Electric Fence

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Electric Fence

by rnn

Summary

The fragile peace Slipstream, freshly appointed Prime of her world, established is put into jeopardy when a group of mecha wearing the Decepticon brand as masks attempt to kidnap her. With possible traitors lurking at every corner, how can she maintain peace?

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Slipstream had never been wanted. That was the truth. Galvatron only offered her the position of Air Commander, and later Second in Command, because all of his other candidates rejected it. Every step of her life, she was second best—the last resort option for when every other had been exhausted.

So, as she stood by the doorway as mecha conversed, she attempted to sneak away. There was no place for her here, where mecha embraced and smiled and cried. But she was beckoned, so she obeyed. There was only one mech worthy of giving her instructions with Galvatron eliminated.

Starscream stood before her, wings relaxed. His new frame, pristine and undamaged, shone in the light. A smile graced his lips as he motioned to the mech beside him.

Electricity seared Slipstream's lines. The mech that stared back at her was a ghost. Wide optics, open smile—no, she died long ago. This wasn't her. It was the version of her from this other world.

She offered a hand.

"You could be mine, if you wanted to be."

And *oh*, how Slipstream *wanted*. Every night she spent under the tyrant's pede, a locked door between her and the last remains of the only mech she felt safe around, she yearned. She wished to go back, wished for the war to end—anything to see Nova again.

But this wasn't her Nova, and she wasn't her Slipstream. When this Nova Storm realized that, she would be disappointed. Slipstream would be cast out again, yet another item added to her long list of rejections.

She backed away.

[You'll never have good things if you can't let yourself have them.]

Of *course* Starscream would chime in. He glared at her, a barely suppressed scowl on his face. She was struck by a realization: Starscream had his own mecha. He didn't need her and never had. Now that he was back home, he didn't have to stay with her.

He would be happier with them. They were what he *truly* wanted, after all. Slipstream was just an interim replacement. With time, he would realize that.

The hand was still in front of her. She turned away. There would be no fooling her this time.

Not again.

ΔΔΔ

Her office was quiet, but her helm wasn't. Ever since that infernal thing attached itself to her, there was a constant buzzing in her helm. Background processes ran, analyzing every little moment. The fragging thing had *feelings*, and judging by the aggressive hum, it was *displeased*.

Why? She couldn't say. She had a successful negotiation that morning. The humans had finally allowed them to build cybertronian signal boosters under the requirement that they were aided in adapting those signals into their own technology. Slipstream saw no reason to deny it—direct communication with the humans would only make relations easier.

Prowl was more reluctant, citing concerns that the humans could use this information against them. Apparently, in the other world, they had. But this world was not that one, and with twice the amount of cybertronians capable of fighting back, the prospect would be unappealing.

Wheeljack—an eccentric mech she learned was the head of the Cybertronian Revival Initiative when he casually waltzed into one of the negotiations—was ecstatic. He eagerly volunteered his mecha to work with the humans, which saved Slipstream and Elita from having to figure out which mecha from their factions to spare—something Prowl would make immensely difficult.

The angry hum increased, and Slipstream caught herself bringing a hand to her chest. She let out an irritated hiss that deflated into a sigh. Stupid thing. Why did it choose her, of all mecha? Didn't it know the only reason she was leader of the Decepticons was that no one else wanted the job after Galvatron died? If it were up to her, she'd be somewhere secluded on the other world's revived Cybertron.

'You want to abandon your soldiers because you don't like them.'

Starscream's words played in the back of her processor, almost as if summoned. She pulled her hand away from the desk as her claws caught on its surface, leaving small marks. She flicked her wings.

Who did he think he was? What right did he have to give her hope only to take it away?

'I ended up alone and miserable. You shouldn't take the same path.'

And where was she *now*? At the helm of a faction she didn't want to lead, with some stupid artifact humming in her chest that made everyone think she was supposed to be there, without any wingmates or allies by her side. The Matrix vibrated, searing heat emanating from it, traveling through her plating like an electric shock.

Slipstream dug her claws into her chestplates and bared her dentae, hissing at the Matrix, "Shut the frag up!"

A knock sounded from the door. Slipstream nearly flinched out of her chair. She rose from it, pressing a button on the keypad to open the door.

On the other side was Ramjet. He shuffled in place, his wings twitching. He towered over her, yet still refused to meet her gaze. She glared up at him.

"What is it?" She said, trying and failing to keep annoyance from seeping into her voice.

She wasn't angry with Ramjet. He just had bad timing. The mech had been nothing but helpful since she asked him to be her secretary. Granted, neither of them actually knew what a secretary was supposed to do. But if they admitted that, they'd be deemed incompetent. Slipstream may not have wanted this job, but she wasn't going to ruin her already abysmal reputation just to get out of it.

"Hook is here!" Ramjet said, voice somewhere between a whisper and a hiss.

Ah, right. She'd asked around for a medic, since the Decepticons were lacking in that department—thanks to Galvatron's 'the weak shall be purged' mentality. But he wasn't supposed to be here just yet.

"He's early," Slipstream said. "Why should that matter?"

Ramjet glanced over his shoulder, wings barely twitching out of the way. For a tall, battle-worn warframe, he was certainly twitchy.

'He shouldn't hurt you. That's just plain fragging stupid.'

She… may have been to blame for that. Once, Ramjet was as arrogant as his wingmate Thrust, possibly even more so. He scoffed at her plans and laughed at every small flub, always there with a mocking jeer. Before she became Winglord, he would take her rations.

He said it was because she didn't know what she was doing. Clearly, an experienced warframe like him deserved the position more than a Seeker, *especially* a domestic Seeker. She tried not to care, but when the same words came out of Galvatron's vocalizer, she couldn't ignore it. He had to be silenced.

Now, he stood before her, hunched as he swayed awkwardly. He glanced backward again.

"He brought someone with him," he said.

Slipstream hummed in displeasure and headed down the hall. Ramjet trailed after her, wings held low.

"He didn't inform us, if you're coming here to tell me *now*. Is it anyone we know?" Slipstream said.

"A shuttle," Ramjet said. "White, black, and red."

Jetfire? Slipstream didn't know any other shuttles with that color scheme. Still, she had to confirm it. Finally, they reached the entrance. Hook stood, a scowl on his face. Beside him

was Jetfire, wings low and arms drawn close, as if trying to disappear into himself.

Acid Storm and Ion Storm stood before them, wings wide. As Slipstream approached, they turned toward her.

"He brought an *Autobot*!" Acid Storm hissed.

Jetfire's plating bristled. "I'm *not* an Autobot!"

"He's not," Hook confirmed. "Jetfire was created and raised among Decepticons."

Acid Storm reached forward, poking Jetfire's wing. Jetfire flinched backward, his wing hitting them on the helm as it flicked.

"Then where's his badge?" They said, rubbing their helm. "He was with the Autobots before."

Acid Storm was right. But Slipstream knew Jetfire was a medic, and they needed all the help they could get. Besides, this was the second time he had rejected alignment with the Autobots, so he clearly hadn't been with them by choice. Slipstream stepped forward.

"The war is over," she said. "We may not allow Autobots here, but Jetfire is *not* an Autobot. He said so himself."

Jetfire's plating relaxed.

"Although—" It tensed again. "I wasn't informed he would be coming."

Hook frowned. "It was a last moment arrangement. I assumed you wouldn't mind."

"*I* don't," she said. She motioned toward Acid Storm and Ion Storm. "But my mecha aren't used to peace. We don't trust strangers."

Hook dipped his helm. "I apologize."

Slipstream flicked her wings. A small crowd had gathered at the edges of the room, mecha watching warily with narrowed optics and widened wings. Acid Storm and Ion Storm may have been the first to confront them, but clearly others were disturbed by their arrival.

"It's fine," she said. She waved the crowd away. "Everything is fine."

Now noticed, the crowd slowly and awkwardly began to disperse. Eventually, the group was left with only the prying optics of their own. Energy built beneath Slipstream's plating, crackling as silence passed over the group. Her claws coasted gently over her arms before she could stop herself.

"How is Starscream?" She asked, unable to fight it any longer.

Jetfire smiled, but the nervous wringing of his hands betrayed him. "He's fine. Everything reintegrated well."

"That's good," Slipstream said.

The energy dissipated. Starscream was *fine*. He was with mecha who cared about him—who meant more to him than she ever could. And she was okay with that. It was fine. *Good*, even.

Slipstream turned away.

"I'm going back to my office," she said. "Please show them around, Ramjet."

Ramjet nodded emphatically before proceeding to do just that. He led them out of the room, wings twitching. He was *always* twitchy.

She *made* him that way. Why did the thought make her want to claw her spark out now when in the past she was *proud* of breaking him?

She sighed and headed toward the hall.

"Slipstream?"

Slipstream stopped, flicking a wing. Of course Acid Storm would have something to say. She just had to be kept from retreating.

"What is it?" Slipstream hissed.

Acid Storm's wings lowered. She took a step back. "Can we… talk?"

"About *what*?"

Acid Storm and Ion Storm had abandoned her, yet Acid Storm had the gall to nearly ruin her and Starscream's assassination plan by attempting to *save* her for once. When she was beneath Galvatron's pedes, begging for him to open the door? Nothing. But now—

Crackling pain spread through Slipstream's chestplate. She froze, bringing a hand to her chest. Her claws dug in. They grew moist with energeon.

"Slipstream?"

Slipstream turned away, fighting not to shake. She knew what this was. That stupid fragging artifact. What did it want? Why did it choose to act up so severely *now*?

Claws brushed her shoulder.

"Are you okay?" Acid Storm asked, brow furrowed. Behind her, Ion Storm's optics were wide.

Slipstream forced her pedes forward.

"I'm fine," she said.

Only when she reached the hall did she allow herself to slump, claws still digging in. She forced herself back into her office, immediately curling up in her chair. The pain, energy—

whatever it was—continued to crackle.

For a moment, she was *small*. Not Slipstream the Winglord, but Slipstream the domestic Seeker with a boundary collar and defective navigation systems, curled up on the edge of the border as rain fell. She closed her optics, trying to force the thoughts from her processor.

This would pass. Whatever the Matrix wanted didn't matter. It couldn't keep doing this to her forever.

But between reminders of the past and the haze of pain, Slipstream missed her borrowed wingmates. They loved Nova Storm, not her, and that was readily apparent. But they used to cuddle with her every night. Acid Storm would stroke her wings while Ion Storm entwined himself with her.

And then being touched started to hurt. Every casual brush was an electric zap, every gentle hand a crushing grip. Embraces became entrapment, making her spark pulse. So she clawed and spat and yelled and scrambled away, and they didn't want her anymore.

'It was her fault,' they said.

'What were they going to do with her?' They asked.

The worst part was that they were *right*. She was the one who tried to kill Galvatron, thinking him an unfit madman. It was his plan that led to Nova Storm's death in the first place! But poor planning skills and a penchant for madness mattered little when a fusion cannon and fists strong enough to crush metal evened the playing field.

She never stood a chance.

His optics had gone offline. She swore his spark flickered out from the hole in its chamber. Yet, somehow he was able to grab her pedes and rise, dragging her to her doom.

'This is what happens to traitors!' He yelled, holding her helm in one hand.

She couldn't flee. Her joints were crushed. She was lucky he left her wings attached. So many optics—*all* of the Decepticons—stared at her. He crossed the room and tossed her at Acid Storm and Ion Storm.

'You,' he snarled. *'Take care of this.'*

They left her in the medbay. When she returned, the door to their shared room was locked. She knocked, pleaded, claws, but it stubbornly remained shut. She only stopped when she wore herself out, slumped in the hallway as she fell into recharge.

When she woke again, the door was still locked. They didn't want her. They never had. But eventually, when her injuries healed, they took pity on her and let her back in.

And so the cycle began. She would stay with them, Galvatron would find some fault with her, she would be punished, they would be angry and refuse to let her in, then they would cave.

Galvatron may be dead now, but she recognized the pattern. It was her turn to shut *them* out, or they'd eventually just find a reason to be angry with her again and it would all start over.

She had no one. Everyone hated her, and those that didn't left. Closeness only hurt. Proximity was a weapon. She needed to remind herself of that.

She curled in on herself, the pain in her chest refusing to abate.

"Stupid fragging Matrix," she muttered.

ΔΔΔ

Her chestplates still hurt by the time another meeting was scheduled. The pain came in and out, sometimes a minor twinge and other times debilitating. She still didn't know what the Matrix wanted, so she did her best to ignore it. As she stood at the entrance to the Decepticon base, she massaged her chest. This time, it was fairly mild, but still enough to make her want to dig her claws into her plating.

Where was Ramjet? He had to come. She insisted—he was the closest thing she had to a second in command, title or not. He was supposed to be here.

And, no. Her plating didn't tense at the thought of flying alone. She wasn't afraid of getting lost. She didn't fear the terrible disorientation that came from having no one to fly with her. She could do just fine on her own. It was just that she needed to make sure *Ramjet* made it.

The claws that weren't buried in her chestplate coasted along her arm. She had flown to the spacebridge before. She knew the way. But the meeting, once they got to Cybertron, was being held in a newly constructed building.

She pulled up the image of it Starscream sent her. She just had to memorize—

"Sorry!"

Slipstream startled, turning around. Ramjet ran toward her, wings set low. She glared at him. He wilted.

"At least we aren't late *yet*," Slipstream said.

"I'm s—"

Slipstream flicked her wings. "Stop apologizing and get in the air!"

"Right!"

Ramjet saluted, then leaped. He took off into the sky. After a moment, Slipstream followed him. Every mech understood that she preferred to follow, but they didn't understand *why*. She wanted to keep it that way. When asked, if glaring didn't make them surrender, she spun a quick lie—if she were at the front, she'd be an easier target.

In reality, she kept her sensors fixed on Ramjet, noting landmarks as they passed by. One wrong turn would leave her completely lost. She couldn't stray from the path.

Cybertronians had innate positioning systems. Those who traveled in space actually had two—one for space travel and one for planetary travel. Since Slipstream was supposed to be a Seeker, which weren't built to leave the atmosphere, she was intended to have one. Instead, she had *none*.

Planetary positioning systems used the electrical field of the body and surrounding ones—whether planet, moon, or something else—to determine where exactly on the planet an individual was. Any cybertronian could call up their position by coordinates at any time, and save and share coordinates, sorting them by body.

Slipstream lacked the ability to determine her own coordinates. Sure, she could save sets of them, but that was useless when she had no idea where they were in relation to her. Still, that ability helped her *pretend* she could—when others asked, she could provide as long as *someone else* had given her the position first.

When the spacebridge finally came into view, Slipstream blasted ahead, determined to arrive in front. Ramjet fell back. The first few times they flew together, Ramjet alternated between forcing himself ahead and forcing himself behind. Slipstream's odd habit of hanging back until the last moment was known, but it was one thing to know her habits and another to break one's own.

When Dirge was alive, Ramjet flew at the front of his wingmates. After Dirge's death, he stayed behind Thrust, who… when had Slipstream last seen Thrust? She couldn't recall.

They passed through the spacebridge. It opened up into a bustling town, half-repaired buildings and all. A few mecha glanced their way, and one of the spacebridge technicians nodded at them. Ramjet smiled back at them, his wings fluttering.

Revulsion rose inside Slipstream, and she scoffed. The Matrix hummed angrily in her chest. She forced her hand back as she found herself digging her claws in yet again. Why couldn't the stupid thing just keep its thoughts to itself?

[Are you okay?] From Ramjet. Slipstream sighed.

[I'm fine. Let's go.]

She leaped into the sky, taking off before he could press any further. It was only a few moments after she blindly surged forward that she remembered she didn't know where she was going. She slowed down, coasting on the air. Eventually, the roar of an engine signaled Ramjet's approach.

He slowed down as he got closer, keeping himself behind her. Slipstream…

She kept going forward. She didn't know where else she was supposed to go. Even if she had remembered any of the cities and locations from her world's Cybertron, they would do her no good—everything had been destroyed and rebuilt.

