tension in his body slowly disappearing. At the end of it, Jetfire had fresh patches on both arms.

Just after Knock Out offered Jetfire a gummy and the newspark took it, Starscream was struck with a revelation. He looked at Knock Out, successfully catching the medic's attention.

"We think he manifested an outlier—"

Knock Out cut Starscream off with a scoff. "Obviously. You don't get heat warping like this every day."

"Shouldn't he be resistant to it?" Starscream asked, twitching his wings irritably at being interrupted.

"That's ideal, yes," Knock Out said. "But an outlier manifesting before the frame has protective measures in place isn't uncommon."

Starscream would have to take his word for it. He hadn't been around when Skywarp and Thundercracker manifested theirs. If any of the other Seekers had this issue, they wouldn't have told him.

Knock Out turned back to Jetfire with a smile. "Be careful when you practice with your ability. Not just because of the patches."

Jetfire nodded. "Okay."

The door to the medbay slid open, startling the small gathering of mecha. Ratchet entered, making his way to the group. Jetfire watched him, wings drifting upward. Starscream fought a sigh—it would take the newspark just as long as before to relax again. They *really* needed to work on that.

"Ah," Ratchet said with a tired sigh. "The mech of the hour. I'm Ratchet, though I think you've seen me before."

"Yeah," Jetfire squeaked.

Ratchet reached for Jetfire's arm, pausing when the newspark leaned away.

"I just need to connect to your medical port," Ratchet said. "Your creator wants me to check something."

Hesitantly, Jetfire offered his arm. Ratchet inserted his cable into the port. After a moment, he hummed.

"He has your glitch," Ratchet said to Starscream.

Starscream hadn't wanted to believe it was spark-coded, but Jetfire was living proof. An inability to sense EM fields explained the newspark's jumpiness after the encounter with Megatron. He couldn't sense that others *didn't* want to hurt him, so he assumed the contrary. It was distressingly familiar.

"What does that mean?" Jetfire asked quietly.

Ratchet glanced at Starscream. Starscream stared back. How could he explain this? Silence passed over the room.

"Oh, for Primus' sake!" Knock Out exclaimed, stepping back into the group. "It's *not that difficult*."

He turned back toward Jetfire, offering the newspark a container of energeon gummies. Jetfire took it cautiously, making no move to open it.

"Nearly all mecha are forged or created with a set of electromagnetic sensors," Knock Out said. He motioned to the sides of his neck. "The most powerful ones are *here*, but they're all over the frame. But just like neurocircuits can malfunction and filters can degrade, EM sensors may encounter problems. You and your creator have coding in your spark that keeps your processor from reading the information those sensors feed you."

Jetfire blinked at him. "Okay. What do they do when they're read correctly?"

"They interpret the fluctuations in fields of the mecha surrounding you," Ratchet said.

"*Yes*," Knock Out said. "Which are correlated with emotion and thought. That means a mech with typical processing can get a general idea of how the mecha around them are feeling by reading their fields."

"But I can't," Jetfire said.

Knock Out nodded. "No, you cannot."

"Okay."

Okay? Just *okay*? Jetfire was just told that he lacked a fundamental sense all other mecha had and all he had to say was *okay*?

"You're… *fine* with this?" Starscream said, failing to control his tone.

Jetfire scrunched his olfactory ridge. "Should I not be?"

Starscream didn't know how to answer that. Obviously, missing an *entire sense* was a disaster. What *else* would it be? They would never be able to read a mech properly, no matter how much they compensated by watching body language or interpreting tone. Every other mech spoke a secret language they weren't privy to.

If his abnormality was discovered before the war, Starscream wouldn't be alive. His frame would have been recycled for scrap like the millions of others that failed testing. Jetfire, if he were created back then, would've met the same fate.

And that was the issue, wasn't it? *Starscream* may have lacked a sense, but it was *other mecha* who made it a problem. He survived this long without even knowing, outliving many perfectly normal mecha, but his society could never have imagined that.

"It just makes me more like you," Jetfire said.

Starscream's fingers twitched. A melancholic warmth rose within him, turning his spark. Conflicting energies warred beneath his plating until he gave in, diving forward and wrapping his arms around his newspark. Jetfire returned the embrace.

When it ended, Starscream pulled away, searching for words he couldn't find. Jetfire smiled at him, wings relaxed.

"You can't just *say* things like that," Starscream muttered.

Jetfire's wings lifted. "Why not?"

The newspark was so *naive*. He didn't *understand* what such a thing meant. That was the only explanation. Starscream couldn't begrudge a mech so new to the world for knowing *nothing*, could he?

"Forget it," Starscream said. "Let's head to our quarters."

They spent the rest of the day in recharge.

☆☆☆

Breaking the news about how the CRI tackled the fuel problem to the Autobots and Decepticons was a difficult task, but one Starscream was fully prepared to handle. Any mech that claimed otherwise was lying. He definitely didn't lose his temper during the announcement after the thousandth question that was just a rewording of the first one he answered. No one could prove that.

The medics went first, so that they could learn the surgery after they recovered. Though small in number, any extra hands sped up the process. Since the surgery, Knock Out took a liking to lightdeer, and extolled its virtues to any post-surgery mech willing to listen. Bumblebee claimed the creature was too difficult to chew. Each of Blitzwing's aspects gave completely different answers every time they were asked for their preferences.

Starscream, wary of potential complications, requested to be placed toward the end of the list. Optimus, ever the self-sacrificing fool, asked the same. The rations were shrinking by the day, and the line energeon of mechanimals was barely a substitute. By the time they reached the end of the list, there may be no energeon left.

Starscream sighed as air whooshed through the room *again*. Skywarp appeared before him, wings twitching with tension. She muttered to herself and disappeared, only to reappear a few moments later.

"You're wasting energy," Starscream said.

"No!" Skywarp exclaimed. "I'm just…"

Starscream rolled his optics. "Just *what*?"

"I don't know!" Skywarp said. "But it's not a waste of energy."

Maybe he *should* let her tire herself out. It might make it easier for the surgeons to induce stasis. As Skywarp warped in and out again, Starscream resigned himself to his fate. Until it was time to leave, there was no settling Skywarp down.

It was between one of these anxious warps that Skywarp paused, stretching her arms. Starscream froze. Did he just hear what he thought he heard?

"Skywarp," Starscream said. "*Please* tell me I didn't hear that."

She turned to him, optics wide. Her arms remained stretched as she stared at him.

"Nope," she said.

Starscream stood up, heading toward her. "You wouldn't mind stretching again, would you? For the peace of my processor?"

Skywarp pulled her arms back toward herself—there it was *again*—and shook her head. "Well, I *already* stretched, so—"

"*Skywarp*."

She took a step back. Starscream moved to grab her arms, and she teleported away. For *whatever* reason, she didn't want this looked at. With a sigh, Starscream contemplated a different approach.

"You're being a hypocrite," Starscream said.

Skywarp tensed, and there it was again—a quiet click. How hadn't Starscream heard it before? How had Skywarp let it get bad enough to be heard from a distance? Joint malfunctions were painful!

"Come *on*," Starscream said, taking a step closer. Skywarp didn't back away. "You're always nagging *me* about my limits, but you're too neglectful to take care of *your own* frame."

Skywarp's wings fanned out. "It's not *neglect*! It just—"

"If you're not neglectful, then why can I hear your elbows click every time you move?" Starscream interrupted, keeping his tone candy-sweet to take the edge off of his words.

Skywarp stammered. "I—I just…"

"Just let me take a look," Starscream said, closing the gap between them.

With tightly shuttered optics, Skywarp offered her arms. Starscream took them gently, running his claws along the seams. There were heavy signs of abrasion on her right elbow—she had been like this for quite a while. Again, Starscream had to wonder how he'd never noticed.

As he got deeper into the joint, Skywarp's plating tensed.

"It seems like this really hurts," Starscream said. "How did you go so long without getting it looked at?"

"It's not that bad—"

Starscream silenced her with a glare. "Don't lie to me, Warp."

Skywarp slumped. "Okay. I've been taking pain patches from the medbay when they're off shift."

"*Warp*," Starscream groaned.

Skywarp shook her head. "I know, I *know*! Okay?"

What was the best approach to this?

"Are you on one right now?" Starscream asked.

"No," Skywarp said. "Just wore off a little bit ago."

At least they wouldn't have to worry about *that*. Pain relief would already be supplied during the procedure. Primus forbid Skywarp *overdosed* because of her self-treatment.

Starscream sighed. "We can have the surgeons look at it while you're under."

Skywarp tensed, wings quivering.

"Yeah," she said.

Starscream moved his claws away from the damaged joint. He rubbed Skywarp's forearm as he contemplated his next words.

"What has you so anxious?" He asked.

Skywarp flinched. "It's—it's nothing—"

"Try again."

