Sacrificial Turbofox

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Sacrificial Turbofox

by rnn

Summary

When a mech thoroughly proven dead steals the Emberstone, Starscream, Skywarp, and Jetfire follow him through a portal. They emerge from it in another world where the war has yet to end. Unwilling to part with Skywarp's warp drive, they strike a deal with this world's Autobots: if they kill Galvatron, they can use his stolen warp drive to go home.

This proves detrimental for all parties.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was dark. The room was covered with fuzz, not just from the lack of light. Still, as Starscream's lagging processor caught up with his visual feed, there was reason to wake. Quiet pedesteps reached Starscream's audials.

Who the frag was up this early? They were too loud to be one of the cassettes. Those three at least knew how to move *quietly*. Skywarp's wing was pressed against his face, so obviously she was still asleep.

Slight movement caught his eye. The Emberstone, lightless yet somehow never swallowed by the dark, reflected a figure. Tall—they were *tall*. Only one mech in the room matched the Emberstone's height when standing.

"Jetfire?" Starscream muttered.

The figure moved, but didn't respond.

"Jetfire!" Starscream hissed. "What are you doing?"

Another step. No response. Starscream prepared to speak again—

"Starscream?"

Jetfire's voice came from beside his helm. Immediately, Starscream threw himself from the berth, activating his weapons. Uncaring of who he woke, he flung himself at the figure. With a loud thunk, the Emberstone pulled free from the wall. Starscream brushed against a long, thin wing as the ground grew increasingly close.

He activated his thrusters, catching himself. Then, he soared through the doorway. The figure was already in the hall. In the low light of the hall, some of its features were clearer. If Starscream hadn't already heard Jetfire beside him, he would've mistaken the silhouette for Jetfire's.

"Starscream—?"

Jetfire burst into the hallway, followed by Skywarp. The others—Nova Storm, Soundwave, and his cassettes—would follow soon. Starscream glanced at them before taking off. There was no time to explain. The figure had already turned the corner.

The Cybertron Revival Initiative must have finally come to take the Emberstone. In their typical fashion, of course. Starscream turned another corner. The stranger glanced back at him, optics wide, before continuing to flee.

Stupid, self-serving fraggers! Starscream would show them! The Emberstone could never fall into their hands—they would surely abuse it. Perhaps they would even use it to create more mecha for their experiments…

A bright light shone at the end of the next hall. The Emberstone glinted in the intruder's grasp. Starscream pushed even more power to his thrusters, ignoring as his fans clicked on, and launched himself at the thief. They turned to him, optics wide, at the moment of impact.

"Starscream!"

Probably Jetfire again.

The intruder was familiar. Achingly *familiar*. Starscream couldn't place it. Suddenly, he was swept up in something, frame swirling and twisting in nothingness. He latched onto the intruder, claws digging deep into his prize's armor—the only thing keeping him from disappearing for good.

Then, grass flew past. Dirt ground into the seams of his armor. A loud crunch echoed through the air, and the intruder yelped beneath him. The sun overhead highlighted the mech's markings.

They were a *very* recognizable blue, but that wasn't possible, so Starscream shoved the idea out of his mind.

"You will return the Emberstone," Starscream hissed in the intruder's face. "Or I will *make* you."

"I can't return it!" the mech said. "It's the only thing that can—"

"Hey!"

Suddenly, Skywarp was beside his audial. The stranger startled, optics wide and wings scraping against the ground.

"What the frag is going…" Skywarp paused, staring down at the stranger. Then, she yanked the Emberstone from the stranger's hands and ran.

With a yell, the stranger shoved Starscream off. Before Starscream could swipe at him, he was already chasing after Skywarp. As he went to grab her, she warped behind Starscream. The stranger turned, and Starscream ducked out of the way.

The stranger dove for Skywarp. Her warp drive hummed, but it didn't build up enough energy to activate before she was seized. With a yelp, she flung the Emberstone behind her.

"Run for it, Jetfire!" She yelled.

Jetfire did as he was commanded. Starscream moved to pry the stranger off Skywarp, but paused. The stranger stared at Jetfire, making no move to pursue.

"Jetfire?" The stranger mumbled.

Starscream's wings flicked. He sank his claws into the stranger's plating, but he barely reacted. So, he pushed with all his might—of which there wasn't much—and managed to loosen his grip on Skywarp.

"What do you want with my newspark?" Starscream hissed.

"*Your* newspark?" The stranger said.

Starscream pried one hand from the stranger's plating to run over his face and let out a frustrated growl. "Tell me what you want with the Emberstone and Jetfire *right now*."

"I don't want anything with Jetfire!" The stranger said, raising his hands in surrender. "I just need the Emberstone."

"And what do you need it for?" Starscream said.

The stranger's optics drifted toward his wings. "Nothing you should know about, *Decepticon*."

What? Starscream searched the mech for a symbol, landing on his pauldrons. He leaned into the stranger's face and bared his teeth, wings wide.

"The war is over, *Autobot*."

The Autobot's olfactory ridge scrunched. He blinked and shook his head. Then, he laughed.

"Oh, if only it was!" He said. "This is quite an interesting trick. If you're going to capture me, you should just get it over with."

"Capture you? Why the *frag* would we do that?" Starscream said.

The Autobot glanced at Starscream's claws, which were still buried deeply in his armor.

"That's just to keep you from going after Jetfire!" Starscream hissed. "Now *tell me* what you're doing and why."

[Can I come back now?]

Starscream sighed and answered the comm.

[No, Jetfire. Keep the Emberstone safe.]

[I saw something. I really don't want to be alone.]

If the stupid Autobot would just talk, he wouldn't have to be. But alas, stupid Autobots were stupid Autobots.

"It's a spark splitting medium," the Autobot said. "What do you *think* I'm going to do with it?"

Starscream growled in irritation and dug his claws into the Autobot's elbow joint. The Autobot let out a quiet grunt as the delicate metal gave way. Starscream dug deeper, drawing a flinch from the Autobot.

"It'll be your optics next," Starscream said.

[There's someone here!]

Starscream couldn't fight the lift of his wings as his protocols engaged. The Autobot's gaze fell to them, and Starscream knew it was noticed. Claws still deep in the Autobot's joint, he called out to Skywarp.

"Go find Jetfire!" He said. "I can handle this from here."

Skywarp disappeared with a whoosh of air. The Autobot's head swiveled toward the sound. His optics grew wide.

"I think this is a misunderstanding," he said.

Starscream scoffed. "So *now* you're going to spin some lie, huh?"

"No, I really think—"

Starscream cut him off by digging his claws even further into the joint. The Autobot let out a yell.

"I think I know what happened!" The Autobot growled through gritted dentae. "That was Skywarp, right? And you're Starscream."

Starscream shook his claws inside the joint. The Autobot let out a pained hiss.

"You know my name. So what?"

The Autobot shook his head. "I know you. *My* version of you. The portable spacebridge must have malfunctioned in a way even I couldn't have predicted!"

"Portable spacebridge," Starscream said. "Now I *know* you're lying."

Such technology hadn't been achieved! Too much risk of scrambling the mecha being transported. Most attempts completely obliterated test subjects. The few that succeeded used harvested warp drives, which were in *very* short supply. If the CRI had turned to something so horrid…

[Skywarp?]

With a large whoosh of air that nearly knocked Starscream off his feet, Skywarp appeared with Jetfire. Her optics were open wide, and her wings were set at maximum height. Jetfire's plating was tensed, his wings shaking.

"What happened?" Starscream said.

"We need to get out of here!" Skywarp whispered. "Right now! There's someone watching us!"

The Autobot's plating tensed, sending a jolt through Starscream's claws. Starscream turned to him.

"Is this one of your *allies*?" He hissed. "Was this an ambush?"

The Autobot shook his head, taking a step backward. He dragged Starscream with him, as if he had forgotten that they were attached. His wings shifted downward—an obvious expression of fear.

"No!" He said. "We need to get out of here."

Purple light flashed in the surrounding trees. The air grew charged, electricity crackling. Then, with a bright flash, a mech appeared before them.

He was as tall as Megatron, with deep purple plating. A large crest sat on his head. Framed by sharp, grinning dentae were two bright purple optics.

"What do we have here, Skyfire?" The mech said.

Starscream froze. There was *no way*. It wasn't possible. Not with Jetfire…

"Nothing of interest to you!" Skyfire yelled.

The mech stared past him, toward Jetfire—and the Emberstone.

"I find that hard to believe," the mech said, grin somehow growing wider. "I've been tracking your little spacebridge, and today it let off a *very interesting* signal."

[Get us out!]

The message was labeled with his name. Skyfire, Skyfire, *Skyfire*. Starscream's plating crawled. He flexed his claws, forgetting where they were at the moment. Skyfire flinched.

Frag. *Skyfire*. It couldn't be real.

A set of coordinates. The world twisted, melting away into white walls with orange accents. Starscream pulled his claws from Skyfire. In the corner of his vision, there was a flash of blue. He followed it.

No. None of this was possible. Had he rejoined the allspark? He glanced at Skywarp. Her wings were pinned in their lowest position. She saw *this*, too.

Then, blue optics behind Thundercracker's caught his, and it all made sense. The mech hiding behind Thundercracker was red and blue—colors eerily similar to Optimus Prime's—but it was unmistakable. Starscream slumped.

"Skyfire," the mech that was undoubtedly himself asked. "What *is* this? Why did you bring Decepticons here?"

"I didn't have a choice," Skyfire said, lowering his wings.

Thundercracker walked past both of them. Wings set firmly in neutral position, she leaned over as she reached toward Skywarp. Skywarp flinched backward, a surprised squeak exiting her vocalizer.

"You're *real*," Thundercracker said.

"You're… *alive*!" Skywarp yelled.

Upon closer inspection, Starscream saw it: small, purple highlights hiding in Thundercracker's armor that were an exact match to Skywarp's paint.

"Your Skywarp is dead," Starscream said.

Thundercracker pulled away, wings lowering as she met Starscream's optics. "Yes, she is."

Thundercracker's optics examined his frame, falling on the blue of his gauntlets. Searching for a familiar but long-unused comm signal, Starscream flicked his wings.

[Don't say it,] he sent to Thundercracker.

"Jetfire, was it?" The name was pronounced awkwardly, as if Skyfire was tempted to say something else. The mentioned mech startled, Emberstone nearly slipping from his grasp. "Would you mind giving me the Emberstone?"

Starscream inserted himself in front of Jetfire, fanning his wings out to block him from sight, and hissed, "You *still* haven't told us why you want it. And, perhaps, you could also tell us *why the frag* we're here and how to get home while you're at it."

Skyfire thumbed the projections on his elbows—an upsettingly familiar nervous habit. Starscream had memory files upon memory files of small moments where *his* Skyfire did that.

"It was an accident," Skyfire said. "I've been searching for two items: the Enigma of Combination and a spark-splitting medium. I was opening portals to look for signals, since my scanner's range is small. I finally found a medium, but I didn't realize I'd stepped into another world."

The Enigma of Combination and a spark splitting medium… such a set could only mean one thing: Skyfire was attempting to build a combiner team. All of them had been wiped out in the war—at least in Starscream's universe. If Skyfire was attempting to create more, they may have been destroyed in his world, too.

Starscream glanced at Jetfire. His newspark clutched the Emberstone as if it were his lifeline, joints creaking from the strain. A painful buzz crept over Starscream's frame, disgust squirming inside of him.

"Send us home," Starscream said.

Skyfire shook his head. "The portable spacebridge was broken in our fall. Even if I know how it created a portal to another universe, I can't even attempt to reproduce it."

Starscream tapped his pede. "What do you need to fix it?"

"A warp drive," Skyfire said. "A genuine one. We… don't have any spares."

Skywarp's warp drive began humming before Starscream himself grasped the implications.

"No!" Thundercracker yelled, latching onto Skywarp with enough force that her plating creaked.

Startled by the sudden yell and intense contact, Skywarp's warp drive stuttered to a stop.

"Don't warp!" Thundercracker said. "Galvatron has your signature. He can track it."

Galvatron. That must've been the name of the mech that stalked them.

Skywarp's wings flicked. "How would—"

"Thunder is right," Skyfire said. "We have a scrambler in this room so that I could use the portable spacebridge, but if you leave its range, he'll know where we are."

Skywarp pried Thundercracker from her, growling when the mech refused to let go. Her wings twitched, and her plating snapped close—obvious signs of irritation.

"So, I *can't* warp?" She asked.

"Not if you want everyone in this base—including you—to live," the other Starscream said.

Skywarp's wings trembled and Starscream realized the truth: she was terrified.

"You mentioned a scrambler," Starscream said. "Is there any reason *she* can't wear one?"

Skyfire scrunched his olfactory ridge. "Well, no, but it makes warping a *lot* more costly."

Skywarp took a step forward, finally shrugging Thundercracker off.

"I don't care!" She said.

Skyfire grimaced. "Then we'll ask for one to be placed—"

"When *you* explain to Commander Elita why they're here!" The other Starscream said, putting her hands on her hips. "I am *not* covering for you again."

Elita? Starscream glanced at the other Starscream again. Was Optimus dead in this universe? Had she taken on his colors?

"I already sent her a message," Thundercracker said. "She's in her office."

"Then let's go!" The other Starscream said, heading toward the door.

Thundercracker and Skyfire followed after her, carefully herding the others—not that they needed to. Starscream wanted to see just what this world had to offer for himself. Unless Skywarp was going to give up one of the most important parts of her (impossible, unsafe) or *someone* figured out how to fabricate an artificial warp drive (also impossible), they were stuck here. Unless…

Galvatron had definitely warped while he was stalking them. Was *he* in possession of a warp drive? What would it take to procure it?

As they passed through wider halls, Autobots stopped to stare. Some whispered, while others chattered like idiots. The other Starscream paid them no mind, while Thundercracker merely twitched her wings. Skyfire let out an exasperated sigh.

Beside Starscream, Skywarp's wings flicked. Her plating rattled quietly. Starscream glared at her, and she silenced it. Behind them, Jetfire fidgeted so intensely his joints creaked. Flexing his claws to rid himself of the nervous irritation that infested his body at the thought of his newspark so anxious, Starscream settled for glaring at the loudest of the onlookers.

Interestingly, they didn't focus on Jetfire at all. Mutters of, "Seekers! Seekers!" and, "Decepticons? In the base?" passed through the air, but none about the anxious warframe that trailed after them. Jetfire hadn't taken a brand, and Starscream had never asked him to. Perhaps, in this strange world, it would be a blessing.

"You know prisoners belong in the brig."

Starscream startled at the voice, whacking Skywarp with his wing. Skywarp shoved him. The other Starscream glanced at them before replying to the interloper.

"These aren't prisoners," she said. "Not the traditional kind, anyway."

The mech furrowed his brow, arms crossed. He seemed familiar, but Starscream couldn't place it. In his own universe, this Autobot was probably dead. Though, with the familiarity, Starscream *should* recall him. Perhaps Hook's insistence that his memory files were corrupted from copious processor traumas wasn't unfounded. Oh, well…

An irritated flick of a wing caught his eye. Wings? On an *Autobot*? That narrowed the list considerably—

On second glance, *no*. Glass shone at the tops of them. They were stupid, fake doorwings. This mech was an Enforcer drone—one of those Praxus-designed models that were all the rage when Starscream was purchased.

Skywarp shuddered beside him.

[What's your problem?] Starscream sent to her.

[He's sizing us up,] she replied. *[His field is all over me. It's creepy.]*

For once, Starscream was glad he couldn't sense it.

"I suppose I haven't seen these Decepticons before," the mech said. "I'll help you escort them."

Skyfire jumped. "It's really not necessary, Prowl. We can handle this on our own—"

Prowl. Starscream's memory files were finally summoned. The Autobot third in command turned second after a *tragic* incident permanently separated Elita from the Autobots. Starscream grinned as their final fight came to him.

Both of them, plating marred beyond recognition, in a standoff. A mission gone wrong at its worst—someone had blown their cover, but the bomb still activated, turning the base to rubble. Starscream took cover behind a collapsed beam, dragging his barely functional legs behind him. That fragger had survived, the tips of his stupid doorwings sticking out from behind what used to be a wall.

Starscream aimed and fired just as he moved to do the same. Two shots: one to the processor and the other to the spark. His landed first.

Vision fuzzy at the edges, Starscream laughed, knowing that in his final moments, he had accomplished something truly valuable. Then, strong hands seized him, and he stared at Megatron's face. The rescue seemed perfectly timed and valiant back then, but Starscream knew the truth now: his ex-leader had placed a tracker in him.

Still, that didn't negate his accomplishment. It was the first of many times he'd survived impossible odds and come out the other end utterly victorious.

[Screamer?]

Starscream glared at Skywarp.

"We're here," she whispered, motioning to the door ahead of them.

Oh. Had he spent *that* long reminiscing?

Prowl entered a code on the door, and it slid open. The office was small, but they all managed to fit—even if Jetfire's wings were entwined with his own to make it work. They'd worry about that when it was time to leave.

Elita sat, arms on the desk. It was clear, save for a small pile of datapads, which were loosely stacked in the corner. She must have been working on them before the call came.

"Skyfire will explain!" The other Starscream said quickly, motioning toward the mech.

"I sure hope he does," Elita said.

Skyfire flinched. "Um, well… I was searching for resources for our project when I finally found a spark-splitting medium. I recovered it successfully, as you can see here—" He gestured to the Emberstone, which was still held securely in Jetfire's hands. "These mecha

were guarding it, and managed to follow me back through the portal. My portable spacebridge must have malfunctioned, because, as you can tell, they are not from our world. It was destroyed in the confrontation, so I couldn't send them home."

Elita's optics narrowed. She scanned the gathered mecha, and Skywarp shuddered again.

[Are you going to flinch like a scared newspark every time someone reaches for your field?] Starscream sent.

[It's so creepy!] Skywarp ungracefully retorted.

[One would think you haven't been sensing EM fields your entire *existence.]*

Skywarp glared at him. *[It's different! They're… wrong, somehow.]*

Starscream rolled his optics. He tapped a pede, waiting for the conversation to resume.

"You're… Skywarp," Elita said, motioning toward the aforementioned mech.

Skywarp fluttered her wings, whacking Jetfire and the other Starscream in the face. "Y-yes. I am."

Elita pointed to Starscream. He beat her to the punch.

"I'm Starscream," he said.

She nodded, moving on to Jetfire.

"You must be Skyfire."

Jetfire shifted in place, wings flicking downward. Starscream stealthily reached behind him, rubbing the spine on his elbow.

"N-no, actually," Jetfire said. "My name is Jetfire."

"Jetfire," Elita repeated, optics drifting briefly toward Skyfire. "How interesting."

Jetfire straightened himself to full height.

"Starscream gave it to me," he said.

Something about his newspark's tone was *off*, but Starscream couldn't place it. Whatever. He needed to get her attention away from Jetfire.

"I have a proposition," Starscream said.

Elita turned to him. "Go on."

"Skyfire needs a warp drive to repair the portable spacebridge and send us home. You need more soldiers to win against the Decepticons. *We* can be those soldiers."

She wasn't reacting, but a lack of reaction was better than a negative one. Starscream steeled himself and continued.

"Galvatron has a warp drive. If we take out Galvatron, we'll have what we need to go home, and you'll be one step closer to winning the war. Working together benefits all of us."

Elita hummed. "Galvatron is a powerful enemy. We'll take any aid we can receive, so long as you prove trustworthy. What do you have to contribute?"

"I was Air Commander during my world's war, and eventually leader of my faction." Starscream specifically avoided using the word *Decepticon*, not wanting to remind Elita of his allegiance. He motioned to Skywarp. "She is a competent fighter and led alongside me when I assumed leadership."

Starscream glanced at Jetfire. His newspark wasn't a warrior—far from it. He was one of the most nurturing mecha Starscream had ever known. There was no way he could offer Jetfire as a *soldier*.

"Jetfire was created after the war ended," Starscream said. "He is training to be a medic, and just completed his basic classes."

Elita glanced at Prowl.

"How likely is this to go wrong?" She asked.

Prowl twitched a doorwing—the one near the wall, thankfully.

"I don't know enough about these mecha to say anything with certainty," Prowl said. "But I believe the risk is low."

Elita nodded and turned back toward the group.

"They'll stay with you," she said to Skyfire. "Since you brought them here, you'll supervise them. Don't let them out of your sight."

Skyfire nodded. "Thank you, Commander Elita. I'll do my best."

The meeting ended, and soon the group made its way back down the halls. The trip was cut short before it could even begin, as Thundercracker paused in the middle of the hallway. She grabbed Skyfire's elbow as Skyfire let out a pained hiss.

"You're injured!" Thundercracker said.

Starscream snickered, recognizing the elbow as the one he dug his claws into. "That's generally what happens when you get into a fight."

Both Thundercracker and the other Starscream glared at him. Starscream rolled his optics. Though, that did remind him—Skywarp was involved in the altercation. He turned back to check her for injuries…

…and found her staring at *him*.

[Frag off,] he sent to her.

"We're going to the medbay *right now*," Thundercracker said.

Starscream grinned. "Well, we can't go anywhere without supervision, so I suppose we'll *have to* come along. We can ask them about getting a *scrambler* for *Skywarp* while we're there."

Behind him, Skywarp stiffened. Then, she wore a grin of her own.

"Yeah," she said. "And we can get a checkup for *Screamer* while we're at it."

Starscream's wings shot up. "I don't—"

Skywarp reached over and flicked him in the olfactory sensor.

"Since you started keeping track of mine, I started keeping track of yours!" She said in a sing-song voice. "Different universe or not, you're overdue!"

[And I want to keep an eye on your… issues,] she added in a private message. *[Especially with the chase this morning.]*

Starscream flexed his fingers, digging his claws into the guards on his arms to hide the irritation that coursed through him. Skywarp was so… condescending! It was as if she didn't think he could care for himself!

He didn't speak for the rest of the trip, rolling his anger around until they reached the medbay. It was much emptier than the one in their universe, and even the Decepticon medbay during the war. Hollow cabinets hung open, and most of the medical berths were pushed together against the wall.

"Oh! Hello!" A quiet voice from the corner of the room said.

Starscream searched the area, nearly missing the mech. He was a white that matched the walls with red highlights, but his colors weren't what made him so difficult to detect. It was his height. As the mech approached the group, the top of his head barely reached Skyfire's hips.

Next to Starscream, the mech would've been up to his chest. He was very close to Rumble and Frenzy's height, which made Starscream wonder: was this mech a cassette? If so, what happened to his console and other cassettes?

"Skyfire is injured," Thundercracker said, grabbing the injured arm and holding it up.

The mech took the arm from her and hummed, gently examining it. "It almost looks like…"

His optics drifted toward the rest of the group, falling on the other Starscream, then Starscream himself. His optics narrowed as they rested on his wings. Then, as they reached Skywarp, he quickly looked away.

"Can someone explain what happened here?" He asked.

Skyfire gave him a brief rundown. Luckily for Starscream, he addressed the mech by name during the explanation, so he now had something to call the medic: First Aid. After receiving the explanation, First Aid immediately got to work, cleaning the wound and sealing the leaking lines that Skyfire's self-repair had yet to reach.

As he worked, Starscream caught Jetfire creeping closer. Whenever First Aid turned in his general direction, Jetfire quickly froze, but it was undeniable. It was a good sign that Jetfire wanted to approach, knowing the newspark's history with strangers.

Just as First Aid finished up, Starscream stepped forward.

"We have a request," he said. "If you're willing to grant it."

First Aid looked up at him, a pleasant smile on his face—the caution had drained from the mech after Skyfire explained the situation.

"What is it?" He asked.

"Skywarp's signature is trackable, but we know you have scramblers. We were wondering if you could place one on her somewhere to protect her when she warps—"

"And also give him a checkup!" Skywarp said, shoving past Starscream.

Starscream yanked her backward by the tip of her wing. She let out a startled yelp.

"Yes," he hissed. "Though that one is a *lot less* important."

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand we're back! Back again! I'll probably upload chapters for this one throughout the day because it'll be easier for me to do that than get it all out in a single sitting. This and Blind Spot are the two longest fics I'll have to mirror.

▶ Original author's note

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Contrary to what many mecha assumed about Jetfire, he wasn't entirely naive. He may not have as much life experience as his creator, but he still knew suspicious situations when he saw them. These Autobots were nothing like the ones in their world, and it was best to treat them as completely different mecha.

Still, he found himself tempted by the soft-spoken medic. Something about First Aid just radiated safety, which was interesting, since he carried the same processing glitch as his creator, so he couldn't have been sensing the medic's field. So, when Skywarp insisted on Starscream getting a checkup, Jetfire knew he had to interfere, even if it meant putting himself close to a stranger.

He tucked the Emberstone safely in his cockpit while no one was looking, then made his move. First Aid had already guided Starscream to a berth for his exam, and was in the process of convincing him to cooperate.

"Um, hi," Jetfire said, doing his best to keep his voice friendly. When First Aid turned toward him, he added, "I'm Jetfire. A medic in training."

"Hello, Jetfire," First Aid said.

[Starscream isn't a fan of exams,] Jetfire sent. It wasn't exactly a lie—his creator despised them—but it wasn't his motivation. *[It'll go better if I help.]*

First Aid nodded. They began a basic helm to pede exam. Jetfire turned up the sensitivity of his audials, listening for Starscream's fans. He tended not to take breaks when they were needed, which only made it easier for him to tire himself out. The hum was quiet, so Jetfire returned his sensitivity to normal.

His creator was foolish about a lot of things. Typically, it was related to how other mecha treated him. Probably because he barely valued himself—it was a challenge just to take him in for basic monitoring.

They finished the outward portion of the examination—Starscream had several dents, most of them on his wings, but no open wounds—and Jetfire moved to intercept First Aid before he could ask Starscream to open his panel. Starscream was oddly secretive about their glitches, so having a strange medic poking around in his files wasn't the best idea.

"I can do this part," he said, really hoping the medic wouldn't put up a fight.

Luckily, First Aid was a very calm mech, and just nodded. So, Jetfire tapped on Starscream's medical panel.

"C'mon," he said. "You know what to do."

Starscream sighed and the panel popped open. Jetfire pulled out his plug and made the connection. Instantly, his processor flooded with values. He viewed them in order of importance.

Temperature? Low, but that was normal for him. Starscream barely ran at the ideal values he was taught in school on a *good* day.

Fuel levels? Decent. He could do with a meal when they got out of here, though.

Fuel line pressure? A bit low. He *definitely* needed a meal. Had he been skipping them before they left? *Again*?

Air change rate? Good.

The spark values were strong, like they always were. Jetfire hoped that would never change. His other values were within normal limits. Not much to worry about other than fuel, which…

They had modified systems. These Cybertronians didn't. They *could* drink energeon, but it was one of the less pleasurable ways of consuming fuel…

The ever-present pit in Jetfire's belly grew deeper. His dentae itched, craving something to chew. He checked his fuel levels, and they came back barely low enough to justify a meal. He was just *hungry*. It was fine.

(Never mind that his secondary tank was almost full.)

"His vitals are normal," Jetfire said.

"That's good," First Aid said.

The results of the exam were entered into a new record, and the appointment was considered over. Jetfire read First Aid's portion of the notes before he wrote his. One of the first notes was to take a cautious approach with Starscream. Jetfire smiled to himself—his creator would be in good hands if First Aid cared enough to make note of that. His wings twitched as he got to the plating condition score. He was rated lower than his last appointment. That just made getting him to fuel even more important.

Jetfire prepared himself to complain about his fuel levels—if *he* was hungry, they'd all have to get a meal. It didn't matter that he wasn't actually *that* hungry as long as it worked.

"On to the scrambler for Skywarp, then," Starscream said, glancing pointedly in her direction.

Right. Jetfire forgot about that. The meal would have to wait a bit longer, but he *would* be ready.

"Yes!" First Aid said. "I think we have a spare in storage…"

He wandered into the closet. A cacophony of noise reached the room as he rummaged around, eventually emerging with a small device in his hand. As he approached the group, he waved it in Skywarp's direction.

"Right here!" He said.

His optics roved over Skywarp's frame. Then, he nodded and retrieved something from one of the cabinets. A glimpse of the label on the container revealed its contents: frame glue.

"I'm going to apply it externally," First aid said. "Where would you prefer it?"

Skywarp's plating visibly relaxed on the word '*externally*.' Clearly, this device could also be applied internally, which Jetfire was glad First Aid hadn't considered. It was probably placed directly onto the warp drive in that case. If First Aid had gone for that option, Skywarp would've warped out of the medbay—Galvatron tracking her or not.

Skywarp hummed, then placed her claws on her left pauldron. "Is here good?"

"There is good!" First Aid said, opening the container of frame glue.

He placed the scrambler on, then activated it with a click. Skywarp moved to stand, but he stopped her with a gentle hand. She paused, and he pulled out a small chip.

"Since we placed it externally, the scrambler runs on a separate power source," First Aid said. "This chip will let you see how much it has left. It's not safe to warp if it has no power."

Skywarp nodded and took the chip. She stared down at it, hesitating.

"Put it in your sublingual drive," First Aid said softly.

Skywarp did as she was told. The chip integrated with a click.

The sublingual drive wasn't commonly used, mainly because modifications were typically integrated into the frame. Most information could be transferred over connections, which made the drive even less popular. But it was very useful for niche situations like this, especially if a modification was temporary—which First Aid seemed to assume this was.

"Can you read the number?" First Aid asked.

Skywarp nodded and read the number aloud.

"Good," First Aid said. "Try warping across the room."

Skywarp activated her warp drive, its quiet hum filling the room, and disappeared. With a pop of air, she appeared on the other side of the room. She flicked one of her wings, then lowered both of them. As she made her way back to the group, she walked slightly low. The posture was familiar—it vaguely resembled the one Starscream adopted toward the end of his bad days, but less extreme.

Jetfire struggled to place it. They'd discussed it in his classes, but only briefly. What was it? Something about balance? Skywarp's gyroscopic sensors typically compensated for her warps, but if the scrambler was interfering with that…

First Aid opened his mouth to ask a question, but Skywarp raised her wings and placed her hands on her hips. "It works!"

Jetfire glanced at First Aid. She hadn't *looked* fine. But maybe Jetfire was just imagining it. Or, just like his creator, she was being a stubborn fragger and refusing to admit something was wrong. He'd have to keep a close watch on her.

First Aid sighed, entering something into the medical computer. Then, he turned to the group. "Is there anything else you mecha needed today?"

A quick exchange of glances gave a negative result. They said goodbye and headed into the hall. First Aid was nice, despite being a stranger. Jetfire wouldn't mind working with him.

But now, it was time to put his plan into action. As they walked down the hall, he increased his speed, creeping up behind Starscream until he could reach his hands. Gently—always gently, he had to be *gentle*—he took Starscream's hand. Starscream twitched a wing and turned toward him.

"What's going on?" He asked.

Jetfire exaggerated the shakiness of his voice. It wasn't difficult—the pit in his belly was making his spark hurt.

"I'm hungry," he said. "Can we get some fuel?"

Starscream's optics met Jetfire's face and he *melted*. Objective achieved.

"Of course," he said. He turned to Skyfire. "Can you take us to the mess hall?"

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Jetfire regretted coming into the mess hall, but he'd never tell Starscream—or any of the group—that. When they entered, mecha stared, the room hushing for a moment. Then, the chatter started up again, this time focusing on them. The pit in Jetfire's belly grew deeper, and his spark hurt even more. So many strangers, and they were all *staring*.

They weren't staring at him. Not really. They were just staring in his direction, straight at Skywarp and Starscream. For some reason, they were really obsessed with them. Jetfire didn't like it. He wrung his hands until the joints ached as the pit threatened to swallow him.

It would be fine. It had to be fine.

He *really* wanted a hug, but the mission came first. Besides, wouldn't that just draw *even more* attention toward them?

They weren't in the system yet, so Skyfire and the red Starscream got cubes from the dispenser for them. Jetfire tried to disguise the disappointed sink of his wings as they took their seats. Now that he'd gotten his fuel processing systems altered, energeon was so *boring*.

The strange new mech, Thundercracker, took a seat next to Skywarp. She didn't seem to mind. Jetfire placed himself between Skywarp and Starscream, determined not to be next to Skyfire or the red Starscream. It didn't matter that the red Starscream was a version of his creator, she wasn't *him*!

Jetfire drank his fuel with little interest in what it tasted like. It was all just uniform liquid, anyway. The pit was still there. Normally, when he ate, it went away! But *this* was just energeon. Energeon had never helped him.

His dentae itched. He *needed* something to chew.

Starscream was speaking. Something about sleeping arrangements? The important part was that he wasn't looking, and neither was anyone else. Jetfire downed the contents of his cube as quickly as he could. He fought a flinch as it passed into his primary fuel tank more quickly than it could drain to his secondary, filling it over capacity. Still…

Jetfire placed his dentae on the lid of the cube and bit down. It gave with an audible crack.

"Jetfire!"

Oh, *slag*. Jetfire bit harder. A piece of the cube broke off into his mouth just before Starscream wrenched it from his hands. Starscream squinted at him, holding the cube on the other side of himself.

"Open your mouth," Starscream hissed.

Jetfire shook his head. Starscream sighed and placed the bitten cube in front of Skyfire. Then, he reached over and grabbed the sides of Jetfire's face.

"Just like a cyberpup," he muttered, digging his fingers into the hinges of Jetfire's jaw. "I asked Hook to show me this."

Against his will, Jetfire's jaw opened. Starscream held it there, inspecting it. With an impossibly quick motion, he reached in and grabbed the fragment. As Jetfire massaged his now-sore jaw, Starscream placed the fragment inside of the broken cube.

"You *know* I can eat it," Jetfire whined.

"Actually," Starscream said with a sigh. "After rushing you to Hook for emergency treatment *three times*, I don't."

Jetfire sank in his seat. What could he do to get rid of the pit *now*? Fidgeting wasn't enough. It lessened the immediate ache, but it didn't fix anything.

Jetfire flinched as his comm pinged.

[We'll head to Skyfire's quarters soon,] Starscream sent. *[You just need to hang on a little longer, okay?]*

Jetfire huffed and slumped onto the table, burying his face in his arms.

"He does that often?" The red Starscream asked.

Great. Now they were talking about him.

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They were about to enter Skyfire's quarters when disaster struck. The other Starscream pressed the keypad to unlock the door. It slid open and something behind it popped, sending a splatter of colorful paint straight onto the three leading members of the group: the other Starscream, Starscream himself, and Skywarp. Thundercracker was caught in the crossfire, flicking a lightly dotted wing as both Starscreams groaned a their plight. Jetfire and Skyfire, both at the back of the group, were spared.

"Do you have a washrack?" Starscream asked, claws dripping with paint. "I'd prefer not to be *green*."

Skyfire shook his head. Before Starscream could speak again, Thundercracker motioned toward the halls.

"We can show you the way."

Starscream hummed and they followed her down the hall. Jetfire crossed his arms, the pit growing deeper. They were *leaving him* now? With *Skyfire*?

He caught Starscream's optics.

[We'll be back soon,] Starscream sent.

Jetfire looked away, his plating itching. Sure, he'd gone to classes on his own, but Skywarp had dropped him off! This was a completely different universe, and he was surrounded by Autobots! *Strange* Autobots. He knew he was being irrationally clingy, but he couldn't help it!

Skyfire beckoned him into his quarters. Reluctantly, Jetfire stepped through the doorway. Three berths sat in the corner of the room, two of them pushed together. Did he share this with Thundercracker and the red Starscream?

There were no spare berths, blankets, or couches. They probably expected the group to sleep on the floor, then. It wouldn't be comfortable, but they would manage it. A small shelf of datapads sat on the other side of the door, a desk roughly perpendicular to it.

Jetfire plucked a random datapad from the shelf and sat at the desk. If he was reading, Skyfire wouldn't bother him. Hopefully.

The datapad was a story—some sort of romance, based on the very brief summary on the first page. Romances weren't Jetfire's favorite type of story, but he could tolerate them.

"If those two are the Starscream and Skywarp of your world, you must be me."

Slag it all.

"No," Jetfire said.

Though, as he glared at Skyfire, the mech's stripes caught his optics. They were the same blue as Starscream's gauntlets—the exact same blue *he* used to have before he got repainted. The pit came back and Jetfire forced himself to read the datapad.

The main character of the story was some sort of dockworker. He nearly died when a group of rebels attacked the dock, but an ancient artifact saved his life—

"What was Thundercracker like in your world?"

Jetfire hadn't even finished the first chapter.

"I never knew a mech named Thundercracker," Jetfire said. "So I can't tell you."

Skyfire frowned as his wings drooped. Jetfire went back to the datapad.

The leader of the rebels noticed the dockworker and recognized the artifact. It was what they were searching for. But now, it had integrated with the dockworker. So, they took him with them—

"When were you made?"

Jetfire shrugged. "About six years ago."

"*Earth* years?" Skyfire asked, optics widening.

"What other years are there?"

Skyfire sighed. "Right…"

The main character was being introduced to the other rebels. Apparently, the artifact that revived them was immensely powerful, and held the key to the rebels' victory—

The door slid open, startling both mecha in the room. Thundercracker slipped through it, glancing at Jetfire before settling beside Skyfire. She leaned into him, their wings intertwining.

If she was back…

"Where's everyone else?" Jetfire asked.

Thundercracker withdrew from Skyfire, paying no attention to the way his wings shifted downward.

"They're still finishing up," she said. "They had a lot more paint on them than I did."

Jetfire fought a sigh and went back to the datapad. The main character was reluctant to trust the rebels, but they had answers. The rebel leader hoped the artifact would choose him, and was bitter about being spurned by the story's imaginary deities. Jetfire was reminded that this story was a romance when said leader kissed the main character for no apparent reason. It wasn't intentional—the author hadn't gone *that* far—but it was a kiss regardless.

Jetfire skimmed through several paragraphs of the main character waffling about the rebel leader turned love interest. What about the artifact? Wasn't that more important than some mech he'd just met? Jetfire almost wished the story *hadn't* been a romance…

A whoosh of air brought his attention away from the datapad. Skywarp popped in slightly above the floor. Immediately upon her pedes hitting the ground, she stumbled forward into the desk, landing on it belly-down with a disturbed squawk. She rolled onto her side, wings scraping against the wall, and grinned at Jetfire.

"I meant to do that," she said. Her optics landed on the datapad. "What'cha reading?"

"Some sort of romance," Jetfire said.

Skywarp reached for the datapad. Jetfire let her take it. She leaned back, skimming it.

"Oooh!" She said. "The Rebel's Dockworker. This one's weird. An… old friend made me read it."

The door slid open, saving Jetfire from having to talk about the story. Both Starscreams passed through it, the red one heading straight for Thundercracker and Skyfire. Jetfire's Starscream settled beside him, one hand on the datapad shelf and the other on his hips.

"Thank Primus it was Earth paint and not Cybertronian paint," Starscream muttered. "Or that would've taken *much* longer."

"Sunstreaker stopped using Cybertronian paint after the last time he pulled this," the red Starscream said, a grin stretching across her face as she examined her fingertips. "I made sure he wouldn't."

Jetfire finally recognized exactly what made the red Starscream so unsettling. Her fingertips were blunt, but they still tapered, as if someone had filed them down. Her dentae were completely flat, lacking the distinct points that his creator had. No rays were fastened to her arms.

Skywarp stretched, nearly falling off the narrow desk. "We'll have to get him back. Prankster's code."

Thundercracker sighed. "If you really must…"

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The silent prank war escalated for a few weeks before dying an unceremonious death when Sunstreaker set off a glitter bomb in the middle of the mess hall. Skywarp placed a trap on the energeon dispenser, somehow rigging it to dispense the glitter bomb only to Sunstreaker. Both of them were made to clean up the mess, and neither wanted to repeat the incident. It was all anyone in the halls talked about for weeks.

Jetfire didn't care. The pranks were annoying when he was caught in the crossfire, but it only happened a couple of times. He just hoped he never met Sunstreaker. The thing he truly cared about was finally being allowed to train in the medbay. First Aid was a patient instructor, and Jetfire grew more excited for his shift each day.

He headed toward the medbay, fluttering his wings as he enjoyed the tranquility of the empty halls, when his comm received a message.

[Sorry, Jetfire. Something urgent came up. We can't train today.]

Jetfire's spark grew cold. The pit crept back in, slowly consuming him. What was he going to do now? He planned his entire day, and now all of it was ruined!

"You really *do* look just like Skyfire."

Jetfire jumped, wings flaring as he whipped toward the voice. A bright yellow mech stood before him, side by side with a duller red mech. Jetfire forced his now-fluttering wings to still.

"I've heard that before," he said.

The yellow one stepped closer. "What's a sweet shuttle like *you* doing hanging out with those creepy Seekers?"

Jetfire took a step back. He glanced at the red mech. The red mech didn't move.

The yellow mech's optics skimmed Jetfire's plating. "You don't even have a symbol!"

Jetfire flicked his wings. "So?"

"So why are you with those Cons?"

Why? Wasn't wanting to be with them enough? Starscream created him. Skywarp helped raise him. He loved them, and they loved him.

"Because I am," Jetfire said, walking down the hall.

The yellow mech stepped in front of him, and the red mech followed. Jetfire turned around. He had no idea where to go except back to Skyfire's quarters, but those two Autobots were blocking the way. If he just kept going, maybe they would lose interest and he could turn around again. This base wasn't *that* big.

The yellow mech blocked his vision.

"I just don't get why you're staying with those sparkless freaks," the mech said. "Seekers are ruthless murderers. It's disturbing just to have them in the base."

Why was he saying that? Jetfire fought back the frustration that crept into his plating, wringing his hands. He had no right to say those things! He didn't even know Starscream and Skywarp!

Jetfire wanted him to stop, but just words wouldn't work. The only option was to *leave*. So, he brushed past the mech and turned the corner.

Something scraped against his wing. The sensors burned, and he cried out. The thing refused to release him, so he turned and swung.

Metal gave beneath his fist. The creaking crunch struck his audials—a deeply familiar sound.

No!

Jetfire staggered backward, staring at the dent in the yellow mech's plating. The mech stared back at him with wide optics. Then, his face contorted into a snarl.

"You—"

Jetfire turned and fled. He needed *out*. Indistinguishable halls passed. He turned a corner and his optics were assaulted by bright colors. Bright optics stared back at him.

Not here!

He ran in the other direction as voices called out. Where was the exit? He had to leave—

There! He ran for the door as it shuttered closed. More shouting behind him. He slammed a fist against the door. The metal crumpled, just like—

Jetfire shook his head and wrenched the door open. He sprinted through the doorway and transformed, then took flight. He didn't know how long he flew for or what direction he went in.

One moment, he was in the sky. The next, wood splintered beneath him as fire surrounded him, the earth giving beneath him. Shrubs and leaves were stuck in his seams. He was in robot mode. When had that happened?

When he finally rose, the fire was out. Ash coated the ground, crunching as he sat on it. Warnings on his HUD declared various damages, but he didn't *feel* any of it.

He didn't feel anything except the pit.

Jetfire's hands closed around a burned tree trunk. It gave under the pressure with a crack, but the force of his grip held it together. It smoked slightly as Jetfire accidentally activated his outlier.

He forced it to turn off. Whenever he grew stressed, it was difficult to control, just like his strength. It all led back to one thing: Jetfire was inherently *dangerous*.

Jetfire's wings twitched as the pit crept up. His spark hurt.

He placed one of the pieces of wood in his mouth and chewed. It was an interesting texture. He didn't have the opportunity to eat the trees on Cybertron, so he had nothing to compare it to. The flavor was bland, but *anything* was better than energeon.

He stayed there, savoring the texture of the wood as it split apart in his mouth, until the pit receded.

"Jetfire!"

Jetfire flinched. How had Starscream gotten here to quickly? Beside Starscream, a slightly woozy Skywarp leaned against a tree, giving Jetfire the answer to his own question.

Starscream came closer, scowl fading to a frown. His wings swept low.

"Are you alright?" He asked.

"I—I'm fine," Jetfire stammered. "Just…"

Starscream's optics roamed the area. Then, with a sigh, he settled beside Jetfire.

"Did you get stuck again?" He asked.

Getting 'stuck' is what they called the fits their processing glitch induced. Jetfire had never seen Starscream have one, but he believed his creator. No one would lie about something that hurt so much.

"Yeah," Jetfire said.

"What happened before it?"

"First Aid canceled my training session," Jetfire said. "And I just… I dunno. I don't like it here."

They didn't need to know about those two mecha. They *especially* didn't need to know about what the yellow one said. Besides, they'd probably just tell him they'd heard that slag before, and he'd just get upset that they weren't upset. *No one* should be okay with hearing things like that about them.

"Prowl told me you punched Sunstreaker."

Jetfire glanced at his hands. One of them was streaked with yellow paint. He closed his eyes and pushed one of his hands into the crushed wood below him.

Starscream didn't *sound* angry.

"I just want to know why," Starscream said. "Our acceptance here is tentative. You're smart enough not to endanger that."

"I—" Jetfire paused. Why was it so hard to speak? It was almost like—

Oh. Aw slag. He'd started chewing on a piece of wood again and hadn't even noticed! Starscream was going to be angry now—he was always angry when he ate something he wasn't supposed to. Jetfire took the piece from his mouth and rolled it between his fingers.

"He grabbed my wing," Jetfire said. "Kept saying mean things. Wouldn't leave me alone."

Starscream huffed. "I'll speak to Elita and Prowl about keeping their soldiers in line. Next time a mech gets the bright idea of harassing you, let one of us know, alright?"

"Okay," Jetfire muttered, still rolling the piece of wood. It was a nice texture, whether it was in his mouth or not.

Starscream stared at him with narrowed optics.

"You ate the wood," he said.

Jetfire slumped. He could deny it, but that would be a lie. He didn't want to lie to his creator.

Starscream sighed. He reached out, arm hovering above Jetfire's shoulders. Jetfire nodded and pulled him into a hug.

"You'll let me know if you feel sick at all. No waiting this time," Starscream said.

Jetfire hummed an affirmative. Starscream gave him a gentle squeeze.

"Does it feel *good* when you eat something you're not supposed to?" Starscream asked.

"Y-yeah," Jetfire said, closing his optics. "It does. Sort of."

The textures of the things he ate felt good. It distracted him from the pit. Sometimes, it made the pit go away completely.

Was Starscream trying to shame him?

"I've noticed something about it, and I want to make sure I'm correct."

Starscream's words were spoken carefully, as if Jetfire were a scared mechanimal.

"Do you feel *bad* before you start wanting to?" Starscream asked.

"Most of the time…"

Starscream released Jetfire. Hesitantly, Jetfire ended the hug. Starscream held his arm out before him, the arm guards he always wore fully on display.

"Do you know why I wear these?" Starscream asked.

Jetfire had no idea. He'd never questioned it.

"Because you like them?"

Starscream's lips twitched upward. He shook his head.

"Look closer," he said.

Jetfire did as he requested. Small divots in the guards caught shadows. They were arranged in patterns, but not ones that made sense for aesthetics. They almost looked like—

"Bitemarks," Jetfire said quietly.

"When I get 'stuck,' or close to it, I want to bite things," Starscream said. "I made these so I'd always have something safe to bite."

Jetfire ran his fingers over the bitemarks. All along, his creator dealt with something so similar to him.

"We can work on something like this for you, if you want it."

Starscream was smiling at him. Warmth rose in Jetfire's chest, and he launched himself at his creator for another hug. It was returned, and he let himself sink fully into it.

Whatever troubles awaited them, he and his creator could sort them out together, just like they always had.

Chapter End Notes

Knowing what's to come makes this chapter feel especially evil.

▶ Talking about writing Jetfire's POV

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On nights like this, Starscream wished he still had his rollator. His pedes ached, and one of his legs refused to cooperate, buckling if he put weight on it for slightly too long. But that didn't matter—as long as he stayed close to the wall and took frequent breaks, he could traverse the halls. His destination wasn't far, anyway.

He turned a corner, and there it was. The door was closed, but when had that ever stopped him? With one hand against the wall to support himself, he hacked the datapad. It beeped as he bypassed its cybermetric security. Not ideal, but as long as there was no one in the lab—

There was someone in the lab.

Bright optics stared into his, standing out starkly in the dim room. Then, the automated lights flicked on, illuminating Skyfire's frame.

"Starscream," Skyfire said.

"Skyfire," Starscream replied.

How hadn't he noticed the mech wasn't in recharge? Foolish!

"What are you doing here?" Skyfire asked.

He had to know Starscream hacked the keypad. So why wasn't he irritated? Skyfire's wings were set in neutral position, twitching lazily as they helped him balance.

Who was he kidding? This was *Skyfire*, different universe or not.

"I know you're building a combiner team," Starscream said. "I want to see it."

Skyfire smiled, motioning toward the items he was tinkering with when Starscream came in. To anyone not versed in frame components, it looked like some scraps of metal, but Starscream knew better.

"That's great!" Skyfire said. "I was just working on the last one."

Skyfire led him across the room to a door, opening it with his signature. It was small, and not the best lit—before it was cleared it, it was probably a storage room. Before them sat five frames.

All but the last were intact. If it weren't for the dull colors of nanites yet to activate and the empty optics, Starscream could have mistaken them for living mecha. Though, a closer examination revealed copious complications—wings slightly too large or small, joints that wouldn't quite fit if they transformed, cockpit glass that wasn't as secure as it should be, the list went on. One in particular had a massive portion of its cockpit and wings just sitting on its back, as if Skyfire and the other Starscream hadn't known what to do with it.

"They're… interesting."

Skyfire sighed, wings drooping. "You can be honest with me. I know they don't look great."

"They look *terrible*," Starscream said. "But working with the resources you have and knowing that you're engineering a *combiner* of all things, it makes sense."

Combiners were created from multiple mecha. Never were they forged as combiners—the Enigma was required to give them that ability. During the war against the Quintessons, several teams were created from forged mecha in this manner. Only a couple were successfully built, and they didn't last long.

Both the individual and group alt mode transformation had to be engineered down to the smallest detail. One missed measurement could doom the whole team. The Enigma, on the other hand, could instantly modify the frames and coding of a team with great success.

The Autobots jettisoned it and many other powerful artifacts deep into space when the Decepticons were just about to get possession of them. Ironic, for it to end up on this planet.

"I know," Skyfire said with a sigh. "But we need them to be *perfect*. That's why we need you."

Starscream's wings shot up before he could stop them. "Me?"

"You're *Starscream*," Skyfire said, taking a step toward him. "If you're anything like my Starscream, studying the inner and outer mechanics of life is something you relish. Your help would greatly improve project Safeguard."

Starscream flexed his fingers. If there was any moment to strike, it was now.

"I understand that, and I would like to help," he said. "But do you truly need to make new mecha for this? Why can't you just find the Enigma and use volunteers?"

Starscream knew the answer before Skyfire could say it, but he still held on.

"There aren't enough forged mecha left," Skyfire said. "Especially not ones we can spare."

That little medic—First Aid—was he forged? Most medics were, but he was so small that he couldn't be that old. He was large for a cassette, sure, but tiny for a forged mech. Elita and Prowl were both drones. Come to think of it, he hadn't seen a single forged mech yet…

Even in another world, forged mecha dwindled to near none. The war wiped them out, along with their hegemony. A thought scratched at the back of Starscream's processor, begging to be

released: if the old system was gone, why were they still fighting?

Even at home, tensions between the three factions—Autobots, Decepticons, and the Cybertron Revival Initiative—threatened what little peace they'd established.

"And you can't use constructed mecha because they aren't flexible enough," Starscream muttered. "But why not reformat volunteers?"

A reformat would be nearly as resource-heavy as making a new frame. Constructed mecha—warframes and drones—were rigid compared to forged mecha. They could only take on alt modes similar to the ones they were created with. Most of the Decepticons hadn't even bothered changing their alts to blend in when they arrived on Earth. Finding suitable modes was too time-consuming.

"We've already come this far," Skyfire said, something sharp creeping into his voice.

"Did you not find enough volunteers?" Starscream asked.

Skyfire turned away from him and adjusted the helm of one of the frames.

"Or did you not ask for them at all?"

Skyfire's wings twitched.

"You *didn't*," Starscream growled. "Why didn't you?"

Skyfire released the frame's helm. He turned back toward Starscream, optics blazing. His wings fanned wide.

"You were right about one thing when you spoke with Commander Elita," he said. "We need more soldiers. Desperately. I'm *making* us more soldiers."

Starscream tensed his claws to strongly that the joints creaked.

"You're making *newsparks*!" Starscream hissed.

A memory file played in the back of his processor: Jetfire, cringing in fear as a crowd of mecha surrounded him. The fire on his fingertips was the the only thing keeping them away. Then, Windblade's cold words after Starscream fought them off.

'The mech who created you underwent empurata. Did you ever wonder why?'

The CRI proved they couldn't be trusted that night, just as Skyfire was proving now.

"I'm making *soldiers*," Skyfire said, baring his teeth. "A combiner team."

Starscream flared his wings in response.

"What if they don't want to fight?" He said. "I remember *very distinctly* two mecha who wanted to stray from their purposes—a little Seeker and a big shuttle. This is what we fought

the war over, Skyfire!"

Skyfire took a step forward and shoved him. Starscream stumbled backward into the wall, fighting a pained hiss as his legs protested the movement.

"*You* weren't here! *You* didn't fight in *this* war!" Skyfire growled. "*You* got to have peace. You don't know what this is like. It's them or us."

Starscream's spark pulsed in his chest, but the burning fury in his fuel lines outweighed it. He slashed at Skyfire's face, shattering his visor and leaving a small gash on his olfactory ridge. Skyfire cried out and took a step back, clutching his face.

Starscream stomped a pede.

"You're a *coward*!" He spat. "A sparkless coward!"

His Skyfire would never have done this! The mech abhorred violence, and his convictions were unshakeable. He sought freedom for every being so ardently that the Council had indirectly assassinated him by sending him on that expedition to Earth—the very same expedition that set Starscream on the path to meeting Megatron and joining the Decepticons.

Starscream's claws twitched as the realization washed over him. His spark grew cold.

That was it, wasn't it?

Skyfire was *alive* here. The Council had never noticed him. He never went on that expedition. This wasn't his Skyfire, nor had he ever been.

Starscream bypassed the keypad and left the room. He stalked through the lab, pausing at Skyfire's work area. Three quarters of a processor sat in the center of it. Starscream's body burned.

He knew what he had to do. Not now, but soon.

Behind him, the door to the storage area slid open. Skyfire stepped through it, energeon smeared across his face. The majority of his visor was missing. When Starscream's optics met his, he snarled.

"I know what Jetfire is," he spat. "Don't pretend you're innocent."

Starscream dug his claws into the table.

"I never pretended to be," he hissed. "But I'd like you to remind me what you 'know.'"

Starscream's plating crawled, the anger fading as his spark continued to pulse. His Skyfire never would have done this, but it was still familiar. Skyfire closed the gap between them with one large step and grasped Starscream's wrists. He ran his fingers over Starscream's knuckles.

"You made him from *me*," he said. "I know what that paint means. I'm dead in your world."

Starscream pulled his hands away. Skyfire let him. That settled something in his spark, the pulsing slowing.

"You are," Starscream said. "You went on an expedition and never came back."

Skyfire's face softened.

"The preliminary expedition to Vision 15-882 D," Skyfire said. "Starscream caught a virus and collapsed in the lab. I missed my window to accept the offer while I was caring for her, but I heard those who went never returned."

Starscream sighed. "I never knew the name of the planet. I just showed up to the lab one day and you weren't there. I kept trying to visit you, but eventually, they wouldn't let me in. I begged the Science Committee to search for you, then the Council themselves. They wouldn't listen."

Skyfire closed his optics.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

That pointless set of words. Starscream recognized the attempt for what it was.

"Please," Starscream said. "Reconsider project Safeguard."

Skyfire shook his head. "I already told you. I can't."

Starscream took a moment to think of a plausible lie.

"I guess I'll have to help you, then. Can't let you leave those transformation seams uneven."

Skyfire's optics widened. He smiled.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Starscream placed his hands on his hips and made a dramatic show as he turned toward the exit.

"It's late," he said. "I'm going back to recharge. You should, too."

Skyfire nodded. Satisfied with himself, Starscream took a step forward. His leg chose that moment to finally collapse under him. He compensated for it quickly enough not to fall, but the lift of Skyfire's wings showed that it wasn't enough. Skyfire approached him, offering an arm.

Starscream took it. The moment his arm touched Skyfire's, Skyfire's wings flew upward.

"Your plating is so thin!" He said.

Starscream rolled his optics.

"It's always been this way."

Skyfire scrunched his olfactory ridge. "Star's plating isn't this thin. Did you… were you ever diagnosed with a fuel processing disorder?"

They stepped through the doorway as Starscream scoffed.

"That's private medical information," he said.

Skyfire chuckled. "That's fine! You don't have to tell me. I didn't mean anything by it! Just… Star was diagnosed with one a long time ago. Before the war really started. Your plating feels like hers used to."

Bitterness coated Starscream's mouth. He hadn't been diagnosed until after the war, and only because he'd nearly died from consuming human vehicle fuel. It was that or starving to death. He always assumed that was the cause of his issues, but if the other Starscream's fuel processing disorder was noticed before the start of the war, was it really?

How long had it gone unnoticed? How much damage to his frame could have been prevented?

"I didn't exactly have the best time during *or* in the immediate aftermath of the war," Starscream said. "It's easier to miss a disorder when *everyone* is starving."

That had to be the reason. Every medic he went to couldn't have just *not noticed*—or worse, not cared.

"I guess so," Skyfire said.

They turned a corner.

"But, really," Skyfire said. "First Aid was a fuel specialist before he had to branch out. If you talk to him, he can probably mix you something that'll help."

Starscream already knew what he'd mix: prefiltered energeon. With his altered processing system, it wouldn't do much.

They paused as Skyfire opened the keypad to his quarters. They passed through the doorway, and Skyfire turned to Starscream, arm relaxing as he prepared to release him. Most of the energeon on his face was beginning to dry, but small amounts of fresh energeon still bled from his wound.

Starscream's wings twitched.

"Do you have a medkit?" He asked.

"It's on the shelf," Skyfire said, motioning toward the shelf of datapads.

Starscream made his way over. At the bottom of the shelf, shoved between datapads, was the medkit. He pulled it out and placed it on the desk. Then, the turned the desk chair away from it.

"Sit down," he told Skyfire.

Skyfire glanced at Thundercracker and the other Starscream, who were deep in recharge. After his group refused the extra berth, the other Starscream slept on it. His group was nestled on the floor between the two berths.

Skyfire sat. Starscream doused a rag with antiseptic and began cleaning Skyfire's face. The olfactory ridge was a delicate place compared to the rest of the face, and his attack struck deeper than he'd assumed. It was something the medic could fix in the morning, if Skyfire thought that was worthwhile. In the meantime, he finished cleaning, then applied nanite gel.

"Thank you," Skyfire whispered.

"Only fair to fix what I broke," Starscream said. "What do you want to do about your visor?"

Skyfire shrugged. "It'll grow back."

There were three common kinds of visors—externally applied protective visors, natural protective visors, and natural optic-integrated visors. Skyfire had the second to last. His visor, despite all appearances, was a part of his frame, and attached directly to his olfactory ridge.

Nearly half of the top portion of the visor was missing. Self-repair of non-essential projections like protective visors was a slow process. With how extensive the damage was, it would take a long time.

"Are you sure?" Starscream asked.

He took a capture and sent it to Skyfire. The other mech cringed as he received it.

"It'll… it'll be fine," Skyfire said, shoulders hu as hunching as his wings lowered. "Thunder won't like it, but I'll be fine."

"Alright," Starscream said.

He packed up the medkit, and both mecha rejoined their respective berthmates. Skyfire was right—the first thing Thundercracker did when she woke up in the morning was drag him to the medbay. When she asked him what happened, he responded with a lie.

"Slipped while I was working."

Starscream didn't know why Skyfire was protecting him. Cowardly, *forgiving* Skyfire. It made his plating itch.

☆☆☆

Starscream hissed in irritation as the message came through. His requests for lab space and supplies were rejected—they wanted a soldier, not a scientist. How *familiar*.

But the Autobots' lack of care wouldn't stop him. He needed to make something to help Jetfire with his biting problem, resources or not. He could break into the supply closet, but

there was a much easier option he could try first: asking his other self for aid.

Sure, he *could* ask Skyfire, but he didn't want to owe that coward anything.

So, as he sipped his energeon in the mess hall—sneakily running his fingers down Jetfire's elbows to lessen the newspark's anxiety—he kept an optic on Star. Skyfire's words from a few nights ago rang true as Star's energeon caught Starscream's eye. It was a different color from the others, though most mecha wouldn't think twice about it.

Ah, well. It would be something to bring up to Hook when they returned. There were more important things to worry about than his nutritional deficiencies.

The meal ended, and the group moved to go their separate ways. Starscream squeezed himself past Skyfire and reached around Star's wing to tap her on the shoulder.

She paused and turned toward him, wings twitching. "You need something?"

"Can I borrow your lab? And some supplies."

Star stared blankly at him. "Why?"

"I'm working on something for Jetfire," Starscream said. "My requests were denied, but he really needs it."

Hopefully, she was as soft as Skyfire. But she *was* a version of himself, so this could easily go wrong.

Star shrugged. "Sure! I'll have to supervise you."

"As long as I can make what I need, I don't care," Starscream said.

They made their way down the hall in silence. A few mecha passed by. Star waved to some of them. Most returned the wave. Any that noticed Starscream left quickly.

Save for one.

"Hey, Starscream!" A red and white mech said, waving as he approached. His doorwings were high in greeting. They shifted wide as his optics landed on Starscream. "And… *other* Starscream…"

Starscream rolled his optics.

"Hi, Bluestreak!" Star said.

"I'm really glad I caught you!" Bluestreak said.

The mech then launched into an unending ramble about various disconnected events, ranging from Sunstreaker's latest prank to how he saw a seagull when he and Hound went on a mission. Starscream tuned it out after the third irrelevant anecdote.

He glanced at Star. She made direct optic contact with Bluestreak, nodding along whenever there was a pause in his ramble. Despite the pleasant smile on her face, her plating was tense, and only grew tenser as the conversation continued.

Starscream tapped his pede. They had places to be. Star knew that. Why wasn't she interrupting?

"And then I asked what ice cream was and Spike said that—"

Finally, Starscream lost his patience.

"We have somewhere to be," he said, ensuring his volume overpowered Bluestreak's.

The Autobot's words stuttered to a stop. He glared at Starscream, then turned back toward Star.

Star wrapped her arms around herself. "Um, yes. He's right."

"Oh," Bluestreak said, doorwings lowering. "Alright. Can we talk later?"

Star nodded. "Of course."

They stepped past him. Starscream waited until they reached a sufficiently empty hallway before speaking.

"Why didn't you just tell him to frag off?" He said.

Star's pleasant smile shifted back to a familiar scowl. "It's *Bluestreak*."

"That doesn't explain *anything*," Starscream grumbled. "And what's up with the whole pleasant and smiley act?"

Star glared at him. "Autobots don't like Seekers. They especially don't like *rude* ones."

Starscream flicked his wings. "So?"

Star stopped walking. Her wings sat in neutral position, quivering as if they wanted to lower.

"The Autobots are full of unwritten rules. To be accepted among Autobots, you have to *act* like an Autobot," Star said. "Otherwise, you won't get what you want—like *you* with your lab space."

Starscream bared his teeth, irritation making his plating tingle. "Are you blaming *me* for Autobot Command not giving me lab space?"

Star placed her hands on her hips, baring her teeth back at him. They were completely flat, as if they were filed down. Starscream fought a shudder.

"You're not playing the game right," she said. "That's why you *lost*."

The tingling graduated to burning. Starscream flexed his plating in an unsuccessful attempt to make it go away. This was fragging *Megatron* all over again—countless unwritten rules, every single one created to hurt or hinder him.

"What are the rules, then? To always smile? To never stand up for yourself? To take whatever they throw at you?" Starscream swiped a hand across the air, the energy trapped beneath his plating too much to contain. "To be meek and pathetic? Do I need to grovel at their pedes and pray they take mercy on me every time I cycle air?"

"If that's what it takes," Star said.

Starscream took a step back. Star's dentae were grounded down, and so were her claws. Where weapons would have been was empty air. Starscream flexed his claws.

"I'm done playing those games," he hissed. "They've done nothing but hurt me. They'll hurt you, too. What will you do if the Decepticons raid this base? You have no weapons."

Star's scowl faded to a frown. "Scientists don't *need* weapons. The soldiers will protect me."

But what if they didn't? What if they were killed? What if they didn't arrive on time?

What if she were on her own?

A request to view a set of memory files appeared. It played without permission.

Bright, brilliant yellow. Laughter, cloaked by a fuzzy glow. An orb of light held in dark hands.

Then, an explosion. Screaming, crying his name. The world filling with static, low fuel notifications and damage pop-ups flooding him. Light leaving optics.

A yellow frame, fading and fading away.

"You're naive to believe that!" Starscream spat.

Star tilted her wings. "I'm *naive* to trust my comrades? I'm *naive* to think they're competent and will protect me?"

"No—"

Star took a step closer. She locked optics with his, fuzz building inside them.

"I'm sorry someone hurt you," she said quietly. "But I have *something* here, even if it isn't perfect."

She turned and walked down the hall. Starscream stood still for a moment, frozen. A shot straight to the spark chamber would've hurt less. Numbly, he followed her.

He had a project to work on, after all.

☆☆☆

Starscream was placing the finishing touches on his gift for Jetfire. His newspark preferred chewing to just biting, so it had to be something different from the arm guards. So, he settled on an object that could be repeatedly chewed, but was small and easy to store: a bracelet with a durable charm.

He sighed as Star moved in the corner of his vision. The other mech worked on the opposite side of the lab bench. What she did barely qualified as supervising, but Starscream wasn't about to complain. The disembodied hand in her grasp twitched as she stimulated it with an electrified rod. Disgust crept into Starscream's fuel tank, the meal Jetfire begged him to share earlier sitting like putty.

He'd fixed many of the seams on the frames himself. The final frame was far from complete—hence the disembodied hand—but the others would be perfectly functional if they had sparks. With the Emberstone in Autobot possession, only one thing was holding them back.

He and Star had established an uneasy alliance since their spat. They steadfastly avoided pushing one another's buttons, speaking only of mundane things. This might get him kicked out of the lab. But with the gift for Jetfire completed, what did he have to lose?

"Why did you decide to make new mecha for project Safeguard?" Starscream asked.

Star looked up from the hand and blinked at him.

"There aren't a lot of us left," she said. "If we run out of soldiers, who do you think they'll send next?"

Starscream sighed. "Would that be so terrible? Skyfire fought against the Quintessons. We both started off chasing down criminals. Neither of you are inexperienced. Those newsparks *will* be."

"They'll learn," Star said.

"They'll *die*," Starscream retorted. "And when they do, what happens? Will you melt down the remains of their frames to make new ones, just like during the Quintesson war? Just like what the Council did with defective drones?"

Star placed turned off the mechanism powering the rod and placed it on the table.

"We have to," she said, gaze falling to the table. "It's the only way."

Starscream bared his dentae. "It's a betrayal of *every* value we once stood for."

Star snapped upward, wings flicking downward with so much force that it created noise.

"I don't want to die!" She yelled. Her hands gripped the table as she sank. "I really don't want to die."

The disgust buried itself deeper.

"So you're sacrificing newsparks instead," Starscream muttered.

Star leaned against the table. She forced her optics upward, glaring at him.

"You're *helping*," she said.

Starscream sighed. "I'm giving them a fighting chance."

He placed the bracelet in his cockpit and turned away before Star could respond. He had what he wanted. There was no changing her mind.

It left him with one option.

Chapter End Notes

Starscream to Starscream communication never goes well.

Skyfire turned out a bit nastier than I expected him to. But he's like that for a reason.

▶ Rambling about Starscream's mobility aid and how that relates to his issues

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

Jetfire finished his shift in the medbay, bidding First Aid a farewell and heading into the halls, as he prepared to send a message to Starscream. His creator hadn't been given many tasks by the Autobots yet, so he was free most of the time. Same with Skywarp. That worked well for him.

Before he could send the message, one came in.

[Meet me in the mess hall.]

Jetfire fluttered his wings. What perfect timing!

[Can we ask Skywarp to come?] He replied.

[If she's available.]

Jetfire sent a message to Skywarp as he headed toward the mess hall and received a quick response.

[Sorry, can't come right now! TC is showing me how to repair a wall panel! But I can meet you after!]

Some of Jetfire's enthusiasm dulled, but at least he was still going to share a meal with his creator—even if it was plain, boring energeon. He reached the mess hall and stepped inside, freezing when the chatter of many mecha greeted him. Some looked up, but few noticed.

The pit crept up on him and he wrung his hands. He took a step backward, and that was the excuse his body required to flee. He stood against the wall beside the doorway, a hand on his chest as his spark pulsed.

Starscream would be here any moment. He could just wait outside where it was quiet and no strangers were around. It was fine.

He chewed on the tip of one of his fingers. The pit crept up further, and suddenly, refueling seemed even more unappealing than it already was. He ran his engine quietly, trying to soothe himself with its vibrations.

"Oh, look! It's the shuttle!"

The voice sent a painful zing through Jetfire's plating. He stepped backward, wings drifting low. Sunstreaker came toward him, flanked by the red mech.

"Still hanging out with those monsters?" Sunstreaker asked, a grin spreading across his face.

Jetfire wrung his hands so hard the plating gave. He *had* to wait for Starscream. If he left, then they couldn't have a meal together!

Sunstreaker waved a hand in front of Jetfire's face. "Hey. Shuttle."

Jetfire flinched. When the mech didn't back away, he bared his teeth and flared his wings. His spark pulsed harder than it already was. It *hurt*. He tried to tell them to frag off, but his vocalizer refused to activate.

Sunstreaker put his hands on his hips.

"What?" He said. "Think you're too good for us? I'm just tryna get you to hang out with *real* Autobots!"

Jetfire tried to speak again. Voiceless, yet again. Wringing his hands could only get him so far. The energy just kept building, the pit consuming more and more.

If he just reached over, put the slightest bit of pressure on Sunstreaker's plating, it would crunch like a—

Jetfire terminated that thought. His dentae itched.

Sunstreaker moved to speak again when the red one grabbed his arm. He turned back.

"What?" He said.

"Sunny," the red mech said. "Pay attention for a sec. I think he's scared."

Jetfire's vocalizer finally decided to work. It projected the words at maximum volume.

"I'm *not* scared!"

Sunstreaker and the red mech exchanged glances. Sunstreaker frowned.

"I see it now," he said.

How much longer was Starscream going to take to get there? Maybe Jetfire was better off if he went searching—

Sunstreaker stepped closer. He offered a hand. Jetfire stared at it. What did he want?

"Whatever you think we're gonna do, we're not," Sunstreaker said. "We just wanna hang cause you're the first new mech we've seen in forever."

Well, it was nice to know that they weren't stupid enough to just *tell* him they had ill intentions.

"Go away!" Jetfire hissed.

Sunstreaker went rigid. His face shifted into a grimace, dentae on display.

"You must be a real idiot if you—"

"Sunny!" The red one exclaimed, hitting the other mech in the side.

Sunstreaker turned toward him, hands curling into fists. "What?"

"He doesn't wanna hang," the red mech said. "Let's just go."