[That's… not the right direction.]

Of course it wasn't! She needed to throw him off.

[If you're so good at navigating, then go ahead. Lead.]

That would work.

[Um—]

Was he clueless?

[Go. Ahead.]

Hesitantly, Ramjet increased his speed until he was ahead of her. He made a slight turn, and she mimicked it.

Eventually, the building was in sight. Slipstream pulled up the image Starscream sent her to double check before surging forward. She landed before Ramjet, heading for the entrance. Since the rooms were numbered, the meeting room was relatively easy to find. She took the first open seat, Ramjet sitting awkwardly beside her.

Wheeljack had a mess of loose parts at his seat. Starscream leaned toward them, wings fluttering. An unpleasant prickle spread through Slipstream's plating. She ignored it.

Optimus—the Prime—er, *other* Prime, since she was technically one as well—sat next to Megatron, who nearly eclipsed him. Megatron's optics fell on hers, and Slipstream fought not to recoil. She couldn't cower like some pathetic glitchmouse no matter how much she desired to. It didn't matter that the mech was large and powerful and looked just like Galvatron before he got the Matrix.

Windblade sat opposite to Wheeljack. She leaned back in her chair, wings twitching. Every few moments, she glared at Wheeljack, who paid her no attention. Briefly, she glanced at Slipstream, then quickly averted her gaze with a frown.

Elita and Prowl sat together, though their chairs were positioned further apart than the others, making the spacing uneven. In the past few negotiations in their home universe, Elita and Prowl sat apart, but Slipstream assumed it was just their preference. Was there tension in her world's Autobot command?

She didn't have time to wonder. Optimus spoke, and the meeting began. It was uneventful, overall—mostly just summarizing the various projects going on across universes. It could've just been a message, but the mecha of the other world seemed to have a preference for meeting face to face.

Wheeljack's CRI was working with the humans on signal boosters. She already knew that. Apparently, they were also aiding conservation efforts for creatures on Earth. Optimus and Megatron's Autobots were proud to announce new construction efforts, as if that wasn't something that couldn't already be assumed from the very building they met in.

Windblade's CRI was studying spark-coded traits, and the mechanics of the spark. At the announcement, Starscream tensed, claws digging into the table with a quiet noise. But he didn't speak.

What about that research was so upsetting? Slipstream didn't know enough to tell.

It didn't matter at the moment. It was her turn to speak. Slipstream removed her hands from her arms, where they had already begun to rub nervously. Her plating tingled, electricity coursing through it.

"As Wheeljack already stated, we successfully negotiated for the placement of signal boosters on Earth," Slipstream said. "We also—"

Something in her chest snapped, the angry hum returning tenfold. She gripped the table, fighting not to curl in on herself then and there.

"We also received our new medics," Slipstream forced the words out.

Optimus's optics caught hers, his brow furrowing. He cut in, drawing the attention away from her. It was Starscream's turn to speak for his Decepticons, reading a prepared statement on behalf of the other members of command, who were unable to attend for various reasons.

After that, the meeting turned to discussing future developments. Slipstream did her best to focus, but words jumbled together as all she could think about was the stabbing pain in her chest.

[Does the Matrix hurt?]

A comm from… Optimus?

[None of your business.]

Just leave her alone.

[It used to hurt for me, too. It's trying to tell you something. You need to find out what that is.]

[Do you think I haven't realized that?]

The line went silent.

[I apologize. Know that you can speak with me at any time.]

Slipstream was tempted to roll her optics, but didn't want to draw any attention to herself. Why would she want to speak with him? Just because they had the same obnoxious relic humming in their chests? She never asked for this. She just wanted to matter for once.

The meeting came to a close, and Slipstream sped into the hallway, dodging any attempts to speak with her regardless of the source. She didn't care. She needed to get *out*. Go somewhere—*anywhere*—secluded enough for her to curl up in until the pain passed.

That was how she ended up in a storage closet, huddled behind a stack of boxes. In the darkness, only her optics shone. A flicker of light appeared in the corner of her vision, and she jumped, plating flaring, but it was gone the moment she searched for it.

The door flew open.

"She's in here, they saw it on the cameras—"

The voice was familiar, but she couldn't place it. The outlines of two mecha appeared through the door, glare from the light hiding their faces. Slipstream rose to a crouch, one claw still digging into her chestplates as she aimed the other toward the intruders.

What did they want with her?

"There's no need for that," one of them said. "Just come quietly."

Slipstream fired a warning shot. The mech sighed.

"The hard way it is," the mech said, lunging for her.

Slipstream sidestepped the attack, claws at the ready. She swung, scratching at the mech's face—but it didn't connect. Something was over the mech's face. It caught the light. *A mask*.

It resembled the Decepticon insignia. Slipstream dodged another attempt to seize her, kicking the other mech in the abdomen. They, too, wore the mask. What was this?

Another retaliation revealed a set of wings on one of her attackers. They were too large to be a Seeker—a warframe, then? There weren't many of them left in her world, but there could be more in this one. The other was a grounder of some sort; she swore there were tires somewhere.

The warframe grabbed her again. She kicked against them, activating her thrusters. This proved to be a mistake. With a crack, her helm smashed into the wall. Was she really that close to it?

In her daze, the mech pinned her. As her vision fuzzed, her panel forcefully opened. A tube was clumsily shoved into her secondary intake, and she realized something: they herded her toward the wall on purpose. She struggled against the mech, and her helm was slammed into the wall again.

"Watch it!" The grounder said. "Tarn wants her functional."

Tarn? She didn't recognize that name.

"Yeah, well, should've given us something that acts faster, then!" The warframe said.

The grounder sighed. "If you frag this up, we'll both be slag."

Slipstream was pushed further into the wall. Her limbs were numb, unresponsive to any commands she sent. Her mouth tasted bitter. Something in her fuel tank burned. Dark spots

crawled at the edges of her vision, slowly overtaking it.

"It's working," the warframe said. "It'll all be fine—"

Everything faded away.

Chapter End Notes

I still really like this one! Kinda sad that it got so little attention when I shared it on the archive, ngl.

▶ Original author's note

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The ground was humming. Why was it humming? Slipstream opened her optics. Everything was blurry. So blurry. She was on some sort of floor. Made of panels. A ship, maybe?

She rolled over, muffling a groan. Her fuel tank hurt. Why did it hurt? And one of her wrist panels, too. She glared at it. Were those scratch marks?

Where was she? She was supposed to be at—

Oh. Oh, *no*. Frag. She had to get up. She rolled back over and pushed herself onto her knees, freezing as everything spun. Slag, she felt *awful*. But she had to get up.

"Hey, she's moving!" A voice called. "Told you it wasn't enough."

"Shut it, *Vos*!" The other mech said the name in an odd tone, a slight hesitation to it, as if it were an alias. It likely was. "Just give her more. We need her intact."

"By *myself*? After that slagshow earlier?" Vos said. "Nuh-uh."

Slipstream crawled toward the wall, wobbling on her pedes. She slumped against it as her fans whirred.

"I'm steering the ship!" The other mech yelled.

Vos made a clicking noise. "It's on autopilot. You aren't steering scrap. Cut the slag and help me, *Helex*."

Another codename. Who were these mecha?

Loud, powerful thunks echoed through the ship as Helex approached. Slipstream pushed herself up using the wall. She couldn't let them put that substance in her again. What could she do?

The matrix hummed, finally doing something useful for once as electricity crackled from her clawtips. She could use that. When Helex reached for her, she struck, putting all of her power into it. He backed away with a yell.

"Fragging—!"

Vos dove at her next. She staggered to the side, just barely evading him. Then, she dug her claws into his wings, letting electricity course through them. He screamed.

She leaped over him, stumbling a bit before catching herself. Where was the control room? If she could access the controls, she could turn the ship around and—

Something seized her wing. She turned, baring her dentae, and bit. Electricity crackled again. She kicked a now-seizing Helex away. But as soon as he fell, Vos came into view. Slipstream ran down the hall, using her thrusters to boost herself. The control room had to be somewhere —

There! She slipped inside, hands raising to manipulate the controls. She yelled as she was slammed into from behind, electricity spreading from her plating and into the attacker's.

"You're lucky he needs you alive!" Helex spat.

Slipstream swiped at his face. He cursed, slamming her into the control panel again. He turned back toward the door.

"Vos!" He called.

Vos stood in the doorway, optics wide and wings low.

"Vos!"

Vos fled.

Helex yelled in frustration, slamming Slipstream into the panel again. "Coward!"

He glared down at Slipstream.

"Looks like I'll have to—"

His optics widened, his face going slack.

"Slag," he said. "Slag, *slag*—"

With a roaring crash, everything around them contorted. Panels fell, wiring sparking. Support beams fractured. A sharp slab of metal came from the ceiling, piercing through Helex's chest. He fell straight onto Slipstream, the metal nearly piercing her own chest.

Slipstream jolted backward, and for the second time in the day, everything went dark. When she woke, it was to smoke and ruin. Her helm ached. She tried to focus her optics, but received an error.

She pushed against the console, attempting to free herself from Helex's dead weight, but her limbs gave out the moment she tried. She slumped with a quiet wheeze. She couldn't get out.

There had to be something she could do. *Anything*. She squirmed, and Helex's dead arm flopped against hers.

That was it. She grabbed the limb, clawing at the frame's panel until it opened. She unspooled her cable and plugged it in. Immediate access was granted, as dead mecha didn't have

firewalls. Since Helex was freshly deceased, there was enough power left in his processor for her to search it. She copied the coordinates his navigation system had stored.

Then, she sent a message to the only mech she could trust not to betray her. She explained as much as she could, but getting the message out was more important than telling him everything. The response was swift.

[Thank frag you're okay,] Starscream replied. *[Stay where you are. A local Guardian will retrieve you.]*

Slipstream sighed in relief. The Guardians were this world's new society's answer to the Enforcers—mecha trained in various search, rescue, defense and deescalation techniques. They'd find her. It would be okay.

That left her with nothing to do but sift through Helex's processor before it shut down for good. She searched his recent memory files for something—anything—to explain why they wanted her.

Flashes came to her: more mecha in masks, a tall mech with wide wings sitting in the middle of it all. Watching her on the cameras, waiting for the moment she was alone. They were *everywhere*. But what did they want with—

{CONNECTION TERMINATED.}

Debris fell from the ceiling, smashing Helex's helm and processor into pieces. Slipstream was pinned flush to the console under the added weight, barely able to circulate air through her frame.

Frag.

ΔΔΔ

A weight was lifted from her. Hands brushed against her plating. Slipstream jolted awake, throwing herself away from the source of the touch with a hiss. She spread her wings wide and flared her plating. The blurry mech before her backed away, hunching in on themself as they held their hands up.

"You're safe!" The mech said. "I'm a Guardian."

They were small. And yellow. So, *so* yellow. A bright red Autobot brand sat on their chest. Not a Decepticon. Not a potential traitor. Slipstream allowed her plating to relax. The bot offered her a hand, and she took it.

He led her away from the crashed ship. Ahead, a few mecha were gathered—all wearing the Autobot brand save for one. He was bright red, tires on his shoulders. He motioned to a nearby chair.

Slipstream hesitated. She didn't know this mech, but that didn't matter. Where was—? He didn't have an insignia. Why was that so reassuring?

"I'm Knock Out," the mech said. "A medic. I just need to make sure you're safe to move."

Slipstream nodded.

"How are you feeling?" Knock Out asked.

How was she meant to answer that? She attempted to speak, but the words wouldn't come.

"It's alright," Knock Out said gently.

He came closer. Slipstream fought the urge to back away. Hands closed gently around hers, pulling them from her chestplates. When had she dug them in?

She pulled her hands away. Everything inside her wanted to curl into a ball and shut out the world, but she couldn't. She had to get back—to her office, her home, it didn't matter—anywhere but *here*.

"I—I made it!"

The too-loud shout was a voice she could recognize anywhere. Ramjet ran through, optics wide. He nearly skidded to a stop when he reached her.

Vos was a warframe. Ramjet was a warframe. He had every reason to want revenge on her. But his paint was stark white, and would have shone in the light. He wouldn't have time to repaint. Vos couldn't be him.

"I couldn't find you, then you sent Starscream that message and—"

"Ramjet," Slipstream said weakly. Quiet as she was, her voice stopped his words.

"Sorry," he said.

Slipstream's frame threatened to tremble. Frag it all, she craved a scrap of comfort. But even Ramjet wouldn't want to touch her. She knew that.

"Thank you for coming," Slipstream said.

Ramjet's wings fluttered. "It's the least I could do."

Slipstream didn't know how to convince him otherwise. There was *much less* he could do—she'd experienced that *much less* many times. Having him here was enough, no matter how much she craved more.

She had hurt him—beaten him into submission the same way Galvatron did to her, publicly humiliating him the way he did to her, becoming the very mech that tormented her—yet he was here, showing *concern* for her. Why didn't he hate her? Would it be easier if he did?

"Do you want him to stay while I check you over?" Knock Out asked, motioning toward Ramjet.

"It's fine," Slipstream said. "He can stay."

"Alright."

Knock Out began a basic exam. Despite it being familiar, Slipstream's spark crackled. He was *touching* her, running his claws along her plating. It didn't hurt, shouldn't have, but—

The claws paused near her panel. It was scratched, small red lines along it. *Red*. One of the mecha who attacked her was *red*. That narrowed the list down, didn't it?

"Did they inject you with anything?" Knock Out asked.

Slipstream searched her files. The memory was corrupted.

"I don't know," she said. "But I think so. When I woke on the ship, everything was fuzzy, and my fuel tank hurt."

Knock Out hummed. "Can I take a sample from your lines?"

Slipstream nodded and opened her panel. He removed a syringe from his medical pack. Gently, he attached it to her line and pulled a sample. He held it up in the light, turning it. Then, he handed it off to a mech nearby.

"They're going to analyze it so we know what we're dealing with," Knock Out said.

Slipstream wasn't stupid. She knew why he was taking the sample. He had to know she knew. So why did he keep narrating?

"Can you take your claws away from your chest, please?"

Slipstream looked down. Her claws were, in fact, buried in her chestplates. She moved them away. The Matrix didn't even hurt. When had she…?

Knock Out's optics narrowed as he examined her chestplates, a frown tugging at his face. Slipstream's plating snapped close. The back of her processor wanted to flee, but she forced herself to stay still.

"Does your chest hurt?" Knock Out asked.

"It's fine," she said. "It's… not related to what just happened."

For once, the Matrix was blessedly quiet. But that didn't stop habit.

"Spark pain is very serious," Knock Out said.

"Not *spark* pain," Slipstream hissed.

Knock Out's optics narrowed, landing on the chamber the Matrix was encased in. "I see."

The rest of the examination continued without incident. Despite enduring a kidnapping and crash, Slipstream's injuries were only superficial—aside from a concussion, which Knock

Out claimed would resolve with rest. The substance injected into her was identified as a sedative commonly used to spike fuel at parties. That, too, could be waited out with rest.

And rest was all Slipstream wanted. Her frame was heavy when they finally reached their home universe. But her spark crackled in her chest at the thought of going home, or even to her office—they had been watching her. There was no way they couldn't track her in those places, too. They could be waiting for her.

And she would be *alone*. They could take her again. How long would it be before anyone noticed?

There was one mech she could trust who would do anything she said. She turned toward Ramjet.

"I'm staying with you tonight," she said.

It was meant to be commanding. It came out as a pathetic plea. Ramjet's wings flicked. His hands moved, then froze, as if he were hesitating to touch her.

"Okay," he said. "Let's… let's go."

She had no idea where Ramjet lived, but she was too tired to do the usual hang back and speed ahead routine, anyway. He led her to his apartment, pausing awkwardly in the doorway. He stuck his helm through, then stepped aside and motioned for her to enter.

It was small—barely enough space for a joint kitchen and dining area, with a berthroom that was most likely a refurbished closet. But it was clean and quiet. Slipstream had slept in worse places (Such as the hallway her ex-wingmates *loved* to leave her in).