"They're gonna take my warp drive," she said, shuttering her optics. "I know they're not, but I *feel* like they are. They're gonna open me up and they're gonna mess around in there, and I *don't like it*."

"I don't like it, either," Starscream said. "But we have to do it."

Skywarp's wings flicked. "You're used to it. They've had to open you up so many fragging times. I'm not."

"I might be," Starscream said with a shrug. "But that doesn't mean I enjoy it. Besides, Hook is *hardly* a medic. The CRI knows what they're doing."

"But they're still going to be *in there*!" Skywarp hissed, grabbing Starscream's arms. "My warp drive is right in the way! They're gonna have to put their hands all over it, and I'm gonna be asleep! What if they mess with it?"

"They have no reason to," Starscream said, repositioning his hands around Skywarp's arms to give her a squeeze.

"But they *could*!" Skywarp exclaimed. "And I wouldn't even know."

She closed her optics, face twisting into a grimace. Her wings fell.

"Do you want me to watch them?" Starscream asked.

She looked up at him. "You can do that?"

"Would it help?" Starscream said.

Skywarp lunged forward, shoving her face into his shoulders. Starscream fought a flinch from the sudden movement and returned the embrace.

"Yes," Skywarp said. "Please. It really would."

Starscream reached out, stroking the edge of her wing. "Then I will."

☆☆☆

Skywarp's surgery went well. He was allowed to watch—in no small part due to her refusal to succumb to the medical overrides without him in the room—and ensured that no one was poking around where they shouldn't. Skywarp was always protective of her warp drive, but it had been so long since she sustained a serious injury or illness that he'd forgotten.

He had also forgotten the many remarks that caused it. Whether it was Megatron himself or their superiors before they joined the Decepticons, dismantlement was a favored threat for transgressions. Her warp drive could function independently of her, and she hadn't counted as a mech, so why wouldn't they?

Time crept forward, and the list grew shorter as more surgeries were completed. Jetfire was eager for his, finding the ordeal fascinating. If Starscream didn't already know he was interested in medicine, the excitement would've been uncharacteristic. The newspark was reluctant to fly—something fundamental to his frame type—and terrified of strangers, but he was totally fine with having his internals rearranged.

Ravage had already taken to the surgery, finding joy in catching small mechanimals and devouring them in front of whatever poor mecha happened to be around. There were still remains of the last petrorabbit the cybercat caught hiding *somewhere* in the New Decepticon command quarters. Starscream checked the entire room from top to bottom, but hadn't managed to find them.

Soundwave hadn't complained when it was his turn. A few times, Starscream caught him sharing with Ravage. One particularly upsetting time, he had entered the room to take a nap

only to find the two (plus Rumble and Frenzy) eating a lightdeer *on the berth*. His nap never occurred.

Starscream sipped his cube—a quarter of the ration they started with—and sighed at the memory. Fewer mecha needed the energeon than ever, but somehow there was even less to go around.

☆☆☆

Starscream drifted out of recharge to a quiet voice. He rolled onto his other side, determined to finish his nap. A hand shook his shoulder, the voice growing more desperate.

"Starscream?"

His lagging processor finally caught up. Jetfire was in danger! He sat up, protocols engaging to… what was going on again?

"What do you need?" Starscream asked.

The newspark's plating was tense. His free hand rested over his abdomen.

"My fuel tank hurts," he whined.

Starscream pushed himself onto his knees. "What have you eaten recently?"

Jetfire stammered, and Starscream sighed. The newspark had already been scolded several times for eating things he shouldn't. Apparently, he had taken to the new systems *too* well, and they often made him crave things that weren't meant to be eaten. So far, that hadn't caused any meaningful issues, aside from the medics having to watch Jetfire when he was around their tools.

Starscream was shocked when he caught Jetfire munching on the corner of a *datapad*, of all things. The screen had fallen off and he'd *already* eaten it. The materials used to make their tools and technology resembled the ones that mechanimals (and Cybertronians themselves) were composed of, so it only made sense. For whatever reason, Jetfire's fuel identification protocols decided the similarity was enough to consider tools and tech as valid of food sources as mechanimals.

So, what had he managed to eat that finally gave him trouble?

"I actually, um… didn't eat much today."

"But what exactly *did* you eat?"

Jetfire's gaze fell. "Just a little bit of ferroet. Ravage offered."

"Nothing else?" Starscream asked.

"Nothing else…"

Typically, the newspark's appetite was insatiable. How could he have eaten so little?

"How long has this *actually* been going on?" Starscream asked.

Jetfire flinched. "Um, uh… a few days? Maybe? It didn't hurt as much at first."

Starscream exited the berth and offered a hand to Jetfire. The newspark took it, gripping it with more force than usual. As he stood, he curled forward—an obvious sign of pain.

"Let's go to the medbay," Starscream said.

Jetfire nodded weakly.

The walk was swift, though Jetfire did lag behind a few times, squeezing Starscream's hand as he stood. It only encouraged Starscream to move faster once the newspark was able to move again. Something about seeing his newspark in pain tore at Starscream's spark. He had to fix it as soon as possible.

They crossed the entrance of the medbay and *aw, slag*—Starscream forgot to send a comm. Hook, Ratchet, and Knock Out stared at them from various places in the room. Hook was the first to jump into action.

"What's going on?" Hook asked.

Starscream relayed the information Jetfire just gave him. The newspark stared at the ground, still hugging his abdomen.

"Alright," Hook said to Jetfire, motioning toward one of the berths. "Lay down."

Jetfire obeyed. Hook tapped on the newspark's hands, prompting him to remove them form his abdomen. Then, the medic set to work, running his hands over the area. When he reached the area Jetfire was guarding, the newspark let out a pained squeak. Starscream's plating ruffled at the noise.

"Keep your weapons turned off," Hook told him with a roll of his optics. "I'm just getting a sense of the issue."

Starscream tapped his pede, but said nothing. Hook continued, muttering quietly.

"Distension of the fuel tank, processing tubes… There it is."

Hook pulled away.

"What is it?" Starscream asked.

"He's obstructed," Hook said. Then, he tapped on Jetfire's arm. "Open up."

Jetfire opened his medical port. Hook connected to it and tutted.

"Low line pressure," he said with a sigh.

He pulled the closest intralineal machine toward him. Then, after checking the bag already hooked up to it and sighing, he took another from a nearby drawer and replaced it. Jetfire sat up and winced, attempting to view the medic as he worked. Hook glanced at him.

"Lay back down," Hook said. "I'm just going to give you some med grade. Get that line pressure where it should be."

As Hook connected the machine to Jetfire's medical intake, he glanced at the newspark's face.

"Have you been passing waste?" Hook asked.

Jetfire opened his mouth, then shut it. His wings fell as he looked away. Hook sighed.

"It's an embarrassing question," Hook said. "But I need to know."

Starscream was suddenly reminded of the drawbacks of the new fuel processing system. Although they could digest nearly anything available to them now, the process created liquid waste that had to be manually eliminated. It was beneficial in some areas—Starscream wouldn't need to worry about crystals in his fuel lines after the surgery because he would have a way to get rid of them—but very undignified in every other.

"No," Jetfire muttered. "Not since it started hurting."

Hook turned and shouted across the room at the other two medics.

"Get me a large container and an intake-tank tube!"

Knock Out placed the instrument he was scrubbing on the counter and shouted back, "What size?"

Hook motioned to Jetfire. "Use your processor!"

Knock Out scowled and opened a nearby drawer, rifling through it.

"Biggest size it is," he muttered.

Meanwhile, Ratchet had already disappeared into the back, returning a moment later with the requested large container. He handed it to Hook, who placed it at the edge of the berth. Knock Out soon arrived with the tube, handing it over to Hook with an exasperated sigh.

Hook held the tube up to Jetfire, who flinched backward at first. After a moment, the medic nodded to himself. He yelled to the other medics again.

"One of you, come over and help me with this!"

Ratchet and Knock Out exchanged glares in a silent battle of will. Eventually, Ratchet shook his head and made his way over.

"This might be uncomfortable," Hook said to Jetfire. "But it's going to help."

"What are you doing?" Jetfire asked.

Hook explained as he worked—the tube would go through Jetfire's mouth and into his fuel tank. Cybertronians, unlike some of their mechanimal relatives, couldn't vomit, so the tube would help remove the contents of Jetfire's fuel tank, easing the pressure that had built up. After they passed the tube, Jetfire let out a whine.

Starscream was at his side immediately, some alarm in the back of his processor going off that he wasn't fully aware of. Hook stepped toward him, brow furrowed, then paused.

"Whatever," he said, waving a hand. "You can hold him. Just don't get in the way."

Starscream did just that, wrapping himself around the newspark as Hook and Ratchet repositioned him. With great effort, Starscream ignored the sounds of the medics draining Jetfire's fuel tank, focusing on the newspark himself. Jetfire's wings twitched, plating tight—he was anxious and in pain.