Sunstreaker stammered, but the red mech just turned away. After a withering glance toward Jetfire, Sunstreaker followed. With them gone, the hallway was much quieter.

Jetfire resumed his waiting, chewing on his fingertip. Starscream would be here any moment. What was taking him so long? Jetfire checked his chronometer. Had it really only been that much time?

He ran his hands down his face with a sigh. Where was Starscream now? With a quick glance down both sides of the hall to ensure no mecha were coming, he placed his hand in front of himself and activated his outlier.

A tiny flame danced in his palm. It flickered and rolled, too small to generate embers. His ability was powered by his own nanites burning energeon externally, so it was costly to use. Though, that mattered little because he rarely had a reason to use it.

"Practicing with your ability?"

Jetfire nearly jumped. He forced himself to stay still, conscious of the flame in his grasp. He let it fade as Starscream approached. Then, with a few large steps, he launched himself at his creator and wrapped him in a hug.

"I love you," he whispered. "You took forever to get here."

Starscream stayed silent for a moment, unmoving. He always got awkward when Jetfire said he loved him. It was as if he'd never heard anyone say it. Maybe he hadn't. Skywarp and Soundwave definitely never said it to him. That was why Jetfire had to say it.

"I was working on something with Skyfire and Star," Starscream said, withdrawing from the hug. "It was time-sensitive. Took a lot longer than I thought."

Jetfire shrugged. He really didn't care why Starscream took so long. He was here now.

"Okay," Jetfire said. "Let's go fuel."

Starscream smiled. "Yes. Let's."

Starscream walked ahead of Jetfire, so he had a decent view of his creator's stride. A slight limp was always present—it didn't seem any worse than usual. Both legs supported his weight just fine. Starscream was having a good day. The fact warmed Jetfire's spark.

Maybe he could ask him to fly with him today.

They got fuel from the dispenser and Starscream picked a table in the corner of the room nearest to the door. The mecha who were sitting there departed just as they got their fuel, but at this time of day, it wouldn't remain empty for long. Jetfire drank his energeon slightly faster than he should, torn between leaving the mess hall as soon as possible and wanting to spend time with his creator.

He winced as he yet again drank too quickly, overfilling his primary tank before it could drain to his secondary. With both tanks, he didn't need to refuel nearly as often as other mecha, but the time meals allowed him to spend with others was worth it. Besides, the secondary tank was for long term travel and compensating for fuel shortages. He didn't *need* to use the fuel inside it.

Starscream wasn't done with his cube yet, so Jetfire waited. He wrung his hands, plating scraping as his fingers ground against each other.

Starscream took a sip, then paused. He opened his cockpit just enough to slide his hand in, searching for something. Jetfire leaned into the table to see, but as Starscream pulled it out, he shielded it from him.

"I made you a surprise," he said.

Jetfire wiggled his wings, leaning toward him. "What is it?"

"Remember when we talked about our bad habits?" He asked.

Jetfire nodded. Starscream opened his hands and placed an object on the table: A small, coiled loop with a diamond-shaped charm attached.

Jetfire picked it up. The coils unfurled a bit, the charm hanging down.

"A bracelet," he said. "I like it."

He liked anything his creator made for him, because it came from him. But what was he supposed to do with it? Starscream had asked about bad habits…

"It's chew-resistant," Starscream said. He grabbed the charm with a smile. "Especially the charm. I figured it would help if you had something safe to chew on when you felt the need."

Jetfire squeezed the charm. Then, holding the loop of the bracelet, he brought the charm to his mouth and but down on it. It had some give, but it didn't fall apart. It wasn't the same as what he'd been doing, but maybe it would work. He pulled the bracelet around his wrist.

"What do you think?" Starscream asked.

Jetfire pulled Starscream into a hug. He stiffened before returning it. He always did.

"I love it!" Jetfire said. "Thank you so much!"

Starscream's wings wiggled. It was a small movement, very difficult to notice unless one knew to look for it. Jetfire grinned, warmth flooding his spark.

"I'm glad," Starscream said.

He picked up his half-finished cube and took a sip. Jetfire fiddled with his new bracelet, stretching the springy band. Suddenly, Starscream jolted upward mid-sip. He paused, then downed the rest of his cube in one large sip.

He turned toward Jetfire, wings lowering.

"I have to go," he said. "They want me on a mission."

He couldn't leave yet! They'd barely spent any time together!

"I'll come with you!" Jetfire said.

Starscream stared at him. "No."

He turned away, walking toward the exit. It was easy for Jetfire to catch up. As they passed through the halls, Starscream didn't speak. When he increased his pace, Jetfire increased his. He wasn't going to be left behind. They burst through the doors to an office—

And Jetfire may have regretted following his creator for a moment. Just a moment.

Prowl stared back at him, brow furrowed. His doorwings twitched. Beside him stood Skyfire and Skywarp.

Starscream turned to Jetfire. "Go back to Skyfire's quarters."

Jetfire fanned out his wings.

"No!" He said. "I'm coming with you."

He had no idea what sort of mission this was, but if both Starscream and Skywarp were going, he would be alone. He couldn't let that happen—especially not after those mecha harassed him earlier.

Prowl harrumphed. "I'll allow it."

Starscream looked between Prowl and Jetfire. He stomped a pede.

"He's not combat trained!" He hissed.

"Good thing it's just recon, then," Skyfire said.

Starscream's hands curled. "He's too young!"

Skyfire and Prowl exchanged glances. Starscream looked to Skywarp. Jetfire fiddled with the bracelet again. If they agreed…

"I was sent into combat the day I onlined," Skyfire said. "Star was sent out the moment she was purchased. There's no such thing as *too young*."

"He's a *newspark*!" Starscream yelled.

Skyfire took a step toward him. He stepped backward, wings flaring.

"Skywarp!" Starscream exclaimed. "You have to agree!"

Skywarp's wings sank even lower. "He *is* a warframe… they have combat protocols like we do, right? And he *wants* to go."

Skywarp's optics met Jetfire's. Guilt buried itself in his spark, but Jetfire refused to be left. They said it was just reconnaissance. He wouldn't need to fight.

(He filed away the mention of him being a 'warframe' for later—it wasn't the first time he'd heard it. No one ever gave answers that made sense.)

"I do," he said. "I really want to go."

"Then you'll go," Skyfire said.

Starscream stomped his pede, about to protest again when Skyfire cut him off.

"It's *his* choice," Skyfire said. "Let him make it."

"So *now* you'll let mecha make their own choices?" Starscream hissed at him. His wings drooped as he turned back toward Jetfire. "You're truly certain you want to come along? If this world's Decepticons find us, we'll have to fight."

Jetfire nodded, fighting the tingling nervousness that crawled through his plating. He had to do this. But was Starscream right to protest? Was he too young and inexperienced?

It didn't matter. He wanted to be with Starscream.

"I'm certain," he said.

◇◇◇

The sky was cold, but it was always cold. As they descended, the cold persisted. Jetfire landed in his alt mode, fighting a full body shudder as his landing gears touched the ground. It was blanketed in frozen whiteness—something he knew was called snow. There wasn't this much of it where the Decepticons had been on Earth in his world.

He transformed into robot mode. An alert proclaimed that due to the temperature, he was going to consume increased fuel, and to seek a warmer climate. Jetfire shook himself. That wasn't going to happen until they got back. Still, something about the cold made his plating itch. The back of his processor wanted him to flee.

Skyfire walked ahead with his scanner. The rest of the group trailed behind him. After a while of walking—Jetfire's fuel consumption growing high and higher as his frame rerouted power toward his sublimation system to generate heat—they paused between two large cliffs.

"The signal ends here," Skyfire said. "If it belongs to the Enigma, then it's somewhere in this area."

Starscream quietly muttered, "You don't *know*?"

Skyfire's wings twitched, but he didn't acknowledge Starscream's words.

"We'll search the ground first. If we don't find it here, then we'll split up to search the cliffs—Skywarp with me—" He motioned toward Jetfire and Starscream. "And you two together."

The ground search revealed nothing. Jetfire checked his fuel levels—still decent. He stuck close to Starscream. His creator was growing sluggish, optics dulling. He couldn't be low on fuel, since they refueled just before they left, so what was it?

As Skyfire declared they split up, Jetfire remembered. His fuel processing disorder—it must've been interfering with the efficiency of his sublimation system! If it wasn't working properly, he wouldn't be able to warm himself in the cold as easily as he needed to. This mission needed to end as quickly as possible.

So, Jetfire scrutinized every possible abnormality as they searched the cliffside. Since no members of the group knew exactly what the Enigma looked like, it could be hiding anywhere. A crack in the cliff caught his optics, and he followed it to a jagged cave.

The cave opened up into a wider cavern. Stalactites and stalagmites hung from the ceiling, many so large that they became one. Jetfire had to squeeze between them as he searched the cavern, letting out a hiss as one of them scratched his wing.

Light caught his optics. He increased his pace. Either this was an exit, which meant another area to search, or it was the Enigma! No matter how close he pulled his wings, the cave still scratched them, but he had to move quickly. Eventually, he reached the far wall.

A box sat before him, its sides glowing in strange patterns. This had to be it! Jetfire carefully placed his hands around the box. With a low hum, the box split apart.

Inside it was a small chip. Unlike the box, which glowed a brilliant blue and had an ornate pattern, the chip was a flat, dull gray. Had they really come all this way just for *that*?

Whatever. Jetfire pinched the chip between his fingers. After a moment's hesitation, he grabbed the box, too. As he wrangled it into his arms, it hummed again and closed. At least that made it easier to carry.

Jetfire squeezed back through the cave, wings stinging as the rocks rubbed against his scratches and created new ones. But his injuries were minor. They'd heal in a day or two.

Just as he was about to exit the cave, the familiar screech of a flying object gave him pause. The other members of the mission had no reason to fly that quickly, nor fly at all. Had they

been found?

[Starscream?] He sent.

The response was immediate.

[Jetfire! Where are you? We need to go!]

[I found a cave! And I think I found the Enigma! I was just heading out—]

The ground outside the cave shook as the sky screamed again. Jetfire ducked behind the cave's entrance. His message remained unsent as he peered around the side.

Bright, energeon cyan filled his vision, framed by a deep purple-pink. Two double-pointed wings stood starkly against the sky as pink optics gleamed. Jetfire knew all of the Decepticons in his world, but he had never seen this mech.

"I know someone is here."

Jetfire scrambled further into the cave. The mech's voice sounded like the verge of a storm—calm but able to unleash chaos at any moment. His spark pulsed as he pressed himself against the wall and remembered that was the only exit. Unless she decided to move on, he was trapped.

As pedesteps grew closer, he retreated further back into the cave, reaching the cavern again. He stood at the edge of it, turning the sensitivity of his audials to maximum. This world's Decepticons obviously wanted something from them. Whether it was themselves or the Enigma, Jetfire couldn't let them have it.

If he was going to fight, he needed at least one free hand. He tried to reopen the box, but it refused. He couldn't just throw it out—who knew if it was essential to the Enigma? He could place it in his cockpit, so he did.

But then, the chip was exposed. It was tiny, which made it very easy to lose. He didn't know how durable it was. If he placed it in his cockpit, it would rattle around, and could get crushed by the box.

Pedesteps drew close again. Jetfire had to make a decision *now*.

He solved the issue the same way he solved all of his problems: he put it in his mouth. As he crept behind a set of stalagmites, something in his mouth clicked. A download began in the back of his processor.

The mech burst through the caverns entrance, rays at the ready. Her optics scanned the cavern, quickly landing on him. She fired.

Jetfire leaped out of the way, the box rattling in his cockpit. Where he crouched moments before was a massive hole. The ray beam exploded on contact with the rocks, rather than searing straight through like his creator's did. Jetfire knew, in that moment, that if he got shot even once, he was dead.

"I can see you," the mech said. "Surrender and I won't need to shoot."

Jetfire cursed his bright white paint job. There was no way to hide against the dark gray walls. He was utterly *doomed*. There was nowhere to hide, no space to run, and he had no weapons—

Actually…

Jetfire emerged from behind the stalagmites, holding his hands up. The mech watched with narrowed optics as he approached.

"I surrender," he said.

The mech grit her dentae for a moment, wings twitching. Had she not expected this? That was good.

"You're not Skyfire," she said. "Who are you? What is your role on this mission?"

Jetfire lowered his hands as he moved to speak, but raised them as the mech aimed her rays at him again.

"I'm Jetfire," he said. How could he describe his role? He wasn't even supposed to be here. "I… just tagged along to help the search. We didn't find anything. We were about to head back."

She wouldn't let him go, but if she thought he didn't have anything, she might not look. Her wings flicked upward, and he knew he messed up.

"Then you won't mind if I check your cockpit," she said.

"Um… no!" Jetfire squeaked.

He stayed as still as he could as she moved to unlatch his cockpit, her rays still aimed at him. Spark pulsing so strongly it hurt, Jetfire braced himself. With a swift motion, he grabbed her arms and activated his outlier.

She screeched as her plating melted, giving under the combined forces of the fire and Jetfire's grip. Guilt nipped at Jetfire's processor, but it had to be done. With a mighty pull, he threw her across the cavern. Something inside her crunched as her body hit the stalagmites.

Jetfire cringed, but there wasn't time for regret. He sprinted out of the cave. After a moment's hesitation, he leaped into the air, using his rockets to slow his fall.

[Jetfire?]

Jetfire scanned the area desperately as he landed. The mech would only be down for so long. They had to get out of here before she got back up.

[I was attacked!] He sent to Starscream. *[A Decepticon Seeker. Cyan, purple, and pink.]*

[Must be Slipstream,] Starscream replied. *[I just took down Ion Storm. Acid Storm must be here somewhere. Be careful. I'll find you when I can.]*

Jetfire's wings twitched. He fiddled with his bracelet as he sent his reply.

[Okay.]

He… hadn't even told Starscream that he found the Enigma. Oh, frag. How did he forget to tell him the entire objective of the mission? He needed to send a message right away—

He let out a cry as something slammed into him from behind, sending him facefirst into the snow. Cracking glass reached his audials as pain spread across his cockpit. Before he could activate his outlier, cuffs clamped around his wrists. Still, he attempted to activate it, but received a weak fizzle in response. Activating his transformation gave him an error.

Hands grabbed him and he was flipped onto his back, one of his wings bending unnaturally in the process. Pink optics glared at him. Jetfire squirmed as Slipstream's hands unhooked his cockpit. He kicked at her, sending her flying as her own cockpit shattered.

Jetfire closed his cockpit and rolled over, stumbling as he pushed himself to his feet. He only made it a few steps before his wing was seized. A ray gun was shoved into the side of his helm. Slipstream's cockpit dug into his dorsal pack, the broken glass sinking into his plating as she pressed herself close.

"Pull that again and I'll blast your processor out of your helm," Slipstream hissed directly into his audial. She reached around his waist, claws drumming on the glass. "Now, open."

Jetfire opened his cockpit. He shuddered as Slipstream's hands entered it, scraping his interior. She clawed at him harshly, caring little for anything except her target. Her hands closed around the cube, dragging it along his interior. He let out a whine as it scraped deep and hot energeon leaked from the wound.

"Pathetic!" Slipstream spat. "Where are the Autobots getting their recruits?"

Jetfire didn't know if he was supposed to answer that. It didn't matter. Her focus quickly shifted to the cube. He attempted to wriggle away, but she just pressed her ray against his helm again.

Slipstream rolled the cube in her hand. "Tell me, *Autobot*—what does this do?"

"Not an Autobot," Jetfire muttered.

Slipstream pressed the ray harder against his helm. "Just tell me!"

Jetfire clenched his jaw until his dentae hurt.

"I don't know!" He said.

It was *technically* the truth. He didn't know if the box was actually part of the Enigma. If it wasn't, he had no idea what it was. It could be a useless case, or it could be an entirely

different artifact.

Slipstream scoffed.

"If you won't tell me," she said, dropping the box inside her broken cockpit. "I'll just have to find out for myself. The Autobots wouldn't send a search team if it wasn't important."

Jetfire sincerely hoped it wasn't. The program running in the back of his processor ended, sending him a notification.

{Download complete. Loading program…}

The downloaded program's name was a long, indecipherable string of letters and numbers. Whatever this chip had installed, he had no way to stop it. But the chip was safe for now, regardless of whatever it did to him. If Slipstream shot him in the helm, she probably wouldn't check his sublingual drive. It just wasn't a thing most mecha thought of.

Jetfire was thrown to the ground as something boomed in his audials. He pushed himself to his feet and ran, putting as much distance between himself and Slipstream as he could. Slipstream didn't pursue, turning toward whoever had shot her and firing. No one was there.

Skywarp appeared on the other side of her, wings spread wide. Slipstream let out a frustrated yell and lunged, but Skywarp just teleported again.

"Thank *frag* we found you."

Jetfire jumped at the voice next to his audial. He lowered his wings back to neutral position as he recognized the source.

"Starscream!" He whispered.

Starscream nodded. "Skywarp can only distract her for so long. We need to get to cover so we can evacuate. Follow me."

They climbed up the other cliff as quickly as they could manage, hiding behind a large outcropping. Skyfire stared as they slid behind it.

"Did you find anything?" He asked.

Starscream ignored him, so Jetfire did the same. As Starscream deactivated the cuffs, Jetfire peered around the rock, watching as Skywarp evaded hit after hit. Her wings dropped as she began to tire, signs of dizziness becoming clearer with each warp. Then, she disappeared and didn't reappear. Slipstream howled and searched for her.

Jetfire was pulled close, then the world twisting around him. He blinked, and they were in the middle of a temperate forest.

"Quite far from the base," Skyfire muttered.

Skywarp hunched against a tree, fans whirring.

"It's as close as I could get in one go," she said quietly, putting a hand to her face. "I can try again in a bit."

Skyfire nodded. He looked toward the rest of the group.

"We didn't find anything," he said. "Did you?"

"No," Starscream said. "We—"

"I found a chip!" Jetfire said.

The other two mecha went silent. Skyfire furrowed his brow.

"Where is it?" He asked.

Jetfire fiddled with his bracelet. "I, uh… put it in my sublingual drive. On accident."

Skyfire frowned. Starscream's optics went wide. He took a step back, wings twitching.

"That's alright," Skyfire said. "Did it download anything?"

"It did." Jetfire read out the program's name.

Skyfire hummed. Starscream tapped his pede, staring down at his claws. They were buried in his arm guards.

"That complicates things," Skyfire said.

Starscream whipped toward him in an explosion of limbs. "*Complicates* things?"

"We'll have to rework project Safeguard," Skyfire said calmly.

"You are not!" Starscream spat, clenching his claws and whipping one of his hands through the air. "You are *not*!"

Skyfire rested a hand on Starscream's shoulder. "We are."

Starscream swiped at him with a yell.

"Don't touch me!" He spat. "Don't *fragging* touch me!"

Skywarp opened her optics. Her wings went up in alarm.

"Skyfire," she said. "Screamer's—"

"Being irrational. I know," Skyfire said.

He wrapped his hand around Starscream's arm. Starscream's optics went wide as he bared his teeth and tried to pull away.

"You know this is the best course of action," Skyfire said gently.

"No!" Starscream spat, launching himself at Skyfire. He slashed his face, reopening the wound across his olfactory ridge. "No!"

Skyfire grabbed his hands. Starscream kicked him, still screaming. When that didn't work, he bit him, dentae sinking deep into the plating of Skyfire's arms. Skyfire bared his dentae and threw Starscream to the ground, then placed a pede between his wings.

Starscream thrashed beneath him, clawing at the ground. He kept screaming. It was the same things over and over—

"No!"

"Don't touch me!"

"You're *not*!"

Skyfire stared down at him with a frown. He sighed, as if Starscream's suffering was exasperating. Jetfire's plating tensed, especially tight around his chest. His spark burned.

"What are you doing?" Skywarp said, finally moving away from the tree. Her wings fanned out as she approached.

"I'm waiting for him to calm down," Skyfire said.

"Just let him go," Skywarp said. "He gets like this sometimes. It's easier if you don't force anything."

"I know," Skyfire said.

"Then let him *go*."

"He needs to learn that this isn't okay," Skyfire said. "Star used to do this. She only stopped after we held her down."

Jetfire played with the bracelet. His dentae itched as the pit crept up again. He wanted to bite the charm, but if Skyfire was doing this to Starscream for getting stuck, what would he do to *him*?

"Let him go," Skywarp repeated.

"He'll exhaust himself and go into recharge eventually," Skyfire said. "I'm just making sure he doesn't hurt anyone or wander off. It's a good incentive to *behave*."

"He doesn't *need* an incentive! He's been punished enough for things like this!" Skywarp snapped.

Starscream was still screaming. Both mecha ignored it. Jetfire wanted to do something—*anything*—but he didn't know how to help. So he stood, paralyzed.

"If you really think so."

Skyfire lifted his pede. Immediately, Starscream scrambled out from underneath it. Both mecha jumped back as he launched himself into the sky and transformed. Before anyone could even think to follow, he was already gone.

"There he goes," Skywarp muttered.

Skyfire glanced at her, brows raised. She growled, flaring her wings. He looked away.

"Let's head back," he said.

Skywarp made a frustrated noise before offering her hands. Skyfire and Jetfire took them, and soon, the group was inside of Skyfire's quarters. The vertigo that warping caused faded quickly. Jetfire took a moment to observe Skywarp, and he didn't like what he saw.

Her optics were dim. As Skyfire and Jetfire backed away from her, she spread her wings out and shook her helm. She took an unsteady step forward, her warp drive humming unusually loud as it activated.

"Now I need to go get Screamer—"

She gasped as her warp drive stuttered to a stop. Jetfire ran to her side immediately, panic seizing his spark. Skywarp clutched her chestplates, optics tightly shut.

"I'm okay," she whispered, voice filled with static as it strained to exit her vocalizer.

"You're not," Skyfire said.

He turned toward the other side of the room. Jetfire followed his gaze. Thundercracker sat up in the berth, a datapad by her side as if she was just reading. The red Starscream—*Star*—sat at the base of the berth, wings against the wall, with a datapad on her legs.

"Thunder, Star—can you two go look for Starscream?" Skyfire asked. "He flew off."

Thundercracker and Star exchanged glances before leaving, placing their datapads on the shelf on their way out. Skyfire watched them leave, then turned back toward Jetfire and Skywarp.

"I'm going to deliver our mission report," Skyfire said. His optics fell on Skywarp, something in his gaze softening. "You should rest."

Jetfire helped Skywarp to the spare berth as Skyfire left the room. Jetfire waited for a moment to ensure he was truly gone.

"Why did he do that to Starscream?" He asked.

Skywarp's hands still rested over her chest. She flicked one of her wings irritably.

"Because he's an ignorant idiot," she said.

Jetfire supposed that was true. But ignorant idiot or not, he was the one in charge of them until the Autobots deemed them trustworthy. What would become of them now?

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The forest was quiet. It always was. Scattered birds chirped as plants swayed in the slight wind, but that was all. With closed optics, Starscream took in the sounds.

He was humiliated. Completely, utterly humiliated. Emerging from an episode was like coming out of a stupor only to discover he had temporarily turned into a raging monster. Or, in the words of Megatron, a rabid turbofox.

He was fully aware of what he'd done. It still didn't feel like he'd done it. Someone else made those memory files. He'd just been dragged along.

But those were his memory files, and those were his actions. The spark-shattering fear and the violent need to destroy the perceived threat were all his. He sat down and lectured Jetfire about how important keeping the peace was only to break it himself. And in front of his newspark, no less!

Starscream buried his face in his hands. When that didn't work, he sighed, letting his hands fall into his lap. He stared down at his arm guards. Fresh, deep bitemarks marred them, made during the throes of his fit. At the very least, his plating itself wasn't injured at the height of his episode. The guards fulfilled their purpose.

Something deep within him craved pain. He *wanted* to take those guards off and sink his teeth in until he drew energeon. He deserved it. It would take the humiliation away.

"No," he hissed to himself.

He'd sworn not to do that. Why was it so hard to avoid thinking about?

A roaring spread through the sky, and he jumped. Flying objects—mech or human—landed nearby. Starscream's plating crawled. He should leave—he needed to leave—but he was rooted in place.

Pedesteps approached. Two sets. *Mecha*.

Starscream fanned out his wings. As the steps were nearly upon him, he charged up his rays. Then, two shapes burst from the trees.

Rays humming lowly as they powered down, Starscream took a step back. Star stared back at him, her red paint blending in with the setting sun. Behind her was the ghost he'd been

avoiding since day one.

"What are you doing here?" Starscream hissed.

"Skyfire sent us to fetch you," Star said. "Apparently, you 'flew off.'"

[Another violation of the rules,] she sent over comm. *[Are you even trying?]*

[So what if I'm not?] Starscream retorted.

He spent his calibration period as a newspark under the claws of the Enforcers, thrown into cells whenever he disobeyed, underperformed, or broke an unspoken rule. During the war, Megatron saw fit to berate, provoke, and violently discipline him for every small slight, often spouting nonsense or just not telling him at all if he asked why he was being punished ('You should know' wasn't an answer!). There was no such thing as 'rules' around mecha like that, only suffering. How did Star not realize it?

"Frag off," Starscream said.

Star and Thundercracker exchanged glances. With a roll of her optics, Star stepped aside. As Thundercracker approached, Starscream fought not to flee again. She sat down beside him.

Her wings were the same. Her optics were the same. She wore that same disappointed expression. The only thing that reminded him this was a mech from another world rather than a ghost was the small purple accents hidden on her frame.

"We need to head back," she said.

Starscream flicked his wing dismissively. "Yeah, sure. I'll find my own way."

"You need to come with us," Thundercracker said, voice growing sharp.

Starscream glared at her. Anger surged within him as he reminded himself that this wasn't *his* Thundercracker. That mech was long dead—killed by the Autobots and his own negligence. Star did *one* thing right in this world by not dragging her into battle.

"Make me!" He growled, baring his teeth.

Thundercracker looked away and sighed.

"What happened to you?" She asked quietly. The words were loud enough to hear, but she still faced away from him as she spoke.

Starscream snorted. What *hadn't* happened to him?

"I fell through a portal and now I'm constantly surrounded by idiots wearing the faces of my dead allies," Starscream snarked. "How about you?"

Thundercracker's olfactory ridge scrunched. "Am I dead in your world? Is that why you're avoiding me?"

"Congratulations, you have a working processor!"

She didn't take the bait. Her wings flicked irritably, but her voice remained soft.

"What did your Thundercracker used to do when you felt like this?" She asked.

Starscream gritted his dentae. He flexed his claws. In. Out. In. Out.

A message to Skywarp received no response.

"She stroked my wings," Starscream said. "Told me it'd be okay while muttering about how I'd inconvenienced her. I know this kind act is a lie. Give it up. You're angry with me."

"I might be, but getting you back to the base is more important," she said.

Starscream pulled his legs to his chest. He rested his chin on his knees and closed his optics. Despite the coldness that rose between them during the war, Starscream missed Thundercracker. She taught him how to capture mecha, and pulled strings to lessen his punishments when he broke the rules. Unfortunately, all of those strings snapped the moment they left the Enforcers for the Decepticons. He ended up having power over *her*, and the discrepancy led to arguments.

She wanted him to bow down—just *comply*—and blamed him for what happened with Megatron. Sometimes, he believed her. If he lowered his wings and groveled, maybe he'd be spared the beating. If he stayed silent, maybe the harsh words and cutting glares would retreat. Perhaps, the fleeting moments of kindness that Megatron spared him would've become the majority of their interactions, rather than moments spared after he was unable to drag himself to the medbay.

Frag, he sounded like *Star*.

"Please tell Skyfire not to use Jetfire in the Safeguard project," he said, words slipping out before he could stop them.

For a moment, he let himself believe that Thundercracker would listen. His Thundercracker, before the war, was kind and doting, if somewhat strict. She truly cared, even if she weaponized that care when it suited her. If anyone could convince Star and Skyfire to change their minds, it would be her.

Thundercracker stared at him for a moment, wings twitching upward, as if taken aback.

"He accidentally loaded the Enigma into his sublingual drive," Starscream said. "Skyfire thinks that means he has to become part of the team, but it doesn't. Please."

Had his Thundercracker begged like this when he got into trouble? Did her spark ache at the thought of him being harmed, too?

Thundercracker glanced backward toward Star. "I… can't."

"You have to!" Starscream said. "Please. He's just a newspark. He hasn't even completed his medical training—"

"Even medics see the battlefield."

Star's voice was toneless, unsympathetic. She stared down at him with narrowed optics.

"But not *him*," Starscream hissed. "He was created after the war. He's never seen combat. All of this is new to him."

"He's safer as a soldier than a medic," Star said.

"What the *frag* is that supposed to mean?"

Medics wore a universal symbol specifically to declare their status. Every soldier was told not to harm them.

Soldiers died every battle.

"The Decepticons stole two of our medics when they killed Skywarp," Thundercracker said. "They raided the base. Galvatron ripped Skywarp's warp drive out. Ratchet and Pharma tried to save her, but he *took* them before they could seal off the lines."

Why would Galvatron capture them directly from the base? Was it simply to weaken the Autobots? The Intergalactic War Code explicitly labeled the targeting of medics as a war crime. Then again, would a monster sparkless enough to rip a living mech's warp drive out care about such a thing?

"Pharma made it back to us," Star said. "We thought it was another raid at first, or maybe a spy. But it was him, desperately clawing against the entrance of the base. He had Ratchet's severed helm in his arms. First Aid had to sedate him so we could take it away."

Star closed her optics, a shudder running through her plating. Starscream knew what an involuntary memory file activation felt like well enough to recognize it.

"He's really safer as a soldier," Thundercracker said.

Where *was* Pharma now? First Aid was the only mech in the medbay aside from Jetfire.

Jetfire didn't want to fight. He could hardly fight at all. The mission today only proved that. If they put him out there, he'd only get killed. How couldn't they see that?

"He'll only be safe when we get home!" Starscream hissed. "Every moment he spends here is another moment of danger."

Star took a step closer, wings fanning wide.

"You made an agreement with Commander Elita," she said.

Starscream glared at her. "I don't intend to break it."

But it was already proving more harmful than it was worth. He had to do something, and soon. The answer in the back of his processor that he kept hiding stared him straight in the spark.

He knew what he had to do.

☆☆☆

The room was silent and dark, save for the light of Starscream's optics. He rose from his place, gently pulling himself out of Skywarp's and Jetfire's embraces. He stepped across the room and turned the sensitivity of his audials to maximum. No one stirred. Satisfied, he set them to three quarters of the maximum.

Then, he overrode the keypad and left the room. The halls were empty, but he wasn't deceived—security had eyes on every corner of the base. But he was prepared for that.

For as long as he could, he snuck out past recharge time to work in the lab. At first, he went with Skyfire or Star, but eventually, he was able to go on his own. He asked for permission at first, but started hacking the keypad after he grew tired of it. If he were honest, Skyfire and Star probably forgot that he didn't actually have access at this point.

The most paranoid of the security officers—some mech called Red Alert—wasn't on duty tonight. Starscream checked the schedule beforehand, but it was a lucky coincidence. He couldn't wait any longer. The frames were nearly complete.

He hacked the keypad to the lab. With all of the equipment off, the room was more silent than it had ever been. Starscream passed by the table, where scattered components of a processor sat. Upon assisting the project, Starscream learned that creating processors was the last step for each frame. Star did most of the work on them—Skyfire's large hands were poorly suited for the task.

Starscream opened a drawer. He pulled out a hammer, and with a swift swing, smashed the processor. The delicate organ gave under the blow immediately with a crackling crunch. He inspected it. Could they possibly piece it back together?

Resolutely, he lowered the hammer a second time. Now, it was unrecognizable. Letting the hammer fall to the floor, he headed to the other room. Bypassing the cybermetric lock was trivial. Not much was needed to fool the scanner into thinking it was Star rather than him.

He charged his rays, set them to maximum power, and fired on the first frame. Its helm was blown off, neck completely obliterated. That wasn't enough. He fired again, and again, until it was nothing but shards of metal.

Then, he started on the second. It was sturdier, and required more hits to destroy, but he managed. The third was more delicate, and required significantly less. As he stepped toward the fourth, glass and metal crunched beneath his pedes.

The fourth frame fell to his attacks quickly, and he was on to the fifth. The first shot blew a hole in its spark chamber. The second… left a mark.

Starscream charged his rays again. Another shot that barely made an impact.

{Alert! Insufficient power for selected null ray intensity!}

He checked his fuel levels. *Slag*. Of course he had to run out before he could finish. He flung himself at the frame, tearing at it with his claws. *Anything* to delay the project.

Voices reached his audials. Pedesteps thundered through the lab.

"Frag," he hissed to himself.

They'd noticed. How did they notice? The lab was soundproof! No one should have heard him!

The voices grew even closer. Starscream abandoned the half-destroyed frame to claw at the wall. The edges of a panel popped loose, and he pulled until his elbows hurt from the strain. With a screech, the panel released from the wall.

He shoved himself through the hole it created. The last time he was inside of a wall, he was barely three quarters of his height. This was a much tighter squeeze than back then. He pulled the panel back into the wall as best he could, trying not to let himself think about how he was going to get out.

He shuffled his way through the walls, wings scraping against every wire and projection. Then, eventually, he reached an area where the outer plating of the ship was thinner than others. Unable to turn without scraping the paint off of his plating, he slammed his back into the wall until it gave.

He fell backward into the rock that surrounded the Ark. His wings stung as energeon leaked from them, but he couldn't tell where it came from. There wasn't enough time for medical treatment. So, he launched himself into the sky and transformed.

{Alert! Fuel levels low!}

He'd have to hope the Decepticons still made their base in the same place. It was far, but it was the only place to go. He pushed himself as much as he could, knowing that the more distance he put between himself and the Autobots, the less likely they were to catch him.

Finally, he arrived at the old Decepticon base. He landed on his knees, cooling fans kicking in as he received error after error. Legs threatening to give in at any moment, he dragged himself from tree to tree. The entrance was buried within the mountain, but if he got close enough, someone would confront him. It was all he had to rely on—he definitely couldn't make it up the mountain in this state.

Step after step, tree after tree. Just one more. Then another. His limbs shook. He was so close! Just a little further!

His knee gave, and he collapsed cockpit-down. His limbs splayed out, barely enough energy in them to dig his claws into the earth as he wailed in frustration. He was just outside the perimeter! Couldn't he have made it a few steps farther?

Starscream forced his elbows underneath himself with a weak growl. He would crawl if he had to. This was too important to let himself die. Then, he heard it—a shuffling in the trees. He rolled onto his side to get a better look.

A flash of red—There it was!

"Laserbeak!" He said, nearly cringing at the desperation in his voice. "Laserbeak!"

The retroraven cassette chirped, ruffling its wings.

"Please—" Starscream's plea was cut off as his systems rerouted power. Forcing words out grew exponentially more difficult. "Tell them I'm—I'm here. I want to join."

Laserbeak leaped off of the branch and glided to the ground. It stared at him, then swiftly pecked him on the olfactory ridge.

"Ve—very funny," Starscream muttered.

Laserbeak trilled and tilted its head. Then, it pecked him again. Starscream swatted at it, but the move set him off balance, and he immediately flopped over. Laserbeak trilled again.

"Gr—rr—great," he said.

He was going to die because this obnoxious cybird thought it was more amusing to toy with him than do its job. Laserbeak took its duties seriously, but it knew he wasn't a threat in this state. It could play with him as long as it wanted.

After another peck, Laserbeak twitched its wings and activated its rockets. It took to the sky and disappeared over the trees. Had it grown bored so quickly? At least it might be reporting his presence to… whoever handled security.

Was Soundwave alive in this world? No one had mentioned him. There was a pattern forming—most of the mecha alive here were dead in his world. He picked at the brittle leaves on the ground. If that pattern held, then Soundwave would be…

A chirp drew his attention. Laserbeak stood over him yet again, this time with a cube of energeon in its beak. It dropped the cube in front of him. When he didn't reach for it, Laserbeak nudged it toward him.

Starscream reached for it—

{EMERGENCY STASIS INITIATED.}

He really should've seen that coming.

☆☆☆

The ground was cold, gray, and empty. Well, empty save for a copious amount of dirt. Ahead of him were large bars that hummed with electricity. The hum pierced his plating, invading his entire body. He pushed himself to his knees and leaned against the wall.

Waking in a cell shouldn't have felt *familiar*. At the very least, he knew he wasn't with the humans or Autobots—they preferred energy fields to electrified bars. The Decepticons shifted from bars to fields after too many prisoner escapes (not including his own, which didn't matter). So where was he?

Purple plating caught his optics, and the memory files finally loaded. Galvatron stared down at him, arms folded. Behind him stood Slipstream. She scowled at him, her wings set wide.

"You're awake," Galvatron said.

Starscream readied himself. He may not have another chance, and he would be useless inside of a cell.

"I want you join you," Starscream said. "The Autobots betrayed me. They claimed they would help me get home only to use me. I want revenge."

Galvatron's optics narrowed. "Why should I believe you?"

The burning, scrutinizing gaze was familiar. Starscream pushed back the fear scratching at his processor. This was no time for that.

"They were working on a combiner gestalt. I destroyed the frames they created before I left. There is nothing for them to use."

Galvatron hummed. Slipstream's wings flicked.

"I say we execute him," Slipstream said. "He's just an inferior copy of that traitor."

Galvatron turned toward her. She flinched, taking a step backward as her wings lowered.

"A copy is still a *copy*," Galvatron said. "However inferior you think he is. If he is anything like the Starscream we know, his intellect will be useful."

Starscream caught his wings mid-flutter and forced them to stay still. This might be his chance! If Galvatron was already interested, integrating himself would take a lot less work.

"I've studied in many fields," Starscream said. "My world's war was much further along than yours. I crafted all kinds of weapons. If I were given the resources, I could recreate them. I also led the Decepticon air force, and was named second in command—"

"I don't need your life's story," Galvatron said, face contorting into a sneer. "I just need assurance that you won't betray me when my back is turned. I've had enough of that."

Slipstream flinched again. Starscream noticed the odd behavior, but paid it little mind. He had something much more important to focus on.

Galvatron wasn't buying it! What else could he offer?

"Of course," Starscream said, trying to keep the fear from his voice as his spark rate increased. "I just want to see the Autobots suffer. I have no ambitions! Accept me into your

ranks, and you'll receive a capable and loyal scientist."

Better to advertise himself as a scientist than a warrior. With the ever-lingering and inconsistent fatigue that plagued him, he was one poor day from being an energeon stain on the battlefield. The skirmish with Acid Storm and Ion Storm had only proven that—he'd barely been able to save Jetfire. Skywarp did most of the work.

"Words are empty," Galvatron said. He stepped forward and held a hand out, palm up. "I want proof. Give me your cable."

Starscream's wings shot up. His *cable*? Galvatron wanted a *connection*? He'd have direct access to his memories!

Starscream's spark pulsed, sending pain through his chest. His limbs grew numb. But there was no other option.

Slipstream's wings fluttered. "Sir, I don't think—"

Galvatron pulled his hand back, using the momentum to push Slipstream, his palms colliding with her chest.

"Silence!" He bellowed. "Turn off the electricity. If this mech wants to prove himself, let him."

Slipstream stepped away, clutching her chest. A moment later, the electricity turned off with a quiet click. Galvatron glanced toward Slipstream before sticking his hand through the bars.

"Now," he said. "Your cable."

Starscream pushed himself to his feet, leaning on the wall as he made his way to the front of the cell. His limbs shook beneath him. He slid his arm guard off and opened his panel, exposing his medical port, and willed his cable to release. With his other hand, he pulled it out and placed it in Galvatron's waiting palm.

Galvatron pulled his hand back out of the cell. He slotted the cable into place.

{Connection detected! Authorize?}

Galvatron was requesting full access. If Starscream granted it, he could read or modify anything. He didn't trust Galvatron, and Galvatron didn't trust him, but he had no other options.

Starscream let his firewalls down.

Galvatron grinned as Starscream received message after message of the mech accessing his memory files. The speed he went through them was dizzying—a headache bloomed in Starscream's helm from the sheer amount of data he was accessing. His cooling fans clicked on, quickly reaching full power.

"Slow down," he hissed. "It hurts."

Galvatron gave his words no heed. Rather, the mech intensified his search. Starscream closed his optics to combat the pain.

The memory files were out of sequence. One moment, he was squawking indignantly as Skywarp poked him in the side when they first met. The next, he was staring down the barrel of Megatron's fusion cannon. Another, and he was holding Jetfire close. One more, and he was falling from the ventilation shaft.

He held a retrorat as Skyfire demonstrated intralineal injections. Crawling through the walls, he hid from Ramjet as the mech sought him out, bitter that he was chosen above all others to be Megatron's Second in Command. He took a handful of energeon goodies from a target, munching on them as the criminal ran off. Then, he was at Soundwave's side as he taught Starscream how to navigate the communications console.

Smoke clogged his olfactory sensor.

"Pl—please," he whined, his voice filled with static. "I'm going to overheat."

He already was.

Memory files kept flashing by. There was no reprieve. He was a fool. He knew that now. He was going to die here—

It stopped. Galvatron lingered on a file.

☆☆☆

{Playing file…}

"Look at this!" Starscream exclaimed, hunching down.

A tiny creature shuddered at his pedes. It stared up at him with beady eyes and bared teeth. He reached down to touch it, then paused as the animal yipped at him.

"Just some organic creature," Megatron said. "Come on, Starscream. We need to move."

Starscream stared up at him with a scrunched olfactory sensor as the old mech glared at him, completely unamused. Why didn't he find this as fascinating as he did? These creatures were just like the ones on Lightness 24-56 C! Whatever niche they filled, and ancestors they had, must have been similar despite being solar systems apart!

Starscream sighed and followed Megatron as the mech turned away. He'd just have to find more of the creatures tomorrow to confirm his theories. They had a war to fight, after all. If they didn't move quickly, the Autobots would find the energeon cache on this planet before they did.

They returned to the campsite. Skywarp paused when they noticed them, wings high in greeting. Then, they warped behind Starscream, immediately upon him. They rubbed their hands across his wings and helm. He pushed them off, but they continued their assault mercilessly, cackling all the while.

"Stop it!" Starscream said between laughs.

"You're just too easy to get!" Skywarp said, poking him on the olfactory ridge.

"Starscream!"

Megatron's bark stilled both Seekers. Skywarp disentangled themself from him. Before them, Megatron held the tent open. Light seeped through the entrance.

"Y-yes, Megatron?" Starscream said.

Megatron's voice never betrayed anything when he yelled—Starscream could be in trouble, or he could be about to receive praise. The uncertainty put him on edge.

Megatron waved him closer. "Come here. Soundwave and Thundercracker are checking in. My *Second in Command* needs to hear what his subordinates have to say."

"Right!" Starscream said, sprinting into the tent.

In front of him, the holoscreen displayed Soundwave sitting calmly at the communications console, and Thundercracker standing sheepishly behind him. Thundercracker brightened upon seeing him, wings raising in greeting.

"Starscream!" He said. "How's scouting going?"

Starscream wiggled his wings. "We didn't find anything. We're checking the next site tomorrow."

Meetings between other members of command were hardly like this—Megatron was always at Starscream's neck, sending him comms to sit this way or that way or telling him that he sounded unprofessional without saying why—but he made exceptions for calls like these. It was just Thundercracker and Soundwave, after all. Soundwave didn't care about formalities, and Thundercracker had known Starscream since he was a newspark.

'Was' being the key word—he *wasn't* a newspark anymore no matter what Thundercracker claimed. How would the Decepticons look if a *newspark* was leading them? He was a fully-calibrated mech!

"You're getting enough energeon, right?" Thundercracker asked. "And Skywarp, too?"

Before Starscream could voice an affirmative, Megatron grunted.

"Primus, Thundercracker! I'm not starving them!" He said.

"You say that—"

"I know how much fuel they consume," Megatron grumbled. "You've made that *very* clear. How is the air force?"

Thundercracker stiffened, posture shifting from open to formal.

"Ramjet and Ion Storm had an altercation during training," she said. "But after breaking them up I managed to resolve the matter peacefully."

Starscream snickered. Those slag-for-processors were always fighting. Ramjet and Thrust particularly enjoyed picking on others, and Ion Storm and his wingmates were their favorite target (second to him, of course—but they were complete cowards and would never try anything if he had company). They usually only stopped after he fired warning shots. Unlike most of the air force, Ramjet and Thrust were warframes rather than Seekers, and were quite bitter about being led by a mech much younger than them.

"Other than that, there's nothing to report."

Megatron hummed. "Satisfactory. Now, Soundwave—how's the rest of the armada?"

Soundwave looked up from the console.

"Halls—loud. Fights—numerous. Discipline—dealt. Energeon—scarce. Reduced rations—causing restlessness," Soundwave said. "Full report—will be sent."

Megatron nodded. "I look forward to receiving it. That is all."

He moved to end the call. Soundwave tensed.

"Soundwave—wishes to ask a question," he said.

Megatron withdrew his finger from the button.

"What is it?" He said.

"Query: Why did Megatron go with Starscream?" Soundwave tilted his head. "Why send Starscream? Why not send other mecha?"

Megatron glanced at Thundercracker.

"I have my reasons," he said. "You'd do best not to question me."

"Soundwave—does not understand."

"Starscream has studied alien flora and fauna," Megatron said. "He is skilled in navigating difficult terrain. He and Skywarp make a formidable team, and are perfectly suited for this mission. But they need guidance. You and Thundercracker do not."

Starscream's wings fluttered, warmth rising in his spark. Megatron called him skilled! He called him perfect!

Soundwave sank in his seat. "Soundwave—understands."

Megatron ended the call.

Starscream hopped in place, unable to contain the tingling joy that coursed through him. Megatron turned toward him with a scowl.

"What is it now?" Megatron said.

"Did you mean it?" Starscream asked.

"Mean *what*?"

Starscream hopped again. "That I'm skilled? That I'm perfect for the mission?"

Megatron sighed. He leaned down and patted the top of Starscream's helm roughly. Starscream squeaked at the unexpected contact. A small smile formed on Megatron's face.

"Yes, you're a skilled little Seeker and perfectly suited for this mission," he said. His smile dropped as he turned away. "Now, stop begging for compliments."

Starscream's enthusiasm fizzled. What was that supposed to mean?

Whatever. Megatron called him skilled. That was enough.

{Playback suspended.}

☆☆☆

{Closing file…}

Starscream opened his optics slowly. Purple optics stared into his, a furrowed brow framing them. With unexpected gentleness, Galvatron disconnected Starscream's cable. Starscream retracted it and closed his panel with a snap.

Smoke rose from between his plating. His fans ran at maximum intensity, the noise filling the room. Errors filled his logs. All he wanted to do was lay down.

"He's trustworthy," Galvatron said. He turned toward Slipstream. "Take him to a free room. I have other business to attend to."

Galvatron walked down the halls. Starscream finally listened to his body and slumped to the ground. Just as he laid himself flat, the bars slid away with a cacophony of clangs.

Claws poked his side. He hissed.

"I'm not carrying you," Slipstream said. "Get up."

Starscream curled up. Slipstream growled and put her arms underneath him, hoisting him into the air. He went limp in her hold, too numb and tired to do anything else.

Slipstream groaned. "Of *course*."

Despite her words, she carried him to the nearest room. She dropped him roughly onto the berth. He was too tired to cry out as his wings landed at the wrong angle.

She kicked the edge of the berth. Starscream hissed as the vibration coursed through his plating.

"You heap of slag!" She spat. "I don't know what he saw in you, but he saw *something*. You'd better survive the night, or he'll blame it on me."

Starscream searched for her comm channel. There was no way his vocalizer would work right now. The inputs swam in his processor, but he managed to find it.

[Medbay?]

"No medics," she said. "No supplies, either. Cool yourself or die."

Starscream didn't care. He closed his optics. Maybe after recharge, he'd feel better.

The door slid shut as Slipstream left.

Chapter End Notes

As you can probably guess by now, the Slipstream in this fic is heavily inspired by TFA Slipstream. She isn't a literal clone of Starscream here, but... Well, I should probably let you guys draw your own conclusions. At least for now. ;3

I cleaned up and posted a bunch of my cybertronian biology headcanons/ideas [current day author edit: hoping to repost that here as well after I figure out how it would be tagged on here], particularly ones related to what's been depicted in this series. It was long enough that I could justify posting it directly to here, LMAO. I didn't make it directly part of the series because I'm probably gonna reuse those ideas in future works, and the guide isn't part of the narrative.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Jetfire woke from recharge to Starscream hacking the door's keypad, he thought nothing of it. He shouldn't have. Maybe then, Starscream would still be here.

Instead, he stood silently as the base was searched. Walls were dismantled. A misshapen panel on the outside of the Ark was found. He was gone. Perimeter searches returned nothing.

"Did he tell you anything before he left?"

Jetfire stared down at the table, ignoring Prowl's request. His spark was hollow, completely enveloped by the pit. Starscream was gone. Why did he leave? Why didn't he take Jetfire with him?

"Jetfire," Prowl snapped. "Did he tell you anything?"

Jetfire shook his helm.

Starscream didn't say *anything*. Why didn't he say anything? He just *left*. Now he couldn't come back—not after what he did. They called him a traitor. But if he was a traitor, that meant he betrayed Jetfire, too, didn't it?

His creator didn't mean it. He wouldn't hurt him like that. It had to be something else.

"Are you sure?" Prowl asked. "You don't remember any suspicious remarks? Anything that could've led to this?"

Starscream was angry at Skyfire—so angry that he'd gotten stuck. Jetfire didn't know exactly *why*, but it had something to do with him and the Enigma. Was it his fault? Did he do something?

It washed over him like a bucket of ice. This was *his* fault. *He* made Starscream leave. He loaded the Enigma into his sublingual drive, and somehow that resulted in Starscream doing what he did.

Prowl was staring at him. He should say something. But he knew it in his spark—his vocalizer wasn't going to work. So he just shook his head.

"So you don't know anything?" Prowl asked.

If Jetfire didn't actually *say* no, was it still a lie? He couldn't speak, anyway. Just the idea of pulling his comms up made him want to bite, but…

He fiddled with the bracelet. Again, he was reminded of what he'd done. He didn't even know *what* it was—he just knew it was all his fault. But even if this was all his fault, Starscream still loved him, right?

His creator wouldn't want him to hurt himself. So, Jetfire bit down on the charm and composed a message.

[He was angry with Skyfire over me.]

Prowl's expression didn't change. His doorwings twitched so slightly that it was nearly undetectable. It was the only indication that the received Jetfire's message.

"Skyfire requested urgent changes to project Safeguard," Prowl said. "You're aware they involved you, correct?"

Jetfire attempted to sink his dentae into the bracelet's charm. It didn't give. He shook his head.

Prowl's brow furrowed. His doorwings twitched.

"Your Starscream, our Starscream, and Skyfire were working on Project Safeguard," Prowl said. "An attempt to make a functioning combiner gestalt. Skyfire requested *you* be added to the team. Did you consent to this?"

Skyfire and Starscream hadn't explained their argument. Was this what it was about? Skyfire wanted him to be a part of this project, and Starscream didn't. Jetfire should say no on that alone. But curiosity crept into his processor.

Combiners were rare. He learned a bit about them in his classes, since when treating them, medics needed to keep their status in mind. It was important not to use treatments that could impair combination.

To know Skyfire wanted to make him one of them…

[I didn't know,] Jetfire sent. *[Can I think about it?]*

Prowl sighed. "Very well. You may go now."

He motioned toward the door. Jetfire stood up slowly and made his way out of the room. Immediately, he was in Skywarp's arms.

"He didn't hurt you, right?" She asked, feeling along his plating.

Jetfire shook his helm.

Skywarp squeezed him. "Oh, thank Primus. How'd it go?"

[He just… asked me questions.]

Skywarp was quiet for a moment. Then, she flicked her wings and resumed checking his plating. Jetfire tried not to squirm under the attention.

"Good," Skywarp said. "Maybe they have some integrity after all…"

Jetfire didn't know what that was supposed to mean. Why did she think they would hurt him? What would the point of that be?

"I—" His vocalizer crashed and rebooted. "I want to talk to Skyfire."

Skywarp's gaze sharpened. Her grip grew tight.

"*Him*?" She growled.

Jetfire nodded.

"What do you even have to talk with him about?" She said.

"Prowl said some things," Jetfire murmured. "I want to know if they're true."

Skywarp looked away, her lips curling. Her wings twitched. She shook her head. Her claws dug into Jetfire's plating, clutching him as if he would disappear at any moment.

Jetfire thought of Prowl's words. Starscream, Star, and Skyfire were working on a project. Skyfire wanted to use him for it because he loaded the Enigma into his sublingual drive

"Did Starscream leave because of me?" Jetfire asked.

Skywarp's grip slackened as her optics went wide. Her wings shot upward. She took a step back.

"No!" She exclaimed, her voice gratingly loud. When Jetfire flinched, her next words were softer. "None of this is your fault. It was *Starscream's* choice to do this. And that idiot'll be back before we know it. He's done things like this before."

Her voice grew tense toward the end. Her wings trembled, almost like she didn't believe herself. They drooped as she spoke again.

"He'll come back," she said. "He has to. How else will we get home?"

"You're right. He'll come back."

Jetfire didn't know if he believed it. But if he didn't know, then it wasn't a lie. It was just what Skywarp needed to hear. He pulled her into a hug, taking care not to put too much pressure on her as he squeezed. She melted into it.

They stayed like that for a few moments. No one came down the hall. It was just them and nothing else. Then, Skywarp withdrew.

"Let's go back to the room," she said.

She took a few steps. Jetfire followed. He nearly walked into her as she froze, a gasp escaping her vocalizer as she clutched her chest.

"Skywarp?" He said quietly.

"I—I'm okay," she said, the words strained. "I'm okay. Just… give me a moment."

He rested a hand on her shoulder as she stood, hand nearly shaking from the intensify of her grip. Then, as quickly as it came, the moment passed. Skywarp released her chest and carried on as if nothing happened. But her wings remained low, and her steps were slower than usual.

Whatever was going on, it didn't need 'just a moment' to go away.

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Jetfire wanted to keep watch on Skywarp, but she insisted that nothing was wrong. It seemed like she found every possible excuse to get away from him, even though he knew that couldn't be true. But with Starscream gone, she was the only mech he could rely on.

He sat at the desk, reading yet another datapad. The last several ones he tried were all romances. He didn't have anything against them, but he really wasn't interested in 'fuzzy feelings in the spark' or whatever else passed for descriptions of romantic love. It was just… weird.

And so many of the stories had little else in them beyond romance! If they had an actual plot, he could tolerate the endless descriptions of the love interest's every panel and decal. He'd stay for grand battles, or political feuds, but most of them were just two mecha meeting in a fuel shop. Who was choosing these?

Whatever. At least this one—

The door slid open.

"He set us back *months*!"

Jetfire carefully placed the datapad back on the shelf. Star and Skyfire burst through the door. With a dramatic flourish, Star crossed the room and flopped backward onto the spare berth.

"I just can't believe it!" She finished.

As Jetfire moved back toward the desk, the projection on his elbow caught one of the datapads. It slid out, taking several others with it as it crashed to the ground. The other two mecha slowly turned toward him.

Jetfire stared. Skyfire stared back.

"It doesn't have to be *months*," Skyfire said. "It could just be weeks, if we change focus."

His words were obviously intended for Star, but he wasn't looking at her at all. Jetfire fiddled with his bracelet.

Star rolled onto her cockpit. "Prowl *said* he wouldn't approve the request unless—"

Skyfire motioned with his hand. Star fell silent. After a moment, Skyfire stepped closer. Jetfire jumped as he backed into the desk's chair, his plating tensing. Crouching down, Skyfire offered Jetfire a smile.

"Prowl must have told you by now," Skyfire said softly. "We need your help with Project Safeguard. You're the only mech who can do it."

Jetfire's vocalizer refused to work. Forcing the words out made it crash again.

"Wh—what do you need me to do?" He managed to get out after a reboot.

He knew. He just wanted to confirm it.

"When you loaded the Enigma into your sublingual drive, you started the gestalt creation process," Skyfire said. "From every record we could find, it's irreversible. The moment the Enigma is loaded into another mech, you *will* be reformatted."

Then he didn't have a choice, did he?

"I'll be part of a combiner," Jetfire said.

Skyfire nodded. "You will. With the strength of you and your partner's combined form, we'll be one step closer to sending you home."

If he agreed, Jetfire would granted an immense amount of power—both in strength and in value. Skyfire and Star obviously lacked the resources to make any other combiners, or new frames at all. He and his partner would be the only combiner team, which would make them indispensable.

But he would have to fight. Jetfire knew his strength. The moment he onlined, his creator's plating crumpled beneath a light touch. He spent every moment fighting his own strength, desperate not to hurt anyone. Would it be a relief to finally use it for something?

There was one way to find out.

"I'll do it," he said.

It was the only way forward. Skyfire said it himself—once the Enigma was loaded into another mech, he would become part of it. It was irreversible.

◇◇◇

The frame stared into his optics with its lifeless visor. Skyfire and Star claimed that it was a mishmash of parts from the ones that were destroyed, but it was uniform. It was smaller than

him, only reaching the base of his chin, and much slimmer. Supposedly, the destroyed frames were larger, but the damage Starscream dealt left much less to work with than before.

The door slid open. Star slipped behind Skyfire, holding a fuel receptacle in her hands. She placed it on the floor and connected it to the intralineal that was already in the room. Then, she opened the frame's medical port and connected the intake to the intralineal. Skyfire watched her before turning back to Jetfire.

"Are you ready?" Skyfire asked. "All you need to do is take the Enigma out of your sublingual drive. Star will handle the rest."

Jetfire nodded. He sent the command to release the chip from his drive. It popped out immediately. He dug his fingers into his mouth to retrieve it.

{Frame syncing protocol activated! Searching for matching signals…}

He handed the chip to Star. She connected her cable to the frame. Without a spark, every command the frame ran was manually requested. Star opened the frame's sublingual drive and placed the chip in.

{Matching signal found! Establishing wireless link…}

Star's optics narrowed in concentration. Curiosity nipped at Jetfire.

"Why are we doing this now?" He asked. "Why not wait until the frame has a spark? Wouldn't it be easier?"

How were they going to give the frame a spark, anyway? Starscream told him how he was created. They needed a donor, and neither Star nor Skyfire said anything about it.

"The reformatting process is rigorous," Skyfire said. "It's easier when there isn't already a spark."

What was going to happen to him? Tension crept through his plating. Maybe he should've asked more questions.

{Wireless connection established!}

"You'll be fine." Star's voice was flat as she stared down at the frame, still locked in deep concentration. "This is just for convenience."

The room fell silent. Eventually, Star removed the Enigma from the frame and disconnected her cable. The intralineal was left in. She offered the Enigma to Jetfire.

"For safekeeping," she said as he took it. "You earned it."

Jetfire hesitated. What was he supposed to do with it? He settled for loading it back into his sublingual drive. This time, it didn't download any programs. It just sat there, completely inert.

{Compatibility reformatting in progress…}

Jetfire fiddled with his bracelet.

"Who's donating the spark?" He asked quietly.

Star and Skyfire exchanged glances. Skyfire huffed. Star flicked her wings.

"It's only fair," she said.

Skyfire unlocked the door with a sigh. They left the lab and made their way through the halls, eventually leaving familiar territory. The further they walked, the darker the halls became. They sputtered to a stop in front of a set of double doors.

Skyfire unlocked the doors. They swung open automatically with a screech, exposing a dim and dirty floor. The light ahead was broken, shining at half brightness through cracked glass. Star and Skyfire stepped forward, and Jetfire cautiously kept pace.

Rooms were carved into the walls. Each had a keypad beside them. The floor inside hadn't been cleaned in a long time. Dirt coated some of the rooms, while others were splashed with old energeon.

One of the rooms had a translucent orange wall at the front of it, and Jetfire realized what this truly was: A prison.

Red optics stared from the back of the cell. Then, suddenly, a mech was at the front of it. The mech screamed as his plating made contact with the energy field. He fell backward, landing with a loud crash.

Sharp, angled wings stuck out from his back. A large crest accented his head. The symbol on his cockpit was an Autobot brand. What was he doing here if he was one of them?

"Are you here to let me out?" The mech asked.

There was deep desperation in his voice. It crackled and screeched as if it were damaged from overuse. His plating was scratched and dented, the colors dull from chronic underfueling.

"Not yet, Pharma," Star said. "Soon."

"Why can't it be today?" Pharma asked.

Star's optics narrowed. "We're not ready yet. *Soon*."

Pharma clawed at the ground. His fingers were worn and energeon-stained—this was a *habit*.

"Please!" He said. "I'll behave! I just want to say hello to Ratchet."

Star put a hand to her face. Beside her, Skyfire flicked his wings. His brow furrowed.

"Ratchet is *dead*," Skyfire said. "You know that."

Pharma's optics widened. He slammed his fist against the floor.

"No, no, no!"

Each yell was punctuated by a slam of his fist.

"I saved him!" Pharma screeched. "Don't lie to me! I saved him! It isn't funny!"

"We aren't lying," Star said.

Pharma swung at the electrical field. It buzzed as it zapped him. He screeched, falling sideways. He thrashed on the floor for a moment, limbs trembling, before he dragged himself back toward the front of the cell.

"Just let me out!" He cried. "I'll show you that I'm not lying! You'll see!"

Something in Jetfire's spark twisted the wrong way. His plating crawled as bitterness coated his mouth. What were they doing here?

"Soon," Star said.

Why did she keep repeating that? Why couldn't they just let him out now?

"Why are you here if you aren't going to let me out?" Pharma cried.

Star twitched her wing. "Just checking in."

She turned away. Skyfire followed her toward the exit. But Jetfire hesitated and that moment of hesitation was his downfall. Pharma's optics landed on him and his struggle renewed in fervor.

"You!" He yelled. "Let me out! Please!"

"I—I can't!" Jetfire squeaked.

"Please! You have to—"

Jetfire was seized by the arm. His pedes dragged as Skyfire pulled him away. Pharma jumped at the electrical field again.

"No!" He howled. "Please!"

He screeched as he was electrocuted yet again. The doors shut, blocking out the noise. Jetfire pulled himself out of Skyfire's grip.

"Why are you keeping him there?" He whispered.

"He's dangerous," Skyfire said. "That's the only place he can't hurt anyone."

Jetfire clutched at his chest as his spark *churned*. His fuel tank hurt like when he ate something he wasn't supposed to, but he hadn't.

"He's hurting himself," Jetfire said.

Star huffed. "He always does. First Aid will take care of it when he gives him his checkup."

"W-why not just keep him in a room? Why do you have to keep him all alone in a cell?"

"He'd just escape," Star said, not even looking at him.

Jetfire clenched his fists until the metal creaked. "Did you even try?"

The silence was the only answer he needed.

What kind of place was this? Were the Autobots always this cruel? Was that why the Decepticons fought them? How could they do any of this and think it was okay?

First, they pinned Starscream down when he was stuck. He needed privacy and understanding, not to be manhandled! Then, they locked a sick mech up all alone and let him hurt himself! If Jetfire got stuck, what would happen to *him*?

Skyfire's sigh pulled him out of his thoughts. The mech laid hand on his shoulder.

"Look, Jetfire—" Skyfire closed and opened his optics, silent for a moment, as if the words pained him to speak. "Some mecha are created with processors that don't work right. It makes them unstable. They hurt other mecha. They hurt themselves. They scream. They cause disruptions. There are only two ways to fix it: make them behave, or lock them away so they can't hurt anyone again."

Jetfire decided it would be unwise to tell Skyfire *his* processor didn't work right, whatever 'working right' meant. He hurt others, but not on purpose. He caused disruptions, but he didn't want to. Still, he didn't want to be locked away. Not like Pharma.

Jetfire searched for Star. If she was a version of Starscream, did she have the same glitch he had? If she did, then did she realize this also applied to her?

She frowned at him. Closing her optics, she looked away.

"It's the truth, Jetfire," she said.

It wasn't.

◇◇◇

They just finished spark resuscitation training, and Jetfire had sore, trembling hands to show for it. Placing the wires correctly and holding them in place took just the right mixture of strength and carefulness to cause strain. Even First Aid admitted it was a tiring procedure, but ultimately a necessary one to learn. The need rarely arose, and success was even rarer, but if it saved even one life, it was important.

Jetfire put the wires back in the cabinet. He turned to ask First Aid where the spark simulator went, only to jump backward with a yelp as First Aid stood directly behind him. In his hands was a large energeon cube. As he held it out to Jetfire, the viscosity made one thing clear: this was medical grade energeon.

Medical grade energeon was a general term. It referred to all heavily supplemented energeon intended for medical use. The high amount of additives resulted in a thicker liquid. Jetfire glanced at the label on the cube. This particular kind was for fueling after severe injuries or a highly invasive surgical procedure—it encouraged rapid growth of nanites and was processed quickly.

"Why do you have that?" Jetfire asked.

First Aid pushed it toward him. "Take it. You'll need it."

Jetfire stared at him. Why would he need it? All he'd done was training!

"I know about your role in Project Safeguard," First Aid said. "Skyfire sent me the files last night. You're going to *need* this."

Jetfire took the cube carefully.

"Okay," he said. "Thanks."

He didn't drink it until he said his goodbye and entered the hallway. After a quick glance down the halls to ensure no one was there, he opened the cube and downed it as quickly as he could. Both of his tanks were on the lower end, so the fuel was needed. He just wasn't sure he needed medical grade energeon specifically.

Unlike mecha with a single tank, he could go long periods without refueling—especially if he shut many of his systems off, like he would if he were drifting through space. It was easy to change the configuration of his secondary fuel tank from everyday use to storage. He never told anyone about it, but that was what he did when the Decepticons and Autobots were heading back to Cybertron. Energeon supplies were so low that barely anyone had more than the bare minimum.

So, to be here, where energeon was handed out so freely, and to hold a cube of med grade in his hands…

The CRI had modified them to eat metal and other materials because they ran out of energeon. *He* could eat other things. The mecha of this world couldn't. Was it wrong to drink that cube when he knew it wasn't necessary, and another mech might need it?

But First Aid insisted, so he did. Why *was* he so insistent, anyway?

Jetfire flinched as something in his chest pinched, distracting him from his thoughts. He rubbed along the seams of his plating to find the cause, but as quickly as it came, it went. Whatever it was, it didn't matter.

The hall was still empty. Jetfire tapped on the sides of the now-empty cube. Something in the back of his processor told him to bite it. He started fiddling with the bracelet to find the charm. The pit wasn't here, so why did he want to eat it?

He found the nearest receptacle and recycled it before it could tempt him further.

The rest of the day followed a similar pattern—doing his usual tasks, feeling something pinch somewhere that went away the moment he tried to investigate, and fighting temptation to eat things he shouldn't. After his processor screamed at him to eat the datapad in his hands, he just gave up and laid on the floor.

It was close enough to night, anyway. No one would care if he went to recharge early. A decent defrag might clear out whatever this was. So, he closed his optics…

And jolted awake. The room was dark. Skywarp was curled next to him, her arms across his cockpit. Jetfire squirmed away, the contact burning. If his plating hadn't finally become fire-resistant just before this whole incident started, he would've assumed he was on fire. As a wave of pain crawled through his plating, he forced back a scream, not wanting to wake anyone.

He dug his claws—*claws*? He didn't have *claws*—into the floor. They sank in easily, creating divots that held him in place as he trembled. His body laid at an odd angle, as if he couldn't sit flush to the floor anymore.

What was happening? Was this what First Aid was trying to warn him about?

Another wave of tremoring agony washed across him. Energeon flooded his mouth as his dentae met his tongue. As the wave receded, he ran his bleeding tongue along his dentae. Small, sharp projections stuck out of them. Those hadn't been there before. They must've been what punctured his tongue.

He wished Starscream was here. He'd know what was going on. He'd hold him and tell him it was okay and—

He dug his claws in again as more pain shocked his systems. Too distracted to swallow, energeon dripped from his mouth to the floor, splattering his arms. When it finished, he was a mess of energeon and oral lubricant. His fans clicked on, body hot from the exertion the tremors caused.

He waited a moment, then another. No tremors came, but he had no idea if they'd stopped. Still, he had to act while he could. He crawled back toward Skywarp. Careful of his new claws, he tapped her gently on the shoulder, and shook her when that didn't work.

She grumbled as her optics opened.

"Whaz goin' on?" She muttered.

"Help," Jetfire whispered. "I have no idea what's happening but it really hurts."

Skywarp's optics widened. She sprung into action, feeling along his plating. It burned like before, and Jetfire let out a whine as he tried not to back away.

Then, the tremors came back. He tried to push her away, but his claws snagged on her seams. She yelped as she was slammed to the floor. Jetfire tried to back away, but only succeeded in dragging her with him.

"It's fine, it's fine—" Skywarp whispered desperately. "You'll be fine—"

Eventually, the wave stopped. Skywarp disentangled herself from Jetfire.

"I'm gonna get Aid," she said.

With a whoosh of air, she disappeared.

There was shuffling behind him. He dug his claws into the floor in case another wave came. Pedesteps approached, stopping right next to his audials.

"Could wake an entire barrack with that," a voice—*Star's* voice—said from the other side of the room.

"Don't be rude," came the voice right beside him.

Thundercracker. Jetfire shuffled away from her, but he didn't get far before his trembling arms gave out.

"We should've predicted this." *Skyfire.* "He's a warframe. They're not very flexible."

"Well, what were we going to do?" Star said. "Not like we had the resources for a manual reformat."

More shuffling. The whoosh of quickly and irritably fluttered wings.

"If you thought this might happen, you should've warned him!" Thundercracker said.

Star's optics were bright enough that Jetfire could see as she rolled them. "Would he have agreed if he knew?"

Jetfire honestly wasn't sure. But, if he knew they would withhold this sort of information from him, he wouldn't have agreed. It didn't matter whether he would experience this—it mattered that they *intentionally didn't tell him*.

A whoosh of displaced air silenced the group as Skywarp reappeared with First Aid in tow. Her hands clutched her chestplates, and she stood stiff for a moment. Then, with a few bleary blinks, she motioned toward Jetfire.

First Aid knelt in front of him. He held out his hand, palm up.

"Let's see what's going on," he said.

Jetfire opened his medical panel—

The wave washed over him again. Panic building in his spark, he pushed himself backward, only to smack his wings against Thundercracker.

"Get away!" He yelled. "You need to get away right now!"

First Aid stepped back immediately. Thundercracker hesitated, but quickly backed off as the tremors began. Jetfire dug his claws into the floor again—the only thing keeping him anchored. He rode the wave, flopping into a heap when it receded.

"Does it feel like it's going to happen again?" First Aid asked.

Jetfire shook his helm.

"Can I try to get some readings now?"

Jetfire nodded and offered his arm. First Aid connected himself to Jetfire. After a moment, he hummed.

"Your processor is experiencing surges—particularly in the locomotive node," First Aid said. "They're making your neurocircuits misfire. I have a temporary program that should help."

Jetfire tried to speak, but his vocalizer refused to cooperate quickly enough. So, he settled for nodding. He received a notification as First Aid uploaded the program.

"I'm going to place a pain patch now, if that's alright with you."

Jetfire hummed an affirmative. The patch took the edge off, but the pain was still there.

"That program should stop the tremors," First Aid said as he disconnected. "Or at least reduce their intensity. If it doesn't work, someone needs to come get me."

"I will," Skywarp said.