"Thrust normally takes the other berth," Ramjet said, motioning toward the tiny berthroom. "But he's been on a work trip."

A work trip… that would explain why Slipstream hadn't seen him. Seems she wasn't the only mech who'd been abandoned.

"Left you all alone?" She said.

"Not…" Ramjet's wings lowered. "No… yeah. But his work is important."

There was an edge to his voice. His wings twitched. She was right. Whatever 'work trip' Thrust was on, he wasn't returning anytime soon.

"A-and so is recharge, Wingl—" he cut himself off, stumbling over the words. "My—my Prime."

Slipstream preferred Winglord over Prime, to tell the truth. But if she didn't use the title, others would question it. She couldn't have that.

Slipstream snorted. "I can take the hint. Where am I recharging for the night?"

Ramjet motioned toward the berths again. Slipstream rolled her optics and walked ahead of him. She scrutinized the berths, settling on the one that appeared the least used. The moment her plating hit the berth, her body went slack. Tiredness crashed in, the day's events catching up with her.

Ramjet was here. He wasn't one of the mecha who kidnapped her. He would stop anyone who tried, because his job relied on her being alive and present. She could trust him not to betray her right now.

And that was all she needed.

ΔΔΔ

"Are you sure you don't want to rest?"

Slipstream glared at him.

"Just show me where you keep the energeon," she hissed.

Ramjet backed away slightly before approaching. He crouched in front of one of the lower cabinets.

"Here," he said, pulling it open and reaching inside. "I can reschedule your meetings, or move them to remote—"

Slipstream took the cube he offered her with a quick swipe. Ramjet flinched, squeezing his optics shut and turning his helm. Did he think she was going to hit him?

Slipstream's spark burned. *Of course* he would. She had done it many times before.

"And then I'll have twice as many tomorrow," Slipstream said. "I might as well get them over with now."

She wasn't going to hurt him. Not anymore. She had to prove herself worthy—first of the title of Winglord, and now as a Prime. But simple vows didn't erase the patterns etched into processors.

"Right," Ramjet muttered.

Slipstream sighed and popped open her cube, waiting for Ramjet to get his own before taking a sip. Then, cube in hand, she headed toward the door. Ramjet trailed after her.

When they reached the lobby, Slipstream froze. A few scattered mecha looked up at her, some staring, optics wide, as they recognized her. She… hadn't thought about other mecha being here. They knew she was here, now. *Any* one of them could—

"M-my Prime?"

Slipstream flexed her plating.

"Right," she said, stepping forward. "Let's go."

Exiting the building brought yet another obstacle. As she stepped outside, light streamed from the sky. It washed everything in a white sheen and stung her optics. She tried to recalibrate her optics, but received an error. Stupid fragging processor damage. How was she supposed to fly if she couldn't see?

She turned back toward Ramjet, fighting a cringe as his white plating gleamed in the light. His wings twitched as he took a small step closer. Then, he backed away.

"Are you okay?" He asked quietly. "I can still reschedule the meetings."

Slipstream flexed her claws, frustration crawling through her plating. She couldn't let the energy out. There was nothing to strike here. Why couldn't just one thing work? Why did everything she touched have to fall apart?

"Reschedule them," she muttered.

ΔΔΔ

Her helm still hurt, and lights were still too bright, but at least she could *see* now. But flying made her dizzy, so she was still thoroughly grounded. Ramjet fetched her datapads from her office, so she requisitioned the dining table for her meetings.

Throughout them, Ramjet was quiet and respectful, completely evading notice. She caught herself watching him the few times he entered the room, more silent than she'd ever heard a mech, as he swiftly fetched whatever he needed to fetch before exiting. It was a far cry from the arrogant mech that proclaimed her unfit to lead, but that mech was long gone.

So, when her meeting wrapped up, Slipstream headed toward the berthroom. She settled on the berth. Ramjet looked over, crouched on his berth with an energeon cube in his hands.

"You're quiet," Slipstream said. "I wouldn't have expected that from you."

Ramjet didn't look away. "You wouldn't like it if I interrupted your meetings."

"I wouldn't," Slipstream said.

She chose him for reasons beyond guilt, though if she said it wasn't a factor, she would be lying. He was more experienced than her, even if he wasn't well-liked, or, really, liked at all. That experience wasn't in leadership, merely in war, but it was more than she had.

Before she hurt him, he was brash. He believed only *he* was the correct option for Decepticon Second in Command.

Slipstream hadn't seen him coming. One moment, she was alone in the hall, on her way to meet with her wingmates. The next, she was slammed against the wall. Ramjet loomed over her, a grin on his face.

'Look what I found!' He sneered. *'You should really keep your guard up, Air Commander.'*

The title was practically spat at her. She struggled beneath him, but he was stronger than her. She couldn't get free.

Her wingmates never asked about the hand-shaped dents on her wings. They just stared. Acid Storm only sighed. After Ion Storm looked away, he refused to look at her wings again. But it was never brought up.

Nova never knew. At least, Slipstream thought she never knew. She always straightened out the dents at the first opportunity she could, and Nova Storm was busier than her wingmates.

(The idea that Nova could have known and done nothing hadn't crossed her mind until now, and it *hurt*.)

And then she died, a sacrifice in a raid that Slipstream had already criticized. Ramjet's wingmate, Dirge, fell in that battle as well, now that Slipstream recalled it. But back then, she cared little for the losses of others. Galvatron's shoddy plan costed Nova's life, and he was going to pay with his.

She never held any true interest in becoming leader of the Decepticons. It was just what would happen after she killed him. And she would be a better one, wouldn't she?

Slipstream closed her optics. Of all mecha, why her? Why had the Matrix chosen *her*? Surely, there was a mech more qualified who actually *wanted* this burden?

"Why did you say yes?" She asked.

Ramjet stirred, the berth creaking as he moved.

"You asked me," he said.

His wings twitched. The ceiling was low, so he hunched as he sat. Ramjet was an old warframe—nearly Galvatron's age—with the height to match.

"If any mech asked you to be their secretary, would you agree?"

Ramjet's olfactory ridge crinkled. "No. Not any mech."

"Do you still think I'm unworthy?"

She needed to hear it.

"No," Ramjet said, shaking his helm. "The Matrix chose you."

The Matrix. Of course. Why did she expect any different?

"It did," she said.

Maybe she wanted to be worth something by herself for once.

ΔΔΔ

Ramjet never kicked her out, and she never wanted to go back. Her own apartment was cold and empty, and likely being monitored. They fell into a routine. Ramjet always prepared two cubes in the morning. They both went into recharge at the same time.

She was tempted to ask why he let her stay, but asking might remind him he had the power to remove her. She didn't know where else she would go. Those mecha could find her at any moment. But if she was here, Ramjet would be with her.

Still, routines couldn't remain undisturbed forever. Slipstream was finally well enough to fly—with assistance, though that wasn't new, she just finally had an excuse for it—so the medics wanted a checkup. Hook turned out to be a stubborn mech, and no amount of avoidance kept him from demanding one. Eventually, he went through Ramjet, who didn't have the same reservations as Slipstream.

She stuck close to him, praying silently that he didn't notice. It took everything in her to keep her plating from rattling, and her wings kept wanting to lower. Optics watched from around her. Those masked mecha could be *anyone*.

They entered the medbay. It was clear, save for the medics themselves. Slipstream's plating relaxed, but only a little.

"Slipstream," Hook said. "You're finally here."

Slipstream flicked her wings. "We aren't late."

Hook motioned for her to sit on a nearby berth. With a glare, she obeyed.

"You're not," he said. "But you should've scheduled an appointment the moment I asked."

"I'm a busy mech."

Hook scowled. "Too busy to care about your health?"

Why did she have to pick *this* medic, of all the medics? She could've made the offer to any other. Though, she knew that was a lie. There were only a handful of fully-trained *Decepticon* medics.

"I was *attacked*, if you hadn't noticed!" Slipstream hissed.

"All the more reason to—"

"I would be afraid of leaving home, too."

Both mecha froze at the third voice. Jetfire turned back toward them, wings low and shoulders hunched. He shut the cabinet he was gathering supplies from.

Slipstream stayed silent as he approached. Any words that exited her vocalizer now would be an admission of guilt. Whether to deny or confirm, they would ignore them regardless.

"I could be wrong, I just assumed—" Jetfire wrung his hands. "I heard you were taking your meetings online and working from home. Someone hurt you. It's okay to be scared."

The words, awkward as they were, crawled their way into Slipstream's processor. She wanted to collapse into a shaking, pathetic heap then and there. But she couldn't allow herself to do that. She was the Winglord of the Seekers, leader of the Decepticons, and the only Prime of her universe.

There was no room for weakness.

"I'll be fine," she hissed. "Just get this over with."

The medics took their cue. After that, most of the conversation died, and the examination was swift. It was as she expected: she was healing, no abnormalities. Slipstream hopped off the berth, readying herself to be exposed to possible traitors again, but a quiet voice gave her pause.

"How does a mech get the symbol?"

Jetfire stood, hands wringing and wings low, as if he were trying to make himself as small as possible.

Slipstream narrowed her optics. "Symbol?"

"Brand," Jetfire corrected himself with a shake of his helm. "The brand. The *Decepticon* brand."

How *did* a mech get the badge? The simplest answer was this: become a Decepticon. But what was becoming a Decepticon?

(The mecha who attacked her wore the Decepticon brand as masks.)

She killed her master and flew, on her own, until she was lost. Nova found her. *She* was the one that brought Slipstream to the Decepticons' first base, Darkmount. With hands still covered in energeon, she swore loyalty to the cause and took the brand.

(The mecha who kidnapped her had done the same.)

But was it just an oath, or was it the path toward taking it? Was it the ideology behind the oath?

"Do you want one?" Slipstream asked.

"I do," Jetfire said, voice stronger than it was the entire appointment. "I want to be a Decepticon."

Did wearing the brand make a mech a Decepticon?

(Were the traitors still Decepticons despite harming her? In their view, was she no longer one?)

Before her was a young mech expecting an answer.

"I'll have someone arrange it," Slipstream said. "But know this—you are already a Decepticon."

Jetfire smiled, his wings finally raising. Hook looked between him and Slipstream, then broke into a smile of his own. Slipstream turned away.

"Let's go," she said to Ramjet.

The brand was just a symbol. Anyone could wear it. Being a Decepticon was carried deep within one's spark.

The Matrix hummed—for once, in something other than displeasure.

Chapter End Notes

I'll give you a hint: the DJD characters in here are not the traditional DJD members. Tis another case of me stealing a concept and running away with it, like with terrorcons in Sacrificial Turbofox.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jetfire's branding was arranged quickly. The moment came and went. Slipstream didn't see him often, but the few times she did, he no longer shrank in on himself. He stood proudly, voice confident, with two brands on his wings.

It was amazing how much a symbol could mean to a mech. His change in demeanor was a reminder of what the Decepticon brand truly meant. Even if it was just a symbol, Slipstream wouldn't let those traitors take it from her, nor would she let them take her life. So, she went back to her office.

A particularly frustrating meeting left her tapping her claws against the desk. An alliance between human nations fell through, causing a delay in supplies. The supplies weren't stolen—thank *frag*—but they couldn't travel the route they were meant to unless the humans stopped fighting.

[You know more about the humans,] Slipstream sent to Elita. *[You can figure this one out.]*

Her Decepticons had no relations with the humans, nor had they ever. It was the generous negotiations of the Autobots that even got them to this point. If Slipstream weren't certain her mecha would just be gunned down and the war restarted, she would've marched them over and just taken the supplies herself. But when working *peacefully* with humans, one had to play their games.

Even if it would be *so* easy…

Movement caught her optics. Her plating bristled, charge traveling through it. Ramjet was outside. No one else should be in her office. She stood from her desk, optics scanning the room.

There it was again! Readying her claws, she sprung. Those traitors would answer for what they'd done—

Her claws landed in the wall with a thunk. *What*? Someone had been there! Where had they gone? Slipstream pulled her hand away from the wall, hissing in pain her claws refused to exit. Her spark crackled.

She couldn't get free. Someone was in here, and she *couldn't get free*. They were going to take her again! There was noise—Slipstream growled, a pointless attempt to intimidate.

"Whoever you are, don't come any closer!" She spat.

She turned toward the intruder, but was stopped by her stuck claws. Still, there was a shape in the corner of her vision. It morphed, large and angular. A crest framed its helm. Could it be…?

No. No, it couldn't be Galvatron. Starscream killed him. She saw the body. The Matrix was in her chest because he was dead. But the shape was so distinct…

Slipstream attempted to pull herself free again. She couldn't let him get her. Not again. The shape grew closer. It reached out.

"No!" She cried, squeezing her optics shut. "No…"

Everything went silent. The room grew cold.

"M-my Prime?"

She knew that voice. Slipstream opened her optics. White plating shone in the light.

"Ramjet," she said, hoping pointlessly that the fear had left her voice.

"Are you okay?" He asked quietly. "I heard a loud bang."

Slipstream sighed and tipped her helm toward her claws. "That was me."

Ramjet's optics landed on her claws. His olfactory ridge crinkled. "Oh."

Slowly, he reached over, fingers closing gently around hers.

"Let me help you, my Prime," he said.

Slipstream nodded. As embarrassing as this was, she clearly couldn't free herself. Ramjet inserted his claws beneath hers, carefully twisting and pulling in just the right way to free them. They stung, but were otherwise unharmed.

"You have visitors," Ramjet said.

Slipstream flicked her wings. There were no meetings scheduled, especially not face to face ones. Ramjet knew this.

"Who?" She said.

Ramjet frowned. His wings lowered. Someone she wouldn't like, then.

"They insisted," Ramjet said. "They've been trying to get ahold of you since…"

He trailed off, but she could guess the rest: since she was kidnapped. She had already spoken to the medics, so who else could it be? The answer came to her quickly, and a growl escaped her. Ramjet backed away.

Those fraggers just had to keep interfering in her life, didn't they? Just had to try making peace that wouldn't last! Slipstream pushed through the door with a snarl and fanned her

wings wide.

Ahead of her, Ion Storm hid behind Acid Storm. Acid Storm stood proudly, her wings firmly in neutral position. She stared into Slipstream's optics.

"Slipstream," Acid Storm said.

Slipstream flicked her wings harshly, creating an audible whoosh. Behind her, Ramjet flinched loudly, plating clacking together. Ion Storm cowered further. Acid Storm glared.

"Prime," Slipstream said. "Or Winglord, if you must. We are *not* friends."

Acid Storm stepped closer. "That's what I want to talk about."

Slipstream flicked her wings again. "*Leave*."

Ion Storm gently grabbed Acid Storm's arm. "Maybe we should—"

Acid Storm shook them off. He strode forward again.

"We heard about what happened," he said. "We wanted to make sure you were okay."

They cared *now*? Slipstream threw her claws in the air, gesturing to herself.

"Now you see that I am," she said. "*Go*."

Acid Storm's optics searched her frame. Then, the stare returned.

"You're not," Acid Storm said. "I can see the tension in your frame. I can *feel* your fear."

"So you can tell when I'm upset after all, can you?" Slipstream hissed.

"I know you—"

Slipstream leaned in, baring her dentae. "You don't know *scrap*—"

"*We* know you—"

Slipstream swiped at the air between them. Acid Storm backed away.

"You did a *great* job showing it!" She spat. "Shutting me out and leaving me to rot! Threatening to never speak to me again! Leaving me to Galvatron's mercy! You *don't* know me, and you *don't* care."

"We do," Acid Storm said, stepping closer again. "We always did. But trying to protect you from him was like digging a hole when the walls kept falling in."

Ion Storm crept out from behind Acid Storm, wings low.

"Yeah," they said. "And we didn't have rank like you did. If Galvatron saw us helping you, he'd have our helms."

"So your best solution was to lock me in the hallway?" Slipstream hissed.

Ion Storm wilted, sliding back behind Acid Storm. Acid Storm watched him, plating ruffling, before glaring at Slipstream again.