Starscream glared at the closest medic, which happened to be Ratchet. "He's hurting. Do something."

Ratchet glanced across the room. Knock Out stared back at him, then started searching one of the drawers.

"He'll be okay," Ratchet said to Starscream.

Knock Out came from behind, telegraphing his movements. Despite knowing he was there to help, something in the back of Starscream's processor wanted to snap at the medic. He shoved that aside, scrutinizing Knock Out's work as he placed the pain patch. Immediately, the tension drained from Jetfire's body.

Eventually, the ordeal was over. The tube was removed, but the intralineal was left in place. Jetfire, thoroughly exhausted, fell into recharge. Starscream continued to hold him.

"I'd prefer if he stayed overnight," Hook said to Starscream. "I can't be certain the obstruction was removed."

All *that* and he wasn't even sure? Starscream's claws itched.

"How will you know?" Starscream asked.

"When he's able to pass waste again," Hook said. "If it doesn't happen within a couple of days, we'll have to consider surgery."

"Surgery," Starscream repeated.

"Yes," Hook said, adjusting a value on the intralineal. "Surgery. But he's a large mech. Hopefully, we dislodged enough material for it to clear on its own."

Starscream absentmindedly stroked Jetfire's wing. The newspark curled into the touch.

"You know an awful lot about this," Starscream said.

Medics only learned to care for Cybertronians, who lacked the complicated fuel processing systems of their distant mechanimal relatives. Ratchet, a fully qualified general practitioner, and Knock Out, a trained plastic surgeon, would know nothing about those systems. They had to learn as they went, as evidenced by their lack of input during Jetfire's treatment.

Hook had never completed medical school. He had no qualifications. Starscream knew this, because before the list of Decepticon medics dwindled to near none, Starscream refused to be treated by an unqualified mech.

"I worked as a vet nurse before I decided to change fields," Hook said. "It was common for some unlucky mech to bring in their cyberpup after it got into something it shouldn't have."

Starscream's nickname for Jetfire took on a new level of irony.

"What made you change your mind?" Starscream asked.

Hook looked down, optics meeting Starscream's.

"My gestalt," Hook said. "I knew war was coming. I wanted to keep them safe."

Starscream's gaze fell, wings drooping. *Hook's gestalt*—the Constructicons.

"Don't do that," Hook scolded. "Whatever you're thinking, *stop it*."

"I'm not thinking anything."

Hook sighed. "Slag happens. Everyone lost someone. *Multiple* someones. I learned to live with the silence. There's always another mech to save."

Starscream didn't reply. The room fell silent, save for the hum of the intralineal.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry for giving your son fuel issues, Starscream. But it's not exactly like you've never eaten something you weren't supposed to. :'D

▶ Talking about researching for the last scene because that's apparently my passion

I feel a bit awkward about this chapter because I wrote the entire thing before realizing other people might find it gross, LMAO. One of the things I've poked at a few times in here is the war causing mecha to take on roles they wouldn't have otherwise, for better and for ill. Hook is just one of the more obvious examples.

But, haha! Take this chapter early. I'm getting impatient, so I'm fighting not to kill my buffer entirely. You're probably gonna get two this week.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jetfire recovered without surgery, though it did take him until the last possible moment. He was under a strict diet until the damage from the obstruction healed, which proved difficult with the newspark's penchant for eating strange things. Starscream had already caught him chewing on a loose wall panel—*twice*. He and the medics were working on finding the cause, since they didn't want another incident, but it was proving elusive.

Starscream just hoped it wasn't spark-coded. It would be a lot more difficult to stop his newspark from chewing the walls if *he* was tempted to do the same. Though, with how low rations were getting, it might be worth considering. Starscream rolled his optics at the thought.

As he crossed the mess hall, pedesteps came from behind him, slowly catching up. He readied himself for whoever it was and whatever they wanted. Megatron hadn't harassed him since their confrontation, but perhaps—

Oh. As Starscream took his fuel from the dispenser, a blue hand gently reached around him. The mech entered his code and received a cube—a tauntingly *familiar* cube. All that time ago, when Knock Out assured him that he wasn't the only one with fuel restrictions, *Optimus Prime* was the other mech?

Optimus, noticing Starscream's stare, smiled and gestured with the cube in his hand. "Would you mind sharing one final cube with me?"

"Why not?" Starscream said with a sigh. He motioned toward the rest of the mess hall. "Lead the way."

Optimus led them to a table in the corner of the room, passing by a few Autobots who gave him friendly waves. He and Starscream settled down in a brief but contented silence as they sipped their fuel. Optimus was strong and intimidating on the battlefield (much like a certain warframe) but in casual matters, he had proven as harmless as a defanged glitchmouse.

Starscream just hoped he wouldn't ask about Jetfire again.

"What do you think of all this?" Starscream asked, swirling his cube with his wrist.

"It's an innovative solution," Optimus said.

"Innovative," Starscream said with a scoff. "*Definitely*."

Optimus took a long sip. "What about you?"

"I don't care for the solution, but I'd rather not starve," Starscream said. "Something about this feels *wrong*, but I have no reason to suspect anything."

Optimus hummed. Silence—as much as could be had in the mess hall—fell over them again. As Starscream stared down at his slowly dwindling cube, his processor drifted. He glanced at the Autobot symbol on Optimus's chest.

Bumblebee preferred Optimus. The matrix had chosen Optimus. When the schism occurred, Starscream's choice was already made. But, looking back, had it truly been?

"If I had joined the Autobots instead of staying with Megatron," Starscream said. "Where would I be now?"

Optimus's gaze was soft, his words softer. "I don't know."

"I suppose we never will."

☆☆☆

His audials activated before his optics, picking up on the soft murmurs and sharp whirring of equipment throughout the room. Slowly, his optic feed trickled in, fading from a blurry mess to something decipherable. He sat up on the berth, using his elbows to prop himself up. A twinge of discomfort rippled through him, and he let out a quiet hiss.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," Hook said.

Starscream rolled his optics. "You'd better not have bungled this."

Hook scowled. Beside him, Knock Out scoffed.

"Bungle this?" Knock Out exclaimed. "How could you *ever* accuse me of such a thing?"

Starscream snorted. Knock Out dropped the scoff in favor of a grin.

"You'll find we did a *perfect* job monitoring your recovery," Knock Out said. "That CRI surgeon, on the other hand… *quite* the suspicious character."

Starscream hummed. The CRI insisted on having one of *their* surgeons work on him, despite all three medics being trained for the procedure. They claimed his fuel processing disorder and past injuries would cause complications if an experienced surgeon didn't handle the procedure. He would've called it a load of slag if the same precautions hadn't been required for Optimus.

"They found something while you were under," Knock Out said with a frown. "You're not going to like it."

"What is it?"

Knock Out motioned to a nearby counter. Hook grabbed something off the edge of it. He presented it to Starscream. It was a small, shiny object that barely fit in the palm of his hand. Starscream took it and turned it over. Small circuit boards ran along one side.

His fingers curled around the object as his fuel lines burned. He *couldn't* crush it. Not yet.

"Where did they find this?" Starscream hissed.

Knock Out and Hook exchanged glances. Hook looked away, and Knock Out's shoulders fell —a silent battle lost.

"We weren't in the room when they found it," Knock Out said. "But I've opened you up enough times to know it had to be near your spark casing."

It was the only place the medic hadn't touched during the many operations Starscream had to undergo. A limited number of mecha would have the ability to request such a thing. The Enforcers hadn't bothered with internal trackers, preferring comparatively cheap collars and tags. It must have been placed during his time under Megatron's leadership.

Starscream pushed himself off the berth.

"Hey!" Knock Out shouted, moving toward him.

Starscream glared at the medic, stepping away from him before exiting the room. Only one mech could have done this. It was the one thing that made sense.

"Controlling fragger!" Starscream spat.

Where was he? Starscream turned a corner, then another. The brute hadn't been in the command center for some time now, so that wasn't worth checking. Where were his quarters?

Another hall. A pair of mecha jumped out of his way. They called his name, perturbed. He didn't bother to check who they were as he sped past them.

More hallways. Starscream peered into rooms, searching for gray plating. Where was that fragger? His claws itched. He needed to—

There! The brute was right ahead, standing beside Optimus. Starscream calculated his trajectory and leaped, claws ready.

The battle was over before it began. Starscream spat and clawed, but Megatron merely hoisted him into the air, lips pressed into a line. Pointlessly, Starscream struggled against the brute.

"What is the meaning of this?" Megatron said.

Starscream shoved the disabled tracker in Megatron's face. The brute's optics widened. Then, his lips drew into a snarl.

"Let's finish this elsewhere," he said, tossing Starscream over his shoulder.