First Aid dipped his helm. "Good. Now, I have a feeling I know what caused this."

"Wh—" was all Jetfire managed to get out.

First Aid understood despite the lack of actual words.

"Reformatting mecha into combiners doesn't just change the frame. It alters the processor, too. The reformatting program must've hit a snag it couldn't cope with. It should self-correct eventually," he said. "But I want to give you an exam tomorrow to make sure it actually does."

Jetfire nodded. That was fine with him. Anything to keep this from happening again.

"Okay," he said, standing up. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

A hard-won word finally exited Jetfire's vocalizer.

"Tomorrow."

First Aid smiled at him as he passed through the doorway. A brief silence fell over the group. Then, Star flopped backward over in her berth. Skyfire laid back down in his, and motioned for Thundercracker to join him. She obliged, wrapping herself around him as she settled back in.

Skywarp laid down beside Jetfire.

[You doing alright?] She sent to him.

[As alright as I can for now,] he replied.

She laid an arm across his cockpit, hesitating for a moment as her arm slid off of its surface. She repositioned it and closed her optics. Jetfire followed her example.

He could learn more about whatever this was tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Took Jetfire's main support away from him and then hurt him. I actually feel evil for once. The more I write, the more fucked up this chapter gets in hindsight.

I did a bit of research on seizures because they were the closest comparison I could think of to what Jetfire experienced here, particularly focal aware seizures with motor symptoms. I have migraines occasionally, so I took some influence from that, but I know those are very different experiences. The most accurate description of what's actually happening to Jetfire is what First Aid said--his processor is caught in some sort of loop. His nervous system is literally being rewired, and he wasn't built for that, so something bad was bound to happen.

▶ (Re)Designs for the Jettwins, Slipstream design and edits of the alt universe character designs

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Unfamiliar walls faded into view. Starscream was on a berth—an uncomfortable, flimsy berth. With a tired groan, he rolled over and pushed himself into a sitting position. A smattering of errors pestered him, but none were *too* important, so he ignored them all.

He checked his fuel levels. They came back low, so he flopped out of berth. He leaned against the wall as he walked, aching limbs beneath him. Frag, he missed his rollator. If he knew he was going to land himself in another universe, he would've taken it with him.

He snickered to himself. That wasn't something anyone expected. Not even Skyfire.

Dirt crunched beneath Starscream's pedes and he grimaced. This place was *filthy*. Stray flecks of energeon stained the walls, and the floor was covered in mud. By the looks of it, no one had even bothered to maintain it. Yet another difference between worlds. Maybe without Starscream, the Decepticons didn't care about living in squalor.

The few mecha he passed in the hallway didn't greet him, not that he expected them to. Some stared, but none spoke. He entered the mess hall. What was a jovial and rough around the edges place was now a silent, awkward hole.

No conversation filled the room. The handful of mecha that populated it drank their energeon quickly, too busy gulping to speak. They watched the room as they drank, as if they expected someone to drop from the ceiling and take it.

Starscream crossed the room, heading for the energeon dispenser. The room remained silent, optics tracking him the whole way. He ignored the stares. A cybernetic lock guarded the dispenser. Starscream nearly chuckled. Those were such easy things to bypass, alternate universe selves or not.

He rolled his optics and tried it anyway. No point in bothering unless he was being rejected. It would be a waste of effort. The dispenser chimed and gave him a cube.

Huh. He was already in the system, then. Galvatron worked quickly.

Starscream took his cube and searched the room. Plenty of the tables were empty or close to it. He settled for the one farthest from the others. Just as he popped open the lid, someone approached. He trained his sensors on them, but didn't look in their direction. What business would anyone have with him here?

"Give me the cube," the mech said.

Starscream recognized the rough, deep voice. It was one he hadn't heard in a long time—not since before the war left Cybertron. It was some quick thinking mid-battle that saved Starscream an eon of power struggles, and now, in another world, that idiot was *alive*.

He turned to face Ramjet. The warframe stared back, stupid cone on the top of his helm and all. His wings were wide, but not fully extended—he wasn't intending to fight *yet*. That could change at any moment.

"No," Starscream said, lifting the cube to his lips to take a sip.

Ramjet slammed his fist on the table, wings fanning out. "Now!"

Starscream glared at him. The idiot was as obnoxious in this world as in his, it seemed. Before he killed him, Ramjet insisted Starscream was unfit for basically *any* duty. He accused him of weakness, and attempted to take his rations whenever he could. Starscream learned to drink his rations in his room or with his wingmates, unable to take the fragger by himself.

He was barely half Ramjet's size back then. Now, as he rose to show off his own wings, he was at Ramjet's shoulder. The idiot was barely shorter than Megatron, which was owed to his status as a flight warframe.

"Why should I?" Starscream said.

Ramjet bared his dentae. "I'll kick your aft if you don't."

Such a boring threat wouldn't have cowed even his younger self. Starscream placed the cube behind him on the table. He leaned forward and bared his dentae.

"*You*?" He said. "You couldn't even beat a glitchmouse in a fight."

Ramjet growled. "I'll show you a fight!"

He lunged at Starscream. How predictable. Starscream sidestepped, compensating for his weak leg by swinging it. With a loud crash, Ramjet hit the table cockpit-first.

Starscream began charging his rays, setting them on medium—he didn't want to kill the fragger quite yet—when Ramjet whirled around and grabbed him by the top of his ray. He yanked Starscream forward, moving his hold to the top of his arms before swinging him.

Starscream activated his thrusters just before he would've hit the table. He grinned. With his pedes off the ground, the real fight could begin.

He launched himself at Ramjet with a graceful leap, aiming a kick toward his cockpit. Ramjet grunted and folded backward as Starscream made contact with his target. Glass shattered beneath his pede.

Starscream aimed his rays at Ramjet, ready to ask him to surrender, when Ramjet shot upward and grabbed his face, forcing his dorsal strut to bend at an awkward angle.

Starscream hissed in a mixture of surprise and pain as he attempted to pull his leg out of Ramjet's cockpit.

He *could* fire his rays, but with Ramjet's hands on either side of his optics, it would be a blind shot. It was better than nothing. He decreased the power of his rays and fired both of them at once. He and Ramjet were flung across the room in different directions.

{Alert! Fuel levels low!}

Of all the times…

Starscream attempted to push himself up, using the seat of the table he crashed into as leverage. His wings burned, plating creeping as energeon dripped down them. He stilled as his cooling fans kicked on.

Ramjet rose, energeon weeping sluggishly from a handful of cuts. He had few marks to show.

"Ready to surrender?" Ramjet sneered.

Starscream's spark pulsed. His chestplates tightened.

"No!" He hissed.

Despite the shakiness of his voice and the quivering of his wings, he wasn't afraid. His frame just didn't get the fragging memo. He forced himself to stand.

He would *not* lose his rations to a mindless brute!

Ramjet stepped into range. Starscream swiped upward, catching one of his optics. Ramjet stumbled backward with a cry.

Starscream's limbs shook as he watched Ramjet clutch at his optic. He flexed his claws. He wasn't afraid. He wasn't.

When he killed his world's Ramjet, it hadn't been a fair fight. They were in the middle of the battlefield. Ramjet flew down to engage an Autobot. Starscream followed him.

So distracted by the Autobot, Ramjet didn't notice the shot that struck him cleanly through the helm. It hit the autobot, too—two for one. Starscream left them there, spark humming anxiously for the rest of the battle. Laserbeak flew overhead, and he knew he was done for.

But Megatron didn't call for him. Ramjet was counted among the soldiers lost, and no punishment came. Starscream never told anyone. He *was* a traitor all along, no matter how much he lied to himself.

It was for the cause. He convinced himself of that for a long time. Ramjet was disruptive and insubordinate. But it wasn't for the cause, and never had been. He'd done it for himself.

The ultimate act of hypocrisy.

"What's happening here?"

Ramjet immediately straightened at the voice, wings snapping upward. Starscream sank to the ground as he disengaged his thrusters. At the doorway was Slipstream, hands on her hips and wings held high as she surveyed the room.

"Winglord Slipstream!" Ramjet exclaimed.

Starscream kept himself from laughing. *Winglord?* Like that stupid nickname the Seekers gave him at the start of the war? *That* Winglord?

"Explain what happened here," Slipstream said.

Ramjet's wings fluttered anxiously. "Just showing the new recruit how things work here, Winglord!"

"You'll do no such thing," Slipstream said, glaring at Ramjet as she pushed past Starscream. "This one is under Galvatron's protection."

Ramjet's wings lowered. "I—I didn't know—"

Slipstream raised her hand and raked her claws across his face. He clenched his dentae, averting his gaze.

"Now you do," she said. "Go fix those tables. No rations for you tomorrow."

Ramjet saluted her. "Yes, Winglord!"

Ramjet practically leaped toward the nearest overturned table. His wings were still low as he righted it. The remaining mecha in the room watched him silently.

Slipstream turned toward Starscream with a sigh. "Now, *you*. Come with me."

Starscream resented being ordered around like a common soldier, but he had no other options. So, he followed her into the hall. Her plating was tense, her dentae bared. The moment they were out of audial range, she whipped toward him.

"You worthless piece of *slag*!" She spat. "Galvatron wants you alive, so I'll keep you *alive*, but just know that I'd rather leave you to die! Get into another altercation like this, and I'll scrap you—Galvatron's current fixation or not! He won't mind if his property is damaged as long as its spark still turns."

Seriously?

"Do you understand me?" Slipstream hissed.

Starscream fought not to roll his optics. He had to play nice here, if he wanted his plan to have any chance of working.

"I do," he said.

Slipstream fluttered her wings.

"Good," she said. "Galvatron asked to see you. Primus knows why, but that's where we're going."

The command room opened to a familiar sight—a tyrant lounging on a throne. Galvatron stared down at them, a hand on his cheek as he leaned his head. He sat up as they approached.

"Satisfactory work, Slipstream," Galvatron said. He motioned toward the desk at the side of the room. "You may take your place now."

Slipstream obeyed, fluttering her wings. She sat, glancing at Starscream before redirecting the entirety of her attention to Galvatron. Starscream did the opposite, allowing his optics to wander. On the other side of the room, a second desk sat. Buzzsaw stood on the top of the chair, helm turning toward Starscream. Laserbeak pecked at the datapads that sat on it.

A closer examination revealed a thick coating of dust. Cobwebs sat between the datapads in the stack. The desk was disused for some time. Starscream understood the obvious implication: Soundwave was dead, and had been for a while. If this universe was anything like his, that meant the Decepticons currently had no communications officer nor third in command.

Galvatron tapped loudly at his armrest, drawing Starscream's attention back to him.

"Now that you've recovered from proving your trustworthiness—" Starscream wouldn't *quite* call himself recovered. "I wish to speak with you about your place in the Decepticons."

Time to put on the show again. Starscream twitched his wings.

"I'm an accomplished scientist—"

"The Decepticons have little need for scientists," Galvatron said.

Starscream's optics wandered toward the empty desk again. He couldn't allow Galvatron to rank him as a common soldier. That would exponentially increase the difficulty of his plan, and plant a massive target on his back—from both Autobots and Decepticons. He would be killed on his first mission.

"Are you in need of a communications officer?" Starscream asked. "I trained under the Soundwave of my world. It's been a long time, but I *do* know how to work the console."

Galvatron hummed. "Yes. I did see you were very close with Soundwave in your memories. Take his old desk and console."

Starscream dipped his helm and stepped away. "Thank you, sir—"

"I didn't tell you to sit."

Starscream froze in place. His plating crawled. A memory file begged to play in the back of his mind. He declined it.

"W-what else do you need from me, sir?" Starscream asked.

Galvatron leaned forward in his seat. "We need to set a few ground rules."

Starscream's wings twitched. He flexed his claws. The game never ended, it seemed.

"What are those rules?" He asked.

"You will come when called. No hesitation."

Starscream swallowed his protests and nodded. What was another controlling fragger in his life at this point?

"You cannot refuse a meeting with me. If I request a private meeting, that meeting stays private. No interruptions, no uninvited guests."

Didn't that overlap with the first rule?

Galvatron's optics narrowed. Starscream flexed his claws again. His chestplates were tight, barely containing the spark that pulsed beneath them. But he wasn't afraid. He knew what this was going to become when he made his choice.

"Final rule: You will give me what I ask of you. If not, I will *take it*."

Silence crept between them. Starscream tapped his pede as energy built within him, seeking an outlet. He couldn't do this. He *had to* do this.

"I—I understand, sir," Starscream said, voice weak and shaky. He cursed his frame for betraying him.

"Good," Galvatron said. "You may go to your desk now."

Starscream obeyed. The quicker he could get Galvatron's attention away from him, the better. He waved Buzzsaw off the chair and sat at the desk. The bitzzard cassette let out a squawk before settling on his helm. Starscream would've scolded it, but his attention was forced elsewhere as Laserbeak picked his hand.

He flicked the retroraven in the beak.

"Stop it," he hissed.

Laserbeak chirped sharply. Starscream rolled his optics and pulled the first datapad off the stack, determined to see what Soundwave was working on before he died. Immediately, both cassettes were upon him in a flurry of angry squawks and pecking beaks. Starscream swatted them with the datapad, but they kept attacking.

"What's wrong with you?" He growled.

He whacked Laserbeak with the datapad. It flew off of the table with a loud clank. Then, it activated its boosters and hopped back onto the table, immediately resuming the pecking.

Starscream resolved to just ignore them.

☆☆☆

Ignoring them didn't work. They only got more persistent. Galvatron glanced his way a few times, but did nothing about them. This was up to Starscream, like it had been every other time members of his own faction wanted to make his life difficult.

Starscream entered the communications office. The console was as dusty as the desk. Without the monitors on, the room was dim. Were they operating without a security officer this entire time, too? How were they even functioning?

Two bright lines stared at him from a visor. Laserbeak stood in the middle of the console. There were no signs of Buzzsaw, but it would be there any moment. The two cybirds never moved alone.

"Stupid fragging birds," he muttered, plopping himself in the seat. He waved a hand at Laserbeak. "Shoo!"

Laserbeak pecked at his arm insistently. Another beak joined the pecking, and Starscream sighed in frustration as Buzzsaw landed on the edge of his wing. He flicked it. The bitzzard flapped its wings and landed in front of him, joining Laserbeak in pecking at his arm.

Whatever. He'd just ignore them like every other time. Starscream opened his panel and unspooled his cable. The console would only work with a manual connection. As he pulled his cable out, Laserbeak snatched it from him.

"Hey!" He said.

He swiped at it, but Laserbeak just leaped backward out of his reach. It tilted its head. Then, quietly opened its medical panel. It moved Starscream's cable toward its panel, but glanced at him before it could plug the cable in.

Did it want to show him something? Is that why it and Buzzsaw were being so obnoxious?

Ravage and Frenzy could speak, verbally and through comms. Ravage could only speak through comms—the cybercat's vocalizer could only make the same noises as the creature it mimicked. As far as he knew, Laserbeak and Buzzsaw couldn't speak at all.

Perhaps this was their way of communicating. Starscream nodded, and Laserbeak plugged the cable in.

{Connection detected! Authorize?}

Starscream allowed Laserbeak limited access. It could read, but not alter any of his files. On its end, it did the same.

A memory file played for just a moment. Soundwave sat at the console. Then, another file—Soundwave motionless on the ground, multiple of his limbs missing as energeon pooled beneath him.

"He really is dead," Starscream muttered.

Despite knowing, factually, that this was the case, it was different to see it. More flashes of memories interrupted his thoughts—various moments of Soundwave at the console and desk, as if to say, '*these were his.*'

"I know," Starscream said. "But he's not here anymore."

Laserbeak fluttered its wings and chirped. It pecked his hand gently and played the set of memory files again. Starscream responded with his own.

He and Soundwave freeing the Decepticons after they were held by humans. A dark room, he and Soundwave laying on the floor with Ravage stretched across their chests. Standing before the New Decepticons, held hands raised in the air as they cheered. The night before he, Skywarp, and Jetfire were taken to another world—settling into berth with Soundwave, Rumble, Frenzy, and Ravage beside him.

Laserbeak let out a long, mournful caw. It settled beside his arm, curling its wings into its body. Staring up at him, it placed its head on his arm.

Starscream reached down, running his fingers up the crest on its head. Its visor dimmed as it leaned into the touch. Beside them, Buzzsaw let out a quiet call and tilted its head.

"What do *you* want?" Starscream muttered, tone less biting than intended.

Buzzsaw stepped onto his other arm, talons wrapping around it. Hand tensing, Starscream prepared to shake the bitzzard off, when it shoved its face into his. It nuzzled his cheeks with a deep rumble.

Laserbeak ejected Starscream's cable from its port. Automatically, Starscream's cable snapped back behind his panel. He sat still for a moment, stunned. Laserbeak gleefully let him fall into stasis right before he joined this world's Decepticons. Both cybird cassettes were harassing him up until this moment. Was showing them he knew Soundwave really all he needed to change their minds?

Starscream carefully removed his arm from beneath Laserbeak. It raised its head, staring into his optics.

"I need to work," he said.

Laserbeak rose to its pedes and fluttered its wings. Then, with a swift leap and short burst from its boosters, it landed on his shoulder. Buzzsaw did the same, climbing along his arm until it reached his pauldron. Starscream sighed and unspooled his cable.

He was terrible with nonverbal communication. He needed concise, clear words. It was one of the reasons that despite the tension in there relationship, Megatron was predictable. There

was a certain comfort in knowing what to expect, even if the expected was insults and injuries (Though, that had changed recently. Starscream never thought he would miss it, but familiarity was a major glitch in the processor).

Buzzsaw's beak dug into one of the seams on his neck. Starscream hissed. The bitzzard backed off with a quiet chirp.

The console booted up. A moment passed as his processor connected with it, summoning long-disused programs. Once it loaded, he could tune into any audio or visual feed in the base. But for now, he was left with his thoughts.

He knew he was complete scrap at reading others. Too many attempts at manipulation failed for him not to notice. A processor that considered EM field data junk was only partially responsible. He was just generally plain awful at it. Maybe it was another part of his stupid glitch. Reading body language could only do so much to compensate when he didn't know what different gestures indicated half the time.

But that made communicating with his new allies difficult. If they couldn't speak, and he could barely read body language, how could they communicate? They couldn't plug in every time they had to talk! They needed some sort of system.

The spare datapads resting at the edge of the console caught Starscream's optics. No one would miss them. Perhaps he could do something with those.

He let the audio feeds play in the background, setting them to switch at a specific interval, as he reached for a datapad and got to work. The easiest solution would be to just set the datapad to read aloud any text typed. But if they didn't use comms, would that be any different?

Laserbeak showed him only visuals when they were connected. Did they have an easier time with those? If he could create a set of symbols…

Yes! That was perfect! With little else to do and no interesting chatter in the base, the work went quickly. Soon, he had a program ready for testing. Starscream placed the datapad on a flat area of the console.

"One of you try this," he said.

Buzzsaw hopped off of his shoulder. It stared down at the datapad. With a quick peck, it pressed one of the buttons.

"Greeting," the datapad said in a monotone voice.

Buzzsaw tilted its helm. It pecked the datapad again.

"You," the datapad said.

"Yes," Starscream said. "Hello."

Buzzsaw fluttered its wings. It stared at the datapad, head bobbing as it viewed the buttons.

[Come to my office.]

Starscream stiffened. A message from Galvatron. The first rule—come when called. The second—keep private meetings private. If he wanted all of this to work, he had to leave now.

He shooed Laserbeak off his shoulder and stood up, hastily telling the two cybirds where he was going before entering the hall. As Starscream gave them one final glance, Buzzsaw attempted to follow, but Laserbeak held it back. Starscream nodded and closed the door.

As was growing typical, few mecha looked his way as he traversed the halls. Galvatron's office was not the command room, but he'd seen fit to send the room number and hall along with his message, so Starscream wasn't concerned about finding it. When the Decepticons of his world occupied a similar base, Megatron stayed in the exact same room.

Frag, it was the same door too. Same vent on the ceiling in front of it. Starscream reached for the access pad—

The door opened before he could press it. Narrowed pink optics glared at him, then widened. Slipstream paused mid-stride, plating tense and wings set wide.

"You!" She hissed.

Starscream stepped aside to let her pass. Instead of walking down the hall, she turned back toward Galvatron with a sneer.

"Well!" She spat. "Have fun with your new *plaything* while I do the *real* work!"

"One more snide remark and I'll deactivate your vocalizer!" Galvatron shouted from the back of the room.

Slipstream's wings fluttered as she cringed. "I apologize, sir—"

"Just get out of my sight."

Slipstream sped quickly down the hall, her wings brushing against Starscream's shoulder. Bitterness coated Starscream's mouth as his spark twisted.

"Get in here."

You will come when called.

Starscream entered Galvatron's office. His spark pulsed, locked beneath too-tight plating. Before him, Galvatron lounged in a large chair, a cube of energeon in his hand. As Starscream approached, he leaned forward.

"How have your duties been going?" He asked.

Starscream flicked his wings as he straightened his posture. A report. He could do this.

"They're going well," he said. "I've managed to review all of the datapads and files Soundwave left behind, and am on track to pick up where he left off. I have already integrated with and updated the communications console."

Galvatron hummed. "Have those spybirds given you any trouble?"

Had he known and just ignored it the entire time? Well, frag him, then.

"We had some quarrels at first," Starscream said. "But we've reached an understanding."

Galvatron sipped from his cube. It was an odd color—a very familiar odd color. The memory files clicked into place. Starscream flexed his claws, a zing coursing through his plating.

"Sir, i—is that—?"

Galvatron held the cube up so it caught the light. It shone a deep, dark purple. He grinned.

"Yes," he said. "Dark energeon. I've sustained myself on it for quite some time."

Dark energeon was a poison. It strengthened the frame while weakening the spark—a deadly combination that led to the deaths of many soldiers. While convinced it was enhancing them, the substance slowly killed. Starscream hadn't taken it even at his lowest, fearing first its status as an untested substance, then its effects.

Did Galvatron know he was slowly killing himself by subsisting on it? He must have, with all of the memory files he went through in Starscream's processor. Should Starscream tell him anyway?

No. It didn't matter. Dark energeon wouldn't be what killed him in the end. That would take too long.

"But enough about that," Galvatron said. "I've called you here for some information."

Starscream flexed his claws again. "What kind of information?"

"The Autobot base. Where is it?"

The moment he made his choice, Starscream purged the coordinates from his processor. He hadn't navigated to or from the base without aid—Skywarp always teleported a portion of the way—so he couldn't use his memories to estimate where the base was, either. Starscream may have despised Skyfire's cowardice, but he wouldn't let Skywarp and Jetfire get hurt if he could help it.

"I don't know, sir," Starscream said. "You've been in my processor. You should know I don't know."

Galvatron rose from his seat, placing the cube on his desk. He wound around the desk, making optic contact with Starscream the whole way. Starscream flicked his wings.

"That was a cursory search for intentions," Galvatron said. "Not an in-depth search for knowledge. Now, I need knowledge. Even if you don't know where the base is, I can glean *something*."

Starscream took a step back. "This isn't necessary—"

Galvatron seized his wrist. His optics burned into Starscream's.

"*I* determine what's necessary," he growled. "Now, give me your cable."

You will give me what I ask of you. If not, I will take it.

Starscream closed his optics as he sent the command to unspool his cable. His frame still ached from the overheat and subsequent crash Galvatron's last search caused him. A shudder crept up his dorsal strut, and he fought not to shake.

{Connection detected! Authorize?}

Starscream allowed it. He didn't have the energy to resist. Who knew what kinds of hacking programs Galvatron carried to enforce his threat?

Galvatron perused his files at a leisurely pace. Was he going to be gentler this time, now that he was looking for details instead of the larger picture? Starscream could only hope. Another overheat like the last would confine him to the berth. Even if temporarily, it would hinder his plans and draw attention toward him through a reduction in his productivity.

If this was what having Galvatron's attention was like, Starscream didn't need any more of it.

Starscream's fans clicked on as Galvatron increased his pace, quickly scrubbing through every memory file Starscream retained since he arrived in this world. Starscream pulled away slightly, but Galvatron grabbed him and pulled him back. He'd looked at the files. They were done, right?

Galvatron went further back. He skipped over Starscream's recent files, heading straight for some of his older ones. What was he doing?

{File selected!}

☆☆☆

{Playing file…}

He told him the plan wouldn't work, but when had Megatron ever listened? Instead of doing the sensible thing and delaying the raid to create a real plan, here they were, getting thrashed on the battlefield! Energeon splattered as yet another Decepticon soldier fell, and Starscream had enough.

[Decepticons, flee!] He sent over the broad-range channel.

Immediately, the majority of his air force took to the skies. They knew he wouldn't call this unless the battle was no longer worth it. Some of the foot soldiers obeyed, but most ignored the order, knowing that Megatron hadn't called it.

Starscream shook himself as he dodged stray laserfire. Whatever. Those idiots could die if they wanted to. He gave them the excuse to save themselves and they didn't take it. He wasn't going to stick around.

He leaped into the sky, sending power to his thrusters. Then, he activated his transformation sequence. Pain flared across his plating, the process aborted as he crashed to the ground. He hissed as he rolled onto his cockpit, one of his wings bending awkwardly. Energeon seeped into the ground beneath him.

He felt around his plating the beat he could, searching for the wound. His damage logs were vague and unhelpful. The clang of metal against metal and the buzzing boom of laserfire slowly died down as more Decepticons fled. Pedesteps grew closer and closer. Starscream searched the field.

Autobots.

He couldn't let them find him like this. Starscream dragged himself across the edges of the battlefield, searching for a place to hide. If he found somewhere, he could wait until the battle died down before he called for extraction. As no hiding spots emerged, he he cursed his luck, until something caught his optics.

A large rock stuck out beneath a ledge. He dragged himself behind it, but the gap wasn't large enough to hide his entire body. So, he clawed at the dirt until it was. The entire process thoroughly coated him in filth, making it even easier for him to hide.

If it weren't for the energeon still steadily leaking from his body. Starscream curled himself up, ignoring the pain, and waited. If he was lucky, they might not notice.

Eventually, the sounds of battle faded to nothing. Starscream tried his comms.

{Alert! Low fuel levels!}

They fritzed out with a painful zap. Had his systems taken damage in the fall, or had he truly lost that much energeon? Either way, he couldn't call for help now. His spark pulsed. He clutched his chest, sinking further into the hole.

Either the Autobots found him and captured him, or he was going to die here. He let out a whine. There was so much he still had to do! Who would lead the air force with him gone?

The Decepticons would fall apart without him! He was essential!

His optic feed glitched as his systems rerouted power. He whined again, claws scraping against his plating as he wrapped his arms around himself. *Slag*, he felt like a newspark, huddled in a confined space and hoping not to die.

He wanted Thundercracker. She'd hold him and stroke his wings and tell him it was alright. He wanted Skywarp. They'd talk him out of being afraid. He even wanted—

"Starscream."

Starscream jumped at the voice, his helm hitting the rock. He hissed in pain, scrunched his optics shut as his feed reset. A moment, then two. His processor identified the voice.

He let out an excited chirp, pulling himself out of the hole. He fell out of it with a crash, nearly biting his tongue as his chin hit the ground. Megatron stood before him, a frown on his face.

"Starscream," Megatron said again.

He knelt before Starscream. Uncaring of his injuries, Starscream launched himself at the old mech, wrapping his arms around his shoulders. He let out a trill and buried his face in Megatron's neck. Megatron placed a hand beneath him and pulled him up. Starscream clung to him, claws piercing his plating. Megatron grunted, but didn't complain.

"Take us back now, Skywarp," Megatron said.

With a whoosh, they were back in the base. Starscream refused to let go of Megatron until they were in the medbay. He didn't care how it looked. He was just grateful to be alive.

{Playback suspended.}

☆☆☆

{Closing file…}

Starscream blinked as his optic feed reset. Strong hands held his shoulders. Galvatron stared down at him with a furrowed brow.

"Go back to your quarters," Galvatron said. "I have what I need."

Starscream didn't want to ask what it was. He obeyed, fans still whirring at their highest setting. When he got to his room, he flopped straight onto the berth.

Why *that* memory? What did he gain from it?

Starscream rubbed his chestplates, an ache settling deep within his spark. He hadn't known Megatron placed a tracker in him back then. It just seemed like a miracle.

He was so *stupid*.

Frustration rose within him. He sank his teeth into one of his arm guards. That fragger just had access to his entire processor. He knew, objectively, that the connection was terminated, but he could still *feel* it—files opening from calls that weren't his, fingers dragging themselves across his raw, exposed processor.

Had he left something behind? No, Starscream would've been notified of any downloads. So why did it feel that way?

He wanted to remove his arm guard. He craved dentae against plating, crushing and denting until energeon seeped through. But he promised himself he wouldn't do that.

Maybe, just this once, to make the crawling across his plating go away…

No. Starscream rolled himself over. He couldn't. One time would become many. He knew that.

A panel on the ceiling shifted. A bright visor shone as a tiny head popped through a newly created gap. With a chirp, Laserbeak descended from the ceiling, landing beside him. He turned away from it, curling himself tightly.

"Go away," he muttered.

Brazenly, it ignored his words, hopping over him and landing on his other side. She pushed herself beneath his chin, pecking at his arms until he released them from his cockpit. She slipped beneath the top one and settled on the bottom one—just like the way he held his snake plush, Ulchtar, at home.

The reminder sent a sharp sting through his plating. The promise he made was to Skywarp as much as it was to himself. She said she'd be there for him when he felt like this, but *he* was the one who left. He couldn't even send her a message now.

She was probably furious. Was she able to see past that to help Jetfire? The newspark had never been without him. At least he destroyed those frames. Jetfire would be safe from the Autobots' plans. Skywarp would protect him when Starscream couldn't.

He was, in his own way. Not that anyone would see it. Still…

"I think I made a mistake," he whispered.

Laserbeak chirruped quietly, rubbing her helm against his chest. Hesitantly, Starscream petted her helm. Dread crept into his frame.

Galvatron could do this to him anytime he wanted, for any reason. He *agreed* to it. He had to agree to it.

The Autobots wouldn't take him back. He was a traitor. He couldn't survive on his own. At least here, he had fuel and shelter—and a chance at making it home.

He just had to endure this until the final step of the plan.

Chapter End Notes

Mayhaps Screamer has bitten off more than he can chew, but when has that ever stopped him? He'll see this plan through even if it kills him, and it just might. ;3

I like writing the flashbacks. There was a sweet spot where Starscream and Megatron got along for a while. Galvatron is interested in Starscream's relationship with his world's Megatron, but there's another reason besides that for that particular memory to be important.

I drew a piece of art a while back while conceptualizing this chapter. If you wanna check it out, I'll link it below.

Small flock on Pillowfort | Small flock on Tumblr

No Galvatron drawing yet cause I'm tired and busy ahaha. Been doing my best to participate in Creative Clash this year and have a bunch of my own personal art I'm working on (including a remake of my personal website, which will include a few redone character refs). But it'll happen eventually!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jetfire woke to a horrible ache in his frame, as he had every day for the past few weeks. Drowsily, he unlatched his cockpit and pulled out a pain patch. He placed it on his neck, lying still until it began to work. When it finally took effect, he rose, wings twitching, as he set off for the day.

He hadn't been doing much of anything, really. The first couple of days after the surges, he was completely wiped out. Most of his time then was spent drifting in and out of recharge as Skywarp held him. After the surges, she was a lot clingier. He didn't mind it. What he minded much more was that she was gone most of the day after he started to recover.

Now, he was able to move around for a couple of days without immediately wanting to lay down. It was time to stop being a useless lump and ***do*** something. Jetfire despised being idle, no matter the excuse.

He entered the medbay, mumbling a quiet greeting to First Aid as he approached. First Aid returned the greeting, placing the tool he was polishing on the table. He motioned toward a berth, and Jetfire sat. Jetfire opened his medical panel, and First Aid connected.

"Spark rate's better than yesterday," Aid said. "Fuel line pressure is up. You've been fueling better."

Jetfire nodded. It was difficult to fuel through the pain, but it had faded the past few days—with plenty of help from the pain patches.

"No more processor surges?" Aid asked.

Jetfire nodded. "No more."

First Aid disconnected.

"That's good," he said. "Now, let's move on to range of motion."

Jetfire fought a groan. He knew it was important—his entire frame was altered in at least some small way—but it was a boring and uncomfortable endeavor. Even with the pain patch, moving too much hurt. First Aid already assured him multiple times that it would go away, and that the more he moved, the less it would hurt, but that didn't make it any easier.

First Aid started with his hands, carefully moving his fingers, then his wrists. They were the least difficult parts of his body, the only real modifications being the claws he now had. The elbows were a bit trickier. He still had all of the plating in that region he had before, but it was all changed slightly. The projections on them now pointed upward instead of downward, but the shields that restricted his motion were the same.

Not much changed about his shoulders, but his general figure was slimmer. He lost a significant amount of chest plating, allowing him a wider range of shoulder movement. His cockpit was much larger now, with a much smaller window. It wasn't the kind that could just 'unlatch' anymore—he would have to relearn how to open it. That was for another time.

First Aid reached for his wings. Apprehension swarmed Jetfire's processor, and he grabbed Aid's wrist to stop him.

"Can we save those for last?" Jetfire asked. "Please?"

Aid sighed. "If you really want to. But we still have to do them."

Jetfire released Aid's hand. "I know…"

They moved on to his pedes. His rockets, which used to be on the back of his calves, shifted to the bottom of his pedes. With all of the other changes, it made walking quite difficult, and he had to recalibrate many of his sensors. It was almost like he was created a second time.

Except Starscream wasn't here.

A different kind of pain struck his spark. He tugged at the bracelet on his wrist. Somehow, it survived the reformatting and the surges. Jetfire was grateful. It was the only thing Starscream left him.

His creator would've been irate to see this. When he had the surges, Starscream would've chewed Skyfire and Star out so loudly that the entire ship would've woken up. He would've held Jetfire, and he would've explained everything to him. He probably would have told him about the surges and the pain in the first place.

Jetfire's wings stung as a hand closed around the edges of one. He flicked his wing on instinct to fight the sting. It responded sluggishly. First Aid bent the wing down, testing the hinge, and a jolt of pain went through Jetfire's dorsal strut. He muffled a hiss.

"I know it hurts," First Aid said. "But we have to do it. If you were more willing to do exercises on your own—"

"I know!" Jetfire snapped. He scrunched his optics shut. "I'm sorry."

Jetfire leaned his arms on his thighs. It was the closest he could get to curling up while staying the way he was. First Aid already explained it to him several times, as if he didn't understand it. He understood it perfectly fine. *Understanding* just wasn't the same as *doing*.

When the Enigma reformatted him, it changed his internal schematics and triggered a transformation sequence, along with aggravating his self-repair systems. The transformation

sequence moved his plating where it could, while self-repair modified the shape and thickness of it. Self-repair also severed and rebuilt his neurocircuits and motors at an accelerated pace, following the instructions that the Enigma fed to it through the modified schematics.

Right now, he had both sets of neurocircuits within him. The old ones sent off pain signals when they fired, having nowhere to connect to and assuming he was damaged because of it. Meanwhile, the new ones were weak, and could only grow stronger with use. Movement triggered the cleanup of the old circuits and the strengthening of the new ones, but it was difficult to withstand the constant sting.

He understood why Skyfire and Star insisted on reformatting the frame they made while it was still sparkless. As Skywarp would put it: this *sucked*. Were his frame forged instead of constructed, this whole dance with self-repair wouldn't be happening. It would've just taken the schematics and rerouted the existing circuits. But warframes were built with specific bodies in mind, and any deviation from that wasn't considered.

A growl escaped Jetfire's vocalizer as First Aid moved his wing again. Embarrassment flooded Jetfire's processor. He buried his face in his hands, mortified.

"You're fine," Aid said. "It's fine."

First Aid moved to his other wing. Jetfire bit back another growl as he moved it, pain crawling up his dorsal strut. Another movement, and the pain spilled over. Something in the back of Jetfire's processor snapped, and the lashed out, slicing Aid's pauldron with his claws.

Aid stepped back, the resulting wound on full display. Energeon dripped from it. The trickle was slow, but undeniable. Jetfire's claws were coated in it.

He did that. He didn't mean to, but he did it.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry—"

"It's fine," Aid said, barely sparing the wound a glance. "It's not the first time I've been clawed by a patient."

It didn't matter that it had happened to First Aid before, it mattered that *Jetfire* did it. But Jetfire didn't say that. Aid would only keep trying to dismiss it.

Eventually, Aid finished with the exercises. Jetfire flicked his wings involuntarily, biting back a hiss at the twinge of pain. His wing sensors had just barely been calibrated before this, as they were particularly tricky to handle. This set him back to square one, only there was no Starscream to help him this time.

The door to the medbay swung open.

"Hey, Aid?"

Jetfire recognized the voice. He forced himself to stay still, fighting the temptation to bare his teeth and flare his wings.

"Come in," First Aid said.

The red mech stepped into the room with Sunstreaker behind him. One of Sunstreaker's optics was shattered with a good portion of the glass missing. His undamaged optic caught Jetfire's, and he quickly brought a hand to cover the broken one.

First Aid frowned. "What happened this time?"

His tone was pleasant, but it had an edge. The red mech chuckled nervously.

"Well, we were practicing with the new weapons, and uh…" The red mech paused, glancing back at Sunstreaker. "He ran into a tree."

Into a *tree*? How? Jetfire forced himself to stay silent. But, really, he would've run straight into it at a very high speed to even have a *chance* of doing that. Wood wasn't exactly resilient when faced with tons of metal. He knew that from experience. And *only* his optic?

First Aid led Sunstreaker to a berth. Sunstreaker hesitated before sitting, his working optic catching Jetfire's. He turned toward him. Jetfire's wings flared before he could stop them.

"Sunny…" The red mech complained.

Sunstreaker broke the stare and sat. Immediately, First Aid stepped between him and Jetfire, blocking their vision. It seemed intentional. Were they that obvious?

Jetfire pushed himself off the berth, silencing a grunt as his body protested. An accidental twitch of his wings sent pain up his dorsal strut. After a quick glance at the table next of the berth confirmed his suspicions, Jetfire headed for the tool rack. He plucked the fine forceps from the top of the rack.

What else would Aid need? Jetfire searched the drawers for a glass patch the correct size. Until the new glass grew in, Sunstreaker would need it to protect his optic. Another moment of thought, and he took patch glue from one of the shelves. Silently, he laid the supplies on the table.

Aid glanced at him, a small smile forming on his face. "Thanks, Jetfire."

Jetfire flinched as his wings fluttered. *Ow*. Did they have to be so sensitive?

Aid reached over for the forceps, and Jetfire stepped away to let him work. He slowly removed the glass from the optic, working around the delicate internals with practiced precision. Something brushed against Jetfire's plating. He whirled toward the source, gnashing his dentae.

The red mech held his hands up in surrender. "Sorry."

Jetfire glanced away, pain and embarrassment coursing through him as his wings lowered. Was a little bit of pain really all it took to turn him into a jerk?

"It's fine," he muttered.

The red mech rubbed the top of his helm nervously. He offered a hand to Jetfire.

"My name's Sideswipe," he said. He motioned toward Sunstreaker. "That's my brother, Sunstreaker."

Brother… that was a human thing, wasn't it? He only saw the term used in the movies he watched.

Sideswipe stared at him, hand still held out. Was he silent for too long? Was he supposed to do something with the hand? What did Sideswipe want?

Slowly, Sideswipe retracted the hand.

"I'm sorry we got off on the wrong pede," he said. "Sunny doesn't take rejection well. He just wanted you to think he was cool."

Jetfire rolled his optics. "He did a *great* job convincing me."

Sideswipe glanced between Jetfire and Sunstreaker. First Aid was still picking glass from Sunstreaker's optic.

"I know," Sideswipe said.

He looked away again. Jetfire fiddled with his bracelet.

"We're having a movie night," Sideswipe said. He rubbed his helm again. "Maybe you could join us? If you want to, I mean."

Jetfire bared his dentae without meaning to. "No."

Sideswipe stiffened.

"That's fine!" He said "But, uh… I'll send you the information in case you cause your mind!"

Jetfire's comm pinged. He ignored the message. There was no changing his mind, even for movies. He didn't want anything to do with that yellow-plated jerk.

◇◇◇

Jetfire finally moved to the low-intensity pain patches. It took a few days, but he managed it. The exercises were working, and hurt less to do each day. The less they hurt, the easier they were to keep on top of. First Aid was confident he'd be fully recovered in a couple more weeks if he kept this pace up.

He sat at the desk—did anyone but him ever use it?—reading a datapad. It was yet another romance, but at least this one had *some* draw to it. The two main characters were from warring tribes. They wanted to be together, but their political positions kept them apart. Jetfire was mostly reading it for the political intrigue and battle scenes, but the romance was less contrived than in the other stories he read.

He was midway through a scene detailing the kidnapping of one of the main characters by their enemies when the door slid open. He looked up from the datapad, plating tensing. Fighting a tinge of discomfort, he met the optics of the mech who entered. Skyfire stared back at him, one hand resting against the doorway.

"We're ready," he said.

Jetfire turned off the datapad and left it on the desk. Hopping up from the chair, he followed Skyfire into the hall. They entered Skyfire's lab, then made their way into the backroom.

Star stood tall, watching as they entered. Her cable was plugged into the frame. In her other arm was the Emberstone. Beside her, Pharma crouched. His plating was even duller than the last time Jetfire saw him. As he looked up at Jetfire, his optics were dim. Paint peeled at the edges of his claws, patchy at the extremities.

Overall, he looked like slag. Were they even feeding him? They said First Aid was looking after him. How could Aid possibly let this stand? Jetfire kept his thoughts to himself, knowing they wouldn't do anything but bring him trouble. But the silence did nothing to lessen the disgust that curled in his tanks.

"You," Pharma said, vocalizer barely able to emit words among glitching and static. "It's good to see you."

Jetfire restarted his vocalizer after it refused to make a sound. "Y-you, too."

His spark ached. He had to do *something*. He just didn't know what.

"Are we ready?" Star said.

Skyfire nodded. Pharma uttered a quiet affirmative. He opened his chestplates, exposing his spark to the Emberstone. The frame's chest opened as Star pushed the command.

"Go ahead," Star said, motioning toward the frame's spark chamber.

The room filled with light. Air crackled around them, the energy flowing through it sending a tingle through Jetfire's plating. Everything went white, and then as suddenly as the light appeared, it was gone.

Jetfire blinked on instinct, then ran a command to reset his optic feed. The room faded into focus. Pharma slumped to the floor, limbs loose like hollow frame. Star stood by the frame, still connected but a few steps further away. Skyfire stood beside Jetfire, lips pressed into a determinedly thin line and optics only on the frame.

A whirr so quiet Jetfire had to turn up the sensitivity of his audials to hear it began. Plating clicked and clanked as the frame shuddered. Then, its visor lit.

{GESTALT PARTNER JSTM connected.}

Jetfire tensed as data flooded in—everything from vitals to a stream-of-consciousness text feed. He closed as much of it as he could before he was overwhelmed by pop-ups. A

panicked command killed them all, and he was able to focus on what was in front of him again.

The frame—no, *mech*—fluttered their wings. Skyfire stepped forward.

"Welcome to the world, Jetstorm," Skyfire said. Jetstorm looked up at him as he continued to speak. "You're an aerial combiner, and an Autobot. Beside me is your partner, Jetfire."

An *Autobot*. Skyfire wasn't giving him a choice. Again, Jetfire kept his thoughts to himself.

As Jetstorm's attention was drawn to him, Jetfire waved awkwardly. Tilting his helm, Jetstorm mimicked the action.

"You're the numbers in my helm," Jetstorm said.

"Um, y-yes," Jetfire said, fiddling with his bracelet. "I am. I can see yours, too."

Jetstorm smiled. "Cool!"

He leaned sideways and tilted his helm again. His wings tilted with it. He raised a clawed hand and pointed toward something near the floor.

"Who is that?" He asked.

Star and Skyfire exchanged glances. Jetfire pounced on the opportunity.

"That's Pharma," Jetfire said. "He just made you. Your spark came from his."

Jetstorm's wings fluttered again. He took a step toward Pharma. On unsteady limbs, Pharma crawled toward him. Jetstorm bent down to meet his optics.

"Woah," he said quietly.

In a swift motion, Pharma reached up and grabbed Jetstorm's face with both hands. Jetstorm yelped in surprise. He rested his hands on Pharma's gauntlets, making no attempt to remove him. Star and Skyfire glared at Pharma, but the mech was too distracted by Jetstorm to notice.

"Don't forget me," Pharma said. "Please don't forget me."

Jetstorm finally pushed him away. "Why would I forget you?"

Pharma shook his head and closed his optics.

"You're so important," he said. "So, so *very* important. You'll win battles I'll never get to see. Save lives I never could. They're going to put me away. So don't forget me."

Skyfire pushed past Jetfire. He laid a hand on Pharma's shoulder.

"Pharma—"

Pharma jerked away. He crawled backward, wings flaring.

"No!" He cried. "No! Don't put me back!"

Skyfire stepped forward, reaching around Pharma's waist and lifting him effortlessly. Pharma thrashed and shouted in his grip, but he didn't let go. Skyfire sighed.

"Is this what you want him to remember?" He said.

Pharma went limp, closing his optics. A twinge in Jetfire's spark made him flinch. Skyfire sighed again and opened the door. As he left the room, Pharma didn't struggle.

Jetfire received a ping from a new contact. He opened the message.

[Don't let them take his freedom, too.]

Jetfire quietly sent a reply.

[I'll protect him.]

Jetstorm's brow furrowed, his visor on the closing door. "Why'd he take him away?"

Because he was ignorant, Jetfire wanted to say. He didn't get the chance.

"He's in very delicate condition," Star said. "He can't be outside for long. He volunteered his spark to create yours, but he's been outside for too long now, so Skyfire had to put him back."

Jetfire fiddled with his bracelet and tapped his pede. It wasn't a lie, but it was certainly a softened set of statements. Oversimplified. It made it sound like he had some sort of disease that would slowly kill him outside of a controlled environment, when in reality, the controlled environment was killing him. He wasn't locked away for his own good—he was locked away for others' convenience.

The worst part of it was that Star probably believed herself. She certainly believed *Skyfire*.

"Oh," Jetstorm said, wings lowering. "Okay. Am I ever going to see him again?"

Star frowned. Baring his dentae, Jetfire glared at her until she finally noticed. He flicked his wings and extended them, letting out a quiet hiss as the still-developing circuits chose that moment to protest.

Star sighed. "You probably won't. He isn't supposed to have visitors unless it's absolutely necessary. Besides, you'll be very busy. You and Jetfire need to practice combining."

Right…

Jetfire wasn't excited, nor was he anxious. He felt nothing at all. The anger that simmered in the back of his processor was already dulling. Another glance at Jetstorm and the situation began to sink in.

He was tied to this mech—*permanently*. Wherever he went, Jetstorm went. Wherever Jetstorm went, he would have to go. Separating gestalt members was a disaster waiting to happen, and the only way to break the link without severe consequences was death. Even then, remaining members of the gestalt carried the modifications forever, unless they got extensive reformatting done.

Whoever Jetstorm would become, Jetfire was tethered to him until death. Sideswipe called Sunstreaker his brother. Is that what he and Jetstorm would be? Or did such a bond transcend even that?

If Jetfire went home now…

He wouldn't be able to. Not if Jetstorm didn't come with him. Either way, one of them would be trapped in a world they weren't born in.

"Come on."

Jetfire flinched. With a wave of her hand, Star motioned for him to approach. Jetfire shook himself and followed her, walking side by side with Jetstorm. As they walked through the halls, Jetstorm looked around, mouth agape.

Jetfire bit the charm on his bracelet.

Was this a mistake? It sure seemed like one. But he already made his choice. There was no backing out now.

Star opened the door to her quarters. Immediately, Jetfire headed for the desk. Jetstorm followed him, wings high as he sat on the berth and swung his legs. Star stayed in the doorway.

"I need to help Skyfire with some things," she said. "We'll practice combining tomorrow. For now, rest."

Jetfire stared at her. He knew he should respond, but he really just wanted her gone. She sighed and shut the door.

Jetfire pulled out the datapad he was reading and turned it on.

"You feel weird," Jetstorm said.

Jetfire hummed.

Jetstorm leaned forward. "Really weird. All tingly and stuff."

Jetfire shrugged. Maybe it was a byproduct of the processing glitch. He couldn't say.

Jetstorm poked him in the side of the helm.

"Really, really tingly," he said.

Jetfire sighed. His vocalizer decided not to allow him to string together words, so he sent a message.

[Dunno,] he sent. *[I'm just me.]*

The words on the datapad were meaningless, no matter how many times Jetfire attempted to read them. He forced back a frustrated growl. Why was this suddenly so hard?

The pit crept up on him, and he brought the charm on the bracelet to his mouth. He gnawed on it, focusing on the way it refused to give under his dentae. It slid beneath them, stubbornly refusing to be damaged.

Jetstorm poked him again. "Why're you doing that?"

Jetfire flicked his wings.

[Makes me feel better,] he sent.

Jetstorm tilted his helm, his wings tilting with it. How could he balance like that?

"Do you feel bad?" He asked. "Is that why you're all tingly?"

Jetfire shrugged again. He had absolutely no idea. Why did Jetstorm keep asking?

There was no point in having the datapad on if he wasn't going to read it, so Jetfire turned it off and put it away. The ache in his frame returned tenfold, though checking his chronometer made it clear he wasn't due for another pain patch yet. Had the room gotten brighter?

Jetfire turned off the lights. He made his way between the berths and laid on the floor. He fiddled with his bracelet. What was wrong with him?

"Are you okay?"

Jetstorm's visor invaded his vision. Jetfire closed his optics.

[Please stop asking me questions.]

"Oh," Jetstorm said, leaning back against the wall.

Jetfire wanted to…

He wanted to…

He wanted to curl up and die. Just *die*. Lay there forever until his fuel ran out and his spark dissipated. But he couldn't do that.

Eventually, the door slid open. Jetfire crunched his optics shut as light flooded the room. Whoever it was stepped through. Another set of pedesteps was behind theirs.

"Jetfire—" Skywarp's voice stopped. "Hey. Who're you?"

Jetstorm fluttered his wings. "I'm Jetstorm! Jetfire's my partner! Seems like you know him."

Skywarp walked between the berths and knelt down. "I do. How's he doing?"

[Slag,] Jetfire sent to her.

Skywarp reached for him. "Are you…?"

Jetfire grabbed her wrist. *Gently,* he reminded himself. *Gently.*

[Stuck,] he sent. *[Something like it.]*

Skywarp hummed. She took his arm in her hands.

"Can I hold you?" She asked.

Jetfire looked away.

[Bit big to hold.]

Skywarp snickered. "I can still try. Whaddaya say?"

Jetfire shrugged. He didn't have the wherewithal to desire anything right now. Skywarp wrapped herself around him. He reciprocated the hold, shoving his face into her cockpit, even if it bent his neck at an awkward angle. He closed his optics.

Skywarp stirred. Jetfire buried himself further.

"You want in?" She asked.

Jetfire opened his optics. Who was she asking?

Jetstorm's wings fluttered. "Can I?"

Skywarp poked Jetfire on the olfactory ridge.

"Can he?" She asked.

Jetfire shrugged as well as he could with Skywarp in his arms. She hummed.

"Come on in!" She said.

Jetstorm walked around him, reaching over him after he got to his back. Jetfire shifted his wings out of the way. Squeezing him tightly, Jetstorm purred his engine.

[I don't know why you're upset, but I hope you feel better,] Jetstorm sent.

[Thanks.]

Chapter End Notes

- Fic rec
- Rambling that's only vaguely relevant

Galvatron design for you guys. Finally.

Galvatron design on Pillowfort | Galvatron design on Tumblr

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Meet me in the command center.]

There was no room for delay, so Starscream rolled straight out of berth and headed for the dreaded room. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw trailed after him. The message was on a channel with both him and Slipstream on it, so he let them follow. If the meeting already wasn't private, what was two more guests? Besides, they were in the command room the last time Galvatron called him there.

He entered the room to silence, pausing in front of Galvatron's throne. The dictator lounged in it, sparing him a fleeting glance before waving him toward his desk. When he sat, Galvatron glared at the door.

"At least *you* understand the importance of arriving to meetings on time," Galvatron said.

This meeting hadn't been scheduled, but Starscream didn't say that. There was no point in stoking Galvatron's ire. Instead, he hummed, burying himself with one of the old datapads. He already went through this one, but Galvatron didn't need to know that. All he needed to do was look productive.

Another few moments. Galvatron sighed.

"She really *is* irresponsible," Galvatron muttered. He turned toward Starscream. "How has she been treating you?"

They hadn't interacted at all since she reprimanded Ramjet in the mess hall. Did Galvatron know that? Starscream twitched his wing. Probably not.

He *could* tell Galvatron everything. She'd done little beyond berate him. But, even if Galvatron cared, it wasn't worthwhile. Something in his spark just… *twinged* at the idea. She was the closest thing to an ally he had beyond Laserbeak and Buzzsaw, however reluctant she was to play the role.

"She's been fine, sir," Starscream said.

Galvatron narrowed his optics. "*Just* fine?"

"Just fine," Starscream echoed.

Galvatron harrumphed and turned back toward the door. He tapped his claws against the arm rest. Starscream went back to poking at the datapad. As Buzzsaw hopped onto his shoulder, he nearly dropped it.

The door slid open.

"Finally," Galvatron said.

Slipstream stepped through, wings quivering. They were in neutral position, so she must have been forcing them to stay that way. As she crossed the room, she stared up at Galvatron.

"Forgive me for my tardiness," she said. "My idiotic air force couldn't understand basic maneuvers. I had to set them straight."

Galvatron leaned forward in his throne. Slipstream's wings twitched. They sat slightly lower after the twitch, as if she didn't notice they moved. Galvatron reached over and grabbed her chin.

"I've given you too many chances. This *will not* happen again," Galvatron growled.

Slipstream yanked herself backward, wings shifting low. She clutched her arms.

"Y-yes, sir!" She stammered. "It won't happen again."

Galvatron stared at her for a moment. Slipstream wilted under his gaze. As silence passed, Starscream tapped his claws against his desk. Were her optics dimmer than usual?

Galvatron leaned back in his throne and pressed a button on the seat. Wings returning to a slightly lower than neutral position, Slipstream relaxed. A hologram popped up in front of them, and Galvatron waved Starscream closer. Starscream approached, dragging his chair with him. Galvatron's optics landed on the chair, and for a moment Starscream contemplated how long he could stand before his frame protested, but the dictator quickly looked away.

Thank frag. Being around the dictator was difficult enough without having to deal with his spontaneous bouts of weakness unassisted.

"The Autobots have located a new energeon cache," Galvatron said. He entered a code into the keypad on his armrest, and it brought up a location on the hologram. "We need to ensure it falls into *our* hands."

Thus began the planning for a raid. Starscream suggested placements when he could, but he only had so much knowledge even with Soundwave's datapads to catch him up. Still—

"Good suggestion, Starscream."

—Galvatron took the majority of his feedback into account. The same could not be said for Slipstream, who spent most of the meeting grumbling just out of hearing range only to be forced to repeat her words.

"If you do that, Ramjet and Thrust will distract Ion Storm and Acid Storm! They've been fighting lately."

"That wasn't what I heard," Galvatron said.

Slipstream scrunched her olfactory ridge. "It's what I said."

Galvatron leaned forward. "It wasn't. Now, *Air Commander*, repeat your exact words."

Slipstream lowered her wings.

"I don't hear anything," Galvatron said.

Slipstream ran her claws down her arms. Her gaze fell.

"I told you to repeat yourself," Galvatron said. "Do as I've asked."

"I—" Slipstream froze.

What was that sound? Starscream turned up the sensitivity of his audials. Cooling fans? Was she *that* worked up?

"If you can't repeat it, I can only assume it's something treacherous."

Wings high in alert, Slipstream snapped upward.

"No!" She cried, optics wide. "It wasn't! I swear!"

"Then you wouldn't mind repeating it," Galvatron said.

Slipstream's wings drooped. "I… I don't remember what I said."

Galvatron scowled. Starscream tapped a pede—*quietly*, so the dictator wouldn't hear.

"I have full confidence that you didn't 'forget' something you just said moments ago," Galvatron said.

With her wings pulled close and her shoulders hunched, Slipstream was small. Not as much in the literal sense as the figurative. Processor glitch or not, something tugged at the back of Starscream's mind. It was calm, simmering, and righteous.

"We have a raid to plan, don't we?" Starscream said. "This… kerfuffle is diverting our focus."

Galvatron turned toward him. Starscream's wings twitched as his spark began to pulse in his chest. Then, with a grand sigh, Galvatron leaned back in his throne. The pulsing faded.

"You're correct," he said. "Let's focus on the raid."

As they resumed planning, Starscream's plating burned. He turned to the source of the burning. Slipstream glared at him, teeth moments from being bared. Starscream resolved to ignore her. After all, he just saved her aft. What was her issue?

Perhaps she felt indebted and despised it. Or perhaps she was just a fool and thought Galvatron would be merciful. If Starscream had his *favor*, he didn't want to know what being the target of the dictator's ire was like. The least he could do was spare her the suffering.

No one had done that for him.

☆☆☆

With all the grace of a dying cybercat, Slipstream avoided him until the raid. Starscream knew something was off beyond her odd resistance to being defended—her wings still quivered and her optics were still dim when she took off with her air force. So, as he supervised the raid, he paid extra attention to her. But just like a dying cybercat, she slinked off somewhere before he could catch her.

Oh well. He'd just have to find her later.

Buzzsaw flew over the battlefield, streaming data across its wireless connection to Laserbeak. Through the cord Starscream had connected to Laserbeak, he could see it all. They attempted to connect him wirelessly before the raid—with much direction from Buzzsaw using the datapad—but his systems weren't compatible. So, a hardline connection was their best solution.

It started off well. The Autobots had no idea they were coming, and the first half of the plan was executed perfectly. But as plans were wont to do, it fell apart midway through. Thoroughly beaten back, it seemed that the Autobots were about to retreat when the sky began to roar.

A gigantic mech crashed from the sky, his stature dwarfing even Galvatron's. Flames surrounded him, swirling as if carried by a mysterious wind. A single hand was all it took to crush another mech's limbs.

Laserbeak fluttered its wings as Starscream slammed a fist against the console. As the giant mech's hands burned with fire, so did Starscream's fuel lines. After all his efforts, Skyfire had managed to go through with it. How could he?

Starscream utterly destroyed all of the frames but one, and the single damaged frame was enough for that coward to rebuild from. His claws scored the surface of the console. Not only was a newspark thrown into battle like they were nothing more than a weapon, it was *his* newspark! Jetfire—his beloved, sweet Jetfire—was in the middle of the battlefield!

He was going to kill that coward and all of the stupid fragging Autobots that let this happen —

Laserbeak chirped. A request to play a memory file appeared. He didn't accept it, but the message was sent. The particular memory was of him, Jetfire, and the rest of New Decepticon Command together.

"Right," he said to Laserbeak. "I need to focus."

Laserbeak trilled approvingly.

A battle which seemed to easy to win now fell apart in front of him. Ramjet, in a reasonable but unprincipled show of self-preservation, took off as the combiner approached, commanding Thrust to do the same. This left Acid Storm and Ion Storm to the combiner's ire.

With an audial-splitting screech, the edge of Ion Storm's wing was torn. He cried out, squirming in the combiner's grip. A well-placed acid spray from Acid Storm made the combiner release him. Acid Storm pulled him away, wings trembling.

The Air Force was in shambles. Whichever members hadn't already fled were in a similar state to Acid Storm and Ion Storm. The rest of the Decepticons weren't faring much better. Galvatron grappled with Elita and Prowl, thoroughly distracted from the state of his troops. Starscream didn't have the authority to call a retreat, and there was no way Galvatron would listen.

[Find Slipstream,] he sent to Buzzsaw.

Buzzsaw flew across the battlefield, using its guns to rescue other Decepticons where it could. A few times, an Autobot or two noticed it, and it had to detour to avoid fire. Starscream saw every Decepticon twice without ever seeing Slipstream. Where the frag was she?

He was too far to send a comm. They only worked in close range without Cybertronian-compatible signal boosters, which, being an alien planet, Earth was distinctly lacking in. Some had been built on his world's Earth toward the end of the war, but this one was too early for that.

Specialized connections like those between a console and their cassettes were entirely different beasts. Signal boosters had actually been modeled after components originally designed for consoles. He was already forwarding messages through Laserbeak. Perhaps Buzzsaw could…

[Buzzsaw, can you forward a message?]

Buzzsaw chirped affirmatively.

[Tell Slipstream to call a retreat.]

Buzzsaw chirped again. It did another lap through the battlefield. No retreat was called.

[Has Slipstream responded?]

A low hiss. Negative.

[Try sending it again.]

Another lap. Another hiss. Where was she? Why wasn't she responding? Frag it all.

[Tell Galvatron to call it.]

Buzzsaw growled, but did as he requested. A response came through.

[I will call a retreat just this once,] Galvatron sent. *[But remember your place.]*

Starscream knew his place. He belonged at the helm of the Decepticons with his trusted and loyal allies beside him every step of the way. But those allies were left behind in another world. He was not some sniveling and beaten cyberdog begging for its master's appreciation—he was a turbofox lying in wait. And because of that, those words had the opposite impact on him. He was not cowed, nor was he silenced. Rather, a sick satisfaction crept up within him. The fool had no idea what he was toying with.

Still, he had to play the part.

[I understand, sir,] he sent.

The battlefield cleared as the Decepticons fled, leaving the Autobots to do whatever it was they did after a victory. Starscream leaned back in his seat. He held no doubts that Galvatron would want to speak with him. He had evaded the dictator's ire for now, but that couldn't last forever.

After a brief stretch, Starscream left his seat. Laserbeak settled on his shoulder, cable stretching as it did so. But the connection remained. So, at the back of his processor, Starscream tracked the return of the Decepticons. He still had quite a while before they got to the base, so he walked to the mess hall.

A quick exploit and the dispenser gave him an extra cube. He held it close to him as he walked back toward the communications room. Buzzsaw flew a lot today. If the bitzzard didn't need to refuel, he'd be surprised. He sipped his own fuel slowly, savoring the silence that coated the base.

Just as he finished, it was broken. Voices traveled through the air, bringing with them a cacophony of pedesteps. Starscream stayed where he was, knowing his summons would eventually arrive. A ceiling panel moved, and Buzzsaw popped out from beneath it.

As it landed on the console, Starscream slid the cube toward it. Buzzsaw cawed appreciatively. With a deft peck, it opened the cube and began to drink.

His summons finally came. Starscream rose from his seat. Voices drifted through the halls, injured mecha paying him little mind as he passed by. They had a paltry understanding of who he was beyond his association with Galvatron, and for now, he intended to keep it that way. The less they knew about who he was, the less likely he was to be targeted.

Galvatron was on his throne, as usual. Energeon leaked from various wounds on his body, and the dents were obvious from a distance, but he sat proudly despite them. It sent a powerful message: nothing could keep Galvatron down. Though, the complete lack of treatment and open display of injuries reminded Starscream of comments Slipstream made while his processor was stalling with overheat.

The Decepticons had no medics. Every injured mech had to pray another soldier took pity on them or fend for themselves. Even at the height of his cruelty, Megatron wouldn't have let his soldiers go without aid. Just how foolish and callous was Galvatron?

Galvatron tapped his claws against his arm rest. His optics scanned the room. What was he looking for?

Oh. Starscream knew exactly *who* he was searching for. Where was she? He hadn't been able to message her during the battle. He hadn't seen her at all since the combiner appeared. Had the Autobots gotten her?

She seemed *off* when they planned the raid, and didn't improve before it began. He knew from experience that engaging in battle when one wasn't in top condition was a foolish endeavor. If she was ill or injured, she may not be able to return on her own. It would explain his inability to message her.

"Do you know where Slipstream is?" Galvatron said.

He spat her name like it was a curse. The words came from his vocalizer in the low, rumbling growl of an enraged predator. Starscream flicked his wings.

"I lost track of her during the battle, sir," he said, bowing his head. "I was unable to contact her through Buzzsaw."

Galvatron shifted in his seat. "Interesting…"

Interesting indeed. The Decepticons needed an Air Commander. Without her, who would lead the Seekers? Starscream wasn't physically fit for the position, even if he had experience.

Something in the back of his processor didn't sit well with the idea of her dying. What if she was alive and unable to return, slowly bleeding out? It was much too familiar.

"I believe she may be injured and unable to return, sir," Starscream said quietly. "Should we send someone to retrieve her?"

Galvatron's optics narrowed. "And risk good soldiers getting captured? Waste energeon ferrying her here when it's her own fault she can't return?"

Starscream flexed his claws.

"And how is it her fault, sir?" He asked.

Galvatron hummed. "Soldiers that can't defend themselves on the battlefield deserve to die. We need to weed out the weak or we'll never win this war."

Starscream nearly took a step back, but caught himself. He flicked his wings again, trying to stave off the dread that was creeping through him. What was *he*, if not a soldier that couldn't defend himself? What was *he*, if not the weak?

"If she returns, she returns," Galvatron said. "If not, then I suppose it's time for a change in command structure."

Starscream bowed.

"I-I understand, sir," he said.

Silence passed between them. Already, Starscream was planning. He couldn't let this happen. Slipstream was too valuable.

"You're dismissed. I expect a full report by tomorrow."

"Understood, sir."

Starscream entered the hall. Again, no mecha paid him any attention. It worked fine for him. He needed to find Slipstream. The raid was just outside of his comfortable range for flight on a day like this. If he pushed himself, he could make it there and back. It might wipe him out for the next couple of days, but it was fine. He could manage that.

He passed by a few Seekers on his way to the hangar. The woods stretched out beneath him, tiny green pine trees coating the land. He readied himself to jump when voices behind him made him freeze.

"I didn't see her," one of them said.

"We can't just leave her," the other said. "The scavenging'll start soon."

Starscream flicked his wings. Scavenging? That wasn't the term they used in his world, but mecha did comb the battlefield for resources after particularly brutal fights. If the dead had what another mech required to survive, why let it go to waste?

There were no medics here, and no medical supplies. They had to get the resources to treat themselves from somewhere. Did they give it a name because it happened so much more frequently?

Starscream turned toward the voices. Before him, Acid Storm and Ion Storm stiffened.

"Oh," Acid Storm said. "You, uh… you're the…"

"The new communications officer," Starscream said.

"Yeah," Acid Storm said. "That."

"Who were you talking about?"

Acid Storm exchanged glances with Ion Storm, his wings fluttering. Ion Storm shrugged.

"Slipstream," Ion Storm said.

They *did* have some sort of loyalty to her. It made sense. In his world, Slipstream and Nova Storm were very close. Until Slipstream died, she was at Nova Storm's side. They knew each other before Nova Storm lost her wingmates, but the loss of her wingmates made them inseparable. If Nova Storm was dead in this world, Ion Storm and Acid Storm may have bonded with Slipstream in a similar way.

"I was just going to search for her," Starscream said. "Do you want to come with me?"

Ion Storm stepped forward, but Acid Storm stuck out their wing, forcing him back. Awkwardly, Ion Storm turned to stare at them. They glared at each other for a moment. Starscream tapped a pede. No doubt they were speaking through comms.

Acid Storm stepped forward, her wings high and slightly wide set—cautious, but not hostile.

"We'll come," she said. "But why are you looking for her?"

Starscream motioned them closer. Acid Storm hesitated, so Ion Storm stepped past her.

"She's an important member of command. Why *wouldn't* I look for her?" Starscream said.

Acid Storm's wings pulled back into neutral position. Their voice was soft.

"Good."

Did they really think—? Starscream stopped himself. They had no reason *not* to think he was going to scavenge. They didn't know him. At best, Slipstream had complained about him a few times. With his proximity to Galvatron, they likely assumed he shared the dictator's harmful ideals.

In another life, he may have. But here, having experienced peace and dealing with the limitations of his own disability, he could barely stand it. The only thing that kept him from howling about the fragger's stupidity was the plan. For it to work, he had to get close to Galvatron.

"Let's go," Starscream said.

He leaped off the ledge and transformed, not bothering to check if the other two Seekers followed him. Whether they came or not, he had to go. But, soon enough, his sensornet alerted him to two objects behind him.

Heat slowly built beneath Starscream's plating as he flew, his systems burning fuel faster than they should have. Whatever fuel processing issue he had made him less efficient at utilizing fuel, so he burned through more of it to accomplish basic tasks. That was why Thundercracker had always been concerned about his fuel intake when he was a newspark—not that he ever noticed at the time.

Since his systems had so much trouble utilizing fuel, it was difficult for him to control his temperature. A heat warning already popped up before they reached their destination. Yet, somehow, he hadn't been able to passively generate enough heat when they were at the poles of the planet. Whatever.

He landed as gracefully as he could manage, which meant catching himself after he stumbled the first few steps. A backward glance brought him a confused stare from Acid Storm, and he fluttered his wings, embarrassed. They didn't know about his issues. Did they just assume he was unskilled? He hoped not, but it was really the only option.

The battlefield was devoid of life aside from the three Seekers. Scraps of metal, entire limbs, deactivated frames, puddles of energeon—all of them littered the area. None of the scrap or frames nearby appeared to be Slipstream's, so at least they had that going for them. Starscream searched for her comm channel and sent a ping.

It was returned.

"She's here," he said.

Acid Storm and Ion Storm nodded. They searched the area as Starscream attempted to ask for her location. He received another blank ping in response. *Slag*, he'd have to follow the signal. Any other mech would just search for her EM field, but he couldn't do that, so his best bet was sending pings until the signal got stronger.

He took a few steps and sent another ping. Weaker. More steps and another ping. Stronger. A few more. Another. Stronger.

He passed through a dense clump of ferns. Stronger. A set of shrubs. Stronger still. A large rock sat before him. He leaned to the side, something shiny sticking out from behind him. He sent another ping. Stronger.

Carefully, he approached the rock. It could be an Autobot, or it could just be a corpse. Either way, there was no guarantee it was Slipstream. The loud whirr of cooling fans reached his audials. Not a corpse, then.

He rounded the rock. Dim, fuzzy optics stared up at him. He sent a comm to Acid Storm and Ion Storm as he leaned down. Slipstream stared straight ahead, completely unaware of his presence. Was she even conscious?

Starscream placed a hand on her cheek. Immediately, she threw herself sideways, flailing blindly. Her claws caught his arm, but it was far from graceful. With a grunt, she landed in a heap. Energeon trickled from a wound on her side, freshly aggravated by the movement.

"Slipstream," Starscream said. Her wings twitched. "I'm here to retrieve you."

When she didn't stir, he reached out again. All it resulted in was more blind flailing. How aware of her surroundings was she? Did she actually register who he was?

Starscream shook his head. Regardless of her awareness, he needed to bring her back to the base. He reached over again, this time aiming for the spot between her wings. Before she could flailing again, he dug his claws into the plating gap, gently picking at it. She stilled.

"That's right," Starscream muttered as she leaned into the touch. "I'm here to help, idiot."

Starscream took a snapshot of her wound and sent it to Acid Storm and Ion Storm.

[Bring something that can patch this,] he sent.

As Starscream continued to pet her, Slipstream purred. Starscream paused. She didn't seem like the type of mech to do that, especially not with someone she claimed to dislike.