"It was wrong of us," Acid Storm said. "We know that. But Galvatron is dead now. We want to help you. We can guard you."

Guard her? When she couldn't trust them not to abandon her when her life was on the line? Slipstream growled from deep within her engine.

"I can't trust you," she said. "This is what we do. I get hurt, you abandon me, you come back, and then I get hurt again. You say you're going to guard me, but I know the truth: the moment your plating is at risk, you'll *flee*."

Acid Storm bristled. "Not this time—"

"Get out!" Slipstream yelled.

Ion Storm sprinted for the door. Acid Storm turned toward him, hesitating.

"Out!"

Reluctantly, Acid Storm obeyed, following Ion Storm out the door. Only in the silence did Slipstream realize her cooling fans were on. Her spark crackled on her chest, fueled by the stress of the argument and what came before it.

The Matrix stung, and then it *burned*. Slipstream turned back toward her office, fighting not to freeze as her joints locked up from the pain. The moment she crossed the doorway, she sprinted to her chair, curling up on it.

"My Prime?"

Slag. She hadn't closed the door.

"Do you need a medic?" Ramjet asked.

"No," Slipstream hissed. "It's the Matrix. It'll pass."

A hand entered the corner of her vision, but quickly retreated.

"I—is there anything I can do?" Ramjet asked.

Slipstream shook her helm. She just had to wait it out. The infernal thing would eventually grow tired of throwing a fit and leave her alone.

Maybe she missed Ion Storm and Acid Storm, but only a little bit. They would hold her, at least, because the pain of being touched was nothing compared to this. Slipstream closed her optics.

What was—? There was something on her wing! She prepared herself to push through the agony and turn around—

It was… nice. *Gentle*. She leaned into it. A kidnapper wouldn't be this nice. She purred. Eventually, almost as if by magic, the pain subsided.

"My Prime?"

Slipstream opened her optics. She was strutless, almost one with her chair. Ramjet stared down at her.

Slipstream forced herself to sit up, attempting in vain to recover some of her composure. "Yes?"

Ramjet tilted his helm toward the door. "We should go."

"I have a meeting," Slipstream muttered. What time was it?

She froze. It was well past the start of the meeting. *Scrap*.

"I cancelled it," Ramjet said. He grimaced. "You were… in a lot of pain."

She *wanted* to be angry with him. Every meeting she had was important. But she wouldn't have survived that meeting in the state she was.

"Okay," she said, pushing herself up from the chair.

"My Prime—"

"Just call me Slipstream," she muttered.

He'd earned it.

ΔΔΔ

Dark energeon was *supposed* to be a corruption of regular energeon. This didn't compute.

"You say you found *more*?" Slipstream hissed.

"We have," Prowl said. "We sent samples to Wheeljack to verify it."

Slipstream dug her claws into her desk. Not *more* of that wretched substance!

"We destroyed the last of our stores," Slipstream said. "We haven't found any since. And now you've found an entire mine's worth of it!"

Prowl nodded. "It appears to be fresh. The entrance was sealed. Not a single crystal of energeon was present, only dark energeon."

Slipstream wasn't a fuel expert, but this sounded like something more than an abandoned mine. It sounded like it wasn't a mine at all.

"These things don't just *grow*, but this makes it seem an awful lot like they do!" She hissed.

"We're investigating the possibility," Prowl said.

Great. Perfect. Stupendous, even. Dark energeon was just sprouting from the Earth! Why wouldn't it?

"Thank you for informing me," Slipstream said.

Before Prowl could speak again, she hung up. The temptation to throw the datapad grew with each passing moment. It seemed she would never truly be rid of Galvatron. Even after death, he invaded everything.

Her resolve broke. She gave in, throwing the datapad across the room. It hit the wall with a crack, landing upside down. *Why* did she do that?

Slipstream rose from her desk and stalked toward it. She lifted it. The screen was cracked, but not broken. It could be salvaged.

"M—um, Slipstream?"

Slipstream nearly dropped the datapad. Instead, she held onto it by the corner, turning toward Ramjet. He stood in the doorway, two cubes in hand.

"I brought you some energeon," he said, reaching over and carefully placing it on the desk.

Slipstream crossed the room. She set the datapad down with a thunk. Ramjet flinched.

"You're scared of me," Slipstream said.

Ramjet cringed. "I—"

"Don't lie."

Ramjet slammed his hands on the table.

"I'm *not*," he hissed.

Slipstream narrowed her optics. "I hurt you and you're scared of me."

Ramjet leaned in, holding his wings high.

"You are living in my apartment," he said. "I *let* you live in my apartment. I am not scared of you."

Slipstream glared at him. He glared back. She bared her dentae. He didn't flinch. She leaned back.

"You have every reason to hurt me, and every opportunity," she said. "Why haven't you?"

Ramjet backed away. A smile crossed his face as a laugh escaped from him.

"I thought you were nothing but a worthless pet Seeker when Galvatron chose you," he said. "I was a Warframe. I had experience. You cowered underneath me. But then you tried to kill Galvatron, and you sought me out."

Slipstream remembered that. Freshly healed from yet another argument with Galvatron, Ramjet had spoken out one too many times while she recited the plan. So, she hunted him down the next day, waiting for the moment Thrust left him alone.

"When you pushed me down and put your ray against my helm, I *knew* you were someone worth following."

He had quieted down after that. He was still a headstrong troublemaker, of course, but never toward her. All bringing him into line required was a swift blow and some harsh words.

She never considered he might *enjoy* that.

"So, no," he said. "I'm not afraid of you. I *relish* you."

"Oh," she said.

What was she supposed to say? 'Hey, now that I know you like being held down and hurt, would you like to let me work out some frustration?' 'Hey, would you like to take the place of that datapad I just threw across the room?'

She had never been wanted, especially not like *this*. Not since…

"I need to think," she said, barely able to force the words out.

Ramjet's composure deteriorated. His proudly held wings drooped. He drew in on himself.

"Okay," he said, backing out of the doorway. "I'll just—"

The door shut, leaving Slipstream alone with the cube he brought her. She stared into it. He wanted her. Actually, legitimately wanted her. How? Why?

'If you don't let yourself have good things, then you'll never have them.'

Maybe it was time to listen to Starscream. Ramjet hadn't hurt her for a long time—quite the opposite, actually. He let her live in his home, and brought her energeon, and was the first mech to reach her after she was kidnapped…

She stood up. But when she reached the doorway, she froze. What if she was wrong about this?

No, no.

She opened the door.

"Ramjet?"

Ramjet looked up from his seat. "Y-yes?"

He was back to being meek, drawing in on himself. Where was the determined mech from just a few moments ago?

"Did you mean what you said?" She asked.

Ramjet's wings rose. "I did."

She beckoned him closer. He obeyed. When he was in range, she grabbed his throat, laying one of her claws on top of the fuel line in his neck. With just one flick of her claw, he risked bleeding out.

He stared into her optics. His hand reached for hers. She allowed him to grasp it.

"You do," she said, releasing him.

The confidence didn't leave him. Ramjet stood tall, determination in his optics.

"What happens now?" He asked.

It was Slipstream's turn to wilt.

"I don't know," she said. "I didn't think that far ahead."

Ramjet hummed, looking away. He turned back to her after a moment.

"I'm going to touch you," he said.

Slipstream nodded, bracing herself for the electric current that always coursed through her. Ramjet closed the gap. His arms enclosed her, but for once, she wasn't trapped. Nothing hurt.

She sank into the first painless touch she had experienced since Nova died. Ramjet tightened the embrace, a purr emanating from him. Slipstream matched it.

ΔΔΔ

"We're going to lay down some rules."

Slipstream paced into front of the table. Ramjet's helm followed her every move. He nodded.

Slipstream sighed. She had no idea what this was, or what she was doing. All she knew was that it was too easy to hurt another mech. Ramjet wanted her to hurt him, but not in a way that *actually* hurt him.

"Don't touch me without asking," she said.

Just because he was able to do it a couple of times without pain didn't mean the possibility went away. Ramjet nodded.

"This stays between us," she said. "We do not bring it into public."

Ramjet nodded. "That makes sense."

"Good," Slipstream said. She completed a circuit before speaking again. "If either of us wants to stop, for any reason, we stop."

"Yes," Ramjet said.

What did they do now? Was she forgetting something? She paused in her pacing, letting her wings lower.

"I've never done this before," she said.

Ramjet rose from his seat. He offered a hand to her. She took it.

"I haven't, either," he said.

ΔΔΔ

Their routine didn't change, but it was still different. Every little moment had more meaning behind it. Ramjet waited for her. She waited for him. They fueled together.

A single berth was large enough for two, despite the small size of the room. Slipstream was safe in a way she never was before. While sitting in her office, she knew Ramjet was outside, keeping watch. After every meeting, she wandered into the entry room, laying on one of the couches as she complained about this or that. He always listened.

She made time for his voice. He had many thoughts on politics, some she definitely couldn't repeat, but quite a few useful suggestions. It wasn't difficult to slip them in during meetings. The housing many of the Warframes were provided was too small? Any excuse to fill the Autobots' and humans' audials with complaints.

They even bought a buffer, which was why Slipstream had no hesitation when she dragged her claws down his chest, his spark crackling beneath her palm. He was pinned beneath her on the berth, but could free himself with ease. And that was the allure—despite his strength, he wanted to be there, and he submitted to *her*.

The screech of metal on metal was music to her audials, topped only by the quiet grunt Ramjet let out when she dug her claws deeper. She knew exactly how deep to dig without drawing energeon. When she reached the edge of his chestplate, she brought her claws beneath his chin, a grin spreading across her face. She turned his helm from side to side, caressing his cheeks.

"You're such a good soldier," she purred.

Ramjet smiled. His optics were fuzzy, but she learned this was a good thing. It was some sort of special state, brought on by her and her alone. Ramjet smiled lazily, his fangs catching on his lips.

He was adorable. That was one of the first things she noticed about him.

She ran her claws down his chestplate again. She changed course partway through, sticking her claws between the seams. She leaned in.

"You're so pliant beneath me that I could pull open your spark chamber right now," she said. "I could have your spark in my hands."

"Please!" Ramjet said.

She hooked her claws beneath his chestplates.

"If you insist," she said.

She pulled. Ramjet let out a groan. She pulled again. It wouldn't budge—they both knew that—but it was a fun game. But, eventually, his groans quieted, and she knew the game was over.

"Time to wrap up, soldier," she said.

Ramjet blinked. She pushed herself away from him. He sat up and stared at a distant point.

Tiredness crashed over Slipstream. It always did. The scratches absorbed the light, catching her optics. She hadn't hurt him—not in a way he didn't want—but still, her processor fretted. What if she misread something? What if he really hadn't wanted this?

She fought her worries with the rote action of preparing and turning on the buffer. As she buffed away the scratches, she hummed. Slowly, the fuzziness in Ramjet's optics receded. The moment the scratches were buffed out, he offered a hand. She took it.

"Gonna hug you," he muttered.

Slipstream nodded. He pulled her close, then leaned back. They laid on the berth together, entwined.

"Was it good?" Slipstream asked.

"Yeah," Ramjet mumbled, shoving his helm into her shoulder. "Good."

She could stay like this forever. Safe, in control, in the bliss of the moment…

Something clicked. The door of the apartment opened. Slipstream pushed herself off the berth in an instant. Ramjet followed close behind.

They weren't expecting visitors. Who was this? And why did they have the access code? Was it another one of those mecha—

"Ramjet!"

The mech in the doorway grinned. His plating was red. His helm ended in a peak just like Ramjet's.

"Thrust?" Ramjet mumbled.

Thrust snickered. "Well, that doesn't sound very enthusiastic."

He placed a bag on the counter. He glanced at Slipstream, a frown on his face.

"I see you already got a new roommate," he said.

Ramjet's wings fluttered. "She's just staying here—"

"Just staying here?" Thrust said. He looked between them, a grin spreading across his face. "So she's not a roomate then? Did you *finally* find a conjunx willing to put up with you?"

"That's not—"

Thrust held up a hand.

"I'll stop you there," he said. "I'm not here to argue, I'm here to visit! What's it matter if you've got a guest or a conjunx? I brought enough extra, anyway."

Slipstream narrowed her optics. "Extra what?"

Thrust walked back toward the counter. He rummaged through the bag, pulling out a cube.

"Energeon, of course!" He said. He pulled out two more. "With a fancy new additive. It's real popular back on Cybertron."

"You work on Cybertron?" Slipstream asked.

Thrust tossed a cube between his hands and shrugged. "Yeah. Deliveries, mostly. I like to travel."

With a grin, he tossed the cube toward Ramjet. It bounced off his chestplates, and nearly slipped between his hands, but he caught it. Thrust pulled out another cube and swung it.

"Don't you dare!" Slipstream hissed.

Thrust scowled. He handed her the cube. She took it, turning it as she examined it. Nothing about it *seemed* unusual. Still…

(Red scratches on her wrist.)

She didn't trust it.

Thrust took out a cube of his own and settled at the table, leaning back in his chair. He took a big sip of his cube. They weren't poisoned, then. Or at least *his* wasn't. She glanced at Ramjet.

Ramjet shrugged before opening his own cube and taking a sip. His optics widened. He turned toward Thrust.

"This is good!" He said. "What's in it?"

Thrust paused mid-sip. He raised his brow.

"They wouldn't say," he said. "They're keeping it secret til they get business going."

Ramjet hummed and took a large sip. Slipstream left hers untouched, but settled beside him. The more questions Thrust answered, the less she trusted this energeon.

"Who?" She asked.

"Swindle," Thrust said. "He and some of his buddies are trying to start a bar, so they're experimenting."

Experimenting. Right. Exactly the type of story one would use as a coverup. Slipstream was tempted to accuse him then and there, but this was Ramjet's *wingmate*. She couldn't just accuse him without reason!

So, she sat quietly as Ramjet and Thrust chatted. The contents of their cubes slowly disappeared, while hers remained full, despite Ramjet and Thrust's urging. Shortly after the cubes were emptied, Ramjet's optics began to shutter.

That was *wrong*. A few moments later, Ramjet lowered his helm onto the table, and Slipstream *knew*. Ramjet couldn't sleep sitting up. That new additive wasn't just an additive.

They needed to get out of here, or get him out of here. A plausible excuse was already made. She tapped gently on the side of Ramjet's helm. He opened his optics.

"Huh?" He muttered.

"I'm going to bring him to his berth," Slipstream said to Thrust.

Thrust shrugged. Slipstream rolled her optics and pulled Ramjet up. He stumbled as she led him. Not typical at all. As they reached the berthroom, she paused.

"How are you feeling?" She asked.

Ramjet closed his optics, swaying slightly. He leaned on the doorway.

"Tired," he said. "Fuzzy."

Definitely not good.

Slipstream led him to the berth. Gently, she helped him lay down. As she turned away, he reached for her.

"No," he grumbled.

"I'll be back," Slipstream said.

Ramjet's hand flopped onto the berth. "No…"

She ignored his protests and left the room. As quietly as she could, she readied her rays. Thrust would answer for this.

As she entered, Thrust looked up at her from his seat at the table, a lazy smile on his face. Slipstream scowled.

"You will leave," she hissed. "*Now*."

Thrust leaned forward. "I know you don't like me, but this is *my* apartment."

Slipstream bared her dentae and flared her wings.

"I know what you did!" She spat.

Thrust's grin fell. "Do you, now?"

He rose from his seat. Slipstream's shoulders twitched. Should she raise her rays now? What if she was wrong, despite every sign pointing to this outcome?

"I suppose the jig is up," Thrust purred, the grin returning to his face.

Now. Slipstream aimed her rays and fired. One of the shots went wide. Thrust hissed as the other grazed his wing. But the distraction was momentary. He pounced on her.

"You know those have to recharge, right?" He said, grabbing her face.

Slipstream swept her feet beneath him, but he stood strong. So, she clawed at him instead. He laughed.

"You're really nothing at all when you aren't in the air, *Winglord*," he said.