"Megatron—"

Optimus's voice echoed quietly through the hall as he reached out. Megatron kept marching. When he crossed the door to his quarters, he dumped Starscream on the floor. Starscream hissed, welds from the surgery still tender.

The brute snatched the tracker from Starscream's hand. He stared at it, turning it in the light.

"It only could've been *you*," Starscream growled.

Megatron glanced at him. Then, he sighed.

"Do you remember when the Enforcers raided Darkmount?"

Darkmount was the nickname given to their first true base—the factory Starscream was produced in.

Starscream used the wall to push himself up. "When *you* let Sunstorm die?"

Megatron's grip tightened around the tracking device.

"If I had taken a moment longer to find you, you would've died too," Megatron said. "He was too far gone to save."

Starscream flexed his fingers. "What does that have to do with this?"

Megatron met his optics. Still, they smouldered. Where had the burning gone? Starscream looked away.

"If I had taken a moment longer, you would've *died*," Megatron repeated, voice popping with static on the last word. "I had to make sure that wouldn't happen."

Starscream sank his claws into his arm guard. "So then you placed a *tracker* in me?"

"Yes," Megatron said, words growing weaker as he spoke. "Location, vitals—I would never need to search if you were in danger again."

A sick, crawling sensation invaded Starscream's plating. His spark turned painfully. His wings twitched as he fought for control over his body. Somehow, after everything, Megatron *cared*. Starscream could block the tender moments out of his processor all he wanted. It didn't change the truth.

How could someone care so deeply, yet hurt the object of their concern so much?

The sensor crunched between Megatron's fingertips. It clinked as it landed at Starscream's pedes. The room was silent save for the quiet click of Starscream's cooling fans engaging.

"I thought about what you said—" Megatron paused, squeezing his optics closed. "You were right. I was shortsighted."

Megatron stepped closer. He was still huge, with hands large enough to eclipse Starscream's, but his presence was smaller. He stared down at Starscream with fuzz-filled optics.

"I never intended to cause harm," he said. "I wanted to protect you—guide you. I saw you not for who you were but who *I* wanted you to become. It was unfair to you."

Starscream pressed himself against the wall. The words wouldn't end.

"Every fight, I justified it to myself. You were loud, arrogant, and violent. I was merely stripping those traits away. You would look back on it and thank me, because it made you *better*. You were naive and soft, but I hardened you. You were defiant and selfish, but I taught you to obey and sacrifice. I provided you with shelter, fuel, and power. Every time you protested my methods, only one thought came to my mind: how could you be so ungrateful?"

Starscream's claws raked against his arm guard. His spark stabbed into his chest as his fuel lines burned. The fresh welds inside of him cramped as his plating tensed.

"Wh—why would I be grateful?" He asked.

His vocalizer barely allowed the words to escape. They were coated in static.

Megatron's face fell. He shook his head.

"I failed to see the coercion," he said. "I felt your fear, your *pain*, and ignored it. I convinced myself it was just part of the process. You were fed and protected—you could *leave* if you wanted to—so it had to be okay."

Starscream didn't know what to think. Starscream *didn't* think.

"I'm sorry, Starscream."

His limbs were detached from his frame. Megatron hovered above him, covered in a dense fuzz. His spark hurt.

"C—"

The words refused to emerge. Starscream dug his claws in and forced himself to speak.

"Can I leave now?"

Megatron pressed a button on the keypad. The door slid open. Numbly, Starscream slithered through. His wings hit the wall of the hallway, and he placed a hand on it to steady himself as he staggered down it.

His quarters. He just had to get to his quarters.

Had the halls always been this long?

A flash of yellow. Bright optics. A blurry face. Starscream kept walking.

"Starscream—?"

Starscream *kept walking*.

Hallway after hallway. Eventually, *finally*—the door. He opened it, spilling into the room.

Bright. Horribly, horribly bright. He fumbled, fingers slipping on the keypad. Darkness.

He had to hide. No one could find him. There. *Safety*.

He slid beneath the berth, bending his wings around himself and pulling his knees to his chest. He was warm. No, not warm. Hot. His fans whirred in his audials. Deafening.

Why did everything hurt?

He whined. No, no sound! Hissing was also a sound. *Slag.* Darkness. He was alone.

The door. Opened! *Slag!* No!

He scooted closer to the wall, claws scraping against the floor. They couldn't find him. Wouldn't let them.

A bright visor, framed by dark gray. Familiar. A paw reached toward him. He hissed. No, no! Leave him alone!

Words. Someone was speaking. He needed to listen. What were they saying? Why was it so difficult to understand?

"Starscream."

His name. Another visor, this one surrounded by blue. He knew this mech. *Safe.* Starscream let out a quiet chirp.

A hand reached beneath, coming toward him. Starscream slapped it and growled. It retreated. The mech sat beside the berth, not daring to reach out again. Starscream fluttered his wings. *Good.*

But everything still hurt. Something was wrong. He couldn't fix it on his own. So, after a while of the mech sitting still, Starscream crawled out from beneath the berth and laid his head on the mech's lap. The mech startled, plating tensing, then relaxed.

They placed a hand on his head. He leaned into it.

"Starscream," the mech said again.

Starscream knew the voice now. He yipped, burying himself in Soundwave's lap. He was safe, safe, *safe* with Soundwave here. Soundwave stroked his helm, and Starscream leaned into the touch, purring.

"Starscream—cease running engine," Soundwave scolded. "Starscream's frame—too hot."

Starscream grumbled and forced his engine to shut off.

"Starscream—loud even when not speaking."

Starscream trilled in amusement. Soundwave shifted beneath him, and he let out a sharp yowl to make his displeasure known. The other mech merely sighed and hoisted him up.

"Starscream—overheating," he said. "Soundwave—bringing Starscream to private washrack."

He was *fine*. All he needed was for the pain to go away. He tried to say that, but his vocalizer refused to produce words. So, he settled for an irritated rumble, hoping it got the point across. Soundwave ignored it, and in a few moments, they were inside the washrack.

Soundwave turned on the solvent. It hissed as it landed on Starscream, creating steam. After a few moments, the static faded from his vision. Thinking grew easier, his mind no longer trapped behind a wall. Starscream stirred, attempting to sit up and immediately thinking better of it as the fresh welds on his abdomen twinged.

"Hurts," he muttered.

"Query: What hurts?"

Starscream rolled over, stretching as much as he could manage. "Everything…"

"Query: Starscream—requires medbay visit?"

Starscream shook his head. A pain patch wouldn't fix this. Besides, he *just* got out of there.

Solvent splattered on the ground like rain, flooding toward the drain. Starscream's frame finally cooled, the hiss of evaporating solvent dying with the heat. Eventually, it grew cold, and Starscream fought not to shiver. Soundwave reached up and turned off the spray.

"He apologized to me," Starscream murmured. "He said it. 'I'm sorry, Starscream.' *Word for word*."

Soundwave froze. "Unexpected."

"No slag," Starscream said with a giggle. "I thought it was impossible. Just when I accepted that he'd never understand, he just *had* to pull the ground from beneath me."

Soundwave dug his fingers between one of Starscream's dorsal seams. Starscream rolled into it, purring. This time, Soundwave didn't scold him.

"Starscream—not required to accept apology."

"I know," Starscream said. "I don't think it was *really* for me, anyway."

Words were empty, often false. It didn't matter what Megatron said, it mattered what he *did*. But for some reason, pointless words brought other mecha comfort. Perhaps, Megatron was

merely comforting himself.

Starscream closed his optics.

☆☆☆

[Please meet me. We have something important to discuss. Bring Jetfire with you and no others.]

Starscream reread the message as he stood outside the building. Jetfire stood beside him, wringing his hands. The newspark was tense, wings high, but that was expected; He didn't know Windblade. Starscream had no idea what she wanted, so he couldn't offer comfort.

He was already on edge from Megatron's… *apology*. This was just more flames to the fire.

The door swung open. Windblade scrutinized them for a moment. Starscream's claws itched. Then, finally, she waved them inside.

"Come in," she said.

She led them down a long hall. It seemed vaguely familiar, but Starscream couldn't recall it. The walls had been freshly repaired, which was made clear by the new, untarnished paint and clean murals. Ahead of them, the hall opened into a large room. A table sat in the center of it, surrounded by many empty seats.

Starscream's plating itched. The back of his processor screamed, unable to identify the room but knowing he had seen it before. In the background, he initiated a search of his databanks. Surely, he could summon at least one memory to justify the familiarity?

Windblade sat at the center of the table. An odd position, but with so many empty spaces, any place would be awkward. Starscream sat on the opposite side of her, and Jetfire sat beside him.

"I've heard rumors about you," Windblade said, leaning forward in her seat—toward *Jetfire*.

"What kinds of rumors?" Starscream said.