"Why are you so out of it?" He muttered.

She seemed ill before the raid. Maybe it was a virus? Certain ones could mess with higher processing, and overheating definitely didn't help. Pair that with energeon loss, and it made sense that Slipstream was a loopy mess.

Pedesteps rustled the foliage nearby. Wings shooting upward, Starscream turned to the source of the noise, only to relax as Ion Storm and Acid Storm stared back at him. Ion Storm held a scrap of metal in his hands just large enough to patch the wound. Starscream motioned them closer.

"Be careful," he said. "I think her higher processing is altered. She might not recognize you."

Acid Storm and Ion Storm approached carefully. Ion Storm looped around toward Slipstream's head, while Acid Storm settled at her side. Slipstream's head jerked upward, her wings twitching. She sensed someone was nearby—if she could even tell it was some*one* and not some*thing*—but her optics didn't land on either of the Seekers.

Typically, they would clean the wound, but they had nothing to clean it with. The medbay, as Slipstream had warned him before, had no supplies. That was why scavenging was so common among this world's Decepticons in the first place—they needed their patches from somewhere.

So, all they could do for now was place the patch to protect the wound. Except…

"Do either of you have any frame glue? Or something similar?" Starscream asked.

Ion Storm and Acid Storm exchanged glances before shaking their heads. Great. How could they handle this?

Starscream scanned the area. What did they have here? Rocks? Shrubs? Trees? None of that was adhesive! Unless…

He searched his memory files. Jetfire said something to him once about how the humans used trees to make a type of glue. It was a long, involved process and they didn't have that much time, but he also said some trees produced sticky substances by themselves. What was it?

Aha! He found the file and skimmed it. Pine trees produced sap during specific times of the Earth year. He checked his chronometer. Yes! It was the correct time! Now, were there any pine trees?

Yes! Right there!

Starscream made his way to the closest one. He reached between the branches, feeling around until his fingers reached something sticky. He scooped up as much as he could, but it wasn't

enough. So, he moved to a neighboring tree, then the next, until he had just barely the amount he needed.

As he headed back toward Slipstream, Acid Storm stared at him with a scrunched olfactory ridge.

"What is that?" She asked.

"Our temporary adhesive," Starscream said, bending down.

He smeared the sap around the wound—ensuring he didn't get any *in* it—and placed the patch on top. With all the strength he could muster, he pressed it down. He wasn't sure if the sap needed time to settle, so he had to be cautious. Then, he released the patch, plating relaxing as it stayed in place.

He turned back toward Acid Storm and Ion Storm. "Can you two carry her?"

When he set off to find her, he assumed she would be mobile. Starscream was a swift mech, not a strong one. In his current state, he would be lucky to make it back to the base without immediately falling apart on landing.

Acid Storm and Ion Storm placed their hands under Slipstream, lifting her. She squirmed, letting out a squawk. They ignored it, shifting their grip to account for the squirming. Starscream nodded at them and took off. Soon, they were behind him, and they made their way back.

When they landed, Starscream's fans were at full intensity again. His limbs shook slightly when he put weight on them, but he ignored that in favor of checking on Slipstream. She finally stopped squirming in her wingmates' grasp, hanging limply with dim optics.

"Take her back to her quarters," Starscream said. "I'll get her some fuel."

He exited the hangar, not waiting for a response. As usual, the mecha he passed in the halls ignored him. He hacked the dispenser to obtain two cubes: one for Slipstream to replenish her lost energeon, and one for him to replace the fuel he burned. Knowing he'd become a target if others saw him with multiple cubes, he stuffed them into his cockpit.

Slipstream's quarters weren't far from his. Despite their proximity to Galvatron, both of them were in a regular hall. Starscream knocked on the door. It slid open.

Ion Storm stood in the doorway. He stepped aside to let Starscream in. Acid Storm sat on the berth with Slipstream's head in their lap. Their fingers rubbed the tip of her closest wing.

Starscream pulled one of the cubes out of his cockpit. At the sound of his cockpit latching, Acid Storm fluttered his wings, optics meeting his.

"I like it when she's like this," Acid Storm muttered. "No yelling, no fighting… and she lets me touch her."

Starscream curled his claws around the cube. "Does she not typically?"

Acid Storm shook their head.

"No," they said. "She's meaner than a pit viper on the best of days. Screams if someone touches her unexpectedly."

An itch crept through Starscream's plating. Slipstream was unpleasant, but for her to have such a reaction to touch…

He flicked his wings and stepped closer. At first, he offered the cube to Slipstream, but she didn't register it, staring blankly ahead. So, with gentle hands, he cupped her face and spilled some of the energeon into her mouth. She jerked away, smacking her lips. Her optics widened as the realization dawned on her, and in a swift but graceless motion, she snatched the cube from Starscream.

She drank quickly, gulping the fuel down as if it could be taken away at any moment. When she finished, she held the cube, staring down at it. Slowly, her optics brightened. The fuzz lessened. She blinked.

"*You*," she hissed.

Acid Storm scooted backward as Slipstream rose, her wings fanning wide. Resolutely, Starscream kept his in neutral position. He wasn't looking for a fight, nor would he engage in one.

"We brought you back," Starscream said. "Galvatron was going to leave you to die."

Slipstream flicked her wings, olfactory ridge scrunching. She turned, staring at Acid Storm, then Ion Storm. Her wings returned to neutral position.

"So you did," she said. She bared her teeth. "What do you want?"

Starscream fought the urge to look away. "Nothing. You're too important to lose. I was merely correcting Galvatron's error."

"I don't believe you—"

They both stilled as they received a message.

[Meet me in my office. Don't delay.]

Starscream turned toward the exit, whatever argument that was about to start forgotten. It didn't matter. *This* did. Pedesteps behind him made clear that Slipstream was also on her way.

As they made their way through the halls, Slipstream passed him, sending him a glare as she did so. Starscream rolled his optics at her petty behavior. He saved her life, and what did he have to show for it? Shaky limbs and low fuel.

Tiredness cloaked his body, the strain of running on low fuel beginning to cloud his processor. But he couldn't have his fuel until after this meeting. Galvatron wouldn't allow it. The dictator was the type to view anything but full attention as disrespect.

As they entered the room, both mecha's cooling fans were on high speed, but while Starscream clung to the doorway until he absolutely had to move, Slipstream stood tall. Her wings were slightly wide, as if compensating for dizziness. She probably was, considering how badly the virus had impacted her higher processing.

Starscream slid the chair from his desk over. There was no way he was standing for this. Galvatron watched him slide himself into place, but didn't comment. Despite his callousness toward his soldiers, he never said anything about Starscream's compensations for his limits. Perhaps the accusations of favoritism were true, or perhaps he was just too important to lose.

"Slipstream," Galvatron said.

Slipstream shuddered.

"You not only failed to control your soldiers, you failed to respond to several pings, and required extraction. You were away from your assignment for the majority of this mission. Am I correct?"

Slipstream twitched her wings. Her wrists closed around her arms. As she spoke, she rubbed them.

"I—I was injured!" She said. "My comms were temporarily out of commission. That was why I couldn't respond."

Galvatron leaned forward. His gaze sharpened to a glare.

"But you still left your post," Galvatron said.

"I had to—"

"You *left your post*," Galvatron growled. "You didn't designate a temporary commander. You didn't alert anyone. *Starscream* had to notify me, and *I* had to command *your* troops."

Slipstream shrank, gripping her wrists harder. "My comms were down! I was injured! I couldn't alert anyone!"

"You still should have—"

Suddenly, Slipstream exploded with movement. She threw her arms wide and fluttered her wings. Her optics fell on Starscream for a moment, then she turned back to Galvatron.

"Starscream was the one supervising!" She cried. "He's the reason the mission failed! Not me!"

Galvatron's hands tightened around the armrest, the pressure chasing the metal to groan. Fury built up inside Starscream, invading his lines and processor. How dare she? He saved her, and now she was trying to accuse *him* of being the problem?

"Starscream did a fine job," Galvatron growled. "Stop trying to pass the blame, Slipstream."

She stammered an incoherent protest as Galvatron rose from his throne. His pedes reached the ground with an echoing thunk. Slipstream flinched.

Galvatron stepped forward. Slipstream staggered backward. Plating snapping close, Starscream pushed his chair away from the two. As Slipstream backed into a wall, wings clanking against it, she let out a quiet yelp.

Galvatron seized her shoulders. He sighed and closed his optics.

"What am I supposed to do with you, Slipstream?" He muttered.

Slipstream squirmed in his grip, optics wide.

"Sir, please—"

In a swift motion, Galvatron tossed her across the room. Starscream kicked his chair out of the way as she flew past him and into the wall. Glass clattered to the ground as her cockpit cracked. She rose to her elbows, muffling a grunt.

Galvatron crossed the room quickly. She was barely on her knees when he kicked her, sending her sailing a short distance. Before she could stand, he kicked her again. She rolled onto her belly and attempted to crawl away, but he placed a pede on her back. He took no care to avoid her wings, bending them awkwardly as he forced her down.

Starscream's spark pulsed in his chest. The anger that rose up in him earlier swirled with something else. He flexed his claws. This wasn't happening. It couldn't be happening. Why was it happening?

Slipstream screamed.

He wished he was the only one. He *had to* be the only one. Was it better if he was special? Was it worse? Why couldn't he be the only one? Why was it happening again? Why why *why* —

Galvatron slammed a pede into Slipstream's helm. It bounced against the floor. He slammed it down again. Glass crunched as her optics shattered.

He had to do something. He couldn't just let this happen. Not again. No mech, no mech…

No mech left behind.

Starscream stepped forward, abandoning the safety of his chair. A brute stood before him, optics blazing. Despite every system of his frame telling him not to, he inserted himself in front of the brute.

"I th-think she's learned her lesson, sir," Starscream said. Why was his voice so weak? "If you harm her further, it will be a waste of the e-effort I spent to retrieve her."

Galvatron placed the pede he had poised over Slipstream's head on the ground.

"You don't know her like I do," Galvatron said. "Besides, she's replaceable."

Starscream flicked his wings, fury turning righteous.

"Then why *haven't* you replaced her?" He hissed. At Galvatron's silence, he continued. "I can't fly alongside the Air Force for long enough periods of time, so the replacement can't be me. Half the force hates Ramjet and Thrust, so it can't be either of them. Who does that leave?"

The answer was no one. Galvatron's irritated grunt made it clear that he knew.

"Please," Starscream said. "Let Slipstream recover. She's still needed."

Galvatron stepped away. With a snarl, he said, "I will allow her to recover. But remember your place, Starscream."

Starscream bowed. "I know my place, sir."

Galvatron took a few steps away. Starscream bent down to examine Slipstream when he suddenly turned around.

"We will have a private meeting tomorrow. I expect more *information* as repayment for this… stunt."

They both knew he didn't need information. He combed through Starscream's Autobot-related memories too many times to count. But that didn't matter. Starscream forced his wings to stay still.

"Yes, sir," he said quietly.

Galvatron finally returned to his throne. With a sigh, Starscream set himself to the task of examining Slipstream. Her cockpit and one of her optics were cracked. Just from looking, there were various dents along her chestplates and limbs.

He laid a hand on her plating to feel for further injuries. Slipstream shot upward, slashing with her claws. The movement was uncoordinated, and she missed by a wide margin.

"Get away!" She spat. "I don't… I can't…"

Starscream searched for Acid Storm and Ion Storm's channels and sent a comm asking them to pick up their wingmate. Their responses were two immediate and resounding rejections. He was on his own.

"I'm helping you!" Starscream hissed.

She continued to squirm under him. "No!"

Resigning himself to scratched plating, he reached underneath her arms and pulled. The hold made it more difficult for her to squirm, but she could definitely still kick. Starscream shifted his hold again.

"Do you *want* me to drop you?" He spat. "I'm taking you back to my quarters, since your *wingmates* don't want to help you."

She stilled at that, hanging almost limply in his arms. She blinked a few times. Then, her optics fell to the ground.

"I can walk," she muttered. "Just… take me."

Starscream highly doubted that, but he released her anyway. He was proven correct a few moments later when she paused in the middle of the hallway with a pained hiss. He pulled her toward him, allowing her to lean against him as he leaned against the wall. She scrunched her optics closed and acquiesced.

When they reached his quarters, Starscream led her to his berth. She sat on it, curling in on herself as much as she could with her injuries. He sat beside her.

"Do your wingmates often abandon you when you're injured?" Starscream asked.

Slipstream glared at him, then turned away. Starscream rolled his optics. Whatever. They could sit in silence forever. He tapped the edge of the berth.

"They don't let me in after Galvatron punishes me," she muttered. "It's my fault."

Starscream often thought the same thing when Megatron harmed him. But looking at the altercation between Slipstream and Galvatron, it was undeserved. Sure, she left her post, but she was ill and injured. Galvatron's response was to injure her further. It was completely illogical.

"He shouldn't hurt you," Starscream said. "That's just plain fragging stupid."

Slipstream bared her teeth. "You know *nothing* about me. I deserve it."

Starscream lowered his wings, not wanting to fight.

"Sure," he muttered.

A wall panel shifted. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw slipped into the room from beneath it. Buzzsaw landed on his shoulder with a chirp. Laserbeak landed on his lap, tilting its head as it studied Slipstream. It turned toward Starscream with a trill.

"She's injured," Starscream said. "Be nice to her. We're recharging on the floor tonight."

Slipstream's wings shot up. "You're giving me your berth?"

Starscream reached beneath Laserbeak's chin to scratch it. The retroraven purred.

"Just for tonight," Starscream said. "You said your wingmates wouldn't let you back in, and I'm not letting you recharge on the floor while you're sick and injured."

He knew how miserable that was. He could deal with some extra aches if it meant she had a comfortable place to recover.

Slipstream stared at him. Her optics darted between his and Laserbeak. Then, her wings fluttered.

"Okay…"

Chapter End Notes

I feel like every story I write has an unexpected showstopper character (at least for me, the author). It was Soundwave in Blind Spot, and, well... I think you can tell who it is here. She was actually a last-minute choice. After I decided not to use an alternate version of Soundwave, it was between her and Cyclonus. I figured she'd fit better with her history of being a Starscream clone in other media (particularly Animated, which is where I mostly know her from).

Rereading this chapter to edit was quite the experience because I already know what happens afterward. I love you Slippy. My poor little meow meow.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The crunch of metal beneath his fingers, the screams as he burned them alive, energeon between his seams—Jetfire remembered all of it. But the memories were fuzzy, as if transferred from another mech. He was fully aware when he combined with Jetstorm, but he had little sway over Safeguard's actions. It was almost as if Safeguard was a completely different mech. Still, Jetfire knew he had at least some hand in what transpired on the battlefield.

The flood of praise he and Jetstorm received for their actions made him sick. The pit crept up, and chewing on his charm only did so much to lessen it. The medic's vow was to never harm another mech unless absolutely necessary. Always to heal, never to hurt. He hadn't reached the point in his training that he could take the vow. Now that he was a weapon, would he ever have the opportunity?

Jetstorm was an alright partner. He was eager in all the ways Jetfire wasn't, and more pliant than an elastic band. Every training session, Jetstorm dragged him over early, arriving with bright optics and fluttering wings. Jetfire cared little for the experience, and always delayed as long as he could. It was petty, but it was all he had.

Jetstorm was always out and about. It was rare that he spent more than a few moments inside the room after that first day. Everyone wanted to speak with him, and he wanted to speak with everyone. Conversely, Jetfire only left the room if he had to. He collected his rations each day and immediately brought them back to the room. One of them sat in front of him at the moment as he laid on the floor, staring blankly at it.

Would it be so bad to just… stop collecting them? Let himself waste away on the floor? He hissed to himself. Even if he actually wanted to do that, he was one half of Skyfire's *precious* combiner. They'd probably just force-feed him and lock him up like Pharma under the grounds that he was insane.

Jetfire forced himself into a sitting position with a quiet groan and popped open the cube. He drank it as quickly as he could, uncaring of the taste or texture. It was all the same boring slag, anyway. He tapped his claws on the container.

He could…

No! Starscream made him the bracelet so he'd have something else. But Starscream wasn't here. Skywarp was doing something with Thundercracker, as usual. Skyfire was probably

doing something in his lab—frankly, Jetfire didn't give a scrap—and Jetstorm was with some of his friends. Star was probably with Skyfire, wherever he was.

There was no one to stop him, and no one to care. Jetfire brought the lid of the cube to his mouth and *bit*. It crunched beneath his dentae. The shards cut his mouth, but he didn't mind. The taste of his own energeon mixed with the flavor of the glass.

He kept going. Soon, there was nothing left of the cube. His cheeks and tongue stung, and his fuel tank had started to hurt, but that didn't matter. He curled back up on the floor, clutching his abdomen as he closed his optics.

A few hours later, he woke to an alarm he set. The pain in his abdomen was worse, but he didn't care. He stretched before rising from the floor. A tinge of excitement flowed through him, but it was quickly crushed by the pit.

He moved to activate the keypad, but the door opened before he could. Star paused mid-step. Behind her, Skyfire loomed. Jetfire backed away, fiddling with his bracelet as they entered. Jetstorm trailed behind them. He stopped to wave at Jetfire. Halfheartedly, Jetfire waved back.

"You look like slag," Star said.

Jetfire rolled his optics. "Thanks."

"I mean it," Star said, glaring at him. "Can't have you falling ill on us."

Jetfire shrugged. "I'm going to train with Aid. The medbay is a convenient place to be sick."

He turned away. As he exited the room, Star shouted after him.

"Get him to give you an exam! We need you in good health for next week's mission!"

Of course. The *mission*. Jetfire wrung his hands. They didn't care about anything else. He wasn't a mech to them, just half of their treasured weapon. They proved that when they withheld information just to get him to cooperate.

[Feel better!]

Jetfire sighed as Jetstorm's message came in. Was he that jovial when he was created? He couldn't imagine being so naive now. But it wasn't Jetstorm's fault. This was all he'd ever known. At least he cared.

Jetfire poked his head into the medbay. First Aid greeted him warmly. The medic was in the middle of examining some mech's knee joint. Jetfire had seen the mech before, but couldn't recall their name. Plenty of mecha filtered through the medbay on a regular basis, needing this or that checked on. Without the resources of their home planet, most repairs were flimsy at best, and needed frequent adjustments.

Reduced rations didn't help. A cybertronian could survive on as little as fifty percent of the ideal ration, but that was just it—they could survive and do little else. Processing systems

required a steady intake of fuel to circulate, so if a mech took in too little, the entire system would stall. Here, rations were approximately seventy five percent of the ideal, or eighty if you were recovering from a particularly strenuous procedure. Even med grade was given in smaller than recommended amounts.

Jetfire's secondary tank, having started full, was just below half now. He drew from it more than a few times after those first few weeks. He activated some of his minor fuel conservation protocols as the amount dwindled, but he didn't want to activate the major ones just yet. He could eat things other than energeon if he had to. He just didn't want to risk a medical emergency if he could help it.

"Can you get me a new file?" First Aid asked. "This one is worn."

Jetfire nodded and headed toward the drawers. He pulled a fresh file out from one of them and brought it over to Aid. As he took it, Aid thanked him. Jetfire watched silently as Aid filed down a section of the joint. The syringe from the local nerve block was still sitting on the table, so Jetfire recapped it and dropped it into the appropriate bin.

Something in his abdomen twisted. He froze, hands instinctively pressing into it, but that only made the pain worse. Forcing himself to pull them away, he closed his optics and fiddled with the bracelet. His cooling fans activated.

He checked his temperature. Odd. He hadn't done anything for it to be so high. But it wasn't too far out of normal values. It would correct itself soon.

First Aid was already sending the mech out the door when he returned. Together, they cleaned off the table. It was best to keep surfaces clear whenever possible, especially since they didn't know when their next patient might be in.

"Are you alright?" Aid asked quietly.

Jetfire shrugged. "Why wouldn't I be?"

He wasn't, but who gave a scrap? Skywarp was off somewhere with Thundercracker, and Starscream was with this world's Decepticons. As much as he enjoyed learning from First Aid, he wasn't going to spill his feelings to the mech. At best, it wouldn't change anything. At worst, it would be an excuse to put him away.

He needed Starscream to hug him and tell him stories about the battles he survived. He needed Skywarp to sneak up on him and make obnoxious jokes. He needed Buster to slip out of his lead so he and Blitzwing would have to catch him. He needed Hook to talk about the ever-growing fangs of retrorats with him. He needed Dirge to tell him random facts about the flora and fauna in the woods in poem format.

Jetfire's spark burned. He missed them. All he wanted was to go home.

"I guess so," Aid said. "Your optics just seem a little dull."

Jetfire gathered up the rag and cleaner they used to clean the table. "Don't worry about me."

"I'm a medic. It's my job to worry about *everyone*. That includes you," First Aid said, his brow furrowing.

Frag, he wanted to spill it all. Desperately, hopelessly—he wanted to tell First Aid everything. But what good would it do? Neither of them could reverse what was done. It was his fault for agreeing in the first place.

He was stupid. Utterly fragging stupid. He thought he was so intelligent but it reality he was just naive.

Another patient entered the medbay, and the conversation was put on hold. First Aid didn't ask again. Jetfire didn't know what he would've said if he had.

◇◇◇

Jetfire felt like slag more than usual. It should've melted away when he and Jetstorm combined during training, like every other sensation, but it didn't. Safeguard's fans whirred just as strongly as Jetfire's, and their combined frame ached fiercely.

But they had training to do. Practicing with Jetfire's outlier was deceptively tiring. Jetstorm's plating was less fire-resistant than his, so Safeguard's protection against his own ability was inconsistent. Still, Skyfire and Star wanted them to practice, so they practiced. Star claimed Jetstorm would adjust over time just like Jetfire had, and eventually they wouldn't need to be so careful about it. But like with all things, they just couldn't wait.

Next was aerial maneuvers. Safeguard's alt mode was gigantic, yet somehow managed to slice through the air more easily than Jetfire ever had on his own. They rolled to avoid imaginary fire and—had the ground always been so close? Pull up!

Jetfire was… dizzy? It was hard to tell. But something was wrong. Up, up! Why weren't they going up?

Everything spun. Where were they? He couldn't see. What was happening?

Pain. Alerts on his HUD. He stirred. *Frag*. Why did it hurt so much? The ground faded into focus—leaf litter and sticks. Flames danced on them. Jetfire rolled over. Wait…

He wasn't supposed to be *Jetfire* right now. He was supposed to be *Safeguard*. Why was he Jetfire? He forced himself to his knees, muffling a grunt of pain. It hadn't been this bad when he crashed that first time. What was so different now?

He stumbled, falling back onto his knees as the world tilted when he tried to rise. His fans were on full blast. One of the notices on his HUD was about his temperature. Ugh.

"Jetstorm?" He muttered, poking through his files in search of the other mech.

{GESTALT PARTNER JSTM temporarily offline.}

Great. He was unconscious or something. Safeguard could only exist if they were both functional. That left Jetfire to solve… whatever this was. They crashed, that much was clear.

But why?

Jetfire already felt like slag. Combining just compounded it. Now, he was injured and his fans were on for some reason. What could possibly…?

Oh, fragging damn it. He was sick, wasn't he? Everyone kept telling him he looked like slag and asking him if he was okay because *he was actually sick*. It wasn't just the pit. Since he and Jetstorm worked as one when they combined, Jetstorm had to be sick, too. That was why it felt worse when they were Safeguard.

Jetfire forced himself to his feet, using Safeguard's wings to balance himself as the world spun again. Could he activate the separation sequence if Jetstorm was unconscious? It only required one member to initiate it, but they hadn't exactly attempted it when one of them wasn't aware. Only one way to find out.

Jetfire activated the sequence. In a dizzying shift of panels, he was freed from the confines of Safeguard. He fell flat on his aft as Jetstorm landed on his side a short distance away. Jetfire cringed at the thud his body made. He crawled over to Jetstorm, placing both hands beneath his body before hoisting him.

He waited for the wave of vertigo to pass before he started moving. Star and Skyfire should be here any moment now. They would've seen the crash and realized they weren't getting back up at this point.

Eventually, he was correct. Red and white streaked across the sky, landing before him with a roar. Star's optics widened as they fell on Jetstorm. Irritably, Jetfire flicked his wings, immediately regretting it when he nearly lost his balance. Skyfire stepped closer, and he offered Jetstorm to him. Gently, Skyfire took Jetstorm.

"What happened?" He asked.

His optics were soft, his brow furrowed. For a moment, Jetfire almost believed he cared.

"I don't know," Jetfire said. "We just got really dizzy, then I was the only one piloting. I think he passed out."

Better for them to realize he was sick on their own. It was obvious, anyway. Jetfire was tired and forcing words through his vocalizer was growing progressively uncomfortable.

Skyfire hummed. Then, he turned around and began walking away. Star turned to follow him, then glanced back. She motioned for Jetfire to follow. His vision swam for a moment, an ache spreading across his processor.

"Come on," Star said. "You both need to get checked out."

"I know," Jetfire muttered, forcing himself forward. He brought a hand to his forehead, wishing it would all just *stop*.

The halls passed in a blur, with Jetfire paying little attention beyond putting one pede in front of the other. It was difficult enough to resist flopping into a heap on the ground right there.

The value on his temperature warning only increased as they kept moving.

Suddenly, Skyfire paused. Jetfire bumped his olfactory sensor on Skyfire's backpack. He hissed quietly, about to ask Skyfire why they stopped when he noticed movement in Skyfire's arms. Jetstorm's optics opened a smidge.

"What?" He muttered.

Skyfire shushed him. "It's fine. You and Jetfire crashed. We're taking you to the medbay."

Jetstorm squirmed in his arms, helm turning as he attempted to view his surroundings. Skyfire frowned and adjusted his grip, freeing a hand to stroke the edge of Jetstorm's wing. Jetstorm hummed quietly and relaxed, leaning his helm against Skyfire's chest.

A hateful, disgusting feeling crawled into Jetfire's spark. He forced it back, but it ignored his efforts. Claws dragged down his plating, slowly grinding lines. The pit grew ever deeper, pain wrenching itself into his gut like never before. He pulled at the bracelet, desperate to make it just *go away*, but the bracelet tightened into a shackle.

How could that liar be so gentle? It was like watching a ferrowolf tear chunks out of a squirming lightdeer. He cared so little for Jetfire, yet cradled Jetstorm in his arms and soothed him.

Jetfire was still reeling when they entered the medbay. First Aid startled upon seeing them, quickly guiding them to berths. Since Jetstorm wasn't quite fireproof yet, he sustained more damage, so Aid tended to him first, cleaning and patching his wounds. Star and Skyfire hovered over him the entire time.

While Aid cleaned a particularly deep wound, Skyfire offered his hand for Jetstorm to squeeze. Jetfire fought not to growl. The pit grew deeper.

"That should be it for the damage," First Aid said. "Is there anything else I should be aware of?"

Star flicked her wings. "Jetfire claimed they got dizzy when they were combined. We think they might have a virus."

First Aid nodded. "I'll take a look."

He tapped on Jetstorm's medical panel. Jetstorm hesitated, looking toward Skyfire.

"It's alright," Skyfire said. "He's just going to plug in and take a look."

Jetstorm cringed. "Plug *into* my processor?"

"He's only going to look at what he needs to," Skyfire said, laying a hand on Jetstorm's pauldron. Jetfire's insides writhed again.

Jetstorm's wings lowered. "Does he have to?"

Jetfire tuned out the conversation. It was more gentle coaxing and reassuring caresses. He tried fiddling with the bracelet, but all that did was remind him of Starscream. His creator left him, and Skywarp was barely around, and the only other mecha who spent time around him didn't give a scrap!

Sure, *Jetstorm* got to have loving reassurances and gentle touches. *He* got to be told he could wake an entire barrack and had to listen to everyone talk over him. Jetstorm got to hang out with Skyfire and Star whenever he wanted, but Starscream was in a whole other faction and Skywarp barely spared him a moment if he wasn't having a medical emergency. He'd given up after repeated weeks of asking her to spend time and getting rejected on account of having other plans.

What was so special about Thundercracker, anyway? What made her so much more interesting? Why did Skyfire and Star treat Jetstorm so gently and not give a scrap about him? Why did Starscream leave? Was he really just that unlovable?

Skywarp told him it wasn't his fault, but maybe it was. He was big, strong, and powerful. He could light fires with his hands. He was dangerous. He was a weapon.

He was a *warframe*.

In his history classes, they were always described as mecha constructed to fight in the Quintesson war. Jetfire had never fought in that war—he hadn't been alive then—so when others described him as a warframe, he had no idea what that meant. It made no sense. But now he knew.

He was made to destroy and little else. *That* was why no one cared. He was just some big, stupid war machine.

"Hey."

Jetfire blinked, slowly emerging from whatever state he sank into. First Aid stood before him. He sat up.

"Y-yeah?" He said.

"It's your turn now," Aid said softly.

Jetfire shrugged. "Go ahead."

First Aid was gentle as he cleaned out the wounds the crash left. He placed patches with a soft touch. It left Jetfire's plating tingling in a pleasant way, his spark warming. He hadn't realized it was so cold.

Aid tapped his panel and Jetfire opened it. A notification alerted him to a pre-authorized connection.

"How are you feeling?" Aid asked.

"Like slag," Jetfire said.

Aid hummed. "Your temperature is really high. Your fans aren't keeping up."

"Definitely not," Jetfire muttered.

Aid continued to read through his parameters. Jetfire stared at the wall, resisting the temptation to swing his legs. He was large enough compared to the berth that it would only make things difficult. Finally, Aid's plug disconnected with a quiet click, snapping back beneath his panel.

Aid crossed the room and opened the energeon additive cabinet. Sorting through the additives, he took two packets. As he pulled out two cubes, Jetfire decided to introject.

"I don't need one," he said.

Aid stared at him. Slowly, Aid placed the cubes on the counter.

"You do," Aid said, words soft but firm.

He shouldn't be putting up a fuss about this. Jetfire knew that. But the ugly thing squirming inside his spark was tearing him apart. He just needed… something. He didn't know what. Just *something*.

"I don't," Jetfire insisted. "Put it back."

Aid sighed, popping open the cubes and pouring the packets in. "I'm going to give you one whether you need it or not. You don't have to drink it, but you should."

Jetfire swung his leg, kicking one of the legs of the berth with a clang. He rolled his optics and looked away. Star stepped closer to him, her teeth bared.

"Behave yourself!" She hissed.

Jetfire flared his wings. The ugly feeling curled inside of his spark, igniting into anger as he stared into Star's optics.

"Make me!" He spat.

Star stepped closer, but froze as a hand landed on her shoulder. She stared up at Skyfire. Crossing the room with a sigh, First Aid stood between Jetfire and the rest of the group.

"I'll call Skywarp in a moment," he said. He shoved one of the cubes in his hand toward Jetfire. "Just, please—take this. Even if you don't drink it."

Jetfire pulled his hands close to himself, but First Aid just shoved it at him with even more intensity. A sharp glare made Jetfire wilt, and he took the cube from the medic's hands. Aid's gaze softened and Jetfire felt… useless. Stupid. Small.

Why was he acting like this? Didn't he always strive to be gentle? What inside him made him want to scream and bite and growl, and why couldn't he make it go away?

Light caught his optics. Jetstorm stared back at him, wings low. He turned away as First Aid handed him his own cube, but quickly turned back. Jetfire scratched at his leg seams.

"Both of them are in rough shape," First Aid said.

Skyfire frowned. "Will they recover in time for the mission?"

"I doubt it," Aid said, shaking his helm.

Jetfire's plating relaxed just a tad. Satisfaction crept into his spark as Skyfire's face fell. Guilt stalked after it, leaving a sour taste in his mouth. He wasn't supposed to feel like this.

Star's wings flicked irritably, a scowl forming on her face. Skyfire hummed as he glanced between Jetfire and Jetstorm. He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a whoosh of air and a shout.

"Hey!"

Leaning heavily against Thundercracker was Skywarp. Jetfire's processor latched onto the way her wings went wide and low as she stepped away from Thundercracker, a too-wide grin on her face. Those gyroscopic sensors weren't being compensated at all, were they?

Skywarp placed her hands on her hips. "So, uh… what's up?"

"I told you in my message," First Aid said gently. "Jetfire and Jetstorm crashed during training today. They have a virus."

Skywarp clicked her tongue. "Sheesh. That sucks."

She glanced at Jetstorm, following his gaze, before heading toward Jetfire. Scrunching his optics shut, Jetfire rolled the cube in his hands. The berth creaked as Skywarp sat beside him.

"How're you doing?" Skywarp asked.

Jetfire sighed. He forced his optics open, the ugly thing in his spark squirming as Thundercracker leaned close to Skyfire and whispered into his audial. He squeezed the cube in his hands, but not too hard—if he cracked it, it'd cause a mess.

"I miss Starscream and I feel like slag," he muttered.

Skywarp reached her arm around Jetfire's shoulders and Jetfire fought not to flinch as the touch burned. His optics fell to the floor as he tapped her thigh three times. She stiffened, then released him and stood up.

"Anyway," she said. "We should head back to the room. You can drink that on the way."

Jetfire stood, having no qualms with returning to the room. But…

"I'm not going to drink it," Jetfire said.

Skywarp's brow furrowed, her wings rising just the tiniest bit. "What? Why not?"

"I don't want to."

She frowned at him, but turned away. They exited to the hall and the rest of the group soon followed. Skywarp glanced back, wings twitching, then wrapped her arm around Jetfire. He flinched at the sudden movement.

"How about we just—" Skywarp said.

The world twisted around them. One moment, they were standing in the hall, and the next, they were in the room as Jetfire's vision swam. He shook his head, trying to force his gyroscopic sensors to stabilize.

"Sorry," Skywarp said, cringing. "But now we've got some time alone."

Silence passed between them. Skywarp clicked her claws together before pacing in a circle. Then, she turned back to Jetfire with an antsy hum.

"So, um," she said. "What's up? Cause I know it's not just the virus."

"I already told you," Jetfire said.

Something in the back of his processor refused to let him spill his spark. If he told Skywarp about how he actually felt, would she be angry? She spent all of her time with Thundercracker, and Thundercracker was close with Skyfire. If she mentioned it to Thundercracker, would Thundercracker mention it to Skyfire?

Skywarp shook her helm, her wings drooping. "I miss him too. He'll come back. He promised he wouldn't leave again."

Jetfire shuffled the cube in his hands. Did she really believe that, or was she just trying to convince herself?

"Okay," Jetfire said quietly.

"Did he ever tell you why he was alone on Earth?" Skywarp asked.

Jetfire shook his helm. Starscream had only told him that he'd been alone, pursued by both Decepticons and Autobots. He never said why. He'd just assumed it was because of Megatron, since Starscream recounted so many fights with the mech.

Skywarp scrunched her optics shut, her claws curling into fists.

"He left us," she said. "He thought we were trying to take his position away, so he *left us*. He does that when he's scared. Just… leaves like that. Doesn't care about who he's hurting or if he's gonna be okay."

It didn't sound the same. If Starscream left the Decepticons because he thought they wanted to take away his position, then what reason did he have to leave now? He had no position in

this world. All he had was them.

Was he afraid of losing *them*? Was that why he left?

"I made him promise to never do that again—" Skywarp spread her arms wide. "—but here we are. So he has to be doing *something*. He has to be planning to come back. Because otherwise, he broke his promise."

Jetfire stared down at the cube. Again, was Skywarp confident or was she just trying to convince herself? Before he left Starscream got stuck because Skyfire wanted Jetfire to be part of Safeguard. He destroyed the frames Skyfire and Star built. Was he doing this to protect them? How? By leaving them alone with the very mecha that wanted to use and manipulate them?

But would being with this world's Decepticons be much better? Galvatron had to get his warp drive from somewhere. This world's Skywarp was dead, and that didn't bode well.

The door slid open. Skyfire and the others entered, and the conversation was silenced.

◇◇◇

Solvent ran down Jetfire's plating as he leaned against the wall. His fans had refused to turn on, and his temperature was too high to just let sit, so he'd dragged himself to the washrack and turned on the cold solvent. Skywarp was out with Thundercracker, but she swore she'd be back soon.

She'd been gone all day like usual. Jetstorm always had someone hovering over him—whether that was Star or Skyfire—while he was on the floor alone. Not a single glance was spared his way. But he wouldn't let himself complain. He knew exactly why they didn't care about him.

Pedesteps came from the hall, barely audible over the assault of solvent. Jetfire opened his optics and watched the doorway. A moment later, Skywarp peeked through it.

"Hey," she said quietly. "How's it going?"

"Bad," Jetfire muttered.

Skywarp entered, a very familiar cube in her hands. Jetfire stuck his claws between the plating of his fingers and sighed. As another set of pedesteps traveled through the room, he looked up again. His optics met Thundercracker's, and he fought a scowl. Why were they spending so much time together?

Without hesitation, Skywarp stepped beneath the cold spray and sat next to him. Jetfire wanted to lean into her, but his plating tightened at the thought of touching another mech. He wasn't normally averse to contact. Why was he now?

"How are you fuel levels?" Skywarp asked.

Jetfire checked them. They were lower than he thought. His secondary tank was completely empty, and his primary was nearly empty. Had he been laying around that long? Was that why his fans wouldn't turn on?

Jetfire shrugged, not wanting to tell her.

Skywarp flicked her wings. "Did you refuel today?"

He hadn't. If he said no, was she going to force him? Would she be upset?

"Jetfire?"

Jetfire closed his optics. "No."

"Okay," she said. He held the cube out to him. "Can you try to drink this?"

Jetfire stared down at the cube, watching the blue liquid swirl inside. He should. But something curled in his spark at the thought. He didn't want to. Why didn't he want to?

What would she do if he said no?

He turned away.

"It'll help," Skywarp said, her voice losing some of its softness. "C'mon."

Jetfire shook his helm. Weapon or not, he could still decide what to put into his frame. He didn't want this. He didn't want *anything*.

Skywarp's voice grew sharper as she shoved the cube toward him again. "You need to refuel, Jetfire."

"I don't want to."

There. He said it.

Skywarp stared at him. Slowly, her face twisted into a scowl.

"What are you gonna do then?" She said.

Jetfire shrugged. "Dunno."

She shoved the cube toward him again.

"You have to refuel. Just take it."

Why was she so insistent? Jetfire swatted the cube away.

"No," he muttered.

Skywarp's scowl turned into a sneer, her wings shifting wide.

"Just take the cube!" She hissed. "It's not that hard. You need it!"

"I don't want—"

His protest was cut off as he was slammed into the wall. He let out a surprised yelp, squirming against it. Skywarp's body pressed into his cockpit. What was she doing?

"TC!" She shouted.

How did Jetfire forget she was there?

Thundercracker's wings rose as Skywarp called her name. She took a step closer.

"Hold his helm!" Skywarp said.

Thundercracker's hands closed around his helm, the rest of her body pinning his other shoulder. Jetfire squirmed as she tipped his helm upward. He could escape easily—all it would take was a quick crunch of plating—but he didn't want to hurt them.

"What are you d—"

Skywarp jammed a finger into his mouth, forcing it to stay open. The click of a cube opening sounded, and his mouth flooded with liquid. No! Jetfire wrenched his helm out of Thundercracker's grip.

He tilted his head down. The energeon dribbled from his mouth. Satisfaction warmed his spark, and he wondered again why he would feel it now. A frustrated growl and his head was yanked upward, a finger jammed into it as his mouth was forced open again.

More energeon was forced into it. Before he could free his helm again, his mouth was forced shut, his helm tilted even further backward. He was pressed into the wall, delicate wings protesting as his back struts were pushed into them. There was no choice but to swallow.

Fingers pushed his mouth open and he tried to free his helm again. More energeon. Helm upward again, mouth shut. Why was she doing this?

"You're not leaving me alone here, you idiot!" Skywarp hissed.

She thought he was going to…? Frag it all, maybe he wanted to. He went limp. Who cared what happened now?

Eventually, the weight holding him down released. He sank to the floor. There was still energeon in his mouth, remains he couldn't swallow. He pulled his legs toward himself, plating rattling as she shook.

He lost his body. He lost his freedom. This was the only thing he had, his only ounce of control, and she'd taken that, too. There was nothing left.

A hand brushed against his plating. He flung himself backward, claws at the ready. Shame flooded him as he realized what he'd just done. Skywarp's optics stared into his, her hand

outstretched.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I shouldn't have done that."

But she did it. There was no undoing it.

"I'm just… scared," she said, wings drooping. "For you. Starscream is gone. I don't want to lose you, too."

Jetfire didn't want to forgive her. He wanted to get up and run far away. But his limbs were shaky and couldn't carry him. She was the only mech he had. He scooted closer to her.

Her claws rubbed gently against the edge of his wing. He leaned into her. Placate, *placate*.

"Everything is going to be okay," she whispered. "I know it's hard. Just keep trying, alright?"

Jetfire didn't believe her.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Thanksgiving to those who celebrate. I was trying to drop down to monthly updates (cause I'm tired and it seems like less people are reading) and had already posted a chapter this month, but I realized this chapter would be fucked up to post right before the holiday and had to do it.

▶ quick biology ramble

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Starscream activated the dispenser, tapping a pede as it took its time granting him a cube. Other mecha in the room took notice, but none approached—not since Slipstream reprimanded Dirge on that first day. Someone lined up behind him, and he set his sensors to monitor them, resolutely ignoring their presence until it became a problem. The cube finally dispensed.

A hand brushed against his shoulder. Starscream flicked his wing, swatting the hand away, and turned toward the mech behind him with a biting remark ready to exit his vocalizer. It was silenced as his optics met Slipstream's.

Her wings were in neutral position, but they were tense, nearly quivering, as if they were being held there. She brought her hand back to her body and rubbed her wrist. Then, she motioned toward a table in the corner of the room. Acid Storm and Ion Storm sat at it, optics fixed on them. A third cube sat between them, guarded on both sides.

"Sit with us," Slipstream said.

Her wings twitched downward, and Starscream understood: she was *anxious.*

"Sure," Starscream said.

What did he have to lose? Slipstream wouldn't harm him. What would the point of that be? Though, why else she could possibly want him with her, he didn't know. Just attempting to defend her from Galvatron before made her defensive and bitter. She hated him.

But she had shown a different part of herself the night he brought her into his room. Something quiet and vulnerable, if prickly, like a cobalt spinehog showing its unprotected belly. Perhaps she wanted to thank him for not taking advantage of it.

He followed her to the table, sitting between her and an empty seat. Of the group, he was the closest to the aisle, allowing for a quick escape if this went sour. But it wouldn't. He had to believe that.

Acid Storm and Ion Storm quickly busied themselves with their energeon, looking away whenever Starscream glanced in their direction. Starscream opened his own cube and began to drink. Beside him, Slipstream tapped at the top of hers, optics focused on some distant point as if lost in thought.

"Any particular reason you asked me to sit here?" Starscream said.

Slipstream blinked, wings shooting upward. She stared at him. Then, her gaze sharpened to a glare, a scowl forming on her face.

"Do I need a reason to?" She said.

Starscream took a long sip of his cube. "I was just asking. You haven't seemed very fond of me until now."

Slipstream finally opened her cube. She looked up from it, not quite meeting Starscream's optics.

"I thought you were trying to replace me," she said. "Now I know you're not."

The thought hadn't crossed his mind, for obvious reasons. Being Air Commander would bring him closer to Galvatron, but it wasn't something he could do. Not like this. At home, most of his duties had shifted to remote and desk-based ones, which was an easy transition to make due to the lack of an ongoing war.

He was an endless pit of determination, but he still understood that he had limits. He just thought they were a bit further than most others assumed. Perhaps that would come to bite him in the aft later, as Hook kept telling him, but frag it all if he wasn't going to do as much as he could for as long as he could. He'd work his aft off until he couldn't.

They finished their cubes in an awkward silence, and received a summon from Galvatron at a suspiciously serendipitous time. Slipstream bid farewell to her wingmates, who simply waved her off, and they were down the hall. Today was a good day—Starscream's legs were strong and his aches were minimal—so he didn't even need support as he walked. Still, Slipstream hovered close to him, her wings twitching.

Starscream stepped ahead of her. She stayed behind him, occasionally brushing against his wings as he changed his pace. Normally, she stormed ahead, determined not to be near him for any longer than necessary. Why was she so close now?

Galvatron's harsh optics glared from the doorway, and Starscream forgot his confusion in favor of pulling the chair from his desk to the front. Slipstream hesitated as he headed toward her desk, taking a step toward him as if she wanted to follow. But he was back quicker than she could make up her mind about whatever she wanted to do. As usual, Galvatron silently and impatiently watched Starscream settle in.

"Good," he said.

The meeting followed the same progression as every other. Starscream made modest suggestions that Galvatron accepted, and anything Slipstream said was treated as an insult, no matter how productive. It was easy to rephrase her suggestions and insert them back into the conversation a few moments later. Either Galvatron actually viewed her contributions as useful and was rejecting them out of spite, or he listened to her so little that he didn't notice when Starscream brought them up again. Either seemed equally plausible.

Slipstream stayed at his side the entire time, periodically glancing at him. The stares made his plating itch, but Starscream did his best to ignore it. Whatever this weird behavior was, he didn't care enough to confront it. Then, after what seemed like an endless amount of time—

"Slipstream, you're dismissed."

Slipstream headed toward the door, then paused halfway through. She glanced back at Starscream, wings twitching as she hesitated. Starscream rolled his optics and waved a hand. Biting her lip, Slipstream turned away and left the room.

Spark beginning to pulse, Starscream stayed still. Galvatron had few reasons for holding him back. He could think of one. Would he be gentle this time? Or would he rifle through files until he overheated?

The dictator rose from his throne, optics bright as the room dimmed. He stepped closer, pedesteps echoing through the room. Digging his claws into his armrests, Starscream prepared himself for what was to come. There was an escape, but not yet. He was just biding his time. It would come.

That was the only reason he allowed Galvatron to tip his head upward. The dictator smiled—a wide, dangerous thing. Beyond the heat of battle, Starscream only saw it in moments like this. Galvatron thought he had Starscream in his claws, but he was wrong—utterly, *utterly* wrong.

Those strong, unrelenting claws closed around Starscream's wrist. They coasted along his panel.

"Are you in need of more information, sir?" Starscream whispered.

Why was his voice so weak? Pathetic. He could do better than that. He *had* done better than that. Why did he tremble now, when in the past he faced such monsters with a sharp tongue and weapons at the ready?

"Yes," Galvatron said. "Give me what I desire, Starscream."

Starscream opened his panel and released his cable. A moment later, he found Galvatron's waiting port. The dictator never plugged himself in, nor did he take Starscream's cable from him beyond that first time. With focused optics, he always watched as Starscream made the connection.

It was a reminder: this was his choice, his folly. He gave himself to this monster willingly. All he had to blame for this was himself.

{Connection detected! Authorize?}

Starscream allowed it. Immediately, the claws sank into his processor, files flipping open at alarming speeds. His fans clicked on.

"Please go slow," Starscream muttered. "I'm tired."

"I'll move at the speed I please," Galvatron said.

Right. Of course. For a moment, Starscream thought the dictator might've had a sensible piece of code in his processor. His mistake.

Galvatron continued to flip through files, most of them having nothing to do with the Autobots and everything to do with Starscream himself. It was never about the information, but Starscream already knew that. The dictator dug deeper and deeper as Starscream's frame grew hotter. The fragger barely bothered to close most of the files he opened, and last time Starscream tried cleaning up while he was still in there, it wasn't appreciated. So, Starscream sat still as the endless open files ate away at his memory.

{File selected!}

Finally, Galvatron decided to play one.

☆☆☆

{Playing file…}

"Catch me!"

Starscream soared through the air, wings slicing through it with unparalleled speed. Behind him, a bright yellow Seeker did his best to pursue. With a flourish, Starscream ducked beneath a ledge. The Seeker fell behind as he battled with the ledge, not quite as skilled in the air as Starscream was.

Starscream turned his nose sharply upward as a rush of air passed over him and purple plating materialized in front of him. As he ascended, he rolled, enjoying the rush that came with flying so high. But he quickly flattened out, knowing that he couldn't go too far.

[I almost had you!]

If Starscream was in robot mode, he would've rolled his optics.

[Warping is cheating,] he sent to Skywarp.

[Nuh-uh!]

Skywarp appeared beside him. He turned to avoid them, but they just warped again. So, the next time they appeared before him, he completely reversed direction.

[This is a speed game, Warp,] Starscream sent. *[Warping isn't going fast. It's just taking shortcuts.]*

Skywarp didn't reply. But, this time, they didn't immediately materialize in front of him. Maybe he got through to them after all. Suddenly, something landed on his back. He jolted at the sudden weight, but quickly righted himself. Then, he transformed into robot mode, turning himself so he could wrestle with his assailant.

"Got you!" The yellow Seeker said, grinning. "You were so focused on Skywarp you forgot about me!"

Before Starscream could escape, the Seeker pulled him tightly against his cockpit. Starscream resigned himself to his fate. The Seeker spun them before settling in for a landing on a nearby building. After landing, the Seeker released him. Small sparks of light flew from the Seeker's hands as he gestured, wings fluttering.

"It was smart, wasn't it?" The Seeker said. "I knew Skywarp would break the rules, so all I had to do was wait until they got impatient!"

A quiet call of "Hey!" was ignored as Skywarp landed.

Starscream flicked his wings. "I will admit it… that was clever."

He'd have to work on that. Getting distracted on the battlefield could be the difference between life and death. If Sunstorm was an enemy, Starscream would've been dead.

"Hey, Stormy!"

Sunstorm turned toward Skywarp as she called out. "Yes?"

Skywarp gestured to his claws. "You're doing the sparky-lighty thing again."

Sunstorm stared down at his claws. The sparks of light continued to emanate from them, growing larger and brighter with each passing moment.

"Oh!" He exclaimed. The light faded away. "Oops. I just… got really excited."

Sunstorm's outlier was uniquely useless. Thundercracker could generate ground-shaking sonic booms and shatter glass. Skywarp could transport themself anywhere instantly. And Sunstorm? Well, he got a little bit sparkly when he was excited.

That was an exaggeration. He could manipulate light, but most of it was just getting sparkly when he was excited. Sometimes, he could form the sparks into a tiny ball of light, and when he lost control of that, it would cause a blinding flash. Everyone in the room had to reset their optic feeds, but it did little harm beyond that. For a prank or two, Skywarp convinced Sunstorm to periodically shut off the lights in some of the rooms at Darkmount, but that was really all it had been good for so far.

Still, something about the ability fascinated Shockwave, their resident scientist and frame expert. Starscream really didn't understand it, and he never would. Megatron thought they could combine Sunstorm and Thundercracker's abilities to create a flashbang, but Sunstorm had so little control that all efforts proved fruitless.

An alarm went off, citing the time on Starscream's chronometer. Starscream tapped a pede.

"We should get back," he said. "We've been out for a while."

Megatron couldn't care less what they did in their spare time, but Thundercracker would have a fit if they weren't back soon. She was always worried about them, even when they were completely fine. It was strange.

Seized by the waist, Starscream let out a surprised grunt. He was pushed against an equally surprised Sunstorm, both of them squished against Skywarp's chest. Skywarp chuckled as the world twisted around them. When it finally stopped contorting, Starscream shoved himself away from Skywarp. His wingmate just grinned at him.

"We could've flown back!" Starscream said.

Skywarp shrugged, their slag-eating grin only growing wider. "Easier to warp."

Starscream scoffed. He kicked a pede.

"You can't rely on your outlier for everything, you know," Starscream said.

Skywarp picked at the seams between their fingers, digging out bits of dirt and grime. "What? You think I'm gonna forget how to fly or something?"

"You know what I mean!" Starscream said, glaring at them.

Slowly, methodically, Skywarp extended their arm, a single finger pointing. It landed on the tip of Starscream's olfactory ridge.

"Nope!" Skywarp said. "I've got no idea!"

Starscream opened his mouth and swiftly bit Skywarp's finger. Hissing in surprise, Skywarp withdrew their hand.

"Well behaved as always, Starscream."

Starscream fluttered his wings as he turned toward the source of the voice. He held them high in greeting after they stilled. Shockwave stood before him, singular optic shining brightly. Starscream placed his hands on his hips.

"Is that sarcasm I detect?" Starscream said, leaning forward.

"It's only sarcastic because you let it be," Shockwave said.

The mech's voice was always flat, even flatter than Soundwave's—a byproduct of the lobotomy he underwent. Criminals, particularly ones that spread ideas the Council declared dangerous, were rounded up and subjected to empurata, a process that robbed them of their faces and much of their social and moral programming. Starscream and his wingmates had captured many mecha to be placed into this process before they freed themselves from the Enforcers. He had no choice, so he didn't dwell on it.

Supposedly, Shockwave could never hold an emotional relationship with another mech. He could value a mech for their skills or actions, sure, but he couldn't *care* about them on an emotional level. The lack of attachment made him a bit more predictable. It was almost a

relief at times. Starscream knew nothing he said or did to Shockwave would change the mech's thoughts on him as long as he held value, and why wouldn't he? He was Starscream!

Starscream hummed, amusement warming his spark. "Do you need anything?"

(This was… familiar. Not just because it was his memory. He knew this one. It lingered. Why?)

"Thundercracker was looking for you," Shockwave said. "She was concerned that you were out so long. But I have no business with you. Sunstorm—"

He motioned toward the aforementioned mech, who turned toward him with his wings raised. "Yes?"

"I've set up today's tests. Please follow me to the lab."

Starscream flicked his wings. The lab… that was a thousand times better than spending the night trying to convince Thundercracker he and Skywarp could fly on their own. As Sunstorm passed him and Shockwave turned away, Starscream stepped forward.

"Can I come?" He asked.

Shockwave paused. Slowly, he turned toward Starscream.

"You'll get in the way," he said.

Excitement dying down, Starscream twitched his wings as he did his best not to be offended. Shockwave was merely speaking what he thought was the truth. It wasn't his fault he was wrong—he didn't have all the data.

"I've worked in labs before!" Starscream said. "Yours may be different, but I can learn."

Shockwave's singular optic stared, endlessly bright as it burned its way through Starscream's face. His plating crawled at the intense stare. He fought not to fidget beneath it, tapping his pede as silently as he could manage.

"I suppose an apprentice would be useful," Shockwave said. He turned away. "Come along."

They passed through the halls and entered the lab—a retrofitted frame production room, with much of the equipment still in it. Starscream only had vague memories of such rooms, a single bright optic staring down at him as he woke for the first time. The lighting was much dimmer back then, but Shockwave needed clear vision for his experiments, so the new lights were nearly blinding.

Shockwave attached a set of monitors to Sunstorm as he stood perfectly still, a small smile on his face. The Seeker was used to this. When he wasn't out with Starscream and the others, he was here, practicing with his ability. For a moment, Starscream watched the process, but quickly grew bored. Did Shockwave really need three different spark monitors?

Starscream picked at the surface of a scratched up berth. There were many scattered throughout the room. How else would the frames be stored? Waking for the first time was a confusing process. Many mecha squirmed and thrashed, hence the scratches, but not him. He was calm when he woke.

It could have been in this very room. Something in his spark was drawn to Shockwave, and he knew, deep down, that the mech had something to do with his creation. Although he asked if Shockwave was his spark donor, Shockwave never confirmed it. The best he received was a dismissive, "I've created many drones. You could be one of them."

Sunstorm, being much newer, still had a clear memory of his onlining. He was part of the final batch before Darkmount was freed. So, Sunstorm knew that Shockwave created him. Starscream assumed that was why he humored the mech, beyond simply wanting to practice with his ability.

Shockwave finally finished placing the monitors. Light brightened the room as he instructed Sunstorm to activate his ability. The numbers on the monitors fluctuated, the graph on the datapad Shockwave had rising and plummeting. Starscream wasn't sure what Shockwave was measuring. He hadn't explained, and Starscream forgot to ask.

Suddenly, the lights went out. The glow within Sunstorm's hands blanketed them. Sunstorm startled, and with a pop and a flash, it disappeared, leaving them in darkness.

"What?" Sunstorm said quietly.

Starscream flicked his wings. "Probably Thundercracker and the repairmecha messing with the power again."

"No," Shockwave said. "They didn't give a warning."

Right. They always supplied warnings, or quickly sent a message if an outage was unexpected. What was this, then?

(Starscream knew. He *knew*. This memory was familiar for a reason. He couldn't let it keep going.)

"If this isn't them," Starscream said. "Who is it?"

Shockwave charged his cannon. Starscream followed the action, charging his rays. Sunstorm glanced between them before doing the same.

[Skywarp?] Starscream sent. *[Thundercracker?]*

No response. Not even a 'message read' indicator.

The door slid open to an empty hall. Shockwave peered through it. Then, he stepped back, the door sliding shut before him. He pressed a button on the keypad and a second door shuttered over the first.

"We are going to stay here—"

{Playback suspended.}

☆☆☆

Burning optics stared down at him. His spark pulsed in his chest, pain crawling beneath his plating. Not this one. He couldn't let him see this one. His cable disconnected as he sent the command, snapping back beneath his panel.

He pushed the chair backward, gasping as his arm was seized. Galvatron pulled him out of the chair as if he were weightless, dangling him by the forearm. His optics seared into Starscream's.

"I wasn't done," he growled.

Starscream was. Galvatron had no right to see that. He had no right to see *any* of his memories. Why was he letting him do this?

"Let me go!" Starscream hissed.

Galvatron's grip tightened. Too-thin plating groaned, threatening to collapse. Pain shot through Starscream's arm, and he fought a flinch. Galvatron dragged him closer. Warm air from the gaps between the dictator's plating washed over Starscream.

"We had an agreement," Galvatron said. "You will give me what I ask of you, or I will take it. Have you forgotten?"

Starscream squirmed, trying in vain to push himself away. "N-no, sir. I haven't forgotten."

Galvatron turned, holding Starscream before his throne.

"Then you know you've brought this upon yourself."

The brute threw him onto the throne. Before Starscream could rise, the dictator was already upon him, pushing him against the throne. Starscream scratched where he could, even attempting to bite, but he had little hope against the brute's strength. One arm forced against the armrest and another against the back of the throne, Starscream found himself thoroughly pinned.

He forced himself to meet Galvatron's optics. The dictator stared back, teeth bared as he snarled.

"Please," Starscream begged. "Don't."

With disgusting precision, large fingers forced themselves beneath Starscream's medical panel. It opened with a screeching click.

"You have one more chance," Galvatron said. "Your cable. Now."

No, no, *no*. He couldn't. He *couldn't*.

"Fine, then."

{Connection detected! Auth—}

{ERROR}

☆☆☆

Dirty, stained gray covered in scratches. An equally dirty floor. A set of double doors. He was…? Starscream's claws clutched his chest, his spark pulsing wildly. His fans were at full power, the sound consuming his audials.

He… where was…?

His entire frame shook. He felt every aching strut and every dent. He felt nothing.

A quiet chirp, just barely extant over his fans. A flash of yellow at his side. He closed his optics.

'Buzzsaw?' He tried to ask, but no words came. So, he brought his arm to his mouth and sank his dentae into his arm guard. Metal crunched beneath his dentae, and… oh, frag. Where had his arm guard gone?

He took it off to expose his panel. Had he never put it back on? The taste of energeon in his mouth. He was still biting himself. *Slag*. He didn't pull away.

He placed his free hand against the floor and pushed himself onto his knees. He couldn't stay here. Wasn't safe. But was anywhere safe anymore?

He placed his hand against the wall as he walked. One pede after the other. Just like that. It wasn't far. He could make it back.

Was that smoke from him? The temperature warning said yes. Nothing he could do about that now. He paused in the middle of the hall as his vision swam. Why was it so hard to move?

"What the frag is your issue now?"

He knew that voice.

"If this isn't worth my time, I'll—"

Pink optics met his. *Slipstream*. Her wings twitched as she studied him. Laserbeak hovered beside her.

"What happened to *you*?" She said.

'Galvatron,' Starscream tried and failed to say.

Slipstream's brow furrowed. She offered him a hand, and as her gaze drifted toward the crushed and bitten exposed plating of his arm, her brow furrowed deeper. Rather than

waiting, she grabbed his wrist, dragging him forward.

"Come on," she muttered. "Let's get out of this pit-damned hall."

They passed through the few halls that remained before reaching Starscream's room. When she reached the door, she took Starscream's hand and placed it against the keypad. It dinged and the door opened. She pulled him toward the berth.

They sat. Buzzsaw landed gently on Starscream's shoulder, and Laserbeak in his lap. He reached beneath Laserbeak's chin and scratched it. Laserbeak cooed. Starscream shuttered his optics and purred his engine.

He missed Skywarp. Her stupid pranks, obnoxious pokes and prods, even her overprotective and possessive side—he missed all of it. She'd be upset that he hurt himself, even if it wasn't quite intentional. She'd hold him and stroke his wings, and he'd believe that everything could be okay again.

He missed Jetfire. Was he okay? What lies did Skyfire and Star tell him to make him agree to become a combiner? Who was his partner? Did he have more than one?

Starscream wanted to hear him ramble about some random thing again, whether it was something as tiny as an Earthen bug or as unique as an experimental medical procedure that was mentioned in passing during a class. He wanted to hold him close, his newspark's large frame blanketing him. Truly, he missed everyone he left behind, whether they made it to this universe or not—Soundwave and his ill-mannered cassettes, Blitzwing and their mischievous dog, Knock Out, Bumblebee…

Why did he ever think this was a good idea? It was a terrible one, perhaps the worst one he'd ever had. But he didn't see any other options.

"What happened?" Slipstream asked, her voice nearing a whisper.

"Galvatron," Starscream said, finally able to speak. His voice was nearly drowned out by his fans and his own purrs. "He wanted to… ex—exchange. Data."

Why was it still so hard to speak? Slipstream stayed silent, giving him the space to reboot his vocalizer. Maybe that would solve whatever was catching, or maybe it was his usual nervous glitch.

"I—I didn't…"

Slipstream's wings drooped. "You didn't want to."

Starscream looked away. "No."

The berth creaked as Slipstream shifted. She sighed, reaching toward him before pulling her hand back.

"It seems there's no such thing as favor from a mech like him," Slipstream muttered. "I thought he valued you."

Starscream allowed a hiss to escape his vocalizer. "I never deluded myself. I—I knew. We made an agreement. I went back on it."

Slipstream frowned. She flicked her wings, shifting in place again.

"What was it you said before?" Slipstream said. She paused, staring into the distance for a moment, then flicked her wings again. "Oh, right. 'He shouldn't hurt you. That's just plain fragging stupid.' That applies to you, too."

Starscream laughed. How snide, to spit his own words back at him.

"Don't laugh!" Slipstream spluttered. "I mean it!"

Starscream refrained from laughing again.

"Why are you even here?" He asked.

Slipstream's wings fluttered as she pressed her lips thin. "It's simple! You helped me, I help you. You're the only mech that seems to actually… give a scrap."

It all made sense now—the clinginess, the glances sent his way, the awkward invitation to sit with her and her wingmates. Slipstream wasn't some ungrateful jerk. She was just a mech unused to being valued. Like everything about her thus far, it was too familiar.

"It makes no sense to harm one's own soldiers," Starscream said.

Suddenly reminded of Slipstream striking Dirge as he began closing memory files, half of his processor expected her to bristle. Instead, she relaxed, her wings rising to neutral position.

"I suppose not," she said.

Starscream opted not to point out the hypocrisy. He was guilty of the same thing, long ago. Perhaps even worse, since he killed his own soldiers to protect himself. Maybe she would change her methods now, or maybe she wouldn't. The occasional strike was nowhere near equivalent to what she endured at Galvatron's hands, even if it wasn't ideal.

The room quieted as neither of them spoke. Laserbeak's purrs joined Starscream's as he returned to scratching the cassette underneath its beak. His fans finally slowed somewhat, though they weren't back to normal yet. The temperature warning finally disappeared.

"I used to have wingmates," Slipstream said quietly.

Seekers were made, and generally sold in, sets of three. There were many reasons a set could be separated. Most of the time, it was through the death of the wingmates. But Starscream had never seen Slipstream with her wingmates. He just assumed they were dead.

"What happened?" He asked.

Slipstream's claws coasted along her arms, caressing her own plating. Her wings lowered.

"I failed basic testing," she said. "They didn't. So someone sold them together with some other mech, and I got put up for offers."

Many mecha didn't pass basic testing. When Starscream learned that drones deemed defective were melted down for parts, he assumed that was where they all went, but he never knew. Now, all of the Seekers that inexplicably weren't owned by the Enforcers made sense—they'd failed basic testing, but could fetch a decent enough sell price, so they were sent elsewhere.

"Who bought you?" Starscream asked.

Slipstream sighed. "Some old mech. Forged, I think. They wanted me to guard their home and entertain them. I was a glorified pet."

She paused, staring off. Her optics unfocused, as if replaying a memory file. Starscream prepared himself to prompt her for more information, but she spoke again before he could.

"It was humiliating," she hissed. "They left me outside all day with no shelter unless they got bored. Do you know how many times I got rained on? How must rust I had to scrape off myself? And I couldn't leave, because that fragger put a boundary collar on me."

Starscream never thought he would be grateful to have been a glorified police hound, yet here he was. No shelter and collecting rust all day? He almost shuddered at the thought. And she'd been left all alone. It was a wonder she hadn't been stolen.

Thieves and resellers were one of the many types of criminals he had to track down. They made up the bulk of his cases. Drones were expensive, so many mecha sought the return of their property when it was taken rather than just buying a new one.

Slipstream smiled, exposing her fangs. Her optics grew distant again, and her wings drooped.

"Then I saw you," she said. "The *other* you. Galvatron and Optimus were there, too, but they didn't matter. They weren't Seekers. You spoke of freedom and I *yearned* for it. So I broke into my master's quarters and killed them right then, and I realized it was something I could've done all along. I don't know why I waited."

Starscream's path to revolution was a lot more convoluted. He befriended Skyfire, visiting the mech every moment he could until he disappeared. After the Council and the Science Committee refused to search for him, Starscream tried to do it himself, despite knowing his frame wasn't built to leave the atmosphere. He crashed, landing right before Megatron, who took him to get treatment at a secret Decepticon clinic.

There was no grand moment of realization like Slipstream. He always thought the system was stupid, he just didn't have the resources to make a difference until he stumbled into them. Without Skyfire's death, was Star's path even remotely similar?

But Starscream knew the crushing helplessness of being controlled by a cruel master. He felt it now, and he felt it beneath Megatron before the end of the war. Slipstream was right—what was stopping him now?

"I came here to kill Galvatron," Starscream said.

He had no fear of being overheard. Who was there to report him? Laserbeak and Buzzsaw were on his side, and he was in control of the security system. Slipstream despised Galvatron as much as she feared him.

She would agree to help him. It was the best option for both of them.

But instead of smirking and asking for the plan, or cackling in delight, her optics widened. She grew still, her wings shooting upward.

"He can't die," she whispered.

Starscream often thought the same thing about Megatron.

"I have a plan," Starscream said. "I've dealt with mecha like him before. But as you said about yourself: I was waiting. We can act now."

Slipstream shook her head.

"You don't understand!" She said, voice growing desperate. "He *can't* die. I tried to kill him and he just got back up. That's why he hates me."

She must have failed, as Starscream had many times before. But if so, why would she be so insistent? Dark energeon had done terrifying things in the past. Perhaps its frame-strengthening abilities led Galvatron to survive something he shouldn't have, and it rattled her.

"You were alone," Starscream said. "This time, you won't be. The Decepticons are miserable like this—no medic, no supplies, rations low enough they're fighting for energeon… it will be easy to make them lose faith if we put pressure in the right places. I already have control of security and communications. If we play this right, we can turn them to our side and Galvatron won't suspect a thing."

Slipstream stared. In Starscream's lap, Laserbeak stirred, letting out a quiet chirp.

"I still think this is going to be a disaster, but I'll help you," Slipstream said.

Starscream grinned. "Good."

The only security flaw in his plan was himself. If Galvatron accessed his memory files, he would be able to see this conversation. Typically, he ignored the recent files in favor of older ones, but Starscream couldn't risk it. So, he clipped the memory and moved it to a junk folder. Galvatron never touched those—what mech would ever care to?

He would rip the warp drive from Galvatron's chest and stand laughing over his corpse. Starscream would return, victorious, and Skywarp and Jetfire would forgive him for leaving them. They would come home and recharge with the rest of New Decepticon Command, ready to face whatever was ahead.

But for now, he and Slipstream sat side by side, two traitors ready to conspire.

Chapter End Notes

Is Starscream overestimating himself? Perhaps...

Song rec: Crying During Sex - Ethel Cain (mostly in relation to Slipstream)

If you couldn't tell from the now-set chapter count, I finished writing this fic! Now, it's a matter of editing and posting everything. I started writing what I hope will be a short sequel (aiming for under 30k words) because *somebody* refused to have a satisfactory conclusion. You can guess who she is.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The days that followed the incident were nothing. That was meant literally—Jetfire barely remembered them. Apparently, the virus nearly fried his processor, and he had to be placed on manual ventilation. He was told all of this by First Aid, and pieced together whatever he wasn't. The memory files from that period of time were completely corrupted, and Jetfire didn't even bother saving them.

First Aid refused to clear him for training or medbay duty, so he spent most of the day laying around, as usual. Skyfire seemed disappointed, if the twitching wings and stares framed by a furrowed brow were anything to go by. He took Jetstorm for the usual round of training despite Jetfire's inability to join. Jetstorm had watched him for a moment, sending him one final glance before closing the door. It was almost as if he cared.

Despite claiming she cared so deeply, Skywarp left with Thundercracker for the day, dismissing Jetfire's requests for her to stay. Why did she keep leaving?

So, Jetfire—big, *stupid* Jetfire—was left alone and useless. He couldn't help out in the medbay or train with Jetstorm. What else was there for him to do except nothing? Whatever.

He was nearly done reading a datapad when the doors opened. Jetstorm poked through, bright red and bright yellow plating behind him. At some point during his stint as a near-comatose patient, Jetstorm befriended the two mecha that kept harassing him. It was even more reason to stay inside.

"Hey!" Jetstorm said.

Jetfire shut off his datapad. "Hi."

"You just lay around all the time," Jetstorm said, wrinkling his olfactory ridge. As Jetfire pushed himself into a sitting position, he continued to speak. "Why don't you come out? We're gonna watch a movie."

Jetfire really didn't care for or about Jetstorm's company, but something in his spark twisted. Memories of movie nights with his… *family* wasn't quite the right word, but it was the closest he could get—came to mind. Buster yapping excitedly during action scenes, Blitzwing always choosing sad dog movies that left everyone but Starscream fuzzy-opticed by the end, cuddling with Starscream and the others as the movie played…

[You feel weird again.]

Jetfire jolted, drawn out of his misery by Jetstorm's comm. Every other mech at the base but him could sense EM fields, but Jetstorm was the only one that ever commented on his. It was odd. Surely, he was a ball of anger and misery at this point. How was that so hard to read?

But even Jetstorm couldn't identify it. He just knew it was strange. Maybe it was another effect of the glitch—he couldn't read anyone, and they couldn't read him.

"I'm fine," he muttered. "Just… tired."

He blinked, and suddenly Jetstorm was in front of him, a hand closing around his as Jetstorm attempted to pull him up. Jetfire allowed himself to be pulled, not truly caring about what was happening anymore.