He swung, sending her sailing into the table. She bounced off it, landing on the chairs. They flipped over, taking her down with them. Pain seared through her dorsal strut.

She attempted to stand, but the pain radiated. The moment she placed weight on her leg, she cried out, agony gripping her. A pede landed on her back. Something pinched her neck.

"You should've just drank the cube," Thrust said.

Slipstream clawed at the floor. "Frag you!"

Slowly, her limbs stopped obeying her. Static crept into her vision, then darkness. Everything faded away.

Chapter End Notes

This series is about violence in all its forms, so I wanted to address consensual violence at some point, and Slipstream was the most fitting to do it with. I originally scrapped the idea but these two freaks (affectionate) decided to make it happen on their own.

For me, writing is kind of like playing The Sims with free will set to maximum. I can direct the characters, but they still make a lot of their own choices. And their choice was to do BDSM.

▶ quick ramble about Ramjet

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The floor was dirty. She knew it wasn't what she was meant to be focusing on. But it was dirty. It would get in her joints and grind against them, and it was so hard to remove.

Slipstream forced herself to sit up, fighting a wave of vertigo. This was familiar. Something happened before she…

She froze. Thrust. The energeon. *Ramjet*. Oh, Ramjet. Was Ramjet okay? She sprung up. Like before, she wasn't bound. The room was windowless. A dim light shone above her, coating everything in a faint red.

Then, there! Ramjet was on the floor, ropes around his limbs. A clip rested on his wings, forcing them still and preventing any chance of transforming. His optics were closed. Slipstream leaned down and untied the ropes.

Why tie him but not her? She didn't have anything restricting her movements. If they were after *her* specifically, why even bother taking Ramjet?

There wasn't anything she could do for the clip. If they escaped this, they would have to flee on pede. Maybe that was the tactic—they knew she wouldn't leave him. The time spent freeing him would give them precious moments to prepare whatever it was they needed to.

She was proven right as the walls around her lifted away. Optics watched from the shadows, faces hidden behind masks. Slipstream rose and fanned out her wings, standing above Ramjet. There were still no windows. No doors, either. No way to escape.

"What do you want?" She hissed.

One of the masked mecha stepped forward. He was large, larger than even Galvatron. Wings jutted out from his back, thick and heavy. An ancient make and model—one of the first flight Warframes.

"I am Tarn," the mech said. "I want you to return what you stole."

"I didn't steal anything," Slipstream said.

Tarn pointed a large, sharpened claw toward her chest. "Return it. Now."

Of course. The Matrix. Slipstream brought her own claws to her chest.

"I can't," she hissed.

"So be it," Tarn said, stepping forward. The shadow he cast was long, almost as if he were consuming the light around him. "You have taken the Matrix from its rightful owner, and misled the Decepticons with talks of peace. There is no peace until all Autobots are *destroyed*. You are a traitor to the Decepticon Cause, and unworthy of the Matrix."

Tarn reached for her. Slipstream stepped back, nearly tripping over Ramjet. It was this stumble that allowed Tarn to grab her, pulling her close to his chest. She attempted to charge her rays.

{ERROR: Unable to connect to weapons systems.}

They thought of everything, didn't they?

"It seems like you need an incentive," Tarn growled.

Another mech stepped forward from the darkness. Even with the mask on, Slipstream recognized him.

"Thrust!" She hissed.

Thrust bent down, picking Ramjet up as if he weighed nothing. He was Thrust's wingmate. Surely, Thrust wouldn't—

Thrust brought his arm up, pushing his ray beneath Ramjet's chin. It hummed as he powered it up.

"How could you?" Slipstream yelled.

"The Matrix," Thrust said. "*Now*."

Thrust was going to kill him. He was going to kill Ramjet. Slipstream's spark seized. She couldn't give them what they wanted, not without…

"I can't!" She yelled. "I already said I can't! The Matrix is *part of me*. It's attached to my spark chamber! Do you think I haven't tried?"

Tarn's grip tightened around her.

"Then I suppose we'll have to tear it out," he said.

He reached around the front of her, hooking his claws under her chestplates. He yanked. The plating didn't give. The soft mesh attached to it burned. Slipstream let out a hiss of pain, squirming in his grip.

Tarn continued to pull. She couldn't get free. He was going to kill her—

A shot rang out. *Ramjet*. No, no! Not Ramjet—

Thrust tilted sideways, his grip going slack. Ramjet slipped out from beneath him as he crashed to the floor. The ray that was aimed against Ramjet's helm smoked. Ramjet stood, his

helm stained with energeon and his dentae bared.

He leaped at Tarn, launching himself at his shoulders. The blow forced him to let go of Slipstream. She slinked away, getting out of grabbing range as quickly as she could. Tarn and Ramjet wrestled like wild mechanimals, growling and howling.

The crowd didn't move forward. They watched, still sitting within the shadows. She had to do *something*.

Then, she remembered: *Helex*. Thrust's frame was right there. She leaped for it, tearing open the panel and connecting. Behind her, Ramjet screamed.

She didn't look. She couldn't. This was all she could do.

She found the latest set of coordinates in his files and saved them. Her comms hadn't been disabled, thank frag. But that led to yet another thought—Tarn must have *known* she wouldn't have the coordinates. Why else would her comms not be cut?

It explained the lack of concern Helex showed the first time she was kidnapped, too. How did they know?

She shook the confusion off and reached for Starscream's channel. He would be able to forward the message. She received a reply fairly quickly, but was unable to read it as she was yanked away from the corpse.

She turned, clawing at her captor. But Tarn's armor was thick. Still squirming, she charged up and fired her rays, not caring that a shot in such close range would damage her as well. She was flung backward as Tarn stumbled.

Ramjet? Where was Ramjet? A white shape laid behind Tarn, steadily leaking energeon. Slipstream sprinted for it.

"Ramjet!" She hissed. "Slag!"

His arm was severed midway through the forearm. One of his pedes was crushed. Slipstream knelt before him. But she couldn't linger. Tarn would be back up at any moment. She charged her rays and turned, aiming them at where she last saw Tarn.

The mask was split, a quarter of it missing. The face was familiar, but she couldn't place it. She knew this mech, but not well. She fired again, and the mask flew off.

She recognized him now. One of Galvatron's most loyal mecha—a member of his elite squad of triplechangers. After the loss of the other two members, he was sent away on a mission and never returned. They all presumed him dead.

Before she could speak his name, the walls shook. A thud echoed through the room. The ceiling collapsed, crumbled rock falling. A massive figure emerged, flame cloaking them. Like a falling star, they crashed into the unmasked mech. Then, with a swift motion and a wicked grin, they tore off his helm.

It clattered to the ground before Slipstream. She widened her wings, readying her rays. The massive mech just laughed. The fire faded into smoke, his plating sizzling. It was split down the middle. She recognized the pattern.

The Autobots' combiner.

As suddenly as he arrived, the combiner split apart. In his place was two mecha: one she knew and one she didn't. The unfamiliar mech simply stared, a small frown on his face. Jetfire rushed toward them, optics wide. Immediately, he settled down in front of Ramjet, pulling a medkit from his storage space.

There was a whole crowd of mecha here. Why were they just standing there? Slipstream searched the darkness, but it was empty. Where had they gone?

They were still out there. That thought froze her lines. That triplechanger may have been their leader, but that wouldn't stop them from coming back. Her spark crackled in her chest.

More noise—were they back? Slipstream jumped. A large jet flew through the opening the combiner created. It landed gently. Hook rested on top of it, clinging to it with a shaky grip.

"We have landed," the jet said.

Hook slowly got down from the jet.

"Remind me to never agree to fly on you again," Hook said.

The jet transformed into robot mode.

"I will," they said.

There were tank treads on their legs—*another* triplechanger. If they hadn't arrived with Hook, Slipstream would've fired. Hook approached, joining Jetfire in treating Ramjet.

The triplechanger approached.

"Are you alright?" They asked with a furrowed brow.

"Alright enough," Slipstream said. She narrowed her optics. "Who are you?"

"Blitzwing," they said.

"Of Starscream's world, I'm assuming."

Blitzwing nodded. "Yes. I happened to be visiting Jetfire when he got your message, so he contacted me."

The Blitzwing of her world was cold and murderous, one of the lost members of the triplechanger squad. This one was decidedly less dangerous. Slipstream's gaze fell to the severed helm. Blitzwing followed it.

Their face fell.

"Oh," they said quietly. Their wings lowered, their composure changing completely.

"Oh *what*?" Slipstream said.

"I knew him, once," Blitzwing said softly. "My world's version of him. It's… a shame."

"It is."

ΔΔΔ

Ramjet survived. They weren't able to reattach his arm, but he survived. Wheeljack offered to make a replacement, which was quickly accepted. Missing a limb meant Ramjet couldn't transform, leaving him particularly antsy.

He tapped a pede as Wheeljack tweaked the new arm, occasionally stimulating it with a charge. He rested his cheek on his palm, staring at the wall.

"Can you feel that?" Wheeljack asked.

"Yes," Ramjet said flatly.

Wheeljack hummed. "Try moving your fingers."

Ramjet's new fingers twitched.

"Good," Wheeljack said.

"Good to *go*?" Ramjet said.

Wheeljack shook his helm. "Just a few more tests."

Slipstream reached out, placing a hand on Ramjet's shoulder. He turned toward her.

[You'll fly soon,] she sent.

Ramjet looked away. His wings twitched downward.

[I want to crawl out of my plating,] he replied. *[Haven't been without flight for this long in a while.]*

A pang of guilt passed through Slipstream. This was her fault, in a way. If they hadn't taken her and Ramjet, he wouldn't have lost his arm.

[We'll go for a flight the moment he says you're ready,] Slipstream promised.

That seemed to settle him. Ramjet sighed, some of the tension leaving his frame. True to his word, Wheeljack finished after a few more tests. He looked up at Ramjet and smacked his palms together.

"Welp!" He said cheerily. "That's all the tests I needed to run. You're good to go. If you have any issues, let me know!"

They said their goodbyes. The moment they left the facility, Slipstream turned back toward Ramjet. He was flexing his fingers, his arm out in front of him.

"Do you think you can fly?" Slipstream asked.

Ramjet looked up. His wings rose. He smiled.

"Yes."

Slipstream smiled back. She leaped into the air and transformed. She flew ahead, but circled back, waiting for Ramjet to join her. An engine sounded behind her and she rolled, catching a glimpse of white plating.

Ramjet surged ahead of her, picking up speed before doing a slip. She followed him.

[Is everything working?] She sent.

Ramjet did another flip. *[Yes!]*

If Slipstream were in robot form, she would have grinned. Her spark warmed. Ramjet generally wasn't one for tricks, but clearly, a while grounded tempted him to test himself.

As they flew home, they weaved around each other. Because Cybertron was beyond saving, the humans had agreed to give cybertronians select territories. Because of this, they didn't need to worry about human aircraft as they coasted across the sky. But this also made the areas densely populated, and as they got closer to home, the chatter and screech of busy mecha reached them.

Somewhere below, two grounders in alt-mode barely missed one another, causing the entire street to back up. It was a good thing they weren't caught in that. The past few days of taking transports was already a slog.

Eventually, they reached the apartment complex. They landed on the roof, then quietly made their way down to their room. As they entered the hallway, Slipstream froze.

She wasn't sure what it was, but she heard something. A voice, maybe? It was muffled and deep. *Familiar*.

"Slipstream?" Ramjet said softly.

The moment was broken. She couldn't hear nor see anything unusual. She pressed ahead. They entered the apartment. The sunset through the window stained it red.

A large hand loomed—

She turned. It was *Ramjet*. Just Ramjet. Who else would it be?

He offered her a cube of energeon. She took it and they settled at the table. Ramjet picked up the datapad that laid facedown on it and placed it on a stand, then turned it on.

It wasn't anything special, and the quality wasn't great, but they lacked the space for a proper TV. So, a datapad it was. They searched for a movie to play, finding one quickly—some trashy romance with a lot of action scenes.

Most cybertronian media was lost in the war, destroyed in battles or left to decay on Cybertron. Final copies rested only in the helms of the dead. But when peace deals were made and construction began, one mech stepped forward.

She had a large collection of media, mostly romance novels. But a few were movies. This wasn't one of them. It was the first film created since the start of peace, directed by her.

The film began with a pair of wingmates. Slipstream tried not to snicker as she recognized the actors. There were only so many Seekers around, after all. It was a good thing they were finding new purposes.

The wingmates were soldiers in a war, sent on a mission. One of the enemy soldiers caught one of the wingmates' optics—classic love at first sight. But it quickly turned dark. The enemy soldier killed the other members of the mission. In an attempt to kill the enemy soldier, one of the wingmates was caught in the crossfire.

It was a shot from his own wingmate that took him out. The scene was exaggerated, but it pulled at her spark. The acting was decent, and the score was beautiful. Beside her, Ramjet stiffened. Slowly, he placed his cube on the table.

His optics were fuzzy. His wings shook.

"Ramjet?" Slipstream said.

His optics fell to the table. "Yeah?"

"Are you alright?"

Ramjet brought his hands to his face, burying it in them. His wings clattered against the chair. He hunched, curling in on himself.

"I killed him," he said, voice muffled by his hands. "I killed my wingmate."

They'd been so busy with his recovery that it must not have had time to sink in. What could she say?

"You saved me," she said.

Ramjet crumpled. The action sent needles through Slipstream's spark. What could she do? Gently, Slipstream reached for the end of his wing and rubbed it.

"I *knew* it was him," Ramjet said, voice cracking. "Recognized the override button on his rays. And I *pressed it*."

Slipstream hooked her arm around his shoulders, pulling him toward her. He turned, wrapping his arms around her, and buried his face in her shoulder.

"He was going to kill you," Slipstream said.

Ramjet squeezed her. His hands shook.

"I don't know what happened to him," he said. "We used to be so close."

Slipstream was reminded of Acid Storm and Ion Storm. The Matrix hummed angrily in her chest, sending a small stab of pain. She ignored it. Comforting Ramjet was more important.

"A lot of things have changed," she said.

"I just don't understand it."

She rubbed his shoulder. "I don't, either."

ΔΔΔ

Ramjet's demeanor changed after that. He was sullen and quiet, his wings always set low. No matter what Slipstream tried, she couldn't get him to brighten. So, she turned to one of the few mecha who might be able to answer.

[What do I do?]

[Give him something to care for,] Starscream replied. *[That's what saved me.]*

'Something to care for' was a very vague statement. Ramjet had little interest in plants, so Slipstream settled for an animal. It took some research, but she had a few ideas. The only issue? *Humans*.

"Is this the… animal shelter?" Slipstream asked.

The human looked up from the doorway, tiny optics wide.

"Yes," they stammered. "I-it is!"

There was no way they would fit inside that building. It was tiny, and much too short. Perhaps this wasn't the best idea, but they were already there.

Slipstream leaned down. "We want to adopt."

She had done research. Any of the animals in the shelter would have plenty of space in their home. She had no preference herself—ideally, Ramjet would be the one to pick.

The human kept staring. They glanced between the two mecha and the interior of the shelter.

"Oh," they said. They glanced away and back again. "Come around the other side. We have a catio and pen."

Slipstream nodded. The human went back into the building. She and Ramjet went along the side. On one side, a wire mesh enclosed a set of small animals with many climbing features. The other, in the side facing perpendicular to the first, housed a set of loud animals of varying sizes.

The human popped out from a door. They smiled.

"Just, uh… look around!" They said. "We can discuss the details if you find one you like."

Slipstream nodded. The loud ones were cute, but the tiny ones caught her interest. One came toward her and rubbed its face against the mesh before letting out a noise. She knelt, placing her finger at the edge of the mesh. It didn't flee.

The air shifted as Ramjet knelt behind her. She took her finger away and gently grabbed his, resting it against the mesh. The animal made a noise again.

"Soft," Ramjet said quietly.

The animal reared up, placing its paws against the mesh. It made a noise again. Ramjet stared at it, face crinkling.