Windblade leaned away from Jetfire. Starscream's plating relaxed (When had he tensed it?). Her optics met his.

"You created him, didn't you?" Windblade said.

Starscream glanced at Jetfire. The newspark's wings were taut with tension, but not yet trembling. Fighting not to dig his claws into he table, Starscream glared at Windblade.

"I did," he said.

He couldn't lie in front of his newspark like that. She *had to* know this. Why else would she ask him to bring Jetfire?

"How?"

Starscream let his claws scratch the table this time. The entire situation was crafted to force this information out of him, and that made his claws itch. But what was the point in hiding it anymore?

"We found a spark splitting medium on Earth," Starscream said. "I used it to make him."

Windblade's wings moved upward slightly. She leaned back in her seat.

"Who was the donor?" She asked.

Starscream allowed himself to grin. "Me."

"You're a drone," Windblade said flatly. "That shouldn't be possible."

"Believe what you want, but it's the truth," Starscream said, voice growing sickeningly sweet. All the better if she didn't believe.

Windblade crossed her arms.

"I believe you."

Starscream's wings shot up. "What?"

Windblade stood from her seat. With a loud scrape, she pushed the chair in.

"There is no other explanation," she said.

Something crackled in the corner of the room. Starscream whipped toward it, wings fanning out. He widened his stance to increase his balance.

"Starscream?" Jetfire whispered.

The walls exploded with motion. Starscream activated his weapons as they were swarmed. He was able to take a couple of them out from a distance, but didn't have enough time to get all of them. With a leap, he engaged his thrusters.

With a graceless dodge, he evaded a blow only to come face to face with another mech. He aimed his ray at the center of their face and fired. Just as the crowd began to thin, a cry pierced Starscream's audials.

"Jetfire!" He yelled, taking off toward the source of the sound.

The newspark was backed against the wall, fire on his fingertips. A mech came close and he swiped at them, but missed completely. His wings shook, held in the lowest position his body could manage.

Starscream launched himself at the mech that dared attack *his* newspark. Wrapping his legs around them to keep from falling, he dug his claws into their optics from behind. The mech

wailed, blindly swiping at him.

He released them, growling as they fled. Served them fragging right. Starscream watched, cooling fans clicking on, as his attackers dissipated. He searched the room for the only mech that could have planned this, then leaped.

Windblade hovered above the skirmish. Just as Starscream reached her, she veered to the side. Starscream howled as he slammed into the wall, losing altitude. After a moment of recovery, he shook himself.

"What is the meaning of this?" He spat.

"We were testing a hypothesis," Windblade said. "Now we know it's true."

Starscream bared his teeth and charged his rays. "*Explain*."

Windblade lowered herself to the ground. After a moment of hesitation, Starscream followed. The floor, splattered with energeon, was especially familiar. Finally, his processor was able to summon the memory files.

This was the Council's meeting room.

"What hypothesis could *possibly* justify this?" Starscream growled.

He took a step toward her, but his legs shook, barely able to support his weight. Stupid faulty neurocircuits. Stupid weak motors. Frag it all.

"The mech who created you underwent empurata," Windblade said. It was a statement, not a question. "As did the mecha that created me and every other drone. The procedure rendered them incapable of forming any sort of attachment with anyone or anything. Did you ever wonder why?"

"No," Starscream said.

It had simply been their punishment.

"Mechanimals reproduce by splitting their sparks, yet we cannot." Windblade pulled her chair back out and sat. "We're more like antdroids—The largest of us create while the rest of us work."

Starscream pulled out his seat and sat, limbs aching. Hesitantly, Jetfire copied him.

"But we discovered that all antdroids have every component they need within them to become a monarch—*including* reproductive protocols," Windblade said. "We have them, too."

"So what?" Starscream asked. "You're just going to modify us into being complete mechanimals?"

"If that's what it takes to survive, then that's what we'll do."

"These things have *limits*," Starscream hissed.

Full frame transfers killed most of the mecha that attempted them. Starscream nearly died bringing Jetfire to life. Jetfire had already encountered issues with the new fuel processing system. That wasn't even getting into spark-coded glitches, which would always self-correct unless they found a way to modify the sparks themselves. He'd seen enough experiments on retrorats and glitchmice to know.

"Limits we've yet to find," Windblade said. "If you got a full frame replacement, you'd know how much of a difference it makes."

Was that why he hadn't recognized her model?

"Who were you?" Starscream asked.

Windblade glared at him. "That doesn't matter. I left my old name in the past."

"Just like you'll leave anyone who holds the least bit of skepticism," Starscream muttered.

Windblade rested her elbows on the table. "You don't have to be left behind. We can build this new future together."

"How does your 'new future' care for mecha it can't cure? Or does it just *kill* them like we always have? Killing in the process of curing is *still* killing."

Windblade frowned. "Of *course* we'll find a way to cure them. We aren't monsters."

"But what if you *can't*?" Starscream hissed, slamming his hands on the table.

"There's always a way."

Such a naive thing to think. Starscream's processing glitch was spark-coded. Changing the spark code of a living mech was near impossible. All attempts had resulted in immense damage.

And even if it wasn't impossible to change, that glitch was part of him. It was deeply rooted —from the inability to read EM fields to his complete difference in interpreting the world that set other mecha so far apart from him. He'd always known something was wrong about him, he just hadn't known what.

"Humor me," Starscream said. "If a mech's disability ran spark deep and your scientists *couldn't* engineer it out, what would you do?"

Windblade's wings twitched. "We'd find a way."

Fine, then. If she was so insistent on this fantasy, he would need to push further for the reality.

"What do you do *now*?" Starscream said, fanning his wings out.

Windblade stared at him. She shifted in her seat. Then, she smiled.

"We won't force you to do anything," she said. "If you don't want to be cured, it's your choice."

Starscream growled. He may as well be speaking to a metal sheet.

"There's nothing wrong with him!"

Both mecha startled at the interruption. Jetfire stood from his seat, palms against the table and wings wide.

"He doesn't need to be fixed!" Jetfire yelled. "The only mech here with something wrong with them is *you*!"

Windblade's wings fanned out as her lips drew into a snarl. In response, Jetfire fanned his. Starscream whacked his newspark with his wing (ignoring a surprised squawk) and placed himself in front of him.

"I apologize for Jetfire's words," Starscream lied, the statement coating his mouth bitterly. "This has been a very *interesting* meeting. If you have nothing more to say, we should get going."

As they rose from their seats and crossed the room, Windblade stared. A small frown was on her face. The further they moved, the more her wings returned to neutral position.

When Starscream set pede across the doorway, she spoke.

"Your spark."

Starscream turned back toward her. She stared directly into his optics.

"What about it?" He said, making no effort to keep the hostility from his voice.

Windblade shifted in her seat. "It's highly unusual."

Starscream didn't bother asking *how* she knew. The answer was obvious—the CRI were poking around where they didn't belong. The crawl of his plating at the thought was familiar.

"Stay away from it," he hissed.

He turned away. Windblade remained silent.

Chapter End Notes

It feels wrong to say on this chapter, so maybe I should refrain, but... happy disability pride month, guys. As happy of one as you can have, anyway.

This fic is poking at a lot of things. It's hard to keep the balance between being subtle enough not to feel preachy and still making sure people actually get what it's saying. I've actually been removing bits here and there to make it less overt.

Might give in to temptation and just post the final chapter (plus the first of the sequel) this week and then slow down a bit to participate in Art Fight. With how impatient I am, you guys will probably know what I decide to do by the end of tomorrow. XD

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cybirds chirped quietly. Starscream walked along a well-worn path, placing his pedes as deliberately as he could manage. His neurocircuits had finally reintegrated, but one leg recovered better than the other, leaving him with a noticeable limp on his better days. Typically, he would avoid the issue by flying, but the canopy was too thick for flight. The sacrifice was worthwhile—this was where the most mechanimals gathered.

A bytemunk crossed his path, leaping for the nut in front of him. As its spiked tail swished into the undergrowth, Starscream stood still. He had no reason to rush. When the creature disappeared completely, he continued.

The stirring of undergrowth reached Starscream's audials as he reached his destination. He approached carefully. Red metal glinted between fronds. As the creature continued to thrash, its yellow optics caught his.

Starscream bent down to examine the creature. This new type of trap was meant to kill instantly, but it was still being tested. The stake meant to pierce the spark chamber had missed, leaving the mechanimal restrained but not put out of its misery.

As he drew close to the misangled stake, the creature snapped at his fingers.

"You're a determined little thing, aren't you?" Starscream muttered.

It stared up at him and growled. The defiance was almost admirable.

"Don't worry," Starscream said, charging his rays. "You won't feel anything soon."

He aimed his ray, but just as he was about to fire, something cold seized his spark. The creature whined, ears pinned.

'Do you have to do this?' It begged.