"You're coming with us," Jetstorm said, leading him out of the room. "If you're gonna sit around, you can sit around on the couch in front of a screen with us."

Jetfire didn't protest. After all, Jetstorm was right. If he was going to do the same thing anyway, what difference did it make?

◇◇◇

The couch wasn't as large as the ones he saw before. It still fit them all, so he supposed it didn't matter. He sat at the side closest to the wall, against the armrest, and slumped into the corner. Jetstorm flopped beside him, limbs spread out. Sideswipe sat next to him in a hesitant but intentional show, leaving Sunstreaker to sit at the far side.

Sunstreaker leaned past Sideswipe and Jetstorm to stare at Jetfire. "You look like slag."

"Sunny—" Sideswipe groaned.

"Why does it matter?" Jetfire grumbled, fiddling with his bracelet as he found any excuse not to look the idiot in the optic. "I almost died last week, anyway. I think I'm allowed to look like slag."

Sunstreaker scowled at him. "No, you're not."

What? Was he serious?

Sunstreaker straightened himself, forcing his chest forward like a preening bird. "I'm going to help you. You can't just walk around looking like that."

Jetfire scowled at him. "What if I *want* to?"

Sunstreaker jolted backward, optics widening. Then, he leaned forward again, matching Jetfire's scowl.

"You're just saying that because *looking* like garbage makes you *feel* like garbage," Sunstreaker said. "You'll thank me later."

Jetfire highly doubted that. He was quite sure it was the other way around. He felt like garbage, so he looked like garbage. But he really didn't have the energy to argue. What was the point in resisting?

He shrugged and slumped back into his seat. "Sure. Whatever."

Sunstreaker stared at him, brow furrowed. Then, he leaned back with a huff. Soon, the movie was on, and Jetfire sagged in relief. No one would be bothering him until the end of it.

The movie opened with narration. What was it called again? Astro… astro something. That barely had anything to do with the narration. It was about a floating city full of humans and robots. The robots were subservient to the humans.

Despite the cheery tone of the narration, it was a horror show. The robots were torn to pieces, crushed, and otherwise destroyed, the surface of the planet covered in their parts. But the voice didn't view this as a tragedy—it happily thanked the robots 'for their service.'

Jetfire's grip tightened on the armrest as he fought a growl. At the same moment, another member of the watch party actually *did* growl. Beside him, Jetstorm leaned forward, wings tilting, as Sideswipe stilled.

"We can turn it off," Sideswipe said quietly.

"No!" Sunstreaker said a little *too* sharply. "It's fine. Keep playing it."

Jetstorm and Sideswipe exchanged glances. With a shrug, Sideswipe leaned back, and Jetstorm copied him. The movie continued. Some sort of weapon was tested, and one of the main characters died. At least, it seemed like he did.

But he was remade. Another character—his dad—used a component of the weapon to make him. Well, not truly him. Just a robotic copy. Jetfire's chestplates grew tight as something dark wormed its way into his spark. He withdrew his hand from the armrest to fidget with his bracelet.

The robot learned who he was just as his creator rejected him for not being a perfect copy. The dark thing in Jetfire's spark grew ugly, the pit creeping up to meet it. He brought the bracelet's charm to his mouth, gnawing on it, but it did little to suppress the feeling. Despite his distress, he was enraptured. This was real in a way nothing had been before.

The robot ran, and oh *frag*, how Jetfire wished *he* could. What would he do if he left this place behind? Where would he go? It didn't matter. He would be free. No one could force him to fight, or lie to him, or take control of his body again.

The robot was mistaken for a human and taken in by group of them. He resuscitated a long powered down robot and befriended the humans, but it was all torn apart when the head human of the group—the *adult*—revealed the truth. Jetstorm let out a squeal as the robot was tazed and captured. A quick scan of the couch revealed the power occupants were in similar states of distress, though as Jetfire looked, Sunstreaker turned toward him, quickly changing his expression into something more stoic.

But Jetfire already saw him upset. What point was there in hiding it?

The robot woke in an arena, the adult narrating to a crowd. His first opponent entered, and Jetfire shut his optics. Rather than being treated as living beings, the robot's arena opponents were merely obstacles. All of the robots in the story so far existed in a liminal state of personhood—their lives only mattered if they were important. Otherwise, they could be stepped on for a cheap joke.

Why the contradiction? Did the lives of robots matter or did they not? Did the main character feel sorrow for the lives he was taking, or were they not supposed to think about it?

The ugly thing in Jetfire's chest squirmed. The pit consumed him, numbing his limbs. What made some of them matter so much more than others? Was it because they looked like the humans? If the main character wasn't built to mimic a human, would he even be considered a person? He was barely even considered one now. The adult certainly didn't think he was one.

Opponent after opponent fell. His last was the robot that he revived. He refused to fight. Though he had with the others, they ignored his please. But the one he revived listened. They stood together against the humans.

But the Enforcers from the floating city arrived. The robot surrendered himself to them, not wanting anyone to get hurt. Jetfire brought his hand to his chest as his spark pulsed. The robot was so *good*, even after being forced to fight. All he wanted was to keep everyone safe.

Jetfire wanted to run away. He was satisfied when he ruined Skyfire's plans, delighted at any small slight he could muster. He wanted to take his massive hands and wrap them around Star's helm and *squeeze*. He… he wanted to *hurt someone*. Why was he so terrible? Why couldn't he just be *good*?

The movie kept going. The robot fought, remaining *good* in the face of everything thrown at him. He sacrificed himself, and was brought back by the friend he revived. Jetfire's frame was numb, his vision covered in static, as the credits began.

[You okay?]

Jetfire flicked his wings and forced himself to sit up. He attempted to speak, but all that escaped from his vocalizer was a pitiful whine. His claws dug into his chest as his spark *burned*. Gentle arms wrapped around him, but they couldn't enclose him.

Stupid fragging frame. He was too big to be hugged. It was dumb, but it was yet another thing to pile on.

"What's wrong?"

Jetstorm's voice was soft, barely above a murmur. His wings were low. Behind him, Sideswipe and Sunstreaker stared. Shame rose within Jetfire, and he buried his face in his hands.

"Well, what is it?"

Sunstreaker's voice was harsh, cutting through the air and his audials. Jetfire let out a quiet hiss.

"Seriously," Sunstreaker said. "What's with the freakout?"

"*Sunny*—"

"It's just a movie!" Sunstreaker said.

"Sunny!"

Sunstreaker whipped toward Sideswipe. "What?"

"Stop being being aft!" Sideswipe snapped.

Sunstreaker's optics widened as he leaned backward. Then, with a rattle of his plating, he leaned forward again, teeth bared.

"Me?" He hissed. "An aft? I'm not the one losing it over a *movie*!"

"It's not the movie!"

Jetfire immediately covered his mouth. Why was his voice so loud? Why did his vocalizer choose now, of all moments, to suddenly work? The room was silent as the words tumbled out.

"It's… it's just…" Jetfire stammered. "I'm a terrible mech. I didn't want to fight. I—I didn't even really want to be a part of a combiner. And now I can't go home, even though I agreed to do it because I thought it'd get us home faster, and—and I fragging *hate* Skyfire! Starscream abandoned me, and Skywarp keeps leaving, and no one cares! I just wanted to complete my medical training…"

Had he really just said all of that? How could he let himself say that? The continued silence only assured Jetfire of what he already knew: he was a terrible mech, and he should've kept his mouth shut. He closed his optics, hiding himself again.

"Y… y'know, the movie upset me, too," Sunstreaker said quietly. "I shouldn't have said that about you. I just thought you'd think I was lame if you, uh… knew."

Jetfire huffed. What did it matter? And why was he telling him this?

"I used to be a… waste disposal drone—" The last part was said quickly, as if speaking those three words brought him discomfort. "—and that first part made me think about it, with all the narration and scrapped bots and everything. I work so hard on my appearance and I train every day to make sure I'm the best I can be, but sometimes I think about it, and I wonder if… well. I wonder if garbage is all I'll ever be good for."

Jetfire opened his optics. Sunstreaker's plating was tense. Beside him, Sideswipe watched quietly, optics wide and focused.

"You're not garbage!" Jetstorm said.

Sunstreaker nodded. "And Jetfire's not just a battle bot."

Was he? His medic training fell to the wayside in favor of battle training and missions. Even setting aside the time he was ill, he had barely done any since becoming part of Safeguard. Truly, he had barely done anything at all aside from fight and prepare to fight.

Sideswipe hummed, bring a hand to his chin. "There's gotta be someone we can talk to."

Jetfire fiddled with his bracelet as Jetstorm adjusted his embrace, giving him a gentle squeeze. He could tell Skywarp, but she didn't have the power to do anything. Star and Skyfire already knew—and they'd lied to him just to get him to agree. Something clicked in the back of his mind, a search that he didn't realize he initiated returning results.

Prowl. Prowl refused to let them include him in Safeguard until he gave permission. If he told Prowl that permission was given under false circumstances, surely he'd understand!

"I'm going to talk to Prowl," Jetfire said, pushing himself up from his seat.

Jetstorm's weight pulled him back down. Well, it didn't really—he could lift his partner with ease—but he didn't want the newspark to fall off, so he had to wait for him to let him go. Sideswipe and Sunstreaker exchanged glances. Sideswipe's brow furrowed. Sunstreaker shrugged.

"Prowl?" Sideswipe said.

"He wanted my permission before everything happened," Jetfire said. "And he's second in command. He'll have the power to do something about this."

Sideswipe shifted his weight. "If you say so."

An awkward but brief silence passed over the group. Sideswipe and Sunstreaker exchanged glances again. Jetstorm squeezed Jetfire again. Finally, Jetfire turned and returned the hug. Jetstorm's wings fluttered as he laid his chin on Jetfire's shoulder.

"You know what we gotta do first?" Sunstreaker said, a grin spreading across his face.

Jetfire squinted at him. "What?"

"A makeover!" Sunstreaker said. He turned toward the door, motioning for Jetfire to follow. "C'mon, let's head to the washracks."

◇◇◇

Thank frag the washracks were empty. Jetfire had no idea what would've happened if they weren't. Sunstreaker stood proudly, hands on his hips, as he surveyed the washrack.

"This'll do," he said.

Sideswipe frowned at him. "This is the only washrack."

"And it'll do!" Sunstreaker said, taking a step forward.

He moved to the nearest rack, opening his storage compartment. Various bottles and tools tumbled out of it. Jetstorm came up behind him, wings tilted in bewilderment.

"You had all that in there?" He asked.

"I always keep supplies on hand!" Sunstreaker said. "You know. For emergencies."

He and Jetfire had very different definitions of what constituted an emergency. Polish and buffers didn't even make the list of items he would expect for one. His list included spark resuscitators and jumper cables, not beauty products.

Sunstreaker shoved Jetstorm away from the rack. Jetstorm stumbled backward with a quiet noise, wings flicking. With a swift motion, Sunstreaker turned on the spray. He stared at Jetfire and pointed toward it.

"You," he said. "Get under there."

Jetfire took a step forward. He fiddled with his bracelet, something rooting him in place. Sunstreaker reached over and pulled him under with a roll of his optics. Jetfire yelped.

Something soft brushed against his plating. He shuddered, attempting to pull away, but a gentle grip stopped him.

"You're fine," Sunstreaker said. "Just let me work."

The scrubbing continued. Slowly, Jetfire sank into it, his plating relaxing. It was… unexpectedly pleasant. He closed his optics, and—wait… was that a second sponge? Jetfire opened them again, Sideswipe having joined Sunstreaker. Jetfire fought not to flick his wings, his plating beginning to crawl at being surrounded.

"You okay?" Sideswipe asked.

Jetfire flinched.

Sideswipe frowned. "What's up?"

Jetfire's vocalizer refused to work, so he sent a message. *[Too close.]*

Sideswipe backed away. The pit gnawed at Jetfire's belly, warm embarrassment creeping through his fuel lines. No other mecha had this problem. *They* didn't start hissing and flinching like a startled cybercat when others came near them.

A jolt passed through his wings, sending a painful zing through his spark. Jetfire turned to the source, claws ready to strike.

"Woah!" Sunstreaker said.

Jetfire lowered his hand. Why did he do that? Why couldn't he just… *not*?

"Sorry," he muttered. "They're sensitive."

Sunstreaker offered him the sponge in his hand. "I'll let you do them, then."

Hesitantly, Jetfire took the offered sponge. Sunstreaker grabbed another sponge and quickly returned to cleaning. Jetfire put the sponge against his wing, fighting a shudder at the contact. When he was first created, Starscream helped him calibrate his touch sensors. Now that most of his neurocircuits were replaced during the reformatting, they needed to be recalibrated. But Starscream was gone, and Skywarp definitely wasn't thinking about it.

He dragged the sponge down, and this time, he *did* shudder. Despite the dentae-grinding discomfort, he forced himself to continue, until eventually he had the fronts of both wings done. It was then he realized a very important issue: he couldn't reach the backs of his wings.

If he just left them uncleaned, would anyone notice?

"Yeesh," Sunstreaker said, crouching near Jetfire's knee. "I thought you were gray but turns out you're just *that* dirty."

"I—well—" Jetfire stammered.

When was the last time he had used a washrack? It was before he was reformatted, likely before he even got stuck here. Although he didn't intentionally avoid them, he didn't quite care for his appearance. Something was just *discomforting* about washing himself, aside from the uncalibrated sensors.

Speaking of… there was no way he would get away with leaving the backs of his wings alone now. They may have been darker than the rest of him, but if he let himself get as dirty as Sunstreaker claimed, it would still be noticeable.

Jetfire's wings lowered. In what was possibly the worst timing ever, Sunstreaker stood up, thwacking his helm against the bottom of Jetfire's wing. Both mecha flinched away from each other, a quiet hiss escaping from Jetfire's vocalizer as Sunstreaker yelped.

"Sorry," Jetfire said.

Sunstreaker rubbed his helm as he stood up the rest of the way. "It's fine. Was bound to happen sooner or later. Your wings are really big."

Jetfire flicked his wings. They really were. Before he was reformatted, they were long, thin things that stuck straight up into the air in their natural position. Now, they were broad, easily covering his back. His entire alt mode had changed. The wings were just the most obvious part of it.

(He couldn't take off horizontally anymore, for one, though he'd never tell anyone that. He either had to leap like Starscream or take off with his nose to the sky. Discovering that last one was an accident.)

"I… yeah," Jetfire said. "They are."

How was he going to…?

[You need any help?] Jetstorm asked him.

Jetfire closed his optics and steeled himself.

[Yeah. Just a little. I can't reach the backs of my wings,] he sent.

Jetstorm approached him, wings held high. He took a sponge from Sunstreaker's supply. He held it up to Jetfire before moving to the other side of him. The sponge brushed against his wing, and Jetfire fought not to flinch again.

[It's okay,] Jetstorm sent. *[It was hard to calibrate my wing sensors, too.]*

Jetstorm picked the sponge up and began another stroke. A shudder ran through Jetfire's plating. He grabbed the charm on his bracelet and shoved it into his mouth. Eventually, the wing was done. Jetstorm paused before moving onto the other wing, giving Jetfire a moment of reprieve.

After both wings were cleaned and Sunstreaker finished with everything else, the spray was turned off. Sunstreaker stepped back, admiring his work. Jetfire wilted under the gaze of the other three occupants of the room.

"Such a brilliant red," Sunstreaker mumbled, heading toward his supplies. He dug through them. "I know I have a match."

Jetfire flicked his wings, glancing at Sideswipe as he whispered, "Do I really need paint?"

Sideswipe shrugged.

Sunstreaker paused, mumbling something Jetfire couldn't make out. Then, he stood up, a small set of paint jars in his hands. He placed them on the ground and motioned for Jetfire to sit. As he opened the first one and dipped his brush in, Jetfire decided to ask.

"Do I really need this?"

Sunstreaker raised his brows. Jetfire stared at him blankly.

"Of course you do!" Sunstreaker said. "Nobody repainted you after your crash, and you definitely weren't taking care of yourself after missions. You've got little scratches everywhere!"

Were they really that important? It was a bit too late to protest now. The brush pressed gently into his plating. Sunstreaker was meticulous with his work. Slow, repeated strokes made Jetfire's plating relax. He closed his optics, losing himself to the sensation.

When he opened them again, it was to Sunstreaker clapping his hands and declaring his work, "Some of my best in a long time!"

Jetfire had no idea what his other works were, so he couldn't dispute it. But was painting over some scratches really so special? Before he could say anything, Sunstreaker was reaching into his storage space. He pulled out a small mirror and held it up.

"You've gotta see it!" Sunstreaker said, a grin spreading across his face. "You look so much better now!"

The mirror was tiny. Jetfire could see a glimpse of bright white plating at best. How was he supposed to—?

Jetfire startled as the mirror unfolded. It was as tall as Sunstreaker, and he could barely see the mech's helm at the top of it. Jetfire took a step back so the mirror could show all of him at once. He had no idea how he'd looked before, but now his plating was brilliant. It caught the light in just the right ways, making him look much shinier than he'd ever seen before.

He tilted his helm, and—were those sparkles? Was the paint *iridescent*?

Sunstreaker poked his head around the mirror. "Pretty cool, right?"

Jetfire nodded. It really was. He barely wanted to look at himself at the best of times, but now… it was nice. Strangely, he did feel a little better. Maybe Sunstreaker was on to something with the whole 'looking like garbage makes someone feel like garbage' idea.

Sunstreaker folded up the mirror and shoved it into his storage space. Then, he turned to the other two occupants of the room and crossed his arms.

"Well, I'm beat," he said. "How about we go get some food?"

Sideswipe and Jetstorm nodded. The group began to head out. Jetfire lingered. His fuel levels were low—still-empty secondary tank and a rapidly dwindling primary tank—but something in the back of his processor didn't want to.

"You coming?" Jetstorm asked, wings tilted.

Jetfire fiddled with his bracelet. "Uh, yeah. I'm coming."

The cafeteria was busier than usual. Nearly all of the seats were taken. Jetfire usually avoided spending time there after Starscream left, since Skywarp was barely around to eat with him. He couldn't be here alone. He just *couldn't*.

Already, his spark was pulsing, and they were only in the doorway. It was just so *loud*. Mecha were chattering over each other, words rolling and bouncing through the room in a cacaphonic mess. There were *so many* mecha.

The group took a seat. Jetfire hesitated, torn between sitting in the corner and at the aisle, before Jetstorm waved him over. He sat beside Jetstorm as the others settled in. Sideswipe went to get the group their rations, leaving Jetfire, Jetstorm, and Sunstreaker together.

Sunstreaker leaned forward.

"So, how's life with the menaces?" Sunstreaker asked. "We haven't seen you around since you got reformatted. You super busy or something?"

"Menaces?" Jetfire asked.

Sunstreaker gestured with his hand. "You know. Them. Well, *her*, I guess, since the other one turned traitor."

Just like that, Jetfire was reminded that these mecha, despite their fleeting acts of kindness, were not his allies. He flicked his wings harshly.

"They're not *menaces*, they're mecha," Jetfire growled. "And it's *fine*. Reformatting just took a lot out of me, so I had to recover."

Jetfire tapped his fingers against the table. He didn't want to argue, but he couldn't let Sunstreaker just say things like that.

[Your 'friend' is an aft,] Jetfire sent to Jetstorm. *[He hates Seekers.]*

Jetstorm's wings lowered.

"Star and Thundercracker are Seekers and you're nice to them," Jetstorm said. "Why is Skywarp any different?"

Jetfire recalled the ever-escalating prank war from the first few days he was here that only ended when Elita put a stop to it. Star implied Sunstreaker played such pranks against them before. Was he *really* kinder to them, or were they just less acceptable targets?

"Star and Thundercracker aren't walking around with the brand of our enemies on their wings," Sunstreaker said. "They took off all their weapons and filed down their claws. They're harmless. Do you know how weird it is to go into battle only to get back and stare into a face that looks exactly like the one you just fought?"

"They're not harmless," Jetfire muttered.

They lied to him. Thundercracker just watched as Skyfire and Star *mocked him* while he was having processor surges. Skyfire pinned down Starscream, and said he did the same to Star until she stopped struggling. They were helping keep Pharma locked away. The *last* thing they were was harmless.

"Not harmless?" Sunstreaker said, raising a brow. "Skyfire's a big softie. He wouldn't hurt a fly. Just the other day, he caught a mouse in the rec room and carried it outside. Even if Thundercracker and Star wanted to pull something, he'd never let them get away with it."

The ugly thing in Jetfire's spark writhed. For the thousandth time, he wondered how someone could be so kind and gentle yet so inconsiderate and cruel. First Jetstorm, now a mouse. Was it just him? What had he done?

"I'm just going to put these here…"

The group quieted as Sideswipe placed the cubes on the table. With one still left in his hand, he sat at his seat, optics flicking between Jetfire and Sunstreaker. With a sharp glare at Jetfire, Sunstreaker took his cube. He slid the other toward Jetstorm. With a sigh, Jetfire reached for his.

Conversation abandoned in place of food, the group sipped their energeon. There was no such thing as silence in the mess hall, but Jetfire still felt the lack of words in every scute of his plating. He fumbled with the lid of his cube.

Energeon, as always, was boring. He knew he needed it, but was it really the only option? Sure, he had no idea how mecha would react to knowing he had his fuel processing system altered, but was that really worse than drinking this boring slag?

The liquid sloshed inside the cube as he lifted it. A couple drops spilled onto his hand. He should just drink it. His plating hurt. Why was he so tense?

He put the cube to his lips. Energeon spilled into his mouth. Immediately, something clicked in the back of his processor, and he fought not to spit it out. His spark pulsed. He forced himself to swallow. Slowly, he placed the cube back on the table.

Just the *thought* of taking another sip made him shudder. But one sip wasn't enough to fill his tanks. So, after a moment, he brought the cube to his lips again. Suddenly, the taste that was so bland before became repulsive. Everything in the back of his processor screamed for him to spit it out, but he forced himself to swallow.

What was wrong with him?

He placed the cube back on the table. Maybe two sips was enough. He could try again later when he was alone—preferably hidden behind the spare berth in the room. When the rest of the group finished, his cube was still nearly full.

Sunstreaker gathered the empty cubes to carry them to the receptacle. After he was out of audial range, Jetstorm leaned toward Sideswipe.

"Sunstreaker is being mean," he said. "I'm not going to keep hanging out with you guys if he's gonna keep saying slag about Seekers."

Sideswipe frowned. "I can try to get him to lay off. But why didn't you say anything before?"

"It wasn't—" Jetstorm paused, scrunching his olfactory ridge. "I didn't realize what he actually meant before."

A message came through Jetfire's comm.

[I don't want to be his friend if he's gonna be a jerk to you.]

It should've felt comforting. Jetfire fiddled with the lid of his cube, struggling to reseal it. It should've warmed his spark and made him feel cared for. Instead, a sneaking apprehension crept in.

"Oh," Sideswipe said quietly. "I thought you knew."

Jetstorm was only a handful of months old. No one was teaching him the history of Cybertron. How would he ever know? Even Jetfire could realize that.

Sunstreaker returned, and the group quieted. He sat, optics slowly trailing toward Jetfire. He pointed at something below him.

"Are you going to finish that anytime soon?" He asked.

Jetfire shook his helm. "I wasn't as hungry as I thought. I'll save it for later."

Sunstreaker scrutinized him for a moment, optics narrowed, then shrugged.

"I heard some talk while I was putting the cubes away," he said. "Prowl is free and in his office right now, if you wanted to talk to him right away."

Jetfire finally resealed the cube. He placed it in his cockpit—the thing opened from his plating instead of the glass now. It took him forever to figure that one out. He stood up.

"Yeah," he said. "I can go right now."

The quiet hum of hope ran beneath his plating. If he convinced Prowl he gave consent under false pretenses, Prowl would listen. Maybe he could even be reclassified as a medic-in-training. He slipped through the doorway, carefully avoiding a set of mecha entering.

Pedesteps followed him down the hall. He turned toward the source to find Jetstorm and the other two trailing after him. He hummed at them questioningly, unable to come up with a phrase that made sense to ask.

"We're coming with you!" Jetstorm said.

Sideswipe kicked his pede. "Yeah. Prowl's not exactly the friendliest mech."

Jetfire knew that. Prowl was the one who interrogated him after Starscream left, and one of the ones who allowed him to go on his first mission. He may not have been warm and fuzzy, but he at least seemed to have principles. That was enough.

Jetfire shrugged and continued down the hall. Eventually, he reached the door, Jetstorm's posse still behind him. He knocked.

"He might not let you in," Sideswipe said.

The door slid open. Jetfire stepped through. Blue optics stared at him from the desk in the back. Doorwings high in greeting and face carefully blank, Prowl motioned toward one of the chairs nearby.

"Have a seat."

Jetfire sat. Prowl pressed a button on his desk and the door slid shut.

"What brings you here?" Prowl asked, staring straight ahead as if Jetfire wasn't there.

Jetfire squeezed the charm on his bracelet. He stuck his claws into it, running them along the few bitemarks he managed to leave. Then, he wrung his hands.

"Before I became a part of Safeguard, you wanted to make sure I gave permission," Jetfire said. "I gave it, but I didn't know what it *meant*. I wouldn't have if I knew."

Prowl blinked, optics brightening, as if finally present in the room. He turned toward Jetfire with a frown.

"But you consented," Prowl said.

"Y-yes, I did, but—" Jetfire wrung his hands again. "I didn't know! No one told me what it actually entailed, and I assumed wrong. If I knew the truth, I wouldn't have."

Prowl's optics narrowed. "Yet you consented."

Jetfire twitched his wings. "Yes, but—"

"You gave your consent," Prowl said. "It has already been done. There's no backing out now."

"I wouldn't have given it if—"

Prowl flicked his wings harshly, silencing Jetfire.

"Your consent was given. It cannot be withdrawn," Prowl said. "False pretenses or not, you are a valuable asset. There is no reversing what was done to you. It would be a waste not to use Safeguard on the battlefield."

This wasn't how he wanted this to go at all! Jetfire fought not to bare his teeth, torn between growling at Prowl and running out of the room.

"I don't want to fight!" He shouted. "I want to be a medic!"

Prowl brought his hand to his face and sighed. He turned back toward Jetfire, cold optics burning into him.

"I know this isn't what you want to hear," Prowl said. "But you are more useful fighting as Safeguard than as a medic. It doesn't matter what you *want*, Jetfire, it matters what we *need*."

Jetfire wanted to leap across the desk and grip Prowl's neck with all the force he could muster. He wanted to take off into the sky and never return. He wanted to fragging *kill* Skyfire. But he could do none of those things, so he sat, spark hurting, as he wrung his hands until the joints creaked.

He lowered his helm.

"I understand," he whispered.

No one was going to help him. Anyone that wanted to couldn't, and anyone that could didn't care. He was truly and completely on his own. He had to do something, but what was there to do?

Numbly, he bid farewell to Prowl and left the office. Jetstorm approached him, but didn't speak. Jetfire sighed.

"Didn't go well, I guess," Sideswipe said quietly. At Jetfire's withering glare, he added, "Prowl's hard-coded. You probably weren't gonna get him to change his mind no matter what you said."

So they just let him do that knowing it wouldn't even work? Jetfire fiddled with the bracelet, fighting the urge to yell. It wasn't their fault. None of this was.

"It was worth a try," Sideswipe said. "There was always a chance."

"Right," Jetfire muttered.

Always a chance, except there wasn't anymore. Jetfire closed his optics. Even *seeing* was too much right now.

"I just want to go back."

Jetstorm stepped ahead, brushing his hand against Jetfire's pauldron as he walked by. He flicked his wings and held them high.

"I wanna head back, too," he said. "Let's go."

He hadn't meant back to the room, but where else was he going to go? He trailed after Jetstorm. His limbs were somehow both numb and overly sensitive—every shift and click of plating as he walked vibrated through him, but he was helpless to stop himself as he kept putting one foot in front of the other.

When they reached the door, Jetstorm paused in front of it. His wings lowered as he turned toward Jetfire.

"I think you should talk to Skywarp," Jetstorm said.

A few weeks ago, Jetfire may have agreed. But now, his spark sized in the same way as it had when he attempted to drink energeon, the phantom memory of fingers in his mouth holding him hostage. He shook his helm.

Jetstorm sighed and unlocked the door. He walked across the room and hopped onto the spare berth. Jetfire moved past him to sit on the floor, but froze as his arm was grabbed. Twitching his wings, he turned back toward Jetstorm.

Jetstorm patted the berth.

"C'mon," he said.

Maybe he wanted to be comfortable just this once, or maybe it was spite because he knew Star normally used that berth. Jetfire didn't know. But he obeyed his partner.

Jetstorm pulled him close, purring. The gentle vibration unlocked something inside of him, letting his too-tight plating go slack. He wrapped his arms around Jetstorm and closed his optics.

"Yeah," Jetstorm muttered. "Let's stay like this for a little while. Just us."

Jetfire purred his own engine. Just them. No Skyfire or Star to yell at them, no Prowl to send them on missions, no Skywarp to… to…

It was nice. For the first time since Starscream left, he was *safe*.

Chapter End Notes

Started laughing while editing because Jetfire actually pays attention to the movies at movie nights (unlike Starscream), which led to a good portion of this chapter being "Jetfire critiques Astro Boy (2009)." LMFAO.

▶ long ramble with a few tangents

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Revulsion lurked in the back of Safeguard's mind as plating crunched beneath his fingers, the mech in his grip screaming. He let out a growl at the audial-piercing noise and threw the mech across the battlefield. They crashed into another Decepticon, giving the Autobot fighting them a moment to finish both of the Decepticons off. He searched the battlefield for his next opponent.

While half of his mind reeled in disgust, the other half was calm, almost satisfied. This was what he was made for. It was beautiful to have a purpose. But buried beneath that was a tingling concern. For who? Himself? It almost seemed like it was.

The pieces that composed him only fed their knowledge to him in brief flashes. He knew everything they knew, but only as he needed to know it. That was fine. It didn't matter. He barely existed beyond moments like this, anyway.

Another mech fell beneath his grip, this time cloaked in fire. He liked watching them burn, but the repulsed half of him always got louder when he used the ability. Maybe it belonged to them. Whoever they were, their feelings were a nuisance. Even *they* didn't like feeling them half the time.

A flash of purple in the sky caught his optics. He grinned. The Air Commander was here. With a mighty leap, Safeguard took off, chasing after the streak of purple and cyan across the sky.

He slammed into her side, not caring that some of his own plating was damaged in the collision. As a much larger mech than her, any injuries he sustained were minor. She transformed into robot mode as she whirled from the impact. With dentae bared, she aimed her blasters at him.

One of her optics was shattered, so Safeguard dodged her poorly-aimed shots with ease. She was a fierce little thing, still yelling and fighting even after so many injuries. Before he caught her, she was already injured, leaking energeon from various places. Something about her was familiar, and he found that fascinating.

He summoned fire to his hands, ignoring the disgusted half's cries, and flung himself at her. She howled as he made contact, the air between them humming as she charged her rays. That couldn't happen, so with a quick pinch, Safeguard tore the rays from her arms and crushed

them inside his fists. He let them fall from the sky, watching the Air Commander's wide optics follow them down.

Typically, she would find some way to evade him. She would pull herself free and escape, or throw sand in his optics or some other equally dirty measure and flee. He would spend the rest of the battle coming through every mech he could, but usually wasn't able to find her again. That was fine. The Autobots liked it when he took out a lot of mecha, anyway.

But this time she was injured. She struggled in his grip, wings trembling. With a weak kick, she screamed something, but Safeguard didn't listen. He grinned, satisfaction warming his spark. A thing in the back of his processor squirmed, deeply uncomfortable with whatever this was, but it was also the source of the satisfaction, so he ignored it. It needed to make up its mind.

Safeguard took one of her wings in his hand and wrenched it sideways. The Air Commander let out a cry. She swatted at him with her free hand. Safeguard rolled his optics and adjusted his grip, taking both her hands in one of his. Then, he returned to pulling the wing. It gave out with a screech. He let that, too, fall to the ground.

Prickles of pain alerted him to a new act of the Air Commander. He shook his arm, attempting to dislodge her dentae. When that didn't work, he seized her face, pulling her off his arm and forcing her jaw shut. He stared into her optics again. She stared back.

They were fuzzy, now. Her pupils couldn't quite stay in place, as if her optical feed was glitching. Considering the amount of pain she must be in, it probably was. Safeguard loosened his grip, readying himself to activate his flames one more time.

Something slammed into his face. It burned as he whirled sideways, losing his grip on the Air Commander. She plummeted, but only for a moment—a flash of magenta streaked through the sky, passing beneath her. As she clung to it, it continued flying. With a growl, Safeguard righted himself and chased after it.

It was swift—much swifter than him. He put as much power into propulsion as he could, determined not to lose the blur even as it spun and turned. Eventually, it landed, and he did the same. It unraveled into a mech.

Blue optics stared into his, and suddenly half of his mind was *screaming*. His helm cleaved in two as he dug his claws into it, desperate to stop it. His twin sparks pulsed, a storm crackling between them.

Then, he was gone.

♡♡♡

Skywarp regretted absolutely everything that led to this moment. Her spark hummed painfully as her warp drive stuttered to a stop for the thousandth time, each rev sending a stabbing sensation through her chest. The room spun, and the only thing keeping her from falling was the wall.

Where was everyone? She hadn't seen Thundercracker since the alarms went off. She hadn't seen Safeguard, either, which meant Jetfire wasn't nearby. Skyfire and Star? She had absolutely no idea.

Skywarp activated her warp drive again, and with an audial-piercing squeal, it came to life before sending her to her destination. It *really* wasn't supposed to make that noise, but it wasn't like she could do anything about it. Especially not in the middle of an enemy attack.

The room swam and ugh, *slag*—was this how it felt for everyone else when she warped them? It was like someone had trapped her in a can and shaken her a hundred times. She leaped to dodge stray fire, the impact sending a thud through her helm. She grit her dentae as a sharp ache spread across her helm. There it was. Yay.

She didn't have much more left in her. Normally, it was her fuel levels that prevented her from warping freely—the process burned a lot of fuel—but now it was her own body. Well, not really. It *had* to be the scrambler. That was when it started.

She hissed as a stray shot hit the edge of her wing, searing it. Another one came, and it occurred to her that maybe these stray shots *weren't* so stray. Wings fanning wide, she turned toward the direction of the shots and charged her rays.

Red caught her optics. A warframe stared down at her, grinning widely. He aimed his ray directly at her spark.

"Thrust," she muttered.

Thrust stepped closer. She fired a warning shot. He laughed, amusement coming off of him in waves. It drowned out the other fields nearby.

"Aww, you're all alone," Thrust said. "Want to surrender for me?"

Skywarp fired a shot at his wing. Thrust stumbled backward with a pained growl. He turned back toward her, charging his rays as he bared his dentae.

"You little fragger!" He spat.

Skywarp turned to the side, and—oh, *slag*, how did she miss that she was at the end of a hallway? All of the doors were locked the moment the base went into lockdown. If she couldn't activate her warp drive, she was fragged.

She sent the command, begging it to work. It activated, humming as it fired up. Agony shot through her chest, and she let out a muffled squeak as it sputtered out. Frag. Not good. Not good at all.

She was going to die. This was it. She was dead. There was no way out. Her spark pulsed in her audials. Her limbs shook as she backed herself against the wall.

Maybe Starscream was right when he kept insisting she learn ground combat. She always blew him off—what use did she have for that when she could just warp away? But now…

The air rumbled. Hope blossomed in Skywarp's spark as a familiar field wrapped around her. Thrust turned, but he was too late—a sharp crack rang out as Thundercracker's fist made contact with his face. He fell sideways with a groan.

"TC!" Skywarp yelled, launching herself at Thundercracker.

She tripped halfway through, landing awkwardly against Thundercracker's chest. Thundercracker pulled her closer, placing an arm beneath hers to support her. She stared down at Skywarp, searching for something. Then, she turned away.

"We need to go," she said.

Skywarp flinched. "I can't—"

"I know," Thundercracker said gently. "We'll be okay. We just need to get to Fire's lab."

She pulled Skywarp along as she ran to the edge of the hall. After a quick glance around the corner, she took off, hand still in Skywarp's. Some shots were aimed at them, but a quick retaliation from Thundercracker's rays or a booming electric crackle from her outlier ability were all that was needed to fend them off. The rest were too busy to notice them.

It was a little weird to be so unnoticed, and to have to few mecha attempt to engage—they all backed off so quickly—but Skywarp wasn't about to wish for a fight she couldn't handle. They rounded another corner, then Thundercracker stopped. She pushed Skywarp against the door and turned her back to her, shielding her with her wings.

"Stay right there," she said. "I'm asking Skyfire to open the door."

Skywarp fell backward as it slid open, landing in waiting arms. The large, careful arms pulled her back into the room. On instinct, she activated her warp drive, letting out a pained whine as agony pierced through her chest and it failed to start yet again. The arms released her into another, more familiar set of arms.

Warmth blanketed her. The air around her whispered comfort and safety. She buried herself in the presence. Gentle claws stroked her wing.

"You're okay," Thundercracker said quietly. "We're safe now."

This wasn't her TC. She knew that. But *frag*, it was so close. She could pretend. Just for a moment. Skywarp closed her optics and curled into the presence she so deeply missed, drinking in everything from the familiar hum of her engine to the softness of her field.

"We need to take the scrambler off."

Skywarp almost forgot that wasn't Starscream's voice. With her optics closed, it was the same. Beneath her, Thundercracker stiffened, her hand hovering over Skywarp's wing.

"We can't," Thundercracker said. "He'll find her."

"This is going to kill her!" Star spat.

"Better this than Galvatron," Thundercracker said. She returned to stroking Skywarp's wing. "I don't want to lose her like that again."

Star stomped a pede. "She's not *her*! You can't just… keep her!"

Skywarp opened her optics as Star's field washed over her, sharp and tingly. Her Starscream wasn't the easiest to read—his field always rippled with some sort of interference—and she was similar. But she'd seen Starscream upset enough times to know what this was.

"Star," Skyfire scolded.

Star flicked her wings and stomped her pede again, her field growing even sharper. She shook her head.

"No!" She hissed. "I'm sick of it. I've been *good* for you. Quiet and obedient like you want. But I'm not going to let you get her killed! This is *hurting* her."

"It's keeping her safe," Skyfire said.

"That's what you always say!" Star hissed, taking a step backward as she shook herself. Her field crackled, wayward energy dancing invisibly on Skywarp's plating. "We're safe, safe *safe* —always *safe*—but none of us are happy! We haven't been happy for a long time—"

Skyfire reached for her. "We're in the middle of a war, Star—!"

Star backed away, flicking her wings harshly. She bared her dentae and shook her head again. But the storm in her field subsided.

"My other self was right," she muttered. "This is hurting us."

Skyfire took a step closer. "Star—"

A loud crack echoed through the room as the air cleaved, sending a powerful whoosh across Skywarp's plating. Purple light coated the room as bright optics stared down at them. Thundercracker clutched Skywarp tighter, claws nearly digging into her plating.

"Did you think I wouldn't find you?" Galvatron said.

Thundercracker dragged Skywarp to her feet, backing away from Galvatron. Skywarp's spark pulsed in her audials, her plating snapping tight. She couldn't warp. Even if Skyfire opened the doors, it would take time they didn't have. Despite being shielded by Thundercracker, she was the only mech with weapons in the room. Did she have the energy to use them?

Galvatron stalked closer. Past him, Star dove behind a table. Skyfire glanced between the table and Galvatron before launching himself forward, barreling into him. Galvatron grunted in surprise, tilting sideways, but quickly turned to grapple with him. Thundercracker took the window to drag Skywarp across the room, tucking herself behind the same table as Star.

Star turned to them, gripping the handle of a hammer tightly in her hands. She handed it to Thundercracker. Then, she reached into the drawer and pulled out another. She and

Thundercracker exchanged glances with a nod before she turned back to Skywarp.

"Stay here," Star said. "As long as Skyfire has him, he can't teleport."

Skywarp was familiar with that limitation. She had only bypassed it a handful of times. It was difficult to avoid teleporting another mech that was touching her without a lot of focus, which she usually couldn't obtain in the middle of a battle. Galvatron must have been the same.

A loud crash echoed through the room, followed by a groan. Star cursed quietly, peering around the edge of the table. Then, she took off in a sprint, Thundercracker behind her. Skywarp stayed behind the table, forcing herself not to avert her eyes even as Galvatron shrugged off their attacks like they were nothing.

Thundercracker's helm was slammed against the wall, her optics flickering as energeon leaked from the side of her head. Star was kicked to the other side, the hammer sliding from her reach. Skyfire was still on the ground, a puddle forming beneath him. The room vibrated as purple light came from the cannon at Galvatron's side.

No. Skywarp's claws dug into the leg of the table.

Galvatron held the cannon up, aiming it at Star with a grin. Star hissed, legs slipping from beneath her as she struggled to stand.

"I should put you out of your misery," Galvatron said. "After all, I have a far superior replacement."

Star flicked her wings. She shook herself as she pushed against the wall, finally able to rise.

"Do it!" She spat.

Galvatron cackled, the laughter shaking his cannon. "If you insist…"

Skywarp couldn't let it happen. She just couldn't. It was too familiar and she knew, with all her spark, that she couldn't sit there and do nothing. So, she charged her rays—begging them to summon at least some power—and fired.

The shot landed on Galvatron's cheek, turning his head and sending him staggering sideways. His cannon went wide, blowing a hole into the floor. He turned, a snarl on his face as his optics locked with Skywarp's.

"You," he growled. "I forgot about *you*."

He stepped toward her, raising his cannon. Skywarp didn't duck. He already saw her. The cannon would blow clean through the table and her. There was no point in hiding.

"I'm going to take your warp drive, too," Galvatron said. "Maybe I'll use it to find *your* world when I'm done destroying this one."

She tried her warp drive one last time. Her chest stung, and she immediately regretted it. It only gave Galvatron's cannon the opportunity to charge. He aimed it at her face, laughing.

A red blur flew at him, knocking him sideways. Glass clattered to the ground. Galvatron growled, attempting to shake the blur off, but it held on. Energeon dripped down his helm.

"You *glitch*!" He howled. "I should've killed you!"

He turned the cannon and fired. The room swarmed with sound. The blur flew into a wall as Galvatron was pushed in the opposite direction. Finally still, the identity of the blur was obvious. Skywarp fought not to activate her warp drive on impulse, the pull to be beside her too strong to ignore.

Galvatron rose with a groan. Energeon pooled in his shattered optics and wept to the floor. He stomped in the direction Star fell. She remained still, limbs twisted at awkward angles. Galvatron's pede collided with her body. He crouched before it.

Nearby, Skyfire stirred. Galvatron stilled. He staggered backward, and the room filled with the hum of his warp drive. With a crackling flash, he was gone.

Skywarp stepped in front of the table, gripping it as her limbs threatened to give out. Her plating ached from how closely it had snapped to her body. She stepped toward Star.

Star was still, but her fans whirred quietly. She was *alive*. In the center of her body was a massive hole that steadily leaked energeon. Skywarp knelt before her. Her optics landed on Skywarp's, dim and fuzzy.

Skywarp closed her optics.

"Star…"

☆☆☆

"Starscream."

Starscream grumbled and opened his optics. Laserbeak chirped in his audial, having settled near his neck sometime during the night. Buzzsaw lifted its head, trilling inquisitively.

"The frag is it?" Starscream muttered.

"Check your comms," Slipstream hissed. "You need to get up."

Starscream rolled his optics and opened his comms. Upon reading the message, he shot out of berth and headed for the door—aching joints be damned. His chestplates grew tight. He tapped a pede as he waited for Slipstream to catch up.

'You will come when called. No hesitation.'

He couldn't be late. Because he wanted to gain Galvatron's trust, not because his spark turned faster every time he thought of that moment, his arms pressed against the throne as Galvatron ripped his cable out. It wasn't because his arm stung at the thought. No, it was just for the mission. He wasn't afraid.

Galvatron stared down at them from his throne. Starscream fought the temptation to leave as he dragged his chair over. Fleeing wouldn't protect him—it would just make everything worse. A hologram appeared before them, and Starscream set himself to the task of pleasing Galvatron yet again.

His focus was shattered when he realized what the hologram was *of*. He forced his wings to still. There was no way he knew. He couldn't know. This was a coincidence. He could still—

"I have learned the location of the Autobots' new base," Galvatron said.

His optics burned into Starscream's. Starscream dug his claws into his arm guards. How had he figured it out? Starscream removed anything that could've possibly told him.

"How… fortunate," Starscream said. The words came out like his vocalizer was coated in sap. Why was it so hard to speak?

"Indeed," Galvatron said. "It was certainly a hard-won prize."

The rest of the meeting was spent planning. Starscream contributed as little as he could get away with, fighting the urge to sink into the floor. This couldn't have been his fault, but how else could Galvatron have found out? Laserbeak and Buzzsaw were on his side. Slipstream, and soon the rest of the Seekers, would be on his side. Who else could he have learned this information from?

What else did he know?

Galvatron called the meeting to an end. Slipstream crossed the room, waiting as Starscream moved to put his chair away.

"Starscream, stay."

Starscream flicked his wings. Slipstream glanced at him, her wings lowering, then left the room. Without her, the air was heavy.

"Come here."

Starscream abandoned his chair, each step he took toward the dictator vibrating through his body. His chestplates hurt. The dictator descended the steps to his throne. A hand landed against the side of Starscream's face—rough and deceptively gentle—and he flinched. The hand stroked the side of his face with a thumb.

"You're beautiful," Galvatron said.

At any other moment with any other mech, he would've preened. But the word was hungry, threatening to consume everything he was. *Beautiful.* Not powerful, not clever, just *beautiful* the way a sculpture or landscape was.

"Please don't call me that," Starscream whispered.

"Beautiful," Galvatron said again. "And finally broken. Others tried, but I will be the last. You're a hard one to tame, little turbofox."

Starscream spark pulsed at the nickname. The word was only ever used against him in a harsh tone, yelled from snarling lips. But Galvatron spoke it like it was something else.

A hand pressed against his arm guard, and Starscream shuddered. It pressed harder. He wanted to pull away, but he didn't know what would happen if he did. The dictator smiled at him.

"Good," he said. "Now stay there."

He released Starscream and turned back toward the throne. He pressed a button on the armrest, and a cube of dark energeon emerged from a slot. As he opened the top and took a sip, he turned back toward Starscream.

"You haven't refueled yet, have you?" He asked.

Starscream shook his helm.

Galvatron held the cube out in front of him. "Drink."

"Sir, I can't—"

Galvatron shook the cube. "*Drink*."

Starscream took the cube and took a sip. It was disgustingly bitter. He forced himself to swallow, even as every system in his body begged him to spit it out. He attempted to hand the cube back to Galvatron, but the dictator waved him off.

"All of it," he said. "You'll need your strength today."

Desperate to stall, Starscream asked, "What for?"

Galvatron nudged the cube. "You're coming on this raid."

Starscream's grip involuntarily tightened on the cube. He drank another bitter sip as Galvatron's optics burned holes in his frame, and he realized what this was: a punishment. They both knew sending him out there was a death sentence. Starscream had never hidden his weakness from Galvatron, because it was unhideable.

"P-please reconsider, sir," he begged quietly.

Galvatron nudged the cube again. "*Drink*. I've already made up my mind."

The dictator didn't let him go until he finished the entire cube. The fuel swirled in his tank, acidic bitterness threatening to burn through it. His frame tingled, anxious energy building within it. Dark energeon was poison. It was only a matter of time before he felt the effects.

Slipstream startled as the door opened. Starscream froze for a moment as she stared back at him with wide optics. Then, she ruffled and unruffled her plating and stepped forward. They walked down the hall together.

"What did he want from you?" Slipstream asked.

"Nothing important," Starscream muttered.

It *wasn't* important. Galvatron didn't threatening him, or hurt him. He just… he didn't know what he did. He didn't know why it made his plating crawl.

"I'm… I'm going on the raid with you, that's all."

Slipstream stopped. Her wings rose.

"You are?" She said. "That's wonderful. Just *wonderful*."

Judging by her gritted dentae and tense wings, it was most definitely *not* wonderful. Starscream couldn't help but agree.

"I know," he said. He fiddled with his arm guard. "We have to make our move soon. He thinks he has me. This is a show of power."

Slipstream scrunched her brow. "I haven't even begun talking to the Air Force."

"Then start now," Starscream said. "I don't expect us to move today. Just soon."

He couldn't keep doing this much longer. Galvatron was right about one thing: he *was* starting to break.

Slipstream hummed. "I need to brief them anyway. We can talk to them now."

Starscream nodded. He followed her to the hangar, where she summoned the rest of the Air Force. Soon, the room was filled with Seekers—give or take a handful of warframes. They stared at her expectantly, and she began her briefing. Just as she seemed finished, she paused.

"This is the plan Galvatron would have us follow," she said. "But I want us to do something different."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd, but no one protested.

"The time has come to end this war," she said. "We are starving and suffering, forced to raid the frames of our dead comrades to sustain ourselves. I will not let this go on any longer. We have a plan, but it must be undertaken with the utmost precision."

The optics of the crowd grew wider, brighter. Wings rose. The murmurs picked up again, voices distinctly excited.

"It begins with this battle. We *cannot* win it."

The murmurs grew more intense, breaking into barely hushed whispers.

"We'll throw this battle," Slipstream said. "Protect yourselves above all else, but if you're able to miss a shot or two, or take off earlier than you typically would, please do. Every missed shot brings us closer to taking power from Galvatron."

The crowd quieted. Slipstream put a hand to her chest.

"I swear it on my honor as Winglord," she said. "We *will* be free. No more trading tyrants for tyrants."

A Seeker stepped forward. Her bright green plating reflected the light of the room.

"How do you know this is going to work?" Acid Storm asked.

Slipstream glanced at Starscream. He flicked his wings, bracing himself, and stepped forward.

"I came here for the sole purpose of killing Galvatron," he said. "I have let him believe that I am meek and broken. He has fallen for my lies. But I have control of all surveillance systems on this base."

A wall panel moved. A tiny visor peeked out from it. He motioned them closer. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw flew over, each perching on a shoulder. He silently thanked them for their timing—the dramatic effect was nothing to scoff at. He reached up to scratch Laserbeak under the chin as it trilled.

"See for yourself," he said.

He paused to allow the crowd to speak among themselves. This next part would be difficult to convey in a believable manner, but it was essential.

"I'm from another world," he said. "One much like this one. I look familiar because I *am* familiar. My name is Starscream, and I am one of the Commanders of my world's Decepticons. In my world, the war is over, and we have all returned to Cybertron."

As expected, the crowd broke out in sound once again, this time outright speaking. Optics grew wide as wings raised. Without the ability to read EM fields and the mixed signals of the members of the crowd, Starscream had no idea how well his speech was being received, but he pressed on.

"There is a life after this," he said. "The war can end. We can go home. We have a future, but you must *believe* in it."

The crowd was silent. They stared up at him, endless optics burning not with anger or hatred, but with *hope*. Damaged mecha held even more damaged comrades, hands and limbs entangled in a show of support for one another. Starscream recognized many members of the crowd. Most stood beside others he knew weren't their original wingmates.

His spark warmed, in that moment. With dawning certainty he stood before them, something deep within him humming with purpose. *This* was his mission—survival, and all the things it required.

Slipstream retook control of the meeting. Eventually, it dissipated, mecha mingling as they waited for the call to leave. An itch crept through Starscream's plating. He lost the battle against scratching it, and was about to start clawing at it when his optics caught movement.

He forced himself away from the painful itch, standing tall as the mech approached. Another mech trailed behind them. Green and blue—Acid Storm and Ion Storm. Starscream raised his wings in greeting.

"Acid, Ion—" Slipstream said. "Do you need anything?"

Ion Storm shook his helm as Acid Storm began to speak.

"Something about this seems wrong," he said. "Galvatron is a control freak. You *know* this. So why has he given Starscream so much power?"

Starscream glanced at Slipstream. She stared back at him with a frown. It *was* true. Galvatron craved control. Something pinched Starscream's arm, and he fought a shudder, only to realize that it was his own hand doing it. He relaxed his grip and picked at his arm guard.

[We both know why,] Slipstream sent. *[What do you want me to tell them?]*

Starscream dug his claws into the guard.

[I'll handle it,] he replied.

He turned back toward Acid Storm.

"Galvatron is a fool," he said. "He thinks he has me under control, but he doesn't. The measures he has taken may have assured him, but they haven't given him any true power."

And how could they? Starscream had survived many impossible things. Despite copious near deaths, his spark refused to go out. It was one of the reasons he went through with this plan in the first place—he was the only mech that could safely attempt it. He had no true proof, but he suspected that he harbored some sort of outlier ability that was keeping him alive.

The itch intensified. It crept along his plating, slowly spreading across his frame. Starscream flicked his wings. He couldn't scratch it now. Acid Storm was watching.

Acid Storm narrowed their optics.

"Alright," they said, turning away. "I'll see you during the raid."

They began walking away, Ion Storm trailing behind them, but quickly paused, turning back.

"And, Slipstream—" Slipstream's wings flicked as Acid Storm spoke. "—if this goes wrong, you're on your own."

Acid Storm walked away. Slipstream fidgeted, her olfactory ridge scrunching as she ran her claws along her arms. Something squirmed inside Starscream's spark as she stared ahead, watching as Acid Storm started speaking with some other mech.

"We won't fail," Starscream said.

Slipstream closed her optics. "It's not that."

Starscream finally gave in to the urge to scratch. It did nothing to relieve the itch. His fuel lines burned, the itch radiating from them. The back of his processor screamed at him to just *tear them out*.

"What is it, then?" Starscream asked.

Slipstream sighed. She didn't speak, but the way her optics never left Acid Storm was still a reply. Starscream knew the feeling well—after he was captured by the Autobots, Skywarp had refused to come near him, angry with him for deserting the Decepticons. She eventually changed her mind, but until then, his spark ached every time he saw her.

"He cares about you," Starscream said.

Slipstream finally looked away. "She does a *great* job showing it."

Desperately, Starscream wanted to offer something, anything—but he wasn't sure what he could. Slowly and deliberately, he reached out, placing a hand on Slipstream's shoulder. Her plating tensed. She grit her dentae. But Starscream didn't let up.

He ran his hand down her pauldron gently. When she didn't push him away, he repeated the action. Her wings fluttered, and slowly, the tension drained from her frame. She leaned into the touch, closing her optics.

Then, they shot open. She stumbled away, wings low.

"Don't—don't do that," she stammered.

Starscream shrugged. "Okay."

☆◇☆

Jetfire stumbled away from Jetstorm as Jetstorm stared at him, optics wide. He turned away, drawn to the mech before him. The sun bounced off his plating, reflecting light in an unreal way. Jetfire reset his optic feed. Was this real? Was he actually here?

The itch still crept through Starscream's plating, and it worsened as he ruffled it, trying to settle himself against the wave that crashed into him. It was one thing to look the combiner in the optic. It was another to look into Jetfire's. His newspark's optics were wide, his mouth open to speak but no sound emerging. His plating was glittery, almost iridescent, reflecting the light in a stunning way. Despite that, his optics were dull.

Was he low on fuel? The Autobots shouldn't have been low—they had the aid of the humans to obtain energeon. A protective urge grew within him, but he forced himself to extinguish it. Still, he longed to close the gap between them and wrap his arms around his newspark, listening to the turning of Jetfire's spark.

There were scratches all over Starscream's plating—fresh ones, if the small bits of energeon were anything to go by. Had Safeguard caused those? No, they were too particularly placed. They were only areas Starscream could reach *himself*. Jetfire longed to close the gap between them, to take Starscream's hand in his and examine the lesions. Whatever was wrong, he could fix it.

He took a step forward. Starscream took a step back.

"Please," Jetfire said.

He wanted his creator back. Everything was so much worse with him gone. He would tell Skyfire and Star to frag off. He'd knock Prowl's desk over and demand Jetfire return to medical training. They would cuddle and Jetfire would recharge knowing he was safe, safe, *safe*.

Starscream stiffened at the plea. He couldn't come back—not when he was so close. Only a short time from now, he would be firing his rays on Galvatron's spark. The Decepticons would be liberated, and he would return home. Everything would be okay again. He would be back with Jetfire and the rest of New Decepticon Command, drifting away in their quarters, for once in his life truly safe, safe, *safe*.

"No," Starscream said.

Jetfire took another step closer. "Please. I—I can't…"

"No," Starscream repeated.

Jetfire closed the gap, hands closing around Starscream's arm. Starscream tried to pull away, but he held him tighter. He couldn't let go, or he'd leave again.

The endless itch combined with the pulsing of Starscream's spark. A shudder crawled up his dorsal strut. Not this. Anything but *this*. Large hands, gripping his wrist. Inescapable.

"Don't go," Jetfire whispered. "Please don't go."

Starscream closed his optics and fired. A scream echoed through the air. The *wrong* scream. Frag, frag, *frag*. What had he done?

"Jetfire!"

The yell came from his newspark's companion, who finally broke from whatever had stunned him before. He rushed to Jetfire's side as the newspark staggered, collapsing to his knees. Starscream turned away. He didn't want to see.

He gathered Slipstream in his arms and took off.

Chapter End Notes

Oof, Jetfire...

Sat down to edit this one and mentally went, "oooh!" cause this was a fun one for me. It was a challenge to figure out how to handle the different things I wanted to tackle without repeating scenes from different POVs, since that was a rule I set for myself (yeah, this was the chapter I was talking about when I asked about that).

I noticed that when I started spacing chapters out, I repeated myself a fair amount in the author's notes (probably because I kept forgetting what I said before). I put myself on a timer by creating a draft for Electric Fence so I could motivate myself to edit these faster, which will hopefully make me repeat myself less. Though, that means I have about a month to edit and post 9 chapters...

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Starscream didn't get far. One of his thrusters gave out just as he passed the edge of the battlefield. He did his best to control his landing, but there wasn't much he could do. He laid beside Slipstream, cooling fans on maximum, as he attempted to recover his energy. If he was lucky, Acid Storm and Ion Storm would come looking. If he wasn't…

There was nothing to do but wait. He forced himself to sit, searching the area for anything he could use. Aside from dirt and debris, there wasn't much. He'd learned his lesson when it came to using dirt to seal off his lines—*never* again.

The side of Starscream's arm stung. He let out a quiet hiss, pulling away claws he didn't realize were scratching. The itch was across his entire body now, pervasive and endless. Where had it come from? He gave up, rolling in the dirt. Stupidly, it helped—every tiny rock, leaf and root grating against his plating.

"Someone is over here."

Starscream froze. He didn't recognize the voice. They were neither Autobot nor Decepticon. If he played dead, would they leave him alone? But Slipstream *couldn't* play dead. He needed her.

He forced himself into a crouching position, plating flexing as he tried to assuage the itch. He charged up his rays on the highest setting his fuel levels could support. The voice approached. Another set of pedesteps followed after it. The other mech spoke too quietly for Starscream to make out, but something about the voice was familiar. Not enough for him to lower his guard, but enough for him to wait before shooting.

A pair of optics shone through the foliage. They were low to the ground. Whoever this was, they were cassette-sized, only slightly taller than Ravage. He adjusted his aim. The mech crept out of the foliage, optics wide.

He was correct. They were, in fact, a cybercat cassette. Their pale plating shone in the sliver of sun that passed through the canopy. Yellow optics stared into his.

"You're alive," the cybercat said softly. "That's good."

"Who are you?" Starscream growled, fanning out his wings.

The cybercat pinned his ears, a frown creasing his face. He took a step backward.

"I am Glit," he said. "I'm neither Decepticon nor Autobot. I am a member of the Cybertronian Revival Initiative. I've been visiting battlefields and treating the mecha I find for quite some time. I wish to treat you and your friend."

The CRI? Starscream fanned his wings wider. Of course they'd be in this world, too! But why were they on Earth?

"I know what the CRI is," Starscream hissed. "I don't trust you."

Glit hung his helm. "I simply wish to help. I hold no agenda beyond preserving the lifeforms of Cybertron, and that includes you."

Starscream glanced at Slipstream. She was still in stasis. Energeon leaked from her wounds. How much did she have left? If he waited for Acid Storm and Ion Storm, would they arrive before she ran out?

It was either allowing this CRI mech to treat them or waiting for help that may not come, from mecha who weren't qualified for anything beyond basic field medicine. He couldn't let her die. He needed her.

"Fine," Starscream said. "But I'll be watching you."

Glit dipped his head and approached carefully, glancing at Starscream before sitting in front of Slipstream. He examined her for a moment, then gently pried open her medical panel. Starscream averted his gaze the moment Glit dug his claws in, something squirming in his spark.

Glit hummed and turned back toward the woods, where a second set of optics shone.

"Can I call my friend over?" Glit asked. "He'll help me stabilize her more quickly."

Starscream nodded. Glit motioned with his tail for the other mech to approach. The moment they entered the light, recognition send a zing through Starscream's processor. The garish color scheme was one he often associated with red, never far from a particular medic.

"Breakdown?" He muttered.

The mech turned toward him, brow furrowed. "Do I know you?"

Starscream shook his head. His world's Breakdown died long before the war ended. He barely knew the mech, but his frequent trips to the medbay made him a familiar face.

Glit called Breakdown over. The two worked diligently. Starscream watched them the whole time, but there was nothing suspicious about what they were doing. They sealed off her lines, cleaned her wounds, and gave her some medical grade energeon intralineally.

Starscream scratched at his elbows. How many times had they done this? How many soldiers left for dead were inexplicably found alive when their comrades came to collect their bodies because of these two mecha? Were they there when Slipstream was ill?

Glit glared it him. "Stop scratching yourself."

Starscream hissed. He ignored the command, digging his claws into one of his seams. Again, he longed to just tear out his fuel lines. Why was he so itchy?

They finished stabilizing Slipstream. Starscream knew because Glit scowled before marching over to him, tail lashing. Glit nipped at his claws, forcing Starscream to withdraw them. With a sigh, he nosed at Starscream's medical panel.

Starscream slipped off his arm guard. But as he prepared to open his medical panel, he hesitated. A strange tension crept into the back of his processor. He forced himself through it and send the command. Glit plugged into his panel with a smooth motion that sang of experience.

After a moment, Glit hummed. He disconnected his cable and looked at Starscream.

"Did you fuel on anything unusual recently?" He asked.

The bitter taste of dark energeon coated Starscream's mouth. He swallowed.

"Yes," he muttered.

Glit narrowed his optics. "What was it?"

Would Glit recognize it if he called it dark energeon? The CRI of his world encountered it, but they had a different name for it. What had Windblade called it?

"U-Unicron's blood," Starscream said. "Not of my own volition."

Glit's glare softened. He curled his ears. Slowly, he brought his face close to Starscream's chest. Starscream dug his claws into the ground as Glit placed an audial against his chestplates.

"Spark sounds strong," he said, pulling away. "Your vitals were good enough. Do you normally run cold?"

Starscream shrugged. Glit flicked his tail again.

"This is highly unusual, but I believe you're having an allergic reaction."

Starscream narrowed his optics. "What?"

He knew what an allergic reaction was. They were more common in mechanimals, who were able to process a wide spectrum of fuels. Up until the CRI developed the surgery to modify fuel processing systems, cybertronians could only consume energeon and candied or jellied forms of it, so allergies were nearly unheard of. A mech who couldn't drink energeon didn't last long.

"Your immune system has decided the dark energeon is a pathogen," Glit said. "Rather than processing it, it's attempting to expunge it. You're itchy because your immu-nanites are

attacking your own nanites to get rid of it."

"I *know*," Starscream said. "I just don't understand *why*."

Glit hummed. "I don't, either. I haven't seen this reaction before. I can do one of two things: take you back to our base so I can flush your lines, or give you an anti-inflammatory and an immune suppressor so you can wait it out."

Starscream glanced at Slipstream, who Breakdown was still hovering over. He couldn't leave her, no matter how desperate he was to get rid of the fire in his fuel lines. Glit followed his gaze.

"She has to come with us no matter what," Glit said. "She needs surgery to fix that optic and replace that wing. And I suspect some internal damage, based on the amount of energeon she's still losing after sealing those lines."

Starscream bared his teeth, muffling a growl. "Do you *often* steal mecha from the battlefield?"

Glit tilted his head and flicked his tail, the cybercat equivalent of a shrug. Breakdown looked up from his work monitoring Slipstream. He stared into Starscream's optics with a frown.

"He did it to me," Breakdown said. "It saved my life. He'll save hers, too."

Starscream hissed. He brought his hands to his face and groaned in irritation.

"Fine," he grumbled. "Take me to your base. I'm not leaving her."

☆☆☆

The first thing Starscream noticed upon entering Glit's base—which he insisted was just a lab, he wasn't a fighter—was that it was swarming with retrorats. They walked through the first set of doors, then the second, and the moment Starscream set pede in the place, something squeaked angrily beneath him. He lifted his pede, and an irate retrorat bared its teeth at him before scurrying away.

Some climbed across the ceiling. Others clung to the walls. Many darted to and fro on the floor. Various wall panels were chewed, some completely disconnected. Starscream grimaced.

"You have a pest problem," he muttered.

Glit approached one of the rats, sniffing it. It sniffed him back. He licked it on the helm, and it squeaked happily.

"Not a pest problem," Glit said. "They're my project. Each scientist in the CRI chose a species to preserve."

A particularly large retrorat stared at him from the corner of the room. Starscream glared at it.

He had fond memories of the creatures from his time with his world's Skyfire. But back then, they were kept in pens and cages, not allowed to free roam and wreck the lab. The sharp fangs of retrorats grew forever, so they were driven to gnaw on and tear apart anything their could get their paws on to wear them down, resulting in messes like this.

Glit whistled, and all of the retrorats on the floor moved toward the walls, clearing the area. After a glance toward the rest of the group, he headed toward a door on the other side of the room. The large retrorat, ignoring whatever command Glit gave them, scurried toward him. Glit dipped his head toward the retrorat, then jumped up to open the door. As soon as the door opened, the retrorat ran in.

After Glit, Breakdown went in, placing Slipstream on one of the berths in the room. Starscream trailed behind him. The retrorat watched him, perched on one of the counters.

Starscream motioned to it. "Should that really be here?"

The retrorat squeaked angrily. Glit turned toward it. His tail lashed.

"Off the counter," he said.

"I'm not causin' harm," the retrorat muttered.

Oh. Well. That explained a lot.

"Down," Glit said. "Your paws are dirty."

The retrorat beastformer groaned and leaped down from the counter. Sure enough, there was a set of muddy pawprints where he just was.

"Whatever ya say, Sparkles," the beastformer muttered.

Glit rolled his optics and huffed. "Rattrap."

Rattrap scowled. "I know, I know! You don't have ta tell me twice!"

He ran to the corner of the room. A small container sat on top of a towel. He leaped into the container. Glit watched him for a moment, then turned toward Starscream.

"Pick a berth," he said.

Starscream hesitated. "Aren't you going to treat Slipstream?"

Glit shook his helm. "All that's left now is surgery. Breakdown can monitor her until I'm ready to start. I'm more concerned about you."

Starscream's fingers twitched. He took a seat on the nearest berth.

"I'm going to be there when you wake her up," he said.

The thought of leaving her alone summoned the memory file of her thrashing on the floor after Galvatron attacked her, convinced Starscream was trying to harm her. Acid Storm's remarks about her reactivity flooded his mind. If she woke here with two strangers hovering over her, it wouldn't end well for anyone involved.

"You will," Glit said. "Open both of your panels. I'll be back in a moment."

Glit headed to the other side of the room. Starscream wrapped his hand around one of his arm guards. He attempted to remove it, but hesitated. If he took them off, he'd be open. *Exposed*.

He hissed to himself. What was he even thinking? This was stupid. He closed his optics and swiped one guard off, then the other. But maybe opening his panels could wait. Glit was still getting the supplies. It would be fine. He scratched his newly exposed plating.

Finally, Glit finished bringing the supplies over. He turned toward Starscream, the end of an intralineal dangling from his mouth, and pinned his audials.

"I told you to open those," he said.

"Y-yes," Starscream said. "I wanted to wait."

Glit's optics narrowed, but he didn't say anything. Starscream opened his panels. Glit activated his overrides before attaching one intralineal to each intake.

"This one will take the dark energeon out," he said, motioning to one of the intralineals. Then, he motioned to the other. "This one will put clean energeon in. I'm going to turn them on. Let me know if you experience any burning sensations, or if you receive any alerts."

Starscream nodded. Glit turned on the machines. One bag drained as the other filled. With each passing moment, the itch lessened, but it didn't quite go away. With a twitching tail, Glit checked something on the machines before turning back toward Starscream.

"Please forgive me," Glit said. "But I've noticed signs of malnutrition on your frame. Are you getting enough energeon?"

This again. Starscream sighed.

"Fuel processing issue," he said. "Nothing to be done about it."

A loud splash sounded as Rattrap, still in retrorat form, leaped out of the container and ran out of the room. Glit's audials swiveled toward the noise. He flicked his tail and tutted.

"There are always things to be done," Glit said.

The conversation went exactly as Starscream expected. Glit asked all of the questions every other medic asked. He answered them all the same.

"Well, you're right," Glit said with a sigh. "There isn't much we can do *now*. But if you stayed with us—"

Starscream kicked the berth with the back of his pede. "*No*. I can't leave."

"It's a matter of health," Glit said. "Treating conditions like yours, especially when left for so long, requires careful management. Please."

"I have a mission," Starscream said. "I have to see it through."

Glit shook his helm. "You don't have to. This is going to kill you."

"But I *do*."

He wasn't quite confident he could be killed, anyway. That was what his plan relied on. There was a reason his spark kept turning despite everything.

Glit growled quietly. He paced in a circle, tail lashing.

"I didn't want to bring this up," he said. "But I saw your panel and cable."

Starscream claws curled, digging into the berth. He grit his dentae. Why didn't he realize Glit noticed? *Stupid*.

"It's clear that someone is hurting you," Glit said. "You're not safe, wherever you are. You're sick and injured. Do you understand why I'm concerned?"

Stupid, stupid, *stupid*.

"You don't know my situation," Starscream hissed.

"I don't," Glit said. "But what I've seen paints a picture I don't like."

"You don't know anything—"

Starscream cut himself off as Rattrap scampered back into the room, energeon splattered all over his plating. He held a retrorat in his mouth, dragging on the floor with an unpleasant screech it as he approached them. Just before he reached them, he transformed in a blur of plating.

The retrorat in his mouth was quickly moved to his hands. In robot form, he was barely taller than Starscream. He stood on spindly limbs, more mesh than plating. He held the retrorat out to Starscream.

"Here," he said.

Starscream had no idea what to think. Should he refuse? Why was this even being offered in the first place? Slowly and reluctantly, he took the retrorat's frame from Rattrap's hands.

Glit let out an irritated growl. "Rattrap—"

Starscream hadn't had anything except energeon since coming to this universe. Though fresh fuel was being pumped onto his lines as the dark energeon was drained, his fuel tank was still

empty. Glit and Rattrap were still glaring at each other. What was the harm?

Starscream pried a scute of plating from the retrorat and bit it. As he relished the sensation of grinding his meal beneath his teeth, Rattrap turned toward him, a grin spreading across his face. Glit's optics widened.

"You're like me!" Rattrap said.

Glit huffed. "He's a *Seeker*, Rattrap. That isn't possible."

Rattrap scowled at Glit before turning to Starscream.

"Ya older than Primus, by any chance?" He asked.