Slipstream turned toward the human. "Can he hold it?"

The human furrowed their tiny brow. They looked between the two mecha and the little creature.

"You won't harm her?" The human asked.

Slipstream glared at them. "We're here to adopt. Why would we hurt the animal we're trying to adopt?"

The human blinked, staring up at her.

"Right," the human said.

They disappeared into the building. A few moments later, they reappeared inside the wire mesh and picked up the animal. It protested with a squeaky noise, but quickly went limp in their arms. Then, the human came back outside. They held the animal up, offering it to them.

Ramjet glanced at Slipstream. Slipstream motioned toward the animal. Slowly, Ramjet placed his hand before the human. They set the animal down on top of it. Ramjet brought the hand to his chest, offering one of his fingers to the creature.

It made a noise and rubbed itself against his finger. Ramjet's optic lenses shifted as he focused on the animal, carefully bringing his finger to the top of its head. He scratched the animal's head. It leaned into the touch.

He *smiled*.

"Can you hear it?" He whispered.

Slipstream turned up the sensitivity of her audials. The creature was *purring*. No wonder Ramjet was excited. She turned back toward the human.

"We'll take this one," she said.

ΔΔΔ

The animal came with a name: Swansong. A bit macabre, but Slipstream didn't see any reason to change it, especially when Ramjet's suggestion—Turboclaws—was much more ridiculous. The humans, despite clearly being afraid of them, scrutinized them at every part of the process. But Slipstream had done her research.

So what if she forgot the creature was called a cat? She still knew what one needed.

So, after a few days, they were able to bring Swansong home. Swansong spent most of her time following Ramjet around, occasionally nearly ending up under-pede. Her favorite place to rest was inside Ramjet's cockpit, something he rushed to tell Slipstream the first time it happened. He had extra cushioning put in for her.

The cat proved a wonderful distraction. Ramjet finally brightened up, spending his spare time finding treats and trinkets for her. He often brought her to work in his cockpit, and she seemed to enjoy flying.

Which led to situations like this one.

Ramjet opened his cockpit and gently set Swansong on Slipstream's desk. With a quiet trill, Swansong leaped onto her datapad. Slipstream petted the cat's head.

"Swansong wants you to take a break," Ramjet said.

Slipstream looked up at him, amusement warming her spark. "Swansong or you? Last I recalled, she couldn't talk."

Ramjet smiled and held up his hands.

"Fine," he said with a chuckle. "You got me."

He was so *sweet*. She never would have thought him capable of something like this when they first met. But…

"I have another meeting soon," she said.

"But you have some time in between!"

She shook her helm. "I have notes to sort through. I need to get ready."

Ramjet's smile fell. He scooped Swansong back into her cockpit despite her protests.

"Right," he said, turning toward the door.

He *was* just trying to help…

"We can go out after work," Slipstream said.

Ramjet looked back, the smile returning to his face as he nodded. He closed the door. Her office was so quiet without him.

But the meeting wasn't a lie. She *did* have notes to review. So, she busied herself by reading them over.

"Oh, Slipstream…"

That voice. Cold claws gripped her spark. She knew that voice. But Galvatron was *dead*.

The lights flickered. The indicator on the access panel turned red, and everything turned off. Slipstream stood up, her spark crackling. The building was in lockdown mode. Why?

Laughter echoed in her audials. She hissed, searching for the source, but it was fruitless.

"Where are you?" She growled.

Shadows moved in the corner of her vision, but when she turned to face them, nothing was there. She charged her rays.

"Such a pathetic sight," Galvatron said. *"You always did need me…"*

"I never needed you!" She hissed.

Where was he hiding?

"Did you?" Galvatron said. *"It was I who elevated you, I who made you something other than a lowly pet Seeker. Even now, you only bear the Matrix because I had it first."*

The Matrix. Was that what this was? An invisible claw scraped down her chest, air rushing over her from phantom vents. What if Galvatron wasn't around her, but *inside* her?

"Even now," Galvatron said. *"You pad after that Seeker like he's your new master. You're woefully dependent. A perfect pet until the end."*

"That's… that's not true!" She hissed.

But her spark seized. She *knew* it was. Starscream had friends, a life, far beyond her own—yet she clung to him. He was an entire universe away and she *still* couldn't do things without him.

And Ramjet… was Ramjet the same? Was he yet another dependency? Just like Nova? He nearly died. And if the masked mecha tried again…

"I can see the gears turning in your mind," Galvatron purred. *"You know it's true."*

She couldn't deny it. Despite being leader of her own faction, she had never been more helpless. Galvatron wasn't just still here—he was *part of her*.

"You don't own me," she said. Her voice was soft, trembling.

"Lie to yourself all you want, Slipstream. It won't change the truth."

The keypad beeped, the light on it turning green. The door opened, and light flooded the room. Gone was the presence she had felt so acutely only moments before.

"Slipstream!"

Ramjet's voice reached her audials. Oh, he was standing in the doorway. His wings were low. He came toward her.

"Are you alright?"

Slipstream forced herself to speak. "I'm fine."

Ramjet offered a hand. She placed hers in his. Gently, he squeezed her hand, pulling her forward.

"Someone activated lockdown mode, but only for this wing," Ramjet said. "I thought they might be targeting you, but I couldn't get in."

They left the entry room.

"There was no one there," Slipstream said. "Maybe they just wanted to cause trouble?"

Best not to let him know Galvatron was inside her. Speaking of… she drafted a message to Optimus.

[You told me I could speak to you about the Matrix.]

They entered the lobby. Ahead of them, Acid Storm and Ion Storm held a mech between them. The mech thrashed, his wings thwacking against their sides. After a moment, she recognized him: Sideways, a fairly unremarkable Seeker.

[Yes,] Optimus replied. *[What did you want to discuss?]*

[Does the Matrix…] How could she phrase this? *[Keep copies of its past wielders?]*

Sideways looked toward her and stilled.

[It does,] Optimus replied. *[Did one of them speak to you?]*

[Possibly.]

[Who?]

Sideways grinned.

[They didn't say their name,] Slipstream lied.

Acid Storm glanced between Sideways and Slipstream. He flicked his wings and flexed his shoulders, as if trying to make himself larger.

"He broke into the control room," he said, motioning toward Sideways. "He was the one who pulled the alarm."

Optimus sent her more messages, but she didn't read them. She already had confirmation of what she feared: Galvatron was inside the Matrix, and he wanted something from her. Was that why the Matrix kept hurting her?

"Take him outside and don't let him back in," Slipstream said.

Acid Storm frowned. "Are you sure you don't want us to interrogate—?"

"He hasn't caused any real harm, and likely wasn't trying to," Slipstream said. "Otherwise, he would've just shot us all."

Sideways laughed. Acid Storm and Ion Storm jumped. Suddenly, Sideways shot forward, barely restrained.

"He's coming for you!" Sideways cackled.

Slipstream stepped back. Sideways attempted to cross the gap, but Acid Storm and Ion Storm pulled him away.

"You're the key," Sideways said. "Destruction or salvation—it's your choice!"

He couldn't be referring to Galvatron. How would he know? But who else could he be referring to? An electric shock traveled across Slipstream's plating. Sideways, still cackling, was hauled away.

There was no way he could know about Galvatron. It didn't make sense. But the timing was perfect.

Later that day, the energeon she shared with Ramjet tasted like ash. Dread crept over her, its tendrils digging into her seams and taking root. Galvatron wanted something from her, and she held no doubt it would destroy anyone close to her.

Chapter End Notes

You know I had to add another cat. Gotta fulfill the kitty cat quota.

The dramatic irony is palpable in this one. I somehow got away without saying Tarn's real name because I figured it would kill all of the drama.

Song rec: Third Degree Burns by Citizen Soldier and Blank Era

Anyway, I'm tired. So so tired. Don't know why. It's annoying, actually. I have things to do and I can't handle them. Figured I could edit this at the very least, because even if I do a garbage job, not too many people are reading it. But I did try.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

- warning for this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She exited recharge with her spark crackling, electricity humming under her plating, as laughter echoed in her audials. Something was wrong, but she couldn't remember what. Large hands trapped her. Pressure on her chest. Someone was holding her down.

She struck blindly, driven only be the need to escape. A cry sounded as she kicked her captor and flung herself off the berth. Dull red optics brightened, staring down at her. Energeon dripped onto the berth pad.

That wasn't…

"Slipstream?"

Ramjet's voice was quiet. He touched the scratch on his cheek—a set of messy, deep lines—and frowned. Guilt settled in Slipstream's still-crackling spark.

"Ramjet," she said quietly. "I didn't mean to—"

She froze as Ramjet rose from the berth. He wouldn't hurt her, not anymore. But she'd just hurt *him*.

"Are you okay?" He asked.

The answer was *no*, but she couldn't say that. He would ask *why*, and there was no explaining what had just happened, and what was currently happening. It was better no one knew. They had only just freed themselves from Galvatron's tyranny—what would they think if they knew he still lived on?

Slipstream flicked her wings and stood up.

"Are *you* okay?" She said. "I'm not the one bleeding."

Before he could respond, she left the room. She pulled the medkit from the cabinet, taking out an antiseptic and a rinse. When Ramjet entered the room, she beckoned him closer. Then, she reached up, gently pulling his cheek to eye level by grabbing his chin.

She cleaned the wound. It was deep, but not large. She squinted at it. Did it need to be closed, or just covered? If only she had refreshed her field training…

Ramjet's hands hovered over hers.

"It's okay," he said. He pulled away from her and cut a strip of absorbent pad from the kit, then placed it on the wound. "Let's just go back to berth."

Slipstream sighed. She let Ramjet guide her back. But when he laid down, she hesitated. She could hurt him again. And wasn't it better if he was further away?

'You're woefully dependent.'

It was. She turned, laying on the other berth. Ramjet's berth creaked as he sat up.

"Slipstream?" He said.

She turned away from him and closed her optics.

"Okay," he said.

ΔΔΔ

Ramjet coaxed her to share the berth with him, but she just couldn't. It was better this way. The more distant she was, the safer he would be. Even if her spark hurt every time his wings drooped dejectedly.

Life continued, despite the voice that assaulted her audials in the dark, with invisible claws digging into her plating. If she kept all of the lights on in her office, did any mech need to know? She wasn't *afraid* of the dark, it just made the phantom touches more real.

Paws landed on her datapad. She glanced up. Ramjet smiled sheepishly down at her.

"Hey," he said weakly.

"I can't."

His wings drooped. Slipstream's spark burned. The sharp bite of the Matrix quickly joined it. She dug her claws into the desk. Swansong sniffed at them.

"I know," Ramjet said. "But maybe we can go out afterward?"

Slipstream flicked her wings dismissively, attempting to project an air of indifference despite the pulling on her spark.

"You can go," she said. "I'd rather stay home."

"We can go to that bar with the mixes you really liked—"

"No!" Slipstream snapped. "I said *no*."

Ramjet's wings rose. His frown turned sharper—not quite a scowl, but close.

"That's all you've been saying lately," he said. "What's going on? I thought we had something between us."

Slipstream stood up. Swansong backed away, meowing quietly.

"You thought *wrong*!" Slipstream hissed.

Ramjet leaned forward, wings going wide. "Then what was all of *that*? Are you going to tell me that it didn't mean anything to you?"

It meant *everything*. But it was better this way. He would be safe. She was used to being alone, once. She could get used to it again.

Ramjet backed away. Slowly, his wings fell.

"Not going to say anything, huh?" He said, his voice losing its bite as he spoke. "You're not…"

He squeezed his optics shut. In a swift motion, he scooped Swansong back into his cockpit. The door slid shut behind him.

It was *better* this way. She repeated that to herself even as the Matrix hummed angrily in her chest, agony pinning her in place. It was *better*. She wanted to reach into her spark chamber and claw the Matrix out, rip that dead tyrant and all of her responsibilities out of her body. It was *better*.

It had to be better. There was no other option.

ΔΔΔ

Even after that, he still tried to bring her energeon. His optics would fall to her chest, and she would find that she was digging her claws into her plating again. The pain was constant, as it was before. She didn't realize it was gone until it returned.

[Ramjet told me what you did.]

Slipstream sighed, burying her face in her hands. *Of course* Starscream would hear about this.

[This has nothing to do with you,] she replied.

[You seemed happy.]

If she didn't respond, would he stop sending messages?

[You're allowed to have good things.]

Clearly, the answer was no. And he was incorrect—Slipstream was *never* allowed to have good things. That was why she had to push Ramjet away. He had already been targeted once,

and would surely be targeted again. Acid Storm and Ion Storm didn't say it directly, but they were right—she brought danger to everyone she loved.

[Was there an actual reason you contacted me, or did you just want to gossip?] Slipstream sent.

She muted his messages. If he wanted to reach her, he could do it through the datapad, about *work*.

ΔΔΔ

"There's something wrong."

Slipstream looked up from the message she was reading. Ramjet stared down at her, his wings wide. He practically *loomed*.

"With what?" Slipstream said.

"With you!" Ramjet hissed. "I made you an appointment with the medics and you're going *right now*."

Slipstream glared at him. "There's nothing wrong with me."

Nothing that could be fixed, anyway. Why did he care so much? Hadn't she driven him away?

"You're practically clawing off your chestplates!"

Slipstream rolled her optics, but stood up from her desk anyway. If Ramjet wanted to waste everyone's time, he could. But she knew they'd find nothing—this was the Matrix's fault.

She followed him through the hall and to the medbay. Jetfire was waiting for them, a pleasant smile on his face as he let them in. He motioned for Slipstream to sit on a nearby berth. Reluctantly, she obeyed.

There were no signs of Hook or any other mecha. Was Jetfire working alone today?

Ramjet hovered beside her. His wings twitched. She hissed at him. He turned, staring at her.

"Out!" She hissed.

Ramjet left. Jetfire watched the door close before turning toward Slipstream.

"So, what seems to be the issue?" He said.

"Ramjet probably already told you."

Jetfire's wings flicked. "Well, yes… but I want to hear it in your own words."

"The Matrix hurts," she said.

Jetfire frowned. "The Matrix?"

"Yes!" She hissed. "The Matrix."

Jetfire's brow furrowed. "I don't know if I can help with that."

"That's what I thought!" Slipstream hissed, digging her claws into the berth. "That's why I never came!"

Jetfire turned toward the drawers on the other side of the room. "I can give you a pain patch —"

"No!" Slipstream snapped. Her processor recalled the last time she was given one—the sharp ache in her helm and the horrible, disorienting dizziness followed by crushing tiredness. "I don't… handle them well."

She hadn't always had that reaction to them, though pain patches had never been pleasant. As she was given them more and more during her recoveries from Galvatron's retaliations, their harm began to outweigh their helpfulness, until eventually, Slipstream begged the medics to put a note in her file.

(That was back when they actually *had* medics—before Galvatron killed them all.)

"Okay," Jetfire said, coming back toward her. "I'm going to take a look at those scratches, then."

He knelt in front of her. Gently, he pushed her hands to the side. Then, he reached over, grabbing a soaked piece of gauze. He hummed.

"Some of these are starting to get infected," he said. "I might need to debride them. It'll sting."

"Do whatever you have to," Slipstream grumbled.

He was right—it did sting—but it wasn't anything she couldn't handle.

"So," Slipstream said. "You're half of that combiner."

Jetfire cringed. "Uh, yeah."

A sore spot?

"It's a formidable beast," Slipstream said. "I'm surprised half of it is you."

Jetfire's wings lowered. "Yeah…"

It was definitely a sore spot, then. But why?

"Your second half is an Autobot," Slipstream said.

Jetfire nodded. "He is. We visit sometimes, when the pull gets too strong."

The pull? Must be a combiner thing. It would explain why she never saw the combiner teams apart before they were all killed.

But his calmness proved that there was no ill will between them, so that wasn't the reason.

"You can visit him anytime you want," Slipstream said. "The war is over, after all."

"Thank you," Jetfire said quietly.

Jetfire paused for a moment, wringing his hands.