Its optics were familiar. Everything about the situation—utterly, utterly familiar. Starscream stared into his own likeness.

'We're the same,' the turbofox insisted.

Starscream fired.

His aim was true. The creature struggled, circuits dying with a horrible crackle. Now, finally able to come close, Starscream ran his claws along the hole he created.

He killed countless times. What made this different?

The turbofox was light in his arms. Its plating was thin, likely due to malnutrition, but it would still make a decent meal. Starscream rose with his prize. Its deactivated optics caught light as he walked, giving the illusion that they were still lit.

Turbofoxes were depicted as tricksters in many tales. They were small, swift, and very difficult to capture. Attempts were made to domesticate them—so many that they became a cautionary tale. They brought bad luck and destruction, often used as symbols of turbulence and rebellion.

Starscream grinned and allowed a laugh to exit his vocalizer. There was a reason Megatron called him a rabid turbofox. Perhaps it was foolish, but the name-calling gave him a feeling of kinship with the creature. It wasn't enough to make him spare the turbofox's life, but it was enough to make him contemplate it.

The canopy was finally open enough for flight, so he leaped and took off. Flying the rest of the way would save time—and his pedes. Fully reintegrated circuits or not, he still lacked stamina. Whatever damage had caused that, it was permanent.

Maybe it wasn't damage at all, he mused as he landed at the camp. Perhaps this just was how his fuel issues manifested with the new processing system. He sighed.

Despite the CRI offering housing, most of the Decepticons—and even a few Autobots—elected to stay in the Ark. It was spacious, stable, and they didn't have to worry about being separated. The Ark didn't seem to mind, and the CRI hadn't pushed, so all was well.

Starscream scanned the small crowd gathering outside. The CRI hadn't lurked since his altercation with Windblade, but that could always change. With wings lowering in relief, he noted that none were present, and approached the crowd.

Ravage was the first to greet him. With an excited mrrowl, the cybercat leaped up, taking the turbofox from his arms. As Ravage disappeared toward the corner where the carcasses were being stripped, a whoosh of air alerted Starscream to his next visitor.

Visitors was the correct word. Large, strong arms enveloped him. The newspark practically vibrated from how intensely his wings fluttered. Starscream returned the embrace, leaning more of his weight than necessary into Jetfire. He accepted the weight, simply hugging Starscream tighter. When they separated, Jetfire stayed at Starscream's side.

Skywarp's bright smile dulled slightly at the sight, but she didn't comment. With her wings held high in greeting, she reached up, grabbing Starscream by the helm. Starscream put up a token struggle. A small part of him recoiled from the rough touch, but he shoved it aside. Skywarp wouldn't hurt him. He knew it with all of his spark.

"You'd better have been taking frequent breaks, you stubborn fragger!" Skywarp half-whispered.

Starscream tapped her arms—a code they developed recently—and she released him. He took a moment to reorient himself before responding.

"Then I assume you went to your appointment?" He said, tilting his head.

Skywarp grimaced. "Yes. They, um… they think it's… what was the word?"

"Spark-coded," Jetfire said.

"Yeah," Skywarp said. "Spark-coded. Some sort of natural overgrowth. That's why it kept coming back. Clipped it and put me on an injection for the pain."

Her wings lowered. The smile left her face.

"You're okay with that?" Starscream asked.

"I'm gonna *have* to be," she muttered.

Starscream held out his hand. She placed hers in it. He ran his fingers over her plating, and some of the tension left it.

"It helps, right?" Starscream asked.

Skywarp nodded.

"Then it'll be okay," Starscream said.

The CRI had plans that Starscream disagreed with, but for now, all of their resources were provided by them. Was it so terrible to be fed, sheltered, and given medical care? His processor summoned memories of low fuel alarms and aching joints, and he fought a shudder.

Starscream turned to Jetfire, attempting to force the files from his mind. "How are your classes?"

Jetfire opened his mouth, then hesitated, bringing a hand up to the side of his head. Since everyone settled, he and Hook attended the CRI's medical academy. Though, because Jetfire didn't have any previous schooling, he was only taking basic classes.

"They're great!" Jetfire finally managed to say. "Really, *really* informative."

Starscream smiled. "What are you learning about?"

The newspark launched into several intertwined explanations. Frequent gestures were interspersed. Starscream kept up with most of it—basic genetics, rudimentary biology, smidges of ecology—and what he couldn't still sounded familiar. Skywarp, to the contrary, stared off into space, wings twitching idly.

[He's like you when you get all science-y,] she sent.

Starscream suppressed an amused lift of his wings, knowing Jetfire would pick up on the gesture. Moments like these were as vulnerable as they were passionate.

[Well, I did *create him,]* Starscream replied.

Jetfire switched from speaking about the different colors of retrorat and how they were inherited to the growth cycles of color nanites. It was something Starscream never had a particular interest in, but coming from Jetfire's vocalizer, it became the most fascinating thing in the world for that moment. If Starscream didn't know better, he would swear he could read EM fields. The newspark practically radiated joy.

[Y'know,] Skywarp sent. *[I didn't really think about it, but he kinda* is *a giant you, isn't he? With the personality coding and all?]*

Technically, Skywarp was correct. Personality coding was passed on directly during a spark split. Another reason on top of the many that drones were treated poorly—since they were sparked from criminals, and therefore had criminal personality coding, they *obviously* couldn't be trusted as equal members of society. Jetfire's personality coding should be identical to Starscream's.

His spark twinged at the idea.

[He really reminds me of you before…]

Skywarp's message was sent unfinished. Starscream met her optics—briefly.

[Before what?]

[The bad things.]

Ah. Right. Starscream looked away, gaze falling back to Jetfire.

"You're not listening anymore, are you?" Jetfire asked, brow furrowed.

"I was," Starscream said. "Skywarp was telling me something important before she forgot about it."

It wasn't *quite* a lie.

Jetfire slumped. "Oh. Sure."

"You were saying something about how color nanites produced pigment using the byproducts of fuel processing?" Starscream prompted.

Jetfire's wings rose, his optics brightening. "Yeah! When fuel is broken down, it creates—"

A loud bark startled him. Starscream nearly jumped as well, until he remembered the only possible cause of the noise. Buster launched himself at Jetfire, who bent down to catch him.

Jetfire held the dog up to his chest. With a wagging tail, Buster pressed his paws against Jetfire's chest.

A shadow fell over the group. Its origin was obvious.

"It is good to see you, little spark," Icebeam said.

Jetfire looked up. "Blitzwing! Hi!"

He offered Buster to Icebeam, who took him gently.

"He just could not wait to see you," Icebeam said. "You know how he is."

Starscream snickered. The dog was nothing but trouble from day one.

"How's synthesizing a diet for him going?" Jetfire asked.

Icebeam frowned, glancing down at the excited dog. Buster's eyes were still on Jetfire.

"It is a difficult task," Icebeam said. "But working with Tarantulas and Dirge has proven fruitful. We are confident that we can make something he will want to eat before we run out of the Earth food."

Jetfire wrung his hands, a smile crossing his face. "That's great! I was just reading about the nutritional requirements of cyberdogs the other day—"

Skywarp jabbed Starscream in the side. Starscream hissed quietly, and she rolled her optics.

"They're gonna be at it for a while," Skywarp said. "Why don't we check on fuel prep?"

Starscream shrugged. That was all the permission Skywarp needed to grab him and teleport him halfway across the camp. A yelp drew Starscream's immediate attention. Beside them, Bumblebee nearly dropped the saw he was holding.

"Warn a mech!" Bumblebee exclaimed, scrambling to regain control of the saw.

"Sorry!" Skywarp chirped. "Wanted to save my *glorious* commander's pedes."

Starscream rolled his optics. He was used to Skywarp's ability, and so were many of the Decepticons, but the Autobots didn't have the opportunity to acclimate. Now that they were on the ground, Skywarp had plenty of space to warp around. Thus, the current situation.

Bumblebee was shaving plating off a carcass. Beside him, Optimus cut the plating into serving-sized pieces. At the base of the table, Ravage was pulling organs out of significantly more intact carcasses, passing the processing tubes to Rumble and Frenzy. When those were removed, Ravage drained the carcasses of their line energeon. The container Ravage was currently using was already half full, and Nova Storm was carrying away a completely filled one.

"What're we preparing?" Skywarp asked as she leaned over the carcass that Bumblebee was stripping.

"Soup," Bumblebee said, handing another scute to Optimus. "As close as we can get to it, anyway."

Starscream had no idea what that was. Based on Skywarp's disinterested wing flick, she didn't, either. Bumblebee pulled an extra saw from the table and offered it to Skywarp.

"If you're going to just stand here, you might as well help," he said.

Skywarp took the saw and warped to the other side of him. After Starscream grew bored of watching them, he walked to over to Optimus. The Prime barely looked up.

"Hello, Starscream," he said quietly.