Starscream froze mid-bite. Older than *Primus*? He had to be joking. Starscream swallowed his bite as he ruffled his plating.

"There isn't such a thing," he said.

Rattrap snorted. "That's what ya think, but it ain't true. I watched Primus ascend with my own optics, and I'll still be kickin' long after its frame rots away. You ever heard of the Maximals?"

Starscream scrunched his olfactory ridge. "Maximals?"

Glit sighed, muttering something as he turned away from the group. Rattrap's plating flared.

"Well," he said, voice sharp. "Everyone's heard of the Predacons, haven't they?"

"Yes," Starscream said.

The Predacons were ancient beasts. They were massive and insatiable, driven to kill and consume everything around them. Many species on ancient Cybertron went extinct because of them. Cybertronians themselves were nearly hunted to extinction. But then, they vanished. No experts could agree on why.

Rattrap grinned. "We Maximals destroyed 'em. It took lifetimes of war, but we got 'em. Your entire species has us to thank."

"Species?" The word rolled out of Starscream's vocalizer before he had the chance to think. Cybertronians were the only sapient species on Cybertron. Rattrap spoke like he wasn't one.

"Where d'ya think cybertronians came from? Or mechanimals? Or *Primus*?" Rattrap said.

"Cybertronians are born from Primus, the core of Cybertron," Starscream said. "No one knows where Primus came from. Except *you*, apparently."

Rattrap snapped his fingers. "'Zactly, though that's not quite what I'm gettin' at. Primus isn't just Cybertron's core, it *is* Cybertron. It used to be tiny, just like you. Then it got bigger n' bigger, and one day it crawled into the planet and never came out. Everything on the surface

started disappearin', til it was just metals and dirt. It ate everythin' from the inside, then you guys started showin' up *everywhere*."

Starscream wasn't a religious mech. He wasn't. But it lined up with what little he learned from early scriptures. His spark sank as he remembered why he knew about these things, of Sunstorm's frame sparkling with excitement as he explained yet another legend he got ahold of. He pushed that away to focus on the facts.

In the supposed early days of Cybertron, when the first mecha set foot on the planet, it was raw and empty, only endless dirt and savage mechanimals that did nothing but kill and eat. One of the original cybertronians—a large flightframe whose specific alt mode depended on who was telling the story—took to the sky and visited other worlds. They brought the first plants back with them, astonished by their beauty, and the plants soon filled the world.

"What are you?" Starscream asked.

"I told ya," Rattrap said. "A Maximal. But what are *you*?"

A beast. A monster. A rabid turbofox. Something beautiful to break. A Commander of the New Decepticons. A creator who abandoned his creation. The list went on.

But most of all, he was *Starscream*.

"I told you I ran into the CRI before, but it wasn't *you*," Starscream said. "I'm from another world, and in that world, the CRI figured out how to modify our fuel processing systems so we could survive on things other than energeon."

Rattrap and Glit exchanged glances. Glit turned back to Starscream, a frown on his face. Somehow, Rattrap grinned wider.

"If you ain't lyin', that opens a lot of doors," he said. "And who would lie about somethin' as crazy as that?"

A realization struck Starscream. He, and others, had assumed the CRI reverse engineered the surgery from mechanimals. But what if they hadn't? What if the CRI of his world had encountered a Maximal? It wasn't a stretch.

He stared between Glit and Rattrap as another thought floated into his mind. These two were neutrals who valued the preservation of life above all else. He had an opportunity here.

"I need your help," Starscream said.

Glit's audials perked.

"Come with me," Starscream said. "I have a plan to take Galvatron down and end the war. It's the only way I can go home. But the Decepticons don't have any medics. The Autobots do."

Glit's gaze softened. His brows drew together. Rattrap glanced at him, a frown on his face.

"I can't," Glit said. "But that explains a lot."

Starscream dug his claws into the berth. "Why not?"

"If I ally with the Decepticons, I cannot treat Autobots," Glit said. "Hurt isn't bound by faction. Healing shouldn't be, either."

It was true. If Glit stayed with the Decepticons, he would be forced to stay at the base. Galvatron wouldn't take kindly to any aid given to enemies. Truthfully, he may not even tolerate Aid given to allies. Galvatron's words came back to him: *'Soldiers that can't defend themselves on the battlefield deserve to die.'*

Was that why Galvatron had singled out Ratchet and Pharma? Did he want to take the medics from both sides to ensure no 'weak' Soldiers could survive?

"I understand," Starscream said.

But there had to be something he could do. Slipstream wasn't the first mech to be in this position, nor would she be the last. This wasn't even the first time she had been too injured to return by herself. The Decepticons *needed* a medic.

He had an idea—one that would keep both Glit and his mecha safe.

"Can I tell my mecha about you?" Starscream asked. "I'll make them swear to keep it secret. But this way, they'll know where to go when they need aid, and you won't be forced to choose a faction."

Glit dipped his head. "You may."

☆☆☆

Starscream was called into the room when they finished surgery, as promised. Slipstream hadn't even woken up when he was allowed in. So, he sat beside the berth. When he requested a chair, Glit didn't hesitate. After so long being glared at, it was nice to be around mecha who didn't have a second thought about accommodating his condition.

Slipstream stirred, her optics flickering. They opened, unfocused and fuzzy. Glit warned him about that. Whatever they used to keep her under would take some time to subside. Starscream didn't remember having to wait after his surgeries, but most of those happened in the middle of war, and many of them involved helm trauma of some sort.

"Sss… Starscream?" Slipstream muttered.

"Yes," Starscream said.

Slipstream pushed herself up from the berth on unsteady limbs. Her optics searched the room, narrowing as they returned to him.

"Where are—"

Her limbs gave out beneath her. She crashed to the berth with a hiss. After a moment, she pushed herself onto her elbows, glaring at the berth as if it had personally offended her.

"A neutral mech found us on the battlefield and took us back to treat us," Starscream said. "We're at his base."

"Didn't know those were still a thing," Slipstream said, her words coated in static.

She swayed slightly. Memory files of engex and high grade drunk mecha came to mind. She attempted to push herself up again only to flop to the side with a frustrated hiss. Her wings twitched.

"There are plenty of surprises in this world," Starscream said. He reached forward to steady her as she attempted to sit up again, but withdrew as he remembered her reaction to touch earlier. "You should wait a bit longer to sit. Whatever they used on you was strong."

"I'll sit when I like," Slipstream grumbled, trying and failing to sit up again. This time, Starscream reached for her.

She snatched his hand and pulled him forward. He staggered out of his chair. Then, with a yank that seemed impossibly strong with how intensely the drugs had affected her, Starscream fell into the berth.

Starscream bared his teeth. "Slipstream—!"

A sound gave him pause. His plating vibrated as Slipstream's engine purred. Arms wrapped around him. Was she… *cuddling* him?

"Slipstream," he said, gently pushing away.

Her wings lowered. The purring quieted.

"I don't know," she said, voice weak and staticy. "I feel like I'm floating away. I don't like it."

She closed her optics. Her wings drooped to their lowest position.

"Nobody likes me. Not even Acid Storm or Ion Storm. That's why I hurt them. So they'll listen to me. But you seem like you care. I thought maybe I could have something good for once. Was I wrong? Do you not…?"

The mech before him wasn't Slipstream, Air Commander of the Decepticons and Winglord of the Seekers. This was Slipstream, the Seeker Drone that was left alone outside, manipulated and abused by her superior, and abandoned by her allies. All but one.

Starscream closed the gap between them. Gently, he rested a hand on her pauldron. She opened her optics.

"I do," Starscream said.

Clumsily, she launched herself at him, claws raking down his plating as she scrambled for purchase. Starscream took her arms in his hands. He lowered himself onto the berth. The moment he sat, she practically scrambled into his lap.

"Please don't leave me," she said. "Everybody hates me and they always leave."

Starscream glided a hand along her wing, mimicking a motion that was used on him many times.

"I won't," he said.

He held her until the fuzz retreated from her optics. It happened slowly, her frame going from relaxed in his hold to tense. She pushed away, wings set wide, and stared at him. Her optics widened, and she shuffled backward.

Straight off the berth.

She fell with a clang, hissing as she landed on her side. Starscream bent down to offer her a hand, but she swatted it away. Starscream sighed, but it wasn't exasperation that warmed his spark. She was back. Whatever effect that medicine had was gone, now.

"You will tell *no one* of this," she hissed, flaring her wings. "Or I'll—"

"I won't tell anyone," Starscream said.

She narrowed her optics. "Why? What do you *want*?"

There was the cobalt spinehog again, back turned to show off its spines. This wasn't stubbornness or defiance, this was a defense mechanism—an achingly familiar one. Starscream wasn't a threat, and he had to convince her of that.

"Why would I want anything?" Starscream asked. "You're already working with me. Attempting to blackmail or humiliate you would hinder my plans."

Her wings shifted closer to neutral position. It was working.

Starscream continued, "You're one of my few allies among this world's Decepticons. And I've been in your position before. I know how it feels, but I also know how to help."

He stepped down from the berth. Slipstream didn't back away.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said. "I'm not going to leave you, and I don't hate you."

Slipstream closed her optics. Silence lingered.

"Okay," she said, running her hands down her arms. "*Okay*."

Starscream didn't know what to do, contrary to what he said. But so far, doing what he wished someone did for him seemed to work. He backed away and sat on the berth, motioning to the space next to himself.

"Let's sit for a while," he said. "We need to fly back, but we can't do that until the sedatives are fully out of your system."

Slipstream sat beside him, leaving a small distance between them. But over the course of a few moments, the gap was closed. Something pressed lightly into his shoulder, and something else brushed against his back. He leaned his helm on the top of Slipstream's, purring his engine quietly as their wings intertwined.

Maybe they could *both* have something good for once.

☆☆☆

But it wasn't to last. They said their goodbyes to Glit and took off. When they were nearly there, a thought struck Starscream, cold claws seizing his spark. He dropped some altitude in his shock, which didn't go unnoticed.

[What was that?] Slipstream sent.

[Just… thinking,] Starscream replied.

When they got back, Galvatron would be there. He was probably waiting for them. The moment he asked for Starscream's cable, it was over. He would know where Glit was, and he would have him captured, or worse.

[How good are you with locations?] Starscream sent Slipstream.

The response took a moment to arrive.

[Good enough.]

That wasn't an answer.

[Do you have the coordinates of Glit's base in your files?]

[Um…]

So, she didn't. Damn it.

[I'm going to send them to you.]

[Sure…]

Starscream sent the coordinates. They flew in silence for a while, eventually touching down near the base. Slipstream hesitated, glancing at him.

"What is it?" Starscream asked.

"What's with the coordinates?" She asked. "I understand why you would give them to me, but the way you asked…"

Starscream dug his claws into his arm guards.

"Galvatron…." He grit his dentae. "Galvatron hacked me. I don't know what he looked at when he did, but I know he can do it again. I have to purge the coordinates from my memory."

Anything he kept about the Autobot base was hidden in a junk folder, heavily encrypted, or both. For Galvatron to have discovered it, he probably combed through Starscream's entire processor, and cracked every file he could. Storing anything he didn't want Galvatron to access was impossible. He knew that now.

"Okay," Slipstream said.

They headed up toward the base, the forest surrounding them eerily silent. Before they reached the entrance, Slipstream paused, hands hovering over the keypad. She turned back toward Starscream.

"If there's anything else you need to store, let me know," Slipstream said. "We're…"

She stammered, struggling for a word.

"Allies?" Starscream suggested.

"Yes," she said. "Allies."

The first thing they did was report to Galvatron. He stared down at them, optics narrowed, as his grip tightened on the armrests of his throne. He dismissed Slipstream with gritted dentae. Starscream's chestplates tightened as he was yet again alone with the dictator.

Galvatron leaned forward, a smile creeping onto his face. "How are you feeling, Starscream?"

"I feel fine, sir," Starscream said, closing his optics.

Galvatron frowned. "Do you?"

"Right now, yes," Starscream said. He flexed his claws. In. Out.

Galvatron leaned back, bringing a hand to his chin.

"Just fine?" He said. "I was certain the dark energeon would benefit you as it has me. But if you aren't feeling the effects, I suppose I'll have to give you more."

A shudder crept down Starscream's dorsal strut. He fought not to flinch.

"I-it's alright, sir!" He said, voice coming out in a strained squeak. "I don't need any more."

Galvatron hummed.

"I'll be the one to decide that."

Chapter End Notes

Considering my little "characters who are dead in Blind Spot's world get to be featured in Sacrificial Turbofox's world" rule, you can guess what happened to Blind Spot Rattrap and how the CRI obtained the information they needed for the surgery.

Starscream's reaction to the dark energeon is inspired by the way food allergies often present in cats.

There's one big, glaring thing Starscream is refusing to address. You've probably noticed it by now. It will come to bite him later.

This chapter also dropped a heavy hint toward the issue that led to Slipstream failing basic testing.

(Also, yeah. 'Cobalt spinehog' is a reference to a very well-known fictional blue hedgehog. I needed a laugh somewhere.)

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His chest hurt. It was the only coherent thought bouncing around in his processor. Everything was dim and fuzzy. There were mecha speaking, but he had no idea what they were saying. His chest *really* hurt.

He closed his optics as the blurry world swam. Why was he so dizzy? His limbs were numb and heavy, barely responsive to his attempts to lift them. But, finally, one of his arms lifted. He moved it toward his chest.

A hand inserted itself into his, their fingers intertwining. He opened his optics. A blurry figure sat beside him. Or was it two? There were too many colors to just be one.

The voices in the room got louder. Jetfire flinched. He still couldn't tell what they were saying. He turned his helm toward the figure next to him.

"Hey," he tried to say, but the words were swallowed by static and sharp beeps.

The hand squeezed his. He squeezed back—gently, always *gently*. He remembered that much. The hand was smaller than his. Delicate. He was a big monster that crushed things too easily.

"You're not a monster."

Jetfire blinked. He reset his optic feed. It cleared somewhat, but it was still blurry. Still, he could finally make out some details. The bright too-many-colors mech was Jetstorm. It had to be. He checked the always-present numbers in his helm to confirm it.

"I am," Jetfire said. "I'm big and I break things and that's all anyone wants from me now."

Starscream didn't want him. His creator, his only chance to be saved, *didn't want him*.

"Well," Jetstorm said. "*I* don't want that from you. I want to be friends. And being so big means you give great hugs."

Jetfire pushed himself up, back resting against the wall. His chestplates protested the moment, twinging with pain. He muffled a grunt. The room spun, and he focused on the texture of the berth beneath his hands to distract himself from the dizziness.

He searched his wrists for his bracelet, the pit crawling into his belly as all he encountered was his own plating. Where was it? Did he lose it? He felt further down, hoping it just slid, and his hand closed around a tube. He followed it.

An intralineal. Why was he so dizzy if he was getting energeon?

The yelling got louder, too muffled to understand but enough to stab Jetfire's audials and make him grit his dentae. Jetstorm's wings flicked. He frowned.

"They've been like that for a really long time," he said. "Star is in there. She got really hurt."

The surgery room. First Aid wouldn't let the others in if he were doing surgery. If Star was still in there, she probably wasn't alive. Otherwise, she would be out here on a berth like he was, and the others would be waiting for her.

He didn't say it. Maybe Jetstorm understood, or maybe he didn't. Jetstorm was sparked into this war. He knew what death was. Jetfire held no doubt that as Safeguard, they'd caused plenty of it.

Ignoring the wave of dizziness that washed over him, Jetfire pushed himself off of the berth. His knees gave as he hit the floor, so he clung to the berth. Jetstorm was at his side quickly, and with a gentle push, Jetfire brushed him off.

Grabbing the intralineal—partially to support himself but mainly so the line didn't get disconnected—Jetfire helmed toward the door. The yelling got louder as he approached, but also more intelligible. He stood as close to the door as he could manage, leaning against the adjacent wall.

"—your fault!"

The voice, uncharacteristically harsh, was Thundercracker's.

"You don't mean that."

Quieter, calmer. *Skyfire*.

"You're right," Thundercracker said. "*I* let you do it. *I* let you suffocate her. *I* didn't stand up for her when she couldn't. And now she's *gone*."

"Thunder—"

The clang of metal. Scraping. Skyfire's quiet grunt. Pedesteps approached the door.

"Don't touch me!" Thundercracker hissed. "I can't… I'm *mad* at you."

"Thunder, please—"

The keypad beeped.

"Stop it," Thundercracker said, voice cracking. "Just *stop*."

The door slid open. Jetfire backed away as Thundercracker came through, her dentae gritted and her wings wide. Skyfire trailed after her, brow furrowed and wings low, with a small cut on his face leaking energeon. The tiniest sliver of vindictive satisfaction crept into Jetfire's spark, but he quickly quashed it.

Skyfire's hand brushed against Thundercracker's wing. She turned toward him, optics growing fuzzy.

"I'm *done*, Skyfire," she said. "I can't do this anymore. You can keep the room. I'm going to…" She paused, squeezing her optics shut. "I'm going to get my things."

Skyfire brought his hands back to himself. "Thunder, you don't need to—"

"I said *stop*!" Thundercracker yelled. "This is exactly *why* I need to. I can't let you just… keep talking me into things like this. You keep pushing even when I say *no*, even when I tell you to *stop*. The next thing I know, I'm agreeing to something I never wanted in the first place. So *please*, just let me leave."

Skyfire opened his mouth, then closed it, stammering as if he wanted to say more, maybe refute what she said. Then, his optics fell to the floor, and he stepped back.

"Okay," he said softly.

Thundercracker opened the door to the medbay and walked out. Silence passed over the room, every mech within it at a loss for words. Jetfire's intralineal beeped. First Aid slipped through the doorway and pulled a new bag of med grade from the cabinet.

Skywarp poked her helm through the doorway, scrunching her olfactory ridge. "I don't think you're supposed to be up."

"He isn't!" First Aid called out as he approached with the bag. He replaced the one on the intralineal with practiced grace, then stared up at Jetfire. "You should at least sit down. Can you make it back to the berth, or do I need to bring one over?"

"I can make it," Jetfire said, pushing himself off the wall. His vision fuzzed out for a moment as his optics glitched and his limbs grew numb. But it passed, and soon he was sitting on the berth.

First Aid looked between him and the other two occupants of the room.

"I have something important to talk with you about," he said. "Are you okay with them being here?"

Jetfire had no idea what he meant, so he shrugged. What were they going to do about it?

First Aid sighed. "Alright, then. I noticed your fuel levels were extremely low, and your fuel line pressure was far below normal."

Oh, *slag*.

"Have you been refueling?"

Jetfire picked at his wrist, his spark stinging as he remembered that the bracelet wasn't there. The truth was, he wasn't—he'd spent the last while waiting until he got to the absolute bare minimum level, when his desperate need for fuel overrode the fear in his processor. Before the attack, he hadn't quite made it there yet.

"Um—" He stammered. If he admitted it, what would Skywarp think? What would First Aid think? Would they force him to? "I, um…"

A hand reached around his wing, gently touching the back of his shoulder. He flinched. The hand moved away. He turned to the source. Jetstorm sat beside him, a frown on his face. He reached toward him again. Jetfire allowed it.

Jetstorm leaned forward, a soft vibration traveling from his plating to Jetfire's. Jetfire leaned into him. Jetstorm kept purring.

"He's scared," Jetstorm said.

Jetfire wasn't sure if he meant in this current moment or of refueling, but either was correct. He closed his optics and focused on the rumble of Jetstorm's engine.

"Okay," First Aid said. "Both of you—out of the room right now."

The sound of shuffling and pedesteps, then the door closing as Skywarp and Skyfire left the room. Jetfire opened his optics. Skywarp stared at him as the door slid shut.

"What's going on?" First Aid asked in a quiet and too-gentle voice.

"I—" His vocalizer froze. What did he say? If he said he didn't want to, would First Aid force him to? Or worse, what if he decided Jetfire was crazy, and decided to lock him up 'for his own good' like Pharma?

Jetstorm purred louder, his arms curling protectively around Jetfire. They weren't long enough to wrap him, but they came close. *Safe*. Jetstorm wouldn't let anything happen. Not while he was holding on.

"I can't," Jetfire said.

First Aid hummed. "Why can't you?"

Wasn't that the question? Again, Jetfire searched for the bracelet, letting out a quiet growl as he caught his hand running over his wrist.

"It tastes boring," Jetfire said. "And it just feels… *bad*."

"Bad *how*?"

Jetfire longed to be anywhere but here. If he were a less restrained mech, maybe he would be. He would run straight out the door, fly off, and never come back. He didn't *need* energeon,

not really. He just needed fuel. Starscream survived on human vehicle fuel without a modified fuel processing system, so he could probably do just fine with one.

"Jetfire," First Aid said quietly.

How did he explain?

He never liked energeon, but before he got his fuel processing system modified, he had no other options. It was terrible to drink, but he could force himself to. Now, he could barely even do that. It all got worse after Skywarp forced it down his throat, but he couldn't say that. There were two possible consequences, and neither of them were good: First Aid would agree with Skywarp, and potentially do the same thing himself, or he would disagree with her and she would get in trouble and be angry with him.

He loved Skywarp. He cared about her. He didn't want her in trouble. And he really, *really* didn't want her angry at him. Not after last time.

"It's just hard," Jetfire said. "It hurts to drink and I don't really have to as much as others, so I wait as long as I can."

"That's not…" Aid shook his helm. "Let me take a look."

Jetfire sat still as Aid examined him. He knew what Aid would find—nothing, because this wasn't a mechanical problem. It was something else.

Aid leaned back, releasing Jetfire's jaw. "I don't see anything unusual, but if you say you're in pain, I believe you."

Jetfire wrung his hands. His optics fell to the floor. The thought of looking Aid in the optic was too much to bear.

"Different kind of pain," he muttered.

"Different kind," Aid mumbled to himself.

He hummed, optics unfocused as he stared at the wall. After a moment, he sighed, turning back toward Jetfire.

"I don't know what's going on," First Aid said. "But fueling is important for everyone. Even if you *can* activate your fuel-saving measures manually, that doesn't mean you *should*, especially not when we have enough to go around. If you keep depriving yourself, it's going to take a toll."

Jetfire knew that. He understood the process. They reviewed it in class—had a whole unit on it, actually. So many mecha endured starvation during the war that it was necessary to cover.

First, fuel-saving measures would activate. The lights on a mech's frame dimmed. Their frame would dull as their color nanites were deprived of the byproducts they needed to produce color. Healing and growth would slow. If they continued without fuel, processes the frame deemed unnecessary for survival, such as comms and weapons, would be given less

and less power until they shut down. After that, the processes shut off would grow closer and closer to being essential, until emergency stasis was induced. At that point, only outside intervention could save them.

But Jetfire was fine. His colors were slightly dull, sure, and his optics weren't as bright as they could've been, but he wasn't *starving*. He might've let himself get close to stasis, but he knew what he was doing.

"It's not the same," Jetfire said.

First Aid stared at him. Then, he crossed the room, returning with a cube of med grade in his hands. He held it out to Jetfire.

"Then show me."

Jetfire hesitated, glancing between the cube and the intralineal. "But the intralineal—"

"Is filling your lines, not your fuel tank," First Aid said. "Please, fuel up."

Jetfire took the cube. It popped open with a click, and he flinched. He could do this. He brought it to his mouth. He had to do this. Aid was watching.

The energeon hit his tongue and he jerked backward, nearly spilling the cube. His spark pulsed in his chest. He pulled the cube away from his face as his hands shook. His vision fuzzed out at the edges.

What was Aid going to do to him? The liquid in the cube sloshed. He couldn't look at it. He held it out toward Aid and hid his face in the crook of his elbow.

"Please," he said. "I can't. Please don't make me."

Gently and slowly, the cube was lifted from his hands. A rumble vibrated through his plating as Jetstorm pulled him closer.

"He's scared," Jetstorm said. "Really, really scared."

"I know," Aid said quietly.

The intralineal hummed, but the rest of the room was silent. Then, it beeped. As First Aid reset the machine, Jetfire uncurled slightly, freeing his helm to watch. There was still a good amount of energeon in the bag.

Aid turned toward him.

"I'd prefer not to make this a regular thing," Aid said. "But if you're okay with it, I can use an override to fuel you directly with this. That way, you can still be fueled while we figure this out."

He wasn't going to force it down his throat? He wasn't angry? It was almost too good to be true. Apprehension crept through Jetfire's plating.

"Y-yeah," he said. "I'd like that. Just for now."

Aid nodded, gesturing for Jetfire to give him his arm. Jetfire complied. Aid plugged in and sent the override. Then, he went back to the intralineal and turned it on.

It was strange. Although mecha without primary intakes fueled this way regularly, Jetfire never had. The fuel practically sloshed into his tanks. His abdomen felt heavy, despite his tanks being far below capacity. Had he grown *that* used to running low?

Every once in a while, Aid asked for his levels, until eventually he got numbers he approved of and disconnected the machine. Jetfire closed his medical panel.

"You're good to go, now," Aid said. "I'll set up an appointment so we can think of solutions."

Jetfire nodded. He pushed himself out of the berth, pedes much steadier than earlier. His chest still hurt, almost anything he did pulling on the large weld in the center of it, but that would improve with time. Jetstorm followed him as he left the medbay. Outside, Skywarp leaned against the far wall, Skyfire nearly an entire mech's worth of distance away from her.

"C'mon," Skywarp said. "We're getting our things from Skyfire's room."

Jetfire scrunched his olfactory ridge. "We don't *have* any things."

Skywarp stared at him, then huffed and looked away. She walked down the hall.

"You're right," she said. "Let's just go meet TC."

They went through the halls, Skyfire and Jetstorm behind them, but when they reached the usual turn to Skyfire's quarters, they walked past it. One of the sets of pedesteps behind them paused, then the other. Jetfire turned back.

Jetstorm stared at him, wings twitching. Skyfire motioned for him to come down the hall. He didn't move.

Skywarp turned back, optics drifting from Jetfire to Jetstorm. Her wings twitched.

"You can come with us if you want," she said. "I'm sure TC won't mind."

Jetstorm hesitated, looking back toward Skyfire.

"Come on," Skyfire said. "You're staying with me."

Something about the way he said it was off. Wrong. Jetfire couldn't explain it, but it irked him. He wrung his hands and decided to chime in.

"Did you ask him?"

Skyfire's brow furrowed. "Ask him what?"

"If he wanted to stay," Jetfire said.

He and Jetstorm were gestaltmates—*partners*. They were linked. If they lived in separate rooms, they wouldn't be far away from each other, but it wouldn't be the same. Some desperate part of Jetfire wanted Jetstorm to brush Skyfire off and just keep walking.

But despite their connection, Jetstorm was his own mech. He had the right to make this choice.

Skyfire sighed. "Do you want to stay with me, Jetstorm?"

Jetstorm's wings twitched. He shuffled in place.

"Um…" He caught Jetfire's optics. Then, he looked back toward Skyfire. "I don't… I don't know."

Skywarp hummed and stepped back toward the group.

"How about this," she said. "You can stay with whichever one of us you feel like, whenever you feel like. Just let us know where you're gonna be."

Jetstorm brightened. His plating untensed, and his stance grew straighter.

"That sounds great!" He said.

Skywarp nodded. "Mm-hm. Who do you want to go with *right now*?"

The nervousness returned. Jetstorm's optics fell to the floor.

"Y-you guys," he said. "I want to go with you guys."

"Then come with us!" Skywarp said, motioning for him to follow.

With one last glance at Skyfire, Jetstorm obliged. He walked side by side with Jetfire as they set off . As they left, Skywarp turned back around, sticking her tongue out at Skyfire. He glared at her, brow furrowed. She rolled her optics and they continued down the hall.

Eventually, Skywarp stopped at a door and knocked. After a moment, it slid open, and the group poured inside. The room had the same general structure as Skyfire's—a desk, a shelf, and a berth—but everything was empty. Thundercracker knelt on the floor in front of the shelf, boxes of datapads surrounding her as she placed them inside the shelf. She looked up.

"I'm going to get another berth," she said. "I don't want you sleeping on the floor."

Skywarp knelt down beside her, opening one of the boxes Thundercracker hadn't gotten to yet.

"It's alright," she said. "We've been sleeping on the floor this whole time. We can manage."

Thundercracker hummed, a frown creasing her face. "You shouldn't have to. I don't know why we didn't just ask for another one. I should have."

"It's really fine," Skywarp said. She turned toward Jetfire. "Tell her it's fine."

"It's fine," Jetfire said.

He really didn't care. It hurt sometimes when he was injured, sure, but not that much.

Thundercracker sighed. "It's not. I shouldn't have let things get this far."

Skywarp opened her mouth to speak. Thundercracker put up a hand.

"*Don't* say it," she hissed.

It was nice that she wanted to help now, but she was right. So much had happened without interference. But whatever. Jetfire drummed his fingers on the desk.

"You're helping now," he said. "That's better than not doing anything."

"Right…" Thundercracker said, gaze falling back to the boxes of datapads.

Quiet moments passed as the two put away the datapads. Jetfire's hands closed around his empty wrist, and the pit crept up on him. Where had the bracelet gone? Had it disappeared with his last shred of hope?

Thundercracker paused while holding one of the datapads, her wings drooping. Skywarp turned toward her after putting another one away, wings twitching.

"What is it?" She asked.

"They found this one for me," Thundercracker said quietly. She placed it on the shelf. "My physical copy got destroyed, and with so many libraries gone, I couldn't get another. So Skyfire and Star searched around until they found a mech with a pirated digital copy. They had them burn it onto a datapad."

"I'm sorry," Skywarp said.

Thundercracker pulled out another datapad. She slumped, optics scrunching shut.

"We've lost so much of our culture to this war," she said. "These might be the only copies of these stories left."

All of the datapads Jetfire managed to read were schmaltzy romances. He held no doubt that was the majority of them. At the start, he discounted them for not matching his preferences. But now…

How much had they lost? How much had mecha like Thundercracker protected?

◇◇◇

Living with Thundercracker wasn't too different from living with Skyfire. Skywarp was in the room a lot more often, now, and so was Thundercracker. It seemed that wherever

Thundercracker went, Skywarp followed. Her increased presence made Jetfire wonder: how long had Skyfire and Thundercracker actually been fighting? Was that why Thundercracker, and therefore Skywarp, had barely been in the room during the day?

They had two berths, now. Skywarp wanted to push them together so they could all recharge together, but Jetfire didn't want to recharge so close to *Thundercracker*. He barely knew her, and despite her attempts to remedy her lack of action, it left many marks.

The times Jetfire was left with Thundercracker alone were few and far between, but not zero. Now was one of such moments. Skywarp was in a meeting with Elita and Prowl—for what reason, Jetfire had no idea. Jetstorm wasn't around, probably off with his friends or something. Jetfire didn't ask.

Thundercracker laid on the berth, reading one of the datapads. Jetfire busied himself by playing with a scrap of metal he found in the hall the other day, since his bracelet still hadn't been found. His requests to search for it were denied. The Autobots were still working with the humans to find a new base, since this one was compromised. In the meantime, only a limited set of mecha were allowed outside, for fear that the Decepticons could be waiting to pick them off.

The metal was surprisingly flexible. He bent it back and forth. How many times could he bend it before it broke?

"I was wondering," Thundercracker said quietly, almost hesitantly. "Why did you decide to accept the offer?"

Two bends.

"What offer?" Jetfire asked.

"To become part of project Safeguard."

Three bends. Four.

Jetfire shrugged. "What else was I going to do?"

The metal warped beneath his fingers, but it still refused to break. What was it? Where had it come from?

"You could've had the program uninstalled," Thundercracker said.

The process was irreversible. Skyfire said it was. But Skyfire was a liar.

"Uninstalled?" Jetfire said.

Sixteen. Eighteen.

"Yes," Thundercracker said slowly. "Uninstalled. Or at least deactivated. First Aid isn't a processor surgeon, but he can manipulate programs."

Jetfire lost count. The ugly thing that lived in side his spark squirmed, the pit rising to meet it. His limbs grew numb.

"It was reversible," Jetfire said.

"It was," Thundercracker said. Her brow furrowed. "Did no one tell you?"

The metal bent beneath his fingers, scraping against his plating as he wrenched it just a little too hard. Inside his spark, the ugly thing howled and thrashed, threatening to claw its way outside. There was already an opening for it, protected only by a flimsy patch.

No one had told him it was reversible. In a calm, gentle voice, Skyfire knelt down and told him the *opposite*.

With a quiet snap, the metal beneath Jetfire's fingers split in half.

"No," Jetfire said.

Thundercracker's wings shot upward. A frown creased her face. She turned off the datapad rose from the berth, marching toward the door.

"I need to talk to Elita," Thundercracker said. "I'll be back."

Jetfire shrugged. Wasn't Skywarp in a meeting with her? Whatever. He ran his fingers along the jagged edges of the freshly split metal. As it dug into the tip of one of his fingers, he let out a surprised hiss. The sting sent a jolt through his processor.

Starscream left him, and he didn't want to come back. He didn't want Jetfire to come with him, either. Starscream didn't want him at all.

Skywarp… hurt him. He didn't want to say it. Just thinking it made his plating tense. But she did. Starscream did, too. They *both* hurt him. They would hurt him again.

Star was dead. Thundercracker was passive, no matter how much she wanted to change. Jetstorm had no power, nor any desire to go against his remaining mentor. Prowl called it all consensual and didn't listen to a word he said. The Autobots, as a whole, kept Pharma in a cell like he was a dangerous criminal rather than an ill victim.

There was no one to save him but himself.

Skyfire was a liar, and he would lie again. He would lie to get anything he wanted. Jetstorm cared about him, so what was to stop him from using Jetstorm to control Jetfire? And since Prowl refused to do anything, Skyfire would be allowed to do whatever he wanted. *Slag*, Prowl would approve each and every abuse.

Jetfire called upon his outlier, watching as the metal in his hands turned red with heat. He was always afraid of his power. He didn't want to hurt anyone. But what if it was the only way to save himself?

The metal melted in his hands. Jetfire turned off his ability and turned his hands into fists, forming the metal into the shape of them. He released his fists, the now-cooling metal clattering to the floor.

He opened the door and walked down the hall. It wasn't far. He stopped before the door and knocked. After a moment, the door slid open. Skyfire's optics met his and widened.

"Jetfire," Skyfire said. "Do you need anything?"

"I want to talk," Jetfire said.

Skyfire stepped out for the doorway, allowing him in. A flash of color on the shelf caught Jetfire's optics. He recognized it immediately. His hands tightened into fists. He forced them to relax.

"You lied to me," Jetfire said. "Thundercracker told me the program was reversible."

Skyfire stared at him for a moment, brow furrowed. His wings twitched.

"It wasn't a lie, exactly," Skyfire said. "None of the records *Star and I* found said it was. That's what I told you."

'Would he have agreed if he knew?'

The thing inside him roared. Jetfire knew now. Skyfire would say or omit anything he could to get what he wanted. Instead of doing any of the things his processor so desperately craved to do, Jetfire turned, helming for the shelf.

"You found my bracelet," he said.

Skyfire straightened. "Yes. It fell off when they moved you. I figured I'd keep it safe."

"I've been looking for it," Jetfire said, forcing his voice to remain calm. "You never told me you had it."

Just like he hadn't told him the program was reversible. Just like he hadn't told him what would happen when it ran.

"I was going to."

Skyfire stepped closer. Jetfire watched from the corner of his vision, waiting for him to get close enough. Then, finally, it happened.

Activating his outlier, Jetfire turned toward Skyfire, digging his class into the other mech's plating. Skyfire let out a surprised grunt, stumbling backward, but Jetfire's claws held. Jetfire snarled.

"What else didn't you tell me?" He spat.

Skyfire's hands closed around Jetfire's arms. "Jetfire, please—"

Jetfire slammed him into the wall. His flames burned bright, turning Skyfire's plating red just like the metal. Skyfire grunted in pain.

"You're a *liar*," Jetfire hissed. "I don't want to do this anymore. I didn't want to do it to begin with."

"Jetfire—"

Jetfire turned and threw him across the room. Skyfire crashed into the berth. It crumpled beneath him, legs giving out under the impact. The softer, more flammable materials resting on the top caught the fire from his plating.

Jetfire stalked forward, only one thing on his mind. This mech made him suffer, and he was going to make him suffer the same. Then, he would end this all, and he would be *free*.

Skyfire attempted to push himself down, but Jetfire struck him across the face, aiming for his optics. His visor, still not fully repaired from whatever happened to it so long ago, provided very little shielding. One of the topics cracked with a loud crunch. The other was missed entirely.

Whatever. Jetfire dug his claws into Skyfire's plating, activating his ability again. He placed a foot on Skyfire's back, pinning him down. A growl rumbled through his plating as Skyfire struggled beneath him. Something in the back of his processor clocked the lack of resistance as odd—Skyfire, despite his distaste for fighting, was a combat veteran—but a much larger part of his processor begged him to keep going.

"Jetfire," Skyfire said. "Let me go."

"No!" Jetfire hissed.

He reached for Skyfire's helm, shifting his full weight onto the other mech so he couldn't get away. Then, he leaned close, his mouth near Skyfire's audial.

"You're a liar," Jetfire growled. "And you're going to *keep* lying. The only way to stop you is to melt your processor out of your helm."

The flames licked his plating, warm and inviting. Skyfire screamed. A laugh threatened to creep out of Jetfire's vocalizer, the disgusting thing inside his spark finally loose. In just a moment, it would all be over.

Pain blossomed on his shoulder as he was blown sideways. What the frag was that? He turned, hands still aflame. The door was open.

"Surrender or we shoot."

Jetfire rose to his feet. He didn't have rays, but he did have his fire. So, he lashed out. The rest was a blur of screaming and flame.

In a move oh-so-familiar, he was forced to the ground, cuffs placed around his wrists. It didn't matter. He could still bite. Soon, a muzzle was slipped around his face. But he could

still fight.

A sudden pinch.

He could…

Chapter End Notes

This is the moment Jetfire's entire character arc in this fic hangs on. That Starscream personality coding is coming in strong, isn't it? Or maybe that's not the coding itself... he's been through quite a lot. Who knows?

Song rec: Points of Authority

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Starscream scratched idly at his plating as he monitored the skirmish. Dark energeon induced itching had become the norm since Galvatron forced him to drink it that first time. Where his plating didn't itch, it stung, much of his paint scraped off from the scratching. He tried not to look at himself, not that there were many opportunities for him to do so.

"Stop."

Starscream huffed and turned toward Buzzsaw, who had its talons resting on the datapad he modified into a communicator. Buzzsaw pecked the datapad again.

"Stop."

Starscream rolled his optics.

"Not much I can do about it," he muttered. "Not unless that fragger gives up on whatever he's trying to do with this, anyway."

Starscream wasn't the strongest mech, but lately, everyday tasks were growing more difficult than usual. His arms shook when he carried even the smallest stacks of datapads. Just the walk from the communications center to his room made his fans threaten to activate. If he didn't know any better, he would've assumed Galvatron was feeding him the poison on purpose to weaken him, but the dictator kept insisting that his reaction was strange, and that 'just one more try' would be beneficial—as if he would suddenly stop having allergic reactions!

He considered asking Slipstream to visit Glit and fetch him an immunosuppressant, but then Glit would know this was still happening. The cybercat was already pushy over one occurrence—how obnoxious would he be if he knew this was a trend? It was better to just deal with it.

Starscream turned his attention back to the battle. Ramjet took a particularly strong blow to the head. That probably scrambled some circuits. Acid Storm and Ion Storm were split up by an incoming group of Autobots, but were able to rejoin after taking out the group. Slipstream was still up in the air, firing on the mecha below as she dodged retaliation.

Something was missing. His dorsal strut tingled, and he suppressed a shudder. He knew who it was.

The combiner hadn't shown up at all for this battle, nor the last few. Since the combiner appeared, it was present at every single battle until now. If the combiner wasn't here, did that mean…?

Starscream dug his claws into the console to steady himself. It couldn't be. It just couldn't. Because if it was, then it was his fault. *He* did it. *He* killed his newspark—

He squeezed his optics shut. His spark pulsed as his chestplates ached sharply. The last time he saw Jetfire, he shot him in the chest. Had it reached the spark chamber? No, no… it hadn't. But had it?

It didn't. He didn't see it. But he didn't really see anything at all. He hadn't looked.

He didn't know because *he didn't fragging look*. And now, the combiner was missing. There was only one reason it would be missing. It was his fault—all of it. If he hadn't shot Jetfire, the combiner would be here. If he hadn't left, Jetfire wouldn't be part of the combiner at all. If he hadn't leaped into that portal like a fool, all of them—Jetfire especially—would be safe at home.

All of this was his fault. Every single little danger they encountered, everything that led to this moment. *All of it*.

He should've known good things didn't last. He *used to* know. Over endless bouts of suffering, he learned that relief was fleeting, easily snatched away. For every moment of peace and light, there were tenfold more of pain and darkness. Back then blame lied with others—the Enforcers, the Council, the Autobots, Megatron—but now…

Megatron apologized to him, and said he was wrong. But was he really? How many of his own problems had Starscream caused? Had it always been his fault all along?

Megatron used to say he deserved the punishments. Maybe he was right back then, and the Megatron that apologized to him was wrong now. Perhaps he was a rabid turbofox in need of a firm hand to manage him, lest he destroy everything around him. It was starting to seem like it.

"Stop."

Starscream hissed. Buzzsaw pecked the button in rapid succession.

"Stop stop stop stop—"

"I get it!" Starscream spat. He turned back toward the console. "I need to focus on the mission."

Buzzsaw shuffled and pecked at the datapad.

"No. Buzzsaw."

Starscream scoffed, but he turned toward Buzzsaw. What did the cybird want, if not for him to focus on the mission?

"You."

Buzzsaw paused, head bobbing as it searched the datapad. Starscream wrinkled his olfactory ridge.

"I *what*?" Starscream said.

Buzzsaw let out a quiet beep, wings ruffling. It shifted its weight back and forth as it continued searching the datapad. Perhaps the vocabulary he installed was a tad limited…

"Urgent. You. Urgent."

Starscream twitched a wing. "What?"

"You urgent urgent urgent—" Buzzsaw slammed its beak harshly against the datapad one final time, then stomped its foot with a caw.

"I don't know what you're saying," Starscream said.

He really did need to add more words to the datapad, but it was difficult to figure out which ones. Buzzsaw and Laserbeak (though the latter barely used the thing anyway) couldn't exactly tell him. Otherwise, they probably wouldn't need it anyway.

Buzzsaw strode toward him. It laid its beak on his shoulder and purred its engine. What did it want? Whatever it was, he wasn't going to figure it out right now. Starscream sighed and went back to work.

But the thought still lingered in the back of his processor. A tension remained in his plating, one moment away from cascading into despair again. He had to focus on the task ahead. There was nothing else for him to do.

Even if Jetfire was…

Skywarp still needed to go home. Slipstream and the other Decepticons of this world needed to be free of Galvatron. Starscream needed that warp drive, and to get it, he needed Galvatron dead. If he said the idea of ruling two different versions of the Decepticons wasn't appealing, he would be lying. Though, what was one more lie atop the pile?

He already—

No. Focus on the mission. *Focus*.

So far, it was going well. They showed up to intercept a human-ferried energeon shipment, the Autobot guards called for backup, and a battle ensued. All was as expected. Slipstream hadn't been too severely injured, though her wing was grazed. Still, not anything to worry about.

Since they made the agreement with Glit (if one could call it an agreement), more and more of their soldiers returned from the battlefield in better shape. Some took their time returning, but it was good that they returned at all. Galvatron never commented on it, but Starscream

supposed that they were all just disposable fodder to him. Why else would he care so little about their safety?

Though, it wasn't as if he cared about anyone's safety but his own. Starscream scratched his neck plating, letting out an irritated hiss as Buzzsaw paused its purring to caw angrily at him. It pecked at his claws.

"I can't help it," Starscream grumbled.

He really couldn't. It was growing worse with each passing moment. He swore he saw some of his paint flake off on its own last night.

The mission. He needed to focus on the mission.

It was nearly over, anyway. The Autobots were falling back without their—Starscream suppressed the ache in his spark—precious combiner to protect them. Now, it was just a matter of securing the cargo and moving it before any other reinforcements could arrive. From what happened in his own world, Starscream knew not to underestimate humans. The ones in this universe could very easily be playing the long game just like the ones on his Earth did.

Finally, everything was secured. The grounders huddled inside their transport as the flightframes took off. Slipstream took the lead and—huh. Acid Storm and Ion Storm weren't behind her. They were at her side, possibly even slightly in front of her, as if *they* were leading.

Had it always been like that? Starscream skimmed his memory files. It had, even in the sparse moments he had saved from *his* world's Slipstream. Typically, wingroups flew with the leader in front and the followers at the side in a v-shape. The other wingroups followed this position, but Slipstream's didn't.

They *had* called her Winglord. Maybe it was related to that. Whatever butterfly effect led to Slipstream taking this position must've had other impacts. But as they grew closer to the base, Starscream was led to question himself yet again—Slipstream surged forward, taking a typical position at the front.

What was that? Why did she lag behind, then suddenly move to the front?

'I used to have wingmates.'

Slipstream failed basic testing. She never said why, and Starscream hadn't asked. If something like his EM field glitch could be overlooked, it had to be a defect in a system essential for the defined purpose of a Seeker drone—something related to flight, tracking, or navigation systems themselves, since he knew they didn't give a scrap about temperament (angrier ones were preferred, actually; the theory was that they would be more aggressive when apprehending targets).

Which of those systems could be compromised without compromising her value so greatly that she would've been melted down?

'And I couldn't leave, because that fragger put a boundary collar on me.'

If she didn't *need* to go anywhere, then it wouldn't matter if she couldn't navigate.

'[Do you have the coordinates of Glit's base in your files?]

[Um…]'

She didn't have the coordinates because *she couldn't generate them*. Slipstream's positioning systems didn't work! That was why she hung back. Acid Storm and Ion Storm were guiding her until she could recognize the area *by sight*. Others probably dismissed it as a weird quirk, or maybe she justified it as her wingmates protecting their Winglord, but Starscream *knew*.

The group finally arrived back at the base, and Starscream filed that information for later. Not only was it important to confirm—that meant she couldn't be in any unfamiliar areas without navigation aid, which was something to consider when planning Galvatron's assassination—but it was yet another experience they shared. Based on the way her wingmates treated her, any support she received was out of obligation, not understanding.

He could be that understanding. He knew what it was like to be missing a sensory system.

But for now, Galvatron would call them in for the typical post mission review at any moment. The moment came just as soon as he thought it, and quickly, he was out the door and down the hall. Slipstream was already in the room, wings twitching. She watched as Starscream dragged his chair over, her hands rubbing her arms.

Nothing about the briefing was notable, but as usual—

"You're dismissed, Slipstream."

—Starscream was left alone with the dictator. Slipstream sent him one last glance before leaving, her wings drooping slightly. But there was nothing she could do. They both knew that. The doors slid shut, and Starscream prepared to play his role, ignoring the unsteady pulsing of his spark.

"Have you refueled yet today, Starscream?" Galvatron asked.

He had a cube before the mission started.

"Yes, sir," Starscream said.

Galvatron hummed, a frown creasing his face.

"Well," he said, pressing a button on the armrest of his throne. "It must have been some time ago. It can't hurt to have more."

Starscream suppressed a shudder as a cube of dark energeon emerged from the armrest's dispenser. Galvatron held the cube up to the light. The energeon inside swirled as it glowed purple.

"I'm fine, sir—"

Galvatron turned toward him.

"Nonsense!" He said. "You did good work today. You deserve a reward."

He said it with a wicked grin as he stepped down from the throne. He had to know what this was doing to Starscream. It was obvious at this point. Yet he kept dismissing it.

The dictator loomed over him and Starscream recognized this for what it was: a powerplay. Galvatron wasn't doing this because he thought it would help, he was doing it because he *could*. Starscream's fuel line burned with something beyond the itch at that realization, but it was quickly extinguished as Galvatron's hand seized his chin. Starscream let out a quiet hiss, energeon leaking into his mouth as he bit the side of his tongue from the sudden motion.

Galvatron snorted. "Don't hiss at *me*, little turbofox."

Starscream reached up, his hand closing around the dictator's wrist. His mouth was forced shut by Galvatron's grip, so it was the only way he could safely protest. Optics roved over his face, the dictator examining it as if he were a particularly intriguing puzzle.

Then, *finally*, he let him go. Starscream resisted the urge to open and close his jaw, the joint sore from how harshly Galvatron forced it shut. The cube was held out to him. He took it slowly, wanting to delay the inevitable as long as possible.

"You're beautiful as always," Galvatron said.

There was *that* horrid word again. Starscream opened the cube and took his first sip. No matter how slowly he drank, Galvatron always waited. He couldn't spit the fuel out—the fragger always watched him swallow it. And once it was in his tank, it wasn't coming out.

"I still don't understand why the dark energeon hasn't strengthened you as it has me," Galvatron said. "It's truly a wonderful substance, and so rare to come across."

Starscream fought not to cringe at its bitter taste. No matter what Galvatron believed, it was a terrible, disgusting poison.

"If it's so difficult to find, why share it with me?" He asked.

Galvatron's optics burned.

"You belong to me," he said. "All things that belong to me deserve only the best."

That was a load of slag. Starscream was a pretty little toy he was having fun breaking. But calling him out on that would ruin the plan.

Galvatron's optics wandered toward the viewing window. The sky outside was tinged red and pink, slowly darkening to purple as the sun set. Purple plating, purple optics, purple energeon, purple insignia, purple sky—what a disgusting color that shade of purple was. Starscream never wanted to see it again.

"It's almost time," Galvatron said.

Starscream swallowed his latest bitter sip. "Time for what?"

Galvatron didn't look at him as he spoke, optics fixed on the window. Starscream took the opportunity to stall taking any more sips.

"There is a being in this planet's core," Galvatron said. "It has spoken to me. Everything will be destroyed, and I will rule the new world that emerges."

Starscream narrowed his optics. Galvatron wasn't just a fool—he had completely lost touch with reality!

"Forgive me if I don't believe you," Starscream said.

Galvatron turned toward him, a small smile on his face. His plating was relaxed, his body open—completely vulnerable to attack. But Starscream couldn't attack now. Even if Galvatron suspected anything, he would've known that. The dictator motioned toward the cube.

"Drink, Starscream."

Starscream forced a sip down his throat, then another.

"You and I will both survive when this planet meets its end," Galvatron said. "You will remain by my side."

Starscream rolled the statement in his processor, combing over it until it barely had any meaning. Why was Galvatron so confident in this? Did he think the dark energeon would save them? Was *that* why he was forcing Starscream to drink it?

"Why us and not others?" Starscream asked.

Galvatron nudged the cube. Starscream took another sip. He stepped toward the window.

"The others cannot withstand what is to come," he said. "But *we* will. The Allspark cannot hold us. I saw it in your memories that first night, in small glimpses. Every time we shared data since has only confirmed it further. You are like me."

Slipstream claimed Galvatron couldn't die. Starscream theorized the same about himself. But it was Starscream's spark that couldn't die, not his frame. He had enough long-term conditions from all of the near-deaths he survived to prove it.

If Galvatron was the same, then there was still a chance to defeat him. But if he was a hubris-driven fool spewing falsehoods, then Starscream would have the pleasure of ending him. Either way, the plan would still work.

Starscream let a smile slip onto his face, fighting the buzzing in the back of his processor. "I should've known you'd figure that out."

Galvatron nudged the cube again, prompting Starscream to take yet another sip.

"Why else do you think I kept you that night?" He said. "I couldn't let something so precious and unique slip from my grasp."

The words were syrupy sweet, rolling smoothly out of his vocalizer. But between the warmth of praise was the sting of the word some*thing*—yet another of the endless confirmations that Galvatron saw Starscream as a possession rather than a mech. Why was that such a difficult thing to escape?

It was time to grovel. Starscream needed to match the sickening sweetness with his own.

"I am grateful that you saw such value in me," he said. "I don't know where I'd be now if you didn't."

The awful taste of the words mixed with the bitterness of the dark energeon as he took yet another sip, ever urged on by Galvatron. In another world, this would be sweet—a mech ensuring his partner was well-fueled. But here and now, every little word had hidden motives, and the fuel fed was poison.

No matter what Galvatron claimed, dark energeon killed. It was a miracle the dictator was alive at all. Starscream hadn't seen him drink a single drop of regular energeon. Did he fuel exclusively on the poison?

Speaking of… Starscream took another sip and realized the cube was nearly depleted. He resisted the temptation to tip the whole thing back and down it immediately just to gr tit over with, knowing Galvatron would notice the change in behavior. They fell into silence, Galvatron alternating between watching Starscream and the sunset.

Finally, the cube was empty.

"You're dismissed, Starscream," Galvatron said, plucking the empty cube from his grasp.

Starscream wheeled his chair back to his desk, wings twitching. His plating was already itchy, and at any moment, it was about to get much worse. He checked his fuel levels, dread creeping through him as they came back high. There wouldn't be much space for him to dilute the poison. But he knew from previous incidents that Galvatron would force him to drink—full tank or not—so it was better to go into meetings with low or middling levels. Today, he was on the side of middling.

Still, he had some space in his tank. He needed to lessen the effects in any way he could. As Starscream entered the hallway, he knew his first destination would be the mess hall.

Before him, Slipstream startled, wings thunking against the wall that she was leaning on. She stepped toward him, holding herself in that awkward not-quite-sure-what-to-do position he began to recognize after that day she first invited him to sit with her in the mess hall. He flicked a wing at her in acknowledgement and kept walking. She kept pace with him.

"What did he want?" She asked.

Starscream sighed. "Just the usual."

Slipstream hummed and looked away. 'The usual' consisted of anything from just drinking the cube to a full hardline connection. He preferred she not know which, and she rarely pried.

Starscream scratched his arms. The itch crept up to his wings and back. He reached backward, but his claws couldn't quite make it. Tapping his pede, he paused in the middle of the hallway.

"Can you—?"

Slipstream scrunched her olfactory ridge.

"No," she said flatly. "I can't. Your paint is peeling off, idiot. You're one scratch away from drawing energeon. I'm not going to make it worse."

Starscream tapped his pede harder. "Just once—"

Slipstream surged forward and grabbed his wrist. His plating tensed, but her fingers were thin and her grip was soft. She was nothing like the dictator. With bared teeth, she dragged him down the hall.

"I swear, I'm going to drag you to Glit myself," she hissed. "At this rate, you'll have no paint by the end of the—"

"You can't," Starscream said.

She couldn't, not if her navigation systems didn't work. Coordinates didn't mean anything if she couldn't put them into her systems, and she wasn't conscious when they were brought to Glit's base. She had no idea where it was.

Slipstream paused, nearly releasing Starscream's wrist.

"Wh—" she stammered. "Yes I can!"

"Your navigation systems don't work," Starscream said. "I figured it out this morning."

It was far from the best way to bring it up. In fact, it was quite possibly the worst. But Starscream was so damn itchy. The itch was all he could think about.

"I—you—" Slipstream's wings flicked harshly. "Frag you!"

She released his wrist and shoved him backward with a hiss. Starscream stumbled, landing on his aft with a yelp. With a growl, Slipstream turned toward the closest wall swiped at it, leaving deep ruts.

She turned back toward him, optics fuzzy. "What is *wrong* with you?"

A lot.

"I never know how to answer that," Starscream said.

Slipstream grimaced and offered him a hand. He took it and she helped him up, then quickly turned down the hall.

"Come on," she said. "We're going to get you a cube, then I'm going to *drown* you in hot solvent until your sensors stop working."

It was one of the few things they could do without any medicine or working medical devices. Starscream followed her down the hall, processor only half-focused on anything that wasn't the itch.

☆☆☆

Starscream was starting to suspect that he did something wrong. He really should have picked up on it the moment Slipstream clawed the wall, but he was a bit preoccupied. With real energeon in his systems and his sensors numbed from the hot solvent, it was easier to focus on something beyond his own frame.

Slipstream didn't speak a single word to him since they returned from the washracks. She sat at the edge of the berth, staring ahead as she rubbed her arms. Starscream tapped his fingers on the berth, the awkwardness digging into his plating. He couldn't let this fester.

"I didn't say that to upset you," he said.

Slipstream turned toward him with a snarl. Her voice was unsettlingly steady.

"How nice of you."

The cobalt spinehog was back yet again, it's spines turned toward the threat. Once more, Starscream had to prove that he wasn't trying to hurt her. It was tiring, but he couldn't begrudge her for it—the company she was forced to keep didn't allow her much vulnerability.

"I don't want you lost or hurt," Starscream said. "You're too important."

Slipstream scoffed. "Because I'm the Air Commander and you can't replace me?"

That was the reason he used to make Galvatron spare her, but it wasn't the one making him seek a remedy now. She was important in that way, yes, but it was a different kind of importance that made him want to protect her. The same kind that made him care for Soundwave, or Skywarp, or Jetfire…

Starscream suppressed the pain in his spark.

"You're also my co-conspirator," Starscream said.

The word didn't convey the depth he desired, but it was the only thing he had. 'Ally' was too general. He doubted she knew what to call this. They were both beyond their depth, both taking shelter in and drowning in whatever this was—two abandoned traitors finding solace in the only mech that would look their way without scorn.

Slipstream's gaze fell, her lips twitching upward. "Right…"

Starscream had to make his move now. He needed to tell her.

"You aren't the only mech with nonfunctional systems," Starscream said. Her optics met his. "I can't sense EM fields. It was never caught during basic testing."

Slipstream's optics searched his. Then, suddenly, she doubled over, a chortling wheeze exiting her vocalizer.

"We have that in common, then," she said.

Surprise zinged through Starscream's plating and he forced himself not to show it. Although Ratchet claimed other mecha like him existed when he made the diagnosis, the only one he knew was Jetfire, who came directly from his own spark.

"I didn't know," Starscream said.

Slipstream raised her brows. "Well, yes. That was the idea."

"Obviously," Starscream said with a huff. "I haven't met another mech like me before."

There was Jetfire, but… Starscream forced himself not to think of his newspark.

Slipstream flicked her wing. "Same here."

This was quickly veering from his original intent. Starscream hummed, preparing to bring the conversation back on topic.

"I just wanted you to know you aren't the only one," he said. "I… value you, functional navigation system or not. I don't want you getting harmed for my sake, especially when it's unnecessary. It's a waste of resources."

"A waste of resources," she repeated, a smile on her face. Her voice was light, laughter on the edge of it, as if he just told a particularly entertaining joke.

"Yes," Starscream said.

He didn't see what was so amusing about it.

Slipstream shook her head. "I can't believe you lead the Decepticons in your world."

Starscream bristled, fanning his wings wide, but something about her tone kept him from reading her words as an insult. Still, he couldn't let it stand.

"I'm a perfectly capable commander!"

Slipstream buried her face in her hands, wings quaking as she laughed.

"I know," she said.

Chapter End Notes

Have another chapter. Whee. I'm tired. If I told you that part of the reason I'm editing these so quickly is that I want to see what the final word count is, would you believe me? Tempted to edit another, honestly. I've reread these later ones a lot, so it's mostly spellchecking to catch things I didn't already.

TFW your AAC device doesn't have the word 'important' on it so you have to tell your buddy that they're a 'very urgent message.' Moral of the story: Don't let Star—"What is friendship?"—scream design your AAC device.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"He tried to kill someone."

How many times had he woken up dizzy? His fuel levels were low. The usual alert was nagging him. Everything hurt. *Why* did everything hurt?

"I *know*—" Skywarp's voice. "But I know him. This isn't… this isn't him. *Something* happened."

"He threatened to melt Skyfire's processor out of his helm. That seems quite clear."

Jetfire stirred. His body was sluggish, but responsive.

"But we don't know *why*! I'm saying we should—"

"Jetfire! Hey!"

Pharma? Why was he…? Jetfire opened his optics. He was surrounded by dirty walls, everything ahead of him shrouded in orange. They put him in a cell.

Across from him, Pharma crawled closer to the field.

"Jetfire! Jetf—"

Prowl turned toward him. "Be quiet!"

Pharma pointed toward Jetfire's cell. Prowl followed it, doorwings twitching. He frowned.

"Oh," he said. He stepped closer to the field. "You're awake. That was quick."

He pulled off the ray gun mounted to his side and charged it. He pointed it at the field and pressed the keypad. The field receded, and Prowl aimed his gun at Jetfire.

"Stay still," Prowl said, stepping into the cell.

Jetfire pressed himself against the wall. Prowl came closer and pressed the barrel of the gun against Jetfire's helm. Jetfire's spark pulsed as his wings began to tremble. Was Prowl going to shoot?

"He's secure," Prowl said. "You can come in now."

First Aid slipped around the edge of the cell. Jetfire hadn't heard him before. Did he just get here, or had he just been silent the whole time? Aid knelt in front of Jetfire and opened his medkit.

As Aid checked Jetfire over, the fuel onside his lines boiled. He should've realized. Aid was the one looking after Pharma, and he'd never attempted to free him. He was yet another facilitator.

Some part of Jetfire wanted to take Aid's helm in his hands and crush it. Prowl would shoot, but would that really be so bad? How painful was death by a shot to the processor, really?

Everyone he loved and cared about had just betrayed and caged him. What did he have left?

Aid pulled away, finished with the checkup. He handed Jetfire a cube of energeon he *knew* he couldn't drink. Jetfire would've taken it as an insult if it weren't for the sorrowful expression on Aid's face as he backed away.

[I'm sorry.]

The message did nothing. He was still helping them keep him here.

[Frag off,] Jetfire replied.

First Aid left the cell. The gun's muzzle retreated as Prowl stepped away. He backed out of the cell, gun still aimed at Jetfire. He didn't lower it until the field was back in place.

Skywarp stepped toward the cell, but Prowl stuck an arm out, preventing her from getting any closer.

"Please—" she said.

Prowl shook his head. "No. He's dangerous."

Skywarp scowled. "He's not going to hurt me—"

"We don't know that," Prowl said. "He *tried to kill someone*, Skywarp. We can't take any chances."

Skywarp snarled, wings fanning out. "But you're still going to drag him out and force him onto the battlefield when it suits you."

"We have control of *Safeguard*," Prowl said. "Not of Jetfire."

Damn fragging right they didn't. He'd get out of here somehow, even if he had to melt the walls to do it. He had to, or they'd make him fight again. It wasn't just Skyfire doing this to him—it was *all* of the Autobots. That was becoming clearer by the moment.

"I still think—"

"*No*."

Pedesteps down the hall. The crowd retreated, leaving Jetfire alone with Pharma… and the cube. Jetfire shook it, cringing as the liquid inside sloshed. Just the *thought* of drinking it—

"Jetfire! Hey!"

Jetfire nearly dropped the cube.

"Pharma," he hissed. "*What*?"

Pharma was pressed against the wall, as close to the field as he could get without electrocuting himself. His colors were even duller than Jetfire remembered.

"They got you too," Pharma said.

Jetfire huffed. "No slag."

"What did you do?" Pharma asked.

"I tried to kill Skyfire. You heard them."

Pharma banged his hand against the wall.

"No!" He said. "Not what they *think* you did, what you *actually* did."

Jetfire sighed. "It was stupid. I thought I could kill him and run away, but…"

He motioned to his surroundings.

Pharma hummed. His wings twitched. He clicked his tongue.

"I know Ratchet died," he said. "I killed him. He was suffering, so I gave him mercy. They didn't give us enough energeon, and nowhere near enough supplies. He wouldn't let anyone suffer, enemy or not, so he gave them his own parts until there were none left."

"So why did you say you saved him?" Jetfire asked.

Pharma clawed at the ground, energeon seeping from his worn down claws.

"I did!" He hissed. "I *did*. I preserved his helm after his spark went out. All of his memories, all of his data—*saved*. If we made him a new frame and spark, we could bring him back…"

"But they didn't," Jetfire said.

They must not have believed him. Jetfire could imagine how it looked—Pharma clutching Ratchet's dead helm and rambling. They must've thought he was insane. But the CRI had completed frame-spark transfers before. Doing something similar but with a new spark instead of an old one was definitely possible.

"They didn't!" Pharma hissed. "And now I'll never see him again."

Jetfire looked away and closed his optics. If they had just listened to Pharma, would things have been different? They certainly would've been for Pharma, but maybe not for him.

Quiet drifted over them. The overhead lights buzzed quietly, flickering every once in a while. They joined with the hum of the fields in a surprising harmony. Eventually, the lights dimmed as the base entered its automated night cycle.

Jetfire curled up on the floor. Pharma's optics shone dimly on the other side of the room. With a quiet sigh, Jetfire closed his optics, quickly falling into recharge.

◇◇◇

Pedesteps woke him. He attempted to fall back into recharge, but Pharma's desperate shouts ruined that plan. Jetfire pushed himself up with an irritated groan.

"Pharma, what—"

He froze. Jetstorm stood in front of the field, wings twitching. As their optics met, Jetstorm grimaced.

"We're getting you out," he said.

Jetfire should've been relieved, or grateful, or *something*. But he didn't feel anything.

"Okay," he said.

What would even happen after they got him out? If they broke him out, the rest of the Autobots would put him back. If they tried to convince the Autobots to free him, they would never agree. Pharma was proof enough of that.

He closed his optics. Whatever happened, it was going to happen no matter what he did.

A few moments later, more pedesteps. Quiet murmurs—Skywarp and Thundercracker. What was Thundercracker doing here? Whatever. He was going back into recharge.

Claws prodded his shoulder. He grumbled.

"C'mon," Jetstorm said.

His voice was too close. Was he in the cell? Jetfire opened his optics just a crack. The field was gone.

Jetstorm poked him again. "You gotta get up."

Sluggishly, Jetfire pushed himself up. His frame sent him a low fuel alert. Right. He never drank that cube. Jetstorm's optics landed on it, and he swiftly reached around Jetfire to grab it. Jetfire gritted his dentae. Now was the moment.

But Jetstorm just tucked the cube into his cockpit and offered him a hand. They stood up together. As they exited the cell, Thundercracker was already at the keypad to Pharma's cell.

It beeped, and the field disappeared.

Pharma sprinted through the boundary, barely managing to catch himself on the wall. Thundercracker offered him an arm and he took it, leaning on her for support.

"We need to get going before they see us," Thundercracker said. "Do you two have enough energy to travel?"

Pharma nodded emphatically. Jetfire's wings twitched, tingling anxiety coursing through his plating.

"I think so," he said. "Where are we going?"

"Anywhere that's not here," Skywarp said, turning down the hall. "Where did you say the loose panel was again, TC?"

"Just outside."

They went through the entrance, turning into the next hall. Skywarp kept watch as Thundercracker pried a panel from the wall. Then, one by one, they crawled through. Jetstorm went in last, pulling the panel behind him. It would still be clearly damaged from the outside, but it would be them some time.

Ahead of them, Thundercracker used a crowbar to pry off an external panel. Moonlight flooded the group. She slipped through the newly created hole, and the rest of the group did the same.

Pharma's wings shot up, his helm lifting to the sky. He reached out to the stars, as if to catch them. Jetfire stepped around him. His optics were fuzzy.

"Are you alright?" Jetfire asked.

"I haven't seen the sky in so long," Pharma said. "It's beautiful on this planet."

Thundercracker grunted, catching both of their attention. She flicked a wing and motioned upward.

"We need to fly," she said. "Pharma, Jetstorm is going to take you. Skywarp and I will support Jetfire. When we land, *all* of us will refuel."

Jetfire wasn't looking forward to it. Some irrational part of his processor insisted that if they never got into the air, they'd never land, so he'd never be forced to refuel, but he ignored it in favor of escape. Jetstorm took off into the sky with Pharma clinging to his back, too weak to support himself at all. Thundercracker and Skywarp took to the sky next, hovering silently as they waited for Jetfire to join them.

Jetfire leaped and pushed power to his rockets. They were strong when he was well-fueled, but no longer as maneuverable as they were pre-reformat. The strength flying through the atmosphere required consumed a lot of fuel—something he was currently in short supply of.

Thundercracker and Skywarp transformed as he approached, and he did the same, sliding between them. They moved closer, supporting him with their wings. The group flew for a while, until eventually Thundercracker sent a comm and they landed in a meadow.

Landing while sandwiched between two other mecha was awkward, but they managed. After everyone transformed back into robot mode, Thundercracker unlatched her cockpit, pulling out a set of energeon cubes. A quick glance confirmed something Jetfire didn't even bother to suspect—Thundercracker, Skywarp, and Jetstorm had stuffed their cockpits full of supplies. This escape was premeditated.

How long had they been considering this? It couldn't have been much longer than a day, since Jetfire was barely locked up for one, yet they were able to execute this so quickly.

Thundercracker held a cube out to Jetfire. The other members of the group already had theirs. Hesitantly, Jetfire took the cube. Just looking at its contents made him want to shudder, phantom sensations of energeon in his mouth. But he had to drink it. Thundercracker said so. If he didn't, they would force him like they did before.

[You gonna drink?]

Jetfire nearly flinched as the message came in, so caught up in his thoughts that nothing else existed. He popped open the cube as he composed a reply.

[Yeah,] he sent to Jetstorm. *[Just give me a moment.]*

How could he manage this? His hands threatened to shake. There had to be a way.

Then, it came to him—that moment in the medbay. He could refuel with his secondary intake. It was completely unpleasurable, but ever since that experience with Skywarp, refueling had become unpleasant. He would take unpleasurable over unpleasant.

Jetfire opened the lid the rest of the way. He waited a moment, ensuring the others weren't looking his way, then opened his medical panel. The intake there was quite small—just a short, thin tube. Experimentally, he sent an unspooling command to it, nearly flinching when it slid out. He inserted it into the cube and sent the command.

Like before, it felt strange. He wasn't used to his fuel tank filling without the accompanying… sensations. Did mecha like Soundwave really refuel like this? He couldn't even taste anything, not that he expected to.

Heaviness settled in his tank. Despite that, the cube was only half-drained. How did he feel so full already? His fuel levels suggested he wasn't anywhere near at capacity.

"Are you alright?"

Thundercracker stared at him, her wings slightly lower than neutral.

"I'm fine," Jetfire said. "Just… I think I'm done."

Thundercracker's brow furrowed. "Are you sure?"

"Y-yeah," Jetfire said.

Thundercracker turned toward Skywarp. She wore a similar expression to Thundercracker.

"I know you burned a lot of fuel on the way here, even with our help," Thundercracker said. "Can you please drink a little more?"

He really couldn't. Well, objectively, he could, but…

"He can save it for later," Jetstorm said, putting his own emptied cube into his cockpit. "Just let him put it away."

Thundercracker frowned, letting out a hum. "Alright. But I want to see it empty by the end of the day. We can't risk running out of fuel while we're out here."

Jetfire silenced a sigh of relief. His fuel tank was already so irrationally heavy and it made him feel disgusting. He closed the cube up and put it away, opening the plating above his cockpit. It took him a while to figure that one out after he was reformatted—the windows were fully attached to his plating now.

"What are we going to do now?" He asked.

Sure, they were away from the Autobots, but they would be pursued. The Autobots wanted their precious weapon whether or not the weapon wanted to be one. And if they Autobots didn't find them, what was stopping the Decepticons from deciding *they* wanted a combiner?

Thundercracker looked away.

"We keep moving," she said. "If Starscream did this, we can, too."

Right. Starscream told Jetfire stories of his time alone during the end of the war, but the tales were few and far between. It didn't seem like a time his creator wanted to dwell on, despite his boastful claims when the topic came up. His creator was evasive in the strangest ways—not hesitating to share stories, but cagey about the details.