"Now that you know…" he said. "Are you going to…?"

"Going to *what*?"

Jetfire scrunched his optics shut. "Force us to combine?"

Slipstream blinked at him. *What?* What would *ever* give him that idea? She laughed.

"No!" She said. "That would defeat the point of the Cause!"

Jetfire looked up. "The Cause?"

Slipstream grinned. "The Decepticon Cause! Before Galvatron went and ruined it, anyway. For every mech to be free! To choose their occupation and lifestyle, rather than having it handed down to them."

Under Galvatron, the Cause had twisted into something else: obey Galvatron or die. But with him no longer in control…

Jetfire's plating relaxed. "Oh. I like that."

"That's why you're here!" Slipstream said.

If the Autobots had forced those mecha to combine, or, even worse, forced them to become a combiner team in the first place, she had half a processor to just march right up to them and restart the war. But neither faction would survive if that happened, so she'd just have to make do with being extra passive-aggressive during the next few meetings.

Maybe they'd care enough to ask, but who was she kidding? They were Autobots, after all!

Jetfire resumed tending to the scratches, furrowing his brow. Slipstream hissed as whatever he was doing stung. He glanced at her.

"Sorry," he said. "Some of these are deep. Do you have a medkit in your office?"

"Yes," Slipstream said.

"Then make sure to clean them out once a day," he said. "I'm… assuming you don't want to keep coming here."

"I will."

Jetfire was a kind mech. But, if he and Hook had any other patients in when she showed up, it would be very awkward. It wasn't that she didn't want anyone to know—though she didn't—but it would attract attention, and that was the last thing she wanted. Mecha would gossip, and might even assume she was ill, which would cast doubt upon her leadership.

They had just established peace, and it was already threatened. She didn't want to endanger it more.

"You seem like you've settled in well," Slipstream said.

Jetfire smiled. "I guess so. Thank you for letting me in."

Where did such a sweetspark even come from? Well, she knew exactly where he came from—he was Starscream's creation—but *still*. In a world where large, strong hands only served to crush and dominate, his were deft and gentle.

He pulled away.

"That's it for the scratches, but—" He wrung his hands. "Can I ask you something?"

Slipstream flicked her wing. "What is it?"

Jetfire wrung his hands again. "This won't leave the room. I won't even write it down. But I want an honest answer: how are you?"

'Fine,' was the easy answer that refused to leave her vocalizer.

'Scared and alone,' was the true answer that also refused to leave her.

"Trapped," she said instead.

"Trapped *how?*"

"You were there," she muttered. "You saw it. I didn't want the Matrix. It took me. And now I have to lead mecha who used to hate me. Many of them still do."

"I'm sorry," Jetfire said.

"Are you the one that crawled into my chestplates and made me a Prime?" She said.

Jetfire shook his helm.

"I didn't think so," she said.

Jetfire stood up. His pede tapped as his optics stared briefly into space.

"That's against the Cause," he said.

Slipstream, already halfway off the berth, nearly fell the rest of the way. "What?"

"You being forced to be Prime and lead the Decepticons when you don't want to is against the Cause," he said firmly. "Just because some ancient artifact integrated with you shouldn't mean you have to do things you don't want to. You should get to make your own choices, too."

His wings widened a fraction. His fists curled. His plating trembled. The pieces came together.

Combiners were made with an artifact—the Enigma. Jetfire didn't want to combine. He wasn't originally from this world, but his partner was. He *had* been forced. This was personal for him.

But this wasn't a matter of just stopping. The role needed to be filled. Everyone already knew she had the Matrix. That was what kept this fragile peace together.

Slipstream walked past him.

"Well," she said. "It's the will of Primus, or whatever religious scrap the Autobots love to peddle. Can't fight that."

She opened the door and slipped through it before he could respond. Ramjet waited on the other side for her, refusing to meet her gaze.

ΔΔΔ

"Have you seen Swansong?"

Slipstream shrugged from her seat at the table. "Are you certain she isn't in your cockpit?"

Ramjet tapped the glass of his cockpit.

"She isn't," he said.

"I'm sure she'll turn up," Slipstream said.

She went back to reviewing her notes. The humans couldn't give them more space because of what again?

"Do you even care?"

Slipstream didn't look up. "She's a cat. I heard they roam sometimes."

A hand landed on top of her datapad, pushing it down. Slipstream bared her dentae and glared at him. Ramjet glared back.

"What *happened*?" He said. "First you say nothing between us meant anything, and now you don't care about Swansong—"

Slipstream yanked the datapad away and slammed it against the table.

"None of this is about Swansong!" She spat.

Ramjet's wings widened as his optics narrowed. "Then what *is* it about?"

She couldn't answer that. Slipstream stood from her chair, backing away. The table was the only barrier between her and Ramjet.

"Is it about me?" Ramjet said. "Is it my fault?"

Slipstream shook her helm. Why would he even think that?

"No," she said. "It's me. It's always *me*."

And it was. *She* was the one with the Matrix inside her, and that tyrant with it. *She* was the one who took his hand after others refused it, who commanded her Air Force into that doomed mission so long ago. *She* was the one who shot the tyrant, finding his wrath rather than her vengeance. *She* was the one they wanted when they took Ramjet and held a gun to his helm.

There was a common thread between it all: her, and her thirst for violence.

She freed herself from her first master through it. When Galvatron offered her a mission—slaughter the Council, no mercy—she was elate. Each mission was yet another opportunity. But it all crashed down when Nova died.

So she did what she knew best: tried to kill her master again. He didn't die last time. She should've known he wouldn't die this one, either.

"I kill everything I care about, Ramjet," Slipstream hissed. "All I know is violence. I'll kill you too, if given enough time."

Ramjet's wings lowered. His expression softened.

"What we had wasn't violence," he said quietly.

Slipstream flashed her claws at him. "I ran my claws down your plating. I did everything short of drawing energeon. What else was it?"

He reached across the table, offering his hand.

"Love," he said. "In a way only we'd understand."

She wanted to take the hand. Every part of her frame screamed for her to take it. But she *couldn't*. And she couldn't tell him *why*. She turned away.

"Let's just…" The words caught in her vocalizer. "Let's just go look for Swansong."

She turned back toward the balcony without waiting for an answer. She dove off of it, using her thrusters to slow her fall. After a moment, Ramjet landed behind her. They searched

around the building, but there was no sign of Swansong. They wandered further, and further. Still no sign.

The sun fell below the sky. Still no Swansong. Ramjet's wings were low. He was upset. Why wouldn't he be? He loved that creature.

"Maybe we'll see her if we fly over," he said.

It was worth a try.

"You can go that way—" Ramjet motioned in one direction, then the opposite. "I can go this way."

Ramjet didn't know. She almost forgot. But here it was, causing problems yet again. There was no reason to refuse.

"Okay," she said.

She waited until he was out of view. Her spark startled to crackle. Energy coursed beneath her plating. Flying alone. She could do it. She'd done it before. She called up her memories of the area, trying to remember landmarks.

Then, she took off. The first few moments were always dizzying. She was used to that. She flew, keeping careful track of what was below her. The roads made a *T* there, the building with the bright red roof was there, and so on.

A tiny dot of orange caught her optics. She flew lower. Was that…? Slipstream landed.

Little green eyes blinked at her from an alleyway. How had Swansong gotten so far? That didn't matter now. She found her.

Slipstream approached carefully. Swansong meowed, nearly skipping toward her, tail high in greeting. Bending down, Slipstream offered Swansong a finger. Swansong sniffed it, then froze.

Her tail fluffed up as the fur on her back rose. She curled her back, a growl rumbling from within. Then, she hissed.

"It's me," Slipstream said.

Swansong knew it was her. She already said hello! So what was…?

Swansong wasn't looking at *her*. Slipstream followed the cat's gaze. A shadow stood in the alleyway, moonlight framing it. She didn't need any details to know who it was. Her spark crackled.

The shadow stepped closer. Slipstream let it approach. There was no escaping it. It grinned—she couldn't see it, only *feel* it, like claws on a chalkboard.

"You're all alone. Did he finally get tired of you?"

Slipstream glared at him. He tilted his helm.

"Poor, poor Slipstream," he said. *"Always second best. The cheap copy. The last choice."*

Hadn't she thought so herself?

"I suppose taking your body for myself will just be the latest in a long line of trends," Galvatron purred.

He was planning to *what*?

"My body?" She hissed, rising to her pedes.

"Did you truly think I'd let myself stay dead?"

This was what he wanted. A second chance at life. Another opportunity to take everything over and make everyone suffer. And the Matrix handed it to him perfectly.

Galvatron laughed.

"Yes, it did," he said. *"It won't take long to override you at all."*

Galvatron was inside the Matrix. The Matrix was inside *her*. He was going to take over her body and ruin everything and everyone she cared about. How could she stop that? Unless…

Slipstream dug her claws into her chestplates. She *did* say she wanted to be rid of the thing.

"What are you doing?" Galvatron hissed.

She couldn't open them. The opened panels would keep her from reaching what was needed. So, she clawed like the desperate animal, metal bending beneath her fingers.

"What do you—" she cut herself off with a grunt of pain as her claws finally punctured through one of her chestplates. "What do you think I'm doing?"

The rest of the metal gave way. The other chestplate was soon to follow. Slipstream sliced through her internals, normally so carefully tucked behind the plates. Her hands grew slippery with warm energeon.

There. She took her claws and *stabbed*.

"I'd rather be dead than under your control again!" She spat.

Her vision grew fuzzy, fading at the edges. With each moment, her limbs grew weaker as they began to tremble. Her legs threatened to buckle. But she couldn't let go. Not yet. She had to destroy the Matrix, or Galvatron may just take over the next poor bot who was forced to bear it.

So, she dug deeper. Deeper. Deeper—

She crashed to her knees. Her vision swam. She careened forward. The Matrix. She had to…

She pushed against the ground. Her limbs shook. She couldn't move.

"No…" she murmured. "No…!"

There was no silhouette at the end of the alley. Galvatron was gone.

Swansong crept in front of her. She sniffed at the growing puddle of energeon beneath her, jumping back when it touched her nose. Then, Swansong raised her muzzle to the sky and *yowled*.

Pedesteps came from the entrance of the alley. Hushed voices. They were familiar.

Tiredness washed over Slipstream. But she had to… had to…

The pedesteps get closer. Two sets. One passed her. The other stayed beside her. The one beside her picked her up, turning her to the side as she was pulled into their lap. *Good*. Slipstream dug her claws into the hole in her chest—

Her hands were forced back. She kicked and squirmed, but the mech just held her even more firmly.

"No!" Slipstream hissed, her vocalizer popping. "I have to…"

"Have to what?" The mech in front of her asked.

What….? What *did* she have to do? Everything was so fuzzy…

ΔΔΔ

It was cold. Her systems should've been compensating for that. She shivered. Why was it so cold?

Muffled voices reached her audials, but she didn't listen to them. She wouldn't understand them anyway. It was so cold. She tried to turn herself over. Why was she so shaky?

The ground shifted. Something inserted itself beside her. It was warm. She clung to it. It pulled her closer. There was a tugging on one of her arms, almost as if…

Slipstream opened her optics. Ugh. Too bright. She tried again. A line attached to her arm, blue energeon running through it. White. White plating, white walls, white berth cover. *Wait*.

'Ramjet?' She tried to ask, but could only manage a repeated *rrr*.

"It's me."

It *was* Ramjet! Slipstream buried herself in his plating again. He was here, and he was so, so warm… but she was supposed to be avoiding him for some reason. What was it?

{Memory bank repair complete.}

It hit her in a rush. Galvatron—Tarn—the Matrix—

She put her claws on her chest. There was a patch there. The Matrix hummed beneath it. Gently, a hand closed around hers, pulling her claws away. There was something dull and soft on the tips of her fingers…

Did they put *caps* on her claws?

She pushed herself away from Ramjet, forcing herself to ignore the cold. None of that was important right now. She had to destroy the Matrix before Galvatron came back.

Colors caught her optics—green and blue. Acid Storm and Ion Storm? What were they doing here?

"They found you," Ramjet said softly.

That didn't matter! She needed to get rid of the Matrix! But without her claws, how could she? Wait! She checked her weapons.

{ERROR: Weapons systems disabled by override.}

A medical override. Of course. They didn't know. How could they? But if she couldn't do this, then…

She whipped back toward Ramjet, seizing his arm. He let out a surprised grunt as she yanked it upward, aiming his gun toward her chest. His optics widened.

"Shoot me!" Slipstream hissed.

"No—"

"Shoot me!" She spat. "We need to destroy the Matrix before Galvatron uses it to come back!"

Ramjet pulled his arm away. "Slipstream, *no*. I'm not going to shoot you."

"Please—!"

"Galvatron?"

Raspy, high-pitched. She knew that voice. Slipstream turned. Starscream leaned against the wall, arms crossed. How hadn't she noticed him before?

"Yes!" She said. "Galvatron! He's inside the Matrix. He said he was going to use it to possess me!"

Starscream frowned. His pede clicked against the wall as he swung it.

"He can't do that," he said.

Slipstream shook her helm. "I talked to Optimus! He said the Matrix saves copies of its wielders. Galvatron is in there."

Starscream pushed himself off the wall, stumbling slightly. He shook himself and approached the berth.

"He can't do that," he repeated. "Because Galvatron was never able to wield the Matrix. He told me before I killed him."

That didn't make any sense. How *else* could he be haunting her?

'These things don't just grow, but this makes it seem an awful lot like they do!'

The dark energeon had to come from somewhere. Galvatron consumed the substance exclusively. She only drank it a few times before the first mech's spark gave out under its influence, but she had still consumed it. Could that be the connection?

'He's coming for you! You're the key. Destruction or salvation—it's your choice!'

What if this wasn't Galvatron at all, but some higher power using his image to get what it wanted?

And what would it want? That answer was obvious: the Matrix's destruction. The Matrix posed a threat to it, whatever it was.

'You're woefully dependent.'

It wanted her isolated so there would be no one to save her when she destroyed the Matrix and herself with it. She almost gave it exactly what it wanted.

"Get my datapad!" She hissed.

Ramjet frowned. "Slipstream—"

"Get it!" She spat. "Right now! It's important."

Ramjet left the room. Starscream watched him leave with a furrowed brow.

"Datapad?" He asked.

"You'll see," Slipstream said.

A few moments later, he returned. He handed it to her before settling beside her again. Slipstream turned it on and pulled up the list of locations dark energeon appeared in. She turned it toward Starscream.

"Are there any patterns here?" She asked.

Starscream leaned down. He scrutinized the information.

"It avoids your city by a wide margin," he said.

Further proof. It couldn't come near her directly.

"Whatever this thing is, it's afraid of the Matrix," she said. "It tried to manipulate me into killing myself to destroy it."

Starscream hummed, his optics narrowing as he made the same connections she had. He sat on the foot of the berth. His pede swung, clicking quietly as it hit the berthpost repeatedly.

"I think I know what it is," he said.

Slipstream pushed herself more upright, fighting the energeon loss induced weakness in her limbs. "What is it?"

"It's…" Starscream's optics drifted away. He picked at the guards on his arms. "When I killed Galvatron, he had no spark. He was *already* dead. I think it was puppeting him, because it has no body of its own. He told me the world was going to be destroyed, and that he was immortal. That I was like him."

Slipstream remembered. Flame streaked across the sky, Starscream crashing to the Earth with Galvatron in his claws. Both frames were nearly destroyed. But in Starscream's exposed chamber, his spark still burned.

Sparks didn't *do* that. When they were exposed, they expended all of their energy and fizzled out. That was why spark casing damage was so fatal, and why exposing one's chamber was such a strong show of vulnerability.

But if Galvatron said Starscream was like him, and his frame had no spark, then…

"His spark is somewhere else!" Slipstream said. "But where?"

Starscream blinked, straightening up, as if suddenly remembering something.

"Inside the Earth," he said.

How would they get there? It wasn't like there was some secret tunnel that—wait!

'Destruction or salvation—the choice is yours!'