"What exactly is *soup*?" Starscream asked.

Optimus shrugged as he carved out a chunk of plating. "A human dish. Usually meats and vegetables suspended in liquid fat."

Starscream hummed. He knew, logically, what all of those components were, but he never cared to *understand* them. The collection of the chyme from the processing tubes made more sense now. It was one of the few ways to obtain liquid metal that wouldn't melt a mech's mouth (or intake, in the case of Soundwave).

"We have a distinct lack of vegetables here," Starscream said.

Optimus's hand slipped, cutting a long gouge in the scute. He paused, staring down at it.

"We do," he muttered.

His plating was close—not tense, just close. It flared slightly as his fan system expelled air. Something was clearly upsetting him. Morbid curiosity bit at Starscream, and he allowed himself to indulge.

"What's troubling you?" He asked.

Optimus glanced at him. Then, he went back to his work. Starscream tapped a pede. It wasn't like the *ever-compassionate* Optimus Prime to ignore a mech.

[Killing to live. It seems wrong.]

The message came in moments later. So, that was how he wanted to play it.

[We've killed for less valid reasons,] Starscream replied.

They nearly drove their own species to extinction just to win a war that shouldn't have happened in the first place. Starscream himself caused many unnecessary deaths, though he preferred not to dwell on them.

[These mechanimals didn't do anything to deserve this,] Optimus sent.

Naive fragger. Starscream rolled his optics.

[Something would have killed them, regardless. It just happened to be us. They feast on each other, and now we're no different. It's worth the cost to live.]

Optimus accepted another scute from Bumblebee. As he moved the previous one, a flash of metal caught Starscream's optics. He reached for it before it could be covered, and found himself with a saw. So, he got to work.

[Maybe we shouldn't have,] Optimus sent.

[Shouldn't have what?]

[Lived,] Optimus sent. *[Maybe we were supposed to die.]*

What Primus-ridden slag was *this*? Starscream sliced a piece off the scute before responding.

[Well, we've defied the odds.]

Optimus's brow furrowed, his cuts deeper, nearly scarring the table.

[We shouldn't have,] he sent. *[I know our history. All of it's in the matrix. Every single moment. It's full of violence and suffering. And now Cybertron is dead and we have to kill just to live.]*

Was this *news* to him? Had Optimus not known this before? Starscream forced himself not to tear into the naive idiot. The world was full of suffering. So what?

[But we're alive!] Starscream sent. *[Perhaps these words don't mean much from a selfish coward, but I would rather this than death. I have too much to lose. You do, too. How would your Autobots feel if you told them you wished they were dead?]*

Optimus fumbled with the saw.

[That isn't what I meant!]

[But it's what you said,] Starscream sent. *[Don't be an idiot. I know where these sorts of thoughts lead.]*

If he sent a couple of messages to a few mecha requesting that they ensure their Prime was intaking sufficient fuel, Optimus didn't have to know. At the thought, Starscream scrutinized him. His optics were duller than they should've been, but not enough for alarm. If he *were* avoiding refueling, he hadn't been at it for long.

Starscream never received a reply. Perhaps Optimus *did* have a petty streak. Eventually, all of the carcasses were processed. Fuel was handed out, and the meal began.

Halfway through his portion of soup, Optimus turned to Starscream.

"Megatron wanted to speak with you," he said.

It took everything in Starscream's power not to let his wings quiver. "He *does*? About what?"

Optimus's optics met his. Starscream forced his wings to stay in position and his helm not to turn away. He sipped his soup.

"He didn't say," Optimus said. "Only that it's important."

It had better be, if that fragger wanted his plating intact. Starscream forcibly downed the rest of his fuel.

"Thank you," Starscream said, turning away. "I'll go find him, now."

As he passed by Skywarp, she sent him a message.

[You really gonna go find the old afthelm?]

Starscream snickered at the insult.

[I have to know what he wants from me.]

Skywarp took a step closer. He swept his wing toward her.

[Don't,] he sent. *[I need to do this alone.]*

She stayed back as he left. He scanned the group, but found no sign of Megatron. So, he settled at the edge, toward the woods. From here, he had a clear view of everything. Still no Megatron.

Ravage joined Frenzy and Rumble in handing out seconds. Soundwave approached them shortly afterward, datapad in hand. Skywarp and Nova Storm popped back toward Jetfire and Blitzwing, who were somehow *still* speaking. Dirge had joined them at some point while Starscream had been preparing fuel with Optimus.

Starscream began to relax when heavy pedesteps caught his attention. He widened his stance as he searched for the source. Megatron approached from behind. His hands were empty. Just what was he doing in the woods?

"Haven't been taking part in the festivities?" Starscream asked.

Megatron grunted. "I prefer to spend my time in quieter places."

"How *asocial*," Starscream muttered.

He couldn't fault the mech. While he didn't mind spending time with plenty of allies at once, the sounds and sights of many mecha in a single place were overwhelming. No one could ever mistake him for a social mech, despite his meager efforts to the contrary.

"I recall a young Seeker getting stuck in the walls in an effort to avoid attending his own promotion ceremony," Megatron said, lips twitching upward.

Starscream rolled his optics. Of course he would bring *that* up. "I never said I wasn't the same. Besides, Ramjet threatened me. I was barely *half* his size back then. Not showing up was better than showing up beaten to scrap."

Buster leaped from Blitzwing's hands. The fall was too high for such a tiny, delicate creature, so it resulted in a scramble to grab the dog before he fell. Dirge managed to catch him, but not before Jetfire whacked his face on Dirge's wing.

"I'm leaving," Megatron said.

Did Starscream care? Did he *have* to?

"Hooray," he grumbled. "Good for you."

Megatron glared at him, but the fire in his optics was put out long ago.

"I want to leave things on good terms," Megatron said. "Whatever that may mean for us."

Starscream flexed his fingers, watching as his joints caught the light. In, out. In, out. For once, Megatron didn't push. He stayed still, waiting rather than demanding.

"Y—you apologized to me," Starscream said, words glitching as they refused to exit his vocalizer. "I blame you for a lot of things, but I wasn't innocent."

Megatron stared at him, mouth opening and closing. Then, finally, he turned away and spoke.

"No, you weren't."

Starscream picked at the edges of his arm guards. He knew what he needed to say, so why was it so difficult to speak?

"You were amazing," Starscream said. "I wanted to be just like you. When you belittled me, it hurt, but not as much as being ignored. I *craved* your attention, even if it meant being hurt. I needed it. So, when you didn't give it to me, I took it. *I* sought you out. *I* attacked you. You were right about that."

He glanced at Megatron. The mech made no move to speak, so he continued.

"I should've stopped. I should've listened to Thundercracker. I should've listened to *you*. Stopped yelling, stopped fighting, stopped *everything*, then *maybe*…"

The hand on his shoulder was gentle—*impossibly* gentle. Starscream felt nothing. His frame wanted to shudder.

"You were a *newspark*," Megatron said. "I was a combat veteran."

Starscream wrenched himself away. He ran his hands down his shoulders, clutching himself.

"Why is it that every time I speak with you, I don't say what I want to?" Starscream said, voice shaking. "I *know* you were wrong. You know it too. You *apologized* for it. But now you're touching me, and looking at me, and it's *nice*, and it just feels *wrong* to say what I should."

"I'm sorry," Megatron said.

He closed the gap between them. Starscream dug his claws into his arm guards. With carefulness unparalleled, Megatron pulled them away. Starscream launched himself several steps back.

"Stop it!" He hissed. "Stop it! I don't…"

His claws scored his chestplates.

"I don't know what to do anymore."

Megatron reached for his hands again. When he pulled Starscream to his chest, holding both of his hands, Starscream let him. He rumbled his engine quietly, the vibration loosening Starscream's tensed plating. Starscream leaned into him and closed his optics, spark aching.

"Then wait until you've figured it out," Megatron whispered.

He released Starscream, but Starscream didn't move.

"I think it's good for me to leave," Megatron said. "We can both get out of each others' lives, allow ourselves the space to decide if we want to try again."

"Perhaps."

The scratches stung. A wall was building between Starscream's processor and frame. Familiar fear clawed at the back of his processor, screeching to be let out. But it was sealed far, far back. An empty sense of comfort rose to the forefront.

He wasn't afraid anymore. Just overwhelmed.

"You should get those scratches treated," Megatron said.

Starscream sighed. "Right…"

[Hey, Warp? Can you bring me to our quarters?]

[If that fragger hurt you, I'll—]

The rest of the message outlined in excruciating detail how Skywarp would dismantle Megatron. Before Starscream finished reading it, she had already warped beside him. With a sharp glare at Megatron, she grabbed Starscream. The world twisted around him, and soon he was standing in the center of New Decepticon command quarters.