How well was this *really* going to go?

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They were running low on energeon. Jetfire knew it. He already activated some of his fuel-saving measures—just the ones he could get away with. They were always in close proximity. No one would notice if his comms were off, right? He could just say he forgot to check them if anyone asked.

It really did save a lot of power.

And if he just *happened* to have some extra fuel in his cockpit when the others were running low, were they really going to begrudge that? It didn't matter that he was only drinking half of his share and condensing his half-empty cubes while the others recharged. They just saw that

he drank his share, and that was all. Did it really matter if the spare fuel was inside or outside of him?

The wouldn't know. It wasn't like they checked his cockpit every day. That would be weird. And now he had an emergency stash in case someone else got low, because he certainly didn't need it. He was just fine.

Besides, he hadn't felt that awful heavy feeling since he started stockpiling.

So, as the group drank their morning fuel, Jetfire took his in the way he always did now. No one had commented on it, though he caught Skywarp staring a few times. It made his plating itch, but as long as she wasn't going to force fuel down his intake again, it was okay. It had to be.

He didn't want to be scared of her. She cared about him, and he cared about her. If he told her that her mere proximity to him while he refueled made his plating crawl and his spark pulse, she'd be upset. He didn't want her upset. Besides, it was only when he refueled. It was fine.

Jetstorm nuzzled Jetfire's shoulder. Ahead of them, Skywarp paused her pacing as Thundercracker landed. Her wings were low, and Jetfire knew it before she said it—she hadn't found any energeon during her trip.

Jetfire's secret stash would be needed sooner rather than later, it seemed. Thundercracker's plating was already starting go dull from the extra flights she was taking to search for fuel. Skywarp's optics were getting dimmer every day. Jetstorm was growing lethargic, no longer exuding the enthusiasm he typically did.

Maybe…

Jetfire nudged Jetstorm's shoulder, offering him his half-filled cube. Blearily, Jetstorm squinted at him. Jetfire pushed the cube toward him, watching Skywarp and Thundercracker through the corner of his vision. They were distracted for now, but they might not be in a moment.

"Here," Jetfire whispered. "Take it. I know you're low."

"Already had mine," Jetstorm muttered. "Whaddabout you?"

Jetfire nudged him with the cube. "I'm fine. You know I don't drink the whole thing anyway."

Jetstorm took it gently, forcing himself to sit up. "You fuel lines're lower 'n mine…"

Right. Jetstorm could see his vitals through the gestalt connection. But since when was he able to actually tell what they meant?

"I'm a shuttle," Jetfire said. "I'm made to work on low fuel."

It wasn't quite the truth, but it wasn't a lie, either. Shuttles were like bears, or other hibernating animals. They could conserve fuel, but they needed to have it in the first place.

Jetfire hadn't loaded himself before this period of near-starvation—far from it—but that wouldn't keep him from using similar tactics.

Cybertronians, in general, required frequent refueling—at least one cube a day, which translated to a full fuel tank, hence why it was the standard ration. It was better to have two or more, since that ensured all systems were at full capacity, but they could survive on just one. This translated interestingly to modified fuel processing systems, with many medics still trying to figure out equivalents. The smaller the frame, the less fuel generally required, barring exceptions like Starscream.

Earth creatures had many different fueling requirements. It was part of what made them so fascinating. There were tiny mice who required constant availability of food, and animals like snakes who only needed to eat every few days at most. If Jetfire was a snake, he wouldn't be having any issues right now. It was a shame he wasn't.

Jetstorm hummed and took the cube.

"Still dun like it," he muttered, lifting the cube to his lips.

Jetfire looked away, the sound of Jetstorm gulping down the liquid grating against his audials. Despite his attempts to work around it, his aversion to energeon only grew worse with each meal. He had to avoid looking at it when he refueled, or he might just throw the cube on impulse and waste the whole thing.

Refueling through his primary intake was terrifying. Refueling through his secondary intakes was both boring and disgusting. There was no winning.

Jetstorm handed Jetfire back the empty cube, which Jetfire quickly shoved into his cockpit. Then, he leaned against Jetfire, nuzzling his shoulder as he purred. He was doing that a lot, lately. Apparently, a lethargic, fuel-deprived Jetstorm was a cuddly Jetstorm. It would've been nice, if not for the circumstances. Hopefully, the extra bit of fuel would perk him up when he started processing it.

Pharma was completely out. The ex-medic spent most of his time recharging, and the rest wandering around nearby. He would come back hours later, covered and dirt and plant scraps, and just lay on the ground. Purple pedes stepped over him, and Jetfire looked up at Skywarp as she approached.

"Can you come with me?" She asked.

Jetfire glanced at now-recharging but still purring Jetstorm. "Um…"

Gently, he extracted himself from Jetstorm. His partner stopped purring, optics opening just a little. Jetfire laid him on the ground.

"I'll be back," Jetfire said.

Jetfire's spark began to pulse in his chest as he and Skywarp left the others, and he had to contend with the fact that it wasn't just refueling around Skywarp that made him anxious.

That just made him feel worse. Skywarp cared about him. She was the only mech from his home that was still there for him.

She stopped once the others were out of view. Wings drooping, she turned back toward Jetfire.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Jetfire's mind went blank.

"Sorry for what?" He asked.

Skywarp closed her optics and sighed.

"Why do you refuel with your secondary intake?" She asked. "I want to hear it out loud."

How did he say it? Jetfire rubbed his wrist, instinctively searching for the bracelet that was left behind when they fled the Autobots. He would never have it again. For all he knew, it was melted in his attempt to kill Skyfire.

The ugly thing in his spark squirmed, but this time it was different. It didn't howl and screech to be let out, clawing at the edges of its chamber. Rather, it pressed itself against the walls, as if hoping it would be swallowed by them.

"It feels better that way," Jetfire said.

Skywarp's wings flicked. "Better *how*? You didn't used to refuel like that."

"It just does."

Skywarp frowned. She took a step closer.

"That's not an answer," she said. "Why did you change how you refuel?"

The thing inside him panicked, the very walls it thought meant safety entrapping it.

"I don't want to talk about this," Jetfire said.

"Just answer me—"

Jetfire flicked his wings harshly, stomping a pede as the thing gnashed its teeth.

"Stop it!" He hissed. "That wasn't an invitation to *keep asking*, it was a request to *stop*! I *don't* want to talk about this, so fragging *drop it*."

Skywarp backed away, wings widening. She stared at him.

"It's because of me," she said. Her voice rose. "Just tell me it's because of me!"

Jetfire's claws flexed, craving something, *anything* to tear into. He and the creature were one. He bared his teeth.

"Yes!" He spat. "Sure! Whatever! You're right. It *was* you. *You* hurt me and made me scared. Is that what you want to hear?"

Skywarp's optics grew fuzzy. Her plating tensed and untensed. She squeezed her optics shut.

"Yes," she said, voice cracking. "It is. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Jetfire."

She took a step closer. Jetfire backed away, wings fanning wide without his permission. She sighed.

"I'm terrified you're going to leave me," Skywarp said. "Like Starscream. Like our world's Thundercracker. I keep thinking that if I just hold on tighter, you won't slip out of my grip. If I take your hand in mine and don't let go, you can't leave. But all it's done is hurt everyone I love. I don't want to keep doing it. I'm sorry."

Jetfire forced his plating to relax. Somewhere deep down, he knew. She didn't want to hurt him, but she just kept doing it. But, maybe, since she realized, she could stop.

"It's okay," Jetfire said. "I know you didn't want to hurt me, but it still hurt. We can… we can figure it out. Just please listen to me when I say something."

She stepped closer. This time, Jetfire didn't step back. He waited as she approached, offering his arms. She fell into them, burying her face in his chest. He rested his chin on her helm.

He was too big to be hugged, but he was big enough to wrap himself around those he loved. It wasn't all bad. They were just two hurt and scared animals, doing their best despite the circumstances.

"I'll listen," she said. "I promise I'll listen."

Jetfire purred his engine, the rumble soothing both himself and Skywarp. She purred back.

They were scared and starving, but they had each other. Maybe it would be okay. Maybe it wouldn't. But there was one less front to fight on.

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Jetfire woke to a quiet rustle. He cracked open his optics. A small paw sat in front of his face. It reminded him of Ravage, but it was gray rather than black. He pushed himself slightly away from Skywarp and Jetstorm together a better view.

Yellow optics stared down at him. Definitely not Ravage—Ravage had a visor.

"Hello," the cybercat said. "I'm Glit. My partner and I have been tracking you for quite some time."

Chapter End Notes

Had to split this one from ch15 so I actually finished it before ch16, hah.

If anyone is wondering why the random CRI medic is Glit specifically, I learned he existed and realized I could fill my kitty cat quota (I am required to have at least one cat per story, and if I do not plan to include one, one will include itself--trust me) and have a 'neutral' medic in one swoop. Decepticon kitty cat doctor? Sign me up.

Song rec: F*ck the World by Badflower

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Glit's lab was nothing like the Autobot base. Loose, chewed-on panels dangled from the walls. Retrorats scurried across the floors and climbed the walls. Various objects, many unrecognizable, littered the floor. It was a complete mess, but somehow Glit and his assistant, Breakdown, navigated it with ease.

Jetfire, Jetstorm, and Pharma were left with the retrorats as Thundercracker and Skywarp followed Glit and Breakdown to a separate room. Jetfire picked a corner of the room to sit in, careful not to harm any of the retrorats in the process of sitting. They were barely larger than his hand.

After a while of sitting still, they approached him, sniffing curiously. Jetstorm let out a quiet peep as they approached him as well, his wings flicking. The retrorats jumped back, startled by the motion.

Pharma was much less comfortable with their presence. The moment they approached, he hissed and swatted, calling out, "Foul beasts!"

They quickly left him alone.

Jetfire offered his hand to the closest retrorat. It sniffed his finger, then promptly ignored it, opting instead to approach his pede. With a swift leap, it launched itself onto his knee. Jetfire dug his claws into the floor, fighting not to flinch. Others quickly joined it, and soon, Jetfire was covered in retrorats.

Their tiny feet tickled his plating. He let out a laugh, and others soon followed it. The retrorats only paused briefly in their scramble. A few of them made the trek all the way up to his shoulders, a lucky one climbing to the top of his head. They were warm—not hot, just pleasantly warm.

A purr rumbled from his engine, for once out of pleasure rather than to self-soothe. Immediately, the retrorats calmed, stopping their mad scramble to flatten themselves against his plating. A few closed their optics.

Carefully, Jetfire brought a hand up and petted one on the forehead. It opened its optics, turning its head to stare at him. Then, with a quick blink, it nestled itself back into his plating and began purring.

They were so small. He was multiple times their size. Yet, for some reason, they didn't fear him at all.

He closed his optics, letting their purrs lull him into recharge.

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"Jetfire."

A hand gently shook his shoulder. Jetfire groaned, cracking open his optics. Thundercracker stared down at him.

"What is it?" He asked, vocalizer taking a moment to activate.

"Glit and Breakdown are giving us all checkups," she said. "It's your turn."

Did he really have to? He was so comfortable here…

Jetfire placed a hand against the floor and began pushing himself up, careful to ensure he didn't harm any of the retrorats that were still recharging on him. At the first sign of movement, they woke, quickly hopping off of him and scattering around his pedes.

"I didn't know retrorats could be so…" Thundercracker trailer off as the retrorats ran across the room.

"So what?" Jetfire asked, pushing against the wall to support himself. He stretched, joints clicking as they moved for the first time in hours.

Thundercracker shook her head. "It's not important. They're waiting for you in the room down the hall."

Jetfire hummed and headed for the hall, quickly finding the door. But before he could enter the room, he paused. He tapped a pede, nearly rooted in place. Beyond that door was two strangers—strangers that saved their lives, but strangers nonetheless.

Skyfire has lied to him. First Aid had helped. Who was to say he wasn't just going from one set of deceivers to another?

He shook his helm and forced himself through the doorway. Regardless, this was necessary. If they wanted to harm him, he could defend himself. There were only two of them.

As he entered, Glit's audials perked, his tail curling at the tip. He turned toward Jetfire, his front paws on top of a counter as he reached for something inside a cabinet.

"Jetfire," he said. "You're here. Please take a seat."

Jetfire sat on the nearest berth. In the corner of the room, a pair of optics stared at him from the edge of a container, framed by two large ears. It looked like a retrorat, but it was much larger than the others. It squinted at him.

Glit approached, drawing his attention away from the strange retrorat.

"Let's get the easy part over with first," Glit said. "Can you open your panel for me? I want to check your vitals."

Jetfire did as he requested, offering his panel. Glit plugged in. After a moment, he hummed, his tail swishing.

"Your spark is strong," he said. "Your air cycle rate and temperature are good… but your fuel line pressure is low. And…"

Glit frowned, his ears pinning.

"Did you activate your fuel-saving measures manually?"

Cold dread washed over Jetfire like a bucket of ice. This was it. He couldn't hide it anymore. Skywarp was going to be furious. What was Glit going to do to him?

"We didn't have a lot of fuel," Jetfire said weakly, the words fighting to stay trapped inside his vocalizer. "I wanted it to last as long as possible."

Glit stared up at him, his tail dropping.

"That's admirable," Glit said. "But your frame isn't meant to do that. Your manual fuel-saving protocols are for space travel, not everyday use."

Jetfire's shoulders sagged. "I know."

Glit hummed quietly. He twitched his tail, optics falling away. Just as quickly as they wandered, they returned to Jetfire.

"I'm going to hook you up to an intralineal to get that fuel pressure up," Glit said. "Then we can talk more, alright?"

Jetfire nodded. Glit disconnected, then brought an intralineal over and hooked him up with practiced grace. In a few moments, Jetfire's vision improved, his helm no longer feeling so light. He'd grown so used to it that he forgot what it felt like to have a sufficient amount of fuel in his lines.

Glit climbed onto the berth beside him, keeping a small distance between them. His tail thudded against the berth as it flicked.

"Do you want privacy for this conversation?" Glit asked.

Jetfire shrugged. It didn't really matter, did it?

Glit sighed. "Alright…"

His optics roamed the room, falling on Breakdown, then the large retrorat, before coming back to Jetfire.

"It's not… uncommon for shuttles to misuse their fuel-saving protocols," Glit said. "I've had to treat many over my time as a medic. I've seen all of this before, and I know how it ends. Do you?"

Jetfire stared down at his claws. "I was a medical student before all of this. I know what fuel deprivation does."

"Then you know why this can't go on," Glit said.

"It was just to save fuel."

It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth. It was to save fuel while they were wandering, sure, but it was also to avoid refueling for as long as possible. Glit's frown told him even he didn't believe it.

"That's what they always say," Glit said.

Glit's tail lashed. Jetfire wrung his hands, fear searing through his plating. The previous times he was confronted about this…

"Don't make me," Jetfire whispered. "Please don't make me."

Glit twitched his audial. "Make you what?"

Scrap. Jetfire his his face in his hands.

The berth shifted as Glit came closer. His voice was soft. "What do you think I'm going to make you do, Jetfire?"

He wanted to say it. But if he said it, would Glit agree with it? Or would he be angry at Skywarp? He didn't want to get Skywarp in trouble, but he also didn't want to risk being forced to drink energeon again.

If he stayed silent, would Glit stop asking?

"Please, tell me."

No. He wouldn't. How did he say it?

"Someone…" The words caught in Jetfire's vocalizer. "Someone made me drink energeon when I didn't want it. Now it's hard to refuel no matter what I try."

If he didn't say her name, she couldn't get in trouble. The room remained quiet, and Jetfire risked a peek. Glit stared at him with a furrowed brow, his audials pinned.

"I see," he said quietly.

Jetfire wrung his hands again. Glit's tail continued to sway, then suddenly, it straightened. His optics grew wide. He turned toward Breakdown.

"Can you get the door?" He asked. "We have an urgent visitor."

Breakdown nodded, exiting the medbay. Glit waited for the door to close behind him before turning back toward Jetfire.

"I won't do anything you don't approve of unless I think your life is threatened, and if it was, my first solution certainly wouldn't be forced fueling," Glit said. "We'll find a way to fuel you that protects your autonomy, I promise."

Some of the tension in Jetfire's frame eased. They were just words, and words could be empty, but the fact that Glit was promising anything at all…

"First Aid—the Autobots' medic—he refueled me with an intralineal," Jetfire said. "I've been refueling with my secondary intake, but it's not pleasant."

Glit hummed. "If it works, it works. We can start by getting comfortable refueling more often."

Jetfire just barely began to prepare a response when they door opened. Breakdown came through it, his back toward them as he helped carry another mech. The mech was conscious, but his optics were dim. A quick glance revealed the cause: energeon loss. One of his wings was mangled, and his knees were bashed in.

His companion, who was carrying his other half, was only faring marginally better. Rather than a handful of large wounds, she had many smaller ones, but the result was the same.

The injured mech was laid on the berth. Glit glanced between Jetfire and the injured mech. Jetfire motioned toward the mech, and Glit nodded before heading toward them.

"Another battle, I'm assuming," Glit said.

The less injured mech nodded. "Yes. One of the 'bots managed to catch Ion by surprise."

Ion… this was probably Ion Storm and Acid Storm, then. Jetfire hadn't seen them during that first mission, but he didn't know any other Decepticons with names like that.

Glit hummed, examining the torn wing as Breakdown approached with a cauterizer. He sealed the leaking fuel lines, reattaching any he could find both ends to, as Glit continued pondering the wing.

"I wish your command would stop sending their soldiers out so soon after healing," Glit said, gently adjusting the wing. "The patches aren't even off from their last wing injury."

Acid Storm grimaced. "I know. Slippy and Starscream have been doing what they can, but… you know how it is."

Glit glanced at Breakdown, who was still cauterizing fuel lines.

"I do," Glit said.

Starscream? Jetfire turned fully toward the group.

"You know Starscream?" He asked.

Even though his creator hurt him, he still cared. His spark ached at the memory, but he couldn't let him go. Some small part of him still hoped that Starscream would change his mind and come back. And maybe he could, now. He wouldn't have to worry about whether the Autobots would accept him back because they weren't with them anymore.

Acid Storm scrunched his olfactory ridge. "More like know *of* him. He doesn't talk much to anyone aside from Slipstream and those cybird cassettes."

Jetfire was undeterred. Anything he could learn about his creator, he wanted to know it. Maybe there was a reason he shot him. He had to keep hoping.

"How is he?" Jetfire asked.

Glit paused briefly in the middle of patching up Ion Storm's wing to look up.

"Yes," he said. "I would like to know how he is as well."

Acid Storm looked away, her wings flicking. "Galvatron keeps calling him to private meetings. We don't know what that fragger is doing to him, but his paint's been peeling off, lately. It's… he looks awful."

Glit's tail lashed.

"I have a decent guess," he said. "If he goes into stasis or has trouble ventilating, please bring him here. I can only assume he's avoiding me."

Acid Storm tilted their helm. "He's the one who told us about you."

Glit rolled his optics. "Doesn't mean he wants to use that knowledge himself."

Jetfire tapped at the edge of the berth.

"He's stubborn about that sort of thing," he said. "He and Skywarp took turns dragging each other to appointments because they both hate visiting the medbay."

A quiet laugh escaped his vocalizer. His vision fuzzed as his spark stung. Would they ever be together again?

Acid Storm frowned.

"I haven't seen you before," she said. "How do you know him?"

Jetfire looked down at his hands, wringing them yet again. He missed his bracelet.

"He's my creator," Jetfire said.

Acid Storm's optics went wide, but they quickly narrowed, roving over his frame.

"That doesn't make any sense," they said.

Jetfire widened his wings. "Why not?"

"Your frame predates his," Acid Storm said. "He's an ULCHTAR Seeker. You're a shuttle of some sort, and those haven't been constructed since the Quintesson war. And all that wear on your plating means you're not *new*."

"He made me," Jetfire said.

If he didn't, what did that mean? Why would Starscream lie about that?

"He wasn't even *alive* when your frame was built," Acid Storm said.

Acid Storm scrutinized him one more time. Jetfire flexed his plating. Acid Storm's wings went wide.

"You're scavenged parts," she said. "That's…"

He was *what*?

"It's not… unheard of," Glit said. "It explains quite a bit about you."

Then who was he made from?

There was one mech in this world who resembled him above all others—one mech was verifiably dead back home. It was the very liar he despised. The pit grew inside Jetfire's belly.

Skyfire. He was made from *Skyfire*.

It was nearly melted, one side completely turned into a bubbly mass, but as Skyfire rolled it in his palms, he could see the outline of what once was. The little charm on the end somehow managed to survive the whole ordeal, indentations from Jetfire's dentae intact. It was the only thing he had left of them now.

Thunder…

She said he always pushed, but if he didn't, she would never agree. Didn't she see that without him, she couldn't function? She needed him to push her. They were the sky and clouds—complimentary in every way.

But still she left. And she did it for that bizarre reanimated corpse. That thing tried to kill him, yet he was the one she sided with!

It was strange to stare at another version of himself. It was horrifying to stare into the optics of his own frame, puppeted by some brand new spark as if the original never existed at all. If Skyfire said he was comfortable with it, he would've been a liar. Despite what others claimed, he wasn't one.

Jetfire was a newspark, sure, but he was also a *monster*. Now, he looked much less like Skyfire, but that didn't change his origin. Besides that, he was half of Safeguard—a mech that

delighted in causing as much suffering on the battlefield as possible. Where would Safeguard get his sadism if not from him?

And *Jetstorm*. Skyfire never deluded himself about Jetstorm. The newspark was never his, but the months spent crafting his frame made him love him all the same. The creation he longed to call his was a bundle of energy, enthusiastic beyond comprehension.

But he had left with the others. They *all* left. Maybe it *was* his fault. He didn't hold on tightly enough. He couldn't convince them to stay.

They would die out there because they didn't listen to him.

Skyfire placed the bracelet back on the shelf. He was moved out of his old room temporarily as it was reconstructed. An entire section of the wall was tarnished by Jetfire's murder attempt. Part of Skyfire wished the others saw it. If they knew exactly how much destruction Jetfire caused, maybe they wouldn't have left.

He was dangerous, just like his creator. They would only be safe if he was locked away and held under supervision, just like Pharma was before they freed him, too. Murderers were bound to murder again. Broken mecha only continued to break.

With a loud creak of his damaged joints, Skyfire left his temporary room. He winced as he headed down the hall. First Aid may have given him pain patches, but they clearly weren't strong enough. He placed a hand against the wall as he walked. One of his optics was melded completely shut—something First Aid claimed would take extensive surgery to fix, among many other things the young monster had melted—which left him with little depth perception. His radar could only carry him so far in tight spaces.

Still touching the wall, he swung through the doorway to the mess hall. Then, he finally released the wall, walking slowly toward the dispenser. He was a difficult mech to miss, so most others were able to get out of his way when he couldn't quite see them. He took a cube and turned back toward the mess hall.

Just the mecha he wanted to see sat in the corner. He approached them, keeping one of his hands just in front of himself so he didn't run into the table. Sideswipe elbowed Sunstreaker, and the two quickly looked up at him.

"Did he say anything to you?" Skyfire asked.

Sideswipe and Sunstreaker exchanged glances. Sunstreaker leaned forward.

"Look, mech," Sunstreaker said. "We already told Prowl everything we knew, and that was *nothing*. Jetstorm didn't even wanna hang out with us in the weeks before they left. Now we know why."

Skyfire leaned down. "He truly didn't say anything?"

"Nope," Sideswipe said. "Nothing at all."

Skyfire sighed. It was worth a try. He left the mess hall, sipping his cube as he headed back toward his makeshift room. His radar pinged. Someone was behind him, but as they approached, he lost track of where they were. Their presence merged with the walls, making it difficult to distinguish the two.

"Skyfire."

Skyfire paused, fully turning to view the mech who approached him. His good optic was toward the wall, so it was the only way he could see them. Bluestreak stared up at him, his own cube in his hands, and his doorwings low.

"Bluestreak," Skyfire said. "How are you?"

Bluestreak glanced down at his cube, swirling it. A quiet, buzzing sadness radiated from him. Skyfire was wrapped up in his own thoughts, but he supposed he could spare a few moments for a friend of a friend. What else was he doing?

"Could be better," Bluestreak said.

Skyfire leaned backward against the wall. "What's the issue?"

"Just…" Bluestreak paused. "I woke up this morning and thought, 'Hey, it's a nice day out! I should see if Star wants to go on a walk with me! She likes walks!' Then I got into the hall and started walking down it, and I went to your room, and it was empty and I remembered…"

Skyfire hadn't thought about Star. He didn't *want* to think about Star. The reminder that he lost more than his conjunx and his sort-of-creation in the past weeks did more than sting. It burned, a searing fire in his very spark.

Star was a troublemaker. She liked to complain, and she used to hit things a lot. She used to destroy things when she got upset. But Skyfire loved her, and he taught her how to be gentle. She begged to go into the lab with him and he let her, showing her how softly and carefully retrorats and glitchmice needed to be restrained.

Her optics lit up whenever they got a new shipment and he allowed her to help put them away. She loved those mechanimals.

And now she was gone, just like them.

"I understand," Skyfire said quietly.

Star and Bluestreak spoken often. He usually went out of his way to find her. If not for Star's consistent refusal of the title, Skyfire would've called them friends.

"I-I'm glad you do," Bluestreak said. "She was really something, just really *really* something. If I ever got stuck or needed ideas, I could just talk to her and…"

Star was smart. She had always been that way. It was why Skyfire allowed her into the lab. She learned quickly, and was always hungry for information.

"Yes," Skyfire said. "I miss her, too."

'This is your fault!'

The words, yelled at him as they stood next to Star's lifeless frame, came back to him. Was it his fault? They couldn't have predicted the attack.

But he could've fought harder. Could've trained more. Could've…

No, he couldn't have. He had no claws—they were filed down long ago to keep mecha from cringing when he touched them—so he couldn't have taken out Galvatron's optics. He had no fangs—they were filed down to keep mecha from recoiling when he smiled—so he couldn't have sunk his teeth into Galvatron's plating and never let go. He had no weapons—he removed them so mecha would stop warily glancing at his shoulders as if he would shoot them at any moment—so he couldn't shoot Galvatron in the helm and end it all there.

Neither could Star.

The realization washed over him, encasing his spark in ice. That was what Thundercracker meant. He *had* killed her, albeit indirectly. Throwing away all of their means of self-defense was his idea, concocted to please a contingent of Autobots that was growing steadily more hostile toward them as the war dragged on.

It pleased no one, and it cost him *everything*.

Skyfire muffled the growl that rose from his vocalizer, not wanting to startle Bluestreak, who was rambling about something or other. Skyfire flicked his wings and pushed himself off the wall, cringing at the creak of his damaged joints.

He had an appointment to get them reshaped today. Would First Aid mind if he came early?

"I need to get going," Skyfire said, cutting Bluestreak off. "It was nice speaking with you."

"O-oh… you too!"

Skyfire turned down the hall, barely sparing him a glance. He headed for the medbay, stopping at the door to listen. It was quiet, so he entered.

First Aid placed the instrument he was holding on the counter. Inventory, Skyfire presumed. First Aid turned toward him.

"You're early," he said.

Skyfire nodded. "I have something extra to ask, if you don't mind."

First Aid tilted his head and shrugged. "Depends on what it is."

Skyfire sat on the nearest berth as First Aid pulled out the supplies he needed for the appointment.

"Reattach my weapons."

First Aid went still.

"Are you sure?" He asked.

"I'm sure," Skyfire said.

It was only the first step. He *needed* to do this.

First Aid looked up at him, optics staring into his. "Is this because of what happened to Star?"

Skyfire's hand squeezed the edge of the berth—*gently*, he couldn't damage it.

"Yes."

First Aid's brow furrowed. "I understand where you're coming from, Skyfire, but are you *really* sure? Grief makes unwise choices. With Safeguard and the others gone, they aren't going to let you back out of this."

"I know," Skyfire said.

By getting his weapons reattached, he was making the same agreement Jetfire did when he became part of Safeguard—to fight and die for the Autobots. With no fliers left but him, Prowl and Elita would refuse any attempts to remove himself from a combat position after this. But it was bound to happen regardless. That was why they were working on Project Safeguard.

It was meant to be their salvation—an aerial combiner with the might of a hundred soldiers. Instead, it became their damnation. Star dead, and his conjunx gone. Now, he alone could fill the role. It was only a matter of time before they sprung it on him, anyway. Better to choose now than be forced later. But that wasn't his only reason.

'We're safe, safe safe—always safe—but none of us are happy!'

Star was right. When was the last time Thunder smiled at him without strain? When was the last time Star had genuinely laughed? When was the last time he felt comfortable enough to let his plating relax?

'This is what we fought the war over, Skyfire!'

It was time to do what he was should have all along.

First Aid brought out his weapons from storage. He insisted on fixing Skyfire's joints first, which required him to undergo medically induced stasis due to the extent of the damage.when Skyfire woke, the pain was gone, finally dampened under an effective dose of pain patches. He checked his connection to his weapons, but didn't test them.

Then, First Aid bade him farewell, giving some basic instructions, and he was back in the hall. His next destination was obvious. As the door slid open, Prowl's optics caught his.

"Put me on the roster."

Prowl didn't speak. His gaze fell to the weapons fastened at Skyfire's sides. He made a mark on the datapad.

"Welcome back," he said.

◇◇◇

"I—" Jetfire didn't know what to say. "He never told me."

"It's generally not something you tell someone," Acid Storm said. "Though how he managed to get the materials for you is a whole other question…"

Jetfire wrung his hands. "I don't know. But I think I know who he used."

He should've guessed. Skyfire looked so similar to him. It explained his assumption that Jetfire was his world's version of him, and why mecha kept saying he looked just like him. Jetfire thought it was just because of their visual similarities, but in reality, it was because they were *from the same frame*.

Ion Storm let out a hiss as Glit adjusted his damaged knee joint, drawing the group away from the conversation. Glit hummed, his tail flicking. Jetfire got off the berth.

"Did you give him a local?" He asked.

Glit shook his head. "Not yet. I was hoping to avoid it."

Jetfire was already halfway to the cabinet. He turned back.

"What do you normally use?"

Glit gave him the name and the amount. He drew it up and searched for the log sheet, quickly finding it pinned to the wall nearby. He noted it down before carrying it over. Breakdown watched him as he approached, Jetfire's plating crawling at the attention.

Glit took the syringe from him. "Thank you."

Glit administered the local anesthetic and waited a moment to ensure it took effect before he continued his work. He handed Jetfire the syringe, and Jetfire placed it in the sharps container, Breakdown still watching him all the while.

"Your comms are disabled," Breakdown said when he got back.

Jetfire flinched. "Uh, right."

He turned them back on. His helm ached as the program started up, unused to the information passing through after he'd had them deactivated for so long.

[Earlier, you said you were a medical student.]

The message was from Breakdown. Jetfire began drafting a reply, but another message came in before he could.

[We can keep teaching you, if you want. We could always use more hands.]

Jetfire tapped his pede and flicked his wings. Energy coursed through his plating. He could help again—he could *learn* again. And maybe this time he wouldn't have to fight.

[Yes, please.]

Breakdown smiled. *[Welcome to the team.]*

It took every bit of Jetfire's self control not to hop in place, or squeal, or do something equally attention-grabbing. He continued to tap his pede, swaying a little to assuage some of the energy. Although they were still trapped a universe away from home and Starscream wasn't there, something good had happened for the first time in months.

Maybe things would be okay after all.

Chapter End Notes

I love writing little stimmy moments. :3

Gonna be completely honest: I've reread these last few chapters so many times that I just ran them through a spellchecker and skimmed them. I don't think it's even possible to freshen my eyes in relation to them at this point. I'm trying to see how many I can post before I have to sleep.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He was dying. She knew that. The peeling paint, the weakening joints, the dimness of his optics, the fatigue—it all was clear. Whatever Galvatron was doing to him was killing him.

But he was right. She couldn't just fly out to Glit's lab. She had no idea where it was, and if she asked, she'd only get confused looks. After all, *she* was the one who told them where it was. How couldn't she know?

He set her up. It was nearly impossible to help him—not unless she wanted to admit her weakness to her subordinates. That was something she needed to avoid at all costs. If they knew her navigation systems didn't work, they'd lose all respect for her.

Just like Nova Storm and Ion Storm had.

Speaking of them… where had they been? She hadn't seen them since the last raid. No one was sporting any distinctly colored new parts, so they must have survived. Where were they?

She shrugged her concerns off and helmed down the hall. Starscream would be out of his daily meeting at any moment. Worrying about mecha who were willing to see her suffer and do nothing about it wasn't worthwhile.

Slipstream rubbed her arms and sighed. She really shouldn't care about them. They certainly didn't care about her. To them, she was Nova Storm's little pet that they were left with after she bled out on the battlefield.

Nova… Slipstream missed Nova. She was one of the few mecha that actually treated her like a mech, instead of an intelligent cyberdog. Even among the other Seekers, there was an odd attitude surrounding those who were sold to civilians. All of the Enforcer Seekers knew each other, but none of the domestic Seekers knew them.

But despite the divide, they were all under the same master. Foolishly, they had traded many masters for one, somehow believing that just maybe *this time* they'd be set free. But masters never released those under their control. Why would they? It would strip them of their power.

The door slid open. Starscream stumbled out, optics dim and paint peeling. His wings were low, but they raised slightly as Slipstream approached.

She wanted to hug him—wrap her arms around him and never let go. She wanted to pick him up and fly him far away where no one could ever touch him again. It was sickening and embarrassing to admit, so she didn't. She merely stood at his side, walking down the hall with him.

"What did he want?" She asked, despite already knowing the answer.

"Just the usual."

They did this every day. The familiarity was comforting, the words rote. It was too easy to fall into. She had to remind herself that he was going to die if something wasn't done, otherwise she'd forget and lose the only good thing she had.

It was mortifying to think that—to know she was so reliant on another being after already losing so many. But somehow he crawled his way into her spark and she couldn't tear him out. She *needed* him the way she needed energeon.

They reached the mess hall, retrieved their cubes, and sat. Acid Storm and Ion Storm still weren't there. She popped open her cube and force herself to focus on that. They were fine. They'd come back.

They hadn't sat with her since she invited Starscream over, anyway.

She kept her sensornet on alert. Few mecha bothered to steal from her—especially since she completely thrashed the last few that tried—but it was always good to keep an optic out. An electric shock traveled through her plating, and she fought a shudder.

Things like this always put her on the fritz, especially since Nova died and she took over as Air Commander. *Winglord*. She took over as *Winglord*.

She needed that title. It was strong. Important. Everything she wasn't at the time.

Starscream stirred beside her and she was brought back to reality. The tips of his digits were completely colorless, the paint long flaked off with no new color produced. His hand shook slightly as he held the cube, unsteady with weakness.

And she longed to hold him again, but just the thought was mortifying. They were in public. She would be seen and scoffed at. Starscream would scoff at her himself. He'd shove her away and call her insane, and wish he'd never spoken to her.

They wouldn't be… *allies*… anymore.

Her spark crackled in her chest just *thinking* about it. She'd be alone again. She couldn't let that happen. It was better to just not.

But he was dying anyway, so maybe…?

He stood up and she terminated that thought process before it could start. She followed him down the hall like a lost cyberpup. As always, he allowed her into his room.

Buzzsaw chirped excitedly as he entered, hopping toward him. It stopped when it noticed Slipstream, letting out a quiet hiss. She rolled her optics.

It flew back to the table and pecked at a datapad.

"Frag. You," the datapad said.

"Frag you too," Slipstream said.

Buzzsaw trilled and ruffled its wings.

It and Laserbeak didn't hate her. At least she thought they didn't—she could never quite tell. But they certainly didn't like her, either. They only interacted with her when absolutely necessary, but seemed to understand that she cared for Starscream as much as they did.

Starscream snorted at the cybird's antics, and it chirped at him. He sat on the edge of the berth, and Slipstream followed. Buzzsaw leaped into the air and landed next to Starscream, nuzzling him with its beak. Something in Slipstream's spark burned.

She tried to push the feeling away, but it only grew stronger as Starscream scratched the top of Buzzsaw's helm. Buzzsaw's visor caught her optics, and it pulled away. It ducked behind Starscream and came around behind Slipstream. She bared her teeth, prepared to tell it off, when it rammed its helm into her side.

"What the frag!" She spat, shoving it away.

It did it again. She swiped at it, but it ducked out of the way before repeating the action once more.

"Stop it, you *fragging*—"

"Buzzsaw."

Buzzsaw paused, staring up at Starscream. It clicked, ruffling its wings, then marched back around toward Starscream. It settled beside him with a low grumble.

Slipstream ruffled her plating. "What's its problem?"

It glared at her.

"I don't know," Starscream said.

His optics flickered, his claws clutching the berth. But as soon as the moment came, it was gone. Still, Slipstream's spark was once again seized by fear.

"You're dying."

The words slipped out before she could stop them. Starscream's wing flicked, a smile crossing his face.

"I'm not," he said.

"You are," Slipstream hissed. "He's killing you."

Starscream turned away, staring at some distant point beyond the wall.

"I can't die," he said.

Slipstream fought the urge to launch herself at him. How could he be so foolish?

"Can't die?" She spat. "Says the mech whose paint is peeling—who just almost went into stasis right in front of me! Are you *stupid*?"

He still didn't look at her.

"I've survived worse," he said. "I know what I'm doing. It's part of the plan. Galvatron will fall, and this will all be over. I'll be fine then."

Slipstream's spark crackled in her chest. It was as if she was still locked in the yard, the boundary collar threatening to zap her again. The thing she needed was just out of reach.

Finally, the wall holding back the tide snapped. Electricity coursed through her plating as her pedes crossed the threshold. She closed her optics and hung her helm.

"Please," she said, her voice weak. She gripped the edge of the berth. He was going to die anyway. What was the use? "You're the only good thing I have."

His hand hovered over her shoulder and she snatched it, pulling it to her chest. His plating was thin, rough where the paint peeled as she ran her fingers over it. Her vision grew fuzzy.

"We'll take Galvatron down, and we'll be free," Starscream said. "There will be other things in the world besides me. But I don't plan on dying anytime soon."

Death wasn't exactly a planned thing, but the words got stuck in Slipstream's vocalizer as she tried to say them.

"You'd better not," she said instead, releasing his arm.

It was easier to let her tongue grow sharp than to let her spark grow soft. Still, it stung. She was vulnerable with him before, as addled by drugs as she was. What made it so difficult to be candid now?

As she absentmindedly rubbed her arms, a thought struck her. After this was all over, what was supposed to happen? Even if Starscream somehow made good on his vow to survive, he would still leave. He'd go back to his universe and she would be alone again, even if he didn't die.

"Take me with you," she said.

Starscream stiffened. "What?"

"When you go home," Slipstream said. "Take me with you."

"What about your air force?" Starscream asked.

What about them? They would be without a leader if she left. Slipstream found she didn't care. None of them cared about her, anyway—she was just some nuisance that somehow managed to become their Winglord.

"They'll sort things out."

Starscream frowned. "You're just going to *leave* them?"

"You left your allies," Slipstream said.

Who was he to judge her for this? He'd left behind that purple Seeker and that awkward shuttle, if the shuttle saying 'not an Autobot' meant what she thought it meant.

Starscream glared at her, as dulled by the dimness of his optics it was. "It was a necessary sacrifice. I'm the only one who can do this, and this is the only place I can do it. They couldn't come with me even if they wanted to. *You* want to abandon your soldiers because you don't like them."

Slipstream flicked her wings and hissed.

"It's because *they* don't like *me*!" She spat.

Starscream's glare softened, his wings drooping slightly.

"I've made that mistake before," he said. "I ended up alone and miserable. You shouldn't take the same path."

The retort left her vocalizer before even she could process it.

"Am I not *already* alone and miserable?"

Starscream sighed. "You have me."

"You're *dying*," Slipstream hissed.

Starscream bared his teeth, his legs kicking against the berth. He leaned forward and snatched Slipstream's hand. Slipstream let out a startled squawk as he pressed it against his chest.

"Feel that," he said, voice steady and strong.

Something hummed beneath her palm, powerful and consistent. It vibrated through her plating. Was that his *spark*? The few times she shared a berth with Acid Storm and Ion Storm, theirs hadn't been this strong. She had never even felt Nova's.

Starscream pressed her hand against his chest harder. The humming got even stronger.

"My frame is fighting the poison Galvatron is feeding me," Starscream said. "My spark is safe. It won't fizzle out. It never will. When my frame gives out, pry open my spark chamber, and it will be there."

When. Not if, *when*. He wasn't lying when he said he planned for this.

"I'm not going to abandon you."

Once again, Slipstream was vulnerable and small. Suddenly, she was standing beneath the skies of Cybertron, longing to reach the stars, but held back by the collar on her neck. She was alone in Darkmount, energeon staining her hands as she begged to be a part of something, anything just to taste freedom.

She was *small*, reaching futilely as her wingmates were carted away without her.

Slipstream finally gave in, searching for a scrap of comfort. She found herself in Starscream's arms, her plating vibrating as he purred. Activating her own engine, she nuzzled him, burying herself in him.

Starscream stiffened, his engine stalling. Slipstream's own engine nearly stalled. Did she hate him now? Had she misread this?

His engine started up again.

Thank frag, she hadn't.

ΔΔΔ

She hadn't seen Skyfire on the battlefield before. A handful of times, she'd caught him when he was on a mission, or during a raid, but never when he was actually intending to fight. As yet another Seeker plunged to the ground, she wished she never had at all.

Starscream would give the signal eventually. In the meantime, their primary task was to survive. When the tables turned, the divide between Autobot and Deception would no longer matter.

That didn't keep the Autobots from firing on her soldiers. *Her* soldiers. Since when were they *hers*? Slipstream shook her helm and changed course, aiming to avoid the giant figure that now scourged the skies.

At least he wasn't the combiner. She didn't know where the combiner went, but his disappearance saved more than a few lives. They had an actual chance at winning without him there, not that it was their aim this time… or the past several times. Galvatron hadn't said anything, hadn't *hurt* her since Starscream put himself between them, but he had to know. He always knew.

Burning electricity seized her spark, making her joints lock up. She shook herself and forced herself to keep flying. Now wasn't the time. She had to keep an eye on this.

Galvatron wasn't here. He stayed back, muttering something cryptic about it 'being time,' whatever that meant. Starscream's wings had tensed, so maybe he knew. But he told her to go forward with the plan, so it couldn't be that important. Galvatron was a madmech—always had been, always would be.

Laserbeak flew past and Slipstream gave the little cybird a nod. It circled her before returning to the fight. Starscream had watched the battles using a link with them, but not this time. For whatever reason, Laserbeak seemed to dislike her less than Buzzsaw did.

She still had no idea what Buzzsaw was doing when it accosted her the other day.

Slipstream rolled as a white blur flew toward her. The blur quickly righted itself, revealing the shaking and bleeding form of Ramjet.

"Winglord—!" He stammered.

Slipstream flicked her wings, silencing him. His optics were dim. However much energeon he'd lost, not much remained. He was just one of many. They were all going to tire soon, especially with that brute in the skies.

"Go find sanctuary," Slipstream said. It had become the codeword for Glit's. "You've… done well, soldier."

Something in her spark tugged at her vocalizer, forcing the compliment out. It was the kind he would never give in return. When she first took her position, Ramjet was merciless, always with a mocking jeer or challenge on his lips. She cowed him the same way Galvatron cowed her—beating the scrap out of him. Repeatedly.

'He shouldn't hurt you. That's just plain fragging stupid.'

Ramjet nodded awkwardly, turning away. Slipstream shook herself again as another shock traveled through her plating.

Perhaps *she* had been plain fragging stupid as well.

[Be safe, Ramjet,] she sent. *[We have much to discuss after this.]*

Ramjet stalled briefly, but quickly picked up his pace, disappearing into the distance. She turned away.

'You want to abandon your soldiers because you don't like them.'

Frag it all, she'd show that idiot. She followed the telltale scream of yet another soldier crashing from the sky. They would all make it out alive whether she liked them or not—whether *they* liked *her* or not. She was the best (though perhaps, only) Winglord in this world and no one would forget that.

She needed to live up to that stupid title.

Slipstream dove, following the blur of limbs and flame as it descended. There was only so much she could do without damaging herself when they were already so close to the ground. Her soldier crashed, and she landed before them, sensors om high alert as she scanned the zone of impact. Green caught her optics.

Acid Storm?

Electricity traveled through her plating again, her spark turning faster. They hadn't spoken since she and Starscream announced the plan before the attack on the Autobot base. Both her and Ion Storm had refused to let her in after the battle, despite it contradicting their earlier threats of only doing it if the plan failed. Maybe they thought it already had.

Acid Storm rolled over with a groan, pushing himself onto his knees. His wings were crumpled and warped, and Slipstream fought a wince. She knew from experience that wings that damaged wouldn't fly. Acid Storm's optics locked with hers.

Slipstream froze, electricity crackling in her fuel lines, her spark, *everywhere*. The invisible boundary was drawn just one pedestep in front of her. She couldn't cross it.

The sky rumbled and roared. Pulled from her trance, Slipstream whipped toward the source of the sound, priming her weapons. The brute approached.

Despite all appearances, Skyfire was named *Skyfire* for a reason. He was a hardened veteran, as many warframes were. On the battlefield, he was the terror of the skies, his enemies always crashing to the ground in a ball of flame at the behest of his specially built missiles. Scientific genius was scientific genius regardless of what it was utilized for, and he put it to great use designing the most destructive of weapons.

He was a great asset to the Decepticon cause, once. If he hadn't defected with the Prime—er, Orion Pax, as Galvatron had so loudly posthumously declared him after ripping the matrix from his chest—during the schism, he probably would've taken her place.

So, when he didn't fire, didn't flee, didn't do anything but land before them with crossed arms and blazing optics, Slipstream knew one thing: they were utterly, royally *doomed*.

"Where is Galvatron?" Skyfire said, his voice rasping with barely restrained rage, static on the edges as if he had recently shorted it out by screaming to the skies.

Slipstream glanced back at Acid Storm. They were still struggling to their pedes. The energeon beneath them was starting to pool. Had a vital line been hit? How much time did they have left?

She couldn't let any soldiers die today.

"He's not here," Slipstream said, ruffling her plating. "He hasn't *been* here. If you want to find him, good luck finding our base."

Skyfire bared his dentae and stalked forward. Slipstream had only a fraction of a moment to regret the slip of her words as she was seized. His hand wrapped around her neck, pressing just enough to strain her components. Her plating grew tight, her spark crackling in her chest.

"Where is he?" Skyfire roared.

Slipstream clawed frantically at his wrist, but his plating was too thick to pierce. She kicked, but she was too far to make contact. So, she tried the only other thing she could think of—she dropped and became dead weight.

Skyfire's grip only tightened. He shook her.

"Tell me!" He spat.

Slipstream renewed her efforts to free herself. "I don't know!"

"You don't know the location of your own base?" Skyfire said, shaking her again.

"I don't!" Slipstream screamed. "I never have!"

Skyfire tightened his grip. The soft metal mesh of her neck dented beneath his hands. A pained squeak exited her vocalizer before she could stop it.

"Let her go!"

Skyfire's grip relaxed, but only slightly. He turned toward the voice. Numb dread washed over Slipstream, her limbs tingling. Acid Storm staggered forward, dragging a mangled pede across the dirt.

"Her navigation systems don't work," Acid Storm said, voice thin and frantic. "Mine do. I can send you the coordinates. Just let her go."

"Acid—" Slipstream's vocalizer gave out before she could finish. It didn't matter. Acid Storm continued approaching them, his wings high and steady despite being mangled nearly beyond recognition.

"Send them," Skyfire said, glancing between Slipstream and Acid Storm. "Then I'll release her."

It was that moment, in the brief silence, that Slipstream remembered something important. For the plan to work, Skyfire couldn't be there. It would ruin everything. There was no way he wasn't going to tear the whole base down the moment he got those coordinates, and any opportunity Starscream had to act would be ruined.

[Don't!] Slipstream sent to Acid Storm. *[You're going to ruin everything!]*

[Shut up. I'm saving your life.]

"I will," Acid Storm said.

What could Slipstream do? The answer was absolutely fragging nothing. All of their hard work was about to be destroyed.

Then, Skyfire's grip went slack. Slipstream fell to the ground in an awkward heap. She scrambled to her pedes. This was it. Acid Storm sent him the coordinates. Everything would be ruined—

What was he looking at?

Skyfire's optics were fixed at some point in the woods that surrounded them. His snarl turned to a grimace. He took a step forward.

"Thunder?" He said quietly.

Slipstream followed his gaze. At the edge of the undergrowth was a mech—blue plating, orange optics. She was familiar. Where did Slipstream know her from?

The mech—Thunder?—stepped into the clearing. More pairs of optics were behind her, obscured by the trees.

"Skyfire," Thunder said. Her optics drifted toward the missile launchers on his arms. "You got your weapons reinstalled."

Skyfire straightened. "I did. After what happened to Star, I couldn't… I had to."

Star. Slipstream almost forgot Starscream had a counterpart. She had barely ever seen her after she left with the Prime in the schism. She was the first Winglord, if such a title could even be applied to a traitorous rocketworm.

It seemed she was dead now. Good riddance. It explained a lot.

"I couldn't just sit by after what happened to her," Skyfire said. "I thought about what you told me. You were right. It was my fault."

He was distracted. Good. Slipstream crawled away, too unwilling to draw attention to herself to stand. Acid Storm was beginning to slump, optics growing even dimmer than they already were. She would hit the ground at any moment, and Slipstream needed to be there to catch her.

Because it would be loud and draw attention. *Not* because she cared or anything like that. Acid Storm didn't deserve it.

"You couldn't have known," Thunder said.

Acid Storm started down at her with optics that were growing steadily unfocused by the moment. Slipstream finally stood, hands hovering near the wound on Acid Storm's side. It was the main source of their energeon loss, but Slipstream couldn't do anything about it here.

On impulse, Slipstream tried to speak. Her vocalizer shorted out with a zing of pain and a quiet puff of static. Damn it.

[You need to find sanctuary,] Slipstream sent.

Acid Storm swayed and shook his helm.

[No,] he sent. *[Ion is already there. If I leave, no one's gonna help you get there.]*

Skyfire and Thunder were… hugging? Whatever. At least they were distracted.

Slipstream tried not to think about the fact that despite Acid Storm and Ion Storm berating her and constantly kicking her out, they somehow managed to still care for her well-being. As if they weren't damaging it themselves by doing those things! Anger seeped through her like a frost, but she couldn't let it take hold of her now.

[Just go, you dumb fragger!] Slipstream sent. *[I'll be fine.]*

She wished she could hiss the words out just to get her point across, but alas. Broken vocalizer.

[I'm not leaving you.]

Slipstream flicked her wings and swiped at the air. Now, of *all* times, Acid Storm decided to be buddy-buddy? Where was the cold, selfish mech who refused to let her in now?

[Like you did every night that Galvatron beat me?]

Acid Storm flinched, which caused her to stumble. Despite herself, Slipstream was at her side, supporting her.

[That was different,] Acid Storm said. *[We didn't want to draw his attention.]*

[So you abandoned *me instead?]*

Acid Storm looked away. She knew it. Selfish, cowardly fragger. Slipstream didn't need her.

Acid Storm slumped, not quite unconscious but steadily descending toward it. He would go into stasis at any moment. They needed to get moving. Slipstream took a step, but Acid Storm jabbed her in the side, causing her to nearly drop him.

[What is your problem?]

Acid Storm tilted their helm toward the woods. The optics that stared from them grew closer. A mech entered the clearing, followed by another. Red and white—Slipstream recognized one, but not the other. She attempted to run, but Acid Storm jabbed her again.

[Stay. They're from the sanctuary.]

Slipstream let out a silent sigh and sank to the ground, helping Acid Storm sit. *Stupid*. She clawed at the ground, needing *something* to run her claws across. The two mecha approached.

Slipstream squinted up at the red and white one. Well, they were both red and white. She knew which one she was talking about. It was one of the medics they took prisoner a while back. A shame she couldn't remember his name.

[You're alive,] she sent to him.

The medical stilled. *[Yes. No thanks to you.]*

[You think I wanted any of that?]

The medic turned toward Acid Storm, busying himself with sealing and redirecting her damaged lines. The other mech—a shuttle of some sort, though a model she'd never seen—knelt beside Slipstream.

"Where are you damaged?" He asked. Then, he winced, optics landing on her neck. "Aside from your neck."

Slipstream shrugged. She couldn't feel anything else, but that didn't mean it wasn't there. The shuttle sighed. He brought his hands under her chin, lightly resting a finger beneath it in a silent request for her to tilt her helm.

Slipstream obeyed, her plating growing tight. This was a medic. He was helping. Still, her spark crackled in her chest. She dug her claws into the dirt. Fingers brushed against the dent on her neck, and she nearly flinched.

He was helping. *He was helping*. He was a medic, it was his job to—

Frag it all, she wanted to run. She wanted to run far, far away. It hurt to sit still when everything in her processor screamed against it.

She snatched his hand and pulled it away. He let her, brow furrowing.

[Just leave it.]

The shuttle withdrew his hand.

"Does it hurt?" He asked quietly.

Slipstream shook her helm.

"It might need to be repaired," he said. "But you'd have to come back with us for that. I don't know much about vocalizers."

Slipstream dig her claws into the ground again. She couldn't leave. Starscream could give the signal at any moment, and she'd be the one to announce the end of the war.

With a broken vocalizer. Her wings drooped. No one would even hear her now.

The shuttle glanced between her and Acid Storm, his wings twitching. Then, finally, his optics settled on her.

"How is Starscream?" He asked.

Just who was this and why was he—*oh*. That voice. She *knew* now. He was that shuttle she fought for the Enigma, the one that said he wasn't an Autobot. The one Starscream left behind.

[He's fine,] she sent, allowing a grin to spread across her face. *[I can't say the same for Galvatron in a few moments.]*

It was somewhat a bluff. Starscream was as weak as always when she took off with her air force. But that was part of the plan. He said it was. She had to believe it would work.

The shuttle's plating relaxed. "That's good."

[What is your name, anyway?]

"Jetfire," the shuttle said.

[Well, Jetfire—] Slipstream stood up. *[This has been… not unpleasant… but I have to rejoin my soldiers—]*

She froze mid-message. A streak crossed the sky, tearing through the clouds. Whatever had made it came from the Decepticon base.

Starscream. It had to be him.

As suddenly as the streak appeared, another joined it, going toward the earth. At the end of it was a ball of flame brighter than a star.

No. He said he would be fine. He said it was all part of the plan. He said he wouldn't leave.

Slipstream leaped and took off. The shuttle—*Jetfire*—followed her. It didn't matter. The flames had already crashed to the ground, forming a crater. The trees around it burned.

If Slipstream's vocalizer wasn't broken, she would have screamed.

Chapter End Notes

I had two things I wanted Starscream to never do (or at least do very sparingly): 1) say the word love and 2) call someone a friend. I don't know if Starscream could qualify as fully loveless, but I wanted him to be on that spectrum.

Also, Slipstream is so lonely. Dear fucking fuck. Rereading her POV in this chapter actually hurt a little. Her feelings toward Starscream aren't romantic, despite the desperateness for physical affection. She's just scared out of her gourd and clinging hard to her only sliver of hope. I actually edited a bit out to avoid people thinking they might be.

We may be surpassing Blind Spot's word count, oh boy...

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

▶ warnings for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nothing was ever truly silent, but the lack of sound emphasized what normally wasn't heard. The delicate inner mechanisms of Slipstream, Buzzsaw, and Laserbeak whirred as they recharged. Starscream remained still, optics on the ceiling. It was as stained as every other surface in the base, somehow.

Tomorrow, this would all end. The finality rung hollow. He didn't know if his plan would work, but it had to. There was no other way forward. Maybe there had been at one point, but now he had backed himself into a corner.

Slipstream stirred in her recharge, her wings flicking lazily. Her lips were pressed together, her plating slack. She was peaceful like this. Acid Storm said she rarely allowed others to touch her, and that held true even in sleep. They had dragged a spare berth into the room together. Starscream never commented on how it steadily grew closer to his as the nights passed.

She was younger than him, but not by much. He had the multiversal travel to thank for the small age gap. The Starscream of this world would've been younger than her, but because his world was further along in the timeline, he was actually older. Still, she managed to be taller than him. Almost everyone did, even if only by a little.

There were a few times he wondered why his growth had stalled. Now he knew—it was that fuel processing disorder rearing its stubborn helm. It certainly wasn't helping… whatever this was. Starscream scratched at his arms, careful not to let the metal screech. His claws came back caked in paint chips.

Despite the age gap being so small, something in him wanted to protect her like she was a newspark. It wasn't quite the same, but the back of his processor triggered the similar routines when Jetfire…

Starscream slumped, his spark stinging. *Jetfire*. Why had he let himself do that?

There was no undoing it. He had to keep going. If this plan failed, it would all be for nothing. He couldn't let it go to waste.

Galvatron had agreed with his suggestion to stay behind during the raid, citing that unknowable force he kept prattling on about. Starscream didn't care much for it. Even if there were a mech at the core of the Earth, the planet was far from becoming the next Cybertron. It

was still rich with organic life, which was nothing like the husk that early Cybertron was described as.

He would take Galvatron down and rip the stolen warp drive out of his chest. Then, they could all go home.

Slipstream stirred, vocalizer letting out a quiet pop. She must've been having a memory flux. Starscream rarely had them, but he knew others did.

When he left, what would happen to her, Laserbeak, and Buzzsaw? Slipstream had asked—borderline *begged*—to come with him. He was tempted to let her. But if she came, who would lead the Decepticons of this world? It was better for her to stay.

Even if Starscream would never see her again.

His chestplates stung. His vision fuzzed at the edges. When did the thought of going home become so bitter?

He sat up and reached across the gap between berths, nudging Slipstream. She let out a quiet and ungraceful sound before opening her optics.

"Wha…?" She muttered.

"Do you want to come here?" Starscream whispered.

She blinked at him, mechanisms whirring as her optics focused. Then, she stretched across the gap between the two berths. Starscream wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into his. At the foot of the berth, Laserbeak chirped, woken by the stir. Buzzsaw's visor lit the room.

Slipstream returned the embrace, nuzzling him as the two Seekers settled back down. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw quickly went back into recharge, the room falling back into darkness as Buzzsaw's visor shut off. The air filled with a quiet purr as Slipstream closed her optics.

"Can still feel it," she muttered.

"What?"

"Your spark," she said. "So loud."

Starscream hummed. There wasn't anything to say to that. Eventually, Slipstream fell fully back into recharge, leaving the room silent once again.

Despite the spark steadily turning in his chest, Starscream was hollow. Why was that? He was about to accomplish all of his goals. It would come at a cost, yes, but one he was willing to pay.

Slipstream's chest rested against his. Buzzsaw and Laserbeak slept at the foot of the berth. There was no Skywarp, or Jetfire, or Soundwave…

Something in him dreaded what was to come.

☆☆☆

The soldiers departed. He and Galvatron stood in that damned command center as they flew by the window. The sun was high in the sky, but not for long. It would eventually be stained red. The battle would stretch beyond sunset.

Starscream meant what he said to Slipstream. He hoped she sought him out after this, because he would need the aid. But for now, it was time to play the part.

"Forgive me for questioning your plans," Starscream said. "But what comes after this? You will have destroyed everything, and the world is nowhere near ready for repopulation."

Galvatron smiled. "Nowhere near? You'll find things move more quickly than you believe. With everything else gone, there will only be more space for the new world to thrive."

Starscream frowned. It simply wasn't how things worked. Even if this mech did speak to Galvatron, which seemed impossible—Primus had never spoke to anyone directly—then it could well be lying. Not that Starscream ever believed this drivel in the first place.

It sounded much too familiar. Windblade had said similar things when she offered to make him a new body. A new body for a new world, all ills cured except for the stipulation that it could very well kill him instead of heal him. Accept the cure or be left behind—the new world had no need for the old and broken.

But this time, Galvatron had somehow decided he didn't count among the 'broken.'

How wrong that was. Starscream *was* broken, by all metrics. His processor discarded EM field data as junk. Despite modification, his fuel processing systems refused to work correctly. He was physically weak, often dealing with aches and unable to stand for long periods of time. He panicked when others touched his wrist, and every cruel word Megatron said to him lived in his mind, even though Megatron himself claimed they were false. He was all of the things a healthy soldier wasn't.

"Why not work with what you have?" Starscream said. "Why do you need to destroy everything?"

Galvatron scowled, his hands moving to his chest.

"They made their choice," he growled. "They're unworthy."

"But I am," Starscream said.

It was a question, despite the way he said it. What made him so different from any other mech, besides the obvious? Galvatron didn't want him for his brokenness, he wanted him for something else. Maybe he just knew he couldn't kill him.

"You are," Galvatron said. "Under my command, the new world will be beautiful and perfect. I will never be denied again. Not by anyone nor anything."

Denied by some*thing*, huh? The picture became clearer the more the dictator spoke. Optimus Prime was dead in this world, and there was no mention of the matrix.

"Do you have the matrix?" Starscream asked.

When a mech thought their victory was assured, they tended to give things away. Galvatron was no exception. His expression shifted, unreadable, and his fists clenched.

"Yes," he said, tapping on his chestplates, right on his insignia. "It rests inside me."

The question Starscream didn't ask: *but did it work?* It was already answered. Galvatron was denied by an object. Prime had told Starscream that the matrix chose its bearer. Although the matrix sat within the dictator's chest, it was dead weight.

Yet another complication piled on top of the others, but it did bring him some reassurance. With the matrix in his chest, the warp drive wouldn't be there. It was probably placed similarly to Skywarp's—just below the chest, toward the center. When he took Galvatron down, he would need to avoid damaging that area. Otherwise, there would be no other chances.

A shot straight to the spark chamber would work.

They stayed at the window until the sky began to bleed. There was no monitoring to be done. Galvatron wanted this battle to last until no mech was left. If they returned, he would just send them out again. If they didn't? Even better.

"We should celebrate," Starscream said, stepping closer to the dictator. "It's not every day the world as we know it ends."

Galvatron smiled, laying a hand on Starscream's shoulder. "It's not an end, it's a beginning."

"Still," Starscream said with a shrug. "This calls for something, doesn't it?"

Galvatron brought his hand down Starscream's arm. Starscream fought a shudder, his joints locking up as his plating tightened. But he had to do this. It was the best way to accomplish what he needed.

Galvatron flipped his arm over and ran his thumb over his medical panel.

"It does indeed," he said.

Starscream sent the command to open his panel and unfurl his cable. With surprising gentleness, Galvatron took his cable. Soon, the link was made. Starscream's fans had already clicked on just from the anticipation, processor running hot as he tried to stave off the fear that coursed through his fuel lines.

Those massive, cruel hands raked through his processor for the thousandth time. Memories flew by, opened but quickly paused. Starscream did his best to ignore all of the open files even as they made his processor stall. He sent the command to charge his rays, leaning into Galvatron as he slotted one right against the dictator's chest.

The recoil would be intense, especially at this level, but he needed to pierce the dictator's armor. Just one more moment, and—

A hand seized the tip of his ray. It forced it backward, bending it as far as it could go and then some, the support giving with a snap. Starscream let out a startled yelp. His arm was forcefully bent until the fully charged ray rested beneath his chin.

Above him, Galvatron's purple optics gleamed.

"You clever little thing."

He said it as if Starscream were a particularly intelligent pet, a grin across his face. Then, he laughed, the sound coming from deep within.

"You think I didn't know?" He said. "I've been in your processor almost every night. There is nothing you can hide from me. I've been humoring you this entire time."

Starscream swallowed, trying and failing to pull his chin away. The ray burned beneath it.

"Wh—Why?" He hissed.

He should have figured. Truly, somewhere in the back of his processor, he did. But Galvatron's lack of action made no sense, unless…

"You can't win this," Galvatron said. "Your place is beneath me, and it always has been."

The data shifted in the back of Starscream's processor, forming connections. The optics, burning even if purple rather than red, the desire to control and possess him, his strange focus on Starscream's older memories, the insistence that the world had denied him—

"You're this world's Megatron," Starscream said.

Galvatron's optics narrowed, his grip tightening.

"How astute," he said. "But I bear that name no longer. I have been reborn in body and spark."

Sure. He may have changed his frame and name, but he was still the same controlling brute. It was easy to see now.

"Good for you," Starscream muttered, trying in vain to pull himself free.

His struggles just made Galvatron grip him tighter. The metal creaked beneath the dictator's grip, threatening to give way. Starscream hissed.

There was one thing Galvatron forgot: Starscream could control his rays separately. With a yell, Galvatron stumbled backward, a burning hole through his hand. Starscream shook himself. That was what the fool deserved for placing his hand right beneath one of his rays!

Starscream wrenched his other arm out of the position it was forced into, ignoring the painful crunch of its joints, and fired. It hit the insignia on Galvatron's chest, scorching it and leaving a small hole. Not enough to pierce the spark chamber, but that only would have worked at point blank anyway. This was going to be a lot more difficult than he hoped.

Galvatron aimed his cannon. Spark pulsing in his audials, Starscream turned on his thrusters and leaped out of the way. The wall where he once stood was scorched and warped, bent outward with a massive hole through it. He spared one moment to shudder before turning back to his enemy.

"You wretched little turbofox!" Galvatron growled, charging his cannon again. "You're going to regret that."

He could only fire it so quickly. It required much more recharge time than Starscream's rays, which were already prepared to shoot again. With a running start, Starscream leaped over Galvatron, turning midair to shoot at the dictator's cannon supports. If he could just detach those…

One shot landed, but the other—the one from his broken ray—went wide and hit Galvatron's shoulder instead. It blew through the decorative plating at the top. As Starscream landed, his knees crumpled beneath him. He scrambled back onto his feet as Galvatron turned back toward him.

The cannon shook slightly as he turned, but it wasn't enough to completely dislodge the support. *Frag*. If only that second shot hit its mark.

He raised it, now fully charged and glowing. The heat from it ran over Starscream's plating, only accentuating the burning of his fuel lines. For a moment, his spark stuttered to a stop. He moved to flee, but his pedes gave out beneath him again.

As brightness enveloped him, static overtaking his vision, he cursed his frame. Of all times, why now? Everything burned, and he let out a screech, his vocalizer shorting out long before it was over. The world around him smoldered as his vision slowly returned.

Error windows popped up on his HUD, but he couldn't read any of them. Most were glitched beyond comprehension. He sent the command for his limbs to move, and despite being unable to feel anything, his frame obeyed. Massive pedes landed in front of him, and he was yanked up by the back of the neck.

Purple optics glared into his.

"Pathetic," Galvatron said. "Be grateful I didn't use it on full power. I still want you."

He dropped Starscream. Before he could crawl away, a firm pede landed between his wings, crushing him.

Finally, an error he could read. Damage to the neurocircuits connecting one of his wings. His body jerked to the side. Galvatron was pulling his wings off, one by one. Without the pain, it was a lot less terrifying.

But a second set of errors didn't join the first. The wing dropped before him with a clang, leaking energeon from its detached fuel lines. Slowly, it went gray.

He wasn't getting that one back, was he?

The pede lifted. Starscream crawled toward the wing, seizing it. Galvatron stepped over him.

"Now you can't flee," Galvatron said.

Starscream bit back a retort. The dictator was right. He could barely feel his frame, but a blast from a cannon, especially Megatron's, left a lot of damage. Starscream dug his claws into his detached wing, which—he had both hands. That was good. Maybe he still had both pedes, too.

Galvatron's back was to him. Starscream stared down at the wing. It had a sharp edge. Maybe he could…

Starscream pushed himself up, swaying, and fired his thrusters. Miraculously, they worked. Galvatron, fully believing him defeated, never had time to react as Starscream plunged his wing into the dictator's back. It pierced all the way through, and Starscream silently celebrated as he dangled from the dictator's shoulders.

Any moment now…

Sparks couldn't survive without insulation. Their energy would dissipate. Any moment…

There was no gleam through the wound. Galvatron stood still. Any moment—

A hand closed around the back of Starscream's remaining wing. He was flung forward over Galvatron's shoulder. The ground met him with a loud clang.

What…?

Burning purple optics stared down at him, framed by a snarl. Then, Galvatron's hand found the edge of the dead wing, and he laughed. Reaching behind himself, he pulled it out with a grinding screech and tossed it aside.

His spark chamber was punctured. Inside it was barren—no light, *no spark*.

"How…?" Starscream stuttered.

Galvatron grinned, stepping closer.

"This is where we differ, little turbofox," Galvatron said. "Your spark cannot be extinguished, and I do not need one to live."

A mech's body could function without a spark. That was how the Autobots kept the Ark until it was revived. But a sparkless frame was merely a machine, with no capacity for thoughts or feelings. Starscream's claws dug into the floor.

Galvatron wasn't a mech. He was something else. Starscream didn't know what, but he couldn't be a mech. Not without a spark.

But, the dark energeon…

Dark energeon weakened the spark while strengthening the frame. The mecha who used it became rambling messes desperate for their next dose. Galvatron didn't quite fit that profile, but the effects added up.

Slipstream claimed she tried to kill him, but he was unkillable. Had she extinguished his spark only to watch him rise? Was that the moment when he stopped having one entirely?

Whatever the case, Galvatron needed to die. If extinguishing his spark wasn't an option, Starscream would have to destroy his frame instead. Not a single piece of it could survive.

His lost wing sat behind the dictator. He knew what he had to do.

With one final leap, Starscream launched himself at Galvatron. The dictator grunted in surprise, but caught him. Starscream sent all power to his thrusters. With every nuke once of energy he had left, he sent them both into the sky. With only a single wing, they spun, the world dissolving into an endless blur.

Starscream had done this on Cybertron, once. Only certain kinds of mecha were designed to survive atmospheric exit and reentry. He was not one of them, and neither was Galvatron.

When Skyfire—*his* Skyfire, who taught him how to train retrorats and told him everything he could about the world—went on that expedition and never came home, he went after him. With nothing but the energeon in his tank and determination burning in his fuel lines, he flew into the atmosphere. But his frame gave out quickly, and he crashed.

That was when he met Megatron, and set himself down the path to both his damnation and salvation.

So high into the air, the dictator didn't struggle. If he did, he would be dropped, and would surely die anyway. Instead, he clung tight, hands denting the metal beneath them. Everything grew cold.

The Earth was surprisingly beautiful from so high. Clouds swirled around, painting the sky with white. Stars glittered on the thin edge where the atmosphere met emptiness. Starscream turned off his thrusters and leaned back.

[Well played,] Galvatron sent. *[But you'll die, too. A spark with no body may as well be deceased.]*

[Do you think I did this alone?]

Starscream dipped backward all the way, spreading out his remaining wing. He fired his thrusters one final time, though they barely did anything at the edge of the atmosphere. Together, he and Galvatron plummeted.

Starscream could die, but he had full faith he wouldn't. His spark hadn't given out the many other times it should have. Why would this be any different? Their frames would be destroyed, but his spark would linger. As long as his spark turned, he still had a chance.

But he knew from creating Jetfire that memories were preserved in the processor, not the spark. His attempt to return life to Skyfire's frame instead created an entirely new mech. Who would he become when this was all over? Or would enough of his processor survive the fall to keep the memories intact?