If anyone knew, it would be that madmech. Slipstream shoved herself off the berth. She immediately regretted it as he knees began to buckle and she stumbled forward. Ion Storm caught her. She stared up at him.

"We need to find Sideways!"

Chapter End Notes

It's so weird to write characters like Starscream and Jetfire from an outside perspective after being in their heads for so long.

You know the concept of a "money shot" in movies? The suicide scene is the money shot of this fic. I originally wanted to end this chapter with the suicide scene, but it didn't quite work out.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As far as Slipstream was concerned, there wasn't time to waste. Still, she was forced to wait several days for her weakness to subside. No, she didn't care that she lost more than fifty percent of her circulating energeon. No, she didn't care that she punctured her main fuel pump and they had to replace it. No, she didn't care that it damaged her systems, potentially permanently. They needed to find whatever that *thing* was and stop it!

So, the moment she could stand and walk, she was up. It didn't matter that she wasn't medically cleared. She was dizzy, but that didn't matter. Still—

"I should come with you. You'll need a medic."

—When Jetfire insisted on joining their party, she didn't refuse. It was just in case. She definitely didn't fear she might collapse in the middle of travel. Definitely not.

Starscream was supposed to be with her, but—

"You're not going!" Skywarp hissed. "We just got you back from one suicide mission. You don't need to go on another!"

Starscream flexed his claws. He leaned toward her, baring his dentae. "Then you can't go, either. Your warp drive is still growing back."

Skywarp flicked her wings. "Fine!"

"Who's going, then?"

Skywarp and Starscream froze, turning back toward Nova Storm. They exchanged glances.

"How about you?" Skywarp said.

—Well, it didn't pan out. Slipstream tried desperately not to look behind her, at the familiar yellow plating. The pink was hers. She knew it would match. All the more reason not to look.

Acid Storm and Ion Storm insisted on coming. Ramjet vouched for them, and Slipstream didn't have the energy to argue. She would just have to ignore them as well. They were talking quietly behind her. She tuned them out.

Sideways was less difficult to find than she assumed. All it took was a little bit of asking around—Ion Storm and Acid Storm, of course, not her—and they had a flood of stories about the mech and confirmation of where he liked to recharge. Apparently, he was a known figure.

They slipped into the alley. Sideways laid splayed across it, his optics shuttered. Slipstream glanced at Ramjet. Ramjet nodded and strode forward, shaking the mech gently by his shoulders.

Sideways stirred, letting out a yell. As his optics trailed over the mecha in front of him, he calmed. A grin spread across his face.

"You!" He said cheerily.

"Tell us where *he* is," Slipstream said.

Somehow, the grin got wider. Sideways scrambled to his pedes. His wings were chipped, his plating covered in dirt. The mech clearly wasn't taking care of himself.

"I know where the demon's spark is!" He said. "He possessed me during the war and I saw it!"

Ramjet glanced at her, expression unamused, as if to say, *'This guy? Really?'*

Slipstream shrugged. Sideways took off. The group followed. They flew above land and sea, staying away from common paths.

"It was the middle of a battle," Sideways said. "I don't remember which one. I was bleeding out. Desperate, I downed the cube of dark energeon I'd stolen that morning. My limbs moved on their own."

"Let me guess," Acid Storm said. "It was the best you'd ever fought?"

"Yes!" Sideways said. "It was. A voice spoke to me, telling me to destroy. That was all it wanted: death. The demon stopped controlling me after the battle, but I still hear its voice. It's what told me to turn on the switch that day."

The… thing told him to do that? It made sense. Why else would Galvatron appear the moment it happened? That just reinforced Slipstream's theory further: whatever this thing was, it was tied to dark energeon.

Sideways finally dove. They landed at the edge of a mountain. Ahead of them was a tunnel, half-obscured by fallen rocks. Sideways pointed to it.

"There!" He said.

Slipstream fired. In a cloud of dust and debris, the rocks fell away. Sideways dove in right away. Before she could follow, a gentle hand grabbed Slipstream's arm.

"Are you sure we should do this?" Ion Storm asked.

Slipstream shook him off. Of course one of *them* would be the ones to ask.

"Go home if you're afraid," she hissed. "You had no qualms about leaving me to face danger alone before."

Ion Storm's face hardened. His wings rose.

"No," he said firmly. "We aren't abandoning you again."

Abandoning… Slipstream didn't expect them to use the word. That required acknowledging their cowardice for what it was. But Ion Storm had used it. Maybe they *did* care.

"Thank you," she said, turning away before he could react. It was better not to see.

She entered the tunnel. The rest of the group soon followed. As they descended, it grew damp, the occasional drop of water hitting her olfactory ridge. But the tunnel held firm.

Her pedes began to hurt as they continued walking in endless darkness, light long swallowed up. But they had to see this through. The tunnel grew choked with heat as her cooling fans came on, her still-recovering systems taxed by the long trek. She wasn't the only one.

Eventually, the tunnel opened up into a cavern. Slipstream felt along the walls for a suitable place, then sat.

"Let's rest for a moment," she said.

Sideways grunted in displeasure, but didn't protest. Soon, the rest of the group was sitting, and the cavern grew steadily less stuffy as temperatures normalized and fans turned off.

Slipstream stood up, ready to call for the continuation of the journey, when a sound made her freeze. The floor vibrated beneath them. Dirt landed on her helm, sliding down onto her face.

"Cave in!" She yelled, feeling along the side of the cavern. What use it would have, she didn't know. They had no idea what laid ahead, and they were too far from the entrance to make it back.

As she shaking intensified, she dug her claws into the walls to steady herself. A cacophony of voices sounded, blending together with the crash and crack of stone. She tried to identify them—Ramjet, Nova Storm, Acid Storm—

There was a scream. Sideways.

The cavern stopped shaking. Slowly, Slipstream detached herself from the wall.

"Who's still here?" She called shakily.

A small chorus of voices answered. Ion Storm, Acid Storm, Ramjet…

"Nova Storm?" She called.

"I'm here!" She said, her voice slightly distant. "A rock hit my helm, but I think I'm okay."

She was alive. That was what mattered.

"Jetfire?" She called.

"Here!" He said quietly, voice much closer to her than Nova Storm.

Good. He was alive as well.

"Sideways?" Slipstream called.

No answer.

"Sideways?" She called again.

She raked her claws against the wall. *Frag.* If she was lucky, he was unconscious. But Slipstream was rarely lucky.

She walked carefully, doing her best not to trip on the freshly fallen rocks. With a clang, her pede hit metal. She bent down, running her hands along the area. They grew sticky with energeon quickly.

A hand. An arm. A helm. A *rock*. Sideways had been crushed. That was the scream.

"Sideways is dead," she said. Silence was her response. She rose. "We need to keep going."

Still more silence. Large pedes followed hers.

"She's right," Jetfire said. "If this happens again, we'll be safer in the narrow tunnel ahead."

That stirred the group. Soon, they were all in the tunnel. Slipstream didn't know what laid ahead, but whatever it was, Sideways thought it was what they needed to find. Considering the timing of the quake, he was probably correct. This thing didn't want the Matrix near it, so it was probably trying to deter them.

But Slipstream wouldn't surrender. It tried to take her life, and had terrorized her for far too long. She wouldn't rest until it was dealt with.

"Do you feel that?" Nova Storm whispered.

"I think I do," Ion Storm whispered back.

Slipstream didn't turn back toward them. The tunnel was too narrow for it.

"Feel what?" She hissed.

"Anger," Nova Storm said. "Deep, sharp *anger*."

They were feeling an EM field. Slipstream couldn't sense them, but the others could. EM fields were generated by sparks. They were getting close.

The ground hummed beneath them. Buzzing invaded Slipstream's audials, swallowing any sound the others could've made. Blinding white light shone ahead.

This was it. Slipstream increased her pace. Only a few pedesteps separated her from her target.

Then, it was none. The tunnel opened up into a large chamber. Stalactites and stalagmites littered the chamber, washed out by the light at the center. It swirled and crackled, shadows dancing across the chamber walls.

The hum was all-consuming. Behind her, the other members of the group fell to their knees—all but one. She and Jetfire remained standing.

A voice rose above the hum.

"You dare bring that here?"

It was layered, a thousand voices speaking as one. Somehow, it was both distinct from the hum and one with it. Slipstream stepped forward as she motioned for Jetfire to stay back.

"You tried to kill me!" Slipstream hissed.

"You are a pest," the thing said.

Slipstream stepped closer. The hum penetrated her plating, vibrating her very spark.

"Why do you fear the Matrix?" She said.

The thing didn't respond.

Slipstream willed the Matrix to produce energy, channeling it up her plating. She held her claws up, offering the energy. The thing in front of her dimmed.

"Cease that!" The thing cried.

"Then tell me!" Slipstream yelled. "What are you and why do you fear the Matrix?"

The thing's wild thrashing calmed. The room grew dark, as if it were sucking in all of the light. The humming lowered in pitch.

"It is not called a Matrix," the thing said. "It's a *spark extractor*."

Spark extractor…? That didn't make sense, until it did. The Matrix stored copies of those who wielded it. It was known to hold great power—able to fell armies with a single strike. All along, it was copying and extracting sparks and their data.

"And you're a giant spark," Slipstream said.

"Not a spark," the thing said. "A *spore*."

"A spore?"

"I destroy—drain, consume," the thing said. "Then I create."

"Create," Slipstream repeated.

"Yes," the Spore said. "I use what I have taken to make life. You are from a rival. That is why you have the extractor."

Energeon nourished them. Perhaps…

"The dark energeon—is it to nourish this life?"

"No," the Spore said. "It is to destroy you. The world must be empty for my creations. *You* are an obstacle."

If the world had to be empty, it couldn't just be referring to cybertronians. The Spore must've been speaking of everything on the planet. Swansong's quiet meow echoed in Slipstream's audials.

"This planet is full of life, not just us," she said.

"It will all die," the Spore said. "I do not care for it."

"But *I* do!" Slipstream hissed.

The Spore *laughed*. Galvatron's voice leaked from it, louder than the thousand others inside.

"You cling so uselessly to others," the Spore purred. "Would it not be better to just let go?"

Slipstream thought that, once. But it left her alone and miserable, just as Starscream said it would. And in the end, foregoing that belief was what saved her from her own foolishness. If it weren't for Ramjet, Acid Storm, Ion Storm, and the others, she wouldn't be there to speak to the Spore now.

"I don't cling," Slipstream hissed. "I *hold*. And they embrace me."

The Matrix rumbled in her chest. The ever-present pain faded, power running through her frame. *This* was what it wanted all along.

Ramjet, who was so sweet and loyal, even when she lied to push him away. Jetfire, who did his best to understand her, offering comfort and secrets even when she thought they wouldn't help. Acid Storm and Ion Storm, who had *apologized*, who still wanted to aid and protect her. Nova Storm…

Slipstream faltered. She turned back toward the group. The darkness had swallowed them, but she could catch glimpses of their plating reflecting the light.

Nova Storm, who she barely knew. Nova Storm, who offered a hand to a stranger wearing the face of her dead friend in the hope they could build something new.

"How sweet," the Spore said. "But there is no room in my world for you."

Slipstream steeled herself, calling upon the Matrix. It responded joyfully, energy crackling down her plating.

"Nor is there room in *my* world for *you*!" She hissed.

With a powerful leap, she launched herself at the Spore. She buried her claws in its surface, gritting her dentae as the current coursed through her. It buzzed over her plating, threatening to consume her.

She howled, burying her claws deeper. Beneath her, the spore screeched, thousands of voices calling out of time and tune. Energy coursed through her lines. Her audials rang, the world consumed by white.

Then, her pedes were on solid ground. The cavern was dark. Water dripped onto her olfactory ridge. Everything was still and silent.

That was it? All of this suffering and fear, for it to just end like that? Slipstream's frame was numb. There should have been a grand explosion, something powerful and all-consuming. Instead, the world shorted out like a broken light.

She turned back toward the group. As her optics adjusted to the darkness, she stared. Acid Storm and Ion Storm were already stirring. Jetfire was awake, leaning against the cavern walls. Then, Nova Storm woke with a quiet noise.

Slipstream took a step closer. An invisible barrier crackled to life at her pedes, daring her to cross. It promised pain if she violated it. She crossed it anyway.

It dissipated, blowing away as if it never existed to begin with. There was no pain. No collar around her neck, sending currents into her plating. It was only her.

Slipstream crouched slightly, offering Nova Storm her hand. Nova Storm smiled up at her and took it. With a gentle pull, she brought Nova Storm to her pedes.

Slipstream was tempted to speak, but the message she needed to deliver was for Nova Storm only.

[I would like to know you, if you'll have me,] she sent.

Nova Storm squeezed her hand.

[Of course!] She replied.

Slipstream released her hand and took a step back.

[I'm not the Slipstream you once knew.]

Nor was Nova Storm her Nova. She couldn't pretend, even if they had the same face and hands—even if their wings tilted the same way when they were happy. They were from different worlds.

[I know that,] Nova Storm sent. *[Nothing can bring her back. But I don't need a replacement. I want to move on.]*

Was this moving on? Slipstream supposed it was. But to her, moving on was forgetting. This was far from forgetting.

The Matrix buzzed in her chest, humming with new power. This was something else. It wasn't consuming the memories or letting them consume her. It wasn't losing herself to the specters in her mind. It was vanquishing them and turning toward what laid ahead, ready to fight.

Nova was long dead, but so was Galvatron. Her closest confidant and worst enemy were both gone. If she wanted to kill the monsters that stalked her mind, perhaps it was best to kill the sorrows as well.

Perhaps the sorrows were monsters all along. They held her back in the same way the monsters did, but even more insidiously. Nova would've wanted her to be happy.

Nova would've wanted this.

That was the thought that brought her forward. She smiled at Nova Storm, passing by her.

[I do as well.]

She made her way to the back of the group. Ramjet stared down at her, a small frown on his face. She reached up, pulling him into an embrace. After a moment of hesitation, he returned it.

She buried her face into his shoulder and whispered, "I'm sorry I lied to you."

Ramjet's grip tightened. She continued.

"I thought you would be hurt if you stayed close to me," she said. "You already were once."

"You're worth it," he said quietly, his voice cracking. "You're worth it."

Slipstream brought her helm up, pulling away.

"You are, too," she said.

Ramjet smiled.

Slipstream turned back toward the group. She locked optics with Jetfire, whose wings lowered in response.

[Thank you,] she sent to him.

His wings shot back up. *[For what?]*

[For letting me confide in you,] she sent.

[Do you still hate the Matrix?]

Did she? Slipstream resented being forced to lead, believing the mecha beneath her hated her. But now? She saw things for what they were.

She wouldn't have chosen this life, or this position, but she found she no longer despised it.

[It just saved us,] she said.

That was reason enough to appreciate it.

She turned to the final members of the group. Acid Storm's wings were high, her face set in a determined expression. Ion Storm hovered next to her, much less sure of himself.

"I'll never forgive you," Slipstream said.

Ion Storm curled in on themself. Acid Storm bristled.

"But I understand why you did what you did," Slipstream said. "You proved yourselves today."

Acid Storm fluttered his wings. "We won't let you down."

Slipstream nodded. She turned down the tunnel, listening as the group fell in behind her—the large but soft pedesteps of Jetfire, the quick steps of Ramjet, the powerful march of Acid Storm, the muffled skips of Ion Storm, and the soft tread of Nova Storm. She didn't know what she would say to the Decepticons when they emerged, but she didn't have to.

For once, Slipstream was worthy—of life, of the Matrix, and of companionship. In truth, she had been all along, she was just blind to it. They would all face the new tomorrow together, not to reconstruct the lives they lost, but to build something entirely new. Because despite what others thought, they were all worthy of seeing it, and all worthy of building it.

The future began not with destruction, but with hope.

Chapter End Notes

Now, the full Still Alive series has officially been crossposted to fanfiction.lol! Yay! I hope anyone who has read far enough to get to this point enjoyed it. :3

▶ original author's note

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!