As claws brushed against the scratches on his chest, he let out a surprised hiss. Skywarp flinched away. With two pops of air, she disappeared and reappeared with a first aid kit.

Starscream sat on the edge of the berth as she opened the kit.

"What happened?" She asked, retrieving an antiseptic.

"Megatron is leaving," Starscream said.

Skywarp dabbed the antiseptic around the scratches. She oversoaked the pad, so some of it leaked directly into the wound. It stung, but not enough for Starscream to care. The wounds were shallow enough that she didn't feel the need to flush them, which was good.

"He wanted to tell you," Skywarp said. "Even though he should *really* just leave you alone."

Before they spoke, Starscream would've agreed. Now, he wasn't so certain—even if Megatron himself seemed to think so. He had known Megatron for more time than he hadn't. The mech entangled himself in Starscream's life. To remove him completely was unthinkable, now that the option was presented.

"He's different," Starscream said.

Satisfied with disinfection, Skywarp moved on to packing the scratches with nanite gel. It was easier to fill small wounds with the stuff than to bother placing a patch. Skywarp frowned, glancing up from her work.

"He still hurt you," she said.

"He regrets it."

Skywarp's gaze sharpened to a glare. She bared her teeth, a hiss escaping her vocalizer.

"How do you *know* that?" She growled. "You *can't* tell what he's feeling. You can't even read EM fields!"

Starscream pushed himself away from Skywarp as hot fury washed over him, burning his fuel lines. He dug his claws into the berth.

"I may not be able to read EM fields, but his actions are *quite* fragging clear!"

He had one of his episodes in front of Megatron and he didn't scold him for it. He didn't hurt him or grab him—only held him and *purred*. And those stupid words—"I'm sorry"—he said them *again*. Then, he'd *let him go*.

Skywarp reached for him. "Screamer, you can't—"

Starscream swiped at her hand.

"You seem to think that just because I have a glitch, it makes me incapable of making decisions!" He yelled. "I'm sick of it!"

Skywarp rubbed her hand. As energeon seeped from it, Starscream's spark twinged.

"I don't think that," Skywarp muttered, gaze falling. Her wings were set in their lowest position. "I… I'm just scared. For you. You've nearly died so many times, and that *fragger* was the cause of most of them. I don't want him to hurt you again."

Starscream took her injured hand in his.

"I'll never trust him," Starscream said. "But I don't think he wants to hurt me anymore. That means something."

Skywarp sighed. "Just be careful."

"I will—"

The door slid open. Soundwave's visor shone through the doorway. Nova Storm and Jetfire peered over his shoulders. At his knees, Ravage ducked past Rumble and Frenzy, crossed the room, and flopped belly-up onto the floor.

Soundwave tilted his head. "Starscream—injured. Query: What happened?"

"*Megatron*," Skywarp growled.

Soundwave stepped into the room, Rumble and Frenzy skittering past him to join Ravage. Nova Storm moved in behind him, then hesitated as Jetfire entered.

"You should wait outside," she told him.

Jetfire opened his mouth to speak. He paused as Skywarp turned toward him.

"You should do what Nova Storm said," she said.

Jetfire wrung his hands. "I—"

"Jetfire—Wait outside," Soundwave said. "Discussion—should not involve newsparks."

Starscream flicked his wings as hard as he could, making an audible *whoosh*. Nova Storm and Skywarp startled.

"Oh, for frag's sake!" He yelled. "He's young, not *stupid*. He's *seen* Megatron. He can stay if he wants to."

All optics turned to Jetfire. The newspark tensed, wings moving upward.

With a shaking voice, he said, "I want to stay."

"Then, that's settled," Starscream said.

Starscream's comm pinged as Ravage rolled over, belly to the ground and paws tucked beneath.

[So, what happened?]

Starscream tapped his fingers on the berth.

"Megatron is leaving," Starscream said. "He just wanted to say goodbye. But he extended an offer to speak again. Before that, he… *apologized* to me. He did it again today."

Soundwave's hands curled into fists. His plating rattled slightly.

"Soundwave—also received apology," he said. "Soundwave—did not accept."

He really *was* trying, then. But if he wanted to apologize to Starscream and Soundwave, he may as well go around and apologize to every other mech that came with them from Earth. In some way, Megatron wronged them all. Starscream had slain many Autobots and taken out some of his own side when it suited him, but no one expected *him* to apologize. So why did the old mech feel the need?

"I didn't accept, but I didn't reject it, either," Starscream said. "I think he really means it."

It was nothing like the callous faux kindness of the past. Or, perhaps, it was *too* close to it. The smidges of care from back then were amplified now without the cruelty that accompanied them. A pang passed through Starscream's spark. Had Megatron been capable of this all along? Or had the final days of the war changed him?

"Soundwave—does not believe."

Starscream looked away. "That's your right. I want to see where this goes."

Soundwave took a step closer.

"Starscream—unwise," he said.

Starscream snickered. "Perhaps. But I don't really care."

"Starscream—will be hurt."

Soundwave's visor was bright.

"He might hurt me, but he can't control me."

He was a turbofox. A rabid one, even. Utterly untameable, and willing to wreck any fool that tried. He knew that, now. A beast could protect just as much as it could destroy. And…

He glanced at Jetfire.

…even animals could create.

The Enforcers had enslaved him. Megatron tried to tame him. The Autobots caged him. Yet, here he was, free. Every time the universe tore him to pieces, he got back up, spitting in its face. Perhaps, his will to survive was so strong that it rendered him unkillable.

Soundwave stared.

"Soundwave—will be present," he said. "Always."

The statement was more reassuring than Starscream could possibly say. As Skywarp finished treating the scratches and put away the first aid kit, the group fell into silence. An alert appeared on Starscream's HUD suggesting recharge. Was it really so late in the day?

Well, the meal was the final of the day, and it had taken a while to prepare. Then, he'd spoken with Megatron, and Skywarp had to treat the scratches…

"I'm going to recharge," Starscream said, stretching across the berth. "Feel free to join me."

With a quiet pop of air, Skywarp dropped on top of him. Before he could chastise her, she had already wrapped herself around him. Jetfire came around the side closest to the wall, inserting himself beneath Starscream carefully. Soundwave was equally careful when he joined. Conversely, Ravage, Rumble, and Frenzy leaped onto the group, eliciting various exclamations of discomfort.

Inconsiderate cassettes aside, it was comforting to have the whole group together. Starscream nestled his face in Jetfire's neck and closed his optics. On his chest, Ravage purred and slipped into recharge. As usual, Starscream was the last to go—but it was habit that kept him up, rather than anxiety. He spent so many nights keeping himself awake that his frame refused to sleep before any others.

Just as he was about to drift away, he was yanked from recharge by a whisper.

"Who is Megatron?"

"What?" Starscream mumbled.

"Who is Megatron?" Jetfire repeated. "Why did he hurt you? Why did he apologize?"

The room was dark except for his and Starscream's optics.

"He's…" Starscream paused.

Who *was* Megatron to him? He was his leader, for a time. He was his enemy for another. Before that, he was his savior. So what was he now?

Starscream reached over, cupping Jetfire's face with his hand.

"He took me in when I was very young," Starscream said. "Not as young as you, but still very young. I was his air commander during the war, and set to inherit his position if anything happened to him."

Jetfire's optics grew wide. "Did he create you?"

Starscream fought not to laugh, but quickly realized the assumption was an easy one for Jetfire to make.

"In a metaphorical sense, maybe," Starscream said. "But, no. He didn't make me."

Starscream closed his optics. That only answered Jetfire's first question. He had two others.

"As for why he hurt me, I don't know. I think he was scared—*of* me and *for* me."

It was the only thing that made sense. Megatron feared he would die, so he placed a tracker. Megatron feared he would take his power, so he sought to control him. He feared Starscream would leave him, so he tracked him down.

Jetfire hummed, nuzzling Starscream.

"I don't like him," he said. "It takes a lot of strength not to hurt anyone when you're this big, and he doesn't even try."

"Maybe not," Starscream said. "But I think he's trying now."

They stayed entwined. Slowly, Jetfire's optics slid shut, leaving Starscream the sole awake inhabitant of the room. He glanced at the wall.

Toward the top of the room—tall enough that it would take effort for him to reach—the Emberstone was mounted. Though it didn't glow, somehow, Starscream could still see it in the darkness.

Windblade hadn't asked about it when she interrogated him about Jetfire. No mecha from the CRI had come after it. So, it sat proudly on the wall, disguised as a simple decoration.

Starscream allowed himself to drift away, wondering what tomorrow held.

Chapter End Notes

▶ A brief ramble on some of the themes of this fic and series

I hope you guys enjoyed! Thank you for reading until the end! It really was a journey. I'll see you in the sequel! Or not, if you decide to leave it off here. I'm going to post the first chapter of it right after I post this one, so anyone who wants to keep going can read that right away.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!