The thought of death terrified him less than it used to. In the past, it stalked him, lurking at the edge of his mind. At some moments, he wished for it, craving relief from his suffering. Now, he held no feelings. It simply just *was*.

The world exploded, and everything went dark.

ΔΔΔ

Behind her, Jetfire's pedes landed with a thud. Slipstream tensed and untensed her plating, fighting the urge to scream and knowing that her broken vocalizer wouldn't allow it. Before them was a mess of flame and melted parts.

He said he wouldn't leave. What a liar! Now she was alone again…

Frag. The plan. She still had to follow through. But how could she when faced with *this*?

'When my frame gives out, pry open my spark chamber, and it will be there.'

Maybe…

Slipstream crouched in front of the pile of parts. Closer, it was easier to tell whose may have been whose. The purple was burnt and blackened, but still recognizable. *Galvatron*. He had taken out Galvatron, just like he said he would.

Galvatron was worse for wear than Starscream was. Aside from half a faceplate and the majority of his cannon, nothing was discernible. Something sat in the center of his chest, and Slipstream made a note to herself to retrieve it later. She needed to see if Starscream was telling the truth.

Despite all odds, the spark chamber was nearly intact. Still, something glowed beneath the small holes it had obtained. Slipstream fluttered her wings as she forced the chamber open.

If her vocalizer wasn't broken, she would have cried. It was right there, strong as ever, humming beneath her fingers. He was here. He was *alive*.

Jetfire came from behind her. He crouched down in front of his helm. Jetfire grabbed beneath the helm's chin and with a powerful crunch, tore it away from the body. Slipstream stared at him.

Jetfire stared back. He knew what this looked like from the outside. How could he not? For all she knew, he was just mutilating a corpse. But he had a reason.

Pharma said Ratchet could be brought back with a new spark as long as his processor was preserved. Jetfire and Jetstorm were created from placing sparks in empty frames. Here, they had both spark and processor. All they needed was a frame.

He held the helm out to Slipstream. She glared at it.

"Take this," Jetfire said. "I need my hands free."

A spark couldn't survive without insulation. It was a miracle Starscream's was still turning at all. They didn't have an insulator here, but they did have two working spark chambers. Jetfire pulled the spark chamber the rest of the way open and opened his.

He hadn't opened it before. The air hitting an area that wasn't meant to be open made him shudder. But he pressed on. He could only leave it open for so long. With gentle hands, he scooped Starscream's spark into his chamber.

He was the largest of the two of them. He had the most room for it. Still, as he slid his chamber shut, his chestplates tingled. He shook himself, subconsciously wringing his hands.

[Can you hear me?] He sent to the spark, despite knowing that Starscream's comms died with his frame.

The spark in his chest buzzed warmly. Maybe it *could* hear, after all. Or maybe it just felt him.

Jetfire turned to Slipstream. "We need to helm back—"

Slipstream shoved the helm into his chest. He took it, confusion traveling through him as she stalked toward the other set of remains. She crouched down and reached for something in the pile. Whatever it was, it had a large hole in the center of it.

She held it up, scrutinizing it. The matrix was spark-powered. It had sat inside that monster's chest for too long. The best way to ensure the future, now that Starscream was safe, was to find another Prime.

A new Prime would unite both factions, with Galvatron gone. Slipstream forced the matrix into her cockpit. It barely fit—she had to fold it in ways she wasn't certain it could fold—and as she attempted to click her cockpit shut, it refused. She would've grumbled in frustration, had her vocalizer been working. Instead, she let out an angry burst of static.

Something jolted inside her. One moment, she was standing before the remains of everything she'd known, attempting to force the matrix into her cockpit, and the next, she was on the ground, Jetfire staring down at her.

"Are you okay?" He asked.

Why did her chestplates hurt? Slipstream forced herself into a sitting position. What had even —

Did she just *groan*? Her vocalizer was broken! That shouldn't have…

"What happened?" She asked. Her voice was crackly, but it worked. How?

Jetfire's optics wandered over her frame. "You, uh… passed out, and the artifact—"

"The *Matrix*," she corrected.

"The Matrix did something to you," he said. "It's… I don't know. Are you okay?"

That *did not* just happen. The universe was playing a cruel joke. It had to be. But she searched her running programs and found it. Why was the world so cruel? Did it want to see her suffer?

She pushed herself to her pedes and shoved those thoughts into a closet and locked the door. That wasn't important right now. They needed to bring back Starscream and end the war.

"I'm fine," she said, twitching her wings to rid herself of the electric itch that crept through her plating. "We need to head back. They're probably still fighting."

Jetfire frowned. "Right."

Gingerly, he placed the severed helm in his cockpit. Slipstream sent him one final glance before taking to the air. Luckily, the battlefield was still in view. Otherwise, she might've had to ask him for directions. That would've been an awkward conversation.

She hovered above the battlefield and grabbed every available comm channel she possibly could.

[Cease the fighting! Galvatron is dead! We are free!]

Her Seekers were the first to listen. Slowly, the battle dissipated, both sides glaring at each other warily. Slipstream lowered herself to the ground, Jetfire trailing behind her.

"The plan is a success," she said. "We don't have to fight anymore."

The crowd rippled. From it emerged Acid Storm, still limping on a broken pede. She reached toward Slipstream, who sidestepped the touch.

"What happened to you?" She asked.

"That's not important," Slipstream said.

"It almost looks like—"

Slipstream whipped toward her, wings fanned wide, and snapped, "It's not important! I'm in the middle of ending a war, here!"

"Holy frag! He's really dead, isn't he?" Some Autobot shouted from the crowd.

Slipstream flicked her wings and swiped her claws through the air. "That's what I've been *trying* to say! With Galvatron dead, I am the Head Commander of the Decepticons, and I

want to negotiate peace!"

"Could you turn off the light show, maybe?"

If another bot called out from the crowd, Slipstream just might rescind her peace offer, part of the plan or not. "*What* light show?"

One of the bots closest to her just motioned to her. Slipstream rolled her optics and glanced at her frame. Huh. That was new. She always felt a creeping electricity passing over her, but she assumed it was just memories of her time with the collar.

Had the matrix…? Maybe. Whatever. She had to turn it off. Eventually, the crackling energy dissipated.

"Now," she said with a sigh. "Maybe we can get back to the point?"

The crowd hushed as Elita parted them, Prowl soon joining her. They approached Slipstream cautiously, weapons uncharged but still at the ready. Jetfire shuffled his pedes, searching the edges of the crowd.

Where was she? Skywarp was sent to fetch mecha from the other side of the battlefield with Thundercracker, Glit, and Breakdown. She needed to know what happened.

There! A flash of purple. He made his way around Slipstream and the others carefully, not wanting to draw attention. That was quickly thrown out the window when Skywarp launched herself at him with a running start, flinging her arms over his shoulders.

"You're okay!" She said. "Skyfire told us you took off."

"Yeah," Jetfire said sheepishly. "I did…"

Skywarp's optics scanned his frame. "You shouldn't—"

She froze, wings rising as her plating stiffened. Her optics went wide. She motioned toward his cockpit.

"What is that?"

Jetfire grabbed her shoulders—gently, always *gently*.

"Don't freak out," he said.

Skywarp bared her dentae. "Tell me that's not what I think it is."

The spark hidden inside his chamber buzzed. Jetfire sighed.

"It is."

Skywarp's wings drooped as her optics filled with fuzz. "No—"

"Look!" Jetfire hissed, opening his chestplates.

Skywarp remained still, optics growing unfocused.

"He's alive," Jetfire said. "That's *him*. His memories are in his processor. That's why I took it. All he needs is a new frame."

Skywarp took a step back.

"A new frame," she said quietly.

Then, with immense speed, she turned back toward the others.

"Glit—" The aforementioned mech looked up from the mech whose lines he was sealing. "Take out my warp drive."

"*What*?" Jetfire said.

Skywarp's ability to warp was something she cherished deeply. Just the idea that she might have to remove her warp drive was enough to make her flee. And now she was *asking* for it to be removed?

"Take it out right now!" Skywarp snapped. "And get Skyfire over here."

Glit finished sealing the mech's lines and padded over, his olfactory ridge crinkled. "That is a surgical procedure, Skywarp. I can't just—"

"I don't care," she hissed. "Take it out and give it to Skyfire when he gets here."

Glit glanced at Breakdown.

"Fine," he said. "But it won't be pleasant."

"I don't care—"

"Sit down."

Chapter End Notes

I hope none of you thought the guy notorious for being an immortal cockroach was going to die.

I kept using 'head' instead of 'helm' for the past few chapters so I did a find and replace on them and now I have a deep fear that I accidentally missed some spots where it wasn't supposed to be replaced because Ellipsus's find and replace selector is very sticky. Oh well.

My sister and I made a lot of Ben 10 jokes about the Matrix and Slipstream. That artifact certainly did what it did. I wanted to call her Delta Prime after the fork in rivers

(resembling lightning, fitting with the electricity theme while also being a funny joke about the second half of her name) until I remembered that Delta Airlines exists. Delta Airlines Prime. Oh no.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There wasn't anything in between. One moment, Starscream was crashing to the Earth, and the next, his optic feed was refocusing in a brightly lit room. He jolted upward, half-numb limbs barely supporting him. But he *had* limbs in the first place.

He wasn't sure what he expected. Perhaps he wanted proof that all those legends about the All-Spark and Primus were true. But if he wasn't dead, just disembodied, would he really have received that confirmation?

Something shifted in the corner of his vision. He turned toward it. Slowly, a vaguely brown blur formed into the shape of Windblade. He stared at her. She stared back, blinking, before sitting up.

"You're awake," she said.

"Am I home?" Starscream asked.

Windblade nodded. "They took you back."

Starscream narrowed his optics. Galvatron's frame was utterly destroyed, including the warp drive. Where else could—?

"She *didn't*," Starscream hissed. He pushed himself up, searching the room, but no one else was there. "Where is she?"

Windblade stood up, turning toward the door. "I'll let them know you're ready."

Starscream was going to… he didn't know what he was going to do, but it wasn't going to be pleasant. How could she? He'd fought so hard for her to avoid giving her warp drive up only for her to do it in the end! But as the door slid open and she stepped through, all of those thoughts slid away.

She stared down at him, wings low and optics fuzzy.

"You're alive," she said.

"I am," he said.

"I—" she curled her claws, her wings trembling. "How could you? You promised!"

Starscream dug his claws into the berth

"I didn't intend to break it," he said.

"But you did!" Skywarp hissed. "You left us."

"I left to prevent you from doing this!" Starscream yelled, failing to push himself up. He flicked his wings. "I couldn't let you know, or Galvatron wouldn't buy the act."

Skywarp stared. Then, her claws curled into fists as she flicked her wings in response. She grit her dentae, a growl rumbling from her throat.

"You're an idiot," she said, her voice trembling. "A complete fragging idiot. You just can't keep yourself from running into danger. Do you *need* to get hurt? Is that what you *want*?"

Starscream shook his helm. "No, I—"

Was it? Every moment Megatron was kind to him send shudders down his dorsal strut. Sometimes, he wondered if the mech had undergone some twisted form of lobotomy in secret. The moment a possible adversary arrived, he was quick to leap into battle and follow them despite not knowing where he would end up.

He left the alternate world's Autobots to pit himself beneath the claws of a selfish dictator, this time on purpose. Megatron had often accused him of wanting to be harmed, or of asking for it, whatever that meant. Maybe he knew now. He also said that Starscream needed someone to control him, and maybe he did.

No. He couldn't let himself go down that path. Not after fighting for himself for so long.

"That's not what I want," Starscream said. "I saw the only clear path forward and took it."

Skywarp sighed. "It didn't have to be like this."

"What would you have had me do?"

"Stay!" Skywarp said, stepping closer. "I would've had you stay, and not risk yourself with yet another *Megatron*!"

Starscream finally managed to sit up, the burning fury in his fuel lines overriding the numbness of his new limbs.

"And watch my newspark be used as a tool for war?" He hissed. "This was the quickest way to get us home, and it worked. I don't regret it."

If he hadn't left, how much longer would Jetfire have been under their control? No matter how hard he fought, they would've made him a part of project Safeguard. It was inevitable. But if he left, then he could fight Galvatron through deception.

And if he never left, what would've become of Slipstream? She thought she deserved what Galvatron was doing to her when he first arrived. Would she have continued to suffer under his wrath, believing it all to be justified?

Where was she, anyway? She had begged to come with him. Did she sneak in, or did she follow his advice and stay behind? *Someone* needed to lead her world's Decepticons.

"That's the problem!" Skywarp said. "You never regret anything. You hurt yourself and don't even think about how the mecha who care about you will react!"

Starscream pushed himself off the berth, clinging to it as his new legs threatened to give out, having never supported weight before. He adjusted his wings to counterbalance and took a step forward.

"I thought about making it home," he said. "I thought about you and Jetfire, recharging in the berth with me, safe and free. I did this for *you*. Every moment I endured under that tyrant, I was thinking of *you*."

Skywarp's wings drooped. Tentatively, she reached out, her face falling.

"Screamer…" She sighed and shook her helm. "You know what?"

She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his shoulder.

"I don't want to keep fighting," she said. "We're both stupid. Let's just leave it at that."

Starscream returned the embrace.

He knew Skywarp would be angry with him. She had been for similar events in the past. At least this time she didn't push him away for it. Which…

He still needed to speak with Slipstream.

"Did anyone come back with us?" He asked.

Skywarp released him, glancing at the door. "Well…"

She twitched her wing and strode over, then pressed the button to open the door. Starscream could make out at least four mecha on the other side of the door, though the other three were quickly eclipsed as one of them entered. He pushed through the doorway, optics wide, and Starscream's spark stopped.

"Jetfire…?" He muttered.

There was no patch, no scar, not even a single mark to indicate what Starscream had done to him. It was too good to be true. Jetfire's wings fluttered and Starscream staggered forward.

His pedes fell beneath him, but rather than meeting the floor, he was held in large, strong arms. They pulled him close. Fuzzy red optics stared into his.

"Jetfire—" Starscream's voice was swallowed by a crackle of static as his vocalizer refused to work.

"I missed you," Jetfire said quietly.

Starscream closed his optics and wrapped his arms around his newspark.

"I couldn't protect you," he said. "I tried. I failed, but I tried."

Jetfire squeezed him. "I-it was why you left, right? To keep me safe?"

His voice lifted at the end, as if he wasn't certain. Had he thought Starscream didn't care about him? What had he assumed?

"Yes," Starscream said. "They wanted to use you, and I couldn't let them, but… they did it anyway. I should've been faster. Not waited so long."

If only he had taken Galvatron out sooner. Maybe then, Jetfire could've been spared. But no matter how deeply he wished that could've been the case, it was nothing but a kind lie. There was no killing Galvatron faster, and no preventing the Autobots from using Jetfire. In war, there was only cruelty after cruelty. Even the kindest sparks hardened.

Skyfire was proof of that.

"You were trying to help," Jetfire said quietly, optics drifting away. He blinked, focusing on Starscream again. "You're here now. *Really* here. Please don't ever leave again."

Starscream could never promise anything, not even as part of a gentle lie.

"I'll try not to," he said.

They stayed together, holding each other as if nothing else existed. Then, a shuffling sound made its way to Starscream's audials, the quiet click-clank of pedesteps following it.

"Can I talk to him now?"

Starscream released Jetfire and stared past him. Slipstream stood a short distance away, her wings tense as she leaned forward. Something glowed inside her cockpit, which… had it always been that shape? No, it hadn't. What happened to her?

Jetfire stepped away, wringing his hands. "Go ahead."

Before she could speak, Starscream introjected.

"What happened to you?" He asked.

Slipstream flinched. "Not important."

She took a step closer, inserting herself between him and Jetfire. Then, with a quick motion, she smacked him in the face with her palm. It didn't hurt at all, or use any meaningful amount of force, but it was so unexpected that Starscream took a moment to collect himself.

"*Never* do that again!" She spat.

"I don't want to test my mortality more than once," Starscream said.

Slipstream flicked her wings. "Good, because if you did, I'd fragging kill you myself."

Starscream put his hands up in mock surrender. Slipstream sighed and looked away. She glanced at the other two occupants of the room, hands drifting to her arms, before turning back to him.

[You saved me,] she sent.

[Only as much as you would let me.]

[No, idiot. You saved me. I would've kept taking his slag forever if you hadn't come along. I thought just because I failed, I deserved it.]

Starscream shook his helm. *[I've found that attempted murder typically has a reason. I was in your position during my world's war.]*

[I know,] Slipstream replied. *[But still… you didn't have to help me and you did.]*

She didn't understand it. The need to defend her had pulled at him, some seemingly dormant part of his processor coming alive. He couldn't resist—he just needed to act.

[Spare it,] Starscream sent. *[What's done is done.]*

"Um."

The conversation halted as a mech poked his helm through the doorway. He was the one with Jetfire—his gestalt partner, then.

"Can we come in now?" The mech asked. "A creepy blue guy just showed up with his buddies, so it's getting a little bit crowded."

Soundwave! An intense wave of emotion overwhelmed Starscream's spark. He waved the mech inside.

"Yes!" He said. "You can come in."

The mech entered hesitantly, followed by an equally hesitant Skyfire. Behind him, Thundercracker trailed in. In a blur, Rumble and Frenzy darted in, followed by a much calmer Ravage and Soundwave. Something small rested on both of his shoulders.

One of the objects let out a caw, and as Soundwave passed through the doorway, it became clear: Laserbeak and Buzzsaw. They had come along! Based on their newfound perch, Soundwave must have accepted them, even though they weren't *his* Buzzsaw and Laserbeak.

Had that been what they wanted all along? It made complete sense.

"Starscream—alive," Soundwave said.

Starscream fluttered his wings. "Yes. I am."

Soundwave shifted his helm so his visor stared directly into Starscream's optics.

"Laserbeak, Buzzsaw—grateful," he said. "Soundwave—also grateful."

Starscream smiled. Finally, a mech who *understood* what he had done. He could always count on Soundwave.

"You're welcome," he said.

How many more mecha would be grateful to meet the counterparts of their lost comrades? So many were lost in the war. It wouldn't be the same, but maybe they could fill the gaps.

With so many mecha in the room, it was nearly impossible to hold a conversation. Any attempts died as Starscream was quickly released from the CRI's hold, and the group headed home.

☆☆☆

Starscream probably should have wonders where Nova Storm was in the crowd, but the question was already answered the moment they entered their quarters. Nova Storm rushed at them, wings high and fluttering, with an uncharacteristic joyful squeal. She launched herself at Skywarp first, of course. She was more Skywarp's companion than anything else. Starscream quickly backed away, wanting to both give them space and avoid receiving an embrace of his own.

"You're okay!" She said, a grin on her face. "Soundwave said you came back, but I almost didn't believe him!"

"Yep," Skywarp said, adding an extra pop to the 'p' as her wings twitched. "We're back…"

Movement caught the corner of Starscream's optics. He tracked it. Slipstream rubbed her arms in the fashion customary of an anxious mood, slowly backing toward the door.

[Where are you going?] He sent to her.

Slipstream flinched.

"What's wrong?" Nova Storm asked softly, releasing Skywarp from her hold as her brow furrowed.

"Nothing's wrong!" Skywarp said just a little too quickly. Nova Storm's wings twitched, clearly picking up on it. "Just… things are a little different, I guess."

Slipstream was creeping toward the door again.

[Stop it. Why do you want to leave so badly?]

[Why do you think?]

Starscream fought not to roll his optics.

[It's not because you want to go back to your world and be the leader your Decepticons need right now, is it?]

Slipstream leaned around Jetfire to glare at him.

[Thought not. Tell me what the issue is.]

"They, um…" Skywarp's optics drifted toward the wall. "I got my warp drive taken out so we could use it to go home."

She said it quickly, as if Nova Storm somehow wouldn't hear it if she mashed the words together. Nova Storm's wings lowered.

"I see," she said quietly.

[Her,] Slipstream sent. *[I can't—she's just… her. It's her.]*

Right. Nova Storm was close to Slipstream. Here, Slipstream was dead, but in Slipstream's world, it was Nova Storm. As much as he was tempted to dismiss her trepidation, Starscream was reminded of his own experiences. Thundercracker hovered awkwardly at the edge of the room beside Skyfire, her purple stripes of paint clear in the light.

[She'll be happy to see you,] Starscream sent.

[But I'm not her Slipstream.]

Buzzsaw nuzzled Soundwave with a quiet chirp. Soundwave reached up and stroked its beak.

"It's fine," Skywarp said. "Really. It'll grow back—"

Nova Storm pulled Skywarp into a hug.

"I know," she said. "I'm glad you're back. I'll help you out until it does."

Skywarp sank into the embrace, nearly going limp. All of the tension drained from her frame as she closed her optics.

[I don't think she'll mind.]

Nova Storm and Skywarp stayed entwined for a few moments. When the embrace finally ended, Starscream took the opportunity to pounce. He strode toward them, forcing his wings into neutral position.

"Nova Storm," he said.

Nova Storm raised her wings. "I'm glad you're back."

"I have someone you should meet," Starscream said. It was better to bring it up before she had the chance to escape.

Nova Storm's wings twitched. "Oh?"

Starscream turned toward the crowd, catching Slipstream's optics. When she didn't move, he motioned for her to approach. She did so hesitantly, her wings quivering as she forced them into neutral position.

Nova Storm's optics widened. "Is that—?"

"Slipstream," Starscream said.

Slipstream stopped in front of them, her wings twitching. "Hello."

Nova Storm leaned forward, optics scrutinizing her. Then, she leaned back, a strained smile om her face.

"You look different," she said.

She definitely did, but most of those differences arose during the time when Starscream was offline. He was curious, but not enough to bother asking.

"A lot has happened in a very short amount of time," Slipstream muttered.

Nova Storm's smile grew less strained. "Definitely."

Slipstream took a step back, her hands coasting over her arms. She started to turn away, but Nova Storm stepped forward, the tips of her claws gently brushing against her side. She froze.

"I missed you," she said quietly. "I know you're not mine, but you could be, if you wanted to."

Slipstream's gaze hardened for a moment, and Starscream began to doubt his decision. Then, it softened, her wings quivering.

"You don't mean that," she said.

Was she serious? Starscream tapped his pede and glared at her. Her optics met his, and she looked away, wilting.

[If you don't let yourself have good things, then you'll never have them,] Starscream sent. *[I know Nova Storm. She isn't lying. So stop acting like a kicked cyberkitten and just talk to her.]*

[I'm not a kicked cyberkitten.]

Slipstream walked away.

☆☆☆

[I need to speak with you.]

The message was from Windblade. Starscream tapped his pede. Should he go? The last time she asked for a meeting with him, she had him and Jetfire ambushed just so she could prove to herself that Starscream had actually created Jetfire. She was oddly fascinated with his spark, and he knew why.

As much as he enjoyed throwing himself into danger, he wasn't eager to risk another confrontation. His hand drifted to the arm guard that covered his medical panel, and he fought a shudder. He had enough of that with Galvatron.

But if he didn't go, he would never know what she wanted. So, with a sigh, he pushed himself away from his desk and headed through the hall.

It had only been a handful of days since he and the others returned home. Skyfire had used Skywarp's sacrificed warp drive to set up a spacebridge with record speed, which allowed mecha to cross freely between worlds. Many mecha from the other world were already present in the halls as he walked toward Windblade's office, side by side with familiar faces.

His own office wasn't out of the way, but it wasn't quite in the main area, either. New Deception Command were all in the same general cluster, though most of them spent their time elsewhere. As time wore on, everything grew more and more consolidated, especially with the need to keep track of two separate universes of mecha. The CRI—both versions of it—moved quickly, eagerly welcoming Autobots and Decepticons from both worlds after peace negotiations were finalized.

Both factions were tired of the war, and Slipstream was a quick negotiator. Starscream suspected that she just let the Autobots have whatever they wanted, which wasn't much, but he didn't feel like confronting her about it. The Other Decepticons were hers to manage, despite her reluctance to do so.

Starscream stumbled slightly around the corner, clutching the wall. His weakness and balance issues weren't entirely gone. Some of it was spark-coded, it seemed, but a lot of it was made worse over time, so a fresh frame brought him back before much of the damage was done. Still, he wouldn't have undergone the procedure unless it was necessary for his survival, and there was no saving what was left behind after he fought Galvatron.

He send a comm to Windblade as he approached the door. It slid open immediately. Ahead of him, Windblade sat forward in her seat, her wings set high. Starscream stepped into the room as the door shut behind him.

"I wasn't sure if you would come," Windblade said.

Starscream pushed out the seat in front of her desk and sat. "I considered staying in my office."

Windblade hummed, staring at some seemingly random point on her desk.

"I'm glad you didn't," she said. Her wings twitched as she looked at him. "I have something very important to address."

"And that would be…?"

Windblade closed her optics, her plating snapping close before relaxing. She brought one of her arms from beneath the desk, laying her hand palm-up on its surface.

"You asked me who I used to be, once," she said. "I think you ought to know."

She flexed her fingers. Tiny specks of light flew off of them, gathering into a small ball. The light bounced off of her plating. Starscream dug his claws into his armrests.

Her statement had two meanings—he ought to know who she was because she felt she should tell, and he ought to know because *he already knew her*. No other mech he met had that ability.

"Sunstorm," he muttered. "You were *Sunstorm*."

Windblade let the light fade. "Yes."

"I thought you were dead," Starscream said, static creeping into his voice.

He mourned Sunstorm for so long, had felt pain so spark-deep that his only choice was to shove it from his processor, just like with Thundercracker. Now, the source of that pain was sitting before him, alive and well. She had attempted to hurt him and Jetfire, for frag's sake!

"The CRI found me when Megatron dragged you away," Windblade said. "I was hurt and sick, but they helped."

It made sense. Sunstorm wasn't dead when Megatron took him away. Starscream had struggled against him, screaming for them to do back, but Megatron only gripped him harder, insisting that they had to leave. The enforcers had already swarmed Darkmount, and any mecha left behind would either be arrested or killed—most likely the latter.

"They were there?" Starscream asked.

Windblade shook her helm. "Not until after the Enforcers left. They thought I was dead, so they left me behind, and the CRI picked me up. I couldn't walk or speak. Doctor Cryak took me in."

Doctor *Cryak*? That sounded familiar…

Wait. The memory file came to him, and he skimmed it. Skyfire—*his* Skyfire—had mentioned Cryak before. She was a researcher and medic. He had met with her a few times, and had always asked Starscream not to mention where he was going.

Frag, was the CRI there all along? Had Skyfire been a part of them? Was that why the Council had targeted him?

(Was that what the other Skyfire was missing?)

"I never recovered," Windblade said. "My parts were too damaged to repair. There were too few functioning neurocircuits left to integrate new ones. Cryak started the frame replacement program for cases like me."

Starscream could never agree with their methods—the CRI was careless with life, wasteful of resources, and moved through trials entirely too fast—but he knew utility when he saw it. There were mecha who would have greatly benefited from the program, like Windblade, had it not been so dangerous. But even that was sullied by the pointless cruelty it took to get there.

Starscream was no stranger to it on both ends. He killed many mecha during the war purely for the reason that they wore the wrong badge. He killed others for the sake of keeping his power. But that was why he could recognize the issue in the first place—he had experience.

"When I met you again, I saw myself," Windblade said. "I didn't want you to suffer the way I suffered. You rejected my offer, but I couldn't let it go. So, I had them make you a frame anyway."

It was a blatant disregard of his wishes. Yet, it had turned out to be a boon. Without it, he wouldn't be sitting here. Windblade smiled at him.

"I think it was the right choice," she said.

Starscream couldn't deny it. Sure, he could complain about how she went behind his back to do it, but he wouldn't be here if she hadn't. So, he kept his vocalizer silent.

Windblade sighed. "Fine. Be like that. Seeing your frame utterly destroyed as Skywarp and the others brought you through the portal, I couldn't stand keeping my distance. I had to tell you who I was before I lost you again."

"It's good to know," Starscream said.

And it was. His processor was stalling, a swirling mess of something he couldn't identify rising in his spark, but it was good to know. Why she had kept it from him before was a complete mystery, but there was no changing the past.

"I hope we can get to know each other again," Windblade said.

Starscream tapped his pede. They were completely different mecha now, not just because Windblade had changed her name and frame. Sunstorm wouldn't have done those things to him. He and Sunstorm were as innocent as they could be back then, two newsparks trying to find their way in the world.

Now, Windblade was a high-ranking member of the Cybertron Revival Initiative. She held knowledge like a weapon and used any means to seek it. Where Sunstorm was light and joy, she was suspicion and shadow.

Starscream was a well-known traitor and deceiver. He abandoned those he cared about repeatedly. He may have felled monsters, but he was also one himself. Where he was once

skittish and gentle, he was now harsh and brazen.

Starscream bid her farewell and left her office, the tips of his digits growing numb. He sank his claws into his arm guards as he walked down the halls. The day was far from over, but the chaos swirling in his processor drew him away from his office and toward his room.

He paused before the door as another mech approached. Jetstorm—Starscream had finally learned his name—stared at him, a frown on his face. His wings went wide.

"Starscream," he said.

Starscream moved toward the keypad, but Jetstorm stuck an arm out. Starscream stepped back.

"What is it?" He said.

Jetstorm tilted his helm. "I don't trust you."

Starscream resisted the urge to roll his optics, knowing it would only cause the newspark to impede him further. If it was a fight he wanted, then a fight he would get. Starscream fanned out his wings.

"So what?" He said.

Jetstorm's gaze sharpened. He bared his teeth.

"You shot him," he hissed.

The fight drained from Starscream's processor immediately, replaced by a cold numbness. He was so relieved to learn Jetfire was alive that he hadn't truly thought of the fact that he harmed him since.

"It wasn't intentional."

"Didn't look very accidental to me," Jetstorm said.

Starscream tapped his pede. How did he explain it to a newspark, especially when he barely understood it himself? The burning optics, the crushing grip, the inability to escape—in that moment, he was a retrorat drowning in a pit. Jetfire hadn't been *Jetfire*.

"I couldn't let him come with me, and he wouldn't let go," Starscream said. "I needed to do *something*."

Jetstorm flicked his wings. "Liar."

"I'm not a liar," Starscream said, narrowing his optics.

Jetstorm tilted his wings—one up, one down. It was peculiar.

"You just admitted you 'needed to do something,'" Jetstorm said. "You did it on purpose, but you said you didn't. You're a liar."

Starscream's pede thunked loudly against the floor. The noise jabbed his audials, but he couldn't stop. Perhaps it was foolish, but he *needed* Jetstorm to understand.

"I didn't want to hurt him," Starscream hissed. "I *never* want to hurt him. I had no choice. He had to let me go."

Jetstorm opened his mouth to speak, but Starscream threw his helm to the side and kept speaking, the words pouring like rain. He couldn't stop.

"I had to kill Galvatron or we wouldn't be free. I couldn't stay. When Jetfire disappeared after that battle, I thought I killed him. I truly did. The only thing that kept me going was knowing I was going to kill that monster."

Jetstorm's wings pulled closer to his body, losing their aggressive edge. His snarl faded to a frown.

"You still hurt him," he said.

Starscream closed his optics. "I know. And I regret it."

Jetstorm's wings drooped.

"If you're really serious, there's some stuff you should know, because he probably won't tell you," he said. "It's… a lot."

What happened to his newspark while he was gone?

"Please, just tell me."

Jetstorm nodded, adjusting his plating as if to steel himself.

"You didn't see him after that battle because he tried to kill Skyfire," Jetstorm said.

That didn't sound like Jetfire at all. Starscream flexed his claws.

"He was imprisoned for it, but we broke him out and ran away. He's… something happened to him. I don't know what. But he doesn't wanna fuel. He's scared of it."

That also sounded nothing like him. Jetfire could barely resist fueling. He enjoyed the process, often getting his hands on things he shouldn't. Some of it was anxiety-driven, but…

What had happened to him?

☆☆☆

The thought lingered in his processor. Every movement, every shift of his voice, Starscream logged. Jetfire was different. He would be, obviously, but the extent of it was what shocked

Starscream.

But every line of questioning led to the same answer: nervous hand-wringing and a quick, "I'm fine."

So, his processor still on his predicament, Starscream extracted himself from his recharging allies and roamed the halls. It was nice to do so with few stumbles and minimal support, for once. How long would it take for all of that to come back?

He shook himself. Whatever happened was going to happen. It didn't matter. He would adapt, like he did before. But it would be much easier if he could just get it over with.

He found himself in front of the many windows in the building, staring out at the sky. Somewhere out there was Earth—not the version of it that hurt Jetfire so deeply, just the one he loved and was born on. Did he miss it? Or did the memories of the other Earth taint it?

Starscream let his wings fall. Why did the others have to follow him through that portal?

Pedesteps at the side of the hall made him freeze. He straightened, fighting not to fan out his wings. Everyone should've been in recharge. Why was someone awake? And why did they have to walk down *this* hall of all halls?

Silver shone in the dim light, and Starscream was faced with familiar red optics. Some part of his processor begged to activate his targeting systems, but a much larger part of it wanted to freeze in place. Megatron stopped a short distance away, staring down at him.

"Starscream," he said. "I didn't expect to see anyone."

Starscream flicked his wings. "Neither did I."

Megatron grunted and took a step closer, turning toward the window.

"What's keeping you up?" He asked.

"Does the phrase 'cross-universe escapade' sound familiar?" Starscream said, raising his brow sarcastically.

"I suppose it does," Megatron said.

Silence crawled over them, digging itself into Starscream's plating. He forced himself not to scratch the upsettingly familiar itch.

"I killed you," Starscream said.

Megatron turned toward him. His lips were pressed thin, his optics cold, dying embers. There was nothing to read.

"A version of you," Starscream added.

Megatron's optics bored into him.

"I heard about that," he said slowly, measuredly, as if holding back something greater.

There were mecha who knew what happened to him. They had guessed, and he had confirmed it. Still, something inside him longed to spill. It wanted him to slice himself open and let everything fall out in front of Megatron, as if baring the truth would…

He didn't know what it would do, or what he wanted. He just yearned.

Starscream dug his claws into his arm guards.

"He hurt his closest ally, just like…"

You, he wanted to say. But he could never say what he wanted to around Megatron.

"Just like someone we know. She thought she deserved it. He told her she did."

Megatron didn't speak. Should Starscream tell him? Megatron did it to him, after all—a dark, twisted version of him, but a version of him nonetheless.

"He made me link up with him, repeatedly," Starscream said, voice breaking. Why was it breaking? "For information, for pleasure—he never told me the truth about why. He just wanted to have me, so he did. And all the while, Jetfire…"

Starscream still didn't know what happened to Jetfire. He likely never would.

"No matter how many times…"

Starscream froze as Megatron finally spoke. It was quiet and mumbly, but in the silent halls, it carried.

"What?" Starscream said.

"You just kept getting up, no matter how many times I thought I went too far," Megatron said. "No matter what I did, you'd just get back up again, and I convinced myself that it wasn't hurting you, because if it was, you wouldn't get back up."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Starscream said.

Megatron hung his helm. "I'm sorry."

What?

"You already apologized," Starscream said.

"About *that,* yes," Megatron said. "But not about this. I'm sorry he did that to you."

Starscream never quite understood the point of apologies. He understood this sort even less.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"I should've realized by now that you will always get back up if you aren't given a safe place to rest," Megatron said. "It's in your nature."

Starscream scoffed. "Like *you* know anything about my nature."

It was petulant—the irritated words of a newspark. Megatron knew him just as well as Skywarp did or Thundercracker had. He had molded him. Starscream followed his lead like a cyberduckling, always looking up, up, *up* until he realized he was being looked down upon.

"Perhaps I don't," Megatron said. "Still, you should rest."

Starscream tapped his pede. "I can't, if you haven't noticed."

At this point, Megatron would glare at him, perhaps chastise him for being disrespectful. He was always so obsessed with attention and respect, but not in ways that meant anything. Only the insignificant things—optic to optic contact, stillness, quietness—seemed to matter to him.

"I suppose not," Megatron said.

There was no sharpness to his tone. It was light, almost fond. Something crawled up Starscream's dorsal strut. Where was the scowl? The scolding? The harsh words?

"You don't mean it," Starscream said.

Megatron's brow furrowed. "Don't mean what?"

Had he secretly gone to a different world? Was he actually home? Starscream's claws itched.

"I'm not here," He muttered. "I'm *not*."

Megatron took a step closer. "Starscream—"

"Just do what you're supposed to!" Starscream spat, taking a step back. "Stop… stop whatever *this* is."

"Whatever what is?" Megatron asked softly—so, *so* softly.

Starscream stomped his pede. "You're just so… you can't just yell at me, and scold me, and hit me for so long, then turn around and be so soft! It's *wrong*."

"I harmed you," Megatron said. "I'm trying to rectify that."

The walls within Starscream's processor broke. Static filled his vision, his vocalizer glitching and screeching as he stomped his pede again and again, almost rhythmically. How could he? After everything, *how could he*?

"I—you—" Starscream stammered, his vocalizer spitting static. Megatron took a step toward him, and Starscream fanned out his wings. "Leave!"

Megatron… *retreated*.

Starscream stood, silence filling the air. Megatron actually *listened to him*. Had the world fallen apart? Was he actually here and not in some strange parallel universe? He had apologized to him before, but it was still so…

Had he meant it? Truly, completely meant it? Starscream thought he had, but he didn't comprehend exactly *what* that meant. Not until now.

Sinking to the floor, Starscream curled up, burying his face in his knees.

This was what he had always wanted, wasn't it? For Megatron to respect him and listen to him? So why did it hurt? Why was it so *wrong*?

He remained curled until the world faded away, his body forcing recharge. He stirred when large, gentle hands hoisted him. Soft red light met his optics.

"Megatron," He muttered.

Megatron grunted.

"Why?" Starscream said.

"I was a fool obsessed with power," Megatron said. "You were the one thing I couldn't control."

It made sense. Something clicked in Starscream's processor—the familiar hold, the soft voice—and for a moment, he was *small*. He shifted in Megatron's arms, clinging to him. Megatron adjusted his grip, holding him tighter.

"But I'm not that mech anymore," Megatron said. "At least, I'm trying not to be."

Starscream nuzzled Megatron's chest, squeezing his optics shut.

"He called me beautiful. Said he wanted to break me," Starscream said.

He left the last part unsaid: it may have worked.

"And you killed him," Megatron said, his voice growing sharp. "You're untameable, Starscream."

Starscream hummed, sinking back into recharge. Later, he woke nestled between his allies, and had to wonder how Megatron managed to become so gentle. Then, it came to him in brief glimpses—little moments before and during the war, few and far between, where kindness, comfort, and affection were offered with no strings attached.

Megatron was capable of this all along.

Bitterness coated Starscream's tongue. But how much could he fault him? He, too, had been unnecessarily cruel in the face of war. Still… Megatron was capable of this all along, and he still chose to hurt him.

It shouldn't have been so upsetting to realize. He already knew it, it just didn't sink in until now. But another part of him spoke louder.

Megatron was *trying*. He held him. He hated what was done to him. The cruel, twisted mirror that Galvatron represented was long dead in both worlds.

Starscream couldn't forgive, nor could he forget, but he could appreciate change for what it was.

Chapter End Notes

Yknow that feeling when someone is uncharacteristically kind/tolerant and you start to wonder if they're possessed, or if you're dreaming, or if you somehow walked into an alternate reality, but then they say something kinda dickish and you realize that naw, it's still them?

Yeah. That's what this chapter is supposed to embody.

I'm aiming to edit the last chapter of this fic and the first of Electric Fence when I get home today so I can post them both at once. At this point, I just want to get this all posted so I, too, can move on.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jetfire was tired no matter how much he recharged. His systems were sluggish, barely responding when he asked them to. Every notification on his HUD stuttered and lagged—not that he was reading them, anyway.

"Jetfire?"

Jetfire startled, nearly falling off the berth. He pushed himself up.

"Yeah?" He said.

Starscream stood in the doorway, one hand against the doorframe.

"Would you like to get some fuel with me?" He asked.

Jetfire's hand gripped the berth. He wanted to spend time with Starscream, but the thought of refueling made his chestplates ache. Still, he forced himself up.

"Sure," he said.

Every step toward the mess hall just made the dread settle further. When they finally reached the front of the line, relief washed over him. A variety of dishes sat before them, all of different consistencies and flavors. *Right*. He didn't have to fuel on just energeon anymore.

He knew that, but it always took a moment to sink in.

Jetfire decided to play it safe, taking only things he'd had before. Starscream's optics followed his arm as he took his portion, and Jetfire fought not to cringe under his gaze. Why was he watching so closely?

They sat down at the table. Jetfire's wings twitched. Why couldn't they go back to their room? It was so loud in here—mecha talking around each other with little care to what others were saying as long as they were heard. It was suffocating. But Starscream sat at the table, and the words stuck in Jetfire's vocalizer before they could ever leave.

Starscream picked at his meal, and Jetfire…

He should've been excited. He would have, before all of this happened. But all he could think of was the horrible heavy feeling in his tank. It was close to empty right now, but if he filled it, it would come back. But Starscream was right there.

Jetfire forced himself to take a few bites. Unlike with energeon, he wasn't immediately averse. But the worry in the back of his processor still lingered, and truly, he had no appetite.

What once would've been rich and delicious was instead uninteresting and overwhelming. Were he an organic creature with a gag reflex, he would've gagged. But Cybertronians lacked that reflex, so instead the meal sat heavily in his tank.

It was just… awful. He felt *awful*.

"How are you?" Starscream asked.

Jetfire nearly jumped. Would have, if not for the table. Subconsciously, he wrung his hands. Sure, he felt awful, but that was the new normal, wasn't it?

"I'm fine," he said.

The table grew quiet after that. Starscream's brow furrowed. Jetfire looked anywhere but at him. Despite the conversation dying before it could start, the mess hall itself was still so loud. The cacophony buried itself in Jetfire's audials.

"Can we go back?" He asked quietly.

They were almost done refueling. He couldn't take it any longer.

Starscream nodded. Relief washed over Jetfire. The moment they were finished, Starscream stood up. Jetfire followed him to the waste disposal like a lost cyberpup, not wanting to spend a moment alone in this place. His creator didn't comment. He never did.

After disposing of their containers, they left, heading back toward the room. They didn't make it far before Jetfire's fans clicked on, a heat warning quietly slipping onto his HUD. The heat bubbled up from his core, bringing with it a wave of dizziness.

Jetfire leaned against the wall with a muffled whine, the room spinning as his helm began to hurt. Immediately, Starscream turned back toward him, his optics wide. He approached slowly, a hand reaching out to touch him.

'I'm okay,' Jetfire wanted to say, but his vocalizer refused to work.

"What's going on?" Starscream asked.

[Dizzy,] Jetfire sent, squeezing his optics shut. *[Helm hurts.]*

Starscream came closer. He rested a hand on Jetfire's arm. Jetfire reached for it, taking the hand in his.

"Do you want to see a medic?" Starscream asked.

Jetfire didn't know. He felt *sick*. Just *sick*. But was it really so bad? The thought of doing anything other than curling up in berth was unappealing.

He shook his helm, pushing himself away from the wall. "Can we just go back?"

Starscream frowned at him.

"Alright," he said. "Let's go."

The moment they reached the room, Jetfire headed straight for the berth and flopped onto it. The dizziness had subsided somewhat, but his helm still hurt and the heat warning hadn't gone away. His fans whirred in his audials.

His spark turned quickly, nearly pulsing. Jetfire brought a hand to his chest. Slowly, the symptoms came together in his processor, and he remembered one of his lectures.

Overcompensation syndrome, they called it—when an underfueled mech refueled more quickly than their systems could handle. It manifested in a variety of ways, and wasn't always consistent, as it was the overarching term for what was really a complex set of issues.

Onset was often delayed. A mech seemed fine, sometimes even felt better than ever, before it crept in and vitals started crashing. But a quick check of his own lessened some of the worry—they weren't declining as rapidly as they could be. He was just underfueled, not starved, so it shouldn't be fatal, even if it was what he assumed it was. It would likely pass, as long as he just laid there.

Still…

"Can you call Glit?" Jetfire asked, pushing himself up a little.

Starscream nodded.

The dizziness faded completely, but the helmache still persisted. Heaviness returned to Jetfire's primary fuel tank in full force, despite his secondary tank being empty. It was supposed to take the overflow, but… well, Jetfire suspected there wasn't actually any.

The door slid open. Glit strode gracefully through the room, the handle of a small medkit held gently in his dentae. He placed it on the edge of the berth. His optics met Jetfire's, but only for a moment. Jetfire offered him his arm.

Glit connected. He hummed, his tail swishing.

"I warned you," he said softly. He let out a sigh, closing his optics for a moment. "This will pass. You're not as far as you could be. When you feel well enough, we'll need to take some line samples so I can see what you're low on."

"Okay," Jetfire said.

It was exactly what he thought. Still, it was good to have confirmation. The clink-clink of heeled pedes travels through the room, and Jetfire was reminded of Starscream's presence. *Slag*. His creator was going to be upset.

But maybe…

"Warned him?" Starscream said, his brow furrowing. "About what?"

Glit glanced at Jetfire before turning his attention to Starscream. His tail lashed.

"That's private medical information," Glit said.

Starscream flicked his wings. "You seemed to have no problem talking about it in front of me just now."

"It's Jetfire's choice to reveal this information to you," Glit said. "Not mine."

Jetfire pushed himself into a sitting position. The ache in his helm grew at the change in posture, but he pushed through it.

"It's okay," Jetfire said. "He can know."

Starscream would be upset, but he wouldn't hurt him, right? A small part of his processor doubted that, trying to push visions of Starscream turning his rays on him to the forefront, but Jetfire ignored it. Starscream was trying to protect him and couldn't take him with him. He said so.

Glit hummed, his ears curling. "Fine. Jetfire was abusing his fuel preservation protocols when my assistant and I found him. We've been working on better habits, but it's not an overnight process."

Starscream's wings drooped, his shoulders going slack. His optics landed on Jetfire as his claws twitched. He didn't seem angry. That was good.

"It's not uncommon among shuttles," Glit said. He glared pointedly at Starscream. "Especially shuttles whose sparks were split from a smaller mech."

Starscream's gaze hardened, his claws curling in and out. "You know."

"Yes, I do," Glit said. "It's not exactly confidential information at this point, but Jetfire told me himself, if that makes you more comfortable. It takes five medics to wrangle the two of you, so I was bound to learn about it."

Starscream sighed, tensing and untensing his plating. Glit watched him for a moment, his tail swishing. Then, Glit licked his lips—an act that almost reminded Jetfire of an anxious dog.

"He isn't the only one that needs an appointment," Glit said.

Starscream's wings fluttered, but there were quickly forced still. He bared his dentae. "Don't start—"

"You haven't seen a medic since your frame replacement," Glit said. "It doesn't have to be me, but I have the tools right here, if you'd prefer to get it over with."

Starscream snarled, but before he could speak, Jetfire did.

"You should," he said.

Starscream's wings twitched, his claws continuing to flex. He tapped his pede and shook his helm with an irritated groan.

"Fine," he said.

Glit moved the medkit to a nearby table and motioned for Starscream to sit. Starscream sat on the edge of the berth, swinging his legs. It was a large berth—big enough to fit several mecha with little issue—so he and Jetfire fit easily. Despite the abundance of space, they were close together, Jetfire scooting even closer. Gently, Starscream rested a hand on Jetfire's leg.

Glit approached, placing his paws on the edge of the berth.

"Let's start with vitals," he said, unfurling his cable.

Starscream removed his arm guard. He stared down at his bare arm, brow furrowed. His plating tensed. Then, as if it had never happened, he relaxed and opened his panel. Glit plugged in.

Jetfire pushed himself off the wall to lean in, ignoring the sharp ache in his helm. Not only was this a medical appointment, it was his creator's medical appointment. He'd sat in on them before, and wanted any information he could glean.

Glit glanced at him, the edges of his lips rising. Jetfire smiled back.

"Your spark is strong as always," Glit said to Starscream. "Everything seems operational. Have you experienced any dizziness, disorientation, itching, or spark pain?"

Starscream shook his helm.

"Good," Glit said. "Your spark has reintegrated well."

"Then there's no cause for worry," Starscream said.

Glit let out a rumble. "These things can change at any moment. Just because you're fine now doesn't mean you'll be fine later. I don't care who you decide to see—*don't* skip your next appointment."

Starscream glared at him. "I won't."

Glit unlinked from Starscream. He reared up, placing his paws on Starscream's arm. He scrutinized the plating before feeling along it.

"They did good work," he said. "Plating is sturdy and thick, but too new for me to tell anything for certain. How have you been processing fuel?"

"My temperature fluctuates sometimes, and I'm a bit weak at the start and end of the day," Starscream said. "But nothing like when you first saw me."

"You'll let someone know if that changes," Glit said.

Starscream nodded, his claws tapping against the berth. "Yes, I *will*."

Glit closed his optics for a moment. His ears flicked. He licked his lips again.

"I know struggles like this are frustrating, and at times undignified," he said. "But we are here to help."

Starscream's claws dug into the berth. No matter what anyone said, Jetfire's creator was stubborn. It probably wouldn't get through to him, but it was a nice attempt. At least he and Skywarp had their mutual 'who can drag the other to the most appointments' competition going.

Glit turned toward Jetfire, optics searing into his from the suddenness, and Jetfire nearly flinched.

"That goes for you as well," Glit said. "Embarrassing or not, trivial or severe—it is our job to help you. Don't forget that."

"I won't," Jetfire said.

That was what he wanted to do, after all—help every mech he could. The realization struck his spark, making his chestplates sting. If a mech came to him with the same struggles he had, he wouldn't view them as stubborn, or paranoid, or dramatic. He wouldn't force them to do anything.

"Good," Glit said, turning back toward Starscream. "You could probably do with some line samples as well, but the need isn't as urgent. I just wanted to ensure your frame was integrating properly."

Glit said his goodbyes, then he was gone. The room fell silent. Jetfire pushed himself into a sitting position, still hot, but no longer dizzy or disoriented. His fuel tank twinged, and he fought not to press his hands into it. It wouldn't help.

Starscream's claws flexed against the berth. He kicked his pedes with a sigh.

"What happened while I was gone?" He asked.

A lot. Too much to explain. Jetfire didn't know what to say.

Starscream's olfactory ridge crinkled. He shook his helm. "I'll start with this one: why don't you want to refuel?"

Jetfire's plating tensed, his temperature increasing as the tension sealed the cracks between, keeping hot air from escaping. His wings lowered.

"I—I don't know," he said.

Skywarp had… well, she *had*, but that wasn't actually when it started. He'd refused fuel before that. It was the last thing he could control, and part of him wanted to let himself wither away just to maintain that control.

"I guess it was the only thing I had," he muttered.

Starscream looked away for a moment, optics dimming.

"The only thing you had," he muttered to himself. He blinked, turning back toward Jetfire. "But you have more now."

It was a statement, but the tone mad fit seem like a question.

"Yeah," Jetfire said. "I do."

Starscream nodded. His claws drifted to his arm guard, running down it.

"These things don't always go away," Starscream said. "But they can get better. They *will* get better."

Something clicked in the back of Jetfire's processor, facts and actions threading together. Carefully, he leaned over, resting a hand on top of the one Starscream had on his arm guard. Starscream's wings shuddered.

"Did you—"

"Yes," Starscream said. "I did. Once, while I was gone. I'd… forgotten the guard."

Jetfire didn't *know* that Starscream hurt himself, but it wasn't difficult to figure out. He showed him the guards while trying to get him to stop his own harmful habits—it was an easy connection to make. They said splitsparks got their personality code from their creators, and it must have been true.

He scooted closer, reaching around Starscream. He moved slowly, giving his creator ample time to wriggle away. Then, he wrapped him in a hug.

"I missed you," Jetfire said.

Starscream shifted in his grip, laying one of his hands on Jetfire's arms.

"I missed you as well," Starscream said.

Jetfire squeezed Starscream—gently, always *gently*—and buried his helm in his shoulder. His creator was *here*.

"Whenever they made me fight, I imagined you protecting me," Jetfire said. His voice wavered. "Telling Prowl to let me go back to medical training, or yelling at Skyfire to leave me alone…"

But he hadn't been there. Starscream was gone, silently executing a plan he never told anyone about. Jetfire's vision grew fuzzy. Everyone who could've kept him safe was gone or didn't bother.

Starscream tensed in his hold. He pushed himself out of it, and Jetfire released him, only for him to turn back around and wrap Jetfire in an embrace of his own. Jetfire returned it.

"I should have been there," Starscream said. "I'll never regret leaving the Autobots, but I do regret leaving *you*. I wish I could've done more."

Jetfire closed his optics. "You killed Galvatron. You ended their war."

"It was supposed to save you and it didn't."

That wasn't…

"You ended their war!" Jetfire said again. "You saved so many lives, did so much *good*—"

"*Good* doesn't matter, Jetfire!"

Jetfire froze. Starscream turned away, shaking his helm.

"It wasn't *good* that saved those lives," Starscream said. "I lied to Galvatron. I manipulated him, and he manipulated me in turn. I stabbed him. It wasn't *gentleness* or *goodness* that killed him—it was violence and deceit."

Jetfire always wanted to be helpful. He always wanted to be kind. He wanted to be *good*. It was failure for him not to be. But if he got his personality coding from Starscream…

"I don't care about some mecha I'm barely ever going to speak to," Starscream said. "I care about you and Skywarp. I just wanted to go home."

Was he ever *good* at all? Was Starscream right? Did goodness not matter?

Jetfire rarely complained. Jetfire always helped. Jetfire wanted to be *good*. But not complaining left him with no one to listen when he needed it. Wanting to help locked him into a life he couldn't escape. Being *good* was what broke him.

"I tried to kill Skyfire," Jetfire muttered.

Starscream didn't startle, nor recoil. He sat comfortably, expression not changing.

"They wouldn't let me go and I just couldn't—there wasn't—"

"It was your only way out," Starscream said. "I know."

The taut wire in Jetfire's mind he didn't know was there snapped. He slumped, plating rattling as he began to shake.

"I asked them to let me go," Jetfire said. "They said no. They lied to me. They locked me up and pointed a blaster at my helm, and I almost wanted them to shoot."

Starscream's wings flicked. He pulled Jetfire closer. Jetfire sank into him—as much as he could at his size, anyway.

"You were defending yourself," Starscream said. "Some mecha don't like that."

"I hurt him," Jetfire said.

"He hurt *you*."

He *did*. That was the problem. But Jetfire hadn't been allowed to hurt him back. He wasn't supposed to. And wasn't attacking someone different to coercion? Was Jetfire even coerced, if he had agreed to it in the first place?

"I said yes when they asked," Jetfire said.

Starscream bared his dentae. "They shouldn't have even asked."

"But I said yes!" Jetfire snapped, his wings hiking. "I said yes… and they wouldn't let me go because I said it."

Starscream's wings lowered. "How were you supposed to know? You've never experienced war. They lied to you. It's not your fault, Jetfire."

The reassurance bounced around in Jetfire's helm. It should've been nice to hear. Instead, he went numb. Why *wasn't* it his fault? He said yes. Until he tried to kill Skyfire, they never did anything he didn't consent to.

Rather than protest, Jetfire sighed, burying his helm in Starscream's shoulder. Somewhere along the journey, a chasm had opened between them. Maybe it had always been there, and he just hadn't noticed it before.

◇◇◇

The hall was quiet—much quieter than the mess hall. Jetfire sat on one of the various rarely used benches that littered the halls. This particular hallway was quite far from the mess hall, or anything, really. It was the perfect place to be alone.

Except he wasn't. Pedesteps assaulted his audials. He turned to the source, plating flaring. A massive figure stared back at him, blue optics narrowed—one moreso than the other. Jetfire glared, but the figure didn't back down.

The mech sat one bench away.

"Why are you here?" Jetfire hissed.

Skyfire waved a full cube of energeon at him, a frown creasing his face. Jetfire flinched away.

"Can a mech not refuel in peace?" Skyfire said. "I didn't expect you to be here."

"No one ever comes here," Jetfire said.

Skyfire opened his cube with a pop. "Exactly."

Jetfire stared down at his own meal, which rested on a tray on his lap. The jelly had already begun to melt, leaking into the food surrounding it. It had barely been touched.

He couldn't bring himself to eat it.

"Why me?" Jetfire said, still staring down.

"Why you what?" Skyfire said casually between sips.

Jetfire flicked his wings, a tingle irritation passing through him. Skyfire should've known.

"Why did you make me part of Safeguard?" Jetfire said. "Why did you lie to me?"

Skyfire's brow furrowed. He pulled his cube away from his face, his lips falling into a frown.

"It was you or me," he said. "Well, you or me and Star."

"So you picked me."

Skyfire nodded. "Yes. Though, it didn't end up how I expected."

Jetfire's claws dug into the bench.

"How did you expect it to go?"

Really, how *did* he expect it to end? How much of this cruelty was just selfishness?

Skyfire raised his helm, staring off with a sigh. "Star, Thunder, and I would be able to stay away from the fighting. We would be safe. *You* didn't factor into it at all. I didn't even think about Jetstorm…"

He hadn't thought about Jetstorm? Then why was he so kind to him and so callous toward Jetfire?

Skyfire closed his optics and shook his helm. "Instead, Star was killed, you tried to kill me, my conjunx left me, and so did Jetstorm."

The berth creaked beneath Jetfire's claws. He forced himself to release it.

"Do you think you deserve that?" Jetfire asked.

Skyfire stared at him.

"You ruined my life," Skyfire said.

It wasn't an answer.

"Did you ever stop and think that maybe *you* ruined *mine*?" Jetfire hissed. He flinched at the venom in his own voice, wings lowering as soon as they had raised.

Skyfire's face contorted into a scowl. He leaned forward, his damaged optic—repaired but not quite the right shape or color—catching the light.

"You're a corpse," he said. "An alternate version of my Star's sick attempt at playing house."

Jetfire leaned away, baring his teeth. The pieces shifted in the back of his helm, forming a new picture. He bit back a laugh.

"You hate me because I'm made from you," he said.

It finally made sense. Jetfire *did* laugh this time. He had an answer. There was a *why* to all of this, and it was the pettiest one he could imagine!

Skyfire spluttered as Jetfire continued to laugh, the loss of composure only confirming his suspicions. Surely, Skyfire understood that Jetfire had no choice in how he was created? That if he had his way, he would be lithe and swift like his creator, not large and slow?

'It was you or me.'

Skyfire was afraid. That was clear now. He looked into Jetfire's optics and saw a twisted mirror of his own, rather than an independent mech.

There was no reconciling this. Not that Jetfire even wanted to try.

He stood up, tray of untouched fuel in hand, and strode past Skyfire. At the edge of the hall, he turned back toward him. Skyfire stared at him with a furrowed brow, wings twitching. Jetfire grinned at him.

"I hope I never see you again," Jetfire said.

He turned down the hall without waiting for a reply. His spark pulsed in his chest, the sound crashing into his audials. How hadn't he noticed it before? His plating was tight, nearly aching.

He continued down the hall, staring down at the tray as his frame grew numb. Frag, he hadn't eaten anything. He didn't want to. But was he really going to waste it all?

The temptation to throw his tray into the nearest waste receptacle grew with every step. His fuel lines practically sung with energy, his spark squirming. The pit had long crept up on him —it enveloped him now, claws digging in.

"Hey, Jetfire!"

Jetfire flinched, but quickly forced himself to calm. He knew that voice.

"Jetstorm?" He said, turning to face him.

Jetstorm increased his pace as Jetfire slowed his. They walked side by side. In his far hand, Jetstorm held a half-empty cube of energeon. Jetfire averted his gaze, the phantom feeling of liquid in his mouth.

"How're you doing?" Jetstorm asked. "Haven't seen you much today."

Jetstorm was an early riser. He was up almost as early as Soundwave, but somehow managed to never wake anyone else up when he extracted himself from the berth. Conversely, Jetfire

only got up if he had a reason to. Right now, the main reason was not wanting Skywarp or Starscream to pester him about a lack of activity. When he didn't have classes or training, there really wasn't much to do.

Jetfire shrugged. "I'm fine."

Jetstorm moved closer. Briefly, his optics fell to Jetfire's untouched tray, his wings flicking. Jetfire pulled the tray closer to himself.

"Wanna sit for a bit?" Jetstorm asked. He led his cube up, the liquid inside sloshing. "I've gotta finish breakfast."

Jetfire nodded. The sat down at one of the benches, and yet again Jetfire was faced with the prospect of refueling. Jetstorm's helm brushed against Jetfire's shoulder. Startled, Jetfire leaned away, before recognizing what the nuzzle was and returning it.

"I've been talking with Bluestreak lately," Jetstorm said after taking a sip of his cube.

"Bluestreak?"

Jetfire had seen the mech in the medbay a couple times, mostly minor injuries. They hadn't truly interacted.

"Yeah!" Jetstorm said. "He's a real nice mech. A bit chatty, though. Can hardly get a word in sometimes."

Jetfire smiled. "Not like someone I know at all."

Jetstorm elbowed him, a grin spreading across his own face. "Hey, hey, hey!"

"It's true," Jetfire said.

It was a lot easier when someone else was carrying the conversation. Jetfire never minded listening. In truth, he reveled in it. Quiet and listening was where he was most comfortable.

Jetstorm took another sip of his cube. The brief silence reminded Jetfire of his own untouched meal. He forced himself to scoop up a portion of it. Before he could put it back, he shoved it into his mouth.

"But, really," Jetstorm said. "A nice mech. He used to hang out with Star."

Jetstorm's wings drooped. He had been close with Star, hadn't he? For Jetfire, Star was one of the mecha holding him hostage, but for Jetstorm, she was just one of his creators. The contrast sliced through his processor.

Yet again, he had to wonder how mecha could simultaneously be so kind and so cruel.

"You miss her," Jetfire said.

Jetstorm clacked his claws against his cube. "Yeah."

He stared down at his claws, wings perfectly still. Then, he shot upward.

"I visited Glit's the other day," he said. "Pharma said he wants to see you again. Rattrap said the retrorats miss you."

Since fleeing the Autobots, Jetstorm and Pharma had bonded—nowhere near the same kind of bond that Jetfire and Pharma had, but it was undeniable. Jetstorm was eager to learn about the mech that made him, and Pharma wanted to know his creation. Although plenty of space had been allocated across both worlds, Glit, Pharma, Rattrap, and Breakdown elected to stay together in a lab only slightly larger than the one they had on Earth. The retrorats had a room now, rather than free-roaming.

Jetfire had only been there once.

"I'm sure they do," he said.

"You should come with me next time," Jetstorm said.

Jetfire shook his helm. "I don't—"

"Don't have time?" Jetstorm said, frowning. "I *know* you don't have anything to do. You can't sit in the room forever."

Jetfire hung his helm, closing his optics with a sigh. "I'm tired."

"You're *always* tired," Jetstorm said.

Jetfire put down the spoonful of fuel he didn't realize he was holding. He *was* always tired—ever since that fragging reformat. But he knew that wasn't why.

He had everything he wanted now. He was home, he was free, Starscream was with them again, and he was training to be a medic. Why wasn't he happy?

"Look," Jetstorm said, resting a hand on Jetfire's elbow. "I'm going to a movie night tonight. It'll just be sitting around, and you can leave whenever if you don't like it. Can you please come?"

"Sure," Jetfire muttered.

What else was he doing, anyway?

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When Jetstorm said 'movie night,' Jetfire assumed something like the ones he'd been to before—small and private. As Jetstorm led him outside, Jetfire's trepidation grew. They sat down in a field full of mecha, and Jetfire regretted agreeing to come. Murmurs from the waiting crowd reached his audials and he fought not to cover them, completely unprepared for a crowd.

[It'll get quieter when the movie starts,] Jetstorm sent to him.

Despite knowing him for a relatively short time compared to others Jetfire knew, Jetstorm could always pick up on when Jetfire was upset. If it weren't so easy for others to miss, Jetfire would've assumed it was his EM field, especially since Jetstorm described him as 'tingly' before. But his apprehension was often ignored by others.

Was it the gestalt bond, then? Jetfire couldn't sense EM fields, so it would make sense that if a connection was made through them, Jetfire wouldn't be able to feel it, but Jetstorm could. But really, Jetfire was just trying to distract himself from the noise. He said he'd come, and here he was.

If he were with Starscream, Jetfire would've whined and pleaded and they would've gone back, because his creator hated crowds, too. But this was Jetstorm, who wouldn't leave with him, and would just try to get him to go some other time.

"Hey, Jetstorm!"

Jetfire froze. He *knew* that voice. He fought not to bare his dentae, his wings shifting wide without his permission as he turned toward the source.

Sunstreaker approached, Sideswipe trailing behind him. Jetstorm waved to them.

[I thought you stopped hanging out with them,] Jetfire sent.

[Yeah… they need to tell you something.]

What could they possibly want to tell him? Sunstreaker and Sideswipe settled next to them. There was a noticeable gap between them and Jetfire, but Jetfire didn't mind. They should've gone further away.

""You guys should—"

"Yeah," Sunstreaker said, cutting Jetstorm off. He turned toward Jetfire. "We're sorry."

Jetfire dug his claws into the seams of his fingers. "For what?"

He needed to hear him say it.

"We were wrong about Seekers," Sunstreaker said. "We only ever saw them as monsters, but Starscream and Slipstream took out Galvatron."

Was that really what it took? They couldn't just realize that Seekers were mecha too? They had to see them end the war for their minds to change?

Whatever. There were two less hateful mecha in the world.

"Okay," Jetfire said.

Sunstreaker leaned closer. "Just *'okay?'*"

"Just that," Jetfire said.

What else did they expect from him? Forgiveness? He wasn't the one they intended to harm. He was just an incidental target.

"So can we hang out with you?" Sunstreaker said. Sideswipe elbowed him, and he hissed at him in return.

That's what this was about? They wanted some blessing so they could be friends with Jetstorm again? Jetfire fought a laugh and shrugged.

"Do whatever you want," he said.

Sunstreaker scrunched his olfactory ridge. "That's not an answer."

"It's the answer you're getting," Jetfire said.

Jetstorm glanced between them, wings fluttering. He turned to Sunstreaker.

"He means it's okay," he said.

Sunstreaker and Sideswipe exchanged glances, warily scooting closer. Jetfire turned away, picking at the ground beneath him. He lifted a small rock and—there! Tiny boltbugs skittered away, their plating shining as they fled. One lagged behind, and before it could disappear like the others, Jetfire stuck his finger in front of it.

He raised his hand back to his face, the boltbug clinging onto it. It was so small. He wouldn't need any force to crush it. If it crawled between his joints, it would be dead before it knew what happened.

Why did he have to be so large? Why did the world have to be so delicate?

Something nudged him in the side. He muffled a squeak, the pressure causing pain to shoot through his internals despite its gentleness. Jetstorm stared up at him, his wings low.

"Sorry," he said, motioning toward the now-lit screen ahead. "The movie is starting."

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When Jetfire first came back, Hook greeted him with little more than a dip of the head and a mumbled hello. He didn't treat the moment as anything special—it was the same sort of greeting he gave every day. It was as if nothing had happened. Jetfire appreciated it.

After much waiting and persuading, they finally let him back into the medbay not as a patient, but as an assistant. It was good to be useful again, and Jetfire finally found himself with a reason to leave his berth every day. This particular day was slow, but there was always plenty to do regardless—cleaning, maintenance, more cleaning, preparations for the next day, inventory, and even more cleaning.

Jetfire and Hook were on inventory. While Hook counted all of their patches, Jetfire checked the various medicines they had stored away to ensure none were expired. He marked off

another set, tossing an expired bottle into a spare box. It would be disposed of properly when they were done.

"I heard you have a partner now," Hook said.

Partner…?

Jetfire must've made a face, because Hook sighed and shook his helm.

"A gestaltmate," he clarified.

"Oh," Jetfire said, tossing another bottle into the box. "Yeah. I do."

"He seems like a nice mech."

Jetfire scribbled down his count. "He is."

Did they really have to talk about this?

"I was part of a gestalt once," Hook said. "They were a bunch of idiots, but there were no mecha like them."

A smile tugged at Hook's face. Despite his words, his tone was warm.

"What happened to them?" Jetfire asked, because clearly something had.

Hook paused, turning toward Jetfire. "They died in the war. All of them."

Jetfire's wings twitched. He looked away. What was he supposed to say?

"What was it like when they were alive?" Jetfire asked.

"Constant noise in my helm," Hook said. "Every moment of every day. I could feel them and they could feel me. It was like we were always next to each other."

Jetfire's bond with Jetstorm was nothing like that. It was all numbers, and he could hide those when he needed. But Jetstorm always seemed to know how he felt…

Was it because he couldn't sense EM fields? Was that why their relationship was so uneven? Why Jetstorm seemed to always know what Jetfire was thinking and feeling but Jetfire couldn't even guess what Jetstorm was?

"It's not like that for me," Jetfire said, closing his optics.

"You're…" Hook paused, brow furrowing as he searched for the words. "Different. But I know Jetstorm can feel you. You were both born on Earth, weren't you?"

Jetfire didn't really want to talk about Earth, but he wanted to talk about his bond with Jetstorm even less, so he took the out.

"Different Earths," Jetfire said. "But yeah."

"Do you miss it?" Hook asked.

Did he miss it? Jetfire's time on Earth was short, but so was his time existing in general. Until they'd gone through the portal, Earth was a wonderful place full of fascinating life. Now…

Jetfire wasn't sure what he thought. He shrugged.

Hook hummed. "Well, with Pharma staying close to Ratchet, and Glit and Breakdown over here, the other Earth's Decepticons are low on medics. Slipstream sent me an offer to stay with them. Do you want to come with me?"

Did he…? Jetfire wrung his hands.

"You've been somber lately," Hook said. "The Autobots and Decepticons on the other Earth are still separated. I figured it would be a nice break for you. And—" he dipped his head in a mock flinch. "Though I've tried to conceal it, I did miss you."

Of all the things, it was that remark to bring static to Jetfire's vision. Hook *missed him*. When he first woke, Hook was the mech he spent the most time with, whether it was staying in the medbay by Starscream's side as he recovered from creating him, or learning basic things about the world.

"I want to come with you," Jetfire said.

He would have to leave Starscream behind, but it was bound to happen eventually. During his time with the other world's Autobots, he had already been without him. And though Starscream cared for him deeply, there were some things he just couldn't understand.

Jetstorm would want to go home eventually, anyway. Thundercracker already went back to the Autobots, and Skyfire had lingered in this world for an uncomfortably long time. Whether it would be to rejoin Thundercracker or get away from Skyfire, they would leave.

Jetfire was never afraid of Decepticons, just of strangers. The other world's Decepticons had only seen Safeguard on the battlefield. They wouldn't know him as Jetfire the newspark, or Jetfire, the second half of safeguard, or Jetfire, Starscream's 'twisted attempt at playing house.'

It would be a fresh start. And maybe, he could finally be something other than *not an Autobot*.

Hook smiled. "I'll make the arrangements, then."

Finally, he would be free.

Chapter End Notes

Jetfire: I tried to kill someone :(
Starscream, murder attempts georg: That's perfectly acceptable.

See you in the final fic, Electric Fence, if you choose to continue. But as with the previous one: you can stop reading here if you want.

▶ A description of the original plans for Blind Spot and how they turned into this fic

I'm tempted to talk about some of the real-life ideas this fic draws from, but I think it's best to just let people pick up on what they can in that regard.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!